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Keeping it Agile: The Internationalisation Decision for The Agile Executive


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Keeping it Agile: The Internationalisation Decision for The Agile Executive

Case study on Executive level

Reference No. ECASA_2022_8 EN

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Abstract

This case focuses on The Agile Executive, a company looking for new market opportunities to expand their business in several possible European markets.

This case is also an exercise case for students to practice their knowledge from the perspective of strategic management, branding, marketing & sales, conducting market research and the development of feasible marketing entry strategies, all based on clear use of robust criteria, aligning with the core competences, resources and capabilities of the organisation.

This case can be divided into sub-cases that could focus on answering the questions of how to enter or expand in a target European market, which market to enter, how to position and brand the organisation, all based on a clear strategic analysis of the core competences of The Agile Executive.

Keywords

SME Growth, Internationalisation, Entry Strategies, Business Model, Core Competencies

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Introduction.

Tony Dignam had good reason to be satisfied with the achievements of his company, The Agile Executive. Having completed the planning and development of the business in late 2018, they launched in April 2019. The growth and progress had been great and despite falling into the constrained world shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, the business had expanded into new areas, opportunities and sectors, often as a direct result of the complex business landscape. Reflecting on the position of the business in 2021, Tony knew that there were significant decisions to be made to shape the future of The Agile Executive.

Expansion into new markets would be logical; they had expertise, abilities and a strong understanding of the needs of small and medium business enterprises (SMEs) in Ireland but would that skillset translate into new markets? Competition was strong and there were major players operating in every market. Besides, building a business on strong personal relationships was a hard one to replicate elsewhere. In addition, was The Agile Executive's ability to facilitate SMEs to tender and access government-sponsored supports limited to the Irish market?

There were major strategic issues to be decided, markets to be evaluated and the shape to the whole offering to be explored. It would need a lot of agile thinking to plan the future for the Agile Executive.

The Agile Executive Background

Tony Dignam has spent his career working in accounting, finance and as a senior Finance Director in the corporate world in Ireland. Growing frustrated with the limitations of such roles and exploring new avenues he opted to work part-time as a finance director. During this time, it became evident that two trends were emerging; there were experienced, highly qualified and ambitious finance executives who could bring their expertise to businesses in need of help and secondly, the corporate world was turning their back on such experienced and capable Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), opting to hire more junior, and cheaper staff to focus on the mundane tasks (often at the expense of strategic input). So, there was a market itself for part-time CFOs in major companies. Looking into this further, it became evident from surveys and research widely available that Irish SMEs in particular lacked the strategic skillset to grow at the rate of their European counterparts.

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While looking at potential offerings in the marketing place Tony and his business partner Paul McArdle were drawn to the FD Centre, based in the UK. The FD Centre provided part-time CFOs and worked with about 200 CFOs across various business sectors. Looking wider it was evident that the FD Centre was a global business, operating in 20 countries and had an operation in Ireland. Essentially this was a franchise model and was replicated with uniformity in all markets. While interesting this was not what they saw as the way forward. A one size-fit-all was not client-centred and looks like the wrong path.

With Paul on board, they teased out what the offering could be. Clearly part-time CFOs and finance would be the core of the business and that was a clear, if nascent market.

A driving force, perhaps from their experience in the corporate world, was the desire to be flexible, adaptive and centred on the client's needs. So, if an SME wanted a part-time CFO, great – but what if they needed advice on procurement or supply chain or a part-time sales director? Being flexible and agile was the key – The Agile Executive was created.

The Business Operation

The Agile Executive quickly signed up a range of clients, exactly the way they planned. As Tony recalls:

by April 2019, we launched the business, the Agile Executive, and very quickly signed up a number of clients. Again, we've been doing work in the background working relationships, which I think particularly in the Irish market, developing relationships with complimentary businesses, you know, was really important to us, we built relationships with a number of Accountancy practices, with some software suppliers, who would be selling other products or services, same target market that we would be looking to sell into.

However, it became apparent that a real opportunity was in building relationships, not directly with the SMEs but with the range of associations, government agencies and bodies that facilitated and supported SMEs (see appendix 1 for a listing of key agencies and bodies) with tailored funded programmes. These programmes were extensive, well-resourced but needed a new skillset. But in the first instance, any organisation that was to manage or deliver such programmes needed to well recognised. Tony stressed the need to build relationships:

We targeted some organisations, Small Firms Association (SFA), Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME). Enterprise Ireland, Intertrade, Ireland, where we wanted to start building

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relationships where we saw that they were in contact with providing services to the types of businesses that we wanted to provide services to.

The turning point was a seminar for small businesses who were the SFAs finalists, held in the centre of Ireland in January 2019. A team of seven Agile Executives led a workshop for SMEs to explore the multiple challenges they faced. The SFA were impressed and the Agile Executive was invited to pitch for a number of proposals. Later, meeting with the CEO of ISME, Tony was connected with Ross McCarthy, an expert in tendering. Tendering is often a struggle for SMEs, where they had little experience of approaching tenders, lacked the time to focus on it and as a result often failed to secure funds. The strong relationship with Ross allowed the Agile Executive to win tenders, benefitting clients in a multitude of ways.

This strength in tendering extended beyond their client base and they were asked to tender for the running of many of the programmes designed for the SMEs by key agencies. At that stage, the panel of experts working with the Agile Executive was around 100. As Tony stated:

So Ross was hugely influential, both in helping us with the tenders, but also introducing us to many people that were key to us being able to win and service those, those tenders. So we had to adapt our business very quickly when you know where the opportunity arose. You know, it wasn't necessarily what we intended to do. We didn't intend to be programme managers for mentoring programmes. When we set out, we were more part time CFOs part time, sales directors, but an opportunity presented itself switch very well. You know, very much fit this skill set that we had, the resources that we had available to us.

So, the Agile Executive began to branch out into new areas of tendering while securing a good group of clients for their part-time CFO offering. The business model was a simple one for part-time CFOs or any other part-time roles.; mentors signed up as associates to the Agile Executive panel and would be available and ready to assist clients with their short-term needs. Client companies were charged a daily rate and the Agile Executive managed the invoicing for the client company and in turn, paid the associate. It was a one-to-one business model and effective. Turnover grew seven-fold from 2019 to 2020.

However, with the tendering the process, timeline and model were different. The Agile Executive would pitch for a programme which was out to tender. This would involve working to a very detailed specification and range of criteria and each tender document would need to demonstrate multiple capabilities. Some programmes were smaller in scale, others could be programmes that would run for four years.

For example, ISME offer the back-to-business programme. This is a mentoring and coaching programme designed for up to sixty SMEs to develop new ideas and strategies. It is open to The ECASA project (2019-1-DE01-KA203-005037) is financed by Union funds (ERASMUS+). But the content of this document only reflects the views of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

members of ISME and funded by Skillsnet. Members of ISME can put forward managers and employees to take part and the cost of the programme is subsidised by ISME.

<https://www.isme.ie/courses/back-to-business-mentoring-coaching-programme/>

Another example would be IBEC (the Irish Business and Employers Federation) a professional body, funded by members to promote, lobby and represent the interests of firms in Ireland. Their programmes include management development, business law, health and safety and business finance to name a few.

In terms of building global competencies and developing export opportunities, Enterprise Ireland (EI) was the state body charged with this task. For example, EI offered a range of programmes to enhance export opportunities for SMEs <https://www.enterpriseireland.com/en/Management/develop-export-selling-capability/>; each programme was tailored to the needs of client companies and required EI to source experts, consultants and trainers to operate and deliver these programmes.

Tony hadn't realised the number of opportunities available through these programmes. While The Agile Executive expected to have approximately 40 clients for their original business model, this new programme-based model put them in contact with thousands of potential clients. In addition to the growing the business with programme tendering and management, it allowed the Agile Executive brand to grow amongst thousands of SMEs who, in the future could become a client of the Agile Executive. It was a one-to-many business model.

The Agile Executive Structure

The Agile Executive's sole employee was Tony, with all back office (invoicing, finance, HR, office management) drawn from the investor's resource. There are 30 core mentors who work directly with individual clients, using the Agile brand in their communication, email addresses etc. In addition, there are over 100 other mentors that are involved in the various programmes and available to be drawn into any specific programme. The range of programmes was vast, with over twenty different sectors covered in the previous year requiring 32 different competences from the mentors. The attraction for the mentors was the ability to get business via the Agile Executive from a group of clients rather than seek that business one client at a time.

Now the business was growing, not just with more mentors and associates, but with a requirement for programme management. In the previous year the Agile Executive had pitched

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for 50 tenders and secured them all. Therefore, the activities and timescales had changed. Clearly The Agile Executive had stayed true to its brand and pivoted during the COVID pandemic. In addition to clients for CFO and other management positions in SMEs, the company now became a facilitator and driver of SME mentoring and development through their various programmes.

The question for Tony was where to go next, with what business model and how to leverage the agile Executive's core competencies.

The Landscape: Competitors

With the emergence of outsourcing of professional services such as CFOs as well as the growth in SMEs who needed other roles, the list of competitors was growing. While small in the Irish context, the FD and CFO Centre <https://www.cfocentre.com/gb/about/> was the reference point. Their emphasis was on parttime FDs and CFOs delivering support, operational efficiency and strategic direction. As part of a multinational company, operating in 20 countries and with a turnover circa stg£50 million they were the reference point.

Toptal offers a similar service <https://www.toptal.com/> with a focus on start-ups, SMEs offer interim CFOs, full-time CFOs, or part-time CFOs as well providing strategic guidance.

Integra Outsourcing Solutions <https://www.integraoutsourcing.co.uk/> offers accounting and bookkeeping services across all sectors and business types.

Beyond <https://beyond.ie/services/outsourced-cfo/> is a recently established accounting outsourcing business with a focus on cloud accounting solutions, systems and technologies.

In addition, most major consulting companies offered such accounting, finance and related services as part of a range of packages as well as offering more advisory, strategic and development services. However this is often to established, larger companies rather than SMEs or companies in their early phase of operation.

Beyond the larger established consulting companies and the newly outsourcing operations, there were hundreds of individual consultants offering their expertise, support and services to companies of all sizes, including SMEs.

As national policy at the highest level was focused on developing SMEs, this part of the market for tendering, including programme delivery for SME consulting, support and management development and training were much more complex. Government departments (such as The ECASA project (2019-1-DE01-KA203-005037) is financed by Union funds (ERASMUS+). But the content of this document only reflects the views of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

enterprise and innovation), linked with various semi-state public bodies (such as Enterprise Ireland) along with private sectoral and industry bodies such as (ISME and IBEC) designed and implemented various programmes, both short and long term and needed to source the expertise and run such programmes.

The Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Sector in Ireland

Like most developed countries, SMEs account for the majority of employment, numbers of enterprise and activity but are often overshadowed by the larger, established and well recognised businesses and organisations. To put SMEs in context it is important to understand their definitions and scope.

A Micro Enterprise is an enterprise that has fewer than 10 employees and has either an annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet not exceeding €2 million.

A Small Enterprise is an enterprise that has fewer than 50 employees and has either an annual turnover and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding €10 million.

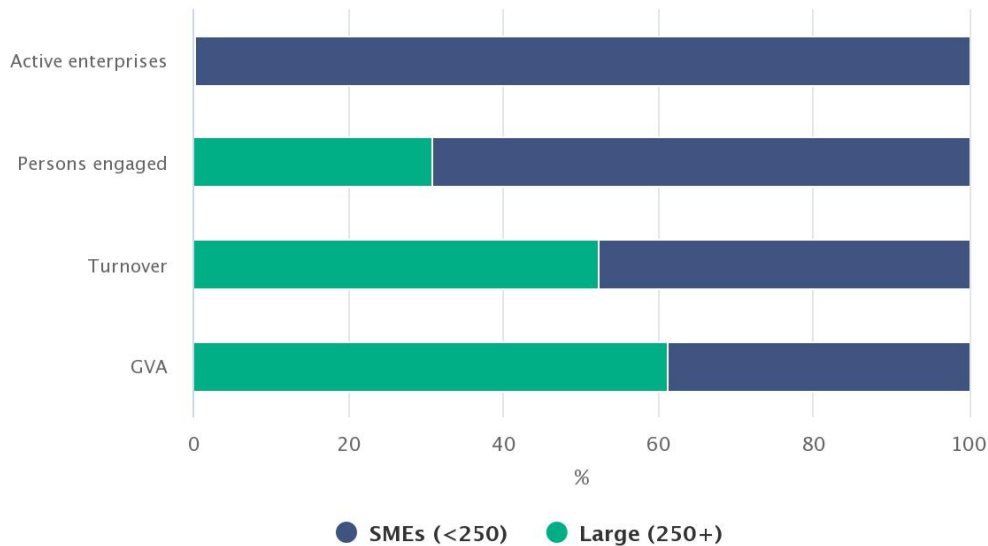
A Medium Enterprise has fewer than 250 employees and annual turnover below €50 million or balance sheet below €43 million. According to the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), there are over 250,000 Small and Medium Enterprises in Ireland. The CSO Business Demography results from 2015 show that 968,881 people are employed by SMEs (source CSO.ie).

Alongside this substantial SME activity, Ireland has a major concentration of large Multinational Corporations (MNCs) with very globalised activities, such as manufacturing of computers and pharmaceuticals, as well as in international financial services and software development. This can distort some comparative figures when comparing different countries.

However, in relation to such larger enterprises, the importance and scale of SMEs in Ireland is clear. The challenges for all Irish SMEs were familiar to every small business in most countries - building a small-scale business, usually with small numbers of employees and limited management skills and time. Often there was an absence of core skills and competencies such as strategic planning, financial management, marketing research and selling skills. Small-scale SMEs would often have somewhat narrow sectoral knowledge and experience but lacks the wider competencies that would be evident in larger organisations who had the resources to hire or outsource the requirements.

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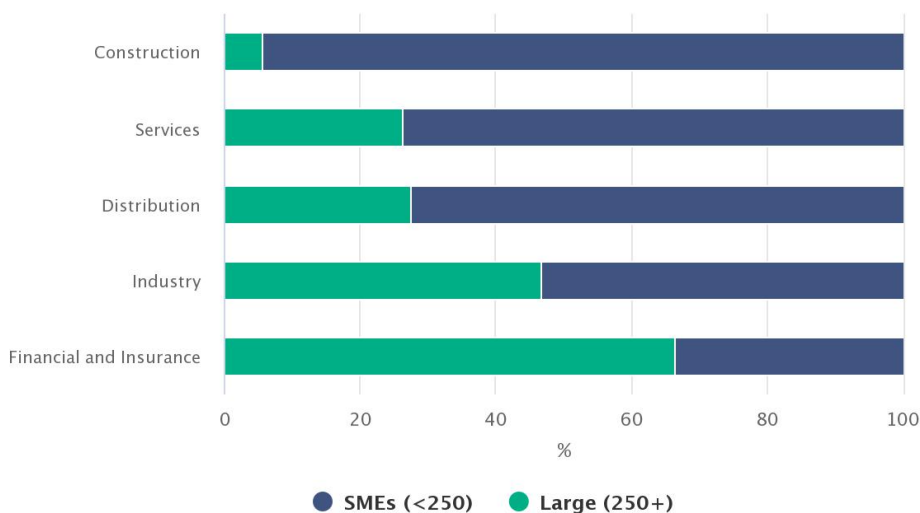
Figure 3.1 SME percentage share of key variables, 2015



Source: CSO Ireland

To examine the nature of SMEs further, there are some clear patterns visible when looking at employment by sector. SMEs account for as much as 56% of manufacturing employment and 74% of services employment in Ireland, roughly in line with the OECD averages.

Figure 3.5 SME percentage share of persons engaged by sector, 2015



Source: CSO Ireland

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SMEs in Ireland; Trends, Issues and Opportunities

While the Irish SME landscape might be somewhat unique, there are a number of common issues evident across the globe. The OECD examined SMEs in Ireland in their 2019 report ‘SME and Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland’, praised some aspects of government policy but equally identified issues and concerns as well as opportunities for the future.

In general, the OECD recognised the importance of SMEs to the Irish economy but had concerns on their productivity, relative to European counterparts. Other evidence shows that medium-sized firms, in both manufacturing and services sectors, have had poor productivity growth between 2005-2016 (OECD SDBS database).

SMEs with 10 to 249 employees account for less than 20% of overall output in Ireland, the lowest of all OECD countries, despite the fact that the relative proportion of firms in that size class, is high when looked at globally. Most important for such a small open economy, the OECD recognised that Irish SMEs were not very active in international export markets.

While Irish SMEs were deemed to be innovative and did invest in R&D, digital technology adoption rates were low. Irish small firms were only around one-third as likely as large firms to be using Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), a software platform that integrates core business processes in real-time (OECD, 2018a).

In summary the OECD listed seven key recommendations and priorities for Ireland’s SMEs which gave the Agile Executive much food for thought

Increasing business dynamism and SME productivity growth are priorities

Ireland is a successful generator of high-growth firms and its SMEs are innovative. Attitudes toward entrepreneurship are also positive overall. However, business dynamism and the start-up rate are relatively low, Irish SMEs are not very active in international markets, and SME productivity growth is stagnant. There are also weaknesses in SME management skills, capital investment levels and technology adoption.

The overall business environment is strong but there are priorities in skills and finance

Ireland offers a favourable regulatory environment, low taxation, extensive R&D support and good physical infrastructure. However, access to finance remains problematic and incentives could be strengthened for investment in SMEs and entrepreneurship. Skills shortages are also rising, implying a need to monitor the success of recent apprenticeship and skills development

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policies. SME engagement in the design of business regulation policies could also be strengthened.

A unified national SME and entrepreneurship policy would be valuable

Ireland has good arrangements for the co-ordination of SME and entrepreneurship policies across government, including for policy monitoring and evaluation. However, the country lacks a unified SME and entrepreneurship policy document that could show in one place the full range of support that is provided for SMEs and entrepreneurship together with the related objectives, activities, targets and budgets.

SME and entrepreneurship programmes could be upscaled and refined in some areas

Ireland has a comprehensive and solid set of support programmes for SMEs and entrepreneurship. However, there is a danger of some traditional SMEs falling between the support offers of the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which mainly focus on smaller enterprises, and Enterprise Ireland, which primarily targets firms demonstrating export potential. The remit of the LEOs could be expanded to address this concern. Some areas of programme support also merit upscaling and refinement. There is scope to strengthen programmes for microcredit and credit guarantees and increase support for financial literacy in businesses. Innovation support could also be made more SME-friendly, in particular when it comes to tax credits for SME innovation.

Local Enterprise Offices have an important role to play

There are large spatial variations in conditions for SME and entrepreneurship activity within Ireland. The LEOs play an important function in providing tailored support for SMEs and entrepreneurship in their areas in collaboration with other bodies working locally and regionally. However there is potential to enhance local level policies to build local networks of enterprises working on common skills and innovation projects, particularly in local industry clusters. Approaches are also needed to connect SMEs and entrepreneurs in remote regions with broader entrepreneurship ecosystems in urban centres and larger cities.

A multi-pronged approach is needed to increase SME productivity growth

Ireland has many SMEs with low productivity compared to the frontier firms in their industry. The causes include prolonged use of low-productivity techniques, underinvestment in capital, weak management practices, insufficient digital technology adoption and limited direct entry into export markets. A range of policy initiatives need to be applied to address this multifaceted issue. They include increasing take up by SMEs of Skillnet Ireland management training programmes, expanding vouchers for digitalisation processes in SMEs, integrating

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international standards adhesion in SME development programmes, and increasing SMEs take up of R&D incentives.

There is scope to strengthen business advisory services

Business advisory services can play an important role in helping SMEs and entrepreneurs to see how to address their challenges and in increasing the effective use of business support programmes by improving the match between firm needs and support taken. While there is a reasonable supply of business development services in Ireland, in particular through the LEO network and Enterprise Ireland, and while SMEs and entrepreneurs have good access to mentoring opportunities, there remains scope for improvement. A business diagnostic tool could be used more widely as an entry point to business development services, management training programmes and financial support for consultancy expanded, training and guidelines for external mentors improved and potential gaps in the provision of services assessed.

Source: SME and Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland, 2019

<https://www.oecd.org/publications/sme-and-entrepreneurship-policy-in-ireland-e726f46d-en.htm>

In summary, it was very clear that SMEs were a driving force of activity in Ireland and there were significant programmes, policies, support and activity devoted to the sector to ensure that SME's capabilities could be expanded and developed. For a company like The Agile Executive with ambitions to grow, in reality Ireland was a small market.

The next step was to evaluate other markets and create a plan for the next phase of expansion. Logically, looking at the closest English-speaking market next door, the United Kingdom, was a good start point.

The UK SME Market

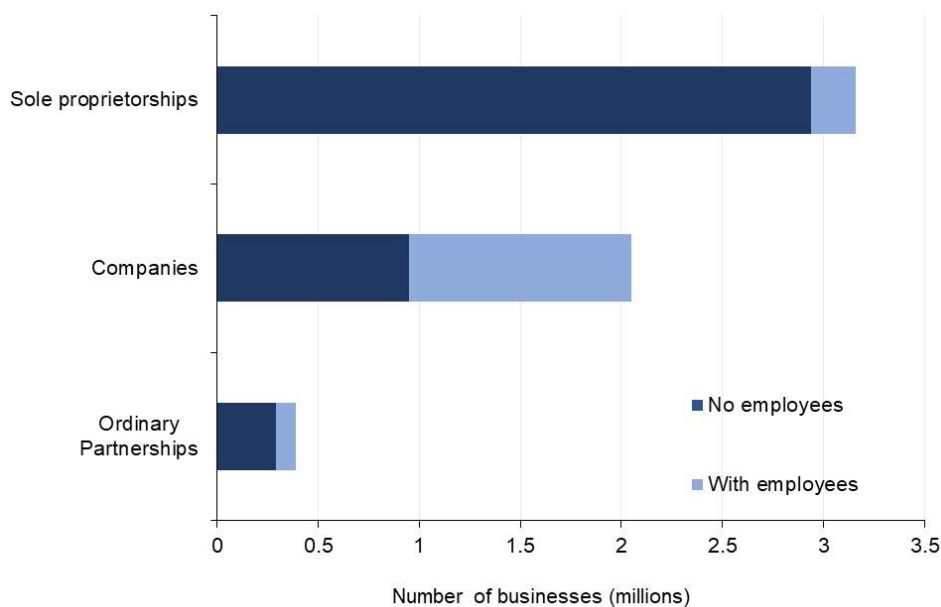
As with most European countries SMEs are an important part of the UK business landscape. According to Angela Eagle, MP, writing for the London Stock Exchange Group,

The dynamism of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is critical to the success of the UK economy. Representing over 99% of UK businesses, they provide 60% of private sector jobs and account for almost 50% of all private sector turnover.

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The UK Government has launched extensive initiatives since 2010 to improve and increase opportunities for (SMEs). Like the Irish Market, there were many common issues facing SMEs but equally there were unique aspects to be considered.

In 2021 there was 5.6 million private sector businesses in the UK. This is broken down as 5.5 million small businesses (0-49 employees), 356,000 medium sized business (50 – 249 employees) and 7,700 large business (250 +). These can also be broken down by the legal form of business. The main three being a sole proprietorship, ordinary partnership and companies. The most common type to be found is the sole proprietorship.

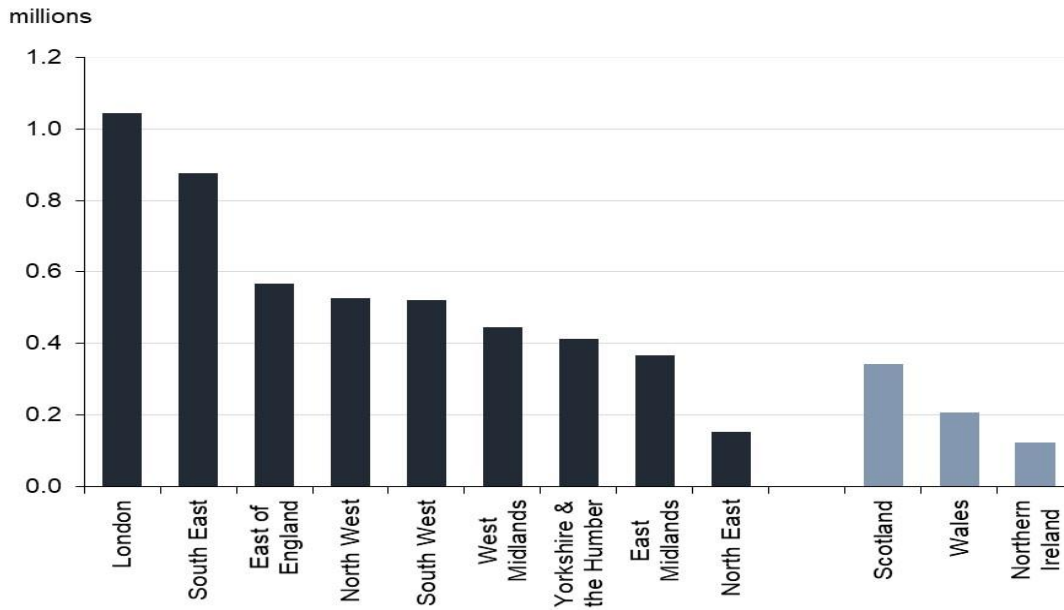


Source: www.gov.uk

Total employment in SME's 16.3 million people which is 61% of the total employment. Private sector businesses are not evenly distributed across the United Kingdom. London and the South East of England have considerably more businesses than any other UK country or region of England.

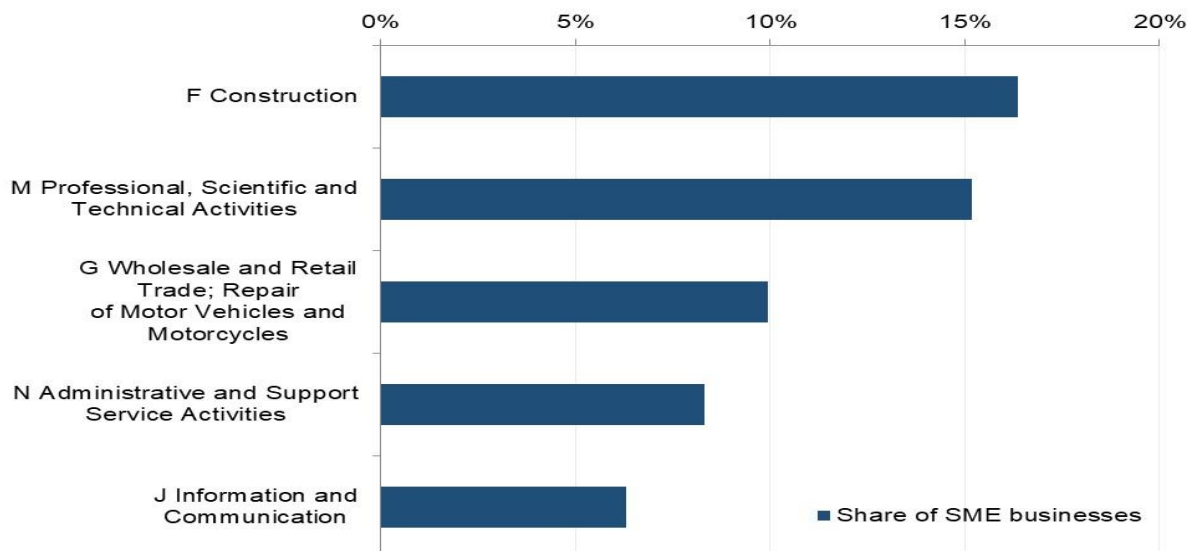
Since 2010, the numbers of business have increased in all the above regions. The largest was in London which increase by 45% and the smallest was Northern Ireland which increased by 4%. Not surprising the bulk of activity is centred around London, the South East and South West. See Appendix

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Source: www.gov.uk

UK SMEs account for at least 99% of the overall population in each of the main industry sectors. Of this 16% are found in construction, 15% in Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities and 10% in Wholesale and Retail Trade and Repair sectors



Source: www.gov.co.uk

Between 2000 and 2021 the business population increased by 2.1 million (+61%), with the highest rate of increase of +6.8% between 2013 and 2014, and 6.7% between 2003 and 2004. However, between 2020 and 2021, the total business population decreased by 390,000 (6.5%) - this is only the second decrease in the series. This decrease is mainly due to the impact of The ECASA project (2019-1-DE01-KA203-005037) is financed by Union funds (ERASMUS+). But the content of this document only reflects the views of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

BREXIT and a global pandemic which has made the last 5 years a difficult time for small business in UK.

Just like Irish SMEs, their counterparts in the UK faced many of the same issues. Insights from research conducted by www.startups.co.uk highlighted the following areas which are viewed as the main barriers or challenges that face SME



The review of small business in Britain by the Economic and Social Research Council in 2020 identified seven key themes, again common to many countries and their struggling SMEs.

- The need for business advice (especially post COVID).
- Digitisation is everything
- Net Zero – at policy level as well as at local level, this will be vital for SMEs
- Innovation is critical
- Management & leadership - always crucial, now more vital post-COVID.
- Mental Health and well-being at work is vital
- Business Resilience

Embracing technology was a top concern. As the world moves online, the need for specialist software has increased amongst SMEs. Areas such as this and innovation are areas that SME need additional advice to ensure adequate implementation. What was different from the OECD report for Ireland's SMEs above was the relative lack of focus on supports and processes for SMEs.

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The UK Government Supports for SMEs

Like the Irish market, there are a range of governmental, sectoral and local organisations and bodies offering support, advice, training and networking for UK SMEs.

There are a range of similar bodies and associations such as the Federation of small business (FSB) (<https://www.fsb.org.uk/>), SmallBusiness.co.uk provides advice and guides to UK sole traders and small businesses (<https://smallbusiness.co.uk/>). Such organisations offer the full range of advice, training programmes and supports.

Appendix 3 illustrates some of the range of support programmes for SMEs in the UK provided by the government. One element, unique to the UK, was the BREIXT decision – Following a UK-wide referendum on 23 June 2016, 51.89% voted in favour of the UK leaving the European Union. This became a reality on 31st **January 2020** when the UK officially left the EU. An 11-month transition phase began, running to December 31, 2020.

The UK Government oversees the provision of supports through various government departments and agencies. For example, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) brings together the best of Britain's international efforts to pursue the national interests and promote the UK as a positive agent for change, with a focus on the key challenges of our age. SMEs are a vital part of the supply chain supporting FCDO to deliver our objectives.

FCDO has identified 3 key areas of focus to encourage greater SME participation:

1. Visibility of Opportunities
2. Doing Business with FCDO
3. SME Relationships with each other and Larger Organisations

The SME friendliness tool is a self-assessment tool for departmental use. It has been developed in consultation with representatives of the SME panel, a representative group of stakeholders who help to ensure the government remains in touch with the reality of SME experience in engaging with government. The overall purpose of this tool is to change how government procures: so that SMEs make up a bigger proportion of the businesses helping government to achieve sustainable outcomes. Specifically, this tool has been designed to:

There are other departments and organisations that were created to help SMEs in their growth and innovation. The information below is from www.gov.co.uk

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[Your Local Growth Hub](#)

The LEP Network covers the UK and there are 38 LEPs in the UK only. The network acts as the lead commentator and negotiator for LEPs at a national level with government, advisers, businesses, academia, policy makers, influencers and other sectors. The LEP Network Ltd is a not-for-profit company

They offer a free Business Support Helpline to help find the right advice and support at all stages of any business at any stage of their experience. Business Representative Organisations are set up to help SMEs and each sector has its own Organisation.

[Innovate UK](#) supports businesses across the UK in every sector to develop and realise the potential of new ideas through funding and research collaboration so that innovations can reach commercialisation level. Their [Knowledge Transfer Network](#) also connects business to expertise, finance and markets to commercialise any developed innovation.

[Venture capital schemes](#) can help raise money for ventures. There are four schemes that offer tax reliefs to investors, designed to help SME business grow by attracting external investment.

[Tech Nation](#) provides programmes to support UK tech businesses, as well as access to free online courses to build digital skills.

Tech Nation's [Data Commons for UK Tech](#) provides a detailed view of the UK's digital economy and is a rich source of market intelligence and insight.

[Be the Business](#) provides practical tools and resources and can help small businesses across the UK enhance productivity.

The [Contracts Finder](#) lets anyone search for information about government and agency contracts worth over £10,000 and explore information on previous tenders.

Clearly the UK SME market offered opportunity to The Agile Executive. There were many questions Tony had to consider to make the next steps. What way should Tony approach the UK SME market (or any other market) and with what proposition – was it for temporary CFOs, tendering or other services? After all, what is the core competence that The Agile Executive

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has? Most important, given the scale of the market, should the Agile Executive chose a single region or market to start with?

Then how to go to market – would it be a subsidiary; a franchise? Should Agile follow their customers to the UK and build from there?

While well-known among the various support agencies in Ireland is the branding and positioning of The Agile Executive right for another market? In addition, with the evolving business landscape of digitisation, climate action and post COVID recovery what was it that SMEs needed for the future?

Tony had to develop a set of criteria to evaluate the UK, its' regions and, with a eye to the long term plans, perhaps look at a few European options too.

Tony sat down and started to consider the options and wondered what was next for The Agile Executive.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Key Agencies and Supports for SMEs in Ireland (verbatim from sites)

ISME

ISME, the Irish SME Association, is an independent representative association for Small and Medium Enterprises and has in excess of 10,000 members across Ireland. Uniquely in Ireland, ISME is independent of big business, big banks and government and gives voice to the issues facing SME owner-managers.

ISME is owned, funded and managed by SME owner-managers, representing the sector through its Members. SME is a not-for-profit membership organisation whose [National Council](#) is made up of elected owner-managers of SMEs from all over Ireland and from a variety of sectors.

ISME exist to support SME owner-managers by [lobbying](#) on their behalf, providing [advice and information](#), and offering discounts on services through their [ADVANTAGE - Affinity programme](#). ISME also provides a number of opportunities for business networking. ISME promote opportunities to work together via the Members Area of the website, and to work with other businesses through advertising and publicity on the ISME channels.

Small Firms Association

The Small Firms Association is the "Voice of Small Business" in Ireland and represent a diverse membership of businesses, all with less than 50 employees; homegrown and spanning every sector of the Irish economy, in every town and every city in Ireland.

Interaction with fellow members happens through their members connect area and through the members directory listing. In addition, the SFA provides events and management training,

Irish Business & Employers Confederation

IBEC is Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group. Our purpose is to help build a better, sustainable future by influencing, supporting and delivering for business success. With over 230 employees, IBEC engages with key stakeholders in Ireland and internationally through six regional offices and and EU office located in Brussels, along with an extensive international network in the UK and US.

IBEC policy is shaped by the diverse membership, which range from small to large, domestic to multinational and include 38 trade associations covering a wide range of industry sectors. IBEC members employ over 70% of the private sector workforce in Ireland.

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As well as lobbying, IBEC provides a wide range of professional services and management training to members on all aspects of human resource management, employee relations and employment law.

Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland is the state agency responsible for supporting the development of manufacturing and internationally traded services companies in Ireland. They provide funding and supports for companies - from entrepreneurs with business propositions for a high potential start-up through to large companies expanding their activities, improving efficiency and growing international sales. They provide funding and supports for [college based researchers](#) to assist in the development, protection and transfer of technologies into industry via licensing or spin-out companies.

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)

The Local Enterprise Office is the first point of contact for SMEs seeking information and support on starting or growing a business in Ireland. The Local Enterprise Office network provides advice, information and support to start up or grow a business. There are 31 dedicated teams across the Local Authority network in Ireland.

The Local Enterprise Office is for people interested in starting up a new business or already in business including; entrepreneurs, early stage promoters, start-ups and small business looking to expand. Specifically, the LEOs aim to:

- drive the development of local enterprise, putting local micro and small business at the heart of job creation in Ireland
- drive and support business start-ups and promote a 'can-do' business culture.
- increase the job potential of new and existing micro and small businesses.
- increase the number of innovative businesses with potential to export.
- be proactive in response to the needs of our clients.

Skillsnet

Skillnet Ireland is a business support agency of the Government of Ireland, responsible for advancing the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish businesses through enterprise-led workforce development.

Skillsnet believe that ensuring a highly skilled workforce is essential to national competitiveness. They currently support over 21,000 businesses nationwide and provide a wide range of valuable learning experiences to over 81,000 trainees. Their mission is to facilitate increased participation in enterprise training and workforce learning in Ireland.

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Intertrade Ireland

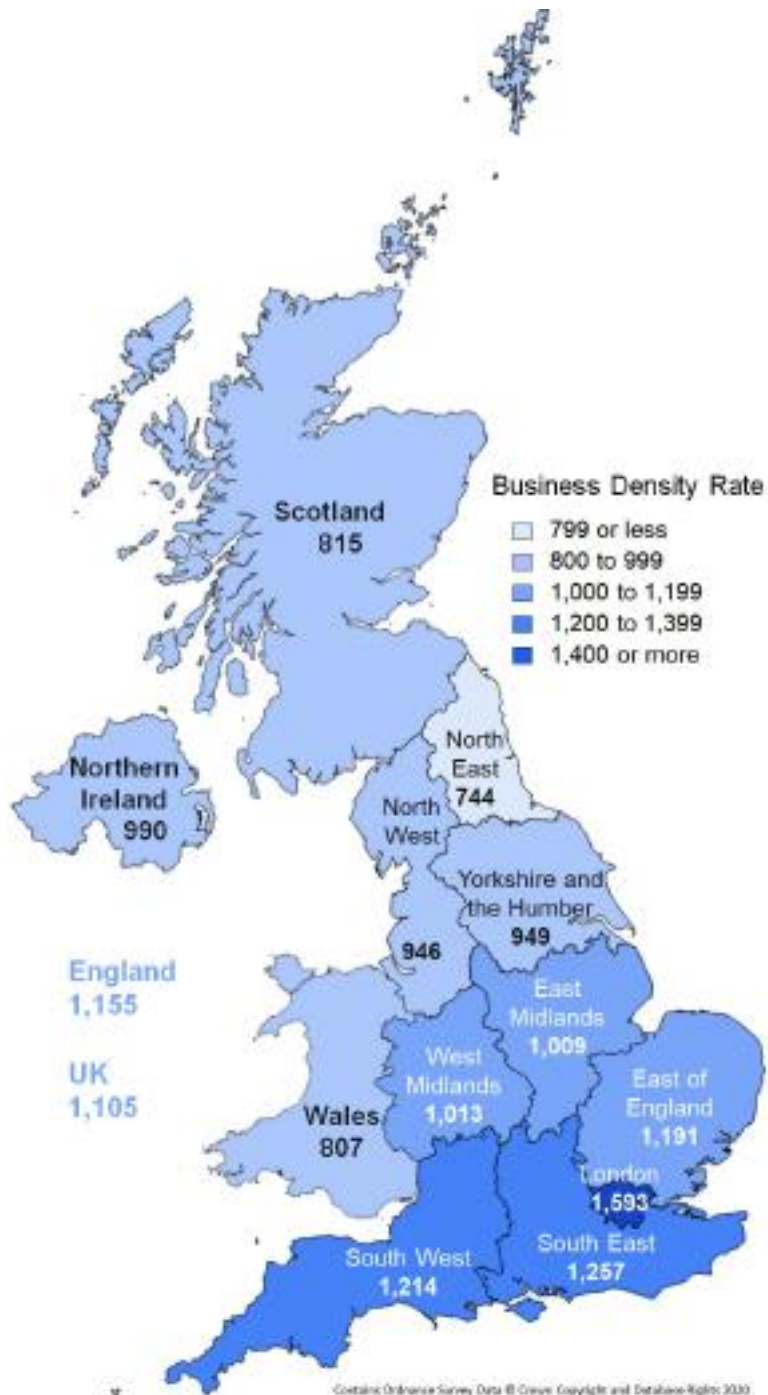
InterTrade Ireland has been helping small businesses in Ireland and Northern Ireland explore new cross-border markets, develop new products, processes and services and become investor ready for over two decades.

Based in Newry, their services include support for sales growth and innovation, as well as funding and business insights for SMEs across Ireland who are looking to grow their business. They also offer a dedicated Brexit advisory service and help companies to manage the evolving trading relationship between Britain and the EU, via a range of supports and services. InterTrade Ireland has also introduced a number of specific Covid-19 supports focused around funding and recovery.

As one of the cross-border bodies, InterTrade Ireland is funded by the [Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment \(DETE\)](#) and the [Department for the Economy \(DFE\)](#) in Northern Ireland.

Appendix 2

Number of businesses in the UK private sector per 10,000 adults, UK region and country, start of 2020



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Appendix 3

Sample Business Support for SMEs in the UK

Business Support Programmes

Design Leadership Programme, Design Council
Passport to Export, UKTI
Catapult centres, Technology Strategy Board
GrowthAccelerator
Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS)
Intellectual Assets service, Scottish Enterprise
High Potential Starts, Business Wales
Business Innovation Programme, Business Wales board
IP Audit

Financial Opportunities

Patent Box
SMART, Technology Strategy Board
Innovation Vouchers, Technology Strategy Board

IP Advisory Services

Pro Bono Clinics
PatLibs
Business and IP Centre, British Library
IP Master Class
Get it right First Time

Online IP Services

Online Health Checks
Health Check series
IP Insight

Teaching Notes

Discipline background and target groups

Discipline background of the case study: Please define/select the most relevant category

- Strategic Management
- Operational Management
- Marketing & Sales Management
- International Marketing & Management
- Supply chain management
- Finance & accounting
- Economics
- Project management
- Other: Scaling SME Enterprise

General target groups: Please select all applicable addresses

- UG students
- PG students
- Executive Education
- Other (_____)

Synopsis according to the integrated case method process

This case is a background case about how The Agile Executive is looking for new market opportunities to expand their business in several possible European markets. The case researchers/writers have conducted research by collecting qualitative (interview managing director) and quantitative data on markets and opportunities. This case is also an exercise case for students to practice their knowledge from the perspective of strategic management, branding, marketing & sales, conducting market research and the development of feasible marketing entry strategies, all based on clear use of robust criteria, aligning with the core competences, resources and capabilities of the organisation.

This case can be divided into sub-cases that could focus on answering the questions of *how to enter or expand in a target European market, which market to enter, how to position and brand the organisation*, all based on a clear strategic analysis of the core competences of The Agile Executive.

Type

This case is a background case and exercise case.

Format

This case is a written case that can be supported by infographic, video, photographs.

Teaching objectives, target groups and target courses

Objectives

This case is designed for postgraduate and executive students (this is a continuum) with a range of possibilities, based on the framework below.

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| Learners Context | Bachelor | Master | Executive |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| experience | limited, mostly theoretical | modest, mostly internships | managerial |
| Case | | | |
| problem | one-dimensional | multi-dimensional | holistic, boundary spanning |
| structure | clear, with guidance | basic structure | blurred, mixed |
| complexity | simple | complicated | complex |
| Teaching | | | |
| questions | detailed | broad | fundamental, purpose-driven |
| | clear answers | multiple answers | contextual, evolving |
| objective | training, application | deeper insight | reflection, experiences |
| learning style | individual | explorative | corporate |
| Outcome | | | |
| competencies | analysis / problem-solving | decision-making | strategic leadership |

The case, in totality, is complex, multi-dimensional and boundaries are blurred. Therefore, the objective in using the case is to address broad yet fundamental questions with potential multiple outcomes.

The case also provides for the creation of multiple outcomes and further, evolving learnings, depending on the chosen solutions, pathways and directions suggested by case solvers. Finally, with multiple outcomes and directions possible to emerge from the analysis, the case solvers can assume more strategic leadership roles and develop these competences.

Specifically the case allows for:

- improved understanding of the European business environment by illustrating some unique market conditions in different target countries, such as SME business supports, the governmental infrastructure and the nature of the SME business ecosystem.
- utilising the correct research approaches & criteria evaluation to aid decision-making.
- applying branding and positioning strategies to SME start-up/scale-up organisations
- applying learning and practising knowledge from key subject areas in identifying market opportunities, developing market entry strategies using suitable criteria
- analysing a start-up organisation to identify competences, strategic direction, and evolving business models.

Target group

The case is written for postgraduate and executive students.

Target courses

The case is intended for International Business and Management related courses and can also be used for courses such as International Marketing & Sales, and Entrepreneurship.

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Teaching approach/area and strategy/organisation

Approach/area

The case is intended to teach students knowledge and develop their competences in some of the key functional areas of business and management, and especially concentrates on the following topics:

Strategic Management, Marketing & Sales, International Marketing, Entrepreneurship.

Strategy/organization/timing

This case can be used as a single-issue case (directed to students) such as ‘*where does the company go next and why?*’ or in a wider context, evaluating the core competences of the Agile Executive and adopting a more generalised evaluation and requesting ‘*a proposed future for the company*’.

This case should be provided to students (e.g. one week) before the class discussion.

If there are more instructors involved in delivering this case in the same period, they are encouraged to study this case together and discuss the possible questions and answers from various perspectives according to the relevant subject areas. The joint preparation among instructors can take 2-3 hours. The goal is to ensure the integrated approach to the case when leading discussion with students.

For in-class discussion: typically a 2 hours session in-class:

- ½ hour discussion about the case: clarifying issues, identify key issues.
- 1 hour working session for students: case analysis, identifying possible analytical tools.
- ½ hour presentation by a team of selected students with all students critiquing and discussing the presented solution, providing counter arguments, perspectives and their insights.
- This format can be extended, with additional groups proposing solutions and others critiquing and providing counter arguments, perspectives and their insights.

1. Case briefing:

Students should prepare the case study before the class. Depends on the level of students (and the specific requirements of learning objectives), the time needed for reading this case can be 1 to 4 hours. Students should also study the company website and any supporting documentation in advance. If students are already formed as a team, it is important to discuss the questions and possible answers together before coming to class.

Given the emphasis on masters and executive level, the briefing should not be overly prescriptive. Case solvers should establish the appropriate frameworks for analysis, identification of issues and potential avenues without the need for ‘textbook pointers’.

2. Case coaching:

We suggest having at least two instructors to coach students in this case study, one from a marketing subject area, one from Entrepreneurship perspective. Any combination of these or additional instructors depending on the learning context is advised.

3. Case work:

See suggestions above.

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4. Case presentation:

Case presentation can take the form of case competition or in-class presentation, online presentations, live presentations to the organisation or recorded presentations with supporting documentation.

Evaluation/Grading

Evaluation criteria

Evaluation can take place based on the following criteria [Define general evaluation criteria (e.g. creativity, rigour, analytical level, presentation technique, communication skills, solution orientation, practicability, etc.) that are needed to be taken into consideration in the evaluation. In addition, an indication of the weighting with which the individual criteria should be included in the evaluation.]:

| Evaluation criteria | Weight (1-100) |
|---------------------|----------------|
|---------------------|----------------|

AN EXAMPLE:

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Analytical level | 40 |
| Creativity | 30 |
| Communication skills | 10 |
| Questioning & Answering | 10 |
| Teamwork | 10 |

Assessment structure

Grading shall take place according to the following assessment structure: [A typical structure may be the following:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Maximum number of marks achievable, thereof for | 100 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case analysis • Case solution • Case presentation: • Participation: | |

Achievement level and grades

| Percentage Score | Grade | Grade Definition |
|------------------|-------|------------------|
|------------------|-------|------------------|

[A TYPICAL SCHEME MAY BE THE FOLLOWING:

| | | |
|---------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 70-100% | First class | Excellent |
| 60-69% | Second class, upper division | Outstanding |
| 50-59% | Second class, lower division | Outstanding ⁻ |
| 40-49% | Pass | ... |
| < 40% | Fail | Fail |

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Recommendations

Make it clear on which achievement level the following grade definitions were reached:

- Excellent to outstanding [e.g. for A⁺, A, A⁻]
- Good to very good [e.g. for B⁺, B, B⁻]
- Satisfying [e.g. for C⁺, C, C⁻]
- Sufficient [e.g. for D⁺, D, D⁻]
- Unsatisfactory (fail) [e.g. for F]

Solution outline

Recommendations

Depending on the nature of the module/subject area where the case is being used, the outcomes may be specific or general (marketing entry and criteria, Branding and positioning, Alignment of core competences and developing strategic options?).

None-case specific learning outcomes may include:

- **Teamwork**
- **Issue identification**
- **Problem-solving**
- **Evaluation of options**
- **Cross-disciplinary thinking**