

Stepping stones across a fast-flowing river: supporting emerging scholars from emerging markets

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Abstract

Purpose – International business as a field values perspectives from various contexts, but scholars from emerging markets face a number of often-unseen challenges preventing them from fully contributing to the field. This study aims to explain those challenges and what the author has done to manage them.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a Reflexive piece in which the author makes sense of her own experience as a scholar not only of but also in an emerging market, as well as the experiences at her school in seeking to develop a high-quality doctoral program.

Findings – When leading scholars interact, whether in writing or in person, they tend to be in academically and otherwise well-resourced locations. This is true even for the leading international business scholars of emerging markets, and it imposes time and financial costs on scholars located in emerging markets wanting to participate in such conversations. Having experienced such challenges, the author worked with colleagues to design a doctoral program that could nurture rich scholarly conversations at the school. However, there remains a clear and pervasive tension between the inclusive aspirations of the field and the tendency for cutting-edge academic conversations to be concentrated in the developed world.

Originality/value – The experiences of emerging market scholars remain underrepresented in the field. By drawing on her own experience, both as a scholar and the head of the doctoral program at her school, the author provides suggestions for how to think about and develop a more inclusive scholarly conversation.

Keywords Conferences, Emerging markets, Sub-Saharan Africa, Education

Paper type Viewpoint

I grew up in South Africa during and just after the years of the academic boycott that was part of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. I discovered the notion of a “community of scholars” at university and thought that it was a metaphor. Quite a striking a metaphor, I thought, imagining a community of people across the world, connected by their collective scholarship. It made me feel less isolated. One day, from my corner of the globe, I could publish a paper, and I would also become part of this (disembodied, in my mind) community of scholars.

Imagine my joy when, upon starting my PhD at Rutgers University in the USA, I discovered that John Dunning was a real person. A tall one with thick white hair and a kind demeanor. I tried to not let anyone see my wonderment, but it was amazing – here was the man whose papers I have been reading! Over the course of the next few years, as I went to a number of conferences in the USA and Europe, I was time and again delighted to discover



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that citations came in the form of actual people: Petite expatriate Tung, Buckley's booming laugh, standing next to Casson (?) and Rugman and Verbeke chatting in the queue for lunch.

There are real people to whom we are talking when we communicate our research. But as an African scholar, I sometimes struggle to communicate effectively with people with preconceived ideas about what is international business scholarship (JIBS, basically) and about what is international business (surely not the undocumented Pakistani trader in the backwaters of South Africa?). In this piece, I reflect on my experiences and how they have shaped how I see myself as an academic.

Scholarship and community

Today, I am a member of the community of international business scholars. I know who are the qualitative scholars, who focus on emerging markets and who are the people for whom macro-level means "firm-level" and for whom it means "country-level". I also know who are active on social media, who are the runners and who the vegetarians. I know whose kids are entering school/college/the world of work – and who are celebrating grandchildren. The community of international business scholars is not an abstract metaphor for me; it is a community of people I very concretely missed during the pandemic when we could not meet.

But I also know that my experience is not typical in emerging markets. This is why I not only encourage our doctoral students to attend conferences but also have a long session before they go, answering their questions. You will meet many of the people whose papers you have been reading – yes, you are welcome to talk to them. Do not talk to them only about their papers; they are human beings who also have other interests. Most people prefer being called by their name rather than their title, but you can start with the title. Yes, you can speak to people even if you do not know their research. Remember, everyone knows that doctoral students are at the beginning of their journey. You are doing interesting work, and you belong there as much as anyone else.

The doctoral students' excitement about the chance to experience a conference, their concerns about not fitting in and attention to my advice about how (not) to behave all remind me of my younger self. And it underlines that although South Africa is no longer a global pariah, we should not underestimate the deep-seated and pervasive challenges faced by young and even established scholars from emerging markets. Those challenges can prevent these scholars to feel like – to be, even – fully-fledged members of the community of scholars.

The invisible walls of the invisible college

It turns out that the belief of a young South African that people become part of the community of scholars purely by virtue of publishing scholarly work was mistaken. When I first encountered the related concept of an invisible college, "a network of communication relations among scholars who share an interest in a particular area of research" (Vogel, 2012, p. 1017), I imagined a lived form of Eduroam: scholars across the world who feel like colleagues, not simply acquaintances. Maybe, but only for some of them. De Solla Price and Beaver (1966, p. 1011) explain the invisible college:

[...] in each of the more actively pursued and highly competitive specialties in the sciences there seems to exist an "ingroup." The people in such a group claim to be reasonably in touch with everyone else who is contributing materially to research in this subject, not merely on a national scale, but usually including all other countries in which that specialty is strong.

They traced this format back to the establishment of the Royal Society of London in the mid-17th century. Although Crane (1969) challenged this elite-focused perspective and suggested

that both “rank-and-file” members and outsiders are important to the invisible college, she nonetheless acknowledges the dominance exerted by “high producers,” the type of elite theorized by [De Solla Price and Beaver \(1966\)](#).

I did not encounter the scholarship at the invisible college as a doctoral student. I found it later, when I tried to explain to myself why I was spending 16 hours in the air (each way) to attend a 10-hours workshop, or when the umpteenth scholar asked, “So you are still in South Africa?” as if that somehow signaled a lack. As a scholar of emerging markets, I have to acknowledge that the most influential scholars in the field are not located in emerging markets. Many are originally from emerging markets, but the “in-group” is living and working outside of the type of context where I live and work.

Guiding doctoral students from outside the in-group

When I became head of the doctoral program at my school, I realized that I had to let go of my musings about the community of scholars and the invisible college, and what I wished they were. I needed to develop clarity on the principles and practices I would use to navigate the world of scholarship, no longer just for my own sake, but also for the sake of the new scholars whom I was supposed to guide.

At the opening of that first doctoral intake, I explained that London and Boston have long been two of the best locations from which to study business in Africa. “But I can see no reason for Johannesburg to not be on that list,” I continued, and then explained to the incoming students that they had the good fortune or the misfortune to have landed at a doctoral program that somehow believes that it has the right to be a global center of knowledge on business in Africa.

It is an activist statement, of course, but it is one I have repeated every year since. It warns students that scholarship is a world from which their own reality is largely absent, and it communicates clearly that it should not be so. It gives them permission to imagine their school as a center of knowledge and also to understand that the knowledge they develop in Johannesburg has to be in conversation with knowledge that originates in Boston, London and elsewhere.

Supporting African scholarship

Constructing an academic argument can be likened to crossing a fast-flowing river where we use previous scholarship to provide us with stepping stones to help us get across, and more or less at the place where we want to get. In Africa, very few academic stepping stones exist. They are far apart, wobbly and not the right size. Making an argument often involves dangerous conceptual leaps or carrying in stepping stones from elsewhere – anthropology, theology and political science. Experienced scholars struggle with that; in my world, a new scholar who wants to theorize her context has no choice but to learn how to navigate these conceptual gaps.

Thus, doing research in an underresearched context makes for both a rich research context and also many challenges. I am not talking about the challenges of data gathering; they are real, but often more severe for outsiders than for people who live in the part of the world that they study. But conceptually, it takes enormous skill to find literature that talks about phenomena that are simply absent from the literature. I remember talking to a student who wanted to understand how the internal tension between Western and traditional African values, a tension experienced not just by black managers but the workforce generally, worked to sometimes enable and sometimes inhibit performance. The challenges of finding an anchoring literature and then crafting a focused, business-oriented argument overwhelmed him, and he let go of the project.

A community of emerging African scholars

In making sure we support our doctoral students, I had to go back to notions of community. As faculty, we seek to role-model the functioning of a scholarly community, including through a formal process where we collectively review and give feedback on their work. There is a lack of supervisory capacity in emerging markets (Nkomo, 2015), and by working collectively, we can pool our insights, use less experienced colleagues as supervisors, and improve the quality of not only our students' work but also our collective skills.

We also encourage students to develop into their own community of scholars. Structured learning happens mainly online, and the two annual on-campus sessions are conceptualized more like conferences than like classes. During those weeks, students present and discuss ideas both formally (work-in-progress presentations are compulsory) and informally. They present to the faculty, discuss work with each other, skip sessions to work on feedback and show up again for the social event in the evening. All cohorts are on campus at the same time, and the more senior students explain that it is motivating to (be able to) answer the questions of the students following in their footsteps. We have had cases when a student's review of another student's work threatened to derail the project, but more often, the learning of both the reviewer and the reviewed is supported. It takes a great deal of ongoing attention (and budget for social events) to make sure that the community functions. But the community is critical for two reasons.

The first relates to the structured sessions, as the peer community is a first reference point for how scholarship works. Students get to experience first squeezing into and then sharing with an audience their arguments in a 10-minute time slot. They become confident enough in their assessment of scholarly work to venture a comment – "Maybe I did not understand, but your argument seems to be a longitudinal one, and the proposed data cross-sectional?" The comments on work-in-progress presentations and the written feedback from the "research quality committee" are based on principles of peer review, and when students informally seek out each other's support, they behave like the in-group of De Solla Price and Beaver (1966).

Second, because codified knowledge about the continent is so scarce, there is value in simply talking about and making explicit the "obvious" ways business happens. We therefore deliberately seek students from across the African continent. The small size of opportunities exciting business from Botswana against the scale of Nigeria, the fascinating Ghanaian experience where government is often trusted compared with the Democratic Republic of Congo, the virtual nonissue of race in Kenya versus the often-invoked and seemingly symbolic racial tensions of Zimbabwe – the insights emerging over conversations help all our students to see their own world from the outside.

In an underresearched context, scholars need peers who can sense-check not even what they theorize but sometimes simply what they observe. In an emerging market context, business does not always work as elsewhere, and opportunities for novel theorizing exist, especially there. Yet others need to believe that internationalizing African businesses often strategically hide their origins, that South African multinationals are setting up locations in advanced economies to retain emigrating talent, and that the limited mandate subsidiaries of advanced multinationals are often run well by excellent, well-paid and frustrated managers who understand that the logic of a differentiated network is efficiency and that your job is to sell and shut up if you are from a small, poor country. In conversations with fellow students, peers will laugh and tease – and help tease out what is happening in that world.

Expanding African academic networks

The real test of knowledge is whether it can cross borders and whether it makes sense beyond an isolated context. Much as the local peer community offers a safe space in which

our doctoral students can start finding their voices, they need to connect with the broader scholarly community, even if they are marginal to its conversations.

To support our students, we hunt for (and overrepresent in our courses) quality scholarly work with Africa as its empirical context and often theme (e.g. [Kim et al., 2019](#); [Meouloud et al., 2019](#); [Pierce and Snyder, 2020](#)). We invite strong African scholars – Nat Boso, Amon Chizema, Hermann Ndofo and others – to work with our students. These experienced colleagues are mentors (often for faculty as well as for students), and the questions they ask often spur rich dialogue and discourse.

If students are serious about scholarship, there is an expectation that they will participate in scholarly conferences. There are limited such conferences in emerging markets, which means that students who want to share their thoughts beyond the school need to go to conferences where their context is often not particularly well represented or well understood. Moreover, going to conferences is far, time-consuming and expensive; even just direct visa costs are greater for people from poorer countries compared with richer countries ([Recchi et al., 2021](#)). It sometimes makes sense for solid students from emerging markets to not attend the leading academic conferences in their field ([Ismail et al., 2020](#)).

But it was transformative for me to attend conferences, and among the faculty at our school, there is a conviction that any of our students who want to should have the chance to attend an academic conference. Getting resources to support our students among many competing demands was an issue until a mentor advised us to create a way for examiners of doctoral dissertations to donate their stipends. These stipends are small, and the bureaucratic requirements to claim them are as burdensome as can be expected from an emerging market institution. To the many scholars who have donated not just their time but also their stipends: Your funds are enabling our doctoral students to meet, in person, the scholars whose work they are citing.

The importance of representation

At our university, a student has to have a paper under review at a scholarly publication to graduate. Exhausted by the intensive doctoral program, no longer in regular contact with their peer community, and with no real incentive to push themselves to get into a top-tier journal, they often do as little work as possible thinking about and choosing a journal, or abandon their paper with the first round of reviewer comments. As a result, the quality of the doctoral dissertations from our program is higher than reflected by the quality of the journals in which the work is published.

My scholarly self is sad that good African research is so often not published, but I understand why this happens. Furthermore, the nonpublishing of important, novel research also carries important insights. The first is about the value of doctoral education beyond the production of scholarships, and the second is about the need to think more creatively and inclusively about where we can move the field.

Doctoral degree changes people

There is a strong personal dimension to the choice to do the doctorate. In Africa, many were not fortunate enough to receive an education, and if they did gain access to education, it for decades involved and served the narratives of colonial powers ([Mwiria, 1991](#)). There is value in the very fact that our doctoral students are asserting their right to pursue independent research and that they can draw on and further develop long-suppressed indigenous knowledge.

Moreover, many of our students are the first in their family to be university-educated, not to mention doctorated. I can testify to the power of role models. As a white South African, I

received and benefited tremendously from a quality education, but that was not the driving force in my decision to pursue a doctorate. Instead, it was the example of my aunt Salie. My great-aunt had obtained her doctorate before she had the vote. I have since wondered about the quality of her research, but growing up, I never doubted my right to have a voice. Every time our graduates interact with their wider communities, they are living proof that doctorates are also done by aunties, cousins and friends.

Doctoral research also directly informs the professional lives of many of our graduates. Some of our students want to become academics, but “black tax,” the obligation in a collectivist society for middle-class people to support poorer relatives (Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley, 2019), means that they often have to defer that ambition until much later in life. They do their doctoral degrees in preparation for such a role while being executives and involved family members. The doctorate also informs the work of people working in government, research houses and consultancies. It is an employee of the Ghanaian Central Bank who established that financial inclusion initiatives in rural communities fail because, in a cash-based economy, inclusion requires cash rather than bank accounts. The graduate who determined how communities experience corporate social responsibility initiatives (in terms of justice, often restorative justice) makes a living as a community engagement specialist.

In other words, although many of our graduates never publish, they nonetheless see both personal and professional value in having done the research.

A more inclusive scholarly endeavor

Not publishing doctoral research is common in emerging markets; Nkomo (2015) points out that few doctoral graduates in emerging markets join academia. It is tempting to explain this with reference to the incentives and priorities of doctoral students. However, the way in which the scholarly community is structured may also be relevant.

How will an African who has developed a validated scale for the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (another doctoral project at our school) answer the question: For whom am I theorizing? And how will the general scholarly community answer that question?

There is an underrepresentation of scholars from most emerging markets in global academic forums. This translates into the absence of certain types of perspectives in scholarly conversations, and scholars from those contexts do not necessarily feel that their voices matter. This in turn can lead to recent graduates from emerging markets choosing not to further participate in academia, even though their choice deprives the global scholarly community of the insights they could have offered.

If international business research has taught us anything, it is about the benefits of crossing borders and learning from what is elsewhere. Scholars of management are wrong for not knowing – when I started, often not even caring – about the nuances of business in Africa. The entire field would be stronger for being open to different ways of doing and understanding. Managers globally are increasingly seeking to increase diversity, and although international business scholars study this topic (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023), we rarely consider what it means for our scholarly practice.

Possible future steps

It is hardly controversial that scholarship from diverse contexts can challenge existing paradigms and offer opportunities to both test established theories and forge new ones (Barnard, 2020; Barnard *et al.*, 2017). Within the cross-cultural domain, the myriad of cultures, languages and traditions across Africa can help deepen our understanding of cross-cultural business and international management practices. Also in Africa, the multi-level interplay between politics, business and society stands to enrich our field, for example

by spanning across the micro and macro divides. I do not know other emerging market contexts as well as this one, but I have no doubt that they also offer many opportunities for enriching the field. This underlines my point: Diversity is strategically relevant. We need voices from as many places as possible.

It will take the combined efforts of scholars from emerging markets and scholars from the bulk of the scholarly conversation to realize the potential of scholarship from and on currently underdocumented places like Africa, Latin America and South East Asia.

Making our voices heard

Although it is generally understood that knowledge creation is a global endeavor, living in an emerging market makes very clear the tensions between the global aspirations of our field and the comforts of well-resourced associations and universities with dense flight networks and frequent flights (Nonkenge and Luiz, 2018). As a South African who warmly welcomes students from Blantyre, Gaborone and Kampala – all cities I have yet to visit – I know that it is “practical” to have a few centers rather than be overly concerned with the periphery, which Benito and Narula (2007) define as “insignificant” players in terms of factors like trade, innovation and scientific progress, their engagement with supranational institutions and others. As a South African who has to get a visa when I want to visit Europe or the UK and then spend 12 or more hours in the air to get there, I also know that there are costs to those choices.

Scholars in emerging markets must take the lead in showing that the knowledge created here matters. We need to develop research centers in emerging markets – likely more narrowly focused than in better-resourced contexts – but centers where we can nurture research excellence around themes that shape our contexts. We need to be courageous enough to theorize our own contexts, even if it means assuming the responsibility/burden/opportunity of working far from the mainstream scholarly conversation. We need to insist on quality and draw on resources from outside our context – diasporans or sympathizers – to complement skills where we lack them.

The need to listen to our voices

At the same time, scholars in the developed world stand to gain real value from paying greater attention to the voices of emerging market scholars. My fellow emerging market-based scholars and I wryly smile about the recent scholarly interest in research that can address societal challenges (Fernhaber and Zou, 2022; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2022). Yes, absolutely – these topics matter. But we remember being dismissed for raising the “nonscholarly” challenges of poverty, failing infrastructure and exclusion in proposed research projects. It seems that the developed world first had to be threatened by these types of challenges before they became acceptable scholarly topics.

The research from emerging markets is often not as theoretically polished as that from richer countries, and often scholars are dividing their time between documenting their findings and helping companies and governments address what they find. Unlike in the developed world, where status accrues to scholars with top-tier publications, scholars with the skills to develop implementable insights into the problems bedeviling their world are valued in emerging markets. Colleagues (e.g. Wöcke *et al.*, 2023) have found value in research outlets that consider not just theorizing but also possible resolutions of issues. Having more such outlets in international business research and considering a greater variety of topics in international business research as legitimate, would both enrich the scholarly conversation in international business.

In short, emerging market scholars can learn from the technically and theoretically rigorous work of their colleagues in the developed world. But given that our field is an applied field, there can be no doubt about the importance of taking seriously the voices of people who live in and trying to make sense of institutional environments that are constantly and rapidly changing.

Conclusion

[Doh et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasize that scholars have a moral responsibility to seek positive societal impact, and from that perspective, it is a blessing to be a scholar not only of, but also in Africa. Each time I publish, it feels to me as if I am placing a stepping stone in the scholarly river that enables others who want to theorize Africa to more easily find their path. Every now and then, those ripples reach beyond the scholarly world. I get LinkedIn contact requests from entrepreneurs and executives who see posts about papers like the one with alumna Pamela that explores how Kenyan returnee entrepreneurs struggle with the many expectations of their large, poor home communities ([Mreji and Barnard, 2021](#)) and with Ana on religion as an institution guiding business in Africa ([Barnard and Mamabolo, 2022](#)).

Africa is a continent that remains starved of knowledge about itself. The work we do here helps us to better understand who we are and how we do business. I believe we need as many different voices as we can to tell our many stories. That is why I am not just a scholar, but also an educator in Africa.

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