

The Merits of Academic Consulting and It's Role in Organisational Development

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Growing Need for Consultancy Services

In the UK, there is growing scrutiny and apprehension over government expenditure on consultancy firms, particularly over recent years. For example, it is estimated that Brexit-related spending on big consultancies increased by 20% in 2019 and the Pandemic has created new opportunities for consultants (a series of articles published in Financial Times in 2020 have focused on government's spending on external consultants, for example see FT articles dated 29 January, 17 April, 19 August in year 2020). In general, it has been common practice for governments and private organisations alike to procure knowledge and expertise through consultancies large and small. We ask whether consultancies are the only source of advisory or can academic researchers fill this gap? There is ample evidence of governments commissioning University-based researchers to solve urgent problems such as the recent development of Covid-19 vaccine (also see recent calls for research funding from UKRI related to Covid-19 crisis). But such engagement tends to be mainly focused in the hard sciences (natural sciences) domain as opposed to soft sciences (social sciences), which includes management research and consultancy. Although some Business Schools in the UK are already explicitly running academic consultancy operations, how far can Universities assemble teams of academic consultants at the pace a commercial consultancy can deliver to address an immediate need for a client organisation is a moot point.

What Makes Academic Consulting Different from Commercial Consultancy?

The successful delivery of an academic consulting project is dependent on harnessing the subject matter expertise of academic researchers (sometimes cross disciplinary) which is perhaps not commercially available. As well as solving a problem for a particular organisation, researchers are motivated by the need to create new knowledge through a rigorous methodology. Whereas commercial consultancies perhaps are less focused on the method of delivery and are more focused on the results. Creating new

knowledge is the quintessence of academic pursuit and therefore an inseparable part of academic consulting engagements. Particularly whilst the clients are more inclined to find solutions to problems at hand, often it can be burdensome or require undue commitment of their resources to focus more on the process of finding solutions (how) rather than the solution itself (what).

There is some evidence of prior research in the domain specific to academic consultancy, for example Ormerod (1996) presents a reflective account of the dichotomy between consultants and academics in their motivations, outlook and behaviour and argues that there is need for synergy to be obtained between consultancy and academic activities. Russell Ackoff, a well-known management theorist distinguished commercial from an academic-led consultancy calling academic researchers Educators as opposed to Consultants –

A consultant goes in with a solution. He tries to impose it on a situation. An educator tries to train the people responsible for the work to work it out themselves. We don't pretend to know the way to get the answer. (Stern, 2007)

Academic consulting assignments are often undertaken for a short period of time and are structured differently compared to commercial consultancies. There might be no in-house or off-the-shelf tools and solutions such as the ones available to consulting firms. Furthermore, an academic consultant might appear uncompetitive compared to consultancy teams that create new ideas on the basis of heterogeneous and profound knowledge that might be unattainable by a single researcher (Nenko & Basov, 2012).

Action Research: A Possible Candidate for Delivering Successful Academic Consulting Projects

How then can academic researchers be engaged in solving an organisational problem whilst maintaining the rigorous requirements of research. Action Research can be a potential candidate for delivering successful academic consulting projects which meets the double objective of creating new knowledge by answering a research question, as well as fulfilling a practical need for an organisation simultaneously (Rapoport, 1970; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990; Pasmore et al., 2008). Action research can be understood as a cyclical method where the researcher primarily enters a real-world problem situation, conducts a structured inquiry so as to improve it, by involving participants from the organisation (Susman & Evered, 1978). Simultaneously, both the researcher and participants start to make sense of the situation with the help of the declared framework and methodology, consequently delivering improvements. The procedure can be repeated in a sequence of new research cycles generating new learning to further improve the situation. Ultimately, the researcher leaves the improved situation and reports the findings. It is a mode of clinical research as opposed to non-obtrusive observation wherein the researcher is detached from the problem situation (Schein, 1990). Another form of action research called collaborative management research is constructed typically out of practitioner perceptions of key issues and out of key issues that emerge out of the themes when issues are analysed (Pasmore et al., 2008). A practical way to deliver such academic consultancy projects is through

University-Industry partnerships. For example, the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme sponsored by Innovate UK, is a well-known route for engaging academic researchers in addressing strategic challenges faced by companies through a fixed term funded project. Such a delivery of academic consultancy also signifies the process consultation model identified by Schein (1990) where the academic consultant external to the organisation takes on the role of a facilitator of change. Recent work by Balthu & Clegg (2021) presented a new model of Situated-Reflective-Agent as the ideal state of an action researcher offering a best practice for ensuring both rigour and relevance in academic consultancy.

Can Academic Consultants Play a Wider Role?

In academic literature there are calls for producing knowledge in the context of application, also termed as Mode 2 Research, as opposed to Mode 1 which is academic, investigator-initiated and discipline-based knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). According to Stoke's (1997) classification, and its adaptation by Tushman & O'Reilly (2007), business schools would fall into Pasteur's quadrant signifying their characteristics of use-inspired research, being both relevant and rigorous. The true innovation according to Stokes occurs in Pasteur's quadrant signifying the contribution of Louis Pasteur to the field of microbiology, who never undertook a study that was not use-inspired. Whereas consulting firms which are relevant but not rigorous fall into Edison's quadrant. This perspective offers a strong case for conducting action research facilitated by academic consulting engagements. Also, there is a need for further empirical studies on how the work of individuals within consultancies unfolds and how knowledge reuse attempts and challenges may unfold across organizations as a whole.

Despite the limitations, there is a potential wider role for academic consultants in meeting the needs of clients who would ordinarily turn to commercial consultants for solutions. The question is, can academic consultants organise themselves to operate in a manner that can work for these clients, particularly during these times of uncertainty when the need for organisational change and renewal is more than ever?

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