

The Learning Space

By Charles Dhanaraj and Paul Beamish

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Since the business world is always changing, there is demand for timely and relevant information that drives B-schools around the world to do research. Asian economies have seen an increase in new B-schools, and many schools report rising enrolments, so the issue of research is vital. The need for research is also evident in situations such as the current economic crisis.

WHY B-SCHOOL RESEARCH MATTERS

Research is important for countries' economic development. The pool of intellectual capital created by citizens directly affects standards of living and organisations' ability to compete. There are four major reasons why B-school research matters:

- It improves the practice of management: Rigorous conceptualisation and empirical testing differentiates between what anecdotally works for one organisation and what demonstrably works for most. The practice of management has been improved by B-school research
- It improves the quality of education: Researchers are typically knowledgeable on current thinking/practice because this enables them to publish and they incorporate this into their teaching. Literature suggests business researchers are often top teachers
- It is why most professors became professors: Most full-time B-school professors have PhDs. This research degree requires one to contribute to knowledge. A PhD is not necessary to teach the basics; professors acquire PhDs because they want to combine teaching and research
- It helps us compete: B-schools with an atmosphere of shared curiosity and discovery are better able to attract and retain faculty and/or improve their rankings

THE EVOLVING RESEARCH PARADIGM

Ironically, just as European schools seem to be transitioning to the American model of research, American schools are re-examining their own paradigms as a result of insider and public scrutiny. Even in America - deemed the Mecca of business research - it was the Ford and Carnegie Foundation grants in the 1960s that catapulted research culture within B-schools. Although B-schools have existed for more than a century, a 1959 study characterised B-schools as 'a collection of trade schools lacking a strong scientific foundation.'

In the next three decades, the scientific approach to business research became the defining criteria for prestige for B-schools. By the 1990s, the pendulum had swung too far and the quest for rigour pushed away some of this relevance. In recent years, the issue of rigour and relevance has been debated and we've explored ways to bring relevance back to research.

Top B-schools have tackled the challenge in different ways. At the Ivey Business School, for example, faculty members have a top-notch teaching environment and are rewarded for providing a well-rounded learning experience for students. And although the school has become known for its publishing record and award-winning dissertations in areas such as international business, it did not drop its focus on the managerial base. Research continues to be driven by business problems.

THE ASIA CHALLENGE

The rapid growth of China and India has unleashed new demands for research and driven the need to legitimise the local faculty within the globalised B-school environment. Chinese B-schools, supported by the government, are aggressively creating a research infrastructure. However, some academics feel overt reliance on publishing in top American journals has discouraged locally-relevant research, which in turn could potentially create a problem with relevance.

In India, B-school research faces different issues. The recent Bhargava Commission that looked at the system of Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) said little about transforming institutional incentives or

enhancing organisational capabilities for research. Recently, there have been efforts to network across the IIMs to create the scale and capability that can foster research. Many of the IIMs are already engaged in case-writing, executive education and consulting work so they do not suffer the problem of relevance. The challenge will be to bring in the rigour.

THE WAY FORWARD

The delicate task of tilting B-school systems toward research is complex. In December 2008, more than 40 deans of B-schools from nine countries met at the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad to tackle these challenges. International partnerships between Western B-schools and schools in countries such as India are growing rapidly. Such partnerships enable Western schools to educate their faculty about the realities of Asian business. In return, Indian faculty gain access to new research capabilities and are able to promote their intellectual work.

Relevant research implies a close relationship between academics and business executives. Executives must also take research seriously and provide opportunities for and access to academic research. B-schools do a poor job of educating MBAs - the future executives - about the value of research. Most of the course materials MBAs are exposed to would not rate highly with researchers. As a result, schools are missing a golden opportunity to create a mindset that academic research is relevant and provides useful precepts. Engaging MBAs with high-quality research materials and exposing them to research work carried out in schools may help create a positive attitude toward research.

Further, the case for a strong national management research network in India cannot be overstated. The recent success in the UK with such a network is an outstanding template. The Advanced Institute of Management (AIM) resulted from discussions in 2002 that questioned the competence of British management and the relevance of management research to the questions that executives face every day. At the time, UK management research was ill-funded and of poor quality. AIM brought together more than 200 researchers from about 50 universities, with some funding from the government and private enterprises. Six years later, the network has been credited with raising the calibre of research in UK B-schools and significantly impacting the practice of business.

Such a network can be a powerful catalyst in creating a research culture within B-schools. It can bring international partnerships to new levels and ensure the research agenda is in tune with the needs of business and creates significant and new knowledge. This will help countries such as India and China, which can invest their human capital in search of new knowledge. Besides, in these times, knowledge is power.

The writers are faculty at the Richard Ivey School of Business University of Western Ontario, Canada. Dhanaraj was also Co-Chair of the Emerging India Conference held at the Indian School of Business (ISB) Hyderabad in 2008. Beamish is Director of Ivey's Asian Management Institute and holds the inaugural Donald L Triggs Chair in International Business