

# **In search of relevance: Perspectives on the contribution of academic-practitioner networks**

## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the current debate on the relevance of academic research to organizational practice but departs from the conventional view of perceiving the problem as one of improving the diffusion of knowledge from research to practice. Two theoretical lenses – Mode 2 and actor network theory – are drawn upon to examine vignettes of the authors' involvement in academic-practitioner collaborations that assist us in understanding the production of knowledge relevant to practitioners. The analysis has the potential to free industry-academic collaborations of unrealistic demands.

## Introduction

The principal concern of this paper is to contribute to developing theory on the production of relevant knowledge in management. The need for such a theory is underlined by the circularity of much of the debate in this field. Thus, many studies address the question of relevance in a normative way, arguing that relevance is or is not an appropriate objective on the basis of largely stylized accounts of the practices of academic researchers and management practitioners respectively (e.g. Keiser and Leiner, 2009). We eschew participating in this debate since it is grounded in the belief that relevance is just a matter of diffusing or refusing to diffuse knowledge from academia to practice.

Our distinctive focus then, is on the production of relevant knowledge amongst and between academics and practitioners. To move beyond high-level stylized accounts and thus contribute to theory development in this area, we have drawn, firstly, on a reflective analysis of our own practical experience of academic-practitioner collaboration in the business and management domain. This experience contributes to theorizing by shedding some light on the distinctive conditions under which relevant knowledge is produced, and the dynamics of its production. The two vignettes which outline that experience are the product of retrospective reflection rather than formal research study, and hence are subject to a number of caveats, not least that the forms of collaboration outlined were not selected as research sites *ex ante*, and are the exception rather than the rule in academic research in this field. However, these disadvantages are mitigated by a number of factors. For example, the advantages of more 'extreme' cases for theory building have been identified elsewhere (Eisenhardt 1989), and our role as both active researchers and participants in collaboration speaks to growing calls to re-think the research process in terms of the relationship between subject and researcher (Guba and Lincoln 1994) (Cox and Hassard 2005).

Second, and relatedly, our contribution to theorizing the production of relevant knowledge is developed through the systematic analysis of our case vignettes by the

application of two contrasting theoretical lenses. One lens is supplied by the work of Gibbons et al. (1994) which has sought to identify changes in the mode of knowledge production within society. The other – which derives from a rather different strand of the social studies of science – is ‘Actor Network Theory’. In their different ways, both of these lenses challenge the conventional distinctions between the production of knowledge by academic researchers and its use by practitioners. Similarly, they counter what we will highlight as the ‘diffusionist’ view of relevance through a focus on the production of knowledge within and between different societal groups. At the same time, these lenses have been adopted here because of their differences. These differences, in epistemology and ontology particularly, open up contrasting, and, we argue, insightful perspectives on the conditions and dynamics of emerging patterns of knowledge production – perspectives which are particularly useful in developing theory on the production of relevant knowledge.

It is important to note, though, that we are not aiming to contribute to the theoretical frameworks themselves. Rather, through these lenses we seek to make sense of the case vignettes as examples of successful and sustained initiatives in the production of relevant knowledge. By exploring the ambiguous and contested terrain of actual academic-practitioner collaborations, these lenses helpful when we seek to move beyond more normative or diffusionist views of relevance. On this terrain, knowledge escapes its usual institutionalized forms of production, as academics and practitioners confront each other in new and sometimes dissonant roles and activities. In such settings, the relevance of knowledge is neither a rhetorical trope in the debate, nor a functional outcome of knowledge transfer, but is rather continuously developed, contested and negotiated through intensive efforts and interactions amongst academic and practitioner groups.

The paper is organized as follows. The first of three sections begins by discussing the evolving debate on academic-practitioner relationships, and seeking to unpack some of the theoretical assumptions and approaches to relevance that characterise the

debate. It examines the distinctive approaches of Mode 2 and ANT before highlighting some of the difficulties in producing relevant knowledge due to the dynamic and context-dependent nature of management practice.

Based on this discussion, the second section begins by preparing the ground both contextually and methodologically for the introduction of the two case vignettes of academic-practitioner collaboration. It documents the trials and tribulations and the positive and negative conditions and consequences of pursuing such collaborations. This is followed by an analysis of these experiences by applying the lenses of Mode 2 and ANT. The final discussion and conclusion sections explore the implications of the analysis for policy and practice and further research in this field.

## **The Debate on Relevance**

The contemporary debate on the relevance of management education and research to practitioners has its historical roots in a growing reaction against the domination of esoterically, technical and quantitative courses and publications that had been driven by the pursuit of academic respectability<sup>1</sup>. Business academics were seeking to secure status and academic respect through adopting the research model of other scientific disciplines. In the late 1980s, however, the relevance of theoretical, technicist, and primarily quantitative approaches began to be questioned (Porter and McGibbin, 1988). This criticism of business schools failing to be relevant to practitioners because of a preoccupation with scientific rigour has continued (Beer, 2001; Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Van De Ven & Johnson 2006; Author withheld).

This 'crisis talk' around relevance has various drivers: financial providers in the form of government or public and private funding agencies and their demands for accountability; students who expect a career return on their educational investment; corporations that often sponsor their staff; the media that claim to represent the public; and business schools/ universities that are anxious to preserve the premium student fees associated with the MBA<sup>2</sup>.

This has resulted in a demand not just for more accessible research but also a commitment to the diffusion of knowledge beyond the academic domain and into practitioner domains. Ultimately a movement began to coalesce around 'knowledge transfer' and 'evidence-based management' with the aim of ensuring that the best available academic research informs managerial decisions and organizational practices (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006; Rousseau and McCarthy, 2007). Business schools were encouraged to conform to an engineering, design science or medical school model of the relationship between research and practice (Hitt, 1998; Drucker, 2001; van Aken, 2005: 22).

These developments reflect a taken for granted, utilitarian conception of relevance that is produced through the diffusion of knowledge. This is open to question for the concept of diffusion not only presumes knowledge to be complete prior to its application (Latour, 1993) but is also a very limited understanding of how knowledge and ideas are produced and travel (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 1996; Swan, 1997; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). These authors recognise that only when those who are acted upon by the knowledge of others (actants) and thereby transformed into actors does knowledge become meaningful and relevant. This ordinarily occurs when the power effects of an actor-network prevents it being ignored by those sharing the problems and interests that it invokes (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). It could be argued that diffusionists subscribe to a traditional commonsense view of knowledge *as* power such that it determines human events whereas recent discourses theorise power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980; Latour, 2005) more as an effect of discourses and practices that have secured some measure of institutionalisation. The limitations of diffusionist approaches have been identified even in the domain of medicine and clinical practice where evidence-based medicine remains, despite its widespread appeal, a normative rather than realist depiction of actual practice (Walshe and Rundall, 2001).

The questioning of the diffusionist approach applies to an even greater degree in the domain of management practice. Here, the assumption that knowledge can travel immutably between the worlds of research and practice has been brought into question by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006). These authors argue that the fundamental problem of relevance is not one of knowledge transfer but of 'engaged scholarship' whereby academics and practitioners come together to produce different forms of knowledge.

To move beyond the diffusionist approach, we turn now to the contribution of the two theoretical lenses introduced earlier. As indicated, we see the use of these lenses as valuable in exploring a novel research problem. This approach has been developed previously, in, for example, Morgan's work where multiple metaphors are used to explore case studies of organizational life (Morgan 1986). Likewise, other studies have applied different paradigmatic lenses to unpack complex organizational phenomena (Hassard 1991). This approach seems particularly appropriate to research problems, which are highly contested and subject to opposing interpretations – as the debate on relevance certainly is.

## **Mode 2 approach to relevance**

In re-defining relevance as a problem of knowledge production, it is important to acknowledge certain tectonic shifts in the relationship between science and society. The most influential of these attempts to date has been developed by a group of scholars who argue that advanced societies are witnessing a profound shift from what they term 'Mode 1' to 'Mode 2' knowledge production. Mode 1 they describe as 'a form of knowledge production - a complex of ideas, values, norms - that has grown up to control the diffusion of the Newtonian model to more and more fields of enquiry and ensure its compliance with what is considered sound scientific practice.' (p. 2). They argue that important societal trends, including the massification of education and research, the impact of IT and the expansion in the market for knowledge, are displacing Mode 1 as the dominant mode of knowledge production. Rather, the dominance is shifting towards Mode 2, which, as outlined in Table 1

below, they characterise as involving radically different organizational contexts, epistemic bases, and forms of governance.

## **INSERT TABLE 1**

The virtue of the Mode 2 perspective is to question the prerogative of institutions such as universities to monopolise knowledge production in the context of greater reflexivity and public engagement. Mode 1 knowledge production is seen to be outdated on the basis that information and communication technology developments now render knowledge almost universally available (Gibbons et al., 1994). In Mode 2, knowledge is more likely to be advanced when it escapes its disciplinary traditions, is directly tied to the context of application, and co-produced by academics and practitioners.

The implications of the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 are profound. Gibbons et al. (1994) claim that 'in mode 1 knowledge was accumulated through the professionalisation of specialisation largely institutionalised in the universities....Mode 2 knowledge is accumulated through the repeated configuration of human resources in flexible, essentially transient forms of organization' (p.9). The new mode of knowledge production is thus associated with radical change in social and institutional locales. No longer bounded by professional structures and academic disciplines, the domain of knowledge production expands out of traditional sites such as universities, government research establishments, and corporate laboratories into wider contexts of use and application.

As the authors subsequently acknowledged, their original account of Mode 2 as set out in the 1994 publication was taken up by 'those with most to gain' from the concept, in particular 'researchers in professional disciplines such as management, struggling to wriggle out from under the condescension of more established...disciplines' (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2003: 179). In response as



much to these newfound followers as to the critics of the original thesis, the Mode 2 authors sought in their next book (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2001) to develop and extend their account by relating it more self-consciously and contextually to the wider co-evolution of science and society. Thus, they criticized the tendency to equate Mode 2 knowledge with applied research, as this would mean retaining a linear, diffusionist model of knowledge production.

They now concede that changes in the organizational structures and practices associated with knowledge production have not been matched by a similar change in the area of core epistemologies and methodologies, thus drawing attention to the micro-dynamics of knowledge production as opposed to its institutional context. This is where ANT provides a powerful lens because it offers an ontology that refuses to privilege human over material actors, an epistemology that suggests knowledge is tied to the effective formation of actor networks, and a methodology that seeks to follow through the associations, alignments and instabilities that build or disrupt actor networks.

### **Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a lens to study relevance**

As outlined by Latour, its most influential proponent and some time critic, ANT questions modernist separations of nature (facts), society (power) and their deconstructions (discourse) as separate and irreconcilable entities (Latour, 1993: 6). He argues that the material and the social are never independent since they mutually enrol and mobilise one another in complex actor networks of ideas, events, identities and practices (Latour, 2005). In this respect, while ANT has so far had little or no impact on the relevance debate, its concern with transgressing boundaries arguably has much to offer to a better understanding of academic-practitioner collaborations. It has the potential to reframe those features that have caused much of the hand wringing in the current debate. These are the question of relevance, the increasing importance of consultants, and the possible marginalization of academics – not as a moral challenge or imperative so much as elements of a seamless web in which practitioners, intermediaries and academic researchers, and numerous non-human

actants are all implicated. Amongst the latter, we might include the 'relevance' debate itself, league tables and other forms of competition, research assessment exercises, corporate and brand image, career paths, legislation and regulation (Author withheld).

There are similarities between ANT and Mode 2 theory with respect to how knowledge develops. Both would challenge diffusion models of knowledge that presume a discrete and unilinear development from production to application that is characterized by the traditional Newtonian scientific model (Mode 1). They also share a pluralistic rather than a unitary view of knowledge such that it develops in a multiplicity of locations and a diversity of forms. Another common feature is that they both represent general theories of the relationship between science and society but are preoccupied principally with the production of scientific and technological knowledge.

On the other hand, there are also major differences, the most central of which is ANT's refusal to accord ontological privilege to human subjects over material objects and to make this a central principle of its epistemology. This could be seen as its most significant departure from social science in general, to which Mode 2 would seem implicitly to subscribe. ANT claims a sociological heritage – albeit one that challenges its humanistic proclivities – whereas Mode 2 seeks to promote trans-disciplinary developments. Mode 2 would subscribe to a utilitarian epistemology that develops knowledge for, rather than of, practitioners whereas ANT is concerned to advance understanding of how knowledge is stabilized through the temporary resolution of controversies, the enrolment of actants, and the mobilization of actor networks that can speak on behalf of their members. The development of knowledge is viewed as a complex affair, involving actor networks of human and non-human actants in local contexts of contest and controversy and within shifting alliances and resistances (Callon, 1991; Latour, 1987).

Through moments of translation where interests in, and solutions to, a problem are shared, and actants enrolled and mobilised to settle controversies, a network can become an 'obligatory passage point' obliging anyone with similar problems to enter the network. The actor network may even become 'irreversible' should the collective memory regarding earlier disputes be lost or where all alternative solutions to the same problem are eradicated. So, for example, Latour (1988: 36-7 quoted in Vurdubakis, 2007) demonstrates how a radical government in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Paris, thwarted the attempted privatisation of the metro system by reconstructing the subway tunnels so that they were too small for the rail coaches of the commercial operators. Thus they rendered the management of the metro impervious to alternative (private) solutions, thereby transforming it into an irreversible actor network.

Our discussion of Mode 2 and ANT approaches to relevance brings into sharp relief the question of how academic researchers can produce knowledge, which is relevant to practitioners in management and business. Mode 2 theorists see a new form of knowledge production emerging from institutional changes in the locus, governance and outputs of research. ANT authors, however, reject this institutional emphasis in favour of a focus on the emergent and dynamic properties of 'knowledge in the making'. Before discussing our case vignettes of academic-practitioner collaboration, we draw briefly on some aspects of the existing literature to explore the distinctive features of knowledge in this domain.

## **Organizational and management knowledge**

There is a long history concerning the ontology of knowledge where it is regarded either as an end in itself or as a means to some objective external to its production. This finds its expression in the debate on the relevance of business schools polarising around epistemological and ontological arguments concerning whether business school research is or should be *for*, or simply *about*, management (Grey, 2001). This,

of course, is to reproduce the academic-practitioner binary that we eschew in our collaborations with practitioners.

There have been a number of attempts to import Mode 2 and ANT theories into the organization and management domain. These have often focussed on producing relevant knowledge by reconfiguring academic research to better connect to the world of practice. Starkey and Madan (2001), for example, outline a 'knowledge chain' in which the theory produced by academics is ultimately applied to 'effective action' by practitioners. Less emphasis has been given, however, to the way in which practitioners construct relevance and their actual demand for relevant knowledge.

One result of this is that while the proponents are proposing parallels with engineering and medicine schools, other scholars have been questioning the view that management knowledge can be equated with the universality and codifiability of engineering and medical knowledge (Morrell, 2008). The organizational specificity of the tasks that managers perform and the ways in which their performance is measured and rewarded tend to militate against the application of generic forms of knowledge. Rather management and organizational knowledge is seen as highly situated and context-dependent (Whitley, 1988). One consequence is that the knowledge underpinning new management practices, for example, needs to be translated, adapted and embedded within specific contexts (Ghoshal, 2005). To point to the fluid and contextualized nature of managerial knowledge is not to portray managers as unthinking actors. Indeed, managers can usefully be viewed as 'practical theorists' in the way they draw on their own situated theories to inform their actions (Watson, 1994). Such theories are, however, practical not academic – that is to say, they are tested through practice within particular settings.

It is also the case that practitioners' draw on a variety of knowledge sources to meet their particular needs (Lamertz and Baum, 1998). They rarely draw directly on academic sources of knowledge, having recourse primarily to the popular and fashionable management literature (Abrahamson, 1996, Mazza and Alvarez, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. Some within the relevance debate have attributed this to the failure either of

academics or as a form of managerial 'false consciousness'. It has been claimed, for example, that the proliferation of 'pop' management books fill 'a vacuum caused by lack of an adequate response by universities to the thirst for relevant knowledge' (Starkey and Madan, 2001). Meanwhile, Weick blames management fashion for misleading practitioners as to their problems, commenting that; 'Practitioners cannot make up their mind what their problem is, and speed from guru to guru to find out. They label their frenzy 'the real world' and label as irrelevant those who are unimpressed with the content of the frenzy.' (Weick, 2001: S72).

What is often neglected is the recognition that the relevance of knowledge is subject to the highly context-specific demands of management. Previous studies have argued that management is not a science and has not developed as a cohesive professional group (Reed and Anthony 1992). These studies tend to challenge the view that there exists the potential for a linear relationship between the production and use of knowledge by managers, including the notion that business schools can function in a similar way to medical schools as institutions of professional education (Author withheld).

Rather, studies of the way in which managers use knowledge suggest a highly contingent social practice, which involves the promiscuous and politicised (Knights and Murray, 1994) exploitation of a variety of non-canonical tools, discourses and intellectual resources from a wide range of sources (Abrahamson and Eisenman 2001; Mazza and Alvarez 2000; Scarbrough 2003). This underlines previous work suggesting that managers address (or frame) problems with ideas and tools that are ready to hand and seem right for the job (Starbuck, 1985). Here, it also worth noting the limited effectiveness even of consultancy work in addressing managers' 'needs' – or what is termed the 'knowing-doing gap' (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000).

## **Context Methods and Vignettes**

So far two approaches have been identified as lenses to analyse relevance. Although the distinction is no more than an analytical convenience, we now draw on our

empirical experience of relevance in practice. Relevance is, of course, a social construct that has political and material effects that can change the conditions of its own reproduction. That is to say, it is a highly rhetorical or persuasive discourse since no one would wish to celebrate his or her irrelevance (Author withheld).

There can be few settings, which at least in theory, are more propitious for the production of relevant knowledge in practice than the kind of academic-practitioner collaborations presented here. This is evident in the literature where Starkey and Madan (2001: S21) call for the creation of 'problem/topic on-going research forums and networks' and Shapiro et al. (2007: 262) demand "a more continuous, two-way dialogue" ... "rather than merely event driven" collaborations. Similarly, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) describe 'engaged scholarship' as involving 'big questions' and as revolving around 'collaborative learning communities'. However, there is a dearth of relevant empirical work on this topic (Jacob, 2001), with relatively few concrete instances of the practitioner engagement advocated by many theorists; itself perhaps significant evidence of the barriers to such engagement.

As indicated in the introduction, the authors had each established and participated fully in the management of these academic-practitioner collaborations. As a result, we had access to a range of documentary evidence, including presentations, emails, minutes of meetings, etc., together with participation in executive board meetings and other aspects of decision-making and strategy making not available to others. We have already acknowledged the limitations of the empirical material, especially since this account does not strictly conform to the methodology of participant observation where extensive notes would record each and every event observed. Nor other than retrospectively did we follow through the 'actants' – those humans and materials that are acted upon – in their interconnections and links to the point at which they are, or fail to be, transformed into 'actors' that make a difference in working their nets. But the challenges posed here have been highlighted in work on more reflexive approaches to methodology. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), for example, argue for the value of such approaches where research findings are

surprising or unexpected, and where there is an 'interest in problematizing and rethinking dominating ideas and theory, when empirical impressions encourage such need for novel thinking' (ibid. 1269). In this respect, we have sought to apply what these writers term an 'open attitude' to the empirical material generated through our analysis of these collaborations.

### **Case vignettes<sup>4</sup>**

The vignettes are presented as an analytically structured narrative, organized around four main headings; origins, focus, structure and governance, and making knowledge relevant. This structure is sensitive to the theoretical concerns so far outlined. First, highlighting the origins of these collaborations is clearly important to the debate inasmuch as they are not part of mainstream academic research practice, and the idiosyncrasies of their formation are material both to the Mode 2 lens (e.g. how far they reflect the lowering of institutional boundaries between the production and use of knowledge), and to ANT (what were the key moments of problematization). Second, a concern with focus addresses the question of whether there are certain arenas in which academic-practitioner collaboration is more possible than others, and, if so, how these are constituted. This issue is important both in terms of what kinds of focus may be associated with success, and whether such a focus has constraining effects on the scope of research. Third, structure and governance highlights the political, managerial and relational dimensions of academic-practitioner interactions. This is an implicit, if often, as noted, understated aspect of the debate on relevance and the wider Mode 2 discourse, and is clearly significant for the enrolment and mobilization central to the ANT lens. The final heading allows us to compare the evolving processes through which knowledge is made relevant in these different collaborations, highlighting the particular dynamics of its production as one of many material and human entities in the formation of actor networks.

## 1. KNOWNET

### *Origins*

KNOWNET was launched by a group of academic researchers from two UK universities in 2002 with financial support from the UK Government. Although the funding provided no financial incentives for academic involvement – all costing having to be justified in terms of the development and benefits of a network for the business members – the development of KNOWNET received a high level of support from the researchers involved. This commitment was crucial, not least in overcoming the bureaucratic hurdles to the management of funding. The willingness of the network's academic members to undertake these activities can be attributed to a variety of problems that might secure resolution through collaboration. These included opportunities for research access, an interest in translating research findings to practitioner audiences, the esteem benefits of funding acquisition, and shared beliefs about the value of academic research to practice.

### *Focus*

The explicit thematic focus of the network was centred initially on the concept of 'Knowledge Management' (KM). Recent studies by the academic researchers <sup>5</sup> had problematised the way in which this concept was being applied in practice, with research indicating that technology-centred approaches to KM had a high failure rate. At the same time, practitioner interest in KM was growing significantly in some major firms. The KM theme thus provided an important and interesting 'problem-space' for academic-practitioner engagement (Abbott, 1988). KNOWNET benefited from the elite reputation of the host university. The initial core group of members, though small, also became an important attractor thus enrolling other organizations.

### *Governance and Structure*

Over the subsequent period, KNOWNET was successful in attracting over 25 industry members. Significantly, however, much of this success can be attributed to a willingness to change and adapt the original consortium model:



- After the third 'Network Coordinator' resigned, management of the network was delegated to a team of independent consultants.
- The initial format involved quarterly workshops. This was quickly extended to include a website and portal through which materials and discussion forums could be made available on a continuous basis.
- The initial broad focus on KM was broken down into topics of specific relevance to practitioners resulting in 'special interest groups'.
- Presentations by academic members soon gave way to a greater use of external consultants and 'gurus' or to member presentations and cross-firm exchanges.

### *Making Knowledge Relevant*

Another important development was need to respond to (deepening) member interests in the field, and hence a divergence between practitioner and academic specialisms around the KM topic. The academic researchers, for example, were developing work on KM as a 'management fashion', while the practitioners were more concerned with topics such as 'gaining management buy-in for KM'. As the academics were subject to the accountability pressures of the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)<sup>6</sup>, practitioner demand for 'relevance' resulted in a reliance on external consultants to respond to specialist concerns. To reflect the shifting scope of the network, a steering committee was established in which practitioner representatives played an increasingly important part.

These changes had important implications for the academic researchers' engagement with the network. While KNOWNET was no longer seen as a forum for the dissemination of research on KM, the academics' engagement with network members and associates, and growing opportunities for collaboration did inspire new areas for research. Successful applications were subsequently made for external funding to support research on 'communities of practice' – a topic which reflected changes in the KM debate and which had been advanced by a special interest group of the network.

## ***2. The Financial Institutions Forum for Research and Management (FIFRM)<sup>7</sup>***

### *Origins*

The FIFRM was established in 1993 at a UK University for the purposes of ensuring continued funding for a Research Centre that had initially been funded by a major bank but had almost exhausted its financial resources. Its formation was made possible by deregulatory changes that had collapsed the boundaries and trading barriers between banks, insurance and mortgage companies so that the existing trade associations and other bodies no longer reflected the sector as a whole. This was one of the non-human actants that the academic initiators of the proposed new body mobilized for purposes of indicating shared problems for which the FIFRM could be a part solution. Other resources facilitating the development were the status of the university, the high research ranking of the Management School, the existing Centre with an established research portfolio in the field, the prestige of the bank that had sponsored it, and the practical as well as theoretical expertise of the organizers in financial services (FS) or corporate management. Enrolling practitioner members was facilitated by the sales experience of the academic organizers, extensive use of the most advanced communication technologies – the fax and later the email<sup>8</sup>. Within 3 years of its foundation, 25 fee-paying financial institutions had been recruited to the FIFRM and the university waived all overheads for the initial period of development.

### *Focus*

The Centre had not only exhausted its funds without renewal but also had conducted research in a Mode 1 fashion only limitedly involving, and engaging with, the sector. This experience stimulated the organizers of the FIFRM to attempt the opposite – that is, have a regular and continuous source of research funding and to collaborate with the practitioners in the co-production of research (Mode 2). However, the lack of experience of both practitioners and academics in co-producing knowledge meant that this remained a limited achievement. Instead the FIFRM

concentrated on its vision to establish a regular dialogue, debate and research on issues or problems concerning the financial services (FS) as a single sector.

Research was at this stage largely stimulated by academic interests and sought to challenge the practitioners. So, for example, one study focused on the failure of product provision in financial services to take account of feminine conceptions of time that are non-linear but tied to the context of their social/family responsibilities (Author withheld). Long-term products such as life insurance, it was argued, are based on masculine linear conceptions of time that reproduce a gendered form of financial exclusion. Another project criticized market research as poorly theorized and therefore misplaced because it assumed that consumers had 'needs' that companies simply had to satisfy through their products. By pointing out that such 'needs' are socially constructed, the researchers made it clear that corporations do not just respond but also create the demands of their customers, especially through the use of huge advertising budgets. Other research criticized the FS industry for its failure to facilitate the development of financial literacy and capability, even among its own staff let alone with respect to consumers and, in particular, the financially and socially excluded. Far from causing a mass exodus from the FIFRM, these challenges were endorsed by the practitioner chair who welcomed new members with the statement: 'you may find some of the research a bit "off the wall" but it is refreshing in contrast to off the shelf consultancy and it makes you think'. Again here was a human and material actant combining to help enrol members into the actor network.

#### *Structure and Governance*

The FIFRM was initially managed by a steering committee comprised of 2 academics and 3 practitioners and these helped to enrol more participants both from their own companies but also beyond. The original host university's initial support for the Forum eventually led to other important financially beneficial awards for industry-related activity thus legitimizing the waiving of university overhead charges. These included a contract to convert and validate the Chartered Institute of Bankers (CIB) professional examinations to degree status, and funding for a Centre for Personal Finance Education (CPFE). Partly because of some internal opposition to the

activities, the Director moved to a different university and the FIFRM followed him but lost several members in the move.

This created several challenges for him and a newly appointed Chief Executive – the most urgent of which was to rebuild the membership. It was necessary to convince ‘hard line’ budget holders in the FS that it was worth supporting. This was put in a direct and stark way to the Chief Executive when, in conducting a feedback exercise he was told: ‘the thing is, you’re not scratching where we’re itching’! (Waite 2005).

### *Making Knowledge Relevant*

The FIFRM began engaging more practitioner members in the research programme and in the steering committee. It also enrolled associate members from government, the regulator, educational groups, consumer interest groups and voluntary associations not only expanding membership, attendance at meetings but also lending legitimacy to the network. In 2009, there were 60 such associate members and currently increasing attention is being given to the network’s impact on both the financial sector and on public policy in general. The public profile of the FIFRM has resulted in it now being represented on a large range of non-governmental agencies such as, for example, the Digital Economy Programme, Toynbee Hall, the Carnegie Foundation, the TSB Knowledge Transfer network. The steering committee ran an away day in 2003 at which the following was agreed:

- Increase the profile of the Network through PR and research impact. One such piece of research was the construction of a trust index that secured widespread media reporting and helped to enrol several new members;
- Make optimal use of affiliate connections to increase legitimacy and impact;
- Focus on practitioner driven research;
- Continue to focus on consumption, distribution and financial education in retail FS.

There has been some material progress in achieving these priorities so, for example, and they remain central to the direction and development of the FIFRM up to the present day but much still needs to be done. Finally, at the latest FIFRM away day,

the steering committee discussed how to respond to the 'credit crunch' besetting the global economy in 2008. It was recognised that the financial sector had a good deal of responsibility for this crisis, as a result of the banks' participation in the creation of excessive personal and corporate debt and the proliferation of new, yet dubious, financial instruments such as securitised mortgages, certificates of deposits, and credit default swaps. A new set of themes followed such as:

- how to increase consumer engagement with FS;
- consumer financial literacy and competence; fairer outcomes for consumers.

The meeting concluded that the FIFRM was at a crossroads, where it needed to choose whether to be a cutting-edge, academically orientated research body or adopt a more policy-focussed approach.

## **Analysis**

Here we seek to draw some comparisons from our vignettes to show how their aspirations to produce relevant knowledge were advanced or limited in part by the different thematic concerns that helped to enrol their membership. In the KNOWNET case, the focus on 'Knowledge Management' made it easier to recruit members from a range of sectors. But, over time it may have also heightened tensions between academic research and practitioner knowledge as the deepening specialization promoted by the special interest groups led interests-driven practitioners towards micro-level tools and practical frameworks. In the other case, a focus on FS as a single industry, rather than as distinct segments as in the trade associations, focused attention on a common set of problems to discuss and research.

We begin our analysis with Mode 2 theory since both KNOWNET and FIFRM involved a transgression of the institutional boundaries between universities and business. Our objective is to demonstrate that the ethos and some of the activities comply with a Mode 2 approach. We outline a summary of the key points of our analysis in Table 2 where a comparison of different features of these collaborations with that of Mode 2 analysis is instructive. We highlight how the governance

arrangements for the consortia– joint practitioner/academic steering committees and host universities’ institutional support, even to the point of waiving overhead costs – reflect a Mode 2 pattern. Also government seedcorn funding for KNOWNET indicated strong institutional support, as has government participation in FIFRM. These factors reflect precisely what Nowotny et al. term the ‘steering of research priorities’.

## **INSERT TABLE 2**

However, other features of both networks are more equivocal about the extent of change. The absence of wider institutional change, for example in UK government policy, surrounding these consortia certainly contributed to the inflexibility of career tracks and RAE-driven focus on research. In both consortia it was impossible to recruit or retain long-term academic ‘hybrid’ roles such as Consortia director whereas within US settings, this might have been facilitated by the more fluid role definitions (Swan et al., 2007).

In terms of knowledge production - a central element of the Mode 2 argument - the evidence is again mixed. Some signs of change can be identified. Over time, activities in both collaborations drifted towards a more explicit concern with practitioner-defined problems and away from the academics’ intellectual agenda. This is reflected in KNOWNET’s special interest groups, eventually leading to funding for a practitioner-oriented research activity, and the new priorities set by meetings of the steering group in FIFRM. .

However, far from being a sign of the academic and practitioner activities becoming integrated through knowledge co-production, these changes actually seemed to reflect the stretching of such activities to accommodate a wider and more diverse range of themes – ranging from the still theoretical and publishing-oriented activities of the researchers to a steadily growing set of practitioner concerns. The growing maturity of the collaborations allowed them to accommodate a greater element of

applied consultancy or what is seen as 'managerialist' (see note 6) knowledge. This found expression in a gradual replacement of the academics by consultants in leadership positions.

This is not to say that this gradual accommodation between academic and practitioner concerns occurred without challenges or contestation. There were obvious tensions, for example, between short-term research aimed at practitioner problems and the pursuit of longer-term publishable academic research. Certainly, the success of these collaborations had only a partial influence on the research agenda of the academics involved, although some modifications were made to maintain practitioner enrolment. Rather, the accountability pressures of the RAE more than outweighed the steering of research priorities in influencing that agenda. Given these pressures, which the RAE created especially for career young staff, the relative seniority of some of the academics allowed them to take the risk of pursuing a research agenda more attentive to the interests of practitioner members. The latter was reflected in the KNOWNET case by the successful pursuit of funding for research on communities of practice. By contrast, an increase in the proportion of marketing academics in the FIFRM steering committee reduced the theory-practice tensions because they had fewer objections to pursuing managerialist research.

While practitioners welcomed the wider intellectual arena afforded by KNOWNET, for instance, the need to ensure 'value for money' led to a focus on problem-solving tools and practices more than researchable concepts. As the academic members were either unable or unwilling to provide such tools, the network was increasingly configured around peer-to-peer interactions, as enabled by the website and portal, which could address such needs. It was also widened to include external consultants who could facilitate and contribute to such interactions. In this sense, KNOWNET like many such partnerships was beginning to focus more heavily on the sharing of practices between its members.

Similar pressures were in force in the FIFRM, most especially the demand for usable data and material of the kind that might be provided by consultants, but there was some resistance to this from the academics. Here, the idea of co-production of knowledge, as heavily promoted by Mode 2 theorists, did seem to provide a (limited) platform for the practitioners to assert their short term interests in pursuing particular projects assigned to them, and this proved more difficult for some academics to resist. Any co-production of knowledge, however, emerged at a comparatively low level of intensity through the debates and discussions in general and steering committee meetings and the feedback surveys, all of which contributed to the design and development of research projects. When co-production was attempted in a more systematic way, it tended either to push the research beyond the terms of reference of the original proposal or to collapse because of the extra time and energy that it demanded of both academics and practitioners. In such cases, limited financial budgets for research were a major constraining factor. There was also less demand for co-production partly because practitioners claimed to value an independent academic perspective on issues since it would encourage them to 'think outside the box' (Tiratsoo 2005; Waite, 2006).

Overall then, the intellectual concerns of the academics and practitioners involved were not always harmonised but they tended to be accommodated by compromises driven by commitment to consortium survival. Also only minor modifications of research agendas occurred suggesting that even in a supportive organizational context of industry-academic collaboration, the Mode 2 ideal is far from fully realised.

Some of the barriers to change here may be institutional. While the host universities for these collaborations were supportive, the wider governmental (e.g. the RAE) and academic systems for evaluating knowledge production were becoming, if anything, more antithetical to innovative practitioner-oriented research. In addition, though, we can also identify the persistence of what Knorr-Cetina (1999) has termed 'epistemic cultures' as a further barrier to change. The latter term encompasses



‘amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms...which in a given field, make up how we know, what we know.’ (p. 1). This term is particularly relevant here because it goes beyond the more traditional notion of ‘discipline’ to locate the knowledge producing and warranting practices within the more fragmented social spaces of modern institutions. In this respect, it reflects some of the changes predicted by Mode 2 theory. However, the case vignettes also show a high level of what we can term ‘epistemic stickiness’ - i.e. the anchoring effect of existing forms of epistemology and methodology (Abbott, 2001) – upon the knowledge producing practices within these collaborations.

Despite the limited evidence of a change in the mode of knowledge production, the growth of these collaborations – and indeed the willingness of member organizations to pay substantial subscription fees – is strong evidence of the creation of relevant knowledge within them. To seek to explain the emergence of such knowledge but also its limitations, we now apply the ANT lens outlined earlier. In contrast to Mode 2, ANT is not reliant on invoking fully formed phenomena such as society, structure, science, institution or technology as explanations or determinants of something that might be described as social order. Instead it is concerned with the emerging associations or assemblies between different human and non-human actors from which some kind of order – contingent, dynamic, unpredictable and provisional – is in process. For ANT, knowledge is best seen as a hybrid of objects, social artefacts and discourses that are organized through material and non-material agents that are mobilised for purposes of securing the actor network, despite continual disruptions and processes of reassembly. We draw on the four moments of the sociology of translation as described by ANT - not in any linear sense of movement from embryonic to completed status but more as an ‘analytical heuristic’ (Whittle and Spicer, 2008: 619) that helps to explain the problems and potentials of forming and stabilizing academic-industry actor networks. Table 3 summarises the resulting analysis of the actor networks’ development in terms of these four moments of translation.

### INSERT TABLE 3

In emphasising the associations and assemblies that link both human and non-human actors, ANT allows us to highlight first the way in which the concept of Knowledge Management in KNOWNET, for example, was central to the *problematization* of certain practices for academics and practitioners alike. The continuing level of interest and support for the network can be attributed to the contribution of this concept's ambiguity and plasticity (as seen, for instance, in the special interest groups) in its problematising role. Similarly in the FIFRM, a range of issues such as personal finance education, information technology, regulation, corporate social responsibility, and trust were seen as problematic both by the academics and practitioners, so ideal for mobilising research resources and enrolling additional practitioner members in pursuit of solutions if only to reduce the ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding them.

Second, ANT's notion of *interessement* can be related to the recruitment of members to the consortia. Both consortia were seen as offering solutions to a set of problems that could not be readily resolved within each member organization, partly because the problem may not have been seen to be 'scratching where they are itching' and therefore not have immediate 'bottom line' value. In the case of KNOWNET, the initial recruitment of high status multinational organizations that were seen as more advanced exponents of KM became an important attractor for other organizations.

As was noted earlier, however, the problems defined by KNOWNET became deeper and more specialized, providing it with the facility to enrol and mobilize new allies in the form of 'special interest' topics, groups and external consultants. In the FIFRM, other human and non-human allies such as government representatives, consumer groups, regulators, voluntary agencies, the ESRC, prestigious speakers such as government ministers, comedy presentations, brand named locations for meetings, topical projects and prestigious endorsements were also mobilised as part of a continual regeneration of interest to enrol new and keep existing members enrolled. In the early days of generating interest in the FIFRM, deregulation and regulation,

regulatory scandals, and government policy were significant sites in which both human and non-human actors were mobilised to problematize issues, and secure shared interests and enrolments.

Third, enrolment applies to the development of more specialized roles within both consortia, encompassing not only the network coordinator, but also the academics and members involved, for example, through membership of the steering committee. Individual members were also enrolled as sponsors of particular projects in the FIFRM. Moreover, FIFRM's enrolment of key government departments, advancing discursive positions on issues that confront the industry, and by holding prestige meetings in locations such as the UK government Treasury, succeeded in engaging human and non-human actors. Likewise, the websites were important actants in facilitating the enrolment of members especially between workshops.

Fourth, mobilization can be identified with the periodic workshops at which network members were both engaged in affirming their membership and, through the presentations and interactions of the day, persuaded to commit themselves to specific actions as a result. Non-human forms of mobilization involved holding venues in member companies where invariably the 'PR machine' would kick into operation thus enrolling other parts of the corporation such as catering, technology, PR, human resource management, and marketing. Ultimately the test of mobilization is where the network can speak on behalf of its members and this occurs to a greater or lesser degree through the leaders being co-opted by other government and private agencies but also significantly by such activities as the writing of this and other articles (Author withheld).

We can see the evolution of the actor networks in our case vignettes as the development of associations and alliances between academics and practitioners that were enrolled by the status of their respective institutions and mobilised various material and human actants in the promotion of knowledge that was relevant to their mutual interests. In the KNOWNET case we found that the interplay between

academic researchers, consultants and practitioners led to the development of ‘tools’ – i.e. concepts and frameworks – which could be readily translated into existing managerial practices. In the FIFRM case, relevant knowledge emerged from the collective elaboration of policy relevant discourses. For example, discourses on corporate social responsibility, outsourcing, the reluctant consumer, and regulation all came out of discussions with members and were then developed by one or more of the practitioners. However, the development of a consumer trust index for the industry as a longitudinal research tool has captured the attention to such an extent as to render the actor network close to becoming an obligatory passage point. This is not surprising given that the index is quite positive<sup>9</sup> at a time – 2008/9 – when the industry has gone through a whirlwind of turmoil. The comparison between the two actor networks thus highlights the way in which relevant knowledge emerges from the interplay between problematizing themes, networks in formation and the social practices of different actors.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have gone in search of relevance through a comparative, theoretically driven analysis of academic-practitioner collaborations. Here reflections based on actual experience of developing such collaboration were developed through theoretical perspectives into a deeper analysis of the conditions that create knowledge and make it relevant to different groups.

In developing our analysis of relevance, we sought to move beyond the view – widely shared both by academic commentators and policy makers – that relevance is simply a question of the diffusion of knowledge from academic theory to business practice. The major flaws in this view are not to do with the immutable integrity of academic research practices (Macdonald and Kam, 2007). Rather, the flaws derive from overlooking the ways in which knowledge is created and applied through management practices. The upshot, though, is that the differences between academics and practitioners are not readily bridged simply through better forms of communication, as is often advocated. This is not to deny the potential virtue for

practitioners of the academic's scholarly, cautious and critical approach to knowledge. Nor is it to assume that academics have nothing to learn from collaborating with practitioners. Through a discussion of our experience of collaborating with business, we have shown that there are mutual benefits. However, we refrain from an assumption that embracing relevance implies the acceptance of a managerialist view of organizational and social problems, just as we resist the demand that relevance should determine how research is conducted methodologically and epistemologically.

Given the limitations of a diffusionist approach, this paper has focussed primarily on two alternative approaches to relevance. These provide very different insights on the ways in which relevance is produced. By highlighting the constraints of Mode 1 mechanisms, Mode 2 offers some valuable insights on the production of relevant knowledge. However, as with other institutional accounts (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Munir and Phillips, 2005), Mode 2 theory is less capable of explaining change and the role of agency in overcoming constraints. By placing the emphasis on re-drawing institutional boundaries it neglects the importance of transgressing existing boundaries. Actor network theory, by contrast, is ontologically grounded in the transgression of boundaries and it enables us to understand how both material and human agents enrol one another in 'chains of translation' as complex associations and alliances are assembled as actor networks. Also as we have found in our consortia, the public interest in such things, for example, as social exclusion, CSR, innovation, trust, technological development, and knowledge in a broad sense can be matched with the private interests of our practitioners in building public relations, and strengthening their organizations. Consequently, and as also revealed by studies from different national institutional contexts (Swan et al., 2007), the ability to transgress and blur institutional boundaries is very important in the production of relevant knowledge. In contrast to Mode 2 theory, the ANT approach may be more capable of grasping such boundary transgressions, and hence the emergence of relevant knowledge described here.

By applying theory to our empirical material, we are able to identify the institutional and practical conditions under which relevant knowledge is produced. This helps to advance understanding by demonstrating the emergent and unruly nature of the production of relevant knowledge – presenting this as, ultimately, the idiosyncratic result of the micro-dynamics of actor-network formation, rather than the programmatic outcome of wider institutional changes in university-business relationships. In consequence, our findings are a useful corrective to both pro and anti-normative stances adopted in the literature. For one, they challenge the view that there is an ‘unbridgeable gap’ between the worlds of practitioners and researchers (Keiser and Leiner, 2009). At the same time, they underline the highly situated nature of the dynamics of knowledge production, which make relevance such an obscure object of desire for policy-makers and practitioners. We trust that this analysis will prove valuable for those academics that have ventured into the minefield of industry-academic collaborations and that it helps free them from unrealistic demands to resolve management problems. This may also be of value for public policy that sometimes is inclined to assume a simplistic linear yet discredited view of the diffusion of knowledge from academia to industry or theory to practice.

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**Table 1: Modes of knowledge production**

<i>Features of knowledge production</i>	<b>MODE 1</b>	<b>MODE 2</b>
<i>Focus of knowledge</i>	Problems defined by academic community	Knowledge produced in context of application
<i>Disciplinarity</i>	Disciplinary knowledge	Transdisciplinary knowledge
<i>Form of knowledge</i>	Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
<i>Governance</i>	Hierarchical and stable organizations	Heterarchical and transient organizations
<i>Accountability</i>	Quality control by the 'invisible college'	Socially accountable and reflexive

**Table 2: Academic-practitioner networks from a Mode 2 perspective**

<b><i>FEATURES OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION</i></b>	<b>KNOWNET</b>	<b>FIFRM</b>
<b><i>Focus of knowledge</i></b>	Shift from academic focus to sharing of practitioner concerns and experiences, development of tools	Independent academic focus combined with practitioner interests. Overall sectoral focus.
<b><i>Forms of knowledge</i></b>	Multiple forms of knowledge – conceptual and practical forms, but with increasing emphasis on managerial ‘tools’	Focused around strategic issues related to consumption, distribution, education and regulation
<b><i>Disciplinarity</i></b>	Deepening specialization around practitioner concerns rather than transdisciplinarity	Degrees of transdisciplinarity between economics, sociology, HRM, IT, organizational analysis, and marketing but determined largely by academic participants and practitioner delegates
<b><i>Governance</i></b>	Move from academic control to a more heterarchical organization in which academics, consultants and member firms all exerted significant influence.	Predominantly academic through the Research Planning Group advising the Steering Committee but increasingly heterarchical as the latter exercises its power to propose and veto activities. Heavily steered, however, by the Executive Director
<b><i>Accountability</i></b>	Increasing accountability to practitioner members via the KNOWNET Steering Committee. Important role played by freelance consultants highlighting member interests.	Increasingly accountable to practitioner members but the Executive Director steers the meeting in the direction already agreed by the Research Planning Group of academics.

**Table 3: Actor-Network Formation in Academic-practitioner networks**

<b>MOMENTS OF TRANSLATION</b>	<b>KNOWNET</b>	<b>FIFRM</b>
<b>Problematization</b>	The development and implications of KM practices.	The new industry of financial services created through regulatory change
<b>Interessement</b>	Initial core group of more advanced KM practitioners and link to high status Business School became an attractor for other organizations.	The only cross sector group combining banking, building societies and insurance. Common interests and concern to eradicate poor image due to regulatory scandals.
<b>Enrolment</b>	Development of special interest groups that enabled greater specialization of interest and another level of involvement via the KNOWNET website and portal.	Network with industry and academics and later with government departments, regulators, consumer bodies and voluntary groups. These served as important allies in recruitment and retention.
<b>Mobilization</b>	Workshop events in high quality venues, and featuring leading KM 'gurus' and experts. Participation in workshop activities leading to ongoing project and special interest group activities.	Corporate brand image; prestigious venues and endorsements; website; glossy brochures and research reports; steering committee enlargement. Growth of the chief executive's alignments and associations to the point where he could be mobilized to speak on behalf of the actor-network

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<sup>1</sup> **Notes**

<sup>2</sup> \* For a detailed history of the trials and tribulations of business schools (see Khurana, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> The competitive pursuit of this privileged status is examined in some detail in Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007: Chap. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Indirectly, of course, much of this literature draws on earlier academic discourses.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of author confidentiality in reviewing, these networks are identified by pseudonyms. The identity of the networks can be revealed should the paper be accepted.

<sup>6</sup> This section benefited from the comments of Prof....

<sup>7</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a UK government invention designed to raise the productivity of academics. UK academics are assessed every few years on the basis of the quality of a minimum number (4 at present) of publications and this determines the research proportion of national funding for the university.

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed description of this Forum can be found in Chapter 6 of Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007).

<sup>9</sup> An interesting side issue here is how each new technology is given priority in communications such that our use of faxes had fairly immediate communicative effects in helping to enrol actors into the network.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ifaonline.co.uk/public/showPage.html?page=ifa2006\\_articleimport&tempPageName=857405](http://www.ifaonline.co.uk/public/showPage.html?page=ifa2006_articleimport&tempPageName=857405);  
[http://www.ifaonline.co.uk/public/showPage.html?page=ifa2006\\_articleimport&tempPageName=857405](http://www.ifaonline.co.uk/public/showPage.html?page=ifa2006_articleimport&tempPageName=857405)