by Agnieszka Chidlow, Elena P. Antonacopoulou, David J. Reibstein & David Steingard

Building Impact Through Strategic Unity: Business Schools' Responsibility to the Common Good

As key knowledge providers, business schools are increasingly redefining their value propositions to create a positive societal impact while bridging the gap between academic scholarship and practice (Cornuel, 2022). This convergence with stakeholder expectations aims to support knowledge co-creation for the common good. This orientation extends beyond previous calls to align the interests of different stakeholders or integrate their knowledge. It begins with their co-existence and ongoing interaction in the co-creation, co-design, and ultimate co-generative emergence of practices that align bodies of knowledge with actions. It is these actions and their continuous improvement that ultimately constitute impact (IMProving ACTion - Antonacopoulou, 2022). To mobilise such improvements and actions that serve the common good, a central focus of these strategies is fostering a genuine sense of responsibility as part of a systemic change (Thomas and Starkey, 2019; Davies et al., 2023). But what does responsibility truly entail? Is it merely a promotional tool to attract a diverse student population and gain a competitive edge, or does it reflect a sincere commitment to transforming scientific scholarship?

Responsible research, after all, aims to produce reliable knowledge that equips policymakers and business leaders to address the 21st century's grand challenges as outlined by the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Exploring the body of work on societal impact published in Global Focus magazine offers a promising direction for guiding the global educational ecosystem toward public benefit and bridging the research-relevance gap. However, ongoing discussions about the role of business schools in fostering societal impact may still raise critical questions that challenge the integrity of scientific scholarship (Kaplan, 2023). Key concerns include the trustworthiness and replicability of methodological fit in scientific research (Knight et al., 2022), which are essential to maintaining scientific responsibility and integrity in the pursuit of relevance, especially in an increasingly digitised world, wherever more sophisticated technologies are now at the disposal of scientists.

The alignment between credibility and relevance forms the foundation of the concept of responsible research, as advocated by the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) global movement (Haenlein et al., 2022). Unfortunately, principles related to scientific integrity are either often overlooked or taken for granted in conversations about impact, perhaps due to the intense focus on societal outcomes, as well as the publish-or-perish culture prevalent in academia and driven by institutional incentives (Huse, 2022). Responsible research, after all, aims to produce reliable knowledge that equips policymakers and business leaders to address the 21st century's grand challenges as outlined by the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This resonates with the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and their call for business schools to commit to responsible management education as part of their mission. Such obligation benefits society by generating relevant insights while upholding scientific responsibility and integrity at every stage of scholarly inquiry and its dissemination.

Achieving these goals may require a coordinated transformative institutional approach that equips scholars with the right methodological skills and resources to ensure reproducible and transparent scholarly inquiry, as part of business schools' commitment to responsible research, ultimately better and credibly informing business and policymakers (Russell Group, 2021). After all, knowledge, being a public good, is produced through academic scholarship often funded by taxpayers. As scientific experts, faculty members invest significant time and effort into this work, aspiring that the knowledge generated benefits businesses and/or society (Kitchener et al., 2024). Consequently, society rightfully expects this research to be rigorous in informing both policy and practice, underscoring the urgent need for business schools to produce credible and useful findings. Reconciling methodological trustworthiness with societal relevance may seem challenging, not only due to the diverse contexts, available training, and expertise within business schools, but also because of the various internal and external pressures faculty face. As these institutions strive to advance academic excellence with societal impact, it is increasingly important to strengthen their commitment to trustworthy scientific methods while bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications. By fostering a real culture of scientific responsibility and integrity that emphasises methodological credibility and when driven by the appropriate institutional incentives, business schools can significantly enhance their societal contributions and fulfil their role as leading knowledge providers contributing to society, in alignment with initiatives such as the Transparency and Openness Promotion Guidelines (TOP), the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Cape Town Statement on Fostering Research Integrity through Fairness and Equity (The Cape Town Statement).

These initiatives seek to restore the ethos of scholarship, which has been increasingly compromised by the growing emphasis on performativity that now characterises universities as 'businesses'. This shift, while understandable in the context of global competition, can sometimes be compounded by certain leadership approaches. In their pursuit of rankings, some deans, though well-intentioned, may inadvertently compromise collective integrity of scientific inquiry. By prioritising rankings and research assessment scores, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), there is a risk of limiting the space for authentic scholarship and diminishing both the quality of research and its broader impact.

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As highlighted in one of the EFMD's Deans and Director Generals conferences, the broader concern is that business schools may not always fully demonstrate the leadership and management quality they advocate. Indeed, many, if not most business school deans are advocating for impact, but this does not necessarily translate to their internal reward system. The pressure of rankings and research productivity, as measured by the number of publications and citation count by other scholars, obscures the harder to measure external impact of this research (Berry et al., 2021). This

disconnect can lead to an unintended sacrifice of impact in favour of rankings. Importantly, this level of reflection is often missing from much of the impact debate. As a result, the common good risks being overlooked when institutions fail to nurture relationships founded on trust, mutual respect, and honour (Antonacopoulou, 2022), both within business schools and in their engagements with wider society.

In the evolving landscape of higher education, shaped by marketisation, commercialisation, and technological advancements, business schools have an opportunity to become true custodians of 'relevant' knowledge. This means embracing scientific endeavours that serve the common good and uphold the values of scholarship (phronesis - Antonacopoulou, 2010). As key players in the academic ecosystem, business schools are encouraged to adopt a proactive approach to fostering truth and integrity within their broader institutions. They have a civic responsibility to engage in open dialogue and provide insights that can inform positive changes at both policy and corporate levels. This requires not just a rhetorical commitment to responsibility but also a tangible shift in how knowledge is produced, transformed, assessed, and applied. When methodological rigour and societal relevance go hand in hand, then research practices reflect a commitment to responsible management, emphasising integrity and purpose. As they navigate the complexities of an AI-driven world, the call for transparency, accountability, and integrity in research has never been more urgent. Therefore, institutions must facilitate the rigorous production of knowledge to ensure that their contributions genuinely benefit society. The path forward necessitates a true commitment to thought leadership, as advocated by initiatives such as Global Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI). By doing so, they can enhance their credibility as knowledge providers and play a pivotal role in shaping responsible management education. The time for thoughtful action is now, and the responsibility to uphold the integrity of scientific scholarship rests firmly in their capable hands.

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