



Making academic research more relevant: A few suggestions

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Available online 2 August 2014

KEYWORDS

Academic research;
Bridging rigour-relevance gap;
Business schools in India;
Criteria of relevance;
Doctoral research;
Ecosystem for research;
Research culture;
Rigour-relevance debate;
Relevant research

Abstract Academic research in the domain of management scholarship, though steeped in scientific and methodological rigour, is generally found to be of little relevance to practice. The authors of this paper have revisited the rigour-relevance debate in light of recent developments and with special reference to the management research scenario in India. The central thesis of the argument is that the gulf between rigour and relevance needs to be bridged to make academic research more relevant to business organizations and practitioners. They have offered some suggestions to enhance the relevance of academic research to practice.

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Introduction

Management research is generally perceived to have limited influence on management practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Miner (1984) found the 32 established organizational theories he reviewed to be of little importance to and usefulness for practitioners. Rigby (2001) discovered that only 7 of the 25 management tools and techniques he

analysed originated from academia, which was also found to have lower utilization and satisfaction, and a greater defection rate.

The findings of academic research that are published in scholarly management journals are perceived to be “only remotely related to the real world of practicing managers” (Susman and Evered, 1978, p. 582) and moreover, managers who apply scientific knowledge or theory seldom get what they desire (Lundberg, 2001). Business organizations, hence, rarely implement management practices that are carved out of the findings of academic research, even if they claim to enhance employee productivity and the financial performance of the organization (Hambrick, 1994; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

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Peer-review under responsibility of Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

The reason for limited relevance of academic research is primarily attributed to academic researchers, who seem to be “out-of-touch” with the language, problems, and concerns of the business world and practitioners (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992). Practitioners who look for “actionable” knowledge seldom refer to academic research (Beer, 2001; Huff, 2000; Lundberg, 2001) or track the advancement of knowledge in the world of academe. Business organizations prefer to approach management consultants (Kilmann, Slevin, & Jerrell, 1983) instead.

A consultant simplifies complex organizational issues of the empirical world on the basis of understanding, explanations, and predictions (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006), whereas academic scholars are perceived to complexify issues in their attempt to theorize organizational phenomena by considering all possible manifestations and contingencies.

In the process, academic researchers seem to be losing ground to consultants as sources of research ideas and advice for practitioners (Bartlett, 2007; Rigby, 2001). This is happening at a time when academics’ dependence on practitioners for relevant research seems to be on the rise (Trank & Rynes, 2003). This seems to contribute in a significant way to the chasm that exists between the worlds of the corporate and the academe.

However, the schism between corporate India and Indian academe seems to be more pronounced than what is experienced in the West, as management research in India has been mostly replicative in nature with limited context specificity. Further, most of the studies are concept centric rather than problem driven (Panda and Gupta, 2007).

The research tradition in India does not seem to have evolved indigenously. Instead, as Gupta (1994) has pointed out, Indian management scholars chose to build research tradition in India on the foundation of the basic premises of American society and concepts, frameworks, and methods of Western business organizations without validating those for Indian context. Hence, the knowledge created by academic research in India seems to have limited usefulness for management practitioners. Academic scholars, even in the recent past, have expressed concern over “the lack of high quality, context specific management research in India and the predilection of Indian researchers to follow Western models of research and publications blindly” (Khatri, Ojha, Budhwar, Srinivasan, & Varma, 2012, p.104).

The underutilization of knowledge generated by academic scholars by practitioners is a serious concern and needs to be addressed (Brannick, 2000). However, there has been a growing awareness and acknowledgement of the disconnect that exists and the challenges of making academic research more context specific and relevant to business organizations.

The relevance of academic research has long been a theme of discussion and debate (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006; McLean, McIntosh, & Grant, 2002; Rynes, McNatt, & Bretz, 1999; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Van de Ven, 2007), as also the rigour-relevance debate in US management research. Academy of Management (AoM) has repeatedly urged academic scholars to engage in more practice oriented research (Andrew Van de Ven, 2002; Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000). Van de Ven (2002, p.178) expressed his concern

about the “growing criticism that findings from academic and consulting studies are not useful for practitioners and do not get implemented”.

Indian Academy of Management (IAoM), during its second biannual meet at IIM Bangalore in December 2011, urged Indian researchers to strive for the level of rigour of the Western models, while conducting indigenous research using context relevant constructs and methodologies, to suit the development and educational requirements of the country (Khatri et al., 2012).

Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney (2007) have noted two types of gaps - the “lost in translation” gap (when managerially relevant research fails to reach practitioners) and the “lost before translation” gap (when managerially relevant research is not undertaken by academics). Kieser and Leiner (2009, p. 517) elaborated that “getting lost before translation means that scientific results are unconnectable and therefore untranslatable for practice”.

This paper is an attempt to revisit the rigour-relevance debate with recent developments and with special reference to the management research scenario in India, and offer some suggestions to enhance the relevance of academic research. This paper focuses primarily on how to bridge the “lost before translation” gap.

This paper is organized into four main sections. The section that follows this one presents an overview of the rigour-relevance gap. The second section focusses on business schools in India. The authors attempt to explore the reasons behind the poor research culture in business schools in India and what needs to be done. The third section deals with how to make academic research more relevant to practitioners. In this section, the authors discuss five criteria of relevance namely descriptive relevance, goal congruence, operational validity, non-obviousness, and timeliness, and how they can be integrated into the research process. The fourth section offers some suggestions to create an enabling ecosystem that would encourage academic scholars to conduct academic research with relevance.

Rigour-relevance debate

A researcher undertakes research as a quest for basic understanding or with consideration of use (Stokes, 1997) or a bit of both. Basic academic disciplines typically strive for expanding the understanding with little focus on application or use. Though management science is an applied discipline, management scholars, deeply influenced by the fundamental tenets of basic disciplines, seem to strive for better understanding of concepts and ideas, rather than their applicability in practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Vermeulen, 2005). They tend to focus on rigorous analysis of concepts to explore inter-relationship among various concepts to explain a phenomenon, rather than on how the “research insights” culled out of academic research can solve organizational problems.

The focus on analysis is reflected in the nature of management education as well. Mintzberg (2004) in his book *Managers not MBAs* puts forth that the MBA programme tends to focus on analytical skills, while synthesis, and not analysis, is the very essence of management. The MBA

programme, he argues, has lost its relevance. What do we mean by relevance?

Vermeulen (2007, pp. 754–755) has noted that “relevance is not necessarily about immediate prescription. It is not advice for some sort of managerial action that companies can undertake that will increase their profits next term by X percent. Relevance is found in generating insight that practitioners find useful for understanding their own organizations and situations better than before”. For Vermeulen again, rigour means “that the various elements of a theory are consistent, that potential propositions or hypotheses are logically derived, that data collection is unbiased, measures are representative and reliable, and so on” (2007, p. 755). A research work can be rigorous without providing any insight into the workings of real organizational life. “Even empirical research can be detached from real organizational life, as percentage of variance explained are often notoriously low, dependent variables are of little importance or not under anyone’s control, or generalizability of a case is unclear” (Vermeulen, 2007, p. 755).

Should and can the rigour-relevance gap be bridged?

There has been a debate on whether the rigour-relevance gulf can and should be bridged. Kimberly (2007, p. 143) has maintained that the “craft of research heavily depends on the ability of the research to maintain a certain degree of cognitive and emotional distance from the phenomena being examined”. Kieser and Leiner (2009, p. 528) have opined that scientific knowledge should enable critical reflection on current practices, which requires that science maintain a distance from practice.

Scholars like Kimberly (2007), Luhmann (2005a, 2005b), Kieser & Leiner, (2009) and Staw (1995) strongly argue that it is difficult to be both scientifically rigorous and relevant as both academic and practice systems are “autopoietic” in nature. The barriers between the two worlds are insurmountable. Communication elements of one system cannot be seamlessly integrated into the other.

The academic world is by and large of, for, and by academic scholars. Only academic scholars with the right credentials are qualified to assess scientific rigour, which is the most important criterion for peer-reviews and for career decisions in academia (Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007; Macdonald & Kam, 2007).

Academic scholars rarely collaborate with practitioners for developing research agenda (Abrahamson, 1996). Luhmann (2005b) has dissuaded academic scholars from collaborating with practitioners. His argument is if science loses its distance from its research objects, for example, by collaborating with practitioners or by trying to produce directly applicable practical solutions, it could no longer generate knowledge that is different in principle from the knowledge of competent practitioners and would no longer be able to fulfil its genuine function. Management science, in the process, may lose its legitimacy (Kieser & Leiner, 2009).

Academic scholars who work on organization and manager-specific problems, often find their work devalued

by their peer group – the academic fraternity. Researchers and educators generally distance themselves from managerial and organizational practices to become closed and insulated groups (Razzaque, 1998). Academic scholars rarely come in direct contact with the organization, except during training and consulting assignments, which provide them the exposure to “real world” problems. Even doctoral research programmes seldom insist on direct contact of research scholars with organizations (Daft, 1983).

Academic faculty and research scholars often identify research problems on the basis of extensive literature review (Strasser & Bateman, 1984) and at times through intelligent conjecture. They may resort to (a) *a priori* assumption regarding the interests of managers (Thomas & Tyman, 1982), (b) topics which are most easily amenable to the scientific method of inquiry (Boehm, 1980) or to pet methodological techniques (Campbell, Daft, & Hulin, 1982), and (c) outright convenience (Campbell et al., 1982).

Academic scholars are expected to create new knowledge using valid tools and scientifically rigorous methods that are accepted by their peers. They are expected to publish in academic journals of repute, irrespective of the value of the topic to the “real world” (Daft, 1983). Knowledge created through methodologically rigorous research process, it is believed, is bound to produce insights that might contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge and ultimately to management practice (Brown, 1995). Hence, an academic scholar rarely compromises with methodological rigour.

What is “researched” by academic scholars may be of little interest and relevance to practitioners and business organizations, with the real issues and challenges being faced by them being rarely researched. This gap needs to be addressed to make academic research more relevant for practitioners and business organizations.

A group of optimistic scholars like Anderson, Herriot, and Hodgkinson (2001), Pettigrew (2001), and Rynes et al. (1999) assert that collaboration between academic scholars and practitioners would facilitate academic research with relevance. Academic scholars can significantly increase the likelihood of advancing knowledge for theory and practice when they interact, collaborate, and forge partnership with practitioners.

Business schools in India

Business schools, like all other social institutions, are influenced by the characteristics of their contexts and the conditions on which they are funded (Khurana & Spender, 2012). Funding organizations/institutions shape the character of business schools significantly.

Two premier business schools in India – the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta, and IIM Ahmedabad were set up in the year 1961, when there was an overriding demand for scientific and methodological rigour in research. These two IIMs, which were mandated by the Government of India to provide quality management education, were set up in collaboration with premier US business schools, and can be said to have largely shaped the

character and evolution of management education and research in India.

The focus of business schools in the US initially was to disseminate knowledge relevant to the trade or business. There was a lack of academic coherence and scientific rigour in education and research (Khurana & Spender, 2012). In 1959, a Ford Foundation report described American business education as an assembly of trade schools lacking a strong scientific foundation (Gordon & Howell, 1959). American business education consisted of a group of "unimaginative, non-theoretical faculties teaching from descriptive, practice-oriented texts to classes of second-rate, vocationally-minded students" (Howell, 1962, p. 76).

Post World War II, serious concerns were expressed as to whether business schools were equipped to address the needs of society. The template of research and education proposed and diffused by the Ford Foundation was intended to enable business schools and business leaders and equip students with knowledge to address the major technical problems confronting society post-World War II. Most business academics then believed that the problems were largely technical and could be solved with the application of rigorous scientific methods. Hence, business schools committed themselves to a research model that emphasized specialization, and methodological or scientific rigour. While this model led to an explosion of management research literature and PhDs, it has produced little in the way of insights about the real dilemmas facing business managers (Khurana & Spender, 2012).

Business schools, as Ghosal (2005) has noted, adopted a more scientific model used in the domains of physical sciences and economics, based on the assumption that "Business is reducible to a kind of physics in which even if individual managers do play a role, it can safely be taken as determined by the economic, social, psychological laws that inevitably shape people's actions." (Ghosal, 2005, p. 77).

This dominant belief that shaped the academic culture of business schools (Clegg & Ross-Smith, 2003) displaced the notion of management being a practicing art (Eccles & Nohria, 1992) and over-rode Simon's (1967) idea of an intellectually robust and relevant research and educational agenda for business schools.

As a result, management education by the late 1980s began to focus on narrow functional specialization (Porter & McKibbin, 1988) and business schools failed to provide students with the ability to relate to realistic management problem solving situations (Wren, Buckley, & Michaelsen, 1994).

Currently, management education and research are being criticized for emphasizing academic and scientific rigour at the expense of organizational relevance (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). Ghosal (2005) has noted that bad management theories were destroying good management practices. Bennis and O'Toole (2005) have attributed the failure to produce relevant research to the preoccupation of business schools with scientific research and hiring professors with limited organizational experience, who produce research and teaching that is not relevant to managers and organizations outside.

Business schools in India, because of their historical legacy, aspire to be like any top rated business school in the

US. But the challenges faced by business schools in India are different and unique in many ways.

One key difference between business schools in India and the US is that business schools in the US emphasize research and publication, unlike the business schools in India, which tend to place more emphasis on teaching, consultancy and training. The priorities of the IIMs, which are funded by the Government of India (GoI), are primarily teaching (Banerjee, 2013). Most of the Indian institutes operate with financial constraints within a self-funding structure. Faculty members are encouraged to generate funds through consultancy and in-company training assignments, leaving limited time for quality research, which acts as a primary disincentive for research. Further, low faculty strength in many business schools leads to academic faculty teaching more courses when compared to their Western counterparts.¹ Business schools in the West fix teaching load factoring time for research, which does not seem to be the case in India. Lau (2002) has observed that business schools in Asia have primarily been teaching oriented, and hence, tend to accord secondary priority to scholarly research. However, more recently, many academics and scholars have spoken out about the lack of research culture in business schools in India.

A number of committees such as the Kurian Committee (1991), the Ishwar Dayal Committee (2001), the Management Review Committee (2003), and the Working Group on Management Education (2005) as a part of National Knowledge Commission have identified and reported that a number of areas need to be revamped to enhance quality and relevance of management education. Professor U R Rao's report (2004) on faculty development and the All India Management Association (AIMA) report (2005) have also elaborated on the state of management education in India. Most of these reports have emphasized the need to promote research culture in business schools, besides other aspects.

Factors contributing to poor research culture in business schools in India

The factors that seem to be contributing to poor research culture in business schools in India are: (a) blind adoption of mainstream research culture of the West, (b) lack of an ecosystem that facilitates research, (c) viewing faculty members as "generalists", (d) emphasis on teaching and training, (e) no genuine incentive for faculty to conduct relevant research, (f) limited bandwidth to conduct relevant research, and (g) a preoccupation with methodologically rigorous research.

Academic research in developing countries including India, as pointed out by Chossudovsky (1977), has adopted the mainstream research tradition of the West at some point of time in history. He argued that the research tradition and culture in developing countries seems to be the byproduct of the global framework of international

¹ 'Paper Lambs', By N. Madhavan, *Business Today*, October 28, 2012 edition, Retrieved through <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/story/best-b-school-research-lag/1/188766.html>, 4th July, 2014.

capitalist relations. Academic scholars in India seem to be under pressure to create “universal knowledge” in alignment with the North American research paradigm (Khatri et al., 2012). That seems to have led faculty in business schools to borrow knowledge from North America, rather than develop it indigenously. This imitation of the Western model of research has not helped in understanding the way organizations function in India or “Indian management”.

Academic scholars in India, as Prof. A. Ojha of IIM Bangalore has noted (Khatri et al., 2012), seem to have limited confidence and rarely assert their stand if it does not conform to the received wisdom from the developed countries. They rarely question the dominant Western research paradigm that has limited applicability in the Indian context and tend to replicate studies conducted in the West using the Western research paradigm. As Meyer (2006) has noted, many Asian scholars lack the self-confidence to challenge existing theories where they are unsuitable, and to push locally relevant research agendas.

Even the custodians of knowledge in India, as pointed out by Prof. Ojha, mostly trained in reputed institutes of the West find it difficult to appreciate indigenous knowledge creation, since the issues of interests and the methods do not conform to the norms acceptable in the West.

Other scholars, such as Deepa Mani, Assistant Professor, Indian School of Business, have attributed India’s poor standing in research to a lack of an ecosystem for research. As Mani notes, “The process to generate ideas for research, get them validated and then published is not mature”². Banerjee (2013) has also noted that no institute has enough infrastructure for quality research and that contributes significantly to the low number of quality research projects undertaken.

Further, as pointed out by Banerjee (2013), academic faculty in business schools are viewed as generalists; they are expected to be superior performers in all aspects of academics (teaching, research and administration), which is unrealistic as each requires a unique competence.

The lack of research culture in business schools in India could also be attributed to the “teaching” and “training” emphasis, which is in keeping with the mandate given by the Government of India to provide quality teaching and produce quality management graduates. The recruitment of faculty in many of these business schools is also based on their teaching skills. The institutional mechanisms of reward and recognition, as also the performance appraisal system focus on teaching excellence. Academic scholars from India seem to publish little in reputed peer reviewed journals. The data compiled by the University of Texas at Dallas on the basis of number of research papers published between 2008 and 2012 in 24 business journals³ (updated on March 12, 2013) revealed that no Indian business school appears in the list.

² ‘Paper Lambs’, By N. Madhavan, *Business Today*, October 28, 2012 edition, Retrieved through <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/story/best-b-school-research-lag/1/188766.html>, 4th July, 2014.

³ Accessed and retrieved digitally through <http://jindal.utdallas.edu/the-utd-top-100-business-school-research-rankings/index.php>.

Further, as Panda and Gupta (2007) have pointed out, there is a lack of “real” incentive for academic scholars in business schools in India to conduct relevant research. At the individual level, most institutions have teaching goals for their faculty (Khatri et al., 2012). Not many institutes have mandatory research goals for individual faculty though they may incentivize research publications.

Business schools in India also seem to be under pressure to establish their reputation and credibility in the international arena by enhancing their international ranking. Hence, they encourage faculty members to publish in peer reviewed journals of international repute, identified by US norms and on citations in databases such as the Social Science Citation Index, through various kinds of incentives. Such criteria tend to create incentives to work on themes of global or US interest at the expense of themes that are relevant to the Indian context.

Academic scholars in India seem to find themselves caught between the need to conduct context sensitive management research to ensure “relevance”, and the need to publish in reputed peer-reviewed journals to ensure enhancement of their professional reputation and the ranking of their business schools.

The review processes of these peer reviewed journals tend to emphasize methodological rigour rather than organizational relevance: methodological rigour includes nature and size of the sample, nature of data collected, methods used for data collection and analysis, and so on. This often comes at the cost of relevance of the findings to organizational realities (Odiorne, 1966). Most researchers are academically trained to develop or validate theories/frameworks using scientifically rigorous data analysis tools rather than conducting problem solving research through application of available knowledge (Kilmann et al., 1983). Sinha (1984) has rightly pointed out that the academic community in India tends to avoid complex organizational and social problems as methodological choices available to them (from the Western academic world) are inadequate to handle complex organizational and social problems.

Asian management research appears trapped between apparently contradictory objectives of local relevance and international publications (Meyer, 2006). The academic community, for reasons mentioned above, seems to be opting to publish in reputed journals rather than conducting relevant research. Consequently, despite the large number of Indian scholars and reputed business schools in India, there is hardly any scholarly contribution on organizations in India and management thereof.

Prof. Ojha of IIM Bangalore has rightly noted that “research in management in India conducted by researchers outside the country, much of it by people of Indian origin ... leaves a lot to be desired” (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 106). He further adds, “Research on India may be related to publishing pressures for tenure and reputation in the context of a researcher’s country of employment” (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 106) rather than a genuine curiosity to explore and understand management in India.

Business schools tend to perpetuate this gulf by hiring fresh PhDs who are trained in and socialized to rigorous academic research. They usually do not possess the skills and mindsets needed for managerially relevant research, and nor are they able to adopt flexible mindsets. They find

it comforting to follow the dominant trend of doing scientifically rigorous research, oblivious of their relevance to practice (Markides, 2007, p. 764).

What is needed now?

Prof. Ojha has noted the “need to bring the focus back to generating and sustaining valid and relevant knowledge, whether it is abstract, empirical, or practical, rather than submit to the rat race of “publish or perish” and the clamour for rankings of business schools” (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 108). He has also argued for the need to review the ontological and epistemological assumptions, and if necessary, tweak them for the Indian context (Khatri et al., 2012).

There is a need to develop indigenous, context specific knowledge on organizations in India and how they are managed. Organizational phenomena should be explored within context with the help of context-specific constructs and methodologies (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002). Context is important for business as businesses develop their strategies and practices to fit specific cultures, legal frameworks, geographies, and industry structures.

Indian management scholarship needs to develop a unique research culture that fits its own circumstances. Such research “must take into account the influence of cultural roots as well as modern political economy and emerging institutions in analysing the behaviour of firms and individuals inside the firms” (Tsui, 2004, p. 500) which also requires deep knowledge of the local context. Panda and Gupta (2007) have also urged scholars in India to develop indigenous organization theories that capture the essence and nuances of the context of organizations in India.

Moreover, “without valid and tested management theories that fit the Indian context, business education and schools in India may lose their relevance ... Many believe, and rightfully so, that this is exactly the phase they (*business schools in India*) are going through at present, making education and curricula suspect (Report of the Working Group on Management Education, 2007⁴)” (Khatri et al., 2012; pp. 104–105, Italics added). Asian researchers need to develop indigenous discourses on organizational phenomena, loosely coupled with global debates on related phenomena (March, 2005). Gupta and Panda (2009) have proposed a business system framework for the Indian context, which is an adaptation of Redding’s (2002) framework.⁵

Ghosal (2005) has urged business schools to take fresh guard by revisiting (a) the structure of the PhD. programme; (b) the requirements of publishing in top journals, and (c) the criteria of faculty recruitment and tenure system. Prof Vasanthi Srinivasan, a faculty at IIM Bangalore, has suggested revamping (a) faculty selection and socialization, (b) performance management, (c) reward and

recognition, and (d) career growth and development processes to craft a research culture in business schools (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 111).

Academic research with relevance

There are gaps between organizational practices, as experienced by practitioners (practice) and the theoretical accounts of the same, as explained by academic scholars (theory). Theoretical rigour and organizational realities should be blended to get a holistic perspective and close the gaps between “knowing” and “doing” (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Pettigrew (2001) has noted the need for simultaneously delivering practitioner relevance and scholarly excellence.

Practitioners’ knowledge complements that of academics’ (Van de Ven, 2007). Such a collaborative form of inquiry, hence, helps both practitioners and academics leverage their unique perspectives to have a holistic understanding about an organizational phenomenon, making for what Van de Ven and Johnson term “intellectual arbitrage” (2006, p. 803). As Burgoyne and Reynold (1997, p1) put it, “Practice ... needs theories to shape it. [And] theory on the other hand, is tested and developed through practice”.

Practitioners should provide researchers with organizational problems, and researchers with their expertise should provide practitioners with useful and relevant solutions. Simon (1967) has urged researchers to view the real world as a generator of basic research problems and a source of data. Academic scholars should view organizations as important stakeholders and take up organizationally relevant problem centric research. Organizationally relevant studies provide insights that help managers understand themselves and their organizations better (Markides, 2007).

Many of the classical studies of organizations were the result of such collaboration between external academics and internal practitioners (e.g. Coch & French, 1948; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). The academic scholar, in such a collaboration, acts as an external researcher working in partnership with a manager who is an insider to the setting (Amabile et al., 2001; Bartunek & Louis, 1996).

Practitioners, while evaluating academic research, look for findings that are related to issues or problems pertinent to their organizations. Academic scholars need to understand what practitioners really expect from academic research (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). Thomas and Tymon (1982) have identified five areas of expectation.

First, practitioners would be interested in knowing if the research is dealing with real organizational problems and issues. *Descriptive relevance* checks for the accuracy of research findings in capturing phenomena encountered by practitioners in their organizational settings. This relevance can be checked at the problem formulation stage. Academic scholars should ensure descriptive relevance by identifying research problems which are of interest to the practitioners. The research problem should be specific (Cheng & McKinley, 1983) and deal with a “real world” problem.

⁴ http://www.knowledgecommission.gov.in/downloads/documents/wg_managedu.pdf, retrieved on May 30, 2013.

⁵ Redding, Gordon (2002) ‘The Capitalist Business System of China and its Rationale’, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Volume 19, pp. 221–249.

The following questions need to be satisfactorily addressed (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992):

- Are the research questions relevant to organizational practitioners?
- Can the research idea be applied in any specific organizational situation and also be generalized to other settings?

Secondly, practitioners would be interested in whether the research findings potentially help them have a better hold on factors like productivity, quality, sales volume or costs (Cheng & McKinley, 1983), which are critical to organizational survival and competitiveness. *Goal relevance* checks for the correspondence of outcome (or dependent) variables in a theory to the factors the practitioner wishes to influence.

Thirdly, organizational practitioners often manoeuvre many organizational factors to achieve a desired result. Hence, they would be more interested in organizational factors that they can influence, which in the parlance of academic research, are independent variables. They would be less interested in factors which cannot be manoeuvred and are a given. This relevance or *operational validity* checks for whether the practitioners can and/or would like to manoeuvre the factors identified by the researchers as causal (independent) variables.

The researcher can check both goal relevance and operational validity during the second phase of hypothesis development and operationalization of research design. The research undertaken is said to have a high degree of operational validity and goal congruence if the variables identified by the researcher are relevant to organizational issues and can be manipulated by the practitioner. High degree of goal congruence is related to the appropriateness of dependent variables. High degree of operational validity is ensured by selecting appropriate independent variables that can be manoeuvred by practitioners. For example, the researcher should avoid including "structure" or "process" as dependent variables, which are rarely of interest to practitioners.

The following questions need to be satisfactorily addressed (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992):

- Are the dependent variables relevant and can they be effectively measured by practitioners?
- Can the independent variables potentially be manoeuvred by practitioners?

Fourthly, practitioners expect academic research to provide new insight in the form of knowledge and information, which go beyond intuition. This relevance *non-obviousness* checks for the extent to which a theory meets or exceeds the intuition of a practitioner.

Finally, in order for research to be useful to practitioners, the insights from the research should be available for use *in time*. This relevance is labelled as *timeliness*.

The researcher needs to ensure both non-obviousness and timeliness of the insights on offer. This can be checked in the final stage of research, where a researcher draws inferences and conclusions based on the interpretation of

data. The researcher should attempt to provide some recommendations, based on these research insights that are applicable to business organizations. In general, though, academic scholars tend to be conservative about drawing prescriptive implications (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992).

With regard to timeliness, research findings are generally not available in the public domain before they are published in a peer reviewed journal, which takes time. Academic scholars should find ways to share some early findings with practitioners at relevant forums, before the findings become irrelevant for the practitioners.

The following questions need to be satisfactorily addressed (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992):

- Does the research bring up some insights which are new or beyond common sense?
- Are the findings of practical utility and significance?
- How long will it take for the findings to be available in the public domain?

Academic scholars should appreciate, understand, and reach out to the realities of the corporate world and explore avenues of collaboration (Boehm, 1980; Caplan, Morrison & Stampbaugh, 1975; Strasser & Bateman, 1984). Both communities need to engage in two way interactions (Caplan et al., 1975) with an open mind (Rynes et al., 1999). They need to get as close to the "reality" of the real world as possible (McCole, 2004).

The biggest challenge faced by the academic community is to balance the requirements of practice (relevance) and building rigour into the enquiry process through specialization (Klein, 1990). The relevance of academic research can be enhanced by (a) doing research in relevant areas and/or (b) working collaboratively with organizational members to understand research findings (Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001; pp. 369–370).

Academic scholars should undertake problem solving research, which is relevant to an organization or industry. They need to be specific and substantive while formulating research problems. The research problems should not be generic and conjectural with a number of a-priori assumptions. Daft (1983) has urged researchers to give up the tendency of armchair theorizing with little input from contact with an actual organization. Others such as Strasser and Bateman (1984) and Boehm (1980) have suggested that the research process should begin with a real organization problem and the focus of enquiry should be directed towards helping practitioners address organizational problems with new insights or knowledge (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Such a collaborative approach represents a distinct departure from the conventional soloist approach of identifying research problems on the basis of review of literature.

Evered and Louis (1981, p. 382) distinguished "inquiry from the inside" which characterizes practitioners who inquire about a setting in order to operate effectively there, from "inquiry from outside", which is typically practised by detached researchers who aim to uncover knowledge that can be generalized to many settings. Evered and Louis (1981) have urged peer researchers to use both kinds of inquiry.

Academic scholars should carry out “boundary spanning” research that relies on managerial sensibility (Gulati, 2007) to focus on phenomena with managerial interest, such as problems with “sizzle” (Ghosal in personal communication, mentioned by Gulati, 2007), “talking pigs” (Siggelkow, 2007) or problem oriented research. They should ask research questions that are important to managers and pursue the answers in academically rigorous ways (Vermeulen, 2005).

This however, as cautioned by Vermeulen (2005), will not happen unless the underlying incentives and culture of the academic system are changed to encourage such research. In the following section, the authors offer suggestions to help craft an enabling ecosystem which would build a vibrant research culture, facilitate problem solving and organizationally academic research in business schools.

Suggestions to create an enabling ecosystem for research

To be world-class institutions, business schools in India need to commit themselves to both research and teaching excellence. These institutes also need to identify broad thematic areas of research and articulate their research philosophy, focus, and long term research agenda. This would help in selecting faculty and doctoral scholars with the right skills, aptitude and interest. It is the quality of research that leads both to a provocative theory and can be translated into practice that differentiates business schools from traditional disciplinary departments and consulting firms (Tushman and O’Reilly III, 2007, p. 773). Quality of research also differentiates one business school from the other. According to Ajit Rangnekar, Dean of Indian School of Business, “We identified research as our differentiator when we started the institution”⁶. Business schools also need to attract faculty with research skills and aptitude and who are adequately grounded in Indian ethos and also suitably exposed to other societies and cultures.

Banerjee (2013, p. 4) has noted the reason why a majority of globally recognized publications in management theory emanate from North American and some European universities (Tsui, 2004), as follows:

“Financial support for academic research in terms of business schools grants provided by industry and government helps foster a healthy climate of rigorous enquiry process that ensures best 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.” (Banerjee, 2013, p. 4)

In order to create an eco-system that facilitates organizationally relevant research, business schools should (a) collaborate with business organizations for research, (b) review and revamp doctoral research programmes, (c)

attract and groom academic faculty for conducting relevant research and (d) collaborate and sponsor a pan-Indian academic journal that puts balanced emphasis on both methodological rigour and practical relevance (usefulness) of the contributions.

The academic scholars too in their individual capacities should (a) understand the nature of disconnect with organizational realities, (b) be more confident and assertive, (c) collaborate with scholars from other disciplines and (d) expand their methodological repertoire by including methodologies which take cognizance of the role of practical issues and explicitly address the interdependence of theory and practice. Besides, they should (e) focus on problem solving research by treating organizations as their primary stakeholders, and be specific and substantive while articulating research problems and communicating findings (f) convert knowledge into practice and communicate the same in jargon-free language, and (g) share ideas, knowledge and research insights at appropriate forums in a timely manner.

What should academic faculty do?

First, researchers should seek to understand the nature of disconnect between the world of academics and practice, which needs to be explored through appropriate research (Rynes, 2007). The nature of disconnect is context specific and would vary in the Indian context from that of the US.

It is the responsibility of academic scholars to generate and disseminate context specific relevant knowledge. Knowledge creation cannot be divorced from knowledge dissemination. It requires skills in research, teaching, and training.

Further, academic scholars from developing countries such as India need to be more confident about the relevance of indigenous research, and not be unduly intimidated by the perceived expectations of US-based journal editors and reviewers (Meyer, 2006). It requires a lot of personal courage and independence of thought for a researcher to suggest that Western theories and instruments may be wholly or partly inapplicable or irrelevant to Indian circumstances (Hofstede, 2007; Meyer, 2006). Such self-confidence would come through mentoring and coaching by experienced and more accomplished researchers. This would require, as pointed out by Prof. Srinivasan, “reflexivity, a learning orientation, and finally a willingness to tread the uncertain goldmine of indigenous context based research”. (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 113).

Panda and Gupta (2007) have listed a number of indigenous and innovative conceptual insights and intellectual leads contributed by Indian research scholars that failed to take off as many of these concepts were not further investigated by other scholars. Consequently, all these remained in a state of conceptual abstraction. Starkey and Madan (2001) have noted that academic research is generally based on a narrow discipline base, which needs to be based on multi-disciplinary perspectives. The limited utility of research publications is that these are recognized for promotional consideration (Banerjee, 2013). Collaboration among research scholars from different academic disciplines is critical to develop relevant knowledge. A

⁶ Paper Lambs’, By N. Madhavan, *Business Today*, October 28, 2012 edition, Retrieved through <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/story/best-b-school-research-lag/1/188766.html>, 4th July, 2014.

network of like-minded researchers who can mentor and support each other in generating indigenous knowledge and meaningful research would be of great help in this direction. In India, the Indian Academy of Management (IAoM) can play a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration among like-minded research scholars.

Leverage collaborative settings

Academic scholars should leverage various collaborative settings to define research problems of interest to practitioners and validate the research insights for their usefulness to practitioners. Scholars have suggested leveraging “executive education setting” (Tushman & O’Reilly, 2007), “consulting assignments” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Schein, 1999), “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) and “twin faculty groups” (March & Sutton, 1997; Zell, 2001) to include practitioners’ concerns while conceptualizing research problems.

Executive education setting offers possibilities for academicians and doctoral scholars to develop relationships with practitioners that can enhance the veridicality of academic research and possibly improve the academic field’s ability to teach material that is both rigorous and relevant (Tushman & O’Reilly, 2007). Such a relationship between academicians and practitioners tends to foster virtuous cycles of knowing and doing (Tushman and O’Reilly III, 2007, p. 771). Academic scholars may also test and validate various theories and frameworks they have developed with thoughtful practitioners in the class (Gulati, 2007).

Consulting assignment is another instance of collaboration, where the managers and employees of the client company help the academic consultant identify problems and change prevailing practices.

The method of **engaged scholarship** in which researchers and practitioners co-produce knowledge can also enhance theory and practice in a given domain (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Employing **twin faculty groups** – one for ensuring rigour and other for ensuring practical relevance – is a novel approach, argued to be more pragmatic than engaging corporate practitioners, who are generally not trained in research methods, in a research process (Kieser & Leiner, 2009, p. 527).

If such opportunities are not available, as Thomas and Tymon (1982) have suggested, practitioners should be involved at a later stage to **vet the research findings** for their utility and applicability in organizational settings. The ultimate goal is to ensure that research is informed by and integrated with practice (Rynes, 2007).

Share ideas and research insights

Scholars such as Razzaque (1998), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Coghlan and Brannick (2005) have suggested that academicians and practitioners should have interactions in seminars, symposiums, and conferences to exchange ideas and learn from each other by seeking clarifications on issues of interest and concern.

Christensen and Raynor (2003) argue that if academic theory was to be useful to executives, it must be researched and “written in ways that make it possible for

readers to diagnose their situation themselves” (p. 72). Academic scholars should translate research findings and insights into managerial lessons (Markides, 2007), which are implementable, similar to the contents in Centre for Creative Leadership’s (CCL) *ideas into action* guidebook.⁷ Beer (2001) has recommended that researchers should take responsibility for specifying how to implement the knowledge they produce.

The communication content should avoid abstract ideas and academic/research jargon so as to make it accessible and relevant to corporate executives. Writing for a management audience could be difficult for academic researchers (McGahan, 2007). Saari (2007) has drawn attention to the communication of quantitative data by researchers in ways that would enlighten readers. Latham (2007) has proposed that academic scholars need to use a different vocabulary to communicate research findings for practitioners. “Theories” should become “frameworks”; “research” should be “project” and so on. For this, academic scholars need to develop ambidextrous mindsets and attitudes (Markides, 2007), and bi-lingual communication capabilities (Gulati, 2007).

Leverage Mode II research methods

Quantitative research methods have dominated the academic research arena, which are generally “deficient in their capacity to generate knowledge for use by members of organizations” (Susman and Evered, 1978, p. 585). Most academic institutes focus on quantitative research methods under various course titles such as “Social Research Method”, “Business Research Method”, “Marketing Research”, “Quantitative Research Method” and so on, which often cover the same set of contents and include statistical analysis tools such as correlation, regression, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

The academic socialization of doctoral scholars tends to emphasize rigorous data analysis and interpretation using various data analysis tools and techniques. The research process is often misconstrued as data analysis and interpretation process. This encourages researchers to demonstrate analytical skills using advanced data analysis tools. Bennis and O’Toole (2005) have argued that management research has promoted research methodologies from other hard disciplines such as physics and economics. Quantitative research methods help mode I approach to knowledge production, which is investigator initiated and with disciplinary scientific rigour. Academic scholars rarely use qualitative or mixed methods in their doctoral research works.

⁷ ‘Idea into action’ guidebook series comprises a number of titles, each of which is a step-by-step approach to implement ideas, insights, or concepts in practice. These titles are written by academic researchers keeping practitioners’ needs in mind, in simple and easy to understand language (without much use of academic jargon). Geared towards the practising manager, this series contains proven, practical actions for carrying out a specific developmental task or solving a specific leadership problem. The list of titles can be accessed using the link <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/publications/readers/GuidebookReader.pdf>.

Pfeffer and Fong (2002) have called upon management scholars to move away from the scientific model and towards the professional or clinical model similar to medical schools. Academic scholars need to curb their proclivity for quantitative research methods (Rudolph & Peluchette, 1992). Instead, they should leverage research methodologies that are more cognizant of the role of practical issues and explicitly address the interdependence of theory and practice, which would provide richer insights (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The research methods that are conducive for carrying out mode II research are action research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006; Eden & Huxham, 1996), action science (Schon, 1983), action learning, participatory or collaborative research (Adler, (Rami), & Styhre, 2004; Brannick and Coghlan, 2006), cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996), grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Partington, 2000), and clinical methods (Schein, 2001). Gibbons et al. (1994) have clustered all these methods under mode II research, which is problem focussed and interdisciplinary and emphasizes collaborative inquiry.

Academic scholars should leverage the advantages of mode II form of inquiry to conduct problem solving and collaborative research and for that, they should make a shift from mode I form of inquiry, which focuses on scientific rigour, disciplinary knowledge and academic skills. Academic institutions, however, mostly patronize mode I form of inquiry.

Huff (2000) has proposed mode 1.5 that blends disciplinary scientific rigour associated with mode I and practically valued problem solving orientation of mode II. This form of inquiry leverages disciplinary knowledge and academic skills to develop definitions and compare data across organizations and prepare generalizable frameworks. Conversation and dialogue between academic researcher and practitioner is salient in this form of inquiry.

What should academic institutes do?

Business schools should forge meaningful collaboration with the corporate world that facilitates interaction between academic researchers and corporate executives in multiple forums and helps them share and exchange ideas, problems and issues. Academic institutes should invite corporate executives to co-facilitate full-credit courses with faculty members. Such joint facilitation would allow for theoretical inputs from the academic scholar and practical insights on how and where to apply these theories from the practitioner. Academic institutes should allow their faculty members to have sabbaticals in industry (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and spend time in organizations as native employees on a regular basis. This would help academic scholars develop a realistic perspective about organizations and the way they function.

Senior executives from organizations should be co-opted into apex doctoral research committees, so that they bring the practitioner perspective into the research process. They may also be invited to be members of editorial boards of management journals.

Review and revamp doctoral research programmes

Building research culture in a business school requires right training, right resources, right incentives and right teaching load,⁸ as rightly noted by Nirmalya Kumar and Phanish Puranam. Prof. Puranam (2011) further emphasized in his interview to MBA Rendezvous⁹ that a strong PhD programme addresses the first two aspects. A group of well-trained researchers not only trains the next generation of researchers, but also provides valuable intellectual resources in the form of thinking partners and collaborators to faculty. A vibrant doctoral research programme should be the ideal breeding ground for quality research and researchers who are critical to the mission of a business school to compete successfully in the market for talent. Investing in a strong PhD programme is an obvious and natural step in the process of building good research capabilities.

Business schools need to articulate the purpose of their doctoral research programmes. As Khurana and Spender (2012, p. 636) have pointed out.

“What are we preparing our students for – to be able to compete in publications and scholarly recognition with students trained in traditional disciplinary settings, albeit while working in a business school setting? Or do we hope to train ‘first-class’ students with a genuine curiosity towards the complexities of the executive process at the intersection of discipline-based knowledge and business practice? Should we focus on students who wish to contribute to a body of rigorous and relevant managerial knowledge?”

Doctoral scholars should be encouraged to take up consultancy oriented doctoral research, with a focus on addressing organizational problem(s). This is only possible if and when academic faculty is engaged in such problem solving consultancy assignments.

Further, the research methodology course should be revamped to include qualitative methods and mixed methods. The training of doctoral scholars should include both theory development as well as theory application. Doctoral scholars should be introduced to a repertoire of research methods which are conducive for mode 2, practitioner-led problem solving research.

Attract and groom academic faculty for research

It is debatable whether the teaching profession in India attracts the best of talent. Many doctoral scholars, after graduation, opt for corporate assignments, given the difference in remuneration. Business schools need to attract doctoral scholars to the profession for which they have been groomed, with competitive compensation package and incentives.

⁸ Kumar, Nirmalya and Puranam, Phanish (2011), ‘India must create its own research culture’, Accessed and retrieved through <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2b96f602-61ed-11e0-88f7-00144feab49a.html#axzz36W18JerH>, 4th July, 2014.

⁹ Prof. Phanish Puranam’s interview to MBA Rendezvous, Accessed and retrieved through <http://www.mbarendezvous.com/Interview-of-Professor-Phanish-Puranam-538.php>, 4th July, 2014.

Faculty compensation structure, as noted by Banerjee (2013, p. 8), is not aligned to incentivize research as "there are less costly options available to faculty to enhance compensation". Business schools need to have "better pay structure to attract talent who are subjected to appropriate tenure based evaluation process to maintain a high level of motivation towards conducting research" (Banerjee, 2013, p. 8).

Performance of academic faculty is generally assessed through the feedback of students and training participants, which essentially focusses on teaching and facilitating skills. In the current system, as noted by Banerjee (2013), with the approach of evaluating faculty members on research and teaching, the quality of academic output would suffer as only a small number of faculty members would be excellent at both. Banerjee has suggested that business schools need to develop specialized tracks and groom a group of faculty members for teaching, another group for research, and a third group for academic administration, as one cannot be expected to be excellent in all three aspects. Academic faculty members should be assessed and groomed for one of these three specialized tracks depending on their competence and interest.

In many institutions, there are several academic researchers who are keen to share their knowledge, and who write regularly in magazines, journals and so on. These academic researchers need to be mentored by senior scholars so that they evolve into serious researchers and engage in deeper research and contribute to peer-reviewed journals. As Prof. Arup Varma of Loyola University, Chicago has mentioned, "junior scholars should seek out partnership with senior scholars around the world to collaborate on and co-author research. This would help them publish in quality journals, as well as learn the ropes of publishing in international journals" (Khatri et al., 2012, p. 114). Business schools should have formal systems and processes in place to mentor researchers. Academic institutes should consider revamping their incentive structure so that research studies of theoretical or practical significance, as compared to empirical significance, are awarded value in terms of career progression. Indigenous research needs to be rewarded through appropriate reward and recognition structures. Some of the incentives could be as suggested by Professor Srinivasan (Khatri et al., 2012; pp. 112–113).

- Seed money for faculty members desirous of undertaking context specific research
- Funds to host conferences on indigenous themes
- Providing and supporting travel to conferences of organizational and industry relevance
- Providing discretionary funds for research travel, appointment of researchers, procurement of aids that enable research etc.
- Rewarding and recognizing faculty members who evangelize locally relevant, context specific research

In an effort to boost research, some Indian business schools provide monetary incentives for faculty publications based on the "category" of the journal in which they are published. However, categorization of academic journals into different grades itself is problematic. A glance at the

Annual Report of Research and Publications in IIMB¹⁰ reveals that the institute categorizes publications into three clusters: (a) articles in prestigious journals listed in FT45, BW20, UT Dallas 24 etc, (b) refereed articles in national journals, and (c) refereed articles in international journals.

Academic journals which are categorized as 'A grade' tend to emphasize scientific rigour rather than relevance. A research that is relevant but does not meet the criterion of scientific/methodological rigour would most probably be desk-rejected, if submitted to any of the A grade journals. It would not make it to the peer-review stage. Such a system encourages academic scholars to pursue scientifically rigorous research with little attention to relevance. Academic scholars currently seem to be pursuing such kind of research. This aberration needs to be addressed.

What is desirable is to categorize academic journals on the basis of emphasis they attach to "relevance to practice" and "need for methodological and scientific rigour" for graded incentives. Academic journals that attach equally high importance to relevance and rigour should be categorized as "A grade". Academic journals that encourage contributions with moderate relevance and high degree of rigour, or with high degree of relevance and moderate scientific rigour should be clustered under "B grade". Academic journals that give moderate but equal emphasis to both rigour and relevance should be categorized under "C grade". Publications related to academic research, which may be scientifically rigorous but without or with little relevance to practice or highly relevant to practice but without or with little methodological rigour should be discouraged by delinking the publication from cash incentive scheme.

Further, the editorial teams of academic journals should take cognizance of this shift and foster a balanced view towards both relevance to practice and the need to be methodologically rigorous. The screening and review process need to be oriented accordingly.

An Indian academic journal that focusses on both relevance and rigour

Even as academic scholars in India are urged to conduct context specific research, they need an avenue to communicate their findings. A review of the list of leading management journals from around the world reveals that there are not many academic journals from India. There are a few India focussed journals such as *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management (IJICBM)*, published from the US by Inderscience.

The focus today should be to nurture Indian academic journals of international standards that emphasize both relevance and rigour, with rigorous review processes of international standards, and with a focus on India and the Indian context. Indian journal editors, reviewers and authors must set high standards and adhere to them. The journals should ideally be agnostic about methodological choices.

Further, not many academic journals, as of now, insist on evidence in the form of successful implementation of the research results in practice (Kieser & Leiner, 2009, p.

¹⁰ Annual report of Research and Publications in IIMB for each year can be accessed digitally through <http://www.iimb.ernet.in/research/annual-reports/>.

522). Though most reviewers' checklists of leading journals include the criterion "relevance for practice", the authors tend to comply with this criterion by pointing out what implications their result *might have* for practice.

Indian Academy of Management, to name one organization, could take the lead and start a journal with both practitioners and academic scholars of repute in the editorial board. The review process should be holistic and balanced, focussing on both academic rigour and organizational relevance. Among the requirements could be a roadmap on how research insights can be implemented for the benefits of the organization. The journal may also seek verifiable evidence of, if and how the key insights from the research have been implemented to the benefit of organization(s).

Conclusion

The authors of this paper have presented an overview of the rigour and relevance debate to argue that the gulf between rigour and relevance needs to be bridged to make academic research more relevant to business organizations and practitioners. They urge academic scholars to reach out to the practitioners and collaborate with the corporate world to take up problem solving research.

The authors have presented a number of suggestions for both academic scholars and business schools to ponder. Academic scholars need to take up the responsibility of making academic research more relevant. Business schools need to craft an eco-system that fosters a vibrant research culture in business schools in India.

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