

Guest editorial

Journal rankings and the notion of “relevance” within business research

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Guest Editorial

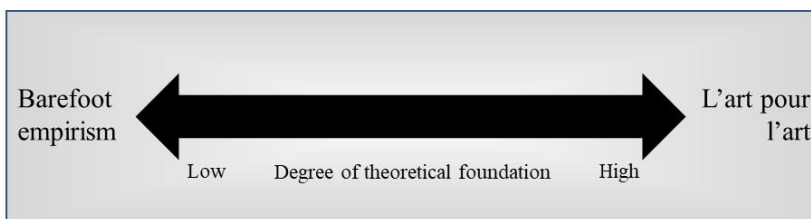
EBR Special Issue on: Journal rankings and the notion of “relevance” within business research

Imagine two very different situations. One situation where research aims at mirroring practices as it is; and another situation where research is aiming at doing research for its own sake. How would research be in those situations? And what would the contribution to society and business look like? We will elaborate on these questions in this editorial.

Two extremes of how to do research

The two extreme situations outlined in Figure 1 are pure forms seldom found in reality. However, they demonstrate the tendencies which put academia under pressure. On one side, the claim has been that business schools are said to have lost their way and have become too detached from practice and on the other side that publishing in highly ranked journals is way forward.

Figure 1: Where to be positioned?



Barefoot empirism

If research aimed at mirroring practices it would be very important to know precisely what is going on in practice. The newest trends should be found and described. Latest strategies, twists in tactics and operational gimmicks should be displayed at an ongoing basis. Presenting openly and swiftly how practice functions is pivotal. The research output would overall be of a descriptive nature. The role of the researcher is to generate descriptions of reality, and to act as a microphone holder balancing fact and fiction all the time to secure that reality is described as objectively and truthfully as possible. Both the variations in business practice and the general business trends would be of interest. To guaranty such truthfulness, the researcher would have to get close to reality and at the same time not inflict on it. The researcher would be a reporter revealing the truth and nothing apart from the truth. Contamination of the reality would raise doubt about the role of the researcher and his impartiality.

Apart from revealing reality as objectively as possible, the researcher would also have a role as communicator and educator. Knowledge about how society and the business world are functioning would have to be brought to the attention of the different stakeholders in society such as

businessmen and politicians. Having a valid picture of reality would provide the opportunity to make laws that effectively and efficiently would underpin the aims of the politicians. For businessmen, a valid picture would potentially make it possible to strategize and reach aims most expediently under the given market conditions.

What would be the downside of such scholarship be? Just describing how reality is, misses out a central part of academic research; analytical, critical and creative thinking! Analytical thinking goes beyond merely portraying what is happening but includes answering “why” and “what” questions. Studying what and why customers are buying and what the effects are provides the grounding for a number of issues about the firms, sales and organization of supply chains just to mention a few. Critical thinking adds to this through raising doubts about the expediency of developed solutions and outcomes and their ethical consequences. Finally, thinking out of the box is not only a popular phrase but brings to the point that research is also about breaking the rules of the current understanding and developing new solutions with better outcomes. Missing out this central part of academic research would also impact on education. Business students would only learn about what businesses do. The advantage of this kind of students would be that they would fit into a call for “ready cooked” students who more or less could get started at the workplace without additional training. However, these students would not be trained in reflective thinking, but instead be misguided relying on “evidence speaking for itself” (Cox, 1996). Students would know everything about the newest trends or fads, be short-time oriented and atheoretical and be trained by what Cox (1996) has labelled “barefoot empirism”. Examples of such a practice is the wide number of published practices that can be termed tool-box lean (Arlbjørn and Freytag, 2013).

L’art pour l’art

In contrast, if the aim is to build grand theories that perfectly reveal how reality work as a precise machinery it would be important to look for clear principles not contaminated by stochastic variations without any relevance and real importance. The researcher should not care much about reality as it is here and now, but focus on building well-functioning clockwork like theories portraying more and precisely the general principles behind the functioning of society and business’ role in it. Researchers should concentrate on building theories that nicely portrays equilibriums under given circumstances, seldom found in reality, but nevertheless providing clear results. L’art pour l’art – art for art’s sake – or theory for theory’s sake holds a number of implications for practice and education.

As the researcher is interested in discovering principles and providing generalizations, variations between firms becomes of less interest. General maps are drawn up and advice on how to read the map is given, but no advice on how to maneuver is provided. Therefore, academia lacks an interest and does not see the importance of practical relevance per se. It is up to practitioners to deal with practical problems. Researchers’ principal objective is to ask the right questions and not to solve practical problems. What is good quality is not a matter whether a problem in practice can be solved, but a matter of to extend a new building block of a theory can be added or not. Quality of

research is judged based on where it is published and the ranking of the academic journal makes out the benchmark. As Bennis and O'Toole pointed out (2005, p. 100) "Nevertheless, a management professor who publishes rigorously executed studies in the highly quantitative Administrative Science Quarterly is considered a star, while an academic whose articles appears in the accessible pages of a professional review, which is much more likely to influence business practices, risks being denied tenure". Based on this understanding of academia's role in society, academia becomes a self-sufficient system. Business students gets trained in understanding the identified principles and in the methods used to develop them. Students become well-trained to be a part of the academic elite. However, not all students will have the good fortune to get employed at universities and business schools. These students will be left on their own and will on an ad hoc basis have to learn how to navigate in and will have to solve real world problems. The theories and methods that the students have learnt will perhaps, to a limited extend, be applicable to deal with real world problems.

Relevance as the backbone for research and teaching

We argue that research must build on a thorough understanding of reality based on a theoretical foundation. Understanding of reality is based on the applied concepts/constructs derived from theory. However, theory building is only a means to an end, as theory building serves two overall purposes: to solve real problems and to be the backbone of teaching at universities and business schools.

We have sometimes argued with some of our colleagues that we are happy that medicine, pharmaceutical and dentist students are not trained in the same way that our business students are. The counter arguments from our colleagues has been that we are not training technicians at a business school and at the same time this is what politicians (sometimes) wants from us. We want to push the understanding of real-life companies that moves beyond an understanding of companies as production functions. Business in real-life contains of people with multiple goals that can be studied from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives. Developing students being able to enter the job market without first having a job as a trainee represents one extreme that call for practice orientation. Students being good at formulating hypothesis and testing these with the purpose of theory validation but without being able to demonstrate their real-world relevance is another extreme of theoretical orientation.

Society wants better pay-off for the money spent in the education system. However, do politicians know what they wish for? And should they not be careful about what they wish for? The education system should give the students the platform for critical thinking so they in practice can contribute with efforts that improve enterprises competitive advantages instead of just maintaining an ongoing practice that over time may drain it for further growth.

No doubt that money spent on education and research should be spent with care and where pay-off is the highest. However, education is a long-time investment but knowledge learnt has a shelf-time

why continued education is needed. Education is not just about what the pay-off is after a year or two or whether students are employed within the first year after graduation or not. Education at universities and business schools must be research based as research based education is the hallmark of universities and business schools. But of what kind should research then be? Let us take a brief look at what is currently going on in academia.

A perception of current state of research and teaching

The amount of academic published papers has been growing and continues to grow immensely. According to Alvesson *et al.* (2017, p. 4), the amount of academic published journal articles has more than doubled from 1 million articles in 1996 to two million and a half in 2009. Such an increase can be perceived as a better pay-off and that the universities and business school has followed the pressure from outside. This makes sense if we just follow simple quantitative output measures. However, as Alvesson (2013, p. 102) argues “In order to look good, it (universities) recruit top researchers, pays them a great deal of money with a minimal teaching load, and hires part-time, cheap people to teach as much as possible”. Such a practice may boost the reputation and ranking of the university, but what this practice does with the quality of research based teaching is another still unanswered question! If the development, as described by the quotation by Alvesson, not is an extreme, but more generally replicates a trend, then this points to a negative side-effect of an incentive and measurement system. However, one might argue that this is perhaps not a perfect system, but if the teacher is good at teaching and the researcher is good in researching, how could the split of work between them then be a problem? In response to this perspective, we should remember that research based teaching not is research based, if a researcher does not play an active role in the process. Research based teaching contains different elements that is related to the specific education taxonomy and the students’ knowledge, skills and competences (ACE Denmark, 2012, p. 13). The students must obtain insight in the newest development in research and knowledge about the subject area. Development of skills means that the students will be able to apply methods and tools related to the subject area. Finally, based on the knowledge and skills, the students must develop competences to work with complex research-related problem areas related to the subject area. Thus, there is a progression of the three research-based elements. To these elements can be added further nuances based on Bache *et al.* (2011, p. 16). The teacher should be able to relate the knowledge communicated towards the process in which the knowledge has been produced. In other words, the teacher has been part of the knowledge production “workshop” and knows what the knowledge is based on and the conditions for its validity. Having the obligation to teach also provides a platform for discussion with the students and where an often-raised question from students will be “what can this model or method be used for in practice?”. In other words, teaching and research will prosper from each other and a benchmark of good research is that it has the relevance for teaching.

What about the content of the research – how much impact it has? A statement is found in Alvesson *et al* (2017, p. 9) that says “never before in history of humanity have so many written so much while having so little to say to so few”. It seems like the quantitative criteria dominates over qualitative criteria and it is questionable whether this production has advanced knowledge as the

following quotation pinpoint: “Today, it’s more ‘publish as we perish’. We have been producing more and more shit of less and less overall quality for a generation. Has it advanced ‘knowledge’? Face it, you’ve read thousands of articles in your career and you’ve been influenced by, at best a few dozen” (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013, p. 246). Other researchers have made similar claims, for instance, Hoffman, 2016; Lambert and Enz, 2015; Martin, 2012. And what is even worse is that this practice can lead to an obsession towards theory where basic and common problem areas become theoretical topics that talented practitioners already know how to solve” (Stentoft, 2017, p. 14). This lack of practical relevance apparently can make the challenge with knowledge production and knowledge transfer worse (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Having an incentive and measurement system that drives quantity up combined with a ranking system that merely look at research from a point of view theory for theory’s sake seems to make research progress in a wrong direction. Thus, research must change direction where real world problems play a more significant role. Still, knowing what is going on in reality has merit for grounding theory and it has been the starting point for much research for example with the structure of distribution channels (Bucklin, 1965), manufacturing strategy (Skinner, 1969) and zero quality control (Shingo, 1985). Dealing with real world problems should be another essential benchmark for research. However, describing reality is not enough. Research must include analytical, critical and creative thinking and this should be another essential benchmark of valid research. Analytical thinking or analysis is about consistency, coherence and application of rigorous methods. Yet it is important to keep in mind that “mainstream research is quite reductionist and asks for increasingly “rigorous” methods. The editors of this book suggest a reinterpretation of rigorous to mean “rigorous relevance” in business market contexts. I agree and hope that such a reinterpretation will help to avoid “rigor mortis” depending on overemphasis on what is believed to be “rigorous” methods” (Mattson, 2018, p. v). Academics should also challenge and be challenged by other researchers and stakeholders about their beliefs and proclaimed results. The ability to think differently should be stimulated through research.

This special issue contains seven papers that do address various aspects of conducting research with practical relevance and through this raises the impact for business and society.

The first paper by David B. Grant, Gyöngyi Kovács and Karen Spens is a viewpoint that discusses questionable research practice in business research with a special emphasis on the logistics and supply chain management discipline. Based on literature reviews and autoethnography, they discuss the incentives behind questionable research practice such as rewards for increased number of publications, increased number of citations and increased number of grant funding. They also discuss the shortcoming of journal rankings that challenge the relevance, credibility and integrity of academic research.

The second paper by Judy Zolkiewski is a commentary that debates the challenges related to balancing relevance and ranking in management research. She discusses the need for doing relevant research and offers numerous ways researchers can pursue to overcome the often-wicked problem with lack of practical relevance. This include, among others, influencing the incentive system to

strengthen the relevance criteria, to improve the consciousness to position the research better for both a theoretical and practical audience and to strive for more inter-disciplinary research.

The third paper by Barry Babin and Julie Moulard discusses what's right and wrong with reviewing for marketing journals and its effect on business knowledge. They reflect upon who the reviewers are; who should do the reviews; how many reviews to conduct; and who should not do reviews. Their discussion of the review process ends up with suggestions for enhancing the process such as acknowledging and crediting the academic activity of conducting reviews, encouraging editors being more proactive in selecting reviewers and to improve the process so it allows more question-answer communication between the authors and reviewers.

The fourth paper is written by Ram Narasimhan and is a conceptual paper addressing the need of relevant research in applied research field like supply chain management. The rigor and relevance discussion is reclaimed and the paper provide different strategies to increase relevance and impact of academic research such as applying actions research, executive engagement, engaged scholarship and sponsored research.

The fifth paper by Torben Bager is a conceptual paper that explores the barriers for knowledge exchange between the world of science and the world of practice. The paper discusses the imbalance of Mode 1 and Mode 2 research and reflects upon why an increased knowledge exchange actually seem to have a little presence in academic journals. The paper outlines various barriers for collaborative research as a form of knowledge exchange such as limited receptiveness of management journals towards case study papers; biased criteria favoring theoretical and methodological rigor at the expense of practical relevance and disincentives for researchers to join time-consuming collaborative research.

The sixth paper by Joanne Hamet and Sylvie Michel is concerned with the classical rigor-relevance debate and the knowledge market with perspective to Mode 1 and Mode 2 research in different science settings. With the help of transaction cost theory, resource-based theory and knowledge based theory they develop seven propositions regarding the divide of the production of research and the diffusion of academic knowledge through the academic research system and the production of research within the business organizations. The theories are applied to the knowledge market to identify the relevant factors in the decision situation for a company either to internalize research or to rely on external academic research.

The seventh paper by Isabelle Bäckström and Kajsa Ahlgren is a conceptual paper that explores how the notion of relevance is produced, distributed and consumed in management research. The paper applies a critical discourse analysis and shows through illustrative texts cases how academic power relations maintain norms in the relevance debate. The paper suggests researchers to analyze and reflect upon one's own role in producing and disseminating academic knowledge stimulating both rigor and relevance.

We hope you will enjoy reading the seven papers in this special issue.

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About the Guest Editors

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