Sources of Research Topic Generation: Lessons From Proficient Researchers of Business Management Disciplines

Adrian France
Centre of Business and Enterprise, Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec), Hamilton, New Zealand
Adrian.france@wintec.ac.nz
DOI: 10.34190/JBRM.17.2.03

Abstract: Journal publications are an output of research though there is little research into the process that led to the outcome and the lack of discussion and debate surrounding the process leads to an allure of mysticism. This paper studies the norms of research through investigating how successful business researchers choose their research topics. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with business researchers. Generating topic ideas by successful researchers were separated into two general sources: 'Professional Capacity' and 'Individual Motivators'. The main Professional Capacity sources were students and previous research. These Professional Capacity sources can be used by an established researcher. The most valuable Individual Motivator is to read. Researchers also revealed that they chose topics they found intrinsically interesting rather than topics that would necessary have a significant impact on the literature. To achieve research and publication success, it is important to make research part of your routine and read, attend conferences, submit your work for review, and persevere.

Keywords: Research topic, significant research, publication, generation, initiation

1. Introduction

There are increasing pressures on tertiary institutions and academics to carry out research. In New Zealand, tertiary institutions are required to undertake research to achieve accreditation by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). New Zealand institutions may also receive funding from the government through a new funding scheme referred to as the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). Funding is provided to institutions for active researchers and for highly rated researchers. Institutions may also be accredited by other bodies, such as the Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand that also requires research output from the tertiary education organisations. Consequently, institutions reward research and research output is a key performance indicator (Fogarty & Ravenscroft, 1999).

The place of publication is often considered an indication of research quality (Hull & Wright, 1990; Zeff, 1996). The journal thus impacts research given the publication likelihood and implied quality (Singh & Remenyi, 2016). Much research has assessed and ranked journals (Reinstein, & Calderon, 2006) and also discussions into the editing and rewriting process to achieve journal publication (Wygal, 2005). The outcome of research, in the form of journal publication, has been a focus for much research, though there has been less study into research activities that lead to the completion of the project.

There have been other calls that there is little examination into the research process. Hopper (2005) states that too little about research writing is debated and the lack of discussion leads to an allure of mysticism. The secrecy of writing "is a disservice to novices and veterans" (Hopper, 2005, p. 177). The activities of researchers including the methods of generating topics that led to successful publication have been disregarded in the research literature.

Ryan, Scarpens, and Theobald (1992) provide a list of reasons why articles submitted for journal publications are rejected, of which subject matter is stated. Though, there is little research literature indicating how subjects, topics, and research questions should be formulated prior to research.

In addition to little investigation into researcher's activities, there is currently no model for choosing and selecting topics (Rountree & Laing, 1996). Yet Chow and Harrison (1998) find that the chosen research topic is determined by potential publication success. The only recent known literature investigating research topic generation appears to be Chow and Harrison (1998; 2002), other than anecdotal accounts such as Mewett

Reference this paper: France, A., 2019. Sources of Research Topic Generation: Lessons From Proficient Researchers of Business Management Disciplines. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods,* 17(2), pp. 74-85, available online at www.ejbrm.com

(2002). An extensive search for literature on activities of researchers failed to find papers that verify or confirm required habits or activities to be successful.

An early activity of the research process is deciding what research topic to develop. When the requirements to research are from external sources, such as funding, then the choice of project topic is already chosen. Without the external forces, people have the choice to research whatever they choose. How should research topics be generated by the potential researcher? Are topics chosen by researcher's interest or by demand? Although most well written academic journal articles provide background, a theoretical framework, methodology, and rationale, few of these articles indicate why the researchers personally chose the topic and research questions.

This study is intended to capture current 'best research practice' of proficient business researchers. An examination of researcher's activities is intended to make the methods of topic generation, more aware to researchers and institutions, to make the findings more accessible to researchers, new or experienced, that want to develop their research profile, and to research leaders that want to gain the greatest return for their investment.
This paper studies the norms of research through investigating how successful researchers choose their initial topics. The personal accounts of researchers are investigated to uncover what activities successful researchers do and why the researchers choose the topic. Success is defined later in the method section of this paper. Through publication of this article, the process of research will begin to be demystified.

The following section provides relevant literature, followed by the methodology. The third section presents the results and analysis of this study. The final section concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Pressure on academics to publish impacts the researcher's place of publication and research topic to match the journal (Talib, 2002, & Christensen, Finger, & Latham, 2002). The place of journal publication also changes (Singh, & Remenyi, 2016). The topic thereby forms an important determinant of the research output.

Modelling of the resulting topics chosen by research authors can be investigated using author topic models (Mahalakshmi, Selvi, & Sendhilkumar, 2018). The modelling of topics is applied over an author's research articles creating a framework of the author. However, the reasons for selecting the topics cannot be identified using these models.

Lei (2009) outlines suggestions, as many others do, as to strategies for finding a research topic. The literature review of Lei (2009) to identify sources of research topics include students as a research team, reading literature, curriculum, and correspondence with others.

Little established literature based on empirical data exists that provides a framework for topic generation of researchers. A framework of the factors impacting researchers in the academic environment can be found in France (2018). The framework involves macro factors, discipline, profession, and institute factors, as well as students and those specific to the researcher. The influencers on researchers are thereby made up of situational factors given the researcher's professional position and also those peculiar to the individual.

The research problem, is considered significant as it affects the entire process of the study from the theory, to the method, and findings (Jensen, 2013; Yalcin, Bektas, Oztekin, & Karaday, 2016). The activity of providing a method and data collection for research can be considered as a set of steps (Yalcin, Bektas, Oztekin, & Karaday, 2016). The process requires the definition of a concept that uses specific observations. A generic abstractive target gets formed into a research problem that is answered specifically and concretely. The researcher continues searching until arriving at a problem that can be answered.

2.2 Historical Results

Chow and Harrison (2002) telephone interviewed 'influential' researchers to find which topics attained publication. Topics that are meaningful and significant were found to provide the most success of publication. Meaningful or significant topics were defined as:

- Addresses real world or practical problem = policy implications
- Significantly impacts literature or knowledge
- Fills a gap or advancement of theory
- Novel, new, or unexpected results
- New procedure or attacks difficult issue

Topics that would be considered meaningful and significant are those that contribute to existing scholarship or those that provide practical benefits if the research question is answered. Whether research is considered meaningful and significant will depend on whether a case to undertake the research is established. Whether there is a case for a particular research topic will depend on whether the topic has previously been investigated unsatisfactorily, or not investigated at all so a gap in the topic exists, or whether the topic has been investigated but requires generalization or application to another context.

The selection of influential researchers was from a list of authors who had published in journals and been cited many times. The results of the research showed that successful accounting researchers generate ideas from three general processes (Chow & Harrison, 2002). The processes are: following and critically looking at literature, keeping abreast of real world issues, and working with colleagues. The latter processes were less frequently stated than the reading of literature process with reading almost unanimously stated as a source of topic generation.

Chow and Harrison (1998, & 2002) used Brown's (1996) criterion of influential accounting researchers as those who had an annual citation count of 4.0 or more in five leading accounting journals. The influential interviewees had an average one journal article every two years in a leading accounting journal, which was considered by Chow and Harrison as prolific. Chow and Harrison recognised that certain paradigms or methodologies may bias the results and that sub disciplines may have been under-represented.

The accounting discipline could be argued to be distinctive, import theories and methods from other disciplines and thereby the research process of accountants is expected to imitate the process of these other disciplines. Though, academics often concentrate their efforts on a limited range of topics ... and hesitate to venture into other topic areas (Dymsza, 1984). This study will expand Chow and Harrison's (2002) sample to include researchers from the broader discipline of business rather than specifically accountants.

Little systematic research has investigated how topics are chosen, particularly topics that are successful and lead to publication. Chow and Harrison (2002) provide one of the only articles that researched topic generation of international accounting researchers. There has been little research of how other business researchers choose topics. This study replicates Chow and Harrison's (2002) method to add to the study by investigating activities of researchers of business management and concentrating on New Zealand researchers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

The informal and flexible process of research has the possibility to vary considerably and in complex ways within and outside of any particular discipline. The process of topic generation has not been established, in any one discipline or in generic fields, except to limited extents. Researchers may have a unique approach to topic generation so researchers will be personally interviewed using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The structured questions asked of the interviewees were: What research topics were they currently working on, how did they go about choosing that topic, what ways do they go about choosing topics, what was their most significant publication, and to describe the process they took to select the topic of their significant publication in addition to the process in gaining publication. Dependent on their responses, further follow up questions were asked of the interviewees.

The apparent unsystematic selection of topics, possible informal nature of researchers and the requisite to explore the successful researchers' own accounts of their successful activities provide reasons to choose the method of in-depth interviews to gather data. Interviews were recorded and the results are described in this paper. This study emulates the research of Chow and Harrison (2002), but varies in the following ways: this study accepts that significant and meaningful topics are important in attaining publication, instead of asking interviewees about their 'noteworthy' studies interviewees were asked to state their 'significant' publications and describe the process of topic generation through to publication. This current study also encapsulates New Zealand business researchers rather than purely accounting researchers with high citation counts, uses different criteria that more closely resembles PBRF criteria, is conducted ten years after the initial identification of individuals in Chow and Harrison's (2002) study, and also interviews research leaders that oversee prolific and less prolific researchers.

The study in the accounting discipline, by Chow and Harrison (2002), provides the guidance for this study. Chow and Harrison (2002) telephone interviewed influential accounting researchers selected from Brown's (1996) study. Chow and Harrison narrowed down the sample to 20 using citation counts in five accounting journals.

Many chosen researchers are busy with teaching during the academic semester, so for this current study it was envisaged to make the interviews during the teaching recess. Most of the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's office, providing a quiet, comfortable, and familiar environment for the interviewee.

3.2 Selection Criteria

As this research intended to investigate the generation of successful research topics and topic choice of successful researchers, success needs defining. Success could be defined as providing seminal work, proliferation of papers, or other means based on quality or quantity. Due to the numerous means of defining success, no preset assumptions were made about the term. Instead, the selection of interviewees was based on the prerequisites stated below.

Gaining a PhD is one of the highest achievements of studying and can be considered a prerequisite for a researcher, particularly at an academic institution. A PhD provides a foundation for further research, so a current practising researcher with a PhD formed the first criterion.

Many promotions are made in tertiary institutions based on past research outputs and performance that provides an indication of quality and quantity of research. Researchers can provide certainty of their past achievements thereby allowing classification as successful or not, and current researchers can provide dialogue of current projects. An academic may also have been heavily involved with teaching and had few research opportunities. Given few opportunities, research quantity and quality would be low, yet, the researcher may be considered successful based on providing outputs while having few research opportunities. In addition, judgement of research output value can be subjective, and typical attempts to objectively measure outputs using number, journal impact factors, or citations neglect the nuances of research.

Senior lecturers and professors usually attain their position through research and typically have experience in PhD supervision of students. The lecturing position was therefore used as another proxy of quality and quantity of research. To be considered successful the researcher needed to have a lecturing position of senior lecturer or higher.

PBRF also uses a peer esteem dimension in the process of researcher rankings. Selected interviewees for this study needed to have been invited to speak at conferences or other institutions as a peer esteem proxy of quantity and quality of output. The esteem also needed to be conveyed at the conference or institute.

The initial participants were chosen from the authors known peers in disciplines of accounting, economics, and business communication. The prospective participants were invited to participate and to suggest other potential participants. Researchers that were suggested were then interviewed if they matched the criteria. Thus a quasi snowball selection technique was used.

The fourteen researchers in the resulting sample were all employed at universities, were from various business disciplines including accounting, economics, marketing, management, and business communication.

Successful business researchers are also considered to exist in Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) other than universities, but the selection criteria of successful business researchers limited the sample to the most prolific of researchers with outputs of excellence.

A further eight researchers were selected that were current research leaders or research leaders in the past. Those designated research leaders were able to comment on their own research, or as they oversaw others, comment on other researchers.

Each participant was interviewed for at least one hour. Some interviews extended for one and a half hours. Interview notes were taken during and after the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and later verbatim transcribed. Respondent answers were compared for similarities and differences. The section that follows is the results of interviews with researchers and research leaders who are from New Zealand academic institutions that met the criteria of a successful business researcher.

4. Limitations

The underlying assumption with this study is that the interviewed individuals can accurately identify how particular topics were generated. Interviewees were asked to recollect the development of a topic that contributed to a significant piece of writing that formed the basis for publication. Interviewee responses were cross checked with questions about their published research.

The sample size is relatively small and the individuals may not represent their particular field. Individual researchers may have different and varied means of establishing a research topic. For validity purposes, the researcher compared responses across all interviewees.

5. Results

A successful researcher typically has a handful of active projects. The range of active projects reported by the researchers varied around seven to twelve. The ongoing projects of successful researchers reflects Hopper (2005) and De Lange's (2005) statements that researchers require ongoing projects to fill waiting times.

The interviewees provided various sources of generating topic ideas, of which many were not stated in textbooks. After identifying the sources of topic generation, the results were apparent that each interviewee provided sources that were due to their position as a researching lecturer, past work, or their own actions. Sources of topic generations were classified into Professional capacity motivators and Individual motivators. The following section is divided into these two classifications.

6. Professional Capacity

The classification labelled Professional Capacity includes those sources of topic generation that are obtained by the researcher's position as lecturer or professor at a university. At a university, ideas are given to a lecturer due to the credible position at a university. The topic generation sources that are categorised under Professional Capacity are:

- Student projects
- Consultancy
- Previous research – Own generation, by reviewers comments, retrieval of previous work, or receiving joint research invitations.

The researchers that were interviewed found that students provided an abundant source of topic generators. The interviewed researchers frequently used the term 'based on a student project", or 'originally a student project", when referring to written research papers that began with supervising student work. Students may have ideas for research or provide questions that cannot be instantaneously answered by the lecturer's current knowledge. The lecturer can then use the idea to investigate an answer. Students, especially graduate students undertake small scale research to fulfil masters or graduate programmes. Once the student finishes the project, the research topic can be expanded, problems can be resolved, the data can be used for other projects, or the research can be applied to a different context. The lecturer of the student may also provide academic support for the student so that the lecturer can attach their name to the research output. Any research by the student that was unfruitful saves the lecturer the time and energy in doing a similar

investigation. Students were found to be a valuable and important source for generating topics. A researcher indicated that a source of topic ideas was: "Doing PhD and then supervising other ones".

Industry contacts, other industry requests, and other external contracts are reasonably common in the business lecturer's profession. These consultancy requests cannot always be published due to anonymity and privacy issues. The consulting provides useful personal rewards, but few rewards from publication.

Once established as a researcher, typically through PhD research, there exists work that the researcher can build upon and develop. Previous studies or publications of the researcher are a major resource for further research and can be built upon and developed. Much research, and research considered successful provides as many questions as there were questions to begin with. Initial questions that become answered or partially answered provide further questions for the researcher. Original research then leads to more research ideas.

Referring to a project originating from a student the researcher said:

> "projects then grow into papers which will sort of give you new branches on a tree. This in turn will branch into one or two other papers."

When research is submitted for refereed publication, especially for journals, the process frequently involves resubmissions. Reviewer comments may be negative or even oppose the researcher. These comments may induce or provide alternative slants for submissions for other publications. Reviewers are other esteemed researchers in the field and therefore the comments from the reviewers are essentially useful comments from peers. Reviewer comments, like other scholarly comments, provide another valuable source to generate topics.

As a result of being established, and fulfilling lecturer roles of teacher and researcher, many research projects were found to be abandoned in the short term to complete other activities. Some research is abandoned because other research is providing more significant results, rewards, or the deadlines for other research makes the project more urgent. Projects with a lack of potential publication success become neglected in favour of projects that are 'trendy'. However, some projects were 'rescued' from the drawer and eventually submitted to journals.

7. Individual Motivators

Individual Motivators consisting of inspiration and motivation pertain to the scholarly activities of individuals themselves. Scholarly activities inspire ideas. The scholarly activities include the following:

- Funding – Aiming for funds or prestige
- Policy demand
- Seeking co-authors
- Conferences – Attending and partaking
- Reading
- Formally thinking, writing, brainstorming

Funding provides a motivator for competent researchers. Aiming for a funding grant provides the researcher an objective, an existing topic and after an unsuccessful attempt at obtaining the funding grant, the remaining proposal, including relevant literature research, can continue to be used.

Funding is often driven by policy demand, though policy demand may be implied or explicit in news and reading material. Thus, the researcher needs to stay up-to-date with current affairs. Places to look for topical ideas that require the smallest amount of time include newspapers, magazines, the contents of academic journals, or book reviews. Themes that keep appearing in journals may also indicate topical or contemporary issues.

Keeping an interest in other researcher's interest areas was also found to provide a subject of discussion and further inspiration for investigation. Once a general subject is acknowledged possible co-researchers could be explored. While no particular interest is established with a general subject, the discussion with other co-

researchers may provide interest and at least the co-researcher will often provide projects that they are working on and would like some collegial help with. A co-authorship is a credible piece of research.

An economics researcher referring to the use of co-authorship stated:

> "so it does typically require some one to spark the process. Or something like that. And in my case, I am often working with co-authors and you kind of feel guilty because they are coming in and you haven't done anything yet."

Attending and participating in conferences provided leads and slants that could be investigated. Conferences, especially the international conferences, provide external advice on papers, establish academic reputations, establish contacts with like minded researchers, aid decisions about the choice of targeted journal to submit to, and may elicit submission invitations from editors (Hopper, 2005). Furthermore, the interviewees indicated conferences of general interest give the researcher knowledge of activities of their peers, the conferences of specific interest that have a narrow discipline boundary provide further research ideas. The researcher that attends specific interest conferences can identify studies that can be altered and applied another way.

Other thought provoking activities include the formal processes of thinking, writing, and brainstorming. A researcher responding to a question regarding generating topics stated:

> "It's rare for me to start with a completely new topic. 'I've finished everything off now and I want to do something new'. It's been several years now since I've sort of had the luxury to say that because things have been evolving at different rates."

Of the active researchers, these activities of formally thinking and writing were mentioned by two researchers, and appear to be done in research lulls. The formal processes may be relied upon during the lull as the researchers have previously exhausted their other sources.

Of all the activities and sources available to the successful research scholar reading was unanimously the most practiced. As well as a means of keeping up-to-date, and maintaining a knowledge of what others are doing, reading other studies provides ideas on applying the study to different data, altering the study in some way, or realising gaps in research. Reading drove the topic in the direction of a research output that could be placed amongst the literature upon completion.

An interviewee stated poorly supported or arguable comments can appear in some articles, providing valuable sources of research ideas. From reading and searching, topic identification can be obtained from looking for the controversy, catchwords or clichés, or what has not been fully explored. Due to the need to do so much reading a researcher stated "find topics of great interest and theoretical approach, and want to read about it".

Research participants stated that a broad topic will eventually require narrowing down into something focused to a thesis and research questions. The main activity that will help a researcher narrow their broad topic appears to be discussing with others and also reading. Much reading can be done, but there becomes a point that reading to understand the broad topic needs to also become focused into a theme or thread. Some of the literature will be read, some of it will be skimmed, and some of it will be glanced at or kept for possible referencing. Reading should help develop themes or ideas on what has shaped the topic and what the topic situation is currently.

8. Discussion

Professional Capacity motivators and Individual motivators were each considered valuable to researchers. No single motivator was ever conducted solely. The motivators are discussed in more detail below.

8.1 Motivators

The professional capacity topic generators of students and previous research were found to be valuable topic generators. These topic generators have not been alluded to or described in other studies prior to this study.

The students referred to by the interviewees were postgraduate students. All of the researchers interviewed were from universities, so there was a rich supply of topic generators for the interviewees. Any lack of postgraduate students would reduce the potential to use students as a source of topic generation and thereby reduce the source of research. The lack of sampled researchers from non universities in this study who did not meet the successful researcher criteria may at least be partly due to the lack of postgraduate students. A polytechnic or tertiary institute without postgraduate students must substitute another topic generator in place of students if researchers are to generate successful research. For any undergraduate students, supervisor involvement is expected to be greater due to the knowledge and expertise required to make journal submission and publication (Delgadillo, 2016). Thereby there is a greater justification for undergraduate research to have supervisors listed as authors.

Attendance at a conference requires funding from the tertiary institute of employment. Funding is typically and, in some cases, only given if papers are accepted by the conference organisers. As funding is only provided for accepted papers, emerging researchers may find it more difficult to attend conferences. Hence, tertiary institutes have a responsibility to provide funding to researchers without paper acceptance so the researchers have a chance to develop research topics.

This study found that reading was a valuable activity to generate research topics, as in Chow and Harrison (2002) that found following and critically looking at the literature to be the most valuable process to identify and develop research topics. Reading provides identification of gaps in literature that is facilitated by in-depth and up-to-date knowledge. The activity of reading also provides illustrations of studies that can be altered and applied to other situations or disciplines. The results of reading a source of topic generation are also consistent with Lei (2009).

Reading, could be argued, is the principle means of generating and shaping research. Reading may be the driving force of research, but also the mode of inquiry. De Lange (2005, p. 196) explains that "our contribution to scholarship [as researchers] is the activity of reading. Research in this context is purely inquiry, and we inquire through reading and debate… reading causes us to participate in academic life generally" and that publication is the by-product of the research and reading process.

Chow and Harrison (2002) found that keeping abreast of real world issues were valuable in identifying research topics. The same was not found in this study, however, this study had classifications that encompass identification of real world issues; reading, funding, consultancy, policy demand, and conferences. And by default, the researchers kept up-to-date.

Working with colleagues, and colleagues in practice have been labelled as valuable topic identifiers in previous research (Chow and Harrison, 2002). This research study did not specifically identify colleagues as a source of topic generators. Academic research was largely viewed as independent, and sometimes isolated. Though researchers did seek co-authors, attend conferences, provide consultancies, and gain feedback from journal submission reviews. Seeking colleagues and networking were activities conducted once a topic had been initiated and development of the research paper was undertaken as was consistent with Worrall (2016). Collaboration occurs for development of papers and publication (Delgadillo, 2016; Selvi, Mahalakshmi, & Sendhilkumar, 2017). This current study finds that topic generation occurs before collaboration.

Individual motivators and professional capacity motivators were used by researchers to generate potential topics but the actual selection of topic was a matter of personal fulfilment. The interviewee respondents show that researchers chose topics that they found interesting rather than topics that significantly impact literature or knowledge. Upon selecting the topic, the impact or influence of the resulting research was inconsequential to the researcher. While the publication outlet is chosen by the researcher and publication success determined by the topic (See Talib, 2000; & Christensen, Finger, & Latham, 2002), the topic itself is chosen by the researcher. The freedom of researchers to choose topics does not lead researchers to choose topics that are significant but leads researchers to choose topics that are personally fulfilling.

The results of Chow and Harrison (2002) hinted at the need for a topic to be internally exciting to the researcher. Interviewees of Chow and Harrison stated that the topic needs to appeal to the researcher and that the decision of what topic to choose relies on whether the researcher wants to devote time and resources to. An interviewee of Chow and Harrison (2002, p.189) expressed the choice of specific topics as a "garbage

can model of decision making". The statement illustrates the choice of topics is decided by the individual researcher rather than a set criteria or direction from literature. Topics are chosen largely by the interest of the researcher.

8.2 Significant Research

A researcher's published paper may provide interest in the research community, though the papers of most significance to the researcher were papers that provided personal fulfilment. When researchers were asked what their most significant research outputs were, the researchers chose research that was personally significant so that the researcher learned something new or approached a topic in a novel way.

An economics researcher describing their significant paper stated:

> "there's one that just came out of _____ which is not as well regarded as some other journals I've published in, but I liked it a lot. Just because it was a paper on a issue which hadn't been sort of done before".

The researcher continued describing their significant papers:

> "Neither of those would be the papers which are in the so called best journals I've published in. So it's not always the case that one's best papers go into the best journals".

After the interviews, the interviewees' output histories were reviewed and compared to their research mentioned in interviews. The papers mentioned in interviews as the most significant were not articles that appeared in the most prestigious journals.

An accounting researcher had a list of research papers, for the interviewer, that had been prepared in advance of the interview and when asked about his significant papers stated:

> "In my own development there was one particular article which was not in a top journal. I suppose it was not the best I've ever done, but for me it marked a change in my research career."

The reasoning for that particular paper being significant to the researcher was explained as:

> "it represented my view, my perspective. I wasn't copying anyone else, I wasn't reproducing anyone else. It was the first piece I felt it was my own. It had my personal stamp on it. It wasn't probably brilliant. It was me. It was significant for me."

The accounting researcher above continued to explain that the significant paper "laid the basis for others."

Researchers were aware of the leading and prestigious journals and chose journal articles that reflected personal significance to the researcher. Journal articles were typically chosen, but the articles were meaningful or significant personally rather than meaningful or significant to the research community.

An interdisciplinary project that applied an approach that previously had not been used in the topic area was one example of personally significant research. Other examples of significant research were of research that informed the researcher rather than the research community. The researcher was better informed from the research and found the research fulfilling.

The descriptions of significant research as outputs impacting the researcher and the need for topics to be interesting were common views of the interviewees. The interest in the topic and the impact of the output provided fulfilling research for the interviewee. This result is in contrast to Chow and Harrison (2002) that had a minority of interviewees that responded that the topic must internally excite the researcher to be a characteristic of significant research topics. Chow and Harrison's study focused on the topic's significance to impact on the literature, while the interviewees in this study described significant topics as those that impacted on the researcher. An accounting researcher summed up the research that was significant because of personal fulfilment in his statement:

> "Research is a very personal thing, and that's why I emphasised why people should find topics and research topics that they feel personally satisfactory for them."

9. Conclusion

This research identified a variety of motivators that initiated topics for business management researchers. Students and reading were two topics that have substantiated Lei's (2009) framework. Correspondence was also substantiated in this research, though not as a topic generator, as development and progression of the work to journal publication. The topic generator of curriculum was not found in this study, unsurprisingly as Lei (2009) was referring to students finding research topics rather than successful academic researchers within tertiary organisations.

Successful researchers generate research topics more easily because of their professional position as established researchers and thus professional capacity. The professional capacity of the successful researchers can depend on student ideas, consulting, and previous research.

Much of the professional capacity sources of topics are not available to all researchers. Improving the professional capacity topic generation sources of researchers could require researchers to teach or supervise post graduate students. Rotational programmes to provide researchers access to post graduate students may be a method of improving research topic generation, perhaps for the researcher, student, and teaching institution.

There are researchers that exist in ITPs, outside of universities, and if research is to be supported and improved in these institutions then professional capacity needs to be improved. The lack of post graduate students at ITPs provides a self initiated barrier for improving topic generation of researchers. Evading the barrier would be a difficult task for ITPs, so an alternative may be to improve other topic generation motivators.

Consulting and previous research relies on past activities. It is thus important for researchers to have a background in research. Much publication can be generated from undertaking a PhD (Zivney, Bertin, & Gavin, 1995), and the PhD provides a basis for further research. Support and encouragement should thus be given to researchers to complete PhDs if not already done so.

The professional capacity motivators are more difficult to emulate than the individual motivators and are more dependent on the institution the researcher is at. Postgraduate students provide a catalyst for research but this occurs if there are post-graduate programmes at the institution. Those institutions with postgraduate research inevitably will provide more successful research than those institutions without post-graduate programmes. In the New Zealand context, universities have an advantage over most technical institutes and polytechnics that do not have post graduate programmes. Universities could improve research output through support and advocating post graduate programmes to graduates.

Sources of topics that would be of benefit to other researchers that want to become successful are individual motivators. Individual motivators include aiming for funding grants, determination through policy demand, seeking co-authors, conferences, reading and formal thinking, writing, and brainstorming. Reading appears as the most valuable source of generating topics for successful research. Universities and ITPs need to therefore provide adequate resources of literature and time to read.

Reading provides a tool to identify research gaps through obtaining in-depth knowledge or up-to-date knowledge in subject areas. Full understanding and appreciation for the topic area is gained through reading and the familiarisation of topical subjects.

A topic seems to lead to other questions and hypotheses that require testing to validate the original question. The later sections of articles provide possible topics that are of interest to the individual researcher.

The process of generating topics is achieved through the practice of reading, attending conferences, submitting articles and resubmitting articles for review and publication. To achieve research and publication

success, the successful researcher makes research part of their routine and reads, attends, submits, and perseveres.

For emerging researchers to emulate the research outputs of successful researchers, then the emerging researchers could improve their research output through imitating some of the successful researcher actions. The dominant individual motivators of successful researchers were reading, conferences, seeking co-authors, and funding applications. These actions set deadlines and small manageable tasks that facilitate the eventual research output. These actions keep the researcher up-to-date and provide a form of peer critique.

Other practical means of improving research is to facilitate joint authorships with others who have previous research. The joint authorship can provide a source of topics as well as research leadership. Emerging researchers also need the support so that they continue with research and use the critique and comments, especially from reviewers. Greater use of researchers with experience to guide and impart emerging researchers could enable those emerging researchers to be supported and improve the generation of quality research topics.

References

Brown L D 1996. Influential accounting articles, individuals, Ph.D. granting institutions and faculties: a citational analysis. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 21(7-8), pp. 723-754.

Chow C W, Harrison P D 1998. Factors contributing to success in research and publications: Insights of "influential" accounting authors. *Journal of Accounting Education* 16(3/4), pp.463-472.

Chow C W, Harrison P D 2002. Identifying meaningful and significant topics for research and publication: a sharing of experiences and insights by "influential" accounting authors. *Journal of Accounting Education* 20(3), pp.183-203.

Christensen, A. L., Finger, C. A., & Latham, C. K. 2002. New accounting scholars' publications in accounting and nonaccounting journals. *Issues in Accounting Education, 17*(3), pp.233-251.

De Lange P A 2005. A rejoinder to the long road to publishing: a user-friendly expose. *Accounting Education: An International Journal,* 14(2), pp.193-197.

Delgadillo, L. M 2016. Best practices for collaboration in research. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 45*(1), pp.5-8.

Dymsza W A 1984. Future international business research and multidisciplinary studies. *Journal of International Business Studies,* 15(1), pp9-13.

Fogarty T, Ravenscroft S 1999. The importance of being 'wordy': willingness to write and publication productivity among accounting academics. *Accounting Education: An International Journal,* 8(3), pp.187-202.

France, A 2018. A review of factors and activities contributing to proficient academic business researchers. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 16*(3), 117-127.

Hull R P, Wright G B 1990. Faculty perceptions of journal quality: an update. *Accounting Horizons,* 4(1), pp.77-98.

Hopper T 2005. A commentary on 'The long road to publishing: a user-friendly expose'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal, 14*(2), pp.177-180.

Jensen, P. H. 2013. Choosing your PhD topic (and why it is important). *Australian Economic Review*, *46*(4), pp. 499-507.

Lei, S. A. (2009). Strategies for finding and selecting an ideal thesis or dissertation topic: a review of literature. *College Student Journal*, *43*(4), pp.1324-1332.

Mahalakshmi, G. S., Selvi, G. M., & Sendhilkumar, S. 2018. Generation of author topic models using LDA. In Hemanth D., Smys S. (eds). *Computational Vision and Bio Inspired Computing, 28,* pp. 837-848.

Mewett P 2002. Making a research topic: A continuing process. In: *Doing fieldwork: eight personal accounts of social research.* Perry J. (Eds.). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.

Reinstein A, Calderon T G 2006. Examining accounting departments' rankings of the quality of accounting journals. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting,* 17(4), pp.457-490.

Rountree K, Laing T 1996. *Writing by degrees.* Auckland: Addison Wesley Longman

Ryan B, Scarpens R W, and Theobald M 1992. *Research method and methodology in finance and accounting.* London: Academic Press Ltd.

Selvi, G. M., Mahalakshmi, G. S., & Sendhilkumar, S. (2017). An investigation on collaboration behavior of highly cited authors in journal of informetrics (2007–2016). *Journal of Computational and Theoretical Nanoscience*, *14*(8), pp. 3688-3691.

Singh, S., & Remenyi, D. 2016. Researchers beware of predatory and counterfeit journals: Are academics gullible? *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 14* (1), pp.50-59.

Talib, A. A. 2000. The RAE and publications: A view of journal editors. *Higher Education Review, 33*(1), pp.32-46.

Talib, A. A. (2002). Behavioural consequences of the research assessment exercise in England. *Accounting Research Journal, 15*(2), pp.186-199.

Worrall, L. (2016). From conference paper to journal article: The long and winding road. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 14*(1), pp.3-7.

Wygal D E 2005. A commentary on 'The long road to publishing: a user-friendly expose'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal, 14*(2), pp.189-191.

Yalçin, M., Bektas, F., Öztekin, Ö., & Karadag, E. (2016). Factors affecting the identification of research problems in educational administration Studies. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, *16*(1), pp. 23-52.

Zeff S A 1996. A study of academic research journals in accounting. *Accounting Horizons,* 10(3), pp.158-177.

Zivney T L, Bertin W J, and Gavin T A 1995. A comprehensive examination of accounting faculty publishing. *Issues in Accounting Education, 10*(1), pp.1-25.