

## Impact template (REF3a)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Ulster
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 19 Business and Management Studies
<p><b>a. Context</b></p> <p>Our overall philosophy within the Business and Management Research Institute (BMRI) is to achieve impact through research that combines intellectual and theoretical rigour with practical relevance. Given the nature of the Northern Ireland economy, the key focus is predominantly on supporting SMEs. Case Study 1 is on innovation adoption in SMEs, Case Study 2 is concerned with the retail supply chain and Case Study 3 involves a spin-out company which provides employee wellbeing strategies. The focus on SMEs is also reflected in the recent involvement of Humphreys and McHugh in the Business School/Mid-Sized Business Task Force, established by the Department of BIS, which looked at how there could be closer collaboration between academia and industry: <a href="http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/b/12-1290-business-school-mid-sized-business-collaboration.pdf">http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/b/12-1290-business-school-mid-sized-business-collaboration.pdf</a>.</p> <p>Over the period of the REF, the BMRI has concentrated on embedding a 'culture of impact' across the activities of the Institute. This has been achieved by focusing predominantly on funded sources of research and ensuring that impact is considered throughout all stages of a research project, both in terms of the process and with regard to the appropriate use of impact tools, identifying economic and societal outputs and impact evaluation.</p> <p>In summary, the BMRI builds and sustains impact through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working closely with established networks and building/sustaining relationships with research users. Typical examples include, trade associations and policy makers at a regional, national and European level, public sector bodies involved in developing policy (in particular, InvestNI – the region's business development agency) and commercial organisations. The letters of support in all three cases, in REF3b, reflect the variety of stakeholder involvement.</li> <li>• Involving users at all stages of the research.</li> <li>• Ensuring well planned public engagement and knowledge exchange strategies.</li> <li>• Developing portfolios of research activity that enhance the Institute's reputation with research users. For example, all three case examples presented are built around highly regarded research output some of which is included as part of the REF submission.</li> <li>• Building an effective infrastructure for managing impact and collating evidence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>b. Approach to impact</b></p> <p>With regard to enabling impact, the BMRI has concentrated on building the impact agenda into funded research projects. This is achieved by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring that various stakeholders, including the user community, are involved in the co-production of research, in terms of planning and undertaking the research from the outset. Such an approach ensures a good understanding of the policy/practice context, which is essential for targeting communications regarding potential research impact. For example, in Case Study 3, the development of organisation wellbeing strategies involved close coordination with the stakeholder organisations.</li> <li>• Effective and timely knowledge translation through the adaptation of research findings to specific policy and practice contexts.</li> <li>• The provision of effective research leadership by high profile, committed and well-connected senior researchers who are pivotal in achieving and promoting research and encouraging knowledge exchange within stakeholder organisations and communities. For example, colleagues in the BMRI have presented the practical implications of their research through the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series, for members of the NI Regional Assembly and advisors.</li> <li>• Embedding a culture of evidence use/learning in stakeholder organisations. For example, in impact case 2, Hutchinson, as the chair of the BAM retail SIG has organised two workshops for academics and practitioners to look at the future of the high street.</li> <li>• Effective dissemination of project deliverables to the stakeholder community through, for example, events (public engagements, project launch and wrap-up), interactive media (project website, podcasts, webzines) and publications (leaflet, booklets). For example, in Case Study 1, the project findings on innovation adoption have been made available through the EU Commission website.</li> <li>• Ongoing evaluation of project deliverables and identifying areas for improving the delivery of impact, through, for example, feedback from attendees at project seminars/workshops.</li> </ul>

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The approach taken to engage with the business community and policy makers, as research users, is facilitated through the extensive regional and national contacts of BMRI members. For example, McHugh is a member of the CBI NI Regional Council and Armstrong is a member of the Agri-Food Strategy Board consultation group. This ensures that research within the BMRI remains topical and relevant to the user community. For example, a key issue regionally, is research support for the agri-food sector, given the recent review by the Agri-Food Strategy Board in 2013. One of the key action points is the need for product innovation by SMEs. Through her relationship with the Board, Armstrong has worked closely with policy makers, such as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as large retailers, such as Tesco, to advise SME food producers (see Case Study 2).

With regard to supporting impact, several Institutional Departments facilitate the process:

- Events management. Provide advice on running workshops/seminars. This is particularly relevant for funded projects to ensure dissemination of research findings to stakeholders.
- Media and corporate relations. Assist in the development of newsworthy research stories to be targeted at the regional, national and international press.
- Staff development. Courses are available to support research staff in engaging with the media.

### c. Strategy and plans

At an Institutional level impact is an important focus of the University's Research Strategy. For example, Strategic Theme 3 of the strategy states, *To Encourage the Translation of Research Findings into Products and Services that will have an Impact upon the Economy and Society*. One of the main drivers of impact within the Institution is the Office of Innovation that is responsible for building relationships with the business community, managing KTP projects and supporting research/consultancy projects. As part of their role, a number of impact initiatives have been developed, including:

- Research impact awards. This fund aims to provide a means of assisting academics to realize and demonstrate the impact of their high quality research for the purposes of the REF. One of the three case studies outlined in REF3b received funding from this source to support their impact activities.
- The Knowledge Club. The initiative has been set up to encourage interaction and strengthen links between the University of Ulster and the business community. Its development is based on the assumption that, by creating a forum of common interest where ideas can be shared, that this will improve opportunities for sustainable wealth creation in the region. Typical seminars have included researchers from the BMRI as well as international experts (including Niitamo, former Innovation Director at Nokia and a Visiting Professor in the BMRI). Examples of topics covered have included: 'Breakneck Branding', 'Worry about service not its cost', 'stock market options for SMEs' and 'Living lab and open innovation for SMEs'.
- Innovation Vouchers and general consultancy. These funds typically provide an opportunity to work on a range of business improvement initiatives and develop relationships with local businesses that can potentially lead to longer-term research collaborations. During the REF period 50 innovation vouchers were awarded with a value of £200k and total consultancy income generated was £670k.

At the research unit level, the BMRI's strategy reflects the views of regional and national government bodies, such as InvestNI and the Department of BIS, with the Plan for Growth agenda and the more recent findings from the Witty Review of Universities and Growth. These regional and national bodies emphasise a need within the private and public sector to develop the impact agenda in terms of concentrating on an innovation based culture with the appropriate entrepreneurial and management skills, a focus on improving productivity levels, promoting the development of national/international networks and enhancing the delivery of services across the private and public sector. This is reflected in the case studies outlined in REF3b.

In order to embed impact as an important aspect of research deliverables, a number of activities have taken place and are ongoing:

- Two impact seminars, one of which was sponsored by ESRC, have been conducted to disseminate best practice to researchers within the BMRI.
- Attendance by senior research staff at national impact seminars.
- Targeting ESRC and other funding sources to support knowledge exchange and impact generating activities. This is reflected in our success, over the REF period, with KTPs (thirteen

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projects) and the all Ireland FUSION scheme (seven projects) outlined in REF5d.

- Encouraging multi-disciplinary research, where management academics collaborate with colleagues from other faculties and Institutions; this is reflected particularly in impact case 1.
- Established a Unit repository for collating impact evidence in terms of reach and significance.
- Peer review of project proposals to ensure that impact is adequately covered and resourced.
- Establishment of a Faculty Business Advisory Group consisting of senior business executives, trade associations, professional bodies, visiting professors and business academics to provide an advisory role with regard to the future research plans of the Unit, providing access to local companies for research purposes and assisting with the establishment of research stakeholder groups for dissemination purposes.

Looking to the future and given the increasing importance of impact, the Faculty has taken the strategic decision to invest in a Director of Academic Enterprise. This role will involve coordinating academic enterprise activities, fostering research linkages with SMEs, ensuring close integration between research and impact activities and the effective dissemination of impact activity. It is anticipated that the infrastructure and support mechanisms outlined above should ensure that the BMRI maximises the potential to generate impact, both currently and in the future.

#### **d. Relationship to case studies**

The three impact case studies presented provide an overview of the range of research activities conducted by the BMRI and how they have led to demonstrable economic and societal impacts. Case Studies 1 and 2 focus on economic benefits, whereas Case Study 3 concentrates more on a combination of societal/economic impacts. The relationship between the BMRI approach to impact and the submitted cases is outlined below:

- Firstly, the focus of research activity within the BMRI places significant emphasis on supporting the activities of the SME sector. This is particularly important given the important role that the SME sector plays within the regional economy. This emphasis on SMEs has permeated previous RAE submissions by the Unit of Assessment in 2001 and 2008. All three case studies reflect this emphasis on SMEs. In addition, within the Faculty a new SME centre has been established in response to the significant challenges facing the NI economy (endorsed by the CBI, FSB and Chamber of Commerce): <http://www.business.ulster.ac.uk/sme/business.html>
- Secondly, the BMRI has concentrated on impact activities aligned to Government priorities within the social sciences. This is reflected in the strategic priorities identified by ESRC over the period 2011-2015. For example, Case Study 1 focuses on the priority related to Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth since it is concerned with enhancing the innovation capability of SMEs. Case Study 2 also supports this priority given that it is assisting small rural retailers and agri-food producers with alternative business growth strategies through a range of marketing interventions. In terms of the second priority area, Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions all three case studies are aligned with this objective. For example, Case Study 1 is concerned with developing and enhancing innovation management skills, Case Study 2 links into consumer behaviour data to assist in more targeted decision making at specific market niches. Case Study 3 concentrates on research that has led to enhancing employee wellbeing.
- Thirdly, the BMRI, through the Faculty's Business Advisory Group, ensures stakeholder involvement during the preparation and implementation of research projects. Staff work closely with the relevant stakeholder groups to ensure the relevancy and currency of their research. For example, Case study 1 involved supporting the management of innovation processes in medical device clusters in Northern Ireland, mainland UK, Europe and the USA, as well as feeding into the policy debate at a European level. Case study 2 involved close cooperation with the NI Independent Retailers Trade Association, both during the delivery of the project and in terms of dissemination, by utilising their members' database. In addition, large multiple retailers, such as Tesco and Asda provided regular inputs during the project to ensure that the deliverables matched their expectations. In case study 3, the issue of work life balance and wellbeing focused not only on supporting individual employees, but on developing appropriate implementation strategies for organisations in the public and private sectors.