

# Project management scholarship: Relevance, impact and five integrative challenges for business and management schools

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the standing of project management in the academy. It does so from the viewpoint of business and management schools. The paper identifies five critical integrative challenges concerning research, how they might be better addressed and perhaps turned into opportunities. The paper builds on recent debates within the area of engaged scholarship and knowledge co-production, which call for greater focus on multi-disciplinarity and research–practice collaborations. The paper offers suggestions as to what project management scholars could do to tackle the identified challenges and thereby improve the standing of project management as a subject area within the academy and its contribution to the curriculum and research agenda of business and management schools. The paper ends with some thoughts about future debates on the role of project management research and teaching, especially how project management scholarship could help respond to some of the current criticism of business school research and how research could better inform management practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Business and management schools worldwide face considerable challenges in the years to come. Recent debates have highlighted a series of issues, including globalization, lack of relevance of the research, lack of diversity, and modest impact on organizational and management practice (see for instance [Denisi, 2010](#); [Pettigrew, 2011](#)). This paper examines the issues of relevance and impact for business and management schools and in what ways PM scholarship can help resolve them. It is a conceptual paper, based on relevant literatures and our own experiences of working in business and management schools. We refer to ‘integrative challenges’—requiring bridging of areas, domains, practices, perspectives, and problem definitions. These challenges not only present opportunities for business and management schools, but some changes in PM scholarship itself. One example of an integrative challenge is

the dualism of strategy and execution; business schools historically have viewed these as distinct and separate activities. An integrative view considers them as a duality, nested and mutually dependent and, contrary to current thinking, one being just as important as the other. In this paper we will discuss this and four other integrative challenges (business and technology, hard and soft skills, linking research with practice, and exploration and exploitation of research). We go further and suggest that teaching and research in PM could potentially make business and management schools better equipped to respond to the issues of relevance and impact, and perhaps even turn the challenges into new opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

The subject of PM has evolved into an increasingly important field both for driving research within business schools and for executive education, and not just for our employers but globally. The main reasons are the strategic

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<sup>1</sup> We have deliberately focused on business and management schools. We recognize that considerable PM scholarship also takes place within engineering schools. The challenges in that context are different and we recognize this as a limitation to our discussion.

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importance of projects in a range of organizations (not only those that qualify as being project-based), the importance of projects and project management for many of the growth industries of our age (including pharmaceuticals and IT), and the large investments that companies, governments and third-sector organizations currently are making to improve their PM competence and capacity (Söderlund, 2005a). Accompanying this change in importance, the past two decades have seen a tremendous growth in education programs at all levels. PMI's Global Accreditation Center has noted substantial year on year increases in the number of programs seeking accreditation, for instance. And it is not the classic project management things that these educational programs thrive on—rather it is the continuous and intense engagement in *'the stuff of management'* (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005) that attracts participants. Stanford University launched its Advanced Project Management program little over a decade ago which has become one of its most important executive programs. Over a similar period, a number of Scandinavian universities have developed an impressive array of PM offerings. Today the institutions that have made this investment, including Aalto University, BI Norwegian Business School, Linköping University, Royal Institute of Technology, and Umeå University, have reaped the rewards of those programs both financially and, in closing loops back to practice, in their perceived relevance. Furthermore, beyond single courses and programs, a number of leading-edge universities have developed so-called 'Project Universities' in collaboration with multinational companies. The BP-MIT collaboration is one example. There are many more including companies such as HP, Statoil, Shell and Rolls Royce with universities such as Delft University in the Netherlands, and Manchester and Cranfield Universities in the UK. As pointed out by Berggren and Söderlund (2011), there is a huge potential in the teaching of PM since this certainly can create the kind of collaborative knowledge space or 'agora' (Nowotny et al., 2001) that has been singled out as critical to drive management knowledge enhancement—meaning that these educational programs and centers offer a space and a place for researchers to meet practitioners to talk about real-life management problems, and investigate solutions to better understand, address and solve these problems. Compared to many other subject areas offered by business schools around the world, PM appears rich in opportunities to teach and develop knowledge about 'the stuff of management'. However, the subject area, particularly its research, is operating under a pressure to conform to 'the logic of the academy.' For instance, a senior and well-respected academic advised one of the authors that *'...if you want to get published, drop the term project management from the title or keywords,'* and noted *'...the area is too applied, too close to practice for proper academic study.'* Similar assertions have been voiced by other well-respected management scholars at doctoral colloquiums at the Academy of Management Meetings. Proper academic study meant 'published in the top, predominantly US, academic journals', such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Science* or *Administrative Science Quarterly*. With an academy suffering with issues of relevance and impact, this appears incredible.

Indeed, the academy has clearly lost its collective mind, if the focus on top-ranked journal articles has become *the end* rather than a means (or indeed *an end*) to any kind of 'engaged scholarship'. As a result, we see whole discussions taking place in the management literature and at conferences with little or no connection to managerial issues. Yet these are where many of the top-ranked journals operate—with little concern for 'the stuff of management' or producing 'good' theories for management (Ghoshal, 2005).

At present, PM is truly a vivid field for scholars, with much academic entrepreneurship and many new collaborations emerging. Sustaining this dynamism is crucial, but this will only happen if the tension identified in the paradox between 'the logic of impact' and 'the logic of the academy' will be resolved. At PM's current stage of development, there are many more challenges and in this paper we can only highlight and discuss the ones we perceive as the most important and those which also generally fit the overall challenges facing business and management schools. Our ambition here is to introduce a structured debate and call for common action on how to address the challenges. As a general case, this paper could also work to improve our understanding of the development and evolution of academic fields within social science where PM functions as a case in point.

For the purposes of this paper we use the term PM very broadly, that is to cover issues related to the management of projects from tactical to strategic levels, and therefore include the spectrum of project, program and portfolio management. In addition, we consider PM not as an academic discipline, but as a knowledge domain and a context for study.

## 2. Five integrative challenges

Regaining relevance and impact has been identified as an important issue for business and management schools. The example of PM research is instructive for these organizations in that PM is clearly viewed as being 'close to practice' and therefore relevant, and engaged with a number of large organizations in which it is clearly having an impact. By the logic of impact, we would expect PM to have significant importance for those organizations. The logic of the academy though, does not value this sufficiently. It is not, of course, essential to resolve this paradox. PM can continue as a separate and occasionally valued domain, but with its research activities continuing to be marginalized. The business and management research agenda can continue with its current values. PM scholars can and do seek recognition for their work by engaging in the logic of the academy, and perhaps this needs to happen more anyway, to both legitimize and ground future PM scholarship. However, we believe, this misses an opportunity—one that leads to integration of the logic streams of impact and the academy.

The challenges discussed in this paper all deal with the integration of these two streams of logic in one way or another—the logic of academy and the logic of impact. Three of the challenges are primarily related to the practice of management, and two concern management research, especially PM research. These challenges also reflect the nature of PM as a management field—where the entire underlying rationale very often

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