

# Are You a “Truly International” Scholar?

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*What makes one a true scholar in international business research?*

A goodly number of scholars are now engaged in international business (IB) research as attested to by the more than 3,000 members of the Academy of International Business, of whom about 1,000 attend its annual conferences. However, *how many of them are truly IB scholars?*

This question is most relevant because IB researchers compete with scholars in other disciplines to identify and solve unique IB research questions. Besides, much research pitched as “IB” is, in many cases, not international at all (Boddewyn, 2016). Moreover, the IB scholarly community needs to be viewed as legitimate because it is staffed with capable and zealous individuals who conduct research to understand issues connected to globalization and internationalization.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves if we, as scholars in the field of international business, are truly “international” in terms of our original and continuous learning about new environments. In this regard, the key development required of us as IB scholars is to supplement our core (although generic) research skills with a strong and experiential knowledge of countries, multinational organizations, and current IB issues of interest to their managers. This experiential knowledge development should begin during our doctoral programs and then continue to grow throughout our careers. True IB scholars need to be impassioned about their field, and make being “truly international” a central theme in their careers and in their lives.

## Warning: A Personal Retrospective

Much of my motivation for the above argument comes from

a personal retrospective on my own journey as an academic. It was partly captured in an editorial I co-wrote to express regret that too much research is exploitative rather than exploratory in nature (Corbett, Cornelissen, Delios & Harley, 2014). More recently, I wrote a direct critique of the formulaic and staid state of IB research (Delios, 2017) which stems partly from systemic issues in the publication process but also from our failures as self-professed IB experts—my failings included!

In my days as a PhD student, I did not do enough to enhance my status as a scholar who works in the IB area. My time as a doctoral student was solely focused on developing a generic set of research skills that could be applied to almost any area of management so that I could publish. I supplemented these skills with knowledge of research topics and theory that underlay the IB and strategy areas.

I was extremely fortunate to have Paul Beamish as my advisor for my dissertation and as my mentor for my career. During my PhD days, he noted this limitation to my development as an IB scholar. At the time, I was studying Japanese multinational enterprises—a topic to which Shige Makino, my senior in the program, introduced me. I had capabilities suited to do this research because I had developed moderate levels of Japanese-language fluency from two years of living in Japan, but my research of Japanese MNEs was solely quantitative in nature when I started it.

Consequently, Paul Beamish advised me to go out into the field and learn more about Japanese multinational enterprises by conducting interviews at their Canadian subsidiaries. After resisting initially, I followed his advice to undertake these interviews. Unfortunately, being expedient, I did not think carefully about what I learned from the interviews, and only years later did I see the value of this process.

If I had been a true IB scholar, I would have been able to leverage these interviews into something substantive for understanding Japanese MNEs. I would have been better able to talk knowingly about these firms to both academic and practitioner audiences. I could have formulated new research questions of substance, but I didn't. These failures imposed limits on my own understanding of an area in which I was supposed to be a specialist.

Now compare my approach to that of my close friend and colleague, Carl Fey, who has always been bold in his approach to IB research. He is fluent in several languages, including Russian. He was an entrepreneur who engaged in an import-export business before joining the Ivey Business School's PhD program. After deciding that his PhD research would be in Russia, he taught himself to speak the local language. He developed a basic competence in Russian by engaging passers-by in Russia in random conversations. He tried and tried, and he learned. Eventually he was even able to teach executive audiences in Russian. However, Carl did not become complacent but went on to his next challenge when he accepted an offer to be Dean in Nottingham University Business School China, in Ningbo, which is close to Shanghai.

I recount these incidents because *my central concern is that we have too many people who study and teach IB that have had formative experiences like mine, and few like Carl Fey's*. This is a major concern because it means that many researchers in our IB scholarly community are fundamentally *not* "international" scholars and know little about international business. They are simply good academics who study IB questions by happenstance.

Some of you may dispute my point by arguing that we have many foreign-born and foreign-educated scholars doing IB research. However, one cannot lay claim to being well versed in IB because having come from South America or Asia to study for a PhD in Europe and then taught at an institution in the United States. Certainly, this is a laudable achievement but this path does not lead to gaining real expertise in IB topics. It only means that you are a foreign national, maybe even a new citizen of a host country. However, you are not an IB expert simply because you were not born in the country in which you teach or studied.

Therefore, becoming an adept IB scholar is a much more involved process—a time-consuming deliberate process of skill and experience development that is tied to success in an academic discipline. If we are to have a well-defined place as a field, as a distinct area of study, and as a legitimate and differentiated discipline in the business school environment, we need a unique set of competences that define us definitively as IB scholars.

Our IB doctoral programs have rarely yielded such a differentiation in skillsets and knowledge because our focus has been on developing competences that match those of our colleagues in

strategy, economics, marketing, or finance in terms of *technical* acumen. Yet, even a middle-of-the-road undergraduate student half-sleeping through a strategy class knows that imitation is not differentiation.

Like it or not, IB scholars are not leaders in empirical techniques, whether quantitative or qualitative. At best, we can match the technical skills of scholars in other areas of the business school, but researchers from other disciplines could easily transition to teaching and conducting studies in international business once they have familiarized themselves with the relevant literature and research questions. As Boddewyn (2016) argued, they are capable to do "universal" research because many hypotheses can be tested abroad as well as at home.

To avoid this conquest by the IB-scholar wannabes, the key for us is to become truly international researchers so that our studies may become differentiated from IB-themed research done by a casual non-IB scholar. *Developing a rich contextual knowledge of the phenomena we study and of the locations where we situate our research becomes our differentiation*. The benefits are many because it provides us with legitimacy as scholars and it helps us define ourselves as working in a field distinct from other management areas. The cost is our time and our commitment to our own professional development as well as to defining and growing the IB discipline.

## Being a Respected IB Professional

How often have you sat in a seminar when it is clear that the presenter knows next to nothing about what he or she is presenting? The lecturer knows the relevant theory, the proper research question, the data and their sources as well as the econometrics and their implications, but he or she does not know anything of substance about the setting, the context, and the broad or narrow meanings of his or her research.

This lack of knowledge is painfully obvious to the audience. The presenters might feign knowledge of context by putting a photo on an introductory slide in order to show they can define the topic of their presentation. A well-prepared presenter will even have a cute story that connects to the data and setting for the research, but this story will have been culled from some media outlet. In sum, everything about the research is secondary, including the quality, which is second-best.

Instead, the best presentation comes from someone who took the time to embed himself or herself in the context so that the lecture gains life from his or her experience in that context. The presenter gains legitimacy and authority, and he or she is able to respond to even the most obnoxious questions. The audience learns not only about the theory and the data but also about the stories behind the story.

Understanding context also helps us, as a community of scholars, to ward off one of the most persistent criticisms of academic research – namely, that we are out of touch with reality. This critique stings because it is too often true but it also hurts because it trivializes all the hard work that goes into producing a sound piece of research.

Knowing context helps to counter such critiques. An adept scholar can speak about the generalities and broad implications of his or her academic research while also citing evidence and information that makes the meaning of the research accessible. Thus, we can talk about the growth of private equity in emerging markets and the management challenges associated with it, but the story becomes more lively and convincing when we know about the personalities involved, the specific situations the scholar has dealt with, their failures and successes, and their attributions for the latter.

Our unique skill becomes the ability to link such stories to academic research. Ill-trained academics cannot do this nor can the media because they only have the skills needed to focus on one part of the story—either the stories of informants or the quantitative patterns and trends in the secondary data.

When we do not know context, we lose the ability and opportunity to speak to a wide audience. IB research necessitates, hopefully, engaging with interesting research questions. Universities' corporate communication teams, popular media outlets, and even journals seeking a non-technical take on a piece of research—they all desire accessible stories about our research. Without context, we must use our imagination to concoct the stories behind the cells in our spreadsheets. However, we can give our imaginations a rest by actually learning about the phenomena we study, which makes the subsequent communication about the phenomena much easier.

## In the End

I hold these critiques to be true, but I am also fully aware that a good number of scholars do indeed develop these skills and perspectives on research. They do make the investments required to become “truly international.” However, this development most often comes late in their academic life, usually catalyzed by a tortuous series of failed teaching episodes or executive education disasters that impel them to learn what they formerly eschewed learning. The journey need not be so traumatic if we focus on contextual knowledge and skill development.

Importantly, we must foster this form of skill and experience development early in the career of IB scholars. We need to find scholars who love and embrace all things international. We need to encourage a strong engagement with context to build scholars with unique competences suited to the phenomena they study. Our practices of investigation need to mimic the phenomena

we study so that we may become truly adept at understanding, explaining and educating others about IB phenomena.

The growth of the Academy of International Business has been impressive, but we need that growth to come from scholars who are fully embedded in, engaged with, and passionate about international business.

Now, the big questions: *What have you done to become a “truly international” researcher? What do you suggest can be done to develop “true” international scholars and scholarship in our field?*

Please kindly post your answers and relevant comments through the interactive comments system, which you can access through the AIB Insights website at <https://aib.msu.edu/publications/insights>. I will respond through this site and we may publish the best answers and comments in a subsequent issue of AIB Insights.

## References

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