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# Business schools and management research: A UK perspective

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the role and value of management research is being increasingly challenged because of the perceived imbalance between its rigour and relevance. The purpose of this paper is to review the progress of management research in the UK and focuses particularly on the need for sensible evaluation of the impact of management research. The paper outlines the research challenges faced by business schools from a UK perspective. It draws upon the author's experiences and the results of an analytic study of Economic and Social Research Council-sponsored research undertaken by the author in 2008. There is a perception that management as a discipline, and its resulting research profile, may be more difficult to evaluate than its social science sub-disciplines such as economics, psychology, and sociology. In some instances, management research is perceived as of lower quality and capacity shortages of high-quality management research scholars have also been identified. The dominant research challenges are both to successfully design practice-informed management scholarship and to carefully address the dissemination of results in order to influence the impact of management research on practice. The paper suggests that an increasing focus on practice and cross-cutting inter-disciplinary topics, such as climate change or the role of finance in society, should form a significant element of the research agendas of business schools. In any event, it is argued that cutting-edge research should be the overarching aim of business schools in a knowledge society.

**Keywords:** Business schools, Management research, United Kingdom

## Introduction

The paper reviews the current state of management research in business schools and provides the contextual background for the issues taken up in the papers in this volume.

## Business schools and management education: Current controversies

Over the last 100 years, business schools have evolved as a significant part of university education. Important reports on management education in the 1950s and 1960s, from the Ford and Carnegie Foundations in the USA and the Franks Report in the UK (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959; Franks Report, 1966) moved business schools from a practically oriented, trade-school focus towards a research and discipline – led academic focus emphasising rigorous academic research over practically relevant research.

However, in recent years business schools (and by association management as a discipline), have been consistently criticised and questioned about whether they have the requisite academic stature and identity compared to other professional schools, such as medicine, law and engineering, in particular, and to the overall context of the university, in general (Antunes and Thomas, 2007;

Hawawini, 2005; Ivory et al., 2006; Lorange, 2005; Mintzberg, 2005; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, 2004; Starkey et al., 2004; Thomas, 2007).

Indeed, writers such as Mintzberg and Pfeffer have been quite critical of such an academic discipline-led focus accusing such schools, inter alia, of doing theoretically grounded but irrelevant research; of being too analytical and not process oriented; of failing to provide adequate ethical and professional guidance and of being too market-driven. Further, critics such as Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) and Khurana (2007) suggest that business schools have strayed too far from their goals of developing and educating creative, insightful, moral business leaders towards the production of much more market-driven, career-minded technocrats through an increasingly narrow focus on analytic models and reductionism.

From a research perspective Schoemaker (2007, p. 1) notes that:

Business educators have always been poised on the horns of a dilemma pitting academic rigour against practical relevance, notwithstanding Kurt Lewin's astute observation that nothing is as practical as a good theory.

A key challenge, therefore, for business schools and the management discipline is how to balance the twin hurdles of academic rigour and professional relevance (Wensley, 2007; Pettigrew, 1997; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998).

A series of articles in the December 2007 issue of *Academy of Management Journal* (Hambrick, 2007; McGrath, 2007; Pfeffer, 2007) have emphasised this "relevance" theme. Hambrick, in particular, examines the field's preoccupation with theory and suggests that it actually retards our ability to achieve the end goal of understanding of phenomena. Pfeffer reinforces this view and believes that management research must both have a closer linkage with practice and an involvement in engaged scholarship (van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) with enterprises – large and small – governments, and social partners with perhaps greater use of evidence-based management (Rousseau, 2006). Indeed, McGrath (2007, p. 1365) notes that:

Many observers have unhappily concluded that the priorities of the management field are out of balance. The pursuit of academic legitimacy, in their view, has trumped considerations of managerial impact.

Starkey and Madan (2001) argue that this increasing relevance gap needs to be bridged or else it will be occupied by consultants or executive education providers. However, the means of bridging the gap are not clear (Grey, 2001). Clearly the challenge of the relevance and rigour gap and measuring the consequent impact and value of management research must be examined thoroughly. Important dimensions of impact include good theory, in the Lewin sense, multi-disciplinary project outputs, citations from journal contributions, and policy impacts in management.

### **Understanding the nature of management research in the UK**

This continuing debate about the nature of research in business schools and the value and impact of management research on both theory and practice has influenced the relationship between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as a research agency and the evolution of management research in the UK. Indeed, Caswell and Wensley (2007) catalogue the problematic history between the ESRC and UK management researchers including such events as the British Academy of Management/ESRC Bain Commission on Management Research in the 1990s through to the

founding of the much more impact-focused Advanced Institute of Management (AIM) (see the extensive set of reports issued by AIM [www.aimresearch.org](http://www.aimresearch.org)). And, the dilemma, and balance, between rigour and relevance noted by Schoemaker (2007, p. 1) continues to bedevil the field.

Wensley (2007) provides some evidence of the perceived quality of UK management research. He notes that there is continued debate about, and questioning of, the value of management research by ESRC along the following dimensions:

- The perception of the lower quality of management research, relative to other social science disciplines.
- The questioning of management as a discipline compared to, for example, economics.
- The difficulty of reviewing and evaluating management research because of its inherently multi-disciplinary nature.
- The perception of capacity shortages of high-quality management scholars in business and management schools.

The challenge for the UK business school community is, therefore, to change quality perceptions in parallel with AIMs successful research programme and define clearly what type of research and research capabilities it wishes to develop in the business and management area. On this theme Pfeffer and Fong (2002, p. 93) note that:

[...] the research capabilities, and particularly the rigorous thinking and theoretical grounding that characterises business school scholars and their research, actually offer an advantage over the casual empiricism and hyping of the latest fad, that characterise much, although not all, of the research that comes out of non-academic sources.

They are probably referring here to the “simplistic” airport books or popular strategy books (Peters, 2008) routinely offered to managers. Further, business schools (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2007, p. 117) “have an obligation (as professional schools) to maintain contact with, and contribute to, both underlying core disciplines and practice.”

This professional responsibility of business schools means that the following principles are important in promoting and enhancing the status of management research:

- The overarching intent should be to produce the highest quality academic research in management, i.e. to fulfil the overriding objectives of academic excellence and policy impact in management research.
- Research capabilities in both narrowly focussed, rigorous, theoretically oriented research and multi-functional, multi-disciplinary research directed towards understanding of the theory and practice of management must be strongly encouraged.
- There is a gap between the process of theory building and the accumulation of knowledge and understanding about important management phenomena. This requires a renewed commitment to research studies, which thoroughly test and replicate existing ideas and themes so that there is a useful accumulation of knowledge and findings that can be implemented in the management arena. Hambrick (2007, p. 1350) develops this point in the following terms:

If we aspire to develop a reliable body of knowledge that managers can use for 'evidence-based' decisions as called for by Pfeffer and Sutton and Rousseau (2006), we must allow an accumulation of the requisite evidence.

- The importance of disseminating the results of research better to the management audience, as is evident for example, in the Wharton Business School's web site Wharton Knowledge. This would enable a reliable body of management knowledge to be available either for further testing and review or more importantly, in a form in which there can be a meaningful dialogue with policymakers and managers about the implications of the research for evidence-based decisions in practice.
- The need for a greater focus on practice informed and "engaged scholarship." van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue that there is "growing recognition that the gap between theory and practice may be a knowledge production problem." Therefore, there must be a process of engagement during the research process with managers and practitioners.
- Understanding practice better, and the needs of the professional management audience, should always be a key element of this knowledge co-production process. Indeed, McGrath (2007, p. 1372) notes, with some despair, the huge gap between the listing of key issues and problems on managers' minds (derived from the Microsoft Summit Chief Executive Office web page) and the topics of papers published in the 2006 issue of the Academy of Management Journal. She concludes, "it is nevertheless the case that there are many research topics on managers' minds that management scholars are not looking at." This suggests that research aims and context of a research study should at least be grounded in terms of the resolution of a significant problem domain in the management field.
- Given the focus on impact measures in the next 2013-2014 Research Excellence Framework, a renewed focus will be required in formulating how to measure the impact of management research. Magnetamin and Baden-Fuller (2007) argue that business school research is not valuable unless it is disseminated through scholarly mechanisms, i.e. publication in scientific journals. They further argue that impact should be measured in terms of citations:

[...] which is the "democratic" vote of the scientific community [...] Our approach is common with widely accepted practices in other fields and the logic is that articles of importance get cited more often and those of less importance are less cited or not cited at all.

However, as noted earlier citations are a partial measure of impact. In the management field impacts on practice and policy must also be taken into account. This means that the measurement and assessment of impact should involve a multi-attributed function incorporating judgements about the practical impact of research. Such measures will require a careful balance between academic rigour and practical relevance (policy and managerial impact).

### **Balance issues: the rigour/relevance dilemma**

Management researchers, business school deans, and research agencies will always be faced with handling the rigour-relevance, twin-hurdle dilemma in formulating their research strategies (Schoemaker, 2007; Pettigrew, 1997). It is important, therefore, for reasons of balanced scholarship

that traditional, focussed disciplinary research, cross-cutting interdisciplinary research and practice-engaged scholarship must all be encouraged to ensure the development of the appropriate set of research capabilities, and promote academic excellence and theoretical pluralism (Bowman, 1974) in the business and management field.

However, while there may sometimes be a lack of clear commitment to user engagement in the conduct of research, the pursuit of practice engaged scholarship should reap considerable dividends for management researchers. It is clear that while practitioners, consultancies and private research firms have tried to fill this void they have achieved limited success beyond the ability, noted by Davenport and Prusak (2003), to re-interpret and make palatable research findings to the management audience. Management research can, and should, fully adopt principles of practice-engaged scholarship in order to attack those significant problems and issues that managers need help and advice with, and do not fit neatly with the traditional model of research project creation and dissemination. In parallel, funding agencies and foundations must build a better understanding in their evaluation criteria of how to assess the contributions that practice-based scholarship can make to policy and management impact.

Therefore, the judgement of the impact of management research must extend beyond counts of journal citations and citations indices. Impact on the practice of management and policy formulation is clearly critical. Effective dissemination of research results is also a critical issue for management researchers. Indeed, an anecdote illustrates this point clearly. When I was recently asked to provide my Advisory Board at Warwick Business School (WBS) with key papers from leading WBS researchers so that they could read and review them, the dominant comments, somewhat unsurprisingly, I received were about the readability and relevance of the outputs. It seemed to them as if they were being invited to explore academic jargon and conversations which were very difficult to understand and often completely beyond their competence. They felt that as researchers and scholars we should spend more time disseminating the results in a more palatable form on our web site (thus mimicking the Wharton Knowledge web site of the Wharton School) and by getting parallel articles to their theoretical academic counterparts published in say *The Harvard Business Review* or in an abridged form in *The Financial Times* or *The Economist*. As a leading business school we have taken their advice seriously but it is equally important to widen the approaches used to promote effective dissemination of research material, for example, in the form of video podcasts and enhanced web-based material in order to maximise the widest policy dialogue and impact in management over the long run.

### **Future research areas in UK business schools**

Despite the promising results in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise there is a clear need to “raise the game” in terms of journal and other publication outputs. If UK management research is to hold its own internationally in the business and management research marketplace, it must encourage both new and established researchers to target the leading international journals in each of their fields (recognising that many of them are North American in origin) as well as the top regional and European journals.

Further there is a need to develop research programmes on cross-cutting, cross disciplinary themes such as:

1. The future of work revisited:
  - Regulation of work and employment in a globalising economy.
  - Work, work organisation, and productivity/performance.
  - Changing work patterns and the influence of technology.
2. Governance in a global economy.
3. Global accounting conventions and standards.
4. Risk management in a globally interdependent world (e.g. following the sub-prime, and global economic crisis).
5. Finance and society.
6. The effects of climate change.
7. Sustainability.
8. Entrepreneurship, SME's and economic growth:
  - Spill over effects.
  - Enterprise hubs and incubators.
9. Innovation in its broadest sense:
  - Not just only R&D but also scientific, organisational, and managerial innovation.
10. The management of health.
11. International comparisons of management processes and practices.
12. Global security and terrorism.
13. Managing growth.

Finally, the continued and energising influence of AIM on management research should be emphasised strongly. It has been very significant in producing both high-quality applied research and also in alleviating the shortage of excellent, skilled researchers in the management field. Nevertheless, business schools and their deans must also build upon the important frameworks and research landscapes opened up by AIM research. They must address the importance of cutting-edge research to the development of both theory and practice in management and its underlying disciplines. Debates about the balance between rigour and relevance and qualitative versus quantitative research should, and will, continue unabated and lead to an increasing high-quality professionalization of management research. The ultimate challenge, however, is provided by accreditation agencies such as AACSB International and European Quality Improvement System. In fact AACSB's (AACSB, 2007), challenge to, and legitimation of, management research is to "require business schools to demonstrate the IMPACT of faculty intellectual contributions to targeted audiences."

## Notes

Parts of this editorial are derived from a report by the author for the ESRC entitled "An overview and evaluation of ESRC management research" (2008).

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