

Rebuilding social license by “working with governments and for society”: a strategy for a business school in a capital city

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to argue that for business schools to regain social license, their teaching and research must create positive social impact. The study adopts the perspective of an applied business schools, based in a capital city. It discusses a strategy to regain public support and to attract new students and new research partners.

Design/methodology/approach – This study’s strategy is based on economic analysis and concepts of social license, using a balanced scorecard approach. The implementation of the strategy is informed by co-design principles and behavioural economics, in particular the UK BIT EAST framework.

Findings – The study identifies three channels for achieving social impact to restore social license. Firstly, through the fields of research conducted – the application of business knowledge to social enterprise and government delivering social services; secondly, through broadening participation of students in business studies; and thirdly, taking an active role in informing public policy decisions. The study illustrates how co-design principles and behavioural economic approaches can be used to implement the strategy.

Research limitations/implications – This is a conceptual paper providing a process to develop a social impact strategy for a business school in an applied university. While the authors are confident that early signs indicate the success of the strategy, the study does not have or can present conclusive data. In this sense the study is speculative.

Practical implications – This study provides two sets of questions – “check lists” – that allow business schools to design their contributions to social impact in a bid to rebuild social license and help to attract students and research partners.

Social implications – The study identifies three channels through which business schools can provide value to society.

Originality/value – This study outlines channels for creating social impact by business schools in applied universities based in capital cities to restore social license and illustrates how such a strategy can be implemented.

Keywords Social impact, Social licence, Strategy, Social enterprise, Student populations, Public policy, Student demand, Research partnerships

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Australia's universities and business schools have come under financial pressure in the post-COVID years, with many facing, or having gone through, academic staff loss, and school and program closures ([Universities Australia, 2025](#)). Up until the mid-2010s, geographic location limited competition, since then online delivery and new EdTech services changed the tertiary education environment and had a strong impact on financial viability ([Kaplan, 2024](#)). COVID lockdowns have sped up the process and created financial challenges for many universities. Several commentators note that the recent shortfall in university funding in Australia ([Universities Australia, 2024](#)) is a direct result of that loss of social licence ([Sullivan, 2025](#); [Winkler, 2025](#), [Williams, 2025](#), see [Chen and Vanclay, 2023](#), for an academic article). In this article we argue that a business school that focusses on “Working with governments and for society” can be a differentiator in a competitive market, rebuild domestic and international student demand, and at the same time help return the social licence that re-establishes public support.

We write this article as the Executive Dean, Uwe Dulleck, of a faculty that includes a business school, and Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra (UC), the Hon. Bill Shorten. UC is a young, applied university that prides itself on reducing inequality [1] and being among the most accessible universities in the country. Analysing how to regain social licence is crucial for university leadership. For the University of Canberra local accessibility was a guarantor of social licence, similar to many other smaller and young universities outside of major population centres. In the age of online teaching and satellite campuses this has become less important for local communities. A strategy to focus on working with governments and for society in a capital city can be a differentiator in a busy market to rebuild national and international student demand – a perspective particularly important to Faculty leadership. Such a strategy will lead to business school research and teaching being more focused on operations and service delivery of government, government agencies, not-for-profits and social enterprise. This contrasts with a focus on private business and large corporations that is common among most business schools ([Redgrave et al., 2023](#)).

In case of the University of Canberra, the pressures identified above led to significant changes in the leadership of the university – Dulleck joined the university just over two years ago, Shorten just over one year before this article was written. In that sense, fresh eyes on the ongoing financial crisis created an opportunity to consider strategy. While the University of Canberra is a case is one of an applied university based in a capital city, it has implications for the sector. Both authors recognise the importance of the university sector, for the nation's fortunes, that are well established in economics (see for example [Valero and Van Reenen, 2019](#); [Williams, 2025](#)).

We will first discuss the *why* of social impact of a business school, then discuss the *what* – what can or needs to be done – before discussing the *how*. Our strategy is a place-based strategy needs to be specific to an organisation. For that reason we have focussed on the specific case of University of Canberra. We argue that social impact can be achieved via education and research content, a customer focus on attracting students from diverse backgrounds, and engagement with public debates and policy design. These elements are identified by [Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo \(2022\)](#) as dimensions of social impact. We foresee a positive future for business schools in Australia that recognise all dimensions of social impact. Such a strategy to regain social license will help secure public and private funding support, attract new students and new research partners.

Why is the concept of social licence and the need to have social impact important for the sector?

In this section we develop the argument on why social licence matters and how it relates to business schools and universities. The definition of social impact is contested ([Bree and Johnston, 2025](#)).

For this article we use the term in line with [Bassi \(2013\)](#) as the social value generated by an organisation. [Islam \(2020\)](#) defines it as impact that achieves positive change in pressing social issues. [Russell-Bennett and Reid \(2026\)](#) define it, in the context of business research and business schools, as creation of value for society through business scholarly activities, including value for individuals, organisations and society. Social impact can be measured ([Bormman, 2013](#), [Raba, 2019](#)), and several authors show how important social license is to build community support (see for example [Dare et al., 2014](#)).

Increased funding needs social licence

Business school teaching and research can successfully be offered by private universities, research organisations or other training organisations including facilities run in-house by large organisations. However, there is agreement that given the large positive spillover from education and research, and the need to involve new student groups, there is a need for government investment in universities (for Australia the case is made by [Sullivan, 2025](#), an international perspective can be found in [Chen and Vanclay, 2023](#), and [Kaplan, 2024](#)).

For a long time, the needs of society to engage in tertiary education and conduct basic research, particularly in Australia, was minimal. It could be funded by limited public money alongside some philanthropic support. However, modern societies require lifelong learning ([Field, 2011](#)) as well as R&D to achieve economic growth and increased productivity ([Stokey, 1995](#); [Williams, 2025](#)). These drivers have led to ever-growing demands for financial support from government. For Australia, we include the underwriting of student debt through the Higher Education Contribution System (HECS) system ([Waghorne and Croucher, 2024](#)) as well as general government funding for universities, often referred to as block grant funding.

The declining social licence has been compounded by scandals such as wage theft, misconduct and academic governance (one perspective on this is presented in [Quiggin, 2025](#), another is [Williams, 2025](#)). The combination of these factors, along with the increasing expense of attending university and the cost-of-living crisis, creates a perfect storm for universities (see for example the recent blog post by [Herndon, 2024](#)). The declining social licence has led to further loss of engagement from students and less willingness of government (and the public) to come to the rescue. Neither of the major political parties in Australia has addressed the crisis in any meaningful way in their 2025 election platforms or since, even though universities' woes were widely known and reported ([Australian Labor party, 2026](#); [Liberal Party of Australia, 2026](#)).

The personal benefit from university education in the form of better job prospects and higher salaries for graduates, particularly in the case of a business school education, obscured the need to think of the social impact beyond the individual. Student fees could be charged for this private benefit ([Kaplan, 2014](#)). However, the rising cost of doing a business degree and a reduction in the potential return for such a qualification ([Uhlig et al., 2015](#)) deters many from enrolling. The value proposition of a business degree is being questioned by students and parents alike as the social licence of business schools and universities nose-dives. Furthermore, the online delivery of business school education has opened up the market for new competitors ([Kaplan, 2022](#)).

Changing expectations for universities

Society's expectations of universities and business schools have changed ([Sullivan, 2025](#); [Kaplan, 2024](#)). Australians expect universities to reduce inequities, close gaps in education and health, and enable traditionally locked-out groups of the population to re-connect with education ([Winkler, 2025](#)). Thus, to earn social licence, the services provided by universities

need to provide impact beyond purely private benefit (Maassen, 2024). Maassen and Olsen (2007) similar to Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo (2022) identify four dimensions of continuously changing expectations on universities. This includes the service provision of education to a growing share of the population, high quality research, engaging with policy agendas, and an effective self-governing institution. While the last factor has been subject to debate in recent times, the first three dimensions are directly relevant to the present discussion.

In this section, we argue that public support for business schools and universities depends on their social licence to operate. The changes in public expectations can help to identify channels through which to achieve this. We will first look at the specific case of the University of Canberra.

The case of the university of canberra or why is there a need for a strategic approach by applied universities?

Applied universities, like the University of Canberra, have come under financial pressure since Covid (Universities Australia, 2024). The pandemic caused a drop in domestic and international student enrolments, often due to online competition, and a reduction in industry engagement with local universities. Rebuilding social licence is important for the University of Canberra. A social impact strategy can help to rebuild financial viability by rebuilding domestic and international student demand, and by attracting new research and engagement partnerships with national and international partners.

The need for a strategy to position the University of Canberra for students and research partners is amplified when one considers the Australian university landscape. In Australia there are several tiers of universities. However, for the purposes of this article, it suffices to look at them as two tiers: the Group of eight (Go8); in many ways elite institutions given their early establishment in each state; and the others - the technology universities, the independent research universities, and the regional universities. Most of the latter have an applied focus (Australian Education Network, 2026). The bulk of the research funding and student enrolment funding is received by the Go8 universities, in 2025 this was, on average, A\$18.5bn per Go8-university, while non-Go8 universities receive on average A\$0.7 bn (Commonwealth Department of Education, 2025). Applied universities are, therefore, more dependent on student demand and industry engagement. International student demand now being driven by rankings creates a double jeopardy effect for the non-Go8 universities. Less research funding implies reduced reputation and that results in reduced international student demand.

Differentiation through a strategy is even more important for non-Go8 universities. Traditionally, a strategy that positioned a university as applied or practical, with a focus on employability of its graduates, was a differentiator in the local market. Almost all of these universities have a focus on accessibility as part of their social impact. Online education delivery makes geographic distance less of a barrier. With more universities in this group of applied or practical institutions and with similar offerings, this market has become highly competitive. The reduction in government support for the university sector has further added to competition, as the Go8 has started to add practical education focus to their messaging.

A focus on social impact for relevant communities can attract new students and research partners, apart from rebuilding social licence and government and community support. In addition, government research grant funding requires a social impact statement (see for example the national interest requirement of the ARC [2]).

How can a business school in a small, applied university, located in a capital city, be different? Non-Go8 universities are usually smaller and more focused in operating in a

particular regional location. This calls for a more targeted or strategic approach to their education and research offerings. Operating in one geographic location and community is a good starting point. Not only does it lead to more meaningful education and research offerings, it also helps a form of diversification in Australia's university market – spatial diversification. Furthermore, the location in a capital city allows another level of competitive differentiation. The specific labour market in Canberra, a capital city, is attractive for the whole country and can inform education and research programs. This will then make the university an attractive place to study and for research partners an attractive place to collaborate, from Australia and beyond. The diversification will offer national productivity benefits ([Pastor and Serrano, 2016](#)) and support financial viability.

In this section we first provided context for the strategy adopted by the University of Canberra. We argued that a social impact strategy can help rebuild social licence. It can also create a unique value proposition by strategically differentiating the university's business school from competitors due to its location in the nation's capital. We will next consider how to achieve these goals.

What needs to be done? A proposed process framework of building social license through social impact of business schools

To address the challenge posed by the loss of social license of universities in Australia, business schools must develop differentiated strategies that are purpose-driven and draw on their natural assets. Social impact can be achieved through three channels:

- (1) the subject or field of research and its translation;
- (2) the accessibility of its education programs – or diversity in the student population served; and
- (3) by translating business knowledge and research to inform the policy processes and public debates ([Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo, 2022](#), [Steidle et al., 2023](#), [Maassen and Olsen, 2007](#)).

While the third channel may be specific to a capital city, like Canberra, applying business knowledges to the service provision of government relates to the first channel. Our view is shared by [Haley and Jack \(2023\)](#) that social impact of business schools needs to be reconsidered in the modern era. The rising importance of social impact in global business school accreditation, see for example [AACSB \(2025\)](#), also provides an impetus for a significant strategic approach by business schools towards social impact.

Using a balanced scorecard approach ([Kaplan and Norton, 1992](#)), we outline three channels through which a business school can have social impact (see [Figure 1](#)). These channels are based on [Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo \(2022\)](#) and [Maassen and Olsen \(2007\)](#). It is a strategic decision to choose weights on the different channels and whether to engage with all or only one or two.

Beneficiaries of social impact in research, education and through political engagement

We now describe three groups of beneficiaries of social impact in a business school: economic agents that are social benefit-generating - social enterprise and not-for-profits; students benefiting from business education to reduce inequalities; and society at large through the political process. We look at research and teaching to achieve this impact and provide a classification of potential benefits (see [Table 1](#)).

Supporting Social Enterprises, non-government organisations (NGOs), charities but also government by research and education provided by business schools, is a direct and highly

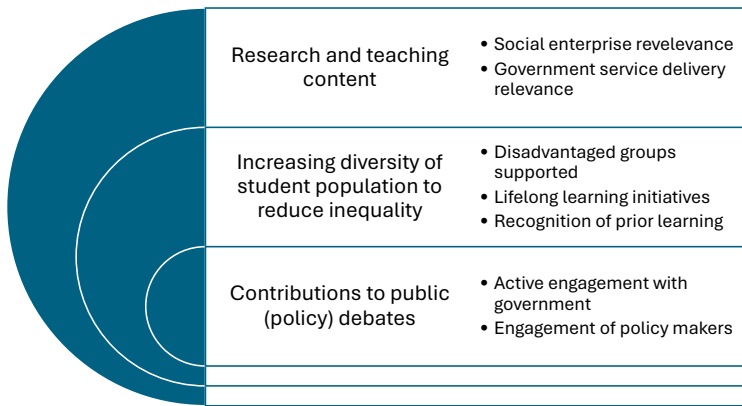


Figure 1. 3D SISL Score: Social Impact to Social Licence – a Score Card
Source: Authors’ own work

Table 1. Beneficiaries and programs to achieve social impact

Beneficiary	Research program	Teaching program	Type of benefit
Social enterprise	Research in social enterprise effectiveness and delivery	Programs that take the difference between the sectors into account	Direct support for the sector by a better (more specialised) trained workforce and the access to research for the sector
Reduced inequality	Scholarship of learning that addressed these groups needs Research in relevant areas where market signals are too weak	Specific support programs, scholarships, active engagement with unusual student groups, opening many pathways into university	Reducing inequality, economic growth through better use of all human resources of Australia
Policy and society	Research on business informing government policy that improves lives of all people	New student groups and new areas of research increase diversity which has direct benefit for all	Better policies, higher productivity

Source(s): Authors’ own work

visible way to gain social licence. It also shows the direct impact of the activities of a business school. This can include incubator programs like University of Canberra’s Millhouse ventures, combining training with consultancy support from staff and students for social enterprise (Millhouse Ventures, 2026). Social impact can thus arise out of the subject area of research and teaching. Both lead to better trained workers for the sector, as well as new knowledge that drives its productivity. Gupta et al. (2020) and Doh et al. (2023) provide overviews of such research. Research and education programs in related business subject areas, such as social marketing, behavioural economics or Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) accounting, have natural industry partners. This is the traditional social impact a Business School can have (Aiello et al., 2021). We know that the not-for-profit sector works well with business schools (see Alkire et al., 2024). These relationships strengthen the

learning experience for students, whether they are driven by a social impact mission or not. They can also help to find commissioned research funding (Tekula and Shah, 2016).

Improving access to education for population groups underrepresented at universities creates two types of social impact – a reduction in inequality between individuals and a reduction in the dependence on other forms of social support. Research shows that higher levels of education lead to better health, wealth and happiness (Newman *et al.*, 2025). Higher levels of diversity as well as a large share of the population engaging with university education (and research) lead to economic growth (see for example Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005, for a survey, and recent case studies can be found in Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle, 2019 and Ziberi *et al.*, 2022). In a capital city, qualified graduates with a social impact mindset and education will benefit from job opportunities. Government organisations and other organisations working with government can address staff shortages, as well as increase diversity of the workforce. Governments and the social services sector are large employers (Christensen and Pallesen, 2008) and public service jobs are viewed as stable, well-paid and with many benefits (Ripoll *et al.*, 2023). This makes a career in the public service attractive to many students.

Why does a social impact strategy make sense from a research and academic perspective? The opportunity to translate business research into social impact practice

The business of government agencies as well as that of social enterprise and not-for-profit organisations is less often the focus of applied business school research. Not every university offers a program on the “Business of Government” (the translation of business research into practice of social service delivery by government), NGOs, social enterprise or not-for-profits. This offers a strong opportunity for teaching and research innovation with government agencies and NGOs potential partners for research projects. For a capital city university, the physical proximity to government also enables research partnerships with universities located outside of the capital city by making research outputs more accessible for politicians, and senior bureaucrats. This can amplify the impact of social impact research. Pathways to policy impact are often not taken even though topics like small business innovation (see for example Gallo, 2025); human resource management challenges of a language-diverse labour force (Dale-Olsen and Finseraas, 2020); or governance challenges of not-for-profits and sustainability accounting (see Arvidsson and Dumay, 2022) are examples of current business school research. This social impact of business school research is often overlooked and more effective for a business school based in a capital city. Kaplan (2014) and Olbrich *et al.* (2022) point out that this idea is not new – they relate it to the German tradition of business schools. Kaplan (2014) refers to the work of Schmalenbach (see for example Schmalenbach, 1928) emphasising the role business studies should play alongside economics and the humanities to inform public policy. This potential for impact is likely to attract research partnerships, with other universities as well as with industry and government.

This section discussed three channels to achieve social impact: The fields of research and education covered by a business school; the social impact of being accessible to a diverse student population; and the engagement with policy debates. We have defined these channels and discussed the benefits for a business school. Next, we discuss how to develop and implement such a strategy.

How to do it? The I D E A framework for implementing a social impact strategy in a business school

Dulleck has applied Behavioural Economics in policy contexts using four step process: identify the problem, design in collaboration with stakeholders, evaluate, amplify (see for

example [Isler et al., 2022](#) or [Russell–Bennett et al., 2020](#)). This four step process is informed and closely related to the processes used by Behavioural Economics teams in Europe and Australia – the UK Behavioural Insights Team (UK BIT), and the Behavioural Economics Team Australia (BETA) based in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [3]. For researchers with a background in service design, one can see that these processes are informed by design thinking approaches ([Banathy, 1996](#); [Design Council, 2025](#)).

In the following we define the four steps and refer to the process applied at the University of Canberra’s business school.

I For identify

Before a strategy can be developed, a problem needs to be identified ([Baer et al., 2013](#)). Social licence and social impact may be important for a business school because its location or its market formulates particular needs. Most importantly, a university strategy – its vision, mission and values – may dictate the need for social impact, or the form it can take. An elite university, aiming for research excellence may focus the business school on social impact through its research. Whereas in a regional university with a focus on equity and accessibility as drivers for a research agenda, growing and diversifying student population may take precedence. Location and alumni may add a focus on engaging with political debates.

Apart from a university strategy, the social impact of business school research may be relevant for accreditation ([Kaplan and Norton, 1992](#); [AACSB, 2025](#)). A first important step is to identify where a university sees its social impact – its focus to achieve social licence. A resource-rich university may be able to focus on impact of its research only. A regional or community university may have a strong focus on accessibility.

D For design

All artificial artefacts or processes are designed by humans ([Norman, 2013](#)). Academics can be motivated by tenure and financial incentives, but these are not the main, and definitely not the only drivers of behaviour ([Johnston, 2016](#); [Carmichael, 1988](#)). Research can be directed, and achieving a focus on social impact can be provided by stating the explicit expectations in promotion criteria, for example, or by the allocation of strategic funding. Strategies to increase accessibility can focus on financial, or other support provided to students, as well as criteria to allow students to study at an institution ([Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015](#)). Finally, engaging with policy agendas is partly about creating the mindset, and rewarding and recognising such activities. While for business school-related disciplines in the social and political sciences, such engagement with government is expected. At the University of Canberra, special training and support materials help to change business school academic capacity [4].

In the following we apply a well-known framework for behaviour change interventions (see UK BIT, 2015 and [Halpern, 2015](#)). There are four potential steps to consider. We discuss how social impact can be introduced in business school teaching and research, and how it can be applied to diversifying the student body. The discussion of nudges for social impact in research apply to the engagement with policy debates as well.

Make it Easy. Easy nudges simplify, and reduce hassle and frictions ([Halpern, 2015](#); chapter 4). Evidence that easy nudges can make a difference is well documented (an overview of nudges of this kind and in what context they work can be found in [Jachimowicz et al., 2019](#), Dulleck applied it in the context of financial decision making, [Isler et al., 2022](#)). This implies one should consider how a business school can make it easy, or a default, for its academics to include social impact content in their research and teaching. This could be provision of, or easy access to, case studies with a social impact focus, and easily accessible support to build links with external partners and work on research with social impact. For students, a default could be

to add a social impact element to subjects they study, and for research students adding elements to their thesis research. [Steidle et al. \(2023\)](#) discuss the changes that can be targeted.

To diversify and grow the student body, one can consider how to make it easier for students from diverse backgrounds to enrol, recognition of previous learning or work experience are examples. Unnecessary admission requirements must also be taken into account, especially for students from more tertiary education remote segments of the population, for example first-in-family university students and other non-WEIRD students (Western – Educated – Industrialised – Rich – democratic students, [Muthukrishna et al., 2020](#)).

Make it Attractive. Attract nudges get decision makers to pay attention to a topic to achieve break through – actively making the decision ([Halpern, 2015](#); chapter 4). Incentives are the easiest way to attract attention. [Gneezy et al. \(2011\)](#) provide an overview where small incentives work and where they do not. Allocating resources to social impact in teaching and research will raise academics' awareness of the strategic focus on social impact and can lead to colleagues taking action. Incentives need not be large. In the case of behavioural economic interventions. They serve to engage academics to consider this part of their work. Incentives driving academics is not a new concept – see for example the discussion around tenure decisions in universities ([Carmichael, 1988](#); [Johnston, 2016](#)).

To diversify the student body, recognition of prior learning (RPL) can attract new student cohorts and as it reduces the cost of a degree ([Raciti et al., 2024](#), provide an overview). Similarly, small scholarships with an equity focus could raise awareness. The same can be said for support systems that take into account the needs of a diverse student body. In Australia, support for First Nations students or for defence force veterans are good examples.

Make it Social. Social nudges rely on the influence that others' perceptions and behaviours have on an individual's behaviour ([Halpern, 2015](#); chapter 5). [Nagatsu \(2015\)](#) provides a definition and overview of social nudges. This form of nudges is likely to align – with personal norms and values of academics. This can be amplified by explicitly stating the strategy and providing feedback – so that contributing to social impact through research becomes part of the group identity. Triggering reciprocity is another social nudge – asking people who receive support from the university to contribute to the social impact agenda in teaching and research.

For diversification of the student body, the strategy itself may help. Communicating that this is occurring will attract more students from diverse backgrounds. [Graham et al., 2017](#), present a study for UK and New Zealand business schools.

Make it Timely. Timely nudges rely on getting the moment right, and engaging with planning ([Halpern, 2015](#); chapter 6). Communications on social impact research timed to align with funding deadlines is a timely nudge ([Ariely and Wertenbroch, 2002](#)). The dates and times when information about social impact needs to be collected for accreditation purposes may provide other opportunities for an intervention. Similarly, the news cycle may provide opportunities to gain more attention for social impact research.

In terms of student body diversification, pinpointing when groups that benefit from an equity and accessibility agenda are best contacted or made aware of opportunities can substantially improve recruitment of new student groups ([Frølich and Stensaker, 2010](#)). Another timely nudge may be moving to a block teaching model which allows for more points of time to allow for student intake. This facilitates non-standard students to engage with university study when life allows. In the student context, deadlines as nudges have been studied, see for example [Zamir et al. \(2017\)](#).

E for evaluate

[Stufflebeam \(2001\)](#) defines evaluation as a study designed and conducted to assist an evaluator to determine an object's merit and worth. In business research, KPIs are frequently

used for evaluation. KPIs can be used to check on progress to achieve the intended social impact. We discuss them in a little more detail later. The focus is to achieve feedback on the success of the strategy and to document the impact goals identified in step I.

For more details on how evaluation methods can be used see [Alkire et al. \(2024\)](#) for example, in services marketing, the UK Behavioural Insights Team instructions on how to evaluate “Nudges” [\[5\]](#); or [Bornman \(2013\)](#) to capture social impact in general.

A for amplify

Strategies, processes, methods or mechanisms that increase the impact or reach of an activity are amplification ([Lam et al., 2020](#)). Business school research that remains hidden behind a paywall and written in a way not accessible to managers and policymakers is not useful. This means going beyond writing opinion pieces or, in the Australian context, *The Conversation* articles, or seeking media mentions. Rather, there needs to be policy implementation and actual effect on people’s lives ([Aiello et al., 2021](#)).

Amplifying the findings to initiate a pathway to social impact is difficult. Medium to long-term tracking of the KPIs needs to be considered. Business schools need to ask “if impact measures consistently and permanently change, how can this be addressed?” and “what is the most effective way to communicate the findings to the broader community to build awareness and buy-in?” ([Steidle et al., 2023](#), [Kaplan, 2024](#)). At a university level, how does the university strategy amplify the business school strategy and vice versa? An additional outcome could be that a diverse student body leads to a change in the composition of the academic staff of the university.

This section provided a framework for developing a strategy focussing on social impact through the three channels identified – social impact in research and education, diversifying the student population, and engaging with public policy debates. We discussed how behavioural economics-informed interventions can help. In the next section we revisit these arguments and provide a checklist.

A checklist for rebuilding social licence – practical action to achieve social impact in research, education and (political) engagement

The discussion in this article can be translated into practical action through a check list that any business school can use to develop a strategy and to document social impact, or to guide strategy development that increases social impact (see [Table 2](#)). This checklist resulted from discussions of the authors, it is by no means comprehensive or a particularly unique guide for a discussion and development of a strategy.

The list is non-exclusive and certainly incomplete. Many Business Schools can answer these questions successfully. Accreditation has helped to document answers to these and other questions regarding social impact. For this article this section’s aim is to provide a conversation starter for a discussion within a business school.

Discussion and research agenda

The purpose of this article was twofold. First to link social impact of business school and university activities and the social licence needed for public support; secondly to illustrate that such a strategy will support a business school’s and university’s viability by allowing it to differentiate in a competitive market – attracting domestic and international students as well as research partners. We have discussed three channels how this can be achieved in a business school located in a capital city:

- (1) the fields of research activity;

Table 2. Checklist for business school

Channel	Question	Tick
Research and teaching programs	- Does the business school have research and education programs focussing on social enterprises and NGOs or on the delivery of social purpose government policy? - Examples: Courses/units and research programs in social marketing [6] or sustainability accounting; a discipline in not-for-profit studies or a Centre for not-for-profit studies. For the university of canberra we have a vision of being a faculty and a business school that works with governments and for society, additionally we partner with the local government on a social enterprise incubator – millhouse ventures - Share of research projects (or taught courses, units) that have research data or questions informed by NGOs, social enterprises or government agencies delivery services - Number of graduates employed in social impact organisations - Share of research funding from social impact organisations	☐
Diverse student population	- What steps does the business school take to reduce inequality and access barriers and to increase diversity of its student body? - Examples: Scholarships, engagement with (remote) high schools, specific support for indigenous students. At the university of canberra this is achieved through a well-established Centre supporting first nations students and explicit programs to engage with remote communities through special scholarships - Do alternative pathways to university exist – particularly in the case of postgraduate studies, and how are these supported: - Recognition of prior learning, e.g. for veterans; entry into MBA programs based on experience in running a business w/o previous university education. At the university of canberra we work closely with veteran organisations to recognise experiences acquired in service and to ease transition in the university study of veterans	☐

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Channel	Question	Tick
Informing public policy	• Do academics engage with policy makers and industry bodies? – Examples: engagement of public servants and politicians in seminars; submissions to parliamentary consultation processes; replies to tender for government programs with substantial research elements. At the university of canberra it is not only One of the authors –vice-chancellor the hon. Bill shorten – as an ex-minister actively engaging with students, but also faculty and adjunct faculty including a former chief of army, a former president of the senate, and a former junior minister to facilitate engagement of students and staff with the political process • Do students learn and get exposed to policy making? – Covering of government relations in coursework; (senior) public servants and politicians as guest lecturers and/or providing feedback to student presentations. As indicated above, at the university of canberra, ex-politicians and public servants work as academics or teach on a casual basis in a business school program • Is there a systematic process to identify opportunities to contribute to policy?	
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 3. Further research for rebuilding social licence through social impact

Type of research	Potential further research topics
Methods	• Empirical demonstration of behavioural nudges for driving institutional change • Identification of mechanisms and boundary conditions
Research methods applied to university context	• Evaluation of university initiatives to improve social license • Strategies for rebuilding social licence in traditional universities or regional universities • Internal reward structures and processes for incentivising social impact in traditional universities • Comparisons across country and university type
<i>Framework element</i> Business school fields of research with social impact implications	• Applying recent breakthrough in fields of business studies to social enterprise, government and NGOs to leverage knowledge breakthroughs for everyone. (Lambell et al., 2008) • Social marketing and behaviour change (Brennan et al., 2014) • Not-for-profit studies (McGregor-Lowndes, 2018) • Sustainability and ESG accounting (Khan, 2010) • Inclusive Management and Human Resource Management practices (Ladwig, 2023) • Effects of AI on workforce wellbeing (Watermann et al., 2025) • Limiting racism in business and society (Ishaq et al., 2010) • Research into gender-equity (Gander and Sharafizad, 2025) • Impact of modern technology on the arts (Walsh, 2024)

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Type of research	Potential further research topics
Diversified student population	- Scholarship of Learning into First Nations student success: what is the role that financial and non-financial support for students from low socio-economic backgrounds plays. (Dulleck <i>et al.</i>, 2016) - What determines the decision to engage in university education in remote communities and from lower SES groups? (Burnheim and Harvey, 2016) - Scholarship of teaching with respect to underrepresented student groups (Langhout <i>et al.</i>, 2023) - Online teaching and its effects on first-in-family students (Kara, 2022) - Research into lifelong learning, effectiveness of business education programs for veterans and other adult learners (Barragan <i>et al.</i>, 2022)
Engagement with public policy processes	- Developing metrics for capturing the engagement of business schools with policy processes (Haenlein and Jack, 2025) - Targeting policy focused journals for business school research. (Petchko, 2018) - Developing frameworks for policy impact on different levels of government. (Schlager, 2019)
Source(s): Authors' own work	

- (2) the diversity of student populations; and
- (3) the engagement with society at large through the political process, the latter being particularly relevant for capital city universities.

In doing so we contribute to the literature on social impact of business research by explicitly adding education and political engagement to the normal agenda of business schools. In the following we will suggest a research agenda that could support such a strategy.

Social impact does not need to be the focus of all business schools or all fields of business school research. But the whole sector depends on social licence. Paying attention to some aspects of social impact is likely to be relevant for all. When the sector has improved social license, all business schools and universities benefit.

There are a number of limitations in this research. Firstly, this research is based on the strategy discussions and the analysis of the underlying problem for the University of Canberra. As such it is conceptual, illustrative and not empirical. Secondly, the research is focussed on applied universities in capital cities and as such does not explicitly address social license problems for traditional universities or regional universities. Potential future research questions based on these limitations and the frameworks in this research are provided in Table 3.

This list is not exhaustive and it is not a literature review, we limited ourselves to one example article for each dot point, where many exist. The research questions on diversifying the student population may indicate an area that will help the business school conduct research that can have a direct impact on the core business of growing student demand, and increasing retention and success of students. Similarly, research around engagement with public policy or other stakeholders can provide tools to increase impact of business school activities.

Conclusion

The financial challenges for the sector and for Business Schools in Australia and in many other countries in the post- pandemic era, require public support – social licence. Business School and University research and teaching need a strategy to rebuild social licence. We discussed this challenge for business schools, particularly applied schools and shared the strategy and thinking behind it employed recently at the University of Canberra. The strategy to regain social impact relies on three channels:

- (1) through fields of research and education;
- (2) through attracting diverse student populations; and
- (3) through engaging in policy development.

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Notes

- [1.] University of Canberra ranked in the top 10 of the Times Higher Education rankings in the world for the last five years www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/, our

university ranked twice first, once fourth, once seventh and once tenth in the category over the years 2021-2025.

- [2.] Articulating National Interest in Grant Applications | Australian Research Council www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/national-interest-test-statement/articulating-national-interest-grant-applications
- [3.] See their respective webpages: Behavioural Insights Team | Global Research and Innovation Consultancy <https://www.bi.team/>; Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government | PM&C <https://www.pmc.gov.au/beta>, both (accessed 26/2/2026).
- [4.] One example being the University of Canberra BGL Policy Briefs Toolkit: BGL Policy Briefs Toolkit - University of Canberra www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/faculties/busgovlaw/research/research-in-practice/policy-briefs/bgl-policy-briefs-toolkit. BGL is the abbreviation for the Faculty of Business, Government, and Law. The Business School is part of this faculty.
- [5.] A concise summary of the UK BIT approach can be found under [BIT-Publication-EAST_FA_WEB.pdf](http://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/BIT-Publication-EAST_FA_WEB.pdf) www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/BIT-Publication-EAST_FA_WEB.pdf, more extensive is Halpern (2015).
- [6.] Parkinson and Naidu (2024) provide illustrate the role marketing can play in the context to improve public health.

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