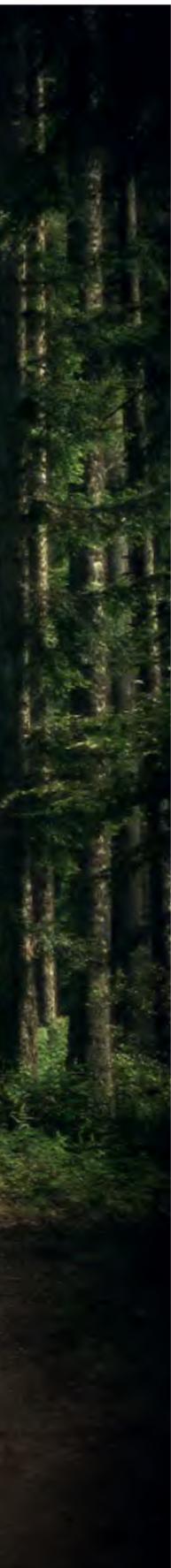


Societal Impact through Sustainable Scholarship

Usha C.V. Haley, Sir Cary L. Cooper and Andrew Jack explain how research collaboration with diverse stakeholders increases impact



Since the 1600s, philosophers have asked: If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? Physicists Nils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg argued that it didn't: without external observation, the tree fails to exist. Like those trees, if academic research reaches few outside narrow academic forests, the scholarship may have little societal impact. Evidence indicates that business academics are, indeed, creating more trees, so to speak, and reaching fewer external forests. We suggest why this might be and indicate some efforts to advance sustainable scholarship.

Today, academics around the world understand the importance of mentioning that their research has had 'impact'. Indeed, from 2000 to 2020, mentions of the word impact in the British Academy of Management (BAM) and Academy of Management (AOM) journals ballooned by over 223% (Haley, 2022)! One can trace at least one stream contributing to this institutional importance of impact to the UK and BAM.

In the late 1980s, the UK government decided to distribute research funding to British universities on research quality. The government assessed each subject group in each university roughly every five years, and distributed funding for research on research grants, scholarly-output quality and research infrastructure in each department; each department and the university overall received a rating to award more research funding. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) lasted until 2001, when it became the Research Excellence Framework (REF), with roughly the same criteria until around 2006. From the beginning, expert

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panels of leading academics from the different subject areas (engineering, medicine, sociology, business and management, accounting, etc.) assessed all the scholarly publications in journals and books, research grants received, departmental research culture, etc. One co-author (Cary Cooper) served on the 1992 Business & Management (B&M) panel as deputy chair, and then chair in the 1996 and 2001 panel for B&M. After the 1996 and 2001 exercises, the chairs of the B&M and accounting panels decided post hoc to review the RAE processes (Bessant, Birley, Cooper, *et al.* 2003; Cooper and Otley, 1998) raising concerns about the impact of scholarly research on wider communities and society at large - rarely addressed issues. Subsequent REFs incorporated the impact of management research as assessment criteria - in 2023, impact represents 25% of the total REF score. Since then, the impact of management research is discussed openly and widely in the literature and in conferences - does business and management research change government or corporate policy, or change corporate practice, or make a real difference to society at large and/or in business? We suspect that the RAE/REF became the precursor to more intensive discussions today about the wider impact of business and management research. But, is academic research truly having societal impact (Jack, 2023)?

STEM Envy and Its Consequences

For the purposes of this article, we define 'societal impact' as effects of scholarship beyond academia, to economies, societies, cultures, public policies, health, environments or qualities of life; we view 'sustainable scholarship' as emanating from and contributing to myriad stakeholders' interests. For over a decade, EQUIS accreditation has pioneered Responsibility and Sustainability metrics as standards in business schools' approaches to management education, research, public outreach, and behaviour (EFMD, 2023). Responsibility links to sustainability through willingness to incorporate broader social and environmental considerations into decision-making and accountability to ascertain the impacts of the schools' decisions and activities on society and environments. In 2013-2014, EFMD introduced the Business School Impact Survey (BSIS), as a tool for business schools to assess and improve their value in society. In 2015, under EFMD's auspices, 24 influential business scholars in the five core subdisciplines of business (accounting, finance, management, marketing, and operations management), created the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) Network to propel a social movement to transform management research into a force for societal good (Tsui, 2023). Since then, the RRBM network has expanded exponentially in terms of members, co-signees, RRBM awards and journal special issues.

Yet gaps between research practice and research impact have continued to increase. According to the AACSB, business schools spend more than US\$4 billion annually on research. From 2011-2019, as in the STEM fields, journal publications per person in the social sciences rose by 64%. However, academic research appears increasingly trivial (Haley, 2023). To paraphrase Winston Churchill, perhaps never have so many published so much with so little to say to so few. Indeed, searches for five top-tier management journals occurred predominantly only in six developed countries. In 2021, normalised data revealed that worldwide, the journals enjoyed less than a tenth of the popularity they had in 2004-2005 (Haley, 2022).



Cynicism pervades systemic measurements of societal impact. A global survey of business and management academics (covered in Haley and Jack, 2023) overwhelmingly found that most wanted their scholarship to have external value, with almost all agreeing that they wanted positive societal impact. Yet, only a third said that societal impact resulted in tenure, awards, research funding and, other resources; another third said societal impact offered no professional rewards. Unsurprisingly, most agreed that scholarship provided career advancement through invalid, instrumental measures such as highly-ranked journals with high impact factors – “the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B” (Kerr, 1975).

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Unlike the STEM fields, the consequences of social science research have few clear-cut benefits or costs. The people and societies academics study form contingent entities, changing constantly, partly in response to academic ideas. Knowledge does not accumulate as in the STEM fields so social scientists cannot make confident generalisations across contexts. They cannot dissect subjects or reassemble them as doctors replace eroded knees. They cannot advise companies on strategies, except through *ceteris paribus* assumptions that rarely hold. Social science approximates what Anthony Giddens termed double hermeneutics, interpreting researchers studying interpreting subjects, so valid measurements must include external relations. Researchers can change the objects of research, for better or for worse, as they can change researchers.

Invalid research measures and escalating journal publications obfuscate scientific understandings. By not engaging with society, many business academics appear as Chris Argyris's single-loop learners and one-way communicators. Their research blinds them to larger social movements, while they slowly modify issues that their forests of like-minded people view as important. They rarely contribute to wider debates of which they appear largely unaware. Disconnected from public life, they become Henry Giroux's models of moral indifference

Without policy implications that others can explicitly implement, business academics cannot fully determine the value or effects of their research. They need to engage the attention of policymakers, business people, consultants, and journalists. For societal impact, their research should have wider relevance and accessibility, incorporating performative aspects from the get-go.



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Relational Solutions for Societal Impact

We argue for relational solutions to the challenge of sustainable scholarship. Our approach contrasts with linear, rationalist models such as in the medical phrase 'bench to bedside'. We focus on interactions among researchers, policymakers, managers and policy implementers. We call for mutual exchanges, rather than one-way transmissions of knowledge, and for early and ongoing collaborations. We do not assume that evidence precedes policy, but that policy environments and evidence develop in tandem, through mutual influence and for societal influence. Thereby, we argue for co-creating knowledge by drawing on diverse interests, emotions and values.

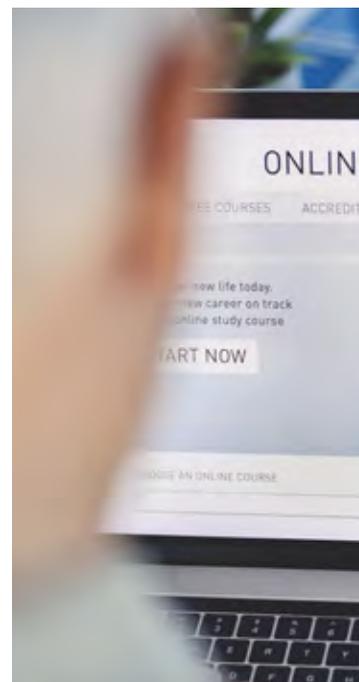
To start, we need better understandings of who benefits from academic research, why, how, and over what time frames. Haley and Jack (2023) elaborated on needed structural changes in institutions and evaluations. Here, we highlight key stakeholders' activities with which we have been involved, not as exemplars, but as incipient efforts and for full disclosure.

- **National evaluations:** As previously mentioned, no national evaluation to measure impact has had the influence of the UK's REF. The framework directly influenced several countries' national evaluations including Australia, New Zealand, and further afield in Europe. The framework also propelled the impact requirements that the AACSB, the major global accreditation body for business schools, currently espouses, thereby contributing greatly to Thomas and Wilson's (2011) third round of legitimacy for business schools



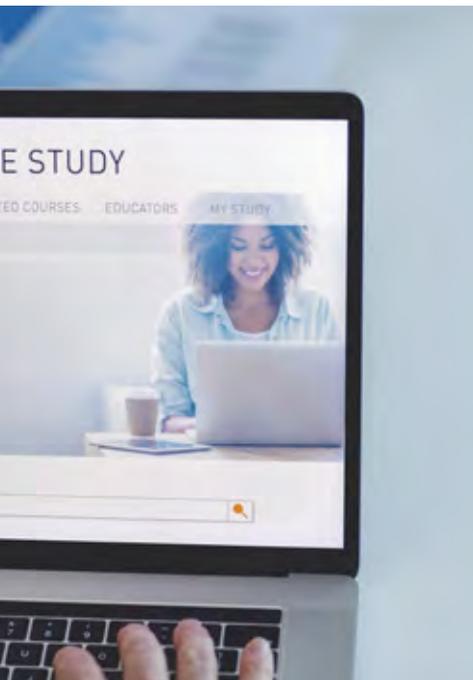
- **Professional academic associations:**

Over the last two decades, the Academy of Management (AOM) has questioned the meanings and operationalisations of research impact through conferences and journal articles. Simultaneously, the AOM's board of governors (BOG) created the Practice Theme Committee (PTC), (co-chaired by a co-author) almost two decades ago, as one of the four strategic pillars of the Academy. The PTC, dissolved in 2019, aimed to define, to shape, and to advance AOM members' impact through their research, and to ensure better accounting of impact beyond simple metrics (e.g., citation counts and impact factors). The PTC also sponsored a comprehensive survey and report on scholarly impact for the first, and to date, the only measure of societal impact by a major academic association (Haley 2022)





- **The media:** The Financial Times (FT) is overhauling its influential MBA and journal rankings, with fresh emphases on external impact, social mobility, student diversity and sustainability: <https://www.ft.com/mba-method>. The rankings track broader academic outputs and outcomes that have rigour, relevance and resonance for practitioners (Jack, 2022); the FT Responsible Business Education Awards reward impactful research such as Imperial College Business School and Ecole Polytechnique (Paris) working with the World Bank to support small, Tanzanian farmers for crop insurance
- **Practitioners:** The World Trade Council of Wichita, (WTCouncil) an independent 501(c)3 US organisation that one co-author chairs, hosts monthly town-meets-gown events, in its strategic partnership with the Center for International Business Advancement, Barton School of Business. Networking provides opportunities for students and faculty to engage with governments, corporations, non-profits, small businesses, the military, and the community to enhance teaching and scholarship. In a course the co-author teaches, graduate students engage monthly with board members, including senior practitioners from Deloitte, Textron, Spirit, Cargill, the Kansas Governor's office, EXIM Bank and the US Air Force, on cutting-edge concepts affecting diverse stakeholders. WTCouncil partners with RRBM, and the World Free Zones Organization, and has won two US Presidential Awards for Excellence in Exporting



US\$10bn

The arguably premier US funding agency for basic research, the National Science Foundation (NSF), provides about US\$10 billion annually to fund research

- **Journals:** Organization Studies and Sage provide monetary compensation for their annual Student Paper Impact Award to reward Masters and Doctoral students for research with impact on societies, environments, and policies. The winning research also receives acclaim at the annual European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS) meeting with EGOS publicising the research through various venues
- **Funders:** Arguably the premier US funding agency for basic research, the National Science Foundation (NSF), provides about US\$10 billion annually to fund research with 'broader impacts'. One co-author, also an NSF award holder, has served on the review panel to advance impactful social science knowledge. At a May 2023 review panel meeting, Director Rayvon Fouché, Social and Economic Sciences Division, urged reviewers to focus not just on the technical competencies of proposals, but concurrently on strong potentials for breakthrough research through broader impacts. Indeed, insufficiently developed impacts could sink otherwise technically-sound proposals
- **Publishers:** As part of its commitment to impactful research to influence and to inform policy and practice, Sage has spawned several avenues for debate, and inquiry including newsletters and video panels as well as primary research. For example, one co-author collaborated with Sage and a diverse panel of social scientists to develop the survey on scholarly impact that we covered earlier, and that Sage distributed globally. Sage also publishes and freely distributes white papers with potential to shape debates on scholarly impacts (e.g., Haley and Jack, 2023).



Call to Action

Intense pursuit of narrowly-defined research has carried societal costs including academics spending less time with students, while devaluing other stakeholders' interests and voices. This unsustainable scholarship also raises students' and taxpayers' higher-education costs. Administrative bloat to manage, monitor and measure research has increased tuition worldwide with most UK and US universities hiring more administrators than faculty. In 2014, the New England Center for Investigative Reporting found that the number of administrators grew twice as fast as the number of students and doubled relative to faculty.





We can do better. We have outlined some ways in which myriad stakeholders can contribute to research and teaching portfolios through tendrils and roots to other forests. But, as the survey we discussed reveals, rewards matter. Our call includes much more institutional credit for high-level faculty engagement with students and practitioners, and for incentives such as case writing at Harvard Business School. Through sustained collaborations with diverse stakeholders, business school administrators should ensure that being heard matters as much as publishing in prestigious academic journals, for recruitment, promotion, tenure, bonuses and other incentives. Academics sometimes cannot see their forests for the trees, but they need more than words to see and be heard for societal impact and sustainable scholarship; more of the same will probably lead to neither.

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