

# Key learnings from universities and business schools



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## The role

**It is evident that as “anchor institutions,” universities and business schools can help scaleups address many of their barriers to growth.**

As deliverers of education, their students also represent an important pipeline for talent for scaleups. “Universities can connect into the local scaleup ecosystem by ensuring students get exposure to local scaleup companies through curricular and extra-curricular activities, such as internships, live projects, guest speaking and mentoring,” says Fiona Whitehurst.

“A great role that business schools can play is connecting ambitious, confident entrepreneurs to talented individuals,” says Eleanor Shaw. “We can help plug the skills gaps that prevent them from realising their scaling ambitions. And that’s not just our student population, it is about connecting them across the ecosystem.”

They provide leadership programmes for scaleups, both as partners of national programmes and as providers of their own courses.

Their academics provide expertise and specialist knowledge and can engage and include scaleup businesses in research projects and knowledge exchange initiatives. Campus facilities can be made available, such as incubation space, specialist equipment and

laboratories. “Universities are in a great position to support businesses as they contain experts in almost every facet of education, not just the management and administration side of business, but often the technical expertise in key departments as well,” says Sarah Underwood.

As permanent features on the local landscape, these institutions also offer stability. “Universities do not come and go with a change in government,” says Sarah Underwood. This means that they have relationships with many other partners – all of whom have a role in fostering the local scaleup ecosystem – and can forge relationships across a wide range of players. “The beauty of the role of the business school is its neutrality,” notes Stephanie Hussels. “Business schools are honest brokers. They are trusted brands delivering trusted programmes – and they are not going anywhere,” says Mark Hart.

They are also a source of many potential scaleups, both through the formation and growth of student enterprises and from spin-outs led by faculty members. “In a world where everything is online, it’s important to have physical spaces where interaction can happen,” says Peter Tufano.

One “major game changer” has been the establishment of the kitemark Small Business Charter (SBC), says Mark Hart. To achieve an SBC award, business schools undergo a rigorous assessment to determine the effectiveness of their business support, entrepreneurship



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education and engagement with their local economy. The first set of accreditations were issued in 2014 and there are now 35 SBC-accredited business schools across the UK which have directly supported more than 18,750 small businesses. According to the SBC's 2018 Impact Statement, a principal benefit of the award for business schools is that it "acts as a catalyst for collaboration with other stakeholders within the business support ecosystem."

### The engagement

There is no single route map for these institutions in the way in which they engage with, and foster, their local ecosystems – but the number of initiatives has increased in 2018.

This year, Manchester University's Alliance Manchester Business School has launched the Scale Up Forum to provide a peer-to-peer network for scaling businesses to explore shared challenges and how different scaleup leaders overcome them. Teesside University has launched LEAP 50, a programme delivered by the University and the Tees Valley Combined Authority, to help at least 50 Tees Valley companies in their scaling journey. Liverpool John Moores University Liverpool Business School has designed and launched an MBA Scale-Ups Masters level degree apprenticeship in conjunction with the Chartered Management Institute to help businesses to achieve growth. Aston Business School is a strategic partner with the Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP working with its Growth Hub to deliver a range of scaleup services.

For the Saïd Business School, a primary mode of engagement with scaleups is through the Goldman Sachs *10,000 Small Businesses UK* programme, in which it is a principal academic partner. "It is the best way for us to focus our resources on some of the best ventures in the country," says Peter Tufano. "We can work with them to develop their skills so that they can move to the next level."

"We look to help businesses at every stage of their growth," says Mark Hart of Aston. The school is a strategic partner in the local Growth Hub and runs its own programme for small business growth as well as Goldman Sachs *10,000 Small Businesses UK*. "We know what connections are needed and can demonstrate that we are part of the wider ecosystem. We pay very serious attention to this."

"Entrepreneurship and innovation is a core priority for the university," says Strathclyde's Eleanor Shaw. "It is not restricted to the business school. When an entrepreneur comes onto the Growth Advantage Programme they don't just engage with the business school. That might be their opening into the university but we work with them to facilitate introductions to the wider innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem at Strathclyde."

### The challenges

Getting scaleups to engage with universities remains a challenge, believes Sarah Underwood of Leeds. "This is partly because there is confusion or misunderstanding about what universities can, or will, do to help. Universities can, and should, do more to get out beyond the limits of the campus and find ways to better interact with the business community."

Perceptions can be changed by working with trusted parties to help convince entrepreneurs that universities are open places that they come to, says Strathclyde's Eleanor Shaw. For example, Strathclyde Business School has an 'open door' policy which welcomes key partners onto campus including CBI Scotland, the ScaleUp Institute, Founders4Schools and the Scottish Chamber of Commerce. With a growing programme of events and now being in the fourth year of running its Growth Advantage Programme, she believes that Strathclyde's connectivity is developing at pace. "We are getting real traction with this but it has not happened overnight."

“We need to do more to identify champions who can catalyse students and staff to engage with the scaleup agenda,” says Newcastle’s Fiona Whitehurst, “and we need to work with partners – in our case the Entrepreneurs’ Forum and North East LEP – to highlight the potential for engagement with universities.”

Awareness remains a challenge. “There is still plenty of ignorance about what courses are available and about how this can help them,” says Stephanie Hussels. “I am always amazed at this.”

For many scaleups, it is simply a matter of committing the time and/or the budget. “It is tough to ask business owners to commit 100 hours in a year,” notes Aston’s Mark Hart. “Businesses can see the value once they have been on the courses but balk at the upfront commitment of time and money.”

## The future

“Doors are starting to open for scaleup businesses to access courses, advice and networks that can be instrumental in helping them to grow,” says Sarah Underwood. Leeds University is currently implementing a number of physical developments on its campus and developing new educational courses for scaleups.

“We want to make it easy for the external community to engage with us,” says Eleanor Shaw. Strathclyde Business School has joined with Glasgow City Council to develop a growth programme – Innovation GAP – for companies on the council’s Tontine business accelerator. With a physical location in Glasgow city centre, Tontine and Strathclyde will work closely together, with other key partners in Glasgow City Innovation District to help innovation-driven enterprises grow to scale.

Others are expanding their reach. “Cranfield has had a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem for many years,” says Stephanie Hussels. “We are now looking to replicate this more widely in the region; we are engaging more with incubators in places such as Milton Keynes and Bedford.” In December, Barclays Eagle Labs will open its first campus site at Cranfield.

Universities and business schools recognise that working with scaleups should not be a one-off intervention. For example, companies are returning to the Cranfield Business Growth Programme to prepare themselves for a new phase of growth.