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Spoilt for choice

A team of ULMS researchers is taking part in a €2.7 million multi-national project to explore how increasing the choice of products that a business offers can help to improve its supply chain performance.

Over the last few years, in reaction to a period of economic uncertainty, businesses have been extending their product variety in order to provide a more tailored approach for customers, with greater flexibility and responsiveness-enhancing initiatives being implemented to help businesses to adopt customer-centric strategies.

These strategies can require major changes to the way manufacturing operations and supply chains are organised, but to date, very little research has been undertaken on the impact that increasing the amount and variety of products a

business offers can have on supply chain performance.

This challenge is currently being addressed at ULMS through its involvement as an academic partner in the EU Framework 7 REMPLANET (Resilient Multi-Plant Networks) research project.

The aims of the research are:

- To devise methods to reduce supply chain complexity and uncertainty costs associated with the provision of high-variety solutions
- To design supply chain networks and configurations to support the delivery of high-variety solutions
- To develop approaches to justify and evaluate supply chain performance within a high-variety context.

Dr Andy Lyons, Principal Investigator

on the REMPLANET project, explains: "We were approached to be involved in the project because of the School's expertise in responsive supply chain design.

"For REMPLANET we're looking to design supply chains that are 'customer-driven', in other words initiatives that are concerned with analysing and improving the flexibility of a particular business unit in order to respond to changes in customer requirements. This requires effective, customer-driven processes that align production with demand, eliminate waste and creatively involve the workforce in process improvement activities. It also requires synchronicity in terms of planning, production and delivery of products and materials."

ULMS researchers are exploring the benefits of the 'glass pipeline' approach, information systems that allow the sharing of demand and production data across supply chain tiers so that customer and supply chain behaviour are completely transparent to decision makers. However the concept is not only dependent on the appropriate use of information and communications technologies, but also requires inter-organisational collaboration and agile processes

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that can take advantage of real-time access to data.

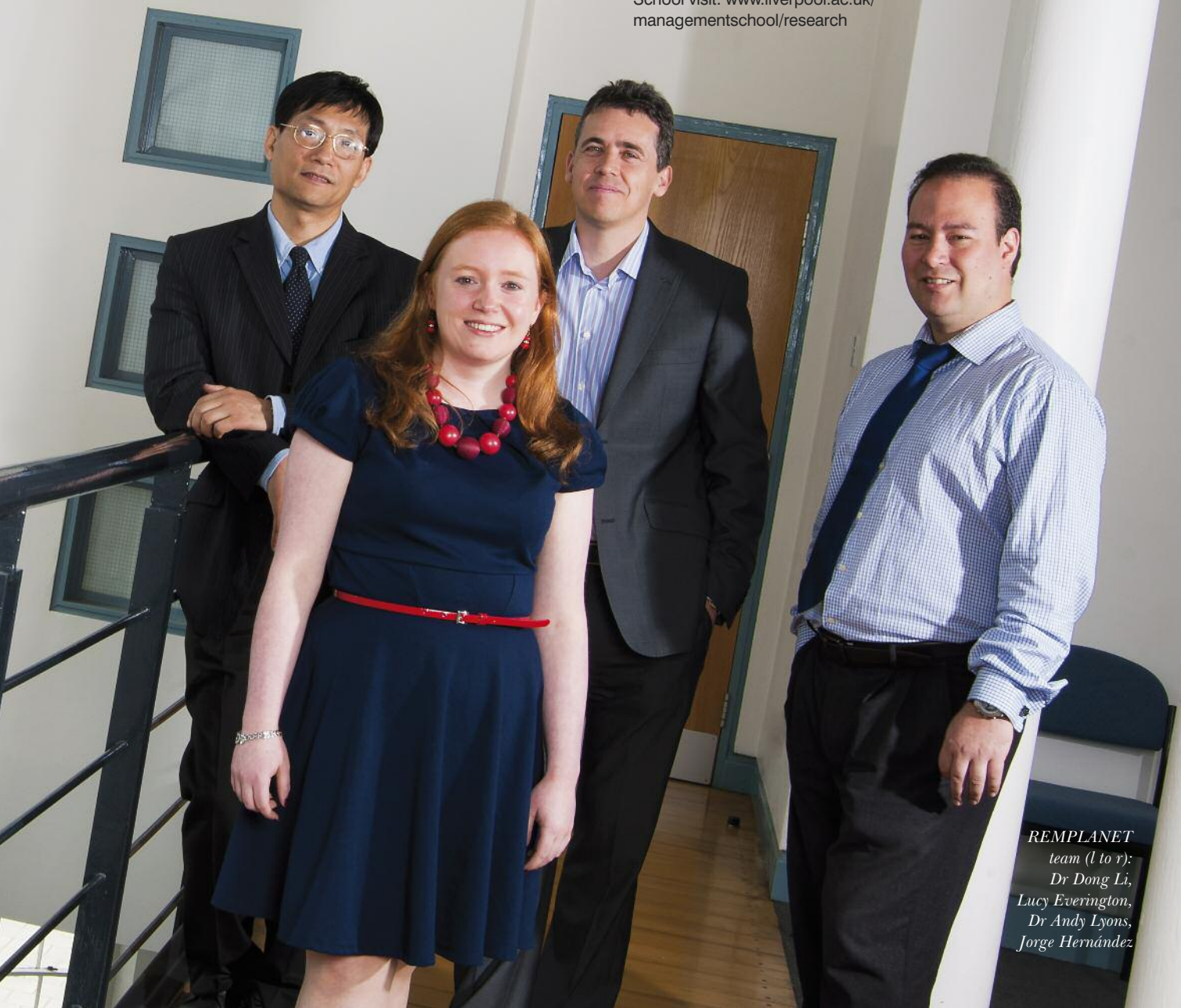
"We have been studying companies like NikeiD and Shoes of Prey who offer customised products and services to their customers, allowing individuals to design their own shoes," said Andy. "By looking at their supply chain processes, we have been able to use these models to translate our research into practical solutions for local companies.

"At Newton Industrial, for example, which is a Merseyside-based manufacturer of solar panels, the REPLANET team is working on the implementation of a series of initiatives that enable the company to more efficiently produce a high-variety range of solar panels, in addition to specific customised products. This should help Newton to enhance its customer service by fostering better collaborative relationships with both customers and suppliers. The result is a

business that can reduce its cost base, in addition to providing a more responsive service for customers.

"The project runs until September 2012 and aims to provide companies with a set of guidelines that will help them to profitably manage variety. We hope that by following these guidelines, the businesses we are working with will be able to make best use of their supply partners and respond to customer requests more efficiently."

To find out more about REPLANET and other research projects being undertaken at the School visit: www.liverpool.ac.uk/management-school/research



*REPLANET
team (l to r):
Dr Dong Li,
Lucy Everington,
Dr Andy Lyons,
Jorge Hernández*

staff profiles



Professor Ossie Jones
Professor of Entrepreneurship

Ossie heads both the Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurial Leadership and the Organisational Behaviour, Learning and Change (OBLC) Group.

His research focuses on entrepreneurship and the management of small businesses. He is currently working on a number of projects, including research into how new entrepreneurs access the resources required to start their businesses, the topic of entrepreneurial learning, and research into generational change in family businesses.

“For me, the School’s ethos of ‘learning to make a difference’ reflects the fact that we need to encourage all our students to be active rather than passive learners and help them to understand the importance of actually applying the knowledge they acquire during their time here,” said Ossie.



Jorge Hernández
Lecturer in Management

Jorge’s research considers collaborative decision-making processes using conceptual modelling, simulation and multi-agent based approaches, as well as forecasting and optimisation techniques.

He is involved in two international projects – the FP7 REMPLANET European project, which is looking at non-hierarchical supply chain networks (see page 4) and REVOLUTION, a Spanish project looking at the transport modelling and optimisation process at a Valencian automotive supply chain network. He also belongs to the Managing Board of the European Working Group of Decision Support Systems (EWG-DSS), which was established as a platform to encourage state-of-the-art research and collaboration within the Decision Support Systems community.

“Liverpool is very well connected with the rest of Europe which makes it much easier to carry out European research activities, plus it’s a fantastic city to live in and enjoy,” said Jorge. “The School boasts highly-qualified staff who are open to collaboration and supporting new ideas, so it’s a real privilege to work in this sort of environment and to be part of the ‘learning to make a difference’ philosophy”.



Professor John Wilson
Director of Programmes

John’s role involves taking a long-term strategic view of the School’s full range of teaching programmes and dealing with operational issues such as staffing, resourcing and programme changes.

“It is vital to ensure that the School is consistently providing an appropriate range of modules, so last year we completely revamped all of our postgraduate programmes and during 2011/12 the undergraduate curriculum is being reviewed and modernised,” said John. “New pedagogic techniques are also being imported into the School in order to enhance the student experience and to ensure that students are educated in the most effective manner.

“Our aim is to provide all stakeholders (students, business and public organisations) with a combination of ground-breaking knowledge and the ability to apply that in real-time situations. I hope that in my role as Director of Programmes we continue to achieve this, developing modules and degrees that students want to do because they can see real benefit in investing in this type of education. The world of higher education is changing rapidly; we need to change with it, and if possible to lead those changes.”