

THE UK SMALL BUSINESS ACADEMIC COMMUNITY AND ITS PUBLICATION CHANNELS: PERCEPTIONS AND RATINGS

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ABSTRACT¹

The dissemination of research results has always been an important activity for academics (e.g. Truscot, 1951). The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has intensified interest in the process of dissemination in most discipline areas and has created considerable controversy regarding the status of different publication channels (e.g. Harley and Lowe, 1998). The small business research area is no exception.

This research provides a profile of the UK small business research community, it explores their perceptions regarding research and establishes the esteem that various publication channels are held. A questionnaire was sent to the 208 researchers on the Institute of Small Business Affairs/Small Business Research Trust database and 98 questionnaires were returned representing a 47% response rate.

The community was found to be more stable and mature than expected, but small business researchers held other research areas in greater esteem and most regarded themselves as empiricists rather than theorists. This has led to the area lacking a clearly articulated theoretical foundation and to concepts being imported from mainstream management. The implications of these results are explored for the next RAE and for the future of small business research.

INTRODUCTION

The dissemination of the results of research effort has always been an important activity for those in the academic community (e.g. Truscot, 1951)². However, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)³ has underlined the need to publish and now dissemination has, for many, shifted from being an important activity to the most important activity reaching almost feverish heights (e.g. Harley and Lowe, 1998).

More specifically the RAE has raised interest generally in the process of dissemination, the nature of academic communities and highlighted the variable status of different publication channels. Anecdotal evidence from conversations with colleagues, academic research (e.g. Harley and Lowe, 1998; Taylor, 1994) and letters in the *Times Higher* (e.g. McClintock, 1996; Thomas, 1996) suggests there is considerable controversy in most discipline areas regarding the RAE process generally and the ranking approach in particular. The small business research area is no exception.

The study of smaller enterprises, as an area, is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. Although it has origins into the 1970s⁴, it could be argued that not until the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) initiative on small firms (see Storey, 1994) did small business research achieve some recognition and respectability as a separate area for studies. For example, in earlier RAEs, there was no member on the business and management panel (unit of assessment 43) with special responsibility for research on small firms. However, in the 1996 exercise a panel member was nominated with small business expertise.

The aim of this research is to profile the small business research community, to explore some of their perceptions regarding research and to establish the esteem that various publication channels are held. The results of this research will be of particular interest to academics who are involved in the RAE next time. Perhaps more significantly the results provide an indication of the nature of research dissemination within the small business academic community, which has implications for academics and policy makers.

MEASURING PUBLICATION CHANNEL ESTEEM

A recognised method of establishing the reputation of publication channels is to review the number of citation events (e.g. Romano and Ratnatunga, 1996; Pilkington and Liston-Heyes, 1999; Watkins, 1995)⁵. Citation studies in mainstream management have become popular in the past ten years with most areas now having been investigated including: accounting (Beattie and Ryan, 1989), operations management (Pilkington and Liston-Heyes, 1999), strategy (Frank *et al*, 1990), marketing (Heischmidt and Gorden, 1993) and organisational behaviour (Culnan *et al*, 1990).

The small business area has also been investigated, by various authors, using citation counting approaches, one of the earliest being by Brockhaus (1988) who looked at how much academic research influenced government reports. More recently Romano and Ratnatunga (1996) assessed the number of citation events in six 'core' small business journals between 1986 and 1992. A similar approach was taken by Watkins (1995) when he reviewed the citation events of papers from ten years of the UK based Institute of Small Business Affairs National Small Firms Policy and Research Conference. Béchard (1997) looked at the "field

of entrepreneurship" by reviewing the citation events in 167 entrepreneurial articles from five small business journals.

Certainly, citation events provide some form of measure of the esteem with which various publication channels are held by academic peers (e.g. Garfield, 1979 cited in Watkins, 1995). However, a number of problems can exist with such approaches, which are after all only a proxy measure of esteem.

First, citation events can become a rather self-fulfilling process. Publications where citation events are counted may have an increased chance of being cited simply because authors are more likely to send articles to publications they know well and to which they have easy access. Watkins' (1995) findings perhaps illustrate this self-reinforcing cycle. He counted the citation events in papers from the ISBA National Small Firms Policy and Research Conference, which is an appropriate place to review as it is the longest established and largest UK small business conference attracting over two hundred delegates each year. He was able to provide some helpful commentary on UK small business research, but one of his findings, namely that the ISBA National Small Firms Policy and Research Conference (papers and edited books) was itself one of the most cited publication sources, appears circular.

Second, there may be a bias towards theoretical articles rather than empirical. Romano and Ratnatunga's (1996) research seems to support this notion, as theoretical articles were the most cited. This may be because theoretical articles are often more generic and less country specific than empirical articles. It may also give them more chance of being cited in international journals. Also theoretical articles often provide useful foundation material for empirical studies and are therefore cited. As a result, theoretical based articles may receive higher citations, but this may not be a valid measure of their level of esteem.

Third, Romano and Ratnatunga (1996) cite May (1967) to suggest that some "popular" authors (and therefore publication sources) may enjoy a "halo effect" which leads to them being highly cited. Indeed, Watkin's (1995) suggests that some small business research has achieved "iconic status" where citation has become "little more than a ritual activity" (page 64). Fourth, some articles will be highly cited because researchers disagree with the findings. Finally, citation events in international journals may not be a good proxy measure for the esteem that journals hold within the UK, especially when there may be some level of ethnocentricity. For example, Pilkington and Liston-Heyes (1999) found that North American and European authors exhibited very different patterns of citation.

A more valid and direct approach would be to ask the academic peers themselves. MacMillan (1993) has conducted the only opinion survey on small business journals. This was a rather restricted survey of 'leading scholars', which concentrated on US based academics and therefore has little to say about the UK. Researchers are understandably reluctant to undertake more extensive surveys as they are resource consuming and it is difficult to define the limits of the academic research community in many disciplines. Fortunately, a database of active small business researchers in the UK is periodically produced. The most recent was compiled on behalf of ISBA and the Small Business Research Trust (SBRT) by Kingston University. This database is a compilation of the research activities and outputs of attendees at the ISBA National Small Firms Policy and Research Conference. This was compiled by a questionnaire to these named individuals who were also encouraged to give copies to colleagues in the small business area who were not mailed

directly. As such, the database is the best available listing of small business researchers in the UK.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The research reported here is based on a questionnaire that was sent to the 208 researchers on the ISBA/SBRT database. This direct approach not only had the advantage of addressing the problems identified with using citation events as a proxy measure, but also provided the opportunity to profile UK small business researchers and to ask them their opinion of dissemination related issues. 98 usable questionnaires were received, 78 from the first survey and a further 20 after reminder letters were sent. This represents a 47% response rate.

There is always a concern with surveys of this type that the non-respondents may be different in some significant way from the responding group. Following Hussey and Hussey's (1997) advice, table 1 compares the profile of first respondents with the second respondents to see if there are any important differences. This provides a proxy measure of the profile of non-respondents compared with respondents. This Table shows that the first and second respondent groups are remarkably similar, suggesting that the respondents are representative of the whole population of UK small business researchers (as defined by the ISBA/SBRT database).

| Characteristic | First Responding Group | Second Responding Group |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Percentage who describe small business as their main research area | 69% | 70% |
| Average years publishing research | 7.9 years | 6.6 years |
| Percentage who view themselves as qualitative researchers | 43% | 40% |
| Percentage who view themselves as quantitative researchers | 17% | 15% |
| Percentage who view themselves as mixed methods researchers | 39% | 45% |
| N= | 78 | 20 |

Table 1. Comparison of first and second respondents

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information in three key areas. First, the profile of respondents, including:

- How they describe their main research area
- How long they have been publishing research
- How they would classify their research

Second, their opinion on various research related issues, including:

- Reasons for disseminating research
- Aspects of the research assessment exercise (RAE)
- Comparison of small business research area against other areas

Third, the esteem which various publication channels were held. The objective was to achieve as representative a list of small business publication channels as possible so as to address the criticism of a self-fulfilling process discussed above. Romano and Ratnatunga's (1996) citation analysis of small enterprise research provided a good starting point. They reviewed a sample of 725 articles and approximately 16,720 citations from the Journal of Small Business Management, International Small Business Journal, Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Journal of Business Venturing, Small Business Economics and Asia Pacific International Management Forum. Their list was supplemented by reviewing the citations of papers from more United Kingdom specific sources, including: papers from the ISBA National Small Firms Research and Policy Conference and the Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development.

This process involved judgements by the researchers as the list would have become too long. Part of the compromise in compiling the final list was to only include publications that are targeted directly at small businesses, so journals like the Work Employment and Society, which are quite often cited, were excluded as they have a more general audience. Therefore, a limitation of this research is that it focuses on the esteem that small business targeted publications are held by the research community. The initial list of journals and questionnaire was shown to researchers in the field ⁶. This process resulted in the following publication channels being listed on the questionnaire:

Asia Pacific International Management Forum
Edited books
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice
International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research
International Small Business Journal
Journal of Business Venturing
Journal of Entrepreneurship
Journal of Small Business Management
National Small Firms Research and Policy Conference Proceedings
Research based book
Research reports from sponsored research
Small Business and Enterprise Development
Small Business and Enterprise Development Conference Proceedings
Small Business Economics
Other (Please state)

In addition, respondents were encouraged to list other publication channels not prompted. In the event two 'other' journals, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development and Regional Studies, were added to the questionnaire by respondents and should with hindsight have been on the original list. As will be shown, the frequency of them being mentioned, and the clear gap between them and the highly ranked journals, makes it unlikely that the overall pattern of results have been distorted.

Respondents were asked to rank the list of publications against each other. A Likert scale was considered but rejected as the ranking system causes the respondent to distinguish the esteem

which they hold the publication channels through direct comparison against each other, rather than comparison against some abstract scale (Coolican, 1994).

PROFILE OF THE UK SMALL BUSINESS RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Table 2 shows that 69% of respondents describe themselves as mainly small business researchers. This is a higher figure than expected, as other researchers (e.g. Watkins, 1995; Béchard, 1997) point to the multi-disciplinary and transient nature of this research community. It appears that there is a core of researchers that are focused on the small business area, suggesting that it has become a stable and long-term subject area for research.

| Respondents' description of their main area of research | Percentage Responding |
|---|-----------------------|
| Small Business | 69 |
| Local/Regional Economy and Development | 4 |
| International Areas | 4 |
| Educational and Skills Areas | 3 |
| Professional Careers, Executive Search and Careers | 3 |
| Entrepreneurship | 2 |
| Labour market/supply | 2 |
| Accounting | 2 |
| Industrial Organisations | 1 |
| Family Owned Business | 1 |
| Leadership | 1 |
| Food industry restructuring | 1 |
| Ethics | 1 |
| Public and Private Sector Interaction | 1 |
| Industrial Economics | 1 |
| Non Profit Entrepreneurship | 1 |
| Hospitality Management | 1 |
| Marketing of Education | 1 |
| High Technology Firms and Marketing | 1 |
| Total N=98 | 100 |

Table 2. Respondents' descriptions of their main areas of research

Figure 1 shows the distribution of years that respondents have been publishing their research. An average of 7.6 years publishing and a standard deviation of 7 seems quite healthy as it suggests the community is reasonably mature, but not aged. However, a closer look at figure 1 may reveal some worrying trends for the future. It implies an influx of researchers in the early to mid 1990s, but a drop in new researchers over the past few years. This could suggest that the early to mid 1990s was an exceptional period for small business research that is now tailing off.

More positively, it could be viewed as a life cycle where the influx of researchers was attracted to the area until a critical mass was achieved and the area is now established and mature. Table 2 provides some evidence in support of the positive interpretation, as it shows that 69% of respondents view the small business area as their main research agenda and are therefore likely to remain in the area over the long term. This suggests that the influx of researchers in the early to mid 1990s are liable to stay in the area. It would be worth following this trend at regular intervals as a barometer of the health of the small business research community in the UK.

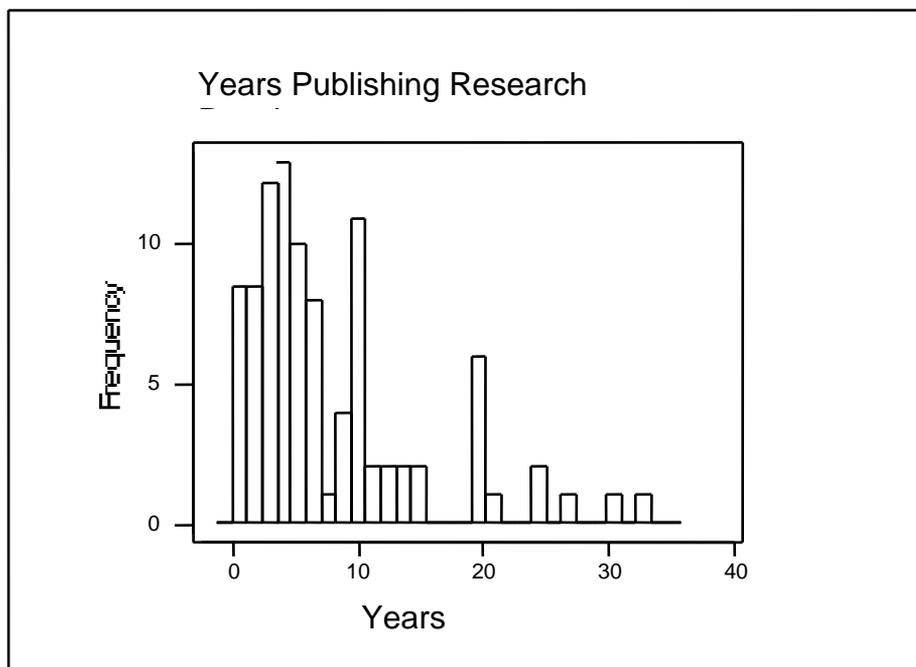


Figure 1. Years publishing research results (N=98)

UK small business researchers tend to be more qualitative and plural in their methods than they are quantitative (see figure 2). They also more likely to regard themselves as empirical researchers rather than theoretical. Indeed, no respondents regarded themselves as mainly theoretical and over 50% of respondents viewed themselves as empirically oriented. This orientation towards qualitative and empirical research is perhaps to be expected from what is an applied topic, with an acute absence of readily available data sources⁷.

These results suggest that the area may well be under theorised. This finding has been suggested by other researchers who have reviewed the area (e.g. Gibb, 1998; Watkins, 1995). The newer researchers (under five years publishing) are just as likely to view themselves as empirical as the mature researchers (over five years publishing), suggesting that the area may remain under theorised in the future.

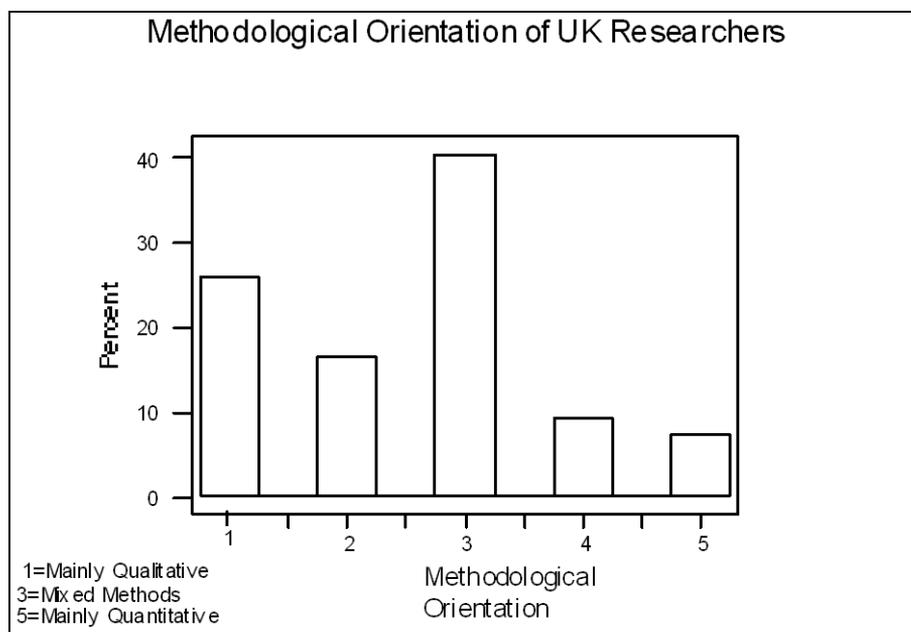


Figure 2. Methodological orientation of small business researchers

PERCEPTIONS OF THE UK SMALL BUSINESS RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Table 3 shows that the small business research community feels it is held in low esteem compared with other management areas (such as accounting, marketing and organisational behaviour) and also against traditional areas (such as physics, chemistry and mathematics). Indeed, 68% of respondents felt that small business research would rank lower than other management areas and nearly 90% felt that it would rank lower than traditional areas.

| Respondents' Perceptions | Small business research compared with other management areas | Small business research compared with other traditional areas |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Much Higher | 1% | |
| Higher | 3% | 6% |
| Same | 28% | 5% |
| Lower | 58% | 52% |
| Much Lower | 10% | 37% |

Table 3. Respondents' ranking of small business research against other areas

One possible reason for this low level of self-esteem of small business researchers is that their methodological orientation appears to be the opposite of what they feel will score well on the next RAE. The majority classify their research as qualitative and eclectic in approach (see figure 2), but feel quantitative research will rank higher at the next RAE. The majority (85%) also view their research as empirical or mixed, but also feel theoretical research will score better at the next RAE.

PUBLICATION ESTEEM AND DISSEMINATION

Table 4 shows how respondents' ranked their reasons for disseminating research. Helping fellow researchers, helping small business owners and helping governments all ranked high. Whereas, helping students and helping advisers were of much less concern to most respondents. Interestingly, respondents who viewed small business as their main research area were more likely to rank helping advisers to small firms higher.

| Reason for disseminating research | Number Ranking 1st | Number Ranking 2nd | Number Ranking 3rd |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Help fellow researchers | 34% | 11% | 13% |
| Help small business owners | 31% | 16% | 17% |
| Help governments create policy | 27% | 32% | 21% |
| Help students in the area | 18% | 11% | 21% |
| Help advisers to small firms | 10% | 32% | 23% |

Table 4. Reasons for disseminating research

Table 5 shows how highly various publication channels are received by UK small business researchers. The International Small Business Journal is the clear favourite and held in the highest esteem by the research community. This is followed by a group of four publication channels that are ranked very closely: Journal of Business Venturing, Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Research Based Books and Small Business Economics. The third group contains a number of newer small business focused journals (e.g. International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research, and Small Business and Enterprise Development), edited books, research reports and journals focused on regional policy and economics.

| | | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 5th | 6th | 7th |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Number of researchers ranking | | | | | | | | |
| Rank | Publication Channels | | | | | | | |
| 1 | <i>International Small Business Journal (ISBJ)</i> | 29 | 9 | 18 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| 2 | <i>Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)</i> | 8 | 12 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (ETP)</i> | 8 | 9 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | <i>Research Based Books (RBB)</i> | 7 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| 5 | <i>Small Business Economics (SBE)</i> | 7 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6 | <i>Journal of Small Business Management (JSBM)</i> | 3 | 8 | 3 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 5 |
| 7 | <i>International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research (IJEER)</i> | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| 8 | <i>National Small Firms Research and Policy Conference (NSFRP)</i> | 3 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| 9 | <i>Regional Studies (RS)</i> | 3 | 1 | | | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| 10 | <i>Small Business and Enterprise Development (SBED)</i> | 2 | 7 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 3 |
| 11 | <i>Edited Books (EB)</i> | 2 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 8 | 3 |
| 12 | <i>Research reports from sponsored research (RR)</i> | 2 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| 13 | <i>Entrepreneurship and Regional Development (E&RD)</i> | 2 | 3 | 1 | | 3 | 1 | |

Table 5. Esteem ranking of publication channels by UK Small Business Researchers

Surprisingly there is little difference in the ranking of publications between researchers with different reasons for disseminating their results or between those that view small business research as their main area of research and others. The only clear trend from these comparisons was that research based books were held in higher esteem by respondents who ranked helping fellow researchers highly.

There were some distinct differences between qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers (see tables 6 and 7). The key journals (ISBJ, ETP and JBV) are held high in the esteem of both groups of researchers, but the position of Small Business Economics varies greatly. Qualitative researchers rank Small Business Economics nearly at the bottom in 13th position, whereas, quantitative researchers hold it in very high esteem ranking it 2nd and nearly as highly as the ISBJ. Differences are also shown with Research Based Books, which are ranked highly by qualitative researchers, but much less valued by quantitative researchers.

| | | 1st | 2nd | 3rd |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|
| Number of researchers ranking | | | | |
| Rank | Publication Channels | | | |
| 1 | <i>International Small Business Journal (ISBJ)</i> | 14 | 4 | 6 |
| 2 | <i>Research Based Books (RBB)</i> | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 3 | <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (ETP)</i> | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 4 | <i>Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)</i> | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 13 | <i>Small Business Economics (SBE)</i> | | 1 | 2 |

Table 6. Esteem ranking of publication channels by UK Qualitative Small Business Researchers

| | | 1st | 2nd | 3rd |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|
| Number of researchers ranking | | | | |
| Rank | Publication Channels | | | |
| 1 | <i>International Small Business Journal (ISBJ)</i> | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| 2 | <i>Small Business Economics (SBE)</i> | 4 | 1 | |
| 3 | <i>Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)</i> | 3 | 4 | |
| 4 | <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (ETP)</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9 | <i>Research Based Books (RBB)</i> | | 1 | 1 |

Table 7. Esteem ranking of publication channels by UK Quantitative Small Business Researchers

These results clearly demonstrate differences in the expectations of various sub-groups within the small business research community and may be the surface manifestation of deeper ontological perspectives. These differences certainly raise some questions regarding the RAE and the level of objectivity that is actually achievable in rating units of measurement, when these results show clearly the social construction (Schwandt, 1998) of research quality.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The UK small business community has been shown to be more stable and mature than previous research had suggested (e.g. Watkins, 1995). An influx of researchers into the area in the early and mid 1990s has achieved what might now be considered a critical mass. Reasons for this influx can only be speculative, but it was around this period that the ESRC sponsored a major research initiative into small businesses (Storey, 1994). There has also been ongoing support for research in the area from public and private sources⁸. There has been a drop in new researchers being attracted to the area over the last few years. This

suggests that the trend should be monitored at regular intervals as a barometer of the health of the small business research community in the UK.

Other researchers have suggested that small business research is under theorised (e.g. Gibb, 1998). Watkins (1995) suggests that researchers in the area often draw upon theoretical foundations from mainstream management theory, rather than fellow small business researchers. The findings from this research support this view and provide some reasons why it might be the case. Small business researchers were more likely to regard themselves as empirical rather than theoretical, suggesting they may not even aspire to generate theory. They also held other research areas in much greater esteem than small business research. This appears to lead to the area continually importing theories from outside and applying them to small businesses. There is a certain irony in this behaviour, as the very existence of the small business area presumably relies on the distinction between "small" and "large" businesses.

There has been a long running debate around the appropriateness of large business theories to small businesses. Indeed, Watkins (1995) found Welsh and White's (1981) article 'A small business is not a little big business' to be one of the few articles which was cited highly in the 1980s and 1990s. Watson (1993, 1995) takes the opposite view suggesting "that the success of any firm, large or small, depends on the quality of its management" and "the essential nature of the managerial task is the same in all firms" (Watson, 1993, page 1). If the small business area is to continue with its development, this paradox needs to be addressed by the research community in the UK. If Watson (1993, 1995) is right then the small business research area is presumably not needed. However, if Welsh and White (1981) are right then small businesses are inherently different from large businesses and therefore the area needs to generate its own theoretical frameworks and to clearly articulate its ontological position. At present the low esteem of academics in the area is probably acting as a block on such theory generation.

It is suggested that the results have ramifications for the impending RAE. First, there is a strong inference that a specialist business researcher is required on the management panel, as in 1996, because of the scale and maturity of work conducted. The relative strength of the subject area and the self-perception of small business researchers in the UK can be improved by a presence on the RAE panel. Second, table 5 provides helpful guidance on research quality for the RAE panel. Third, if small businesses are not believed to be "little big businesses", then researchers who are striving to articulate theoretical foundations for the area should be rewarded in the next RAE.

NOTES

¹ This paper is currently being reviewed by the *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*.

² Truscot (1951) draws together a range of commentators to suggest that academics have two key roles, research and teaching. He sees dissemination at the core of his definition of research: "original work of a scholarly kind, such as investigation, criticism, the intelligent publication of texts, appreciation based on scholarship, and certain types of imaginative and creative activity. It will, of course, include the presentation of facts or ideas either in a new

light or (as a rule) in such a way as to bring them within the reach of those whom they would otherwise be excluded..." (Pages 148 and 149).

³ Harley and Lowe (1998) provide the following explanation of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE): "The first exercise took place in 1986 and was called the Research Selectivity Exercise, thereby denoting its original intent. There have since been three such exercises, now called the RAE... The higher the score, the greater the level of funding. The process has undergone various refinements over the years, as has the scale, but the principle remains the same." (page 24).

⁴ The report of the Committee of Inquiry on Small Firms chaired by J.E. Bolton (1971) was a major catalyst for research interest in the area.

⁵ Some of the references relating to the theory of citations were originally obtained from Romano and Ratnatunga (1996) and Watkins (1995).

⁶ We would like to acknowledge the comments from Professor James Curran and Dr. John Kitching in this process.

⁷ An example is the Census of employment data which has minimum size band points, below which it is based on a sample of firms only. Academic surveys are also capable of this avoidance of small firms. For example, the long-running Workplace Industrial Relations Survey has lower size-band cut-off points and even the most recent survey has a cut-off point of ten employees.

⁸ Examples include: professorial chairs in the area that are sponsored by the private sector (e.g. Kingston's University has a Small Business Professor sponsored by HSBC Midland Bank); professional institutes sponsoring research with policy implications (e.g. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants is sponsoring research into the role of non-executive directors in small businesses and the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants is sponsoring research into accounting in small businesses); research councils sponsoring research (e.g. The ESRC has recently funded an initiative on intellectual property management which had a dominant SME theme (Kitching and Blackburn, 1999)).

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