

# Institutional development, divergence and change in the discipline of project management



Mike Bresnen, International Journal of Project Management 34.2 (2016) p.328-338

## **KEYWORDS**

- PMBoK
- MoP
- Knowledge production

## **Article Highlight:**

This article looks at the challenges of developing project management as an academic discipline.

## **What does the paper cover?**

A number of studies have been conducted into the development of project management. Taken together, they describe the challenges and opportunities of attempting to institutionalise project management as a singular academic discipline.

### The potential advantages of developing the subject are:

- **Common practices:** Having a set of common practices that would enable a shared understanding of the nature of project management.
- **Communication:** Having a shared set of terminology and guidelines which would help communication and knowledge sharing between distinct communities of practice.

### Some of the difficulties in achieving this are:

- Distinct communities of practice approach project management in different ways.
- Different communities of practice have developed their own standards and guidelines which do not necessarily mirror each other.
- The limitations of having a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to project management which can be used across all subject disciplines but may not be suitable for all.
- The variations between communities of practice in institutional structures, methods and forms of knowledge production that discourage the sharing of methods, knowledge and learning between those communities.

## Methodology:

The paper looks at a number of published texts on project management research and compares the findings of those texts, as well as drawing its own conclusions.

## Research findings:

**Diversity of practice:** Studies show that there is great diversity of implementation and schools of thought in project management, which could make it difficult to come up with universal standards for the subject.

**Little commonality:** Many practitioners and institutions have developed and use their own methods of project management. These tend to reflect the interests and perspectives of the academic and practitioner communities who developed them, who in turn come from a large variety of sectors and approach project management in different ways.

**Knowledge production:** In the past, knowledge production has mostly been through research alone (known as 'Mode 1'). Some argue that it has recently shifted to more context-specific research and practice, and cooperation between research teams and practitioners in their particular field of study ('Mode 2'). This presents both opportunities and challenges for the consolidation of project management knowledge.

**Institutional development and change:** It is important to understand how institutional structures help promote and sustain conflicting institutional 'logics'. This will identify the challenges facing the development of project management knowledge and the 'institutional work' needed to consolidate project management as a discipline.

## Conclusions:

- The author argues that it may not be possible, or even desirable, to think of practitioners and academic researchers in this field as a single community of practice with common goals and methods.
- There are quite clear differences between perspectives on project management in various subject fields.
- Opportunities for interaction between different communities of practice are likely to be fewer than those which professionals often have through continuing professional engagement and interaction with their peers.
- More research is needed, specifically in the areas of project management knowledge, its various communities of practice, and the structures and institutions necessary for developing the discipline.

## Significance of the research:

There is great diversity between communities of practitioners, something which can be both its strength and a potential difficulty in developing the discipline.

This article draws together and analyses several pieces of research into project management as an academic discipline. It argues that this field of research should be taken further, building on past research.

## Comments from author:

If we conceive of the project management field as not one community of practice, but as several, we are closer to a realistic interpretation of what is needed to consolidate the knowledge base of project management and its status as a discipline. The challenge is in overcoming the multiple institutional barriers and diverse knowledge production practices that characterise the field and which inevitably impede the development and spread of a unified body of knowledge and common set of project management principles and practices. It is not just the suitability of project management knowledge that is at issue here, but its acceptability and legitimacy across multiple domains of practice.

What this paper argues for is the need for more research that tries to unpack the institutional processes and modes of knowledge production that encourage divergence – as an important first step in finding ways of promoting convergence. It takes a critically informed approach that is attuned to the tensions associated with conflicting institutional logics and the challenges ahead in attempting to reconcile those conflicting logics.

## Complete article

The original version of this article was published in the International Journal of Project Management, Vol number 34.2. Mike Bresnen (2016) p.328-338. It can be accessed via: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263786315000459](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263786315000459).

For further information please visit [apm.org.uk/research](http://apm.org.uk/research). Please contact us with your views and suggestions at [research@apm.org.uk](mailto:research@apm.org.uk).

## Association for Project Management

Ibis House, Regent Park  
Summerleys Road,  
Princes Risborough  
Buckinghamshire,  
HP27 9LE

**Tel (UK)** 0845 458 1944  
**Tel (Int)** +44 1844 271 640  
**Email** [research@apm.org.uk](mailto:research@apm.org.uk)  
**Web** [apm.org.uk](http://apm.org.uk)

---

## Glossary:

### **PMBoK:**

The Project Management Body of Knowledge: a set of standard terminology and guidelines for project management.

### **MoP:**

Management of Projects: a set of strategic processes and decisions within an organisation that help ensure project effectiveness.

### **Knowledge production:**

the practices, methods and institutional frameworks relied on within a discipline for generating reliable information and practical knowledge.

---



Copyright Elsevier Ltd, APM and IPMA  
and is reproduced with permission.