

2011 UNIVERSITY ANNUAL LEARNING & TEACHING CONFERENCE
Changing Times: Refreshing the Learning & Teaching Strategy

Theme: A university for the region

13:25 - 14:05

**The strangeness of the SME - overcoming a culture clash
to promote co-operation**

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“The Learning and Teaching Strategy should explore ways of working with SMEs for mutual, regional benefit.”

Abstract:

“SMEs have become increasingly important in our society as providers of employment opportunities and key players for the well being of local and regional communities... they are the backbone of our society.” Gunter Verhuegen (Vice President of the European Commission); Enterprise and Industry paper: Putting Small Businesses First - 2008:3

Combined, large and medium sized enterprises represent a mere 1.3% of all EU enterprises. Small enterprises constitute 7.3% and micro enterprises represent a colossal 91.5%. Furthermore, they account for over half of the EU private sector jobs and are rightly described as “the real giants of the European economy.” (Enterprise and Industry 2008:7).

Yet, in spite of such commentary on the hard facts, there appears relatively little academic interest in micro/small business strategy as though the two worlds were absolute strangers, operating perhaps under different laws, constraints and theories.

Indeed, a micro/small business operator wishing to find academic models to work to will struggle if that search starts with the standard web portal. A paper entitled “*What’s in it for me? A strategy for engaging small and micro business operators in learning*” (Innovation and Business Skills, Australia) suggests that the problem is *mutually* generated. For whilst academics might perhaps be corrected for their own myopia toward the sectors, the small business operator is similarly found to have little interest.

“The low level of participation in formal training by small and micro business operators has been well documented. (What’s In It For Me? 2009:3)

This paper is written from the standpoint of someone who has practically and academically straddled the gap and continues to successfully operate within both worlds. The paper will begin to reveal the extent of strangeness and why efforts should be made on both sides to engage.

This paper does not warn of dire consequence for mutual estrangement. Rather, it suggests the enrichment which might arise from a learning and teaching strategy which embraces the cultural novelty of the SME and its place as regional societal ‘backbone’ (Verhuegan,2008). As Larkin suggests: “Always it is by bridges that we live.”