



Department for  
Business, Energy  
& Industrial Strategy

# Evaluation of the Small Business Leadership Programme (SBLP)

Phase 1 Report

December 2021



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# 1. Executive Summary

## Overview of the programme context

In 2019/20, the then Chancellor allocated £10.7 million to the Small Business Leadership Programme, in line with recommendations in the 2019 Productivity Review. This highlighted poor firm-level productivity as a barrier to economic growth. At this point, BEIS engaged with the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) to design a programme to address these underlying issues.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there was a renewed push from BEIS and CABS to start the programme. There was an added recognition that SMEs needed immediate support to help deal with the economic effects of the pandemic, as well as targeting a boosting of firm-level productivity. The grant agreement process between BEIS and CABS started in June 2020, being completed a month later.

The grant agreement involved programme delivery within a tight timeframe. Programme delivery began in October 2020 and was originally due to end in March 2021 albeit the programme was later extended to include 15 additional cohorts running from April 2021 to June 2021.

## Purpose of the evaluation and this report

The primary focus of the evaluation is two-fold: firstly, to help determine how well the programme was designed, delivered, and managed; and to better understand what impact the programme has had on participants and the wider economy.

This report summarises our findings for Phase 1 of 2 of the study, and looks at the following high level research questions (HLQs):

- HLQ1: How effective is the SBLP in recruiting business and ensuring they complete the programme?
- HLQ2: Is the SBLP successfully delivering high quality business support?
- HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?

The evaluation has adopted a mixed method approach, drawing on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative, and primary and secondary research. This has included:

- Interviews with nine stakeholders (including business schools involved in programme delivery, trade associations, and CABS management staff)
- Feedback via survey and interview of 11 business schools not consulted during stakeholder interviews (73% response rate)

- An online survey of SBLP participants post-programme completion, attracting 383 responses (an 18% response rate)
- Sixteen semi-structured interviews with participants (against a target of 25, a 64% success rate)
- Participant observations of four different SBLP cohorts, attending at three modules for each cohort
- Analysis of monitoring and administrative data such as registration data and module feedback data
- Review of background literature including the business case and curriculum outlines.

## Programme overview

The emphasis of SBLP was threefold:

- Improve the management and leadership skills of SME leaders
- For these skills to then translate into personal behaviour changes and/or changes to management and leadership practices within their business
- For these changes to then improve the resilience of SMEs during COVID, as well as creating a culture of learning, all of which will ultimately lead to improved productivity.

The programme itself was delivered by 20 CABS-accredited business schools, each one delivering a common curriculum and content and at no cost to participants. SBLP consisted of three core activities:

- **Online masterclasses/webinars:** eight modules delivered weekly (over 10 weeks) which focused on a particular management skill
- **Facilitated peer group calls:** again taking place weekly, these provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the content covered that week, and work through ideas and exercises together
- **Independent asynchronous learning:** a series of exercises and reference material related to the week's module, for participants to complete in their own time

SBLP delivered training to 127 cohorts of 15-25 SME leaders, encompassing just over 3,000 participants.

## Findings for HLQ1: How effective is the SBLP in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the programme?

Overall, programme recruitment was successful with a national campaign having helped recruit large numbers of participants in a short time period. Business schools topped up these numbers by working with their existing contacts and networks, most notably Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Chambers of Commerce.

The main ways that participants heard about the programme were via marketing email (26%), social media (23%), personal recommendations and word of mouth (17%).

SBLP exceeded its original target of recruiting 2,000 participants by March 2021, adding additional cohorts in April to June 2021 to cater for the high programme demand.

Although SBLP has been successful in recruiting businesses, there were some teething problems. In the early stages of the programme, recruitment was a little slow and it took time to determine the most effective recruitment strategies. Additionally, staff shortages and the short start-up period meant that the business schools could not fully exploit all their local contacts to optimise recruitment levels.

SBLP has attracted a diverse range of businesses covering a range of different sectors, company ages and turnover. This has been a particular concentration of participants based in the West Midlands and North East, while half the participants have been micro-enterprises, with 5-10 employees.

While the range of businesses supported has been diverse, the range of individuals supported has not been. Those registering onto the programme have tended to be male (60%), identify as British (74%), aged 35-49 (52%) and have 1-5 people reporting to them (70%). However, the SBLP participant base still appears to be more diverse than the total SME leader population in the UK.

Of the 3,005 that registered onto SBLP, 71% completed the programme, with 42% (1,273) completing all eight modules. Typical barriers to completing all the modules or the entire programme were activities being held at unsuitable times of the day, business commitments, and the individuals facing personal issues (e.g. bereavement, childcare, illness) during lockdown.

## Findings for HLQ2: Is SBLP successfully delivering high quality business support?

The online masterclasses have been very well regarded by participants. They have deemed the course modules to be very relevant to their needs while course facilitators have also been well regarded. By and large, participants thought the number of modules offered, and the online format of the masterclasses were appropriate during the pandemic. Nevertheless, many participants alluded to the masterclasses having too much content for



a 90-minute session, while some facilitators were not always familiar with video-conferencing platforms, affecting the quality of delivery at times.

The peer group sessions were also well regarded by participants. In most cases, participants did not see having cohort members from different sectors or geographies as barriers to them being effective. Participants also felt that facilitators managed the sessions well. In terms of potential improvements, the timings of peer group calls did not work for all participants while a recurring theme was that the peer groups worked best when they took place two to three days after the masterclass, providing time for reflection on the content covered in them.

Feedback on the independent learning tasks has been much more mixed. Participants tended to hold some of the resources, such as the business planning canvas, in high regard. They also tended to feel that the materials would be a valuable resource to return to later. However, participants commonly commented that there was too much material to cover in the independent learning tasks, with only c.25% of survey respondents completing all the tasks. Furthermore, many participants highlighted having technical difficulties in accessing materials via the dedicated SBLP virtual learning environment (VLE).

Overall, the SBLP delivery model seems to have worked well. The standardised curriculum helped provide consistency and quality control, while there was also good coherence and linkages between different SBLP activities each week. Stakeholder and participants alike thought that SBLP covered relevant content, albeit that it appears that participants prioritised attendance at the masterclasses and then peer groups – the independent learning commanded far less attention.

## Findings for HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?

At the time of the fieldwork for this evaluation phase, there was limited evidence on this area. However, survey evidence collected following course completion showed that most respondents were planning to make changes to the way they manage, organise or operate their business. Moreover 60% of respondents were aiming to make these changes within the next three months, indicating a high level of relevance of concepts learned and skills gained as well as willingness to change behaviour based on the SBLP experience.

Interview evidence also highlighted how SBLP participation had helped encourage a change in people's behaviour, be it implementing some of tools used on the source, looking to build contacts with cohort members, or differently approaching the way they run their business.

## Summary of recommendations

- Increase **programme lead in times** to allow delivery teams more time to recruit staff and participants

- **Maintain current curriculum and delivery format, with tweaks.** There is potential for instance, to split the leadership and employee engagement modules. Some face-to-face sessions, particularly for peer groups, would help build relationships and be welcomed by participants
- Consider **programme branding** as participants commonly view SBLP as a 'mini-MBA' rather than something to improve productivity
- **Improve IT infrastructure**, specifically the development of a more friendly VLE. The programme would also benefit from a centralised IT infrastructure that includes a single platform that has all the VLE material, and host peer groups and masterclasses
- **Some improvements to the evaluation and monitoring approach are also needed.** There was often missing or incomplete monitoring data, in large part because participants were unsure of their unique identifier and how to find it. The issue was not helped either by data collection being decentralised to the business schools, with each one collecting data inconsistently. The programme would benefit from a centralised data collection platform which CABS has access to.

## 2. Introduction

### Background

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has appointed Technopolis to undertake an evaluation of its Small Business Leadership Programme (SBLP). The evaluation has four main aims, as identified in the evaluation specification:

- To understand how SBLP is being delivered in practice and to understand how to improve delivery (process evaluation)
- To understand and measure the early impacts of SBLP in terms of the adoption of new practices (early impact evaluation)
- To generate evidence to inform future programme design and funding decisions (strategic question)
- To embed the right data collection practices to enable a separate longer-term impact evaluation to be conducted in the future (impact evaluation)

This evaluation is taking place in two phases. Phase 1 collects baseline data for programme participants, and also centres on providing a process evaluation for the programme. Phase 2 of the evaluation, subject to approval, will provide an impact evaluation for SBLP, focusing particularly on programme participants.

The evaluation itself has five high level research questions as outlined in Table . Phase 1 centres on answering two of these, with some initial insights into HLQ3.

**Table 1 SBLP evaluation high level research questions (HLQs)**

Phase 1 research questions	Phase 2 research questions
<p><u>Process evaluation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HLQ1: How effective is the SBLP in recruiting business and ensuring they complete the programme</li> <li>• HLQ2: Is the SBLP successfully delivering high quality business support?</li> </ul> <p><u>Early impact evaluation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?</li> </ul>	<p><u>Early impact evaluation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?</li> <li>• HLQ4: What early changes are businesses making after participation in the programme?</li> <li>• HLQ5: What other factors influence how and what changes businesses are making after they complete the programme?</li> </ul>

This report presents our findings from Phase 1 of the evaluation, looking to determine how effectively and efficiently SBLP has been designed, run and managed. It also looks to identify programme delivery best practice, and identify areas for potential improvement –

both of which will inform the delivery of future BEIS business support programmes. There is also an initial assessment of early impacts generated – limited evidence is currently available to this as at the time of writing, not all cohorts have completed the programme and for those that have, meaningful outcomes or impacts will take time to arise. However, we have examined participants' signalled intentions of future behaviour to help us understand early impacts created.

This report examines the following areas:

- **Chapter 3** assesses the processes and events leading to the **formation of the programme**
- **Chapter 4** focuses on how CABS and BEIS **planned for programme delivery**, including engagement with business schools, and setting up the curriculum
- **Chapter 5** looks at how the programme sought to **recruit participants** and the relative effectiveness of the approaches used
- **Chapter 6** assesses the **programme's approvals and onboarding** processes
- **Chapter 7** examines how well the **programme delivery model** has worked
- **Chapter 8** considers outlines thoughts on the quality of **course content**
- **Chapter 9** sets out **early** evidence of business outcomes
- **Chapter 10** provides commentary on how well the **programme management** process has fared
- **Chapter 11** provides a **summary and conclusions** reached by this report

Chapters 2-4 focus on answering HLQ1, while Chapters 5-7 provide the evidence base for HLQ2. Chapter 8 provides evidence for both HLQ1 and HLQ2. We consider HLQ3 throughout the report, with particular attention paid to it in Chapter 8.

## Programme overview

SBLP is a business support programme available to SMEs in England and looks to support key decision makers within the businesses. Starting in August 2020, it aimed to work with the business leaders to help them enhance their business resilience and recovery from the impact of COVID-19, as well as providing business leaders with the tools and knowledge needed to develop the future growth and productivity potential of their businesses.

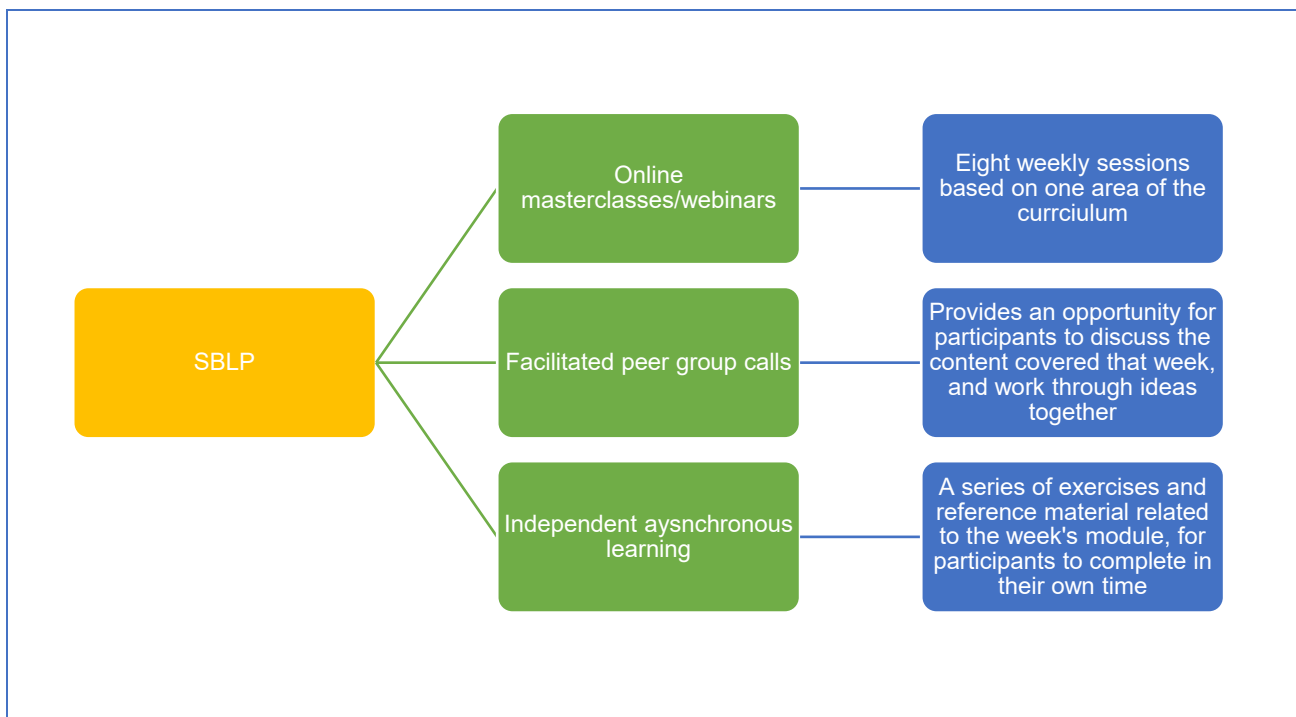
A ten-week programme, at no cost to participants, consists of three main aspects as highlighted in Figure 1 below: online masterclasses, facilitated peer learning groups, and independent learning exercises. The programme incorporates two break weeks, with the remaining eight weeks being dedicated to a curriculum addressing eight business themes:

- Module 1: Overview – Productivity, Resilience, Sustainability

- Module 2: Innovation and Markets
- Module 3: Leadership and Employee Engagement
- Module 4: Vision, Brand and Purpose
- Module 5: Your Customers, Segmentation, Target & Positioning
- Module 6: Operational Efficiency
- Module 7: Finance and Financial Management
- Module 8: Action Planning and Implementation

A consortium of 20 business schools, all of whom have Small Business Charter accreditation from the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), delivered each module, with some also helping design the curriculum. The programme was also designed to offer consistent content, delivery style and quality, while giving the individual Schools some scope to tailor materials and content to cater for the individualities of their audience.

**Figure 1 Summary of programme delivery model**



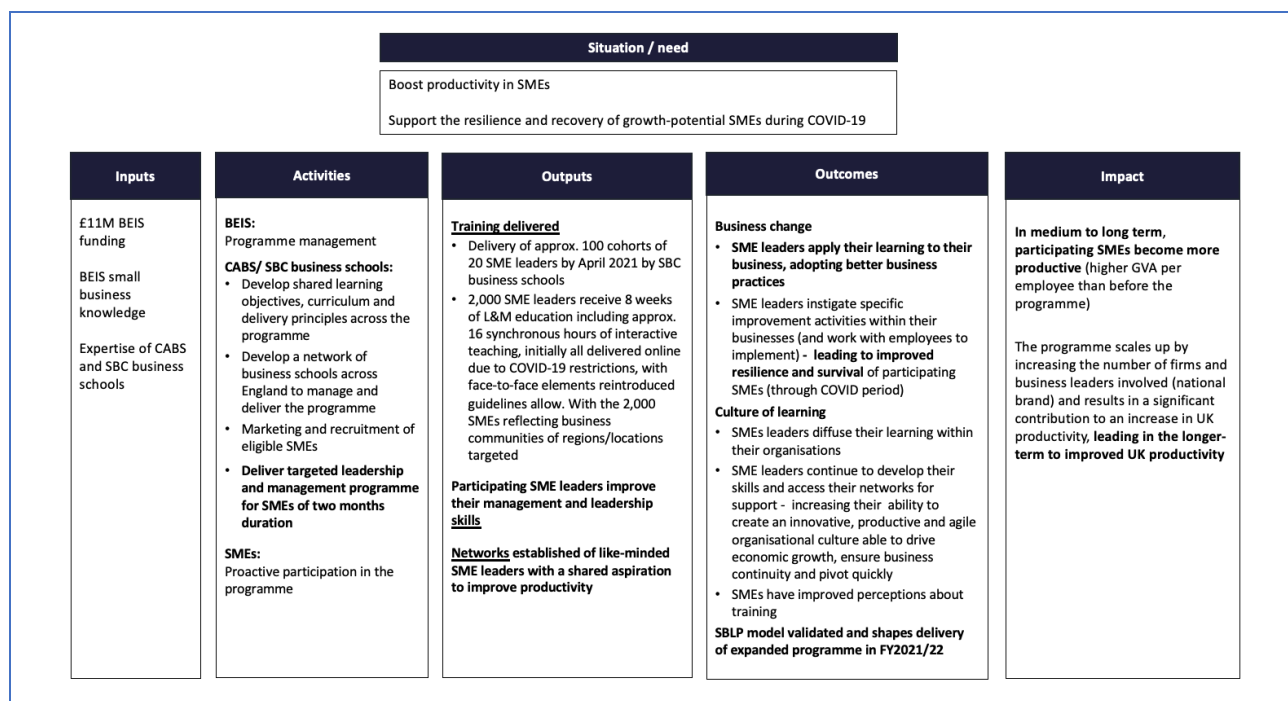
Source: Technopolis

The programme has delivered this training offer to approximately 125 cohorts of 15-25 SME leaders (involving approximately 3,000 participants in total) between October 2020 and June 2021.

The logic model below (Figure 2) sets out the intended outcomes and impacts for the programme. As shown, the programme's emphasis was threefold: i) to improve the management and leadership skills of SME leaders; ii) for this to then translate into personal

behaviour changes and/or changes to management and leadership practices within their business; and iii) for this in turn to lead to improved resilience for the SMEs during COVID and a culture of learning, all of which lead ultimately to improved productivity. There was also the intention that the programme would prove itself to be successful and as a result be scaled up to reach larger numbers of SMEs.

**Figure 2 SBLP logic model**



Source: Technopolis revision of CABS and BEIS drafts

## Evaluation methodology

This report draws on a mixed methods approach which combines the analysis of monitoring and administrative data, with largely qualitative primary research with all major programme stakeholders (namely beneficiaries, delivery organisations, and management organisations). Table 2 summarises the method used.

In this phase of the evaluation, the study team also worked with BEIS and the CABS delivery team to establish a process to capture quantitative and qualitative baseline data for participants to support an econometric analysis of the programme in Phase 2.

**Table 2 Summary of research tasks**

Method	Details
	Primary research

Method	Details
Stakeholder interviews	<p>Semi-structured interviews conducted with nine stakeholders both connected and unconnected to the programme. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five business schools involved in SBLP delivery</li> <li>• Two individuals associated with CABS/national level programme design</li> <li>• Two external stakeholders unconnected to the programme (one academic, and one trade association representative)</li> </ul>
Business school feedback	<p>We approached the 15 other business schools involved in SBLP delivery but not consulted as part of the stakeholder interviews. They were given the option to provide either written (via an online form or email) or verbal feedback on their programme experiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We received feedback from representatives at 11 different business schools (73% response rate)</li> </ul>
Beneficiary survey	<p>We ran an online survey to gain thoughts on how well SBLP had been run and managed, the elements of the programme that worked well and less well for them and to collect some evidence on early impacts (for example, whether participants intended to make changes to the way they ran their business in light of skills and knowledge gained through SBLP participation). We shared the survey with all those that had completed the programme<sup>1</sup>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the 2,139 that we sent a survey to, 383 provided a response – a response rate of 18%<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>
Follow-up beneficiary interviews	<p>We conducted follow-up semi-structured qualitative interviews with 16 survey respondents, covering a mixture of different cohorts and business school providers. We selected interviewees based on whether they had opted in to a follow-up survey in the online each one from a different SBLP cohort and therefore having experienced a different business school provider.</p>
Participant observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have observed the delivery of SBLP across four different cohorts, each delivered by different business schools. We chose business schools on the basis of their geography, and their ranking in different business school league tables. We</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> This only includes all those that CABS were able to provide us with details of, rather than all those that had definitely completed by that date

<sup>2</sup> This is slightly below the typical response rate for online surveys, which we would typically expect to be at between 25 to 30%. There was a noticeable drop in response rates amongst those who completed the course after the beginning of March 2021. These cohorts were surveyed several months after completing the programme (owing to administrative issues) and the survey may therefore have had less traction with them as a result.

Method	Details
	<p>ensured that the selected business schools were evenly split across both criteria.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With each cohort, we have observed at least three different modules and for two cohorts, we also attended peer group sessions</li> <li>• Between the four cohorts, the study team has observed each of the eight SBLP modules</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring and administrative data</b>	
Module feedback data	Each business school collects feedback data on each of its module. This report draws on analysis of all the data collected by the business schools that were made available to CABS.
Registration data	CABS centrally collects all data submitted by prospective participants at registration. Our report draws on the analysis of all registrations as of 5 March 2021
<b>Background literature</b>	
Study of background literature	<p>We have drawn on wider background literature on the programme including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The BEIS-produced business case</li> <li>• Curriculum outlines</li> <li>• The SBLP website</li> </ul>



# 3. Formation of the programme

## Rationale and market failures

### Addressing low productivity in the UK

SBLP was designed to address the issue of the long-tail of UK businesses with low productivity. The UK's lacklustre productivity performance, often referred to as the productivity puzzle, is a long-standing issue of concern to policy makers. Within the G7 group of the world's largest economies, the UK went from having the fastest growing productivity in years before the 2008 financial crisis, to having the second slowest growing in the years since.<sup>3</sup> According to the Bank of England, despite the presence of 'frontier firms' with high productivity, at world-leading levels, the UK is home to a long tail of companies with low, slow productivity growth.<sup>4</sup> For example, approximately one-third of UK companies have seen no rise in productivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although there are some notable exceptions, the problem is especially acute for small companies. Average productivity levels for small firms (fewer than 50 employees) is on average 7% lower than those of larger firms.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are greater proportions of high productivity businesses in the South East contributing to significant difference in productivity across the UK.<sup>6</sup>

The reasons behind the productivity gap were explored in depth in the Government's Business Productivity Review published in 2019, taking into consideration the productivity literature and expert input via an open call for evidence.<sup>7</sup> The review found that strong leadership and good management capabilities and practices are significantly correlated with higher productivity and that use structured management practices is lower in the UK than in other countries. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated these productivity issues. Analysis presented in the SBLP business case suggests the pandemic is likely to lead to fluctuations in transaction costs, weakened staff mobility, and reduced scope for resource allocation across firms, sectors and countries, all of which will further impact on firm level productivity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Productivity Leadership Group (2015) How good is your business really? Raising our ambitions for business performance, p. 4. Available at <https://www.bethebusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/how-good-is-your-business-really.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See speech given by Andrew Haldane, Chief Economist at the Bank of England delivered on 20 March 2017. Available at <https://www.bis.org/review/r170322b.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Business Productivity Review, UK Government, November 2019  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Di Mauri, F. and Syverson, C. (2020) *the COVID crisis and productivity growth*, cited in the BEIS business case for SBLP

The Business Productivity Review also reported research demonstrated an overconfidence within UK businesses with a large proportion of UK managers believing their business was as productive or more productive than their peers, indicating a low awareness or acknowledgement of the productivity gap. This suggests market failures in terms of the factors that prevent businesses, SMEs in particular, from seeking external advice, training and support to help them improve productivity.<sup>9</sup> These are centred on information deficiencies, not only in terms of *information asymmetries* in the presence or scale of the productivity problem between SMEs and training providers (such as business schools), but also *incomplete information* regarding SME needs by training and availability of training provision by SMEs and *inaccurate information* where, for example, SMEs may have inaccurate information on training provision and/or may find it difficult to judge the quality of training and support available. All of which reduce take-up of suitable training by SMEs but also an under-provision of training that fully meets SME needs in terms of content and delivery method.

Interviews with stakeholders confirmed the presence of such market failures, as outlined below.

### **Lack of SME-focused leadership and management training**

Feedback provided by participating business schools, and external stakeholders is while there is an extensive market for business support, there is very little that deals specifically with leadership and management training exclusively for SMEs. For instance, there are lots of local ERDF-funded projects but according to interviewed stakeholders, these have a tendency to be focused solely on micro businesses, or concentrate more on finding talent. While Knowledge Transfer Partnerships can provide some of the management and leadership skills that SMEs may look for, it is as a longer term scheme that does not have an exclusive focus on management training, and therefore does not especially help SMEs address time sensitive business management problems, including those associated with the pandemic.

MBA's provide a clear pathway of gaining leadership and management skills from a business school. However, their content is typically geared towards prospective leaders of multinationals than SMEs. Furthermore, their cost and two-year time completion is typically unsuitable for leaders of SMEs.

### **Variable quality of existing business support**

As noted above, stakeholder interviewees have highlighted that there is considerable local-level provision of business support, often delivered via Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). However, stakeholders believed that this creates something of a postcode lottery in terms of programme quality. Furthermore, interviewees indicated that these local programmes tend not to be delivered by business schools or other organisations with certification in delivering business management and leadership), so there is uncertainty as to the quality of programme delivery.

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<sup>9</sup> SBLP Business Case, October 2020 (version provided for the evaluation team)

## Lack of national-level provision

Our experience from the evaluations of other locally delivered business support programme is that without an element of national level oversight and co-ordination, there is a risk of local providers competing for the same customers - a point also raised during the stakeholder consultation. The competition for clients leads to a duplication of efforts, and inefficient delivery of business support and adds to concerns about the quality and value of support on offer.

An additional problem with a reliance on local-level provision is that it risks causing an uneven distribution of business support. As noted in the SBLP business case, currently the network of leadership and management training providers is fragmented, a majority of training providers being based in the South East of England. Without a programme with national reach, there is a risk that the market will under serve businesses in other parts of the country.<sup>10</sup>

## The programme's introduction

As noted above, there are several long term market failures, most of which pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, interest in introducing SBLP has been long-standing. A commitment to SBLP was first made in the Autumn Budget for 2018, with the Chancellor allocating £10.7 million of funding to the programme in 2019/20 in line with the recommendations of the 2019 Government's Business Productivity Review.

Since then, The Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) has worked alongside BEIS to design and implement it, building on a close working relationship between BEIS and CABS for a number of years. Early in 2020 and with the onset of the pandemic, CABS felt the need for SBLP's introduction was more pressing, and worked with BEIS to create a firmer and more long-standing relationship between the two organisations to enable the programme's delivery and introduction. At this point in time the programme was intended not only to boost firm-level productivity but also provide a toolkit for SME owners to manage the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. More generally, the programme fitted in with BEIS' to provide support to businesses following the onset of the pandemic, having introduced other programmes such as the Peer Networks Programme to help support SME leaders.

BEIS began working with CABS in June 2020 with the grant agreement process with CABS for curriculum design and programme delivery completed in July 2020. This meant a comparatively short turnaround time to set up the programme, with delivery to the first cohorts commencing in October 2020, and with all modules needing to be completed by all cohorts by the end of March 2021.

Initially, both CABS and BEIS had planned to include a nominal, but not insubstantial, registration fee to SBLP to encourage attendance at programme sessions. However, by the

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<sup>10</sup> SBLP Business Case, p.5

time that SBLP opened for registrations, both BEIS and CABS agreed that a registration fee would not be appropriate in the context of a major economic downturn, and might deter some from participating.

## Programme relevance

Feedback from stakeholder interviewees is that SBLP is playing an important role in tackling the market failures identified earlier in this chapter.

SBLP has carefully considered the needs of SMEs, developing an offer based on established best practice tailored to the SME context. By providing a modular course that is short and of no cost to them, SBLP removes some important barriers to SMEs in accessing business support. While the pandemic has necessitated a move to online programme delivery, this has also eliminated geography as a barrier to accessing support – some beneficiaries having noted that not having to travel to attend sessions has made them much more likely to join the programme. Online provision also means that the programme has national reach, enabling it serve areas that may not traditionally be well-served by business support.

The programme also helps to tackle some of the concerns around the variability of quality in terms of business support. Having a nationally led programme which is backed both by BEIS and CABS enables quality control measures to be in place, both in terms of content covered, and amongst programme delivery providers. As shown in Chapter 4, CABS introduced measures to quality assure curriculum content, and to ensure consistency in programme delivery.

There are also clear links between the productivity issues described, and SBLP's core focus. Unlike other business support programmes, SBLP is exclusively focused on management and leadership training for SMEs, with the aim of using gains here to improve practices that are known to improve firm-level productivity. Furthermore, the programme's emphasis on peer networking will also contribute to productivity improvements. In 2015, the Productivity Leadership Group, a group of 14 senior business leaders came together to examine drivers and solutions to the UK's productivity puzzle. Their report highlighted the importance of business working together to share best practice, and support each other to make necessary improvements. This business-to-business interaction is central to the SBLP and can therefore help tackle some of the identified productivity issues.<sup>11</sup>

As shown in Table 3 it also appears that SBLP is providing an offer that is different to other relevant business support programmes delivered by certified SME support providers like business schools. Compared to other programmes, SBLP offers a shorter course, caters for more businesses, and requires no fee.

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<sup>11</sup> Business Productivity Review (2019), HM Government. Available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf)

**Table 3 Comparing SBLP to other business support programmes offered through business schools**

Programme	About	SBLP's differentiating factor
Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses (GS100)	Provides support to small businesses looking to scale, create employment, and expand into new markets. It does so by providing 100 hours of tuition from UK universities, and residential learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A less involved application process</li> <li>• Offers more places</li> <li>• Targeted at all businesses, particularly the long-tail of low productivity businesses (and not the high performing businesses of GS100)</li> <li>• Takes place over a shorter time period (10 weeks compared to 4 months)</li> </ul>
Productivity Through People (PtP)	A ten month programme that provides leadership exercises, focused discussion and peer-to-peer learning to SME leaders. Delivered by five business schools, it also facilitates links and site visits with organisations such as BAE Systems, Siemens and Rolls Royce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants do not need to pay a fee</li> <li>• Working with a larger number of business schools and a larger number of business participants</li> <li>• Takes place over a shorter time period (weeks rather than months with PtP)</li> </ul>
Leading to Grow	Offers twelve hours of support to micro-businesses looking to grow, innovate and increase productivity through the adoption of new technologies. It does so through workshops, peer learning, and tailored support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to all SMEs and not just micro-enterprises</li> <li>• Larger number of business schools involved and a larger number of business participants</li> </ul>
Made Smarter Leadership Programme	Provides workshops, one-to-one meetings, forum discussion and site visits for SME manufacturing leaders in the North West looking to move their business towards greater digitalisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available beyond the North West of England</li> <li>• Participants do not need to pay a fee</li> </ul>

Source: Stakeholder interviews, and SBLP business case

## Summary

- Together, BEIS and CABS have designed a programme that targets low productivity in SMEs by focusing on leadership and management skills and tackling the underlying market failures by:

- Making business school expertise and training experience available to SMEs and in doing so providing a recognised 'badge of quality' to those considering SBLP
- Designing a course specifically for SMEs and delivered by business schools with the Small Business Charter (awarded to business schools that have demonstrated their ability to support small businesses and engage with their local economy)
- Tackling barriers of cost and geographical convenience to accessing business support (including the typically high cost of accessing training provided by business schools)

## 4. Planning for programme delivery

As highlighted in Chapter 2, there was only a three to four month period between signing the grant agreement between BEIS and CABS and the start of SBLP training of SMEs. In that time, CABS needed to secure business schools as delivery providers, develop and provide learning materials for the curriculum, and recruit relevant SME leaders. This chapter examines how the programme implemented the first two of these elements and considers the programme management processes.

### Securing the engagement of business schools

Once they had confirmation that SBLP would proceed, CABS approached all 33 business schools that hold their Small Business Charter – accreditation of their ability to successfully work with small businesses. Of these, CABS secured the involvement of 20 in the SBLP (see Chapter 6 for a full list of these). A number of other business schools expressed interest in being involved in the programme but were unable to commit the required time to it. Additionally, four Welsh and Scottish CABS-accredited schools expressed initial interest in delivering the programme but when it came clear that the programme was only targeting SMEs in England, they declined to participate as they were keen to support businesses local to them.

CABS representatives have spoken of how they have been pleased not only with the proportion of accredited business schools that they managed to secure as delivery providers, but also in the level of engagement that the 20 SBLP schools have shown in the programme. Consultees highlighted two factors in particular that helped secure business school buy-in:

- BEIS and CABS' involvement in SBLP gave the programme credibility, in turn helping create greater interest
- Government funding provided an element of security to the business schools, both in terms of the scale of funding available (which meant the programme would be sufficiently resourced), but also in terms of funding commitment (i.e. a perception that a government-backed programme was less likely to be pulled at short notice)

While there were no major issues in securing business school interest in the programme, getting delivery contracts in place did create some administrative issues for the programme. CABS had to sign contracts with 20 different institutions, each of whom had different contracting procedures and used different lawyers. This meant that CABS made financial and legal agreements with the schools at different rates and different times, adding a level of unpredictability to programme roll out during an already a tight timeframe for programme set-up.

## Resourcing the programme

A number of business school representatives spoke of it being challenging to find staff to deliver some modules. The issues were less around having access to suitably knowledgeable or capable staff, but more around their availability. There was relatively little lead-in time before commencing programme delivery and, in some cases, business schools found that facilitators had little time to contribute to SBLP given pre-existing teaching commitments. The business schools facing such problems were generally able to find solutions, for instance, drawing on associates and others in their networks, cancelling leave, and negotiating as necessary with other colleagues. However, there were also some comments that the online delivery made SBLP easier to manage and deliver. Business schools did not have to arrange for room bookings which made it easier to start delivery given the short lead-in times.

The business schools have also given universal praise to the CABS SBLP team for their management and co-ordination during the programme set-up phase. CABS staff always provided prompt responses to any queries that the business schools raised, and freely offered advice and support to the schools as needed.

## Designing the curriculum

CABS opted for a centrally designed curriculum and module content which they would share with the 20 business schools. Academics at Aston had been involved in some of the early discussions with BEIS about programme content and delivery models and therefore led and co-ordinated curriculum development. Nevertheless, all the participating business schools were given opportunities to feed into the curriculum. CABS asked the business schools which modules they were interested in helping draft and from there, CABS set up working groups for each module, with a nominated leader. As Figure 3 shows, 12 business schools, over half of those participating in SBLP, played an active role in developing course content. Decisions to join module working groups were driven largely by the availability and expertise of staff at the participating business schools.



**Figure 3 Institutions involved in preparing materials for each module**

	Introduction + Getting Started	Module 1	Module 2*	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5	Module 6	Module 7	Module 8
Nottingham Trent	■						■		
Portsmouth	■								
Manchester Met	■								
Aston	■								■
Leicester		■	■						
Staffordshire		■							
Northumbria			■						
Sheffield Hallam				■					
UWE					■				
Leeds Beckett						■			
Brunel								■	
Derby									■

\*Also included involvement from the Intellectual Property Office (IPO)

Source: CABS

Not all the participating business schools chose to be part of these working groups but were able to contribute to course content in other ways. Where there were knowledge and resource gaps for certain modules, CABS invited all business schools to provide any additional material they felt useful. Secondly, while the core course material remained the same for all schools, each school was able to tailor examples and case studies for their audience. We are aware of some business schools, for example, using local firms as examples or case studies in course material, while other facilitators shared their own personal experiences with participants during masterclasses.

As each module was developed, there was training call with each business school to explain the course content. Where possible, module working groups tried to build in time for feedback from the other business schools but there were some instances where final modules were only sent to course facilitators a day or two before they were due to deliver them.

BEIS also had opportunities to comment on the curriculum and it was in part due to their feedback that CABS added the finance module to the programme.

According to stakeholder consultees, developing the curriculum in such a manner brought a number of advantages:

- It has given business schools an opportunity to work with each other on a scale and to an extent that would not otherwise have been possible. While two or three business schools might have previously worked together on programmes such as Goldman Sachs 10,000 Businesses or Productivity through People, SBLP provided the first real opportunity for 20 different business schools to work together and share ideas with one another
- Creating a community of business schools has allowed business schools to talk to each other to help fill any gaps in knowledge. For instance, business schools have

been able, if necessary, to call on another's guest speakers to help them deliver a module

- Having centrally designed content has ensured that there is consistent delivery, while also enabling the quick deployment of the programme to a large number of SMEs

One or two business school representatives said that the model for curriculum development meant there was less scope for them to tailor the course content to their specific audience, and to the local geography. Others, however, did point out that there was scope to tailor the content somewhat through case study examples. Overall, there were few complaints about the processes used to design the curriculum.

The business schools were also given autonomy as to the timings of SBLP course sessions. Some schools had masterclasses that lasted an hour while other opted for longer sessions still. With the peer group calls, some business schools opted for half hour sessions while others opted for longer ones. Likewise, we found that some business schools held their peer group calls immediately after the masterclass while others opted to have a two- or three-day gap between them. There was variation in the time of day that different schools held SBLP sessions. While a large number held sessions during the working day, a small number chose evening sessions instead.

## Suitability of the curriculum

Feedback from the participating business schools is that the curriculum design process has led to the production of a curriculum that is fit for purpose. The course themes have almost universally been welcomed and they cover all the fundamental themes needed to support SMEs. Business school consultees have spoken of how modules 2 (innovation) and 7 (finance) appear to have been especially well received by participants. Others commented on the importance of having the business planning module, although there was some suggestion that this could take place earlier in the programme, to enable participants to use the course content to work more towards tangible goals.

A handful of business school consultees also highlighted that Module 6 (operational efficiency) needed some improvements. Some indicated that it was too manufacturing focused, while others spoke of it being incoherent in places – feeling as if it was actually two different modules that had been bolted together. In terms of broader curriculum content improvements, some business schools raised concerns about it being a little too theoretical at times and lacking in practical guidance but this view was not universally shared across all business schools.

While business school representatives overwhelmingly felt that the course themes were comprehensive, they also provided some feedback on areas that could have received greater coverage in the curriculum. These included low carbon strategies, and sales and marketing.

We have qualitative beneficiary feedback on the suitability of the curriculum from both survey responses and interviews. On the whole, they agreed with the business school representatives in saying that the majority of the topics covered in the curriculum were

appropriate. There were a few areas that individual beneficiary survey respondents and interviewees thought they were superfluous but there was no consensus on modules that were in this category and it would seem to be a matter of personal preference or need. There was also no consensus on additional topics that the curriculum might have included. Further beneficiary feedback on specific module content is provided in Chapter 8.

## Managing programme set up

In order to develop a programme and, once up and running, deliver an intensive level of programme activity between July 2020 and March 2021, CABS assigned a small team to manage the programme: a programme manager; a curriculum lead and a marketing manager closely overseen by the CABS chief executive. They were supported and overseen by a BEIS project board. The CABS team meet regularly (albeit virtually) to plan, deliver, monitor implementation progress and trouble-shoot and the BEIS project board met with the CABS team on a monthly basis. Developing administrative processes and tools (including the SBLP website and online registration capabilities) and branding and marketing the programme largely took place in parallel to programme design to avoid any delayed start once all the delivery elements (business schools, curriculum, training staff) were in place. The project board (as well as the CABS team) had a strong operational focus directed at achieving the targets set for SME recruitment and completion of the SBLP training. The BEIS programme lead also met with CABS on a weekly basis, developing a close working relationship and a pragmatic and agile approach to solving problems and ensuring delivery. Programme management and administration is covered more broadly in Chapter 10.

## Summary

- CABS, with BEIS backing for SBLP, were able to recruit, with relative speed, 20 business schools with a track record in working with small businesses to deliver the programme
- The CABS programme team developed a largely centrally designed curriculum, but one that all participating business schools have been able to meaningfully contribute to
- The centralised curriculum has ensured consistency in content and delivery approach, and enabled the rapid roll-out of the programme across multiple cohorts and business schools
- The curriculum design processes have led to a curriculum that business schools and participants alike believe is fit for purpose. The curriculum covers all the major themes and topics that business schools expect to see and SMEs feel meets their needs
- There is universal praise for CABS' management role in the programme set up phase

- The short lead-in time to delivery created some problems in establishing the programme, most notably:
  - Administrative challenges in devising and signing contracts with 20 different business schools over such a short time period
  - The business schools found it challenging to allocate appropriate staff to deliver the modules at such short notice

# 5. Participant recruitment

## Strategies used

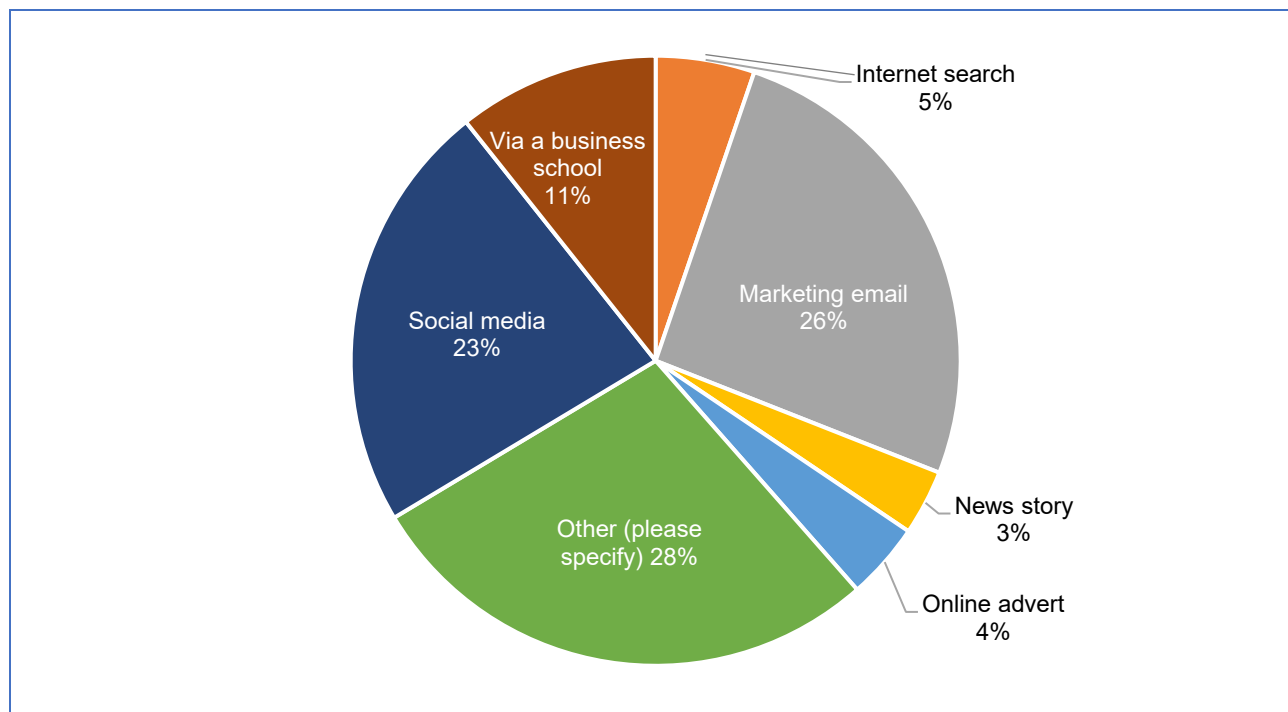
CABS ran a national marketing campaign to drive interest in SBLP and encourage registration. Recruitment occurred through a variety of platforms, including direct approaches to relevant SMEs via email and social media, and more open communication methods through adverts online and on commercial radio. CABS also sought to work with a variety of trade associations who would advertise the programme through their own channels.

CABS acknowledge that there was a significant learning curve and it took some time to identify which strategies were most effective but by the end of the marketing campaign they were much more comfortable that they had found the recruitment strategies that were most likely to be successful. Consultees highlighted local radio campaigns, and articles in trade association communications as being particularly effective strategies. As the recruitment campaign progressed, the activities became much more targeted. For instance, CABS identified good recruitment rates in London and the South East, leading them to direct more marketing resources to other areas such as the North East and South West where recruitment rates were not as high.

The programme also gave each business school a limited budget for local recruitment activities. Feedback from the business schools indicated that particularly effective routes for local recruitment included working with contacts at the LEPs and Chambers of Commerce, use of external communications agencies and drawing on the school's own contacts. Nevertheless, business schools acknowledge that without additional support from the national campaign, it would have been very difficult to recruit the required numbers in time for programme delivery.

Figure 4 illustrates the diverse nature of SBLP's successful outreach activity. While marketing emails (distributed by business schools directly; and via Elite Business, HR Magazine, and Haymarket Group to their subscribers) and social media account for 49% of programme awareness amongst those who registered for SBLP, 'other' accounted for the largest share of referrals at 28%. These 'other' avenues included sources such as radio campaigns (1% of all registrations) and business advisors or consultants (2% of all registrations), Growth Hubs (1% of registrations), and local authorities (1% of registrations). The biggest source of 'other' referrals, however, were personal recommendations and word of mouth (e.g. from colleagues, friends, and business contacts – accounting for 174% of all registrations).

**Figure 4 How individuals registering to the programme website heard about SBLP (as of 4 March 2021)**



Source: CABS registration data (n=2,976)

## Converting programme interest into programme registration

While CABS was drawing up contracts with each business school, SMEs were able to register an expression of interest in the programme in different regions ahead of a full registration process at a later stage. The ability to state a preferred region was rooted in the early design phases of the programme, where it was envisaged that there might be a shift to in-person delivery if circumstances of the pandemic allowed and the expectation that business leaders would want a business school close to them. Only one business school reported that the delay in signing contracts resulted in difficulties converting expressions of interest into programme sign-ups – as the SME leads had gone cold.

Over time, the conversion rate from visiting the SBLP website landing page to full registration has fluctuated. Conversion rates of 5.6% in October 2020 fell to 1.5% in November and 1.0% in December.<sup>12</sup> It is not clear what may have caused these falls in conversion rates. One potential explanation is over time, some business schools focused attention away from recruitment to programme delivery. However, one business school highlighted how the third pandemic lockdown had made it harder to convert some

<sup>12</sup> By way of comparison, according to analysis by Unbounce, producers of landing pages for websites, the median landing page conversion rate for business services is 3.5%, and 5.8% for education (further details available at [https://unbounce.com/conversion-benchmark-report?qclid=EA1aIQobChMluuzxybST9AIVTwKLCh10YAwdEAAYAiAAEgJRCPD\\_BwE#about\\_this\\_report](https://unbounce.com/conversion-benchmark-report?qclid=EA1aIQobChMluuzxybST9AIVTwKLCh10YAwdEAAYAiAAEgJRCPD_BwE#about_this_report)). Therefore, conversion rates were in line with industry averages in October, they were below them in the following months.

interested leads into sign-ups. By February and March 2021, the conversion rates had increased slightly to 1.8%, possibly a result of individuals having adjusted to the new status quo of the third lockdown.

Evidence does not suggest that the application process was a barrier to participating in SBLP with 76% of 173 beneficiary survey respondents strongly agreeing with the statement “Applying to the programme was a simple process” and 78% of respondents strongly agreeing with “It was clear what I needed to submit for my application.”

## Effectiveness of the marketing and recruitment campaign

### Attracting sufficient numbers

Ultimately, the marketing strategy was successful, a total of 3,005 individuals enrolled onto the programme against a target of 2,000 set by BEIS. The 3,005 individuals also includes additional cohorts added to SBLP, running in April and May 2021, to accommodate all interested SMEs.

Business schools and national programme stakeholders view the recruitment processes positively, speaking of how they were able to meet the target number of recruits (and in some cases exceeded them) despite having to work to very short timescales. The timescales to generate sufficient interest were somewhat longer than anticipated and as a result cohorts started at a slower pace than initially hoped but the target of 2,000 places completed by March 2021 was reached and indeed, there was sufficient interest to extend delivery to additional cohorts starting in April 2021. Nevertheless, within this positive story, consultees have spoken of a number of challenges that hampered their ability to recruit participants more efficiently and effectively:

- Lockdown and furloughing of staff acted as a barrier to local level recruitment – some business schools said that potential recruits were not always able to commit to the course
- The short lead in time prior to delivery meant that some business schools did not have sufficient time to fully utilise all their contacts and possible recruitment channels
- One business school was unable to claim for their marketing spend until they had two cohorts up and running. This meant that they could not commit to resource intensive marketing and recruitment strategies (given risks in being unable to claim for them), meaning they had to be heavily reliant on social media and personal contacts for early cohorts
- There were initial ambiguities as to whether charities were eligible for the programme, creating uncertainty as to where to direct some of the marketing efforts
- According to some stakeholders, SBLP has not been as successful as hoped in attracting ethnically diverse participants (although as shown below, it appears that

the programme has attracted a slightly more ethnically diverse participant base relative to all English SMEs)

- Some business schools alluded to changing guidelines over time as to the expected number of participants per cohort. This created some uncertainty as how many participants each school needed to secure
- On occasions, some business schools said they would have welcomed greater support from CABS, particularly in providing the schools with more leads which the schools could then work to convert into registrations.

Many of these issues are the sorts of teething problems that would be expected at the start of a programme, particularly one being delivered during the uncertain times of COVID when flexibility and agility to respond to changing conditions and needs was important. Nevertheless, the tight timescales of the programme meant that there was not always time to 'iron out' issues and all those involved in delivery (at CABS and at the business schools) were aware of the pressure to get cohorts up and running.

## Clarity of messaging

Aside from the small issue of eligibility of charities for SBLP, the communication and recruitment campaign's messaging around programme eligibility appears to have been clear. To join the programme, participants needed to be:

- From an English based enterprise
- From a business employing between 5 and 249 people and have been operational for at least one year
- A decision maker or senior management team member within the business, with at least one person reporting directly to them

These terms appear to have been well understood by participants. According to programme registration data, all individuals met these three criteria, while 86% of the 383 respondents to a beneficiary survey indicated that they either 'strongly agreed' or 'somewhat agreed' with the notion that it was clear who was eligible for the programme. Beneficiary survey data also suggests some success in making SBLP appear relevant to businesses. Some 88% of respondents (383) said that they agreed with the notion that that the programme was aimed at businesses like theirs.

The recruitment and marketing strategies also appear to have effectively articulated the programme's goals and remit to those interested in it. Some 73% of beneficiary survey respondents (380) indicated that when they applied to the programme, it was 'very clear' what SBLP was seeking to do and achieve.

Module feedback data collected by the business schools also supports this idea of clear programme messaging. Of 659 responses to a survey for Module 1, 90% agreed with the statement "I understand the programme structure and approach and what I need to do to participate fully," including 44% who strongly agreed with it.



## Who the programme recruited

Programme registration data helps reveal more about the individual that SBLP has recruited, and the businesses that they work for.

### The types of individuals recruited

Those registering onto the programme tended to be:

- **Male** (accounting for 59% of the 3,005 registrations). In contrast, 68% of UK small businesses are owned by males<sup>13</sup>
- Identify as being '**English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British**' (accounting for 74% of all registered individuals). This compares to 85% of England SME employers being majority led by those from white ethnic groups<sup>14</sup>
- **Aged 35-49** (accounting for 52% of registrations) albeit that there were notable proportions of people aged either 25-34 (20%) or 50-65 (23%). By way of comparison, 38% of all UK business owners are aged 35-49, 13% are aged 25-34, and 37% are aged 50-65%
- Have **1-5 people reporting to them** in their business (70% of registered individuals)

Through our observations of SBLP delivery, we have also seen more qualitatively that the levels of business experience can vary hugely between participants. While there was a slight tendency for participants to be relatively new to a managerial position (typically 1-2 years), others were well-established business leaders who had been part of their business' management team for many years.

### The types of business they work for

As shown in Figure 5, over half of the businesses that registered individuals work for are micro-enterprises, employing 5-10 people (52%, 1,565 individuals) with a notable proportion, 34%, being small businesses (employing 11-49 people). By way of comparison according to UK Business Count data for 2021, 90% of English SMEs are micro-enterprises and 8% are small businesses, suggesting that SBLP participants work for larger SMEs relative to the total business population.<sup>15</sup>

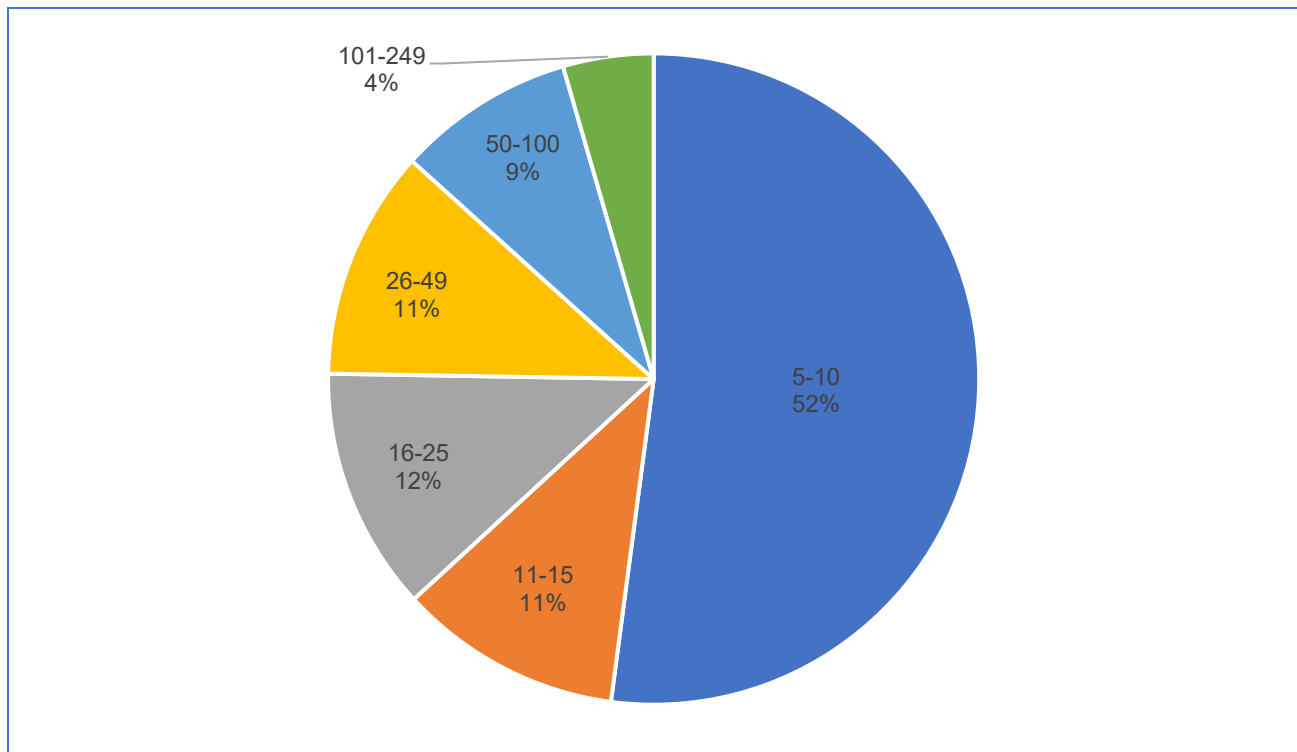
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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in UENI's 2020 Report on Gender and Small Business. Available at <https://ueni.com/blog/report-gender-small-business-female/>

<sup>14</sup> Based on Longitudinal Small Business Survey 2019, Quoted at <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/business/leadership-of-small-and-medium-enterprises/latest#main-facts-and-figures>

<sup>15</sup> These data categorise micro enterprises as employing 0-9 people, and small businesses as employing 10 to 49 people.

**Figure 5 Number of employees of the company that each registered individual works for**

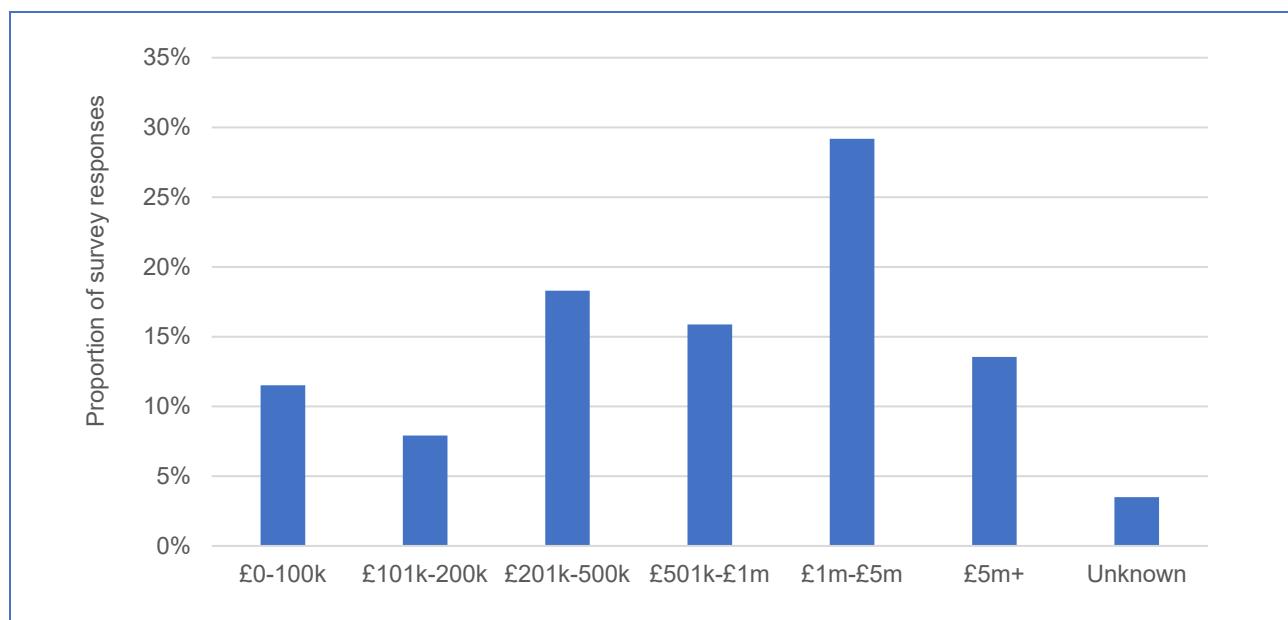


Source: CABS registration data (n=3,004)

As Figure 6 below shows, there is considerable diversity in terms of the turnover of the businesses represented in the SBLP participant base. While there are a large number of firms (20%) who had £200k turnover or less in their most recent financial year, another 44% generated turnover of more than £1 million. By way of context, the median turnover for all small businesses participating in SBLP was £589,481 relative to a UK average of £262,458<sup>16</sup> (please note that comparable statistics were not available for medium sized businesses, or all SMEs). This suggests that SBLP has attracted firms with a higher turnover, amongst employing less than 50 people, than might typically be expected.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted nu NimbleFins in April 2021. See <https://www.nimblefins.co.uk/business-i69nsurance/small-business-2%insurance-uk/small-business-statistics-155%0uk#:~:text=The%20average%20small%20business%20in,by%20size%20of%20the%20business..>  
 Note no details provided on which average this refers to.

**Figure 6 Turnover (for the most recent financial year) of the company that each registered individual works for**



Source: CABS registration data (n=3,005)

As Table 4 shows, SBLP has been able to attract a range of differently aged firms. While a number of the firms represented on the programme are very young (18% have been in operation for less than three years), there are also a large proportion of more mature businesses, including 24% that have operated for 11-20 years. It appears that SBLP participants tended to be older relative to the whole SME population. Data by Statista shows that 28% of UK SMEs had been operating for 1-3 years (relative to 18% for SBLP), with another 28% operating for more than 10 years (compared to 50% for SBLP).

**Table 4 The years of operation for businesses that registered individuals work for**

Years of business operation	Total registrations	Proportion of all registrations
1-3 years	535	18%
4-7 years	545	18%
8-10 years	409	14%
11-20 years	716	24%
21-30 years	378	13%
31-40 years	191	6%
41-50 years	69	2%
50+ years	150	5%
Unknown	12	0%

Total	3,005	100%
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Source: CABS registration data (as of 4 March 2021)

Table also shows there is great diversity in the industry that registered firms belong to. Three very different sectors, 'other service activities,' 'manufacturing' and 'professional, scientific and technical activities' account for 40% of the stated industry of participant's firms. However, participants come also come from other diverse sectors such as agriculture and the arts. Relative to the distribution of all SMEs across England, the SBLP participant has an over-representation of businesses on other service activities and manufacturing, and an under-representation of business in wholesale and retail trade, and administrative and support services.

**Table 5 Industry of firms that registered individuals work for**

Industry	No. of registrations	% of total registrations	Industry's share of all SMEs in England <sup>17</sup>
Other service activities	459	16%	4%
Manufacturing	391	13%	5%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	330	11%	17%
Information and communication	278	9%	8%
Construction	257	9%	13%
Education	220	8%	2%
Human health and social work activities	190	6%	4%
Arts, entertainment and recreation	182	6%	3%
Accommodation and food service activities	159	5%	6%
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	129	4%	15%
Financial and insurance activities	106	4%	2%
Real estate activities	61	2%	4%
Transportation and storage	50	2%	5%
Administrative and support service activities	42	1%	9%
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	38	1%	0%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	25	1%	4%

<sup>17</sup> Based on ONS UK Business Count data for 2021

Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	10	0%	0%
Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods-and services-producing activities of households for own use	5	0%	0%
Mining and quarrying	1	0%	0%
Unknown	44	2%	
Total	2,933	100%	

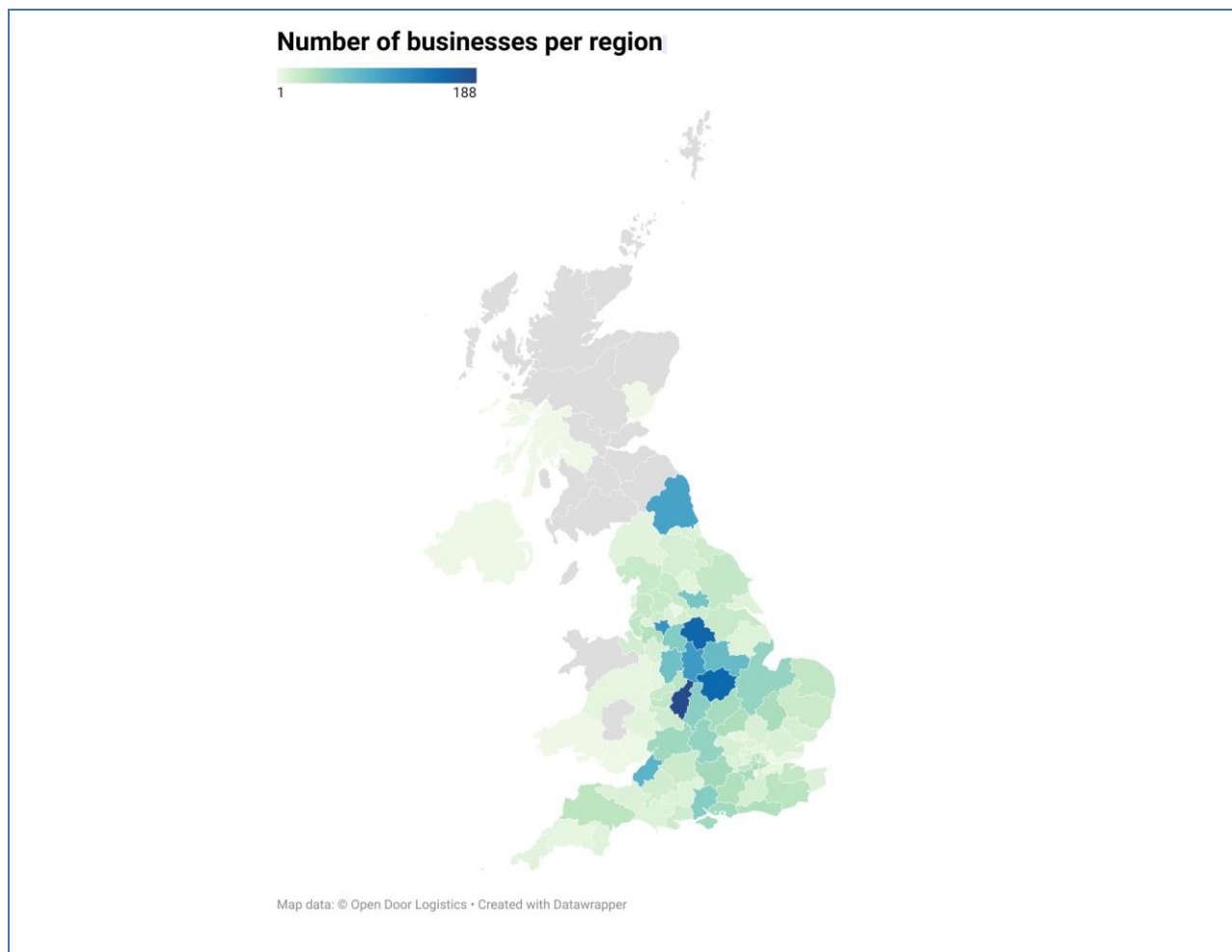
Source: CABS registration data

In terms of geography, programme registration data (as per **Error! Reference source not found.**) shows a particularly large concentration of businesses in the West Midlands and in the North East, and a lower concentration of businesses in the South East (excluding London) and the South West. Compared to the entire SME population, SBLP had a noticeable larger share of businesses from the West Midlands (accounting for 17% for SBLP registered individuals but only 8% of UK SMEs<sup>18</sup>) but a much lower share of businesses from London (accounting for 7% of SBLP registrations but 19% of all UK SMEs<sup>19</sup>).

<sup>18</sup> Based on UK Business Count data for 2021. West Midlands accounted for 219,395 of 2,765,150 SMEs

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. London accounted for 534,590 SMEs

**Figure 7 Location of SBLP registered businesses by postcode area**



Source: CABS registration data (n=3,005)

Our participant observation of SBLP delivery also helped provide some evidence on one final characteristic of participant businesses – the level of business health. As part of peer group sessions, participants typically introduced themselves, their experiences, and the issues their business was facing at the time. Broadly speaking, the programme seemed to have attracted two types of participant: those whose companies were trying to deal with increased demand during the pandemic, and those who were having to pivot or re-structure in light of COVID related decreases in demand.

## Summary

- The recruitment campaign was successful - a total of 3,005 individuals from across the UK registered onto the programme against a target of 2,000. CABS, BEIS and the business schools added extra cohorts to SBLP, running in April and May 2021, to ensure all interested SMEs were accommodated

- SBLP adopted national and local level recruitment campaigns. While it took some time for the national campaign to find the most effective recruitment avenues, feedback from CABS stakeholders is that the greatest success has come from radio campaigns, and working via trade associations. Monitoring data, however, suggest that marketing emails and social media have been very successful advertising channels for the programme
  - The national level campaign has also eased the recruitment burden of business schools who themselves have relied on existing links with LEPs and Chambers to recruit participants
- The tight timescales meant that the recruitment process was more intensive (and at times rather fraught) than CABS and business schools would have liked
- To a large extent a slow start to raising awareness and gaining recruitment is be expected for a new programme and the pattern of recruitment largely aligned with availability of places within business school cohorts
- The recruitment campaigns have also ensured clarity of messaging, both in terms of programme eligibility, and programme goals and have recruited the target participants that is leaders from SMEs
- There is limited diversity in terms of the individuals that the programme has been able to recruit with notable proportions being male and in the 35-49 age group. The business leaders typically to manage 1-5 people. Stakeholders interviewed also identified some issues in recruiting an ethnically diverse group of participants
- There is however, a wide diversity in the types of business that SBLP participants lead – spanning a range of sizes (in terms of revenue and employment), location and sectors.

## 6. Approvals and onboarding

Having secured registrations to the programme, the next step in the SBLP delivery process was to onboard them, converting registrations to programme starts. This section reviews the effectiveness of this process.

### The approval process

As part of the registration process, individuals selected their preferred business school and were free to select from any one of the 20 involved in the programme. Early on in the programme's design, the anticipation was that businesses would select their nearest school given plans to move to face-to-face teaching if circumstances allowed. We understand from stakeholder interviews that these selections were typically based on the course dates and times that a business school offered which were advertised on the SBLP website.

The preferred business school then carried out a series of eligibility checks<sup>20</sup>. It appears that this approval process took place in a timely manner. The beneficiary survey indicates that 74% of respondents (283 of 383) strongly agreed with the idea that they had received a timely response as to whether their application had been accepted or not. A further 14% (54) stated that they agreed somewhat with this statement. Anecdotally from beneficiary interviews, we have seen several instances of participants starting the SBLP course within a week or so of them registering.

### Onboarding

Once their applications were approved, successful applicants were allocated to a specific cohort within their chosen business school. To an extent, each business school over-recruited for each cohort, anticipating that some would fail the eligibility checks and others would drop out of the programme along the way. This over-recruitment meant that there were occasions when a given business school was oversubscribed and could not provide places to those that had listed it as their preferred option. In cases where schools were oversubscribed, they were able to allocate successful applicants to a central pool that other business schools could accommodate to fill any spare capacity. On the whole, most participants were able to join their preferred school – 75% of 383 beneficiary survey respondents strongly agreed with the statement “I was able to join the programme at the business school of my choice.”

As shown in Figure 8 many cohorts ran concurrently at different business school with some business schools, with greater delivery capacity, delivering more SBLP cohorts than others. Between them, the 20 business schools have delivered 127 cohorts, an average of

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<sup>20</sup> Please note that no data were collected by programme stakeholders on the number of individuals failing eligibility checks.



6.4 cohorts each. Kingston has delivered the most cohorts (12, 9%) followed by Portsmouth and Derby (11, 9% each). In contrast, London Metropolitan business school delivered two cohorts.

**Figure 8 Start date of programme delivery for each cohort**

Business School	w/c 5 Oct	w/c 12 Oct	w/c 19 Oct	w/c 26 Oct	w/c 2 Nov	w/c 9 Nov	w/c 16 Nov	w/c 23 Nov	w/c 30 Nov	w/c 7 Dec	w/c 14 Dec	w/c 21 Dec	w/c 28 Dec	w/c 4 Jan	w/c 11 Jan	w/c 18 Jan	w/c 25 Jan	w/c 1 Feb	w/c 8 Feb	w/c 15 Feb	w/c 22 Feb	w/c 1 Mar	w/c 8 Mar	w/c 15 Mar	w/c 22 Mar	w/c 29 Mar	w/c 5 Apr	w/c 12 Apr	w/c 19 Apr	w/c 26 Apr	Total cohorts	
Aston	C1					C2&3									C4	C5															6	
Birmingham City															C1		C2								C7	C3					7	
Brunel		C1	C2												C3&4		C5		C6												7	
Coventry															C1&2				C3&4						C7						5	
Derby	C1	C2		C3	C4		C5	C6		C7				C8	C9	C10												C5		11		
DMU						C1									C2	C3							C11		C4						4	
Kingston						C2&3		C4-6								C1,7-12															12	
Lancaster									C1							C2&3											C4				4	
Leeds Beckett					C1										C2	C3															4	
Leicester							C1-3							C4-8										C9		C4					9	
London Met															C1&2																2	
Manchester Met								C1&2									C3&4		C5&6												6	
Nottingham Trent					C1	C2	C3										C4														6	
Northumbria		C1		C2	C3		C4&5											C5													9	
Portsmouth*						C1		C4							C6	C7	C8								C9	C6					11	
Salford				C1&2											C10&11	C12	C13-15							C16							11	
Sheffield Hallam					C1			C2	C3	C4		C5				C3&4										C5					5	
Solent					C1-3										C4-6			C7-8													8	
Staffordshire		C1		C2											C3&4																5	
UWE															C1&2	C3&4								C5								5
																																127

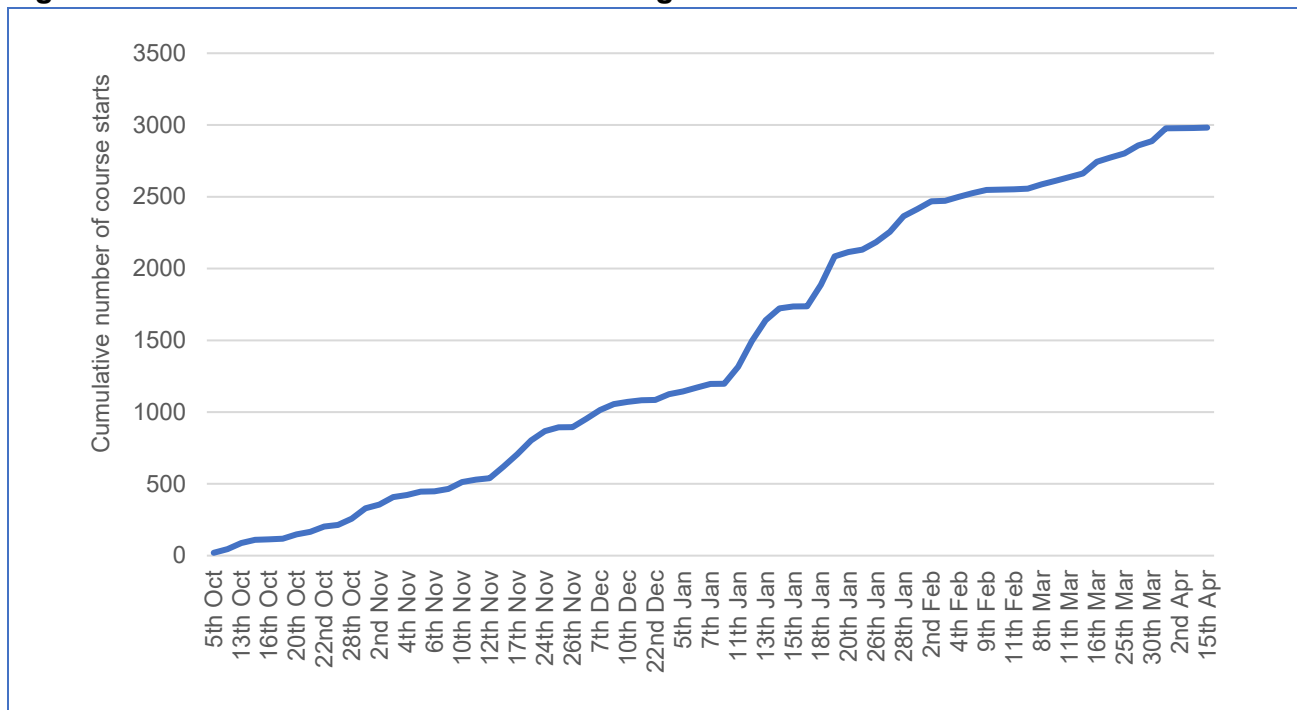
\*Portsmouth did not number their cohorts sequentially

Source: CABS and business school data

As might be expected from the pattern of marketing and recruitment (with an initial slow start building into the successful recruitment of more SME leaders than planned) the number of participants starting the SBLP programme grew over time<sup>21</sup> (**Error! Reference source not found.**), with a particularly large number of programme joiners in mid-to-late November, and mid-January.

<sup>21</sup> We do not have data on the number of programme starts over time but have used the intended course start date for all registered individuals as a proxy

**Figure 9 Course starts over time for SBLP registered individuals\***



Source: \*this chart is an approximation based on CABS registration data

## Summary

- The onboarding process appears to have been effective and efficient, with the vast majority of participants stating that they started the programme shortly after registration. Most participants were also able to join their preferred business school too
- The business schools have each delivered to different numbers of cohorts. While each school has on average, delivered to 6.4 cohorts, Kingston, Portsmouth and Derby have delivered to nearly double this
- There have been particular peaks in programme starts in mid-to-late November 2020, and mid-January 2021

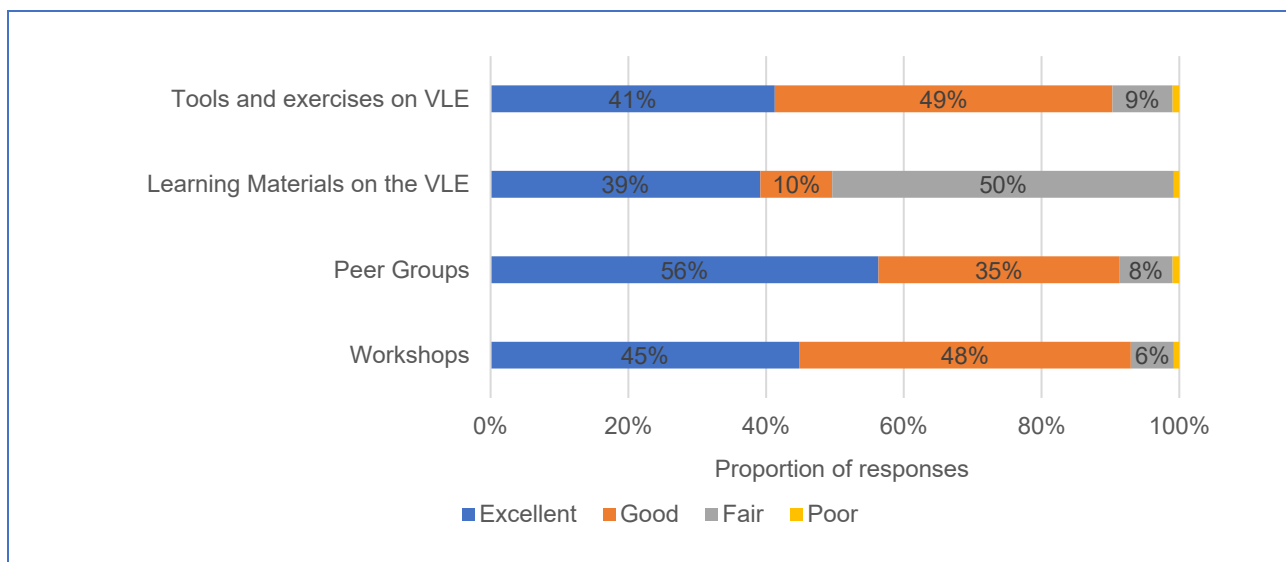
# 7. The programme delivery model

## Introduction

As outlined in Section 2, the SBLP delivery model consisted of online masterclasses, facilitated peer groups and independent learning through a virtual learning environment (VLE). Each business school received a common set of slides and teaching materials to present during the webinars although there was some level of flexibility to tailor the slides (e.g. introduction of regional case studies) and make them more relevant to the cohort audience. There was also flexibility in the choice of software platforms for delivering webinars and facilitated peer groups and their timing, but use of the VLE (provided by Open University) was common for all participants.

As outlined in Figure 10 below, all three elements of the programme are highly rated, each one rated good or excellent by module feedback respondents (and with over half recording the peer group session as excellent). This chapter provides more specific feedback on each of the delivery model elements.

**Figure 10 Participants on how effective different elements of the SBLP delivery model were**



Source: CABS module feedback form (n=383)

## Online masterclasses

The masterclasses were the feature that attracted the highest proportion of participants, with nearly two thirds of survey respondents (232 of 383) quoting it as the most attractive element. Participant interviews highlighted that those with interest in the webinars did so because they saw it as a way of developing leadership knowledge and skills in general. Some interviewees reported that they had some initial concerns about the webinars even

before the programme started, being unsure which modules would be relevant or not. However, our interviews showed that once completed, beneficiaries reported positive reflections on the modules they had initially been concerned about.

Interviewed stakeholders voiced some initial concerns about having a course delivered solely online. For instance, there was some worry that it would be harder for group facilitators to engage the participants, and indeed that it might be difficult participants' interest if they had no in-person interaction with others. However, a survey of beneficiaries indicated that many respondents did not think the format made any real difference (45%). Nevertheless, a second group, encompassing 35% of respondents, stated that the sessions would have worked either a little better or a lot better if held face-to-face (as per Table 6). Nevertheless, several stakeholders and participants also highlighted that online provision meant that participants were not restricted to enrolling into SBLP with their closest business school – they could opt for a business school that provided the most convenient dates and times for them. In general there was little consensus on the optimal way of running course sessions.

**Table 6 Beneficiary survey responses to the question on whether webinars would work better online or face-to-face.**

Answer	Count	%
The format would make no real difference	170	45%
The sessions would work a little better if face-to-face	88	23%
The sessions would work a little better if held online	35	9%
The sessions would work a lot better if held online	42	11%
The sessions would work much better if face-to-face	46	12%
Total	382	100%

Source: Technopolis analysis of beneficiary survey

A large majority of respondents thought that the number of online masterclasses was about right (74%). Some 18% would have preferred to have a slightly higher number of sessions than eight, in line with the qualitative feedback from stakeholder and beneficiary interviews. The candidate for an additional module mentioned by several interviewees (stakeholders and participants alike) would be employee engagement. It is currently part of Module 3 (Leadership and Employee Engagement) but it could be a separate standalone module as this issue is central to small business leadership, particularly during the pandemic when high numbers of employees are working remotely. Examples of other additional modules or subject areas that were of interest to beneficiary survey respondents and interviewees were social media, sustainability, contracting and risk management.

Most survey respondents (81%) reported that the duration of masterclasses was about right. Only a small proportion of respondents thought that the sessions were a little too long (7%) or little too short (11%). Beneficiary interviews confirmed this finding and participants noted that the webinars covered lots of content and even in 90 minutes, there was content

that could not be covered in as much depth as the supporting materials available on the VLE.

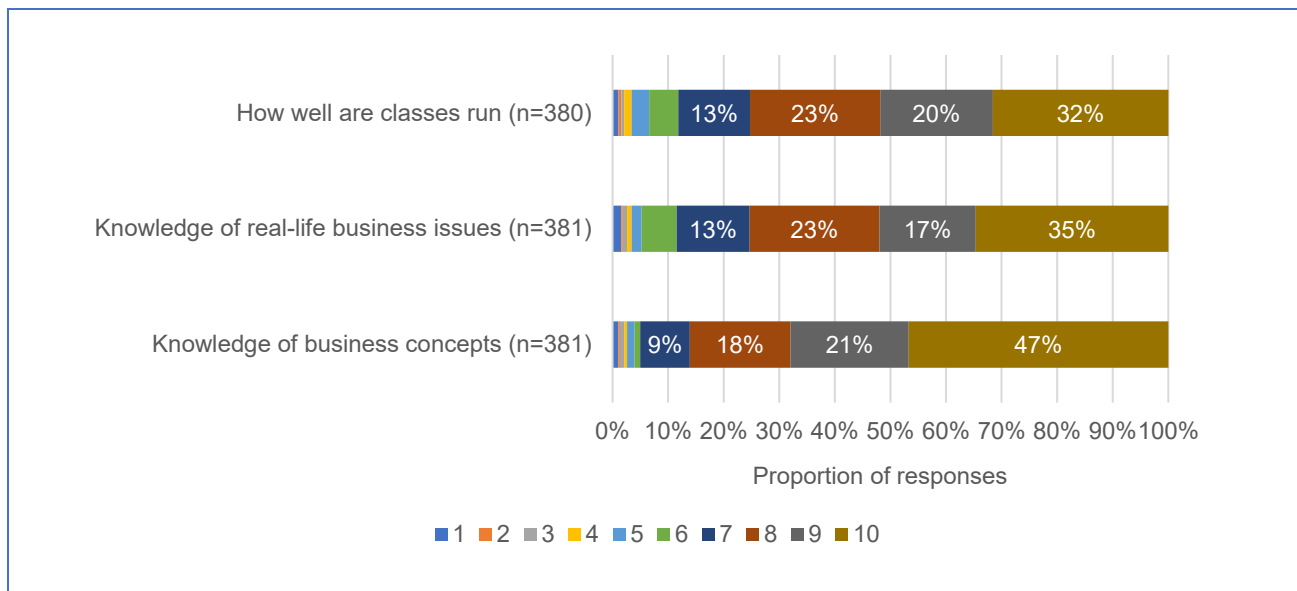
The gap between masterclass sessions was seen to be about right by 79% of survey respondents while 18% would have preferred more time between sessions. One of the stakeholders noted that in an ideal world a programme covering such breadth of concepts would be delivered over a longer period, perhaps even 16 weeks, with a webinar every fortnight. This would give more time for reflection, and more time for participants to try out some of the tools presented within their business. Though they also noted that more time between sessions might reduce the momentum of attendance and possibly increase drop-out rates.

Based on the monitoring data provided for masterclass attendance rates, it seems that attendance was fair with 55% of participants with relevant records (1,373 of 2,486) having attended all eight masterclasses. Business school interviewees agreed that masterclasses were well attended, reporting that many participants prioritised attendance of these over other parts of the course (although there were not able to suggest why this was the case). Feedback from beneficiary and stakeholder interviews also indicated that good attendance was also helped by holding sessions at lunchtimes.

Those who missed the webinars were the exception and, in some cases, commended the support from facilitators to help them make up the course-work. The most commonly noted reasons for missing sessions were personal reasons (childcare, bereavement etc.), business priorities (business trips, meetings, reopening business or shortage of staff), followed by health issues (COVID and non-COVID related). Beneficiary survey interview feedback also indicated that there were a small number of instances where starting sessions at 4.30pm prevented some site-based staff from attending.

As shown in Figure 11 below, beneficiary survey respondents also noted the teachers as being of good quality in terms of knowledge of business concepts, real life business issues and how well they ran the classes. Some 95% of respondents scored the teachers' knowledge of business concepts as 7 or more out of 10, while 88% of respondents also gave 7 or more out of 10 scores on the teachers' knowledge of real-life business issues and 88% to their ability to run the classes. Participant interview feedback echoed these results, most interviewees praising the ability of teachers to deliver the content with genuine interest and expertise in the topics. Few commented on the quality of visiting lecturers delivering some of the modules. Amongst those that did, there was a mixture of positive feedback as well as also instances of one or two lectures being hard to follow (but interviewees gave no concrete examples of what they could do differently). Overall, the quality of teachers delivering the content was judged as high by all participants, regardless of whether the teachers were business school research staff, staff from executive education courses, or course coordinators.

**Figure 11 Responses to “On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the least happy and 10 the most happy), how happy have you been with the following”**



Source: Beneficiary survey

## Facilitated peer groups

Stakeholder consultees voiced concerns over delivering facilitated peer learning exclusively online – for peer groups to work, participants need to build trust in each other, and this is often easier to do in person. Some noted that in theory a hybrid model with the first session taking place face-to-face with subsequent sessions online could yield better results. While this was not possible during the pandemic, some stakeholders alluded to having adopted this approach to other business support programmes in their portfolio. One interviewed stakeholder, a non-participating school, indicated that it was better postponing facilitated peer group sessions entirely, rather than move them online – they had decided to pause all their courses and only held optional ‘keeping in touch’ peer sessions.

As with the webinars, the surveyed participants were less concerned about the format of delivery (as per Table 7). The most common response amongst respondents (38%) was that the format would not make any real difference to the sessions. However, 44% indicated either a little or large preference for face-to-face delivery of peer group sessions. Interview evidence also supported the notion that a notable share of participants would prefer an online element to the peer groups. Interviewed participants spoke of how it would have been easier to have developed rapports with cohort members had they been meeting face-to-face, and would have made more informal networking easier.

**Table 7 Beneficiary survey responses to the question on whether peer groups would work better online or face-to-face.**

Answer	Count	%
The format would make no real difference	144	38%
The sessions would work a little better if face-to-face	108	28%
The session would work a little better if held online	30	8%
The sessions would work a lot better if held online	38	10%
The sessions would work much better if face-to-face	61	16%
Total	381	100%

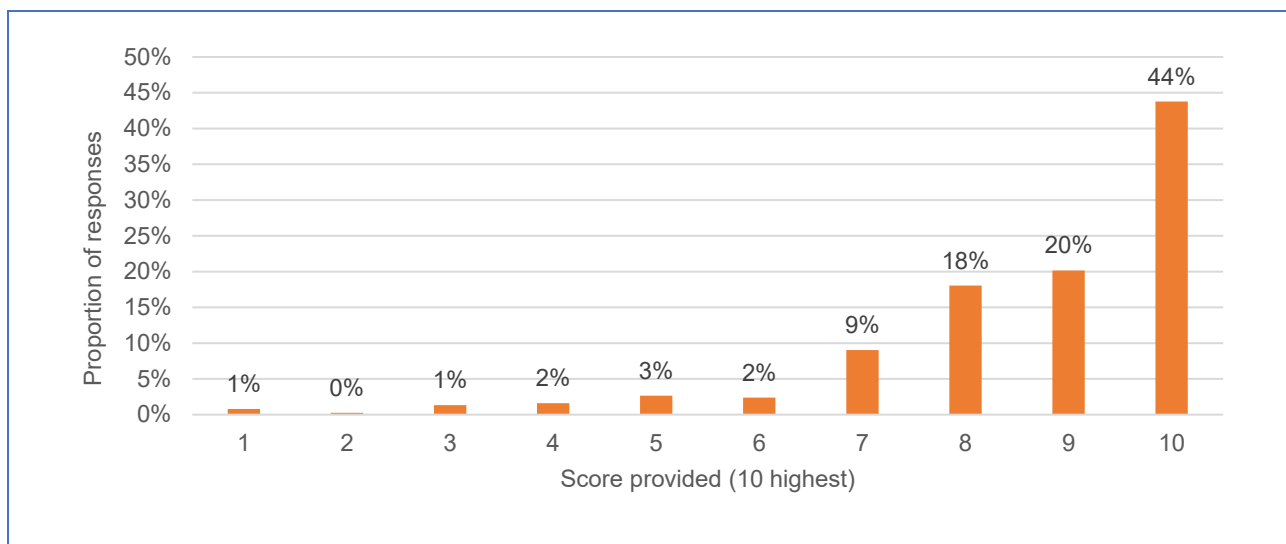
Source: Technopolis analysis of beneficiary survey

Similarly to the webinars, most survey respondents thought the number, duration and frequency of peer sessions was about right (70%, 69% and 80% respectively). Those that offered criticism on the peer group session formats stated that they would have preferred more sessions, and wanted them to be longer. Interviews with beneficiaries identified that they found these sessions useful, especially if they had 2-3 days to reflect on the content of the webinar, e.g. having webinars on Monday and peer sessions on Thursday or Friday. They added that lunchtime slots worked particularly well for webinars and peer groups alike, while having the peer session straight after the webinar was too intensive and did not give sufficient time for reflection.

Generally, participants found the sessions useful despite differences among cohorts in geography and sector. Surveyed participants tended to agree with the statement that their cohort members were willing to share knowledge and experiences with each other (78% to a large extent and 19% to a small extent) even though they had never met face-to-face. In fact, one of the interviewees was delighted about the fact their cohort included a direct competitor with whom they continued to exchange ideas beyond the course.

There was a high level of satisfaction among survey respondents in relation to how facilitators managed the peer sessions, with 91% scoring them 7 out of 10 or higher (see Figure 12). Beneficiaries seem to have enjoyed working with unmuted microphones and having open conversations with other attendees. As with the webinars, holding lessons at lunchtime seemed to work well, while sessions starting at 4.30pm prevented some site-based staff from attending some peer group sessions. There were also a small number of instances of last-minute scheduling changes.

**Figure 12 Responses to : “On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the least happy and 10 the most happy), how happy have you been with how well your peer group facilitator managed the group sessions”**



Source: Beneficiary survey (n=377)

## VLE and independent study

Surveyed participants were, to a large degree, satisfied with the learning material on the VLE with 85% of the 373 respondents answering the corresponding question scoring it 7 out of 10 or higher. That said, only 28% of 383 survey respondents indicated they managed to complete all independent study tasks, despite the course expectations that all participants would complete all the reading and online exercises made available to them each week. Approximately 30% of surveyed participants completed the majority of them, 22% completed three quarters, 11% about a half, and 5% about a quarter.<sup>22</sup>

The main reason for not completing all of the tasks was a lack of time - 48% of the 276 not completing all the independent tasks said a barrier to completion was being busy looking after the business. Other barriers to VLE usage included the view that the formal activities (webinar and peer group sessions) covered all the material they needed (14% of those not completing all tasks), and having trouble accessing the information on the VLE (7% of those not completing all tasks).

Some of the participants we interviewed raised concerns about the VLE platform being clunky and difficult to navigate, one participant identifying the ‘Canvas’ platform used by some of the higher education institutions in the UK as a superior and easier to use system. Business school representatives were also overwhelmingly critical of the VLE, with several saying that participants had experienced technical issues and the only workaround some course facilitators could find was sending out materials by email instead. Some participants themselves spoke of difficulties with password not working and the site itself being inaccessible but praised the responsiveness of webinar leads to these (where participants

<sup>22</sup> Another 3% answered ‘not sure’ to this question.



could not attend a class, schools promptly provided recordings and relevant material so they could catch-up independently).

Barriers that prevented independent study included home-schooling, spending time trying to save their business and one of the solutions put forward was to allow longer timeframes for completion of some of the tasks.

## Facilitators and business school management

Having business schools as the main point of contact for participants worked well. Business schools and their programme delivery staff are well equipped to handle contact with participants. Stakeholders consulted praised the central co-ordination function of CABS, and the speed of responses to any queries.

There were nevertheless some instances of facilitators were not being familiar with teaching platforms, meaning that facilitators spent time at the start of each sessions dealing with technical issues, thereby reducing the time available to work on course content.

## Potential improvements to the delivery model

Overall feedback from stakeholders and participants alike did not reveal any major discontent with the overall delivery model elements. Survey respondents echoed this with 266 participants providing comments on how to improve the programme. Nearly a quarter (21%) of them stated they could not think of anything to improve, some adding positive comments on the quality of the course and others that it was delivered as best as it could given circumstances. The most prominent areas for improvements were in:

- **Scheduling** – 24% of those who provided a comment on improvements said that course scheduling could be better. Typically suggestions were asking for longer gaps between webinars and peer sessions, webinars and independent study, and holding webinars over a longer time period. Scheduling preferences appeared for webinars to take place on Monday or Tuesday with peer sessions either on Thursday or Friday. Lunchtime sessions dominated the preference, with few participants noting that 4:30pm was too early to start training in which case they would prefer later in the evening, especially if they are site-based staff.
- **Face-to-face vs online** – 11% of those who provided a comment on improvements to the programme delivery noted they would have liked to have an element of face-to-face delivery, even if only one or two sessions at the beginning to induce ‘gelling of the group’. This was in line with views from stakeholders who agreed that this would have enabled the building of trust between peers. Everyone understood that in current circumstances this was not possible.
- **Length of sessions, introductions and breaks** – as outlined, survey respondents by and large felt that the length of masterclasses (typically 90 minutes) were

appropriate. That said, several participants did say that the masterclasses were trying to cover too much material in them. Several commented specifically that they would prefer a longer session with a short break in the middle. One participant noted they would be happy to have different length of webinars, module by module but this may work against the consistency in scheduling. A few participants also commented that introductions to new lecturers took up invaluable time from the lectures. Four participants responding to the survey thought one of the improvements to the course would be to lengthen the peer group sessions, noting that some of the coursework could be covered in group setting.

- **Addition of one-to-one tailored support** – A few participants noted that there could be a bespoke one-to-one time set out for each business to speak to the facilitator. Stakeholders also noted that this element features in other programmes but that this could be an optional paid for extra. We are aware of at least one business school that has provided an element of one-to-one bespoke support themselves to SBLP participants, recognising that it could be beneficial
- **Lecturer approach, and style**– 8.6% of participants pointed out that quality of lecturers could be improved
- **Cohorts matching** – Business schools did not generally look to match cohorts according to different characteristics (e.g. sector, age of business, level so management experience). Only a handful of participants noted that the programme would benefit from matching cohorts based on company characteristics (such as size and sector). This would possibly address the issue that few of the larger SME leaders found some of the course content too light touch. More generally though, interviewed participants seems surprised at how much they could learn from businesses that were very different to them
- **VLE issues** – 8.2% of those commenting on potential improvements mentioned VLE or an element of independent learning. The majority of comments related to technical issues with access, ‘clunky systems’, and use of numerous platforms which caused confusion and made it harder to navigate. Some thought it would be good to have pre-recorded webinar sessions on the VLE along with audiobook content instead of reading lists (so they can be listening to during commutes).
- **Other suggestions** – Participants provided other ideas for improvement such as provision of a course booklet to have to hand, and emphasizing the need for completing VLE elements during the course introduction. One of the participants noted that to be more like a mini-MBA, they would have expected more active participation such as preparing a presentation of how concepts presented within the course have been applied to their business.
- **Perceived value of the course** – Many interviewed beneficiaries noted that they would be willing to pay a nominal sum (somewhere between £500-£2,000) for the programme, something that stakeholders suggested could reduce the dropout rates and increase the feeling of having some ‘skin in the game’. Some stakeholders however, warned that charging for participation could make conversion of leads more difficult.

## Summary

- Beneficiary survey, stakeholder and participant interviews all provide evidence that the programme delivery model on the whole worked well.
- Specific areas where the delivery might be improved (or made consistent across business schools and cohorts) include:
  - Scheduling masterclasses on Mondays and Tuesdays is preferred by most participants with the facilitated peer learning sessions at following 2-3 days after. Participants felt that peer learning sessions sooner than this did not allow sufficient time for reflection.
  - Holding session (both webinars and peer groups) at lunchtime seemed to work well for some participants. However, this varies person to person and cohort to cohort, so the best timing of session should be discussed with the participants and adjusted if possible.
  - The VLE is seen as one of the main weak points, being at times difficult to access and the content not always being relevant. The VLE needs to be easier to navigate and possibly moved to a more user-friendly platform. Consider making recordings of the masterclasses could be made available of the VLE to help those who were unable to attend particular sessions.
  - Ensure that all lecturers are familiar with online platforms they are using to avoid any technical issues during workshops to improve participant engagement.
  - Some beneficiaries would have liked an element of one-to-one time with business school staff to discuss their specific issues.
- When the COVID situation allows, future iterations of the programme should consider a hybrid model of delivery, incorporating a number of sessions delivered in person. This might entail, for example, the first and last masterclasses in person and/or a number of the peer learning session in person. There was not a strong demand for a course delivered fully in person as the online model makes attendance easier for busy SME leaders.
- Consideration could be given to the possibility of increasing the perception of 'skin in the game' and commitment either through a chargeable fee for participation (at least to those businesses that are in the position to pay) and/or introducing an element where participants present back how they applied one or more concepts (possibly part of Module 8).

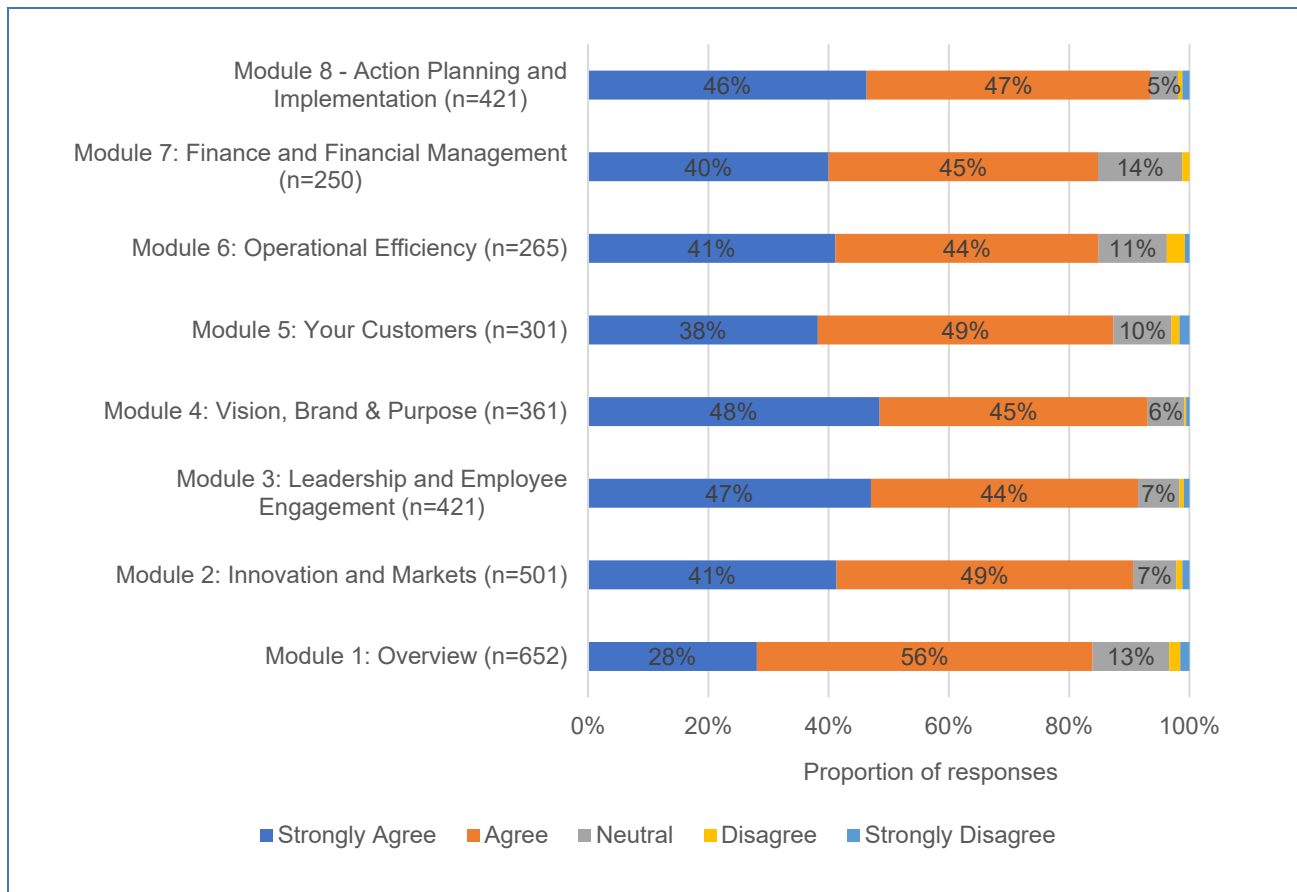
## 8. Perceptions on course content

While the previous chapter dealt with the appropriateness of the different delivery mechanisms that SBLP used, we also have feedback on the quality of the content delivered through this delivery model. We summarise the reactions to the course content in this chapter.

### Views on the content

Weekly participant feedback collated by CABS in March 2021 shows that participants found the module content useful with 82% of 3,172 responses indicating that they either agreed or strongly agreed that the module they had attended that week had given them specific ideas that they could apply to their business. As shown in Figure 13 below, respondents considered modules 3 (leadership and employee engagement), 4 (vision, brand and purpose) and 8 (action planning and implementation) to be the most useful, with 91%, 93% and 93% respectively agreeing with notion that it provided content that they could apply to the business. A large proportion of responses also strongly agreed that module 7 would be useful to their business, echoing sentiments raised in the participant and business school interviews. Qualitative feedback from interviews indicates that businesses have found concepts such as the business model canvas, market segmentation and innovation management as being particularly useful and we are aware of some participating businesses having implemented them shortly after completing the course.

**Figure 13 Responses to “I feel there are specific ideas from this module that I can apply in my business”**



Source: Technopolis analysis of CABS module feedback data

In terms of modules that worked less well, as noted previously, business schools have raised some concerns about the quality of module 6 (operational efficiency). Participant module feedback also suggests some issues here, it being the module which had the second smallest proportion of ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ responses (85%) when asked about their notions on the usefulness of module content to their business.

Generally, stakeholders and participants found the content of the programme fully-encompassing if not too broad to cover over an 8-week course. Due to the breath of areas that it covers, webinars could not cover the depth that some participants expected. Most notable feedback on content included:

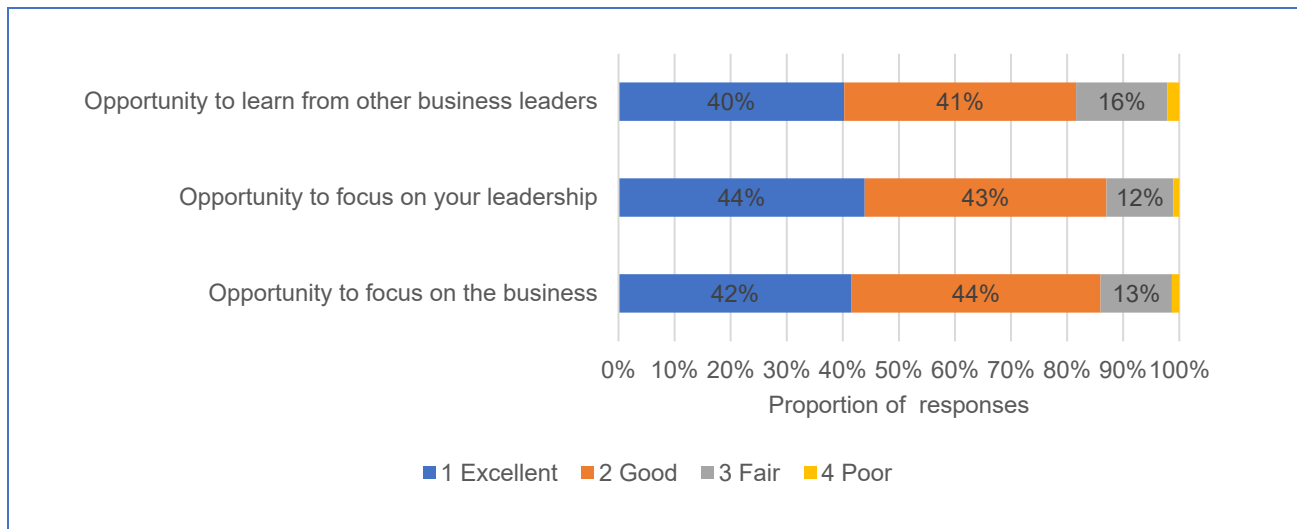
- Finance module too simplistic for leaders of larger SMEs** - six participants noted in the survey that the finance module was too simplistic for their purposes but some noting that for micro-SMEs it was probably pitched at the right level. Feedback from participant interviews and business schools echoes this, with smaller businesses finding module 7 particularly helpful. Even those who were sceptical about the module initially landed up finding it “useful and thought provoking”. Splitting cohorts by company size and having a more advanced version of the module could rectify this perceived issue.

- **Dedicating one session to leadership and one to employee engagement** – Participants and several stakeholders noted that the breadth and importance of concepts covered by module on Leadership and employee engagement would justify turning it into two
- **Mixed feedback on VLE content:** There are conflicting views on the VLE. Module feedback data indicates that 88% of the 205 respondents think the VLE learning materials are either good or excellent. Some participant interviewees have spoken of they liked having access to the material after the programme's conclusion, while one particular participants engaged with VLE content so much that they felt comfortable commenting on the editorial choices of the webinar lead. Equally however, we came across a number of beneficiary interviewees and survey respondents that indicated that the VLE content was difficult to access, and its content overwhelming. Some business school representatives also spoke less positively about the VLE content, with some choosing to provide their own material in addition to it. Others indicated that VLE usage could have been more of an optional part of the programme. Overall, it appears that views on the VLE content is mixed, working well for some but not for others
- **Potential additional subject areas to cover** – Only a limited number of participants and stakeholders felt they could comment or suggest additional areas for SBLP to cover. Ideas included a module on sustainability, more emphasis on leadership and staff engagement (point above), and dedicating more to social media use in marketing.

## Views on learning opportunities

Aside from specific subject matters, SBLP participants gave individuals the opportunity to develop more general business and management knowledge. As shown in Figure 14 below, module feedback respondents indicated that the programme was particularly good in giving them an opportunity to focus on their leadership (87% indicating SBLP was either good or excellent in this regard), and in providing an opportunity to focus on the business (86% saying the programme was good or excellent here). It appears that SBLP has been marginally less effective in enabling participants to learn lessons from other business leaders, with 81% rating the opportunity to learn from other business leaders as either good or excellent(see Figure 14).

**Figure 14 Participant perceptions on how well SBLP has provided different learning opportunities**



Source: SBLP module feedback data (n=385)

## Summary

- Overall, beneficiaries and business school stakeholders alike have been pleased with course content and the topics covered. They have found it to be relevant and have been willing to engage with it. Modules 3 (leadership and employee engagement), 4 (vision, brand and purpose) and 7 (finance and financial management) seem to have been especially well received. Nevertheless, there are some consistently reported areas for improvement:
  - The programme should consider splitting leadership and employee engagement modules and possibly deepening some concepts (e.g. having optional more advanced finance modules). Some modules could be cross-referenced and linked (such as marketing and innovation – finance was very much seen as a standalone).
  - Feedback on VLE content is mixed, with some finding it valuable but others finding the amount of material there to be overwhelming
  - It appears some improvements to Module 6 (operational efficiency) may be needed with beneficiaries seeming to find it the least useful module.

## 9. Early evidence of business outcomes

Key to the SBLP theory of change is that SMEs take action to improve their businesses based on the management and leadership skills gained during the programme. This starts during the course itself - as part of the independent learning, participants are given tasks and exercises to try out specific tools presented during the masterclasses/webinars and reflect on these exercises during the peer group sessions. The participant observations suggests that these exercises were of often of value to individual business leaders. From the observations, we also found that those businesses most negatively affected by the pandemic lockdowns not only had more time to try out tools, but were also more focused on changing their business to improve its resilience, or simply had the time to make the changes they already knew were needed.

The CABS feedback surveys observed high levels of agreement among participants regarding the potential to apply specific ideas from SBLP in their businesses, as noted in Chapter 8. Our participant survey confirmed this with 94% of 383 respondents saying they were planning to make changes to the way they manage, organise or operate their business. Moreover 60% of respondents were aiming to make these changes within the next three months, indicating a high level of relevance of concepts learned and skills gained as well as willingness to change behaviour based on the SBLP experience. Only 3% of respondents were not planning to make any changes as a result of SBLP participation.

Follow up interviews with beneficiaries confirmed this finding, with most of the consultees already implementing concepts from SBLP curriculum in their businesses and working with their colleagues to do so. These are already leading to concrete business decisions more grounded in theoretical concepts and best practice. One example includes a firm that undertook a more detailed segmentation of a market that pre-COVID formed only 5% of total business. Since the pandemic, the market has grown, in part because since their programme involvement, the firm has charged for ancillary advisory services that were previously provided free of charge, generating new revenue. The business has also applied innovation management concepts to new items on a food menu.

There were also more profound changes in the behaviour of the business leaders consulted. These include adopting more strategic decision-making processes, taking more time to make strategic decisions, asking their staff to report progress using more objective productivity measures, and moving beyond utilisation metrics to real productivity metrics.

The majority of participants we consulted completed the course 2-4 weeks prior to interview and networking activities following the programme completion had been limited since then. Several participants established relationships with one or two cohort members: in one case a direct competitor in the same city, and in another a colleague from a completely different sector but with greater links to other local business networks. Other interviewees spoke of having set up WhatsApp groups with their cohort members which they are using to share articles with each other. For others though, even this level of on-



going interaction has not occurred, with interviewees citing factors such as not having much in common with cohort members, and inconsistent attendance of peer groups sessions by others making it difficult to develop meaningful relationships. Some business schools encouraged their cohorts to organise a catchup zoom call several months after completion. Participants seemed receptive to this and were looking forward to seeing how the different businesses were doing.

Interestingly, several consultees noted how useful the VLE was as a continued resource following the completion of the course, re-engaging with the course content on weekly basis. The fact that participants have continued to reflect on course content indicates a potential for changes in long term behaviour for a larger number of business leaders who have completed the programme than those reported so far. This will be studied further in Phase 2 of the SBLP evaluation.

## Summary

- For many participants, it is still too early for SBLP participation to have led to sustained changes in personal behaviour, of approaches to managing the business. However, the majority of beneficiary survey respondents have signalled an intention to use the knowledge gained from their course to change future business management approaches, with many planning to do in the next three months
- Some interviewed beneficiaries have spoken of how they have introduced some of the theoretical concepts learnt into everyday business operations. These include work on market segmentation, and financial planning
- Some cohorts have already started communicating with each other outside of a programme setting via social media groups. Many cohorts, however, have not engaged in meaningful activity here.

# 10. Programme management

There have been a number of programme management and administrative processes that have sat behind all elements of programme design, set up and delivery. BEIS has provided overall oversight to the programme with CABS as the grant holder, having responsibility for curriculum design, SME recruitment, co-ordination of the business schools' activities and reporting to BEIS. Ultimately the core programme activity, to train and develop skills in SMEs, is delivered by the participating business schools and we focus on this aspect of programme management here. (Programme set up, curriculum design and recruitment are presented in Chapters 4 and 5)

## Providing a cohesive offer between the different schools

### Methods to ensure consistency in delivery

Ensuring that the business schools provided a consistent offer has been an important focus of programme management. SBLP is a national brand and therefore it is important that all participants know that they are receiving the same offer. CABS used a number of measures to try and achieve this consistency, but broadly speaking, they fall into two categories:

#### **Common curriculum and course resources**

The common curriculum is the fundamental basis for a consistent SBLP experience for all participating SMEs. Underpinning this is a common set of course materials and resources. Each business school delivered their masterclasses and webinars using a common slide deck prepared at the national SBLP level. The slide deck for each masterclass is comprehensive (and in many cases too large for the 1.5 hour session) and each lecturer has been able to make adjustments and tailor the presentation used (e.g. removing some slides, tailoring some of the case studies for their specific audience and from their own experience). The common slide deck has helped ensure that the business schools are delivering comparable content.

The programme operated a central VLE which all participants, regardless of cohort or business school, have access to. This has meant that participants have all undertaken the same exercises outside of the business school-led sessions, and all have had the same resources to draw on.

#### **Facilitating regular communication between the business schools**

In addition to an initial run through of the content of each masterclass, CABS has seen regular communication as being a way of ensuring that each school is aware of what they are expected to deliver, and to help tackle any queries or misunderstandings that may exist. There were regular group meetings between the schools where they could discuss programme delivery. In addition, as mentioned previously, each school was giving a

training session every time module content had been finalised. These meetings also provided an opportunity for quality control. For instance, initial business school feedback was that Module 6 (operational efficiency) did not work particularly well. Through the training and group forums, the business schools were able to address the issues present, including a re-design of Module 6.

## The level of consistency achieved

Broadly speaking, it appears that there has been a fairly consistent cross-cohort SBLP offer. While each business school was able to tweak the content of webinars, speaking with beneficiaries from across different schools, it appears they have all learnt fundamentally the same concepts, and have used common resources (e.g. the business model canvas, and the customer personas).

There has been less consistency in the peer group delivery approach adopted by the different schools. While CABS had certain expectations as to how schools would run each peer group (e.g. holding them on different days to the masterclass, and working through a similar set of exercises). CABS did give each school the freedom to run these in whichever manner they wanted. While many schools appear to have held peer groups a day or two after the week's masterclass, we are aware of one school which delivered their peer group immediately after the masterclass. Another business school ran their peer group on two different days, giving participants flexibility each week on which one they would attend. These variations in delivery seem to have been driven by the time and resources available to each school, and potentially differing attitudes on what constitutes best practice. Although the delivery approach to the peer groups should not have varied hugely, the discussion topics for them were centrally set to help ensure some consistency (even though our delivery observations found one cohort where the peer group discussion topics were not usually in line with those suggested in the course material).

## Challenges in co-ordinating activity between different schools

Feedback from CABS was that given the short timeframe within which they had to set up and then deliver the programme, there was little choice but to rely on the resources and infrastructure that the individual business schools already had. While this is something that we do not disagree with, it is clear that the reliance on local infrastructure has presented a number of problems in co-ordinating activity between different schools:

- **Inconsistent monitoring data collection:** the registration data are the only ones that are collected centrally by CABS. All other data including diagnostic and module feedback are collected by the individual schools using their only mechanism before being shared with CABS. This has led to inconsistent data collection by the schools. Data are not collected on a single format or according to a single proforma. This means that for instance, some business schools collect diagnostic data in a systematic electronic format, while others simply have each person's information on a selection of different files. Similarly, each business school uses their own survey platform to request module feedback data. Each platform has different capabilities

meaning that two schools may not be able to ask the same question in an identical manner. This also leads to further data inconsistencies between schools.

- **Missing monitoring data:** with data not being collected centrally, we have found that CABS has to spend considerable time following-up with the different business schools in order to obtain access to their data. It would have been far more efficient for all participants to send their information to a central repository which both CABS and the business schools had access to. However, given the time constraints the programme was operating under, this was unlikely to have been feasible
- **Participants needing access to multiple platforms:** while the VLE was held on a single platform that all participants could access, the programme relied on using each business school's own platforms to deliver the peer groups and webinars. In some cases, this meant the participants needed to use three different platforms each week (one each for the webinar, peer group and VLE respectively). Business schools and CABS representatives alike have commented on how having multiple platforms almost certainly created a barrier to using the VLE – accessing was not as straightforward as it could have been. Consultees across the board agreed that ideally, all three components of the SBLP course would be delivered through the same platform, accessible to all business schools too.

## Support from BEIS

Interviewed stakeholders reported that BEIS provided sufficient support during programme and implementation. Throughout, BEIS has been clear in its expectations of the programme, CABS and the business schools. For instance, BEIS set particular targets for the number of cohorts in each LEP region but worked with CABS and delivery staff to ensure that the targets were appropriate and offered advice on how to achieve them.

BEIS has also made some important inputs to the curriculum. As noted, earlier in this report, CABS included the finance module into curriculum following guidance from BEIS and this module was viewed as particularly valuable by a number of participants.

The business schools consulted also welcomed the opportunity to have a delivery feedback session with BEIS, believing that the Department took their points on board.

There appear to have been some occasional moments of tension between CABS and the delivery team, over issues such as the need for expressions of interest at the start, and the ability to convert these into registrations. However, by and large these were teething problems of a new programme rather than serious issues and programme stakeholders have been happy with the level of interaction and support that they have received from BEIS.

It would have been beneficial to understanding the effectiveness of SBLP if CABS and the evaluation team had started engaging with one another earlier. We understand that this was not possible owing to short timescales within which the programme had to start delivery. CABS stakeholders have highlighted how as a result, they had to second-guess the types of question that the diagnostic survey would need to ask in order to be useful for

evaluation purposes. The evaluation team worked with CABS to develop a revised diagnostic tool suitable for use in an evaluation baseline, and for programme delivery. However, this was introduced after a large number of cohorts had already started, meaning the volume and quality of total baseline evaluation data captured has not been as high might have been hoped.

## Summary

- Given the short timescales involved in establishing and delivering an entirely new programme, CABS has done an impressive job. SBLP has delivered a consistent and cohesive training programme across 20 business schools and 127 cohorts and, once all cohorts are complete, will have supported 3,005 SME leaders to improve their leadership and management skills.
- CABS developed coherent course content at a fast pace that business schools and participants were happy with.
- CABS provided regular opportunities for business schools to interact with them to ask questions and provide feedback.
- The short timescales involved necessitated the use of each business school's own IT and data collection infrastructure leading to a number of issues:
  - Fragmented and inconsistent collection of monitoring data
  - An inefficient experience for participants, with course content being across multiple platforms and potentially presenting barriers to participation
- Therefore, SBLP (or any successor programme) would benefit from having a single data collection platform to capture participant data and which both CABS and business schools can access
- SBLP would also benefit using a single platform to host the VLE, webinars and peer group, again one which all business schools and participants can access

# 11. Summary and Conclusions

This report has looked to address three high level research questions (HLQs):

- HLQ1: How effective is the SBLP in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the programme
- HLQ2: Is the SBLP successfully delivering high quality business support
- HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?

In this section, we summarise the report's key findings into each of these three questions

## HLQ1: How effective is the SBLP in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the programme

- SBLP recruitment process was effective, recruiting 3,005 SME leaders to the programme and exceeding its target of 2,800.
- While recruitment was initially a little slow, this is not unusual for an entirely new programme that needs to establish a brand and raise awareness.
- The programme adopted a national recruitment campaign which used a range of approaches to reaching SME leaders. These included direct approaches via email and social media, open communication methods such as online and commercial radio adverts, and adverts with trade associations. It took some time to identify which strategies were most effective but over time, as data were collected, CABS was able to fine-tune its approach. Radio campaigns and advertising via trade associations were found to be particularly effective method but SME leaders became aware of the programme in a variety of ways.
- The national campaign was effective and the primary route to SME recruitment, nevertheless business schools welcomed the limited budget they were given for local level marketing too. They found that working with LEPs, Chambers of Commerce, and drawing out their own contacts were good ways of adding to nationally recruited participants
- It appears that conversion rates of visits to the SBLP website landing page to programme registration interest has been between 1.5% and 2% since November. Conversion rates at their lowest (in late 2020/early 2021, potentially due to the introduction of new lockdown measures. As people have adjusted to these circumstances, the programme appears to have been better at securing more registrations

- The programme has been effective in recruiting its target audience of SME leaders and has attracted a wide range of businesses - spanning a range of sizes (in terms of revenue and employment), location and sectors.
- SBLP has been less effective in attracting diverse individuals to the programme. A notable proportion of participants have been male and are from the 35-49 age group. Nevertheless, the SBLP beneficiary profile appears to have been a little more diverse than the SME leader population as a whole.
- Based on the monitoring data provided for masterclass attendance rates, it seems that attendance was fair with 55% of participants with relevant records having attended all eight masterclasses. This is in line with findings from our participant observations. Non-attendance at specific sessions was usually due to a need to focus on immediate business needs or lockdown related time constraints (home-schooling, etc). Importantly, where time-constraints existed, participants prioritised attendance of masterclasses and peer group sessions, rather than self-directed asynchronous learning via the VLE.

## HLQ2: Is the SBLP successfully delivering high quality business support

- CABS successfully recruited 20 business schools to deliver the programme, with half of these also involved in developing the curriculum. This has been in the context of having very little lead in time to organise programme delivery
- The programme curriculum has been appropriate and fit for purpose, covering all the major areas that participants wanted, and the areas that business schools felt that participants needed. That said, several participants have spoken of how they would welcome more detailed coverage of leadership and employee engagement issues (potentially as separate modules rather than in combination as they are currently)
- The online masterclasses and facilitated peer group sessions have been well received. Overall participants have been very happy with the quality of teachers and facilitators running the sessions. Nevertheless, there have been several instances where a lack of familiarity by teachers and facilitators with different video conferencing platforms has lessened the quality of the sessions, and made them less easy to engage with:
  - Participants have reacted positively to webinar speakers in terms of their knowledge of business concepts, real life business issues, and their ability to run a class
  - Peer groups have been most effective when they have been several days after the webinar, giving time for participants to reflect on the webinar and VLE content
  - While online delivery of the masterclasses and peer groups does not seem to have detracted from the experience, it would be preferable to have some sessions face-to-face to help build trust and relationships between participants

- Feedback on the VLE and independent study has been much more mixed:
  - The quality of some of the materials has been particularly good, especially the business planning canvas. Some participants have seen it as a valuable knowledge source which they can return to later. Others, though, have had concerns about the volume of material, and technical problems in accessing it
  - Only 28% of beneficiary survey respondents indicated that they were able to complete all the independent study tasks (albeit that the inability to complete tasks does not seem to have affected participants' enjoyment of the programme, or how useful they have found it)

### HLQ3: How effective is the SBLP at encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices?

At the point of writing, it is only a couple of months since the first SBLP cohorts completed the programme. For many cohorts, completion occurred a matter of weeks ago, meaning that in many cases, there has been insufficient time for SBLP participation to have translated into the adoption of new practices. However, early evidence indicates participants have been able to take away ideas from the programme which they can tangibly apply to their businesses:

- Our participant survey found that 94% of respondents were planning to make changes to the way they manage, organise or operate their business. Moreover 60% of respondents were aiming to make these changes within the next three months
- Commonly cited examples (from beneficiary interviews) of behavioural changes made as a result of SBLP participation include sharing knowledge with colleagues, customer segmentation exercises, and applying the brand and visioning principles to marketing content
- There is also evidence of greater receptiveness to peer networking, with several interviewed consultees maintaining contact with their cohort members via social media groups.

Phase 2 of this evaluation will consider in more detail SBLP's effect on encouraging SMEs to adopt new practices.

Overall, given the short timescales involved in establishing and delivering an entirely new programme, CABS and the business schools, supported by BEIS, have done an impressive job. SBLP has delivered a consistent and cohesive training programme across 20 business schools and over 100 cohorts and, once all cohorts are complete, will have supported 3,005 SME leaders to improve their leadership and management skills.



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