



Report 5 - Impact Analysis

The impact of the AWE programme on women entrepreneurs in France and the UK

At a Glance

The Accelerating Women's Enterprise (AWE) project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), was launched in 2019 and aimed to support disadvantaged women entrepreneurs to create and launch their enterprises. By doing so, the AWE programme intended to address the gender imbalance in enterprise start-ups in the cross-channel region and to alleviate the structural barriers experienced by disadvantaged women entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial journey.

To achieve its objectives, the project has been divided into two phases: the first phase took place from 2019-2022 and then Phase 2 from 2022 to 2023.

This report outlines the impact of the programme on participants (from all phases of the project), based on the responses of 70 participants both in France and in the UK (40 responses to the impact analysis survey and 30 semi-structured interviews). Most of the participants reported a high level of satisfaction with their participation in the AWE programme and mentioned several benefits for their entrepreneurial journey, including:

- **Peer-to-peer support**
- **Increased technical knowledge and skills to scale-up their businesses (human capital)**
- **Extending their social networks as well as their market and customer opportunities (social capital)**
- **Building their confidence and their sense of accomplishment (psychological capital)**

The participants also provided insights regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their businesses and entrepreneurial journey, as the outbreak occurred during the delivery of the AWE programme. They highlight the key role of digitalisation in their support and coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdowns which continues to remain an importance facet even when there has been a resumption of onsite face-to-face training.

Finally, from the findings, we make the following recommendations to improve and enhance future programmes like AWE and their positive impact on disadvantaged women entrepreneurs:

- **To adopt a holistic approach combining both 'hard' technical skill-oriented training and gender-specific 'soft' skills training**
- **To offer tailored support to disadvantaged women entrepreneurs' specific needs and time commitment**
- **To offer consistent support over time and specific to the stage of business development**
- **To apply a gender lens to curriculum and delivery of programmes to support women entrepreneurs, and to evaluate the programme in support of women entrepreneurs**



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Please note that all interviewees voluntarily participated in the study and were granted anonymity to ensure ethical compliance. Therefore, participants are not named.

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1.0 Introduction

Since the launch of the Accelerating Women's Enterprise (AWE) project in 2019, the project has offered enterprise interventions to over 700 disadvantaged women entrepreneurs in the UK and France through three interrelated strands of training, bootcamp and mentorship. Disadvantaged women entrepreneurs are defined by the AWE programme as those who face unfavourable intersections of identities: gender, physical and mental disabilities, those living in areas of socio-economic deprivation, income (e.g. being economically inactive), race, age, region (e.g. urban or rural), migrant status, and educational and skill attainment. There is currently little understanding of this particular group, in terms of how enterprise interventions could enrich their entrepreneurial experience, enabling them to overcome business barriers and challenges, allowing for better entrepreneurial outcomes as well as wider social implications beyond income generation. Generating such insights from the AWE programme is crucial for future programmes in ensuring that they can better align their pedagogies, approaches and practices with the priorities perceived by their respective end-users. It also aligns with the general consensus within the enterprise training research literature in relation to the implementation of a user and context-led approach towards enterprise intervention (Maguire, 1992; Vinten, 2000). The context of the COVID-19 pandemic adds an extra layer of complexity, in that the pandemic may offer new opportunities and pose serious challenges that many previously tried-and-tested enterprise interventions would not adequately cover and support.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the impact generated by these enterprise interventions offered by the AWE programme. We heard from the disadvantaged women who participated in the training about their experiences and how the project impacted them. In this study, impact is measured through a range of entrepreneurship-related performance indicators amongst disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, including changes in entrepreneurial capacity, behaviour, and actual entrepreneurial outcomes concerning start-up and performance. Furthermore, the report seeks to understand how the enterprise interactions may impact upon the attitudes and perceptions of disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, such as a change in perception regarding feasibility and desirability or entrepreneurship, as well as impact on health, social wellbeing and empowerment. It is the ultimate aim of the report to capture some of the critical insights in terms of the intervention approaches and pedagogies that the participants found to be the most facilitative given the specific contexts that they faced, as well as identifying potential improvements to be made for future programmes for this specific target group.

The remainder of the report is organised as follows:

- **Section 2** provides an overview of the AWE programme in terms of its history, overarching objectives, the rationale for the different training components and the content development process.
- **Section 3** outlines the research methodology and methods used for this study, in terms of its research approach, data collection strategy and the analysis process.
- **Section 4** reports the findings concerning the impact of AWE's enterprise interventions on its end-users in the UK and France. In particular, it highlights different aspects of impact beyond the traditional focus of economic performance, but also includes those relating to perception, attitude, and social wellbeing.
- **Section 5** is the discussion and conclusion section where findings concerning the impact of AWE's enterprise interventions are considered, highlighting elements that worked well and also exploring possible improvements. The results are discussed in the context of the existing enterprise education literature, highlighting commonalities and new gaps identified.
- **Section 6** provides recommendations for future enterprise intervention programmes.

2.0 The programme 'Accelerating Women's Enterprise'

Accelerating Women's Enterprise (AWE) was launched in 2019 to help support disadvantaged women to create and launch enterprises, and to increase the sustainability of struggling, early-stage, women-owned businesses. The AWE programme focused on addressing the gender imbalance in enterprise start-ups in the cross-channel region, and the lack of support tailored for disadvantaged women who are the most excluded from the labour market. AWE is a 'social innovation' project which the European Commission (no date) describes as 'new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations', funded through the EU Interreg cross-channel (EU INTERREG France (Channel) England) funding.

The project was divided into two phases. The objectives for phase 1 (2019-2022) were to:

- Support and upskill over 700 women through the creation of 50 hours of new, tailored, online and face-to-face training content and resources
- Research possible gender bias in the entrepreneurial ecosystem
- Recruit and train a mentor bank of 200 trained mentors
- Help over 130 women to start businesses, reduce benefit dependency, and increase Gross Value Added (GVA) and associated income tax at a rate of £2M annually

The successful implementation of the above objectives led to an additional round of funding. The objectives for phase 2 (2022-2023) were to:

- Take the tried and tested training approaches, learning and experiences from the first phase of the project to support more women in new areas and specific gender intersectionality that was not covered in the first phase
- Further develop the Bootcamp accelerators, which could only be delivered on a pilot basis during lockdown
- Expand the mentoring service
- Carry out new pertinent research on enterprise interventions and knowledge dissemination, through reports, podcasts and impact cases

Training and capacity enhancement for women entrepreneurs was the core focus of the AWE programme. Previous research both conducted by the AWE team and externally found that there is a tendency for the entrepreneurial ecosystem to be gender blind which often neglects the needs of women and their additional challenges (see, for example, Danho et al., 2021; Pickernell et al., 2022, Huang et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2022; Frimong et al., 2023; 2023b; Zhao, 2023). The AWE programme was established as a means to redress and contribute to gender awareness in entrepreneurship education and development, and was delivered in France and the UK in the Channel region. The training was offered to women who experienced at least one additional disadvantage (for example, neurodiversity, health, age, ethnicity, economic disadvantage, rural location) in the development of enterprise, in the early startup stage or with businesses that were struggling to grow. An extensive programme encompassing multiple training interventions was co-created by partners of AWE in consultation with external experts and end users both in France and the UK. These interventions included:

Training

Eight sessions were developed and offered to women who were either at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey and had a business, or were at the initial idea stage. The training focused on developing women's knowledge on a variety of topics. 'Hard' technical training focused on areas such as managing money and risk in a business, building a brand and a brand value, and increasing sales or managing a social focused business. The 'soft' training was designed to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and to help with aspects such as time-management and business confidence. While many of these training initiatives were initially designated as face-to-face, the project had to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing remote learning via Zoom.

Bootcamps

A two-day intensive programme was delivered using Business Model Canvas (a strategic management framework), enabling women to develop their business plans in a supported environment. Key workshops varied depending on the needs of attendees, but typically included marketing, business and financial planning. Further women-centred arrangements included provision of an on-site creche during the bootcamps.

Mentoring

Mentoring plays a specifically important role for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, who often need more support than other start-ups as their confidence, resilience and self-efficacy can be much more fragile. Therefore, a development programme was designed to develop mentors, specifically to build their understanding of the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. Mentors were trained to offer their experience and expertise to help women's businesses succeed, and act as successful role models.

These programmes were demand-led, drawing both from the insights and knowledge of AWE partners and external committee members with extensive experience in supporting disadvantaged women entrepreneurs (Danho et al., 2021b), as well as views from the end-users. Learning materials and content were developed and shared between AWE partners, which were then pilot-tested (Kwong et al., 2023) along with the mentorship scheme, before rolling out more widely across the partners in both countries.

Based on the enterprise interventions above, a practical legacy "Starter Kit" has been created to allow new and established enterprise intervention programmes to enhance their training provision. It includes over 50 hours of tailored learning resources and training materials on a range of critical topics for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, good practice highlights, and a mentoring training guide.

This report draws on the evaluation and reflections of women who took part in the programme over the four-year period, and the benefits that they gained.

3.0 Research Methodology

In conducting this research, we adopted a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative research. Thus, we followed a convergent parallel design by concurrently collecting quantitative data and qualitative data.

The quantitative data was collected through a survey disseminated to women entrepreneurs who participated in the AWE programme both in France and in the UK. The survey included the same questions in English and French translated versions, and was disseminated using an online survey (Qualtrics) to former AWE programme participants. The survey took an average of 5 minutes to complete for the English version and an average of 9 minutes to complete for the French version. The responses to the survey disseminated in England were a total of 41, and in France, a total of 21 responses were received. However, the total number of usable responses from the English survey was 28 because 2 did not give consent and 11 participants did not complete the survey or partially completed the survey. Their responses were therefore discarded. For the survey disseminated in France, there were also 2 participants who did not give consent and only 12 participants fully completed the survey. Thus, the total number of responses was 40, which has been included in the data analysis below.

The focus of the survey was to provide a better understanding of:

1. Engagement with AWE (engagement areas, completion, reasons for joining)
2. Their overall and specific assessments of AWE programmes
3. The contributions of AWE in developing participants' human capital, social capital, cultural capital, and psychological capital
4. Participants' assessment of the AWE programme

The qualitative research involved former AWE participants in France and the UK. Participants were interviewed according to a semi-structured interview, which was undertaken by an independent consultant with expertise in programme evaluation. Independent consultants, i.e. not members of the AWE training or research team, were employed to avoid any biases, and ensure the objectivity and integrity of data. Participants were invited for an interview via email. Compliant with ethical protocols, participants were assured of voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. Women entrepreneurs were randomly selected and invited for interview. A sample of 22 French women entrepreneurs and 30 from the UK were selected. The response rate for the interviews for the French entrepreneurs was 8, and 22 in the UK. Thus, the total response rate for the qualitative research was 30 interviewees. Consistent with the ethical protocol of voluntary participation, interviewees who declined to participate had their wishes respected. In most cases, their decline to participate in the interviews was due to lack of availability or time to participate in the interviews, and/or closure or restructuring of their businesses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, 7 French women entrepreneurs stated that their businesses were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdowns, and some of them decided to close or restructure their businesses or exit entrepreneurship to have salaried employment. The interview procedure is contained in Appendix A.

The interviews ranged between 30 minutes and one hour in length and were recorded with permission, transcribed, and translated where necessary. Data was cleaned and uploaded to spreadsheets so that emergent themes could be identified, facilitated by the use of Nvivo software. Participants were coded only by number, to retain their anonymity. For the same reason, quotations from participants that are mentioned in this report are not attributed.

The focus of the interviews was to establish:

1. The lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in their participation in AWE programmes
2. How the participants perceived the impact of AWE on their entrepreneurial stance and on their entrepreneurial journey in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and how AWE addressed their intersectional challenges
3. How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their entrepreneurial journey and interactions with the entrepreneurial ecosystem

Both analyses of the results from the survey and the interviews provide a comprehensive impact assessment of the AWE programmes combining both quantitative insights and qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of the participants. The data analysis was likewise undertaken by an independent consultant to avoid bias in reporting. The findings yield recommendations for enhancing the interventions and future initiatives to support women entrepreneurs.



4.0 Findings

4.1. Descriptive findings of the survey

In terms of age, 22.2% of respondents were between 18 and 24 years old; a further 22.2% were 25 to 30 years old; 19.4% were 31 to 40 years old; 16.7% were 41 to 50 years old; 11.1% were in the age range of 51 to 60; 5.6% were 61 to 65 years of age; and 2.8% were over the age of 66. Most respondents were White (55.6%); 13.9% were Asian Indian; and the ethnic identity of respondents was spread across Bangladeshi, Chinese, Pakistani and mixed. 50% of respondents reported having a disability; 47.2% did not have a disability, and 2.8% preferred not to declare whether they had a disability or not. The majority of respondents (83.3%) did not have a learning difficulty. The respondents' level of qualifications is illustrated in Table 4.1.1. below:

Table 4.1.1: Qualifications

	N	%	Valid %*	Cumulative %
Postgraduate	15	37.5	41.7	41.7
Undergraduate	17	42.5	47.2	88.9
A Level or vocational equivalent	3	7.5	8.3	97.2
Other	1	2.5	2.8	100.0
Total	36	90.0	100.0	
Prefer not to say	4	10.0		
Total	40	100.0		

Most respondents were single/unmarried (41.7%); 36.1% of respondents were married or living with a partner and 22.2% were separated or divorced; 41.7% of respondents did not have children; 36.1% have one child; 19.4% have two children; and 2.8% have four children.

The majority of respondents did not live in an area of social deprivation (44.4%); 33.3% lived in an area considered as socially deprived; 16.7% of respondents were unsure as to whether the area they lived in was classified as socially deprived; and 5.6% preferred not to declare. 47.2% of respondents have home ownership (in their own name or jointly with a partner); 16.7% of respondents' spouses or partners owned their home; 22.2% rented their accommodation; 2.8% lived with family or friends; 2.8% were homeless; and 8.3% had some other form of accommodation.

There was a spread of responses in the employment status of respondents, as illustrated in Table 4.1.2. below.

Table 4.1.2: Employment

	N	%	Valid %*	Cumulative %
Unemployed	8	20.0	22.2	22.2
8	8	20.0	22.2	44.4
20.0	6	15.0	16.7	61.1
22.2	13	32.5	36.1	97.2
22.2	1	2.5	2.8	100.0
Employed	36	90.0	100.0	
8	4	10.0		
20.0	40	100.0		

* valid = responses to question

Most respondents (37.5%) received their income from self-employment; 30% through some form of formal employment (full or part-time); 20% from savings; 2.5% from some form of social funding; and 10% of respondents received an income through other means. 36.1% of respondents have an income of between 10,000-20,000 British Pounds (GBP) or Euros per annum; 30.6% earn below 10,000 GBP or Euros per annum; 11.1% have an income between 20,000 and 30,000 GBP or Euros; a further 11.1% have an income between 30,000 and 40,000 GBP or Euros; 2.8% of respondents stated they have an income between 40,000 and 50,000 GBP or Euros; and 2.8% have an income above 50,000 GBP or Euros. 5.6% of respondents preferred not to state what their income was. The majority of respondents (75%) worked in a for-profit organization and to a lesser extent (7.5%) in a non-profit organization. Most respondents (47.2%) did not feel they had any constraints in terms of entrepreneurship or business creation, while 27.8% felt they had constraints, and 11.1% felt they had geographical constraints.

4.2. Descriptive findings of the interviews

Table 4.2.1: French Interviewees' profile

Business	Operating since/ Business stage	Age of the participant
Restaurant	2019	Under 35
Embroidery	2017	Over 50
Jewellery design	2017	Between 35 and 50
Business consulting	2011	Over 50
Business consulting	2017	Over 50
Event organising	2013	Over 50
Coaching	Nascent entrepreneur	Between 35 and 50
Website design	Nascent entrepreneur	Between 35 and 50

Table 4.2.2: UK interviewees' profile

Business	Operating since/ Business stage	Age of the participant
Employment and education charity	2003	Unknown
Artist and graphic design (Social Enterprise)	2019	Unknown
Management consultancy	2022	Between 35 and 50 years
Beauty specialist	Unknown	Between 35 and 50 years
Language instructor	2021	Over 50
Healthcare (Social enterprise)	2019	Between 35 and 50 years
Welfare service (Social Enterprise) x5	3x nascent, 2019 & 2021	Between 35 and 50 (4), one over 50 years
Marketing management	Nascent Entrepreneur	Under 35
Not-for-profit (sustainability)	2021	Over 50
Business support x 5	2019, 2020 (x2), 2022, Nascent	Between 35 and 50 (5)
Health specialist x2	Unknown and 2019	Unknown
Retail x2	2020	Under 35 (1) Over 50 (1)

* Nascent entrepreneur is in setting up phase committing resources to launch an enterprise

4.3. Impacts

The following section reports our findings on the impact of the AWE programme on participants, providing a comprehensive overview of their **motivations** for engaging with AWE programmes (Theme 1), and their **overall assessment and satisfaction** with the programmes (Theme 2). The findings also include the specific **benefits** of the AWE programme regarding their entrepreneurial development and journey (Theme 3), and their reflections on the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on their business and their interactions with the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Theme 4). Finally, the findings highlight the **participants' recommendations for improving the programmes** and providing better and more adequate support to disadvantaged women entrepreneurs (Theme 5).

Theme 1: Motivations to engage in AWE programmes

The reported motivations of survey participants for engaging with the AWE programme was to refresh their knowledge and skills around business creation and development (25%).

Table 4.3.1: Motivations for Engaging in AWE

Motivations	%
Refresh their knowledge and skills around business creation and development	25%
Acquire knowledge and skills necessary to develop an already existing business	17.5%
Acquire knowledge and skills in particular areas that they had been struggling with	12.5%
Meet like-minded people	7.5%
Meet people that could help them with their business development	5%
Explore new opportunities	2.5%
Build confidence	2.5%
Other reasons (not stated)	27.5%

The results from the survey are consistent with the motivations for engaging in the AWE programme as stated by interviewees. The majority of interviewees stated that their motivations for engaging with the AWE programme were to acquire and refresh their knowledge and skills to develop an already existing business. As the following interviewees stated:

“People are starting to tell me that I am an old entrepreneur (...) When there are calls [workshops/bootcamps] for the general public, I don’t hesitate to participate and to take what there is to take. If there are systems in place, I might as well take advantage of them, especially if you don’t come from a background where there are entrepreneurs in your entourage. I didn’t go to business school, so it’s during these workshops, with their associations, their workshops, that I ask the questions and I get the answers around. (...) So I take advantage of it, I continue to benefit from them.” - FR-ENT-01

“The reason I decided to do the programme was that I had in the background something else which is a kind of long-term project, so my son is autistic and I had an idea to develop an app to help autistic children communicate. The reason I went on the course was that this is a completely different area, I’m not tech-based, and I thought I would learn different things.”

- UK-ENT-105

While only 2.5% of survey respondents considered ‘exploring new opportunities’ as a motivation, several participants in the UK stated their desire to engage in the AWE programme as a means to further explore business ideas, to discover new business opportunities, and to provide them with valuable new skills that would benefit their career prospects.

“To explore my thoughts and ideas that - the business that I’m hoping to develop.” - UK-ENT-109

“Again that’s another reason why I thought the course might help me to develop skills that would help....open doors.” - UoP-ENT-105-27-02-23

“I wanted to add more to my CV and stuff like that because it felt like a marketing one, but it just talked about entrepreneurs, stuff like that. I wanted to add it to my CV really.” - UK-ENT-111

Finally, although as shown in Table 4.3.1, 27.5% of survey respondents did not state the other reasons underlying their motivations for engaging in the AWE programme, the interviews provide further insights in this sense. Indeed, some interviewees stated that their engagement with the AWE programme was a way to foster their social integration in the region and to build a new professional network.

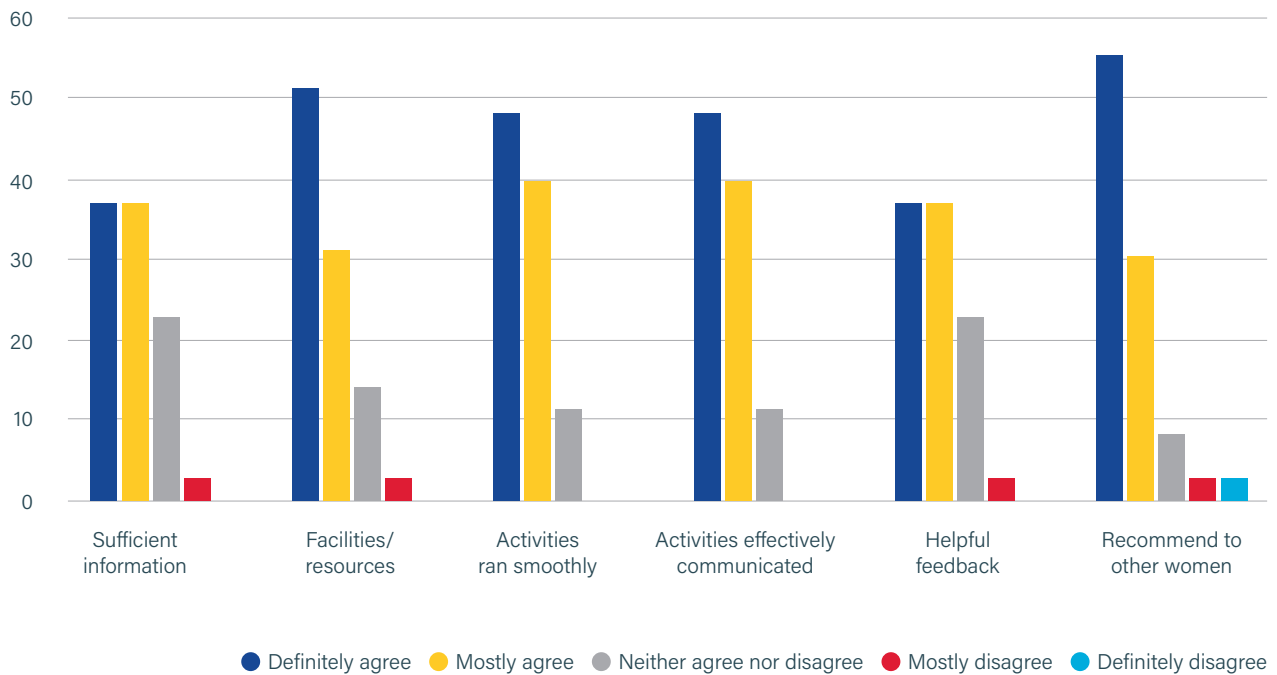
“So to be very honest, my expectations at the time were 1, to get back and network again, and get back into a professional context because I was really completely isolated. I was in a house in the countryside, apart from friends who came from time to time, well every 3 weeks... so really it was 1, to get back into the professional mindset. My objective was also to create a network and to get to know the region of Brittany better.” - FR-ENT-06

“I just needed somebody that had been in business, just to - for me to be able to bounce ideas off but also have the opportunity for meeting people within my local area that were in the same position.” - UK-ENT-104

Theme 2: Overall assessment of AWE programmes

The survey respondents reported a high overall level of satisfaction with the programme, based on a cumulative percentage of ‘definitely’ and ‘mostly’ agree responses only (84.6%). In addition, overall survey respondents were satisfied with the AWE programme operations as illustrated in the following graph (Figure 4.3.2.). Respondents definitely agreed that they would recommend the AWE programme to other women. Respondents were also very satisfied with the facilities and resources such as the physical spaces and technology available to undertake the AWE programme. Also reported were high levels of satisfaction with the smooth running of the AWE activities and the helpful feedback on respondents’ work, development and/or questions.

Figure 4.3.2: Satisfaction with AWE Programme



In response to an open question on what was most valuable about the AWE programme or experience, most responses centred on the support they received from peer-to-peer networks and the support among the women entrepreneurs. While there were specific activities which the programme respondents mentioned, the most valuable aspect of the AWE programme was the opportunity for women entrepreneurs to share experiences and knowledge, support each other and meet other women entrepreneurs, which suggests the value of peer networks and the isolation of the entrepreneurial experience for many women. Some of the responses reflect the value of the AWE programme for women.

These findings from the survey are consistent with the responses from interviewees, which also present a high overall satisfaction with the programme, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

“I was really happy with those days! It gave me a lot. I don’t remember everything, but I know that at the end of those 2 days, there are many things in me that have actually shifted. (...) AWE is something important for us because it supports us. And actions like that can only do us good in fact. So to really continue to do our activity and to keep our project alive, and also to evolve, well, it’s clear that I thank all...AWE and all the organisations that are there to promote this kind of event, especially for women...(…) I would also recommend it to people who don’t know about it. I don’t know what else I can say... it helps me.” - FR-ENT-08

"I did like the way it was delivered that did suit me very much in. So the way it was delivered for me was really, really good that's good." - UK -ENT-107

The most positive aspects of their experiences are related to peer-to-peer interaction through knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and peer support.

"I was not the only one who had a production activity, so it was interesting to share with other women who, like me, are in rural areas with production activities. And I think that for them too, it was interesting to see my life, my vision of things. I mean, it was really an exchange (...) So it's always interesting to see how such and such a person manages to solve such and such a problem." - FR-ENT-03

"I met some good people, got some ideas from the other participants, and saw what some of them are going through." - UoP-ENT-112

However, there was some negative feedback. The most recurrent was related to their expectations, and more precisely related to the discrepancy between their expectations about the content and the content offered. Many participants interviewed stated that they had already created their businesses, and therefore perceived the content offered as less appropriate to their stage of business growth. They considered the content as more beneficial for nascent entrepreneurs or those at the business creation stage. Furthermore, although they positively evaluated some of the technical tools discussed during the bootcamps, the overall technical content was perceived as less relevant to their need for growth tools.

'The programme was fun! But I can't say that it had an impact on my business, that it helped it to take off. I'd like to say, yes, it was great, it changed my life, but I'm already very senior, I'm going to close my business and retire next year. (...) But my company was already 8 years old, and I've been running it for 12 years now. I think it (Bootcamp) is perhaps better for less mature companies or for people with less seniority...' - FR-ENT-04

"I don't know how to put this without sounding like I'm really big-headed or something, a lot of what we covered were things that I was already aware of anyway because I'd been in business for quite a while. I felt like I probably wasn't - it probably wasn't the right place for me because I didn't feel like I learnt loads of stuff. If I hadn't had any knowledge then they were very informative, they were very good sessions, I'm not saying that they weren't, they were really fantastic. It was just my own personal level of understanding that was already there" - UK-ENT-105

Theme 3: Benefits of AWE programmes

The majority of survey respondents (79%) 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed that the AWE programme benefited them. Table 4.3.3 illustrates the different benefits of the AWE programme by frequency.

Table 4.3.3: Benefit of AWE Programme

Benefit	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Cumulative agreement score	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree
AWE helped me with interacting /engaging / speaking with others	36.8%	47.4%	84.2%	10.5%	2.6%	2.6%
AWE gave me the opportunity to express myself	37.8%	43.2%	81.0%	13.5%	2.7%	2.7%
I felt valued for the contribution I made	36.8%	39.5%	76.3%	18.4%	2.6%	2.6%
I feel that Covid and the lockdowns prevented me from fully engaging with AWE activities	10.3%	23.1%	33.4%	33.3%	15.4%	17.9%
My engagement with AWE activities met my expectations	28.9%	39.5%	68.4%	18.4%	2.6%	10.5%
I am satisfied with AWE activities	41.0%	43.6%	84.6%	10.3%	2.6%	2.6%
My engagement with AWE activities changed my aspirations for my business	23.7%	44.7%	68.4%	21.1%	7.9%	2.6%
Engaging with AWE definitely helped my business	22.2%	33.3%	55.5%	27.8%	11.1%	5.6%

In terms of cumulative percentage based on 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed responses, the most benefit respondents reported receiving from the AWE programme was interacting, engaging or speaking to other entrepreneurs, which suggests the benefit of peer-to-peer support. This is consistent with the interviewees' responses which predominantly mentioned peer-to-peer interactions and support as the key benefit of their participation in the AWE programme.

“Well, in the Bootcamp, in fact, there is a wealth of experience from each of the participants. It created links. Moreover, we often see each other (...) how can I put it... a link was created because we lived together for two whole days, we ate together, we laughed together, we tested aromatherapy, we tested essences that we even kept. So that’s it... I still have it on my desk, I don’t see it, but sometimes I pick it up and I smell it because it reminds me of the times we spent together.” - FR-ENT-08

“It was a good course in that it sort of reminded me some of the silly bits that you forget about like when you’re not doing it daily, like you would be for work [refresh knowledge] Actually, what it’s been best for is networking. Out of that, I’ve made quite a few good friends and one of the other ladies who was on the course with me, we’ve been – all this time, we’re talking two or three years later now, we have our own little accountability club that sort of started at that point” - UK-ENT-103

Peer-to-peer support was also more valued by women who felt isolated due to their geographical location in a rural area, as the following quote illustrates:

“This aspect [meeting other women entrepreneurs] is very important, especially when you are in areas where you are not in town, where you are not in big cities. Here, where we are...I’m in a [rural area]. Most events are often held in [big cities].” - FR-ENT-02

The research showed a number of benefits of the AWE programme for women, which we categorise thematically as Human Capital, Social Capital, Cultural Capital and Psychological Capital. The following section provides insights into these thematic findings.

Human capital

Table 4.3.4: Human Capital Benefits of AWE programme

Human Capital Benefit	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree
Improved my ability to take action and initiatives	21.6%	45.9%	27.0%	2.7%	2.7%
Improved my confidence	24.3%	45.9%	24.3%	5.4%	0.0%
Improved organisation and time management skills	25.7%	45.7%	22.9%	2.9%	2.9%
Improved problem-solving skills	20.0%	48.6%	25.7%	2.9%	2.9%
Improved digital and data handling skills	11.8%	41.2%	41.2%	2.9%	2.9%
Improved my leadership skills	11.1%	27.8%	50.0%	8.3%	2.8%
I acquired new knowledge in financial management	0.0%	51.5%	33.3%	9.1%	6.1%
I acquired new knowledge in marketing	5.6%	47.2%	38.9%	8.3%	0.0%
I gained knowledge about funding sources for businesses	11.4%	31.4%	34.35	14.3%	8.6%
I developed a better understanding of business support	16.2%	48.6%	27.0%	8.15	0.0%

Human capital considers the skills, knowledge, and experiences that individuals possess. In terms of the cumulative of 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed responses, respondents reported that they benefited most from improved organisation and time management skills (71.4%); then from improved confidence (70.2%); improved problem-solving skills (68.6%); an improved ability to take action and initiative (67.5%); and a better understanding of business support (64.8%). To a lesser extent, the AWE programme improved leadership skills (38.9%); improved respondents' knowledge of funding sources (42.8%) and new knowledge of financial management (51.5%). Most respondents were neutral as to whether the AWE programme improved their digital skills and new knowledge in marketing. The least human capital benefit of the AWE programme respondents reported was their likelihood of exploring alternative funding methods that they had not previously considered for their business.

According to interviewees, the human capital benefits of the AWE programme were improved knowledge of marketing, and related social media training, which helped in the scaling-up of their business presence in the market, relevant entrepreneurial ecosystem and communities. For example, interviewees stated that:

"I think a lot about these workshops where you have to organise yourself, define your priorities, what drives you to undertake. So, it was really, these are really points that I learned and that I maintain today. Organisation above all, planning, things like that. Yes, these are really things that we learned and today they are still useful to me and I continue to develop these themes in my entrepreneurial life. In the Bootcamp, we also have our exercises to visualise ourselves, to see where we want to take our business. It's a question I asked myself and I know where I want to take my business. It's in the little diagrams they gave us and I'm working to get to where I need to be." - FR-ENT-01

"Yes, it gave me some insight into my motivation and told me that I needed to pay attention to that. To make sure that the business developed in a way that interested me. It taught me about marketing which I'm slowly coming to terms with, yes, it really helped me." - UK-ENT-112

The technical skills of the AWE programme such as tax information and financial planning, accounting and business planning were also of value to participants. As interviewees commented:

"There was an interesting speech on dashboards (...) The speaker was very interesting, he came from my accounting firm, so that was really good. For me, what was most interesting was really that. It was the work on the dashboard, the work on the Business Model Canvas, someone also came to talk to us about social networks, so that was also interesting."
- FR-ENT-03

"One of the bits that we touched on was things like time management" "and things like using a pomodoro timer. I've completely forgotten about this stuff that I'd learnt 20 years ago"
- UK-ENT-103

Social capital

Social capital considers the network of relationships that people form. Survey respondents reported that the AWE programme had social capital or socio-cultural benefits. 64.7% of respondents 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed that the AWE programme improved their ability to develop effective relationships with partners, customers, and other business stakeholders; 73.5% 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed that the programme improved their ability to share ideas with others; and 63.6% 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed that the AWE programme helped them consider the role of their business in addressing societal challenges.

Interviewees likewise articulated social capital benefit gains from the AWE programme. Through the AWE programme, interviewees stated that they increased their networks of collaborations or support to increase their business presence and market, increased access to customers, and sustained their business services

long after the completion of the AWE programme of training. Social capital gave participants access to customers, clients and support from peers and actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. For example, interviewees stated that:

"I have one of the participants who today...I work with...she is my community manager, for example. To give you an example." - FR-ENT-07

"The connections I made through AWE at the people that have become my sounding boards when I need to discuss something. So yeah, there are quite a few AWE women still in my life and that's really, really helpful." - UK-ENT-100

Another benefit of the AWE programme interviewees in terms of social capital is the 'skill swap' or 'skill exchange', which allowed them to further develop their business ideas by drawing on each other's skills.

"I made friends with one who was - one person who was very good on social media. So they taught me a lot. We had a great skill swap." - UK-ENT-104

"I actually exchanged skills with one person on the programme and she wanted to start up a podcast, and I'd obviously had the podcast started and I was doing stuff. I talked her through all the key processes and blah, blah, and she then came back and was helping me how to pitch myself. She was very good at pitching and getting grants or funding, or partnerships. We swapped with that" - UK-ENT-108

Cultural capital

Cultural capital looks at the values, knowledge, skills, and ideas that are valued in a given culture. 69.7% of survey respondents 'definitely' to 'mostly' agreed that the programme improved their ability to work with groups of people outside their sphere of familiarity (in relation to class, ethnicity, social deprivation, etc.). In terms of the cumulative agreement score the second most frequently reported benefit by survey respondents was "To more likely seek support and resources outside my close family and friends' network." However, the responses from the interviews indicated that women entrepreneurs were more likely to seek same-gender peer-to-peer support. In other words, although women entrepreneurs through the AWE programme were more likely to seek support and extend their networks beyond the familial sphere, they were more likely to seek support from other women entrepreneurs. The interviewees found other women entrepreneurs more relatable and supportive. Some interviewees, for example, found the AWE programme nurturing to the extent that they could be themselves and felt comfortable being 'vulnerable' in front of other women, rather than having to adapt to a masculine competitive environment in the presence of men. Interviewees stated that:

'We were all comfortable sharing things, even a little personal, that's all. And it was to bring something to everyone, beneficial of course! (...) I felt that I was in a caring network where we can exercise, where can be ourselves, without being judged. I was able to express myself and that was it. I was able to say things and everyone was there with the same aim, to learn, to evolve and to enrich each other in fact.' - FR-ENT-08

"So just to build my confidence because I'd been knocked down by so many people to say this idea was just never going to work. I was definitely reminded by everybody, not only the people taking the group but also other people in the group, it was really nice to be with other people. One of similar age to me which is kind of not rare but it doesn't happen to me that often. There were various different backgrounds so they had different experiences and different knowledge. It was really great because they just reminded me that I started this for a reason. That is a massive thing. I met so many people out of it that I am still in contact now with. That would still easily help me or support me if I needed it, and that I could message at any point" - UK-ENT-108

Psychological capital

Psychological capital refers to the internal personal resources that we draw on to help us manage tough situations. The psychological benefit survey respondents most reported was “a sense of accomplishment of what I do in my business/career” (based on the cumulative percentage of ‘definitely agree’ to ‘mostly agree’ responses). There were also further psychological benefits of the AWE programme, as illustrated by the responses in Table 4.3.5.

Table 4.3.5. Psychological Benefits of AWE Programme

Psychological Benefit	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree
Improve my ability to manage change	21.2%	33.3%	39.4%	6.1%	0.0%
Improve my ability to manage the stress in relation to my business/working experience	15.6%	40.6%	43.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Improve my ability to be more in control of my own decisions about my business	15.6%	53.1%	25.0%	6.3%	0.0%
To feel a sense of accomplishment of what I do in my business/career	34.3%	45.7%	14.3%	5.7%	0.0%
To more likely seek support and resources outside my close family and friends' network	27.3%	48.5%	21.2%	3.0%	0.0%
To more likely explore alternative funding methods for my business to what I previously considered	18.8%	31.3%	40.6%	3.1%	6.3%
To more likely to consider new business ideas in the areas where I did not feel comfortable before (e.g. new industries, markets, products)	15.2%	48.5%	27.3%	6.1%	3.0%
To focus on business growth and financial sustainability of my business	20.6%	41.2%	29.4%	8.8%	0.0%

Likewise, interviewees articulated the psychological benefit of the AWE programme was instilling a sense of confidence which provided women with determination to make a success of their business and making an idea a reality. Many interviewees expressed the view that they could ‘make it happen’ with the skills, knowledge and support provided by the AWE programme. The following quotes are illustrative of this sentiment:

“AWE took place a year ago. A year passed, and the dream was to create a second restaurant. And I’m in the process of doing that. In 2023, I will have a second establishment. And I think that all of this also starts with Insurance. As I said earlier, we worked on our self-esteem. And when you’re sure that you can do something and that you have these structures to which you can return for advice, you’re not alone in the wilderness, in other words, it takes away the fear of launching yourself.” - FR-ENT-01

“The course actually gave me the confidence to set up the business after I’d finished the course. I think I set it up in March and I finished the course in December 2021. It just gave me that – I was toying with the idea of setting up a business, and I was being encouraged by other people... It just gave me the courage to take that next step” - UoP-ENT-113.

Theme 4: Impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs and role of AWE/Ecosystem

The extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns is varied, depending on the stage of the business before the pandemic, and nuanced, depending on the severity of personal circumstances such as bereavement and increased care for dependent children and elderly parents. Furthermore, the pandemic also had some opportunities for women who were able to pivot their business model to an online presence and the ability to work from home. For some women entrepreneurs, the pandemic allowed women to work from home and have a work-life balance, while for others working from home increased juggling family and work roles. A negative impact of COVID-19 was the loss of face-to-face peer support and in some cases the loss of mentors and having to abandon their businesses to seek full-time paid employment.

“I thought to myself but this is going to be an opportunity [COVID-19 pandemic] to completely reinvent my business and shape it more to meet my needs rather than to meet the needs of the customers. I’d really fallen into a system where I was responding to demand, I had shopkeeper’s hours, so I’d come home late, my kids didn’t have any extracurricular activities, and I couldn’t keep up with their homework.” - FR-ENT-03

“In fact I was obliged to transform my intervention models. I had interventions planned when they were cancelled, I couldn’t imagine that...in fact, what I do is a lot of collective and creative intelligence, and it’s a lot with the body, with objects, and things like that. And when I was told can you intervene from a distance, I said to myself no, no, I couldn’t. But you know, it’s like the ceiling has fallen on your head and you really don’t know how you’re going to deal with it. In short, I thought about it for 3-4 days, I talked about it around me, and I saw that what I do as an intervention model can be transformed. I made it a creative exercise and I transformed my support models and I accompanied one or two women who were creating a business and we did it at a distance.” - FR-ENT-04

“I mean one of the kinds of driving forces behind the business was I was keen to open a business that was more on the environmentally friendly side of things because I found that where I was, I don’t know why there was a period of time where I think COVID played into it as well but people weren’t accepting keep cups and all that kind of stuff was going on. A lot of the coffees that I was visiting they weren’t using – they weren’t accepting keep cups and they weren’t using cups that were recyclable or compostable.” - UK-ENT-115

“It was quite difficult because my husband, he was not a key worker or anything, but he has an office job that couldn’t be done from home. He was working throughout and obviously the first however many months we couldn’t use grandparents for childcare. We couldn’t use the nursery because they were all closed. The hardest bit, honestly, was trying to juggle childcare without actually getting anything done.” - UK-ENT-103

Theme 5: Recommendations for the AWE programme

The survey included an open question on what respondents found least satisfactory about the programme. There were very few responses to this question (10 in total) with most respondents stating that the programme, time or input in the sessions was too short. For example, respondents stated the following:

“I would have appreciated an extra day of training for the Bootcamp.”

“Inputs in marketing strategies and customer search, not enough.”

“I would have appreciated the interaction with other mentors during the programme.”

“Too short, except that the programme is perfect.”

The interview participants also mentioned similar comments about the AWE programme, such as the length of the Bootcamp being too short, or the desire to have more mentoring support, etc.

“If it can last a little longer because two days are fast! It goes by so quickly! And so we didn’t really have time to breathe and integrate things. It was a bit of a speedy pace...speed, yeah. So we didn’t really have breaks to discuss what we had in the morning for example...” - FR-ENT-08

“More one-to-one mentor support, more focus on social media training, and possibly more face-to-face.”-UoP-ENT-104-21-02-23-1

However, they mentioned further details on aspects that can be improved to better meet their needs and support them in the entrepreneurial process. Thus, one of the recommendations mentioned was to provide them with further support and guidance, as they experience a lack of follow-up after the programmes terminate. According to them, such a follow-up would help them sustain their businesses, maintain what was acquired during the programmes, assist them in their business growth, and finally alleviate the loneliness they experience in the entrepreneurial journey. Similarly, they also recommended that mentoring be closely monitored and sustained over time so that they can benefit adequately.

“But if there is a follow-up, even if it means selecting two people, to see how to put things in place, such as telling them that since they have participated in AWE, there is a such and such activity available to support them over time. It would have been really great to have that in any case. (...) I think that this could really help women to have this identity. AWE could really identify women, support them after the Bootcamp, and see today what they have become and what they have been able to achieve as entrepreneurs. And then, these people could become the mentors of other women, etc., so they could really go much further.” - FR-ENT-01

“We would need more follow-up support, coaching in fact. (...) [Having] things that are really monitored over a few months, because it’s not like a magic wand that makes you feel good and then you’re on your own.” - FR-ENT-03

“Yes. I was matched with someone on the course, and one of the lecturers. And we had a couple of phone calls, apart - you know, separate to the actual tuition part of the course. Which was great, and really helped me. But then a couple of times I made contact with them and said, “I’m a bit stuck. I need a bit of advice.” And marketing never came back. So I thought, “Has it finished? Am I still part of the course?” - UK-ENT-104

In a similar vein, although several participants kept in touch with each other informally after the programme (e.g., through Facebook and Whatsapp pages), some participants recommended setting up an official platform where they could access the contacts of their cohort counterparts to sustain the peer-to-peer exchange.

“I would have loved to have had a place where I could have contacted all the people in my group, to get together, or have an optional get-together scheduled every other week or something because it wasn’t until close to the end that I was kind of really getting to know them.” - UK-ENT-108

In addition, as mentioned above, some of the participants experienced a discrepancy between their needs and the content offered. Thus, in line with this observation, these participants suggested tailoring the content according to the participants’ business stage, and on the other hand, providing specific support to women entrepreneurs in the post-creation stages. According to them, providing such support will fill the gap in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as there is a lack of structures supporting them beyond the creation stage, and it would also enable them to have adequate resources to overcome the ceiling experienced in their business growth process.

“The period before and during the creation of the business. So there’s something missing when you reach your ceiling, and you need to go beyond it. So I’m thinking about coaching, mentoring, sponsoring, and things like that. It could really help.” - FR-ENT-03

“What also came out of the Bootcamp was that someone who is starting up and someone who started up 4 years ago does not have the same expectations, because at some point you come up against the glass ceiling. Suppose you want to stay in the market. In that case, you have to grow, so how do you do that?” - FR-ENT-02

“I think having that mentor, definitely have a mentor but maybe from the start as you work through the course. As you’re reaching different parts of the course.” - UK-ENT-113

However, some recommendations appear to be specific to the French and English context. Regarding the French context, some participants recommended taking advantage of the cross-cultural nature of the AWE programme by having a cross-cultural peer-to-peer exchange with their English counterparts. Such cross-cultural exchanges would broaden their perspectives on similar issues and challenges experienced as women entrepreneurs.

“I saw that the programme also extended to England (...) And so, for example, I am bilingual and I think it would be an opportunity to exchange with other people from another country. Because potentially we all have the same problems because even if we are not in the same place and the same culture, we have the same European culture, so maybe that, in terms of opening up. Maybe, I don’t know... I don’t know, maybe a meeting in Visio 2 by 2, after it’s true that there are people who only speak English and others only French, so it’s not possible, but if there are some who speak both, or some, just even an exchange on a problem. It could be... at least I would be interested.” - FR-ENT-07

“I would have loved it if the programme had included a cross-Channel section, because I speak English and I’m very close to England, and I think it would have been great if it had been a programme on both sides of the Channel. So I would have been really interested in that, but it was not at all part of the things that were proposed.” - FR-ENT-04

Another French-specific recommendation was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most participants have been able to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on their businesses, they pointed out less support from the AWE programme to help them build their entrepreneurial resilience. Thus, some of them recommended setting up specific training or workshops aiming to provide them with tools and resources to bounce back in challenging times.

“What would be nice is to be able to talk to entrepreneurs who have been through this kind of phase, and who can give you the tools you need to get through it. (...) For people like me, psychologically, I think that meeting people who have been there, is to find tools. (...) This could be an interesting area, how to negotiate your rates when you are in a difficult position. How to hide or not to show the other party that you are in a difficult position. That’s important. It’s also about daring to get back in touch or how to dare to reconnect (...) Dare to reconnect when you are in this position because it’s not easy. Because you have a feeling of failure, it’s not easy. Yes, these are the points.” - FR-ENT-06

Regarding the English context, although one of the benefits associated with the AWE programme was the increase of human capital by improving marketing, social media, and accounting knowledge, another set of recommendations concerned technical training, especially in relation to digital tools. This is in line with the prior AWE reports highlighting the digital divide among participants in the English context.

“It was run really well. I mean there were a few times where they weren’t sure what they were doing or maybe how to do Zoom, or how to use a feature or something like that, but back then it was all still a little - not everybody was great with that sort of stuff. We’re all more used to it now.”- UK-ENT-105

“Yes. I was matched with someone on the course, and one of the lecturers. And we had a couple of phone calls, apart - you know, separate to the actual tuition part of the course. Which was great, and really helped me. But then a couple of times I made contact with them and said, “I’m a bit stuck. I need a bit of advice...More focus on social media training and possibly more face-to-face.”- UK-ENT-104

In addition, given that the AWE programme also aims to address the barriers and challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs from BAME groups, some of the UK participants recommended that the content of the training should include more insights addressing their challenges and helping them to better identify issues that they might face as BAME women entrepreneurs.

“I didn’t feel they were much for the - targeting the BAME women or BAME communities that were relevant to the training. That was more related, like how the entrepreneurs within the BAME community - there weren’t that many examples available. I think that would be something. If I was to provide feedback, would be something like that, to give more examples. And there were other businesses that they did share. It was more sort of about British women, and British people. It’s not something that you would see, like, culturally, like the diverse businesses. Those examples weren’t there, and I think that would be really beneficial.” - UK-ENT-109

Finally, the last English-specific recommendation was in line with funding. Consistent with the literature and with the prior AWE reports, funding is a critical challenge for women entrepreneurs with additional disadvantages. In this sense, women entrepreneurs communicated that funding was a huge challenge, and articulated the need for more support to know the sources of funding available, and how to access them in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as they stated:

“I found the funding side is a massive thing because when I was trying to apply for funding it was all about COVID funding, and they weren’t letting you apply for anything which is really difficult because I set up a company during COVID, and another company during COVID, not because of COVID, I could have carried on with that but - that was really difficult. The funding was all regarding COVID.” - UK-ENT-108

“And also more information about funding, what funding’s available.” - UK-ENT-104

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings highlight the positive impact that the AWE programme had on participants' lives and entrepreneurial journey. The provision of the three different enterprise intervention elements: **training**, **bootcamp** and **mentorship** offer a holistic support framework to cater for the different needs of disadvantaged women entrepreneurs. The survey highlights the importance of the provision of technical, skill-orientated enterprise interventions to the participants, who found the training improved their entrepreneurial capacity and self-confidence. The latter is particularly important for women who are affected by additional disadvantages; the ecosystem structural barriers and their inherent exclusion, as reported in the AWE baseline report 1, negatively affected their self-esteem and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Danho et al., 2021). Such a finding is as expected, and consistent with the entrepreneurship research literature (Walker and Webster, 2006).

This impact research also echoes the view from the emerging literature of the importance for support to go beyond the traditional emphasis on **'hard' technical, skills-orientated** enterprise interventions, and the crucial need for 'soft' enterprise interventions alongside it to support disadvantaged entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial endeavours (Ubfal et al., 2022; Glaub et al., 2014). These **soft enterprise** interventions centre on skills that enable entrepreneurs to develop the psychological readiness to start a business (Campos et al., 2017). The research highlights disadvantaged women entrepreneurs acquiring soft skills through the AWE programme, contributing to their business development. Training such as organisation of time between personal life and business, improving personal effectiveness, time management, etc., are developed in a gender-specific way, and thus enable disadvantaged women entrepreneurs to address some of their challenges, such as the role-identity conflicts related to childcare responsibilities that are reported in extant entrepreneurship research (Ekinsmyth, 2013, 2014). Such findings regarding soft skills are also consistent with the literature stating the need to design enterprise interventions to increase women entrepreneurs' confidence (Roper and Scott, 2009). Other soft training, such as resilience, enable the building of confidence, allowing disadvantaged women to be able to take setbacks as part of the learning journey, and persevere and adapt by changing their business, which many studies have found to be crucial in allowing disadvantaged businesses to prosper (Campos et al., 2017; Ubfal et al., 2022). Finally, soft training such as **resilience** and **mindfulness** training enables disadvantaged women to develop **relaxation techniques**, which is crucial to enable entrepreneurs to maintain physical and mental wellbeing while facing the tremendous challenges of running both business and home (Murnieks et al., 2020).

Another valuable aspect of the AWE programme for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, both in France and in England, is the access to **peer-to-peer support**. Peer-to-peer support not only fosters knowledge sharing, mutual aid, and emotional support (Campos et al., 2017; Haller et al., 2017; Sarkar, Osiyevskyy, and Hayes, 2019), but it also fosters participants' identification with each other's lived experiences and inspirational peer role modelling. These benefits are key for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, as they positively influence entrepreneurs' belief in their entrepreneurial abilities (entrepreneurial self-efficacy) and their entrepreneurial intentions (for those at the business creation stage) (Markussen and Røed, 2017). In turn, this peer-to-peer support stemming from both mentoring activities and participants' informal mutual support during the Bootcamps and workshops creates a virtuous circle by enabling disadvantaged women entrepreneurs access to more social, cultural and psychological capital. Considering that intersecting structural hierarchies in society contribute to unequal access to entrepreneurial resources such as social capital, cultural capital, power and legitimacy (Martinez Dy, 2020), contributing to disadvantaged women entrepreneurs' access to more social, cultural, and psychological capital is an important added value of the AWE programme as it enables women entrepreneurs to expand their networks and opportunities outside their personal circle, and to build confidence in both their entrepreneurial projects and their entrepreneurial abilities.

Nevertheless, while it is worth noting that the AWE programme contributes to increasing women's access to social capital and cultural capital, these types of capital often remain gender-specific, and do not necessarily open doors to resources within the wider ecosystem. Indeed, the social capital accessed by participants is a

bridging social capital (i.e., relationships beyond their current social network) but is related to other women entrepreneurs encountered in the programme. Similarly, the cultural capital is oriented towards the other participants and the programme's mentors. Thus, through the gender-specific social and cultural capital acquired, the AWE programme enables participants to identify and seize opportunities to develop their entrepreneurial projects, creating a virtuous circle in their peer-to-peer interactions. However, the scope of opportunities accessed remains in a nested ecosystem and there are still barriers for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs to penetrate the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem. Developing a pathway that would enable them to be taken seriously by mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystem actors, such as formal financial institutions and governmental support agencies, remains a long term goal (Atkinson et al., 2017).

The findings from the AWE programme also offer insight on the challenges of delivering enterprise interventions during the major global COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have found that the pandemic had a **disproportionate impact** on women entrepreneurs (Manolova et al., 2020; OECD, 2020), although women entrepreneurs were heterogeneously affected, depending on their industry, their business stage, and their specific intersectional challenges. Whereas some women were heavily affected and had to leave entrepreneurship and change their career choice, some were able to pivot their business model and benefit from the emergence of digitalisation. Women entrepreneurs with caring responsibilities experienced an additional challenge during the pandemic, notably with the closure of school and childcare infrastructure, and the intertwining of the private and professional spheres. However, for some women entrepreneurs, the pandemic presented some opportunities through digitalisation. Contrary to some concerns, some women entrepreneurs, notably those with neurodiverse challenges, found the online platforms more accessible than face-to-face, to network and learn. In a similar vein, the online platforms also contributed to alleviate geographical isolation experienced by women entrepreneurs living in rural areas. Finally, the digital platform provided several business opportunities for women entrepreneurs to **pivot** their **business model**.

Although some AWE member organisations developed several online activities and online learning content to support women entrepreneurs and to alleviate their isolation during the pandemic, several women entrepreneurs mentioned a general lack of support from the ecosystem to help them cope with the crisis and build their entrepreneurial resilience to get through it. While it is true that this observation was specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, it provides insights beyond the context of this period, and points out the need to provide more adequate and tailored support to disadvantaged women entrepreneurs in times of crisis. In this sense, investing in **tailored online networking** and/or learning platforms, and relevant content oriented towards entrepreneurial resilience building, is key. This observation is particularly relevant as women are often the first to suffer the negative impacts.

In the same vein of support, as returning to normal and with onsite face-to-face training resuming, it is also important not to forget the importance of **pragmatic infrastructure** to support disadvantaged women, but to continue to think of ways to offer tailored support catering for their specific needs. Studies have found that pragmatic infrastructure support, such as providing childcare during training (Kwong et al., 2023), or providing support such as childcare vouchers (Clark et al., 2019; Viitanen, 2011), could produce an economic empowerment effect, facilitate disadvantaged women's re-entry to the job market, and enable women's peace of mind so that they are able to fully engage in businesses. Therefore, despite the benefits provided by digitalisation for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, the pragmatic infrastructures support that address their needs are equally vital.

These benefits associated with the AWE programme are thus crucial for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs' journey in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as the entrepreneurial ecosystem is dominated by an androcentric discourse and lacks a gender-sensitive approach and infrastructure to support them (Danho et al., 2021; Frimong et al., 2023; 2023b; Zhao, 2023). The report provides relevant insights for future training agendas and methods aiming to provide support to disadvantaged women entrepreneurs. It points out the importance of tailoring support to the disadvantaged women entrepreneurs' context and challenges in order not to reproduce structural barriers encountered within the mainstream ecosystem, and to facilitate access to resources. Finally, the importance of a **holistic approach** to enterprise intervention, incorporating both hard and soft components, is highlighted. After all, the art of enterprise intervention should, as some have suggested, be about both winning the heart and shaping the mind (Chandra and Jin, 2023; Kwong et al., 2012, 2012b).

6.0 Recommendations

Future enterprise intervention programmes targeting disadvantaged women entrepreneurs are called to adopt a holistic approach combining both 'hard' technical skill-oriented training and gender-specific 'soft' skills training, to improve their entrepreneurial capacity, self-efficacy, and confidence. This approach is essential for their entrepreneurial development and to address their intersectional challenges.

In addition, we make the following recommendations to improve and enhance the future type of AWE programme and its impact on disadvantaged women entrepreneurs:

- The programme should offer **tailored support to women's time commitments**. In order to adequately support disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, it is important to avoid perpetuating structural barriers related to their intersectional challenges. In this sense, considering the specific time commitments of participants and providing pragmatic infrastructures along with this approach are essential to cater to their needs. This recommendation is all the more pertinent for women entrepreneurs navigating caring responsibilities, as they have more time constraints and are more likely to need pragmatic infrastructure support.
- In a similar vein, it would be beneficial and advantageous for the programme to keep **providing support beyond developing entrepreneurial competencies**. As much as women are interested in developing entrepreneurial competencies, their other needs and challenges (e.g., business-family balance, geographical distance, etc.) have to be supported so that they learn effectively.
- The programme should offer consistent support over time. Currently, the activities offered by the AWE programme are ad-hoc and time-limited. However, there is a need for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs to be **supported and guided throughout their entrepreneurial journey, in the process of creation as well as in the process of growth**. This is all the more important for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs who lack relevant business-related human, social and/or cultural capital, to support them outside the programme. Thus, having a consistent support and follow-up is key to sustaining their development and addressing the challenges related to the different development stages.
- The programme needs to be **specific to stages of business development**, to be able to provide relevant materials and content to participants so as to have a significant impact on the development of their business. Indeed, currently many enterprise interventions aiming to support disadvantaged women entrepreneurs tend to focus on the business creation stage, which creates a gap in the offer and do not cater for many disadvantaged women entrepreneurs' needs. Thus, this recommendation will foster the inclusion of more disadvantaged women entrepreneurs and support them to overcome the glass-ceiling related to some stages of business development. This is all the more important at times of crisis where growth and development of enterprises becomes more challenging. Designing programmes to better fit and support disadvantaged women entrepreneurs will help them navigate the most appropriate support and lead them to build their entrepreneurial resilience.

- **Mentoring activities needs to be maintained and supported adequately.** Mentoring is a key activity to help women entrepreneurs build their confidence and to build their social and cultural capital. Although these benefits were valued by most participants engaging it, the support was uneven, with some participants' experiences ending rather negatively, the women having been abandoned by their mentors. These negative experiences are all the more important for disadvantaged women entrepreneurs, as they tend to lack confidence and legitimacy in their entrepreneurial journey and may also have experienced rejection from mainstream ecosystem actors. Thus, offering a more adequate, rigorous, and consistent mentoring experience is essential.
- **The programme should promote more inspirational peer role-modelling activities,** to enable women entrepreneurs with intersectional identities (such as women from BAME ethnic groups, women with neurodiversity challenges, etc.) to have more self-identification in their entrepreneurial journey to help them build their confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities. Considering the marginalisation associated with some intersectional categories, offering peer role-modelling can also help them to better tackle some of their challenges (e.g., reconcile business and family while having neurodiverse challenges).
- In line with the peer-to-peer support, given that the AWE programme is cross-cultural, it would also be beneficial to **promote cross-cultural peer knowledge exchange** to foster more experience-sharing and practical learning between disadvantaged women entrepreneurs from the different member countries (i.e., France and UK). This would help them to address the same challenges experienced with different approaches and solutions, and would also give them the opportunity to benefit from more 'skills swap'.
- Finally, considering the disproportionately negative impact of crises on women, the programme should develop entrepreneurial **resilience training** to increase women entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial resilience and to support them in navigating the negative impacts of the crisis as well as the challenges inherent to the entrepreneurial journey.



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Appendices

Impact Analysis interview guide (English version)

Impact Analysis interview guide

NB: The ecosystem refers to entrepreneurs and other stakeholders involved in enterprises. It, therefore, includes resource providers such as financiers, and suppliers, but also those who have resources such as knowledge and skills, which are crucial for entrepreneurial development, as well as those who can support the development of networks and facilitate the business relationships of entrepreneurs.

Please, can you tell us how your participation in the AWE programme enabled you to develop (and/or sustain) your business?


- What type of business do you undertake? / To what extent does your company address inequalities or social problems in your environment?
- At what stage was your business at the beginning of the program and at what stage is your business now?
- Are you doing anything differently since your participation?
- What changes have the AWE programme brought to your business development? (What are the reasons of these changes ?)
- Did you have access to more and/or new resources?
- Did you have access to more and/or new opportunities?

Please, can you tell us how your participation in the AWE programme enabled you to develop your business as a woman entrepreneur?

- How did your participation in the AWE programme enable you to embrace your identity as a woman entrepreneur? (What changes have you experienced in this sense? E.g., work-life balance, time management, etc.)
- To what extent did your participation in the AWE programme enable you to overcome the challenges experienced as a woman entrepreneur?
- What ecosystem actors helped you in this sense?


Please, can you tell us how the AWE programme helped to address other challenges you experienced in your entrepreneurial journey in the ecosystem?

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Impact Analysis interview guide (English version)



Impact Analysis interview guide

Please, can you tell us how the AWE programme helped to address other challenges you experienced in your entrepreneurial journey in the ecosystem?

How did your participation in the AWE programme enable you to overcome the challenges experienced related to ... ?

- neurodiversity/ mental or physical health condition/ disability
- caring responsibilities
- rural area
- education level
- socio-economic area
- ethnicity
- age range

What ecosystem actors helped you to address these challenges? (What changes have you experienced in this sense?)

How has the covid-19 pandemic affected your interaction with the entrepreneurial ecosystem actors?

- Types of interaction (e.g., funding, business management support, etc. / f2f, on zoom, etc.)
- Amount of interaction / do you consider that you interact less or more than before the crisis? (If applicable) / why?
- Quality of interaction / do you consider these interactions to be more or less satisfactory than before the crisis? (If applicable) / why?
- Impacts of these interactions on your health, emotional and mental well-being, and the development of your business
- Do you feel that these interactions have helped you to address some of the challenges you experienced during the pandemic related to your business?
- Did you receive any resources/support from the ecosystem actors? What type of resources/support?

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Impact Analysis interview guide (French version)



Impact Analysis interview guide

NB : L'écosystème fait référence aux entrepreneurs et aux autres parties prenantes impliquées dans les entreprises. Il inclut donc les fournisseurs de ressources tels que les financiers, les fournisseurs, mais aussi ceux qui disposent de ressources telles que les connaissances et les compétences, qui sont cruciales pour le développement entrepreneurial, ainsi que ceux qui peuvent soutenir le développement de réseaux et faciliter les relations commerciales des entrepreneurs.

Pouvez-vous nous dire comment votre participation au programme AWE vous a permis de développer (et/ou de maintenir) votre entreprise ?

- Quel type d'entreprise développez-vous ? / Dans quelle mesure votre entreprise s'attaque-t-elle aux inégalités ou aux problèmes sociaux dans votre environnement ? (Si entreprise à mission sociale)
- À quel stade de développement se trouvait votre entreprise au début du programme et à quel stade se trouve votre entreprise aujourd'hui ?
- Faites-vous les choses différemment depuis votre participation au programme ?
- Quels changements le projet AWE a-t-il apporté au développement de votre entreprise ? (Quelles sont les raisons de ces changements ?)
- Avez-vous eu accès à plus de et/ou nouvelles ressources ?
- Avez-vous eu accès à plus de et/ou de nouvelles opportunités ?

Pouvez-vous nous dire comment votre participation au programme AWE vous a permis de développer votre entreprise en tant que femme entrepreneur ?

- Comment votre participation au programme AWE vous a-t-elle permis d'assumer votre identité de femme entrepreneur ? (Quels changements avez-vous expérimentés dans ce sens ? Par exemple, en lien avec l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, la gestion du temps, etc.)
- Dans quelle mesure votre participation au programme AWE vous a-t-elle permis de surmonter les défis rencontrés en tant que femme entrepreneur ?
- Quels acteurs de l'écosystème vous ont aidé en ce sens ?

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Impact Analysis interview guide (French version)



Impact Analysis interview guide

Pouvez-vous nous dire comment le programme AWE vous a aidé à relever d'autres défis que vous avez rencontrés au cours de votre parcours entrepreneurial dans l'écosystème ?

- Neurodiversité/ état de santé mentale ou physique/ handicap
- Responsabilités familiales
- Zone rurale
- Niveau d'éducation
- Zone socio-économique
- Ethnicité
- Tranche d'âge

Quels acteurs de l'écosystème vous ont aidé à relever ces défis ? (Quels changements avez-vous expérimentés dans ce sens ?)

Globalement, comment considérez-vous les impacts du programme AWE sur votre parcours entrepreneurial dans l'écosystème ?

- Quels ont été les impacts sur votre parcours entrepreneurial ?
- Quels ont été les impacts sur votre situation économique ?
- Quels ont été les impacts sur votre bien-être ?
- Que pensez-vous que l'écosystème pourrait mieux faire pour vous soutenir?

Comment la pandémie de covid-19 a-t-elle affecté votre parcours entrepreneurial ?

- À quel stade de votre entreprise étiez-vous lorsque la pandémie a commencé ?
- Quel impact a-t-elle eu sur votre activité et sur le développement de votre entreprise ?
- A-t-elle été une source d'opportunités pour votre entreprise ?
- Quels défis avez-vous dû relever ? Avez-vous rencontré des difficultés liées à l'équilibre entre votre entreprise et votre famille ? Si oui, pouvez-vous nous en dire plus sur ces défis

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Impact Analysis interview guide (French version)



Impact Analysis interview guide

Comment la pandémie de covid-19 a-t-elle affecté votre interaction avec les acteurs de l'écosystème entrepreneurial ?

- Types d'interaction (par exemple, financement, soutien à la gestion de l'entreprise, etc./ aussi f2f, zoom, etc.)
- Quantité d'interaction / considérez-vous que vous interagissiez moins ou plus qu'avant la crise ? (Si applicable) / pourquoi ?
- Qualité de l'interaction / considérez-vous que ces interactions soient plus ou moins satisfaisantes qu'avant la crise ? (Le cas échéant) / pourquoi ?
- Impacts de ces interactions sur votre santé, votre bien-être émotionnel et mental, et le développement de votre entreprise.
- Avez-vous le sentiment que ces interactions vous ont aidé à relever certains des défis que vous avez rencontrés pendant la pandémie en ce qui concerne votre entreprise ?
- Avez-vous reçu des ressources/soutien de la part des acteurs de l'écosystème ? Quel type de ressources/soutien

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