by Agnieszka (Aggie) Chidlow | Andrew Karolyi

Shaping Trust and Impact: Business Schools, Responsibility, and Societal Impact

Reflecting on the Path Toward Integrated Research and Education[1]

As business schools redefine their mission to serve the common good in a rapidly changing world, the need to align responsible research with responsible education has never been more urgent (Hoffman, 2025). At the 2025 United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Global Forum, the breakout session titled 'Shaping Impact: Connecting Responsible Research and Education Through Strategic Unity' brought together leaders - including Lilly Bi, CEO of AACSB; Alfons R. Sauquet, Director of Quality Services at EQUIS; and Morris Mthombeni, board member of PRME and Dean of the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Studies (GIBS) - all of whom serve on the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) Working Board, along with the authors of this article, to explore how business schools can meet this challenge and rebuild public trust by strengthening their value proposition.

The session emphasised the importance of moving beyond separate discussions of research and teaching towards a unified strategy that enhances both. Panellists stressed that impact should not be regarded as a marketing add-on but as the natural result of responsible scholarship. Scholarly credibility and relevance are inseparable and form the basis of responsible research, which supports the research-intensive responsible management teaching that is central to business schools' value proposition. When research and education are genuinely integrated, business schools are better placed to respond to societal needs at local, national, and global levels, while reinforcing their legitimacy as trusted producers of knowledge. Indeed, what are the ideas worth teaching, asked the participants, and how do we know?

The interactive breakout session also highlighted RRBM's decade-long mission to promote both rigour and relevance in research as a form of scholarly unity. The alignment of credibility and relevance is fundamental to the concept of responsible research. Unfortunately, principles related to scientific integrity are too often overlooked or taken for granted in discussions about impact, perhaps because of the strong emphasis on societal outcomes and the pervasive 'publish-or-perish' culture in

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Responsible research, however, seeks to produce reliable knowledge that enables policymakers and business leaders to address the 21st century's major challenges, as set out by the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

[1]This reflective piece emerged from discussions with all participants during the breakout track 'Shaping Impact: Connecting Responsible Research and Education Through Strategic Unity', led by the authors on Tuesday, 10 June 2025, at the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Global Forum, held as part of Responsible Management Education (RME) Week, 9–10 June 2025, at Cornell University's Tech Campus, New York City, USA.

academia driven by institutional incentives. Responsible research, however, seeks to produce reliable knowledge that enables policymakers and business leaders to address the 21st century's major challenges, as set out by the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This aligns closely with the United Nations' PRME and its call for business schools to embed responsible management education within their core missions. Such a commitment benefits society by generating relevant insights while upholding scientific responsibility and integrity throughout all stages of scholarly inquiry and dissemination.

Moreover, RRBM's work, supported by its strategic co-founders EFMD Global and AACSB, together with ongoing backing from the UN Global Compact (UNGC), exemplifies the systemic approach needed to achieve lasting change. Initiatives such as the RRBM 'Dare-to-Care PhD scholarship programme demonstrate how emerging scholars are being encouraged to engage responsibly with complex global challenges.

Several challenges remain, especially the tension between rankings-driven cultures and the deeper goals of responsible scholarship. However, there was broad agreement that aligning institutional strategies with global frameworks, such as the UN SDGs and PRME's principles, can significantly enhance both scholarly credibility and societal impact. It was also recognised that greater coordination and collaboration, including the use of frameworks like the UNGC, are crucial to maximising research impact and responding effectively to pressing global issues, particularly in regions such as the Global South.

Crucially, business schools and colleges need a clear and enduring strategic edge and distinctive positioning to have the space and resources to invest in innovation and maintain high-quality development. Strategy is therefore central to how business school accreditation systems evaluate and support business schools. In an era where fast-growing digital tools driven by Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) can quickly produce a passable strategy document, the emphasis should be less on the output itself and more on the underlying approach and the specific context of the business school, including its culture, stakeholders, and environment (Bieger, 2025). Just as Blair & Hunt (1986, p.148) highlight that context shapes how researchers approach a phenomenon, understanding the unique context of a business school shapes strategic priorities, decision-making processes, and how opportunities and risks are assessed. Schools must cultivate a shared, often implicit, understanding of these strategic priorities alongside a well-defined process for evaluating options. Equally important is the ability to make selective decisions - saying "no" to new degree programmes or new co-curricular activities when necessary - without causing harm, ensuring that both educational and institutional strategies remain responsible, focused, and impactful.

In today's AI-driven environment, the need for transparency, accountability, and integrity in research is more pressing than ever. Business schools must ensure that the knowledge they produce is rigorous and genuinely benefits society. This requires a strong commitment to thought leadership, exemplified by three closely aligned initiatives: the Global Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI), promoting responsible leadership; PRME,

advancing responsible management education; and RRBM, advocating responsible research. Together, these sister initiatives provide a framework guiding business schools toward the common good, integrating education, leadership, and research to meet societal needs. By embracing this holistic approach, business schools can strengthen their credibility as knowledge creators and play a central role in shaping responsible management education and research. The time for deliberate action is now, with the responsibility to uphold scientific integrity resting firmly in capable academic leaders' hands (Chidlow et al., 2025).

Key takeaways from the special session at RME Week include:

- **Advancing responsible research:** The RRBM global network and its strategic partners, such as EFMD and AACSB, are working to enhance responsible management education through credible and impactful research, aligned with PRME's principles on education and research. This coordinated effort must continue.
- **Complementary missions:** The RRBM focuses on promoting responsible research, while PRME emphasises responsible management education. Together, their missions support a research-intensive approach that elevates the distinct role and contribution of business schools. These must work together in tandem.
- **Balancing rigour and impact:** Business schools face the challenge of balancing academic rigour with societal impact while managing pressures from rankings and marketisation. The pressures can be managed effectively, and rigour and impact must be the guiding principles.
- **Engaging with accreditation bodies:** By collaborating closely with accreditation organisations, business schools can better integrate responsible research and management education into evolving accreditation standards and evaluation processes, reinforcing strategic unity. Together, we are stronger and can render impact.
- **Building trust:** Strengthening responsible research and responsible management education enhances trust and reinforces the value proposition of business schools within the wider education ecosystem.

In conclusion, the 2025 RME Week breakout session was highly engaging and thought-provoking, sparking rich discussions and generating a wealth of important insights among both participants and speakers. It clearly demonstrated that business schools have the expertise and influence to lead on critical issues. The vibrant exchange underlined that success requires strategic unity, connecting research, education, and leadership through a shared commitment to the common good.

Now is the moment to transform these conversations into meaningful action and ensure business education remains a powerful force for positive societal change.

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