The ‘knowing-doing’ gap: academic/practitioner engagement in strategic management

Authors:

Dr Tim Hughes,
Reader in Applied Marketing,
Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus,
Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY UK. England.
E mail: tim.hughes@uwe.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)117 328 3400

Professor Nicholas O’Regan,
Professor of Strategic Management
Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus,
Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY UK. England.
E mail: nicholas.O’regan@uwe.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)117 328 3735

David Wornham,
Director of Business Development,
Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus,
Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY UK. England.
E mail: david.wornham@uwe.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)117 328 3459
Biographical notes

Dr Tim Hughes is Reader in Applied Marketing at Bristol Business School. Previously he worked for 17 years within large companies in senior management positions and ran his own consultancy for 7 years. He has published in journals such as European Journal of Marketing and Journal of Marketing Management. The current focus of his research is on academic/practitioner knowledge exchange across the range of management disciplines.

Professor Nicholas O’Regan is Professor of Strategy/Enterprise and Innovation at Bristol Business School. His research interests include the organisational culture, leadership and the strategic planning processes of small and medium sized organisations. He has published widely in journals such as Technovation, the International Small Business Journal and the Journal of General Management.

David Worham is Business Development Director at Bristol Business School and lecturer in strategic management and consultancy. He was previously a strategy consultant, working for, amongst others, PA consulting Group. He has published in the area of corporate responsibility and developed a number of published case studies in the strategy and public policy field.
Abstract

This study examines the business-academia relationship in the use of strategic management concepts and techniques – an area that is vastly under researched. The methodology involved a series of semi-structured interviews with practitioners, academic and consultants. The results indicate that a range of well-established iconic frameworks that practitioners use dominates strategy. The transfer of new strategy approaches can only be achieved once practitioners acknowledge the credibility of academia in dealing with practitioner related issues. This has implications for academics, where publication in high-ranking journals has dominated research to date. Ideas are put forward to for improving academic/practitioner engagement. These relate to motivation, gaining credibility, and creating collaborative communities. Collaboration is considered the perspectives of context, content and processes. The context relates to the academic understanding the operating environment that the firm is in. The content refers to the programme of research or action areas selected as part of the collaboration framework. Finally, the process refers to how the collaboration is handled – its organization and coordination, as well as motivation and incentives.
The ‘knowing-doing’ gap: academic/practitioner engagement in strategic management

Introduction

Universities and business schools, cognisant of the increasing value of knowledge, have sought to increase their degree of ‘business inter-facing’ to include greater curriculum relevance to practitioner. At the same time, businesses are increasingly looking to universities as a source of innovation and competitive advantage, as they seek to address the competitive pressures inherent in their operating environment. Such pressures include; reducing product life cycles and greater product and process innovations.

While one might expect a high degree of mutual interdependence, the literature is highly critical of the business-academia relationship, stressing that the failure to capitalize on this relationship will result ultimately in corporate and economic decline. However, the relationship is not as straightforward as one might imagine. For a start, the literature suggests that much of the teaching and research carried out in universities is irrelevant to the needs to business. Mintzberg argues that Business Schools and in particular MBA courses tend to reduce strategic management to a toolkit of analytical techniques that often fail to achieve relevance for the organisation. Others have also raised concerns albeit with less dramatic intonations where they refer to a widening gap between theory and practice. The gap is seen in terms of a failure to effectively transfer knowledge, with blame being apportioned between business and academia in varying degrees. Kuratko summarises the task ahead as one to reduce the degree of ‘academia vs. business incongruence’. Davenport et al state that “most
business schools ... have not been very effective in the creation of useful business ideas ... a lot of business ideas are explored in business school research, but for the most part, they are created elsewhere". This is consistent with the work of Lave and Wenger that most organizational learning actually takes place ‘on the job’.

This paper focuses on the exchange of knowledge between academia and business which Pfeffer and Sutton term the ‘knowing-doing gap’. It aims to identify means by which the degree of ‘academia vs. business congruence’ can be enhanced to effectively meet the needs of the business-operating environment

**Literature review**

**Overview of academic relevance in the business and management field**

There seems to be a widening gap between academia and practice in the business and management field. Bennis and O’Toole’s influential paper in the Harvard Business Review argues that business schools have adopted an inappropriate model of academic excellence, measuring themselves solely by the rigour of their scientific research, and becoming less and less relevant to practitioners. This growing divide has been a subject of concern for a number of years and according to Rynes et al. ‘the gap between science and practice is so pervasive that some have despaired of it ever being narrowed’. The broad argument is as follows. Because of the need to get academic status, business schools have become too focussed on analytics and problem finding rather than problem solving and implementation. The subject of management is taught as a science rather than as rooted in action and this has led to a separation from the management profession.
This divergence is a fundamental problem for a field that fits well into a Mode 2 approach to knowledge production. In Mode 2 research discovery, application and use are closely integrated. Those that apply knowledge are legitimate stakeholders and business schools may lose their legitimacy in knowledge generation if their research is seen as irrelevant. However, there has been little research into the ways in which academics and practitioners do actually engage with each other in the business and management disciplines.

**The knowing-doing gap in strategic management**

Fundamentally the worlds of academia and practice are underpinned by very different basic assumptions and motivations, according to Shrivastava and Mitroff. Pfeffer and Sutton refer to the lack of congruence between strategic management research conducted by academics and that used by practitioners as a ‘knowing-doing gap’. They contend that this is largely a failing on the part of universities and suggest that ‘for scientifically developed organizational theories to be interesting, understandable and worth implementing they must both question and be based on the assumptions that managers make in practical decision making situations’. A later study by Rynes et al. also stressed the lack of relevance to practitioner utility as the principal obstacle to greater academic-business congruence. Arguably this is as a result of the academic community becoming increasingly specialised in its research orientation and only valuing studies that are highly rigorous without any regard to their overall relevance.
As a first step, Friga et al suggest that universities need to acknowledge that knowledge creation is not their monopoly and that ‘…knowledge creation takes place not only in ivory towers, but also in corporate boardrooms’. This point is reinforced by Starkey et al. who acknowledge the knowledge creation role of practitioners and caution that academia needs to adjust to the modern operating environment by developing new models of operation.

**Time for change?**

There are factors on both sides that can be seen to provide good reasons for academics and practitioners to work more closely together. First, firms need to achieve greater competitiveness in the face of increasing competition and more demanding consumers and academia provides a potential source of ideas and innovation. Second, universities are facing changing demands from stakeholders and increasingly are becoming dependant on private sector funding. Hence universities are seeking to become more ‘business facing’. However, few practitioners read studies on strategic management published in the principal high ranking strategic management journals and instead largely focus on a small number of high profile non-academic authors in the trade journals and in best selling books. One reason for this may be that the majority of articles in academic journals are widely considered to be impenetrable, according to Gore: “Have you ever tried to read a research study or academic journal? They’re overwritten, irrelevant, convoluted, and have poor sentence structure”.
From a strategic management perspective, the literature suggests that much of the impetus for change must be driven by academia. Currently practitioners largely ignore the outputs of strategy research for the following reasons. First, strategy research outputs are rarely readily transferable to the practitioner community. To date research has tended to focus on knowledge management rather than the impact of knowledge on organisational performance.27 Second, most strategy research is about know what rather than know how.28 Third, there is an over reliance on theory to the virtual exclusion of practitioner utility.29 This point is stressed by Peters in his distinctive phraseology where he refers to the output of the University education system as ‘wonderful stuff – but its theory. If there’s one thing that’s damn sure, it’s that the real world of business, particularly in today’s environment, isn’t about theory’.30 This leads to a questioning of how academia can reclaim the academia- practitioner strategy agenda.

One way forward is to place a greater emphasis on micro-level strategizing, which is both activity based and outcome related.31 This points to a shift in emphasis from the macro strategizing that dominates strategic thinking and the literature to date. It is pertinent to note that this is already happening as research moves from an organisational focus to become more people and strategist orientated, a trend that is mirrored by the extant research.32

The majority of studies and reports support the concept of collaboration between academia and practitioners as the way forward. For example, the Lambert Review (2003) on Business- University Collaboration suggested that Universities should get better at
identifying their areas of competitive strength in research while business should learn how to exploit the innovative ideas that emanate from the University sector. Mohrman et al argue that the usefulness of research comes from collaborative, contextual approaches to its design and interpretation, and suggest that ‘perceived usefulness is related to the establishment of interpretive forums where researcher and practitioner thought-worlds are joined’. This means that knowledge can and should be co-produced between the academic and practitioner communities in joint research collaborations.

**Narrowing the Gap**

However, as Starkey and Madan point out that there are currently no clear models of collaborative research and its dissemination. They contend that the generation of more relevant research requires managers and organizations to be more closely involved in the framing of the research and its active dissemination. This begs the question of what is relevant? Wilson suggests that an appropriate underpinning for the concept of relevance is the intention, ‘in general to give or add information about what is a matter of standing or current interest or concern’. Contingency factors such as education, experiences and expertise influence relevance and it needs to be considered in the context of such variables. Therefore, the transference of knowledge from universities to firms must consider the characteristics of the individual, the firm, the dynamics of what is taking place in the organisation as well as the organisational context.

As a practical measure, Starkey and Madan propose a number of activities to encourage greater knowledge exchange ranging from research forums and networks to incentives
and academic impact assessment. Van de Ven and Johnson also consider ways in which the gap between theory and practice can be addressed and conclude that engaged scholarship based on collaborative inquiry between academics and practitioners is the principal mechanism to bridge the gap. They contend that ‘by leveraging their distinct competencies, groups composed of researchers and practitioners have the potential to ground and understand complex problems in ways that are more penetrating and insightful than they would be were either scholars or practitioners to study them alone’. This can benefit managers as well as academics. Rousseau refers to a movement towards evidence-based management that involves “…translating principles based on best evidence into organizational practices. Through evidence-based management, practicing managers develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science and organizational research–part of the zeitgeist moving professional decisions away from personal preference and unsystematic experience toward those based on the best available scientific evidence”.39

In the case of strategic management, business strategists perform a vital role in the strategic decision-making. Rosenweig suggests that ‘rather than succumb to the hyperbole and false promises found in so much management writing, business strategists would do far better to improve their powers of critical thinking’. Arguably, business strategists need to have a greater awareness of the needs of the various stakeholders in the organisation and on the ways by which those needs can be met or addressed. In addition, management needs to be able to think, formulate and deploy strategy in a holistic manner rather than on a functional basis. In addition, Porter contends that many companies fail to
distinguish between operational effectiveness and strategy as they are increasingly driven by conditions emanating from a volatile operating environment.42

Bennis and O’Toole encapsulate the previous literature by stating that ‘things won’t improve until professors see that they have as much responsibility for educating professionals to make practical decisions as they do for advancing the state of scientific knowledge’.43 However, it could be argued that it is easy to reach this contention, but quite another matter to engage practitioners in in-depth research of a prolonged duration. It is our contention that motivating both practitioners and academics to get involved is the key issue in achieving collaborative research.

**Research questions**

If the strategic management discipline is to overcome the ‘knowing-doing’ gap, its theory needs to be related more closely to the situations in which managers operate. The literature suggests that collaborative enquiry needs to be emphasised and this requires the active involvement of practitioners in framing the research and providing a perspective on the context in which strategy is implemented. However, as previously discussed, there is a knowledge gap relating to understanding how academics and practitioners can engage with each other most effectively. This exploratory research addresses the following questions:

*RQ1 How is strategic management theory applied in practice?*

*RQ2 What is the role of universities and other organisations in transferring strategic management knowledge to practice?*
RQ3 How is the transfer of strategic management knowledge impacted by the different contexts of practice?

Data and methods

We took a critical realist approach to the research using semi-structured interviews that allowed us to probe the respondents’ answers in some depth.\(^4^4\) From the critical realist point of view there is a real world to discover, but it is only imperfectly understandable. This approach accepts that the social context is an important element of the world and consists of individual and shared ideas in peoples’ minds.\(^4^5\) Given that the application of strategic management knowledge occurs in complex social contexts we believe that critical realism is particularly applicable in this case. In-depth interviews are considered to be appropriate for theory building within this paradigm.\(^4^6\) The interviewees were chosen in order to get a balance of views from different perspectives on the academic/practitioner divide in strategic management. They came from three groups: academics, practitioners and experts. The interviewees are detailed anonymously in Appendix 1. The approach of selecting interviewees on the basis of their credibility and expertise in the area of research is well established. It stresses the validity of the research through getting close access to the phenomenon under study. This closeness together with the richness of data that can be derived from in-depth approaches makes sense in studying an applied domain.\(^4^7\) The emphasis in selecting interviewees related to identifying those who might be expected to have an informed perspective on the subject. As detailed in Appendix 1 we interviewed more practitioners than academics. In this the authors were mindful of their own closeness to the subject matter as members of the
academic community and therefore put an emphasis on gaining insights from practitioners. Where academics were interviewed it was because they had particular perspectives stemming from having specific roles relating to practice.

In conducting this type of research it is vital to put processes and protocols in place to ensure that the research can be demonstrated to be dependable and confirmable. This requires careful control of the way the data is collected, coded, sorted and analysed. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that common areas were covered, while also allowing interviewees to go into as much depth as necessary in areas of particular interest. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then coded using Nvivo software. In analysing the qualitative data produced from this process the authors’ collective experience of the politics of both practice and academia was found to be invaluable in assessing the significance of what was said by the interviewees.

Analysis

How is strategic management theory applied in practice?

Strategy application is dominated by a range of well-established iconic frameworks. They are attractive precisely because they are well known given the critical need to communicate strategies widely throughout an organisation from the top management to shop floor levels. Examples include SWOT analysis, PEST analysis, Resource based view [RBV] and Porter’s Five Forces analysis. Therefore, whilst it may be tempting to dismiss such tools as unsophisticated they have a wide currency amongst practitioners:
‘On the basis that we need to communicate at shop floor level as well as senior management we will often use simple, iconic frameworks and models which can be understood by all’ Pra 1.

‘over the past few years firms have started to think more seriously about strategic planning and knowledge creation. The theories are not strongly embedded – they have picked up some of the terms and are starting to use them’ Exp 3.

Strategic decisions are seen as inherently risky and so decision-makers looking to offset risk may sensibly avoid new approaches. Organisations tend therefore to look for, and believe in, ‘magic bullets’. This is exemplified by another respondent talking about the use of strategic tools and techniques as:

‘giving the management hooks on which they can hang their ideas and so in that sense it is very useful, but practitioners want silver bullets and want to avoid complexity at all costs’ Exp 1.

Few organisations are able to refer to novel and significant strategy techniques and approaches that have recently been introduced:

‘I can’t actually think of any particularly exciting and novel addition to the canon of strategy techniques in recent times’ Pra3.

Theorists and practitioners alike subscribe to the observation that many of the pronouncements about strategy tend to focus on the ‘obvious’. This reflects the
observation that business is focused on the here-and-now and the stability of their core business or activity:

‘We use a variety of simple frameworks – this is just a way to organise the information so that one can see the big picture – this gives the ability to analyse data as otherwise there is so much information out there that on its own doesn’t mean a great deal but when considered in the big picture they do’ Pra 2.

‘In my experience even relatively senior managers are not averse to the use of incredibly common strategy templates…if it helps they’ll use them’ Pra 3.

There appears to be a lack of willingness also to tamper too often with strategic planning mechanisms in order to adapt to new, but potentially ephemeral, techniques. In addition overlaying too many strategy approaches can be seen to introduce unnecessary complexity into organisations where strategic imperatives need to be simple. Implicit sharing of strategy theory and application may also be a result of the considerable lack of time managers have for such activity, reflected in a ‘coping’ rather than planning environment. Novel techniques and approaches may be used on a more ad hoc basis within specific projects. There is surprisingly little bashfulness about using strategy icons or borrowing, in an undisguised fashion, ideas from applied journals. The emphasis is on utilizing ‘anything which will help’ and there is little resistance, even at top managerial levels, to the application of commonplace strategic theories. Application of strategic thinking derived from academia tends to be hit or miss. It is difficult to predict which methodology will appeal:
'I pick and mix from a wide array of available strategy techniques, depending on my purpose, audience and level of sophistication required’ Pra 3.

There is a consensus that whatever approach or framework is utilised it must have commitment from the top and be used over a period of time: this also means that the approach or paradigm must be carefully positioned at a strategic or tactical level as appropriate. Care must be taken also to ensure that the technique does not dominate the required, underlying thinking / application process:

‘I suppose, having been a consultant before taking up this management role, I am sensitive to the possibility that strategy techniques can be merely superficially ‘grafted’ onto an organisation’s own thinking’ Pra 3.

*What is the role of universities and other organisations in transferring strategic management knowledge to practice?*

The main role of universities in strategic management seems to be seen as being in the education of large numbers of people in basic strategy concepts. This provides a willing and able audience for participation in strategic development programmes within organisations, the audience having been, to some extent, pre-exposed to the canon of strategy practice. This is important where employees are asked to fully understand, believe in and apply a particular programme or concept. The head of an employer’s representative body commented:

‘What is taught in business schools – the more theoretical side of what universities are doing and the studying of cases that have been drawn from the practical side clearly
gives an understanding to managers that might be drawn from a narrower field. Managers benefit from what universities have to offer as they look at the broader picture. This is invaluable in the longer term as it adds to the manager’s outlook particularly if they are based in a small company’ Exp 2.

‘The assumption is that, as we train our own managers in strategy and expose many of our people to external courses, containing a strategy element, that they will at least grasp the basics when we talk to them about our plans’ Pra 1.

Meanwhile the issue is not necessarily between academic / consultant / practitioner when it comes to the application of paradigms and approaches but more a question of how the strategy specialist in an organisation communicates to non-specialists in their own organisation. We found a number of instances where this has not been achieved and where strategic practice is confined to the CEO and a conclave of surrounding ‘MBAs’.

‘I have seen situations where strategy is seen really to be the preserve of a cartel of senior managers whereas it is vital that strategy, in fact, gets down to operating and dispersed levels of a firm’ Pra 4.

‘Strategy is seen as a senior management role and entirely separate from the day to day operations. It is often formulated on an away day or in ‘secret-type’ meetings, and seldom involves lower or middle staffing levels. When it arrives it is like an edict ....... here is our strategy and here are our targets. Middle management interprets in it’s own way and this gets reinterpreted as it cascades down the hierarchy. As a result, operational people tend to have a decontextualised view of strategy resulting in probably the biggest source of strategy failure’. Exp 1.
Quite a lot of strategy approaches are felt to be transmitted tacitly between practitioners rather than through a formal conduit between academia and commercial organisations. Practitioners may well use pre-existing networks, such as MBA alumni, to facilitate this. Full appreciation needs to be given to the implicit and pragmatic transfer of approaches to strategy between practitioners themselves. For example:

‘Few small business managers read academic journals – perhaps when it filters down through trade publications – maybe. Most firms are much too busy to bother with what they see as high level theory and are more content to attend trade conferences and exchange information between themselves’ Exp 3.

‘I rely on quite a diverse range of sources and particularly people who I know are in touch with the subject’ Pra 5.

The important point is that strategy ideas, emanating from academia, permeate thinking rather than being applied ‘to the letter’. Practitioners have limited time to search for information on potential strategy applications. Learned journals are likely to be ignored altogether by practitioners in favour of conferences, with the latter often needing to be permeated by an industry-specific focus. Academic journals are often seen as using overly complex language to describe relatively simple strategic ideas:

‘Academics tend to write for themselves in arcane journals and even if an MD is given one, he/she would not want to read past the first page. The articles are often shown to demonstrate what the academic knows rather than what is useful to someone doing the job’ Exp 1.
I really don’t see much evidence of people in business referring to peer-reviewed journals etc.. They are much more likely to pick up the Harvard Business Review or McKinsey quarterly’ Aca2.

Another point made is that firms would contact and liaise more with academia if they had a better understanding on what is available from universities:

‘Business would rarely go to a business school – it would be very low down in their list. Of course, business does not know that you are interested in doing real projects – you need to tell them that you are interested in dealing with real problems’ Exp 2.

The approach or theory being developed must be seen as highly relevant by the client organisation, particularly in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Academic strategists, invited into the company / organisation will tend to have significant industry knowledge rather than simply theoretical knowledge. Academics in the strategy field will need to have had industry experience to add credibility to what they offer to client organisations. The academic’s ability to apply strategy techniques / paradigms is seen to require an understanding of the company or industry context. For this reason companies often prefer commercial consultants. Consultants are seen as an effective bridge in terms of translating academic knowledge about strategy into business language. For example, one organisation seeking advice on competitor intelligence gathering saw the consultant as a far more credible source of instruction and advice than an academic.
‘Consultants are a useful conduit – they have a skill to do that [blending a bit of theory and a bit of practitioners] they are a natural conduit. This is an indirect link with business per se’ Exp 2.

Others appear to use a number of sources for advice:

‘We have specific links to certain people in business schools and consultancies and tend to bear on their knowledge and contribution’ Pra 1.

At the same time, reservations exist as to whether the commercial consultant faithfully interprets academic findings and outputs. Consultant are seen in some quarters as taking a superficial approach when applying techniques and paradigms sourced from academia:

‘Years ago, smaller firms would get in a consultant but more are now finding that it is not the most appropriate mechanism to use. We want to go a step beyond’ Pra 2.

‘Some businesses take the route of consultants but there are also problems with this approach as well as the expense involved. They like to impart the result but they don’t really like to impart the true knowledge – of course at the end of the day that is their competitive advantage’ Pra 2.

Consultants clearly have greater credibility with clients than a lot of academics, at the same time I have seen a number of them misinterpret empirical data and theory coming from business academia in the strategy area’ Aca 2.

One distinction between academia and consultancy is that, by definition, academia will tend to put its thinking about strategy into the public domain whilst consultants may well
attach intellectual property constraints to strategic ideas and approaches which are internally generated and commercially viable. A number of organisations source strategic information from specific consultancies on a preferential / membership basis. Leading consultancies tend to be extremely selective about sourcing strategy ‘technologies’ from academia in the first place, preferring to generate applied research [amongst client groups] themselves. However, smaller consultants’ practice may differ sharply with strong emphasis on taking ideas from academia. One interviewee did cite the dangers attached to being non-conversant with a new approach or methodology, implying that it is necessary to have links to the sources of the latest thinking.

‘We had a situation in which a client had sourced a new strategy paradigm of which we were unaware: what followed was a very quick catch-up on that approach in order to get up to speed with our client’ Pra 3.

It is difficult to identify the precise nature of more direct routes for knowledge exchange between academia and practitioners. Our interviewees presented an opaque picture with a lack of clarity as to how organisations might or should access strategy thinking from within academia. This also extends to some uncertainty about what industry ‘needs’ and, from the point of view of the academic, what should be provided to client organisations. Universities are seen as becoming more commercial generally and, as part of this, making additional efforts to reach out to organisation. This may apply more in areas such as technology rather than strategy though. University – business links have some way to go in order to be considered effective. Communication between academia and organisations
may also be hindered by the different cultural and, indeed, contractual environments inhabited by both. One respondent stated that:

‘Practitioners often see academic as peddling the same material over and over to a variety of different companies regarding of what the companies do or what they need’ Exp 3.

Another stated that many practitioners see academia as:

‘sitting in musty old rooms with woven blazers’

However he conceded that:

‘MDs and CEOs tend to underestimate what they can learn from academics and overestimate what they know’ Exp 1.

Another saw academics as:

‘a little bit remote and most firms that I know do not have contact with universities. I personally have kept involved but this is certainly not the norm. If you mention to a company why not contact a university they will give you a bewildered look’ Pra 2.

Where organisations do look to universities they tend to look to the most esteemed sources of strategic knowledge, the leading business schools, which have the necessary source credibility.

How is the transfer of strategic management knowledge impacted by the different contexts of practice?
A ‘one size fits all’ approach to strategy is clearly inappropriate when the context in which strategy is implemented is ignored. For example, the public sector provides a special instance when it comes to the transfer of strategy practice and there has been little attempt to significantly mould strategy techniques for public sector use. A general observation from our research is that strategy frameworks need to be better segmented to suit the sector, the size of organisation and the culture in which the organisation operates.

In the public sector the key to this segmentation may be an appreciation that whereas the private sector is more ‘content-focused’ [strategy analysis] the public sector is more process-focused [strategic change]. Whilst strategy process techniques may be more to the fore in the public sector there is a general question as to the relevance of that substantive aspect of strategy theory that deals with the area from a sociological perspective, ‘actor theory’ for example. Individual public sector organisations often have limited first-line use for major strategic techniques as they see themselves merely implementing and executing strategies that have largely been constructed at the centre:

‘Central government policy units do make an attempt to hand down useful strategy tools and methodologies: the problem is that many of them are unsuitable both because they are simply derived from private sector practice and are therefore not fit-for-purpose and, where we are more tactically rather than strategically focussed, often inappropriate’ Pra 5.
There may be industry differences too. Consultants attempting to understand differential strategic value within the banking industry, for example, may develop their own business modelling techniques that differ markedly from traditional strategy practice techniques:

‘Even in a relatively sophisticated area business academic theory may not be much help with consultancies really needing to develop their own data and research’ Aca 3.

Company size is also important. The assumption is that people from smaller companies will benefit more from exposure to strategy from academia than those from larger companies who are likely to be exposed to relevant approaches through a larger pool of colleagues and connections.

‘It is difficult getting our hands on the knowledge available from external sources – and of course, some smaller firms have difficulties knowing if they need new knowledge and what type of knowledge that might be’ Pra 2.

‘In smaller firms, there is a lack of time and resources to become involved in a relationship that they may not be entirely sure will yield benefits’ Exp 3.

Discussion and implications

Credibility

A theme that emerges from our interviews is of the importance of the credibility of the academic if he or she is to be effective in engaging with practice. While credibility relating to the prestige of an academic institution can be a relevant factor, of equal importance is the need for an understanding of the context for implementation. This is at the heart of the ‘knowing-doing’ gap. The concerns raised by Bennis and O’Toole (2005)
would seem to be particularly relevant here. If there is little exchange going on between the academic and practitioners communities, how are academics meant to keep in touch with the reality of business practice? Even academics with practical experience are likely to lose credibility pretty quickly from a lack of field exposure. With regard to this, Strategic Management, as a discipline, has particular challenges compared with other disciplines such as Accountancy or Human Resources that have a strong functional presence in most organisations and are represented by powerful professional bodies. Strategic management is by definition organisation-wide and will require academic/practitioner engagement at the highest level. Younger or less experienced academics may lack the experience to operate effectively at this level, but how are they to develop this experience and expertise?

Re-gaining credibility requires academics to put a greater emphasis on finding opportunities to work in the context of practice. For those with relevant practical experience this perhaps means seeking out consultancy work or other schemes, such as knowledge transfer partnerships to ensure ongoing and up to date contact with strategic management in the real world. These also may provide opportunities for experienced academics to involve less experienced colleagues in these kinds of projects, as a way of building experience and credibility. Alternatively, the less experienced academic may gain credibility through seeking placement opportunities with industry and other organisations. In either case universities will need to invest in the development of less experienced academics by allowing sabbaticals or regular time off from teaching to conduct this type of work. An increased priority on working in context on the side of
academics needs to be matched by a willingness of practitioners to involve academics more closely. Our research suggests that this may be very dependent on the attitude of practitioners to the world of academia. Broadly practitioners seem to fall into three groups: those who actively seek out links with academia; those who are well disposed to academia, but do not seek contact and those who are negative towards any involvement. It would be informative to carry out further research in order to build up a clearer picture of these attitude groups so that academics could identify where the best opportunities for cooperation exist.

Motivation

The importance of attitude towards academic/practitioner engagement is also apparent on the academic side. There appear to be a number of strategic management academics that actively seek out contact with practice while many others do not. This raises the question of motivation and the reward criteria in academic life. In the UK the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and other institutional mechanisms for directing funds for research emphasise publication in a limited number of high ranking academic journals. In turn individual universities respond to this through their recruitment and promotion policies designed to optimise their research ranking as measured mainly through academic publication and research grants awarded. Academic publishing of research fulfils the need to maintain academic rigour through the peer review process, but it does little to stimulate discussion or testing of the arguments or implications in the wider context. Our research confirms the findings of others that academic journals are not read by the practitioner community because of their format, the language employed and
the lack of relevance of the subject matter to their immediate needs. The use of narrow measures of academic endeavour, designed to encourage academic rigour does little to motivate academics to relate to issues that are considered important to the world of practice and little to encourage knowledge dissemination and debate outside the academic community.

At the level of institutions (universities, business schools, funding bodies) new metrics of academic excellence could be developed in order to encourage more academics to pursue activities relating to stimulating debate and dissemination outside purely the academic community. At the level of individual academics this could usefully start with the process of setting the agenda for research. How far is the subject matter of concern or importance to the wider community? A move to placing greater emphasis on understanding the contexts in which theory is implemented also has implications for the type of research that is conducted. Developing understanding in context requires a move from the dominance of hard science implicit in positivism to a more pluralistic view of different research approaches incorporating more inductive and interpretive methods such as case studies, action research and grounded methods. This does not necessarily have to be at the expense of academic rigour. The quality of research can be enhanced by practitioner participation rather than harmed by it. Stepping further outside the academic community in developing knowledge that is of mutual value requires all parties to be involved in a social process pertaining to knowledge development. Therefore it is useful to consider how more inter community collaboration could be encouraged.
Creating collaborative communities

The ‘knowing-doing’ gap and generally poor levels of engagement between academics and practitioners highlighted in our research suggests that the development of relationships between academics and practitioners do not in the main emerge automatically. Collaboration needs to be proactively developed and managed. This raises questions about ways in which business schools, subject schools and individual academics define which communities they serve and how they reach out to those communities. At the level of the business school and the university there is a requirement to understand the knowledge needs of its communities and to provide frameworks for collaboration, particularly identifying cross-disciplinary opportunities leveraging the wide knowledge base that exists in the university environment. A useful starting point would be to consider the content of the collaboration and this in turn can be seen to relate to process of setting the agenda for research. In this it would seem to be very important for academic and practitioner communities to develop joint agendas in order to provide value to both sides. Often the academic needs to be proactive in this asking the fundamental question about how far the subject matter is of concern or importance to the wider community, as mentioned in the previous section. In addition there are a number of factors relating to effective engagement that we broadly define as relating to the process rather than the content. Practitioners point to lack of accessibility to information as being a major barrier to knowledge exchange. This takes a number of forms: academic articles are written in a language that is difficult for practitioners to understand and getting hold of relevant articles is problematical. Therefore there is a need for a process of translation, synthesis, interpretation and delivery if academic research is to be more effectively
shared outside the academic community. One suggestion emerging from our research is that the academic can provide a valuable knowledge broking role. This is more than teaching and research, requiring institutions to understand the knowledge needs of its communities and to support academics in serving the needs on an ongoing basis. This again relates back to the role that the higher educational institution plays within the community. Our research suggests that more firms would contact and liaise with academia if they had a better understanding on what is available from universities and also if they believed that universities could relate to their “real world” problems.

Conclusions

The practice of strategic management is, perhaps, less well defined compared to other business disciplines. This is reflected in the diversity of approaches with respect to practitioners’ adoption of strategy theory and accompanying tools and frameworks. In addition, the practice of strategic management can be further complicated by the choice of whether to focus on the ‘what’ [content] and/or on the ‘how’ [process], the former the province of industrial economists and traditional strategists, the latter falling into the domain of more general management and organisation theory. For these reasons transfer of knowledge from business academia to practitioners, sometimes via intermediaries such as consultants, is more generally characterised by serendipity.

There is little evidence that startling new developments in thinking about strategy are guiding organisational practice, indeed organisations, for good reasons, seem to have absorbed standard, iconic strategy techniques and processes and may not, therefore, be
relying on academia for new insights. Furthermore industry knowledge may be more important than deep understanding of theories. Meanwhile individuals and organisations tend to look to practitioner-based publications, existing informal networks and tried and tested providers, both academics and consultants, for strategy updating. There is some evidence that organisations may prefer to look to intermediaries, such as consultants, who, on the whole, develop on-the-job strategy approaches based on practical observations.

Academics meanwhile need to take steps to ensure that they remain, or indeed become credible amongst strategy practitioners, are incentivised to do so, arrive at some sort of consensus on the best approach and position themselves much more robustly for collaboration within business communities. Collaboration can be considered from the following perspectives: context, content and processes. The context relates to the operating environment that the firm is in and the alignment of the firm’s goals and objective with that environment. This means that firms can adopt both formal and informal approaches to the demands of the operating environment by engaging in formal or informal business-academia collaboration. The content refers to the programme of research or action areas selected as part of the collaboration framework. Finally, the process refers to how the collaboration is handled – its organization and coordination, as well as motivation and incentives. Public funders of research can influence the process by insisting that a collaborative approach to research is mandatory. Consideration should also be given to the role of collaboration with intermediaries such as consultants.
The manager’s world is often one where incremental tactics are more important than ‘grand strategy’ and in which the practice of strategy is often seen to overlay a spurious rationality on a more chaotic reality, bringing into doubt the validity of an overly ‘scientific’ approach to strategic management. A good starting point for academics wishing to engage with practice might be to find ways in which to ‘translate’ relevant academic articles into practitioner related language.

**Appendix 1 Details of interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of years relevant experience</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of years relevant experience</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aca 1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Dean of internationally recognised management college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aca 2</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Head of university centre for regional competitiveness [research and consultancy], ex university dean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aca 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Senior lecturer, ex McKinsey consultant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Practitioners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of years relevant experience</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pra 1</td>
<td>15+</td>
<td>Strategic planning manager international engineering company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra 2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Chief Executive of engineering company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra 3</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Strategy Director, health service trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra 4</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>International Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra 5</td>
<td>25+</td>
<td>Strategy Director regional public service organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Experts & consultants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of years relevant experience</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp 1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp 2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Head of Employers Representative body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp 3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


