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# **What is business school research for? Academic and stakeholder perspectives**

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# **What is business school research for? Academic and stakeholder perspectives on research impact**

## **Abstract**

Through an empirically grounded analysis of contested interpretations of impact held by business school academics and wider stakeholders, we provide a political and relational understanding of research impact. Our qualitative study of three UK business and management schools, comprising interviews with around 70 researchers, academic leaders and stakeholders explores conceptualisations of impact, examines the processes through which impact is achieved and considers the influence of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The inclusion of academic leaders and business stakeholders adds value to studies that have focused primarily on academic researchers. We present a nuanced picture of the ways in which academics and business stakeholders conceptualise impact and navigate the complexity of roles and relationships in this arena. Implications for practice include the desirability of embracing different understandings of impact, creating space for generative dialogue and incorporating impact more explicitly in teaching and learning.

## **Key words**

Business schools; impact; management research

## **Introduction**

Public policy statements in the UK and internationally increasingly emphasise the role of universities in achieving 'impact' beyond their core activities of research, teaching and learning. In the particular context of business and management schools there has been an increasing focus on the translation of research into improvements in managerial practice and organisational performance (HM Government 2017). Implicit in such policy statements and commentary in popular and business literature (Bennis and O'Toole 2005; Financial Times 2011) is an assumption that a key role of business and management research is to discover ways of improving organisational performance and to disseminate these new ideas to practitioners, who in turn are assumed to be seeking to apply these research breakthroughs within their organisational environments. Failure to achieve impact, according to these types of models, suggests the existence of a 'gap' between academics and practitioners, one that needs to be bridged in some way.

This article joins the debate about the purpose, impact and legitimacy of management research, a debate which goes to the heart of the purpose of universities (Collini 2017; Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman 2017). Based on an in-depth study of three UK business and management schools, we explore academic and business actors' conceptualisations of impact, examine the processes through which impact is pursued and consider the influence of the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) on these conceptualisations and processes. Our study is significant because of its access to a trio of research-intensive UK business schools and its attention to the perspectives and practices of wider stakeholders who interact with them.

## **The role and purpose of business schools**

"Asking what something is for all too often turns out to be asking for trouble" (Collini 2013, ix), and yet for institutions which receive considerable public investment and make grand claims about the legitimacy of their knowledge or claims to expertise, the fundamental

purpose of universities in the modern world, in the face of marketization and alternative sources of legitimate knowledge, has become an absorbing question (Collini 2017; Docherty 2011). As they are embedded in this setting, and perhaps because they are closely associated with worlds of markets and practice and yet at the same time lack historical claims to a scientific tradition, business and management schools have been particularly exposed to critical questioning of what value they have and what positive differences they are making to society (Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman 2017; Pettigrew, Cornuel and Hommel 2014).

The impact agenda is embedded within the debate about the role of research and the purpose of business and management scholarship (Hodgkinson and Rousseau 2009; Pettigrew, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Pettigrew and Starkey 2016; MacIntosh et al. 2017). Notable interventions include Starkey and Madan (2001) who warn that business schools face a 'relevance gap', and later Starkey and Tempest (2005) who argue that a fragmented and pluralistic environment for knowledge production means that the academy no longer holds a monopoly position and therefore needs to reconfigure its activities and work with different actors and organizations. Chia and Holt (2008, 473) focus on the type of knowledge being generated in business schools, arguing that "a preference for abstract causal explanation over practical knowledge, and for reason and truth over what works, has led to a privileging of detached contemplation over involved action."

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013, 128) argue that "Despite the huge increase in the number of management articles published during the last three decades, there is a serious shortage of high-impact research in management studies." They attribute this paucity to the institutional and professional norms, and researchers' identity projects in which academic knowledge is privileged over relevance or practical utility.

These critiques and interventions have generated counter arguments which either challenge the underlying assumptions about the purpose of business schools, or seek to leap beyond these dichotomies through offering various philosophical re-castings of academic-practitioner relations. Aldag (2012) questions the contention that management research has had scant impact on practice and Antonacopoulou (2010) argues for phronesis (or practical wisdom) as a foundation for making an impact on management practice. Starkey, Hatchuel and Tempest (2009, 547) have called for "new logics of discovery and engagement" and have invited scholars to "re-imagine relevance as a necessary condition for rigour." MacIntosh et al. (2017) present four 'ideal types' of impact in the context of business and management research (changing practice, changing self, influencing others and changing ideas) and a model of how research might impact on academic and policy/practice communities, emphasising the significance of temporality and performativity in the impact process.

These debates, and associated policy developments, for example the increasing role of impact within research assessment exercises such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), form an important context for a series of studies of academic identity and practices in university settings, many of which have been reported in this journal. Early studies such as Harley (2002) focus on the responses of academics to research selectivity exercises, detecting a high level of hostility among UK academics to a process felt by many as an attack on academics' identity, based around concepts of independence, autonomy and collegiate peer review.

The introduction of impact as a key element of the 2014 REF (HEFCE 2011) prompted a number of studies designed to gauge academics' reactions to this and in particular to explore issues surrounding the rigour-relevance debate. Watermeyer (2014, 359) interviewed ten directors of social science research centres in a research-intensive UK university prior to the 2014 REF and identifies a "...disjuncture between an impact discourse mobilised by research

fundings/regulators and the daily practice of academics." A later paper by the same author argues that impact as defined and operationalised by the REF risks creating a "...sub-economy or marketplace for academics, where impact is an economic, less altruistic driver ..." (Watermeyer 2016, 205). Chubb and Watermeyer (2017) are more forthright. Focusing on the increasing requirement for 'pathways to impact' statements in research funding applications, they highlight the perceived deleterious effects of 'hyper-competitiveness' in the HE market and the temptation for academics to engage in 'impact sensationalism' in order to win research grants.

A survey of 68 staff members and PhD students in one UK university faculty (Wilkinson 2017, 2) similarly identifies "...a hesitation that drives for evidence may create a neo-liberal monitoring of 'impact' and that certain subjects will have advantages in demonstrating impact" . In contrast to some earlier studies, however, Wilkinson notes "...a significant desire to value and achieve impact among researchers in this case study..." (2017, 10). Gunn and Mintrom (2017) similarly emphasise the potentially beneficial outcomes of efforts to evaluate research impact. They conclude that "...careful policy design has the potential to raise research performance in universities and raise the societal relevance of academic research" (Gunn and Mintrom 2017, 28).

Hughes, Webber and O'Regan (2017) review the impact case studies submitted under the business and management Unit of Assessment in the 2014 REF, concluding that impact occurs in a variety and range of ways. They observe that a number of barriers exist, on both sides, to effective engagement between researchers and practitioners and suggest that engagement and impact should be better recognised among business and management academics in relation to career progression.

Few studies have focused specifically on academics working in business and management disciplines. Additionally there has been an almost total lack of consideration of the

perceptions and experiences of business and wider stakeholders in relation to research impact. The implication appears to be that 'business' stakeholders are relatively homogeneous, and look towards business and management academics to provide answers to short-term business issues with a view to improving business performance and the financial 'bottom line'. This stereotype of the 'instrumental practitioner' has not, to our knowledge, been subject to rigorous scrutiny, a surprising omission in the light of the long-running and largely unresolved nature of the 'rigour-relevance' and research impact debates.

Finally, a wide range of literature - notably in the education, business and management and policy fields - has attempted to categorise the different ways in which research impact may be conceptualised. Forms of impact include awareness of, and access to, research; the extent to which research is considered, read or cited; new knowledge or understanding; changed attitudes and beliefs; and changes in behaviours and practices (Nutley 2003; Nutley, Walter and Walter 2007). Specific frameworks have been developed for the policy arena (Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw 2009). With these it is noted that the ability to establish attribution to the original research reduces, the more widely or deeply an idea or practice becomes embedded or implemented. Davies and Nutley (2008, 11) emphasise that "... only rarely will research impacts be direct, instrumental and clearly identifiable". Synthesising this literature, Table 1 summarises the ways in which impact has been conceptualised and the approach that follows from each model. In the discussion of our findings we use these models to analyse our participants' perspectives on impact.

Informed by these scholarly conceptualisations of and debates around impact, our paper explores front line understandings of and approaches to impact, and examines how academics are trying to navigate competing priorities for action. We address an important research gap by incorporating into our study an examination of business and other stakeholder expectations and experiences of engaging with the same business and management schools as



those in which our academic participants are based, as well as considering the influence of performance regimes such as the REF.

Our article explores three inter-linked research questions:

- How is impact conceptualized by business school actors and wider stakeholders?
- How do these differing conceptions translate into practices designed to achieve impact?
- How do performance regimes such as the REF influence dilemmas in relation to impact?

### **Methodology**

We conducted a qualitative study to explore the interaction between three leading UK business and management schools and their wider business/practitioner stakeholders. The original study was commissioned by a national research funding body and the initial output was a published report (Johnson *et al.* 2013), a draft of which was reviewed by members of its steering group, and by a selection of research participants, to check for any errors of interpretation or facts, as well as to fit the remit. The brief was finalised through iterative dialogue between the authors and the commissioning body, both during the tendering process and prior to the commencement of the research. The schools were selected purposively, in consultation with the commissioning body, as organizations with reputations for high-quality research, indicated by achievements in terms of publications and securing research funding (Table 2). Whilst recognising the healthy number of research intensive institutions in the UK, a major criterion was the success with which these schools had attracted research funding as well as their standing in national and international rankings. We were also keen that we included three different ‘regions’ of the UK in the sample. We recognise the potential to have selected alternative sites and we do not claim scientific representativeness in our sampling. Nonetheless, our sample is larger in size and wider in scope than is the case for

most previous studies of this type, incorporating participants operating in different research-related roles in institutions highly regarded in the sector and which have research excellence as a central part of their mission. From the inception of the project, it was the explicit intention of the authors to produce two outputs: the first a report designed primarily to meet the requirements of the commissioning body; and the second a peer-reviewed journal article to expose our findings to the wider academic and practitioner communities. The philosophy behind these twin objectives is to communicate with as wide a readership as possible. It is in keeping with an engaged scholarship approach (Van de Ven 2007) in which we wish to engage with policy makers and practitioners, as well as make a contribution to the academy. This dual objective was explained in the introductory letter to our selected institutions seeking access and was reinforced in the introductory remarks within interview settings.

We sought to meet three broad categories of respondents. Table 3 profiles our interviewees. We spoke with School leaders performing roles relevant to the organising of research. These included deans, directors of research, departmental heads, and directors of PhD programmes. In addition we sought to interview those members with organisational responsibility for ‘outreach’ or practitioner engagement. Second, we included research conversations with academics at different career stages, from associate lecturers through to senior professors. The third category involved participants drawn from the world of practice. The lines here were drawn inclusively to encompass business actors, as well as public and third sector respondents. We worked with the deans and directors of each school to ensure that the spread and balance felt reflective of the shape of its network. Advisory board members were an important starting point for this exercise, but we also spoke to participants engaged in external engagement initiatives. Ensuring appropriate coverage of each of these categories of actor, meant that the overall sample size across the three institutions was relatively large for a qualitative study. The scale of the fieldwork contributes to the robustness of the research, and

gave us confidence about the point at which we felt we had reached data saturation. In this respect we were alive to “resonance” with the literature (Anderson 2017) as well as wishing to explore the “richness” of the local contexts (Tracy 2017). The interviews were carried out at the relevant universities – or business premises in the case of some stakeholders. These face to face conversations ranged from 40 to 80 minutes. In most cases (n.50), and with the consent of participants, interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed. When it was not feasible to record interviews, notes were taken and written up immediately following the conversations in order to provide a contemporaneous record.

The authors led a research team of six members (another academic and three consultant researchers) involved in the fieldwork. The interview protocol was developed by the authors in relation to the need to address the terms of the original commission, as well as being informed by the literature review. It was finalised in conversation with members of the research team. The protocol was used as a common guide, whilst recognising the need to hold reflective discussions with participants. Our meetings were purposeful conversations (Alvesson 2003) with research participants whom we recognize as co-creating the encounter. We include the interview protocol as Appendix 1. For most site visits two members of the team were present in order to maximise the scope for sense checking and dialogue between researchers (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). A total of nine visits to the three institutions were made. At seven out of the nine at least one of the authors was part of the team in order to ensure ‘read across’ of the conversations with participants. Prior to the field visits and immediately afterwards, conference calls between team members took place in order to share initial reflections and highlight any points that needed especial follow up in subsequent visits. The two authors are experienced academics who between them have held chairs in business or management schools in four UK universities, and served in a range of leadership roles as heads of departments, research, and schools. Our positionality means that we were peers of

the academics with whom we were speaking - colleagues in the general arena, though not members of their institutions. The collegiate dimension of this undertaking contributed to the building of trust between the researchers and the participants. We were keen to emphasise the purpose of the fieldwork as being to learn more about interesting practices, as well as to better understand constraints or dilemmas. We clarified that this was not an evaluation exercise. With the practitioner participants we recognise that our positionality means that we stood in a different relation. Our identity was as academic researchers, members of the same ‘tribe’ as academics in the focal institutions. Again we emphasised the study’s goals of learning, and in particular the opportunity to highlight ways in which practitioner engagement is being accomplished, as well as the chance to highlight challenging issues. The authors were able to draw upon their track record of carrying out applied or commissioned research in various sectors, as well as experience of post practice teaching, academic-practitioner knowledge coproduction, and involvement with advisory boards to establish rapport, to contribute to the flow of the generative conversation, and later to help interpret the data. A challenge for the researchers was to present as credible and informed researchers, and to be respectful of and sensitive to the distinct experiences and perspectives of individual, situated respondents. The presence in the field of the consultant researchers contributed an additional dynamic. They were able to build rapport with the practitioner stakeholders as being non academics, and with academic interviewees as people knowledgeable about the sector and experienced researchers. This mixed membership also helped us within the team to remain “open to the phenomenon” (Levitt, Creswell, Josselson, Bamberg, Frost and Suárez-Orozco 2018). In our breaks and debriefing conversations following field visits we shared our impressions, mindful of our different backgrounds.

The fieldwork took place around 12 months prior to the deadline for submission to the 2014 REF. The timing is noteworthy in that 2014 was the first occasion that the REF considered

the impact of research, based on submissions of ‘impact case studies’ (HEFCE 2011). This significant shift in the focus of research assessment in the UK generated considerable debate, much of which mirrored themes in our literature review. Our study therefore provides in-depth qualitative data that adds nuance and front line voices to the ongoing debate about the role of business and management research at a point when dilemmas were being keenly felt. Verifying fair representation of participant voices entailed two stages. We sent drafts of the original report to a selection of interviewees. We also shared emergent findings in the draft report which was read by the funding body’s steering group comprising academics and practitioners. In returning to the data, revisiting the literature review, and engaging with this journal’s submission process, we circulated a draft of this article to a number of critical friends from policy, practitioner and academic communities to ascertain coherence, credibility and check for alternative interpretations of our findings. We also presented our findings at a number of academic conferences and seminars. In this way we sought to ensure internal validity through checks with participants, and through peer debriefing to members of their wider communities outwith our specific research sites, and through the thoroughness of the review process of this journal.

## **Data Analysis**

Our data analysis is grounded in an understanding that language is constitutive and central to how we construct social and organizational realities (Gabriel 2015). It is an approach based on an understanding that “local concepts and practices are where organizational structure and process come to life” (Agar 2010, 298). Independent short reports summarizing each field visit were produced by each member and used as the basis for subsequent reflective discussion. Interrater reliability was strengthened by the use of independent notes and initial coding. Coding categories were informed by the original purpose of the project but emerged

iteratively through the coding process in relation to the formulation and refinement of this article's research questions. Coding was undertaken manually and iteratively by the authors, sharing emergent codes that we refined through dialogue.

Interpretive research focuses on situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors. Epistemologically, we are seeking to understand practices from the perspective of local actors, both within Schools and amongst wider stakeholders. Our data analysis entailed standard, systematic, inductive, and abductive processes in which we moved between data and theory, focusing on academics' talk about impact, academic roles and priorities, the purpose of research, the role of the business school, assumptions about impact, sense of opportunities and constraints, and relations with practitioner communities. In analyzing the interviews with wider stakeholders we focused on examples of talk about the role of the school, of academia and of research; the needs of different practitioners and the imperatives of a range of university actors; rich stories about experiences including enrichment and frustration; examples of influence; personal impact tales including ways in which research had impact for them or their communities; senses of frustration or constraints; and, throughout, assumptions about impact.

In general we looked for fragments of talk in which the accounts said something important about research impact. We used an open coding system in which we iteratively identified a raft of provisional organizing categories (for example, "academic views," "practitioner views," "barriers", "priorities", "working across boundaries"), which we then collapsed or combined into broader categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). We moved from data-generated first-order codes to second-order themes, in keeping with the tradition and norms of interpretive research, and we acknowledge that these involve creative acts of interpretation. Our early impressions of how research impact was approached in each School gave way to new understandings of the range of ways in which it was thought about and pursued. In light

of new insights from the field interviews, our formulations and reformulations were subjected to further analysis in an “iterative, spiral-circular recursiveness of abductive reasoning” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 56). Our interpretations were accomplished through an adaptive and recursive process in which inquiry, data generation, and analysis are intertwined. In line with the reporting canon of interpretive research (Saldaña 2016), we organize our findings in response to our three research questions.

This process resulted in the model presented in Figure 1, which outlines the wide range of responses we received in relation to four key dimensions of impact that emerged through our conversations with participants. Respondents refer to underpinning conceptions of impact, which we have labelled 'contestations' in recognition of the competing nature of these conceptions, for example ranging from instrumental concerns with performance improvement to 'enlightenment' type processes of challenging conventional understanding. The second dimension relates to 'configurations', referring to the organizing of impact, including formal advisory boards as well as more informal relationships and coproduction activities. Thirdly, the 'connections' dimension summarizes respondents' views on roles and relationships, including bridge-building, critical friend or 'cultural irritant' roles. Finally, most respondents - especially those in academic posts - recognize the significance of the policy and performance management context, in particular the REF, in influencing the extent and nature of impact activity.

The purpose of the article is to add to the conceptualisation of impact by providing an empirically grounded understanding of different interpretations of impact held by business school academics and their wider stakeholders. It contributes a political and relational conceptualisation of the processes and practices through which impactful research is accomplished. Our guiding approach views the concept of impact as socially constructed and therefore differently understood by different actors and groups. This appreciation underlines

the importance of engaging with the perspectives and experiences of non-academic actors and stakeholders, viewpoints that have been under-explored in the literature on rigour and relevance. We also offer insights drawn from the analysis of our data to identify processes underpinning (and factors inhibiting) the achievement of impact. We end by suggesting areas for further research.

### **Making sense of impact: academics' perspectives and contestations**

Our academic respondents emphasized that business school research focuses on a wide range of organizations and groups and therefore that conceptions of impact that relate solely to improving the performance of private sector, profit-focused organizations do not adequately encapsulate the breadth of impact of business school research. Some academics pointed to research concerned with improving the performance of public sector organizations and others were engaged in work with or for not-for-profit organizations, social enterprises, trade unions, international bodies or alternative forms of organizing. Commonly, respondents felt that it was important to conceptualize 'impact', and the 'audience' for research, in a broad sense, and not only in relation to improving the performance of individual private sector profit-making businesses.

We found academics and research leaders working to a broad - and to a large extent contested - range of 'senses' of impact. As we return to shortly in our discussion of 'Context', the timeframe of the study was dominated by intense preparations for the 2014 REF, so it is perhaps not surprising that academic respondents often called to mind the REF definition of impact:

"... an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia..." (HEFCE 2011, 26)



Amongst our academic participants the data was particularly dense on ideas of impact which reflect ‘knowledge driven’, ‘problem solving’, ‘changing behaviours and practices’ and ‘enlightenment’ models (Table 1). Many academics prized achieving impacts on ‘ways of thinking’ – for example on how a problem is framed or on how well it is understood. This idea was exhibited strongly in our data. As one professor explained, *‘The impact [of research] is an outcome – the residual of addressing a problem. Addressing a problem is the thing for us.’* Another described business impact as *‘research that enters into the consciousness of people in business and influences their practical decisions.’*

Some respondents expressed scepticism about the way in which instrumental notions of impact are being championed in the policy discourse of governments and funding bodies, or the mission statements of schools. As one professor, drawing on the model of impact through critique, put it:

*‘We need to take a deep breath on the role of management schools and business schools ... We need to do provocative research which is frightening and which makes you feel uncomfortable.’*

Such a view portrays academics as the ‘grit in the oyster’ or the figure who speaks truth to power, rather than an instrument of business interests. In this tradition, a research director offered a view which emphasizes the autonomy of Schools and of academics arguing that *‘You know, we’re not a school for business, we’re a school that studies management, and management in all organizations ... so there’s the fear that if we truly would engage in business we would subjugate our knowledge and our agenda to what business wants and needs.’* This uneasiness, and the emphasis on the need for autonomy, was a recurring theme among many of our academic participants. But it was not universally held, especially by some of those who have core responsibilities for outreach who advocated ‘bridge building’, ‘problem solving’ or, broadly, ‘dialogical’ models of impact. One such interviewee offered

the observation that sometimes academics *'can be a little 'precious' about themselves when it comes to listening to what practitioners want to see us do.'*

### **Making sense of impact: stakeholder perspectives**

In our interviews with business stakeholders, many expressed a mixture of frustration and some puzzlement about the orientation of business schools, which reflects a perception of cultural differences between practitioners and academics. Such criticism was of high density in our data from practitioners. An advisory board member was critical of elements of his school's approach to research: *'It does lots of work that could be useful and only a small amount that is... That's a shame because impactful work is lost.'* This view suggests the need to undertake 'bridge building' in order to be more successful at achieving impact. It is not the quality or intrinsic relevance of research that is seen as deficient, it is the connectedness of the communities. The potential to 'change behaviours and practices' is lost in the gap.

Other stakeholder respondents articulated similar perspectives. For example, one business leader wryly described the experience of explaining to business colleagues that university researchers do not see themselves as beholden to the bottom line or to a 'problem solving' mission:

*'I've discussed with the network of businesses that we work with... [I explained] what the REF is and that twenty percent ... is likely to be on impact. They were astounded that it was only twenty percent, why is it not everything?'*

Another business figure with a close relationship to one of the schools, admitted to being *'...staggered at the trivial nature of papers that come out and the, almost invisible veneer of knowledge that seems to be added to the world as we know it.'*

On the other hand, many business actors spoke enthusiastically of examples when they felt their organization had helped build capacity as a result of academics' input. This perspective

was prominent, if not as dominant as some of the more critical voices above. In this way, one practitioner who had experience of hosting an academic fellowship in his business offered the view that a compelling notion of impact lies not with measurable business improvements but with academics working with staff and improving their everyday competencies. Supported by other conversations in the study, this suggests that some business organizations can view academic engagement as embedded within a developmental relationship, and that academics can achieve important impacts through their role as educators, mentors or engaged expert friends. These examples contrast with 'gap-based' perspectives and draw upon a range of impact models, including 'coproduction' and 'co-influence', 'dialogical', and 'sustained engagement'.

Success here may sometimes rely on practitioners acting not just as gatekeepers but as active intermediaries willing to help others to span boundaries or build bridges. As one such broker, an entrepreneur, commented: *'My role was to help the University join business in their world, working with academics to help them join the small businesses in their world.'* Relatedly, a university-based knowledge broker expressed optimism that in his experience businesses' understandings of the role of academics has changed, shifting from a simple 'knowledge driven' model: *'They recognize that academics are not paid to give an answer like consultants... their work is more about understanding a problem better.'*

## **Practical processes to generate impact**

### ***Communication, engagement and dialogue***

Many academic interviewees engaged with practitioners by adopting a two-pronged writing strategy, producing a journal article but also a practitioner-focused version, underpinned by a common piece of work. As one respondent put it, impact involves *'getting people to read the stuff'*, for example by publishing in trade journals, despite the fact that these outlets tend to be

seen as relatively low status in relation to research quality metrics or academic career prospects. This skill of ‘re-packaging knowledge’ runs through the practices of those academics who see impact as part of their role. The models invoked in these instances are closer to those where practitioners have the less active role. They may also have a tendency to subsume impact and dissemination, with the assumption perhaps that the achievement of the former is dependent upon, even if not guaranteed by, the latter.

However, across the range of research participants, we found that dialogical exchange - although not without its constraints - is widely regarded as a vital process in achieving impact. This can take place in a range of formal and informal settings, and is informed by ideas including bridge building, co-production, and building communities of inquiry (Table 1). Many respondents emphasized that generating impact is not a linear process which begins only after the research has been conducted. Instead, academics often seek to engage businesses as early and as often as possible during the research process.

Our interviews with both academics and business respondents described the importance of ‘getting out and about’, suggesting a partly speculative (if targeted) process of working with business actors and tuning into their language. As one advisory board member from the business community suggested:

*‘We need to get better at having groups of practitioners we can call on at those early stages to shape the research and then again at a later stage to give advice on framing, language and how it is presented...’*

One intermediary expressed the view that *‘it’s more difficult to get into businesses than it is to get the academics on board... they just have so many people knocking on their door.’* This view is interesting as it emphasizes the pressures faced by business actors in assessing and dealing with approaches by academics. It highlights the constraints on businesses, in ways

which move beyond the attention which has been given to the strengths and weaknesses of academic institutions and research practices. Many respondents underlined the importance of academics having communication skills and of being able to *‘talk the language of business.’* This idea featured strongly across our interviews, and highlights the significance of ‘dialogical’ and ‘co-production’ models of impact (Table 1). It was particularly dense in the data drawn from practitioners and outreach professionals, but it was a factor acknowledged by many academics themselves. One senior professor, who nonetheless had achieved longstanding record of sustained engagement with practitioners observed, *‘We have different languages and reward structures in academia which don’t promote impactful research engagement.’*

#### ***Coproduction and research consortia***

Many of the researchers we interviewed spoke of building in practitioner and business involvement at different key stages of the research process. Some felt strongly that this form of collaboration or coproduction, rooted partly in a problem solving tradition but accomplished through dialogue and with the potential for co-influence, is of increasing importance. As one respondent commented, *‘otherwise you are just answering questions that people [businesses] don’t have... and believe it or not you get to meet interesting people doing interesting things!’* Such joint projects begin with the topic identification stage, the research scoping, preliminary presentations on emerging findings (which gives an opportunity to ‘sense check’) and then framing conclusions and dissemination. This appreciation of the potential for systematic involvement was at its most dense among academics active in collaborative research, and amongst outreach colleagues, but less present in the responses of the wider academic participants. This suggests the possibility of a learning process through which researchers may transition from knowledge-driven conceptions of impact towards an understanding based on dialogical engagement.

We also found models of stakeholders coming together to form research clubs or consortia, through which they could influence the choices made about issues for research to focus on, in other words playing an active role in setting the research agenda. In one case, it was clear that a research consortium established between the local business community and the business school held the potential for wider impact, as government agencies and policy-makers were expected to take greater note of ‘coproduced’ research than if reports were produced by academics alone.

However, another professor cautioned that some industry actors had expressed the view that, as the thought leaders, it should be the academics who propose topics. In our fieldwork therefore we encountered academics and business actors negotiating the basis for engagement and making tricky and ambiguous accommodations about agenda setting, focus of activity and the basis and direction of influence. This suggests that ‘gap-filling’ conceptions fail to encapsulate the range of processes through which impact is pursued. In these accounts, processes emerge as political and relational rather than linear.

#### ***Learning and teaching as an impact mechanism***

Finally, many interviewees in these research-led schools felt that a key if often overlooked mechanism for generating impact is through learning and teaching provision: *‘Our teaching is based on our research and the students take these ideas and use them later in their practice.’* Another respondent agreed, identifying the significance of learning and teaching as providing important vehicles for generating impact:

*‘If you do have excellent graduates and you do have excellent... acolytes going out there, then they themselves make the change... I think our student body... is a great conduit of our impact, but largely uncaptured.’*

This theme was especially prominent among Deans or senior leaders with holistic responsibilities within schools, or by those most closely involved in post-practice provision.

As one Dean argued *'We ... don't see teaching and research as separate, we see it as a continuum and we see the development of different cohorts ... embedded in business.'*

Similarly, an outreach manager argued that *'the way a lot of our research is actually disseminated is through often a company training programmes.'* More broadly, the institutions' status as universities, with a core mission of learning and teaching, confers important benefits in relation to trust and relationship building. As one respondent described:

*'...there's an element of trust that's inbuilt because you're an educational institution. ... people will step over the boundaries into a university, feeling that they're in an environment they trust...'*

### **Context: how do performance regimes such as the REF influence dilemmas in relation to impact?**

Our conversations confirmed the significance of the REF as a key influence on the attitudes and behaviour of business school academics. For some academic respondents, the rise in the significance of research impact has enabled even greater recognition of those colleagues who are working to generate impacts on business. As one practitioner-engaged academic reflected, *'It's shifted our status in the School. They're [senior managers] a lot more interested in the sort of things... we've been doing for years, but you know weren't thought to be proper research.'* Her experience speaks to the idea that the kinds of activities in which she had invested – including building communities of inquiry, or working towards a sustained engagement – had historically been dismissed as relationships and practices which fell too close to consultancy and too far from classical knowledge driven university research. This reframing of what constitutes legitimate or valuable activities within her school brought a boost to her status, even if it came on the back of a long period of feeling marginalised or a lower class academic.

However, we also heard many critical voices regarding the role of the REF in relation to business impact and its enshrinement of a ‘publish or perish’ mentality. One professor felt that the core REF emphasis on the quality of academics’ publications in peer reviewed journals had led him to produce fewer practitioner-oriented pieces of writing. Another agreed that *‘the REF has affected my dissemination practice; it is detrimental to my work in engaging with practitioners.’* Here the perception of a REF demand for classic ‘knowledge based’ dissemination activities was felt to be crowding out the space for more sustained or dialogical engagements. Another respondent outlined the difficulty of operating within both academic and practitioner environments:

*‘... one of the biggest barriers to engagement has been the RAE and REF... If you spend time engaging with businesses... that reduces the time you spend engaging with academics gaining theory knowledge, thereby reducing the chances to publish.’*

Yet for business respondents it seems that it is often such rankings and assessment exercises that attract many practitioners towards working with particular business schools. This idea featured strongly in our conversations with practitioners. In one of our schools, a board-level director of a large multinational organization serving on the advisory board, emphasized the importance of working with academics with reputations for high-quality, robust work. She noted however that impact tends to occur when such work is published in the press or in professional journals, and stressed that the timing of such publications needs to coincide with issues that are predominant in the business world. Another business respondent stated that the ‘brand’ of the local business school, being a top ranking international organization in its field, conferred status on organizations wishing to work with it. In these examples the practitioners point to the significance of dissemination (timely and consumable), combined with institutional reputation, as the basis for beginning a more engaged relationship. An academic informant who has significant engagement with businesses echoed those views:



*'...probably the biggest thing here is academic reputation and academic experience. When [businesses] see that someone is strong at research, they're more willing to work with you ... They don't understand REF but they understand if you say we're in the top four business schools for research in the UK.'*

The picture that emerges is complex, belying simplistic dichotomies of detached academics and instrumental practitioners. We see a certain tension in that the spirit and focus of research quality assessment regimes are felt to be unhelpful even sometimes by those who otherwise welcome the growing significance of impact. The REF consumes a lot of time and diverts some academics from the very practitioner engagement that part of that performance regime is trying to foster. The models of impact incentivised by the REF reflect narrow, knowledge-based conceptions that account for only a minority of the approaches adopted by our academic and stakeholder respondents. Paradoxically, the seal of approval, or the badge of quality, that such exercises confer on institutions appears to have a significant bearing on the attractiveness of a school as a collaborative partner.

## **Discussion**

Business and management schools occupy a contested space in which different ideas and assumptions about the rightful focus of scholarly work, and the responsibilities of faculty, are enacted. This unsettled view of the role of business and management schools reflects wider disagreements about what universities are for, and how we ought to view their mix of intellectual, educational, economic, scientific and cultural purposes (Collini 2013, 2017).

As played through our research conversations, a result of this contestation is that the impact agenda may be viewed by both academics and stakeholders as a dilution of scholarly rigour and academic autonomy; as a tokenistic effort at practitioner engagement; or as a welcome development that enables scholars to embrace the pursuit of actionable knowledge. In other words, the exhortations towards impact generate a range of reactions by different participants,

depending on how they make sense of such calls amidst other academic and institutional traditions. For some academics the idea of the need to make impacts on wider stakeholders – policy makers, commercial organizations and so on – is taken for granted. For others, perhaps, ideas of scholarly autonomy and even the right to pursue research which is ‘irrelevant’ (Grey 2001) may be much more influential. We found different traditions of scholarship co-existing in the Schools and within and across their different disciplines. Our fieldwork suggests ways in which academics experience dilemmas related to being asked to work across these different traditions of practice, and that these choices have been further complicated by the influence of the REF.

We found practitioners enthusiastic about the legitimacy of academics who have a licence to think unfettered by short term commercial imperatives, while others were puzzled and offended by the apparent disconnect between business schools and the concerns of businesses. We heard from those keen to protect academia from the taint of subservience to commerce. We met others keen to develop ways of working across different traditions of academic practice, through different modes of writing, research coproduction, teaching, and wider opportunities for interaction. Within each school we encountered academics interested in and experienced in practitioner engagement but who felt dragged away from it by the demands of the REF, even after the REF has been redesigned seemingly to give more weight to impact activities. Those employed in practitioner engagement, executive education or applied research roles often welcomed the way in which their status had been enhanced and their practices given enhanced legitimacy by the REF’s assessment of impact.

Our respondents described examples of direct business impacts, consistent with models that emphasize the complex and dialogical nature of knowledge production, dissemination and exchange (Pettigrew 2001; Wensley 2002; Starkey and Tempest 2005; MacIntosh et al. 2017). These examples included instrumental models of impact, through which businesses

benefit directly from interaction with business schools, but many of our conversations pointed to broader conceptual impact or enlightenment gains. Impacts are achieved through dialogue between academics and business partners and accomplished in a range of formal and informal settings. Involving practitioners at multiple stages of the research processes, including models of research coproduction (Yanow 2004; Orr and Jung 2016) was felt by many to increase the prospects of generating impact. Furthermore, in contrast to simplistic notions of businesses as merely recipients of the benefits of research, business actors operate as advisors, co-producers, advocates, champions, ‘probers’ and ‘cultural irritants’.

Our conversations entailed reflection on people’s experiences, and normative discussion of what research ought to be, or how impact ought to be pursued. So, issues of position, and their underlying assumptions about the role and purpose of schools and of research are significant. In presenting our data therefore we have identified resonances between our participants’ voices and the concepts of impact featured in the literature (Table 1). When a private sector actor talks of the need for academics to do research which is more useful to businesses, the reasons why this is being said seem straightforward. Likewise, when a professor talks sternly of the need for autonomy, the dominant academic tradition is probably fairly easy to read. However, the data are more complicated than that, containing light and shade, and shifting contours between and within groups. The range of meanings in action being used by academics and wider stakeholders are overlapping and interacting, defying neat typologies. Because our data suggests points of contention and intersection, we articulate a political and relational conceptualization of impact.

Throughout the findings section above we comment on the density of themes within and between groups of participants. In this way, we heard from academics with impressive records of practitioner engagement who nonetheless offer critical comments of their own institutional context, including unintended consequences of the REF in draining resources

needed for sustaining relationships. We met practitioners (not just faculty, as would be more predictable) who were keen to prevent academics becoming the ‘servants’ of business, or becoming subsumed into wholly instrumental relations. Even amongst voices calling for more dialogues and zones of exchange, there was respect for autonomy and the legitimacy of academic research leadership. Many practitioners could be at one and the same time committed advocates of their school and critical of the perceived distance in expectations and focus between the two groups of actors. The metaphors of gaps and distance used in the literature also featured in much of the discourse used across all groups. This complexity and nuance prevents an easy mapping of assumptions by category of participant. Instead, our data suggests that different assumptions about impact are present within each group, and that the same actor can invoke or draw upon different models of impact in order to reflect upon their experience and offer insights about their context, or to suggest practical steps towards greater impact.

There are elements of our data that support explanations of impact that derive from linear knowledge transfer assumptions. But the greater density of data points to the significance of interactive-generative assumptions. Conceptually the talk among participants of gaps, disconnects and mutual misunderstandings all point to the enduring power of the ‘two tribes’ metaphor (Gulati 2007) in this setting. However, the myriad of front-line examples of dialogical modes of engagement highlight a shared commitment to interactive-generative relationships.

### **Limitations and further research**

The thick description offered in our study, and the deep contextualised understandings reported in our findings, offers a basis for consideration of application to other contexts (Walby and Luscombe 2017; Levitt, Creswell, Josselson, Bamberg, Frost and Suárez-Orozco 2018). It would be worthwhile to return to our research sites to pursue follow-on inquiry,

looking at how the conversation has developed not least in the run up to the subsequent REF. In addition, encompassing other kinds of schools – perhaps those on a journey to becoming more research intensive – would be valuable, as doing so may reveal innovative ways of navigating distinctive parts of their strategic landscape as they build research activities in the context of other demands. A study interrogating impact practices (and wider stakeholder perspectives) across a broader set of fields and disciplines in universities would also be enriching. Across the institution, different schools are implicated in relationships with expectant stakeholders, or would see their mission as including, through learning and teaching, preparing students for worlds of professional practice. The finding from this study about learning and teaching as a significant route to impact is likely to resonate in other disciplines.

Though the fieldwork included three UK regions, it would be interesting to pursue a fine-grained regional study and to extend the enquiry to international settings. In this respect we are optimistic that our conclusions will ‘travel’ insofar as the issues explored in this article speak to the core of ongoing global debates about the purpose of universities (Collini 2017). They are likely to be of interest to practitioner-engaged academics and schools engaging with wider stakeholders through research, teaching and a blend of relational activities. They can act as a set of frames for inquiry and reflection upon local strategies and choices. The wider conversation needs to include important scholarship which problematizes performance regimes in business schools (Kallio, Kallio, Tienari and Hyvönen 2016; Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman 2017; Parker 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Conceptually our study points towards an understanding of impact as a process accomplished “in the spaces between”. It is the very gaps that create the room for dialogue and interaction. They are the areas in which the caricatures and negative mutual stereotyping arise, and yet

they are also the zones in which productive knowledge-based relationships are formed.

Dialogues through which participants make sense of each other - and of the possibilities for learning and change - occur in these gaps. Our study concludes that rather than rendered as the problematic to be tackled, these differences open up spaces in which actors can explore and improvise critique and co-create.

Our data identifies that the gaps are not simply the obvious and often commented upon distances between academics and practitioners. Gaps and differences of outlook and interest also occur within communities and institutions. There are different orientations towards research, and the purpose of academic work, at play within the same school. There are gaps too between some of the local traditions of practice and those expressions of purpose enshrined in national REF guidance. Within networks of stakeholders, there are differences of emphasis in relation to their expectations on academics. These aspects of the social and professional landscape are the backcloth against which academics, and a diversity of stakeholders with an interest in what can be accomplished, frame their dilemmas and assess their own agency. In this respect, practitioner-engaged research is accomplished within a fluid and shifting context. It involves struggles with institutional, professional pressures and the politics of relational practices.

Our conceptualization therefore highlights a political and relational view of research impact. Impacts are realized through situated, relational and ongoing interactions. Articulations of the purposes of academic work and the responsibilities of academics to wider stakeholders cannot be removed from the wider sectoral pressures and politics which protagonists and stakeholders navigate. Our interviews suggest that these interactions can be characterized by disappointment and frustration as well as satisfaction and success.

Our conceptualization draws upon Levinas' idea that communicative action involves an unsettling (Levinas 1987). This insight points towards an appreciation that the pursuit of impactful research relationships is not achieved through dissolving differences of perspective or interest. The potential of academic-practitioner relationships lies in the very capacity to unsettle. This conceptualization is an alternative to seeing the enterprise as an exercise in gap-closing in which there is a bland merging of purposes, practices and remits. The multiplicity of stakeholders and perspectives enlivens the social context in which academics develop their ideas, practices and projects. Achieving impact is not about dissolving differences or legislating them away. Nor is it even about closing the gaps. Instead it is about explorations in the spaces between actors and different traditions of academic practice; and a willingness on the part of actors to feel unsettled in the spaces that open up.

This is a political conceptualization of research endeavors in which business school actors and stakeholders each recognize the insufficiency of themselves, and embrace the part the other can play in their development. This idea points to the potential for generative tensions between a range of purposeful actors motivated by different, as well as intersecting, interests.

Acting upon this study of academic and stakeholder perspectives on research impact therefore entails recognizing difference, alongside the ambition that academics and practitioners may be able to work together on areas of mutual concern. Impact is understood as involving reflexive and relational processes in which researchers and wider sets of actors are neither frozen in a mistrustful stalemate nor aligned in a perfect unity of purpose and interest. The picture that emerges from our fieldwork is of a mosaic of approaches academics and practitioner stakeholders use to focus their minds on shared concerns. We conclude that doing so entails an ongoing appreciation of difference, an alterity which provides both politics and generative power to the research process.

## **Implications for practice**

The processes through which business schools achieve impact are complex and by implication are not amenable to simplistic interventions. Our study suggests a number of factors that are associated with impact, and from which business schools, their stakeholders and policy makers might learn. Below we articulate some focal points to stimulate discussion.

### **1. Embrace different understandings of impact**

A range of interpretations of the term ‘impact’ exist both within the academic community and, albeit to a lesser extent, within business and wider stakeholder communities. Progress in addressing the rigour-relevance divide is most likely to take place in circumstances where the various proponents acknowledge and respect these divergent viewpoints. Businesses might be encouraged to appreciate that research undertaken without direct impact in mind can make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge and the reputation for rigorous research upon which later engagements may be built. Conversely it may be important for ‘impact sceptical’ academics to recognize that not all impactful research is geared towards helping private sector organizations to increase their performance and profitability. Impacts on the policy environment and the not-for-profit sector are significant, and the ‘irritant’ effect of critical research can be impactful in the long run, for example by challenging businesses to examine their own ethical responsibilities and everyday practices.

### **2. Generative dialogue**

Maybe academics and practitioners can only ‘irritate’ rather than understand one another (Kieser and Leiner 2009), but it is through engaging in generative dialogues that impact can be achieved. We found numerous examples of academics and business actors finding ways to communicate, often through informal rather than formal interactions. There is scope for academics to learn more about effective means of communication with non-academic



individuals or organizations, for example through blogs or other social media or participating in professional events. That said, not all academics have an interest in external engagement and therefore there is a case for focusing development on those who have the skills or inclination to do so. Schools may consider how to help business actors to understand better the academic environment and to offer sympathetic understanding of a distinctive world of practice which, though its imperatives are different, is as legitimate as their own.

Our findings suggest that the notion of coproduction can play an important role in enhancing our understanding of the relationship between business school academics and business-related practitioners who are engaged in different ways with the research process. While we encountered examples of respondents expressing views consistent with a 'two tribes' interpretation (Gulati 2007), the predominant discourse was one in which the identities of academics and practitioners are, to varying extents, inter-woven. Practitioners involving themselves with schools did so for a variety of reasons, including improving their credentials, enhancing their professional profile, their legitimacy with peers, personal and professional distinctiveness and/or demonstrating that they are 'giving something back'. Academics expressed their building of professional identities around producing relevant scholarship, achieving impact, the usefulness of their research, connectedness with the wider business context and 'savvyness' in their interactions with business practitioners. This, we argue, lays the basis for potentially fruitful coproduction relationships between academics and professionals, in contrast with 'two tribes' discourses that imply the existence of significant dividing lines both within the academic community and between academics and practitioners.

### **3. Think big, act local**

While our three focal Schools have international reputations for their teaching and research, they all pay close attention to building relationships with businesses operating in their local regions. Some of these are international organizations, but many are small or medium-sized

enterprises. The creation of forums, on a sector or spatial basis, has helped to create a degree of mutual understanding and respect, but also enabled academics to extend their reach internationally from strong local foundations. Participants can benefit from careful, robust, long-term research engagements rather than short term consultancy-type interventions. Clearly, the nature of engagement between business schools and local organisations will be influenced by the local economic and institutional context in which they are operating. Many business schools - in the UK and elsewhere - are located in areas that are not well populated by large corporate organisations; some are dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises and in others, the public sector may be a dominant force. Indeed, it can be the case that the university itself is the most significant employer and purchaser of services in an area. While each of these contexts poses particular challenges, our point remains that it is advantageous for business schools to develop their impact and relevance on the basis of strong local engagement.

#### **4. Spread your bets**

Business impact is often achieved over a long period of time, based on relationships built and developed around mutual interests. It is possible to identify ‘impact’ that has occurred through the short-term coming together of academics and business actors, for example through government-supported initiatives. However, approaches based on a long-term view are key to achieving significant impact. This strategy requires investment on the part of academic institutions and businesses, and a willingness to accept that setbacks will occur and that the ‘payback’ is likely to take place over a long period of time, with an element of uncertainty. Relationships need to be built in the context of the institution’s mission and ethos, and supported by leaders especially in the early days when the benefits may be less apparent.

#### **5. Incorporate impact into teaching and learning**

Finally, the majority of the debate, in the UK at least, has focused on the impact of business school research rather than teaching, notwithstanding some discussion regarding the relevance of MBAs (Mintzberg 2005; Financial Times 2013, 2017). Our research suggests that businesses tend not to distinguish between teaching and research as mechanisms of impact. Our business respondents, in general, assumed that business school research was being incorporated into teaching and therefore ultimately embedded in the knowledge and skills of graduates, many of whom will become employees. A holistic understanding of impact would consider teaching and learning processes as much as the research activities of schools. Maintaining strong links between research and teaching at all levels is crucial to achieving the type of long-term conceptual and practical impacts championed by academic, policy and business actors.

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**Table 1: Models for exploring research impact**

<b>Impact model</b>	<b>Approach to impact</b>
Knowledge driven	Classic dissemination of findings to influence action (e.g. Mode 1 research)
Problem solving	End users lead in identifying relevant problems as basis for research (e.g. commissioned or applied research)
Changing behaviours and practices	Identifiable changes informed by research ideas (e.g. Morton 2015)
Enlightenment	Impact is not simple or instrumental and is felt through new ways of understanding (e.g. Weiss 1979)
Political	Research is used as a resource to shape (or delay) decisions and direction (e.g. official inquiries or organizational reviews)
Critique	Related to the enlightenment model, but with a more political edge and a greater emphasis on autonomy of academics to produce critical work, irritate, or speak truth to power (e.g. Kieser and Leiner 2009).
Teaching and learning	Academic programmes, informed by research ideas, help in the formation of practitioners, their ways of understanding, and practices.
Bridge building	Connecting otherwise-distant communities of academics and practitioners to achieve rigour and relevance (e.g. Pettigrew 1997)
Dialogical	Socially useful knowledge is generated through reflexive dialogue involving situated actors (e.g. Shotter 2010)
Co-production of knowledge	Academics and practitioners share responsibility for setting the agenda, undertaking research and generating knowledge (e.g. Campbell 2016)
Co-influence	Academics, through long term exposure to a setting, are enriched and enlightened by practitioners as much as vice versa (e.g. Wells and Nieuwenhuis 2017)
Communities of inquiry	Building inclusive, participative communities of scholarly inquiry (e.g. Bartunek and Rynes 2014)
Sustained engagement	Impact is achieved over long term and through mutual commitment (e.g. Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman 2017)
Holistic	Rounded educational engagement (e.g. Thorpe et al. 2011)

Source: authors, based on literature review

**Table 2: Indicators of research activity for focal business and management schools**

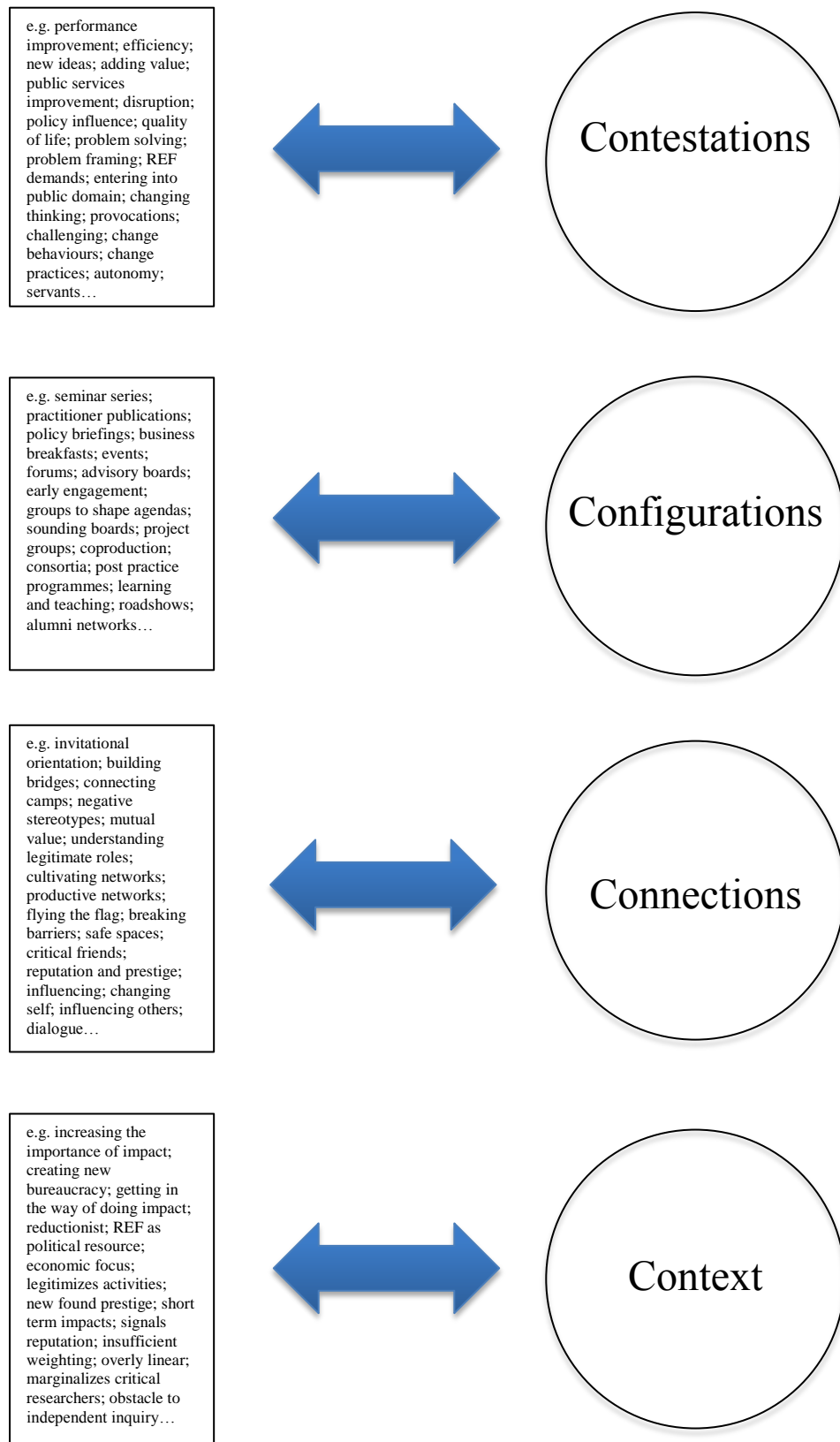
School	REF GPA Unit 19, 2014	GPA rank (out of 101 schools)	Research income, 2015-16 (£)	Research income per academic staff member(£)
A	3.28	6	826,000	6400
B	3.16	11	1,443,000	9300
C	3.15	12	5,103,000	39250

*Source: HEFCE, Chartered Association of Business Schools*

**Table 3: Research participants**

Organisational leadership, e.g. deans, directors, etc.	12
Professors/ Readers	14
Lecturers / Senior Lecturers	8
Associate Lecturers	3
Staff with outreach responsibilities	8
Private sector organisations	11
Public Sector organisations	7
Third Sector organisations	6

Figure 1: Coding Categories



## Appendix 1: Interview protocol

We will undertake semi-structured interviews with key actors and stakeholders in the schools, including:

- the Dean, senior managers and research leaders
- AIM Fellows and staff engaged in Research and Knowledge exchange
- members of the School's Advisory Boards
- business stakeholders who are involved in collaborations with the Schools
- stakeholders from relevant national-level organisations such as the Association of Business Schools, the CBI, ESRC, and British Chambers of Commerce
- other stakeholders relevant to the case studies we generate in each school

### ***This topic guide***

The questions in this document should be treated as a guide to the types of questions we wish to explore with respondents, rather than as a definitive set of questions that must be asked of all respondents. Some questions will be more relevant to some respondents than others; likewise it may be appropriate to explore with some respondents topics that are not explicitly included in this document. Interviewers should use their judgement, bearing in mind at all times the focus of the study on exploring the processes through which impact occurs, and seeking examples of good practice as well as issues and problems encountered.

The following questions have been organised according to the main objectives of the study and follow a fairly logical order. Interviewers should use their experience and discretion in relation to the order that the questions are asked.

### **1. Background information**

- i. Respondent name and role
- ii. Activities in relation to business impact
- iii. Other relevant background information

### **2. Nature of business impact**

*Objective: Identify the range and nature of business impacts resulting from the work of the business schools*

- i. How do you interpret the notion of 'business impact'?
- ii. What is the role and significance of business impact in relation to the overall research strategy for social science in your School?
- iii. How is the significance of business impact communicated to others in the School?
- iv. What is the status of business impact in relation to other criteria for assessing research quality or guiding research in the sector?
- v. How do you see business impact taking place through the research being generated in your institution? What is the range of business impacts that research and related activities make in your institution? Can you give some examples? (Prompt if necessary: We know that research impact is

*rarely a neat, linear process, so how do you know when impact has occurred? How can you make sense of that?)*

vi. How do you try to 'track' impact, given for example the time-lags that can take place?

### **3. Processes of business impact**

*Objective: Evaluate the processes through which business impacts may be or have been generated, through research and related activities (including academic/business collaborations, knowledge exchange and business engagement initiatives, networking and dissemination)*

i. What are the key means by which business impact occurs?

*(Note to interviewer: not all of the questions below will be relevant to all respondents)*

ii. What role does academic-business collaboration play? Key examples? *(Prompt: jointly-funded research or related activities?)*

iii. What role is played by knowledge exchange initiatives in your institution?

iv. To what extent are these interactions part of formal relationships?

v. To what extent is impact generated through the 'everyday' networking practices of academic researchers?

vi. Given the importance attached to academic publications, how has the School encouraged researchers to be mindful of business impact?

vii. What would you say are the key factors that facilitate/promote business impact?

a. Factors internal to the School and/or University

b. Factors related to businesses

c. Other factors e.g. government policy, funding ...

viii. What obstacles or barriers stand in the way of maximising the impact of research?

a. Factors internal to the School and/or University

b. Factors related to businesses

c. Other factors e.g. government policy, funding

ix. Would you say that everyone in the School 'buys in' to the significance of impact?

x. What would you say are the best examples of business engagement? *(Probe for contact details, suitability for case study follow up etc.)*

xi. What role does impact play in the recruitment of staff? In promotion and reward?

xii. To what extent is there a shared perspective in your institution on what 'ought to be' the relationship between social science and business?

xiii. To what extent is there a shared perspective across academia and the business sector? To what extent does this vary across businesses and why?

#### **4. Local, regional and national contexts of business impact**

*Objective: Develop an understanding of the contributions of social science within local, regional and national contexts, and the factors that promote or inhibit impact within these contexts*

i. Your institution is of national and global significance, can you talk us through how you approach research impact at international; national; local levels? How do you see the interrelationships here?

ii. What factors are useful in promoting such impact (in each case)?

iii. What factors inhibit such impact (in each case)?

iv. How does business impact enhance your reputation as an institution?

v. What value does/should PhD training add to a business? *(Note to interviewer: if respondent has specific responsibility for PhD research, this question should be pursued further – see project objectives re PhD impact)*

#### **5. Determinants of impact**

*Objective: Identify and analyse the determinants of the impacts identified (i.e. why and how impact has been generated)*

**Note to interviewer:** *these questions may well have been covered in answers to earlier questions. If so, skip to next question or use this section as an opportunity to clarify/elaborate as appropriate*

i. Thinking about one or two of the most notable ('best') examples where your business impact has been generated, what are the key or critical factors that have been in place to secure this?

ii. Has it been linked to funding sources? *(Probe for specific role of ESRC funding)*

iii. What mechanisms and practices (by social scientists, by managers or leaders, by business actors) have enabled impact to take place?

iv. What factors do you think have inhibited impact? *(If appropriate probe for views about communication, academics and business people speaking 'different languages', divergence of objectives, short/long term outlook etc.)*

#### **6. Good practice and lessons learnt**

*Objective: Identify good practice and lessons learned, to support the development of impact generation within the business sector*

i. Thinking in terms both of things that have worked well but also more difficult experiences, what lessons have you learned in your institution about generating impact?



- ii. What would you identify as interesting or effective practice that we can take away and highlight as part of our study, for others to learn from or think about?
- iii. What are the main areas you are trying to improve and what strategies do you have for these?
- iv. Looking ahead, how can the ESRC maximise the value of investment from social science research in relation to business impact?
- v. How can the ESRC maximise the value of investment in social science postgraduate research training, in relation to business impact?

## **7. Case study suggestions**

- i. We are seeking to construct business impact case studies in each of our business school visits. We will seek to ensure a spread of examples (at least one per business school) relating to different aspects of social science research and also different types of business organisation by size, sector, ownership, location etc. Can you give us any guidance about where we should focus our attention?
- ii. We are seeking to construct PhD impact case studies will be based primarily on the survey findings, focusing on respondents who identify some form of impact and who are willing to participate in further research. Can you give us any guidance about where we should focus our attention?

## **8. Final comments**

- i. Do you have anything further to add regarding the business impact of social science that we have not already covered in this discussion?
- ii. Can you suggest anyone else that we should contact in relation to this study, in addition to the case study / PhD case study examples that you have suggested?
- iii. Many thanks for your assistance with this study. Just to remind you that all interviews are confidential and non-attributable, unless otherwise agreed. We will be submitting a report to ESRC in early 2013 and their usual practice is to publish reports once they have been approved by the Evaluation Committee.