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**An analysis of the importance
of management research topics to
academics and chief executives in
New Zealand and Canada**

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Abstract

This paper reports on a survey in July 1990 to ascertain and compare the views of chief executives and academics in commerce and administration in New Zealand concerning management research topics, and to compare these with one done concurrently in Canada. The survey was by means of a postal questionnaire developed by Paul Bergman at the University of Western Ontario and respondents were asked to rate forty-three research topics on a five point Likert-scale, according to their view of the topic's importance to management research in their respective countries.

The analysis of results provides a comparative ranking of the importance of the research topics and of significant differences in the rating of their importance to the four groups. The pattern with respect to the ranking of topics' importance is of broad similarity and five topics - quality of customer service, strategic planning and management, international competitiveness, managing technological change and fostering organisational innovation - are ranked in the top ten topics by all four groups.

The differences found in ranking and importance ratings suggest a mainly intra-organisational focus by chief executives and a wider focus, in particular taking more account of governmental policy topics, by academics.

Keywords: Chief executives; academics; university; business research.

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Introduction

The background to this paper is a concern with the nature and role of research in business schools, and its interface with the research needs of the business community. It reports the results of concurrent surveys of the views of academics and chief executives in New Zealand and in Canada (Bergman 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1990). The New Zealand survey is part of a larger programme to promote collaboration between the Graduate School of Business and Government Management, Victoria University of Wellington (GSBGM) and the wider business community on a research agenda relevant to both groups' interests. The particular purpose was to identify levels of agreement or otherwise between academics and chief executives about the importance of different research topics.

The Survey Design and Method

The research design follows that of Bergman to allow a comparison with Canada and comprised a postal questionnaire survey of academics and chief executives. The questionnaire was piloted and some minor changes made to adapt meaning to the New Zealand context. The questionnaire took approximately fifteen minutes to complete, including questions not germane to this paper.

Respondents were asked to rate each of forty-three randomly listed research topics on a five-point Likert scale (1 = most important, 5 = least important) according to how important they felt the topic to be to business related research. Additional topics were requested, but as less than five were offered, they have not been included in the analysis.

Mean scores for each topic were calculated for chief executives and academics in New Zealand and t-tests calculated to determine statistically significant differences in these means. The equivalent analysis in Canada by Bergman (1990) used ANOVA. [Note that for tests of equality of two population means, the two tests can be considered equivalent (Daniel and Terrell, 1986 Chs. 7 and 8)]. In both cases the alpha level set is 0.05.

The topics were ranked by mean score and a comparison of these rankings for all four groups made. Also a comparison is made of statistically significant differences in the rating of importance of topics.

The Sample

Academics

The academic viewpoint was sought from staff at all seven New Zealand Universities; Auckland, Canterbury, Lincoln, Massey, Otago, Victoria and Waikato. All staff were surveyed who teach in the disciplines (or their equivalent) taught in Victoria University's Faculty of Commerce and Administration. These disciplines are accountancy, commercial law, economic history, economics, industrial relations, information systems, management, marketing, money and finance, public policy and quantitative studies. This broad disciplinary range covered all staff at Victoria with a possible interest in the GSBGM research programmes.

A total of 540 questionnaires were posted, producing 255 replies, of which 249 were usable, representing an overall response rate of 46%. Table 1 shows the percentage response rates for the seven universities. It should be noted that, for unknown reasons, one university, not that of the author, failed to provide any returns.

Table 1: The importance of research topics to chief executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada:

Percentage survey response rates from the seven New Zealand Universities.

University:	% response rate
U 1:	47%
U 2:	0%
U 3:	50%
U 4:	57.5%
U 5:	52%
U 6:	53.5%
U 7:	45%

Chief Executives

The chief executive viewpoint was sought from a sample of chief executives of New Zealand's top 250 companies (*Management* December 1989) and from the GSBGM's fifty-five Associate Members. Associate Members (drawn from organisations in the Wellington area) cooperate in many of the GSBGM activities and their participation in the survey was sought to encourage continued involvement and to inform possible collaborative research ventures. To protect confidentiality and because the two groups were not mutually exclusive, they could not be differentiated from the main chief executive sample. It is acknowledged that their undifferentiated inclusion introduces a degree of bias with respect to location, and extends the type of chief executive surveyed beyond the 'top company' criteria used in Canada and the main New Zealand survey.

A total of 256 questionnaires were posted, providing 117 replies, of which 112 (43%) were usable.

The Canadian questionnaire was virtually identical. The samples were of Canadian business school academics and of one thousand one hundred and one (1101) of the largest Canadian companies. The response rate in Canada was considerably less than in New Zealand, being 25.8% for their chief executives and 22.2% for academics.

Results:

The results are presented in the following tables.

Table 2: The importance of research topics to chief executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada:

The forty-three research topics rated on a five-point Likert scale as randomly listed in the questionnaire.

Privatisation of SOE's
 Managing information systems
 Fostering organisational innovation
 Strategic planning & management
 Tax reform/GST
 Quality of customer service
 Takeovers & acquisitions
 Environmental issues & concerns
 Managing technological change
 Relevance of business education
 Risk management & insurance
 Fostering entrepreneurship
 Labour markets & productivity
 Adaptation to free trade
 Global capital markets
 Employee ownership
 Improving boards of directors
 Managing labour relations
 Improving public sector management
 Downsizings & divestitures
 Improving financial reporting
 Controlling production costs
 Management of health care
 International competitiveness
 Executive training & development
 Employment equity
 Managing corporate communications
 Management succession
 Stress management & health
 Transfer of technology
 Changing pension requirements
 Business ethics
 Advancing women in management
 Managing joint ventures
 Deregulation of financial institutions
 Managing compensation programmes
 Expert systems & artificial intelligence
 Foreign ownership of NZ business
 Developing leadership in organisations
 Product liability
 Regional industrial expansion programme
 Worker retraining programmes
 Changing distribution & marketing patterns

Table 3: The importance of research topics to chief executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada:

Ranks (derived from mean scores), mean scores and standard deviations for New Zealand chief executives and academics and ranks and mean scores for Canadian chief executives and academics for forty-three research topics rated for importance on a five-point Likert scale (1 = most important, 5 = least important). Topics listed by the rank ordering of the mean scores of New Zealand chief executives.

NEW ZEALAND						RESEARCH TOPIC	CANADA				
CEOs			Academics				CEOs	Academics			
Rank	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD		Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	
* 1	1.70	0.8898	6	2.34	1.0668	Quality of customer service	* 2	2.09	8	2.50	
* 2	1.77	0.7619	5	2.30	1.0514	Strategic planning & management	* 1	1.92	5	2.31	
	3	2.06	1.0251	1	1.91	0.9478	International competitiveness	* 6	3.33	1	1.86
	4	2.10	0.8590	4	2.28	0.9352	Labour markets & productivity	13	2.58	17	2.74
	5	2.10	0.8590	3	2.11	0.9208	Managing technological change	* 3	2.31	2	2.05
* 6	2.10	0.7656	13	2.48	0.9598	Managing information systems	12	2.60	11	2.59	
* 7	2.12	0.8017	10	2.42	0.8851	Managing labour relations	* 18	2.76	27	3.08	
* 8	2.13	0.8061	20	2.72	1.0037	Developing leadership in organisations	* 5	3.32	16	2.73	
* 9	2.17	0.6283	18	2.59	1.0459	Executive training & development	* 9	2.47	19	2.82	
	10	2.20	0.9104	7	2.34	1.0248	Fostering organisational innovation	* 10	2.53	4	2.26
* 11	2.28	0.8788	19	2.71	0.9715	Controlling production costs	* 8	2.47	18	2.75	
	12	2.33	0.8955	12	2.45	1.0737	Fostering entrepreneurship	11	2.53	7	2.45
	13	2.39	1.0139	9	2.41	0.9636	Improving public sector management	14	2.64	13	2.65
	14	2.47	0.9507	11	2.43	1.0913	Business ethics	7	2.46	14	2.65
* 15	2.48	0.8761	24	2.87	1.0644	Improving financial reporting	* 28	3.06	38	3.93	
	16	2.50	0.8309	16	2.52	1.0287	Relevance of business education	* 20	2.94	12	2.60
	17	2.55	0.9500	8	2.37	0.9861	Adaptation to free trade	* 16	2.74	6	2.41
* 18	2.59	0.9208	35	3.08	1.0031	Managing corporate communications	* 21	2.94	37	3.34	
* 19	2.62	0.7141	41	3.39	0.9616	Management succession	* 15	2.70	42	3.53	
* 20	2.71	0.9197	2	2.09	0.9423	Environmental issues & concerns	4	2.31	3	2.14	
	21	2.74	0.9891	26	2.91	0.9774	Changing distribution & marketing patterns	29	3.07	26	3.22

Table 3 cont.

NEW ZEALAND			RESEARCH TOPICS			CANADA				
CEOs			ACADEMICS			CEOs		ACADEMICS		
Rank	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	
* 22	2.75	0.9342	14	2.51	0.9779	Transfer of technology	* 25	3.02	9	2.56
23	2.75	1.0107	28	2.99	1.0423	Improving boards of directors	* 26	3.04	39	3.44
24	2.87	0.8749	30	3.05	1.0118	Risk management and insurance	37	3.36	41	3.52
* 25	2.87	0.8103	25	2.87	1.1390	Advancing women in management	19	2.80	24	3.00
26	2.87	0.9545	32	3.06	0.9278	Tax reform/GST	* 17	2.75	21	2.96
27	2.92	0.8289	33	3.06	1.0948	Stress management and health	* 24	2.98	28	3.20
* 28	2.95	0.8403	40	3.37	1.0361	Changing pension requirements	42	3.55	40	3.46
* 29	3.05	0.9476	22	2.82	0.9613	Global capital markets	* 22	2.95	15	2.70
* 30	3.08	0.9638	21	2.80	1.0245	Worker retraining programmes	* 32	3.21	23	2.99
31	3.11	0.9121	17	2.56	0.9935	Management of health care	23	2.97	10	2.58
32	3.12	1.0112	39	3.25	1.0091	Product liability	38	3.36	36	3.33
33	3.14	0.9861	36	3.09	0.8490	Managing joint ventures	27	3.05	28	3.10
* 34	3.17	0.8622	43	3.42	0.8785	Managing compensation programmes	* 30	3.11	32	3.10
35	3.18	1.0331	29	2.99	1.1117	Employment equity	34	3.29	34	3.25
* 36	3.20	0.8543	27	2.94	1.0003	Deregulation of financial institutions	* 33	3.25	25	3.02
* 37	3.21	0.9585	15	2.52	0.9134	Privatisation of SOEs/Crown Corporations	39	3.38	33	3.24
38	3.23	0.9349	34	3.08	1.0760	Expert systems and artificial intelligence	* 40	3.90	20	2.91
39	3.26	0.9599	31	3.05	1.0097	Takeovers and acquisitions	* 36	3.32	22	2.99
40	3.26	0.9599	31	3.05	1.0097	Downsizings and divestitures	31	3.20	31	3.21
* 41	3.50	0.8816	38	3.21	0.9516	Employee ownership	35	3.32	35	3.33
* 42	3.67	0.9148	23	2.83	1.1124	Foreign ownership of NZ/Canadian business	* 41	3.52	30	3.20
* 43	3.69	0.9348	37	3.14	1.0341	Regional industrial expansion programmes	* 43	3.84	43	3.53

* A significant difference in means exists ($p < 0.05$)

NB: Where apparent tied mean scores occur, ranking applies, as mean scores have been rounded up to the nearest two decimal places.

Table 4: The importance of research topics to chief executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada:

The eighteen topics ranked in the top ten by any one or more of the four groups. Ranking determined by mean scores.

TOP TEN RANKED BY ALL FOUR GROUPS:

Quality of customer service	NZ academics
Strategic planning and management	Canadian academics
International competitiveness	NZ CEOs
Managing technological change	Canadian CEOs
Fostering organisational innovation	

TOP TEN RANKED BY THREE GROUPS:

Environmental issues and concerns	NZ academics
Canadian CEOs	Canadian academics

TOP TEN RANKED BY TWO GROUPS:

Executive training and development	NZ CEOs
Developing leadership in organisations	Canadian CEOs
Managing labour relations	NZ CEOs
Labour markets and productivity	NZ academics
Adaptation to free trade	NZ academics
	Canadian academics

TOP TEN RANKED BY ONE GROUP:

Managing information systems	NZ CEOs
Business ethics	Canadian CEOs
Controlling production costs	
Improving public sector management	NZ academics
Fostering entrepreneurship	Canadian academics
Transfer of technology	
Management of health care	

Table 5: The importance of research topics to Chief Executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada:

Topics where a significant difference in rating of importance was found ($p < 0.05$).

Rank NZ CEO	Rank Can CEO	Topic	Rank NZ Aca	Rank Can Aca
Topics rated as more important by Chief Executives in both New Zealand and Canada than by academics (9).				
1	2	Quality of customer service	6	8
2	1	Strategic planning management	5	5
8	5	Developing leadership in organisations	20	16
9	9	Executive training & development	18	19
18	21	Managing corporate communications	35	37
19	15	Management succession	41	42
7	18	Managing labour relations	10	27
15	28	Improving financial reporting	24	38
11	8	Controlling production costs	19	18
Topics rated as more important by chief executives in New Zealand only (1).				
6	12	Managing information systems	13	11
Topics rated as more important by chief executives in Canada only (5).				
23	26	Improving boards of directors	28	39
10	10	Fostering organisational innovation	7	4
26	17	Tax reform/GST	32	21
27	24	Stress management and health	33	28
25	19	Advancing women in management	25	24
Topics rated as more important by academics in both New Zealand and Canada (8).				
31	23	Management of health care	17	10
22	25	Transfer of technology	14	9
42	41	Foreign ownership of NZ/Canadian business	23	30
29	22	Global capital markets	22	15
36	33	Deregulation of financial institutions	27	25
34	30	Managing compensation programmes	43	32
43	43	Regional industrial expansion programme	37	43
30	32	Worker retraining programmes	21	23
Topics rated as more important by academics in New Zealand only (4).				
20	4	Environmental issues & concerns	2	3
28	42	Changing pension requirements	40	40
37	39	Privatisation of SOE's	15	33
41	35	Employee ownership	38	35
Topics rated as more important by academics in Canada only (6).				
3	6	International competitiveness	1	1
38	40	Expert systems and artificial intelligence	34	20
39	36	Takeovers and acquisitions	31	22
5	3	Managing technological change	3	2
16	20	Relevance of business education	16	12
17	16	Adaptation to free trade	8	6

Discussion:

The New Zealand survey undertaken by this author in July-August 1990 replicates that undertaken concurrently in Canada (Bergman 1990), to assess agreement between the views of chief executives and academics concerning the importance of business research topics.

Table 2 lists the forty-three topics as randomly listed in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rate their view of the topic's importance as a research topic on a five point scale, 1 = most important, 2 = very important, 3 = some importance, 4 = little importance, 5 = least important.

Table 3 presents the topics listed by rank ordering of the mean scores of importance ratings by New Zealand chief executives and showing the corresponding rank ordering of means by the other three groups. The mean scores (and standard deviations for New Zealand only) and significant differences in means between chief executives and academics in New Zealand and Canada are given.

The top ten ranked topics for each group, eighteen in all, are identified in Table 4, which shows shared and exclusively ranked topics for the four groups. There is evidence of substantial agreement between groups with respect to top ranking of topics, with five topics sharing this ranking by all four groups. The topics are 'quality of customer service', 'strategic planning and management', 'international competitiveness', 'managing technological change' and 'fostering organisational innovation'.

Seven topics share top ten ranking by both chief executives and academics in New Zealand, and six in Canada. There is shared top ten ranking for seven topics by chief executives in both countries and for seven topics by academics in both countries. 'Environmental issues and concerns' is ranked by all groups except chief executives in New Zealand in the top ten topics.

Two topics, 'executive training and development' and 'developing leadership in organisations', are top ten ranked by chief executives only, and 'adaptation to free trade' by academics only. In New Zealand, 'managing information systems' and 'improving public sector management' are exclusively ranked in the top ten by chief executives and academics respectively. In Canada 'business ethics' and 'controlling production costs' are exclusively ranked by chief executives and 'fostering entrepreneurship', 'transfer of technology' and 'management of health care' by academics. 'Managing labour relations' and 'labour markets and productivity' are exclusive to chief executives and academics in New Zealand, but there are no topics exclusive to both in Canada.

Table 5 lists topics where a statistically significant ($\alpha = 0.05$) difference in the rating of importance was found, showing the groups to which this applied, the direction of difference and the ranking of the topic. A total of fifteen topics were rated as more important by chief executives and eighteen as more important by academics. Examination of these topics suggests those rated as more important by chief executives may be classed as of a mainly intra-organisational focus, whereas those rated as more important by academics appear to be of a wider focus, and/or within the realm of government policy.

There is evidence of substantial agreement between all groups with respect to top ten ranking, with five topics sharing this ranking by all four groups.

An examination of individual topics is not offered, but one topic 'environmental issues and concerns', deserves mention. It is ranked in the top ten by all groups

except New Zealand chief executives, is rated as being more important by academics than chief executives in New Zealand, and is not rated differently by chief executives and academics in Canada, suggesting New Zealand chief executives regard this as topic as substantially less important than any of the other three groups.

Examination of the topics where significant differences are found (Table 5) suggests the topics rated as more important by chief executives may be regarded as of a mainly intra-organisational focus, whereas those rated as more important by academics appear to be of a wider focus and/or within the realm of public policy.

Conclusions

This survey was intended to help inform development of an academic business research agenda. It has proved useful in identifying areas of common interest with potential for collaborative research ventures. This is of particular interest to the GSBGM as a newly established school in New Zealand, but it is thought the results may be of wider interest.

The survey is exploratory and several important issues are not directly addressed, in particular: whether the items selected provide reasonably comprehensive coverage of important topics and to whom they are important, questions concerning the degree of agreement found and thought desirable, and questions relating to the definition of management research.

There is evidence that the topics given are considered important by the two groups surveyed, in that the means for all items are above 3.7 and 3.8 for New Zealand and Canada respectively. However, it is not possible to draw any conclusions from the data about how comprehensive and appropriate to the New Zealand experience (or the Canadian experience) the listed topics are. Also no conclusions can be drawn from the very limited response to a request to respondents to list additional topics of importance. There was evidence from the pilot study in New Zealand that some academics had reservations about the comprehensiveness of topics given, which seemed to relate to definitions of management research. Bergman (1990) reports a change from the topics used in 1988, but criterion for topic selection are not reported.

Closely related to this are issues concerning the degree of agreement found and thought desirable. The programmatic aims of the survey assume high levels of agreement may be fruitful for research collaboration, but agreement about the importance of a broad topic area need not imply agreement about its particular investigation nor the problems it presents. Also the implications of the degree of consensus on research objectives need to be examined, especially vis a vis funding policies, the interests of other stakeholders and the role of universities in critique of theory and practice.

It is concluded that there is broad agreement between the two countries and that differences found may represent a mainly intra-organisational focus by chief executives and a wider focus by academics, in particular taking greater account of government policy issues. While this may not be a very surprising finding, it has implications for the content of university research agendas increasingly dependent on commercial rather than government support and funding.

Beyond this, it highlights a need for a framework within which changing research priorities can be analysed and understood, and suggests continued and perhaps extended, inter-country comparisons, given comparability in determining topic selection, would be worthwhile.

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