Knowledge exchange and management research: Barriers and potentials

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Abstract

Purpose: The growing involvement of management researchers in knowledge exchange activities and collaborative research does not seem to be reflected in a growing academic output. The purpose of this paper is to explore barriers for academic output from these activities as well as the potential for ‘interesting’ papers.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper uses secondary data and statistics as well as an illustrative case study to trace knowledge exchange activities and barriers for academic output based on these activities.

Findings: The paper identifies a number of barriers for the turning of data derived from knowledge exchange activities and Mode 2 research into academic papers such as low priority of case study research in leading management journals, a growing practice orientation in the research funding systems, methodological challenges due to limited researcher control, and disincentives for researcher involvement in this type of research. The paper also identifies a potential for ‘interesting’ research and discoveries in relation to this type of research.

Research limitations/implications: Diminishing the barriers for publication of Mode 2 and case-based research and exploring the potential for ‘interesting’ discoveries has a potential to lift off papers with a high level of scientific rigor as well as a high level of relevance for practice.

Originality: An outcome focus on the relationship between knowledge exchange activities and management research is to our knowledge new in the debate about the lack of practical relevance of management research.

Keywords: Knowledge exchange, management research, barriers, relevance debate, interesting research, discoveries

Article classification: Conceptual paper
Introduction

Alongside research and teaching, knowledge exchange is now well established as a key mission for universities and business schools. Knowledge exchange encompasses a wide variety of activities such as commercialization and incubation activities, joint research and development projects, consultancy, training activities and community engagement.

The role of researchers in knowledge exchange activities is mainly the expert role, with researchers applying and disseminating their knowledge and competences to outsiders for a practical purpose, i.e. transferring science-based knowledge to practitioners and thereby enhancing the knowledge spillover to society (Acs et al., 2013). However, researchers are not only contributors of new knowledge, they are also recipients of practice-related knowledge when they engage in knowledge exchange activities and become enriched by the tacit knowledge carried by practitioners (Van de Ven, 2007). Moreover, exchange of knowledge is often accompanied by creation of new knowledge when science-based and practice-based knowledge is mixing and new ideas and solutions emerge (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nonaka and Konno, 1998).

In firms and other practice oriented organizations, knowledge creation is primarily an internal process among employees who exchange and combine knowledge rooted in shared codes and language (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Boisot, 1998; Kolb, 1994). This knowledge is to a large degree tacit and therefore inaccessible to outsiders. Hence researchers wanting to access new knowledge in specific organizations and sectors need to collaborate with actors inside these entities, and through this process new knowledge with inputs from both sides may be created. Such knowledge exchange and knowledge creation between ‘the world of practice’ and the ‘world of science’ carry a potential for interesting research (Figure 1).

However, under current circumstances this potential does not seem to be realized. The call by international bodies, governments, businesses and research foundations for more engagement by university researchers in practice-oriented activities outside the university seems to succeed well but enhanced academic output is lacking. In other words, in terms of knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange the ‘world of science’ seems to have approached the ‘world of practice’, but the two ‘worlds’ might nevertheless, as the intense debate about weak relevance of management research suggests, be drifting away from each other rather than approaching. Why is this so? What barriers at the system, organizational and individual levels reduce or prevent the turning of experiences and data picked from knowledge exchange activities into high-quality research contributions? And what potential contributions to the ‘world of science’ are not made due these barriers? These are the questions explored in this paper.

The paper is structured in the following way: First we dive into the relevance debate to identify the problem space and consider reformulation from a ‘practice-to-science’ perspective; then the development in knowledge exchange activities is explored, using statistics from the UK which has been a forerunner in this area; this evidence is followed by an outline of the discussion about Mode 2 research and the extent to
which peer reviewed management journals are receptive to this type of research, including discussion of case study research and ‘interesting’ research; then a number of organizational and methodological barriers for publication of Mode 2 research are identified, inspired by an illustrative case study of the challenges and potentials experienced by a group of researchers in a Mode 2 project aimed at small business managers.

Making sense of the relevance debate

The relevance of management research for managers and practice has long been a discussion point. The growing volume of management research and published scientific papers does not automatically diminish the gap between management research and practice, it may even widen the gap: “The greatest challenge facing management scholars is the presence, extent, and growth of the gap between research and practice” (Banks et al, 2016, p. 2205). The reasons for this development are many such as increasing publication pressures on researchers, a tendency to auto-communication in the research community, and changed publication criteria in top management journals favoring rigor rather than relevance.

While many scholars acknowledge that there is a problem of relevance, it is less clear how the problem should be understood: Is it the relevance of research in general or certain forms of relevance which constitute the problem (Nicolai and Siedl, 2010)? And where is the problem located: in the transfer of knowledge from research to practice, in knowledge exchange and knowledge production, or in the transfer of new knowledge from practice to academic output (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006)?

In diagnosing the relevance problem it is useful, as elaborated by Nicolai and Siedl (2010), to distinguish between different forms of relevance, particularly instrumental relevance versus conceptual relevance. Contributors to the relevance debate tend to focus on the declining instrumental relevance of management research while tending to ignore the importance of conceptual relevance. Historically many new management concepts have gained popularity among managers and influenced their mental maps and decision making processes, starting with Scientific Management in the early 20th Century.

Kieser et al. (2015) provide a comprehensive overview over the relevance debate and its streams of literature. They distinguish between two main streams: the programmatic literature and the descriptive literature. The view by Kieser et al. (2015) on the programmatic literature is negative, arguing that it is “neither empirical nor theory-building, but typically consists of normative opinion statements” (Kieser et al., 2015, p. 145). In contrast, they see as rigorous the descriptive literature which focuses on “how management practice deals with the output of management research” (Kieser et al., 2015, p. 145).

The deeper root of the relevance problem seems to be the gradual shift in publication tradition over the last decades. What counts today in a research career is publication in peer reviewed academic journals, with increasing focus on top journals and citations. Monographs, textbooks and contributions to practice-oriented magazines may be counted by research monitoring systems – but they do not count much in terms of promotion in the academic career system.

While the pressure to ‘publish or perish’ is felt increasingly in the research community, another pressure is also getting stronger. As documented in the next section, management researchers are under growing pressure for involvement in externally funded projects. The consequence is a significant growth in the time researchers spend on applying for and executing knowledge exchange activities. In their discussion of the
relevant debate Nicolai and Siedl (2015, p. 1259) points to this paradox arguing that “it remains unclear why there should be a problem of relevance at all: many professors at business schools offer consulting services to companies; business schools offer executive programs that focus explicitly on practitioners; companies cooperate with business professors at various levels”.

This suggests that the relevance problem is not rooted in a general disconnection between the research community and the businesses community although they rest on different self-referential systems and overall logics (Kieser and Leinar, 2009). Other contributors to the relevance debate focus on specific problem areas which have to be addressed such as the need for researchers to identify research ideas more often in the ‘world of practice’ than through gaps in published academic papers (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Huff and Huff, 2001); to involve practitioners more in research and publication processes (Shapiro et al., 2007; Banks et al., 2016); to rely more on pragmatism and action research (Fendt et al., 2008); to diminish the dissemination gap through new forms of communication (Toffel, 2016); to enhance the practical relevance of research findings while maintaining scientific rigor (Wolf and Rosenberg, 2012); and to focus more at ‘interesting’ research which breaks with conventional wisdom and present new discoveries (Davis, 1971; Bartunek et al., 2006; Frank and Landström, 2015).

The growth of researcher involvement in knowledge exchange activities

Since 1990, European universities and business schools have experienced a drastic change in their framework conditions. Universities have become mass universities with a growing amount of enrolled students. At the same time public funding to universities has tended to stagnate, implying that public funding to research activities has tended to decline. Moreover, an increasing share of the public research funds is allocated competitively through application rounds.

These financial changes have been accompanied by a new policy and governance agenda which emphasizes the societal relevance of research activities in addition to research quality. Hence, public and private research funding institutions increasingly demand measurement of the societal impact and the practical relevance of their investments (Nicolai and Siedl, 2010; Augier and March, 2007).

Measuring knowledge exchange activities is, however, difficult and statistics at the European level are weak. A closer look at one country might therefore be a better way to draw a picture of how knowledge exchange activities have developed in the last decades. The UK is selected for this purpose as the UK has good statistics on knowledge exchange activities and seems to have been a forerunner among the European countries.

According to the Public Funding Observatory of the European University Association (www.eua.be, accessed 25.02.2017), public funding in the UK went down from over £ 10.000M in 2010 to under £ 8.000M in 2016. This financial pressure in a situation with growth in the teaching load has pushed the UK universities to search for alternative funding to cope with the financial pressure, which again has led to a rapid growth in researcher involvement in knowledge exchange activities at UK universities since 2000.

This development is documented in an annual survey called ‘Higher Education – Business and Community Interaction Survey’. The most recent report for 2014-15 confirms the growth of knowledge exchange activities in the UK (Hefce, 2016). From 2003-04 to 2014-15 the grand total of knowledge exchange activities has, in real terms, increased from £ 2.5M to £ 4.2M (Hefce, 2016, p.6). The overall growth from
2013-14 to 2014-15 was 6.2%, but with variation in growth figures across subfields: Collaborative research 9.9%, Contract research 1.5%, consultancy 0.2%, facilities and equipment related services 17.5%, continuing professional development 5.4%, regeneration and development projects 13.3% and intellectual property income 18.2% (Hefce, 2016, pp. 3-4). Out of these subfields ‘collaborative research’ and ‘contract research’ were the most important, amounting to £ 2.5M in 2014-15 out of the grand total of £ 4.2M (Hefce, 2016, p.6). Collaborative research has gained importance over the years, growing from about £ 0.7M in 2003-04 to about £1.3M in 2014-15, constituting about 30% of all knowledge exchange activities in 2014-15 (Hefce, 2016, p.6).

**Mode 2 research and its output in peer reviewed journals**

The observed mixed character of knowledge exchange activities suggests variation in the potential for research output across subfields. Particularly interesting is the empirical category called ‘collaborative research’ in the UK system. This type of research is typically problem-oriented and multidisciplinary in character and involves researcher-practioner collaboration, also called Mode 2 research in contrast to classic single-disciplinary Mode 1 research (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) label this type of research ‘engaged scholarship’ defined as “a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their differential perspectives and competences to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon” (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006: p. 803). This implies that there, ideally, is a take-away for both researchers and practitioners aligned with the dominant logic in their field: academic publication for researchers and problem solution for practitioners (Kieser and Leiner, 2009).

Proponents of Mode 2 research view Mode 1 research as being elitist and of limited practical relevance, dealing with problems picked from the literature rather than from practice, and predominantly trying to fill theoretical holes rather than build new theories inductively from the world of practice (Huff and Huff, 2001, Tranfield and Starkey, 1998, Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). Proponents of Mode 1 research on their side have criticized Mode 2 research for lack of rigor and weak ability to turn research outcome into publications in peer reviewed journals (Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Nicolai and Siedl, 2010; Kieser *et al.*, 2015).

In spite of the disagreements in the research community about Mode 2 research, policy makers increasingly embrace it. Most EU research grants emphasize practice-oriented, collaborative and multidisciplinary research and some European countries prioritize ‘strategic research’ in addition to basic and applied research. An example is the Strategic Research Council in Finland which aims at “finding solutions to the major challenges facing Finnish society” (www.aka.fi/en/about-us/SRC/, accessed 25.02.2017).

The growing public funding stream for knowledge exchange activities has, however, “tended to be one-sided and to focus on the relevance and use of academic research for practice” (Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p. 8). In other words, knowledge transfer from researchers to practitioners has dominated the scene. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p. 8) suggest that this transfer approach should be substituted by a balanced approach which “not only enhances the relevance of research for practice but also advances research knowledge in a discipline”.

This call in 2006 for a balanced approach does not seem to have resulted in increased subsequent research output from Mode 2 research. Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009) provide a number of cases where Mode 2
Many factors influence the publication of journal papers based on Mode 2 research. A perfect investigation of the matter would require good data on the amount of Mode 2 research, the number of submissions to management journals and the reject rates for these submissions compared to other types of research papers, but such data are not available. We therefore rely on indirect data, particularly about case study methodology which is very important for Mode 2 research in the management field because it is typically rooted in an organization or an organizational effort which can be analyzed through a case study.

Case study methodology has long been a recognized methodological approach with many formats: quantitative and qualitative, descriptive and analytical, single-case and multi-case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Most management journals are open for case study papers which often are praised for their high level of relevance: “case studies are typically carried out in close interaction with practitioners, and they deal with real management situations” (Gibbert et al., 2008, p. 1465). In the mission statements of top journals practical relevance is usually emphasized and some of them invite a broad range of empirical methods. An example is the Academy of Management Journal (AMJ) which understands itself as “a flagship empirical journal in management”, aiming to publish papers which “contribute to management practice using a variety of empirical methods (e.g. quantitative, qualitative, field, laboratory, meta-analytic, and combination)” (http://aom.org/amj/ accessed 25.02.2017).

Nevertheless, when reviewing all published papers in 10 management journals during 1995-2000 (including AMJ), Gibbert et al. (2008) only found 159 case study papers out of a total of 2643 papers, i.e. about 6 percent (AMJ was down at 1.9 percent). The selected journals were US based which, according to the authors, may have resulted in some bias compared to a more balanced selection. But in any case, this publication rate is low and begs explanation. Logically there may be two main causes, either peer reviewed management journals only receive few case study based submissions, or the rejection rate is relatively high for this type of paper.

The growing amount of Mode 2 research and knowledge exchange activities suggests that there should be fertile soil for an increased number of case study submissions. From the point of view of the individual researcher, however, Mode 2 research and case studies may seem unattractive compared to desk research such as theoretical work or analysis of empirical data through statistics or data bases. Compared to desk research, Mode 2 research requires a high level of time consumption and entails a high level of uncertainty about the process and outcome due to its explorative character. Whether true or not, the involved researchers may also share a perception about high access barriers to peer reviewed journals for this type of research papers, among other things because reviewers in contrast to the typical quantitative paper are lacking standard protocols for reviewing such papers. Naturally other channels for publication are also available for Mode 2 researchers such as practitioner-oriented magazines, books and report series, but particularly young researchers cannot afford to spend much time on such publications. In a contribution to the relevance debate a group of young researchers explain that “many of the authors of this article have been strongly discouraged – both in their training and in their early socialization in their first and second
(i.e., pre-tenure) positions – from publishing books or even refereed practitioner journal articles” (Banks et al., 2016, p. 2222).

The limited number of published case study papers may also be due to other factors. As argued and documented by Gibbert et al. (2008), many published case study papers suffer from validity problems which suggests that rejected papers also suffer from methodological weaknesses. Moreover, editors and reviewers of mainstream journals may, in spite of mission statements, share a rather negative view on this type of papers. Some researchers have reported such negative views. When Flyvbjerg first planned to do case study research he was met with negative reactions from colleagues such as, “you cannot generalize from a single case” and “case study is subjective” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 219). This led him to identify – and reject - five core ‘misunderstandings’ about case study research: “(a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalize from a single case, therefore, the single case cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, while other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias towards verification; and (e) it is often difficult to summarize specific case studies” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 219).

Whatever the reason, the low publication rate for case study papers is surprising taking into consideration that such papers not only are seen as having a high level of relevance but also a high capacity to challenge taken-for-granted understandings and conceptualizations (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Weick, 2007). Gibbert et al. (2008) may be right in pointing to methodological weaknesses as one of the barriers for more case study publications but it is hardly the only important factor. This raises the question whether the claim for rigor has become so dominant that it blocks the way for interesting theoretical and empirical discoveries, such as those stemming from Mode 2 research and qualitative case studies. In general the research community acknowledges the importance of ‘interesting research’ but seems rather ambiguous in the handling of this evaluation criterion (Davis 1971; Frank and Landström, 2015; Bartunek et al., 2006; Das and Long, 2010). Frank and Landström (2015, p. 51) defines ‘interesting research’ as “well-crafted and well-written studies that challenge established knowledge and produce new theories and findings”. The Forum of Academy of Management Editors reached a similar understanding by saying that ‘interesting’ papers “must ‘stand out’ in some way” (Bartunek et al., 2006, p. 11), not only theoretically as emphasized by Davis (1971), but also empirically through new and surprising empirical evidence which challenge taken-for-granted perceptions. In relation to this discussion, the Academy of Management Journal also investigated the opinions of its board members on ways to make the journal more ‘interesting’ and the top priority was: “accept more innovative, less formulaic research” (Bartunek et al., 2006, p. 10). Based on discussions and survey results the editors of this journal decided to change its mission statement and concluded optimistically that it is “both possible and desirable to raise the proportion of articles published in AMJ that are regarded as important, competently executed, and really interesting” (Bartunek et al., 2006, p. 9). However, some years later Bartunek expressed a less optimistic view: “As someone who has been active in trying to bridge the (rigor-relevance) gap...I am much more aware of problems accomplishing this now than I was ten years ago” (Bartunek, 2011, p. 556).

While the AMJ discussion does not seem to have changed the applied criteria in its review and publication process much, it seems to have inspired another recent change, namely the launch in 2015 of a new journal
called Academy of Management Discoveries (AMD) which in a more direct way invites ‘interesting research’. The AMD webpage argues that it was seen to be better to launch a new journal than to threaten the paradigm of AMJ “by mixing in new articles that would not adhere to the paradigm” (http://aom.org/amd/, accessed 25.02.2017). The mission of the new journal is to “promote exploratory empirical research” and it understands itself as a “phenomenon-driven” empirical journal, focused at “a novel finding, unusual empirical pattern, or a robust anomaly”. It is also worth noting that the journal “welcomes studies at the pre-theory stage”. This new journal thus emerged on the basis of acknowledgement of something missing in the repertoire of Academy of Management journals, which neither focus narrowly on rigorous theoretical contributions nor on rigorous theory testing empirical research, but primarily emphasize surprises and discoveries generated through inductive research. It is worth noting that the founding editor of AMD is Andrew Van de Ven who is a strong proponent of Mode 2 research and engaged scholarship. Hence, this new journal seems to be a promising new channel for publication of Mode 2 research and case study papers but it also seems as if the other leading management journals are still searching for ways to make ‘interesting’ a stronger criteria in their review and publication activities.

In addition to the outlined input and output processes in relation to peer reviewed journals, academic outcome of knowledge exchange activities is also influenced by organizational and methodological challenges. In order to identify such barriers we first dive into the real world through an illustrative case study.

**Case study of a training project for small business managers**

During 2012, 2013 and 2014 more than 700 growth-oriented small business managers were trained across Denmark with the purpose of enhancing their growth ambitions and competences to manage growth processes. The selected firms should be small (5-50 employees) and the managers should be interested in growing their firms and enhance their personal competences. The training program, which was called Growth through Management, consisted of a mixture of consultancies, seminars and networking activities in groups of about 25 managers. The project was primarily financed by the Danish Government and project execution was handled by five regional business promotion centres in collaboration with three national business associations and a university department. The project was predominantly practice-oriented, but contained a research component with a priori funds for research and transfer activities. These activities, including a PhD project, were only sketched a priori and had to be defined during the process.

*Project initiation*: The project was defined during 2011 and funds allocated to the business promotion centres early 2012. A research group which had been part of the application process in 2011 decided to withdraw from the project just before it started. The business promotion centres therefore approached another research group which had to make a quick decision. The group, which is specializing in entrepreneurship and small business management, found the project interesting. It opened for qualitative as well as quantitative longitudinal data collection which promised good publication chances. The ‘price’ to be paid was researcher involvement in knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange activities such as participation in a steering group, participation in a group of involved consultants, and participation in seminars with groups of managers.
This project initiation is very different from traditional research projects where researchers identify a problem, design the project, select partners and search funding based on a detailed research plan. Here the problem was defined and the project designed by a ministry before the researchers got involved. Moreover some decisions on data collection and evaluation processes had been made by the consortium partners before the researchers joined the process. This imposed some limitations, particularly on data quality and collection which was governed more by concerns about project evaluation and participant satisfaction than research output. On the other hand the research component was funded in such a way that it gave wide possibilities to pursue new research ideas which were likely to emerge during the knowledge exchange and knowledge creation process.

Control group design: In the initial period the researchers involved themselves in knowledge exchange processes with the partners and the involved consultants and managers. A qualitative PhD project was designed as well as a quantitative project aimed at measuring cognitive, behavioral and performance changes during the project period through two rounds of interviews, one early on and another late in the process. The surveys among participants had to be supplemented by a similar survey with a control group of non-participants to reach methodological rigor. This control-group design was not planned a priori, but the steering group approved the proposal by the researchers who argued, rooted in the intervention literature (Storey, 2002), that the impact of this policy intervention could only be studied properly through control group design. However, the steering committee demanded that this additional data collection process should be integrated with the planned evaluation process and that questionnaires should be designed in collaboration with the evaluation experts at the business promotion centres. Hence, data control and data collection was not entirely controlled by the research group but had to be negotiated with the partners who primarily were interested in the practical results and in good governance of the project. This power relation in which researchers were dominated by the project organizers implied limitations to the researchers’ access to interviewees and non-researcher influence over the design of questionnaires and the formulation of questions.

Discovering a new research idea: During the first year of the project, a topic kept surfacing in the discussions in the steering group meetings: recruitment of participants. The project target was minimum 600 participants in three years and the minimum requirements of participants were defined by the funding agency, but how to recruit and whether certain types of managers or industrial sectors should be prioritized was not defined a priori but left to the partners to decide. During these discussions a new and ‘interesting’ topic surfaced: should the project aim to recruit the ‘best’, i.e. the best qualified and most ambitious managers, or rather the ‘second-best’ who would be likely to benefit more from the program than the ‘best’ who already had acquired a high level of growth qualifications and ambitions? The research group decided to take a closer look at this topic and soon realized that enrollment of participants to intervention projects is a surprisingly under-researched topic. There is a substantial theoretical and methodological literature about the impact of intervention projects, and theoretical concepts such as ‘additionality’ and ‘market failure’ to guide project organizers interested in the impact of intervention projects, but only few empirical studies of recruitment processes and no studies specifically on the impact of enrollment for the project outcome were found. This is surprising as the impact of policy intervention projects is likely to rely on the character of the enrolled participants. The group therefore designed a new project, collected data, presented results for the steering group and at an international research conference, and eventually a paper was submitted to an international journal and published (Bager et al.,
As always, the choice of journal was a matter for discussion in the research group. In the end the researchers decided to go for a medium-level international journal interested in publishing articles on policy issues and training. The research group judged that the planned paper would only have limited publication chances in a top journal due to some weaknesses in the collected data, and the group also assumed that top journals, which tend to be rather conservative, would be more skeptical to the new enrollment topic than a medium-level journal.

Without participation in the project and involvement in the recruitment discussions, this research idea would not have surfaced. The research group was initially, in accordance with the learning literature, focusing on the learning impact of the project in terms of cognitive, behavioral and performance changes resulting from training compared to non-training. Hence, the recruitment idea can be seen as an example of the value of collaboration with practitioners in terms of discovery of a research idea which was interesting for the researchers as well as the practitioners. For the researcher community this collaboration added to the existing scientific knowledge on policy intervention aimed at managers, and opened for more research on recruitment processes; and for practitioners it led to reflections on what recruitment criteria to use in future interventions projects.

Organizational and methodological barriers for improved research output from knowledge exchange activities

The case illustrates that knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners can lead to ‘interesting’ research ideas through dialogue and knowledge creation processes, but it also points at a number of organizational and methodological factors which are likely to be barriers for publication in peer reviewed journals.

First, as outlined in the illustrative case, the methodological choices in Mode 2 projects are not always fully controlled by the researchers because choices often are made during the project rather than planned a priori, and also because involved practitioners, who sometimes dominate project groups, primarily are action and result driven. This may cause problems for researchers who aim to generate detailed and systematic data in order to reach a high level of methodological rigor. In such a setting, compromises have to be made between practitioners and researchers which may not be optimal from a research and publication point of view.

Second, qualified researchers may in reality be only marginally involved in the collaborative processes with practitioners. In the outlined case the senior researchers were only marginally involved in concrete training activities because of heavy involvement in other activities at the university, while research assistants and PhD students were deeply involved. In other cases Mode 2 projects are primarily handled by non-research units at the university with its own staff and limited research qualifications. These units can to some extent involve qualified researchers from research departments, but such involvement tends to be limited and transfer oriented. Such limited involvement of senior researchers is likely to influence the potential research outcome negatively because involvement is important: “The importance of spending more time on site to build direct and personal relationships with organizational participants has been argued not only to facilitate the implementation of research findings but also to increase the likelihood of making significant advances in a scholarly discipline (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 813).
Third, research activities in Mode 2 projects are often an ‘add on’ to a project which due to its funding and overall goal primarily is practice-oriented and fixed in terms of project planning and financial allocation. This may prevent the partners from pursuing ‘interesting’ topics when they appear during the collaborative process. In the described case the researchers succeeded in reallocating funds for control group design and additional data collection during the project execution, but these decisions could not be made without approval from the other consortium partners. This suggests that some slack in the project plan and existence of reserve funds is conducive for the ability to pursue new opportunities which appear during the process.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The relevance debate has focused on the separation of the ‘world of science’ from ‘the world of practice’ in terms of limited practical impact of academic publications and weaknesses in the communication between the two sides. This debate has tended to neglect that knowledge exchange activities have grown rapidly over the last decades and resulted in intensified knowledge transfer through ‘action’ rather than ‘talking’. Moreover, the debate has tended to neglect the reverse transfer process, asking the question: why is the growing researcher involvement in knowledge exchange activities so limitedly reflected in academic outcome?

Our investigation of knowledge exchange activities in the UK demonstrated the mixed character of these activities. While most knowledge exchange activities have only limited potential for research output, collaborative research, which constitutes a significant and growing proportion of these activities, seems promising. Nevertheless, our literature search suggests that this potential is not realized under present circumstances. This may be caused by barriers related to journals as well as the research community, such as:

- Limited receptiveness of management journals to case study papers, particularly qualitative case studies, which are a typical outcome of Mode 2 research in the management field
- Biases in the applied criteria used by editors and reviewers of management journals which emphasize theoretical and methodological rigor and pay less attention to practical relevance and the degree to which research papers are ‘interesting’
- Disincentives for researcher involvement in Mode 2 research which tends to be more time consuming and uncertain than desk research, and with lower publication chances.

Some of these barriers have been discussed among editors of leading management journals and resulted in attempts to reform some journals (such as the Academy of Management Journal) and the launch of new journals (such as the Academy of Management Discoveries). These moves may open for publication of more ‘interesting’ papers based on Mode 2 research, particularly if reviewers and editors pay more attention to the practical relevance and discovery potential of submitted papers.

In addition to these general factors our case study pointed to a number of organizational factors which may constitute barriers for the turning of Mode 2 research into high quality papers:

- Dominance of practice orientation in many Mode 2 projects which limits researcher control over the methodological design and the data collection process
Increasing involvement of non-research units at universities and business schools in the handling of university-business collaboration, with senior researchers tending primarily to focus on knowledge transfer tasks and abstaining from time consuming knowledge exchange and knowledge creation activities.

Lack of flexibility in terms of project execution and funding when the partners discover new ‘interesting’ topics as the project unfolds.

Overcoming these publication and organizational barriers is important for all parties: journals may receive and publish more ‘interesting’ research, authorities and project organizers may benefit from more systematic knowledge building, and Mode 2 researchers may enhance their publication records and career options. What also seems clear, however, is the fact that the present situation cannot just be changed by one of the parties as we are dealing with a systemic lock-in: peer-reviewed journals and reviewers tend to be skeptical of the Mode 2 research output, Mode 2 researchers tend to avoid submitting to top journals and to peer reviewed journals at all, and managers and decision-makers do not prioritize peer reviewed journal publication as they typically do not read such papers and find them difficult to use in practice.

In order to change the lock-in situation, important recommendations to the parties could be:

- **Academic journals**: Consider ways to balance publication criteria so more emphasis is laid on papers which are ‘interesting’ and relevant, and elaborate more clear guidelines for reviewers on how to evaluate case study papers, particularly qualitative case studies.

- **Researchers**: The tendency for researchers, and particularly early-career researchers, to avoid uncertain Mode 2 research and prioritize desk research is understandable, but long term Mode 2 can be rewarding for management researchers and worth the investment in time and energy. However, a precondition for good publication results is researcher control of the data collection process, ensured through consortium contracts.

- **Authorities and consortium partners**: As the strength of Mode 2 research is the possibility to co-create new knowledge through interaction between researchers and practitioners, it is important to design and organize Mode 2 projects with this in mind, recognizing that senior researchers are likely to remain in the knowledge transfer mode unless good conditions for knowledge creation and data control are ensured.

The exploration in this paper of barriers and potentials related to researcher involvement in knowledge exchange activities should be seen as a first attempt to understand this side of the relevance debate better. What we have found here is only indications of barriers and potentials in need of further investigation and discussion, particularly empirical investigation of submissions and rejection rates for different types of research in relation to management journals. We quite agree with Kieser et al. (2015) when they suggest that there is a need for a rigorous scientific research program focusing on the utilization of management research, but while such investigation is unfolding there is also a need to move on with discussions on how to overcome the identified barriers for Mode 2 research.
Litterature


Figure 1. Knowledge processes between the ‘world of science’ and the ‘world of practice’