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Putting AIM in Context: Retrospective and Prospective Views on UK Management Research Initiatives.

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It is appropriate to start with a small bit of self-plagiarism. With sincere apologies to those who have read it before. A lot is said in the particularly prescient but slightly gnomic note of the minutes of the first informal meeting of the SSRC in 1965:

“The Council would also have responsibility for research in Education and Management: the latter created particular difficulties which would be discussed at a later meeting”.

(from the minutes of the first informal meeting of SSRC (11th November 1965) under the chairmanship of Michael Young)

A Sequence of Initiatives

Caswell and Wensley (2005) traced the development (and subsequent to a lesser or greater extent the demise) of a sequence of initiatives, which could certainly be seen as addressing these “particular difficulties”. Of course, any attempt to reduce the range of discussions and debates over an extended period to four initiatives is in danger of being an oversimplification but in this instance we would argue it provides a reasonable basis for initial analysis

The initiatives they identified were:

- the formation and influence of the Management and Industrial Relations Committee during the 1970s;
- the implementation of the “Open Door Scheme”, designed to get non-traditional research users actively engaged in the whole process of management research, during the 1980s;
- the BAM/ESRC Commission on Management Research in the early 1990s; and, finally
- the Advanced Institute of Management (AIM) initiative, on-going but starting around 2002.

In their analysis they particularly noted that the evidence from the episodes raised questions about the extent to which social science research funding

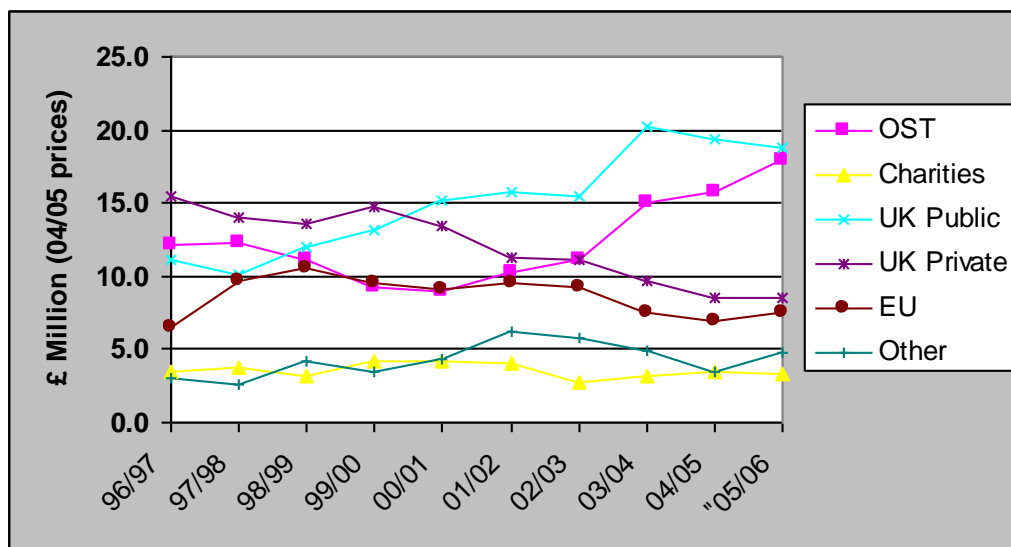
agencies recognise the challenges posed by the complex interfaces between the academy and practice, or whether they take them for granted as capable of linear and normal solutions. They were often seen as simply susceptible to presentational arts, and that these were mainly if not solely questions of language and communication.

It was therefore arguable that a number of the initiatives foundered at least partly because their was limited recognition of the underlying challenges in creating more beneficial links between academic research and management practice

How Have we Done?

There are two obvious ways to assess what overall aggregate progress has been made. First there is the trend in the overall funding of management research. Table 1 gives the HESA data, adjusted for price inflation:

Table 1: Research Funding in Business and Management (HESA)
Actual Adjusted for Inflation (other services D7FR)

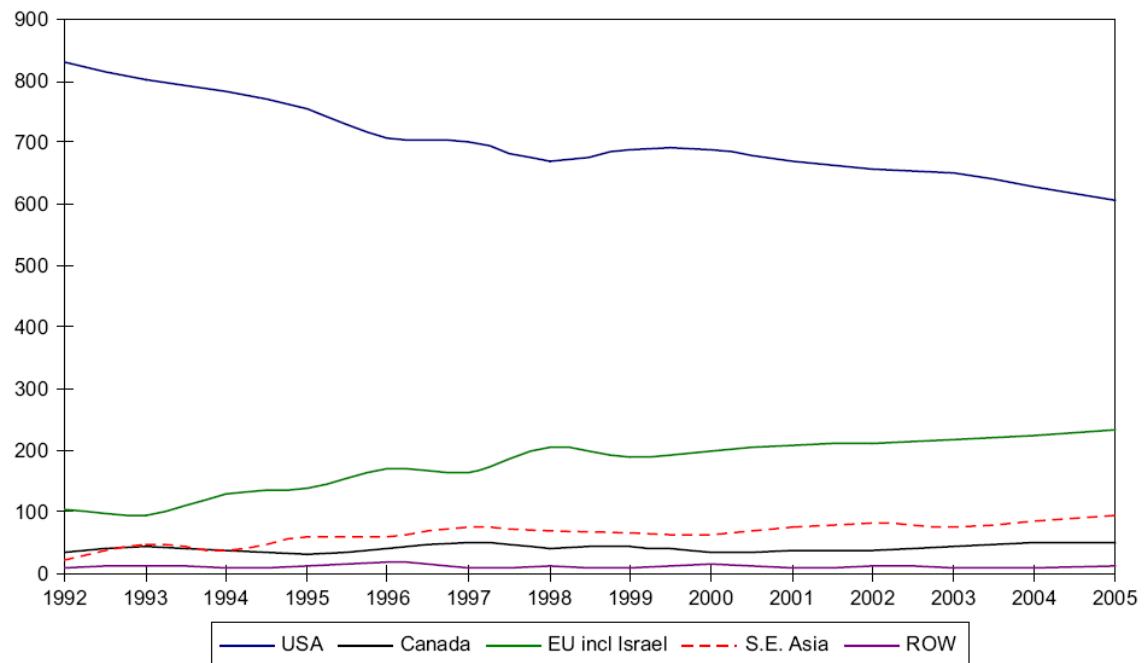


In general there has been a degree of overall real growth in funding but there are two caveats:

1. The overall growth has been caused by significant increases in funding from OST (for which read the Research Councils) and the UK Public Sector. There has actually been a significant decline in the funding contribution from the UK Private Sector.

2. The growth in funding has not kept pace with growth in academic staff so the real level of funding per academic staff member has actually declined over the period.

The second piece of data is more focused on outputs and academic impact¹. Table 2 is an analysis developed in Mangematin and Baden-Fuller (2008) looking at the world-wide trends in citation distribution for academic articles in Business and Management



Notes: Share Figures are parts per thousand.

Figure 1. USA vs. Europe, Asia, Canada and Rest of the World

Table 2: Citation Shares

Whilst this data are still too aggregated to address particularly the performance of UK academics, it is clear that the USA hegemony is already significantly reduced and the UK as part of the EU is to some extent at least increasing its overall share.

¹ We recognise that there is at least equal importance in looking at the trends in terms of impacts on policy and practice but this remains an area where reliable data is even more difficult to accumulate.

As often therefore we can conclude, very tentatively given the paucity of reliable data that some progress has been made but that it remains a rather mixed picture²

The Challenge for Management Research

We can at best therefore conclude that we have made some progress but that the challenge clearly hinted at in 1965 remains as well. What is then the nature of the challenge? Three distinctive ways have been used to frame the problem:

1. The relationship between research and practice can be defined in terms of an issue of translation recognising how the field of translation studies has problematised the notion of translation. In translation studies there is a recognition that there is no real sense in which veracity to the original meaning can be the key criterion: it is not just a question of focusing on “translation of sense” rather than “translation of words” but also the inevitability that meaning itself is culture and context dependent³. A rather different but related commentary on this issue is the observation that as Sims et al (2009) note the process of transfer is more one of “stories partly told and partly heard”
2. The general principle that management consultants are to be seen as key intermediaries in the transmission of research knowledge to practical action. In terms of our previous definition of the problem there are two questions: In practice what do management consultants develop and sell as their products or services? How do they see the knowledge development process.
3. The view that the knowledge worlds of academia and practice are fundamentally distinct and to a lesser or greater extent incommensurate. This perspective links closely with the notion of practical knowledge as “folk wisdom”, as compared to the specific notion of valid empirical knowledge which is determined on more statistical criteria.

The Issue of Translation

A central issue in translation is the relationship between the Source Text (ST) and the Target Text (TT) and the issues raised above are part of the overall problematic of the relationship between the two texts. Much debate in the field of communication related to management research still clearly privileges the

² On the other hand we might do well to remember that the book published by HBS to celebrate the first sixty years of the Harvard Business School was given the title “The Delicate Experiment” to remind ourselves that what seems to be very well established now can have had a long period of challenge and development. (Cruikshank 1987)

³ For a more extended discussion on the extent to which the issue can be solely framed as one of communication or translation see Wensley (2009)

academic “source text”, in a manner which could be seen as highly problematic. It for this reason amongst others that we might wish to reverse the usual concerns in discussions about “rigour and relevance” in management research and focus our attention on the relationship between management knowledge and research practice.

Put rather directly we might at least extract from these translation studies perspectives the evident fact that in practice we have to recognise that any use of translation needs to be interactive and extended as well as sensitive to the differing cultural milieu.

The Nature of Management Consultancy

In simple terms, management consultants are hired for a number of reasons, including gaining external, objective advice, access to their expertise, or simply as extra temporary help during a limited period.

Because of their exposure to and relationships with numerous organizations, consultancies are also often said to be aware of industry "best practices", although the transferability of such practices from one organization to another is the subject of debate (see AIM 2009)

Management consultants generally bring their own, proprietary methodologies or frameworks to guide the identification of problems, and to serve as the basis for recommendations for more effective or efficient ways of performing business tasks. Classical examples include the McKinsey Flow Boxes and the Boston Consulting Group Market share/growth matrix (Morrison and Wensley 1991)

In his history of the development of the profession of management consultancy, McKenna⁴ emphasizes the impact of regulation changes during the Great Depression:

“Congress passed the Glass-Steagall Banking Act of 1933 to correct the apparent structural problems and industry mistakes that contemporaries believed led to the stock market crash in October 1929 and the bank failures of the early 1930s. Glass-Steagall divided the investment and deposit-taking functions within banks like J.P. Morgan and National City Bank into two separate industries commercial banking and investment banking. J.P. Morgan & Company for example, chose to remain a commercial bank, but several partners left to form the investment banking Firm of Morgan, Stanley & Company. Simultaneously Congress created the Securities and Exchange Commission to regulate financial markets and enforce a more open system of corporate disclosure. These legislative changes which reconfigured banking and promoted the rapid growth of independent accounting audits also shaped the institutionalization of management consulting. Since Glass-Steagall

⁴ See also his book on the same topic (McKenna 2006)

prohibited commercial banks from engaging in "non-banking activities," like management engineering, commercial banks could no longer act as management consultants. Federal regulators forced commercial banks to cease their non-banking activities like insurance, real-estate development or, management consulting. And, while Glass-Steagall did not restrict investment bank from acting as management consultants, S.E.C. regulations required that underwriters perform external due diligence on securities issues and corporate reorganizations so investment banks could not use their internal management engineers to certify new issues. Federal regulation forced investment and commercial banks from 1934 onward to hire outside consultants to render opinions on the organization of a bankrupt company or the prospects of a newly-formed public company. Commercial bankers simultaneously encouraged business executives to hire management consultants since officers inside the banks could no longer coordinate internal organizational studies of their clients. The new institutional arrangements in banking opened up a vacuum into which firms of management consultants rushed." (1995: 54-55)

We therefore note that Management Consultancy provides a powerful legitimising mechanism for managerial action, alongside its espoused intention to provide an external and informed perspective on the nature of particular organisational challenges. We have also noted that there is a tension in these activities between reflecting the synthesis of what is essentially publicly available empirical evidence and providing a bespoke and individual service.

Inevitably management consultancy is strongly influenced by the requirements of its primary customers or clients. To understand the ways in which management consultants use empirical evidence we need to start with the nature of managerial knowledge itself.

Folk Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge

There is a long tradition in management studies of espousing an essentially scientific approach to research and analysis from the so-called "Foundation Reports" on US Business Education: the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports both published in 1959⁵ (Gordon and Howell 1959, Pierson 1959), through to the recent book with the rather polemical title: "Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense" (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006). However we need to recall that ever since Aristotle there has been a clear

⁵ For instance, the Ford report recommended that:

"the business schools (and departments of business) need to move in the direction of a broader and more rigorous educational program, with higher standards of admission and student performance, with better informed and more scholarly faculties that are capable of carrying on more significant research, and with a greater appreciation of the contributions to be made to the development of business competence by both the underlying nonbusiness disciplines and the judicious use of clinical material and methods"

argument that such “wisdom” or knowledge needs to be balanced against other forms of understanding. One popular distinction which has been applied to social science in general and management in particular is indeed based on the Aristotelian distinction between episteme, techne and phronesis⁶

Episteme is pure knowledge, such as of mathematics, geometry or logic. Techne, from which our word ‘technology’ is derived, is concrete knowledge of how to rearrange lumps of matter in a purposeful way. Phronesis has no obvious counterpart in English, but has more recently been defined as “practical wisdom” (see Flyvbjerg 2001).

The question therefore of the ways in which practical knowledge is developed and represented cannot be resolved just by reference to what might be termed a “scientific” absolute. Some interesting alternative approaches are to be found under the general notion of Folk Wisdom or Folk Theories (Pearce 2004). At the moment a rather disparate series of studies in fields such as mathematics education (Lave 1988 , Nunes et al 1993) and experimental psychology (Oaksford and Chater, 2002) suggest that we need to adopt a very different framework in assessing and engaging with knowledge in such circumstances⁷. As Oaksford and Chater (1998) argue:

“(folk theories) must deal with domains in which good science is more or less impossible and rough and ready generalisations must suffice. Thus the fact that folk explanations do not stand up to scientific scrutiny should not be viewed as a criticism of folk theories: it is an inevitable consequence of the fact that folk theories must venture where science cannot” (p166-167)

The Nature of Practice Engaged Scholarship

At AIM we have often espoused and encouraged what has been termed “practice engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven 2007). However we would observe that we often find ourselves faced with questions such as “so what should we do?”. One could argue that this “search for certainty” is also a “flight from variation”: indeed in terms of relationships with practitioners, one sometimes suspects a sort of collusive game is going on. The researcher will try and answer the question with a clear and unambiguous response even when both parties know that life isn’t really like that.

On the other hand it may well be that in trying to answer the question directly we are not really recognising that the questioner could be genuinely trying to engage with the nature and meaning of the research but, as is entirely reasonable, from their own perspective. In doing this they may be quite willing to accept significant ambiguity but are looking for rather more than “ on the

⁶ See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics,

⁷ There may also be useful links to the current active debate about the role of intuition in management decision making but this is a little beyond the reach of this paper (see Dane and Pratt 2007 , and Hodgkinson et al 2008)

one hand, and on the other..” Such an observation might usefully be linked to the apparent greater interest that practitioners show in “outliers” rather than the central tendencies discussed by McKelvey (2006) in his commentary on Van de Ven and Johnson (2006)⁸

It seems reasonable to assume that “outliers” are of more interest to practitioners for almost exactly the same reasons as they are a relative irrelevance to statistically inclined researchers: they are by definition both exceptional and different. Practitioners are more interested in the question of what can usefully be inferred from this exceptionally whilst again those more concerned with policy question of the aggregate may be much more interested in the nature of the central tendencies.

The Role of “Evidence Based Management”

Pfeffer and Sutton have argued strongly that managerial in practice is often more informed by fads and fashions alongside the assertions of management gurus rather than statistically assessed empirical evidence. In the context of our discussion about the possible “folk wisdom” aspect of managerial knowledge this is hardly surprising but it does raise questions about the efficacy of the current enthusiasm in certain quarters for Evidence Based Management⁹ (Rousseau 2006). The twin challenges of a lack of interest in the average – except perhaps as a benchmark to be surpassed and the widespread recognition of the central characteristic of high levels of context dependency poses key questions as to indeed the nature and saliency of much empirical evidence in management research.

AIM and “after AIM”: Where do we got to now?

We have very much attempted to frame AIM as a collaborative initiative both with the academic community, in particular British Academy of Management, and the business school community and in particular the Association of Business Schools. On the other hand AIM is still a creature of the research council(s) who also find themselves challenged to achieve both high quality research and also impact. This means that central to all our activities is a

⁸ To be fair in their reply to this comment, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue: “Actually, “legitimate” study of outliers, extreme values, and unique cases has been long-standing in management and related literature. A variety of methods and models have been used to systematically investigate unique cases of strategy, decision making, and best practice” but they also note that the key issue is “the methods employed for framing problems as unique or general depend on the phenomena being studied and the purpose of the research”.

⁹ See <http://www.evidence-basedmanagement.com/index.html>

commitment to both engagement and capacity building alongside consistent emphasis on world class research itself (Wensley 2006).

I am not sure I am the right person to discuss “after AIM” but I would like to emphasise two approaches that I hope define AIM but also in some form or other the way in which an initiative in management research should continue to develop:

1. a continued emphasis on capacity building and the role of the AIM network in engaging with the widest possible range of academics, scholars and fellows. We have to continue to try and find ways in which we can have a beneficial impact on the largest number of management academics both directly and through their other activities such as teaching. We are pleased for instance that the AIM website is widely used to download materials for teaching as well as research purposes.
2. an emphasis not only on engagement with practice relevant research agendas but also an emphasis on ways to be more effective in transfer of knowledge between academe and practice. There is little doubt that the renewed interest in “evidence based” represents a useful challenge to those who contribute to and disseminate the result of research and theory application. But as we have suggested above such enthusiasm perhaps needs to be informed by a more sophisticated interpretation of the nature of managerial dilemmas, their wider context and the usefulness of different forms of knowledge and research.

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