SPARK SOCIAL ENTERPRISE EVALUATION

FINAL REPORT D1.2.3

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Executive Summary

The SPARK project, funded by the European Union Interreg 2 Seas programme, was a four-year project running between 2016 and 2020. Through a wide-ranging programme of research, policy intervention, and enterprise support it sought to enhance the framework conditions for social enterprises (SEs), enabling them to develop the capabilities for delivering high impact and sustainable innovations. The project was focused on three regions in Belgium, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom and involved collaboration between the University of Brighton (UK), De Punt (Belgium), Stadsgarage (formerly Seinwezen, The Netherlands), Sociale Innovatie Fabriek (Belgium), and West Sussex County Council (UK). This document reports on the evaluation of the project.

Ongoing evaluation throughout the project assessed the benefits, issues, and challenges of the different project activities, as well as enabling learning and improvement between them. In particular, it focused on the SPARK Accelerator and Start-up Programmes as support measures that were designed as the practical expression of the insights gained from the SPARK research, strategy and action plan, and framework methodology. Using a mixed methods approach, the evaluation set out to investigate how effective these measures had been in achieving the aim of putting the SPARK principles into practice. These guiding principles include the importance of achieving a suitable balance between commercial and social/environmental priorities, the benefits to be had for SEs of developing a more holistic, strategic, and systematic approach to innovation, and the need to connect SEs to supportive framework conditions by building network relationships with appropriate innovation system actors.

The results of the evaluation provide favourable evidence of the effectiveness of the two SPARK support programmes in putting these principles into practice. In terms of balancing commercial and social/environmental priorities, the participants of the two programmes started with a well-established commitment to the latter, with less confidence on the business side. Participants in the Accelerator Programme identified a number of important improvements in business skills that they lacked confidence in before the start of the programme. Top of these was business strategy and planning, which only 22% of participants were confident about at the start of the programme and 84% reported improvements by the end. Looking at business skills overall, 73% of participants stated that the programme had helped them to improve their business skills. Evidence from the Start-up Programme also indicated a positive influence on business capabilities. Three quarters of those who piloted the online learning tool that formed the centrepiece of this programme rated its usefulness at 7 out of 10 or above. In their qualitative feedback they specifically highlighted the business and

innovation concepts, frameworks, and tools they had learned, and the application of these to the developmental needs of their organisation.

With regard to building innovation capabilities, the data from the SPARK Accelerator indicate a growing confidence by participants in their innovation activities, importantly developing capabilities that they were much less confident in at the start of the programme. Only 15% of participants were confident about commercialising and capturing value from new products, services, or processes before taking part in the programme. At the end 56% reported improvements in this area. Other strong areas of improvement were in ensuring the long-term benefits of innovations, with 50% of the participants reporting improvements in an area that 20% were confident about before, and launching and implementing new products, services, and processes, with 67% reporting improvements compared to a previous confidence level of 39%. Overall, there were indications of a widening out of innovation capabilities beyond the early part of the innovation process to address the implementation and value-capturing stages. At the same time, strong improvements were reported over and above an already solid base in front-end innovation activities, such as coming up with novel ideas, scanning the environment for new ideas, and developing new products, services, or processes. Considering the overall impact of the programme:

- 70% of participants improved their ability to capture financial, social and/or environmental value from their innovations.
- 70% improved their understanding of the activities involved in innovation.
- 69% improved their innovation skills.
- 59% improved their ability to turn new ideas into practical applications.
- 59% improved their ability to find new ideas.
- 58% improved their ability to repeat the innovation process in the future.

Finally, in relation to encouraging positive connections between SEs and supportive framework conditions and innovation system actors, there was evidence of productive network building. 77% of the SPARK Accelerator participants introduced new ways of working with external organisations. From the relationships resulting from the programme:

- 69% found these helpful for identifying new opportunities.
- 62% used them to develop new business skills.
- 62% reported they were a useful source of support and advice.
- 51% said they created opportunities for joint activities, partnerships, and collaborations.

Taken together, the evaluation results suggest the SPARK SE support methodology offers a positive influence on developing and further extending the innovativeness of SEs by encouraging a strategic approach to business and innovation and leveraging the benefits of connecting with inter-regional innovation systems.

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1 Introduction

This document reports on the evaluation activities and results of the SPARK Social Enterprise project. The SPARK project, funded by the European Union Interreg 2 Seas programme, was a four-year project running between 2016 and 2020. Through a wide-ranging programme of research, policy intervention, and enterprise support it sought to enhance the framework conditions for social enterprises, enabling them to develop the capabilities for delivering high impact and sustainable innovations. The project was focused on three regions in Belgium, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom and involved collaboration between the University of Brighton (UK), De Punt (Belgium), Stadsgarage (formerly Seinwezen, The Netherlands), Sociale Innovatie Fabriek (Belgium), and West Sussex County Council (UK).[1] Detailed research, involving interviews with 90 social enterprises, 45 key social enterprise stakeholders, and 30 enterprise support organisations across the three regions provided a solid evidence-base for understanding the challenges, opportunities, and enablers of social enterprise innovation. These include achieving an appropriate balance between the joint commercial orientation and social/environmental purpose of these hybrid organisations, building a clearer understanding of the innovation process, and being able to access a suitable range of knowledge, support, tools, and networks to guide them through the process. This initial research, combined with the extensive knowledge and experience of the project partners in supporting social enterprise, and business more widely, shaped the design and implementation of the following activities:

1. A strategy and action plan on social enterprise innovation to influence policy makers and support agencies.
2. A new framework methodology – the SPARK Social Enterprise Innovation Roadmap – designed to provide a clear guide to the innovation process adapted for the specific needs and conditions of social enterprises.
3. A cross-border innovation support programme, the SPARK Accelerator, targeted at more established social enterprises.
4. A programme of innovation support for start-up social enterprises, centred around an online learning tool.
5. An online social enterprise innovation accelerator network (SEIAN) to enable knowledge sharing and support between social enterprises and a range of stakeholders.

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[1] Another UK partner, The Platform, was the coordinator of the project until 2018 when it unfortunately ceased trading. The University of Brighton took over the coordination of the project.

Ongoing evaluation throughout the project assessed the benefits, issues, and challenges of the different activities, as well as enabling learning and improvement between them. In particular, it focused on the SPARK Accelerator and Start-up Programmes as support measures that were designed as the practical expression of the insights gained from the SPARK research, strategy and action plan, and framework methodology. The evaluation set out to investigate how effective these measures had been in achieving the aim of putting the SPARK principles into practice. These guiding principles include the following ideas about how to support social enterprise innovation.[2]

The first guiding principle is that the hybrid nature of social enterprise, combining the dual pursuit of commercial and social/environmental objectives, creates particular challenges for their sustainability as businesses. They need to find a suitable pathway that allows both missions to be accommodated. The social and/or environmental purpose of SEs is often their driving rationale, giving them a distinctive identity and encouraging a strong degree of commitment in seeking to achieve these goals. However, without sufficient attention to the commercial side they may struggle to generate the necessary revenue and resources to survive.[3] Conversely, too much emphasis on the commercial side can lead to a neglect or dilution of the SE's social/environmental purpose, leading to a perception of 'mission drift'.[4]

The second principle is that a more developed practical understanding of business and innovation processes can help SEs achieve a suitable balance between their dual missions and pursue an appropriate and sustainable trajectory in terms of growth and development. This could be following an ambition to increase in scale and reach, both in commercial terms as well as social/environmental impact, or it could be about sustaining their commercial and social/environmental position in the face of changing, market, technological, or other conditions. To increase business and innovation capabilities, according to the SPARK Innovation Roadmap, it is important to be aware of the different skills and practices required to address the different elements of these processes. In the case of innovation, the Innovation Roadmap sets out the different stages and activities that are needed to move through the whole innovation process from generating new ideas and identifying

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[2] The SPARK Strategy and Action Plan uses the following terminology: understand to innovate, support to innovate, connect to innovate, and conditions to innovate, which are combined into the three principles outlined here.

[3] This is not to say that all organisations contributing social and/or environmental value need to go down this route, with some charities exhibiting strong fundraising capabilities, even in the difficult climate of the last decade. However, by definition, an SE needs a threshold income from commercial sources to be classified as such. Issues of SE definition and the political economy of delivering positive social and/or environmental outcomes have been addressed in other SPARK project publications.

[4] Cornforth, C., 2014. Understanding and combating mission drift in social enterprises. *Social Enterprise Journal* 10, 3–20.

opportunities to implementing and capturing value from them, as well as connecting innovation to strategic business priorities. In addition to understanding these elements, it is obviously crucial to be able to put them into practice. Here the SPARK principles emphasise the benefits of moving from a more ad hoc and sporadic approach to innovation, to a more systematic and repeatable process. The rationale is that by making their innovation processes more sustainable, SEs enhance their ability to survive, grow, and deliver both commercial and social/environmental value.

Lastly, it is important to understand that innovation is not an isolated activity that takes place purely at the enterprise level. Instead, it is more systemic, occurring within systems of innovation at differing geographical scales that provide the framework conditions for innovations to emerge. These in turn are shaped by activities, knowledge, resources, and capabilities that are distributed across different domains of government, business, universities and the research-base, and civil society, often referred to as the quadruple helix.[5] The support provided by the SPARK Accelerator and Start-up Programmes emphasised the multi-actor character of innovation and, in line with the focus of Interreg, the role of cross-border interactions in enhancing the framework conditions and innovation systems of each region.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. The next section describes the overall evaluation approach and methods, outlining the terms of reference and how these were addressed. Section 3 provides a description of the SPARK Accelerator Programme and then Sections 4 to 10 report on the results across different dimensions. These include the financial, employment, and other characteristics of the participating SEs in Section 4; the development of business and innovation capabilities in Section 5; networking activities and outcomes in Section 6; the innovation activities and outcomes of the participants in Section 7; the impact of the programme on innovation capabilities in Section 8; and the experience of the participants of the different programme activities in Section 9. Section 10 closes the discussion of the Accelerator results by using qualitative feedback from the participating SEs to triangulate the findings in the other sections and explore some of the emerging themes in more detail. Section 11 then turns to a description of the SPARK Start-up Programme and Section 12 outlines the evaluation results from this programme. The conclusions in Section 13 reflect on what has been learned from the two programmes, how far they have met their overall aims and objectives, and identifies areas for further development.

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[5] Carayannis, E.G., Grigoroudis, E., Campbell, D.F.J., Meissner, D., Stamati, D., 2018. The ecosystem as helix: an exploratory theory-building study of regional co-opetitive entrepreneurial ecosystems as Quadruple/Quintuple Helix Innovation Models. *R&D Management* 48, 148–162.

2   Approach and methods

2.1   Terms of reference

The evaluation requirements of the project were set out in D1.2.3 as follows:

> *UoB will test the framework [innovation model] through working with project partners to develop and create accompanying tools and methods to support established SEs ready to accelerate to develop sustainable and high impact innovations. Learning from the accelerator programme will be further developed into tools and methods to support start up SEs. These activities in WP2 and 3 will be piloted, tested, and improved through evaluation and impact measurement.*

As such, the key project activities to be evaluated were those included in WP2, aimed at established social enterprises (the SPARK Accelerator Programme), and WP3, targeted at social enterprise start-ups, to assess the validity and effectiveness of the social enterprise innovation model known as the SPARK Innovation Roadmap (see Appendix 1). The main goals were to test and refine this model, inform the design of the SPARK Accelerator and Start-up Programmes, and provide an assessment of its practical effectiveness and impact through its implementation in WP2 and WP3.

The evaluation activities were spread throughout the project, providing both formative evaluation, offering interim evidence and insights to help shape the design and implementation of the two main support programmes, as well as collecting evidence for the overall summative assessment of the impact of the measures deployed. In the case of the former, in the earlier stages of the project this was about taking the lessons learned from D1.2.1 (research on social enterprise innovation) and D1.2.2 (the development of an innovation model/roadmap for sustainable and high impact innovations in SEs) and translating these into practical and actionable interventions. This involved the SPARK Accelerator in the first instance, with initial lessons learned from this being fed into the design of the Start-up Programme. The goal of the evaluation was then to look at the outputs and outcomes of the two programmes, as far as possible testing them under conditions of full operation to gain an overall picture of their effectiveness with regard to their main objectives, i.e. the development of capabilities for delivering high impact and sustainable innovations through the building of cross-border support measures and collaborations. To meet the needs of both the formative and summative orientation of the evaluation activities, a detailed multi-method evaluation strategy was developed, as outlined in Section 2.2 below.

It is important to note that not all evidence collection for the project was about evaluation as set out in D1.2.3. Much of the collection of data was for the wider requirements of project reporting and as

such fell outside the scope of the evaluation deliverable. However, UoB provided support to the other partners in developing appropriate tools and strategies to help them collect the necessary evidence to demonstrate and report the impact of the project.

2.2   Description of methods

2.2.1   Evaluation of the SPARK Accelerator Programme

The SPARK Accelerator Programme, targeted at established SEs, was an extensive innovation support programme offering a portfolio of interlinked activities over the course of a year (see Section 3 for a description of the programme). It represented the most fully developed practical expression of the combined insights from the SPARK SE research, Innovation Roadmap, and extensive experience of the project partners. As such it was the most involved of the evaluation activities. The main performance targets were to demonstrate the contribution of the Accelerator Programme to improving the business capacity of the 75 participating social enterprises, of which 30% deliver high impact and sustainable innovations during the lifetime of the programme. This raised familiar issues about measuring change over time and how far to attribute this to the various interventions. Given this challenge, the proposed evaluation method sought to measure the same organisational attributes and performance indicators at two different points in time, before and after the programme. The differences between the two sets of indicators would then be compared to identify the degree of change between the two. The main instruments for achieving this were a baseline survey at the start of the programme and an exit survey at the end, complemented by a number of other methods and data sources to help triangulate the evidence and provide additional insights.

With the baseline/exit questionnaire approach it is important to ensure that the same respondents complete both surveys, which can be problematic, especially where the intervening period is of a long duration. In the case of the Accelerator Programme, participants committed themselves, expressed in a written agreement, to taking part in the full duration of the programme and agreed to respond to reasonable requests for information to help the evaluation process. As such, the risk of being able to collect matched survey responses was considered to be acceptable. Even so, it was decided following discussions between the partners that a slightly modified baseline/exit survey approach would be employed to minimise the risk further. The purist version of this comparative technique specifies that the questions asked in each survey must be exactly the same to allow for a reliable comparison. However, a more pragmatic approach was adopted to allow for any change in membership of the programme – as it happens there were a few substitutions where participants realised that they were unable to continue and were replaced by new SEs to make up the cohort of

25 in each region. The design of the exit questionnaire was therefore modified so that even those respondents who had not completed the baseline questionnaire would still be able to provide data that were of some use to the evaluation. The decision to adopt an augmented baseline/exit approach was also informed by another common challenge in attempting to measure change. This relates to issues of additionality and how to disentangle the effects of any support measure or intervention from other influences. On its own, the purist version of the baseline/exit approach offers a reasonable basis for identifying changes in the target attributes and conditions, but without additional information is unable to reveal whether the changes have resulted from the focal support measures or some other factors (e.g. participation in other support programmes, shifts in broader socio-economic conditions). To address this problem, the modified approach used additional questions to try to measure the specific effects of the programme.

Both baseline and exit questionnaires went through multiple iterations of feedback from the partners and revisions, as well as pilot testing with SEs, to make them as robust and useable as possible. The final version of the baseline survey was agreed in August 2017 and distributed to all SEs that had signed up to the SPARK Accelerator. The questionnaire was hosted on the online SurveyMonkey system and accessed via a link in the invitation email. A copy of the baseline survey can be seen in Appendix 2. The programme was designed for a total participation of 75 SEs across the three regions, although there was some variation in the early stages before the membership stabilised. Overall 74 responses were received for the baseline survey, 23 from Belgium, 26 from The Netherlands, and 25 from the UK. This gives an overall response rate of 99%, although varying at the regional level with a slight under- and over-representation of respondents in Belgium and The Netherlands respectively. The exit questionnaire was finalised and distributed in December 2018, with a slightly adapted version for the Open Innovation Group (OIG) members sent out in March 2019 (see Section 3.3 for details about the OIG; see Appendix 3 for a copy of the exit questionnaire). Response rates were slightly lower than for the baseline questionnaire, but still very respectable. A total of 66 responses to the exit survey were received, giving an 88% response rate (20 from Belgium, 22 from The Netherlands, and 24 from the UK). By this stage of the programme, the participants were arguably experiencing 'evaluation fatigue' and so the efforts expended to achieve this level of responses were considerable. In terms of the overlap in respondents between the two surveys, 64 people completed both the baseline and exit questionnaires and 2 people completed just the exit survey (one from Belgium and one from The Netherlands).

As well as the baseline and exit surveys, which formed the core of the evaluation methodology for the SPARK Accelerator, other sources of information were used to complement, confirm, and extend

the findings of the surveys. These included a number of exit interviews conducted at the close of the programme. The intention was to interview 4-5 SEs per region who would be selected on the basis of their responses to the surveys to represent a range of positive experiences and challenges. In the end it was only possible to conduct 7 interviews (4 in the UK and 3 in Belgium) with enthusiasm for contributing to the evaluation definitely tailing off in the later stages of the programme. Another source of supplementary information were the one-to-one notes written by the coaches who helped the participants with their individualised learning journeys (see Section 3.3). Given potential issues of confidentiality and the sensitivity of the coaching relationship, these were only used for the purposes of the evaluation with the explicit agreement of the participants. A total of 89 notes were received, 66 from the UK, 22 from The Netherlands, and 3 from Belgium. These were useful for validating the responses to the survey, especially those relating to innovation activities during the programme. Web pages from the participating SEs and other online material mentioning them, such as news items and support organisation case studies, were also used to help triangulate the different sources of data.

2.2.2   Evaluation of the SPARK Start-up Programme

As explained in Section 11, the activities that made up the Start-up Programme were rather different to those of the SPARK Accelerator. The latter primarily involved face-to-face activities, such as one-to-one coaching, action learning sets, training, and international visits, with additional support from online resources and networks. The emphasis for the Start-up Programme was the other way round, with support focusing primarily on an online learning tool, supplemented by webinars, online ask-the-expert sessions, and only a small number of face-to-face activities in the form of peer-based learning events. Another major difference was that there was not such an easily identifiable cohort of participants that could be used as a target for collecting evaluation data, unlike the 75 members of the SPARK Accelerator. The closest equivalent for the Start-up Programme was the group of 61 individuals representing 59 start-up SEs that were recruited to pilot the online tool. However, there was not the same consistency in membership across the different activities compared to the SPARK Accelerator, which placed clear limitations on the evaluation, especially with regard to assessing the overall effects of the programme as fully implemented.

The way the tool was piloted, some testers were involved earlier in the process and some later, so their experiences would have been different – the earlier groups looking more at the structure of the tool and its usability and the later testers going deeper into the substance of the content and the usefulness of the tools and exercises for their start-up or pre-starter businesses. Thus, while the piloting activities of the 61 testers were invaluable for the ongoing evaluation and refinement of the

online tool, they were less amenable to the needs of summative assessment. With hindsight, it would have been preferable to have made a clear split between the two, using one group to pilot the tool and another to use the tool in its full version following launch. This would have permitted a more thoroughgoing assessment of the tool under full operating conditions. Unfortunately, practical considerations of timing within the duration of the project and the need to find another cohort of willing start-up SEs meant this was not possible. These limitations shaped the chosen methodology for evaluating the Start-up Programme, which included two main components.

The first included tools for harvesting information about the usefulness, clarity, and usability of the online tool, based both on direct feedback during piloting sessions and short surveys designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. In the later iterations of the tool, once sufficient content had been included and it was operating as a functioning mock-up, the survey questions were built into the tool itself so that testers could give their feedback online after completing a training module. Most of the data collected from the pilot exercises were used for the purposes of formative evaluation. This provided interim feedback that was incorporated into the design and development process allowing for a better understanding of user requirements and the progressive refinement and debugging of the content and functionality. However, the later stages of the pilot also provided data that gave some insights into the potential benefits and impacts, as well as limitations, of the online learning tool. Given the relatively short period of engagement with the tool in its more or less finalised form, the feedback from the testers was obviously limited compared to a more extended period of usage.

To attempt to get around this, the second component of the evaluation methodology for the Start-up Programme aimed to collect data about the longer term use of the online tool by the group of start-up SEs involved in the piloting process. This was especially designed to provide evidence for the following specific targets committed to by the project: 1) at least 50% of SE start-ups engaged in the pilot project who have started training increase their turnover; 2) at least 50% of SE start-ups engaged in the pilot who have not yet started training report an improved capacity to increase their turnover in the next three years. Reservations about using increases in actual or potential turnover in start-up SEs as a reliable indicator notwithstanding, a survey was designed to capture evidence about the financial performance and capability development of the pilot group (see Appendix 4). Unlike the SPARK Accelerator surveys, the Start-up Programme survey was deployed online using JISC Online Surveys instead of SurveyMonkey. This was due to changes in UoB regulations with regard to GDPR. The survey was distributed about a year after the launch of My Social Start-up in August 2019. The hope was that the start-up SEs that piloted the online tool would have continued

using it and/or would have had time to embed the lessons they had learned, and that sufficient time had passed for any effects to have started to manifest themselves. As with the evaluation of the SPARK Accelerator, there were similar challenges in terms of isolating the effects of the support measures from other influences on the data. In the case of the Start-up Programme this was exacerbated by the lower level of engagement with the programme, which was much less intensive compared to the structured programme of events and activities provided by the SPARK Accelerator. Even so, the aim was to collect data on the use of the online tool by the pilot group and information about their financial performance and innovation/business capability development. Since the deployment of the survey fell during the earlier stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also decided to include some questions about the response of the start-up group to the crisis. The rationale behind this was to collect additional data that would allow inferences to be drawn about the robustness and innovativeness of the respondents in the face of these challenges. Despite the inclusion of extra questions, we were mindful of the need to keep the questionnaire short to encourage a good response rate. Compared to the baseline and exit questionnaires for the SPARK Accelerator, the start-up questionnaire was much shorter. Unfortunately, for possible reasons discussed later in Section 11.4, the number of responses was extremely low, with only 2 responses from the 61 testers to which the survey was distributed. Needless to say, this rendered the data from this element of the Start-up Evaluation unusable.

3   Description of the SPARK Accelerator Programme

3.1   Purpose

The Accelerator Programme was a structured support and development programme for social enterprises targeted at more established SEs. Its main intentions were to help SEs develop, embed, and continually leverage innovation capabilities to support their long-term organisational sustainability, as well as providing opportunities for cross-border learning, network development, knowledge sharing, trading, and collaboration. While clearly inspired by commercial accelerators, using many of the same activities, tools, and mechanisms, the SPARK Accelerator was explicitly designed to reflect the specific characteristics and requirements of SEs. As such, there was a focus on innovation not only as a means of achieving growth and commercial success, but also as a key driver behind the ability to deliver social and environmental benefits.

3.2   Design

The first stage of designing the SPARK Accelerator was subject to a co-design process, drawing on input from members within the consortium and crucially from stakeholders, support agencies, and SEs, which together helped to develop and refine the concept. The design was informed by the SPARK Innovation Model, itself shaped by the extensive research conducted by the consortium at the start of the project, involving interviews with 90 SEs, 45 stakeholders, and 30 support agencies across the three regions. It was also strongly influenced by the practical experience of delivering support interventions by one UK-based support agency in particular. Having gone through several iterations of feedback and amendment, the resulting design was then subject to peer review by 11 experts from across the UK, Belgium, and The Netherlands. This led to further modification and refinement before the final design was agreed and implemented.

The SPARK Accelerator involved a total of 75 participants, 25 from each of the three regions. The selection of participants was competitive and subject to a recruitment process for which the following criteria were used.

1. Potential entrants should be actively engaged and keen to develop their innovation capabilities.
2. They should be established SEs that have traded for at least one year and preferably three years or more.
3. They should be relatively financially stable with a substantial turnover (the benchmark of £100,000 per annum was used) and preferably an operating surplus.

4. They should have sufficient human resources in the form of staff, management, and governance (trustees or management board) to implement changes identified as useful during the course of the programme.

5. They should have a clear focus on social and/or environmental impact in their vision.

3.3   Activities

A key feature of the SPARK Accelerator was that it provided a portfolio of linked activities available for the SEs to undertake, offering a range of opportunities for learning, development, and collaboration. These took place at different intervals over the 12-month period of the programme and included:

1. *One-to-one coaching:* This was a core component of the programme, involving regular face-to-face contact between each SE and a dedicated coach who was responsible for guiding the SE through a personalised innovation journey. The target was for each participating SE to meet with their coach four times during the year, supplemented by regular phone and video calls and emails to catch up on progress and provide additional encouragement. The focus of the one-to-one support was broadly structured according to four phases, with the aim of leading the SEs towards an actionable innovation plan that they could ideally implement, test, and refine during the course of the programme (see *Table 1*). Within this broad structure the emphasis was on providing individualised support tailored to the particular needs of each SE. This meant that the actual focus and timing of activities varied between participants. To provide continuity between the phases, notes were made by the coaches of each one-to-one meeting. These were intended to provide a traceable record of actions and progress.

Phase	Activities
Phase 1	Initial meeting, diagnostic and evaluation, assess social innovation capabilities, assess and address social enterprise fundamentals (operations, resource allocation, social impact, marketing, legal structures, and reporting, etc.), use the adapted Social Enterprise Business Model Canvas to support structured and repeatable discussions.
Phase 2	Continue addressing issues of business fundamentals, explicitly introduce the SPARK Innovation Roadmap (SIR) to assess current capabilities and have a framework for further discussions; introduce the Growth Plan as an actionable set of tasks to be completed to ensure the implementation and use of the Innovation Roadmap
Phase 3	Update on ongoing general trading and social enterprise activity, social innovation activity and outputs and outcomes relevant to the SPARK programme such as increased revenue generation, new product or service

	introductions (NPIs/ NSIs), increased overseas network development etc.; develop each participant's intermediate Growth Plan
Phase 4	Continue and reconcile work completed to date on addressing operational issues, embedding social innovation capabilities and explicitly finalising each participant's actionable Growth Plan

Table 1: Phases of one-to-one coaching and support

2. *International visits:* Another important element of the SPARK Accelerator were international visits, or 'safaris', between the three regions. There were three safaris during the course of the programme, one in each region, each providing a week-long itinerary of activities for a cohort of 15 SEs selected from each region. The UK safari took place in June 2017, followed by the Belgian safari in October 2017, and the Dutch one in March 2018. These involved visits to established SEs to learn from their experiences, workshops with key local stakeholders, and opportunities to build relationships and networks with the other participants. They also included participation in action learning sets which allowed for facilitated peer-based learning. As outlined below, action learning sets also took place beyond the safaris and were a third component of the programme.

3. *Action learning sets:* The purpose of the action learning sets was to provide a supportive environment in which participants could exchange ideas and experiences and help each other with addressing particular problems, issues, or opportunities they were facing. As noted above, these were run once during each safari involving a cross-border membership, with the safari participants split into three groups. There was then a follow-up session in each respective region. The idea was that each participant would come away from the first action learning set with an action plan. This would then become the basis for discussions in the follow-up session where members provided an update on their progress with the action plan and worked on developing their next steps. These sessions were facilitated to encourage positive interaction between the participants and ensure a suitable degree of structure.

4. *Training:* The training component of the programme was specifically designed to complement the other activities by addressing gaps in technical or specialist skills and knowledge that the SEs felt were hindering their progress. The idea was that this would help them engage as productively as possible with the other aspects of the SPARK Accelerator. Based on overall observations of training needs, a long list of possible topics was presented to the participating SEs from which they chose the sessions they felt were most relevant to them. In the UK part of the programme, the participants chose five topics which were run twice in two different geographical locations to make the sessions

as accessible as possible. Unlike the other elements of the programme, the training workshops were open to participants from outside the SPARK Accelerator.

5. *E-Hub:* The E-Hub was designed as a central electronic repository of information, tools, and resources useful for supporting the participating SEs as they progressed through the programme. It was a custom designed platform with access initially limited to the participants of the programme. Content included information about the SPARK Accelerator and its components, downloadable tools and templates, links to SPARK research, the Innovation Roadmap, and the Strategy and Action Plan, and a moderated forum for discussion. Once the programme was complete the material was migrated to a redesigned SPARK website and made accessible to all interested parties.

6. *Open Innovation Group (OIG):* This was an addition to the main programme available for five participants selected from the original cohort in each region. It ran for an additional three months beyond the main programme and concluded in January 2019. Entry to the group was through a competitive selection process in which candidates were judged on the basis of their written applications. The stated aims of the OIG were to provide information and a real-life experience of working following open innovation methods as a new way to understand problems, mobilise resources, and deliver social change; to encourage and support partnership development and collaborative working; and to encourage and support the co-creation of innovative solutions to social problems.

4 Characteristics of participating social enterprises

4.1 Sector and social/environmental purpose

As with all group-based support programmes, where there is a cohort of participants that work through the programme together, the selection and composition of the members of the Accelerator Programme had an important influence on the delivery and outcome of the intervention. Issues about group composition will be discussed at several points throughout this report. In the context of business and innovation support, there is a well-established paradox between similarity and difference in the composition of cohorts, reflecting wider research on group and team dynamics[6]. Similarity between participants encourages cohesion and helps to build a shared identity around the programme but can limit possibilities for learning from the experiences of those with different backgrounds and perspectives. Diversity can be good for expanding the possible learning space but can make it more difficult to manage the social dynamics of the group. Achieving a suitable trade-off between similarity and difference can be a fine balancing act. The recruitment process for the Accelerator Programme was designed to provide such a balance. As we shall see later, the indications are that this was mostly successful. Nevertheless, there were some issues arising about the degree of fit between the different participants. This is probably not surprising when one considers the range of sectoral activities in which the participating social enterprises were involved. Overlaid on that, one also needs to consider the range of social and environmental purposes targeted by the SEs across the three regions.

Appendix 5 lists the detailed sectoral activities undertaken by the participants, alongside their social and environmental mission. A simplified sectoral distribution is provided in *Figure 1*, with similar activities grouped into broader categories. Overall it can be seen that the two most common areas of activity were associated with 'training and education' and 'food, agriculture, and gardening', each accounting for 20% of participants. Also more popular were 'clothing and design' (14%) and 'art and culture' (10%). Between them these four sectoral categories accounted for nearly two-thirds of the participating SEs. The remaining sectors, in descending order, were 'sport and outdoor activities' (9%), 'energy and construction' (7%), 'transport' (6%), 'community services' (4%), 'healthcare and social services' (4%), and 'sharing platforms' which provide web-based platforms to allow people to share or exchange goods and services (4%). Looking in more detail at the regional composition of sectors, there was a degree of variation, with some sectors being more highly represented in certain

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[6] Cartwright, D., Zander, A., 1968. *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory.* Harper and Row, New York; Marshall, N., Tsekouras, G., 2009. The interplay between formality and informality in managed learning networks. *International Journal of Strategic Business Alliances* 1, 291–308; Sherif, M., Sherif, C., 1953. *Groups in Harmony and Tension: An Integration of Studies on Intergroup Relations.* Harper, New York.
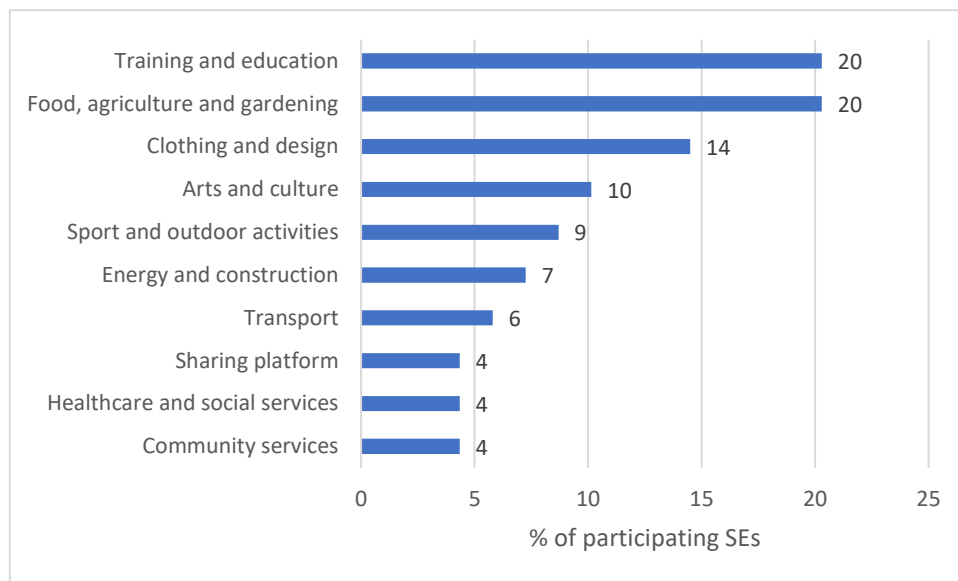
Figure 1: Sector characteristics of participating SEs

regions (see *Figure 2*). For example, 'sport and outdoor activities' and 'arts and culture' were relatively more common sectoral foci in the United Kingdom, together accounting for more than a third of participants from that region. The equivalent percentages in the other two regions were 5% for Belgium and 13% for The Netherlands. In the case of Belgium, 'clothing and design' (24%), 'transport' (10%), and 'sharing platforms' (10%) were more extensively represented, together amounting to nearly half of all participants from this region. These sectors accounted for only 12% of participants in the United Kingdom and 21% in The Netherlands. The distribution of sectors in The
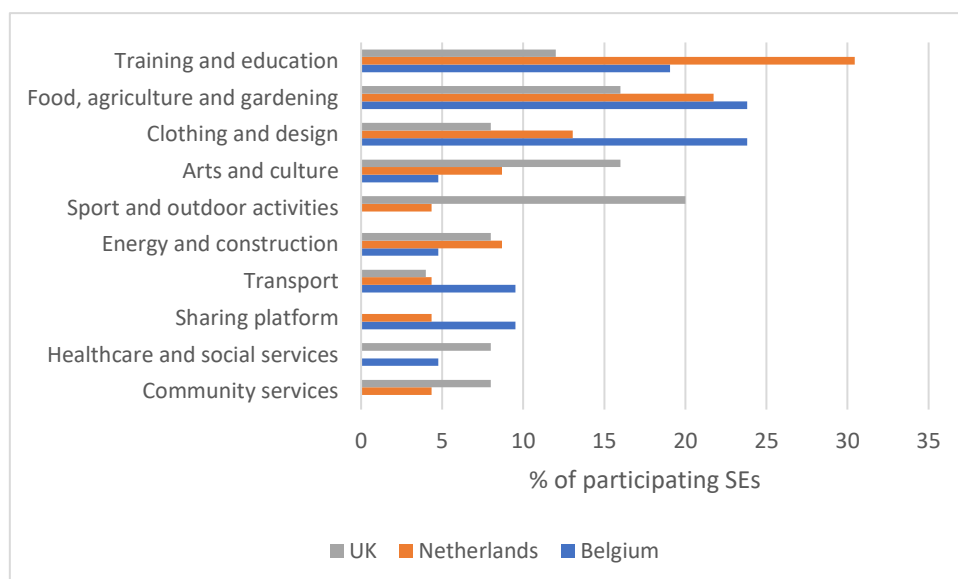
Figure 2: Sector characteristics of participating SEs by region

Netherlands was closer to the average across all regions, although it was somewhat over-represented in 'training and education' (30%) and under-represented in 'healthcare and social services' (0%).

Adding to the variety of the Accelerator participants, as shown in Appendix 5, it is evident that they engage in a wide range of activities designed to have an impact on social and/or environmental issues. In the broadest terms *Figure 3* indicates the extent to which participating SEs focused their missions on social or environmental goals, or a mixture of both. From this, it is clear that most participants either pursued one or more social purposes (46%) or a mixture of social and environmental goals (39%). Only 14% focused their missions on environmental issues alone. This
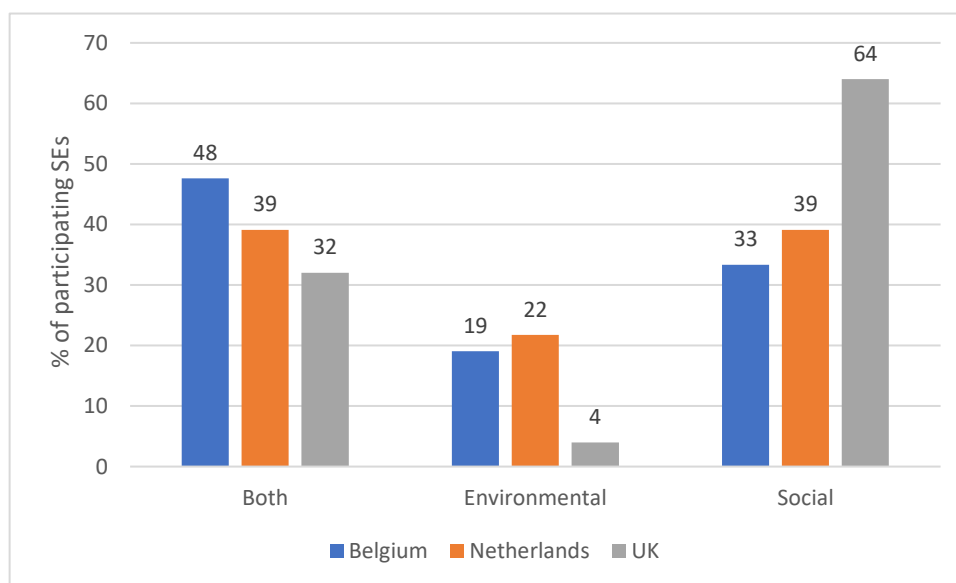
Figure 3: Mission of participating SEs by region

trend was even more pronounced in the United Kingdom, where 64% of participants concentrated on social goals, 32% on a mixture of social and environmental issues, and only 4% on environmental goals alone.

Taken together, sectoral activities and social/environmental purpose present two of the main vectors of variation between participants. On this basis, while it can be seen that there is significant diversity among the cohort, there are also clusters of commonalities along these dimensions. This mixture of similarity and difference potentially creates an appropriate foundation for productive social dynamics and learning between the participants. However, it is important to remember that there are other bases of identity and experience at play. An important influence here is the region in which the participants are located, with their differing framework conditions for social enterprise (e.g. legal, governmental, and institutional conditions, cultural norms and beliefs, social, economic,

and environmental influences and attitudes). The opportunity to share insights and experiences across these contexts was obviously a central concern of the Accelerator Programme given the Interreg 2-Seas agenda. Other characteristics shaping the social and learning dynamics of the programme include the age of the participating SEs, the previous experience of the key actors in the firms (i.e. those taking part directly in the programme and any others responsible for designing and implementing changes in the enterprises), and the size of the participants in terms of employment and financial characteristics. The next two sections consider the employment and financial characteristics of the participating SEs and how these changed over the course of the programme. The other influences will be discussed as appropriate throughout the report.

4.2 Employment characteristics

Apart from a few outliers, the size distribution of the participants by number of employees is decidedly skewed towards the smaller end of the scale. Using the EU definition of firm size by number of full-time equivalent employees, as shown in *Figure 4*, nearly 90% of participants are in the micro category of firms with 10 employees or fewer. Other bases of difference aside, this lends a certain degree of homogeneity to the cohort. While SMEs are often lumped together in terms of
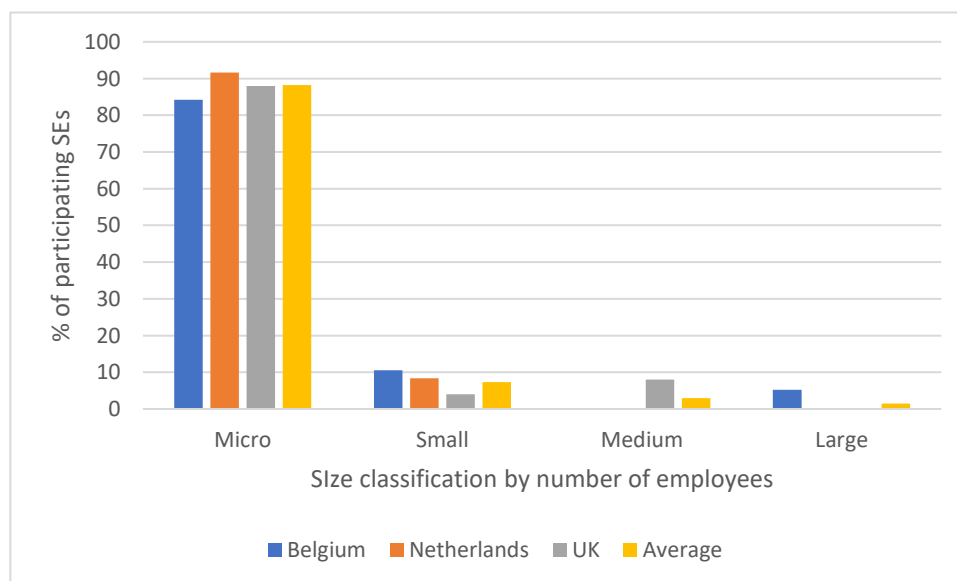
Figure 4: Size classification of participating SEs by region

their challenges and opportunities, it is clear that the issues facing a firm with fewer than 10 employees are likely to be quite different to those at the higher end of the SME size scale, the upper limit of which is 250 employees. The demands on managing a firm as it grows in size tend to encourage greater degrees of structure and formalisation of processes and routines in order to cope

with increasing specialisation and complexity in the division of labour[7]. The few participants outside the micro category were distributed between small (11-50 employees), representing 7% of the cohort, medium (51-250 employees), with 3%, and a single SE in the large category (more than 250 employees). Interestingly, a participant from one of the larger SEs, who was interviewed, commented about the differences between their needs and those of smaller and/or less established enterprises. Although the size distribution across the three regions reflected the dominance of micro sized participant in the programme, there were some small variations. For example, Belgium had slightly fewer micro enterprises (84%), with more in the small category (11%), as well as being the location of the single large enterprise. In comparison, The Netherlands was marginally over-represented in the micro category (92%), while the United Kingdom was the only region with medium-sized SEs among its participants (8%).

Looking in more detail at the employment data confirms the overall prevalence of micro-sized SEs in the programme, as might be expected, but also reveals some interesting patterns in terms of the distribution between full-time and part-time employees, as well as the extent to which participating SEs relied on volunteers. In terms of the number of full-time and part-time employees, the first thing to note is that 38% of participants reported having no full-time employees in the exit survey. In most of these cases, the SEs relied instead on part-time employees, often reflecting the involvement of social entrepreneurs in a range of activities (e.g. running a social enterprise at the same time as being in other employment). Four of the responding SEs reported having no employees at all, with work being provided on a voluntary basis. However, there are also likely to be some reporting errors
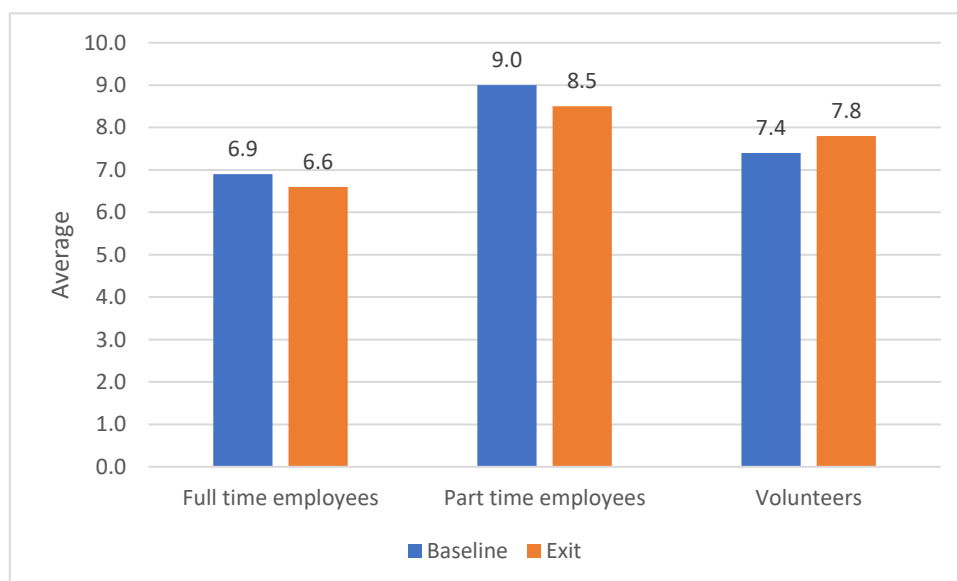

Figure 5: Change in average number of employees and volunteers

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[7] Scott, M., Bruce, R., 1987. Five stages of growth in small business. *Long Range Planning* 20, 45–52.

in these data. For example, some SE owners may not have included themselves in the employment count.

As shown in *Figure 5*, many of the participating SEs make use of the contribution of volunteers, with 60% reporting the involvement of volunteers in the exit survey and an average number of volunteers across the three regions of 15.5. An overall decline in the number of volunteers was reported for the period of the programme, with an average of 22.4 being recorded in the baseline survey. However, this was almost entirely accounted for by one response – an SE that runs a sharing platform which counted all the users of the platform as volunteers, reporting 1000 in the baseline survey and 500 in the exit questionnaire. Regardless of the reliability of this response, which may be open to question, it is clearly an outlier in the data. Removing it from the calculation gives a more realistic representation of the contribution of volunteers to the participating SEs. With the outlier removed, the average number of volunteers across the three regions actually increased very slightly, from 7.4 at the start of the programme to 7.8 at the end. Volunteer levels varied between the regions, with participants from the United Kingdom reporting more volunteers than the other two regions: 11.1 at the start of the programme, rising by a small amount to 11.9. Not including the outlier, reported numbers of volunteers in Belgium doubled from a lower level of 3.9 to 8.1 during the programme period, while those in The Netherlands decreased from 6.3 to 3.2.

Since the data were collected at the start and end of the programme, they also show changes in employment during the target period. Considering the participating SEs of the programme as a whole, the average number of full-time employees at the start of the programme was 6.9, with an average of 9.0 part-time employees. By the end of the programme these figures had fallen to 6.6
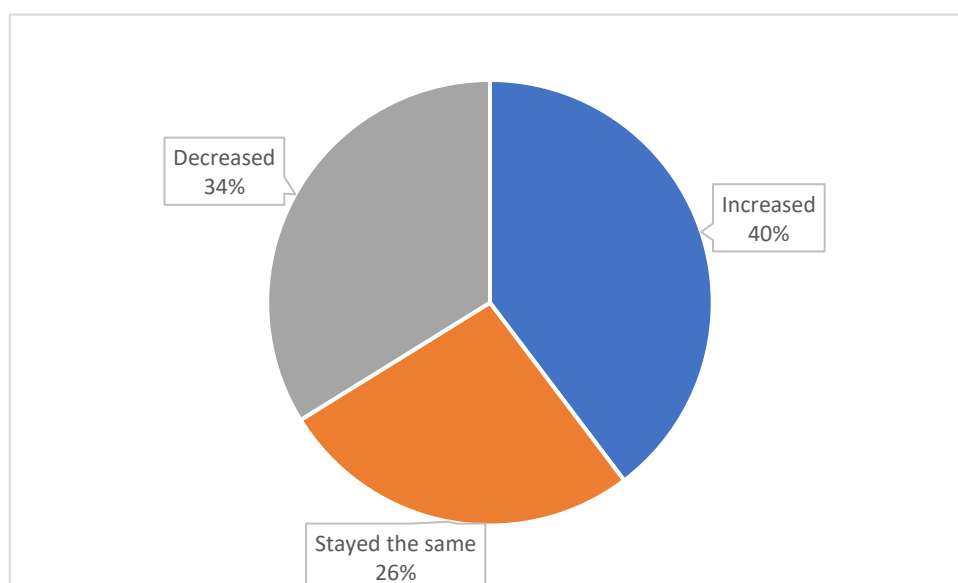

Figure 6: Change in employment by participating SEs during programme

and 8.5 respectively, indicating a small fall in employment overall. Given that one of the purposes of the Accelerator Programme was to help more established SEs consolidate and scale-up their activities, the immediate evidence from the employment data do not appear to support this. However, a closer look at the data reveals unevenness in the distribution of gains and losses across the respondents. As *Figure 6* shows, proportionally more SEs increased their employees (40% of total participants) compared to those that decreased in size (34%). The remaining 26% of SEs stayed the same size. In other words, two-thirds of the cohort either grew in terms of employment or stayed the same.

The average change in employees is also skewed, with only 8 SEs accounting for nearly 80% of the losses in terms of employment, of which half were contributed by a single SE. By comparison, the gains at the other end of the scale were less pronounced. The average increase for those SEs that recorded gains was 2.8 employees, while the average decrease for participants that lost employees was twice that at 5.6. Thus, while the overall picture is one of a small loss of employment from the participating SEs during the programme, the detailed data show that this is generated by larger losses from a relatively small number of respondents, with the majority of SEs growing or staying the same size. However, where there is growth, it is typically modest in scale. Having said that, it is worth noting the limitations of this data as an indicator of the impact of the programme, either positively or negatively, given the short measurement period and the likelihood that there will be a time delay before any effects on employment resulting from the programme show up. As such, any connection between the employment data and the success or otherwise of the programme need to be treated with caution. As we shall see in the next section, the same limitation applies to the financial data, with some inconsistencies suggesting additional reporting errors.

4.3   Financial characteristics

The financial profile of the Accelerator Programme participants is consistent with the dominance of micro-businesses within the cohort, with most participants reporting rather low levels of annual turnover and profit (see *Figure 7*)[8]. According to the results of the exit survey, the average annual turnover for the cohort as a whole was around EUR660,000, although the median figure was much lower at EUR108,000, indicating a long tail of SEs at the lower end of the earning scale. As with the number of employees, the financial data are skewed by the single large SE that participated in the programme, reporting a turnover in excess of EUR24 million, equivalent to more than 60% of the combined turnover of the entire cohort. Only three other participating SEs had annual turnovers more than EUR1 million and another three in excess of EUR500,000 (see *Figure 9*). Nearly 90% of

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[8] For ease of viewing, Figure 7 excludes the top earning participating SE with an annual turnover in excess of EUR24 million.
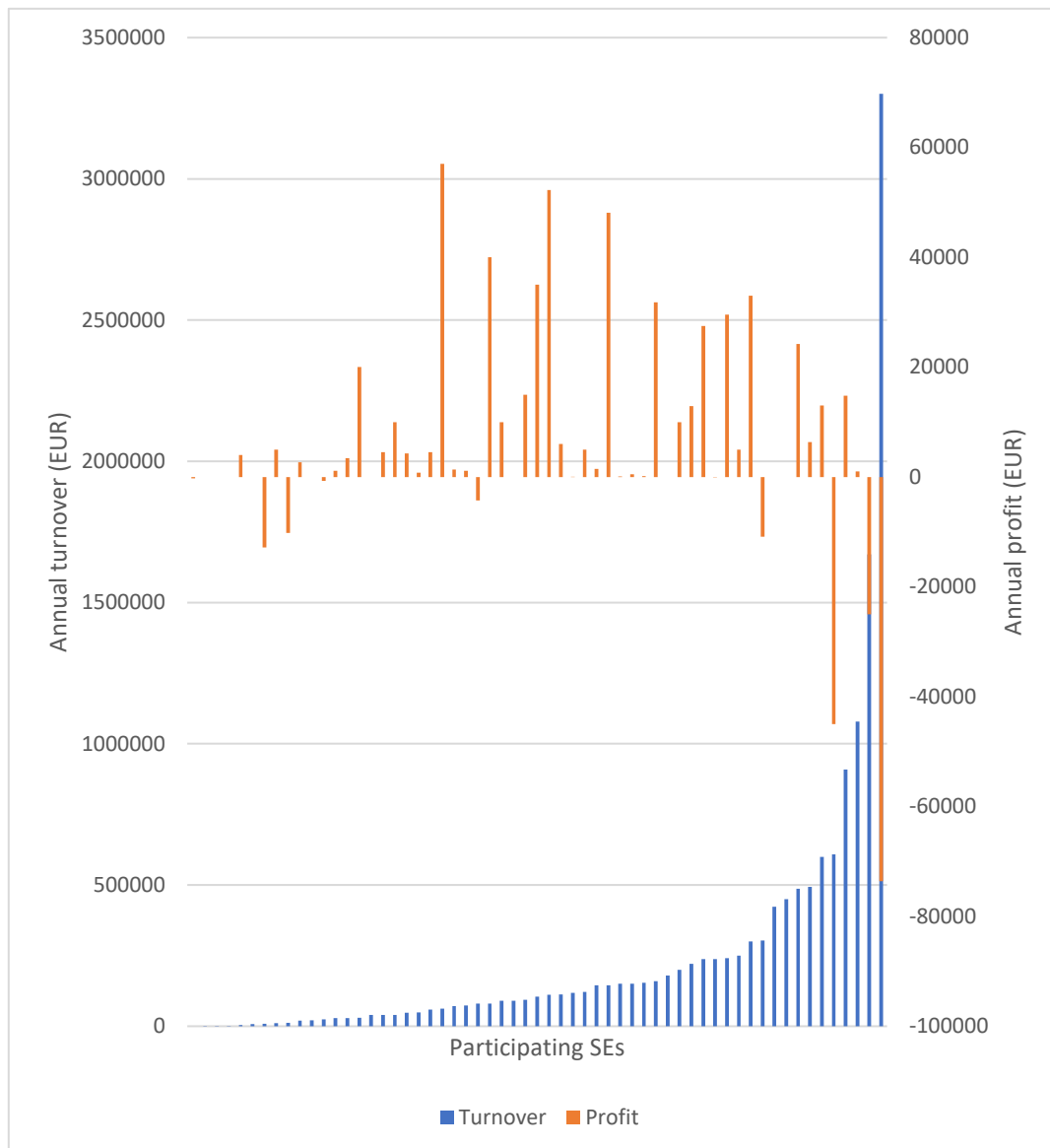
Figure 7: Annual turnover and profit, 2018

participants reported a level of turnover less than EUR500,000, three-quarters less than EUR250,000, and around a third less than EUR50,000. Reported annual profit/loss follows a similar pattern, with average profit (EUR9,500) much higher than the median (EUR3,700), again reflecting the influence of the single large SE on the data. In terms of the distribution, two-thirds of SEs reported profits of less than EUR10,000 (44%) or losses (22%). Only three SEs recorded profits of EUR50,000 or more (see *Figure 8*). While these figures suggest rather weak performance in traditional financial terms, with margins around 1.5-3%, it is likely that profits were under-reported, with some respondents probably including expenditure on their social and environmental purpose as overheads (which is a useful reminder of the importance of non-financial performance criteria for SEs) and others relying on non-trading forms of income, such as grants, where profits in the form of
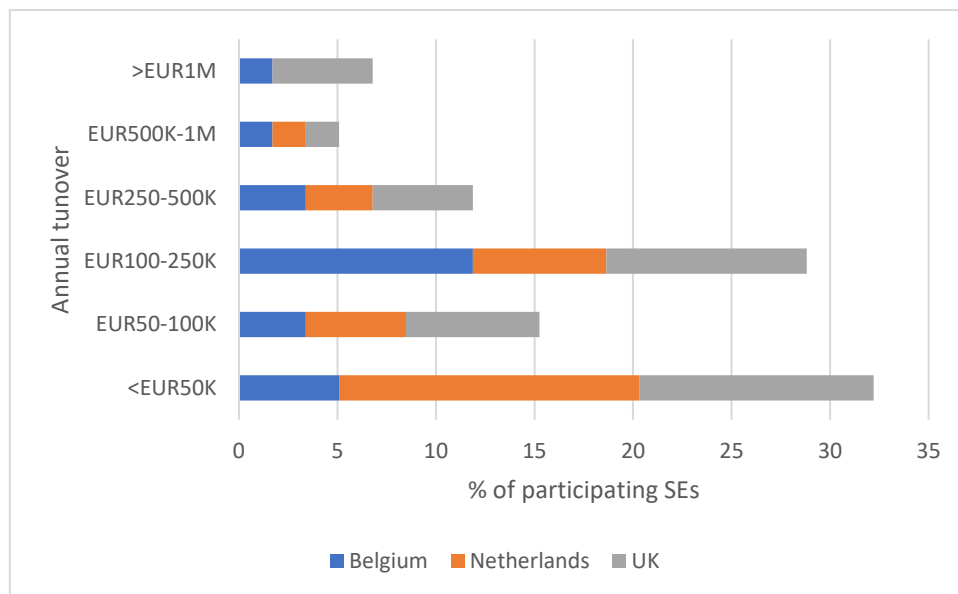
Figure 9: Annual turnover - banded and by region
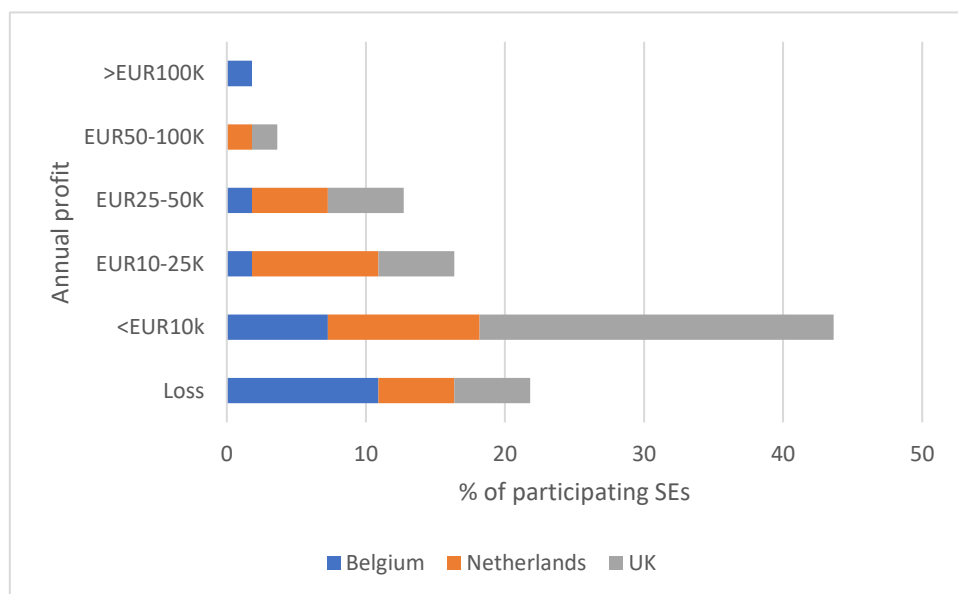
Figure 8: Annual profit - banded and by region

underspend are discouraged or actively precluded.

Having said that, the data on the proportion of income from commercial trading show a relatively low dependence on other income sources, such as grants or donations (see *Figure 11*). 56% of respondents to the exit questionnaire said that they earned more than 75% of their income from commercial trading, with 72% earning more than 50% from such sources. Only 16% derived less than 25% of their income from commercial trading. Compared to the baseline questionnaire, there was evidence of an overall shift away from non-commercial sources of income. This is something that

many SEs taking part in the programme wished to achieve, as indicated by interviews and one-to-one notes, and was actively promoted by the different activities of the programme as a way of making the business sustainable. This trend is, therefore, encouraging, with the usual caveat of being unable to draw firm conclusions from a relatively short measurement period.
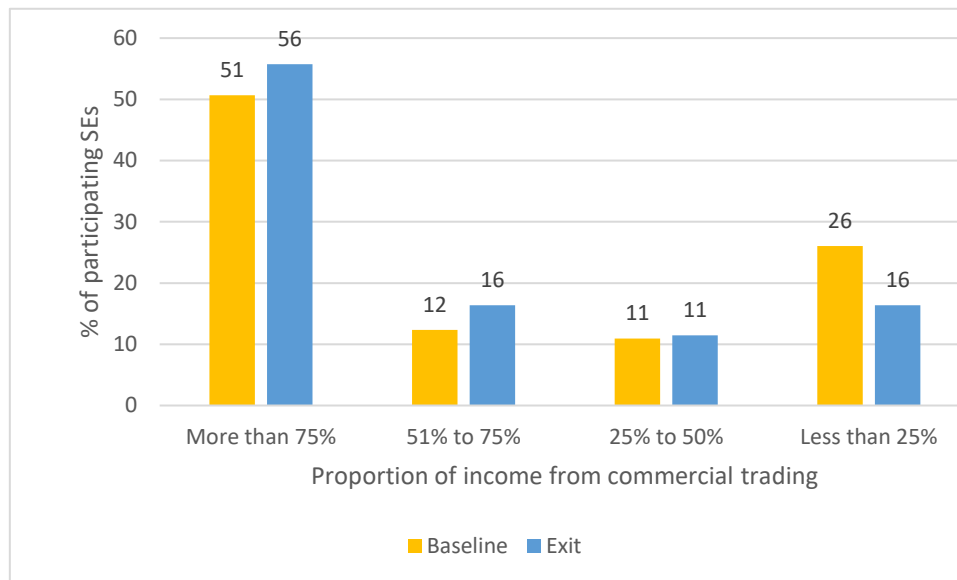
Figure 11:: Proportion of income from commercial trading - baseline and exit surveys compared

The same applies to the relative change in annual turnover and profit/loss between the baseline and exit questionnaire, although in this instance retrospective data were collected covering the period from 2015 to 2018. This potentially gives a clearer view of the historical trajectory of the
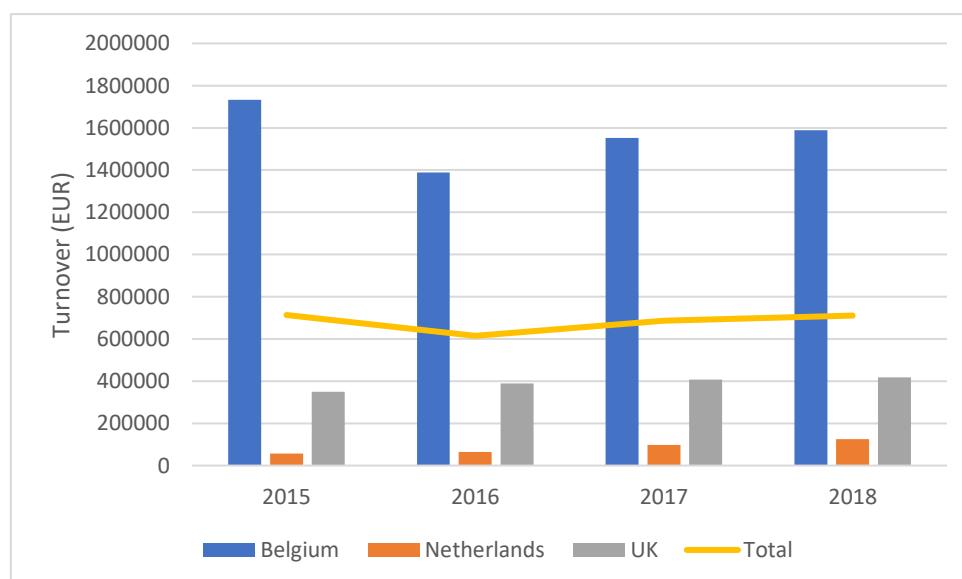
Figure 10 Average annual turnover of participating SEs, 2015-2018

participating SEs but does nothing to address the problem of inferring the effects of the programme with measurements taken so soon after it finished. As we shall see later in this report, there is more substantial evidence for the positive impact of the programme on the development of business and innovation skills and capabilities. However, one would not expect these to translate into bottom-line financial performance so quickly. Even so, it is worth looking at the changes in the financial data to see if any early patterns can be discerned. As above, the single large SE in the cohort has a disproportionate effect on calculating the overall trends because of the sheer size of its turnover and profit levels. *Figure 10* shows changes in the average annual turnover of the participating SEs for the years 2015-2018 including the response from the large SE. On this basis, the trend for average turnover across the cohort indicates a dip in 2016 followed by an increase over the next two years,
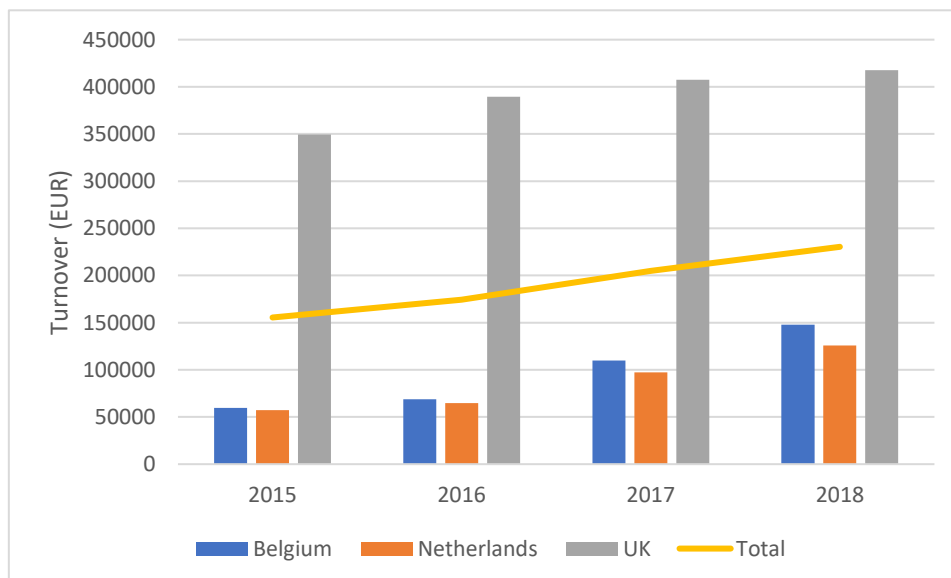
Figure 12: Average annual turnover of participating SEs, 2015-2018 (adjusted)

albeit not enough to bring the figure back up to 2015 levels. This is almost entirely an artefact of the turnover trajectory of the large SE. Removing this respondent from the calculation reveals a different pattern (see *Figure 12*). The trend in average turnover is now a steady upward one, from around EUR155,000 in 2015 to EUR230,000 in 2018. It might be tempting to see this as an indicator of the positive impact of the programme, and certainly it provides more positive evidence than if the trend was downwards. However, the average growth trajectory over the four years is fairly constant. All things being equal, this does not suggest a large and immediate effect of the programme in terms of income growth. A more favourable indicator of this would have been an upturn of the growth curve in the period since the support measures were provided. As suggested above, this is unlikely in such a short timescale.
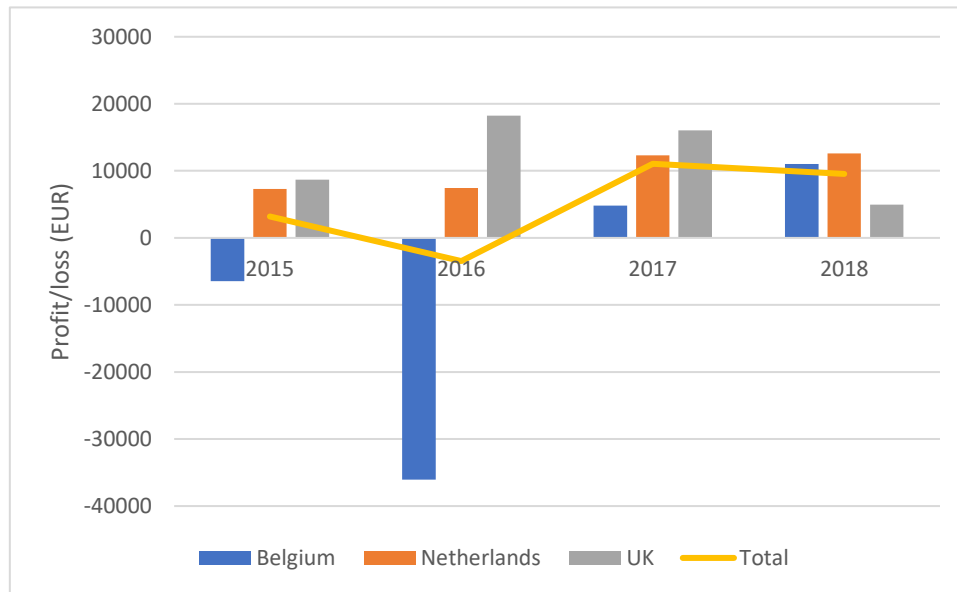
Figure 14: Average annual profit/loss of participating SEs 2015-2018
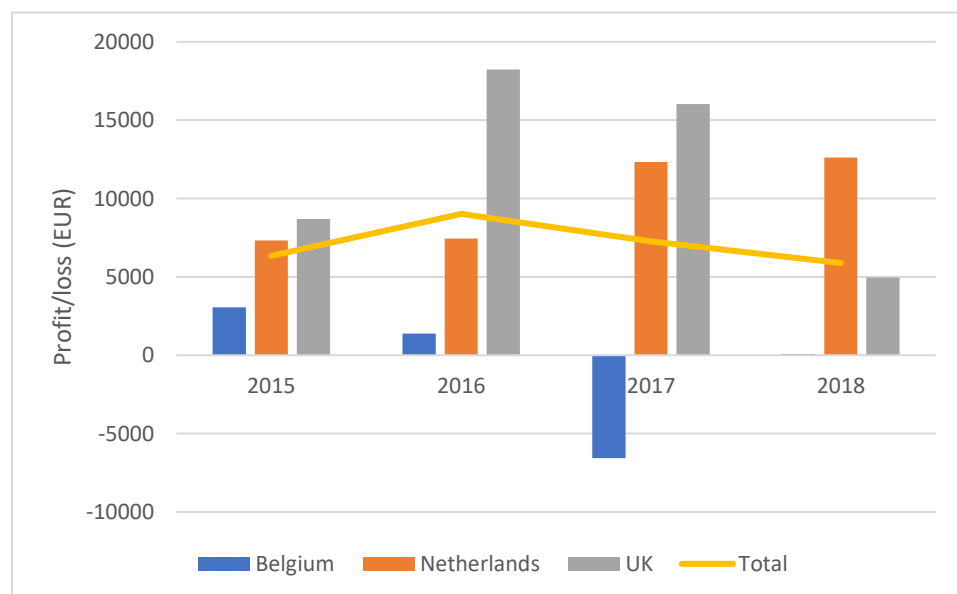
Figure 13: Average annual profit/loss of participating SEs 2015-2018 (adjusted)

While the single large SE participant again has a disproportionate impact on the data for change in average profit/loss (see *Figure 14*), adjusting for this does not reveal any clear pattern across the data as a whole (see *Figure 13*). This is mainly because, in either case, the three regions exhibit quite different change trajectories. For Belgium, including the outlier response of the large SE from this region, the data show a major dip in profitability in 2016, followed by recovery and growth over the next two years, mostly reflecting the influence of the outlier on the data. Removing this response reveals an overall downward trend in profitability, with another dip into negative earnings, this time in 2017. By contrast, average profit/loss levels for the United Kingdom respondents show a rise and

fall over the four years, nevertheless staying on the positive side of the balance sheet, while those for The Netherlands display an overall upward growth trend. Even more so than the turnover data, it is difficult to draw any conclusions from the figures for profit/loss regarding the impact of the programme.

5 Developing business and innovation capabilities

The baseline and exit surveys included questions designed to measure how far business and innovation skills and capabilities developed during the course of the programme. In the baseline questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate their confidence across a range of skills and capabilities, firstly, associated with managing their business, and secondly, focusing more specifically on their innovation practices. Responses were measured according to a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Not at all confident' to 'Very confident'. The exit survey included the same list of items, but instead of asking respondents about their level of confidence, the questions asked about the extent to which these had changed during the period of the programme. A five-point Likert scale was again used, this time ranging from 'Significantly decreased' to 'Significantly increased'.

Although the questions in each survey measured different perceptions about respondents' skills and capabilities - level of confidence and degree of improvement respectively - comparing them nevertheless provides useful insights into the pattern of improvements and how far these address weaknesses identified by SEs in the baseline survey. The rationale behind this is to get a sense of additionality, i.e. where respondents report low levels of confidence and high levels of improvement, there is potentially more added value compared to a situation where strong improvements are made in areas where respondents are already very confident. Conversely, where both confidence and improvement levels are reported as weak, the implication is that capability gaps are not being addressed, which is a potential cause for concern.

This is relevant for assessing the influence of the programme because of the customised nature of the interventions, especially the one-to-one coaching. Given that each SE was supposed to be diagnosed according to its strengths and weaknesses in terms of business and innovation, an indication of success would be the extent to which improvements occur in areas of weakness, suggesting an effective targeting of support to the needs of the SE.

5.1 Business skills and capabilities

Figure 15 shows the comparison between confidence and improvement levels for the different items included under business skills. The results can be clustered into four different groups representing differing combinations between levels of confidence and degrees of improvement, as shown in *Figure 16*.

The first cluster includes those items where SEs reported low levels of confidence at the start and strong improvements at the end of the programme. By far the biggest positive variation is in

Figure 15: Change in confidence in business skills

'Business strategy and planning'. While only 22% of respondents said they were 'Confident' or Very confident' in this area, 84% reported either moderate (48%) or significant (36%) improvements in this capability. The low levels of confidence in strategy and planning are in line with existing research on SMEs, which suggests that limited resources and the operational demands of the day-to-day running of the business make it difficult to create time to consider more future-oriented and strategic issues. Given the objectives of the programme, the strong relative improvement in this area is a favourable outcome and quite consistent with the emphasis of the package of support on encouraging a more systematic approach to strategy.

Although not of the same magnitude as 'Business strategy and planning', there were also developments in a number of other business skills where respondents were starting from a relatively low confidence base. 'Measuring and communicating your social and/or environmental value' was only rated in the top two categories of confidence by 22% of respondents, compared with 56% who

LOW   HIGH

Managing people **Technical skills and knowledge**	**Solving problems** **Making decisions** **Business networking** **Working in partnership and collaborating with others**
Sales and customer support **Fundraising** **Accessing public procurement** **Managing cashflow** **Working with trustees and volunteers**	**Business strategy and planning** **Measuring and communicating your social and/or environmental value** **Marketing and branding** **Market research** **Costing your products and services**

CONFIDENCE (HIGH / LOW)

Figure 16: Change in business skills clustered by baseline confidence and improvement

reported either moderate (40%) or significant (16%) improvements in this area. The ability to measure and communicate non-financial types of value has been identified as a challenging but important thing for SEs to be able to do in order to compete effectively for customers, contracts, investors, and funders. It is, therefore, encouraging to see this capability ranked near the top of the areas revealing the biggest improvement. Strong improvements from low confidence levels were also made in the related areas of 'Marketing and branding' (confidence 32%, improvement 57%), 'Market research' (confidence 29%, improvement 53%), and 'Costing your products and services' (confidence 30%, improvement 47%), which are all market-related capabilities. As with support for developing strategic planning skills, all these areas received specific attention in the programme, again suggesting a positive outcome for the Accelerator in helping to build these capabilities.

The next cluster of business skills and capabilities are those where strong improvements were reported for areas that respondents were already reasonably confident about. While this may not

yield the same additionality, these are nevertheless important and provide evidence that the programme was able to contribute to developing skills despite starting from a relatively high base. Indeed, all of the items in this group of results are in the higher range in terms of how widely respondents reported improvements. The most highly ranked of this cluster, coming in at 2nd overall, was 'Solving problems', with 68% of respondents reporting moderate (60%) or significant (8%) improvements in this skills area. The other items in this cluster include 'Business networking' (ranked 3rd, improvement 65%), 'Making decisions' (ranked 4th equal, improvement 58%), and 'Working in partnership and collaborating with others' (ranked 4th equal, improvement 58%). Confidence levels in these skills and capabilities similarly rated quite highly, again appearing in the upper rankings for this criterion. 'Making decisions' was the top-ranked item, with 58% of respondents judging their SE to be either 'Confident' or 'Very confident' in this area. 'Working in partnership and collaborating with others' was ranked 3rd (confidence 54%), 'Solving problems' was ranked 4th (confidence 53%), and 'Business networking' 6th (confidence 45%).

It is probably no coincidence that these are all more generic or foundational business skills, compared with the more specialist capabilities above. As such, they are likely to be already developed in any more established business. However, the results indicate that the programme encouraged further improvements, which are maybe not too surprising given the design of the activities. For example, the Accelerator involved a large element of networking and relationship-building, both within and across the participating regions, which are consistent with supporting networking and collaboration skills. Similarly, the one-to-one coaching and peer-based action learning elements of the programme placed a firm emphasis on helping the SEs to solve specific problems they were experiencing and make decisions about what courses of action to implement, as confirmed by the interview data and analysis of records from the coaching.

The third cluster is comprised of two areas where respondents indicated relatively high levels of confidence, but where the reported improvements were on the lower side. The first of these is 'Managing people', with a confidence level of 55% and 41% of people reporting either moderate (29%) or significant (12%) improvements. As above, this is a more foundational business skill, although potentially of rather less relevance to sole traders and micro-businesses, at least internally. The reported improvements are smaller, but still in the medium range, so this is not a major cause for concern. Indeed, looking at the percentage of respondents that reported significant

improvements, this is the sixth highest item. The other area relates to 'Technical skills and knowledge' (confidence 50%, improvement 35%).

The responses here are likely to be influenced by the product and service areas that the SEs operate within, either on the commercial side or in the delivery of their social/environmental purpose. As shown in Appendix 5, the participants in the Accelerator were extremely varied with regards to their commercial and social/environmental activities. As a result, the technological intensity and technical specificity of these activities also varies and one would, consequently, expect this item to be most relevant to those SEs operating in more complex and specialised domains, where they will have needed to develop and deploy specialist technical capabilities in order to operate effectively. Therefore, looking closely at the reported confidence levels, it is not too surprising that 22% of respondents said they were 'Very confident' in this area - this is the top ranked response when considering the highest confidence category on its own. Similarly, since the programme only offered specialist technical support for a selection of topics, and focused more on broader business and innovation skills, it is not unexpected that improvements in technical skills and knowledge were towards the lower end of the scale.

The final cluster of results are those where respondents reported both lower levels of confidence and improvement. On the face of it, these are potentially areas where the programme may have been less effective in targeting support and so warrant careful scrutiny. There are five items in this cluster. Of these, three are probably explainable because of their more limited relevance to the full cohort of participants in the Accelerator. These are 'Working with trustees and volunteers' (confidence 36%, improvement 33%), 'Fundraising' (confidence 27%, improvement, 34%), and 'Accessing public procurement' (confidence 17%, improvement 18%). Indeed, the number of respondents answering 'Not relevant' to these items was relatively high compared to the other areas - 15%, 11%, and 17% respectively in the baseline survey, and 15%, 13%, and 21% in the exit survey.

Accessing public procurement is lowest ranked along both dimensions and does raise questions about the degree of engagement with public sector contracts as a source of income. Without further investigation it is not possible to say whether this is because of availability, which has been negatively affected by spending reductions in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, or lack of knowledge, willingness, and/or ability to tender for those public contracts that are available. If it is the latter, then the results may indicate the need for more specialised support in this area. With regards to fundraising, this is unlikely to be relevant to those SEs that are less dependent on finance from non-commercial sources (such as grants and donations). As we saw in Section 4.3, just over 50% of SEs participating in the Accelerator were deriving 75% of more of their income from

commercial trading. Similarly, working with trustees and volunteers is not a skill that all SEs need to develop, depending as it does on the chose legal form and the extent to which volunteer employees are used.

The remaining two items in this cluster are arguably of more concern. These are 'Managing cashflow' (confidence 39%, improvement 37%) and 'Sales and customer support' (confidence 29%, improvement 37%). These results are more in the mid-range, but even so these are areas where SEs are typically less confident and would benefit from more assistance. This is especially important because both areas can have a significant impact on the performance and indeed survival of firms.

5.2   Innovation skills and capabilities

Zooming in more specifically on innovation skills and capabilities, *Figure 17* shows the confidence and improvement levels reported in the baseline and exit surveys for different associated areas. As above, the results have been clustered according to a two-by-two matrix depending on the differences between the two dimensions (see *Figure 18*). In this case, only three out of four of the quadrants are occupied. Overall, the reported improvements for innovation skills were of a greater magnitude compared to those for business skills. Given the particular focus of the programme on helping SEs to develop capabilities for generating high impact and sustainable innovations, this is a positive result.

The first cluster comprises areas that respondents identified as lower confidence at the beginning of the programme and then reported stronger improvements in the exit questionnaire. As before, this can be interpreted as a good indication that the programme helped to target areas of need, where capabilities were previously less developed. Interestingly, the two areas that exhibited the biggest differences between confidence and improvement levels both relate to the back-end of the innovation process. These are 'Commercialising and capturing value from new products, services, or processes' (confidence 15%, improvement 56%) and 'Ensuring the long-term benefits of new products, services, or processes' (confidence 20%, improvement 50%). This is significant because both the research conducted at the beginning of the project, as well as the wider literature on SME innovation[9], highlight the challenges that smaller firms face in capturing the benefits from their

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[9] Saunila, M., 2019. Innovation capability in SMEs: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, In press; Spithoven, A., Vanhaverbeke, W., Roijakkers, N., 2013. Open innovation practices in SMEs and large enterprises. Small Business Economics 41, 537–562.

Figure 17: Change in confidence in innovation skills

innovations. They also tend to be stronger in terms of front-end innovation activities, such as searching for opportunities and coming up with new ideas, but often struggle to turn those ideas into reality. It is, therefore, encouraging that another two of the items in this cluster relate to the evaluation and implementation of ideas. 'Assessing risks and feasibility of new ideas' (confidence 26%, improvement 60%) is an important capability relating to the selection of promising ideas on which to focus resources for further development. 'Launching and implementing new products, services, or processes' (confidence 39%, improvement 67%) is similarly about taking new ideas and turning them into something concrete. The last item in this group of results is 'Accessing and using external know-how' (confidence 31%, improvement 62%). This is an important capability, relevant throughout the innovation process, and especially significant for smaller firms that often need to build external relationships because they lack internal resources (time, knowledge, expertise, money, etc.).
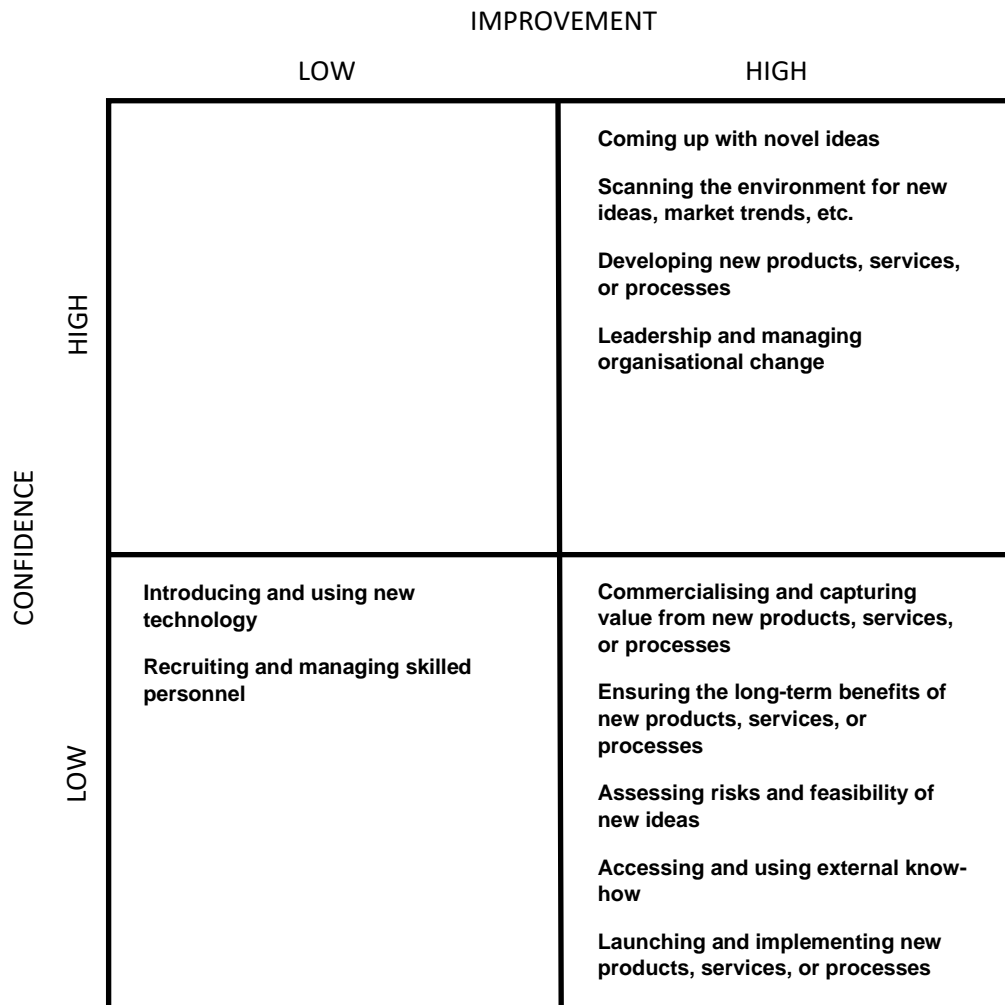
Figure 18: Change in innovation skills clustered by baseline confidence and improvement

The second cluster includes innovation skills and capabilities that respondents were more confident about, but nevertheless reported positive improvements on the back of this strong base. The first two of these confirm the point made above that SEs in this size range tend to find front-end innovation activities less of a challenge than the subsequent stages of the innovation journey. 'Coming up with novel ideas' (confidence 69%, improvement 61%) and 'Scanning the environment for new ideas, market trends, etc.' (confidence 53%, improvement 67%) are both at the ideation end of the innovation process, which is about inspiration, inventiveness, and identifying new opportunities with potential for further development. Generating new ideas is something that respondents report particular confidence in, yet interestingly a healthy majority also considered they had improved in this respect during the programme. A plausible interpretation is that the programme provided an additional stimulus for those taking part by creating situations that sparked their inspiration. Since most participating SEs were already strongly predisposed to come up with

new ideas, it is not surprising that they would have used the activities and environment provided by the programme to assist with this process, whether consciously or otherwise. As we will see in the section below on networks and relationships, there is evidence to support this suggestion. Nearly 70% of participants reported using the networking opportunities offered by the programme to identify new opportunities. These network relationships, as well as those beyond the programme, are also an important contributor to the scanning activities that help SEs identify opportunities and begin to evaluate how far their innovation ideas address unmet existing needs or open up new avenues for creating and capturing value.

The other two skills areas in this cluster are 'Developing new products, services, or processes' (confidence 50%; improvement 70%) and 'Leadership and managing organisational change' (confidence 46%; improvement 63%). Initial confidence levels and degree of improvement in both of these areas are in the middle range, but nevertheless do indicate a reasonable positive impact during the course of the programme. In terms of skills relating to new product, service, and process development, the initial confidence levels are consistent with the findings of the earlier interview research. Respondents typically found idea-generation to be the least difficult part of the innovation process and capturing value from innovations to be the most challenging, with development activities sitting somewhere in between. Improvements in this area are important because they provide a crucial bridge in the process of turning new ideas into reality, which is a necessary condition for creating and capturing value. Improvements in being able to lead and manage organisational change are also important. This is especially the case because most forms of innovation, particularly more radical innovations, are like to have repercussions for existing organisational arrangements and if such changes are not managed effectively they can undermine the potential benefits of the innovation process.

The third and final cluster includes innovation-related skills that respondents considered themselves to be less confident about at the beginning of the programme, but also reported lower levels of improvement than in other areas. As with business skills in the equivalent quadrant, there is possible concern that these innovation skills remain under-developed despite the activities of the programme. However, it is worth bearing in mind that not all skills and capabilities are equally relevant to all organisations depending on such things as their size, sector, and types of innovation activities undertaken. The two areas in this cluster are 'Introducing and using new technology' (confidence 28%; improvement 33%) and 'Recruiting and managing skilled personnel' (confidence 36%; improvement 37%). Since the technology level of participants varied widely, including a range of high, medium, and lower technology sectors, it arguably the case that introducing and deploying

new technologies may not be as relevant for some of these firms than others. Even so, with the ongoing diffusion of digital technologies into the majority of sectors, being able to make the most of these technologies is important, As such, this is an area that may warrant more specific attention in future versions of the programme. Similarly, with the majority of participants being in the micro- and small- ranges in terms of size, highly developed human resource management skills may not be as relevant as for larger firms. Certainly, with fewer employees to manage, smaller enterprises are less likely to develop extensive capabilities in this area because they do not really need to. However, especially for those interested in scaling-up, this could be another area to be enhanced in future iterations of the programme.

6 Leveraging networks and relationships

It has long been recognised that innovation is a multi-party activity, rarely undertaken in isolation[10]. This message has received particular emphasis more recently in the literature on open innovation[11]. Smaller organisations, which represent the majority of the Accelerator Programme participants, are particularly reliant on interactions with external stakeholders for access to resources – knowledge, ideas, expertise, support, finance, and so on – that they are unable to mobilise internally. The initial interview-based research showed that many SEs are extremely adept at building and leveraging networks to make up for the lack of internal resources. This was confirmed by findings from the baseline survey. For example, one question asked about the importance of different sources of knowledge for generating new ideas (see *Figure 19*). Although not all of the items are about network connections, the top two responses by a reasonable margin were 'Clients, customers, or end users of
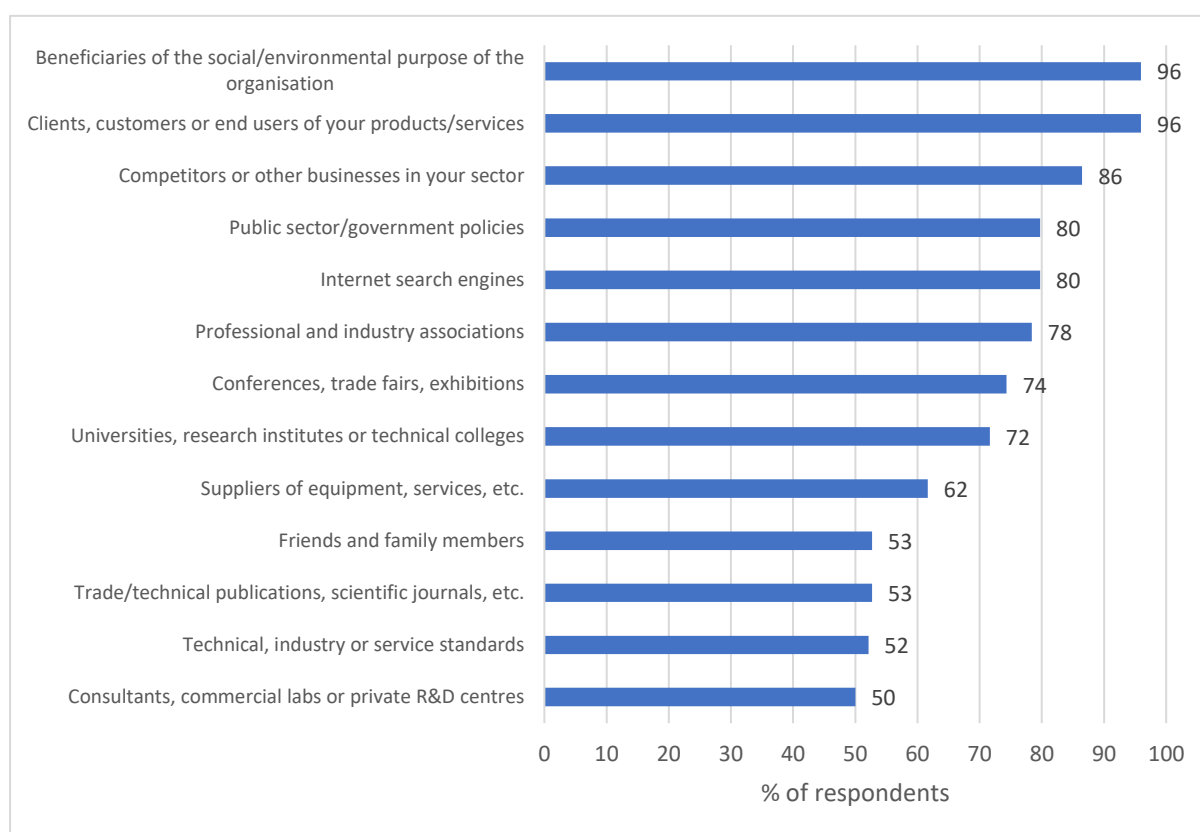

Figure 19: Sources of new ideas

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[10] Freeman, C., 1987. *Technology, Policy, and Economic Performance: Lessons from Japan.* Pinter Publishers, New York; Lundvall, B., 1995. *National Systems of Innovation: Towards a Theory of Innovation and Interactive Learning.* Pinter, London.

[11] Chesbrough, H., 2003. *Open Innovation: The New Imperative for Creating and Profiting from Technology.* Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA; West, J., Salter, A., Vanhaverbeke, W., Chesbrough, H., 2014. Open innovation: The next decade. *Research Policy* 43, 805–811.

your products/services' and 'Beneficiaries of the social/environmental purpose of the organisations', which 96% of respondents in both cases considered to be either 'Very important', 'Important', or 'Moderately important' as a source of new ideas. This is perhaps not surprising as these groups are those with whom SEs are likely to have most regular contact. Other important network-related sources of new ideas were 'Competitors or other businesses in your sector' (86%), 'Professional and industry associations' (78%), 'Conferences, trade fairs, and exhibitions' (74%), and 'Universities, research institutes, or technical colleges' (72%). Somewhat less important were 'Suppliers of equipment, services, etc.' (62%), 'Friends and family members' (53%), and 'Consultants, commercial labs, or private R&D centres' (50%).

It is important for SEs to be aware of what is happening in their immediate business environment. As such, interactions with stakeholders (customers, beneficiaries, partners, competitors, and suppliers) are a crucial source of feedback and market intelligence. However, other sources can also provide useful support, which there is arguably more scope to leverage. The SPARK programme, with its portfolio of activities and opportunities for interaction with a range of different groups across the three regions, potentially offered a way not only of building on the existing network strengths of the participating SEs, but also extending and broadening them into new areas. To gain insights into this, the exit questionnaire asked questions about the types of network relationships built during the programme and how these connections were used.
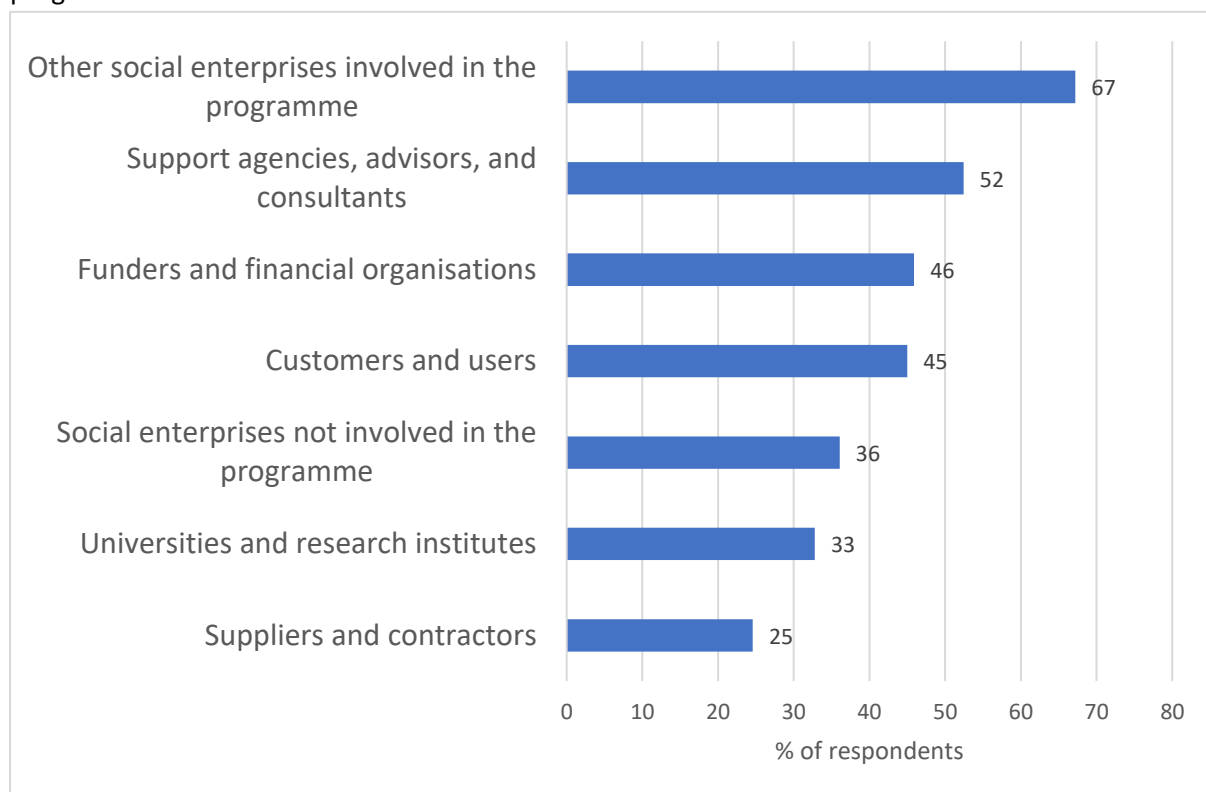

Figure 20: Network contacts made due to programme

Figure 20 shows the extent to which the SPARK programme helped participants make connections with different groups and organisations. Unsurprisingly, the top category is 'Other social enterprises involved in the programme' (67%), although what is perhaps surprising here is that the percentage is not higher. One interpretation is that only those connections that some importance or significance were considered worth mentioning, so some respondents did not consider the programme to have put them in touch with other participating SEs of relevance to them. Even so, one would have thought that a larger proportion would have reported making contacts through the peer-based action learning, international safaris, and joint participation in specialist training. This is a potential area for investigation and further development of the delivery of programme, in terms of ensuring that all participants make the most of the chance created to interact with other SEs taking part in the programme.

The next highest category of contact is 'Support agencies, advisors, and consultants' (52%). The equivalent category in the baseline survey was identified as the least important source of new ideas, which can probably be explained by the costs involved, since they are likely to be beyond the limited resources of many smaller SEs. Programmes such as SPARK are able to reduce this barrier by offering such services for free or at heavily subsidised costs. However, the reported level of contact is still lower than expected given that the programme was delivered by consultants, advisors, and support agencies, especially with one-to-one coaching forming such a major part of the activities. This finding is difficult to interpret, particularly when compared with other evidence from the exit survey which suggest that the vast majority of participants really appreciated the long-term engagement and coaching they received from specialist advisors.

'Funders and financial organisations' (47%) is the next most important group that respondents reported being put in contact through the programme. This is an interesting and important finding for two reasons. Firstly, finding sources of finance is challenging for SEs, often more so than SMEs because of issues about legal status, in some cases, and negative perceptions of financial performance and stability of SEs by traditional financial institutions, as signalled in the initial SPARK interview survey. Being able to signpost them in the right direction towards receptive funders that understand and are sympathetic to SEs is important. Secondly, this is an interesting result because, unlike some other SE support programmes, SPARK did not offer a specific financial element to its support, although there was some coverage of financial issues in the specialist training. The percentage reporting contact with funders through the programme is quite high given that this was not an explicit part of the design and largely happened through the information and advice provided by the coaches and other specialists involved in delivering SPARK. Being able to repeat this in future

support based on the SPARK design would thus crucially depend on recruiting coaches and other advisors with the same sorts of knowledge and contacts to enable them to play such a signposting role. It may also be worth considering whether there needs to be a more direct inclusion of funding and financial considerations in the innovation model and its associated support pathways.

'Customers and users' (47%) are reported as a reasonably important target for contacts facilitated by the programme, but much lower than the equivalent groups in the baseline survey (albeit this focused specifically on networks as sources of ideas rather than contacts more generally). Taken together these findings do not raise any great concerns as the participating SEs were already strongly engaged with their customer and user bases. Any additional support the programme can offer in this area is useful, but perhaps less so than filling in other gaps in the networks typically leveraged by SEs.

Groups which respondents reported rather lower levels of contact as a result of the programme include 'Social enterprises not involved in the programme' (36%), 'Universities and research institutes' (33%), and 'Suppliers and contractors' (25%). These figures suggest there is potentially more that could be done in connecting participating SEs to these sorts of contacts. The lower level of reported engagement with universities and research institutions is especially surprising, not least because a university was a key participant in the design and delivery of the programme. This is an
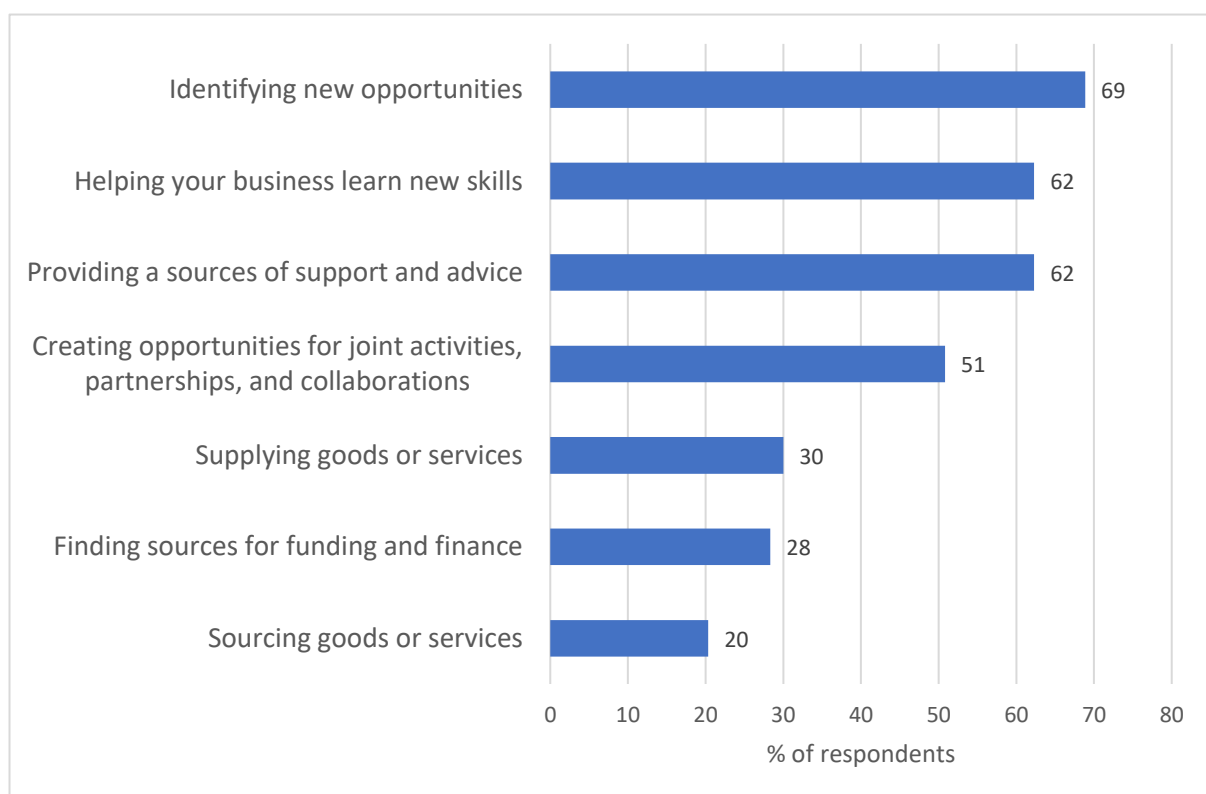

Figure 21: Use of network relationships

area that is worth investigating to see whether this is a more generalised trend and, if so, to consider ways in which any barriers to engagement can be addressed.

Figure 21 shows how the responding SEs have used the network relationships built during the Accelerator Programme in support of a range of activities. The most popular of these are 'Identifying new opportunities' (69%), 'Helping your business learn new skills' (62%), and 'Providing a source of support and advice' (62%). The first is consistent with existing studies on SEs (and SMEs more generally) in that it fits with the tendency to focus on front-end innovation activities and confirms the use of network contacts as a way of scanning the environment for new opportunities. Taken in conjunction with the type of network contacts respondents interacted with most intensively, the findings suggest that SEs search relatively close to home for new ideas and opportunities, relying mostly on customers and beneficiaries. This has the benefit of helping to ensure that customer, user, and beneficiary needs are addressed. However, if the search space is too narrow, there is the risk that wider and potentially more unexpected opportunities will be missed. Using networks to learn new skills is another important activity. Indeed, this was one of the key principles built into the programme, creating opportunities for participants to benefit from a range of connections allowing both more formal and informal learning. For example, the one-to-one coaching and specialist training offered more structured and formal learning opportunities, while the international safaris, peer-based action learning, and other interactions between the participants encouraged situations in which they were able to learn from each other. The same applies to using networks as a source of support and advice. This can also be closely linked to learning, where advice takes the form of practical solutions and technical knowledge to help address particular issues faced by the respondents. However, support may also take the form of emotional encouragement and understanding. The research conducted earlier in the SPARK project clearly indicated that the innovation process for many SEs can be challenging and fraught with difficult choices. Given these pressures, emotional support can be just as important as more technical advice. The Accelerator Programme was designed to create an environment for interactions that enables SEs to develop their innovation skills and capabilities. The ways that respondents use the network opportunities are consistent with this in terms of underpinning learning, support, and skills development in an encouraging environment.

The SPARK Accelerator also sought to establish an environment in which joint activities and collaborations could emerge in support of SEs' innovation processes. This was most explicitly developed in the Open Innovation Group (OIG) activities, which were designed to allow for knowledge sharing and co-development of innovations between the participants. However, it was

also a wider aspiration that creating suitable network opportunities would potentially also allow such collaborations to emerge in a more organic fashion. It is, therefore, encouraging that 51% of respondents reported that contacts made during the programme 'Created opportunities for joint activities, partnerships, and collaborations'.

Activities rather less supported by network connections facilitated by the programme include 'Supplying goods or services' (30%), 'Finding sources for funding and finance' (28%), and 'Sourcing goods or services' (20%). The responses for supplying and sourcing goods or services are not unexpected as these activities were not a primary focus of support for the programme. However, it is still informative to see indications that both upstream and downstream supply chain connections were made as a by-product of the network opportunities created by the SPARK Accelerator. The item referring to sources of funding and finance needs to be considered in conjunction with the question about what connections were made through the programme. Thus, while 47% of respondents reported connections with funders and financial institutions as a result of the programme, a lower proportion (28%) said they had used the network connections created by SPARK to find sources of funding. A reasonable explanation for this would be that making contact with funders does not mean that one is necessarily successful at securing funding.

7   Innovation activities and outcomes

The exit survey collected information about the innovation activities undertaken by participants during the Accelerator Programme. This was guided by a broad definition of innovation in line with more recent approaches to the measurement of innovation[12]. Thus, while suitable significance was accorded to standard indicators, such as the number of new products and processes, these were modified and extended to include other types of innovation not necessarily captured by traditional measures. As is clear from the sectoral profile of the cohort, there is a large representation of service activities and so care was taken to include intangible services as well as physical products in recording the number of new products/services. Efforts were also made to shift the emphasis away from a narrow view of innovation as mainly a matter of technological change. While technologies are certainly important, we also sought to capture other types of innovation in terms of marketing and market position, organisational configurations, business models, managerial approaches, and so forth. Crucially, given the focus on social enterprise, innovations relating to social and environmental impact were also included.

As shown in *Figure 22*, the vast majority of SEs that took part in the programme introduced new products or services during the period of their participation. 86% of the cohort introduced one or more new products or services, with an average of just over 2 overall. As a point of comparison, the
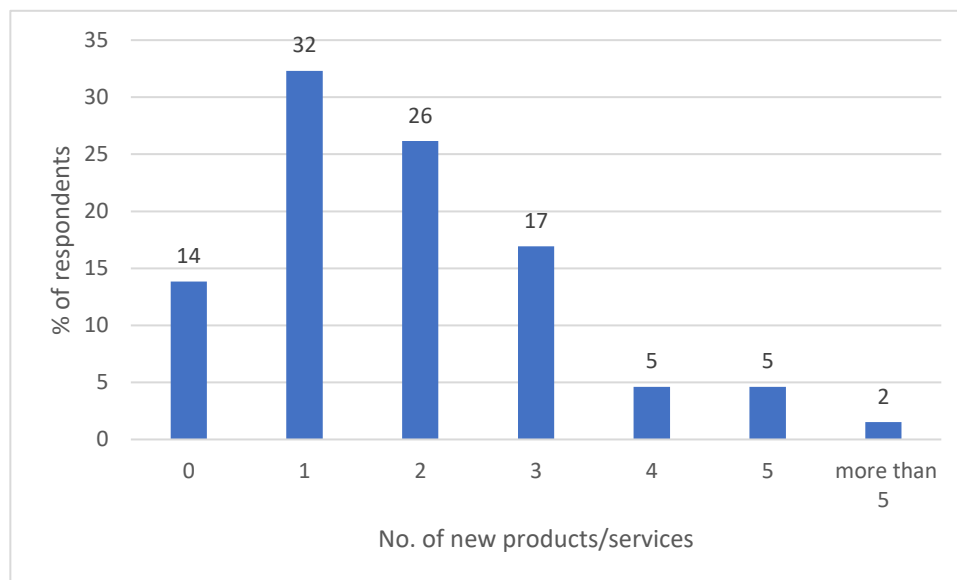

Figure 22: Number of new products and services introduced during the programme

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[12] E.g. OECD, 2018, *Oslo Manual: Guidelines for Collecting, Reporting, and Using Data on Innovation,* 4th Edition. OECD, Paris.

Social Enterprise UK State of Social Enterprise Survey 2019 reported that 56% of social enterprises in their UK-wide sample introduced new products or services in the previous 12 months, which in turn compares with 36% of UK SMEs[13]. This suggests a favourable performance for the SEs taking part in the Accelerator Programme. The proportion of participants introducing new processes during the programme was smaller at 59%, but again it is interesting to compare to the SEUK 2019 survey where the equivalent figure is a much lower 37%.

Figure 23 shows the level of activity in other areas of innovation that are not captured by more traditional product and process measures. Here we can see that 83% of respondents introduced changes to their marketing concepts and strategies during the period of the programme, while 80% introduced new organisational processes and procedures. For the latter there is some overlap with
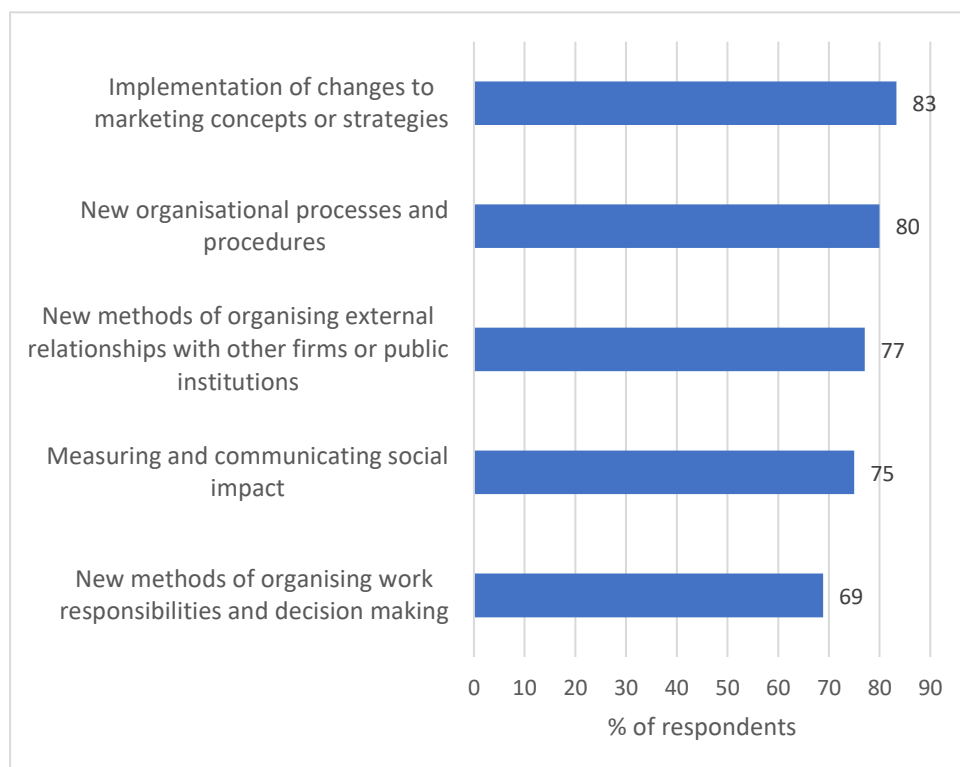

Figure 23: Organisational, marketing, and other innovations introduced during the programme

the wider measure of process innovation, although the focus here is specifically on new organisational arrangements rather than the implementation of new technologies. Innovations in terms of interacting with external stakeholders were also important, with 77% of respondents reporting new methods of organising external relationships with other firms or public institutions.

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[13] Social Enterprise UK, 2020, *State of Social Enterprise: South East.* Social Enterprise UK, London.

Still high, but perhaps lower than might be expected, 75% of participating SEs made changes to how they measure and communicate their social impact. 69% of respondents also reported changes during the programme to how they organise work responsibilities and decision-making. It is clear that the participants in the programme innovated across a range of vectors and this diversity is confirmed by additional data collected on the specific innovations undertaken by the SEs (see Appendix 6).

As well as measuring the occurrence of innovations of different types, the exit survey also asked about the effects of the innovations introduced across a range of outcomes (see *Figure 24*). The responses reveal some interesting patterns. For example, in terms of economic impact, a much larger proportion of respondents (48%) reported that the innovations they had introduced during the programme had a positive effect on turnover, compared to increased profit (36%) or reduced
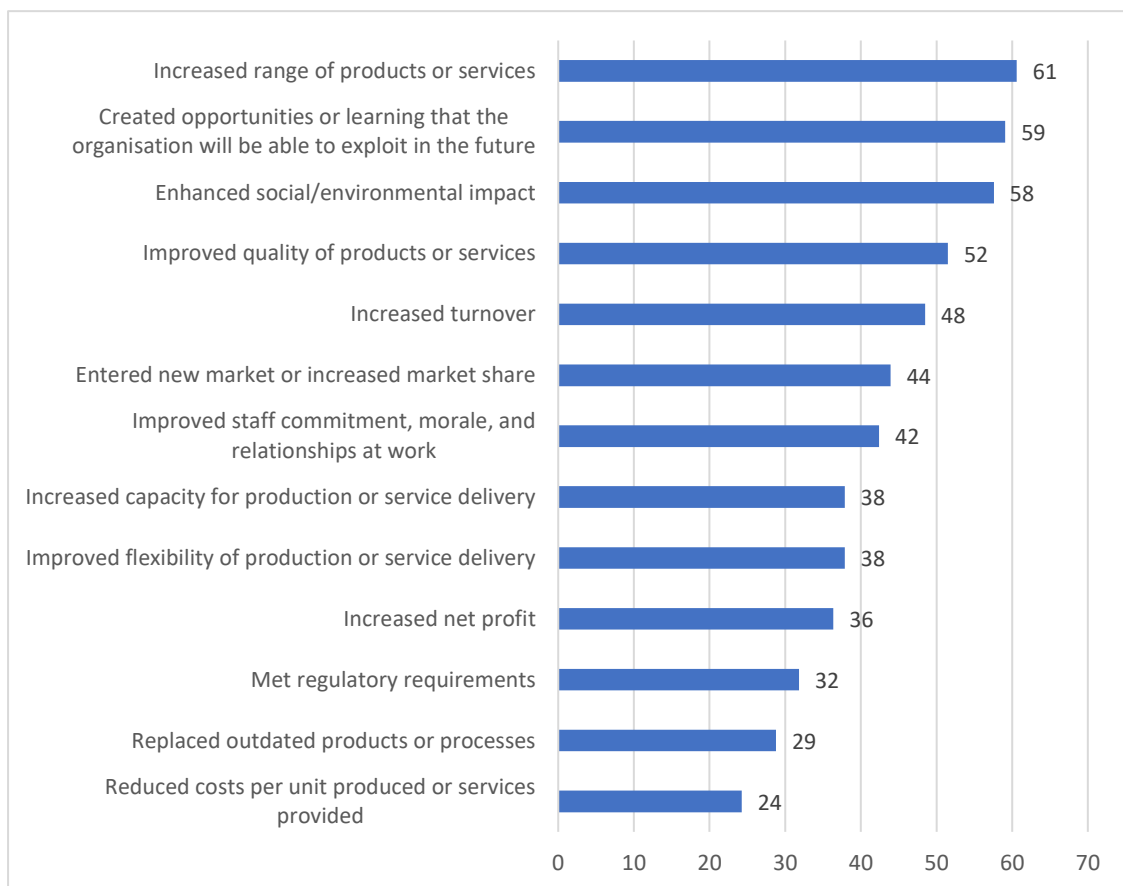

Figure 24: Effects of innovations introduced during the programme

costs of products and services (24%). In terms of profitability this is not too surprising given that there is likely to be a time-lag between the introduction of an innovation and any financial return that it may yield. It is also worth bearing in mind that financial value is not the only type of return

that can arise from innovation, as can be seen from the other impacts resulting from innovation in *Figure 24*. For example, 58% of respondents said that their innovations had enhanced their social and/or environmental impact. Many of the other effects are important but would not necessarily have a direct effect on the bottom line and in any case are likely to take some time to feed through. The top response, reported by 61% of participants, was that the innovations they introduced helped them to increase the range of their products and/or services, while 52% identified improved quality as an effect of innovations introduced. Both of these could in turn influence levels of turnover and potential profitability. Another related effect, reported by 44% of respondents, was the opening up of new markets or increased market share, which again could ultimately feed through to important economic impacts.

As well as market-facing effects, participants in the programme also identified productions-side influences, including increased capacity and flexibility of production, both of which were reported by 38% of respondents. Somewhat less important were meeting regulatory requirements (32%)[14] and replacing outdated products or processes (29%). Reflecting impacts beyond the usual emphasis on product/service and process/technological innovation, it is interesting to note that 42% of participants introduced innovations that improved staff commitment, morale, and relationships at work.

Overall, the data suggest that the innovations supported by the programme have had a range of positive effects, both directly and indirectly, both on the commercial performance and social/environmental purpose of the participating SEs. In addition, the exit survey indicates that innovations themselves were also a source of learning, with 59% of participants reporting that the innovations they introduced created opportunities for learning that their organisations would be able to exploit in the future. This points to the role of innovation as part of a learning process where engaging in the process itself helps in building capabilities that can be used to support innovations in an ongoing way.

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[14] This will almost certainly have increased during Covid-19.

8   Impact of the SPARK Accelerator Programme on innovation capabilities

Sections 5.1 and 5.2 outlined the main patterns of business and innovation skill and capability development that occurred during the programme. This section focuses more specifically on the extent to which the programme helped to facilitate these changes. *Figure 25* shows the responses to a question asked in the exit survey about the extent to which participants felt the programme had helped them across a range of innovation-related activities. In terms of the overall development of business and innovation skills, 73% and 69% respectively reported a positive impact from their participation in the programme (combining the moderate, large, and very large items in the preference scale responses). The improvement of business skills is the top ranked category, while improving innovation skills is fourth. The second highest ranked area is 'Improving your ability to capture, financial, social, or environmental value from your innovations' (70%). This is a potentially significant result because the earlier interview-based research and the baseline survey showed SEs to be typically more adept at front-end innovation activities, with strong existing capabilities for
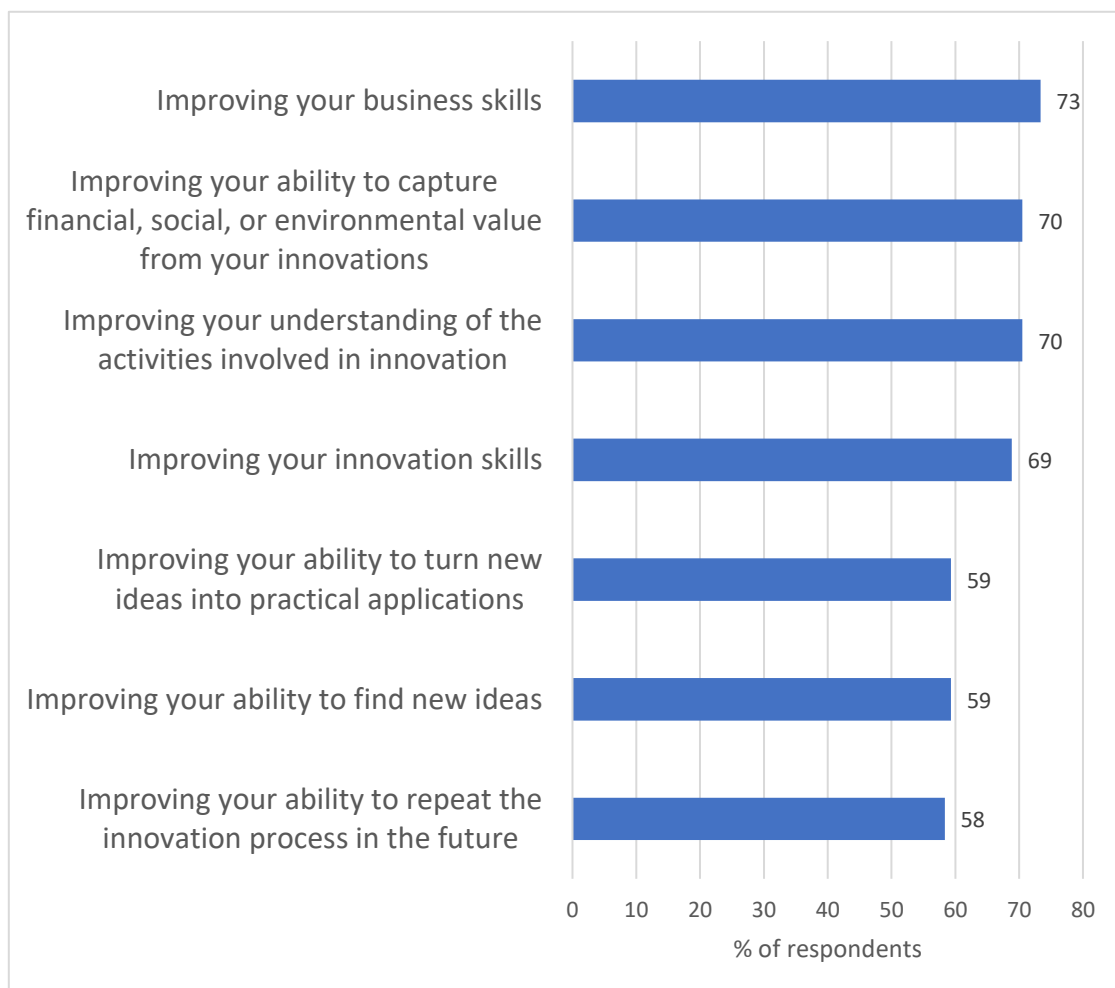

Figure 25: Impact of programme on business and innovation skills and capabilities

coming up with new ideas and searching for opportunities. Capabilities for turning ideas into reality and capturing value from them were revealed as much less developed. The Accelerator Programme was designed to provide support across the whole spectrum of innovation activities and stages. This finding from the exit survey is encouraging because it suggests that a large proportion of participants felt that the programme had helped improve their ability to capture value from their innovations, either in commercial terms or with regard to their social and/or environmental mission.

Another key aim of the programme was to encourage a more explicit understanding of innovation. This was based on the premise that a clearer understanding of the innovation process will help SEs to navigate their way more readily. The initial interviews showed that while many SEs are able to innovate, this often occurs in a more informal way, with a certain degree of 'muddling through'. By creating a more visible roadmap of innovation and helping guide participants through the different pathways, the Accelerator Programme sought to make the process less opaque and more manageable. It is thus positive to see that 70% of participants reported that they had improved their understanding of the activities involved in innovation.

The remaining three categories were rated somewhat lower, but still show that a respectable majority of participants experienced improvements in these areas. These are 'Improving your ability to turn new ideas into practical applications' (59%), 'Improving your ability to find new ideas' (59%), and 'Improving your ability to repeat the innovation process in the future' (58%). Although not of the same magnitude as the response about capturing value from innovations, the first of these items offers further evidence that the programme has been successful in supporting the development of capabilities targeting the later stages of the innovation process. This further helps to address the tendency for SEs to focus more on front-end innovation activities, in this case by turning new ideas into practical applications. Even so, the programme is based on a holistic view of innovation, which means that attention needs to be paid to developing capabilities across the whole range of innovation activities. Imbalances and gaps can lead to bottlenecks in the process. As extensively shown by the literature on organisational ambidexterity[15], it is equally problematic to focus only on coming up with new ideas and opportunities (exploration) as it is to concentrate too much on extracting value from existing products and services (exploitation). The problem with too much exploration is that there is not enough emphasis on selecting the most promising ideas, implementing them, and capturing value from them. The problem with too much exploitation is that the organisation can become too fixed on what it already does and less receptive to potentially

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[15] March, J.G., 1991. Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science* 2, 71–87. Tushman, M.L., O'Reilly, C.A., 1996. Ambidextrous organizations: Managing evolutionary and revolutionary change. *California Management Review* 38, 8–30.

disruptive changes in the competitive or institutional environment. It also means that the flow of new ideas and opportunities is likely to dry up, putting a brake on future innovations. Given the need for balance, it is encouraging to see that many participants in the programme still felt that it helped them in their ability to find new ideas. As we know from the previous research and the baseline survey, this is something that they already felt confident about, so this further improvement is building on already strong foundations. The final item is about sustaining the innovation process over time. The innovation model underpinning the programme suggests the importance of moving from one-off, ad hoc innovations to a more formal and repeatable innovation process that is built on continually developing capabilities. It is thus a positive indication that 58% of participants felt that they had improved their ability to repeat the innovation process over time. Nevertheless, the relatively modest figure for this area does indicate scope for future iterations of the programme to focus more on the repeatability of the innovation process. Having said that, there are important limitations in terms of what can be achieved in the relatively short duration of the programme and how long it takes for outcomes to manifest themselves. In this case, a more robust measure of the repeatability of the innovation process would ideally need to allow a longer time-lag for capabilities to be embedded. Evidence for this came from the sample of interviews conducted approximately one year after the programme was completed, with respondents describing how they continued to use the concepts, tools, and models to support their current innovation activities.

9 Experience of individual programme activities

The Accelerator Programme was specifically designed to bring together a portfolio of different support activities, with the intention of providing a range of mechanisms for supporting the development of innovation capabilities. These are intended to be complementary and work together, ideally in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. However, it is still important to understand the relative usefulness of the different elements to see where there is scope for refining the delivery of the programme. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows how useful the respondents perceived the different elements of the programme to be for supporting their innovation activities. By far the most popular response is 'One-to-one support from coaches' (85%), which favourably reflects the centrality of the coaching component to the programme as a whole. The one-to-one coaching was a consistent thread running through the SPARK Accelerator, with participants given tailored support and guidance to identify innovation activities to concentrate on and track these through the duration of the programme. As confirmed by the exit interviews, participants particularly appreciated the customised nature of this support and the quality of the advice provided by the coaches.
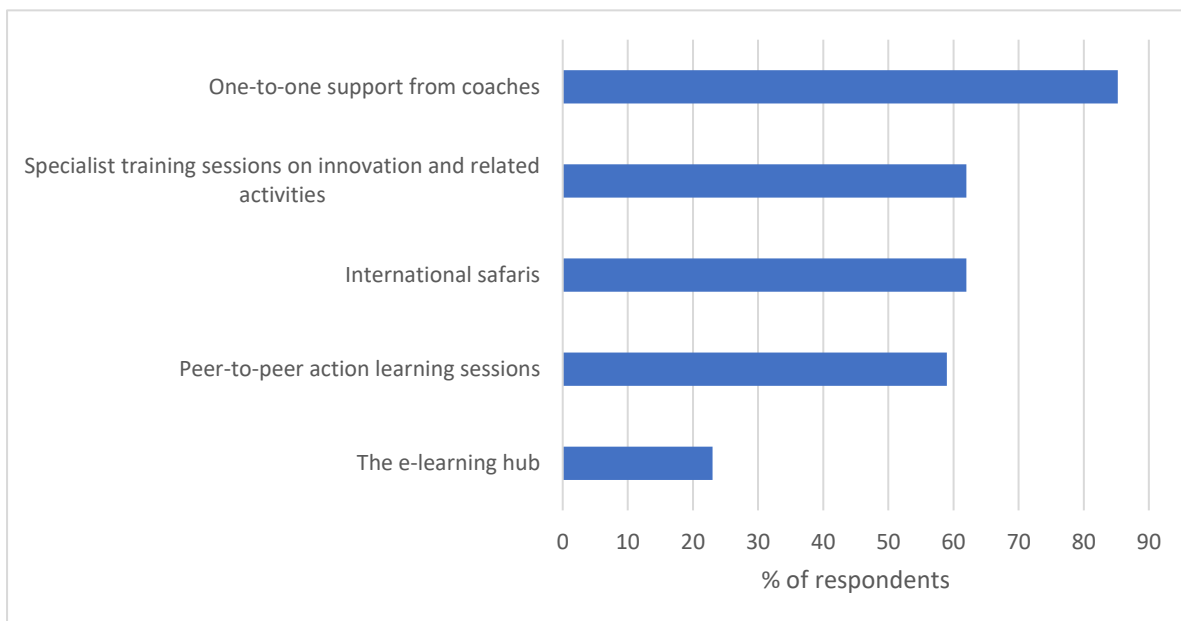

Figure 26: Usefulness of different programme activities

The specialist training sessions on innovation and related topics were considered to be useful by 62% of respondents. While reasonably high, this activity was still rated considerably lower than the one-to-one coaching, which is reflected in the mixed feedback received from interviews, free text responses in the exit survey, and informal comments. For many the sessions were useful and timely, providing tools and information that they subsequently drew on to support their innovation

activities. However, some people found them much less useful, which was mainly an issue of how relevant the topics were in view of different individual's experiences, knowledge, and interests. One of the challenges of support programmes is to recruit the right mix of participants, especially where support is built around shared learning and network interactions. There is a tension here between two opposing tendencies. The first is to group participants together according to one or more shared characteristics, such as growth stage, size, or sector. The second is to ensure sufficient diversity of participants so that the range of experiences is wide enough to encourage learning from different perspectives. There may also be issues of trust in cohorts that are too similar, e.g. where participants are in direct competition.

The Accelerator Programme sought to balance these tendencies by aiming to recruit participants at a similar stage in their growth trajectories, as signalled by the use of the 'accelerator' terminology. In other words, the programme was designed for more established SEs who are beyond the start-up phase and are aiming to move their business to the next level. Diversity came in the form of sector, either in terms of their commercial focus or social/environmental purpose, and importantly in the inclusion of participants from three different regional settings. The latter was particularly interesting for participants, who reported new insights from learning how SEs operated in different contexts to their own. This is reflected in the rating of the international safaris, which were considered to be useful by 62% of respondents.[16]

However, despite recruiting SEs in the post-start-up stage, differences in levels of experience and types of need still varied considerably. This was partly because the rules on SE age were not enforced as strictly as they should have been to ensure full levels of participation from each of the regions. Moreover, we know from the earlier research and later interviews that personal trajectories of SE owners, managers, and employees are extremely diverse, with many engaging in other careers before and sometimes alongside their SE role. The result is that the age or development stage of any given SE is not necessarily a good reflection of the skills and experiences of those working there. The more negative comments about the specialist training workshops typically came from those who were already familiar with the area being covered.

The next activity that respondents found most useful were the peer-to-peer learning sessions (59%). These provided the opportunity for the SEs to exchange ideas, share experiences, and work on finding solutions to specific problems they faced. Again, this was supported by the exit interviews which, moreover, provided examples of individuals who found this type of action learning to be so

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[16] Not all Accelerator participants took part in the international safaris, so this response has been adjusted to include only those respondents who attended one or more of the safaris.

useful they had established their own groups after the end of the programme so they could continue to benefit. However, there were some who commented on the need for more support in implementing their growth plans. This could be a consequence of the relatively light version of action learning that was operated, with only two sessions, which arguably did not provide enough time to explore and act upon the specific challenges faced by the participants. Increasing the opportunities for structured peer-based learning in the future deployment of the programme would be worth considering.

By far the lowest rated support measure was the e-learning hub (23%). This is entirely consistent with the exit interviews, as well as informal feedback from participants and those delivering the programme, which all suggested a rather low level of take-up of the e-learning portal. In addition, there were some issues with the design of the website which were considered to be less than user-friendly. These were addressed, but arguably came too late in the programme to make a major difference. Inconsistency with the evidence aside, the use of internet-based resources in future iterations of the programme is an area for scrutiny and potential improvement. In this case, there are some useful lessons that could be learned from the SPARK Start-up Programme, where the digital delivery of support occupied a much more central role.

10 Qualitative feedback from respondents

As well as the scale-based question in the exit questionnaire about the usefulness of the different components of the programme, respondents were also given the opportunity to provide free text feedback on their experience of the SPARK Accelerator, both positive and negative, as well as additional comments. In order to make sense of this qualitative data, the responses were coded and categorised according to the different issues that they covered.[17] As can be seen in *Figure 27*, there is a good amount of overlap with the analysis of the scale-based responses. In particular, the appreciation of the customised one-to-one coaching and the usefulness of the international safaris
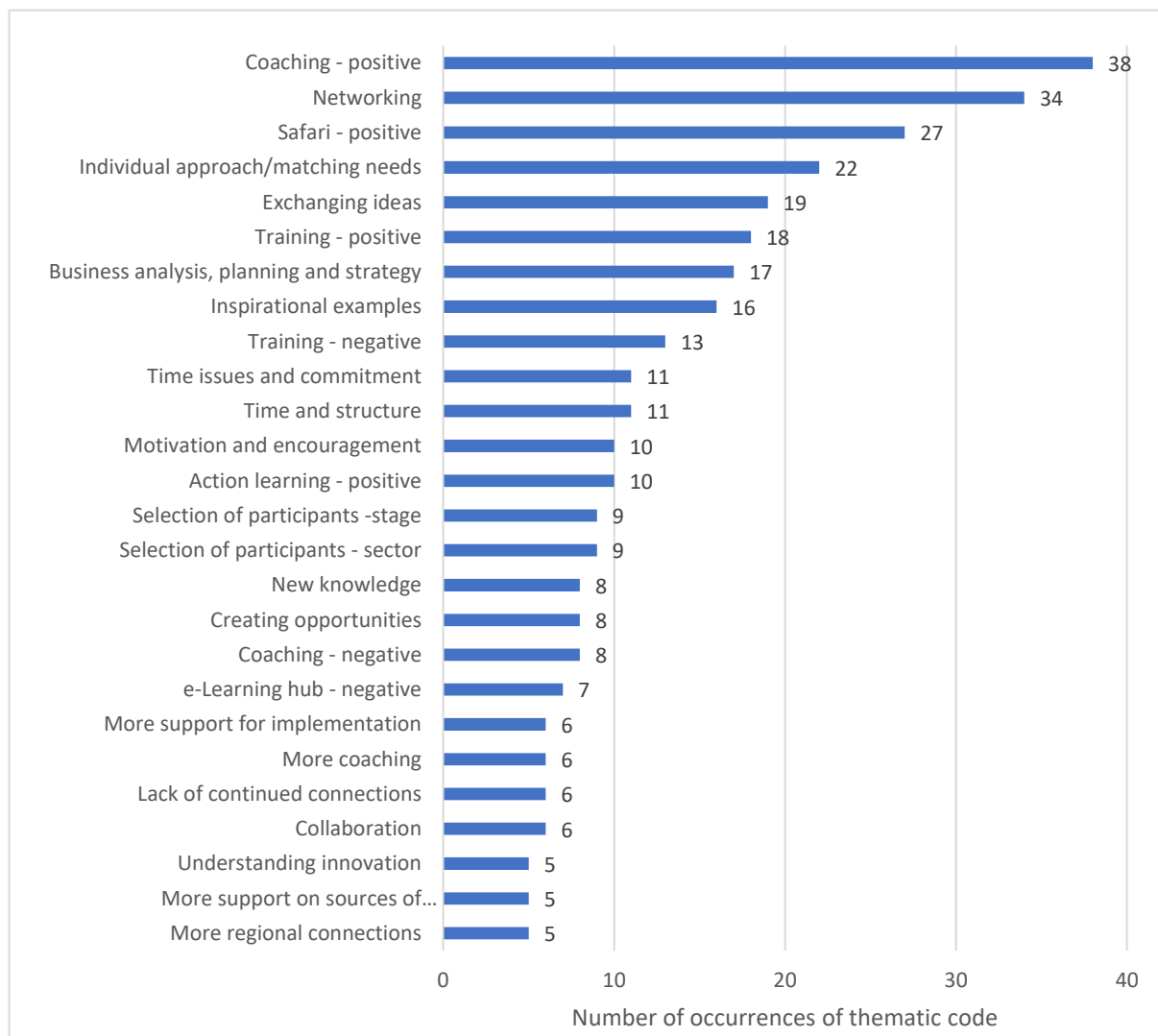
Figure 27: Participant feedback coded by theme (excluding themes with fewer than 5 occurrences)

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[17] Coding was carried out using Atlas.ti software. A grounded coding approach was taken whereby themes emerged from the data and were refined and consolidated as the open-ended comments were grouped into different categories.

are clearly reflected in the free text feedback. Other comments are more mixed, for example, regarding the specialist training and give more detailed insights into the range of responses behind the figures.

As well as allowing triangulation between the two different sets of data and the degree of agreement between them, the qualitative feedback also allowed us to explore additional issues not raised in the closed questions of the exit survey. The next section discusses the positive comments offered about the programme, before turning to consider the more critical feedback.

10.1 What did participants find useful about the Accelerator Programme?

Figure 28 shows the coded responses from feedback respondents gave about what they considered to be the three most useful aspects of the programme. As indicated above, positive references to the one-to-one coaching were mentioned most frequently, with 38 references from the 60 respondents who answered this question. In percentage terms, at 63%, this is somewhat less than the 85% of respondents who found one-to-one support from coaches useful in the scale-based responses. However, unlike the latter, respondents were not constrained in the free-text responses to provide feedback only on the five main support activities of the programme. As such, the frequency of positive references to the coaching still provides a strong indication of the degree to which the one-to-one coaching was valued by participants.

The second most frequently mentioned open-ended comments relate in different ways to the positive effects of networking facilitated by the programme (34 references, 57%). This is consistent with the other data on networking discussed in Section 6. It highlights further the important role of the Accelerator in creating an environment for connecting people and organisations, both within and across the three participating regions. Several of the other coding categories derived from the free-text data are also related to networking. For example, one of the key facilitators of this, the international visits or safaris, are the third most referred to category in terms of what people found useful about the programme (27 references, 45%). Although not solely linked to networking, other relevant categories include: exchanging ideas (19 references, 32%); inspirational examples (16 references, 27%), which typically refer to the visits to exemplar social enterprises; creating opportunities (8 references, 13%); and collaboration (6 references, 10%). Although the last two are numerically smaller, they still provide an important indication that the Accelerator, alongside its core
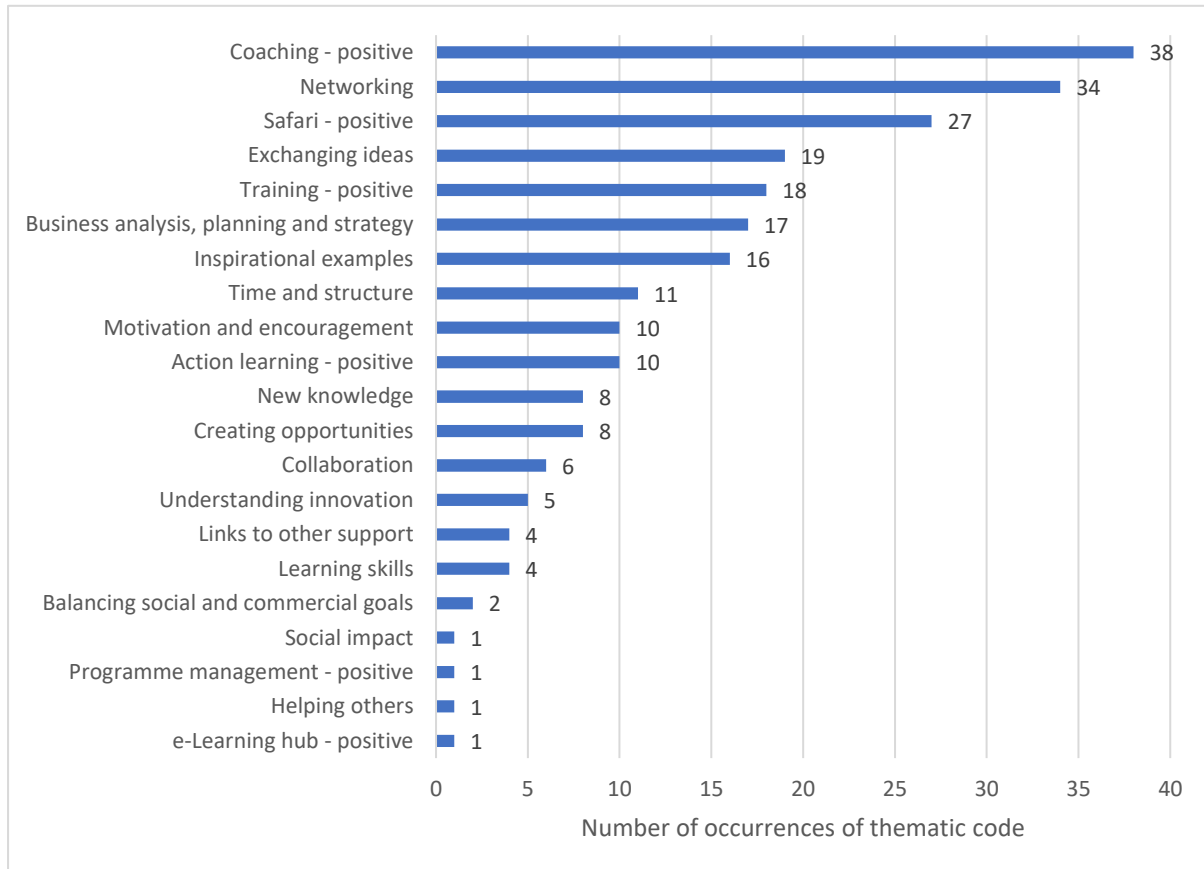
Figure 28: Participant feedback - positive themes

support for developing innovation capabilities, did also help to promote additional tangible outcomes in terms of specific opportunities and collaborations that some participants were able to take forwards.

Another important cluster of codes are indicative of the development of skills and capabilities. Positive references to the training provided by the programme were mentioned 18 times by 30% of respondents, although as we shall see later training also attracted some negative comments. Other categories of positive comments broadly relating to skills development include: business analysis, planning, and strategy, (17 references, 28%); new knowledge (8 references, 13%); understanding innovation (5 references, 8%); and learning skills (4 references, 7%). Positive comments about action learning (10 references, 17%) could also be included in this cluster, with such peer-based learning being a context for knowledge- and experience-sharing and the development of skills. However, action learning also has a link to networking, in the form of creating opportunities and making connections, as well as other types of social and emotional support, which can be just as important as more technical knowledge and skills in generating the impetus and momentum for successfully navigating through the innovation process. This applies to the programme more widely, with

respondents referring to how its portfolio of activities and interactions with other SEs provided a source of motivation and encouragement (10 references, 17%). A final positive feature worth mentioning relates to comments about time and structure (11 references, 18%). Having a fixed duration to the programme with a specific timetable of events was seen as useful in helping participants to plan their time and focus their attention specifically on innovation activities. This can be a challenge for many enterprises, especially smaller ones, where day-to-day operational pressures can push other less immediate priorities, such as pursuing innovation projects, into the background. Having the impetus of the accelerator programme, with its expectations of commitment and participation, helped members to set aside some dedicated time and space for their innovation activities. The one-to-one coaching was also recognised as useful in this respect, with its emphasis on innovation planning and regular meetings to review progress and plan next steps. However, as we shall see in the next section, a number of participants still found it challenging to devote sufficient time and attention to make the most of the programme.

10.2 What did participants find less useful about the Accelerator Programme?

Respondents were also asked to provide free text comments on what they considered to be the three least useful aspects of the programme. As before, the comments were coded into different categories and the results are presented in *Figure 29*. What is immediately obvious is that the number of categories of critical comments (35) is much larger than for positive ones (21). This reflects a wider diversity of negative issues raised, often about matters of quite specific interest to individual participants. This is reflected in the long tail of categories with fewer than five references, of which there are 23, compared with 7 for the positive comments. It is also worth noting that the overall number of negative comments provided (154) was lower than positive ones (241). While respondents were given the opportunity to make three points of positive and critical feedback respectively, some people provided fewer than three comments or no feedback at all. The lower number of negative comments can be taken as an overall indication of satisfaction with the Accelerator Programme, which is in line with the responses to the scale- based questions.

Nevertheless, it is important to pay careful attention to the critical feedback as there are some recurring issues that offer helpful direction about where the programme could be improved in the future. By far the largest cluster of comments were about the need to tailor the programme more closely to the needs of the participants (22 references, 37%). This is perhaps surprising given that the one-to-one coaching was designed precisely to assess each participants' requirements and devise an individualised innovation plan. However, it is mostly with regard to the other elements of the programme that comments about meeting individual needs were made, particularly those involving
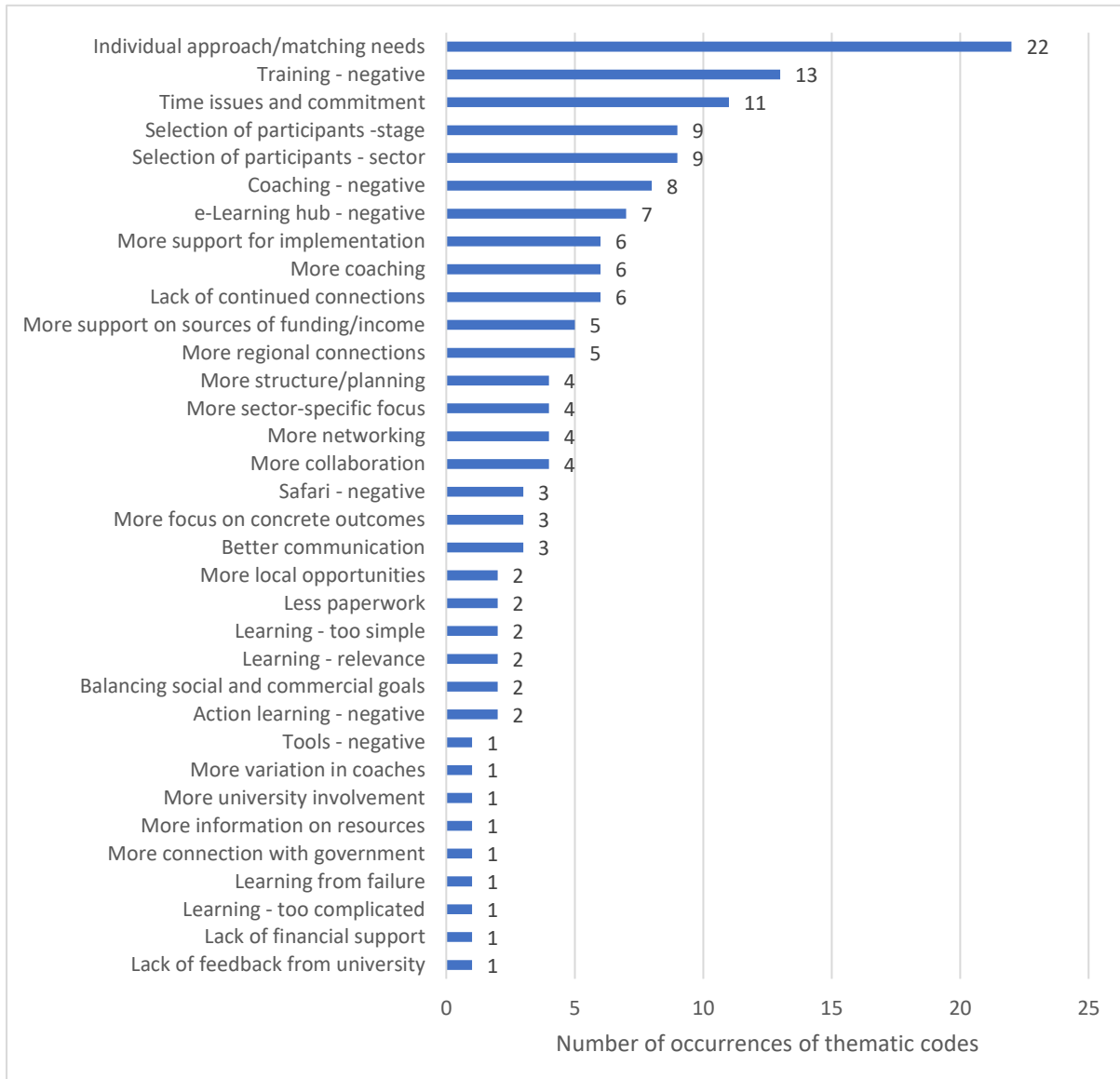
Figure 29: Participant feedback - critical themes

interaction with other members. Here the choice of cohort can have a major influence on learning and networking activities as this defines to a large extent the pool of potential contacts and experience. Criticisms of the make-up of the cohort mostly referred to a mismatch in levels of experience, either in terms of the age or sector of the participating SEs. This was reflected in separate items referring to the selection of participants by stage of development (9 references, 15%) or sector of activity (9 references, 15%). Criticisms about the former typically came from more established SEs who felt they had less to learn from newer and potentially less experienced enterprises. Similarly, there were those who questioned the extent to which those in very different sectors would be able to learn from each other. As one respondent commented, it is important not to assume "similarity between organisations in very different sectors e.g. renewable energy and a

community café, just because both have a social or environmental purpose beyond just making a profit."

Issues about experience and tailoring support to individual requirements also arose in suggestions about how the specialist training provided by the programme could be improved (13 references, 22%). These criticisms were partly about the relevance of the topics covered by the training, either because the respondents were already quite familiar with some of the subjects presented or, to a lesser extent, found the level to be too advanced for their current level of understanding. Other critical comments suggested room for improvement in the quality of some of the training. Taken together, issues relating to customising support to the individual needs of the participants raise a number of challenges for programmes of this type. Clearly there are resource implications in providing a fully customised offering where the specific needs of all participants are fully met. As such, there are likely to be trade-offs between offering bespoke support and reaching a sufficiently large cohort of participants. The latter is important because there is a key social component to the programme, in the sense that it is not only about individual development, but crucially also about collectively building innovation capabilities through processes such as peer-based learning, networking, and experience sharing. These latter activities are likely to be undermined by an excessively individual focus.

The design of the programme sought to balance individual and collective needs by offering a portfolio of support activities. The one-to-one coaching was intended to provide more personalised support, while the international visits, training, and action learning required communal participation. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that comments were made about the need for more attention to be paid to individual needs. In a few instances, this was because respondents felt that the coaches could have worked more closely with them to develop a personalised innovation plan and help them put this into practice. In one case, the participant felt that their selected coach was not a good fit to their specific needs, which reduced the relevance of what they were able to learn. However, it is clear that the majority of the feedback, both structured and open-ended, was extremely positive about the support provided by the coaches. Beyond that, the main issue, as outlined above, was about a closer matching of the participants. As one respondent commented, there was "too varied [a] range of organisations to find training that fits all." Similarly, another participant would have preferred fewer "introductions to social enterprises, because they are all so different, they all have different challenges." Several respondents were interested in the formation of smaller sub-groups of like-minded SEs that could share experiences about their common challenges. For instance, one participant thought it would have been useful to foster "sector-specific groups/networks, e.g. young

education, adult training, drug/alcohol, disabled, ex-offender groups, etc. to help network with others who have similar challenges or targets." It is interesting to note here that the respondent uses the term 'sector' to refer to the area of social or environmental need in which the enterprise operates. Depending on their business model, this may or may not be the same as their trading activities, which differ in their degree of connection to their social purpose. For example, some SEs generate trading income through the sale of socially or environmentally beneficial products or services, while in other cases their trading activities are quite independent and unrelated, with the income from those being used to fund the SE's social purpose. This adds an extra dimension of complexity in assembling a suitably matched cohort of participants for the programme. However, it is important to bear in mind that if participating SEs are too closely matched, they may not bring the variety of experiences and perspectives from which new ideas and opportunities can emerge.

Time constraints and the commitment of time required by the programme were another major category in the negative feedback received about the programme (11 references, 18%). Lack of time and resources is a common problem, as one SE commented: "social entrepreneurs have very busy agendas [and] are under time pressure." Arguably this is the same for all innovation and business support programmes offering more than minimal support interventions and there is not really much that can be done to change this from the programme side except to ensure that the benefits delivered justify the time commitment needed. A typical challenge is that the urgent pressures of running the business on a day-to-day basis can distract attention from more strategic and indirect activities, such as participation in support programmes. As acknowledged by one respondent, who was subsequently involved in a follow-up interview, they felt they did not really make the most of the opportunities offered by the programme because they were unable to devote the time. This was because the representative chosen to take part was under extreme pressure in managing the delivery of an expansion project being undertaken by the SE. There is thus an important element of getting out what one puts in. Interestingly, some participants felt that the programme was over too quickly, and they would have appreciated further support to implement the new knowledge they had learned (6 references, 10%). Others would have liked more coaching sessions (6 responses, 10%) and more continuity in contact with other participants throughout the programme (6 responses, 10%). Without underplaying the real issues that many SEs have with making time for training and development, these are all indications that participants felt they benefited from the programme and would have welcomed even more engagement.

The issue of continuity of contact with other participants also came up in relation to the e-learning hub. This platform was intended to give participants access to online documents and resources, as

well as a way of interacting with other members of the programme. However, some respondents identified this as an area of improvement for the programme (7 references, 12%). This can be compared with the scale-based data from the exit survey, where 77% of respondents felt that the e-learning hub was only useful 'To a small extent' or 'Not at all'. One of the specific issues about the e-learning hub reported in the free text feedback was that it would have been better to use a platform that people were already using rather than creating a bespoke system. As one respondent commented: "I think we all have social platform overload so maybe just using a Facebook group with documents uploaded would have been easier." This way participants would be more likely to check the activity of the group when logging in for other purposes instead of having to make a specific effort to visit the bespoke platform, which required its own log-in details. Indeed, the effectiveness of using an existing platform was clearly demonstrated by the SPARK Social Enterprise Innovation Accelerator Network (SEIAN), which was hosted on LinkedIn and attracted a strong membership.

11 Description of the SPARK Start-up Programme

11.1 Purpose

While the SPARK Accelerator focused on supporting more established SEs, there was also a separate programme targeted at helping start-up SEs less than three years old. Recognising that the needs of start-ups are, in many respects, different to more established enterprises, the SPARK Start-up Programme offered a tailored set of tools, activities, and resources appropriate for early-stage SEs. The main goal of the programme was to address the particular needs of start-up SEs in developing their ability to deliver high impact innovations in a sustainable and repeatable way. To do this it sought to fills gaps in existing training programmes; there is certainly no shortage of training and support programmes for commercial start-ups, but there are fewer that specifically target the needs of SEs. For the SPARK Start-up Programme there was a special focus on creating additionality in the pre-starter phase on the understanding that targeted efforts at enhancing innovation activities at this stage have the potential to boost subsequent impact as the SE develops.

11.2 Design

As with the SPARK Accelerator, the Start-up Programme was driven by a collaborative design philosophy drawing on knowledge, insights, and experiences from a variety of sources and stakeholders. The initial SPARK research activities identified the main challenges of early-stage SEs which include: attracting customers; developing a business model that is sustainable in the long-term; reducing dependency on public funding and other sources of grants; and overcoming the struggle to meet the threshold levels for trading income. A second important influence on the design of the programme was the SPARK Innovation Roadmap. However, the findings of the research combined with insights from partners, support agencies, and stakeholders suggested that the original Innovation Roadmap needed to be adapted to reflect the characteristics and challenges of start-up SEs. A comparison of the original and modified SPARK Innovation Roadmap can be seen in Appendix 1.

A similar process of refinement and adaptation took place in incorporating lessons learned from the SPARK Accelerator. A number of design and planning meetings between the partners were held in which learning from the Accelerator Programme and other sources of insight and experience could be combined in shaping the design of the Start-up Programme. As with the design of the SPARK Accelerator, this took place through a series of iterations where ideas were generated, tested, and refined. As outlined in the next section, the central component of the Start-up Programme was an online tool as a way of delivering a series of training modules. This was quite a different approach compared with the SPARK Accelerator, which had more face-to-face activities in the form of one-to-

one coaching, international safaris, live training, and action learning sets. Nevertheless, there were clear lessons from the Accelerator Programme that were able to inform the design of the Start-up Programme. Although the SPARK Accelerator was still ongoing at this stage, it was evident from feedback that the customised nature of the programme was a major benefit. This took place largely through the one-to-one coaching, which guided each participating SE through an individually tailored 'learning journey'. Further elements of customisation were provided through the emphasis on individual growth plans in the action learning sets and the selection of training topics to be covered. In the absence of face-to-face delivery, the challenge was how to deliver a tailored training experience through an online platform. It was here that lessons from the SPARK Accelerator's use of online tools (in the form of the E-Hub, but also SEIAN, the wider Social Enterprise Innovation Accelerator Network) informed the discussions about what the Start-up Programme's online delivery should look like. Experience of the former, which had received mixed feedback, suggested that users were not that keen on a static repository of information that they had to search in order to find relevant tools and resources. This was also a bespoke system with its own password protected access – this in itself was not a problem, but it did mean that the reward needed to be sufficient to make the effort of logging in worthwhile. In comparison, SEIAN, which used the established LinkedIn platform, had the benefit of attracting visits by people using the social media platform for other purposes, such as engaging with other groups or searching members' profiles. At the same time, the more regularly changing content and interactive nature of SEIAN was seen as a positive feature of the network. To address the issue of customisation and dynamic content, the decision was made to develop an interactive online tool with a straightforward diagnostic function that, when completed, would lead the user to the relevant content. This in itself would take the form of tools and exercises that required active involvement, rather than having to read large quantities of passive information. However, the personalised nature of the online tool did mean that users would need to create their own online account so that their settings and progress could be saved as they worked through the different modules. In this case, the benefits of using an established platform were outweighed by the functional requirements of the tool with its more specialised interactive content and navigation. This was different for the SPARK Accelerator E-Hub, which had basic functionality for which a bespoke system was unnecessary (and was indeed subsequently migrated to a standard set of web pages). On balance, it was judged that the benefits of the Start-up Programme online tool would act as a sufficient incentive to create a user account.

The earlier stages of the programme design were also informed by the experience and needs of start-up SEs that had been involved in various partner networks in the three regions. In addition, a systematic review was made of 17 existing learning programmes and tools, providing both positive

and negative examples that helped to shape the overall architecture of the tool and the form and content of the different modules. This resulted in a prototype version of the tool that was then subject to a crucial process of user testing and refinement focusing on functionality, ease of use, user experience, and usefulness of content. This took place through a series of workshops, some of which were combined with other activities that formed part of the Start-up Programme. The intention was that a cohort of 60 start-ups, 20 from each region, would be involved in the piloting process. In the end the process involved 61 individual participants from 59 start-up SEs, 21 from Belgium, 19 from The Netherlands, and 22 from the UK. The initial feedback focused on the usability of the tool, while subsequent workshops concentrated more on the usefulness and relevance of the content. This important user input allowed for the progressive refinement of the online tool in preparation for its public launch.

11.3 Activities

The core of the SPARK Start-up Programme was the online learning tool My Social Start-up (www.mysocialstartup.eu). The tool consists of 16 online modules covering a range of topics of relevance to start-up SEs, including: the innovation journey, legal considerations, pitching, impact management, funding mix and income, business modelling and planning, theory of change, market research, stakeholder management, non-monetary resources, growing and scaling, and prototyping. The modules do not have to be worked through in any particular order and users can go through them at their own pace. As explained above, there is a registration process for the tool and users have the option of completing a short profiling or diagnostic survey which allows the system to suggest which modules would be most useful to complete first. Each module is made up of a combination of tools, worksheets, and exercises covering different aspects of the module topic and suited to different learning styles. There are also 12 videos by experts from the three different regions on subjects related to the modules. The modules can be completed individually online, but there are also collective exercises where the online tool can be used to provide the framework for facilitating group sessions, such as peer-to-peer learning or collective business planning.

The SPARK Start-up Programme also involved a series of 6 webinars. Each session was held back-to-back, with an expert presenting a webinar on a topic of relevance to start-up SEs and then making themselves available for one-to-one question and answer sessions with individual SEs, giving them an opportunity to discuss problems and issues they were facing. While the majority of the tools and activities were online, there were also six live peer-to-peer learning events. These provided guidance and information to help start-up and pre-starter SEs navigate their business and innovation journeys, as well as opportunities to discuss issues of shared relevance between the participants.

12 Evaluation of the SPARK Start-up Programme

The role of evaluation for the Start-up Programme was different compared to the SPARK Accelerator. The latter represented a full expression of the SPARK Innovation Roadmap and supporting research, practical, and policy experience translated into a complete package of tools, methods, and support measures delivered over a specific time frame. This was tested through the participation of a mostly stable cohort of established SEs who participated in all of the different activities for the duration of the programme. Although, as we have seen earlier, there are some limitations in terms of the time interval between participation in a support activity and measurable effects, the Accelerator Programme was at least of a sufficient duration and with a continuity of membership to track the effects and outcomes on participants, comparing a range of measures at the start and end of the programme. Participation in the Start-up Programme was much less intensive and shorter term, both with regard to the overall duration and degree of contact. This presented a challenge for evaluating the influence and outcomes of the programme to the same extent as the SPARK Accelerator. In addition, the evaluative focus on the Start-up Programme was both formative and summative due to the intended feed-forward of learning from the Accelerator and the integration of piloting activities into the development of the online learning tool. In other words, evaluation activities were focused both on developing, refining, and improving the programme before it was fully launched, as well as trying to assess the ultimate impact of the programme on participants. This led to something of a tension between the two modes of evaluation. The start-up SEs involved in piloting the online tool were brought in at different stages to provide invaluable feedback and insights to shape the progressive refinement of the online modules until they were ready for public launch. The same group of SEs were then called upon to provide feedback on the overall benefits, or otherwise, of the Start-up Programme. There was a major limitation here because not all SEs involved in the piloting were involved in the same range of activities at the same stage of development and for the same duration. This was unlike the participants of the SPARK Accelerator whose experiences were more or less comparable and provided a more robust basis for evaluating the overall effects of the programme. Given the challenge of accommodating the dual evaluation requirements, relatively more emphasis was given to collecting the necessary formative feedback to allow the online tool to be developed and tested. While this is not the same as a more summative exercise conducted after sufficient use and application of the tool to reveal tangible outcomes, it does nevertheless provide some initial insights into the potential utility and usability of the online tool.

The testers were asked to try out a selection of modules and assess them on the basis of a combination of numerical rating scores, yes/no responses, and free text feedback. For the purposes of the piloting process, this feedback was collected through the tool itself in the form of a short survey that would appear on completion of a module. The numerical ratings covered the overall usefulness of the module being tested, as well as the specific usefulness of the exercises and worksheets included in the module. As shown in *Figure 31*, there were very few low ratings, with the
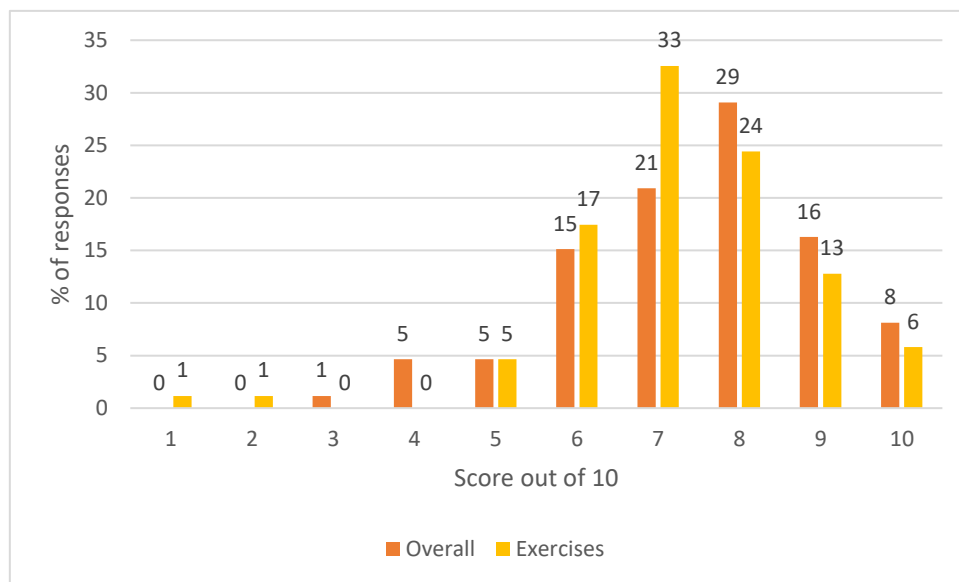
Figure 31: Usefulness of My Social Start-up overall modules and individual exercises

majority of scores in the upper range. Around three-quarters of responses both for the overall usefulness of the modules (74%) and that of the specific exercises they contained (76%) rated them 7 or above. Similarly, in terms of the clarity of the modules, the responses were overwhelmingly positive (see *Figure 30*). Content was judged to be clear in 78% of responses, with 20% answering
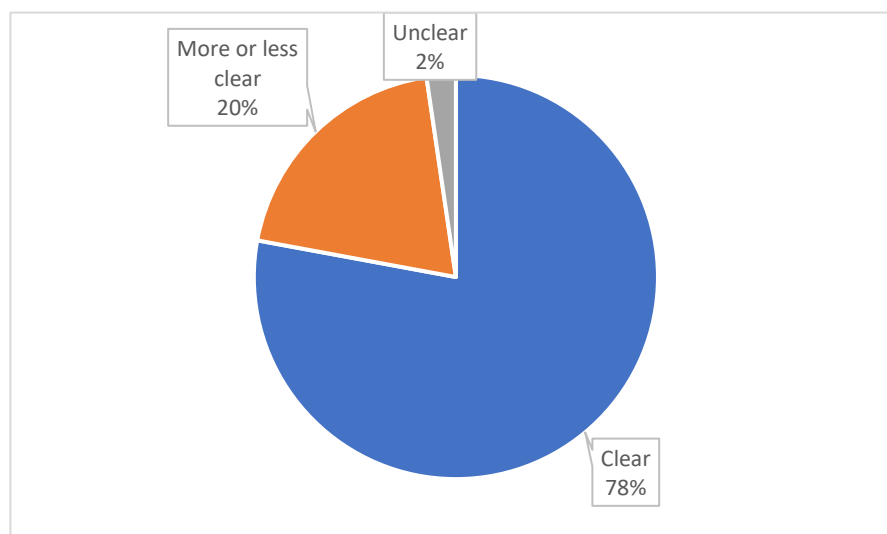
Figure 30: Clarity of content in My Social Start-up

Another indicator of the usefulness of the modules was collected in the form of how far the testers would recommend them to different groups of users, including start-up SEs, established SEs, SE support organisations, researchers, and consultants. The results can be seen in *Figure 32*. Since the online tool was explicitly designed for start-up SEs, it is encouraging that 90% of responses stated that the tester would recommend the module to SEs in their early stages. Although lower, with a 50% recommendation rate, the data also suggest that elements of the online tool could be useful for more established SEs. This reflects the relevance of the material and activities for SEs at different stages in their development and the continuing usefulness of the topics covered. Rather more surprisingly, there were fewer recommendations for SE support organisations (43%) and consultants (36%). The tool was designed to be used both by individual SEs as well as forming the basis for facilitated group activities. Either way these uses could be readily incorporated into the portfolio of support measures offered by consultants and support organisations in their guidance to start-up SEs. This is not fully reflected in the response from the testers, although it is important to note that as this group was comprised solely of start-up SEs their ability to comment on the usefulness for other groups is arguably limited and at best indirect. The group with the lowest recommendation score were researchers (19%). This is probably a fair reflection given that the content is likely to be familiar to many researchers. However, with the increasing emphasis on impact and engaged scholarship, the use of practical developmental tools in the research process is potentially growing as less
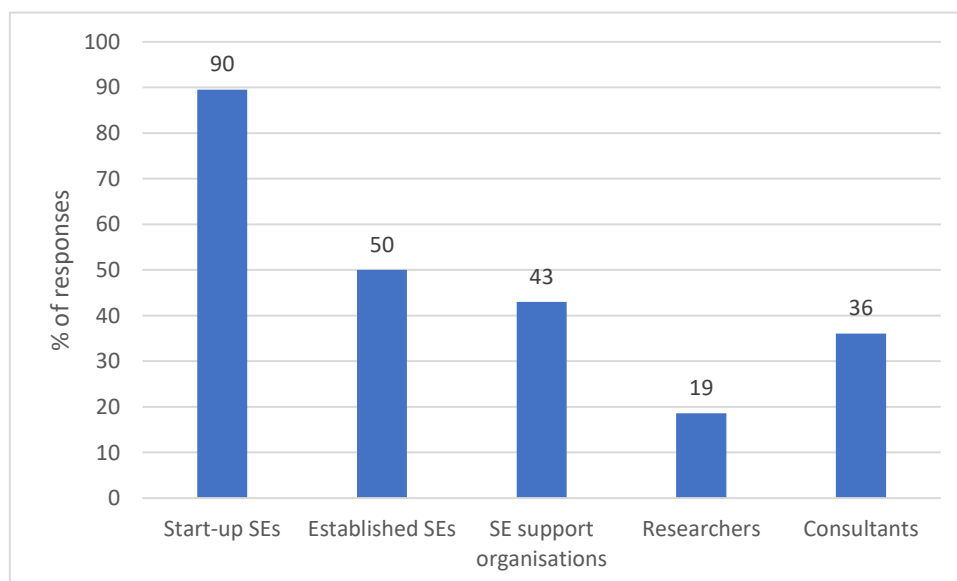
Figure 32: Recommendation of modules to different users groups for My Social Start-up

traditional styles of research emerge. As such, the relevance for researchers of the online tool identified by the testers could well be understated.

As well as numerical and binary response (yes/no) data, the start-up SEs piloting the online tool were also given the opportunity to provide more extensive free-text feedback about the usefulness, clarity, and usability of the tool. In a similar way to the open-ended comments received about the SPARK Accelerator, the text-based feedback about My Social Start-up was coded into different
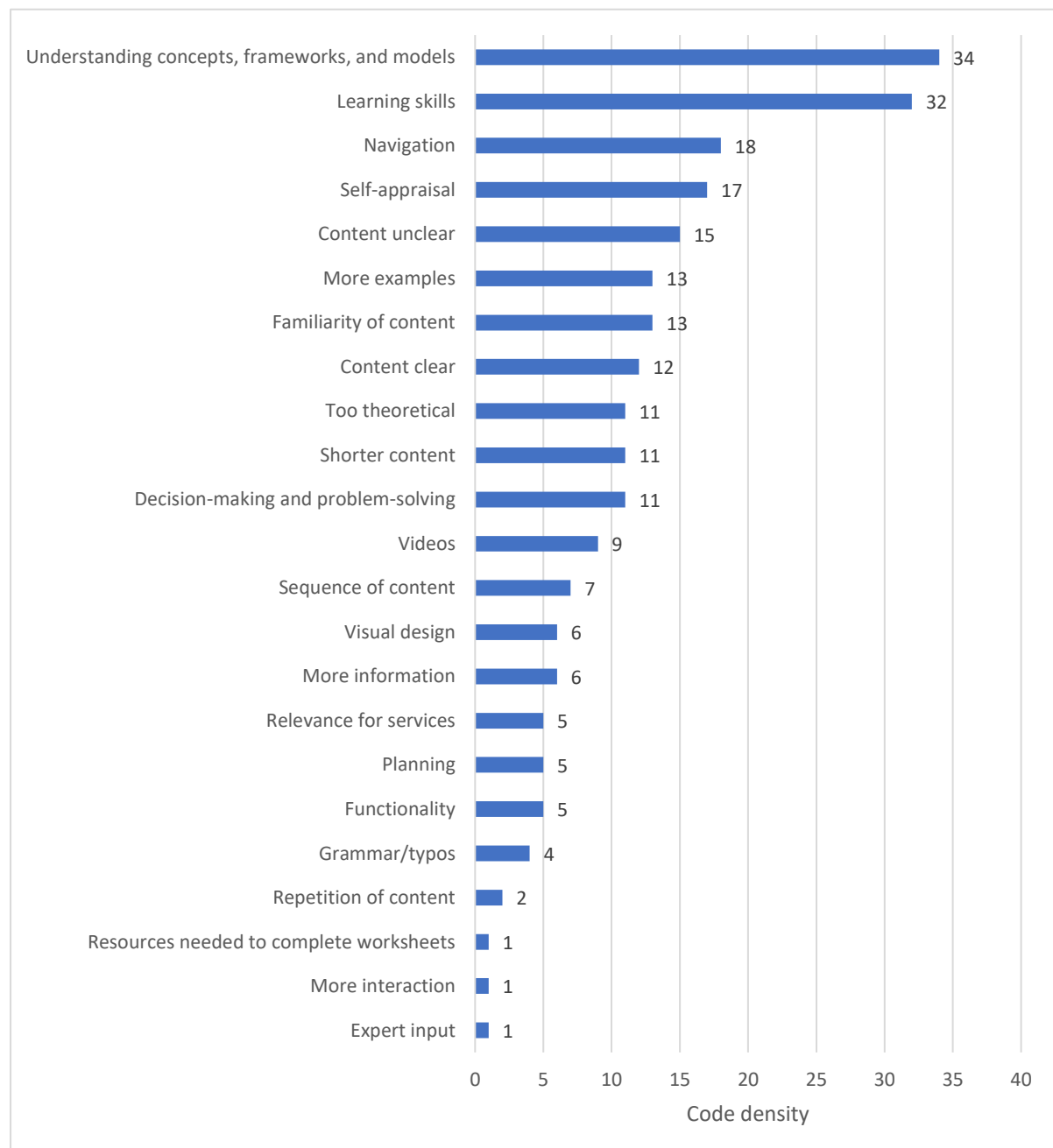
Figure 33: Thematic coding of feedback about My Social Start-up

themes in order to identify patterns in the data.[18] The code density for each theme is shown in *Figure 33* in descending order, referring to the number of instances that each theme is mentioned in the feedback from the testers. The answers to three different free-text questions were combined for the purpose of the analysis, covering the usefulness of the module, clarity of content, and any other suggestions. This was to give an overall view of the feedback covering the subject-matter, clarity, presentation, and functionality of the content. However, in presenting the results here it makes sense to divide the themes into two groups: the first includes those themes that relate to the specific subject focus and usefulness of the modules in terms of domain knowledge, focus of learning, tools, and skills; and the second group is more about the form and functionality of the tool. In the first group (as well as the coding overall), the top two most frequent themes were 'understanding concepts, frameworks, and models' and 'learning skills', together accounting for 66 mentions or 28% of the total theme count. The first, with 34 mentions, was 'understanding concepts, frameworks, and models'. This is obviously a high level theme, which partly explains its frequency, but also captures a major element of what the online tool is about, i.e. developing a clearer idea about key concepts, frameworks, and models that will help start-up SEs develop. *Table 2* gives some examples of the type of responses categorised under this theme.

Theme	Count	Examples
Understanding concepts, frameworks, and models	34	"Understanding what the theory of change is and how it can be applied to my business." "The basic steps of innovation." "The difference between innovation and invention." "Explaining the difference between beneficiaries and customers." "The difference between output and outcome." "The MVP [minimum viable product] concept where you really have to think about how can I go in small steps from what is the vision in the end, but realising in small incremental steps and improvements." "The [SPARK innovation] roadmap is a good overview. It was useful to realise what innovation means and its significance to the process."

Table 2: Examples of thematic codes - understanding concepts, frameworks, and models

As can be seen, these are all theories and frameworks that can form the basis of actionable knowledge by being put into practice by being applied by the SE in its activities. This could take the

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[18] Coding was carried out using Atlas.ti software. A grounded coding approach was taken whereby themes emerged from the data and were refined and consolidated as the open-ended comments were grouped into different categories.

form of more extended frameworks, such as the SPARK Innovation Roadmaps and the Theory of Change, or insights that are simpler but nevertheless useful. For example, several respondents made reference to the importance for their practice of distinctions between different pairs of concepts, such as invention and innovation, output and outcome (in impact measurement and communication), and beneficiaries and customers.

The second most popular theme was 'learning skills' (32 mentions). Another high level theme, this is intended to reflect changes in how the participating SEs approached their business practices and the practical application of different techniques, methods, and approaches. As such, there is a high degree of overlap with the previous theme – understanding new ideas, concepts, and frameworks can lead to the development of new or refined skills as they are put into practice. The difference with this theme is the emphasis on practical application (see *Table 3*).

Theme	Count	Examples
Learning skills	32	"It makes sense after completing this module that it's very important to do market research. I had been more daunted about it before and now I feel like there's some starting point for figuring out how to do it." "[Knowing] which skill is required at which phase of the initiative." "Choosing a good evaluation question." "Even though I was familiar with the business model canvas, I had never applied it to a service organisation and certainly not to a social enterprise. The guidance around it was useful." "What kind of questions you can ask at each stage." "Simple and clear explanations of the structure of a pitch and body language."

Table 3: Examples of thematic codes - learning skills

The examples refer to practical tools and methods that participants could apply to their own situation, increasing their repertoire of skills. The first group of subject-related themes also included those referring to specific types of skills, in particular decision-making and problem-solving, with 11 occurrences, and planning, with 5 mentions (see *Table 4*), which could be considered a subset of the more general 'learning skills' category.

Theme	Count	Examples
Decision-making and problem-solving	11	"Using the problem tree to visualise problems and solutions." "Thinking about the logical structure between problem and solution. Exercises to do that." "I came away with clarity about what to do next and felt enthused to do it." "Working with the impact framework Theory of Change was very useful to break down my idea into all aspects. Getting behind the why of the problem and the solution. And what real impact I want to achieve in the lives of elderly or their children."
Planning	5	"Going from business model canvas to business plan." "Clear step-by-step approach to fill in the business model canvas and a clear overview of the topics that are relevant for your business plan."

Table 4: Examples of thematic codes - decision-making and problem-solving, planning

The third most frequent theme in the first group (fourth overall), with 17 occurrences, was 'self-appraisal'. This alludes to the activities in the online tool that are designed to help start-up SEs diagnose their own priorities, challenges, and skill gaps. This could relate specifically to the profiling or diagnostic tool built into the system to help users navigate the content, but also includes reference to any activity, learning, or insight that helps the SE come to a greater awareness of their own situation. Examples of this theme can be seen in *Table 5*.

Theme	Count	Examples
Self-appraisal	17	"The personal innovation profile tool was really useful and the results surprised me. I will be using it to complete with the whole of the team to discover our skills gaps and find out where we might need to ask for help from others either internally or externally." "Sharing different methods how you could evaluate your own assumptions." "I think this module is very important for a social entrepreneur who does not know exactly who or what he[/she] is helping." "[Realising] I need more time to take the next step."

Table 5: Examples of thematic codes - self-appraisal

The last two themes to discuss in the first group are 'familiarity of content' and 'relevance for services', with 13 and 5 occurrences respectively. These both refer to the relevance of the subject matter and learning materials for different types of start-up SEs depending on their experience and sector. It is useful to remember that those involved in setting up an SE do not necessarily have a lack

of experience in running their own business. Some may have previous experience gained from establishing other enterprises (either SEs or more conventional businesses) or transferable skills and knowledge from previous or ongoing business careers. As such, some of the content in the online tool, especially the more standard exercises and frameworks, are likely to be familiar to many people with a business background, and indeed those having studied business and management disciplines at a variety of levels, from university degrees and diplomas, to professional development courses, and self-directed learning. The examples in *Table 6* show a number of instances where respondents are already familiar with the content, although in most cases still found something useful in revisiting or extending their knowledge of these more familiar ideas and activities. However, there are also those who admit to having little background knowledge about the topics – in some cases the modules provide them with useful tools to get started, while in other instances this lack of background acts as a constraint to understanding the language of the tools and how to apply them.

Theme	Count	Examples
Familiarity of content	13	"I know these theories. Not surprising to me." "Overall it was a repeater of things I knew, but nice and good to repeat." "The module motivates you to flesh out your storytelling, even if you already know the content of pitching." "Make a clearer division between those starting out and those who have already started up their businesses." "The innovation process was much too technical in this phase of my start-up." "A pre-existing level of understanding is assumed. What is an area of innovation? Is it one of the steps? How practically can I use innovation to increase efficiency or develop advantage?" "The module assumes the user already has a clear idea about exactly what they need to know and how it is useful." "I am a real novice … Some of the questions assumed a working understanding of terminology which I didn't have."

Table 6: Examples of thematic codes - familiarity of content

The issue of familiarity, or lack of it, is important as it is about the degree to which the online modules are accessible, relevant, and understandable to the target user group, i.e. start-up SEs. In addition to other influences on the pre-existing knowledge and experience of start-up social

entrepreneurs mentioned above, it is also important to acknowledge that start-ups, as a catch-all label referring to enterprises under three years old, nevertheless includes a potentially wide diversity of development stages and trajectories. A particularly important distinction, commented on by one of the respondents included in the examples above, is the difference between pre-starters, who are considering setting up a new SE, and start-up SEs that have taken the decisive step of establishing an enterprise and starting to operate. The various modules in the online tool were designed to cater for different levels of experience and stages in the SE's development and innovation journey, but the above feedback suggests that it is still difficult to create content pitched at the appropriate level for all users. The individual profiling tool was intended to point users in the direction of which modules to take first, but this was not always reflected in the way the testing was conducted. To provide a good coverage of the range of content, testers were not always piloting modules that they would have chosen themselves, either using the profiling tool or through individual selection. This probably led to some mismatches between experience and needs that would not have arisen if the selection and sequence of modules had been different (this is identified as a specific theme below).

Another issues about the relevance of content arising from the feedback concerned the extent to which the online tool provided guidance appropriate for start-up SEs in service sectors (see *Table 7*).

Theme	Count	Examples
Relevance for services	5	"I think that the MVP is well explained for SEs that use a platform, but not when they offer a service. I would like to see more examples of SEs that deliver services without a platform." "I miss examples/ideas how to test a service." "Less product oriented text – in my case is about service." "Even though I was familiar with the business model canvas, I had never applied it to a service organisation."

Table 7: Examples of thematic coding - relevance for services

Most of the examples refer to a product bias in some of the modules and the need for guidance and examples more relevant for SEs providing services. Having said that, one of the comments talks about the successful application of the business model canvas to a service environment. As with the other influences on the relevance of the content outlined above, this theme highlights the challenges of providing the right mix between broad appeal and catering for the specific needs and requirements of different groups of start-up SEs. Given the significance of services, both in SEs and the economy more generally, this is an important area to attend to and efforts were made to ensure

that the online tool moved beyond the traditional product focus of much innovation and business support. As a concluding note on the issue of relevance, it is worth comparing the individual comments with the preference scale responses about the usefulness of the modules which, as shown above, provided consistently high ratings both for the modules overall and the specific exercises and worksheets contained within them.

The second broad group of themes arising from the coding of the free-text comments relate to the form, clarity, and functionality of the online tool and the material presented. Most of the issues raised here were about the user experience of the tool rather than the relevance or usefulness of the content and were readily addressed in the iterative process of developing and refining the tool in preparation for public release. The most frequently occurring theme in this group (and third overall) was 'navigation', with 18 mentions. As seen in the examples in *Table 8*, navigation issues were mentioned both to the smooth functioning of the tool, especially links that were not working, as well as more general issues about the ease of navigating around the tool and clarity about the relationship between the different blocks of content. An associated theme, occurring 5 times in the comments, related to other issues of functionality, especially where elements of the tool did not work as expected.

Theme	Count	Examples
Navigation	18	"The last page with the links on it – maybe open in new windows. The page that you click to re-direct to the feedback form could have a button to click to the next module or home." "Not all links work." "Reference is made to many other modules. I understand the links but would do it more visually to indicate how they relate to each other."
Functionality	5	"I couldn't access the Excel personal innovation profile questions. The worksheet didn't have them on it." "I could not fill in the innovation profile." "Excel file did not open on my MacBook."

Table 8: Examples of thematic codes – navigation, functionality

The second most cited cluster of comments in this second group, with 15 occurrences, make reference to instances where the content of the modules is unclear. In some cases this is about the structure and presentation of the material, while in others there are more fundamental issues about ease of understanding (see *Table 9*). To some extent, the deeper issues of understanding are related to the earlier discussion of relevance and the role of experience and other characteristics in influencing how appropriate the module content was perceived. In other words, a base level of

knowledge about certain concepts and ideas is needed to make some of the material understandable.

Theme	Count	Examples
Content unclear	15	"I found the language used in the questions on the profiling tool a bit difficult to understand and had to re-read them a couple of times." "The lay-out of the module makes it more difficult to read quickly." "Structure and the use of subheadings." "The lay-out was a little inconsistent and confusing … Once I'd read it all through a couple of times it was useable and manageable but could do with improvement to make it more user-friendly." "Plain language would be easier." "I still have no idea what steps to take to move forward. The questions were not a logical progression. I have got experience of this type of working method but never found it easy. I think flow charts might have been good. I'm not sure because I still don't really understand."

Table 9: Examples of thematic codes - content unclear

In comparison, the theme 'content clear' was mentioned 12 times. Although this is less frequent than 'content unclear', it is important to note that comments on clarity were specifically invited after a yes/no question asking whether the content was easy to understand, to which 78% of responses were 'yes'. In most cases, people then left the free text question unanswered. This was in contrast to the 20% who answered 'more or less' and the 2% who answered 'no', who were more likely to elaborate on any needed improvements in clarity in their open-ended feedback.

Related to issues of clarity, other frequently made comments asked for more examples in the modules to illustrate the points being made (13 mentions) or said that the material was sometimes too theoretical (11 mentions). There is also some overlap between the latter theme and those comments that would have preferred the content to have been shorter (11 mentions). Having said that, there is something of a trade-off between providing enough information and background material on underlying concepts and definitions to make the activities understandable and making things as short and practically focused as possible. This is reflected in another theme where comments asked for more information to make the content clear (6 mentions). Examples of these themes can be seen in *Table 10*.

Theme	Count	Examples
More examples	13	"More examples from real-life social enterprises how they manage their stakeholders." "It was sort of clear, but I would like to see different examples." "In this module there were no real examples of filled out templates for a particular case, but it was easy enough to understand how to do it."
Too theoretical	11	"Too much theory for me." "It was quite theoretical. Some concrete examples would have been good to illustrate the theory." "Make it more practical. Let users choose if they want to get this deep into what innovation is. It is not a study."
Shorter content	11	"It was a lot of text and then I lose attention." "Perhaps you could try to keep it a bit more compact." "Less is more! Too much text. Better showing some best practices (more examples)."
More information	6	"[More detail] on the history of the theory of change." "I would like to know more about how to collect feedback. What questions to ask and how to measure the feedback." "Some terms like R&D can be more explained."

Table 10: Examples of thematic codes - more examples, too theoretical, shorter content, more information

Also related to the clarity and relevance of the material were comments referring to the sequence of content (7 mentions). The issues raised here relate to the appropriateness of the information and exercises for start-up SEs at different stages of development, as well as the effect of taking certain modules on the relevance or understandability of subsequent modules (see *Table 11*).

Theme	Count	Examples
Sequence of content	7	"The innovation process was much too technical in this phase of my start-up. Not relevant as a first module." "I feel that the pitch will come at a later time. You may first want to gain more insight into your service, your product, your added value. The pitch is then instinctively the last." "Not sure if this is the right moment for impact measurement tools. I am still in a forming phase." "I think that the business model canvas should be included or explained before this module."

Table 11: Examples of thematic codes - sequence of content

As suggested earlier, some of these issues of sequence could be a function of the testing process rather than a limitation of the tool itself. The architecture of the online tool was designed to be as flexible as possible in allowing users to navigate the material. For those who need more guidance, the personal innovation profiling tool was intended to provide pointers in the direction of the most appropriate modules to complete first. However, this guidance is by no means compulsory and users are free to navigate the different modules as they wish. The design phase of the tool did consider alternative architectures, with a more limited set of pathways through the modules, but this was judged to be too limiting.

The final cluster of themes from the free-text feedback concerns the presentation of the material in the online tool that were addressed in its further development. These include references to the visual design of the tool (6 mentions), problems with grammar and typographical errors (4 mentions), and places where content was repeated (2 mentions). Examples of these are given in *Table 12*.

Theme	Count	Examples
Visual design	6	"My suggestion would be to use more graphics next to words." "More visuals." "The text spacing, size, layout, and wording need work. It looks rushed." "I love the colours."
Grammar and typos	4	"There are some grammar and typo errors, but only a few." "Check spelling and grammar. There have been several mistakes in the modules I have taken and it left an impression. It could be easily fixed to look more professional."
Repetition of content	2	"I noticed that the worksheet came by three times. The same worksheet." "… the same PDF was put in place for no apparent reason."

Table 12: Examples of thematic codes - visual design, grammar and typos, repetition of content

As is evident, the feedback from start-up SEs who tested the tool provided invaluable formative insights, allowing for its further refinement and improvement. However, it also gives some indications of the overall utility of My Social Start-up, if only over a rather limited time horizon. The intention was to complement this aspect of the evaluation with a follow-up survey that would investigate the longer term effects of using the online tool, particular in terms of the economic performance of the tool's target user group and the development of innovation and business

capabilities. Unfortunately, the evaluation experienced a number of obstacles on this front, the most limiting of which was the collection of sufficient data to offer any reliable insight. Online questionnaires were distributed to the 61 testers of the online tool but only 2 responses were received. This obviously compares unfavourably to the response rates we achieved for the evaluation of the SPARK Accelerator baseline and exit surveys, which were 99% and 88% respectively. There are a number of likely reasons for this, the two most important of which are timing and level of engagement. With regards to timing, the decision was made to leave a sufficient time after the launch of the online tool and its use by the testing cohort to allow any traceable effects to begin manifesting themselves. This meant that the distribution of the My Social Start-up survey coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 global pandemic and subsequent policy measures that affected the three participating regions. On the one hand, this offered an opportunity to collect additional data about how the cohort of start-up SEs were faring in the face of the challenges presented. The guiding question here was whether or not the development of business and innovation capabilities through participation in the SPARK Start-up Programme had provided these SEs with resources that helped them respond to the pandemic (see Appendix 4 for the questions included in the survey). On the other hand, the resulting disruption and uncertainty for many businesses, our cohort of start-up SEs included, understandably meant that filling in evaluation questionnaires at this time was probably not the highest priority.

Timing aside, in comparison with the SPARK Accelerator, the cohort of start-up SEs that helped to pilot the online tool were rather less engaged in a sustained way with the support measures provided. This was influenced by the different design of the Start-up Programme and the dominant role of the online tool in this. Unlike the Accelerator, with its more structured and time dependent portfolio of activities, the cohort of start-ups was more variable in terms of the range and level of engagement with the support activities. In particular, the use of the online tool, as a self-directed activity in the context of the testing meant that the frequency and pace of use was entirely up to the users without any external influence.[19] The direct implication of this for the collection of survey data was arguably that the level of identification with the programme was lower and the quid pro quo commitment of completing additional evaluation activities was not so great when compared to the SPARK Accelerator. More indirectly, there were implications of this lower and more unpredictable intensity of engagement for the ability to collect meaningful impact data, even if the response rate had been useable. Obviously it would have been preferable to have had a decent response to the

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[19] This is in contrast to potential uses of My Social Start-up where it is employed by support agencies or consultants to structure their interventions, or becomes part of start-up SEs action learning activities or team strategy development.

survey, but even with this there are question marks about what the results would have told us. To provide a more robust basis for analysis, the cohort of testing start-ups would have needed to continue using the tool in a more closely observed way for a longer period of time. This was not practical under the circumstances.

13 Conclusions

This report has provided a detailed overview of the activities and results for the evaluation of the SPARK Social Enterprise project. In this concluding section we reflect on what has been learned in broader terms, consider how far the project has been successful in achieving its overall aims and objectives with regard to supporting and extending social enterprise innovation, and identify some areas for further development. As explained in the introduction, the SPARK Accelerator and Start-up Programmes were used as practical test-beds for the guiding principles advocated by the research, strategy and action plan, and Innovation Roadmap. In line with the terms of reference of the evaluation, the overall evaluation approach and specific methods focused on collecting and analysing evidence from these two programmes to assess the extent to which they represented a solid and useful reflection of these principles in practice. As a reminder, these included encouraging an awareness and appropriate balance of commercial and social/environmental objectives among SEs, building capabilities to deliver high impact and sustainable innovations, and the importance of connecting to suitably supportive framework conditions for innovation.

13.1 Balancing commercial and social/environmental objectives

The results of the evaluation of both programmes indicated a development of their business skills and commercial orientation. The participants were largely driven by their social and/or environmental mission first and foremost, with greater levels of confidence in areas relating to these than in a number of fundamental business and commercial skills and capabilities. Evidence from the SPARK Accelerator suggests a positive improvement on the business side of the equation, pointing to a shift in the balance of the dual focus of the SEs towards a greater awareness of commercial challenges and how to deal with them. Same as the analysis of innovation capabilities, comparison of data from the baseline and exit questionnaires showed the areas of greatest improvement, where respondents reported high levels of improvement in areas where they had previously been less confident (see *Figure 15* and *Figure 16*). These included business strategy and planning, marketing and branding, market research, costing products and services, and measuring and communicating social/environmental value. All of these capabilities are, in some way, about taking a more structured and systematic approach to understanding the environment in which the SE is operating and developing plans and strategies for moving the SE along a preferred development trajectory. Two areas which they improved from an already strong base were solving problems and making decisions, but the new business capabilities supported by the programme are clearly complementary, applying more systematic strategic approaches to existing problem-solving and decision-making skills. The contribution of the SPARK Accelerator to helping the participants build

their business skills and capabilities is underlined by the respondents' views on how useful they found the programme (see *Figure 25*). Improving business skills came top of the list, with 73% of respondents reporting that the programme had helped them in this area. A shift in the balance of priorities can also be seen in a decline in the reliance on non-commercial sources of income. At the start of the programme 63% of participants derived 50% or more of their income from commercial trading. By the end of the programme this figure had risen to 72%.

The data from the Start-up Programme evaluation offered further indications of a positive impact on the development of business skills and capabilities. Here again, the feedback from respondents highlighted the usefulness of concepts, frameworks, and skills, in this case relating more to wider business capabilities. The role of more structured and systematic approaches to decision-making, strategy, and planning again came across strongly. Importantly, there were indications how business skills were not displacing or diluting the social/environmental orientation of the SEs, but complementing and extending them as the former were adapted to the specific needs and challenges of SEs. Thus, for example, one respondent noted: "Even though I was familiar with the business model canvas, I had never applied it to a service organisation and certainly not to a social enterprise. The guidance around it was useful." The thematic analysis of the qualitative feedback also identified specific themes relating to planning, decision-making and problem-solving, giving further indications of the key areas in which the participants found the tool to be useful.

13.2 Building sustainable innovation capabilities

The impetus behind this principle was the evidence, collected both by the SPARK project and others, that while many SEs are highly innovative, especially with regard to their social and/or environmental purpose, they do not necessarily have a more strategic or systematic view of innovation with some gaps in their understanding of the innovation management process. This is one of the key pillars of both the SPARK Accelerator and the Start-up Programme, which both encourage a developmental path that involves identifying and working on a suitable individual 'learning journey', where they can prioritise their innovation activities and follow them through. In the case of the SPARK Accelerator, the results from the baseline and exit questionnaires clearly indicated that participants had built upon their existing innovation potential to develop a more holistic and systematic understanding of the different elements of the innovation process and how they fit together. Supportive evidence for an increasing spread of innovation capabilities can be seen in the comparison of confidence levels in different innovation dimensions before and after the programme (see *Figure 17* and *Figure 18*). Thus, while many participating SEs already felt confident about some innovation activities, these were mostly in the earlier stages of the innovation process,

such as coming up with novel ideas, scanning the environment for new ideas and opportunities, and developing new products, services, or processes. Interestingly, the responses to the exit questionnaire suggest that participants consolidated their capabilities in this area, reporting high levels of improvement on the top of an already strong base. However, it is the areas of improvement which respondents were least confident about before the programme that give the most telling insights into innovation capability development during the programme. Here we can see strong improvement in capabilities, crucially including dimensions associated with the later stages of the innovation process. These include launching and implementing new products, services, or processes, commercialising and capturing value from innovations, and ensuring their long-term benefits. Altogether this suggests not only an overall development of innovation capabilities, but also a widening out across all the main dimensions of the innovation process.

The role of the programme in supporting the development of innovation capabilities was further supported by evidence outlined in Section 8. Important results to highlight here are that 70% of participants felt that the programme had improved their understanding of innovation and, confirming the comparative analysis of the baseline and exit questionnaires, 70% thought that the SPARK Accelerator had improved their ability to capture financial, social, or environmental value from their innovations. 69% reported improvements in their innovation skills overall and 58% felt more confident about being able to repeat the innovation process in the future. Although the last figure is somewhat lower than the others, it does suggest a positive contribution in a challenging area. It takes time to develop and embed capabilities and to expect this to happen in the space of a one-year programme is arguably quite optimistic. As such, it is an encouraging sign that a reasonable proportion of participants already felt that they were moving in this direction.

Providing evidence of the practical expression of innovation capabilities, Section 7 offered useful indicators of the intensity and range of innovation activities and outcomes by the participants during the programme, showing evidence of their innovation capabilities in action. 86% of participants introduced one or more products or services during the course of the programme, with an average of just over two overall. Three-quarters or more of participants introduced innovations in the areas of marketing, organisational arrangements, external relationships, and measuring and communicating their social impact. The incidence of process innovations was somewhat lower at 59%, but the overall picture is one of a vibrant level of innovation activity.

Due to limitations with the evaluation results, especially with the disappointing response rate to the start-ups questionnaire survey, the evidence of building and deploying innovation capabilities in the SPARK Start-up Programme is rather less far-reaching. Nevertheless, there were some important

signals in the data from the piloting activities for the online tool. What was especially evident from the analysis of the feedback was that participants found the tool useful both in terms of their understanding of concepts and frameworks about innovation, and the development of practical skills to support these. As one respondent commented: "The [SPARK Innovation] roadmap is a good overview. It was useful to realise what innovation means and its significance to the process." Taken together, it is evident that both SPARK programmes provided positive support to those taking part in helping to develop and round out their previously more imbalanced innovation capabilities.

13.3 Connecting to framework conditions for innovation

As highlighted in the introduction, SE innovation does not take place in a vacuum and instead occurs in more or less supportive environments that are made up of systemic interactions between key players, knowledge, resources, rules, and institutional relationships and logics, which together shape innovation systems. The support programmes of the SPARK project were designed to help SEs connect with supportive framework conditions in and across the three participating regions. Direct components of this were the efforts in the programmes to encourage cross-border collaboration and help the participating SEs more effectively leverage different actors and resources distributed throughout these innovation systems. The evidence for this was most developed in the case of the SPARK Accelerator, whose portfolio of interlinked activities explicitly attempted to create the conditions for network interactions and collaborations to emerge. It aimed to act as a connector between the different actors of the quadruple helix which, when aligned correctly, can support the needs of SE innovation.[20]

Evidence for this networking effect can be clearly seen in the data collected from the SPARK Accelerator evaluation. The first set of indications come from the comparative analysis of the baseline and exit surveys for initial confidence and subsequent improvement in business skills over the duration of the programme. Two business capabilities that saw large improvements were business networking and working in partnership and collaboration with others, building on existing confidence in these areas and making use of the programme to take them even further. This is consistent with the findings from the baseline questionnaire which showed that the respondents already used their relationships with a whole range of actors as a source of new ideas (see *Figure 19*). In most cases, these were interactions with those they would encounter in their more immediate circle of operations, primarily beneficiaries of the social and/or environmental purpose of

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[20] It is important to note that the support programmes on which the evaluation focused were not the only ways that connections within and between the three regions were encouraged by the SPARK project. Evidence of these wider activities is presented in the final report.

the SEs, clients and customers, and competitors and other businesses in their sector. Data on the specific influence of the programme on developing network relationships indicates a consolidation of existing trends and a broadening out of interactions to include new sets of connections. Most network relationships developed during the programme were with other participating SEs, which is consistent with the earlier reported focus of their networks. However, as noted in Section 6, one might have expected a higher absolute percentage for this indicator given the amount of opportunities the SEs were given to interact with each other. Having said that, the qualitative feedback and exit interviews provide an important reminder that network relations take a variety of types and intensities, with deeper and more involved relationships, for example, in collaborating over a joint project or ongoing interactions with a mentor, are quite different from much shorter encounters that, for instance, may be a source of inspiration or new ideas, but is not of sufficient duration to be recognised as a relationship in the more restrictive numerical data.

Other relevant relationships resulting from the SPARK Accelerator that mark a departure from earlier patterns, include interactions with support agencies, advisors, and consultants, and funders and financial organisations. These indicate a widening of the range and scope of network relationships. Overall, 77% of participants reported new ways of working with external parties. Interestingly fewer participants identified universities and research institutes as a type of network contact made during the programme. This might have been expected to be higher given that a university was one of the project partners, and other universities were involved in various parts of the programme. This may suggest some room for further development of network interactions, but the clear overall picture is that participants were able to develop and leverage network relationships through taking part in the SPARK Accelerator.

The data on network relationships from the exit survey also gives interesting insights into the ways that participants of the SPARK Accelerator used the network connections they made during the programme. The most important of these were identifying new business opportunities, helping the SEs learn new skills, and providing a source of support and advice. These all suggest useful complementary evidence of the role of the programme in helping SEs develop their business and innovation capabilities. There were also indications of more involved relationships emerging in the form of joint activities, partnerships, and collaborations, which more than 50% of participants reported they had built due to the programme. This was particularly the case among the Open Innovation Group members, but also occurred more generally across the whole cohort of Accelerator participants.

13.4 Areas for development

The evaluation of the SPARK project has offered extensive evidence that the objectives of the two programmes were achieved across the three domains of balancing commercial and social/environmental priorities, building sustainable innovation capabilities, and connecting with supportive framework conditions. However, in the spirit of continuous learning, it is worth noting that there are a few areas where future implementations of the two programmes could pay particular attention in enhancing the delivery and benefits of the support offered in the future.

Firstly, it is important to ensure the correct mix of participants and seek an appropriate fit between their needs and the support measures provided. Both the Accelerator and Start-up Programmes placed a careful emphasis on these issues. In the case of the former, there were clear guidelines for recruitment and extensive efforts were made to achieve these, but even so there had to be a degree of flexibility and pragmatism in balancing the selection criteria. This meant that participating SEs were not always as well-established as they could have been, which in turn led to some mismatches, especially between the more and less experienced SEs. This made it difficult to satisfy everybody in terms of the level at which training was pitched and in the formal and informal exchange of knowledge and experiences. The larger and more experienced SEs were, as a result, marginally less engaged than they could have been. Having said that, this is not a recommendation to reduce differences in the cohort. Homogeneity may enhance social integration between the group and the recognition of shared experiences, but it can also limit the diversity and novelty of learning opportunities. Issues of relevance also arose in the Start-up Programme, with some disconnect between the learning modules and the needs and expectations of the participants. This highlighted the variety of levels of experience of those involved in starting up SEs and the challenges of accommodating this variety. The online learning tool was designed to do this with its individual profiling tool that was included to point users in the direction of appropriate modules. However, it is not certain how far the pilot activities fully tested how effective this was and an analysis of how the tool is used 'in the wild' would have been useful.[21]

Connected to the above, the second point is that it is important to think about the demands on participants and the benefits that they perceive from their participation. This is particularly relevant for the SPARK Accelerator which, as a year-long and fairly demanding programme, required a high level of commitment from the participants. As the evaluation has shown, there were clear benefits

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[21] The idea of studying things 'in the wild' alludes to the limitations of learning from artificial experimental conditions and the benefits of detailed practice-based studies. See, for example, Hutchins, E., 1995. *Cognition in the Wild*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

to be had, but this depended to a large extent on the degree of engagement. Given time pressures, not all participants were willing or able to engage to the same extent. As such, it is helpful to consider how threshold levels of engagement can be achieved and maintained throughout the duration of the programme. Although this is not something that has been discussed thus far, a crucial element of sustaining any longer term support measure relates to how it is managed over time. In the case of the SPARK Accelerator, the coordinator of the programme, or 'relationship manager', played a central role in encouraging ongoing participation and keeping up momentum. In relation to the previous point, while thinking about the composition of the cohort at the recruitment stage is obviously important, this is only the starting point. To maximise engagement and participation, as well as the benefits of networking and connecting with actors across different regional innovation systems, it is critical to see the management of programme relationships as an ongoing effort. As mentioned previously, this involves achieving a balance between meeting the individual needs of the participating SEs at the same time as leveraging the collective benefits of taking part in the programme. As well as the programme relationship manager, the one-to-one coaches have a significant role to play here and their selection and matching with suitable participants is also important.

Thirdly, the comparison of the baseline and exit questionnaire data for the SPARK Accelerator revealed some interesting patterns in terms of the added value of the programme. The comparison of initial confidence levels and improvement for a range of business and innovation skills helped to identify areas where participants had made improvements during the programme in skills they felt unconfident about before joining the programme, as well as those they were already confident in. However, it is also important to pay attention to the quadrants in *Figure 16* and *Figure 18* where both initial confidence and levels of improvement were lower, as these are where there is the largest potential scope for added value. In terms of business skills, the items in this quadrant were sales and customer support, fundraising, accessing public procurement, managing cashflow, and working with trustees and volunteers. For innovation skills, the items of low confidence/low improvement were introducing and using new technology and recruiting and managing skilled personnel. These all suggest skill deficits where there may be scope for future programmes to target their support, although, as explained in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, these gaps may not necessarily be priority areas for all participants. This is where it is crucial to make sure that the one-to-one coaching offers a full needs assessment for each SE taking part in the programme.

Finally, it is useful to say something about the benefits to be gained from participating in the two SPARK support programmes and the limitations of the evaluation process, which could be

incorporated into future iterations. Even with the longer time horizon of the SPARK Accelerator, it was not possible to collect data about the long term impact of the programme. This is especially the case with respect to concrete outcomes, such as financial performance, employment growth, or numbers and types of innovation introduced. The evaluation results suggest positive developments in these areas, but especially for financial and employment outcomes reveal rather modest changes that in any case are difficult to link conclusively to the effects of the programme. The gestation period of innovations, from initial idea to capturing value, and the time it takes to learn and embed new organisational capabilities, not to mention the time it takes for these to translate into bottom-line impacts, mean that there are benefits to evaluating these effects at a greater remove from the end of the programme. This still presents significant challenges, particularly with regard to disentangling the specific contribution of any support measure, the resources required to conduct such evaluation activities, and problems of 'evaluation fatigue' among the participants. However, it could be incorporated into a more enduring implementation and assessment of the SPARK programmes in the future to provide further evidence of their benefits and a good basis for continuous learning.

13.5 Final thoughts

While all these areas for improvement are important, this should not detract from the overall message of the SPARK project evaluation. As a genuine and detailed effort to translate policy principles into practice through practical support measures, the evidence suggests it delivered considerable value. This offers validation for the usefulness of the design and implementation of the two programmes, and endorses their wider diffusion and adoption by others seeking to build the framework conditions and practical actions to support the ongoing development of SE innovation. This process has already made a powerful start within the scope of the project, diffusing among stakeholders and support agencies who are able to take the learning from the SPARK project forwards. The results of the evaluation should be taken as encouragement for others interested in promoting vibrant SE innovation systems, suitably refining and adapting the measures developed by SPARK to extend it across a wider range of regional contexts.

14 Appendix 1: SPARK Innovation Roadmaps
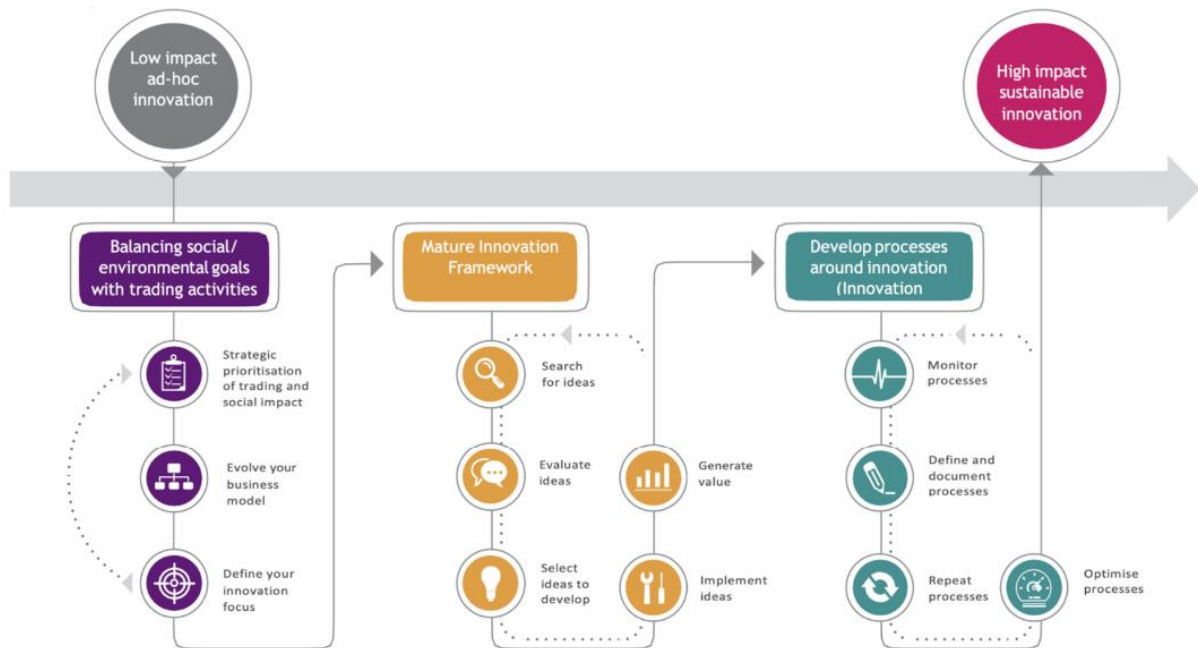
Figure 35: SPARK Innovation Roadmap for established SEs
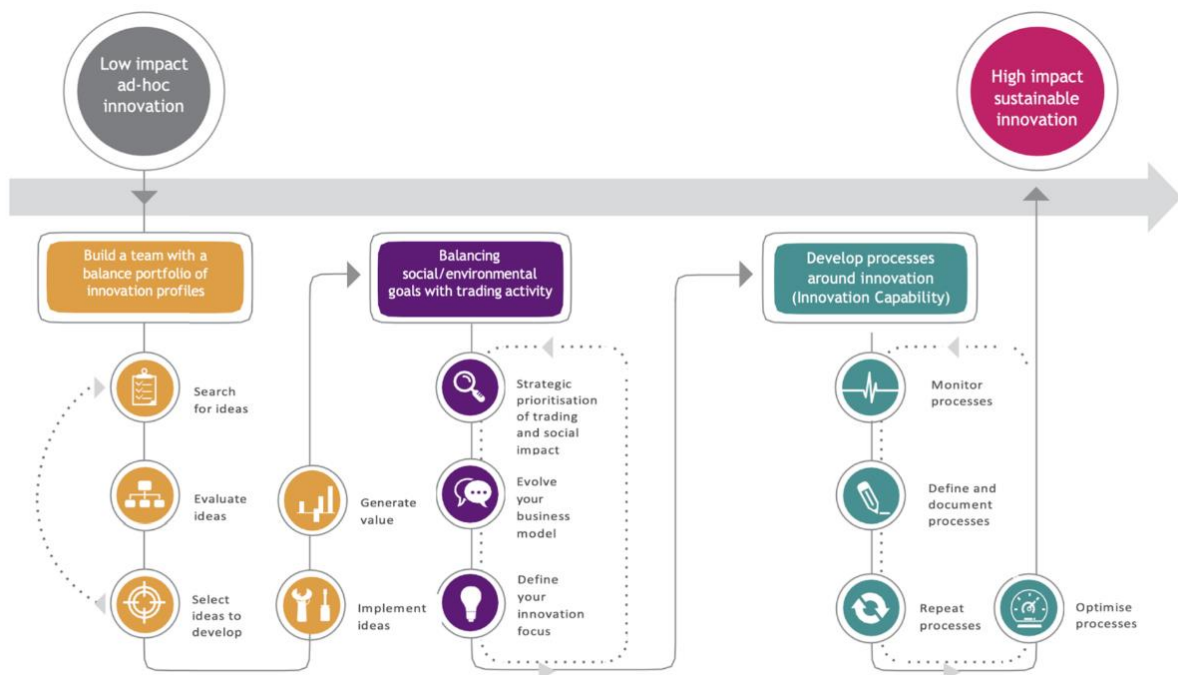
Figure 34: SPARK Innovation Roadmap for start-up SEs

15 Appendix 2: SPARK Accelerator baseline questionnaire

SPARK Accelerator - Baseline Diagnostic

Welcome

As a participant in the SPARK Accelerator we would really appreciate it if you would complete this survey. It should take around 10-15 minutes to fill in.

As you know, the SPARK Accelerator is a structured development programme which aims to help you take your social enterprise's business and innovation activities to a new level. To do this, it is important to have a clear idea of where you are now, where you would like to be in the future, and what to work on to help you get there. We have created this survey to collect information to help us to help you in planning the priority areas to work on during the programme. This will also give you a point of comparison so that at the end of the programme you can look back and see how far you have come. You will be asked to complete another questionnaire at the end of the SPARK Accelerator so you can compare where you were at the start of your participation and where you ended up. This will also be really useful for us to assess how effective the programme is and where there is room for improvement.

We would be really grateful if you could answer the following questions. We are more than aware that surveys can be quite tedious, but the aim is to help you make the most out of your participation in the SPARK Accelerator. The information you provide will be treated confidentially and only used for the purposes of delivering and evaluating the SPARK Accelerator programme unless otherwise agreed in writing. This means that your responses will only be seen by the SPARK Accelerator delivery and evaluation team. No data identifying individual organisations will be released into the public domain without prior written consent. All data will be securely stored with appropriate measures taken to prevent unauthorised access. Unless otherwise requested, data from the survey will be kept for as long as required for the purposes of evaluating the SPARK Accelerator and any follow-on research that will be of benefit to the continuing impact of the programme.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey.

If you have any problems completing the questionnaire or would like to ask a question, don't hesitate to contact us.

The SPARK Social Enterprise team

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SPARK Accelerator - Baseline Diagnostic

Part 1 - About You and Your Social Enterprise

* 1. What is the name of your social enterprise?

* 2. In which country is your social enterprise based?

- ○ Belgium
- ○ The Netherlands
- ○ United Kingdom

* 3. What is your name?

4. What is your job title and/or role in the social enterprise?

5. How many employees and volunteers does your social enterprise currently have?

Full time employees	
Part time employees	
Volunteers	

6. What was your annual turnover for the last three financial years?

This is the total amount of money that your social enterprise earns within any given financial year, including sales of goods and services, grants and donations, interest, investment returns, and any other source of revenue.

2016-17	
2015-16	
2014-15	

7. What was your net profit for the last three financial years?

This is the profit you make after operating expenses and all other charges including taxes, interest, and depreciation have been deducted from your total revenue.

2016-17	
2015-16	
2014-15	

8. What percentage of your turnover comes from commercial trading activities?

This includes income from commercial trading as well as public sector contracts for the provision of specific services that have been commissioned or procured. Trading activity excludes grants, donations, and other funding that does not directly result from the sales of goods and/or services.

- ○ More than 75%
- ○ 51% to 75%
- ○ 25% to 50%
- ○ Less than 25%

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Part 2 - Business Skills

9. Looking at the following areas, how confident are you about the business skills in your social enterprise and which do you think would benefit from further development?

	Very confident. We don't need help here.	Confident, but we'd like to get even better.	We're doing OK, but there's room for improvement.	Not so confident. This is an area we're keen to develop.	Not at all confident. This is a really important area for us to develop.	Not relevant.
Business strategy and planning	○	○	○	○	○	○
Costing your products and services	○	○	○	○	○	○
Working with trustees and volunteers	○	○	○	○	○	○
Solving problems	○	○	○	○	○	○
Managing cashflow	○	○	○	○	○	○
Market research	○	○	○	○	○	○
Working in partnership and collaborating with others	○	○	○	○	○	○
Fundraising	○	○	○	○	○	○
Making decisions	○	○	○	○	○	○
Accessing public procurement	○	○	○	○	○	○
Technical skills and knowledge	○	○	○	○	○	○
Marketing and branding	○	○	○	○	○	○
Measuring and communicating your social and/or environmental impact	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sales and customer support	○	○	○	○	○	○
Business networking	○	○	○	○	○	○
Managing people	○	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

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SPARK Accelerator - Baseline Diagnostic

Part 3 - Innovation Skills

10. Looking at the following areas, how confident are you about the innovation skills in your social enterprise and which do you think would benefit from further development?

	Very confident. We don't need help here.	Confident, but we'd like to get even better.	We're doing OK, but there's room for improvement.	Not so confident. This is an area we are keen to develop.	Not at all confident. This is a really important area for us to develop.	Not relevant
Leadership and managing organisational change	○	○	○	○	○	○
Recruiting and managing skilled personnel	○	○	○	○	○	○
Scanning the environment for new ideas, market trends, etc.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Introducing and using new technology, e.g. IT systems	○	○	○	○	○	○
Accessing and using external know-how	○	○	○	○	○	○
Coming up with novel ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○
Assessing risks and feasibility of new ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○
Developing new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Launching and implementing new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Commercialising and capturing value from new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ensuring the long-term benefits of new products, services, or processes, e.g. through ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement	○	○	○	○	○	○

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Part 4 - Sources of Ideas for Innovation

11. How important are the following sources of information for finding new ideas?

	Not at all important	Of little importance	Moderately important	Important	Very important
Suppliers of equipment, services, etc.	○	○	○	○	○
Clients, customers or end users of your products/services	○	○	○	○	○
Beneficiaries of the social/environmental purpose of the organisation	○	○	○	○	○
Competitors or other businesses in your sector	○	○	○	○	○
Friends and family members	○	○	○	○	○
Consultants, commercial labs or private R&D centres	○	○	○	○	○
Universities, research institutes or technical colleges	○	○	○	○	○
Conferences, trade fairs, exhibitions	○	○	○	○	○
Professional and industry associations	○	○	○	○	○
Public sector/government policies	○	○	○	○	○
Technical, industry or service standards	○	○	○	○	○
Trade/technical publications, scientific journals, etc.	○	○	○	○	○
Internet search engines	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

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Part 5 - Innovation Activities

12. How many new products and services did you introduce in the last three years (broken down by year)?

2016-17	
2015-16	
2014-15	

13. Has your organisation introduced any new or significantly improved processes for production, service delivery, distribution, or any other activity in the last three years?

○ Yes

○ No

14. In the last three years, did your organisation make changes in the following areas?

	Not at all	To some extent	To a large extent
New organisational processes and procedures (e.g. changes in systems for managing suppliers, ways of organising production or service delivery, processes for reducing waste, quality management)	○	○	○
New methods of organising work responsibilities and decision making (e.g. new systems of employee responsibilities, motivation or remuneration, team work, decentralisation, etc.)	○	○	○
New methods of organising external relationships with other firms or public institutions (e.g. new forms of alliances, partnerships, outsourcing, sub-contracting, accessing public procurement, etc.)	○	○	○
Implementation of changes to marketing concepts or strategies	○	○	○
Measuring and communicating social impact	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

15. To what extent have these new products, services, processes, and organisational arrangements affected your business in the following areas?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Increased turnover	○	○	○	○	○
Increased net profit	○	○	○	○	○
Increased range of products or services	○	○	○	○	○
Entered new market or increased market share	○	○	○	○	○
Improved quality of products or services	○	○	○	○	○
Replaced outdated products or processes	○	○	○	○	○
Improved flexibility of production or service delivery	○	○	○	○	○
Increased capacity for production or service delivery	○	○	○	○	○
Reduced costs per unit produced or services provided	○	○	○	○	○
Improved staff commitment, morale, and relationships at work	○	○	○	○	○
Met regulatory requirements	○	○	○	○	○
Created opportunities or learning that the organisation will be able to exploit in the future	○	○	○	○	○
Enhanced social/environmental impact	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

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16 Appendix 3: SPARK Accelerator exit questionnaire[22]

SPARK Accelerator - Final Diagnostic - Open Innovation Group Participants

Welcome

Having participated in the SPARK Accelerator Programme we would really appreciate it if you could complete the following questionnaire. This should take around 15-20 minutes.

We hope you will find this a useful opportunity to reflect on your journey during the programme, assess where you are now, and consider possible areas to work on in the future. The previous survey you completed gave us a really useful picture of where you were at the start of the programme, for which we are very grateful. The current questionnaire is crucial for us to see what has changed since then and the extent to which the SPARK project has helped you. It is also an opportunity for you to tell us what worked well and what we can do to improve the programme so we can enhance our support for social enterprise innovation in the future.

Before starting this survey: Please make sure you have information about your turnover, profit, trading income, and number of employees available to refer to.

Privacy statement: The information you provide will be treated confidentially and only used for the purposes of delivering and evaluating the SPARK Accelerator programme unless otherwise agreed in writing. This means the following:

- Your responses will only be seen by the SPARK Accelerator delivery and evaluation team.
- No data identifying individual organisations will be released into the public domain without prior written consent.
- All data will be securely stored with appropriate measures taken to prevent unauthorised access.
- Unless otherwise requested, data from the survey will be kept for as long as required for the purposes of evaluating the SPARK Accelerator and any follow-on research that will be of benefit to the continuing impact of the programme.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey.

If you have any problems completing the questionnaire or would like to ask a question, don't hesitate to contact us.

The SPARK Social Enterprise team

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[22] This is the version of the exit questionnaire designed for the Open Innovation Group members. The standard version did not include item 5 of question 19 or question 20.

SPARK Accelerator - Final Diagnostic - Open Innovation Group Participants

Part 1 - About You and Your Social Enterprise

* 1. What is the name of your social enterprise?

[   ]

* 2. In which country is your social enterprise based?

○ Belgium   ○ United Kingdom
○ The Netherlands

* 3. What is your name?

[   ]

4. What is your job title and/or role in the social enterprise?

[   ]

5. How many employees and volunteers does your social enterprise currently have?

Full time employees	[ ]
Part time employees	[ ]
Volunteers	[ ]

6. What was your turnover for the last year?

This is the total amount of money that your social enterprise earns within any given financial year, including sales of goods and services, grants and donations, interest, investment returns, and any other source of revenue.

| Last year's turnover | [   ] |

7. What was your net profit for the last year?

This is the profit you make after operating expenses and all other charges including taxes, interest, and depreciation have been deducted from your total revenue.

| Last year's profit | [   ] |

8. What percentage of your turnover comes from commercial trading activities?

This includes income from commercial trading as well as public sector contracts for the provision of specific services that have been commissioned or procured. Trading activity does not include grants, donations, and other funding that does not directly result from the sales of goods and/or services.

| 0 | % | 100 | [   ] |

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Part 2 - Business Skills

9. Looking at the following areas, to what extent have these business skills in your social enterprise changed since joining the SPARK Accelerator Programme?

	Significantly increased	Moderately increased	Neither increased nor decreased	Moderately decreased	Significantly decreased	Not relevant
Business strategy and planning	○	○	○	○	○	○
Costing your products and services	○	○	○	○	○	○
Working with trustees and volunteers	○	○	○	○	○	○
Solving problems	○	○	○	○	○	○
Managing cashflow	○	○	○	○	○	○
Market research	○	○	○	○	○	○
Working in partnership and collaborating with others	○	○	○	○	○	○
Fundraising	○	○	○	○	○	○
Making decisions	○	○	○	○	○	○
Accessing public procurement	○	○	○	○	○	○
Technical skills and knowledge	○	○	○	○	○	○
Marketing and branding	○	○	○	○	○	○
Measuring and communicating your social and/or environmental impact	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sales and customer support	○	○	○	○	○	○
Business networking	○	○	○	○	○	○
Managing people	○	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

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Part 3 - Innovation Skills

10. Looking at the following areas, to what extent have these innovation skills in your social enterprise changed since joining the SPARK Accelerator Programme.

	Significantly increased	Moderately increased	Neither increased nor decreased	Moderately decreased	Significantly decreased	Not relevant
Leadership and managing organisational change	○	○	○	○	○	○
Recruiting and managing skilled personnel	○	○	○	○	○	○
Scanning the environment for new ideas, market trends, etc.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Introducing and using new technology, e.g. IT systems	○	○	○	○	○	○
Accessing and using external know-how	○	○	○	○	○	○
Coming up with new ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○
Assessing risks and feasibility of new ideas	○	○	○	○	○	○
Developing new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Launching and implementing new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Commercialising and capturing value from new products, services, or processes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ensuring the long-term benefits of new products, services, or processes, e.g. through ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement	○	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

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Part 4 - Innovation Activities

11. How many new products and services did you introduce in the last year? How would you describe these?

Number of new products/services introduced in the last year

Description of these new products/services

12. Has your organisation introduced any new or significantly improved processes for production, service delivery, distribution, or any other activity in the last year? How would you describe these?

○ Yes

○ No

Description of these new or significantly improved processes

13. In the last year, did your organisation make changes in the following areas?

	Not at all	To some extent	To a large extent
New organisational processes and procedures (e.g. changes in systems for managing suppliers, ways of organising production or service delivery, processes for reducing waste, quality management)	○	○	○
New methods of organising work responsibilities and decision making (e.g. new systems of employee responsibilities, motivation or remuneration, team work, decentralisation, etc.)	○	○	○
New methods of organising external relationships with other organisations (e.g. new forms of alliances, partnerships, outsourcing, sub-contracting, accessing public procurement, etc.)	○	○	○
Implementation of changes to marketing concepts or strategies	○	○	○
Measuring and communicating social impact	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

14. To what extent have these new products, services, processes, and organisational arrangements affected your business in the following areas?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Increased turnover	○	○	○	○	○
Increased net profit	○	○	○	○	○
Increased range of products or services	○	○	○	○	○
Entered new market or increased market share	○	○	○	○	○
Improved quality of products or services	○	○	○	○	○
Replaced outdated products or processes	○	○	○	○	○
Improved flexibility of production or service delivery	○	○	○	○	○
Increased capacity for production or service delivery	○	○	○	○	○
Reduced costs per unit produced or services provided	○	○	○	○	○
Improved staff commitment, morale, and relationships at work	○	○	○	○	○
Met regulatory requirements	○	○	○	○	○
Created opportunities or learning that the organisation will be able to exploit in the future	○	○	○	○	○
Enhanced social/environmental impact	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

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Part 5 - Relationships and Collaborations

15. To what extent has the SPARK Accelerator Programme, either directly or indirectly, helped your social enterprise make useful connections with the following types of organisation?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Other social enterprises involved in the programme	○	○	○	○	○
Social enterprises not involved in the programme	○	○	○	○	○
Customers and users	○	○	○	○	○
Suppliers and contractors	○	○	○	○	○
Support agencies, advisors, and consultants	○	○	○	○	○
Funders and financial organisations	○	○	○	○	○
Universities and research institutes	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

16. How far have these relationships contributed to developing your social enterprise in the following areas?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very a large extent
Providing a sources of support and advice	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Identifying new opportunities	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Helping your business learn new skills	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Supplying goods or services	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Sourcing goods or services	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Finding sources for funding and finance	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Creating opportunities for joint activities, partnerships, and collaborations	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Other (please specify)

[   ]

17. How many relationships with other organisations have you made, directly or indirectly, as a result of the SPARK Accelerator Programme in the following geographical areas?

	None	1-5	6-10	More than 10
Belgium	◯	◯	◯	◯
The Netherlands	◯	◯	◯	◯
United Kingdom	◯	◯	◯	◯
Other European Union countries	◯	◯	◯	◯
Outside the European Union	◯	◯	◯	◯

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Part 6 - Your Experiences of the SPARK Accelerator Programme

18. Looking at the SPARK Accelerator Programme overall, to what extent has it been helpful for your social enterprise in the following areas?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
Improving your business skills (see Question 8 for a list of things to think about)	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your innovation skills (see Question 9 for a list of things to think about)	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your understanding of the activities involved in innovation	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your ability to find new ideas	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your ability to turn new ideas into practical applications	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your ability to capture financial, social, or environmental value from the innovations you have introduced	○	○	○	○	○
Improving your ability to repeat the innovation process in the future	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

19. How useful have you found the following activities of the SPARK Acclelerator Programme for helping your social enterprise to innovate?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
One-to-one support from coaches	○	○	○	○	○
The e-learning hub	○	○	○	○	○
International safaris	○	○	○	○	○
Specialist training sessions on innovation and related activities	○	○	○	○	○
Peer-to-peer action learning sessions	○	○	○	○	○
Open innovation group activities	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

20. To what extent did your participation in the Open Innovation Group help in the following respects?

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent
I learned more about the concept and principles of open innovation	○	○	○	○	○
I learned practical methods for implementing open innovation	○	○	○	○	○
I increased my confidence and willingness to use open innovation methods in the future	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

21. What three things did you find most useful about participating in the SPARK Accelerator Programme?

1) [   ]

2) [   ]

3) [   ]

22. What are the three most important areas where the SPARK Accelerator Programme could be improved?

1) [   ]

2) [   ]

3) [   ]

23. Anything we've missed? If you've got any other comments that would help us support innovation in social enterprises in the future, then please let us know.

[   ]

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17 Appendix 4: SPARK Start-up Programme questionnaire

SPARK My Social Start-Up

0% complete

Page 1: Introduction

As a participant of the SPARK Social Enterprise project we would really appreciate it if you could complete the following short questionnaire. This should take around 10 minutes.

Your assistance will be invaluable in helping us to evaluate the support to start-up social enterprises offered by SPARK, namely the My Social Startup online tool, peer-to-peer learning, webinars, and ask-the-expert sessions. It is an opportunity for you to tell us what worked well and what we can do to improve the programme to enhance our support for social enterprises in the future. Social enterprises face particular challenges and opportunities that it is important to understand in shaping support. As such, we also ask about your experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before starting this survey: you will need to have information to hand about your social enterprise's income since it was formed.

Privacy statement: The information you provide will be treated confidentially and only used for the purposes of delivering and evaluating the SPARK Social Enterprise project unless otherwise agreed in writing. This means the following:

- Your responses will only be seen by the SPARK delivery and evaluation team.
- No data identifying individual organisations will be released into the public domain without prior written consent.
- All data will be securely stored with appropriate measures taken to prevent unauthorised access.
- Unless otherwise requested, data from the survey will be kept for as long as required for the purposes of evaluating the SPARK Accelerator and any follow-on research that will be of benefit to the continuing impact of the programme.

For further information about data protection at the University of Brighton please click here.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have any problems completing the questionnaire or would like to ask a question, don't hesitate to contact us.

The SPARK Social Enterprise team

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SPARK My Social Start-Up

50% complete

Page 2: Page 1

1. What is the name of your social enterprise? ✳ *Required*

2. What year was your social enterprise formed?

This part of the survey uses a table of questions, view as separate questions instead?

3. What was your commercial trading income for the last five years (or from when your social enterprise was established if more recently), e.g. income from commercial sales, government and other contracts?

2016	
2017	
2018	
2019	
2020 (projected)	

This part of the survey uses a table of questions, view as separate questions instead?

4. What was your non-trading income for the last five years (or from when your social enterprise was established if more recently), e.g. income from grants, donations, and other non-commercial sources?

2016	
2017	
2018	
2019	
2020 (projected)	

5. How useful was the support provided by the SPARK Social Enterprise project (including the My Social Startup online tool, peer-to-peer learning, webinars, and ask-the-expert sessions) for the following aspects of your business?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent	Don't know
Understanding business modelling and planning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social impact measurement and assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding new sources of income	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Addressing legal considerations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Improving marketing and sales	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Understanding the innovation journey	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Growing and scaling the business	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Working with stakeholders and beneficiaries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Achieving the right funding mix	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. What changes have you made to your social enterprise because of the COVID-19 pandemic (tick all that apply)?

☐ Increased use of online channels for sales
☐ Changed products or services offered
☐ Reduced the number of paid employees
☐ Increased use of government support
☐ Entered or opened up new markets
☐ Changed ways of communicating with stakeholders
☐ Increased borrowing
☐ Reduced spending on costs
☐ Other

7. Anything else? If there's something important we've missed or you've got a burning issue you want to tell us about, please feel free to do so below.

< Previous   Finish ✔

ID	Commercial activities	Broad sector	Social purpose	Focus
BE01	Café, clothing retail	Clothing and design	Support for adults with disabilities	Social
BE02	Singing coach, training	Arts and culture	Community building	Social
BE03	Flower shop	Food, agriculture and gardening	Promotion of sustainable practices and biodiversity	Environmental
BE04	Craft products, food	Clothing and design	Ethical sourcing, tacking poverty in developing countries, community projects	Social
BE05	Training and education	Training and education	Support for young adults with learning disabilities	Social
BE06	Bicycle courier	Transport	Sustainable urban transport, responsible business	Both
BE07	Textiles and clothing	Clothing and design	Ethical sourcing, tacking poverty in developing countries, community projects	Social
BE08	Agriculture, forestry	Food, agriculture and gardening	Community building, sustainability	Both
BE09	Communal after-school childcare	Sharing platform	Incubator for projects with social impact, community building	Both
BE10	Car and bicycle sharing	Transport	Sustainable urban transport	Environmental
BE11	Employment, training, coaching, advice	Training and education	Inclusive employment, community building, sustainability	Both
BE12	Education, training, advice	Training and education	Support for gifted children	Social
BE13	Nature and landscape management	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Inclusive employment, sustainability	Both
BE14	Recycling, upcycling, retail	Clothing and design	Inclusive employment, sustainability	Both
BE15	Education, training, digital design	Training and education	Sustainability, digital inclusion	Both
BE16	Clothing manufacture and sales	Clothing and design	Sustainability, fair trade	Both
BE17	Vegetable growing, food production	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Sustainability, responsible business	Both
BE18	Garden design	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Sustainability	Environmental
BE19	Sharing platform for household items	Sharing platform	Sustainability, community building	Both

BE20	Sustainable building consultants	Energy and construction	Sustainability	Environmental
BE21	Massage service	Healthcare and social services	Support for people with chronic diseases, quality of life	Social
NL01	Employment consultant	Training and education	Inclusive employment, support for people with disabilities	Social
NL02	Restaurant, community services	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Community building, sustainability, inclusive employment	Both
NL03	Charity consultant, intermediary	Training and education	Sustainability, social inclusion	Both
NL04	Research, intermediary	Training and education	Social inclusion	Social
NL05	Consultants	Training and education	Support for social enterprises	Both
NL06	Digital fabrication, craft shop	Clothing and design	Inclusive employment, support for young people	Social
NL07	Food production	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Inclusive employment, sustainability	Both
NL08	Storytelling platform, ICT	Arts and culture	Community building, social inclusion	Social
NL09	Restaurant	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Inclusive employment and training	Social
NL10	Restaurant, catering	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Inclusive employment and training, sustainability	Both
NL11	Sharing platform	Sharing platform	Community building, sustainability	Both
NL12	Neighbourhood cooperative, community services	Community services	Community building, sustainability	Both
NL13	Events agency	Arts and culture	Inclusive employment	Social
NL14	Management consultant	Training and education	Self-development, sustainability	Both
NL15	Education, training	Training and education	Social inclusion, health	Social
NL16	Management consultant, energy	Energy and construction	Sustainability	Environmental
NL17	Renewable energy	Energy and construction	Sustainability	Environmental
NL18	Transport consultant	Transport	Sustainable urban transport	Environmental
NL19	Recycled clothing and accessories	Clothing and design	Inclusive employment, sustainability	Both

NL20	Childcare, sports activities	Sport and outdoor activities	Health, personal development	Social
NL21	Household products and design	Clothing and design	Sustainability	Environmental
NL22	Team coach, performer	Training and education	Not clear	Social
NL23	Seaweed farming	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Sustainability, clean oceans	Environmental
UK01	Garden design, gardening courses	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Support for people with dementia, sustainability	Both
UK02	Community garden, cooking courses	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Community building, sustainability, support for elderly people	Both
UK03	Renewable energy	Energy and construction	Sustainability	Environmental
UK04	Business Improvement District	Community services	Community development	Social
UK05	Assistive technology, training	Training and education	Support for neurodiverse and disabled people, social inclusion, support for developing countries	Social
UK06	Photographic agency	Arts and culture	Social inclusion, sustainability, international development	Both
UK07	Picture framing, printing, garden	Clothing and design	Support for people with dementia, inclusive employment	Social
UK08	Theatre company	Arts and culture	Inclusive employment, support for people with disabilities, support for long-term unemployed	Social
UK09	Production company	Arts and culture	Social inclusion, support for LGBTQ+ people	Social
UK10	Sport and outdoor activities, training, childcare	Sport and outdoor activities	Health, support for people with disabilities	Social
UK11	Wood recycling	Energy and construction	Sustainability, inclusive employment, support for disadvantaged people	Both
UK12	Women's centre	Community services	Support for vulnerable women	Social
UK13	Forest school, childcare	Sport and outdoor activities	Support for disabled and disadvantaged people	Social
UK14	Sportswear, swimwear, retail	Clothing and design	Sustainability, clean oceans, international development	Both
UK15	Sailing courses, cargo	Sport and outdoor activities	Support for disadvantaged people, sustainable transport	Both
UK16	Training and education	Training and education	Inclusive employment, support for disadvantaged people	Social

UK17	Social care training	Healthcare and social services	Support for disabled and disadvantaged people	Social
UK18	Training and education, culture, heritage	Arts and culture	Community building, arts	Social
UK19	Mental health support services	Healthcare and social services	Support for people with mental health issues	Social
UK20	Country centre	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Support for people with disabilities, inclusive employment	Social
UK21	Skatepark	Sport and outdoor activities	Support for young people	Social
UK22	Training, recruitment	Training and education	Inclusive employment, support for disadvantaged people	Social
UK23	Food production, cooking courses	Food, agriculture, and gardening	Sustainability, community building	Both
UK24	Electric vehicle design, education	Transport	Sustainable transport, support for young people	Both
UK25	Childcare, after-school club	Sport and outdoor activities	Social inclusion	Social

19 Appendix 6: New products, services, and processes introduced by participating SEs during the programme

ID	Description	No. of new products/ services	Product/service	New processes	Process
BE01	Café, clothing retail	1	Introduction of a new weekly dish	No	
BE02	Singing coach, training	1	Contracts for singing sessions in big companies	Yes	1. Only use professional singing coaches to guarantee quality 2. Use of resellers for distributing services in their portfolio
BE03	Flower shop			No	
BE04	Craft products, food	2	New carpets and footstools made from recycled Indian textiles	No	
BE05	Training and education	1	A learning program for people with a mental disability	No	
BE06	Bicycle courier			No	
BE07	Textiles and clothing	2	Designer made carpet and cushions	No	
BE08	Agriculture, forestry	2	Introduction of short-term user terms for land and know-how	Yes	Candidate participants can pay for a short term trial
BE09	Communal after-school childcare	1	B2B service to organise collective collaborative childcare at work.	Yes	New processes to introduce collaborative childcare into HR policies
BE10	Car and bicycle sharing	1	Bicycle sharing platform	Yes	Improvement of workflows to cope with growth in employees and volunteers
BE11	Employment, training, coaching, advice	3	New HR solutions for businesses	Yes	Introduction of job analysis and design tools, e.g. job carving and job crafting
BE12	Education, training, advice	0		Yes	Changed organisation from a hierarchical company to a horizontal network-organisation of freelancers

BE13	Nature and landscape management	4	1. Skilled landscape team to execute technical jobs which are too difficult for the lower skilled social economy teams. 2. Landscape design and landscape management plans. 3. Outdoor teambuilding activities 4. Communication material for companies that want to communicate their efforts to improve biodiversity	Yes	Introduction of self-organising teams
BE14	Recycling, upcycling, retail				
BE15	Education, training, digital design			No	
BE16	Clothing manufacture and sales	9	New collection of shirts	No	
BE17	Vegetable growing, food production	3	1. Lectures about urban farming and business implementation 2. Retreat for social entrepreneurs to find their true purpose 3. Consultancy for urban agriculture	No	
BE18	Garden design		New garden design service	Yes	Digitalisation of internal processes
BE19	Sharing platform for household items	1	New sharing platform	No	
BE20	Sustainable building consultants		Improvement and commercialisation of building advice offerings	Yes	Structuring, optimising and commercializing of building advice
BE21	Massage service	3	New massage workshop	No	
NL01	Employment consultant	1	New ICT solution for disabled people	No	
NL02	Restaurant, community services	1	New cooperative in another neighbourhood	Yes	Reorganisation of team.
NL03	Charity consultant, intermediary			No	

NL04	Research, intermediary			No	
NL05	Consultants	1	Workshop on strategy development for social enterprises	No	
NL06	Digital fabrication, craft shop	3	New consumer products	Yes	Automation of order and production processes
NL07	Food production	7	Low carb products and savoury biscuits	No	
NL08	Storytelling platform, ICT	2	1. Specific marketing tools 2. Regional products	Yes	No details given
NL09	Restaurant	4	1. Catering in new business meeting room 2. Dinner dances 3.Day specials in combination with music concerts 4. Full wedding catering	Yes	Cooperation with other businesses to deliver services
NL10	Restaurant, catering	3	New cookies, sandwiches, and personal gifts	Yes	Transport by cargobike
NL11	Sharing platform	2	1. Introduction of premium accounts 2. Advertising service	No	
NL12	Neighbourhood cooperative, community services	3	New services concerning energy saving for house owners	Yes	Implementation of new CRM system
NL13	Events agency			No	
NL14	Management consultant				
NL15	Education, training	2	New services, brand strategy, and business plan	No	
NL16	Management consultant, energy	1	Coworking space	No	
NL17	Renewable energy	2	1. New services for apartment owners associations (VvEs) 2.Wider product offer	Yes	Measures to improve efficiency
NL18	Transport consultant	3	1. Making podcast radio interviews 2. New cost-benefit analysis 3. Visualising	No	

			impact for customers		
NL19	Recycled clothing and accessories	3	New products	No	
NL20	Childcare, sports activities	2	After-school sports activities	Yes	No details given
NL21	Household products and design	1	Workshops	Yes	Increase of network relationships
NL22	Team coach, performer	1	Measuring team culture	Yes	1. More focus on short- and mid-term goals 2. Introduction of kanban agile workflow management
NL23	Seaweed farming	2	New seaweed products	Yes	Cooperation with larger external partners for outsourcing of production on a bigger scale
UK01	Garden design, gardening courses	5	1. Events 2. CPD Training 3. Therapeutic programme for different user group 4. Extended programme for existing user group 5. New income-generation project with our first product for sale in 2019	Yes	1. Introduction of IT-based impact assessment tool 2. New online accounting system 3. Meeting GDPR obligations
UK02	Community garden, cooking courses	3	1. Cookery classes 2. Venue hire 3. Private classes/ team building & parties	Yes	New processes for marketing, delivering, and evaluating services provided
UK03	Renewable energy	1	Business coaching of other community businesses	Yes	Outsourcing of administration and back office functions
UK04	Business Improvement District	3	1. Gift Card 2.Procurement assistance 3. Footfall management	Yes	1. Evidence based data collection 2. Collective support
UK05	Assistive technology, training	1	Selling our services to corporate clients	Yes	No details given
UK06	Photographic agency				

UK07	Picture framing, printing, garden	2	Offering online printing and framing via the Big Issue shop	Yes	Introduction of online sales
UK08	Theatre company	1	Community cafe and drop-in centre	No	
UK09	Production company	4	New productions and services	Yes	National touring projects
UK10	Sport and outdoor activities, training, childcare	2	1. School camps 2. Joint events with another provider	Yes	Partnerships with larger organisations
UK11	Wood recycling	1	Community laundry being set up	No	
UK12	Women's centre			Yes	Widening services, by securing contracts/commissioning
UK13	Forest school, childcare	2	1. Holiday club 2. Sales of merchandise	No	
UK14	Sportswear, swimwear, retail	1	Sunglasses made from recycled materials	Yes	Introduction of affiliates
UK15	Sailing courses, cargo	1	Importing olive oil and other food products by sail from Portugal to Sussex	Yes	Trialled three different ways of importing cargo by sail to find most efficient and sustainable approach
UK16	Training and education	2	New courses	No	
UK17	Social care training	5	New service supporting therapeutic fostering	Yes	Processes to support the introduction of blended learning in service offerings
UK18	Training and education, culture, heritage	2	Training and studio rental	Yes	Improving new income stream development
UK19	Mental health support services	1	Young people's programme aged 14+	Yes	Better evaluation of existing services and the potential for new services
UK20	Country centre	3	New building, with shop, cafe & conference facilities	No	
UK21	Skatepark	2	Different events	No	
UK22	Training, recruitment	1	Paid internship programme	Yes	Better digital infrastructure and processes
UK23	Food production, cooking courses	2	1. Community supported beehive scheme 2. Seaweed	Yes	Development of new processes to support commercial sales and trading income

			commercial programme		
UK24	Electric vehicle design, education	2	1. New suite of education projects tailored to primary schools 2. New collaborative engineering project aimed at secondary schools	No	
UK25	Childcare, after-school club	1	School cleaning contract	No	