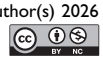
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Translating ahead, translating again, translating across: Unlocking the value of academic board advisors

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Abstract

Organisations constantly seek a strategic competitive advantage, while academics seek to make a greater impact in industry. To address these issues, this paper advocates including academics as board advisors and introduces a framework to understand and unlock the value of an academic advisor. Conceptualised based on a reflexive interrogation of the author's perspectives and experience as an academic and board advisor to a commercial entity, with triangulation against the management and service management literature, the framework of translating ahead, translating again, and translating across can be used to optimise board performance and collaboration between practitioners and academics serving on boards. The paper further highlights the application and benefits of these capabilities from the perspective of an academic advisor in the tropics and advances a holistic and systematic understanding of tropical development. Although this paper is based on the perspective of a single academic appointed as a board advisor in the hospitality sector, the framework introduced further bridges the academia–practitioner gap and enables academics to add more value at the strategic level in organisations. Practitioners can also use the insights of this paper to better understand and assess the value of academic board advisors.

Keywords

board of advisors, academic board advisor, board diversity, governance, management, academia–practitioner gap

Introduction

Bridging the academia–industry gap remains critical. For academics who serve as board advisors to organisations, the rewards are plentiful. While board members in the form of a board of directors have more fiduciary duties, legal authority, and liability to shareholders, an organisation may also have a board of advisors that can inject fresh strategic input to support the leadership team with less formal fiduciary duties, confidentiality agreements, and legal liabilities (Feld et al., 2022). Structured advisory-board appointments also differ from consultancies, which are more short-term and project-based, or informal university–industry engagements such as speaker invitations, which tend to be more ad hoc and unstructured.

Academics acting as board advisors face less risk and have greater flexibility than other board members, and they can help the organisation grow with scholarly insights while fostering closer institutional engagement and industry learning experiences for students. Research-wise, academic advisory roles can reduce the likelihood of research work being lost in translation or lost before translation (Shapiro et al., 2007) and enable academics to communicate more meaningful research to industry.

This paper advocates for academics to join boards to maximise their impact at a strategic level. Academic advisors can be particularly useful in providing state-of-the-art insights, plural rethinking, and systems-oriented solutions needed to holistically address the challenges organisations face in tropical regions (Elf et al., 2026). Accordingly, this paper introduces three key capabilities academics need to unlock value as board advisors: translating ahead, translating again, and translating across. These capabilities correspond to the different phases surrounding the board meeting in which the academic board advisor is expected to provide evidence-based perspectives to support the company's strategic direction.

Approach

Several important studies have highlighted the academia–practitioner gap, including tensions between academic and

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practitioner objectives and ways to bridge the divide (Benoit et al., 2019). This paper is inspired by the dynamic governance model of thinking ahead, thinking again, and thinking across developed by Neo and Chen (2007) to explain how innovation can be created at the macro level by economies such as Singapore through leaders with such capabilities. Underscoring the need for innovative capabilities at the micro- and meso-level between academics and organisations, this paper adapts similar conceptual ideas underpinning the original framework while replacing the term 'thinking' with 'translating' to better reflect the longstanding challenges associated with knowledge production and transfer in translating research into useful industry insights (Shapiro et al., 2007).

This practitioner insight is based on the author's lived experience as an academic and appointed board advisor to a company in the hospitality and food and beverage sector in Singapore since 2025. The company has grown since its inception in the early 2010s and now operates a diverse portfolio of restaurants and cafes in Singapore. During monthly board meetings, I provide strategic advice based on the agenda and issues that surface related to service management and marketing across their outlets. Similar to other practitioner insights (Ng-Soon-Chye, 2026) and service-related research (Buckley and Cooper, 2024), in this study, I use an autoethnographic approach with reflexive interrogation based on my retrospective cumulative past experiences as their board advisor, as well as my academic research in service management, to inspire the insights in the subsequent section.

Insights

For each of the following capabilities of translating ahead, translating again, and translating across, I will first discuss insights that can apply to all regions, including the tropics and beyond. At the end of each sub-section, I will highlight how these capabilities are particularly relevant to the unique context of the tropics.

Translating ahead

'Translating ahead' is the first capability required of the academic board advisor and begins before the board meeting itself. This capability requires the academic to translate research insights that can be useful for the upcoming board meeting. Guided by a meeting agenda, the academic needs to be familiar with the latest relevant literature and market reports to provide the necessary inputs based on the issues the organisation faces. In this endeavour, it is useful for the academic to keep an open mind and capture relevant insights for the board whenever they are engaged in other teaching and research duties.

As a performance measure for board advisors includes their presence and ability to provide strategic input during meetings, the academic's ability to provide insights is key. Accordingly, translating ahead becomes a vital stage and reflects the advice of Sun Zi, a scholar himself, in his Sun Zi Bingfa, or Art of War, which emphasises the importance of planning and understanding the landscape (Wee, 2017). After several meetings, the academic board advisor will be better positioned to understand the culture and how reporting is done during the board meetings. This helps with future preparation by identifying areas of particular concern to the other board members and management.

In the context of the tropics, the wide socio-economic, cultural, and political–legal differences represent an opportunity for cooperation and synergy between regions (Case et al., 2024). Accordingly, translating ahead offers both a temporal and spatial advantage. Published insights focused on one tropical region that is more advanced in a particular area may prove useful and provide early indicators and managerial lessons for organisations operating in other, less advanced tropical regions. For example, research on technological advances in parts of Southeast Asia can provide useful insights for less developed technological regions in Africa (Noor et al., 2026a) and further promote international technology transfer to developing countries through research and development (Pandey et al., 2022). Academics can prepare to share relevant state-of-the-art research due to their ready access to scholarly databases, their constant pulse on the latest scholarly literature, and their expertise in judging what is relevant for the upcoming board meeting.

Translating again

'Translating again' is the second capability and happens mostly during the board meeting when the academic listens in and decides when and how best to interject. This capability requires the academic to translate their knowledge and academic expertise into support for the organisation's strategic goals and activities. This core capability holds the most weight and is the main reason why the academic has been appointed to the board. During the meeting, the academic needs to provide insights based on current understanding of theories and concepts from up-to-date research. To do this effectively, the academic needs to be flexible and bilingual in both academic and practitioner languages (Benoit et al., 2019) to communicate effectively and in a way that is easy for others in the board meeting to understand. The academic must refrain from giving a lecture and instead effectively focus on how the organisation can use the concept that is being shared, as opposed to overzealously explaining what the concept is about.

Beyond introducing and explaining cutting-edge theories and research insights, the academic can help educate the organisation with the expertise gained through their PhD qualification. The rich skills that the academic possesses from their PhD training include problem-solving,

project management, and effective communication. These are transferable to the company and can help improve culture, systems, and processes. Academics well-versed in both qualitative and quantitative research methods can be particularly useful in helping the company build empathy and understanding with its internal and external stakeholders, as well as measure performance more accurately and effectively. Overall, translating again means that the academic lends expert opinion and support to management's decisions, providing assurance and credibility.

As for the tropics, the region's unique diversity challenges represent fertile ground for sharing ideas and new ways of thinking (Elf et al., 2026). For instance, ASEAN members can forge greater cooperation by sharing best practices in sustainable marketing and consumerism (Noor et al., 2026b). For international organisations that operate across the tropics, the outside-in perspective afforded by both the advisory role and a non-industrial profession allows the academic to uncover new synergies and empathise with the organisation's stakeholders. These fresh paradigms, offered amid the complexity of operating in the tropics, make the academic advisor a valuable asset.

Translating across

'Translating across' is the third capability and reflects how the academic's board advisory role can be extended back to the university. This capability requires the academic to translate the organisation's current key issues into other channels, such as research projects and student activities. Translating across happens after interaction with the organisation and other industry board advisors and board members. At these post-board meeting stages, the academic reflects on whether any issues raised in the previous board discussion warrant greater attention.

One way is translating the central business problem into a research project. This allows the academic to use a theories-in-use approach with a front-row seat to the questions and issues relevant to practitioners in their business (Zeithaml et al., 2020). Bringing the organisation closer to the university ecosystem through student engagements, internships, and research projects can also help the corporation connect with younger, future stakeholders, leverage their insights, and potentially identify future talent.

For the tropics, creating holistic ecosystems of diverse stakeholders, together with researchers, is key to tackling the multiple interconnected and wicked problems the region faces (Elf et al., 2026). In this regard, academic advisors can facilitate early dialogue between organisations and students and help build institutional understanding and cooperation for a more sustainable tropical future. These research relationships and potential partnerships can then be channelled towards research centres dedicated to the tropics, such as the Centre for International Trade and Business in Asia, which can further accelerate the growth of the research environment between academics, key policymakers and its younger student members (James Cook University, n.d.).

Conclusion and recommendations

Notwithstanding the value that non-academic board advisors and board members can bring to the table, as well as other valuable interaction avenues such as traditional networking events and other informal university–industry engagements, this paper sheds light on how academics can add to the diversity of the board and contribute towards the organisation by becoming an effective board advisor. For industry practitioners, this paper highlights several capabilities that can be tapped from academics across tropical regions and motivates more organisations to co-opt them as part of a diverse and high-performance board. For academics, this article highlights the importance of being intellectually ambidextrous and the synergies that can be realised from board advisory roles.

While the insights in this paper are based on the author's reflexive interrogation of their experience as an academic board advisor in a commercial entity, the learning points may apply to organisations across private, public, and not-for-profit sectors. Future studies can also shed light on how different permutations of academic–industry board collaborations in which academics and organisations come from diverse economic and socio-cultural environments in the tropics can affect the outcomes of such proposed synergies. Overall, this paper clarifies how to foster greater collaboration between practitioners and academics at a strategic board level to advance both organisational competitive advantage and the boundaries of knowledge.

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Nurhafihz Noor is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at James Cook University Singapore. His research examines the intersection of services marketing and the ABCs: artificial intelligence-driven service technologies, behavioural responses of consumers and organisations, and cultural contexts. With a decade of industry experience and holding fellowships in the Chartered Institute of Marketing (FCIM), Chartered Management Institute (FCMI), and Higher Education Academy (FHEA), he also serves in industry advisory roles and regularly contributes expert commentary to regional media.