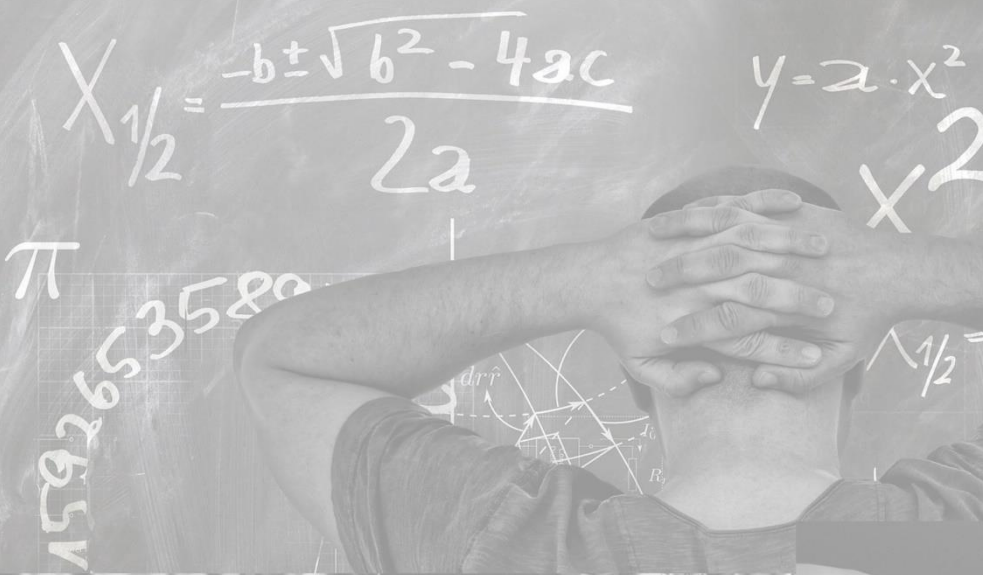


Centre for
Management
Consulting
Excellence



Report

What management consultants
want from academics





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■ 1. Management summary

CMCE has carried out some exploratory research into how consultants access and use outputs of academic research in their work.

We found that academic work contributes to the knowledge base that consultants draw on in three main ways:

1. It is a source of ideas underlying major types of consulting interventions and of widely used consulting tools;
2. Outputs of academic work provide information for use on a specific project;
3. Academic outputs can contribute to consultants' continuing professional development (CPD).

Most of the consultants who participated in our research had used outputs of academic research in their work. Most commonly used were outputs of general business, management or consulting interest, but sector-specific content or content specific to an organisational function, e.g. finance or marketing, was also popular.

The most common source for the outputs of academic research was academic journal articles (in print or online), but many of our research participants had worked jointly with academics on a project. Consultants also benefited from reports and presentations specifically commissioned by consultancy firms from individual academics or university departments.

The most commonly identified benefit of academic outputs was the credibility of the source. Academic outputs were also seen as a good source of useful conceptual models, frameworks, tools or techniques and as providing access to the latest thinking, and were chosen because of their relevance to the project in hand.

Our respondents also saw some disadvantages to academic outputs. Some academic outputs were found to be too complex to communicate to a client, too long term for a client's requirements, not specific enough or difficult to read or understand. Academic writing is a significant barrier for some consultants and their clients.

Consultants mostly found academic outputs by Internet search or through a university, business school or public library. They mostly looked for academic outputs to help in

the delivery of specific projects, but they were also a useful resource in the development of 'thought leadership' materials.

The majority of consultants participating in our research had worked with a university department, employee or student in their consultancy work. Most respondents reported positively on these relationships but there were also negatives, most commonly long-drawn-out timescales for completing work or missed deadlines and an inability to deliver written materials in the format and to a standard required by consulting firms. Specific problems relating to student placements were also reported.

Most consultants engage in continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Reading and attending seminars, conferences and webinars are the most popular CPD activities. General management and business books, articles and websites written for a professional or general audience are the most popular CPD reading materials, with only a small minority of consultants reading peer reviewed academic journals for CPD. Seminars, conferences and webinars attended by consultants are most commonly organised by professional or learned societies, universities or business schools, or commercial conference organisers. Typically, they feature the findings of academic research to some extent but not exclusively.

We drew the following conclusions from our research:

- Consultants should make more use of the outputs of academic research;
- Consultants should find out where to look for the outputs of academic research;
- Academics who would like to have their work used by consultants should focus on dissemination;
- The usefulness of academic work to consultants depends on the topic and theoretical approach;
- Consulting can help academic research influence other organisations and increase its impact;
- Consultants could be a useful source of research questions;
- Student placements should be organised to benefit both students and host organisations.

■ 2. Introduction

In accordance with the mission of CMCE to build bridges between the profession and the academic community, we have carried out some exploratory research into how consultants access and use outputs of academic research in their work. This position paper presents the findings of our research and draws some conclusions, as a basis for discussion and potentially more comprehensive research.

Our research consisted of some initial desk research into the origins of a number of consulting tools and interventions, an online survey, telephone and face to face interviews, and two focus groups. After developing and piloting the survey questionnaire, links to the questionnaire were distributed in an online newsletter sent to a mailing list of over 500 recipients. We collected 24 completed questionnaires, a response rate of 4.8%; this is an order of magnitude lower than the response rate to previous CMCE surveys. We concluded that working with academics was not 'front of mind' for most consultants. Comments from consultants who declined to be interviewed suggested a stronger conclusion, that there was a lack of interest in the research topic.

We also carried out 17 phone or face to face interviews. Seven of these were with people who completed the online survey, so that we had inputs from 34 individuals. Our sample mostly consisted of experienced consultants (over 10 years' experience: 79%), from all sizes of consulting businesses, as shown in Figs. 1 and 2, and included consultants who had held senior positions in major international consulting firms. Many of the consultants now working as sole practitioners or in small firms had started their consulting careers in much larger firms. The two focus groups discussed the initial findings and helped to draw conclusions.

Figure 1: Length of time respondent had worked as a consultant

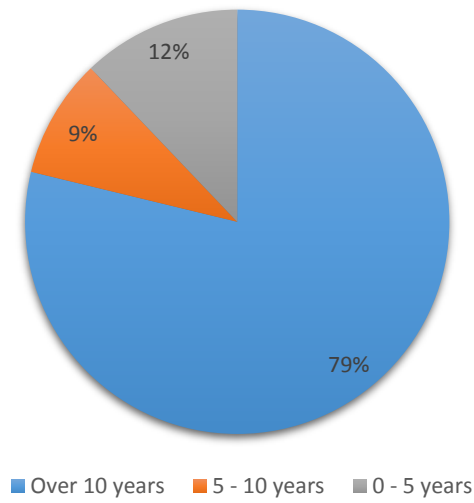
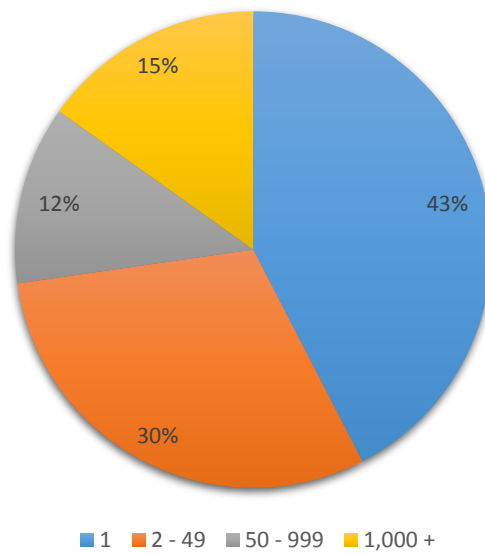


Figure 2: Number of consultants in firm



Our sample size was too small to give reliable quantitative findings, but enabled us to gauge the relative importance of various factors. The interviews provided some rich qualitative material.

In Section 2 of this paper we discuss the ways in which academic work contributes to consulting practice. Section 3 presents our findings on how consultants use the outputs of academic research in their work, while Section 4 reviews the contribution of academic research to consultants' continuing professional development. In Section 5 we discuss our findings and present our conclusions.

■ 3. Academic work contributes to consulting practice in three main ways

Management consulting work typically combines generic consulting skills with specialist expertise in a particular organisational function and often detailed knowledge of one or more economic sectors. The organisational function might, for example, be finance, IT, HR, manufacturing or supply chain management. The exception is strategy consulting which typically requires a general appreciation of all organisational functions but not expertise in any particular function. Strategy consultants do, however, need highly developed analytic expertise and often sector knowledge. To support their work consultants need to access sources of knowledge relating both to generic consulting skills and to their particular function and sector specialisms.

Academic work contributes in three main ways to the knowledge base that consultants draw on:

1. It is a source of ideas underlying major types of consulting interventions and of widely used consulting tools;
2. Outputs of academic work provide information that can be used on a specific project;
3. Academic outputs can contribute to consultants' continuing professional development (CPD).

Widely used consulting methods and tools originally derived from academic work include Porter's Five Force Model, the Balanced Scorecard, Business Process Re-engineering, Data Envelopment Analysis and PESTLE analysis. Only a minuscule fraction of published academic papers have contributed widely adopted methods and tools, and most consultants are likely to be unaware of the academic roots of these interventions.

Most often, consultants look for outputs of academic work to provide information for use on a specific project. The topics often concern function- or sector-specific knowledge, but not always. Figure 3 gives a list of the topics researched by our survey respondents; it can be seen that they range from the very general to the highly specific. How consultants access the outputs of academic work and the kinds of topics they look for are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Thirdly, the outputs of academic work can contribute to consultants' continuing professional development (CPD). The ways in which consultants use academic outputs in their CPD is discussed in Section 4.

The distinction between work produced by academics and non-academics is not clearcut. Some of the most useful outputs are provided by people who combine academic work with a role in another sector (industry, the public sector, an NGO) or with a consulting practice, or who have moved into academia from consulting or another sector. Their practical experience undoubtedly helps them produce outputs of use to practitioners.

Figure 3: Topics for which outputs of academic work were sought

General business, management or consulting topics

Research in the soft skills needed by management consultants: empathy, emotional intelligence, etc.

Futurecasting economics

Business strategy

The impact of "The Internet" on business strategy

Decision support methods and processes

Digital innovation

Consulting skills

Business Process Reengineering

Data Envelopment Analysis to help monitor performance

High performance organisations, in particular leadership

Models of leadership

Business/ organizational culture

Sector-specific topics

Markets (size and scope)

Market analysis and topical contents

Mergers and acquisitions (public private partnerships)

Restructuring utility industries

Investigating the potential for carbon pricing

How educational institutions develop themselves

Sustainability, oil and gas sector

Family businesses

Luxury sector; luxury sector in different cultures

International NGO best practice

Heritage sector

Rights of girls

Banking

Charity management, federated charities

New battery technologies

The effectiveness of the 'Secured By Design' scheme in preventing crime

Function-specific topics

Failures in ERP implementation projects

Psychological safety

Investment management (innovation)

E-learning, blended learning

Service level management for telecoms networks

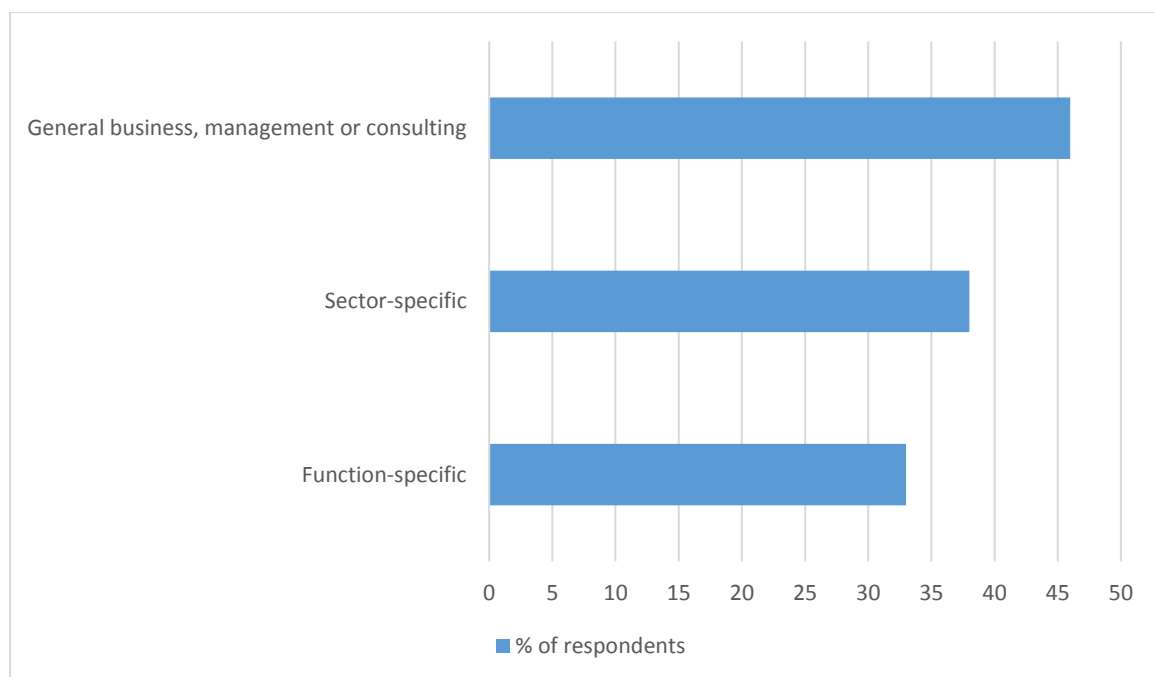
Use of the internet to obtain feedback for service quality improvement

Implementing robotics, related savings

■ 4. Most consultants have consciously used outputs of academic research in their work

Most of the consultants who participated in our research (three quarters of our sample) had used outputs of academic research in their work. The nature of the content they used is shown in Figure 4. Most commonly used were outputs of general business, management or consulting interest, but sector-specific content or content specific to an organisational function, e.g. finance or marketing, was also popular. (Some respondents used more than one kind of content, and there was some overlap between sector- and function-specific content.)

Fig. 4: Type of content that consultants used

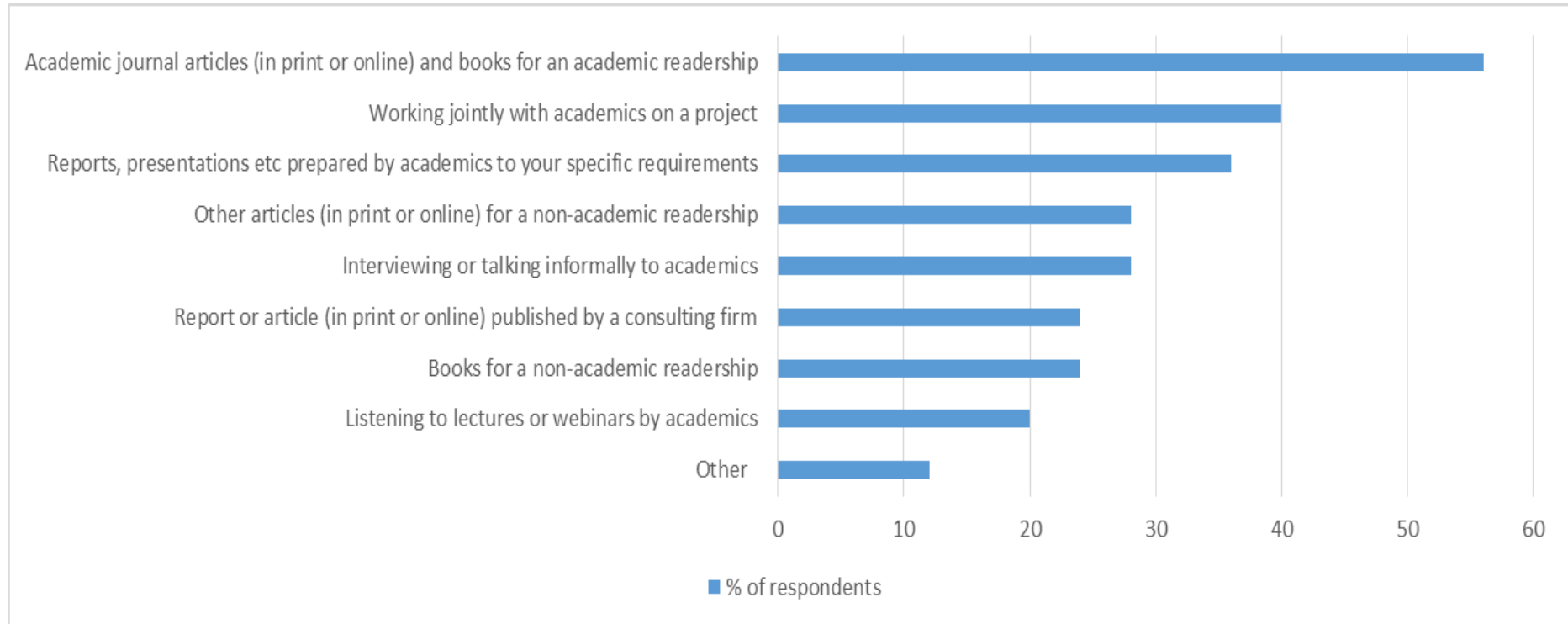


Almost all of the consultants who had not used outputs of academic research were one-person businesses. This finding makes sense in the light of the view that sole practitioners have to stick to their area of specialism to succeed (1).

Figure 5 shows how academic outputs were most frequently accessed by the consultants who participated in our research. The most common source was academic journal articles (in print or online), but many of our research participants had worked jointly with academics on a project. Joint working happened in various configurations,

with either a consulting firm or university department as prime contractor or with consultants and academics working in a joint initiative. Consultants also benefited from reports and presentations specifically commissioned by consultancy firms from individual academics or university departments. Typically, it is only the largest consulting firms that commission bespoke inputs.

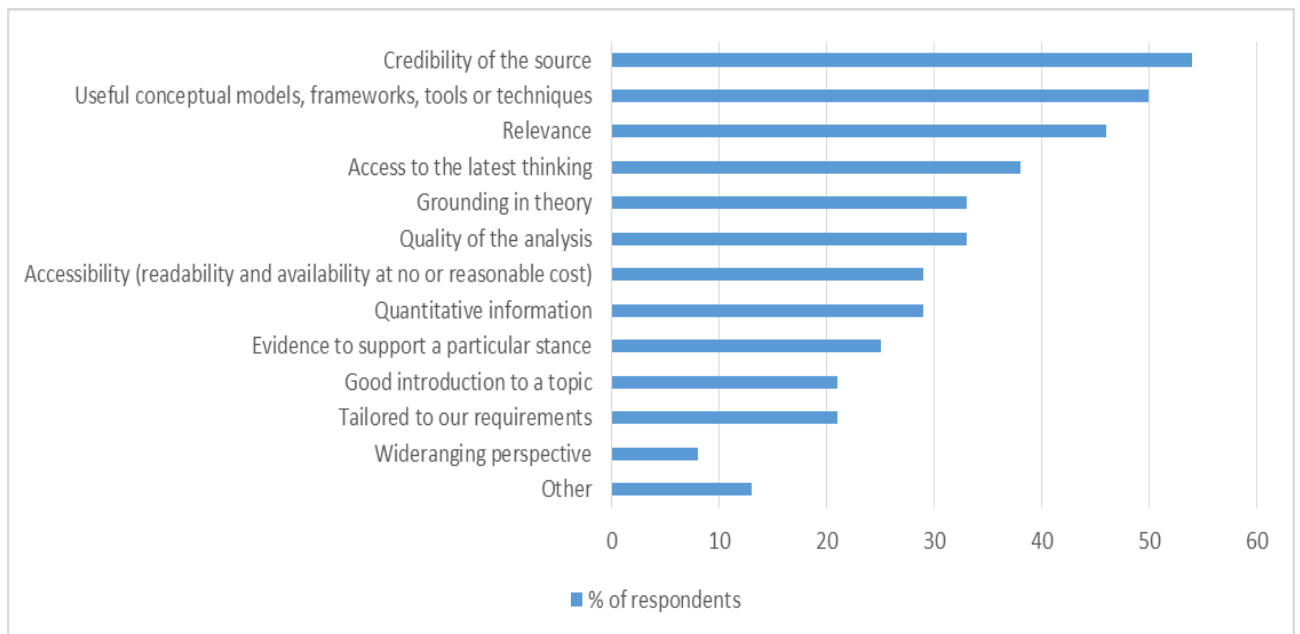
Figure 5: How academic outputs were accessed



Many of the examples of joint working and work commissioned from universities described by our interviewees occurred over ten years ago, and some were much more historic. Anecdotally, it appears that more recently consultants have found it difficult to engage university departments or individual academics in cooperative work because of increasing competition between universities and between academics. Examples of this trend related to both the UK and USA. One interviewee who had had extensive experience of liaising with universities internationally reported that American academics tended to have a more practical orientation than those in UK and European universities and were more interested in working on projects of practical value.

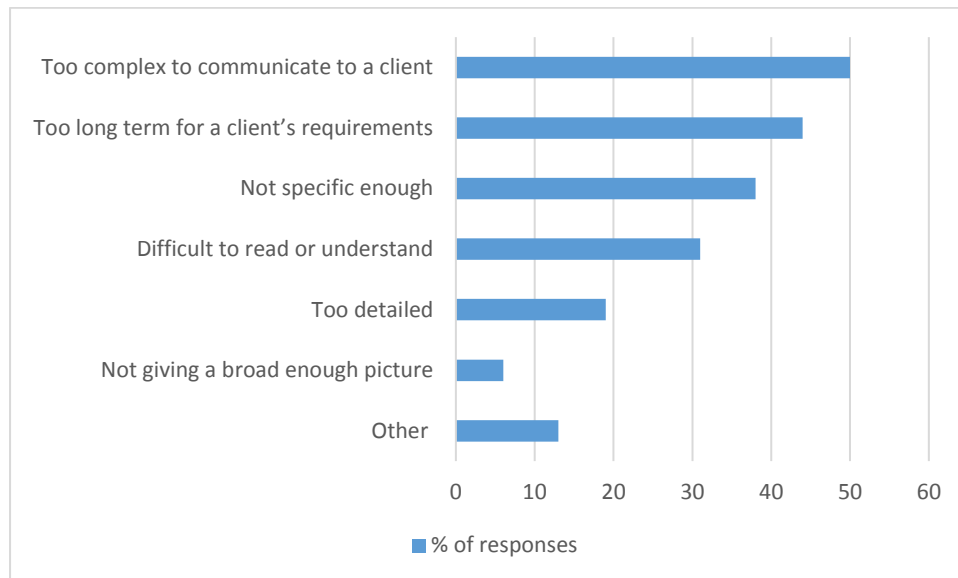
Figure 6 shows the main benefits identified by our respondents of using academic outputs. The most commonly chosen benefit of academic outputs was the credibility of the source. One consultant who had worked extensively in the United States for a major consultancy even said that he had arranged for leading academics to take part in sales calls there to add credibility. However, credibility can work against academic sources too: one experienced former consultant, subsequently a director of several businesses, said that he commissioned consultancy from leading consulting firms rather than academics because the consulting firms were seen as more credible. Academic outputs were also seen as a good source of useful conceptual models, frameworks, tools or techniques and as providing access to the latest thinking, and were chosen because of their relevance to the project in hand.

Figure 6: The benefits of academic outputs



Our respondents also saw some disadvantages to academic outputs (Figure 7). Some academic outputs were found to be less useful than they might have been because they were too complex to communicate to a client, too long term for a client's requirements, not specific enough or difficult to read or understand. Academic writing is a significant barrier for some consultants and their clients.

Figure 7: The disadvantages of academic outputs



Consultants mostly found academic outputs by Internet search (about half of our respondents) or through a library, which might be a university, business school or public library (over a third). One of our interviewees, an early career consultant, provided a good example of using academic outputs in a specific project. He was assigned to a large-scale project to advise a major client on investment strategy. He remembered having learnt about a particular investment strategy on an academic course and researched it in more detail, finding several relevant academic papers and a book about the application of the strategy in General Electric. He used the strategy to compare projects with a similar timeline and received positive feedback on his work.

Consultants mostly looked for academic outputs to help in the delivery of specific projects (three quarters of our respondents). However, they were also a useful resource in the development of 'thought leadership' materials (over half).

The majority of consultants could think of a time when they might have found outputs of academic research useful but did not use them. The main reasons were that they did not know that relevant research was available, they could not find material relevant

to a specific context, or the cost of academics' fees. The cost of fees related specifically to hiring academics to provide inputs or carry out projects, but could also reflect the cost of accessing individual academic journal articles for people outside the academic environment.

Consultants responding to our survey said that in future they might find outputs of academic research useful in creating thought leadership material, to support a specific project, and as part of continuing professional development (over half of our respondents in each case).

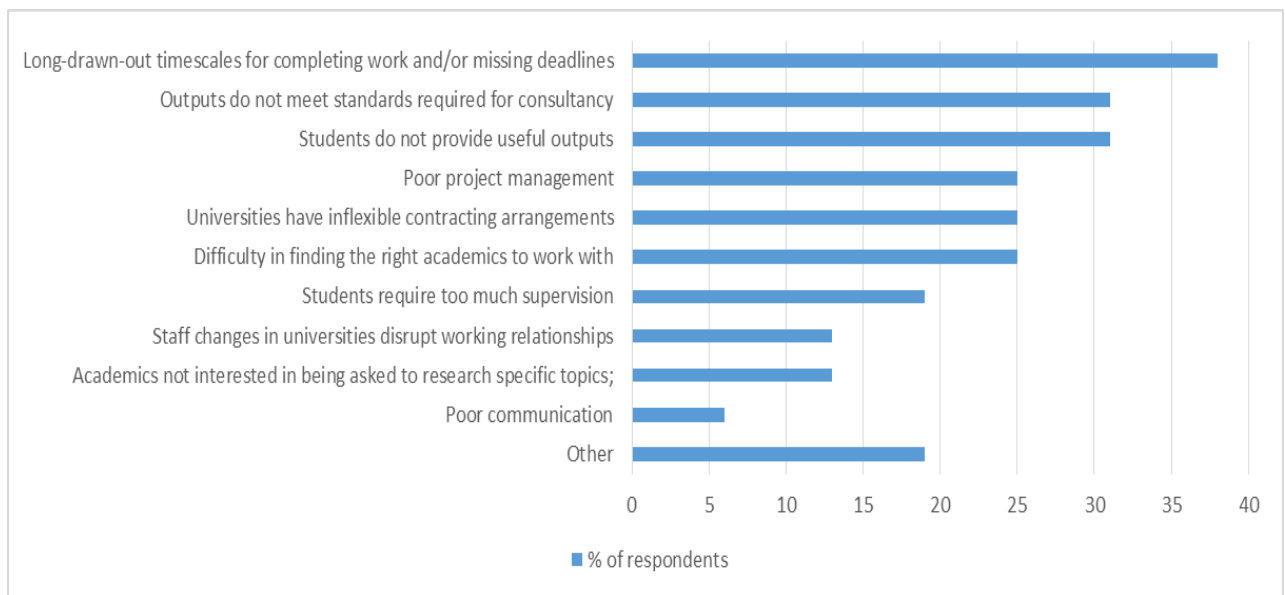
We reported above that the most common way of accessing academic knowledge for consultants was reading academic journal articles. However, the majority of consultants participating in our research had worked with a university department, employee or student in their consultancy work, most commonly:

- Providing placements for students to carry out projects or give them work experience, or working with students on placements with clients (half of the respondents);
- Contracting a senior academic to provide expert input (over a third of respondents);
- Contracting a university department or individual academic to carry out a project (over a quarter of respondents).

The positive aspects of these working arrangements were unsurprising. Typically, they were characterised by useful and/or interesting inputs (three quarters of respondents), good working relationships (two thirds of respondents) and stimulating team members (over a half).

The problems encountered with these working arrangements are more informative (see Figure 8). The most frequently encountered problem was long-drawn-out timescales for completing work and/or missing deadlines, reported by over a third of our respondents. Timescales for finishing consulting projects are often not compatible with academics fitting contributions in between other commitments, and project deadlines are sometimes not treated as seriously in the academic world as they are in business.

Figure 8: Problems encountered in working with academics



Mismatches in timescales may also betray a fundamental difference in ways of working, as one senior partner at a major consulting firm pointed out: consultants typically form hypotheses very quickly and then collect evidence to support them. This is not the same as the scientific method.

More surprising was the complaint that outputs did not meet the standards required for consultancy, voiced by about a third of our respondents. The main issues here were writing style and skills; consultants are used to distilling the conclusions of greatest interest to top management and presenting them in a highly condensed and structured form, typically according to the Minto pyramid principle. This is a far cry from most academic writing, which in its characteristic form of academic journal articles requires a completely different structure and much more extended treatment of a topic.

Specific problems relating to student placements were also reported, with about a third of respondents saying that students did not provide useful outputs and about one in five saying that they required too much supervision. Our interviews provided more information about these problems and examples of successful and unsuccessful placements.

Placements were often too short for host organisations to benefit. Unduly short placements could be discouraging for students too, as they see they are not doing

anything useful, especially if busy employees cannot give them as much time as they need.

More generally, supervision arrangements were a cause of problems. Our interviewees described situations where short-staffed small businesses and charities had welcomed a student to carry out a task which they do not have anyone with the skills to complete. Typically, the lack of supervision by someone with appropriate practical expertise led to a failure to complete the task successfully and a frustrated student.

An example of a successful placement was given by a consultant who, at the time, was working for the European operations of a multinational company. A gap year student on a sandwich course spent a year working with the consultant. The student trained on Lean Six Sigma and worked on a targeted project. The student was a native Spanish speaker, which was very helpful in dealings with operations in other countries, and in general it was a productive, symbiotic relationship. The student made a useful contribution to projects and benefited from learning skills and gaining practical experience.

A scheme that placed students with not-for-profit organisations on internships provided an example of unsuccessful placement. The not-for-profit organisations did not have the resources to manage the students and 80% of the placements were problematic. Either the not-for-profit organisations were too busy to provide good guidance or the students' assignments required skills the non-profits did not possess, e.g. marketing or survey design. As a result, everyone was disappointed.

Other problems consultants encountered in working with academics included poor project management and universities' inflexible contracting arrangements; for example, high margins allocated for overheads made cooperation uneconomic.

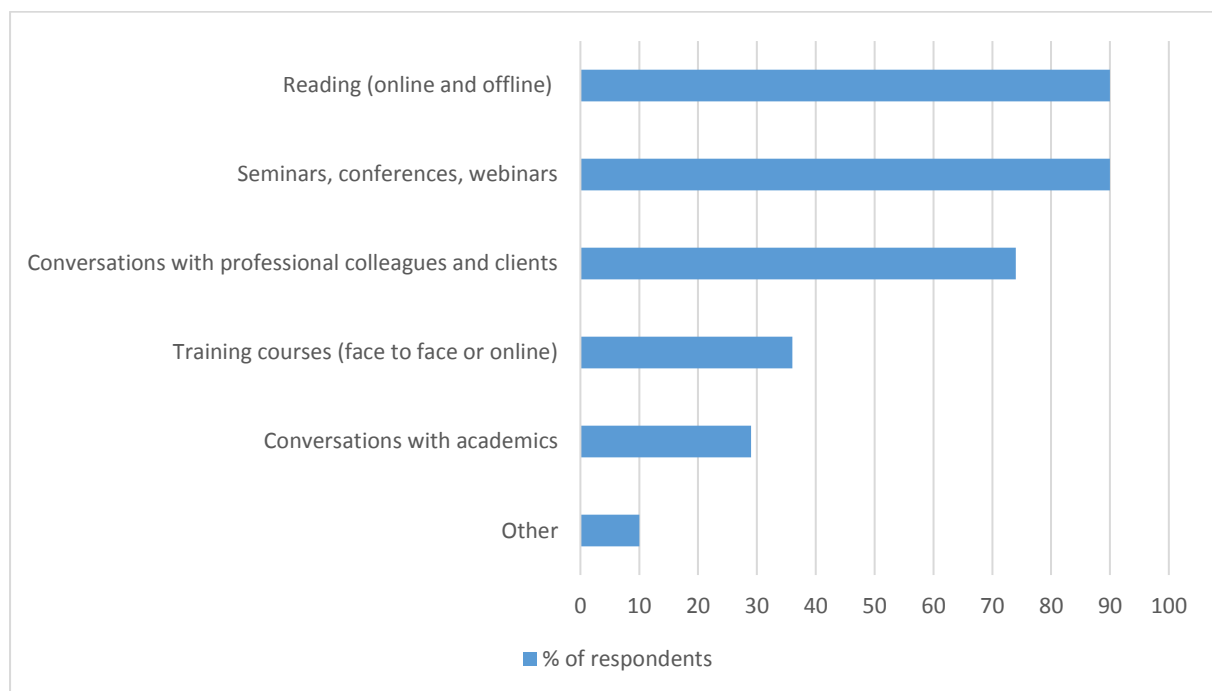
About one in four respondents had contacted university departments or employees about working together or using their research outputs, but failed to reach an agreement. The numbers concerned were too small to draw general conclusions, but the main reasons given were that research in question was not sufficiently oriented to practical application and that there was a lack of interest on the part of the universities or academics concerned.

■ 5. Consultants rely to a considerable extent on the outputs of academic research for their continuing professional development

Consultants need to keep their expertise up to date, both in their area of specialist knowledge and in general consulting capabilities. As well as learning on projects they carry out, most consultants engage in continuing professional development (CPD) activities.

The relative popularity of various CPD activities among consultants is shown in Figure 9. The most common ways in which consultants keep their professional expertise up to date are reading (both online and offline materials), attending seminars, conferences and webinars, and conversations with professional colleagues and clients.

Figure 9: Popularity of various CPD activities among consultants



Consultants' preferred reading materials for CPD are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Popularity of different kinds of CPD reading materials



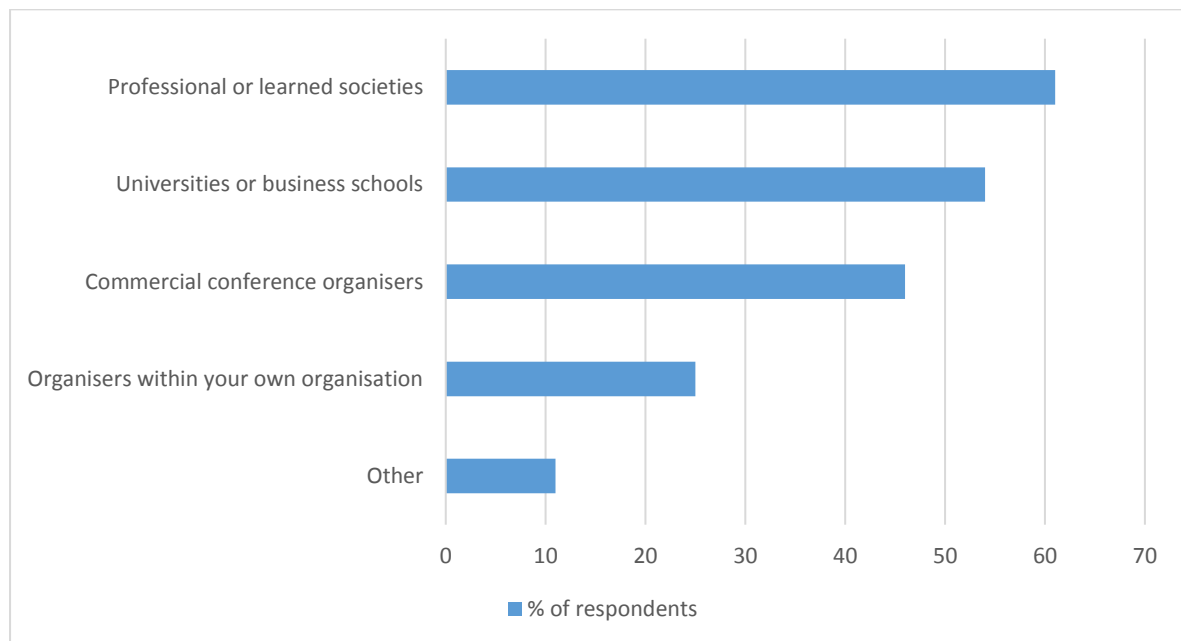
General management and business books, articles and websites written for a professional or general audience are the most popular CPD reading materials. Publications by consulting firms and materials relating to consultants' professional or technical specialisms are also popular.

It can be seen that only a third of consultants said they read academic journals for their CPD. Interviewees' comments indicated that in many cases this referred to *Harvard Business Review*, which is not regarded as a scholarly journal because it does not employ peer review for its articles. A few interviewees mentioned bona fide academic journals relating to their consulting specialism, for example *Total Quality Management Journal* and *Family Business Review*. However, the proportion of consultants reading peer reviewed academic journals for CPD is probably very small.

Nevertheless, a substantial majority of consultants say that the materials they read draw on the findings of academic research at least some of the time. For example, the management books and articles they read may be written by academics popularising their research or by specialist journalists who draw on academic research.

Consultants are most likely to attend seminars, conferences and webinars organised by professional and learned societies, universities and business schools, and commercial conference organisers (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Proportion of consultants attending CPD events organised by different organisations



Four in every five respondents said that the seminars, conferences and webinars that they attended presented the findings of academic research at least some of the time. Not all of these events featured academics as speakers, but presenters drew on the findings of academic research to a greater or lesser extent.

When survey respondents were asked to name books, articles or reports based on academic research that they found particularly useful or insightful, more people (three quarters of our respondents) mentioned books than mentioned articles or other publications (half of respondents). It seems that books are an effective vehicle for communicating the findings of academic research to consultants.

■ 6. Conclusions

Consultants should make more use of the outputs of academic research

Although many consultants do make some use of the outputs of academic research, most consultants could make more use of them. It is prudent for consultants to keep up to date with research relevant to their specialisms and also to consulting processes, as part of their CPD.

In particular sole practitioners could make more use of academic research outputs. Most sole practitioners have specialised practices and typically keep up with commercial developments in their fields, but monitoring relevant academic research could give them opportunities to take a lead over their competitors and reduce the risk of being caught out by research-driven developments.

There is a broader debate about the extent to which management consultants' recommendations are evidence-based (2). In many cases the practicalities of a consulting assignment do not allow for an exhaustive search for evidence, but professional ethics dictate that consultants should give the best advice practicable in the circumstances. This would include taking account of any relevant and reasonably accessible academic research.

Consultants should find out where to look for the outputs of academic research

If a consultant needs information on a specific topic for a project, there are other ways of accessing academic outputs than reading the *Harvard Business Review* or searching for academic papers on the internet. Consultants should familiarise themselves with them and make use of them as appropriate. Identifying and speaking to academics with relevant expertise, or even engaging them on a project, may be an option. The largest consulting firms do this regularly but it may be practicable for smaller consultancies too. Abstracting services for practitioners, e.g. the *Oxford Review*, which covers human sciences and organisational research, can also be very helpful.

Academics who would like to have their work used by consultants should focus on dissemination

It is clear that consultants undertaking personal development usually learn about academic work from secondary sources, not original academic papers. Academics

wishing to increase the impact of their work should therefore consider how to disseminate it. There are a number of channels available:

- Articles in print media and on websites aimed at a practitioner audience, e.g. *Harvard Business Review*;
- Books written with a practitioner audience in mind;
- On business and management degree courses: participants attend these courses to learn the latest academic thinking;
- Lectures, seminars and conference papers for practitioner audiences;
- Through working with consultants in person (for example on a specific project, serving together on a board or committee, or simply responding to enquiries or requests for interviews);
- Through being commissioned by a consulting firm to provide an expert input or carry out a project;
- Having their publication summarised in an abstracting service for practitioners. In the case of the *Oxford Review*, the publishers decide which academic papers to summarise, but inclusion raises the profile of a paper among practitioners;
- Departmental open days and hosting executive study tours.

The usefulness of academic work to consultants depends on the topic and theoretical approach

In most cases consultants look for academic outputs to help them on a specific project or as professional development materials with a bearing on their practice. It follows that the usefulness of a piece of academic work to consultants depends on the topic and the theoretical approach taken. Work that engages with practical consulting issues or provides applicable models or frameworks is likely to be more useful to consultants than critical theory (although clients may value the latter).

Consulting can help academic research influence other organisations and increase its impact

The nature of consulting is to work with other organisations. Consultants can therefore increase the impact of academic work by providing an interface between academia and business, public sector and third sector organisations. Where consultants use the findings of academic research in their work, that research will impact the organisations they advise, and employees of those organisations may also learn from the findings and act on them in their work.

Consultants could be a useful source of research questions

Academic researchers could make more use of consulting as a source of research questions. Consultants are well placed to identify problems of practical importance, or simply real-life situations that do not correspond to theory. In addition, consultants have developed a range of methods and models on the basis of their experience. The methods and models developed by consultants should be evaluated by academics; there would be considerable value in establishing whether they are supported by evidence.

Student placements should be organised to benefit both students and host organisations

Many consultants reported problems with student placements, typically in client organisations. Placements are often too short for host organisations to benefit; for this to happen, students will need enough time to learn about the organisation and master specific competencies so that they can work productively, and then a further period to accomplish useful work. Unduly short placements can be discouraging for students too, as they see they are not doing anything useful.

Adequate supervision arrangements are also essential for a successful student placement. Unless a student is supervised by someone with practical skills relevant to the task in hand and the time available to devote to supervision, the task is unlikely to be completed successfully and the student will be dissatisfied.

The role of academic research in consulting may be similar to that in a wider range of businesses

The importance of academic research to business varies widely between business sectors. Some sectors such as pharmaceuticals and high-tech manufacturing are research-intensive and are known for the cooperation between academic researchers and leading businesses. Other sectors like hospitality are less known for making use of research, although even hospitality has its own dedicated academic journal (Tourism and Hospitality Research).

Consulting falls between these extremes and may be representative of a wider range of knowledge-intensive professional service businesses. The disciplines in which management consultants most often specialise (e.g. accounting and finance, IT, marketing, human resources) also vary in the extent to which they draw on academic research but fall between the extremes of the most and least research-oriented business sectors.

Notes

1. <https://www.cmce.org.uk/knowledge-bank/starting-consultancy-business-1-what-are-you-selling>, retrieved 24 July 2021.
2. For example Rob Briner, Professor in Organizational Psychology at Queen Mary University of London, is quoted as saying “...because in my experience, none of them [management consultants] apply evidence-based management. I am not saying they do not use any evidence at all, but the process they apply has nothing to do with evidence-based management.” (<https://www.jodetavernier.com/2020/07/rob-briner-interview-management-consultants-do-not-know-how-to-read-the-scientific-literature/>) Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton of Stanford University argue that management consultants often face perverse incentives not to provide the best evidence-based advice (*Hard facts, dangerous half-truths and total nonsense*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2006, pp 33 – 34).

About the author



Dr Karol Szlichcinski has 30 years' experience as a management consultant, with expertise in strategy, market analysis, business planning, change management and the exploitation of IT. In 2013 he was appointed professor at the University of Silesia School of Management, Katowice, Poland, and held senior academic posts at the university for five years. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Consulting, Chartered Marketer and Chartered Psychologist, and has published a book, *Financial Network Services*, and numerous reports and articles for business and academic readerships.

A large, abstract graphic in a light pink color dominates the right side of the page. It consists of several overlapping, curved shapes that form a stylized, organic form, possibly resembling a speech bubble or a stylized letter 'C'. The background is white.

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