

# EQUIPPING RESEARCHERS FOR IMPACT

Unlocking the potential of university-  
business relationships

April 2025



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## University of Exeter foreword

The potential for university-industry collaboration to drive innovation, economic growth and social prosperity is now well-recognised by government and policy organisations. Recent reports by the *National Centre for Universities and Business* and others present compelling examples of researchers engaging beyond academia to solve business challenges and share expertise. However, the awareness of industry and researchers alike of how to connect purposefully remains variable.

In this report we draw on the results of a recent survey to explore industry perspectives on the role of academia in addressing business challenges, with the aim of proposing key actions that maximise the potential for productive engagement with researchers. Responses show that businesses are facing serious skills shortages and are especially open to working with university researchers in areas where these gaps are most acute.

Researchers are at the heart of any academia-business engagement and remain a largely untapped talent pool rich in higher level skills. However, industry concerns over the preparedness of academics to work with business indicate that support for researchers must be at the centre of any higher education strategy to reshape academia-business engagement.

Our [Developing Business-Aware Academics](#) project, funded by Research England and based at the University of Exeter, is working with partners across the country to develop an evidence-led programme that equips researchers with the skills, mindsets and networks to work effectively with non-academic organisations. Programmes like this are the key to driving academia-business engagement, but they need the support of universities and funders to incentivise and reward researchers. Promotion criteria, workload allocations and research cultures need to recognise that business engagement and research excellence can be mutually beneficial: they both champion innovation, offer new perspectives and open new paths to funding.

Investing now in the development of business-aware postgraduate and early-career researchers will ensure a robust pipeline of talent, ready to work with industry to boost innovation and revitalise the economy. It's time to recognise academic researchers as a powerful force in supporting businesses to create a healthier, more sustainable and socially-just future.

### **Professor Alison Truelove**

Project Director, *Developing Business-Aware Academics*

University of Exeter



# CBI Economics foreword

The UK's world-class higher education system is the envy of many of our international peers, and a vital engine for future growth, innovation and resilience. This report arrives at a pivotal time, as the government renews its focus on driving economic growth, accelerating the transition to net zero, and embedding emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) across the economy.

Unlocking stronger partnerships between academia and business is essential to achieving these ambitions. Universities are uniquely placed to act as hub institutions for both national and local growth plans, bringing businesses into contact with cutting-edge research and innovation, equipping the future workforce with the skills needed to thrive in a fast-changing world and incubating the next generation of start-ups.

This report demonstrates how the Developing Business-Aware Academics project can play a central role in realising that potential. It provides timely insight into where and how academic expertise can support businesses – particularly in closing critical skills gaps in AI, machine learning and complex data analysis. These are areas where businesses increasingly recognise the value of engaging with researchers, yet often struggle to access the expertise they need.

Earlier this year, the UK government's AI Opportunities Action Plan reaffirmed a commitment to cross-economy AI adoption, but overlooked the role that academic-industry partnerships must play to deliver it. Researchers are a national asset in this transition, with the ability to bring cutting-edge insight and capability to both public and private sector innovation.

The Developing Business-Aware Academics project is a timely, evidence-led intervention. By supporting researchers to engage more effectively with business and to develop commercially relevant skills, it will help ensure that universities remain central to the UK's long-term economic success. We hope this report provides an invaluable resource to make the most of these opportunities as the programme continues to evolve.

**Louise Hellem**

Chief Economist, Confederation of British Industry



## Executive summary

*Commissioned by Developing Business-Aware Academics at the University of Exeter Business School, CBI Economics carried out a survey of 235 UK employers across all business sectors, sizes and regions. The research sought to explore the motivators, barriers and enablers of UK business engagement with academic institutions. This included examining business perceptions of academic research and researchers, the extent of current business involvement with academia and identifying opportunities to reshape academia-business engagement.*

### The findings of this survey underscore the significant potential for enhanced collaboration between academia and businesses in the UK

In the face of the UK's pressing economic challenges – marked by poor productivity, skills shortages and the imperative for technological adoption – universities are uniquely placed to drive the ambition for sustainable economic growth. As pivotal connectors between higher education and the business community they are at the forefront of equipping the workforce with essential skills and driving innovation through research collaborations.

Recent data underscores the urgency of these collaborations. The March edition of the CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends Survey<sup>1</sup> indicates that accessibility to skills and talent is persistently the highest ranked threat to businesses' sustainability and ability to realise their full growth potential. This is particularly the case in critical sectors with skills shortages reported in engineering, artificial intelligence (AI), and data science which are acting as impediments to business growth and innovation. Additionally, a joint survey by the CBI and the London School of Economics reveals that approximately 60% of UK businesses have adopted or plan to adopt artificial intelligence (AI) tools, yet many face significant expertise gaps in areas like predictive analytics and automation.<sup>2</sup>

These insights highlight a substantial opportunity for universities to address critical skills shortages in AI, machine learning, and complex data analysis. By fostering knowledge transfer and enhancing researcher development in these domains, academic institutions can directly contribute to business innovation and economic resilience. The *Developing Business-Aware Academics* project at the University of Exeter exemplifies this approach, aiming to bridge the gap between academic research and industry needs, thereby strengthening the UK's position in the global economy.

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<sup>1</sup> [Opportunity in Growth: CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends Survey 2024 | CBI](#)

<sup>2</sup> [What an LSE-CBI survey found about AI adoption in UK firms - LSE Business Review](#)

## Emerging opportunities for action

**Businesses see the potential benefits of engaging with academia to access expertise and knowledge and to unlock innovation but believe that academic researchers could be better equipped to work with business.**

This survey highlights opportunities to reshape academic-business engagement by prioritising researcher development and driving more effective ways for universities to contribute to industry innovation.

**Businesses responded positively to potential approaches to removing barriers to engagement with academia.** Businesses identified funding issues and complex processes as notable barriers to collaboration but welcomed actions to address them. The results indicate that universities should simplify collaboration processes, increase awareness of opportunities, integrate business priorities into research, offer improved networking and align engagement opportunities with funding.

**Businesses are most likely to engage with academia in areas where they have skills gaps, particularly in artificial intelligence, machine learning and complex data analysis.** Business engagement with academia to meet their less pressing skills needs is currently rare. This indicates an opportunity for universities to prioritise knowledge transfer and researcher development activities in AI and data analysis where there is a strong business need.

Skills shortages and recruitment challenges, alongside economic and policy uncertainty, were identified as the most important, primarily short-term challenges faced by businesses.

# Introduction

*This report presents key findings from a CBI Economics survey for the Developing-Business Aware Academics (DBAA) project based at the University of Exeter on business-academia engagement.*

## **The importance of university-industry collaboration in solving business challenges and unlocking growth**

At a time when the UK is seeking new avenues to stimulate economic growth, address chronic skills shortages, and embed cutting-edge technologies across its economy, the role of universities as connectors between academic research and business innovation has never been more vital. Universities are uniquely positioned to support national priorities – not only by preparing the future workforce but also by contributing world-class research and expertise to help tackle the most pressing business and societal challenges.

However, as businesses navigate a complex landscape marked by inflationary pressures, recruitment difficulties, and geopolitical uncertainty, they are also contending with the need to rapidly adopt emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and advanced data analytics. The 2024 CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends Survey<sup>3</sup> reveals that 71% of businesses identify skills gaps as a threat to competitiveness, with 58% specifically concerned about labour shortages. This sentiment is echoed in the CBI's Industrial Trends Survey from January 2025<sup>4</sup>, which reports that manufacturing output volumes fell sharply, with 14 out of 17 sub-sectors experiencing declines. While labour shortages have consistently been cited as a constraint on investment in recent years, more recent trends suggest that uncertainty around demand and returns on investment are now more prominent concerns for businesses, as they seek to reduce costs and create efficiencies. Alongside this, over half of firms highlight the need for government and industry to invest in digital skills to ensure the UK remains competitive in the long term.

AI is increasingly viewed by businesses as both a challenge and an opportunity. A joint CBI-LSE survey published in July 2024 found that around 60% of UK businesses have either adopted or are planning to adopt AI tools, particularly in areas like predictive analytics, natural language processing, and automation.<sup>5</sup> Yet the majority also say they are constrained by a lack of in-house expertise and struggle to recruit talent with the right AI and data capabilities. This is consistent with previous CBI Economics research showing that many firms, especially SMEs, lack the internal capacity to deploy and scale new technologies on their own.

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<sup>3</sup> [Opportunity in Growth: CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends Survey 2024 | CBI](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Manufacturing output contracts in the quarter to March - CBI Industrial Trends Survey | CBI](#)

<sup>5</sup> [What an LSE-CBI survey found about AI adoption in UK firms - LSE Business Review](#)

This context underscores the untapped potential of academic researchers as a national asset. Researchers bring deep subject expertise, analytical rigour and a capacity for innovation that can directly support business adoption of AI and data-driven technologies. Yet, too often, businesses perceive academia as difficult to navigate or disconnected from their commercial realities.

To bridge this gap, the University of Exeter's DBAA project has commissioned this survey to better understand what businesses need, value and expect from academic engagement. Conducted by CBI Economics, the research draws on insights from 235 UK employers across all sectors, sizes and regions. It explores the motivators, barriers and enablers of business-academia collaboration – providing evidence to inform a more responsive business-aware research culture.

This report comes at a critical juncture. It highlights a clear appetite among businesses to engage with academia, particularly in areas where skills gaps and technological transformation coincide. The findings reveal a strong business demand for academic support in AI, machine learning and complex data analysis – an opportunity for universities to align researcher development and knowledge transfer activities with the technologies that are critical to the UK's economic future.

By reshaping how universities support academic-business engagement, this project has the potential to unlock fresh innovation, improve productivity, and strengthen the UK's position as a global leader in AI and technology adoption. Researchers have a central role to play in this transformation, and universities must act decisively to equip them with the skills, networks and frameworks to do so.

## **About the DBAA project**

Universities, industry and government have long identified a need for greater collaboration between academia and business to realise the full potential of the UK's research and innovation talent. Although there has been much progress in this space over recent years, considerable barriers remain.

DBAA is a four-year (2023-2027) £5m Research England project, based at the University of Exeter Business School and working in collaboration with the Chartered Association of Business Schools and a range of academic and non-academic partners.

The DBAA project brings together universities, industry, non-profits and policy makers to encourage mobility of people and ideas. The project is developing an evidence-led programme to empower academic researchers in the early stages of their careers, and across all disciplines, with the skills, mindsets and opportunities to engage beyond academia.

This survey will inform the activities of the DBAA project including policy recommendations and the development of training and networking provision for researchers.

Assessing the current sentiment of businesses towards the academic sector is a crucial step towards developing a robust strategy that broadens the scope of collaborations, shifts mindsets and appropriately tailors researcher training and networking initiatives. This will ensure that a skilled pipeline of research talent is poised to drive innovation in both the short and longer term.

## About this report

The survey, conducted in November and December 2024, received 235 responses from businesses across regions, sectors and sizes in the UK. The survey sought to explore barriers, motivators and enablers to business engagement with academia and identify ways to enhance business engagement by addressing key barriers.

A major objective of the survey was to identify new areas for academic researcher development - delivered through targeted training programmes, networking initiatives and engagement campaigns – that lead to increased readiness for impactful engagement between researchers and industry in the future.

Survey questions explored businesses' current involvement with academia, their perceptions of researchers, their research and development (R&D) practices, skills gaps, and ways to improve business-academia collaboration.

Further details relating to the survey sample can be found in the Appendix.



# Business perspectives on collaboration with academia

**Businesses see the potential benefits of engaging with academia to access expertise and knowledge and to unlock innovation but believe that academic researchers could be better equipped to work with business.** The responses highlight opportunities to reshape academic-business engagement by prioritising researcher development and driving more effective ways for universities to contribute to business innovation and productivity.

**Businesses believe that collaboration with academia is beneficial**, indicating that there is notable appetite amongst both large and small organisations for a greater level of engagement. Respondents acknowledge that academic research is relevant to their organisations. They also indicated that increased collaboration could unlock or accelerate new innovations and enhance productivity. Larger organisations tend to exhibit a more pro-academia sentiment.

The findings indicate that businesses recognise the gains to be had from engaging with academia. However, **businesses are yet to be convinced that academic researchers are well equipped to work with business**, a concern further exemplified by doubts about whether there are roles in their organisations for which a person with a doctorate would be preferred, particularly in smaller organisations. This sentiment may be the result of lack of personal experience with academia or from having limited resources to allow effective engagement, which could be inferred from the divergent responses of smaller and larger businesses. **Figure 1** overleaf summarises business perspectives on a range of areas for collaboration with academic researchers.

**Figure 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements**  
(% of respondents)



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

NB: Balanced scores, used within this report, aid the interpretation of questions with an even positive-negative scale, calculated by subtracting the total proportion of those selecting negative options from the total proportion selecting positive.

### Opportunity for action

The findings underline the need to create opportunities to enable businesses to realise the benefits of engaging with academia. The results also indicate that researchers need more support to ensure that they are well-equipped to work with business.



## Businesses would currently engage with academia to gain access to expertise, knowledge and technology-based innovation

Respondents indicated that they believe engagement with academia would be most beneficial if centred around knowledge-based activities as well as in innovation and product development.

It is notable that for smaller businesses, having access to academic facilities, resources and equipment were amongst the most popular reasons for engagement, while larger businesses also stated that finding solutions to business challenges - including operations and management – was key. This suggests that smaller businesses may gain advantages from their engagement with academia by addressing gaps in their capacity and expertise, which are typically more constrained compared to larger businesses. Additionally, some text-based responses – particularly from the third-sector and the creative sector – highlighted that collaboration with universities can strengthen funding bids, enhancing their chances of success. **Figure 2** illustrates the areas in which large and small firms are most likely to collaborate with academia.

**Figure 2. What are the primary reasons your organisation may engage with universities and academic researchers? (% of respondents)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### **Opportunity for action**

The findings indicate an opportunity for universities to support smaller businesses by offering access to specialist equipment, resources and expertise through consultancy and contract research. The approach enables researchers to use their expertise to address business challenges and has the potential to maximise the role of the university in society and the wider economy.

This is especially pertinent given persistent national skills shortages in fields like AI, data analytics and engineering, which smaller firms often struggle to recruit for - highlighted in the CBI's recent Employment Trends and Industrial Trends Surveys.

To support engagement at scale, universities and policymakers could also consider mechanisms such as innovation vouchers or simplified IP and contracting frameworks tailored to SMEs.



# Opportunities for improved business-academia engagement

**Businesses responded positively to potential approaches to remove barriers to engagement with academia.** The results indicate that universities should simplify collaboration processes, increase awareness of opportunities, integrate business priorities into research, offer improved networking and align engagement opportunities with funding.

The previous chapter established that businesses recognise the benefits of collaboration. This section interrogates why more collaboration does not currently take place. Half of **businesses responded that funding issues and complex processes were a barrier they had encountered when trying to engage with academia.** By business size, the most significant barrier for larger businesses were funding issues, while other significant barriers included misaligned goals, a lack of internal resources and communication gaps. For smaller businesses, complex processes were the most significant barrier, though a lack of awareness and misaligned timescales were amongst other prominent responses.

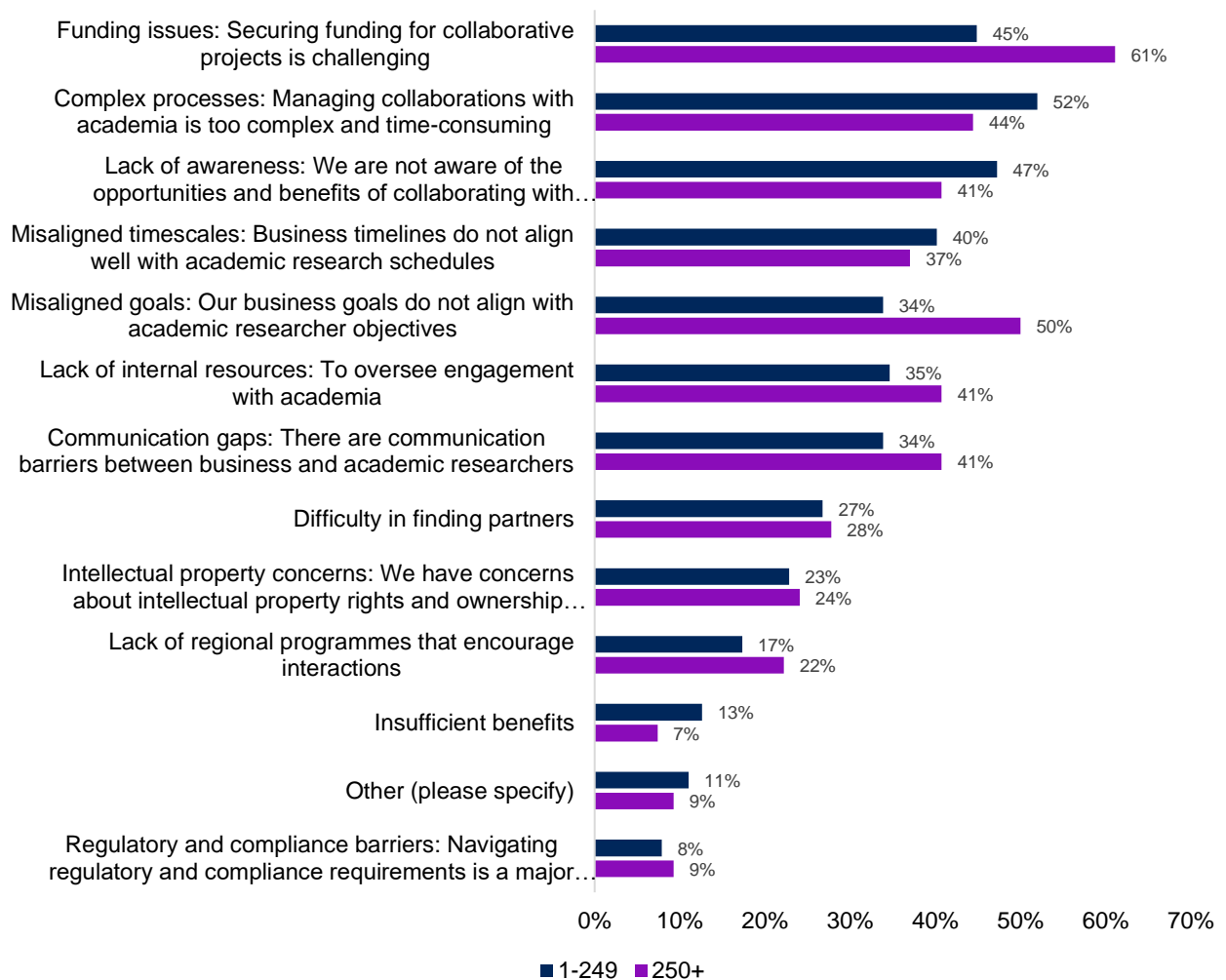
Some of the text-based answers provided by respondents echo the theme of misalignment within the collaboration process, and could be key to the design of programmes to improve engagement. The examples provided below, and the results to the survey question illustrated in **Figure 3**, suggest that actions to improve the business-awareness of researchers would be welcomed. Likewise, any actions that can help to simplify the overall process for businesses could lead to greater engagement. As businesses navigate a number of pain points, such as recruitment challenges, cost pressures and a fast-evolving technological landscape, streamlined academic partnerships could help firms access innovation without the high fixed costs of internal development – particularly in emerging technologies such as AI and data science.

*"I don't think universities are structured, organised, nor aligned to business wants and needs." North West, sector not disclosed*

*"Universities seem very out of touch with business requirements, particularly small businesses." East Midlands, Engineering*

*"Probably need a middle ground liaison who understands business and universities (they are very different) at the initial stage to help personalise how the two could interact." Yorkshire and the Humber, Transport, storage and communication*

**Figure 3. What barriers has your business encountered when trying to engage with academia? (Please select all that apply)**



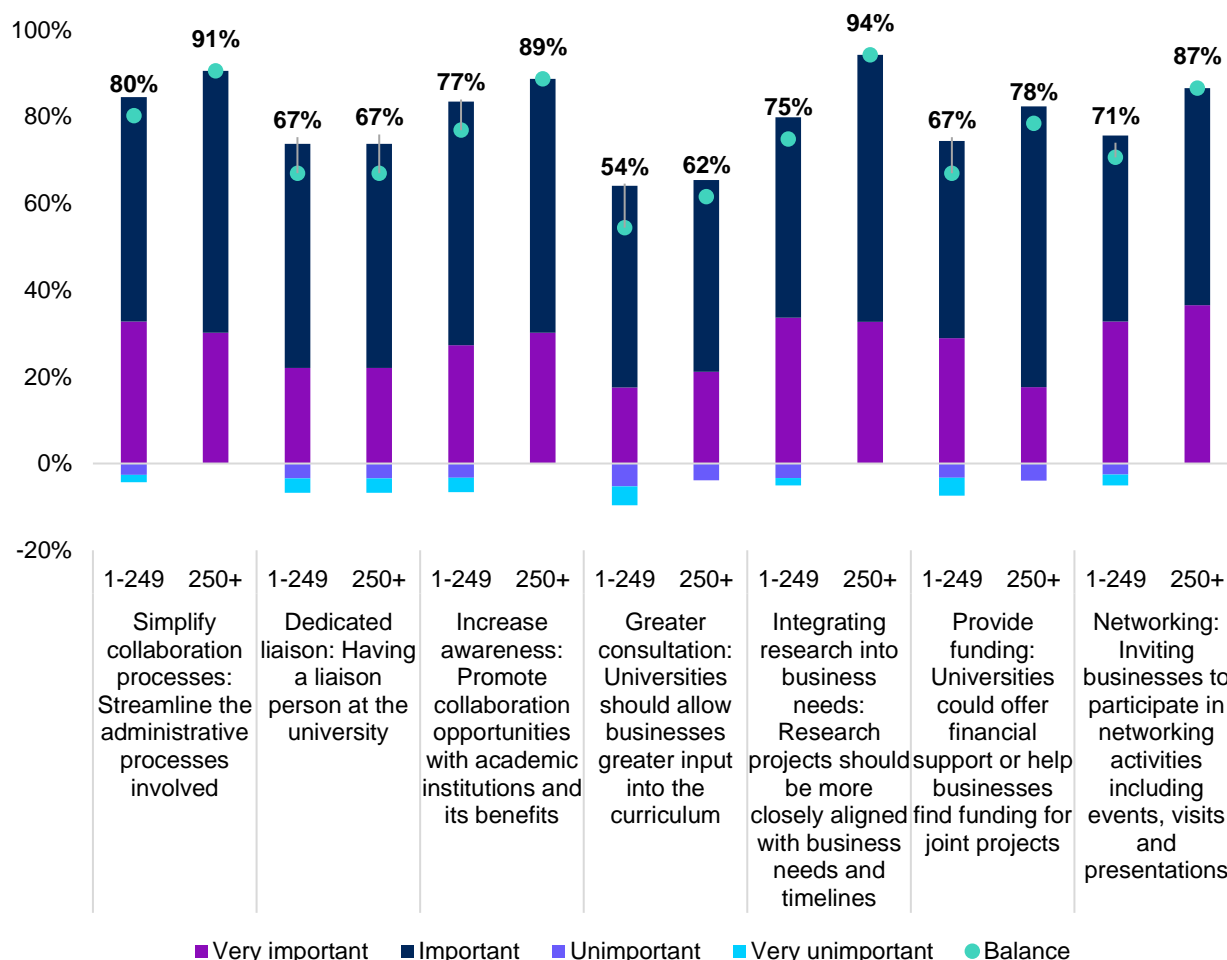
Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

Despite this, **businesses have said they would look positively on a range of actions that universities could take to improve engagement.** Among the most popular actions and, in seeming direct response to the most significant barriers, was simplifying collaboration processes and increasing awareness. Networking was deemed to be most important, receiving the highest number of ‘very important’ responses, closely followed by integrating research into business needs. A dedicated liaison person and the provision of funding by universities were relatively less popular, though still considered positively overall. This is illustrated in **Figure 4** overleaf.

Qualitative responses indicated that the academic sector needs to listen to industry needs and pay more heed to economic benefit. Comments also touched on high levels of bureaucracy and for Innovate UK to play a more active role in bringing together industry and academia. Developing trusted intermediaries – whether individuals, platforms, or institutions – can ease the friction between academia and business and improve communication, especially for SMEs unfamiliar with academic processes.



**Figure 4. How important are the following actions that universities could take to improve collaboration with businesses? (% of respondents)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### Opportunity for action

Universities should expand professional development for researchers to include sector-specific training and networking initiatives that are tailored for engagement with non-academic organisations. The approach would ensure a robust pool of research talent with the skills and contacts to work collaboratively with businesses and help drive innovation and productivity. It would also raise awareness of opportunities for engagement and improve mutual business – academia understanding.

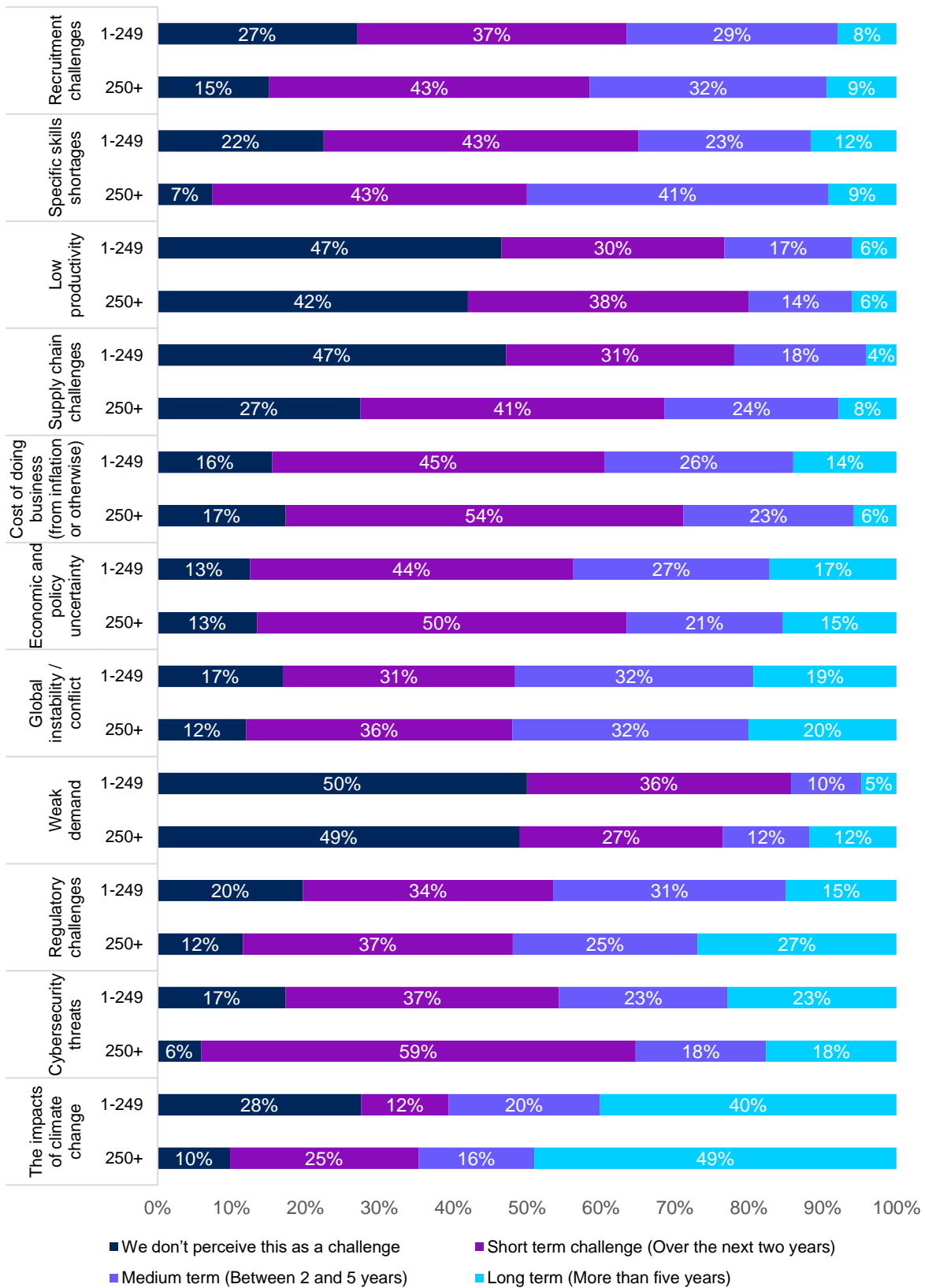
# The role of academia in addressing business challenges

**Businesses are most likely to engage with academia in areas where they have skills gaps, particularly in artificial intelligence, machine learning and complex data analysis.** Business engagement with academia to meet less pressing skills needs is currently rare, according to respondents. This indicates an opportunity for universities to prioritise knowledge transfer activities in AI and data where there is a strong business need.

Businesses face a number of pressing challenges, most notably recruitment difficulties and ongoing shortages of specialised skills. Other commonly cited issues include rising costs, supply chain disruptions, and the impacts of climate change. Cybersecurity, economic and policy uncertainty, and the overall cost of doing business also featured prominently among the concerns raised by respondents.

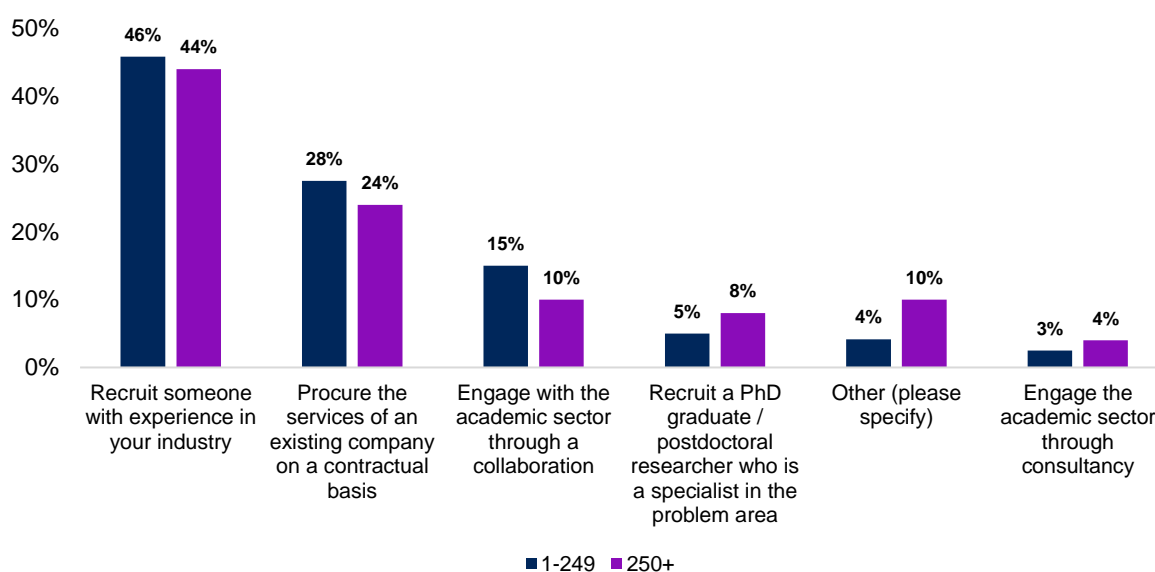
Despite the potential for the higher education sector to help address some of these challenges, survey responses suggest that businesses currently favour solutions grounded in industry experience. When asked how they would typically respond to a business challenge, most said they would be more likely to recruit someone with relevant industry experience than pursue academic collaboration. Very few selected academic collaboration as a preferred course of action, and even fewer reported that they would consider recruiting a PhD graduate or postdoctoral researcher. This may reflect limited awareness of the opportunities for engagement with academia, or simply a stronger confidence in commercially proven experience.

**Figure 5 What are the biggest challenges facing your organisation over the given time horizons? (Please select all that apply)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

**Figure 6. To address a specific business challenge, what would your organisation most likely do? (% of all respondents)**

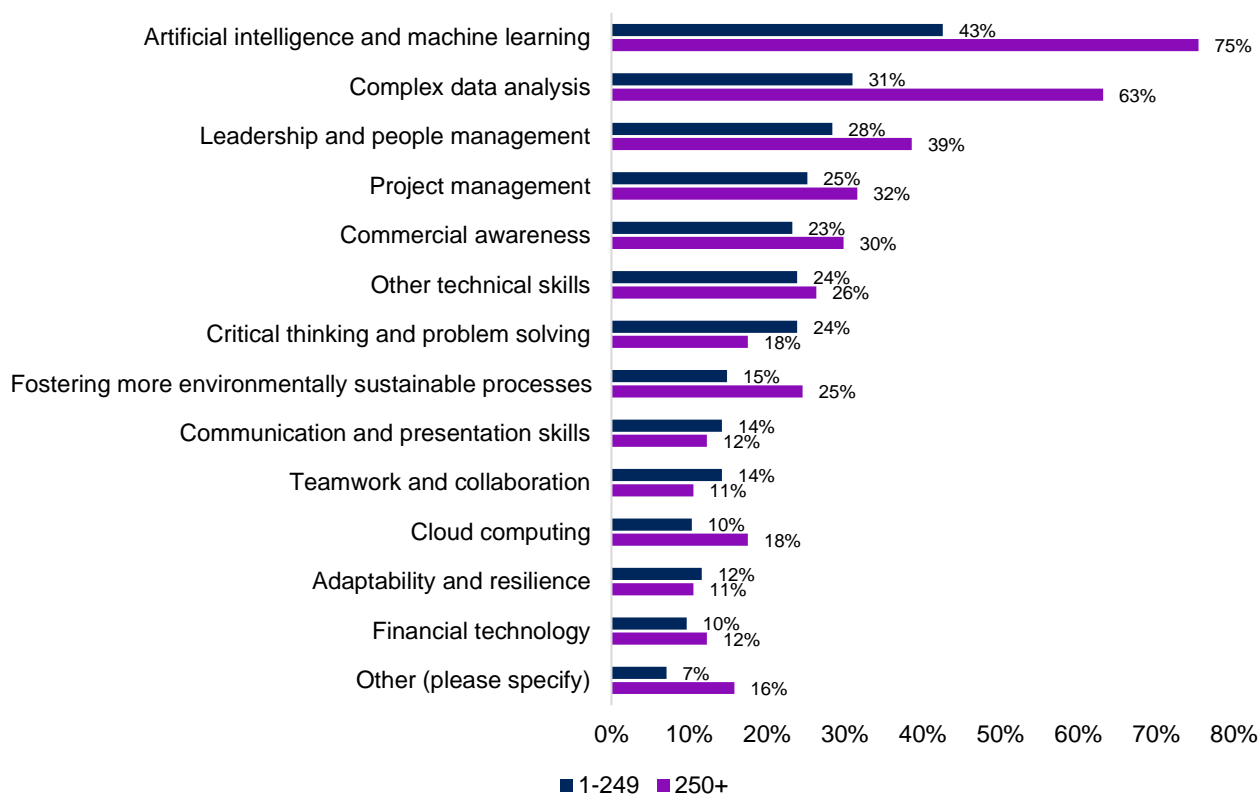


Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### Respondents reported that their greatest skills gaps were artificial intelligence and machine learning as well as complex data analysis

Over three quarters of respondents from larger businesses and almost half of respondents from smaller businesses report a skills gap in artificial intelligence and machine learning. Additionally, more than half of larger and almost a third of smaller businesses have a skills gap in complex data analysis. Interestingly, these skills were in demand across professional services, production, services and other business sectors (See Figure 12 in Appendix) – suggesting that, while these might previously have been thought of as solely technical skills, they may have become integrated across the labour market and be increasingly viewed as transferable skills.

**Figure 7. What higher level skills gaps, if any, does your business face? (Please select all that apply) (% of respondents)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### Opportunity for action

For universities, developing opportunities for researchers to gain experience in addressing real-world business challenges will be key to shifting mindsets and fostering collaboration between researchers and industry. This could include creating more placements, secondments, or joint projects that immerse researchers in commercial settings. Additionally, raising awareness among businesses about the capabilities of academic researchers – and offering flexible, low-barrier models of engagement – could help challenge assumptions and build trust over time.

## **Businesses are more likely to turn to academia for AI, machine learning and data analysis expertise**

Respondents from both large and small businesses indicated that they are more likely to engage with academia to address skills gaps in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and complex data analysis than to pursue industry-based solutions such as outsourcing or recruitment. This finding points to a clear opportunity for universities to support the development and adoption of emerging technologies, particularly in areas where business demand is high and internal expertise is limited.

This aligns with national priorities, including those set out in the 2025 AI Opportunities Action Plan, which seeks to accelerate cross-economy AI adoption. However, many businesses report that they lack access to the expertise needed to make this transition, indicating that this is an area where academic researchers could play a transformative role.

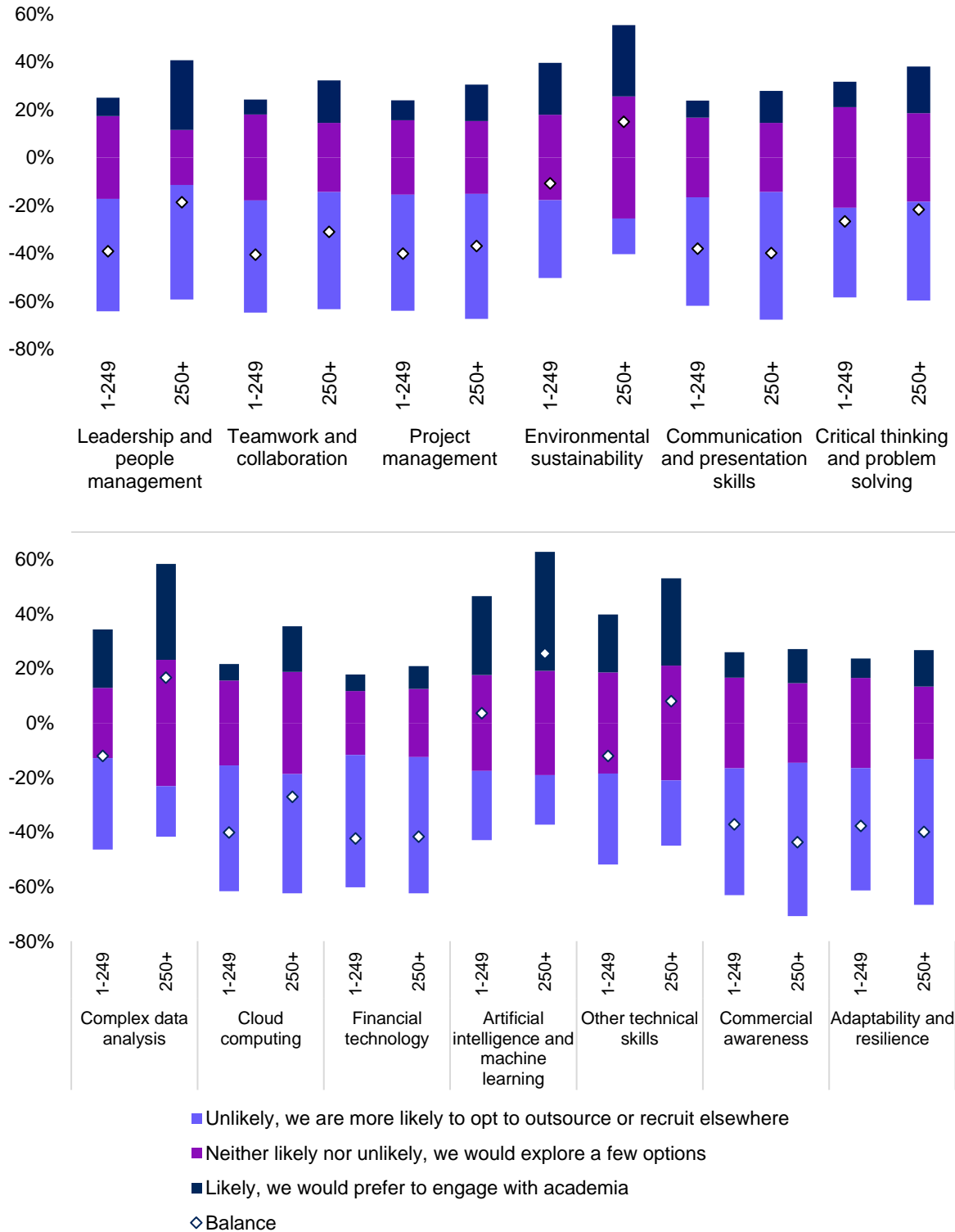
While technical skills were most frequently cited, respondents also reported gaps in project management, leadership and commercial awareness. Yet businesses showed less inclination to engage with academia to address these needs, possibly reflecting a reliance on in-house training or established commercial providers. Nonetheless, these areas present potential opportunities for academic engagement, particularly through the lens of social science and humanities expertise.

Additional qualitative feedback highlighted demand for creativity, cybersecurity and design engineering skills. Businesses are likely to favour engagement with individuals who possess high-demand, hard-to-source expertise, underscoring the need for universities to align researcher development with evolving business needs.

Finally, while AI and data were top skills gaps, businesses also pointed to broader challenges linked to the transition to net zero. Here too, universities have a valuable role to play in offering expertise in clean technologies innovation, climate risk analysis and green skills development.



**Figure 8. Thinking about future higher-level skills needs (in the next 10 years), how likely is your organisation to engage with academia to address said needs through researcher recruitment or collaboration?** (Please select one option for each row)



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### Opportunity for action

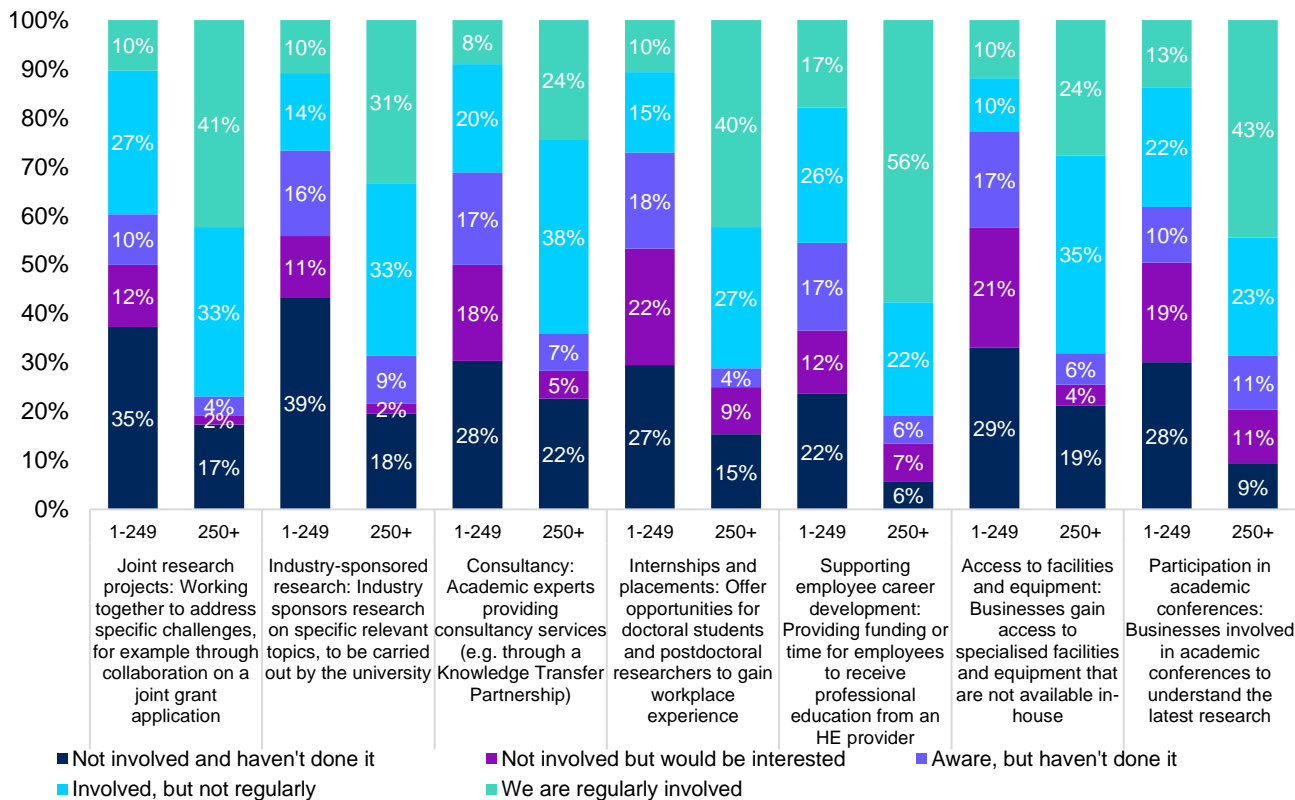
The willingness for businesses to engage with academia in areas in which they have skills gaps presents a major partnership opportunity for universities with several different forms of engagement possible, from executive education to research collaboration and consultancy. It also indicates that offering academic researchers from all disciplines professional development opportunities not only in business engagement, but also in artificial intelligence and data analysis, should be a priority.

### Larger businesses are currently more engaged with academia in different aspects of their work, but SMEs are open to opportunities in the future

At present, the larger businesses surveyed are more likely to be engaged with academia than smaller businesses. However, smaller businesses expressed an interest in exploring potential opportunities. Larger businesses are significantly more engaged in **joint-research projects** than smaller businesses. The same trend is observed for **industry-sponsored research** and **consultancy**. However, almost a fifth of smaller businesses expressed interest in consultancy despite not currently being involved.

**Internships and placements** for doctoral and early-career researchers are popular among larger businesses, with over two thirds either regularly involved or sometimes involved compared to only a quarter of smaller businesses. Again, over a fifth of smaller businesses indicated they would be interested in being more involved in this, suggesting a potential area for growth. When it comes to **supporting employee career development**, over half of larger businesses are regularly involved, compared to under a fifth of smaller businesses. Larger businesses are also substantially more likely to engage with **academic conferences**.

**Figure 9. How involved is your organisation with the following different means of engagement with academic institutions and researchers? (Please select one option for each; % of respondents)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

### Opportunity for action

These results highlight the need for universities to raise awareness of ways for businesses to engage and also reinforces the opportunity described earlier in Chapter 1 for universities to support smaller businesses by offering access to specialist equipment, resources and expertise through consultancy, contract research or through joint research projects that involve placements or internships.

## Conclusion

The findings of this survey underscore the significant potential for enhanced collaboration between academia and businesses in the UK. While businesses acknowledge the benefits of engaging with academic institutions to unlock innovation and access specialised expertise, it is rare for respondents to see the benefits of engaging with academia in addressing skills shortages, suggesting that the two challenges are considered as separate. While businesses typically look to universities for graduate recruitment, the results highlight an opportunity to reimagine the role of universities in addressing nation-wide skills shortages through, for example, research collaborations or contract research as well as the more established approach of executive education.

Barriers to effective engagement are multi-faceted, with lack of awareness, funding issues, and complex processes being the most significant obstacles identified. The findings reveal that businesses are more inclined to seek industry-centred solutions to their challenges and prefer to recruit industry professionals or procure the services of established companies, rather than engaging with academia.

Despite these hurdles, there is a clear interest in collaboration, particularly in areas where businesses recognise substantial skills gaps, such as in artificial intelligence and machine learning, and complex data analysis. The results indicate that structured and accessible pathways for researchers to develop the right skills, networks and experience are likely to foster greater collaboration between academia and business. Businesses have indicated that they would look positively on a range of measures to reduce barriers including simplifying collaboration processes, increasing awareness and more networking opportunities.



Amid persistent recruitment difficulties and growing demand for AI and data capability, universities have a strategic opportunity to help businesses adopt transformative technologies, build resilience, and strengthen productivity. Initiatives like the *Developing Business-Aware Academics* project are well-placed to deliver impact aligned with national growth and innovation objectives. By providing targeted training in business skills and fostering multi-disciplinary networking opportunities, universities can equip early-career researchers with the tools to effectively engage with industry. This approach not only builds researchers' capacity to address business challenges, but also realises the tangible benefits of academic collaboration in driving innovation and solving global challenges.

Universities are uniquely placed to help businesses meet their skills needs and solve business challenges by connecting them with a future-ready talent pool of researchers. This shift in approach will need initiatives that:

- Support researchers to engage effectively with business
- Offer opportunities to upskill in specialist and transferable skills
- Provide targeted networking opportunities in business sectors with skills shortages

Initiatives like these, that enable researchers and businesses to build connections and develop trust, are essential for developing impactful partnerships that drive innovation and deliver greater prosperity and sustainable growth. Realising this potential will require deliberate investment in researcher development, institutional incentives for engagement, and simplified pathways for collaboration.



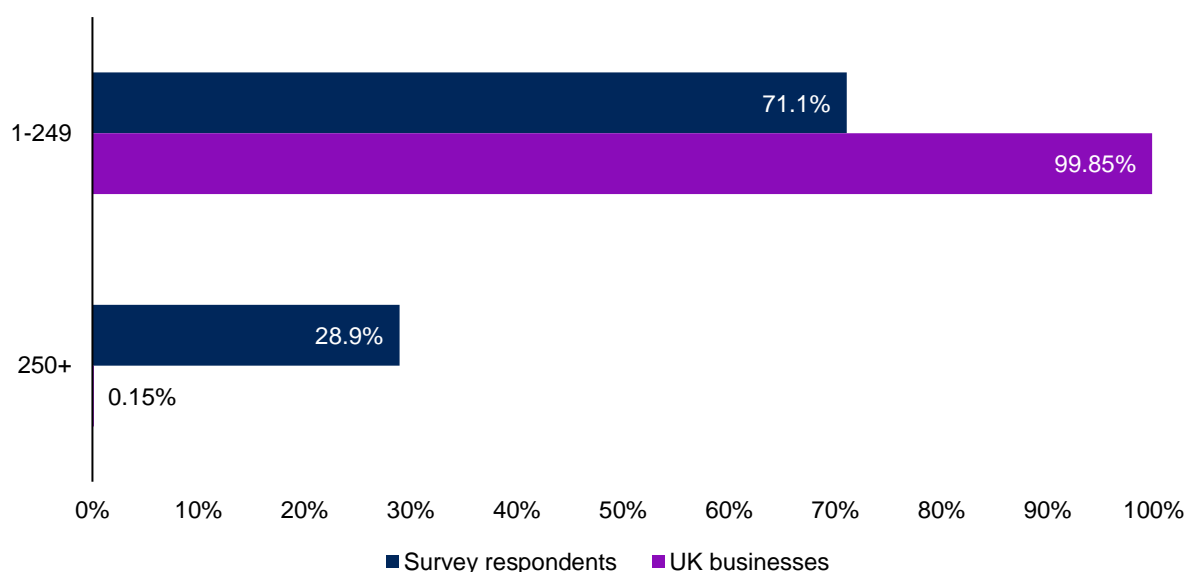
# Appendix: Our survey sample

## Survey sample overview

**Our sample was distributed across all business sizes, sectors and regions, leaning slightly more towards London and larger businesses**

A total of 235 UK businesses contributed their insights to this survey, with broad and comprehensive coverage across types of UK businesses. In terms of business size, 71.1% of respondents were small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (up to 250 employees) and the remaining 28.9% were large businesses (over 250 employees). With large businesses making up only 0.15% of UK businesses overall, we see an over-representation of large businesses in our data. Analysis is therefore broken down in most instances according to size of organisation.

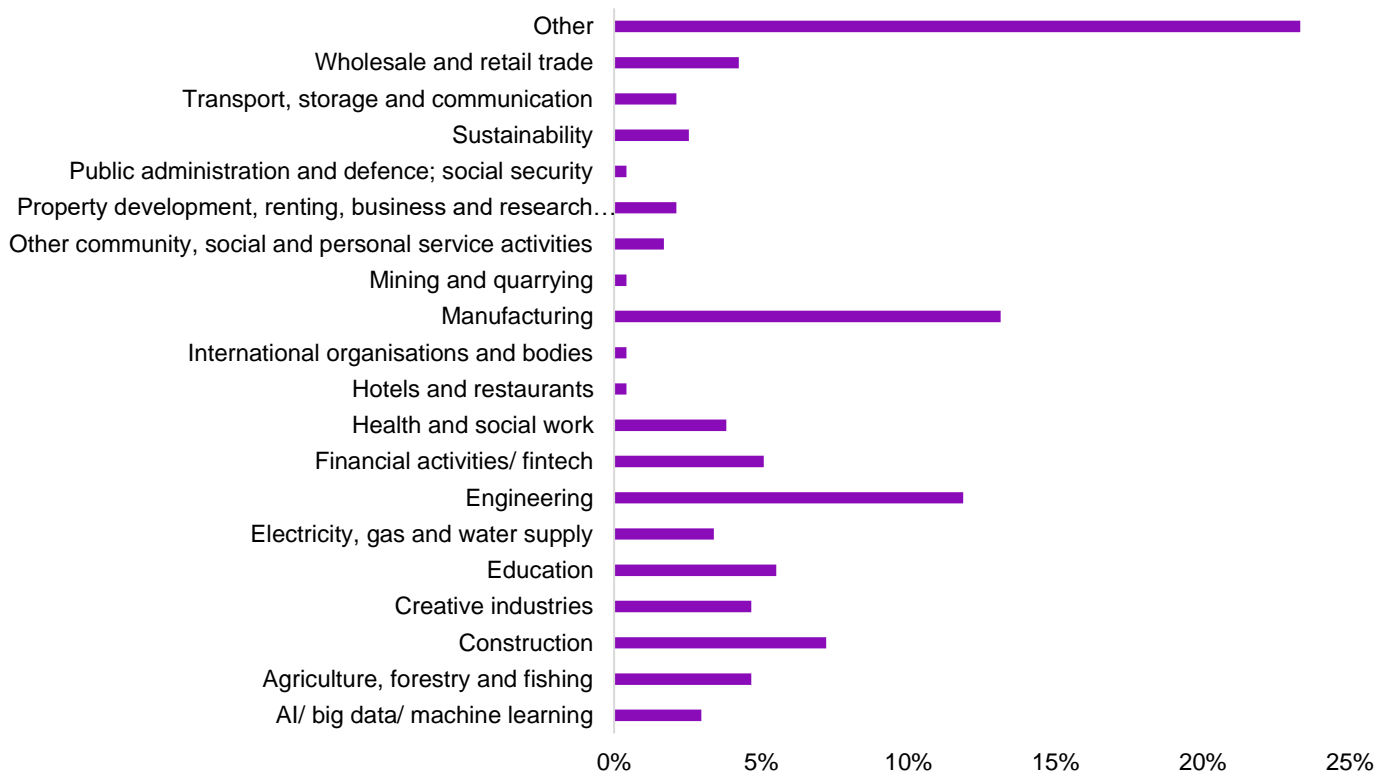
**Figure 10. How many employees are currently working in your organisation?**  
(% of responding employers)



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024) and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Business Population Estimates (2024)

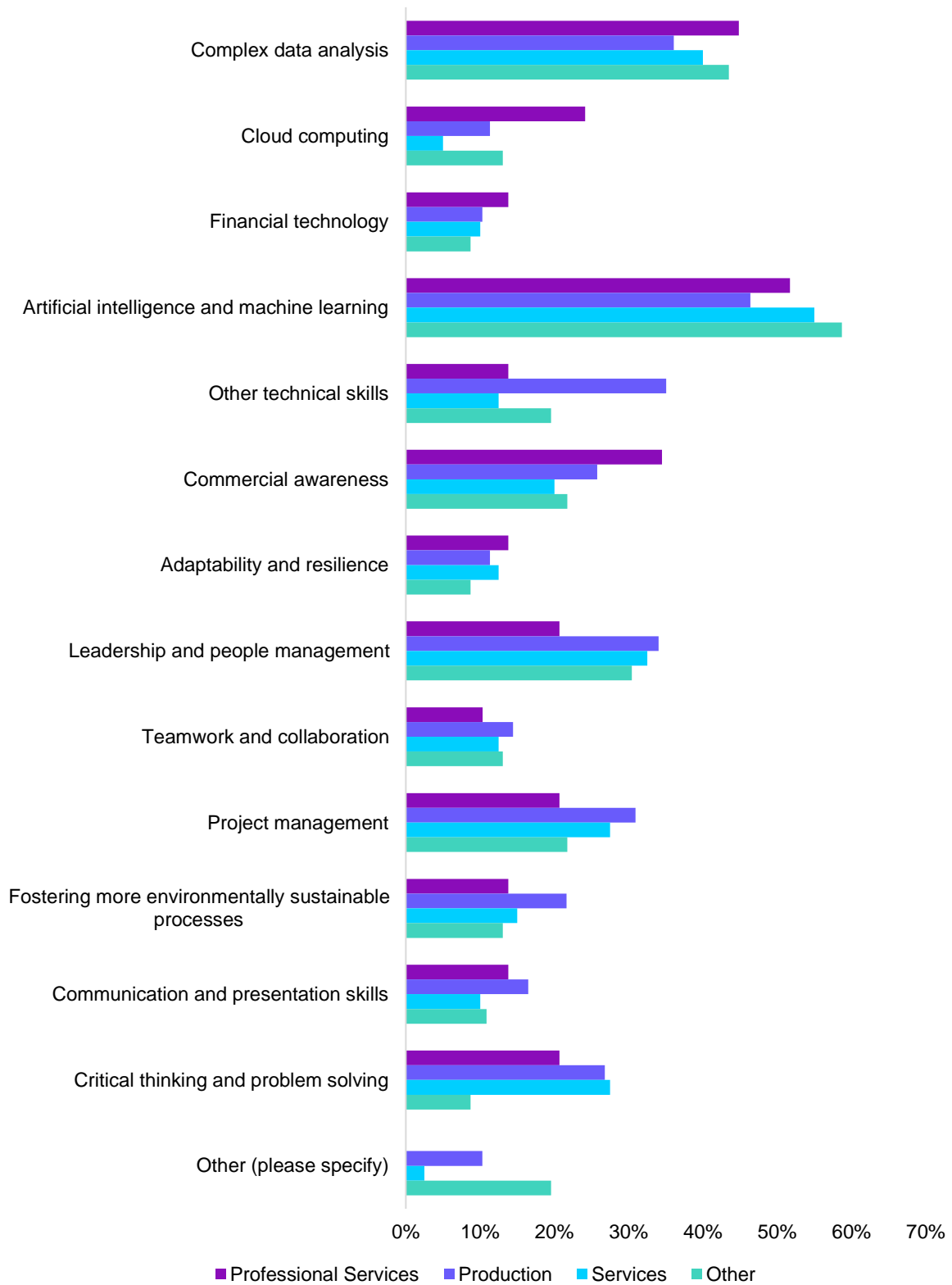
Our sample reflects a wide range of UK sectors, with particular focus on manufacturing and engineering. Despite this, the sample does not have a large enough sectoral representation to undertake robust sectoral analysis. In statistics, a sample size being greater than or equal to 30 is usually considered large enough to apply the central limit theorem which is generally required to make inferences about the mean. This is not satisfied here.

**Figure 11. In what sector does your organisation primarily operate?**  
(% of responding employers)



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024) and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Business Population Estimates (2022)

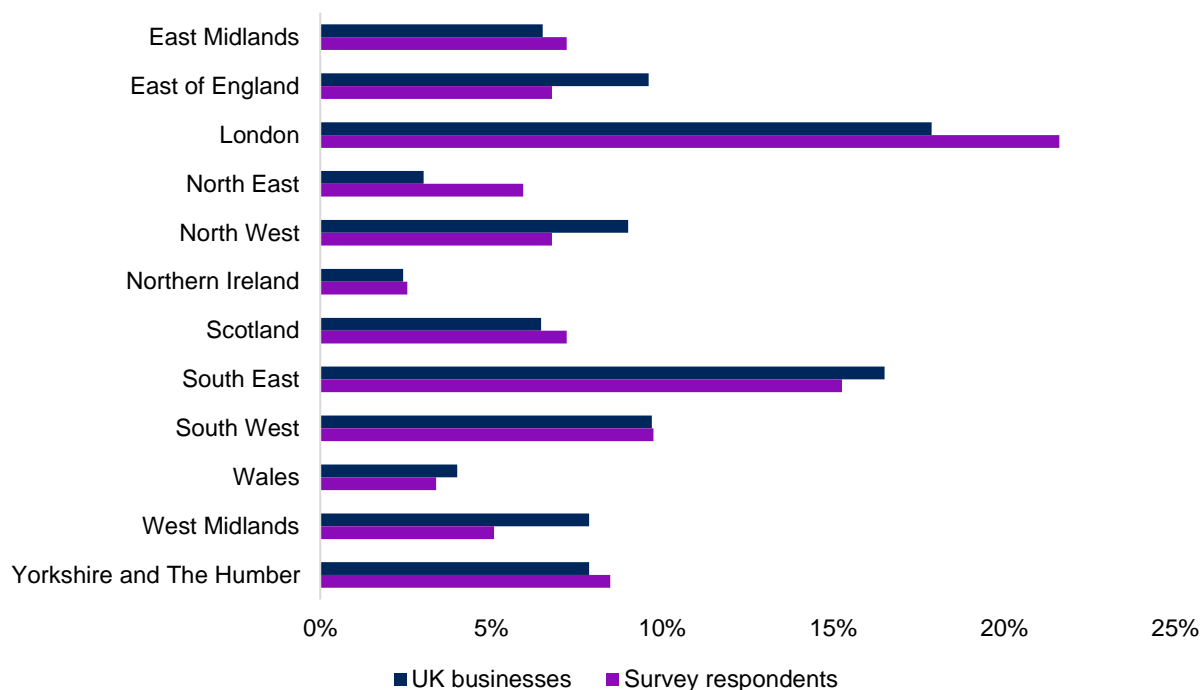
**Figure 12. What higher level skills gaps, if any, does your business face? (Please select all that apply) (% of responding employers)**



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024)

Geographically, the survey sample is distributed evenly across UK regions, with the only regions slightly underrepresented being the West Midlands, North West and East of England. As displayed in **Figure 13**, the geographic distribution of the survey sample is largely in line with the wider UK business population. The only notable disparity lies in London being slightly overrepresented.

**Figure 13. In which region/nation is your head office based?**  
(% of responding employers)



Source: CBI Economics analysis (2024) and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Business Population Estimates (2024)

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