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IIMs need to ponder whether they should invest research into a straitjacket, and if not, how they can build a research ecosystem that institutionally encourages the pursuit of relevance and plurality.

Many of my friends outside academia will express surprise when I tell them that the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) run strong doctoral programmes in management. Indeed, research in popular perception is equated in terms of more visible domains of scientific endeavor—such as computer or biological sciences. In contrast, in a field like management, which is part science and part art, academic research can appear esoteric, irrelevant or simply useless. The abstruse nature of most B-school research publications means that they are usually read only by fellow academics, making fundamental questions about their purpose, relevance and future direction.

When it comes to business research, American B-schools provide the dominant paradigm. In the US, doctoral programmes, including in business, are typically offered only in bigger, research-focused universities. Admission is competitive, and programmes offered are only by lower-ranked B-schools usually meet minimum quality standards. Post-PHD, there is a challenge of finding and then retaining a tenure-track faculty position, with B-schools making faculty tenure/promotion decisions based primarily on an applicant’s research productivity.

The more prestigious the B-school, the greater the focus on research, and the more restrictive the list of journals that are recognized for tenure decisions. Research rankings of B-schools by external agencies (for example, the UT Dallas ranking) also focus heavily on this narrow set of journals, and B-schools frequently vie with one another to improve their research rank. Faculty pay and prestige among peers depend mainly on their research output, and since professors are in high demand globally.

Yet, must this be the case? The near-universality of the American model is not without some obvious downsides. While there’s a consensus about the rigors of publishing in top-tier US journals, it is difficult to publish consistently in them unless one has access to specialized datasets and is part of a tightly coupled network of scholarly connections. Papers must conform to certain structural norms and speak to some canonical discourse in the area of contribution. Sophisticated analysis is preferred just for its own sake; speculative research topics are often chosen considering publication potential and data availability, and results from various studies on the same relationship often end up all over the map.

In addition, because B-school rankings and faculty reviews are so intimately linked to research, counsels may have the urge to ‘game’ publications, for example by presenting results that work, but not reporting otherwise important findings that don’t. As a result, there is a greater number of publishing business research that is relevant, with certain exceptions, business journals are neither read by industry managers nor factored in by governments in making policy choices. Indeed, much of what influences an academic contribution is simply unavailable from a practitioner’s perspective.

That is because, unlike in IIMs, many faculty members even in well-known US universities hardly do much executive education or consulting. Although this frees up time for research, it results in publications that are divorced from the realities of the corporate world. In hindsight, publishing in top-tier journals becomes an end in itself, enhancing faculty careers and earning them bragging rights among their peers.

Nonetheless, US business school norms of publication and tenure are pretty much the gold standard globally, and although IIMs have a loose tenure system (for example, faculty members at IIMs earn an 80-year age, unlike in the US where faculty members voluntarily decide when to retire, which is usually around 75), there appears to be a strong consensus among academic decision-makers within the IIM system and in the government that research is the way to go. As a result, there are ongoing efforts aimed at further strengthening the Fellow Programme in Management (equivalent to PhD) offered by IIMs, making the process of granting tenure (conferment) to new faculty more rigorous, and increasing faculty numbers via variable pay linked to research productivity. And when it comes to defining what is meant by research, there is a default recognition of the need to move towards the dominant US-led system.

Admittedly, there are certain advantages of focusing on publishing in top-tier journals. It enhances faculty and institute prestige, aids in global recruitment, improves institute rankings, and promotes better integration with global business academia. As scholars based in India start speaking in the same language.

As such, should IIMs wholeheartedly move towards the US research paradigm, and if all that the answer depends on what we see as the core mandate of IIMs.

Should research—rather than postgraduate teaching, executive training or consulting—be given pride of place in IIMs? Or should it be a more holistic system that finds equal merit in all of these, with each reinforcing the other? The answer depends on what we see as the core mandate of IIMs.

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