

# Sheffield Hallam University

*How business schools programmes can more effectively stimulate action in SMEs*

CARTWRIGHT, Glyn

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**How Business Schools Programmes Can More Effectively Stimulate Action in SMEs.**

Glyn Cartwright MBA, FCIM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

September 2021

## Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.
2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.
4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy.
5. The word count of the thesis is 76,677.

Name	How Business Schools Programmes Can More Effectively Stimulate Action in SMEs.
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Award	<i>DBA</i>
Faculty	'Social and Economic Research Institute'
Director(s) of Studies	<i>Dr Richard Breese.</i>

## **Abstract**

The objective of the research is to explore SME business training programmes to identify the "trigger point/s" that stimulate action in SME leaders, to take action within their business'. SME development programmes, run by Erasmus, UKCES and European Region Funding and the participant SME leaders on these programmes are the focus of this research.

The emergent insights are explored relating to existing programmes currently being provided by Business Schools for SMEs development, through the stories of SME leaders. More specifically, themes relating to four component features of development programmes, those of content, context, facilitator, and network are used as the focus for this research.

The combined impact of these four components in the SME development programmes and the comparative impact each of these individual components has in stimulating action by SME leaders are reflected on, as is how these finding can improve the impact of such programmes in stimulating the participants to take action.

This research followed a qualitative and interpretive approach. Research into humanist literature was informed by the four component features. Secondary data from independent analysis and pre-research pilot interviews and questionnaires were used in the focus of this research, together with insights from participant interviewees. Emergent themes were compared with the existing literature and the independent secondary data.

All four components were perceived by the research participants as important and influential, in varying degrees, in stimulating action within the SME leader.

Other emergent themes emphasise the importance of additional key components, those of improving self-confidence, storytelling, and relevance to the design of SME training programmes.

The insights emerging of the comparative value of the four components of content, context, facilitator, and network, together with the other emergent themes in stimulating SME leaders to take action is the contribution to theory.

The findings inform practitioners' thinking in their design and delivery of SME development programmes.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my family, who have enjoyed losing me for so many hours most days during the last 5 years.

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Finally, I would like to express a huge thank you to my supervisor, Dr Caroline Cole, who throughout my journey has assisted me far more than anyone could reasonably expect. This has kept me motivated and helped make my learning journey even more enjoyable.

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## **Glossary of Key Words and Terminologies**

Provided below definitions for terminology that have been used as words can be defined differently, by different people, in different situations. This has been done this at this stage in the thesis in recognition of how important a constant and clear definition of a terminology is (Gennan, et al., 2007), and to provide clarity of focus to the reader.

### **Small to Medium Enterprises, SMEs**

There has been a lot of controversy and debate about whether SMEs and entrepreneurs are different entities, (Drucker 1993; Lucky and Olusegun,(2012). However, even these authors, whilst highlighting differences, acknowledged that there were a lot of similarities, particularly in relation to the needs of SME leaders and entrepreneurs when looking at the transfer of business knowledge.

Researchers, such as Mariotti and Glackin (2010), observe that SME leaders are entrepreneurs. This opinion is reinforced when looking at the definitions of an entrepreneur; ‘an entrepreneur is someone who exercises initiative by organising a venture to take benefit of an opportunity and, as decision-maker, decides what, how, and how much of a good service will be produced. The entrepreneur supplies risk capital as a risk taker and monitors and controls the business activities. The entrepreneur is usually a sole proprietor, a partner, or the one who owns the majority of shares in an incorporated venture’ Business Dictionary (2019). Another definition from the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary (2009), is an entrepreneur is, ‘someone who makes money by starting their own business especially when this involves seeing a new opportunity and taking risks.’

Within definitions of an entrepreneur, the word that repeats itself is the word ‘risk’. Being an SME leader/owner carries significant risk. From this, the definition of SMEs and entrepreneurs is interchangeable as all have to invest in time, finance and effort, with no guarantee of a return on their investment.

Government bodies and business growth development programmes across Europe consider SME leaders and entrepreneurs as one and the same. An example of this is detailed in the European Commission's 2018 publication entitled Entrepreneurship and Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). This report states its objective was to create a business-friendly environment, that promotes entrepreneurship improves access to new markets and internationalisation, and helps facilitate access to finance, which helps support SMEs' competitiveness and innovation, and provides key support networks.

Throughout this research the terms SME leader and entrepreneur will be regarded as interchangeable.

### **Actions**

Actions are interventions, 'doing something with a particular purpose' (Collins Dictionary 2020).

### **A Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise (SME)**

SME businesses have a headcount of less than 250 people and a turnover of less than €15 million or the balance sheet of less than €43 million (European Commission Recommendations, 2003). Within this definition, and for the purpose of this paper there are no restrictions on the size of business, the number of employees and the market sector in which they operate, as the literature indicates, any links to different segments of this broad definition have only a 'loose' impact on the development of skills, (Johnson et al., 2015). All the delegates were either the SME owner or the major decision maker, within the SME business.

### **Four components of business development programme's**

**Content:** The data and material including business models, concepts and theories used in the delivery of business training programmes.

**Context:** The way in which the programmes are delivered, ‘for example’ lectures, seminars, reflective learning, and workshops.

**Facilitator:** The individual delivering the business training programme.

**Network:** The group of people involved in the interaction during, and post completion of the delivery of the programme. This would include both delegates and facilitators.

**Impact:**

Impact means the influence that the four components in business development programmes have on stimulating SME leaders to take actions that they would not have taken had they not attended the programmes.

**Trigger Point:**

Trigger Point is the light bulb moment a decision to take action is made. It is a reactive response to external factors, (Vehora et al., 2004; Bessant et al., 2005; and Brown & Mawson (2001).

**‘Real World’.**

Everyone lives in a ‘real world’ but the context of this in this study is the crazy, topsy-turvy world that SMEs operate in (Gibb & Dyson, 1984).

**Business School**

The Oxford dictionary (2019) definition is ‘a high-level educational institution in which students study subjects relating to business and commerce, such as economics, finance and management’. This is the definition used throughout the paper and includes business schools that are also part of universities.

**UK plc.**

UK plc. has been commonly used for The United Kingdom commercial community considered as a single organisation or the commercial interest of the United Kingdom, (Collins Dictionary, 2013). This has been used, for example, in the report by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, (2012). 'Governments Response to London 2012: A Global Showcase for UK plc.

**Abbreviations**

EBGC: European Business Growth Catalyst

LEAD: Leadership and Entrepreneurship Academy Doncaster

Erasmus: European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

UKCES: UK commission for Employment and Skills

ABS. Association of Business Schools

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## Chapter I Introduction and Research Objectives

### Introduction

For over 40 years, a multitude of academic papers have been published highlighting the lack of practical relevance of business development programmes that are offered by business schools, specifically when the focus of such programmes is to seek to stimulate action by SME leaders, (Thorpe & Rowlinson, 2013; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016).

This research will analyse experimental business development programmes targeted at SME leaders, that have been cited as programmes of excellence, in how they stimulated the SME leaders who participated in them to take actions they would not have taken had they not **participated** the programmes.

Data will be gathered from existing literature, third party independent analysis of these programmes and primary qualitative semi-structured interviews with the SME leaders participating and the Business Schools involved in the delivery of these programmes.

This data will be analysed in an interpretive manner, seeking to identify what it is about these experimental programmes that is different from conventional programmes, and facilitates a 'trigger point' for the SME leaders to take action.

The key differentials these programmes featured, when compared to conventional business development programmes were that they were –

- These programmes were not taught in a didactic, teacher orientated manner, but in an inclusive, participant orientated manner. Inviting debate about the relevance of the business concepts being introduced, as opposed to the accuracy and prescriptive nature of them.
- Whilst academically underpinned, these programmes were delivered by practitioners, not academics.
- The relevance of the concepts to the SME leader's current situation, is the focus of the programmes, not the accuracy of the concepts being introduced.

- Allocating time for reflective and reflexive thinking, to help relate the concepts being introduced to the 'real worlds' in which the SME leaders live.
- Constant facilitation enabling the SME leaders to ask themselves, 'so what does this mean to me?', and 'what is in this for me?'
- The facilitators help to bring the concepts and models to life, by the sharing of their own experiences and harnessing the power of the network to enable the SME leaders to share, relevant stories.

Governments globally have recognised the value of the SME sector. In the UK, the number of SME businesses make up 99% of private sector companies (96% employing less than 9 people). In relation to job creation, 60% of private sector jobs and 51% of the UK's turnover is generated by the SME sector, and this sector is growing.

Department of Business and Energy (2017).

### **Why is this research important?**

This research aims to provide insights that inform and assist the sustained growth of UK plc. Published business data and academic literature relating to the potential value that further development of the effectiveness of any training and development programmes aimed at helping SMEs grow and develop is extensive. There are four significant stakeholders that could benefit from this research SME business leaders, business schools, government bodies and UK Plc.

European governments believe SMEs will lead economic recoveries, as is reflected by the allocation of substantial funds to support this. Budgets of€2.5 billion, have been allocated through Europe's programme for small and medium-sized enterprises to support business growth within SMEs across the European Economic Union (EEC) between 2014 and 2020. The effectiveness of such programmes is essential if governmental investments are to significantly impact upon the economies of Europe. Indeed, within the UK, the recent advent of the national governmental programmes, the Growth Accelerator scheme and the Growth Voucher scheme (with £200 million and £30 million funding respectively) emphasise the importance placed on the growth of SME business within the UK. Global governments' investment in SMEs is significant

in monetary terms, reflecting the value that governments place on the effective transfer of business knowledge to SMEs Foyelle et al., (2019).

For over 30 years it has been identified that entrepreneurship within SMEs is the largest single source of job creation in both the developed and developing areas of the world, (Birch, 1979). Goldman Sachs and British Business Bank in 2016 identified that between 2008 and 2013 a high proportion (85%) of new jobs in the UK were created by firms with fewer than 50 employees. It went on to state that the SME population in the UK has grown by 14% since 2011 and that their contribution to the UK economy is significant. SMEs in the UK now account for 15.6 million (60%) of all private sector jobs in the UK and £1.75 trillion (47%) of revenue per annum.

The report went on to say that around 90% of SMEs have fewer than five employees and only 20–30% will survive for a decade. Only a small number of high-growth SMEs out of the 5.4 million private sector SMEs are responsible for job creation and productivity growth. The majority of UK SMEs, however, state that they would not know where to seek support to expand internationally.

Another observation is that the limited and dated evidence available shows that whilst SMEs generate a disproportionately high percentage of new jobs, SMEs also account for 44% of jobs lost in the UK, (Hijzen et al., 2010). In the World bank annual report of 2010, it was highlighted that the high failure rates observed in micro-enterprises can compromise the overall net job creation therefore providing further justification of the need to improve and increase the role of effective business training to assist economic development.

When considering the reasons for this failure rate, it should be noted that other data highlights that there are 5.7 million SMEs in the UK (Business Statistics Parliament UK, 2018). 30% of small businesses fail within two years and 50% within five years (Small Business Association, 2016). These figures reinforce the need to try to help improve the sustained success rate of SMEs.

The main reasons for failure were identified as being –

- Lack of cash
- No plan
- Lack of clear value proposition
- Heavy reliance on one or two customers
- No marketing platform
- No performance data or analysis
- Not acting on market information
- Poor management
- No data security

(Hiscox Insurance, Informed Small Business Knowledge Centre, 2016).

A survey carried out by the Guild of Entrepreneurs in 2018 identified that 50% of entrepreneurs had no business qualifications whatsoever, and that 60% of business owners get no more qualifications after starting their first business. In fact, only 45% of entrepreneurs believe specialist education can help small businesses succeed more, 42% felt that anything offered by business schools would make no difference at all to their business and 73% of them believe that businessmen were born and not made.

The Chartered Management Institute, in 2015, made interesting observations of business schools and SMEs. They highlighted that in 2015 the UK's management education sector represented one in five of all university students, contributing 3.25 billion to the UK economy. There are 4.9 million small businesses employing over 15 million people and generating a turnover of £1.6 trillion. However, only 6% of start-ups generate at least £1 million worth of revenue within the first three years and then above this only a further 6% will grow their business to 3 million over the following three years.

In 2015, only one in three small businesses were engaging with or allocating time to any sort of management training. Between 2011 and 2014, the survival rates of small business start-ups were only 56% and of those that did survive only 16% could be classified as fast-growing. Young SMEs were the primary source of job creation

between the years of 2001-2011, accounting for 42% of job creation and only 22% job destruction. Conversely, older SMEs over the same period were found to be net job destroyers. This highlights the needs of new SMEs, but even more so, for older SMEs to continue with the relevant business development training (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011).

In 2015, the Enterprise Research Centre reported that the lack of business growth within the SME sector was linked to the lack of strategy and management skills, and that these were the main barriers to growth. A more recent report on the effective transfer of knowledge to Canadian entrepreneurs has been cited as an effective way to reduce small business failure, (Foyelle et al., 2019). This report also expressed the attractiveness of 'experimental programmes' that were participant-orientated, delivered in a non-traditional way and that had a definite link with the 'real world' of the SMEs. These points describe the programmes being researched in this thesis.

### **Why focus on the four segments of content, context, facilitator, and network in a business development programme?**

This research segments the four components of a business development programme, highlighting them as separate entities in the design of business programmes offered by business schools (see figure.1.), that is, what contained within a business programme, how the programme is delivered, by whom it is delivered and with whom it is received.

This segmentation, on which there is an abundance of literature relating to all these components, allows a more focused analysis and exploration as to which, if any, of these components has the greatest contribution to stimulating action with the delegates participating in business development programmes. This will be explored in depth in Chapter 3.

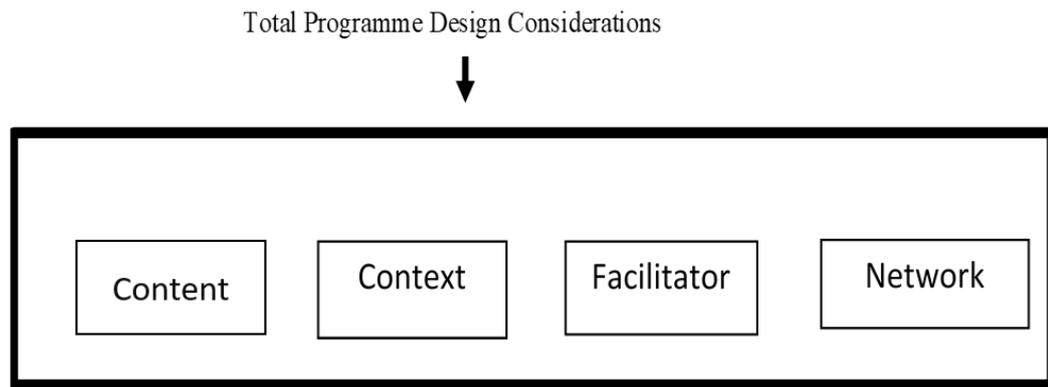


Figure 1. Components considered independently

This research will explore the comparative and the combined impact these four components have in stimulating SME leaders to take action in their businesses.

### **The key Aim and Objectives of this Research**

The research question is How Business School Programmes Can More Effectively Stimulate Action in SMEs.

The overall purpose and aim of this research is to explore how business school SME development and training programmes can be designed to stimulate action in SME leaders and help develop their businesses. Specifically, the research will investigate how participation in such programmes can help develop the thinking of SME leaders, so that they then take action that they would not have taken had they not participated in these programmes. This will be achieved by completing these objectives. It was considered whether using the word intervention as opposed to action. Action, as defined earlier in the glossary of key words and terminologies, is more appropriate for this study, as it more comprehensive, and incorporates interventions.

Objectives:

1. To investigate and analyse insights of SME leaders on experimental business programmes.

2. Compare and analyse the findings to provide insights into these four component features in SME business development programmes with the information identified in the pre-research secondary data and literature reviews.
3. To identify themes and gain an understanding of what it is within business training programmes that are the "trigger point/s" that stimulates action in SME leaders to develop their businesses in a way that they would not have done had they not participated in the programme/s.
4. Contribute to academic knowledge, highlighting the combined and comparative impact the four components of a business development programme content, context, facilitator, and network have in stimulating SME leaders to take actions they would not have taken had they not participated in the programme.
5. To make recommendations to inform the design of SME development programmes that will help practitioners in the design of such programmes.

It is important to note that the research will look not only at the combined impact of these four components in the development programme/s but also seek to identify the comparative impact each of these individual components has in stimulating action by SME leaders.

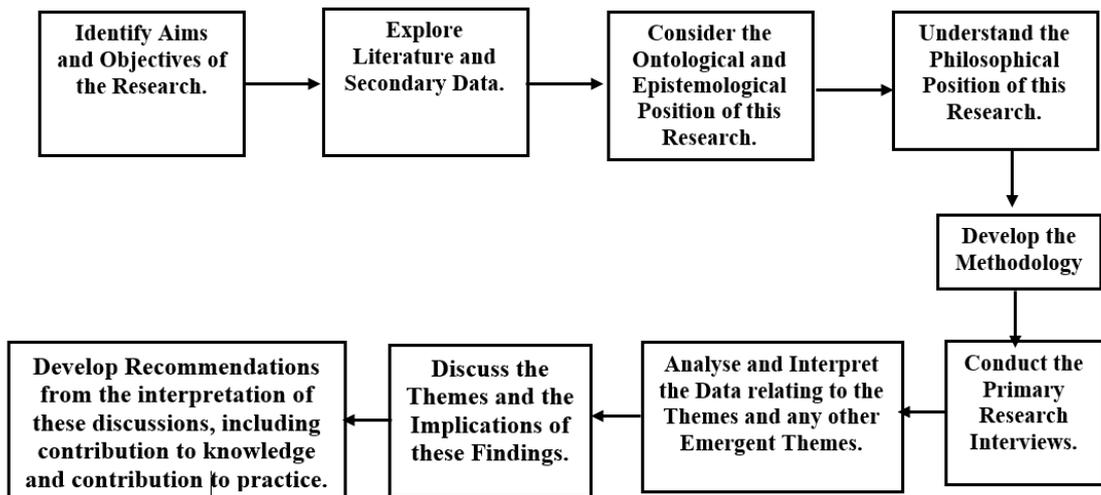
Extensive research of literature and publications, as detailed in Chapter 3, supported by discussions with business networks and interested academics, indicates they have not found reference to any work that focuses on the combined role of these four components within business programmes, and nothing that refers to the influence they have on facilitating action by SME leaders.

A World Bank Report (Valerio et al., 2014) provides some valuable and relevant insights into the components of a business development programme, which is used to inform further review of the literature. Whilst similar to this study, the World Bank Report only explicitly analyse three of the four components that are the focus of this research, their report, assessed success of any impact in monetary terms, unlike this research, which is focused on stimulating action.

The programmes selected to be at the core of this research were deliberately chosen as they were ‘experimental programmes’ that achieved independently assessed a success in terms of ‘impact’ stimulating action, in contrast to conventional programmes.

With these overall aims and objectives for this research, this is a qualitative interpretative study, but the journey to reach this position was informed by many hours of extensive research and reflection. The journey is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

**Fig 2. The research journey.**



## Summary

This introduction has sought to emphasise the need for and the contribution that research into the design and delivery of business development programmes can have in stimulating action in SME leaders. It has also explained the motivation for embarking on this research and the benefits this can bring to all of the major stakeholders involved in the effective knowledge transfer by business schools to SME leaders.

## **Chapter 2 My relevant Contextual Background and Experience**

### **Introduction**

I am passionate and interested in this research. Because of the personal content of this chapter, and because I am a participant in this study, I have written this chapter in the first person.

In this chapter, I share my relevant contextual background and experience in the context of this study. I provide insights into my experience and knowledge that informs my understanding. I seek to bring to life for the reader insights into my bias and the considerations of this for my study.

I discuss my reasons for embarking on this research and what I am aiming to achieve from it. I consider that my relevant contextual experience and background has been a great strength for me in conducting the research. I have also been mindful with the approach I am taking that I had to remain open to surprises and emerging themes, emerging from my interpretivist research.

### **My Background Assumptions and Expertise**

I have a wealth of experience in corporate life within the construction industry, holding the positions of Sales Director, Marketing Director, Managing Director and Chief Executive in several businesses. I established my own small group of SMEs in 2007, in the construction and business consulting industries, and I remain a major shareholder in five of these businesses. Thus, I am currently in the roles of both an SME leader and a facilitator of the transfer of knowledge, to SME leaders, which provides me with historic and current relevant experiences.

I have always been passionate about new learning and development for individuals in business and the transfer of knowledge to facilitate this. In my early career, I trained as a secondary school teacher. In my corporate life, I have set up internal business training centres in four different organisations, focused on meeting business development needs.

I have always been passionate about my own self-development and completed my MBA with the Open University in 1985, and since then I have lectured MBA students at Summer Schools for the Open University, and more recently, supervised and examined MBA and MSc students for the University of Sheffield, which has helped provide further current and relevant experiences to my study.

The motivation for opening the corporate training centres was the lack of relevance of the business programmes on offer from business schools at the time. After completing my MBA with the Open University in 1985, I remained disappointed in what I saw as the lack of emphasis that seemed to be placed on bringing academic concepts to life, and established a practice to aid the development of business managers.

I have also been proud to chair the Thought Leadership Committee for the Worshipful Company of Marketors within the City of London, where education and business development is the prime focus of our activity. Currently, I am Middle Warden of this Worshipful Company, and subject to annual election, will progress to Master of this prestigious marketing organisation in the City of London. This facilitates my engagement with leading business leaders and eminent leading professors and researchers in the current business environment of the UK.

I believe that there is a need to improve impact (stimulating action in business) via the transfer of knowledge. I was fortunate enough to be commissioned to write and deliver an Erasmus funded 'EBGC' programme, a UKCES funded 'LEAD' programme and a European Regional funded 'Start up Accelerator' programme, all experimental programmes targeted at stimulating SME leaders to take action.

I was, via one of my consultancy businesses, a lead partner in each of these experimental business development programmes targeted at SMEs. This meant that I was lead author of all these programmes, responsible for the training of the other facilitators delivering the programmes.

I have immersed myself in these programmes for the last 7 years and have just been awarded another 3-year Erasmus programme to assist disadvantaged entrepreneurs in the UK, Austria, Netherlands, and Cyprus.

The degree of my involvement in these experimental programmes raises the question as to how objective I can be in my interpretive research and the analysis of the outcomes. This is something that I reflected on for a long time before embarking on this research, and is something that I have continued to consider during the planning of the research and during my interpretation of the findings.

As all of the experimental programmes were delivered in partnership with business schools, other consultancy businesses, local authorities and Chambers of Commerce, and the ones completed independently assessed by Erasmus and UKCES, this brings a significant degree of neutrality to the analysis of these programmes. These programmes were also delivered by other facilitators, in different environments and in different countries.

The primary research interviews deliberately took place a minimum of 2 years post-completion of the programmes, with the aim of bringing more objectivity to the research.

My experience has given me a great opportunity to develop insights into SME leaders and how they seek to practically develop their organisations. During my time involved with various development programmes, I have been both surprised and saddened by the number of times I have been asked by SME leaders, “why have we never been told this before?” These comments were made in the context of practical application of the academic business concepts and models that formed the base of the programmes they had participated in. These observations by SME leaders, were particularly surprising because many had attended programmes at leading UK business schools who incorporate these concepts to form a key part of their business development programmes.

There is great value in the business models being taught by academic institutions. From my experience I see that these are not being transferred effectively enough to assist the development of SMEs.

Because of these observations, I became convinced that there must be a better way of making these concepts relevant to SME leaders by bringing them to life practically and to stimulate action in their businesses.

This is the motivation for my research and is where my passion for this DBA originated. My practical experience in my chosen subject matter is extensive and, because of this, I have sought to be part of my research and not removed from it. During my research I have heeded the warnings from Lincoln and Guba (1985), McGiven (2013) and Saunders et al. (2016) and sought to be suspicious of, I remain open to new insights that might emerge from my study that are different to my own.

### **My motivation inspired by the experiences of the programmes in this research**

SME development has been a genuine interest for me throughout my career. I chose the EBGC, Leadership and Entrepreneurship, and Start up Accelerator programmes as the focus of my study because, as previously explained, I was personally involved in the development and delivery of these experimental programmes and found them inspirational, motivational, and rewarding in the action they stimulated in the SME leaders involved. From my experience, I found them to be unique in the approach they took to the design and delivery and impact that they had in stimulating action, and this further motivated me to explore and better understand the contribution different components of these programmes had in the stimulation of action.

These programmes have been independently assessed by organisations of repute and cited as programmes of excellence to be emulated by other business programmes, (Appendix 1), which, was written by Erasmus after 2 years of reflection about the impact the EBGC programmes had on the participating SME leaders. The assessment for Erasmus was carried out by a consulting company called Aristos (2016), and an executive summary is included in Appendix 2, which provides an independent analysis of the EBGC programmes that were delivered.

The key programme of the research, the EBGC, was designed and delivered with three other leading business schools in Europe, University of Sheffield, Esade in Spain and Alba in

Greece. One of my own companies was the lead partner in the writing and delivery of these programmes, which provided a great insight into what was delivered, as well as access to the delegates and the independent analysis of the impact these programmes had in stimulating action. Once again, whilst I consider it a great benefit, the influence of my involvement, whilst motivational to my research, means that this is something that I must take account of as I take on the role as a reflective practitioner and interpretivist researcher within my study.

I detail below a brief overview of the experimental programmes that are the focus of my research:

### **EBGC programme**

The EBGC was central to my research and consisted of 47 delegates all of whom were SME leaders from across, three countries. The participants had turnovers between £100,000 and £1 million, having operated between 2 years and 20 years, operating in 8 different market sectors and consists of male and female SME leaders, reflecting the diversity of SME leadership. This variety in cross-section of companies involved in this programme was important as, as identified by Mason and Brown, (2010), high-growth firms are heterogeneous in terms of age, size, ownership, and industry sectors.

### **LEAD programme**

The Leadership and Entrepreneurship Academy Doncaster (LEAD Programme), which was UKCES funded, and independently evaluated by Doncaster Council for them, in particular highlighting its impact in stimulating action. The LEAD report and executive summary, covering September 2015 to June 2016, is included in Appendix 3. This programme involved three separate cohorts that took place at different times, with the feedback and learning from each cohort being used to continually improve the design of the programme. There were 67 companies participating, from a large cross-section of industry sectors; all were SME owners, employing less than 50 people.

The key findings of the LEAD programme's evaluation were that a hundred percent of the delegates completing the course commented that the programme had met or exceeded their expectations; it stimulated a hunger for more training in 60% of the delegates with,

90% feeling that it would have a positive impact on their business. Many of the SMEs participating in this programme found it so useful in adding commercial value to their business that they referred other senior managers from their organisations to attend future programmes.

Observations that emerged from the UKCES report, were that the SME leaders participating had found it stimulated thought-provoking discussions, was interesting, motivational and challenging, and helped them to develop a business plan, and that they benefited more from talking to similar businesses and came away more confident.

I was further inspired by some comments contained within the EBGC and LEAD reports. For example, one delegate said, *'I didn't realise how beneficial courses could be'*, and a lead partner from one of the business schools commented that, *'this project not only allowed us the freedom to experiment, learn, adapt and evaluate but the results have been surprising'*. This sits at the core of my interest. In my opinion, it is comments such as these that business programmes aimed at helping SMEs develop should seek to achieve, and arguably be assessed by.

The 'start-up accelerator programme' is targeted specifically at start up SMEs that are either just about to start trading or are under two years old. This programme commenced in 2016 and was due to end in 2019, but because of its success, this has been extended until 2021.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have explained my genuine interest and motivation for conducting this research. I have provided insights into my relevant contextual background and experience, together with how objectivity can be brought to this interpretivist research. This, to provide visibility to the reader of what I am bringing to this study.

I have introduced three SME development programmes that have been instrumental in motivating me to commence my DBA.

## Chapter 3 Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter the wealth of existing literature which has explored conventional business school development programmes. This literature, which spans over forty years, and highlight some of the deficiencies of these conventional business development programmes.

The literature relating to conventional business development programmes, delivered by business schools, is then explored further by dividing the programmes into four segments, those of the content, (what is contained within the programmes), the context, (the way the programmes are delivered), the facilitators, (who are delivering the programmes), and the network, (the participants in the programmes). Also, literature relating to the combined and comparative impact these 4 components have in stimulating action with SME leaders will be explored, highlighting any emerging gaps in the current literature.

The conclusion section of this chapter will then identify what has been learnt from this literature review and how this will shape the research that is being conducted.

### **Literature exploring conventional business development programmes offered by business schools and their deficiencies, particularly when targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders**

The scope of this research includes literature relating to the development of SMEs around the world, acknowledging the views of a report initiated by the World Bank in 2014. Their 2014 report about this entitled 'Entrepreneurship Education and Training Programmes Around the World' (Valerio et al., 2014) observed that there were considerable similarities across the programmes researched, and similarities in the learning experiences and business considerations emerging from these different programmes around the world.

The similarities encountered by businesses globally is reinforced by the use of business models that have been developed in one country being used by business schools around the world, for example, Porter (2008), USA and Mintzberg (2004), Canada.

This literature review draws on authoritative literature that spans many decades. However, rather than the age of the literature being a negative, because the findings and recommendations arising from these researchers are very similar to the more recent papers referenced, this adds to the authority of the views expressed. This reflects that this topic lends itself to qualitative research more than quantitative research. Qualitative research, which is more appropriate for interpretive research into business skills is an area of research that seems to buck the trend of the dominance of quantitative research are that of Key Adult Education Journals, (Boeren 2017).

The Sheffield Hallam University Online Library search and Google Scholar searches were used for this literature review, focusing on key words and phrases in order to focus the research, together with search recommendations that came from DBA tutors, supervisors, and a network of business academics. Key words used in this research have specific meanings for which definitions have been provided at the start of this thesis, recognising, as Gelman et al. (2007) observe that different words mean different things to different people at different moments in time.

**To explore conventional business development programmes offered by business schools and their deficiencies, particularly when targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders, literature relating to the following two subject matters have been researched:**

- The needs and perceptions of SMEs in relation to business training offered by business schools.
- The impact on SME leaders that business school programmes are having.

The objective of this is to identify potential gaps in the literature relating to the needs of SME leaders and what the business development programmes offered by business schools provide.

### **The needs and perceptions of SMEs in relation to business training offered by business schools.**

The objective of any business professional seeking to satisfy the needs of a client or potential client is to try and identify exactly what it is that the client wants and needs. Specifically, in relation to SMEs, their characteristics should be considered when designing business development programmes for them. Unlike many business management roles, an SME or an entrepreneur needs no formal qualifications. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2011) recognised this in their study. However, business development programmes offered by business schools follow a traditional academic learning journey and require entry level qualifications that, as mentioned above, many SMEs do not have.

It has been highlighted that SME leaders may have different personality traits to others in the population, like requiring a quick return for themselves in terms of their own personal development (Cole and Ulrich 1987). SME leaders want to see quickly what is in it for them in attending a business programme. As Bhide (1996) identified, key questions that SMEs are looking to answer are, have they chosen the right strategy? Can they do it? And do they have the appropriate resources and capabilities?

In searching the literature in relationship to the characteristics of SME leaders, some authors have identified that SME leaders are risk takers, (Hisrich, 1988; and Phillips & Kirchoff 1989). Others have identified that they are also highly motivated (Slatter, 1988; LaFuente & Salas 1989), that they are likely to be influenced by both their culture and background (Birley & Bridge, 1987; Leppard & Macdonald, 1989), and be task orientated generalists, (Drucker, 1985; Carson & Cromie (1989). Carson (1993) observed that SME leaders are likely to make decisions which, are both creative and opportunistic. in a haphazard manner. This means, as noted by Lancaster and Waddelow (1998) that the

decisions that SME leaders make have short-term horizons. Johnson and Scholes (1993) identified that SME leaders tend to be multifunctional, focusing on operational issues, which they find easier to deal with, rather than strategic issues.

These observations highlight the opportunity for developing more medium-term strategic considerations within the minds of SME leaders, while still fulfilling their short and medium-term requirements. Developing this theme further, Greenley (1985) identified that only 10% of SME businesses have and use what might be described as a strategic comprehensive marketing plan.

As early as 1965, McClelland identified that SMEs needed to feel that they were discussing their situation with peers, as opposed to academics, and concluded that they had a high need for achievement. McClelland (1965) also noted that whilst SME leaders want to be independent, they also like to receive feedback on how well they have done. This could indicate that whilst a SME leader may appear confident, they also harbour a degree of insecurity.

In a similar way, Poly and Tawny (1968) observe that SMEs also desire to be masters of their own destiny. Mangham (2005) proposed an analogy that SMEs saw themselves as actors to be judged on their performance, and, as such, wanted to know how to improve their performance quickly.

Hornaday and Bunker (1970) and Schere (1982) also highlighted the need for SME leaders to be able to feel that they are in control of their own fate, within certain limits, and not doing simply what is suggested that they do by facilitators during business development programmes. This indicates that they are not simply learning concepts, but more importantly understanding them and the practical application and value to their own organisations.

Hornaday and Bunker (1970) and Schere (1982) also observe that SME leaders often embrace ambiguity and novelty, which contrasts with the way business models and

concepts are often presented with perceived inflexible boundaries and may serve to make them less acceptable and relevant to SME leaders.

The views of SME leaders attending any business development programmes has been described by Mole (2002) as sceptical, and that first impressions and perceptions that the SMEs make about a training programme can shape the outcomes of a programme. Karlan and Valdivia (2011) went on to observe that this was particularly evident when looking at attrition levels from these programmes.

It is interesting to observe that the insights detailed above range from the early 1960s to the present day, and have remained relatively consistent, which suggests that little has changed.

The works of Berlyne (1972), Schultz (1987) and Rotter (1972) identify that storytelling is a useful facilitator in achieving a level of arousal and in facilitating optimal learning performance. These writers also found that attentiveness carries with it a plausible reaction and encourages the learner, the SME leader, to continue to stay focused.

As O'Farrell and Hitchens (1988) and Turok (1991) observed, not all SME leaders want or have the appropriate resources and capabilities to grow. This must be recognised as embarking on a growth strategy, but without the desire or appropriate resources, which may reduce the sustainability of the SME. As Davidson (1989a, 1989b), Storey (1994), and Roper (1999) noted, SME leaders start to operate their businesses for a variety of reasons, not all of which are for economic return.

Work done by Potts and Morrison (2009) focussed on behavioural change in SME leaders and how this could help them stimulate innovation in their organisations. In the same way, the earlier works of Simon (1995) and Conlisk (1996) discussed bounded rationality in the context of behavioural change and action stimulation. They went on to suggest that the

economic cost associated with behavioural change is often seen as the reason for the appropriate resources not being allocated in the pursuit of achieving this behavioural change.

The value of academic underpinning of business development programmes has also been highlighted by Mole (2002), who suggested that business advisers who are facilitating business development programmes, and who do not reference academic underpinnings in their teachings, are unlikely to gain significant kudos or impact on business leaders participating in such programmes. Bennett and Robson, earlier in 1999, also suggested this, identifying that besides specialist knowledge, facilitators of business development programmes also need to demonstrate the legitimacy of what they are saying, which, facilitators can achieve by demonstrating academic underpinning of the business concepts being presented.

### **The benefits of delivering effective business development programmes to SMEs**

Robson and Bennett (2000) identified that SME development programmes funded by UK government initiatives do not seem to have had the required impact in terms of stimulating action by SME leaders participating in these programmes. Shane (2009) also considered UK government initiatives that focused on encouraging more people to start their own businesses, and observed that initiatives such as these do not lead to sustained job creation or economic growth. Shane (2009) instead advocated that what is needed is the intervention of effective business development training.

Exploring the potential benefits of delivering effective business development programmes to SME leaders, research conducted by Glaub and Frese (2011) identified the positive effects on entrepreneurial performance that could be achieved as a result of effective training programmes which focused on enhancing entrepreneurial mindsets, in particular the way that SME leaders structure their thinking in the area of business growth. This was achieved by giving confidence to these delegates to assist them develop strategies that made them

stand out from competitors and for the SME leaders to be innovative, with a desire to expand.

Another paper by McKenzie and Woodruff (2012) assessing one of the Entrepreneurial Education Training (EET) programmes in America identified how effective training programmes helped business owners to be innovative and launch new businesses more quickly. These studies suggest that business schools are in a strong position to facilitate the development of entrepreneurial skills.

Some analysis finds the connection between outcomes, such as entrepreneurial intentions and entrepreneurial activity (for example starting a business) to be tenuous (Pittway & Cope, 2007). They highlighted the potential benefits to entrepreneurial training of reflective and inter-active aspects of programme delivery.

McKenzie and Woodruff (2012) observed that whilst there was relatively little immediate impact on profit or sales, from SME participation in development programmes, there were modest effects with practising entrepreneurs in the areas of decision-making and implementing improved business practices.

Klingert and Schündlen (2007) suggest that receiving business training significantly increases the possibility of business start-ups succeeding and existing businesses expanding. They demonstrated in their Techno Serve project that effective business training led to a higher probability of success. They found that in their quantitative study that this increased the number of delegates opening a business and the probability of delegates expanding their businesses.

Further quantitative research highlighting the benefits of business schools and SME interaction emerged from the Intersise project in the USA (2011), which found that participants also form peer-mentoring groups, and that when taught by people who have a track record of successful small business growth and of enabling adult learning or facilitative

instruction, the outcome significantly improves. The improvements identified can be quick and significant, particularly in the areas of job creation and business growth (World Bank Report 2014).

Benneworth (2001) also identifies the benefits of university-industry interface in supporting knowledge-based economic development, which can also lead to innovation to help keep businesses competitive. Hibbert and Huxham (2010) go further and suggest good relationships between academia and industry are important in building sustainable growth. In order to achieve this, account must be taken of all actions, such as an individual's decisions to seek out new capital or start new ventures (Singh & Verma, 2010) or to increase income and savings (Cox et al., (2012).

Gilbrat's Law (1931) proposed that an organisations, size and rate of growth are totally independent. However, in more recent times this theory has been challenged, suggesting that smaller firms have larger growth potential than larger firms (Almus, 2000; Calvo 2006). Work by Cassia and Colombelli (2008) shows that smaller organisations have a quicker growth rate, which can be increased still further by the effective transfer of business knowledge. In a similar way, Vossen (1998) has highlighted several differences with respect to innovation between large businesses and SMEs.

Vossen (1998) also observed that in comparison to large organisations, SMEs demonstrated more rapid decision making and effective internal communications with short decision chains. This, Vossen suggests, enables faster reaction to changing market requirements, higher labour dynamics, greater capacity for customisation and the capability that SMEs have for fast learning and adaption of routines and strategy. Earlier, Rothwell (1995) also recognised these differences and concluded that the advantages SMEs have are mainly behavioural (flexibility, dynamism, and responsiveness). In addition, Rothwell noted that the most important disadvantages of SMEs, which are advantages for large firms, are predominantly material, for example, economies of scale and scope, easier access to technology and knowledge, and finance.

Germann et al. (2015) also identified that bringing a structured and strategic thought process to business and marketing planning benefitted small businesses more than large organisations, as large organisations often have more people and layers of management, which can lead to less managerial discretion.

### **The deficiencies of conventional business development programmes delivered by business schools**

In contrast to the literature highlighting the benefits to SME leaders of business development programmes delivered by business schools, there are many authors that have identified the lack of impact these business development programmes have on SMEs. For over 30 years, authors have been highlighting the mutual suspicion and mistrust between business and academia, which has been identified as being particularly pronounced in the UK. A key reason why business education was late in developing in Britain compared to other parts of the world for example, the USA, (Griffiths & Murray, 1985; Brown et al., 1996; Tiratsoo 1998a, 1998b. These writers observed that because of this, when the first business schools were established in the UK in 1965, there was no consensus regarding either their purpose or their function, or in how their performance should be judged. As a result of this, different business schools pursued very different agendas in this regard, leading to an uneasy compromise which all involved seemed to recognise was a serious weakness in developing effective business development programmes in the UK. This has resulted in a continuing debate about what is the value of business training, particularly in relation to SME development.

This contrasts with the poor accessibility of relevant knowledge transfer for SMEs, that has been one of the conclusions of a study carried out by Kemp and Borger (2000) who saw this as a major disadvantage for SMEs.

The tensions around what SMEs want and need and what business schools are offering are further exaggerated in a world that has been changing at an ever-increasing speed, as observed as early as 1970 by Toffer. The same questions were asked by Bhide (1996), who observed that because of this continual change and the pace of change, SMEs are asking

themselves 'have I chosen the right strategy?' and 'do we have the required resources and capabilities to implement that strategy effectively and efficiently?'

There have been numerous research projects that have highlighted the absence of effective communication and co-operation between industries and universities, which they suggest could be a contributing factor in the perception SMEs have about the value and relevance of programmes offered to them by business schools (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2009; Carvalho & Da Silva 2003; Engelkemeyer 1995). This is further developed by other research highlighting that SMEs often express concern about the unsuitability of university outputs in relation to their business needs (Carvalho & Da Silva 2003).

A research project commissioned by the Association of Business Schools in the UK, (The ABS Report, Thorpe & Rowlinson 2013) looked to answer the question of how British business schools could better meet the needs of SMEs. The authors expressed a concern about business schools' engagement with SMEs and the impact they have in helping stimulate growth in SMEs. They went on to highlight the need to look more closely at the type of engagement required, and what does and what does not work in relation to helping develop SMEs. They further recommend that practice experience should form part of the design of courses and to help facilitate this, a practitioner should be engaged within business schools to inform the design and support the delivery of these programmes. They also suggested that this would be necessary to develop and improve relationships between SMEs and Business Schools and to improve measurement and assessment of the impact the programmes are having.

The ABS report also went on to say that the taught courses and programmes in business schools lacked relevance and application focus for SMEs. Finally, the report concluded what was being offered too often reflected the research interests of the academics, rather than the needs of the SME.

Peters (2006) questioned the drive that many business schools have to publish papers, particularly when he observed many of these are unintelligible to practising business managers. This may also contribute to the lack of engagement between SMEs and business

schools. As Lee and Greenley (2010), suggest this lack of relevance of business academic research to practitioners may arise from the preference many business journals have for quantitative research. These quantitative research papers have also moved into ever narrowing areas and this has meant that they are often incomprehensible to practitioners. Ivory et al. earlier in 2006 also observed that management research lacked relevance to businesses and, as such, failed to have impact on business practice.

The lack of engagement with not only SMEs, but the general business management community has also been attributed by Minzberg (2004) to the lack of relevance of MBA programmes offered. It has further been suggested, by Alvesson and Willmott (1996), that much management research has been focussed on preserving the status quo, rather than initiating change, which in a world that is changing at an ever-increasing rate may be another reason why the relevance and value of such programmes are not recognised by SME's.

Mitroff et al. (2015) are highly critical of the rational problem-solving models used and presented by many business schools, as they bear no resemblance to the problems that SMEs face in making decisions in complex situations and complex contexts. A possible solution to this is offered by Syed et al. (2009), who suggest that the contents of such programmes should include independent variables that are managerially actionable.

Earlier Gibb and Dyson (1984) recognised that the topsy-turvy world in which SMEs operate should encourage the adoption of suitable techniques or concepts included in business development programmes targeted at SMEs. It is notable that Gibb and Dyson, for example, are writing about these issues in 1984 and Ryder (2003), 19 years later, when reflecting on the same issues. The question relating to the relevance of business school business development programmes has been constant over the last 40 years, which challenges why nothing significant appears to have changed in the design and delivery of these programmes.

Many papers have explored the lack of impact business schools have had on the development of SMEs (Hodgkinson et al., 2010; Huff & Huff, 2001; Kerste & Muizer, 2002;

McClean et al., 2002; Bolton & Stolcis, 2003; Ghoshal, 2005; Keiser & Leiner, 2009). Starkey and Madan (2001) observed that universities are overly focused on rigour at the expense of relevance, and they highlight the need to bridge this rigour/relevance gap, and even question if this can be achieved. Bennies and O'Toole (2005) argue that rigour is not the problem, but more that the focus on rigour has been at the expense of other forms of knowledge generation. They also question how universities can achieve relevance if, as they observe, "today it is possible to find tenured professors who have never set foot inside a real business, except as a customer." (2005, p. 9).

Exploring what business schools are currently offering, Christensen (2010) suggested that business schools should be teaching SMEs how to think, not what to do because the situation in every SME is unique. Delanty (1997) also recognised this and suggested that the aim for business schools should be to release the suppressed knowledge that the SME leaders already have to help them recognise that they have this knowledge. This will then help boost their confidence and stimulate the SME leaders to act. To help facilitate this Carlile (2002) suggested that the delivery of business development programmes should take place away from the delegates normal organisational settings and, as such, away from any tacit boundaries that may constrain them.

The perceived lack of relevance of business programmes offered by business schools is not new, as illustrated in some of the literature already discussed. Pfeffer and Fong (2002) observed that business schools appeared to be facing a crisis, not just in terms of the relevance of their research, but also the relevance of their teaching. Other views expressed, relating to general business training programmes offered by business schools, are that MBA graduates, are seen by business practitioners as lacking leadership qualities, as they have been taught only to follow established management theory and practice, not to question or move beyond it (Mintzberg, 2004; Mintzberg et al., 2002; Ghoshal 2005). This is one of the reasons that the practical value of MBAs has been called into question since the 1980s (Anthony, 1986; Leavitt, 1989).

Pettigrew (2011) recommended business schools should be social science schools that formed relationships with other university departments, such as psychology, sociology, and economics. The objective being to form peer-to-peer relationships within the social sciences community. Pettigrew identified here similarities in the requirements of developing social sciences skills would lend themselves to the development of the soft management skills. This is something that should be considered, as SMEs live in a world of incomplete information and uncertainty, (Mintroff et al., 2005).

SME leaders have difficulty in relating to the models used by business schools, that show businesses developing in a linear way, each business moving logically from one stage into the next. As O'Farrell and Hitchins (1988) also recognised difficulties arise because SMEs do not operate in such a linear way. Garavan and O'Connell (1994) likewise recognised that SMEs have similar difficulty relating to the models that seek to train delegates how to analyse large amounts of business information. One of the key reasons they highlighted for this is that these business models they described as 'credible' are a mismatch with the realities of the SMEs' world, which is chaotic, dynamic and requires them to work with incomplete data.

Much of the research and many case studies that are often used in business development programmes just serve to emphasise these difficulties, that SME leaders have in seeing the relevance and value the application of these can have to their own businesses. In part, as in Kerste and Muizer, 2002 research, the case studies they reference are large organisations outside the SME sector.

Kerste and Muizer (2002) found that SME leaders' willingness and ability to look for knowledge seemed to be negatively correlated with concerns about time and costs. They also identified that SMEs are not completely convinced of the advantages of absorbing new knowledge for stimulating interventions into their businesses. For the SMEs, they suggest that the absorption of new knowledge is only interesting if this knowledge can be easily obtained and will lead to more efficiency, a higher turnover, or to competitive advantages. They conclude that these advantages should be clear and easy to attain, otherwise these

SMEs are likely to focus on their traditional way of working, for example, do nothing different.

The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs (2000) identified three trends that have created the need for SMEs to receive more effective business training. The first is because of internationalisation; some firms must compete with a growing number of competitors in other countries. Given this growing competition, they must apply themselves to inventing new products, services and processes and find ways to differentiate themselves from their competitors through innovations. Secondly, consumers make higher demands on the products that they buy. Products and services need to be introduced to the market faster and meet changing individual demands. This means that entrepreneurs need to know what the client's wishes are. Thirdly, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) developments mean that knowledge is spread within society faster and faster. Because of this, it has become easier for firms to get knowledge from external sources, but, at the same time these developments lead to a shorter life span for the exclusivity of new knowledge and product or service differential. This need for SMEs to develop differentials that originate from the intangible resources (Grant, 1991), in the case of SMEs these could be things like such brand, which, being intangible resources are harder to replicate.

An article in the Guardian newspaper, (April 27<sup>th</sup> 2018), entitled, "Why we should bulldoze the business school?", was positioned as a reflection of public opinion, which should not be ignored, as the public are a key stakeholder in the funding of many business schools. This article was based on a book by Parker (2018) who argued that most business school graduates will not become high-level managers but could just remain, as was quoted in this article, 'precarious cubicle drones in anonymous office blocks'. From Parker's observations the first thing that the business models used in MBA programmes share is a powerful sense that market managerial forms of social order are desirable. The second is the assumption that human behaviour, of employees, customers and managers is best understood from a position that we are all rational egotists.

A report by Goldman Sachs and the British Business Bank in 2016 identified the need to ensure that there was a wide range of accessible programmes available to businesses who

had a desire for growth. This report highlighted that experimental programmes, such as those offered by Cranfield University, Santander's Breakthrough Programme and the government sponsored Growth Advantage Programme offered in Scotland, could be looked at in order to draw out the best practices, in terms of having impact on SME leaders.

Davidsson and Wikund (2000) found that research that has been conducted on SMEs during the last 20 years has been increasingly fragmented, with these studies only covering a fraction of the variables that SME businesses experience every day, rather than a focus on the overall big picture. This has been described by Wiklund et al. (2009) as considering the holistic nature of business.

From the literature reviewed so far it appears that an underlying problem in relation to effective communication between business schools and SMEs is that SME leaders struggle to engage with or see the relevance of the business programmes on offer. Darabi (2013) highlighted a general lack of engagement between business schools and SMEs, which means that effectively communicating the benefits to SME leaders of any business development programmes offered becomes more difficult. In regards to this, it has been identified that one of the ways to develop and improve company relationships institutionally between SMEs and business schools is to improve measurement and assessment of the impact it is having on the SME business (Thorpe and Rowlinson, 2013).

### **What needs to change in order for business schools to deliver more effective business development programmes for SMEs**

Smith (2000), cited in Marzo et al., 2009) suggested that universities, whilst aiming to develop SMEs to be more entrepreneurial and innovative should be more entrepreneurial themselves and look to commercialise their knowledge for the purpose of economic development.

Cornelisen and Lock (2002) noted that in order to achieve impact and bring more relevance to theory laden concepts, business practitioners should be involved in the delivery of

business development programmes and, in doing so, present conceptual insights and information using symbolic language, such as descriptive stories and illustrations.

Whilst recognising that business schools' external reputation is heavily influenced by mass media, particularly business schools ranking Ivory et al. (2006) suggest that professional business schools would maximise their impact by providing well designed and well delivered programmes.

If this can be facilitated, the benefits of effective knowledge transfer, to SMEs becomes even more valuable. This consideration was also highlighted by Delanty (1997) who identified how individuals could be facilitated to release their suppressed knowledge and that of others, by harnessing the concept of individual and group reflective learning. This is important for this research, as it is not that they do not have the knowledge required, as they often do, it is that they often need support and confidence in applying this knowledge.

Whilst studies like Delanty (1997), seek to transfer learning from large organisations to SMEs by including a broader spectrum of case studies may facilitate SMEs seeing more relevance and practical application to their businesses.

Kawalek (2015) observed that business practitioners operate in an environment that requires them to apply some sort of practical reasoning. In other words, their thought process should facilitate the achievement of practical results. He goes on to observe that, on its own, this is likely to have little impact and needs academic underpinning to help bring credibility to the business concepts being taught and to provide confidence in these.

As previously highlighted, the value of academic underpinning of business development programmes has also been highlighted by Mole (2002), who suggested that business advisers who are facilitating business development programmes, and who do not reference academic underpinnings in their teachings, are unlikely to gain significant kudos or impact on business leaders participating in such programmes. Bennett and Robson, earlier in 1999 also suggested this, identifying that besides specialist knowledge, facilitators of business development programmes also need to demonstrate the legitimacy of what they are saying,

this suggests facilitators can achieve by demonstrating academic underpinning of the business concepts being presented. This legitimacy could also be achieved by facilitators working in collaboration with business schools.

It has been identified that one of the ways to develop and improve company relationships 'institutionally' between SMEs and business schools is to improve measurement and assessment of the impact it is having on the SME business (Thorpe & Rowlinson, 2013). In order to focus on how this might be achieved, the overall programme has been sub-divided into four segments, content, context, facilitator and network.

### **The value of the content in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders**

As previously defined, for this study, content means the use of hard data and materials, which includes business models, concepts and theories used in the delivery of business training. This research will explore the relevance of the content that is being used, and how it is facilitated within the delivery of business programmes. Also considered will be how the content can help meet the needs of SME leaders and be used more effectively in order to be trigger points for stimulating action within the SME.

In exploring the literature relating to the content of business development programmes, many research papers seem to focus on the technical accuracy of the concepts or models being reviewed, for example, Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), Karagiannopoulos et al. (2005), Grundy (2006) and Porter (2008). All these authors were critical of the reliance placed by business schools on the content of business programmes being delivered. This relates to the apparent rigidity of how these business models are being presented, which can result in restricting the thinking of the delegates of the relevance of these models to them and their businesses. These authors all suggest that business schools should be more ambitious about the way in which they seek to approach the teaching of these concepts.

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) were a key academic reference point for this research, as they provided practical and insightful observations that were relevant. They challenge the relevance of programme content, and the value of business programmes using concepts that are presented only as scientific models. They questioned the relevance to businesses, because if only presented as scientific models this assumes a clear business context and availability of relevant and complete data, whereas in business, the context and the situation is often messy and the information available is incomplete.

In a similar way, other writers are also highly critical of rational problem-solving models and how they are used and presented during the delivery of business programmes, as this bears little or no resemblance to the problems SMEs face in making decisions in complex situations and contexts (Mitroff et al., 2015).

Much earlier in 1970, Toffler was also writing about these issues suggesting that the way these types of scientific business models were being taught only resulted in creating corporate paralysis. A little later in 1983, Schön developed this thinking further and suggested that the way business schools were teaching scientific business models means that the businesses were focussing on today's known problems, and that by the time they had found a solution these problems had gone away, and others had appeared.

O'Farrell and Hitchins (1988) also questioned the relevance of business programmes offered by business schools. They observed that many of the concepts used suggest that all businesses move logically through different stages of development. This is something SMEs have difficulty engaging with because, as previously highlighted, they often operate in messy and uncertain environments that change rapidly. Churchill and Lewis in 1983 earlier had observed that many business models suggest that all firms go through stages of growth, and whilst this might be useful when looking back at an organisation, it might limit a leader's thought process when looking forward.

A striking observation was made by Bennis and O'Toole (2005) in relation to the content of business programmes being offered by business schools. They observed that business models, when applied to businesses where judgements are often made using messy and incomplete data, were often seen as statistical and methodological wizardry, which is often

contained in business programmes, and which can often blind, rather than illuminate the situation for SME leaders.

Gibb and Dyson (1984) explicitly recognise the topsy-turvy world of the business environment and go on to suggest that the adaption of any techniques or concepts should be included in the delivery of business programmes. Levic and Lichtenstein (2008) asked the question, is it not at least a little surprising that considering that there is such a lack of empirical evidence to show that the use of such stage modelling works why has it still not yet petered out?

This question remains very relevant today, not least because the increase in the availability and volume of data is increasing the speed of change in the business environment. The consensus emerging in the literature is that the digital revolution is leading to increasingly complex and rapidly changing markets which are difficult to predetermine and predict (Day, 2011; Leeflang et al., 2014). The availability of so much information could result in information overload. This reinforces the need to assist SMEs in how to selectively identify and use data holistically and strategically and not to try to become an expert in all the new technological advances.

The literature reviews relating to the content of a business development programme targeted at SMEs suggests, as Postrareff and Lindblom (2011) identified, that teachers with a content focus profile had neutral or negative feelings about learning and the development of teaching. They found that this created confusion in relation to the importance of concepts, particularly during the development phase of their teaching.

Gertler (2010) and Welter (2011) both suggested that when developing the content of a business development programme, particularly in relation to its relevance to SMEs, it is essential that the programme writers and facilitators recognise that processes within the SMEs domains are highly context dependent. Mason and Brown (2010) also emphasised the importance of this, as they found that any growth or development SME leaders experience may not be uniform or follow a linear process.

This all indicates that there is a need for development programmes to be holistically and strategically focused. Souitavris et al. (2007) identified that the most effective business development programmes for SMEs contain the entire portfolio of activities associated with running a business. It has also been suggested by Ulrich (1983) that to be effective, business programmes should not offer a collection of prototypical problem-solving techniques, but should be aimed at helping structure SME owner's thought processes in order to make the practical business issue the problem, instead of the problem being understanding the technical aspects of the academic model.

A key theme emerging from this section of the research is how important the credibility and relevance of the content used in business development programmes is for SME leaders.

### **The value of the context in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders**

Context is the way in which programmes are delivered, for example lectures, seminars, reflective learning, use of workshops, and is a key component in facilitating how business programmes stimulate action.

As previously referenced, Christensen (2010) observed that we should be teaching SMEs how to think. Çeviker-Çınar et al. (2017) have called this a type of design thinking, where the focus for the delegates on the business programme is on developing thought process rather than remembering business models and concepts.

Some writers (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002) suggest that business programmes should be related to an organisation's absorptive capacity or stage of growth, which would mean that an organisation is only able to take on new knowledge at certain times in their development. These writers 'however' only seem to have focused on the technical aspects of business programme design and have not explored the impact that

these programmes have had on the individuals participating in them, and the considerations of this for their businesses.

Ulrich (1983 p.22) talked of “...the art of making “the problem”, the problem...”and emphasised the importance of setting boundaries when seeking to solve problems in their businesses the scope of these boundaries being the context and focus of specific problems. Ackoff and Greenberg (2008) asserted that much knowledge is known rather than understood. If this is the case, knowing something, but not understanding how it might be applied may be of little value to SME businesses. This suggests that it is important to understand a few key business models and concepts and how to apply these in practice, rather than just learn about a multitude of concepts without insight into practical application.

Carson (1993) shared that the didactic style of teaching had some significant limitations when used in the development of small businesses. This highlights the importance of the nature of the interaction between students and teachers, and is identified as such by Kember and Kwan (2000) and Samuelowicz and Bain (1992, 2001). Their research all positions the value of a reflective and inclusive style of delivery during business development programmes.

Postrareff and Lindblom (2011) also considered the nature of the interaction between students and teachers and suggested that there are two types of mindsets that teachers have. One is a teacher-centred mindset, or way of thinking where students are considered to be passive in the teaching process. The second, which they considered to be more appropriate for business training, is a student-centred mindset, where a teacher thinks of themselves as a facilitator.

Similarly, research by Trigwel et al. (1994) and Kember and Kwan (2000) suggests that the choice of these two styles of teaching would often be dependent on the teacher’s mindset and approach to teaching, and should be a key consideration when asking business schools

to deliver business development programmes in this way, as it may require cultural change and a shift in the mindsets of some of the teaching staff.

Sutton and Wheatley (2003) also found this to be the case and suggest that this could be because the teachers of business programmes are focused on the contribution of research from an academic teacher-centred perspective, and, as such, the role that emotions play in teaching has largely been neglected.

In a similar way, Postrareff and Lindblom (2011) agree with this, and position that the role of emotions in higher education has been mainly ignored. They suggest that this is because emotions are often viewed as childish, out-of-control and primitive, all of which are things that do not fit comfortably in an academic world that is often controlled and civilised in its nature.

Postrareff and Lindblom's observations possibly reflect an underlying cultural problem in higher education in relation to the transfer of business knowledge, in that the importance of emotion in effective knowledge transfer does not receive enough attention.

Also, Zhang and Zhu (2008) suggest that a lack of focus on emotions and the value of emotion in teaching, in higher education, could be because teachers often hide their own emotions, which potentially can be seen as them being less authentic and, as such, the content of what they are teaching being seen to be less relevant to students.

A succinct observation about the value of this type of student-centred teaching approach was captured by Honey and Mumford (1989), who noted that the learning style of do, reflect, do, which also has its roots in Kolb (1984), was of great value when developing effective business knowledge transfer programmes.

As early as 1968, Churchman was highlighting that the crucial issue is often not what we know but rather how do we deal with the fact that we do not know enough? This is even more relevant in the rapidly changing world of SME leaders today, which is full of uncertainties about their macro and microenvironments. This has a significant impact when taking a holistic view of their business and the implications of any action they may take in one area of their business, and the impact this might have on their business as a whole.

The value of including SME leaders in the learning experience, which student-centred teaching can facilitate, was highlighted by Karlan and Valdiva (2011), and Marin et al. (2013), who also found that programmes targeted at improving business technical knowledge within SMEs are more effective if they are run as short workshops.

It was also identified by Brown and Mawson (2013) that business professors often forget that SME leaders need help and guidance in understanding how to interpret facts in the absence of clear or complete information. This, they suggest, is important in order to give SME leaders confidence in their own practical wisdom and the decisions they take, especially when they are looking at complex business information and considering different opinions from a variety of sources. Brown and Mawson (2013) also considered the importance of the application of practical wisdom, as executives who fail financially, as well as morally, rarely do so from lack of expertise. Rather, they suggest, they fail because of a lack of interpersonal skills and practical wisdom; something that they remind us, Aristotle called prudence.

The application of practical wisdom is a theme that appears in much of the literature reviewed. Mintzberg (2004), Gosling and Mintzberg (2006) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) also advocate that discussions facilitated as part of business development programmes should represent, as much as possible, real workplace situations, which, they suggest, provides more relevance to delegates, and so, will therefore be more likely that the delegates will reflect on the learning, and take practical learning insights back into their

workplace. The value of this type of reflective learning was illustrated by Shulman and Shulman (2007) in their model that shows practice, understanding, vision and motivation, all contributing to an individual's reflection process when taking business decisions.

A key theme again emerging from the discussion above is the importance of relevance, and particularly the relevance of the context, to SME leaders, and how this directly meets their learning needs.

The insights emerging clearly show that SME leaders do not want, or respond well to, a 'being talked at' style of facilitation and learning. This suggests that traditional styles of business school education need to be rethought in order to demonstrate that they are close to and understand the 'real world' in which SME leaders operate. As Johnson et al. (2015) position, the objectives of relating to entrepreneurs is best facilitated by a process that involves experiential learning and should be task-orientated and relate to their 'real world'.

### **The value of facilitators in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders**

As previously explained facilitators are defined as the people delivering a business development programme.

Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) considered the role of the facilitator when business schools were delivering business programmes targeting SMEs. They observed that, better connectivity was needed in relation to the ability of facilitators to translate the language of academic theory into the language that SMEs would understand in the application of business concepts. They also highlighted the value of facilitators being industry experts as they can bring practical experience to explain how academic research can be used in practice. Furthermore, they advocated that these facilitators should be student-oriented practitioners who hold permanent positions within business schools. This, they observed was because few faculty members also have practical business experience. They go on to suggest that to ensure a more effective impact on SMEs, academic facilitators need to be able to quickly identify with the interests and characters of the delegate managers and demonstrate an understanding of the business context that these managers operate in.

There is an abundance of literature highlighting the value of the facilitator having practitioner experience. Many authors suggest that this is a pre-requisite to the effective delivery and transfer of business knowledge to SMEs. Once again, this literature spans many years, with similar themes and observations being made.

The importance of the facilitator having practical experience, was expressed in the Times Educational Supplement in 2010, in an article that questioned if teachers who had no experience of a subject matter, could effectively teach that subject.

Karlan and Valdivia (2011) when discussing how participants' perceptions of facilitators shape the outcomes of business programmes. More specifically, in relation to the issue of participants not completing these programmes as they considered this a key feature that defines the success of business programmes.

Earlier, in 1979, Churchman also identified the benefits that facilitators having practical experience brought to business programmes and how they were better able to relate business concepts to practice. Churchman also recommended incorporating an interpretation of a real or lived experience by facilitators who have direct experience of business change. This, they considered would be of great benefit to business delegates, as sharing practical examples in this way would help give the SME leaders confidence to commence interventions into their own organisations.

Gergen (1999) observed the value of storytelling in business development programmes, going on to note that these stories or narratives need a valued end point that business leaders can relate to. In addition to this, other writers have observed that narratives play a crucial role in the structuring of our human experiences and identity, (Bruner, 1986; Gabrielle, 2000; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

It has also been suggested by authors such as Oakey and White (1993), Bessant and Rush (1995), Arnold and Thuriaux (1998) and Arnold et al. (2004) that the role of facilitators in the successful transfer of business knowledge to SMEs is best achieved if the facilitators see themselves more as agents to help the delegates understand what they already know and

to give them time to reflect on this, rather than just seeking to transfer new knowledge to them. To achieve this, these authors also noted that facilitators must have the skills and experience to communicate in a way that is easily understood and seen as relevant by the SME delegates.

A key factor in the success of storytelling by facilitators, in relation to business development, was the credibility of the individual or individuals telling the story, and how it was presented and the perceived truth of the story itself. As Vance (1991) also found, the stories have more impact if the person who experienced the story recalls it, than if the story is delivered second-hand. Cohen (1969), and Durkheim (1961) highlighted, several decades ago, the importance of the presence of the facilitator, and positioned that when stories, for example, were relayed on video or on-screen, they would not have the same impact as when the stories were delivered live.

Carson (1993) advocated the need to search for facilitators who are highly skilled in practice, but suggested that these would be difficult to find, as there are few tutors or mentors capable of being able to deliver business development programmes where effective learning can occur.

Gull (2010) reinforces the view that excellence in teaching should be expected and the mechanisms for assessment of the quality of teaching are focused too much on research success and significantly undervalue the effectiveness of teaching and its impact on the effective transfer of business knowledge, particularly in relation to SMEs.

Gull's (2010) report also positions that there has been a lack of leadership from business schools in the areas of raising the levels and status of effective teaching. Effective teaching, Gull found, was not recognised enough as a valuable attribute in some business departments, and suggested that this recognition is essential to facilitate the impact of the programmes being delivered.

Magenda and Chabeli (2005) identified that to be effective in transferring knowledge, facilitators need specific practical experience and knowledge, in other words, they have been there and done it. Facilitators need, they argue, to use language that programme delegates can relate to, and be able to communicate in a social, not academic manner, which suggests, as discussed earlier, that facilitators should engage in discussions with delegates, and talk with them, rather than at them.

Magenda and Chabeli (2005) also suggest that educators (facilitators) are set in the past and reluctant to change. Bullough et al. (2015, p.258) recommend that in order to design effective educational training programmes for SMEs, business schools should look to *'hire and train subject matter expert instructors, selected, because of their first-hand knowledge of the business environment and the surrounding context'*.

Over many decades, and particularly in the last 15 years, there have been numerous research papers for example, Gosling and Mintzberg (2006), Bower (2008), and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) all calling for greater incorporation of management expertise during the business knowledge transfer process in business development programmes. Research by Baldrige et al. (2004) and Tucker and Lowe (2014) also identify the value of linking experience with facilitators that are connected with the topics being discussed or the changes planned.

Mintoff et al. (2015) also reflected on this and found that business school faculties often still hire economists, sociologists, and psychologists to teach how to manage a business, but the individuals they hire do not practice what they teach as they are not business practitioners. Their paper highlights their findings, which are highly critical of the preponderance and use of rational problem-solving models, when the business world in which students will often operate within, they argue, will be different, and complex in both situations and contexts.

The suggestion that business schools need to bring more relevance to their programmes targeting SMEs was highlighted by the Association of Business Schools' (ABS) own research

commissioned with Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013). Thorpe and Rowlinson, in this report, observed that better connectivity with SMEs could be achieved by engaging more practitioners as facilitators. They also recommended that academic staff undertake regular placement in the real world of small businesses to understand better the needs of SMEs.

It should be recognised, however, that Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) made their recommendations in order to specifically satisfy a gap they identified in the engagement between SME leaders and business schools, so it can be seen that encouraging academics to work in SMEs could help to facilitate this. They also recommend that business schools should be more purposeful, and any practice-orientated teaching faculty should have practitioners holding permanent positions within them. They position that doing this, *'would help build more capabilities, in order to deliver more ambitious levels of business engagement'* (p. 13). They go on to observe that more impact can be achieved, in gaining credibility with SME leaders, if facilitators are able to quickly identify with particular characteristics of SME leaders, as opposed to facilitators who are unable to demonstrate a real understanding of SME leaders' operational contexts and problems.

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) observe, in relation to the facilitation of business programmes delivered by business schools, that the facilitators are often brilliant collectors of information, but despite this and their high level of confidence, they are often uncomfortable dealing with multiple and complex practical business issues in the classroom. This again illustrates how facilitators with practical experience can enhance the learning experience for SME leaders.

A key theme emerging from the discussion above is the importance of the role of the facilitator and their ability to gain the confidence of SME leaders, not only by how they share academic knowledge, but as importantly, their ability to use language that SME leaders understand, and their ability to share stories of their own practical experiences that help bring academic concepts to life.

### **The value of the network in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders.**

Network as defined earlier, means a group of people involved in the interaction during and post completion of the delivery of business development programmes. This includes both the delegates and the facilitators, when the facilitators transfer into being part of the network during group discussions and think tanks.

A network in an educational setting was defined by Soledad and Montoya (2017) as the linkage of people from education related communities collaborating with a common objective.

Literature was explored that looked at the value that a network has as a trigger point for change for SME leaders participating in business development programmes.

Some literature suggests that knowledge is more likely to be transferred and therefore be more successful, if it is transferred between people with similar knowledge, training, and background characteristics (Rogers, 1995; Reagans & Mcevily, 2003). McPherson et al. (2001, p.416) called this 'homophilic learning' and noted that people prefer to learn from homophilic networks.

Pittaway et al. (2004) in a similar way identified that networks can be a valuable means of raising issue awareness during business development programmes. As discussed in the introduction, the needs of SMEs are similar and are not constrained by global geographic location. Ceglie and Dini's (1999) carried out work in developing countries also recognised the success that network formation had on stimulating action in SME development programmes.

Evidence of well-performing SME clusters benefiting from strong networks has been extensively reported (Goodman et al., 1989; Pyke et al., 1990; Sengenberger et al., 1990; Cross et al., 2001; Rimmer et al., 1996) highlight that trust and experience can be expected

to be greater within delegate groups than between individual delegates. These writers also noted the importance of business networks and how they help bring credibility to ideas and build confidence in business leaders, citing the role that employer associations could have in helping develop the credibility further.

Mead, much earlier in 1934, observed that human beings have a sense of self that they develop through interactions with others and suggested that this could be achieved, “through sense of self that we construct the actions that we take towards objects in our world”. Locke, (2001, p 44) suggests that for collective action to take place meaning must be shared and a common language used in communications. This again emphasises the importance of using language and terminologies during business development programmes targeted at SMEs that the delegates can understand and relate to.

The work of Rauch and Frese (2007) also emphasises the value of networks. They highlight the importance of respect and influence within the network and suggest that these features can in themselves stimulate action. Oosterbeck et al. (2010) also recognise the importance of respect and influence in a learning network. They found that delegates need to have relevant work experience to make an influential contribution to network discussions resulting in practical outcomes. Botha (2006) supports this and observes that the perceived value a potential delegate sees that the experience and ideas others may bring to the network is an important factor when they are considering the value of the programme to them and, as such, can influence their decision to participate in a programme. Fuchs et al. (2008) also stress the importance and power of the network. They suggest that to maximise impact on stimulating action the network could even be extended to include collaboration with institutions and organisations in the SMEs’ local community.

Many authors have emphasised the value of networks in the successful transfer of business thought process and knowledge during SME development programmes. It is therefore interesting that from the literature reviewed there is little evidence that the value of the network is being recognised and harnessed by business programmes. A potential reason for this can be seen from the findings of Dini (1998). When reviewing the business development programmes being offered by business schools, Dini noted that these programmes were not

realising their potential by not facilitating the sharing of the insights and experiences of the network, specifically in relation to insights from commercial, innovative and technological ideas, that other participants in the network may have.

Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) also identify a lack of interactive relationships between the delegate networks and SME development programmes facilitators. They suggested that if these interactive relationships could be developed, the SME programme facilitators would have an opportunity to foster a closer understanding of SME leaders needs and agendas, which otherwise would remain invisible to them. Thorpe and Rowlinson also noted that practical problem-solving often requires an interdisciplinary approach and that strategic partnerships must be developed to improve collaboration and high-quality relationships with outside organisations. They go on to suggest that development programmes should mix formal instruction with work experience. They provide insights into SME leaders feedback to emphasise the benefits of this approach; one delegate observed that it had, “taught me to work better in a group” (2013, p15).

The Goldman Sachs and the British Business Bank 2016 report identified that further work needs to be done to increase awareness of the SME development programmes that are available, including a greater drive towards ensuring business owners participate in such courses. They specifically highlighted the value of peer-to-peer networks and that the sharing of successful case studies in these networks is one way of accomplishing this. They go on to say in this report that holistic support for SME growth should also be based on a long-term and intensive relationship between development programme facilitators and the SME leaders participating in these programmes. Whilst there may be value in the ongoing relationships, they suggest these are likely to add a considerable cost to the programme, a consideration that cannot be ignored. One key advantage of this type of approach, however, is the intimate knowledge which the education provider can develop with the SMEs and to meet their individual specific needs. The Goldman Sachs report notes that this helps to build trust between small business owners and programme facilitators, something which is crucial to their willingness to accept advice, and potentially their willingness to take action.

Girdauskienė and Savanevičienė (2007) emphasise that knowledge transfer is a social activity by its nature. They suggest that successful transfer of knowledge within networks includes the understanding of how network participants develop and manage intercommunications, which includes factors, such as structure, culture, activities, and control of teams. Again, this highlights the networks being an essential component within business development programmes and instrumental in affecting knowledge transfer. (Vinke-de Kruijf, 2013) also observed that learning occurs through group interactions and like Girdauskienė and Savanevičienė (2007) consider this social learning that may concern new insights into problems or solutions, as well as the improvement of knowing or trusting others.

Vinke-de Kruijf (2013) also noted that social learning involves changes in individuals' motivations, cognitions and networks. When harnessed constructively, they suggest that this can contribute to the development of collective outcomes on which future collaborative actions, such as those needed for problem-solving, can be based. They further identified the value of networks in the transfer of knowledge by observing that direct and personal communication in small groups has a significant impact on the development of a mutual understanding. They also emphasise that small group interactions should not be at the expense, nor diminish the importance of other communication means, such as organising formal consultation meetings or storing knowledge in databases and documents. They go on to say that learning is about being receptive to the shared experiences and environmental contexts of others. Vinke-de Kruijf (2013) called this adaptive management, which means that business strategies and goals are continuously adapted in response to new information from others. This information is often about dynamic, uncertain and ambiguous contextual situations, which reflects the business world in which they operate, which is, as chaotic and full of incomplete information.

Developing this theme further, Prince (1999) shows that the greater part of the knowledge that SMEs acquire is from their various networks, including suppliers, colleagues, competitors, and clients, with these networks being within a restricted geographic region around SMEs' own locations. Prince suggests that to a lesser extent SMEs also utilise the knowledge acquired from formal knowledge transfer programmes. In a similar way

Frambach et al. (1998) when referring to innovation, once again highlight that networks, and particularly network participation, are a key to the successful adoption of business models by SME leaders.

Exploring the literature further, specifically in relation to the value of the network in stimulating action in business development programme targeted at SME leaders, research by Mintzberg (1973), Johannisson and Peterson (1984), Aldrich and Zimmer (1986), Johannisson (1984, 1986, 1987 1988) and Aldridge et al. (1989) all highlighted the value of the network of people on the programme was not lessened by the fact that they were not necessarily from similar backgrounds or marketplaces, but was in fact enhanced by this. Carson (1993) also suggests that peer group experiences, for the delegates, was as important as the tutor's guidance in a small business learning environment.

More recently, Thomas (2019) highlighted the value of utilising the impact of network discussions in business development programmes targeted at SME leaders to help entrepreneurs solve 'real world' issues. Liao et al. (2003) identified the value of SME leaders being exposed to a network of other SME leaders in order to assist the absorption of business knowledge. They highlighted that this would help facilitate growth within the SME leaders involved in the network, by the network participants sharing experiences which would help gather and filter knowledge. Sarasvathy (2009) expresses the view that the value of networking and, something they call effectuation, for example, the creation of business ideas, had been underestimated in entrepreneur education and these components had a much greater impact in entrepreneur education than previously thought.

Johnson et al. (2015) also express a concern that what they consider has been delivered by business schools in business development programmes does not maintain practical relevance. They go on to suggest that relevance could be maintained by harnessing the value of the network, as, *'this could help maintain relevance, which, could be assisted by the fostering of a supportive peer learning environment, which, could help facilitate a*

*heightening of the network's trust which could lead to valuable exchange and group learning,' (p.16).*

In the same way, San Tan and Ng (2006), Gundlach and Zivnuska (2010), and Hytti et al. (2010) all identify that learning in teams and relating concepts and models to real life situations enhance students' passion and motivation for developing their businesses. Thomas (2019) also emphasises the value of a network and learning from each other by sharing experiences. Thomas (2019) continuing the theme of the network helping to solve 'real world' issues, suggests that this can be particularly helpful when businesses are considering the challenges of growth, which can be daunting.

Weick (1995) and Jones and Paulhug (2011) position that good theory is built through an iterative process which, includes discussion and debate as well as testing. Other writers, such as Johannisson (2000) and Wiklund et al. (2009) propose that the value of the network is a concept that should be integrated into education programmes targeted at SMEs in a more substantial way to enhance the effectiveness of these programmes. They suggest that a key output of the programmes being offered to help the SME leaders is the SME leaders' recognition and understanding of how valuable the networks they develop can be to their ongoing business development.

A key theme emerging from the literature researched above is the importance of the role of the network, and how important the views and opinions of like-minded people are to the SME leaders attending the development programmes. The insights emerging suggest that SME leaders, or others in similar situations, are very important in helping empower SME leaders to make decisions and take actions. The power of the network helps to develop the confidence of SME leaders, not only by how they share business experiences, but, as importantly, with the facilitator being a practitioner it is the way in which the total network can help bring the business models and concepts to life through the sharing of stories.

**The value of the combined and comparative impact these four components, content, context, facilitators, and network have in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders**

Going on to explore not only what value each individual component has in stimulating action in SME leaders, but also what the combined and comparative impacts are, nothing was found that specifically explored the relative value of the four components at the core of this research, or their combined value in relation to the transfer of business thinking and behavioural change that stimulates action for SMEs.

The extensive study commissioned by the World Bank, as referred to earlier (Valerio et al., 2014) considers some of these issues and seeks insights from research that has been carried out in different parts of the world. What is clear from the Valerio et al. research is that the challenges SMEs face and how they most effectively absorb business training is similar and, as such, insights from this research can inform the design of SME business development programmes in the UK.

Valerio et al. (2014) developed a conceptual framework detailing the combined value of three components identified in the development programmes they studied and that they considered stimulated action. For them, these three components are programme characteristics, context, and participants as illustrated in figure 3 below.



Fig 3. World Bank Conceptual Framework 2014.

There are similarities in the descriptions used in this report to that of this research as programme characteristics could be described as content, and participants as network.

The major component in Valerio et al.'s conceptual framework that is missing is the recognition of the significance of the facilitator in the whole process. The role of the facilitator is particularly important, especially if it is accepted, as suggested by Ayers (1971), that reflective learning is best facilitated by practitioners who can tell relevant stories and who have related business experiences. Valerio et al. (2014) also did not consider the relative importance each of the components being researched, in relation to what they describe as outcomes.

In the Goldman Sachs (2016, p29.) 10,000 Small Business Programme Report what was particularly interesting as it specifically identifies key components of business development programmes that are essential in SME programmes that seek to stimulate action.

*“Programmes of this type are often delivered in short but concentrated blocks, balancing content and process. Challenge is often provided through academic input or outside speakers of significance. Reflection and debate on how the issues raised relate to an individuals’ own businesses are developed through action-learning sets. Networks develop initially from individual cohorts of students to form powerful learning communities that eventually develop across cohorts, and between the corporate and academic participants. A feature of this programme is individual mentorship”.*

Two significant observations from the Goldman Sachs programme are the power of network discussions and then the subsequent introduction of practitioner experience into these discussions. They found that this introduction of practitioner experience made a significant difference to stimulating action by the SMEs participating in the programmes. As a result of the success of this, Goldman Sachs included more focus on the inclusion of practitioner experience as their programmes progressed.

Pettigrew (1997) and Sminia and Round (2012) explored the combined impact that the context and the content of development programmes targeted at the business world could have in facilitating change. Once again, these two components were explored in what was somewhat of a limited bubble that did not recognise the overall impact by linking these to the facilitator and the network of people involved in these programmes.

Whilst there was a lack of literature relating to identifying the comparative impact that the different components have in stimulating action in SMEs, there are many authors that have highlighted what they see as the shortcomings of business programmes provided by business schools aimed at assisting the development of SMEs. Of note the report commissioned by the Association of Business Schools, Thorpe and Rowlanson, (2013).

Observations and recommendations relating to the lack of relevance of business programmes offered by business schools, have been consistent for many years, as are the positive benefits that can emerge when SME leaders engage in purposeful and relevant

business development training (Toffler, 1970; Gibb & Dyson, 1984; Griffiths & Murray, 1985; O'Farrell & Hitchins, 1998; Kerste & Muizer, 2002; Minzberg, (2004); Mintoff et al., 2015, Thorpe & Rawlinson, 2013; Bennis & O'Toole, 2015). Once again this raises the question, with so much recognition over many decades relating to the lack of relevance between what SME owners need and what business schools offer, why is this observation is still being made?

What is evident is that research into how effective business development programmes delivered by business schools that stimulate action with SMEs leaders would be helpful, to all of the relevant stakeholders, the SMEs, the UK economy and the business schools. The benefits that SMEs can derive from effective transfer of business knowledge to them by business school facilitators who have practical business experience have been continually observed as a benefit to a programme. There is a challenge to achieving this, as the literature also observes, SME leaders perceive that the business development programmes offered by business schools have little relevance to them, and do not meet their needs.

The literature highlighted above, suggests that this could be a result of business development programmes often drawing upon case study references relating to large organisations and presenting linear models without supporting insights on how these can be adapted and used by SME leaders in practice.

### **Gaps in the literature that have emerged from this literature review**

Emerging from the literature review has been a wealth of rich academic references relating to conventional business programmes offered by business schools and their deficiencies. These academic papers span over 40 years and the observations have remained consistent.

These observations highlight the opportunity to develop more medium-term strategic considerations within the minds of SME leaders, while still fulfilling their short and medium-term requirements.

There is little literature relating to how to identify individual SME leader's needs, and then translate this into a business development programme that meets these needs. Pittaway and Cope (2007) also recognised that the motivations for SME leaders vary significantly in relation to why they became SME leaders and what they wish to achieve this identifies a need to better understand how satisfying these various needs can be facilitated by business development programmes.

As highlighted earlier, there is a wealth of research focussed on the needs and different characteristics of SME leaders. The insights taken from this research data, should be taken account of and reflected in the design of programmes offered by business schools aimed at stimulating action within the SME community can be developed to improve the impact the programmes have in stimulating action.

It has been identified by Zanakis et al. (2012) that entrepreneurs and SME leaders have a high desire for autonomy. From these insights, SME development programmes need to be designed and delivered to facilitate confidence in SME leaders participating in these programmes. The impact of the programmes is to help SME leaders develop their thinking and structure their thought processes when analysing their own businesses. As Christensen (2010) suggested the aim of such programmes should be teaching business managers how to think, not what to think.

This may mean that some of the business models may need adapting, the words used may need changing, and linear models adapted to reflect the situation of the individual SME leader at any moment in time.

Little changing in business development programmes offered by business schools that address the deficiencies identified could indicate an underlying cultural consideration within business schools in relation to the way they seek to interact with SME leaders, particularly in the appointment, use of, and retention of facilitators that have practical business

experience. Again, the insights emerging emphasise a need for facilitators to be able to use language the SME leaders understand, be able to communicate in a social manner, and to tell stories that bring theoretical concepts to life. This a radical cultural change for many business schools may be a step that would be just too big and difficult to take.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, it appears that the benefits of effective training development for SMEs will have a significant impact on helping them act to facilitate growth and development of their businesses. However, against this backdrop, there is a wealth of rich academic research, spanning many years, identifying the deficiencies of traditional business development programmes offered by business schools, particularly when targeted at SME development. This literature review has re-enforced the need for research that seeks to identify what are the needs of the SME leaders, and how the development programmes can be structured in a way that stimulates the SME leaders to take action.

## **Chapter 4 Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter starts by considering the ontological and epistemological positions that this research was conducted from and the implications this may have on the research. The philosophical positions are discussed, culminating in the philosophical position taken for this research, and, more importantly, what impact this may have on the research.

The methodology adapted is then explained, which leads to the research design that has been adopted. In the final section, the ethics and impact of this process is considered.

### **The ontological and epistemological position of this research**

This research is conducted from an objective ontological position and a subjective epistemological position. Buchanan and Bryman (2009) described ontology as the nature of reality, or what can be known, and epistemology as the knowledge of knowledge, or how can we know what we know, and the values that underpin knowledge.

Drawing on the work of Crotty (1998), this research is undertaken from an objective ontological and subjective epistemology, recognising that there is a reality that can be found and explored, whilst recognising that people are unique, and that what they say or do creates their reality which can be interpreted and understood. This position has led to the research taking an interpretivist methodology.

#### **Objective Ontological Position**

Ontology is about the nature of reality or what can be known. It is appropriate for research which explores a world that is best understood by examining the perceptions of human actors, (Hussy & Hussey, 1997).

This research takes an objective ontological position as, whilst not assuming one single truth, it does seek to identify a truth that is complex and rich, thus there may be multiple meanings, interpretations, and realities, which when combined with a subjective epistemology, people form their own unique understandings of that reality, (McGivern, 2013; Saunders et al., 2013).

### Subjective Epistemological Position

This research takes a subjectivist epistemological position which enables the researcher to be more consciously reflexive (Johnson & Duberley, 2010). At the core of the research are experimental programmes as Dewey (1988) observed genuine intellectual integrity can be found in experimental knowing. Subjective epistemology can put the emphasis on narratives, stories and interpretations, which try to find out new understandings and worldviews, (McGivern, 2013; Saunders et al., 2013). Alexander and Weinberg (2006) observe that epistemology can be experimental and involves bringing together philosophical reflections, questions, and experimental methods, usually associated with psychology and cognitive science. These insights have helped inform the approach to this research.

### **Objective Ontology and Subjective Epistemology**

Drawing on the work of Crotty (1998) research that is undertaken from an objective ontological and subjective epistemology position considers that there is a reality that we can find and explore, but that people are unique. What they say or do creates their reality that can be interpreted and understood.

This objective ontological position and subjective epistemological position, using the model developed by Burrell and Morgan (1979) lends itself to this research being interpretivist in its nature.

### **What it means to be an interpretive researcher**

As McGivern (2013) and Saunders et al. (2013) observed, if the researcher is immersed in the research, then, as Foster (1994) further noted, the process may be confused, cloudy, and may even be contradictory as there may be multiple meanings, interpretations, and realities. This could result in, as Johnson and Duberley (2011) observed, a multitude of truths emerging, some of which could be more appropriate than others at different moments in time. For this reason, the interpretation should continue until nothing new emerges. This being the case the observations of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and which this research acknowledges, the exploration may be influenced by preconceived expectations, and that considerations of reflection and reflexivity are important aspects of the research. It must also be recognised that interpretivists inject a host of assumptions in their analysis (Crotty, 1998). Another observation of the potential benefits of an interpretive approach to qualitative research, is that it seeks to assess all data, trivial and non-trivial (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017).

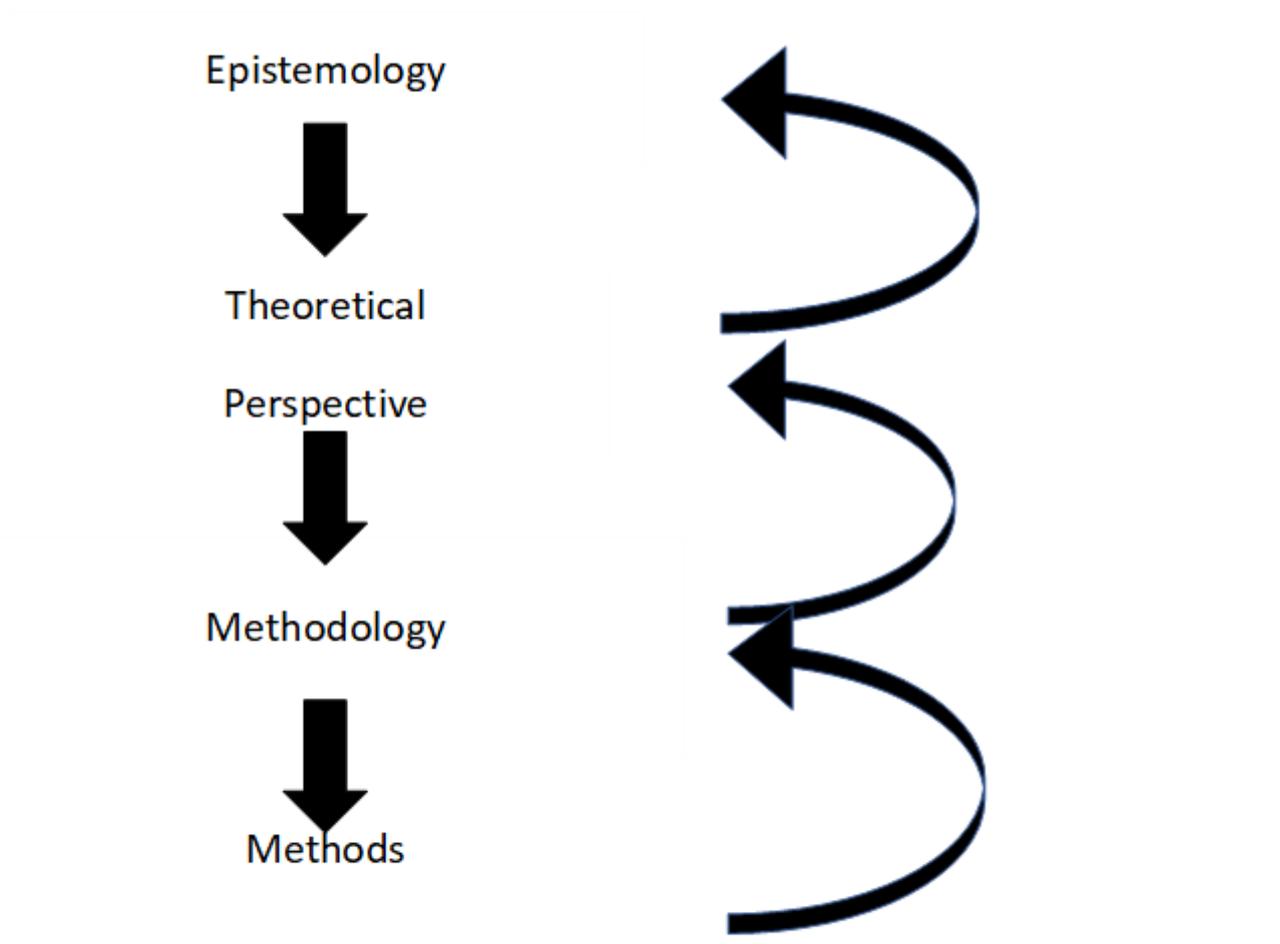
### **Philosophical position adopted**

Before embarking on this research study, it was important to understand the philosophical position that was the foundation of the research. More importantly, having identified this position, it is important to ensure that the implications of this position were considered throughout the research, including, the selection of questions asked, the collection and analysis of the data.

This is important because as Gergan (1992) observed words and the context in which they are used can mean different things to different people. Before identifying the philosophical position adopted for this research was that of a 'Reflective Practitioner' many other positions were considered. A more comprehensive description of this journey can be found in appendix 4.

An adapted model from Crotty (1998) helped facilitate this process by exploring the different potential philosophical positions, reflecting on these in relation to the ontological and epistemological positions, and having chosen, understanding the implications this position would have on the choice of methodology and methods.

Fig 4 Adaptation of the work of Crotty



### **The implications of a reflective practitioner's viewpoint.**

After reflecting on different philosophical positions, and the implications to the research of each of these positions, the philosophical position adopted in relation to this research was one of a reflective practitioner.

The implications of this for the research, as Bolton (2010) observes, is that reflexivity will be a key component of the methodology adopted. Schön (1983) suggested that a reflective practitioner has the ability to reflect on what they see with a view to continually improving what they do a view which has much of its origins in the works of Kant (1724-1804).

Locke (1690) suggested that we were born with a mind like a blank piece of paper but were gifted with the powers of reflection. Kant (1781) argued that we are not passive receivers of external data, but are affected by the bias we impose, based on logic and order to interpret what we see. He expanded this to suggest that we do not have knowledge of objects but have a phenomenon, and we should think about our own thinking.

Whilst Locke and Kant were writing many years ago, their observations are just as relevant today. The considerations for this research are that historic views and experiences can never be totally removed, and, as such, the influence of these should be recognised and embraced in the question, interpretations, and analysis used.

Bolton (2010) suggested that reflective practitioners examine practice both in a reflective and reflexive manner. The words reflection and reflexivity are often used interchangeably. This research adopts the descriptions provided by Hibbert et al. (2010) who noted that reflection suggests a mirror image, which allows engagement and observation, whereas reflexivity is more complex and involves thinking about the actors' (participants) interactions and settings. So, reflexivity involves focusing on the meaning of what is being observed, rather than just what is being observed and can bring depth and richness to the

research, as it is not only looking back on what has happened but is also seeking to explore what contributed to these things happening. Peterson and Chapman (2013) suggest that reflexion can help researchers reach a deeper understanding. This reflexive focus is by its nature interpretivist.

### **Methodology adopted**

As previously stated, the ontological and epistemological position, reinforced by the philosophical position, led to the research methodology adopted to be that of an interpretivist. Whilst there are different ways in which an interpretive methodology has been described, this research engages in interpreting the views expressed by humans with the aim of developing more knowledge about the social world in which they live, (Prasad, 2005). In this research, the actual meanings and interpretations of what the interviewees have shared when discussing what are, for them, everyday realities are explored and interpreted to see how these can be shared with others, as suggested by Outhwaite (1975), Guba and Lincoln (1994), Van Maanen (1998) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

As highlighted by Symon and Cassell (2012), an interoperative methodology is more likely to be interested in the output from reflexive analysis than reflective analysis. Also, as McAuley (2004), observed that an interpretivist approach seeks to find patterns and themes that can emerge from interview transcripts, which in turn can start to help the researcher in their understanding of the accounts being assessed.

The objective of this interpretive methodology is to try and bring some sense to the analysis, by focussing on how the interviewees in this research have retrospectively made sense of the events they are describing (Weick, 1993, 1995; Brown 2006). Recognising this need to look at things retrospectively in order to make sense of events, the primary interviews took place at least two years post-completion, after the programme had ended.

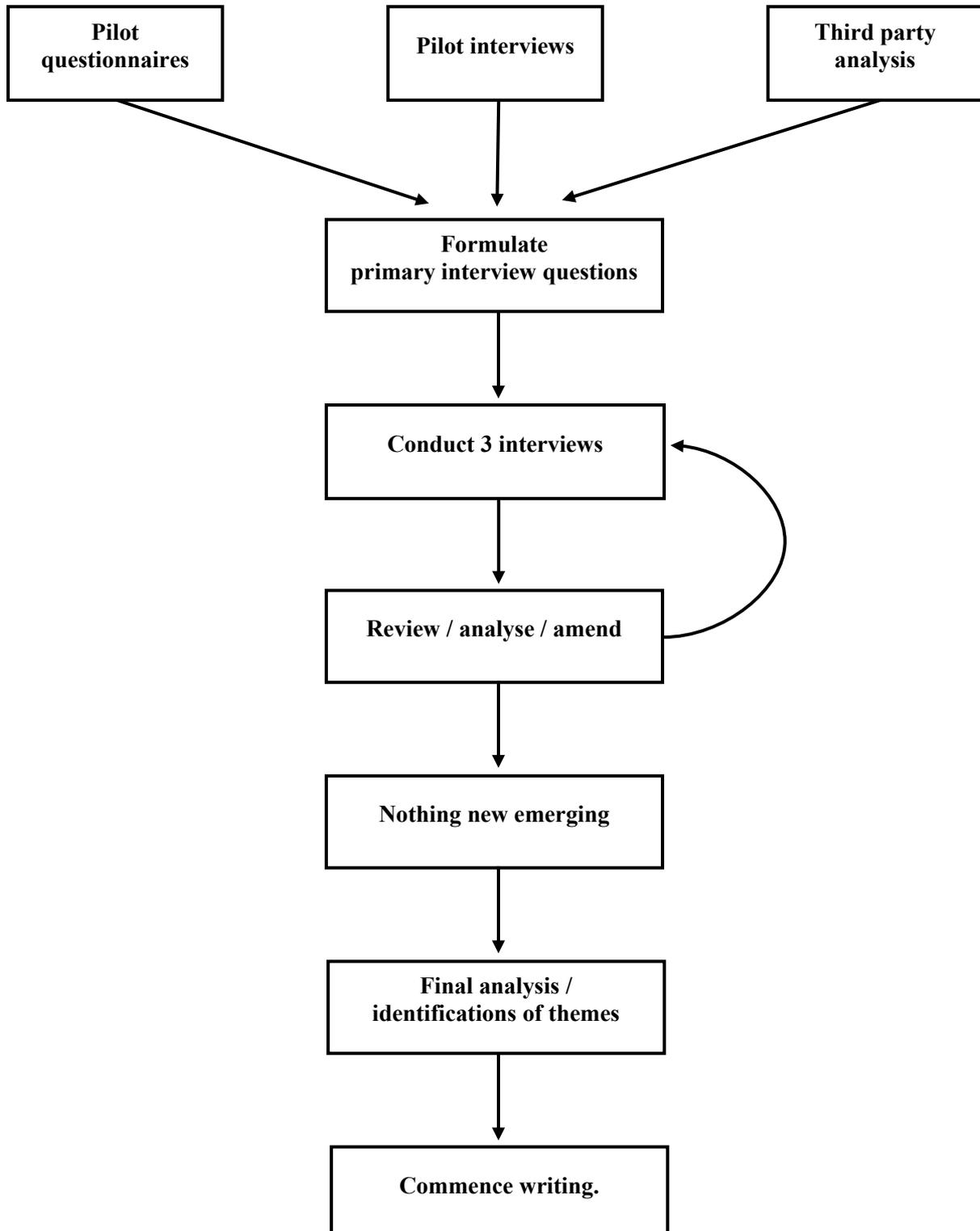
### **Research Design**

Taking account of the objective ontological, subjective epistemological and interpretivist nature of this research, it was decided to take a research approach involving thematic analysis. This thematic analysis was appropriate as it looks at the data from a 'bottom up' viewpoint, avoiding existing theoretical or practical commitments, so allowing themes to emerge and develop inductively from the data (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Data analysis is

often viewed as the most complicated phase of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000), and Thematic analysis can help bring more trustworthiness and credibility to the research, (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Chronology of the research process, Fig 5 below illustrates the chronology of the research process.**

**Fig. 5.**



### **Use of Secondary Data.**

The pilot questionnaires, pilot interviews and third-party reports on the experimental programmes at the core of this research, which as a group have been detailed as 'secondary data', helped formulate the questions for the primary research interviews.

Analysis relating to which of the four components had had greatest impact of stimulating the SME leaders participating on the programmes to take action stimulated by participating in programmes, varied significantly between the analysis and interpretation of the pilot questionnaires and the pilot interviews. Also, analysis of the data from the independent reports on both the EBGC and the LEAD programmes, also showed variances relating to what component of the programme the participants felt had greatest impact on stimulating them to take action.

These apparently varying observations highlighted the need for the research to seek a deeper understanding of which of the 4 components did, in the views of the participants, have greatest impact on stimulating the participants to take action. In order to achieve this deeper understanding, the primary interview was semi-structured nature, the vast majority of the questions being unprompted open-ended questions, overlaid with some prompted open-ended questions in relation to the four components of a business development programme at the core of this research. After the information and themes emerging from the primary interviews had been identified, these were compared and contrasted with the information and themes emerging from the secondary data., using different data sources, from both the secondary development programme data and my primary interview research data has helped to add rigour to my study, as suggested by Campbell and Fiske (1959).

### **Explanation of Secondary Data**

#### **Third Party Analysis**

Third party analysis of the programme called the European Business Growth Catalyst (EBGC), which was a totally independent report commissioned by Erasmus and conducted

by Aristos Consulting and published in October 2015. This consisted of ongoing questionnaires and interviews with 47 SME owners from the UK, Spain and Greece, consisting of 68% male participants and 32% female participants. The size of these SMEs varied significantly, as did the industries they were from. It was viewed by Erasmus that this mix of cultures, gender, size, and market sectors gave the research authority and credibility. Another independent analysis conducted by UKCES, was conducted by Doncaster Council, in relation to the LEAD programme (see appendix 2 and 3). The independence of the reports relating to the EBGC and the LEAD programme add credibility to this research. It should be noted that the report from Aristos (2015), on the EBGC did not have numbered pages, so the pages cannot be referenced.

### Pilot Questionnaires

The pilot questionnaires were completed by the delegates willing to complete the questionnaire after participating in the programmes being assessed. Eighty-two questionnaires were completed immediately post-completion. The objective of this questionnaire was to assess, in the opinion of the delegates, which of the four components contributed most in them taking decisions and action they would not have taken had they not attended the programme.

These questionnaires were completed with the agreement of the programme sponsors and the results shared with them. The participants on the programmes were also made aware that the data from these questionnaires may be used in future research projects, only those that consented to this completed the questionnaires (this was over 95%).

The data emerging from the questionnaires was analysed numerically in an objective manner, looking at the views in the form of mean, medium and mode averages, and in a subjective manner, interpreting the comments made by the participants.

### **Outcome of Pilot Questionnaires**

The delegates were asked how much they thought each component contributed to the relevance of the programme to them as SME leaders, which resulted in them taking action

within their own organisations. In the questionnaire, the delegates were asked to score the individual components on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being a low contribution and 10 the highest contribution. Analysing the data's total scores, the facilitator scored highest with 679 points, content came second with 654 points, the context came third with 635 points and fourth the network with 619 points. There were a total maximum points of 820 to be awarded by the participants.

Looking at the mode average scores (most commonly occurring) from the delegates, the role of the facilitator was rated as the most important when considering the ratings of the individual delegates and rated most important in five out of the six cohort groups. The content came second, the context third and the network fourth. The interesting observation here is that by using different averaging measures, the ranking of the components appears to be the same as in the total scores in the paragraph above. However, the differentials between the ranking were quite small.

What was also interesting was that 68% of the delegates had the opinion that they would take additional action directly as a result of participating in these development programmes, with 28% saying they 'probably would'. This indicates that the programmes appeared to have a significant impact on the SME leaders' decision making on them taking action.

### **Pilot Interviews**

The pilot interviews were eight semi-structured interviews conducted with the objective of helping in the development of the primary interviews that are at the centre of this research. The selection of the interviewees was on a convenience (or availability) sampling basis, (Lavrakas, 2008). The interviewees were different to those involved in the primary interviews. These interviews took place after ethics approval had been received by Sheffield Business School.

### **Outcome of the Pilot Interviews**

The interview data and transcripts from these are retained in hard copy form and electronically in the programmes' confidential, secure archives.

The insights that emerged from these interviews were very interesting. All the delegates interviewed had taken action that they would not have taken had they not attended the programmes. Two examples of the type of actions SME leaders had taken, could be described as major strategic actions –

- Identifying the key objectives of their business and what made them different from their competitors and ensuring that these were constantly highlighted to their employees.
- Realising that they were in a different business and market sector to the one they had perceived that they were still in.

#### **How the secondary data contributed to primary interviews**

The data emerging from the secondary data, the pilot questionnaires, the pilot interviews, and the third-party reports were then analysed, suggesting different views relating to which of the four components this research is exploring, was having greatest impact on stimulating action with the participants.

This emphasised the need for more in-depth exploration which would be facilitated by the primary interviews. Considering this need, the design of the primary interviews was such that it was worded in a way to test and explore more deeply the themes apparently emerging from the secondary data. In relation to the four components of the programme, prompted questions were added to the open exploratory unprompted questions, to ensure the participants reflected on these four components for a longer period and shared their opinions in more depth.

This process resulted in the following questions being asked during the primary interviews –

- First of all, could you tell me a bit about your educational history prior to participating in this programme?
- To what extent have you engaged with management education previously, and what was the nature of this and why did you attend?
- How was that experience for you? Please comment on anything either

positive or negative and what benefits if any did you gain from the experience either personally, or professionally?

- What is your perception of management education? Do you feel it generally has utility and practical relevance and if so in what ways is this important to you and what other things are important in making management education effective for you?
- What made you engage with this programme? Did you experience it as being different from other programmes you've attended and, if so, in what way what was this a good or bad thing, in your view?
- What, specifically, did you take away from the programme? In what ways, if any, did it change your thinking, attitudes, behaviours or actions?
- What, if any, differences has it made to the way you do business? Can you think of specific business incidents or decisions you have handled differently because of your participation in the programme? What was it? How and why did you do things differently?
- Was there something specific about the programme itself that enabled you to engage with the concepts in a way that changed your thinking or actions
- How does this differ from any previous experience as you have had?
- If I had asked you immediately after you had completed the programme, do you think your views would have been the same?
- If I was to ask you to explain this experience to someone else, how would you do this?
- Finally, for my DBA I have segmented the programme into four areas those of content, what was in the programme, context, how the programme was delivered, the facilitator, the fact that they were practitioners and not purely academic and finally, the network of people you interacted with both the delegates and the facilitators, how important were each of these areas, in your opinion in stimulating you to take actions that you would not have taken had you not attended the programme?

### **Primary Data (Interviews)**

How the interviews were conducted

Nine interviews were carried out with SME leaders, all of whom were owners of SME businesses. These were different participants to those interviewed in the pilot interview. As detailed below, some had a degree level education and, or academic business credentials, others had left school early and had no higher-level academic education. To preserve the anonymous stature of the interviewees, they are referred to as D1-D9.

D1: has an academic background including a BA in English and a master's degree in politics.

D2: has an HND in computing and has also attended private sector business development programmes.

D3: has a BSc in management.

D4: attended grammar school before entering the business environment. They then gained a Diploma in Marketing with the Chartered Institute of Marketing and later became a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. They have also attended a multitude of privately-run business training programmes.

D5: after completing their A-levels, they achieved a degree in IT and has attended numerous management training programmes including, programmes run by Cranfield Business School, University of Oxford, and Goldman Sachs in conjunction with the University of Leeds.

D6: has no higher educational training but has attended some private sector business development programmes.

D7: has a marketing degree and a master's degree in coaching psychology and has also attended numerous private sector training programmes. They also lecture in business operations at a UK university.

D8: has a BA Honours degree.

D9: has a degree in biochemistry and is a Six Sigma Black Belt as a result of continuous in-house training and development.

All had attended one of the experimental business development programmes that are part of this research.

Seven of the interviewees attended the core programme assessed the EBGC Erasmus programme. The other two interviewees attended similar programmes, written and delivered in the same manner. These other two programmes were funded by UKCES and the European Regional Development Fund.

The academic leads were identified as BS1 and BS2, both have responsibilities for the business development programmes at their respective business schools, which are, as previously described, leading business schools in Europe.

The primary research interviews were purposely conducted, as mentioned previously, at least 18 months after each interviewee had completed their development programme. This was to negate any immediate post-completion euphoria, and with the aim of recognising, as McGough (2013) suggested, any memories of the programme that they had participated in might be stronger and more meaningful, particularly, as Kelly et al. (2008) noted, when related to personal experiences. The advantage of time means that what individuals may or may not have done with the learning from the programmes can be considered.

## **Primary Research Design**

### **Selection of Interviewees for the Primary Interviews**

#### **Sampling**

The interviewees were selected on a random and convenience sampling basis. This has the benefits of simplicity and being relatively quick to organise but can be viewed as potentially facilitating bias into the selection of the interviewees (Lavrakes, 2008). This type of sampling is also considered appropriate for small numbers of interviewees (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). The potential to limit any bias was, as previously discussed, was continually reflected upon throughout the research. The potential interviewees, who had participated in the programmes were able to provide rich and insightful data into their experiences which they were willing to share (Saunders in Symon & Cassell 2012). Whilst of more interest is the quality of the interviewees and so the focus of these being less anxious about reducing bias, as all these interviewees were randomly contacted to check their availability on specific dates, with the first three confirmations for each date being selected, the potential for bias was lessened.

#### **Population**

The population of the sampling, referred to above, had little variation as all of the population were SME leaders and had attended the experimental programmes that are the focus of the research. The convenience sampling adopted in this research helps focus on a

homogenous group of people in order to provide an in-depth focus (Saunders in Symon & Cassell 2012). In relation to the number of participants being interviewed, rather than being over concerned about the numbers of participants interviewed, the population used was dependant more on what was needed to be discovered, focusing on observations and interviewing skills, ensuring that the number of interviews was sufficient to explore the stories shared, until nothing new was emerging, Patton (2002).

To achieve the collection of data until nothing new is emerged, Symon and Cassell (2012), recommended interviewing between 4 and 12 people, providing that they were from a homogeneous population. For this research, 9 participants who received the delivery of the programmes were interviewed to provide another observation on the same subject, two lead academics from the business schools providing the delivery of the EBGC were also interviewed.

## **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the primary research data. This was chosen in order to seek qualitative insights (Kvale, 1994). As noted by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000), that this will be a difficult but useful method of collecting data. As King (1994), (2004) observed this approach is flexible, understood by participants and provides insights into their views of world, which is the objective.

Following on from this, King (2004) also suggests that as individuals like to share experiences but may not often have the opportunity to do this with interested outsiders, they may exaggerate or be over-enthusiastic in their answers.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) position that it is not only the language and the words used by the researcher and interviewees, that are important considerations, but also non-linguistic phenomena, such as, behaviour, body language and feelings.

The process followed is illustrated in figure 5., with three interviews being conducted, and the response to these interviews were then assessed and reflected upon to explore if the

interview design enabled interview participants to engage and express their views freely and openly. These interviews were conducted in a relaxed and casual environment.

The themes emerging from each batch of interviews was reflected on and compared with the insights taken from the literature review and the secondary data. It was also considered whether the questions used in these three interviews should be amended in any way prior to carrying out further interviews.

The sustainability of any changes made by the interviewees was also reflected on, acknowledging the observations of Buchanan et al. (2005) who recognised that sustainability of change in thought process could be achieved by considering new working methods, performance goals and how improvements can be maintained over a sustained period, appropriate to the specific context of the business.

Twenty potential participants, all of whom were either SME leaders or university programme leads were contacted to assess their availability. Then carried eleven interviews in total were carried out, over a period of four months. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. After each stage of interviews, the data was reflected on, listening to, and reading the transcripts, to see if further adaption of the questions was required. It was not felt it necessary to change any of the questions or the structure of the discussions due to the active and relaxed engagement of the participants and the detailed stories that they shared.

The interviews were concluded after carrying out eleven interviews, as nothing new was emerging from the analysis of these.

### **How the data was collected**

The interviews were recorded using a small Bluetooth recording device, and in addition to this, notes were made during the discussion, as Patel (2014) suggested, of surprising

comments and where the tone of the delegates voice changed, or where their body language appeared to change or show differing emotions.

Each interview was then confidentially transcribed, recognising the affect transcribing this myself may have of the accuracy of this. Each transcript provided between five and eleven A4 pages of everything that was discussed during the interviews.

These transcripts formed the primary research data.

In this collection of data, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) observed, the interpretivist researcher would bring to any interviews their own bias, which should be embraced and viewed as a rich addition to the research (Strauss, 1987), particularly when looking to explore the lived experiences of people (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

### **Process of data analysis**

As Goulding (1999) states, interviews, by nature, are subjective, which means that the approach taken to interpreting and analysing data collected in this way becomes an essential part of the research design.

When analysing data there is a need for there to be an emphasis by the researcher on drawing and shaping their data and that this is achieved by their ability to reflect on and contrast the data with their own common-sense assumptions, was taken into consideration (McAuley, 1985).

The data emerging from these interviews was reflected upon, read and re-read and repeatably analysed over time, allowing sufficient time for the data to be effectively analysed as suggested in various ways by Moser and Kalton (1971), Sapsford (2006) and Bryman and Cramer (2004).

The type of analysis used in this research was described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as thematic analysis, as it was not wedded to specific theoretical position or methodology. Thematic analysis is also suitable for the type of 'bottom up' analysis that this research engaged in (Kenealy, in Symon & Cassell, 2012).

## **Reliability and Authority**

Breakwell et al. (2006) describe reliability in research as the consistency of the research approach over time and in different situations. Whilst McGivern (2013) and Saunders et al. (2013) suggest that qualitative data may be viewed by some as having low reliability, others question if the concept of reliability should even be a consideration in qualitative research design (Rolfe, 2006; Long & Johnson, 2000).

For Lincoln and Guba (1985), whilst the same methods of establishing reliability in quantitative research, such as probability findings, cannot be used in qualitative studies, degrees of reliability can still be established if researchers review their research approach and reflect on their personal bias. In line with this, and as Morse (2002) also recommends, this research sought to remain aware of any pre-understandings, experiences, and bias and to share any reflections on these.

The design of this research, it has incorporated a consistent approach to gathering the research data and to the interpretation and analysis of this to inform the reliability of the study. This includes providing descriptions of the research participants, as advocated by Slevin (2002), transcripts of the recorded interviews, together with handwritten observations relating to emotions and feelings expressed as advocated by Sandelowski (1993) and Long and Johnson (2000). This approach also seeks to identify themes from seeking out similarities and differences, taking account of different perspectives, as advocated by Morse et al. (2002) and Slevin (2002).

In addition to this Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) observed that interpretivism could assist in the attainment of authority by reflecting underlying paradigms, and recognising the strength of the arguments emerging, providing these related to the research objectives.

## **Ethics**

This research has been assessed as low risk. Acceptance of the ethics proposal was given by Sheffield Business School in July 2016, before completing the pilot interviews, and

questionnaires. A final Converis ethics approval (the computerised updated version of ethics approval at Sheffield Business School) was confirmed on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017, before conducting the primary research interviews. Throughout this research, respect and consideration for all involved has been taken account of at all times.

In addition to this, this research has not involved any vulnerable people, everyone participating in this research has consented to being interviewed and observed and no personal data is held about them.

The primary research interviews were recorded, but prior to commencing the interviews, all participants were asked for their permission to record, then asked to sign the agreement form (Appendix 5). The recordings were then transcribed and are stored on a password secure computer. Hard copies were securely stored. All individuals' and business' names have been anonymised.

## **Summary**

In this chapter the objective ontology and subjective epistemology position has been explained, which has led to an interpretive research methodology. The methodology that has been used has been explained chronologically and justified academically. The data collection and analysis methods adopted to interoperate the data has also be explained, and these findings and interpretations will be explored in the following chapter.

This is an appropriate approach for this research, as it explores the needs of SME leaders in relation to their own knowledge transfer which, as noted by Royrvik and Wulff (2002), has to be continually created and recreated in order to keep in touch with the macro environment. When exploring the needs of SME leaders, as Baxter and Jack (2008), advocated, this has been done in a real-life context, using a variety of data sources.

This reflexive approach throughout the research embraces what Kant (1781) refers to as thinking about our own thinking, recognising that we are not passive receivers of external data, but that our bias imposes a logic in order to interpret what we see.

## **Chapter 5 Findings: Primary and Secondary Data**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the research findings emerging from the primary research interviews and the secondary data. The interpretation of the data on the four components that are the focus of this research, and the themes that have emerged from both these primary research interviews and the secondary data analysed are reported separately. These will be reflected upon comparatively in Chapter 6. This chapter seeks to bring to life the insights developed.

To bring more context and objectivity to the interpretation of the data emerging relating to the views expressed by the interviewees the responses that were prompted and those that were unprompted, relating to the four components, content, context, facilitator, and network, at the heart of the research, have been clearly identified.

Also, with the same objective of seeking context and objectivity, to the interpretations made, details of the interviewees academic backgrounds were highlighted in chapter 4.

### **Primary Research Interviews**

The objective of the primary interviews, and key to the success of them, was to understand not only what the interviewees were saying, but also what they were thinking, in order to develop a better understanding of their world views.

Whilst most of the interview questions were open questions, in relation to the four key components the interviewees were also asked directive questions in relation to the perceived value they felt that each of these components had in stimulating them to take action within their organisations. Of particular interest, were actions that they took that they would not have taken had they not participated in the programmes.

The observations that emerged from the open questions, have been highlighted as 'unprompted' responses, and the those that were in response to direct questions relating to the four components, 'prompted' responses. Finally, this chapter concludes summarising the key observations and themes that can be taken from the interpretation of this data.

## **The four components at the centre of the research**

### **Content**

#### **Introduction**

The first component of a business development programme that is considered is the programme's content. Content, in this research, means the business models that were used as the basis for the business development programmes. Shared below are the key points emerging from the unprompted and prompted responses relating to the content of the business development programmes, that provide insights from the words of the interviewees who participated in the programmes and the academics responsible for delivering them.

#### **Primary Research**

##### **Unprompted responses**

##### **Participants:**

D1 observed that, when referring to their time at university and discussions about theoretical concepts, "*... that kind of really robust dialogue seems quite good in universities*".

In relation to the programme being assessed within the research, D1 went on to observe that, "*I kind of found the academic background stuff enough to pique my intellectual curiosity which, .... (was at) a level (relating to the academic underpinning) that (I) felt appropriate for me at that point in my business development*".

D2, observed, '*I think that (the content) was mainly good quality material, for us*'.

D3 commented, '*I guess I would have been looking for some kind of direction, some kind of legitimate direction, in the sense of this not just coming from a random friend giving you*

*advice, ...(but instead) it's like, you know, (the facilitators) were certified and qualified to give advice in this area.'*

D4 commented, in relation to the academic underpinning, that *'you felt as though you're in an organised setting, even though it was very relaxed.'*

D5 who reinforced this view, commenting, *'I like the fact that (the development programme) has an academic thread through it, so it wasn't just somebody who proclaimed themselves to be a business expert telling us how to run businesses. I have been on (programmes) like that before, and it hasn't gone very well, (for me).'*

### **Business School Leads.**

For BS2, *'it enabled good thinking, underpinned by appropriate good frameworks.'*

### **Prompted responses**

#### **Participants**

The prompted responses made by the SME leaders when asked how valuable they felt the concept and models used in the programmes they attended and how useful they were, in stimulating action within their businesses:

D1 shared that they, *'... kind of found the academic backgrounds enough to challenge my intellectual curiosity which, .... (was) just ...at a level that I felt appropriate for me, at that point in my business development. Had (the content) just been academic, without the practical, I would have quickly got a bit bored.'*

For D3 *'it was good, similar to (my previous academic experience) you know. It was reminiscent of the things I've done in University (learning about) the different models and how to look at businesses.'* D3 reflected that when learning about these models previously at university, they had not seen the practical value and relevance of these models to business, and commented that, *'...(the business models used didn't) ... help me that much,*

*because sometimes (trying to understand the business models), works in reverse, because it makes me panic.'*

D3 continued, 'it's not just some random friend giving you advice, it is like, you know, when actual people who are certified and qualified to give advice in this area.

D4 observed, *'I thought (the content) was really good. I thought it was well thought out and it flowed from one section to the other.'*

D5 commented that they felt all four segments were, *'great and made the programme unique.'* When commenting specifically about the content, noted, *'I think, because it had an academic thread, you knew it wasn't just somebody's idea of the latest thing, and so it was good. Yes, great, it was good content.'*

For D6 whilst they shared what the impact and value the programme had given them in practical terms, they were unsure how to evaluate the specific models used in the programmes. As they observed, *'yeah the theories, I don't know honestly how to assess them.'*

### **Business School Leads**

For BS1, *'it felt like, you know, a good level of knowledge for most people, who have a relevant background or not.'*

Again, in relation to the content, BS2 commented that, *'where I would argue this programme completely differed (to other business development programmes) in the sense that it wouldn't get into frameworks and the justification of the frameworks, it wouldn't get into, necessarily, the abstract, theoretical blue skies ideas behind any given framework.'*

What BS2 shared was that the focus was not on the teaching of the technical aspects of business development models, but entirely on how these models could be practically used to help SME leaders think about their businesses.

Having commented on how important it was for the concepts being presented to have credibility, hardly any of the participants could remember the precise business models used during the programmes. They could not remember the names or recall accurately the precise details of these models. However, what came across very strongly was that they all understood the value of using these models to alter the way they thought about things, and also the value of adapting the models to suit their own situation and help their own thought processes when making decisions about their SME businesses. This was highlighted by such comments as:

D2 shared with me *'I don't remember any negative feelings'* and, *'I can't remember the names of the models, but in terms of content, I seem to remember every single section'*. They shared with me that they, *'... walked away learning something new'*. When seeking to describe the content, they felt it had credibility and noted that, *'I suppose the word official or formal (to describe the content) is not quite the right word'*, but wanted to emphasize the value that they had taken from it.

D7 shared that they *'... couldn't remember anything particular now (about the specific models) but I do remember at the time thinking that (the academic underpinning is) what gives the kudos (to the programme).'*

Whilst D8 could not remember the names or details of specific models, they did share that they had used the models in their business. They gave an example and said, *'I tell you what, I can only put my hand on one thing that I probably used most (this) was the rate card.'*

D9 again, was another of the interviewees who did not remember anything specific about the content, but commented that, *'the way (the programme content) was broken down, made it exciting to understand.'*

## **Secondary Data**

In the Aristos Report (2015) relating to the EBGC, the university leads observed that it was *"Interesting to learn about entrepreneurs' problems. Interesting to see problems are the same amongst different sectors."* These comments emerged from the feedback from over 70 SME leaders from three different countries, varying markets sectors, and businesses of

varying size and age. However, reflecting on this and supported by the literature, this could have been anticipated, as the lack of understanding that business schools have in relation to the needs of SME leaders has been identified in academic papers for many years. Without this understanding of the SME leaders, needs how can appropriate content be developed?

A positive observation from the Aristos report (2015) was that all of the universities involved now believed that they have a better understanding of the training needs of SME leaders across Europe. Whilst this seems to be good, the report has not sought to explore what universities will do with this knowledge, or indeed if the universities plan to make any changes as a result of this learning experience.

As explained in Chapter 4, the quantitative data emerging from the pilot questionnaire indicated that the content of the experimental programmes was considered by the participants to be the second most important component. This conflicts with the analysis of the qualitative data emerging from the primary and secondary data.

## **Summary**

The key theme emerging from the primary and secondary data analysis is that the credibility of the accuracy of the content of the models used in the programmes was not questioned and viewed as adding value by SME leaders. However, the participants did consider the precise details of the content to be an important factor in stimulating them to take action. This is also not to suggest that SME leaders consider the credible content relevant to them. What this suggests is that the quality and credibility of the content used by business schools has value, the question is how this content can be better harnessed in order to more effectively stimulate action in SME leaders. The theme developing of relevance is discussed later in this chapter.

## **Context**

### **Introduction**

For this research, as explained earlier, context means the way in which the programmes are delivered.

The business programmes that form the basis of the research did not consist of long lectures by the facilitators, and they did not seek to justify the business models used. Instead, the programmes involved short introductory sessions, highlighting the potential relevance of each academic business model, and discussed with the SME leaders attending the programmes.

Following the introduction of each business model, the SME leaders were split into small groups of three or four people, which were called 'think tanks.' In these think tanks, the SME leaders had an opportunity to discuss the models and the relevance of the models to their own SME businesses. They were encouraged to challenge each other on the way in which they could use the models, specifically in relation to the needs of their own organisations.

During the interviews, there were more references to the context of the business programmes in their unprompted comments shared than there had been in the responses relating to content. Once again, however, as it did in the stories SME leaders shared, regarding content, the passion relating to the value of the context of the programmes came across more strongly in the prompted responses. A potential reason that the context, or the way in which the programmes were delivered, was not commented upon more in the unprompted sections of my interviews by the SME leaders, in contrast to the comments made from the prompted questions, was because, for them, the programmes flowed smoothly, and so the context was almost unnoticed. This view is supported by such comments as:

### **Unprompted**

D4 *'you felt as though you were in an organised setting, even though it was very relaxed.'*

D5, when reflecting on the context and the short plenaries that were part of it, commented that this worked for them as, *'I do not work very well in lectures in general. I think people have an attention span may be 10 to 20 minutes max.'*

D3 shared that, *'I could engage a lot more than what I did in university, .... (the development programme) was more interactive.'*

D8, commenting on the context and the way the programme was structured, shared that they liked the approach as it allowed them to, *'learn theory, as well as applying the theory.'* As a result of the way the programme was structured, they shared, *'I was more attentive to (the programme itself) because, I really came to know (the) insights (the models provided), and how they (helped me) challenge or approach things.'*

### **Prompted responses**

#### **Participants**

D1 when referring to the short background plenaries explaining the theory, followed by breaking quickly into 'think tank' group discussions, observed that *'the balance felt about right.'*

D2 shared, *'I don't think, academically speaking, if it was just an eight-hour lecture, where I was just being talked at all day, I think I'd have probably switched off after so long. The short breakout sessions and communication with peers within the group, that worked really well.'*

For D4, the context was particularly important because of their fear of information overload. *'I found (the context), really helpful because, I easily get overwhelmed, because I try to take too much on. So, my personal style is to get something, go away, perfect it, and move onto the next thing.'*

D6 also observed, in relation to the way in which the programme was delivered, *'I felt it was a good idea, because normally if you do (any training), you know, you sit there all day and then you may get a sheet of paperwork to walk away with.'*

D7 commented, *'I actually thought the way (the programme was presented) was probably where I got the most benefit, ... discussing (the concepts) with somebody else, who is not even in your sector,'* and as a result of this, *'I got new ideas.'* Which, for D7, meant the

context of the programme stimulated them to think about things in a way that they would not have done before.

For D8, when asked their opinion of the context in which the programme was delivered, commented, *'Incredible. It is the way I like it'*. They went on to share that, *'the short 15-minute sessions, then go to the practical sessions was ideal for me and that's how I would rather be taught for learning as I go forward.'*

D8 went on to observe, 'when compared to other programmes they had attended, the benefit to them came from the context *'it's the way it was approached. It was different because (of the approach) .... I took learnings from the course.'*

D9 also observed that this interaction was important to them, and noted that, *'I wouldn't have (understood or remembered the concepts and nothing would have) sunk in if the delivery (of the concepts) just (used) formal text.'*

D4 commented *'(the context of the programme) gave you a chance to go away and do something about what you've been thinking about.'*

For D5 the context was, *'yeah fantastic, that for me is how I learned, as I take the idea of a concept and then begin to apply it, and then you will need time, just (to) pause, (and reflect), you know, especially, when you know, you're dealing with many things day-to-day.'*

D6 felt this programme, *'just set the ball in motion; have a look at this topic subject, then run with it yourselves,'* and observed that they found this approach more valuable and relevant to them as an SME leader.

D9 also reflected, *'that (the context) was actually the big turning point.'* They went on to say, *'I need to take a concept (that is being) taught, think about the concept thoroughly, interlocking the sections, and then apply it to something, and that's what we did (during the programme)..... so, that meant (the concepts) stayed in my head, and I got excited, because I understood it.'*

## **Business School Leads**

BS1, when reflecting on the context and the way in which it was delivered, commented, *'I think this was the best part of the course, but I think this combination, with, you know short courses, (the plenaries, and the), post (plenaries) breakout sessions was really good value for the programme, and that is what distinguishes it from other training.'*

BS2 also observed that, *'I think (the context) is very important.'* They reflected that this was because of the nature of the discussions the delegates engaged in, and commented that the delegates, *'would discuss how (the concepts) might be applied in their own different businesses and then they would each challenge one another in how that worked, and (doing this) gave them opportunities to explore their own limitations.'*

Also, in relation to the context of the experimental programme, the interviewees enjoyed and found valuable the reflexive style of the programmes.

## **Secondary Data**

There was little direct reference in the Aristos report (2015) to the context in which the EBCG programmes were delivered. Throughout this report, it is inferred that the context was appropriate in that it is noted that the delegates felt that the context was valuable to them, as it not only involved them as individuals, but also encouraged opinions and discussions between all delegates. This type of reflective, Kantian learning highlighted in the report was noted, by the SME leaders and the universities involved, to be the right approach for the development of business knowledge and skills for SME leaders.

From the secondary data, 96% of the delegates, when asked, said they were happy with the context used during the programme. The views expressed by the delegates, and contained in the Aristos report (2015) illustrate that they felt there was, *'a good balance between practice and theory and a good innovative approach to learning, in the way in which (the programme) was delivered'*. This observation suggests that long structured 'talk to' style lectures were not welcomed, but that involving the delegates in discussions about the concepts presented with their co-delegates, was highly valued as it facilitated recognition of how these concepts could be practically applied and used to stimulate action.

A quote taken from the surveys carried out as part of the LEAD report in relation to the context of the programme is representative of much of the feedback from the survey, and states that this was an, *'excellent programme and very useful and (had) a fantastic structure (context)'*.

## **Summary**

Reflecting on the way the programmes were delivered, and the data emerging from the primary interviews and secondary data, the short sharp explanatory sessions about the business models used, followed by small group discussions, with the delegates relating the models to their own businesses were both strong contributors in helping SME leaders recognise the relevance and value of the concepts being discussed to their own businesses.

From the stories that SME leaders shared, there were also a number of references that noted that had it been a university style lecture, without the interaction and discussions of the concepts being presented, then many of the SME leaders would have turned off and stopped listening. It was also interesting to note that the business schools involved in the programmes commented that the way it was delivered was a key ingredient for them, in assessing the success of the programmes. These observations emerging from the experimental programmes indicate that when designing development programmes targeted at SMEs, they talked at lecture style of delivery is not suited to the most effective stimulation of action in SME leaders. A more inclusive and reflexive style of delivery needs to be embraced.

## **Facilitator**

## **Introduction**

The third component of a business development programme is the facilitator. Facilitator means the person who delivers the programme, which in the experimental programmes that are the subject of this research are practitioners with academic understandings.

There were thirteen facilitators of the programmes that are at the core of this research. All of the facilitators had a minimum of an MBA qualification, and all were practitioners in their own businesses.

During the interviews, there were more references to the facilitator of the business programmes in the unprompted comments shared than there had been in the responses relating to content and context. However, unlike in the stories SME leaders shared regarding content and context, the passion relating to the value of the facilitator of the programmes came across equally strongly in the prompted responses.

Shared below are some of the unprompted and prompted responses relating to the facilitator of the business development programmes to provide insights from the words of the interviewees.

## **Unprompted responses**

### **Participants**

The combination of the practitioners delivering the programmes not only having practical experience but also having a good academic understanding of the concepts being presented was referred to by the interviewees. There were constant comments on the value of this practical experience to bring relevance to the participants of what was being presented:

For D2, the facilitator was *'someone with real-life experience and (understood), the theories of the business (models), as well, I mean, it came across. I've been in courses in the past where you get trainers that only know the theory, never (having) been there in practice. I think that was why mainly (the programme) ended up exceeding my expectations. (it was a real-life sort of experience.'*

D3, when sharing stories about their previous academic experiences in relation to business training, felt that the training could have been improved if *'it (had used) examples of small*

*businesses, maybe even local small businesspeople coming in to talk to us and having that interaction, rather than, you know, here is a journal or case study about (this model in a large corporate setting.'*

D4, when comparing the experimental programmes of this research to other programmes, commented about the lack of relevance, observing, *'that was what made me leave other programmes, so to be on a course where somebody, who had been successful, and (who) said, it's not about money, it's about whether you're enjoying it and how it fits in with, actually, what you want out of your life, without getting airy fairy.'* This, for D4, was what they found most beneficial.

D5 shared similar insights, noting that, *'for me, one of the amazing things about this programme was that you guys were delivering it and you had genuine business experience, and you have your own businesses and you know what the day-to-day challenges were like (and) were able to refer to real-world experiences.'*

D8 shared *'the engagement isn't there for me anyway. Because of our business, I want to be able to take things away with me to use (in) my work. If I'm learning from someone who has not actually got experience, it (does not have) the same gravitas or the same weight to it...(I) definitely think (the facilitation) works better if it comes from someone who's got (business) experience behind them.'*

D9, when reflecting on their previous business degree experience, was quite disillusioned with the facilitators on their course, and commented, *'they didn't teach us anything. My lecturers didn't know. They were basically people that failed (in) industry.'* Whilst, this is a personal perspective, what D9 did share is that the business learning that they took away was *'blue sky, but it has no (practical) function.'*

### **Prompted responses**

#### **Participants**

D1 observed that *'I think having people who have done it themselves, practical SME scars and all, it's a good blend and I think that's about right for me.'*

For D3, facilitators having practical, real business world experience was important to them. They shared, *'I think (practical experience) definitely makes a huge difference and maybe that would have been more beneficial in my university if some of my lecturers said, I have a side business and actually, I have worked in XYZ. Maybe I would have gravitated towards them more or sat in the lectures and not gone home.'*

Similar insights were expressed by D4, who shared that it was important to them that the facilitator had practical experience, and commented, *'I thought it was vital'*, and went on to say, *'I just firmly believe you can't be told how to go out and do something by some dude who just teaches in the classroom, and has never actually experienced the challenges you will face (as a SME leader).'*

D7, when commenting on their own academic experience said, *'it's purely (my) opinion, probably (I would) say the biggest thing would be (that) the theory is all well and good, but it's about real-life experience.'*

D8, when asked about the importance of the experience of the facilitator, said that they felt, *'it's pivotal to the engagement,'*

### **Business School Leads.**

BS2 shared similar insights about the importance the facilitators' practical experience had in bringing the learning to life for the delegates, and commented, *'I don't think it could have worked without it. I'll be perfectly honest, I think the idea that you can teach business without having experienced business is complete tosh.'* BS2 went on to say that, *'secondly, the world is in need of special people, who can link theory to practice. Basically, the problem is, with practitioners, a lot of the time, (is) that (they) have no theoretical underpinning, so it just becomes, like, a very unstructured thought process, without any discipline and a lot of ego in there. And the problem with academics, (is that they do not have any) practice (experience), so we end up with the situation where they have no stories or experiences that they can really demonstrate, (to) give (the delegates) a depth of understanding about the issues involved.'*

### **Facilitator telling stories**

Another theme emerging from the interviewees comments relating to the facilitators of the experimental programmes was their ability to 'tell stories' about the concepts being discussed

### **Unprompted**

#### **Participants**

D3 observed, *'I gravitated most towards the sharing of stories (and the) sharing of experiences, because for me, I learnt a lot (from doing this)'*. They described the programme, as *'like a taste, or snapshot of what you would do in a business, however, it's more practical. It's aimed at (the) practical side (for) people in practice or going into practice.'*

#### **Prompted responses.**

#### **Participants**

For D5, this was also very important, and they noted that having facilitators who are practitioners felt, *'yeah, I think (this is) massively important. I think being able to draw attention to real life examples was the most rewarding experience, and (the facilitator) being able to relate generally, as a small business owner'*. D5 also found that this added, *'to the credentials of this person.'*

D6 shared similar insights and noted how this inspired confidence in them. As they reflected, *'so, for us to be able to see that (the facilitator doesn't, just teach it, (they are) still doing it, I think it gives a lot of value to us. If (they) can do it, why can't we?'*

D7 felt that the practical experience of the facilitator was, *'One hundred percent (important). I don't think I would have gone to do it if it was an academic programme.'* They went on to say, *'so I like theory, but it's the power in the story. (A non-practicing facilitator) wouldn't be telling us about (their) factories or (sharing) here I was doing this.'*

Likewise, for D9, the practical experience of the facilitator, *'was the biggest factor because they (the facilitators) were doing it (running their own businesses). I felt if I was asking a question, their opinion would be relevant, because they had gone through it, so they know it. It was lovely, never once did anybody say, "look at me, I'm so successful." Everybody,*

*including yourself, were like, I've messed up major, sometimes'. D9 went on to say, 'so, it (the facilitator) made it real life, and it was really relevant, because I've lost faith in academia.'*

### **Business school leads**

BS1 commented that they believed that the practical experience of the facilitators added value to the delegates because, *'you are actually dealing with people who have, not only studied business, they have been successful in business, and they have set up their own company. So, it's really important, the combination of academic (knowledge) and practitioners (experience).'*

### **Secondary data**

The interviews conducted by Aristos about the EBGC programmes were consistent with, and reinforced the findings emerging from the primary interviews relating to the importance of the role of the facilitator. Shared below some of the quotes taken from this secondary data (Aristos 2015):

*'The facilitators were very attentive leaders and tutors who seemed genuinely interested in creating successful businesses.'*

*'Really interesting speakers; made me think about my company's future'.*

*'All material has been clearly explained in plain language, easy to understand'.*

*'The trainer provided us with useful guidelines in order to apply what we learned in our own business model.'*

*'I found the facilitator's ability to relate the concepts to real situations added to the credibility and relevance of my own situation.'*

*'The facilitator showed how they apply the tools and techniques which were being taught.'*

*'The facilitators interaction made me really think about my own company.'*

## **Summary**

The importance of the facilitator having practical experience, and the value this brings to the learning experience and practical utility of the concepts being discussed, for the SME leaders, is a key theme that has emerged throughout all of the research data.

This importance of the facilitator who is used on a SME business development programme, being a practitioner who can bring academic concepts to life and make them real for the SME leaders was consistently highlighted by the SME leaders interviewed as being key to ensuring that the programme had impact and relevance for them.

It was not only what the SME leaders said in relation to the value of the facilitators having practical experience, but the depth and strength of the feelings they were expressing, was evident from the passion in the tone of voice and from the body language of the SME leaders when discussing this.

Another key theme that has emerged is that it is not facilitators having practical experience alone that is important, but the combination of them having practical experience and academic knowledge. This was specifically highlighted when SME leaders shared stories of development programmes they had attended which had been run by, 'successful business people,' but which did not include academic concepts to support the discussions. The absence of the academic underpinning led to the SME leaders questioning the value of such business programmes for them.

These findings indicate that in order to improve the stimulation of actions in SME leaders, the facilitators chosen to deliver these programmes need to be able to relate the business concepts being introduced, to the 'real world', and from sharing their own experiences.

## **Network**

### **Introduction**

The fourth component of a business development programme explored was the value of the network. The network means the people involved in the programmes the SME leaders and the facilitators, as defined at the start of this thesis.

During the interviews, in the same way as when exploring the facilitator component, there were more references to the network of the business programmes in the unprompted comments SME leaders shared than there had been in the responses relating to content and context. Once again, however, unlike in the stories SME leaders shared regarding content and context, the passion relating to the value of the network in the programmes came across equally strongly in the prompted responses.

Shared below are some of the unprompted and prompted responses, relating to the network in the business development programmes to provide insights from the words of the interviewees.

A strong theme emerging from the interviewee's perceptions of the value of the network, was to have discussions with like-minded people in similar situations.

### **Unprompted responses**

#### **Participants**

D1 shared, *'I can very quickly understand that we were 97% the same as everyone else in that room, that people in commercial businesses were kinda, 97% of the delegates. I think that's important.'*

D2 expressed that *'There's also the peers that were there in similar situations, that gave me that second opinion, gave me time to think and change the way I operated the business. (This) made me take more time out of the day-to-day running and look at the business as a whole.'*

D2 went on to reflect, *'you would sit with other like-minded individuals, who were small business owners and operators and there would be a format that you would follow, but it would be a case of working in groups, for the five people sitting around a table, discussing*

*subject matter, putting your life scenarios down of your current business situation, then hearing how other businesses would approach it.'*

In a similar way, D4 noted, *'it was really useful to speak to people, even if their businesses are completely different and they have a different-sized business. I think it is really good to speak to other people, there is always some sort of familiarity between them and there is always something you can take away from it (the discussion).'*

For D5, the network during the programme had a positive influence on them, as they shared, *'I love the interaction. The small groups meant (we) could actually talk about a concept, or a model, then you could specifically talk about it in the context of your business and then think about how to apply it in your business.'* They went on to share, *'I think it was just about having time with other businesses, where you can interact, you could talk about it (the concept), you could do it, rather than (just) receive information.'*

D6 provided insights into a network interaction they had had with another delegate and SME leader, who had been successful in their business, *'it was nice to feel, and to listen to what he was saying to the people in the group as well (as listening to the facilitators).'*

D7 reflected on the value of the network to them, not just during the programme, but the continuing value of this after the programme had finished, and observed, *'so for me, the networking was really useful to me, the opportunity to meet other people face-to-face. I'm still in touch with a lot of the people (who I met) on the course.'*

D8 also shared, *'I generally learn from other people in need of collaborative network,'* and went on to emphasise the practical value of the network to them, *'it was great to meet and greet and collaborate. The network also helps with the project that you were doing.'* D8 also highlighted that what they liked about the programme was, *'the bringing together of people of different business backgrounds and mindsets, because they help me challenge my perception on how to approach things.'*

## **Prompted responses**

### **Participants**

D1 shared, *'I think in terms of people that I was on the course with, following the reflections we did together, were a good bunch of eggs, all there for the right reasons and wanted similar stuff.'*

For D2, *'the communication with the peers within the group worked really well for my style of learning,'* and in relation to the value of the network, stated, *'I'd say (it was) very, very important. I think, if you're helping someone with issues that are very similar to your issues, you actually almost have that eureka moment, where things become clearer.'*

D4 commented, *'I actually made some contacts on the programme (with whom) I still meet with today.'* They shared that they had continued utilising the value of the network, and had, *'put together a group and we started to meet once a month and we sought to follow the structures learnt (during the programme).'*

For D5, the value of the network was when, *'you know, you have someone else talk about your business from an external viewpoint, and you also have access to people you'd never have access to (normally to be able to do this).'*

D6 also continued their association with some of the network of people they met on the programme, commenting that the value of the network to them was, *'everybody was there, and nobody was higher or bigger or better. We were all there together and we all enjoyed it.'*

D7 reflected on the importance of the network to them, and like other SME leaders interviewed, shared that they were still in touch with many of their fellow participants from the programme.

### **Participants sharing stories.**

**Another theme relating to the value of the network interaction was that this provided an opportunity for the participants to 'share stories, about their own businesses, which made the relevance of the concepts being discussed more obvious.**

### **Unprompted Responses.**

#### **Participants**

For D3, as for D1 and D2, the various views from different people, in different situations shared during the programmes appeared to have a major influence on them. D3 observed, *'I gravitated most to sharing of stories and sharing of experiences, because to be able to look to do this, it (the platform to share business problems) just doesn't exist, or is normally very rare, and I saw that the different people and their different characters, someone doing well, some were failing and trying, I guess it was a mixed bag.'*

### **Business school leads.**

BS1, in relation to the value of networks, shared that the delegates have continued to operate as a network after the programme, and that this, *'was definitely a positive thing.'* BS1 also reflected that what was equally as important was that, *'the ideas on how to use the concepts being presented were coming from the participants.'*

### **Prompted Responses.**

#### **Participants**

For D8, the value of the network and the impact it had on them as an SME leader, commented that it had a, *'very large impact'*, and went on to say that they felt this created, *'the whole freshness and complete different perspective on how to approach your business, as well as (providing insights into) what others do (and) how they do it.'* For them, this had made the programme, *'more of an open-minded thinking (experience).'*

#### **Business school leads**

BS1 when reflecting on the value of the network, commented, *'yeah, I think (the SME leaders) managed to identify many common problems (together)...I think in practical terms, through the exchanges (they had, the SME leaders) have benefited from exchanging experiences and (sharing) the way they have sorted other types of problems.'*

In the same way, BS2, when asked about the value of the network, commented, *'that (the) structure, whereby these individuals (the SME leaders) could discuss how they themselves were applying these ideas, and critique each other's (approaches) is a very important element of (the programme), although it's slightly time-consuming.'* BS2 went on to say, that

in relation to this networking, *'the interaction can create human relationships, which actually last over a long time.'*

### **Continuation of network**

Many of the participants had found the value of the network so useful they had continued to maintain their network after the programme was completed, the comment from D4 below illustrates this.

### **Prompted responses**

#### **Participants**

D4 also agreed that the value of the network was important and commented that they had found that the network of other SME leaders so valuable to them that they had actively set up continuation of this network immediately post-completion of the programme.

### **Secondary Data.**

The Aristos report (2015) highlights that 95% of the delegates felt that the network interaction was good to excellent. The report also notes that several of the delegates suggested the inclusion of more networking sessions among the delegates and the programme facilitators, as this, they felt, may further increase the benefits of the programme to them.

These insights strongly suggest that the network was one of the major components in contributing to the success of the programmes and in stimulating the SME leaders to take action. This view was supported by the universities involved in this project, who commented that more time should be allocated to network discussions and talking amongst participants and should also include more network interaction between the three countries involved in the programmes.

The Aristos questionnaire specifically explored the elements of the programmes that stimulated action. The component they highlighted as having the greatest impact was teamwork stimulated by the networking and discussions between the participants. They also commented that it was the interaction between participants that enabled each participant to see other people's perspectives. The report highlights that the participants found this interaction extremely valuable, as it gave them confidence to make their own decisions, having been helped to see their world through other people's eyes.

The value of the network, with SME owners discussing their own personal and business situations with like-minded people was frequently highlighted in the secondary data. Shared below are some examples of these:

*'I found the network discussion so valuable, and I still continue to meet regularly with three other delegates on the programme to discuss their business situations'.*

*'The relevance of what was being presented was reinforced by the benefit that we had (from) group discussions with such a diverse group of business people, and we still meet regularly with one or two other members to review best practice'.*

*'I have kept in touch with a number of the other delegates on the programme and found this really useful'.*

*'The group discussions enabled us to apply theories with practical knowledge (shared by the group)'.*

*'Other people helped me realise, not only what we need to improve, but also what we are (already) really good at'.*

Similar comments to those detailed in the secondary data during the pilot interviews. For example, EB1 commented:

*'Other people made me realise, not only areas we need to improve in, but also what areas we are great in'.*

The importance of the network is a theme that is also highlighted in the independent report on the LEAD programme, produced by Doncaster Council (2016). The feedback detailed in this report identifies that the SME leaders would have liked more peer-to-peer discussion time, and that group work was valued. This could reflect just how isolating being an SME owner can be, and how engaging with others in practical business-related discussions, alongside new learning from academic concepts, can help generate new ideas, solve problems and stimulate action. This report recommends that this was something that should be built on when developing other business development programmes targeted at SME leaders.

In addition to emphasising the importance and the value of the network, this report also illustrates how the continuous improvement of the programme, after reflection upon completion of each cohort, further improved the impact of the programme for the SME delegates. For example, the report notes that in cohort one of the LEAD programme, 50% of the delegates said that they had retained their network of contacts. In cohort two, this had increased to 56%, and had further increased to 70% in cohort three. Whilst these are statistical insights, they provide an indication of the perceived importance of the network to the delegates. This observation did not emerge from the primary research of this thesis, but is an observation that should be considered.

Comments emphasising the value of networking are contained within the LEAD report (2016), for example, *'a great mix of people'*, and *'I gained information from other small businesses and our discussions were good discussions'*. Relating to the value of the network, the authors of the LEAD report, (Doncaster Council, 2016), observed that one of the key reasons for the success of the programme was that there had been greater emphasis placed on peer-to-peer learning than is often found within a traditional academic business development programme.

## **Summary**

A key theme emerging from the insights shared above is that the network is an important feature in SME business development programmes. The network, as described earlier in this thesis, consists of the other SME leaders on the business development programme, as well as the facilitators when they are not delivering the concepts contained within the programme. The network was consistently highlighted by the SME leaders that were interviewed in the primary research as being key to ensuring that the programme had impact and relevance for them.

Many of the SME leaders interviewed shared, in detail, how they had continued to utilise the value of the network post-completion of the programmes. These insights indicate that utilising a network of delegates is an essential part of developing an effective and meaningful programme for SMEs to help stimulate action in them.

The SME leaders involved in the programmes came from very different backgrounds and industries. Rather than this being perceived as a disadvantage by the SME leaders, this was viewed as a significant advantage, in terms of emphasising how the concepts and models being discussed are relevant and real in many different situations and can be used in many different types of businesses. Many of the SME leaders commented that the network and peer discussions helped them realise the problems they had previously felt were unique to them were, in fact, common problems experienced by other SME owners, no matter what their industry was, or their levels of experience, or size of organisation.

These findings and observations suggest that in order to more effectively stimulate action in SME leaders, there needs to be more focus on harnessing the strength of the network in achieving this goal.

### **Combined and comparative impact of the four components**

The key components of a business development programme that this research focusses on are those of content, context, facilitator, and network. I have discussed these components, individually, in the section above.

The insights emerging from the research material, with the researcher adopting a reflexive and interpretive methodology, necessitated continually listening to the recordings of the

interviews, and reading the transcripts, reflecting on the content, and then listening and reading the content, again and again until nothing new was emerging. During this process, there was a need to be prepared to be surprised, and consciously seek to explore what was emerging from the research material.

Some of the insights emerging were surprising. One being the order of the comparative importance that the four components had in stimulating action with the SME leaders, from the stories they shared with me. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

The strength of feelings about the value of the network and facilitators, shared by the SME leaders, were emphasised in both the primary research interviews and in the secondary data. For example:

### **Participants**

*'You know you have someone else talk about your business, from an external viewpoint, and you also have access to people you'd never have access to.'* (D7).

*'I love the interaction, the small groups meant they could actually talk about a concept or a model, then you could specifically talk about it in the context of your business, and then think about how to apply it in your business.'* (D4).

*'So, for me, one of the amazing things about this programme was that you guys were delivering it, and you had genuine business experience and you have your own businesses. And you know what the day-to-day challenges were like and were able to refer to real-world experiences.'* (D9).

### **Secondary Data**

There was nothing specific about the comparative importance of the four components of content, context, facilitator, and network in the independent analysis carried out on these programmes by Doncaster Council (2016) and Aristos (2015), as this was not a specific focus of their analysis. In the Erasmus report (2015), 95% of the delegates felt that the network interaction was good to excellent, but they also reported positive views relating to the

value, to them, of the content, context, and facilitator, as illustrated by the following comments:

*'The facilitators were very attentive leaders, and tutors who seemed genuinely interested in creating successful businesses.'*

*'There is a good balance between practice and theory, and a good innovative approach to learning, in the way in which it was delivered.'*

*'The content has been most useful and is already starting to pay dividends.'*

The insights emerging from the review of the secondary data helped to inform thinking around the importance of the four components when designing and delivering business development programmes targeting action stimulation in SME leaders. This is reflected upon in chapter 6, when considering the perceived relative value of these components in stimulating action.

### **Summary**

The components being assessed in this research, content, context, facilitator, and network are viewed by SME leaders to be important aspects in stimulating action.

SME leaders shared strong feelings relating to the value, to them, of the network and facilitator, and that the context enabled them to feel that they had an input into their own learning outcomes.

These insights highlight that all of these components should be taken account of when designing and delivering programmes targeted at stimulating action with SME leaders.

There is a need to also recognise the combined and relative values of these four components is only the starting point. A major question is, what in order to achieve more effectiveness of business school programmes in improving the effect they have on stimulating action in SMEs needs to happen to build on these insights and knowledge, so that they are key considerations in the design of future business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SME businesses? These considerations and potential implications will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 6.

## **Emergent Themes**

The strong emergent themes that from the primary interviews, were those of relevance, time, shared experiences, inspiration and motivation, academic recognition and improvement in self-confidence.

## **Relevance**

The strongest theme emerging from the primary interviews and reinforced by the secondary data was in relation to the need for any programmes targeted at stimulating action by SME leaders, is that they must perceive these to be relevant to them and their businesses.

This section relating to relevance will be divided in three subsections:

- Perceptions of SME leaders relating to the relevance of existing business development programmes available.
- The needs of SME leaders.
- Why the experimental programmes at the centre of this research were perceived by the SME leaders to be more relevant to them than other programmes they had participated in.

## **Perceptions SME leaders have of business development programmes currently offered by business schools**

### **Positive Perceptions**

#### **Participants**

Interestingly, throughout the interviews, many of the comments that were made by the SME leaders, were not positive about what business schools' development programmes offered to SMEs. However, there were consistent references to the importance to the SME

leaders of the credibility business schools' involvement brought to the concepts and models being presented:

D1 observed that, when referring to their time at university and discussions about theoretical concepts, "*... that kind of really robust dialogue seems quite good in universities*". In relation to the programme being assessed within my research, D1 went on to observe that, "*I kind of found the academic background stuff enough to pique my intellectual curiosity which, .... (was at) a level (relating to the academic underpinning) that (I) felt appropriate for me at that point in my business development.*"

D2 observed, '*I think that (it) was mainly good quality material for those attending*'.

D4 commented, in relation to the academic underpinning, that '*you felt as though you're in an organised setting, even though it was very relaxed.*'

D3 who commented, '*I guess I would have been looking for some kind of direction, some kind of legitimate direction, in the sense of this not just coming from a random friend giving you advice, ...(but instead) it's like, you know, (the facilitators) were certified and qualified to give advice in this area.*'

D7 commented about the academic models used during the programme, that, '*I couldn't remember anything particular now, but I do remember at the time thinking that's what gives it kudos*'.

The focus on the credibility of academic business models and concepts was also important for

D5 who reinforced this view, commenting, '*I like the fact that (the development programme) has an academic thread through it, so it wasn't just somebody who proclaimed themselves to be a business expert telling us how to run businesses. I have been on (programmes) like that before, and it hasn't gone very well, (for me)*'.

A key theme emerging that reflected the views of the interviewees was that the facilitator was not just somebody who proclaimed themselves to be a business expert, but also someone who had academic teaching credibility.

## **Secondary Data**

An academic paper was produced as part of the Erasmus requirement for the EBGC and presented to the International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS), in Berlin in October 2015 (Kawakek). This paper recognises that academic business models being used by business schools would continue to benefit SME leaders, providing the models were presented in a way that emphasised the relevance and practical benefit to SME leaders.

On revisiting the secondary data, the unprompted comments made by delegates that highlighted the importance of the business models and concepts being presented, and their academic underpinning, and how these together, brought more credibility to the business development programme and the concepts being presented. Shared below is a comment made during the third-party analysis of the EBGC that typifies many of the views expressed by the delegates:

*“I found the programme credible, because of the University link and real, (relevant to me), because of the practitioners delivering it”.*

## **Negative Perceptions**

In reading and re-reading, the transcripts of the interviews, what became evident was that because of the number of times it was commented on, and the passion with which it was expressed, was that the level of exposure to formal business school or university training the SME leaders had previously had, the stronger their opinions were that business development programmes offered by business schools were of little value to SMEs. The strength of these negative views was surprising. The passion and emotion, together with the body language they used when sharing their stories, forcefully illustrated their opinions that they had not benefited at all from the programmes they had attended. In practical terms, these programmes had not been useful in helping them to develop their own businesses, something which they had expected.

## **Participants**

Shared below some of the comments made:

D1, stated that, *'had it just been academic without the practical I would have quickly got a bit bored with stuff'*.

D3, when referring to their experience of the BSc management they had completed at a top-ranked UK Russell Group University, commented that, *'the seminars and the lectures and things like that, I don't know if I took much from (these), because I didn't particularly connect with a lot of the lecturers.'*

D3 also considered there is a one size fits all approach and individual needs are not necessarily accommodated: *'I don't like the whole part of education, which is, okay, this is our format for everybody, and (everybody has) to follow this format for the sake of getting a grade'*.

In relation to the value business development programmes bring to SMEs' D3 also commented that, *'everything (referred to on the programme) was aimed at big corporate companies, there was some that was more public sector, but nothing nurtured the idea of small businesses.'* *'There wasn't anything that I found particularly helpful.'*

D5, stated, *'I think some academics stop short of (relating concepts to SMEs) and they just go to this model, and if you're Procter and Gamble and you can do this, and you are like this, this will work.'*

D5 when talking about the academic business development programmes they had attended, commented that, *'there had been quite a few times when (the programme) had been dry, irrelevant and non-interactive'*. Their view of what business schools offered for SMEs was, as they observed, *'not particularly positive. I do generally feel like, it's quite academically heavy and having looked, and I could be wrong, this is just my perception on it, however, some of the models and MBA things, like international logistics, that's not necessary or relevant, for a business based in the UK.'*

D7 shared that they had suggested potential improvements to these lectures, in order bring these to life for the participants. They were told they could not do this by the business schools, as their suggestions were, *'... not academic (and) I just think well, (the students are) gonna have to relearn everything they (have) just (been taught) and learn a new language when they go into business.'*

D8 shared their reflection of their university experience and substantial business training that they had received, which was not positive. They commented that when presented with case studies that they felt were not relevant to them, their interest in the programme ended; *'this is what happened in this case study, then all right, I am switching off here'*

D9 also when reflecting on the BA Honours degree they attained in product design, referred to the feedback they received from their lecturer when they had asked for advice and guidance on a real-life opportunity. *'I contacted my lecturer from university, and said, hey, how do I do this? This is so exciting, to which, he said, I have no idea.'* Following which, D9 went on to say, *'they didn't teach us anything. My lecturers didn't know. They were basically people that failed in industry and then taught us, and they were passionate, but they didn't know how to converse.'*

The strongest theme emerging from these insights was that of relevance, or the lack of relevance of the programmes being offered, regardless of whether they were business programmes specifically targeted at SMEs, or a more general business education programme. Several of my interviewees commented that case studies used by business schools in their programmes always seemed to relate to big businesses, and, as such, had no relevance to them, as they were either operating as a sole trader, or with a small team of people. Again, observing the body language and tone of voice during these interviews some interviewees were very passionate about the need for all training to be relevant to their 'real world' as an SME.

In the absence of this relevance to the 'real world' of SMEs, boredom, resulting from just being talked at, was mentioned several times. In contrast, when reviewing what SME leaders had enjoyed about the programme they attended, they noted that they had enjoyed the engagement and active participation in discussions relating to the relevance and value of what was being presented to their own businesses. The relevance of the content of business development programmes to SME leaders, together with the facilitation that engaged them in an open sharing of ideas and views was key to retaining the interest and participation of SME leaders on these programmes.

Another contributing factor to the perceived lack of relevance of business development programmes for SME leaders is their preconceptions of what business schools offer and the value and relevance of this to them. The following comments illustrate this:

D4, when commenting about their experience of business school programmes, observed that, *'(the business programme), was (more) geared to.... (large) corporate (organisations), although the training in itself was good and trainers (were) very knowledgeable, (but the content and the training) was more (about) corporate marketing,'* and, as such, not related to the needs of an SME.

D4 also went on to observe that, the professional certificate they gained from a marketing development programme they attended, *'just didn't apply to the real world. It was okay if you worked in massive organisations and had lots of teams there.'*

D7, as noted earlier, has a marketing degree and a master's degree in coaching, however, they observed that, in relation to how useful they had found these when they set up their own business, *'none of (my qualifications) were relevant'*. They went on to say that, *'I (was only taught, and, as such,) only know how to market businesses when I've got 50 million quid to spend, you know what I mean, I don't know (what to do), when I've (only) got 20 quid to spend. (The two scenarios are) very different.'*

D7, when sharing their own experience of lecturing in business schools, commented that, *'theory is all well and good, but it's a real-life experience (that matters).'*

Interestingly, the SME leaders interviewed who had not attended business school training had no opinions about what was offered. This suggests that there is opportunity for business schools to engage positively with SME leaders.

As was identified by Berlyne (1972) and Rotter (1972), a key question the SME leaders were asking was 'what's in it for me?'

To help answer this question, the delegates in the programmes at the centre of my research were asked two questions at the commencement of the programmes.

- What is the span and scope of your business? (Define your business)
- What do you want to do with your business? (What do you want out of your business?)

They were then asked throughout the programmes to relate any questions originating from the concepts and models to their answers to these two questions.

From the secondary data and some of the responses from the primary interviews, it is evident that at the start of these programmes very few of the delegates had reflected on these questions. This does not necessarily mean that, they did not know the answers to these questions but, this could be an indication that they had not previously considered their businesses in this way.

This indicates that, focusing on helping the SME leaders identify what they need, both personally and for their businesses, in relation to the span and scope of their businesses, is a useful starting point in the design of any SME business development programme.

This is something that SME leaders may find difficult to do, yet from the insights emerging from this research data, this focus is fundamental for SME leaders when considering what interventions to take in order to develop their businesses.

If SME leaders do not seek to consider the analysis or development tools that they are shown in the context of their own personal and business situations, which the two questions above would help them clarify, then any work they do on the programme, could be perceived as purely academic with no practical value.

This is vital when looking at developing a strategic marketing plan, because an individual may make different decisions if they were looking to build a business to sell or if they wanted lifestyle out of the business.

## **Secondary Data**

There was little in the secondary data relating to the SME leaders' perceptions of business programmes currently offered by business schools as this was outside of the scope of their research. Comments and observations from the secondary data that did relate to this topic are contained in the section below relating to what, in the perceptions of the SME participants, made these experimental programmes different from other business school development programmes they had participated in.

### **Summary**

There are three key themes emerging from the data above.

- SME leaders must be able to quickly see that business development programmes they attend are relevant to them and that their investment in the time they have taken out of their businesses to attend will help them to achieve their personal and business objectives.
- The case studies used in SME business development programmes to illustrate the use of business models and concepts will be seen by SME leaders as more relevant to them, and be more practically useful to them, if case studies used are focused on other SME businesses, and how these models may apply to these businesses, as opposed to the focus being on large corporate organisations.
- In considering the way in which the SME development programmes are delivered, SME leaders must be active participants during the discussions about the models and concepts being presented and must not just be 'talked at' in order to help them recognise the relevance and practical use of these models and concepts in their own businesses.

These findings indicate that the perceived lack of relevance of the programmes currently offered by business schools to SME leaders is a major barrier to the programmes effectively stimulating the SME leaders to take action. As shown above, this perceived lack of relevance is not caused by a single individual reason. Whilst a major issue, the reasons for it are more complex, and need careful consideration as to how this perception can be changed.

## **SME leaders' needs.**

### **Primary research data**

Before considering the views and opinions that the SME leaders expressed in relation to the perceived value and relevance of business programmes currently offered by business schools and universities, it was important to consider the comments that SME leaders made in relation to their expectations from attending business development programmes. These needs should form the basis of any programme design targeted at SME development. Reflecting on what the SME leaders shared and interpreting their body language and the passion with which they expressed their observations, the following observations were made:

#### **Time**

Time was the most important consideration for the SME leaders when choosing whether to engage in a business development programme. They questioned if they could 'afford' to take time out away from their businesses. In addition to this, it was important to SME leaders to be able to quickly see the relevance to them of any programme and to have the confidence that it would have an immediate impact upon how they operated within their businesses and, as such, the performance of their businesses. On commencing a programme, if they did not quickly see the relevance to them, they would not have returned to future sessions in the programme and would have terminated their participation early.

#### **Participants**

This was reflected in comments shared:

D1, felt that programmes offered should be '*solution orientated*', and expressed a major concern relating to attending any development programme when, as they observed, '*...time's extremely precious, there's four or five days worth of stuff here that will be a good use of my time, because that's the cost to my organisation and we are tight on time.*'

D2, in relation to attending the EBGC training programme commented, *'I didn't really see any negatives other than the potential use of my time. Obviously as a business owner and operator, time seems to be the most precious thing out there and with the number limited of hours in the day.'*

### **Shared Experiences**

The loneliness of being an SME leader was stated or alluded to numerous times during the interviews, and the value of being able to network and compare stories with like-minded people was a key influencer on their decision to engage with the programmes that were the subject of this research.

### **Participants**

D4, was looking for, *'motivation. I always find it really good to step out, consider what I'm doing'*, and then went on to say, *'I always find it really useful to speak to people who are in businesses that are completely different (to my own), and they (also have) different sized businesses. I think when it's your own business it's really good to talk to other people'*.

D5 noted that, their motivation for joining the programme was, *'I wanted to learn. I always believe, you know, having different experience, hearing other people speak about business, is really valuable.'*

D7 was also motivated to engage with these development programmes because, *'the networking was really useful to me, (and) the opportunity to meet other people face-to-face.'* D7 went on to say, *'I was just setting up my business and it's quite a lonely time. Everything is, like trial and error, so it's good to have a sounding board.'*

D8 was just opening their first SME after years in corporate life and saw the programme as an opportunity, *'to meet and greet and collaborate and network with other people'*, and went on to say that their value was enhanced by these, *'people from outside (my own business), the different businesses (represented on the programmes), completely (provided), a refreshing kind of mindset.'*

## **Inspiration and Motivation**

Looking to find inspiration and motivation were common themes alluded to by SME leaders, either directly or indirectly throughout the interviews:

### **Participants**

D6 was motivated to engage with the programme because having lost a lot of money in four previous enterprises, as they reflected, *'I didn't do anything wrong (in relation to the lack of success of my previous four enterprises). I probably just needed a bit of confidence (from the programme and), that I may be able to learn about business again.'*

D9 commented that their motivation to engage with the programme, was as a result of, *'not being confident about (how) to tackle (business opportunities)'*, and they expressed, *'the hope that I'd be inspired,'* as a result of participating in the programme.

## **Academic Recognition**

### **Participants**

One SME leader, D3, referred to the importance to them that this was an academic-led programme and that they would leave with some form of academic confirmation of their participation. Interestingly, this SME leader, whilst stating that this was one of their motivations for attending the programme, later on commented, in relation to doing more academic study, *'thank God I didn't waste my time on (more academic business study), because I need to put the time somewhere else.'* For this individual, *'somewhere else'* was the practical application of the business concepts presented on the programme they attended.

## **Summary**

In summary, the key themes emerging in relation to the needs of SME leaders were:

- **Relevance**

- **Time**
- **Shared Experiences**
- **Inspiration and Motivation**
- **Improvement in self-confidence**
- **Academic Recognition**

What was highlighted was the need for SME leaders to quickly see a return on their investment in participating in the programme, particularly in relation to the time they invest. The importance of the network of people and the opinions of people not involved in their businesses was also important to SME leaders, and contributed to an improvement in their confidence.

If business development programmes offered by business schools are to more effectively stimulate action in SMEs, the starting point must be understanding the needs of the SME leaders. Then to develop programmes that will meet these needs.

#### **The stories the SME leaders shared relating to the emergent themes**

#### **The relevance of the programmes in the study to the SME participants**

#### **Primary Data**

The perception that the SME leaders shared during the primary research interviews was that the business development programmes business schools offered lacked relevance to them as SME leaders. Reflecting on this, it was not surprising that another key emergent theme from the primary research was that the relevance of the business development programmes had a significant impact on the SME leaders taking action that they would not have otherwise taken. This was because they could see how the concepts being presented, discussed, and analysed directly related to their own businesses.

This suggests that it is essential that SME development programmes are seen to be relevant to SME leaders. This includes all four components, content, context, facilitator, and network being tailored to meet the needs of the SME leaders in the design of development programmes targeted at them.

## Participants

This was brought to life by such comments as:

D1, when asked about their opinion of the programme, reflected that, for them, it was, *'dead easy. There is a 'so what' to everything within the programme'*. D1, reflecting on the course, noted that they struggled to think of a single half hour during the course, *'without there being a practical, real life business example (being discussed)'*.

D3 shared similar insights to D1 and D2, observing that the programme was, *'like an entrepreneurial business course; like a taster or snapshot of what you would do in a business degree. However, it's more practical, it is aimed at the more practical side, for people in practice or going into practice.'*

D4 felt that on the business programme they had attended, *'the content was really good, and it was really relevant.'*

D5 shared that they were concerned before engaging with the programme because, *'it was being delivered by (a) university, and I was nervous and concerned about, it may be a bit dry, and a bit of a lecture to me'*. D5 went on to comment that after completing the programme their view on this had changed, *'the amazing thing about this programme was the fact that (the facilitators who) were delivering it (had) genuine business experience, (they) own (their) own businesses, (they) knew what the day-to-day challenges were like, and (they) were able to refer to real-world experiences'*.

D7 shared similar insights to all the other interview participants when reflecting on the programme and the benefit to them. Prior to commencing the programme, they commented, *'I had really kinda thought about the business, but had not really thought about what I actually wanted from the business day-to-day.'* They went on to say that as a result of attending the programme, *'I stopped trying to be all things to all people, (and), I found that knowing what I wanted to do, drove me harder (to achieve) it.'*

D8 compared the business programme that is the focus of this research to other business development programmes they had experienced. They shared that, for them, this one had

a, *'whole freshness'*, and gave them a, *'complete different perspective on how to approach (their) business, as well as what others do, and how they do it.'*

D9 observed that the way the programme was delivered, *'made it exciting to understand,'* and that the learning experience they took away had, *'made it real life, and it was really relevant, because I'd lost faith in academic programmes.'*

### **Business school leads**

The business schools involved in the programmes also commented on the importance of the relevance of the programme.

BS1, when asked about what it was that made these business development programmes different from other programmes commented, *'with the questions (we asked), the participants (have) to think about their own business, and then getting questions, (and) having to answer questions from people (who) have nothing to do with their industry (from their co-participants),'* they went on to say that the SME leaders, *'had to apply it (the concepts). I think (this) was quite significant. (if, it wasn't for) the questions that they (were asked, they) would never have thought about (these questions). Even on very, you know, basic principles.'* This was, for BS1, a 'light bulb' moment.

BS2 commented that because the programme was, *'led by a framework, of (that related everything to) working in your business, let's see how (these models and concepts,) might apply,'* and felt that it was very important that the delegates, *'would discuss how it (these models and concepts) might be applied in their own different businesses, and then they (the SME leaders) would take each other apart (challenge each other,) on how that worked.'* This framework and approach in practice is what made the programmes relevant to these SME leaders.

Whilst the insights shared have not specifically used the word 'relevance', one of the emerging themes coming from my interviews with the SME leaders and business schools is one of relevance. The stories they shared highlight that they felt that a major success factor of the programmes was that they saw the concepts being presented as being specifically important to them and to their own businesses.

## Participants

D1 identified that they felt the programme was relevant because, *'like myself, they all (the other SME leaders) might be a bit stuck with something, (a business situation, and we realised that) being stuck with something is okay, because it's real life.'*

In the same way, D2 observed that the real-life focus of the programme, *'was beneficial to me, as a small business operator, and I learnt new things (in) nearly every section that we had.'*

D5, when reflecting on using the business models the programme was based on academic research, commented, *'(the facilitators) you know running it, having had the experiences, running an SME, made (the content) very approachable, but applicable as well.'*

D6, when describing the programme, shared, *'it's perfect for a small business, because you can either stay a small business, with what you're taught, or you could try and push forward.'*

It was interesting to note that all of the SME leaders interviewed felt that the experimental programmes were relevant to them, in their current situations as SME leaders. The insights emerging suggest that this was because of the openness of the questions in the programmes, and the freedom and openness of the network discussions this facilitated.

Another important theme that has emerged from the research data is the importance of time to SME leaders. As discussed earlier, had the SME leaders not found the programmes relevant, the need for them to see a return on their time investment, as they shared with me, may have resulted in them not returning for the subsequent sessions, and not completing the programmes.

## Secondary Data

Considering how important relevance of the programmes is to SME leaders, the Aristos report (2015) cites a high percentage of delegates who were satisfied or very satisfied with the relevance of the programme, and also a high percentage that found that the programme met their professional or educational needs. This indicates the EBGC programme was successful in demonstrating its relevance to SME leaders. However, this means that there were a small percentage of delegates who did not find the programme excellent or very good and a small percentage who did not find that it met their professional or educational needs. The silent voice of these delegates should not be ignored. Further insight relating to this was not included in the Aristos report (2015), but is something that was explored during the primary research interviews of this study.

Shared below are some of the insights from the two independent reports that give examples of the views expressed in relation to the relevance of the EBGC and the Leadership and Entrepreneurship programmes to the SME leaders:

*'The programme was very interesting and relevant for businesses.'*

*'Yes, the tools and methodology used during the course are very helpful and easy to apply to the day-to-day of the company.'*

When the delegates were asked how relevant they found the programme, 95% rated it as excellent or very good, 97% felt that they had been actively involved and it met their professional and educational needs.

Examples of comments within the report that illustrate the feelings expressed by the delegates about the value of the programme to them as SME leaders.

*'This programme is really different, with respect to other programmes (that I have attended), and at the same time, complements what I received from earlier ACCIO programmes.'*

*'The course provided a good number of 'oven ready', tools, ideas and nuggets of information that I could drop into our organisation the next day'.*

*'Very helpful, sparked many lightbulb moments. (I) learnt some new things, as well as revised topics (that I had been taught before).'*

In reading, and re-reading and reflecting on the reports from the secondary data, it was evident that the lack of relevance of business development programmes delivered by business schools that the delegates had previously attended was deep-rooted within the minds of many of the SME owners. They contrasted this against the programmes that are the focus of this research. Their feedback on these programmes in this context is illustrated in the delegate quotes below:

*"I found the content of the programme very stimulating, made even more so, by being made to feel real".*

*"I found the facilitator's ability to relate the concepts to real situations, added to the credibility and relevance to my own situation".*

*"Having concluded management school training, which, whilst I found it interesting, I have not found it useful. In contrast, this (programme), was delivered in such a way, to make the concepts seem real".*

*"Thinking about my personal aims, and (asking myself, do these) coincide with my business aims? (this programme), helped me to think in images, (which, made things much clearer, for me)".*

An academic paper originating out of the Erasmus 2015 assessment relating to the EBGC programme, was presented at the International Society for the System Sciences (ISSS) conference in Berlin in October 2015. This paper, by Kawalek (2015), identifies the importance of relevance in any business development programmes designed to assist SMEs to grow and develop, and positions that business growth can only be achieved by transferring knowledge into action on the ground by businesses leaders themselves. Kawalek goes on to observe that in order to facilitate this, business development programmes need to be relevant to the individuals participating in the programmes, and their organisations.

An observation made in Doncaster Council's report on the Leadership and Entrepreneurship Programmes (appendix 3) is that a benefit of the programme to the SME leaders is the 'non-academic' style of learning and facilitation, which was enhanced by practical examples that they found helped make the programme relevant to them. The programme was based informally on academic business models, and, as such, this feedback suggests that the difference, in terms of making the programme relevant to SME leaders, was the way in which the concepts and models used were delivered and the terminologies that were used in the delivery were familiar to them.

## **Summary**

A key theme emerging from this research is relevance. The insights emerging from the research material suggest that for effective practical learning to take place, programme participants must be able to quickly see the direct relevance of what is being discussed to them and their businesses. This is a reoccurring theme, articulated in different ways throughout this research, and is a critical feature in business development programmes seeking to meet the needs and characteristics of SME leaders. Without business schools bridging this gap in what they are offering SME leaders, the opportunity for business programmes offered by business schools in order to stimulate action in SME leaders will, at best, be substantially reduced.

## **The value of storytelling in stimulating action**

### **Primary Data**

The importance of relevant and appropriate storytelling in making the programmes, concepts seem real, and more relevant to the delegates, was mentioned 'unprompted' by the SME leaders' numerous times throughout this research.

The power of storytelling in relation to bringing credibility and relevance to the business concepts and models being discussed was a surprise to emerge as a theme as strongly as it did. It is not storytelling for the sake of storytelling that provided the impact, for the SME leaders, it was the telling of relevant stories that brought the models to life, and helped the

SME leaders relate the business models and concepts being discussed to their own 'real world'. Relevant stories, in this context, mean descriptions of experiences relating to the concepts being discussed that not only have relevance to the concept being discussed, but add credibility, in the minds and perceptions of the audience of SME leaders.

Storytelling had a motivational effect on the SME leaders participating in these programmes. What was equally as important was the credibility of the storytellers themselves. Storytelling, and the credibility of the storyteller, did not just relate to the facilitators, but also the other SME leaders participating in the programmes. This need for the SME leaders to respect the storyteller and for them to feel empathy with the situation the storyteller is describing to them, and this was essential in order to make the stories, relevant to both themselves and their own businesses.

It was the credibility of the storyteller, in the eyes of the SME leaders, and their empathy with the business situation being described by the storyteller, that helped SME leaders see how the concepts and models being discussed were useful and could work in their own real life situations.

### **Participants**

Examples of the impact storytelling had that the SME leaders shared were:

D2 shared that, *'the ability to address certain situations from real-life experience, I think, it is not impossible to seek some sort of theory of how it can be done, but there's no substitute for experience, and (also) respect (for the storyteller) certainly is very important.'*

D5 valued that the facilitators, *'had (their) own businesses, and (they) knew what the day-to-day challenges were like, and were able to refer to real-world experience, and talking in a real-world way.'*

### **Business school leads**

BS2, when reflecting on how the programmes were delivered, commented, *'Here's the framework. Here are a few experiences. Here is how I used it or haven't used it. This is where it might be applicable or not applicable. (This was done) through short sharp introductory*

*sections that gave a structure that the delegates could apply to (their situation, using) the same framework.'*

It was not just success stories that had an impact on adding more credibility and relevance to the business concepts being discussed. Stories about failure or stories about small companies thinking big also helped the SME leaders understand that it is okay to fail, and quite normal to fail, as this is part of a learning process.

## **Participants**

For example:

D1 observed, *'I think having people who (have), done it themselves, practical SME (leaders), scars and all, it's a good blend'.*

D4 commented that they *'just firmly believe that you can't be told how to go out there and do something by someone who just teaches it in the classroom, and has never actually experienced the (real business) challenges that you will face.'*

D6 shared that they remembered thinking, *'how did a little man like (the facilitator) get (a trading relationship with) B and Q? And that made me think that's a good story to listen to, but if (they) can do it then, why can't I do it?'*

D9 observed *'everybody including (the facilitator), said, like I've messed up major sometimes, guess what I did one time. It makes it feel real, and it makes you feel like, if you can fail and actually then succeed, there is learning from failing.'*

D9, when reflecting on the interaction with the facilitators, said, *'I felt like I was asking the question, and their opinion would be relevant, because they'd either gone through it, or knew someone who had. That was lovely. Never once did anybody say, oh look at me I'm so successful,*

Some of the SME leaders interviewed also felt that it was important that this storytelling was face-to-face with real people, as opposed to online storytelling. Comments shared highlighted that this face-to-face interaction meant that the SME leaders were able to feel the passion of the storyteller and sense the sincerity of their stories. For example:

D3 noted, *'I think I gravitated most towards the sharing of stories, sharing of experiences, because for me, I learn a lot like that.'*

D7 observed, *'the stories gave you the real-life aspect of the business.'*

D8 felt that *'having someone who has that (practitioner) background just gave so much more weight behind their delivery, and especially when you refer to something that you can actually speak from experience, so that you deliver (the story) with feeling. The tone of voice was important, not just this is what happened in this case study.'*

### **Business school leads**

BS1 observed that the SME leaders, *'were really motivated, and really serious about having to press on and work, and 'you know' run their business on a daily basis, and I think by listening to successful stories, or by exchanging stories about their daily routines, I think it gives them, 'you know' a boost to continue.'*

The overriding insight that emerged is that relevant storytelling by credible storytellers, was that they bring relevance and reality to the business concepts and models being presented. This helps the SME leaders to see the value of the concepts and models and relate them to their own situations, and as a result, gives them confidence to take actions.

### **Secondary Data**

Within the Aristos report (2015) the value of storytelling was also referred to:

*'We had a great insight into the background of the tutor, how they apply the techniques they are teaching'.*

*'How they (the facilitators, had applied the tools and techniques being taught'.*

*'Stories from the participants confirmed the credibility of the concepts being taught'.*

*'It was the stories that made the concepts seem real, unlike my original business degree'.*

*'The content of the programme was made more real by the storytelling, and personal experience of the facilitators, both good and bad experiences.'*

These comments refer to the fact that the facilitators told stories about how they had used or had not used the business models and concepts in their own businesses, and the impact these actions had on their businesses, either positive or negative.

The universities involved in the EBGC programmes have also commented, in the report, that the time spent working in groups (network time) was especially useful for the delegates to share experiences or tell stories. The only negative comment emerging from this report about the programmes' facilitation of the sharing of stories was that not enough time was allocated to this.

The value of storytelling was also referred to within the LEAD report (2016). This report observed that the facilitators were practitioners with relevant storytelling abilities, which, when combined with strong academic knowledge, was the key to the success of the SME development programme

### **Summary.**

The power of this emergent theme, of the value of credible storytelling, and the added credibility and relevance this brings to the business concepts and models being presented was surprising. Reflecting on this, it perhaps should not have been so surprising, as observed by the wisdom of Albert Einstein, who, it is suggested, stated that all knowledge originates from experience.

It was not that storytelling was a contributing factor in stimulating action with the SME leaders attending the programme that was the surprise, but how powerful these stories were in stimulating action. This raises the questions

- can the ability to tell stories be taught, and if so how?
- Does this type of expertise and experience need to be brought into business schools?
- Should facilitators in business development programmes targeted at SMEs, be helped to develop techniques, for facilitation of the exchange of credible stories between themselves and the SME leader delegates?

As indicated above, the impact that the telling of credible and relevant stories during a business development programme targeting stimulating action in SMEs, will be a crucial component in achieving this improvement.

These questions are discussed further in Chapter 6.

### **The importance of the improvement of self-confidence in stimulating action**

The main objective of this research is to identify what it is within a business development programme targeted at SME development that stimulates SME leaders to take action.

In this section, a theme that has emerged from the research material that was not anticipated was that of the participants feeling an improvement in their self-confidence. From the insights emerging, a key factor in the SME leaders taking action as a result of participating in a business development programme was that of the increase in their self-confidence. As stated previously, this was a surprise, but upon reflection whilst most SME leaders appear to be confident individuals. This may be an act that they have developed? This is a strong emergent theme and is a major facilitator in the SME leaders taking action. Detailed below are stories shared during the primary research interviews, from both the SME leaders and the lead individuals from the business schools who participated in the programmes to illustrate this. Most of the insights shared were unprompted. Some insights were shared in answer to a specific question about self-confidence, which were asked in order to better understand the stories being shared.

#### **Participants**

D1 shared, *'I still have feelings that we are a different type of business, because there are some different drivers. So actually, I do things that make no commercial sense whatsoever in the organisation, but actually, going through the learning and development (on the programme and), being absolutely clear that it makes no commercial sense, somehow, helps me present that back better to my board of directors, colleagues or partners.'* D1 went on to share that, *'(this learning and understanding) helps me make better decisions about the long-term commercial aspects of my organisation.'* These insights reflect an improvement in the SME leader's own self-confidence. As they shared, they had developed confidence to

take decisions when the decisions they were making did not initially appear, to others, to make any logical commercial sense. They had developed confidence to proceed, believing in themselves and knowing it was the right thing to do for their business in the long-term.

D3, in a similar way, shared that the confidence they gained from participating in the programme helped them make a life-changing decision, and made them realise that, *'I definitely need to work for myself. It was like 100% concluded.'*

D4 reflected that, *'it (the programme) was great. It was really good. It built my confidence. Not (that) my confidence was low, but it gave me a boost.'* D4 went on to say, *'I realised that I actually had quite a lot of knowledge, and sometimes, I probably don't give myself credit for that.'*

When sharing their business history, D6 said that they, *'probably lacked a little bit of confidence'*. They shared that they had previously experienced very difficult business situations and business failure, and reflected that, *'(I) didn't do anything wrong. I probably just needed a bit of confidence, and maybe to learn about business again.'* I explored this further with D6 and asked if my understanding of what they were saying was that one of the outcomes of the programme, for them, was that it had given them more confidence. Their enthusiastic reply of, *'yeah definitely,'* emphasised their strength of feeling about this.

When D7 was asked to share what they thought was the most important thing that they had taken away from the programme, they said, *'I think, number one, (it) gave me a lot of confidence, and a lot of confidence that I already knew a lot of stuff. It definitely gave me a lot of confidence.'* They went on to expand on this by adding, *'(it gave me), confidence to try new things.'*

D8 provided some insights into how they operated when entering a negotiation after their participation in the programme, as opposed to what they would have done before it. As their self-confidence had increased, they were pleased that during negotiations with customers they, *'stood (their) ground. I said no, no, no, but I was always open in my mind. I thought I could (achieve a successful) negotiation (outcome). And (I) came up with a rate card (to facilitate this, which offered a framework to fairly reflect price and service)'*.

For D9, one of their key reasons for engaging with the programme was, *'not being confident of how to tackle (business issues). And I came onto the programme, in the hope I'd be inspired.'* They went on to comment, *'I felt much more motivated when I came away,'* and *'I remember being really excited after I'd left (the programme). I was gonna tackle the world.'*

### **Business school leads**

BS1 felt that the programmes had, *'inspired them (the SME leaders) to do it and gave them confidence to do something.'* When asked specifically if the programme had helped improve the SME leaders' confidence, they were enthusiastic in their assertion, and replied, *'yeah, yeah.'*

A common theme emerging throughout the discussions with the SME leaders that were interviewed, was how proud they were that their confidence had increased, and the extent to which this had increased as a result of participating in the business development programmes. They shared how participating in the programmes had changed the way they view, not only their businesses, but their lives, and the actions they have taken. This sense of pride was evident in all of the SME leaders interviewed. Their body language, and the passion with which they spoke about the actions they had taken, and how they now felt about their businesses emphasised how much their self-confidence had improved, and how much this meant to them, was powerful.

As previously observed, these are SME leaders, did not seem to have any lack of confidence in their capability or knowledge was not immediately evident. However, the insights emerging strongly from the stories they shared clearly indicate an increase in their self-confidence, that the programmes had facilitated. As one of the pilot interviewees, EB1 noted, *'I realised not only what we were not so good at, but also what we were really good at'*. Whilst this increase in self-confidence does not necessarily mean these SME leaders had no self-confidence prior to participating in the programme, it does illustrate the actions that SME leaders were stimulated to take as a result of the improvement in their self-confidence.

The SME leaders shared that their increase in self-confidence had helped them to make strategic decisions immediately, or on a just-in-time basis, rather than delaying them, or not

taking them at all. Shared below is an example of the insights that emerged from the discussions with interviewees, including some of their reflections and feelings about this.

D1 shared that they felt that the programme they attended, *'gave me a far more strategic mature view of the world that (would) have probably taken (me) two years to get.'*

This view, that the SME leaders may have eventually made the decisions that the programme stimulated, even had they not participated in the programme, was mirrored in the stories that some of the SME leaders shared, but in these cases, they also shared that they would not have taken these actions as quickly as they did had the programmes not increased their confidence in the actions they were considering.

### **Secondary Data**

Looking at the secondary data, specifically in relation to improvement in self-confidence, reviewing the report generated by Aristos (2015) about the EBGC programme. There are many insights emerging from this report that emphasise the value of this feature. Shared below some examples from the report that illustrate this.

*'Yes, I am confident that I can easily (and happily) implement what I have learnt'.*

The Aristos report concludes that delegates felt more confident to lead their companies and guide the growth of their businesses as a result of attending the programmes.

When Aristos interviewed the universities involved in the delivery of the programmes, these being the University of Sheffield, Esade business school in Spain and Alba University of Greece, they observed that the interaction between participants resulted in an improvement in the delegates' confidence to take action because they could check their own ideas and experiences with others.

Aristos also asked the SME leaders who had participated in the programmes the specific question, *'do you feel more confident in your ability to grow your business?'* Examples of the responses they received are:

*'Yes, I learnt new things, and (the programme) definitely helps my motivation'.*

*'Yes, (the programme) helped me look at things from a different point of view, (from the discussions with and ideas from the facilitator and co-participants on the programme).'*

*'Yes, I learned how to better manage my time'.*

*'Yes, (it gave me a better) perspective for everything I was doing, even though I've done an MBA a few years ago'.*

The Aristos report on the EBGC (2015) programme also reflects similar comments shared during the primary research interviews. The Aristos report observed that the SME did not necessarily lack confidence in their ability to effect changes within their organisations, but that after participating in the programmes, their confidence levels grew from the commencement of the programme, when it was 58% to 65% at the end of the programme. In addition to this, when asked how confident they felt as a manager and leader within their organisations, their confidence levels here increased from 60% to 95%, on the completion of the programme.

When asked to what extent had they expected that the programme would help them make a difference to the growth and development of their businesses, their confidence levels in this area increased from 50% to 86%. Finally, when asked to assess their own knowledge, ability and confidence at the end of each taught business topic of the programme, their self-perception of their capabilities increased by 45% across each topic.

These observations are mirrored in the comments made by the SME leaders interviewed in the primary research. Whilst they all shared that they did not feel that they lacked confidence prior to attending the programmes, upon leaving the programmes, they found that their confidence had been given a boost and had improved significantly. They felt they were more confident in making decisions and taking actions earlier than they would have done, had they not attended the programmes.

Examples of the SME leaders' comments included in the secondary data which reflect an improvement in self-confidence facilitated by attending the programmes are:

*The programme, 'Helped me ensure my business is commercially viable, and gain significant confidence in my ability to develop the business'.*

*'The programme was life and business-changing'.*

*'Yes, I am confident that I can easily, and happily, implement what I have learnt'.*

*'My knowledge and confidence to enter the area of international growth (trading) has increased'.*

*'The programme came just at the right time and has helped in both the planning and having a clear vision of the way forward (for my business)'.*

*'I have gained significant confidence in my ability to develop the business'.*

*'It (the programme) has given me a lot of confidence that this is a great business'.*

*'Everyone (people I come into contact with, inside and outside of work), has commented on how my confidence has gone through the roof'.*

*'I am confident that this is **my business**'.*

*'I feel more comfortable and determined'.*

Within the LEAD 2016 report, the delegates identify that their main learning points were that they now had different views relating to planning, vision, creative thinking, and acceptance of change. These changes in the way they viewed their businesses, also resulted in them feeling more motivated, which could include, being more confident.

## **Summary**

An emergent theme of this research is the improvement in self-confidence, and this being a major driver in stimulating SME leaders to take action that they would not otherwise have taken had they not attended the business development programmes.

This has been explored and continually reflected on the underlying contributing factors to this improvement in self-confidence. This improvement in self-confidence is a result of the credibility of the concepts being utilised (content), the way in which the business development programmes are delivered (context), by whom they are delivered (facilitator) and through the nature of the interactions between the participants on these programmes and the facilitators (the network). Whilst the facilitators interaction between the participants and facilitators it is the nature of these interactions which are the driving force

in improving confidence in the programme participants. This suggests that it is the network and facilitator working together that helps to improve self-confidence and so stimulates SME leaders to take action. This warrants careful consideration when designing programmes targeted at SME development.

Another emergent theme from this research that also requires careful consideration, is the value of storytelling when designing business development programmes. Individuals like to talk about themselves and their experiences. The SME leaders all shared stories about their own businesses and experiences. They also shared their stories with each other during the business development programmes, and this was a major factor in aiding the development of their self-confidence. This also assisted in enhancing the credibility and relevance of the concepts being discussed by them and helped them to relate the concepts to real life and their own organisations. Examples of comments which help to inform this research from the primary research interviews are:

*'I not only learnt what we were not so good at, but also what we were really good at'*

*'I thought, if little people (businesses) like that (who are not a big business) can do it, why can't I?'*

Once again, when discussing these topics, SME leaders expressed, through their body language and tone of voice, how their improvement in self-confidence was important to them, and that they were proud of this. It had not only stimulated them to take action but had also increased their own happiness and enjoyment of life and what they were doing.

In order to be more effective in stimulating SME leaders to take action, programmes written and delivered by business schools need not only to focus on the transfer of business knowledge and concepts, but in the development of the SME participants improvement in self-confidence about their abilities.

### **Specific strategic actions taken by the delegates as a direct result of attending the programme**

#### **Primary Data**

The main objective of this research is to identify what it is within a business development programmes targeted at SME development that stimulates SME leaders to take action. By

action, in this context and as discussed in the introduction, this means to explore any actions that SME leaders took as a result of participating in the programmes. Whilst it was anticipated to find examples in the research of SME leaders taking action, having being stimulated to do so by attending the programmes, what was a surprise was that the actions that the programmes stimulated were all major strategic decisions that could have, a major impact on the participants businesses.

Reflecting on the actions that SME leaders explained they have taken as a direct result of attending the business development programmes, there is no commonality in the specific actions that each SME leader has taken. The actions they have taken vary tremendously. A common thread that can be drawn from these is that the actions were what the SME leaders felt were appropriate, for themselves, at the time they took the action, in relation to either the needs of their business or their own personal needs. All of the actions taken by the SME leaders can be described as being strategic actions. This observation is worthy of note because they are not small day-to-day actions that have been taken. They are all actions that could have a major impact on the ongoing development of their businesses. To illustrate this, detailed below are some examples of the stories the SME leaders shared in relation to, action the programme they participated in stimulated them to take in their businesses:

### **Participants**

D2 shared that one of the actions they took. *'At the time our recruitment processes were pretty poor. We didn't do any type of psychometric testing, or anything like that. We didn't do nearly as much research as we should have (in relation to the strategic resource capacity and capability for our business).'* They shared that as a result of attending the programme, this had now changed.

D3 shared that they decided to change the price point for their service offer, moving it to the premium end of the market. *'We (during the programme) were talking about how to increase pricing, because there's been times when I was like, should I increase prices because all the competition (have) a standard price. Then, I was like, you know what, not in a horrible way, I'm not standard, I'm not the same as these people, I need to differentiate, even if it's by £1 just to make the point.'* D3 also shared that as a result of the pricing decision they

took, their business had grown at the premium end of their market, and they had just celebrated their third year of success.

D4 reflected that they had looked at their business and, *'then identified who their ideal customers were, and how we could best serve them. And the part about sitting back and thinking (that the programme facilitated), that was big for me, in the path to bouncing back (recovering my business) and thinking, what do I actually want out of the business'* They went on to say, *'it (the programme) made me sit back, and think, you know what, success is not just about money.'* And as a result of this, they shared that they had changed their strategy to be more about satisfying their lifestyle aspirations. They shared that they had developed a segmented and focused business plan that has helped their business grow in a sustainable and more enjoyable manner for them as an individual.

D5 explained that they decided to take their senior management team away, and to identify the three largest strategic differentials their organisation offered their customers. Having identified these differentials, these became screensavers, not only for the management team, but also for the other 26 people they employed. This, they reflected, kept the whole company focused on their core business, and their key differentials. It became a daily reminder for every one of their key strategic differentials, and what made their company different.

D6 commented about the action they had taken as a direct result of participating in the programme. *'I bought the first licence in the country to do (distribute) a product called XXX'*. They also shared that they had decided to set up a partnership with a company in India, commenting that had they not attended the programme they would not have had the confidence to do this. In their words, *'yeah, probably, I would have said no to the guy, in all honesty.'* D6 also shared that their company had set up a trading relationship with a major blue-chip supermarket group, again, something they noted they would never have considered doing prior to participating in the programme. The quote by D6, that shared earlier, also highlights the thinking, by this SME leader, that underpinned this strategic action; *'how did a little man like you get into B and Q, that's a good story to listen to, because if you can do, it then why can't I do it.'*

D8 stated that immediately after finishing the programme, *'when I wrote my business plan, and my business strategy for the next five years, I had a fairly clear idea by year five what I wanted to achieve (as a result of what I learnt on the programme).'* They also shared that the programme had helped them realise that, *'I have to work with collaborations (other businesses)'* to achieve their strategic goals. They went on to comment that, *'the way I approached it (the business plan) was different, because (of) the learnings from the course, not just in terms of working within my own sector, (but) looking at business opportunities (in other sectors).'* Their focus, as D8 shared, was, *'how we can actually help others (businesses), as well as how my business can actually complement things that I wouldn't even have dreamt of.'* And finally noted, *'I thought I could not get a negotiation done. I would never have attempted (it), and come up with a rate card (strategic approach to business negotiation), that's something I took from (the facilitators), and I actually got a rate card.'*

D9, as a direct result of attending the programme, had changed their strategic business model to introduce outsourcing, commenting, *'I am realising other people's skills are better at certain things (than) my own, and I give the job to them and I don't feel like it took my control away from me. Actually, I'm better for it. I'm busy with what I'm good at, and I hand out what I don't enjoy, and don't find easy.'*

A sub-theme emerging from the strategic actions SME leaders have taken as a direct result of attending the business development programmes is that the SME leaders, once they had taken these actions, were enjoying their businesses more, and also getting more personal satisfaction from working in them.

The SME leaders shared that they now look at every business situation, either their own, or a business owned by others, more strategically and objectively. Their reflections were emphasised by their body language and tone of voice when sharing these stories. What they said, and how they said it, indicated that they were proud that they now looked at business situations from this perspective.

This raises another question is there a link between enjoying what SME leaders do and success in business? This question is outside of the scope of this research, as this broadens

the research focus significantly. It is of interest, however, and is certainly a topic for a future research project.

Shared below are examples of comments made by the SME leaders during the primary research interviews, in relation to how they feel that they now look at business situations more strategically and objectively:

D1 shared that since participating in the programme, they now always look at business situations with a *'helicopter view of the problem or opportunity'*. They went on to say that they had formed partnerships with organisations they would not have considered working with prior to participating in the programme, stating that they had developed the, *'ability to be quite pragmatic about the fact that an individual or an organisation might be competitors or partner suppliers of customers.'* They added that they now take, *'a far more strategic, and mature view of the world than I'd have probably taken two years ago.'* They also shared that by, *'going through the learning and development (of the programme, this) had helped me be absolutely clear that if something makes no (short-term) commercial sense to someone else (The programme gave me the confidence) to let me present (the long-term benefits) better to my board of directors, colleagues, or partners.'*

For D2, they realised that after attending the programme, taking time to review their business was strategically important, and noted, *'you need to take time out, to sort it out, and look at it as a whole, and see things clearer. Better that way round, than just plodding along, doing the same thing, day in day out.'*

D3 commented that, *'the way I do things (naturally) in a way conflicts with what I learnt at university, and that made me panic at the beginning (when starting in business)'* and went on to say that after participating in the business development programme, *'I'm like, thank God I didn't waste time on that (what they learnt at university, regarding business analysis) because I need to put that time somewhere else (practical strategic development, to help my business).'* D3 also shared how the programme had helped them realise what they wanted to do strategically, and to do for themselves, *'I definitely need to work for myself. It was like 100% concluded.'*

D4 reflected that in terms of their existing knowledge and strategic capability, the programme helped them recognise that, *'I actually had quite a lot of knowledge, and sometimes I didn't give myself credit for that.'*

D5 commented that prior to attending the programme, they felt that the *'academic models were almost completely irrelevant to my business.'* After completing the programme, this had changed, as they observed, *'but actually, it's been having those models and having them explained in a way I can understand the relevance to my business. (This) made me think to myself actually, there's more value in this. And I probably would have never engaged with (these models) before.'*

D7 shared, *'(I) had not really thought about what I actually wanted from the business day-to-day (prior to participating in the programme).'* They went on to say that, during the programme, they realised that, *'my lifestyle came before the business needs, and I stopped trying to be all things to all people'*. As a result of this, they considered that, *'the knowing why I wanted it, drove me harder for it.'* Since completing the programme, they shared that their business is continuing to grow profitably and that they are really enjoying what they are doing.

## **Secondary Data**

Exploring the stimulation of action is a key focus of this research, and is also a key question explored in the secondary data by the Aristos report (2015) relating to the EBGC programme. SME leaders who participated in this programme were asked by Aristos if they intended to take actions as a result of attending the programmes. Shared below are some of the answers included in this report.

*'Yes, yes, yes, yes.'*

*'Yes, I have many plans to use the material from the course to take my company plans forward.'*

*'I did not think I had much interest in international markets, but I realise now, it was a lack of knowledge/confidence in this area, and I think it's an excellent opportunity to learn and develop'.*

When Aristos asked what specific actions the delegates had taken as a direct result of participating in the programme, examples of the comments made by the SME leaders are:

*'I immediately hired new people'.*

*'I involved my staff in the development of a new business plan'.*

*'I introduced a new selection process into my business'.*

*'I changed my business from a public sector business to a private sector business'.*

One SME noted that, *'We needed to create a new business plan,'* and went on to develop this.

As found in the primary data, these actions reflect strategic actions, rather than small day-to-day tactical interventions, as all of these have a significant impact on the strategic performance of a business.

Within the LEAD report (2015) the main sustained changes the SME leaders had taken as a direct result of participating in the programmes were business planning, leadership skills, acceptance of change, marketing, efficiency, quality and most importantly, clarity of thinking.

When asked, specifically, what action they had taken as a direct result of participating in the programme the following actions were referred to:

- Developing strategies
- Diversifying
- Establishing a manufacturing base in Doncaster
- Staff development and purchasing of additional resources
- Moved to new premises
- Enrolled on the Goldman Sachs programme
- Identified the need for additional resources and actively recruited new staff
- Embarking on additional training

UKCES, who funded the LEAD project, viewed these strategic actions stimulated by the LEAD programme in Doncaster as a key measure when they were assessing the success of this experimental project (appendix 2 and 3).

The wide scope of specific actions identified in this report indicate that the SME leaders realised the value of business training, how this facilitates better business understanding, and further improves their operations. All the feedback comments in the LEAD report were mirrored in the comments from the primary research interviews and cited positive and constructive actions that the SME leaders had taken in their businesses as a result of the learning experience on the programme.

Specific strategic actions that the programmes had stimulated with the SME leaders participating in them are illustrated in the secondary data:

*'As a direct result of the programme, I have formed an alliance with another company, and opened another leg of our operation'.*

*'I went away with my senior management team, and realised that the business we were in was different from the company we started. As a result of this, we developed a new, and more sustainable strategy'.*

*'(The programme helped) me take action 5 to 10 years earlier than I would have done'.*

*'(The programme) helped (me) develop a plan which put a different emphasis on some areas of my operation'.*

## **Summary**

What is interesting when exploring what it is that stimulates SME leaders to take action, as a direct result of attending business development programmes, is that all of the actions taken are strategic actions and not just minor operational actions. This is a common theme that emerges from the literature, from the secondary data, and from the insights shared during the primary research interviews.

Two key insights emerging suggest that the actions taken by SME leaders are a result of strategic thinking. This is something that Christensen (2010) describes when businesspeople are shown how to think, not what to think. What also emerges from this research shows that showing people how to think is a key feature in making the programmes more enjoyable for SME leaders and having greater relevance to them.

Many of the insights emerging from this research data show that the success of any business development programme targeted at stimulating action in SME leaders should not be assessed solely by an organisation's financial performance, which is often the case, especially with government funded programmes. Improvements in financial performance may not be the prime objectives of SME leaders participating in development programmes. Improvements in financial performance may not be in the short-term interests of their businesses. Their businesses may be influenced by changes happening in the macro environment, such as, the global Covid 19 pandemic, or other factors relating to their business specific industry. What is emerging from this research is that the success of business development programmes needs to start with, a focus on the needs of SME leaders attending the programmes and be assessed from this context.

It interesting to observe how the way the SME leaders looked at their businesses changed as a result of participating in the programmes, and it was this change in their mindsets which gave them confidence to take strategic actions in their businesses that they would not have previously taken. This emerging theme will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

A strong message emerging from the findings of the research data, is that in order for business programmes offered by business schools more effectively stimulating action in SMEs, the programmes offered should be focused on showing the participants how to think, rather than telling them what to think.

### **What, in the opinions of the SME leaders, made these programmes different to other programmes they had experienced?**

To explore further the difference between the experimental business development programmes that are the focus of this research, and other business school programmes the SME leaders interviewed had participated in they were specifically asked during the primary research interviews, what, if anything, they thought was different from these experimental programmes and other business development programmes they had participated in. Shared below are some of the insights and opinions expressed in answer to this.

### **Participants**

D2 reflected, *'I think it was more useful than I expected. It exceeded my expectations, which, was a pleasant surprise, and I think what was mainly good (was the) quality material, and obviously quality facilitators that (they) presented in such a way that they could relate (the concepts) to real life experiences.'*

D2 also observed, *'What we were shown could be applied to other businesses, particularly my own. I've been on courses in the past that were business-orientated, and the trainers only knew the theory and (had) never been there. The style worked well. I think, academically speaking, if it was just the 2, 4, or 8-hour lecture, where I'm just being told what to do all day, I think I'd have probably switched off.'*

D3 commented, *'I have a strange way of learning and getting a sense of things, relating to the lectures and things like that.'* They referred to their previous business school programme experiences, and went on to say, *'I don't know if I took much from them (their previous business school experience) because I didn't typically, connect a lot with the lecturers, and for me, (the facilitator) has to be somebody that draws me in (for me) to sit there for 2 or 3 hours, and interpret the information (about the concepts being presented).'*

D3 also explained, *'When at business school, I concluded that I might as well not go to the lecture, (but instead, just) print off the slides and go home and interpret them myself. Maybe I would have been more likely to attend the University if some of my lecturers had said, "I do it this way", or "I run this side business, and I've actually worked in XY and Z". Maybe I'd have gravitated towards them more and stayed in the lecture and not come home.'*

D4 observed that, *'with this programme, you are talking to people from completely different markets, with different sized businesses, but we all had similar problems, unlike my experience (on previous business development programmes) in universities. I felt relaxed. You immediately felt as though you could chat to people, and it wasn't stilted. The content was really good and really relevant'.*

D4 went on to observe, in relation to the comparison with previous programmes they had participated in, *'Whilst extensively this programme was for entrepreneurs as well as self-employed people, previous programmes I attended were more geared to corporate training. It just didn't apply to the real world. It was okay if you work for a massive organisation.'*

For D5, *'The business programmes I'd attended in universities, whilst good, had been very dry, irrelevant, non-interactive. I don't enjoy lectures. I think people only have an attention span of 15 to 20 minutes max. The difference of this programme is having the time to spend with other businesses, who said "this is how I'd apply (this concept), to your business". You got an external viewpoint as well. What made this programme different was the mix of academic understanding, with real-life practicality, and I think that is so unique. I'd never seen anything quite like that at all.'*

D7 shared that they felt, *'What made (the programme) different was the combination of theory along with real-life experience. I lecture in universities sometimes, and I'm often told that the language I'm using is just not academic enough, and I think, well, (If I use the language I am being told to use), they (the students) are going to have to forget the words I am teaching, and learn a new language when they get a real job'.*

D8 observed that unlike previous business development programmes they had attended, the programme involved them actively interpreting the concepts, and shared, *'(Unlike previously), at University, I learn better through an activity, rather than through just sitting and listening. I will learn by associating that it's (the concept) real, otherwise it's just like reading the text, and counting on what I've read to work.'*

### **Business school leads**

BS1 shared that they felt, *'The method of this approach, with the facilitator and with the participants questioning one another, meant they (the participants) had to think about what they were discussing, and relate it to their own businesses. They then got questions from other people that have nothing to do with their industries. In relation to how the theory related to their own businesses, they were asked questions like, "what's your strategy," a question that (the participants often found) difficult to respond to. The structure of the programme and the facilitators constantly made sure they (the delegates) applied it (the models) in their own contexts. The breakout into the think tanks was what distinguished (this programme) from other courses.'*

BS2 shared, *'Well in my opinion business schools overcomplicate the simple,'* when referring to the presentation of the concepts and models, something that did not happen on these programmes.

The comments shared above often refer to the context in which the programme was delivered, the language used, and the stories told by the facilitators.

When comparing the business experimental development programmes featured in this research to other business programmes the SME leaders had attended at business schools, many of which are leading redbrick business schools, SME leaders emphasised the major difference was how they felt they had been engaged. They shared that, in previous business schools they had attended, the lack of relevance to their own situations was a problem that prevented them engaging fully with these programmes.

Also reflected on carefully are the stories that were shared with in order to explore the four components that are the focus of this research to see how these might differ between the business programmes featured in this research, and others that the SME leaders had participated in. The four components were all referred to in a positive way by the SME leaders interviewed. The insights shared highlight that these components provided a key difference, as they did not feature in the same way in previous programmes the SME leaders had participated in. This difference the SME leaders described was how the experimental programmes featured in this research ensured they were relevant to them. Shared below are some of their insights to illustrate this.

Other comments relating to content, the difference and value of this to the SME leaders, was reflected by comments made by the SME leaders interviewed '*Good quality material (D2),*' '*The content was really good, and really relevant*'(D9), '*The mix of academic understanding with real-life practicality (brought the content to life)*' (D5). All of the interviewees reinforced the view discussed earlier in this thesis that the difference that was important, was that the content of programmes, was based on business models, but also had strong academic underpinning, which helped the SME leaders see the relevance to them, and to their businesses.

The difference and value of the context of these programmes, for example, the way in which they were delivered, emerged as a major differentiator during my primary research interviews. Shared below are some examples of the comments that highlight this.

### **Participants**

*'The style worked well. If it was just 2, 4, or 8-hour lecture, where I would have been just been told all day what to think, I think that I would have switched off'. (D2).*

*'In relation to the lectures (in previous business schools) I attended I don't know if I took too much from them. I felt I might as well go home and interpret (the material) myself. I found the lectures very dry, irrelevant, noninteractive. I don't enjoy (that)'. (D3).*

When sharing their stories, the SME leaders were passionate in how they expressed their opinions about the style of delivery and context, and how this made a positive difference to the value of the programmes they attended when compared with their previous experiences. The following comments reflected their passion.

*'I felt relaxed immediately' (D6).*

*'You felt as though you could chat to people, and it wasn't stilted' (D4)*

This suggests that because of the different and relaxed style of the context, the SME leaders' initially, were not aware that much consideration had been allocated to this component in the planning of the delivery of the programmes. However, when the SME leaders compared the context with other business programmes they had participated in, they emphasised that this difference was important. Once again, the way that they expressed their views on the context of the programme, positively and with passion, highlighted how important this was to them.

The stories the SME leaders shared about the value, to them, that the facilitators were practitioners, and how this made a difference to these programmes when compared to their previous experiences, is reflected in some of their comments below:

*'The way that they (the facilitators) could relate to real life experiences, (made a big difference)' (D7).*

*'The mix of academic understanding, and real-life practicality (the facilitators had) is so unique. I've never seen anything quite like that at all. (They could combine) theory along with real-life experience' (D5)*

An emerging theme from the stories that the SME leaders shared is the difference and value, to them, of the facilitators having the ability to relate concepts to real life experiences, and to tell stories that are both relevant and believable. The emphasis the SME leaders placed on this ability became even more pronounced when they compared this to their previous experiences of business programmes, they had participated in at other business schools.

The network also emerged as a significant differential between the SME leaders' experience on the programmes contained in this research, and their experience of other programmes they had participated in at business schools. Examples of the views, the SME leaders shared are:

*'Talking to people from a completely different market, with different sized businesses, who had similar problems (was) unlike my experience at universities'(D1).*

*'You got an external viewpoint as well (as the view of the facilitator)' (D8).*

Reflecting overall on the comments the SME leaders shared a key theme emerging, and one that reoccurred many times, is the lack of relevance to the SME leaders of business school programmes they have previously participated in.

### **Secondary Data**

On re-reading the comments made by the SME leaders in the pilot questionnaires, contained in the Aristos data (2015), the difference and value of the programmes that are the focus of this research to the SME leaders are highlighted in some of the extracts from the secondary data shared below. The comments were in direct response to questions about how these programmes differed from others they had attended.

*'It (the programme) highlighted points I never thought about, but (which) are essential for sustainable business growth'.*

*'What made it (the programme) different was the fact that it was engaging, not just a lecture'.*

*'What made it (the programme) different was the moving of tables for discussion with peers, and (the opportunity) to challenge one another'.*

*'Everything was transferable to my business needs'.*

*'The programme is relevant, honest and insightful, relaxed and inspiring'.*

*'The programme helped me look at my business approach and (helped me) create a more targeted direction'.*

*'One of the best business programmes I've attended, with a unique approach of self-reflection. I have identified some key areas I need to address and (that) will help my business grow'.*

*'A very different way of learning and discussing the points raised'.*

*'Working with the group, also helps stimulate ideas or actions, and bring them to the forefront, including past practices which I had forgotten.'*

*'Whilst initially, in relation to the networking, I did not think it was a great idea, I found a great deal of ideas and inspiration from this method of learning'.*

The value of the context, content, facilitator, and network, together in the way in which the programmes were designed and delivered, once again emerges as a significant differential of the business development programmes that are the subject of this research. This was strongly emphasised when the SME leaders compared them to other business development programmes they had previously attended.

Shared below are further comments below from the secondary data to illustrate this:

*'Business schools (I previously attended, had not been) explicit to the individual needs of each SME.'*

*'(In the business school programmes I had previously attended), there were far too many stereotypes, and it (the programme) was too black and white'.*

*'I got experiences and tools that will help me in my new role, (which I did not take away from previous programmes I attended).'*

### **Summary.**

A key difference emerging from the data between the experimental programmes that are the subject of my research and business development programmes that the SME leaders had previously attended is the relevance of the programmes. This is in relation to the SME leaders individually, and to their businesses. The experimental programmes that are the subject of this research, SME leaders found to be relevant to them, whereas programmes they had previously attended, did not meet their needs and lacked this relevance.

The data analysis above has highlighted learnings from the experimental business development programmes at the centre of this research that can assist in the business programmes offered by business schools to more effectively stimulate action in SME leaders.

### **Additional observations from the data analysis**

A key question and consideration for the design of programmes targeting the stimulation of action with SME leaders that emerges particularly from the secondary data is, how long should the reflection period be before returning to a state of action? One of the observations contained in the Aristos report (2015), arising from the feedback of the delegates, was that the reflection period added value to the learning, but a four-week reflection was too long because this meant, for them, a loss of momentum.

This feedback was taken on board in the subsequent LEAD programme (2016), and the reflection period was reduced to two weeks, with positive feedback on this, being highlighted in the Doncaster Council's 2016 report.

In considering the context of the programmes being researched, the SME leaders and the business schools involved noted that the short plenaries, followed by breakouts to reflect in 'think tanks' (workshops) was what made the programmes different for them when compared with the business school teaching they had experienced previously, and, for them, this had had a significant positive impact on their assessment of the value to them.

The value of this type of reflective learning was illustrated by Shulman and Shulman (2007) in their model that shows practice, understanding, vision and motivation, all contributing to an individual's reflection process when taking business decisions. All of these considerations, in the context of understanding what SME leaders wanted was found within the data emerging from the experimental programmes assessed in this research. This includes how the SME leaders were asked to relate the learning to their own businesses, and how the language used in the presentation of the concepts was tailored specifically for the target audience. The insights emerging from this research highlight that these features increased the confidence of the participating SME leaders and helped to motivate them. It is also worth noting that the secondary data observes that in the experimental programmes featured in this research, there was minimal fallout of delegates participating in the programmes.

These insights also introduce the value of practitioner-led facilitation, underpinned by academic rigour to achieve credibility, and stimulate action with SME leaders. Also, harnessing the power of the network, can stimulate a sharing by other members, of the network with similar issues or problems that they are having. This often facilitates a collaborative group discussion focused on sharing experiences and using the business concepts that have been presented during the development programme, to help guide one another to potential solutions.

However, if there is no mutual respect between participants in the network, engagement may have a neutral or negative impact on stimulating action. Without respect, delegates may even disengage with the learning discussions as evidenced in the primary research data.

The observation by Thomas (2019), in relation to a programme being real world orientated, particularly compliments the comments of the SME leaders that were interviewed, who often referred to any programme content needing to relate to their 'real world'.

The insights emerging from the stories the SME leaders shared emphasise how important the network is to them, as delegates on business development programmes. These insights highlight the value of the networking experience to them, in particular, the exchange of stories. Whilst these opinions are underpinned and reinforced by publications that emphasise the benefits of the power of the network, this was a much stronger emergent theme than had been anticipated. The questions for consideration, are 'how is this done?' and 'why has it not been done before?'

Another observation emerging from the primary research interviews, is that SME leaders can often feel lonely, and as Walsh and Ungson (1991) observed, small business owners can feel isolated when dealing with business challenges.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

There were features emerging from the primary and secondary data that were anticipated emerged from the existing literature:

- Lack of relevance of what was being taught
- Lack of business practice credibility of the individuals delivering the programmes
- Confusion over the language and terminologies used
- Lack of understanding of the life of a SME leader and their needs

There were also features that emerged from the primary and secondary data that were surprising:

- The development programme helped SME leaders clarify what businesses they were in.
- The programmes helped SME leaders clarify their own personal and business objectives.
- The strength of the combination of academic and practitioner contributions to a development programme.

- How powerful the value of the network was in being the trigger point for stimulation action with the SME leaders.

The data emerging from the primary and secondary data adds to the overwhelming body of work highlighting a lack of relevance in development programmes offered by business schools targeting the stimulation of action in SME leaders. Some of these observations date back over forty years. These observations continue to be made, so why does little appear to have changed?

A possible reason for this could be that little research seems to have been done on how the individual components of a programme, individually and collectively, can be structured regarding lack of relevance business development programmes offered by business schools have to SME leaders to provide relevance to SME leaders, and improve the chances of stimulating action in SMEs. This can be harnessed to help business school programmes more effectively stimulate action in SMEs.

The following chapter will discuss how this might be achieved.

## **Chapter 6. Discussion.**

### **Introduction.**

The purpose of this research is to explore how business school programmes can more effectively stimulate action in SMEs. Chapter 1 outlined the objectives of the research that were to be explored to achieve the prime research purpose.

This chapter will commence by discussing the findings of the four components of the experimental business development programmes at the core of the research, those of content, context, facilitator, and network. Every sub-section ends with the implications of the findings. These discussions will include how the research met some of the objectives set out in Chapter 1.

The discussion in this chapter relating to how the findings met the objectives of the research will relate to objectives 1-3, set out in Chapter 1. Consideration relating to how objectives 4 and 5 were met will be discussed in Chapter 7.

#### **Objectives 1-3:**

1. To investigate and analyse insights of SME leaders on experimental business programmes.
2. Compare and analyse the findings to provide insights into these four component features in SME business development programmes with the information identified in the pre-research secondary data and literature reviews.
3. To identify themes and gain an understanding of what it is within business training programmes that are the "trigger point/s" that stimulates action in SME leaders to develop their businesses in a way that they would not have done had they not participated in the programme/s.

In discussing the themes, consideration is given to how consistent or inconsistent are these emergent themes from the primary data with secondary research data and the literature that has been reviewed. Consideration will be given to the observations, if these provide new insights that, as Seidman (1998) suggests, go beyond the current contents of the published literature.

To put the discussion that follows into context, in Chapter 1 the importance of the development of SMEs in order to assist their growth was identified as being important to both the economy and the UK government, as is reflected in the government's investment in the development of SME businesses Foyelle et al. (2019).

### **Content**

Two key themes emerging from this research about the content of business development programmes targeted at SME development are that of credibility and relevance. Many business development programmes offered by business schools use case studies of large organisations, such as Amazon or Facebook. This research shows that SME leaders consider that studying and attempting to take learning from large organisations has little relevance to them, especially as many SME leaders may operate in a small office environment, perhaps with only one or two other colleagues in their whole business.

This research also indicates that another contributing factor to SME leaders' stories about the lack of relevance, to them, of the content of business development programmes offered by business schools is models suggest that all businesses move through specific linear development phases, which rarely happens in practice. This perceived lack of relevance is particularly emphasised in the chaotic world in which SME leaders live and operate. Churchill and Lewis (1983) also found that this linear illustration of the stages of growth that businesses go through might limit a leader's thought process when looking forward. In a similar way, Gertler (2010) and Welter (2011) suggested that when developing the content of a business development programme, that in order to be made more relevant and can help the content to be more effective, it must be more context driven.

In contrast to this, SME leaders embrace and see the practical value in stepping back from their businesses, periodically, to look at their organisations in a structured and logical way. What they have difficulty relating to is a suggestion that they can bring rigid structures and processes into their own chaotic worlds. This, for many of the SME leaders attending the programmes in this research, was a step too far and not a credible suggestion for them.

There has been much research, over many years, that question the suggestion that all businesses move in linear stages of development for example, O'Farrell and Hitchins (1988), Levic and Lichtenstein (2008), Mason and Brown (2010). This need to accept the existence of the chaos and incomplete information that the SME leaders operate in was welcomed by the SME participants. Pettigrew and Starkey (2016) and Bennis and O'Toole (2005) made similar observations of this need for SME leaders to accept chaos and incomplete information.

Barringer and Ireland (2010), Eagly and Carli (2007), Ely et al. (2011) all suggest that development programmes targeted at SME audiences should have content that is more related to the outcome objectives of the programme, as opposed to the process of learning itself. Whilst the insights from this research support this, this is dependent on the nature of the outcome objectives. The outcome objectives, must, in order to make a difference, as the data from the primary research highlights, be focused on understanding and meeting the needs of SME leaders to develop their confidence and stimulate action.

The dominant and most significant theme emerging from this research supports the view that the content focus should be in relation to business programmes targeted at developing SME leaders, is, as Christensen (2010) identifies, the content focus should not be on what to think, but rather on, how to think. This helps develop SME leaders' confidence and helps stimulate them to take action in their businesses. The findings here are mirrored in the work of Shane (2000), who describes this content focus as helping SME leaders to develop the necessary idiosyncratic knowledge to help develop their businesses. This view is not new, as Pascale (1623-1662) advocated a similar approach.

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Of the four components explored in this research, the content, for example, the detail of the academic models used during the programmes, was considered by the SME leaders to be the least important to them. Notwithstanding this, however, the importance and credibility of the academic underpinning contained within the content of the programmes, in the eyes of the SME leaders, should not be underestimated. The SME leaders' stories emphasise how the credibility of these business concepts is enhanced by the academic rigour and research behind them, and how the learning from these helps to build SME leaders' confidence and stimulate action.

Giving context to this observation from the primary research about the relative value of the content of a business development programme, Postrareff and Lindblom (2011) identified that teachers with a content focus profile had neutral or negative feelings about learning and the development of teaching. They found that this created confusion in relation to the importance of concepts, particularly during the development phase of their teaching. This relates back to the earlier observation that SMEs often make judgements in a chaotic situation and with incomplete information.

Giacalone and Wargo (2009) even suggest that the content of general business education provided by business schools could have been a contributing factor, in the financial crisis in 2008 and 2009. This suggestion potentially overstates the negative impact management training delivered by business schools has had on the global economy. Whilst the considerations by Giacalone and Wargo (2009) are quite bold and may be open to challenge, the fact that they present these findings indicates that there is an underlying problem in the business programmes offered by business schools.

The primary research findings observe that one of the impact objectives of any business development programme targeted at SME leaders should be to assist SME leaders to take a holistic approach to solving their business problems. In the same way, Michelmore and Rowley (2013) identify the need for SME leaders to develop rounded entrepreneurial competence to effectively develop their businesses. This holistic development approach is not a new idea it is recommended by Churchman (1979).

An example of how this holistic thinking was achieved in the experimental programmes involved at the core of this research was when the SME leaders were asked to identify the key performance indicators that they felt appropriate for their own businesses and their own personal objectives. To help them do this, they were asked to map these on a 'spider model', as illustrated in figure 6 below. The concept of this spider model was explained to the SME leaders at the commencement of each programme, with the SME leaders returning and adapting their models, throughout the entire period of the programmes.

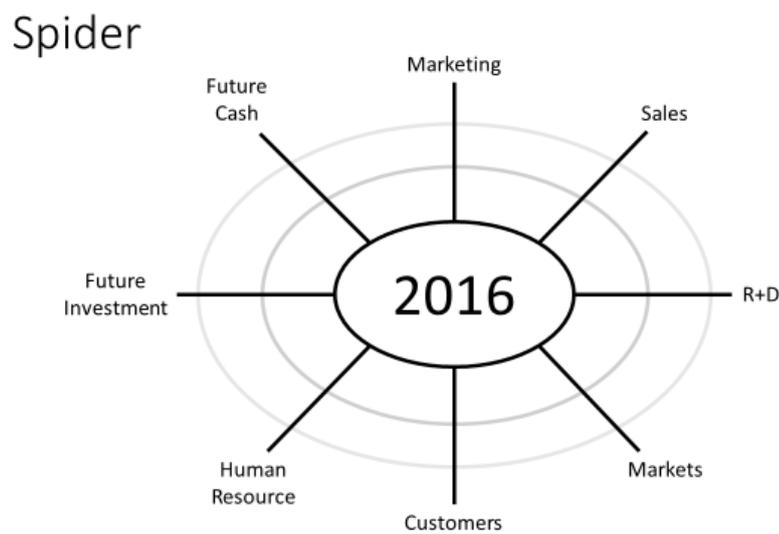


Figure 6. Strategic Spider

Consultancy Academy 2010.

The key objective of this spider model is that, like a spider's web, if one part of the web is moved, this moves or has an impact on other areas of the web. This approach is designed to encourage SME leaders to continually think about, not only the direct impact of any individual actions that they might take in one area of their business, but also the implications, or the unintended potential impacts this might have on other key areas of their business. This model helps SME leaders think holistically in the same way as identified in the research. Gibson and Burkinshaw (2004) also recognised the benefits of this type of holistic, strategic thinking, which they described as contextual ambidexterity. Once again this holistic overview, combined with a continued return and development during the business

development programme helps bring relevance and impact to the SME participants as it helps to personalise the programme to the participants as individuals.

These views were supported by the secondary data when the universities involved in the programmes were asked by Aristos about how they viewed the value of the content used in the programmes. The insights shared identified that there were possibilities to adapt and revise the content and present them with a clearer focus, and also with more relevance to SMEs.

### **Implications of findings**

The implications from the findings of this research, relating to the content of a business development programme targeted at stimulating action in SMEs are:

There is an acceptance by SME leaders that the quality and rigour of the business models developed and used by business schools are of the highest quality and add value to the programmes being delivered. However, there is an overwhelming perception by SME leaders that whilst they may reflect rigorous research, they have little value to them either as SME leaders or for their businesses. This suggests that less focus should be on the detailed understanding of any concept being presented to the SME participants, and more on how these concepts can be adapted in order to be relevant to the SME participants.

Concepts that SME leaders have difficulty relating to from their 'real world' perspective such as all businesses progressing through a linear line of development, should not be used unless significantly adapted, in programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs.

The individual concepts of business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs should not be presented as stand-alone concepts, but be continually linked to a holistic reflection that relates to their own businesses at that moment in time.

As the data from the experimental programmes indicates, when this is done the objective of stimulating action is more effectively achieved.

## Context

In relation to the context of business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs, the importance of giving SME leaders time, during the programmes, to reflect on the business concepts that were being presented to them, so they could relate them to their own businesses was something that came across very strongly in the interviews and the secondary data analysed.

This was emphasised during the research interviews conducted with SME leaders, and in the stories they shared. Many of them had previously participated in business training programmes with leading business schools and universities, where they neither enjoyed nor reacted well to being 'talked at'. In contrast to this, in the experimental programmes that are the focus of this research, SME leaders valued the context, and enjoyed discussing the merits of each concept presented to them, taking the time to collectively, and individually, reflect on these in relation to their own businesses. In the experimental programmes, this was facilitated by short plenaries followed by small group discussions, 'think tanks.' In a similar way, Karlan and Valdiva (2011), and Marin et al. (2013) referred to the value of utilising short sharp interactive sessions in order to make the programmes more effective.

It is important, for SME leaders, during business development programmes they attend, to have the opportunity to participate and input into the concepts and the knowledge that is being discussed with them, and not to be talked at and treated as silent witnesses in the learning process. This was a reoccurring and powerful theme emerging from this research.

This type of reflective and action-orientated learning approach that has been adopted in the experimental development programmes at the centre of this research has been recommended by numerous authors (Kant, 1788; Shulman & Shulman, 2007; Christensen, 2010; Valerio et al., 2014; Thorpe Rowlinson, 2013). The importance of this type of reflexive learning approach, as Hibbert et al. (2010) found, is that it enables the delegates to not only understand what they see, but how this relates to their own personal situations and how their personal needs might influence their views.

The observations of Postrareff and Lindblom (2011), support this view, when they suggest that there are two types of mindsets that teachers have. One is a teacher-centred where students are considered to be passive. The other a student-centred mindset, where a teacher thinks of themselves as a facilitator, which reflects the approach taken by the experimental programmes at the core of this research. This potential lack of suitability of this teacher centred approach to effectively stimulate action in business leaders was also highlighted by Sutton and Wheatley (2003).

The need for the SME participants to feel valued and that the content of what was being discussed does relate to them as individuals was also seen by the participants interviewed as important factor in stimulating them to take action. Postrareff and Lindblom (2011) referred to this as recognising the power of the participants emotions in the effective transfer of knowledge. But also observed that this was mainly ignored in many business development programmes.

Another emergent observation of the SME participants was that the language used, and processes presented be kept as simple and as relevant as possible. Christensen (2010) alluded to this when highlighting the value of getting participants on development programmes to understand more and to learn less. Christensen is advocating here, is that it is more beneficial, to focus on and seek to understand, how a few business concepts can be applied in practice. This is instead of asking them to learn many business concepts by rote, that SME leaders may not fully understand, or see how these can be used in practice, mirroring the findings of this research.

In this way, SME leaders can as Churchman advocated in 1968, discipline themselves to see the world through their own eyes and the eyes of others. This research shows that this can be achieved by SME leaders being reflexive, and continually stepping back and viewing their own situations holistically. This also helps the business programme to more effectively stimulate action.

The findings emerging from the primary and secondary data of this research relating to the use of simple business language a limited amount of volume of content, are similar to the concept of critical systems heuristics suggested by Ulrich and Reynolds (2010). Utilising this

type of critical systems heuristics in the design of a programme, they suggest, can help facilitate greater understandings and promote a commonality of language and meanings. They suggest that this can be achieved by encouraging delegates to constantly look at, and to review the boundaries that the individuals themselves are setting within the scope of any problem being assessed. Ulrich and Reynolds (2010) also advocate encouraging delegates to be brave, and have confidence to articulate their own judgements and to be able to answer questions set by others about their specific business problems. This came across very strongly in the information emerging from the data. A key differential that any business has is the SME leader's own views and opinions, especially if they have confidence in these, even if these do not initially appear to be logical in relation to any given set of circumstances.

This primary research indicates entrepreneurship is something that SME leaders can learn and develop from attending programmes that meet their specific needs. Hasse and Lautenschlager (2011) found that entrepreneurship education focuses on teaching knowledge, and they recommend that in order to be more effective, this focus should also incorporate business creation and practical application. These insights emerge as key features leading SME leaders to take action, and therefore, the success of the programmes being assessed, in the eyes of the SME leaders who participated in the experimental programmes at the core of this research. These programmes encouraged the SME leaders not only to look at how to structure their own businesses, but as importantly, how to structure their thinking and to experience entrepreneurship through the exchange of real-life stories. These stories helped them relate the concepts being discussed in the development programmes to their own specific business situations.

The research by Postrareff and Lindbloom (2011) supports the research findings of this thesis and reflects some of the comments made by the SME leaders interviewed, in relation to the style of delivery of academic business programmes they had attended in the past. This particularly relates to the traditional style of talking at the participants that Carson (1993) also identified, had some significant limitations when used in the development of small businesses. The SME leaders' comments referred to the lack of open discussions about the content and its relevance to them, together with being told, 'this is the model you need

to use, and this is what you need to do with it'. As discussed previously, where SME leaders are not helped to see 'what is in it for them' and are not encouraged to engage with these models from a practical perspective, the value of them attending the programmes is questionable.

This highlights the importance of the nature of the interaction between students and teachers, and is identified as such by Kember and Kwan (2000) and Samuelowicz and Bain (1992, 2001). Their research all positions the value of a reflective and inclusive style of delivery during business development programmes. Raposo and Do Paco (2010) found that a key reason for these tensions was that the prime objective of entrepreneurship education should be about fostering entrepreneurship mindsets, and they question whether business schools do this. In the experimental programmes that are the focus of this research, these tensions were not evident. This is a result of the context of these programmes, seeking to mirror the view of Christensen (2010), and which has the objective of teaching SME leaders how to think, not what to think. In doing this, actions that are stimulated in SME leaders, as a result of attending these programmes, can be seen from this research material to be directly related.

### **Implications of findings**

The findings of this research in relation to the context of a business programme helping to more effectively stimulate action in SMEs, is that there needs to be a radical change from the way the majority of business development programmes targeted at SMEs are. This observation is not new Samuelson (2011) and Pettigrew and Starkey (2016) call for changes in the way business schools deliver management education. Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) observe that business schools do not appear to understand what type of support and engagement, they ought to be offering SMEs, in terms of what they need and what does and does not work in order meet SMEs' needs. They go on to say that this situation does not seem to have been extensively researched. Understanding of this, has been the focus of this research, which has explored what works and what does not work in the design of business development programmes, from the perspective of SME leaders' to meet their needs

Postrareff and Lindblom (2011), observations possibly reflect an underlying cultural problem in higher education in relation to the transfer of business knowledge, in that, the

importance of emotion in effective knowledge transfer does not receive enough attention. Zhang and Zhu (2008) suggest that this lack of focus on emotions results in the content of what they are teaching being seen to be less relevant to students and so lessens the effectiveness of the programmes.

If this student-focused approach is to be adopted by business schools, this raises the question as was identified by Trigwel et al. (1994) and Kember and Kwan (2000), that to succeed in achieving this may require a significant cultural change, as teaching styles are often dependant on teacher's mindsets.

A key theme, emerging from this research, is the importance of participant-centred learning. There is a need for business schools, in order to be more effective in the transfer of business knowledge to SMEs, to move from instructor-centred learning to participant-centred learning that harnesses the power of the network. This participant centred learning approach was also recommended by Sweet et al. (1992), who highlight the value of team-based learning in the effective transfer of business knowledge.

The effective facilitation and use of network discussions motivate SME leaders to take action. Anderson et al. (2014) called this intrinsic motivation, and discuss the value of this in stimulating action in their report, commissioned by the UK, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Micro Businesses.

Reflecting further on the theme of participant-centred learning, it is important for SME leaders and programme facilitators to share stories that include real situations, which bring this to life. The benefits of doing this have been highlighted by Barrett and Moore (2011) as a key factor in facilitating effective participant-centred learning. As discussed earlier, to achieve this, and as also identified by Bosma et al. (2012), it is important for facilitators to be credible role models.

The implications emerging from these findings are that in order to more effectively stimulate action in SMEs, it may not only be in the design of the context for a programme needs to be more participant centric. However, if part of the problem is a cultural one, then the time and disruption such a change will involve cannot be ignored

## **Facilitator**

The individual credibility of the facilitators on business development programmes, targeting the stimulation of action by SMEs, is a key theme that emerged repeatedly throughout this research. This was particularly in relation to the facilitator helping to more effectively stimulate action with the SME participants. The practical experience of the facilitators, and the way they use their experience to bring to life and help SME leaders see the practical value of the concepts that were being introduced to them, emerges as an essential component of any development programme targeted at SME leaders. The stories SME leaders shared strongly emphasise this.

The ability of the facilitator to also tell stories about their own real-life experiences, or those of others in relation to the topics being discussed was highlighted by SME leaders as a clear differential and measure of the success of these programmes, when they compared them to others that they had participated in. Equally important is the ability of the facilitator to encourage SME leaders to share and reflect on their own and each other's stories in relation to the concepts being presented, and to stimulate rich group discussions about these.

Interestingly, it is also the nature of the stories that is important. Several of the SME leaders interviewed emphasised that a facilitator who only had stories to tell about their own success and how wonderful they were lacked credibility. In the same way, they considered that facilitators who could share academic concepts, but if they had never been there and done it in practice or could not relate the concepts to real life situations, also lacked credibility. The stories that had more impact, and that SME leaders took more learning from, were not the stories of success, but the reflexive stories about failure and the performance of organisations that could have been enhanced had the SME leaders utilised the concepts being discussed.

This suggests that there is a need to engage facilitators on business programmes targeted at SMEs who not only have practitioner experience, but also have a comprehensive and credible academic understanding of the concepts they are presenting, which, together,

brings credibility to the stories they are telling. This is a catalyst in helping to build SME leaders' confidence and stimulate them to take action that they would not have taken previously.

Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) recommend that in order to achieve this, business schools need to engage more practitioner experience within their departments. Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) go on to suggest that governments and others, such as, the media and business opinion are drawing attention to their criticism and concern about business schools, and their lack of connection and impact on the SME community.

The importance emerging from the data about the facilitators having been there and done it, giving the facilitators the ability to tell stories and relate the concepts being presented in a language that the SME leaders related to, was a strong observation emerging from both the primary and secondary data. This observation mirrors those of Magenda and Chabeli (2005); Bullough et al., (2015) recommendation to *'hire and train subject matter expert instructors, selected, because of their first-hand knowledge of the business environment and the surrounding context'*, further supports this observation, p258.

The strong emergent theme emerging from the data relating to the experimental business programmes at the core of this research, that of the facilitator needing to have practical experience, is not new. The wealth and volume of such observation is substantial, Baldrige et al. (2004), Gosling and Mintzberg (2006), Bower (2008), and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013), Tucker and Lowe (2014) and Mintoff et al. (2015). The value of using industry experts to assist in connecting research findings with practice was highlighted by the comments emerging from the SME participants interviewed. Similar observations were made by Churchman (1979), Bruner (1986), Gergen (1999) Oakley and White (1993), Bessant and Rush (1995), Arnold and Thuriaux (1998), Gabrielle (2000), Arnold et al. (2004) and Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) who all emphasised the added value that the lived-in experience could bring to the effectiveness of a programme.

The observations of Jansen (2000) mirror the findings of this primary research, which suggests that facilitators involved in the process of effective transfer of knowledge to SME

leaders should see themselves as change agents and champions for change. The role of these facilitators should be to help facilitate and maintain business readiness for business situations the SME leaders may encounter. This, Jansen (2000) recommends, should be delivered in the context of a proactive planned engagement that seeks to influence beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours within the SME leaders' thought processes.

This observation emerging from both the primary and secondary data that in order to more effectively stimulate action, facilitators on such business development programmes should see themselves as facilitators of change is reinforced by Gull (2010),

who observed that excellence in teaching should be focused on its impact on the effective transfer of business knowledge, particularly in relation to SMEs. In relation to more effectively stimulating action, Gull's 2010 report positions that there has been a lack of leadership from business schools in the areas of raising the levels and status of effective teaching. Effective teaching or facilitation, Gull found, was not recognised enough as a valuable attribute in some business schools, even though this was crucial in facilitating the impact of the programmes being delivered.

The findings of this research are also mirrored in the work of Walsh and Ungson (1991), who also recognise that external stimuli can be organisational triggers for change or action. In the experimental programmes at the core of this research, this external stimulus is provided by facilitators who are also business practitioners. Zahra and George (2002) develop this further by observing that this external stimulus may trigger SME leaders to seek additional external sources of knowledge. This was found to be the case in this research, with many insights emerging, as discussed in Chapter 5, and that illustrate the actions SME leaders have taken in this regard. This is summed up by the observation made in the independent LEAD (2016) assessment, which observed that the success of the LEAD programme had facilitated a hunger for more knowledge in many of the SME leaders who participated in these programmes.

Another emergent theme in relation to the facilitators on the experimental business programmes at the core of this research was that their key role was one of a facilitator. Having the experience and capacity to initiate and Facilitate group discussions, sharing of

stories and reflection on how the models and concepts being discussed relate to their own personal and business needs. These comments shared by the SME leaders are mirrored in the research of Oakey and White (1993), Bessant and Rush (1995), Arnold and Thuriaux (1998) and Arnold et al. (2004), who all find that in order to achieve results in the transfer of business knowledge to SMEs, the facilitator should view their role as a facilitator to help business leaders understand their needs and how they can satisfy these needs.

### **Implications of findings**

Carson (1993) highlights the value of this practitioner/academic facilitation. They consider that individuals that have these combined talents are a scarce resource and difficult to find. This is a view that could be challenged as from the insights emerging from this research, the question is not one identified in some previous papers, of how to resolve a scarce resource, but one of, how do business schools attract individuals with these talents, who do exist?

The suggestion that business schools need to bring more relevance to their programmes targeting SMEs was highlighted by the Association of Business Schools' (ABS) own research commissioned with Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013). Thorpe and Rowlinson, in this report, observed that better connectivity with SMEs could be achieved by engaging more practitioners as facilitators. They also recommended that academic staff undertake regular placement in the real world of small businesses to understand better the needs of SMEs.

Whilst this is one option, other options that Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013) did not discuss could be to separate the practitioner and teacher role from that of the academic and research role within business schools. A potential reason they did not position this as a possible option, and as highlighted in other literature discussed earlier, is does this need a radical cultural change for many business schools, which, from the insights emerging in this research, may be difficult to achieve and probably take a long time to be effective.

## **Network**

Emerging from the primary and secondary data from this research, what was a surprise was how strongly SME leaders valued the peer group discussions and network sharing experiences the strength of their feelings and emotions, when sharing stories about this and how their interactions help to bring business concepts to life and make them real and relevant for the SME leaders. This led to an enhancement to the programme effectively stimulating action in the SME participants.

From the stories that the SME leaders shared, a feeling of loneliness was something that many of them experienced. This was highlighted particularly when they were looking at business problems they were encountering. They felt that these problems were unique to them, and potentially a result of their own individual inadequacies. The peer group discussions helped them realise that most of the problems they were experiencing other SME leaders, from a variety of businesses in relation to size, market sector and maturity, were also experiencing. This helped contribute to the improvement in self-confidence the SME leaders gained during the programmes. Walsh and Ungson (1991) also found that small business owners can feel isolated when dealing with business challenges.

The value of this type of peer group interaction was identified by Rogers (1995) and Reagans and Mcevily (2003), who suggested that knowledge is more likely to be transferred effectively if the target groups or audience have similar knowledge and backgrounds. Whilst SME businesses represent a multitude of different types of enterprises and industries, the SME leaders all face similar challenges and experiences. This type of homophilic (people like us) networking was also identified as a strong contributor to improving the effectiveness of the transfer of business knowledge by MacPherson et al (2001).

On further reflection relating to the power of the network to more effectively stimulate SME leaders to take action, when attending a business development programme, the value of this has also been recognised by Mintzberg (1973), Johannisson and Peterson (1984), Aldrich and Zimmer (1986), Johannisson (1984, 1986, 1987 1988), Aldridge et al., (1989),

Liao et al., (2003). Carson (1993) goes further and suggests that peer group experiences are as important as the tutor's guidance in a small business learning environment.

Thomas (2019) highlighted that utilising the value of network discussions in business development programmes targeted at SME leaders improves the effectiveness of them by helping them solve problems in their 'real world'. This need to meet the problems of the participants' 'real world' was again, a strong emerging theme from the primary and secondary data from this research.

The value of working in teams (workshops), harnessing the strength of the network and relating the concepts being presented to the 'real world' as has been highlighted in this research, was also recognised by San Tan and Ng (2006), Gundlach and Zivnuska (2010), and Hytti et al. (2010). Sarasvathy (2009), referred to this harnessing of the power of the network as effectuation, i.e. the creation of business ideas, and this had been underestimated in entrepreneur education and these components had a much greater impact in entrepreneur education than previously thought. In a similar way, the need for harnessing the value of and including more in business development programmes targeted at SME in order to improve their effectiveness was also recommended by Weick (1995), Johannisson (2000), Wiklund et al. (2009), Jones et al. (2011), Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013).

### **Implications of findings**

These findings emphasise the power of the network. The network must be included as a major consideration and component when designing, and delivering business development programmes that have the objective of stimulating action in SME leaders.

The skill sets needed to effectively harness the undoubted power that the network can bring in order to more effectively stimulate the SMEs leaders to take action, are a different skill set to those of imparting knowledge. This re-emphasises the need, as identified earlier, for the facilitators on such programmes to be student centric. This raises the question can the existing personnel delivering these programmes in business schools develop these student centric skills, or will new facilitators need to be engaged?

### **Combined and comparative importance**

All the four components, those of content, context, facilitator, and network, emerge as key themes from this research, and were all valued highly by the SME leaders interviewed. The success of a business development programme targeted at SMEs is dependent on the design and delivery of all these four components being brought together, to meet the needs of the SME leaders.

The facilitator and the network components have been identified as having the greatest influence in terms of stimulating action in SME leaders. Whilst the context and content are also key components, successful outcomes of the programmes are dependent on the facilitator having the ability to bring the concepts being discussed to life and make them real and relevant through the practical stories they tell. The role of the facilitator, together with the network interaction, through which SME leaders can discuss their own businesses with their peers, brings even more relevance to the topics being discussed.

It is important that more consideration of the facilitator and network components is incorporated in the design and delivery of business development programmes targeted at SME leaders. To date, business school programmes that bring these components together are not visible in many of these programmes.

This research was unable to find any academic papers that had explored the impact the components of content, context, facilitator, and network have in stimulating action with SMEs. The World Bank Report research, conducted by Valerio et al. (2014), did recommend that entrepreneurial education and training, in order to be effective, needs to be sub-divided into different categories. Whilst giving the components different headings, they explored the value of the content, context, and network, but did not specifically explore the facilitator. The Valerio et al. report also suggested business development programmes targeted at SMEs, in order to be more effective, should be further sub-divided into smaller sub-sections, such as size of business and age of business. The opposite to this view on sub-division of business types has emerged from the primary and secondary data from this research. The SME leaders involved in this research came from a cross-section of industries,

from various countries, and in organisations of different sizes and maturities. The insights emerging from this highlight that SME leaders share similar challenges, regardless of the size and maturity of their businesses, and rather than been seen by the participants as a negative, but, was seen as an additional benefit.

After completing the research, and having written up the findings, in draft form, a paper closely related to this research by Johnson and Orr (2019) was published. Whilst this study has a different objective to that of this research, some of the findings, observations and recommendations, mirror the ones emerging from this research. Johnson and Orr (2019) explore business schools' research, and its relevance to the practitioner's world, in contrast to this research which explores the impact that business development programmes delivered by business schools have in stimulating action in SME leaders. Whilst the overall focus of these two studies is different, similar arguments and observations are made. Both Johnson and Orr's work and this study identify that effective training of entrepreneurial skills can help stimulate improved business performance and create jobs. Also, both identify that entrepreneurs learn less effectively from a conventional didactic type of training delivery provided by much of the business education sector. Also, both identify the opportunity, and a need to develop mutual understanding and trust between business schools and industry by focusing on the practical relevance of business school development programmes, research, and outcomes that meet the needs of business leaders.

The data emerging from the primary and secondary data from this research indicates that in terms of more effectively stimulating action in SMEs, the network has the greatest impact, the facilitator a close second, the context was third, with the content being perceived by the SME participants, whilst important, being the least important of the 4 components in stimulating the SME leaders to take action.

Interestingly, Anderson et al. (2014) also looked to identify, which elements of a development programme had the greatest impact on stimulating action by the delegates. To explore this the different components of the programmes at the centre of this research were content, context, facilitator, and network. Anderson et al. (2014) took a slightly different approach and segmented the programmes in their research into seven

components, those of facilitator, expert, mentor, coach, learner, peers and miscellaneous, but, unlike this research, they did not include content or context.

They also chose to assess their findings based on a categorisation of how delegates described their learning experience. They focussed on five different learning experiences, whereas this research chose to consider all the learning experiences shared as a whole. Despite this different type of analysis, the findings of this research mirror the findings of Anderson et al. (2014). They suggest that in three of the different learning experiences they looked at, they found that the peers within the group had the greatest impact, with the facilitator having greatest impact in two others (p 74).

In addition to the insights that emerge from this research relating to the value and importance of the four components, content, context, facilitator and network, there are also other key themes that emerge, which are supported by published works of peer reviewed authors. These are discussed below.

### **Implications of findings**

The key theme emerging from this research is that all of the four components at the core of this research are important in improving the effectiveness of programmes offered by business schools stimulating action in SMEs. All must be interlocked, with one complimenting the other, however, if emphasis were to be given to these components, it should be in order of importance, network, facilitator, context, and content. This refocus of emphasis may be viewed as a revolutionary change for the culture and personnel within the traditional business school environment.

## Relevance

Relevance, or the lack of currently offered in terms of what business schools offer business offer SME leaders, must be a key consideration if business are to meet the needs of business leaders and stimulate them to take action.

The UK Government's statements highlighted the need for business schools to undertake research that is relevant to business, and, as such, has more business impact (H.M. Government, 2017). This report, which was written by Huzzard et al. (2017), questions if business schools do not do this, what is their practical purpose, and in the absence of relevant research, what is the positive contribution and difference, that business school research really makes to society?

The primary and secondary data emerging from the analysis of the experimental programmes at the centre of this research, found that it was that the participants must perceive the programme to be relevant to them, as individuals and to their businesses.

To achieve this relevance, Chia and Holt (2008) highlight the shortage of high-impact and relevant practical research produced by business schools. They suggest that business schools need to improve their casual approach to how they explain practical knowledge, and the value of this. Chia and Holt (2008) go on to say that to achieve this, there is a need for business schools to engage with different actors and organisations. The work of Macintosh et al. (2017) also supports this, and highlights that there is a need for business schools to change, and consider how they bring practitioner experience into their faculties. This, they suggest, inevitably will involve changing staff.

As identified in this research, the focus should be on the skills and expertise that will support the development and delivery of effective knowledge transfer in business development programmes targeting the stimulation of action in SME leaders. Whilst initially this might seem to be an easy thing to achieve, despite research over many years advocating that this does not appear to have taken place. Macintosh et al. (2017), and suggest that this is due to, 'an almost total lack of consideration of the perceptions and experiences of business and the wider stakeholders in relation to research impact', (p. 3).

This also applies to the design and delivery of business programmes offered in the past, by business schools, which purport to target the development of SME businesses. Key to more effectively stimulating action in SMEs is to understand SME leaders' needs, and how the development programme will meet these.

Whilst the work of Macintosh et al. (2017) focuses on business school research, rather than effective knowledge transfer, the findings of this research have a great deal of synergy with their observations and recommendations. As Macintosh et al. (2017) and Fayolle et al. (2019) observed the rigour/relevance gap that has been cited as unbridgeable by Kieser and Leiner (2009) is bridgeable, as evidenced by the data emerging from the experimental programmes at the centre of the research. This changes the question from 'can the rigour/relevance gap be bridged?' to 'how can it be bridged?'

In 2019, a book titled 'The Role and Impact of Entrepreneurial Education', by Alaine Fayolle was published, which mirrors some of this research's findings and observations. Fayolle et al., (2019) work suggests that the ever-changing world of entrepreneurs and SMEs is going to be even more accelerated by the impact of artificial intelligence and Big Data, but that entrepreneurship education is not changing to reflect these innovations. They suggest that to address this, the starting point of any programme targeting the development of entrepreneurial activity should be to understand and seek to meet current and ever-changing needs of the entrepreneur.

Fayolle et al. (2019) recommends that in order to facilitate more effective knowledge transfer, the role of the teaching staff needs to become that of a facilitator, in order to give the responsibility for learning to the delegates, which would help to facilitate them taking action. The findings of this research mirror these recommendations, in that the context, this being the reflective learning approach used in the programmes in the research, and the responsibility of the SME leaders in this, are key themes that helped to stimulate action.

Another emergent theme from this research illustrates that meeting the needs of SME leaders can be achieved by harnessing the strength of a practitioner and academic alliance. In a similar way, Lima et al. (2015) and Piperopoulos and Dimov (2015) highlight the benefits

of embracing new teaching methods and combining fields of expertise, to help enhance the impact of business development programmes.

Kolb and Kolb (2009) also emphasise the value of experiential learning through the type of experimental programmes that have been the focus of this research, which adopt a participant-centric learning approach as a key ingredient in the success of knowledge transfer to entrepreneurs, and which results in the stimulation of action.

From reviewing the research material, it is evident that the design of the three experimental programmes incorporate features that facilitated the effective transfer of business knowledge, through practical reasoning and reflective enquiry. The SME leaders participating in these programmes were asked to relate the concepts and discussions to the needs of their own businesses, and their own personal objectives. The actions that they subsequently were stimulated to take were different, but tailored directly to their business and personal requirements for example, some wanted to build their business to sell quickly, whilst others wanted to build their businesses to provide a lifestyle for themselves and their families.

These three experimental programmes have bridged the rigour/relevance gap that Starkey and Madan (2001) identified exists in business schools' engagement with the SME community. These three programmes, as the data shows, were relevant to the SME leaders participating in them. This is in direct contrast to the findings of numerous authors over many years, as discussed earlier, who have highlighted the lack of relevance of business development programmes to the business community, (Hambrick, 1994; Gopinath & Hoffman, 1995; Davenport & Marcus 1999; Huff & Huff, 2001; Ghoshal, 2005; Spender, 2005; Kieser & Leiner, 2009).

The focus of this research explores what does and what does not work in the design and delivery of business programmes, targeted at SMEs, as Greenley (2010) recommends. As identified and discussed earlier, marketing scholars from different backgrounds and with different philosophies and theoretical perspectives overwhelmingly recognise that business schools need to concern themselves with the effective transfer of business knowledge and relevance, and the focus on research should be driven by practitioner needs. Recognising these observations, Greenley (2010) suggests that research, such as the one conducted here

with the three experimental programmes, it is essential if this rigour/relevance gap is to be bridged. The insights emerging from this research demonstrate that bridging this gap is possible, resulting in stimulating action with SME leaders.

### **Implications of findings.**

The need for the SMEs to see relevance to them as individuals and to their businesses, at that moment in time, was a powerful emergent theme from the analysis of the primary data. In order for business development programmes to be more effectively in stimulating action in SMEs, this is something that must be considered and be at the core of any business development programme, with this objective.

This lack of relevance of business development programmes offered by business schools to SMEs has been researched and documented in abundance for over 50 years. This raises the question, why is this the happening?

The value of practitioner involvement within business schools should be recognised, and their participation as facilitators embedded in the design of business development programmes to add value to a high quality, relevant and robust business development research, and to facilitate effective transfer of learning that stimulates action. Macintosh et al. (2017) recognised the gaps and different outlooks taken by the different stakeholders (business schools, SME leaders, and government bodies) involved in seeking to achieve this, and the tensions this may create. In relation to the SME sector, they identify a need to create a degree of mutual understanding, which a closer link between academics and practitioners could help facilitate.

There seems to be overwhelming evidence that this relevance gap between what business schools offer and what SMEs need exists. The question is how can this be made to happen.

### **SME Needs**

The data emerging from the primary and secondary data relating to any programme targeted at stimulating action with the SME participants must meet the needs of the SME leaders. In addition to this, the SME participants must recognise quickly that such programmes will meet their individual and specific company needs.

In order to achieve this and evidenced by the wide variety in terms of individual needs, company size, market sector, maturity that participated in the experimental programmes at the core of this research. As Farquhar (2012) and Thomas (2019) recognised the needs of SME leaders are becoming more diverse, and so the need to continually review development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs has never been greater. There are some challenges in achieving this, as the work of Godwyn (2015) and Thomas (2019) highlights, this diversity within the SME market sector is not being matched by developments in business training. These insights also emerge from this research which has highlighted the need for business schools to become more customer-centric in order to meet the needs of this diversity. These findings mirror those of Foyelle et al. (2019), who suggest that a way of achieving this is for business schools to develop entrepreneurial ecosystems within their faculties.

Many of the insights emerging from this research resonate with the findings of Foyelle et al. (2019) and emphasise the importance of designing business development programmes to harness the strength of the academic and practitioner contribution together in order to meet the needs of SMEs.

To achieve this, programme designs should be directly aligned to SME leaders' personal, and company needs. A key feature in the transfer of knowledge approach taken in the experimental programmes explored in this research was that the SME leaders were asked to consider and relate all the business concepts and models presented to their own business context and identify what interventions their reflections and answers to these questions were needed to improve their businesses.

From the insights emerging from this research, if SME leaders do not engage in this type of reflection, it is unlikely that they will be able to relate practically to any analysis, concept, model, or any other development tools that they are shown. In the absence of their reflections on their own specific business contexts, that are stimulated by the answers to two questions, those of 'what business are they in?' and 'what do they want out of their business? Any learning approach, and subsequent knowledge transfer is considered by SME leaders as purely academic, and not relevant to them.

The questions detailed above are a simple example of how business concepts can be introduced and facilitated. From this, their utility and practical value, and relevance, can be recognised quickly by SME leaders. To facilitate this, it is important that a reflexive approach is introduced at the start of any business development programme, and also is embedded as a core feature throughout the programme that is visible, and continually discussed.

The answers to the questions detailed above are very individual, and will be different for many SME leaders. SME leaders will make decisions directly informed by their reflections and answers to these questions. As such, it is important that these questions, reflections on these, and the potential answers to these, should be considered when developing any business development plan.

As identified in the data emerging from this research relating to the experimental programmes, as a result of participating in the programme, the SME leaders had reshaped their businesses and were enjoying their business more, and shared that, the business performance had become more successful.

This indicates that where programmes, have been designed and delivered with the aim of understanding what SME leaders want and need, this, often stimulates them to take action. The findings emerging from this research are supported by the insights shared in numerous research papers, over many years (Cole & Ulrich, 1987; Bhide, 1996; Alajoutsijavi et al., 2001; Karlan & Valdivia, 2011).

Whilst the experimental business development programmes that were the focus of this research were independently assessed and cited as programmes of excellence in relation to impact and stimulating action within the SME community, there is no room for complacency here, as there are still opportunities to take from the experience and lessons that can be learnt from the insights emerging from these independent assessments. There is scope for

continuous improvement if programmes of this type are continually reviewed, and actions taken to develop them further.

For example, on the LEAD programme (2016) even though this programme started with the first cohort reporting a high acceptance and impact score, by listening to the cohorts' feedback and adapting and amending the programme for cohorts two and three, this resulted in an increasing impact score and the stimulation of more actions that the SME leaders reported having taken.

It is not just about continually reviewing, and improving the programmes in this way, but it is also as important to ensure the design and delivery of these programmes keeps abreast of the changing environment in which SME leaders operate. If business schools do not do this, this can result in the type of feedback highlighted in this research, where SME leaders find there is little relevance to them, and, as such, the practical utility is poor.

If business schools have a genuine desire to target SME leaders with the objective of stimulating action, business schools need to become very people and customer-orientated, where it is explicitly recognised that the customer is the SME leader. The insights emerging from this research identify that business schools do not often consider the end recipients of knowledge transfer as customers. Whilst this may be a controversial suggestion to some academics, for others, it will resonate, and, as such, these will recognise how repositioning programmes to focus on the SME leader as the customer results in practical outcomes and the stimulation of action.

Another key theme that emerges strongly from the research data is focused on what SME leaders need, and what is the answer to the 'so what's in it for me?' question. This focus on the 'so what' question was mentioned many times in the primary interviews, indicating how important to SME leaders this is, and a key ingredient and reason why they considered the programmes to be of value to them. The answers to their 'so what?' question was something they explored via the reflective process they engaged in during the programmes to find their own answers.

These observations are supported by the work of Thorpe and Rowlinson (2013), who observe that in order for business schools to have more impact with SMEs, then better

connectivity is needed to facilitate industry experts to connect with the SMEs and tell stories about current research and practice concepts concern about business schools and their lack of connection, and impact on the SME community.

This research indicates that there is a link between effective business education and subsequent entrepreneurial activity. There are eight articles on this subject in the *International Entrepreneurship Management Journal*, April 2010. These articles highlight the tension between what providers of business education want to deliver, and what the entrepreneurs attending business programmes want to receive, and, as such, any subsequent link to entrepreneurial activity is tenuous.

### **Implications of findings**

It may seem obvious that any programmes targeting to improve the effectiveness of business development programmes targeted at stimulating action should first of all understand the needs of the SMEs these programmes are seeking to help develop. However, as supported by the overwhelming volume of academic research, spanning over 50 years, this seems not to have happened.

The key needs of the SME leaders emerging from the primary and secondary data from this research are:

- Time: SME leaders are time scarce and need to quickly see a return on their time investment. This observation is supported by Bhide (1996), Berlyne (1972), Schultz (1987), Rotter (1972), and Kerste and Muizer (2002).
- Motivation: this was achieved by involvement and peer group discussions and the sharing of stories. This observation is supported by (1965), Hornaday and Bunker (1970), Berlyne (1972), Rotter (1972), Schere (1982), Schultz (1987), Potts and Morrison (2009).
- The acceptance of ambiguity and having the confidence to make decisions and take risks from incomplete information. This observation was supported by: Hornaday and Bunker (1970), Schere (1982), Hisrich (1988), Slatter (1988), Phillips 1989, LaFuente and Salas (1989), Simon (1995) and Conslisk (1996).

- The need for the programme and the facilitator to have credibility and relevance. This observation is supported by: Bennett and Robson (1999), Mole (2002), Kawalek (2015).
- A recognition that SME leaders' needs differ significantly. This observation is supported by Greenley (1985), Drucker (1985), Rautama and Vesalainen (1987), Birley and Bridge (1987), Davidson (1989a 1989b), Leppard and Macdonald (1989), Carson and Cromie (1989), Carson (1993), Johnson and Scholes (1993), Storey (1994), Lancaster and Waddelow (1998), and Roper (1999).

As shown above the challenge is not to identify these needs, but how these are incorporated into a business development programme delivered by business schools that will more effectively stimulate the SME participants to take action.

### **Storytelling**

The value of credible storytelling in stimulating action, in SME leaders, is a strong emergent theme from this research and where credible storytelling is a key component in the design and delivery of development programmes targeted at SME leaders, SME leaders report that this was the catalyst that helped increase their confidence and take actions that they would not have taken previously. These findings mirror those of Bettelheim (1976), who highlights the value of storytelling during business knowledge transfer, particularly in the areas of stimulating imagination and generating reassurance.

To achieve this, the choice of facilitator is important. A facilitator's ability to stimulate interaction with the network, and exchange stories that stimulate action, that are credible to the network, these are an essential component in effective stimulation and transfer of knowledge, to SME leaders. As noted earlier, the stories being shared need to be credible, in that SME leaders, as individuals, and as a network, can relate practically to these stories. To achieve this, the stories are not all about individual and business successes, as some of the more powerful messages came from stories of failure, as a result of not doing some of the things suggested in the business models being presented.

In the same way, and as supported by the work of Gabrielle (2000), the value of storytelling to facilitate effective business knowledge transfer is recognised. Gabrielle (2000) highlights the need for relevance and credibility and observes that without this, some stories can have a negative impact on organisations. Gabrielle (2000) suggests that stories, that are experienced first-hand the descriptive commentary of things that have happened, and which can be explored in an objective manner, act as catalysts for stimulating action. Once again, this mirrors the findings from this research primary and secondary data.

Kemper (1984), Levi-Strauss (1978) and Van Dijk (1975) also observe that storytelling helps to justify and explain the value of some of the concepts being presented, to make them relevant to the delegates. The findings of the data from this research mirror these observations, and, in the same way, indicate that stories can be used to facilitate effective knowledge transfer, not only in a constructive manner, but also in order to warn SME leaders of the potential risks, and dangers of the actions they might take.

This benefit of the facilitator having the experience to tell stories from their own experiences was also observed in the World Bank report (2014), when it referenced the Intersise Project in the USA, it observed that when SMEs are taught by people who have a track record of successful small business growth, the impact of such programmes increased for the SME leaders. This benefit on the facilitator having the experience to tell relevant first-hand stories to more effectively stimulate action was also observed by, Levi-Stauss (1978), Churchmen (1979), Ayres (1971), Peters and Waterman (1982), Boje (1991), Neuhauser (1993), Fineman (1993) Ready (2002), Denning (2004), Henry et al. (2005), Botha (2006), Frances (2009), Drape, Levy and Blass (2009), Hasse and Lautenschlager (2011), Karlan and Valdivia (2011), Thorpe and Rowlandson (2013), Collins (2013), Martin et al. (2013), Goldman Sachs (2016), Lawrence and Page (2016), and Allcorn and Stein (2016),

### **Implications of findings**

The strong emerging theme is the significant added value of the facilitator delivering business development programmes is need to harness the experience and skill sets of facilitators to tell relevant stories from their own experiences that relate to the business concepts being presented. This is to make the concepts 'come to life' and be relevant to the

SME participants. This raises two questions, do these people exist? And can they be attracted into business schools. Chapter 7 will explore possible answers to these questions.

### **Self Confidence**

Whilst self-confidence, and the importance of this, is not the focus of this research, a theme, emerging from the data is the improvement in SME leaders' self-confidence, particularly in relation to them recognising their existing skills and abilities as SME leaders, this was a trigger point in them taking action as a result of participating in the programmes. This helped to stimulate them to take action they would not have taken previously. As highlighted in Chapter 5, many of the SME leaders shared that whilst they did not lack confidence prior to joining the programmes, after participating in the programmes, their confidence improved. Reflective thinking is a key component in helping SME leaders, develop their confidence, and in stimulating them to take action.

### **Implications of findings**

Whilst the improvement in the SME leaders participating in the programmes was not originally an objective of the experimental programmes at the core of this research, the improvement in the self-confidence, as a result of participating in the programme had such a strong impact on the programme more effectively stimulating the participants to take action, it should not be ignored. This applies to both the development and delivery of such programmes and in the measurement of the success of the programmes.

The observations expressed above resulting from the primary and secondary data emerging from this research had also been identified, in different ways by, Keller (1979, 1987), Carlisle (2002), Luthje and Franke (2003), Sturges et al. (2003), Detienne and Chandler (2004), Simpson et al. (2005), Madsen (2007), Russell et al. (2008), Wiklund et al. (2009), Gull (2010), Glaube and Frese (2011), Pruett (2011), Jackson (2011), McKenzie and Woodruff (2012), Jarzabkowski et al. (2013), Thorpe and Robinson (2013), Keller (1979, 1987)

### **Taking Strategic Actions**

As shown by the quotations in Chapter 5, all told stories of major strategic actions the participants had taken as a direct result of participating in the programmes. There is no

other commonality in the specific actions that each SME leader has taken. The actions they have taken vary tremendously but could all be described as strategic.

### **Implications of findings.**

Whilst Pittway and Cope (2007) observed that any correlation between business-people participating in business development programmes and the stimulation of actions and outcomes resulting were tenuous, this view is countered by Buisseret et al. (1995), Delanty (1997), Falk (2007), Cassia et al. (2008), Van Der Sluis et al. (2008), Clarysse et al. (2009), Frese (2011), McKenzie and Woodruff (2012), Zanakis et al. (2012), and Bullough et al. (2015).

### **What is learnt from the experimental programmes?**

As discussed earlier, one of the most powerful themes emerging from this research is that of the perceptions that SME leaders have about business development programmes offered by business schools, and their lack relevance to them, as these programmes do not reflect the 'real world' SME leaders inhabit. Also discussed, is that a potential reason for this is that many of the business models used by business schools suggest that all businesses move through a linear process, and often cite large organisations as examples. This suggests that organisations move from point A to point B to point C in these models, in a logical and structured manner. This is something that SME leaders have difficulty in engaging with, and relating to, as Pettigrew and Starkey (2016) observe, they are looking at these models from a very different and chaotic world in which they live.

These observations reinforce the observations of Christensen (2020), who emphasised the importance of teaching SME leaders how to think as opposed to what to think, and that it is better for SME leaders to understand a little, than to learn a lot. This will then lead to business programmes targeting the stimulation of action in SMEs being more effective.

To bring to life these reflections and interpretations as figure 7 below illustrates how business schools often expect SME leaders to learn in a linear structured way that is unrepresentative of the 'real world' in which they live and operate. The figure depicts a traditional approach of teaching SME leaders 'what to think'.

Figure 8 below illustrates what the approach to learning in a business development programme targeted at SMEs representing the 'real world' could look like, to help SME leaders to structure their thinking, in order to improve their chances of success in an ever-changing environment. This approach was used in the experimental business development programmes at the core of this research, which were successful in stimulating the SME participants to take action. This approach explicitly recognises change and uncertainty in the world in which we live, teaching SME leaders 'how to think'.

Instead of suggesting to SME leaders that they can in some way bring structure into the chaotic world in which they exist, as figure 7 shows, to effectively transfer knowledge and stimulate action, SME leaders in order that they can embrace and accept chaos as the norm, an approach as illustrated in figure 8 is more effective. The approach in figure 8 emerging from the findings, which show the focus of any business development programme to be on teaching SME leaders how to think, as already highlighted, is not new, as Pascale (1623-1662) was advocating a similar approach.

There is, however, a challenge to achieving this. There has been much research, over many years, that question the suggestion that all businesses move in linear stages of development for example, O'Farrell and Hitchins (1988), and Levic and Lichtenstein (2008). Despite this, and despite research that advocates the acceptance of chaos for example, Pettigrew and Starkey (2016), little seems to have changed in this regard.

The approach that was adopted in the experimental programmes at the centre of this research, indicates that by being encouraged, and being given permission to take this approach, SME leaders were able to step back from their respective organisations, and analyse real-world chaotic situations. The terminology, 'being given permission' has been used deliberately here, as in order to help SME leaders think and reflect in a way that encourages them to step back, and take a non-linear approach, giving 'permission' was important to help facilitate this.

In taking this approach the SME leaders were able to confidently assess their own organisational and individual situations in the context of the world in which they operate. In doing this, they were able to utilise the business models and concepts they had been shown,

and to do this holistically, taking into consideration the chaotic environment in which they operate, whilst still thinking about their business situation in a structured way. 'Structured', does not mean the SME leaders attempted to force fit business models and concepts into their own situations, but instead they adapted these to help them assess their business situation more effectively. From this, they were able to develop plans of actions that had given their respective organisations a better chance of success. As North (1990) also observed, this approach could also assist entrepreneurs in becoming agents for change, by responding to the opportunities that are embodied in the institutional frameworks that exist. This suggests that entrepreneurs can be the catalysts of change, as they challenge the neo-classical business rules that exist, and that by challenging these rules, can find better solutions to meet the ever changing and diverse performances of economies and societies, over time.

Figure 7. A traditional approach to teaching SME leaders what to think

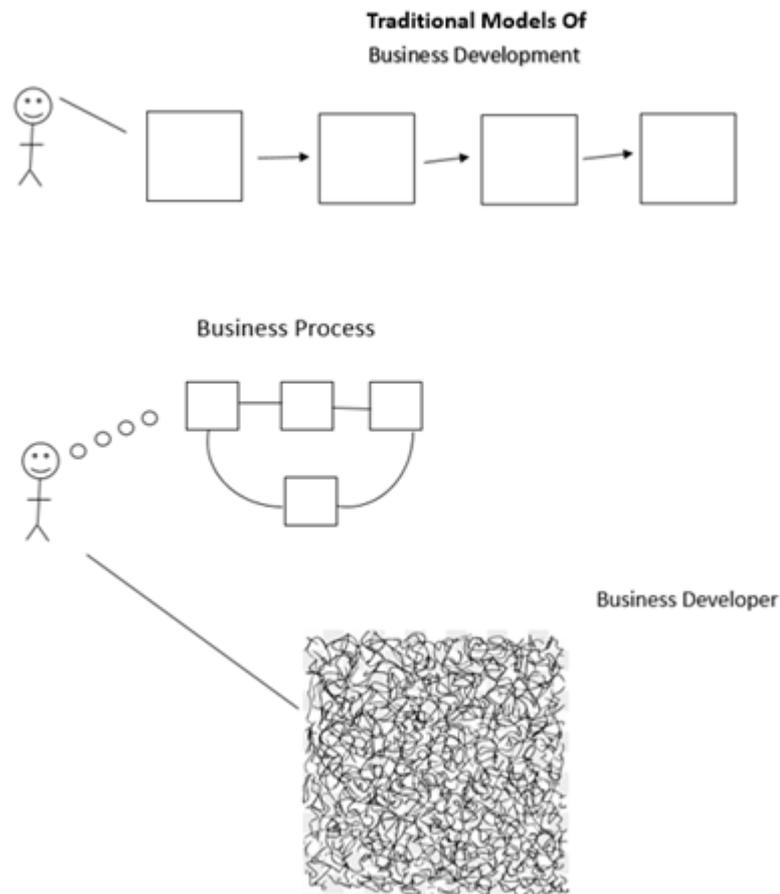


Figure 8. Illustrates an approach to teaching SME leaders how to think |

Also illustrated is that if effective business development programmes can be designed and delivered, this can improve business performance, competitiveness, innovation, and job creation within the SME sector, in line with the work of Johnson et al. (2015). As Lerner (2010) notes, this has triggered strong interest from government policymakers for some time. However, as Leitch et al. (2010) observe, surprisingly little is known, or understood about the growth dynamics of SMEs. This could reflect that, as McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) identified, for many years, business research has focused on how much firms grow, rather than exploring the reasons why they take action, which, in itself can facilitate growth.

What has been surprising throughout this research, and as highlighted several times during the discussion, is the volume of papers identifying a disconnect between what business schools offer, and what SMEs need, in order to help SMEs, develop and grow. The research identifying this mismatch spans over 50 years, and whilst some of the research is now quite old in terms of when it was written, the observations and recommendations on this topic have remained constant throughout the period. Why then, one might ask, is it, as little appears to have changed, that all of this research has not translated into practice.

What is also surprising is that there seems to be little in the form of published papers relating to this mismatch in more recent years. This is even more surprising, when this apparent lack of research is set against a backdrop, as identified in Chapter 1, of governments across Europe investing heavily in the funding of effective SME development programmes. This investment has the objective of ensuring that SMEs are given assistance in knowledge transfer, in order to help them develop and grow, in a more effective and sustainable way.

Recent papers such as one by Roper and Hart (2013) who are, two leading academics in the UK in the field of SME development, highlight that business development programmes targeted at SMEs, in order to be relevant, need to be holistic, functional and personalised in their nature. This white paper, however, does not offer suggestions on how this might be achieved.

Another report published by the Christian Aid Organisation (2016) also highlights the need to improve the training offered to SMEs. This report suggests linking the SME delegates with larger organisations, but does not offer other more specific recommendations in how the training offered to SMEs can be improved and also does not offer suggestions on how the design of such programmes can be developed.

This research seeks to identify not only the problems that business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs have, but to also explore potential ways that these can be remedied. Reflecting on the reality that views such as those highlighted above are being expressed and justified academically, further highlights an urgent need for

attention to be given to business programmes delivered by business schools that target the development of SMEs.

From the insights that have emerged from this research, if better and more effective links and interactions between business schools and SMEs can be achieved, the results can be impressive. Cassia and Colombelli (2008) support this, and identified that during the period 1995 to 2006, the assistance business schools gave to SMEs, in terms of idiosyncratic knowledge input and output, were important determinants for the 231 companies listed on the UK Alternative Investment Market (AIM), which subsequently progressed to become listed companies. In a similar way, Valerio et al. (2014), in the World Bank Report, identify that SMEs that had engaged in effective business development programmes often became examples of best practice.

There is a requirement for effective knowledge transfer and development of SMEs in the UK, as the contribution made by SMEs to UK plc's economic development and employment, is significant (Department of Business and Energy, 2017). Despite this, in the UK 60% of SMEs fail within five years (Office of National Statistics, 2018). If this failure rate could be reduced, this could ensure that SME businesses make an increased contribution to the economy. In recognition of this, governments around the world are investing heavily in the development of SMEs. The effective knowledge transfer to entrepreneurs has been cited by Foyolle et al. (2019) as an effective way to reduce small business failure.

The insights from the primary research and secondary data conducted identify how this can be achieved, but clearly there is a need to extend the learning from these experimental programmes to business schools generally.

## **Summary**

This chapter has:

- investigated and analysed the insights of SME leaders on the experimental business programmes at the core of this research.

- compared and analysed these findings to provide insights into these four component features in SME business development programmes with the information identified in the pre-research secondary data and literature reviews.
- Identified themes and gained an understanding of what it is within business training programmes that are the "trigger point/s" that stimulates action in SME leaders to develop their businesses in a way that they would not have done had they not participated in the programme/s.

The objective of the research was to identify how business school programmes can more effectively stimulate action in SMEs. This chapter has identified actions that can help facilitate this. However, as continually observed, from the wealth of academic research spanning over 40 years highlighting the lack of relevance in the business programmes offered to SMEs by business schools, little seems to have changed. What needs to be done in order to facilitate the changes needed is presented in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 7.**

### **Contribution to Knowledge and to Practice**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, how this research achieved the first three objectives was explained, those of:

1. To investigate and analyse insights of SME leaders on experimental business programmes.
2. Compare and analyse my findings to provide insights into these four component features in SME business development programmes with the information identified in the pre-research secondary data and literature reviews.
3. To identify themes and gain an understanding of what it is within business training programmes that are the "trigger point/s" that stimulates action in SME leaders to develop their businesses in a way that they would not have done had they not participated in the programme/s.

This chapter discusses the findings of the research in relation to objectives 4 and 5 of the research:

4. Contribute to academic knowledge, highlighting the combined and comparative impact the four components of a business development programme, content, context, facilitator, and network have in stimulating SME leaders to take actions they would not have taken, had they not participated in the programme.
5. To make recommendations to inform the design of SME development programmes, that will inform practitioners in the design of such programmes.

These will be explained in the following two sections contribution to knowledge and contribution to practice.

## **Contribution to Knowledge**

The first contribution to knowledge is the approach taken with this research, the way the research has been carried out and the context of the study. Whilst the study is taken from a qualitative position, the contribution informs the positivist, managerialist perspective in the literature relating to business development. The research has been carried out with the SME leaders who have participated in the experimental business development programmes that are also the focus of this research. This has not been done before, in this way, and with these participants.

The contribution provides insights into four components, those of content, context, facilitator and network, individually and collectively, and how they can be used in business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SME leaders.

There have been some papers that have explored individually the four components contained within business development programmes, that are the focus of this research, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 5. The literature search, did not find any papers that had explored the combined importance of these four components as this research has done. Nor has any research been found that explores the combined and comparative importance of these components in relation to stimulating action by SME leaders. This is something that is the focus of this research.

Illustrated and discussed below are the relative considerations that should be given to each of the four components content, context, facilitator, and network, in the design of business development programmes.

As the primary and secondary data has shown, with the participants of the programmes all taking specific strategic action as a direct result of participating in these programmes that they would not have taken had they not attended the programmes. Supported by the independent assessment, particularly the Erasmus statement (appendix 1), that these were programmes of excellence in terms of impact in stimulating action that should be emulated by programmes with similar objectives, these insights should be incorporated in the design and delivery of any business development programme targeted at SMEs.

Whilst not a quantitative academic research, so the findings are not specifically quantified or measured, the interoperative analysis of the primary data showed how much the four components, content, context, facilitator, and network helped make the programmes more effective in stimulating action with the SME leaders participating in the programmes.

The illustrations below shows how the analysis of the individual and relative value of these components developed during this research.

The size of the boxes in each figure below represents an indication of the emphasis placed on each component, which emerged from the primary and secondary data analysis.

- Fig 9 Programme Design: This was the perception of the participants in relation to business development programmes delivered by business schools that they had previously participated in. The components are not integrated together and are dominated by content- low impact in stimulating action in SME leaders. This observation was supported by the participants, perceptions, particularly relating to the lack of relevance of such programmes to the SME sector, emerging from the primary data highlighted in Chapter 5.
- Figure 10 Programme Design: used in the design of the experimental programmes at the core of this research. All components integrated together, with strong facilitator and context emphasis – high impact in stimulating action in SME leaders.
- Figure 11 Programme Design: All components integrated together, with strong Facilitator and network emphasis, emerging from the primary research - high impact in stimulating action in SME leaders.
- Figure 12 Programme Design: All components integrated together, with strong Network emphasis - optimum impact in stimulating action in SME leaders, emerging from the primary research.

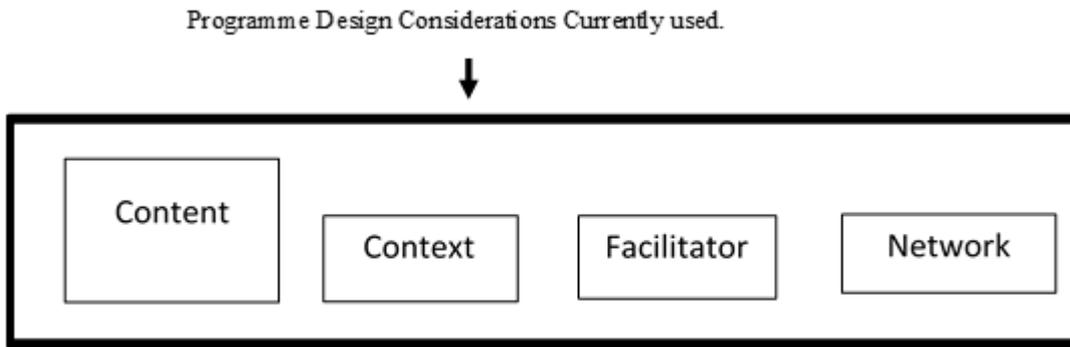


Figure 9. Components considered independently.

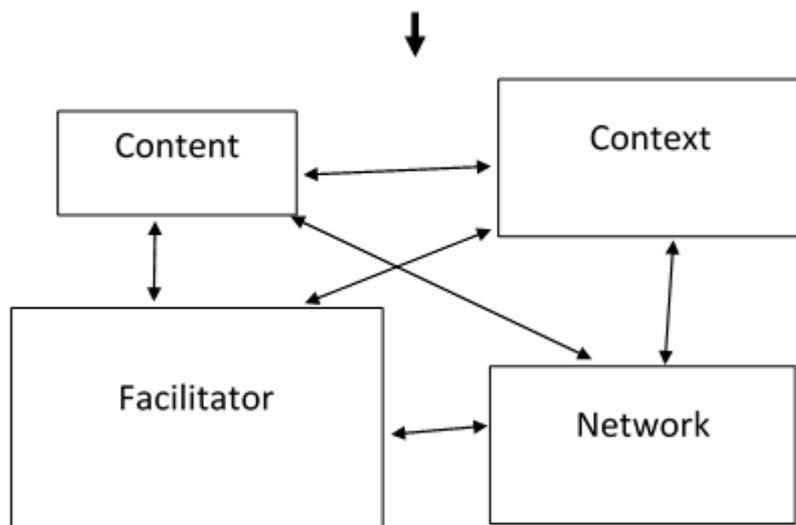
Figure 9 illustrates a programme design, where the four components of content, context, facilitator, and network of the programme are not integrated together and are dominated by the content. Where the content component is dominant in the design of business development programmes, with the focus being on technical accuracy of the content, the resultant impact it stimulates in SME leaders is low.

As supported by the stories shared by the participants in the experimental programmes at the centre of this research, when all four components are integrated in the design of business development programmes targeted at SMEs, effective transfer of learning can be improved, meeting the needs of SME leaders and helping to stimulate them to take actions that helped them further develop themselves and their businesses.

The programme design illustrated here in figure 10 is the approach taken to the design of the experimental programmes that are the focus of this research.

In this programme design, all the four components content, context, facilitator, and network, are integrated together, with a strong facilitator and context emphasis, which results in effective transfer of knowledge, and a high impact in stimulating action in SME leaders who participated in the programmes.

Figure 10. Programme design of the experimental programmes



Whilst, as evidenced by both the primary and secondary data, this design had an impact on making the programmes more effective in stimulating action in the SME participants, what was surprising was the relative importance these four components had in the opinions of the SME leaders, emerging from the secondary data. After reviewing the secondary data, and as illustrated below in figure 11. the impact of the network, in the perceptions of the SME leaders' had become more important.

Figure 11. Programme design emerging from secondary data.

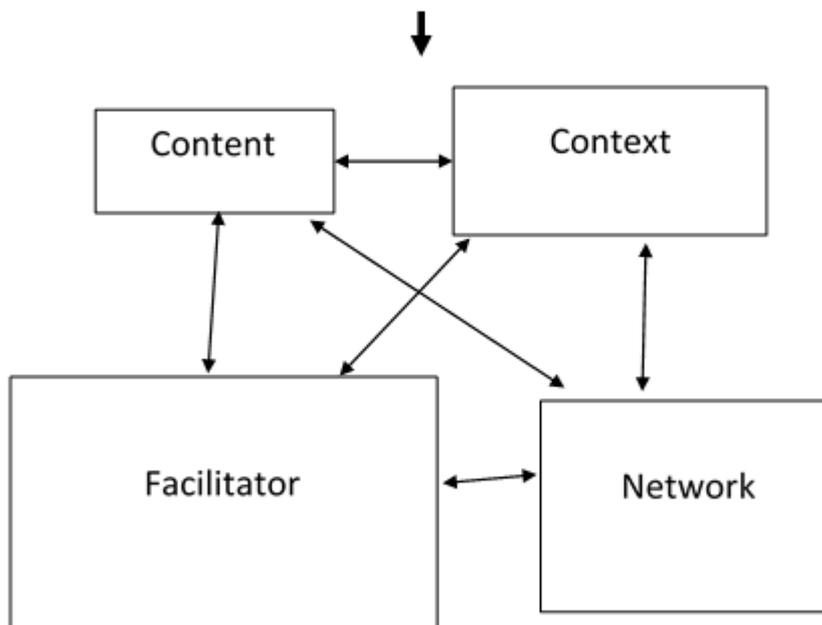
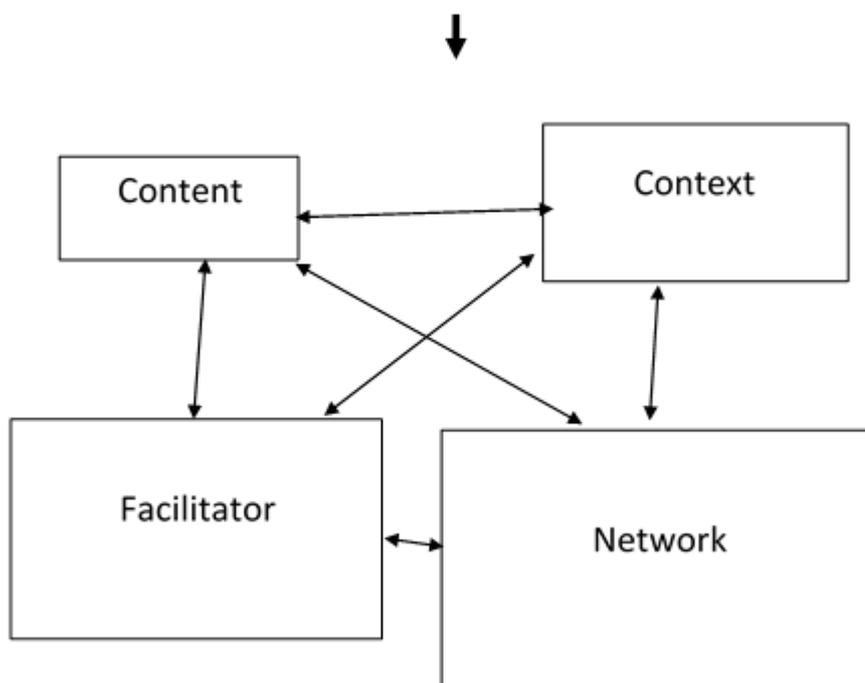


Figure 11. illustrates a programme design where the four components are integrated together, but this time, with a strong facilitator and network emphasis. This also results, as in figure 10. in high impact in stimulating action in SME leaders.

Figures 10. and 11. above illustrate that where the emphasis in programme designs placed on facilitator, network and context is greater than the emphasis placed on content (although content is still an important factor and cannot be ignored), the impact in stimulating action in SME leaders will be high.

Figure 12 below indicates how an understanding of the comparative impact each component has in the stimulation of action, if integrated into the programme designs, with the objective of making the programmes more effective in stimulating action, can be optimised.

Figure 12. Optimum programme design emerging from the primary research.



The relative importance of each component emerging from this research, as illustrated in figure 12. is a programme design where the four components, content, context, facilitator and network, are integrated together, with a dominant network emphasis was followed by facilitator, context and content in this order, reflecting, the emphasis being placed on them. Analysing and interoperating the data emerging from the primary research, this programme design results in effective transfer of learning, and optimum impact in stimulating SME leaders to take action.

The delivery of programmes designed in this way facilitates inclusive and effective learning environments that meet the needs of SME leaders and ,as highlighted in the primary data in chapter 5., helps give them confidence to take what they have learnt and use this to develop themselves and their businesses.

Again, as emerging from the primary research and evidenced in chapter 5, in the sub section relating to context, an inclusive and participative approach that includes a balanced content of theory, new knowledge and practical application of this is welcomed by SME leaders who

like an inclusive style of delivery, where they are not talked at and where their experience is acknowledged and respected and integrated into the learning experience.

The World Bank Report written by Valerio et al., (2014) is the closest research to this research found. Whilst there are some similarities, Valerio et al (2014) study does not consider all four of the components that this research has explored. They also did not research the combined and comparative values, of these four components, in stimulating action in SME leaders.

The themes emerging from this research challenge the observations of Valerio et al. (2014), who suggest that to be effective entrepreneurial education and training needs to be further sub-divided into different categories relating to a business' stage of development. This research finds that the development needs of SME leaders are the same, regardless of their businesses' stage of development, and, as such, do not need to be sub-divided into different categories.

### **Bridging the academic/ practitioner gap**

This research confirms the observations of other researchers that there is an academic practitioner gap in the way business schools have designed, developed, and delivered, business development programmes for SMEs.

To provide business development programmes that meet the needs of SMEs and that are targeted to stimulate action in SME leaders, this gap should be bridged. This research has shown that this gap can be bridged and recommends that an option to facilitate this is to design and deliver programmes that explicitly recognise, include, and combine, practitioner hands-on experience and relevant academic knowledge in order to make these programmes 'real', for SME leaders. The findings and recommendations here reflect those of Pittaway and Cope (2007), Carey and Matlay (2010), Edwards and Muir (2012) and Bullough et al. (2015).

As evidenced in the primary research data, it is important for facilitators delivering business development programmes for SMEs to have the ability to tell real life stories from their own

experience, and to use these stories, together with reference to academic research, to help bring the concepts and models to life for SME leaders.

Again, also recognising the data emerging from the primary research in order to help bridge the academic practitioner gap, business schools should seek to ensure that the programme design and the delivery of this positions the concepts and models being presented in a real-world context, that is as close as possible to SME leaders' everyday environments. The recommendations here are also reflected in the work of Henry et al. (2005) and Haase and Lautenschlager (2011). This approach was demonstrated in the experimental business programmes reviewed during this research. The design of these experimental programmes included a reflexive, SME leaders' 'think tank' approach, which again emerging from the stories shared in the primary research data, should be a core feature in all business development programmes targeted at SMEs and the stimulation of action by SME leaders.

In developing programmes in this way, SME leaders are encouraged to reflect, and then relate each concept and model to their own businesses, and to discuss their views with fellow SME leaders. In suggesting this and listening and analysing the data emerging from the primary research, conventional didactic approaches to delivery should change. The recommendations here mirror those of Johnson et al. (2015), who identify that there are a range of entrepreneurship and leadership skills that can be effectively developed, if the often non-participative lecture style of delivery is changed.

There is a need for business schools' development programmes targeted at SMEs to change. Should business schools not respond to the changing needs and demands of the SME market sector, especially as the demand for effective SME development programmes continues to grow, alternative institutions that satisfy the needs of SMEs, governments and local authorities will emerge and flourish.

## **Contribution to Practice**

This research provides new insights into how business development programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs to effectively inform and engage them can utilise the components of content, context, facilitator and network in programme design and delivery.

Content, context, facilitator, and network are key components in effective knowledge transfer to SME leaders. Business development programmes targeted at SME leaders should be designed integrating these components in a visible and cohesive way.

There is a need for effective engagement between SMEs and business schools who are seeking to offer development programmes targeted at assisting SME leaders to take action they would not have otherwise taken. As highlighted earlier in this thesis, it is the desire of the UK government to help fund and facilitate such interventions to help stimulate employment and benefit the UK economy.

The role of facilitators to harness the power of networks in the design and delivery of SME development programmes has been highlighted from the findings of the primary research. This should include both practitioners and academics, and a genuine focus on understanding the needs of SME leaders and the ever-changing environments in which they operate.

In order to help SME leaders develop their confidence and stimulate them to take actions they would not have taken previously, facilitators who are credible in the eyes of SME leaders should be recruited. As evidenced in the primary research, sub-heading facilitator, in Chapter 5, to be credible, these facilitators should be practitioners who have 'been there and done it', and also as shared in the sub-heading storytelling in Chapter 5, who have the ability to tell stories and bring academic and business concepts to life in the context of what the participants in the primary research called, a 'real world', in a dramatic and creative way that has impact and results in stimulating action.

To harness the power of the networks, consideration should be given to how the design and delivery of such programmes visibly embraces and utilises the individual and combined

knowledge of SME leaders and facilitators involved in the programmes. The use of reflective 'think tank' forums discussion as used in the experimental programmes at the core of this research and cited by the participants in the primary research as important in stimulating action, to facilitate this. This approach provides SME leaders an opportunity to discuss the concepts with one another and share stories and experiences. They can then take ideas away and reflect on them, in relation to, and in the context of, their own businesses.

This approach helps to also develop and boost SME leaders' confidence, as evidenced in the sub-section self-confidence in Chapter 5, which encouraged them to take action they would not have taken had they not participated in such programmes. This reflexive approach provides the opportunity for SME leaders to recognise that, as they commented, they might not be as bad as perhaps they thought, through recognising that they were doing some things well.

The approach to the design and delivery of business development programmes targeted at SME leaders with the specific focus on stimulating action as detailed in figure 13.

This is a unique adaptation.  
Specifically taking account of findings of the research

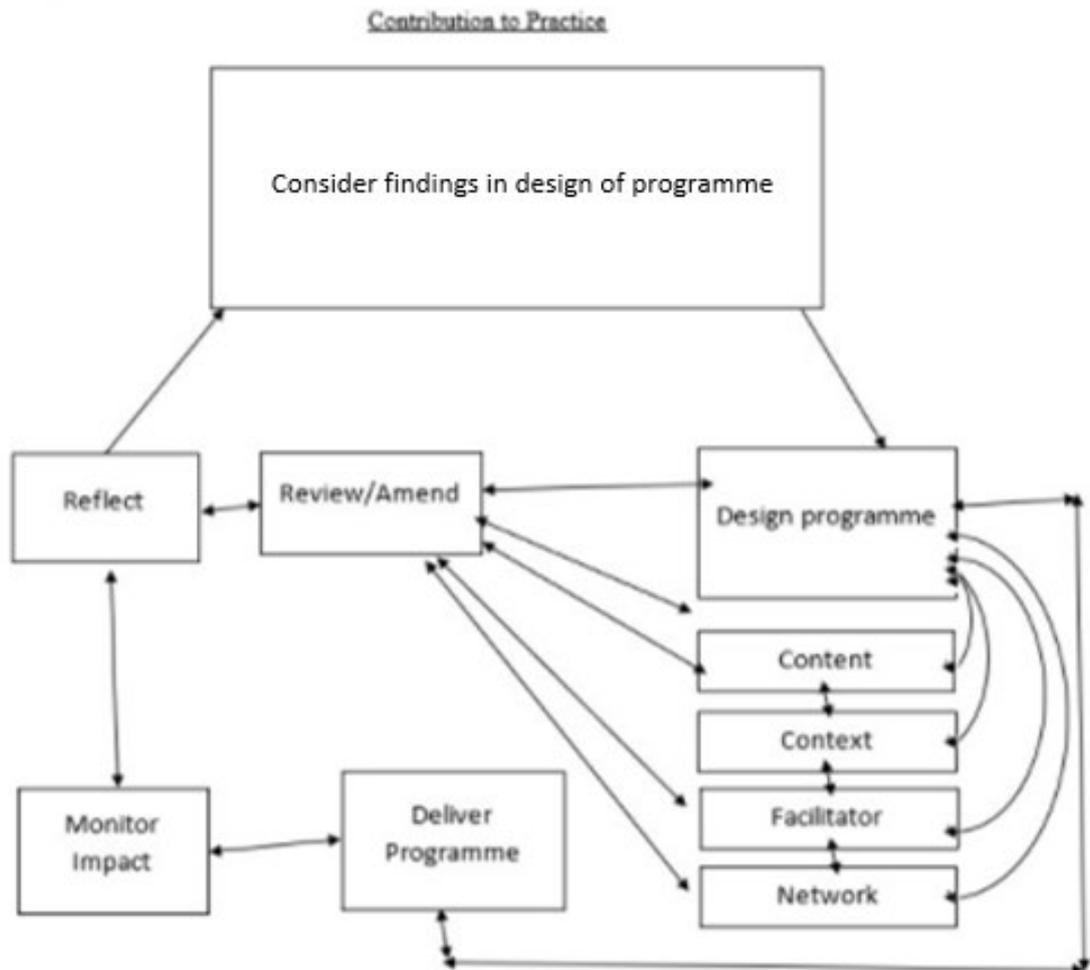


Figure 13. Impact in stimulating action in SMEs

This approach builds on and adapts Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, and explicitly recognises the importance of continuous learning and improvements in the programme design. Feedback from SME leaders participating in development programmes should be sought by business schools, and the feedback visibly used to effect continuous improvement of these programmes.

Feedback from SME leaders should be sought specifically on the actions they have taken that have been stimulated by their participation in these programmes, and their feedback used to inform how successful the components of the business development programmes have been in meeting the needs of SME leaders.

This should be an iterative process and one that focuses on continuous improvement. The design of business development programmes targeted at SMEs should continue to incorporate academic business models and concepts. These models and concepts, as identified in the subsection. What in the opinions of the SME leaders made these programmes different to other programmes they had experienced, should not, however, be taught in a prescriptive, 'one size fits all' context, but instead used as a base from which, through facilitation and discussion, they can be brought to life and adapted by facilitators, drawing on their knowledge and talents to meet the specific needs of SME leaders.

This contribution to practice, builds on the work of Toffer (1970), and Gavin and O'Connell (1994). By adopting a continuous improvement focus, this provides the opportunity for business schools to keep their business development programmes, targeted at SME leaders, current and relevant, in a world that is changing at an ever-increasing pace.

By sharing these recommendations, this helps to provide some useful insights for business schools. This research highlights the components of business development programmes that are important in stimulating action within SMEs. These components are the content, context, facilitation and use of network, and when designed and delivered together as part of business development programmes, this research demonstrates how such offerings meet the needs of SME leaders, to develop their confidence, and stimulate them to take action.

The key areas of recommendations for business schools focus on:

- Making the programmes more relevant
- The choice of facilitator
- Meeting the needs of the SME

Each of these areas is discussed below:

### **Making the programmes more relevant**

From this research and an extensive review of the literature, there is a significant focus placed on the content of the business programmes. There is much less focus placed on the context. This, as identified in the sub-section SME needs in chapter 5, is where SME leaders have a desire to feel their experience is recognised, and to be involved in discussions relating to the relevance of any models or concepts being presented to them. This is so they can specifically relate to them as individuals, and for them to understand how these models and concepts can practically benefit the development of their own businesses.

Business schools should avoid lectures and talking at SME leaders in a prescriptive way that does not allow for their reflection, participation and discussion. A conscious focus on the design and development programmes targeted at SME leaders, that explicitly recognises the needs of the SME leaders, as identified in the primary research, to go back into their own businesses and reflect on the relevance of the concepts being presented to their own businesses, and that time is built into the programmes to facilitate this.

To assist in making the concepts presented more relevant to the participants, that emerged from the primary research, a focus on developing understanding when designing and delivering business development programmes targeted at SME leaders, that recognises, and accepts that not every model or concept is appropriate to every business at given moments in time. The stories shared by the participants also suggested that the delivery of models

and concepts should always be dynamic and flexible, involving SME leaders in peer group discussions, during which they can reflect on the relevance of these models to their businesses. It is this type of reflexive, dynamic, Kantian learning environment that should be a key feature of business development programmes that have the objective of stimulating action in SME leaders. This also reflects the importance of the network in being the key trigger point for stimulating action, that emerges from the primary data of this research.

Embracing the findings of the primary research data, to design and deliver relevant business development programmes that genuinely target the development and stimulation of action in SME leaders, it is recommended that business schools wanting to offer such programmes, first revisit the substantive question of what they exist for and what they need to do to achieve this. It must be recognised that this will have some challenges as some business schools may not accept the need to do this, or may not have the desire or capability to achieve this. There is a growing body of work, as highlighted in the literature reviews and which this research contributes to, that encourages business schools to ask this substantive question (Collini, 2012; Barber et al., 2013; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). Christensen and Eyring (2011) even question the future need for business schools if the status quo continues.

Business schools should embrace the insights from the primary research shared above in order to deliver business development programmes that have impact and relevance to SME leaders, particularly as the world we live in, is constantly and rapidly changing. These recommendations mirror those of Delanty (2001), Aguinis (2014), Alajoutsijarvi (2015) and Pettigrew and Starkey (2016), the findings from the primary research also highlight that consideration should be given to the emphasis placed on each component of such programmes.

## **The choice of facilitator**

Emerging from the primary data is the need for business schools to engage and embed the role of facilitators who are practitioners with good academic underpinning on all business development programmes that are targeted at SMEs.

Also, it is evident from the primary data that the language used throughout these business development programmes needs to be accessible to SME leaders to facilitate understanding and effective transfer of knowledge. Avoiding academic terms and language that can be confusing and inaccessible to SME leaders would be beneficial in helping such programmes more effectively stimulate action.

In making these recommendations, a change of mindset might be required in business schools regarding the academic language, terminologies and nature of communications that form the basis of business development programmes targeted at SME leaders. This research, as identified by some of the stories shared by the participants, has found examples of arrogance relating to the terminologies used, and hints of an elitist, closed community which is not always easily open to those who do not speak the same language.

As discussed in previous chapters, there are many papers highlighting that the success of business schools is judged by how many academic papers these institutions produce, even though these papers often lack relevance to businesses and are read by very few businesspeople. These papers all advocate that this is something that must be changed. However, the nature, scale, speed and the ability to facilitate such cultural change within business schools should not be underestimated.

The potential benefits arising from such changes are substantial, indicating that these changes should and must happen. The external environmental pressures in relation to the needs of the market and SME leaders are also driving these changes. The value of assisting the development of SMEs is recognised by governments and local authorities, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. There is also the evidence from a breadth of academic research, some of which is discussed in the literature review, which emphasises the value of

effectively developing the business knowledge of SME leaders, and helping to stimulate them to take action that they would not have taken previously.

### **Meeting the needs of the SME**

From both the literature reviews and the insights emerging from this research, it is evident that business schools have ignored the different characteristics, motivations and needs of SME leaders, as discussed earlier.

The starting point of any business development programme designed with the objective of stimulating action within SME leaders' in order to help facilitate business development is to have a clear understanding of the needs of the target audience. To help achieve this, it is recommended that the needs of SME leaders should be researched, and the emergent insights tested.

There are key insights emerging from the primary data in this research in relation to the needs of SME leaders. These should be incorporated in the design and delivery of development programmes to facilitate effective knowledge transfer to meet these needs.

These are:

- The approach adopted meets a 'what's in it for me?' test of the programme being delivered in such a way that SME leaders can quickly see the relevance and value to them of any concepts being discussed.
- The language used is accessible and understandable by SME leaders. Academic language used should be translated into SME business language, with meanings being clearly defined.
- There should be recognition that the biggest consideration for SME leaders, as identified in the primary data, when deciding whether to participate in a development programme, is the time that they take out of their own businesses in order to commit to this. To achieve this, it is important to ensure that the models and the concepts being discussed on the programmes have credibility by being grounded in the SME leaders' 'real world'. In doing this, SME leaders can see

the value to them and their businesses, as a return on the time they have invested in participating in such development programmes.

### **Summary of this section**

This research has identified that the SME development programmes, offered by business schools often do not meet the needs of the SME community. There is often a disconnection between what is taught on programmes such as these experimental programmes, and the impact these have on stimulating action by SME leaders. Effective knowledge transfer of business concepts, that could improve SME leaders' chances of sustained success and development, appears to be elusive. The observations and considerations here are not new. They have been discussed and highlighted for over 40 years. As discussed in some detail, throughout this thesis, the question is, if this has been an observation for such a long period of time, why does it appear that so little has been done to address this? It could possibly be a result of bureaucracy in business schools that has been a barrier, or that as cultures in business schools would need to change, the actions required to achieve such changes may be too great to facilitate this. It could also be that business schools do not recognise, or accept that there is a need for what is considered to be such a radical change.

This research has not sought to identify the reasons behind why most SME development programmes have not evolved to meet the changing needs of SME leaders. What has been identified through the experimental development programmes explored, is that SME development programmes can be designed and delivered in a more agile and targeted way, so that they can meet the needs of SME leaders, help them develop their confidence, and stimulate them to take action that they would not have taken, prior to participating in these programmes.

This research indicates there are many external stakeholders, such as SME leaders, government bodies, and local authorities who are becoming impatient because of the lack of provision of effective business development programmes targeted at SME leaders. These stakeholders recognise that SMEs are essential to the regeneration of, not only the UK, but

also the European, and world economies. The investments in SME development being made by governments around the world, including in the UK, evidence this.

Research by Rasche and Gilbert (2015) suggests that tentative steps are being taken within some UK business school faculties, such as Warwick University and Cranfield Business School. These business schools appear to be placing some emphasis on educators who are practitioners, who can tell stories, and who can walk the talk.

Further indication of these tentative steps is the initiative taken in July 2014, when 554 business schools, globally, 'signed up' to PRME which is an initiative by the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education. The insights from this research, which reflects little has appeared to have changed, again this asks the question, are these initiatives just window dressing that enables business schools to be seen to embrace the increasing pressures to provide SME development programmes that meet SMEs needs, without refocusing their programmes to facilitate this? The findings of the data from the primary interviews in this research suggests that business schools' intent to refocus their programmes has yet to be turned into reality.

Another question is where are and who are the change champions that will have the skills, the desire and the power to affect such radical changes in the development of programmes that business schools offer SMEs? This research supports the observations of Rasche and Gilbert (2015), who suggest that these change champions are essential, as failure to make changes to SME development programmes could result in the continued disconnect between what business schools are offering SMEs, and the needs of SME leaders and other key stakeholders.

The experimental programmes that have been at the core of this research, which were offered temporarily by the business schools involved, but designed and delivered by practitioners to test the concept, demonstrate that the changes advocated, by this research can be made if there is the desire and willingness to do this. If this is not there, as suggested earlier, new types of development organisations could emerge that will genuinely seek to listen to, and understand the needs of SME leaders. The purpose of these new organisations would be to provide development programmes that both satisfy the needs of SME leaders, and improve the chances of SME leaders developing successful and sustainable businesses.

## Considerations for Future Research

The insights emerging from this research have been many and varied, they provide rich data that has informed the focus of this study, the observations, and recommendations. This research has sought to reflect on and consider all the insights some of which, took the research down avenues that started to significantly broaden the scope of this research. These insights, presented below as headlines, and as interesting topics for future research are:

- Confidence is important in decision-making for SME leaders. What does this look like? How important is confidence? What role does it play in decision making? How can the development of confidence within SME leaders be facilitated?
- There is a need to better understand the approach business schools currently take, to design and deliver SME development programmes. What does this look like? How can changes be suggested and implemented? What are the cultural change considerations to facilitate this?
- There is a need to attract and retain facilitators who are practitioners. What are the considerations for business schools to facilitate this?
- Success of business schools' SME development programmes should be measured by the impact these programmes have on SME leaders and the actions they are stimulated to take, to develop their businesses. What does this look like? How can these be measured?
- There is a need for business schools to harness a reflective learning approach to SME leaders' development. This, as Honey and Mumford (1986a and 1986b) advocated, means that there is a need for a process of do/reflect/do, which has its origins in Kant (1781). What does this look like? How can business schools harness this style of reflective learning approach for SME business development?

## Reflection on the Research

Over the last 20 years, as Turok (1991) highlights, there has been much interest by the UK government into why some SMEs succeed and others fail because of the significant impact SMEs have on employment and the UK economy.

There are encouraging signs and opportunities for organisations to develop and deliver business development programmes that meet the needs of SMEs. A small number of business schools, for example, started to make changes some time ago to address this, as highlighted by Gull (2010) and McDonald (2010). They noted that The University of Warwick appointed a Professor in Practice and Cranfield Business School appointed a Chair of Teaching, both having the objectives of recognising teaching excellence, in the same way as they do with research excellence. These appointments, however, were made over ten years ago, and do not appear to have been made in many other organisations in the same way. Throughout this research, it has been discussed that numerous studies have identified the lack of relevance of business programmes targeted at stimulating action in SMEs offered by business schools. Despite some small changes that have been made by business schools, it is noted that nothing of significance appears to have changed. This demonstrates that changes to SME development offerings by business schools needed to ensure that they meet the needs of SME leaders are not happening quickly enough, or not happening in a way that is significant in relation to facilitating the stimulation of action in SMEs leaders. Despite all of the research advocating change to stimulate SME actions, this raises the question, why today there appears to be apathy around this, or, if not apathy, what is it that is preventing business schools responding to the needs of SMEs or responding to the drive of the UK government.

This research journey has been fascinating, challenging, surprising, and rewarding. What was fascinating was the passion that was sensed, and a desire to help to change things when discussing this topic with both the SME leaders interviewed, and with business academics that have been involved in the discussions on this topic, the majority of whom recognise the need for radical changes to take place in what business schools offer but are sceptical that anything will happen.

What was challenging, was the style of academic writing required for a doctoral paper that can meet the academic requirements of an academic paper, whilst remaining relevant and interesting for any practitioner to read.

What has been surprising is the emergent theme relating to how important and powerful the network is in the effective knowledge transfer of business concepts to SME leaders. What was also surprising was the volume of research papers, relating to the gap in what business school development programmes targeted at SMEs offer and what SME leaders need, little seems to have changed.

What has been rewarding is the output of this research. This research has not focused on the gaps, identified by many authors, in what is offered by business schools and the needs of SME leaders, but on suggestions on how these gaps can be filled.

As such, this is not the completion of the research nor the end of a journey, but only the start. The next challenge is to help facilitate changes by communicating the findings of this research to as wide an audience as possible.

The findings of this research suggest that:

- The gap between business theory and business practice, often described as unbridgeable, for example by Starkey and Madan (2011), is bridgeable.
- There is a gap between the needs of SMEs, combined with the desire of governments to help SMEs develop, and SME development programmes, often offered by business schools. The gap arises from cultural mindsets in business schools, and their understanding of the needs of SMEs, which often do not reflect the day-to-day challenges facing SME leaders. This is the gap that needs to be bridged first.
- There should be a change in the measurement of success of business programmes targeted at SMEs. These measures should be more output-orientated, and reflect the actions taken by SME leaders as a direct result of participating in these programmes.
- There is a need to attract business practitioners into business schools, to undertake the role as facilitators on business development programmes targeted at SMEs. Business practitioners who have the ability to tell credible stories, and bring these to

life for SME leaders in the context of academic business models and concepts should be recruited as facilitators by business schools.

- Once credible business practitioners who are successful in their own fields of expertise are recruited by business schools, their business competence, experience, and expertise should be acknowledged, and the value this brings to business development programmes explicitly recognised. This is important in order to retain their engagement, and motivation to contribute as facilitators on business development programmes.
- In order to meet the needs of SME leaders, and governments' intent, it is recommended that new types of business schools should be established that are not qualification-orientated, but which are output and impact orientated instead.

### **Meeting the aims and objectives of the research**

The overall purpose and aim of this research, is to show 'how business schools' programmes can more effectively stimulate action in SMEs'. Specifically, the research has sought to investigate how attendance on such programmes can help develop the thinking of SME leaders, so that they then have the confidence, to take actions that they would not have taken had they not participated in these programmes. This has been achieved by focusing on and completing five key research objectives:

1. To investigate and analyse insights of SME leaders on experimental business programmes.

This was achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews with nine SME leaders, and two business school leaders who had attended the experimental business programmes, that are the focus of this research. This data including the stories and insights was analysed through a line by line, reflexive and reflective interpretivist approach. Extracts from these interviews, have been discussed and reflected upon in Chapter 5.

2. Compare and analyse the findings to provide insights into these four component features in SME business development programmes with the information identified in the pre-research secondary data and literature reviews.

This was completed with the primary and secondary data being analysed separately in Chapter 5 and discussed in Chapter 6. In reflecting on the role, value, and relative contribution of the four components, the research continued to seek insights from business research and development literature. This focused on literature that provided insights into what business schools could do to improve the impact of programmes they offer in relation to stimulating action in SMEs. This involved a process of continued reflection on insights emerging from the consideration of the literature, alongside the primary and secondary research data until nothing new was emerged.

3. To identify themes and gain an understanding of what it is within business training programmes that are the "trigger point/s" that stimulated action in SME leaders to develop their businesses in a way that they would not have done had they not participated in the programme/s.

These emerging themes were identified in Chapter 5 and discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7. In doing this, the perceptions that SME leaders shared about what they felt was being offered by business schools in relation to the development of SMEs were repeatedly reflected upon. From this analysis, gaps and opportunities in how these programmes could be developed to fully meet their needs and help stimulate action, by them, to develop their businesses emerged.

4. Contribute to academic knowledge, highlighting the combined and comparative impact the four components of a business development programme, content, context, facilitator, and network have in stimulating SME leaders to take actions they would not have taken had they not participated in the programme.

This has been clearly explored and the outcome and contribution to academic knowledge explained in Chapter 7 in the sub-section, **Contribution to Knowledge**.

5. To make recommendations to inform the design of SME development programmes that will inform practitioners in the design of such programmes.

This has been clearly explored and the outcome and contribution to academic knowledge explained in Chapter 7 in the sub-section, **Contribution to Practice**.

This has been a reflexive, reflective interpretive study and as such the researcher has been part of this study, and not removed from it. The research material has been collected through secondary research material and primary research interviews from three experimental business development programmes. An extensive literature review has been conducted on an ongoing basis, throughout the research. Throughout the research there was an acceptance of potential bias that may result from this type of research, and consideration of this potential bias was continually reflected upon.

Key themes that inform the overall research aim and objectives emerged repeatedly throughout the research. These themes, as identified in chapter 5, started to emerge from the very start of the research and literature review, and were a consistent thread that continued as all of the research objectives were explored.

These themes were drawn upon to help develop the recommendations of this thesis, and that provide insights into how business development programmes offered by business schools that are targeted at stimulating action in SMEs can be evolved and become more effective in order to stimulate action in SMEs to the benefit of the SMEs, the UK government, business schools and UK plc.



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## Appendix

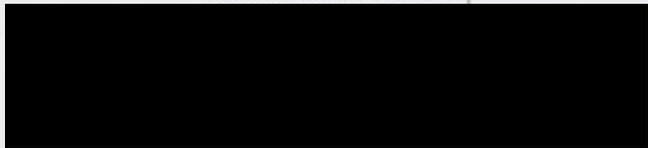
### A1 Erasmus Citation



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Dissemination and exploitation of programmes

Brussels, 28 October 2016  
EAC.C.4/MK/H  
File code: 2015/DISSEMINATION/001



Dear Project Coordinator,

It is my pleasure to inform you that your project 539287-LLP-1-2013-1-UK-ERASMUS-EKA- "The European Business Growth Catalyst Training Programme for SMEs - EBGC" has been selected as a "success story" by a panel of experts from the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. It has also been marked as such in the [Erasmus+ Project Results Platform](#).

The Erasmus+ Project Results Platform is a database where you can find descriptions and results of projects supported by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, as well as its predecessor programmes.

"Success stories" are finalised projects that have distinguished themselves by their impact, contribution to policy-making, innovative results and/or creative approach and can be a source of inspiration for others. The choice of your project as a success story was made on the basis of a selection process according to rigorous criteria regarding the quality, relevance and results of your project.

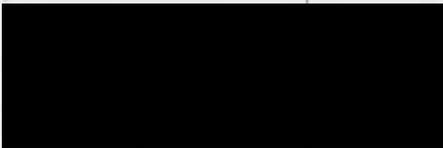
As a consequence of this selection, visibility and acknowledgement will be given to your project, for instance on our websites, social media, and when preparing documentation for conferences or other events with high-ranking attendance.

We therefore invite you to upload any additional updated information about your project on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform in order to give your project even wider visibility.

Please also note that you may be contacted by our external contractor for dissemination and exploitation of results for additional material related to your project.

I would like to congratulate and thank you and your project partners for your commitment, enthusiasm and high-quality work.

Yours sincerely,



Michal KREJZA  
Head of Unit



***EBGC Project***  
***2013-3402/001-001***  
*Report 5: End-Point Quality Report*  
*Final monitoring and evaluation process*

**1<sup>st</sup> October 2015**

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## 2. ANALYSIS

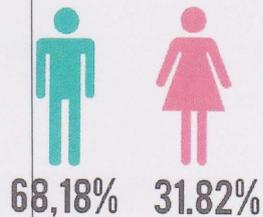
### 2.1. PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPATING SMES

The following charts show an analysis on the profile of the participants at the EBGC Pilot over the 3 countries where the programme took place. The typical participant is male, comes from a company with less than 20 employees, which operates since less than 5 years, and with an annual turnover higher than 1 million EUR/year.

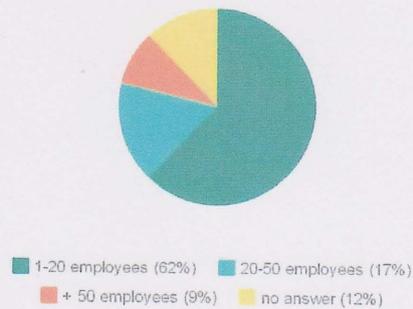
The external evaluators considered that a good representation of different SME profiles was achieved, and recommend to include in future analysis the education level of the participants, and their position and antiquity in their companies. It is also recommended to make an effort to include some companies bigger in terms of staff members. The programme should also make efforts to attract more women, as less than 1/3 of the attendants were female.

4

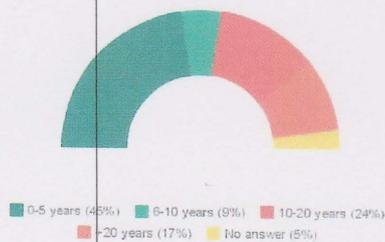
#### PARTICIPANTS



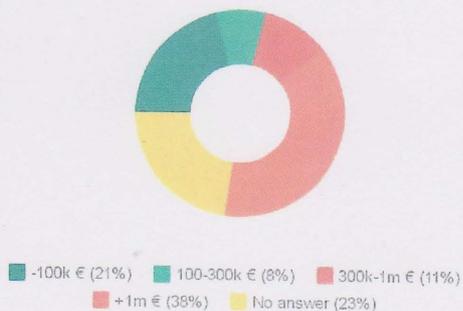
#### SIZE OF COMPANY



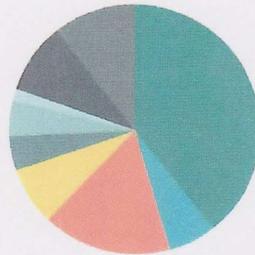
#### YEARS IN BUSINESS



#### ANNUAL TURNOVER



## COMPANY SECTORS



5

**IMPORTANT:** Methodologically, the design of the questionnaires used for this profile analysis **was different** in the 3 countries involved. It is **strongly recommended to harmonise the questionnaires in the future**. Standard categories for the answers must be defined before asking participants to fill in the questionnaires. In some cases, there wasn't coincidence in the ranges of the data collected resulting difficult to compare them, the external evaluators had to make an extra effort to make them comparable, taking several assumptions, leading to less reliable results.

## 2.2. GENERAL FEEDBACK FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

### Executive summary:

The section of the report analyses two different concepts

- > Analysis the self-evaluations of the skills/knowledge of the participants in the pilots of the EBGC Programme. The questionnaires which were completed by participants before and after concluding the training, in the 3 participating countries: Spain (ES), United Kingdom (UK) and Greece (GR). All participants were required to complete the form in order to assess the increase in skills and knowledge during the course and evaluate their experience of the training. 47 pilot participants completed the evaluation questionnaires and their responses are outlined below. Main conclusion is that there was a great improvement in the self-perception of the knowledge of the participants when we compare the before/answer questions.
- > Evaluation of the attendants about general aspects of the training programme. The programme is very positively rated in all aspects.

As external evaluators we confirm that the general evaluation of the programme expressed by the participants is really positive.

Almost every area where the participants were initially feeling poor skills or low knowledge has consistency increased their rate after the training, leaving only an insignificant percentage in the 2 areas considered the most difficult, internationalization and finances. However, as these 2 areas seem to be really important for the participants (or where they felt they had a lower less confidence/knowledge), we suggest to consider dedicating more time in future editions of the programme (taking also in

consideration that a 6% of the participants express the duration of the training was not so appropriate).

We consider the following as really important aspects that will contribute to the success of the training especially the following:

- > Almost all the participants consider they could easily implement what learnt in their own business achieving with this one of the main target of the full programme.
- > The positive increment in the self-confidence participants after the training.
- > The positive expectation about the difference in the growth and development of their own company for the participation in the programme.

6

*Before/after comparison*

Participants were asked to rate their feelings towards the three statements below both **before and after** the training programme:

RATING SCALE: 1 = LOW      3 = MEDIUM      5 = HIGH

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS RELATED TO:
Do you think you can effectively implement the changes necessary to achieve growth in your organisation?
How confident do you feel as a manager and leader in your organisation?
To what extent do you expect this program will make a difference in the growth and development of your business?

**BEFORE TRAINING**

The graph below shows consolidated participants' responses to this question at the beginning of the training.

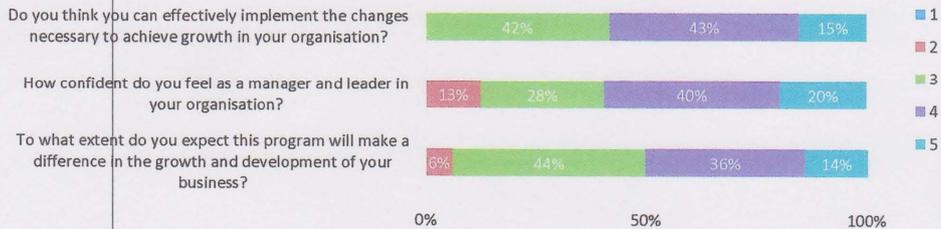


Fig.1. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Before Training (consolidated ES, UK, GR)

As can be seen in Fig.1 above, before the training:

- > 60 % of the attendants had high or very high self-confidence as their knowledge and skills as manager or leader in their organisation
- > 58% of the attendants had high or very high confidence that they could effectively implement changes in the organisation.
- > Regarding their expectations on the training, and how this training can make a difference in the growth of their businesses, as an average 50% of the attendants expressed they had high or very high expectations. These positive expectations were higher in Spain (60%), then in Greece (54%), and finally

UK (37% as "high" and none as "very high").

**AFTER TRAINING**

The second graph illustrates the same participants responses at the end of the training: -

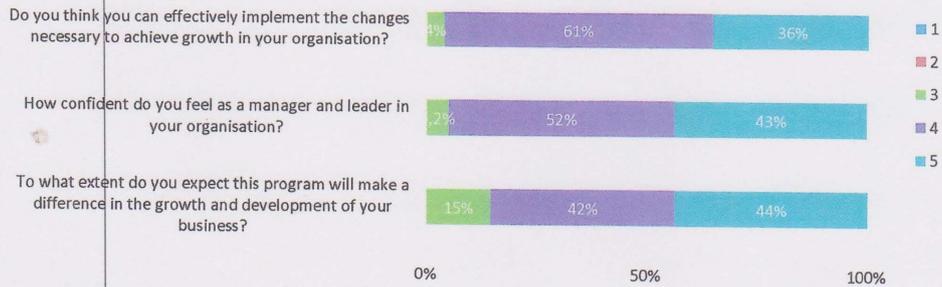


Fig.2. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills After Training (consolidated ES, UK, GR)

As can be seen in Fig.2 above, there is a significant shift up in how participants ranked the three aspects after the training:

- > 96 % of the attendants had high or very high self-confidence as their knowledge and skills as manager or leader in their organisation.
- > 95% of the attendants had high or very high confidence that they could effectively implement changes in the organisation.
- > Regarding how this training can make a difference in the growth of their businesses, as an average 86% of the attendants expressed they had high or very high expectations. These positive feelings were higher in Spain (94%), then in Greece (77%), and finally UK (85%, including 53% ranking as "very high").
- > Interesting to notice that, after the training, no one has answered "very poor" or "poor" to any of the three questions.

Fig 3 compares participants' marks (over 5) before and after the training. In the 3 evaluated areas there is a positive difference of at least 1 between before and after.

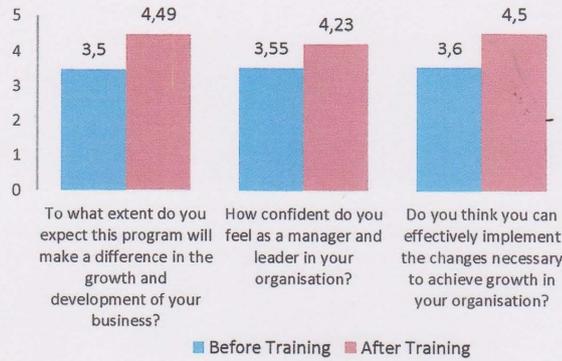
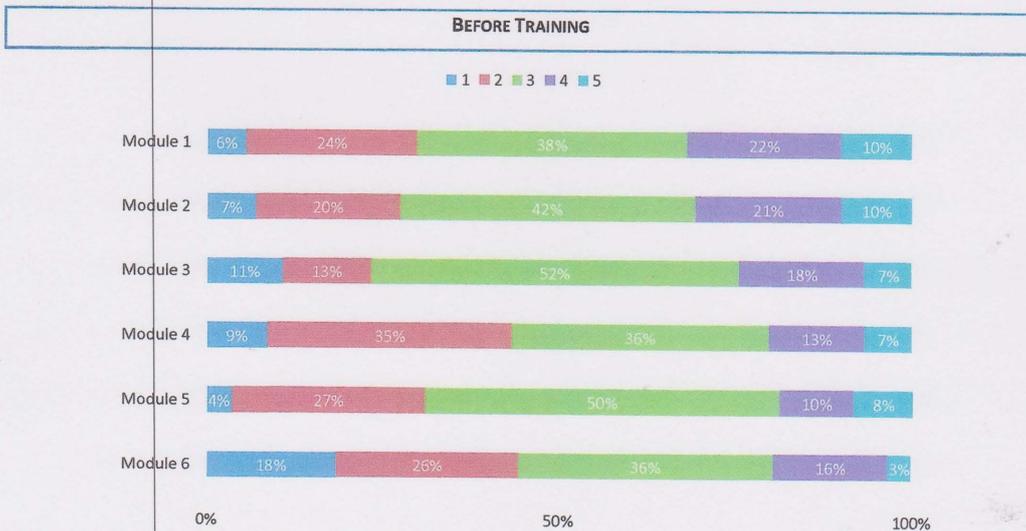


Fig.3. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills / Comparison Before and After Training (consolidated ES, UK, GR)

Participants were then asked to rate their knowledge and skills in each of the areas covered by the 6 modules before and after the training, in order to assess how this knowledge improved during the programme.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS RELATED TO:
<b>Module 1:</b> Diagnosis and Business Fit
<b>Module 2:</b> Resource and Capability Analysis and Identification
<b>Module 3:</b> Intervention Methods and Leadership for Business Growth
<b>Module 4:</b> Exploring International Markets
<b>Module 5:</b> Financial Planning and Restructuring
<b>Module 6:</b> Project Catalyst Operationalisation

Note: the numbering of the modules was different in UK, this report takes GR/ES numbering as a reference.



*Fig.4. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills related to the Modules Before Training (consolidated ES, UK, GR)*

As observed in Fig.4 above, prior to the modules, a majority of participants mainly considered their knowledge and skills in each of the areas as being "medium" or "low".

- > The initial skills corresponding to Project Catalyst Operationalisation were ranked the lowest (with 2,58 as average), followed by Knowledge of International Markets (2,7 as average).
- > On the top side, the skills corresponding to Diagnosis and Business Fit were the highest rated with 3,21 as average)
- > Very few participants rated themselves highly in any of the modules and only 3% scored "5" at the beginning of the training.
- > Regarding differences by country, participants from UK had rated their initial skills the lowest, Greece is in intermediate position, and participants from Spain rate their initial skills higher (higher than 3)

AFTER TRAINING

The below table shows the change in the self-assessment of the participants according to the modules, after the training programme:



Fig.5. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills related to the Modules After Training

As observed in Fig.5 above, after the training, the self-perception of participants about their skills greatly increases. The majority rate their knowledge and skills as "high" or "very high" in all areas.

It is worth highlighting the following points:

- > The Module 4 "Exploring International Markets", follows the tendency of improvement but still a significant percentage of the attendants (34%) consider their skills are still "medium" or "low"
- > Participants are rating the "Financial Planning and Re-structuring" module with the high rates of "4" and "5" with a 91% and now only 2% feel "low" knowledge.
- > Low rating on Module 6 – Project Catalyst Operationalization – has now improved considerably with almost 90% feeling good knowledge
- > The tendency per country remains the same: all them show a great difference between initial and final capabilities/knowledge. In particular:
  - UK: From 2,5 to 4
  - Greece: 3.03 x to 4.055
  - Spain: From 3.25 to 4.72
  - Globally: from 2.92 to 4,26 (see Fig 6 below)

This very positive evolution of the self-perception on their own skills and knowledge is also depicted in the graph below (Fig. 6) which compares participants' self-assessment before and after the training in each single module:



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Fig.6. Self-Assessment of Knowledge and Skills related to the Modules / Comparison Before and After Training

Also after the training, participants were asked to comment on **how they would implement** what they learned on the course. They were asked if they would easily be able to apply what they learned during the programme into their own organisations. If the answer was 'no', participants were then asked to explain why and say something about how the programme could be improved to make the answer positive.

All the participants answered this question positively stating that they were planning to use the materials they have learnt during the modules in their businesses.

**Relevant comments include:**

- "Yes, the tools and methodology used during the course is very helpful and easy to apply to the day to day of a company"
- "Yes, I appreciate the contents but now I need to find time to apply I in my business"
- "Yes, it was especially useful to complete my training starting in ACCIO – it add the strategic view to the more operative one"
- "Yes" (multiple times)
- "Yes. The trainer provided us with useful guidelines in order to apply what we learned in our business model"
- "It's possible."
- "Yes, in the majority of cases"
- "Yes, without doubt!"
- "Yes, I am confident that I can easily (and happily) implement what I have learnt"
- "Yes, I will need to review the content again but the understanding is there."
- "Yes, I have many plans to use the materials from the course to take my company plans forwards"

*Other general question about the training programme*

A second questionnaire, fulfilled after the training was completed, asked participants to rate the programme on 8 aspects:

1. How do you rate the programme overall?
2. Do you think the duration of the training was right?
3. How do you evaluate the methodology used?
4. Do you think the training achieved its objectives?
5. How do you rate the level of difficulty of the program?
6. Did the program meet your professional educational needs?
7. Did the trainer actively involve you in the learning process?
8. Was an appropriate amount of material covered in the programme?

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The following graph illustrates the responses received. Again the scale went from 1 (inadequate) to 5 (excellent).

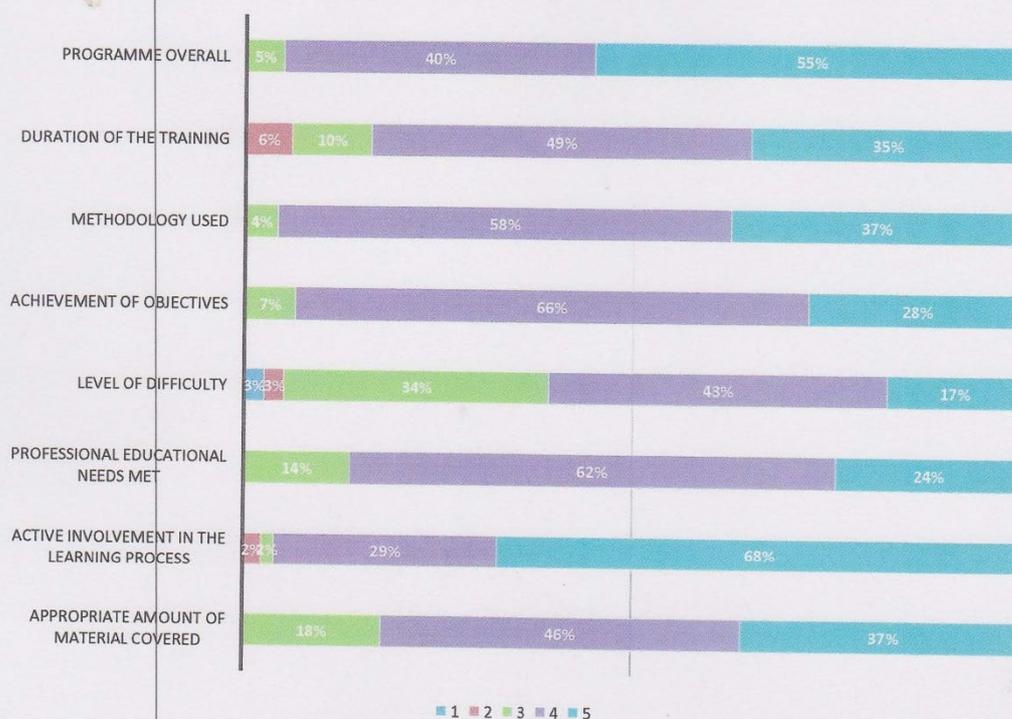


Fig.7. General Questions about the Training

It can be observed that:

- > Participants in a vast majority rated the training in a very positive way with a 95% of "very good" or "excellent" evaluation. They are satisfied with the amount of the material covered.
- > 97% of them think that they have been actively involved in the learning process and that the training has met their professional educational needs.
- > 96% of the participants are highly satisfied with the methodology used during the training and with

the achievements of objectives.

- > Also, it may be important to mention that some participants found the training fairly difficult although given the high level of satisfaction in all other areas it seems safe to assume that this is a positive response and that participants found the challenge of the course fulfilling.
- > The question duration of the programme is, in the 3 countries, market the lowest. It seems an important part of the participants believe that more time would have been better.
- > No significant differences per country were observed:
  - UK: Average of the 8 answers 4.24
  - Spain: Average of the 8 answers 4.25
  - Greece: Average of the answers 4.16

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Participants were then asked how they had found out about the “European Business Growth Catalyst Programme” in order to help partners of the EBGC programme to better understand the market and how they might promote the course effectively in the future. Fig 7. below shows the answers:

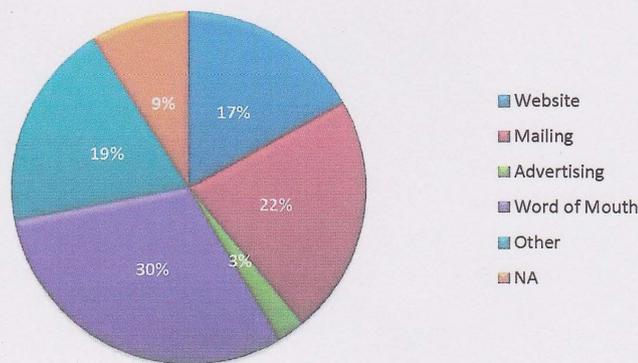


Fig.7. How did you heard about EBGC?

As observed in the chart above, 30% of the participants had heard about the programme by “word of mouth” and 22% by mailing and, probably due to the high amount of networking and communication with local SMEs and business groups which was undertaken by the organisers in order to promote the programme to contacts locally in their area. A 17% found out about the program through the website.

However, the existence of this programme was communicated in very different ways in each of the countries. While in UK, the word of mouth represent 63% of the total, in Spain and Greece this was only 13% and 15% respectively. In these two countries, mailing and website were the most effective communication means.

“Other” means included: Information from governmental office devoted to promote the internationalization, Linked and other social media postings, networking events...

Finally, the questionnaire was asking for **further comments and suggestions**. Mostly, participants gave strongly positive feedback about the EBGC programme. According to them, the training has been an enriching experience providing them with insights and thoughts on how to grow their business. This programme, in their opinion, has met their expectations and has achieved its objectives. They feel more confident to lead their companies and guide the growth of their business.

Some suggestions received are related to:

- > The international side of a business. They would like to have modules including more international business plan.
- > The financial side of a business. They would like to have modules including more financial planning and business plan drawing.

- > Also, they would like to understand more about business analysis for service led businesses.
- > Finally, some would suggest to include networking sessions among the participants, with the programme facilitators, in order to increase the benefit from their involvement in the group.

**Some comments given by participants include:**

- *"I am representative of ACCIO, a governmental agency. It was very helpful to participate in the programme and I think it was very helpful for SMEs"*
- *"The methodology and tools given during the course is very useful and easy to apply in the day to day to the company"*
- *"Overall, a great course. The challenge will be to find time to apply it in my day to day work".*
- *"This programme is really different with respect to other programme and at the same time complete what I received from ACCIO programmes"*
- *"I received very interesting tools. Maybe it will be useful to have an additional one to one support in the company to improve the implementation".*
- *"It was very informative. I would have liked to have some personal tutorial"*
- *"It could be useful to have some more organized perspective"*
- *"Overall, a great course. I think a more structured outcome to the course would be great. Also assess the work as well."*
- *"I really enjoyed the course, & meeting such interesting & friendly people, who I have full intention of keeping in touch with. Thank you very much!"*
- *"Brilliant! Thanks."*
- *"Excellent, thought-providing and developmental."*
- *"Very good course, well presented and delivered. Definitely recommend to others!"*
- *"More business analysis for SERVICE led businesses? Manufacture/product based models weren't always relevant for me."*
- *"I would suggest to have a more in depth module on financial planning and business plan drawing"*
- *"The course came just at the right time and has helped us both in planning and having a clear vision of our way forward."*
- *"The EBGC was a useful course that has supported both my own professional development and the development of my organisation. In addition to helping me refine our organization's strategic plan for the next three years and crystallize our growth aspirations, the course also provided a good number of "oven ready" tools, ideas and nuggets of information that I could drop into our organisation the next day. For me, the most important discipline learned on the course was the importance of perennially asking "so what?" when thinking about my business. In a world of information overload this has helped me to get to the important stuff that bit quicker than I was doing previously."*
- *"Just to confirm that my experience on the EBGC has been extremely positive. The course has been well developed, well run, well organized, and well delivered. The content has been most useful and is already starting to pay dividends. Anyone who wants MBA content in a shorter format should seriously consider this as an academic option. Excellent, highly recommended, - 5 stars."*
- *"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate. Congratulations to Eleni and Alexis for the fruitful experience"*
- *"Competitive and Branding strategy could be a module"*

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

This report is generated in the framework of the collaboration established between ESADE and ARISTOS for the project "European Business Growth Catalyst" (EBGC) with contract 539287-LLP-1-2013-1, where ARISTOS has been selected as to carry out the external monitoring and evaluation services of the EBGC project (project funded through the Lifelong Learning Programme, hereafter LLP), following the description of tasks included in the Application Form of the mentioned project.

The European Business Growth Catalyst (EBGC) is designed to develop a new learning programme for managers and owners of European Small to Medium Sized Businesses (SMEs) to grow their businesses. This is a programme that responds directly to the contemporary European context, in which business growth for SMEs is a paramount concern for future job and wealth creation in Europe: SMEs represent 98% of all enterprises across the EU, (with micro-businesses comprising 92.2% of this).

The conclusion of the evaluation process conducted by ARISTOS is that the EBGC project has reached all its main goals, and the implementation has been smooth and successful. All partners have been highly involved in the project execution and there are good perspectives that the developed training courses can continue after the project ends.

3

## 2. BACKGROUND

This report is generated in the framework of the collaboration established between ESADE and ARISTOS for the EBGC project, where ARISTOS has been selected as to carry out the external monitoring and evaluation services of the EBGC project (project funded through the Lifelong Learning Programme (hereafter LLP), following the description of tasks included in the Application Form of the mentioned project.

This is the fifth report delivered by ARISTOS, the "End-Point Quality Report" in the framework of the established assessment, after the "Strategy Plan", the "Preliminary Evaluation Report", the "Interim Quality Report" and the "Evaluation of the Pilots", an extra report (included as Annex 1), not originally foreseen in the assignment, realized to give an external global analysis of the pilot actions taken in the project (WP4).

This End-Point Quality report is a complete report covering the full project period. According the Strategy plan, this end-point report covers four aspects:

- > Evaluation of the progress toward the contractual outcomes and respect of the contractual workplan
- > Evaluation of partnership performance
- > Evaluation of effectiveness and impact of dissemination activities
- > Evaluation of the extent to which the project activities form an element of a lifelong learning strategy

### Sources and methodology

2 external evaluators from ARISTOS (Ms. Irene Larroy and Ms. Carlotta Daldoss) have been assigned to this project. The progress toward the contractual outcomes and respect the contractual work plan on the basis of the guidelines for reporting are set in the document Project Handbook (Annex IX or VII – *Guidelines for Administrative and Financial Management and Reporting*).

The **direct contact** of the external evaluators from ARISTOS with the project partners of the EBGC project has been the main information source for evaluating the progress of the project.

Other sources of information used are:

1. Participation in monthly tele-conferences.
2. The 2 external evaluators are in copy in most of the email communications exchanged by the partners.
3. Attendance of the external evaluators to the Steering Meetings:
  - o 2 external evaluators attended 2<sup>nd</sup> Steering Meeting that took place in Barcelona on 5-6<sup>th</sup> June 2014
  - o 1 external evaluator attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> Steering Meeting that took place in Sheffield on 25-26<sup>th</sup> November 2014
  - o 1 external evaluator attended the extra 4<sup>th</sup> Steering Meeting that took place in Barcelona on 16-17<sup>th</sup> April 2015
  - o 1 external evaluator attended the 5<sup>th</sup> Steering Meeting that took place in Athens on 10<sup>th</sup> September.
4. Questionnaires: To follow and complete questionnaires collected and analysed during the first Barcelona meeting (June 2014) and October 2014. A third set of questionnaires was collected from the partners' last steering meeting in Athens in September 2015. The intention is to collect their inputs on the last period of the project in view to compare the full period and see if improvements were made and get a general opinion.
5. Phone interviews
6. Minutes of partners meetings
7. Google Analytics Statistics Reports of the project's website
8. Social networks

### 3. INTERIM EVALUATION

#### 3.1. Evaluation of the progress toward the contractual outcomes and respect of the contractual workplan (work package current status)

**Summary:** the progress of the work is evaluated as highly positive. Some delays appeared in the first months of the project, which were timely identified and correctly addressed. The work schedule has been recovered and only minor negative points have been identified.

5

#### WP1: Project & Consortium Management

**WP leader:** INOVA

**WP Participants:** all

#### Analysis of the work performed:

Within this work package, the main Project Management Tools set up, including IT platforms, contact lists, document templates etc. Some minor activities in the WP1 suffered slight delays in the first months of the project but this was completely recovered. The external evaluation experts deem that the quality of the management of this project is very high, and that the distribution of the different management tasks between UoS and INOVA is really efficient.

Participation in monthly tele-conferences continued constantly during all the project period and it has been a key issue for the successful management of the project. These conferences are performed through the IT system "GoToMeeting" and are considered crucial for keeping a good communication level among the partners. Participation of the partners is always very high and all partners feel really free to express their opinions and concerns, allowing a constant follow-up of the progress of the project.

5 Steering meetings took place during the project:

- 1<sup>st</sup> meeting in Sheffield (UK) on 18<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup> November 2013
- 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting in Barcelona (Spain) on 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> June 2014
- 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting in Sheffield (UK) on 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> November 2014. During which all partner organisations and the external evaluator Irene Larroy highlighted the need of having an extra meeting shortly after the end of the pilot so that delegates can reflect on the project implementation and share any lessons learnt.
- 4<sup>th</sup> meeting took place in Barcelona (Spain) on 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> April 2015. All partners attended and the meetings were considered a success.
- 5<sup>th</sup> meeting. The last Steering took place in Athens (Greece) on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

External evaluators have attended 4 of this 5 meetings. See annex 2 for the detailed evaluation reports about each of the meetings.

#### Internal progress reports

A first Internal Progress Report covering first 6 months of the project was correctly completed. However, the consortium has not completed the rest of the internal reports as scheduled (every 6 months). Partners plan to produce a second internal report covering the last 18 months of the project.

#### Official periodic reports

The official periodic report covering activities and costs of each partner for the first year of the project was prepared and submitted without major delays. EACI approved this project report on 28/01/2015

Partners are now preparing the second and final report. The reporting materials are being collected by UoS and INOVA for the second year official periodic report covering activities and costs of each of them.

### *Issues found in management*

The biggest problem identified affecting project management during this first year of the project was the delay in signing the final version of the Consortium Agreement. The 1st version of the Consortium Agreement has been signed by all partners EXCEPT ESADE because of legal inaccuracies due to differences on Spanish and UK copyright law. A second version of the Consortium Agreement was prepared after long discussions among all the partners, especially ESADE and UoS. A final common position was met in June 2014 and all partners have agreed now on the final text of the Consortium Agreements, that it was finally signed by the legal representatives of the beneficiaries.

Some partners have reported some problems in getting answers from the coordinator UoS when they made questions about financial issues. Finally, partner INOVA asked the partners to send their questions to INOVA.

### **WP2: Needs Analysis: Understanding the Needs of SMEs in Partner Countries for European Innovation**

**WP leader: ALBA**

**WP Participants: ALBA, ESADE, UoS**

#### **Analysis of the work performed:**

This WP was fully completed at the beginning of November 14 when all information and documents was uploaded in the G-Drive. This work package suffered a considerable delay at the beginning related with the creation of the "focus groups" in Greece, Spain and UK but this was completely recovered and the national reports were produced. The 3 academic partners are satisfied with the job done and stressed that they extracted very useful conclusions from the focus groups, which were very helpful for the development of the training materials in WP3.

### **WP3: Development of European Business Growth Catalyst Materials**

**WP leader: UoS**

**WP Participants: INOVA, CA Ltd, ALBA, KNOWL, ESADE, PINAFORTE**

#### **Analysis of the work performed:**

This WP was concluded as originally planned without any particular problem. All the training materials were ready and uploaded to the website and the "Learning Hub" after being tested in the first Barcelona meeting (June 14) and the feedback from partners was very positive. From the interviews taken with the partners we can conclude that all of them are really satisfied with the quality of the materials. The work done by the team of UoS in leading this WP3 and preparing the documents is considered outstanding.

All partners are highly involved in this task, actively contributing to the discussions. Some materials was adapted according to the participant's profile and the cultural difference among countries as it was suggested from some of the partners and materials was translated into Spain and Greece. Material also had a very high and positive evaluation from the participants to the pilot, as can be seen in Annex 1 of this report (point 2.3 "Specific evaluation of the 6 training modules").

### **WP4: Piloting of European Business Growth Catalyst Training Materials**

**WP leader: KNOWL**

**WP Participants: UoS, INOVA, CA Ltd, ALBA, ESADE, PINAFORTE**

#### **Analysis of the work performed:**

This WP was successfully concluded in June 2015 with the ending of the training pilot programme that took place in the 3 countries in March 2015 and the analyses of full programme.

The recruitment process for the pilots in UK, Spain and Greece was completed successfully, with a high number of applicants and it's remarkable that the percentage of female entrepreneurs in the EBGC programme is 32%, higher than the EU average of 29%.

The partners have jointly designed two evaluation questionnaires to be collected from the participants before, during and after the training course. Each partner analysed their own questionnaires and the external evaluators produced a consolidated report covering the entire pilot experience. This report included also the outcome of 6 phone interviews with 6 participants (2 per country) in order to have reliable feedback from participants to evaluate the project's impact. The result of this evaluation is very positive. (See the full evaluation of the pilots in Annex 1 of this report).

#### WP5: Development of the Online 'Learning Hub'

WP leader: UoS

WP Participants: INOVA, CA LtD, ALBA, KNOWL, ESADE, PINAFORTE

#### Analysis of the work performed:

The online Learning Hub has been developed as part of the EBGC to provide an online space for participants in the training. The hub consists of a space with three types of users, (i) learners, (ii) facilitators, and (iii) administrators.

The Online "Learning Hub" is now working fine, it has been positively tested by the external reviewers. All documents in English are uploaded and it is possible to implement additional functionalities when needed. However, it was the only part of the programme receiving a negative evaluation from the participants of the pilots.

#### Issues found in the use of the learning hub

During the pilot, participants were invited to use the Learning Hub and test it. But the hub was not set on time for the first module of the pilot. Moreover, most participants experienced problems for accessing with their account and most of them recognised they did not use it at all. The access was not easy to find and the participants who forgot their password had not a simple way to recover it or generating a new one.

Unfortunately, in the second version of the website, **this problems are not yet satisfactory solved**. The navigation in the new website is quite confusing. The menu "Community" > "Login" does not directly take you to log in, but to a registration page. If a participant who is already registered wants to access he/she should select the menu "Community" > "Learning Hub" and then click into the small text <<login here>>, that's to say, 3 clicks and a route which is not intuitive at all. UoS as WP leader are appointed to discuss and solved this problem improving the access to the online platform.

The role of UoS as WP leader is positively evaluated by the rest of the partners.

Good improvement was made in the hub during the second year of the project, both in the resources section (to have all documents properly indexed), and in encouraging participants to use it more, but more improvements is still needed.

During September 2015 and after having uploaded new resources (at least 50 per countries), partners submit a survey to the pilot participants in order to gather better impressions on the quality of the e-learning platform.

The response of the survey came from 8 English and 5 Greek participants. No answers have been collected from Spain.

The survey was focused only on the content of the hub (range, quality and relevance of the resources); in our opinion, also structural and design information should have been collected in view to have a complete idea about the new feeling on the learning hub.

Answers about the range and quality got high or very high punctuation for more than 90% of the answers and the relevance to participants businesses was high for the 61.5% and very high for 21.1% of them.

All recommendations collected shown requests about more interactive resources such as videos, quizzes, infographics, to be used in the hub in view to keep more interest rather than just reading materials. This suggests that some structural changes will maybe further improve the platform.

#### WP6: Quality Assurance and Evaluation

WP leader: ESADE

WP Participants: UoS, INOVA, CA Ltd, ALBA, KNOWL, PINAFORTE

#### Analysis of the work performed:

A Quality Peer Review Team (QPRT) has been set up in order to internally assess quality in the deliverables between the team. Composition of the QPRT is shown below and consists on a representative of each partner plus the two external evaluators (external quality assurance specialists).

PARTNER#	PARTNER	DELEGATE	E-MAIL ADDRESS
P1	UoS	Rhoda Watson	<a href="mailto:Rhoda.Watson@sheffield.ac.uk">Rhoda.Watson@sheffield.ac.uk</a>
P2	INOVA	Marina Larios	<a href="mailto:mlarios@inovaconsult.com">mlarios@inovaconsult.com</a>
P3	CA Ltd	Glyn Cartwright	<a href="mailto:glyncartwright@hotmail.com">glyncartwright@hotmail.com</a>
P4	ALBA	Aristotelis Alexopoulos	<a href="mailto:aalexopo@alba.edu.gr">aalexopo@alba.edu.gr</a>
P5	KNOWL	Sofia Ioannou	<a href="mailto:s.ioannou@knowl.gr">s.ioannou@knowl.gr</a>
P6	ESADE	Ivana Casaburi	<a href="mailto:ivana.casaburi@esade.edu">ivana.casaburi@esade.edu</a>
P7	PINAFORTE	Guillermo Prenafeta	<a href="mailto:guillermo.p@pinafortepartners.es">guillermo.p@pinafortepartners.es</a>
EQAS	ARISTOS	Irene Larroy Carlotta Daldoss	<a href="mailto:irene.larroy@aristos.cat">irene.larroy@aristos.cat</a> <a href="mailto:carlotta.daldoss@aristos.cat">carlotta.daldoss@aristos.cat</a>

This WP also includes the external quality assurance process delivered by ARISTOS which includes the evaluation of:

- > partnership performance;
- > progress toward the contractual outcomes and respect of the contractual workplan;
- > effectiveness and impact of dissemination activities;
- > the extent to which the project activities form an element of a lifelong learning strategy.

This WP was ongoing during the whole project and no deviations from the work plan have been identified. All partners are extremely cooperative with the two external evaluators and the relationship runs smoothly.

As external evaluators we are comfortable collaborating in this particular project and congratulated the partners on the progress achieved. All minor problems detected during the projects life were immediately corrected and the improvements achieved were visible and always positive.

#### WP7: Dissemination

WP leader: INOVA

WP Participants: UoS, ESADE, CA Ltd, ALBA, KNOWL, PINAFORTE

#### Analysis of the work performed:

In this WP there are two different aspects that should be considered separately:

- > The marketing and dissemination materials already prepared to be used, which includes the website and leaflet and postcard.
- > The pro-active dissemination actions started in the second year with the goal of positioning the project and make the EBGC learning programme sustainable after the LLP programme finishes.

#### *Analysis of the dissemination materials*

The leaflet are very professional and faithfully transmits the summarised information about the programme in a very attractive way, showing the benefits for the participants and their companies if they follow the programme. The leaflet also shows who the programme is addressed to, and introduces the programme structure (modules) and dates.

The postcard is a shorter version of the leaflet and is also positively evaluated.

The leaflet and the postcard are available in English and Greek. Partners from Spain considered that the use of the English version is fine for their purposes to reach the desired audience, which is considered adequate by the external reviewers.

The programme website was possibly the weakest point detected within this WP. The first version of the website was considered weak. As external evaluators, we summarised the key points that need to be improved or changed in the previous interim report.

- > *The logos of the partners are not visible until the bottom part of the website (scroll is needed to find them). This is considered a missed opportunity as the reputation of the partners is one of the biggest assets of the project, but it seems the website is not taking advantage from this fact.*
- > *The logo of the project European Centre for Business Growth does not appear in high resolution.*
- > *The multilingual menu on the top bottom shows 16 languages but only English version is working. It is advised to remove the language options.*
- > *The structure and global design the website seems adequate for a standard EU project but does not seem attractive for a learning programme if we consider it is mainly addressed to future participants.*
- > *The main sections of the menu are not 100% intuitive, especially 3 sections that have very similar names, whose contents are not obvious to the new-lookers:*
  - o *Project- EBGC*
  - o *ECBIZ*
  - o *EBGC*
- > *The sections "Dates" and "Apply" work well although design may be improved to give a more professional look*
- > *The section "E-learning hub" opens the Moodle platform and participants may log in, but the design of the first page is not really intuitive (for instance, it takes a while to find the option to log-in).*

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> transnational meeting in Sheffield, partners extensively discussed about these points and decided to create a new website. The second version of the website was launched in June 2015 (unfortunately, the pilots were already finalised by then).

All areas described below were addressed and the second version of the website, definitely better than the first one. The second is more attractive, clearer and with higher resolution. There are however 3 points that in our opinion should be improved:

1. The logotype of the European Centre for Business Growth that still does not appear in high resolution
2. When scrolling down in the webpage, the logotype of the EGBC gets reduced in size and it should not have the white background but with transparent one (as it is on the postcard for example).
3. Navigation issues to access the e-learning hub (see comments in WP5)

All partners feel comfortable and satisfied with the new website.

*Analysis of the pro-active dissemination actions*

An active dissemination plan has been put in place by partners in the 3 countries:

- > **Social media:** partners has kept updating social media platforms on an ongoing basis and the number of followers has increased, but still we consider the number of followers is too low for a training programme that pretends to have continuity after the project finalisation. The Youtube videos issued are of high quality and interesting content, including presentations of the EBGC programme, video testimonials and webinars, however the number of visualisations is considered too short.

Twitter account	Followers	Following	Tweets	Global Rank
	71	194	68	73
LinkedIn group	Members	Posts	Comments	
	90	36	23	
Youtube	Video pieces	Suscriptors	Average Views	Comments
	14	2	57	0

- > **Newsletter:** 3 newsletters were issues during the project. Newsletters were released in each country and in all partners' language. (Greek, Spanish, English)

Greece	Direct mail	Facebook of KNOWL	Twitter of ALBA	Press Release in Greek
	10.051 recipients	>1.500	685	347
Spain	Direct mail	LinkedIn group EBGC Spain	LinkedIn ESADE Executive Education	LinkedIn PINAFORTE
	15 recipients	14 members	6.107 members	188 contacts
UK	Direct mail			
	1.611 recipients			

- > **Spread the Word Group:** 3 to 4 meetings were organised in each country to spread the word to potential stakeholders and ensure sustainability.

	Spread the Word 1	Spread the Word 2	Spread the Word 3
Greece			
n. of Participants	16	12	22
Spain			
n. of Participants	2	15	71
UK			
n. of Participants	4	22	6

- > **Final conference:** this is a final event that took place in Athens, Greece, on 11th September 2015, targeted to help with the sustainability of the EBGC project, with 110 attendatts, including project partners. See independent report in annex 3.

**WP8: Exploitation**

**WP leader: KNOWL**

**WP Participants: UoS, INOVA, ESADE, CA Ltd, ALBA, PINAFORTE**

**Analysis of the work performed:**

During the Meeting in Sheffield in November 2014, partners discussed about the exploitation strategy and started preparing the business plan. All partners were focused in ensure the sustainability of the programme as well as the proliferation of the European Centre for Business Growth. They participated actively in the deep discussions about setting the bases of the future commercialisation of the programme. A lot of original ideas were expressed during this session. A draft of the business plan was prepared on July 2015 and the final Business Plan was finalised in September 2015.

Some concerns about all the future exploitation process appeared in the 1<sup>st</sup> Barcelona meeting. They were related with the ownership of the training materials developed in the EBGC project, about if this is owned by individuals or their organisations depending on the country was solved. After a fruitful discussion in Sheffield, partners agreed that the background knowledge which is the one that existed prior to the launch of the pilot will belong to the original author(s) and the foreground knowledge which occurs as the programme is being developed will belong to the partnership.

Finally all partners express their interest in go ahead with the programme even if the final decision could only be taken when the detailed business plan will be presented and for some of them depending on consent of their directors (ESADE) or if the EBGC will be profit or no profit (ALBA). A general agreement on the functioning of the future editions of the EBGC programme was reached during the last partners meeting in Athens..

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### 3.2. Evaluation of the partnership performance

**Summary:** The partnership performance notable increased during the 2 years of the project. A big improvement in their relationship and involvement in the project, started in June 2014 after the first transnational meeting in Barcelona, where partners had the occasion to meet face-to-face. Since then started a real positive partnership that get stronger in the months coming and allow big improvements in the project results.

In general all partners had very positive feedbacks about the work progress, the organisation and the communication between them, they are such satisfied that some of them are already thinking in work together in future projects.

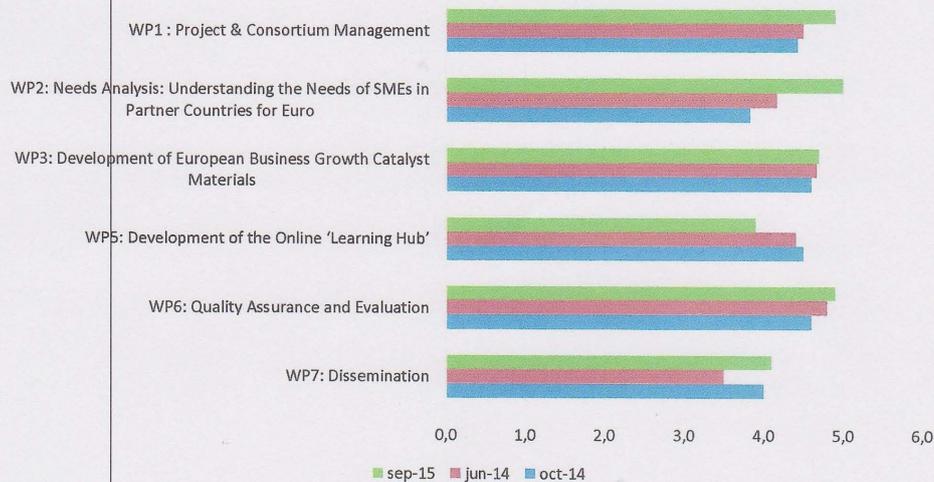
12

#### Perception of the work progress by the partners

A first questionnaire about the perception of the project progress was performed in June 2014 during the face-to-face meeting in Barcelona, a second round of questions has been performed in telephone interviews with each partner during October 2014 and a last one was performed in September 2015 during the last transnational meeting in Athens. In general, the perception of the quality of the work performed has notably increased during the project especially after the first meeting in Barcelona, as all partners mention that it helped to solve many open issues. Immediately afterwards the work advanced faster.

As you may notice in the graph below, there is only one work package, WP5 about the development of the Online "earning Hub", that has decreased in its valuation especially in this last performing of the questionnaire. We consider that this is mainly due to the problems occurred during the development of the hub and the website (see page 7 of this report in WP5 analyses).

Perception of the progress of the WPs



### Communication issues

Some problems with communication and organisational issues appeared in the first 7 months of the project. After the meeting in Barcelona, the partners took adequate corrective measures and all the problems seem to have been completely solved.

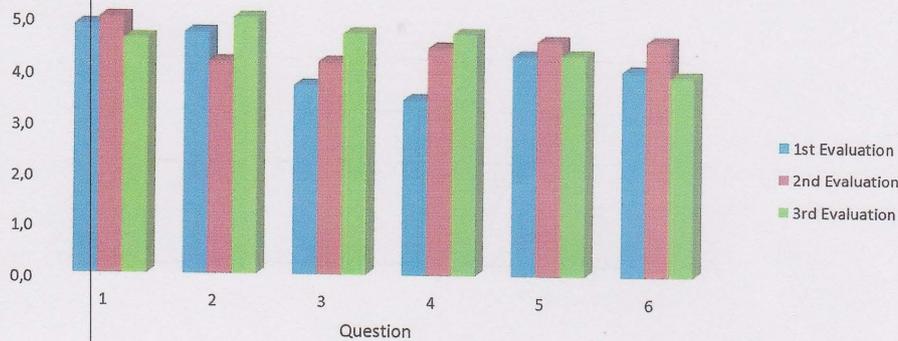
The main two issues identified, and already corrected, were:

- > The fact of having 2 platforms as working space (Trello and Google Drive) was perceived as confusing by most of the partners. After several trials, it was jointly decided by the partners to keep Google Drive only. This makes work and processing much easier and also it makes much easier to follow and assess the current status of the project.
- > There was also a problem for signing the final version of the Consortium Agreement, already solved, as explained in WP1.

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In general, all the partners are very satisfied with the partnership performance. The management, leadership and coordination is effective and high quality. The questionnaires answered by the partners in June 2014, October 2014 and September 2015 did also include some questions about management communication. A notable improvement of the satisfaction of the partners could be detected, as shown in the following table and figure.

		June 2014	October 2014	September 2015
1	How do you qualify the effectiveness of having this 2 institutions working in the general project management? Is this system working well?	4,9	5,0	4,6
2	How useful do you consider these monthly call conferences are?	4,7	4,1	5,0
3	How comfortable do you feel by using the G-DRIVE platform set up for this project?	3,7	4,1	4,7
4	What is your general opinion about the communication that took place in the partnership as a whole during the first 7 months of the project?	3,4	4,4	4,7
5	How often have you participated in the virtual call conferences via Go-to-meeting?	4,3	4,6	4,3
6	How often do you use the G-DRIVE platform set up for this project?	4	4,6	3,9



The interviews contained also some qualitative questions about the benefits of participating in the EBGC project. Answers are summarised below:

#### How did you benefit personally of having being involved in the project?

- > Good partnership and networking
- > Transnational cooperation
- > Possibility to adapt/reuse materials already developed but with a clearer focus.

- > Interesting to learn entrepreneurs' problems. Interesting to see problems are same amongst different sectors.
- > Developed an excellent method + colleagues for future projects.
- > It was a very interesting learning process.
- > New knowledge and experience gained and better understanding on cultural differences in terms of needs, level of understanding of concepts, commitment and endorsement of interactive learning methodologies.

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**How did your organisation benefit of having being involved in the project?**

- > Enlarged network.
- > Better understanding of the training needs of the SMEs across Europe.
- > Partners need to enlarge their range of products and this programme seems strategic for them.
- > Most of the organisations expect to increase their businesses in the future and are willing to develop the Business Plan to commercialise the programme after the project ends. More business in future, depending on the BP to be developed.
- > Fruitful exchange with academic institutions.
- > Good networking with other Consortium partners, possibility to cooperate on other projects. Getting close to the local business community.

**Other remarks:**

Partners have also expressed that the work load in this project is much higher than initially expected, possibly the work plan was not designed in an accurate enough way, so most of them consider the grant is covering a lower percentage of their costs, although they internally consider this is an investment because they plan to exploit project results.

### 3.3. Evaluation of effectiveness and impact of dissemination activities

**Summary:** big effort was dedicated to the dissemination activities but so far, the impact of these activities is still limited. However, partners have the clear intention to launch a dissemination campaign will be launched before the next editions of the programme.

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Four aspects were analyzed to have a better understanding of the impact of the dissemination activities.

- a) Presence in social networks
- b) Statistical analysis of the traffic of the project website containing information directed at the main target group
- c) Evaluation of the quality of the academic paper produced in the project focused on the pedagogy and process issues will be developed for presentation at an academic conference

#### a. Presence in social networks (figures at 30/09/2015)

- **Twitter.** The account @ECbizgrow has 71 followers, which is considered a too low number at the end of the project. Number of tweets issued is 68, also quite low. However, the frequency of the tweets is adequate and the content of the tweets is very interesting, not only informing about the project and the training but also providing other useful information for SMEs who wish to grow. The use of popular hashtags, sending via popular users and/or inclusion in specific lists is recommended to expand the impact of the account.
- **LinkedIn:** there is a quite active group named "European Centre for Business Growth". The content of the posts is really interesting but again the impact is very limited, as there are only 90 members (many of them working in the partner organisations, so not real targets).
- **Youtube:** A Youtube channel was created and a total of 14 video pieces have been uploaded, including testimonials of attendants to the pilots, introductions from the partners and several webinars or guides. The content is of very high quality but we find again a very limited repercussion, the video that has had more visualizations ("ebgc introv2 ") got 128, and the average is only 57 visualizations per video piece.

#### b. Statistical analysis of the traffic of the project website containing information directed at the main target group

##### Analysis of the first version of the website

This analysis is based only on the first version of the website that was online approximately until June 2015. The total number of acquisitions was 945 sessions. Of this total, 87.09% were New Sessions and 823 New Users.

##### By Country of Origin:

In the following images that shows the countries of origins of the visits there are 213 sessions (29.31%) that appears as *not-set* so no information about the origin are given. In this data there could be also visits from Spain as it doesn't appear in any other entries and it is one of the country where the pilot took place. There are a total of 129 visits (13.65%) from the UK and 24 (2.54%) from Greece and other 396 sessions from other countries also outside Europe.

Demographics	Country	Sessions	% Sessions
Language	1 United States	212	24.55%
Country	2 not set	213	22.54%
City	3 United Kingdom	129	13.65%
System	4 China	46	4.87%
Browser	5 Japan	41	4.34%
Operating System	6 Brazil	26	2.75%
Service Provider	7 Greece	24	2.54%
Mobile	8 Germany	20	2.12%
Operating System	9 India	17	1.80%
Service Provider	10 South Korea	14	1.45%



*By City of Origin:*

In the following images that shows the cities of origins of the visits there are 277 sessions (29.31%) that appears as *not-set* so no information about the origin are given. In this data there could be also visits from Barcelona as it doesn't appear in any other entries and it is one of the city where the pilot took place. There are a total of 83 visits (8.78%) from Sheffield (UK) and 22 (2.33%) from Athens (Greece), both cities of the pilot and other 57 other sessions from other cities also outside Europe.

City	Acquisition		Behavior		Conversions				
	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
	945	87.09%	823	84.66%	2.36	00:02:13	0.00%	0	\$0.00
1 not set	277 (29.31%)	99.54%	270 (32.8%)	90.03%	1.02	00:00:07	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
2 Sheffield	83 (8.78%)	8.62%	8 (0.97%)	18.02%	13.25	00:21:27	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
3 New York	16 (1.69%)	100.00%	16 (1.96%)	100.00%	1.00	00:00:00	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
4 Athens	14 (1.48%)	7.14%	1 (0.12%)	21.43%	6.43	00:04:04	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
5 Belfast	13 (1.38%)	23.08%	3 (0.37%)	23.08%	4.92	00:03:53	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
6 Athens	8 (0.85%)	62.50%	6 (0.73%)	37.50%	4.12	00:02:07	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
7 Cheltenham	7 (0.74%)	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	57.14%	3.71	00:01:43	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
8 Seoul	7 (0.74%)	100.00%	7 (0.86%)	100.00%	1.00	00:00:00	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
9 Los Angeles	7 (0.74%)	100.00%	7 (0.86%)	60.71%	6.86	00:00:00	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
10 Chicago	7 (0.74%)	100.00%	7 (0.86%)	100.00%	1.00	00:00:00	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)

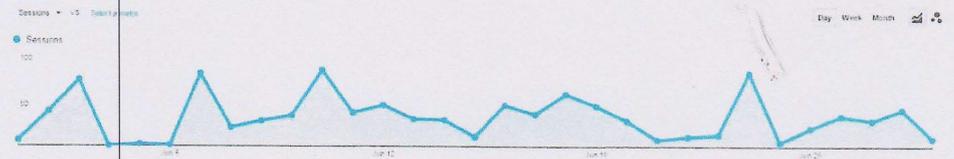
**Daily Visits:**

Looking at the daily visits of the website, it is shown that the 87.1% are new sessions and that there is only a 12.9% of returning visitors. Visitors view an average of 2.36 pages each session and they stay in the website for 2:13 minute in average.

The negative data is the Bounce that is almost 85%. This means that these high amount of visitors just enter and left the website without visit it.



**Daily News vs returning visits:**



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User Type	Acquisition		Behavior		Conversions				
	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
	945	87.09%	823	84.66%	2.36	00:02:13	0.00%	0	\$0.00
1 New Visitor	823	100.00%	823	91.59%	1.14	00:00:15	0.00%	0	\$0.00
2 Returning Visitor	122	0.00%	0	24.49%	10.94	00:17:29	0.00%	0	\$0.00

In general traffic to the website is not high and should especially increase in the Countries where the pilot took place and partners are from working on the SEO or with some Google payed and targeted advertise campaign.

Analysis of the second version of the website

The information about the traffic of the second version of the website has not been provided by the partners, despite having been requested in several occasions by ARISTOS.

*c. Evaluation of the quality of the academic paper produced in the project focused on the pedagogy and process issues will be developed for presentation at an academic conference*

Although more papers will be published during the next months/years directly related with the EBGC project, just one was generated during the project duration. This paper was presented in the 59th Annual Meeting of the ISSS - 2015 Berlin, Germany. ISSS stands for *International Society for the Systems Sciences*. The single author of the paper was John Paul Kawalek, Sheffield University Management School

A first draft version of the academic paper prepared by the project coordinator John Paul Kawalek was sent to the external evaluators on July 2015 for their assessment. The final version was sent to the evaluators in September 2015, and the comments included below correspond to this final version:

The paper positioned the EBGC with the 'theory of practice' and 'practical philosophy', and represents a step-change in the design and evaluation of business growth programmes.

The article is constituted by 16,5 pages of text, plus 3,5 pages of references.

The paper is linguistically perfectly written.

The paper is divided in 3 sections:

- **Abstract**
- **Introduction**
- **Practical reasoning:** this section of the paper outlines that basis of the design, and the rationale for using a Systems Approach for the design.
- **Principles of a project design for the EBGC:** this section provides a discussion of the process designed into the approach taken in the project.
- **Some disciplinary and Reseach Implications:** includes some of the key results from the pilot study, The EBGC project has taken a very different approach with several important implications. Firstly, it has been assumed that business growth can only come from 'action on the ground', i.e. from the businesses themselves. Secondly, that researching business growth may continue to benefit from traditional application of research methods. Thirdly, that policy making may benefit from considering new approaches to creating conditions for business growth.

The content is quite theoretical but in its majority it's understandable (even for us, the external evaluators, which are not familiar with concepts such as Systems Thinking or Kantian theories). However, we have not the required expertise to evaluate the quality of the content.

*Suggestions for improvement:*

- Mention the specific EU programme who funded the project (Lifelong Learning) and the contract number (539287-LLP-1-2013-1)

### 3.4. Evaluation of the extent to which the project activities form an element of a lifelong learning strategy

**Summary:** The very positive evaluation from the participants in the pilots was confirmed both by the questionnaires and the interviews performed by the external evaluators.

In general the attendants had very positive feedbacks about the program and constructive critics on what they think it should be improved, giving many suggestions. Some of them were really enthusiastic and others admit they had higher expectations before taking the programme. We consider this is mainly due to the kind of knowledge and previous experience of the participants.

It is important to highlight that all the interviewed people declared that they already started to implement changes in their companies, some of these was already planned and reconfirmed during the training, others was ideas that came along the programme.

An important common point to consider is that they were expecting more networking (promoted from the organisers) among participants of the same country but also with the participants from other countries. Everybody appreciated the potential that this kind of programme had but they didn't really have the chance to network during training or after it.

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The objective of this section is to provide a qualitative assessment on the fitting of the developed programme into the lifelong learning strategies of the users of the newly developed training materials. In other words, this section evaluates the **impact and global usefulness** of the developed training materials for the target audience, in particular SMEs/micro-businesses across partner countries who are thinking of expanding and developing their business to be more international. For evaluating this point, two sources of information have been used:

- The questionnaires fulfilled by the participants of the pilots in the 3 countries (before, during and after the pilots)
- 6 deep interviews have been conducted by phone with 6 the SMEs participating in the piloting action (2 per country). The phone interviews took place not immediately after the completion of the training but sometime later, in order to evaluate the real impact that the training caused in their organisations.

The detailed content of this evaluations can be found in Annex 2 - sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4.

## 4. ANNEXES

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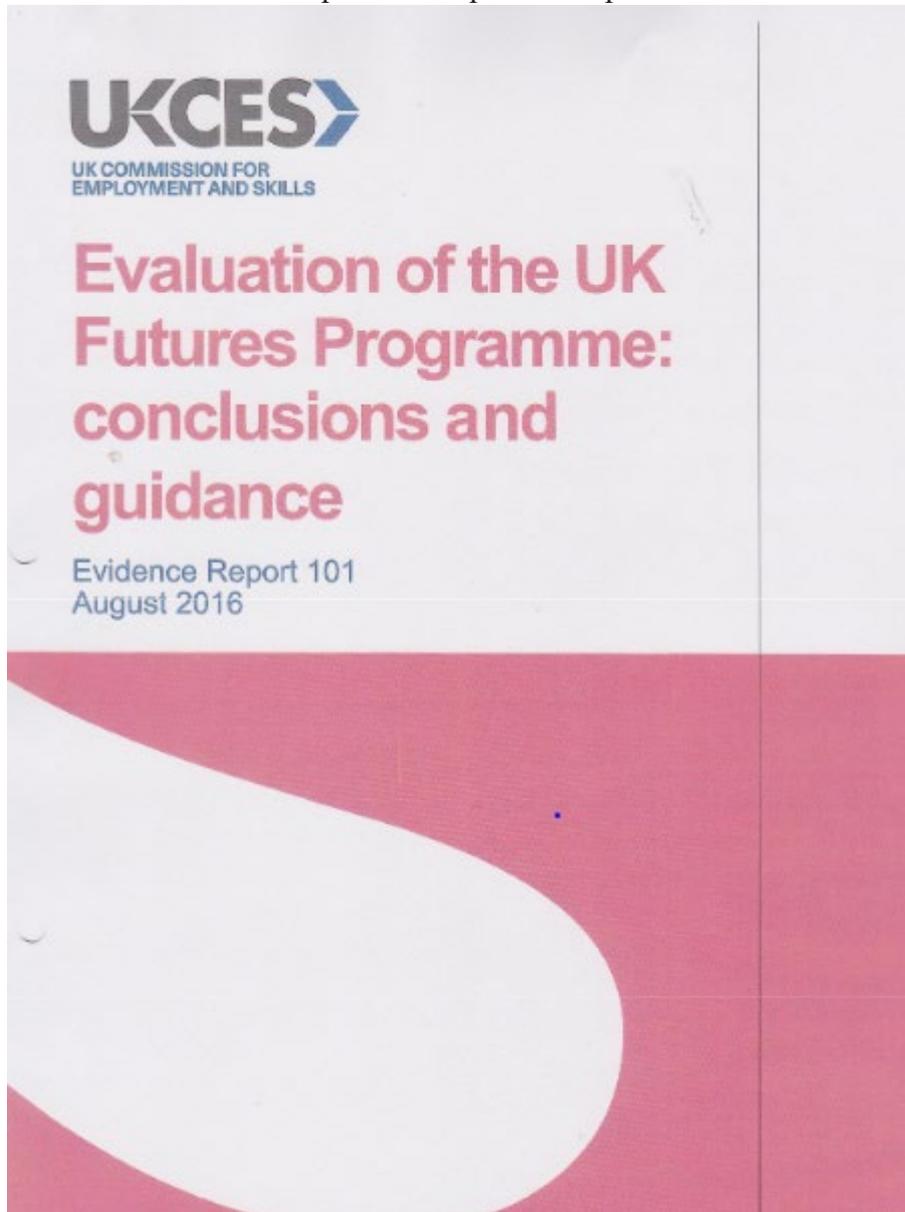
### ANNEX 1. REPORT ABOUT THE PILOTS

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Report about the pilots performed in WP4.

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A3. UKCES - Leadership and Entrepreneurship



## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This evaluation report presents the learning from the evaluation of the UK Futures Programme (UKFP). The UKFP ran between April 2014 and June 2016, and was funded by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' (UKCES). The UKFP provided an innovative approach to tackling workforce development issues, offering small scale public co-investment to employers and industry, to design and test their own solutions to emerging or long-standing skills and productivity challenges. The UKFP's four key objectives were to:

- Support collaborative approaches to workforce development issues amongst employers and, where applicable, wider social partners
- Encourage innovative approaches to addressing workforce development issues
- Identify ways to address new or persistent market or system failures which act as a brake on UK workforce competitiveness
- Identify 'what works' when addressing market failures in relation to workforce development, for adoption in policy development and wider business practice.

### Evaluation of the UK Futures Programme

UKCES commissioned SQW to carry out a real-time evaluation of the Programme. The purpose of the programme level evaluation is two-fold: to build on the learning from across the individual Productivity Challenges to identify thematic learning about 'what works'; and to investigate the design and delivery of the programme to evaluate the extent to which the investment approach met its objectives, above.

Conducted between October 2014 and July 2016, the evaluation methodology of the Programme consisted of three key elements:

- desk based review of programme documents
- consultations with key stakeholders
- participation at Co-creation Labs (which drew on wider experience of delivery of 'Innovation Lab' style investments).

### **Approach of the UK Futures Programme**

The UKFP was designed on the basis of learning from previous UKCES investments and from the 'Innovation Lab' approaches being adopted in policy development. Key features included highly specified and targeted Productivity Challenges, employer leadership and engagement, collaborative solutions, a strong emphasis on testing new (and ideally innovative) approaches with an appetite for risk and co-creation between public and private investors.

### **The Productivity Challenges**

The UKFP funded five Productivity Challenges. Each Challenge was focused around a specific skills and workplace productivity challenge:

- Productivity Challenge 1 focused on designing solutions to the workforce challenges in the offsite construction industry, an example of issues faced in 'sunrise' industries
- Productivity Challenge 2 focused on improving leadership and management through supply chains and networked organisations
- Productivity Challenge 3 focused on improving progression pathways in the retail and hospitality industries
- Productivity Challenge 4 focused on enhancing skills for innovation management and commercialisation in the manufacturing sector
- Productivity Challenge 5 focused on developing leadership and entrepreneurship skills in small firms and the role of anchor institutes in supporting the development of small firms.

Each Challenge comprised a number of distinct projects (between 5 and 7), most of which were employer led and based on partnerships between different organisations or companies. Each Productivity Challenge was evaluated and links to the respective evaluation reports can be found in Chapter 9.

### **Learning from the Productivity Challenges**

The experience of the different Productivity Challenges generated a great deal of learning and evidence in relation to what works, and what doesn't, in enhancing skills and capabilities amongst the workforce within sectors and businesses where there are recognised barriers. A summary of the key common lessons across the five Challenges is provided below.

**Generating solutions:**

- Identifying the right problem was an important first step in developing solutions and making the case for change with businesses. Testing and learning is an important part of developing solutions, allowing end-users to identify elements that do not work, as well as highlighting gaps that need to be addressed
- The solutions need to be high quality and tailored to address the specific problem identified. These conditions apply, both for engaging end-users and employers, and in delivering solutions.

**Engaging employers and end-users:**

- Utilising existing networks and relationships, usually through face-to-face conversations, is a more efficient and effective means of engaging employers and wider stakeholders than 'cold' approaches
- Intermediaries and sector bodies can facilitate access to networks. Their non-commercial status can be useful for engaging employers as they are viewed as independent, non-competitive and operating on behalf of the sector or for social good
- Small firms face significant information and resource barriers to engagement. For practical reasons, sector initiatives also tended to be geographically focussed
- It is easier to engage employers and stakeholders, especially those with whom there is little previous relationship, with a product or solution that is tangible (e.g. a demo or prototype), rather than an idea
- The employers targeted by the UKFP are often not sure of their needs or the benefits to be gained from training, due to their lack of previous engagement. Therefore, they are more likely to engage if the initial offer is at low or no cost to employers, to enable them to participate with minimal risk or commitment
- Senior teams within employer organisations need to be engaged to ensure organisational buy-in and commitment to change, and middle managers need to be on board for effective implementation.

**Promoting collaboration:**

- Managers within organisations are critical in driving change and collaboration. They are able to put learning into action and cascade knowledge to other staff
- Effective promotion of collaboration requires sustained support from funders or other third party organisations to set up networking sessions, identify and highlight opportunities and provide introductions.

#### Sustainability and scalability:

- Securing sustainability and scalability of solutions requires a lead person or organisation to drive this and engage stakeholders across the wider industry
- The value of high profile employers and well-connected intermediaries in supporting projects and solutions to be sustainable was highlighted across all five Challenges
- There are a wide range of factors that impact on the sustainability of a project, including setting in place all of the right conditions cited above alongside strong project management
- Demonstrating the value of taking action is important to overcome barriers. Measuring baselines, tracking and assessing progress and reporting on this will support 'human stories' to garner wider engagement
- In part because they are not fully aware of their needs, businesses will underinvest or resist paying for skill development. Therefore, it is beneficial to attract participants by asking for a low level investment (or making the first stage free) for a fairly limited amount of support. Then, once participants experience the benefits of the solutions, they are more willing to increase their investment to gain further support. Public co-investment helped manage risk in the testing of pricing and marketing strategies for some projects.

#### Learning from the UK Futures Programme

The key learning from the delivery model and process of the UKFP are summarised below:

- The UKFP was successful in attracting new partners (stakeholders and employers) that UKCES did not engage previously. However, those who were less experienced in writing applications for funding may have benefited from additional support from UKCES in the application process. They were also not helped by the tight timescale for the market making phase and for submitting applications
- The objective of collaboration and co-creation was generally met. Evidence from the different Productivity Challenges showed that projects were collaborating with each other to some level through sharing information and joining resources. But collaboration and co-creation required a great deal of stimuli from the UKFP team. UKCES Relationship Managers were key to spotting opportunities, which often the projects alone would not have seen
- The objective of innovation was achieved to some level with projects testing solutions that were new to them, as they adapted elements into new contexts. However, the feature of employer-led projects may have led to less transformative innovation and risk taking to the fullest, preferring instead to focus on practical solutions to existing challenges that they faced

- The UKFP achieved high levels of engagement from UKCES staff, project teams and participants in the projects. Furthermore, the programme has been successful in engaging contributions from partners (both cash and in-kind), which demonstrated the commitment from the companies and other organisations that were engaged in the projects. That said, the time invested from UKCES staff was an under-estimated cost of the programme. Any future similar investment should take into consideration the time that is required to support this type of model.

#### **Lessons for future policy and programme delivery**

As set out above there has been a great deal of learning generated through the UKFP and messages for a variety of audiences: funders, policy makers, businesses, individuals and delivery organisations on how to implement such a programme and / or how to tackle some difficult barriers which contribute to skills and workplace productivity challenges.

UKFP has shown that a relatively small amount of public cash investment can stimulate private investment and changed behaviour when supported by strong employer leadership and co-creation support from public sector project managers. Across the Challenges, UKFP focused on difficult barriers, to ensure the Programme added value to existing initiatives. In so doing, it highlighted the important role Governments can play in supporting businesses to address these barriers, through information exchange and risk-sharing. This is particularly the case for addressing the long-term issue of management and leadership development in the UK and the management of UK workplaces, core themes of UKFP.



## A4. BAM Paper from a Rational Managerialist to a Reflective Practitioner

### **From a Rational Managerialist to a Reflective Practitioner**

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#### **Key words**

Philosophy

Subjectivism

Reflexivity

Motivation

#### **Abstract**

This development paper is a reflection on a DBA journey: the starting point and context; DBA motivation; philosophy and reflections. It is informed by a DBA Study that seeks to inform the development of SME business programmes offered by business schools unpinned by the current gaps in the relevance to SMEs of these programmes.

An initial intent to apply a Rational Managerialist rules-based research approach evolved into a qualitative, hermeneutic study undertaken through a reflexive practitioner lens.

We ask the question "why?" and explore how we can inform our research by reflecting on, our nature of being, experience and the emotive search for a philosophical label. We reflect on how we can derive confidence and authority in philosophical frameworks and how in doing so we can seek to unsettle our view of the world and start to answer our question "why"?

#### **Introduction**

This development paper is a reflection on a DBA journey: the starting point and context; DBA motivation; Philosophy and reflections.

We are the question "why?" and explore how we can inform our research by reflecting on, our nature of being, experience, how we can derive confidence and authority in philosophical frameworks and how in doing so we can seek to unsettle our view of the world.

## From a Rational Managerialist to a Reflective Practitioner

This paper is born from a DBA study that seeks to inform the Development of SME business programmes offered by Business Schools underpinned by the current gaps in the relevance to SMEs of these programmes.

An initial intent to apply a Rational Managerialist rules-based research approach evolved into a qualitative, hermeneutic study undertaken through a reflexive practitioner lens.

### Philosophy

“Subjectivist research is always at least partly about the researcher; the researcher is not separate from the research. By adopting a subjectivist position the notions of the possibility of a neutral engagement with data and the emergence of a transcendental truth are explicitly rejected. Whatever emerges from the research is inevitably tainted by the researcher’s a priori understandings. This is often a major concern for (researchers) who can’t easily see how they can show the worth of subjectivist research in organisational and business studies, a field dominated by positivism” (Couch, et al. 2016)

From our experience (long serving business practitioners and researchers), the initial approach is often that, which is known and familiar. Here, we have a business practitioner, undertaking DBA research that seeks to inform business practice from a rules-based rational managerial perspective; a familiar, attractive and dominant space. There are no shocks that unsettle thinking or direction of travel; the philosophy, order, method and journey is safe...

... now he unsettles this. The motivation starts with the question “why?” instead of “what?”; it introduces intrinsic reflections on subjectivist philosophical considerations. It is a less familiar path;

Our researcher shares some insights;

... I feel confusion and less certainty; two reasons; first, when I reflect on philosophical texts; I see some of myself and can find interesting features that could inform my study in most of them. Then, the language used and the context in which they are often presented. As Gergen says, one word can mean different things to different people (1992). Take the word “pragmatism”; In my life and business, I look at situations pragmatically every day, however, pragmatism in a philosophical context is different and unfamiliar.

What does then subjectivist research represent? Does unfamiliarity translate into harder, more complex, more difficult to do and less acceptable research? In part, for us, it represents, the researcher and their a priori understandings and nature of being; a researcher’s assumptions arise from many influences; their lives, social circumstances, personal experiences; all of which, sit at the heart of subjectivist research.

So, how can subjectivist business research be designed so the journey and emergent insights add value to the receivers? Reflecting on Couch et al.’s (2016) observations; “In our experience, a non-academic organisation will listen to a consensus based authoritative piece of research as closely as they will to a “truth” based on questionnaires. Our task as researchers is to be faithful to our own convictions, to understand and pay due homage to academic traditions, and to claim no more than we think justified. If we get our research question, philosophy, methodology and conclusions sensibly aligned, we make that result as

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likely as we can. To do that, we must start with our own motivations” and ask not “what are we doing?” but with “why are we doing it?”.

As Johnson and Duberley (2000) and Crotty (1998) all advocate; to achieve this, it is necessary to ensure that the research question, philosophy, methods and conclusions form part of aligned and consistent argument. For accessibility, researchers should be clear about what they are doing and express these in everyday terms Couch (2007).

To do this, we consider the work of Cole et al. (2011), and also suggest that the researcher’s reflexivity on the motivations that are driving their research decisions should be looked at; this, to facilitate a strong grasp on the research and then used to provide the golden thread that runs throughout the study.

#### **Reflexivity - why “why?” is important**

The research interest here has arisen from professional, personal experience and subjective views of the world but until the “why?” of the research is clear, convincing authoritative research may not be possible.

“Why?” is the domain of the reflexive researcher (Alvesson and Sköldbörg, 2009; Cole et al 2011), and is achieved through reflecting through the researcher’s lens on the purpose and the possible philosophical and methodological paths. This, so an understanding of the position of the research and the motivation driving it, is clear. The researcher’s aim is to reflect on and challenge their world view and be ready to be surprised by what emerges from this.

There are of course many possible answers to the “why?” question and questions, such as, “Where does my affinity lie?”, and “Why do I think this?”.

As Johnson and Duberley (2003) observe, “... management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher’s own habitus. Indeed, it would seem that epistemic reflexivity must relate to how a researcher’s own social location affected the forms and outcomes of research as well as entailing acceptance of the conviction that there will always be more than one valid account of any research”.

As Cole et al (2011) observes, “... the aim is that as a minimum, as researching practitioners we can hope to become more consciously reflexive. That is, as researchers we can see the importance in noticing and criticising our own pre-understandings and to examine the impact of these on how we engage with the social world of management. This form of self-comprehension requires, as Johnson and Duberley (2000) argue, researchers to “challenge their epistemological pre-understandings” (pp.5) and to explore “alternative possible commitments”.

Couch et al (2016) agrees, “... it’s not just exploring what’s there, in the researcher’s mind, but it is also about challenging oneself and testing one’s understanding against other positions and views”.

We share some insights here;

Rational Managerialism has been described by Locke and Spender (2011) as the expressions of a special group embedded ruthlessly and systematically in organisations.

## From a Rational Managerialist to a Reflective Practitioner

A clear option at the start of my DBA journey, given SMEs, where decisions are taken without complete knowledge or information, are my subject focus. This was my philosophy with, as Diefenback (2013) observes, a strong belief in the value of professional managers and the concepts and methods they use, linked to hierarchical structures and organisations.

I sought, however, encouraged by my mentors, to consider different philosophical positions, to challenge my thinking against different views, and to identify where I might have affinity or otherwise in the context of my research. This was an uncomfortable experience but in persevering with it, it became a fascinating and rewarding journey of reflexion, not just around the research focus but around understanding my motivation and my thinking as a researcher.

Working with Crotty's (1998) models, my philosophical position and approach moved into unfamiliar territory; from rational managerialist to reflective practitioner; from positivist to interpretivist; from a quantitative and qualitative mixed methods approach, to being qualitative in a hermeneutic tradition using interviews instead of questionnaires.

Whilst Crotty was an early academic guardian for me, I found his visual presentations channelled my thinking in a definitive way that was uncomfortable. My experience of business models has shown me that thinking and learning does not run on linear lines in this way. I was, however, encouraged by Crotty (1998) who also observes, it is not where one's research starts or finishes, it is about having a strong thread running through the research that brings the story to life.

To illustrate, I share my considerations around Critical Realism. Throughout my working life I have always critically analysed situations in a pragmatic way. I agree with Trigg (1980), that things that cannot be observed or measured can still be real, and also with Bhaskar (1978), who says that critical realism allows for critique through observation. He goes on to say that while some things cannot be observed they can be shown to be real by retroductive argument. In my study, my aim is to combine my own core beliefs whilst seeking to identify the real intransitive essence of casual powers that trigger action so I have some affinity with this position.

Reed (1997) provides a different radical managerialism perspective and suggests the critical realist asks what consciously motivates behaviour and how can this be skilfully and opaquely manipulated. This suggests that individuals can manipulate situations, leading to individuals doing things they would not naturally do as a result; not a view I have affinity with.

Another example; my interest in post-modernism and the consideration that encourages different views, assessing each of these and their relative strengths in order to move away from order, DeCock (1998). I find affinity with and Clegg's (1990) view that this explicitly recognises the ever-increasing speed of change in social, economic and technical fields, although, I question whether or not this takes account of some forms of extremism as is seen by the current world swing away from conventional politics. Berg's (1989) post-modernist view that the truth or falseness of a statement does not matter if it could be acceptable, saleable or valid to a large audience, is interesting,

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although from a practical business perspective, I question the sustainability of actions arising from its application in practice or the suggestion that language is all there is.

Cole et al (2014), encourages researchers, "...critically and reflexively to evaluate how philosophical issues and their own emotions and feeling about the research affect the relationship between data and theory, the overall design of research, the visibility of this and hence the authenticity and trustworthiness of research outcomes." To do this, they suggest it is, "... worth looking at development and personal interaction of the researcher ... to encourage reflexivity and ...visibility of this..."

For me, I found Hermeneutic philosophical features aligned most with my intent. As Alvesson and Deetz note, "... recognising the interpretative nature of research means no data, except possibly those on trivial matters, are viewed as unaffected by the construction of the researcher..." (2000 pp. 113); and for me, as McAuley observes, "...the researcher is not looking at the subject alone; there is also the position of the interpreter as the scene unfolds, and in the process of interpretation" (2004 pp.194). Earlier in 1985, McAuley considers that a Hermeneutic position embraces intervention by the researcher leading to the subsequent facilitation of change if practical aspects from research are to be realised. One of the most valuable and relevant reflections is that of recognising that I cannot ignore my own experience and deep-rooted opinions; these, as noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), form part of my considerations when developing my research questions and interpreting my research material.

#### In summary ...

Reflecting on my motivations for the research and asking "why?", has influenced not only what I do, and how I do it but also, the considerations this has had on my observations and conclusions. There is more to do to develop this paper and provide more in-depth insights into this journey from a Radical Managerialist researcher to a Reflective Practitioner. As Couch et al (2016) observes, it is the thought process driven by the motivations to conduct the research that is fundamental to subjectivist research. This is not optional.

We acknowledge that there is no one way to approach research. Here we are seeking to provide some insights into reflexive research. We advocate starting with the "why?" and letting that inform and guide the journey.

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## A5. Interviewees Approval

Glyn Cartwright's Research Interviews Participants Information Sheet.

You have within the last 3 years attended a business programme written and delivered by the Consultancy Academy. You have also kindly agreed to be interviewed by Glyn Cartwright and reflect on your experience and give your opinions on the process and the impact of attending the programme.

Detailed below are some key details of this interview –

- The interview will be recorded and then typed up as an accurate record of the discussion. Once typed up the recording of the interview will be deleted as will the written copy once Glyn's DBA is completed
- The interview will be anonymous, in so much as you will be allocated a number e.g. D1, D2...
- Relevant quotations may be taken from the interview and included in Glyn's DBA
- There will be no reference made to either yourself or your organisation in the DBA
- You can stop the interview at any time or ask that none of the opinions already given is used
- You will be asked to sign below, having read the information detailed above that you are happy to proceed with the interview and for Glyn Cartwright to use the content of the interviews within his DBA, whilst complying with the points detailed above.

I agree to be interviewed by Glyn Cartwright, and for any information I provide to be used in his DBA; subject to the information detailed above.

Signed  
Name of Delegate  
Date

Signed Glyn Cartwright