

Article

Agenda for Practice-Oriented Research: From Relevance versus Rigor to Relevance with Rigor

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Despite continuous recognition of the need for research that matters for practice, most of our research makes negligible impact on practice. We suggest a need to change the way we perceive practical impact and outline a definition of what research that matters for practice is. We develop an agenda for conducting research that meets our definition, assigning explicit roles for the academic scholars that produce research and the institutional environment that oversees their research, referring to academic institutions, journals, and academic associations. We call for scholars to change the way they view academic research and its role in society.

Many of the research insights that international business (IB) scholars generate seldom leave the academic world and make little difference outside of this domain. As social scientists, many of us see our ultimate purpose in explaining the world rather than fixing it, and we allocate our intellectual energy accordingly. This approach reflects an (often implicit) assumption that conducting applied research is not where our strength lies and hence should be left for other constituencies. In parallel, the world of practice grapples with real-life phenomena that we are well equipped to address. This situation creates a mismatch between the supply and demand for knowledge and represents an inefficient use of the intellectual capital we collectively have to offer evidence-based insight into practice. This oversight is troubling throughout management disciplines, but it is particularly disturbing in international business, given the complexity of the issues associated with these activities – e.g., the relationships between international investors and governments – and the challenges of addressing them (Eden & Nielsen, 2020).

Calls for practical relevance have proliferated throughout IB (Fainshmidt, Haensel, & Andrews, 2021; Fayerweather, 1986; Van Assche, 2022; Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, & Prencipe, 2021), as well as management and strategy, for decades (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Hoffman, 2021; Van de Ven, 2007), but little progress has been made in closing the relevance gap. If anything, academic research has become less accessible for practitioners as the demand for academic rigor has escalated and the theoretical and

methodological intricacy of academic research has increased (Eckhardt & Wetherbe, 2014; Simsek, Bansal, Shaw, Heugens, & Smith, 2018). This theoretical orientation is particularly disquieting in an applied, practice-oriented field as IB. Other such disciplines, like medicine and law, appear to be considerably more oriented to practice. Medical research does not stay in the laboratory, nor is it judged by its publication record alone. Rather, its ultimate test is in its effectiveness in treating and preventing disease. Rarely do we test the effectiveness of our research in addressing the challenges that the IB business and policy communities confront.

In this article, we seek to address this concern and propose ways forward to tackle it. We surmise that our scholarly community is best equipped to provide evidence-based insight into the challenges of practitioners, and ought to be at the forefront of discussions of ways in which they can be addressed.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH THAT MATTERS FOR PRACTICE: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The approach we advocate in this article towards practice-oriented research is based on two fundamental beliefs. The first *sine qua non* condition towards this end is that practice-oriented research should build on the foundations of solid scientific inquiry. The relevance debate in academia is often formulated in terms of relevance versus rigor. Instead, we posit that the type of practice-oriented – and hence rele-

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Table 1. Agenda for Practice-Oriented Research in IB

	Scholars	Academic Institutions			Examples: Best practices	
		Universities, Business School	Journals	Associations	General	IB
Intent/ commitment	View of scholarships and its goals	Reward systems	Review process	Membership	Granting agencies	JIBP AIB Insights
Familiarity/ engagement	Questions addressed; knowledge of challenges	Foster engagement with practice	Practitioners on editorial boards	Promote engagement with practice during events, e.g., international organizations	SMS society and journals; AEA; Journal of World Trade	Journal of World Investment and Trade
Outreach	Engagement with practice	Visibility in the practice milieu	Distribution venues, mailing lists	Communication channels	HBR ISDS	AIB- UNCTAD

vant – research we seek to promote derives its transformative power from the rigor of the scholarship on which it is based and the scientific robustness of its findings. We advocate the employment of the methodological and theoretical toolkit at our disposal to address challenges for which practitioners seek guidance.

Second, and more critical of current academic practices, we reason that the failure to inform practice originates in an inadequate view of practical relevance. What goes as ‘implications for practice’ is often more theoretical than practical. Even when scholars deal with real-world issues and draw practical implications, these are seldom concrete and specific enough to be of use to practitioners. Hence, we call for “seeing research that matter for practice in new ways” (Simsek et al., 2018). We define such research as one that descends from the abstract, theoretical level to the actual real-life practical challenges that practitioners deal with. It results in specific recommendations or options for a concrete course of action that practitioners should take to address these challenges, and it has a recordable influence (Van Assche, 2022). The litmus test for practice-oriented research is not that it “contributes to the literature,” but rather that it provides relevant new insights for practitioners. Such research advances or challenges the way practitioners think about their work and potentially changes the way they implement it.

We argue that joint efforts are required by two constituencies to produce research that meets our definition of research that matters for practice: scholars who produce research, and academic institutions – universities and business schools, journals, associations – whose reward systems have the power to shape scholars’ incentives and the nature and orientation of their scholarship and foster its visibility to practice. We view these constituencies as highly interdependent, each playing respective roles in the conduct of research that matters for practice. The outcome we advocate requires changes by both constituencies in the way they conduct their affairs.

We identify the audience for the practical research we advocate as including both managers and policymakers.

However, we submit that the need for IB research with practical implications is more acute in relation to the latter. The absence of feedback from market forces as the compass that guides firms’ conduct turns policymaking into a more complex task that requires more evidence-informed advice (Hewlett Foundation, 2018; Schmidt-King, 2020).

Below, we outline an agenda for the conduct of practice-oriented research and its execution by scholars and academic institutions. This agenda consists of three components: (1) intent to conduct practice-oriented research and commitment to its pursuit; (2) familiarity with the world of practice and understanding of the challenges that practitioners confront; and (3) dedicated outreach efforts to bring the research output to the attention of its intended audience. While many of our arguments apply to research across disciplines and audiences, our orientation is decidedly IB, and we illustrate our arguments with reference to IB research. These principles are summarized in [Table 1](#) and elaborated below.

INTENT TO CONDUCT PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH

To conduct research that matters for practice, IB scholars need to want to do so and feel able to accomplish the task. All too often, neither of these conditions hold. Many researchers appear to believe that practical implications are of lower value compared with the pursuit of “pure science.” Hence, they conduct research that is scientifically novel and interesting but does not address problems of interest to practitioners (Buckley, Doh, & Benischke, 2017). There is also a sense that conducting research for practice is not where IB scholarship’s comparative advantage rests, particularly when focusing on policy questions, and that academic training does not prepare one to do so. An often-heard self-criticism is indeed that IB is a largely self-contained discipline with its own jargon, terminologies and methodologies that are considered alien and inaccessible to practitioners (Van Assche, 2018).

From the bottom up, strengthening practice-oriented research requires scholars to change their view of their trade and its ultimate goals. The typical approach towards practical research is to view impact as an ex-post outcome of the research findings. However, conducting impactful research requires that the practical orientation dictates the research questions and the research design. Practical recommendations should be the main goal of an article, rather than an afterthought buried in a conclusion, as is all too often the case in the so-called implications for practice. In the context of IB policy, for example, the overarching aim for research should be to inform policymakers what concrete instruments they can use to shape MNEs' corporate behavior in order to address leading societal challenges (Sauvant, 2021; Van Assche, 2022).

From the top down, institutions should strengthen their commitment to practice-oriented research by adjusting the incentive systems in a manner that is consistent with their priorities. Academic institutions should incorporate explicit recognition of practical research in recruitment and promotion considerations. Currently, these decisions are based almost entirely on scientific research that is published in leading journals based on their impact ratings and rankings. Granting agencies could offer a model to follow. Agencies in, e.g., Australia, Canada, and the European Union increasingly place the influence of research on society centrally in their evaluation criteria. The UK includes research impact in its frameworks for assessing research at universities. Academic institutions should adopt a similar approach.

Expectations could in this respect vary between tenured and untenured faculty. The tenure process evaluates junior faculty predominantly based on research skills, which we put at the heart of practice-oriented research (the *sine qua non* condition). Successful passage of this stage demonstrates faculty capabilities to conduct high-quality scientific research. Passed this stage, tenured faculty should be encouraged to put these skills for use in practice. Academic institutions need to develop evaluation metrics of success and incentivize practical research by incorporating it in the evaluation criteria for past-tenure promotions, such as full professorships, chair positions and internal grants. Academic institutions should allocate resources accordingly, for instance, by extending financial support to faculty participation in industry and policy-oriented events. They should also create venues for the engagement of faculty with practice and give wide publicity to policy-oriented faculty research.

The commitment of academic journals for practice-oriented research must be apparent in their evaluation criteria and review process. Many journals include in their policy statements and submission guidelines requirements for implications for practice – but this is seldom among the major evaluation criteria in the review process. Nor is the review process suited for evaluating such a requirement. Rather, the typical editorial process is based predominantly on inputs from academics, with minimal contributions by reviewers with practical experience. Editorial teams consist overwhelmingly of academic scholars, selected based on academic qualifications accrued to them by virtue of publications in academic journals. In the absence of channels for feedback from practitioners, journals have limited ability to

judge the value of papers for practice and to improve scholars' ability to deliver them. Publishing research with practical orientation requires participation of practitioners in the review and editorial decision process.

The IB community has made concerted efforts towards addressing this problem with the introduction of the *Journal of International Business Policy* and *AIB Insights*, publication venues with an explicit practical orientation. In the *Journal of International Business Policy*, for example, most members of the editorial team have extensive consulting experience for international organizations and national governments; they regularly assign practitioners as reviewers; and they pay attention to the policy relevance of manuscripts in their editorial decisions. These routines should be pursued more vigorously and systematically. Editors of IB journals should explicitly ask reviewers to evaluate the relevance of an article for practitioners (the litmus test) and should ensure that at least one reviewer is a practitioner or practitioner-oriented researcher. Pursuing these steps will help IB journals to move towards a new emphasis on relevance.

FAMILIARITY WITH THE WORLD OF PRACTICE AND ITS CHALLENGES VIA ENGAGEMENT

Conducting practice-oriented research that leaves a mark necessitates knowledge of the phenomena it seeks to study – the world of practice. Such knowledge is most effectively gained via direct engagements with practitioners, as they enable scholars to identify concrete challenges faced by practitioners for which research-based evidence could offer remedy. Direct engagements also enable scholars to recognize connections and observe complementarities between academic and practical knowledge systems, and open opportunities for cross-fertilization and feedback (Simsek et al., 2018). Moreover, engagements with practice enable scholars to develop an understanding of execution challenges practitioners confront, making their recommendations realistic and manageable (Van Assche, 2022).

IB scholars, however, rarely interact with practitioners and have limited knowledge of their concerns and constraints. Their professional networks tend to include predominantly other scholars, who serve as their major sources of inspiration and research ideas. This concern is particularly acute in relation to engagement with policymakers. The course of academic careers typically involves more opportunities for engagement with firms and managers than with policymakers. As teachers, we are confronted by practical managerial issues and engage with practicing managers. There are fewer venues for similar fertilization between scholarship and practice in relation to policymaking. As a result, we tend to be more acquainted with managerial issues than with those that confront policymakers.

Academic associations are well positioned to foster such engagements. As the largest assemblies of experts in their respective fields, academic associations garner legitimacy and credibility as the ultimate source of knowledge in their fields, and they enjoy the influence that such a position awards. This should be used to nurture engagement of their members with practice. The recently established AIB-UNC-TAD partnership is an excellent model for such an engage-

ment. It should be replicated – especially with organizations that have rule-shaping and rule-making functions – such as the WTO, the World Bank Group, the UN Regional Commissions, the African Union, and the OECD, with a view towards ascertaining the concrete issues with which these organizations are grappling. Such engagement should not only involve staff of these organizations, but policymakers linked to them as well. AIB should pro-actively organize webinars that bring together staff of these organizations, delegates to them, and interested AIB members to discuss the real policy concerns with which policymakers grapple (Cuervo-Cazurra, Doh, Giuliani, Montiel, & Park, 2022). Similar actions should be undertaken in relation to firms, for instance by engagements with global industry associations and chambers of commerce.

Engagement with practitioners will also enable scholars to present their research in a manner that is accessible for practitioners, and perceived as relevant for them, using language and writing style that are meaningful for them. This is a condition for making an impact. This task is challenging due to fundamental differences between the outcomes scholars and practitioners seek. Researchers search for abstract, generalizable patterns and regularities in relationships; parsimonious theories and frameworks applicable to wide empirical concepts and contexts are the “holy grail” of scholarship. Practitioners, in contrast, are interested in concrete recommendations that can be implemented in a specific context. Further, scholarly research often points at inconclusive and mixed evidence. Practitioners seek simplicity, direct causality, and answers to specific challenges they face, ideally with a menu of actions that would yield desired outcomes. President Truman’s famous quote, “Give me a one-handed economist. All my economists say ‘on one hand...’, then ‘but on the other...’” vividly demonstrates this divide.

The practical research that we advocate requires consideration of these differences in logic, motivations, and frames of reference between scholars and practitioners. It entails supplementing abstract patterns of insights and generalizable theories with context-specific, concrete guidance with attributable outcomes. There is also a need to explicitly demonstrate the utility of research for practice. Audiences’ attention is drawn to information that is perceived as having utility.

Academic journals have an important role to play here. They should require the “translation” of research findings and their presentation in a manner that is accessible for practitioners. Some practice-oriented journals have accomplished this goal, with varying levels of success. The *Harvard Business Review* is widely read by practitioners, with global paid circulation of 340,000 in fourteen languages. Other practice-oriented journals, like the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *California Management Review*, and *Foreign Affairs*, also attract practitioners.

The task is more challenging for the more academic-oriented journals, but a few journals have successfully mixed

academic research and policy-driven papers that are read by policymakers. The *Journal of World Trade* and the *Journal of World Investment and Trade* are cases in point. The Strategic Management Society has long added a requirement for a managerial abstract to all papers published in its journals seeking to reach managers. This is a good start in that it hopefully serves to whet practitioners’ appetite to read underlying articles, but more should be done beyond asking for additional practice-oriented content from the authors. Journals could create a new Area Editor who would work with authors to develop an effective practice-oriented message in their abstract and social media posts.

OUTREACH EFFORTS TO BRING RESEARCH TO THE ATTENTION OF ITS INTENDED AUDIENCE

Ultimately, making an impact requires reaching the target audience. For IB research to make a difference to practice, it needs to reach practitioners. Academic institutions can play a role in achieving this task. Universities and business schools should make deliberate efforts to make publicity for their faculty’s policy-oriented research in venues read by practitioners. Academic journals need to share research published in these outlets beyond academia by extending their distribution venues to practitioners’ milieus. The *Harvard Business Review*, which is featured on newsstands around the world, is a case in point.

Academic associations should employ their visibility and ability to attract the attention of outsiders to their activities to serve as a platform for the visibility of their members’ research relevant to practitioners. The Strategic Management Society and the American Economic Association offer compelling examples for this approach. Their membership is composed of academics, business practitioners and consultants, and they actively seek to foster contacts and exchange among their constituencies.

As the foremost institution of IB, the Academy of International Business is well-positioned to do the same, by producing and disseminating knowledge that tackles practical problems, and initiating active engagement with practice. AIB should see itself as a facilitator of knowledge not only for core IB scholars, but also for practitioners. The AIB should publicize more actively its activities, e.g., by encouraging media coverage of its conferences through the targeted invitation of journalists, to increase the visibility of its members’ research.

The AIB should furthermore establish venues for direct inputs by its members into ongoing negotiations in IB-related areas. A model for such an approach could be the Academic Forum on investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS),¹ established by scholars whose inputs into the reform of investor-state dispute settlement have had ramifications for the international investment law and policy regime. The AIB could establish similar Forums, geared, for example, to the WTO negotiations on an investment facilitation for development agreement (Sauvant, 2021) – an area in which

¹ <https://www.jus.uio.no/pluricourts/english/projects/leginvest/academic-forum/>

IB scholars have much to say. Similar inputs could be made into the updating of the OECD's Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises, which is being considered this year by the OECD Secretariat and delegates. A number of other thinktanks and transnational institutions, such as the WEF, WB, IMF, can be targeted for similar initiatives.

IN CLOSING

At some level, we all probably agree that the role of IB scholarship should extend beyond academia, and that our goal should be to employ our knowledge to better the state of the world. In this article, we sought to outline ways by which this goal could be translated into action, specifying directions for change for scholars and academic institutions as the consistencies that determine this outcome. For the many of us who strive to make the world a better place, and leave their mark on the way it evolves, we offer a way to do so.

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