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The Entrepreneur Impact Assessment Report

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Document Information

This The Entrepreneur Programme 2014 - 2024 Impact Report aims to present feedback on the impact that The Entrepreneur business accelerator programme has had on participating finalists and their businesses

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Executive Summary

Business accelerator programmes have emerged as critical instruments for nurturing entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in emerging economies where small and medium enterprises (SMEs) face systemic barriers to growth. In South Africa, where SMEs contribute significantly to GDP and employment yet continue to experience high failure rates within the first few years of operation, accelerators offer a targeted intervention to fast-track entrepreneurial development, enhance innovation, and support job creation (Herrington & Kew, 2018).

Against the backdrop of South Africa's persistent socio-economic challenges, including high youth unemployment, spatial inequality, and constrained access to business support, accelerator programmes have gained policy relevance. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 identifies entrepreneurship and SME development as key levers for inclusive growth and sustainable employment, highlighting the need for platforms that support scalable enterprises with access to skills, mentorship, networks, and finance (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Business accelerators, such as The Entrepreneur Programme in the iLembe District, respond directly to this national agenda by providing intensive, time-bound business support focusing on enterprise viability and growth readiness. The programme aligns with the South African government's broader push towards fostering a resilient, opportunity-driven entrepreneurial culture capable of catalyzing local economic development (DTIC, 2020).

This impact assessment report presents an academically grounded analysis of The Entrepreneur Programme as implemented in the iLembe District of KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing on mixed-methods survey data from past programme participants (2011 - 2024), the study evaluates the programme's impact on business growth, employment, and sustainability.
This is aligned to accepted approaches in evaluating the impact of business accelerator programmes, where key performance indicators often include employment generation, the promotion of innovation, sustainability in business practices, and the strategic resilience of participating enterprises (Cohen et al, 2019).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope of the Report

This report presents the impact assessment of The Entrepreneur Programme, implemented in the iLembe District. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data from 82 survey respondents, it evaluates the impact of The Entrepreneur business accelerator programme on participating businesses, using business growth, employment outcomes and sustainability as measuring criteria. The findings are presented with emphasis on positive trends, strategic insights, and real-world applications.

1.2 Methodology and Data Collection Approach

A mixed-methods online survey was conducted, completed by 82 participants spanning from 2011 to 2024. The survey integrated closed-ended quantitative questions and open-ended reflections. Numerical data was validated for accuracy, while qualitative responses were thematically analysed to extract insights, representative voices, and strategic recommendations.

2. Overview of The Entrepreneur Programme

2.1 Programme Background and Objectives

The iLembe Chamber's The Entrepreneur Programme, a business accelerator programme, serves as a platform for entrepreneurs and owners of SMMEs in the iLembe District from which they can develop their businesses to a sustainable level.
Through this UKZN Graduate School of Business & Leadership accredited short course, and with the support of iLembe Chamber accredited mentors, it allows finalists to examine their businesses through, among others, extensive business modelling, mentorship support, corporate identity development and related marketing collateral, the development of comprehensive business plans, and business exposure.

2.2 Structure and Implementation

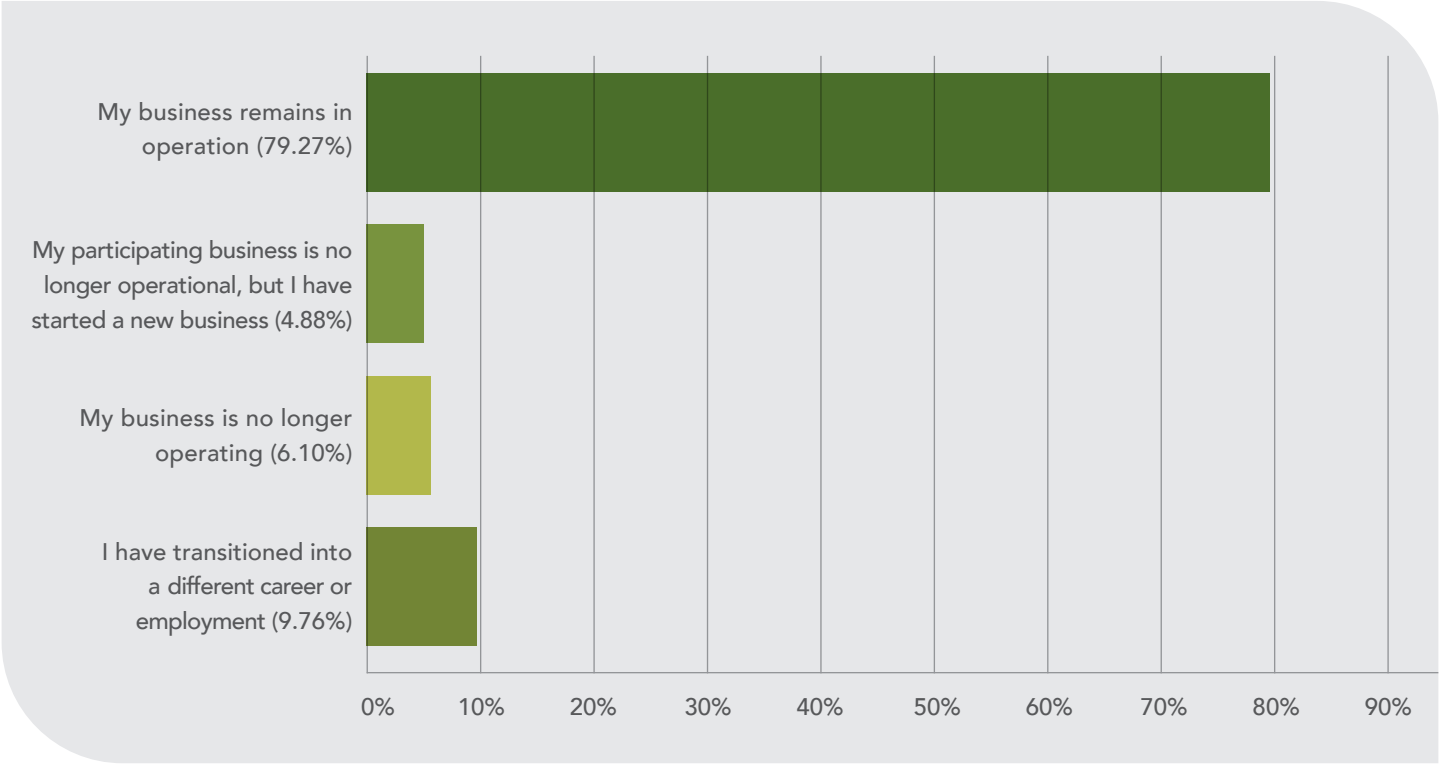
The programme combines an academic base with hands-on business support and exposure. It spans various sectors and levels of enterprise maturity. Support mechanisms include workshops, mentorship, and development of brand and identity.

2.3 Survey Participant Profile

Participants in the survey represented a diverse mix of business sectors, reflective of the economic landscape of the iLembe District. The most common sectors represented were Manufacturing (19.5%), Construction (14.6%), and Business services (11%). These sectors are also recognized as strategic growth nodes within the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Growth and Development Strategy (PGDS) and the iLembe Growth and Development Plan (GDP), which identify local economic development and SME participation in key value chains as priority areas for inclusive growth (KZN PGDS, 2021; iLembe GDP, 2022).

A strong indicator of the programme's impact and the resilience of its participants is that 84% of respondents were still operating a business - either their original venture (79.27%) or a new enterprise (4.88%) - at the time of the study. This figure surpasses national averages for small business survival and reflects positively on the sustainability and relevance of the support mechanisms in The Entrepreneur Programme. The continued operation of these businesses further aligns with the objectives of the National Development Plan 2030, which calls for robust enterprise development to tackle unemployment and economic marginalization in rural and peri-urban areas (National Planning Commission, 2012).

This figure illustrates the operational status of businesses at the time they completed the survey.



3. Business Growth

Assessing business growth is a crucial element in evaluating the effectiveness of an entrepreneur development programme. It provides tangible evidence of how participants are evolving, not only in terms of business performance but also in terms of entrepreneurial mindset, confidence, and problem-solving capabilities. Measuring business growth contributes to continuous programme improvement and helps ensure that interventions are relevant, targeted, and adaptive to participants' needs. For entrepreneurs, seeing their own growth can also boost motivation and reinforce learning outcomes (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2014).

3.1 Turnover and Profitability

Participants' turnover and profitability are core indicators of business performance and growth, particularly in the context of small business development programmes. Participants in The Entrepreneur Programme shared pivotal moments of financial clarity, where increased turnover transitioned from being coincidental to intentional, and profitability became a strategic focus. This shift reflects a deepened entrepreneurial maturity where decisions are guided not only by sales growth but by an understanding of cost structures, margins, and long-term sustainability.

3. Business Growth cont.

This transformation is consistent with research showing that effective entrepreneurship training and accelerator programmes are most impactful when they integrate financial literacy, pricing strategy, and profitability analysis into their curriculum (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2014).

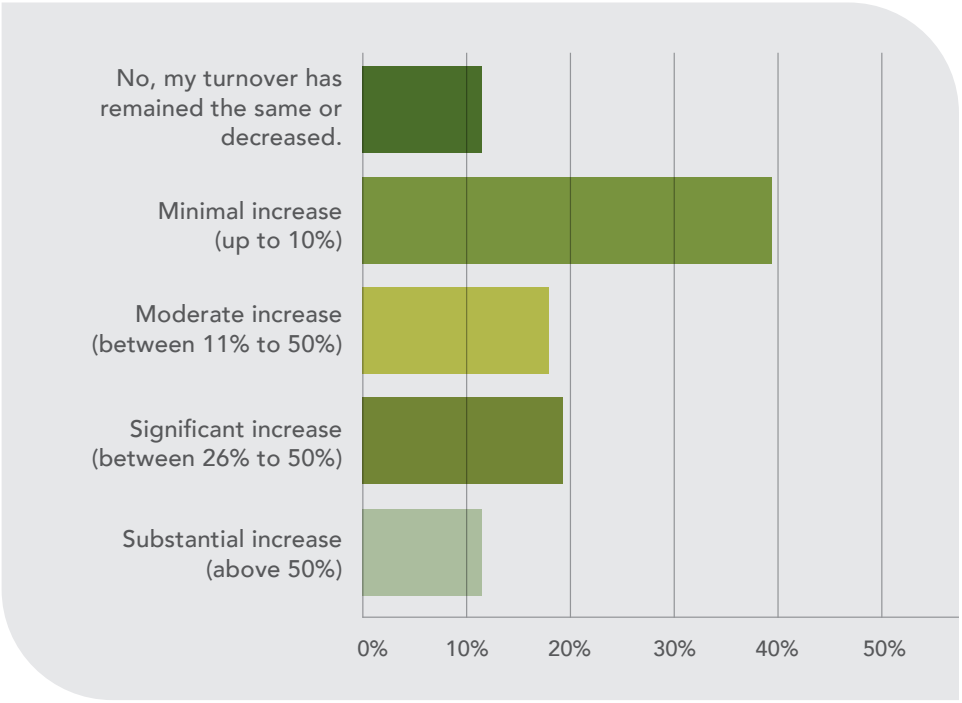
The assessment data supports this shift:

Feedback

"When I saw my turnover increase, I thought, 'this is it!' But when I began to focus on profit margins, I realised the real lesson: you can't scale without profitability. The programme showed me how to balance both."

- ***82% of participants experienced turnover growth post- programme***
- ***31% reported Significant or Substantial turnover growth***
- ***76% of participants reported improved profitability***

These findings align with international and local studies indicating that business accelerators contribute significantly to early-stage revenue and profit improvements by fostering better decision-making, mentoring, and access to markets (Cohen et al, 2019). Notably, profit-focused growth is often a more accurate indicator of long-term viability than revenue alone, especially in the SME sector where cash flow management and margin optimisation are critical (OECD, 2018). 82% of businesses reported turnover increase post-programme, with 11.8% exceeding 50% growth.



These figures highlight the programme's success in supporting financial performance across a diverse group of entrepreneurs.

3. Business Growth cont.

3.2 Market Expansion & Product Diversification

A majority of participants (57%) successfully expanded into new markets or introduced new products. This reflects meaningful progress in both market and product diversification among The Entrepreneur programme finalists. According to Ansoff's (1957) Product-Market Growth Matrix, such outcomes demonstrate the application of effective growth strategies, specifically market development and product development, which are essential for business expansion.

The success of these programme finalists in diversifying their offerings and target markets suggests that the programme has played a key role in enhancing participants' strategic decision making and innovation capabilities - important in view of the fact that diversification contributes to enterprise resilience and competitiveness, particularly within resource-constrained environments often faced by SMEs (Hitt et al, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings support the notion that structured support programmes, such as The Entrepreneur Programme, can cultivate dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007), enabling entrepreneurs to adapt to changing market conditions and sustain long-term growth.

4. Employment Creation

Employment creation remains one of the most critical benchmarks for evaluating the socio-economic impact of entrepreneurship development programmes. In the South African context marked by persistently high unemployment, especially among youth and rural populations, entrepreneurship is widely regarded as a catalytic vehicle for inclusive employment and local economic empowerment (Herrington & Kew, 2018). Business accelerators like The Entrepreneur Programme not only aim to grow businesses but also to expand employment opportunities in their communities.

Tracking employment outcomes enables programme evaluators to assess the extent to which participating enterprises contribute to broader development goals, such as poverty reduction, youth employment, and skills development (Valerio et al, 2014). Research has shown that small and medium enterprises (SMES) account for more than 60% of employment in developing countries, and targeted entrepreneurship interventions can significantly improve job quantity and quality (OECD, 2018).

Moreover, beyond mere job numbers, workforce development, in the form of upskilling, fair wages, and internal career growth, signals a maturing business and an emerging employer of choice. Entrepreneurs who invest in their workforce build strategic resilience and improve long-term retention, productivity, and innovation capacity (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2014). In this section, feedback from past participants of The Entrepreneur Programme is analysed to highlight trends in employment growth, the types of jobs created, and how business owners are contributing to workforce development in the iLembe District.

4.1 Full-Time and Part-Time Job Creation

Job creation is not only a key performance indicator for entrepreneurship programmes, it is also a profound marker of socio-economic transformation. In contexts like the iLembe District, where unemployment, particularly among youth, remains high, each new job represents both personal empowerment and broader community upliftment (Stats SA, 2023). For participants in The Entrepreneur Programme, hiring their first employees or expanding their teams marked a proud milestone, one that brought new skills, energy, and capacity to their ventures.

The total employment among surveyed participants increased by 82.26% - from 248 employees at the start of the programme, to 452 at the time of the survey, which serves as a compelling indicator of impact.

Significantly, the cost per job retained or created is a mere R4,258. This underscores how entrepreneurial support can lead to tangible improvements in employment outcomes within underserved communities. It affirms the finding that accelerators can catalyse growth-oriented entrepreneurship, especially when complemented by mentorship, access to markets, and skills development (Cohen et al,2019).

4. Employment Creation cont.

This growth aligns with international evidence showing that SMEs participating in accelerator programmes exhibit stronger employment growth trajectories than their unsupported peers (Kerr & Robert-Nicoud, 2020). In developing economies, where informal and precarious employment is common, creating formal and semi-formal work opportunities contributes to both economic stability and improved livelihoods (ILO, 2019). It also aligns with the South African National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which identifies entrepreneurship as a central pillar for achieving employment and inclusive economic growth (National Planning Commission, 2012).

These jobs are not just payroll numbers, they are opportunities for skill-building, upward mobility, and economic agencies within communities

4.2 Wage Growth and Workforce Development

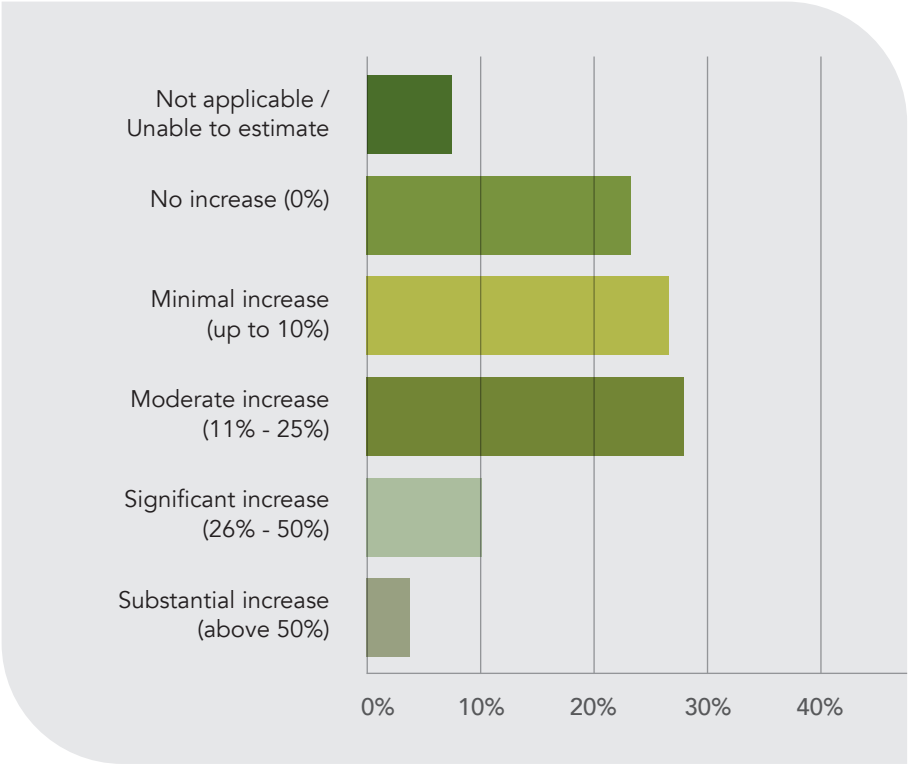
While employment creation is a foundational outcome of entrepreneurship, long-term economic transformation depends equally on job quality, particularly wage growth and opportunities for workforce development. Among surveyed participants of The Entrepreneur Programme, 69% reported increased investment in employee benefits, wages and staff training, signaling not just business growth, but an evolution into more mature, responsible enterprises.

This trend mirrors broader international findings that link entrepreneurial success with internal reinvestment into human capital (Valerio et al, 2014). As businesses stabilise and generate consistent revenue, many shift toward building stronger employment structures offering improved compensation, providing training, and fostering a culture of learning.

In the South African context, wage stagnation and underinvestment in skills remain key barriers to productivity and economic inclusion, particularly in semi-formal or informal sectors where many small businesses operate (Stats SA, 2023). Therefore, findings from The Entrepreneur Programme, where participants are demonstrably increasing wages and committing to staff development, represent a positive departure from this norm and contribute toward the objectives outlined in South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which prioritises decent work and lifelong learning as essential levers for inclusive growth (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Furthermore, skills development within SMEs has a dual benefit: it improves the capacity of the business to scale, and simultaneously builds the capabilities of the workforce, many of whom are young and previously unemployed.
By investing in their teams, entrepreneurs not only grow their businesses, they catalyse broader socio-economic development, laying foundations for local prosperity and economic development.

4. Employment Creation cont.



Increase in Workforce Investment: Indicates that 69% reported higher employee-related costs, including wages and training.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Not applicable / Unable to estimate	7.35%
No increase (0%)	23.53%
Minimal increase (up to 10%)	26.47%
Moderate increase (11% - 25%)	27.94%
Significant increase (26% - 50%)	10.29%
Substantial increase (above 50%)	4.41%

Importantly, the increase in wages and investment in employees among these entrepreneurs has a multiplier effect, by raising the earning potential of workers, local buying power and consumer spending are also enhanced. When employees earn more and feel more secure in their roles, they are more likely to spend within their local economies, supporting other small businesses, stimulating demand, and reinforcing economic circulation at the community level (ILO, 2019). This contribution to local consumer activity strengthens the case for entrepreneurship not only as a driver of job creation, but as a force for sustainable and inclusive economic development (Zarazua de Rubens et al., 2016).

4. Employment Creation cont.

4.3 Ecosystem Impact

Business growth catalysed through accelerator programmes like The Entrepreneur Programme often extends far beyond the individual entrepreneur. It has a ripple effect, leading to new job creation, expanded supplier networks, and inter-business collaboration. As businesses scale, they unlock opportunities not only for internal development but also for strengthening their ecosystems. Participants in the programme experienced this network effect firsthand, with increased purchasing volumes, enhanced supplier relationships, and peer-to-peer mentorship emerging as hallmarks of programme impact.

Feedback

"Through the programme, I started forming strong supplier relationships. Now, my purchasing volumes have increased. It's not just my business that's growing, it's the whole network around me."

These outcomes align with international research that shows business accelerators play a critical role in fostering ecosystem linkages, innovation capacity, and market access for SMEs (Cohen et al, 2019). Ecosystem impact is central to understanding the wider value creation of accelerator programmes. 88% of participants felt that they contribute to their immediate economic ecosystem, through the forming of 3rd party job creation as well as distribution, supplier partnerships, mentorship and subcontracting opportunities.

These findings reflect what Isenberg (2011) describes as the "entrepreneurship ecosystem multiplier effect", where individual entrepreneurial growth spurs broader social and economic development through networks, collaboration, and reinvestment in local systems.

In the South African context, these ripple effects are particularly meaningful. Given the country's goals to foster inclusive and decentralized growth (NPC, 2012), the development of interconnected, resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems, especially in rural and peri-urban areas like the iLembe District, is vital to long-term job creation and economic transformation.

These outcomes speak directly to the goals of the South African National Development Plan 2030, which places innovation, job creation, and SME development at the centre of inclusive economic growth (NPC, 2012). Programmes that build market linkage are especially critical in rural and peri-urban contexts, like the iLembe District, where ecosystem connectivity can drive sustainable transformation (Khavul et al, 2009).

5. Sustainability

Evaluating the sustainability of businesses post-intervention is critical in determining the long-term impact of entrepreneurship support programmes like The Entrepreneur Programme. Sustainability extends beyond initial success to consider a business's ability to maintain consistent revenue, withstand market shocks, adapt to changing environments, and continue contributing meaningfully to local economic development (Isenberg, 2010).

A compelling indicator of the programme's contribution to business sustainability - particularly within a context of typically high SME failure rates - is that 84% of respondents were actively running a business at the time of the study, whether continuing with their original venture or having launched a new enterprise. This aligns with research that shows access to structured support, through mentorship, networks, and capacity-building, significantly improves long-term survival rates for small businesses (McKenzie & Puerto, 2019).

In South Africa, sustainability is particularly relevant due to structural challenges facing entrepreneurs, including limited access to markets, finance, and skills development opportunities (Herrington & Kew, 2018). Many micro and small businesses in rural and semi-urban districts, such as iLembe, operate in precarious conditions, often within the informal sector, where resilience and adaptability are critical for survival (Rogerson, 2008).

5.1 Strategic Adaptation: Technology & Systems Integration

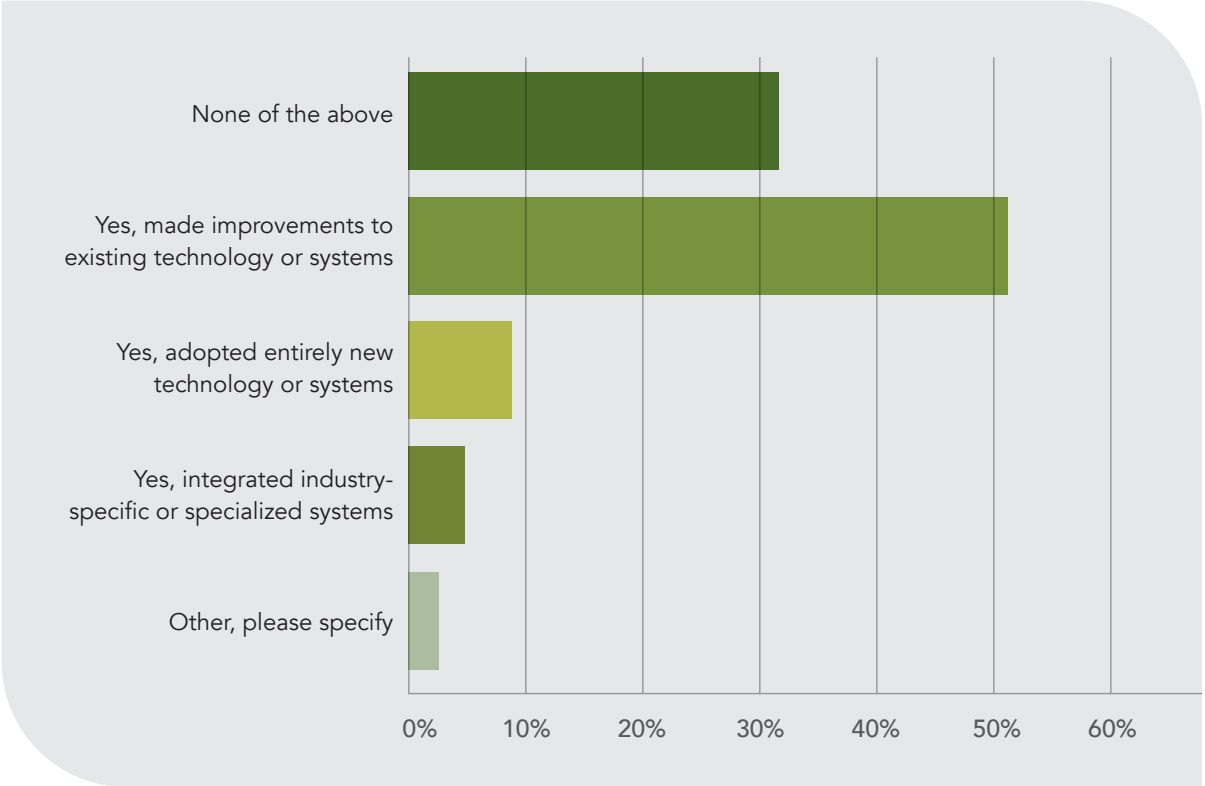
In today's business environment, strategic adaptation is the ability to adjust to changing market conditions. This is essential for small business survival and growth. One of the most impactful forms of adaptation is the integration of digital technologies. In this impact assessment, 68 % of participants reported adopting or upgrading digital tools such as inventory management systems, mobile payment platforms, and customer relationship management (CRM) software. These technologies were not adopted incidentally; rather, they represent deliberate, strategic choices aimed at streamlining operations, minimising human error, and creating capacity for more informed decision-making.

In the South African context, where SMEs often operate within infrastructural and administrative constraints, digitization emerges as a critical enabler of scalability, formalization, and long-term sustainability (Chigada & Madzinga, 2021). Tools such as point-of-sale apps, WhatsApp Business, and cloud-based accounting platforms are not just technical add-ons, they are strategic resources that help bridge critical gaps in market access, customer engagement, and financial literacy (Banga & te Velde, 2018).

More than just a functional upgrade, technology adoption signals a broader shift in entrepreneurial mindset. It reflects a strategic orientation towards data-driven decision-making, business model innovation, and operational resilience (World Bank, 2021).

5. Sustainability cont.

In regions like iLembe, where digital infrastructure is evolving but still uneven, initiatives such as The Entrepreneur Programme play a vital role in facilitating this strategic adaptation. By demystifying technology and contextualizing it for township and rural entrepreneurs, the programme ensures that early-stage businesses can make informed, strategic choices that align with their growth trajectories and long-term goals.



Technology Adoption: Reflects implementation or improvement of digital systems in 68% of businesses.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
None of the above	32.35%
Yes, made improvements to existing technology or systems	51.47%
Yes, adopted entirely new technology or systems	8.82%
Yes, integrated industry-specific or specialized systems	4.42%
Other, please specify	2.94%

5. Sustainability cont.

5.2 Strategic Adaptability: Financial Management

Effective financial management is a cornerstone of strategic adaptation, enabling entrepreneurs to navigate uncertainty, allocate resources wisely, and make informed growth decisions. The graph illustrates a convincing outcome in this area; 88% of participants reported an improvement in their financial management skills following their participation in The Entrepreneur Programme. Notably, the majority indicated slight (39.71%), moderate (19.12%), or good (19.12%) improvement, with a further 10.29% reporting significant progress, highlighting the programme's success in fostering deep financial capability among a substantial portion of the cohort.

In the context of strategic adaptation, enhanced financial management is not simply a technical skill, it is a strategic asset. Entrepreneurs who can interpret financial data, adjust pricing, manage working capital, and forecast expenses are better equipped to respond to market volatility and scale responsibly. The results underscore that The Entrepreneur Programme not only transferred knowledge but also cultivated the adaptive capacity necessary for sustainable growth.

Self-reported improvement in financial management skills among programme participants.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
No Improvement	11.76%
Slight Improvement	39.71%
Moderate Improvement	19,12%
Good Improvement	19.12%
Significant Improvement	10.29%

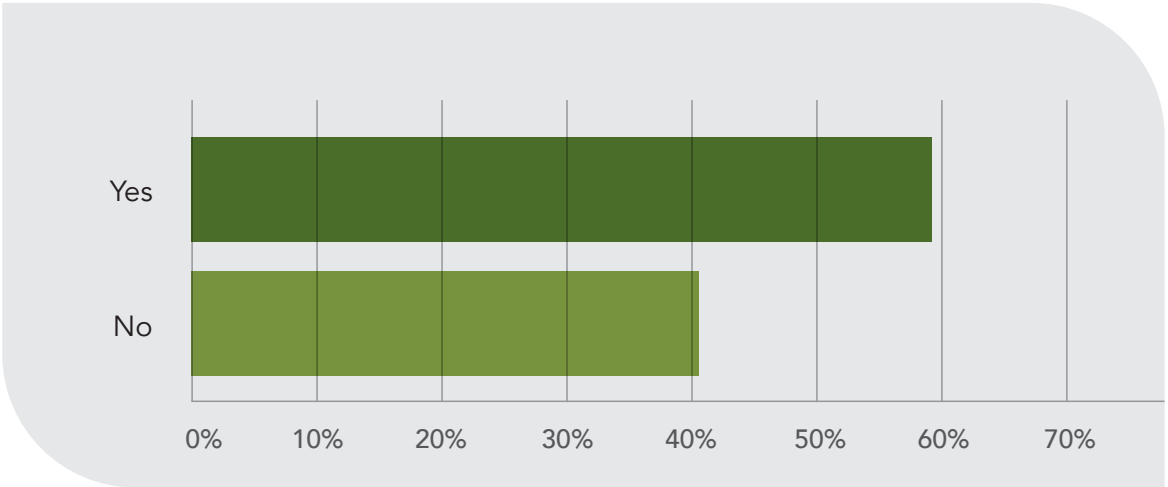
5. Sustainability cont.

5.3 Strategic Adaptability: Business Model Evolution

Strategic adaptability is not limited to operational changes, it also encompasses the reconfiguration of core business models in response to changing market conditions. For participants in The Entrepreneur Programme, adaptation meant more than just staying afloat; it involved deliberately reimagining their business models to navigate external pressures and seize emerging opportunities. From launching e-commerce platforms and adopting subscription-based pricing to blending B2B and B2C strategies, participants embraced business model innovation as a forward-looking, adaptive strategy.

This ability to pivot, reported by 59% of participant, demonstrates what Teece (2018) terms dynamic capabilities; the capacity of a business to integrate, build, and reconfigure both internal and external competencies in response to rapid environmental change. This includes pricing strategies, adopting new customer channels, or shifting their core value proposition
In a context like South Africa, where SMES often face limited access to capital, infrastructure, and formal markets, such adaptability is not optional; it is essential for resilience and long-term sustainability (Fatoki, 2014).

By embedding strategic adaptation into its core methodology through mentorship, peer learning, and access to digital tools, the program equips entrepreneurs to navigate changing business environments effectively. In doing so, it aligned with global best practices, positioning business accelerators not only as startup enablers but as essential platforms for strategic reinvention and growth (Pauwels et al., 2016).



Changes to Business Model: Shows the nature and scale of adaptations made post-programme.

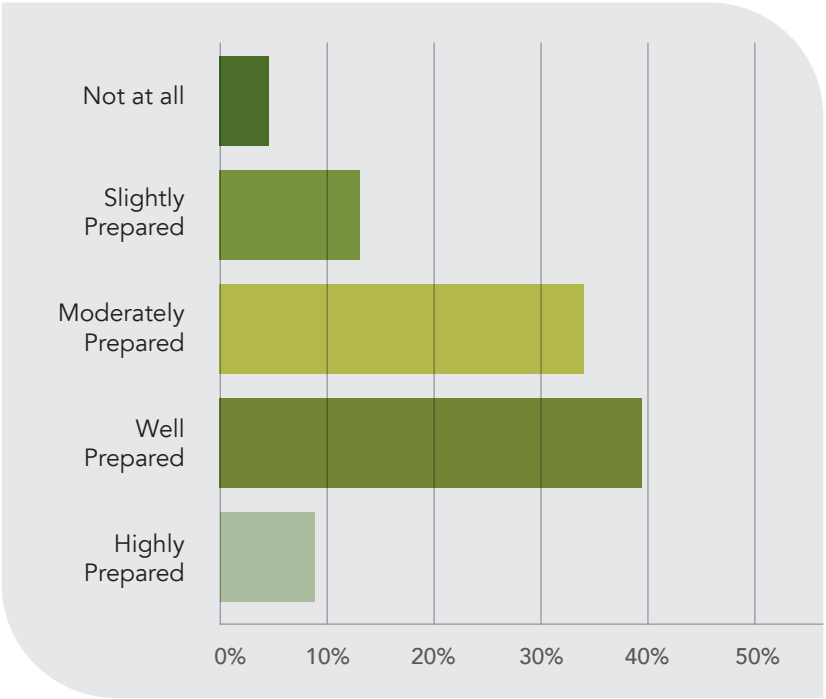
5. Sustainability cont.

5.4 Resilience and Preparedness for Disruption

A defining measure of an entrepreneur's resilience is the ability to anticipate, plan for, and adapt to disruptions, be they economic, environmental, or socio-political. In this study, 82% of programme participants reported feeling moderately to highly prepared to navigate future disruptions following their participation in the programme. This reflects the development of not only technical skills but also entrepreneurial confidence.

Strategic thinking is the foundation of adaptive capacity, the skillset that enables entrepreneurs to not only respond to immediate challenges but to pre-emptively structure their businesses in ways that are flexible, agile, and forward-looking (Liedtka, 1998). In uncertain environments like those found in many parts of South Africa, strategic thinking becomes essential for survival and growth, especially in underserved markets where access to formal support structures is limited (Rwigema & Venter, 2004).

The programme's impact in this regard aligns with research on Resilience Theory, which emphasises the importance of proactive coping strategies, scenario planning, and learning orientation in building businesses capable of weathering shocks (Linnenluecke, 2017). Entrepreneurs who internalise these competencies are more likely to shift from reactive to anticipatory management-cultivating psychological safety, confidence, and operational agility (Williams et al., 2017).
Participant reflections such as "I now approach challenges with a plan" and "The programme taught me how to pivot quickly" echo the literature on entrepreneurial preparedness, which links structured learning experiences with increased decision-making confidence, faster recovery from setbacks, and sustained innovation during crises.



Entrepreneurial Resilience: Illustrates participant readiness to respond to future economic or operational uncertainty.

5. Sustainability cont.

5.5 Competency Assessment and Personal Development Integration

A critical component underpinning the success of The Entrepreneur Programme has been the integration of scientific competency assessment and personalised development planning, delivered through a strategic partnership with BIOSS Southern Africa.

This collaboration represents a sophisticated approach to entrepreneurial development that moves beyond generic training models to embrace evidence-based, individualised support mechanisms (Boyatzis, 2008).

BIOSS conducted comprehensive research to identify the core competencies that correlate with entrepreneurial success, establishing a robust foundation for participant assessment and development planning that aligns with international best practices in talent development and entrepreneurial capacity building (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Man et al., 2002).

The assessment methodology, developed by BIOSS, integrates multiple validated instruments to create a holistic view of each participant's entrepreneurial potential and development needs. This includes competency assessment against research-identified success factors, career anchor analysis using Schein's established model to understand underlying motivations and work preferences (Schein, 1990), and personality assessment through the Linked Psychometric Assessment (LPA) tool. This multi-dimensional approach enables programme coordinators to understand not only what participants can do, but also what drives them and how they naturally approach work and relationships - critical factors in entrepreneurial success and sustainability (Rauch & Frese, 2007; Baum et al., 2001).

Each participant receives a comprehensive integrated report that synthesises data from all assessment tools, providing a detailed competency rating and clear identification of strengths and development areas. These reports serve as the foundation for personalised development plans that outline specific, actionable recommendations for skill enhancement and strategic focus areas (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006). Rather than offering one-size-fits-all solutions, this approach ensures that each entrepreneur receives targeted guidance that builds on their natural strengths while addressing specific capability gaps, maximising the effectiveness of the programme investment and increasing the likelihood of long-term business success (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010).

The assessment insights directly inform the mentorship process, providing mentors with detailed, objective data about their assigned entrepreneurs' capabilities, motivations, and development priorities. This evidence-based approach to mentorship enhances the quality of coaching relationships and enables mentors to focus their efforts on areas with the greatest potential impact (St-Jean & Audet, 2012; Sullivan, 2000).

The integration of scientific assessment with practical mentorship represents a significant advancement in entrepreneurship development methodology, contributing to the programme's strong outcomes in business growth, employment creation, and participant satisfaction. This systematic approach to talent development exemplifies how data-driven insights can enhance the effectiveness of entrepreneurship support programmes and improve long-term sustainability outcomes (Ahmad et al., 2010; Bird, 1995).

6. Reflections and Recommendations

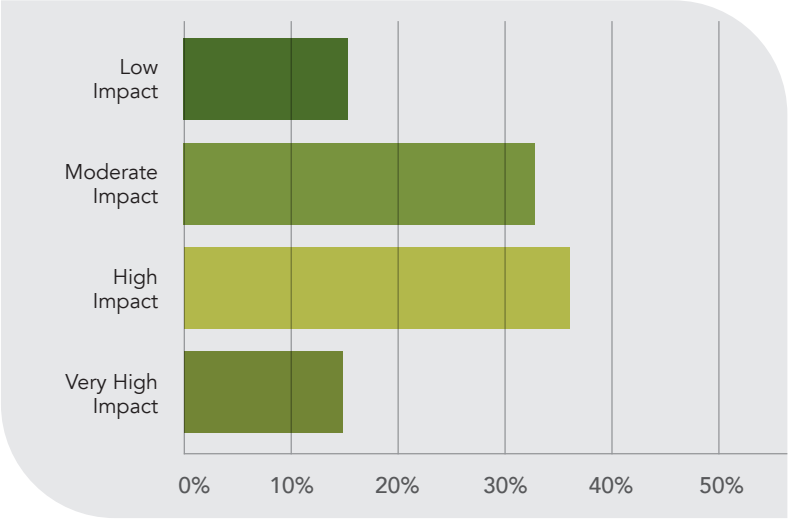
6.1 Perceived Programme Value

The true value of an entrepreneurship development programme lies not only in its content but in how participants perceive its utility and applicability to their business context. In this evaluation, 84% of participants rated the programme's impact as Moderate to Very high, with half saying that the impact was High to Very high, underscoring the programme's relevance and effectiveness. Participants highlighted the mentorship and practical tools as key elements that contributed to their development as entrepreneurs.

Perceived value is a critical indicator in programme evaluation literature. According to Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training Evaluation (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), learner satisfaction and perceived usefulness are foundational to deeper learning and behaviour change. When participants value the training, they are more likely to internalize and apply new knowledge, leading to measurable impact at the business level. The mentorship component, in particular, is consistently linked with entrepreneurial success and confidence, as it offers tailored, real-world guidance that complements formal training (St-Jean & Audet, 2012). Research shows that mentorship enhances both self-efficacy and the quality of strategic decisions made by small business owners (Sullivan, 2000).

Moreover, programmes that emphasize practical, hands-on learning as opposed to abstract theory are more likely to be rated highly by entrepreneurs and lead to higher retention and application of skills (Cope, 2005). The high satisfaction rate reported here indicates that the programme successfully addressed the contextual needs of local entrepreneurs and provided actionable tools for business growth and sustainability.

Overall Impact Rating: Depicts the perceived value of the programme, with most participants rating it highly.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
LOW IMPACT - Small improvements to key aspects of my business	15.87%
MODERATE IMPACT - Noticeable positive impact on key aspects of my business	33.33%
HIGH IMPACT - Significant improvements to key aspects of my business	36.51%
VERY HIGH IMPACT - Transformative impact on my business	14.29%

6. Reflections and Recommendations

6.2 Areas for Improvement

While overall programme satisfaction was high, several participants recommended enhancements such as sector-specific content and extended post-programme support. These insights point to a growing demand for contextualised learning and lifelong entrepreneurial development.

From an academic perspective, these findings align with the argument that one-size-fits-all training models are often inadequate for the diverse needs of entrepreneurs across sectors (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008).
Furthermore, research highlights that entrepreneurial learning is continuous and cumulative, requiring ongoing reflection, adaptation, and support (Politis, 2005). Many accelerator programmes globally are evolving to include post-programme support structures such as alumni networks, advanced training modules, and continued mentorship, proven mechanisms for maintaining momentum and long-term success (Pauwels et al., 2016).

6.3 What They Still Need

The Entrepreneur Programme participants identified key areas where continued support is crucial:

- ***access to markets,***
- ***digital enablement, and***
- ***funding opportunities.***

These needs are consistent with global research that highlights post-acceleration gaps as major barriers to sustained SME growth (Brown et al., 2017).
Market access is a persistent challenge for small businesses, particularly in developing contexts. Without integration into value chains or buyer networks, entrepreneurs struggle to convert their offerings into stable income (Liedholm & Mead, 1999). Facilitating market linkages, through trade fairs, B2B platforms, or procurement inclusion can significantly enhance enterprise viability (OECD, 2021).

Digital transformation is also essential. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution reshapes business landscapes, SMEs that are digitally excluded risk being left behind. Access to affordable, relevant technologies, paired with training, enables improved efficiency, customer engagement, and competitiveness (World Bank, 2021).

Access to finance remains a globally cited constraint, especially for early-stage businesses in emerging economies. In short, continued investment in ecosystem enablers is essential to ensure the long-term success and scaling of businesses accelerated through programmes like The Entrepreneur.

7. Conclusion: A Story Still Unfolding

The evidence from the impact assessment of The Entrepreneur Programme demonstrates, overwhelmingly, that the initiative has been a catalyst for change in the iLembe district.

With 82 % of participants reporting turnover growth, 76% experiencing enhanced profitability, and 57% expanding their teams, the programme has provided a tangible boost to business performance. Moreover, nearly 69% of participants increased their investment in employee development, ensuring that staff not only contributed to current operations but also grew with their businesses, while 68% adopted or upgraded technology and systems.

These quantitative improvements are complemented by qualitative shifts in strategic thinking and management practices. Participants moved from reactive decision-making to embracing dynamic capabilities, as reflected in their evolving business models and increased preparedness for market disruptions (Teece, 2018). With tailored mentorship and sector-relevant tools, entrepreneurs not only refined their internal operations but also contributed to the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem through supplier partnerships, mentorship, and localised job creation (Herrington & Kew, 2018).

The journey of these entrepreneurs is marked by more than just favourable metrics; it is characterised by profound personal and community transformation. Entrepreneurs emerged as confident leaders, capable of strategic adaptation, while their businesses evolved into robust ecosystems that are increasingly interconnected and resilient. These developments echo global research on entrepreneurship that emphasises the necessity of continuous learning, market access, and digital integration for sustainable growth (World Bank, 2021).

Furthermore, while areas for improvement, such as sector-specific content and ongoing support, were identified, these gaps underscore a hunger for further development and signal the potential for even greater impact in the future. In essence, The Entrepreneur Programme has not only fostered individual business success but has also set the stage for long-term sustainable prosperity in the iLembe district.

As the story of these entrepreneurs continues to unfold, the programme's achievements serve as both a benchmark and a springboard, inviting further innovations in training, support structures, and ecosystem development. The narrative of transformative growth, leadership, and community advancement is still in its early chapters, one that promises enduring contributions to local economic development and sustainable prosperity.

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THE ENTREPRENEUR
TAKE YOUR BUSINESS TO NEW HEIGHTS

The Entrepreneur Programme Review

The Entrepreneur Programme Review Introduction

The Entrepreneur Programme has reached a significant 15-year milestone, and the iLembe Chamber is conducting a review to celebrate, and evaluate, its impact and effectiveness.

As a finalist of The Entrepreneur Programme, we value your insight and would like to understand your business's progress, growth, and the role the programme has played in your entrepreneurial journey.

This brief survey is an essential part of our review, and we appreciate your participation.

Please use the following navigation buttons to move through the survey:
- Click "NEXT" to continue to the next page
- Click "PREVIOUS" to return to the previous page
- Click "SUBMIT" to close and submit your survey once you are finished.

Please answer all the questions to progress through the survey.

Your contribution is greatly appreciated – completion of the survey will only take 10 minutes of your time.

PLEASE CLICK ON THE BUTTON BELOW TO COMMENCE THE SURVEY.

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The Entrepreneur Programme Review

Finalist business profile

In this section, we would like to update ourselves on your business - where your business is based, what industry you are operating in, and in which year you were a programme finalist. We would also like to know how your business is currently doing.

*** 1. In which year did you participate in The Entrepreneur Programme?**

- 2011
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017
- 2018
- 2019
- 2021
- 2022
- 2023
- 2024

*** 2. At the time of programme participation, in which region of the iLembe District did your main business activity take place?**

- KwaDukuza
- Mandeni
- Maphumulo
- Ndwedwe
- Other

*** 3. In which sector do you operate?**

- Agriculture, Forestry, Hunting
- Agricultural Processing
- Mining, Quarrying
- Energy, incl. Oil, Petroleum & Gas
- Manufacturing, Assembly
- Construction, Property Development, Property Sales & related (incl. Arch & Eng Services)
- Tourism, Catering, Accommodation, Property Management
- Wholesale, Retail, Vehicle Trade
- Arts, Culture & Creative Industries
- Transport, Distribution, Warehousing, Storage, Freight Forwarding, Shipping & Exports
- Education, Financial & Business Services (incl. IT, Media, Security & related)
- Health & Wellness, incl Medical & Fitness

*** 4. What is the status of your business?**

- My business remains in operation
- My business is no longer operating
- My participating business is no longer operational, but I have started a new business
- I have transitioned into a different career or employment

The Entrepreneur Programme Review

Business growth, job creation and sustainability

In this section, we take a closer look at how your business has developed since your participation in the programme.
We'll explore key areas like business growth, workforce retention, and how these changes have impacted your suppliers, distributors, and other stakeholders.

*** 5. Since your participation in the programme, has your business' turnover changed?**

- No, my turnover has remained the same or decreased
- Minimal increase (up to 10%)
- Moderate increase (between 11% to 25%)
- Significant increase (between 26% to 50%)
- Substantial increase (above 50%)

*** 6. Has your business' profitability improved since participating in the programme?**

- Yes
- No

*** 7. Has your business expanded its customer base, either by entering new markets, new regions or by diversifying your product/service offerings?**

- No, we have not expanded yet
- Yes, we have expanded into new regions
- Yes, we have introduced new products/services
- Yes, we have expanded to both new regions and through new products/services
- Not applicable to our business model

*** 8. Please indicate how the number of full-time and part-time employees have changed since your participation in the programme? Please consider yourself as one employee.**

No of staff during programme participation

No of staff now

*** 9. Please provide an estimate of how much your employee-related costs have increased since your participation in the programme, including wages, employee benefits, and training.**

- ○ No increase (0%)
- ○ Minimal increase (up to 10%)
- ○ Moderate increase (between 11% to 25%)
- ○ Significant increase (between 26% to 50%)
- ○ Substantial increase (above 50%)
- ○ Not applicable / Unable to estimate

*** 10. Following your participation in the programme, how has your business positively impacted on your suppliers, distributors, or other businesses in your ecosystem? (Select all that apply)**

- ☐ Increased purchasing volumes or formed new supplier partnerships
- ☐ Created new distribution or market access opportunities for other businesses
- ☐ Provided subcontracting, outsourcing, or collaboration opportunities
- ☐ Offered mentorship, training, or support to other small businesses
- ☐ Contributed to new direct or indirect job creation in the ecosystem
- ☐ Other, please specify
- ☐ No, not yet

*** 11. Have you implemented any new technology or systems in your business since participating in the programme?**

- ○ Yes, made improvements to existing technology or systems
- ○ Yes, adopted entirely new technology or systems
- ○ Yes, integrated industry-specific or specialized systems
- ○ Other, please specify
- ○ None of the above

*** 12. How has your financial management improved as a result of the programme?**

No improvement	Slight improvement	Moderate improvement	Good improvement	Significant improvement
○	○	○	○	○

*** 13. How prepared do you feel to handle business challenges or economic disruptions after completing the programme?**

No at all	Slightly prepared	Moderately prepared	Well prepared	Highly prepared
○	○	○	○	○

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The Entrepreneur Programme Review

Programme impact and value

This section examines the impact of The Entrepreneur Programme on your business strategies and key milestones, focusing on how it has contributed to your long-term growth and overall success.

*** 14. Have you made any significant changes to your business model as a result of the programme?**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

15. If yes, please describe the changes made to your business model as a result of the programme.

*** 16. Please indicate how the programme has influenced your approach to business strategy (e.g. clarity on value add, resource allocation, strategic partnerships)?**

THE ENTREPRENEUR
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The Entrepreneur Programme Review

Programme evaluation and feedback

Your feedback is crucial in refining the programme for future entrepreneurs. This section allows you to highlight what the programme did well, areas for improvement, and the types of additional support that would help your business scale.

*** 17. Please rate the overall impact of the programme on your business success?**

Low impact - small improvements to key aspects of my business	Moderate impact - noticeable positive impact on key aspects of my business	High impact - significant improvements to key aspects of my business	Very high impact - transformative impact on my business
○	○	○	○

*** 18. In summary, how would you rate the overall effect of the programme on the success of your business?**

	No noticeable impact	Little impact	Good impact	Excellent impact
Business growth	○	○	○	○
Operational efficiency	○	○	○	○
Enhancement of your leadership skills or business acumen	○	○	○	○
Networking opportunities	○	○	○	○
Sustainability and scalability	○	○	○	○

*** 19. Please indicate any areas where the programme could improve to better support entrepreneurs?**

*** 20. What additional support from the Chamber would help your business to be more successful?**

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The Entrepreneur Programme Review

Thank you

Thank you for your time - your views will assist us to enhance The Entrepreneur Programme and your participation in our local economy.