




Systematic review of business support practice: Establishing design features

Revisión sistemática de las prácticas de apoyo a las empresas: Definición de las características de diseño

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Abstract

This paper addresses the research gap associated with the core components of effective SME business support and its governance. Adopting a systematic literature review protocol, this study analyses the academic literature published between 2004 and 2025, identifying a "nexus" of six core support components: interaction pattern, independent internalisation, diagnostic tools, depth of engagement, expert coaching, and concept translation, all of which are interdependent. Five key governance elements are also identified, focused on: evaluating outcomes, search and selection, funding and delivery partnerships, mobilisation, and client management. These findings are used to develop a framework which offers a content-agnostic blueprint for effective business support, emphasising high-intensity, one-on-one interactions and the critical role of expert practitioners able to translate concepts to specific SME contexts. This paper directly contributes to a deeper understanding of how support programs are absorbed and provides a foundation for future theory development and policy design.

Keywords: business support; SME; systematic literature review; practice; growth

JEL Classification: L53; O21; O25

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la laguna existente en la investigación relacionada con los componentes fundamentales del apoyo empresarial eficaz a las PYMEs y su gobernanza. Siguiendo un protocolo de revisión bibliográfica sistemática, este estudio analiza la literatura académica publicada entre 2004 y 2025, identificando un «nexo» de seis componentes fundamentales de apoyo: patrón de interacción, internalización independiente, herramientas de diagnóstico, profundidad de compromiso, asesoramiento especializado y traducción de conceptos, todos ellos interdependientes. También se identifican cinco elementos clave de gobernanza, centrados en: la evaluación de resultados, la búsqueda y selección, las asociaciones de financiación y prestación de servicios, la movilización y la gestión de clientes. Estos hallazgos se utilizan para desarrollar un marco que ofrece un modelo independiente del contenido para un apoyo empresarial eficaz, haciendo hincapié en las interacciones individuales de alta intensidad y en el papel fundamental de los profesionales expertos capaces de traducir conceptos a contextos específicos de las pymes. Este artículo contribuye directamente a una comprensión más profunda de cómo se absorben los programas de apoyo y proporciona una base para el futuro desarrollo teórico y el diseño de políticas.

Palabras clave: apoyo empresarial; PYMEs; revisión sistemática de la literatura; práctica; crecimiento

Clasificación JEL: L53; O21; O25

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1. Introduction

Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are a core element of the economy in many countries (Chege & Wang, 2022; Mena-Siles & Gemar, 2025; Mole et al., 2017), and government agencies often rely on business support for SMEs to alleviate and generate growth (Knox et al., 2024; Lwesya et al., 2021). As business support has been increasingly recognised by governments and businesses as vital to enhancing performance, a broad range of support mechanisms has evolved (Mole et al., 2009; O'Farrell & Wood, 1998; Smallbone & Welter, 2001). Nonetheless, there is now a wider range of different support on offer to SMEs (Henry et al., 2004). Business support can improve market competitiveness (Mole et al., 2009) and help overcome resistance to change (Love & Roper, 2015) as well as channelling business resources (Vossen, 1998) and extending networks (Vickers & Lyon, 2014).

Given the cost of supporting these programmes, which are often publicly funded (Mole et al., 2009), there has been extensive research looking to establish the effectiveness of business support in improving actual performance (Knox et al., 2024; Mole et al., 2009). Yet meta-studies are equivocal on whether business support does affect performance in the longer term (Knox et al., 2024; Mole et al., 2009). At a more micro level, studies have examined why and when SMEs might seek support (Jibril et al., 2023), and the tensions and difficulties for the individuals delivering business support (Arshed et al., 2021), as well as the development and utility of networks for those firms that engage with business support (Edwards et al., 2010).

What is absent from the extant literature is an exploration of what constitutes the components necessary for effective business support, a featured emphasized in the systematic literature review by Piza et al. (2016). Rakićević et al. (2016) identify how business support programs should be developed, but not what components they should contain, illustrating the lack of granularity and specificity around such support. Multiple studies consider the components of particular interventions (e.g. Henley, 2024; Jones et al., 2020), but no meta-studies examine multiple support programmes to identify important components such as the nature of the support, the delivery mechanisms and the mode of interaction. In addition, individual studies are often located in individual areas or countries, highlighting the need for a holistic, international scope to identify best practices (Piza et al., 2016). This paper directly addresses Knox et al.'s (2024, p.29) assessment that "future research should further delve deeper into the specific components of business support".

Therefore, the research aim of this study is to derive what are the key components for effective business support for SMEs, which is the main contribution of the paper. The resulting research questions for this study are:

- RQ1: What are the components of effective SME business support?
- RQ2: What are the potential relationships between these components?

This is achieved by conducting a systematic literature review and subsequent conceptualisation. This can then facilitate the derivation of a business support framework, which can be transposed into a blueprint for practice. The paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the methodological approach taken to complete our systematic literature review. Second, we outline our results and analysis, and third, we discuss the findings, and lastly, we conclude the paper by focusing on future directions for research.

2. Methodology

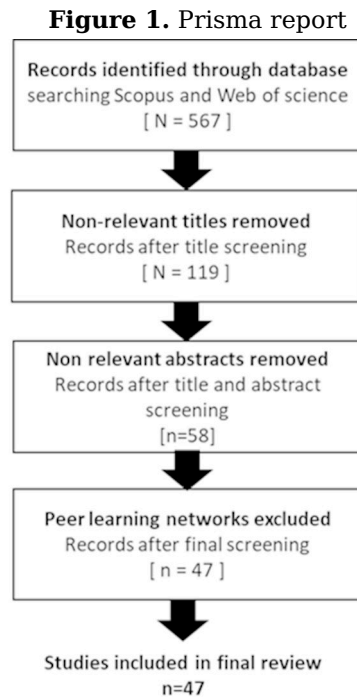
Systematic literature reviews can generate a deep understanding of theoretical concepts and enable the formulation of theoretical advancements in knowledge (Lim & Weissmann, 2023). This study achieves this by critically evaluating the existing contributions and synthesising the multifarious findings across all the singular studies in relation to business support components and mechanisms.

To address the research aim of identifying the key components of effective business support, a systematic literature review (SLR) was undertaken following the principles of the six-step SLR (Sauer & Seuring, 2023) and illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Six steps taken from Sauer and Seuring (2023)

Step	Descriptor
Step 1:	Defining the research questions
Step 2:	Determining the required characteristics of primary studies
Step 3:	Retrieving a sample of potentially relevant literature
Step 4:	Selecting the pertinent literature
Step 5:	Synthesising the literature
Step 6:	Reporting the results

Next, we outline how these six steps were deployed, the results of which are summarised in the PRISMA style diagram in Figure 1 and discussed in the following sections.



2.1 Defining the research objectives

The research objective of this study is twofold: first, to determine the components of effective SME business support; and second, to establish the potential relationships between these components.

2.2 Determining the required characteristics of primary studies

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and significant policy and government reports. As indicated in the introduction, the study was designed to avoid a specific geographical focus, to achieve an international perspective, but only papers written in English were included. Exclusion criteria included conference papers, duplicates, and studies with inaccessible full text. The review covered the period from 2004 to the end of 2025. Although the study aims to cover business support globally, a substantial body of knowledge emerged related to the UK context. Hence, the start date of 2004 was chosen to coincide with changes made to the UK Business Link model as the 'one-stop' shop for business support (Robson & Bennett, 2010).

2.3 Retrieving a sample of potentially relevant literature

A comprehensive search was undertaken using Scopus (created by Elsevier) and Web of Science (WoS, produced by Clarivate Analytics) (Casado-Belmonte et al., 2021). To address the research objectives, the following search terms were used:

'business support', 'enterprise support', 'business advice', 'business assistance', 'business advisory service', 'manufacturing advisory service', 'enterprise advice', 'Business Link', 'expert coach', 'small business support', 'entrepreneurship assistance', 'government support programmes', 'business incubators', 'funding Components for SMEs', 'SME interventions', 'SME Support', 'SME support programmes', 'SME Innovation support', 'SME business development support', 'small firm innovation', 'SME business development', 'coaching SMEs', 'innovation coaching', 'SME industry academia support', 'innovation support'.

Some adjacent terms were included as search terms because initial scoping indicated significant relevance to business support and advice components, policies, or programs. These included types of 'coaching', 'innovation support', 'business link', and 'manufacturing advisory service'. This initial search produced 567 results.

2.4 Selecting the pertinent literature

The first stage of the screening process was to exclude irrelevant papers with respect to the research objectives, based on the article title (Rathbone et al., 2017). This included those focusing on enterprise education, scientific innovation, and university incubators. The search terms used yielded 119 results, having excluded 448 references.

The second stage of the screening and selection process included a screening of the abstracts (Teo et al., 2023), resulting in 58 references. Papers were excluded as the abstract made it clear the paper was not directly relevant to the research objectives. The final phase excluded those which focused on peer learning networks (Freel & Harrison, 2006), which were deemed to be distinct from direct business support. The resulting 47 papers were then subjected to a full-text review in the next step.

2.5 Synthesising the literature

The initial review identified two broad thematic areas: First, the actual components of the business support design, and second, management and governance practices. The former was defined by induction during the review, as those aspects where there is direct intervention or interaction with the target SME. Governance practices were similarly defined as those aspects which involve either or both management and governance of the support programme.

The next round of coding involved assigning labels at a lower level, looking for identifying elements in both thematic areas. At this stage, coded fragments were permitted to reside in both thematic areas. To provide a degree of reliability and validity each theme was coded by two different researchers, who then exchanged code books and recoded. A third researcher then moderated both of the coded outputs, which included a check that no coded units from the governance theme should be transitioned into the mechanism theme for the next phase of more granular coding.

The first theme, that of design components, was then sub-coded by all three researchers independently, and the resulting nine sub-codes were then consolidated to six core themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2012) guidance in dealing with similar or overlapping codes, which can be collapsed or reorganised to form more analytically meaningful themes. This process also produced one broader theme of governance and management.

3. Results and analysis

The six core themes identified were potentially influenced by interdependencies between the various themes. Recognising this complexity, we examine each theme in turn, although the level of complexity with each theme means that some themes receive more attention than others. We then map and discuss the potential relationships between the core themes to present an interim framework. This is then developed further by incorporating the evidence from the governance theme, leading to the creation of a framework for effective business support, with a series of research propositions underpinning the identification of the components of effective support for businesses.

3.1 Outline of core themes

3.1.1 Interaction pattern & Intensity

The "**interaction pattern**" refers to the basic configuration of how, when, and with whom SMEs interact with business support and knowledge exchange programmes. Done et al. (2011) posit that best practice interventions (BPI) typically have a mixture of preparation activities, workshops, and follow-up consultations. This approach was adopted by McGovern et al. (2017) and Jones et al. (2024) in their analysis of the diffusion of process improvement practices. Farrukh et al. (2019) identify the resource implications of these interaction patterns and stress the need for balance between *extensive*, lower-cost interactions, such as 1-2-many¹ workshops versus the number of *intensive* of 1-2-1² consultations with individual firms. However, many studies of programme evaluations show that deeper interaction rather than broader intensity is much more effective (Bennett & Robson, 2004; Mole et al., 2009, 2011, 2017; Mole & Keogh, 2009; Rakićević et al., 2016; Suci et al., 2022). Cunningham and McGuire (2019) found that 1-2-1 interactions are more effective as the support professionals need to "enter into the world of the SME" (Devins & Gold, 2002, p. 23). Giebel (2024) suggests that U shaped interaction pattern is sometimes required where intensity pattern is high to low and high again, which is different than a more straight-line adjustment recommended by Jones et al. (2024) who suggest an intervention gradient is required, moving the intervention to more involvement and ownership from the client toward the end of the intervention window.

3.1.3 Diagnostic tools

Diagnostic tools are widely used in business support programs (Rakićević et al., 2016), particularly in the SME context (Burgess & Wake, 2012; Sepulveda et al., 2010; St-Pierre & Delisle, 2006). Diagnostic tools (Jones et al., 2024; Łobacz et al., 2016) serve as a template to help both the external consultant and the SME pinpoint areas for improvement and allow the business to be more time efficient in engaging with the business support programme (McGovern et al., 2017; Mole et al., 2011; Salazar-Elena & Guimón, 2019). Diagnostics also help raise awareness of strategic choices (Mazzarol et al., 2014) and provide an affordance for capability assessments (Kumar & Harris, 2021). Such tools also offer SMEs greater agency in shaping their future development trajectory (OECD, 2020). However, complex and extensive diagnostics are unsuitable for SMEs (Burgess & Wake, 2012; Foggin et al., 2004; Kumar & Harris, 2021; OECD, 2020), posing a problem in developing a diagnostic extensive enough to achieve its objectives, but which SMEs find accessible and actionable.

3.1.4 Depth of engagement

Many studies mention the role of a "change champion" within the SME—someone who acts as an intermediary and leads by example. However, Jones et al. (2020) found that SMEs often struggle to identify suitable champions with the right qualities. Additionally, SMEs tend to use employees in multiple roles (McAdam et al., 2007), which makes it harder to identify and develop specific experts. Nevertheless, Done et al. (2011) stressed that broader employee involvement is important and that middle management is often key to longer-term success. McAdam et al. (2007) and Done et al. (2011) found that employee involvement in SMEs is important for developing management practices, but that depth of engagement (i.e. the number and scope of employees involved in the support intervention) is often too low (Done et al., 2011). Jones et al. (2024) found that depth of engagement was one of the most critical factors in the success of business support interventions.

3.1.2 Independent internalisation

Developing 'best' management practices in SMEs requires both external intervention and internal action by the SME itself to make the changes permanent (Done et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2024). Essentially, this means that for the SME to develop different capabilities some form of individual learning (Kurdve et al., 2020) and organisational learning (Smith, 2009) needs to take place. These two learning processes are usually interlinked (McAdam et al., 2007). The resulting 'socialisation' (Kurdve et al., 2020) of these practices is termed 'internalisation' (Jones et al., 2024). Smith (2009) shows that this internalisation requires both action and reflection on the part of the SME participants in the business support programmes. Kurdve et al. (2020) and Done et al. (2011) also argue that both these learning processes, and resulting internalisation require a degree of increasing independence from the support programme. Hence, this component of business support should contain both aspects and this theme is best classified as 'independent internalisation' of the relevant knowledge and management practice.

3.1.5 Expert coaches

Many effective support programs use expert consultants (Done et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2024; Klonowski, 2010; Łobacz et al., 2016; McGovern et al., 2017), who also act as coaches (Azizi et al., 2023; Farrukh et al., 2019; Mole, 2023; Vidal-Salazar et al., 2012). Many evaluations show that the use of experts bolsters trust (Ardley et al., 2016; Łobacz et al., 2016; Ram & Trehan, 2010; Ward, 2016). Moreover, these experts provide highly codified knowledge (Vasconcelos et al., 2019), which is easier to transfer to SME clients (Oberschachtsiek & Scioch, 2015). However, Gray et al. (2011) identify coaching as effective for SME leaders in self-determination, unless the coaching is designed and directed to specific business practices, where it is less effective at producing business outcomes.

3.1.6 Concept translation

Concept translation (Galbraith et al., 2017) is the customisation (Cunningham & McGuire, 2019; Klonowski, 2010), adaptation and reconfiguration of 'standard' best practices (Łobacz et al., 2016), also referred to as 'templates' (McGovern et al., 2017), to the local business context. This is critical to the successful diffusion and development of practices (Done et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2024; McGovern et al., 2017). Key extensive studies, such as Henley (2024) and Bennett (2008), as well as intensive studies (Ardley et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2024), found that this 'translation' of concepts to each unique SME context is critical to the success of the intervention support.

3.2 Thematic relationships

The papers in each theme were then re-interrogated to identify the nature of the potential relationships between them as a correlation matrix (Table 2). The summary of this is shown as a type of correlation matrix in Table 2. Although this type of matrix is symmetrical, the relationships are shown on both sides of the main

diagonal to illustrate that the relationships as discussed appear to be bi-directional in some form. It is worth noting that in some instances, there is currently limited evidence of the relationship; in these instances, **r** rather than **R** is used. The stronger relationships have been shaded green for further clarity.

Table 2. Mechanism relational mapping

	Interaction pattern	Concept translation	Independent Internalisation	Diagnostics	Expert Coaching	Depth of Engagement
Interaction pattern	---	R1	R2	r5	R3	R4
Concept translation	R1	---	r7	r6	R9	r14
Independent Internalisation	R2	r7	---	r7	r10	r12
Diagnostics	R5	R6	r7	---	r11	r8
Expert Coaching	R3	R9	r10	r11	---	r13
Depth of Engagement	R4	r14	r12	r8	r13	---

3.2.1 Relationship mapping

R₁) Concept translation requires that there is some degree of high intensity within the interaction pattern and that multiple follow-up interactions are required (Jones et al., 2024; Kurdve et al., 2020). Concept translation has a tension between the fidelity (McGovern et al., 2017) of utilising a successful template or concept, and the high-intensity interaction required for tailoring the adoption of individual SMEs. Although the need for concept translation should drive interaction patterns, if the pattern is low in intensity, then less translation will occur, and therefore classed as a two-way relationship.

R₂) Kurdve et al. (2020) and Redien-Collot and Lefebvre (2015) found that frequent interactions with SMEs lead to more meaningful dialogue, while Farrukh et al. (2019) noted that firms need time between interactions to reflect. Jones et al. (2024) utilised these aspects and found that meaningful dialogue and reflection within the interaction pattern design led to independent internalisation. Similar to **R₁**, the goal of independent internalisation should drive the interaction pattern, but if there are no frequent interactions with reflective gaps, then less internalisation is more likely.

R₃) High-intensity one-on-one consultations with coaches are needed as this provides an opportunity for the individuals in the firm to understand the concepts (Kurdve et al., 2020) and for coaches to understand the context (Clarke et al., 2006). As they move forward, a gap-structured, high-intensity pattern helps coaches support firms reflect between events and interventions (Jones et al., 2024). This is a two-way relationship; coaching requires this type of interaction pattern to be effective; but high intensity interactions without coaching will be less effective.

R₄) Intensive support to an SME can often be provided at no extra cost requirement to many employees/teams within each SME [Logical inference], although it requires more commitment and resource from the SME (Jones et al., 2024; Tamošiūnas & Lukošius, 2009). Low-intensity 1-2 patterns, such as workshops (de Wit-de Vries et al., 2019), often limit the capacity for firms to send multiple employees. There is, therefore, a two-way relationship between interaction patterns and depth of engagement

R₅) The use of a diagnostic can help frame the interaction pattern and lead to efficient and relevant paths for expert advice (Mole et al., 2011). A diagnostic can help focus on where a mixture of intensity is part of the constraints of the programme and is critical for brokered types of intervention design (Henley, 2024). This relationship is likely to be mostly one-way - the interaction pattern does not affect the diagnostic deployment, although many diagnostics are likely to need to have a degree of 1-2-1 high intensity for them to be effective (**r₅**). Still, this can be overcome with self-assessment diagnostics (OECD, 2020).

R₆) The Diagnostic helps initiate a dialogue to facilitate the start of concept translation (Jones et al., 2024), and a diagnostic approach is an individually high-intensity means of customising the concepts and thus, aids concept translation (Mole et al., 2011). The need for concept translation could, in some circumstances, affect the deployment or design of a diagnostic (**r₆**).

r₇) Jones et al. (2024) also found that the diagnostic dialogue around the application of concepts helps lead to independent internalisation (organisational learning). The need for independent internalisation in some programme contexts could, in some circumstances, affect the deployment or design of a diagnostic.

r₈) Although it is the case that diagnostics are often completed within a singular setting with SME owner-managers (Mazzarol et al., 2009), diagnostics are more effective when deployed with multiple respondents and within teams (Jones et al., 2024). Moreover, the event of using the diagnostic could bolster the depth of engagement (Jones et al., 2020). The complexity of the diagnostics would be potentially affected by the need to deploy it in a group setting.

R₉) These expert coaches can help the translation process by customising best practices to suit the specific needs of the SME (Azizi et al., 2023; Farrukh et al., 2019; Mole, 2023; Oberschachtsiek & Scioch, 2015; Vidal-Salazar et al., 2012) and manage the tension between concept fidelity and customisation (McGovern et al., 2017). Concept translation usually requires some form of expert coaching (Oberschachtsiek & Scioch, 2015).

r₁₀) Feedback from expert coaches also facilitated independent internalisation (Jones et al., 2024; Redien-Collot & Lefebvre, 2015). The need for specific independent learning could affect the deployment and focus on the expert coach, and the type of expertise required.

r₁₁) Expert coaches can assist in the deployment of the diagnostic, so it is done thoroughly with respect translating the relevant concepts and help the coaches understand the business and build trust with the clients (Mole et al., 2011; OECD, 2020). The diagnostic could require some degree of knowledge, but not necessarily expertise in the relevant area, or competence in coaching, but the level of knowledge of the support professional could constrain the diagnostic design.

r₁₂) The more employees engaged in the interventions, the more likely that internalisation will take place, from both a probability perspective and peer learning networks /pressure (Turianskyi et al., 2018). The socialisation of internalisation could increase the depth of engagement, as participants learn they wish to share this knowledge with others (Vasconcelos et al., 2019).

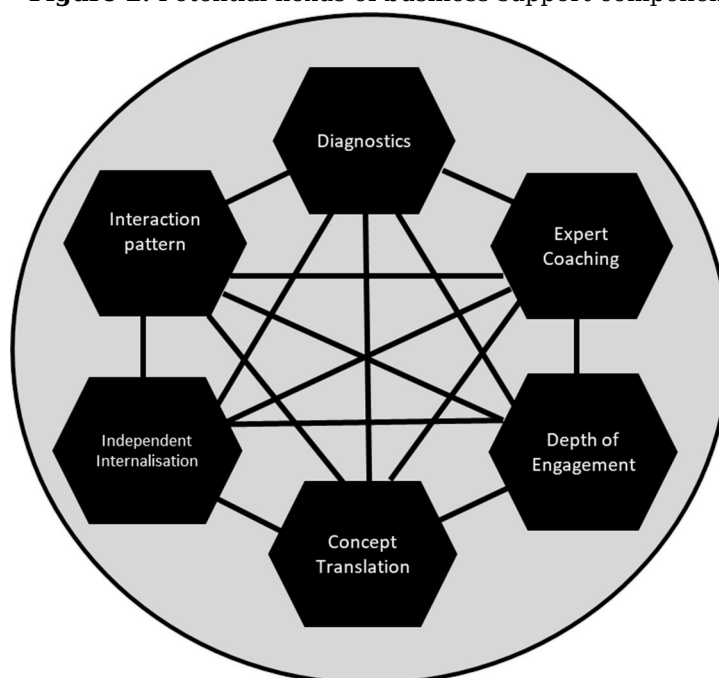
r₁₃) Depth of engagement might be assisted by coaching, if this were designated team coaching (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Jones et al., 2024). Conversely, if depth of engagement was important, then this would affect the designated skill set of the coaches on the programme (Rousseau et al., 2013).

r₁₄) Depth of engagement could affect concept translation due to the socialisation involved in internalisation (Kurdve et al., 2020), whilst difficulties and requirements to translate certain concepts could drive a deeper and wider engagement with the support interventions (McAdam et al., 2007).

3.2.2 Potential nexus of support components

The analysis in section 3.1.2 reveals that all core components are linked in some way to all the other components, albeit with different strengths and different levels of evidence. In some cases, there is logical inference in some of the direction of the relationship rather than direct evidence. We can therefore consider these core components as a nexus arrangement (Jones et al., 2020), where there is an expectation that each component will have some form of interaction, effect or dependency with another component. There is not enough evidence to discriminate between R and r strength of relationships, given the lack of research into business support design components, as identified in the introduction. The resulting nexus is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Potential nexus of business support components



3.3 Governance and management thematic

The additional theme of governance and management was then sub-coded using the same approach as the core themes, and the results were produced using the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) of merging and consolidating thematic codes across the research team. This produced five elements of programme governance and management, which are detailed below.

3.3.1 Evaluating outcomes

Several studies outline the importance of measuring and evaluating programme outcomes (Henley, 2024; Rakićević et al., 2016) and how this is gathered, not just what is measured (Singerman & Voytek, 2023). Henley (2024) and Singerman and Voytek (2023) both outline the importance of tangible firm financial performance data as well as satisfaction and self-assessment.

3.3.2 Search and selection

The Search and Selection element is a bi-directional process; firms seek knowledge transfer and collaboration for competitive advantage (Bishop et al., 2011), but SMEs struggle with finding the right collaboration for the relevant purpose (Kurdve et al., 2020). Many evaluations of business support programmes struggle with the separation of identifying the bias of self-selection of businesses (Bennett, 2008; Henley, 2024), which has led to the emphasis on Random Controlled Trials (RCT) for government-funded interventions and evaluations. Balog et al. (2022) found that overall effectiveness was reduced once a self-selection bias was removed. Henley (2024) argues that a selection process is required to identify the firms that would best benefit from business support, and Azizi et al. (2023) and Jones et al. (2024) show that the selection process is critical to retention and completion on business support programs. Arshed et al. (2021) identify an informal and formal process of capability assessment by support providers, which is beneficial to the overall support outcomes.

3.3.3 Funding and delivery partnerships

Previous experience of collaboration and greater levels of trust help lower collaboration barriers (Bruneel et al., 2010 cited in Knockaert et al., 2013) and Bennett (2008) identifies that a reliable partnership between funders and delivery providers is critical to success, as is a more stable policy and program landscape, particularly for SME's accessing and utilising the relevant business programmes. Mole et al. (2014) show that even in the same programme across regions, the choices made by agents in the partnership affected the programme outcomes both positively and negatively.

3.3.4 Mobilisation

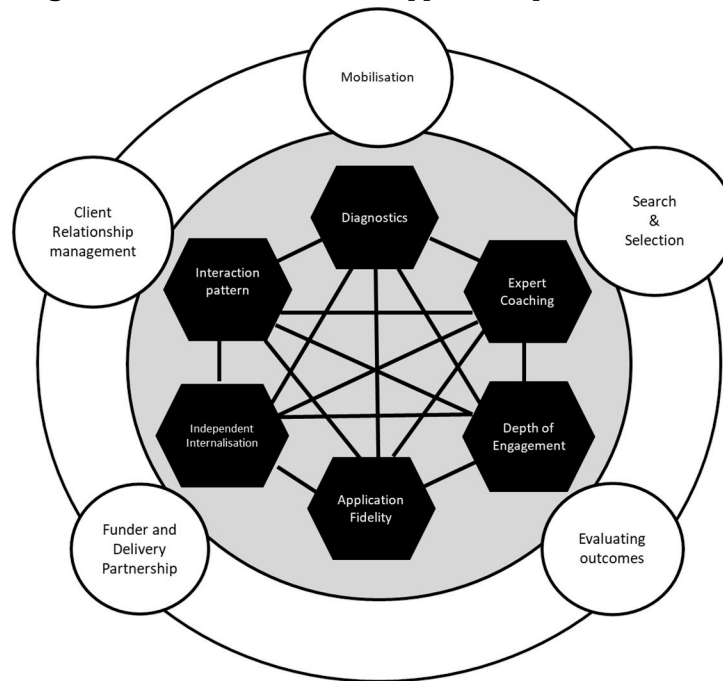
Rakićević et al. (2016) in their best practice model of support programs show that a structured mobilisation design for implementation and mobilisation is key to the success of a business support program. Mole et al. (2017) showed that choices and project management capability around implementation are key differentials in program outcomes.

3.3.5 Client management

Henley (2024) highlights the high attrition rates on business support programmes, and Bennett (2008) and Jones et al. (2024) both identified the significance of a client management process once the SME has enrolled on the programme. This is to ensure retention and progression through the programme, particularly where the SME might find some aspects challenging and they need to devote resources or attempt new practices (Jones et al., 2024) and the development of trusted relationships between the providers and the client can directly assist the knowledge transfer process (Balog et al., 2022; Henley, 2024; Mole et al., 2017).

3.4 Final business support practice framework

Based on the critical analysis of the findings, governance and management practices can be integrated to create the core nexus to complete the overall 'Effective business support component framework' (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Effective business support component framework

4. Discussion

4.1 Contribution

Our analysis and resulting framework propose the key components that effective business support programmes should contain or at least consider, and why these are important. This marks a step change in thinking to fill the initial gap in the literature highlighted by Knox et al. (2024), identifying the specific components of effective business support. We provide five contributions to the existing business support literature. First, our framework reveals what the core components of effective business support are in the SME domain, and why they are important. Second, it illustrates how and why these components are effective. Third, it identifies that there are potential relationships between the core components in this framework. Fourth, it highlights the wider programme governance components – evaluating outcomes, funder and delivery partnerships, client relationship management, mobilisation and search and selection aspects which are often overlooked in formal evaluations and in the literature. The framework has derived evidence from a wide range of business support studies, not just one area, for example, human resource management or productivity (Cumming et al., 2015; Henley, 2024), enhancing its validity across different support contexts. The components themselves are content agnostic, so has more applicability to all types of support delivery; it is focused on the how, rather than the what.

4.2 Limitations

There are three limitations associated with which we recognise in this study. First, important decisions are required to define and limit the search term for conducting the systematic literature review. Although guidance was taken from extant research (Sauer & Seuring, 2023; Tranfield et al., 2003), and some adjunct terms were added, some potentially relevant studies are likely to have been excluded from the review process. Second, the thematic review, by its nature, looks for the amount of evidence for the relevant components, but within the constraints of this literature review, meaning there was no scope to develop a scale of evidence for each component. The third limitation is the lack of confirmation of the nature of the relationships between the different components.

4.3 Future Research

The analysis of the literature helps identify the potential relationships between the components of effective business support. However, these relationships need to be explored in more detail, as some could have a degree of dependency, some may be mutually reinforcing, whilst others could have positive or negative impacts depending on the vector of direction of the relationship. This is in addition to the current limitations of the lack of relative scale of those relationships. The framework, therefore, has a yet-to-be-revealed dynamic nature. The resulting framework therefore has the potential to constitute a ‘research framework’ (Martínez-Alonso et al., 2018) to guide future research into the relationships that need to be investigated within the

overall framework. This could include understanding if the components of the governance and management aspects interact with each other, and with the inner core components, for example, how search and selection might influence depth of engagement.

4.4 Implications for practice

The proposed model has several potential consequences for business support, policymakers, practitioners and SMEs. The propositional model has value for policy makers in terms of designing tenders for support programmes and evaluating incoming bids against this framework. Furthermore, bid evaluation should consider how the programme deals with the potential interactions between the components included in that bid.

The evidence suggests that high-intensity interactions, more 1-2-1 elements, are key to effectiveness, which has implications for the cost and scale of programmes. In addition, the interaction pattern component has the strongest relationships with the other components, so it should be examined in detail when commissioning and evaluating potential support programme designs. The need for 'expert coaches' in the field of delivery /knowledge area will affect costs, but an additional constraint is the number, availability and capacity of experts required to deliver at scale.

The framework is predominantly supply-side focused, in that the components detail how programmes should be designed and delivered. However, from an SME's perspective, 'depth of engagement' appears to be critical to effectiveness, but achieving this in practice is problematic (Jones et al., 2024). This is because SMEs often have small and task-diverse management teams (Choueke & Armstrong, 1998) and SME leaders find it difficult to delegate and empower others (Chandranathan, 2025; Cope et al., 2011). However, SME managers should be made aware of the benefits of deeper engagement of their business with the support programme, and support practitioners should consider ways to 'design in' means to engage more SME personnel in the support programme. The further these components can be considered for business support programs, the more the benefits to SMEs will be considerable, in terms of the effectiveness of the goals of the individual program in question, and overall, the potential increased trust in business support generally in the SME sector (Darabi & Clark, 2012).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review consolidates disparate evidence on SME business support into a design blueprint, showing that programme effectiveness hinges on a tightly interdependent nexus of six components—interaction pattern and intensity, independent internalisation, diagnostic tools, depth of engagement, expert coaching, and concept translation—supported by complementary governance arrangements for outcomes evaluation, search and selection, funding and delivery partnerships, mobilisation, and client management. Taken together, the framework shifts attention from whether support “works” in the abstract to how support is configured and absorbed in practice,. The proposed framework highlights the primacy of sustained, high-intensity, one-to-one engagement and the pivotal role of expert practitioners who can translate general concepts into firm-specific action while enabling SMEs to internalise capabilities independently. For policy makers and delivery organisations, the framework provides a structured basis for commissioning, programme design, and bid evaluation that explicitly accounts for component interdependencies and delivery constraints. Future research should test the proposed relationships, examine boundary conditions across sectors and institutional contexts, and develop robust measures that connect mechanism-level design choices to longer-run firm outcomes.

Data Availability Statement

Data not shared.

Footnotes

¹ 1-2-Many is a common business support nomenclature for activities where there is one advisor and a number of participants in an intervention activity

² 1-2-1 is therefore represents situation where one advisor is working with just one client in an intervention activity

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