



## Empowering local economies: Community consultancy for sustainable cities and communities

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of university-led community consultancy in supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and advancing inclusive, place-based economic development. Based on qualitative data from interviews with seven SMEs that participated in a Community Consultancy project in Scotland, the study examines how short-term, research-informed consultancy—delivered free at the point of use—enhances SME strategic capacity, promotes local resilience, and aligns with Community Wealth Building and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Findings demonstrate that practitioner-scholars acting as mentors, collaborators, and knowledge brokers play a central role in fostering trust, translating academic expertise into practice, and enabling accessible engagement that breaks down traditional perceptions of the ‘ivory tower’. The paper contributes to the literature on university–SME collaboration, anchor institutions, and knowledge exchange, and proposes community consultancy as a replicable model of engaged scholarship that supports local innovation, strengthens business resilience, and generates wider community benefit.

**Keywords:** Community Consultancy, local economic development, sustainable cities, anchor institutions, community wealth building, place-based innovation, university–SME collaboration, inclusive growth, engaged scholarship

### Introduction

In the context of ongoing economic uncertainty, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) continue to play a vital role in local economies yet often face significant barriers to sustained growth. Although no definitive definition exists, perhaps the most relevant in this context comes from the European Union who state that a business is an SME “when it employs fewer than 250 persons and has an annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros, and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding 43 million euros” (Montanari & Kocollari, 2020).

This paper explores how universities—through the application of short-term, research-informed community consultancy—can help address these challenges. Drawing on the community consultancy project at the University of the West of Scotland, as a case study, the paper examines how practitioner-scholars can work directly with SMEs to co-create strategic solutions, enhance competitiveness, and foster resilience. The

community consultancy was delivered by the authors in pairs, working with seven SMEs over a six-month period in 2024. Each organisation accessed up to three free sessions, held either at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) Hive incubation space or on-site at their premises. The sessions were flexible, covering issues such as strategy, idea generation, and business modelling, and concluded with tailored recommendations for further action.

Grounded in the principles of Community Wealth Building and aligned with the aims of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UNSDG) 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (United Nations, 2015), the project demonstrates how universities can leverage their academic capital in practical, inclusive ways. Community Wealth Building (CWB) provides the rationale for universities' more entrepreneurial role, as it prioritises local assets, anchor institutions, and inclusive economic models that retain wealth within communities rather than allowing extraction by external actors (Dubb, 2013; Guinan & O'Neill, 2019). This focus on local systems of ownership and participation positions universities as embedded economic actors and makes CWB particularly suited to advancing the UNSDG agenda, which emphasises resilient, sustainable, and inclusive development (CLES, 2020). UNSDG 11 in turn provides the strategic objective, offering a globally recognised framework that connects local interventions with international sustainability goals. By situating the project within this framework, the study illustrates how university-led interventions can address structural barriers while contributing to global targets. Offering consultancy free at the point of use removes traditional barriers to support, increasing accessibility for diverse organisations and directly contributing to the inclusivity and resilience emphasised by SDG 11 (United Nations, 2015; University of the West of Scotland, n.d.).

The paper positions universities as anchor institutions capable of breaking down perceptions of the 'ivory tower' (a metaphor for academic detachment and elitism), by embedding themselves within local enterprise ecosystems. This shift aligns with the transformation from the traditional ivory tower university towards the entrepreneurial university, a model emphasising economic and social engagement (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Through this work, universities not only offer tangible support to SMEs but also create opportunities for knowledge exchange, live case study development, and long-term collaboration. This paper argues for the strategic value of university-led community consultancy as a replicable and impactful model of engaged scholarship, linked to UNSDG11 and Community Wealth Building approaches.

### Literature review

Research suggests a positive link between organisational performance and interventions from higher education enterprise educators. Management training and competence-enhancing interventions can improve performance in SMEs (Panagiotakopoulos, 2020; Owoeye & Muathe, 2018) whilst real estate interventions can also enhance organisational performance in educational settings (de Vries et al., 2008). Learning organisations, strategy adoption, and knowledge transfer are factors that contribute to improving performance in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Mohammed et al., 2016, ). Entrepreneurial orientation and management have been associated with improved organisational performance in university extension programs (Fox, 2005). Government funding can moderate the relationship between entrepreneurial factors and organisational performance in higher education (Khalid et al., 2016). Additionally, entrepreneurial activity is gaining importance as a component of value creation for society by HEIs, necessitating strategic frameworks and performance measurement mechanisms (Lourenço & Valente, 2019).

HEIs play a role in supporting SMEs through entrepreneurship education and collaboration; partnerships which can lead to economic benefits for both SMEs and regional development (Darabi & Clark, 2012; Gordon et al., 2010). HEI engagement with SMEs creates social capital and network benefits, fostering trust and knowledge exchange (Gordon & Jack, 2010; Gordon, 2013). Entrepreneurship education programmes delivered by HEIs can enhance SME owners' strategic focus and leadership capabilities (Gordon et al., 2012). However, challenges exist in aligning academic and SME needs, requiring flexible and interactive approaches (Valencia et al., 2021). The relationship between education and entrepreneurship in SMEs is complex, with mixed findings on its impact (Bartoš et al., 2015). University-based incubators and student internships serve as effective knowledge transfer tools, supporting innovation in SMEs and improving HEIs' community engagement and student employability objectives (Piterou & Birch, 2016). These forms of engagement align directly with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (UN, 2015), particularly in their emphasis on inclusive, resilient, and sustainable local development. The UNSDG's are central to the University of the West of Scotland's strategic vision, which places the goals at the heart of its Strategy 2030 and aims to position UWS among the global leaders in research that is excellent, relevant and purposeful (University of the West of Scotland, n.d.).

By acting as anchor institutions, HEIs can drive Community Wealth Building strategies by supporting local enterprise ecosystems, retaining economic value within communities, and promoting fairer economic participation (Guinan & O'Neill, 2019; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015). Through micro consultancy and applied research, universities can operationalize their civic mission to support locally rooted, inclusive economic development. Several studies have raised questions regarding the impact of HEI interventions on innovation and their cost effectiveness (Cravo & Piza, 2016; Piza et al., 2016). Concerns have also been expressed that the outcomes may appear relatively modest (Gordon et al., 2010; Ismail et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that the influence of such interventions is uneven, with effects differing according to firm size and the type of support provided (Devins & Johnson, 2002; Wren & Storey, 2002).

At the same time, the literature indicates that HEI engagement can play a vital role in supporting SMEs. Such interventions have been shown to enhance managerial skills, strengthen networks, and encourage incremental innovation (Gordon & Jack, 2010; Gordon, 2013). They can also lead to improved business practices, sharper strategic focus, and the development of social capital. HEI support has been linked to higher survival rates and growth, particularly among medium-sized firms (Wren & Storey, 2002), therefore the approach of community consultancy can be seen as offering positive benefits to the SMEs participating.

### **Methods for growth stimulation in SMEs**

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By leveraging their expertise in entrepreneurship, innovation, and business development, they act as catalysts for knowledge transfer, skill enhancement, and industry-academic collaboration. Enterprise educators facilitate knowledge exchange between academia and SMEs (Armas et al., 2024). By conducting research and offering consultancy services, they help SMEs adopt innovative practices, optimize operations, and solve complex business challenges (Moore & Manring, 2009). Universities often provide access to cutting-edge technologies, data, and intellectual property, which SMEs can leverage to develop competitive advantages (Humayun, 2021). They can play a significant role in the regional ecosystem as they can have a vast reach beyond the ivory towers (Davies et al., 2024). Enterprise educators play a central role in translating academic research into practical solutions that drive SME growth (Jones & Iredale, 2014).

Through workshops, tailored training programs, and mentorship, enterprise educators enhance the entrepreneurial skills of SME leaders and employees (Hynes & Richardson, 2007). They equip SMEs with tools for strategic planning, financial management, and market analysis, which are crucial for scalability and sustainability (Ayatse and Onodogu, 2024). Moreover, many universities host business incubation and accelerator programs where enterprise educators guide startups and SMEs through early-stage growth hurdles (Harun et al, 2024). Enterprise educators often act as conduits for building networks between SMEs and larger corporations, investors, and policymakers (Ayatse and Onodogu, 2024). These connections are instrumental in creating opportunities for partnerships, funding, and market access (Kruss, 2006). Through university-led events, SMEs gain exposure to diverse stakeholders, enabling them to broaden their influence and secure valuable resources for growth (Jones et al., 2020).

By fostering entrepreneurial mindsets, higher education institutions create vibrant innovation ecosystems (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021). Enterprise educators collaborate with SMEs to test and commercialize new products and services, thereby driving local and regional economic development (Bramwell et al., 2012). Many universities also provide SMEs with access to state-of-the-art facilities and research labs, which they might not afford independently. Enterprise educators contribute to shaping policies that benefit SMEs by participating in government-led initiatives and advisory boards (Bennet, 2014). They advocate for regulatory changes that create a more conducive environment for SME growth (Kruss et al, 2015). Furthermore, enterprise educators often champion inclusive growth, ensuring that SMEs from underserved communities have access to resources and support (Vorley & Williams, 2017).

In conclusion, higher education enterprise educators significantly impact SME growth in the UK by fostering innovation, developing entrepreneurial skills, and creating networks that empower SMEs to thrive. Their collaboration with industry and government ensures that SMEs remain agile, competitive, and resilient in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology to explore the role of university-led community consultancy in supporting SME growth within the Scottish economic landscape. Specifically, the research investigates how short-term, research-informed consultancy interventions by academic staff can enable businesses to refine strategic plans, access new markets, and build resilience.

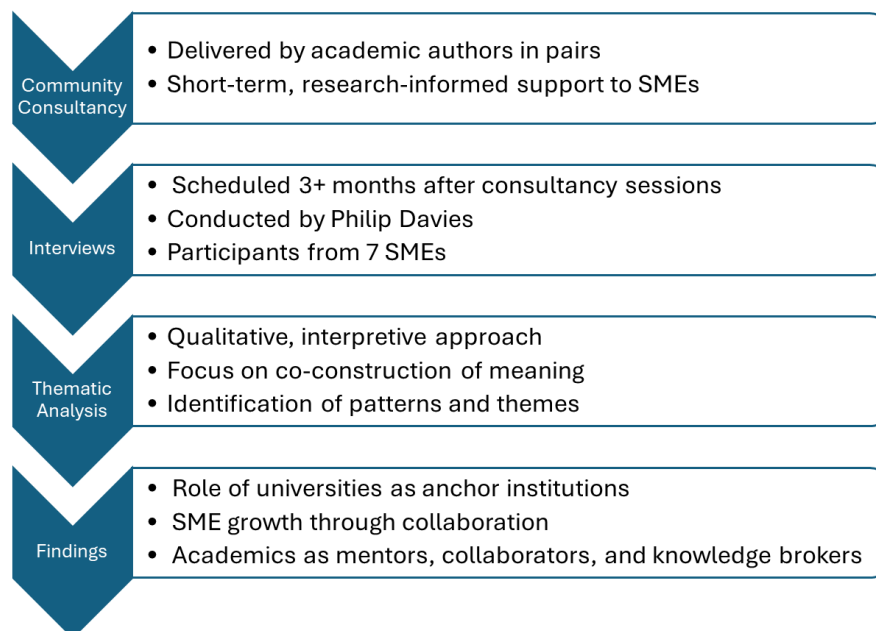
The community consultancy initiative itself formed the context of the study but was not the primary source of data. The initiative was delivered by the authors, who acted as consultants working in pairs with participating organisations. Each organisation engaged in up to three sessions over a six-month period in 2024, with meetings held either at the UWS Hive incubation space or at off-site venues hosted by the businesses. The consultancy was free of charge, ensuring accessibility for all participants. Sessions were intentionally flexible and tailored to the needs identified by each organisation, covering issues such as strategic planning, idea generation, and business modelling. Each session concluded with suggested follow-up actions, allowing organisations to continue developing their ideas and strategies beyond the consultancy itself.

The primary data for this study were collected at least 3 months after the consultancy had concluded, through semi-structured interviews designed to capture participants' reflections on the value, outcomes, and dynamics of the intervention. Given the relational, context-dependent, and processual nature of the consultancy activity, a qualitative approach was essential for capturing the depth and nuance of the

interactions between academic consultants and business leaders. This approach allowed us to examine not only the interventions themselves but also the meanings and strategic outcomes attributed to them by the participants.

Our study builds upon interpretive traditions in qualitative research, which emphasise the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants (Crotty, 1998). We respond to recent calls for more qualitative research in the fields of entrepreneurship and business ethics, particularly studies that explore under-researched areas such as trust, mentorship, and knowledge exchange (Enudeme et al., 2025). Quantitative approaches were deemed unsuitable for this inquiry, as the phenomena under investigation—strategic growth intentions, perceived barriers, and mentorship experiences—are difficult to capture through standardised instruments such as surveys (Jenssen & Kristiansen, 2004; Omeihe et al., 2020). Instead, the research seeks to surface rich, embedded narratives and practical examples that can inform both academic discourse and future university–business collaborations.

In total, seven SMEs participated in the study. Multiple representatives were interviewed across these firms, ensuring that perspectives were captured at both organisational and individual levels. All of the authors acted as consultants during the interventions, typically working with organisations in pairs, with the specific pairing of academics dependent on availability at the time of delivery. While this involvement positioned the authors as practitioner-scholars embedded in the intervention process, data collection was conducted solely by Philip Davies through semi-structured interviews held after the consultancy sessions had concluded. This design helped to maintain separation between the delivery of consultancy and the generation of research data, reducing potential bias and ensuring that participants could reflect openly on their experiences.



**Figure 1** Methodological Flow

This methodological orientation aligns with previous research which has highlighted the value of qualitative approaches for exploring the ethical and relational dimensions of entrepreneurship (Omeihe, 2019; Omeihe et al., 2020). Our approach recognises the situated nature of trust and learning in SME environments and treats the consultancy sessions as lived episodes of co-production between academia and enterprise. The interviews, conducted retrospectively, provided space for participants to reflect on how the consultancy

influenced their thinking and practice, allowing the study to capture both perceived value and longer-term strategic outcomes. These insights demonstrate dynamics of knowledge transfer, social capital building, and innovation that cannot be fully appreciated through numerical measures alone.

### Research setting

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The research took place in the context of post-COVID and post-Brexit Scotland—a setting marked by considerable economic disruption, policy uncertainty, and shifting market dynamics. SMEs across the country have been significantly affected by supply chain interruptions, rising operational costs, labour shortages, and changes in consumer behaviour. Despite these challenges, many businesses remain committed to growth and innovation but often lack the strategic capacity or external support needed to realise their ambitions.

This backdrop provided a unique opportunity for university-led consultancy to demonstrate value, particularly in supporting organisations that had survived the immediate shocks of the pandemic and were now transitioning into a new phase of development. The Community Consultancy project operated under the umbrella of the University of the West of Scotland's enterprise initiatives and sought to connect academic expertise with real-world business needs. By focusing on practical, short-term interventions, the project was well suited to address the kinds of barriers faced by organisations operating in economically fragile environments.

### Research questions

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The research questions that we identified were:

- RQ1: How does offering community-consultancy free at the point of use impact accessibility and engagement for a diverse range of SMEs?
- RQ2: How does university-led community-consultancy contribute to Community Wealth Building principles and the aims of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)?
- RQ3: How do short-term, research-informed community-consultancy interventions by university academic staff enable SMEs in Scotland to refine their strategic plans?
- RQ4: How do practitioner-scholars work with SMEs to co-create strategic solutions, and what are the key features of this co-creation process?

### Participants

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Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025), with the intention of engaging businesses that could provide insight into the effectiveness and value of community consultancy. The sample consisted of seven SMEs based in Scotland, each of which had previously participated in the UK Government-backed 'Help to Grow' programme (Small Business Charter, 2023) delivered by UWS. This shared background ensured that all participants had some prior engagement with structured business development support and were able to articulate their current growth objectives and challenges.

The purposive sampling technique allowed us to include a diverse range of businesses across multiple sectors, including retail, creative industries, digital services, professional services, and light manufacturing. This heterogeneity was important not only for capturing a broad set of experiences but also for exploring how consultancy needs and outcomes varied across different business models. In line with recommendations for mitigating sample bias (Vershina et al., 2019), we also made efforts to ensure variation in business size, ownership demographics, and geographic location within Scotland.

Access to participants was facilitated through the UWS Help to Grow alumni network and with the support of programme coordinators, who helped identify businesses that were both willing and suitable for participation. In total, seven businesses engaged in one-to-one community consultancy sessions and contributed to the data collection process.

### Data collection

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The consultancy sessions provided the practical context for the study but were not themselves the source of primary data. These sessions, lasting between one and three hours, took the form of open-ended discussions between academic consultants and business owners or senior managers. The aim was to explore current strategic challenges, identify potential growth opportunities, and co-develop practical solutions. Their unstructured format allowed participants to set the agenda and highlight issues most relevant to them, while enabling the academic consultants to draw on disciplinary expertise to offer tailored advice.

The primary data was collected through follow-up semi-structured interviews conducted three to six months after the consultancy sessions. These interviews, carried out via video call, provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the consultancy process, the changes it stimulated, and the perceived value of engaging with the university. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and followed the guide included in Appendix A. AI-assisted transcription (Atlas.ti) was used to generate draft transcripts, which were then manually reviewed to ensure accuracy and to familiarise the analyst with the material prior to coding.

### Ethical considerations

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Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of the West of Scotland's institutional research ethics committee (University of the West of Scotland 2024). All participants provided written informed consent prior to the commencement of consultancy activity, and were briefed on the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. Given the close working relationship between academic consultants and participants, particular care was taken to maintain confidentiality and to avoid any undue influence or pressure.

Participants were offered the opportunity to review case study material generated from their sessions and were assured that any identifiable information would be anonymised. Throughout the project, the ethical principle of beneficence was prioritised—ensuring that the consultancy provided tangible value to each business while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Boyatzis, 1998), which allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and themes across the dataset. The analysis was underpinned by the principles of Community Wealth Building and the strategic orientation of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (United Nations, 2015), which together framed the rationale for examining universities as entrepreneurial anchor institutions. The initial stage of analysis involved close reading of interview transcripts, followed by the generation of open codes to capture significant ideas, challenges, and insights shared during the sessions.

Coding was conducted manually by Phillip Davies, with the aid of qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti to organise and structure the data. At the transcription stage, identifiable information was removed to ensure that only anonymised transcripts were used in the analysis. Access to both raw audio and anonymised transcripts was strictly limited to the research team to maintain confidentiality. The AI tool used was Atlas.ti, with data stored locally on Philips' device. In line with their policies, Atlas.ti's data-security confirms that project data are stored locally on the user's device by default, with all data encrypted and accessible only to the user and explicitly authorised collaborators (ATLAS.ti, n.d.).

Following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2008), the analysis proceeded in several stages. First, codes were reviewed for internal coherence and relevance to the research questions, interpreted through the dual lenses of CWB and knowledge exchange. Next, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that reflected shared issues or strategic concerns across the cases. These included themes such as "Achieving Strategic Clarity," "University as an Anchor Institution (Providing Access, Resources, and Support)," "Making Support Accessible by Overcoming Financial and Logistical Barriers to Engagement," and "Academic's Role as Mentor, Collaborator, and Knowledge Broker." As analysis progressed, each theme was subjected to further scrutiny to ensure it was well grounded in the data and representative of multiple participants' experiences. Where necessary, themes were revised, merged, or split to better reflect the complexity of the dataset. This iterative process allowed for the development of rich thematic narratives supported by illustrative examples and anonymised quotations from the sessions.

In line with best practices in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saunders et al., 2024), the final stage of analysis involved defining and naming themes, producing clear descriptions and interpretations, and explicitly linking the findings back to the theoretical framework. Community Wealth Building provided the rationale for universities' greater entrepreneurial role (Dubb, 2013; Guinan & O'Neill, 2019; CLES, 2020), while UNSDG 11 offered the strategic objective, connecting local practices to international sustainability goals (United Nations, 2015). The result is a set of well-evidenced insights into how community consultancy operates in practice and how it can be scaled to support inclusive and sustainable economic development.

## Findings

The coding and theming process was shaped using basic, organising and global themes to develop codes from the data into meaningful themes. 89 initial codes were generated from interviews and observations using an open coding process. These codes, each representing an issue discussed, formed the foundation of the analysis of the data, being clustered initially to form 13 basic themes, as shown in Table 1, reflecting a range of often overlapping issues related to the research questions.



These 13 Basic Themes were then further clustered into 8 broader groupings, or Organising Themes, which were themselves grouped into 3 Global Themes. This process helps to identify the underlying issues and patterns which address the Research Question and naming them allowed us to map the non-hierarchical networks present in the data. These Organising and Global themes are shown in Table 1, while the Thematic Networks they represent are visually depicted in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

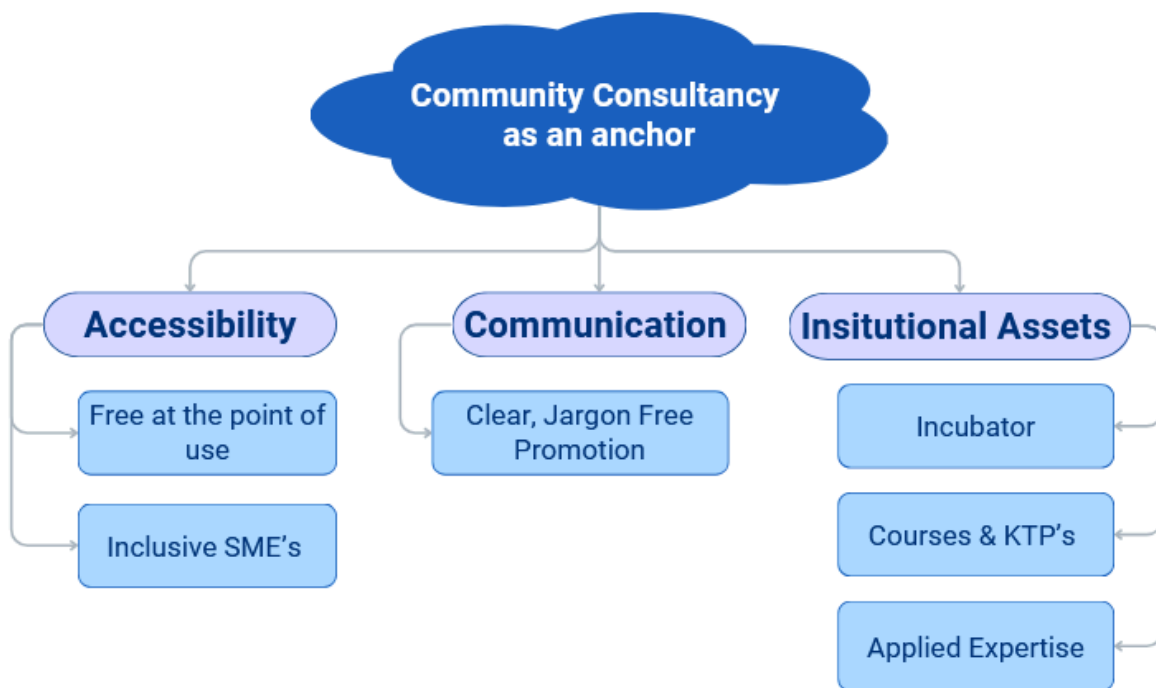
**Table 1** From Basic to Organising to Global Themes

Research Question	Basic Themes	Organising Themes	Global Themes
RQ1: How does offering community consultancy free at the point of use impact accessibility and engagement for a diverse range of SMEs?	Making support accessible by overcoming barriers to engagement	Enhancing Accessibility through Barrier removal	The University as an Anchor Institution Leveraging Assets Building SME
	University as an Anchor: Providing Access, Resources, and Support		
RQ2: In what ways does university-led community consultancy contribute to Community Wealth Building principles and the aims of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)?	University as an Anchor Institution (Providing Access, Resources, and Support)	The University as an Engaged Anchor Promoting Applied Scholarship	Growth through Collaborative Engagement
	Engaged Scholarship		
	SME Challenges and Barriers (Operational, Financial, and Strategic)	Contextualising the Need	Building SME Growth through Collaborative Engagement
Local Economic Impact and Inclusive Growth	Driving Inclusive Community Growth		
RQ3: How do short-term, research informed community consultancy interventions by university academic staff enable SMEs in Scotland	Achieving Strategic Clarity	Achieving Enhanced Strategic Focus and Business Competitiveness for SMEs	
	Enhancing SME Competitiveness		

to refine their strategic plans?	The Academic's Role: Mentor, Collaborator, and Knowledge Broker	The Academic Contribution: Mentorship and Application of Research to Real-World Problems	The Academic as Mentor, Collaborator, and Knowledge Broker
RQ4: How do practitioner scholars work with SMEs to cocreate strategic solutions, and what are the key features of this co-creation process?	Applying Research for Real-World Impact and Mutual Learning	The Practitioner Scholar	
	Academic's Role as Mentor, Collaborator, and Knowledge Broker.		
	Engaged Scholarship for Real-World Impact		
Co-Creating Goals, Direction, and Action Plans with SMEs	Key Dynamics of Co-Creating Strategic Solutions through Engaged Scholarship		

**Thematic Network I: The university as an anchor institution leveraging assets**

This thematic network highlights the institutional mechanisms through which universities enact their anchor role in supporting SMEs, with particular emphasis on the need for proactive approaches to ensure support is both accessible and effective. Grounded in the principles of Community Wealth Building, this positioning is theoretically robust and supported by evidence of its positive outcomes for local economies.



**Figure 2** Thematic Network 1: The University as an Anchor Institution Leveraging Assets

The data illustrate that the availability of free consultancy significantly reduced barriers to engagement, a factor that was especially valuable for newer and smaller businesses seeking to access university expertise. “Really just that it was available... well, this is available and it's free and why not?” (Participant A). When Participant A asked what would make working with the university more attractive – “If it was all free!”

Although participants valued the free support, there was a sense of surprise that it existed at all, alongside uncertainty about whether further access was possible. This created hesitancy to re-engage, underlining the need for proactive and transparent communication about ongoing support and its inclusivity.

I probably didn't think I could reach out again. And I thought, well, I've used up my credits, if you like. (Participant D)

I mean, I feel like you're going out your way to come and help us and we're not maybe giving a lot back. It seems like a lot that you're doing for free. (Participant E)

Participants also described the broader resources offered by the university, not only through consultancy but also through courses, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), and facilities such as the Hive (UWS’s incubator/enterprise hub). Accessing one form of support often led to involvement in others, demonstrating the role of the university as an engaged anchor and as a promoter of applied scholarship.

At the same time, limited awareness of university programmes and the alienating effect of academic jargon reinforced the need for accessible communication.

Sometimes I think lecturers and university people forget how to talk normal speak. So we find that quite often they go way into theoretical ideas and it's like yeah, but how do we do that in the real world? Like how does that practically happen? I think that's probably the biggest challenge. (Participant D)

I've also told lots of other organisations about it because I think it's fantastic for local businesses. (Participant D)

But I think there's lots and lots of businesses who don't have that level of engagement with the university and they're probably missing an opportunity... They're not aware that that expertise is there and available to them. (Participant A)

Community consultancy has emerged as a keyway for universities to demonstrate their anchor role, providing SMEs with accessible and practical support. The findings show that offering consultancy free at the point of use lowered barriers to engagement, which was particularly valuable for newer and smaller businesses. While the free support was highly valued, several participants expressed surprise that it existed at all and uncertainty about whether they could return for further help. This points to the need for universities to communicate proactively and ensure that support is presented as inclusive and ongoing. Community consultancy therefore illustrates how universities can leverage their assets in line with Community Wealth Building principles, but also shows that its impact depends on awareness, openness of access, and the confidence of businesses to re-engage.

**Thematic Network 2: Building SME growth through collaborative engagement**

This theme emerges from participants’ repeated emphasis on the challenges they face in sustaining and growing their businesses, and their accounts of how community consultancy provided a structured way to confront these issues. SMEs consistently described the pressure of limited time, resources, and capacity, which often left little space to focus on strategy.



**Figure 3** Thematic Network 2: Building SME Growth through Collaborative Engagement

Community consultancy created an opportunity to step back from day-to-day operations, reflect on long-standing problems, and clarify priorities. The prominence of these reflections in the dataset shows

that the consultancy's value lay not only in providing advice, but also in enabling businesses to engage in critical conversations they might not otherwise have had.

Participants described a wide range of pressures — funding, staffing, resource management, regulatory burdens, and the need for strategic focus — that restricted their ability to step back from daily tasks. The consultancy sessions created opportunities to reflect on these issues, helping businesses clarify their priorities and identify practical solutions.

It was probably something long overdue in terms of us actually physically doing... it's actually quite rare for us to sit down and say, "Right, this is what we're trying to do, but here are the challenges", and have that discussion around what the challenges were. (Participant A)

It just helped us kind of focus a bit on what would work, what wouldn't work, what's worth exploring, what isn't, that kind of thing. (Participant C)

I think it definitely helped us again think outside the box a wee bit... just maybe making sure that we bring it back to what it is that we're trying to achieve and having a summary and then maybe a task thing would be quite helpful. (Participant D)

Evidence of impact was described in terms of competitiveness, process improvement, refreshed marketing, and increased confidence to make decisions. Participants linked the consultancy directly to actions such as rebranding, redesigning websites, and adopting new service offerings.

Yeah, I thought it was really useful and I think that was why kind of made the decision as well to [change branding]... because there's definitely areas that we hadn't focused on that were highlighted. (Participant G)

It kind of identified that we all have the same pain points but we're maybe approaching them in different directions, so we were then able to kind of take that and improve upon consistency across the business. (Participant B)

I think it was really useful just hearing from your experience and insights. (Participant G)

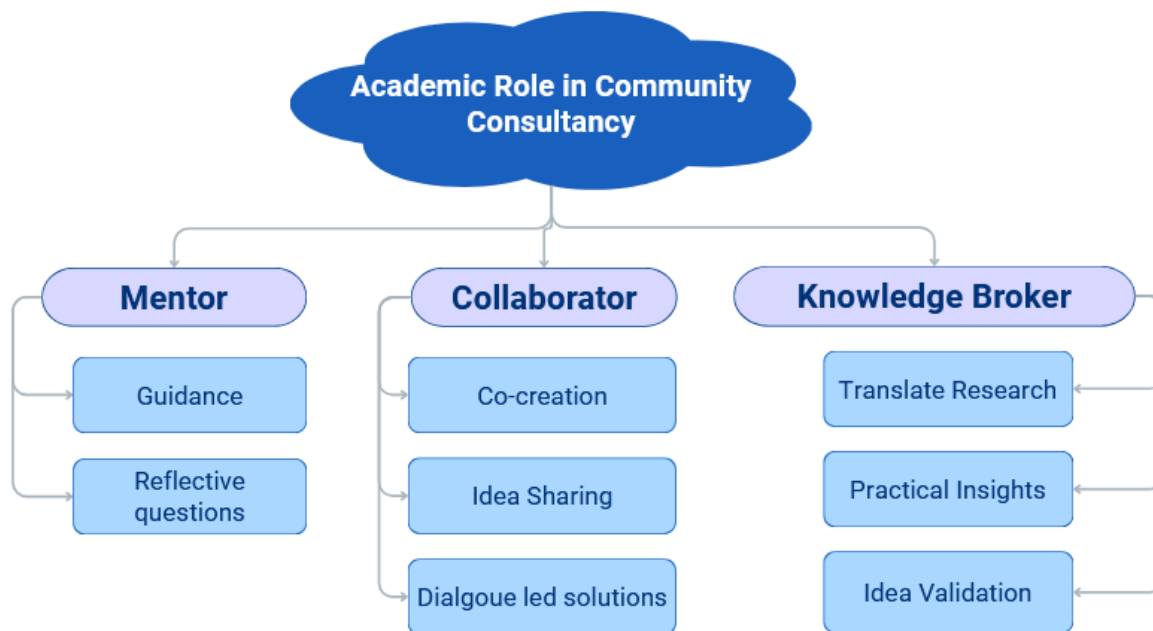
So partnering up with universities is a fantastic way of helping them research but also helping us you know look at the bigger picture and bring in new innovations. (Participant D)

It made us kind of see, oh yes, it's not just this is something that we need to do day in day out, there is a bigger vision and an end goal that we want to create for our business and how do we do that? So it was good for us to have a wee insight that way... and we've redone our website and we've got a professional copywriter in and we focused on these things, you know, to kind of enhance what we are selling. (Participant C)

Taken together, these reflections show how community consultancy supported SMEs in achieving strategic clarity and building the confidence to make concrete changes. By enabling businesses to step back, reassess, and act on new insights, consultancy demonstrates its value as a mechanism that links local enterprise growth with wider Community Wealth Building principles and the goals of UNSDG 11.

**Thematic Network 3: The academic as mentor, collaborator, and knowledge broker**

This final thematic network is closely linked to the first, but whereas Theme 1 focused on the university as an institution, this theme narrows attention to the specific role and contribution of academics or practitioner-scholars within community consultancy. It highlights how the value of consultancy is not only shaped by structures and resources but also by the methods, trustworthiness, and interpersonal dynamics created by individual academics.



**Figure 4** Thematic Network 3: The Academic as Mentor, Collaborator, and Knowledge Broker

The role of the academic as mentor, collaborator, and knowledge broker was strongly evidenced across the dataset. Several participants emphasised that their willingness to engage was based on trust in particular academics and the positive experience of working with them. Skills, personality, and delivery were repeatedly cited as central to the quality of the sessions. Academics were valued for bringing external perspectives, challenging assumptions, and facilitating discussions in ways that prompted reflection and new thinking.

They were lovely two guys. They were really nice. (Participant E)

I think just the way yourself and Will approached it probably took them out their comfort zone a bit in their general day-to-day thoughts because it was very much approached in a different way... (Participant A)

We were willing to take that risk because we'd met Will and even though he didn't have a pitch [about the Creative Community Consultancy Programme]... because we trusted Will, we were happy to engage with that process... (Participant B)

I think being challenged worked well, them asking us probably different difficult questions and making us think about the answers. (Participant C)

It was his delivery. You weren't aware that he was getting us to do all these things. Then at the end we came up with ideas. (Participant F)

The application of academic research and expertise to real-world problems was also strongly recognised. Businesses valued both the practical insights academics offered and the way they helped validate existing strategies or stimulate new ideas.

I always think somebody coming from the outside looking in is a lot easier than when you're in it. (Participant F)

So yeah, I guess it was also from the mentoring sessions in what he was warning me about in terms of servicing that market. (Participant G)

Collaboration was described as a defining feature of the consultancy, with solutions often co-created through dialogue rather than delivered as prescriptions. This informal, flexible, and conversational format was highlighted as supportive, creative, and conducive to open idea generation.

...nine times out of 10 the solution sits with the people that are doing the work, but it's getting them in the right room in the right space in the right environment for them to share what the issues are, for them to identify the way forward. (Participant A)

That is where I like the creative consultancy title, because it is being creative. It's getting you to think outside the box and it's opening up the dialogue... it's getting everybody together and it's opening, encouraging conversation and essentially a safe space. (Participant B)

I think it was quite good that was more informal as well... it was conversational, and yeah, I actually thought that was a cool format. (Participant G)

This theme demonstrates that community consultancy depends as much on the relational and communicative practices of academics as on institutional structures. By acting as mentors, collaborators, and knowledge brokers, academics create trust, open spaces for dialogue, and translate knowledge into practical insights. These dynamics highlight that the personal role of academics is critical in ensuring that consultancy is experienced as accessible, inclusive, and impactful.

## Discussion

The findings of this research bring new data to an important field of study offering new and valuable insights around the impact that university-led community consultancy can have in supporting SMEs' growth and local economic development objectives. To this end the study highlights several important considerations as follows.

### Enhancing accessibility and engagement by removing barriers

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This finding connects closely to the theme of the university as an anchor institution leveraging its assets. Free-at-the-point-of-use support was shown to be a decisive factor in enabling SMEs to participate in community consultancy. The removal of financial costs significantly increased engagement, particularly

among newer and smaller firms that lacked the resources to access traditional consultancy but had the greatest need for support in skills, knowledge (Hynes & Richardson, 2007), and mindset development (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021). This approach reflects the principles of Community Wealth Building, which emphasise inclusivity and equitable access to resources (Engage Renfrewshire, n.d.).

While Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to diversify income beyond student fees, the study demonstrates that offering consultancy free of charge can create tangible benefits. By lowering barriers, universities establish connections with businesses that might otherwise remain disengaged, building relationships that can evolve into longer-term collaborations. These relationships have the potential to generate wider institutional value in areas such as research partnerships, teaching and learning innovation, and commercial activity (Kruss, 2006). In doing so, universities not only strengthen their role as anchor institutions but also contribute directly to the aims of UNSDG 11 by fostering more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable local communities.

#### **Driving SME growth and local impact through collaborative engagement**

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The data from the study clearly show that community consultancy interventions had a notable positive impact on participating businesses across several core functions. Businesses reported that the support was beneficial in addressing key operational and strategic challenges, including funding constraints, staffing issues, resource management difficulties, regulatory burdens, and a lack of strategic focus. These findings align with research that highlights the persistent challenges faced by SMEs in dynamic economic environments (Bramwell et al., 2012).

The consultancy sessions provided businesses with a rare opportunity to step back from day-to-day operations and engage in strategic reflection. By facilitating focused discussions on firm-specific challenges and offering external perspectives, academics enabled business owners to refine strategic plans, set clearer goals, and make more informed decisions. This process led to enhancements in business models and processes, the development of targeted marketing messages, the consideration of new service offerings, and increased confidence among decision makers. These findings support the argument that university-led interventions can enhance SME performance (Gordon et al., 2011). However, they also emphasise the importance of tailoring support to the circumstances of each business, rather than adopting the resource-efficient but generic approaches often used by enterprise agencies. The community consultancy model, with its emphasis on co-creation and applied problem-solving, appears particularly effective in this regard.

Moreover, the study demonstrates the potential for university engagement to contribute to local economic development and Community Wealth Building (Engage Renfrewshire, n.d.) by deploying significant institutional resources for local benefit (Manring, 2009). By supporting SMEs, universities can foster more resilient and inclusive economies, generating spill-over benefits for the wider community. While the term *Community Wealth Building* was not widely recognised by participants, the discussions reflected a clear awareness of the importance of local economic development and the role of SMEs in sustaining community well-being.



### The academic as mentor, collaborator, and knowledge broker

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Universities have long been positioned as custodians of knowledge, yet this study shows that academics can play a more active role in advancing local development through community consultancy. The findings emphasise their role as mentors, collaborators, and knowledge brokers, helping SMEs address specific challenges through the transfer of expertise and the co-creation of tailored solutions. This profile reflects the practitioner-scholar, combining applied experience with academic insight, rather than the more traditional conception of the detached academic.

Trust in academic consultants was repeatedly highlighted as critical to engagement. Participants valued external perspectives, constructive challenge, and facilitation of strategic conversations that allowed them to step back from day-to-day operations. Many also recognised the credibility of academics who could ‘walk the walk’ through prior professional or entrepreneurial experience. These dynamics underline the relational basis of consultancy and its importance in building confidence and stimulating innovation within SMEs.

This ability to combine research with practice demonstrates the value of community consultancy as a mechanism for advancing the goals of Community Wealth Building. By lowering barriers to engagement, tailoring support to local business needs, and fostering collaboration, community consultancy retains value within the local economy and strengthens the resilience of SMEs as key community actors. For academics with less professional background, these skills can be developed through structured, industry-facing activity such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, CPD programmes like Help to Grow, or industry consultative projects (Rees et al., 2021). The study therefore extends existing work on knowledge transfer by showing how community consultancy enables academics to act as practitioner-scholars who contribute not only to SME growth but also to the wider aims of inclusive local development, directly supporting Community Wealth Building and UNSDG 11.

### Theoretical implications

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This study contributes to several theoretical domains including:

**Community Wealth Building:** The findings provide empirical support for the principles of Community Wealth Building, demonstrating how university-led initiatives can contribute to local economic development, inclusive growth, and the empowerment of local businesses.

**Knowledge Transfer:** The study sheds light on the dynamics of knowledge transfer between universities and SMEs, highlighting the importance of relational factors, co-creation, and the active role of academics in facilitating the process.

**Engaged Scholarship:** The research exemplifies the principles of engaged scholarship, demonstrating how academic expertise can be applied to address real-world problems and generate mutual benefits for both academia and society.

### Practical implications

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The findings of this study highlight several important implications for practice, centred on the actions that academics, universities, policymakers, and businesses can take to challenge the traditional ‘ivory tower’ perception and strengthen collaboration. These implications are summarised in the stakeholder action framework presented in the quadrant model below.

**Table 2** Practical Implications of Community Consultancy: A Stakeholder Action Framework

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Academics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Deliver mentoring sessions with SMEs</li> <li>2. Co-create solutions in consultancy workshops</li> <li>3. Translate research findings into practical guidance</li> <li>4. Integrate consultancy cases into teaching</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Universities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide consultancy free at point of use</li> <li>2. Publicise opportunities in clear, non-technical language</li> <li>3. Open facilities (e.g. labs, incubators) to SMEs</li> <li>4. Embed consultancy into teaching, research, and staff workload models</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Policy-makers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund SME-focused consultancy programmes</li> <li>• Adapt KEF to reward measurable SME engagement</li> <li>• Require annual reporting on anchor contributions</li> <li>• Align funding with Scotland’s Economic Strategy</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SME’s</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Register for and attend consultancy sessions</li> <li>2. Share challenges openly with academics</li> <li>3. Apply insights to strategy, marketing, and operations</li> <li>4. Disseminate learning through business networks</li> </ol>

*For academics*

Individual academics are central to breaking down the perception of the ivory tower. By adopting the role of practitioner-scholars, they can apply disciplinary expertise to real-world problems, build trust-based relationships with SMEs, and co-create solutions that reflect local contexts. This requires using clear, jargon-free language and approaching businesses as partners rather than subjects of research. Practical outputs may include tailored business strategies, reflective case studies, and innovation resources co-designed with firms. Academics can also integrate consultancy outcomes into teaching, creating live case studies and reflective assignments that enrich student learning while delivering value to communities. By combining research, teaching, and civic responsibility, academics demonstrate accessibility and responsiveness, actively dismantling the ivory tower stereotype.

*For universities*

Universities must embrace their role as anchor institutions (Ehlenz, 2017) and reposition themselves as active contributors to local economic development rather than distant observers. Overcoming the ivory tower image requires consistent and practical collaboration with local stakeholders (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Structured community consultancy programmes, where academics provide targeted, short-term support to SMEs, illustrate how expertise can deliver tangible outcomes. Findings from the trial highlight the importance of accessibility, with greatest impact achieved when consultancy is free at the point of use, clearly communicated, and embedded in teaching and research agendas. Outputs could include strategic action plans, marketing approaches tested through student projects, and toolkits adapted from research. Universities can also repurpose assets such as incubators and maker spaces and translate research into

accessible policy briefs. Embedding consultancy within curricula and workload models ensures it becomes a mainstream element of academic practice and a visible contributor to UNSDG 11.

#### *For policymakers*

University-led community consultancy offers a cost-effective means of strengthening SME growth and advancing inclusive local development. Policymakers can encourage its adoption through targeted funding streams, such as embedding consultancy within the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or Innovate UK programmes, with ring-fenced resources for demonstrable SME impact. Frameworks like the Knowledge Exchange Framework (UK Research and Innovation, n.d.) could be adapted to reward universities that deliver measurable contributions to Community Wealth Building. Policymakers might also require publicly funded anchor institutions to report annually on how their assets have supported SMEs. In Scotland, this could be integrated into the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (Scottish Government, 2022) and local Community Wealth Building action plans, embedding consultancy as a mainstream practice that advances UNSDG 11 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

#### *For businesses*

For SMEs, engaging with universities provides immediate benefits, such as strategic plans, refreshed marketing approaches, and access to facilities including incubators, maker spaces, and digital labs. Businesses should be proactive in seeking out this support, not only to address operational challenges but also to co-create knowledge that shapes future research. Participation in consultancy can lead to the development of practice guides, case studies, and innovation toolkits that serve both individual firms and the wider business community. By embracing collaboration and knowledge exchange, SMEs can enhance competitiveness, expand networks, and position themselves as partners in local economic development.

### **Addressing the research gap**

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The study also addresses a clear gap in literature. While, it is noted, previous research generally focuses on the specific outcome of traditional University-Business interventions such as business incubators (Piterou and Birch, 2016), the implications of the cost barrier have not been adequately explored. This research highlights that free provision can significantly increase the reach and impact of university activity, ensuring that even the most budget-constrained business can get access to and benefit from academic expertise.

This clearly has benefits in terms of enhancing the reputation of the University as a trusted support partner (Gordon and Jack, 2010). However, the study also confirms the widely held belief among the business community that university support is limited, difficult to access or simply not relevant to their business even when it is offered free of charge. This suggests that Universities need to be more proactive in communicating their offerings and building relationships built on trust with the business community (Gordon et al, 2010). The use of clear and accessible language, rather than academic jargon, is also essential to ensure that businesses can easily understand and engage with university initiatives.

### **Limitations of the study**

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While this study provides valuable insights into the role of university-led community consultancy, it is important to acknowledge its limitations:

**Sample Size:** The sample size of businesses is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

**Sample Selection:** The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for this type of qualitative research, may introduce some bias.

**Context Specificity:** The study was conducted in the specific context of post-COVID and post-Brexit Scotland, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other regions or countries.

**Researcher Bias:** As the researchers were also involved in delivering the consultancy, there is potential for researcher bias to influence data collection and analysis.

### Areas for future research

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Building on the findings of this study, there is a clear opportunity to further explore the role and potential of community consultancy in supporting SMEs growth and regional development. While the Community Consultancy project demonstrates immediate value, deeper investigation is needed to understand its long-term impact, disciplinary dynamics, and wider application. Future research should not only evaluate outcomes but also engage stakeholders in co-creating scalable models aligned with inclusive economic strategies. The following areas are proposed to extend the current research and contribute to ongoing debates around sustainable development, academic engagement, and community wealth building.

#### *Long-Term impact of community consultancy on business growth and sustainable communities*

While the short-term benefits of university-led community consultancy are increasingly visible, further longitudinal research is required to evaluate its sustained impact on business development. This includes assessing outcomes such as improved strategic focus, increased access to procurement opportunities, innovation activity, and resilience in times of economic uncertainty. Importantly, such research could be framed within the context of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UNSDG) 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.), examining how community consultancy contributes to the development of inclusive, economically vibrant localities. By supporting businesses that form the backbone of local economies, community consultancy has the potential to enhance place-based resilience and reduce economic inequalities.

#### *Exploring the role of disciplinary expertise in consultancy outcomes*

Universities house a range of academic disciplines, each bringing distinct theoretical and practical insights. Future research could investigate how the disciplinary background of academic consultants—such as marketing, digital innovation, or sustainability—shapes the consultancy experience and the perceived value by businesses. This line of enquiry would help identify which kinds of expertise are most impactful in different business contexts and could inform more strategic matching of consultants to business needs. It may also highlight opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration that further enrich consultancy outcomes.

#### *Co-Creating a community consultancy toolkit through a community wealth building lens*

There is an opportunity to undertake an action research project focused on co-designing a Community Consultancy Toolkit for Anchor Institutions, developed in partnership with local authorities, universities, and SMEs.

This project would use iterative cycles of design, implementation, feedback, and refinement to create a practical, scalable model for delivering short-term academic consultancy that advances the goals of Community Wealth Building (CWB). Anchored in the CWB principles of local economic resilience, inclusive

growth, and democratic ownership, this research would generate a resource that enables anchor institutions to more effectively leverage academic capital to support local enterprises. The toolkit could provide templates for engagement, reflection tools, evaluation frameworks, and sector-specific strategies, contributing to regional economic development through knowledge sharing and applied research.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that universities can play an active and meaningful role in supporting the growth of local businesses through short-term, research-informed community consultancy. At a time when small enterprises face increasing complexity and limited access to tailored strategic support, universities are well positioned to fill a critical niche. Situated at the intersection of theory and practice, they bring together the applied knowledge, analytical tools, and reflexive inquiry needed to help businesses overcome barriers and pursue sustainable growth.

By embedding community consultancy within academic praxis, universities can act not only as centres of knowledge but as collaborative partners in economic development. Practitioner-scholars, who operate with an understanding of both academic rigour and real-world business challenges, are particularly well placed to drive this engagement. Their ability to translate research into practice helps to break down the long-standing image of universities as 'ivory towers' (Etzkowitz et al., 2000), instead positioning them as accessible, responsive, and embedded within their local communities.

Importantly, initiatives like the Community Consultancy project also create opportunities to build communities of practice and foster sustained relationships between universities and organisations. These connections can generate future collaborations, live case studies for teaching and research, and more integrated forms of knowledge exchange. To ensure equity and maximise participation, it is essential that this consultancy remains free at the point of use—removing barriers to engagement and enabling businesses from all backgrounds to benefit.

Through this work, universities can reaffirm their role as anchor institutions—not only generating and sharing knowledge but actively co-creating it with the communities they serve. In doing so, they contribute to more inclusive, resilient economies while positioning themselves at the heart of place-based innovation and enterprise.

## Biographies

*Alan Martin* is an Enterprise Lecturer at the University of West of Scotland, with a background in FTSE 100 project management and productivity. After over a decade as a serial entrepreneur with parallel activity in consultancy to SMEs in the speciality food sector, he has, over the last five years, transitioned to educator where his focus is on the wider societal impact of enterprise education.

*Dr William Shepherd* is an Enterprise Lecturer at the University of West of Scotland, with a background in blue chip FMCG marketing and innovation. He has spent the last decade blending his lecturing with running his own management consultancy. A passion for innovation led him to spend time in Cambodia, working with over 15 different NGOs and projects, including developing financial models that adjusted for pig pregnancy and leading an innovation project focused on delivering food security through microentrepreneurs working on frog farms.

*Philip Davies* is an Associate Lecturer and PhD candidate at the University of West of Scotland. He has run a marketing and strategy consultancy since 2007, helping small businesses and charities start and grow. He has also worked as a consultant on funded business growth programs since 2011, supporting more than 700 small businesses and start-ups with their marketing strategy and planning.

*Dr Alan Murray* is a Reader in Enterprise at the University of the West of Scotland where he is also the Enterprise Lead for the School of Business and Creative Industries and Director of the Transformative Enterprise Research Group (TERG). He has an extensive background as a business practitioner in industry and as an academic with a proven track record as a successful, innovative and award-winning entrepreneur. His work as an enterprise educator has been recognized nationally and internationally.

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