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

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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 case vignettes of the authors' involvement in academic-practitioner collaborations. The resulting analysis assists us in understanding the production of knowledge relevant to practitioners and by implication has the potential to free industry-academic collaborations of unrealistic demands.

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Introduction

Our principal concern in this paper is to contribute to developing theory on the production of relevant knowledge in management[1]. The need for such 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. They do this on the basis of largely stylized accounts of the practices of academic researchers and management practitioners respectively. We avoid participating in this debate since it is grounded in what we consider the false belief that relevance is largely a matter of diffusing or failing to diffuse knowledge from academia to practice.

In contrast to the conventional emphasis on knowledge diffusion, our focus here is on developing better theory on the production of relevant knowledge, recognizing that the conditions under which knowledge is produced are central to its exploitation within the domain of practice. This contribution is developed firstly, by comparing and secondly, contrasting important theoretical lenses on the production of relevant knowledge. One lens is supplied by the work of the 'Mode 2' theorists (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). This 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'. These lenses are subsequently applied as an analytical framework for the examination of two case vignettes of academic-practitioner networks in which the authors played a key role.

As we will outline in the remainder of this paper, both of the theoretical lenses adopted here challenge the conventional distinctions between the production of knowledge by academic researchers and its use by practitioners. Similarly, they counter what we will term the 'diffusionist' view of relevance. They do so through focusing on the production of knowledge within and between academics and practitioners but also including other groups such as think-tanks, government agencies, and professional associations. At the same time, these lenses have been selected because their differences, in epistemology and ontology particularly, open up contrasting, and insightful perspectives on the conditions and dynamics of 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. These academic-practitioner networks represent an ambiguous and contested terrain on which 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. Rather knowledge is continuously developed, contested and negotiated through the intensive efforts, increased reflexivity and unintended outcomes of academic -practitioner interactions.

The paper is organized as follows. The first of three sections begins by discussing the evolving debate on academic-practitioner relationships, and unpacks certain 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 empirical case vignettes of academic-practitioner collaboration. It documents the trials and tribulations and the positive and negative conditions and consequences of pursuing such collaborations. The subsequent analysis of these experiences is developed through the comparative application of the lenses supplied by Mode 2 and ANT theory. 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 relevance has its historical roots in a growing reaction which can be traced back to the 1980's (Porter and McGibbin, 1988) against the domination of management education and research by highly technical or estoreric approaches which draw on the natural science model for their legitimacy. Since then this reaction has coalesced into a wider movement which criticizes business schools for privileging scientific rigour over relevance to practitioners (Beer, 2001; Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Van De Ven & Johnson 2006; Knights, 2008).

The 'crisis talk' around relevance has various drivers, including: 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[2]. Relevance is, of course, a social construct with 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 that trades on the fact that no one would wish to celebrate his or her irrelevance (Knights, 2008). It also often has the intended or unintended consequence of disciplining business academics to serve, rather than constructively criticize the practices and values of those whom they research and teach (ibid.).

The spread of the discourse of relevance 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. The argument that the best available academic research should inform managerial decisions and organizational practices (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006; Rousseau and McCarthy, 2007) has been formulated into demands for greater 'knowledge transfer' and 'evidence-based management'. Meanwhile, business schools have been encouraged to adopt 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 can be seen as reflecting a widely taken for granted assumption that relevance principally involves the more effective diffusion of academic knowledge. Such a diffusionist approach, however, is at odds with much recent work on the way in which knowledge travels across contexts (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 1996; Swan, 1997; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). This is not least because the concept of diffusion presumes knowledge to be complete prior to its application (Latour, 1993).

This questioning of the diffusionist approach seems especially appropriate 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, amongst others, 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.

This re-framing of relevance in terms of the demands of different forms of knowledge production represents an important development in the debate. To build on this insight, and move further 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 especially valuable in exploring the new problematic posed by the search for relevance. Such a multi-lens approach has been developed previously, in, for example, Morgan's (1986) work where multiple metaphors are used to explore case studies of organizational life. Likewise, other studies have applied different paradigmatic lenses to unpack complex organizational phenomena (Hassard 1991). This approach seems particularly appropriate to research problems that are highly contested and subject to opposing interpretations – as is the debate on relevance.

The Mode 2 lens on 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 (Gibbon et al., 1994). 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.' (ibid 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 ability 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 is 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 et al., 2003: 179). In response as much to these new found followers as to the critics of the original thesis, the Mode 2 authors sought in their next book (Nowotny et al., 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.

At the same time, these authors 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. This observation underlines the need to pay greater attention to the micro-dynamics of knowledge production and not only its institutional context (ibid.). At this point, in our argument, therefore, we turn to the powerful lens which ANT provides on such micro-dynamics.

The Actor Network Theory (ANT) lens on 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 towards 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 – the question of relevance, the increasing importance of consultants, and the possible marginalization of academics. It does this not as a moral challenge or imperative so much as by articulating the elements of a seamless web in which practitioners, intermediaries and academic researchers, and numerous non-human actants are all implicated. Amongst the latter group, 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 (Alferoff and Knights, 2009).

There are similarities between ANT and Mode 2 theory with respect to how knowledge develops. Both would challenge the diffusionist model of knowledge outlined above, and the traditional natural science or Mode 1 model on which it is based. 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.

When viewed through the ANT lens, the production of knowledge is seen as 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 alternative solutions to the same problem eradicated.

Our discussion of Mode 2 and ANT approaches to relevance thus brings into sharp relief the question of how academic researchers can produce knowledge, which is relevant to practitioners in management and organizations. 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, however, we draw briefly on some aspects of the existing literature to explore the distinctive features of knowledge in the specific domain of management and organizations.

Organizational and management knowledge

Of the lenses outlined above, Mode 2 theory has been most influential in the debate on relevance. Work drawing on such theory has 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.

The importance of addressing the needs and contexts of practice is emphasized by work which suggests that the organizational specificity of the tasks that managers perform and the ways in which their performance is managed tend to militate against the application of generic forms of knowledge. Management is not a science and managers have not developed as a cohesive professional group (Reed and Anthony 1992). This work challenges proposed parallels with engineering and schools of medicine by rejecting the idea of management knowledge as a universal and canonical body of knowledge (Morrell, 2008). Rather management and

organizational knowledge is seen as highly situated and context-dependent (Whitley, 1988), such that the knowledge underpinning new management practices 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.

In a similar vein, the diffusionist argument also makes some questionable assumptions about practitioners' demands for knowledge. The evidence shows 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)[3]. Some have attributed this either to the failure of academics to produce relevant knowledge or as from the result of a 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).

In summary, studies of the way in which managers actually develop and apply knowledge suggest a highly contingent social practice, involving 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). Clearly, this suggests that the relevance of knowledge cannot be readily assured no matter how well research is diffused or tailored to practitioner concerns – a point underlined by the limited effectiveness even of consultancy work in addressing managers' 'needs' (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000).

Context, Methods and the Case Study Vignettes

We now turn to 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 and dynamics under which relevant knowledge is produced. We record this experience through two case vignettes of academic practitioner collaboration, namely the Knowledge and Innovation Network (henceforth 'KIN'), and the Financial Services Research Forum (FSRF). These vignettes are the product of retrospective reflection rather than a 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. Also while our account is derived from a fully participant form of observation, it does not strictly conform to that methodology 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.

However, these disadvantages are mitigated by a number of factors that have been highlighted in work on more reflexive approaches to methodology. Alvesson and Karreman (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 dominant 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. Also 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).

There can be few settings, which at least in theory, are more propitious for the production of relevant knowledge 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.

We were centrally involved in the development and management of these collaborations. As a result, we had extensive 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. In addition, the data that we have drawn upon is longitudinal – spanning a decade or more - as we have been involved in these networks since their outset.

Case vignettes

We present the vignettes 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 (highlighting 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 and often 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. KIN (Knowledge and Innovation Network)

Origins

KIN 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 KIN 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 motives. These included potential 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 [4] 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). KIN benefited from the elite reputation of the host university and the initial core group of member firms, though small, also became an important attractor in enrolling other organizations.

Governance and Structure

Over the subsequent period, KIN 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 in quick succession, day-to-day management of the network was delegated to a team of independent consultants.
- The initial format centred on 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 the deepening of member interests in the field of KM – something which generated an increasing divergence between practitioner and academic specialisms. 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)[5], practitioner demand for 'relevance' here resulted in a growing reliance on external consultants to respond to their 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 KIN 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'. This was a research topic that simultaneously reflected academic interests but which also reflected developments in the KM debate as advanced by a special interest group of the network.

2. FSRF (Financial Services Research Forum)[6]

Origins

The FSRF 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 such that the existing trade associations 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 FSRF could be a part solution. Other non-human actants facilitating the development of the network 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 email[7]. Within 3 years of its foundation, 25 fee-paying financial institutions had been recruited to the FSRF 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 FSRF 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 FSRF 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.

Our 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 and tied to the context of women's social/family responsibilities (Odih and Knights, 2000). Long-term products such as life insurance, it was argued, are based on masculine linear conceptions of time that unintentionally 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 to, but also create the demands of, their customers and 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 FSRF, 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 FSRF 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 FSRF 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 FSRF 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 2003, the steering committee ran an away day 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.

The subsequent period saw significant progress particularly in advancing the public profile of the network and its recognition by the government, research agencies and

the sector. By 2009, there were 60 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 FSRF 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.

At the present time, the financial stability of the network remains precarious especially when fee paying members are lost through mergers and the financial crisis of 2008. Indeed, at the FSRF away day 17 September 2008, the steering committee discussed how to respond to the 'credit crunch' besetting the global economy. 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 FSRF 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 draw on our two analytical lenses to facilitate an understanding of the growth and development of KIN and the FSRF. We begin our analysis with Mode 2 theory since both KIN and FSRF involved a transgression of the institutional boundaries between universities and business. Our objective is to establish how far the ethos and some of the activities can be interpreted as falling within 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 KIN indicated strong institutional support, as has government participation in FSRF. These factors reflect precisely what Nowotny et al. (2001) term the 'steering of research priorities'.

INSERT TABLE 2

However, other features of both networks send a more equivocal message about the extent of change. There was little change, for example, in the national institutional context for academic career tracks and research practices, as exemplified by the demands of the UK's RAE. As a result, both consortia found it difficult to secure academic participation and virtually impossible to recruit or retain long-term 'hybrid' roles such as Consortia director.

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 consortia drifted towards a more explicit concern with practitioner-defined problems and away from the academics' intellectual agenda. This is reflected in KIN's special interest groups, and the new priorities set by meetings of the steering group in FSRF.

On the other hand, as noted, such developments cannot really be taken as a shift towards a form of co-produced knowledge. Rather, they seemed to reflect the stretching of the networks' activities to accommodate a wider and more diverse range of themes. The growing maturity of these collaborations allowed them to accommodate a greater element of consultancy or 'managerialist' (see note 6) knowledge, including an increasing role for consultants in leadership positions.

This is not to say that the 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 This was especially the case for younger academics. In contrast, more established academic members were more able to take the risk of pursuing a research agenda attentive to practitioner interests. The latter was reflected in the KIN case in the successful pursuit of funding for research on communities of practice. In the FSRF case, a similar effect resulted from an increase in the proportion of marketing academics on its steering committee.

While practitioners welcomed the wider intellectual arena afforded by KIN, the need to ensure 'value for money' in relation to subscription funding led to a greater need for the provision of problem-solving tools and practices. This need, could not be satisfied by the academic members for the reasons outlined above. As a result, the network was increasingly configured around peer-to-peer interactions, facilitated by website and portal, which were more equipped to address this problem-solving requirement. It was also widened to include external consultants who could facilitate and contribute to problem-solving. In this sense, KIN like many such collaborations was beginning to focus more heavily on the sharing of practices between its members.

Similar pressures were in force in the FSRF, 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 debates, steering committee meetings and 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 the interests of practitioners were not always harmonised but they tended to be accommodated by compromises driven by a shared commitment to consortium survival. Also only minor modifications of academic research agendas occurred, suggesting that even in a supportive organizational context, the Mode 2 ideal was 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 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 these knowledge producing practices.

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 – seems to represent 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 KIN was central to the *problematization* of certain

practices for academics and practitioners alike. This thematic focus made it easier to recruit members from a range of sectors, while its ambiguity and plasticity helped to sustain interest and support in its problematizing role (as seen, for instance, in the special interest groups). However, 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 practitioners towards micro-level tools and practical frameworks.

Similarly in the FSRF, 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. They were therefore 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. In the case of KIN, 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 KIN became deeper and more specialized over time, providing it with the facility to enrol and mobilize new allies in the form of 'special interest' topics, groups and external consultants. In the FSRF, 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 regeneration of interest to continuously enrol new and existing members. In the early days of the FSRF, 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 FSRF. Moreover, FSRF's enrolment of key government departments, advancing discursive

positions on issues that confront the industry, and by holding prestigious 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 agencies[8] but also significantly by such activities as the writing of this and other articles[9].

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. These associations mobilised various material and human actants in the promotion of knowledge that was relevant to their mutual interests. In the KIN 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 FSRF 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. Moreover, 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[10] 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 by both academic commentators and policy makers – that relevance is largely 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 (cf. 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, our experience also shows that embracing relevance does not imply the acceptance of a managerialist view of organizational and social problems. Nor does it override methodological and epistemological commitments to academic research.

Given the limitations which we have identified in the diffusionist approach to relevance, this paper has focussed primarily on two alternative theoretical lenses. These provide very different insights on the ways in which relevance is produced. As discussed, Mode 2 offers some valuable insights on the production of relevant knowledge. Ironically, however, and as noted of other institutional accounts (Barley & Tolbert, 1997), Mode 2 theory has actually been more useful in explaining the constraints on change in knowledge production. However, by placing the emphasis on sweeping changes in institutional boundaries, Mode 2 seems to neglect the importance of more localized efforts to transgress existing boundaries. Actor network theory, by contrast, is ontologically grounded in the transgression of boundaries and thus 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 as, for example, social exclusion, social responsibility, innovation, trust, and technological development, can be matched with the private interests of our practitioners in building their public image, and strengthening their

organizations. Consequently, and as also revealed by studies across different national institutional contexts (e.g. Swan et al., 2007), the ability to transgress and blur institutional boundaries is critical to 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 as described here.

In sum, by applying theory to our empirical material, we were able to identify the institutional and practical conditions under which relevant knowledge is produced. This helps to advance our theoretical understanding by demonstrating the emergent, idiosyncratic and unruly nature of the production of relevant knowledge. From these case vignettes at least, we can say that the production of relevant knowledge seems to require an evolving network capable of sustaining key moments of translation across practitioner and academic groups. This does not mean a major institutional shift or the integration of practitioners and researchers in a new mode of knowledge production. Much more important, it seems, are the micro-dynamics of knowledge production. These dynamics certainly served to limit the extent of any change – through 'epistemic stickiness' as we described it - towards the Mode 2 ideal of co-production. However, they also enabled some expansive shifts in the interests, reflexivity and practices of the academic and practitioner groups. These can certainly be construed as successful outcomes, inasmuch as they did not involve the subordination of one group or epistemology to another. As such, they seem to reflect the ability of these collaborations to support the co-habitation of different ways of creating and using knowledge.

In conclusion, one important implication of our study is that relevant knowledge is not an object that exists independently of collaborative relationships but rather has to emerge from them. Further, the sustained production of such knowledge seems to be ultimately conditional upon developing an actor network robust and resilient enough to resist competing alliances. These 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, by underlining the highly situated character of knowledge production, they help to explain why those searching for relevance will continue to find it such an elusive objective. 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. By the same token, this may

also be a useful corrective to public policy makers when their desire for relevance leads them to a simplistic view of the diffusion of knowledge from academic theory to administrative practice.

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Table 1: Modes of knowledge production

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

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

FEATURES OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION	**KIN**	**FSRF**
Focus of knowledge	Shift from academic focus towards greater sharing of practitioner concerns and experiences, and the development of tools.	Independent academic focus combined with practitioner interests. Overall sectoral focus.
Forms of knowledge	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
Disciplinarity	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
Governance	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
Accountability	Increasing accountability to practitioner members via the KIN Steering Committee. Important role played by independent 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

MOMENTS OF TRANSLATION	KIN	FSRF
Problematization	The development and implications of KM practices.	The new industry of financial services created through regulatory change
Interessement	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.
Enrolment	Development of special interest groups that enabled greater specialization of interest and another level of involvement via the KIN 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.
Mobilization	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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[1]   We wish to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper.

[2]   The competitive pursuit of this privileged status is examined in some detail in Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007: Chap. 3).

[3]   Indirectly, of course, much of this literature draws on earlier academic discourses.

[4]   This section benefited from the comments of Prof Maxine Robertson

[5]   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.

[6]   A more detailed description of this Forum can be found in Knights et al., (2007) and in Chapter 6 of Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007).

[7]   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.

[8]   For example, the CEO of the FSRF is continually invited to serve on government and quasi-government committees and research agencies.

[9]   We are grateful to Prof. Ola Bergström for comments on this section.

[10]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