

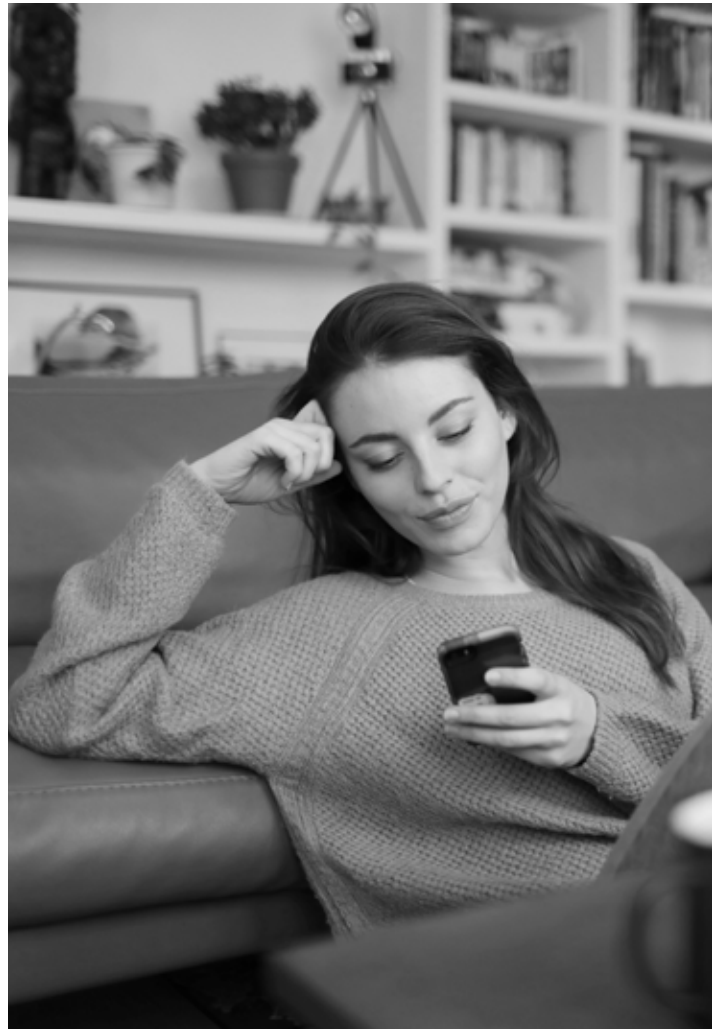
Research Brief

# Online and Hybrid Learning: Candidate and Employer Perspectives

Since the first online MBA was launched in 1987, online learning has played an increasingly prominent role in graduate management education (GME).<sup>1</sup> According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, more than 50,000 students were enrolled in online MBA programs worldwide in the 2020-2021 academic year.<sup>2</sup> The stage was set for digital learning to take a more prominent role in graduate education, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 served as a further catalyst.

Now, three years after the first stay-at-home policies, educators face a changed educational landscape. Candidates and employers alike have increased familiarity with online programs and their methods, with many having already experienced online learning for themselves. How has this changed their perceptions of online graduate management programs, and how can graduate business schools tailor their programs and outreach to respond to these expectations?

In this research brief, results from the [2023 GMAC Prospective Students Survey](#) and [2023 Corporate Recruiters Survey summary](#) reports offer insights into these questions. Data from the [2023 GMAC Prospective Students Survey](#) summary report was collected throughout the calendar year 2022; data from the [2023 Corporate Recruiters Survey](#) was



<sup>1</sup> "The History of Online MBA Programs." Online MBA, March 28, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Byrne, John. "Online MBA Students Now Outnumber Full-Time MBAs." Forbes, May 3, 2022.



collected from January to March of 2023. The brief discusses candidates' perceptions of the value of online programs and employers' views of online and hybrid GME programs and their graduates. Many trends differ across categories, such as age, gender, and geographical region. Still, this analysis does not imply that any group is monolithic in its preferences or behaviors.

The findings of this brief indicate that the rush to embrace online education during the pandemic was neither a permanent switch nor a one-time fluke. By and large, confidence in the overall value of online and hybrid degrees has increased with more widespread exposure to online learning. However, the surveys reveal lingering concerns among candidates and employers, especially in certain regions.

# Program & Recruitment Takeaways

GMAC Market Intelligence | Online & Hybrid Learning: Candidate and Employer Perspectives

**1** Candidates worldwide tend to believe that the value and career opportunities available to graduates of online programs do not stack up to those of in-person experiences. Prospective students are even more concerned with the networking opportunities available to graduates of online programs.



**Takeaway:**

Online programs can highlight any in-person networking opportunities as well as the value of an extensive online network in creating career connections for their graduates.

**3** Despite the worldwide access granted by online study, online candidates previously preferred to study close to home. Now, a plurality (37%) of candidates who want to study online report preferring to study in programs outside their country of citizenship.



**Takeaway:**

Online programs can expand the pool of interested online applicants from abroad in their marketing and recruitment efforts.

**2** Most employers worldwide (54%) consider an online GME degree to be of equal value to a degree from an in-person program; however, about two-thirds also hold concerns about the specific communication, leadership, and technical skills that candidates gain in online programs compared to in-person studies.



**Takeaway:**

Graduates of online degrees should discuss their credentials differently depending on the employer. For example, employers in Asia are more likely to value the degree, while U.S. and consulting employers would rather hear about specific skills candidates attain.

**4** Globally, first-generation candidates, women, and millennials are more open to hybrid and online programs than their counterparts, on average.



**Takeaway:**

Programs can highlight how flexibility and convenience can support candidates to work full or part-time, care for their families, or balance other responsibilities.

# Candidate Interest in Online Programs

According to the *GMAC Prospective Students Survey*, 22 percent of candidates worldwide preferred to study in a predominantly online or hybrid program in 2022—an increase from 16 percent in 2019, though one point down from 2021 (Figure 1). Sentiment toward online programs is also trending slowly upward. In 2022, 13 percent of prospective students worldwide agreed that online programs offer the same value as in-person programs, an increase from 9 percent in 2020. While these numbers are relatively low, they demonstrate positive trends compared to pre-pandemic levels.

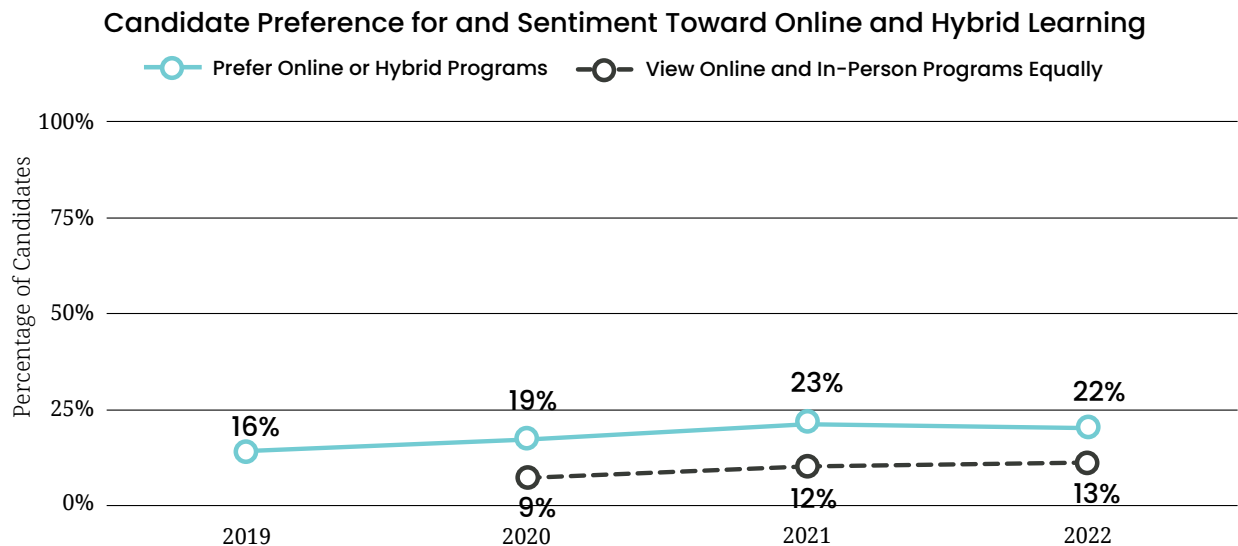
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## Interest in online and hybrid programs is highest among women, first-generation, and millennial candidates.

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**Figure 1: Candidate interest in online and hybrid programs remains above pre-pandemic levels.**

The dashed line refers to candidates worldwide who agreed with the statement: “A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers the same value as an online degree.”

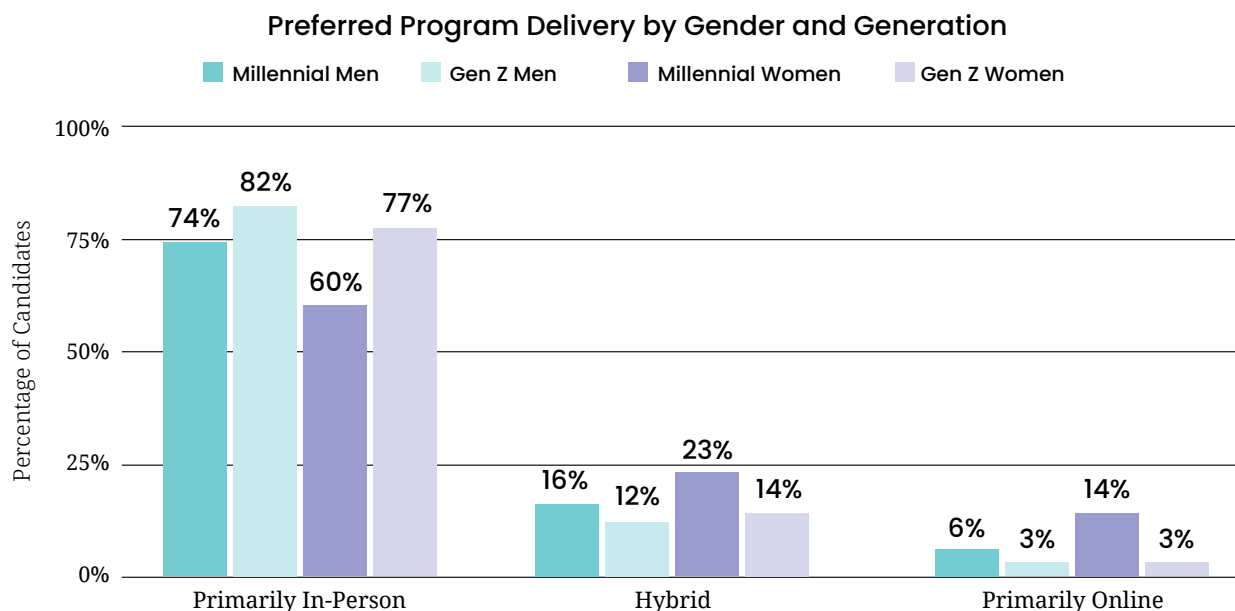


Women are more likely than male and non-binary candidates to indicate a preference for study in online or hybrid programs. Twenty-seven percent of women say they prefer online or hybrid programs compared to 19 percent of men. However, generation may play a greater role in preferred program delivery since Gen Z women are more likely than millennial men to want to study in person (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Millennial women are the most interested in hybrid or online programs, followed by millennial men.**

Across gender and generation, in-person learning continues to be the preference among prospective graduate business school students.



\*Due to a small sample size of non-binary candidates, only results from candidates who self-identified as men or women are displayed.

\*\*Categories may not add up to 100 percent because undecided respondents are not displayed.

\*\*\*In this brief, any individual born in 1996 or after is referred to as a Generation Z (Gen Z) member. Millennial refers to any individual born between 1981 and 1995.



Although Gen Z and millennial candidates have roughly similar opinions about the value of online programs, Gen Z prospective students are less likely to seek out online or hybrid options (**Figure 3**). This is perhaps because Gen Z professionals are the most likely generation to have had their education disrupted by the pandemic and may be seeking in-person educational experiences to counteract this. According to GMAC's white paper [Gen Z in the GME Pipeline: Explain Why It's Worth It](#), Gen Zers prefer a baseline of in-person learning, but many still expect flexibility to learn outside of the classroom based on their individual circumstances on a given day.<sup>3</sup>

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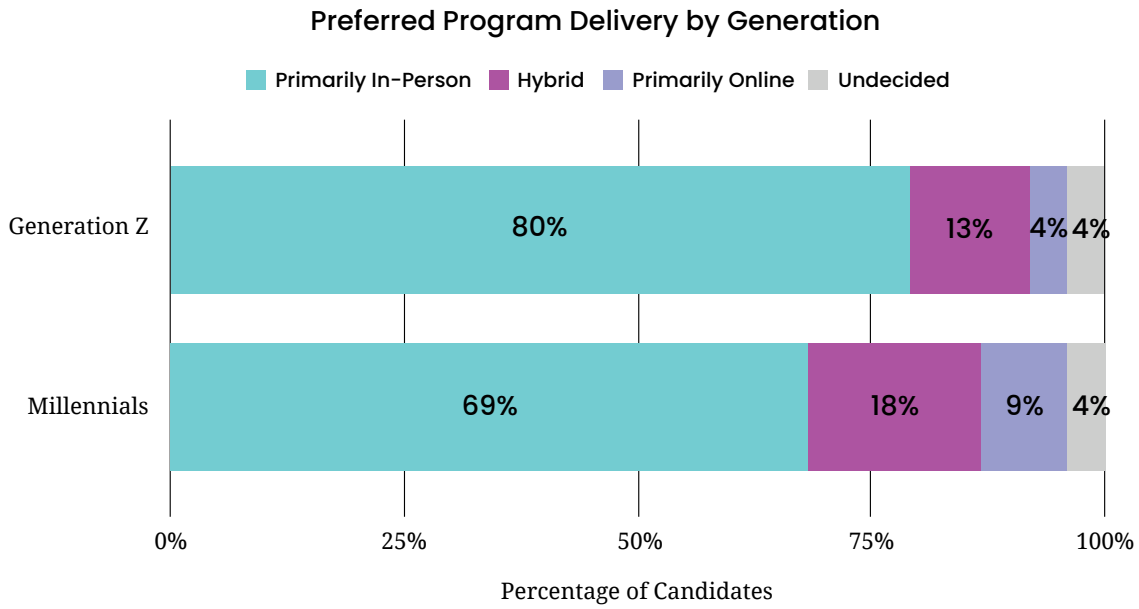
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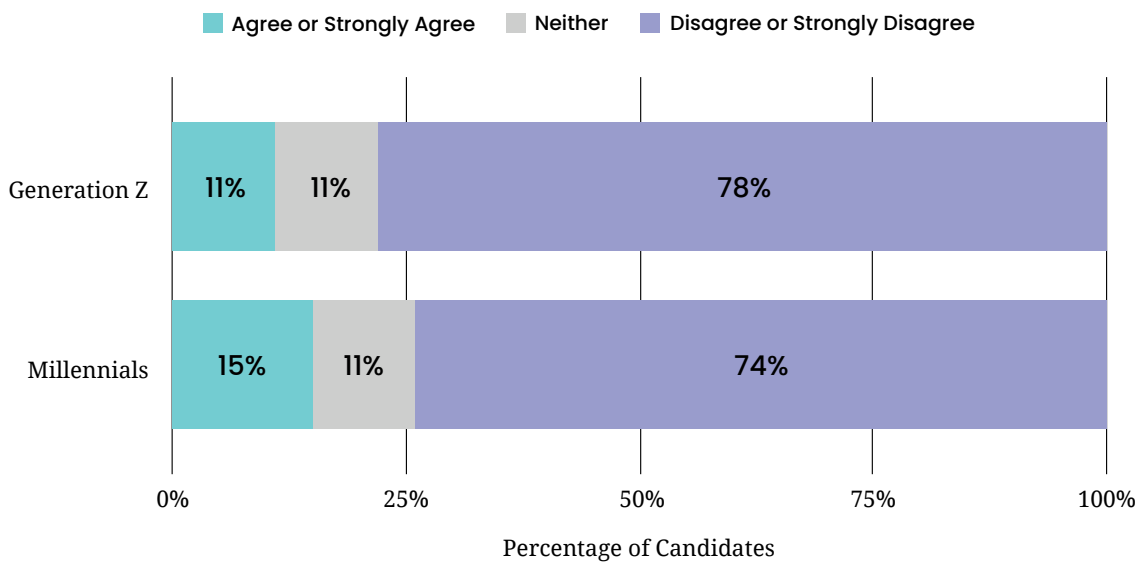
<sup>3</sup>Walker, Andrew. "Gen Z in the GME Pipeline: Explain Why It's Worth It." Graduate Management Education Council, June 2023.

**Figure 3: Although Gen Z and millennials value in-person and online degrees equally at roughly similar rates, Gen Zers are less likely to report a preference for online or hybrid programs.**

Gen Z and millennial respondents prefer in-person learning, on average, followed by hybrid and online learning.



**Agreement with the Statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**





Students from underrepresented backgrounds in the United States and first-generation students worldwide are especially likely to see the value in online and hybrid degrees (Figure 4). This may be due to the flexibility that online and hybrid degrees allow, which may enable students with additional responsibilities to earn alongside their studies to support their families or supplement tuition.

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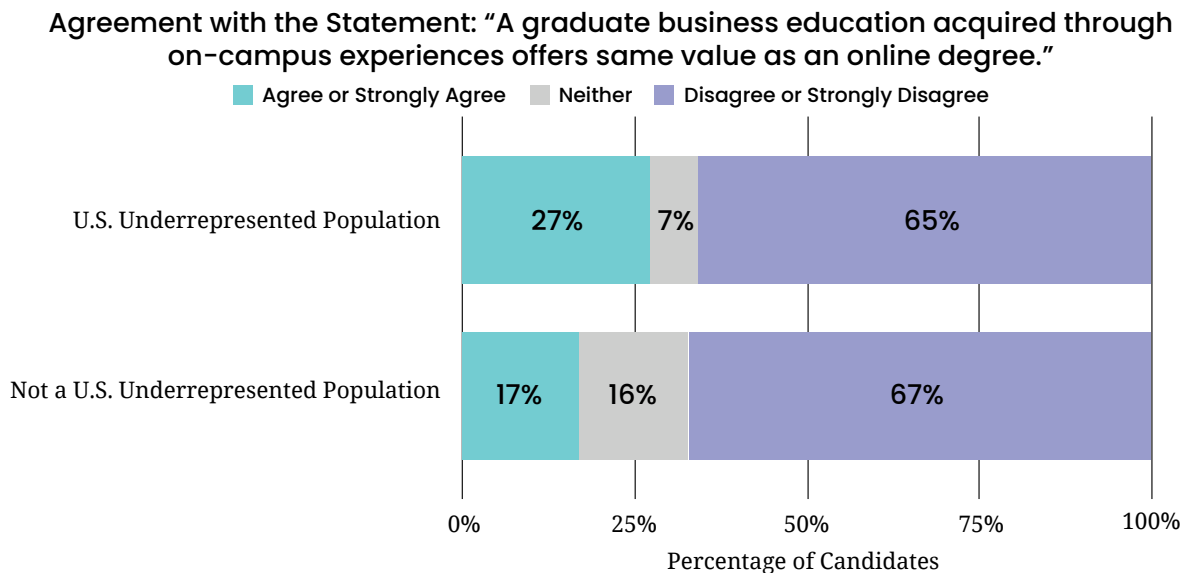
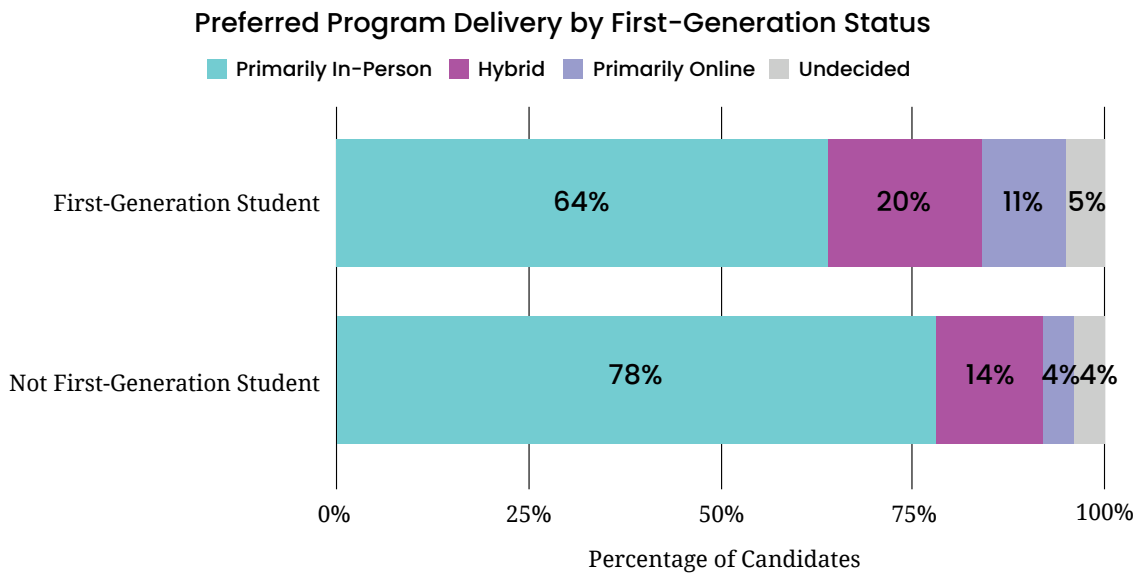
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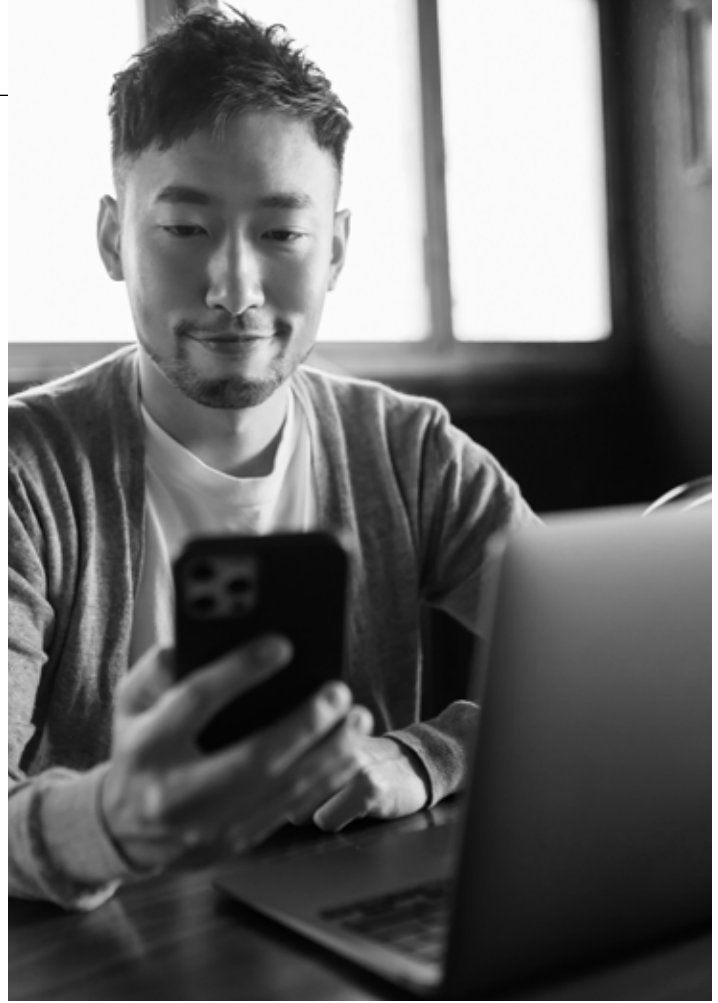


**Figure 4: Both first-generation candidates worldwide and U.S. prospective students from underrepresented backgrounds have a more favorable view of online programs compared to their counterparts.**

First-generation candidates indicate higher interest in hybrid and online programs, and U.S. underrepresented candidates are more likely to value in-person and online degrees equally.



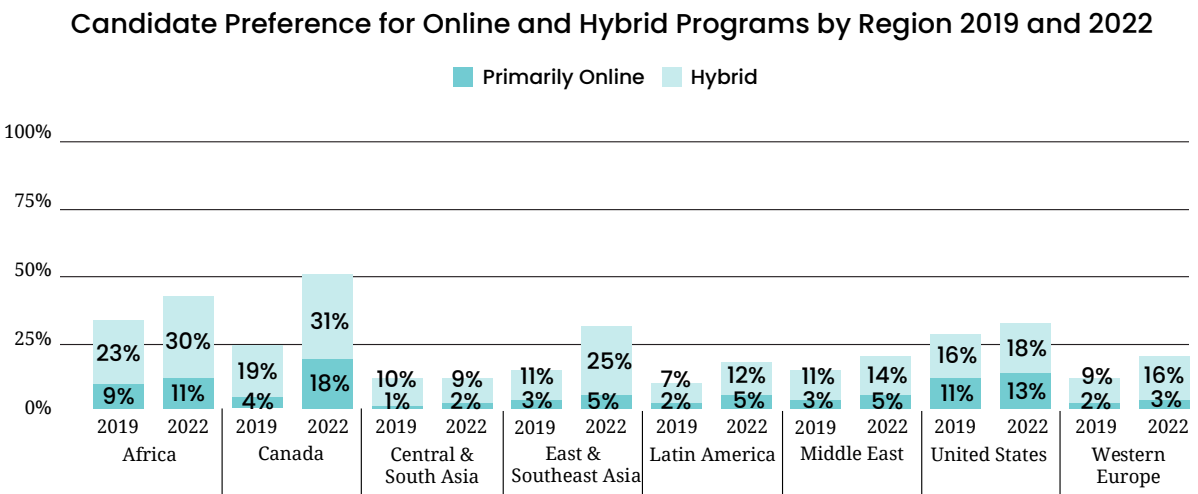
\*First-generation students are defined in GMAC's Prospective Students Survey as candidates whose parents' highest level of educational attainment did not exceed an associate degree. Candidates who self-identified as Black or African American, Hispanic, or Native American were classified as underrepresented U.S. candidates. Respondents who self-identified as white or Caucasian, Asian, or another race/ethnicity were classified as non-underrepresented U.S. populations.



Regionally, candidates from Central and South Asia show the least interest in online and hybrid programs, holding steady at a combined 11 percent of candidates in 2019 and 2022 (Figure 5). However, the appetite for online and hybrid programs is growing around the world. The fastest growth is happening in Canada, where interest in online and hybrid programs has almost doubled from 23 percent before the pandemic to 49 percent in 2022. It's similar in East and Southeast Asia, which jumped from 14 percent in 2019 to 30 percent in 2022. For more information, refer to the regional profiles at the end of the brief.

**Figure 5: Interest in online or hybrid GME programs has grown globally and is currently highest in Canada, Africa, and the United States.**

Prospective students in Canada and the United States have the highest interest in predominantly online programs, and candidates in Canada and Africa have the greatest interest in hybrid programs.





## Candidates' overall sentiment toward online programs lags far behind in-person programs, especially as it relates to networking.

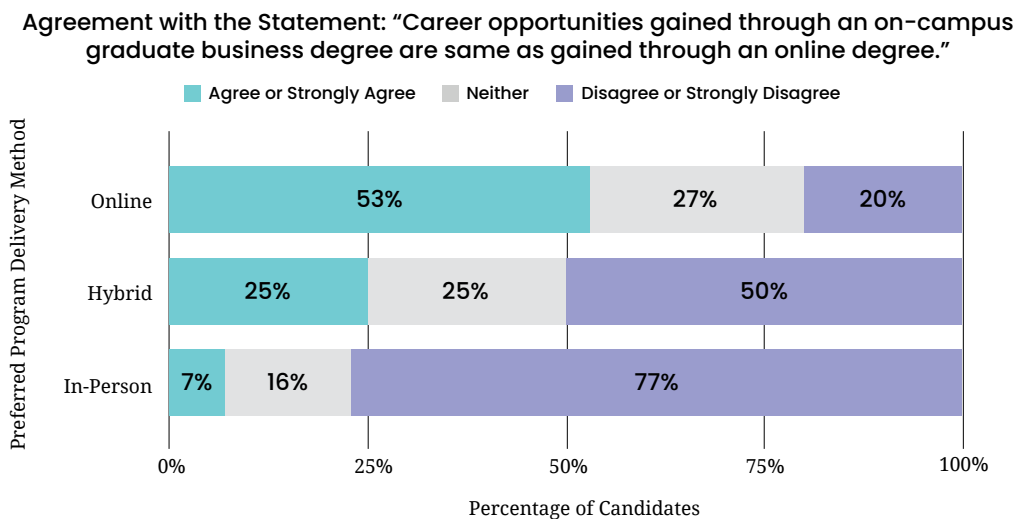
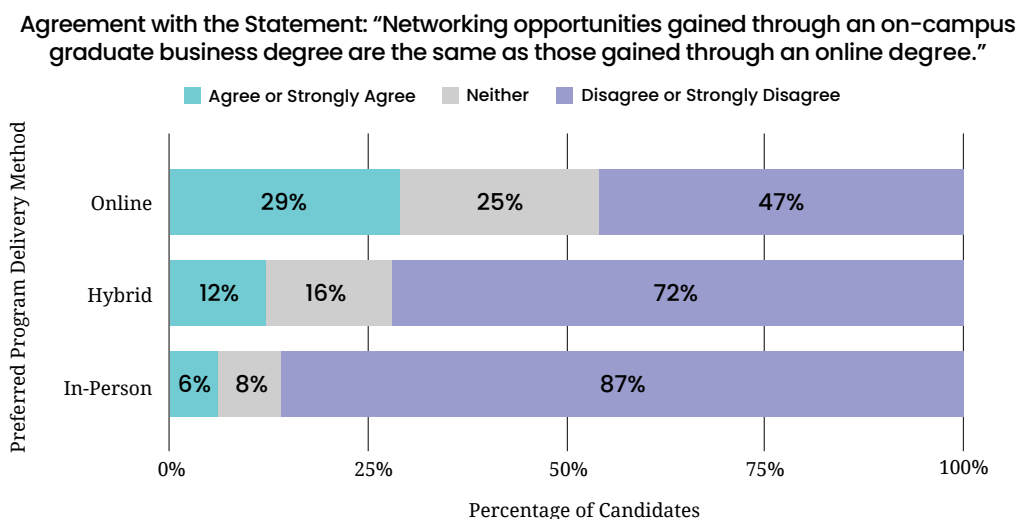
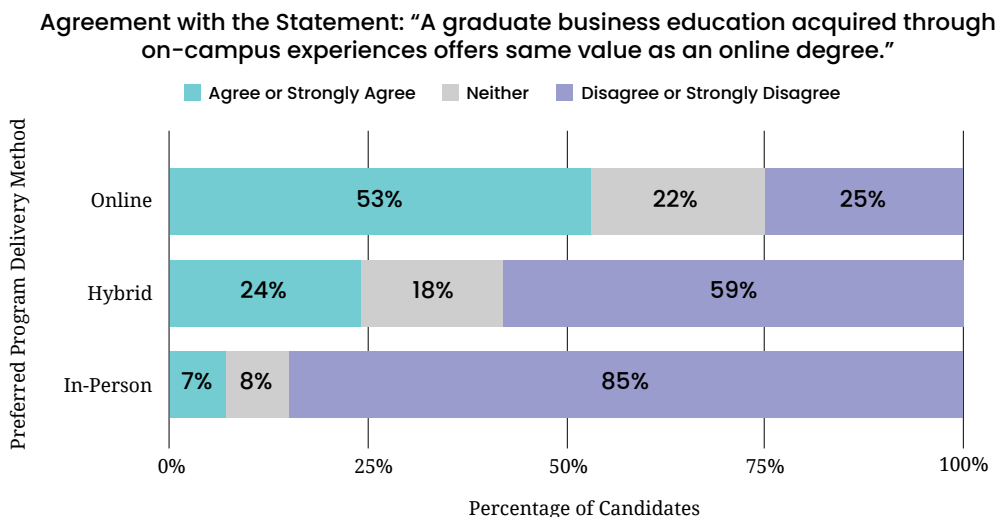
Overall, 13 percent of candidates worldwide agree that online programs offer the same value as on-campus degrees, and another 12 percent are neutral. The area in which candidates have the least faith in online business programs is networking opportunities. Eight percent of candidates worldwide believe online programs offer the same networking opportunities as in-person programs, with 81 percent of prospective students disagreeing.

Even among prospective students who report they prefer to study in online and hybrid programs, there is a sentiment that online degrees do not offer the same value as in-person experiences. About a quarter of students who indicated preference for online programs believe they do not offer the same value as on-campus business degrees (**Figure 6**).

Prospective online students are also acutely concerned about building their professional networks—nearly half believe online programs do not offer the same networking opportunities as in-person degrees. These doubts about online learning are further magnified among candidates who prefer to study in hybrid programs.

**Figure 6: While candidates interested in online and hybrid programs are more likely to see their value, about half are not convinced networking opportunities are comparable to in-person degrees.**

About a quarter of students who prefer online learning also don't believe the overall value is the same as in-person learning.



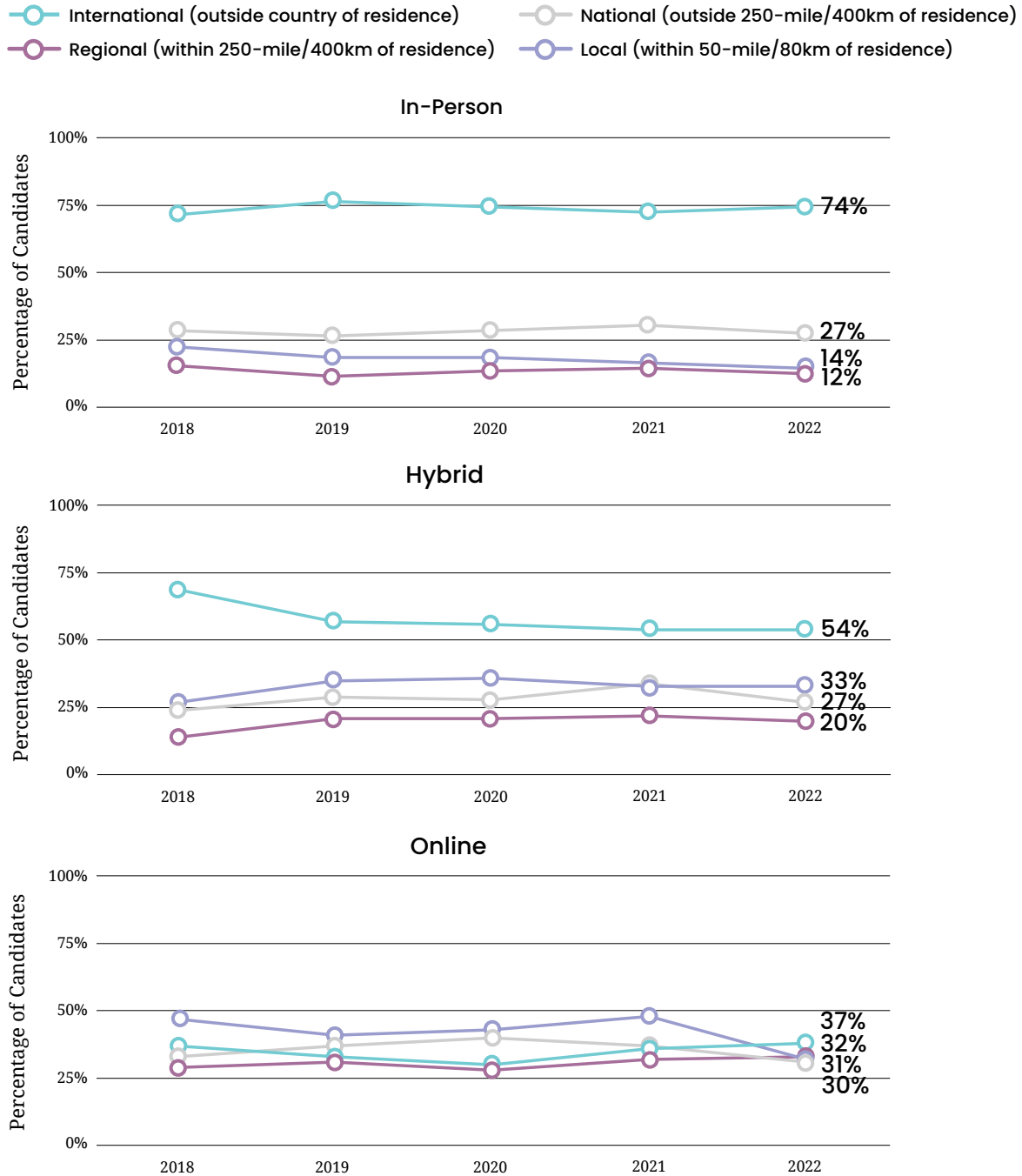


Though online prospective students have typically preferred to study close to home, a plurality of candidates—regardless of their preferred program delivery—indicated plans to apply to international programs.

Historically, candidates interested in online programs have preferred to study locally—within 50 miles/80 kilometers of their residence. But in 2022, the greatest share of prospective students who preferred to study online are interested in studying outside their country of citizenship (**Figure 7**). This means that regardless of the preferred program modality, the average student in the candidate pipeline wants to apply to pursue GME abroad.

**Figure 7: The average prospective student plans to apply to international programs regardless of their preferred program modality.**

A plurality of candidates who prefer to study online have previously planned to apply to local programs.



\*Categories may not add up to 100 percent because undecided respondents are not displayed, and respondents were able to select multiple application destinations.

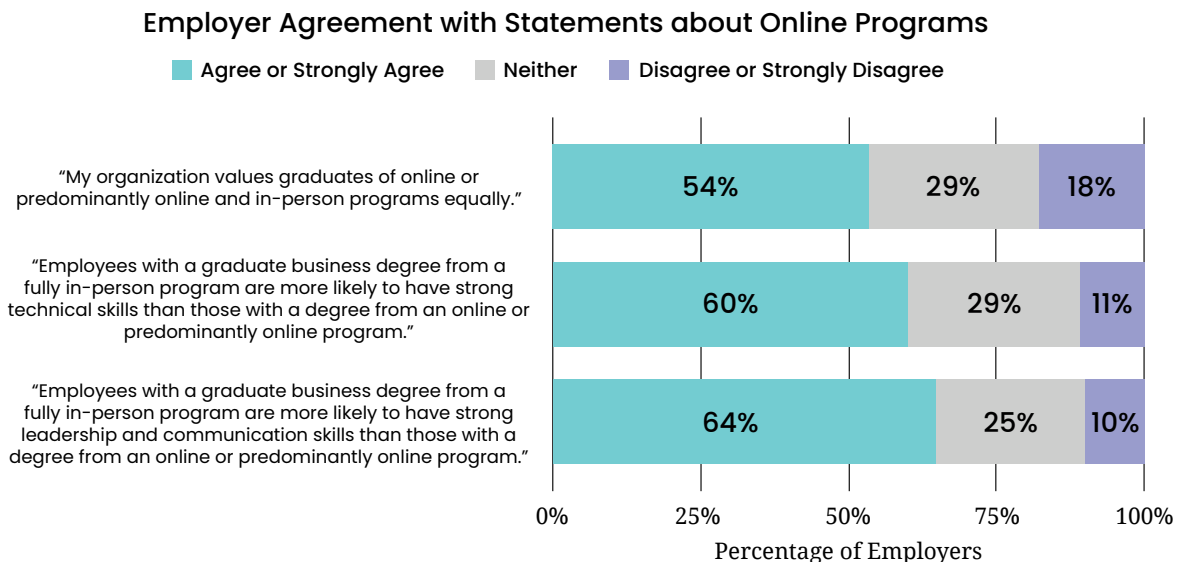
# Employer Perspectives on Online Programs

According to GMAC’s 2023 Corporate Recruiters Survey, the percentage of global recruiters who ascribe equal value to online and in-person GME decreased slightly since last year, with 54 percent now agreeing that the degrees are equivalent compared to 60% in 2022 (Figure 8). This may be because 60 percent of respondents believe that in-person degrees impart stronger technical skills, and 64 percent agree that graduates of in-person programs have better communication and leadership skills.

**Most employers worldwide report valuing online and in-person degrees equally, but most recruiters lack confidence in online grads’ communication, leadership, and technical skills.**

**Figure 8: About half of employers view online and in-person degrees equally, though most tend to believe employees from in-person programs have stronger leadership, communication, and technical skills.**

This indicates that some employers value online and in-person degrees equally but think in-person degrees equip graduates with stronger skills.

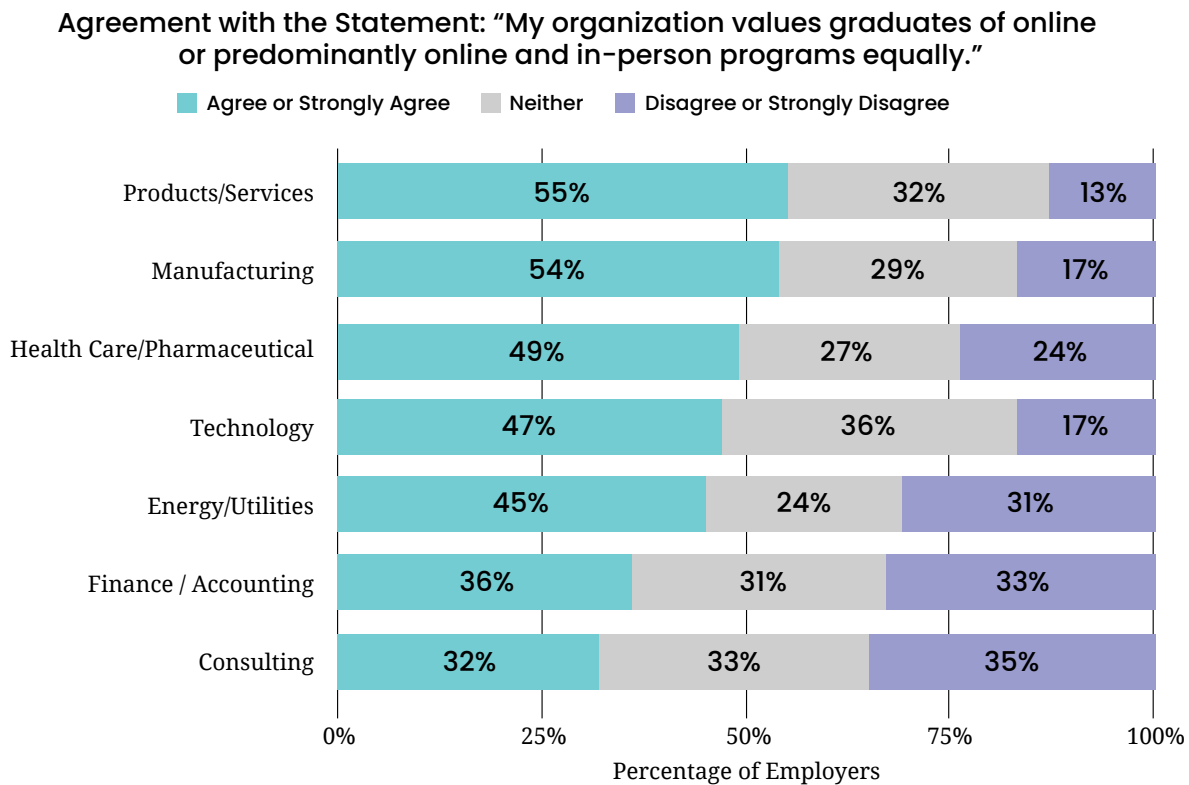




The consulting industry places the least faith in online programs, with just 32 percent of recruiters saying they value online degrees like in-person formats (Figure 9). However, they tend to be more ambivalent than employers from many other industries about the technical skills that online degrees impart.

**Figure 9: Employers in the products/services, manufacturing, health care/pharmaceutical, and technology sectors are most likely to value online degrees equally to in-person programs.**

Employers in the consulting and finance/accounting industries are least likely to value online degrees.





Finance and accounting is the next most critical industry, as just 36 percent of recruiters value online and in-person programs equally. Fifty-nine percent of finance recruiters believe in-person graduates develop better technical skills than online graduates, and 70 percent of finance employers agree in-person graduates develop stronger communication and leadership skills.

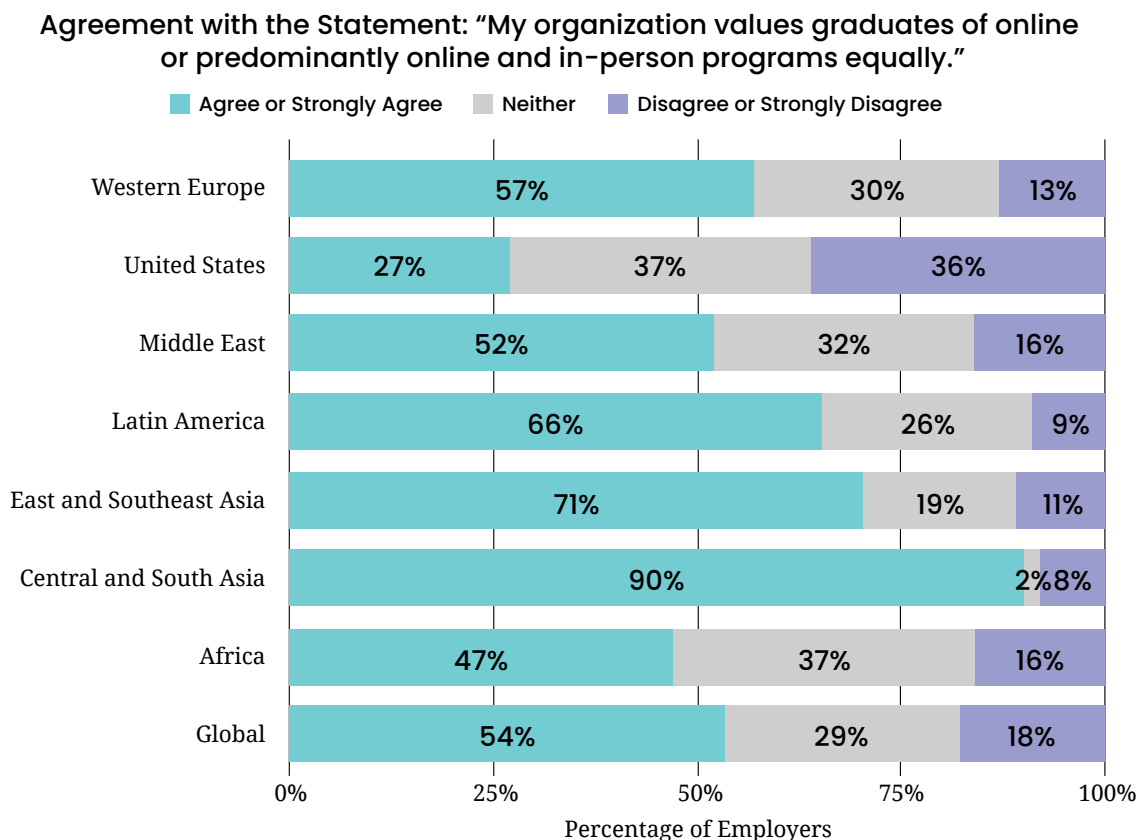
While consulting and finance/accounting are the most popular post-GME industries among prospective students, technology is also a top industry candidates have in mind for after graduation.<sup>4</sup> Employers in the tech sector are among the most positive about online

degrees, with nearly half agreeing their organization views them as favorably as in-person programs and only 17 percent outright disagreeing.

Employers in Asia are the most likely to say they value online and in-person degrees equally, but most also believe graduates of in-person programs attain stronger technical, communication, and leadership skills than those with online degrees (Figure 10). Meanwhile, the opposite trend is occurring in the United States. While U.S. employers indicate they value in-person degrees over online degrees overall, they tend to be more ambivalent about the source of talent’s technical skills.

**Figure 10: Employers in the United States are the most critical about how online degrees stack up to in-person programs.**

Employers in Central and South Asia and East and Southeast Asia have the most favorable views of online programs.



<sup>4</sup>Walker, Andrew. “GMAC Prospective Students Survey: 2023 Summary Report.” Graduate Management Admission Council, April 2023.



## Conclusion

The boost in visibility that the pandemic afforded to online and hybrid GME programs has largely benefited online educators. Interest in these programs is growing steadily globally, with most employers agreeing that online degrees are equivalent to in-person providers and growing numbers of prospective students seeking more flexible options.

Still, perceptions of online degrees among employers and candidates alike have not necessarily kept pace with the dramatic shifts in the composition of online degrees that have occurred in the past couple of years. This sentiment varies by region and industry, but it presents an opportunity for graduate business programs to narrate the particular value of online and hybrid programs to future students and employers.

Online—and especially hybrid—programs have made inroads with groups most likely to benefit from their flexibility, such as women, first-generation, and millennial candidates. These programs can play a role in the overall equity of graduate management education, attracting candidates who rely on flexible program delivery and may not otherwise pursue graduate management education.

But with this opportunity comes an uphill battle to ensure candidates and employers know how the value of an online or hybrid degree stacks up against in-person opportunities.

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | United States

Compared to other regions, employers in the United States are critical about how online degrees stack up to in-person programs, but are also more open to business school graduates developing technical skills in online programs. Interest on the candidate side is high relative to other regions in terms of both preferred program delivery and sentiment about the overall value of online learning.

**27%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

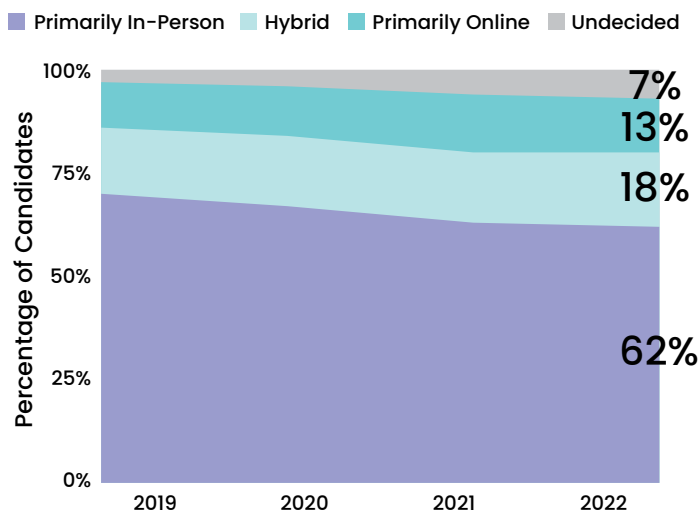
**58%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**43%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**Nearly one-third of candidates in the United States are now interested in online or hybrid course options.**

Preference for in-person learning has decreased among U.S. prospective students since 2019, though still remains the program delivery of choice for most candidates.

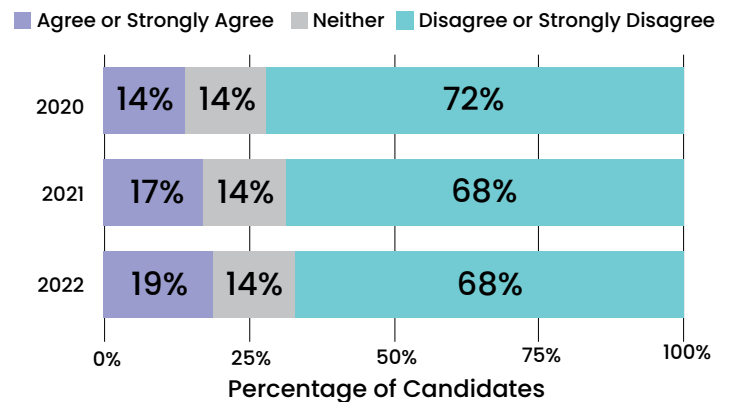
### Candidates' Preferred Program Delivery Over Time



**Candidate confidence in the quality of online degrees has been relatively stable in the United States over the past three years.**

About two-thirds of U.S. candidates have disagreed that online and in-person degrees offer the same value for the past three years.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**9%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**22%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**41%**

Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | Western Europe

Employer sentiment about online degrees is improving in Western Europe, largely in line with global averages. Candidate perception of online programs lags far behind in-person degrees, especially in terms of specific networking and career opportunities.

**57%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

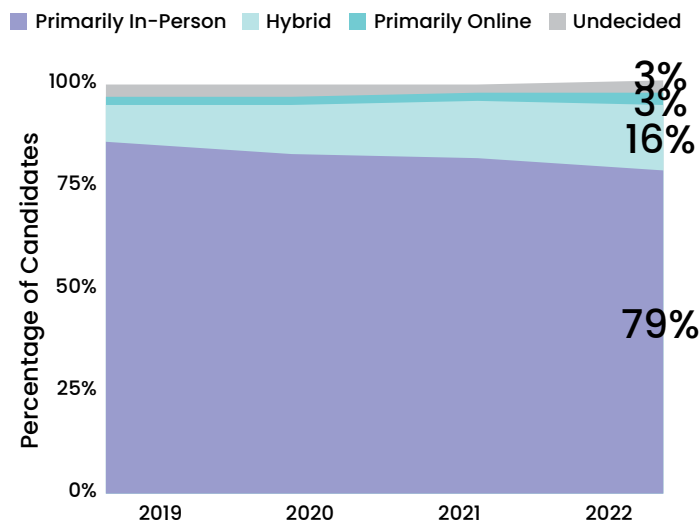
**51%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**62%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**About one-fifth of candidates in Western Europe are targeting online or hybrid courses, with interest in in-person programs declining since 2019.**

Interest in hybrid programs has grown the most, from 9 percent in 2019 to 16 percent in 2022.

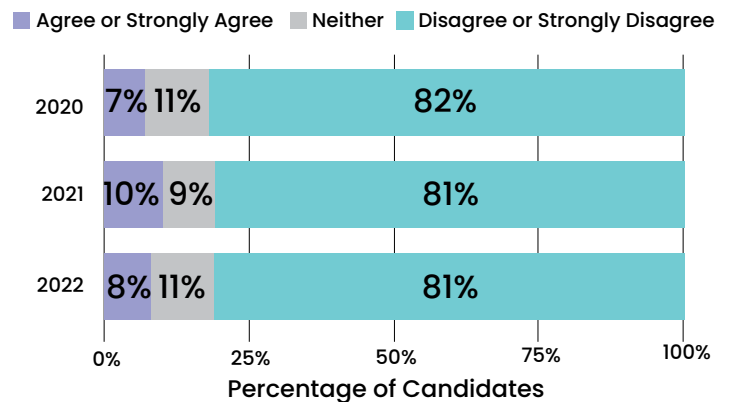
### Candidates' Preferred Program Delivery Over Time



**Candidates' opinions on the value of online programs has remained relatively low over the past three years.**

About four of five European prospective students disagree online and in-person programs deliver equal value.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**4%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**7%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**34%**

Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | East and Southeast Asia

Compared to other regions, employer sentiment around the overall value of online degrees is high. But counterintuitively, employers also believe in-person degrees equip their graduates with stronger technical, communication, and leadership skills. Candidate preference for hybrid programs has grown quite a bit since 2019, though sentiment about the overall value of online programs remains limited.

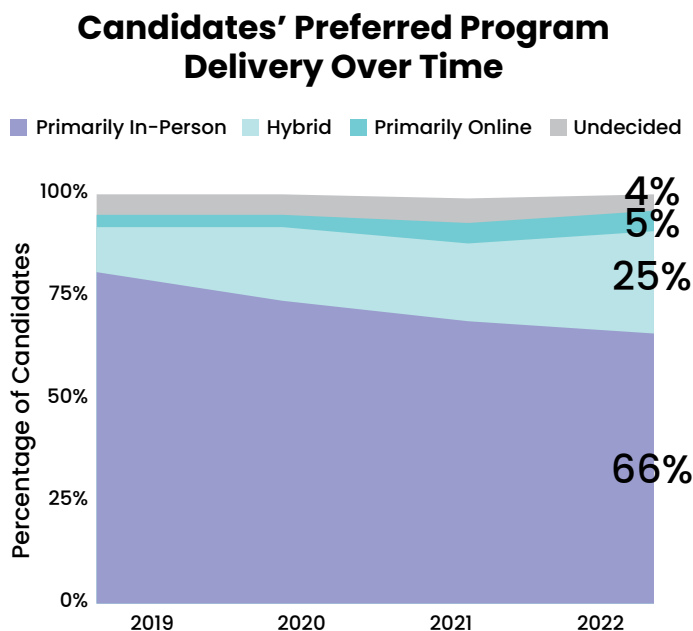
**71%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

**74%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**72%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**There has been comparatively high growth for online and hybrid programs among prospective students since 2019.**

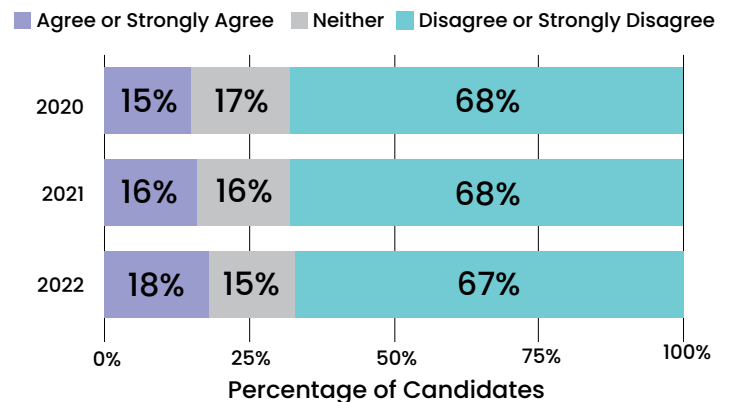
Hybrid programs now attract a quarter of candidates, with interest in in-person courses shrinking to 66 percent from 81 percent in 2019.



**About two-thirds of prospective students in East and Southeast Asia do not believe online and in-person programs offer the same value.**

There has been limited movement in candidate sentiment over the past three years.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**15%** Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**18%** Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**45%** Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | South and Central Asia

Like employers in other parts of Asia, recruiters express confidence in the overall value of online programs, but still believe in-person degrees equip their graduates with stronger technical, communication, and leadership skills. While employer confidence in online degrees is the highest in the world, candidate confidence is among the lowest.

**90%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

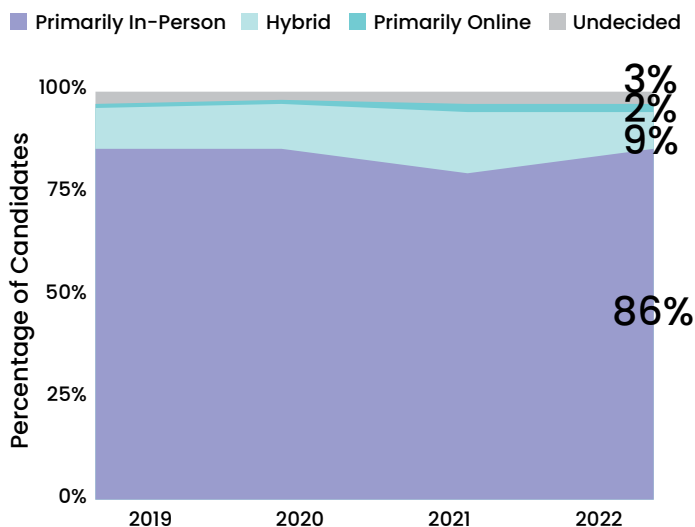
**80%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**82%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**Candidates in South and Central Asia are consistent in their preference for in-person programming.**

Candidates' intent to study in-person programs returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 at over 80 percent.

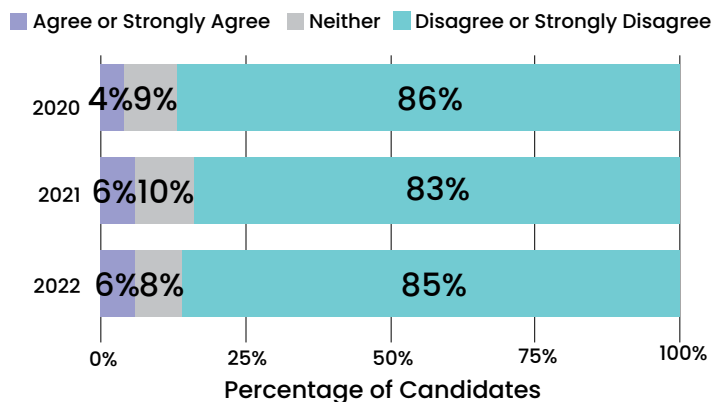
### Candidates' Preferred Program Delivery Over Time



**Candidates in Central and South Asia are among the most concerned in the world that the value of online education does not stack up to in-person degrees.**

Only 6% of prospective students agreed that online and in-person programs offer equal value in 2022.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**7%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**5%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**27%**

Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | Latin America

Employer sentiment about the value of online degrees relative to in-person programs is positive compared to other regions, though like in other places, recruiters maintain their concerns about the technical, communication, and leadership skills graduates develop in online programs. Though candidate preference for online or hybrid degrees remains relatively limited, prospective students' views are growing steadily more favorable.

**66%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

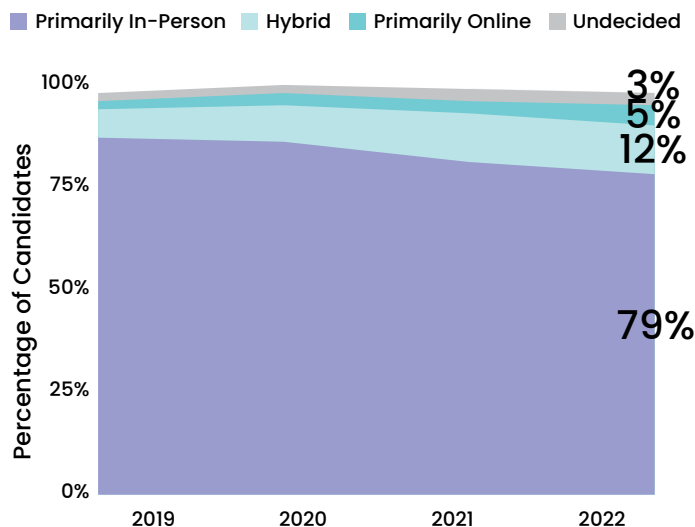
**67%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**64%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**Interest in in-person programs in Latin America has decreased by almost 10 percentage points since 2019, falling to 79 percent in 2022.**

The gains here are mainly in hybrid programs, which have almost doubled their share of interested candidates from 7 percent in 2019 to 12 percent in 2022.

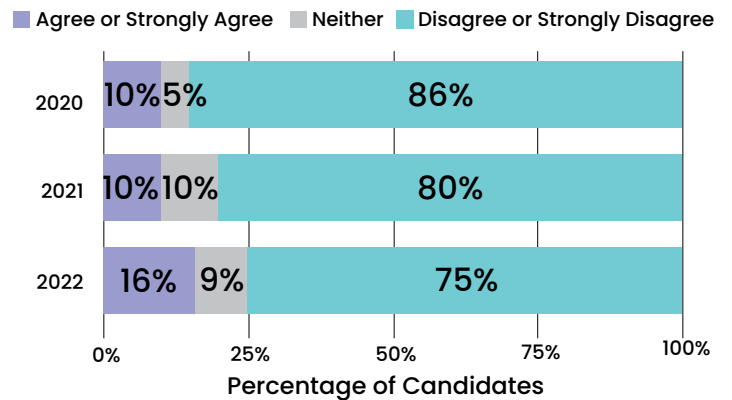
### Candidates' Preferred Program Delivery Over Time



**Prospective students in Latin America are growing more favorable towards online degrees.**

The share of Latin American candidates outright disagreeing that online and in-person programs have the same value has decreased more over time compared to other regions.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**8%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**11%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**27%**

Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | Africa

Employers in Africa have become more neutral on the value of online degrees since 2022, and most hold concerns about specific technical, communication, and leadership skills shared by employers in other regions. Meanwhile, candidate interest in hybrid programs is among the highest in the world.

**47%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

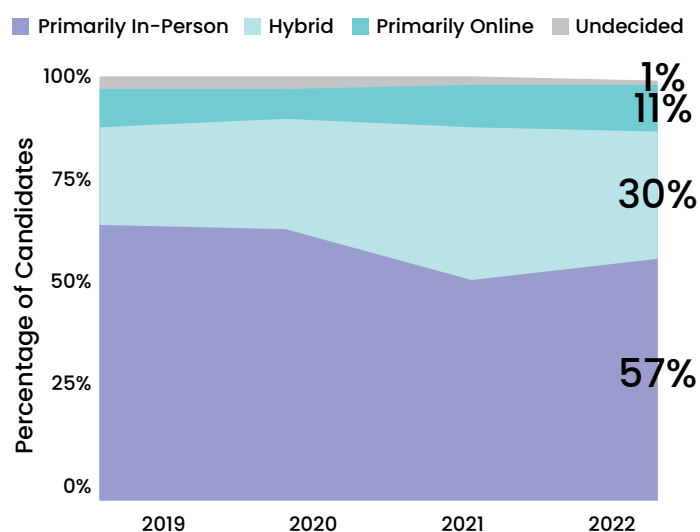
**72%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**61%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**After a noticeable spike in interest in online and hybrid programs in after 2020, interest in-person programs grew in Africa from 2021 to 2022.**

Hybrid programs are more popular than most other regions, with 30 percent of candidates indicating this is their preferred program delivery method.

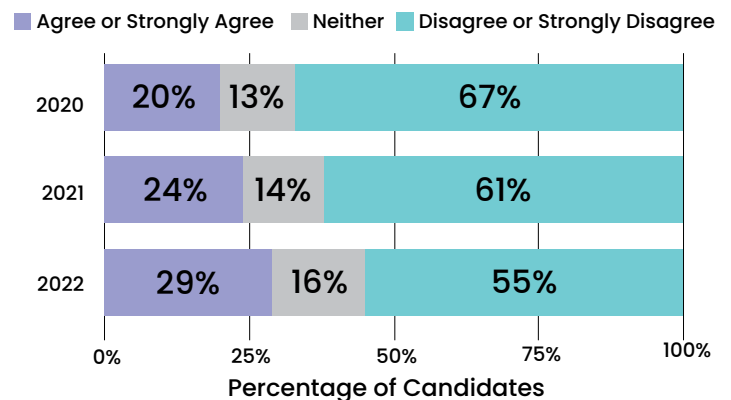
### Candidates' Preferred Program Delivery Over Time



**Overall opinion of the quality of online degrees has improved among candidates in Africa year-over-year and is among the highest in the world.**

Just over a quarter of candidates in Africa agree online and in-person programs have the same value.

**Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."**



**19%** Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**29%** Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**43%** Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022



# Online & Hybrid Learning

## Regional Profiles | Middle East

Confidence in online programs among employers in the Middle East is diminishing, though more than half still value in-person and online degrees equally. Most recruiters hold concerns about the development of technical skills, but especially communication and leadership skills. Candidate sentiment about the value of online degrees has improved, though preference for hybrid programs has retracted since last year.

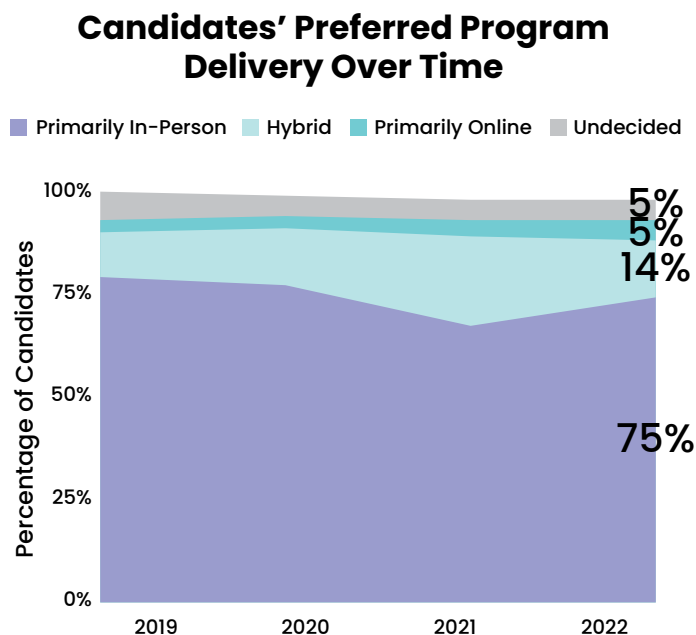
**52%** Of employers agree their organization values graduates of **online and in-person programs equally** in 2023

**90%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **communication and leadership skills** than online programs in 2023

**65%** Of employers agree in-person programs impart stronger **technical skills** than online programs in 2023

**In-person programs grew after a small dip in 2021, with interest in online and hybrid programs among prospective students falling from 26 percent to 19 percent.**

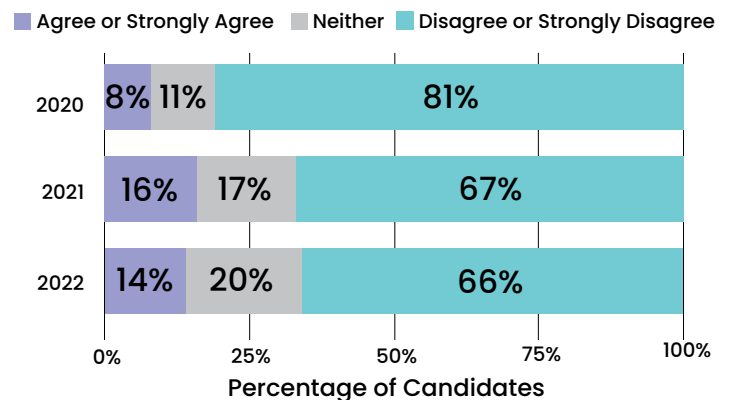
Candidate interest in hybrid programs is still higher than in 2019, at 14 percent compared to 11 percent.



### Candidate sentiment about online programs has become more positive or neutral since 2020.

Two-thirds of candidates disagree that online programs have equal value to in-person ones, 15 points less than 2020.

### Agreement with the statement: "A graduate business education acquired through on-campus experiences offers same value as an online degree."



**5%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **networking opportunities** in 2022



**7%**

Of prospective students agree in-person and online programs offer equivalent **career opportunities** in 2022



**38%**

Of prospective students would pursue an **online degree at a higher ranked school** over an in-person degree at a lower ranked school in 2022

