

# The mixed impact of the Help to Grow programme to boost SME management skills

As someone who has been an advocate for improving management skills within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) since I began my academic career over thirty years ago, I have been disappointed that there has been little effort by the higher education sector in utilising its expertise within business schools to make a real difference to the growth prospects of founder-led firms.

Fortunately, that partly changed with the introduction of the Help to Grow programme by the UK Government in 2021, which was set up with the aim of equipping leaders of SMEs with the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance productivity and drive growth.

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Help to Grow programme seems to be making a positive contribution to both individual participants and the businesses they manage., alongside mentoring, peer learning, and access to an alumni network, with the UK Government covering 90% of the costs of participation.

A recent evaluation of the programme shows that since its launch, nearly 8,000 SME leaders have completed it, with 91% saying they would recommend the programme to other business leaders.

With the content covering a wide range of management and leadership practices, it is not surprising the varying needs of different sized- businesses have been addressed.

For example, founders of micro-businesses with fewer than ten employees found modules on customer engagement especially valuable, while those leading larger SMEs gravitated towards topics related to growth strategies and sustainability.

Another one of the standout elements has been mentoring which participants widely appreciated used to build on the topics covered in the programme curriculum as well as seeking advice, guidance and support on ad hoc issues they or their businesses were facing.

The programme's impact is evident in the enhanced confidence and leadership capabilities reported by those taking part as well as a deeper understanding of core management practices, with participants reporting significant improvements in their ability to lead employees, develop strategies, and identify key drivers of business success.

Unfortunately, fewer than anticipated had created formal

growth action plans suggesting an opportunity in the future to encourage more structured planning for productivity improvements.

Beyond individual development, Help to Grow is also generating business-level benefits with graduates of the programme reporting improvements in leadership practices, operational efficiency, and digital adoption, all of which can contribute to long-term productivity gains.

Many have also shared the knowledge gained from the programme with their teams, fostering a culture of learning and innovation within their organisations. And despite the focus on leadership training, self-reported data from the evaluation also suggests tangible financial benefits, including increased sales, cost savings, and recruitment of new staff.

Interestingly, the programme's impact has had unintended consequences, with the learning experience inspiring significant career changes amongst some participants including leaving their original businesses for new opportunities.

Additionally, the low engagement with the programme's alumni network, launched in 2022, suggests an area of untapped potential that could play a more significant role in sustaining the programme's long-term benefits through peer learning and collaboration.

Those taking part in this programme are facing same challenges as we have seen with other training initiatives involving SMEs. For example, addressing the issue of time constraints for participants could reduce dropout rates, while encouraging the formalisation of learning through growth action plans may strengthen the link between training and tangible business outcomes.

It could also explore ways to better engage alumni and expand its networks, fostering deeper connections and ongoing collaboration.

One important finding is that female participants reported particularly strong outcomes, suggesting that Help to Grow has the potential to support under-represented groups in leadership roles. This could provide an opportunity to develop targeted initiatives that further address gender disparities in business leadership.

Whilst it has been successful, Help to Grow has unfortunately not had the impact that it should have had given the positive feedback it has received from participants.

For example, it aimed to support 30,000 SME businesses to improve their productivity over the course of the first three years, but this was revised downwards to 10,000 in 2022 to reflect actual levels of demand.

It is also disappointing to note that the evaluation suggests that only around 250 Welsh businesses have participated in Help to Grow since its inception, lower than would be expected by the share of the UK's business population.

That should not be too surprising, as only two of the eight business schools at Welsh universities are directly involved in delivering the programme, and both – Cardiff Business School and Cardiff School of Management – are based in the capital city.

Yet again, this demonstrates that despite the rhetoric we hear from university leaders in Wales, there is little tangible effort in supporting the growth of SMEs in local communities. It also adds weight to various arguments I have made in this column that more should be done to increase leadership and management training across Wales to boost the productivity and competitiveness of the nation.

Therefore, the Help to Grow programme seems to be making a positive contribution to both individual participants and the businesses they manage. Those SME leaders who completed the programme report greater confidence, enhanced skills, and

improved understanding of business needs, while businesses are already seeing improvements in management practices, efficiency, and resilience.

More importantly, it shows that such an intervention can make a difference to businesses that undertake leadership development and demonstrates to those running businesses the value of investing in leadership training, not just as a tool for individual development but as a strategic lever for organisational success.

However, it is also critical, given that it has not met its initial targets, that policymakers and educators consider how to build on this momentum to ensure that this type of programme can continue to deliver on its promise of driving growth and productivity across the UK's SME sector