

ERDF Internal Evaluation

**Presented as part of the wider University of Gloucestershire
ERDF Summative Assessment**

Authors: Dr Colin Baker & Dr Mouhamed Thiam

November, 2019

Executive Summary

Introduction

This document reports the findings of the internal evaluation of the ERDF projects GRIP, GAINS, S&GE and Core Growth Hub. Consistent with the wider UoG summative assessment, this evaluation sought to undertake the following:

- Internal stakeholder review to assess the impact on UoG of delivering multiple projects in respect of the experience of delivering and managing the projects;
- External beneficiary review to assess the economic impact on project beneficiaries of engagement with multiple ERDF projects

Methodology

The evaluators sought to deploy a mixed methods approach to provide a means of collecting qualitative and quantitative data via an overarching data collection framework that mapped out the projects' outcomes.

A qualitative component explored staff experiences of delivering and managing the projects. A quantitative component sought to assess the impact on project beneficiaries of engagement with multiple ERDF projects delivered by UoG through the measurement of the Gross and Net Additional Impact for Employment and GVA.

Main Findings

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed a number of salient themes which are presented according to three domains:

Things that went well

- Perceived significant impacts within respective client groups. Achievements included the creation of jobs, delivering workshops and training, establishing of the business laboratory.
- Additional achievements included: strong relationships with local businesses (including significant local companies); strong case studies concerning value-added and service delivery; strong internal collaboration and relationships, and collaboration with external partners (including external agencies, deliverers of workshops, and clients themselves).
- Strong buy-in from academics and students with respect to understanding and responding to business needs.

- Wide-scale pro-active approach to learning and reflective practice in order to refine and enhance the service offer and respond meaningfully to business needs.
- Widening and deepening of offer to extend original service to include a broader range of business types and sizes.
- Creation of a strong and trusted brand within the county.
- Creation of monitoring processes that supported tracking of client progress, understanding and responding to client preferences, and wider project management.
- Cultural shift towards a wide-scale adoption of a ‘platinum service’ approach to all aspects of delivery that goes above and beyond in respect of valuing and supporting clients.

Things that went less well

- Lack of clarity during initial stages concerning the purpose of the projects in a singular and collective sense. This compromised internal and external understanding of the role and purpose of the projects which impeded the mapping out of the client journey and project performance.
- Early imperative to deliver services that were underdeveloped perceived to have wasted resources and damaged brand reputation.
- Inflexible approach to budgeting perceived as an issue with respect to project effectiveness and efficiency of spend. This led to later problems in terms of delivering services.
- Delays to project implementation and establishing teams following securing of the bids meant that opportunities in the market place had been lost to other parties.
- Internal competition (particularly during the early stages of delivery) between projects for the same clients impeded cross-project learning and cooperation and led in some instances to a duplication of offer.
- Inherent resources pressures and instability within the University environment led to disruptive changes of staff, disruptions to the flow of information, and uncertainty regarding the future of the projects.

What have been the challenges?

- General issues of engaging wider academic staff and teams as part of the match approach (perceived issues included academic calendar, awareness of the projects, reluctance to work in a ‘commercial’ setting, with exceptions), and development of processes concerning how this was going to work in practice.
- Varying leadership approaches with regard to performance management, client targeting and budgeting, and office management.
- Excessive pressure to deliver targets that were not based on sound information.

- Reconciling University and private sector approaches, particularly concerning the urgency of business needs and decision making.
- Developing sufficiently capable monitoring and management systems including CRM and time-sheets.

Quantitative findings

Establishing quantitative data in order to address the issue of GVA and to provide evidence of beneficiaries' perceptions of the quality of activities was challenging due to the internal evaluation being initiated only towards the later stages of the projects. This impacted the ability to fully embed this component within the wider evaluation and to ensure that its function was fully understood. As such, the scope of the dataset and the evaluation strategy required to support its development were not fully developed and data were subsequently missed. The lack of data made it impossible to engage in a clear analysis of the value for money each project provided.

Recommendations

1. Sustain, evolve and strengthen relationships with the local business community in order to identify opportunities for enhanced service delivery and needs-based approaches.
2. Embed evaluation within project delivery from inception to ensure adequate and timely capture of relevant data.
3. When running multiple projects, establish clear client journeys that map out the relationship between offers, avoid competition between project teams and reduce the risk of duplication.
4. Support reflective practice within delivery teams to ensure continuous learning and development across the University.
5. Create stronger awareness and understanding of Growth Hub projects across the University to foster interest and commitment from academic colleagues.
6. Devise flexible budgetary approaches to provide greater responsiveness within spending plans to maximise effectiveness.
7. Developing sufficiently capable management, monitoring and evaluation systems that maximise the use of resources and minimise burden on project staff.

Contents

Executive Summary	i
1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background to the evaluation	1
2.0 Methodology.....	2
2.1 Qualitative component	2
2.2 Quantitative component	3
2.2.1 Data collection	4
3.0 Findings.....	4
3.1 Qualitative findings.....	4
3.1.1. What went well?.....	4
3.1.2. Things that went less well.....	8
3.1.3 Challenging aspects of delivery	12
3.1.4 Other	13
3.2 Beneficiaries' survey findings	13
3.3 Summation of data	15
3.3.1. Has the project delivered its intended activities to a high standard?	15
3.3.2 Could the delivery of the project have been improved in any way?	16
3.3.3 Did the project engage with and select the right beneficiaries? Were the right procedures and criteria in place to ensure the project focused on the right beneficiaries?.....	17
3.3.4 Quantitative findings.....	17
4.0 Recommendations.....	18

List of Tables

Table 1: Main areas of investigation.....	3
Table 2: Overview of qualitative themes	5

List of Figures

Figure 1: Sector in which respondents operate (n).....	14
Figure 2: Interventions received by the respondents (n).....	14

1.0 Introduction

This document reports the findings of the internal evaluation of the ERDF projects. Consistent with the UoG approach to the summative assessment sought to undertake the following:

- Internal stakeholder review to assess the impact on UoG of delivering multiple projects in respect of the experience of delivering and managing the projects;
- External beneficiary review to assess the economic impact on project beneficiaries of engagement with multiple ERDF projects.

The internal evaluation reported here assessed various aspects relating to processes and structures created to support project implementation in order to understand what worked well and areas for development in future similar projects. It also seeks to assess the total aggregate gross and net additional impacts achieved by the projects as expressed by Gross Value Added (GVA).

Due to the multi-project delivery model the University operated with respect to the GRIP, GAINS, S&GE and Core Growth Hub projects, the Summative Assessment plan sought to assess the individual projects in addition to the aggregated benefit of the multiple projects. This report establishes additional evidence and insight in support of the wider Summative Assessment activities undertaken by the separate Project Managers.

1.1 Background to the evaluation

Internal stakeholder review

Appointed in January 2019, the evaluation team liaised with the senior project management team to identify the participants for the proposed qualitative data collection activities. The evaluation team conducted a workshop early in 2019 to discuss the evaluation approach and timeline of activities with a view to planning the data collection phase. A wide range of participants was targeted via individual interviews and workshops in order to provide the best means of establish rich data concerning experiences of delivering and managing the projects.

External beneficiary review

Due to the fact that some beneficiaries had received intervention from multiple projects during the projects' lives the senior project management team's preference was for a simultaneous evaluation of

the four projects. This presented a number of technical and practical challenges with respect to the collection of data, particularly for beneficiaries that received interventions from multiple projects due to the need to establish attribution of effect for each individual project.

Evaluation context

The wider project monitoring data provides compelling evidence of strong performance with respect to delivery and impact of the projects. However, a number of challenges are recognised including delays at the start of the projects, significant demands of delivery and structural changes within the University during the course of project delivery. These impacted the implementation of the internal evaluation presented here with respect to access to data and the target sample.

2.0 Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted in order to provide a means of collecting qualitative and quantitative data. All procedures were approved by the University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Committee.

A data collection framework was devised in liaison with the Senior Project Coordinator that mapped out the projects' outcomes in order to establish the scope of the internal evaluation. These provided the basis on which to explore the processes and structures that were devised to support progress towards the outcomes within each project. Table 1 outlines the areas for investigation and the respective component these sat within.

2.1 Qualitative component

The evaluation team conducted three data collection workshops between May and September, 2019 lasting between one and a half and two hours (total n = 14 project managers and staff) between in addition to two individual interviews with participants representing senior University management. These explored the implementation of the projects and issues relating to delivery, governance and management.

A simple data collection template was devised in order to help participants organise their thoughts prior to and during the workshops and interviews, where possible. This included space to consider what had worked well, what had been challenging, and learning for future similar projects.

Discussions between participants were guided by the template and recorded in order to ensure accuracy of data capture.

Table 1: Main areas of investigation

Area	Quant	Qual
GVA	✓	
Design and delivery		✓
Factors which explain performance		✓
Governance, management and operation		✓
Quality of activities		✓
Delivery improvements		✓
Targeting, recruitment and retention of participants		✓
Participant feedback re. delivery of project	✓	✓
Attribution of outcomes to project		✓
Lessons learned		✓
Future lessons		✓
Legacy		✓

Data were analysed thematically using an inductive approach loosely based on Braun and Clarke's (2013)¹ qualitative techniques, with an emphasis on the aspects highlighted in Table 1, where feasible.

2.2 Quantitative component

The impact evaluation aimed to assess the impact on project beneficiaries of engagement with multiple ERDF projects delivered by UoG through the measurement of the Gross and Net Additional Impact for Employment and GVA. As such, the evaluation reported here followed internal (University of Gloucestershire) summative assessment guidance and the contractual requirements of the four ERDF funded projects. This sought to ensure that the important principles of consistency and standards of evaluation were fulfilled in order to provide a robust analysis of the available evidence.

A counterfactual impact approach was implemented where adequate, in concordance with the summative assessment guidance and summative assessment plans of each projects. In doing so, the evaluators relied on the relevant sections of The Magenta Book and Evalsed Sourcebook as instructed in the guidance. This was operationalised via the deployment of a methodology outlined below.

¹ Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage. ISBN 9781847875815

2.2.1 Data collection

Primary data collection was undertaken using a bespoke online beneficiary survey designed by the evaluation team in liaison with the senior project management. It was difficult to administer the survey because its development, and alignment with required resources, was undertaken during the later stages of project implementation. This prevented its incorporation with wider summative assessment activities and the ability to raise awareness of its purpose with relevant stakeholders.

The extensive nature of the online beneficiary survey was problematic given that encouraging a positive response rate was difficult. Given the timing, availability of resources and complexity of issues that needed assessing, it was important to establish a tool that was effective at assessing a range of salient aspects. Conventional online survey tools were not able to effectively handle this complexity. As such, it was necessary to develop a survey tool from scratch in order to build a highly responsive system that was capable of assessing, and filtering, the multiple conditions experienced by beneficiaries.

3.0 Findings

This section provides a summary of the key findings as a result of the data analysis performed on the qualitative and quantitative data derived from the workshops, interviews and beneficiary survey.

3.1 Qualitative findings

This section is divided into three main areas including what went well, what went less well, and challenging issues. Table 2 below provides an overview of the themes through data analysis. Main themes that emerged are highlighted in blue, subthemes are emboldened throughout the text. These represent the perceptions of those interviewed and in doing so express the inherent contradictions and contrasts of real-world project delivery.

3.1.1. What went well?

The first theme **significant impacts** related to the benefits that had been brought to their respective client groups. This had resulted in the creation of **highly credible services** which were unanimously agreed to have established a sound relationship with local businesses.

Table 2: Overview of qualitative themes

Section	Main theme(s)	Subtheme(s)
3.1.1 What went well	Significant impacts Addressing and overcoming challenges	Highly credible services Sense of ownership Collaboration Internal structures and processes
3.1.2. What went less well	Coordination and delivery Instability in operating environment	Lack of clarity Failure to fully align the projects Meeting targets Negotiations with the funding agency Academic match Financial pressures
3.1.3 Challenges	Financial pressures	Temporal perspective Constant changes Busy market place

Key achievements included the establishing of the laboratory and 3D printer, supporting clients through their journeys within the wider offer, and ability to develop strong and compelling case studies, and creating jobs in Gloucestershire; *“It’s great that the Growth Hub is creating jobs, it also proves we’re doing what we’re supposed to do”* [Project Manager].

Particular mention was made of clients who had received the coaching offer and had achieved substantial results as time progressed. Results were perceived as particularly strong where clients had worked across the projects. For some respondents it had been possible to achieve the majority of outputs ahead of time in respect of delivery plans that were developed as part of the original project submissions. These factors provided a strong source of motivation and satisfaction.

Successes in **addressing and overcoming challenges** were perceived as significant achievements. Challenges to achieving impacts related to defining, developing and delivering the offer, creating awareness and understanding of the offer and brand, and establishing credibility of the projects and the wider package of services the Growth Hub provided. These challenges and the responses to them were couched as an evolutionary process. With respect to project start up, there was recognition that although participants had experience from other professional roles and projects, the scale of each of the four new projects presented a significant challenge. This was in respect of shaping the offer, establishing systems and processes and managing diverse individuals and teams.

As the projects grew and matured participants discussed the need to refine the offer in order to ensure sensitivity to client needs and to improve internal processes and procedures. Whilst each project had its own unique experience the process of refining was common to all projects. What emerged strongly from participant comments was a strong **sense of ownership** and the notion of the importance of effective collaboration between the project staff; *“We are all different, very varied people. You learn from one another, which is so important. This just happens, it is encouraged, but it happens anyway. So, we grow vicariously, we share knowledge, look at benefits that accrue. It’s very much a learning process, a journey and naturally we challenge things and try to push things on; we push each other”* [Project Manager].

This provided the basis of increasing awareness and understanding of how the offer could be refined and the best way of achieving this. Examples included shared learning, developing a more sensitive CRM system and creating a development cycle in which the needs of clients could be explored, understood and used to shape delivery; *“At lot of trial and testing has led to where they are in terms of the way the offer is designed, presented and implemented and recorded. It’s also about how systems were designed e.g. the CRM, fine tuning that, but, always a work in progress”* [Project Manager]. The willingness to work together had created a strong sense of synergy that had yielded benefits that went beyond the defined project deliverables, specifically with regard to establishing sustainable approaches which sought to avoid duplication of service and share client information.

The processes required to achieve this had taken some time and no small effort to develop. However, there was agreement by participants that achievements in respect of these areas were in themselves important due to their role in supporting sustained improvements; *“We seem now to be getting the right data into the system that’s needed to understand what’s being achieved. It’s clear we need to make changes very quickly because of the dynamic nature of clients’ needs, like the materials we provide. Quarterly reviews are important for us in order to respond to issues in real time so as not to impact future delivery and impact”* [Project Manager]. As a result of these processes, participants described the ability to act strategically in an increasingly proactive way in respect of proactively developing the offer rather than reacting solely to clients’ needs which had been the case earlier on in the project lifecycle. Participants also reflected on developing increasingly efficient data collection and reporting approaches which were critical to monitoring progress and for end-stage reporting as client’s exited the projects.

Beyond the Growth Hub itself, a further factor influencing success was the **collaboration** that took place with external partners including external agencies, deliverers of workshops, and the clients themselves. This was perceived to have helped develop a strong offer which valued the client journey and which was underpinned by effective support mechanisms; *“Partnering with externals has worked*

well for example, speakers at events, third parties to support delivery and coaches working in this environment. If that hadn't worked the whole thing would have fallen flat" [Project Manager].

However, it was recognised that creating a culture and approach that allowed this complexity to be reconciled within a purposeful delivery plan had been extremely challenging. Participants recognised the importance of Project Managers in fostering these relationships for example, bringing more engaged coaches on board, and encouraging clarity of vision and purpose. However, these achievements had been hard-won with respect to challenges early on in project implementation that had impeded the development of relationships and delayed the attainment of outputs.

The diverse nature of the projects and the variety of stakeholders involved including academics, clients and external agencies and individuals involved in delivery necessitated a highly evolved management approach that was capable of balancing multiple needs and priorities. This presented challenges with regards to developing approaches which worked in both a strategic and practical sense. Marketing was unanimously perceived as being a critical factor in supporting project activities with respect to relationship building, brand positioning and identity, and reputation-building. Participants discussed at-length the notion of brand identity, focusing on the process of creating brand understanding and awareness, and positioning the projects within a competitive and busy market place. The highly dynamic nature of the projects and types of clients accessing them necessitated the development of an iterative brand-building approach that allowed the projects' offer to be accurately reflected as they changed over time as the projects matured.

It had been a significant achievement to work through these issues although participants agreed that there was still work to do; *"This phase has brought more credibility to the offer particularly for medium sized SMEs whereas initially it tended to be thought that we were only for one-man bands. Recalibration of Growth Hub marketing has helped, we're the best kept secret; there but not always on people's radars. It's definitely been a work in progress and everybody has played a part in that repositioning I think. We're now more energised"* [Project Manager]. Indeed, there were mixed opinions regarding the quality of the marketing that had taken place, particularly with respect to the early stages of the projects. However, participants agreed that brand messages surrounding the projects had become strong as the projects matured and were achieving good levels of penetration across the county.

Regarding the sustainability of project impacts, changes in **internal structures and processes** were perceived as a significant achievement because; *"... [these] brought in a much more commercial focus and logical approach. The opportunity now is to be much more pragmatic and realistic in a way that has more bearing on the market place"* [Project Manager]. Notwithstanding the importance of developing appropriate and efficient internal management structures, one Senior Coordinator paid

particular attention to the importance of establishing a “*trusting and cordial*” relationship with the funding agency which had provided the opportunity to discuss measures which supported implementation and the overall evolution of the projects as they matured. This was perceived to create a much more solid foundation for the project activities going forward and provide opportunities beyond the lifespan of the funding to continue the work already underway. The importance of this was evident in discussions between participants concerning progress with the wider local business community where it was understood that businesses were incorporating elements of the offers into their long-term strategic planning.

3.1.2. Things that went less well

Two key themes regarding things that went less well emerged from the analysis of the data. Firstly, **coordination and delivery** related to issues that had been particularly problematic during the early stages of the projects and which, to some extent, remained throughout the life course of the projects. Delays to project implementation were noted as particularly problematic for those that had been in post early on; “*The lack of clarity during initial stages concerning the purpose of the projects in a singular and collective sense was an issue. This compromised internal and external understanding of the role and purpose of the projects which prevented the mapping out of the client journey and project performance*” [Project Coordinator]. Consequently, there was an initial **lack of clarity** over how, specifically, project management systems would operate and what mix of resources were needed i.e. type of project teams, CRM systems to manage and monitor referrals, and the creation of customer insight. In practice, this led to teams being under resourced in terms of the skills needed to meet targets (e.g. sales, marketing), requiring a great deal of internal upskilling needed, which took a long time. Indeed, one participant noted the high level of administration and resource needed to produce sign ups led to later issues in terms of being able to provide a flexible approach and bespoke service.

Much of this was attributed to the **failure to fully align the projects** successfully. That four separate project bids had been successful was widely regarded as a significant achievement. However, participants widely agreed that the potential of this was significantly attenuated by an underpinning lack of understanding and awareness of the potential synergies between projects and how these might be harnessed; “*... where we had four distinct units all essentially going for the same client, from a leadership perspective there was not a great deal of steering or working in conjunction with others. It was more placed in a competitive and territorial environment. So, having multiple projects all going for the same clients but having the journey mapped out before all that got landed was challenging*” [Project Administrator]. Hence, there was a failure to identify and maximise synergies between the projects, the negative effects of which were not distributed equally. For example, one project which was geared more towards follow-on support was, from the outset, competing with other projects and

so missing the opportunity to find its best position within the wider offer and to devise the most appropriate cost model. Consequently, early opportunities to synchronise client journeys, to share resources including information, data and experiences were missed. A consequence of which were instances where project offers were duplicated and client uncertainty concerning which projects were most relevant to their needs; “... *it was incredibly confusing for clients. The lack of transparency, visibility, management styles ... the logic would be to maximise free hours before being introduced to fee-based services and opportunities. In future, we need to map out the potential journeys, how they run concurrently, what they do*” [Project Manager].

This situation was attributed, in part, to the lack of managerial input during the bidding process, these not being in place at the time; “... *there was pre-implementation planning but there were no managers in place at the time. So, it was just senior management and the people looking to implement the project. None of the management had been involved in the pre-planning stage*” [Project Manager]. Whilst it was clear that there was no management in place, therefore preventing consultation, participants recognised a fundamental disconnection between the project concepts and apparatus needed for effective implementation; “...*the bid documents that were written by people who didn't go on to lead the projects. They didn't necessarily work on the ground. So, a lot of the things written in to the bid were nice ideas but they didn't have enough level of practicality or detail about how they were going to be delivered*” [Project Manager]. As a consequence, significant time, energy and resources were invested early on by project staff in order to chart a course through the uncertainty that had arisen in order to establish the conditions needed for the successful delivery of services.

For example, participants highlighted the significant investment of time and energy in order to establish systems that would allow real-world project activities to be delivered; “... *we had so many meetings about what the eligibility criteria were going to be; how to get them on the programme, refer to other projects. It just did not fit together. We looked at webforms to help alleviate the issue but that didn't get going for at least six months; it was all paper-based*” [Project Administrator]. A further example concerned targets; “*They did not convert well into reality. We spent a long time working out how to deliver what was intended and what the intended deliverables actually were, as this was not always clear and open to interpretation. There was a difference between what was proposed and what was needed*” [Project Manager]. All participants recognised in one way or another that these issues had created a great deal of unnecessary work which detracted from the main delivery of activities with which staff were concerned.

Meeting targets was an overarching preoccupation both in terms of delivery and project spend, and was recognised by all participants as a strong imperative with respect to ‘hitting the ground running’; “*There was panic, we were all starting late, there were no outputs, no money being spent. We just*

threw money at the problem. It was not a project management decision, it was a leadership decision [Project Administrator]. This led to an inflexible approach which sought to immediately demonstrate progress despite the necessary systems, structures and processes not being fully developed or articulated, particularly in terms of establishing metrics that helped all projects manage delivery; *“Early on we were encouraged to spend money, we needed to show we were on track, meet the spending requirements but that’s ultimately had a detrimental impact on the projects”* [Project Coordinator]. One participant identified that building the project around 24 hours of support increased the cost and investment required by the client despite it not make a clear contribution to the project outputs, whereas a 12-hour model would have meant that clients would have had to invest less and would have led to a more efficient management process and use of resources. The general impression was that there was an early imperative to deliver services that were underdeveloped which was perceived to have wasted resources and damaged brand reputation. Whilst it is not possible to state with certainty how these issues were experienced by clients directly, participants highlighted later budgetary constraints resulting from spend early in the projects and that client events had been cancelled due to low uptake early in the delivery process. It was clear from participant feedback that there had been significant personal and professional impacts with regard to team morale and wellbeing.

Participants did recognise, however, that **negotiations with the funding agency** had alleviated some of these issues, one project in particular being able to revise the targets in order to make them more realistic and attainable. Further, the test and learn approach adopted within the projects had meant that teams were able to develop offers and processes in a way that spoke to the complexity of the delivery context. For example, direct calling had been adopted by one project as a means of eliciting growth data and to help develop a more personalised service via a, ‘more human touch’. The chasing process had taken some time to develop, with work still to be done, and many more call backs had been generated as a result. Whilst this represented a resource-intensive activity it was perceived as critical to the success of the project and client experience overall. Participants recognised that these aspects had helped to bring targets and delivery activities into closer alignment over time, although there was frustration that this had been a situation at all.

Secondly, **instability of operating environment** related to University issues which had impacted the projects. Achieving academic match had been particularly challenging. It was perceived that a more realistic, if not cautious, approach had been needed from the outset; *“... thinking back, that’s definitely something that could have been done better, there could have been more scrutiny around what was being proposed”* [Senior Management]. From a practical and conceptual point of view it had been challenging to make meaningful links with academics to secure **academic match** that yielded the level and nature of impacts desired; it has not gone well. Participants understood that the

intention was to gain access to academics and students and that there was, in part, a desire to work with businesses and community, but that ultimately they were struggling to find a way to make that work; *“If you have an academic lead who is in two days a week who is the primary contact for passing referrals through, discussing KTPs, that is an issue. It seems that wasn’t thought through, how communication works, response times, who does what and when. When you hear that nothing has moved along, you’re left thinking has anything happened for the client”* [Project Manager].

Whilst there had been some successes, participants recognising that in excess of 40 academics had been involved in the projects, there was a perceived need to increase awareness and understanding of the projects’ offers and the Growth Hub more generally. Indeed, there was general agreement that the potential of academic match was yet to be fully realised but that it was a worthwhile endeavour: *“When match works, it works really well. You have real life businesses working with academics and students in a meaningful way. But it’s only small for us at the moment, that will be really powerful going forward but it takes so much work to get it off the ground”* [Project Coordinator].

A key concern here was reputation; *“... the business community is close knit and they speak to each other about these things. They work in a fast-paced way and need immediate response and support. Structures at the moment are not capitalising on that or supporting the employability agenda adequately by being more proactive in terms of aligning academics and students with opportunities”* [Project Manager]. Participants widely agreed that academic staff did not always recognise the potential they had with respect to supporting local businesses in an engaging and meaningful sense. In this respect further negotiations with academics were strongly encouraged in order to identify practices that might better support the process of acquiring academic match.

Participants also discussed the **financial pressures** faced by the University. Here, the inherent resource pressures and instability within the University environment were perceived to have led to disruptive changes in staff, disruptions to the flow of information, and uncertainty regarding the future of the projects. These concerns represented something of a pervading ‘background noise’ which was perceived to impede, or provide a distraction to project achievements being secured by the teams.

In this respect, all participants recognised that there was both a need and desire to look for synergies and efficiencies between projects and the wider University community. Indeed, there was general agreement that the University needed to understand and promote the need to better share resources including expertise, information and processes; *“The projects now all pretty much use the same system and records, same files. They’re largely the same clients so things have worked well there but it took a long time and a lot of money to get there. It’s still not used as well as it could be”* [Project

Manager]. Staffing had been and continued to be a concern given the significant changes that had taken place during the life course of the projects.

3.1.3 Challenging aspects of delivery

The theme **financial pressures** referred to the multifaceted and interacting aspects of management and delivery which presented significant challenges across the projects. From a **temporal perspective**, changes in the needs of clients and their journey over time meant that the offer needed constant tweaking and for materials to be constantly updated and refreshed which demanded a degree of budgetary flexibility. This was challenging given the evolving nature of the offers, in addition to the delays to project inception highlighted above which impacted the development and provision of marketing materials and a media; *“There was a real lack of unified marketing messaging and managing with confusion at the outset ... I feel like we made life more difficult for ourselves by not having an aligned top-level marketing function”* [Project Manager].

From a management perspective, **constant changes** in costing models, team staff and reporting systems meant that there were very few common threads that ran uninterrupted through the projects. This made it difficult to present a clear offer to clients with respect to the suite of services available, though participants invested a great deal of time and resource in establishing a clear brand and supporting marketing, as highlighted above. Some participants highlighted a lack of control over delivery which, for one participant, hampered effective project management; *“They [coaches] have been really difficult to work with and as a project team, we’ve had little to hold over them. They are paid up front, in full, by the client. To help timely and accurate return of paperwork, and improve coach behaviour, it would help if we could have been the ones to issue the payment to the coach. It would help the client’s cash flow situation and it would help us to say if you don’t report well, you won’t receive your payment”* [Project Administrator]. This was suggestive of a broader challenge concerning the relationships between different elements of process and delivery which relied on effective management of internal and external resources.

From a client perspective, complexity related to the notion that projects were competing with providers of similar services in a **busy market place**, including fully-funded opportunities. It was important, therefore, that the client journey was as smooth and efficient as possible in order avoid problems; *“We had a few businesses leave the programme due to paperwork demands not being worth the subsidy, and some needing to spend time and money spent preparing for a no-deal Brexit. Our pitch didn’t hit the mark with respect to what it actually meant in practice”* [Project Coordinator]. These issues underscored the importance of developing a clear brand, succinct offer and effective management processes that had the full support of all relevant internal and external stakeholders. The

importance of these aspects was highlighted by one participant, who highlighted that long-term benefits could be realised when there was a clear pathway in place; “[We’ve] *had many challenges along the way. But there have been examples where clients have worked across all the projects which is kind of what was hoped for. There are some examples of coaches and client still working together after the service*” [Project Administrator].

3.1.4 Other

This section summarises issues raised by participants which emerged largely as a result of reflection which took place during the workshops and interviews and which were not discussed at length:

- The project branding was perhaps too-well aligned in some respects. Rather than sitting alongside other project offers, certain projects could possibly have been as a premium paid-for support offer that was clearly distinct from other projects;
- The external perceptions of delivery were very strong and there was the sense that a strong, positive and measurable impact had been made in the county;
- A ‘whole-university’ approach is needed to build on the achievements to date. Future projects / extensions must consider the inclusion of deliverers’ perspectives in the planning phase.
- A stronger focus on sustainability will ensure that opportunities to maximise the long-term potential of the projects are identified and understood.

3.2 Beneficiaries’ survey findings

The beneficiary survey across all projects resulted in a response rate significantly below the summative assessment plan targets. The required length and complexity of the survey meant that administering it online was challenging though it is recognised that there were limited other options in this respect. In order to encourage survey responses, the survey was administered in the form of a telephone interview in the closing stages of the evaluation.

In total, 20 responses were received. This prevented meaningful statistical analyses and limited the ability to determine the impacts made by the projects. Figures 1 and 2 respectively illustrate the industrial sector in which the respondents operate and the interventions they received.

Figure 1: Sector in which respondents operate (n)

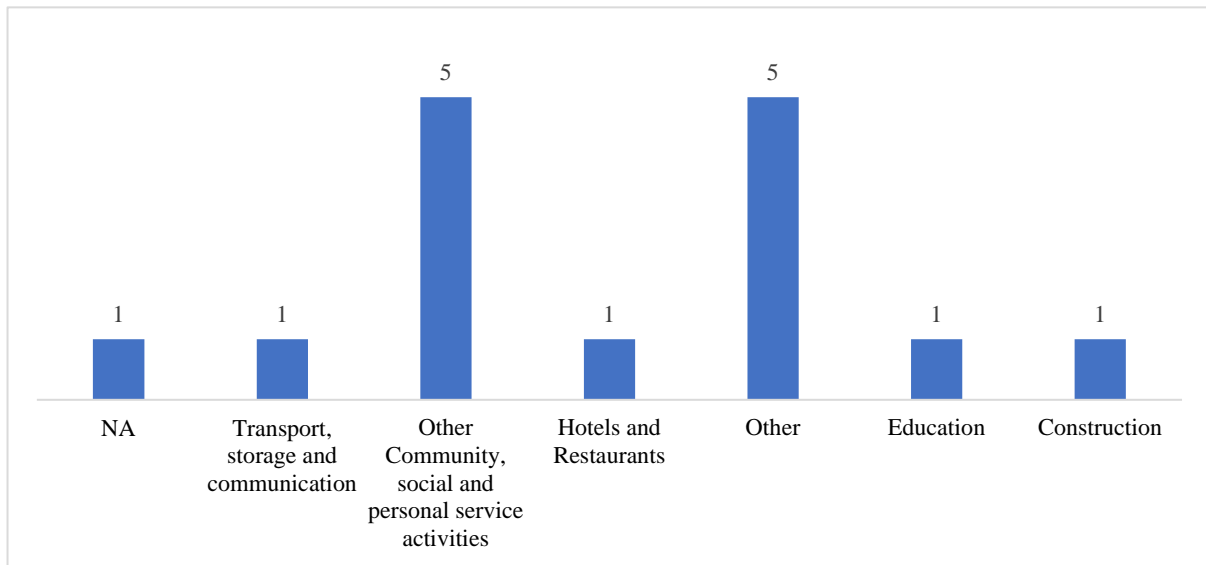
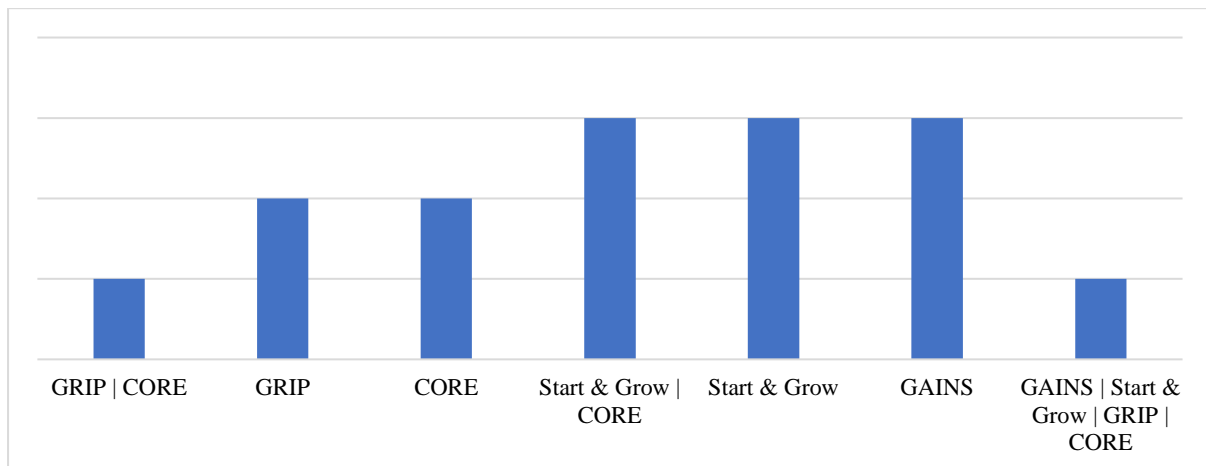


Figure 2: Interventions received by the respondents (n)



Three respondents answered the survey with sufficient detail to allow GVA for their enterprise to be calculated. Using the alternative GVA calculation method based on Turnover, the GVA of one of the respondents was estimated at £72,464.98 for the year after intervention. The same respondent estimated the impact of the GAINS intervention to be worth an added 25% of its turnover, which is consistent with its figures since turnover increased from £37,208 prior to intervention to £160,030 after intervention.

GVA for the second respondent was estimated at £70,800 using the same calculation method. However, the respondent estimated that the support received from GAINS did not make any difference in its turnover.

Finally, GVA for the third respondent was estimated at £256,000. However, no estimates were provided in terms of the difference the GAINS intervention might have made.

No other respondent provided turnover data in order to calculate GVA. Additionally, the dataset was not complete in order to allow an estimation of the Displacement, Substitution and Leakage. The lack of data made the estimation of the net impact for the activities of each project unfeasible which, in turn, means that it is also impossible to engage in a clear analysis of the value for money each project has provided. Furthermore, the limited data obtained, does not make the detection of a clear trend in terms of impact possible.

3.3 Summation of data

As a result of the presentation of the data above which is based on the synthesis of empirical evidence, this section seeks to address three questions which speak directly to the requirements of the overall evaluation.

3.3.1. Has the project delivered its intended activities to a high standard?

Overall, the projects have delivered their intended activities to a very high standard with examples of some activities going above and beyond what was originally planned for. Participants in the qualitative interviews highlighted that a variety of enterprise interventions, new products, non-financial and financial support, and network attendance had taken place. Furthermore, there has been a cultural shift towards a wide-scale adoption of a 'platinum service' approach to all aspects of delivery that goes above and beyond in respect of valuing and supporting clients.

From a position of relative infancy, the four projects have evolved into highly responsive offers that have a strong brand identity and which harness, and continue to seek, synergies between each discrete service. Activities include delivering workshops and training, relationship building with local businesses, the development of strong case studies concerning value-added and service delivery; strong internal collaboration and relationships, and collaboration with external partners including external agencies, deliverers of workshops, and clients themselves. Strong buy-in from academics and students is evident with respect to understanding and responding to business needs although further work is required to consolidate and extend this potential.

The delivery of project activities has been underpinned by a widescale pro-active approach to learning and reflective practice which helps to refine and enhance the offer and respond to business needs with a high degree of fidelity. This is evidenced by the widening and deepening of offer to extend original

service to include a broader range of business types and sizes in order to ensure the needs of the business community are met.

Integral to the delivery of the activities has been the creation of robust monitoring processes that support the tracking of client progress, help to understand and respond to client preferences, and support wider project management. This has been a significant challenge. However, the systems now in place represent something of a blueprint for future similar projects

3.3.2 Could the delivery of the project have been improved in any way?

Participants articulated a number of areas in which improvements could be made. Thematically, these improvements were diverse and many examples were alluded to in terms of improvements that had already been completed and some which were still in progress.

Delivery of the projects could have been improved through greater clarity concerning the purpose of the projects in a singular and collective sense which, at least initially, was felt to have compromised the mapping out of the client journey and overall project delivery activities. The strong early imperative to deliver fledgling services and adhere to projected spend were perceived to have wasted resources and damaged brand reputation. In this respect project delivery would be improved by greater flexibility in budgetary processes and collaborative working in order to support more efficient use of resources and greater sharing of knowledge, information and cooperation. The notion of improved and purposeful collaboration extends also to the developmental phase of the bidding process with respect to ensuring that

A further improvement concerns the need for stronger focus on change management within the projects with respect to avoiding disruptions to delivery caused by changes in personnel over the course of the projects, and ensuring the right roles and staff are in place in terms of technical and practical capabilities. Inherent resources pressures and instability within the University environment were perceived to have disrupted the flow of information and to have created uncertainty regarding the future of the projects. Establishing more robust systems and structures could have helped mitigate the impact of some of these issues in terms of ensuring consistent and effective communication of important information.

Finally, it was clear that the challenge of securing the benefits of academic match had been significantly underestimated, some projects achieving a higher degree of success than others. A whole-systems approach in respect of bringing wider university colleagues and student into the pre-bidding planning stage, as well as project implementation, would help create widespread awareness,

understanding and engagement within the broader environment and help identify opportunities early on. Such an approach would support a pro-active approach to academic match and secure stronger buy-in prior to project inception and in doing so help the strategic planning of services and opportunities.

3.3.3 Did the project engage with and select the right beneficiaries? Were the right procedures and criteria in place to ensure the project focused on the right beneficiaries?

The projects engaged with the right beneficiaries in respect of the range of businesses that were eligible for the type of offer provided. Participants perceived a high degree of impact with respect to their respective target clients and understood that this had resulted through a strong commitment to improvement and evolution of the offer.

Establishing the right procedures and criteria were in place was a pervasive challenge in terms of ensuring sufficient focus on the right beneficiaries. This stemmed from the complexity of implementing four projects simultaneously which in some respects shared a similar focus, internal competition driven by pre-determined targets, and the difficulty of mapping client journeys across the wider offer.

Greater flexibility in the delivery model would allow greater responsiveness to business's needs and accommodate changes in the market, including competition from alternative providers. Participants had invested a great deal of time and effort to introduce this flexibility. In addition, identifying opportunities to reconcile University and private sector approaches, particularly concerning the need to appreciate the urgency of business needs and decision making, would help develop a whole-system understanding of the procedures needed to support project delivery.

3.3.4 Quantitative findings

Establishing quantitative data in order to address the issue of GVA and to provide evidence of beneficiaries' perceptions of the quality of activities was challenging due to the internal evaluation being initiated only towards the later stages of the projects. This impacted the ability to fully embed this component within the wider evaluation and to ensure that its function was fully understood. As such, the scope of the dataset and the evaluation strategy required to support its development were not fully developed and data were subsequently missed. The lack of data made it impossible to engage in a clear analysis of the value for money each project provided.

4.0 Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence presented above the following recommendations are made:

1. Sustain, evolve and strengthen relationships with the local business community in order to identify opportunities for enhanced service delivery and needs-based approaches.
2. Embed evaluation within project delivery from inception to ensure adequate and timely capture of relevant data.
3. When running multiple projects, establish clear client journeys that map out the relationship between offers, avoid competition between project teams and reduce the risk of duplication.
4. Support reflective practice within delivery teams to ensure continuous learning and development across the University.
5. Create stronger awareness and understanding of Growth Hub projects across the University to foster interest and commitment from academic colleagues.
6. Devise flexible budgetary approaches to provide greater responsiveness within spending plans to maximise effectiveness.
7. Developing sufficiently capable management, monitoring and evaluation systems that maximise the use of resources and minimise burden on project staff.