ALPHAS Summative Assessment

November 2022

'Highlighted all the levers that can be pulled to ensure that the business use of finance is as efficient as possible.'

Ian Hird, White Motorcycle Concepts Ltd

'I find that I am learning something new every time I attend a workshop. Some have given me a new perspective on business and even made me make a change in direction.'

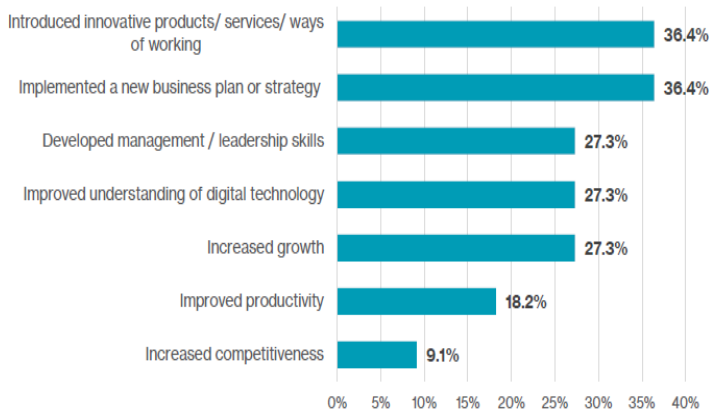
Eugene Matthias, Create My Legacy

"I was able to apply the skills and knowledge from my studies to a variety of challenging projects at Levello, developing new processes and problem solving along the way. Being offered a permanent role was the 'icing on the cake'!"

Mohammed Parveys, Electronic Engineering Graduate

'Identified areas for business improvement. Took advantage of Business Consultancy and lengthy research and obtained part funding towards an infrastructure project to achieve objectives.'

Espère Healthcare Ltd



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1.0 Introduction

In July 2022, Focus Consultants was appointed by the University of Bedfordshire to undertake an independent summative assessment of the ERDF Accelerating Leadership & Productivity in High Ambition SMEs (ALPHAS) project.

As outlined in the brief, the evaluation includes:

- Documentation and Output Review: including the original application, logic model, contract agreements, progress / claim reports and highlight reports, determining a thorough understanding of how the project has progressed to date and to assess progress against profiled outputs, outcomes, spend, and milestones.
- Project Team Consultation: undertaken with representatives of the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Northampton.
- Beneficiary Consultation: results of an online questionnaire issued to SMEs that have received business assistance and social enterprises that the initiative has helped.
- Case Studies: in-depth one-to-one conversations with beneficiary businesses to gain a more detailed understanding of the project impact.
- Economic Impact Assessment: a critical component of the evaluation, assisting in outlining the project's progress in terms of impacts and adherence to ERDF requirements.
- Final Report: Pulling together the information captured in the above methodology and adhering to the structure outlined in the ERDF Summative Assessment Guidance, the information is compiled into a cohesive report that includes key conclusions and recommendations.

The evaluation determines the success of the ALPHAS project at the University of Bedfordshire. This will be based on the outputs and outcomes it has directly and indirectly delivered, as well as lessons learned for any potential future economic growth initiatives.

All ERDF grant recipients are required to conduct an evaluation. The Summative Assessment Report adheres to the structure intended and covers all of the elements outlined in the ERDF Project Summative Assessment Guidance Appendices (June 2020). This requirement is fixed and applies to all projects, regardless of their nature or scale.

Focus has taken every precaution to conduct the study professionally, openly, and thoroughly, in order to maintain an objective stance, balance the opinions expressed, and investigate the justification for the comments made. It must also be acknowledged that budget and time constraints will inevitably limit the resources available for the evaluation.

It should also be noted that much of the project was delivered during the Coronavirus Pandemic, and the consequences will be felt for the remainder of the project's delivery period. This will almost certainly have an effect on the project's final budget and outputs.

2.0 Project Context

In this section, the project's objectives and the justification for the delivery methods are discussed together with the context in which the project was designed.

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Background

The Accelerating Leadership & Productivity in High Ambition SMEs (ALPHAS) project was created to establish a knowledge exchange channel between universities and SMEs in order to solve business problems that are impeding SME growth, build capacity within the business for future employment, and support the regional goal of retaining graduate talent.

ALPHAS focuses on Knowledge Exchange Projects (KEPs) which involve placing an up-to-date and business-ready graduate within a SME to boost that company's capacity for scale-up and to provide opportunities for graduates to work in local firms rather than leaving the region. This creates a pipeline for the exchange of modern intellectual property while utilising the most recent business improvement methods to solve a current problem that has been identified as impeding company growth.

The project is being led by the University of Bedfordshire and is being carried out in collaboration with Northampton University. Partners were chosen for their geographical reach and breadth of expertise across the relevant industry sectors.

In order to help SMEs to develop new business models or higher-quality products, or to improve productivity - including resource efficiency, business processes, attract FDI, collaborate on projects, and gain access to finance - ALPHAS offered graduate consultants who were already skilled in knowledge exchange. The initiative, which has been running since October 2019, has directly and tangibly affected productivity and overall business performance.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) provided £1,434,716 to the project as part of the European Structural and Investment Funds Growth Programme 2014-2020. The project is worth £2,887,885 in total.

2.1.2 Meeting ERDF Requirements

The ALPHAS project was developed in response to the requirements outlined in Priority Axis 3c: Improving SME Competitiveness. The project aims to support the Call in the following ways, by:

- Promoting entrepreneurship, in particular by facilitating the economic exploitation of new ideas and fostering the creation of new firms, including through business incubators.
- Supporting the creation and the extension of advanced capacities for products, services, and development.
- Supporting the capacity of small and medium sized enterprises to grow in regional, national, and international markets and to engage in innovation processes.
- Providing of advice, consultancy support, mentoring, peer to peer support, and support for collaborative.

2.2 Project Details

2.2.1 Activities

The project had four distinct streams: workshops, micro KEPs, academic consultancy and grants:

- Micro-KEPs - Graduates completing micro-Knowledge Exchange Partnerships (KEPs) in scale-up SMEs for 8-12 weeks. SMEs could access grant funding to cover 60% of salary costs towards hiring a graduate.
- A 12-hour series of tailored workshops for SMEs including leadership and management, digital tech, staffing for the future, and financing growth.
- Academic expertise from the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Northampton.
- Grants of 30% towards the cost of capital equipment or expertise.

The workshops were created in collaboration and led by two universities, both of which offered the following specialisms respectively:

- Commercial Enterprise – University of Bedfordshire
- Social Enterprise – University of Northampton.

Some of the areas that the ALPHAS project has supported businesses with include:

- Leadership and Management
- Strategy
- Finance and Funding
- Staffing for the Future
- Digital Tools
- Productivity.

Delivery partners have had to adjust to the difficulties that organisations and universities alike encountered as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. In response, the most promising scale-up enterprises were instead given access to limited 1:1 sessions in addition to half-day group workshops.

2.2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Eligible businesses were based in the South East Midlands and needed to meet the criteria listed below, depending on the type of business.

Scale-Up Business

- Minimum of 10 employees at the start of the engagement.
- Achieved minimum £500k turnover in last year (operating for at least 3 years).
- Potential/aspiration to grow turnover and/or profit by a minimum of 20% (per annum) over a 3-year period.

Pre-Scale-Up Business

- Minimum of 5 employees at the start of engagement
- Achieved minimum £250k turnover in last year
- Potential/aspiration to grow turnover and/or profit by a minimum of 50% over a 3-year period.

2.2.3 Customer Journey

The SME customer journey is briefly summarised below.

1. The University of Bedfordshire briefed business support organisations on client criteria and support strands offered.

2. Clients are identified directly or through support organisations, and their information is forwarded to the University of Bedfordshire. The referrer performs the initial need assessment.

3. Full needs assessment by University of Bedfordshire and delivery partners' Business Officers.

4. SME requirements are linked to an academic knowledge base (one delivery partner HEI).

5. Clarification of problem areas through client interview.

6. Initial support interventions were carried out via one of the routes listed below.

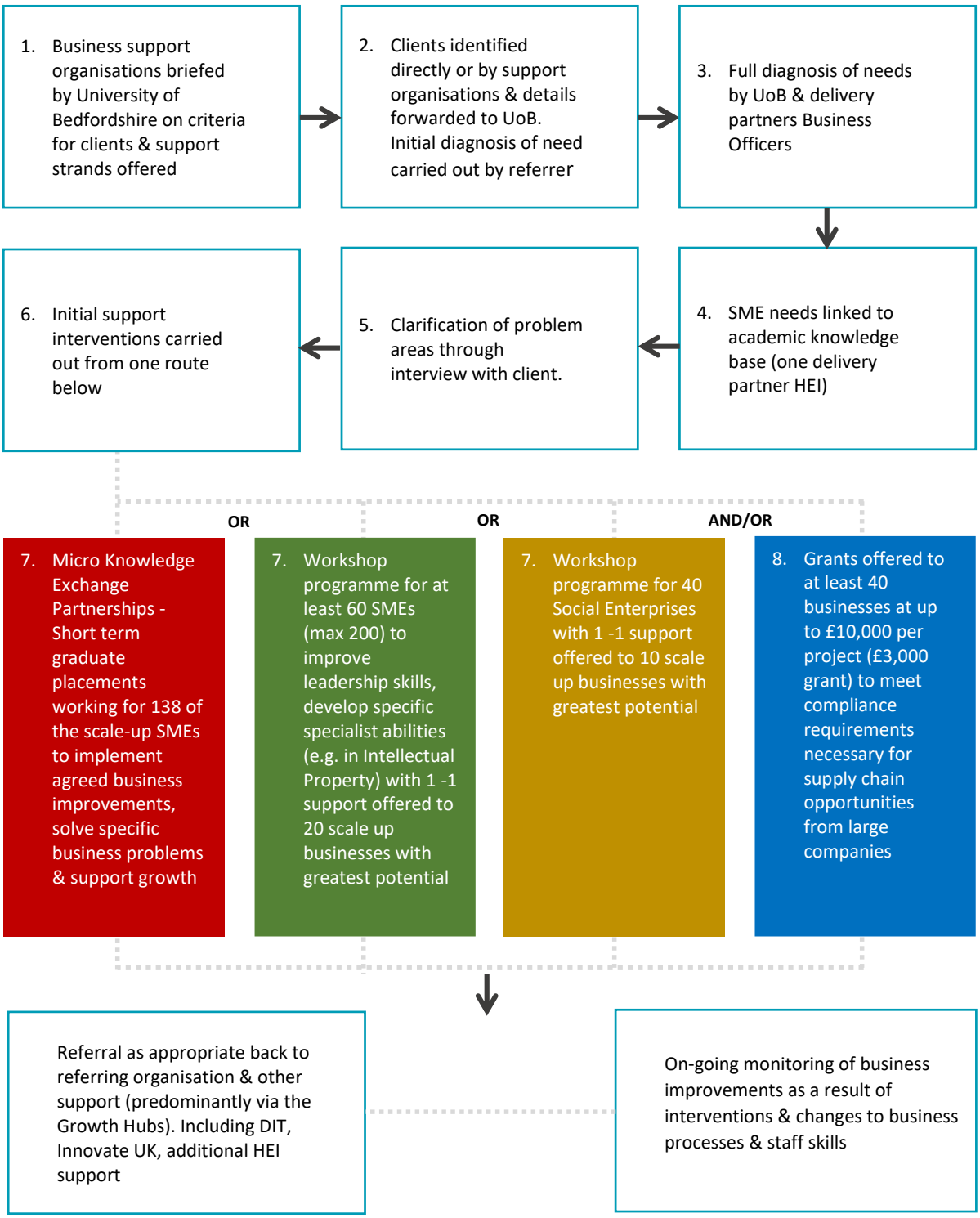
7. Micro Knowledge Exchange Partnerships - Short-term graduate placements at 138 scale-up SMEs to implement agreed-upon business improvements, solve specific business problems, and support growth **or** workshop programme for at least 60 SMEs (maximum 200) to improve leadership skills and develop specific specialist abilities (e.g. in Intellectual Property), with one-on-one assistance provided to 20 scale-up businesses with the greatest potential **or** workshop programme for 40 Social Enterprises, with one-on-one assistance provided to 10 scale-up businesses with the greatest potential. – **And/or**

8. Grants of up to £10,000 per project (£3,000 grant) are being offered to at least 40 businesses in order to meet compliance requirements for supply chain opportunities from large companies.

9. Monitoring of ongoing business improvements as a result of interventions and changes to business processes and staff skills **or** referral back to the referring organisation, as needed, and other assistance (predominantly via the Growth Hubs). DIT, Innovate UK, and additional HEI support are included.

The SME client path for the ALPHAS project is better understood from the graphic over the page.

SME CLIENT JOURNEY



Micro Knowledge Exchange Partnerships (Micro-KEPs)

Enabling scale up companies access to graduate-level expertise**.** ALPHAS offers SMEs the expertise of a graduate (1-3 months) to work for them on identified business growth activities for innovation projects in the business (e.g., production, marketing, product/service development, intellectual property & patenting) to meet a core strategic need.

This focussed Knowledge Exchange through a graduate and an academic supervisor working within the SME, introducing & embedding new innovation-based solutions, provides a conduit from SME to Higher Education Institutions. "Ensuring the uptake of new technology and digital processes which support growth" is an integral part of the new Government Industrial Strategy Green Paper. Outputs will typically be improved quality and operations, increased sales & access to new markets.

Supply Chain Scale-up

A series of four half-day day workshops for SMEs in 'Lean Leadership' for productivity improvements (particularly focussed upon technology and intellectual property), followed by targeted consultancy for a number of the highest potential delegate SMEs. Workshops and follow up support also focus upon enhanced support (building upon DIT services) to encourage greater or new export activity.

Social ALPHAS

Capacity building activities for scale-up social enterprises - a series of four half-day day workshops focussing on the professionalization, commercialisation and financial health of the sector for 40 social enterprises, supported by 1-1 specialist support from an expert to support the 10 Social Enterprises with the greatest scale-up potential, helping them to commercialise their offers and to secure private, non-governmental external funding for innovation and growth.

Grants

Grants (up to £3,000 at 70% private match) to enable at least 40 SMEs to grow and take forward their action plans. For instance, this could enable the SME to meet compliance requirements placed on them when supplying large companies (e.g., Cyber Essentials, ISO27001, ISO9001, GDPR).

2.2.4 Outputs

The project was contracted to deliver the following ERDF outputs:

Contracted Outputs		Project Target
P13	Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support	238
C1	Number of enterprises receiving support	238
C2	Number of enterprises receiving grants	178
C4	Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	60
C6	Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£533,920
C8	Employment increase in supported enterprises	90
C28	New to market products	25
C29	New to firm products	40
Source: ERDF Application Form / PCR		

The project is delivered by the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Northamptonshire, each of whom are responsible for a proportion of the overall project targets:

Contracted Outputs by Knowledge Base		
Knowledge Base	**Micro-KEP Target**	**Workshops**
University of Northamptonshire	30	16
University of Bedfordshire	80	28

In addition to the specific project outcomes the project was designed to result in:

- An increased willingness of employers to employ graduates
- A greater likelihood of graduates seeking local employment with SMEs, retaining skills in the SEMLEP area
- Immediate capacity changes within SMEs.
- Development of specific leadership skills within SMEs to translate innovation into commercially viable business models.
- Improved competitiveness, efficiency & productivity through the better use of knowledge, technology & skills
- Social enterprises & third sector SMEs will be assisted to commercialise and become self-sustaining, benefiting from expert support to increasing their capability and capacity.

2.2.5 Logic Model

A copy of the project's logic model is set out overleaf.

Project

ALPHAS - Accelerating Leadership and Productivity in High Ambition SMEs

Context

ERDF funding is applied for to promote investment that will support economic growth and job creation. PA3 aims to improve the competitiveness of SMEs, especially in call 3c which aims to support the capacity of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises to grow in regional, national and international markets and to engage in innovation processes. SEMLEP's aspirations for sustainable economic growth, through developing infrastructure fit for purpose business premises and sites, provides the base that will attract and retain inward investment. Supporting those High Growth Businesses through a co-ordinated, targeted and cost effective interventions remains a core theme of Government enterprise policy. A locally tailored High Growth offer would support those smaller businesses that have growth potential e.g. mid-growth businesses and new-start businesses, e.g. those that have potential to achieve a turnover of £1m within three years of starting trading or to have at least 10 employees within three years. The offer would extend to eligible 'scale-up' businesses of which in the South East Midlands Area there were over 200 (according to the Scale Up Report). These smaller high-potential businesses are often started by technical or functional specialists with little or no management/ strategic knowledge, so there is a regional need for projects targeting, supporting, promoting and developing scale-ups' and small and medium sized enterprises' leadership. SEMLEP is central to the OxCam Arc, part of the National Industrial Strategy (NIS) and a regional opportunity to stimulate inward investment, but companies are looking for the wraparound services of innovation, including access to expertise/ facilities/ skilled staff. The skills base in SEMLEP, especially where those skills fit with the NIS Grand Challenges, is often drawn away to London through very successful rail links, so ALPHAS creates demand for those skilled jobs in SEMLEP itself, feeding along the commercialisation corridor of the Arc.

Market Failure Assessment

For growth companies, the number one problem that prevents them from being able to accept customer orders according to 'The Scale-up Report on UK economic growth, Nov 2014 is a lack of appropriate talent. 41% of social enterprises created jobs in the past 12 months compared to 22% of all SMEs but suffer from a lack of relevant leadership and business development support.' (Social Enterprise UK). information failures, negative externalities and institutional deficiencies are restraining 63% of SMEs with >10 employees from engagement in Innovation Activity (BIS 2013, The Key Enablers of Business Success & the Economic Rationale for Government Intervention). Underdeveloped management and leadership skills are one of the main factors in SME underperformance. Research undertaken by SPEDI & NUBS has found that by employing graduates, SMEs increase management & leadership skills (Graduate recruitment to SMEs, BIS, 2012). Access to finance remains a key barrier to growth across numerous dimensions of the economy. UKTI research has shown that there are a large number of barriers preventing companies from considering internationalisation. Overall investment in Research and Innovation amongst SMEs is underperforming, the investment in R&D falls well below the 2.4% of GDP target outlined in the National Industrial Strategy. Not enough SMEs are engaging in Knowledge Exchange or collaborative innovation with research institutions. Fewer of our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) introduce new products and processes than their European competitors, and UK productivity is falling behind its competitors. Comparisons of productivity data in the three LEP areas shows that SEMLEP has the lowest productivity output in the region. The OECD Rural Policy Review, England 2011 suggests that many smaller rural firms struggle to access funding and the various types of management and technical support needed to increase innovation and productivity.

Project Objectives

First and foremost - Supporting the creation & extension of advanced capacities for products, services & development, with the objective to increase the growth capacity of small & medium sized enterprises, especially those in the 4 SEMLEP growth sectors of Manufacturing and Advanced Technology, Logistics and Supply Chain, High Performance Technology and Cultural and Creative. To contribute to the potential of the OxCam Arc and the SEMLEP region by enabling better leadership, encouraging innovation connection and collaboration between businesses and knowledge partners across the entire corridor, and creating direct employment with the beneficiary SMEs. To help SME leaders to maximise the new opportunities along the OxCam Arc. Encourage SMEs to create entirely new products and services which build on the grand challenges of data and AI, clean growth, ageing population and the future of mobility.

Rationale

As the number 1 problem is lack of skilled talent, Alphas provides a route to that talent. Where an SME is ambitious but doesn't have a clear vision, ALPHAS provides workshops, 1-2-1 support and consultant expertise to create that vision. Where the problem is underdeveloped management and leadership skills, ALPHAS provides SMEs with graduate consultants who are already skilled in Knowledge Exchange to deliver advice and support for the development of new business models or higher quality products; productivity improvements including resource efficiency; business processes; attracting FDI; collaborative projects and access to finance, enabling the business leaders of the region to deliver the SME vision through immediate access to knowledge and capacity. The graduates will demonstrate the leadership vision that the SME director can learn from. The ALPHAS grant programme shows SMEs the process of accessing finance at small scale, for a specific purpose, training them to access other financial instruments and services for the future. The ALPHAS project seeks to create a conduit for knowledge exchange between Universities and SMEs in order to solve business problems that are preventing SME growth, creating capacity within the business for R&D, further employment and supporting the regional aim to retain graduate talent. ALPHAS is focussed on Knowledge Exchange Projects (KEPs); placing an up-to-date and business-ready graduate within the SME to boost the capacity of that company for scale-up and to provide opportunities for graduates to work in local firms rather than leaving the region.

Inputs

What	Value
ERDF funding	£1,434,717
Recruitment of 1 Business Project Manager, 1 Project Administrator, 2 x	included above
Knowledge Exchange projects	inc above
Match Funding from University of Bedfordshire	£545,530
Match Funding from University of Northampton	£195,754
Match Funding from Open University	£177,965
Academic Expertise via workshops	inc above
Private Sector Capital investment	£280,002
Private Sector Revenue Investment	£253,922
1-2-1 consultancy x 30	inc above

Activities

What
Triage
Workshops
Revenue Grants
Capital Grants
Knowledge Exchange Partnerships
Academic Expert 1-2-1 consultancy

Outputs

What	Value
C1s: No of enterprises receiving s	238
C2s: Enterprises receiving grants	178
C4s: Enterprises receiving non-fin	60
C6s: Private investment	£533,920
C8s: Employment increase	90
C28s: New to market products	25
C29s: New to firm products	40
P13 - Enterprises receiving information, diagnosis and	238

Outcomes

ID	Intended Outcome	How is it Measured?	Level	Baseline	Actual
1	Increased GVA	Turnover of business after 12 months and 24 months as	Business	Created as each SME is accepted	
2	New companies created	Company status recorded at Companies House	Project	0	
3	Increased collaborations with SME and Knowledge base	Formal contract/ MOU	Business	0%	
4	SMEs with improved capacity through job creation	No of staff at outset, no of staff employed 12 months after	Project	Employment numbers recorded	
5	More SMEs investing in R&D	Traige/ outcome results, involvement in R&D tax credits,	Business	Created as each SME is accepted	
6	More SMEs creating new innovations and understanding	Questionnaire and signed documents around new products/	Business	Created as each SME is accepted	

Intended Impacts

What
Productivity improves in beneficiary SMEs, narrowing the gap with European competitors
More people employed in the target SMEs amd more employment opportunities are created
Increase in revenue and profitability for beneficiary SMEs
Creation of new products and services centred in the Arc
Increased exports by beneficiary SMEs
New innovative companies started - creating new jobs
Improved market resilience through improved ability to innovate
Investment in R&D in the region moves closer to 2.4% of GDP.

2.3 Strategic Context

2.3.1 Project Rationale

The project is designed to overcome the number one issue identified for SMEs in the region which is a lack of skilled talent or access to that skilled talent. The ALPHAS project aims to provide a route for SMEs to find the talent they need to help them scale up, as well as providing talent with job opportunities in the local area, thereby retaining talent in the region. ALPHAS is thus focused on Knowledge Exchange Projects (KEPs), which involve placing an up-to-date, business-ready graduate within a SME to increase that company's capability for scaling up and to give graduates options to work for local businesses rather than moving out of the area.

In addition to facilitating relationships between SMEs and graduates, the project delivers both half-day courses to ambitious SMEs, as well as 1-to-1 support and consultancy expertise to assist them in developing a distinct vision for the future of the company. Where the issue is a lack of developed management and leadership skills within the organisation, ALPHAS provides graduate consultants to advise on and support the development of new business models or higher quality products. Graduates also advise on productivity enhancements such as resource efficiency, business processes, attracting FDI, collaborative projects, and access to finance. Moreover, the ALPHAS grant programme teaches SMEs how to obtain small-scale, targeted financing while preparing them to utilise other financial tools and services in the future.

2.3.2 Market Failure

Despite being the home to many innovation, technology and research assets, the SEMLEP area significantly underperforms in overall levels of innovation, including in terms of its share of employment in high and medium technology firms, a low level of business investment in RTDI, and also in the number of patents registered. Greater emphasis is needed on business-to-academia linkages, commercialisation and encouraging business investment.

The project addresses the market failure around a lack of innovation activity in SMEs by creating an operational-level link between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and SMEs to bypass information failures, negative externalities and institutional deficiencies which are restraining 63% of SMEs with >10 employees from engagement in Innovation Activity (BIS (2013) The Key Enablers of Business Success & the Economic Rationale for Government Intervention).

SME exporters typically outperform non-exporters in terms of productivity, innovation, and resilience. SEMLEP has the lowest productivity output in the area, according to comparisons of productivity data in the three LEP areas. According to research, SMEs fail to reach their full potential for growth by failing to overcome obstacles related to financial availability, leadership and management abilities, and entry into new markets (including exports). Access to credit continues to be a major obstacle to growth in many areas of the economy, and job creation is not keeping up with population growth. According to UKTI research, there are a lot of obstacles standing in the way of businesses considering internationalisation. SMEs which export are on average more productive, more innovative, and more resilient than non-exporters. Export growth is a critically important part of the UK economic growth and vital to the national interest.

There are a number of established structural market failures that affect the supply of finance to SMEs in addition to information failures connected to firms receiving business information and guidance, which results in a lower supply of finance than is ideal for companies with development potential. One of the main obstacles to growth and development, for instance, has been recognised as the difficulty to acquire funding. In a recent survey of SEMLEP firms, it was discovered that nearly half of those seeking financing had not been successful. Over a quarter of the businesses surveyed, particularly those in rural areas, said that this situation acted as a substantial obstacle to growth.

The ALPHAS project was also created in response to a lack of skilled talent available or accessible to SMEs in the region, in order to assist them in promoting and supporting innovation and growth in their industry. According to the 'The Scale-up Report on UK Economic Growth, November 2014,' a lack of appropriate talent is impeding opportunities for SMEs to create jobs, with 41% of social enterprises creating jobs in the previous 12 months compared to 22% of all SMEs.

One of the key causes of SME underperformance is the lack of developed management and leadership abilities. SMEs in the region are likely to benefit from ALPHAS' provision of tailored workshops and one-on-one advice on business models, fit for purpose products, processes, and services because research conducted by "SPEDI & NUBS" has shown that hiring graduates increases management & leadership skills (Graduate recruitment to SMEs, BIS, 2012). Placements facilitated by the ALPHAS project are designed to support the SME to develop the absorptive capacity needed for the subsequent growth stage.

2.3.3 Policy Context

In addition to the LEPs' primary objective of assisting businesses in adapting and diversifying in light of the changing circumstances, especially Covid-19, the SEMLEP Economic Recovery Strategy emphasises the significance of continuing to focus on scale-up activity and diversification.

The Strategy highlights the changes to the business environment brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Strategy notes that the current challenge is to ensure that R&D investment and the innovative nature of local businesses do not become casualties of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Strategy also emphasises the importance of continuing to focus on scale-up activity and diversification to navigate the EU exit process and promote exporting. The one-to-one advice and placements provided to businesses through the ALPHAS project will help SEMLEP to achieve its aim to engage with innovative businesses across the SEMLEP area to understand their needs and help them to access funding and support.

Moreover, the UK government’s Innovation Strategy (2021) notes that the UK is seeing a growing number of scale-up businesses, who are more likely to undertake innovation activity than conventional SMEs. The Strategy similarly prioritises the need to provide businesses with access to the support, knowledge and skills requires to adopt and take advantage of technologies. These goals are made feasible by the ALPHAS project, which provides workshops, one-on-one consultations, and Micro Knowledge Exchange Projects (KEPs), which entail the temporary placement of a graduate who is prepared for business in order to increase capacity, to scale-up and pre-scale-up enterprises.

According to SEMLEP's Strategic Economic Plan, whilst there are strong relationships between universities and large corporations, there are lesser ties between universities and small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). The ALPHAS project provides SMEs with the assistance of a business-ready university graduate to exchange information and help the creation of action plans to accelerate business growth. Moreover, one of SEMLEP's four Strategic Objectives is productivity - ALPHAS recognises that to increase business productivity, there needs to be increased levels of knowledge exchange, specific knowledge transfer opportunities geared towards scale up companies, with tailored consultancy support for the most ambitious.

According to the OECD Rural Policy Review, England 2011, many smaller rural firms struggle to obtain funding and the various types of management and technical assistance required to increase innovation and productivity. Some SMEs are hesitant to use government services, and many lack the necessary skills and experience in international trade. The majority are unaware of the opportunities. ALPHAS addresses this reluctance to participate. To ensure the client has a simple and understandable journey, the programme was designed around the client interface.

The ALPHAS project aligns with key Growth Hub priorities for 2021/2022, specifically 'supporting companies with the greatest opportunity for growth.' Furthermore, the project aligns with the stated goal of 'connecting businesses to the right finance.' The project's targeted interventions will strengthen the internal capabilities of SMEs, something which DIT research has demonstrated to be crucial; according to the ScaleUp Review (2019), scale-up businesses generate 20% of all turnover and 20% of employment growth amongst existing businesses.

The Industrial Strategy further identifies barriers to scale-up activity as an inability to adopt digital processes and limited access to skills, particularly the leadership and management skills required to scale up successfully. According to data from the Education & Skills Funding Agency, embracing apprenticeships within a firm has various positive effects. 76% of respondents indicate that productivity has increased, and 75% said that apprenticeships have enhanced the quality of their goods or service. ALPHAS graduates are pre-trained in the benefits of apprenticeships to businesses, and one of their responsibilities within the company has been to identify the potential and likely impact of an apprentice within the SME.

2.4 Summary – Strategic Context

- The project is designed to overcome the number one issue identified for SMEs in the region which is a lack of skilled talent or access to that skilled talent. SME underperformance is also attributes to a lack of developed management and leadership abilities. The project addresses the failure around this lack of innovation activity in SMEs by creating an operational-level link between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and SMEs, providing graduate consultants to advise on productivity enhancements and the development of new business models, as well as grant funding to support companies with development potential.

- SEMLEP's ESIF strategy and the government's Innovation Strategy similarly emphasises the significance of continuing to focus on scale-up activity and diversification. Although the area has above-average business survival rates, the majority of SMEs do not scale their operations.

ALPHAS assists businesses by providing management and leadership skills that can aid in the implementation of growth plans.

- The ALPHAS programme has been set up in a way to ensure that it meets certain criteria within the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) and supports the LEP's ambition to overcome challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic as stated in the Economic Recovery Strategy. The one-to-one advice and placements provided to businesses through the ALPHAS project will help SEMLEP to achieve its aim to engage with innovative businesses across the SEMLEP area to understand their needs and help them to access funding and support.

3.0 Project Progress

This section outlines the ALPHAS project's progress towards achieving the output and spend targets stated in the ERDF contract, with a focus on project implementation, drawing on annual and lifetime performance against expenditure, activity, and output targets. It involves an analysis of quantitative data provided by the University of Bedfordshire and is also supplemented by qualitative evidence gathered through consultations to provide commentary where appropriate.

The evaluation method has been designed to allow the positive / negative impact on those assisted to be measured, both qualitatively and quantitatively, while also highlighting the direct impact of the assist delivered and drawing conclusions against the hypotheses established at the start of the project.

3.1 ALPHAS - Output Targets

3.1.1 Output Definitions

Output data has been gathered up to and including Q1 2022 in order to evaluate the ERDF program's effectiveness. These are the output definitions:

- P13 Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support
- C1 Number of enterprises receiving support
- C2 Number of enterprises receiving grants
- C4 Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support
- C6 Private investment matching public support to enterprises
- C8 Employment increase in supported enterprises
- C28 New to market products
- C29 New to firm products.

P13 – ERDF – Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support

The type of support includes information, diagnostic advice / guidance, and signposting to individual businesses. Support must signpost to relevant ERDF funded provision and/ or other provision relevant to the needs of the enterprise.

Assistance counted must include a structured review lasting a minimum of 3 hours incorporating information, diagnostic assessment, advice, and guidance. The method for delivering assistance can include face-to-face, telephone or web-based dialogue.

C1 - ERDF - Enterprises receiving support

This is a minimum of either:

- 2 days (12 hours) active consultancy support (non-financial support)
- Grant or Loan / Risk Finance Investment of at least £1,000 (financial support investment).

This type of support includes consultancy, information, diagnostic advice, and guidance to individual businesses, as well as financial assistance for investment that results in the production of goods and / or services. Assistance counted can include initial diagnostic and assessments, as well as any defined subsequent support. The method for delivering assistance can be face-to-face, telephone or web-based dialogue, through conferences, seminars, meetings, and workshops dependent on the needs of individual businesses.

Activities should support the project's objectives and be directed towards ultimately improving the performance of the business. Support can be provided across a range of activity including management / leadership support; access to new supply chains and markets including new international markets; marketing; innovation and commercialisation of R&D; process improvement, quality assurance; access to finance support; direct loans and financial instruments; resource efficiency.

C2 – ERDF – Number of enterprises receiving grants

This is a subset of the indicator C1. To register support as grant, the business must be provided with a cash payment by the project, which is not repaid.

C4 – ERDF – Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support

C4 outputs is a subset of indicator C1. To register as non-financial support, the business must be provided with a service or services by the project with no direct payment of monies.

C6 – ERDF – Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)

The ERDF support to the enterprise is provided in the form of a grant. The gross amount of direct tangible investment from the private sector, charitable and not-for-profit organisations induced through ERDF assistance or financial support. The investment must have been induced through ERDF assistance or financial support.

- The sum of the private contribution to the supported project (£) where the project includes support that constitutes state aid, including support to parts of the project not eligible for ERDF.
- The levered private investment is counted when it is received by enterprises from the ERDF project, or from a third-party private investor resulting from ERDF investment.

C8 - ERDF – Employment increase in supported enterprises

This is a minimum of:

- A job with an intended life expectancy of at least 12 months is created. Date of creation is the day the new employee starts work in the enterprise.
- The 36 hours per week threshold is reached. Part – time jobs should be treated on a pro-rata basis.
- A job results in an overall increase in the employment levels of the supported enterprise.

- Seasonal jobs may be counted where this is normal practice for an industry. The job must exist for a minimum of 4 weeks per annum and is counted on a pro-rata basis.

These are the jobs created following an intervention with an enterprise that result in an increase in the overall numbers of staff employed within that enterprise. It should be noted that the employment increase due to the support might not always equal the number of jobs created that are directly attributable to the support – e.g., where organisations have restructured during the period and posts have been removed.

C28 - ERDF – New to market products

C28 outputs are a subsector of the C1 indicator. To register support for an enterprise, it must introduce one of the following:

- Product - when it is either at pre-launch or launched to the market
- Process - when it has been introduced into the business
- Service - when it has been introduced to the market.

C29 - ERDF – New to firm products

This is also a subsector or the C1 indicator. The indicator measures whether an enterprise is supported to develop a "new to the firm" product.

3.1.2 Contracted Outputs

The output targets in the table below are from the ALPHAS ESIF PCR Financial and Output form. They demonstrate what the project was contractually obligated to deliver over the course of the programme.

ERDF Output Targets	
Overall	**Total**
P13 - Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support	238
C1 - Enterprises receiving support	238
C2 - Number of enterprises receiving grants	178
C4 - Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	60
C6 - Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£533,920
C8 - Employment increase in supported enterprises	90
C28 - New to market products	25
C29 - New to firm products	40

3.2 ALPHAS - Progress Towards Targets

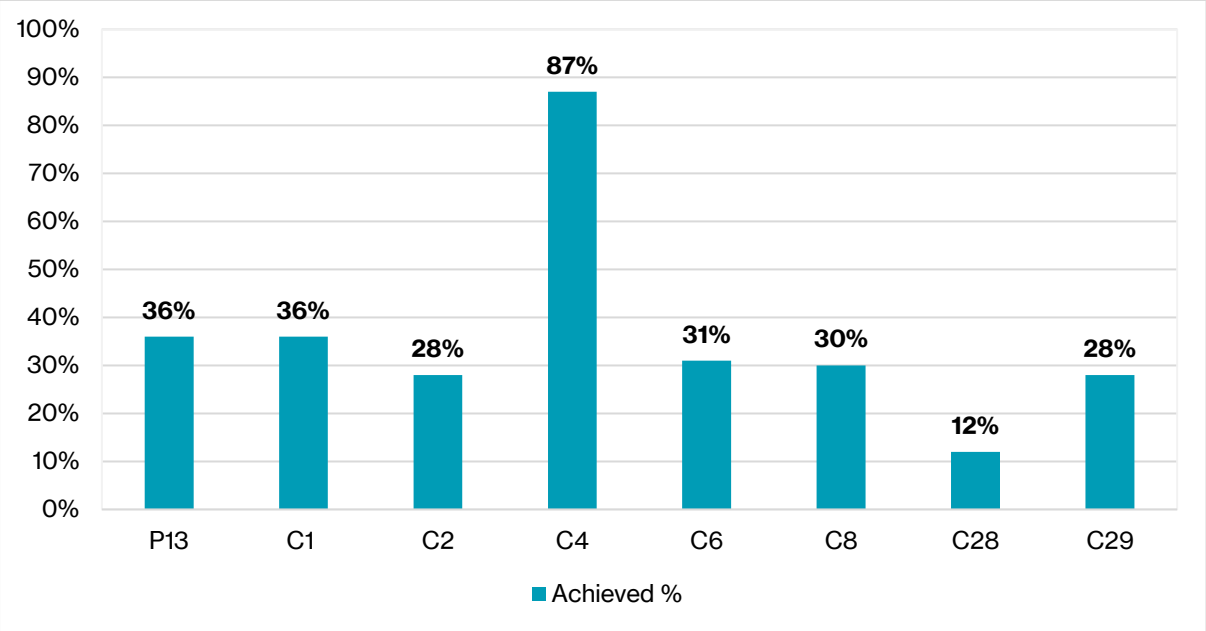
The table below details the progress made against the identified ERDF output targets, up to March 2022.

3.2.1 Review of Outputs Achieved

ERDF funding is typified by a series of predictable outputs and outcomes, against which tangible success can be measured. The following table lists each of the outputs and records the target contracted, the progress to date compared to those targets, and how that relates as a percentage towards the contracted outputs.

ERDF - Project Outputs			
Output	**Contracted Output**	**Progress Against Targets**	**%**
P13	238	85	**36%**
C1	238	85	**36%**
C2	178	50	**28%**
C4	60	52	**87%**
C6	£533,920	£162,949.70	**31%**
C8	90	26.62	**30%**
C28	25	3	**12%**
C29	40	11	**28%**
Source: ALPHAS Project Claim Q1 2022 Progress Report			

- The project has supported **85** enterprises with 12hrs of support (C1) to date, which represents **36%** of the overall target of **238**.
- C2 outputs have reached **50** as of Q1 2022, compared to the contracted target of **178** which represents **28%** of the overall project target. The project has struggled to secure graduate placements as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic requiring remote positions that have proved challenging or businesses and graduates alike.
- The project has made excellent progress with regards to the outputs relating to enterprises receiving non-financial support, having achieved 87% of the overall target with months of delivery still remaining.



- 31% of the £162,950 of grant funding has been drawn down to date. Grants have been harder to allocate than expected, which is attributed to a reluctance amongst SMEs to invest at a time of economic uncertainty. ERDF processes require the money to be spent upfront by the SME before the project can reimburse them; however, during the pandemic businesses conferred that such investments could cause cashflow issues. There is still a strong pipeline for the grant programme, and the project will need to focus efforts on encouraging drawdown over the remaining programme.
- The project has created 26.62 jobs to date which is 30% of the contractual target. The project is still collating evidence of whether businesses retained the graduate following the placement.
- As of March 2022, the project has supported the development of 3 new to the market products and 11 new to the firm products, which represents 12% and 28% of the respective contractual targets,
- The project will need to concentrate resources on increasing product development in supported enterprises across the rest of the programme, as just 12% of these outputs have been achieved so far. This can be attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; evidence from consultation with the project team and stakeholders suggests that business, even high growth ones, have concentrated on survival rather than growth through product development.

It is worth acknowledging the intangible nature of many of the additional / non-contracted outputs produced as a result of enterprises' involvement with the ALPHAS project. Businesses themselves report that the project has helped to add value, help to develop growth plans, improve efficiency, improve understanding, and helped to create develop new ways of working, which isn't necessarily captured in these outputs yet. The experience of other similar projects suggests that outcomes relating to jobs and product creation are often realised sometime after the intervention has taken place.

3.2.2 ALPHAS Project Spend

The ALPHAS project is funded through a combination of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), public and private match funding.

ERDF Growth Curve Project Financials	£
ERDF	£1,434,717
Public Match	£919,249
Private Match	£533,920
Total	**£2,887,886**
Source: Annex A PCR Financial and Output Information	

The table below shows the contracted spend compared with the spend to date (Q1 2022 – latest data available from progress reports provided). As of March 2022, 44.7% of the **£1,291,069** contracted spend has been achieved.

	Contracted	Actuals to Date	%
Project Spend	**£2,887,886**	**£1,291,069**	**44.7%**
Source: ALPHAS Progress Reports			

The total variance of £1,596,817 is due to a variety of factors detailed in the progress reports. The main issue affecting the project was Covid-19 and its impact on Micro-KEPs and Grants, as well as promoting the project and people attending workshops, all of which had an impact on claims.

- Micro-KEPs underspend flows from the low levels of uptake due to the pandemic, with businesses focusing on survival and having to furlough existing staff, making them less willing to engage with external organisations or to take on new staff or new projects.
- The project has also seen a high turnover of internal staff for similar reasons – the project lost staff such as the project manager and project officer choosing to relocate to areas offering them more outdoor space - which put an added burden on resources.
- Additionally, The Open University withdrew from the project midway through, which undoubtedly impacted the programme and resources available.

3.3 Summary – Project Progress

- The project's performance can largely be attributed to business's preoccupation with survival, with short-term resilience prioritised over innovation. It was also noted that over the course of a three-year project, business needs often change in response to a variable economic climate regardless of the influence of a worldwide pandemic.

- The project has supported **85** enterprises with 12hrs of support (C1) to date, 50 of which have secured grants, representing 26% and 28% of the contractual targets respectively. The project has struggled to secure graduate placements as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic requiring remote positions that have proved challenging or businesses and graduates alike. Businesses focusing on survival and having to furlough employees made engaging with external organisations a low priority.

- The project has made excellent progress with regards to the outputs relating to enterprises receiving non-financial support, having achieved 87% of the overall target with months of delivery still remaining.

- 31% of the £162,950 of grant funding has been drawn down to date. Grants have been harder to allocate than expected, which is attributed to a reluctance amongst SMEs to invest at a time of economic uncertainty. The 30% intervention rate was particularly useful for businesses that were primed and ready for purchase, but for most businesses facing a ceasing of operations over the pandemic, the grants weren't large enough to entice additional spend on a new piece of equipment. There is a strong pipeline for the grant programme, and the project will need to focus efforts on encouraging drawdown over the remaining programme.

- The project has created 26.62 jobs to date which is 30% of the contractual target. The project is still collating evidence of whether businesses retained the graduate following the placement.

- The project will need to concentrate resources on increasing product development in supported enterprises across the rest of the programme, as just 12% of these outputs have been achieved so far.

This can be attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; evidence from consultation with the project team and stakeholders suggests that business, even high growth ones, have concentrated on survival rather than growth through product development.

- As of March 2022, 44.7% of the £1,291,069 contracted spend has been achieved. The total variance of £1,596,817 is due to a number of factors, including a lack of participation in Micro-KEPs and the awarding of grants. Furthermore, the Open University left the project halfway through, which had an impact on resources.

For Conclusions

- It is worth acknowledging the intangible nature of many of the additional / non-contracted outputs produced as a result of enterprises' involvement with the ALPHAS project. Businesses themselves report that the project has helped to add value, help to develop growth plans, improve efficiency, improve understanding, and helped to create develop new ways of working, which isn't necessarily captured in these outputs yet. The experience of other similar projects suggests that outcomes relating to jobs and product creation are often realised sometime after the intervention has taken place.

4.0 Project Delivery and Management

This section provides a qualitative analysis of the implementation and management of the project. It includes an analysis of delivery performance, SME engagement, governance, management, impacts, ideas and next steps. It has been informed by consultation with project and delivery staff from the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Northampton. Feedback from businesses is included in the next section.

To demonstrate the wide-ranging impact of the project, this section details the results of consultation with project staff and delivery partners. The consultation included one-on-one interviews with key members of the ALPHAS project team. The following people were consulted with as part of the evaluation:

- Gordon Brady, Business Partnership Manager, University of Bedfordshire
- Lesley Goodship, Project Manager, University of Bedfordshire
- Wray Irwin, Director of Enterprise and Employability, University of Northampton
- John Grisby, Professor in Management Practice, University of Bedfordshire.

The findings of this consultation have been grouped together under themes and have not been attributed to particular individuals.

4.1 Project Context and Engagement

4.1.1 Need for the Project

The project identified that most of the time, although finance isn't the primary issuing facing a business, a long-standing traditional perspective holds that grants are the key to success. Typically, businesses are thought to often apply for grants for things they don't really need. The project was therefore designed to accelerate growth within businesses, to identify certain areas above and beyond grant funding that they could improve upon to enhance their growth and help them to "jump to the next step". Businesses, at certain points in their development cycle, lack staff, financing and knowledge – primarily in marketing, sales, quality assurance, software, strategies, programming and leadership - all of which can be offered by the Business School and the wider university.

ALPHAS also serves a broader purpose to connect universities – and graduates - to the local business base through knowledge exchange. The SEMLEP area suffers from a brain drain of locally produced graduates who relocate to other areas in pursuit of employment opportunities. The project was designed to transfer expertise to business in new methods, processes and ways of working whilst improving rates of graduate retention. Graduates would benefit from a real-world placement and an improved understanding of how a business works, coupled with the opportunity to secure long-term employment as a result.

Businesses need support with managing their finances, financing their own growth, improving their leadership skills, future strategy and the staffing required for growth. During times of struggle, some businesses often look to curtail their innovation spend, rather than improving their strategy and considering where to position themselves in the market. For others, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the need for the project, forcing lots of businesses to diversify and pursue a different path to growth, requiring the adoption of digital and online platforms as well as new marketing strategies in order to operate in an increasingly technology-orientated world.

4.1.2 Engaging with the Project

There are lots of different channels used to engage businesses – a marketing database, partner activities, other university programmes, enquiries through the Growth Hub website, and networking. However, it is proving increasingly challenging to attract businesses to the programme, with the university reporting that they are hitting the same businesses again and again.

There has been a challenge around marketing and engaging with the right calibre of businesses. Initially, the project engaged with fully established middle-market businesses, before being forced to concentrate on one-man-bands and entrepreneurs, who require more tailored support. More time and resource are required to support an entrepreneur to a stage where they would consider Micro-KEPs. The project was designed for established, staffed businesses, who present more opportunities and attach more value to the solutions offered through the ALPHAS project.

ALPHAS workshops were originally delivered separately from the Micro-KEPs, but participation was a prerequisite for applying for a grant. The workshops were designed to support businesses to identify the most appropriate means to reach the next stage of their growth, be that through grant funding, a Micro-KEP, or to be referred to another project for more in-depth advice. The Micro-KEPs are also treated as grants because they are match-funded. The offer of a 1-to-1 with a university academic could have been selected instead of a workshop and both counted towards the same output – in practice, grants and graduate placements have proved much more popular than university consultancy.

Delivery partners vary in their level of engagement with the engagement and delivery process; the University of Bedfordshire are very hands-on and take on an organisational role. The project would benefit from a collaborative effort between the project team and the delivery partners to ensure minimum cohort numbers are met.

4.2 Project Management

4.2.1 Management

The bilateral partnership model is considered a useful means of providing support to businesses across the entire LEP area, many of whom are reluctant to travel further than their local university. The pan-LEP working meant the project could benefit from a wider array of specialisms – the University of Northampton (UoN) specialise in not-for-profit and community interest companies, whereas the University of Bedfordshire (UoB) are renowned for their strong network of SMEs.

Both universities consider themselves to have a strong working relationship; each acknowledges that the project management could have been improved, for which changes in personnel and organisational restructuring inevitably impacted the smoothness of operations. ALPHAS initially had a very strong internal administrative team; the project has since suffered during the transitional period due to turnover of staff. Personnel management has been challenging over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic; remote interactions made it difficult to manage staff on a personal basis, with welfare, time management and general wellbeing made more challenging to monitor. All projects are thought to be inhibited by the time taken at the start to build a project team and the relationships required to deliver successfully.

Having worked with the Open University (OU) on a previous project, UoB approached them to be a key part of the ALPHAS offer. One lesson learnt by the team already is the importance of identifying the appropriate personnel in any partner organisation who will drive the project on your behalf in their institution. The OU don't deliver any EU-funded projects of their own and their lacking of a business development unit means they don't have the infrastructure set up to deliver projects of this nature. Over the course of the programme, the OU didn't deliver any workshops and were subsequently removed from their role on the project. Some funding will need to be decommitted to account for this change because not all of the spend will have been attributed by the end of the programme.

4.2.2 Processes

Originally, the University was going to employ the graduates over 12 weeks and invoice the SMEs for 40% of the cost, with 60% of the graduate's salary being covered by the project. The graduate payments were originally costed as salaries (thus attracting 15% overheads) but are in fact "Other Revenue" grants (no overheads). The team implemented a new process that utilised direct grant funding to SMEs who would instead apply for a £3,240 grant to cover the majority of the fixed-term graduate salary. SMEs needed to demonstrate what the job description was and how it would lead to a new product, process or service. The evolution and the changing of the graduate placement process is strong evidence of the programme's adaptability and ability to respond to the unprecedented challenges facing businesses and projects alike.

4.2.3 Impact of Covid-19 on Project Partners

The project sought to meet the requirements of the government and its beneficiaries in tandem, at once pivoting to provide support to businesses by any means necessary (as requested by the government), whilst also prioritising students (as requested by the Office of Students).

It was suggested that the project prioritised the delivery of the workshops over 1-to-1 consultancy support with university academics, largely due because universities were required to concentrate on student experience over industry engagement. Moreover, if more businesses had sought 1-to-1 support, the universities would have needed to source more academics with more specialist knowledge. In contrast, the workshops relied on a core of 5 or 6 academics in place.

Overall, ALPHAS has helped to develop a working relationship between its project partners who were forced to work together, flexibly, in a 'solution-focused' crisis management mode that was thought to strengthen the bonds between the teams respectively.

4.3 Project Delivery

4.3.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Project Delivery

The Covid-19 pandemic had an overwhelming impact on the project's delivery and on the changing needs of the increasingly risk-averse business base. Initially, the project was focused on competitiveness and innovation, before the pandemic required a shift towards support for survival in a period of uncertainty in order to remain relevant. National lockdowns severed the existing pipeline that had been built prior to March 2020, whilst the following uncertainty saw some businesses only tentatively return to the realms of business support.

Workshops that were more relevant prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – delivered around leadership, management, digital technology, staffing for the future – arguably became less of a priority, whilst sessions around 'financing your own growth' became much more about navigating the finances for survival instead. Business needs are yet to stabilise, with concern still paramount for the cost-of-living crisis and the impact on their customers, disruptions to supply chains, and the instability caused by the war in Ukraine.

As part of their overall response to small businesses, the government edict at the time was to support businesses in any way possible, which allowed for some flexibility in allocating grant funding, which became slightly easier to issue. The changing edict meant that the original objective to support businesses to invest in capital costs, equipment or expertise evolved to incorporate, in some cases, a topping-up of other financial support received. The project retained its due process and justification for any allocation. The rewriting of the bid to incorporate more pragmatism and flexibility is thought to be fundamental to the overall success of the project.

The project pivoted to include more of a sense-making function to support businesses who found themselves lost. The project team worked with local authorities to run forums and provide webinars to support businesses who didn't know what to do next. The webinars doubled as a useful means of feeding the ALPHAS project into businesses in a different way to how they originally had planned. The ALPHAS project was commended for pivoting rapidly towards a remote delivery model.

Moreover, the nature of the engagement between the graduate and the business also changed drastically and the placements became less attractive. Businesses are thought to have questioned the efficacy of taking on a graduate when existing staff were furloughed, whilst those that were unemployed were more inclined to source a job where they could work in-person and build a relationship with a potential employer. As time went on, it became harder to reconcile the slightly different needs and wants of both businesses and graduates, with the shared overlap increasingly narrow. This is thought to be commonplace in business support programmes offering grant funding to businesses - whether led by the demands of the business or you recruit businesses based on graduate needs.

4.3.2 Project Performance

Overall, the workshops were actually oversubscribed – they were easy to sign-up to, could be delivered and attended remotely, and easily fit around business schedules. Workshops have thus been well attended; although the 12 hours of support was designed to be delivered face-to-face over two sessions, the pandemic required the workshops to be delivered remotely instead. After delivering two sessions in this manner, the team divided the support across initially four sessions – and eventually eight sessions - to account for webinar fatigue.

Over the course of the project, the team struggled to find businesses seeking a graduate placement, whilst also finding it difficult to source graduates who lived-up to the expectations of the SMEs. Many of the graduates applying to the short-term placements were those who had largely been unable to find employment to date and would perhaps have required more training and guidance to undertake an in-depth piece of work in a short space of time. Businesses were thought to have had higher expectations of the graduates.

The grants were harder to allocate than expected. The 30% intervention rate was particularly useful for businesses that were primed and ready for purchase, but for most businesses facing a ceasing of operations over the pandemic, the grants weren't large enough to entice additional spend on a new piece of equipment. Many businesses were transitioning to online platforms, diversifying their offers to accommodate the changes in operation forced by the pandemic, and capital investment for many became less of a priority. It was thought that revenue funding was more popular than capital funding.

Despite the broad economic constraints on businesses in the area, the offer of grant funding still acted as a real incentive to businesses who were prioritising survival over growth; aspirational businesses still had projects for which they wanted to go out to market, and the risk of engaging in graduate placements became lessened in terms of finance invested when they considered the monetary grant investment that could be secured through the project.

4.4 Benefits to Beneficiaries

4.4.1 Benefits to Businesses

Despite the challenging economic climate, there was still a stated demand for business support; many businesses engaged with the project approached ALPHAS with nowhere else to turn. ALPHAS has provided access to expertise in a variety of areas, including business systems, process management, entrepreneurialism, digital technologies and marketing.

The workshops look at key parts of the business – leadership, finance, marketing – and builds on them, providing techniques, challenging existing methods, and developing new approaches. Businesses can also be signposted to well-researched areas where they can access other support. Owner-managers are thought to spend too much time working 'in' the business than 'on' the business, prioritising troubleshooting and firefighting over long-term growth plans; the workshops provide businesses with some perspective, helping owners/directors to look at their business holistically, identifying their barriers and scripting how they can start to reach for their objectives.

Businesses are receiving academic expertise from universities in an interactive forum that facilitates the development of a toolkit that can be used to help the business to grow, beyond the lifetime of the project.

Workshops are thought to raise awareness of current possibilities and threats to an SME, disseminating information targeted at Director level specifically, and revealing the current landscape of help and assistance available on a regional and national level, including a variety of free or open-source resources available for business use. The workshops therefore also help business directors to consider their potential for productivity gains and efficiency savings.

From an operational perspective, the project has helped businesses to implement improved systems which help to avoid inefficiencies, improving their service and giving them an edge to help them grow. In some cases, the project has helped businesses to have the right people in place in response to recruitment and furlough issues instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For many businesses, the project has acted as a catalyst to develop their own knowledge and understanding; for some businesses, graduates are reported to have helped linked their processes to their strategy, leaving them better placed to grow. For example, ALPHAS project supported one business to adopt pre-qualification techniques alongside basic software and webpages, which had a huge impact on the business's productivity.

ALPHAS is also thought to have kept some companies afloat by helping them to adapt, evolve, diversify and change the way they operate to a more sustainable, resilient way. At least two companies were expecting to close, and as a result of their involvement with ALPHAS have survived, even retaining all of their staff. In terms of job safeguarding, the project has therefore represented excellent value for money that couldn't not have been foreseen.

Businesses also benefitted from ALPHAS' centralisation of various support mechanisms, allowing them to access business growth advice, survival advice, grants and staffing in the same place. Moreover, ALPHAS is also well-connected to other similar projects offering tailored R&D or digital support, for which they signposted and referred SMEs. ALPHAS has offered flexibility and a range of support functions rather than simply advice.

4.4.2 Benefits to Universities / Graduates

Considering the launch and operation of the project occurred through the height of the pandemic and its aftermath, the project has performed admirably. A key feature of the project's offer – the internships/knowledge exchange partnerships – were redefined to account for the national restrictions on movement and social distancing requirements. Many of the graduates for which the project facilitated placements did actually end up in full time employment, which represents a significant success. Feedback from graduates who participated in the project is overwhelmingly positive, which evidences the notion that where the project has been able to succeed in brokering relationships and knowledge exchange partnerships, said relationships were both valuable to the graduate and advantageous to the business.

The project also undertaken a programme of upskilling for graduates to prepare them for placements; although some attendees of the skills sessions went on to secure jobs and placements outside of the ALPHAS programme, this still represents an indirect benefit and contributes to the university's wider outcomes.

Graduates are thought to have gained a better understanding of a working business environment, whilst SMEs are encouraged to work with universities and academia in a way they hadn't necessarily considered before. From a university perspective, the project has served as a useful tool for advertising and raise awareness of its services and capabilities amongst an industry of SMEs with little understanding of how a relationship with a university can support their growth.

The project is thought to be a key enabler for attracting new graduates and therefore inward investment, with some of the graduates recruited relocating from outside of the region. As a result of the increasingly remote and hybrid nature of employment over the course of the pandemic, many graduates recruited into jobs as a result of the project were from outside the SEMLEP area all together, coming from universities in Northumbria, Liverpool and elsewhere. It could be argued that this unforeseen consequence is an expected but positive outcome for the project, one that has seen graduates relocating to where they grew up as a result of the pandemic and because they have been able to find employment as a result of the project.

The project's long-term value is also in the building of relationships with SMEs who might eventually commit to a Knowledge Transfer Partnership or long-term collaboration with the university. The project has served a wider purpose in allowing the university partners to connect to businesses and recruit them to participate in some of their other projects, consultancy and other areas of the universities' work, some of which they wouldn't have engaged with otherwise, further transferring research, knowledge and expertise from the knowledge base to industry.

4.4.3 Impacts

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent national lockdowns from March 2020, the ALPHAS project was reported to have had a positive impact on the region's economic recovery. By May 2020, ALPHAS had already delivered 120 hours of direct support via workshops at a time when any business support was invaluable. For one business – MyNewTerm - their involvement with ALPHAS has seen them hire a University of Bedfordshire graduate full-time, launched a new product to the market, and increased its turnover by nearly £450,000,

One example of this impact is the project's work with DigitechMK Limited who were producing a portable medical device for taking electrocardiograms (ECG)/electroencephalograms (EEG) anywhere in the world, connected to an app. The business engaged with ALPHAS to identify its primary challenges. Following their involvement with the project, the University of Bedfordshire linked the business to Medilink, IHR, and has been supporting the business to prepare a bid for both the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Innovation Bridges grant schemes. The development could have significant ramifications for global health challenges.

4.5 Challenges, Improvements and Lessons Learnt

4.5.1 Challenges

The project has suffered from changes in the project partnership. The Open University failed to facilitate their own workshops or to recruit businesses to the project. The bi-lateral project was subsequently delivered with by the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Northampton only, which proved to be a more effective partnership. Both universities secured good numbers of vacancies and businesses; where the project struggled was in securing enough graduate interest to meet outputs.

The project also suffered from delays in recruiting a project team and in rolling out the project itself, as well as delays in receiving funding, which has had a knock-on effect on payment schedules for some interventions. A common challenge, projects are scheduled to deliver outputs throughout the programme but in reality, it can take months to develop systems and processes, to develop traction and a pipeline of engaged businesses, whilst raising awareness.

Marketing and communicating the programme has been a challenge, one which is considered to be commonplace across this type of programme. Business support can be a crowded marketplace, competing with various programmes offering services to the similar target markets. This can have an impact on the project's ability to generate enquiries at the start of the programme.

The project initially adapted and pivoted well to the Covid-19 pandemic, before weaknesses in the administration, coupled with a diminishing quality of businesses engaged in the project, impacted the overall delivery and achievements of the programme in its latter months.

4.5.2 Improvements

The team organised workshops and adapted them to accommodate support areas the academics could fulfil. Projects of this nature could benefit from ingraining a means of adaptability and flexibility into the project design to allow longer-term interventions like these to vary their offer to better meet the needs of businesses at any one time.

The project would benefit from a stronger mechanism for referrals from local authorities to help deliver grant funding in particular. It was suggested that Local Authorities often refer to projects that they understand the most; in this case, most referrals were made to SEMLEP's Growth Curve project which was oversubscribed and ultimately couldn't support some businesses, who were then caught by the ALPHAS project in a last-chance-saloon scenario.

4.5.3 Lessons Learnt

The rate at which graduate placements are thought to have secured full-time work is a key success for the project. With the placement largely acting as an extended job interview, many SMEs have chosen to take-on the graduate full-time following their involvement with the project, which reflects the effectiveness of the initial workshop, graduate role definition, graduate recruitment, and support for growth over the 12-week period.

The project's slow start after delays in recruiting a project team were exacerbated by a high turnover of ALPHAS staff and within partner universities. The project would have benefitted from more consistency in both project management and project partnerships. Delivery partners would also have benefitted from a clearer set of roles and responsibilities, whilst businesses might be more likely to remain engaged with a clearer, more defined client journey from the outset.

One key lesson to be learned for the university surrounds the labelling of 'placements'; it was suggested that a 'fixed-term contract' is a more attractive sounding offer than 'internship' or something that suggests more temporariness. The wording was thought to put some potential graduates off. It is important that the team acknowledges the difficulties in motivating SMEs to engage and invest in graduate placements. The grant intervention rate wasn't high enough to justify recruiting new staff for the SME; rather, the grant was effective because it de-risks the investment, allowing SMEs time to train and upskill the graduate without contributing a full wage – the project off-sets against the time taken to train the graduate. The placement should be marketed as such.

The workshops delivered as part of the ALPHAS project were designed to be independent of one another, complete with distinct themes and content. The project could have benefitted from some transition and linkages between workshops.

Some consideration was made for potentially extending the project; however, the job market at the time was prohibitive in its lacking of enough graduates to fill increasingly high rates of vacancies. The project became increasingly challenging during an economic climate moved from one of low vacancies to and low unemployment to high vacancies.

4.6 Summary - Staff and Delivery Partner Consultation

- The impact of Covid-19 has emphasised the need for the project, forcing some businesses to diversify and pursue a different path to growth, requiring the adoption of digital and online platforms as well as new marketing strategies in order to operate in an increasingly technology-orientated world. Workshops that were more relevant prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – delivered around leadership, management, digital technology, staffing for the future – arguably became less of a priority, whilst sessions around 'financing your own growth' became much more about navigating the finances for survival instead.

- The project sought to meet the requirements of the government and its beneficiaries in tandem, at once pivoting to provide support by any means necessary (as requested by the government), whilst also prioritising students (as requested by the Office of Students). The project's academic focus during the pandemic largely switched to supporting students which resulted in more workshops being delivered than 1-to-1 support.

- Businesses are thought to have questioned the efficacy of taking on a graduate during the pandemic when existing staff were furloughed, whilst businesses and graduates alike doubted the value of remote placements. As time went on, it became harder to reconcile the slightly different needs and wants of both businesses and graduates, with the shared overlap increasingly narrow.

- The changing government edict meant that the original objective to support businesses to invest in capital costs, equipment or expertise evolved in its flexibility to incorporate, in some cases, a topping-up of other financial support received. The rewriting of the bid to incorporate more pragmatism and flexibility is thought to be fundamental to the overall success of the project. The similar evolution and the changing of the graduate placement process is also strong evidence of the programme's adaptability and ability to respond to the unprecedented challenges facing businesses and projects alike.

- There has been a challenge around marketing and engaging with the right calibre of businesses. Initially, the project engaged with fully established middle-market businesses, before being forced to concentrate on one-man-bands and entrepreneurs, who require more tailored support.

- The project also suffered from delays in recruiting a project team and in rolling out the project itself, as well as delays in receiving funding, which has had a knock-on effect on payment schedules for some interventions. A common challenge, projects are scheduled to deliver outputs throughout the programme but in reality, it can take months to develop systems and processes, to develop traction and a pipeline of engaged businesses, whilst raising awareness.

- The bilateral partnership model is considered a useful means of providing provision to businesses across the entire LEP area, many of whom are reluctant to travel further than their local university. The pan-LEP working meant the project could benefit from a wider array of specialisms – Northants specialise in not-for-profit and community interest companies, whereas Bedfordshire are renowned for their strong network of SMEs.

- Both partners acknowledge that the project management could have been improved, with this attributed in part to regular changes in personnel and organisational restructuring. All projects are thought to be inhibited by the time taken at the start to build a project team and the relationships required to deliver successfully. The project would have benefitted from more time prior to the pandemic to develop and embed effective processes.

- Overall, the workshops interventions were actually oversubscribed – they were easy to sign-up to, could be delivered and attended remotely, and easily fit around business schedules. Grants remained an effective incentive to aspirational businesses that still had projects for which they wanted to go out to market, and the risk of engaging in graduate placements became lessened in terms of finance invested when they considered the grant.

- The project is thought to be a key enabler for attracting new graduates and therefore inward investment, with some of the graduates recruited relocating from outside of the region. Graduates are thought to have gained a better understanding of a working business environment, whilst SMEs are encouraged to work with universities and academia in a way they hadn't necessarily considered before. From a university perspective, the project has served as a useful tool for advertising and raise awareness of its services and capabilities amongst an industry of SMEs with little understanding of how a relationship with a university can support their growth.

- The project has served a wider purpose in allowing the university partners to connect to businesses and recruit them to participate in some of their other projects, consultancy and other areas of the universities' work, some of which they wouldn't have engaged with otherwise. The project's long-term value is also in the building of a relationship with SMEs who might eventually commit to a KTP or long-term collaboration with the university.

5.0 Project Outcomes and Impact – Business Feedback

To demonstrate the wide-ranging impact of the project, this section details the results of consultation with businesses engaged. A range of business consultation has been undertaken during the interim evaluation stage using the following:

- **Case Studies of Beneficiary Businesses** – This section captures more in-depth feedback from one-to-one consultation with businesses who have received in depth support and provides a more detailed understanding of the impacts that support from the ALPHAS project can have.
- **Questionnaire for Beneficiary Businesses** – A questionnaire was circulated to businesses who engaged with the ALPHAS project capturing details about the benefits that taking part in the programme has had on their businesses.
- **Workshop Feedback** – An analysis of business feedback data gathered from ALPHAS workshop participants.

The findings of each of these is shown over the following pages.

5.1 Case Studies

As part of this evaluation, five beneficiaries of the ALPHAS project were consulted with to produce more comprehensive case studies looking at the impact that the project has had.

The business case studies listed below can be explored over the following pages:

- My New Term
- Life Science Group
- Orange Juice Communications
- Levello
- Briteyellow

5.1.1 My New Term

Background

Developed by a former teacher in 2015, MyNewTerm is an innovative technology application created out of moral purpose to connect schools and candidates directly, in response to the ever-increasing budget pressures regularly faced by schools, often affecting the recruitment process.

Recruitment in education has faced problems for years. With ever-increasing budget pressures, schools are regularly faced with spending a small fortune to advertise vacancies and recruit for qualified staff. The process is normally time consuming, requiring many dedicated man-hours to complete, and the schools have little choice as they cannot do without teachers.
This process is thought to be the very reason many teachers simply gave up or preferred the 'agency route', inevitably costing schools thousands in finders fees.

A University of Bedfordshire Alumni developed a technology application to automate much of the recruitment process and connect schools and candidates directly via a fully compliant standardised application process, allowing applicants to submit their details/applications to multiple schools in one go. The service was designed to be simple to use with the aim of cutting school recruitment costs by up to 90% compared to more traditional approaches.

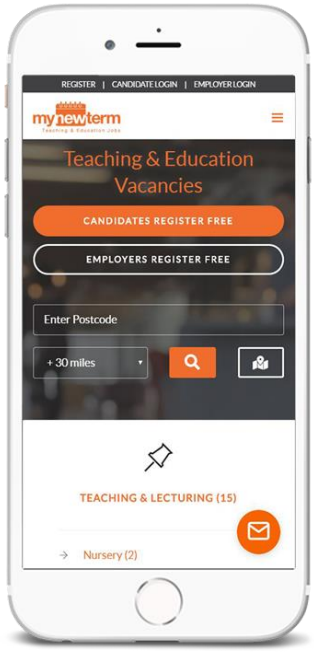
Initially launched in Bedfordshire as a free product in order to develop the concept, generate market interest and to secure a body of schools and candidates on the system, the application has since been monetised and grown to cover 1,000+ schools nationwide.

Involvement with ALPHAS

The bespoke MyNewTerm technology application has been developed in collaboration with leading academics at the University of Bedfordshire and Open University, specifically for the education sector. The business previously engaged with the university's Research & Innovation Service before taking part in a number of business support projects including ALPHAS.

Despite monetising in September 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 forced the business to reorientate their goals at a time when schools were focussing more on survival than investing in new software. For MyNewTerm however, the pandemic was framed as an opportunity in which to

invest as much as possible into product development. The business engaged with a number of interventions through the ALPHAS project with each complementing the other.



The ALPHAS team provided MyNewTerm with 30% of the costs for consultancy from senior computer science academics at the Open University. The business was looking to grow and scale-up from a geographically local product for a couple of hundred schools in Bedfordshire to one on a much larger scale, one that could incorporate international markets. The business faced a number of scalability problems that were restricting their growth including a slow website; across five workshop sessions, the academics provided targeted consultancy to support the lead software developer to transform their model to one that would allow the business to grow.

In addition, ALPHAS helped MyNewTerm to undertake a Cyber Risk Assessment with Samurai Digital Security. In order to scale-up effectively and safely, the business needed to ensure its cyber security was adequate. SDS advised the business in any areas that needed addressing to mitigate risk.

At the time, the business had very few resources of their own and were reliant on only 3 employees. In order to scale, the business required a crowd server as well as back-up security and a disaster recovery function. Prior to engaging with the ALPHAS project, the business was spending c.£250 annual on hosting their server, which though adequate would need improvements to scale-up and to better prevent the worst-case scenario of the server going down. Through ALPHAS, the business engaged a third-party provider to secure a much-enhanced server platform with a back-up function that provides the sever with a safety net that would see the sever rebooted in just a few minutes.

In addition, with the support of the ALPHAS programme, the company were able to recruit a Computer Science graduate to help with this highly technical project.

> *"With the knowledge gained from University of Bedfordshire and my employment at MyNewTerm, I am happy to see my work being used in real life problem-solving."*
>
> Computer Science Graduate

In January 2021, the business was able to launch a new product to the market, a reference requesting tool that has revolutionised their service. Historically, reference requesting was a manual, time-consuming process; MyNewTerm's system channels reference enquiries digitally and automatically, saving all parties time.

Impact of Involvement with ALPHAS

MyNewTerm's bespoke technology now connects thousands of job seekers with schools every month, automating and simplifying the recruitment process, increasing candidate attraction and saving on costs. The long-term collaboration has assisted the company with addressing a number of necessary software improvements, providing opportunity for further business growth and extending their target audience reach. The new functionality and optimisation have made MyNewTerm's application a more end-to-end Applicant Tracking System for the education sector – significantly increasing business client numbers across a much wider geographical area.

> *"Our long-standing relationship with academics at the University of Bedfordshire has been absolutely pivotal to the development and growth of our business."*
>
> CEO, MyNewTerm

An agile and lean business relying on a small team and minimal expenditure, the ALPHAS project has allowed them to de-risk investments and decision making that would've needed to be implemented individually without the support available. ALPHAS has been a great opportunity to accrue added benefit and match funding for process developments that might have only been realised later on.
Without the support, the business was limited in what they could achieve from a growth perspective, unable to scale-up without the appropriate platforms, risk assessments and server capabilities in place.

As a result of their involvement with the ALPHAS project, MyNewTerm have been able to reach 100 new potential clients, 10% of which are reported to be paying customers (at £20,000 each), allowing their turnover to grow to nearly £450,000. In In total, MyNewTerm have now hired three University of Bedfordshire gradates in full time positions.

MyNewTerm are a great example of how Business-University collaborations can support entrepreneurs in realising their commercial ideas and boost job creation and employment numbers, retaining graduate talent in the region. MyNewTerm now boasts a team of 10 FTEs. Overall, it was suggested that the grant funding issued through ALPHAS and previous University of Bedfordshire projects has generated a significant return in the local economy.

The Future

With the cost-of-living crisis well underway and expected to worsen, the inclination for most businesses will be to look to save costs and reduce investments, whereas MyNewTerm will look to innovate and develop further. The business is hoping to rapidly expand within the UK in the next two years, before potentially growing into international markets comprising international schools or schools in primarily English-speaking nations.

The business aims to continue to build long-established partnerships with local universities and higher education academies.

Lessons Learnt

Academics have helped the business to consider new ideas and approaches that they never would have considered without their specialist expertise. Anecdotal evidence from the case studies suggests that it is vitally important for academics and businesses alike to understand the challenges and potential solutions in order to meet each other's expectations.

Start-up businesses are thought to be hesitant to invest in things that at the time feel decidedly out of reach. With this in mind, grant funding is thought to be the most effective way of supporting smaller businesses to take that first step towards growth and innovation. Workshops are thought to be more hit and miss – this is in part attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the requirement to deliver workshops remotely, which is thought to reduce their effectiveness.

5.1.2 Life Science Group

Background

The Life Science Group (LSG), based in Bedford, provides quality custom biological and in vitro products and services to Pharma, Biotech, CRO and Universities worldwide. Life Science Production (LSP) is one of the UK's leading suppliers of off-the-shelf and custom biological products, also offering contract manufacturing services for life science research requirements worldwide. In recent months, the business launched a Diagnostic Kit Service in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic after being contracted to supply into the PCR test kit arena.

The Life Science Group (LSG), based in Bedford, provides quality custom biological and in vitro products and services to Pharma, Biotech, CRO and Universities worldwide. This also involves the contract manufacture of cell culture sera, media, buffers and associated reagents. LSG has a range of traceable, customisable solutions through three divisions:

1. **Antibody Production Services (APS):** development of quality antibodies for pharma, bioscience and contract research organisations.
2. **Life Science Production (LSP)** provision of contract manufacture and dispensing of cell culture sera, media, buffers and reagents in ISO Class 5 cleanroom environments.
3. **Diagnostic Kits Service (DKS):** provision of fully customisable and traceable solutions from concept to delivery for a range of high-quality testing kits for both human and veterinary use. DKS provides manufacture, clean room operations, custom medical device packaging, kit documentation and shipping services. Since April 2020 LSG has been providing consumables to the UK Test and Trace programme.

Involvement with ALPHAS

Life Science Group benefit from a long-standing relationship with the University of Bedfordshire, one that has seen them engage with a number of prior projects including Time To Grow, and has helped them connect with the likes of Medilink, SEMLEP and various other public bodies.

The business has been reliant on a primary market of university research departments for their services. In March 2020, following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workplaces, most research departments closed down, leaving the business with a much-reduced customer base.

Even since, universities have been more reluctant to invest and spend during such an uncertain economic climate, with research projects delayed further. At the time, LSG relied on ISO9001 quality management system accreditation.

Prior relations with Public Health England enabled LSG to secure a £10.5m contract to develop Covid-19 test kits over an 18-month period, before they began engaging with other components in the supply chain to develop a new market of customers, as well as other divisions of medicine. At around the same time, LSG attended an ALPHAS workshop after which they engaged with the project.

With an eye on new markets, the business was considering ISO13485 accreditation which is secured from the government in order to supply medical devices. Public Health England determined that LSG's product would be categorised as a medical device and would therefore require an enhanced ISO accreditation at some point, despite an earlier dispensation to develop the product. Without the necessary expertise in-house, LSG required specialist support in order to meet the standards required to fulfil the contract.

Impact of Involvement with ALPHAS

ALPHAS offered the project funding towards specific ISO-orientated external consultancy support to advise the business. The consultants prepared documentation for LSG to submit to government whilst at the same time advising them on what it is they needed to do in order to meet the criteria for accreditation. ALPHAS also supported LSG with additional advice. The supported facilitated by the ALPHAS project helped the business to understand which internal processes needed to change, and how to maintain such accreditation following the intervention, including the acknowledgement that the recruitment of a specialist would be greatly beneficial to achieving this. In June 2020, LSG subsequently recruited their own Quality Control Manager who offered ISO experience, taking over the role of preparing the technical files to submit to government.

Obtaining ISO13485 allows LSG to access new and different customer bases; without the accreditation, there are various diagnostic products that the business would not be able to market. Of primary importance are the government contracts that require ISO131485 that would be inaccessible to LSG. The accreditation has also impacted processes and decision-making throughout the rest of the business's operation – regardless of the product and the necessity for accreditation, everything at LSG is now produced to the higher standard. The new accreditation is also a stepping stone towards securing additional accreditations, as the business is now aware of the commitment required to achieve them.

As a result of their contract with the government, LSG were able to adapt and take advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic. Between May 2019 and 2020, LSG boosted their turnover from £2.6m to £7.8m (although this fell to £4.6m in 2021). The DKS contracts have enabled the business to grow at a time when their primary market of university research departments has yet to return to previous levels of investment, and to become more resilient in the face of increased costs in the supply chain resulting from the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis.

The business remains engaged in a long-term collaboration with the University of Bedfordshire surrounding their involvement with the production of PCR test kits. Academics at the university are supporting the business to develop an inactivation buffer to prevent the potential spread and contamination of diseases from the test kits, helping to ensure the safety of those involved in the transport, handling and testing of cells including the likes of Covid-19 and Ebola.

5.1.3 Orange Juice Communications

Background

Founded in 2012, Orange Juice Communications, is a creative agency based in Northamptonshire. Their strong connections in the county and niche approach - using state-of-the-art software - allows them to bring their clients' visions to life, ensuring maximum audience connection on a global scale. The business is divided into eight segments, each representing a different service they provide: PR, marketing, social media, events, campaigns, brand, build, and web design.

The business currently hosts 11 employees with years of experience in print, online, and broadcast journalism, event planners and content creators. In addition to their success across multiple industries, Orange Juice have gradually developed specialisms in the Healthcare sector. Since the pandemic, they have re-focused on hybrid events providing clients with even more exceptional local, national and international media coverage.

Involvement with ALPHAS

Orange Juice was made aware of the assistance available through the ALPHAS project due to their already strong working relationship with the University of Northampton. As a small business, the biggest barriers to growth were identified as capacity, recruiting, and securing the right people who 'fit' with the business.

In the spring of 2021, in order to futureproof their service offering against the market and industry, Orange Juice turned to the University of Northampton seeking a solution to bring fresh thinking and digital skills to the business by increasing capacity of their editorial team, preferably a graduate with an events background. The support from ALPHAS has thus accelerated the process of recruiting suitable personnel by providing a sense of security, allowing a graduate to showcase the skills they can bring to the company.

The ALPHAS project supported the business to recruit a highly skilled Multimedia Journalism graduate for three-months, which allowed the graduate to develop their skills with real world experience. The placement would eventually result in a full-time position.

Impact of Involvement with ALPHAS

The graduate placement facilitated by the ALPHAS project has allowed Orange Juice to "try before you buy," removing much of the risk that a small business faces when hiring someone.

The graduate has brought new skills to the business; for example, Orange Juice can now offer a podcast to clients, which they would not have been able to do without spending money on training existing employees.

"Lucy has been an excellent addition to Orange Juice. She is part of our editorial team and as well as bringing new skills to the company, she significantly contributes to all our PR and marketing outputs. We now produce and publish podcasts, all thanks to Lucy.

The University's Changemaker team has been excellent. They provided help and advice at every stage. We have already recommended them to other businesses."

Director, Orange Juice

The new recruit has had a positive impact on the business's productivity and growth, illustrated by a nearly doubling in their turnover. The introduction of a podcast demonstrates a newfound capacity to understand and implement a new digital technology approach into their operations, which has made them more dynamic and competitive.

Bringing fresh insight, new skills and a passion for digital marketing and audio content, the graduate now permanently manages PR and relationships with journalists at local and national titles as well as raising brand awareness through targeted social media content, podcasts and blogs whilst coordinating and producing coverage reports for clients.

"To go from being a paid intern to a permanent member of the team, feels great! The ALPHAS project helped lay the groundwork for all of this and is an opportunity that other graduates should readily take part in!"

Account Executive, Orange Juice

The overall impact of ALPHAS on Orange Juice has been crucial in supporting their recruitment of young people as well as their growth through high-quality employees and innovation, increasing their services and allowing them to work on new projects that have grown the business. The new recruit's permanent position will also allow them to develop their skills further and provide even more added value to the business.

Prior to the project, the company had received little assistance from universities. Despite initial reservations, the project has proved to greatly benefit the company, and they have subsequently developed a positive relationship with the university Once they were "in the system", the business acknowledged that more opportunities started to come their way.

5.1.4 Levello

Background

Levello is a UK manufacturer of Lighting and Ceiling Accessories based in Hitchin. Their unique, magnetic fixing system gives Designers, Installers and Homeowners unparalleled flexibility with their lighting installations.

Levello uses a housing which is fitted permanently into the ceiling, different styles of fittings or 'inserts' are placed in the housing and held in by magnets, a front plate completes the flat finish. As a result, Levello is versatile, allowing the user to change a downlight, to a pendent, to a spot light or even blank out the position completely in seconds.

To continue setting themselves apart from their competitors and consistently delivering high quality products, Levello were looking to improve their quality management systems to increase productivity and aid company growth. The implementation of the new quality system and process is essential in meeting their client requirements and legal demands within the industry.

Involvement with ALPHAS

The new recruit, an Electronic Engineering graduate from the University of Bedfordshire, designed and implemented a new Quality Engineering System, establishing a leaner and more efficient manufacturing process throughout the business.

"I was able to apply the skills and knowledge from my studies to a variety of challenging projects at Levello, developing new processes and problem solving along the way. Being offered a permanent role was the 'icing on the cake'!"

Electronic Engineering Graduate

Impact of Involvement with ALPHAS

In addition to the increased productivity, Levello have streamlined their Quality Management Process, as well as reducing the company's manufacturing waste, thus lowering their carbon footprint. Mohammed also worked on two new product developments, taking them forward from inception through to completion, deploying a new 'Surface Mounted Light Fitting' product that Levello are preparing for launch.

Following the successful completion of the Time2Grow and ALPHAS programmes, Levello offered Mohammed a permanent job leading the Quality Assurance function for the business.

"I would highly recommend working with the University of Bedfordshire, as they help to bring highly skilled graduates into the real-world working environment, to assist companies with their business growth."

Managing Director

5.1.5 Briteyellow

Background

Briteyellow was established in 2003 by founder and CEO Fredi Nonyelu to provide Interactive and Wireless communications. The company evolved in 2018 to focus on developing new ultra-precision sensors for augmented and virtual reality (x-reality) applications. In 2020, Briteyellow relaunched as a new company, Briteyellow XR to focus on applications for mixed realities indoors. Originally a specialist in high-performance cloud managed Wi-Fi and analytics, Briteyellow have evolved into a leading innovator in the global Indoor Location technology market with a long-term commitment to Research and Development. Briteyellow's wayfinding applications and monitoring sensors utilise indoor movement data enabling clients to locate, track and guide customers and staff more effectively.

These innovative information systems can be used by transport and healthcare providers, as well as local authorities that need digital information indoors for better planning, benchmarking, service optimisation, monitoring, tracking and user guidance. Briteyellow's products help client operators to improve customer experience, operational efficiency and liberate untapped revenues through deeper insight into the market. The solutions are designed to support clients to attract more customers whilst managing assets and resources more effectively, or to provide greater duty of care and accessibility for people living and travelling with disability.

As decision making is becoming increasingly reliant on location-based information, particularly when it comes to vulnerable people who are living alone or in assisted living, Briteyellow have developed a new wearable device and APP to allow remote monitoring of people in need.

Involvement with ALPHAS

As Briteyellow's unique technology design is unlike anything else in the industry, the company turned to the University of Bedfordshire in search of assistance with vital market research and strategy development, in preparation for their product launch.

Through the EU funded ALPHAS project, the University's Innovation & Enterprise Service were able to offer the company access to a highly skilled business management graduate, as well as grant funding to help with their research and development.

> "I would strongly recommend ALPHAS to all graduates, as it can provide a hands-on experience, building a solid foundation to business and technical learning."
>
> Levello Graduate

Impact of Involvement with ALPHAS

The ALPHAS business management graduate provided invaluable insights and solutions, producing a market research report and customer target list, as well as developing a go-to-market strategy and marketing tool kit. As a direct result of the placement facilitated by the ALPHAS project, the University of Bedfordshire graduate was hired in a permanent role as Head of Marketing at the company.

Since the ALPHAS project, Briteyellow have been successful in securing substantial funding from InnovateUK, allowing them to reach several project milestones, with the next being the trial stage. Briteyellow have an official product launch planned for Spring 2021 at the Digital Health Technology show in London. The company has since become a winner of the InnovateUK collaborative R&D fund and is a showcase company of the UK Digital Catapult Centre.

> "The collaboration between University of Bedfordshire and Briteyellow has enabled us to develop and bring to market a new product within a challenging timescale."
>
> Briteyellow CEO

5.2 Summary – Case Studies

- To date, the ALPHAS project has had a significant impact on all of the businesses consulted as part of the case study analysis. The case studies offer anecdotal evidence of the impact of the project, illustrating examples where grant funding and graduate placements have improved processes, turnover, and facilitated business growth.

- The Covid-19 pandemic forced businesses to change the way they operate – some have developed new products whilst others are targeting new markets. For one business, the pandemic created a market opportunity to pivot, grow and expand faster than they had anticipated, with testing requirements presenting an opportunity to develop a new service. Although many businesses suffered from furlough and a lack of trade, in the wake of the pandemic, the ALPHAS project has remained relevant in supporting businesses to recover and take advantage of a changing market.

- It is worth noting the intangible services that the ALPHAS project has provided outside of the core interventions; anecdotal evidence from businesses as part of the case study interviews suggest that many have benefitted from marketing support, reductions in waste and emissions, from new relationships with universities, and one has even been able to secure InnovateUK funding. Much of the support, relationships and placements facilitated by the project will have legacy benefits for businesses beyond the end of the programme.

5.3 Questionnaire for Beneficiary Businesses

A questionnaire was circulated to businesses who engaged with the ALPHAS project capturing details about the benefits that taking part in the programme has had on their businesses.

The following is a brief summary of the business survey's key findings.

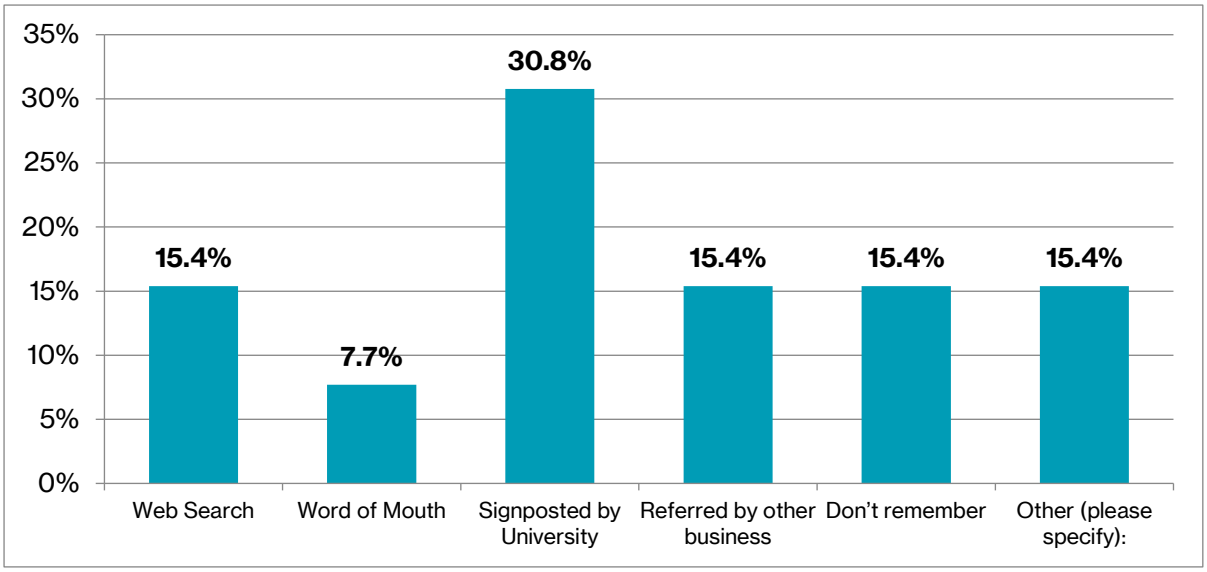
Business Background

- 92.3% of businesses taking part were classed as an SME, 7.7% were social enterprises
- The project engaged businesses from a broad range of sectors, from construction and manufacturing to health and social work and scientific activities.

Involvement with ALPHAS project

In the survey, businesses were asked about their involvement with the ALPHAS project. This included the question, *'How did you find out about the ALPHAS project?'* The chart below shows a visual representation of the responses.

- **30.8%** of businesses were signposted to the project by university

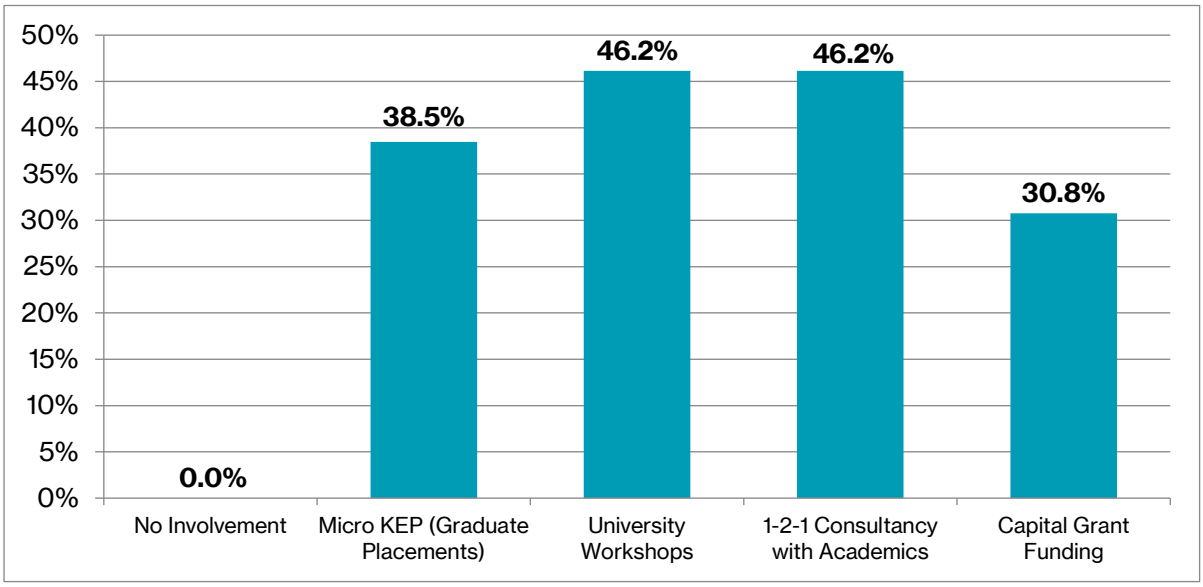


The project has benefitted from the delivery partners' strong network of businesses, with 30.8% of businesses involved with ALPHAS signposted by the universities. Anecdotal evidence from the case studies suggests that many of the businesses engaged have had prior engagements with the universities. 15.4% of survey respondents said that they discovered the project via a web search and business referral respectively.

Businesses were asked about their involvement with the ALPHAS project. The graph below depicts the percentage of respondents who participated in each of the project's interventions.

- **46.2%** of respondents said that they took part in a university workshop and 1-2-1 consultancy with academics.
- **38.5%** of respondents said that they were involved with a Micro-KEP.
- **30.8%** of those taking part in the survey saying that they received a capital grant.

The data suggests that 69% of survey respondents engaged with more than one of the project's interventions.



Businesses were asked to elaborate on their involvement with the ALPHAS project.

- *'ALPHAS helped me when I was changing from Purely Wellness Coaching to Clear Pathways with my website and marketing.'*
- *'Identified areas for business improvement. Took advantage of Business Consultancy and lengthy research and obtained part funding towards an infrastructure project to achieve objectives.'*
- *'I attended the online ALPHAS webinars that were informative and MKEP. the MKEP was to help with looking at way to obtain support to develop our own APP.'*
- *'I participated in some one-to-one workshops with ALPHAS team and at the end they helped me to secure some grant funding to help with the purchase of a piece of equipment.'*
- *'We had meetings with Maureen who was excellent and then continued our work with Ioana who used our firm for a live case study with the students' making presentations to us and report afterwards.'*

'We had a graduate placement to help us develop our social marketing strategy. And we also had an academic help and advice on our workflow and potential software investment/solution.'

38.5% of respondents said that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted their engagement with the ALPHAS team and the project.

Rationale for Involvement with the Project

Businesses were asked to explain why they engaged with the ALPHAS project. The majority of businesses required expertise and advice on the next steps to scale-up and move their business forward, whilst some referred to new product and process development as a motivating factor. The grant funding available through the project also acted as an incentive.

A selection of responses is below:

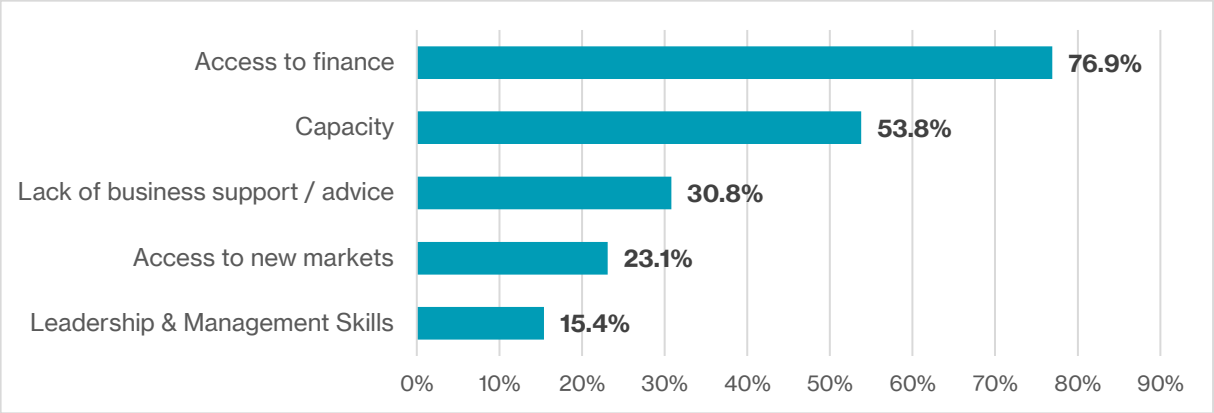
- *'We needed a trainee surveyor with a relevant graduate qualification. We hoped to gain a full-time employee from participating in this project.'*
- *'We had a graduate working with us for 4-5 months on launching a new service to a customer.'*
- *'On this current project to help me creating a podcast.'*
- *'We were looking to scale up and automate our order processing system in light of business growth.'*
- *'We were concerned about our processes and our accountant.'*
- *'I learnt about the ALPHAS programme following on from MKEP, it was informative, and I learnt about new programmes and support available for SMEs.'*
- *'To gain some advice and guidance, to help me to drive the business forward.'*
- *'Business support and advice with potential for finance/grant funding for growth and improvements.'*
- *'Branding guidance from our target audience.'*

- *'Building a prototype.'*

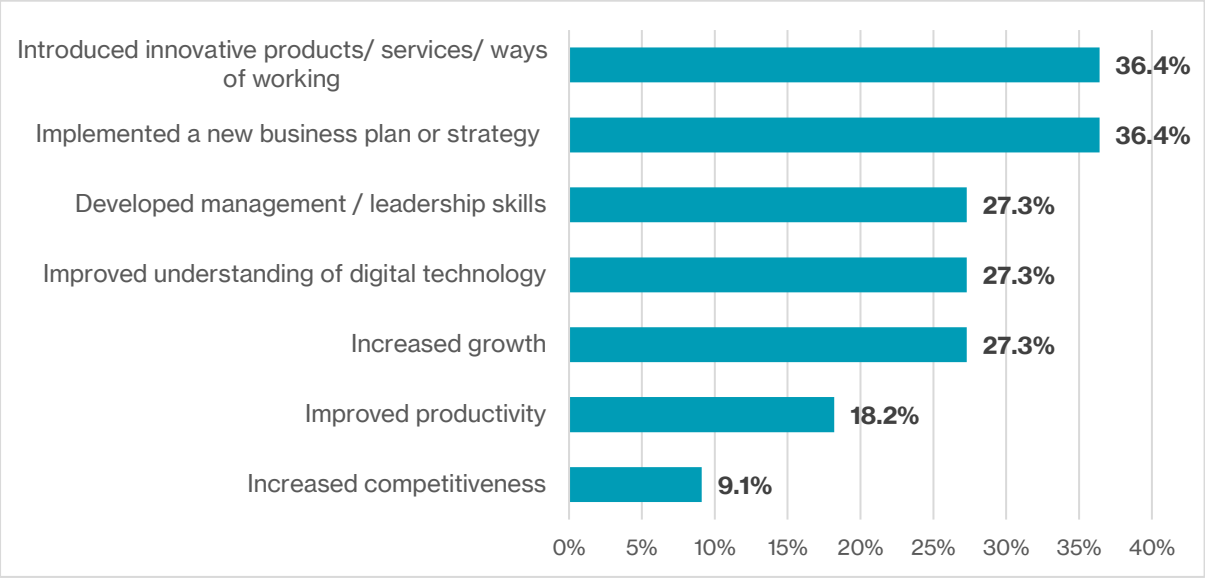
> *'We had a graduate placement to help us develop our social marketing strategy. And we also had an academic help and advice on our workflow and potential software investment/solution.'*

Barriers to Growth

We asked businesses about their barriers to growth. The most prominent barrier to growth for the businesses participating in the survey was access to finance, with nearly 77% of the businesses stating this. More than half of respondents also mentioned capacity challenges. A portion of businesses also discussed leadership and management as a concern.



The survey sought to determine the impact that the project has had on businesses. More than one-third of respondents said that their involvement with the ALPHAS project has supported them to introduce innovative products/services/ways of working and implemented a new business plan or strategy respectively.



More than a quarter of respondents have developed management/leadership skills, increased growth, and improved their understanding of digital technology as a result of the ALPHAS project. Businesses also conferred that they have created jobs, improved productivity and increased their competitiveness via the project.

Businesses were then asked to elaborate on their responses and tell us about the project's impact on their operations. One business said that they expect a significant uplift in their turnover in the next 12-18 months as a result of their involvement with ALPHAS.

A selection of responses is below:

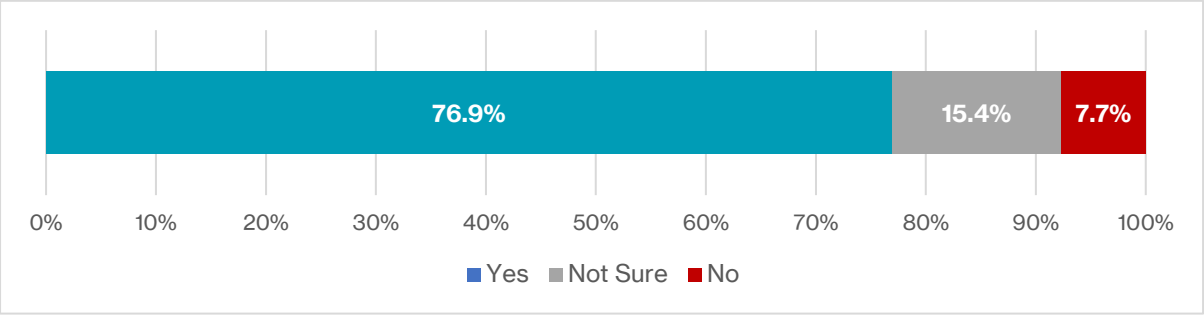
- *'We were able to employ a trainee graduate surveyor.'*
- *'Increased productivity and helped adapt focus to new markets and services.'*

'By receiving the capital growth fund, we were able to purchase a new piece of equipment that has meant we were able to develop another side to the business which has in turn increased our revenue.'

- *'We have employed a graphic designer with the help of ALPHAS.'*
- *'The project helped us identify some of the weaknesses within the business and we are currently trying to address these with self-funding, so it is slow.'*
- *'Helped us tweak a couple of things in terms of how we present to the market which hopefully will help us a lot in the long term.'*
- *'We will be using less paper to transmit information around the building.'*
- *'It makes you work on the business rather than just in it. It also gave us the chance to give a graduate a taste of work experience which I would hope would give them something to add to their CV.'*
- *'It was useful funding.'*
- *'Particularly as a micro business it has been helpful to be able to bounce ideas of other people.'*

Economic Impacts

- Nearly **67%** of businesses involved in the survey believe they will see some increase in turnover over the next two years.
- Nearly **54%** of respondents believed that taking part in the programme would result in higher spending on RD&I over the following two years.
- **23.1%** claimed that their participation had already increased the number of FTE employees, whilst **50%** expected an increase in FTE employees within two years.
- **76.9%** said the project had a positive impact on their business.



We also asked businesses to elaborate on the above response. A selection of responses is provided below.

- *'The project was very helpful from Day 1. It made us focus on the key issues and develop solutions to achieve objectives. Some of the sections were a bit slow and cumbersome for a company of our level of expertise but we are humble enough to realise that not all companies have as much experience and need to be guided through some basics. We will be benefitting from this project for a number of years to come. Thank you.'*
- *'It enabled us to employ a new person with the security of some funding during their settling in period'*
- *'Has helped us improve our overall product and brand'*

'By being involved with the ALPHAS project we have been able to add to and grow another side of the business that would not have been possible without the support of the ALPHAS project.'

Impact on Funding

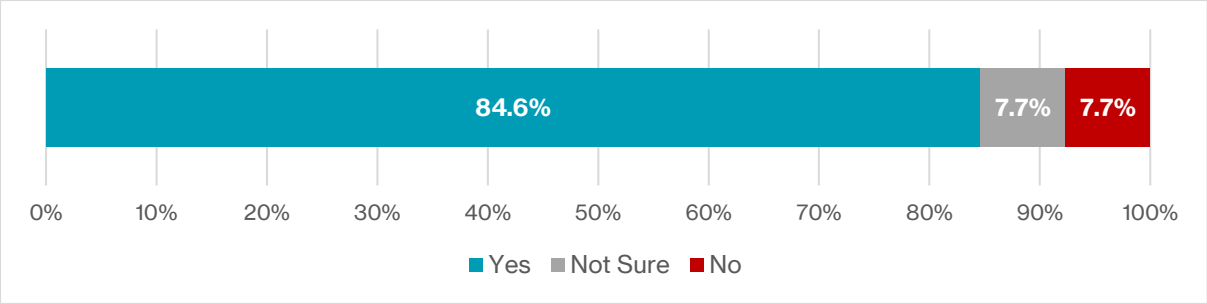
Businesses have benefitted from ALPHAS' interventions directly and some have subsequently been able to access, or apply for, additional programmes and funding to further develop their growth. Some examples of what some of the businesses who were involved in ALPHAS have achieved are:

- Development work with ALPHAS has led to links with the UKRI's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Medilink, IHR, plus an Innovation Bridges grant application.
- Increased market reach, increased turnover by c.£450,000, employed a University of Bedfordshire graduate, and launched a new product to the market.
- Developed new products to access new markets, academics working on the scope for funded Masters by Research with full funding.
- Identified new circular economy model and product, leading to a grant application for InnovateUK funding, reduction in the business's environmental impacts and creation of new IP.

Improvements

This section of the survey allowed businesses to discuss whether the project met their expectations as well as make suggestions for improvements based on their experience. Overall,

69.2% of respondents said that the support met their expectations. In addition, 84.6% of respondents said they would recommend the ALPHAS project to other businesses.



Businesses discussed the time-consuming nature of reclaiming costs, the pace of delivery, and the grant application process of areas for improvement. It is acknowledged that businesses often operate on a shorter timescale to universities; it is important for any project to manage beneficiaries' expectations. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic coupled with a high turnover of project staff has at times delayed engagements with businesses. Businesses would have benefitted from more communication and more follow-up from project staff. A selection of suggested improvements is listed below:

- *'The whole process to apply for support, then reclaim costs was so time consuming and also we struggled to get answers for requests.'*
- *'We've reached the end point that we thought we'd achieve, albeit a little slower than planned.'*
- *'The process was quite disorganised, and I had to do a lot of chasing for the funding.'*
- *'We are still waiting for our capital funding grant to come through even though the application was submitted in July 22.'*
- *'Improved admin for support- it took over 5 months for the claim to be paid - 5 months after the project had ended to process the claim - this creates cashflow challenges for SME's. We didn't get response to questions until I started to request read receipt messages. This did affect our experience after what was a very successful experience working with our graduate'*
- *'You might want to "tier" the initial phases in line with client experience levels. A lot of people dropped out of the video teach-ins at the beginning - Why? Overall, a very rewarding experience.'*
- *'More organised, also more done to publicise the availability of the grant to companies.'*
- *'Long-term working strategy with follow up meetings to ensure you stay on track and help if you deviate from any plans. Ongoing financial support as and where needed'.*
- *'Easier access to funding/grants with less restrictions on what funding is spent on.'*

5.4 Summary - Questionnaire for Beneficiary Businesses

- The project has benefitted from the delivery partners' strong network of businesses, with 30.8% of businesses involved with ALPHAS signposted by the universities. Anecdotal evidence from the case studies suggests that many of the businesses engaged have had prior engagements with the universities.

- The majority of businesses sought out ALPHAS for expertise and advice on the next steps to scale-up and move their business forward, whilst some referred to new product and process

development as a motivating factor. The grant funding available through the project also acted as an incentive.

- The most prominent barrier to growth for the businesses participating in the survey was access to finance, followed by capacity challenges. A portion of businesses also discussed leadership and management as a concern.

- More than one-third of respondents said that their involvement with the ALPHAS project has supported them to introduce innovative products/services/ways of working and implemented a new business plan or strategy respectively. More than a quarter of respondents have developed management/leadership skills, increased growth, and improved their understanding of digital technology as a result of the ALPHAS project. Businesses also conferred that they have created jobs, improved productivity and increased their competitiveness via the project.

- Nearly **67%** of businesses involved in the survey believe they will see some increase in turnover over the next two years. Nearly **54%** of respondents believed that taking part in the programme would result in higher spending on RD&I over the following two years. **23.1%** claimed that their participation had already increased the number of FTE employees, whilst **50%** expected an increase in FTE employees within two years.

- Businesses have benefitted from ALPHAS' interventions directly and some have subsequently been able to access, or apply for, additional programmes and funding to further develop their growth, including: the UKRI's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Medilink, IHR, Innovation Bridges, and InnovateUK.

- Overall, 69.2% of respondents said that the support met their expectations. In addition, 84.6% of respondents said they would recommend the ALPHAS project to other businesses. 76.9% said the project had a positive impact on their business.

- Businesses discussed the time-consuming nature of reclaiming costs, the pace of delivery, and the grant application process of areas for improvement. It is acknowledged that businesses often operate on a shorter timescale to universities; it is important for any project to manage beneficiaries' expectations. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic coupled with a high turnover of project staff has at times delayed engagements with businesses. Businesses would have benefitted from more communication and more follow-up from project staff.

5.5 Workshop Feedback

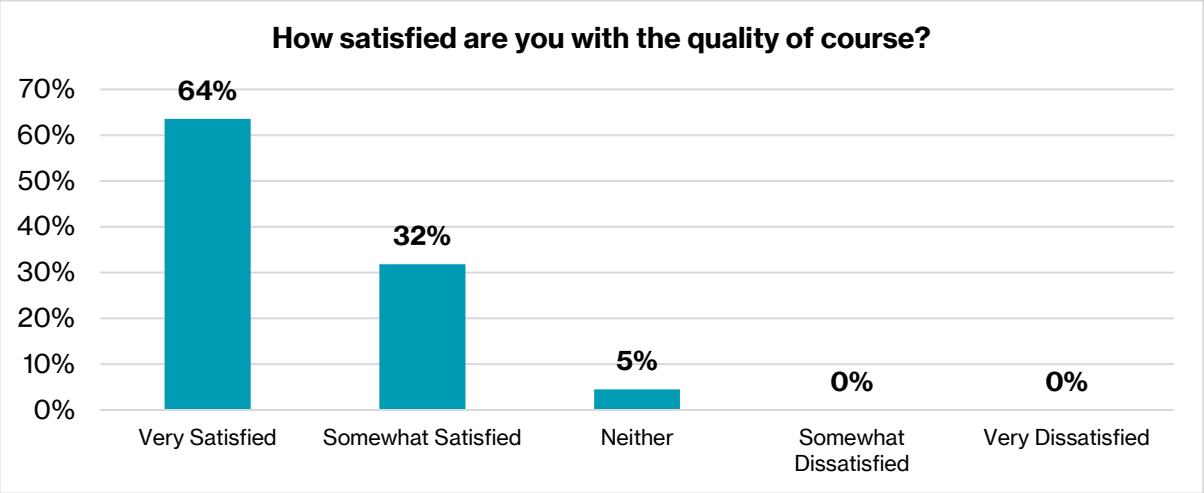
As part of the ALPHAS project, attendees had the opportunity to participate in a variety of workshops. These included the following topics:

- Finance and Funding
- Leadership and Management
- Business Scale-Up
- Digital Tools Strategy and Marketing
- Performance and Productivity.

We created some charts based on the responses in those feedback forms to show how businesses felt about the workshops.

Satisfaction

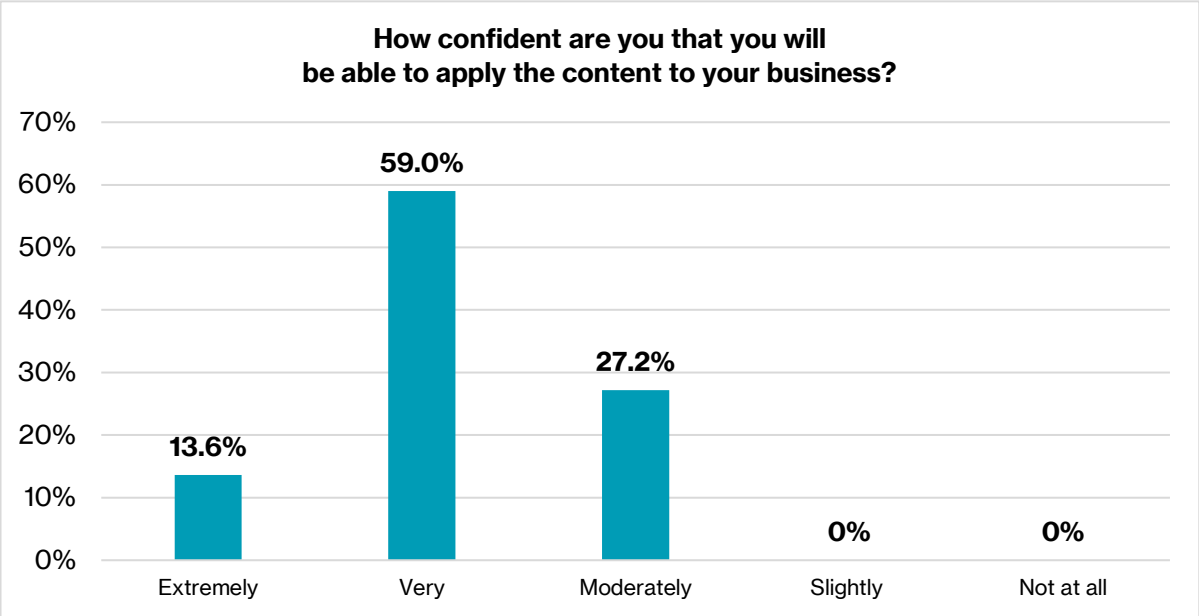
Businesses were asked how satisfied they were with the quality of the course. More than 95% of businesses said that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the quality of the course.



Overall, 82% of workshop survey respondents said that they would recommend ALPHAS to other businesses.

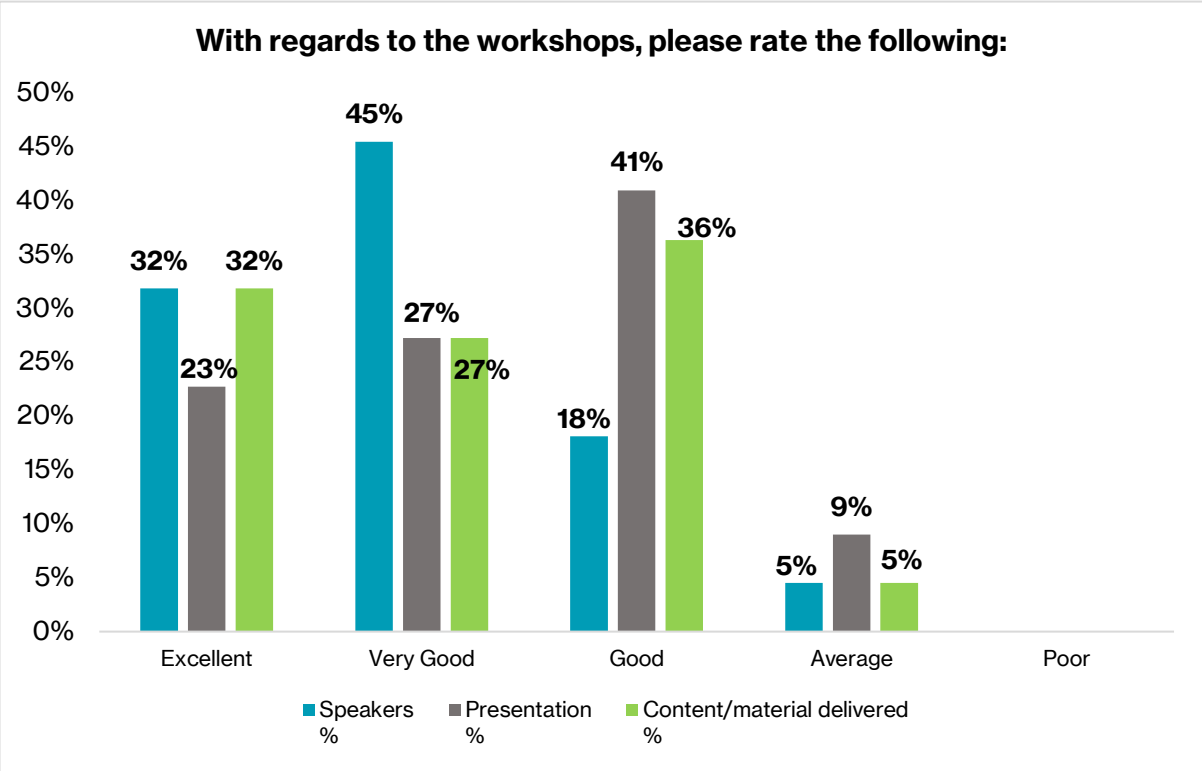
Confidence

The survey asked businesses whether they were confident that they would be able to apply the workshop content to their business. 72.6% of respondents said that they were either 'extremely' or 'very' confident of being able to use the workshops to aid their business.



Quality of Workshops

Attendees were asked to rate the quality of the speakers, presentation, and content/material delivered in a final multiple-choice question. More than 90% of survey respondents considered the speakers, presentation, and content/material delivered to be good, very good or excellent.



Additional Feedback

Attendees of the workshops were asked to complete a form to provide feedback, one of the questions asked, 'What are the main things you will take away from these workshops?' A selection of responses to this question can be seen below.

- 'Where to start - I have learnt so much and I can't wait to start implementing it. Please say a huge thank you to the team!'
- 'I learnt something from each of the modules I attended, but I found the digital sessions particularly useful for my current needs.'
- Finance – 'Highlighted all the levers that can be pulled to ensure that the business use of finance is as efficient as possible.'
- Leadership & Management – 'We have created a skills matrix and identified our gaps as a result.'
- Business Scale-Up – 'This highlighted a number of pitfalls that we have now considered and have actions in place to address.'
- 'I find that I am learning something new every time I attend a workshop. Some have given me a new perspective on business and even made me make a change in direction.'
- 'A better understanding of how to develop the business in the mid and long term.'
- 'The marketing session was very helpful for coming up with a strategy.'

- ‘Really useful as I’m currently recruiting and the sessions on staffing/leadership and process development are all in use already.’

‘The workshops gave a good overview of each topic. They were interactive and geared towards the companies taking part. The speakers were very knowledgeable and gave good advice. I particularly found the "Leadership & Management" and "Business Scale-up" workshops very informative and will be able to put the lessons learned in these workshops into use in our company.’’

People attending the course were also asked to ‘Please add any other comments you wish to make about any aspect of the course:’ The answers they provided can be seen below.

- ‘It was all very well organised, and all sessions provided relevant support to our business that has had a positive impact. It is the nature of being an online course, but the only element that would be better was the networking opportunity with the other businesses. I know this is being address, by sending the emails of the participants, but would be good maybe in the coffee break to invite participants into a breakout room if they are interested.’
- ‘I was very happy with the courses, the content was good and, on most occasions, easy to follow.’
- ‘I liked the range of the course and the topics covered.’

5.6 Summary - Workshop Feedback

- More than 95% of businesses said that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the quality of the course.
- Overall, 82% of workshop survey respondents said that they would recommend ALPHAS to other businesses.
- 72.6% of respondents said that they were either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ confident of being able to use the workshops to aid their business.
- More than 90% of survey respondents considered the speakers, presentation, and content/material delivered to be good, very good or excellent.
- Businesses were highly complementary of the workshop content, discussing the impact that the sessions have had on their strategies, perspective on the business, recruitment processes, and their understanding of digital.

6.0 Economic Impact

6.1 Economic Impact Assessment Principles

This section outlines the approach that has been taken to estimate the economic impact that the ALPHAS programme has had on the South East Midlands economy. It provides a review of the key features of the economic impact methodology and terminology used and details the calculations undertaken.

We have particularly focussed on the quantifiable estimated economic impacts that the business support programme has had, or is anticipated to have, on:

- Additional employment created
- Increase in business turnover
- Increase in business research and development spend.

Before we detail the findings, we have first highlighted below some of the key principles/features used in the economic impact calculations. We have also included a glossary of the terminology used.

a. Key Features of the Economic Impact Assessment

- The approach taken is rooted in HM Treasury 'Green Book' methodology, using a mix of relevant technical guidance, and judgements, primary data or standard assumptions for key economic factors.
- When using data sources to inform calculations we have applied the following approach:
  - Use of primary sources where possible.
  - Where possible use of data from the project team.
  - Where primary data is not available, we have used standard assumptions.

b. Economic Impact Terminology Used in the Calculations - Glossary

The research undertaken has been designed to estimate the total effect of the business interventions made by ALPHAS. This means considering a wide range of consequential or induced effects as well as the immediate effects. Throughout the calculations a variety of factors have been applied to calculate these effects – these are explained below.

- **Additionality**: The impact arising from the intervention that is additional - i.e., it would not have occurred in the absence of the intervention.
- **Multiplier effects**: The further economic activity (jobs, expenditure or income) that is associated with additional local income, local supplier purchases and longer-term effects of the intervention.

  - **Indirect:** The effects of purchases made as a result of the intervention and further purchases associated with linked firms along the supply chain.
  - **Induced**: The effects associated with local expenditure as a result of those who derive incomes from the direct and supply linkage impacts of the project over a set period of time.

- **Deadweight**: The outputs that would have occurred without the intervention.
- **Displacement**: The proportion of intervention outputs accounted for by reduced outputs elsewhere in the target area.
- **Leakage**: The proportion of outputs that benefit those outside of the intervention's target area or group.

6.1.1 Limitations of Economic Impact Assessments

It is important to recognise that there are limitations to any economic impact assessment. Below we have listed both limitations that are applicable to all economic impact assessments and also limitations that are specific to ALPHAS.

a. General Economic Impact Constraints

- The approach is constrained to a specific impact area.
- The findings are reliant on the robustness of the 'base case'.
- There is an inability to count non-quantifiable economic benefits that have value to individuals or organisations (e.g., quality of life improvements, profile raising, personal saving on travel time).

b. ALPHAS Specific Economic Impact Constraints

- Only limited numbers of businesses completed their financial information as part of the survey. Whilst this is understandable due to the sensitive nature of the data, it has resulted in the calculations being built on a small sample size.
- Some of the calculations, such as job creation, rely on businesses estimating the future predicted impact of their involvement with ALPHAS. There will always be some inaccuracy with estimated figures.

Not discounting all of the above it must be noted that the approach taken is cost effective, comparable and is built on economic convention.

6.2 Employment

Firstly, we have investigated the impact that the ERDF funded ALPHAS project has had on existing and predicted future levels of employment in the East Midlands.

6.2.1 Additional Employment Created

This section calculates the direct employment that has, or is predicted to be created in the future, as a result of the ALPHAS programme.

These calculations have been based on data gathered through the consultation process. It then goes on to calculate the wider employment impact of the scheme in the South East Midlands.

The methodology is shown below:

a. Employment Data Collected from Businesses

As part of the consultation process, businesses were asked whether, as a result of their involvement with ALPHAS, they had taken on any new employees. The results are shown in the tables below.

Increase in Staffing as a Result of Involvement with ALPHAS		
Number of Additional Staff Employed To Date	**Number of Businesses**	**%**
None	10	76.9%
0 - 5	3	23.1%
Number of Additional Staff Predicted to be Employed in 2 Years	**Number of Businesses**	**%**
None	6	50.0%
0 - 5	6	50.0%

From the table we know that of the businesses that have increased their staffing, or plan to increase their staffing as a result of their work with ALPHAS, assess their increase to be between 1 and 5 people. Taking a midpoint of this range we have assumed that these businesses have or will create 3 jobs each.

We can pro-rata these figures to estimate the anticipated number of jobs that have been/will be created within all businesses taking part in the ERDF funded ALPHAS project. This has been done using the following calculations:

Estimate of New Jobs Created by all Businesses Taking Part in the Project to Date

Total businesses supported by the project (85 profiled business to date)
X
Percentage of the businesses completing the question in the survey who told us that they have created new jobs as a result of the ALPHAS project (23.1%)
X
Estimated new jobs created in each business that has, or will, create jobs as a result of the project (2.5 jobs)

= 49.1 jobs

Estimate of New Jobs Created by all Businesses Taking Part in the Project in the Next 2 Years

Total businesses supported by the project (85 profiled business to date)
X
Percentage of the businesses completing the question in the survey who told us that they will create new jobs as a result of the ALPHAS project (50%)
X
Estimated new jobs created in each business that has, or will, create jobs as a result of the project (2.5 jobs)

= 106.25 jobs

Note: calculations assume that businesses who completed the survey are a representative sample for the whole programme. Figures are based on 85 businesses being supported by the programme.

This job creation figure varies from the jobs reported through the ERDF funded project. The project was contracted to create 90 new jobs in enterprises engaged with the project. Many of these jobs are predicted in the future and some may not have been created or sustained for long enough to allow them to be counted.

However, as noted above, our economic impact research has been designed to calculate the total effect of the business interventions made by ALPHAS. This means considering a wide range of consequential or induced effects as well as the immediate effects. The findings also need to specifically relate to the South East Midlands.

These calculations have been undertaken in the next section.

b. Calculating Total Employment Impact for the wider LEP areas

To understand the total impact of these jobs on the South East Midlands we have applied the following factors:

i. **Leakage**: *The proportion of outputs that benefit those outside of the intervention's target area or group – in this case the target area is the South East Midlands*
ii. **Multiplier effects**: *Further economic activity (jobs, expenditure or income) associated with additional local income, local supplier purchases and longer-term effects.*
iii. **Deadweight**: *Outputs that would have occurred without the intervention.*
iv. **Displacement**: *The proportion of intervention outputs accounted for by reduced outputs elsewhere in the target area.*

Each of these is considered in more detail over the following pages:

i. **Leakage**

The leakage factor represents the number of jobs created within the businesses supported that are likely to be outside of the target LEP areas. To estimate this, we have used industry benchmark data from English Partnership's Additionality Guide (2008).

A 'Medium' 'ready reckoner' would apply a 25% leakage factor, defined by 'a reasonably high proportion of the benefits will be retained within the target area/ target group'.

We can therefore assume that 75% of all new jobs created will be within the target LEP areas.

ii. **Multiplier Effect**

This section quantifies the employment Multiplier Effect – this is the further economic activity, in this instance jobs, associated with additional local income, local supplier purchases and longer-term effects. The Scottish Office have developed an input-output model using economic data since 1999 which includes the calculation of economic multipliers. They present two different employment multipliers that can be used:

- Type I employment multipliers – the ratio of direct plus indirect employment changes to the direct employment change
- Type II employment multipliers – the ratio of direct plus indirect ***plus induced*** employment changes to the direct employment change.

As we want to capture the induced effect as well as the direct and indirect effects, we have opted to use Type II multipliers in this instance.

The Scottish Government publishes these multiplier rates for a range of different sectors of the economy – i.e., the multiplier rate is different for each sector of the economy and there are therefore different multipliers for different industries.

As the ALPHAS project works across a variety of sectors there is no one multiplier rate that directly matches with the industry sectors that the ALPHAS support programme has worked with. We have therefore taken an average across a number of relevant sectors. This is shown in the table overleaf.

Employment Multipliers for Different Industry Sectors	
Sector	**Type II Employment Multipliers**
Manufacturing	1.6
Construction	1.8
Accommodation / Food Service Activities	1.25
Information and Communication	1.3
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	1.5
Human Health and Social Work Activities	1.4
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	1.3
Average Multiplier	**1.45**
Source: Scottish Government (2021)	

The average Multiplier Effect across all of these industries as shown by the table is 1.45. This is the multiplier that we have used in the later calculations.

iii. **Deadweight**

A deadweight factor of 20% is applied in this instance. Although the businesses taking part in the consultation directly attributed their increased employment to ALPHAS, anecdotal evidence suggests that the project has in some cases accelerated growth that would have happened anyway. We can therefore assume that without this intervention most of the outputs (80%) would not have happened.

iiii. **Displacement**

No displacement factor has been applied in this instance. From the business consultation questionnaire, we can see that many of the businesses involved in the business support programme have very niche areas of work. It is unlikely that expansion by one firm would have an impact on another.

Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands to Date

Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands to date can therefore be counted by calculating:

Jobs Created **(49.1)**
X
Multiplier **(1.45)**
X
Leakage **(75%)**
X
Deadweight **(80%)**
=
Estimated Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands to date = 42.7 Jobs

Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands in the Next 2 Years

Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands in the next 2 years can therefore be counted by calculating:

Jobs Predicted to be Created **(106.25)**
X
Multiplier **(1.45)**
X
Leakage **(75%)**
X
Deadweight **(80%)**
=
Estimated Total Employment Impact for the South East Midlands to date = 92.4 Jobs

c. Additional Gross Value Added (GVA) Created

This section measures the potential impact that the additional jobs created could have on the Gross Value Added (GVA) in the local South East Midlands LEP area.

We have used data from the SEMLEP Strategic Economic Plan (2017) Evidence Base which notes that GVA per employee in SEMLEP is estimated to be at £37,700, which places South East Midlands 8th out of all 39 LEP areas. This is assumed to be a reasonable average across the period of the programme.

Economic Impact of Jobs Created per Annum on SEMLEP Economy		
Productivity Measure	**GVA Impact of Employment to Date**	
The average GVA per employee per annum is £37,700	Jobs X	42.7
	Average GVA per employee per annum	£37,700
	= Increase in GVA	£1,609,790
Productivity Measure	**GVA Impact of Employment to Date**	
The average GVA per employee per annum is £37,700	Jobs X	92.4
	Average GVA per employee per annum	£37,700
	= Increase in GVA	£3,483,480

- The potential total impact for the SEMLEP area of jobs created to date as a result of the ALPHAS project after leakage, multipliers, displacement and deadweight have been attributed to 42.7 jobs. Assuming these jobs are permanent jobs, these workers would create an additional £1.61m increase in GVA per annum for the area.
- The potential total impact for the SEMLEP area of jobs predicted to be created in the next two years have been attributed to 92.4 jobs. Assuming these jobs are permanent jobs, these workers would create an additional £3.48m increase in GVA per annum for the area.

6.3 Research, Development and Innovation Spend

This section quantifies the potential impact that the ALPHAS project has had on Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) spend amongst the businesses that it has supported.

The methodology is shown below:

Businesses taking part in the consultation survey were asked whether as a result of their involvement with ALPHAS their expenditure on RD&I will increase in the next two years. Those businesses who had noted an increased spend on RD&I were asked to indicate by how much. This is shown in the table below.

Increase in RD&I Spend as a Result of Involvement with ALPHAS			
Increase in Spend on RD&I to date	**Midpoint of Spend Range**	**# of Businesses**	**% of Businesses**
No impact on RD&I	N/A	9	69.2%
£1 - £9,999	£5,000	4	30.8%
Increase in Spend on RD&I in the Next 2 Years	**Midpoint of Spend Range**	**# of Businesses**	**% of Businesses**
No impact on RD&I	N/A	6	46.2%
£1 - £9,999	£5,000	4	30.8%
£10,000 - £24,999	£17,500	2	15.4%
£25,000 - £49,999	£37,500	1	7.7%

The average increase in spend can therefore be calculated by multiplying the increase in spend by the % of businesses with this spend. We have used midpoint values in these calculations:

- The average increase to date = (4 x £5,000) / 4 = **£5,000**
- The average predicted increase in the next two years = (4 x £5,000) + (2 x £17,500) + (1 x £37,500) / 7 = **£13,214**

Impact on Research, Development and Innovation Spend to Date

We can use this information to estimate the predicted spend on RD&I to date of all businesses who took part in the ALPHAS programme by using the following calculation:

Total number of businesses supported **(85)**
X
% of businesses who increased their spend on RD&I as a result of working with ALPHAS to date **(30.8%)**
X
Average increase in spend of those businesses who increased their spend as a result of working with ALPHAS (**£5,000)**
=
Estimated Increase on spend on Research, Development and Innovation = £130,900

Impact on Research, Development and Innovation Spend in the Next 2 Years

We can use this information to estimate the predicted spend on RD&I in the next two years of all businesses who took part in the ALPHAS programme by using the following calculation:

Total number of businesses supported **(85)**

X
% of businesses who increased their spend on RD&I as a result of working with ALPHAS **(53.8%)**
X
Average increase in spend of those businesses who increased their spend as a result of working with ALPHAS **(£13,214)**
=
Estimated Increase on spend on Research, Development and Innovation = £604,276

- The potential increase in investment to date in RD&I of businesses supported by the ALPHAS project is £130,900.
- The potential increase in investment in the next 2 years in RD&I of businesses supported by the ALPHAS project is £604,276.

6.4 Turnover

This section quantifies the estimated impact that the ALPHAS project has had on turnover amongst the businesses that it has supported. The methodology is shown below:

Businesses taking part in the consultation survey were asked whether as a result of their involvement with ALPHAS their turnover increase in the next two years. Those businesses who had noted an increased spend on RD&I were asked to indicate by how much. This is shown in the table below.

Increase in Turnover as a Result of Involvement with ALPHAS			
Increase in Turnover to date per year	**Midpoint of Range**	**# of Businesses**	**% of Businesses**
No impact	N/A	9	75.0%
£1 - £9,999	£5,000	2	16.7%
£10,000 - £24,999	£17,500	1	8.3%
Increase in Turnover in the Next 2 Years	**Midpoint of Spend Range**	**# of Businesses**	**% of Businesses**
No impact	N/A	4	33.3%
£1 - £9,999	£5,000	4	33.3%
£10,000 - £24,999	£17,500	2	16.7%
£25,000 - £49,999	£37,500	2	16.7%

The average increase in turnover can therefore be calculated by multiplying the average increase in turnover by the % of businesses with this spend. We have used midpoint values in these calculations:

- The average increase to date = (2 x £5,000) + (1 x £17,500) / 3 = **£9,167**
- The average increase predicted in the next 2 years = (4 x £5,000) + (2 x £17,500) + (2 x £37,500) / 8 = **£16,250**

Impact on Turnover Per Annum to Date

We can use this information to estimate the increased turnover to date of all businesses who took part in the ALPHAS programme by using the following calculation:

Total number of businesses supported **(85)**
X
% of businesses who increased their turnover as a result of working with ALPHAS to date **(25%)**
X
Average increase of those businesses who increased their turnover as a result of working the ALPHAS **(£9,167)**
=
Estimated Increase of Turnover to Date = £194,799

Impact on Turnover per Annum in the Next 2 Years

We can use this information to estimate the increased turnover predicted in the next 2 years of all businesses who took part in the ALPHAS programme by using the following calculation:

Total number of businesses supported **(85)**
X
% of businesses who are predicting an increase in their turnover as a result of working with ALPHAS in the next 2 years **(66.6%)**
X
Average increase of those businesses who increased their turnover as a result of working the ALPHAS **(£16,250)**
=
Estimated Increase of Turnover to Date = £919,913

Note: calculations assume that businesses who completed the survey are a representative sample for the whole programme. Figures are based on 85 businesses being supported by the programme

- The potential increase in turnover to date of businesses supported by the ALPHAS project is £194,799 per annum.
- The potential increase in turnover in the next 2 years of businesses supported by the ALPHAS project is £919,913 per annum.

6.5 Summary - Economic Impact Assessment

A high-level economic impact assessment has been undertaken for the project to understand the potential economic impact that the project has and will have on the businesses supported. The calculations are based on the quantitative data collated through the beneficiary survey.

Economic Impact to Date

- **Employment:** Potential estimated additional total direct and indirect employment impact for the SEMLEP area of the ALPHAS project = 42.7 Jobs Created
- **GVA Impact of Additional Employment:** The anticipated jobs that will be created as a result of the ALPHAS project will have the potential to generate an additional £1.61 million of GVA per annum for the local economy.
- **RD&I Spend:** It is anticipated that businesses supported through the ALPHAS project to date have invested £130,900 (total for all businesses) in RD&I as a result of their involvement with the project.
- **Turnover:** The potential increase in business turnover to date of the businesses supported (total for all businesses) as a result of their involvement with the project is estimated to be circa £194,799 per annum.

Economic Impact in the Next Two Years

- **Employment:** Potential estimated additional total direct and indirect employment impact for the SEMLEP area of the ALPHAS project = 92.4 Jobs Created
- **GVA Impact of Additional Employment:** The anticipated jobs that will be created as a result of the ALPHAS project will have the potential to generate an additional £13.48 million of GVA per annum for the local economy.
- **RD&I Spend:** It is anticipated that businesses supported through the ALPHAS project have the potential to invest £604,276 (total for all businesses) in RD&I as a result of their involvement with the project in the next two years.
- **Turnover:** The potential increase in business turnover in the next two years of the businesses supported (total for all businesses) as a result of their involvement with the project is estimated to be circa £919,913 per annum.

Note: All above calculations are based on sample data from businesses completing a questionnaire about their involvement and benefits from working with the ALPHAS project. Calculations assume that the businesses completing the questionnaire are a representative sample of all businesses supported through the project. Figures are based on 85 businesses being supported by the end of the programme.

7.0 Value for Money

To explore the extent to which the ALPHAS project has represented value for money we have applied a simple but standard analysis of the estimated cost per output. This enables comparison to be undertaken with the cost per output achieved within the Priority Axis 3 of the ERDF Programme. Drawing upon the analysis in the consultation and impact assessment sections, this section provides a clear analysis of the value for money that the project has provided and is benchmarked against similar interventions.

It should be noted that this is only an approximate method of understanding efficiency, as projects and programmes deliver a range of activities. The results should be viewed alongside the overall quality and impact of the project.

7.1 Cost per Outputs

7.1.1 ERDF Cost per Outputs

The ERDF England Operational Programme 2014 to 2020 (2019) highlighted that the allocation of programme funding for Priority Axis 3 (PA3) was as follows:

- €822,835,839 for More Developed areas, equating to £732,077,046.

The project target area is defined as a More Developed area. In total, the allocated programme funding for Priority Axis 3 was €1,515,183,107, equating to £1,348,058,410.

The table below details the published targets under Priority Axis 3 (PA3c). The targets are taken from ERDF England Operational Programme 2014 to 2020 (2020): '2.A.6.5 Table 5: Common and Programme-specific output indicators (by investment priority, broken down by COR for the ERDF). We have calculated the cost per ERDF output by dividing Union Support (£) by the ERDF Target.

ERDF PA3 Cost per Output				
Output	**PA3A**	**PA3C**	**PA3 Total**	**Cost per ERDF Output**
Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support	-	4,693	4,693	£155,993
Number of enterprises receiving support	18,886	47,216	66,102	£11,075
Number of enterprises receiving grants	12,591	31,477	44,068	£16,612
Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	4,906	12,264	17,170	£42,637
Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£54,260,475	£135,651,188	£189,911,663	£3.85
Employment increase in supported enterprises	7,852	19,631	27,483	£26,637

ERDF PA3 Cost per Output				
Output	**PA3A**	**PA3C**	**PA3 Total**	**Cost per ERDF Output**
New to market products	1,511	-	1,511	£484,498
New to firm products	-	7,554	7,554	£96,913

7.1.2 ALPHAS Cost per Outputs

The total budget for the ALPHAS project is £2,887,885. The ERDF contribution for this is £1,434,716. This can be used to work out the costs per output of the outputs contracted and achieved by the project.

The table below shows the cost per output for the contracted outputs – this is what the cost per output was anticipated to be at the start of the project and assumes the full £4,201,800 was spent. It has been calculated using the following calculation:

Centre of Excellence Contracted Project Budget (ERDF Contribution) / Contracted Outputs
= Cost per Output Contracted

The table below also shows the cost per output of the outputs that have been achieved so far by the project. We have taken the 'worst case scenario' – assuming that all of the project contracted spend will be spent but no further outputs will be achieved.

In reality, the actual cost per spend achieved by the end of the ALPHAS project is likely to be better than this, as the numbers of outputs reported by ALPHAS increases as the project draws to a close. These figures should be reviewed once all outputs have been reported.

ALPHAS Cost per Output				
Output	**Outputs Contracted**	**Cost per Output**	**Outputs Achieved**	**Cost per Output**
Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support	238	£6,028	85	£16,879
Number of enterprises receiving support	238	£6,028	85	£16,879
Number of enterprises receiving grants	178	£8,060	50	£28,694
Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	60	£23,912	52	£27,591
Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£533,920	£2.69	£162,949.70	£8.80
Employment increase in supported enterprises	90	£15,941	26.62	£53,896
New to market products	25	£57,389	3	£478,239
New to firm products	40	£35,868	11	£130,429

7.2 Benchmarking – Value for Money

The table below shows the cost per output of the ALPHAS project benchmarked against the ERDF PA3 outputs. It shows both the cost per output of the actual outputs achieved to date by the project and the original contracted cost per output that was anticipated at the start of the project.

ALPHAS v ERDF PA3 Cost per Output			
Output	**Contracted Cost per Output**	**Cost per Output Achieved to date**	**Cost per Output – ERDF Programme**
Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support	£6,028	£16,879	£155,993
Number of enterprises receiving support	£6,028	£16,879	£11,075
Number of enterprises receiving grants	£8,060	£28,694	£16,612
Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	£23,912	£27,591	£42,637
Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£2.69	£8.80	£3.85
Employment increase in supported enterprises	£15,941	£53,896	£26,637
New to market products	£57,389	£478,239	£484,498
New to firm products	£35,868	£130,429	£96,913

The data suggests that when all of the contracted outputs have been achieved, the project will deliver outputs at a better value for money than the ERDF target for Priority Axis 3.

For some of the outputs the project is already performing below the average programme expenditure; outputs relating to new to market products, diagnostic and brokerage support as well as non-financial support in particular has been delivered either below or significantly below the programme level "cost per output"

The table also shows where the project needs to concentrate its resources in order to align with ERDF target cost per outputs. The project has underperformed so far in terms of cost per outputs when comparing to the benchmarking for the ERDF programme for:

- Number of enterprises receiving support
- Number of enterprises receiving grants
- Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)
- Employment increase in supported enterprises
- New to the firm products.

If the project can reach its target number of businesses receiving support, grants and non-financial support, it will have achieved the outputs at around half of the cost per output of the ERDF PA3 programme. This is likely to improve as further outputs are reported for the project.

7.3 Benchmarking – Previous Projects

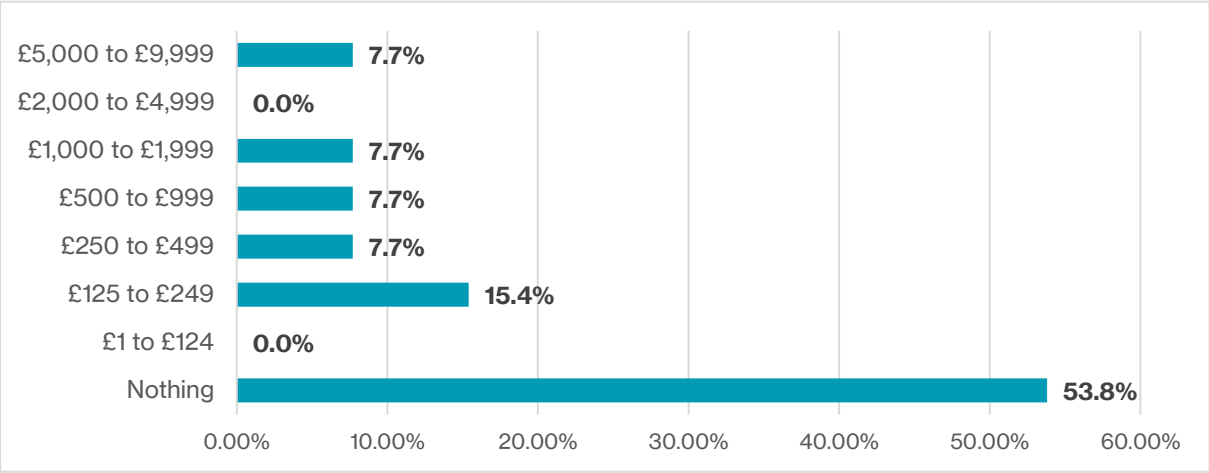
In 2013, Regeneris, as ex-ante evaluators, were appointed by the Department of Communities and Local Government to research the unit cost of a number of key economic outputs to inform the Local Enterprise Partnership's proposals for the ESIF programme. This work involved analysing data from 1,185 previous projects from across the English regions.

The findings of this research are used to compare the unit cost of some of the ALPHAS outputs.

- Regeneris suggest that for intensive business assistance, a unit cost of £10,000 should be used as a benchmark. To date, the unit for ALPHAS for a C1 output is c.£17,000 and therefore slightly above the suggested unit cost. However, this is expected to reduce somewhat as more outputs are delivered and if the project can achieve 60.5% of its output target it will achieve its outputs at the benchmarked level.
- In terms of jobs created, Regeneris suggested that a figure of £26,000 gross cost per job is used. The unit cost per job for ALPHAS is currently c.£54,000, significantly below this unit cost.
- For introducing new to the firm products, Regeneris suggested a unit cost of £28,000. The unit cost for ALPHAS is currently over £130,000 and therefore significantly above this figure. If further C29 outputs are achieved by the end of the programme, the unit cost will likely be in line with or below the Regeneris benchmark.

7.4 Perceived Value from Businesses

Business survey respondents were made aware of the fact that some of the services they received from the team were provided free of charge due to external funding secured from the European Regional Development Fund. The survey asked businesses how much they would have been prepared to pay for the service they received, if this funding was not available.



If we take an average of all responses, using midpoints of each range for each response, we find that the businesses surveyed would be willing to spend an average of £810 each for the support they received. Providing the project supports its full target of 238 businesses, this would equate to £192,780 of perceived value to the businesses.

7.5 Summary – Value for Money

Even if no further outputs are achieved the project will have performed well in terms of cost per outputs when compared to the benchmarking for the ERDF programme for:

- Number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support
- Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support
- New to the firm products.

To date, the unit cost for ALPHAS for intensive business assistance (C1) and job creation (C8) outputs are slightly above Regeneris' suggested unit costs. However, these are expected to reduce somewhat as more outputs are delivered.

ALPHAS' unit cost to-date for introducing new-to-the-market products is higher than the benchmark figure; therefore, the project needs to concentrate on new product development during the final few months of operation.

8.0 Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

8.1 Conclusions

- The impact of Covid-19 has emphasised the need for the project, forcing some businesses to diversify and pursue a different path to growth, requiring the adoption of digital and online platforms as well as new marketing strategies in order to operate in an increasingly technology-orientated world. Workshops that were more relevant prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – delivered around leadership, management, digital technology, staffing for the future – arguably became less of a priority, whilst sessions around 'financing your own growth' became much more about navigating the finances for survival instead. Access to finance and capacity challenges remained prominent barriers to growth.

- ALPHAS has had measurable impact on productivity and overall business performance through graduates working in scale up SMEs carrying out micro KEPs. The project has included tailored workshops and a specific workshop programme for social enterprises with ambition to become self-sustaining through innovative commercial enterprise.

- Overall, the workshops interventions were actually oversubscribed – they were easy to sign-up to, could be delivered and attended remotely, and easily fit around business schedules. Grants remained an effective incentive to aspirational businesses that still had projects for which they wanted to go out to market, and the risk of engaging in graduate placements became lessened in terms of finance invested when they considered the grant. The workshops have helped owners/directors to look at their business holistically.

- More than 95% of businesses said that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the quality of the course, whilst 84.6% of survey respondents said that they would recommend ALPHAS to other businesses. 76.9% said the project had a positive impact on their business.

- From an operational perspective, the project has helped businesses to implement the correct systems, which helps to avoid inefficiencies, improving their service and giving them an edge to help them grow. In some cases, the project has helped businesses to have the right people in place in response to recruitment and furlough issues instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- The project is thought to be a key enabler for attracting new graduates and therefore inward investment, with some of the graduates recruited relocating from outside of the region. Graduates are thought to have gained a better understanding of a working business environment, whilst SMEs are encouraged to work with universities and academia in a way they hadn't necessarily considered before. From a university perspective, the project has served as a useful tool for advertising and raise awareness of its services and capabilities amongst an industry of SMEs with little understanding of how a relationship with a university can support their growth.

- If no additional outputs are achieved, in the next two years, the potential impact of jobs created after leakage, multipliers, displacement and deadweight can been attributed to 92.4 jobs, which would create an additional £1.61m increase in GVA per annum.

It is anticipated that the total number of businesses supported by the ALPHAS project have the potential to increase their turnover by £919,913 per annum, and to invest £604,276 in RD&I, in the next two years.

- Even if no further outputs are achieved the project will have performed well in terms of cost per outputs when compared to the benchmarking for the ERDF programme for: number of enterprises receiving information, diagnostic and brokerage support; number of enterprises receiving non-financial support; and new to the firm products. ALPHAS' unit cost to-date for introducing new-to-the-market products is higher than the benchmark figure; therefore, the project needs to concentrate on new product development during the final few months of operation.

- It is worth noting the intangible services that the ALPHAS project has provided outside of the core interventions; anecdotal evidence from businesses as part of the case study interviews suggest that many have benefitted from marketing support, reductions in waste and emissions, from new relationships with universities. Much of the support, relationships and placements facilitated by the project will have legacy benefits for businesses beyond the end of the programme. For example, businesses have been able to access, or apply for, additional programmes and funding to further develop their growth, including: the UKRI's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Medilink, IHR, Innovation Bridges, and InnovateUK.

8.2 Lessons Learnt

- The bilateral partnership model is considered a useful means of providing provision to businesses across the entire LEP area, many of whom are reluctant to travel further than their local university. The pan-LEP working meant the project could benefit from a wider array of specialisms – Northants specialise in not-for-profit and community interest companies, whereas Bedfordshire are renowned for their strong network of SMEs.

- Both partners acknowledge that the project management could have been improved, with this attributed in part to regular changes in personnel and organisational restructuring. All projects are thought to be inhibited by the time taken at the start to build a project team and the relationships required to deliver successfully. The project would have benefitted from more time prior to the pandemic to develop and embed effective processes.

- The team organised workshops and adapted them to accommodate support areas the academics could fulfil. Projects of this nature could benefit from ingraining a means of adaptability and flexibility into the project design to allow longer-term interventions like these to vary their offer to better meet the needs of businesses at any one time.

- The project would benefit from a stronger mechanism for referrals from local authorities to help deliver grant funding in particular.

- The successful rate at which graduate placements are thought to have secured full-time work is a key success for the project.

With the placement largely acting as an extended job interview, most SMEs have chosen to take-on the graduate full-time following their involvement with the project, which reflects the effectiveness of the initial workshop, graduate role definition, graduate recruitment, and support for growth over the 12-week period.

- The project's slow start as a result of delays in recruiting a project team were exacerbated by a high turnover of ALPHAS staff and of those accountable in the partner universities. The project would have benefitted from more consistency in both project management and project partnerships. Delivery partners would also have benefitted from a clearer set of roles and responsibilities, whilst businesses might be more likely to remain engaged with a clearer, more defined client journey from the outset.