

Evaluation of the Advanced Institute of Management (AIM)

By Technopolis

Executive Summary

Background

The AIM initiative was instigated in 2001 by ESRC after many years of concern among the management and business research community and the funding councils about the quality and relevance of UK management and business research. In the early 2000s, this concern was combined with increasing interest from government as to the role of management in improving the productivity and competitiveness of UK businesses. As a result dedicated funding for a five year initiative in management and business research funding was made available from DTI (as was) via ESRC in the 2000 Spending Review. The Advanced Institute in Management (AIM), as the initiative became, was tasked with improving both the quality and impact of UK management and business research. In 2002 EPSRC joined the initiative as a funding partner and in 2007 AIM was funded for a second phase.

The basic shape of the delivery model for AIM, as a virtual institute of Fellows guided and overseen by a central Directorate, was developed by ESRC based on the portfolio of grant awarding schemes at its disposal. From 2003 AIM was governed by an Executive Steering Committee comprising the ESRC, EPSRC, senior academics, policy-makers and businesses. Its role was pragmatic, both steering AIM as representatives of the stakeholder communities and providing an executive function for AIM's Directors.

AIM was active for nine years from late 2003 until 2012 and supported 72 AIM Fellows across six fellowship cohorts. It expended just under £30M, just over two-thirds on the fellowships themselves and one-third on the Directors and Director's Office.

Conclusions

Rationale and objectives

The rationale for AIM was sound in that the dedicated funding allocated by DTI provided ESRC with an opportunity to address well-known and long-standing capacity and quality issues in UK management and business research *and* respond to the increasing policy focus on research relevance and impact. While these dual objectives are not inherently opposed, there is tension between them and therefore the AIM initiative was presented with a challenging task. Nevertheless the initiative provided a rare opportunity for the management and business research community to access funding dedicated to their field and for that reason alone was widely welcomed.

The objectives set for AIM were extensive in both scale and scope. It was tasked with improving the size and performance of the entire UK management community while also significantly changing the working practices of academics in terms of engagement with management practitioners. For a budget that, while large for ESRC, was relatively small with respect to existing research income and activity in the field (of the order of 3%), these objectives were over ambitious.

Design and implementation

The breadth of the ambitions for AIM, along with its high profile among the research community, was a challenge to its design and implementation for both ESRC and AIM's Directors. As a result it got off to a slow start as the strategy and delivery model evolved and organisational structures were put in place. While the basic model was defined by ESRC right at the start, it did not provide a detailed design, strategy or programme logic to explain the initiative's purpose and direct its implementation. Instead the initiative evolved over time with inputs from various stakeholders and driven, in part, by the practicalities of getting the initiative underway as quickly as possible.

One consequence of this was that key performance indicators for AIM were not developed until several years into the initiative. Furthermore the KPIs focused only on the direct outputs of the initiative or on very near-term effects. Without a clear strategy or targets AIM's purpose could not be effectively communicated to the relevant communities or its progress adequately assessed.

Greater strategic direction from ESRC at the start and the development of programme logic would have enabled the stakeholders to develop a common view as to the intended outputs and impacts of AIM. Nevertheless the evolutionary approach did enable ESRC and AIM's Directors to experiment with the model and some of the initial concepts for AIM were abandoned in the light of the early experience.

The resulting model for AIM resulted in a fairly conventional 'research first, dissemination second' approach to impact that was not equally suited to all of its objectives. The fellowship aspect of the model was well suited to AIM's academic objectives but less to its relevance and impact objectives. The model essentially treated engagement with practitioners as an activity parallel to rather than integrated with the research. The ability for practitioners to influence research agenda was limited. The Management Research Forums, for example, took place after the most of the Senior Fellows (and most of the research budget) had been allocated and much of the engagement activity took place once the research was near completion. The Director's Office went to great lengths to encourage research partnerships, make outputs accessible and facilitate dissemination and engagement, with a fair degree of success, but the delivery model was not well suited to engender a significant shift in working practices to co-produced research.

Academic impacts

AIM met or exceeded most of the KPIs assigned to indicate progress towards the academic focused objectives i.e. in the quality, quantity and capacity of management and business research. The fellowships model was particularly suited to scholarly study and research and it provided a unique opportunity for a group of existing and potential high quality management and business researchers to focus on research. The capacity building and networking activities were highly valued by the Fellows and AIM was able to establish a community of management and business researchers across the UK that was more than the sum of its parts and that continues, at an informal level, to the present day.

The majority of Fellows regarded their experience during AIM as having improved their research skills, the quantity and quality of their research outputs and their level of UK and international academic collaboration. The effect was particularly pronounced among the mid-career researchers who benefited from support at a critical point in their careers and therefore AIM made a significant contribution to their career progression. Furthermore the funding for international activities helped to raise the UK's international profile.

However quantitative evidence is limited as to the *additionality* of improvements in academic quality (i.e. effects in addition to what would have happened without AIM) and the impact beyond the group of academics directly supported. Bibliometric analyses of the group of AIM Fellows and the wider UK management and business community before, during and after AIM do not show clear improvements in research outputs aligned with AIM timescales. The AIM Fellows do not appear to have improved in bibliometric terms, although this may be a direct result of an initiative that predominantly funded existing high quality senior academics who had less room for improvement. At the UK level, the management and business community has been on an upward trajectory that pre-dates the start of AIM and is largely driven by the RAE and business school ranking systems. Therefore the majority of its academic impact has been confined to those supported directly.

In addition, the success rate of management and business applications to ESRC's competitive grants, a particular area of concern for both ESRC and academics, is currently at a lower level than before the AIM initiative. This suggests that the structural issues regarding the quality, or perception of quality, of management and business research by other social scientists remain. One effect of which is not only low grant success rates but also a disproportionately low application rate (relative to its size).

Non-academic outputs impacts

AIM addressed its non-academic focused objectives in two ways. Firstly it addressed the competitiveness objective through ensuring that the Fellows' planned research embraced one or more of four themes relevant to competitiveness. Secondly, the Director's Office undertook communication and engagement activities to increase the flow of research outputs to potential users. Together these activities aimed to produce relevant research (phase 1 of AIM) and increase opportunities for its use (phase 2). Impact was intended to occur via improved management practices and the development of appropriate public policy. Therefore, while the AIM Directors encouraged Fellows to engage with potential research users throughout their research, the overarching approach to impact was fairly traditional - research followed by dissemination.

The four research themes were intended to be broad to ensure that the initiative could attract a wide range of high quality researchers. Therefore, although the themes were relevant in a broad sense to understanding the causes of competitiveness, their very breadth, coupled with a bottom-up approach to the selection of Fellows, resulted in a research portfolio that was only loosely connected.

The KPIs largely monitored AIM's activities to stimulate impact by making AIM outputs more accessible and creating increased opportunities for interactions between researchers and research users. The Director's Office was extremely proactive and undertook communication and engagement activities on a considerable scale leading to greater dissemination of research outputs than would have happened as a result of the fellowships alone. The support and opportunities for engagement were for the most part welcomed by AIM Fellows and they gained skills in engaging with research users. Most of the non-academics that engaged with AIM had a positive experience and gained new personal skills in management some of which led to wider benefits within their organisations. Importantly both AIM Fellows and participating practitioners /policy-makers reported a greater propensity to engage with each other in future as a result of their experience.

There is evidence of impact attributable to AIM's research and engagement activities amongst the target communities of management practitioners (both in the private and public sectors) and

policy-makers. Non-academics who engaged with AIM were able to provide examples of impact as a result of their interactions. Impacts related to specific process improvements and business benefits but impacts also took the form of personal learning and development, new tools for management consultants and contributions to policy-making all of which provide opportunities for future impacts. The increased propensity for engagement also increases the likelihood of future interactions and impacts.

Examples of impacts include:

- Managers in businesses, consultancies and public organisations have learned new skills and deployed them within their own business and with their clients. For example, TNT have made use of frameworks and methodologies developed under AIM that have contributed to the design of better business processes and improved skills to respond to future challenges. The experience with AIM also increased the level of TNT's engagement with management research. Voluntary Action Camden implemented an analysis tool that enabled it to understand and improve its information processing and service operations leading to improved productivity and service delivery to its client base.
- AIM Fellows and their research outputs have contributed to a number of policy documents including: DTP's Innovation Report, *Competing in a Global Economy: the Innovation Challenge* (2003); DTI reports *Innovation in Services* (2008) and *Professional Business Services Vision 2020* (2010); Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's report *Strategies for Organisational Recovery in Local Government: Retrenchment, Repositioning and Reorganisation* (ODPM, *Learning From The Experience Of Recovery Policy Paper*) and the Treasury report *Globalisation and the UK: Strength and Opportunity to Meet the Economic Challenge* (2005). In addition, while in existence AIM provided policy-makers with an accessible single point of contact to a wide range of management and business researchers.

Role of the Director's Office

The Director's Office was central to the impact delivered by AIM. Without it AIM would have very likely become a loosely connected group of individual Fellows dispersed around the UK. The virtual institute aspect of AIM was largely driven by the Office with significant support provided by the Capacity Building Fellows. This was a considerable achievement given that Fellows held individual contracts with ESRC. The networking activities of the virtual institute contributed to Fellows' research skills providing intellectual stimulation, new theoretical and methodological insights as well as new research partners.

AIM's proactive approach to communication and engagement resulted in improved engagement skills among its Fellows and produced identifiable impacts among practitioners and policymakers. The experience also led to an increased propensity for engagement among academics and non-academics increasing the likelihood of future impacts. Without the Director's Office there would have been much less dissemination of research outputs, less interaction with practitioners and less impact.

Legacy

AIM has only recently come to an end and its legacy remains to be seen. AIM Practice will need on-going support if it is to continue to provide access to AIM's research outputs in a user-friendly format. At the present time the networks created by AIM continue at an informal level and its Fellows have a greater skills and motivation to engage with research users. However the networks will not continue indefinitely. While AIM has made some inroads into the quality and impact issues in management and business research, a recent study by the Association of Business Schools shows that many of the challenges remain. In light of the reduced expenditure

of both ESRC and EPSRC in the field, this suggests that research councils still need to consider ways to ensure sufficient research is supported and that its both accessible and relevant.

Recommendations

AIM was a departure for ESRC in its approach to research funding and as such was experimental. Experiments are not always successful but the AIM Directors, supported by the Executive Steering Committee, managed to evolve the initiative towards a solution that partially met a broad and ambitious set of objectives. Nevertheless with the benefit of hindsight and the experience gained by policy-makers, funding agencies and analysts since 2002, a number of recommendations can be made with respect to approaches to improving the quality and impact of management and business research:

- ESRC should not abandon experimentation and innovation in its approach to research funding. However the rationale and objectives of new initiatives should be more clearly articulated by ESRC and tested with stakeholders. Implementing a logical framework (or similar) approach to the design of initiatives would be highly beneficial.
- ESRC should consider the introduction of a competence centre style initiative in management and business research or a national programme designed along similar lines. At a minimum, where greater engagement and impact is sought, potential research users should be involved in the design phase of new initiatives or programmes.
- ESRC should consider the introduction fellowships for early and mid-career academics to enable them to focus on their research sufficiently early in their careers. To ensure the development of both research skills and relevance the fellowship model could include the provision of two mentors, one from the academic community and one from business or policymaking.
- ESRC needs to consider how to overcome the issue of low numbers of applications and low success rates of management and business research in responsive mode funding. This requires greater promotion of ESRC funding to the community to increase applications and (ii) processes to improve application success. The latter may require training in grant writing for potential applicants, increased representation of management and business researchers (in line with the relative size of the community) on ESRC peer review panels and/or a further dedicated fund for the field.