

## **Academia-Industry Interface in B-Schools: Challenges & Imperatives**

**Srirang Jha\***

### **Abstract**

There has been a lot of hue and cry about gloomy academia-industry interface in recent years. Louder voices for closer collaboration between academia and industry heard in a number of conferences, seminars and forums usually turn hollow and fade away on the ground. This perspective paper tries to explore why the higher education institutions and industry fail to develop lasting associations in spite of a fair understanding about concomitant benefits that may accrue as a result of such ties. The paper provides a critique of the current scenario vis-à-vis academia industry interface especially in the context of Indian B-schools and corporate houses operating in the country. Imperatives for strengthening academia-industry collaboration have also been discussed at length so as to inspire some real-time actions on the ground for benefit of all the stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Academia-Industry Interface, B-schools, India

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### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions in general and B-schools in particular have infinite potential to play an important role in augmenting competitiveness of firms by providing an impetus to industrial innovation through research and development endeavours. However, relationships between academia and industry are often founded on unequal expectations and are usually characterized by contract-based sporadic arrangements which do not favour the establishment of strong and long-lasting linkages (Alves, Marques & Saur-Amaral, 2007). Dismal academia-industry linkage across the globe may be attributed mainly to mind-set divergences which obstruct mutually beneficial and long-term cooperation (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

At the same time, there is an urgent need for paradigm shift in the attitude and approach of both the educational institutions and corporate houses for leveraging academia-industry interface in order to optimize their gains the knowledge-driven world. While both industry and academic institutions complement each-other in terms of creation, development and application of new knowledge and innovations, they operate with typically contrasting

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\* Associate Professor, Apeejay School of Management, New Delhi, India  
**E-mail:** [jha.srirang@gmail.com](mailto:jha.srirang@gmail.com)

mind-sets. Industry looks at profit as the prime motive. On the other hand, academia operates in a non-profit ecosystem at a leisurely pace and is motivated by larger societal benefits rather than finding solutions to typical business problems. Usually, academia is not keen to work on business problems because 'industry's desired time frames are instant, and investment is guided by efforts that yield result-oriented solutions' (Nangia & Pramanik, 2011).

Further, academics have pervasive apathy towards applied research and they are reluctant to leave the comfort zone of pure teaching; they are generally adamant when dealing with collaborative projects and typically present additional levels of restrictive internal policies and procedures that hinder innovation (Nangia & Pramanik, 2011). Majority of academics prefer to indulge in run on the mill researches primarily aimed at publications in peer-reviewed journals which are not open to case studies or reports on solutions to typical business problems. Journal publications being essential for career advancement, they overlook any opportunity to meaningfully engage with industry in finding solutions to business problems through applied research processes. There is a rat race to publish in journals with higher H Index or impact factor assigned by Scopus and Scientific Citation Index (Thomson Reuters).

Supervisors of doctoral research projects also insist on publication in journals of repute without much emphasis on how such work can be effectively used by industry or stretching themselves to reach out to industry to look at a real business problem as part of doctoral research. Even the industry prefers to work with consultants who are focused on solutions rather than academics who are always inclined to explore range of phenomena within or outside industries from a broader perspective and find generalized solutions instead of customized ones. Hence, faculty members generally loose the race to consultants when it comes to clinching real-time research projects with the corporate houses. For the same reasons, majority of B-schools in the country fail to get good number management development programs –a domain currently dominated by large training and consultancy companies. On the other hand, there are only few examples of B-schools trying to break this conundrum and coming forward with value-added offerings to the industry which might provide them a gradual foothold in the corporate world. Most of the B-schools have accepted the status quo as ground reality which cannot be challenged ever.

### **Challenges**

There is an invisible wall that divides the academia and industry to come closer and collaborate on mutually beneficial projects and programs. Both academia and industry fully understand the value of closer ties, yet they are far from each other when it comes to working together at a deeper level. At superficial level, there seems a lot of interest in academia-industry interface. But these interfaces are limited to occasional participation in corporate guest lecture series conducted by most of the B-schools in the country and need based participation in campus placement drives for summer training as well as final placements as and when required. Superficial nature of academia-industry relations may be attributed to the perceptions held by them. Industry mainly looks at the B-schools as hot spots from where they can hire people even if they are a bit below the mark in terms of competencies. Generally, industry organizes comprehensive training programs for the new recruits so that they are able to deliver results with proficiency. Hence, they are not much

concerned about actively getting engaged with the B-schools in terms of improving the curriculum, pedagogy, skill development, etc.

B-school graduates are generally selected for jobs based on their potential and trainability during campus placement drives. On the other hand, B-schools see the industry primarily as recruiters and therefore focus on maintaining cordial (not deeper) relations with them by inviting corporate executives for guest lectures, key-note addresses in seminars and conferences and sending greetings and gifts during various festivals. Any serious attempts at obtaining their feedback on recruitment experience, quality of hires, skill gaps, etc. are missing at most of the B-schools. Again, the focus is on hospitality provided to the industry representatives visiting the B-schools during campus placement drives. Meaningful dialogue with them is simply not part of the agenda of the B-schools. Incidentally, academics and industry representatives have opposite mind-sets (Kapil, 2014).

As rightly observed by Sivaram (2015), industry and academia have fundamentally different goals and value systems –whereas industry has problems for which they seek solutions, academia comes up with solutions where seemingly there is no problem. Changing the mind-set of both the B-schools and the industry is a major challenge in the way of fostering deeper ties between them. While industry truly needs to look up to the B-schools as potential centres of excellence which might be developed further to meet their requirements beyond hiring fresh graduates, the B-schools in turn should move beyond superficial engagement and allow the industry representatives enough space in terms of influencing curriculum design, pedagogy, agenda for skill development, selection of students as part of admission panels, etc. Besides, they should be engaged in joint teaching of a few courses to begin with. If the B-schools take a leap in this direction, it is certain that the industry will also reciprocate by opening its doors to the faculty members.

Another challenge is reorienting the faculty members towards applied research by making appropriate changes in the performance management system, career advancements and incentive schemes. Globally, academic publications in peer-reviewed journals are the considered as ultimate yardstick for faculty selection, retention and promotion. Hence, initiatives by a few B-schools to incentivise applied research in business are unlikely to change the scenario. Unless concerted efforts are made by associations of B-schools and regulatory authorities, faculty members will remain apathetic towards applied research especially because they cannot publish results due to restrictions on use of proprietary data of the company.

At the same time, industry needs to develop long-term perspective on research funding so that B-schools may get opportunities to engage in applied research without worrying about additional resources. However, getting the industry on board on this is a big challenge considering their perceptible suspicion about ability of the B-schools to deliver on applied research front and fear of use of results and proprietary data of the company without permission. Thus building trust between academia and industry is a pre-condition for any deeper association in the long run. The government can also pitch in in terms of liberal funding to augment applied research by B-schools in collaboration with industrial partners.

### **Imperatives**

B-schools need to emerge as centres of excellence in applied research in order to attract good number of corporate houses on board for greater and deeper involvement. This first step has to be accomplished even before long-term commitments from large industrial houses. So far, the faculty members devoted their time to curiosity-driven research. They now need to focus on market-driven researches, starting with small businesses in the community which are likely to open their doors for such initiatives under the academic civic engagement programs (Jha & Jha, 2012). Besides, the B-schools can independently take up research projects which might be of interest to the industry in order to showcase their capabilities to deliver on applied research.

At the moment, most of the B-schools suffer from poor credentials to carry out applied research, thus giving enough reason to the industry to downplay their interest in any serious engagement with them. Further, the B-schools need to open up their doors for serious engagement with the industry representatives in terms of governance. Currently, most of the boards of governors or academic councils in B-schools have only cosmetic representations from the industry. Either they are disinterested or disallowed in a polite manner to influence the working of the most of the B-schools. There are a few B-schools which are already leveraging corporate connection to improve their governance structures, curriculum, pedagogy, etc. But number of such schools is depressing. Hence, it is important that all the B-schools in India should rise to the occasion and get involved with the industry in order to change fortunes of their respective institutions.

A few good examples are unlikely to impress the industry to come forward and engage in meaningful collaborative projects. Leveraging existing level of association with industry can also go a long way in fostering deeper collaborations. For instance, summer training projects can be used as opportunities to develop case studies on industry problems with active involvement of the corporate mentors. Currently, B-schools in India have extremely poor track record of developing case studies. Moreover, visits of internship sites by faculty members can also allow them to understand the shop-floor issues. Even unstructured dialogues between corporate mentors and faculty members can help the latter understand business issues and develop their research agenda based on actual needs of the industry. Such interactions can also be used to discuss curriculum and pedagogy and obtain objective views on teaching-learning process from corporate mentors. Industry is likely to have greater interest in collaborating with B-schools at a deeper level if they aggressively pursue the three game-changing imperatives discussed above.

### **Conclusion**

Vardiman and Mhlanga (2013) rightly observe that academia and industry complement each other in having knowledge and skills of great value to economic development –while academia is looking at industry as an avenue for growth and enhancement of the educational services it provides, industry is also looking to universities to help in educating its workforce and solve business challenges. However, there exists a wide divide between academia and industry especially in the context of management education. Current levels of industry-academia interface can at best be characterized as superficial. There are several challenges in fostering a deeper collaboration between B-schools and industry due to opposite mind-sets and orientations.

Besides, there are issues of lack of trust and mutual suspicion. As management education in India is trying to revitalize in the wake of declining interest number of MBA aspirants, it is important for the B-schools to strengthen their ties with industry by enhancing level of interfaces –moving from shallow to deeper associations. This is possible if the B-schools take the first step instead of waiting for the industry to come forward and build the bridges. It is sure that the industry will take note of any serious effort by the B-schools to add value to existing management practices or come up with game-changing innovations.

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