

Mapping and Analysing the Scottish SME Landscape to Support Change Management Initiatives

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Abstract: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are recognised as key drivers of economic growth. Despite their significant contributions, Scottish SMEs face many challenges and barriers when transitioning from a start-up to scale-up, including, for example, adapting to organisational structures, securing funding, and having limited time to develop innovation strategies. This study aims to understand the change management needs of Scottish SMEs in the scale-up phase and map the current business support landscape while exploring how these needs are perceived by support consultants. The paper begins by setting the context of the SME landscape across Scotland before describing how the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with business support and change management consultants to determine the strategic barriers that SMEs face. The technique of empathy mapping was used to initially visualise and document SME needs, followed by a Thematic Analysis (TA) to uncover deeper research themes and insights. The findings reveal specific challenges related to mindset, leadership, and cultural factors that impact growth and change management for SMEs. The research also highlights the importance of business community engagement, the necessity of open-mindedness and receptiveness to external advice in enabling SME founders to grow and change. The paper concludes by discussing trends and gaps in the SME support landscape and emergent opportunities for intervention, laying the groundwork for a broader conversation on the systemic conditions shaping SME success in Scotland and underscoring the need for further research into how support for SMEs is designed and implemented in an ever-evolving landscape of small business growth.

Keywords: SMEs, Change Management, Growth Aims, Scaling-up, Mindset, Leadership and Culture.

1. Introduction

In the UK, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represent a significant percentage of the economy, and “accounted for 99.9% of the UK business population at the start of 2024, with 99.2% being small businesses with fewer than 50 employees” (Department for Business & Trade 2024). According to the Procurement Act 2023, an SME is generally characterised by its number of employees (fewer than 250), annual turnover (less than or equal to £44m), and total assets (Government Commercial Function 2024). SMEs are vital to the UK’s economic success, contributing to innovation, the creation of long-term employment opportunities, and the increase in added value to the local economy (Varga 2021). Despite their significant contributions, SMEs face many challenges and barriers when transitioning from a start-up to scale-up, including, for example, adapting to organisational structures, securing funding, and having limited time to develop innovation strategies. Change is hard. Kotter (2011) usefully points out that many businesses often make mistakes and are likely to fail during change initiatives, largely due to many managers overlooking the fact that transformation is a gradual, ongoing process (p.3). Therefore, SMEs would benefit from tailored change management processes and strategies to achieve continued growth and renewal. Moran and Brightman (2001) define change management as “the process of continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers” (p. 111). While many step-by-step change management models and offerings exist (e.g. McKinsey’s 7-S Model, Lewins 3-Stage Model of Change and Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model) that aim to plan, implement and sustain organisational change, they mostly serve larger organisations leaving a gap in the business support market that would cater to the distinct needs of SMEs. Indeed, only a few studies have explored innovation-related people and change management practices within an SME context. This is partly because Human Resources practices in SMEs are still emerging with limited focus on people management (Reid et al. 2002) at the early stages of the scale up process.

This study is part of a wider two-year Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) research project funded by Innovate UK, which aims to develop, test and implement a design-led change management service to help Scottish SMEs grow. The focus of this paper centres on the change management needs of Scottish SMEs in the scale-up phase and investigates the current business support landscape while exploring how these needs are perceived by support consultants. The paper begins by setting the context of the SME landscape across Scotland, paying

particular attention to the change management literature. It then goes onto describe how data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 14 business support and change management consultants to determine the strategic barriers that SMEs face, underscoring the pressing need for further research into how support for SMEs is designed and implemented in an ever-evolving landscape of small business growth.

2. The Scottish SME Landscape

SMEs play a crucial role in Scotland’s economic success with an estimated 355,805 SMEs delivering 56.9% of all jobs in the private sector and generating an annual turnover of 41.7% (Scottish Government 2024a). The latest figures by the Scottish Government (2024a) provide an up-to-date picture of the SME landscape in Scotland, indicating the following:

- Approximately 174,085 (49%) of all private sector SMEs operate above the VAT threshold, which represents a first-time increase of 0.4% since 2020. The number of unregistered businesses has more than doubled (from +94,915) since 2000 while VAT registered businesses have only increased by 17.1% during that time.
- Registered and unregistered SMEs are therefore currently responsible for providing an estimated 1.2 million jobs within the Scottish economy, which is more than half of all of Scotland’s private sector employment.
- Within the SME category, small versus medium-sized businesses are unevenly distributed, with 98.2% of private sector businesses operating as small enterprises (0 to 49 employees) while 1.1% operating as medium-sized businesses (50 to 249 employees). This high percentage of small businesses in comparison to medium-sized businesses suggests that there is a high potential of businesses that need upscaling support for their future operations (Figure 1).
- The Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities, Construction and Wholesale/Retail sectors are the three largest private business sectors in Scotland accounting for 34.5%.
- Data from local authorities shows an imbalanced spread of the number SMEs across Scotland. Rural areas demonstrate a higher occurrence of SMEs (Orkney 82%) compared to the Central Belt (Glasgow City 38%).

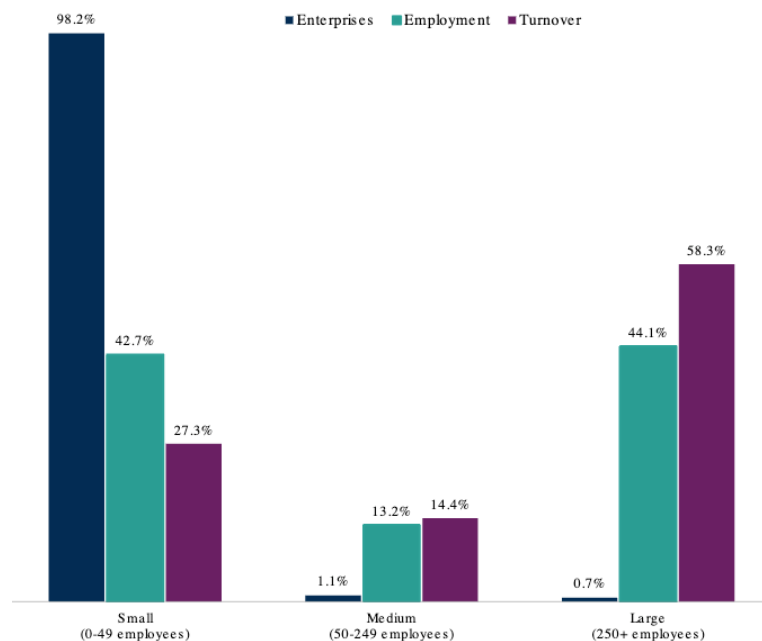


Figure 1: Private sector businesses operating in Scotland (as at March 2024)

Source: Scottish Government (2024a)

While Scotland has displayed significant growth potential since the Covid-19 pandemic, challenges and obstacles to growth remain such as the level of energy prices, taxation and the UK’s exit from the European Union (Department for Business & Trade 2024). Nonetheless, there are strengths and opportunities for growth in the Scottish economy. Figure 2 provides a snapshot of these strengths, highlighting that overseas visits to Scotland

have recovered faster compared to the rest of the UK since the pandemic, productivity has continued to grow since 2007, and 58% of businesses are exporting internationally with a GVA increase of 108% between 2012 and 2022.

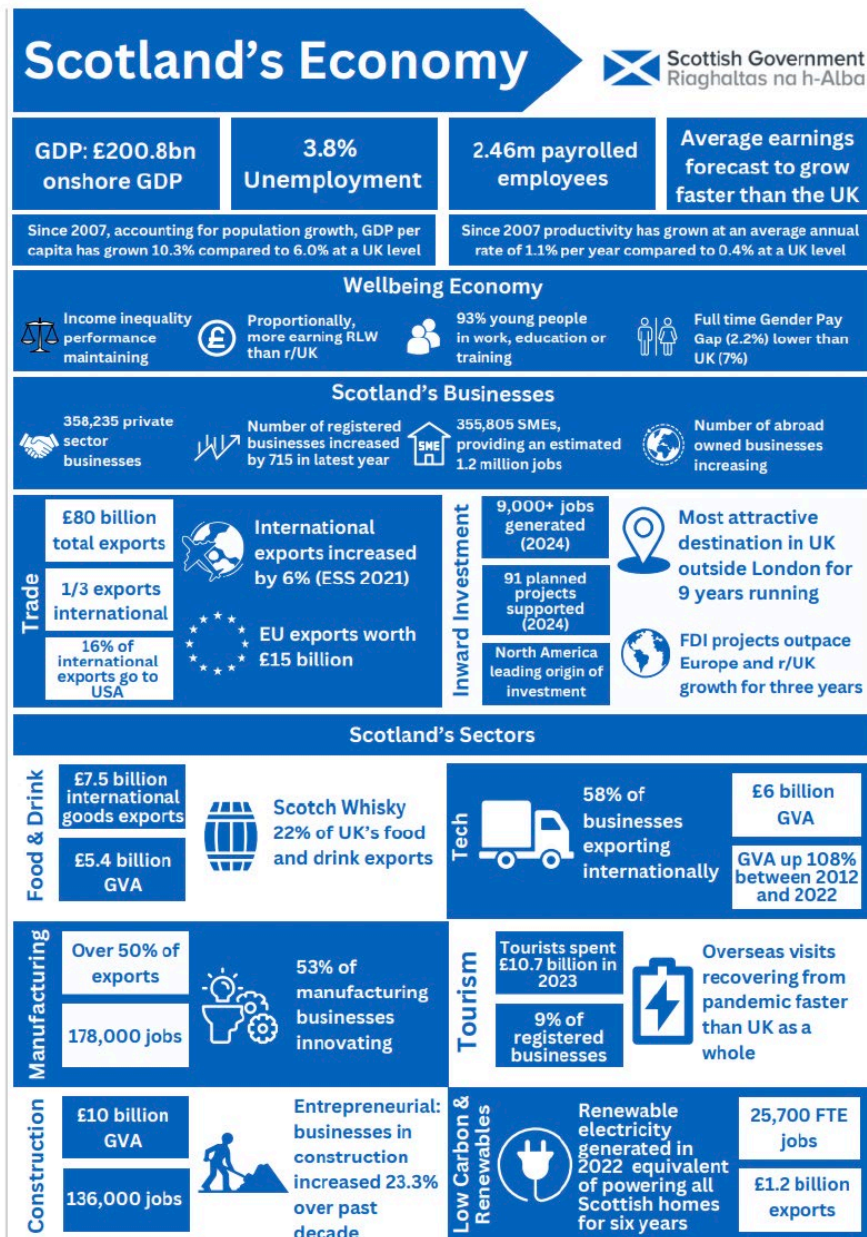


Figure 2: provides a snapshot of the strengths and opportunities of Scotland's economy,

Source: Scottish Government (2025)

Currently, 50% of SMEs operating in Scotland do not employ any staff beyond the entrepreneur. Dingwall and Cook (2023) point out that "more than three fifths of Scottish SMEs plan to grow their business in the next two years" with growth plans "highest in the Information and Communication sector (84%) and lowest in the Transportation and Storage (36%), and Accommodation and Food Service Activities (37%) sectors" (p. 47). This finding is also supported by data from the Small Business Survey Scotland: 2023-2024 which indicates that accessing business support networks related to growth is top priority (23%), closely followed by finance (22%), tax and insurance (18%) advice (Figure 3). Therefore, facilitating growth and scaling up these businesses is considerably important for the Scottish economy, as it offers significant potential for growth.



Figure 3: Reasons for Using Information or Advice (2023-24). Multiple answers allowed across this question. Source: Small Business Survey Scotland 2023-2024 (Scottish Government 2024b).

To support SMEs on their growth journey, a robust support network is required. Hrusková, Mason, and Herzog (2023) observe that the Scottish entrepreneurship support landscape consists of many entrepreneurship support organisations (ESOs) offering a broad range of services but often failing to differentiate between support for start-ups and scale-ups or to clearly target specific segments of entrepreneurs. This lack of differentiation makes it challenging for entrepreneurs to identify the most suitable service for them, contributing to the perception of a "cluttered landscape" with too many players. The authors further note that entrepreneurs typically engage with multiple support providers throughout their entrepreneurial journey. The support of business growth in Scotland is delivered through either government and public sector funded business accelerator programmes, such as Help to Grow (University of Dundee 2025) or private sector growth support from consultants, investors, coaches and industry experts. Business support for growth is often to prepare businesses for an organisational change. This is not a coincidence, as SMEs generally find it difficult to plan and implement a change strategy due to limited resources and conflicting operational priorities. As described by Kotter (1996) "Change management refers to the methods and manners in which a company describes and implements change within both its internal and external processes" (p. x). Moreover, "(...) the central issue is never strategy, structure, culture or systems. (...) The core of the matter is always about changing the behaviour of people (...)" (Kotter and Cohen 2002, p. xii).

3. Change Management Challenges for SME's

SMEs encounter multifaceted pressures that call for agile responses. Market dynamics, including evolving consumer preferences and intensifying competition, require SMEs to position themselves strategically (Burns 2016). This context highlights the need for ongoing innovation, as SMEs strive to sustain competitive advantage through activities such as strategic optimisation, diversification, and product development. Okręglička, Gorzeń-Mitka and Ogorean (2015) emphasise how SMEs navigate the challenges posed by rapidly changing market conditions, arguing that embracing complexity can enable them to transform external threats into opportunities and internal weaknesses into strengths, despite the inherent difficulties of such approaches. While the concept of change management is often associated with larger organisations, it is equally pertinent for SMEs (Wiesner, Chadee and Best 2017). Given their typically smaller size and greater proximity to customers, SMEs possess the advantage of agility and flexibility, enabling them to respond more swiftly to market changes and customer needs compared to larger enterprises (Nastase, Lisetchi, Bibu, 2014). This adaptability helps the development

of innovative strategies and supports the ongoing evolution of the business. The role of the entrepreneur or owner-manager is widely recognised as central to determining the functionality and performance of SMEs, based on their vision and decision-making. The actions, decisions, and characteristics of the entrepreneur have a significant influence on the success and sustainability of the business, both in the short and long term, as well as in relation to growth and adaptability (Nastase, Lisetchi, Bibu, 2014). Furthermore, modern companies increasingly seek to balance profit with social impact, reflecting broader shifts in business priorities. Recent research by Albarracin, Fayaz-Farkhad and Granados Samayoa (2024) highlights the importance of targeting effective drivers of behavioural change within organisations. Their work identifies those interventions addressing both cognitive and behavioural factors, such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and social support, that are particularly promising. Strategies that incorporate emotional and behavioural skills, alongside traditional approaches, tend to yield more sustainable effects, especially when interventions target both the legal-administrative and social dimensions of organisational behaviour. As such, fostering adaptability and learning within SMEs is crucial for converting potential threats into opportunities and supporting sustainable growth in an increasingly complex global environment. That said, SMEs typically lack the "(...) internal capabilities for proactive change" (Ates and Bititci 2011, p. 5602), time (Kindström, Carlborg and Nord 2022), financial and human capital (Van Gils 2005) to successfully implement change initiatives. According to Kindström, Carlborg and Nord (2022) they "tend to emphasize tactical and operational aspects thus neglecting more long-term strategic activities" (p. 713). Against this backdrop it seems pertinent to investigate the change management needs of Scottish SMEs in the scale-up phase and map the current business support landscape while exploring how these needs are perceived by support consultants.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

In collaboration with the University of Dundee and a consultancy based in Scotland, this KTP research project aims to understand the change management needs of Scottish SMEs in their scale-up phase in order to develop a design-led change management service. As part of the wider project, this particular study provides findings on the current business support landscape for SME's while exploring how these needs are perceived by business support and change management consultants. Hall's (2022) Sampling Strategy Framework for design research was used to inform the study design, the formulation of interview questions, and the participant recruitment process (Figure 4). By 'design research' Hall implies "(...) asking and answering questions in a systematic way in order to make more intentional and informed decisions about planning and creating new things and ways of doing things". The rationale for adopting Hall's framework to map the SME support landscape in Scotland lies in its flexible approach, efficient time and resource allocation to achieve desired outcomes, and capacity to offer rich insights into real world contexts. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 14 business support providers and change management consultants over a period of 2 months to determine the strategic barriers that SMEs face. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen due to its flexibility in exploring participants' insights while maintaining a focus on the key research objectives (Ellis 2016). More specifically, the interviews were designed to uncover information about the current change management needs of SMEs in Scotland as well as the nature of the obstacles relating to the implementation of change. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the technique of empathy mapping (Gray 2017) was used to initially visualise and document SME needs (to be reported in a subsequent paper). Thematic Analysis (TA) was then used to allow recurring themes and insights to emerge organically through inductive coding grounded in the empirical data (Clarke & Braun 2017). This produced initial codes that were collapsed or collated to form an over-arching theme 'Growth Transformation' and the process ultimately informed the development of four sub themes that reflect core patterns within the dataset, namely (1) Place-based Obstacles & Opportunities; (2) Mindset; (3) Growth Aims; and (4) Cultivating Culture and Leadership.

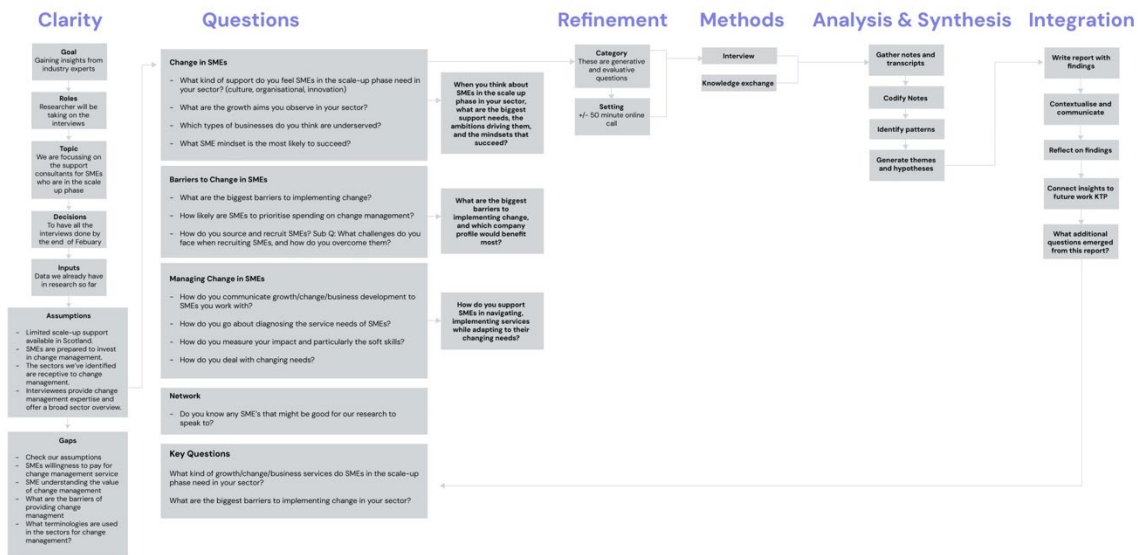


Figure 4: Sampling Strategy Framework (Hall 2022)

5. Findings

Access to finance is widely regarded as the primary obstacle to growth for SMEs, as noted by the business support providers interviewed in this study. However, it is important to note that this research focuses on the people-related aspects of change management rather than financial constraints. As such, the following findings reveal several key challenges related to growth and change management. The TA produced initial codes that were collapsed or collated to form an over-arching theme, namely ‘Growth Transformation’. This overarching theme was underpinned by four sub themes, namely: (1) Place-based Obstacles & Opportunities; (2) Mindset; (3) Growth Aims; and (4) Cultivating Culture and Leadership.

5.1 Place-based Obstacles and Opportunities

According to the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2020 (2021), 66% of SME employers in Scotland were located in urban areas, while 34% operated rurally. In many of the interviews, business support providers operating in rural areas highlighted both the advantages and challenges presented by the region’s geography.

Micro SMEs (0-9 employees) account for almost half (45%) of employment in remote rural areas and over a third (35%) (Scottish Government 2022) in urban areas. According to the interviewees, many SME founders choose to establish their businesses in these areas due to a strong personal attachment to the land and the region rather than locate their business operations in more profitable regions or markets. This enables business owners to sustain a desired lifestyle while knowingly giving up opportunities of maximum business growth. As one interviewee observed, many SMEs in the Highlands and Islands are vocation-driven, with business owners pursuing a broader mission beyond financial gain. A strong motivation among these businesses to employ local residents positively contributes to the regional job market. However, the desire to hire locally is in contrast with the frequently cited skills shortages, not only in rural areas but also across the whole of Scotland, particularly in practical, industry-specific roles. These shortages often limit SMEs’ ability to take on larger contracts due to a lack of available workforce. For example, in the food and drink sector, some businesses struggle to expand into markets beyond Scotland, including England and Wales due to staffing constraints. Despite these challenges, the geographical landscape also presents opportunities for emerging industries, such as the space sector and the transition to green energy in the sea. However, as one interviewee pointed out, the infrastructure necessary to attract highly skilled professionals to rural areas is a challenge. A lack of luxury housing refrains professionals from relocating to these regions. Another obstacle that sits in the way of growth specifically for Micro-SMEs in rural areas is community dynamics. In some cases, interpersonal conflicts or local rivalries may impede business success. Nevertheless, initiatives by organisations such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE 2025) are actively working to mitigate these challenges, foster collaboration, and support business development in these areas.

5.2 Mindset

A recurring theme in the interviews was the concept of mindset. In particular, the Scottish mindset was frequently described as one of extreme humility. This cultural characteristic manifests in various ways, notably in the reluctance of Scottish SME owners to seek external investment or engage in debt financing. This hesitancy is, in part, linked to difficulties in self-promotion, as many SMEs struggle to present themselves in front of investors or their target market. A prevailing attitude of "don't mind me, I'm just doing my thing in this corner" often results in businesses not receiving the visibility they require to grow. Several interviewees suggested that Scotland could potentially adopt certain aspects of entrepreneurial mindsets seen in regions such as Silicon Valley. However, there was some scepticism regarding how well this approach would align with Scottish cultural values. Beyond the specifically Scottish context, mindset was widely identified by interviewees as a critical determinant of both SME success and the implementation of business support initiatives. A key argument presented was that SMEs with the right mindset are more likely to achieve growth. Consequently, business accelerator programmes often assess the mindset of potential participants in advance. Interviewees noted that individuals with a closed mindset characterised by resistance to learning and an unwillingness to accept guidance, tend to hinder both their own success and that of other participants in the programme. One interviewee likened the process of assessing a company's mindset to a doctor's consultation, suggesting that by engaging in conversations with SME owners, their mindset and the likelihood of successful intervention can be determined.

5.3 Growth Aims

The interviews with business support providers revealed a nuanced picture of growth aims among Scottish SMEs that challenged traditional economic metrics. Many Scottish SMEs have different growth aims compared to well-established businesses. Interviewees suggested SMEs tend to prioritise objectives beyond revenue expansion, market share, and employee numbers with their ambitions focused more towards, maintaining relevance, remaining manageable as well as sustainability and quality of life. As one interviewee observed, growth might not even be the right term, as most SMEs seem less motivated by profit maximisation, but instead focus on building relationships while keeping a steady flow of workstreams. In rural areas of Scotland another interviewee pointed out that businesses often align their development goals with their vocational calling, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2024), creating local employment opportunities or maintaining locally sourced production methods. Interestingly, a tension between authentic growth intentions and funding requirements was revealed. To secure public funding, SMEs often claim to have high growth aspirations, though these claims are not always realistic or genuine. Some SMEs reported feeling pressure to use business growth terminology simply to secure funding. One interviewee specialising in the technology sector noted that whilst many founders express ambitions to grow, they frequently lack concrete plans or practical steps to achieve these ambitions. Similarly, SMEs in the wellness and social care sectors often prioritise social impact, sometimes undermining their business sustainability. Interviewees generally agreed that many Scottish scale-ups lack clear vision, and few SMEs have undertaken appropriate market research to understand the key points in their growth journey where value significantly increases. While the study suggests that most Scottish SMEs do not necessarily aspire to grow in conventional ways, notable exceptions exist in sector-specific contexts. For instance, businesses operating in technology, space, life sciences, and energy services tend to align more with traditional growth indicators, such as team expansion, profit generation, and exit strategies. Sectors such as food and drink, manufacturing, and micro-enterprises often focus on production-oriented growth, particularly in terms of scaling operations to access cross-border or EU markets.

5.4 Cultivating Culture and Leadership

When discussing barriers to SMEs growth and scaling, numerous interviewees emphasised that a healthy working culture is essential. A "good" working culture is one that serves a critical function in staff acquisition and retention, particularly as SMEs are often unable to match the competitive salary packages offered by larger organisations. Instead, they must foster a workplace environment that both retains current employees and attracts new talent. Several challenges emerge in this context. For instance, founders frequently struggle to articulate organisational values to new staff members, with one interviewee noting a tendency amongst entrepreneurs to seek replicas of themselves during recruitment rather than acknowledging the value of diverse skill sets. Moreover, many founders lack formal management training, which hinders workplace innovation whilst simultaneously managing operational demands. The immediate pressures of daily operations typically take precedence over long-term cultural development initiatives, despite their importance. From a leadership

perspective, mature and family businesses tend to adopt autocratic approaches, whereas new established SMEs demonstrate greater adaptability to change. One interviewee indicated that many SMEs suffer from "accidental managers" meaning capable operators who have been promoted to leadership positions without adequate management training. The interviewee went on to suggest that a leadership approach significantly shapes organisational culture effectively removing obstacles whilst maintaining appropriate distance from day-to-day operations. In contrast, inadequate leadership fosters political manoeuvring and interpersonal conflict that ultimately undermines project success. It is also important to note, as several interviewees emphasised, that simply establishing a management strategy is not enough, and instead distributing decision-making authority and responsibility is crucial for business success. Interestingly, it was highlighted that many SME founders are reluctant to delegate authoritative control, which has significant implications. For instance, when founders overvalue their own technical expertise, they often disproportionately allocate resources towards technical proposition development, consequently undervaluing contributions from other team members. Other interviewees noted the importance of formalised staff engagement and open-door policies, advocating for workplace cultures that prioritise knowledge sharing and staff empowerment over traditional top-down management approaches. They suggested that decision-making responsibilities should be distributed across various organisational levels rather than concentrated at the top. It was mentioned that family run businesses struggle most with implementing a new working culture.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal how Scotland's urban-rural divide shapes business support needs. Understanding rural challenges is important when designing support, addressing infrastructure gaps, leveraging community dynamics, and mitigating regional workforce limitations. By recognising these place-based factors, it allows support organisations to develop more targeted interventions. The geographical remoteness presents particular challenges for talent acquisition, as SMEs struggle to develop compelling value propositions. However, this apparent disadvantage may be reframed as a potential competitive advantage. For instance, the findings suggest that the Highlands and Islands of Scotland offer distinctive lifestyle benefits that align with vocational desires for work-life balance and connection to nature. Rather than viewing geographical isolation as a barrier, bespoke support could help SMEs leverage these unique regional characteristics to attract the talent which seek alternative lifestyle arrangements that urban environments cannot provide.

It was noted that there is considerable scope for evaluating SME potential beyond sector-specific frameworks. Indeed, mindset emerges as a critical variable in assessing SME growth prospects and designing targeted business support interventions. The cultural tendency toward humility in Scottish SMEs directly impacts bold investment decisions and drive for growth. Therefore, interventions must encourage a change in mindset to counteract cultural habits. The cultivation of mindset characteristics not only facilitates SME growth trajectories but proves equally essential for successful support outcomes. By recognising that a healthy balanced humility, self-awareness, and resilience can stimulate success, resources can be allocated to nurture these traits. The idea of a 'defining the right mindset' varies among individuals, but based on the interview data, a consensus consisted of four key components:

1. A healthy degree of humility: While excessive humility can be detrimental, a balanced level is beneficial, as inflated egos can obstruct growth.
2. Self-awareness and open-mindedness: Successful SME leaders recognise their own and their company's strengths and weaknesses. They are also receptive to innovation and external advice rather than resisting change.
3. Resilience and passion: Running a SME is inherently challenging, with crises being an inevitable part of the business landscape. The ability to navigate difficult periods is crucial for long-term survival and success.
4. Leadership skills: Good leadership within an SME is often a key factor in determining its overall success.

The findings show a disconnect between the traditional growth metrics used by policymakers and the actual aspirations of many Scottish SMEs. This misalignment often leads to what can be described as 'goal distortion', where businesses feel compelled to reshape their true ambitions to meet funding requirements. As a result, both business planning and support programme effectiveness may be compromised. Many Scottish SMEs define growth in broader terms than financial expansion alone, prioritising goals such as work-life balance, community impact, and personal fulfilment. These more holistic aspirations challenge the current "high growth narrative" of business support services. Therefore, it is essential that business support services understand growth

aspirations and design more tailored support offering in alignment with what Scottish businesses genuinely value, rather than imposing standardised packages.

It is also clear from the findings that failure in leadership can hinder change. Founders, especially in small or family-led businesses often struggle with delegating and adapting to managerial roles. This reluctance, combined with skills gaps and limited resources, frequently blocks growth and change initiatives. Continuous support structures and training that offer leadership advice for SMEs is integral for the ever-evolving business community. Leadership skills are also pivotal in the creation of productive work environments. Therefore, a positive and intentional organisational culture, one that encourages innovation, openness and personal development is vital for SME success but is often undervalued and difficult to implement. This needs to be carefully considered by support providers as they tailor their offerings.

In conclusion, this paper sought to understand the change management needs of Scottish SMEs in the scale-up phase and map the current business support landscape while exploring how these needs are perceived by support consultants. The interviews highlighted place-based obstacles and opportunities, mindset, growth aims and cultivating culture and leadership as the most significant topics to support Scottish SMEs. These findings will now be used to inform the remaining workstreams of the wider KTP project to support the development of a design-led change management service to help Scottish SMEs grow. The research continues.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at the University of Dundee.

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used for either the data analysis or writing of the paper.

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