

## STATUS OF EXTENSION RESEARCH: THE QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ASK AND THE LESSONS WE CAN LEARN



*As extension researchers, are we doing the right things and doing it right? Mahesh Tengli raises several such questions in this blog and urges us to introspect on the current status of extension research.*

### CONTEXT

Agricultural Extension is a responsible and dedicated profession. Extension research provides the conceptual and operational principles for this profession. Sivakumar et al. (2017) has rightly raised concerns about the dwindling quality and contribution of extension research. The authors further raise the issue of limited influence of extension research on improving extension practices, designing new programmes and policy matters, which has lowered the respect and recognition accorded to extension researchers. To re-orient extension research we need to identify the direction in which extension research is moving and the deviations of the researcher from the specified professional standards.

This blog piece is based on an analysis of an auto-ethnographic study entitled ‘What is the state of hospitality and tourism research – 2018?’ by Bob McKercher, a veteran in the field of hospitality and tourism research. The main objective of this blog is to make extension researchers aware of the issues that could be taking us on a wrong path. We need to deliberate on the questions raised by McKercher (even though in another field his concerns are valid for us as well) and examine our own approach and the options available to us.



## SHOWER OF QUESTIONS, LET US BATH IN IT

The very first question we need to ask ourselves is: how much do we really know about the extension discipline? Let us pose the questions raised by Tribe (2006) in the extension context. Is it possible to tell the truth about the quality and utility of extension research? What can we tell based on the findings and recommendations of elaborate and expensive knowledge production systems – agricultural universities, extension research departments, extension journals and extension conferences? But could it be that the thousands of research articles that have been published have failed to uncover the real truth? We need comprehensive and precise answers.

The gratifying part of our discipline is that we have specialised journals on extension, but we choose to publish in several journals that are irrelevant to our discipline, which thus becomes a cause for concern. A very serious question arising out of this is whether we really read extension journals? Is it always necessary to publish in non-extension high NAAS (National Academy of Agricultural Sciences) -rated journals? It is a systems demand (minimum NAAS 5.00 or sometimes 6 and above) and we are forced to comply with it. An



extension scientist or a research scholar with a low NAAS-rated publication is not recognised as a good scientist and researcher. I remember one of the scientists saying “NAAS rating ke peeche mat bhago satyanaas ho jaoge” (Don’t run behind the NAAS rating you will be destroyed). Aren’t we greedy about high impact factors and NAAS ratings? Have we forgotten the basic principles of farm journalism and research article publication? Who should be the reader of our research papers – entomologists, microbiologists, pathologists? Are we writing for an unintended audience? For instance, does an agronomy researcher read a genetics journal to know about core agronomy concepts? Though we have published thousands of research papers which have added to the body of extension knowledge, we are still no closer to understanding what extension education, research and service are, and how they work for farmers and the extension discipline.

Based on his 30 years of academic and research experience Bob McKercher (2018) says, “More that gets published and the more journals that publish material, the further away we seem to be moving from being able to answer those questions. More papers do not necessarily mean more knowledge, and more knowledge doesn’t necessarily mean better understanding”.

We may not want to agree with him, but it is worth questioning ourselves. The beauty of extension is that there is a plethora of topics to do research on, but the irony is that the research outcome gets disseminated into non-extension journals, informing non-extension professionals first, yet keeping our own people in the shadow of others informed knowledge of extension. From the observations of Huang and Chen (2015) another question can be raised: what is the status of theoretical or conceptual foundation of extension research and its statistical rigor?

If we find it difficult to answer these questions let us examine the probable causes that have led us into this quandary, through the thematic questions posed by McKercher. These include:

- How are we addressing changing academic research?
- Are we lacking in critical thinking?

- Are we becoming method robots?
- Are we facing any pressure to meet publishing targets?
- Do we know what we are talking about?



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Bob McKercher,

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## What is the state of hospitality and tourism research – 2018?

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### Abstract

#### Purpose

- This paper provides a personal view of the state of hospitality and tourism research as we enter 2018. It seeks to highlight a number of systemic issues that are affecting adversely the quality of research published.

#### Design/methodology/approach

- An auto-ethnographic approach based on the author's nearly 30 years of working and researching in the field of hospitality and tourism.

#### Findings

- The paper begins by talking about many of the positive things that are occurring in our field, before raising five main issues that are of concern: the changing nature of academic research; our own lack of critical thinking; becoming method robots; publishing and authorship pressures that hinder career development and creativity; and, whether our own lack of working experience hurts the academic development of the field.

#### Originality/value

- The paper provides a list of 5 key issues all academics must be aware of to ensure both their own career progression and the continued development of the field.

### How are we addressing changing academic research?

We have done much ground-breaking academic work in the past, such as development of theories, methods, models, psychological scales, assessments, evaluations, awareness, knowledge, adoption, perception and so on. We are expanding our search into new topics which is a good indication for the growth of extension's body of knowledge. The question we need to answer is: "With what purpose are we conducting research?" Is it to churn out as many papers as possible in as short a time as possible, and to get a large number of citations? The answer to this will help us correct ourselves, in case we have deviated.

### Are we lacking in critical thinking?

CCP: cut copy paste, and BRCR: borrow research and conduct research, are the two easy ideas of research problem identification, is it true? May not be true all the time. One can test hypothesis  $H_1$ : CCP and BRCR are the least preferred philosophy of research problem identification, (use, level of significance= 0.95).

Sivakumar and Sulaiman (2015) have suggested that in order to re-orient extension research, a creative generation of relevant research ideas using an intuitive or common sense approach is imperative. What is the extent of novelty in our selected research problem? How have we identified our research problem? How is a systematic review of literature done? In what way is the research going to address the needs of extension education, research, service and policy? ...Answers are called for.

### Are we becoming method robots?

We have to learn and adopt new methods in our research in order to enhance the validity of our research findings. But before that, are we really concerned about the validity of our findings? Have we become method robots? Perhaps yes, with full confidence we use the methods applied by other researchers, because they produce 'good' results and more importantly get published in high impact journals. For example, we apply Principal Component Analysis (PCA), without knowing its assumptions and applicability and thus paralyse our research. The same may happen with wrong usage of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in the near future. We have to know PCA, SEM and many other advanced techniques – provided we learn to use them with caution.

To quote the words of Beritelli et al. (2016): *"The use of increasingly and unnecessarily complicated methods to produce significant statistical test score results does not mean the findings are necessarily relevant"*.

### Are we facing any pressure to meet publishing targets?

To go back again to McKercher (2018), he says that people get into research collaborations in order to address the pressure of meeting publication targets. Further he suggests that team work is better as it is built on the expertise gained by different team members and that can produce higher quality research.

But he cautions us by drawing our attention to the observations made by Fisher et al. (1998) about how collaborations lead to intellectual compromises and make projects less innovative. Further, he has also noted that higher the division of responsibilities among authors lower is their professional development. He was seriously concerned about young scientists becoming sub-scientists, almost

like factory workers who get specialized in one aspect of the project and fail to learn how to complete the full project on their own. Is this observation seen in our system too?

### Do we know what we are talking about?

Here McKercher speaks about practical exposure for academicians and doctoral candidates. He was of the opinion that by developing the key employment criteria all through from Master's level to PhD by means of an extensive publishing track record one could have a candidate who can become a good academician with just one missing qualification – field experience.

### The last question McKercher asks and also answers is: what can be done?

McKercher answers the last question by stating,

*"It's easy to point to problems. That's what a lot of people who have tenure and job security do. Finding solutions is hard. But there are some solutions at hand. To begin, let's acknowledge that life as an academic is great! We get to research what we want, teach what (we want), how (we) want, providing the subject outcomes are met, and have a great deal of freedom to explore ideas. Not many people have that luxury. But, let's also acknowledge that the world of academia has changed, and not always for the better. The five issues identified above represent an existential threat to the future development of the field of study and potentially a personal threat to someone's career development."*

### WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

- We need to be pragmatic.
- If we want to survive as an academician, we have to do the things that will allow us to get and keep a job.
- We shouldn't be a slave to metrics/statistics.
- McKercher shares what his director said to him, *"Look after your own best interests because the university won't. It will only look after its own best interests!"*
- Do not target numbers and thus forget how to do quality research without relying on a senior academic to lead.
- He also says, *"Being a slave to numbers is a good way to rise to the middle. It may get you tenure, but at the cost of learning how to do good research."*
- We need to challenge ourselves to produce good research.
- We need to question, question and question again to develop critical thinking.

McKercher advises us:

*"Ask yourself 'do I really believe the findings?' If they are too good or too unbelievable, then maybe you need to rethink the work. The same applies when writing a paper. Does it have a logical plot that flows from beginning to end? Or does it require some magic or great leap of logic to prove your point?"*

- We need to question the procedure to overcome the problem of being a method robot.
- His advice for handling publication pressure: *"Indeed, a single authored paper is a great way for a young academic to truly test her or himself. If you can publish a good paper on your own, then you have the ability to lead research. If you must rely on the help of others, then you will be a follower your whole career".*
- It is always better to have academic guidance from experienced academicians to handle academic pressure in general, and publication pressure in particular.

- To tackle lack of field experience we need to get out of the comfort of an AC office, smart classroom, or nostalgic hostels, and step into the field and sit with farmers, extension practitioners, academicians, fellow researchers and policy makers.
- We need to read and question.
- We need to read and publish in relevant journals.
- We need to read online reviews, newspaper articles and many other sources.
- We need to ask ourselves why?  
McKercher says, *“Teaching is also a great way to identify research ideas for sometimes what is accepted as fact does not ring true. Question, don’t be afraid to question the status quo”*.

McKercher’s last message to all of us:

*“The future of our field of study is in the hands of young academics entering the field. Each generation of academics has changed the field and taken it to the next level. As an academic who is staring retirement in the face, the comments and advice given in this viewpoint are designed to help the next generation maintain the tradition and continue to elevate our field of study”*.

**Author’s note:** *With a lot of respect to the current body of knowledge and gratitude to extension veterans, researchers, budding students and field level extension personnel, I have made an attempt to take on the questions that Bob McKercher raises apropos his own discipline and applying it to our extension research, just to sensitize myself and the fraternity. I was cautioned by my inner conscience of being vocal and straight, and reminded of the unnecessary dire consequences that may ensue as I am still a budding researcher among professionals. Despite this warning I dared to take this risky opportunity in order to pose these serious questions at the very beginning of my undecided and uncertain career in extension discipline, due to the fact that we extension fraternity are pro-change, progressive, optimistic, and change agents, innovators, good managers, dedicated, critical, and believe in self-correction. We must welcome criticism so as to become more creative and contribute not only to this discipline but also to society as a whole.*

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