

Empowering Place: The Role of Women's Leadership in Driving Regional Development through the Leeds, UK, #WECAN Project

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Abstract

Leeds Beckett University is a member of the Leeds Anchor Network, the most prominent anchor network in the UK. The university's #WECAN (Women Empowered through Coaching and Networking) project highlights the transformative power of place-based interventions by advancing women's leadership and breaking systemic barriers across the Leeds City Region. Through fully funded training, accredited leadership qualifications, and structured networking opportunities, #WECAN empowered a significant number of women from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), charities, and social enterprises to strengthen their leadership capabilities, navigate social, cultural, and economic challenges, and thereby contribute to leadership resilience and SME development across the region. To ensure that #WECAN's impact extended beyond that of a standard training and support program, the initiative incorporated a structured mixed-methods research component comprising an onboarding diagnostic questionnaire (131 individual and 83 business responses), a detailed participant survey (122 responses), observation data from intervention sessions, and follow-up interviews as part of the impact evidence collection. The headline findings highlighted increased confidence and leadership capability among participants, persistent barriers to career progression, and a notable gap between individual and employer perceptions regarding leadership development needs and opportunities. This paper examines how this anchor institution-led initiative leveraged regional assets, engaged stakeholders, and enhanced socioeconomic mobility, creating a legacy of impact, as evidenced by the continuation of #WECAN Connects and the

Driving Change series beyond the initial funded period. The analysis highlights the project's vision, challenges, and key outcomes, including leadership resilience, SME development, and the establishment of a sustainable model for the #WECAN network.

Keywords: Leeds Beckett University, women's leadership, community engagement, regional development, leadership development, anchor institutions

Context

The role of universities as anchor institutions and their value to regional economies is well established (Coll et al., 2025). Much of the literature focuses on their contribution to local economic development (Comunian et al., 2014) and their engagement with businesses (McCauley-Smith et al., 2022), as well as their capacity to upskill local communities and influence employment outcomes (Frenette, 2009). Such work positions universities as organizations with the scale and reach to shape regional economic trajectories and play leadership roles in their localities (Cantor et al., 2013; Goddard et al., 2014). Over the past two decades, policies at international, national, and regional levels have aimed to strengthen competitiveness, support economic growth, and promote social stability by helping businesses increase productivity, participate in networks, access development programs, and manage talent (Fischer & Nijkamp, 1988; Sternberg, 2012). SMEs, in particular, are widely recognized for their critical economic role. Georgescu and Avasilcai (2022) argue that SMEs remain central to job creation and form an essential foundation for inclusive and sustainable societies.

However, a paradox continues to shape discussions of leadership and organizational development. Despite the significant increase in the number of women entering managerial roles, longstanding inequalities in workplace experiences and wider family responsibilities persist. As Davidson and Burke (2000) note, women represent a substantial proportion of the workforce in many Western economies, yet organizations have often been slow to recognize and fully develop the potential of their female managers. This has implications not only for the women themselves, whose progression, confidence, and well-being may be adversely affected, but also for the organizations that risk limiting their own capacity for growth, innovation, and resilience by not drawing on the full range of talent available to them (Shatila et al., 2025). Failing to harness the perspectives and capabilities of women represents a missed opportunity. As Davidson and Burke (2000) point out, effective leadership and sustainable organizational strength depend on engaging all resources within the workforce and supporting employees to contribute to their full potential.

Alongside this, a substantial body of research has highlighted the persistent gender inequalities that shape women's experiences in the workplace (Anton & Moise, 2025; Tench et al., 2000, 2001, 2005). Studies consistently report societal, cultural, and institutional barriers; challenges related to confidence; masculine organizational norms; and limited access to training and skills (Topić et al., 2021a). Women continue to face discrimination through the pay gap, the glass ceiling, and other obstacles that hinder progression into leadership roles (Tabassum et al., 2019), as well as stereotypes and bias that reinforce gendered expectations (Bolade-Ogunfodun et al., 2022; Topić et al., 2021b). These inequalities remain entrenched despite women's critical contribution to the resilience and growth of the small business economy (Topić et al., 2021a; Tabassum et al., 2019). This pattern is also evident within the Leeds City Region, which provides the context for this study.

In response to these challenges, Fielden et al.'s (2003) argument that academia should never exist in isolation remains highly relevant. Universities must stay deeply connected to the dynamic societies and communities they serve, operate in, and work alongside. This principle aligns closely with Leeds Beckett University's role as an anchor institution committed to building inclusive and prosperous communities across the region. Recent work on metropolitan and anchor universities has further highlighted the importance of civic engagement, collaborative regional partnerships, and service-led approaches to community development within anchor networks (Denison et.al., 2024). It was within this context that a £1.7 million initiative, funded through the European Social Fund as part of the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme, was launched to strengthen leadership capacity, widen opportunities and raise aspirations for women working in SMEs and self-employment across the region.

Women Empowered through Coaching and Networking (#WECAN) was created to offer structured leadership development while also nurturing the informal networks and confidence-building spaces that are often central to career progression. The program engaged more than 920 women and over 350 businesses across ten local authority areas, delivering diagnostics, ILM-accredited training, coaching, community-building events, and tailored interventions focused on leadership capability, self-esteem, career progression, and business resilience. The diversity of participants, from early-stage entrepreneurs to experienced managers, demonstrates the ongoing need for development opportunities that recognize women's potential and address the barriers they face in their workplaces.

A core principle of the project was the understanding that leadership development cannot be reduced to knowledge acquisition or traditional classroom-based programs (Ahmadi & Vogel, 2023). The philosophy underpinning #WECAN has been that leadership development of community members is more effective when supported through coaching, peer and action learning, opportunities for networking and reflection, and engagement within their ecosystem. These principles reflect the University's wider anchor mission to support the communities it serves. Although the literature on anchor institutions is substantial, it often treats universities as isolated actors and pays limited attention to how their activities interact with the broader regional ecosystem. As a result, there remains relatively little research on how anchor-institution strategies can be aligned with specific local priorities, or on the contribution universities can make to more inclusive and prosperous communities. Accordingly, our research question asks "How do place-based anchor institution-led initiatives (such as #WECAN) shape leadership development opportunities and resilience for women in SMEs?"

In this paper, we review Leeds Beckett University's experience of working with partners to deliver a leadership development program for women working in SMEs across the Leeds City Region. This is considered alongside the literature on anchor institutions, women's barriers to progression, and regional ecosystems. We begin by outlining the context and reviewing key

research on the role of anchor institutions within their local ecosystems, introducing the Leeds City Anchor Network. We then discuss our theoretical lens, after which we describe the methodological approach, followed by an account of how the leadership program was designed, developed, and delivered in a way that integrated social value and supported the creation of the #WECAN community. Using the program as a case study and drawing on preliminary findings, we examine the benefits, challenges, and outcomes identified by participants and their organizations, considering the wider implications for the region. The paper concludes with recommendations informed by the principles and practices of anchor working.

Women's Barriers and the Importance of Supportive Regional Ecosystems

Across many SMEs and among sole entrepreneurs, women frequently encounter persistent organizational and cultural barriers that shape their opportunities for growth and leadership development (Pincha Baduge et al., 2025; Guthrie et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 2004). These barriers are well-documented and were also reflected in the experiences of participants in this study. In SMEs, these include limited access to role models, uncertainty about progression pathways, unspoken gendering of roles, and a lack of confidence, often reinforced by organizational cultures that do not actively support or recognize women's leadership potential.

In many cases, these barriers are directly connected to the structure and character of SMEs (Mudara & Mafini, 2022). Small organizations often have fewer formal development pathways, limited HR capacity, and resource constraints that may unintentionally restrict opportunities for leadership growth. Sectoral dynamics also play a role, particularly in traditionally male-dominated industries where cultural norms and expectations can make it harder for women to build visibility or secure influence (Quaye et al., 2015). These intersecting challenges highlight the importance of access to peers, mentors, and wider stakeholders who can provide practical guidance, encouragement, and a broader sense of belonging within the regional ecosystem.

For women operating as sole entrepreneurs, the challenges are often more individualized but no less significant. Many experience isolation, limited access to networks, difficulties securing appropriate professional support, and personal factors that can shape how they navigate their business environment. Women entrepreneurs also face challenges that stem directly from gender (Carter et al., 2007). These include obstacles to accessing financial resources, traditional gender roles, gaps in human capital, such as management experience, restricted networks, and fear of failure (Cho et al., 2021). Traditional expectations surrounding women's roles continue to influence participation in entrepreneurial activity and help explain why women are less represented in this space (McGowan et al., 2012).

This is where the value of a strong regional ecosystem becomes evident (Fritsch, 2013; Tsvetkova, 2015; Autio et al., 2014). When women have opportunities to connect with others who share similar experiences, they are better equipped to share their learning, build confidence,

and navigate organizational barriers. Peer networks also act as a counterbalance to isolation, offering an environment in which experiences can be validated, and women can begin to articulate their leadership identity and/or career aspirations more clearly (Baumol, 1993). For sole entrepreneurs in particular, access to such networks can be a crucial source of advice, challenge, and support that might not otherwise be available within the day-to-day demands of running a small business.

Within this broader ecosystem, universities with an anchor mission have a distinctive role to play. An important element of the anchor role is to consider how the institution can help its business partners grow and contribute to regional economic development. Universities foster business thinking, influence behaviors, and support the venture development cycle (Audretsch, 2014; Cooke et al., 1997). Members of the academic community are trained to create "knowledge innovations" that can be shared formally or informally through interaction, networking, education, presentations, and publications (Boucher et al., 2003). Boucher et al. (2003) identify universities as critical institutional factors in regional knowledge development, while Ierapetritis (2019) positions them as connecting institutions within entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In practice, this means that universities can offer women in SMEs and women sole entrepreneurs access to expertise, networks, and supportive spaces that may not exist within their own organizations. Through leadership programs, coaching, knowledge exchange, and community-building, universities can act as a bridge between individual development and wider regional priorities. When aligned with a clear anchor mission, such interventions can strengthen inclusive growth, enhance local business resilience, help communities to prosper, and create more visible and accessible pathways for women to develop their leadership potential and meet their career aspirations.

The Role of Women's Leadership in Driving Regional Development

Women's leadership has a critical role to play in strengthening regional development, particularly in areas like Leeds where SMEs form the backbone of the local economy (Ghouse et al., 2017; Osei & Zhuang, 2020; Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez & Sánchez-García, 2020). Innovation and creativity often emerge from diversity in thinking, and organizations that draw on the full range of their people's experiences, insights, and skills are better positioned to adapt, grow, and respond to change (Kuratko, 2007; MacKenzie, 1992). By contrast, when women's progression and participation are limited, whether through structural barriers, cultural expectations, or a lack of targeted support, organizations restrict their own potential (Kuratko, 2007). They lose access to alternative perspectives, diminish their capacity for problem-solving, and weaken their resilience in competitive or uncertain environments.

The same applies at the wider regional level. When women are not able to participate fully in leadership roles across SMEs and entrepreneurial activity, the region loses a significant source of talent, creativity, and economic contribution (Osei & Zhuang, 2020; Quaye et al., 2015; MacKenzie, 1992). This affects not only individual organizations but also the strength and vibrancy of the regional ecosystem as a whole (Spigel, 2017). A thriving ecosystem depends on a broad base of leaders who can innovate, collaborate, and drive change (Roundy & Lyons, 2023; Lang & Fink, 2019). Ensuring women can progress and contribute fully is therefore not simply a matter of fairness: it is essential for regional growth, sustainability, and long-term competitiveness.

Leadership development facilitated by a university with an anchor mission strengthens this potential even further. Universities operating as anchor institutions are grounded in a commitment to their place and to supporting inclusive and sustainable growth. When they deliver leadership development, the content becomes more relevant to local businesses, individual participants, and the wider communities they serve. The focus on place ensures that leadership learning is connected to real regional challenges, opportunities, and priorities. The emphasis on inclusivity reinforces the idea that everyone in the region should have access to opportunities that allow them to contribute and thrive.

Moreover, the anchor mission promotes a sense of collective effort, recognizing that regional development cannot be achieved by any single organization but only through collaboration across sectors. Leadership development delivered within this context supports the creation of shared networks, fosters mutual understanding, and encourages the belief that collective goods can be achieved through collective action. For women in SMEs, this creates a supportive environment where their leadership potential is recognized not only as valuable to their organization but as essential to the strength and resilience of the region itself.

The Leeds City Anchor Network

The Leeds City Anchor Network was founded in 2018. It has 14 members, dominated by “Eds, Meds, and Feds” – higher and further educational institutions, hospitals, and local government – who operate at scale and are rooted in the city. The network has four aims, with members seeking to: 1) act as exemplary employers who support a diverse local workforce; 2) commit fully to the city’s carbon reduction ambitions; 3) increase the proportion of discretionary purchasing spend with local organizations; 4) increase the positive benefits of service delivery for local people. For the four educational members, including Leeds Beckett University, this means developing and redefining the concept of “service learning” (Denison et al., 2024).

At LBU, the core anchor network principles were incorporated into the university’s strategic plan in 2021. Since then, they have been influencing the development and implementation of core operating strategies on both the academic side (e.g. in student recruitment, teaching and learning,

and research) and the operational side (e.g. in workforce development, estate planning, and decarbonization). For example, approaches to procurement have been redesigned to improve access for local suppliers; student learning has been increasingly aligned with live briefs linked to regional needs; and research projects have sought to respond more directly to regional priorities and challenges. Internally, senior leadership engagement with anchor priorities has also led to the inclusion of regional metrics in performance monitoring and the creation of cross-functional working groups to drive progress.

These steps were not undertaken in isolation. Building the University's anchor strategy required coordinated engagement with external stakeholders, ongoing dialogue with the Leeds Anchor Network and other regional partners, and alignment of institutional communications to reinforce this commitment. A central part of this work is the University's commitment to supporting the development of people within the community, enabling them to unlock opportunities for themselves, their organizations, and the wider region. The approach taken by LBU illustrates that effectively embedding anchor-institution principles requires organizational alignment, ensuring that strategic objectives, core operations, and academic delivery work together to deliver sustained local benefit. For other HEIs, this example underscores the value of formalizing regional commitments and aligning them closely with institutional missions.

Theoretical Lens

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Anchor Institutions as a Framework for Women's Leadership Development

A useful theoretical lens for interpreting the #WECAN program's contribution to women's leadership in SMEs is the combined framework of entrepreneurial ecosystem theory (Spigel, 2017; Autio et al., 2014) and anchor institution theory (Goddard et al., 2014; Cantor et al., 2013). Entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) theory emphasizes that entrepreneurial and leadership outcomes are shaped not only by individual capabilities but also by the social, cultural, institutional, and infrastructural conditions within a region. These ecosystems are constituted by networks, norms, supports, skill infrastructures, and enabling organizations (Spigel, 2017; Roundy & Lyons, 2023). Leadership development in SMEs, therefore, depends on an interplay among individual agency, organizational practices, and the wider institutional environment, making the EE lens particularly appropriate for analyzing the experiences of women in the Leeds City Region.

Within this framework, women's leadership trajectories are understood as being shaped by systemic constraints and enabling mechanisms distributed across the ecosystem (Cho et al., 2021; Godley et al., 2021). Barriers such as patriarchal norms, limited networks, restricted access to role models, and gendered organizational cultures represent ecosystem-level failures that constrain the effective utilization of women's human capital. From an EE perspective,

interventions that enhance networking, mentoring, and confidence act as ecosystem-level correctives that improve connectivity, knowledge flows, and resource access (Lang & Fink, 2019). #WECAN's emphasis on coaching and community-building, therefore, aligns with the principle that strengthened relational infrastructure enhances entrepreneurial and leadership potential.

Anchor institution theory complements this ecosystem view by positioning universities as place-based, mission-driven institutions capable of shaping local economic and social development (Birch et al., 2013; Boucher et al., 2003). Universities act as stabilizers and conveners within regional ecosystems, leveraging their knowledge resources, networks, and credibility to address inequality and foster inclusive growth. Unlike more mobile private-sector actors, anchor institutions possess "sticky capital," allowing them to take long-term roles in capacity building, network development, and institutional transformation (Goddard et al., 2014). Through this lens, #WECAN is interpreted not merely as a development program but as an expression of Leeds Beckett University's anchor mission, mobilizing research, pedagogical expertise, and regional partnerships to address systemic gender inequality. Integrating EE theory and anchor institution theory provides a multi-level understanding of the #WECAN initiative. At the micro level, it supports individual women's confidence, capability, and leadership identity. At the meso level, it influences SME cultures, developmental pathways, and organizational support systems. At the macro level, it shapes the connectivity, inclusivity, and resilience of the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.

This integrated theoretical framework foregrounds the idea that leadership development for women in SMEs is not an isolated HR or skills issue but a structural ecosystem challenge requiring coordinated institutional responses. It highlights how anchor-led interventions can alter regional opportunity structures by addressing cultural norms, enhancing social capital, and redistributing access to networks and knowledge. As such, this combined lens offers a robust foundation for analyzing the project's effectiveness, interpreting its findings, and articulating its contribution to regional development.

Research Approach and Methodology

The #WECAN research was designed to move beyond program evaluation and to explore the systemic and cultural challenges facing women working in SMEs. This aligns with the University's broader anchor-institution mission to generate evidence that can inform regional strategy, institutional practice, and future support programs.

As part of the onboarding process, all learners and participating businesses completed a diagnostic questionnaire that captured their motivations, development needs, organizational context, and anticipated outcomes. At that point, we also asked participants for permission to use their participation data for research (in addition to informing project planning). From those who

agreed, we obtained 131 complete individual diagnostics and 83 business ones. The individual and diagnostic questionnaires were completed independently by participants and businesses with participating employees, respectively. In some cases, such as sole entrepreneurs or where the head of the business was also a participant, the same person may have completed one questionnaire in each set; however, the two instruments were not formally linked at the data level, and the samples were not treated as matched pairs. The individual survey captured women's own experiences and perceptions, while the business survey captured employer perspectives on organizational provision and culture independently of any individual participant. Women who consented to participate were also invited to complete a detailed questionnaire (122 responses), which examined social background, perceived barriers, organizational opportunities and perceptions, among others (such as wellbeing and resilience, preferred leadership and communication styles, etc., that are not reported in this study). Consenting participants were also observed during intervention sessions. These sessions were transcribed and analyzed using corpus-inspired techniques to identify patterns in language use and draw out deeper insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, and developmental needs. This mixed-methods approach brought together diagnostic, survey, and observational data to form a comprehensive evidence base (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The diagnostics provided baseline measures of confidence, leadership readiness, perceived organizational support, and motivation for participation. Business respondents were asked: a) about provision and opportunities for employees generally (including the availability of flexible working, coaching, networking, and EDI events) and b) whether the business maintained any "professional development or internal support" either specifically for women or where women were, in practice, the primary beneficiaries (for example, support for single parents). The comparison in Figure 2, for instance, reflects differences in how organizations and individual women participants viewed the same developmental landscape, rather than a direct assessment match. We acknowledge that some questions, particularly those relating to promotions and cross-training opportunities, were designed with a broader organizational context in mind and may therefore have been less directly applicable to very small enterprises: the relatively low agreement rates reported for these items (57.5% of businesses; 45.8% of participants) may partially reflect structural constraints inherent in SMES rather than active organizational policy choices. Notably, several respondents commented that their organization was simply too small to provide opportunities for upward progression. This consideration informed the interpretation of the findings.

The corpus analysis of open comments identified recurrent words and phrases that highlighted underlying concerns and thematic consistencies across responses (Stubbs, 2001; Konstantopoulou & Gabrielatos, 2025). Alongside this, thematic analysis was undertaken, drawing on both inductive insights emerging directly from participants' accounts and deductive

elements shaped by the project's overarching research aims (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019).

These insights were then synthesized across the dataset, enabling connections among confidence, leadership identity, workplace culture, perceived opportunity, and broader structural barriers. The findings informed the delivery of the #WECAN developmental program. Taken together, this multi-layered approach allowed the research to capture both breadth and depth (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019; Voulgarides et al., 2025). It supported personalized engagement throughout the program while providing a robust foundation for understanding the project's legacy and its broader implications for women's leadership development across the Leeds City Region.

Findings

Across the dataset, a consistent picture emerged of the challenges women face in SMEs, particularly in male-dominated sectors. Many participants spoke about issues related to confidence, visibility, and isolation. These reflections echoed arguments in the extant literature that highlight imposter syndrome, the absence of role models, and broader structural inequalities as recurring barriers. The program's emphasis on coaching and networking appeared to create valuable spaces where women could reflect on their experiences, build supportive relationships, and begin to develop a stronger sense of confidence in navigating their leadership pathways. We present relevant survey findings in Figures 1 and 2, as well as representative quotes from the data, to provide further clarity.

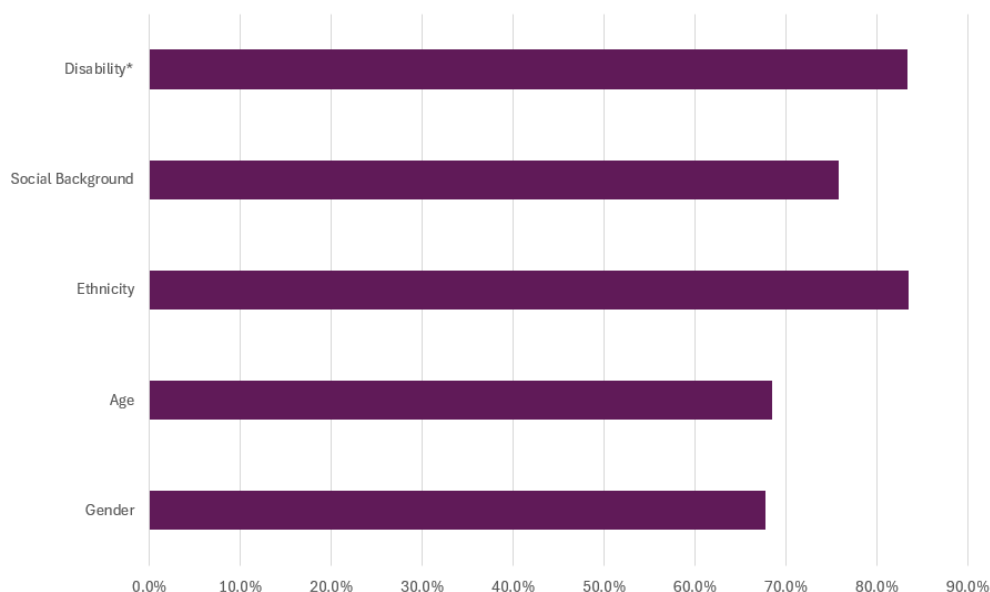


FIGURE 1A. I feel I have given the opportunity to grow in my job, regardless of my...

**101 of 131 respondents answered the question on disability as N/A. 10 did so for ethnicity, and 7 for social background. Percentages calculated from those who gave an answer other than N/A.*

Large majorities of participants strongly agreed with the statement “I feel I have been given the opportunity to grow in my job, regardless of my [demographic]”, across all five demographics tracked.

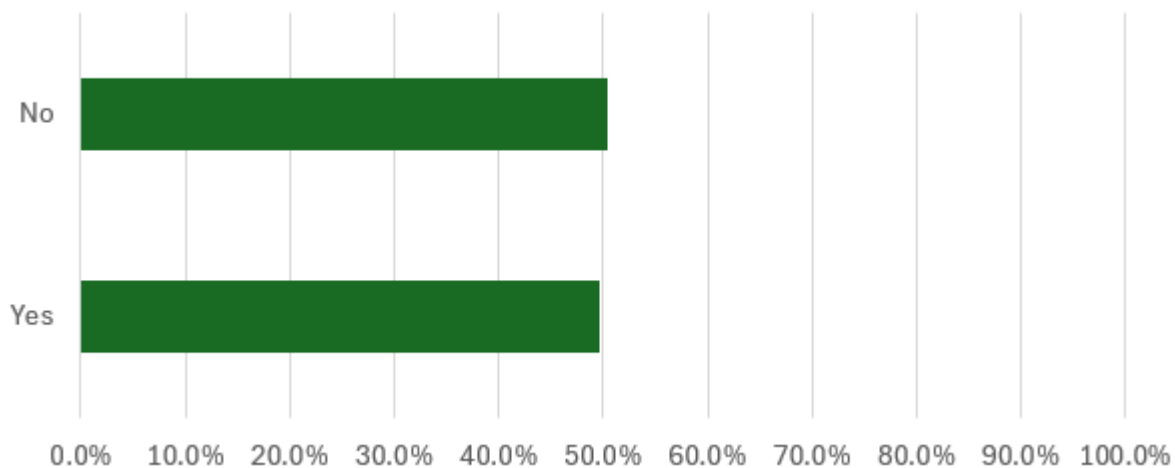


FIGURE 2B. Have you experienced any workplace barriers to career progression?

Later in the diagnostic, after the demographic questions and some questions on professional development, participants were asked whether they had faced *any* workplace barriers to progressing. 49.6% (65 of 131) said yes, and 50.6% (66 of 131) said no – suggesting that a woman’s chance of progressing unimpeded in her career is no better than a coinflip.

This question complicates the previous one and perhaps indicates women do not always think of workplace barriers as systemic and gender specific: of 88 women who earlier had “strongly agreed” that they had been able to progress regardless of their gender, when prompted to talk about barriers they had faced at work, 22 (25%) nonetheless shared specifically gender-related examples. Additionally, when asked “In your opinion, are there any specific issues/challenges/barriers for women in your industry or sector?” more than two-thirds (57 of 83; 68.6%) of business respondents said yes. One participant said:

I work in a male dominated industry and I have to have the confidence to assert myself in this space. (Business owner, 45)

Across the open-text sections of the diagnostic, both individual and business versions, comments illustrated the breadth and complexity of the barriers women encounter. In addition to direct discrimination on the tracked factors of gender, age (both “too old” and “too young”), disability, ethnicity, and social class, participants reported experiencing prejudice linked to other demographic factors. These included education level (particularly among those without a university degree), nationality, physical appearance or perceived attractiveness, and parenthood. Many also referred to challenges around maternity or childcare: examples included needing to leave roles because flexible working options were unavailable; being replaced or pushed out while on maternity leave; part-time workers with caring responsibilities being overlooked in

favour of full-time colleagues; and being excluded from prestigious events, or travel, due to real or perceived parenting constraints. A participant said:

When there were more opportunities for progression earlier on in my career, they involved a lot more travelling which I wasn't able to do because of having young children. Parenthood was a barrier. (Sales Manager, 44)

Issues specific to smaller businesses included:

- lack of funding for salary progression or professional development, sometimes accompanied by discriminatory patterns in how the limited funding available was allocated
- organisational structures with no room to progress, either within specific roles or overall. A participant stated: *[In] my last role, the organisation was structured so that [...] I would essentially need to retrain in order to progress in the organisation which wasn't something that I wanted to do* (Finance Officer, 42)
- nepotism, particularly in businesses originally founded by family members or close friends, where decision-making informally favoured personal connections.

Owners/senior managers, both those responding as individuals and those answering for their business, also cited issues such as:

- prejudice toward female workers/female-led businesses from male clients
- difficulty in charging properly for the worth of their work – both because of client perceptions and internalised self-deprecation
- finding that women candidates for promotion self-reject due to lack of confidence or impostor syndrome

One participant stated:

[My industry] is about connections so I had to [...] do a lot of free work and took projects on for less money. This was a combination of being a woman (lack of confidence in negotiating salaries) and from a working class background. (Business owner, 39)

Participants described a range of entrenched structural and cultural barriers that affected their progression. These included experiences of overt sexism, the lack of visible female role models and working environments shaped by patriarchal norms and the informal gendering of roles. Several women also spoke about self-doubt and imposter syndrome, describing how these internalised barriers often caused them to withdraw from opportunities or question their readiness for more senior responsibilities. For participants with international backgrounds, additional cultural expectations further constrained their advancement, reinforcing the uneven and often fragile landscape in which women navigate leadership pathways. A senior manager stated:

... they try to make it more inclusive although it is challenging as it's not the done thing in the sector. A woman can't do this role, certainly an [ethnicity] British woman can't do the role. (Senior Manager, 31)

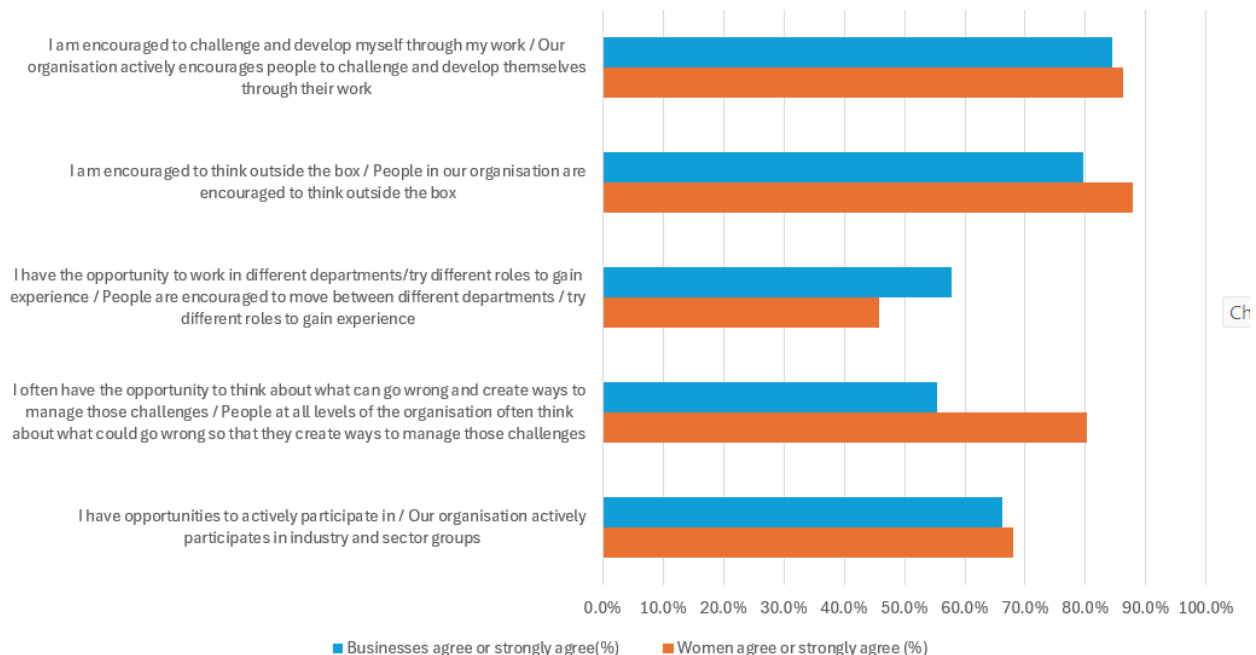


FIGURE 2. Organisational opportunities and perceptions.

Business diagnostic responses were completed by the individual who enlisted the organization in the #WECAN program. In most cases, this was the business owner, founder, or a senior manager. In a smaller number of cases, it was an HR or operations lead.

Comments shared in relation to Figure 2 highlight the differences in how participants and their employers perceive developmental opportunities within SMEs. We recognize that perceptions of developmental opportunity may vary with respondents’ seniority and role, and this was taken into account when interpreting the business data.

Remarkably, participants were generally more positive than businesses, with the most striking gap emerging between the 80.2% of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they “*had the opportunity to think about what can go wrong and create ways to manage those challenges*” compared with only 55.4% of businesses who felt this was true for employees more broadly.

Around two-thirds of both participants and businesses reported having opportunities to participate in industry or sector groups, suggesting that a significant proportion - approximately one-third - do not. Similarly, fewer than six in ten businesses (57.5%) and less than half of participants (45.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that employees “*had the opportunity to work in different departments or try different roles to gain experience*”. These findings indicate that

cross-training, broadened exposure, and varied role experience remain notable gaps in many women's developmental trajectories.

Confidence emerged as a particularly strong theme across the responses. Participants frequently linked confidence to their ability to manage teams, deal with legal or procedural uncertainty, step into new responsibilities, or maintain visibility within the organization. Many described confidence not as a fixed attribute but as something that required continual support, reassurance, and opportunities for growth, something the coaching-led approach of #WECAN appeared to offer. A participant stated:

The opinion of others knocked my confidence - that an older male "should have got" [a promotion]. Starting a family slowed my career progression and I have stayed in middle management since then. (Project Manager, 37)

Women's reflections on their leadership experience and readiness varied widely, reflecting the diversity of roles and pathways within SMEs. Their accounts highlighted differences in role scope, the size and dynamics of teams, and the leadership qualities they felt they possessed or wished to develop further. What became clear was that readiness for progression was shaped not only by skills and experience but also by the extent to which participants felt supported, recognized, and able to see themselves as leaders.

Experiences of organizational support were notably mixed. Some women described positive cultures in which their contributions were valued and development was encouraged, while others reported limited opportunities, inconsistent support, or unclear pathways for progression. These variations underscore the broader regional challenge of ensuring that access to leadership development is fair and equitable across SMEs. A participant stated:

In a previous job I was in a very male dominated environment and felt undervalued and overlooked [...] It was also a very unsupportive working culture, and led to me having a lack of faith in myself and my own abilities - this is why I left and moved on. (Social Media Manager, 21)

Businesses were also asked whether they offered each of a specific set of supports to their employees. Almost all said they offered flexible working and networking opportunities, but only 45.7% offered internal EDI events, only 36.1% access to communities of practice, and only 24.1% said they offered dedicated supports to women employees, or for which they would expect women employees to be the main beneficiaries (e.g., support for single parents)

Taken together, the findings present a picture of women navigating a complex landscape of organizational, structural, and personal factors that shape their progression. They also reinforce the importance and need for leadership development approaches that do more than deliver technical skills and/or training; they need to address confidence, identity, and the wider cultural environment in which leadership is exercised.

Program Outcomes and Observed Change

Observational data and post-program participant accounts suggested that the #WECAN interventions contributed to important changes in participants' confidence, leadership identity, and workplace behavior. Many participants described feeling more able to assert themselves within professional settings, engage in decision-making processes, apply for promotions, expand their professional networks, and challenge limiting assumptions about their capabilities. Others reflected on an increased sense of legitimacy as leaders and a greater willingness to make their achievements visible within their organizations. The coaching and peer-learning model appeared to strengthen the relational infrastructure surrounding participants by creating supportive communities of practice, opportunities for reflection, and trusted peer networks. In turn, this enabled many women to access and exercise forms of agency that they had previously felt constrained from using within their workplaces. Participants frequently linked these changes to the value of collective learning, shared experiences, and the confidence gained through engagement with other women facing similar challenges. At the same time, the findings do not suggest that the structural inequalities were resolved through the program alone. Rather, the continuation of initiatives such as #WECAN Connects and the Driving Change series demonstrates sustained institutional commitment to supporting women's leadership development and maintaining regional support networks beyond the funded life of the project.

Discussion

The findings can be more fully interpreted through the combined lens of entrepreneurial ecosystem theory and anchor institution theory, which illuminate how women's leadership trajectories are shaped by the structural conditions of the regional environment. EE theory emphasizes that leadership development is embedded within interconnected cultural, organizational, and institutional systems (Spigel, 2017). The persistent confidence challenges, isolation, and constrained opportunities reported by participants reflect ecosystem-level barriers, including patriarchal norms, limited access to networks, and uneven organizational infrastructure within SMEs. These patterns align with ecosystem failures described in prior research (Cho et al., 2021; Lang & Fink, 2019), where the absence of supportive relational structures inhibits women's ability to exercise agency and envision themselves as leaders.

#WECAN's coaching-informed model, with its focus on reflection, peer learning, and network-building, functioned as an ecosystem corrective by strengthening the relational and cognitive resources that women require to progress within SMEs. By enhancing confidence, visibility, and a sense of leadership identity, the program addressed the "soft infrastructure" deficits – such as mentoring, social capital, and community embeddedness – that often constrain women entrepreneurs and leaders. This explains why confidence emerged so strongly across the dataset: from an EE perspective, confidence is not merely psychological but a product of one's position within the ecosystem's opportunity structures.

Anchor institution theory further clarifies the strategic role of Leeds Beckett University in tackling these systemic inequalities. As a place-based institution with deep regional ties, the University mobilized its networks, research capacity, and convening power to strengthen the ecosystem's inclusivity. This aligns with the anchor mission's emphasis on long-term regional engagement and collaborative approaches to resilience-building (Goddard et al., 2014; Cantor et al., 2013). Through structured diagnostic and onboarding sessions, participants were introduced to peer cohorts and wider support networks that reduced isolation and encouraged shared learning. ILM-accredited leadership training created formal developmental pathways, while coaching sessions, networking opportunities, and community events strengthened the relational infrastructure surrounding participants and supported the formation of ongoing communities of practice, later sustained through #WECAN Connects and the Driving Change initiatives. Engagement with employers also opened dialogue around progression opportunities, organizational culture, and leadership support within SMEs. Through these interconnected mechanisms, the program sought to strengthen both individual leadership capacity and the wider ecosystem conditions that shape women's progression and development. Through #WECAN, Leeds Beckett acted as a connective institutional node, linking women, SMEs, and regional stakeholders in ways that redistributed access to knowledge, opportunities, and support.

Understanding the findings through this theoretical lens highlights that leadership development is not only about individual capability but about ecosystem transformation. The continuation of the work through the follow-up schemes – WECAN Connects and Driving Change – demonstrates the University's anchor-driven commitment to sustaining regional impact and institutionalizing change. The findings therefore reinforce the need for leadership development models that integrate skill acquisition with confidence-building, identity formation, and structural awareness – core principles identified within both EE and anchor institution theory.

Implications for Theory

The integration of entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) theory and anchor institution theory offers new theoretical insights into women's leadership development within SMEs. First, the findings extend EE theory by demonstrating that confidence, leadership identity, and visibility – typically treated as individual-level attributes – are better understood as ecosystemic outcomes shaped by social capital, cultural norms, organizational structures, and network availability. This challenges capability-focused models and supports a more relational and structural interpretation of women's leadership barriers. Second, the study advances anchor institution theory by illustrating how universities can function not only as knowledge providers but as active ecosystem orchestrators. Through #WECAN, Leeds Beckett University shaped regional opportunity structures by convening networks, redistributing access to resources, and embedding inclusive practices across SMEs. This moves anchor institution theory beyond its traditional economic lens, proposing that anchor roles can encompass gender-inclusive leadership ecosystem development. Third, the integration of these two theoretical lenses highlights the value of a

multi-level conceptualization of leadership development – micro (individual identity and confidence), meso (organizational culture and practices), and macro (ecosystem connectivity and institutional capacities). This multi-level framing contributes to leadership theory by illustrating how progression pathways are formed through interactions between personal agency and place-based institutional forces.

Implications for Practice

For universities, the findings reinforce the need to design leadership interventions that extend beyond skills training to include confidence-building, identity work, mentoring, and community formation, particularly for underrepresented groups. Anchor institutions should embed these programs within wider regional strategies, positioning themselves as facilitators of inclusive leadership ecosystems. For SMEs, the study highlights the importance of developing clearer progression pathways, investing in leadership development for women, and addressing structural barriers—such as gendered norms, inconsistent support, and limited cross-functional exposure. SMEs benefit when women’s leadership potential is recognized as a contributor to organizational resilience and innovation. For policymakers and regional development agencies, the findings suggest that women’s leadership must be treated as an economic development priority rather than a diversity add-on. Policies should encourage cross-sector collaboration, fund anchor-led initiatives, and support regional networks that integrate business development with leadership inclusion.

Recommendations for Further Studies

The study raises opportunities for further academic research. There is a need to deepen understanding of the relationship between women’s leadership development, effective pedagogical and developmental approaches, and place-based impact. Exploring these connections would help universities realize their anchor mission more fully, enabling them to design and deliver programs that address structural inequalities while contributing to regional prosperity. The momentum generated by #WECAN and its continued evolution through WECAN Connects, and the Driving Change series, demonstrates both the demand for such interventions and the opportunity to position women’s leadership as a central contributor to economic development across the Leeds City Region. Future research could also focus on organizational culture within SMEs, analyzing how gender norms, resource constraints, and informal practices influence leadership opportunities. This would deepen understanding of the meso-level mechanisms identified in the current study. Research could also incorporate the perspectives of policymakers, SME owners, community organizations, and other anchors to map how value is created across the entire ecosystem. Such work could refine the understanding of anchor institutions as ecosystem orchestrators and identify systemic bottlenecks in leadership development.

Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights into the experiences of women working in SMEs and the role of anchor institutions in supporting regional leadership development, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the dataset is limited to those who chose to participate in the program and subsequently consented to the research. The diagnostic and survey responses, while rich, do not represent the full population of women working in SMEs across the region. The self-selecting nature of the sample may also mean that those who engaged were already motivated to seek development or were experiencing challenges that prompted them to participate. It is also possible that participants who chose to engage were particularly motivated, already seeking leadership development opportunities, or experiencing barriers that made them more likely to participate in the program and the associated research. This may affect the representativeness of the findings and should be considered when interpreting the results. As such, we do not aim to make a broad generalization but rather to offer insights into a place-based phenomenon.

Second, the methodology combined diagnostics, surveys, and observations within the context of a single intervention. While this mixed-methods approach generated depth and distinction, it is situated within the boundaries of one program delivered by one institution and its partner (another university). The reliance on a subset of data also means that there are gaps in understanding the experiences of those who attended sessions but did not consent to be part of the research, or those who engaged only partially.

Third, this study examines the work of a university operating within a specific regional context. Anchor institution roles and dynamics are deeply shaped by local cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors, and by the maturity of relationships within local networks. As a result, the insights generated here may differ from those emerging from other institutions or universities operating outside urban centers, in regions with different social or economic characteristics, or which are not key regional anchors. Future research could usefully broaden the institutional and geographical scope to explore how different types of HEIs mobilize their anchor role and respond to local needs. Further studies could also replicate this research across different urban and non-urban institutional contexts to test the wider generalizability of the anchor-led model presented here.

Finally, the findings presented here draw largely on the perspectives of participants and on the University's engagement with SMEs. Although this offers an important view of the ecosystem, a more comprehensive understanding would require further work with a wider range of stakeholders, including policymakers, community organizations, and partners across the Leeds City Region. This would help build a fuller picture of how anchor networks operate, where value is created, and how leadership development initiatives can be embedded more widely across regional systems.

Conclusion

By integrating entrepreneurial ecosystem theory with anchor institution theory, this study shows that women's leadership trajectories are shaped by interactions between personal agency, SME cultures, and the institutional architecture of the region. Within this landscape, #WECAN operated as an ecosystem-strengthening intervention, enhancing social capital, expanding networks, and enabling women to articulate and develop their leadership identity. This study provides new insights into the structural, organizational, and personal barriers affecting women's leadership development within SMEs in the Leeds City Region, and demonstrates how anchor-led interventions can help reshape these conditions. The findings reveal that confidence, visibility, and identity formation remain central challenges, reflecting wider ecosystem-level constraints rather than individual deficits. What has also become evident is that organizational support remains uneven within ecosystems, reinforcing the need for leadership development that goes beyond technical skill-building and knowledge acquisition to address identity, agency, and the wider cultural context in which women work.

The evidence presented in the Findings section further demonstrates the program's wider impact. Across the program, participants achieved 426 accredited qualifications, while the data also identified indicators of SME growth and resilience, including increased confidence in leadership capability, broader participation in professional networks, and changes in organizational practice and behavior reported by participants and employers. Participant highlighted a greater willingness to pursue progression opportunities, engage in decision-making, develop new workplace initiatives, and challenge restrictive organizational norms, suggesting that the program's effects extended beyond individual development to organizational- and ecosystem-level change.

Leeds Beckett University's role as an anchor institution was instrumental in redistributing access to knowledge, networks, and developmental opportunities, demonstrating how universities can contribute to inclusive regional growth. The continuation of this work through #WECAN Connects and the Driving Change series reflects a long-term commitment to ensuring that impact is sustained and extended. These initiatives build on the evidence generated through the project and provide ongoing opportunities for shared learning, dialogue, and capability development across the region. They also demonstrate the value of universities working collaboratively with businesses, policymakers, and regional partners to create more inclusive leadership ecosystems. The momentum generated by #WECAN and the wider anchor-institution work that surrounds it shows the potential for women's leadership to become a central driver of resilience and growth across the Leeds City Region. The evidence presented here demonstrates that when women's leadership is developed within a place-based, anchor-supported ecosystem, the effects extend beyond individual capability; they reshape organizational cultures, broaden networks, and contribute to the conditions for more inclusive regional growth.

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