Executive Education Defined: A Complete Plan for the Future

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Abstract

This article synthesizes the evolution, value, and governance of executive education (EE) and proposes a standardized nomenclature for programs and credentials. An integrative literature review, conceptual analysis, and a scan of LinkedIn profiles inform a synthesis of impact evidence and credential practices. The study maps EE's value drivers, soft-skills development, career progression, flexible delivery, institutional brand, and networking, alongside threats from outdated curricula, limited availability, and misaligned industry ties. It specifies a five-tier taxonomy (EE Online, EE Hybrid, EE Accelerator, EE Flagship, EE Specialization Flagship) and recommends blockchain-verifiable digital badges to improve signaling and integrity. It also consolidates multi-level ROI considerations for individuals, organizations, and invested capital. The framework guides schools and firms in designing offerings, auditing ROI, and governing credentials; it supports policymakers seeking transparent, portable recognition. The article offers a field-level definition of EE and a blueprint that aligns program design, measurement, and credentialing.

#Keywords

Executive education ROI; Blockchain-verified digital badges; Micro-credentials in executive education; Hybrid executive education programs; Online executive education courses; Executive leadership development programs; Executive education taxonomy (standardized nomenclature); Industry-aligned executive education; LinkedIn credential signaling; Credential misuse and inflation.

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Executive Education definiert: Ein umfassender Zukunftsplan

Dieser Beitrag synthetisiert Entwicklung, Wert und Governance der Executive Education (EE) und schlägt eine standardisierte Nomenklatur für Programme und Qualifikationsnachweise (Credentials) vor. Eine integrative Literaturübersicht, eine konzeptuelle Analyse sowie ein Scan von LinkedIn-Profilen bilden die Grundlage für eine Synthese der Evidenz zur Wirkung und der Praktiken der Credential-Vergabe. Die Studie kartiert die Werttreiber der EE: Entwicklung überfachlicher Kompetenzen (Soft Skills), beruflichen Aufstiegs, flexible Formate, institutioneller Marke und Vernetzung. Zugleich benennt sie Risiken durch veraltete Curricula, begrenzte Verfügbarkeit und unzureichend ausgerichtete Industriekooperationen. Sie spezifiziert eine fünfstufige Taxonomie (EE Online, EE Hybrid, EE Accelerator, EE Flagship, EE Specialization Flagship) und empfiehlt blockchain-verifizierbare digitale Abzeichen (Badges), um Signalwirkung und Integrität zu stärken. Zudem konsolidiert sie mehrstufige ROI-Überlegungen für Einzelpersonen, Organisationen und investiertes Kapital. Das Rahmenwerk unterstützt Hochschulen und Unternehmen bei der Angebotsgestaltung, der ROI-Prüfung und der Governance von Qualifikationsnachweisen; es hilft politischen Entscheidungsträgern, transparente und portable Anerkennung zu fördern. Der Beitrag bietet eine feldspezifische Definition von EE sowie einen Blueprint, der Programmdesign, Messung und die Vergabe von Qualifikationsnachweisen (Credentialing) aufeinander abstimmt.

「高管教育的界定：未来的完整规划」

本文综合梳理高管教育（executive education，EE）的演进、价值与治理，并提出项目与证书的标准化命名法。通过综合性文献综述、概念分析，以及对 Lin-

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kedIn 个人资料的检索，整合了影响证据与证书实践。研究绘制了 EE 的价值驱动因素：软技能发展、职业进阶、灵活交付、机构品牌与人脉网络；同时指出威胁：课程过时、供给有限、产业联系不匹配。本文提出五层分类法（EE Online、EE Hybrid、EE Accelerator、EE Flagship、EE Specialization Flagship），并建议采用可由区块链验证的数字徽章，以提升信号与诚信。文章还整合了多层级的投资回报（ROI）考量，涵盖个人、组织与投入资本。该框架可指导院校与企业设计供给、审计 ROI、治理证书；也支持寻求透明、可携带认可的政策制定者。本文提供 EE 的领域级定义，并给出一套使项目设计、测量与证书对齐的蓝图。

Introduction

Executive education has undergone a significant transformation over the decades, adapting to the evolving needs of industries and professionals. In this article, we will examine the historical context of executive education (EE), including technical advancements, the evolution of EE programs, their nomenclature, and a future outlook for both the academic world and industry.

History of Executive Education

The Pre-Google Era (1945-1999). In this segment, EE focused more on fundamental business concepts. These programs were typically lengthy, face-to-face, and designed for top executives seeking to enhance their leadership skills (Amdam, 2020).

The Phase After Google (2000–2019): Following the rise of the Internet, EE began to evolve. In turn, online learning platforms emerged to provide flexible, accessible, and diverse courses with the potential to reach a larger number of cohorts (Amdam, 2020).

The Digital Transformation and COVID-19 (2020). The pandemic jumpstarted the digital transformation of EE. Harvard Business School led the way in creating access to executive education through an online platform, highlighting the value of effective online and hybrid models (Diaz & Halkias, 2021).

How Do You Define the Value of Executive Education

Defining the impact of Executive Education (EE) programs is paramount for industry and academia, as it enhances the clarity of objectives and focuses on executive development activities (Stine, 2019). Executive education programs have evolved to meet the demands of global business environments, offering a range of learning experiences that aim to have both individual and organizational impact (Long, 2004). The current offering of programs provides a pathway for lifelong learning and professional development for executives, imparting them new knowledge and skills in organizational leadership (Tiberius et al., 2021; Long, 2004). The corporate sector has seen significant growth, particularly highlighting digital transformation, reskilling, and upskilling efforts, especially in technology-related fields (Diaz & Halkias, 2021; Li, 2022; Stine, 2019). Integrating online delivery methods has further expanded access to education, providing flexibility and improved cohort/instructor interaction, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience (Stine, 2019). In terms of career advancement, research indicates that participants in executive education programs experience significant changes in motivators, such as acceptance, social contact, status, order, and tranquility, becoming more collaborative leaders with a tempered approach to management, which is vital for career progression (Jacobson et al., 2017).

Participants have reported impacts in areas such as general learning, perspective-taking, organizational identification, career pathing, and attitude changes, including changes in affect, mood, and confidence (Hou & Chen, 2020). On the other hand, obstacles persist in determining the results of EE initiatives, as there is a lack of comprehensive and in-depth evaluation systems beyond regular assessments based on participant numbers (Cataldo, 2018). Repeat participation is also viewed as a significant measure of program effectiveness and impact, indicating both individual and organizational performance (Shea, 2023). Although longitudinal data introduces additional complexity and cost to the analysis, it is critical for optimal impact assessment (Doh & Stumpf, 2007). Some key success metrics include measuring program ROI, monitoring KPIs such as changes in revenue or retention, and assessing the long-term impact on the organization (Jacobson et al., 2017). Lastly, technology has enabled the delivery of complex, digital learning opportunities in volume, along with automated feedback on group dynamics, thereby increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of executive education (Jacobson et al., 2017).

EE Impact Strengths

Improvement of Soft Skills. Soft skills development is key to shaping the difference that executive education will make in the landscape of a changing global workplace. Research suggests that the crucial skills needed to be future-ready comprise a set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Stine, 2019). Beyond knowledge, skills such as emotional intelligence, social intelligence, adaptability, and resilience are recognized as critical elements of future-ready skills in EE programs, aligning with the growing needs of capabilities to navigate complexity and uncertainty in business environments (Jacobson et al., 2017; Haskins, 2019). Ultimately, the connection between skills development and Executive Education is essential for comprehending the program's impact, effectiveness, and relevance (Jacobson et al., 2017). Research on cohorts and the industry itself has shown both a need for pre- and post-program assessments (Jacobson et al., 2017).

Career Progression. Executive education programs cater to cohorts seeking career progression by offering topic-focused courses and leadership development programs (Stine, 2019). These EE programs aim to prepare leaders for the rapidly changing global business landscape, focusing on skills applicable in the workplace, such as soft skills development and experiential learning methods (Long, 2004). The cohorts in executive education programs often include middle- to upper-level managers looking to align organizations with new directions, communicate corporate strategy effectively, and broaden their understanding of the organization to advance their careers (Smith & Keaveney, 2017).

Flexible Delivery Formats. Executive education is responding to some shifting market needs by considering flexible delivery formats such as hybrid and online learning (Klotz & Wright, 2017; Percept Research, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift away from traditional modes of training delivery, with a combination of physical and virtual learning becoming the new normal (Halkias et al., 2020). EE programs have benefited from becoming more flexible in their program delivery formats to accommodate the varying needs and preferences of students (e.g., topic-focused, executive, part-time, weekend, online, and blended) (Cataldo, 2022).

School Brand. The participant's ability to identify the brand of EE programs offered at schools has become essential for cohorts when considering EE programs (Tiberius et al., 2021). Studies show that for program selection, executives and companies care about a recognizable brand; thus, EE programs need to invest in a strong brand and faculty cadre (Tiberius et al., 2021). The school's reputation within the industry is another crucial factor in attracting participants to EE

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programs, influencing their decision-making process and overall program selection (Farris et al., 2003). The brand of an institution holds significant power in the decision-making process for prospective cohorts, as a well-known and reputable institution can increase the perceived value of the education received and the credentials earned (Jacobson et al., 2017). Ultimately, attending a prestigious business school can offer access to an extensive and influential alumni network, which is crucial for career progression and growth (Jacobson et al., 2017).

Networking. Decades of participants have benefited through expanding their social networks through networking opportunities during EE programs and interacting with other fellow students and instructors (Haskins, 2019). Networking possibilities in EE promote knowledge exchange and foster a continuing interest in lifelong learning and professional development (Zehetmeier et al., 2015). The networking benefits are among the most critical aspects of Executive Education (EE) programs, as participants gain access to personal and professional social networks (Tiberius et al., 2021). Networking has a significant impact on EE cohorts by establishing connections between students, sector specialists, and prospective companies, leading to career opportunities and upward mobility (Halkias et al., 2020). Additionally, surveys reveal that executive program participants typically look back on their networks established during their EE program as a significant career influence that is enjoyed to an even greater degree than MBA graduates (Amdam, 2020). Lastly, regarding networking, alumni networks provide valuable peer contacts that help establish connections that last long after the programs conclude (Amdam, 2020).

EE Impact Threats

Outdated Curriculum. Research has consistently highlighted the ongoing criticism of outdated curricula that fail to address relevant real-world problems or emerging technology trends, resulting in a lack of relevance and responsibility in EE education (Lastner et al., 2021; Jacobson et al., 2017). Adaptation is necessary if EE is to serve as a meaningful driver of organizational development and outcomes, as demonstrated by the numerous issues in measuring the value of EE programs (Moldoveanu & Dash, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of fresh ideas in EE may also limit the preparation of generations for the needs of the corporate world, potentially leading to less competitive and less flexible job seekers in the future (Andriole, 2023). The growth of digital technology and emerging trends in EE suggest that current curricula must evolve to accommodate the complexity and unpredictability of industry globally (Stoten, 2023). Recent initiatives to shift towards virtual learning environments, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the need for ongoing curriculum innovation that addresses the mental effects and improves student engagement and well-being due to the distance (Lastner et al., 2021). In conclusion, the threats can be partially avoided by embracing advancements such as artificial intelligence in EE, enabling greater relevance of the curriculum and higher engagement of students, who are better prepared to return to industry (Vincent-Lancrin & van der Viles, 2020).

Alignment to Industry. Partnering with industry ensures that Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) align with industry to develop effective EE leadership; together, HEIs and industry can maximize synergy and increase the number of users of leadership development (Crotty & Soule, 1997). Programs can then engage with industry leaders and meet direct industry needs, ensuring relevancy and practicality (Maybar, 2023). This collaboration also fosters trust and long-term cooperation, which enables programs to become a trusted partner for the industry (Andriole, 2023). Above all, it allows for industry vertical customization of program content, thereby enabling the program to have the most excellent efficacy on a per-sector basis (Rogers & Duening, 2013). The combination of academia and industry in executive education design can increase program efficiency (Diaz & Halkias, 2021). It helps establish leaders who will assist one another to thrive in our new environment, develop new processes, introduce new context, establish new boundaries, and ultimately create positive change through working toward meaningful outcomes (Diaz & Halkias, 2021).

It is crucial to work with the industry not just to create leaders who can drive change, but also to address global issues such as skills obsolescence (Maybar, 2023). One way this collaboration can be improved is to set up advisory councils, which can provide cohort members with expert insights, strategic guidance, and directional advice for the program (Rose & Stiefer, 2013). Collective advisory councils form groups of leaders to assist contributors in networking and developing success stories and recommendations to improve programs and curricula more effectively (Li, 2022). Guest lectures are integrated into EE programs as a crucial component of the learning process, as they provide experience and perspective to the cohorts in terms of industry expertise (Neubert et al., 2020).

Research indicates that guest lectures contribute to a more engaging learning environment, promoting student interaction and critical thinking (Kets et al., 2007). These lectures can enhance the faculty's knowledge by covering specialized topics that may not fall within their primary area of expertise, thereby providing a more comprehensive education for cohorts (Hrivnak, 2019). Also, guest lectures allow students to connect with professionals in their field of study, which can be valuable for networking and future career opportunities (Klotz & Wright, 2017). Finally, guest lectures in EE programs provide cohorts with insights from experienced professionals who share their real-world experiences and practical knowledge, which can be impactful for comprehending various business scenarios and applying theoretical concepts to actual situations (Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2007).

Limited Availability. Executive education programs encompass in-house, short-term, credit, and non-credit programs, as well as blended learning experiences (Stake, 2006). However, limitations exist in the diversity of course offerings due to factors such as curriculum composition and program specialization (Lockhart et al., 2017; Hinton and Williams Van Rooij, 2021). Although some aspects of EE are implemented in an online environment indicating that different components (i.e., face-to-face and online) were engaged and motivated in EE, the study illuminated the current lack of research on various models of EE beyond traditional classroom models, which may help inform a more full understanding of the range of outcomes and the effectiveness of different EE models (Hou & Chen, 2020).

As the demand for skills-based certification and credentialing increases, there will likely be a shift toward more specialized and targeted courses, potentially favoring digital badges and certificates over traditional degrees (Stanton & Stanton, 2017). Additionally, the emergence of alternative providers and changing market dynamics will require EE programs to reevaluate their value proposition and curriculum to meet the ongoing needs of cohorts and industry (Sawhney, 2021). This transition signals a landscape in which multiple options, ranging from affordable online courses to exclusive in-person programs, will cater to varying cohort demands and preferences, thereby ensuring the sustained expansion and relevance of executive education within the ever-changing corporate workplace (Sawhney, 2021).

Cohorts often worry that flagship executive education programs don't focus on a single area of business in their program offerings. This is because typical executive programs typically cover a wide range of business areas without delving

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into excessive detail (Narayandas et al., 1998). This problem contradicts the growing trend of specialized master's programs, such as those in finance, accounting, and analytics, which offer in-depth curricula designed to meet specific skill development demands (Percept study, 2017). Many EE schools haven't done a good job of planning for the future and haven't updated their current offerings, which means they lack innovative courses that can meet the changing needs of the global market (Diaz & Halkias, 2021).

EE Program Cost. Tuition for just one course can run into the tens of thousands of dollars, and the overall capital investment encompasses course fees, as well as extensive travel and lodging expenditures (Cataldo et al., 2018). Executive education tuition fees depend on various parameters, including program basics, content, and the delivery method used (Jacobson et al., 2017). Interestingly enough, the corporate world considers executive development to be an investment that should yield a compelling return on investment, but equally important, a skills transfer and the progression of leadership within the organization (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2017). For meaningful investment by industry in executive education, one of the main challenges is whether the financial benefits (in terms of productivity, leadership skills, etc) offset the program costs (Cataldo et al., 2018). Finally, such data overlooks opportunity costs, which refer to what else participants could be doing if they were not in the program, but instead at work (Ryan, 2023). The corporate sector should also investigate and account for all costs, including both direct and indirect expenses (Ryan, 2023). The entire cost to the business should be calculated within the organizational strategy, leading to improved decision-making (Ryan, 2023).

There are several ways institutions can reduce executive education (EE) costs, one of them being transitioning to cloud delivery options (Andriole, 2018). Such an approach has made evident the necessity of meeting industry needs and remaining competitive in the market by providing faster, better, and less expensive solutions (Andriole, 2018). Additionally, the trend of corporate universities has seen a significant increase, from 300 in 2004 to 2,000 in 2016, representing an approach to more affordable and timely solutions for learning infrastructures tailored to the industry's requirements (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2017). Variation in delivery format, lead time, and cohort size enables executive education programs to offer different pricing levels and potentially lower costs to a more diverse client base (Jacobson et al., 2017). Finally, the future may also unlock new types of tuition from EE cohorts through different dynamic pricing mechanisms. Dynamic pricing systems can also allow for outcome-based models (i.e., tuition rates fluctuate based on the likelihood of achieving one or multiple outcomes) (Halkias et al., 2020).

Return on Investment

Return on Investment (ROI) is a growing imperative for Executive Education (EE) programs as it helps illuminate the business case for such cost and growth initiatives (Jacobson et al., 2017). The success of EE programs depends on the cohort's response to the instruction provided and their subsequent application of what is learned in the classroom, which is then deployed in the workplace and ultimately impacts the ROI (Ryan, 2023). Industry demand for EE programs is increasing in areas such as curriculum, structure, and leadership development. There are rising industry calls for the measurement of the effectiveness and impact of the EE (Cataldo, 2018). Assessment of ROI has never been more crucial for demonstrating the value and viability of specific EE programs (Stoten, 2023; Tiberius et al., 2021).

ROI for Organizations. The consideration of ROI for EE programs can be multifaceted for organizations (Ryan, 2019).

One of the significant barriers to reskilling and upskilling is a lack of knowledge among leaders and decision-makers about the skills required to move forward in an era of automation and digitization. Notably, one in four managers states that they are unable to quantify the business case for reskilling (Ryan, 2019). Furthermore, HR may not be ready to close the new skills gap, especially in operationally intensive sectors such as manufacturing and retail (Cataldo, 2018). The problem is how to build models of executive education input-output that are not one-way, faculty-driven offerings but instead are joint, action-based projects that contribute to concrete organizational results (Dover et al., 2018).

ROI for Individuals. Several obstacles exist to proving a return on investment (ROI) for individuals attending executive education programs (Ryan, 2023). One barrier is the lack of tools or knowledge to measure the reskilling of the cohort (Ryan, 2023). Additionally, a survey of 116 executives conducted by McKinsey revealed that older workers, in particular, may be resistant to upskilling due to concerns about changes in their employment conditions, suggesting that addressing mindset barriers is crucial (De Vries et al., 2020). Additionally, the call for alignment to Industry 4.0 skills and the urgency for demand-driven skills in education design suggest challenges for individuals seeking to enhance their capabilities (Cataldo, 2018).

ROI for Deployed Capital. ROI for invested capital in executive education programs is difficult due to requirements for a thorough examination of organizational and learner needs as well as outcomes of training interventions (Ryan, 2023). Tracking the ROI of Executive Education Programs is one of the most significant aspects that influences participants' responses to training and the application of skills at work (Maybar, 2023). To confront them more effectively, however, the sector should unite executive education outcomes with other elements of the organizational architecture, such as reward and performance evaluation systems, as they are the two elements that, if not aligned, risk losing their newly acquired skill set (Conger & Xin, 2000). Lastly, evaluations taken after a program has ended and indicators of intellectual capital can improve the accuracy with which EE programs' effects and learning outcomes are quantified (De Vries et al., 2020).

Defining the Nomenclature

The market now includes various program types, each catering to different learning needs and preferences. This current offering has led to inadvertent or intentional misrepresentation of educational accomplishments within industry and networking circles. The use of LinkedIn to display certificates suggests that the platform is being utilized to enhance employment opportunities and professional networking (Matkin, 2018). The posting of credentials aligns with the broader trend of using digital platforms to share credentials and skills with a wider audience, increasing visibility to employers and peers (Matkin, 2018). As credentials become more popular, there might be a risk of credential inflation, where the value of these credentials diminishes due to their widespread availability and varying quality. This could lead to skepticism among employers regarding the actual value of educational accomplishments (Matkin, 2018). The lack of standardization among business schools may lead to credential misuse, where some credentials do not accurately reflect the skills or knowledge they are intended to represent (Diab & Zhang, 2023). Individuals might misuse credentials by misrepresenting their skills or qualifications to potential employers. This dynamic could occur if the credentials are not thoroughly vetted or if there is a lack of transparency in what the credentials signify by the business school (Diab & Zhang, 2023).

Upon scanning many EE profiles on the LinkedIn platform, it became apparent

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that many EE alums chose to post the central Harvard Business School (HBS) logo rather than the actual course they completed. In some cases, as shown in Figure 1, the cohorts used the HBS logo; however, upon closer examination of the education subsection, they entered the name of their specific course. For example, the HBS logo, accompanied by a subsection indicating HBS Online, Strategy Execution, or HBS Executive Education, such as the General Management Program.

Current Program Offerings

There is no universally accepted standardized nomenclature for executive education programs across the global educational landscape. However, some terminologies and program types are commonly recognized and used. We aim to provide recommendations for the classifications and terms associated with executive education. These would be granted to the cohort upon completion of an EE program:

- **EE Online.** Short, self-driven courses with exclusive online content culminating in an *EE online badge*.
- **EE Hybrid.** Interactive, short to medium-length courses that blend online and collaborative instruction, earning participants an *EE Hybrid badge*.
- **EE Accelerator Program.** Intensive, under-three-month programs requiring on-campus instruction are awarded with an *EE Mini program badge*.
- **EE Flagship Program.** Comprehensive leadership development courses with on-campus components, granting alum status and an *EE Badge*.
- **EE Specialization Flagship Program.** Industry-specific leadership development courses with on-campus components, granting *alum status* and an *EE Badge*. This capstone includes an *EE Badge* highlighted by an *anchor concentration award* in fields such as finance, marketing, hospitality, and others.

Figure 1: *Harvard Business School Curriculum Credentials (source: own).*

Pitfalls

One Size Fits All. A significant challenge in EE is the "one size fits all" approach, which fails to meet the diverse needs of learners. Customized and specialized programs are essential for addressing this issue. Discuss misuse of credentials and the need for blockchain verification (for example, LI misrepresentation of accomplishment).

Verification of Credentials. The use of blockchain digital badges for course and award confirmation could represent a shift in how educational achievements can be recognized, offering secure and verifiable credentials. Additionally, a change towards skills-based credentials and digital badges in the executive education industry suggests that focusing on relevant skills rather than traditional degrees is becoming increasingly important for career progression, indicating a potential impact on the value of executive education certificates and programs in facilitating career growth (Negm, 2023; Stine, 2019).

The Future of Executive Education

The future of EE should point to microcredentials, digital badges, and a focus on specialization, emerging technologies, and ROI—expansion into other parts of the world, attracting a wider and geographically more diverse audience. The use of digital badges, which can be independently verified with the help of blockchain, is proposed as the naming architecture for program awards that currently exist in an academically proven format. This can be applied to all program types and has a system for secure and verifiable credentials for executives.

Conclusion

The field of executive education stands at a critical juncture. It faces a world that is rapidly evolving in AI, as well as personal development and generational differences. Additionally, as the world becomes smaller, EE is not education for all in terms of access and cost. The field is ripe for disruptive innovation as new programs enter the EE space. The institutions that embrace industry's evolving needs and make a commitment to lifelong learning, retention, and ROI will change the global EE marketplace.

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Declarations

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Conflict of (Competing) Interest

The authors declare that they have no (competing) financial or non-financial interests related to this study.

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Data Availability and Supplementary Material

All data generated and analyzed during this study and supplementary material are available upon reasonable request.

Prior Publication

The authors confirm that this research has not been previously published and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Ethics Statement

This study complies with the ethical guidelines of the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and adheres to the requirements of the GDPR for data protection. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of EIM, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Responsible AI Ethics Statement

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support tasks such as identifying relevant literature, analyzing datasets, and editing textual content. These tools were employed solely to enhance efficiency, and their outputs were critically reviewed to ensure alignment with research objectives. The use of AI adheres to ethical principles outlined in the EU AI Act, the OECD AI Principles, and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, emphasizing transparency, fairness, and accountability. The authors made all final decisions and retain full responsibility for the integrity, rigor, and conclusions of this research.

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