

Impact-Driven Research: The Case of Hult

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Concepts of the Purposeful Business School

Pioneering a Different Approach

Business and management research receives only a small fraction of total academic research funding globally, with most resources going to areas like sciences, engineering, and health (Starkey *et al.*, 2010). Within universities, funding for business and management research often comes from the business school's own budget rather than university-wide research funds. This suggests that neither the research aspiration and outcomes, nor the presumed impact of business school research impress major funders like the European Research Council, the US National Science Foundation, or major donors. In view of this fact, it is high time to try new approaches to business school research.

It is globally acknowledged in our sector that business schools should orient their research more towards addressing major societal challenges, embrace multidisciplinary research tactics, and create value for stakeholders even outside academia. By encouraging faculty members, professional researchers, post-docs, and doctoral candidates to cluster into Impact Labs, the approach by Hult International Business School resonates with these ambitions to have an impact that matters more to society.

Whether it's assisting a humanitarian organisation to develop more inclusive leadership, publishing teaching cases about how to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in companies or in business education, or using hands-on tools to address stress levels among managers, Hult's research strategy and operational model diverges from orthodoxy that often emphasises the importance of publish or perish regardless of the societal impact. As this article explores, our research model can offer insights into how research in business schools can be framed, supported, rewarded, and generate outcomes that benefit organisations and communities.

THE UNIQUE HULT PERSPECTIVE

As an independent, non-profit institution, Hult International Business School manifests its presence on a global stage, delivering an enriching and multicultural learning journey to a student body of over 4,000 individuals, representing over 140 nationalities. The geographic expanse of our campuses extends from London to Boston, from San Francisco to Dubai, and even into the digital sphere via our online platform. Additionally, during part of the year, we make our presence felt in vital business epicentres such as New York and Singapore.

Hult's reliance on tuition fees for revenue and its informal and historical roots with Arthur D. Little and EF Education First adds a practical and market-oriented layer to its academic culture.¹ Today, Hult represents one of the philanthropical undertakings from the founder of EF, Mr. Bertil Hult. This mixture of academic and business cultures permeates all our operations, influencing branding, marketing, enrolment, analytics, as well as research strategy, faculty recruitment, and performance management.

Our strategic priorities focus on financial stability and growing institutional prestige while also striving to make Hult an appealing destination for professional development, academic exploration, and diverse learning experiences. A board of directors, with extensive experience in education, governance, business, technology, and law, supports this strategy, offering comprehensive guidance to the institution.

With a global team of around 90 full-time faculty members based around different campus locations and bolstered by a considerable number of long-serving adjuncts, Hult ensures students are privy to an eclectic mix of academic and practical knowledge and skills. Aspects such as entrepreneurship, global perspectives, and personal growth are intrinsic to our students' experience and reflected in the institutional approach to research. This orientation is also reflected in the curriculum design. For example, the

Bachelor of Business Administration focuses on human, business, and technical skills alongside disciplinary knowledge as well as global, entrepreneurial, and personal growth mindsets. In 2023, this programme won the MERIT Award for Innovation in Higher Education.

The faculty selection and performance management processes emphasise teaching excellence in traditional disciplines and emerging areas of business education. Faculty are also expected to generate new knowledge that addresses evolving real-world challenges facing organisations and leaders, to drive pedagogic development and innovation, and to contribute to the academic discourse in their disciplines. For example, in 2022-2023, faculty in the field of data analytics and management pursued a year-long research project with a large European insurance company to develop new knowledge about data governance and data custodianship in multinational organisations. Not only do these insights help leaders deal with an emerging key business issue, but the research also generates teaching cases and academic publications.

In summary, Hult carves a unique identity in the academic landscape through its blend of global outlook, practical focus, commitment to learning and teaching excellence, and its mixture of academic and business cultures, which distinguishes itself from many of its peers in the sector.

HULT'S APPROACH TO IMPACTFUL RESEARCH

Research at Hult pursues three key objectives—increase output quality, grow the institutional reputation, and make a difference in society:

1. **Community-building and integration:** We aim to cultivate a concentrated, robust 'intellectual ecosystem' that drives academic curiosity, underpinned by a requisite infrastructure and a critical concentration of intellectual capital.
2. **Augmenting institutional prestige:** Our goal is to enhance Hult's international standing through impactful research output.
3. **Make a difference in society:** We hold the conviction that our research endeavours can catalyse positive transformations for leaders, learners, organisations, and the wider society by delivering novel insights and by improving practices.

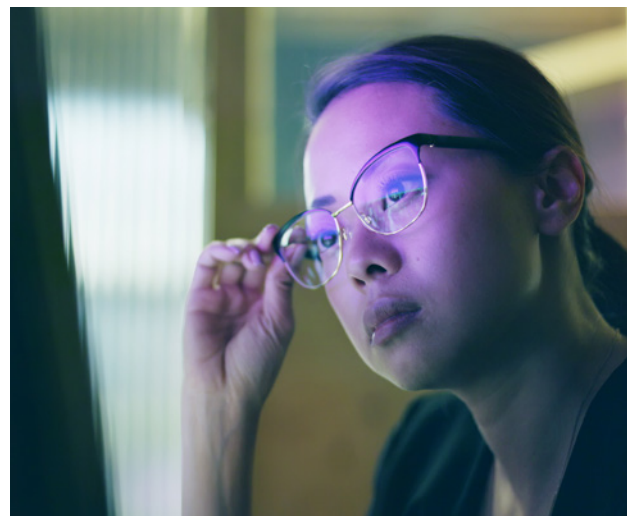
As many faculty members have experience in the corporate world, they have the necessary ethos to impart their knowledge and skills in leadership, change management, and other critical business skills. This proximity to practice also flavours their approach to research. They often forge strong relationships with private, public, and third-sector organisations, enabling engagement

in longitudinal research projects with practitioners. An example is a multi-year partnership with Diabetes UK, Novo Nordisk, and NHS diabetes specialists. This collaboration led to a revolutionary approach to diabetes care, earning the 2017 EFMD Excellence in Practice Award.

Another example that bridges theory and practice is the in-depth research on Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan. Faculty members engaged with leaders in Unilever to better understand their strategic choices and what the company did to integrate sustainability principles into its business model. In 2018, a Hult case on Unilever's development won the Ethics and Social Responsibility category of the UK Case Centre.

Collaborative projects with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) further demonstrate Hult's commitment to socially impactful research. Faculty assisted in the establishment of the Humanitarian Leadership & Management School (HLMS), an initiative that has fostered inclusive and authentic leadership within the ICRC, enabling its leaders to respond more effectively to humanitarian challenges. A case study of this initiative received the 2021 EFMD Excellence in Practice Award, exemplifying the transformative impact of the research.

Doctoral candidates and their faculty supervisors also contribute to our research ecosystem. Hult offers two distinct part-time doctoral programmes; the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) and the Doctor in Organisational Change (DOC), both accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) in the US. Both programmes address practical business issues but significantly differ in their philosophical and practical approaches to knowledge acquisition and problem-solving.



The DOC programme employs action research, a method for in-depth self-reflection and learning about practical problems. In short, action research integrates theoretical knowledge and real-world experience through pragmatic application. The link between theory and practice is, by definition, fluid and dynamic. This is ideal for managers seeking to understand complex business problems and to explore their roles in solving them. For example, the Global Head of Risk in a Hong Kong bank used action research to explore higher order change as a 'form of embodied enactive ethics' in the context of shareholder capitalism. Her work resulted in changed banking policy, allowing increased access to banking services.

A second example is the research by a sustainability practitioner in a manufacturing company in Sri Lanka. He used action research to shift the national discourse about sustainability. His work contributed to the cessation of coal power plant construction in Sri Lanka. The Global Head of Organisational Development in the energy sector in Europe also used this method to examine whether a sense of belonging mattered to globally mobile professionals. Her work resulted in an alternative way to consider belonging at work, which enables global professionals to live a healthier and more fulfilled life.

In contrast, based on a different epistemology, the DBA programme helps practicing managers address business problems using statistical methods. In short, methods grounded in positivism emphasise empirical evidence as the source of authoritative knowledge. For example, a DBA candidate, working as a sustainability consultant, used advanced statistical methods to study how companies' adaptive capabilities drive their environmental responsibility and their Sustainability Development Goals (SDG) performance. His research highlighted how managerial capabilities both drive and reduce non-financial performance and organisational accountability.



Another example of insight gained from statistical methods is the research conducted by a medical doctor and expert on digital health strategies and systems. In her research, she explored why patients prefer emergency room visits over primary care for non-emergency medical conditions. This study helped policymakers and health care leaders understand and manage public health care, particularly in the management of hospital emergency rooms. A senior bank manager in the Middle East also illustrates the societal impact of quantitative research. Based on a study of historical data and financial downturns, he explored how policymakers and banks stimulated and encouraged lending to small and medium-sized (SME) companies during financial downturns. His findings have clear implications for the future of lending to SMEs.

These differences illustrate the broad spectrum of research pursued not only by the two doctoral programmes for practicing managers, but also throughout all of Hult.

ORGANISING IMPACTFUL RESEARCH: IMPACT LABS

Unlike most peer institutions, Hult does not organise faculty and research into traditional disciplines, nor into semi-autonomous research centres. Instead, we organise research activities into dynamic 'intellectual ecosystems' that we call Impact Labs. These labs develop not only concepts and theoretical models but also practical solutions applicable to leadership and organisations. This pragmatic approach to research is captured by the term 'Impact Research'.

The Impact Labs serve as a hub for a diverse group of scholars and practitioners to collaborate on solving practical problems faced by managers and institutions. The labs engage a variety of experts: Impact Fellows (internal faculty members), Visiting Fellows (external academic experts), Doctoral Fellows (DBA and DOC candidates), Post-docs (two or three-year appointments), and Research Fellows (two or three-year appointments). The labs also affiliate with distinguished industry experts.

Each lab concentrates on a broad theme that shapes their research projects. For instance, the 'Futures Lab' focuses on the practical challenges of global risk mitigation and future-readiness, aiming to strengthen organisational resilience in an increasingly complex, technology-driven world. Affiliated Fellows study how evolving technologies are transforming societies, businesses, governments, and individuals using behavioural sciences and empirical data. Projects range from the role of AI in companies, neuroscience, foresight, strategy, and disruptive business models, to new organisational models and theories.

The 'Sustainability Lab' focuses on the practical challenges of industrial and societal 'sustainability transitions', aiming to connect practitioners and researchers at the forefront of this field. The UN SDGs represent the road-map and projects, such as, threats to organisations and society from the climate and biodiversity crises to human rights and 'modern slavery' issues.

The 'Leadership Lab' builds on Hult's renowned strengths in leadership development, people management, and organisational change management. The lab combines this with its history of developing innovative management tools, which refer to a broad range of instruments and techniques used to assess, diagnose, strategise, and develop various organisational and team capabilities. They include diagnostic tests, self-evaluations, strategy frameworks, and creative methods that help managers and teams understand their current state, identify areas for improvement, and develop plans to reach desired goals. The tools draw from fields like organisational psychology, leadership theory, and design thinking, and take many forms from surveys to simulations to board games. While diverse in nature, management tools share the purpose of providing structure, insight, and direction to enhance organisational and team effectiveness. Examples of such tools developed by affiliated faculty members include an in-depth leadership experience based on cardio-neuroscience, looking at the role of the heart rate on learning effectiveness zones. Other examples include a simulation of boat-sharing marketing decisions, and a board game for sensitive diversity issues. This lab serves to further develop a variety of tools based on the needs reported by company interventions and executive education, as well as on pedagogical innovations and 'learning-to-learn' practices.

More than a dozen faculty and staff members have been certified in the LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) method (Roos and Victor, 2018), which is used with students, corporate clients, and among internal staff. LSP is a multi-modal and play-based method helping clients and students to go beyond words and to 'think with their hands'. At Hult it has been used to effectively develop new and shared perspectives and strategies, to solve tricky people issues, to help in crisis management, for 'real-time' change management in corporate engagement, and for enriched hackathons in degree programmes. Such hands-on learning methods bring a wealth of data that can result in scientific publications. Examples include articles on what drives 'change readiness' based on LSP interventions in organisations, and on the connection between heart rates during critical incident simulations and perceived learning.

Hult's impact research generates teaching materials via new tools and publications, as well as through extensive case writing. In 2023 we decided to accelerate the production of peer-reviewed teaching cases, engaging many faculty members in active case writing. Our approach brings faculty colleagues into cohorts during an intensively coached process to develop high-quality cases. This process encourages a rich, diverse, and robust case portfolio on current managerial and business issues. It also imbues a sense of collective ownership and pride among faculty as well as instilling an institutional Hult 'flavour' to the narratives captured in these cases.

Examples of teaching cases produced in 2023 include how Generative AI transforms marketing, the use of AI in ideation and productisation, inventory planning in manufacturing, HR practices for burnout prevention, startup funding in the UK, building trust and convincing customers, handling of difficult conversations among business students, and how to use AI in business teaching. After a peer review and publication, the flow of teaching cases is integrated into undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral, and executive education programmes, strengthening our research culture. Thus, the Leadership Lab serves as a crucible for the constant evolution of experiential learning tools, ensuring their effectiveness and relevance in addressing important managerial and organisational challenges.

The incentive system for research prioritises output quality over quantity, while ensuring strategic and ethical guardrails. In addition to academic research outputs, Hult values practice-oriented research and pedagogical developments and innovation. The incentive system includes five categories of intellectual contributions: (1) peer-reviewed academic journals, (2) peer-reviewed teaching cases, (3) peer-reviewed conference contributions, and (4) books. The fifth category includes editor-reviewed practice-oriented research output published in recognised media outlets. These can benefit from significant promotion by Hult advertising and marketing. Hult offers one-to-one coaching with faculty members to boost their individual public profiles. Marketing support, such as in blogs, webinars, social media, planned book publishing, and conference activities are all available on a case-by-case basis.

The institution is open to, and supportive of, individual research projects that span a wide spectrum of subjects. However, a significant portion of Hult's resources is explicitly channelled towards reinforcing the Impact Labs. This approach encourages both focus and critical mass to drive impactful outcomes.

In line with the internal Hult mantra of ‘only necessary bureaucracy’, the administrative system for research has been simplified. This includes an easy-to-use online form for project applications, an internal blind review and regular (monthly) approval process, access to professional research support, and a transparent incentive system for output. The Dean of Research, reporting to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), is responsible for implementing the research strategy. The CAO reports at every board of director meeting.

INSIGHTS FROM THE HULT APPROACH

A few elements of our impact-driven research approach stand out.

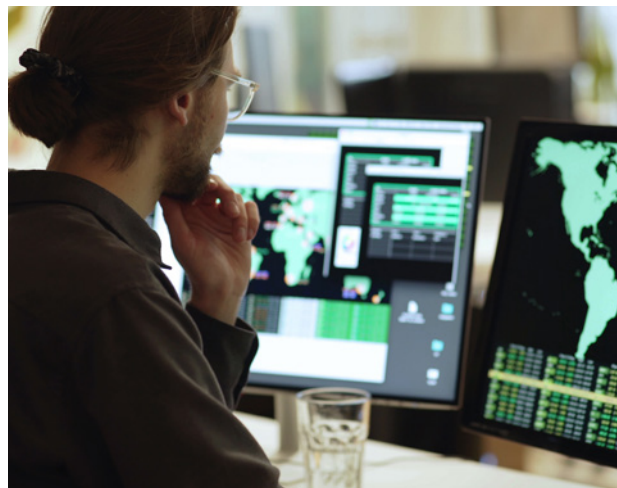
Firstly, at the core is a commitment to serving the interests of many stakeholders: students, faculty, business, government, and civil society. Our research aims to yield tangible benefits for diverse stakeholders beyond academia. A testament to this is the above-mentioned engagement with various institutions, executive education clients, and the organisations employing the part-time doctoral candidates.

Secondly, our approach underscores the benefits of adopting an interdisciplinary and inclusive perspective *by default*. Unlike the constraints of traditional disciplines or reified research centres, the dynamics of the Impact Lab and their projects mirrors the multi-disciplinary nature of the challenges facing leaders, organisations, and society. Our multitudes of philosophies and practice-oriented research spark the innovative thinking needed to address increasingly complex business and societal problems. The Futures Lab’s focus on global risk mitigation and future readiness, as well as the Sustainability Lab’s work on sustainability transitions, embodies Hult’s commitment to tackling critical global issues. Our research also contributes to continuous improvement in leadership and to learning and teaching in our sector, as illustrated by the drive to develop teaching cases and other learning tools within the Leadership Lab.

Thirdly, Hult’s market-oriented support infrastructure and performance management systems encourage productivity and drive impact. This sets Hult apart from both the mindset and the operational norms in most traditional academic institutions. Our incentive system favours impact over effort, and reinforces the notion that research at Hult transcends the pursuit of academic rigour at the expense of relevance to organisations and society.

CONCLUSION

Although difficult to generalise, I hope that elements of the Hult approach to research can inspire peer institutions, especially those operating within traditional academic contexts. Adjustments to research strategy, structure,



systems, and even the culture can make a difference for the value created by research—for students, leaders, learners, organisations, and the wider society.

References

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Footnote

¹ Established by the Hult family in 1965, EF is the world’s largest private language learning company, specialising in educational travel, language training, cultural exchange, and academic degree programmes. In 2003 EF was asked to take over the ADL School of Management in Boston, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. This charitable educational institution was renamed Hult International Business School.

About the Author

Johan Roos is Chief Academic Officer & Professor in Hult. He was previously the Dean of Jönköping International Business School, President of Copenhagen Business School, Dean of MBA Programs at Stockholm School of Economics, and Founding Director of Imagination Lab Foundation. He has also held academic positions at the International Institute for Management Development, Norwegian Business School, and The Wharton School. Professor Roos is Senior Advisor to Drucker Society Europe, Chair of the High Level Scientific Council at Vienna Center for Management Innovation, and board member of Imagination Lab Foundation.