

# Why care about impact?

The impact, or otherwise, of academic research in management and business is a current hot topic but **Peter McKiernan** and **William Glick** suggest a cooler, more measured approach

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The European Enlightenment shaped much of our present educational world.

The intellectual elites of the day placed great emphasis on the usefulness of science to a changing social and economic society. John Anderson, a professor of oriental languages and natural philosophy at Glasgow University in Scotland, gained an infamous reputation among his university colleagues for daring to educate the working classes in the benefits and applications of science. His scientific research was an inspiration to James Watt in his re-design of the steam engine, which then drove the industrial revolution in Europe. Influenced by his friend Benjamin Franklin's founding of the school and academy in Philadelphia in 1749 – later to become the University of Pennsylvania, Anderson established Scotland's only Enlightenment University in 1796 – “for the good of mankind and the improvement of science, a place of useful learning”. Today, the UK's first technological university, the University of Strathclyde, still bears his motto as ‘a place of useful learning’, which interpretation permeates strongly through its pedagogy and scientific activity today.

Fast forward 200 years and we see deans and directors of business schools across the world suffering waves of critiques about both the manner in which the scientific enquiry of their colleagues has been conducted and the irrelevance of the outcome of their research.

Pressures such as rankings and ratings on business school recruitment, reward and promotion have helped to rush the science of management and business and raised serious questions about its integrity.

Additionally, “physics envy” has fostered a focus

on theory and technical prowess with numerous tightly focused research articles generating a self-consuming industry that has relegated usefulness to the margin. Broader societal impact has been for the brave and the few, as academic careers are built on self-referential metrics.

Divorcing science from usefulness, Udo Steffens and Michael Grote (*Global Focus*, October 2016) posed the provocative question: does academic research have to have an impact? They claim that “impact is the new relevance”, as relevance might have emerged as the “new usefulness” in a prior evolution.

They argue that all that really matters is very good science *per se*. Most scholars would agree that good science is essential but it is also a pre-requisite to any useful application. In medicine, engineering and management, that translation to application is crucial, especially where public money is concerned.

Faced with the rapid rural to urban industrial shifts of 18th century Europe, Anderson and the scholars of the Enlightenment knew that the application of science was a social and economic necessity. Investments in research were motivated by the hope of discovery and the potential for new insights, inventions and innovations.

However, what is practically “useful” about the question posed by Steffens and Grote is that it ignites an old debate that invites an answer.

Here we argue that good science in business and management possesses both inherent credibility and practical relevance. Such ingredients provide legitimacy to the provision of answers to complex problems and an accuracy in the guidance to associated decision making. This

is more than another journal acceptance; it is impactful and responsible research.

But what is impact and why should we care about it? We argue that impact is not limited to citations, media hits or applied research. We believe that there are broader interpretations; that impact can be about making a difference in the world. For most of us, that world is pretty inclusive, so the direction and type of impact will vary. Influencing the transition from agrarian to industrial economies is impactful but so is the reframing of a policy decision, an alteration in strategic direction, the reshaping of our understanding of agency problems or market inefficiencies, and the effective teaching of our students.

As the public has become more concerned with research impact, funding agencies have developed their own approaches to impact, most notably in the UK's Research Excellence Framework in 2014.

As an initial attempt at measuring research impact across universities, REF 2014 made a statement about its importance, forcing institutions to direct scholars to submit evidence in detailed case-based work that accounted for 20% of the total research quality weighting. In its aftermath, the Stern report (2016) called for a much wider definition of impact (to embrace public engagement, culture and pedagogy as well as the traditional emphasis on policy and engagement) and an increase in weighting to 35% by combining research impact with research environment.

In the US impact has crept into the funding criteria for the National Science Foundation. In addition to intellectual merit, proposers must explain the broader impacts of their proposed activities. Rather than defining a single approach to "broader" impacts, the NSF offers a series of questions, beginning with "How well does the activity advance discovery and understanding while promoting teaching, training and learning?" It ends with the simple question "What may be the benefits of the proposed activity to society?"

So, when viewed more inclusively, "impact" is not so ugly after all. Of course, all academic research does not have to have an impact but why invest so much time and effort into pursuing research for the sake of just another publication? Intellectual stimulation and mathematical elegance are fun and important but are insufficient alone to satisfy many of the stakeholders in the dynamic research eco-system that surrounds them.





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The problem faced by business and management academics is the “publish or perish” culture and the path-dependent processes that have reinforced it and enslaved its populace.

For sure, publication is a major motivator for many recruits to academe. But, as institutional forces reward publications mostly in “top journals”, these recruits suffer untold stress, and struggle to achieve first base in a seemingly endless uphill game. No wonder, because such journals are perceived as “top” because of the citations from other perceived “top journals” and reputations among “top scholars” and “top universities” that get rewarded for publications in these journals.

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External isomorphic pressures and internal path-dependent processes have created self-reinforcing feedback loops. Inputs from broader society – and the “paying public” – are shut out of this closed-loop system. As several senior business academics have echoed, this is a self-centred, self-serving, self-feeding process, a form of academic narcissism that parallels the salons of Marie Antoinette.

But in the physical sciences and areas of social science that are more dependent on funding agencies, there is a growing movement to break these feedback loops with the goal of producing credible and relevant knowledge useful for society.

And more recently within business and management schools, there is an evolving Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (CRRBM). Its purpose is to advocate both the quality of the scientific method in research and research’s relevance to society. For them, high quality and high relevance equates to responsible research.

CRRBM has emerged from a group of leading scholars, current and former editors of top journals

and deans with the support of the top two business school associations, EFMD and AACSB. As influential members of the research ecosystem, they have all been successful at working the system, guilty of sustaining it and, curiously, committed to its systemic change.

As founding members of this group, we encourage you to critique its forthcoming White Paper and interact with its web site, due early in 2017. Determined to make an impact, the authors will disseminate this work widely, including plenary panels at major international conferences, special issues of academic journals and commentaries in specific general journals including *Global Focus*.

The time for this reflection is nigh. Concerns about accountability and the sustainability of the business model supporting universities have changed attitudes dramatically. Deans, directors, funding agencies and the broader public are gripped by value for money, fit for purpose research that has societal impact. This is why it is crucial to care about impact.

For the moralists among us, it fulfils a responsibility and duty to society; for the pragmatists in our midst, it is a necessity in a competitive world where resource flows are eventually redirected to contributors; for the idealists, it is a desire to make the world a better place; and for our stakeholders, it is the evidence on which their judgment of our work will be made.

If we cannot be concerned with Anderson’s pursuit of “the good of mankind [sic] and the improvement of science”, then why should we expect continued public support for the sacred pursuit of knowledge?



**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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