

# Real World Impact

— *Bringing research to life*



## *The business of impact: does anyone use management research?*

Does the academic research article actually equip professionals for changes in their practice? Is it a format which is open and easy to engage with? Can we help take research to a wider audience, beyond the academic and educational setting to help it have real world impact? What formats should we publish in to make research content as engaging and potentially impactful as possible?

Many of these challenges are top of mind among researcher communities, institutions and publishers but it is becoming increasingly important to tackle them. Applied management research and business education are critically important in this fast-changing world. Our economic, environmental and social health need sustainable, ethical business decisions and practices.

# Structural disincentives to having real world impact

That many business schools can play an important role in modern society is not in doubt. However, researchers have struggled for decades to find a solution to what is variously termed the research-teaching gap, research-practice gap,<sup>i</sup> or rigour-relevance gap. Yet, while MBA programmes continue to attract high paying students, and researchers attract citations and secure tenure, there can be little impetus to change course. The emphasis on publishing in prestigious academic journals, and the inadequacy of support mechanisms for research collaborations, are ‘structural disincentives’ to the pursuit of real world impact.

*‘..We have not explicitly recognized that the goal of doing research is to make business and society better, rather than simply publishing in somewhere “good” or somewhere that “counts”’*

- Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (2016)<sup>ii</sup>

## The gap between academia and practice

More than two decades ago, Donald Hambrick challenged the Academy of Management to strive for influence and impact, asking ‘what if the academy actually mattered?’<sup>iii</sup> In 2005, Warren Bennis and James O’Toole asked their peers to recognize that ‘in fact, business is a profession, akin to medicine and the law, and business schools are professional schools—or should be.’<sup>iv</sup>

*‘By allowing the scientific research model to drive out all others, business schools are institutionalizing their own irrelevance.’*

- Warren Bennis and James O’Toole (2005), *How Business Schools Lost Their Way*, Harvard Business Review<sup>v</sup>

Some may argue that times have changed, and that business schools have already woken up to their societal responsibilities. Indeed, initiatives such as the United Nations-endorsed Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)<sup>vi</sup> show that business schools can play a central role in educating a new generation of managers in sustainability.

Nevertheless, more can be done to create bridges with businesses and civil society organizations.<sup>vii</sup> Research conducted among 300 of Emerald’s authors reveal that the gap between what academics produce and what professionals want remains worryingly wide.

	What professionals want to read...	Where academics want to publish...
1	An outlet that values practical relevance	An outlet with a high academic ‘impact factor’
2	An outlet with close relevance to the specific topic/issue	An outlet that values academic rigour

### The relevance gap

Despite ongoing efforts, there is a disconnect between what many business and management researchers do, and what society needs. The work produced by researchers is variously criticized, fairly or unfairly, as inaccessible to or irrelevant for professionals. And often both. Publications are generally written by and for academics. They focus on research questions that contribute to the advancement of theory and fill gaps in the literature. The extent to which those questions have practical relevance for managers is not necessarily a chief concern.

*‘My profession is... just horrendously misguided in what it spends its time on. Because it spends its time on completely unimportant things and neglects the very important things’*

– Jeffrey Sachs, Economist and Professor of Sustainable Development (2016)<sup>viii</sup>

*‘...It is not rewarding for researchers to concentrate on activities other than those resulting in publications. And that is a hindrance for developing societally relevant research.’*

– LERU (2017), *Productive interactions: societal impact of academic research in the knowledge society*<sup>x</sup>

## The accessibility gap

Academic research is often inaccessible to professionals. Professionals want to know why they should care about this research: if a publication does not spell out its implications for practice, it is unlikely to be used.

*‘Each August, we come to talk with each other; during the rest of the year we read each others’ papers in our journals and write our own papers so that we may, in turn, have an audience the following August: an incestuous, closed loop.’*

– Donald C. Hambrick (1994)<sup>ix</sup>

There is a case for researchers to use less of the closed-loop academic dissemination. For instance, the role of the open research environment should be further explored as one of several ways that can help professionals understand, engage with and implement academic research in their working practices. Researchers – and, indeed, publishers – should consider publishing more of their underlying research data, protocols and methodologies - as well as their papers and implications for practice - quicker and in more accessible and usable formats.

## Incentives to break the cycle

Given the challenges involved, academics need powerful incentives to carry out impactful research. Changing the status quo means enabling a generation of researchers to break this cycle.

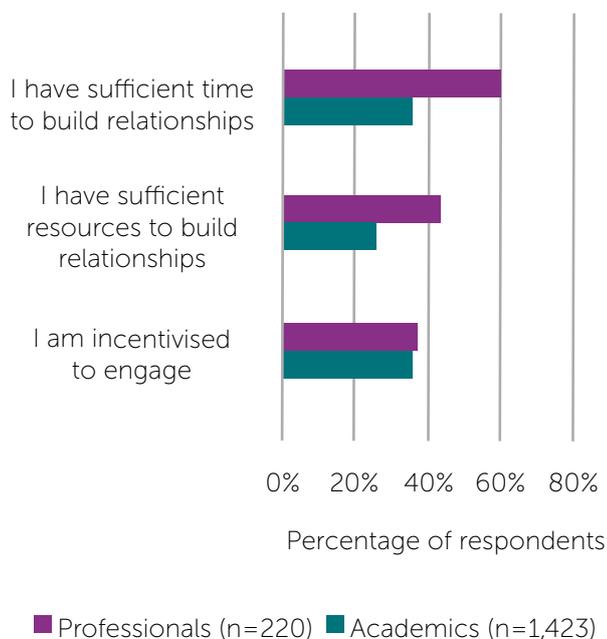
Policymakers and research funders are working to change incentives in favour of real world impact. Earmarking funding for research on grand challenges or to support collaborations with professionals may help – witness the UK government’s Global Challenges Research Fund and Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund. Yet buoyant student recruitment figures, healthy financial surpluses and the low costs of social science research mean business schools can be less susceptible to these drivers than other academic departments. The policy levers are being pulled, but their effect is not always felt on the ground.

*‘There is reason to worry that the reward system in our field, particularly in the publication process, is misaligned with the goals of good science.’*

– Gerald F. Davis (2015), *What Is Management Research Actually Good For?*, *Harvard Business Review*<sup>xi</sup>

## Key insights (Emerald author research 2017)

- ▶ 97% of academics believe their research has direct or indirect relevance outside academia
- ▶ 65% of authors agree that knowledge co-creation with non-academics is likely to produce highly-cited research
- ▶ ...but only 36% feel incentivised to engage with non-academics...
- ▶ ...and only 15% said incentives from their organisation were a reason to enter into an existing collaboration



*‘The world has become so dependent on new and reliable knowledge and a highly educated workforce, that governments have intensified their explicit demands for societal impact from universities in general, and from research in particular.’*

-LERU (2017). *Productive interactions: societal impact of academic research in the knowledge society*<sup>xiii</sup>

In the UK, there have been a number of changes over the last decade focused on demonstrating the role research has in societal benefit. In 2011, a joint statement was issued by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which runs the Research Excellence Framework (REF), Research Councils UK and Universities UK, which said:

*‘We are committed to working together to continue embedding throughout the research base a culture in which excellent research departments consistently engage with business, the public sector and civil society organisations, and are committed to carrying new ideas through to beneficial outcomes, across the full range of their academic activity.’*

Those institutions who are actively managing their impact will increasingly see the benefit in terms of funding, whether from government, industry, or other private or charitable sources.

## Now is the time to change course

There are signs that this situation cannot last. Policymakers and funders are demanding greater societal impact from research. Businesses are embracing social responsibility. A new generation of researchers are primed to use new technologies to affect change. Business and management research must pick up the pace of change to remain relevant. We highlight three reasons why now is the time for business schools and researchers to change course.

### 1. The changing role of research in society, and the funding landscape

Policymakers and funders recognize the central role that research can play in driving economic growth and delivering sustainable development. The Standard Evaluation Protocol in the Netherlands, Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), and the Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom all reflect the fact that the delivery of impact is becoming part of the social contract with academia.

### 2. The rise of the millennial researchers

The ‘super-connected millennials’ of today are taking stock of their place in the world and want to be enablers of social change, making the boundaries between research and practice porous. Whether working in academia or business, millennials expect information to be shared rapidly and in accessible formats, and to make an impact on society.

Increasingly, young scholars will become frustrated with the ponderous sharing of knowledge through publication in high impact journals. For the digital native, academic journals can no longer claim a monopoly over the dissemination of academic knowledge.

**76%** of millennials regard business as a force for positive social impact.

- Deloitte Millennial Survey, 2017<sup>xiii</sup>

### 3. A socially-responsible business world

As of 2017, almost 10,000 companies around the world have signed the UN Global Compact – a promise to uphold social responsibility in human rights, labour standards, and environmental protection. ‘B Corps’ – a new type of company that uses the power of business to solve social and environmental problems – can be found in more than 50 countries. Businesses have recognized that social responsibility is becoming the rule, not the exception, and governments are waking up to the power of business to deliver social change.

*‘I want to ask you to work with me to show that the forces of capitalism, globalisation and free trade offer the best hope for the problems facing so many people in our country.’*

-Theresa May, British Prime Minister, speaking to the Confederation of British Industry (2016)<sup>xvi</sup>

Business schools can both embrace and shape these trends, and some are already doing so. The most forward-thinking will become active participants in transforming the relationship between researchers and society – a change that many within these disciplines see as long overdue.

## Creating a favourable environment for real world impact

Incentives are an important part of the picture, but place and serendipity also play a role. For co-creation to occur, academics and professionals must have opportunities to engage. Three organizations can play a key role in facilitating this: business schools, professional bodies, and knowledge networks.

### Business schools

A recent report by the Chartered Academy of Business Schools in the UK argues that business schools are ‘anchor institutions’ that can advance regional development by developing business support infrastructure, engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises, nurturing entrepreneurial talent, and leading skills development. Initiatives like the Trinity Global Business Forum show that business schools have the power to bring together business and academic leaders, creating opportunities for them to engage with the pivotal issues facing business today.<sup>xvii</sup>

*‘Business schools have experience, knowledge, expertise, and a longevity that makes them ideally suited to play the anchor role, but only if there is full engagement together with the other key participants.’*

-CABS (2016), *Business Schools Delivering Value to Local and Regional Economies*<sup>xviii</sup>

### Professional associations

Professional associations can provide credibility with industry, opportunities to meet professionals in person, and access to resources, research participants and data. Building a broad and active academic membership will help create common understanding and opportunities for collaborations.

Yet, without specific activities aimed at bringing the membership together in solving common challenges, the incentives for academic and professional members to engage with one another are unclear.

*‘Academics tend to understand the background by looking at what other researchers have done in the area... but one of the best things you can do is to talk to the people in professional bodies who commission research.’*

*-Hilary Lindsey, Past President, The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales*

## **Key insights (Emerald author research)**

60% of academics and 61% of professionals believe membership of a professional association enables collaboration

## **Knowledge networks**

Knowledge networks function as an effective way to connect with collaborative partners. Examples include the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) - a worldwide network of 2,000 executives in 60 companies and 2,000 academics - and the Center for Evidence-Based Management in the Netherlands. The latter operates as an institutionalized ‘collaborative knowledge creator’, facilitating ongoing co-operation among producers, arbiters and users of management knowledge.

*‘Greater depth of engagement between the communities will be achieved where “Willing & able” academics are able to engage more “Uncommitted” practitioners, through more use of unconventional routes such as knowledge networks.’*

*- Hughes et al (2011)<sup>xix</sup>*

There are some important vehicles of collaboration used to bring the partnership together in practice, which include the levels of university support, non-academic outlets to disseminate and share research findings, and conferences. But the large majority of

respondents to Emerald’s author survey would like more opportunities to engage with each other. Challenges to this are understanding and agreeing on the shared goals and designing the research question to meet the needs of both academia and practice.

The survey found that the value a publication places on research with practical relevance is only the fourth most important motivation for academic authors. However, among professionals it is the single most important factor. There are a lack of resources - from training, to project management, to events, to awareness of funding opportunities, and to publication outlets - to stimulate and enable collaboration.

# **Moving to knowledge mobilization through co-creation**

## **Changing dynamics**

Making research relevant means switching from a linear model of knowledge transfer to a more cyclical one of knowledge mobilization. Relevant business and management research originates from an awareness of the practical context, which is likely to be gained through co-creation. The more researchers observe the problems affecting practice, the more their research questions will be relevant for professionals.

Co-creation is predicated on the involvement of professionals in the research process. Academics and professionals can learn from one another through interaction, including but not limited to formal co-creation processes that can lead to more informed and better decision-making.

*‘When researchers engage with a range of external constituencies, research outputs can avoid serving the interests of the few and most powerful and better serve the well-being of the many and most lacking.’*

*-Ozanne et al (2016), Assessing the Societal Impact of Research: The Relational Engagement Approach<sup>xx</sup>*

## What does it take to conduct impactful research?

Co-creation of knowledge is not easy. 'Relational engagement' (see box) is one way of achieving it. However, it means creating connections, negotiating collaborations, and managing relationships between academia and practice. Researchers are rarely trained for this, and many receive little support from their organizations. In consequence, engaging in impactful research is a risky choice not many want to make.

	Traditional approach	Relational engagement
Formulation of research questions	Based on gaps in the literature	Based on interactions with constituencies who might benefit
Research goal	Contributes to the advancement of theory	Provides workable solutions to immediate concerns
Data and evidence	Constrained by what is easily accessible to the researchers	Enhanced by increased depth, breadth, and quality of productive interactions
Outputs	Academic publications	Knowledge products and improved social networks

*Adapted from Ozanne et al (2016), Assessing the Societal Impact of Research: The Relational Engagement Approach<sup>xxi</sup>*

## Key takeaways

### Knowledge mobilization a 'win-win'

Knowledge mobilization is a two-way co-creation process, which is a 'win-win'. From the academic perspective, it offers inspiration, questions and often money and expertise from the world of practice and business into academia, resulting in new research and collaborations. And academic research that has been co-created with the world of professional practice or policymaking in mind can often more directly deliver actionable insights that result in positive change over time.

### Co-creation

Close partnerships between business schools and industry is attractive for a number of reasons. A collaborative alliance between academia and industry from a research design and publication perspective is something that we know benefits the quality of research. The most highly cited articles that Emerald publishes are both international in their authorship, and tend to be collaborations between university and industry. Just as this has an impact on their citations, it also helps keep the research pertinent to practice.

### Business schools as 'anchor institutions'

Business schools can create bridges with the business community. To future proof business and management research, it is therefore incumbent upon business schools to act as 'anchor institutions' that can advance regional development by developing business support infrastructure, engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises, nurturing entrepreneurial talent, and leading skills development.

### Rewarding impact beyond academia

Publishers, funders, universities, practitioners and assessment bodies should work together to identify ways of tracking and assessing impact beyond the walls of academia. This is a notoriously difficult challenge - but collaboration between parties in the scholarly and practitioner ecosystem will help complete the jigsaw.

### Making it easier for professionals to use academic research

Research - including the underlying data, other research assets and the final paper - should be published more quickly. And in more accessible formats - such as short-form or multimedia content which draws out implications for practice in order to be more easily understood, and, ultimately, used by professionals and policymakers.

# Real World Impact

— *Bringing research to life*

*“Systemic change requires coordinated action.  
Without it, independent stakeholder attempts  
will likely fail.”*

—CRRBM<sup>xxii</sup>

## Collective action

Emerald is calling for researchers, research managers, librarians and practitioners to share the following on its newly launched Real World Impact blog:

- ▶ Your recommendations of solutions to some of the challenges outlined in this paper
- ▶ Your examples of research evidence changing the course of practice or policy in the real world, however small

Please share your thoughts in the Real World Impact blog to inspire and inform others. If you're interested in writing for the blog, get in touch at [realworldimpact@emeraldgroup.com](mailto:realworldimpact@emeraldgroup.com)

Emerald will be running a vote and a prize amongst the community for recommendations and examples shared. Follow the social media conversation using the hashtag #RealWorldImpact or #RWI to stay involved and informed.

[www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/tk/RealWorldImpact](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/tk/RealWorldImpact)

[#RealWorldImpact](https://twitter.com/RealWorldImpact)

# References

---

- i. Burke, L.A. & Rau, B. (2010). [The research-teaching gap in management](#); Bansal, R., Bertels, S., Ewart, T., MacConnachie, P. & O'Brien, J. (2012). [Bridging the Research–Practice Gap](#); Hodgkinson, G.P. & Rousseau, D.M. (2009). [Bridging the rigour-relevance gap in management research: It's already happening!](#)
- ii. Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (2016). [A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for credible and useful knowledge](#)
- iii. Hambrick, D.C. (1994). [1993 Presidential Address: What If the Academy Actually Mattered?](#)
- iv. Bennis, W. & O'Toole, J. (2005). [How Business Schools Lost Their Way](#)
- v. Bennis, W. & O'Toole, J. (2005). [How Business Schools Lost Their Way](#)
- vi. United Nations (n.d.). [Six principles for Responsible Management Education](#)
- vii. Anthony F. Buono, Jonas Haertle, -Rudi Kurz , (2015), UN-Supported Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME): Global Context, Regional Implementation, and the Role of Signatories, in Maria Alejandra Gonzalez-Perez , Liam Leonard (ed.) The UN Global Compact: Fair Competition and Environmental and Labour Justice in International Markets (Advances in Sustainability and Environmental Justice, Volume 16) Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.1 - 15
- viii. Nelson, E. (2016). [Jeffrey Sachs: Economics is "horrendously misguided" and obsessed with "completely unimportant things"](#)
- ix. Kessler, E.H. (2010). [Management Theory in Action: Real-World Lessons for Walking the Talk](#)
- x. LERU (2017). [Productive interactions: societal impact of academic research in the knowledge society](#)
- xi. Gerald F. Davis (2015), [What Is Management Research Actually Good For?](#)
- xii. LERU (2017). [Productive interactions: societal impact of academic research in the knowledge society](#)
- xiii. Deloitte (2017). [Millennial Survey](#)
- xiv. United Nations (n.d.). [The UN Global Compact](#)
- xv. B Corporations (n.d.). [Find a B Corp](#)
- xvi. UK Government (2016). [CBI annual conference 2016: Prime Minister's speech](#)
- xvii. <https://www.tcd.ie/business/forum/>
- xviii. CABS (2016). [Business Schools Delivering Value to Local and Regional Economies](#)
- xix. Hughes, T., Bence, D, Grisoni, L., O'Regan, N. & Wornham, D. (2011). [Scholarship That Matters: Academic–Practitioner Engagement in Business and Management](#)
- xx. Ozanne, J.L., Davis, B., Murray, J.B., Grier, S., Benmecheddal, A., Downey, H., ... & Veer, E. (2016). [Assessing the Societal Impact of Research: The Relational Engagement Approach](#)
- xxi. Ozanne, J.L., Davis, B., Murray, J.B., Grier, S., Benmecheddal, A., Downey, H., ... & Veer, E. (2016). [Assessing the Societal Impact of Research: The Relational Engagement Approach](#)
- xxii. Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (2016). [A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for credible and useful knowledge](#)

## Authorship

# Rory ffoulkes, Emerald Publishing

This whitepaper is based on the report 'Crossing the bridge between academia and practice', commissioned by Emerald Publishing and prepared by Research Consulting.

The full report investigates the role of business and management disciplines in delivering societal impact. It explores:

- ▶ The research-practice gap in business and management;
- ▶ The mechanisms available to bridge the gap;
- ▶ The potential for universities, publishers, and other actors to be catalysts of change.

## Contacts



Research Consulting is a UK consultancy specialising in the management, dissemination and commercialisation of academic research. It advises funding bodies, universities, libraries and academic publishers on policy changes and technological developments in research and scholarly communication.

[www.research-consulting.com](http://www.research-consulting.com)

---

## About Emerald Publishing

### Nurturing fresh thinking that makes an impact

Emerald Publishing was founded in 1967 to champion new ideas that would advance the research and practice of business and management.

Today, we continue to nurture fresh thinking in applied fields where we feel we can make a real difference, now also including health and social care, education and engineering. We publish over 300 journals, more than 2,500 books and over 1,500 case studies, via our dedicated research platform.

[emeraldpublishing.com](http://emeraldpublishing.com)

The report will also be made available as a series in due course.

The Emerald survey explored the experiences, opinions and perceptions as someone working in the business and management space, including how academic research can be used in practice.

More specifically, it looked at how academics engage with those outside academia, with key questions focusing on collaborations between academia and industry.

The survey was launched on Friday 17 June and closed on Tuesday 4 July.

It was sent to roughly 65,000 authors and received a total of 2,250 responses, of which 1,656 were complete (74% completion rates).

