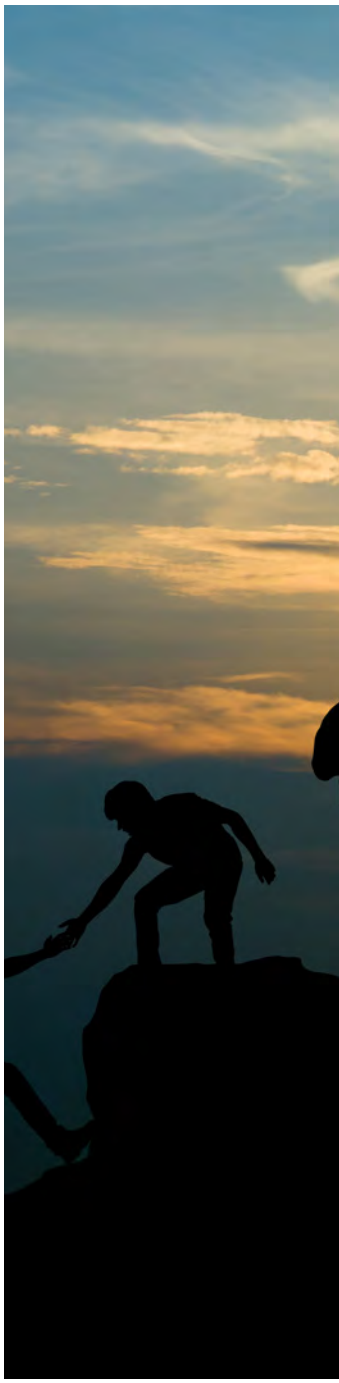
# Celebrating Small Wins and calling Bold Actions

**Anne S Tsui** asks if business research is finally reconnecting with the business world?



The January 2015 issue of *Global Focus* published an essay entitled 'Reconnecting with the Business World: Socially Responsible Scholarship'. The essay called for business scholars to respond to the growing criticism of irrelevant and self-serving research. The message conveyed in that essay was not new, since for more than two decades, many scholars have expressed concerns about this gap between research and practice. Ironically, business schools began with a strong connection to practice, earning the nickname of "trade schools" for about half a century after the founding of university business programs at the end of the 19th century in France and Germany, and the start of the 20th century. in the United States. The purpose of these early programs was to improve the practice of commerce and administration. The famous 1959 Gordon and Howell report, funded by the Ford Foundation, called for business research along the lines of other disciplines to create science-based knowledge and improve the quality of business education. Business schools responded enthusiastically by importing social science research and hiring PhD graduates from economics, psychology, sociology, and even mathematics. Impressive progress was made in the years from 1960 to the early 1990s, producing practical theories which filled the textbooks that are still in use today. These thirty years may be considered the golden age of business research and provided valuable content for business education.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, researchers in business schools became more and more engaged with science and less and less interested in the applied implications of their work. The science orientation using a logical positivist framework crowded out practically oriented or phenomena-inspired research. Business researchers retreated into their ivory towers and concentrated on publishing papers: in the A-ranked journals that were useful for advancing the careers of individual scholars (under the guise of advancing science) and for improving the rankings of business schools (to attract students and employers). With some exceptions, the research-practice gap became a defining feature of business research. Despite the increase in research on socially meaningful topics such as Corporate Social Responsibility and sustainability, the A-ranked journals are not overwhelming receptive to publishing these specialized topics especially when these research projects do not fit nicely into the positivist framework. The Jan 2015 "Reconnecting" essay was a clarion call to reconnect business research and the business world.

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**A world in need of science-based solutions**

During the years since the January 2015 GF essay, the world has witnessed the resurgence of many forms of injustice, including economic inequality, racial and gender discrimination, climate irresponsibility, and global healthcare disparities. Progress on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals is slower than desired. The media reminds us of these grand challenges daily, and some of us may have personally suffered the severe storms or wildfires caused by global warming and the coronavirus. As management scholars, we need to deeply reflect on our responsibility. Using our expertise in business and management, have we contributed to reducing injustices as well as improving workplace safety, reducing work-from-home stress, or identifying alternatives to weathering the economic downturn by both large and small businesses? Can we as "management scholars" rise above self-focused research practices and dismantle the self-reinforcing processes in the research ecosystem that focus on novelty in theories and methods (but without solving any real problems) at the expense of credible and useful knowledge? Fortunately, many scholars, especially the younger generation of scholars, are eager to use their talents to address these societal ills. Some senior scholars are calling for transformative changes.

**An instrument to transformative changes: The responsible research in business and management network**

In early 2015, with encouragement and support from EFMD, a global team of scholars decided to explore solutions to this research-practice gap problem. A total of 24 influential scholars in the five core subdisciplines of accounting, finance, management, marketing, and operations management, along with leaders in four institutions closely connected to business education, created the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) network. They articulated their vision for the future of management research in a position paper which also proposes seven principles of responsible research. The position paper has 85 co-signers from around the world. The RRBM website was launched in January 2018, inviting scholars and institutions to join the social movement of transforming management research into a force for good in our societies.

EFMD deserves a special recognition for its pioneering work on encouraging business schools to have an impact on their local and global communities. In 2012 EFMD published a manifesto on management education which stressed socially responsible research and learning. In 2013/4, EFMD introduced the Business School Impact Survey (BSIS), providing a tool for business schools to assess and improve their value on society. To date, it has surveyed 60 business schools in 17

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countries. The assessment highlights practice-oriented research. The RRBM initiative further led the EFMD board to change its EQUIS accreditation standards in 2017/8. Given EFMD's mission and values, its support for RRBM was not surprising. EFMD hosts the RRBM website and offers staff support to RRBM activities.

To date, in addition to the 28 co-founders and 85 co-signers, RRBM has over 70 institutional partners (from 27 countries) which are committed to responsible research. There are over 1500 endorsers of the position paper, consisting of 33% full professors, 18% associate and 20% assistant. There are also 5% postdoctoral fellows, researchers, emeritus, clinical, and practice professors, and 15% doctoral students, along with a small number of executives or practicing professionals (4%). These 1500 endorsers reside in 75 countries, and twenty countries have one endorser each, reflecting the global reach and global mix of the RRBM network. All this occurred without a major marketing campaign by RRBM.

Together with its institutional partners, RRBM has organised a variety of activities to encourage and stimulate responsible research. The RRBM bimonthly newsletter VOICES highlights major activities and accomplishments. The RRBM website is the depository of all the actions and resources (articles, books, media news, blogs, videos) related to responsible research. This video gives a brief historical overview of RRBM since its founding through June 2020.

In the seven years since RRBM was founded in August 2015, there have been a few small wins due to the bold actions of individuals and groups. Below are the highlights of a few significant activities and accomplishments.

**Awards on Responsible Research**

RRBM facilitated the creation of an annual Responsible Research Award in several disciplines. The American Marketing Association, co-sponsored by EBSCO, gave its first award in February 2020. The Manufacturing and Service Operations Management Society introduced its award in 2019. The International Association for Chinese Management Research co-sponsored this award with RRBM beginning in 2018. In 2021, the sponsorship was taken over by the Academy of Management Fellows Group. The awards in these three disciplines are given to published research articles and research books in the past one to five years. The European Finance Association decided to give a Best Paper Prize in Responsible Finance beginning with the 2020 annual conference.

These award-winning works exemplify the principles of responsible research by producing both credible findings and useful knowledge that may have the potential of informing better business practices and creating policies for better societies. The award in Management also engages practicing executives in evaluating the finalists, after a rigorous academic review, on the usefulness of the research findings for practice. This executive review is an important input in selecting the winners. At least two executives reported that they introduced new practices in their companies based on the findings in the research papers for which they served as reviewers. The four business subdisciplines together have identified almost 100 articles and 14 books since the award was launched in 2018. Interestingly, most of the authors are junior scholars who courageously pursue research ideas against the advice of their senior colleagues. These award-winning papers and books serve to legitimise topics that are not mainstream in the literature but clearly are mainstream in the world. They offer excellent examples of responsible research.

*Journal Initiatives to Encourage Impactful Research*

Many journals have introduced special issues on topics related to the grand challenges of the world often related to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. RRBM has helped to publicise over 30 such special topics in many of the disciplinary journals. For example, the *Journal of Applied Psychology* has a special issue on "racism in organizations" (the submissions are under review currently). The *Academy of Management* Journal has introduced an "Impact Award" to recognise published papers that have made an impact on the world of practice. This editorial in the October 2021 issue of *AMJ* introduced the winning articles for the 2020 and 2021 Impact Award. This editorial calls for courage to pursue research that matters to the world.

*"…it is our hope that scholars, and those who advise and mentor them, will demonstrate the courage and risk-taking needed to do the kind of transformative work that our society needs, perhaps now more than ever."*

*Global summits to foster personal and group commitment to actions*

RRBM and its partners organised four global summits; the first was an in-person event hosted by the Rotterdam School of Management on 1 July, 2019. This by-invitation summit included deans, association leaders, journal editors, senior scholars, and accreditation officers. A total of 62 participants came from 13 countries and represented the five core disciplines. This summit concluded with each participant writing an "I Will" statement describing a concrete action that they would take to promote responsible research. Here is one example: "I will embrace the RRBM 7 Principles and endeavour to encourage, within my circle of influence, the production of thought leadership that contributes to a healthier, more sustainable, collective, responsible society."

Due to COVID, three other summits were held virtually in 2020 and 2021. All summits ended with participants writing action statements either individually or in a group as a commitment to advance the responsible research movement. The summit reports and the "I/We Will" statements can be read on the Actions/Events page of the RRBM website. The following are a few "We Will" statements from the 2021 Responsible Research Academic Summit, attended by 199 participants organised into 18 groups representing eight internal stakeholders (such as deans, editors, association leaders, doctoral directors, doctoral students, senior and junior scholars) of the business research ecosystem. The full list of "We Will" statements by the 18 groups can be read in the full report of this summit.

- We will identify what RRBM means for our specific journals and disciplines, disseminate these insights to our AEs, reviewers, authors, and doctoral students, and hold the community accountable via metrics. (Editors)
- We will pursue meaningful and actionable research that will create measurable impact. Even the smallest impact starting with oneself and influencing one other or more matters. (Junior Scholars)
- We will provide PhD students with the tools, interdisciplinary research exposure, knowledge and skills, and establish contacts with industry as an explicit part of the PhD training. (Doctoral Directors)

- We will create support groups and initiatives to help doctoral students develop responsible research practices. (Doctoral Students)

The most recent summit 'Responsible Research Roundtable' was held virtually on 28/29 June, 2021. The 84 participants included 57% academics and 43% practicing executives, from 70 institutions in 15 countries. This 'RRR' had three objectives:

- Identify the benefits and challenges of engaged research (Why?)
- Generate demand-led research (What?)
- Solve wicked problems through knowledge co-creation (How?)

Through two rounds of breakout group discussions, participants identified several key issues as most important for collaborative research involving business schools and societal stakeholders. Topics like poverty and inequality, the future of work, and sustainability

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all emerged as priorities for attention, as did the need to explore different metrics for how work is valued – both on the business side as well as on the academic side.

Participants also ranked how the ideas expressed in the Roundtable summit could be transformed into ongoing collaborative action. Broad interest emerged in further pursuing "insight communities" to facilitate convening, collaboration, and common learning on key issues.

*School accreditation and ranking standards*

Inspired by the discussion in the first global summit held in Rotterdam, The American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) used societal impact as the central theme in its revised accreditation standards. Beginning in 2021, schools under accreditation review will need to document how their teaching and research programs have made positive impacts on society. The *Financial Times*, publisher of the global ranking of business schools, is also revising its approach to measuring research contributions. Research performance historically was based on the number of publications in the FT50. Convinced by the need to consider the societal impact of research, RRBM is working with the *Financial Times* to explore methods to measure the impact of research to improve business practices which, in turn, will help to create a better world. It is conducting a hackathon to solicit innovative ideas.

*Collective actions by Chinese deans*

Three deans and an executive vice dean of the top four business schools in China were participants in the first global RRBM summit in Rotterdam. Echoing the RRBM Summit, the first Chinese Summit on the theme of 'Management Research for a Better Society' was hosted by the School of Management at Zhejiang University on 12 December, 2019 and attended by the deans and associate deans of the top ten business schools in China. These deans made a joint commitment, with an Action Plan, to take the lead to transform research in all business schools in China toward responsible science, by encouraging and supporting research to solve the practical problems of social and economic development in China. The School of Economics and Management of Tsinghua University is organising the third summit. This school also has revised its promotion and tenure criteria to give equal weight to publications in global English journals and local Chinese language research outlets. Focusing on problems of the Chinese society is the preferred content of all the research projects.

*Preparing future responsible scholars worldwide*

Another participant's "I Will" statement written during the 2019 summit focused on doctoral education. The statement reads 'I will work with scholars in different disciplines to design and deliver a course on *Responsible*

*Science* for doctoral students and junior faculty worldwide.' After two years' preparation, in Fall 2021, RRBM introduced a free online 10-week PhD course on the Philosophical Foundation of Responsible Research, partnering with the WP Carey School of Business at Arizona State University in the US and the Hong Kong Baptist University. Students from any region worldwide could apply to join either the ASU class or the HKBU class. The ASU class consisted of 17 students from 14 business schools in eight countries. They studied in management, entrepreneurship, marketing, international business, and public policy. In addition to two management professors serving as the primary instructors, there were also several guest professors, including one from Marketing. The course covered four main topics: a. philosophical issues in natural and social sciences, b. progress in science, c. values, responsibility, policy and society, and d. current challenges and opportunities in business research. The following is unsolicited feedback from one student, a sentiment shared by most students.

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*'I must say that I had high expectations of this course and these expectations were remarkably exceeded. In fact, I think I was able to get the most out of this course and I am ready to use it in the course of my PhD. […] The extremely well organized way you presented all the contents and lectures (starting with the syllabus and ending with each of the session closings, including the last one) is impressive.'*

In addition to this formal course, RRBM launched a webinar series. The first webinar on 16 June, 2020 focused on how to choose a dissertation topic that addresses a significant current societal problem. In the 18 months since then, RRBM has co-sponsored over 30 webinars on how to conduct responsible research. The speakers include winners of the responsible research award, experts on responsible research methods, and distinguished senior and young scholars whose research is exemplary in showcasing the principles of responsible research. The volunteer organiser of these webinars is a doctoral student endorser of RRBM.

To encourage responsible research, a few partners of RRBM decided to invest financially in doctoral dissertations. The business school at the Colorado State University offered the 'Business for a better world dissertation proposal' award. CSU does not have a PhD programme in business, yet it is investing in future responsible scholars by offering generous financial support to PhD students worldwide to pursue dissertation research that will have the potential to make the world a better place. The three 2021 winners, one from UK and two from USA, received 6000 USD each to further their work. EFMD, in partnership with Emerald Publishers, also launched in 2021 an

Outstanding Doctoral Research award for addressing grand challenges, specifically those that address the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

RRBM, with the support of an anonymous donor, has launched a Dare to Care Dissertation Scholarship, supporting research that focuses on improving all forms of justice in and by organisations, or that addresses the SDGs with potential to reduce inequity or injustice. It offers eight scholarships worth 10,000 USD each. The submission deadline was 1 December, 2021, with winners to be announced on 1 March, 2022. The donor has pledged financial support for at least three years. If the award is successful in stimulating outstanding research that contributing knowledge and solutions to solving the injustice problems in organisations and societies, the support will continue. This project has received overwhelming support from over 50 senior scholars who volunteered to serve as reviewers and judges.

**Encouraging momentum but need courage to take bolder actions**

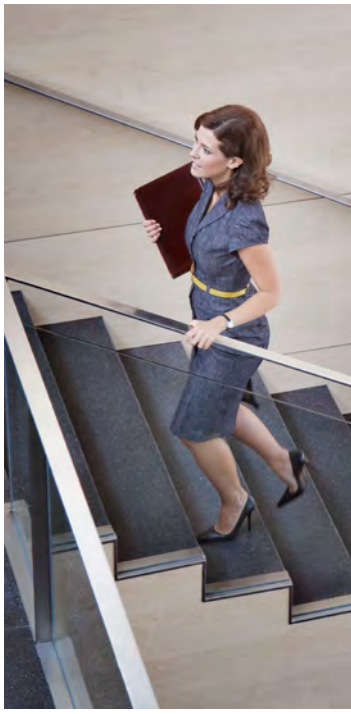
Space does not allow a thorough reporting of all the small wins and relatively bolder steps taken by members of the RRBM community. However, we can see an encouraging momentum in both the direct and indirect impact of the RRBM movement. RRBM has over 2000 ambassadors around the world (including community members and summit participants). Many are making personal changes toward responsible research; others are introducing small or large changes in their institutions, whether they are schools, journals, associations, or institutes. There are also second order effects. The awards have recognised several hundred authors who provide strong testimony regarding the value of high-quality research on important problems. There are several hundred academic reviewers and increasing numbers of executive reviewers who are exposed to the principles of responsible research. In addition, thousands of scholars and students have participated in the RRBM-sponsored webinars. The idea of responsible research is becoming part of the on-going conversations in some circles.

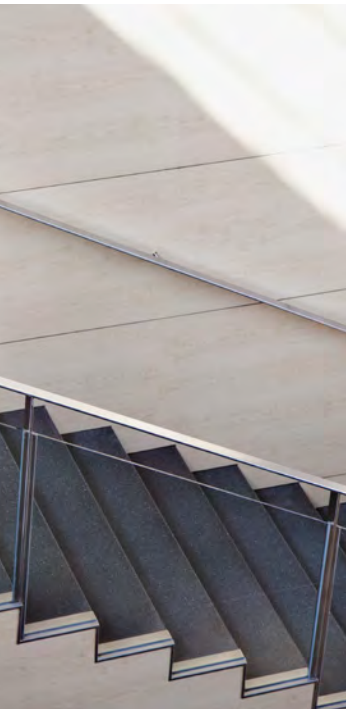
99%

There is both a collective and individual responsibility to make sure that we are practising sound science and not junk science, and that our scientific knowledge benefits the 99% ordinary citizens

Given the overwhelming number of life-threatening issues in the world, business schools have both the opportunity and the obligation to rise up now to do the right things. This is necessary before the legitimacy of business schools will be challenged by governments, funders, citizens, and students; and before talents who want to make a difference in the world will leave the university to join other employers or careers that will support more meaningful and generative work. Luckily, the transformative change is gaining momentum. We have reason to be hopeful that business research will soon become a positive force for a better world and will offer a meaningful career for future generations of researchers who can live out their dreams of making the world a better place for all citizens globally and in the future.

However, the most important determinant of research priorities and practices, i.e., hiring, promotion, and tenure criteria, remains largely unchanged in most business schools worldwide. I still hear the same concern in my interactions with doctoral students and junior scholars. The pressure to publish papers in the A-list journals is still the hard reality in their academic world. Senior scholars are still hesitant to move away from using the number of A-list journal publications as the desired performance measure, citing the lack of alternative metrics to replace this seemingly "objective" criterion. There have been some marginal changes in journal policies but rigour in method and theoretical novelty still dominate the relevance of research topic. If we accept that science has the dual goals of seeking truth (credible knowledge) and benefitting humanity (useful knowledge), current research practices seem to have compromised both goals.





The RRBM position paper (written before COVID) begins with this vision,

*'In 2030, business and management schools worldwide are widely admired for their contributions to societal well-being. Business and management scholarship has been central to solving society's challenges, such as the achievement of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Research is timely and cutting edge, producing well-grounded knowledge on pressing problems.'*

To achieve this vision, all stakeholders of the research ecosystem must be more courageous in taking bolder actions toward responsible research. There is no lack of ideas of what to do by the various stakeholders. A recent paper to be published in the *Journal of Management Studies* provided a detailed list of light and heavy actions that each internal and external stakeholder can take. There is also no lack of talents to develop innovative ideas to add to this list. What we need is not what to do or how to do it. What we need is the courage to speak up about practices that do not serve either science or society in our communities or institutions. What we need is to take bold actions that get to the root causes of the problem and not merely treat the symptoms. What we really need is the WILL to be bold and courageous in living up to our responsibilities. For all of those who have a stake in business research, there is both a collective and individual responsibility to make sure that we are practising sound science and not junk science, and that our scientific knowledge benefits the 99% ordinary citizens and not just the privileged 1%. There is a need and an opportunity for the scientific community and the practice communities to join forces to co-create knowledge that will benefit everyone.

RRBM is a global imperative. Not all business schools are equal. Those in developing economies do not have the same business models or resources as those in the developed countries. But there is a common mission. All business schools have the responsibility to contribute credible knowledge based on research by their own faculty or others, to inform business practices for better communities. We hope RRBM provides the inspiration and support to intellectually curious students and faculty wherever they are. This is RRBM's long-term purpose and mission.

This brief reflection of the seven years since the January 2015 essay on 'Reconnecting with the business world: Socially responsible scholarship' suggests that business research is beginning to reconnect with the world. Hopefully, the year 2022 will bring a new resolve to contribute to the RRBM momentum and turn this steady stream into magnificant "waves" globally.

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**About the Author**

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***Special Note:*** *Many people contributed to the ideas in this essay through their writing, their actions, or both. The pages would be filled with their names if I list them all. I thank them for the wonderful work they have done about responsible research, and their continue efforts. In this essay, all of them will remain anonymous heroes or heroines.*