

# 'An exploration of impact & engaged scholarship among DBA students'

## Introduction

A key learning outcome of the DBA at Nottingham Business School (NBS) is for students to reflect and report on how their study impacts upon their professional role, industry and wider society. The emphasis on impact is in-line with the requirements of the UK research agenda and is a new addition to the learning outcomes of the recently re-validated NBS DBA. More generally, this reflects a trend in other DBAs and Professional Doctorates which have started to stress the importance of engaged scholarship and impact in their course design. However, defining impact and how the notion of impact might fit with engaged scholarship within a Professional Doctorate context is under-researched despite HEFCE (2015) defining impact as '*an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia*'. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that DBA course leaders have found it difficult to apply the notion of impact and engaged scholarship in a meaningful way. This matters since a key aspiration of DBA and professional doctorate students is to influence practice through research-informed endeavour. .

## Literature Review

Research undertaken in business schools has to meet the dual criteria of being both rigorous in academic terms and relevant in relation to the conditions in which it is used (Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007). This has led to calls for different ways of measuring impact which do not only emphasise the need for identifying a gap in academic knowledge, but also overcome the so-called *knowledge transfer problem* (from theory into practice). Engaged scholarship is the term used to describe this process of, 'negotiation and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in a learning community' (Van de Ven, 2007: 7) that results in the dissemination of knowledge into professional practice.

To facilitate this transfer process, students need to be taught how to become engaged scholars and this can be achieved by guiding students through a developmental process as outlined in Action Regulation Theory. Action Regulation Theory is a cognitive theory of learning which leads to 'goal-orientated behaviour', by the learner moving through a series of steps in order to bridge the gap between cognition and action (Frese and Zapf, 1994). By following a process of learning by doing, individuals are able to see how abstract cognitions can be translated into operational levels (Glaub et al., 2014). For Pettigrew (2001) these action steps help to resolve the division between theory and practice producing a deeper form of research which meets both the standards of academic rigour and those of practice. To explore the perceptions DBA students have of how relevant their DBA studies are to their professional practice, this paper maps the beginning of a cohort of doctoral students' journeys by addressing the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do students believe that their academic work will impact their professional practice and vice versa?
- 2) In what ways do students perceive that their research will impact on their professional practice and vice versa?

## Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, longitudinal approach to data collection and focuses on students' interpretations whilst taking account of the real-life context in which the participants work and research (Bryman, 1989). As the study is over an extended time period, the research intends to map how the students' interpretations and experiences of 'impact' and engaged scholarship may change as they become more embedded in the research process. Data will be collected from the same 17 students in the same cohort, each year for the duration of their course (4 years). This cohort is an international cohort, representing a number of industries and all students have senior roles in their organisation or are management consultants. Students are required to complete a qualitative, open-ended questionnaire which asks them to comment on how academic work generally might impact professional practice and vice versa, how they might collaborate with different stakeholders to ensure their work has impact and the extent to which they think their research will inform their own professional practice. Data has already been collected at two points – 2015 and 2016 and it is the findings from these two points that are discussed here. Data has been analysed using thematic analysis (Flick, 2006).

## Preliminary findings

Most students were of the view that academia does have the potential to influence practice, showing some interest in the notion of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) with only one student seeing the causal direction as coming *from* practice *to* academia asserting; "The profession will inform academia". Students seemed to attribute the anticipated failure to achieve a *relational scholarship of integration* (Bartunek, 2007) to a lack of interest on the part of some academics or the drive by some scholars "to develop a new theory" not to engage with practitioners. Many participants outlined their plans to engage with key organisational stakeholders showing that they are commencing the 'goal development' phase of Action Regulation Theory (Frese and Zapf, 1994), although most expressed this in terms of social capital accrual as opposed to identifying specific tasks and steps towards a clearly articulated goal.

In terms of the impact that a DBA might have, students at this early stage feel that this would be twofold; an improvement in their own interpersonal skills (e.g. social capital accrual, leadership, organisation etc.) and an improvement in organisational efficiency or profit (or both). One respondent commented that the barriers to encouraging an integration between theory and practice are, "mutual trust and understanding" between the different stakeholders, including the supervisor and student. The key to fostering this may lie, as Bartunek (2007) argues in overcoming mutual suspicions about the value and relevance of theory versus practice.

## Conclusions

These preliminary findings indicate that students are starting to explore the mutual benefits of a participatory approach to research, albeit with more students feeling that professional practice will learn lessons from academia, rather than the other way around. From an impact perspective, students can see a personal development benefit for themselves, but they also anticipate improvements in organisational efficiency as a result of the outcomes of their research. The next stage of this research project will be to start to track in more detail how the students move through

the steps outlined in Action Regulation Theory in seeking to close the gap between theory and practice.

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### **Speakers' Biographies:**

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