

Developing a Responsible Research Strategy at Saïd Business School

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Research Ecosystems, Partnerships and Collective Know-How

The notions of 'purpose' and 'social responsibility' in business have been gaining increased traction in recent years, in turn raising questions about what business schools should be teaching and researching.

In his famous 1970 *New York Times* essay, Milton Friedman proposed 'there is one and only one social purpose of business... [which is] to increase profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game' (Friedman, 1970), an idea that has formed the basis of business practice, policy, and education ever since – and, in many cases, business research, where areas of inquiry were predicated on an acceptance of the principle of shareholder value.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, and with growing awareness of the extent of the climate crisis, together with concerns about inequality, exclusion, and other social problems, a number of new ideas have circulated under the umbrella of 'responsible business'.

However, these initiatives can be problematic in two ways.

First, many of these initiatives have been seen as an 'add-on' or a PR exercise, distinct from the main activities of the business, which continues to focus on short-term profit maximisation. 'Corporate social responsibility' has been a particular casualty in this regard.

Second, in formulating and publicising their 'purpose', many companies sound a lot more like charities or non-profit organisations than businesses. In the rejection of the idea that the pursuit of profit should be the sole purpose of business, 'profit' itself has come to be a dirty word. And while most organisations do still seek to deliver profits even while claiming that they are saving the world, a casual observer might reasonably draw the conclusion that the only way to be a responsible business is not to be a business at all.

So, what does this mean for business schools and the development of responsible business research strategies?

I mention the tensions involved in the idea of responsible business particularly because it is important that business schools do not fall into the same trap. 'Responsible' research is not only research that investigates social enterprises or issues of sustainability and development. Scholars focusing on all areas of business activity both can and should engage in research that leads to positive impacts for business and thus for society in general.

For Oxford Saïd, the first step in developing our own responsible research strategy was in recognising that management and business is essentially an applied discipline. Our research mission is: 'to produce research of the highest quality that is rigorous, imaginative and meaningfully relevant to – and enhances – business practice'.

Historically, colleagues across all disciplines have argued for the importance of basic or 'pure' research, driven by a spirit of inquiry and with the aim of increasing the sum of human knowledge. While business and management were establishing themselves as credible disciplines (being relative newcomers to the university curriculum: the majority of business schools were founded only in the last century) it is little surprise that there was an emphasis on theoretical concepts and somewhat abstruse questions. This sort of research was impact-agnostic and tended to support the shareholder-value focus because that was the assumption behind the systems and organisations that were being studied. However, that is changing and is the basis of explicit, useful debates today.

Even so, there is not always a straight line between research and impact; and, if there were, it could raise questions about whether what we were doing could more accurately be described as consultancy. Consultancy projects can be useful in building connections with practitioners and, indeed, in demonstrating the applications of research findings, but combining it directly with research can be a tricky balancing act.

Our research strategy, developed collaboratively by members of our research community, led by the Research Dean, Professor Andrew Stephen, therefore focuses on the core values of high-quality, rigorous, and responsible research, encouraging a wide range of projects and methods that address large scale problems; are boundary-spanning and future-focused; are developed in collaboration with practitioners and with colleagues from other disciplines; and that are directly linked with our teaching on both degree programmes and executive education.

ADDRESSING PROBLEMS

Through research, our scholarly community identifies the most important and interesting challenges facing the world that pertain to business practice and business-related public policies, attempts to make sense of them and proposes innovative, evidence-based ways to tackle them. We encourage our research community to think in terms of tackling big issues and messy problems, going beyond making incremental and purely theoretical contributions that are only of interest to other academics.

A strong example of this is in the cluster of research initiatives under the heading of Responsible Business, many of which were established by (now) Emeritus Professor Colin Mayer CBE, who also led the *Future of the Corporation* programme at the British Academy and has published extensively on the topic of business purpose (Mayer, 2013; 2018). These projects include the **Economics of Mutuality Lab**, which was developed from a five-year research project on Mutuality in Business conducted in partnership with Mars Catalyst, the think tank of Mars Inc., and stimulated by a fundamental question asked by Mars in 2007: ‘What is the right level of profit?’

This research programme led to the development of the Economics of Mutuality: a set of new management practices, tools, and metrics to help businesses not only increase financial value, but also improve human capital and community cohesion, and strengthen environmental protection and regeneration. This thinking, together with a set of practical case studies, was published in 2021 by Oxford University Press. *Putting Purpose into Practice: The Economics of Mutuality* (Roche and Mayer, 2021) was made available on an open access basis, reflecting the belief that sharing knowledge drives impact.

In 2020, Mars Catalyst transformed into an independent Economics of Mutuality Foundation, comprising a not-for-profit, public benefit foundation focusing on research, education and advocacy, and a for-profit arm delivering consultancy, executive education and services to business.



The **Oxford Initiative on Rethinking Performance** was initially born out of the Mutuality in Business project, and aims to develop a framework for the measurement and operationalisation of corporate purpose. This initiative has research at its heart, demonstrated by publishing in academic journals and books. It is funded by a consortium of partners, who actively engage with the research team and indeed work with them on specific projects of mutual interest.

The **Enacting Purpose Initiative** is another partnership-based research project, supported by a number of leading universities, corporations and professional service firms, and contributing to the British Academy’s work on the *Future of the Corporation*.

The **Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship** was one of Oxford Saïd’s first research centres, and continues to conduct innovative research investigating big themes at the nexus of research and practice, as well as to create further impact through education, particularly on the MBA programme. A current study is the **Systems Change Observatory**, which draws on a large sample of ventures affiliated with the Skoll Foundation programmes for a long-term empirical study of systems change efforts in the social impact space, including pathways, challenges and solutions.

BOUNDARY SPANNING

If business school academics only studied the inner workings of conventional businesses, we would soon run out of things to say. To deliver research with impact we believe it is important to recognise that business thinking and business issues appear not only in established commercial enterprises but also in almost every other type of institution, from health services and other public sector organisations to professional firms, NGOs, social enterprises, and a wide variety of entrepreneurial start-ups. In addition, we recognise the wide variety of new developments and influences that are changing and challenging organisations, including social innovation, artificial intelligence, cyber-crime, engineering and infrastructure development, climate change and the environment. Even within the core business areas of, for example, finance, marketing, and leadership, research at the intersection with these external phenomena yields interesting and meaningful findings that are of immense practical value.

For example, digitisation, artificial intelligence and social media platforms, along with other new technologies, are increasingly overlapping with the traditional work of marketing departments. The **Oxford Future of Marketing Initiative**, which brings together academics and senior executives from some of the world's largest companies, has worked extensively on the new challenges and opportunities arising from this overlap, with three members of faculty incorporating a research spinout, Augmented Intelligence Labs (AIL), in 2020.

The company develops analysis and decision support systems for marketing leaders, creating tools which are integrated into those offered by marketing research companies. Research on modelling multi-relational data (Clarke *et al.*, 2023) has been developed into a tool called Hypertrends, a trend-detection and analysis system that maps complex social connections to understand the flow and significance of ideas, discussion topics and emotions. This analytical capability is being used to underpin the sustainability practice at Kantar, the market data business, and will guide companies' sustainability strategies and investment.

The path from science to impactful business is also trodden by participants in the **Creative Destruction Lab Oxford**, supported by our faculty members focusing on entrepreneurship, as well as by mentors drawn from successful entrepreneurial businesses. Since CDL-Oxford launched in 2019 £1.3bn has been created in equity value along with 716 jobs in businesses working in the areas of AI, climate, fintech, and health.

FUTURE-FOCUSED

A fascinating research collaboration between a number of different University of Oxford departments, led by Oxford Saïd and the Department of Politics and International Relations, is the **Oxford Space Initiative**. As a new, commercial space economy grows alongside the traditional exploration focus of national space agencies, the initiative was created to influence policy for space commerce and governance, aiming to contribute to the development of a responsible and inclusive sector.

Bringing these different academic fields together with governments and young and emerging businesses can allow us to anticipate and mitigate complex future challenges, such as the problem of space debris. This is growing as an issue now, and reflects many much more developed environmental challenges on the ground, but efforts to address it may lead to solutions that enable a 'bad' actor to take out GPS and other broadly used satellites. The Oxford Space Initiative is also an opportunity to study what could be thought of as an 'extreme' context, and certainly a new type of emerging market, raising questions about the role of governments in shaping emerging markets at their inception, and – as hundreds of space agencies are established across the globe in countries such as Rwanda, Egypt, and Azerbaijan – what seems to be a renewed role of government in leading economic development.

In addition, researchers have observed that work on commercial satellite data – that is, building markets for geo-analytics data – may well revolutionise many uses of these data for novel or unexpected purposes, in turn reshaping earth contexts or policy solutions.



INTERDISCIPLINARY

The Oxford Space Initiative is one of many examples of interdisciplinary research engaged in by academics at Saïd Business School. Diversity of thought is the cornerstone of imaginative and innovative research. It also contributes to creating ‘responsible’ research by discouraging ‘groupthink’ and drawing on different perspectives to ask critical questions.

Unlike many of our peer business schools, we are an integral part of our parent university. The collegiate structure of the University of Oxford has for centuries fostered interdisciplinary connections. Members of the business school’s research community are also affiliated with different colleges of the university, bringing them into contact with scholars from a wide variety of academic backgrounds, with different research interests and levels of expertise and experience.

We recognise that we are fortunate to operate in this rich intellectual environment, and it is part of our research strategy that we actively encourage all members of our research community to make the most of it. This can be through informal means, such as participation in other departments’ research seminars or symposia, or something more formal such as collaborating on interdisciplinary research projects. In addition, a number of our faculty members hold joint appointments with other Oxford University departments, creating the conditions for innovative and ambitious work. For example, Felix Reed-Tsochas – whose academic background is in theoretical condensed matter physics – is also a Director of the Complexity Economics Programme at INET Oxford, and a founding Co-Director of the CABDyN Complexity Centre. This interdisciplinary framework forms the basis of research that seeks to develop new approaches for the management of systemic risk (Reed-Tsochas and Johnson).



COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Some of the best – and certainly the most impactful – research ideas come from active engagement with external stakeholders. In the case of business research, this usually means business practitioners and business-related entities (e.g. policymakers, regulators, international organisations). In fact, most of the examples of responsible research projects that I have given above have some element of collaboration with external stakeholders – in some cases, a genuine research partnership.

Other research initiatives such as the **Oxford Future of Marketing Initiative**, the **Oxford Future of Real Estate Initiative** and the **Oxford Initiative on AI x SDGs** are examples of where external corporate funding is being used to directly fund research costs and to enhance the potential for subsequent impact by helping to ensure that the research undertaken is relevant.

LINKS WITH EDUCATION

Research, of course, also drives other activities within the Business School, in particular the provision of quality business education through our MBA and other degree programmes, as well as through executive education.

While influential engagement with non-academic external stakeholders typically occurs through individuals’ own networks and via research centres, initiatives or networks that have external stakeholder involvement, executive education and degree programmes (especially those focused on experienced executives such as the Executive MBA and Diplomas) are another viable avenue for research-related external engagement. The management and delivery of executive education in most business schools is a professional job – as it is at Oxford Saïd – but we have long had a policy of ensuring that a member of faculty is appointed as an ‘academic director’ of every open-enrolment programme (Trevor, 2021).

In addition, some researchers have intentionally engaged with executive education to apply the fruits of their research.

A key example included in REF 2021 is Jonathan Trevor’s work on **strategic alignment**. Trevor’s research has centred on the principle that organisational performance is secured through an ‘enterprise value chain’, in which an enterprise’s enduring purpose, business strategy, organisational capability, architecture (including organisational structure, culture, processes and people) and management systems should be as closely aligned as possible. This framework provides a valuable system of thought for practitioners to apply to their own setting, regardless of sector. Using a combination of action research, consultancy and executive education as channels for research engagement and impact,

Trevor has worked with senior leadership teams from over 25 global companies (including IBM, Shell and Serco) to help them to align their purpose, strategy and organisational capabilities for improved business performance, agility and resilience.

Also published in REF 2021 was Rafael Ramirez's interdisciplinary research on **Scenario Planning** (SP) to develop the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach (OSPA) (Ramirez, 2021). The OSPA is a distinctive SP methodology that has been influential worldwide across organisations and industry sectors by enabling a shift in the mindset of strategic management from closed to more open and flexible. Approximately 1,000 individuals from several hundred organisations have absorbed this methodology via the Oxford Scenarios Programme, run by our executive education business. As a result of this programme, large companies such as Rolls Royce have changed their approaches to strategic planning; and the programme has also influenced policy and funding decisions within public bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Economic Forum (WEF), the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), and the National Health Service (NHS), charities such as Diabetes UK and Mercy Corps, and even scientific fields such as gastroenterology and the chemical sciences.

DEVELOPING ECOSYSTEMS

The Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, which aims 'to equip entrepreneurial leaders for impact within and beyond business', contributes to the fields of social entrepreneurship, social innovation, and systems change. It sees itself as occupying the nexus of research, education, and community, in which the research it catalyses informs its education programmes; insights from the practitioners it works with improve research and teaching; and the community it brings together sparks the collaborations needed to drive systemic change. That is, it has created its own ecosystem that extends beyond the boundaries of the Business School, and indeed the University of Oxford.

Map the System, for example, is a global competition that invites students from universities and higher education institutions to select a social or environmental issue and to research the contextual factors that contribute to it. The Systems Change Accelerator research grants, awarded by the Skoll Centre, invite faculty members at the University of Oxford to put together diverse teams that represent different identities, disciplines, and schools of thought to use research to inform and drive systems change. **The Systems Change Observatory (SCO)** (see earlier Addressing problems section) is a research project that intentionally sets out to build a community of practice and research, drawing together practitioners including funders,

entrepreneurs, Skoll alumni, researchers, and policy consultants. The project is exploring data from a large sample of ventures affiliated with the Skoll Foundation, and draws on insights from organisational design and strategy, institutional and funding contexts, the work of leaders, and broader venture ecosystems. The goal is to generate actionable insights, case studies, and tools in support of systems change, both for practice and policy, looking at different pathways to change and assessing new models (Savaget *et al.*, 2022).

Members of our research community who have been drawn into the Skoll Centre ecosystem continue to publish in established journals. But the outputs of these collaborative, systems-based research projects are just as likely to be a learning tool¹, a map² (**Movement of movements** project), or a playbook³ (**Climate justice playbook**).

These non-traditional academic outputs can occasionally raise questions about the rigour and quality of the research compared with the more familiar publishing approach. This brings us to a final question about how responsible and impact-focused research is assessed and measured.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH

The measurement of both research quality and impact is a vexed subject. Many (usually very senior) academics worldwide have already spoken out against the publishing treadmill, arguing that it breeds myopia within academia and within disciplinary boundaries. Impact measurement, also, is a challenging task, especially in the short-term – as usually required by funding bodies or governmental assessment exercises – as a true judgement of the value of an intervention cannot usually be made until many years afterwards.

Our answer is to build on the existing metrics of scholarly research by determining KPIs (key performance indicators) relating to the values underpinning our research strategy. Obviously, we continue to encourage our academics to publish in high-quality publications. Research cannot be defined as responsible if it comes at the expense of the careers of members of our research community. However, we also assess, for example, the number of members of our research community conducting interdisciplinary research with colleagues in non-business disciplines – particularly where those collaborations involve future-related topics; the number of scholarly publications that involve relevant external stakeholder groups in some form of collaboration and/or was clearly prompted by a relevant external issue, source or problem; and the number of scholarly publications that have had a demonstrable and documented impact on one or more external stakeholder groups.

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Footnotes

- ¹ <https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/movement-of-movements-primer.pdf> (ox.ac.uk)
- ² <https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/influencesg-movement-maps.pdf> (ox.ac.uk)
- ³ *The Climate Justice Playbook for Business: How to Centre Climate Action in Climate Justice* (bcorporation.net)

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