

Commentary

Building Research Culture

Shyam Sunder
Yale School of Management

Business school faculty and administrators in Asia often ask their foreign colleagues: Why won't your journals publish our research? What kind of research should we conduct in order to have the chance to have it published in international journals? This is no idle talk; these urgent and sincere questions arise in the face of impending promotion and tenure decisions under university or government rules calling for publication in international journals. Such external publications often are an important consideration in these decisions that are widely believed to make or break academic careers.

Rules requiring publication in international journals (and presentations at international conferences) as criteria for promotion have been promulgated by many universities and ministries of education in Asia. The intent is to introduce research cultures to old institutions which may not have such a tradition, or to build such a culture from the outset in new institutions. This is an admirable goal.

Trying to achieve this goal through international publication rules may serve the short term goal of selecting the qualified faculty, but not without paying a heavy price in the form of undermining the longer term goal of building an indigenous research culture to address the important problems of society.

In many emerging economies, there are few universities and even fewer business schools with a robust tradition of research. Some universities publish their in-house journals to disseminate the work of their own faculty without the benefit of independent evaluation of its quality. Sometimes, the evaluation processes that exist get closely entangled in interpersonal relationships. There may not be enough active scholars engaged in research in domestic universities who can be relied upon to conduct such evaluation.

Processes of international journals are hardly perfect, and there exist Asian journals that compete with the very best in the world. Still, on the whole, many more of the international journals have established themselves in their respective fields for decades. They are edited and refereed by renowned scholars, many of

them pioneers in their fields. These editors and referees are unlikely to know most of the authors who live in other countries, and even if they did, their well-established processes can be relied upon to be reasonably free of favoritism and interpersonal conflicts. It is understandable that under such circumstances, educational administrators, eager to identify the research talent in their own faculties, would use publication in the better known international journals as a way to address the problem of objective evaluation of faculty research.

This strategy runs into several difficulties. First, the Asian countries are so large, with so many—and fast growing—universities and faculty that there is no way for the journals published in US or Europe to have enough space to publish more than a handful of papers originating in Asia. The strategy of outsourcing the task of assessing research conducted by thousands of Asian faculty to international journals is simply infeasible, especially for giants like China and India. They must bear the burden of devising their own solutions.

Second, even if space were not a constraint, international journals focus their attention on addressing the problems of the economies in which most of their readers reside. When a research article crosses an editor's desk, the first question the editor asks is if it is important and of interest to the journal's readers. Given that a considerable volume of business research is economy-specific, only a small fraction of articles from Asia are able to cross this importance-and-interesting hurdle at international journals. This perceived and real hurdle generates the questions mentioned at the outset.

Third, scholars faced at home with rules of promotion that call for international publications, and with the importance-interesting hurdle at the international journals, tend to turn away from addressing the research questions of their home economies toward the problems of societies in which their target journals are published. As much as they might try, most of Asian scholars have no comparative advantage in this task. What is worse, the scarce time and talent of these scholars get diverted away from addressing the important issues and pressing problems at home where their research might yield significant results and better policies. The policy of requiring international publications induces them to turn toward addressing unfamiliar problems of distant lands for the sole purpose of getting a publication or two so they can get promoted. This turns the very purpose of research on its head—instead of doing research in order to serve society, faculty start doing research so they can get it published, so they can get promoted and in turn be able to do more such research. One might reasonably ask: Why should a society, especially a developing one, pay for the time and resources spent on this activity?

Fourth, Asian universities' culture of research and innovation suffers under the heavy burden of hierarchy and rank. It is difficult to claim credit for better ideas if the older folks whose ideas are being improved upon hold the veto power and they are not reluctant to exercise it. Workshops in which people present their work, answer questions and face criticism are not quite as frank and open in Asia. The processes to add rigorous reasoning, innovation, and cross-disciplinary insights is weak. Independence of the editing and refereeing processes also shows gaps when

compared with international standards. Most important, separating interpersonal relationship from criticism of research is harder to do in Asia. Developing research culture in Asia calls for working on these aspects of universities and their faculties by changing their shared expectations.

There is no better way of building research cultures in Asia than to develop healthy authorship, workshop, refereeing and editorial processes of the indigenous journals. Unfortunately, the international publication requirement undermines this fundamental goal. It not only diverts the best minds to try to publish abroad, it undercuts the attempts to develop good journals and research culture at home.

Educational administrators and policy makers in Asia have to address a basic policy dilemma. Should they continue to focus their attention on the immediate goal of making sure that the faculty who get promoted or appointed to senior positions have scholarly accomplishments comparable to elsewhere in the world? But pursuing this worthy short term goal too vigorously undermines the progress toward building an indigenous research culture through domestic processes and journals. If building domestic research culture is also an important goal, how can the two to be balanced?

While there are no fixed formulas for building a culture of any kind, much less of research, a few steps taken under judicious (not bureaucratic) supervision may help. De-emphasizing the power of hierarchy and rank over the creative younger faculty, especially when those in power are not themselves productive researchers, could be a first step. Innovation itself, as reflected in their work and activities, could be considered a plus in faculty assessment. Starting new kinds of journals with radical new ideas would be a kind of innovation that could receive special attention. Any steps that will increase the mobility of faculty across educational and research institutions would be helpful by creating an external market for research talent. Lowering the cost of transactions that involve moving from one institution will prevent faculty from getting trapped in institutions whose needs do not match their abilities and talents. Allowing greater discretion and subjectivity in promotion and tenure decisions may also help, although the immediate question of favoritism comes to mind. If the transactions cost of moving across institutions can be reduced, favoritism can be counterbalanced, and the mistakes made by the subjective processes of one institution can be checked— if not corrected by— the market place for talent. Overall, most systems of higher education in Asia treat faculty as just another civil service which can be managed through the standard bureaucratic procedures. Obviously they can be, and are, managed in this manner. But then they cannot be expected to produce radical innovation that a research culture calls for, and they don't.

In the recent half-a-century, many Asian economies have achieved rapid advancements in many fields that they themselves had earlier thought were beyond their ability due to presumed cultural barriers. The fact is that human beings are essentially the same everywhere; the differences in their achievements are rooted in what they believe about themselves, and expect from one another. In the recent decades, American and European scholars have made rapid advances in the level of scholarship in many fields. Asian research need not be an exception.