

Promoting environmental sustainability in SMEs: the role of intermediaries

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In recent years, governments around the world have introduced a variety of policies designed to address environmentally damaging practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including social enterprises (e.g. Blundel et al. 2013; Calogirou et al. 2010; Parker et al. 2009). This is important for a number of reasons, including: the aggregate environmental impact of SMEs; their central role in meeting governmental targets (e.g. reducing greenhouse gas emissions); and their capacity to influence broader patterns of production and consumption. There is also an emerging research strand that examines the role of intermediary organisations in promoting environmental sustainability in SMEs (Ortolano et al., 2014; Klewitz and Hansen, 2014; Weltzien Høivik and Shankar, 2011). Recent studies have found that, in the absence of effective support structures, intermediary organisations can sometimes take on a proto-institutional role (e.g. Gómez and Atun, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2002). Furthermore, these interventions have often proved effective in encouraging a longer-term transition towards more environmentally-benign business models, inter-organisational networks and patterns of entrepreneurial growth (e.g. Wahga et al., 2018; Vickers and Lyon 2014; Clarke et al. 2014). One potent argument for such interventions is that many SMEs have been slow to adopt environmental measures, with evidence suggesting that this is due to a combination of internal and external barriers, which include issues related to the individual values of SME owners and managers (e.g. Williams and Schaefer 2013, Schaefer et al. 2018). Other reasons include: the limited resources available to government agencies, both in developed and developing economies, and the tendency for SMEs to engage more actively with non-governmental organisations.

The successful applicant's research would investigate the proto-institutional role of intermediary organisations in advancing sustainable practices and environmental capabilities in SMEs. Your research proposal should relate directly to this theme, but could focus on any countries, regions and/or particular industry sectors. It would build on The Open University's work in this area, including studies conducted by Aqueel Wahga, Sarah Williams, Anja Schaefer and Richard Blundel.

About the supervisors:

Richard was co-lead on the ESRC Seminar Series 'Green Innovation: Making it Work' (2015-17) (www.open.ac.uk/esrc-green-innovation). He is currently lead academic on an ESRC-funded project on promoting sustainable enterprise, [Growing Greener](#) and an Honorary Fellow at the ESRC Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (www.cusp.ac.uk), which may also provide opportunities for networking and engagement. Aqueel's current research probes the micro-foundations of environmental capabilities in leatherworking SMEs in Pakistan, while also examining the barriers to environmental improvement in these firms. He is also collaborating with

Pakistan's leading business support agency, SMEDA on projects related to environmental sustainability.

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