Impact template (REF3a)

Institution: University of Bedfordshire

Unit of Assessment: 19 - Business and Management Studies

a. Context

Research submitted to this unit reflects the work undertaken by staff in the Business and Management Research Institute (BMRI). BMRI facilitates and champions research and consultancy related scholarly activity within the University of Bedfordshire Business School. The core themes of BMRI research are information systems, knowledge management, operations management, culture, branding and human resources management. BMRI has five research centres that serve as focal points for facilitating research activities of academics and research students with common interests. The three within this Unit of Assessment are: Business and Information Systems Research Centre (BISC), Centre for Research in Marketing, Centre for Leadership Innovation.

BMRI is committed to producing high quality research that is practice-based, relevant to the needs of the business community, and which informs teaching, learning and curriculum development. Research activities focus on practitioner based themes which seek to make a difference to businesses (especially for SMEs), public organisations, and society.

b. Approach to impact

Our overall approach to impact is to identify research themes of direct relevance to practitioners within business communities, public sector organisations and society at large, which have the potential to make a measurable difference to performance and whose outcomes can realistically be disseminated to the interested parties. In particular, our approaches to impact include:

Targeting business communities that need support most

In particular, we focus our efforts on supporting SMEs, in part because SMEs have been identified as a key engine for innovation and job creation and in part because they have received less attention from research communities, as compared with large businesses. For example, although emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide new opportunities for SMEs to innovate and transform their businesses and secure competitive advantages, SMEs are still regarded as being slow to adopt emerging ICTs and less able to gain the maximum benefits from ICT applications.

This particular research focus has been very successful in securing external funding, mainly from the European Commission. Funded projects include: VEGNET (e-supply chain), TRIMAR (e-marketing for SMEs), INVOCED (work based training), MOVE (Asia link), TRICTSME (e-commerce in SMEs), LEFC (e-commerce web site design and training), USE AND DIFFUSE (SME use and dissemination of EU research), i10 activities (SME innovation support), LEVERSME (SME research support), Webstep1, Webstep2 and Webstep3 (business web site design for SMEs), and E-Business for Women.

The main beneficiaries of our research are SMEs in the UK, Europe and China, especially those engaged in e-business, but also organisations supporting and working with SMEs, including business consultancies, ICT developers and vendors, policy makers at different levels (local, regional and international), training and advice providers, European Commission, etc.

All impact case studies submitted to this unit focus on and benefit SMEs.

Collaboration with academic and business partners nationally and internationally

We have a specific strategy for working with European and Asian academic and business partners to develop and disseminate our research for impact at the international level. As a result, we have developed strong international collaborations with EU and Chinese partners in developing bids for grants and have been very successful in receiving EU funding for research to help SMEs as reported in our impact case studies. Our approach has helped in both the research itself and in the dissemination of its outcomes, enhancing our research impact at both national and international levels.

Carrying out high quality research on helping business to benefit from emerging technologies and innovation

BMRI was formed with the aim of providing a focal point for staff to conduct research on emerging

themes with extensive practitioner engagement and potential for application.

For example, research undertaken in BISC has centred on helping SMEs improve their business competitiveness by embracing e-business and applying cutting-edge innovation to contemporary business practices and processes. The work of BISC attracts interest from academic and business communities at a regional, national and international level generating a wide impact. Our case studies place particular emphasis on demonstrating research impact on the networks of individuals and organisations supporting SMEs. Increasingly, businesses of all sizes have to rely on ICT to deliver their products and services, with the effective adoption of information systems widely acknowledged as an important driver for product and process innovation and an essential ingredient for success and growth. The deployment of advanced ICT in business organisations continually creates new opportunities, as well as posing new challenges. To maximise the potential benefits which ICT can deliver, it is imperative for ICT researchers to understand and address the critical issues associated with ICT applications. A major focus of our activity has therefore involved supporting SMEs in e-business adoption and innovation through knowledge management and transfer.

Research outcomes have successfully impacted in the following main areas:

- Improving business performance through raised awareness, shared "know-how" and "best practice", and enhanced knowledge and skills in e-business adoption and innovation
- Influencing policy-making through dissemination of findings and raising awareness
- Raising awareness among business communities
- Informing training design and material development
- Engaging end users including SMEs, policy makers, IT experts, training providers, etc.

Working closely with research users to make a difference

In undertaking our research we have adopted a dynamic two-way communication approach between research and end-user communities, in line with our commitment to undertake empirical investigations with end users. To this end, focus groups, interviews and surveys have been used to better understand and identify both current and future needs for effective practitioner engagement with the emerging technologies. This approach has enabled us to identify specific training gaps experienced by a significant number of SMEs and develop relevant online training systems and workshop training materials.

The research has involved close liaison with the University's Knowledge Hub, Research Development Office, and the Business School Office, providing both a facilitating mechanism and a basis for academic staff to communicate and engage with a wide range of potential end users. For example, the Knowledge Hub has facilitated researcher access to their business network members, and helped us to approach specific business contacts for joint research bids.

In addition to the submitted cases, our research has also demonstrated impact in the following areas:

Capacity Building and Growth of Women-Owned Enterprises in the UK, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The findings of this research identify the barriers and factors contributing to the growth of women-owned entrepreneurial ventures. As a direct result of this evidence-based research, five training programmes in Pakistan and one in Bangladesh were designed, developed and delivered to female entrepreneurs. This research created an impact by contributing to the provision of a level playing field for women-owned enterprises to develop their enterprises in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan and Bangladesh through provision of business development services, improving the performance (sales and employment) of women-owned enterprises, promoting equality, and benefiting their families and communities.

Integrating Equality and Human Rights: Managing Diversity in the UK Voluntary Sector. Dr Schwabenland and her team have developed an initiative to create a framework for diversity management in the voluntary sector, which has the potential to significantly affect diversity practice at the national level.

Supporting Development of Creative and Innovative Capability in Organisations. Research in this area demonstrates impacts as regards supporting the facilitation of organisational creativity and innovation through practice-based management education. This research is exemplary in demonstrating organisational transformation, (re)igniting the spark for creativity and innovation

through intrinsic motivation and increased staff morale within the rigid bureaucratic environment of a public sector organisation (name removed for confidentiality).

c. Strategy and plans

We aim to conduct high quality applied and practice-based research to meet the needs of local, national and international business communities and public sector organisations. We broadly work in the areas of "Information Systems and Operations Management", "Culture, Organizational Development, and Leadership", and "Branding, Cross-cultural Marketing and Marketing Communications". We focus on issues which potentially have significant impacts on practice and performance (e.g., emerging ICT adoption and diffusion in SMEs, addressing 'big data' and its impact on business performance, transnational knowledge transfer; sustainable supply chain management, creativity and innovation in the public sector, advances in marketing research and practice, leadership innovation, etc.). In particular, our strategies as regards impact include:

Developing practice-based research. With the new senior management team in place since 2012, developing practice-based research is regarded as a top priority. "Applied and practice based research, business engagement, and curriculum development" is the BMRI's mission for research impact. In particular, the BMRI will expand and strengthen research areas, such as: organisational development, leadership, branding, cross cultural marketing, aiming for substantive impact on private and public sectors.

Strengthening our link with practitioners and setting up systems to analyse impacts over time. We have recruited eight Professors in Management Practice who have extensive practice-based experience from working in private and public sectors and are able to use their insights and contacts to strengthen the link between academic research and its relevance to practice. Collecting and analysing impact evidence is now part of current and future research projects. BMRI has a system to collect and report impact from all researchers at least once a year in its Annual Research Report.

Raising awareness and supporting staff in undertaking high impact research. We will continue to provide regular workshops and training events on bidding for research grants from a diverse range of funding sources, especially end users. We regularly invite speakers from private and public organisations to review challenges, current practices and needs (e.g., leadership challenges in managing global companies, RFID in logistics, etc.). We continue to support research dissemination activity by engaging with research users through consultancies, conferences, events and company visits.

d. Relationship to case studies

As the result of our approach to impact through research engagement with SMEs and business communities that need support most and working with national, European, and international partners, we have two impact case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of such an approach. Research activity reported in these case studies embeds the outcomes of major funded projects undertaken by key members of the BISC over the past 15 years. Funders have included HEFCE, ESRC, and the EU.

Increased e-business adoption in SMEs. This research centred on identifying the needs of SMEs and providing support through interactive training workshops, on-site training workshops, expert support systems, intelligent web-based online training systems, and ICT facilitated knowledge sharing of know-how and best practice for e-business adoption. This case demonstrates our research rigour, originality and impact on improving e-business adoption at both the national and international levels.

Facilitated innovation and improved knowledge transfer in SMEs. Through funded projects, we have developed strong European collaborations with Research Technology Developers (RTDs), SMEs and public body partners. These projects have improved business competitiveness by providing tools, processes, events by which SMEs engage with universities; allowed SMEs and universities to jointly create technology roadmaps and to engage in knowledge transfer; encouraged SMEs to become involved in R&D projects by providing tools to the European National Contact Points.