

Scholarly activity of successful business researchers in the tertiary sector – research proposal

Adrian France
Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec)

ABSTRACT

There are increasing pressures on tertiary institutions and academics to produce research. In New Zealand the pressure to conduct research comes from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) and other professional accreditation bodies (such as the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants [NZICA]). While the pressure increases there appears to be little published discussion of the scholarly activity of researchers and what distinguishes the practices of ‘successful’ researchers. Previously published research available has used quantitative approaches, drawing on research output databases or surveys. This paper is a research proposal to investigate scholarly activities of ‘successful’ researchers using a qualitative approach. Qualitative data using interviews is proposed to be collected from tertiary academic researchers and analysed.

Keywords: scholarship, activity, research, PBRF, universities.



INTRODUCTION

There are increasing pressures on tertiary institutions and academics to produce research. In New Zealand the pressure to conduct research comes from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) and other professional accreditation bodies (such as the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants [NZICA]). While the pressure increases there appears to be little published discussion of the scholarly activity of researchers and what distinguishes the practices of 'successful' researchers. There are various textbooks that indicate how research should be initiated and conducted. However, little research has substantiated the claims within research textbooks. Research textbooks indicate what scholarly activity is required by researchers while little research has been published on the activities of researchers while constrained by their dichotomous role of lecturer and researcher. There appears to be little published discussion of the scholarly activity required by researchers. This research investigates what scholarly activity, to generate and produce research, is undertaken by New Zealand researchers who might be considered 'successful'. The study is intended to capture current 'best research practice', as guidance for developing researchers and those wishing to advance their research in a pressured PBRF environment.

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

There is little attention in the literature regarding selection, design, and conduct of research activities. Many textbooks discuss the issues surrounding the formulation of a research project without regard for the situation of the researcher. There are also few rigorous investigations into the practice of researchers. Sadler (1999) provides a discussion of choices that need to be made in a researcher's career, but does not include the regular activities of researchers.

Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (2001) provide a discussion of how a developing researcher should select a topic and narrow their topic selection¹. The book also discussed what resources could be chosen for a researcher to refer to, in the event that a topic cannot be chosen or narrowed down. This is one of the few of many research textbooks that provide possible avenues for developing researchers to turn to. These processes of choosing a topic and narrowing the topic into a manageable topic and research question are almost absent from the credible journal publications.

Further, most well written academic journal articles provide background, a theoretical framework, and methodology that indicate why the research is important and significant to study. Yet, few of these articles indicate why and how the researchers chose their topics and research questions.

Mewett (2002) provides a personal account of a PhD research topic that evolved and changed from the initial question. Mewett was undertaking participant observation research and found that the reason for research subjects to conceal information became the research topic. The research topic changed while conducting the data collection rather than the literature research. The topic of the research evolved in the research process. There has been little investigation into the process of topic selection and accommodating changes in the research process.

Crick (2002) provides a personal account illustrating the effect that research results have on submitting research for publication. Due to the research results of the study giving a

¹ These authors focus on postgraduate researchers, but the same principals can be applied to researchers who are academic staff members and teachers.

poor impression to the subjects and the funding organisation of the research, the research could not be published. It would be equally likely that certain topics may not be as fashionable, or contentious, and therefore may not receive the same interest from potential journal editors. Christensen, Finger, and Latham (2002) find that new scholars commonly use journals not in their specialist discipline as publication outlets. Ryan, Scarpens, and Theobald (1992) provide a list of reasons why articles submitted for journal publications are rejected, including their subject matter.

The potential to be accepted or rejected for publication can have an effect on the researcher's choice of subject matter and topic. Talib (2001) finds that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in Britain has an influence on the choice of research topic and research management by academics. Similarly, it would be interesting to find out what potential effect publications and research topics have on the researcher's scholarly activity.

It appears to be a common understanding that some of the initial publications made by academics arise from their PhD thesis. Chapters from a PhD thesis could be rewritten to form journal articles in scholarly journals. Zivney, Bertin, and Gavin (1995) provide data of accounting faculty that indicates early publications result from supervised study, such as a thesis or dissertation. Early publications resulting from guidance while completing a thesis or dissertation are referred to as the dissertation effect. In addition to the dissertation effect another career stage effect is the behaviour of researchers upon reaching tenure. Research findings suggest that once academic researchers pass their probationary period and gain tenure at an institution, the amount of research output per year decreases (see Swanson, 2004; Zivney, Bertin, Gavin, 1995; Talib, 2001; Talib, 2002). Little is known about the interrelationship of the dissertation and tenure and research.

In addition to career and extrinsic influences there are intrinsic influences on the academic researcher. Bailey (1994) writes that intrinsic motivation is more important than extrinsic rewards and that it is important how rewards are used to encourage research in universities. Institutional effects on research include resources, philosophies, and expectations.

Other, mainly undocumented, influences on researchers include the unique and personal skills, experiences, and characteristics of the individual researcher and the practice, habits, and daily routines. Those influences and activities that are documented are typically descriptions of individual research papers or projects. De Lange (2005) documents the publication process with a research paper as an example to illustrate barriers and requirements of gaining journal publication. See also Perry (2002); Frost & Stablein (1992).

This review has revealed that a number of issues about how researchers select, design, conduct and publish their research are given only limited attention in the existing literature. Also much of this prior research has used quantitative approaches from research output databases or surveys. There exists little research documenting successful researchers' own descriptions of, and reflections on, the scholarly activities they undertake. This research will address this gap.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This proposal aims to qualitatively investigate the scholarly activities of researchers and document those activities. The leading aim of the research is to investigate: what activities of academic researchers contribute to generating and producing successful researchers?

This research addresses the lack of research on the practice of generating successful research and thereby provides guidance for developing researchers who are themselves seeking to become successful.

This study will aim to provide more our understanding of the practices and activity required for successful research. The understanding and framework can then be practically used within tertiary institutions to improve the research activity and output of novice and successful researchers

CONDUCT OF DATA COLLECTION

The research outlined above indicates that researchers are influenced by daily activities, personal characteristics, career stages, professional associations, and institutional environments. As few studies have investigated the scholarly activities of academic researchers, there are few hypotheses and results to generalise. The author proposes an investigation into scholarly activities of researchers, using a qualitative approach, to identify best practice to provide guidance for developing researchers. Academic researchers will be directly spoken to in an interview and asked to describe and reflect on their research practices and the extent to which they have contributed to their success as a researcher.

Most academic researchers are presumed to be busy with teaching duties during the academic semester, so it is envisaged to interview people during the teaching recess. The interviews will be conducted at the interviewee's office, which provides a quiet, comfortable, and familiar environment for the interviewee. The interviews will be recorded using tape recorders.

POTENTIAL INTERVIEWEES

Subjects are those who could be considered successful researchers but not necessarily the most successful. Promotion of academic staff members in tertiary institutes is often obtained through a reasonable amount of research so those who have reached the status of professor or associate professor provide initial selection.

To be successful, a reasonable number of significant research projects would have been completed, so participants must have completed a minimum of four research papers in the last five years.

The selection criteria, of professor and four research papers, could lead to members that are chosen due to the tertiary institutions they belong to providing plentiful research time and resources compared to other institutions. As universities are considered to require lecturers to teach less than in polytechnics and technology institutes, the chosen subjects are likely to be from universities. A limitation of this study is therefore the narrow generalisation of selecting only university researchers. Results may differ with a different definition of "successful".

Most academic researchers are presumed to be busy with teaching duties during the academic semester, so it is envisaged to interview people during the teaching recess. The interviews will be conducted at the interviewee's office, which provides a quiet, comfortable, and familiar environment for the interviewee. The interviews will be recorded using tape recorders.

An interview guide for semi-structured interviews is attached. Academic researchers will be directly spoken to in an interview. A face-to-face interview will be conducted with a minimum of eleven interviewees. Interviews will be conducted in a face-to-face setting to obtain recorded transcription. Other interview methods of phone and video conferencing will be used for any further additional interviewees or follow up interviews. Email and letter gathering methods will be used for later projects to generalise the findings from this qualitative research.

CONCLUSION

The increasing pressures to research exist in New Zealand and elsewhere with little published or substantiated best practice for new, emerging, or experienced researchers to draw upon. As few studies have investigated the scholarly activities of academic researchers, there are few hypotheses and results to generalise. Researchers may be influenced by daily activities, personal characteristics, career stages, professional associations, and institutional environments. The author proposes to investigate the scholarly activities in a qualitative approach to identify best practice to provide guidance for developing researchers. Academic researchers will be directly spoken to in an interview and asked to describe and reflect on their research practices and the extent to which those practices have contributed to their success as a researcher.

DRAFT INTERVIEW GUIDE:

Theme one – Publications

1. What are five significant research outputs you have attained to date?
2. Could you take one of your first published studies and share the process that you went through in arriving at and developing this idea.
3. What changes did you have to make to your initial research to get it published?

Theme two – Person characteristics

4. What qualifications & experience did you have prior to the first publications?
5. What have you considered important for you to produce successful research?
6. What are your priorities of work?
7. How do you organise your time to do research?
8. How important do you believe your research to be as part of your job?

Theme three – Scholarly environment

9. Describe your work day yesterday.
10. Describe a typical research day or block of research time.
11. What affiliations do you belong to and how have they provided research benefits?
12. Explain the rewards you receive from research.
13. Explain the philosophical position of your department.
14. What literature do you choose to keep up with and how much time is spent on reading literature?

Theme three – Conceptual reasoning

15. What does it take to produce research that is considered memorable or significant by your peers?
16. What differences do you think exist between research when you began your career and research today?
17. What has made you a successful researcher while others struggle?
18. What advice do you have for someone beginning an academic research role?

REFERENCES

- Bailey, J. G. (1994). Influences on researchers' commitment. *Higher Education Management*, 6 (2), 23-35.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., & Tight, M. (2001). *How to research*. (2nd ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Christensen, A. L., Finger, C. A., & Latham, C. K. (2002). New accounting scholars' publications in accounting and non-accounting journals. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 17, 3, 233-251.
- Crick, M. (2002). Shifting identities in the research process: an essay in personal anthropology. In *Doing fieldwork: Eight personal accounts of social research*. Perry, J (Eds.). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- De Lange, P. A. (2005). The long road to publishing: A user-friendly expose. *Accounting Education*, 14 (2), 133-168.
- Frost, P. J., & Stablein, R. E. (1992). *Doing exemplary research*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Mewett, P. (2002). Making a research topic: A continuing process. In: *Doing fieldwork: Eight personal accounts of social research*. Perry, J. (Eds.). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- Perry, J. (2002). *Doing fieldwork: Eight personal accounts of social research*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- Ryan, B., Scarpens, R. W., & Theobald, M. (1992). *Research method and methodology in finance and accounting*. London: Academic Press Ltd.
- Sadler, D. R. (1999). *Managing your academic career: Strategies for successful research career*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Swanson, E. P. (2004). Publishing in the majors: A comparison of accounting, finance, management, and marketing. *Contemporary Accounting Research*, 21 (1), 223-252.
- Talib, A. A. (2001). The continuing behavioural modification of academics since the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise. *Higher Education Review*, 33 (3), 30-46.
- Talib, A. A. (2002). The Research Assessment Exercise and motivation: A note on the difference in the impact on the active researchers and the non-active. *Higher Education Review*, 34 (2), 51-59.
- Zivney, T. L., Bertin, W. J., & Gavin, T. A. (1995). A comprehensive examination of accounting faculty publishing. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 10, 1, 1-9.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to acknowledge the feedback received on this paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Business, Hawaii, April 2006. Any errors or omissions are the author's.