

# Women in the Spotlight

## GET Visibility

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### Researching the SMEs of Northern Ireland's Food Sector

by Mariana Bogdanova

Dr Vlajic tells us about what it's like researching supply chain practices carried out by food producers and retailers. The QMS research project *Waste Not, Want Not* aims to tackle food waste and contribute to reshaping specific business practices as sustainable and part of the circular economy. Jelena and her research team have a small grant from Centre for Irish Business and Economic Performance and a list of expected research outputs for 2017.

SMEs make up 99% of the businesses in Northern Ireland but remain largely under-researched in comparison to large companies. The project starts a conversation around what it's like conducting research with SME enterprises in the region, and what developing knowledge sharing networks across sectors business and academia entails.

Research begins with getting information about SME business routines, usually by observing daily work practices – purchasing, making deliveries, taking stock of inventory, or setting up a stall in the market at the early hours of the day. What starts out as information exchange for understanding is expected to gradually grow into sharing knowledge and ideas about improvements, options, and solutions between the researcher and the practitioner. And it is quite different from carrying out research in large organisations.

As a researcher in a large company your point of contact is the R&D or Marketing Department who disclose the respective processes. Business activities are monitored, analysed, and improved upon by experts who have time to benchmark and share knowledge with their professional community. In contrast a micro enterprise is often a “one-man-band” short of time and resources.



Jelena, Lecturer QMS

“It's one thing to start the day at 4am and put your whole heart into your work... not the same as being a professional in a role from nine to five. In a micro enterprise the owner-manager are expected to take care of all aspects of business and make it work.” Dr Jelena Vlajic

As a small shop owner or food grower, you have to think twice about making any decision about what management academics sometimes casually call “strategy”. Relevant research approaches and skills are called for in order for academics to add value with workable strategies. They may have to start with exploring what is happening on the ground, learning the ropes of the business context in the process of constructing a detailed *case study*. Only

then the researcher would consult tried and tested models underpinning the operations, logistics and supply chain management disciplines.

Developing possible solutions together with the business is another type of collaborative research mode. *Action research* may be considered in cases where impact, rather than the furthering of knowledge, is the ultimate objective.

Case study and action research methodologies should not be confused with *consulting*, which requires empirical rather than theoretical justification. These differences can become a grey area especially when managing respondents' expectations for silver bullets from academic experts.



“In my case, SME managers know that they are not just talking to an academic from a multidisciplinary, engineering-management background, but with a pragmatist interested in real-world problems and solutions... Which also means they don't care what country I'm from or that I am a woman as we have shared interests. But case research informs my understanding of theory and I remain an academic throughout the fieldwork.”

Even without the theory-practice gap as a serious barrier to communication between academia and practice, doing research as a non-native is a challenge on its own. Establishing contacts and developing trust is even more difficult. Not being able to persuade people to disclose their business challenges can kill even the most promising research plan. Nevertheless Jelena is optimistic:

“I feel micro and small enterprises have been interested in talking to me so far because any improvement on how they conduct their business is a direct improvement on livelihoods. This is probably the most important aspect - being able to have the kind of impact which matters in practice.”