

Most business school research ‘lacks real-world relevance’

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January 14, 2023



Business school academics globally are spending far too much time writing journal articles that do not pursue meaningful real-world effects at a time of dire need for improvements in human conditions, an international analysis has concluded.

The assessment led by Usha Haley, professor of management at Wichita State University, combines results from surveys of hundreds of faculty to portray an academic field that has grown increasingly irrelevant while important concerns about the role of companies in society escalate around it.

Given their potential importance, business schools “should not continue, in the form in which they are currently”, Professor Haley said.

Excessive emphases on journal publication have long raised concern in higher education across various fields. A *Times Higher Education* survey last year of nearly 10,000 academics found that scholars persist in their overwhelming reliance on measuring each other through metrics such as journal prestige and author citation scores.

Those struggles with real-world relevance, experts warned, stand as especially important in a field such as business, given the power of economic and corporate decisions to affect overall societal well-being.

The Covid crisis, Professor Haley said, has provided a hugely important example of business schools broadly failing in their missions to help society. While various governmental and health organisations warned for years about the risks of a civilisation-altering global pandemic, she said, business schools appear to have largely overlooked the possibility, paving the way for disastrous economic effects once one arrived.

The business field's top 50 journals, as ranked by *The Financial Times*, offered only "minuscule coverage" of potential pandemic planning and implications ahead of the Covid outbreak, Professor Haley said. Overall, such journals put "very little emphasis on actually creating revolutionary or disruptive knowledge", instead preferring "incremental knowledge production", she said. "It's the safest route to take," she explained.

The head of the world's largest accreditor of business schools endorsed the concern. Business-related research "needs to be spent in the service of a higher good", said Caryn Beck-Dudley, outgoing president of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. "Otherwise, what are we spending all of our time doing?"

Other critical areas that major business journals and their academic authors rarely address, beyond pandemic preparation, Ms Beck-Dudley said, include water scarcity and desertification, and issues of population and poverty. "The journals where business scholars publish, by and large, are not looking at what business problems are," she said. "They're looking at what the discipline considers problems."

The study of business school behaviour by Professor Haley and her team was published by Sage as a peer-reviewed white paper separate from any of its journals. Professor Haley's own survey component covered 373 researchers in business and management – mostly from the US, UK and India – of whom 81 per cent said that it was important or highly important that their research have value outside academia, yet with only a third believing their university shared that perspective.

The team cited the *THE* study and other surveys of business school academics by Sage and the Academy of Management as reinforcing the sense of misguided institutional missions.

Ms Beck-Dudley said that her association was using its accrediting power to try to force improvements. Starting in 2020, it adopted the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations as yardsticks for the types of topics it wants to see addressed by the business schools it accredits worldwide. Back in 1985, that kind of peer pressure by the AACSB led business schools to universally adopt programmes in ethics, Ms Beck-Dudley said. A similar outcome should now be expected on topics of real-world societal value, as business schools seek their once-every-five-years reaccreditation, she said.

“That’s our way of hopefully pushing pretty hard on our schools,” said Ms Beck-Dudley, former dean of the business schools at Santa Clara, Florida State and Utah State universities.

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Reader's comments (5)

#1 Submitted by graff.40 on January 14, 2023 - 12:41am

Come on! Most university research, indeed most research of any kind, "lacks real world relevance." What is the point of this? Educational writers must know a little bit about....

reply

#2 Submitted by timothy_devinney_manchester_ac_uk on January 14, 2023 - 9:14am

We really have heard this over and over and over. The issue is that no one really knows the ex ante value of research activities and a large amount of research cannot be evaluated individually as its value is collective -- it is the body of work around ideas that matter not any specific individual piece of work. I wrote back in 2013 as a response to the never ending "Oh, whoa is me! We are not relevant :(" discussion (<https://www.ft.com/content/3ba9551e-4898-11e3-8237-00144feabdco>) in an article entitled, "What is the role of scholarship in business schools? Many aspects of management practice are based on what was originally meaningless research". As I noted in that article, if I wanted all of my research to hit the ground running in terms of relevance, I would be a consultant selling that work for a fair market price and not be an academic working on more scientific and personal goals. Also, the more you can expect something to be immediately relevant the likelihood that it has potential future innovative potential may be reduced (what if Einstein was asked about the relevance of his original work?). Statistics show that the 'innovativeness' of research outputs seems to be declining (we can argue as to the validity of those measures). One of the reasons

is that narrowness of metrics leads scholars to focus on marginal advances. Focusing on relevance could, in my opinion, also lead to an erosion of innovativeness as it becomes yet another metricised output (on which, in the case of one of the authors of the Sage report) to be able to be put into a ranking or evaluative model that will even further reduce the willingness of scholars to take risks.

reply

#3 Submitted by deheuty on January 14, 2023 - 9:27am

Part of the problem is, in the UK, REF has always been biased towards theoretical research - this is well known and the recent 2021 REF has only begun to address this. Academics, like any person, will work towards what their employers reward them with. So if employers look at REF, and REF rewards theoretical research, then academics will do just that. This also fosters a kind of intellectual snobbery among academics who do theoretical work and look down on applied research as lacking in intellectual 'purity' and 'rigour'. It is almost like they regard applied researchers as doing research for monetary profit (crass) rather than for the higher cause of pursuing the 'truth' kind of snobbery.

reply

#4 Submitted by timothy_devinney_manchester_ac_uk on January 14, 2023 - 10:21am

One comment to add to my earlier one. I once was on a panel with a CEO who rabbited on about the relevance of business school research. I asked him if he thought we did not teach well or were teaching the wrong things? He said no. I asked if he sent his executives to b-school for training? He said yes. I asked was he dissatisfied with the people he hired from b-schools or the XP training his managers got? He said, no. I said, OK, so you want me to do more 'relevant' research for free? He said, of course not. I then asked when we could expect his company's \$M donation to establish a centre in the areas of work he viewed as relevant? Even he bust out laughing (BTW they never gave us any money -- not before this interaction or after the interaction). My point here is why should anyone care about the choice of a scholar's work? If someone wants specific 'relevant' research (and remember 'relevant' is always relevance to a 'whom') then they should be asked to pay for its cost. Part of the 'relevance' argument is that those wanting it are simply not prepared to pay for it. So (to paraphrase Dire Straits) "they want their relevance, they want their relevance", but what they really want is "money for nothing and your relevance for free."

reply

#5 Submitted by usha.haley on January 14, 2023 - 4:04pm

Tim, thanks for these comments. I liked your reference to Einstein. It may be relevant to bring up here that none of Einstein's papers, including one on special relativity that got him the Nobel Prize, were peer reviewed; through his life, Einstein had only one anonymous peer review in 1936, and that article was rejected. Indeed, the establishment of his time generally classified Einstein as overly simplistic. As our Sage paper discusses, we are not against peer review, replication or theoretical progress; instead, like you, we argue for a portfolio of scholarly accomplishments for social impact and wellbeing as every metric has its drawbacks. Thanks for your interest.

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