



ImpactEd
Group

Scaling educational programmes

Understanding commercial models for scaling and sustainability

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The
Brilliant
Club

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communications + impact



Education
Endowment
Foundation

Overview on a page

Successfully scaling an education programme requires both delivering quality programmes with impact and a deep understanding of the programme's commercial foundations. **Understanding your commercial model** means knowing how your organisation generates income, manages cost, delivers programmes and builds relationships with the schools, settings and communities you serve. Scaling without this understanding risks the pursuit of growth opportunities that exhaust resources, overwhelm capacity or undermine the qualities that created initial success.

This guidance and accompanying practical tools are designed to help education and purpose driven organisations systematically examine their commercial model to identify strengths, dependencies and opportunities. The goal is to support strategic decisions that allow impactful education programmes to grow in ways that are **both impactful and sustainable**.



Key messages

Key message 1:

Define your scaling ambitions before analysing your model

Be clear about why and how you want your programme to grow. Your goals should inform how you analyse your commercial model and make scaling decisions.

Key message 2:

Map your revenue streams and understand their sustainability

Build a clear picture of how funding supports your programme. Identify which revenue streams are stable and which are vulnerable or overly dependent on specific funders, contexts or conditions.

Key message 3:

Analyse your cost structure to identify scaling opportunities and constraints

Understand which costs are fixed versus variable, where you achieve economies of scale and what drives your cost per participant. This will inform realistic growth planning.

Key message 4:

Evaluate your delivery model and participant journey systematically

Map how participants engage with your programme from awareness to completion, identifying what creates value, where bottlenecks occur and what will enable quality at scale.

Key message 5:

Identify dependencies and constraints that could limit scaling

Recognise the external factors, capacity limitations and critical success factors that most affect your ability to grow sustainably while maintaining impact.

Key message 6:

Use your commercial model analysis to inform strategic scaling decisions

Use insights from your current model to guide choices about revenue strategies, growth approaches and investment priorities – consider what capabilities need developing to pursue growth opportunities.

We have also developed the following documents that you may also find helpful to consult:

- Adopting Mission-Led Marketing and Communications
- Building Recurring Partnership Revenue Models to Support Ongoing Impact
- Using Technology to Support Scale

These can be accessed [here](#).

Contents

Glossary	4
Introduction	5
Who is this guidance for?	5
Using this guidance	5
Understanding your commercial model: key messages	7
What is a commercial model?.....	7
Why scale?	7
Revenue streams and sustainability.....	8
Cost structure and scaling economics.....	10
Delivery model and participant experience	12
Dependencies and limiting factors.....	13
Strategic application of insights.....	15
Conclusion.....	17
Practical tools	18
Commercial model analysis framework	18
Growth opportunity and constraint analysis	20
Strategic decision framework.....	23

Glossary

Break-even point: The point at which total income equals total costs – meaning a programme is financially self-sustaining without generating a surplus or loss.

Commercial model: How an organisation generates income and delivers its education programme to create value for its target beneficiaries.

Cost per participant: The total cost of delivering a programme divided by the number of participants.

Diseconomies of scale: When growth makes a programme less efficient, causing costs per participant to increase as it serves more people.

Economies of scale: When growth makes a programme more efficient, causing costs per participant to decrease as it serves more people.

Fixed costs: Expenses that remain the same regardless of the number of participants - for example, rent, core staff salaries or software licenses.

Revenue stream: A specific source of income for a programme – for example, grants, service contracts or programme fees.

Scaling: Growing a programme's reach, impact or revenue whilst maintaining or improving quality and effectiveness.

Surplus (or Profit Margin): The amount by which income exceeds costs. In mission-driven organisations, this surplus can be reinvested to support growth, innovation or long-term sustainability.

Variable costs: Costs that rise in proportion to the number of participants – for example, materials, mentor fees or travel costs.



Introduction

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) commissioned a consortium of three expert organisations (ImpactEd Group, The Brilliant Club and PLMR) to supply capability building support to EEF funded programmes in the 2024/25 academic year. The aim of the project was to support a selection of existing EEF projects to grow their setting reach longer term while maintaining quality programme delivery. This work has been facilitated through the Accelerator Fund, a DfE-funded project that is enabling the EEF to support programmes with previous evidence of impact to scale and reach more settings.

This guidance document has been developed out of this work, by this consortium, to support future EEF funded delivery teams to understand their current models and how they feed into decisions about how to scale. This was selected as an area of focus in this work because it is critical that delivery organisations develop sustainable business models in order for programme delivery to be viable in the long term and to support overall and ongoing impact.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is relevant to education programmes that have developed impactful interventions and are seeking to scale. It examines the systematic analysis needed to identify growth opportunities that build on programme strengths whilst addressing constraints.

Using this guidance

This guidance is designed to be used as a strategic planning resource. It is recommended that organisations work through the key messages and then use the practical tools at the end of the document and conduct their own commercial model analysis.

When ImpactEd Group works with delivery organisations on capability building, we draw on our own Impact and Sustainability Framework, which considers impact and sustainability through the lens of eight dimensions:

1. Governance	2. Strategic Direction	3. Outcomes	4. Activities	5. Revenue	6. Operating Model	7. People	8. Community
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We believe that the leaders and teams of education and purpose-driven programmes need to think deeply about these eight dimensions in order to maximise their potential as impactful and sustainable programmes. This guidance document is particularly relevant to strategic direction, revenue and operating model. However, it should be noted that decisions made in one dimension will have implications across the others, and we encourage users of this guidance to consider its impact across all areas of their organisation.

The authors would like to thank all those who contributed to the development of this guidance. In particular, we are grateful to the delivery organisations with whom we worked closely while providing capability-building support. The insights gained through this collaboration have been invaluable in shaping this guidance, especially our work with the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), Ark Curriculum Plus, and the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT).

Understanding your commercial model: key messages

Over time many education programmes reach a juncture where they must evolve beyond their initial model to scale and achieve greater reach. Organisations approaching this transition require a thorough understanding of their current commercial model; including what they do as well as how they generate revenue, deliver value and manage costs.

What is a commercial model?

Your commercial model encompasses how your organisation creates and delivers value. For education programmes, this goes beyond simple revenue generation to include impact, organisational sustainability and strategic clarity.

Without this foundation, scaling efforts can lead to unsustainable growth, diluted impact or financial instability. Understanding your commercial model provides the clarity needed to make informed decisions about how to grow whilst maintaining the quality and effectiveness that defines your programme.

Why scale?

There are multiples drivers behind a desire for growth – for example, reaching more beneficiaries, diversifying revenue streams or increasing organisational resilience to staff turnover. Understanding these reasons helps to define goals, which should sit behind analysis of your commercial model and subsequent decisions about how to scale.

For education programmes looking to expand beyond initial delivery models, growth often happens in one or a mixture of the following ways:

- **Intensive to extensive models:** Many programmes begin with high-touch, intensive interventions that deliver strong impact but are expensive to scale. In this instance, successful scaling often involves finding ways to maintain impact whilst reducing delivery intensity.
- **Grant-dependent to diversified revenue:** Programmes that start heavily dependent on grant funding may find they need to develop new revenue streams to achieve sustainability and growth.
- **Founder-led to systematised delivery:** Early-stage programmes typically depend heavily on the expertise of their founder or other key members of staff. Scaling requires systematising knowledge and building delivery capacity in others.

- **Regional to national presence:** Geographic expansion requires developing systems for maintaining quality and consistency across multiple locations.

Key message 1:

Define your scaling ambitions before analysing your model

Be clear about why and how you want your programme to grow. Your goals should inform how you analyse your commercial model and make scaling decisions.

Revenue streams and sustainability

Revenue streams vary significantly across education programmes - from grant funding and contracts to participant fees and partnership arrangements. What matters is understanding not just where money comes from, but how reliable these sources are, how much effort they require to maintain and whether they can support the type of growth being considered.

Before pursuing growth, you need a comprehensive understanding of how money flows into your organisation and a clear view of how this might evolve as you scale. Revenue analysis reveals which income sources can support scaling and which create dependencies that might limit growth, and crucially, what type of organisation you are building for the long term.

Many education programmes discover they rely heavily on funding sources that cannot easily scale or may face future constraints. It is therefore important to consider whether current revenue aligns with your scaling ambitions. For example, a programme aiming to reach 30-50% of schools nationally that currently relies on 70% grant dependency would require a sizeable fundraising operation, potentially one that is larger than its delivery team.

There is no single 'right' model, but organisations must think carefully about their revenue streams as they grow. Each path has consequences and early-stage choices can have a compounding effect over time. As an organisation grows and becomes reliant on a particular funding route, it becomes much harder to pivot.

What to examine

Your revenue analysis should cover both current reality and future trajectory:

Current revenue landscape:

- All revenue sources and their contribution to total income over 2-3 years
- Trends in each revenue stream (growing, stable, declining)
- The effort required to generate each pound of revenue
- Dependencies on particular funders, contracts or revenue types

Long-term sustainability implications:

- Whether your current revenue mix could realistically support your scaling ambitions
- What your organisation would look like if you achieved your growth goals with your current revenue model
- The trade-offs between different revenue strategies and their organisational consequences
- Pricing strategies and participant willingness to pay (even if not currently charged)

Implementation approach

Create a detailed revenue analysis that maps all income streams, identifies trends and assesses the sustainability and scalability of each stream. This analysis should reveal which revenue sources offer the greatest potential for supporting growth and which create the most significant constraints.

Key message 2:

Map your revenue streams and understand their sustainability

Build a clear picture of how funding supports your programme. Identify which revenue streams are stable and which are vulnerable or overly dependent on specific funders, contexts or conditions.

Cost structure and scaling economics

Understanding your cost structure reveals where growth creates efficiencies and where it might create unsustainable pressures. The difference between fixed and variable costs, economies of scale and cost per participant drives whether scaling improves or undermines your financial sustainability.

Understanding these patterns helps you predict whether, for example, doubling your participants will halve your cost per person or double your expenses. Cost structure analysis helps you understand which aspects of your model become more efficient at scale and which face constraints. Some programmes find that their staff-intensive delivery models create challenges for rapid growth, whilst others discover that their fixed costs mean they need to reach a certain scale to be financially viable.

Worked example

The two examples have been included below to illustrate how different delivery models can affect growth. Please note these have been purposefully simplified and both models are likely to include costs that may or may not benefit from economies of scale.

Programme A delivers a mentoring programme where each mentor can support a maximum of 10 schools. To serve 100 schools, they need 10 mentors at £35,000 each (£350,000 total). To double to 200 schools, they must hire 10 more mentors, doubling their mentor costs to £700,000. Their mentor cost per school remains constant at £3,500, meaning that they do not benefit from economies of scale.

Programme B creates digital curriculum resources with high upfront development costs. They spend £200,000 developing materials and have £100,000 in annual overheads (staff, technology, marketing). If they serve 100 schools at £2,000 each, they generate £200,000 revenue but lose £100,000 annually. However, if they reach 200 schools, they generate £400,000 with the same £100,000 running costs, creating a £100,000 surplus. Their fixed cost structure means they need sufficient scale to cover their investment, but once achieved, additional schools dramatically improve profitability.

What to examine

To conduct this analysis effectively, you need to examine several key areas of your cost structure. The following table outlines what to look for in each area and why it matters for scaling decisions.

Area	What to examine
Cost categories by function	Break down spending into functions (for example, delivery, operations and overheads) to understand where money goes and which areas might scale differently
Fixed versus variable cost patterns	Identify which costs stay the same regardless of participant numbers (fixed) and which increase with growth (variable)
Cost per participant calculations	Calculate how much it costs to serve each participant to understand your unit economics and track changes as you scale
Break-even analysis	Calculate how many participants you need to serve to cover all costs, helping you understand minimum viable scale.
Infrastructure and technology	Understand what systems, facilities or technology investments would be needed to support different levels of growth
Economies or diseconomies of scale	Identify where growth makes you more efficient (economies) or where it creates new costs and complexity (diseconomies)

Implementation approach

Categorise all costs and analyse how they behave as you grow. Identify which aspects of your model become more efficient at scale and which face constraints. This analysis should inform decisions about what scaling approaches align with your cost structure.

Key message 3:

Analyse your cost structure to identify scaling opportunities and constraints

Understand which costs are fixed versus variable, where you achieve economies of scale and what drives your cost per participant. This will inform realistic growth planning.

Delivery model and participant experience

Your delivery model determines how you create impact and whether that impact can be maintained as you grow.

If your programme has proven evidence of impact, it is important to be cautious about how you adapt any core components of the programme that drive this impact and to think through the implications of any proposed changes. For example, you may have evidence of feasibility or positive impact as part of the EEF's [evidence generation pipeline](#) or be undertaking a development project or research trial and awaiting results. If you have formative findings or trial results from an EEF project, it is important to spend time understanding these before adapting your delivery model. Revisit your Theory of Change to consider and identify how any elements of your programme that you want to adapt for delivery at scale relate to any evidence you have about what makes your programme effective.

If you do not yet have any formative findings from participants, or have not taken part in a research trial, better understanding your participant journey can reveal opportunities to deepen relationships, improve efficiency and enhance outcomes because you can see which components of your programme may create the most impact, where participants are most likely to disengage and what additional support might improve their experience.

The way participants currently discover, engage with and experience your programmes provides insight into what works well and what might need to change as you scale. Some delivery approaches that work excellently at small scale become more challenging as programmes grow, whilst others can be systematised and replicated effectively. For example, a mentoring programme that requires highly experienced practitioners to build deep personal relationships with participants may face quality and recruitment challenges at scale.

What to examine:

- **Your current participants:** Who they are, how they discover you and how they experience your programmes from start to finish
- **Your delivery approach:** What creates the most impact, where bottlenecks occur, and what quality control processes you use
- **Your capacity and constraints:** Where operational limitations affect delivery and what prevents you from serving more participants
- **Your relationship opportunities:** Where you could deepen engagement, improve retention, or extend participant relationships

Implementation approach

Map your participant journey comprehensively, identifying each touchpoint and what creates value at each stage. Assess which aspects of your delivery are most critical for impact and which face the greatest constraints when scaling. Consider how your current approach to reaching and engaging participants could inform future go-to-market strategies.

Key message 4:

Evaluate your delivery model and participant journey systematically

Map how participants engage with your programme from awareness to completion, identifying what creates value, where bottlenecks occur and what will enable quality at scale.

Dependencies and limiting factors

Every programme operates within constraints that affect scaling potential. Some constraints are absolute limits, whilst others can be addressed through investment or strategic changes. Identifying these early helps plan realistic growth strategies and avoid scaling approaches that are likely to fail.

Dependencies might include reliance on specific funding sources, key staff members, particular partnerships or regulatory requirements. Understanding these dependencies helps assess which aspects of your model are most vulnerable and which would need to change to support different types of growth.

What to examine

- Core components of your Theory of Change and any related research findings for your programme (if applicable)
- External dependencies (funding, policy, market conditions)
- Internal capacity constraints (staff, expertise, systems)
- Critical resources that are difficult to scale (specialist expertise, relationships)
- Regulatory or compliance requirements
- Market limitations or competitive factors
- Quality requirements that may limit rapid growth

Worked example

Organisation C runs a literacy intervention programme and conducts an analysis of their scaling constraints:

- **External dependencies:** They rely on a single grant for 80% of their revenue, creating major vulnerability if funding priorities shift.
- **Internal capacity constraints:** Their programme depends on a single member of staff who trains all other delivery staff.
- **Critical relationships:** Their credibility stems largely from endorsements by three respected headteachers who act as advocates. These relationships took years to build and losing them could significantly impact school recruitment.
- **Regulatory requirements:** As their intervention involves one-to-one work with vulnerable pupils, all staff must have enhanced DBS checks and complete safeguarding training, increasing onboarding time.

Through this analysis, Organisation C categorises their constraints: the funding dependency and advocate relationships are addressable through diversification and relationship-building, whilst the regulatory requirements represent absolute limits that must be planned around. They decide to prioritise systematising the training approach and building broader advocacy networks before pursuing growth.

Implementation approach

Systematically identify all factors that could constrain your growth, both internal and external. Assess which constraints are absolute limits and which could be addressed through investment or strategic changes. This analysis should inform realistic growth planning and help prioritise capability building.

Key message 5:

Identify dependencies and constraints that could limit scaling

Recognise the external factors, capacity limitations and critical success factors that most affect your ability to grow sustainably while maintaining impact.

Strategic application of insights

Understanding your commercial model prepares you to make informed scaling decisions by identifying your core strengths, recognising critical dependencies, understanding your economics and assessing your readiness for different types of growth. The goal is not perfect analysis but sufficient insight to guide strategic choices. It is important to also consider any research findings or evaluation of your programme, carefully considering what impact changes might have, particularly if your programme has been shown to have positive impact in its current format.

These insights should directly inform your approach to growth and decisions about which revenue models to pursue, which scaling strategies align with your capabilities, where to invest limited resources and how to sequence growth activities for maximum impact and sustainability.

What to examine

- Which aspects of your model create the most value and should be preserved
- What must remain constant as you grow versus what can be adapted
- Which activities generate the best return on investment
- Where you have competitive advantages that could support scaling
- What capabilities or resources you need to develop

Implementation approach

Use your commercial model analysis to inform strategic decisions: revenue strategy selection, growth planning, investment priorities and risk management. The insights should guide your exploration of specific scaling approaches, ensuring they build on your strengths whilst addressing your constraints.

Key message 6:

Use your commercial model analysis to inform strategic scaling decisions

Use insights from your current model to guide choices about revenue strategies, growth approaches and investment priorities – consider what capabilities need developing to pursue growth opportunities.



Conclusion

Understanding your commercial model is not a one-time exercise but an ongoing discipline that enables informed decision-making about growth and sustainability. By systematically examining how you currently create, deliver and capture value, you can identify opportunities for scaling that build on your strengths whilst addressing your constraints.

This foundation enables you to pursue growth strategies that enhance rather than compromise impact. The time invested in this analysis will pay dividends in more strategic, successful scaling efforts that achieve both greater impact and long-term sustainability.



Practical tools

Commercial model analysis framework

This diagnostic framework is designed to help the leadership teams of education programmes assess their current commercial model across three key areas: revenue, costs, and delivery. It will be most effective when completed in collaboration with finance teams and programme delivery staff.

Use this tool during strategic planning sessions or when considering scaling opportunities. Work through each section methodically, gathering data and evidence to support responses. The 'next steps' column should capture specific actions needed to address gaps in understanding or capability.

Revenue analysis			
Relevant key messages	<i>Key message 2: Map your revenue streams and understand their sustainability</i>		
Checklist statements	Yes	No	If yes, key learnings and insights... If no, to complete this we need to ...
<i>You have mapped all revenue sources and their trends over 2-3 years</i>			
<i>You understand which revenue streams are most sustainable and scalable</i>			
<i>You have assessed participant willingness to pay and pricing sensitivity</i>			
<i>You understand the effort required to generate each revenue stream</i>			
<i>You have identified dependencies that could constrain growth</i>			
Next steps			

Cost structure analysis			
Relevant key messages	Key message 3: Analyse your cost structure to identify scaling opportunities and constraints		
Checklist statements	Yes	No	If yes, key learnings and insights... If no, to complete this we need to ...
<i>You have categorised costs by function and type (fixed vs variable)</i>			
<i>You can calculate cost per participant/beneficiary accurately</i>			
<i>You understand where economies of scale occur in your model</i>			
<i>You have identified capacity constraints and bottlenecks</i>			
<i>You know which investments would be needed to support growth</i>			
Next steps			

Delivery model assessment			
Relevant key messages	Key message 4: Evaluate your delivery model and participant journey systematically		
Checklist statements	Yes	No	If yes, key learnings and insights... If no, to complete this we need to ...
<i>You have mapped the complete participant journey</i>			
<i>You understand what creates the most value for participants</i>			
<i>You have identified quality control processes and success factors</i>			
<i>You know where operational bottlenecks occur</i>			
<i>You understand post-programme engagement opportunities</i>			
Next steps			

Growth opportunity and constraint analysis

This prioritisation tool helps organisations identify and evaluate potential scaling opportunities alongside the constraints that might limit growth. It is designed to build on insights gained by completing the commercial model analysis framework.

The tool maps opportunities and constraints against their potential impact, helping you focus on high-potential opportunities while identifying and addressing constraints. Be specific about what each opportunity and constraint entails (e.g., 'expanding to primary schools in the North West' rather than just 'market expansion'). To use the tool, you will need to download a copy so that you can add in additional rows under the relevant category.

Use this tool during strategic planning to guide investment decisions and sequencing of growth activities. The analysis should inform your scaling strategy and help you allocate resources effectively.

Growth Opportunities	High Potential	Medium Potential	Low Potential	Action Required
Market expansion (new audiences/geographies)				
Service extension (additional offerings to existing participants)				
Partnership leverage (working with partners to reach more participants)				
Model adaptation (delivering differently to reduce costs/increase access)				

Growth Constraints	High Impact	Medium Impact	Low Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Capacity constraints (people, skills, systems)				
Financial constraints (funding/revenue limitations)				
Quality constraints (difficult to scale factors)				
Market constraints				

Strategic decision framework

This discussion guide provides structured questions for leadership teams to use to reflect on their commercial model analysis and make informed scaling decisions.

Clarity and understanding

- Do we have a clear, shared understanding of how our programme creates and captures value?
- What are the core components of our programme that should be preserved during scaling? What type of feedback or research evidence is this decision based on?
- Where do we face the most significant constraints?

Sustainability and alignment

- Are our current revenue streams sustainable and capable of supporting growth?
- Do we understand our break-even point and minimum viable scale for financial sustainability?
- Which aspects of our model can scale efficiently, and which face significant constraints?
- Does our potential scaling approach support or conflict with our mission and impact goals?

Opportunity and investment

- Where do we see the greatest opportunities for sustainable growth that align with our capabilities?
- What capabilities or resources do we need to develop to achieve our growth ambitions?
- How will we measure success and monitor the impact of scaling on our core mission?

Risk and resilience

- How vulnerable is our model to external changes in funding, policy, or market conditions?
- What are the biggest risks of our proposed scaling approach, and how will we mitigate them?
- How will we ensure that growth enhances rather than compromises our impact?



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