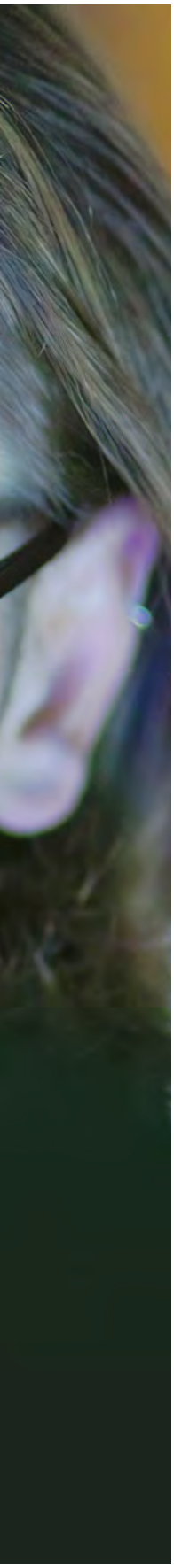
From research for publication to research for impact

Business and management academics invest a significant proportion of their time and business schools' money in undertaking research and publishing their findings. Thousands of articles are published every year in "top academic journals", however this massive effort rarely impacts businesses, policies or society, either directly or indirectly. By **Kamran Razmdoost**



Many of these studies are merely for theoretical advancement and those that investigate a practical problem are often too specific to enable research rigour. Furthermore, it is extremely challenging for professionals to find a relevant article out of thousands of published studies. Sometimes good research outputs remain within academic circles and it can feel as though we are generating very useful tools but then hiding them from those who need them most. Even if a practitioner randomly chances upon an article, they won't be able to evaluate its quality, and they may well relate better to the less rigorous articles which are more accessible for them (both in terms of language and availability). In many cases, after reading a high quality article, the reader comes up with the question "So what?".

On the other hand, there is little incentive for academics to perform relevant research and make it accessible. Business schools' research excellence, and therefore incentive, is measured by their number of publications in the top journals (e.g., *UT Dallas Research Ranking*). In general, academic communities measure academic excellence by combining publication quantity with other metrics such as article citations, to evaluate academic reputation and encourage dialogue, yet these metrics are disconnected from the potential practical or policy impact of a piece of research. Even if the scholar wants to investigate a relevant research problem, the disconnection to existing theories, the multi-disciplinary nature of problems, the lack of rigorous data and the long research and review process (in many cases taking five or six years) make the research too risky to perform and, if attempted, will be too theoretical and probably outdated by the time of publication. The academic nature of the problem is depicted in detail in the book *"Return to Meaning: A Social Science with Something to Say"*.

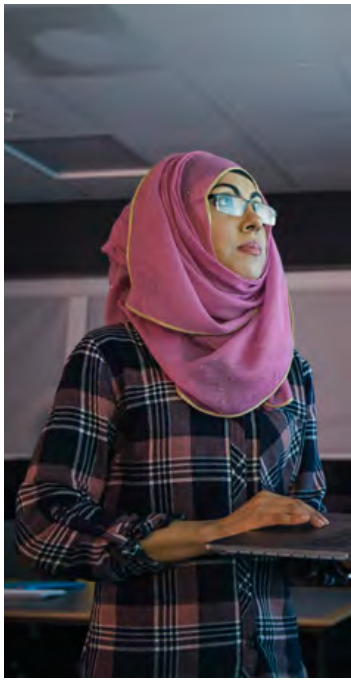
> *A good example is the* Responsible Research in Business & Management *community who encourage and enable scholars to perform impactful research*

Obviously, the process of scientific discovery and academic rigour is the key element of academic scholarship, but the issue is the institutionalisation of mass-publication, with the focus on rigour and publication as an end in itself to show academic prestige in a field that needs practical and policy relevance (as opposed to pure science). In addition to several problems this has created for academics, it is morally wrong to use the best talents in society only to show a narrowly defined version of academic excellence. Some professors, particularly those who are already tenured, have found a way to address this issue and have a more balanced portfolio of activities to generate impact. A good example is the *Responsible Research in Business & Management* community who encourage and enable scholars to perform impactful research. However, we need to change the culture at the industry level. In fact, there is a strong resistance (conscious or unconscious) to a fundamental shift on how we approach research. What if we put the same level of emphasis (if not more) on the meaning and relevance of research? What if we spend the same amount of effort on defining a research project? What if we engage practitioners in the research development and evaluation process? What if we publish highly relevant studies as soon as we can (even if they are not fully addressing validity criteria, we can highlight their shortcomings)? What if we connect the academic ecosystem to media and practice? What if we incentivise impact rather than publication?

To address these issues, we need to transform the academic ecosystem with initiatives that enable the transition. Firstly, top academic journals can open new submission tracks for mini articles that investigate, discuss and debate the practical relevance of existing research. In many cases, academic outputs may not have a significant practical relevance, but along with other works they could have strong practical implications informed by collective research outputs. These submission tracks could benefit from a shortened review process to allow academics to reflect on the very latest business issues. The review process should include practitioners and policy makers to ensure both relevance and rigour. These submission tracks are emerging and a good example is *the Impact Pathway* launched by the *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*.

Secondly, ranking organisations (government and media agencies) need to abandon their metric of publication quantity and move to the metrics that combine academic rigour and practical or policy relevance, accessibility and impact. In particular, the Financial Times rankings needs to revise its approach to measuring research excellence (currently, being the number of publications in the top 50 FT listed journals) to include other aspects of research quality such as educational and practical relevance. Obviously, impact measurement is one of the most complex issues in this equation. Imagine an academic who helps a manager to change their way of thinking on a certain organisational problem: how can we measure these impacts at a global level? In my view, we can start with a combination of process-based metrics to measure engagement activities and outcome-based metrics to measure evidence-based impacts. The *UK Research Excellence Framework Impact Assessment* is an initial effort to address this issue, but it needs to be further developed and refined according to each knowledge discipline, so as to become a global assessment tool and accessible for ranking organisations.

Thirdly, business schools should define incentives and career paths that encourage both academic rigour and relevance. At ESCP Business School, we have created *multiple career paths* to enable different types of scholarship and set publication expectations to allow enough space for engagement activities. We have also incentivised our academics to disseminate their work through more accessible media such as our *Impact Series* and *The Choice*. These efforts need to be further formalised and then integrated in the career progression of academics in business schools. In particular, the recruitment criteria needs to include both academic excellence and impact activities and it needs to be applied across the industry to ensure mobility for those who engage with impact research (who may not be as efficient as those who focus on research for publication). Business schools also have the responsibility of training PhD students who are capable of making their research accessible to non-academics. Formal inclusion of practitioners in the initiation phase of research could also help academics to form a more accurate understanding of practical problems. Furthermore, the practical implications chapter of PhD theses should include a reflection of tangible engagement activities rather than an abstract and imaginary arguments.



Fourthly, professional bodies also need to create research-informed initiatives and events. These engagements need to be done in a transparent and inclusive way where academics' proposals could be reviewed to be featured in professional bodies' events and publications. One of the key issues for strong researchers is the ambiguity of how to engage with professional bodies while also engaging with practice communities. Such transparent processes could facilitate engagement with a wider range of researchers. In turn, these efforts could be the basis of academic excellence assessment by ranking organisations and business schools.

Finally, corporates could encourage and enable their employees' engagement with research development, evaluation and impact activities. There are practitioners who collaborate with academics due to shared interests or the existence of an organic synergy with their work. This can be further formalised and can become part of an employees' personal development and reputation. Historically, a gap has been created between academia (in particular, academic research) and practice. Now that there are approaches on the academic side to fill this gap, business leaders could also join these movements and nurture a generation of talent that is aware of the latest academic advancements in their fields and are themselves part of the scientific discovery process. In fact, the solutions proposed above require inputs from practitioners to work with academics in defining relevant questions, accessing data, framing the practical relevance, tuning the language and implementing new discoveries or ways of thinking. This would benefit corporates and their employees by accessing cutting edge practices, developing critical thinking, engaging with evidence-based decision making, building a stronger brand and generating wider impact.

These initiatives may not initially look perfect, but if we don't start, we will never be able to challenge the strong institutions formed and reinforced around mass-publication and publishing as an end rather than a means. It is our duty to encourage research that has meaning for people outside closed academic circles, to create value for our society, offer meaningful and healthy career paths to academics and show the right signal of academic excellence to students and public. This goal is only possible if all stakeholders (i.e., business schools, academic journals, practice communities, corporates, practitioners and academics) work together towards transforming the existing research ecosystem.

gf

About the Author

Kamran Razmdoost is Dean of ESCP Business School, London Campus (UK).