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A study of a university-led entrepreneurship education programme for small business owner/managers

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The small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector is crucial to regional and national economies [Thorpe, R., J. Cope, M. Ram, and M. Pedler. 2009. Leadership development in small-and medium-sized enterprises: The case for action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 6, no. 3: 201–8; Jones, O., A. Macpherson, and R. Thorpe. 2010. Learning in owner-managed small firms: Mediating artefacts and strategic space. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 22, no. 7/8: 649–73]. In recognition of this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been supported through government policy to provide training programmes for SMEs aimed at developing a higher level of skills that will support growth [Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration. 2003. Final Report, KM Treasury, London. <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk>; HM Treasury. 2006. *The Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – World class skills*. London: HM Treasury; DIUS (Department for Business Innovation Universities and Skills). 2007. *Implementing 'The race to the top': Lord Sainsbury's review of government's science and innovation policies*. TSO; DIUS (Department for Business Innovation Universities and Skills). 2008. Higher education at work: High skills, high value. http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/ec_group/HLSS4_08 (accessed February 7, 2011); Zhang, J., and E. Hamilton. 2010. Entrepreneurship education for owner-managers: The process of trust building for an effective learning community. *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship* 23, no. 3: 249–70]. This study considers the relationship between entrepreneurship education and SME owner/managers by examining a programme delivered by a HEI for growth-oriented small business owner/managers. It addresses the questions: *What factors do participants believe enhance the effectiveness of HEI and SME engagement? And what impact, if any, do participants perceive such engagement has upon them as an individual operating within an SME and their business operations?* Qualitative techniques are used to explore the situations of five SME owner/managers at three points during a 5-year period. Findings show that entrepreneurship education delivered a range of benefits to SMEs and the region. Through engaging, owner/managers interacted with others. This extension of their network supported business growth and development. This study demonstrates that enterprise education can deliver positive benefits to SME owner/managers and the wider region in which they are located.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; HEI/SME engagement; network

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore the relationship between entrepreneurship education and its impact on the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owner/manager. More specifically, we examine a programme delivered by a Higher Education Institution (HEI) for growth-oriented small business owners and its impact on the individual and the business operations. This interaction between higher education and small businesses was funded by government, driven by European, national and regional policies (CEC 2006; DIUS 2008; NWDA 2009). This HEI/SME engagement has been the subject of a number of previous studies which demonstrate a positive economic impact on the economy of the North West of England (Ferris 2003; Cox and Taylor 2006; Wren and Jones 2006; Flores-Romero, Robertson, and Sanyal 2008). In these studies, regional impact was measured in terms of increased sales, number of employees and other measures of economic output. In contrast, in this study, the focus is on how the participants of the LEAD programme articulate the impact of engaging with a HEI on themselves as owner managers and the way they operate the business.

In undertaking this research what emerged was the added benefit of high levels of trust existing between non-competing owner/managers, the evolution of strong networks that endured beyond the programme and the learning that took place in these networks. The findings from the research contribute to entrepreneurial learning theory and enterprise education. They also show that engaging impacted on the individual and influenced the way the business was managed and operated. The entrepreneurial learning literature has emphasized that SME owner/managers learn from their experience and the nature and extent of that learning depends critically on the essential role of reflection (Cope 2003; Gordon and Jack 2010; Kempster and Cope 2010). This understanding of the importance of provoking reflection on experience was embedded in a programme of entrepreneurship education for small business owners designed by a HEI. It took the form of an integrated learning model designed to provide a series of experiential learning activities and to trigger reflection that would lead to learning. The integrated learning model was enshrined in the LEAD programme, a 10-month part-time course for SME owner/managers. Participants articulated that different elements of the programme prompted them to reflect and change their world-view and their everyday practices.

We present the findings from a study which considered the experiences of five entrepreneurs at three points during a 5-year period. These small business owners participated in a development programme (LEAD) from 2004. The programme concentrated on two areas; the business itself and the personal development of the owner/manager, providing a framework to increase profitability, diversify and grow the business. Qualitative techniques were used to explore the situations of our participants and record their experiences. For the purpose of this study, we concern ourselves with addressing the overarching questions: *What factors do participants believe enhance the effectiveness of HEI and SME engagement? And what impact, if any, do participants perceive such engagement has upon them as an individual operating within an SME and their business operations?*

We argue that our research is building on our understanding about the impact entrepreneurship education can have on small business owner/managers, business performance, operations and subsequently regional development. We show that the HEI specific processes of LEAD, based on experiential learning and reflection,

accelerate the build up of trust. Further, we show that the creation of a HEI-generated network of entrepreneurial owner/managers, funded by regional government, creates social capital within the network and there are indicators that the social capital and the networks created have endured years after the engagement with the HEI has finished and that these have impacted on the individual and business operations.

This paper is organised in the following way. First, a review of the literature relating to HEI–SME engagement, the relevance this has for economic impact and the role of entrepreneurial learning in informing SME engagement is provided. Following this, a discussion about the methodology used to operationalize the research questions is provided along with background material about the participants involved in this study. Thereafter, the findings from this study are discussed. Finally, conclusions, recommendations and some direction for future scholarly inquiry are provided.

2. The impact of HEI/SME engagement

The SME sector is crucial to regional and national economies of most developed countries (Thorpe et al. 2009; Jones, Macpherson, and Thorpe 2010). Since SMEs are often seen as ‘tiny acorns from which large oak trees can grow’ (Thorpe et al. 2009, 201), the view of government throughout the developed world is that this sector should be supported and encouraged. In order to achieve this, a number of government schemes and policies have been introduced in the UK to encourage interaction and engagement between HEIs and SMEs (Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008).

2.1. The drivers for HEI/SME engagement

Ideally, HEI/SME engagement is seen as a two-way relationship, the notion being that while HEIs are encouraged to interact and engage with the small business community, SMEs are enticed to play a ‘demand-led role’ and to collaborate in research and teaching opportunities (Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008). Ultimately, the underlying assumption is that both parties need to collaborate and create a dialogue to stay competitive (Yusuf 2008). This is primarily for three reasons. First, the rise in the importance of the knowledge economy means that by forging links between universities and business, knowledge will be exchanged, and so nations will become more competitive (Yusuf 2008). The ability to learn through acquiring and applying new knowledge is important for enhancing organizational performance especially within the SME sector (Jones, Macpherson, and Thorpe 2010). Second is the realization that the funding situations for education are becoming difficult and so alternative sources have to be found if universities are to survive (Yusuf 2008). Third, through such links the HEI is perceived to be able to play a critical role in revitalising and regenerating regions through facilitating economic growth and stimulating and sustaining SME development (Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008). This being the case, it is probably not too surprising that there has been an increasing amount of research looking at the role of HEIs in shaping economic enterprise and development (Cox and Taylor 2006; Gunasekara

2006; Coenen 2007; Woollard, Zhang, and Jones 2007; Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008).

2.2. *The regional impact*

There is a suite of recent studies of the regional economic impact of entrepreneurship education developed and delivered by HEIs (Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008; Johnston, Robinson, and Lockett 2010). Noteworthy amongst these is a body of work addressing the work of Lancaster University and more specifically its LEAD programme. During the period 2004–2006, LEAD delivered a 10-month development programme to 67 micro-business owner/managers. Zhang and Hamilton (2009) illustrate that the programme included seven elements: (1) 2-day overnight experiential events when participants got to know one another; (2) master classes covering specific skills such as finance and marketing; (3) action learning where six participants met six times over the course for a full day, and the group members adopted a questioning approach in order to help the issue holder get a deeper understanding of his or her issue and reach a conclusion; (4) coaching and mentoring by experienced and trained professionals; (5) consultancy projects applicable to each participant, mainly on marketing, competitor analysis, business planning or growth; (6) shadowing and business exchanges where a pair of participants visited each other's business for 2 or 3 days observing and giving feedback to their pair on his or her leadership (shadowing), and working in their partner's business for a week to run a mini-consulting project (business exchange) and (7) an electronic discussion space (www.theleadforum.co.uk) to support communication and peer-to-peer interaction between everyone involved in LEAD.

Some 8 years into a period of sustained engagement with regional SMEs, Wren and Jones (2006) conducted an evaluation of the impact of Lancaster's LEAD¹ Programme. The *ex-post* evaluation carried out by Wren and Jones (2006) employed a questionnaire, receiving 42 responses from the 67 companies involved in LEAD. They reported that the LEAD programme positively impacted on firms by encouraging owners to develop a more strategic approach and improve the general management of the business. More specifically, they found that median and modal annual sales increases due to LEAD were in the range £100,000–250,000, compared with average annual sales turnover for the firms of around £1 million. Even taking the pessimistic view that LEAD had no effect on non-respondent firms, the mean annual sales increase due to LEAD was £130,000 a year across all 65 firms. Wren and Jones (2006) concluded that LEAD had substantial effects on business operations and outcomes, and that the LEAD programme was successful in achieving its objective of promoting business development and growth.

Going beyond the single-project level, the consulting firm Arthur D. Little undertook an appraisal of the impacts likely from an investment in a new building at Lancaster University Management School (LUMS). Based upon interviews with small business clients of the university, they concluded that investment of £4.5 million in the building would produce a strongly positive economic impact in the North West of England (Ferris 2003). The report recommended that the investor, the North West Regional Development Agency, should produce a good practice report on the business support activities of the LUMS. In response to the endorsement that came in the Arthur D. Little report, Lancaster staff published a case study on the

impact of LUMS on regional economic development (Cox and Taylor 2006). Examining forward linkage effects that would result from a higher degree of engagement with regional SMEs, they demonstrated the substantial positive impacts that the university sector can have on regional economies. They singled out the effects that university work with businesses can have on increasing SME sales turnover, and thus on regional economic competitiveness.

Finally, at the cross-campus level, Flores-Romero, Robertson, and Sanyal (2008) analysed the impact of eight business engagement teams from a range of faculties and departments at Lancaster University. Their survey received 242 responses from 495 target companies which had been supported over the 2-year period January 2006 to December 2007. They found increases in employment which exceeded regional averages for comparable firms from equivalent sectors (an annualized rate of 9% for assisted enterprises versus a North West range of -2.2% to 0.2%). They also recorded increases in sales turnover, profit and gross value added. Moreover, they recorded that respondents attributed positive contributions to their business growth as resulting from the interventions by the university. They concluded that every £1 of public grants spent on supporting businesses generated an increase of between £2.40 and 4.30 of additional sales.

These studies, all dealing with a single institution over a period of 3 years, give a consistent message that appropriate engagement between a university and regional small businesses can yield tangible business benefits resulting in positive impact on the regional economy. This work has also produced a host of real benefits for the university. In addition to funding and the new posts that come with it, these include more abundant opportunities for student placements and projects with local businesses; enhanced access to companies and entrepreneurs for research purposes; ready availability of practitioners who are willing to contribute in classroom and seminar teaching; an increased salience across campus of the need for, and benefits accruing from, meaningful engagement with the business world; and, perhaps most importantly, a changed perception in the business community at large of the readiness of the university to engage with business.

2.3. SME entrepreneurship education to date

Historically, business and management schools, especially university-based schools, have had an increasing impact on business knowledge, how it is transferred and delivered to students and managers (Gibb 2009). Nevertheless, their delivery of entrepreneurship education has met with criticism, particularly within the realms of entrepreneurship and the wider SME sector (Gibb 2009, 200). Criticism probably stems from the fact that such schools were established to serve the requirements of large organizations, but in the 1990s courses directed more towards the needs and requirements of the SME sector appeared in curriculum (Pittaway and Cope 2007b; Gibb 2009). However, there is a belief that entrepreneurship is best taught outside such schools because of the narrow context they offer compared to the wider context of entrepreneurship (Gibb 2009). Yet, establishing relationships with universities can have substantial rewards for SMEs (Gilbert, McDougall, and Audretsch 2008). Nevertheless, it is often the case that small business owner/managers have to be 'bribed to attend formal programmes of learning' (209); the driver to participate is often the development of the business, the solution to a problem, ability to grasp an

opportunity, benchmark the business or simply curiosity and the need to move away from isolation (Gibb 2009).

HEIs have been providing a growing number of education programmes for SMEs (Zhang and Hamilton 2010). This strategy has been supported by government policy and is viewed as a mechanism for developing higher-level skills and supporting small business growth (Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration 2003; HM Treasury 2006; DIUS 2007, 2008). However, the link between what universities do and how this impacts on organizational performance is coming under increasing scrutiny, especially in recent times when policymakers quite rightly have to justify how much money is spent and how it is allocated (Thorpe et al. 2009). According to Ram and Trehan (2009), there is also an issue over business support interventions that have been criticized for being top-down, product oriented and not designed to meet the needs of the smaller firm (see also Anderson and Gold 2006; Bennett 2008). Possibly as a consequence of the encouragement they have received from policymakers but also as a response to the criticism such interventions have faced, HEIs involved in small business and owner-manager provision have been shifting away from the more traditional means of education delivery and towards facilitating entrepreneurial learning through more innovative methods (Zhang and Hamilton 2010).

The LEAD programme is delivered through LUMS. It was established with funding from the North West Development Agency (NWDA). From the HEI perspective there was an assumption underpinning the development of the programme that the design should be driven by a theoretical understanding of how small business owners learn. At the time the integrated learning model was being developed for the LEAD programme there was a relative lack of understanding about small businesses and how they learn (Deakins 1996; Rae and Carswell 2000; Harrison and Leitch 2005). However, there was an important emergent literature in the area of entrepreneurial learning which commonly focused on the owner/manager as the unit of analysis (Reuber and Fischer 1993; Gibb 1997; Cope and Watts 2000; Rae and Carswell 2000; Minniti and Bygrave 2001; Cope 2003). This literature aimed to develop an understanding of the learning 'experienced by entrepreneurs during the management of a small enterprise' (Cope 2003, 429).

This emergent entrepreneurial learning literature held the view that small business owners learned from their experience. This understanding suggested that experiential learning theories would be an appropriate basis for designing what Cope (2003) described as entrepreneurial 'learning mechanisms' (430). The individual elements of the LEAD integrated learning model were not innovative or particularly new. The combination of the elements and the ethos of embedding triggers for reflection were, however, unique. This understanding was derived from the emerging entrepreneurial learning literature and its focus on experiential learning theories. Researchers appeared in agreement that small business owners learn through experience. Cope (2001, 2003), drawing on organizational and adult learning theorists, emphasized that learning took place in reflecting on that experience. His work concluded that reflective processes and learning 'are inextricably linked' (443).

The elements of the LEAD programme are designed to present triggers for reflection. The theory suggests that entrepreneurial learning takes place when SMEs reflect on their own practice, and studies to date suggest that this reflection is

triggered in everyday action in running the business (Deakins and Freel 1998; Taylor and Thorpe 2000; Cope 2003). It is further suggested that 'critical incidents' can trigger 'transformative learning' for the SME owner-manager and their business (Cope 2003, 445). The challenge in designing the LEAD programme was to understand how to facilitate this 'transformative' learning in an education programme. The effectiveness of embedding reflective processes was evidenced by two changes made in the early days of the programme in response to feedback from the small business owners. Firstly, there was a request to put on 'learning and reflection' days where participants could take stock at various points in the 10 months of the programme. Secondly, the first cohort was offered mentors, but this was deemed by the participants to be unhelpful. It was often the case that the mentor would offer advice and be directive whereas the participants had learned to rely on the reflective process to find solutions for themselves.

Subsequent literature has reinforced the importance of experiential learning for SME learning (Cope 2005a; Corbett 2005; Politis 2005; Anderson and Gold 2006; Pittaway and Cope 2007a). Some authors also note the importance of a social dimension to learning (Taylor and Thorpe 2000; Cope 2005a; Hamilton 2005; Pittaway and Cope 2007a; Hamilton 2011). This is supported by studies of the LEAD programme suggesting that learning from each other, 'peer learning', is taking place (Zhang and Hamilton 2009, 2010).

HEIs can provide a theoretical understanding of how to support enterprise education for different groups. In their work, Pittaway and Cope (2007a) studied an undergraduate entrepreneurship module and found that experiential learning was important. These findings were fed directly into their teaching and the tools and methods they used to work with students. Rae (2005) based a programme for 'mid-career' entrepreneurship on an 'opportunity centred approach' (556). He used his entrepreneurial learning model to provoke the participants to reflect on the programme rather than an underpinning of the process. Nevertheless, his design was theory led. Evidence suggests that enterprise education based on the foundations of on-going research in the field of entrepreneurship appears to deliver positive economic benefits to SMEs and the region.

It is against this background that this research is set. More explicitly, we deal with the questions: *What factors do participants believe enhance the effectiveness of HEI and SME engagement? And what impact, if any, do participants perceive such engagement has upon them as an individual operating within an SME and their business operations?*

3. Method

According to Leitch, Hill, and Harrison (2010), 'social research requires that the questions asked and the designs employed are shaped by the researcher's underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions' (69). Since our research questions were grounded in our respondents own understandings and personal experiences (Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010), an interpretivist position was adopted for the study. Leitch, Hill, and Harrison (2010) point out that 'interpretivism is based on a life-world ontology which argues that all observation is theory-and value-laden and that investigation of the social world is not, and cannot be, the pursuit of detached objective truth' (69). Having determined that an interpretivist position was best

sited, it seemed appropriate to draw on qualitative techniques to explore the areas we were concerned with. Qualitative techniques were used to explore the situations of five SME owner/managers who participated in the Lancaster University LEAD programme from 2004. As part of the learning process, participants were encouraged to interact, engage with and support each other throughout this programme. Participants for this study were originally interviewed at the beginning and in the middle of the programme (2004/2005) and follow-up interviews were carried out by the lead author (himself a practising entrepreneur)² in February/March 2009.

Delivery of the programme utilizes an integrated learning model that is based on experiential and observational learning manifested in action learning, one-to-one coaching, business shadowing and exchanges and inspirational and business master classes. In dealing with our research questions, an objective was to consider what impact, if any, LEAD had on these delegates 5 years after they had completed the programme and importantly whether or not it had impacted on their learning experiences and business activity. We felt 5 years was an appropriate period of time to see if participants were still able to articulate on-going impacts of the programme.

3.1. Approach

Qualitative techniques were deemed appropriate for this study because we were dealing with soft and complex issues involving elements of process over time (Oinas 1999; Curran and Blackburn 2001). Such issues are difficult to quantify (Hammersley 1992). Rather than looking to measure the situations of our respondents using statistical techniques, we were looking to develop in-depth understanding (Oinas 1999). Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison (2009) point out, most work that has looked at programmes of this nature within the smaller business context has been quantitative in nature using a pre-developed, behaviourally based leadership assessment tool (Bryman 2004; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, and Mumford 2007). While such an approach offers some benefits, it also comes with a range of limitations such as tracking and tracing processes, changes and implications and may hinder understanding (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Shah and Corley 2006). Thus, approaching our study using qualitative techniques was felt to not only offer the opportunity to deepen understanding, but also to broaden our knowledge about entrepreneurship education, how this might impact on the small business owner/manager, his/her activities and over time.

To consider the experiences of our individual respondents, data relating to their situations, learning activities and experiences of engaging were gathered. A framework for data collection and analysis was developed from the literature review. This approach provided in-depth and detailed information. The themes used for all stages of the study were learning, leadership, engaging and impact. Initial interviews (67) took place pre-start LEAD from October 2004 and follow-up interviews took place in April 2005.³ The final stages of data collection took place in February/March 2009 involving five respondents, with an informal follow-up in August 2010. The final stage in 2009 to generate data and understand the areas under investigation from the perspective of respondents involved observation in each of the five businesses and semi-structured interviews were carried out with the

owner/manager of these five businesses. These are regarded as the main methods for data collection with a qualitative approach (Hoepfl 1997). Interviews and observation were also supported by a detailed review and analysis of materials and transcripts generated from the owner/managers 5 years previously while they were on the LEAD programme. Notes relating to the observations and semi-structured interviews were recorded in a diary as a way of placing respondents in context. In-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. This provided the opportunity to understand, through their reflection, how this programme had impacted on them as individuals and the businesses in which they were immersed. During the 2009 data collection period, 3 days were spent considering each business. This involved the observation period, informal conversations with the SME manager/owner and staff, semi-structured interviews which took place at the business of each respondent and reviewing of other material such as previous interview transcripts. This was all designed to try and provide an informed understanding of the situations and experiences of each respondent.

Recording the interviews enabled the researcher to capture all the discussion that took place. It also allowed him to focus on the interview, the direction of the conversation and what respondents were actually saying, so he was more aware of when and how to probe deeper (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991; Hoepfl 1997). This approach helped ensure that the information received reflected the respondents' perceptions. Interviews have been described as one of the most common and powerful ways to understand people (Fontana and Frey 1994). To ensure focus was maintained and research time was used appropriately, an interview guide was used based on the themes learning, leadership, engaging and impact. These themes were then explored in the interviews. Preparing the themes in advance was a way of maintaining the focus of the research and helped to ensure that specific areas were covered with each respondent. However, there were no pre-determined responses and the intention of the interviewer was to probe for further information where required, explore and delve deeper into the specific areas where and when necessary. This approach is consistent with that suggested by Hoepfl (1997). It is also consistent with the approach suggested by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989, 138) and Cope (2005b). Observing respondents provided the opportunity to see them at work, watch their interactions, expressions and the situations they might encounter. It also provided a better understanding of the world respondents lived in and the context in which they operated (Patton 1990; Hoepfl 1997). To ensure situations were not distorted in any way, outside of the interview the researcher's interaction with participants was limited. Instead, he watched and noted what was taking place. Only when clarification or expansion about a particular point seemed necessary did the researcher engage more actively. This approach again follows that suggested by Hoepfl (1997).

The content and form of the emerging data determined the direction and length of the interviews. Questions and areas of investigation were not addressed in any specific order but were instead governed by the actual situation (Gummesson 2000). Throughout, data collection probes were used (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991, 80). This helped ensure that the interviewer was not being led in any way and helped to confirm that the details received from respondents reflected the situations and experiences they had encountered (Jack 2005).

3.2. Respondents

The sampling method was purposeful, whereby respondents were deliberately selected with a specific purpose in mind (Punch 2005, 187). Given our research questions, the nature of the study and the flexibility it offers, purposeful sampling seemed to be an appropriate approach to use for identifying respondents (Hoepfl 1997). This purposeful sample was selected on the basis that we thought the particular individuals selected would provide interesting examples and that we could learn about their experiences and the impact of those experiences on the business. However, one of the criticisms this sampling method has faced is that it can cause distortion through insufficient breadth (Patton 1990). So, in choosing our respondents we looked to ensure that we achieved a balance in terms of research participants and looked for breadth in terms of type of respondent, and his/her engagement experience. To achieve this, we returned to the original interviews gathered in the initial stage of LEAD and the second round of interviews and purposefully looked for indicators of experience (both negative and positive). We also looked to select a balance of owner/managers from the 67 participants on the LEAD programme during this time to interview based on sector, structure of business, turnover and number of employees. The decision regarding the number of respondents to interview was based on our research goals and the depth and breadth of material and information we were able to generate to achieve these and that allowed us to deal with our research questions in depth. The five respondents selected seemed to allow us to achieve this. Moreover, while all respondents were involved in a business and had followed the LEAD programme, they were drawn from a diverse set of backgrounds, businesses and activities. To ensure results were not distorted and unnecessarily favourable towards the University, we purposefully looked for respondents who were not currently engaged in entrepreneurship programmes with that University. Moreover, the individual who carried out this stage of the research is an entrepreneur-in-residence (EIR) and not a direct employee of the University. We felt this was important as it would ensure that respondents felt able to be as open and frank as possible. The result was two manufacturing companies and three service companies. These five respondents also offered a spread of limited companies, family businesses, sole traders and engagement views. The turnover of the five chosen businesses varies across the range of turnover reported for the whole cohort (£150,000–2.7 m).

Details about individual respondents are provided in Table 1. This table also provides an indication of reasons for joining the LEAD programme.

3.3. Analysis

The process of data analysis also followed a similar approach to that used in previous work that has considered entrepreneurial learning (Ram and Trehan 2009). Data analysis used the key research themes but was supplemented by categories that were identified as being appropriate and which emerged during the process. This meant reading and re-reading interview material, revisiting notes and material generated through the data collection process, summarising and categorizing. So, the process was iterative rather than linear (Ram and Trehan 2009). This meant that an inductive approach to data analysis could be used. Eisenhardt (1989) suggests starting data analysis by first sifting through all the data, discarding whatever is

Table 1. Respondents.

Entrepreneur	Business activity	Established year	Turnover at start	No. of staff	Lead cohort	Turnover 2008	Reason articulated for joining LEAD
Rose	Insolvency practitioners	1992	250,000	7	2004/05	500,000	Avoid getting bogged down in routine matters and grow the business
Laura	Estate agents	2000	300,000	12	2004/05	1,125,000	I felt I was missing 'focus' in my personal development
Robert	Sports fertilizer sales	1998	650,000	10	2005/06	1,100,000	We have a good company; it should be a great company. I need help to make the next big step with my business
Amanda	Outside TV production	1997	2,700,000	29	2005/06	4,500,000	I often feel alone and I'm worried that lack of leadership skills could be a constraint of the business
Duncan	Accountancy	1996	600,000	13	2005/06	1,100,000	To help my team, my clients and myself to achieve our true potential

irrelevant and then bringing together the elements that seem most important. In essence, this took the form of looking at the data and asking ourselves, 'what is going on here?' This involved the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000; Silverman 2000) and an iterative reviewing of the data with emerging categories and concepts. This has become an accepted approach and one reported in previous work (Human and Provan 1996; Hill, McGowan, and Drummond 1999; Jack 2005, 2010; Jack et al. 2010; Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010).

Wolcott (1990) argued that the key with qualitative work is not to accumulate all the data you can, but instead to really identify and reveal the essences with enough context that allows the reader to understand those situations individuals are immersed in. The research process used here generated large amounts of data. Once collected, it had to be sorted before it could be analysed. Interviews were taped and transcribed, discussions, field notes and observations were collected, written up, merged, synthesized and then organized around the themes which seemed to fit with our interests. This provided a way of sorting and arranging the rich raw data into useful and explanatory categories.

Data were then examined and explored for detail relating to our research interests. To achieve this patterns of activities were compared and contrasted to determine categories. Thus, incidents and experiences, observations and responses were continually compared with others within emerging categories. Approaching the data in this way enabled us to build confidence in the way the data were being interpreted.

Using this, constant comparative element of a grounded approach has been used in previous work (see e.g. Jack 2005; Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007; Jack, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Anderson 2008; Jack et al. 2010; Discua Cruz 2011). Moreover, it provided a way to 'undertake empirical research which is informed by prior theoretical understanding, but which is not so determined or constrained by this understanding that the potential for making novel insights is foregone' (Finch 2002, 57). Thus, the constant comparative approach used consisted of stages. First, data were explored for any patterns or themes. Second, themes were refined into descriptive categories. These processes were inductive. Third, the descriptive categories were synthesized into analytical categories which helped explain the process and provided insight around our research questions. This approach also follows that offered by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) who describe qualitative analysis as 'working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what you will tell others' (145). It is also consistent with the process used in other entrepreneurial settings and as described by Jack et al. (2010). Placing the raw data into logical, meaningful categories and then examining these categories in a more 'holistic fashion', also allowed us to deal with some of the challenges faced when analysing qualitative data (Hoepfl 1997, 55).

3.4. Methodological issues

This study set out to deal with the questions: *What factors do participants believe enhance the effectiveness of HEI and SME engagement? And what impact, if any, do participants perceive such engagement has upon them as an individual operating within*

an SME and their business operations? To achieve this, the first part of this paper provided us with a preliminary theoretical framework about the role of HEIs, their regional impact through the learning experiences of owner-managers and was used to inform our understanding.

We are all engaged with the HEI concerned in some way, so we wanted to ensure we were not looking at things through 'rose tinted glasses', and therefore only finding what we wanted to find. We were aware that more positive elements relating to the engagement experience were coming through in the data. So, we purposefully revisited each round of the data again and again to seek out more negative aspects. We then returned again informally to our final five respondents in August 2010 and invited them to comment. Therefore, to deal with these issues, we did purposefully look for contradictory indicators and examples but found few. This provides us with some confidence that our findings and interpretation of the situations reflect the actual experience through this programme and the impact that took place.

As 'EIR', the role of the interviewer himself is interesting because not only does he have an appreciation of the world of the HEI and research, he also comes from and still lives the world of entrepreneurship and business (George, Gordon, and Hamilton 2010). Moreover, given his professional and personal experiences he was theoretically sensitized as a researcher with the skills, ability and awareness required for carrying out qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This did seem to impact on the interviews and the level and depth of information generated, respondents seeming open and willing to engage but also frank, honest and extensive in their responses. Being new to research, the EIR spoke to a number of academic colleagues and was influenced by the work of Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) and Cope (2005b) and their work on phenomenological interview methods. Being an SME owner/manager, the EIR has over 25 years of varied experience and brought world views on the life of an owner/manager to the research. In establishing contact with the participants, setting up the interviews, and carrying out the observations and semi-structured interviews he was able to quickly establish a rapport with the owners in a way that was empathetic to their day-to-day lives. The respondents were able to see him as part of their world and as a result were more open than they might otherwise have been. Some respondents felt this was a useful 'go-between' positioned between the fast changing world of the SME and the more stable world of the HEI. He was able to intuitively respond to observed behaviour and was keenly aware of the ethical framework. Thus, the respondents were told of the study's purpose, agreement was requested to tape the interviews and they were assured of anonymity. The objective was to obtain a first-person description. The EIR was also in a position where he could remain neutral and non-judgemental and report things in an unbiased and balanced way (Hoepfl 1997).

The techniques used provided sufficient depth of data to analyse the experiences of respondents. Quotes from the data are used to provide valuable supplements, add voice to the text, help categorize the data and allow the readers to judge and understand the situations themselves (Wolcott 1990; Hoepfl 1997; Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010). Practices, backgrounds and situations are also linked to respondents, inductively and demonstrate veracity in the story told (Steyart and Bouwen 1997). What we have looked to do is make sense of the experiences of respondents and attempt to reconstruct their view of their world (Wiseman 1979). The inherent limitations of this approach are recognized. The small number of respondents used

and the methodology employed inhibit generalizability (Larson 1992; Chandler and Hanks 1994). However, the research design provides insight, detail and description (Geertz 1973). Due to the nature of the findings and the conclusions that we have arrived at, we are confident that elements of these could be transferable to other instances of HEI/SME engagement, both within the UK and further afield. Moreover, we also feel that some of our conclusions may be key to supporting entrepreneurship education programmes and thus economic development.

4. Findings

This section presents a discussion of the data and findings from the study. It is organized around the core themes. First, the impact and the outcomes of engaging with entrepreneurship education (LEAD) are presented and what this means in terms of leadership. Then, the experience of engaging, the role of trust and the evolving network are considered. Finally, the influence of reflection and experiential learning are illustrated. Due to the quality and richness of the data and to help illustrate how views and perceptions changed over time, we have presented the data in table format. Where applicable, more illustrative examples have been drawn on and presented in the discussion around these themes.

4.1. *The impact and outcomes of engagement*

In Section 2, a discussion was presented which demonstrated the relevance and impact of HEI/SME engagement and its impact on the regional economy. Here, we illustrate how respondents articulated the impact they felt the programme had on them and their perceptions of the outcomes of engaging. When looking at the data (Table 2) what becomes clear is that respondents seemed to feel that engaging had quite a dramatic impact on them as an individual and that this in turn had influenced the way in which they looked to operate and manage the business. This was evident not only during the time they had participated in LEAD but also in the 5-year period thereafter. Robert, for example, emphasized that one of his greatest changes was how he ran his business. In 2004, he said, 'I do a massive number of hours, you can't expect people who you are paying to do the hours you do'. Five years later he said, 'When I'm not needed in the office now, I go home'. Rose commented that 'To the outside observer my company probably looks the same but anybody who spent a day in it five years ago would not recognise it in terms of atmosphere and attitude now'.

From the data presented in Table 2, it is clear on joining the LEAD programme some respondents (Amanda, Duncan and Laura) saw themselves as managers and were looking to the programme to help them address management aspects related to the business. On the other hand, others (Robert and Rose) were initially talking about leadership and the need to become better leaders. The way respondents perceived their reasons for joining the programme is interesting. Not only do the data demonstrate an individual development aspect, it is also clear that all respondents saw the programme as a mechanism to take a more strategic view of the business.

Specific themes emerging from the data included increased confidence, learning to delegate and changing the way the business ran. Confidence was a key theme during the programme. Amanda commented, 'One of the biggest things that I have

Table 2. The impact of engaging on the owner/manager and the business.

	Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Rose	<p>The business had a very formal leadership style which isn't where I sit happily. I think in the past the leadership has been quite dictatorial. Within my organisation the roles are very clearly defined and generally people don't have the opportunity to work with others. The team doesn't see themselves as a team. I think it is always very difficult when you don't, when you can actually fulfil 90% of your role without interaction with other people and we are not an open plan office so people shut their doors and get on with it</p>	<p>I am more confident in my leadership ability and I communicate better. I have also learnt that I have tended to want to communicate but have worried too much about other people's views on whether I should or not rather than just going with my instincts. So I am learning to trust those instincts a bit more really rather than worry about what the others think</p>	<p>The long term impact of LEAD has been significant. To the outside observer my company probably looks the same but anybody who spent a day in it five years ago would not recognise it in terms of atmosphere and attitude now. There is much more delegation and training and a lot more coaching techniques used. It's also become a less formal environment and more relaxed. Pre LEAD I saw my role as providing answers, now I see my role as giving people the tools to find their own answers</p> <p>Recognising the same problems in other people and then thinking well actually that's the same problem I've got so if they can deal with it like that, stop seeing different experiences but people having, no matter what the business, similar problems. It stopped some of that presumption that I think a lot of small business owners have is that I'm the only one in this situation. It's the same the world over, it's just small business owners</p> <p>The first thing that comes to mind is the fact that there is empowerment in understanding that others are like-minded and share in similar</p>
Amanda	<p>One of the concerns is that I am too involved with management and not leadership and I think that I can see more and more the divisions between</p>	<p>One of the biggest things that I have got from LEAD is a lot more confidence. None of this has been a blinding flashing light, the difference is that my</p>	

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
<p>the two. I think management is where you actually tell people what you want them to do and leadership is where you help them make the right choices; I think leaders need to be intelligent and I think that society classes intelligence as having some form of qualifications, but I don't – I think being a leader is something you are more born with than taught how to be</p>	<p>perception of myself has gone from being in his shadow [the main shareholder] whereas I feel now that I stand completely autonomously and that I believe I am the best person in the business to run the business</p>	<p>experiences/pressures. There is a degree of isolation in being 'the Leader' but when you realise that others share in these feelings it gives you a confidence in who you are and what you have to say, even if it doesn't conform to the norm. Knowing that others on LEAD had doubts allowed me to accept my own. I often still refer to things I learnt at LEAD and there's more of a mental 'its ok to think/feel this because X said the same or X wouldn't put up with that'; My behaviour is definitely different in recent years as a result of LEAD. I often felt like I had to conform to the image I upheld of myself at work. Now I'm me. I say what I think in any situation, professional or personal. I can't be perfect stereo-typically, I can't be everything to everyone, but I do get it right a lot of the time and bring things to the table that others don't see. Staff do take the mickey about things I do or say but I know they always turn to me for help and direction so I have their respect, as well as feeling more comfortable allowing myself to be just that</p>

Duncan	<p>I'm going on LEAD because I want to see whether there is anything that I do from a management point of view and a business development point of view that needs to be changed. I'm going on it in the hope that I will come across completely new ideas to ways I had not dealt with before</p>	<p>The reason I came on LEAD was because I wanted to develop further than I have and I expected that when I came on it there would be new ideas, new approaches, new techniques, that I would then be able to apply to my business and also to apply to clients businesses with any problems. Some of the master classes fit into that category</p>	<p>LEAD has given me a completely different view on how I deal with clients and also staff and the various issues that they bring with them. Previously I would have been sorely tempted to dive in sort the problem out (without having any idea about any external factors) and thinking that the client or member of staff appreciated that being done. Sometimes they did and sometimes they DEFINITELY didn't; In quite a few cases had I actually taken more time to look and listen I would definitely have done things in a more LEAD orientated way. I now use my own life experiences (including Tales from LEAD) to try and give people a framework to work on and identify the possible steps that they could take to deal with the problem or decision that they need to deal with; So having gone from a purely financial role I now find myself as a new age accountant who actually tries to coach people in to finding the best paths for themselves, and their families in a number of cases, who tries to help people make sense of what is happening around them particularly at times like this and also helping them see that change is a benefit not a curse</p>
Robert	<p>I think the characteristics of leadership are massive. I think ability is</p>	<p>I still work longer hours than anybody else. I can't see that changing. One of</p>	<p>Probably the biggest difference between then and now is that when I'm not</p>

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

	Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
	<p>important. I think consistency is a very important thing. I don't think you can act one way one day and another way another day. It is far too easy for me to expect everybody to be able to do what I can do. Bluntly if they could all do what I can do they would do it for themselves and they wouldn't work for me. Also the hours – I think when it's your own business you do whatever hours – I mean I do a massive number of hours. You can't expect people who you are paying to do the hours you do even if they are committed to the target you are setting</p>	<p>my complaints is why nobody else works the hours I do, but I keep being told it is because it is not their business. I still don't see that as a reason. I am joking with you to an extent. I am actually planning next year that I will be even more actively involved. I certainly want to be on the road more. I want to try and use my strengths more and focus on what I do better</p>	<p>needed in the office I now go home. Whereas before I felt that because it was my business I had to nail myself to the desk and I wasn't leaving until the last person left and I was the first person to arrive in the morning. I don't feel that need now. I think I'm more confident in myself because of that; The single biggest benefit I think that LEAD offers any of the people who go on it is it doesn't tell you what to think but it makes you think</p>
Laura	<p>I am hoping this course will give me the skills to help manage my partner because that is one of the hardest things. I found it hard convincing him what skills I have got underneath and I still struggle with that to be fair and I quite often don't get the response that I need from him when I am asking him business questions</p>	<p>The course has made me realise I'm just like everyone else, we all have the same issues</p>	<p>I suppose the difference is now that I feel as though I have never looked better, I've never felt better, I've got so much more confidence and there's so many new situations coming my way that I'm really quite excited about life. I actually believe if I hadn't gone on LEAD I'd have either had a heart attack and not be here or I'd be very much looking like one of my aunts at the age of 65</p>

got from LEAD was a lot more confidence'. Some respondents (Amanda, Laura, Robert and Rose) displayed characteristics underpinning their feeling of loneliness and the need to be seen to be in control and as a result delegation does not feature to any great extent in the initial transcripts. What came out of the data, but which was not specifically thought of in the design of the course, was the extent to which the HEI generated network helped address the issue of loneliness. Amanda commented 5 years after the programme, 'There is a degree of isolation being the leader but when you realise that others [on LEAD] share in these feelings it gives you a confidence in who you are'. Rose made the point that her business has a very formal leadership style and that, 'the leadership has been quite dictatorial'. However, 5 years after completing LEAD she noted that, 'there is much more delegation and training. It's less formal and more relaxed'. Prior to starting LEAD Robert did not believe that his staff could do what he could do so delegation never featured in his thoughts about leadership, 'the characteristics of leadership are massive. I think ability is important'. In his view, he was the only person who could 'do' all the tasks necessary for the business, 'it is far too easy for me to expect everybody to be able to do what I can do'. Five years later, he recognized this style of behaviour as inadequate and commented, 'I felt that I had to nail myself to the desk and I wasn't leaving until the last person left. I don't feel that need now. I'm more confident in myself because of that'.

On joining a group of other SME owner/managers, respondents quickly realized that they all shared common problems. They all, to some extent, discussed the feelings of isolation and loneliness in running their businesses. The LEAD programme helped them to realize that their issues were an inevitable part of their context, not necessarily a symptom of their own failings. This helped them to grow confidence in their own abilities. Illustrating this 5 years later, Amanda said, in relation to working with other like-minded LEAD participants, 'it gives you a confidence in who you are and what you have to say'.

The increased confidence and better delegation demonstrated by all the participants resulted in them doing things differently in their businesses. Duncan said, 'LEAD has given me a completely different view on how I deal with people. I try to help people make sense of what is happening around them and help them to see change as a benefit not a curse'. Rose saw her role as, 'giving people the tools to find their own answers' and has embedded the reflective processes in her management practice. Amanda referred to her behaviour saying, 'my behaviour is definitely different in recent years as a result of LEAD. I had to conform to the image I upheld of myself at work. Now I'm me. I say what I think in any situation, professional or personal'.

The data presented here and in Table 2 clearly show that the engaging experience had impacted not only on respondents, at the individual level, but also on the way they operated within the business and performed their role.

From the beginning of the research, it was clear with all respondents that this programme had an impact on the owner/manager, especially over time. However, in addition, respondents felt that the culture of their organizations changed as a result of engaging. This was articulated as an outcome from the confidence in their abilities LEAD had provided. The increased confidence and skills of the owner/manager freed up the working relationships within each company so that employees were more confident about the communication processes and became more proactive.

Respondents felt that these benefits to the business were only achieved through joining LEAD. Robert, for instance, mentioned how he 'included other management far more in decisions and discussed things with them far more'. Reflecting on this later he said, 'I changed the business a lot because of LEAD'. This programme not only changed the way these individuals perceived their role but also how they actually managed their businesses. The process of engaging with the programme was felt to have had a positive impact. Respondents also appreciated time away from the business not only to improve the work/life balance but also recognized that time away gave them the opportunity to reflect on what was happening in their company. The different elements of the programme triggered reflection which prompted changes at a strategic level.

4.2. Experiences of engaging: Trust and an evolving network

While the responses presented in Section 4.1 demonstrate a positive side to impact and outcomes of engaging, we felt it was important to delve deeper into this experience. Our reasoning was that we wanted to try to generate a better understanding of how and why respondents felt the way they did. We felt this would not only help develop our understanding but also our appreciation of what respondents did actually gain. One thing that became clear was that all respondents felt they had limited access to people they could talk to about the issues that concerned them. Interestingly, there is little evidence among respondents of trust in and with their staff. Rose for example commented, 'if my manager has got her door shut she knows that she will walk out and find people chatting'. Amanda's comment reflects a similar situation, 'if you are incompetent then people think they can get away with things with you'. Yet, data demonstrate that the programme appears to create openness and trust amongst its participants (Table 3).

However, interviews during LEAD and after LEAD show the dramatic nature of the change participants have experienced. The same people who did not really trust their staff are now confidently expressing their involvement of staff as a good thing. Amanda said, 'I see myself far more as a leader than a manager. Part of that is the trust in my LEAD friends that has allowed me to trust my staff better'.

Trust was also evident in other ways. Take Rose, for instance. She made the point that 'the building of trust by realising that other people are dealing with similar issues is very helpful and useful'. In the final transcripts she said, 'to have that trust where you've got people who are going through the same pressures and the same experiences is invaluable'. All of the participants felt that they had to be immersed in the LEAD process and that it took time to build up trust. Trust appeared to play a big part in the way individuals were prepared to engage with the HEI and with each other. Some respondents were initially concerned about being able to participate. For instance, on starting the programme, Laura commented, 'I didn't know if I was going to be able to compete with them'. Laura gave some insight into how the process of trust developed, 'the length of the programme [10 months] meant you built up good relationships, had I just gone on a short programme for two weeks I don't think I would have got the same sort of benefit'. Interestingly, it was the relationships that individuals became immersed in that enabled this trust to develop.

Table 3. The experiences of engaging and the role of trust.

	Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Rose	If my manager has got her door shut she knows that she will walk out and find people chatting and it is fine within reason but you know they actually have to be at a level where they are doing the work because it needs to be done not because the boss is going to walk in any minute	The building of trust by realising that other people are dealing with similar issues is very helpful and useful. I have lots of friends but very few who are in business and it is completely different owning a business as opposed to being employed in one. So for me this is probably the only opportunity I really have to be completely open with people who understand exactly because they are in the same boat	I think to have that trust where you've got people who are going through the same pressures and the same experiences is invaluable. There are very few opportunities to do that because most people you come into contact with in business are with customers or suppliers, neither of whom you ever want to admit you've got a problem to
Amanda	If you are incompetent then people think they can get away with things with you. It is just human nature for people to try out certain things for an easy life. The problem that we have is the team underneath us aren't strong enough yet and we need to get more people in place but we are not making money at the moment so I have to run myself ragged and it is all a bit of a vicious circle at times	One of the things that I am worrying about in the back of my mind is when it all finishes because at the moment I have got people around me on LEAD who have similar problems. I have got people to talk to that I trust and I have got friendly, calm faces around. I'm going to be a bit sad when it ends	It was never that I didn't trust the people I work with but for some silly reason I kept them all in departments depending on what their job was. On LEAD certain people in the first few days appeared to be quite stand-offish and they have actually been some to the people that I became closest to. I do see myself far more as a leader, before I saw myself as a manager. Part of that is the trust in my LEAD friends that has allowed me to trust my staff better
Robert	We have got a good business and we should have a great business. We have a number of difficulties. I am very bad at identifying people who would be good for the business – very bad at it.	My style of leadership is something I have looked at, I don't think I have changed it fundamentally. I think I have tweaked it in a number of areas because of LEAD. One of my staff	I changed the business a lot because of LEAD. I think the atmosphere in the company is better, the staff are happier, everybody like being here more. I sent Jill, who is in charge of

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

	Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
	<p>I have appointed half a dozen salesmen that haven't worked for us and they have cost me £20–25,000 each to find out that they are not going to work. Now partly that might be that I am getting wrong in directing them which is partly why I wanted to find out more about leadership</p>	<p>described it as a benevolent dictatorship which I think is a fair description and I do tend to be very positive on how I like things done. I have included other management far more in decisions and discussed things with them far more. I have actually had a sales meeting that I didn't attend and I got the sales force to run their own sales meeting</p>	<p>administration, on LEAD. She is more confident, she understands more where the business is going and that's without me talking to her and I think that's come from the university</p>
Duncan	<p>I don't think there's many situations that you will come across where you would be able to sit down in an open environment and generally discuss which direction you are going in</p>	<p>The normal sort of relationship I tend to get with people in business is the accountant/client interface that stops the kind of reactions I have got when I have dealt with people in LEAD. LEAD is more peer based. There is not the barrier there anymore. That is why I have been able to learn basically so much from everybody on the course because it has given me an insight into how people view</p>	<p>I'm sure if I met any of the connections in LEAD they'd still be as strong as they were. But I've deliberately not pursued the LEAD connections form a client point of view. There was somebody in our cohort who was thinking of changing accountants and asked me to give him a price. So I gave him a price and he said well actually no I've decided to use somebody else because you just seem to be</p>

- accountants and what they actually need and what they want and what I can do for them
- Because we did all disclose some personal information, we built up real trust. And I know that if I've got a personal issue that I don't want to discuss with my husband, I just ring one of them and say how do I tackle this?
- When I first went I was very very nervous about starting the LEAD programme. I am a graduate myself but that was twenty years ago. My biggest fear had to do essays and do exams. So I felt quite nervous because I wasn't sure what these other business owners were going to be like, and I didn't know if I was going to be able to compete with them
- having that many problems in your practice that I didn't think it was worth it. I thought, this is not really what it's all about
- I think the fact it was the length of the programme meant that you did build up friendships and good relationships with people along the way. Had I just gone on a short programme for two weeks I don't think I would have got the same sort of benefit. I benefitted from the friendships that I formed with people. Most of them were very similar to me in our outlook and what we were experiencing so that was good, created my own support network. I've actually got stronger links now with some of the members from cohorts two, three and four because there is nobody from cohort one that has kept contact with anyone. It just seemed to dissolve. However, I do know that if I picked up the phone to any of them then I could have a nice lengthy chat and you know things would be great
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In the very initial stages of LEAD, participants are required to attend a 2-day event with an overnight stay doing a variety of experiential team building exercises. For most, this is the first time they have experienced such an event. It is also rare for them to take 2 days out of running their business. This experience sets the scene for the next 10 months and participants refer back to these 2 days throughout the programme. This experiential learning might help in the development of trust because of the type of team-building situations the group is placed in. Although not an academic programme, participants are very much made to feel part of the university; they sit in lecture theatres, the language is biased towards academia and programme content being delivered, although practical in nature, is always anchored in theory. In addition, delegates recognize the structure of the university as being an established reputable place of study (Zhang and Hamilton 2010). While respondents had a view of a university, they perceived its relevance in different ways. Laura thought the university was important, Rose and Robert did not think trust would have been created without the university and Amanda felt the university simply channelled the activities in a professional way to bring out the learning. While the views of respondents are articulated differently, what all respondents do demonstrate is the relevance of the HEI to their experiences of engaging and it being a mechanism for bringing people together.

What did strike us as particularly interesting was the extent to which respondents talked about the evolving networks they became immersed in as a consequence of LEAD and the benefits that accrued through the ties they developed. All participants had some involvement with a network prior to starting LEAD. All of them viewed their networks as an external resource and not part of their organization. Attitudes varied depending on how happy or otherwise individuals were about participating in these. Rose, in talking about her network experiences, expresses herself saying, 'I would literally be standing outside the door with sweaty palms and it would take a lot of will power not to just walk away'. Whereas Robert confidently attended a network prior to joining LEAD and was honest saying these pre-LEAD networks were all about selling, 'I go and sell to people there... I wasn't looking to learn anything from them'. It is clear from the comments presented in Table 4 that time involved with LEAD has built up participants' networking abilities with startlingly different views 4 or 5 years after LEAD. Amanda sums up the change with her frank admission, 'I've got a LEAD friend and he tells me things he wouldn't even tell his wife'.

Comments suggest that what the LEAD programme has done is provide a mechanism for the emergence of a network of individuals and that through this network those who were part of it supported the others. This seems to reflect the importance of networks and that through networks social capital is created which supports the SME owner/manager (Portes 1998; Chell and Baines 2000; Anderson and Jack 2002; Hoang and Antoncic 2003; Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007). As the findings here show, this emerged through a process of developing trust, interaction, associability, sociability and interdependency. This reflects the findings of Anderson, Park, and Jack (2007) who considered social capital within the entrepreneurial context. However, what is striking here is that it was the LEAD programme that provided the mechanism for the creation of a network and the building of social capital.

Table 4. The role of HEI and experiential learning.

	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Rose	I think for me the one of the problems I have found is that the master classes are wonderful because you get lots of ideas but sometimes the chance to reflect and really consider and maybe implement things – there isn't enough time . . . I think maybe a realisation that there is more than one way of looking at things	I think it was probably the whole thing, I think each strand brought its own particular piece to the jigsaw, or maybe side to the piece to the jigsaw . . . [LEAD] sort of triggers things off and even though you think oh this is going to be a nice jolly time it doesn't apply to my business inevitably its starts, things come through and you're into oh yes mmm. But without the coaching and the action learning the opportunity to develop those thoughts wouldn't happen in the same way I think because I think you're right taking time out of the business per se is invaluable and it should almost be compulsory that every business owner does that I think because it's the time away from the desk that gives you that opportunity to focus on things . . . I'm a great fan of action learning because I've done more action learning since that first lot. And I think from the very basic level of the opportunity to improve your questioning skills and your coaching skills effectively[] And being able to work through a problem gives you a great learning opportunity
Duncan	And [LEAD] is making me reappraise what I do and why I do what I do And unusual though they are, I've seen quite a few different thought processes from the different members on LEAD	And LEAD was very useful for my point of view because it gave me a number of different tools [] as an alternative way of dealing with things But [LEAD] is definitely something that without a doubt makes a difference. And it made a difference from my point of view. After LEAD my six year old son was diagnosed with Lymphoblastic Leukaemia. His treatment lasts over three years and in year one I probably spent three months in the office, if that, and years two and three were not much better. Because of LEAD I was able to deal with the impact of the diagnosis on my personal life, the master class on emotional capital made incredible sense to me

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Laura	The master class speakers have given me real insights into their minds, experiences to relate back to life. It's also a good insight to meet other business managers and to see what the university is doing, what training opportunities there are – I've driven past it may thousands of times and not really thought about what goes on	and stopped me holding on to things that simply did not matter or fit any more. . . . Our turnover and profitability has remained fairly constant. This is despite me contributing about one thousand hours less in each year at £200 per hour. Without LEAD I am certain that I would have been forced to sell the business. With LEAD I had the business and mental tools to deal with a very challenging situation and get through it that opportunity to meet different people or to have different learning experiences. . . . Well the key thing that LEAD changed, all things mental, physical. . . . The master classes made a massive difference because the content, I always picked something out from the content that was relevant to me at the time and I think I've said before the Chris Moon one particularly where he said whatever life throws at you don't be the victim. And that was a major light bulb moment for me
Amanda	I thought it would be more about the business and I was quite shocked how much it was about me. I can see that to some extent that I am the business and the way I behave. . . . So I sit there and it's like loads of light bulbs coming on. . . . It is all just led it has all been a build up to where I am now and the reflective time without actually realising it is all adding in. . . . I had a problem with a member of staff the other day and I took her off site and just spent a bit of time with her a couple of hours in the evening and normally I would try and solve her problems and motivate her and I wasn't and I realised what I was doing was asking her to find her own answers	What LEAD is unaware of and again just in the spirit of being honest and open, which I don't know whether I put, it's all about the applications that I learnt some fantastic things at LEAD but then you can only, you only learn from it if you apply it to yourself don't you. . . . I don't believe that LEAD failed me in any way, because if I'd had the same model I think that I would be working in the business, not on the business. . . . I mean conversations I've had with the life coaches are fascinating you know that set snowballs going because I started to think about my behaviour

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Robert	The university was not my first thought in getting any help or advice for my business. It was a surprise to me that the LEAD programme existed at all. I think partly it's the environment. It doesn't feel like part of the outside world, when you are in LEAD. The action learning sets the agreement that everything is confidential and stays in the room and that it's followed out into the master classes and everything else	I don't think LEAD would have worked outside of the university. It provided stimulus's that promoted discussion. So I think the course is important. I don't think you could have just dumped a group of people together, and I was surprised at who I learnt from

4.3. Reflection and experiential learning

A further aspect that did come through from the data relates to reflection and how the process associated with this supported learning. Rose, for instance, talks about being given the 'chance to reflect'. Robert articulates the 'single biggest benefit that LEAD offers' is that 'it doesn't tell you what to think, but it makes you think'. Interestingly, the metaphor of light bulbs occurs more than once. Amanda talks about 'light bulbs coming on', while Laura refers to a 'major light bulb moment'. In other instances respondents articulated this reflection more clearly. Rose comments that LEAD 'sort of triggers things off' and that 'being able to work through a problem gives you a great learning opportunity'. Amanda says that 'the reflective time without actually realising it, is all adding in'. It appears that engagement in the process of the programme provides reflection and triggers learning.

Learning through reflection was linked to each of the elements of the programme but many commented on it being the combination that was important, for example, Rose said 'I think it was probably the whole thing, I think each strand brought its own particular piece to the jigsaw'. Laura talks about the opportunity 'to have different learning experiences'. Amanda said she thought the programme would be all about the business, but the emphasis on personal reflection made her feel that it was about her, and her practice as an owner/manager in the business 'I was quite shocked how much it was about me'. Five years later, she still said that the programme had meant 'I started to think about my behaviour'. Duncan commented that LEAD 'is making me reappraise what I do, and why I do what I do'. It seems that the integrated learning model impacts on the individuals themselves and the way they operate the business.

The respondents identified that the different interactions and processes in the integrated learning model trigger reflection which in turn they articulate as learning. What we found here supports the work of Cope (2001, 2003, 2005a) and the understanding of how SME owner/managers can reflect on their experience

Table 5. Experiences of engaging producing a network benefit.

	Pre-start of LEAD (from October 2004)	Middle of LEAD (April 2005)	Five years later (February 2009)
Rose	The idea of walking into a room full of strangers and I would literally be standing outside the door with sweaty palms and it would probably take a lot of will power not to just walk away and pretend haven't got there at all	I like the fact that it is a group of people who are like-minded but with very different experiences in business. For me the only time I talk to other business people is when I am talking to my competitors which means you don't ever talk about things honestly. So to have the networking side of LEAD is something I like	Being able to work through a problem gives you a great learning opportunity. I think the level of support for everybody was tremendous and I think one of the great things was there was always somebody you could talk to about something
Robert	I attend a forum put together of creative industries but if I'm being honest I go and sell to people there . . . I wasn't looking to learn anything from them. I am the owner of my business and nobody knows the business better than myself	In my particular industry networking hasn't been a big feature but it has been very helpful to meet other people on LEAD with similar businesses. One of the important things about the whole LEAD programme has been having confidence in the other people in the group. The confidence that you could talk about your problems and know they weren't going to be talked about outside the group or anything	The benefit of LEAD was meeting other people on the course and talking to them and realising that they had the same problems. I got as much from listening to other people on the course as from a lecture. That gave me confidence as I thought I can't be the only one who has cash flow problems and the like. Martin and I did the business exchange, I got a lot from Martin, and I still do. He and I are still in regular contact. We meet up three, four, five times a year on various things. We meet and we talk and we discuss problems and I find that very very useful
Amanda	There are things like the Federation of Small Businesses and so on which I	I do believe you learn from people I think no matter who they are. If you	I've got a LEAD friend and he tells me things he wouldn't even tell his wife

and I tell him things that most people might be shocked at and I'm okay with that

come into contact with them in your network you should try to take something from it

am a member of. But people don't get to know each other. You meet once a month or once a quarter and it's a fleeting visit. So, whilst you do talk to a lot of people and know what they are doing, there are very few people you can just talk openly to about your business

I have used what I have learnt at LEAD in my advice to clients and I have recommended a substantial number of clients to take part in the programme. Life changing? Probably but not how I expected it to be

One of the things we try to do is get a client group together of five or ten clients to comment on what we did, what we should be doing and how we should be doing it, but also they would interact between the different businesses as well

I think networking is important, I know a lot of the others on LEAD have enjoyed keeping their links, It's how long it lasts. I'm quite impressed that a lot of groups have stayed together. But I suppose there's only a certain amount of master classes you can listen to without coming away with the same message. And perhaps because LEAD is quite generalist that maybe after LEAD there should be a series of specific workshops, you know looking at exit strategies or how to handle the recession or where you can borrow money

I really like the group rapport, we are similar people with similar approaches to life and sense of humour. This has made me realise I'm just like everyone else, we all have the same issues

When I started our business I had nobody to ask – that is the problem. I just had nobody to ask, nobody to bounce ideas with – so I end up stewing on it and stressing because of it – I hate stress. So I am hoping that on LEAD you meet other people in similar situations who have been there and I can talk to them about it and I need a clearer path how to manage it

Duncan

Laura

and behaviours and trigger entrepreneurial learning. The impact of the programme appears to be linked to the ability of respondents to reflect on themselves as an owner-manager, their behaviour and the way they operate the business (Table 5).

The data collected 5 years after the completion of LEAD suggests that participants had fundamentally changed the way they ran their businesses, dealt with their staff and customers (see Table 2) and that this was an outcome of the LEAD programme. There are ways in which respondents articulate taking those reflective practices back into the business, for example drawing on action learning principles to deal with staff problems. The owner-managers said that they had moved from assuming that they should solve problems to supporting others. As Amanda says when talking about a member of staff, 'normally I would try and solve her problems and motivate her and I wasn't and I realised what I was doing was asking her to find her own answers'.

5. Interpretation and analysis

5.1. *Enhancing engagement*

Learning is crucially linked to reflection and to the notion of different levels of learning (Cope 2003, 432). Higher levels of learning are associated with intense reflection and can lead to 'transformative' learning (Cope 2003, 444). These higher levels of learning are described as having 'the capacity to create entirely new assumptions and strategies for effective action' (Cope 2003, 432). Duncan's comment about the programme 'making me re-appraise what I do' indicates a fundamental re-assessment of practice in the business that was achieved through the process of reflection. Rose's observation that her company was unrecognizable 5 years on from LEAD suggests this particular engagement programme not only impacts on the individual but has the capacity to change business practices and the way a business operates in the long term.

The findings confirm, empirically, the role of reflection in the entrepreneurial learning process. The widely endorsed view that entrepreneurial learning is based on experience and action oriented (Young and Sexton 1997; Deakins and Freel 1998; Cope and Watts 2000; Minniti and Bygrave 2001) is linked to calls for a deeper understanding of how owner-managers of SMEs learn from experience (Reuber and Fischer 1993; Harrison and Leitch 2005). Subsequently, researchers have drawn on learning theorists to develop helpful explanatory conceptual frameworks. For example, Corbett (2005) drew heavily on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory to develop a model of opportunity creation. More broadly, Cope and Watts (2000) and Cope (2001, 2003, 2005a) rely on a whole range of theorists from individual, organizational and adult learning literatures.

The findings presented demonstrate an extension of the way in which entrepreneurial learning might take place. Firstly, they suggest that entrepreneurial learning does not have to depend upon discontinuous, significant 'learning events' occurring in the day-to-day running of the business as argued by many theorists (Young and Sexton 1997; Deakins and Freel 1998; Rae and Carswell 2000; Taylor and Thorpe 2000; Minniti and Bygrave 2001; Cope 2003, 2005a). It appears that entrepreneurial learning can be facilitated through the design of an education programme that provokes reflection which can lead to 'transformative' learning. Secondly, the

learning is not only based on the experience of the owner/managers themselves but indirectly through reflecting on the experience of others. This supports Sullivan (2000) whose study reported facilitating entrepreneurial learning from critical incidents supported by the use of entrepreneurs as mentors.

This is a form of what might be called 'second-order experiential learning' as opposed to experiential learning based on firsthand experience. This is articulated in two ways by respondents. Firstly, in relation to insights from the Master Classes, reflecting on the experience of others could bring what Laura termed a 'major light bulb moment'. Secondly, the peer-to-peer learning that has been identified in relation to the programme (Zhang and Hamilton 2009, 2010) relies essentially on the ability for the participants to learn through reflecting on the experience of others. This insight suggests a path to extending existing experiential entrepreneurial learning theory to include an examination of the process of learning through the experience of others.

There are instances where although overall the benefits of LEAD are positive our knowledge of the programme and the data presented makes us aware of more negative elements. First, if the businesses were competitors, there was evidence to suggest negative trust. Laura, for example, talked of how another participant stole a business idea she was in the process of developing. Duncan talks of an instance where 'There was somebody in our cohort who was thinking of changing accountants and asked me to give him a price. So I gave him a price and he said well actually no I've decided to use somebody else because you just seem to be having that many problems in your practice that I didn't think it was worth it'. Second, the programme has been a work in progress and mistakes were made in early iterations. In response to feedback, initial events became induction days where participants got to know each other well rather than a launch day which was attended by government agents, academics and participants. Third, in some instances it was not the owner/manager who attended but instead a senior manager. However, if that senior manager did not have the power to implement the changes prompted by the programme they became frustrated.

5.2. *The impact of engagement*

The findings also show that through the LEAD programme the HEI instigated the creation of a new network. While the HEI's role might be described as that of broker (Aldrich 1989), it was noticeably important. The HEI was able through its LEAD programme to create a supportive and comfortable environment. This was assisted through the use of social events and the building of trust. However, it is evident that this relies on a social process and can only be developed over time and once knowledge about other members of the group was gained through social interaction and understanding.

The evolving network alleviated the feelings of loneliness and helped build confidence because respondents felt comfortable and at ease with each other and developed trust. However, trust was a key aspect of building relationships with others and this aspect of trust comes through clearly in our data and the data of others who have looked at similar issues (Zhang and Hamilton 2010). Trust has been described as a 'coin of social exchange' (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007, 244) and it is social trust that is seen to facilitate co-ordination and co-operation between

individuals (Putnam 1995). Perhaps the greatest benefit of the LEAD programme is the way the creation of a new network that is high in trust provides peer-to-peer role models that inspires leadership development within its participants. To a great extent, all the interviewees displayed this. Others have demonstrated that with whom entrepreneurs have ties has implications for the ways in which the business is operated, managed and functions (Greve and Salaff 2003; Jack 2005; Elfring and Hulsink 2007). This is supported by the findings of the study reported here.

The LEAD programme is funded by the local development agency (NWDA). Neergaard and Ulhoi (2006) found that government agency may destroy existing cooperative arrangements. Others (see e.g. Jack et al. 2010; Zhang and Hamilton 2010) have concerns about network intervention and instigation within the small business context. However, what the findings from the study show is that the HEI provided the mechanism which facilitated the network process. By bringing people together in the way it did the LEAD programme established through the HEI might even be described as a catalyst for creating change.

Change came about through the development of social trust. This in turn led to the development of social capital which helped to support the owner/managers and their activities. Social capital has been said to represent an investment of social resources with expected returns and that those expected returns can apply directly or indirectly now or possibly in the future (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007). Certainly our data seem to resonate with the notion of social capital and the evidence from our findings is that networks of social capital are being created. The benefit for respondents permeates all transcripts. The idea of social capital implies that individuals should look to develop associations and build bonds that are applicable to their businesses and activities (Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007). This is what seems to have been the case here. Moreover, the argument made in the literature is that the generation of social capital is good for owner/managers whose world otherwise can be a lonely place (Fafchamps and Minten 1999; Liao and Welsch 2005). The evolving network respondents became a part of through LEAD, quickly established social capital (Burt 1992) and this social capital was robust enough to exist over time and well beyond the life of the LEAD programme.

Through the LEAD programme contacts were converted into socio-economic bonds through the development of trust. This conversion process took place as understanding about each others was gained, as knowledge about the other was increased and as participants gained experience of each other and learned how to trust the others but only over time. In many ways, the socio-economic bonds generated through the LEAD programme helped determine the future shape and form of the businesses. By demonstrating the positive role that the HEI had on this process through engaging owner/managers in an entrepreneurship education programme, the study reported here therefore also extends recent work which considers evolutionary perspectives on networks and co-operation in and between organizations (Hite 2005; Neergaard and Ulhoi 2006).

6. Implications and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to consider the questions: *What factors do participants believe enhance the effectiveness of HEI and SME engagement? And what impact, if*

any, do participants perceive such engagement has upon them as an individual operating within an SME and their company operations? In addressing our questions, this study presented a number of interesting findings that contribute to knowledge and understanding about entrepreneurship education for SMEs. This study also has implications for researchers and those involved in the design and delivery of SME engagement programmes at/with HEIs.

This study demonstrates some useful lessons for enhancing the effectiveness of HEI/SME engagement. First, reflecting on both the individual's experience and that of others increases the capacity to learn. In turn, this process enhances knowledge and understanding. Thus, this study supports the argument that entrepreneurs learn as and when they need knowledge and that they have a preferred style of experiential learning (Deakins and Freel 1998; Cope 2003). It extends our understanding of the link between entrepreneurial learning and reflection and how these processes might be facilitated by the design of SME engagement. The creation of trust and sociability are key aspects for the long-term success of the experience of engaging. However, this must be coupled with content that is rich in reflection opportunities. It is, therefore, important that HEIs recognize what creates these aspects as they may well be context specific. Second, through Regional Development Agency funding, HEIs are able to instigate networks that are effective in supporting programme participants. Such networks are high in trust and clearly support learning through peer-to-peer activities. These networks can continue beyond the life of a programme. This supports the work of Jack et al. (2010) who found that networks evolve over time into something which suits and supports the needs of its members. Linked to this, and similar to Pittaway et al. (2004), this study shows that building informality and a social element into the design of a HEI/SME programme is important because it provides owner/managers with the opportunity to develop relationships, build trust and social capital in a way that expands their ability to learn. Third, this study shows that for the SME owner/manager engaging can provide the opportunity to bring about change. Such change can have a positive impact on the development of the SME and the individual business owner/manager. Owner/managers immersed in a supportive environment are able to share experiences and seek support and advice. Engaging with the HEI sector and this type of programme can therefore aid the business development process.

This study highlights areas for future research. First, it highlights the need for more work that considers the role and impact of relevant agencies in business engagement. While previous work has questioned whether or not agencies, especially those established and supported by Governments, do actually have a role to play (Neergaard and Ulhoi 2006; Jack et al. 2010; Zhang and Hamilton 2010), the study reported here demonstrates a successful engagement story which would not have happened without the Regional Development Agency. It has been argued that the HEI/SME interface can be difficult and fraught for many reasons (Johnston, Hamilton, and Zhang 2008). Through our study, we have contributed to this debate and demonstrated a positive outcome from this relationship and how this was brought about. Nevertheless, we recognize this as only one example. Therefore, it would be useful if this study was replicated. Second, this study demonstrates the role and impact of network relationships. However, it does overlook the intermediaries involved such as the Regional Development Agency and their role in supporting the engagement process. Within the context of innovation, Howells (2006) notes that

more research which considers intermediaries, the types of functions or roles they offer, how these have evolved over time but especially the nature of network relationships they are immersed in is needed. We would like to see more work on these aspects to strengthen our appreciation of the role they might play in influencing the development of such networks. Third, this study shows that engaging with a HEI can have long-term implications for SMEs and their owner/managers. We do feel that longitudinal work designed to consider the themes explored here and/or similar issues would be useful in further enhancing our knowledge and understanding about the pros and cons of such engagement and its wider regional impact.

Finally in addressing our research questions, we realize there are limitations to our study in that it focused on one programme, delivered by one institution, in a single region with a small number of respondents. However, we wanted to consider the situations of participants in-depth. We feel the research questions posed and the approach used allowed us to achieve this. It also allowed us to seek out negative as well as positive aspects. However, as reported few negative aspects were found. It might be that this is due to the construction of the research questions and that this might have limited the need to articulate the negative aspects. We do feel that this is an area for further research. We appreciate the need to consider performance, measure turnover and GVA. However, others have looked at these aspects (Cox and Taylor 2006; Wren and Jones 2006). Rather than deal with harsh financial indicators and the tools used to explore these, we purposefully chose to address the softer side of HEI/SME engagement. In doing so, we have demonstrated, using an interpretivist position and applying qualitative techniques to explore the situations of participants, the consequences HEI/SME engagement can have on the owner/manager, the workforce and the wider region. Through evolving networks and the relationships participants became embedded in, a shared perspective emerged. This became a mechanism for changing the business and its operations.

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Notes

1. LEAD was funded by the NWDA, and the programme is currently being rolled out across the North West of England via a network of 12 delivery partners. This roll out will see the total number of LEAD alumni exceed 1500 by 2013. In addition, LEAD Wales is to be launched by Swansea University, and will see over 600 SME owners from that country benefit from the programme by 2015. Lancaster University is assisting these new providers to develop and deliver their programmes, and the impact of LEAD is now evident on a significant scale.
2. ESRC Business Placement Fellow entitled 'Entrepreneur-in-Residence' RES-186-27-0003.
3. Growth-oriented businesses are selected to join the LEAD programme on a range of qualitative and quantitative criteria. These include number of employees but also growth aspirations of the individual owner/manager who has to be the main decision maker (Peters 2011).

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