

**Local connections, national impact:
The role of business schools in
driving SME success**



Empowering small business success

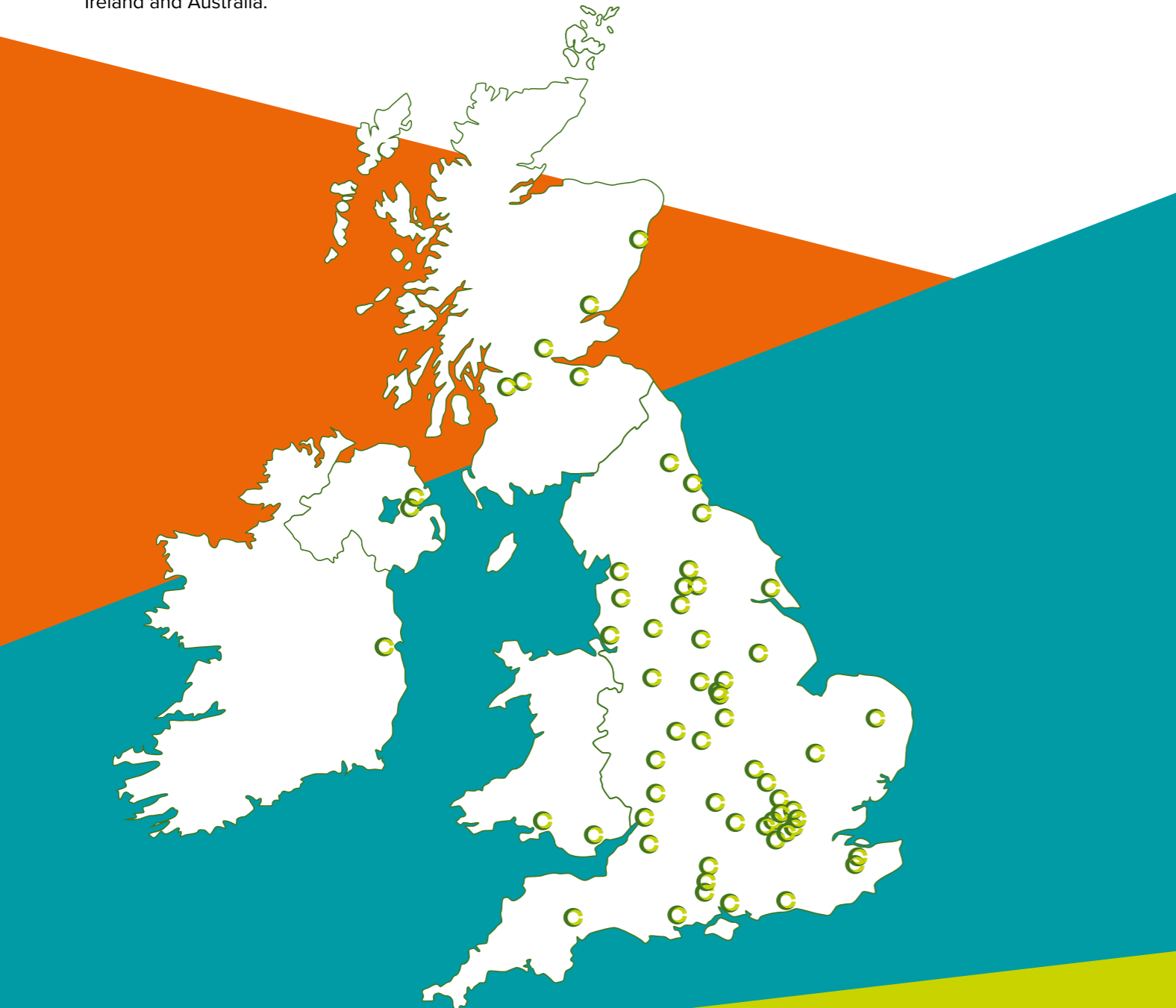
The Small Business Charter (SBC) is an accreditation celebrating world-class business schools across the UK.

Business schools are critical to the Government's growth mission and are pivotal anchor institutions in their local economies; supporting businesses and developing talent in our cities, regions, and nations.

There are 70 accredited schools within easy reach of SMEs in every region and nation across the UK, and two trailblazing international business schools in Ireland and Australia.

To achieve the Small Business Charter accreditation, all schools undergo a rigorous assessment to determine the effectiveness of their business support, entrepreneurship education, and engagement with their local economy.

This report is the first time we have taken a collective snapshot of the activities business schools undertake to support SMEs, enterprise students, and local stakeholders, to better understand the scale of their engagement over the course of an academic year.



Foreword



Lord Karan Bilimoria of Chelsea, CBE, DL
Patron, Small Business Charter

I am fortunate enough to spend my time pursuing my three greatest passions – public life as a crossbench peer, my entrepreneurial life, and my academic life. In fact, education is the golden thread weaving its way through from my childhood in India to my life today, where I'm currently pursuing a business doctorate at Judge Business School. These different parts of my life have intertwined at major life events too. It was while studying law at Cambridge University that I started my entrepreneurial journey in earnest, developing the idea to bring an Indian-style beer to the UK.

Success is founded on opportunities to learn

I always relish the chance to go back to studying, because I believe deeply that lifelong learning is essential for business success, that success is indeed founded on opportunities to learn.

Why? Because in my opinion, business leaders need to possess two very important traits: the ability to adapt and the desire to improve. Just as our physical muscles are strengthened through training, these leadership qualities can be developed through business education. The agility required to adjust to fast-paced change is bolstered with deeper knowledge, laying the foundations on which to make critical decisions and take risks.

The UK is well equipped to give business leaders the opportunity to learn through its world-class universities and their business schools. They have a huge role to play in economic growth regionally and nationally.

The engines of creativity and innovation

In my opinion, these institutions are the jewels in the crown of this country. Universities, with business schools at their heart, are the engines of creativity and innovation, supporting people and their businesses to solve problems, propel themselves forward and maintain stability, especially during these rollercoaster times.

For the first time, this report explores the extent of business schools' collective engagement with small businesses, student entrepreneurs, and economic stakeholders across the three pillars of the Small Business Charter. It shows us how business schools connect with their local business ecosystems across the curriculum and real-world engagement. SBC-accredited business schools believe it is essential to stay very close to business, and I hope this report will inspire more people to come closer to business schools - whether they are leading a firm, studying entrepreneurialism, or developing economic policy.

Executive Summary

The Small Business Charter commissioned research in partnership with its business schools to capture their engagement with SMEs across three fundamental pillars: business support, connectivity to the business ecosystem, and student enterprise and entrepreneurialism.

Captured across one academic year (2024-25) these results show the extent to which SMEs, students, academics and alumni were engaged: ranging from learning experiences to participation in collaborations and research.

The scale of what's on offer to SMEs and the extent to which SMEs are involved is wide ranging and provides a useful snapshot of some of the dimensions explored across all schools when they take the Small Business Charter Assessment.

These findings are based on 47 responses, representing 67% of schools accredited with the Small Business Charter from across the UK.

Connecting businesses to vital support

- Our research revealed a total of 5,615 SME businesses attended growth and leadership programmes in the 2024-25 academic year.
- There was a higher number - 8,068 - of individuals from SME businesses attending growth and leadership programmes, demonstrating these programmes are valued and attended by more than one leader within some SME businesses.
- Business hubs and enterprise centres are the most popular physical spaces provided to SMEs at business schools, with a total of 5,411 small businesses using them in 2024-25. Other stages of businesses' growth journeys are supported too with 41% of schools offering startup spaces, 37% incubators and 24% accelerators.

- SMEs come from a wide range of sectors, including those designated as priority sectors in the Government's Industrial Strategy.

Collaborations for mutual benefit

- There are 420 Entrepreneurs-in-Residence attached to those schools surveyed.
- SMEs were involved in a total of 998 projects that included collaborations with other university departments in the academic year 2024-25.
- Three quarters of our respondents have collaborated with other business schools to deliver projects specifically aimed at SMEs.
- 35 business schools delivered 187 Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) during this academic year.
- 2,216 businesses were involved in teaching and student experience across the UK.
- Nearly all schools involve SMEs in live projects, student consultancy, student placements and internships, alongside guest lectures on degree programmes.

2,216

businesses were involved in teaching and student experience.

From entrepreneurial learning to starting a business

- Nearly two thirds (57%) of responding schools provide a dedicated student start-up space which collectively were used by 7,175 students and 613 alumni in the 2024-25 academic year.
- The same number of respondents run a start-up programme for alumni, students and academics. During the academic year 2024-25, 4,302 students participated in these programmes along with 219 academics and 666 alumni students.

Exchanging real-world knowledge and experience with students and small businesses

- Business schools report a third (32%) of course modules involve contributions from entrepreneurs and small businesses in the design, planning, evaluation and/or delivery of the curriculum.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of staff have a portion of their workload dedicated to enterprise and entrepreneurship.
- Away from the campus, 6,288 students, or an average of 1 in 4 (23%) students took up placements and internships in the 2024-25 academic year. More than 7,000, or an average of 16% of students, were mentored by small businesses, further underlining the value placed on ensuring students learn from businesses on their educational journey.

6,288

students took up placements and internships in the 2024-25 academic year

7,175

students and **613** alumni used dedicated student start-up spaces in the 2024-25 academic year.

Connecting to local business ecosystems

- Engaging with stakeholders in the business support ecosystem ensures that SBC-accredited business schools, and their activities, are anchored in the regional economy and aligned with its needs.
- Through these partnerships business schools can develop collaborative solutions to policy and employer needs, and to inform their course curriculum design and research priorities.
- Local Chambers of Commerce were the most common stakeholder relationship, followed by the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chartered Management Institute. English schools also have engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Growth Hubs, and Combined Mayoral Authorities.

There for businesses

Business schools are reaching a substantial number of SMEs at scale. A total of 5,615 SMEs attended growth and leadership programmes run by SBC business schools that responded to the survey (an average of 122 small businesses per responding school).

The number of individuals from SME businesses attending these courses was 8,068 (an average of 175 people per school), demonstrating the value of participation in business school programmes often extends to more than one leader within in an SME business.

A total of
5,615

SME businesses attended growth and leadership programmes run by SBC business schools.

Dedicated spaces for small businesses

Table 1 shows the different types of dedicated spaces available at business schools. While business hubs/enterprise centres are the most popular, businesses are also supported at different stages of their growth journeys through incubator and accelerator provision.

Other examples given by respondents include virtual business centres, business clinics, and a marketing hub.

Table 1. Type of dedicated centre(s) that supports SME businesses at business schools.

Type of Centre	% of schools with dedicated type of centre
Business hub/enterprise centre	54%
Start-up space	41%
Incubator	37%
Accelerator	24%
None of these	30%
Other (Please specify)	22%

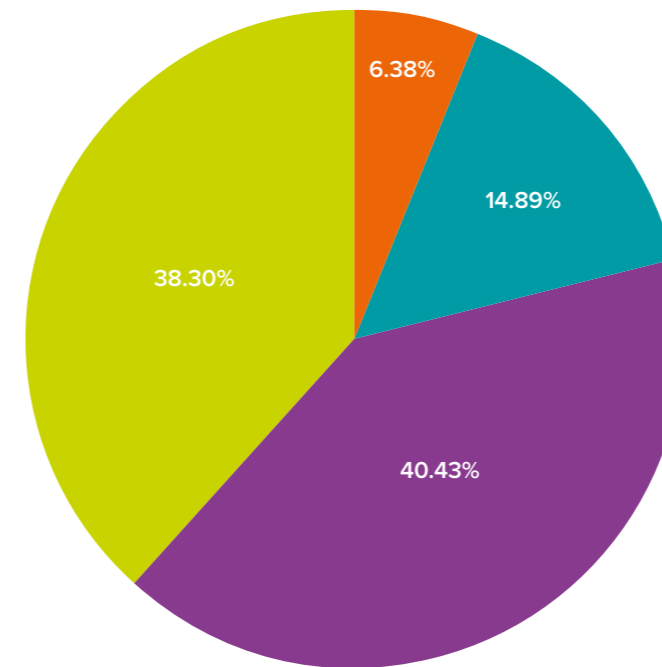
Respondents could provide multiple answers.

Uniquely positioned to open the door

Nearly all business schools run business centres and services. Some are run autonomously while nearly two-fifths are delivered in collaboration with the wider university.

Fig 1. Where in the institution are business support services delivered?

Does the wider university have a separate business centre(s) (start-up space, incubator, accelerator, enterprise centre) that supports SME businesses?



- No, the business centre and services are all delivered through the business school **14.89%**
- Yes, the university has a separate business centre and services in addition to the business school's **40.43%**
- The business centre and services are run in collaboration between the business school and the central university **38.30%**
- Neither the business school or the university has a business centre **6.38%**

Who uses these centres

A total of 5,411 SMEs used business enterprise centres at two thirds of responding schools in 2024-25. Usage varies widely between institutions, ranging from as few as three business users at one site to over 800 at another school, suggesting some variation in the level of provision.

In addition, 419 academics and 821 alumni students used business enterprise centre services across responding SBC schools during the academic year.

Comparing all sets of users, there is roughly a ratio of 4 SMEs for every internal user across respondents, showing these schools have a very strong commitment to supporting their external small business ecosystems while creating opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange by bringing SMEs, students and academics together.

A total of
5,411

SMEs used business enterprise centres at two thirds of responding schools in 2024-25.

Bridging the gap between academia and business

The Small Business Charter assesses how business schools bridge the gap between academic practice and the real world.

A clear example of this is the presence of Entrepreneurs-in-Residence. 70% of responding business schools had Entrepreneurs-in-Residence in the academic year 2024-25; a total of 420 entrepreneurs-in-residence across the network.

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), which enable businesses to access academic expertise to develop ideas into business innovations were delivered in just over three quarters of business schools in the academic year 2024-25.

Out of a total of 187 KTPs, 129 were active and underway during the academic year, an average of 3.58 per school. A further 58 KTPs were completed, an average of nearly 2 per school.

These figures are broadly in line with the Chartered

Association of Business Schools 2025 report on business schools and knowledge exchange which analysed data extracted from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) database on KTPs. This revealed a total of 121 active KTPs being implemented by UK business schools at the end of September 2024. The total value of all grants amounted to £16.9m.

Embedding real-world knowledge into teaching and student experience

SBC accredited business schools have outstanding engagement with SMEs when it comes to involving small businesses in teaching and the student experience.

2,216 businesses were involved in teaching and student experience in business schools across the UK.

Nearly all schools involve SMEs in live projects and student consultancy, student placements and internships, alongside guest lectures on degree programmes.

Table 2. Types of teaching and student experience activities involving small businesses in 2024-25.

Type of activity	% number of schools involving SMES in each activity
Guest lectures on degree programmes	97.87%
Live projects and student consultancy	97.87%
Student placements and internships	95.74%
Guest lectures outside of degree programmes	87.23%
Curriculum design	80.85%
Mentoring undergraduate/postgraduate students	72.34%
Presenting on the Help to Grow: Management Course	72.34%
Presenting on executive programmes (open or custom, excluding Help to Grow)	63.83%
Apprenticeships	61.70%
Mentoring entrepreneurs or other SMEs	59.57%

Respondents could provide multiple answers.

Business engagement is widespread across sectors

Small Business Charter accredited schools have an impressive breadth of engagement across all sectors, including those in the Industry Strategy (IS-10). The range of sectors involved in teaching and student experience activities reflects strong engagement across their local business ecosystems.

Table 3. Which sectors do SMEs involved in teaching and student experience activities come from.

Industrial Strategy key growth sectors	% of business sectors mentioned that are involved in teaching and student experience activities at the business school
Digital and Technologies	91%
Professional and Business Services	84%
Creative Industries	80%
Financial Services	73%
Health and Social Care	64%
Advanced Manufacturing	60%
Construction	38%
Clean Energy Industries	33%
Life Sciences	29%
Other (Please specify)	18%
Defence	13%

Respondents could provide multiple answers.

Business schools convening and collaborating across universities

More than three quarters (77%) of respondents reported SMEs were involved in a total of 998 projects that included collaborations with other university departments in the academic year 2024-25.

The projects were wide ranging in content. One respondent described KTPs that were with computing, engineering and physical sciences faculties but where the contact was initiated through business school activity. Another school described support for SMEs in the health and life sciences sector to grow and scale their businesses.

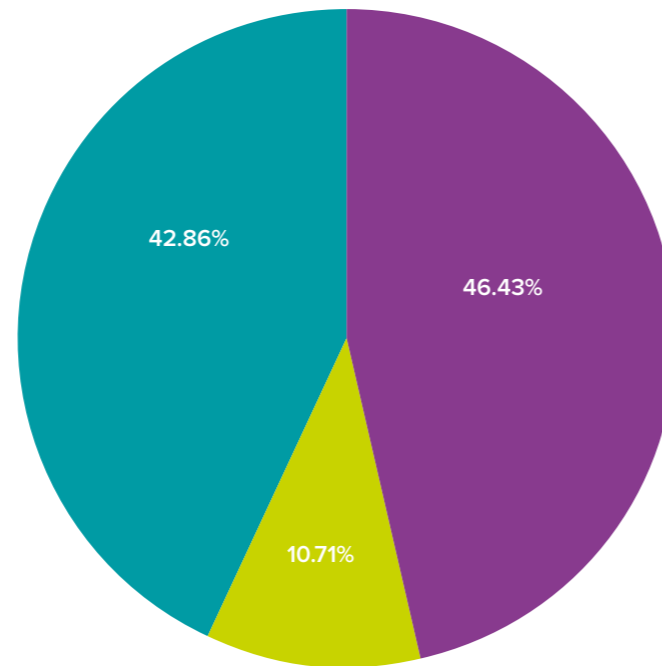
Beyond their own campuses, three quarters of business schools have undertaken collaborations with other business schools to deliver projects specifically aimed at SMEs.

SMEs were involved in a total of

998

projects that included collaborations with other university departments in the academic year

Fig.2 Collaboration between business schools across and within regions



- Business schools based in the same region **46.43%**
- Business schools based in a different region **10.71%**
- Business schools based in both the same region and different region **42.86%**

Business schools are embedded in the local business support landscape

Engaging with stakeholders in the business support ecosystem ensures that SBC-accredited business schools, and their activities, are anchored in the regional economy and aligned with its needs.

Through these partnerships business schools are able to develop collaborative solutions to policy and employer needs, and to inform their course curriculum design and research priorities.

Local Chambers of Commerce were the most common stakeholder relationship, followed by the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chartered Management

Institute. Given Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Growth Hubs, and Combined Mayoral Authorities only exist in England, the data suggests that engagement from English business schools is high given the results include respondents from across the UK.

Other stakeholders that responding business schools have relationships with include Business Wales, Invest NI, and Scottish Enterprise in the devolved nations. Elsewhere business schools have links with sector business networks such as digital, technology, net zero and specialist business networks like the Asian Business Chamber of Commerce.

Table 4. Which regional SME bodies and business support organisations have relationships with business schools.

Business stakeholders	% of schools that have a relationship with each organisation
Chamber of Commerce	91.49%
FSB	74.47%
CMI	70.21%
Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)	68.09%
Local growth hub	65.96%
Combined mayoral authorities	51.06%
IoD	44.68%
CBI	27.66%
Make UK	17.02%
Other	31.91%

Respondents could provide multiple answers.

Investing in future skills

The Chartered Association of Business School 2025 report on Graduate Outcomes data, shows business and management courses produce more graduates running their own business 15 months after finishing their courses than any other subjects. Just over 1 in 4 of all university graduates running their own business studied a business subject.

SBC-accredited business schools are assessed on how they nurture this entrepreneurialism in their settings. Two thirds of our business schools provide a dedicated student startup space which were collectively used by 7,175 students and 613 alumni in the 2024-25 academic year.

Teaching business founders of the future

Nearly two thirds (57%) of SBC-accredited schools have a dedicated startup programme for alumni, students and academics. 4,302 students participated in these programmes along with 219 academics and 666 alumni students.

Table 5. Number of start-ups created by students, academics, and alumni in 2024-25

Founder type	No. of startups created
Students	675
Academics	51
Alumni	31

4,302 students, **219** academics, **666** alumni participated in dedicated startup programmes.

7,175 students and **613** alumni used their business school's dedicated student startup space.

Exchanging real-world knowledge and experience with students and small businesses

According to recent data from the [Careers and Enterprise Company](#) (the national body for careers education in the UK), employers who offer work experience "are 77 per cent more likely to report direct business benefits than those that don't". This is just one of the many reasons why businesses and business schools need to collaborate more closely for mutual reward.

Our surveyed business schools report a third (32%) of modules involve contributions from entrepreneurs and small businesses in the design, planning, evaluation and/or delivery of the curriculum.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of staff have a portion of their workload dedicated to enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Away from the campus, our schools reported 6,288 students, or an average of 1 in 4 (23%) students, taking up placements and internships, in the 2024/25 academic year. More than 7,000, or an average of 16% of students, were mentored by small businesses, further underlining the value placed on ensuring students learn from businesses on their educational journey.

47 schools reported **6,288** students taking up placements and internships, in the 2024-25 academic year.

One third of business school modules involve contributions from entrepreneurs and small businesses.

International proof of concept: Our SBC-accredited international business schools

Examples of SME engagement at both SBC-accredited international schools included the presence of Entrepreneurs-in-Residence and SME involvement in guest lectures, live projects, student consultancy and mentoring.

Both business schools reported the wider university having a separate business centre in addition to their business school.

A total of 443 students from international SBC schools took part in work placements or internships at SME businesses in 2024-25.

With regards to the business ecosystem, both business schools were connected to their local Chamber of Commerce and one of them reported collaborating with three other business schools to deliver projects specifically aimed at SME businesses.

One business school reported a total of 11 KTPs, of which 4 were completed in the academic year.



About this report

This survey was run by the Small Business Charter and carried out across SBC business schools across the UK in March and April 2026.

These findings are based on 47 responses, representing 67% of SBC's UK schools.

We also received two additional responses from our international SBC business schools. Some of their findings are included on p14.

We would like to thank all the schools for taking part in the survey.



Find out more about our work, visit smallbusinesscharter.org

