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Kuwait water challenges: Building a research agenda for policy impact and student experiential learning[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a research agenda in the College of Business and Economics at the American University of Kuwait. One driving factor for developing an agenda is the need to satisfy AACSB requirements. AACSB encourages strong development of students' analytic and decision-making skills, as well as a reasonable level of "scholarly contributions." Action research and experiential learning methods are well-suited to achieve these goals. The research agenda was developed around the subject of "water," and was accordingly constructed to integrate themes from the entire supply chain, from raw materials to consumer consumption and use of water. The projects in the agenda are usually conducted as part of the interaction with government entities and private organizations having any association with the subject of water.

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1. Introduction

This paper is a case study about developing a coherent research agenda in the College of Business and Economics at the American University of Kuwait (AUK). The university is currently in the process of seeking accreditation from the AACSB, which encourages impactful research (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, AACSB, 2015). The initial motivation for beginning to deliberate on such a research agenda was the need to satisfy the AACSB requirements for intellectual contributions by utilizing measures having a practical impact on student learning and on issues relevant to Kuwait. Generally, AUK is a teaching-oriented school. However, most faculty members are engaged with the local business community and government, sometimes in a consulting role, integrating external material and introducing speakers into the classes. The aim is to foster scholarly contributions in order to enhance, rather than sacrifice external engagement, and to incorporate even more real-world issues into the classroom.

Our small research team developed an agenda to focus on water-related subjects. Our plan has multiple objectives, including targeting government entities concerned with water, involvement of students,

use of research results as classroom material, use of results for publication in academic journals, and integration across several disciplines (notably marketing and economics). This paper discusses how we developed and pursued the research agenda. A brief discussion of the results is occasionally included to illustrate how they are useful to external organizations, how they can be incorporated into the classes, and how the agenda can be integrated across the fields of marketing and economics. The paper does not intend to indicate the detailed results of any one project, many of which are still ongoing.

2. Action research and experiential learning

Two related themes in business research and education provided guidance on how to develop such a research agenda: "participatory action research" (PAR) and "experiential learning." In action research, "close collaboration with the research object and its practical problem solving is part of the research process" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 193).

"Professional researchers do not enter communities to conduct studies on community members. Rather, they form partnerships with community members to identify issues of local importance, develop ways of studying them, collect and interpret data, and take action on the resulting knowledge" (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen, & Romero, 2010, p. 407–408)

AACSB explicitly recommends that "students engage in experiential and active learning designed to improve skills and the application of

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knowledge in practice is expected” (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, AACSB, 2015, p. 29), and thus, students are accordingly involved in most projects. A key component of the work involves recommendations to the “client.” Students must be “able to translate knowledge of business and management into practice” (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, AACSB, 2015, p. 32), that is, given the knowledge they have acquired about a subject, they must be able to recommend realistic decisions about the subsequent steps. Further, government agencies and businesses are more cooperative about access to data when they feel they might learn something useful.

Such methods essentially shift more responsibility to students, who must actively participate in developing their knowledge and skills by working on various projects themselves, rather than relying on teachers to enhance their skills. Teachers are not considered the only source of all knowledge, but rather their role has shifted toward being a project manager and guide. Research shows that a higher involvement of students in the learning process enhances their learning (e.g., Reynolds & Vince, 2007; Silberman, 2007). Although not as common as other forms of experiential learning, community-based projects are certainly used in higher education (e.g., Pain, Finn, Bouveng, & Ngobe, 2013).

Experiential learning methods do work outside the West, although they may require some adaptation to culture (e.g., Javalgi, Joseph, & LaRosa, 2009; Valiente, 2008). For example, Speece (2002, 2003) shows that, with some adaptation for cultural differences, these learning methods work well in Southeast Asia. In the Middle East, although educational systems are still quite conservative, Arab CEOs are clear in their preference for a shift of business education away from memorization and toward the development of critical thinking skills. They prefer less theory and more practical applications (Lootah & Simon, 2009). Experiential learning is thus an excellent way to achieve this objective.

Evidently, action research and experiential learning methods can be merged to accomplish the key objectives our research team had at the outset. The research itself focuses on contributing to solutions for addressing the important challenges faced by Kuwait. Involvement in this research provides students with experience in dealing with these real-world issues. The outcomes of research include recommendations to the “clients” based on analysis of data relevant to the specific problem. For students, there is no pre-determined answer, which can be memorized for the next exam.

2.1. Theory from case studies

Some of the agenda’s research noted here uses case study methods, which could contribute to developing conceptual frameworks for dealing with water-related issues. This relates to specific projects, which we do not address here. However, the process of building our research agenda can itself be considered a case study on how a small business school can successfully develop such an agenda. We can assess this process with a general framework for using case studies to start building the theory.

“Since it is a theory-building approach that is deeply embedded in rich empirical data, building theory from cases is likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting, and testable” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25–26).

The agenda-building process roughly fits that discussed in Eisenhardt (1989), although the “selecting cases” step is simply the process of building our own research agenda. The researchers are intimately involved in the case, rather than being independent external observers. Participant observation, in which the researchers become a part of the community, is characteristic of “business-related ethnographic research” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 139 ff), and action research is simply the active involvement of participants rather than passive observation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, Chapter 13).

Eisenhardt (1989) also notes the integration of current literature into the process to help in theory construction during the case study. Most studies on “developing a research agenda” (and various related search terms) describe how researchers have accomplished this in a particular context. Occasionally, searches provide literature reviews that pertain to “research agenda” as topics addressing gaps in the literature. Although there exist studies covering some conceptualization of the process (e.g., Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013), we have not been able to find adequate theories on how to construct a research agenda that can extend our multiple objectives at AUK. Thus, we are currently in a “grounded theory” situation, aiming to build a “middle-range theory,” according to the terminology of Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, Chapter 11).

Eisenhardt (1989) recommends multiple methodologies in a case study, and “flexible and opportunistic data collection methods,” which “allow investigators to take advantage of emergent themes” (p. 533).

Table 1
Current projects.

Project	Purpose	Methodology
1. Tap water pricing for demand management	Investigate WTP; estimate price elasticity; assess impact of eliminating subsidy; assess WTP in the presence of information about costs & environmental impact	Survey among house owners
2. Tap water pricing for demand management	Assess reasons for lack of price sensitivity	Qualitative focus group, house owners
3. Tap water subsidies for demand management	Assess attitudes toward subsidy and eliminating/reducing subsidy	Qualitative in-depth interviews, house owners
Technology policy for water production	Understand government acquisition and use of technology; off-the-shelf purchase vs. in-house development & customization	Qualitative expert key informant interviews
Price sensitivity for trucked water	Determine demand curve/estimate price elasticity; apartment complexes	Quantitative, observation
Distribution logistics for trucked water	Assess efficiency of trucking logistics; water demand; water wastage	Qualitative in-depth interviews, water truck personnel
Water trucking company case study	Case study: operations of a water trucking company	Qualitative in-depth interviews, in-firm observation
4. Brand behavior for bottled water	Awareness of brands; degree of loyalty to brands; price/value/quality orientation; knowledge of technologies	Survey among consumers
Perceptions of package/bottle	Impressions of bottles; preferences & choice criteria for bottles	Qualitative in-depth interviews among consumers
Perceptions of package/bottle	Importance of packaging attributes; impact on brand image; brand loyalty	Survey among consumers
Several student projects on commercializing KISR’s bottled water	Marketing (range of class projects, noted in the discussion)	Consulting, which includes qualitative in-depth interviews of consumers
Student projects on demand/production efficiencies	Economics (several class projects, noted in the discussion)	Qualitative

Note: The four numbered projects have already been presented at conferences: 1: Aljamal et al., 2015b; 2: Aljamal et al., 2015a; 3: Aljamal et al., 2015c; 4: Bagnied et al., 2015.

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