



UNIVERSITY  
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP  
PROGRAMME



# BUCS & FA WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME IMPACT REPORT 2025-26

An evidence-led report on programme outcomes, participant development, accelerator insight and year-on-year learning.

Prepared July 2026



**CREAS**

SPORTS CONSULTING

# Contents

|           |                                                           |              |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Executive Summary.....</b>                             | <b>3-4</b>   |
| <b>2</b>  | <b>Introduction to the programme and its purpose.....</b> | <b>5</b>     |
| <b>3</b>  | <b>Evaluation approach.....</b>                           | <b>6-7</b>   |
| <b>4</b>  | <b>Cohort profile and starting point.....</b>             | <b>8</b>     |
| <b>5</b>  | <b>Impact in numbers: 2025/26 headline findings.....</b>  | <b>9-10</b>  |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>Evidence impact themes.....</b>                        | <b>11-14</b> |
| <b>7</b>  | <b>Accelerator insight.....</b>                           | <b>15-16</b> |
| <b>8</b>  | <b>Comparison to previous years.....</b>                  | <b>17</b>    |
| <b>9</b>  | <b>Case studies.....</b>                                  | <b>18-19</b> |
| <b>10</b> | <b>Conclusion.....</b>                                    | <b>20</b>    |

# Executive Summary

The 2025/26 BUCS and FA Women's Leadership Programme (WLP) continued to demonstrate the value of a focused, women-centred leadership development pathway for university students who want to work in, influence or contribute to football.

The evidence from this year shows a programme that is continuing to build confidence, deepen self-awareness, strengthen networks, and give participants a clearer sense of how their skills can translate into the football industry. The report draws on a strong mixed-method evidence base: five sets of survey responses captured before, during and at completion of the programme, as well as three focus group conversations with participants. It also compares the 2025/26 findings with the 2024/25 cohort report and the wider 2019-2024 impact report covering the first five cohorts of the programme.

Overall, the story of 2025/26 is highly positive. The cohort entered the programme already motivated, already connected to football in different ways, and already ambitious about the role they wanted to play in sport. The programme then helped many of them convert that passion into greater readiness, more intentional networking, stronger confidence, new opportunities, and a greater understanding of leadership. This is particularly powerful because many participants are at a transition point: graduating from university, ending club committee roles, exploring internships, entering postgraduate study, applying for work experience, or seeking their first roles in football. In that context, the programme acted as both a development experience and a bridge between university life and the next stage of their professional journey.

## The headline numbers are compelling. By the end of the programme:

**100%**

of respondents agreed that WLP had positively contributed to their professional development.

**94%**

agreed that it had positively contributed to their personal development.

**100%**

agreed that programmes like WLP are important.

**100%**

agreed that they are now more equipped to cope with pressure, deal with setbacks and remain resilient and effective.

**100%**

agreed that the programme has increased their awareness of the leadership qualities needed to inspire people.

**100%**

agreed that they are now more confident in themselves and what they can accomplish.

**100%**

agreed that completing WLP has improved their ability to connect with people through the quality of their communication and influence.

The data also shows very clear growth against the cohort's starting point. At the beginning of the programme, 41% of respondents agreed that they felt prepared to undertake a role in the football industry. By the end, 83% agreed that they felt more prepared to do so. At the start, 46% agreed that they were aware of the vast range of opportunities available in the football industry. By the end, 88% agreed that they were more aware of the range of career opportunities available in football. This movement is one of the strongest pieces of evidence in the dataset. The programme is not simply confirming what participants already know, but broadening awareness and helping participants see practical routes into a sector that can often feel complex, relationship-driven and difficult to navigate.

The qualitative evidence brings these numbers to life. Participants described WLP as confidence-building, eye-opening, warm, safe, inspiring, reflective, empowering, and highly valuable. They repeatedly highlighted the importance of being in rooms with other women who share a passion for football, learning from women in the industry, working with accelerators and having opportunities to practise presenting and storytelling. One participant summarised the impact by saying the programme had made her *"a stronger, more reflective, more self-aware person"* and given her *"a level of confidence and belief"* she lacked before. Another said it had *"inspired me to aspire big"* and not be afraid to make connections or take risks. These reflections show that the programme's impact is not limited to technical career knowledge; it is also about identity, belonging and belief.

The central conclusion of this report is that WLP continues to fulfil its purpose. It gives aspiring women and non-binary higher education students a space to develop confidence, networks, leadership behaviours and football industry understanding. It helps participants see themselves in the football workforce and take practical steps towards it. It provides access to people and rooms in the industry that many participants said they would not otherwise have entered at this stage in their journey. It creates a cohort network that participants value deeply. The 2025/26 evidence confirms that the programme is valuable not only because it supports participants to get closer to football careers, but also because it helps them understand who they are, what they can offer and how they lead

# Introduction to the programme and its purpose

The BUCS and FA Women's Leadership Programme exists to unlock the potential of a diverse cohort of female and non-binary students who aspire to work in football. Since its launch, the programme has been positioned as a bridge between student leadership and early career exploration in the football workforce. Its purpose is not only to tell participants that opportunities exist in football, but to help them develop the confidence, self-awareness and the practical understanding required to pursue those opportunities competitively.

WLP brings together three elements that students rarely receive in one place:

- **exposure to football careers and professionals**
- **personal leadership development**
- **access to peers, accelerators and industry networks**

Participants joined with varied ambitions across teaching, sports medicine, performance analysis, media, operations, governance, coaching and community development. Some already held football roles, while others are still exploring where they might fit in the industry. This breadth reinforces that WLP supports multiple routes into and across the football ecosystem.

*"I want to be a teacher who gives students a great first experience of football."*

Participants also valued being surrounded by women who understood their passion for football. For those used to male-dominated environments, this representation and sense of belonging made their career ambitions feel more attainable.

Overall, WLP helped participants move from interest towards informed action. Not everyone left with a clear career plan, but many gained further confidence, broader awareness and a better understanding of the next experiences they need.



# Evaluation approach

The 2025/26 evaluation uses a mixed-method evidence base to demonstrate the impact of the programme and understand how participants and accelerators experienced WLP. The quantitative evidence gives a clear view of satisfaction, perceived development, confidence, industry awareness, network growth and career readiness. The qualitative evidence gives depth, context and meaning, showing what the programme felt like, why particular moments in the programme mattered, and how participants are making sense of their next steps following WLP. The combination of surveys and focus groups is particularly helpful for WLP because many of the intended outcomes, confidence, self-awareness, belonging, reflection and readiness, are best understood through both numbers and narrative.

The evidence base includes five survey datasets for the 2025/26 season. The pre-programme survey captured the cohort's starting point, including their current roles, career ambitions, motivations, confidence in football industry readiness, and awareness of opportunities. The Residential 1 survey captured immediate feedback after the first in-person experience, including satisfaction, support, learning, confidence, belonging, networking confidence and leadership styles. The Residential 2 survey captured feedback after the online residential, including support, learning, development, opportunities, communication and readiness. The end-of-programme participant survey captured post-programme outcomes, including new opportunities, changes in football involvement, career readiness, skill development, barriers, recommendations, favourite moments and overall impact. The accelerator end-of-programme survey captured the experience of staff supporting participants, including their perception of participant impact and their own development.



The focus groups offered particularly valuable insight because participants were able to respond to each other, build on shared themes and reflect more openly on their journey. The transcript data also supports a core finding that is sometimes harder to capture in surveys. WLP created shared emotional and social experiences that participants will remember. The storytelling exercise, networking dinners, group challenge, presentation tasks and accelerator conversations were not just activities during the residentials; they were moments in which participants tested their confidence, practised vulnerability, built relationships and saw themselves differently.

The accelerator survey adds a further layer because it helps triangulate participant-reported outcomes. Participants may feel they have grown, but accelerators also observed growth in confidence and self-belief in the participants. The accelerator evidence also includes useful reflections on programme structure, their role, feedback time and the balance between classroom-style content and active learning. The strongest positive finding from the accelerator data is that the role can support both participant development and accelerator development when accelerators are meaningfully integrated into the learning journey.



The comparison to previous years uses two available benchmarks. The first is the impact report covering WLP from 2019 to 2024, which drew on evidence from 69 individuals across the first five cohorts, alongside accelerator reflections. The second is the 2024/25 impact report, which provides last year's cohort-level statistics. These benchmarks extremely useful for understanding whether the 2025/26 cohort is sustaining the programme's established strengths. The findings show that WLP's long-term impact areas remain consistent: professional development, personal development, confidence, networks, leadership awareness, communication, resilience, industry awareness and employability readiness.



# 2025/26 cohort profile and starting point

The 2025/26 cohort entered with high motivation and a strong connection to football, but varied career clarity. At baseline, 82% held another paid or voluntary football or futsal role, including club leadership, coaching, refereeing, committee work, activator roles and placements.

Participants studied a wide range of subjects, including sport science, PE, sports management, medicine, politics, neuroscience and wildlife conservation. Many were approaching graduation, postgraduate study, teacher training or early-career roles, demonstrating that football careers can draw on diverse academic and professional backgrounds.

The starting point showed clear room for participant growth. At the beginning, only 41% agreed that they felt prepared to undertake a role in the football industry. Only 46% agreed that they were aware of the range of opportunities available in the football industry. These baseline figures are valuable because they show that even a highly motivated cohort did not necessarily feel ready or informed. Many participants had passion and experience, but not full confidence in the pathways, expectations and practical steps required to progress in the football industry. This is precisely where a programme like WLP can add value.

Participants applied to build confidence, understand the industry, develop leadership skills, meet like-minded people and clarify career routes. Recommendations from university staff, peers and WLP alumni were particularly influential in their motivation to apply for the programme.

Participants continued to face barriers in football, including limited knowledge, unclear opportunities, competitive recruitment pathways and insufficient experience. At the end of the programme, 67% still reported barriers to progressing in football, highlighting the wider structural context in which WLP operates.

WLP did not remove every barrier, but it gave participants greater confidence to respond. Participants reported applying for roles, asking for opportunities and using LinkedIn more intentionally. Participants increasingly recognised that taking an initial step was more important than having a perfect career plan.



# Impact in numbers: 2025/26 headline findings

The headline findings from the 2025/26 end of programme survey show clear and wide-ranging impact:



Together, the results show impact across self-belief, communication, leadership awareness, resilience and career confidence, closely matching the programme's intended outcomes.

Career readiness also improved markedly from baseline: preparedness for a football role rose from 41% to 83%, while awareness of football opportunities rose from 46% to 88%. In addition, 88% had a clearer understanding of the skills and experiences they still needed to develop.

*"WLP helped me have the confidence to just go for it, apply for opportunities and reflect upon the skills I would bring to a role".*

The recommendation data is positive, though more nuanced than in the previous year. The average recommendation score was 8.44 out of 10. Seven participants were promoters, ten were passives and one was a detractor, producing an NPS of +33. While this is below the +100 NPS recorded in 2024/25, the underlying picture is still supportive: 89% of participants scored the programme 8 or above, and 94% scored it 7 or above.



# Evidence of impact: key themes

## Confidence, self-belief and personal growth

The most powerful theme across the 2025/26 evidence is confidence. At the end of the programme, 100% of those who answered agreed that they were more confident in themselves and what they can accomplish. 94% agreed that WLP positively contributed to their personal development. 94% also agreed that they felt more confident applying for or pursuing opportunities in football.

Participants described a more grounded form of confidence, knowing what they are more and less comfortable with, understanding their boundaries, being willing to speak up, being prepared to apply for roles and recognising that they have something valuable to contribute.

*“WLP made me a stronger, more reflective, more self-aware person and given me a level of confidence and belief in myself that I lacked before”*

The storytelling and presentation elements were particularly important for participants' growth in confidence. Several participants identified the five-minute story activity in Residential 1 as one of their greatest challenges and one of their most memorable developmental moments of the programme. It required them to speak about themselves, reflect on why football mattered to them, and share something personal with people they had only recently met. In the focus groups, participants said this moment helped them let down barriers and feel closer as a cohort. One participant said the personal story activity pushed her out of her comfort zone, but afterwards she felt as though a weight had been lifted. Another said that speaking up in front of the group was difficult, but the programme made her feel safe and by the end she was able to answer questions confidently.

This finding highlights the importance of psychological safety for WLP. Participants did not grow in confidence because the programme avoided challenge. They grew because challenge was held within a supportive environment. Being asked to present, network, take part in group tasks or receive feedback can be uncomfortable, but participants were able to interpret these experiences as developmental because they felt supported by the staff, accelerators and peers who wanted them to succeed.

The confidence theme also links directly to career action. One participant said that after Residential 1 she applied for a job she did not feel ready for, simply to see where she was at, and getting an interview increased her confidence to keep applying. Another said WLP helped her feel able to apply for jobs she previously would have assumed she did not have the skills for. Another said it gave her confidence to ask people for opportunities. These reflections show that the programme has supported participants to feel confident enough to take the next steps in their journeys.

*"Being around like-minded people was really helpful. We all have clear passions for what we want to do, and we pushed each other to be that person".*

## Career readiness, employability and practical opportunities

WLP strengthened career readiness by broadening opportunity awareness, increasing confidence to pursue roles and helping participants identify the skills and experiences they need. Preparedness for a football role rose from 41% to 83%, while opportunity awareness in football increased from 46% to 88%.

Participants valued realistic career stories, access to people working in football and exposure to roles beyond the most visible parts of the industry. These interactions made potential routes feel more tangible and attainable.

*"I feel so much more prepared for the next step. I know what I'm getting myself into, and I know what's out there for me."*



Participants also left with clearer next steps, including completing university, starting new roles, pursuing internships or postgraduate study, seeking work experience and strengthening professional networks.

WLP reduced pressure to identify one perfect pathway by showing that football careers can be non-linear and can connect with teaching, medicine, governance, media, operations and other sectors.

Understanding specific routes into football remains a development area. Participants wanted even more guidance on entry-level roles, job descriptions, shadowing opportunities and pathways into particular specialisms in the game.

This suggests WLP is strong at broadening horizons and building belief, with scope to make the journey from inspiration to application even more specific and personalised to participants.



## Network, belonging and access to the football ecosystem

Networking is a clear outcome of WLP. At the end of the programme, 94% of participants agreed that they had grown their network in the football industry. 100% of participants agreed that completing WLP had improved their ability to connect with people through the quality of their communication and influence. These results are supported by extensive qualitative evidence. Participants repeatedly identified networking moments as favourite, most useful or most challenging experiences of the programme, and many described the 2025/26 participant cohort itself as a powerful network.

*“The connections that you make with the accelerators and the girls around you are huge. We’re so supportive of each other on LinkedIn and in person – it is such a community.”*

This sense of belonging matters because football can still feel male-dominated for many young women. Several participants contrasted WLP with their usual football environments, where they often work or study around men and have fewer opportunities to meet women with similar ambitions. WLP created a different kind of environment, one where women in football were visible, where participants could ask questions, and where conversations about leadership, confidence and careers felt normal. A participant said the first networking evening felt like an opportunity she would not get elsewhere, describing it as a space that only happened because she was on the programme.

*“Being in a room full of women working in football felt inspiring and cool. Those conversations do not just happen in my everyday life.”*

The networking experience was also developmental because it was not always easy. Several participants said networking pushed them out of their comfort zone. Some had never been in that kind of environment before. Some experienced imposter syndrome. Some found it difficult to start conversations when guests’ careers did not match their desired career ambitions. Others felt tempted to rely on friends or university peers as a safety blanket. These challenges are valuable because they mirror the industry. WLP provided repeated opportunities to practise networking, receive reassurance from accelerators and build confidence over time.

The accelerator relationship was an important part of the network. Participants mentioned accelerator check-ins, reassurance, honest feedback, and the ability to have deeper conversations with someone already working in sport. One participant said the support of her accelerator helped her overcome her imposter syndrome during networking. Another said working with her accelerator helped her become more present and less pressured to have a fixed career plan. Another valued being challenged by her accelerator in a way that helped her identify her values and future priorities. These reflections show that accelerators operate as both mentors and connectors, helping participants process experiences that might otherwise feel intimidating.

*“My accelerator really helped me through networking. She reassured me, and with her help and the programme I was able to get over that imposter syndrome.”*

## Leadership behaviours, reflection and communication

The 2025/26 evidence shows that WLP developed leadership as a behaviour rather than a title. Participants learnt not only about leading from the front, but also about active listening, feedback, followership, reflection, trust, communication, collaboration and managing time. This is highly positive because many participants already held formal leadership roles in their university football clubs or committees. The programme helped them look beyond position and examine how they actually lead.

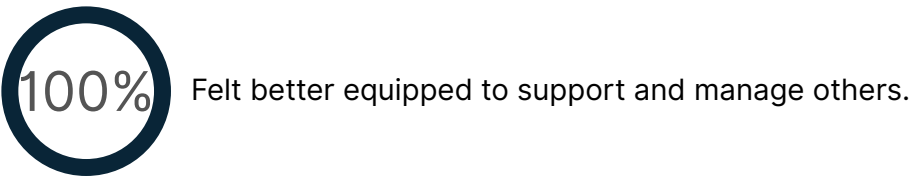
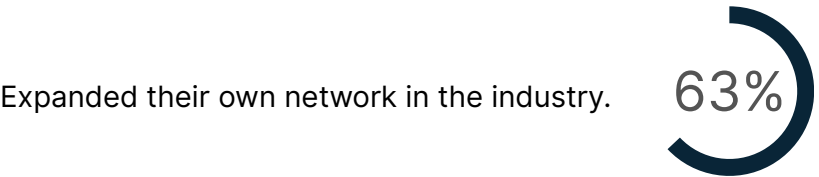
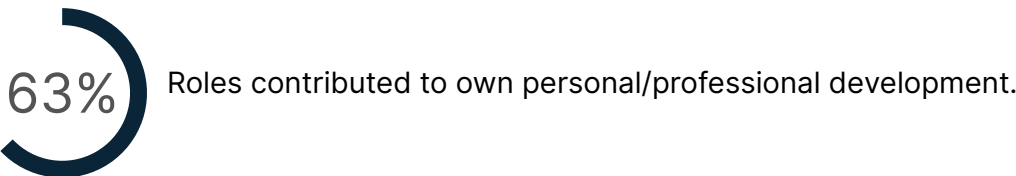
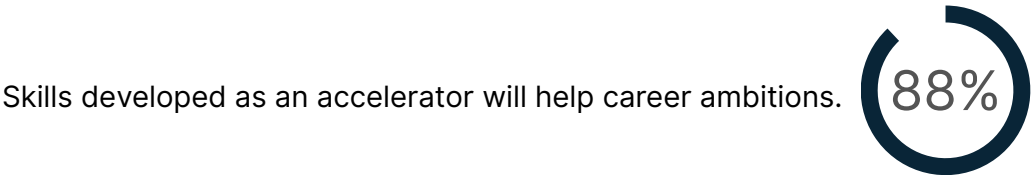
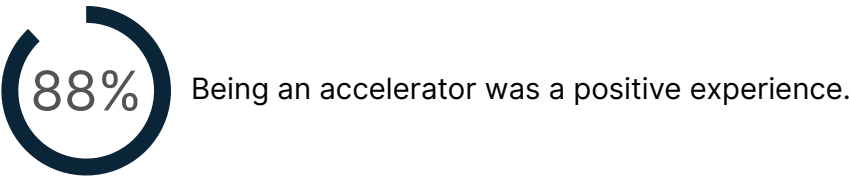
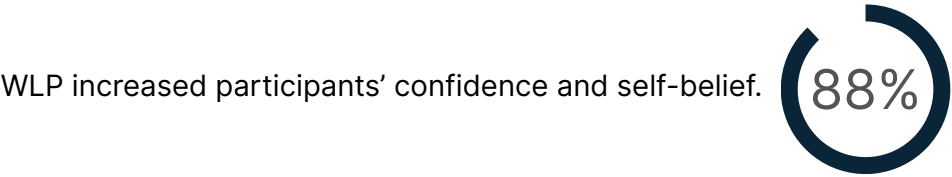
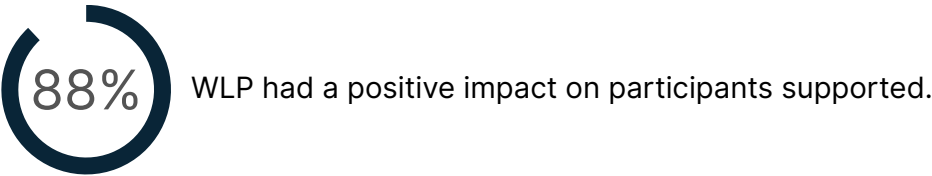
At the end of the programme, 100% agreed that WLP increased their awareness of the leadership qualities needed to inspire people. 100% of participants agreed that the programme improved their ability to connect with people through communication and influence. 88% agreed they were more able to analyse information and think outside the box to develop solutions to problems. 78% of participants agreed that WLP improved their ability to develop collaborative relationships with stakeholders from different backgrounds, and 78% agreed it made them more able to plan activities, set goals and organise resources and time.

Feedback was another major theme from WLP. The final group task and presentation gave participants a chance to work with others, respond to challenge, receive feedback and give feedback. Several participants found that this pushed them outside of their comfort zone. Some had to manage different group dynamics, challenge others, lead without fully taking over, trust their teammates, and present ideas under pressure. This kind of applied leadership practice was valuable because it revealed habits that are difficult to surface in classroom-style content alone. One participant said the group presentation helped her understand her own controlling tendencies and the need to trust others.

Overall, WLP helped participants move from instinctive to more intentional leadership by giving them the language, practice, experience and feedback they can apply to their future roles.

# Accelerator insight

The accelerator model remains a distinctive and valuable part of WLP. Accelerators provide mentoring, reflective support, challenge, feedback and a bridge between participants and the wider sport or football workforce. The 2025/26 data shows that accelerators had a positive view of the programme’s impact on participants and also experienced development themselves. Their insight is particularly useful because they saw participants at close range across the programme journey.



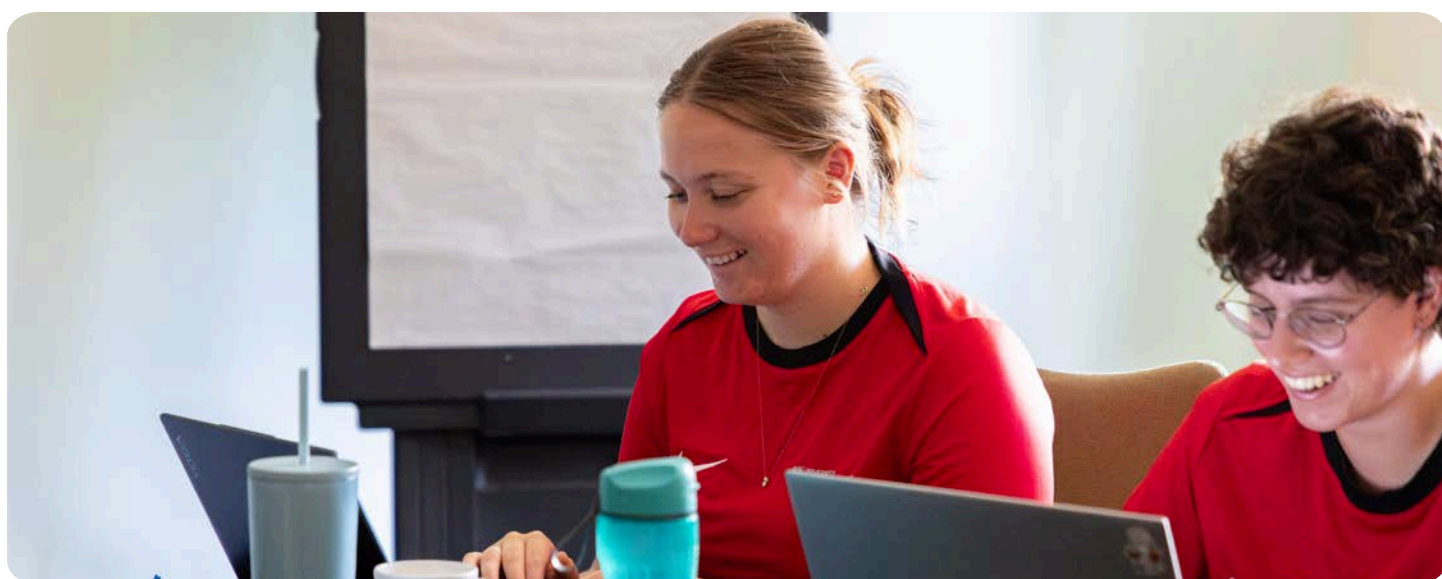
Accelerators described the most valuable aspects of the role as supporting students, working directly with participants, facilitating reflection and giving feedback. One accelerator said working directly with participants alongside the course content had helped them develop and learn as a manager, with lessons they were embedding into their professional life. Another said supporting students was particularly valuable because they felt they had an impact on other people. These comments show that the accelerator role can be mutually beneficial; participants receive support, and accelerators practise leadership, coaching and management.

*“Working directly with participants alongside the course content has helped me to really develop and learn as a manager, and there is much that I have been working to embed into my professional life.”*

The accelerators observed participant impact most strongly as an increase in confidence and self-belief. 88% agreed WLP increased the confidence and self-belief of the participants they supported. Accelerators’ favourite moments included seeing participants grow in confidence when presenting, opening up on a deeper level, sharing personal stories and delivering their group presentations. This aligns closely with participant evidence and strengthens confidence in the findings of this report.

*“This programme has taught me so much about myself and how to support others. It has allowed me to reflect and get out of my head more.”*

Overall, the evidence endorses the accelerator model while showing that its impact will be greatest when accelerators are embedded early, visible during tasks and supported to provide consistent feedback between residentials.





# Comparison to previous years of WLP

The comparison to previous years shows that the 2025/26 programme continued WLP's long-term pattern of positive impact.

| Impact area                              | 2019-2024 benchmark | 2024/25 benchmark               | 2025/26 result                  |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Professional/personal development        | 92% combined        | 94% professional; 100% personal | 100% professional; 94% personal |
| Confidence & self-belief                 | 85%                 | 94%                             | 100% of valid respondents       |
| Communication & Influence                | 90%                 | 100%                            | 100%                            |
| Leadership qualities awareness           | 88%                 | 100%                            | 100%                            |
| Network in football industry             | 86%                 | 100%                            | 94%                             |
| Prepared to undertake a role in football | 81%                 | 89%                             | 83%                             |
| Opportunities awareness                  | 80%                 | 94%                             | 88%                             |
| Resilience                               | 78%                 | 94%                             | 100%                            |
| Lifelong learning/reflection             | 78%                 | 100%                            | 83%                             |
| Recommendation/NPS                       | 100% recommended    | +100 NPS                        | +33 NPS average score 8.44/10   |

The 2025/26 cohort exceeded the 2019-2024 benchmark in confidence, communication, leadership awareness, resilience, networking, preparedness and opportunity awareness, indicating that WLP's core impact model remains strong.

Compared with 2024/25, the current cohort matched or exceeded several development outcomes, including professional development, confidence, communication, leadership awareness and resilience. Personal development, opportunity awareness, lifelong learning and NPS were lower.

Across all available years, participants consistently affirm the need for WLP. In 2025/26, 100% agreed that programmes like it are important, particularly for building confidence and networks within the football industry.

In summary, 2025/26 delivered strong impact and its purpose remains validated, its outcomes compare well historically, and the evidence offers practical ways to improve consistency and programme advocacy.

# Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate two different forms of impact: leadership through education and progression into women's football employment.

## Megan

Megan entered WLP as a student studying Physical Education, with a clear interest in teaching and a strong personal connection to football and futsal. Her motivation for joining was rooted in the role she hoped to play for young people. In a focus group, she explained that she wanted to join WLP and learn more about football because she may be 'the first impression of football a lot of kids might have'. This is a powerful motivation as she saw WLP as a way to become the kind of teacher who can shape inclusive, positive first experiences of the game.

Through WLP, Megan developed confidence, self-belief and a clearer understanding of her boundaries and leadership behaviours. She described becoming more reflective and more able to recognise what she had achieved.

*"It has made me think deeper about my behaviours and encouraged me to reflect frequently and look back at what I have done and be proud of myself."*

During the programme year, Megan was accepted onto a teacher training course and began setting up a futsal team in Canterbury.

Speaking in front of the group was a significant stretch for Megan. By Residential 3, Megan felt able to answer questions confidently. She linked this growth to the programme and felt it would support her in entering a new school environment for her work where she would initially know nobody.

*"It has given me confidence that even though I'll be walking into a school not knowing anybody, I'll still be able to progress, get to know people and become more comfortable."*

## Izzy.

Izzy joined WLP as a final-year sport science student and captain of Exeter University Women's Football Club. During the programme year, she secured an internship with Exeter City Community Trust and a supporter engagement role at Exeter City Women FC, marking a clear step from university leadership into the women's football workforce.

Izzy credited WLP with strengthening her networking, confidence, communication skills, while also increasing her employability. With an ambition to work in WSL operations, the supporter engagement role provided a relevant next step towards the professional women's game.

*"The programme inspired me to aspire big and don't be afraid to make those connections and take risks."*

Izzy said the programme had more impact than she expected. She particularly valued networking, meeting women with similar ambitions, and the practical stretch created by storytelling and group presentations.

*"Do it. You won't regret it. I have enjoyed every single part of the programme."*



# Conclusion

The 2025/26 WLP achieved its core purpose. Participants left more confident, reflective, connected and prepared to pursue opportunities, with evidence consistent across surveys, focus groups and accelerator insight.

This support came at an important transition point, as many participants were graduating, starting training or employment, applying for internships or exploring new career directions.

There are four clear, connected outcomes that underpin the programme's impact: confidence built through stepping outside their comfort zone; career readiness through exposure and action; new networks and belonging; and stronger leadership behaviours developed by participants, including reflection, communication and resilience.

Ultimately, participants described WLP as inspiring, safe, empowering and, for some, life-changing, while historic comparisons show sustained strength across the programme's core aims.

*"Go for it. It has the power to change your life."*

WLP remains a valuable route for helping women and non-binary students see themselves in football, understand the industry, build relationships and take their next step with greater confidence. Its impact lies both in the opportunities participants secure and in the confidence, connections and reflective habits they take forward.

