

Chapter 8

Practical Approaches to Problem Identification in Doctoral Research: Driving Business Impact Through Applied Orientation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter advocates for an applied orientation in research in Higher education, stressing the importance of selecting relevant problems to yield actionable insights and improve business practices. The methodology of this chapter includes synthesizing literature, evaluating relevance-rigour gap, and proposing a process and a checklist to convert a real-world problem into a research problem. The proposed checklist aids in identifying pertinent problems, covering stakeholder identification, problem frequency, clarity of solutions, and research feasibility. Bridging the academia-industry gap, this approach fosters innovation and knowledge transfer, supporting evidence-based solutions. Prioritizing practical relevance and stakeholder impact enhances research quality and drives advancements. Applied doctoral research addresses real-world challenges, enhancing organizational efficiency, sustainability, and profitability. Further exploration of its impact is recommended for improved research outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, the pursuit of a worthy research problem in higher education, especially within the vast realms of social sciences, such as Business and Management, can often feel like navigating through dense fog. It is akin to searching for a needle in a haystack while blindfolded. Researchers find themselves grappling with the conundrum of problem identification. On a lighter note, we can say that the researcher may pray: “Oh God! Give me a problem.”

The crux of the issue in identifying a research problem lies not necessarily in the absence of potential problems to investigate but rather in the challenge of discerning which ones are worthy of scholarly attention and why. One aspect of this challenge is the subjective nature of what constitutes a ‘problem.’ The issues in identifying a research problem are in neither seeing the problem nor in seeming to *be* the problem. What may seem obvious as a problem to one individual or group may not be perceived as such by others. It may be due to differing perspectives and societal contexts. Also, the intricate fabric of modern societal complexities often renders problems multifaceted and interlinked, challenging their very identification. For example, the challenges of climate change necessitate a comprehensive understanding of environmental, economic, political and social factors. In addition, the speed of change brings out new challenges, potentially eclipsing those previously deemed urgent. A problem of importance today may be overshadowed by emergent developments tomorrow.

Moreover, identifying a research problem is challenging when researchers lack the expertise to determine its significance. Despite worthy existing issues, inadequate training may obscure recognition. This highlights the necessity for robust training programmes to cultivate researchers' analytical skills, enabling them to identify and address pertinent problems within their respective fields effectively.

Academic research in business, management and commerce domains has a huge rigour-relevance gap. The research outcomes have contributed less to the management practice. There is a huge need to address the current and emerging problems in the above-said domains. However, academic researchers are disconnected from the problems and concerns of the real world (Jenkins et al., 2020; Panda & Gupta, 2014). Academic research in the domains of business, management and commerce must predominantly be applied in orientation rather than pure or fundamental research (Sandberg et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2019). Doctoral research is a channel of academic contributions. It also lacks relevance to the practice. There is an imperative for universities to train doctoral scholars to equip themselves for solving real problems (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2023). Identifying research problems in business, management and commerce domains with practical implications is challenging. Academic researchers mostly focus on finding their research

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