

# Management Research Meets Practice: Analyzing the Closing Relevance Gap

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## Abstract:

Over the last decade, there has been a lot of academic controversy in management research circles about how management practitioners aren't using management research produced by UK institutions. These debates have focused on the research rigor and relevance issue, as well as the need for new forms of social organization for the development of management knowledge, which include concerns about the structure of business schools, the nature of management education, and research methodology. Despite this debate and the demand for greater relevance, the amount of financing that UK business schools receive directly from businesses continues to diminish. The objective of this paper is to generate debate about these topics.

**Keywords:** Management, management Research, Closing Relevance Gap

## INTRODUCTION:

In the recent past there has been a growing appreciation in the business strategy literature, typified by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), that knowledge is an essential, non-imitable element of a firm's competitive strategy. Government policy in the UK The former Teaching Company Schemes have been renamed Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, and universities in the UK are increasingly being encouraged to develop more effective partnership relationships with businesses in order to capitalize on, exploit, and transfer the knowledge created in universities in order to improve UK business competitiveness and productivity. One might expect that the adoption of the results of management research conducted in business schools should improve the competitive position of the UK and increase the productivity of UK businesses, even though these initiatives are focused much broader than the transfer of management knowledge and frequently concentrate on transferring and then exploiting technology to return revenue back into an underfunded higher education system. They do this, of course, assuming that research outputs produced by universities are applicable, relevant, and feasible to implement.

Despite this hope, experience tells us that this transfer of management expertise is not taking place. There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that management research has had, and continues to have, little effect on management practice.(see Ford et al, 2005 Brannick and Coghlan, 2006; Keleman and Bansal, 2002;Transfield and Starkey, 1998; and, Starkey and Madan, 2001)These worries have existed since the early 1980s, when there was a reference to the idea that management research had not had much of an impact on companies' daily operations and that more work was required to increase the application of

organizational research. Beyer, 1982, p. 588 cited in Vermeulen, 2005, p. 978), Ghoshal (2005) even went as far as to suggest that bad management theories were actually destroying good management practices. It appears that management research as it is now implemented has a significant "utilization problem" and low practitioner face validity. According to Rynes et al. (2001, p. 340), academics rarely turn to practitioners for guidance when interpreting their findings or to formulate research questions, and executives rarely look to academics or their research findings to solve problems. Despite these reservations, Rynes et al. (2001, p.342) also point out that there is a dearth of empirical studies explaining the causes of the gap's creation and maintenance. the knowledge being produced in academic institutions to improve UK business's productivity and competitiveness. One might expect that the adoption of the results of management research conducted in business schools should improve the competitive position of the UK and increase the productivity of UK businesses, even though these initiatives typically focus on transferring and then exploiting technology to return revenue back into an underfunded higher education system. This is assuming, of course, that research outputs produced by universities are relevant, applicable, and capable of being implemented.

We would sense that this transfer of management knowledge is not occurring despite this hope, based on experience. (See Ford et al., 2005; Brannick and Coghlan, 2006; Keleman and Bansal, 2002; Transfield and Starkey, 1998; and Starkey and Madan, 2001.) In fact, there is a wealth of evidence that suggests management research has had and still has minimal impact on management practice. These concerns are far from new; in fact, there is a reference from the early 1980s that expresses concerns that management research has not had a significant impact on the operations of organizations and that more work needs to be done to increase the use of organizational research (Beyer, 1982, p. 588 cited in Vermeulen, 2005, p. 978). It was even suggested by Ghoshal (2005) that faulty management theories were really killing good management practices. The way management research is now implemented appears to have a significant "utilization problem" and low practitioner face validity. According to Rynes et al. (2001, p. 340), academics rarely look to practitioners for guidance when interpreting their findings or for help framing research topics, while executives rarely look to academics or their research findings to solve problems. Notwithstanding these reservations, Rynes et al. (2001, p.342) also point out that there is a dearth of empirical studies explaining the causes of the gap's creation and maintenance.

### **HOW MANAGEMENT RESEARCH IMPACTS PRACTICE:**

There is no denying that the proliferation of fads, half-truths, self-congratulatory stories from corporate executives, and believable sophistry found in airport bookshops worldwide has had a far greater influence on management and organizations than management research. Although fads can influence management practitioners, more conventional management research does not. Some may contend that some of the fads that have gained popularity have academic roots (for instance, the business process re-engineering movement, followed by re-engineering the corporation and, finally, re-engineering management (Champy, 1995). However, I contend that the process of commodification has turned this commodified research into a form of plausible sophistry that is too easily ingested by a cadre of managers who lack the critical skills necessary to assess the validity of the claims the research makes or the potential harm that populist material of this kind can cause to the organization. On the subject of re-engineering, the business and popular news regrettably provide several instances of companies re-engineering themselves entirely out of existence. It appears that too many managers fail to recognize the context-dependence of much of this research, believing that if something worked there, it will work here. The point is still the same: fads are far more

capable producing mimicking behavior than more rigorous academic studies. Van Aken's (2004, p. 220) conclusion that "management fads, scorned by academics" appear to have had a greater influence on management actions than the findings of mainstream academic researchers support this viewpoint. Some researchers argue that academics have focused more on making their work academically rigorous than on making it practical and useful in real-world situations (Pettigrew, 2001; van Aken, 2004, 2005). This may be because academic careers are often based on meeting strict research standards. Additionally, funding from UK private companies for management research has been decreasing since 1995/6, even though researchers have been talking about the importance of making research relevant to practice since the late 1990s." The reduction is considerably more pronounced when looking at the decline in "1995/6 pounds" (the statistics are presented in Appendix 1). The economics of self-interest would take over if management researchers were bridging the "relevance gap" with private sector managers. The private sector would undoubtedly view university research as a source of competitive advantage. It is obvious that either the private sector's current vision of the market for management research is extremely small, or the market is failing for an unidentified and confusing cause. The patterns of the commercial sector and the two other financing sources (the public sector and the Office of Science and Technology, or OST) in Appendix 1 have diverged significantly, especially since 2002–2003. The OST's 2002–2003 trend break can be attributed to the Advanced Institute of Management's (AIM) substantial financing for management research from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It is more challenging to explain the rise from the UK public sector, while some recommendations are offered later in this article. According to Wensley (2007), the UK has a GBP10 billion market for consulting, which dispels the misconception that there is no market for management knowledge or what is commonly referred to as management knowledge. The business sector's support of management researchers at UK universities in 2004–05 was less than 0.1% of the consulting industry's total revenue (source: Wensley, 2007). I've become more concerned about these issues recently due to my involvement with the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Research Committee and the British Academy of Management (BAM). Data presented to the ABS committee from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that funding from UK private sector organizations for management research has been decreasing since 1995/6. This decline has continued in recent years, even though the relevance gap has been a major focus for academic management researchers since the late 1990s. Looking at the data in "1995/6 pounds," the decline is even more significant (see Appendix 1). If management researchers were successfully bridging the "relevance gap" with private sector managers, the private sector would likely view academic research as a way to gain a competitive advantage, driven by self-interest. This suggests that either there is very limited demand for management research as it is currently framed, or there is a failure in the market for reasons that are still unclear. Although some recommendations are provided later in this article, it is more challenging to explain the rise from the UK public sector. The idea that there is no market for management expertise (or what passes for management knowledge) is largely debunked by the fact that the UK has a GBP10 billion market for consulting (source: Wensley, 2007). Less than 0.1% of the consulting industry's turnover was allocated by the corporate sector to management researchers at UK universities in 2004–05 (source: Wensley, 2007).

At the ABS research conference in March 2007, Robin Wensley, Director of the Advanced Institute of Management, raised concerns about management research. He shared data from the ESRC showing that management research had the lowest success rate in securing 'response mode' research funding and that many research bids were considered 'problematic.' As an occasional ESRC reviewer, I agree with

Wensley's point, having found that many management research proposals lacked strong theory and had weak methodologies. Wensley also highlighted findings from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, showing that while only 3% of economists were in the lowest research categories, this figure rose to 20% for management and business. He also mentioned evidence from the 1960s suggesting that funding bodies recognized management research faced unique challenges, although the exact nature of these challenges wasn't fully clear.

Perhaps the reason the UK business sector does not sponsor more management research is that they believe it is of poor quality. Is it because academic management scholars and practitioners have divergent, if not incompatible, frames of reference (see Rynes et al, 2001, p.341) for what constitutes management knowledge in general, and operationalizable management knowledge in particular? It is possible that academics value the academic reputation system and their desire to advance within it more than creating research that is more tightly aligned with the practitioner reputation system. Perhaps because they prioritize the interests of other stakeholders or their own self-interest over those of management practitioners, academic management researchers may simply be failing to respond to a clear market signal from one of its stakeholders, particularly private sector management practitioners. Perhaps because of the way they have been conditioned by the management education procedures they have undergone, management practitioners in the private sector, in particular, do not perceive the importance of more scholarly, theory-driven research. Maybe MB's emphasis on "how to" rather than "why so," combat anecdotes rather than philosophy, and "doing over thinking" are to blame. Maybe MBA program deliverers and MB As are disengaged from research are perpetuating a vicious circle?

The passage you've shared discusses the gap between academic research and practical management application, specifically the differing perspectives of academics and practitioners. Here's a simplified and more accessible version of the text:

Recent studies, like those by Worrall and Cooper (1999), show that the percentage of managers with an MBA is similar in both public and private sectors (11%). However, managers in the public sector are more likely to hold higher degrees or doctorates from other fields (24%) compared to those in the private sector (12%). This raises the question: Are managers in the private sector, who tend to have more formal education, more open to academic research than their counterparts in the public sector?

Weick (2001) suggests that the gap between theory and practice might be due to both academics being overly focused on abstract concepts, and practitioners being too attached to popular trends or "gurus" (p. 571). But why are they drawn to these gurus? Other scholars, like Carter and Jackson (2004), argue that practitioners are often only interested in knowledge that aligns with their existing beliefs, making it harder for new ideas to penetrate.

Whatever the reasons for this divide, it's clear that the gap between academic research and real-world management practice is growing, not shrinking. This is especially concerning in the UK, where management quality is often considered lacking, given the productivity differences between UK businesses and their European counterparts.

There's plenty of evidence showing that these gaps are widening, but little research explaining why this happens or how to close the divide. What's needed is more relevant and actionable research. Specifically, we need theories that can explain why these gaps exist and persist, as well as practical theories that help bridge them. As I'll argue later, we need research that covers both "why" (understanding the problem) and "how" (guiding action to fix it). Academics tend to focus on "why," while practitioners often prioritize

"how." For many practitioners, the "how" is more important than the "why," as they need practical solutions more than theoretical explanations.

### **DOES MANAGEMENT RESEARCH HAVE ANY UNIQUE ASPECTS?**

Since the early 1990s, I've been involved with organizations like the British Academy of Management (BAM) and the Association of Business Schools (ABS), where I've heard many discussions about the "relevance gap"—the gap between academic research and real-world management practice. These conversations often focus on how academia can better connect with management practitioners and contribute to improving the UK's economic competitiveness.

An interesting perspective on this issue comes from Donald Hambrick's 1993 presidential address to the American Academy of Management. He compared management research to George Bailey, the main character in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the movie, George is about to commit suicide, and an angel named Clarence shows him what the world would be like if he had never existed. Hambrick used this idea to suggest that, if we apply the same test to management research, we might find that the world could have functioned just fine without it.

So, why has management research failed to make a real impact on the world of practice? Despite the valuable research it produces, the large number of students studying business and management at the undergraduate level, and the many MBA graduates who have passed through our programs, it seems that academic research has yet to make the significant difference we might expect. This version should make the text easier to read and understand while preserving the main points. Let me know if you'd like further adjustments!

My questions are: Does "management research" exist as a separate field beyond the individual disciplines that contribute to it? And is there a unified body of management research literature?

A review of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (Geary et al., 2004) found that around 1,580 different journals were cited within the business and management assessment unit, covering everything from well-known sources to very niche ones. Bessant et al. (2003, p. 62) concluded that the business and management "Unit of Assessment" (UOA) included a wider range of disciplines than any other UOA. It's clear that management research is an umbrella term that includes disciplines like economics, sociology, psychology, and management sciences. It also covers specific areas like marketing, strategy, accounting, finance, human resource management, and information management. This broad scope means that management research includes many different methods, from econometrics to action research to critical ethnography.

This makes management a highly diverse field, which Transfield and Starkey (1998) describe as fragmented and heterogeneous. It's a field with no single agreed-upon approach to understanding or studying it. Pettigrew (2001, p. 563) doesn't even consider management a discipline but rather a mix of different fields of inquiry. This variety might be one of the main challenges: as Armand Hatchuel (2001, p. 534) suggests, there's a need for management research to have a clearer "scientific identity" that sets it apart from social and economic studies. Van Aken (2004, 2005) also views management as a "design science," focusing on practical solutions. "design science," focusing on practical solutions.

These challenges are made even more complex by other factors. First, we must distinguish between business and management research versus research done within business schools. Second, we need to separate research about management from research for management.

There are also questions about how research is organized within universities. Over time, universities have



become more “managerial,” with issues of structure and power shifting as financial pressures grow (Bryson, 2004). In this climate, many academic departments—like economics, industrial sociology, and organizational psychology—have been moved into business schools, which have become a key revenue generator for UK universities (Starkey et al., 2004, p. 1521). This version makes the text easier to read and focuses on the core points. Let me know if you need further revisions or clarifications!

Creating an environment where multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary work can thrive isn't necessarily a bad thing. However, these collaborations and partnerships tend to develop more effectively when they grow naturally from the bottom up, rather than being forced through top-down management decisions. Often, when departments are co-located as part of a cost-cutting measure or to tidy up the organizational chart, the collaboration doesn't happen organically, and the partnerships don't truly take root.

Another key shift has been the movement of power in many UK universities—particularly former polytechnics—away from more collaborative, collegial governance structures, where power is spread across different levels. Instead, there's been a shift to more hierarchical, managerial structures where a small group of elite academic managers hold most of the power. Many of these managers have moved away from active research careers to focus on gaining status within the institution. These changes have reshaped the environment in which management (and other) research occurs, especially when paired with initiatives like 3rd Stream Funding. This funding, which comes directly from businesses and partnerships with external organizations, is often used to supplement the decreasing funds for teaching and research. It focuses on using university-generated knowledge to create partnerships and generate income, which is seen as a way to boost university finances. This version highlights the key points and makes the language more straightforward while still addressing the issues of power shifts, organizational changes, and funding challenges in universities. Let me know if you need any further changes!

Universities in the UK have faced increasing pressure to generate additional funding, particularly through business partnerships, as government support for teaching has failed to keep up with inflation. Alongside this, student numbers have risen, but the number of teaching staff has not kept pace, leading to a significant strain on academic resources. This imbalance has intensified the workload for many academics, with increased teaching loads often leaving them with less time and energy to conduct high-quality research. Bessant et al. (2003), in their review of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), highlighted the significant tensions within universities between teaching, research, and practical experience. They concluded that “nowhere in the higher education sector is this tension more evident than in business and management” (p. 64). This is especially concerning given the growing expectation for universities to generate income from external business partnerships. Paradoxically, while universities are under pressure to attract funding from businesses, the amount of funding business schools are receiving from these external sources has actually declined, both in absolute terms and in relation to other forms of funding.

These institutional challenges clearly affect academics' ability to focus on research. The combination of reduced government funding, the rise in student numbers, and the shifting priorities within universities has created an environment where the time and resources available for high-level academic research are increasingly limited. This version provides more detail on the financial pressures facing universities, the resulting strain on academic workloads, and the paradox of declining business funding. It connects these issues more clearly to the impact on research capabilities. Let me know if you'd like to add or adjust anything!

## IS IT MANAGEMENT-RELATED OR MANAGEMENT-RELATED RESEARCH?

A second area of discussion is the distinction between research about management and research for management. While some academics may appreciate the potential impact their research can have on management practice, there is also a significant group of management researchers, particularly those with a critical perspective, who are more focused on deconstructing and critiquing management than supporting it. A key theme in much critical management research is highlighting the struggles of those affected by management and advocating for their empowerment. However, it's difficult to imagine many practitioners engaging with the work of most critical management scholars, as some of it is conceptually and linguistically difficult to understand, and some is, as Martin Parker (2002) puts it, "against management." Whether managers would actually benefit from critically examining their actions and value systems is another question altogether.

A recent paper by van Aken (2004, p. 219) starts with the idea that there are significant doubts about the relevance of current management research produced by the academic community. He suggests that management research should embrace the "design sciences" paradigm, which is based on field-tested, practical rules. However, he argues that much of the theoretical work in management is too reductionist, often either too broad or trivial to be practically useful, which contributes to the "utilization problem." Van Aken then compares management with other applied fields like medicine and engineering, where the integration of theoretical research into practice is, according to him, much more advanced. In medicine, for example, there's a clear distinction between the theoretical research aimed at improving understanding and the development of problem-solving theories that facilitate the transfer and application of knowledge into clinical practice. While there is a difference between laboratory-based science and clinical practice, van Aken notes that they are not separate; rather, they work together in a beneficial way. Clinical practitioners provide feedback on the effects of interventions, which, in turn, helps refine existing theories, identify new research directions, or redefine existing problems.

However, van Aken points out that this type of collaboration does not exist within the UK management research landscape. While some countries, like Sweden and France, have examples of such a collaborative research model (Hatchuel, 2001; Starkey and Madan, 2001), it is not yet common in the UK. This version aims to make the points clearer and more accessible while maintaining the key ideas, and connects them to the broader discussion of management research's practical relevance. Let me know if you'd like further modifications!

In the field of medicine, there is an increasing trend toward creating cross-, multi-, or transdisciplinary teams, especially in areas like oncology, where professional and disciplinary boundaries are blurred. These teams foster a more collaborative approach to knowledge production, bringing together laboratory scientists, clinical practitioners, and social policy experts to facilitate feedback, learning, and reflexivity. This model of working aligns with Mode 2 knowledge production, as described by Gibbons et al. (1994), and discussed in works by Transfield and Starkey (1998) and Eden and Hexham (1996) on action research. In Mode 2, research and learning are embedded in real-world action or change processes, making the knowledge more applicable and responsive to practical needs. In contrast, Mode 1 research is the traditional approach, typically done from a single disciplinary perspective with little focus on how the knowledge is applied or adopted. Huff (2000, p. 288) describes Mode 1 as "discipline-based, university-centered, and dominated by highly trained individuals," primarily focused on cognitive understanding and peer-reviewed validation, with practical application left to others later. Van Aken (2004) argues that the relevance problem of academic management research can be addressed if descriptive research, which

produces what is often called Organization Theory, is paired with prescriptive research, or Management Theory. This idea reflects Transfield and Starkey's (1998) assertion that management research should not just answer "what" happens but also provide answers to "how" things should be done. Beer (2001, p. 59) adds that a major issue preventing the development of practical knowledge is the division between those who develop substantive management theories and those who focus on how this knowledge can be implemented and used to drive organizational change.

Van Aken's distinction between substantive theories and theories of action is an important challenge in management research, one that few scholars have effectively addressed. However, Hatchuel (2001) offers an exception by proposing a model of intervention-based research, where researchers collaborate with host organizations in a negotiated partnership. In this model, problems are not seen as isolated issues but as deeply embedded in the context of the organization. The goal of the researcher is to ground these problems in a more academically rigorous context, ensuring that research has real-world relevance. In the organizations in France and Sweden that Hatchuel describes, this collaborative model leads to the development of research capabilities within the organization itself, as a result of ongoing engagement with academic researchers. Hatchuel argues (p. 538) that this structured approach leads to significant cultural change within the organization, where managerial decisions and evaluations are increasingly informed by scientific knowledge. This approach helps combat misguided management practices, such as blindly following gurus or trends. However, this kind of collaborative working model does not seem to exist widely in the UK, though it may be a model worth considering.

This revision provides a clearer, more detailed explanation of the differences between Mode 1 and Mode 2 research, expands on the key points raised by Van Aken and others, and further connects these ideas to practical management research. Let me know if you need further adjustments!

Aspect	Mode 1	Mode 2
<b>Research boundaries</b>	<b>Discipline, impermeable, Single</b>	<b>Transdisciplinary, permeable</b>
<b>Stakeholders &amp; audience</b>	<b>Academics often within prescribed discipline and often a much smaller sub-field of experts</b>	<b>Academics &amp; Practitioners</b>
<b>Aim</b>	<b>Production of new knowledge, theory building, adding to the base of disciplinary knowledge, replicability, validity</b>	<b>To gain insight that are useful &amp; usable to practitioners &amp; society at large production of solution</b>
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Basic &amp; applied research</b>	<b>Applied &amp; applicable research</b>
<b>Organization</b>	<b>Often individualist research agenda set autonomously hierarchic</b>	<b>Team based Externally defined research agenda Hierarchic, networked</b>
<b>Dissemination</b>	<b>Peer revied journals controlled by other academics, well defined &amp; institutionalized channel, single &amp; limited public</b>	<b>Transfer into practice, oriented journals, dissemination often through professional bodies, multiple publics</b>



<b>Usage</b>	<b>Production precedes consumption may never be used to support practice protentional use doesn't influence research design</b>	<b>Simultaneous production &amp; consumption: Knowledge production and diffusion are interlinked and may be multi-modal</b>
<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Elitist, Exclusive</b>	<b>Pluralist, Participatory</b>
<b>Evaluation criteria</b>	<b>Excellence as determined by peers, disciplinary norms and quality audits</b>	<b>Applicability, perceived usefulness by research users and contributions to practice practitioners</b>
<b>Validation</b>	<b>Validation through peer review and publication</b>	<b>Validation in use</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Defined by the academic discipline</b>	<b>Plural and defined by the research context, often emergent</b>

**Table 1: Mode 1 and Mode 2 research compared**

The shift to Mode 2 knowledge production brings about a significant change in how knowledge is organized and created, which is very different from the traditional Mode 1 knowledge production. In Mode 2, the structure of knowledge creation is more collaborative and interdisciplinary, but this approach contradicts the current way academic research in management is organized. For example, even though the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) emphasized the importance of transdisciplinary research, most research submissions were still confined to the traditional academic disciplines found in business schools, such as marketing, strategy, and human resources. It seems unlikely that business schools will embrace transdisciplinary research in the 2008 RAE because the assessment process still follows the old academic structure, which divides research into traditional functional areas like those mentioned earlier. The key issue here is that the shift to more cooperative and interdisciplinary approaches to management knowledge creation is being hindered by institutional inertia in UK universities and business organizations, as well as cognitive inertia among academics and professionals in the UK. This means that the established mindset and institutional structures are slowing down progress toward more modern, integrated approaches to management research.

The transition to Mode 2 knowledge production not only affects the way research is organized but also has significant implications for how business schools and management education programs are structured. If we continue with the analogy to medicine, this shift suggests that business schools should adopt organizational models similar to medical schools and become what some have referred to as Professional Schools. There has been ongoing debate regarding the future of business schools. For example, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) predict the decline of business schools, while Starkey et al. (2004) aim to rethink the role and function of business schools in today's world. Murray (2006) argues that business schools are failing in their mission, as they educate new generations of managers who disregard academic research because it doesn't offer evidence-based insights that are directly applicable to their practices. He asserts that managers want research that is closely tied to real-world action, but academics are often resistant to this idea.

Pfeffer and Fong (2004) argue that business schools should be evaluated in two key areas: their contribution to management research and their contribution to management education. They claim that business schools fall short in both areas because their research lacks both rigor and relevance. According to Starkey et al. (2004), business schools also fail in education because they have not fostered critical

thinking or inquiry about business and management. In response, Starkey and colleagues call for a reinvention of business schools, shifting their focus to the development of skills in reflective, collaborative, and analytical thinking, as well as fostering an action-oriented mindset that equips managers to navigate the complex relationships between theory and practice. This transformation would require business schools to collaborate more closely with businesses to co-create knowledge, focusing on issues that are relevant to the business world, rather than those that academics think should be prioritized.

Other scholars suggest that business schools should aim to produce professional managers who practice evidence-based management, similar to the approach found in the medical profession. However, Murray (2006) challenges this idea, questioning whether behavioral science research is truly accessible or actionable for practitioners. Rousseau and McCarthy (2007) counter Murray's perspective, suggesting that managers and educators are not fully utilizing the wealth of behavioral science evidence available for improving organizational practices. The real concern, as van Aken points out, is whether management theory is complementary to the practical needs of managers, making it harder to implement in real-world settings.

The vision for a new form of business school, as advocated by Starkey and Madan (2001) and Starkey et al. (2004), doesn't align well with the structure of many existing schools. These schools often operate under traditional teaching and research methods, and their students, increasingly influenced by the commodification of education, tend to approach their learning in an instrumental and sometimes minimalistic manner. Most current business schools still don't resemble the "new agora" that Starkey et al. (2004) and Nowotny et al. (2001) describe—a collaborative environment where multiple stakeholders come together to produce and share knowledge. Achieving such a transformation would be challenging due to the cognitive inertia of participants who are used to the existing system and the need for a radical change in the academic recognition system. In this new system, practitioner-oriented research would be valued just as highly as academic research published in prestigious journals, and academic careers would progress based on contributions to both practice and the development of academic specialisms. Under Mode 2, however, academics might need to adopt a more eclectic and inclusive approach, moving away from the rigid boundaries of single-discipline work (Starkey and Madan, 2001).

What is striking is that most of the literature on these issues—especially the idea of the new agora—doesn't mention the role of new and emerging technologies in enabling previously disparate stakeholders to come together virtually. These technologies offer the potential for a community of practice where people can collaborate and exchange ideas more freely, creating new knowledge and perspectives. This lack of focus may be due to inertia and a fear among academics of losing control over the educational experience. The idea of a shift in academic authority—where new players have greater influence in shaping management knowledge—could be unsettling for those who have traditionally held authority in the knowledge production process. Under the existing Mode 1 framework, it is the academics themselves who determine what constitutes legitimate knowledge, what should be published, and what enters the academic public domain, even if that domain is small and specialized.

### **The pursuit of the relevance-rigor issue:**

The ongoing conversation has primarily focused on the issues of rigor and relevance, as well as the adoption of various research styles or modes of knowledge production, which come with distinct forms of social organization that often clash with deeply institutionalized academic and practical values. One of the key points addressed in this context is captured in Table 2, which, following Hodgkinson et al. (2001),

introduces a two-by-two matrix, a framework commonly used in management research. This matrix categorizes research based on two dimensions: the level of theoretical and methodological rigor (either high or low) and the level of relevance to practitioners (either high or low).

Based on this framework, research can be classified into four categories: "puerile" (low relevance and low rigor), "populist" (high relevance but low rigor), "pedantic" (low relevance but high rigor), and "pragmatic" (high relevance and high rigor). The "populist" category addresses issues that are directly relevant to practitioners, focusing on current, practical concerns. However, there is concern that much of this "populist" research is driven by available funding rather than genuine scientific inquiry, and as a result, it may not meet the rigorous theoretical and methodological standards required in the "pedantic" quadrant. Research in the "pedantic" quadrant is characterized by high theoretical and methodological rigor but may lack immediate practical relevance. This category is closely associated with Mode 1 research (as previously described in Table 1), which is often perpetuated by established academic systems and recognition structures. These systems, like research quality assessment exercises such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), can inadvertently distort the very goals they aim to achieve. In these highly institutionalized academic environments, the emphasis on rigid criteria for evaluating research can sometimes obscure the practical relevance of the work being conducted.

In response to these concerns, many scholars argue that management research—though not all—should aim to reposition itself within the "pragmatic" quadrant. This quadrant focuses on producing solutions that are both theoretically and methodologically robust while also addressing urgent and practical managerial problems. Ideally, this would involve academic researchers working closely with practitioners to develop knowledge that is directly applicable to real-world situations, a concept that Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to as knowledge production "in the context of application."

However, as Starkey and Madan (2001) point out, achieving this shift requires significant institutional, structural, and cultural changes within academia. They propose a number of reforms to make this change possible, including:

1. **Business Education Reform:** There needs to be a rethinking of business education to better align academic curricula with the real-world challenges faced by businesses and practitioners.
2. **Encouragement of Interdisciplinarity:** A greater emphasis on interdisciplinary research would help bridge gaps between different academic fields, fostering more comprehensive and practical solutions to managerial problems.
3. **Restructuring Academic Institutions:** There is a need for academic institutions to be restructured in a way that enhances the exchange and dissemination of knowledge between scholars and practitioners.
4. **Creation of Cross-Disciplinary, Impact-Focused Journals:** New journals that focus on cross-disciplinary research and highlight the practical impact of research should be created to disseminate knowledge that can directly inform practice.
5. **Development of New Measures of Academic Impact:** New metrics for evaluating academic research should be developed, moving beyond traditional citation counts to include assessments of practical impact and relevance to real-world problems.
6. **Creation of Academic/Practitioner Forums:** Forums that facilitate the co-mingling of academics and practitioners should be established to encourage the co-production of knowledge. These forums would provide a platform for collaboration and the exchange of ideas, allowing researchers to better understand and address the needs of practitioners.

These proposed reforms aim to bridge the gap between academic research and its practical application, ensuring that management research is both rigorous and relevant to the problems faced by practitioners in the real world.

Low	High
<b>Popularist Consultancy?</b> <b>Epistemic drift</b> <b>Publishable in practitioner journals</b> <b>Fads, sophistry?</b> <b>Inappropriate solutions to pressing problems</b>	<b>"Pragmatic"</b> <b>Problem-solving focus</b> <b>Theoretically robust Academic &amp; practitioner collaboration</b> <b>Mode 2 characteristics</b> <b>Unlikely to be published in "top" journals?</b>
<b>"Puerile"</b> <b>Addressing irrelevant problems with inadequate theories and methods</b>	<b>"Pedantic"</b> <b>Accessible to the few Targeted on the few Model characteristic</b> <b>Main aim to be published in the "top" journals RAE oriented</b>

**Table 2: A typology of research (adapted from Hodgkinson. Herriot & Anderson, 2001)**  
**Theoretical and methodological rigor**

While many have recognized the potential benefits of these new research structures and modes of knowledge production, there are others who caution against making a drastic shift toward this model. These critics are particularly concerned that focusing on quick-response research, which is funded by end-users and driven by immediate, short-term issues, could result in what is known as epistemic drift (Transfield and Starkey, 1998, p. 350). This concept refers to the potential for research to lose its scientific integrity and depth, as it becomes overly focused on addressing transient, practical problems rather than pursuing broader, long-term theoretical advancement. Additionally, such a shift could lead to the rise of what Hodgkinson (2001, p. 543) terms "popularist science"—research that is primarily designed to appeal to the current interests and demands of funding bodies or public opinion, rather than adhering to rigorous, scientifically grounded methodologies.

The concern here is that these funding-driven research models could distort the behavior of management researchers, compelling them to prioritize topics that are popular or easily marketable, at the expense of maintaining academic rigor. This could undermine the quality and robustness of the research being conducted, which is a legitimate risk in such funding-driven environments.

However, this risk can be effectively mitigated by adopting a portfolio approach to management research. This approach would ensure that both basic and applied management research are given equal importance and reward. Basic research, which is more theoretical and aimed at advancing fundamental knowledge without immediate practical application, would continue to be valued for its long-term contributions to the field. In parallel, applied research, which addresses real-world challenges and is often driven by the immediate needs of practitioners, would be encouraged for its practical relevance and ability to provide actionable solutions.

By establishing a balanced research portfolio, management research can avoid being overly swayed by the demands of short-term funding, while still remaining connected to practical issues. This model would also introduce the necessary structures and knowledge production processes that allow for the

development of pragmatic research—research that is both theoretically rigorous and methodologically sound, yet grounded in the real-world challenges faced by practitioners. In this way, the portfolio approach helps maintain the rigor of academic inquiry while ensuring that research remains relevant and impactful.

### **Conclusion:**

In line with Gibbons (1994), I believe that Mode 2 research should coexist alongside Mode 1, rather than replacing it entirely. Both theory and practice should inform each other, a goal that presents significant challenges. Achieving this requires fundamental changes in the organization of management research, including the value systems that shape it and the funding structures that drive it. Furthermore, transforming management education is crucial to ensure future managers engage in the co-production of management knowledge. As someone who has always sought to integrate management practice into my research, I can attest to the profound potential for leadership and personal development that arises from conducting applied research. However, disconnecting from theory would mean that my applied research would no longer qualify as academic work.

Academics face real risks if they fail to collaborate more closely with key stakeholders in research. Hodgkinson et al. (2001) highlight a concerning trend: the widening gap between academics and other stakeholders, which could lead to the decline of university academics as central figures in the knowledge production process. This gap could be filled by consultancies or even virtual knowledge production environments, which could dominate the space academics have failed—or been unwilling—to occupy. Both Hodgkinson et al. (2001) and Pettigrew (2001) argue that fully adopting Mode 2 research is problematic and unlikely to close the relevance gap. They advocate for pragmatic research that combines theoretical and methodological rigor with practical relevance, suggesting a hybrid research model that blends Mode 1 and Mode 2 (or as Ann Huff (2000) termed it, Mode 1.5). This suggests that a subsequent paper could explore the unclear characteristics of Mode 1.5, as discussed in Huff's 2000 address to the Academy of Management.

Although the intense debates about management research that occurred five or six years ago seem to have subsided (partly due to the focus on the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in UK universities), questions about the future development of management research remain unresolved. Management research is still viewed as problematic in many circles, and the relevance-rigour debate has not been definitively settled. Even if it was the right question to ask, it remains unanswered. Academic careers, increasingly shaped by the RAE, are still driven by Mode 1 principles, where publishing in top journals is prioritized. Securing research funding from sources like the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) or charitable bodies such as the Leverhulme Trust is often considered more prestigious than obtaining funding directly from management research end users.

In management education, debates around MBA design, especially concerning the dissertation, have occurred sporadically, but little has changed. From my experience, it's rare for an MBA dissertation to meet the standards of robust management research, with many falling into the "populist" quadrant of Hodgkinson et al.'s (2001) model, and some even appearing to belong to the "puerile" quadrant. In my view, much of the MBA curriculum focuses more on practical techniques—on the "how to"—rather than on deeper exploration of the "why." As a result, many MBA programs are more about training in skills than offering true management education that fosters reflexivity and conceptual thinking. A professional school, as outlined by van Aken (2004) and Hatchel (2001), should strike a better balance between theory and practice than many UK-based MBA programs, particularly those on the lower end of the prestige



spectrum. Too many MBA candidates view the degree as a means to increase salary and status rather than as a transformative educational and developmental experience. Despite efforts to digitize education, we are still years away from a truly "new, IT-enabled agora" where multiple stakeholders in management research can virtually meet, share knowledge, and create new insights.

It's disheartening to note that much of the UK research on the relevance of management research to practice, particularly from the British Academy of Management in the early 2000s, highlighted the need for more practitioner-relevant research. Yet, since then, private sector funding for UK business schools has continued to decline. This trend is troubling, especially if we are encouraging students to pursue more evidence-based research, as advocated by Rousseau and McCarthy (2007).

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