

The role of governance in augmenting the adaptive capacity of a business school to create social impact

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to describe an emerging governance structure that organises research, thought leadership, learning and teaching, community and extracurricular activities and activates, inspires, evaluates and measures the social impact of the staff, students and partners of Swinburne University of Technology's School of Business, Law and Entrepreneurship (the School).

Design/methodology/approach – Participatory systemic inquiry (PSI) is a collaborative process designed to map and analyse complex social systems. In this study, it informed the development of a narrative case study that examined the key milestones of evolving governance structure as reflected by a representative group of participants in the process.

Findings – Evaluation of grassroots-level activities informed the School's direction and how top-down and bottom-up developments intersected to augment the adaptive capacity of people and resources, thereby enhancing the School's social impact.

Originality/value – This study combines narrative case study with participatory systemic inquiry to show how governance structures overcome fragmented efforts and connect adaptive interventions, empowerment and capacity building. It also introduces an approach that moves beyond traditional theories by emphasising non-linear change, resilience and inclusive participation, explaining how grassroots initiatives evolve into institutional capacity and governance. These insights inform the development of Advancing Social Impact in Business Schools: A Practical Guide for Deans, which is presented in this paper, and which outlines how business schools can embed social impact through governance, stakeholder engagement, systemic mapping, adaptive practices and iterative learning.

Keywords Business schools, Social impact, Participatory systemic inquiry, Governance, Case study, AACSB, PRME, Carbon literacy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The term “social impact” is becoming synonymous with organisational activities that produce identifiable “good” to communities, similar to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The rising popularity of social impact as an idea and a practice reflects growing acceptance that organisations should create sustainable positive social impact, especially considering the global ecological crisis. Business schools both influence and are influenced by diverse



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stakeholders (government, funding bodies, professional organisations, students, staff and communities), therefore, have a responsibility to maintain positive social impact. They have been challenged to be more “purposeful” (Thomas, 2023) through measures adopted by international accrediting bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2023).

Holling (2001) introduces the concept of adaptive cycles and panarchy to explain how ecological, social, and economic systems evolve through phases of growth, accumulation, collapse and renewal. Through adaptive capacity, which is described as the ability of a system to absorb disturbances, reorganise, and maintain its core identity (Holling, 2001), it can be expected that business schools should evolve in responding to major global challenges. Folke *et al.* (2005) also introduce adaptive governance as a framework for managing complex social-ecological systems under conditions of uncertainty and change. Key mechanisms such as social networks, bridging organisations, trust-building and leadership are identified as enablers of resilience and transformation.

Business schools in general have the potential to contribute to positive social impact. One mechanism for achieving this is through accreditations. AACSB accredited business schools, for example, seek to contribute positively to society in alignment with the 2020 Standards (AACSB, 2023). AACSB recommends that business schools align their strategic objectives with societal impact in alignment with the United Nations’ (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many Australian business schools adopt the AACSB Standards by defining, implementing and assessing societal impact initiatives (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). For example, since 2021, Swinburne University of Technology’s School of Business, Law and Entrepreneurship (the School) has strived to improve its staff and students’ carbon literacy and was one of the first Australian business schools to be awarded Carbon Literacy Educator status. This commitment motivates staff to consult government climate policies, work with industry partners to mitigate climate change, and inspire students to drive social enterprises that tackle environmental, social and business challenges.

Developing meaningful metrics, integrating impact into curricula and operations, and demonstrating and communicating the impact to key audiences are non-trivial tasks for business schools. Multiple frameworks have been proposed (Thompson *et al.*, 2022), as well as guiding frameworks and governance structures, that prioritise positive social impact (Rozell and Spangler, 2024; Steidle *et al.*, 2024).

We argue in this paper that governance of the social impact of business schools should be informed by both top-down strategic initiatives and bottom-up staff and student agency and engagement. Collaborative efforts that enhance the adaptive capacity of all actors can encourage internal and external stakeholders to accept and collectively create social impact. While adaptive governance (Holling, 2001) focuses on flexibility and resilience, it does not fully capture participatory integration or multi-level accountability. While adaptive governance (Folke *et al.*, 2005) provides a strong foundation for flexibility and resilience, it primarily addresses ecological and resource management contexts and does not fully operationalise institutional transformation in higher education. Therefore, as detailed in the next section, we adopt participatory systemic inquiry (PSI) to provide a holistic institutional lens to examine the interaction of governance, culture and leadership in the School.

Using a narrative case study approach, this study explores the School’s social impact journey to understand how it has evolved to systematically design governance structures, implement incentives, and measure the adaptive capacity of people and resources in enhancing its social impact. Through this process, the School has transformed from offering activities and curricula with social impact to achieving impact via a formal governance

structure. This has taken the form of a Societal Impact Steering Committee that aligns with university priorities, reports to central teams and evaluates and measures impact for accreditation purposes. Our case study provides insights into the opportunities and challenges of developing and implementing a social impact strategy in business schools.

Literature review

This section presents a review of literature on the social impact of business schools, focusing on governance structures. It begins with an exploration of the conceptual clarity of social impact, then focuses on the impact of governance structures on the social impact journey of business schools.

It is incumbent upon business schools to articulate what social impact means for their operations and ensure their approach to social impact is strategically coherent and widely communicable to stakeholders. “Impact” refers to the creation of positive change in pressing social issues at both individual and systemic levels (Islam, 2020). In the context of business schools, Bornmann (2013) referred to impact as the assessment of quantitative and qualitative social, cultural, environmental and economic returns from research outputs or anticipated outcomes. Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo (2022) argue that the dimensions of social impact encompass intellectual contributions (e.g. research), academic programs and courses, other school-supported co-curricular activities and community and industry engagements. Within this approach the social impact of a business school should be seen as an ongoing social change process (Vancly, 2002), rather than a one-off event.

The practices of business schools in creating social impact and advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while meeting accreditation standards, are commonly demonstrated through strategic alignment, curriculum and research alignment and fostering community engagement. Some business schools adopt a “public value” mission to prioritise economic and social impacts through interdisciplinary research, teaching, service and purposeful engagement with stakeholders to maximise their social impact (Steidle *et al.*, 2024). Others use applied research with practical impact to position themselves as hubs for business, government and society. These endeavours are designed to mould business schools into ecosystem leaders and catalysts that can facilitate collaboration across diverse sectors and disciplines (Thomas, 2023).

Steidle *et al.* (2024) emphasised the importance of assessing the current social impact of business schools, identifying common themes and selecting focus areas. These findings should be integrated into the business school’s strategic plan, specifying indicators and targets mapped to the chosen Sustainable Development Goals. Developing a social impact framework can guide the above process. In particular, a governance structure with simplicity and modularity is essential when transferring the framework into practice (Rozell and Spangler, 2024).

Social impact frameworks can be hybrid and multifaceted, encompassing human rights, environment and climate, business and research. While developing a framework is often considered the first and most important step in creating social impact in business schools, it can be based on multiple guidelines. For example, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) emphasises flexibility and modularity as essential elements (Rozell and Spangler, 2024) and recommends a four-step process:

- (1) understand the organisation’s context;
- (2) identify actual and potential positive and negative impacts;
- (3) assess the significance of the impacts; and
- (4) prioritise the most significant impacts for reporting.

The GRI highlights the need for a governance structure in the process of creating social impact in business schools. Effective governance practices and diverse governance bodies are necessary to enhance the adaptive capacity of stakeholders and facilitate convergence between business education and social impact (Kalika and Shenton, 2021). A governance structure often takes a broad view of the business schools' and stakeholders' interests and strategic priorities (Rozell and Spangler, 2024).

While business schools with a framework and established governance structures for social impact can activate desirable social change processes, resource constraints and the need for institutional alignment are barriers to their realisation (Egir, 2024). Consequently, many schools use a piecemeal approach to meet social impact demands (Steidle *et al.*, 2024). Beaulieu (2022) asserted that business schools should adopt a more comprehensive and responsible approach to mitigate their social impacts. To this end, Steidle *et al.* (2024) emphasised the importance of guiding staff and leadership through a structured process using a Sustainable Development Goal-based sustainability framework tailored to the specific needs of the school.

Some business schools struggle to create legitimate governance processes to demonstrate their social impact (Kabadayi and Jason-DiBartolo, 2022; Ryazanova *et al.*, 2024). Meanwhile, research on how governance structures in business schools evolve to achieve social impact is scarce (Butler and Burke-Smalley, 2023). We argue that an effective governance structure for achieving social impact in business schools should be informed by both top-down and bottom-up approaches and emphasise the crucial roles of staff, students and other stakeholders. Recognising the multiple strategic imperatives for social impact, we examined the transition and consolidation of the School's approach to integrating social impact activities into its governance structure.

Theoretical insights on social impact

Scholars have applied several social theories to study the social impacts of business schools (e.g. Burns, 2012; Folke *et al.*, 2005; Godonoga *et al.*, 2023; Holling, 2001; Miotto and Rom Rodríguez, 2017; Nonet *et al.*, 2016). Social impacts of business schools are multi-layered; no single theory can capture the breadth and depth of the impacts. We identified several complementary theoretical perspectives that shed light on the phenomenon (Table 1).

As shown in Table, 1 above, the comparison of theoretical frameworks reveals that conventional theoretical lenses including institutional theory, corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory, institutional logics, critical theory and social constructivism offer valuable yet partial insights into the social impact of business schools. These theories explain legitimacy-seeking behaviours, stakeholder responsibilities, competing logics, power relations, and meaning-making, yet they often overlook systemic complexity and interdependencies. Emerging perspectives like Participatory Systemic Inquiry address these gaps by emphasising non-linear change, co-evolving dynamics and inclusive participation of diverse stakeholders. Complementary contributions from Holling (2001) and Folke *et al.* (2005) introduce resilience and adaptive governance, highlighting flexibility, learning and polycentric decision-making as essential for navigating uncertainty and embedding sustainability. Together, these frameworks underscore the need for integrative, participatory, and adaptive approaches to achieve transformative societal impact in business schools.

Using these theoretical lenses in combination allows researchers to ask not only *what* impact occurs, but *why* patterns persist and *how* alternative pathways can emerge. As explained in the next section, Participatory Systemic Inquiry was our primary theoretical lens and informed our methodological approach (see appendix 1 for a note on Participatory Systemic Inquiry). Participatory Systemic Inquiry builds on Wadsworth (2016, p. 79)

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives on societal impact of business schools

Theory	Postulation	Societal impact of business
Institutional theory	Organisations seek legitimacy by conforming to societal norms	Explains why schools adopt principles for responsible management education (PRME), UN SDGs and AACSB reporting and impact metrics in response to accreditation and public pressure
CSR and stakeholder theory	Firms (and schools) owe responsibilities to a broad stakeholder set	Highlights curriculum reforms and outreach designed to regain trust after the global financial crisis and neoliberal market failures
New institutionalism/institutional logics	Actors navigate competing logics (market vs mission)	Illuminates tensions between rankings driven strategies and societal mandates
Critical theory	Power relations and neoliberal ideologies are primary motivators	Encourages scrutiny of how schools may reinforce inequality and environmental harm
Social constructivism	Meaning is cocreated through interaction	Guides analysis of how teaching practices shape graduates' ethical worldviews
Resilience and Adaptive Capacity (Holling, 2001)	Systems evolve through adaptive cycles (growth, accumulation, collapse, renewal); sustainability depends on adaptive capacity	Encourages governance that embraces flexibility and cross-scale interactions; highlights the need for institutions to reorganize and maintain core identity under changing societal expectations
Adaptive Governance (Folke et al., 2005)	Governance should be flexible, collaborative and learning-oriented to manage complexity and uncertainty	Suggests polycentric decision-making, trust-building, and social networks to enhance resilience; relevant for embedding sustainability and responsiveness in higher education governance
Participatory systemic inquiry (PSI)	The world is a web of relationships with co-evolving dynamics. Change is emergent, non-linear and often unpredictable	Identifies all actors and forces influencing the business school's social impact, such as: • Curriculum design, research agendas, community engagement, graduate outcomes, employer expectations • Interdependencies and power dynamics that shape the school's role in society A participatory approach (students, faculty, alumni, employers and community partners) considers multiple perspectives, especially those often marginalised in traditional evaluations. PSI is useful for business schools navigating rapid changes in societal expectations, such as demands for sustainability, ethics and inclusivity

Source(s): Burns (2012), Folke et al. (2005), Godonoga et al. (2023), Holling (2001), Miotto and Rom Rodríguez (2017), Nonet et al. (2016)

proposition that inquiry is the fundamental process by which living systems including human individuals and collectives learn, adapt, and evolve. As a theoretical lens, Participatory Systemic Inquiry was chosen because it uniquely combines systemic thinking with participatory governance, enabling analysis of why patterns persist and how alternative pathways emerge. Unlike adaptive governance or complexity leadership (Holling, 2001; Folke *et al.*, 2005), which emphasise flexibility and emergent leadership, Participatory Systemic Inquiry operationalises inclusive processes and multi-level accountability, making it particularly suited for embedding social impact within business school governance and culture. For example, Participatory Systemic Inquiry facilitates the co-creation of a governance map by professional and academic staff, and students, revealing feedback loops between research priorities, curriculum design and community engagement insights that inform new pathways for integrating social impact into core academic structure of a business school.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach of the study is a narrative case study (Brandell and Varkas, 2001, Sonday *et al.*, 2020). Narrative case studies explore social problems within their environmental context, offering rich, experience-near descriptions often missed by other methods (Brandell and Varkas, 2001). Narrative case studies usually focus on a single unit, such as an organisation or community, investigating multiple dimensions of a research phenomenon and emphasising context, with generalisation being analytic and impressionistic rather than probabilistic (Brandell and Varkas, 2001). While case study methodology contextualises processes within historical, political and social layers, narrative inquiry captures storied lives to reveal meaning-making. Merging these approaches offers a novel framework for theorising and representing experiences, moving beyond descriptive themes to uncover how organisations navigate transformation within changing socio-political contexts (Sonday *et al.*, 2020).

We used a modified version of Participatory Systemic Inquiry in our narrative case study of the social impact of the School, for several reasons. Participatory Systemic Inquiry exhibits characteristics of constructivist and pluralist epistemologies. Knowledge is understood to be constructed by diverse actors representing multiple realities of stakeholders. While plural in perspective, Participatory Systemic Inquiry offers explanations of why patterns persist.

Methodologically, Participatory Systemic Inquiry is closely linked to pragmatic action research inquiry, which focuses on real-time learning, iterative cycles of inquiry and adaptive problem solving (Burns, 2014; Wagle, 2022). Moreover, systematic action researchers embed inquiry in ongoing change processes rather than making aloof or detached observations. Participatory Systemic Inquiry facilitates collaborative sense-making, enabling business schools to respond to evolving social expectations regarding social impact, ethics, climate change, sustainability and inclusion (Lake and WendlandLiu, 2018).

Participatory Systemic Inquiry facilitates holistic system mapping and capture of short-term changes in a research phenomenon (Burns, 2014). Participatory Systemic Inquiry is grounded in relational-systemic ontology, treating the world as a web of interdependent relationships. Dynamics (norms, power flows, feedback) are co-shared and co-evolved. Change is viewed as emergent, dynamic and non-linear, shaped by interactions among actors, institutions and environments (Burns, 2014; Wagle, 2022). This worldview challenges reductionist perspectives by emphasising contextual and holistic inquiry, especially pertinent to analysing the multifaceted impact of business schools.

This narrative case study examines how the School systematically designed governance structures, implemented them and incentivised their use, and measured the adaptive capacity of its people and resources in enhancing social impact. We began with a stakeholder mapping exercise, which involved identifying key actors in social impact-based accreditation (e.g. AACSB Standard 9). These actors included the accreditation manager, the former chair of the PRME community of practice (CoP), the environmental, social and governance (ESG) coordinator, the former (interim) Dean, the chair of the Societal Impact Steering Committee, and representatives from the Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) and Carbon Literacy teams.

Multiple voices, including those of the key stakeholders noted above, and the inclusive decision-making of other stakeholders (e.g. students, alumni, staff, employees and local communities), were captured through secondary document data sources, notably information on the School's social impact performance developed during the 2024 AACSB reaccreditation process and UN PRME reporting since 2020. Ethics approval for use of these documents was granted. All document data were thematically analysed using a coding framework (please see [appendix 7](#)) created based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2019). The framework facilitated the data analysis of the study, enabling a triangulated understanding of the phenomenon.

The coding framework covered turning points of social impact, flagship sustainability projects, institutional capacity building, social impact mapping, a social impact framework, and agency in social impact and power dynamics. Iterative coding (open and axial coding) and thematic analysis were performed, followed by reflection on the themes through the theoretical lens of PSI. [Table 2](#) below depicts the methodological approach of the study.

Table 2. Methodological approach and PSI integration

Step	Description	PSI contribution
Stakeholder mapping	Identified key actors in societal social impact accreditation, including leadership and sustainability teams, based on document data	Emphasises inclusive participation and mapping interdependencies among actors to understand systemic dynamics
Capturing multiple voices	Incorporated perspectives from students, alumni, faculty, employees, and local communities using secondary data sources such as AACSB reaccreditation documentation and UN PRME reports	Ensures pluralistic perspectives and co-construction of knowledge, reflecting multiple realities of stakeholders
Data analysis using thematic framework	Applied a coding framework based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to enable triangulation and deeper understanding of the phenomenon	Encourages iterative sense-making and reflexivity, aligning analysis with emergent patterns in complex systems
Coding framework components	Covered turning points in societal impact, flagship sustainability projects, institutional capacity building, impact mapping and agency and power dynamics	Highlights systemic feedback loops and power flows, enabling identification of leverage points for change
Iterative coding and reflection	Conducted open and axial coding, followed by thematic analysis and reflection through the lens of participatory systemic inquiry (PSI)	Facilitates adaptive learning cycles and co-evolution of insights, reinforcing dynamic and non-linear change processes

When examining the key milestones of the evolving governance structure, in a context in which the authors of this paper are participants in the process and are passionate about social impact, a certain level of researcher bias is expected. It is possible that the research team engaged in critical reflection on both changes and challenges, viewing them as stepping stones towards enhancing the school's social impact (*learn, adapt and evolve*) (Wadsworth, 2016, p. 79). We acknowledge, therefore, the potential for researcher bias given the insider perspective of the authors of this paper and have taken steps to mitigate this limitation. First, the study used a participatory approach using Participatory Systemic Inquiry, which emphasises collaborative sense-making and inclusion of multiple stakeholder voices, as presented in documents, reducing reliance on a single viewpoint. Data triangulation was achieved through diverse sources, including secondary documents and accreditation reports, ensuring a balanced representation of perspectives. The use of documents as the data for this paper is important, as those documents reflect the process over time. In addition, iterative coding and thematic analysis were conducted transparently, with reflexive practices embedded throughout the process to critically examine assumptions and interpretations. These measures enhance credibility and minimise bias while acknowledging that complete elimination of subjectivity is not possible in research.

Background of the case: the school

Key events, milestones and individual actions shaped the School's journey of social impact. The School is one of six at the University, which is among the world's top 300 universities for sustainability and ranked 270th in the 2025 QS Sustainability rankings. A key strategic milestone was the successful net zero certification status achievement in 2025 (Swinburne University, 2026a). The School's mission is to advance innovation, entrepreneurship and social impact through career-ready graduates and industry-engaged research, and connecting people and technology. Its vision is to support people, organisations and communities through business and law education and research to create a sustainable world (Swinburne University, 2026b).

The School holds AACSB accreditation and has been a signatory to the UN PRME since 2018. The School was one of the first Australian Carbon Literacy Educators, accredited by the Carbon Literacy Project, a globally recognised initiative in transformative education for climate action.

Over the years, the School's sustainability champions (staff) have engaged in curriculum-driven or co-curricular sustainability-focused initiatives, forming a vibrant sustainability culture generating significant social impact. The establishment of the PRME CoP in 2020 was pivotal. A CoP involves grassroots associations that collectively use resources and energies to achieve a common goal (Smith, 1997). The School's PRME CoP brought together diverse efforts into a shared community, fostering collaboration, shared learning, and long-term commitment across departments and disciplines. This background sets out some of the key elements of the process for social impact developed by the School over time, also providing context for the findings which follow.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the narrative case study. In narrative case study research, it is common to acknowledge researchers' reflexivity in gathering and interpreting data (Simons, 2009, Etherington and Bridges, 2011). A narrative researcher focuses on participants' embodied engagement in events, senses, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, ideas and the significance of other people (Anderson and Gehart, 2007). This reflexive stance of the

researchers (i.e. participatory actors in the social impact journey of the School) also informed the findings of the study.

Organised into three thematic categories, the case study highlights the spill-over effects of bottom-up developments in social impact projects in expanding the School's adaptive capacity, culminating in the establishment of a formal governance structure – the Societal Impact Steering Committee. This strategic milestone reflected the School's commitment to institutionalising its social impact efforts in a coordinated and sustainable manner.

Theme 1: Grassroots developments expand institutional capacity in social impact

Initial efforts to create a social impact culture were led by the School leadership and academic and professional staff who founded the PRME CoP. Co-chairs were appointed to represent the School in Swinburne's Sarawak and Hawthorn campuses, while staff from other teaching locations were also invited to join the CoP. Through regular meetings, this collective encouraged members from multiple locations to share best practices, collaborate and learn from one another. Some of its grassroots developments include the Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) initiative, carbon literacy training, the PRME CoP newsletter and peer learning seminars (see [Appendix 2](#)).

A team of professional staff established Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) in 2020. The initiative adapted to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which were put in place at that time, by creating an online Canvas portal to raise awareness and promote engagement with the SDGs. The portal is accessible to Swinburne staff, students and partners (CoP members) across all campuses. It features curated modules for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, using multimedia content like podcasts, videos and quizzes. By August 2021 the initiative had enrolled around 1,300 participants. Engagement remains consistent to the present day, averaging nearly 400 weekly views in 2024 and more than 600 weekly views in 2025 (see [Appendix 3](#)). Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) gives PRME CoP members updates on the SDGs and generates interactive dialogue to inspire them to create greater social impact. In recognition of its value, the Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) team received the Vice Chancellor's Sustainability Award in 2021.

In 2021, a volunteer academic group from the CoP launched carbon literacy training in the School. As detailed below, this initiative proved a well-received, transformative learning journey for both staff and students. These developments led to appointment of an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) coordinator to nurture the School's social impact projects in consultation with School leadership. For example, the Transformative Education for Sustainable Social Impact Institute and the School co-delivered a one-week interdisciplinary workshop designed to empower staff, community and other practitioners with the expertise and tools needed to reshape their courses, curricula and programs in response to global grand challenges.

Such developments are shared using the PRME CoP newsletter, which has enabled the School's sustainability champions to engage with like-minded CoP members since 2022. It showcases sustainability initiatives within teaching, research and engagement. Simultaneously, CoP-organised peer learning seminars enrich the collaborative culture vital for social impact and spark conversations among internal and external stakeholders. These grassroots developments informed the School's social impact framework, implemented in 2024.

Theme 2: Empowered individual and collective agency

Empowered individual and collective agency develop effective governance structures through inclusive participation ([Sánchez-Soriano, et al., 2024](#)). To illustrate, the School's Carbon Literacy Training initiative can be used. As detailed below, the grassroots efforts of

staff and strategic leadership support and direction converged to build the School's institutional capacity and foster sustainability and inclusive governance. In 2021, a group of volunteers from the PRME CoP pioneered the delivery of carbon literacy training in Victoria, the first of its kind. A module originally designed by the [University of Queensland Business School \(2021\)](#) was integrated seamlessly into the School's vibrant working environment with the support of the executive leadership. The School leadership covered the certification fees of the School's staff, and supported them to disseminate carbon literacy across the Australian university sector. The practice has been continued by subsequent school leadership. Having expanded the pioneering effort to a three-university collaboration involving Federation University and Deakin University, nine university rollouts have been completed, involving more than 200 participants whose carbon action pledges total over 1,000 tonnes of carbon emissions. In the School, 58 staff members (40%, including executive leadership) and 65 students became carbon literate certified by 2025, and two fully accredited carbon literacy trainers continue training delivery.

The training inspired many participants – strategic decision-makers, academic and professional staff, team leaders and student leaders – to become carbon literate and action oriented. By introducing new perspectives, carbon literacy training overcomes the “action paralysis” that affects many individuals in the face of the complexities of climate action and emphasises the positive impacts of grassroots-level climate actions. Many participants pledge to involve School colleagues in climate action (e.g. integrating climate change into curricula, industry-linked projects, work-integrated learning, sustainable procurement practices and carbon neutrality initiatives), creating spill-over effects. The team's efforts were recognised with the Vice Chancellor's Accountable Award in 2023.

In 2023, the inaugural Climate Action Fellow of the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) invited Swinburne's Carbon Literacy Team to lead a nationwide rollout. This led to the establishment of the highly successful ABDC/PRME climate action working group, which received ABDC Climate Action awards in 2023 and 2024. In 2024, the UN PRME Climate Action group invited the Carbon Literacy Team to lead Asia-Pacific delivery of carbon literacy training; testimonials from participants and other team leaders ([Appendix 4](#)) show its success.

Carbon literacy education has been a flagship area of social impact for the School, which now has bronze-level Educator status with the UK-led Carbon Literacy Project, one of 100 transformative action programs recognised at COP21. This global recognition validates the initiative's trustworthiness and impact. In 2025, the School's executive leadership invited the carbon literacy co-leads to join the Societal Impact Steering Committee as members and subgroup leaders, demonstrating the continuation of formal recognition and support.

Theme 3: Transforming bottom-up developments in social impact into a governance structure

In alignment with AACSB Standards, the School developed a societal impact framework to help assess, collate, audit and report on the school's multifaceted social impact practices. Guided by the School's mission and strategic goals, the societal impact framework outlines a definition of societal impact, a societal impact statement (see [Appendix 5](#)), enablers of social impact, and social impact measures (see [Appendix 6](#)).

Despite its foundational contributions, the societal impact framework lacked the strategic control necessary to steer diverse social impact practices effectively, necessitating the formation of the Societal Impact Steering Committee. The committee includes representatives from various groups of social impact champions and fosters a more holistic approach.

In 2024, changes to the standardised PRME reporting model and growing impetus for social impact prompted the School to formalise its activities around responsible management

education and sustainability and expand its adaptive capacity. Creating a champions group as part of a Societal Impact Steering Committee was intended to create momentum in societal impact planning and execution (AACSB, 2023). The committee includes staff and students, the School executive team, accreditation manager, academic director (Indigenous), an adjunct professor of ethics, the ESG coordinator and representatives from the Carbon Literacy and Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) teams.

Research shows that students expect business schools to pursue social impact (Giacalone, 2004; Yakut *et al.*, 2025). Accordingly, the School welcomed students with innovative ideas about sustainability as members of the committee. The student voice is ably represented by representatives from undergraduate, masters and doctoral students. Representation from all School disciplines, research areas and education delivery channels support broad engagement and inclusion. The Societal Impact Steering Committee composition ensures diversity of staff and students, who collectively engage with social impact focus areas and projects. Inviting student representatives to the committee incentivises them to contribute their ideas around social impact, incentivising staff in turn.

Discussion

This study examined the emergence of a governance structure within Swinburne University of Technology's School of Business, Law and Entrepreneurship that seeks to enhance societal impact through coordinated efforts in research, education and community engagement. Drawing on Participatory Systemic Inquiry, the findings highlight how grassroots initiatives and top-down strategies intersect to build adaptive capacity and institutional coherence. The grassroots initiatives are bottom-up, voluntary programs initiated by committed individuals within the school. These initiatives often emerge organically from staff members' personal commitment to social impact, rather than being mandated by formal governance structures. While these efforts are invaluable for innovation and cultural change, their continuity and scalability depend on embedding them within an institutional governance framework to ensure alignment with strategic priorities and long term sustainability. The discussion that follows is organised into three key areas: theoretical contributions, practical implications, and limitations with directions for future research.

Theoretical contribution

This paper advances theoretical understanding of social impact in business schools by addressing the limitations of commonly applied frameworks including Institutional theory, corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory, institutional logics, critical theory and social constructivism. While each of these theories offers valuable insights, they fall short of capturing the systemic and multi-layered nature of business schools' social impact. For example, institutional theory explains conformity but not social outcomes, while corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory assume linear relationships that overlook complexity. Similarly, institutional logics highlight tensions without assessing transformative change, critical theory remains largely normative, and social constructivism focuses on discourse rather than material outcomes. These gaps underscore the need for an integrative approach that moves beyond isolated theoretical silos.

By using Participatory Systemic Inquiry as the primary theoretical lens, this study enabled the present study to explore not only what impact occurs, but also why patterns persist and how alternative pathways can emerge. Participatory Systemic Inquiry offers a distinct theoretical and methodological contribution by integrating systemic thinking with participatory governance in a way that alternative frameworks such as adaptive governance and complexity leadership do not. While adaptive governance emphasises flexibility and responsiveness, and complexity

leadership focuses on emergent leadership dynamics, Participatory Systemic Inquiry combines these with structured stakeholder co-creation, multi-level accountability and feedback loops. This enables researchers to examine not only how impact occurs, but also why patterns persist and how inclusive pathways for transformation can emerge. Methodologically, Participatory Systemic Inquiry operationalises these principles through participatory processes, providing a practical roadmap for embedding societal impact within institutional systems rather than treating it as an isolated leadership or governance challenge.

By demonstrating the value of systemic and participatory approaches, this paper contributes to advancing social impact in business schools. It offers a roadmap for scholars and practitioners to adopt frameworks that embrace complexity and interdependencies, enabling more inclusive and transformative strategies for addressing societal challenges. For other business schools, the findings highlight the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, embedding reflexivity in decision-making, and aligning accreditation processes with sustainability goals. Organisations can use these insights to benchmark their societal impact initiatives, strengthen governance structures and foster collaborative networks that accelerate systemic change.

Practical contribution

Governance structures sometimes inhibit organically evolving grassroots-level developments. It is also important to understand the role of power imbalances within the approaches and systems established to achieve social impact. Differences in ideas or approaches may arise when business school leaders and impact champions engage with other members of broader communities (e.g. universities) who have not participated in these developments. Hence, an inclusive and flexible governance structure that accommodates iterative inquiries and changing social needs and continually reviews its goals, strategies and actions, is crucial.

As shown in this case study, the executive leadership of the School consistently supported staffs' initiatives, such as instituting carbon literacy training. The School leadership's approval of the establishment of staff training and funding staff to participate and other formal and informal support and recognition of grassroots-led efforts enabled carbon literacy to flourish within the School, showing that action-oriented, active participation of leaders is critical.

Previous studies show that while accreditation standards are essential, meeting them is impossible without fostering a dedicated governance structure and a culture of social impact (Brinkhurst *et al.*, 2011; Kamel, 2020). As largely publicly funded organisations, Australian business schools should be accountable for their practices. Governance bodies that adhere to accreditation standards are crucial in establishing accountability and transparency and shaping the business school's social impact journey. However, accreditation standards alone cannot drive the social impact of business schools, whose ability to advance the UN's global agenda is hampered by the complexities of advancing multiple SDGs simultaneously (Filho *et al.*, 2024), resource constraints (Azmat *et al.*, 2023; Izquierdo, 2019), lack of interdisciplinary collaboration and misaligned governance structures (Filho *et al.*, 2023; Izquierdo, 2019). Moreover, attempting to meet the multitude of expectations of accreditation bodies can dilute the social impact strategies of business schools.

Previous research also shows that approaching social impact through a strategic planning and governance perspective is best done by using multifaceted practices (Serafini *et al.*, 2022). Such an approach requires systematically measuring the outcomes of efforts to advance social impact and is crucial for tracking progress and finding areas for improvement (Erin *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, the School's Societal Impact Steering Committee documentation and reporting of flagship projects (e.g. the carbon literacy teams' progress and impact) is vital. It alleviates concerns about greenwashing or virtue signalling, enhances stakeholder engagement and collaboration, and justifies resource allocations for continued social impact.

Supporting previous research (e.g., Steidle *et al.*, 2024), the Societal Impact Steering Committee is a key element of organisational governance in the School's quest for social impact. With a flexible and consultative approach (Rozell and Spangler, 2024), it encourages sustainability champions in the School to partner with other school leaders across the university to integrate flagship activities. It seeks to ensure that activities are well designed, supported by efficient and collectively owned processes, and are measurable and able to demonstrate impact. Table 3 below outlines practical short-term actions and long-term systemic changes for advancing societal impact in business schools, along with the expected outcomes of each initiative.

Table 3. Advancing social impact in business schools: a practical guide for deans

Action area	Specific actions	Outcome
<i>Short-Term actions (immediate outcome on engagement and visibility)</i>		
Provide visible support	Endorse and actively participate in grassroots initiatives (e.g. sustainability champions, carbon literacy programs)	Builds trust and signals commitment to societal impact internally and externally
	Allocate immediate funding and formal workload allocations for staff training and participation in social impact projects. Ensure these forms of resource support continue into the long term	Enables quick implementation of impactful activities
Address governance gaps	Recognise and reward academic and professional staff contributions	Motivates participation and strengthens a culture of impact
	Review governance structures for flexibility and inclusivity	Removes barriers to grassroots innovation and responsiveness
Communicate and engage	Initiate documentation and reporting of flagship projects	Enhances transparency and credibility, reducing greenwashing concerns
	Promote social impact through internal communication and awareness campaigns (e.g. newsletters, meetings)	Improves visibility and stakeholder buy-in
	Encourage staff participation in sustainability activities	Expands engagement and ownership of impact initiatives
<i>Long-Term systemic changes (structural and cultural transformation)</i>		
Build inclusive governance	Establish a societal/social impact steering committee with a consultative approach	Institutionalises social impact as a strategic priority
	Ensure governance processes are transparent, collectively owned and regularly reviewed	Sustains accountability and adaptability over time
Strategic alignment	Align social impact strategies with accreditation standards while maintaining focus on complex social challenges	Integrates impact into core business school strategy
	Develop clear goals and measurable social impact outcomes linked to strategic priorities	Provides direction and benchmarks for long-term success
	Foster interdisciplinary collaboration	Enhances capacity to address complex social challenges
Accountability and measurement	Implement systematic measurement and reporting of social impact initiatives	Builds evidence of impact and informs resource allocation
	Use data-driven insights to identify areas for improvement	Supports continuous improvement and strategic decision-making
Culture and partnerships	Embed social impact into the school's culture through training and leadership support, and through ongoing investment of resources	Creates a lasting cultural shift toward social impact
	Build long-term partnerships with external stakeholders, and ensure social impact is an agenda item for school advisory board and other school committees with industry representation (e.g. Course advisory committees)	Expands reach and amplifies impact beyond the business school

Participatory Systemic Inquiry provides value in the business school and SDG context by turning passion-driven sustainability efforts into systemic, enduring change. While many initiatives start with committed champions, their impact often fades without governance. Participatory Systemic Inquiry bridges this gap by embedding inclusive processes and accountability, ensuring sustainability and social impact become integral to institutional culture rather than isolated projects.

Limitations and further research

Our findings should be interpreted with consideration of the specific contexts of the School and the Australian higher education system, as well as the varying requirements of accreditation bodies. Future researchers can consider potential researcher bias in this paper, given the insider perspective. Techniques such as data triangulation should be used to enhance the credibility, though complete elimination of subjectivity is not possible in research. Future research should also investigate how governance structures and decision-making processes shape the integration of social impact within business schools, while also examining the power dynamics that influence these efforts. Comparative studies across accreditation frameworks such as AACSB, EQUIS and PRME could illuminate tensions between compliance-driven approaches and authentic commitment to social impact. Further work on measurement and accountability is needed to develop robust metrics for assessing impact and guiding resource allocation. Longitudinal and cross-country studies could enrich understanding of how these factors evolve over time and across diverse institutional contexts.

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Further reading

- Swinburne University School of Business, Law and Entrepreneurship (2026), "UN principles for responsible management education", available at: www.unprme.org/swinburne-school-of-business-law-entrepreneurship

Participatory Systemic Inquiry

Participatory Systemic Inquiry (PSI) relates to [Wadsworth's \(2016, p. 79\)](#) ground-breaking proposition that “the act of inquiry is the fundamental process through which all living organisms and collective human systems continuously learn, improve and adapt”. PSI is a short, collaborative process designed to map and analyse complex social systems as a baseline for assessing change. Unlike Social Action Research, which is an iterative methodology spanning 18 months to three years and integrates design, planning, action and evaluation, PSI typically occurs over 2–12 weeks. It can function independently or support an action research process. PSI involves multiple stakeholders co-creating large, “messy” maps of relationships, which are then distilled into smaller, systematic maps highlighting causal links and feedback loops. This approach enables rapid understanding of system dynamics and provides a foundation for impact assessment and adaptive learning (for more details, see: ([Wadsworth, 2016](#); [Burns, 2012](#); [Burns, 2014](#)).

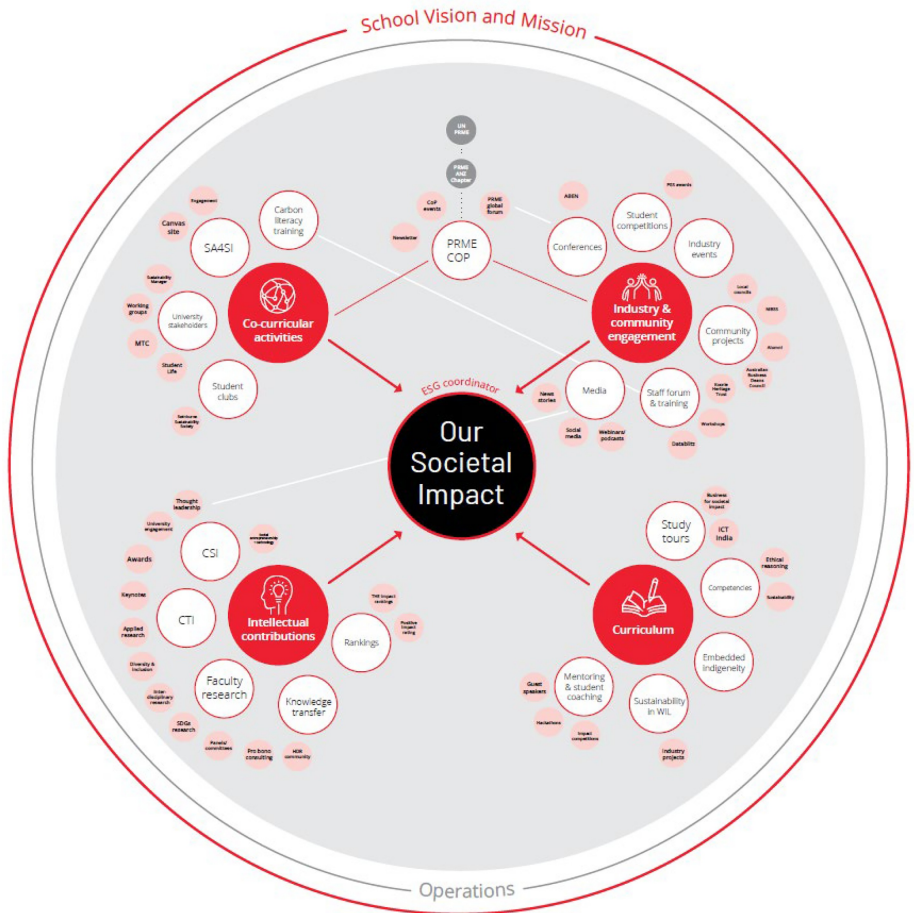


Figure A1. Societal impact mapping across school activities

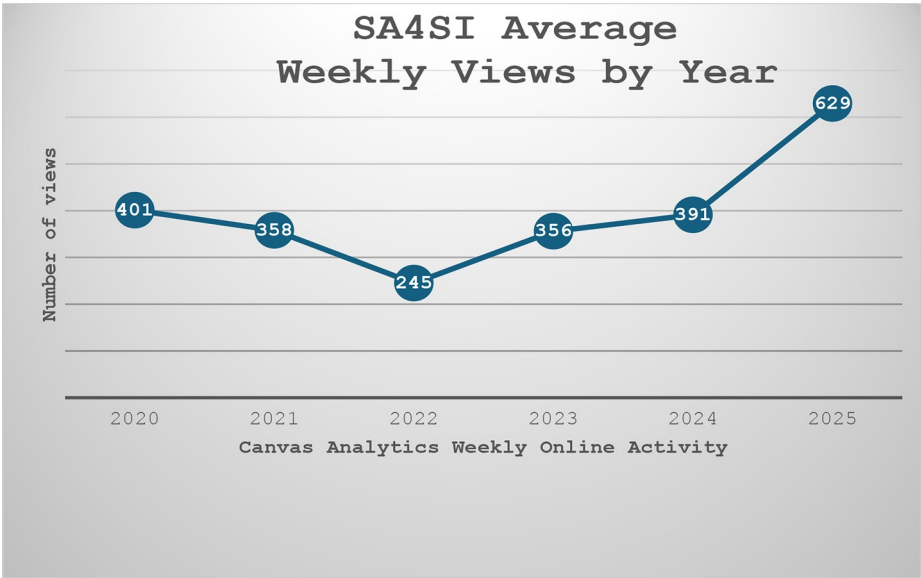


Figure A2. Views from Swinburne actions for sustainability impact (SA4SI)
Source: Generated from internal records

Appendix 4. Is from the carbon literacy training participants and organisers

As a student leader passionate about sustainability and sustainable development, it has been inspiring to witness Carbon Literacy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) impact our community. Becoming certified as Carbon Literate has shifted my approach to sustainability, especially in communicating and acting on our environmental responsibilities. This experience has shown me the power of small changes that can collectively drive significant impact – a mindset I carry and apply in university work and beyond (student Leader).

Carbon Literacy Training offers a low-pressure environment in which there is ample space for collaboration and peer-to-peer learning. It is a great gateway to having more discussion on climate change and making the ‘actions’ towards lessening climate change more approachable (CLT Participant).

I truly valued the opportunity to undertake Carbon Literacy Training with colleagues at Swinburne and at other institutions last year. As someone with a strong personal commitment to climate action, this training course helped me to consider the different ways in which this personal commitment could be translated into my professional life. As a result of the training, I believe I now have stronger advocacy skills, and look forward to continuing to promote greater climate literacy in my work communities, both within and outside Swinburne (Senior Staff Leader, CLT Participant).

I want to THANK YOU all sincerely for your contributions, leadership, and excellent facilitation through this CLT iteration. I hope you saw the shoutout in our newsletter today!

It was a pleasure working with you and learning from you. I know the participants gained great insight and walked away with a newfound energy to take action.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to PRME and I hope we get to do this again. Don’t hesitate to reach out if you would like to plan another one for the region early next year (Representative, UN Global Compact).

Source: Extracted from internal records

Societal Impact Statement

In alignment with Horizon 2025, the University's strategic plan where priorities and actions are underpinned by a vision of *people and technology working together to build a better world*.

We engage in interdisciplinary research that advances thought leadership on planetary health, social impact and decarbonisation.

To this end, in designing and delivering curricula and research projects, our faculty and research groups, including the Social and Environmental Sustainability Research Group (SESIO), **Faculty of Business**, IT for Social Impact, Centre for Social Impact, Centre for Transformative Innovation, collaborate with industry partners who seek sustainability-focused socio-technical solutions.

We inculcate our students with the knowledge, skills and abilities to tackle authentic, complex global challenges as future responsible business leaders through curricula and co-curricular activities.

We foster a teaching and learning environment to seamlessly integrate PRME principles into Swinburne Business curriculum and pedagogy, as well as developing collaborative projects involving people from business, government, civil society, and academia to advance responsible and accountable management education and practice. All **University** staff and students can avail themselves to our award-winning Swinburne Actions for Sustainability Impact (SA4SI) learning modules on the Sustainable Development Goals.

We take pride in our commitment to tackling the climate crisis by providing carbon literacy training for faculty, students, and staff.

With the University committed to be carbon neutral by 2025, we aspire to elevate our status from a bronze-level Carbon Literate Organisation to reach higher-level accreditations while leading the Australian Business Schools in disseminating carbon literacy programs of our award-winning carbon literacy team.

We will measure and track the impact of our activities over time by systematic data capturing of our achievements in pedagogy, research, and service areas through our well-established reporting systems, which demonstrate the trajectory of the social impact journey of **University of Swinburne** Business.

Figure A3. Societal Impact Framework

Source: Societal Impact Framework, 2024, extracted from internal records

Intellectual contributions		
Initiatives	Measures	PRME Principles
Research prioritisation and recognition of studies that investigate global challenges with significant societal impact.	Publications in peer-reviewed journals or special journal issues devoted to complex global challenges, emphasising or addressing areas of societal impact.	 Research
Provide training to faculty on the significance of grey literature with potential impact.	Non-traditional research outputs emphasise the number of outcomes creating an impact from the grey literature.	  Research Share
Network-building activities enhance collaboration among stakeholders, faculty, and industry.	Faculty's commitment to transferring their expertise in resolving pressing social issues.	  Research Share
Regular research seminars and guest speaker series	Faculty's engagement in research seminars and other events with projects related to societal impact.	 Share
Promote interdisciplinary collaborations and industry engagement.	The number, type, outputs, and outcomes arise from partnerships between research centres groups and external organisations focusing on societal impact.	   Research Share Partner
Provide mentorship and guidance to HDR students to ensure their projects align with societal impact goals.	The number and nature of HDR topics with a societal impact focus, HDR publications.	    Research Teach Practice Values
Facilitate HDR students' participation in industry engagement projects that align with societal impact during their research journey.	The number and nature of industry engagement projects of HDR students during their research journey and post-graduation.	    Research Teach Practice Values
Support Swinburne Business faculty in developing and participating in projects on national-level ESG policy developments.	Swinburne Business Faculty's engagement directly or indirectly as a result of Swinburne Business research and consultancy	  Share Values
Recognise and award faculty for contributing to national-level ESG policy changes through research and consultancy activities.		
Promote and increase the number of articles in media outlets that engage with the SDGs and highlight their societal impact.	The number of articles in media outlets that interact with the SDGs and societal impact.	 Share
Provide content creation support for the faculty to generate media outlets.		

Figure A4. Excerpts from the social impact measures
Source: Societal Impact Framework, 2024, extracted from internal records



Curriculum & Co-curricular activities

Initiatives

Survey existing courses and curricula to find an area where societal impact can be more effectively integrated.

Establish a teaching and learning hub for sustainability education to facilitate faculty to design effective T&L activities with a societal impact.

Support faculty to engage with Swinburne for sustainable Impact (SA4SI) Canvas.org and embed SA4SI canvas content in subsequent T&L activities.

Develop an assessment framework to measure the societal impact of courses and curricula.

Introduce and continuously improve curricula and courses focused on societal impact.

Measures

The number of teaching activities with a societal impact focus offered to students within the school and across the Swinburne Business suite of programs.

The number, types, and nature of capstone projects with a societal impact dimension mapped to the Sustainable Development Goals

The number of courses, electives, and core units making a societal impact using industry client's projects in the curriculum and bringing students' attention towards social problems.

The number of courses, electives, and core units making a societal impact using industry client's projects in the curriculum and bringing students' attention towards social problems.

The number of courses, electives, and core units making a societal impact using industry client's projects in the curriculum and bringing students' attention towards social problems.

Traffics in learning and teaching activities towards sustainability hub

Number of academic staff who contribute to the SA4SI Canvas page, courses referencing SA4SI content, and SA4SI Canvas analytics

Number of Swinburne Business academics and professional staff engagement in SDG dialogue

The number of internships or WIL activities with a societal impact focus offered to students across the Swinburne Business suite of programs.

School events that align with the SDGs or have a societal impact focus, e.g., the Global Goals Week initiative, Open Day

The number of students/staff who complete the Carbon Literacy Training through other business units

The number of carbon literates in the faculty.

PRME Principles



Teach



Share



Values

Figure A5. Societal Impact Framework, 2024
Source: Societal Impact Framework, 2024, extracted from internal records

 Industry & community engagement		
Initiatives	Measures	PRME Principles
Support, recognise, and reward faculty who contribute towards the community well-being of the university, business community, and broader society. Support, recognise, and reward faculty who actively engage with industry partners and other valued organisations related to UN PRME	The number, type, and nature of faculty's societal impact activities beyond their faculty role.	 Share  Practice  Values
	The number of social enterprise partner organisations engaged in research, curricula and service delivery.	
	The level of faculty engagement in university-level engagement activities	
	Media mentions in newsletters and social media.	
	The number of collaborative projects established with industry partners to work on making a societal impact.	
	Swinburne Business faculty actively establishes connections with the broader university networks in Australia	
	The number and nature of the role of corporate advisory representation of industry leaders from the ESG sector in Swinburne Business.	
	The number of organised guest speaker events to expose students and faculty to real-world practices of societal impact.	
	The number of certification programs co-created by Swinburne Business and industry partners from the ESG sector.	

Figure A6. Societal Impact Framework, 2024

Source: Societal Impact Framework, 2024, extracted from internal records

(1) Open Coding (Initial Codes):

- Meaningful segments in the data (e.g., references to grassroots initiatives, capacity building, agency, governance).
- Descriptive codes such as *community-driven initiatives*, *institutional strengthening*, *agency empowerment*, *governance evolution*.

(2) Axial Coding (Grouping into Categories):

- Cluster related codes into broader categories:
 - *Grassroots and institutional dynamics*
 - *Agency and empowerment*
 - *Governance and structural transformation*

(3) Selective Coding (Theme Development):

- Integrate categories into overarching themes:
 - *Theme 1: Grassroots developments expand institutional capacity for societal impact.*
 - *Theme 2: Empowered individual and collective agency.*
 - *Theme 3: Transforming bottom-up developments into governance structures.*

About the authors

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