



IFSAM GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S POSITION STATEMENT ON MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

June 2, 2021

Background

In December 2020, the Financial Times (FT) launched a survey soliciting feedback from individual academics and deans on the list of 50 journals it uses to determine the research rank of business schools (known as the FT50 journal list), along with input on different ways of measuring the quality and impact of management research. As the IFSAM Executive Committee noted in its January 2021 statement (<https://www.ifsam.org/blog/2020/12/20/webinar-on-jan-29-2021/>), this triggered an asymmetric response across the world, in particular, among scholarly associations of management, as well as among journal editors.

Many in the scholarly community subsequently received emails from learned societies' presidents and journal editors asking them to complete the survey, with some encouraging them to denominate their particular journals as critical to the FT50 list.

The IFSAM Executive Committee was concerned with aspects of the survey, particularly with the section on identifying the valuable journals, and felt strongly that this procedure was asymmetrically reaching the field. The launching of the survey, and the various responses it generated, gave fresh impetus to the thorny issue of how best to judge the quality of management research and publications, something which has been a perennial issue for a protracted period of time.

As part of its response to addressing the issue, IFSAM decided to organize a series of webinars dedicated to examining various aspect of the evaluation of management research. Its central purpose was to give voice to representatives from many if not all of the major stakeholder groups involved in management research: presidents of scholarly associations of management, management journal editors, academic administrators, publishers (including the FT), governmental agencies and councils responsible for management research evaluation and funding, as well as management practitioners and consultants.

Drawing on the multiple insights generated across the five webinars that took place (all of which are available for viewing [here](#)), in what follows we present a synthesis of the current situation and we make a number of recommendations designed to give a renewed impetus to engaged, decent scholarship.

Analysis of the Situation

Concerns were expressed about the global diffusion beyond mainstream management schools, of a tenure system whose research dimension is solely based on journal publications, and, even more narrowly, on a prescribed set of ‘elite’ journals. Contributors highlighted that when only a select few journals are considered ‘top tier’ and the process for selecting those journals is dominated by editors and scholars working within the mainstream schools, a whole raft of scholars are excluded, and their scholarly contributions ignored. It was noted that this also reduces diversity in research and publication genres or types in many different ways including, for example: a) the disregarding of books, which though allowing for a more holistic and detailed treatment of an issue, become almost completely ignored (or considered worthless) in most tenure processes; b) the neglect of important journals with substantial regional impact which tend to be overlooked in dominant English oriented indexes; and c) the lack of recognition in research evaluation of good research-based textbooks. Such textbooks constitute research in enough themselves given that they entail structuring, sometimes in very creative ways, a synthesis of extant theories and empirical findings. They can also play a central role in the translation of research for teaching and therefore can have a fundamental influence on what students and participants in management programs might later bring to practice.

Contributors argued that much management knowledge had become homogenized and formulaic with researchers compelled to craft their work to conform to a particular style and format. This was considered necessary to get consideration at many of the prestigious journals and to have a chance of surviving the review process and making it through to publication.

With this tenure and attendant research model being adopted internationally, as has become particularly apparent over the last 20 years in Europe and in Asia (particularly in China), as well as in Latin America, contributors argued that we have witnessed a reduction in the type and diversity of inquiry taking place worldwide. The individual and organizational incentive to conduct valuable research that doesn’t fit into the Western scientific paradigm vanishes if it cannot be published in the journals that are considered ‘worthy’ of publishing in for hiring (for PhD students) and for retention and promotion.

Contributors highlighted that scholars from non-Western countries, or those focusing on particular research phenomena relating to, for example, gender, race, labour, sustainability, power, and critical management studies can often find themselves at the margins, a particular case in point being the recent University of Leicester decision to ‘disinvest’ from research in critical management studies and political economy.

Many panelists and attendees acknowledged during the webinars that the FT50 journal list is only one symptom of a much more insidious problem. The FT is not responsible for creating the current culture and incentive system in management schools that places overwhelming value on articles published in a select set of journals. The FT50 journal list was created to support the FT ranking of management schools, which itself was designed to help professionals select MBA programs. It is not suggesting that the FT50 journal list has had no impact. As it ranks MBA programs, and as MBA programs are a source of significant revenue for management schools, faculty members have

felt the pressure to publish (including through financial incentives in some cases) in FT50 listed journals, which management schools in turn use as recruitment materials.

Acknowledging the FT50 journal list as a symptom, rather than a cause, led to discussions in the webinars of the reasons, consequences, and potential fixes for the over-valuing of “top tier” journal publications at the cost of other forms of valuable academic output. USA management schools understanding from the 1950s of “management as a science paradigm” resulted in the emergence and dominance of positivism and quantitative methods as the preferred approach.¹ This became so deeply embedded in the way that management researchers think (to a large extent thanks to the diffusion and global adoption of the USA tenure model) that the preferred way by which management research should be evaluated became through measurement, ranking and counting.

Several participants in the webinar series asked for and could see real value in advocating for a scalable, global research evaluation system, one that also recognizes research publications and scholarship, other than just articles in a narrow list of journals. Others called for regional lists of publication outlets as a way of acknowledging contextual heterogeneity. Yet others called for a standardized, scalable set of measures for both managerial and broader societal impact of management research publications, as well as for an appreciation of the impact on teaching and management practice. Concomitantly, others expressed the concern that the establishing of standardized impact measures might result in an alternative form of gaming.

The conversations with EiCs and publishers made salient that ‘open access and open science’ labels might be associated with problematic behavior such as the undue acceleration of peer reviews, predatory journals, and a limited capacity for certain researchers and universities to pay for journal publication across the world. It also brought greater, renewed attention to the value creation and appropriation imbalance in the field between knowledge creators (academics) who contribute their work (as authors, reviewers, and editors) almost for free, and publishing houses which monetize this work making a substantial profit. Interestingly and paradoxically, several publishers call for learned societies to further discuss and raise their collective voice in shaping the open science paradigm.

Government agencies expressed their concerns with the increasing focus on journal publications as the overriding measurement of management research contributions. While many publishers and governmental agencies across the world have adhered to the DORA declaration, faculty evaluation practices and governmental funding to universities are still centered to a large extent on this particular format of management research publication. Concern was also expressed regarding the governmental (non-expert) intervention in choosing which research deserves to be funded.

Practitioners, including top managers, (economic and social) entrepreneurs and consultants joined representatives of scholarly societies, journal editors, publishers and foundations in expressing the concern that the interface between academia and practice is not fully working. Recent discussions including in the specialized press (FT) have raised attention again to the importance of addressing and articulating the managerial and societal relevance of management research. Several actors

¹ This view differs from the design science approach that Herbert Simon proposed. For a recent rediscovery and development of this approach in the context of public management, see Michael Barzelay (2019) *Public management as a design-oriented professional discipline*. Edward Elgar, London.

asked for greater accountability of management researchers given its substantial resource use. Many reiterated the importance of management research in providing the necessary empirical evidence to make evidence-based recommendations, whether to organisations or policy-making. Practitioners, particularly those with an academic background in management, also pointed to the need to reflect more deeply about the ‘service’ mission of management schools and faculties. Prompted by the fact that the debate on the interface between management academia and practice is not new, as reflected in the shaping role of the Ford Foundation report in 1955, some participants pointed out that it might be useful to revisit prior attempts at coping with the obstacles that management academia faced in being more responsive to managerial and societal concerns. Here Herbert Simon’s design science approach was once again invoked. Most practitioners, including policy makers, were unanimous in expressing the view that new knowledge should be addressing organizational, managerial and societal goals, and in this way should become more accountable to society.

Recommendations

Based on the above synthesis of the contributions from key stakeholders, and pursuant to article 2.2. of the current Federation’s statutes dedicated to ‘establishing and maintaining standards of competence in the domains of management research, education and practice’, the General Assembly of IFSAM calls for a renewed emphasis on engaged and decent scholarship. The General Assembly expresses the view that in pursuing engaged and decent scholarship we must redouble our efforts to:

- 1- Build a connected community of researchers who behave as scholars.
 - a. This might entail less pressure and thus a reduction in the quantity of outputs but an increase in overall scientific quality, creating some of the conditions necessary for interdisciplinary work essential for addressing and solving complex organizational and societal issues.²
 - b. Conduct scientific research which upholds the core values of ensuring due credit (to prior work), truth, and parsimony so scarce resources are not diverted to generating pseudo novelty through conceptual or theoretical relabeling.
- 2- Ensure fair remuneration and due recognition of all scholarly work, including (a) being clear about the ownership and effective control of data by researchers, and (b) freely agreeing to conditions proposed by funders and employers, through a negotiation process in which national and international scholarly associations collectively represent the interests of researchers.
- 3- Promote and support scientific journals owned and managed by learned societies. Given that the costs of publishing, even online publishing, might be prohibitive for some scholarly associations, we encourage cooperation among societies, particularly among those in regions that currently do not sponsor their own journals.

² See Andrew van de Ven (2017) *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research*. Oxford UP: Oxford.

- 4- Recognize and value a range of research publications, in particular, scholarly books whose longer format allows for a more holistic, systemic and thus valuable analysis, research led textbooks, along with journal outlets that have a clear regional impact.
- 5- Appreciate the distinction between scientific contribution (to the body of causal knowledge³) and practical contribution to action (whether managerial or organizational) and to the broader society.
 - a. To regards to practical contribution to action, we advise co-definition of research questions with practitioners.
 - b. To regards to societal contributions, we advocate ensuring societal accountability of management research by encouraging scholars to tackle significant organizational issues which also influence society more broadly.⁴
- 6- Promote a pluralist and contextualized perspective on the evaluation of management research across the world, among others, by (a) promoting greater consultation and dialogue between governments and scholarly associations when designing policies relating to the evaluation and funding of management research, and (b) including ensuring disciplinary diversity in the composition of governmental regulatory commissions and councils so all the social sciences which are and can be mobilized for management research are included, particularly when evaluating research.

³ See the distinction between know what, know how and know why in R. Garud (1997) 'On the distinction between know-how, know-why, and know-what'. *Advances in Strategic Management*, **14**, 81–101.

⁴ See G. George et al. (2016) 'Understanding and tackling societal grand challenges through management research', *Academy of Management Journal*, **59**, 6, 1880-1895.