

The relative growth and significance of Small Businesses (SMEs) to the economy is clear as they account for over 99% of the UK's registered businesses and approximately 52% of UK's turnover. Furthermore, since the 1980's there has been a spectacular increase in the number of small businesses created and a remarkable revival in their role in the UK economy. This trend is mirrored in the West Midlands region where the number of SMEs continues to grow. SMEs are now more important than large firms in their contributions to employment and business turnover and have become a formidable business presence (Curran and Blackburn, 1994). Arguably, this is largely due to changes in technology, consumer demand, and the drive for efficiency and flexibility, which has in turn led to restructuring and downsizing of large enterprises and the entry of new smaller firms. SMEs are an important audience for educators since they provide a source of innovation, in new products, services and work practices. A recent US study indicated that small businesses create over 50% of all innovations and that contribution is still growing

Established in 2010, the Business Solutions Centre (BSC) managed by the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) responds to reports such as the BIS 2010 'A strategy for sustainable growth' and Lord Browne's independent review 2010 'Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education in the UK'. In 2010 the University sought strategic partners for its work, which was further refined following Professor Sir Tim Wilson's 2012 'Review of Business-University Collaboration'. Our 'one-stop-shop' partnership is expanding regionally and internationally, whilst serving emerging/existing SME businesses in the city and the wider Black Country region.

Although there is a general consensus that SMEs are a vital part of the UK economy, relatively few develop to become large employers. This may in part be due to SMEs not getting sufficient learning support. However, this is changing. Small firms are seeking greater assistance to develop their knowledge base and take their business forward by identifying factors leading to growth and success (McLarty, 2005). In this respect, the role of the University as an enabler is of pivotal importance. With a plethora of SME support being provided (Technology Strategy Board research (2009) demonstrated over 220 support programmes available) the 'knowledge transfer space' suffers from significant confusion and 'white-noise' due to many voices trying to reach the same target audience. Additional regional research (undertaken by SQW, commissioned by UoW) indeed showed businesses were unsure which competing provider to contact when looking for help to grow, develop and finance their business. In response to this need the University brought together valuable, but often disparate activities of four major organisations:

1. FE College
2. Chamber of Commerce
3. Local Authority
4. University of Wolverhampton

The collaborative nature of the Centre delivers a comprehensive raft

of expertise and services which can be easily accessed by businesses. Employees of each of the Centre's four partners offer all packages of support available within the partnership. The seven members of the Centre's management team are based at the University and drawn from all partners.

The objectives of the University's partnership Business Solutions Centre are:

- \* single point of access for business support
- \* the successful transfer of knowledge into SME's to accelerate innovation
- \* customer friendly front-end to its four partners' services
- \* providing customer-led enquiry handling and solutions engagement
- \* all partners pro-actively promote awareness of each other's services
- \* Developing sustainable long-term relationships with business.

The strategic importance of the Centre to the University is multi-faceted.

- \* The Centre creates income for the University from its engagement with industry. In 2012 income was at £3m, this is projected to double in 2013 and treble in 2014 compared to 2010 revenue streams. The University does not consider that it would have risen this high had it continued with its former lone approach via its former Competitiveness Centre, successful as it was. The annual income is targeted to increase as our global, as well as local, reach develops.

- \* The Centre enables the University to get its intellectual property out into a wider audience in the business community. The local business community is identified to be pre-innovation level, and thus more difficult for the University to engage with alone.

- \* Through initiatives such as the Caparo Innovation Centre (itself a partnership with a major global diversification of industries), the University's engagement via the Business Solutions Centre enables work with businesses and investors to develop new products and technologies, taking a stake in the outcome and engaging its academics with SMEs - all in long-term relationships.

- \* The University has a commitment in its employability agenda to find opportunities for its students to gain meaningful work placements and employment. The Centre's interface with industry enhances these opportunities and has led to 20% more placements.

- \* It creates new opportunities for our academics to work with and in industry so that engagement is first hand and more likely to lead to long-term 'for business life' relationships that enable introduction to a wider range of support. Our latest appointment by the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership requires us to place academics in micro and small SMEs to work alongside them in developing their skills for growth - something previously done by a raft of business consultants under initiatives such as Business Link.

- \* It serves the University's place as an economic driver for the region.

More widely, the University's relationships with UKTI and overseas

academia have been enhanced by its partnership in the Business Solutions Centre, leading to overseas institutions and business looking to it to provide an exemplar for their own development. Across the UK, other universities such as Manchester Metropolitan, Teesside, Bristol and Hertfordshire have turned to the University and acknowledged the exemplar status of its Business Solutions Centre as a model for their own future business engagement.