Editorial: The future of social impact in business schools − enabling research environments

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Abstract

Purpose – This editorial aims to propose features of research environments in business schools that incentivise, measure and reward the social impact of business research.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual approach is used drawing on scholarly frameworks.

Findings – The authors propose a conceptual framework for incentivising, measuring and rewarding social impact in business schools organised around strategy, initiatives, resources and culture, alongside risks to avoid. They also identify three themes and five place-based and purpose perspectives on social impact in business schools from the seven articles in the special issue.

Practical implications – This editorial assists business school deans and researchers in identifying enablers and diagnosing barriers to creating a research environment that supports social impact research.

Originality/value – This editorial introduces a framework of enablers for incentivising, measuring and rewarding social impact in business school research. The editorial also synthesises the articles in the Deans' special issue.

Keywords Social impact, Business schools, Research environment, Business schools, Future

Paper type Extended editorial

Introduction

Business schools play a crucial role in generating social impact through both the education of future leaders and the production of research that informs responsible decision-making and innovation across the commercial, public and non-profit sectors. Over the past two decades, however, expectations of business schools have shifted substantially. Once primarily evaluated on their ability to produce rigorous academic research and prepare graduates for corporate careers, business schools are now increasingly expected to demonstrate broader societal contributions (Redgrave *et al.*, 2022). Governments, accreditation bodies, industry partners and students alike are asking how business education and research contribute to addressing pressing social, economic and environmental challenges.

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Social impact of business research is the:

> […] creation of value for people through business scholarly activities resulting in intentional improvement in micro, meso or macro economic, human and environmental phenomena over time with the market and organisations leading, partnering, supporting or yielding (to) change (Russell-Bennett and Reid 2026 p. 5).

This definition focuses on the role of businesses and other organisations to improve economic, environment and human phenomena for the benefit of people. Business schools are thus the scholarly units that study business and organisation and are the primary scholarly unit for conceptualising, incentivising and measuring social impact from business research.

While business schools globally recognise the importance of social impact (AACSB, 2023; Haenlein and Jack, 2025), there remains little clarity around how research environments should be structured to support these outcomes. In particular, there are currently no widely accepted business-specific frameworks or guidelines to assist leaders in designing research systems that actively incentivise, measure and reward socially impactful scholarship. Within this context, the concept of social impact has become a central theme in debates about the purpose and legitimacy of business schools. Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) defines socially impactful research as scholarship that produces credible knowledge capable of addressing important societal challenges and improving the wellbeing of individuals, organisations and communities (Cross *et al.*, 2022). Yet, despite the growing emphasis on impact, business schools lack clear frameworks for systematically designing research environments that support these outcomes.

This special issue addresses this challenge by asking a central question. How might business schools systematically design, implement and refine frameworks that incentivise, measure and reward the social impact of business research? To explore this question, the special issue brings together perspectives from business school deans operating in diverse institutional contexts. These leaders occupy a unique vantage point at the intersection of academic governance, research strategy and societal engagement. Their insights offer valuable guidance on how business schools might navigate the complex task of fostering impactful scholarship while maintaining academic rigour. The special issue was developed in partnership with the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC). Through this collaboration, the special issue seeks to provide guidance for business deans, academics and university administrators on how policy frameworks, measurement approaches and research incentive systems can be designed to stimulate and sustain social impact in business scholarship. The executive leadership of the ABDC has also contributed a practitioner commentary within the issue, reflecting on the insights presented by the authors and outlining the implications for policy, governance and strategic leadership within business schools.

Australian Business Council − special issue partner

The Australian Business Dean’s Council (ABDC) is the collective voice of Australian university business schools, which educate 16% of all domestic students and 39% of the nation’s international students (ABDC, 2026). The 38 member business schools teach and research the areas vital to the success of the businesses that underpin the economy. The ABDC’s aim is to make business schools even better. As their peak body, ABDC’s role is to ensure that those with political, social, cultural and economic influence appreciate and support how business education contributes to Australia’s future. As a partner in the special issue, members of the ABDC leadership have written a response commentary in this special issue outlining the importance of social/societal impact for Australian business schools and providing comment on each article in the special issue.

Trends in business school social impact

Business schools, particularly those who are accredited with AACSB, EQUIS and/or AMBA, recognise the important role business schools play in achieving social (societal) impact. Business schools have a greater remit that merely generating shareholder value, they have a "responsibility to improve the lives of all stakeholders" (AACSB, 2023 p. 2) through their teaching, research and service. Despite this recognition and sporadic efforts (see Alkire *et al.*, 2025), there are currently no clear definitions of social impact in business research, no common language, agreed-on evaluation frameworks or metrics for business researchers and no frameworks to guide business school leaders for incentivising and fostering social impact research in a business school (see Parkinson and Naidu, 2024). While there are templates and guidelines available (see AACSB, 2023), these are not prescriptive and are not evidence-based or theoretically-grounded. Given the dominance of research quality metrics that reflect academic impact rather than social impact (i.e. journal impact factors, field-weighted citation index, H-index) and KPIs that focus on publishing in high-ranked journals, it is probably not surprising that there is little discussion about how business schools can generate social impact. Indeed while there has been discussion for more than two decades about the need for broader measures of a business school's success than publications (Lockett, 2024), little progress has been made. Indeed the relevance and impact of business schools is a topic with increasing discussion (Redgrave *et al.*, 2022; Basken, 2023).

A key consideration in developing useful social impact frameworks for business schools is unintended consequences. When academics are rewarded or punished by KPIs, the emergence of "system gaming" occurs, where extrinsic outcomes are the focus of behaviour rather than the true value of the research (see Hudson, 2024). We do not know how to foster genuine social impact research that avoids or mitigates such unintended consequences. Without such frameworks, we risk replacing one set of KPIs (research quality) for another set of KPIs (research impact) that is extrinsically rather than intrinsically driven. If we do not want "one-dimensional academics" who are afraid to take risks and adopt "performative" tactics to their career (Mingers and Willmott, 2010, 2013), then we need frameworks that drive the behaviours we seek. A recent blog on the AACSB website provides a useful starting point; "to produce research with true societal impact, business schools must abandon one-size-fits-all journal list metrics in favour of diverse, personalised, mission-driven research objectives for each faculty member" (Lockett, 2024).

Designing business school research environments that enable social impact

Encouraging socially impactful research requires more than simply adjusting evaluation metrics. It involves the intentional design of organisational environments that enable scholars to engage meaningfully with societal challenges while maintaining high standards of academic rigour (Godonoga, 2025). Business school leaders play a central role in shaping these environments through the strategic, structural and cultural levers available to them. As expectations around the societal relevance of business school research continue to grow, institutional leaders are increasingly called upon to design research systems that balance academic excellence with broader social contribution (Redgrave *et al.*, 2022).

Recent work by the ABDC highlights that societal impact from business research rarely follows a simple linear pathway from discovery to application. Instead, impact often emerges within complex ecosystems of stakeholders, including academics, organisations, governments and end beneficiaries of research (ABDC, 2026). Within these ecosystems, societal and social impact develops through a series of interactions between researchers and external stakeholders in which knowledge is co-created, interpreted and applied in different contexts. This perspective suggests that the design of research environments must extend beyond publication outcomes to also support relationships, engagement activities and long-term knowledge exchange processes.

Research strategies represent one of the most visible signals of institutional priorities. When schools articulate clear missions that emphasise societal and social contribution alongside scholarly excellence, they provide a framework that legitimises research addressing complex social, economic and environmental problems. Accreditation bodies such as AACSB have reinforced this shift by encouraging business schools to demonstrate how their activities contribute to societal impact through research, teaching and engagement (AACSB, 2023). Strategic research themes, mission aligned research centres and cross-disciplinary initiatives can further encourage scholars to pursue questions that connect academic inquiry with real-world challenges.

Promotion and tenure systems are another critical mechanism through which leaders shape research behaviour. Traditional evaluation systems often privilege journal publications and citation-based indicators of academic impact (Haenlein and Jack, 2025). While these remain important indicators of scholarly influence, such systems can also narrow research agendas and discourage engagement with practice-oriented problems (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Evidence suggests that academics respond strongly to the incentives embedded in evaluation systems, shaping their research activities in ways that maximise recognised performance indicators (Hudson, 2024). Business schools seeking to foster social impact may therefore need to broaden evaluation criteria to recognise activities such as policy engagement, industry collaboration, community partnerships and knowledge translation.

Resource allocation also plays a key role in enabling impactful research. Internal funding schemes, seed grants, or strategic investment in interdisciplinary initiatives can all support research addressing complex societal issues that rarely fit neatly within a single discipline. Such mechanisms are particularly important given that societal challenges often require collaboration across disciplines and sectors (Fisk, Kabadayi, Sidaoui and Tsiotsou, 2024). Research on societal impact in business schools emphasises that knowledge exchange and engagement with external stakeholders often occur through a series of productive interactions over time, rather than through single research outputs (ABDC, 2026).

Equally important is the cultivation of research cultures that value engagement alongside academic excellence. Organisational culture shapes the informal norms and expectations that influence academic behaviour and signal what types of scholarship are valued within an institution (Tierney, 1988). When institutional leaders publicly recognise and celebrate impactful scholarship, they help establish social impact as a legitimate dimension of academic success. The RRBM movement similarly emphasises the need for research that addresses important societal problems while maintaining credibility and usefulness to multiple stakeholders (Cross *et al.*, 2022).

Ultimately, fostering socially impactful research requires alignment across strategy, incentives, resources and culture. When these elements operate together, business schools are better positioned to support scholars in producing research that not only advances knowledge within academic communities but also contributes meaningfully to addressing the challenges faced by organisations and societies. Developing frameworks that support such alignment remains an important priority for business school leaders seeking to strengthen the societal contribution of business research (Parkinson and Naidu, 2024).

Risks of performative impact and unintended consequences

Efforts to promote social impact in research must also contend with the potential for unintended consequences. Research evaluation systems shape academic behaviour, and when particular outputs or indicators are rewarded, scholars adapt their activities to align with these incentives. This phenomenon has been widely documented in relation to journal ranking systems, where the prioritisation of publication metrics influences research agendas, methodological choices and career strategies within business schools (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2025).

A similar dynamic could emerge if business schools attempt to measure social impact using narrow or overly simplified indicators. If impact becomes defined through a limited set of visible metrics or reporting requirements, academics may focus on producing measurable indicators of engagement rather than pursuing research that genuinely contributes to addressing societal challenges (Hudson, 2024). In such contexts, social impact risks becoming performative, with narratives of influence constructed primarily to satisfy institutional evaluation systems rather than reflecting meaningful societal change. This concern reflects broader debates about the limitations of metric driven research evaluation. Scholars have argued that an overreliance on standardised indicators can unintentionally encourage strategic compliance and system gaming, rather than fostering the diverse forms of scholarship required to address complex societal problems (Lockett, 2024; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Designing impact frameworks therefore requires careful consideration of how incentives shape academic behaviour.

Rather than replacing one set of rigid metrics with another, business schools may need to adopt more pluralistic approaches to evaluating research contributions. Such approaches recognise that societal impact often emerges through long term engagement with stakeholders, collaborative knowledge exchange and context-specific applications of research insights (Aguinis *et al.*, 2014). Recognising these diverse pathways to impact is essential if business schools are to avoid creating new forms of performative behaviour while seeking to enhance the societal contribution of their research (Redgrave *et al.*, 2022) (Figure 1).

Themes and perspectives in the special issue

The special issue is comprised of seven articles from ten universities and four countries; the USA, Australia, The Netherlands and Lebanon. The focus of the business school varied from faith-based to mission-based, including large and small business schools in capital cities (both regional and metropolitan). Despite this diversity, there was unity in the answers to the

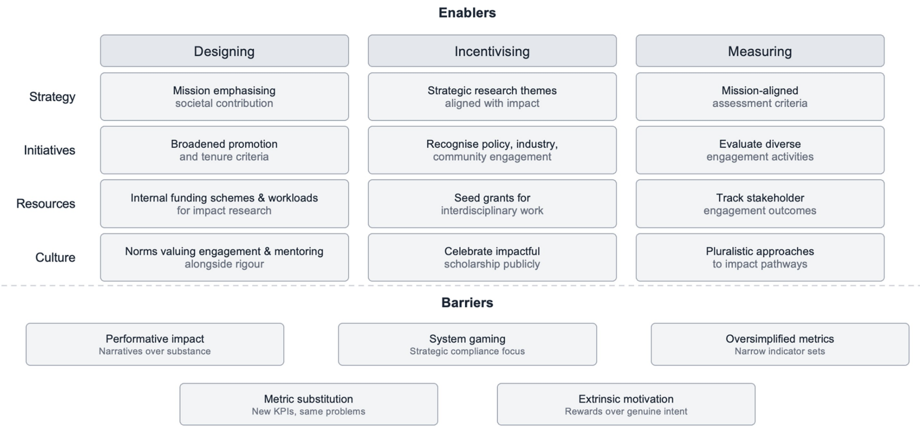

Figure 1. Business school research environment for enabling social impact
Source: Authors' own work

special issue question of h*ow might business schools systematically design, implement and refine frameworks that incentivise, measure and reward the social impact of business researchers?*

Incentivising, measuring and rewarding social impact in business schools themes

We identified three themes from the articles to summarise the author's ideas to answer this question. Business schools can only design effective impact frameworks when social impact is anchored in a clearly articulated institutional purpose, not retrofitted to compliance requirements. The seven articles demonstrate that incentivising social impact can be done through purposeful alignment and enabling structures, measuring social impact needs to go beyond outputs and rewarding social impact required embedding in scholarly identity that is core not peripheral.

Theme 1: Incentivising social impact through purposeful alignment and enabling structures

Business schools can incentivise social impact when impact is normalised as core academic work through institutional purpose, strategy, governance and support systems, rather than relying on individual motivation or discretionary effort. Kleijnen and Odekerken-Schröder conceptualise incentives as part of an institutional architecture showing how strategy structures, capability and resources must foster online practice rather than as an add-on. Wragg, Perera, Chong, Marjoribanks and Hewege then outline how adaptive government structures of participatory and hybrid top-down/bottom-down can create organisational conditions that motivate and sustain social impact research. Dulleck and Shorten emphasise that incentives are strengthened when business schools choose specific social impact channels rather than attempting to pursue all forms of impact simultaneously. This prioritisation reduces ambiguity for academics and signals that socially oriented research is institutionally valued and supported not symbolic. Rebeiz illustrates the incentivising power of clear expectations and Metz demonstrates how explicit mission alignment, research focus statements and structural supports act as incentives through legitimacy. Finally, Dulleck and Shorten pick up the legitimacy concept by outlining the motivating effect of social licence as one of survival and thriving.

Theme 2: Measuring social impact beyond outputs

Measurement frameworks must move beyond publication counts and media visibility to capture resonance, uptake, use and durable change, using process-based and developmental indicators. Phillips, Rao and Smith conceptualise impact measurement as tracing productive interactions over time. They emphasise engagement, use and behavioural uptake rather than retrospective outcome counting. Metz also emphasises use and adoption-based indicators and distinguishes between academic and social impact. Kleijnen and Odekerken-Schröder identify that changes in how stakeholders think, feel or act are important outcome metrics that go beyond dissemination and visibility. Wragg and colleagues identify the need for process metrics to reflect the iterative nature of social impact.

Theme 4: Rewarding social impact as scholarly identity that is core not peripheral

Rewarding social impact requires embedding impact within evaluation, promotion and academic identity so that socially impactful research is recognised as real scholarly value, not as peripheral service. Hall, Batista and Pittarese show how rewarding social impact is strengthened when impact is recognised across research, teaching and engagement, reinforcing academic identities that span traditional role boundaries. Metz demonstrates how explicitly recognising mission-aligned research in review and promotion processes transforms social impact from voluntary labour into valued academic achievement. Wragg and colleagues show the role of formal governance bodies for recognition and visibility, while Kleijnen and Odekerken-Schröder argue that reward systems must move away from symbolic recognition towards valuing co-creation quality, sustained collaboration and durable societal change as markers of academic success. Finally, Dulleck and Shorten highlight that social impact is rewarded indirectly through enhanced social licence, public trust and stronger government and community partnerships that reinforce institutional legitimacy and researcher relevance.

Place-based and purpose perspectives

Perspective 1: Capital cities as translational impact hubs for policy

Universities located in capital cities or close to centres of government are positioned to translate business research directly into policy design, public administration and societal decision-making. Dulleck and Shorten show how location enables research impact through policy engagement, behavioural insights and co-design with public institutions, making “working with governments and for society” a defining impact pathway.

Perspective 2: Regional universities as social anchors

Universities located in underserved, rural, or economically distressed regions frame social impact as place-based responsibility, often tied to long-term community wellbeing and economic resilience. Metz demonstrates how a rural, Appalachian business school where the university acts as a social anchor. Social impact is incentivised by aligning faculty research with regional needs, community partnerships and institutional mission, rather than external rankings.

Perspective 3: Accredited business schools as navigators of global-local tensions

Business schools in an environment with strong pressure from global accreditation and rankings must mediate between global norms and local meaning, making architectural and governance approaches critical for avoiding symbolic compliance. Kleijnen and Odekerken-Schröder in the Netherlands demonstrate a context where national and supranational initiatives encourage systemic rethinking of impact, recognition and rewards across borders. Wragg and colleagues in Australia show how governance structures translate global expectations into local practices to address the challenges of a globally accredited school navigating AACSB, PRME and sustainability agendas. Hall and colleagues show how a AACSB-accredited business school can embed social impact without abandoning accreditation standards, by aligning impact with core academic identities and roles rather than treating it as an add-on.

Perspective 4: Faith-based purpose as a moral responsibility

For a faith-based business school, impact is not optional or instrumental, it is a normative obligation rooted in values such as human dignity, stewardship, justice and service to others. This contrasts with secular or prestige-oriented institutions where impact is often justified through legitimacy, reputation, or funding logic. Phillips, Rao and Smith therefore frame social impact in the USA. Jesuit business schools as a core expression of institutional faith commitments, rather than as a response to accreditation standards, rankings or policy pressures.

Perspective 5: Purpose not prestige as public value

Business schools across the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and North America are governed by the same prestige hierarchies (elite journals, rankings, accreditation norms). These global systems are overwhelmingly shaped by Anglo-American epistemic and institutional logics, regardless of local context. This can result in homogenised incentives that can marginalise socially impactful research. Rebeiz's central focus is to shift attention from where a business school is located to the global academic field in which it is embedded. He identifies that business schools worldwide are losing credibility due to prestige-driven, inward-looking research. Likewise Dulleck and Shorten also advocate for a focus on purpose rather than prestige through research that delivers social impact. Thus, social impact by business schools is framed by Dulleck and Shorten, and Rebeiz as a field-level corrective to achieve legitimacy, restore social licence and provide societal value.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this editorial emphasises the urgent need for business schools to move beyond traditional academic metrics and embrace research environments that genuinely incentivise, measure and reward social impact. By aligning institutional purpose, strategy, resources and culture, business schools can foster scholarship that not only advances academic knowledge but also addresses pressing societal challenges. This special issue with perspectives from Business school deans and university leaders demonstrates that effective frameworks for social impact must be purpose-driven, context-sensitive and embedded within core academic identities rather than treated as peripheral or compliance-driven activities. Ultimately, the path forward requires pluralistic evaluation approaches, intentional leadership and a commitment to meaningful engagement with stakeholders. The aim is to restore legitimacy and social licence by ensuring that business research delivers tangible value to communities, organisations and society at large.

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