



Revisiting the Rules of the Game in Management Research and Education

EURAM 2020 Opening Ceremony – Thomas Durand

As I am opening the EURAM 2020 conference, I am delighted to turn the presidency of the academy over to Kathrin Moslein. With Kathrin as our next president, the academy is in very good hands. I wish you good luck, Kathrin.

Let me take this opportunity to share with you my thoughts on where our community of management scholars stands, as well as some concerns and some hopes for the future of our field.

I'd like to start with a quick recap of where we stand. Four considerations on this.

1-We operate in a booming "industry"

Our community is about Management Education and Research, both Research and Education. While it is part of academia, let's face it, some may see our activities as an industry of its own. And we can't deny it, the business of business schools – even if some of us may not like this wording -- has been booming for several decades. For sure, with ups and downs as we all know, including now with the pandemic.

2-Geopolitics matters

Management education and research are politically loaded. Our field conveys representations and prescriptions of how economies should work. This is quite sensitive. Given the growing tensions between the US and China, Europe and other parts of the world may want to create their own path to build something new, different, in line with their values (of course freedom and free enterprise, but also social welfare, well-being, greening of the economy, multilateralism, etc.). Our activities are not politically neutral. Geopolitics matters.

3-Business Schools are often treated as Cash cows by their corporate university

Within academia, our field typically addresses solvent demands, as we respond to important economic and social needs. This conveys both good news and bad news for us. As they generate income, business schools are often seen as cash cows in the portfolio of their university.

Thus a question to ourselves: Beyond bringing revenues to our employer and beyond publishing -- maybe selfishly for our own career -- we should not forget our overall contribution to society (such as educating managers for organizations, or providing evidence-based concepts, models and theories in order to help practitioners, those who lead collective coordinated action).

4- We are driven by Rankings

Given the pressure put onto them by their university, Business school Deans are doing their best to secure the revenues expected from their school, thus playing by the rules of the game to get more income. And this game has a name: rankings.

We should not put the blame on Deans. Or should I say, not just on Deans. We are all *de facto* applying the rules of the game of rankings, when we review papers, take part in evaluation committees, select a candidate for a position, etc.

As we all know, we live in a world of rankings – Business schools, programs, journals, professors, researchers, or gurus - whatever. It seems like everything boils down to some form of ranking nowadays. Yet should the rankings dictate our behavior?

The four observations I just put forward are for the sake of generating a debate.

Let me now turn to some concerns that bear the same intent, namely spur a strategic conversation about what we do and why we do it.

Here again 4 items.

1-We are caught in the middle of a vicious circle

With the rankings, starts the loop of a vicious circle. To attract more “customers” (especially in executive education) and increase the fees that generate revenues, Deans ask for ever more publications that will help go up the ranking ladders. They use part of these revenues to incentivize more output, more starred papers. They pay higher salaries to those who are “bankable” with more stars in their pipeline of papers. They hire adjuncts to get the teaching done at lower costs, taking part of the teaching load off the shoulders of the publishing tenure track faculty. As a result, the faculty is increasingly (tacitly or explicitly) divided in two tiers. The research faculty on the one hand, and the teaching faculty on the other. This is the opposite to the *raison d’être* of universities since medieval times. A place where knowledge creation and knowledge transmission both take place at the same time and are delivered by the same scholars. Departing from this long-established tradition is a risky business. In addition, imposing a heavy teaching load to those who do not publish enough sends a very questionable signal: teaching becomes a penalty for not publishing enough starred papers. We have ended up operating in a field where paper stars have become the currency.

What about the intellectual contribution of our research? Is it acceptable to measure the quality of research by the number of stars of the journals that published the papers? The container to qualify the contents without taking the time to read them. The quality of the wine according to the design of the bottle. At this point, let me offer a bit of common sense from a Frenchman: we drink the wine, not the bottle itself, nor the cork, nor the sticker. Let’s ask ourselves: Is the number of stars an appropriate proxy for quality?

2-All of this leads to tensions in our community

I am afraid to say, our community is torn apart. Some go for the academic ambition of scholarly enquiry. Some go for transmission of knowledge. Some accept to do what is asked from them, namely, to publish in targeted, starred journals while they expedite their teaching load. They do it for the sake of rankings to help grow their school’s reputation, which in turn will attract more participants in higher fee programs. Some do it primarily for their career and their own reputation. Many try to do a bit of all the above. All should be respected for their work. But let’s ask ourselves, do we collectively strike the right balance? Are our activities still in line with what we were looking for when joining academia?

To what extent, in doing what we are increasingly asked to do, are we contributing to the wellbeing of people and society?

3-We contribute to widen a disconnect between management research and the world of practice

Indeed, the gap between academic research in management and the world of practice is widening. Do we write for practitioners, for academic peers or for career purposes? Why is it that writing books or case studies does not seem to count anymore in our evaluation process? Also, many of us lost interest for clinical studies because such empirical studies take forever with uncertain pay-off as the papers are often difficult to publish. Yet, these could be of interest to practitioners. In fact, most of what we could do to raise their interest tends to be disincentivized. This disconnect with practice is a major issue.

4- Our community is in a Lock-in

Deans are constrained by the dynamics of rankings and the need for more resources to support both the corporate university and salary inflation to attract steady publishers. These are badly needed to increase the numbers on the scoreboard and thus the schools' reputation.

In fact, I fear that, if we do not put our acts together, we will not escape the lock-in situation we are in.

Altogether, this draws a rather grim picture, with the risk that these concerns may remain or even worsen over the coming years. There is no way out unless coordinated action takes place to change the rules of the game.

So much for the stock taking and the concerns, now my hopes: these are many.

I dream of EURAM playing an active role to unlock the lock-in.

I dream of EURAM as a community welcoming all academic profiles in management.

Those playing the tough game imported from the US, working hard to publish in US-based journals. Those choosing to conduct research with other methodologies, even if these are not mainstream. Those focusing on education, coming to EURAM to get an update on new concepts and theories, while learning about and discussing new ways to teach management.

I hope that we can all respect each other, whatever the choices we make. This is my key wish for the future of our community. We need all of you. I really mean it. We do.

I wish that EURAM remains a place with a warm, friendly, open, inclusive atmosphere where lively discussions can take place in professional ways, rewarding talent, supporting rigor as well as relevance, bringing novel ideas with bold contributions and creativity.

I wish that EURAM continues to actively support transmission of our values and ambition for the field and the community, welcoming and helping junior colleagues, accepting all methodologies, a variety of bodies of literature, staying away from the idea that there is one single, best way to write a thesis, and from a standardized paper format that stifles imagination and in-depth thinking.

I wish we find ways to influence the rules of the game to prevent publications by kilos (kilograms of paper, kilometers of texts, kilobytes of files). We need to read what our colleagues write instead of counting stars or whatever unit is the currency of the time.

This is very serious. Obviously, something went wrong. We need to fix it. I am convinced that together, we can do it.

I admire Serge Haroche. He won the Nobel prize in Physics in 2012 for isolating a photon (light is both a particle, the photon, and a wave). It took him 17 years to do it. 17 years chasing photons. How many papers could he write while he was doing this? I really wonder. Obviously, the number of papers was not the key performance indicator that he had in mind.

I wish you all the best in chasing some form of light, typically your own photons in our field of management.

Enjoy the conference in this new online format.

Thomas Durand - December 4, 2020