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Academic Research Productivity: What may be “reining” in the Indian B-School?

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Abstract

The article points at some historic reasons for poor productivity in research, including unproductive competition among institutions due to a false sense of self sufficiency, lack of adequate research infrastructure at the institution level and, the long standing government policy in India that has considered teaching to be the core activity in our University system. It emphasizes the need for collaborative action across institutions that by themselves do not have the wherewithal to upgrade the quality of research. It also stresses the need to build specialized competence in individual faculty members to strive for excellence in a core academic activity, be it research, teaching or executive training and administration. The traditional view of a faculty being a superior performer in all aspects of academics may not yield the results needed to attain global standards of excellence.

Academic Research Productivity: What may be “reining” in the Indian B-School?

At the outset, let me direct the reader’s attention to recent assessments made by two current policy makers of India. One, the criticism about the IIMs’ (in)ability to produce world class research and the other, an attempt to defend these institutions by stating the priorities set for these institutions by the government are largely on teaching and graduation and not so much on developing a healthy enquiry process¹.

I think both these statements aptly sum up the conundrum currently associated with India’s premier academic institutions in the Higher Education Sector. Being part of an important constituent of this sector, I am worried about the continuance of such a flux and its possible negative ramification. I am particularly wary of some of the potential remedies that are being increasingly (and hastily) suggested in various policy making congregations, which are, according to me, piece meal and cosmetic in nature. Instead, having been a faculty member in a B-school environment for long years, I would like to describe some of the potential flaws in the operating model of many such academic institutions in the country which need to be addressed first in order to resolve the core issue. However, first, it would be prudent to begin by tracing the history of academic research in the domain of management.

Formal and theoretical research in management has evolved fairly recently, in the past 60-70 years, although traces of its existence can be found in military epics in history (Johnson and Breckon, 2007). Modern management theory owes its genesis to the more fundamental stream of social science which has been researching on the world’s most intriguing entity for centuries – the human being. However, the true fillip to this interdisciplinary science was provided in the post War phase, when ravaged western economies required multi-faceted help to rebuild their fortunes (Baalen and Karsten, 2012).

Given its nascent status in the evolutionary process, and its multi-disciplinary approach, the stream of management research has significant entrenchments in the practice environment of business and industry, borrowing handsomely from the definitely more evolved streams of Economics, Psychology and Statistics / Operations Research.

Not surprisingly, given its antecedence, the realm of management research is today facing an increasing challenge of balancing the requirements of practice as well as building rigor into the enquiry process by increasing specialization and fragmentation (Klein 1990). This has spawned some very significant strides in terms of research papers, models, theories and propositions, though the discipline remain still strongly associated through the umbilical connection with the mother science, the realm of the social behaviour.

The crossroad of perspective-based and theoretic research

The peculiarities in its origins from the practice domain and the supposed imperfectness in identifying social phenomena, has led to this domain witnessing diverse approaches at documenting

¹ <http://www.indiaeducationreview.com> May 27, 2011, Sibal defends IIT, IIM faculty; blames focus on graduation for lack of research.

research insights, from anecdotal evidences from multiple scenarios to building rigorous and testable propositions in a limited set of environment. However, this diversity has also been its most significant challenge in addressing a potential criticism, the “rigor vs relevance dilemma”(Schön, 1983).

While each has its merits and complements the other through either deeper analysis or the breadth of scope, the debate about which is more impactful (practice anecdote-based research or scientific rationale driven theory building) has remained largely unresolved. A more balanced view about the research content in the area acknowledges the need for both coexisting in harmony given the requirements of current practice as well as the need to document knowledge which is generalizable (scientific) across context.

Notwithstanding the on-going debate, management science has proceeded to encompass the trueness of science with the advent of theorizing that is more common in other established realms. Important faces of management research include the like of Herbert Simon, James March, Richard Cyret and Frank Bass, who tried explaining intricate phenomena existing in management practice with models that captured the essence of decision making such as, the bounded rationality and non-maximization dictum. In spite of its intertwined and often deeply polarized approaches, management research has come to be respected for both its “disciplinary depth” and its “interdisciplinary” breadth (Baalen and Karsten, 2012).

Advancement in Academic Research in Management : Some Crucial Facilitators

This evolutionary track in a practice cum theory dominated environment has not come without generous support from various stakeholders. The domain of practice has significantly contributed in many ways to ensure an environment that produces cutting edge research. Interestingly, many of these theory building exercises today do not have direct relevance to the practicing world. Nevertheless, that has not diluted the interest that practitioners have for academic output. The hope is that it may, at an appropriate time trickle down to practice with big impact.

It is not surprising that a majority of the globally recognized publications in management theory emanate from the North American and some European universities (Tsui, 2004). Financial support for academic research in terms of business school grants provided by industry and government help foster a healthy climate of rigorous enquiry process that ensure the best of standards in scientific research being conducted. This is complemented by an effective rewards and recognition and compensation system that encourages organized and high level of enquiry in an evolved research environment. A lot has already been discussed about this process in many forums.

The formation of research alliances through the setting up of research bodies such as the INFORMS / Marketing Science Institute, the Operations Research Society of America, the Academy of Management and the likes are adequate evidence of the symbiotic relationship that exists between industry and academia to promote academic research of top quality.

As an illustration, a top quality research journal in the United States would either be administered by an academic institution of repute or, one of these research bodies and in a sense with the tacit support of the industry.

Case of Management research in India:

Let us quickly turn the focus on India which is the subject matter of this article. A lot has been commented on India's growth story in the past 10-15 years. Surprisingly though, among the BRICS nations, India stands out as one that is lagging behind significantly on research and innovation and academic productivity. Not one of its universities or academic institutions of repute show up in the QS² and THE³ rankings of Top 200 universities globally. Naturally, this is a matter of extreme concern for the long term sustenance of the growth story of our country. It is perhaps necessary to delve into the complexity of low productivity in academics in India. But like many other vexing issues in India, a "broad brush" approach at finding a resolution to this problem may not prove to be very effective.

The health of the Indian academic environment is perceived in various ways. What is agreed upon though by many experts and policy makers is that the investment of time and resources in pure research should increase by leaps and bounds. It however remains unclear to many, including myself, as to what may kick start a sustainable climate for research. I must add that management research as a serious academic activity is not alien to the academic environment in India. It is more about setting the correct policies for research at the systemic level that has been missing for a long time. Historically, as a practice in our universities, research has remained an individual pursuit that was recognized largely for promotional considerations with non-existent standards set on the dimensions of quality of output. However, in recent times, it appears that these perceptions may be changing. The establishment of a formal Performance Management System (PMS) in many institutions which highlight the importance of research output as an element of measured faculty productivity appear to support such transformation in priorities. However, the debate on "what" and "how" to research in management remains largely unresolved. I will turn the attention of the reader to these two important dimensions.

A recent colloquia on the "State of Management Research in India" (Khatri et al. , 2012) provides mixed views on the priorities to be set for academic research in India. While a section of academia strongly believes that the priorities need to be specific to the requirements of the Indian environment and not merely "apeing" the western model of publications, there is also the recognition that the Indian model of academic research should not and, need not be exclusive and insulated from similar pursuits elsewhere in the world. What is also largely agreed upon is the requirement to set up institutions such as the Indian Academy of Management that may provide a pan India academic-industry coordination council to stimulate research infrastructure in the country. While it is a good idea to have an overseeing body that both facilitates and lends direction, what may be needed really are more unit level changes in the focus on research at the institution level. In the process, an overarching body such as the Academy of Management can help in providing a scaled development of shared infrastructure across institutions which identify their own strengths, but at the same time recognize the necessity to complement their resources with that at other institutions. Let me attempt to explain this piece in greater detail.

A routine review of the spending on research activities at an undisclosed academic institute revealed that a very large proportion of money is being spent and over multiple years on two major Heads that have, at best, a secondary association with research – 1) expense to hire a research assistant

² Quacquarelli Symonds

³ Times Higher Education

and, 2) spending on travel. While both these may be somewhat relevant for conducting good quality research, typically high spending on two seemingly peripheral areas of a conventional research process raises questions about the nature and, at times, the quality of research that gets done in this environment. Part of this “polarized” spending habit on supposedly specific research initiatives can be attributed to the lack of measurability of the quality of output. It is unclear whether institutions have clarity about what needs to be measures, as well. However, to be fair to the researchers, such skewed research investments may also reflect the nature and content of research that they embark upon (case writing and macro-technical reports using published data that may require literature search done by an assistant), partly due to legacy and individual interest but also perhaps due to the lack of availability of other portent research tools and facilitators that may limit the nature of work that can be realized in this environment.

To cite an example of such a limitation, the Indian management research environment lacks either, a) infrastructure to collect data on large scale or, b) the network across institutions to make available syndicated microscopic (unit level) data or other such inputs for academic research. The truth may be that the problem is a mix of both these dimensions. Given the enormous potential that unit level data provides to empirically study management phenomenon at a great degree of detail, is unfortunately inaccessible to many researchers.

It will be not entirely appropriate to say that there is no availability of this type of data in the country. Certain governmental agencies and others in the private sector have steadily built their own collection infrastructure over the years to compile large scale cross sectional and time series information that capture the enormous details regarding the Indian markets and society, which can be of significant use for academic enquiry. The complication as it appears to me is that historically such expertise in data collection has not been fully complemented by powerful analytics that can expose important insights about the Indian environment.

Part of the reason for this incompleteness in the intellectual prowess has been in the gap between objective of such massive data gathering initiatives and our understanding about their true potential to provide insights. Hence, many organizations in the realm of large data collection have mainly focussed on reporting aggregated level facts and figures pertaining to the economic, social and cultural landscape of the country. While motivation seems to be a key driver in this pursuit, I also suspect that many institutions with large scaled data bases may lack sufficient analytical capabilities to truly mine the data to reveal deeper level insights that may be worthy of a superior academic venture. At the same time, research organizations that may possess the capability to conduct deeper analyses may find such data resources unavailable to them.

Needless to say, the evolution of better academic enquiry may be somewhat stifled by such skewed capabilities across research organizations. This asymmetry in ownership of potentially useful databases and, analytical capabilities/motivation for mining such databases has given rise to a challenging situation. While the research climate in India was never evolved in terms of fostering collaborative ventures, it has been difficult to forge academic tie-ups across institutions that have varying degrees of capabilities to do research. Even in the case of the IIMs, collaborative research programs have largely remained in the cold storage in spite of it being discussed actively in various pan-IIM forums. For that matter, a suggestion to offer doctoral level coursework to research students across all IIMs has yet to take off in spite of widespread support.

What is instead available in the public domain in the form of data for consumption are macro level or aggregated indices that are computed from such data repository by commercial enterprises which are available on purchase. The less commercially savvy enterprises such as the governmental agencies publish their own reports for mass consumption or, if they do share the data, it is done informally. Formal institution-wide collaborations for sharing research inventory of any kind are still in the planning stage.

Other Factors Impeding Superior Research in India

a) Traditional Focus on Business Education and Research

Building research infrastructure (and the availability of large scale syndicated data and its collection mechanism) is certainly an issue facing academia in India in the management stream. A probable reason for the lack of rapid development of research infrastructure at premier institutes may be attributable to the original tenet which led to the introduction of business education in India. It was largely driven by the requirement of the vocation with the predominant view being that apprentices should be provided with skills to equip them for the practice world. Therefore, the enquiry process was centred more about achieving practice excellence rather than developing theoretical rationale of the management phenomenon. That may well have served the purpose of these institutions then and now, except that with the globalization and opening up of the education market, the benchmark set for attaining global standards are somewhat different than what were back when these institutions were conceived.

It is important to emphasize at this stage that the research agenda need not force academicians to chosen one path or another. The mission of resolving problems of practice in the local environment will remain significant and topical for India-based business schools. However, that should not preclude these institutions from finding resolutions to more fundamental problems of management science that may require newer theoretical constructs applicable to India based problems and also ones that have universal appeal.

b) The competitive dimension of the Indian Business school

There is an added dimension the stymies collaboration among Indian Business schools. When it comes to rankings of their PGP/MBA programs, there is a certain aggressive competition which is not to be derided. However, the competitiveness tends to get drawn in unimaginable ways and may have debilitated the process of building cross-institutional networked research capabilities. Instead, what may have been created is unhealthy competition in areas where these institutions are hardly self-sufficient. Whereas, resource sharing and joint initiatives could have mitigated this problem to an extent, we find an amazing redundancy of limited resources across institutions unwilling or not knowing how to cooperate. How else can one explain the fact that each of these premier institutes has its own research journal and conference to boast, which attracts many researchers from various schools, but surprisingly there is still little recorded interaction or cross pollination among researchers associated with these institutions. A possible consequence of such behaviour is that many of these publications and conferences become seemingly the mascots of their respective institutions, fostering similar (to the MBA program) but unproductive competition.

Whereas the need for collaboration in building research infrastructure is critical, in reality the marginal investment in research infrastructure is seemingly consigned to unsustainable competition among various business schools.

What may be addressed to improve collaborative research climate

For starters, collaborative attempts are needed desperately in this nascent environment. It may not be about the lack of motivation alone that prevents us from a productive collaboration. Historically, there are very few pointers to provide guidance on collaborative initiatives amongst the top business schools other than perhaps conducting the admission examination (CAT). There is also the predominant view that research has to be individual driven and that collective initiatives have very little role to play in this pursuit. This is a reason why intra institutional academic planning processes have been largely focused on the teaching dimension and the research has been left to individual pursuits. Here are some strong perceptions that support this hypothesis:

- a) Many institutions have started their own conferences and journals for publishing articles. But for a majority of these institutions the driver for such activity has been the regulatory body (AICTE or UGC) asking for allocation of budgets to conferences and publications. There is hardly any mechanism to determine the quality of the output. For instance, India's 4000 plus B-schools published altogether 36 papers in journals tracked by UT Dallas between 2009 and 2012⁴. In the bargain, they remain symbols of achievements on paper for many B-schools without commensurate impact on academics or industry. As mentioned earlier, there is the need to look at an academia–industry supported body that facilitates the appropriate forum for creation and dissemination of knowledge.
- b) Exchange of training and research activities under the FPM and doctoral programs across business schools is limited if not non-existent. Hopefully, the recent initiatives of the MHRD to create a pan IIM venture would help in cementing these relationships in the long run.
- c) There are no major standards organization other than the AICTE and the UGC to monitor the quality and standards of the research programs in the Higher Education sector in Management. There has been a debate about the efficacy of the standards that are being implemented by these bodies. Perhaps, a review of the standards set for higher education in the management stream is overdue.
- d) Faculty compensation structures are not aligned to incentivize research given that there are less costly options available to faculty to enhance compensation (comparable salaries in the industry are much higher). The fact of the matter is that research being a long duration venture cannot be incentivized by the standard short term performance driven incentives which are applicable in the corporate sector. Rather it may require better pay structures to attract talent who are subjected to appropriate tenure based evaluation processes to maintain high level of motivation towards conducting research. Unfortunately, this issue has

⁴ "Why Indian B-schools lag in publishing research papers: Indian B-schools are far behind their global counterparts in publishing research papers." Madhavan, N. Business Today, Oct. 28, 2012.

largely being left in the cold storage for long in spite of it being debated now and again in various management forums.

Lately, there has been some talk about getting high quality researchers at higher pay bands from overseas institutions. What may be sustainable is to institutionalize higher pay for certain higher level of accountabilities in academic work (such as global quality research) and to introduce a process of regular evaluation of performance against expectations, in the same lines as the tenure system in US universities. The Planning Commission's twelfth Five Year Plan on Higher Education recognizes the role played by the some schools such as the ISB, Hyderabad in achieving higher quality research publication among the Indian B-schools. Part of this achievement could be attributed to a combination of strategic focus and faculty remuneration and, what may be termed as a system of "disincentivizing" poor quality (or zero) research by pruning faculty at regular intervals, especially the ones who do not perform up to expectations. Pitroda 2008, makes a mention about enhancing remuneration to attract the "brightest minds" to research and academia. However, as he rightly points out, remuneration has to go hand in glove with a rigorous evaluation process for output.

In this respect, a further modification in the PMS at various premier B-schools may be worthy of consideration. The research component should be reviewed on a longer cycle and not so much as annually. Shorter review cycles generally encourage "quick hits" and need not necessarily facilitate quality research of the kind that has global appeal. Hence, the PMS should truly drive better performance on long term initiatives rather than get relegated to a HRM⁵ device to record annual employee "productivity".

- e) Finally, a joint action across the top level institutions to better develop infrastructure locally through partnership programs to foster both empirical and theoretical research. Simply left to individual researchers to resolve such daunting problems will not foster a rapid rate of research productivity. In this regard, it may help to take assistance from willing investigators in more developed research environments to form healthy networks of collaboration. This will certainly provide the necessary ingredients to initiate the process. However, long term the Indian academia needs to be somewhat self-sustainable in terms of its research productivity, irrespective of its linkages with academia from other parts of the globe.

Concluding Comments

While the situation at the moment is one of extreme disquiet as expressed by many commentators about our flagging position in the global research scape, what is required at the moment is that, beyond macro level policies regarding fund allocation and revising mandates, academic leadership in the country must come together to put in place the necessary pillars for a collaborative and healthy research environment. For all the well intentioned policy on the part of the government, lackadaisical implementation and imperfect detailing can wash out all the promise of a healthier research culture in no time.

⁵ Human Resource Management

Changes in the working model at B-schools may also be considered. Good research programs cannot be sustained on limited institutional facilitation such as money and some “shop talk”. The premier B-schools may require a change in their expectation of faculty output, specifically, do away with the system where every faculty member is expected to contribute significantly to teaching, administration and research. The overall quality of academic output will continue to remain mediocre – the law of large numbers is not surmountable since it is not humanely possible to strive for excellence with such diluted focus. This again appears to be a big deterrent in building a superior research climate in our institutions.

It is time to look at some specialization in our academic institutions with various kinds of faculty focussing on varying mix of activities across teaching, research and innovation academic administration and applied research, depending on their competence and with the assurance that they are compensated appropriately for the expected output that they need to produce. The success of the future B-school in India requires a system that fairly monitors intellectual output quality ongoingly to ensure compliance of its employees (faculty) to their specific contractual agreement with the organization, which is dependent on their specialized capabilities (Ladha, 2012). The days of the “superstar” Professor who happens to be an excellent teacher and is also a prolific writer of thought-provoking papers in his domain and, routinely attends meetings on academic administration are long gone.

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