

# Understanding the Part-Time Program Candidate

This research brief aims to guide graduate business schools on engaging prospective part-time students effectively. Part-time candidates have unique needs and preferences, such as flexible schedules or out-sized interest in online and hybrid learning. Understanding these preferences enables GME programs to design tailored solutions, enhancing applications, student satisfaction, and retention. Clear insights into part-time students' motivations and challenges help craft targeted programs, marketing efforts, and recruitment campaigns. These findings will assist in strategically communicating how programs can meet the unique expectations of this cohort.



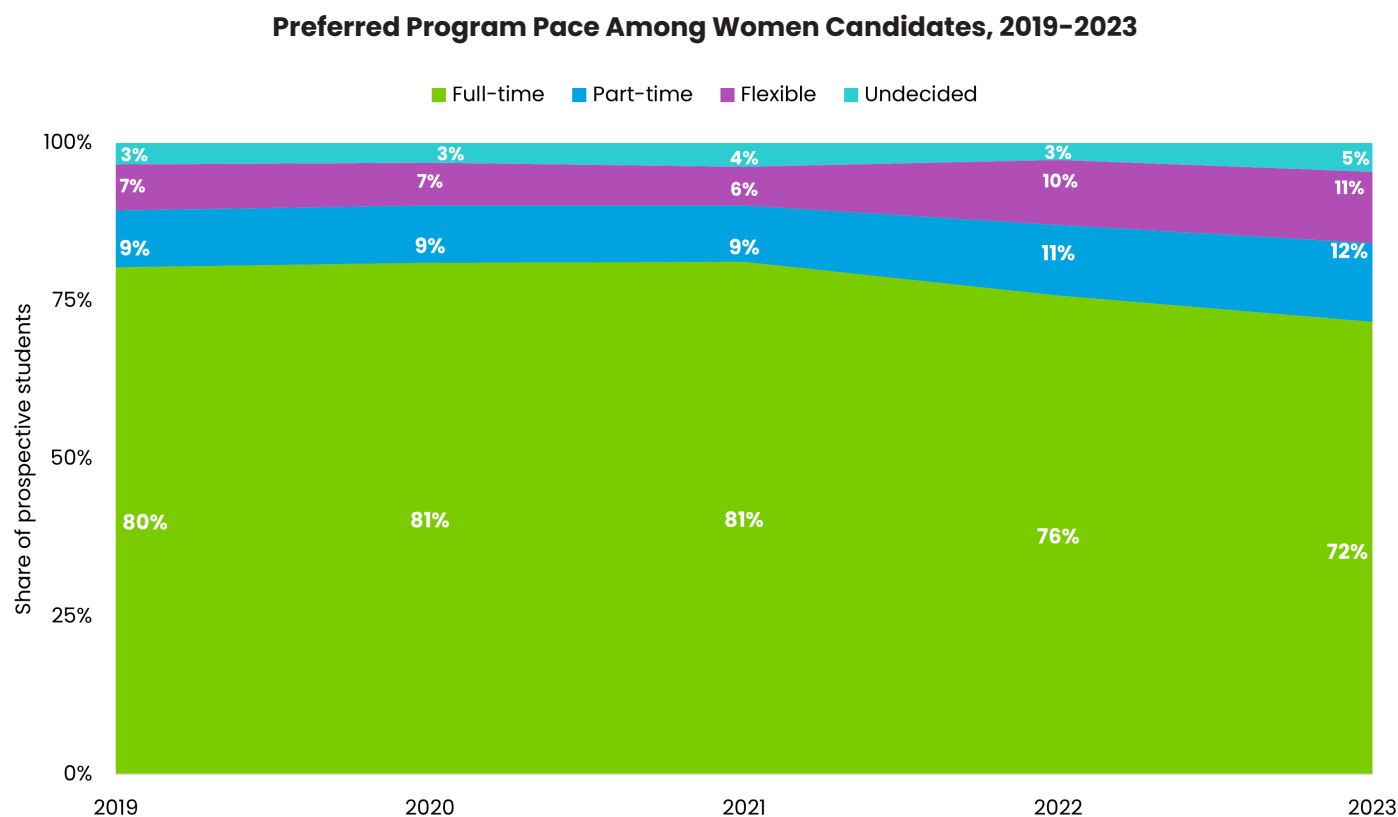
# Overview of part-time candidates

Part-time programs are most popular among women, older candidates, and prospective students from North America and Africa.

According to the [GMAC Prospective Students Survey – 2024 Report](#), about one-third of women in 2023 preferred part-time or flexible programs compared to only 17 percent of men.<sup>1</sup> As shown in the Figure 1, the share of women interested in part-time and flexible programs have been increasing over the past five years, with the largest shift happening over the past two years.

**Figure 1: The share of women who prefer part-time or flexible GME programs has increased to 23 percent from 16 percent in 2019.**

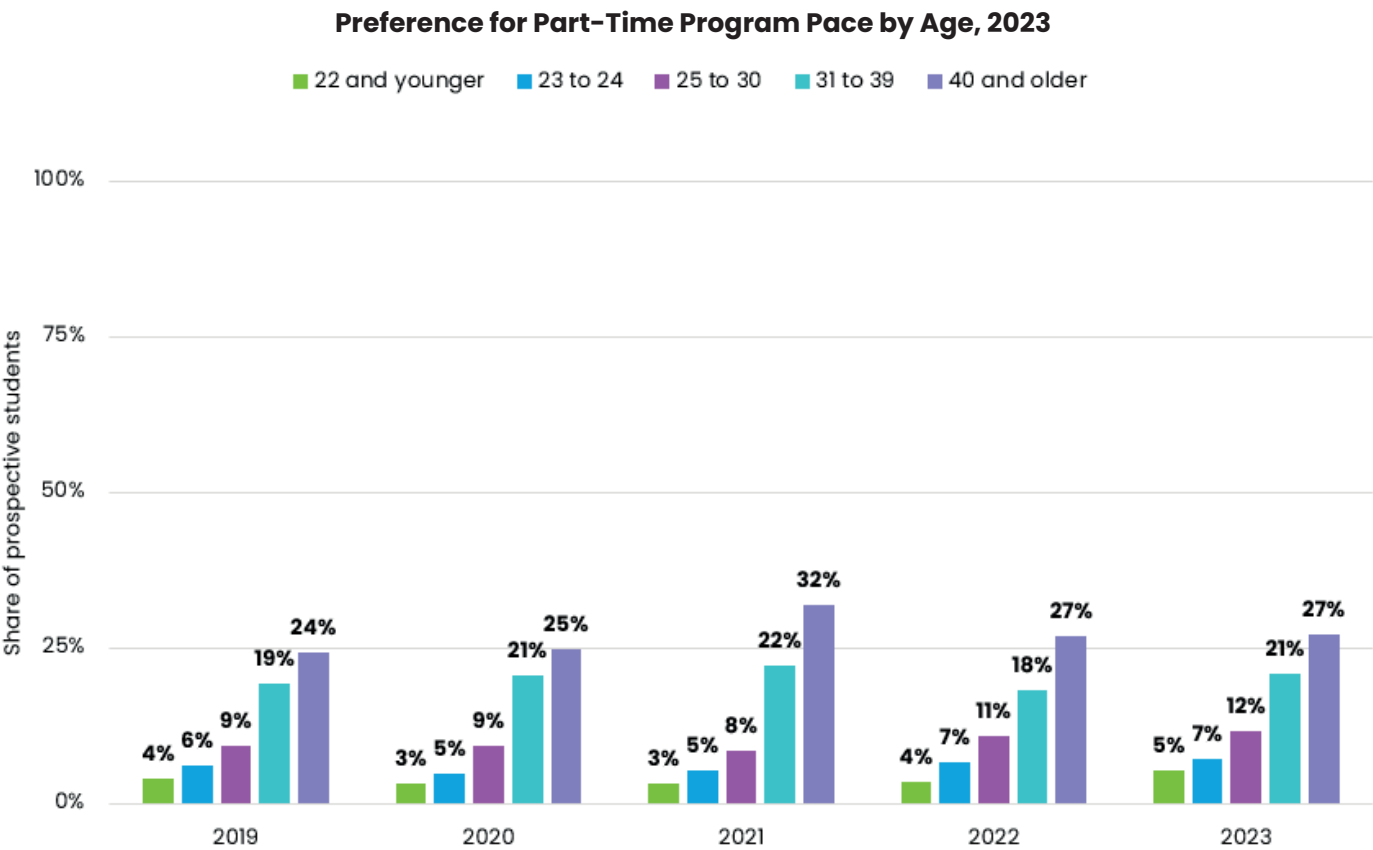
*The share of women interested in full-time programs has declined since 2019.*



<sup>1</sup> Walker, Andrew. “GMAC Prospective Students Survey – 2024 Report.” Graduate Management Admission Council, March 2024.  
<https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/market-research/mbacom-prospective-students-survey>.

Understanding how age affects the preferred pace of part-time GME programs is crucial for catering to the diverse needs of students. As age and work experience increase, the flexibility that comes with part-time programming becomes more appealing (Figure 2). Age influences time management, career stage, personal commitments, and learning preferences. Younger students who are early in their careers may prefer a faster pace to quickly advance. Mid-career students often prefer a moderate pace to balance education with professional roles and personal responsibilities. Adults over 40 are most likely to favor a part-time pace.

**Figure 2: As candidates grow older, their preference for part-time programs increases.**  
*More than a quarter of candidates 40 and older preferred part-time programs in 2023.*



Regionally, part-time programs are most popular in North America and Africa. According to GMAC’s recent [research brief about online and hybrid learning](https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/research-library/admissions-and-application-trends/2023-gmac-pss-online-and-hybrid-learning-candidate-and-employer-perspectives), these same regions are where candidates most prefer online and hybrid programs, too.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that interest in online and part-time programs would overlap—especially given that many part-time programs are offered online. However, business schools where in-person part-time programs are run separately from online part-time programs should be aware that there is likely a large overlap in the students interested in the flexibility provided by both.

<sup>2</sup> Graduate Management Admission Council. “Online and Hybrid Learning: Candidate and Employer Perspectives.” September, 2023.  
<https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/research-library/admissions-and-application-trends/2023-gmac-pss-online-and-hybrid-learning-candidate-and-employer-perspectives>.

## Figure 3: In 2023, almost a third of candidates from Canada preferred part-time programs.

Since 2019, preference for part-time programs has risen in regions like Canada, the United States, and East & Southeast Asia.

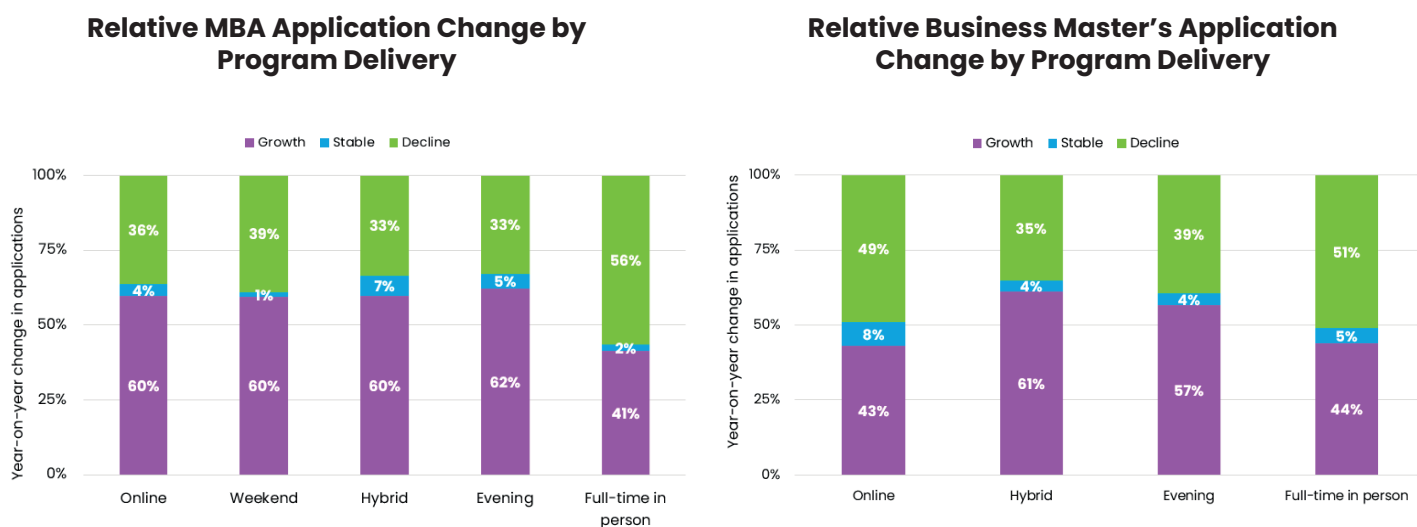
**Preference for Part-Time Pace by Region, 2019–2023**



As candidates actually apply to programs, there has been a recent increase in applications to online and part-time programs. According to [GMAC's Application Trends Survey – 2023 Report](#), full-time MBA programs were more likely to experience a decline in applications, while there has been a notable rise in applications to programs offered in more flexible formats (Figure 4).<sup>3</sup> This trend is likely driven in part by the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the reliance of remote learning—and remote work—and highlighted the wants and needs for more adaptable education and workplace models.

**Figure 4: Among both MBA and business master's programs, more flexible programs were more likely to see growth in applications compared to full-time, in-person programs.**

*Online business master's programs application growth was more in line with full-time, in-person programs.*



*\*The sample size was not sufficient to report results for business master's programs offered on weekends.*



<sup>3</sup> Walker, Andrew. "Application Trends Survey – 2023 Report." Graduate Management Admission Council, March 2024.

<https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/market-research/application-trends-survey>.

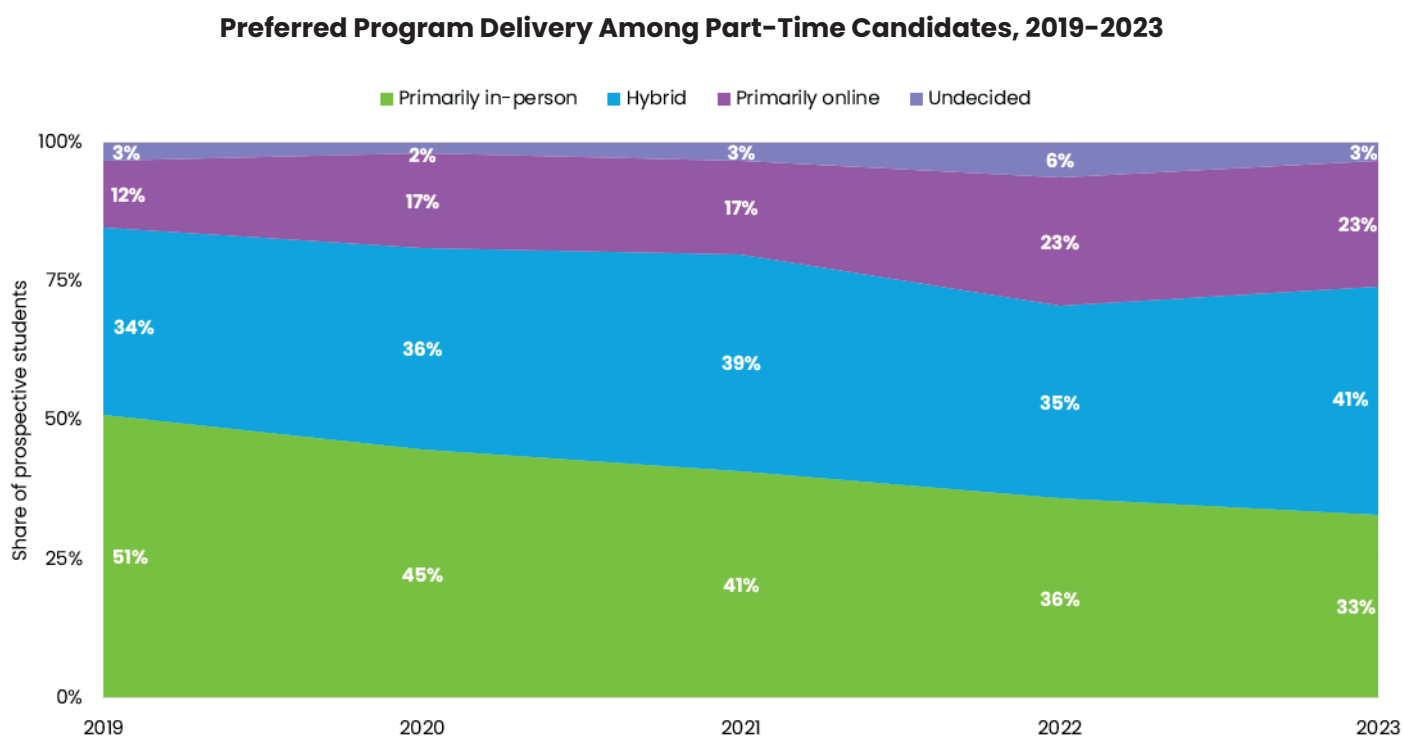
# Program & curriculum preferences

## Hybrid program delivery is now preferred over in-person learning among prospective part-time students.

Results from GMAC's Prospective Students Survey highlight that hybrid and online programs have gained popularity among all candidates as they allow students to balance their studies with professional and personal commitments. Among candidates who prefer a part-time program pace, online and especially hybrid options have surged in popularity. Over the past five years, there has been a clear increase in the share of part-time candidates who prefer GME program delivery to be online or in a hybrid format (Figure 5). Since 2019, preference for in-person delivery has steadily declined among part-time candidates, and hybrid delivery is now preferred by a plurality of prospective part-time students.

**Figure 5: A plurality of part-time candidates now prefer hybrid delivery of GME programs.**

*Among part-time candidates, in-person GME programs have decreased in popularity over time.*



Part-time students often juggle professional responsibilities and personal commitments alongside their academic pursuits, so online and hybrid formats offer the flexibility to manage these demands more effectively. Students can attend classes and complete coursework at times that fit their schedules, reducing the need for commuting, and allowing for better work-life balance. In addition, the ability to continue working while studying part-time in hybrid or online formats allows students to maintain their income streams, making it financially easier to manage tuition fees and other educational expenses. Students might also save on commuting, housing, and other campus-related expenses, making online education a more cost-effective option for many part-time students who may already be balancing significant financial responsibilities.

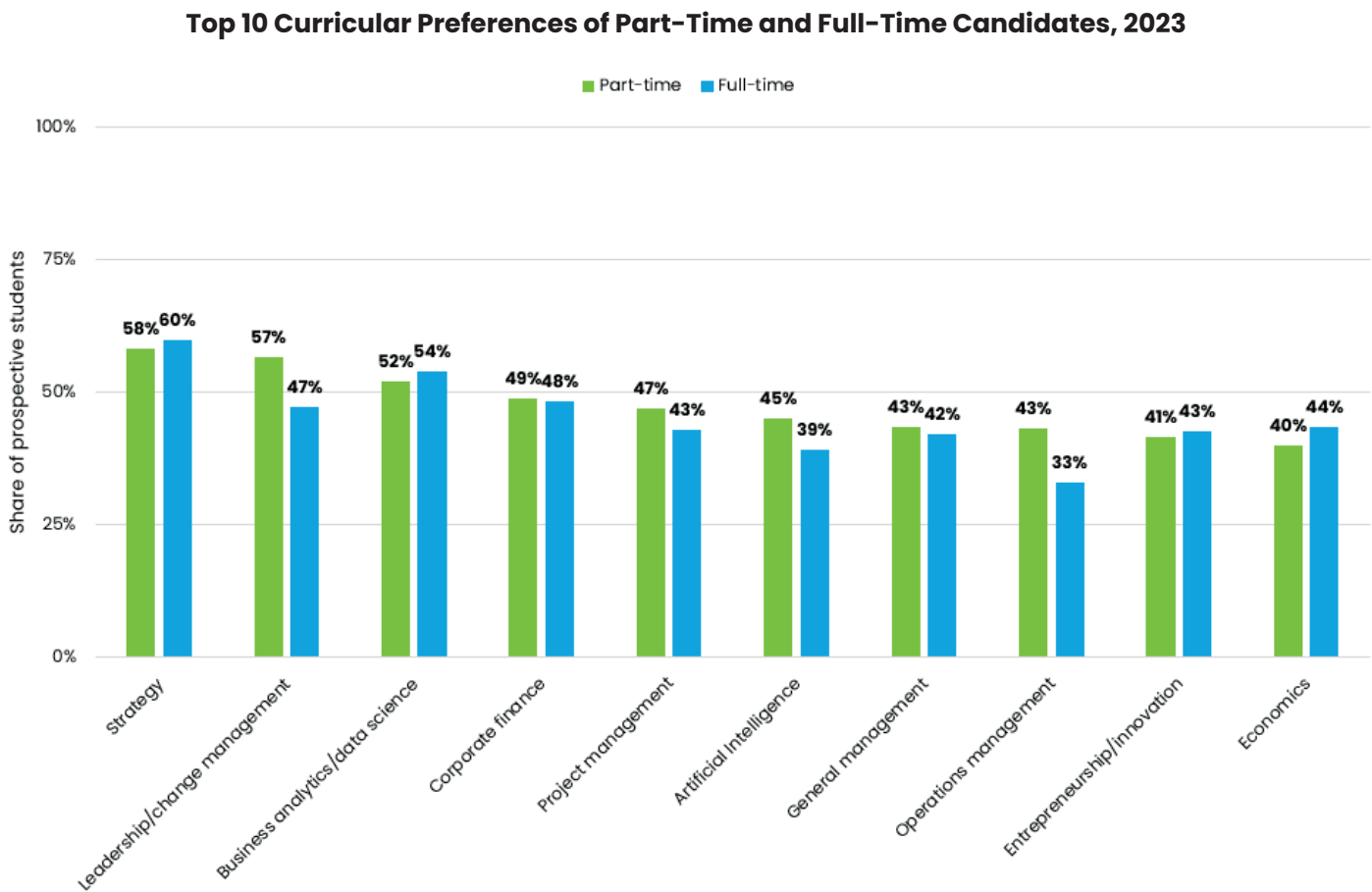
Curriculum that is centered on information systems for practical application in the digital age is gaining popularity among prospective part-time applicants.

Graduate management education (GME) candidates increasingly prefer curricula that are flexible, practical, and aligned with current industry trends. The pace of a program is of course paramount in meeting the needs of an applicant; however, other elements of GME programming are key to their decision-making. According to the AACSB Innovations That Inspire report, there is a growing demand for courses in data analytics, digital transformation, and sustainable business practices. It is also not surprising to see that programs that offer experiential learning opportunities and promote the application of theoretical knowledge to real-world business challenges are preferred.<sup>4</sup>

Curricularly, part-time students are most interested in strategy (63 percent), leadership/change management (61 percent), and business analytics/data science (56 percent). Full-time students are most interested in courses in strategy (60 percent), business analytics/data science (54 percent), and corporate finance (48 percent) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Part-time candidates are more interested than full-time candidates in management curricula.

Curriculum in strategy is the top preferred area of study for both part-time and full-time program applicants.



<sup>4</sup> AACSB International. “Innovations That Inspire.” <https://www.aacsb.edu/about-us/advocacy/member-spotlight/innovations-that-inspire>.



The overlap in curricular interests highlights that many candidates prefer to gain similar skills from business school regardless of the program pace or delivery format. However, part-time candidates' preferences may be attributed to several key factors related to their professional backgrounds, career goals, and the practical needs of their roles:

### 1. Strategy

- **Long-Term Planning:** Strategy courses help students develop long-term planning and decision-making skills. Part-time candidates, often aiming for senior and executive roles, need to understand how to create and implement strategies that drive business growth.
- **Competitive Advantage:** Understanding strategic management allows these students to contribute to their organizations' competitive advantage by identifying opportunities, mitigating risks, and making informed decisions that align with the company's goals.
- **Career Goals:** For those aspiring to roles such as chief executive officer (CEO) or chief operating officer (COO), strategic thinking is a critical competency. Courses in strategy help them build this crucial skill set.

### 2. Leadership and Change Management

- **Career Advancement:** Part-time candidates, often already employed and in mid to senior-level positions, seek to advance their careers. Leadership and change management skills are crucial for ascending to higher leadership roles where they are expected to lead teams and drive organizational change.
- **Organizational Impact:** Part-time candidates are frequently in positions where they can influence company culture and processes. Knowledge in change management equips them to implement and manage significant changes within their organizations effectively.
- **Real-World Application:** Many part-time candidates are looking for skills they can apply immediately in their current roles. Leadership and change management training provide practical tools and techniques that can be directly used to improve their workplace effectiveness.

### 3. Business Analytics/Data Science

- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** In today's business environment, data-driven decision-making is paramount. Part-time candidates recognize the importance of being able to analyze data to make informed business decisions. This is especially relevant for those in or aiming for roles that require significant analytical skills.
- **Industry Relevance:** Many industries are increasingly relying on big data and analytics to drive business insights and innovation. Knowledge in business analytics and data science makes part-time students more valuable to their employers and enhances their future employability.
- **Skill Enhancement:** Part-time students often seek to enhance their technical skills to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving job market. Proficiency in business analytics and data science can set them apart from their peers and open up new career opportunities.

Part-time students prefer curricula in leadership/change management, strategy, and business analytics/data science due to their immediate applicability, relevance to current and future career goals, and the competitive advantages these skills provide. Understanding these preferences allows GME programs to tailor their offerings to better meet the needs of part-time students, ensuring the programs are aligned with the professional aspirations and practical requirements of this demographic.

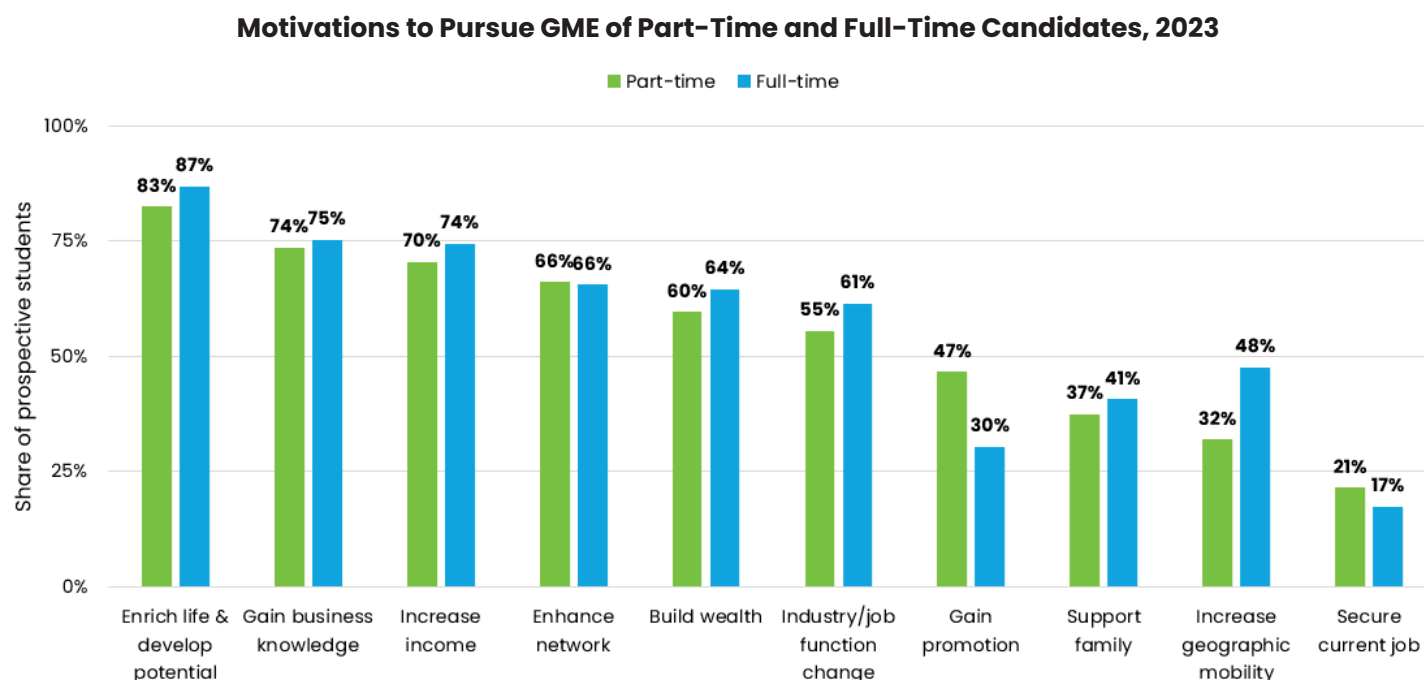
# Motivations & barriers

**Part-time applicants seek GME to enrich their life and develop their potential alongside traditionally sought outcomes like greater knowledge and increased income.**

The motivations for pursuing a GME degree are diverse and often multifaceted. GME programs offer the opportunity to develop a broad set of skills that are crucial in today's business environment. Part-time candidates are most motivated to pursue GME in order to enrich their life and develop their potential (83 percent); gain business knowledge (74 percent); increase income (70 percent); and enhance their network (66 percent) (Figure 7). These findings are not too dissimilar to those that prefer full-time programs, again indicating overlapping interests among business school candidates regardless of their preferred program pace or format.

**Figure 7: Part-time program applicants are more motivated by a search for an enriching life more than any other factor.**

*Gaining business knowledge and increasing their income are also key reasons for part-time candidates to pursue graduate business school.*



Fortunately for part-time applicants, many of their motivators come to fruition. According to GMAC's [Enrolled Students Survey](#), networking is consistently cited as a significant benefit, with many students and alumni reporting that the connections made during their programs have been instrumental in their career success.<sup>5</sup> Survey respondents also reported increased incomes following GME and overall satisfaction with their experience.

<sup>5</sup> "2023 Enrolled Students Survey: Summary Data Report." Graduate Management Admission Council, September 2023.

<https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/market-research/enrolled-student-survey>.

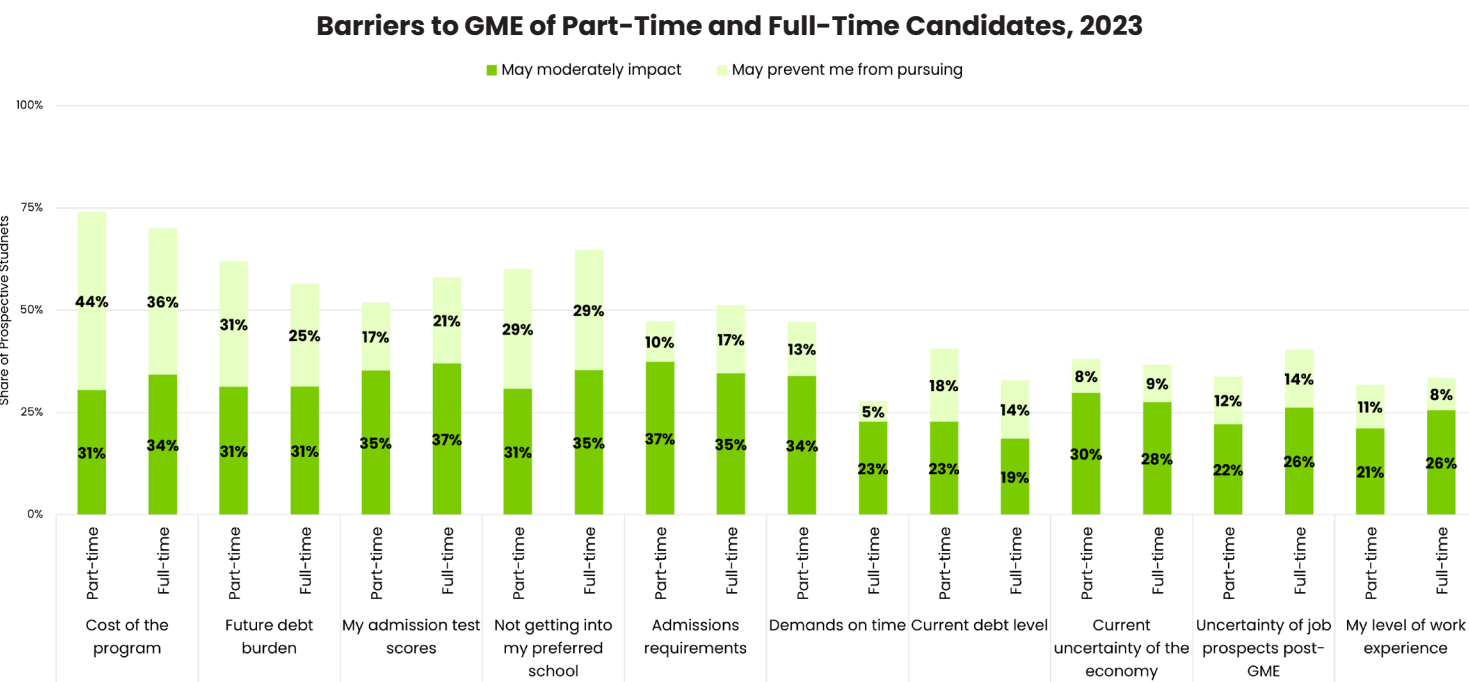
Barriers to pursue GME can be alleviated by more flexible admissions processes and clear information about financing.

Despite their motivations, graduate management candidates face several barriers, including financial constraints, concern with balancing work and study, and navigating the application process. The cost of tuition and related expenses is often reported as a deterrent, particularly for prospective students from lower-income or first-generation backgrounds. Time management is another critical challenge, especially for part-time students who must juggle professional responsibilities with academic commitments.

The biggest barriers that may prevent part-time students from pursuing GME or moderately impact their decision are cost of the program (44 percent), future debt burden (31 percent), and not getting into their preferred school (29 percent) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: The cost of the program is most influential barrier felt by part-time applicants.

The idea of debt and making compromises on schools further adds to the barriers that are felt by part-time applicants.



The data may reveal similarities, but it is plausible that the reasoning behind the barriers could vary for part-time applicants. Part-time applicants may face different financial considerations compared to full-time students. They might be more concerned about the cost-benefit analysis of the program, tuition reimbursement options from employers, and the ability to maintain an income while studying.

These barriers, often deterring enrollment, involve the admissions process and financial constraints. Admissions obstacles include stringent requirements, limited program options, and complex procedures. Financial barriers include high tuition costs, limited financial aid, and balancing education with other expenses.

By addressing these issues, programs can tailor their outreach efforts to highlight flexible admissions processes, robust financial support, and clear information on managing the cost of education. Providing resources such as financial planning workshops, streamlined application procedures, and flexible payment options can make GME more accessible to part-time applicants. Recognizing and mitigating these barriers not only broadens the reach of GME programs but also ensures that a diverse range of candidates can achieve their educational and career goals.



## Part-time candidates are more likely seek leadership and management roles in their careers following GME.

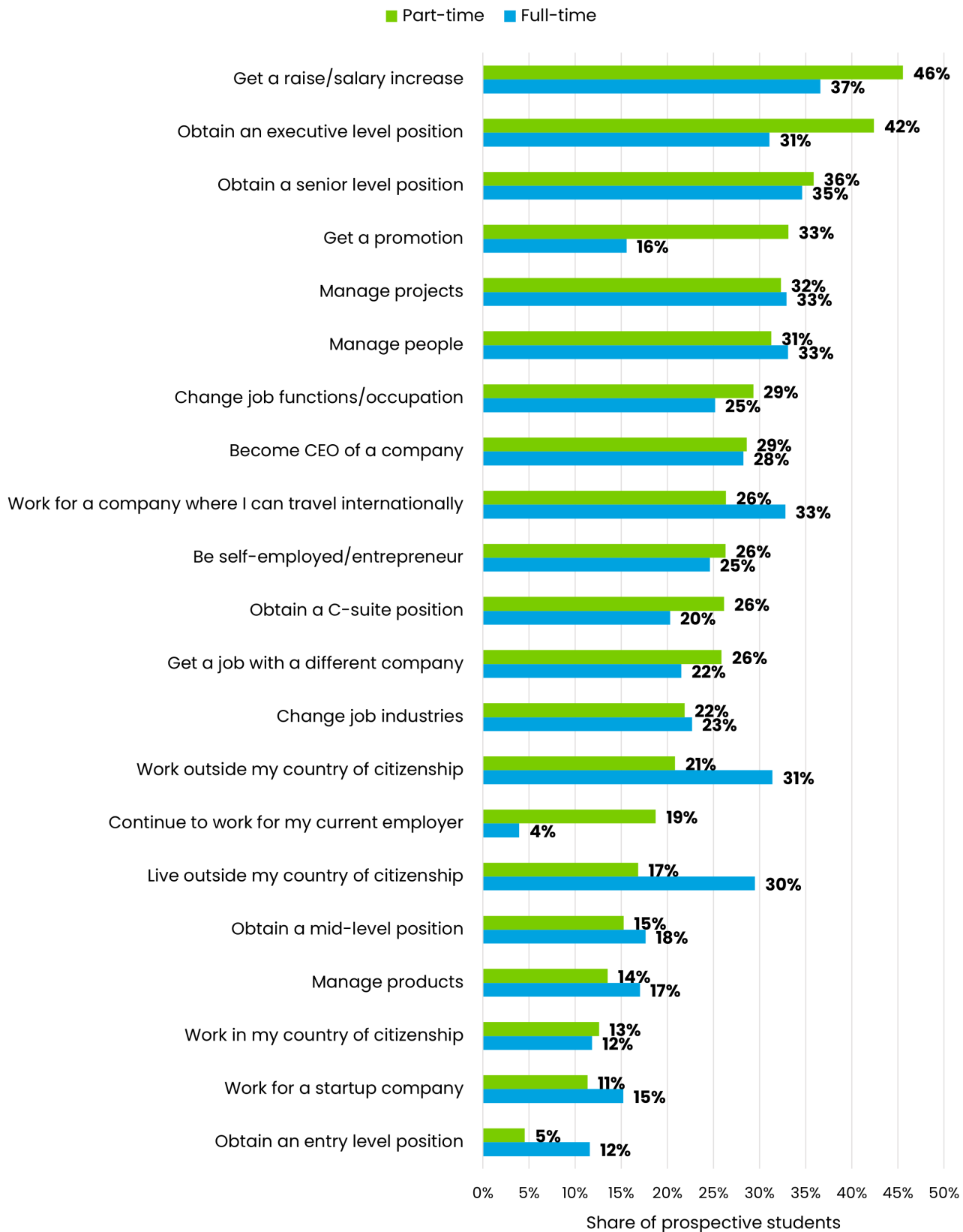
Understanding the career goals of part-time prospective GME students is crucial for institutions aiming to design programs that meet their specific needs and expectations. The career goals of part-time and full-time graduate management education candidates reveal distinct priorities and aspirations, reflecting their distinct stages in career paths and professional needs (Figure 9). For example, part-time candidates are more interested than full-time candidates in advancing to senior or executive positions—and especially the greater salary that comes with promotion. Understanding these differences allows GME programs to better tailor their offerings and marketing strategies to meet the specific goals and needs of part-time and full-time students, enhancing their appeal and effectiveness in attracting and retaining students.



**Figure 9: Part-time candidates are most interested in advancing to more senior positions following GME—especially when it means a greater salary.**

*Full-time candidates are more likely to seek out international opportunities following GME.*

**Post-GME Career Goals of Part-Time and Full-Time Candidates, 2023**





# Program & recruitment takeaways

*Distinguishing strategies to attract part-time and full-time talent*

1

## Career stage and experience

**Part-time students:** Often already established in their careers, part-time students are focused on climbing higher within their current paths. Their goals of obtaining senior or executive positions, managing people, and getting promotions reflect a desire for career advancement within their established fields.

**Full-time students:** Typically earlier in their careers or looking to make significant career changes, full-time students prioritize financial gains and building foundational management skills, such as project and people management.

2

## Program design and support

**For part-time programs:** Schools should emphasize how their programs can facilitate career advancement and leadership development. Highlighting pathways to senior and executive roles, offering leadership and management training, and highlighting success stories of alumni can be effective.

**For full-time programs:** Institutions should focus on the financial returns of their programs, including salary increases and career opportunities after graduation. Providing robust career services, project management training, and networking opportunities can attract these students.

3

## Marketing strategies

**Part-time programs:** Marketing should focus on flexibility, immediate applicability of skills to current roles, and support for career advancement. Testimonials from alumni who have achieved senior or executive positions can be particularly compelling.

**Full-time programs:** Marketing should emphasize the potential for significant salary increases, comprehensive management training, and career-switching support. Highlighting the program's ROI and successful career transitions can appeal to prospective full-time students.

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# Conclusion

Understanding the motivations, career goals, barriers, curricular preferences, program preferences, and application trends of graduate management students is crucial for institutions aiming to attract and retain top talent. By addressing financial and time management barriers, offering flexible and industry-relevant curricula, and fostering inclusive and supportive environments, schools can better meet the needs and expectations of their diverse student populations.

For GME programs, understanding the part-time applicant is essential for creating tailored, flexible, and supportive educational experiences. This understanding enhances marketing efforts, program development, student support, and long-term strategic planning. Ultimately, it leads to higher satisfaction, better academic outcomes, and stronger connections within the professional and alumni community.

