Tell us: What are you doing? Improving how you communicate your academic research, relevance and expertise

The Australian Business Deans Council has launched a book to boost skills in translating academic research for wide audiences. **Leslie Falkiner-Rose** explains its importance and summarises its content

The global push for universities to demonstrate their societal value and impact highlights the importance of skills to communicate and connect with a wide range of audiences.

Yet significant opportunities to build business school and academic profiles are often lost when ground-breaking academic research does not gain exposure beyond peer-reviewed journals because of a lack of planning, time and skills.

Opportunities to enhance industry and government partnerships are also forgone when business school research stays within the academy or is not effectively translated to resonate with non-academic audiences.

The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), which represents 39 business schools that want to do something about this issue, recently published, *Tell us: What are you doing? Improving how you communicate your academic research, relevance and expertise*. The 300-page book aims to show academics, in all areas of expertise, how they can hone their communication skills to maximise the reach and impact of their knowledge and work.

ABDC President, Professor Keryn Chalmers, says: "We don't spend a lot of time, energy and effort upskilling our academics in this important role. I think there are many reasons why it hasn't happened, but it has become increasingly important for us to make sure that the relevance of business research is really out there and well-known.

"Business schools want graduates that are employable, which means industry engagement in your curriculum. You want to be doing research that is going to be impactful, and that means it's going to make a difference to a business or to industry or to government enterprises. So, a key pillar of that is getting increasing attention," she says.

Public money is invested in tertiary education and research with the expectation that universities will create and share new and useful knowledge. However, academics in the book argue that this should not mean relying solely on articles that appear in peer-reviewed journals a year or two after research is completed. Those articles may be of little or no contemporary relevance to industry, government, policymakers or media.

Professor Nick Wailes of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Business School, says: "It's a critical role for the universities to be actively involved in the debates about our society and how we're shaping it. And if we have expertise and insight, we should be thinking about sharing that.

"Whether you want to call that engagement or impact, it's still core to our mission and it's also core to our ongoing relevance."

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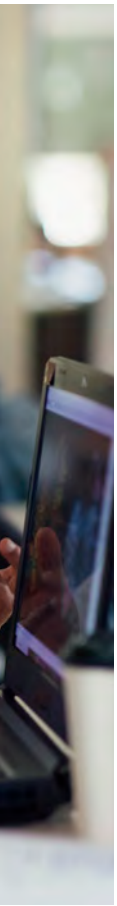

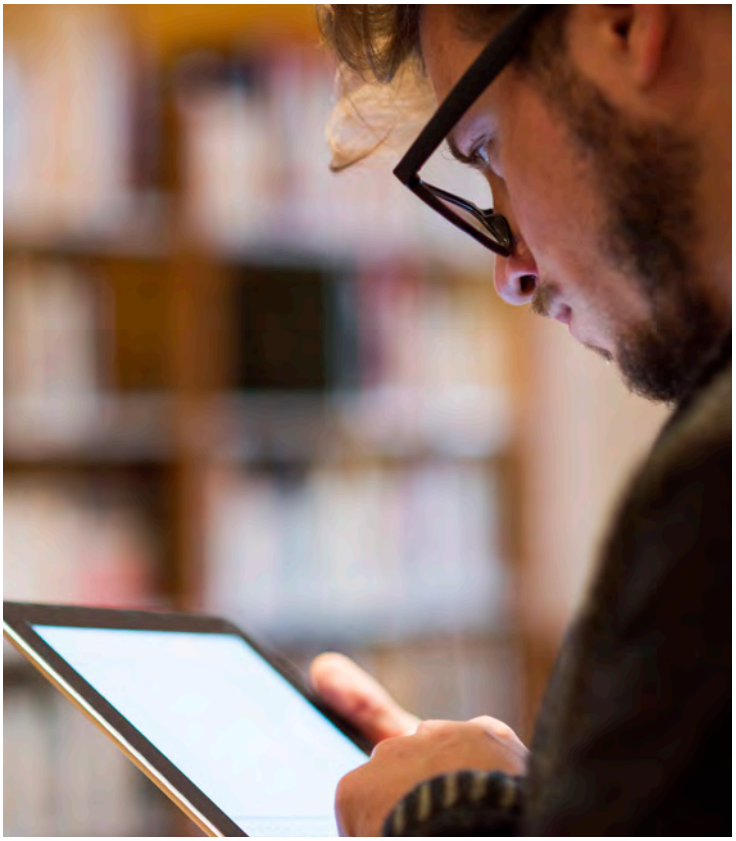

From undergraduates to established academics

Being a great communicator may not come easily but many of the skills can be learned.

The ABDC's book aims to upskill established academics and the next generation of undergraduates, researchers, PhD candidates and early-career practitioners. It is also relevant for media, policymakers and industry executives who want to build relationships with business schools.

Tell us: What are you doing? provides insights and practical advice, together with examples from research and 34 successful business school communicators and Australian and international journalists. It is written by Leslie Falkiner-Rose, the ABDC's communications advisor who has 40 years' experience in journalism and strategic communications.

Chapters explain ways to address the challenges of communicating well; finding a balance between talking solely about your research and providing more general expert commentary; learning to speak academic and journalese; developing media relationships; building and boosting your public profile; strategically sharing work; and connecting through social media.

Professor Gary Mortimer of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Business School is a well-known media figure and a key commentator in the book. Prior to joining QUT, he spent more than 25 years working with some of Australia's largest general merchandise and food retailers.

"When I came to QUT, the one thing that struck me is that there are academics doing amazing research, cutting-edge research that industry is hungry for. But when I was in industry, I had no idea of the level of research, information and data that was available," Professor Mortimer said.

Almost all his academic research has been funded by industry.

"Coming out of industry is helpful because we tend to talk two different languages: industry versus academia. But certainly, I would attribute all of my research funding to engaging in industry and working on industry projects that are collaborative. That's not only impactful research that might change policy or procedures in some way for retail, but also generating new knowledge for academia," Professor Mortimer says.

However, when he finished his PhD, he struggled with the concept of being an expert. It wasn't until Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Radio wanted to talk to him about his research and retail expertise that he began to rethink his view of being "just an old retailer who did a PhD".

Professor Mortimer points out that academics become experts in their PhD research. The challenge is to then build the confidence to own that space. It took years before he was comfortable commenting publicly when he disagreed with something said by a CEO of a major company.

Build promotion into grant applications

Academics should plan to promote their research right from the start and build promotional budgets into research budgets. This is acknowledged to be a weak area.

Swinburne Business School's Dr Jason Pallant regularly comments in the media – experience that makes it easy for him to explain on a grant application how he will disseminate research results. This can include writing a feature, doing an episode on his podcast and tailoring information to the needs of specific audiences like specialised trade publications or more general news services.

Many of the academics interviewed agree there are benefits in sharing early outcomes of research. They provide examples of ways to do that without compromising project confidentiality or releasing results prematurely.

For example, Dr Pallant provides top-line or preliminary trends and general findings to public or commercial audiences that want to be pointed in the right direction. That work does not conflict with his academic journal articles that require much greater detail.

Professor Carl Rhodes of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School says: "To work with a partner and to suggest you're not going to share anything preliminary would strike me as being a little bit precious on the part of the academic.

"Speaking to people in public and to journalists about ideas that are based on your work means that you have to qualify those ideas. You need to explain them, you need to think them through, and it actually helps develop the intellectual work."

The importance of building networks

Building networks can be critical to attracting research partners and disseminating results.

Adjunct Professor Warren Hogan of UTS Business School knows many researchers who grudgingly started engaging with people who were interested in their research, and who then discovered those relationships led to new collaborations and funding.

Professor Debbie Haski-Leventhal of Macquarie University created a network of 34 leading Australian companies that worked together for four years to enhance research on corporate social responsibility. The project included workshops, events in Australia's Federal Parliament House, joint research and reports.

"That opened me up to having all this feedback of: 'This is how your research impacted our work'. But to be able to do that, I had to get out of my comfort zone – which was very hard – and work with these companies and create ongoing engagement with external stakeholders," she says.

Professor Haski-Leventhal says that wider engagement and impact – including involvement in policy processes such as submissions to parliamentary committees – should be linked to employment, performance management and promotion.

"The narrative of how we're making a difference, how we are serving the community, how we are becoming a force for good, is usually left out of the applications for promotion. We always talk about, and I see, people promoted just on the basis of their research citations.

"So even when we talk about research impact at universities, what we're actually looking at is research outputs, at how much we're publishing in journals. Not the way that our research is helping to shape the community, society, industry."

Understanding the media

Three chapters in the book are devoted to explaining how media operate and the nuances of working with journalists, including how to build and maintain media relationships, what journalists want from you, and how to give a good interview.

Those working at the coalface also provide advice on understanding your audience; writing media releases for news or current affairs, opinion pieces and blogs; targeting media outlets, scattergun distribution versus exclusive placement, and connecting with social media.

Many academics eschew the *dumbing down* of research, but the book looks at how to distill the main messages, identifying what makes a good story with a strong lead, and writing in the active voice.

"There are some interviews I walk away from thinking there's nothing in that I can use," says Conor Duffy, Education Editor of the ABC. "I mean, if you can't explain your research in layman's terms to a person on the street, you probably shouldn't be doing it."

Professor Marian Baird AO of The University of Sydney Business School says if she can explain to students the research process and outcomes, she should be able to do that to the general public.

Any initial lack of confidence can be overcome with practice.

"The biggest thing is: *Have you got something to say?*" she says. "I am very careful to listen to what the journalists are asking questions about because, I think, that does give us a little bit of a sense of that's where the movement of interest is going." That, in turn, can inform future research topics.

John Ross, Asia-Pacific Editor of Times Higher Education, says: "The people I like to speak to most – and there's only a few of them – are people who know the subject really well but can also express it very, very clearly and concisely in a few words. There are not many people who can do that, but they're gold."

Tell us: What are you doing? Improving how you communicate your academic research, relevance and expertise is available from https://abdc.edu.au/ and online bookstores worldwide. Ebook: $16.50 AUD, paperback $36.25 AUD plus shipping.

About the Author

Leslie Falkiner-Rose is the communications advisor at the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC)