From the Editors: In Search of Scholarly Impact

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Scholarly Impact and Its Understandings

During a 2013 interview with Salman Khan of the Khan Academy, Tesla and Space-X CEO Elon Musk described academic papers as "pretty useless." Musk continued, "How many PhD papers are actually used by someone, ever? Percentagewise, it's not good" (Khan Academy, 2013). The last decade has seen an increase in the questioning of the legitimacy and relevance of scholarly research. While most vivid recently in societal debates on the scientific truth behind climate-change studies, or the effects of COVID-19 vaccinations, this questioning has seeped into management studies. Tourish (2020) pointed out that increasingly management scholars write for those already on the inside of the debates they reference: scholars appear to publish primarily to further their careers rather than knowledge, neglect critical issues for bite-sized chunks of easily-publishable research, and resort to pretentious prose for illusory theory development.

The Academy of Management (AOM) has a long history of questioning and debating research impact, what it means, and how to operationalize it. Over the last two decades, numerous professional development workshops, symposia, and conference sessions have addressed issue of research impact. Simultaneously, the Board of Governors (BOG) has devoted 100s of hours of meeting time discussing and debating the meaning and nature of the impact that the Academy and its members create through research. The BOG created the Practice Theme Committee (PTC) almost two decades ago as one of the four strategic pillars of the Academy. The PTC, dissolved in 2019, aimed to define, to shape and to advance our members' impact through their research, and to ensure people can better account for the

intended impact they believe or hope their research will have beyond simple scholarly metrics such as citation counts and journal impact factors.

We believe this special issue comes at a crucial juncture for business schools around the world buffeted by administrative challenges for those running these schools, and professional challenges for those identifying as scholarly researchers and everything that identity entails. Within many business schools lurks an inherent assumption that scholars must publish or perish; and, many early career scholars receive cautionary advice to focus on academic publications as a priority, and so-called A-level academic publications in particular. Yet, a growing chorus of government officials, business leaders, academics, and regulatory bodies have questioned the value and impact of academic publications (see Haley, 2021). Indeed, for over a decade, researchers have argued for engaged scholarship (see Hoffman, 2021; Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Regulators and grant-bestowing organizations have similarly underlined a social need for research that engages with broader audiences beyond academic confines (e.g., National Science Foundation's broader impacts; UK's Research Excellence Framework impact case studies). Continuing in that vein the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the major accreditation body for business schools worldwide, has clearly distinguished between outputs and outcomes in its accreditation standards: Outputs focus on numbers such as the numbers of intellectual contributions, while outcomes deal with the impact of those contributions. The AACSB has urged moves from outputs to outcomes (Bryant, 2021). Despite these arguments and calls, few academics accept that their roles and identities include informing the general public (Besley and Nesbit, 2013); concurrently, academics rarely feature in public discourse (Hoffman, 2016).

Historical understandings of institutional and regulatory factors underly assumptions

about the creation and dissemination of scholarly research for impact. Some have argued that

management educators misappropriated concepts of intellectually robust and relevant research

and education, thereby contributing to intellectual stasis in business education and research

(Khurana and Spender, 2012). These theorists have contended that business schools have

institutionalized research models of narrow scope and methodological rigor to produce a

plethora of management literature and PhDs, but with little capacity or desire to inform

regulators, the general public or professional managers (Hambrick, 1994; Mintzberg, 2004;

Polzer, Gulati, Khurana and Tushman, 2009). Following Simon (1967), many have viewed

scholarly impact as a design problem to encourage interdisciplinary, relevant research; yet, as

these theorists have also noted, discipline-trained faculty and a dearth of committed

practitioners in academia have hampered effective business-school design. Prescriptions on

effective design for scholarly impact span business schools' accreditation criteria (e.g.,

AACSB, 2020/2022), measurement issues (e.g., Aguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, and

Cummings, 2014; *BizEd*, 2018; Haley, 2018), and societal efforts at classifying and obtaining

state funding (e.g., the UK's Research Excellence Framework in place since 2004).

Academic essays in management journals have elaborated on conditions spawning

rigor vs. relevance (e.g., Gulati, 2007). Simultaneously, despite the global acceptance of US

business schools' standards (see Haley, 2021), other theorists have rejected generic

approaches to measuring and ascertaining impact: as complex organizations, business schools

operate within unique social, legal, economic and technological environments that fashion

their activities and potentials, especially across national environments (Spender, 1992).

Relations between institutional fields might facilitate or hinder scholarly impact with mutual

dependence and power imbalances affecting outcomes in contrary ways (Furnari, 2016).

Indeed, though generally ignored in our theories, competing institutional logics (Zhu, Rooney

and Phillips, 2016), causal complexity, and a configuration of attributes including barriers to

entry that evaluators erect for interdisciplinary research (see Fini, Jourdan, Perkmann, and

Toschi, 2022; Misangyi, Greckhamer, Furnari, Fiss, Crilly and Aguilera, 2017) may influence

and shape scholarly impact.

Focusing on process, other theorists have argued that competing global, cultural scripts

may lead to ostensibly similar but intrinsically different impact (Haley and Haley, 2016),

contradicting notions that identical, normatively-sanctioned ideas increase homogeneous

organizational strategies, forms and practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Some theorists have

viewed knowledge transfers between organizations as rule-based translations that correspond

to institutional conditions, but also change them, resulting in new distributions of power

(Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Rovik, 2016). Despite readily available data that invalidate

widely-used measures such as journal impact factors, academic institutions continue to use

them (see Callaway, 2016). Others have focused on how management ideas circulate and

transform (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby and Sahlin-Andersson, 2008), enhancing relevance

for practitioners and impact for academics (Bartunek and Rynes, 2010; Sandberg and

Tsoukas, 2011). In these theories, academics and other stakeholders actively translate

concepts in complex networks for impact. Local translation of what constitutes global

scholarly impact may lead to diverse structures, routines and practices such as for the

Balanced Scorecard (Madsen, 2014) and international auditing standards (Mennicken, 2008).

Thus, scholarly impact may differ in essence globally, bolstered by political processes.

Personal identity may shape pursuit and reach of scholarly impact. Bedeian (1996)

identified research-intensive publications as one indicator of career success that leads to

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desirable outcomes such as high salary and status, affecting academics' career paths (Kraimer, Greco, Seibert and Sargent, 2019). Postcolonial and critical approaches draw on concepts such as mimicry to shed light on management educators' and scholars' identities around the world as business schools globalize. Kothiyal, Bell and Clark (2018) discussed how the English language's dominance, and pressures to conform to global research norms of ranked journals, shaped scholars' identities in Indian business schools. Hybrid organizational forms may disrupt established processes, mold alternate global identities, contribute to scholarly engagement and yield diverse measures of scholarly impact. For pedagogy, threshold, integrative concepts in management (Wright and Gilmore, 2012; Wright and Hibbert, 2015), such as opportunity costs in economics (Davies and Mangan, 2007), can broaden scholarly impact on education by causing students to "see things in a new way" and by transforming learning processes (Lucas and Mladenovic, 2007). Identifying these threshold concepts in management through transdisciplinary research (i.e., by enabling inputs and scoping across scientific and non-scientific communities to address systemic, holistic challenges), and interdisciplinary research (i.e., by analyzing, synthesizing and harmonizing links between disciplines for coordinated, coherent wholes), could thereby yield pedagogical returns for management educators for sustainable, scholarly impact. Additionally, making and implementing strategic decisions in a complex, global economy requires practical wisdom; yet, business researchers rarely analyze which stakeholders benefit or lose from streams and methods of research or how they may transmit normative concepts to students (see Clegg, Jarvis and Pitsis, 2013).

The AOM, RRBM & *FT* on Scholarly Impact

The AOM undertook a pioneering global study of its members (Haley, Page, Pitsis, Rivas, and Yu, 2017) to provide "both a mirror and window to comprehend better the complex, pluralistic nature of scholarly impact." The project, conducted by the PTC, consisted of a qualitative study and a quantitative survey of members. The PTC received responses from 700 members who included academics, doctoral candidates, businesspersons and policy makers, with the majority (57 percent) located in North America. Respondents perceived the top five audiences for management research as other management academics, top managers and decision makers at companies, governments and policymakers, social science academics, and students. Yet, respondents also perceived their research as having the most influence on management theorizing, teaching, and future research practice; most appeared to believe that their research exercised little influence on broader social issues. As a group, respondents noted that management research currently has the greatest influence over the research and teaching of other management academics.

Respondents to the AOM/PTC survey also recognized the paradoxes that researchers often face. For example:

- the majority believed that scholarship affecting management practice and government policy provided an "intensely" or a "strongly important" indicator of impact - yet, only a minority (38 percent) noted that their own institutions supported such scholarship;

- the majority believed that interdisciplinary research "definitely" or "probably" had greater impact than single-discipline research, though more difficult to publish in top-tier journals - yet, most institutions used publications in top-tier journals as leading measures of scholarly impact; and,

- the majority believed that journal lists, journal rankings, and impact factors as applied to

  journals "definitely" or "probably" did not reflect journal quality or scholarly impact -

  yet, academic institutions still widely used these metrics to evaluate faculty contributions.

A narrow focus on privileged outlets and a small base of acknowledged consumers for

scholarly research could account for the perceived lack of impact. According to respondents, the

top five indicators of impact for research included publication in top-tier journals, citations by

other researchers, ability to attract competitive grants, scholarly books, and publications in

practitioner-focused outlets. Yet, simultaneously, winds of change have originated from

associations such as Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM, 2017/2020)

that have argued for cultivating "research ecosystems" where schools encourage academic and

social impact across a research portfolio of publications, grants, doctoral dissertations, and

engagement efforts. Such a portfolio approach to scholarly impact offers the promise of reaching

a range of stakeholders, without sacrificing rigorous research.

Though difficult to quantify and challenging to achieve, the *Financial Times* (*FT*), which

publishes the widely-used *FT*50 academic journals list, chose to honor impactful, academic

research. A diverse panel of academics, businesspersons, grant-bestowers and journalists

(including a co-editor of this special issue) judged the 2022 Responsible Business Education

Awards (Jack, 2022). The submissions indicated that business schools' academics with a

portfolio of interconnected research can within a three-year period achieve positive social impact

through rigorous research, tackling significant societal problems, and driving change in policy or

practice. A sizable number of submissions for the "best business school academic research"

category "combined intellectual originality, a focus on pressing social issues and efforts to

engage organizations to bring about change." The judges looked not just at the core academic

articles or books but also associated ripples, effects and outreach achieved through the research. The academic research that the judges saw as most impactful involved interdisciplinary approaches, sometimes with core articles in non-business academic journals (such as the major journal, *Science)*. Importantly, the authors viewed the published research as just the beginning of their conversations with external stakeholders, not the end.

Contributions of This Special Issue

For this special issue, we define scholarly impact as an "auditable or recordable occasion of influence" arising out of research (Haley et al., 2017). In light of the AOM/PTC report's recommendations, articles we chose for this special issue explore various facets of the impact of research on communities that include a range of external and internal stakeholders such as regulators, policymakers, managers, students and society at large. Theorists have argued that impactful research requires dialogue, praxis, and reflexivity (MacIntosh, Beech, Bartunek, Mason, Cooke and Denyer, 2017)—and in this special issue, authors have engaged in all three modes.

We feel that scholarly impact constitutes a critical issue for the field of management, and for business schools generally, and one deserving of in-depth research at the institutional/regulatory, processual and individual levels. In this fashion, and through this *AMLE* special issue, we look toward the future with actionable recommendations for faculty, administrators, policymakers, students and managers, as well as draw on the past to provide frameworks, theories and best practices. By exploring several of the theoretical perspectives we identified earlier, we hope for this special issue to have relevance not just for management academics, but also for other disciplines in business and the social sciences. In addition to theoretical and empirical analysis, articles explore implications for diverse stakeholders such as

marginalized communities, faculty evaluators and regulators: i.e., articles aim not just for

historical analysis and critique, but also for influence in policy debates through focusing on the

relevance of findings for trajectories of influence as well as on concrete, implementable, policy

recommendations.

In conclusion, this special issue aims for the renewing of theory-driven research on

implementable strategies for scholarly impact, and for the continuing development and debate

over conceptual models for external impact. Such research would likely continue to have

important implications for what we study, how we engage in research, and how we disseminate

and teach new knowledge. Indeed, one can argue scholarly impact is, at its core, what we strive

for as management scholars and educators. We see articles in the special issue as contributing to

perceptual change on impactful scholarship, encouraging knowledge-infused change in academic

environments, and critically self-questioning our roles as academics in society. A description of

the articles in this special issue follows.

Overview of Articles

The articles in the special issue focus on both research and teaching, include diverse theoretical

perspectives and levels of analysis. The authors illustrate in numerous ways the complexity of

unpacking scholarly impact. Impact happens at various stages of scholarship and teaching.

Indeed, a plethora of pathways exist for impact creating opportunities and challenges for those

aiming to achieve impact, but, also for those aiming to measure, to capture, to reward, and to

sustain impact.

Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch and Bansal (2022) provide actionable insights into the long-

studied processes and importance of co-creating solutions with practitioners to solve complex

problems. The authors highlight the potential and merit for dynamic spaces in business schools

to work with myriad key stakeholders for sensemaking and solving wicked problems in that ecosystem. The cocreating forward process offers a practical and engaging narrative on involving practitioners in academic collaboration for scholarly impact. In that same space, *Parola, Spiess-Knafl and Thaler (2022)* take us deeper into the micro-practices between academics and practitioners as they collaborate for understandings on how mundane acts trigger turning points that enable transformation and impact. The authors present a process model of turning points to allow for greater understanding into micro-level interactions over time and how these can affect impactful research collaborations between academics and practitioners.

While the first two articles concentrate on research collaborations, *Guerrero, Audretsch, Belitski and Siegel (2022)* focus on the impact of scholarly research on regional economic growth. Through metanalysis of data from the UK's Research Excellence Framework, the authors show the spillover benefits of university and business school research on human capital development, economic growth and commercialization. The authors conclude that universities make a positive economic contribution to their region through research.

Spencer, Anderson and Ellwood (2022) move us away from dualist ideas of scholar-practitioner through interweaving scholarship with practice in education. To illustrate, the authors report on a multi-method study of Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) students to show that impact requires neither novel research nor the presence of scholars. DBA students can function as scholar-practitioners and hence generate impact through their practice *in situ*.

Continuing on education, *Dodd, Graves and Hentzen (2022)* focus on business schools' training courses designed to create positive impacts on marginalized groups in society. As business schools have increasingly sought to influence their surroundings, many have instituted programs to engage more with marginalized and at-risk people within their communities. Issues

of equity, diversity, and inclusivity have special importance in these interventions. The authors

provide a framework based on a systematic literature review for training marginalized groups.

They offer advice on how to design programs that can have a positive impact by homing in on

systemic factors.

In addition to the empirical pieces, an essay and two exemplary contributions continue to

explore issues of import to the study of scholarly impact. *Ramani, Aguinis and Coyle-Shapiro

(2022)* highlight the importance of how we measure and make sense of scholarly impact. In their

essay, the authors delve into the flaws surrounding the use of the ubiquitous Journal Impact

Factor in faculty evaluations. Journal Impact Factors do not serve as proxies for impact and can

obfuscate when evaluators fail to account for correct levels of analysis The authors provide

actionable advice for evaluating research quality in business schools.

Our final two invited essays speak directly to business school administrations to foster

policy impact (*Beech, Mason, MacIntosh and Beech, 2022)* and to the crucial role of teaching in

generating impact (*Bartunek and Ren, 2022*). Beech et al. call for the paradox box, a learning

zone where academics and policymakers inhabit a collaborative space where all actors "drop

their tools" and work with paradox and ambiguity towards creating impactful knowledge.

Bartunek and Ren, focus on the scant attention given to emotions and meaning-making in

classrooms. Understandings of emotion should underpin curriculum design to ensure relevance,

healthy meanings, and impact in classrooms. Bartunek and Ren offer actionable strategies for

educators to foster students' meaningful engagement with course material.

In addition, *Yarrow (2022)* and *Ryazanova (2022)* review in depth three books that

explore a myriad of issues with delivering and judging the scholarly impact of management

research; and, on measuring research impact.

We believe all the articles make a unique contribution to the spirit and intent of the special issue. Each article provides useful knowledge and advice for how we might define, generate, make sense of, measure, reward, and shape the nature of impact generated in business schools. The articles span the gamut from how best to set up co-creative relationships and spaces, to how administrators should measure impact, to the breadth and depth of the scholarly impact we create. Each article provides insights that we hope inspires further research and action on this fledgling but all too important topic of scholarship. We understand that our present notions of scholarly impact in relation to teaching and research will continue to churn and to spur considerable debate and change. We have little doubt that in the not-too-distant future the number of publications and citations will hold less valence for our profession than it once did within business schools. However, we also see growing interest in what business schools do, how they do it, with whom they do it (collaborations), and how administrators develop, promote and reward scholars producing impactful research.

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