

What Topics Should Business School Research Focus on?

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Insights from 123 Award-winning Responsible Research Projects

A WORLD IN NEED OF SCIENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

In recent years, there is an active conversation within the business research community of the need to give more research attention to the grand challenges of the world. There is also an increasing awareness, which became particularly salient as the world endures the COVID-19 pandemic, of the importance of science-based knowledge or solutions to tackle many life-threatening or existential crises in both developed and developing worlds. As articulated by the United Nations Global Compact through the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals,² business firms are powerful instruments for solving most of these grand challenges, alongside government and non-profit agencies. At the same time, young scholars, especially the millennials and the generation Z, are eager to contribute to a better world by working on research that matters. In response to the challenges of the time, many business and management journals are beginning to welcome problem-inspired research, pivoting away from literature-motivated research. Furthermore, the accreditation agencies of business schools, such as AACSB and EFMD, have introduced new standards to encourage attention to the societal impact of the schools' research, education, and outreach programmes. But the pace of change toward problem-solving business research is very slow. Without a substantial infusion of science-based new knowledge, business school curricula and business education will continue to fail in meeting the needs of the changed and changing world.³

The Responsible Research in Business and Management network (www.rrbm.network), founded in early 2015 by 24 leading scholars (including the three authors of this paper) in the core business disciplines and from ten countries, serves as a catalyst to encourage, recognise, and stimulate research that produces both credible and useful knowledge. The former refers to research findings that are reliable,

trustworthy, and replicable, which is necessary to solve the "credibility or replication crisis". The latter refers to research findings that are related to important problems in the real world with potential applications that can improve the life of stakeholders (such as workers, consumers, and communities), beyond the financial return to the shareholders. This focus on usefulness is to solve the "relevance" or "research-practice gap" problem, a great concern to many business scholars for almost three decades.

Business schools were originally founded to solve the needs of society including efficient productions of goods and services that societies need. Over time, this attention to the needs of society has shifted to maximizing shareholder returns. Correspondingly, there was much less attention to life-improving outcomes for stakeholders beyond shareholders in business research. Analyses of published articles in the leading management journals have found more than 80% to focus on the financial or economic outcomes valued by owners or top managers and less than 20% on outcomes valuable to other stakeholders like employees, customers, or society.⁴ Some of the consequences of the narrow pursuit of maximizing shareholder value are resource depletion, environmental degradation, global economic inequality, and climate change – all of which have become some of the grand challenges of our time. The struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic added oil to the fire. It is so much more urgent for the scientific communities, natural and social, to offer evidence-based solutions to address the wicked problems causing suffering for most of humanity. Business schools and business scholars have a great opportunity and a grave responsibility to contribute to creating and disseminating science-based knowledge to a world in need, highlighting the role of businesses in addressing the grand challenges such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

WHAT TOPICS SHOULD BUSINESS RESEARCH FOCUS ON?

Responsible research calls for a more balanced attention to outcomes important to all stakeholders. Fortunately, in response to society's expectations, even among for-profit corporations, there is a growing awareness that something must be done differently to realign business with the rapidly changing global economic context and to avert the grave condition of our future if the grand challenges are not addressed in a timely fashion. This new realization is evident in the redefinition of "Corporate Purpose" by the Business Roundtable (members are CEOs of leading US companies) on August 19, 2019.⁵ The signatories of this statement, 181 CEOs, "commit to lead their companies for the benefit of all stakeholders—customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders". The 2022 World Economic Forum Global Risk report⁶ identifies social cohesion erosion, livelihood crises, mental health deterioration, debt crisis, cybersecurity failures, digital inequality, and backlash against science as the most concerning problems in the world today and in the near future.

What do business scholars concerned with relevance consider to be topics of importance? Through a Delphi study, the RRBM "position paper"⁷ identifies five topics that received the greatest assent. These topics align well with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

1. Understanding the broader impact of firms on and their roles in society, beyond the creation of shareholder value.
2. Understanding the changing nature of work and the workforce, as well as the changing nature of consumers and their role in co-creating value.
3. Examining the social sustainability of business organisations, including their impact on the health and well-being of employees, customers, and community.
4. Enhancing environmental sustainability, managing the use of natural resources, and reducing negative environmental impact.
5. Alleviating poverty, creating greater prosperity, and reducing economic inequality, both locally and globally.

In the face of these existential challenges affecting developed and developing economies alike, research in business schools cannot and must not continue with "business as usual". Grand challenges by nature are big, complex, and wicked for which solutions cannot be easily identified. It is understandable, though disappointing, that most business researchers, like part of the society, have ignored the problem of global warming and climate change—which is not a meteorological problem but a business problem. There has been limited research on how business activities have contributed to global warming and on the

impact of global warming on lives around the world now and in the future. COVID-19 provided another wake-up call by revealing the gross inequity in public health, both within and across countries. The pandemic led to economic disruptions by large and small businesses, displacing millions of workers, and weakening the global supply chain. With over ten thousand business schools worldwide and thousands of articles published per year, we should be able to expect more science-based solutions to pressing challenges than have been offered to the public. A recent essay in AACSB Insights reported a study of how business schools worldwide have paid little attention to the 17 SDGs since 2015.⁸ A few schools have integrated the SDGs into their teaching and research, but the overall conclusion is that the attention is much less than expected. Even a year ago, when we asked a group of participants at a webinar how many of them have heard of the SDGs, the response disappointed us.

However, we can be optimistic that many business schools and scholars are beginning to engage in deep reflection, along with an awakening to our duty as responsible social scientists. The call for responsible research by the RRBM network is long overdue. Responsible research is no more difficult or easy than traditional research. The work of the three 2019 Nobel laureates in Economic Science provide a good example of how a complex problem like poverty can be studied by breaking it down into manageable research questions. They focused primarily on public health, early childhood education, and agriculture. By using Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT), with repeated testing (replications) of interventions (e.g., ways to reduce teacher and nurse absences, to incentivise farmers to use pesticides), their research yielded great impact: five million Indian children benefited from remedial teaching; many countries increased their spending on preventative health care, and great improvements were realised in agricultural yield. The RCT method is not restricted to medical or economic research. Business researchers have used field experimentation for many decades.



THE RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AWARD

To encourage more attention to tackle the research topics that are of importance to stakeholders beyond shareholders, RRBM supported the creation of a Responsible Research Award in three disciplines: management, marketing, and operations management.⁹ The purpose of this annual award is to identify and recognise research that exemplifies the seven principles of responsible research.¹⁰ Principle 1 is to support the basic goal of science, that scientific work is to serve society. Principles 2 to 4 are to provide guidelines on designing research that will enhance the credibility of the findings. Principles 5 to 7 offer various ways to include stakeholders in the research process to improve the relevance of the research for them and to ensure the discoveries will provide actionable and beneficial ideas. These three awards are managed by the three sponsoring disciplinary societies with open nominations of research published in the previous one to five years. The nominations go through a rigorous review process and are judged by highly accomplished scholars. In the case of management, the nominations are also evaluated by a team of executives who assess the relevance of the topics for practice or policy. The award has been given for four years in management (2018-2021), three years in marketing (2020-2022), and three years in Operations Management (2019-2021).¹¹ A total of 108 articles (60 in management, 35 in marketing, and 13 in operations management) and 15 books (14 in Management and one in Marketing) have won this award to date. We analysed these research projects to identify the major research themes, the primary stakeholders who may potentially benefit from the research, and the methods the authors used to disseminate their work as described in the nomination letters – so that the findings can reach the communities of practice. We are pleased to report the major insights from these outstanding research projects, first the 108 research articles and then the 15 research books.

RESEARCH THEMES AMONG THE 108 AWARD WINNING RESEARCH ARTICLES

Table 1 shows the major themes we identified in the 108 winning articles, mapped onto the 17 sustainable development goals. With one exception, Organisational Outcomes, each of the major themes identified in the papers can be linked to multiple SDGs, as indicated by the relevant SDG numbers in the parentheses in column one of Table 1.¹²

Major Themes (e.g., relevant SDGs)	Management	Marketing	Operations Management	Total	%
	60 (100%)	35 (100%)	13 (100%)	108	100%
Well-Being (e.g., SDG 1, 2, 3, 8)	17 (28%)	14 (40%)	6 (46%)	37	34%
Justice/Equity (e.g., SDG 5, 10)	13 (22%)	6 (17%)	4 (31%)	23	21%
Sustainability (e.g., SDG 6, 7, 12, 13)	12 (20%)	7 (20%)	1 (8%)	20	19%
Institutions/Infrastructure (e.g., SDG 9, 11, 16)	7 (12%)	6 (17%)	2 (15%)	15	14%
Organisational Outcomes	11 (18%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	13	12%

Table 1 Major Themes (Outcomes) in the 108 Award Winning Articles

Well-Being

Well-Being is the largest theme, representing 34% of all awards, across disciplines. Within marketing and operations management, the percentage is even higher at 40% and 46%. Well-Being focuses on individuals as well as communities and spans different types of well-being including health, financial, social, and disaster recovery.

The health sub-theme includes physical health, emotional health, identity, and well-being of individual workers, consumers, and communities. For example, one marketing award-winning paper studied over-the-counter drug use and potential overdosing by consumers. Through five empirical studies the authors identified communication interventions that would help to avoid unintentional overdosing by consumers (Caitlin, Pechmann, & Brass, 2015). Several other marketing award-winners focused on promoting healthy food choices. For example, Berry et al. (2019) explored the paradox of including calorie counts on menus and found that showing calories does not necessarily lead to lower calorie menu item choices.



A management award-winning study focused on health of patients with rare diseases. The authors (Kucukkeles, Ben-Menahem & von Krogh, 2019) focused on a practice known as drug repurposing or drug repositioning. This study identifies the ways in which nonprofit actors can propel drug repurposing by engaging patients in the drug development process, creating platforms and communities for knowledge exchange among diverse stakeholders. This study offers valuable knowledge on the comparative efficacy of alternative organisational arrangements such as social entrepreneurship for tackling societal challenges.

Other award-winners studied social well-being of communities and financial/economic well-being of vulnerable groups. In one ethnographic marketing study, the researchers focused on community recovery and well-being following a series of earthquakes. The research tracked the development and effectiveness of an alternative market structure – namely “time banks”. Time banks facilitate and track the exchange of services among community members through time currencies earned by individuals who provide skills or services to a community member and in turn have the opportunity to use their time currency in exchange for an unrelated service from another community member. This innovative exchange structure promoted adaptive capacities and fostered resiliency within the community as it restructured following the disasters (Ozanne & Ozanne, 2016). Another award-winner focused on underserved consumers living in geographic bank deserts, identifying communication and organisational strategies for banks entering those markets that would increase access to banking services (financial well-being) for vulnerable consumers (Mende et al., 2019)

A management award-winning paper (Shepherd & Williams, 2014) studied how local people organised compassion ventures to alleviate the suffering of victims after major natural disasters. Another paper (Ballesteros, Useem & Wry, 2017) found regions hit by natural disasters

recovered much faster when they received substantial aid from firms with local operations than from other sources. These studies show how business and entrepreneurship can directly contribute to citizen well-being when disasters strike.

In operations management, there are many papers focusing directly on health. For instance, Jonasson et al. (2017) demonstrates how to achieve improvements in HIV Early Infant Diagnosis in Sub-Saharan Africa by improving assignment of clinics to laboratories and the allocation of capacity across laboratories. While many papers in operations management directly concern the healthcare industry, there are also papers studying a different angle of well-being such as safety. Ibanez and Toffel (2020) studied outcomes of thousands of food safety inspections and found that inspectors were affected by the inspection outcomes at their prior-inspected establishment. Choudhary et al. (forthcoming) focuses on increasing safety of drivers using simple behavioral nudges.

Justice/Equity

The justice/equity theme represents 21% of all award winners and includes papers that focus on social, economic, gender, and race equity. Among marketing award-winners, several papers focused on advancing racial equity in marketing and business practices. For example, one study (Bone, Christensen, & Williams, 2014) observed minority business customers’ access to bank loans, demonstrating the negative effects on self-concept of restricted choice because of systemic biases. The research has had long-lasting impact on banking practices and public policy related to minority business loans. Among operations management papers, Ata et al. (2017) demonstrate feasibility of reducing geographic disparity among kidney transplant patients using private jets to increase geography for matching. As another example, Cui et al. (2020) demonstrate how reviews can reduce racial discrimination in the sharing economy using experiments on AirBnB.

A management award winner (Liu, et al., 2020) studied bias in hiring. The authors identified an easy to implement intervention—grouping job candidates into different categories to nudge decision makers to choose more diverse candidates without lowering the average competence of the selected candidates. This research provides a solution that contributes both to better business and to a better world. Another study (Hideg, et al., 2018) focused on the negative effect of long maternity leave on women’s career advancement in the context of Canadian maternity leave policies. They found that when corporate programmes kept the women engaged in the workplace during the long leave, the women were less likely to incur negative career consequences.

Sustainability

The sustainability theme, representing 19% of all award winners includes papers on climate change, ESG themes, social sustainability, natural resources, and responsible production and consumption. The emphasis is on business practices and individual behaviors that promote innovation in the preservation of resources.

Environmental (climate and ESG) topics were prominent in the management discipline award-winners. For example, a 2021 winner of the award (Rousseau, Berrone & Gelabert 2019) focused on SDG#11 which is about making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The authors explored how the density of local environmental nonprofit organisations (LENOs) promotes city sustainability. Using a panel dataset of 100 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) over 12 years, they discovered that a higher density of LENOs is associated with a reduction in toxic contamination and an increase in the adoption of voluntary environmental standards at the city level. The study also identified some conditions when the effects of LENOs are stronger or weaker. The study results offer important implications for urban city designers and policy makers.

In marketing, the dominant sustainability focus was on responsible consumption and responsible product disposition. For example, one paper (Winterich, Nenkov, & Gonzales, 2019) focused on communication and positioning messages related to recycled products found that consumers are more likely to recycle when they are told specifically how the recycled products will be transformed into new products. Another award-winning paper studied messaging approaches that retailers can use to increase the purchase of unattractive, but perfectly good, produce products (Grewal et al., 2019). Often these unattractive or imperfect produce items are not offered at all, or they are thrown out, increasing food waste. Through a series of experiments, including one in the field, the researchers were able to show that various messaging strategies which increase consumer self-esteem led to increased purchase of unattractive produce.

Institutions/Infrastructure

The Institutions/Infrastructure theme, representing 14% of all award winners, included research on business practices and individual actions that promote more responsible approaches by institutions (e.g., professions or government) and infrastructure (e.g., technology) in ways that will benefit society. Among the management award winners, there was a significant focus on specific professions such as adopting green chemistry practices (Howard-Grenville, et al., 2017) in the chemical profession, stigmatization of the medical profession by patients and citizens (Wang, Raynard, & Greenwood, 2020), or commercialization of religious organisations (Yue, Wang & Yang, 2019).

In marketing, most papers within this theme emphasised ethics and transparency in technology and social media, focusing on topics such as the effects of default privacy and security settings on trust and transparency when consumers are asked to share information online (Walker, 2016) and the ethics and privacy implications of mothers sharing children's information online (Fox & Hoy 2019).

Examples in Operations Management include Gui et al. (2016) which develops cost allocation mechanisms that induce participation in large collection and recycling network systems to maximise cost efficiency and collections. Another example is Zhang et al. (2020) which analyses a resource allocation problem faced by medical surplus recovery organisations which recover medical surplus products to fulfill the needs of underserved healthcare facilities in developing countries.

Organisational Outcomes

This is the smallest theme, representing 12% of all award winners. Four of these papers are in management, with two in marketing and none in operations management. These papers focused on strategies aimed at business success such as a long-term orientation (Flammer & Bansal, 2017), or personal initiative training for entrepreneurial success in Africa (Campo, et al., 2017). In marketing, papers falling within this theme focused on increasing organisational success of nonprofit organisations through strategies that enhance donations (Yin, Li & Singh, 2020; Fajardo, Townsend, & Bolander, 2018).

STAKEHOLDERS WHO MAY BENEFIT FROM THE RESEARCH

Award-winning papers are expected to benefit stakeholders beyond increasing financial returns to firms and shareholders. We analysed which stakeholders may potentially benefit from the findings of the 108 award-winning research projects.

Table 2 illustrates the wide range of stakeholders who are the primary beneficiaries of the award-winning research, and they logically differ across the three disciplines. Employees/workers are the most frequent stakeholder beneficiary of management award winning projects (32% of management papers) while consumers/customers are the most common stakeholder beneficiary for marketing award winners (46%). Society is the most frequent group for operations management (38%); it is the second largest for management (27%) and marketing (28%). The second most common stakeholder group for Operations Management is consumers/customers (31%). Combining all three disciplines, society is the major stakeholder beneficiary (38%), then consumers/customers (19%) and employees/workers (18%). Including patients in the consumers/customers group increases that beneficiary group to 25% of the total.

A few studies focused on multiple stakeholders. For example, a study on a social enterprise (Smith & Besharov, 2019) has potential benefits for both employees and society. We found 14 of the 108 articles (13%) have potential benefits for two or more stakeholders. This is a major departure from the past with a major shareholder-benefiting orientation, i.e., executives, owners, or shareholders.

RESEARCH THEMES AND BENEFITING STAKEHOLDERS OF THE 15 AWARD WINNING RESEARCH BOOKS

The main themes of the research books are broad in nature. Ten of the 15 research books are about building stronger institutions such as reimagining capitalism to focus on purpose, shared values, and long-term solutions to wicked problems (Henderson, 2020) or building sustainable and scalable enterprises at the bottom of the pyramid to reduce poverty (London, 2016). Other examples include using multistakeholder partnerships to solve wicked problems (Gray & Purdy, 2018), using the B Corps to create better business (Marquis, 2020), identifying the contribution of educated Russian immigrants to innovation and the US economy (Puffer, McCarthy & Satinsky, 2018). While the primary theme in these books is about strong institutions, the secondary themes are for these institutions to improve the social justice and well-being of different stakeholders of the world.

In addition, three books focus on justice issues and two books on sustainability. For example, Johnson and collaborators (2019) published an edited volume of original research based on the premise that markets should be, but are not, equitable and just. The collection presents research by scholars in the interdisciplinary and global Race in the Marketplace Network that seeks to codify and advance understanding and solutions related to race and its intersecting socio-political constructs (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality) in a variety of marketplace settings. Thomas and Hendrick-Wong (2019) use case studies to illustrate how access to vital networks for economic opportunities can be a way to narrow the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Hoffman (2015) examines crucial questions about the research on climate change, including why people reject scientific consensus and why climate change is a part of culture wars in politics.

Given the broad foci of the books, the main stakeholder benefiting from these ideas is the people in our societies. A second stakeholder is marginalised populations such as the people at the bottom of the pyramid, racial minorities, or immigrants. Other beneficiaries include employees and business organisations.

Primary Stakeholder Beneficiaries	Specific beneficiary groups	No. (%) of Management articles	No. (%) of Marketing articles	No. (%) of OM articles	Total No. (%) of articles
		60 (100%)	35 (100%)	13 (100%)	108 (100%)
Society	Citizens, children, communities	16 (27%)	10 (28%)	5 (38%)	41 (38%)
Consumers/Customers	Poor/vulnerable, minority, entrepreneurs, technology users, online/retail store, bank, or food shoppers	0	16 (46%)	4 (31%)	20 (19%)
Employees/workers	Women, minority, transgender, supply chain, independent contractors, job applicants	19 (32%)	0	0	19 (18%)
Patients	Minority patients, rare disease, terminal, or cancer patients, pharmaceutical customers	3 (5%)	4 (11%)	1 (8%)	8 (7%)
Firms	Large firms, shareholders, nonprofits	5 (8%)	2 (6%)	0	7 (6%)
Entrepreneurs	Small businesses, women, technology	6 (10%)	0	0	6 (6%)
Non-business organisations	Religious, education	2 (3%)	1 (3%)	0	3 (3%)
Government and society	Regulators, investors, citizens	2 (3%)	2 (6%)	0	4 (4%)
Multiple stakeholders	Firms and employees, firms and society, employees and society	7 (12%)	0	3 (23%)	10 (9%)

Table 2 Stakeholder-Beneficiaries of 108 Award Winning Studies

DISSEMINATION BEYOND THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Based on RRBM principles, responsible research should have impact beyond the academic research community. While publication in leading academic journals and citations by other academics are important, they do not tell the story of actual impact on practice, policy, or society. To illustrate practical impact, academic research findings and implications should be disseminated to relevant stakeholder groups, such as students, government, policymakers, and media. Across the 108 award-winning papers a wide variety of dissemination methods were mentioned in the nomination letters, with many papers using multiple methods. Our analysis identified nine methods being used by these authors. They include, in descending order of the frequency with which they were utilised, (1) articles in practitioner outlets such as the *Harvard Business Review*, (2) presentation to organisational leaders or policy makers, (3) coverage by media, (4) presentation at practitioner conferences or events, (5) presence in social media and online platforms, (6) sharing with students in the classroom, (7) consultation or training projects with organisations or policy makers, (8) publicity through university media groups, and (9) books or white papers.

The most common media coverage in print, radio and TV included such outlets as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg, *Forbes*, the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *Fast Company*, The Conversation, CNN, Huffington Post, American Banker, and many national newspapers in countries including Australia, China, France, Japan, the Netherlands, and the U.K. Other media included podcasts, YouTube, TedX, Twitter and Linked In. Presentations to organisational leaders and policy makers were made to the FDA, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, U.S. Congressional committees, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and practitioner conferences such as the World Economic Forum.

A very important and easy approach to dissemination is through classrooms that educate students on the research findings and societal implications. Many of the award-winning research papers have also been adopted by faculty not associated with the original research team as required reading in their PhD seminars and MBA classrooms. One paper has become standard reading in business ethics courses worldwide. Finally, researchers frequently consult with partner companies and others to implement the research or develop training related to the research within organisations and government.

Some authors found unique ways to disseminate their research to non-academic communities, government, classroom, and business stakeholders. For example, one of the marketing award winners studied community outcomes

(e.g., consumption opportunities, diversity, and interaction across groups) of gentrification and developed a film that illustrates the research findings and their societal implications. The film was shared with scholars, activists, community members, businesspeople, community developers, economists, public school teachers, real estate professionals, government officials and more (Grier & Perry, 2018). One management research team collaborated with Google to develop a 9-week training programme to help Asian employees to enhance their communication skills (Lu, Nisbett, & Morris, 2020). Another team informed the US Senate's S.230 hearings in October 2020. Later, the founder of Reddit contacted the authors to form a major collaboration with Sentropy (www.sentropy.com) to use AI tools to tackle the problems their research project revealed (Kitchens, Johnson, & Gray, 2020). The Communication Workers of America labor union is using the findings of an award-winning project to fight against hedge funds targeting AT&T (DesJardine, Marti, & Durand, 2021).

The dissemination methods for books are largely similar to those of articles. The book nomination letters describe numerous invitations to present the work at practitioner conferences or to various groups of policy makers and organisational leaders. Media coverage has involved a variety of well-known, geographically and professionally diverse outlets for print, audio, and video. Additional exposure for some books came through inclusion in recommended reading or book award lists, such as The Financial Times Top Business Books, Social Change Innovators Recommended Reads, FT & McKinsey Business Books of the Year, and Porchlight Business Books of the Year, among others. As with articles, several books (or cases developed from them) have been adopted for use in teaching across multiple universities. The Johnson, et al (2019) book is notable for its open-access availability and high download rate through the publisher's (Springer's) Black Lives Matter campaign.

BACKGROUND OF THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHORS

Lastly, we found encouraging diversity in the background of the authors of these award-winning research projects. We focused on the first authors since they are the intellectual leaders of these projects, reflected in the order of authorship in the three disciplines. Among the authors of the 108 research articles, 46% are female and 54% male. In terms of position rank, 44% of them are assistant professors, 22% associate and 29% full professors. The remaining are doctoral students and postdocs (5%). Most of them work in universities in the U.S. (71%) and 29% of them work in 12 other countries. Among the first authors of the 15 books, only three are female, and all of them are full professors. Ten of the 15 books were single-authored while only four of the 108 articles were single-authored.

THE GRAND CHALLENGE FOR BUSINESS SCHOOLS: TO BE THE NORTH STAR FOR SCIENCE IN SERVICE TO SOCIETY

We hope our analysis of the 123 award-winning research projects in responsible research and the implications we drew have provided a promising answer to the question of our paper title “What topics should business school research focus on?” These award-winning papers cover a wide range of topics that relate to many of the Sustainable Development Goals and other grand challenges of the world. Reporting on the findings of these projects energised us and gave us much hope that business research has great potential to offer valuable knowledge to inform life-improving business practices and government policies. The primary focus on well-being and social justice with potential benefit to employees and communities will pay dividends for businesses as well. Healthy and happy citizens are also creative and productive employees. Responsible business research can create a win-win-win condition for employees (including both managers and workers), consumers, communities (including citizens and especially marginalised populations), and employers (including both suppliers and buyers). By focusing on RRBM’s Principle 1 of “Science in service to society”, business researchers can be the guiding light for businesses, non-profits, and government through delivering credible and useful knowledge.

While most of the award-winning projects offer actionable ideas, relatively few used field experiments to test specific interventions. We encourage greater use of the RCT method – randomised controlled trials – as the three 2019 Economic Science Nobel laureates did, to test interventions aimed at benefiting society and alleviating suffering through improving business practices. Experiments on ideas to reduce poverty, inequality, and discrimination, or to increase justice in resource allocation, education, healthcare, or shared prosperity can be conducted in organisations, societies, and even nation states. Such research may require multi-party collaboration involving businesses, NGOs, government agencies and researchers. Greater attention to and publication of replications also are necessary to make sure the conclusions are robust, and the risk of wrongful conclusion is minimised.

Beyond the practical wisdom of managers and policymakers, the world needs science-based actionable knowledge. Can business research become a guiding light by discovering and disseminating solutions to many wicked problems facing humanity? We believe it can. Business researchers must rise to the challenge of becoming a positive force for good in this troubled world.

Footnotes

¹ The three authors contributed equally to the work in this article. We thank Juliane Iannarelli for her assistance with the analysis of the management articles.

² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

³ The challenges of business schools in the twenty-first century are well discussed in the book by Howard Thomas, Peter Lorange and Jagdish Sheth, 2013 by Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Walsh, Weber & Margolis, in *Journal of Management*, 2003; Tsui & Jia, in *Management and Organisation Review*, 2013.

⁵ <https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans>

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2022/digest>

⁷ <https://www.rrbm.network/position-paper/>

⁸ <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2022/03/how-are-business-schools-engaging-in-the-sdgs>

⁹ The sponsors of these three awards are The Academy of Management Fellows, the American Marketing Association, and the Manufacturing and Service Operations Management Society, respectively.

¹⁰ <https://www.rrbm.network/executive-briefing/eb-principles/>

¹¹ We will not offer a Reference list in this essay. You can find all the award-winning papers and books on the RRBM Awards page: www.rrbm.network/taking-action/awards

¹² Well-Being is tied to four of the seventeen SDGs: No Poverty (1), Zero Hunger (2), Good Health and Well-Being (3), and Decent Work and Economic Growth (8). Justice/Equity is tied to two of the SDGs: Gender Equality (5), and Reduced Inequalities (10). Sustainability is tied four of the SDGs: Clean Water and Sanitation (6), Affordable and Clean Energy (7), Responsible Consumption and Production (12), and Climate Action (13). Institutions/Infrastructure is tied to three SDGs: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure (9), Sustainable Cities and Communities (11), and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (16).



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