



THE IMPACT OF THE
IMPACT AGENDA

BUSINESS SCHOOLS ARE FACING INCREASING PRESSURES TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR 'IMPACT' ON THEIR SURROUNDINGS AND OPERATIONS. **CHRISTOPHE LEJEUNE, JULIE DAVIES, AND KEN STARKEY** ANALYSE NEW RESEARCH INTO HOW THE IMPACT AGENDA IS AFFECTING SCHOOLS

Among the many implications for business schools of the 2008 financial crisis was the emergence of the “impact agenda.”

At its core have been policy makers seeking greater evidence of learning institutions’ contributions to the public good and different measures of their accountability to multiple stakeholders.

The business school community is well positioned to provide evidence of its impact.

In early 2014, for example, EFMD together with FNEGE (the French National Foundation for Management Education) launched the Business School Impact Survey (BSIS) as a methodology to help business schools assess and measure their impact on the world around them. The Australian Business Deans Council and AACSB International have made similar responses.

In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a peer review assessment of the quality of research taking place at higher education institutions, which is used to distribute government funding. REF incorporates an impact dimension to assess excellent research in universities and business schools.

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Although many current debates and discussions are about the assessment and measurement of impact, an interesting question concerns the organisational consequences of “impact thinking.” In other words, what is the effect of the impact agenda on business schools?

Our research uses the UK as a specific case study to explore the impact of impact. To investigate this topic, we sent a short survey to deans, directors of research and research managers of UK business schools, and collected answers between 14 November 2014 and 12 December 2014.

We purposely chose UK business schools as a starting point since they seemed to be the European business schools that are most aware of having to articulate the impact agenda, especially with the UK government’s REF intervention.

Further, most UK business schools, with the exception of a few graduate schools, are university based and full service with a balance of research and teaching in their missions.

130

From the targeted population of 130 UK business schools, we received answers from 42 respondents, representing 35 business schools (27%).

From the targeted population of 130 UK business schools, we received answers from 42 respondents, representing 35 business schools (27%). Respondents who indicated their profiles included deans (38%), directors of research, (31%) and research managers (7%). Business schools in the sample included members of the Russell Group representing 24 leading UK universities (24%); the University Alliance Group of science and technology universities (24%); and the Million+ Group, a collection of 22 universities that were formerly polytechnics (7%).

Different business school missions were represented by a range of institutions identified as research intensive (24%), teaching and research balanced (57%), and teaching intensive (19%). Finally, respondents who participated in the survey represent business schools that provide graduate programmes (98%) and executive education (79%). Our analysis of the survey responses conveys three key messages related to:

- Strategic priorities and research design
- New roles and hiring and promotion criteria
- The continued imperative for excellent scientific outputs in academic journals.

Strategic priorities and research design

The majority of respondents, 68%, stated that the impact agenda has changed their strategic priorities. Over 75% felt that the impact agenda has recognised an increased diversity of contributions. Almost half the respondents felt this would help their school's differentiation strategy. In addition, over half felt that the impact agenda has changed the prioritisation of key stakeholders for their school.

The vast majority (90%) said that the impact agenda has supported the way they think strategically about how they engage with external stakeholders. Consequently, some 85% of respondents said that the impact agenda has also influenced the design of future research projects.

New roles and hiring and promotion criteria

One business school in a technologically focused university has recently been hiring more scientists and individuals with track records of increasing research income to change the mix of faculty hires and to help design research projects to be more impactful.

29% of the respondents in our survey disagreed that the impact agenda has modified faculty recruitment and/or processes and 34% disagreed that it has changed criteria and/or processes for faculty promotion and tenure.

Moreover, it is clear from the responses that the impact agenda has influenced business school leadership.

The role of the dean is strongly affected by the notion of impact, with almost half of respondents agreeing that the dean's remit has changed as a result of the impact agenda. Most of the respondents stated that the role of the director of research has also been affected by the impact agenda (81%) and to a slightly lesser extent the role of the research manager has also altered (64%).

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The majority of respondents, 68%, stated that the impact agenda has changed their strategic priorities. Over 75% felt that the impact agenda has recognised an increased diversity of contributions



Continued imperative of excellent scientific outputs in academic journals

The impact agenda does not appear to have reduced the importance of scientific publications or promoted higher-quality research outputs. Most respondents (73%) disagreed that the impact agenda has decreased the importance of academic publications.

Less certain in the survey was the perception that research outputs of higher quality are necessarily a consequence of the impact agenda, with only 20% saying that it has promoted research outputs of higher quality. Interestingly, the impact agenda was seen to have increased the diversity of recognised contributions (78%) rather than the quality of research outputs.

Next to these specific questions, the survey also asked a set of open questions related to changes resulting from the impact agenda in terms of: (1) behaviours, (2) processes and activities, (3) positions and responsibilities, and (4) incentives and rewards.

Behaviours

In terms of behaviours, respondents suggest that the impact agenda has promoted more collaboration and communication, either inside business schools, across departments and teams, or with external parties. Respondents noted perceived behavioural changes: "Less silo thinking and more cross-disciplinary thinking" as well as "More legitimacy around engagement with external stakeholders" and "Greater emphasis on outward-facing activity."

Respondents observed that the impact agenda has also pushed forward information systems, formalisation and quantification attempts.

In short, the impact agenda seems to have reinvigorated some types of interactions within and across business schools at the same time as triggering formalised mechanisms to record these interactions and their outcomes.



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Processes and activities

When looking at the processes or activities that were developed to make impact more central in business schools, respondents indicated new IT/monitoring systems, staff development/training workshops on impact and encouragement by research directors. Other changes related to new roles.

Positions and responsibilities

Respondents indicated some new positions and groupings that include the terms "impact" or "engagement" such as associate dean for business engagement, impact co-ordinator and faculty impact officer. Some new positions and responsibilities explicitly refer to the business world such as business development manager or business engagement champions.

In other cases, they reported that impact is "embedded in our normal positions rather than having impact-specific roles."

Incentives and rewards

Finally, new incentives and reward systems related to impact mainly take the form of promotion and specific workloads. Comments such as "promotion criteria now include evidence of impact" or "we now give credit in the workload model for media, press and public engagement work" illustrate this well.

Criticisms of the impact agenda suggest the risks of university research becoming too commercialised, with REF impact case studies rewarding journales and impact as a distraction from blue skies and fundamental research or from an appreciation of impactful teaching activities.

There are also concerns about how new forms of doctoral training might encompass impact. There is potential for greater value to be placed on the DBA that UK research funding bodies currently do not support.

For some schools, the impact agenda means simply formalising what was done before. For others, it is perceived as role enlargement or "yet another" constraint to consider with additional pressures on individual faculty anchored to a single discipline to work in cross-disciplinary teams.

In recent discussions with UK directors of research, there seems to be some shift from a fixation on impact to a concern for generating more income for management research. There are many unresolved issues. How can business schools attract greater industry and international funding on the scale of some major management consultancy firms? How can they generate income through collaborations with other disciplines and through consortia with other business schools, publishers, private competitors, social enterprises, SMEs and medium-sized organisations as well as large corporates? Will journal editors incorporate broader dimensions of impact? How can social media be used for greater impact, research income generation, and enhancing the legitimacy of business schools?

The impact agenda is here to stay. Clearly, governments, employers, families and students that are funding education find rankings, accreditation kitemarks, and other indices useful to make informed judgments. Business schools globally can draw on a basket of metrics to show that they make a positive difference to the various outcomes valued by students, the community, practising managers and scholars.

Finally, we argue that measures of impact should not merely enhance business schools' profiles and reputations. The impact of impact should ultimately be to create synergies, for example between research and executive education, to advance innovative business models and practices, and make tangible differences in society.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Christophe Lejeune is Research Adviser, Research and Surveys Unit, EFMD.

Dr Julie Davies is Deputy Chief Executive, the Association of Business Schools (ABS), UK.

Professor Ken Starkey is Professor of Management and Organisation Learning, Head of the Management Division, Nottingham University Business School, UK, and a member of EFMD's R&D Steering Group.