**ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP**

**Questioning relevance and impact in contemporary Entrepreneurship/SME research**

**Guest Editorial**

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The aim of this Special Issue is to make a significant contribution to understanding the theory and practice of engaged scholarship, by engaged scholarship we mean “collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to co-produce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world” (Van de Van, 2006, p.80). Such a definition draws attention towards the co-constructed nature of knowledge which has relevance, by creating space for interaction between the academic and practitioner, creating the opportunity for knowledge and understanding to be co-created and enacted into practice, this space facilitates the ability to question one another and gain mutual understanding by directly bringing together methods of inquiry and practice.

Building on the current growth of interest and literature in this area, our aim is to move the field on in terms of how engaged scholarship is both theorised and practiced and in so doing, to produce useful theory that enables engaged scholarship to develop as a practice in small firm’s research. Our focus is related to *conceptualisation* of the field and the *dynamics* of implementation, which all too often remains implicit within extant studies in Entrepreneurship/SME research. The current interest in engaged scholarship and its application to small firms has brought to the surface a range of important questions for scholars, policy makers and practitioners. As a consequence there is a growing need to cultivate;

1. Innovative research approaches which address social science questions that make a difference to practitioner communities
2. Engaged impact – What is it and how do we do it? Should scholarly research influence and support practice?
3. Policy engagement – How do we marry the divergent world of academics, policy makers and small firms?

The increasing importance of “lived practices” in entrepreneurial related studies have sought to pose several questions and challenges for researchers/scholars in the field. These changes require the research community as a whole to seek out new methods of engaging with the role of practice through the formulation of more applied research. One particular issue concerns the role of impact, in terms of how scholarly research can directly influence and support lived practice, an issue which has become a contentious point of debate amongst academic/practitioner communities, (Ruona and Gilley, 2009; Short, Keefer and Stone, 2009).

These questions present a number of challenges to HEIs and researchers alike, ranging from deeply rooted values, beliefs and theoretical positions in regards to the nature and purpose of Entrepreneurship/SME as applied fields of research and to the challenges of determining what measure of impact such research can have on the practitioners themselves, the organisations and wider society. The image of engaged scholarship promotes the need for the entrepreneurship/small business management scholarly and practitioner community to co-create knowledge which can seek to advance entrepreneurial practice while continuing to drive the orientation of the co-production of knowledge creation, (Pettigrew, 2003). It is these practices of critical entrepreneurial scholarship which can significantly add relevance and rigour towards what can be viewed as impactful research.

The contentious relationship between theory and its application/relevance to practice continues to pose a sense of uncertainty around how Entrepreneurship/SME research can have impact; the debate has been a central issue in social science research for a number of years, (Beyer and Trice, 1982; Starkey and Tempest 2005; Rynes, 2007; Huggins et al, 2008). This debate has drawn specific attention to the need for applied research in entrepreneurial scholarship, which is more reflective of lived practice. Appreciating and valuing the importance of impact is of profound importance to university business schools, not only in terms of strategic positioning, but as a means of measuring research value. The issue concerning divergence between researcher and practitioner, has heavily influenced how the academic world views research as having “rigour” and how practitioners view research as having “relevance”. The need to reach a balance between practitioners and academics’ expectations in terms of delivering research which is focused towards achieving academic rigour and application to practice, which is both meaningful and relatable, is of significant importance for both communities, (Huggins et al, 2008; Ram and Trehan 2010 ).

The research landscape has and is becoming more dynamic, the realisation that research funding is becoming more competitive, and the requirement of HEI to demonstrate research impact as a measurable unit of performance. The national concordat for public engagement, Research Councils UK {RCUK}, (2010) suggest that engaged research holds value to the principles of inducing co-operative, co-constructed, cross-fertilising expert/public synergies. In this sense the role of HEIs in building collaborative partnerships, as a funding mechanism, is now viewed as a critical mechanism through which potential research impact is both influenced and made explicit. In this sense HEI/SME engagement is not simply a nebulous exercise in building collaborative partnerships but has now a far more significant instrumental value, regarding how knowledge and skills are developed through research practice from which research impact claims may emerge. Through such partnerships HEIs can play a significant role in the re-development, re-skilling and regeneration of entrepreneurial and enterprise related activities through the co-creation of emergent, but equally beneficial, research agendas, (Cox and Taylor, 2006; Coenen, 2007).

Critical examination is now required around the nature and role of engaged scholarship at a time when university business schools are planning their research strategies. Researchers are encouraged to become more critically reflexive and engage with real life practice in terms of research findings and outputs, ([Pettigrew, 2001](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00769.x/full#b27); Watson et al., 2011), becoming more accountable scholars, where transparency and application to practice is so critical (Watermeyer, 2011). The need for HEIs to better understand and make sense of impact development and advance its application to practice is of significance. For example the “mode 2” (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998), debate has given focus towards particular modes of analyses, such as practice based research, evidenced-based management, collaborative inquiry, action research, and researcher reflexivity in qualitative based research as a means of engaging with the lived experience, (Rousseau, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007; Bartunek, 2007; Eden and Huxham, 2006; Cunliffe, 2011; Nicolini, 2009). This debate has further sought to illustrate the need to re-assess current research practices through the promotion of, what Van de Ven (2007) called “engaged scholarship”. The increasing emphasis on academics evidencing, in meaningful and purposeful way, (measurable), the value and contribution of their work to public and private domains, requires the development of a new set of values for academic work where engagement is now considered to be the singular method of impact articulation and the means by which applied knowledge is mobilised.

The articles in this Special Issue address ways of rethinking engaged scholarship through the evaluation and critique, empirical and experiential observations and theoretical development. Thus, for this Special Issue we build on the theory of engaged scholarship with the aim of contributing to future ways to conceptualize and make explicit connections between both new models for engaged scholarship and ways of extending existing ones and they provide suggestions on directions for future research on engaged scholarship.

**Outline of the Special Issue**

The first article in this Special Issue is Paul Edwards’ *Critical Performativity and the Small Firm: Challenges and Prospects,* addresses three key themes: the nature of a ‘radical pluralist’ view of engagement; the distinct challenges in a small firm context; and concludes by highlighting the idea of engaging directly with management practice while retaining a strongly critical social. Engagement is both desirable and feasible, though large challenges remain, notably the demands of small-firm owners and the requirements of close engagement over a period of time. In the second article, *engaged scholarship in small business research: Grappling with Van der Ven's diamond model in retrospect to inform future practice*, Fiona Whitehurst and Paul Richter explicate the dynamics of initiating and implementing engaged scholarship within a small business development context. They depict Van de Ven’s (2007) diamond model to elucidate critical reflection of their research process. The article concludes by highlighting the opportunities and tensions associated with the lived experience of engaged scholarship. Ainurul Rosli, Muthu de Silva, Federica Rossi and Nick Yip in the third article *Engaged scholarship and new business opportunities: how do SMEs capitalise on their engagement with academics?* draw on empirical work to offer new contributions to our thinking about the role of SMEs engagement under the Knowledge Transfer Partnership programme in the UK. The article illuminates the role engaged scholarship can play in developing new business opportunities and how SMEs who have adopted interaction practices, and made use of boundary spanners, have capitalised on their engagement with academics in order to explore new business opportunities beyond achieving instrumental engagement outcomes. In the final article, *Engaged or Activist Scholarship? Feminist Reflections on Philosophy, Accountability and Transformational Potential,* Julia Rouse and Helen Woolnough make an important contribution in advancing the field of engaged scholarship by drawing on ideas from feminist critical realist ontology to explore Activist Scholarship. The authors argue that Engaged Scholarship is incompatible with feminist critical realism and propose a critical engaged/activist method to address the limitations of current institutionalized approaches to engaged scholarship.

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