Balancing the triple-helix

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How can we balance the proprietary interests of individual organisations, the international public interests of academics and the national public interests of the state in the development of knowledge of management and business?

In the recent presidential address of the Academy of Management, Jean Bartunek talks about the dichotomy in the management world (Bartunek, 2003). As Bartunek sees it, the division of theory and practice generates conflict, and from that conflict the creation of new knowledge occurs. The question should then be asked, how is it possible to balance the various elements, often in conflict with one another, that make up the world of management and business research? One such element is the individual academic, who is interested in furthering the public knowledge in the field, possibly to gain recognition or promotion. Organisations also play a part, as research outputs are consumed and put to use to improve business performance. Research generation is not limited to academia, as in-house and consultancy based research occurs. In addition, the government has a hand in all of this, attempting to ensure policy goals are met through stewardship of the nation’s research resources.

An important issue in this triple-helix of academia, business and state is that of research relevance. A common discussion point is that the research generated by academia is often not directly useful by practitioners. Starkey & Madan (2001) offer three points to note. These are that current research does not focus on topics of relevance for managers; the results from the research cannot be directly used in a managerial role; and that practitioners lack an awareness of these results. Davenport & Markus (1999) provide some possible solutions of these problems that are aimed at the information systems (IS) discipline, but are in many cases more widely applicable. They suggest that the current structure of research in IS is limited in that it cannot produce relevant results because of the rapidly changing environment of the information technology industry. Davenport & Markus (1999) go on to say that a solution to this problem might be to emulate the research structure of law and medicine, whereby those who read the academic literature most often are practicing. A further recommendation is to base promotion for academics on a wider range of published material, rather than through the traditional academic outlets. This might generate an increased flow of relevant information to the practicing manager in a format that is readable. Hitt (1998) gives a similar view of traditional management research in that business executives can be reached if the popular press such as the Harvard Business Review is used for dissemination.

The balance between academia and industry can be difficult to achieve without a guiding light. Interaction between academia and the business community is often set up by the state. In a report on harnessing excellence in this country by the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ, 2002), the current government's strategy for research is outlined, with the implementation consisting of Centres of Research Excellence. The report gives particular attention for the need for “Model B” centres, which includes world-class research, but “has a number of additional elements, including: lifting of private sector investment in R & D; networking between researchers and users; and improving the uptake and use of research findings.” (RSNZ, 2002, p. 1). “Model A” centres are characterised as being concentrated on the creation/discovery side of research. By ensuring that industry is part of the research process, as in “Model B”, the government is attempting more of a balance between pure research and that of the more applied nature. One vision for New Zealand's excellence in research and innovation is to “encourage tertiary education institutions to work collaboratively with each other and also develop relationships and linkages with other research organisations, enterprises and other end users.” (RSNZ, 2002, p. 3). The whole concept of linking and collaboration between those in academia and business demonstrates how the state can be instrumental in fostering a particular type of research model to achieve economic and social development.

Starkey & Madan (2001) refer to two research modes, Mode 1 and Mode 2. “Model A” and “Model B” described above can be loosely assigned to Mode 1 and Mode 2 respectively. The authors point to the work done by Gibbons et al. (1994, cited in Starkey & Madan, 2001) that a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 is developing that has resulted in a blurring of distinctions between private and public knowledge development. Knowledge networks are appearing that implement linkages between institutions across the sectors that result in the aligning of theory with practice, therefore aligning the needs of those who do research and those who make use of it in practice (Starkey & Madan, 2001). By involving often opposite sides of the management world together, the creativity mentioned in the opening paragraph can be realised by a cooperative research strategy. The academic will learn of problems that exist for managers and can focus on these, while the manager is made aware of a world of knowledge that perhaps previously they were unaware of or unable to utilise.

Within the management discipline, or any other discipline, individual goals can override the ability for research as a whole to be all that it should be. No one component of the triple helix of academia, business and state should be dominant or lacking in the goal of creating a balanced research community. Academics should have a link to business to enable increased relevance in their work. Business should cooperate with academia to solve management problems by generating practicable theory, while the state has the opportunity to provide the glue to make the balancing act successful.

References

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