

Designing societal impacting architectures for business schools: do-gooders or doing good?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the authors reconceptualize societal impact for business schools by shifting the focus from static outcomes to the dynamic process of societal impacting. Second, drawing on systemic reforms and lessons derived from the Dutch higher education context, the authors introduce an architecture for societal impacting that enables business schools to deliberately design, implement and refine frameworks that incentivize, measure and reward the societal contributions of business researchers and educators across Europe and beyond.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors synthesize recent literature on impact definitions and situate their analysis in the Dutch context. Building on an ecosystem perspective and a service research lens, the authors develop an integrated architecture for societal impacting.

Findings – Societal impacting is conceptualized as a co-created, recursive and purpose-driven process through which business school researchers and educators collaborate with stakeholders to generate durable positive change. The authors highlight resonance, the extent to which academic work changes how stakeholders think, feel or act, as the key differentiator between output and true impact. Achieving resonance requires balancing inside-out expertise with outside-in societal responsiveness, supported by structural alignment and a shift from dissemination toward sustained collaboration and co-creation.

Originality/value – By integrating a service research lens, the authors operationalize societal impact as an emergent process and propose a cohesive architecture for policy alignment, capability building and enabling infrastructure. The framework supports deans and institutions in embedding co-creation and iterative learning in research and education, broadening stakeholder engagement and realigning incentives toward interaction quality, mutual learning and durable societal change.

Keywords Societal impact, Societal impacting, Social impact, Business schools, Co-creation, Ecosystem, Resonance, Recognition and rewards, Higher education reform

Paper type Impact article



1. Introduction

Business schools have been defined as “educational institution that specializes in teaching courses and programs related to business and/or management” (Kaplan, 2018, p. 599).

However, nowadays, business schools across the globe are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their relevance and legitimacy by two core activities of research and education in a world marked by geopolitical instability, economic uncertainty, climate change and deepening social inequalities (Redgrave *et al.*, 2023). In this paper, we focus on business schools that consider both research and education as pathways to impact. Traditional markers of academic success (e.g. publications in high-ranked journals, citation counts and international rankings) are no longer sufficient to justify the societal license to operate that business schools hold. Policymakers, funding agencies and society at large increasingly demand evidence that academic work translates into tangible benefits for communities, industries and public institutions and changes beliefs and preferably the actions of stakeholders (i.e. managers, consumers, policymakers and academics) (Pauwels *et al.*, 2024; Redgrave *et al.*, 2023). Against this backdrop, societal impact has emerged as both a pressing challenge and an opportunity for business schools to reorient their missions and practices.

In Europe, this shift has been accelerated by systemic reforms in higher education. Broader European frameworks, such as the European Research Area (https://researchandinnovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en.com) and Horizon Europe (https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en), explicitly call for academic institutions to contribute directly to societal goals, ranging from sustainability and inclusivity to innovation and resilience. The European Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment seeks to drive systemic reform of research assessment to advance research quality and impact by recognizing diverse outputs and practices (<https://coara.org/>). In terms of incentivizing structures but also norm setting, the Dutch initiative *Recognition and Rewards* exemplifies how national policy can reshape academic incentives by encouraging scholars to balance excellence in research with societal engagement and impact (<https://recognitionrewards.nl/>). Recognition and Rewards is a national career reform program that changes hiring, promotion and tenure evaluations by valuing diversified academic profiles, such as strengths in research, teaching, leadership and team science and also rewarding societal impact, rather than expecting uniform excellence across all dimensions, alongside traditional research outputs.

These developments call for a reconceptualization of “impact” and its various forms, as well as for deliberate, proactive strategies to integrate such definitions into institutional processes.

In a similar vein, accreditation systems for business schools, such as AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA, are placing growing emphasis on demonstrating actual use and benefit, rather than relying mainly on proxy metrics and simple counts. Therefore, accreditation is not an end goal; it functions as a governance scaffold that enables impact-by-design and communicates legitimacy to external stakeholders (Avolio and Benzaquen, 2020; Lagrosen, 2017; Kundu and Majumdar, 2020).

Our disciplinary background in marketing and service research provides a particularly relevant lens through which to address these calls. Both fields are grounded in stakeholder orientation, co-creation and value-in-use perspectives, which resonate strongly with the broader idea of societal impact. Marketing scholarship has long grappled with the tension between creating shareholder value and fostering societal well-being, while service research has developed conceptual and methodological tools to study interactions, collaborations and transformative outcomes (e.g. Verleye *et al.*, 2017). This orientation informs our approach to defining and operationalizing societal impact in business schools, based on the research they conduct and the education they provide.

This paper develops a practice-oriented definition of societal impact for business schools and reframes it as the ongoing process of societal impacting. We share lessons derived from

the Dutch experience in higher education and offer insights applicable across Europe and beyond. Our guiding question is: How can business schools systematically design, implement and refine frameworks that incentivize, measure and reward the societal impact of business researchers and educators? To address this question, we discuss different views on impact, advance a perspective on societal impacting and identify essential building blocks to guide the process of societal impacting. By doing so, we contribute to the ongoing debate on how business schools can move from recognition toward relevance and from being perceived as do-gooders to genuinely doing good in society.

2. Context of the Dutch Business School

The role of Dutch universities, as in many other countries, has undergone significant change in recent decades. While knowledge creation (through research) and knowledge dissemination (through education) remain at the core, the importance and visibility of societal impact have grown considerably. Where business and public engagement have always been an integral part of a university's role, societal impact was often not explicitly defined, let alone evaluated. More recently, a broad range of stakeholders, including government, funding agencies and society at large, have called for greater accountability in making impact both visible and tangible and for universities to act as direct partners in addressing grand societal challenges across all disciplines.

The Association of Universities in The Netherlands, which represents all 14 Dutch universities, recently launched its 2025–2028 strategy (UNL, 2025), in which they identify increasing societal impact as the number one priority. Several initiatives have been launched to advance this agenda. The Dutch universities are strong advocates of Open Science, as articulated in the national Open Science agenda (UNL, 2023), which promotes openness in data, publications and collaboration. Open Science is seen as a key facilitator of knowledge sharing and a driver of research quality, efficiency and (interdisciplinary) cooperation. While Open Science does not in itself equal impact, it is a critical enabler of it.

Another major development is the Recognition and Rewards program, a nationwide reform of academic career assessment. Traditionally, (individual) academic performance was primarily evaluated on research metrics, such as publications and journal prestige, and to a lesser extent, teaching contributions. The new system explicitly introduces diverse career paths and evaluation criteria, valuing contributions in five domains: research, education, impact (societal/economic relevance), leadership and patient care (for medical faculties). This explicit recognition of impact as a formal career track not only signals a shift in the academic landscape but also serves as a call to action for institutions and individuals to embed societal impact more deeply in their work. Similar policy developments can be observed across Europe. At the European level, frameworks such as Horizon Europe explicitly position societal impact and stakeholder engagement as core evaluation criteria for publicly funded research (European Commission, 2021), and the European University Association has documented a broad shift among universities toward embedding impact in institutional strategies rather than treating it as an individual or peripheral activity (EUA, 2022). The Dutch context is distinctive in that this emphasis has been translated into a nationwide reform of academic career assessment through the Recognition and Rewards program, thereby formalizing impact-related roles and responsibilities at the institutional level.

A further characteristic of the Dutch context is the embeddedness of business schools, or in our case, Schools of Business and Economics, within comprehensive universities, rather than as stand-alone institutions. This structure can pose some challenges, but in the context of impact, it also creates major opportunities. Being part of a larger academic ecosystem means access to interdisciplinary knowledge and partnerships, which are essential when tackling societal grand

challenges that transcend disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, it is important to recognize that impact can also be realized at smaller scales and within specific disciplines, underscoring that every school today has opportunities to contribute meaningfully.

Finally, the Dutch system is defined by its reliance on public funding as the primary source of university income. Notably, this funding has declined substantially over the past 20 years (<https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/onderwerpen/financien/feiten-en-cijfers>). The biggest parameter determining funding is education (based on market shares determined by student enrolments and degree completions), and research is second. Next to the state, there are other institutions that support research, but these are often competitive (i.e. grant structures). However, despite the growing emphasis on impact in policy and evaluation frameworks (Cornuel, Thomas, and Wood, 2024), there is still no formal structural funding attached to impact activities. This gap between expectations and funding provision presents a major challenge for Dutch universities and for business schools in particular as they seek to integrate impact as a core academic responsibility. Before continuing the discussion on how to create impact, it is important to discuss the various types of impact and our perspective on this.

3. All impact is not equal

The concept of societal impact has gained salience across higher education, management research and policy, yet, like many emerging constructs, it is approached through diverse and sometimes fragmented lenses. Empirical studies of business schools confirm this fragmentation. For example, Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo (2022) show that business schools adopt heterogeneous, largely activity-based interpretations of societal impact shaped by accreditation requirements, with limited consensus on definition or measurement. In this paper, we deliberately use the term societal impact rather than the narrower notion of social impact, as it encompasses not only social dimensions but also economic, environmental and cultural contributions of business schools (Dotti and Walczyk, 2022; Fecher and Hebing, 2021). While recent work has advanced a definition of social impact in business research that focuses on value creation for people as the primary end goal (Russell-Bennett and Reid, 2026), we intentionally adopt the broader notion of societal impact to reflect our focus on systemic, multi-level change across economic, environmental and institutional domains. To improve clarity, Table 1 synthesizes recent definitions, ranging from outcome-oriented views (impact as change or benefit) to process-oriented views (co-creation, reflexivity and collaboration), highlighting the need for conceptual precision. Traditionally, impact has been equated with academic quality indicators such as publication counts and citations. Much of the discussion on impact here focused on knowledge dissemination after publication (Macinnis *et al.*, 2020), with little involvement of different stakeholders in the early stages of research. Table 1 shows that when definitions explicitly address societal dimensions, a consistent theme is engagement with stakeholders beyond academia. At the same time, definitions differ in emphasis. For example, whether they foreground measurable outcomes, adopt a normative orientation or explicitly align with grand challenges and global goals such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Taken together, the definitions indicate a shift from viewing impact mainly as an end-state (change/benefit) toward viewing it as a practice shaped by interaction, collaboration and reflexivity.

Visibility via media or advisory roles may raise awareness but should not be mistaken for impact; rather, impact should be understood as durable changes in practices or outcomes (Haley and Jack, 2023). Building on critiques of primarily outcome-oriented definitions, we reframe societal impact in business school research as *societal impacting*: an ongoing, co-created process that enables durable positive change in society. In this manuscript, “durable positive change in society” refers to changes such as improvements in workforce well-being,

Table 1. Definitions of impact

Source	Impact type	Outcome/ process/ hybrid- oriented view	Definition/conceptualization	Operationalization
Jaworski et al. (2011)	Managerial relevance	Outcome	Managerial relevance (impact) is the present or future influence of research on managerial thinking and/or action	<i>Unit:</i> managers/organizations <i>Mechanism:</i> influence on managerial thinking and/or action (present or future) <i>Evidence:</i> specify the intended “route to impact” by aligning timing (present/future) and nature (thinking/ action)
MacInnis et al. (2020)	Broad impact (consumer research)	Outcome	Broad impact is the ability of consumer research to influence stakeholders beyond the academic marketing community	<i>Unit:</i> stakeholders beyond the academic marketing community (e.g. media, influencer industry) <i>Mechanism:</i> research reaches and shapes external audiences <i>Evidence:</i> documented contributions/ uptake outside academia (e.g. media and influencer ecosystems)
Fecher and Hebing (2021)	Societal impact	Outcome	Societal impact is the benefit that research generates for the economy, individual well-being, the environment and culture	<i>Unit:</i> societal/economic/cultural actors affected by research <i>Mechanism:</i> impact unfolds from research products to use and, ultimately, benefits <i>Evidence:</i> evidence of use and resulting benefits (not proxy visibility metrics alone)
Findler (2021)	Sustainability impact	Outcome	Sustainability impact is evidenced when research outputs are taken up outside academia and contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs)	<i>Unit:</i> society and environment as reflected in sustainable development (SD) objectives <i>Mechanism:</i> uptake of research outputs outside academia to support SD <i>Evidence:</i> qualitative impact cases mapped to SD/SDG-related objectives
Dotti and Walczyk (2022)	Societal impact	Process	Societal impact is a social, political and value-oriented activity that requires researcher reflexivity regarding research goals and key relationships	<i>Unit:</i> societal actors, including marginalized communities (distinguishing societal vs social impact) <i>Mechanism:</i> productive interactions (co-production/co-creation) plus non-academic dissemination <i>Evidence:</i> mixed assessment, qualitative evaluation of interactions complemented by quantitative alternative metrics (e.g. altmetrics)
Doh et al. (2023)	Societal impact	Outcome	Societal impact is the production of meaningful, rigorous evidence-based research that inspires action and positive change for society	<i>Unit:</i> communities, economies, environments and other societal actors (e.g. households, firms, workers and governments) <i>Mechanism:</i> evidence-based research that motivates action and change <i>Evidence:</i> observable changes among affected actors and systems

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Impact type	Outcome/ process/ hybrid- oriented view	Definition/conceptualization	Operationalization
AACSB (2023)	Social impact	Hybrid	Social impact refers to mission- and strategy-guided actions through which a school positively influences society at local, regional, national and international levels	<i>Unit:</i> society at local, regional, national and international levels <i>Mechanism:</i> mission- and strategy-guided initiatives undertaken by the school <i>Evidence:</i> documented initiatives/ outcomes reviewed across the accreditation cycle (AACSB Standard 9)
Schauerte et al. (2023)	Managerial impact	Hybrid	Managerial relevance is a project's potential to influence managerial decision-making and thinking; managerial impact is the measurable effect of research on managerial thinking and business performance	<i>Unit:</i> managerial audiences and organizational practice <i>Mechanism:</i> research creates different relevance types (e.g. problem-solving, explicating, consolidating, forward-thinking) <i>Evidence:</i> relevance assessed via six criteria across appeal, validity and usefulness; impact tracked along the marketing science value chain (creation → conversion → application)
Haenlein and Jack (2025)	Academic, teaching, societal and managerial impact	Hybrid	Impact refers to the influence of research across four domains: academic impact (within academia), teaching impact (knowledge transmission to students), societal impact (public well-being/policy) and managerial impact (managerial practice and decision-making)	<i>Unit:</i> four stakeholder domains (academia, teaching/learners, society/ policymakers, managers) <i>Mechanism:</i> impact potential depends on rigor, relevance and resonance <i>Evidence:</i> stakeholder-specific indicators and long-term evidence emphasized as behavioral change
Wegener et al. (2025)	Pragmatic impacting	Process	Pragmatic impacting is the co-creation of knowledge and practice through relational, processual and recursive dynamics to address grand challenges	<i>Unit:</i> ecosystems involving academic and societal actors <i>Mechanism:</i> “impacting” as an ongoing co-creation process around evolving ends-in-view <i>Evidence:</i> process indicators such as collaboration, negotiation, reflexivity and iterative adjustment
DRC (https://impact.nwo.nl)	Societal impact	Outcome	Societal impact is cultural, economic, industrial, environmental or social change that is partly the result of research-generated knowledge and skills	<i>Unit:</i> private and public stakeholders engaged in or affected by research <i>Mechanism:</i> knowledge exchange links outputs to outcomes <i>Evidence:</i> outputs (direct insights) and outcomes (changes in behaviors, relationships, actions and activities resulting from using outputs)
Phillips et al. (2018)	Societal impact	Process	Societal impact arises from meaningful, reciprocal interactions (“productive interactions”) between academics and external stakeholders and should be assessed by tracing	<i>Unit:</i> researchers and external stakeholder groups (e.g. businesses, not-for-profits, governments, beneficiaries/end users)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Impact type	Outcome/ process/ hybrid- oriented view	Definition/conceptualization	Operationalization
			how research-related engagement and co-creation activities contribute to positive change over time	<i>Mechanism:</i> clusters of co-creation/ engagement activities between researchers and stakeholders; impact unfolds nonlinearly and often over long time horizons <i>Evidence:</i> mapping activities along a staged pipeline (topic creation → embeddedness → direct outputs → awareness → use), with “use/adoption by external stakeholders” as the stage where research most clearly translates into change
This study (2026)	Societal impacting	Process	Societal impacting is an ongoing, co-created and purpose-driven process through which business school researchers and educators collaborate with stakeholders to generate durable positive changes in societal systems and outcomes, rather than treating impact as a static, retrospective end-state	<i>Unit:</i> business school actors and societal stakeholders (e.g. managers, policymakers, consumers and communities) embedded in wider institutional and service ecosystems <i>Mechanism:</i> relational practices (collaboration/co-creation), iterative learning and adaptation and continuous negotiation around ends-in-view; resonance as the prerequisite that connects rigor and relevance to stakeholder thinking, feeling and acting <i>Evidence:</i> documented uptake and use by stakeholders, plus observable and sustained changes in practices and/or outcomes (e.g. social well-being and inclusion; economic resilience/ decision quality; environmental performance such as emissions/ resource use; cultural/institutional shifts in norms and routines)

inclusion or equity (social); more sustainable or resilient organizational performance and decision-making (economic); reductions in emissions, waste or resource use (environmental); and shifts in norms, capabilities or institutional practices (cultural). This reframing is crucial because it shifts attention away from retrospective measurement of outcomes toward the relational practices (e.g. in team science), iterative learning and stakeholder collaborations through which impact is continuously produced and sustained (Smit and Hessels, 2021; Wegener et al., 2025). Rather than seeing impact as a final state, impacting is a continuous negotiation between academic and societal actors around ends-in-view. Each step involves learning and adaptation, producing “small wins,” concrete, bounded, short-term and observable improvements (e.g. an adopted decision, practice or routine) that accumulate into larger societal change and, over time, systemic change.

Table 1 makes this development visible by synthesizing recent definitions in chronological order. Three trends stand out. First, definitions increasingly move from outcome-oriented views

(impact as change or benefit) toward more process-oriented views that emphasize how impact is generated through interaction, co-creation and reflexivity. Second, the implied unit of analysis expands beyond academia and managers to include broader societal stakeholder domains. Third, what counts as evidence shifts from proxy signals of reach or resonance (e.g. dissemination or visibility) toward indications of uptake, use and durable change. These trends help explain why “impact” cannot be treated as a single, stable construct and motivate our use of societal impacting to capture impact as an ongoing practice rather than only an end-state.

Consistent with recent work, we use “resonance” to denote the extent to which research connects with and reaches its intended stakeholder audiences, a prerequisite for turning rigor and relevance into actual behavioral change; this also aligns with editorial guidance that emphasizes proactively ensuring research reaches the intended audience with the intended message (e.g. [Haenlein and Jack, 2025](#); [Pauwels et al., 2024](#)).

We use a service lens because it explains how societal impact is produced: as value created in use through interactions among multiple actors, rather than as a linear transfer from research to society. This lens helps us specify the mechanisms that [Table 1](#) points to but does not theorize in detail stakeholder engagement, co-creation and iterative learning over time. It also provides a clear basis for operationalizing societal impacting in business schools by linking practices (interaction and resource integration) to evidence of durable change. The process perspective presented in this paper aligns with service research’s emphasis on value-in-use and co-created outcomes ([Vargo and Lusch, 2016](#)). From a service research standpoint, societal impact can be understood as a process of value co-creation among multiple (interdisciplinary) stakeholders ([Ostrom et al., 2015](#)). Service ecosystems theory emphasizes that value does not reside in isolated outputs but in the interactions and relationships among actors embedded in broader institutional arrangements. From this lens, societal impacting is relational as it unfolds through interactions between academia and stakeholders; recursive as outcomes feed back into the research process; collective as it requires cross-sector collaboration, often (but not by definition) interdisciplinary in nature; and purpose-driven as it is oriented toward addressing societal grand challenges. In line with a purpose-orientation view, we take purpose to integrate organizational logic (why we exist), identity (who we are) and strategy (what we do) to create transcendent stakeholder value, developed through a combined inside-out and outside-in approach ([Blocker et al., 2025](#)).

Empirical studies highlight that business schools rarely provide the institutional scaffolding needed for sustained societal impacting ([Godonoga et al., 2024](#)). As capturing societal impact is complex and largely disputed, performance management remains largely focused on publications, while co-creation activities are undervalued. Yet, recent examples show that when business schools embed impact goals into strategy, align incentives and partner with societal stakeholders, the capacity for meaningful societal change increases ([Cornuel et al., 2024](#)). Thus, the ecosystem view is essential as societal impacting thrives when supported by school structures, resource allocation and an infrastructure that facilitates collaboration.

Based on our literature review, we propose that societal impacting consists of three interrelated dimensions: co-creation and collaboration: jointly framing problems, generating solutions and sharing responsibility within teams and with stakeholders ([Fecher et al., 2021](#)); iterative learning and adaptation: continuous cycles of action and reflection that allow adjustments in light of stakeholder feedback and societal dynamics ([Wegener et al., 2025](#)); and resonance: pursuit of long-term positive change aligned with global goals, resisting the pressure for short-term proxies ([Haenlein and Jack, 2025](#)). These definitional differences have direct implications for measurement. Indicators commonly used for academic impact (e.g. citations) and visibility signals (e.g. media attention or advisory roles) may capture reach or awareness, but they do not demonstrate durable changes in practices or outcomes.

We, therefore, reframe societal impact in business school research as *societal impacting*: an ongoing, co-created process through which impact is produced and sustained over time via relational practices, iterative learning and collaboration with stakeholders. Table 1 is intended as a sense-making device for the discussion above. It synthesizes recent definitions in chronological order to show how thinking about impact develops over time: from primarily outcome-oriented definitions (impact as measurable change or benefit) toward more process-oriented views that emphasize how impact is generated through co-creation, reflexivity and collaboration. To support comparison across sources, the table separates Definition/Conceptualization (what each author means by impact) from Operationalization (the implied unit of analysis, the proposed mechanism of impact and what would count as evidence). This distinction helps explain why visibility indicators (e.g. dissemination or media attention) may signal reach or resonance but are not sufficient to demonstrate durable societal change. The patterns observed in Table 1 directly motivate our conceptual move from “impact” as an end-state to “impacting” as an ongoing practice, which underpins the architecture for societal impacting developed in the subsequent section.

4. Architecture for societal impacting

Figure 1 presents an architecture for shifting away from viewing impact as a static outcome to practicing impact as a dynamic process. It emphasizes that societal impacting requires a deliberate and continuous process. At its core, societal impacting unfolds through a recurring cycle of engaging with societal stakeholders, learning from these interactions, adapting research and educational practices in response and sustaining those changes over time as they become embedded in practices, relationships and institutions. The inner cycle captures the processual logic of societal impacting as it unfolds in practice. Surrounding this core process, the figure identifies six configuration elements that together constitute the institutional

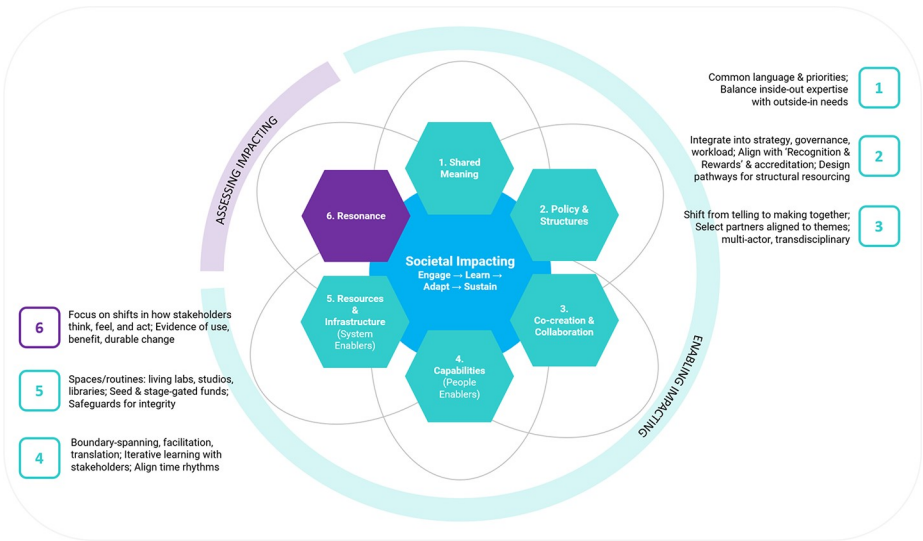


Figure 1. Societal impacting architecture: six configuration elements

architecture for societal impacting. The first five elements, Shared Meaning; Policy and Structures; Co-Creation and Collaboration; Capabilities; and Resources and Infrastructure, enable the engage–learn–adapt–sustain cycle by shaping the conditions under which it can occur, while the sixth element, Resonance, focuses on assessing whether and how these processes translate into durable change in how stakeholders think, feel or act. While our discussion may suggest a sequential ordering of elements, societal impacting is in reality experimental and iterative: an emergent strategy that advances through cycles of trial, error and adaptation. It evolves from the interplay of deliberate intent and unforeseen opportunities, a process of “learning while engaging” (Williams, 2025).

Taken together, this architecture is intended to support a shift from symbolic or visibility-oriented engagement toward societal impacting that produces use, benefit and durable change, emphasizing that it is the interaction of the full set of configuration elements over time, rather than any single element, that enables business schools to move from being perceived as “do-gooders” to demonstrably “doing good” in society.

4.1 Configuration element 1: develop a shared meaning of societal impact

The journey starts with developing a shared meaning of societal impact, ensuring that the academic community speaks a common language and embraces societal impacting as a guiding principle. A shared meaning helps the school avoid virtue signaling (“do-gooders”) and anchor its identity in use, benefit and durable change (“doing good”). With that, business schools must adopt a strategic orientation that balances “inside-out” contributions (what unique expertise the school can offer) with “outside-in” responsiveness (addressing the needs and challenges of society). Given that no institution can address all societal challenges simultaneously, it is imperative for business schools to establish clear priorities and concentrate their efforts on areas where they can generate the most distinctive and sustainable contributions. Such a focus will also allow for scaling more quickly and collectively than when having a fragmented strategy. Importantly, these strategic choices are not neutral. A business school’s mission, identity and institutional affiliations shape which societal challenges are prioritized and how societal impacting is configured in practice. Mission-driven institutions tend to make more explicit and sustained choices regarding focal domains (e.g. sustainability, inequality, health), target sectors and types of partnerships, thereby creating coherence across research, education and engagement activities. For example, the fossil-free commitment adopted by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam operationalized the university’s societal mission into concrete policy choices affecting partnerships, investment criteria and research collaboration (<https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about-vu-fossil-free>). Such mission-anchored decisions provide direction and boundaries for societal impacting, enabling focus rather than dispersion, and illustrate how shared meaning is translated into institutional action.

4.2 Configuration element 2: policy and structures

Shared meaning must be anchored in policy and structures at both the institutional and (inter)national levels. Without such anchoring, there is often a gap between articulated ambitions around societal impacting and the incentives, governance arrangements and resource allocations that shape everyday academic practice. Embedding societal impacting into strategies, governance and infrastructures helps bridge this gap, but ultimately, the current gap signals a significant hurdle to overcome. Business schools will have to make significant investments to enable impact. Yet, those activities would typically be more focused on knowledge dissemination to relevant stakeholders and activities that would be more discrete and incidental in nature. Embracing impact as a core activity next to as well as in relation to education and research requires explicating ownership and governance (Cornuel, Thomas, and Wood, 2024; Godonoga et al., 2024). This includes alignment with frameworks such as

“Recognition and Rewards” and accreditation standards (Haenlein and Jack, 2025; <https://www.nwo.nl/en/definitions-knowledge-utilisation>), as well as internal strategies that signal societal engagement as a formal priority. In moving from an initial investment strategy to financial resilience, business schools must design pathways that aim to allow for structural resourcing of societal impacting (Salter *et al.*, 2017). Otherwise, performance systems drive out engagement activities through opportunity costs (Fleming and Harley, 2023).

4.3 Configuration element 3: co-creation and collaboration

Element 3 describes the collaboration setting and co-creation processes (how collaboration happens in practice), not the people capabilities (Element 4) or the system-level resources and infrastructure that enable these processes (Element 5). Societal impacting is inherently relational and reciprocal, as it emerges from ongoing interaction, collaboration and recursive learning rather than one-way dissemination (Wegener *et al.*, 2025; Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). This shifts the center of gravity from “telling” to “making together” (MacInnis *et al.*, 2020; Schauerte *et al.*, 2023). Within a focused strategy, business schools should identify meaningful stakeholders and then prioritize and select partners whose problem framings align with the school’s thematic priorities, thereby cultivating collaborative relationships that generate mutual value and embed research within ecosystems of practice. In light of societal needs, “grand challenges” or so-called “wicked problems” have created renewed attention for interdisciplinary collaborations and team science (Wegener *et al.*, 2025). Yet, these are especially demanding: they often involve larger, multi-actor constellations, require teams to bridge epistemic and methodological differences, reconcile incentives and time horizons, navigate governance and develop shared languages. At the same time, building such continuous ecosystems builds trust, surfaces evolving societal needs and stimulates new quests for impact. Examples include partnership platforms such as living labs and co-design environments that provide a structured setting for sustained collaboration.

While such challenges may represent the most ambitious form of impact, we want to stress that meaningful impact can occur at any scale: tightly scoped collaborations that solve bounded problems in specific organizations, communities or sectors are equally consequential when they lead to durable change.

4.4 Configuration element 4: capabilities (people enablers)

Element 4 concerns who is enabled and how (roles, skills, incentives, leadership support), rather than the co-creation work itself. Achieving societal impacting requires integrating impact into our way of doing and thus fostering an impact culture (Cornuel *et al.*, 2024; Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo, 2022). This impact culture must equip faculty and students to engage confidently with external partners while safeguarding academic integrity. Given the importance of societal impacting as a process that requires continuous involvement of external stakeholders, boundary-spanning capabilities, including skills for stakeholder engagement and dialogue, are key. While formalized skill-development trainings can be helpful (Smit and Hessels, 2021), developing those capabilities is also an iterative process of mutual learning from and with stakeholders. This deep engagement will also create a shared understanding of the different time rhythms of various partners in the ecosystem. Academic research is typically long-term oriented, fueled by curiosity to explore and understand, with timelines that are not determined by hard deadlines and no predefined outcome deliverables. Societal partners are often short-term-focused, with an emphasis on tangible deliverables with immediate payoff. In an ideal world, all stakeholders involved would have a full understanding of each other’s way of working and be accommodating to those differences. In reality, external partners’ business models might not allow for this, and business schools will have to learn to adopt a more flexible

way of working to accommodate at least partly these differences in speed. Another specific bottleneck, yet again, is communication barriers: academics are used to publish their work in outlets that are read and understood by only a very select audience, especially non-academics. We hardly consider how our knowledge translates to practice, let alone how practitioners engage with the knowledge we create in a meaningful and effective way that consequently creates impact. Stimulating immersive learning from and with different stakeholders for academics to understand the value of their work from the stakeholder's perspective can contribute to better alignment, as well as creative avenues for impact.

4.5 Configuration element 5: resources and infrastructure (system-level enablers)

Element 5 concerns the system-level resources and infrastructure that enable and sustain co-creation processes (e.g. iterative cycles, feedback loops, shared decision-making), supported by the capabilities outlined in Element 4. Delivering societal impact at scale depends on system-level enablers that make collaboration and team science routine rather than exceptional. This calls for supportive infrastructures such as spaces and routines to engage, convene and co-design with stakeholders (Godonoga *et al.*, 2024; Fecher *et al.*, 2021). Business schools should professionalize the relationship management of external stakeholders and alumni by establishing a dedicated engagement function with clear roles, relationship mapping and service standards, ensuring that collaborative partnerships persist beyond individual contacts and can be mobilized at scale. Most important here is to consider what is needed to move from *ad hoc* interactions to institutionalized and sustained ways of working, fitting the cultural and societal context of the institute.

Financially, expectations for impact are rising while structural funding remains limited, producing a persistent gap between aspirations and resources. Additionally, this creates tension between time invested in societal impacting and traditional academic performance metrics. For business schools early in their societal impacting journey, the emphasis should be on iteration and experimentation. This can be facilitated by small seed and matching funds that enable scoping workshops and early co-creation, while progressive incentives tie internal allocations to stage-gated progress along the pathway from engagement to uptake to outcomes (Haenlein and Jack, 2025). Over the longer term, monetizing a substantive share of societal impacting activity is essential to sustain effort at scale. The goal is to move from discretionary projects to a default mode in which societal impacting is hard-wired into role design, workload and quality assurance so that it is resourced by design rather than added on.

Finally, impact with integrity remains a first principle (Smit and Hessels, 2021). This calls for instituting safeguards (i.e. policies, processes and roles) to protect academic independence and manage conflicts of interest.

4.6 Configuration element 6: resonance

While conceptualizing societal impact is already a challenging task, determining how to assess and capture the societal impact generated by business schools proves to be even more complex. This complexity arises from the fact that impact may be direct or indirect, immediate or delayed and is often embedded in reciprocal relationships between business schools and the ecosystems they operate in (Kalika *et al.*, 2016; Jaworski, 2011). Previous work illustrates how this complexity is currently addressed in practice. Business schools tend to operationalize societal impact through activity-based categories such as research, curriculum, co-curricular initiatives and community engagement (e.g. Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo, 2022). While these approaches help make impact visible and auditable, they remain largely compliance-oriented and privilege what is easiest to document rather than what produces durable change.

It is also important to realize that assessment frameworks are never neutral instruments: they actively shape what is understood as valuable research and practice (Smit and Hessels, 2021). The measurement framework should remain a means rather than an end and should not overshadow the primary objective of creating societal impact. Therefore, the central principle in guiding our efforts to improve assessment is that measurement systems and administrative procedures should not eclipse the foundational objective of generating positive societal change. Centering resonance, defined as shifts in how stakeholders think, feel and act, moves business schools from do-gooders (visible outputs) to doing good (influenced outcomes), evidencing use, benefit and durable change over proxy metrics (Fecher and Hebing, 2021; Dutch Research Council (DRC) Impact Approach) and, in turn, from compliance to transformation. Business School accreditation frameworks (such as AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA) increasingly encourage evidence of use and benefit rather than proxy counts alone, aligning with a resonance-oriented approach. We, therefore, treat accreditation not as a target in itself but as a governance scaffold that supports impact-by-design and signals legitimacy to external stakeholders (Avolio and Benzaquen, 2020; Lagrosen, 2017; Kundu and Majumdar, 2020).

Smit and Hessels (2021), in their review of ten impact evaluation methods, demonstrate that models range from linear approaches to cyclical and co-production perspectives (see Table 2). Linear models emphasize accountability through input–output chains but risk narrowing impact to easily measurable proxies (e.g. LinkedIn impressions). Cyclical models acknowledge feedback loops and iterative learning, as seen in Business School Impact System (BSIS)-type frameworks. By contrast, co-production models such as SIAMPI, contribution mapping and public value mapping embed societal value directly into the research process, highlighting collaboration, mutual learning and shared responsibility. For example, business school service researchers co-design and pilot a social-robot support service with patients and health-care professionals, iteratively refining it based on user feedback and adoption. This perspective aligns with our view of *societal impacting*, a verb that captures the iterative, collaborative and processual dynamics of engaging with stakeholders to generate change. Evaluation should focus on contribution, i.e. how research plausibly supports and shapes change through interactions, uptake and practice changes, rather than attribution, which implies isolating strict causal effects (Dotti and Walczyk, 2022; Păunescu et al., 2022). In practice, this points to an evidence architecture built around curated impact cases that narrate contribution pathways, mixed-method indicators and external corroboration (e.g. stakeholder testimonials), with explicit recognition of time lags between activities, outcomes and longer term impacts (cf. the impact pathway logic in DRC; Kalika and Shenton, 2020). This also advocates mixed approaches and triangulation, selecting methods to fit the scope (Dotti and Walczyk, 2022), and includes practitioner perspectives to clarify what constitutes academia’s value of the contribution (Baldridge et al., 2004). Tools such as EFMD–FNEGE’s BSIS can help structure a school’s societal-impact evidence portfolio (activities, outputs, uptake/adoption and outcomes), yet they remain self-assessment frameworks rather than benchmarking tools and can be resource-intensive (Kalika and Shenton, 2020). To avoid narrowing impact to what is most measurable, assessment should foreground the quality of interactions, mutual learning and recursive co-creation of value (Smit and Hessels, 2021; Kalika and Cornuel, 2023; Wegener et al., 2025).

To illustrate how the proposed architecture for societal impacting operates in practice, we present a brief vignette that integrates the six configuration elements outlined in Figure 1. The vignette demonstrates how societal impacting unfolds as a

Table 2. Models of impact assessment for business schools

Model of impact assessment	Key characteristics	Examples	Implications for business schools
Linear	Focus on inputs–outputs–outcomes chain; assume direct causality; and make it relatively easy to quantify	Traditional bibliometrics; accreditation metrics distinguishing inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes	Can demonstrate accountability but risks narrowing impact to measurable proxies
Cyclical	Emphasizes feedback loops between research and use; acknowledges iterative learning and adaptation	Pathway approach: adaptive evaluation frameworks that track both outputs and feedback (e.g. BSIS)	Highlights adaptation and learning but may still underplay relational dynamics
Co-production	Views societal value as embedded in the research process itself; emphasizes collaboration, mutual learning and shared responsibility	SIAMPI, contribution mapping, public value mapping, stakeholder engagement and co-created impact trajectories	Encourages viewing impact as “impacting”: an ongoing, processual and co-created journey with stakeholders

Source(s): Based on Smith and Hessels (2021)

recursive, co-creative process and how the different elements jointly contribute to generating durable change. It thereby complements the conceptual discussion by providing a concrete example of how business schools can move from designing for impact to practicing societal impacting (see Vignette 1).

4.7 Vignette 1: societal impacting in practice

A service-robot ecosystem

A business school works with a health-care organization to improve patients' daily structure using a service robot (based on [Mahr et al., 2025](#)). This is a societal impacting because value is created with stakeholders through iterative learning and implementation and assessed by durable change rather than one-off outputs. The initiative is embedded in a broader ecosystem involving care providers, a technology partner, a health insurer and research partners, jointly addressing challenges of care quality and staff shortages in long-term care.

- (1) *Shared meaning*: Partners agree on a shared meaning of impact: progress is evidenced by uptake, adoption and sustained improvements in patient well-being. For example, success is not defined by pilot completion but by whether patients integrate robot-supported routines into their daily lives and whether caregivers observe improved structure and reduced workload.
- (2) *Policy and structures*: This shared understanding is anchored in governance arrangements such as a joint steering group, clearly defined decision rights and alignment with broader strategic objectives. These structures ensure coordination across organizations and continuity beyond the pilot phase.
- (3) *Co-creation and collaboration*: Co-creation and collaboration take place with a technology partner, health-care professionals, patient representatives and an insurer to design robot-supported routines (meals, medication and physiotherapy). These routines are iteratively developed and adapted in practice, based on ongoing feedback from patients and frontline caregivers, ensuring alignment with individual needs and care contexts.
- (4) *Capabilities*: Developing societal impacting requires building capabilities such as boundary-spanning roles and facilitation skills. For instance, caregivers are trained to configure and use the robot, while dedicated roles emerge to coordinate between clinical practice, technology development and research, enabling effective collaboration across organizational boundaries.
- (5) *Resources and infrastructure*: Sustained collaboration is supported through enabling infrastructure, including living lab cycles and formal data agreements. This also involves ICT systems that allow for safe data exchange and ongoing monitoring and adjustment of the robot in care environments.
- (6) *Resonance*: Resonance is tracked along the pathway from interaction → uptake → adoption → outcomes, documenting “small wins” that accumulate over time. Initial interactions (e.g. reminders or simple conversations) evolve into routine use, ultimately contributing to improved daily structure for patients and adjustments in care delivery practices.

5. Moving forward

5.1 *Some reflections*

Our goal for this paper was to outline a societal impacting architecture. While one could argue that this has always been the core purpose of academic institutions, the landscape is now changing. Business schools globally are facing increasing pressure to demonstrate their purpose, relevance and legitimacy in a world marked by global challenges, including geopolitical instability and economic uncertainty. This new context demands that institutions shift their focus from producing results by their research and education, measured purely as “league table” outputs (e.g. citation counts or institutional rankings), to demonstrating meaningful outcomes that benefit society (Cornuel *et al.*, 2024). It challenges business schools to take a more visionary perspective on how we can (re)define and realize our contribution to society. We reiterate our stance that “doing good” at our Schools of Business and Economics can take many different shapes and forms, and they each create value in their own way. However, the societal dialogue needs to continue, both internally and with our external partners and stakeholders, to implement our roadmap. Our proposed architecture is intended to help avoid the “do-gooder” trap of proxy visibility in favor of cumulative, context-sensitive value creation. Embracing the practice of societal impacting cannot merely be a process of incremental adaptations of existing ways of working. It necessitates a conceptual shift from viewing impact as a discrete, unidirectional outcome to understanding it as an emergent, relational and ongoing process of co-creating (Wegener *et al.*, 2025). This might be considered a more provocative stance than most business schools are currently adopting, as this calls for scholars to view their profession as syncretic, balancing analysis of judgments of fact (the way the world is) with articulation of judgments of value (the way the world ought to be) in a responsible way (Cornuel *et al.*, 2024). This also poses challenges that need further investigation to understand the implementation and (potentially unintended) consequences of transitioning to *societal impacting* as an explicit strategic goal.

5.2 *Unintended consequences and mitigation strategies*

Calls for a focus on societal impact have indisputably broadened the merit of business schools, yet poorly designed and implemented impact strategies can generate unintended effects that ultimately undermine scholarly quality and public value, requiring mitigation strategies to minimize these undesirable effects. A first potential unintended consequence is instrumentalization: once societal impact becomes a scorecard, measurement practices begin to shape behavior in ways that privilege what is visible over what is valuable. Martin (2011) already warned that such regimes can create a “Frankenstein monster” of indicators that invite gaming and symbolic compliance. Meanwhile, pressures across the field make business schools look alike and focus on what’s easy to audit, crowding out place-based goals and plural ways of serving society (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These dynamics can reinforce research output-oriented proxies (e.g. mentions, downloads) at the expense of evidence about use, outcomes and change, despite widely used distinctions between outputs and outcomes in research assessment guidance. In education, indicators such as enrollment volumes can become more salient than evidence of graduate quality and longer-term contributions. To counter instrumentalization and proxy drift, research evaluation should move beyond visibility counts by combining contribution narratives with evidence of use (who used what, for which decisions) and results (practice change, institutionalization), prioritizing resonance shifts in stakeholder thinking and behavior over simple counts (Fecher and Hebing, 2021; Pauwels *et al.*, 2024). Impact assessment systems that include educational impact (e.g. BSIS) should be used diagnostically rather than prescriptively to support

learning and alignment with place-based missions while avoiding audit-driven mission drift (Kalika and Shenton, 2020; Kalika and Cornuel, 2023).

A second, closely related concern is the displacement of long-horizon and discovery-oriented research. Engagement takes time, and short reporting cycles bias attention toward rapid, demonstrable activity. Evidence from the UK indicates that academics perceive real opportunity costs between publication and impact work, with performance systems often tipping the scales toward the former (Salter *et al.*, 2017). Proposals to assess impact over the long run aim to curb short-termism, but they are not yet built into reward systems or workload plans (Haenlein and Jack, 2025). To protect long-horizon and discovery-oriented work, business schools should adopt portfolio logic at individual and institutional levels, with explicit support for foundational and longitudinal projects and stage-gated funding, seed (scoping and partner framing), pilot (co-created prototypes) and scale (institutionalization), so short-cycle deliverables do not cannibalize long-term inquiry; longer assessment windows and pacing should be reflected in workload plans and reviews (Haenlein and Jack, 2025; Salter *et al.*, 2017).

Third, the invisible labor of societal impacting is frequently underestimated. Boundary-spanning work, such as building relationships, facilitating co-creation and translating knowledge, rarely fits neatly into standard metrics, with burdens sometimes falling disproportionately on early-career and non-permanent staff. Empirical accounts from business schools describe how collegial norms and informal expectations mask substantial uncounted work, creating risks of overwork and inequity (Fleming and Harley, 2023). A team science or team learning (Edmondson and Harvey, 2025) approach makes this work visible, distributed and professionally supported: impact is produced by heterogeneous roles (e.g. principal investigators, disciplinary specialists, knowledge brokers, community liaisons, project managers and data stewards) whose contributions should be planned and credited at the team level. Recognition and Rewards and workload models should therefore:

- evaluate outputs and outcomes at the level of the collaboration (e.g. interdisciplinary academic teams and their collaborations with societal stakeholders) rather than only individual CVs;
- define role profiles and career tracks for knowledge brokers (focused on translation and connection) and impact producers (focused on implementation and uptake);
- recognize resource coordination time and boundary work as core tasks;
- use contribution statements/credit taxonomies and team charters to assign responsibilities;
- provide team-based training in stakeholder mapping, facilitation and change management;
- offer tailored support for grant writing; and
- ensure promotion routes recognize equivalent forms of excellence across research, education, impact and leadership (Fleming and Harley, 2023; Merga and Mason, 2020; Smit and Hessels, 2021).

Fourth, in initial deliberations, stakeholders often argue that greater external embeddedness with powerful partners may compromise academic independence. Close collaboration with corporate or governmental actors may subtly skew problem framing, limit publication or narrow critical perspectives, legitimacy risks long recognized in debates on the role and impact of business schools (Pettigrew and Starkey, 2016). From a service-ecosystem perspective, co-creation in multi-actor constellations also potentially introduces power asymmetries: when well-resourced stakeholders dominate, design choices can marginalize community voices and induce imbalances in service networks

(Ostrom *et al.*, 2015; Verleye *et al.*, 2017). Academic independence is a non-negotiable cornerstone of the university. To protect it and counter power asymmetries, all external partnerships must include enforceable academic-independence clauses and a public-interest test, with ethics/oversight bodies empowered to challenge problem framing and identify conflicts of interest. Contracts must codify shared framing, decision rights, data stewardship, benefit sharing and exit options; stakeholder panels must embed under-represented voices; and independent oversight must continuously audit for mission drift and capture (Pettigrew and Starkey, 2016; Ostrom *et al.*, 2015; Verleye *et al.*, 2017). Together, these safeguards operationalize a shift from impact to impacting that favors durable change over proxy visibility (Wegener *et al.*, 2025).

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Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT 5.0 and Notebook LM) assisted with structural refinement and language editing (spelling and grammar). All outputs were critically reviewed and selectively incorporated by the authors, who accept full responsibility for the manuscript.

Author contribution

Authorship is in alphabetical order, both authors contributed equally.

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Further reading

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