

Comments

A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for Credible and Useful Knowledge

Stewart Clegg

UTS Business School

Sydney, Australia

Generalities & Organicism

- The generality of the White Paper is problematic, despite its laudable sentiments.
- However, an implicit organicism imbues the paper.
- Singular entities, such as ‘business’ and ‘society’ are scattered through its pages:
 - ‘society’ occurs 31 times
 - ‘business’ occurs 138 times.

There is no such thing as society

- There is no essence to which the abstract noun of either 'society' or 'business' can be attached
- 'Floating signifiers'
- 'Belief' grounding 'science' in a 'future perfect'

Future perfect

In 2030, business and management schools worldwide are the envy of other social science disciplines in the universities. Research is timely and cutting edge, producing well grounded knowledge on pressing problems. Both schools and scholars are committed to the principles of responsible research, which are embedded in the core curriculum of doctoral education. Research has helped organizations and communities of all kinds to develop effective systems leading to high economic performance, great innovations, positive employee and customer wellbeing, a clean environment, and strong communities. Policymakers routinely seek the guidance of business academics in developing policies that promote vibrant socio-economic systems for their constituents. Many schools have a focused area of research where they excel and are centers of excellence around their chosen areas of focus. Many schools have contributed valuable knowledge to support humanity's highest aspirations, e.g., poverty alleviation; access to food, clean water, and education; a green environment, gender and social equality; economic growth and fair wealth distribution. Business leaders and government officials are frequent guests in business and management schools, seeking advice on policies and offering support for research on issues that need understanding. Business and management research is a model of "responsible research" after a major transformation that began in 2017.

Obstacles to the future perfect

- What are the obstacles to this future perfect Nirvana?
 - The fetishization of novelty necessary for publication in elite journals that produces discontinuity rather than an accumulation of what Lakatos called ‘hard core’ knowledge.
 - A widening gap between research and practice: in essence, the worlds of research and the worlds of practice exhibit different and largely non-communicative institutional logics.
 - Performativity in the one does not amount to ‘a hill of beans’ in the other.
 - In addition, cut price teaching that does not trade on research can massively undercut in the market that which does so trade.

Achieving Nirvana: Seven pillars of wisdom

1. Service to society
2. Stakeholder involvement
3. Impact on stakeholders
4. Valuing both basic and applied contributions
5. Value of plurality and multidisciplinary collaboration
6. Reliable knowledge
7. Broad dissemination.

1. Service to society

- That which is called 'society' is better thought of as a collection of heterodox and unstable interests, contradictions and connections, so how does one serve something that has no intrinsic meaning?
- Society is not a unitary thing, it is also an index of a temporal process that is dynamic and contested, in which a key part of the contestation will be the ideological appropriation of key terms such as 'business', 'science' and 'society'.

2. Stakeholder involvement

- Different stakeholders play different games even when they are using the same signs.
- Business and management scholars might co-create knowledge with business and other organizations such as NGOs, governments and social enterprises but the grounds for doing so with agencies from each sector simultaneously are, I suspect, slight.
- More likely that there will be possibilities where interests align – but that brings power relations into knowledge – something that is omitted from the White Paper.

3. Impact on stakeholders

- Having a positive impact on stakeholders is only possible where the stakes are aligned.
- It is the nature of vibrant democracies for that rarely to be the case: think of Brexit and the role that our disciplines have played in its debates.
- Then think of the stakeholders: reason does not characterize the debates that have ensued.
- We live in a world traversed by diverse and occasionally irreconcilable interests that are hard fought

4. Valuing both basic and applied contributions

- In principle, valuing both basic and applied contributions is unproblematic. In practice it may be a little less so.
 - For **basic** orientations, the idols of the Tribe, Cave and Marketplace are particularly dangerous
 - **Idols of the Tribe** – abstractions, imaginings, mingling with facts until the compounds become inseparable.
 - **Idols of the Cave** – individuals fill their minds akin to a cavern, according to the fruits of their peculiar interest, interpreting all other learning according to the colors of their own devotion to disciplinary norms.
 - **Idols of the Marketplace** – false significance becomes bestowed upon words, such as ‘markets’, so that they become more iconic than literal.
 - For the **applied** orientation the idols of the Theatre are never far away
 - **Idols of the Theatre** – sophistry and false learning that have attained a wide audience and thus a wide sphere of dominion go unquestioned. False superstructures are raised on false foundations, and in the end systems barren of merit parade their grandeur on the stage of the world.

5. Values of plurality and multidisciplinary collaboration

- Who cannot be for pluralism and paradigmatic promiscuity?
 - Well, plenty of professors, that's for sure: having made intellectual investments they are reluctant to relinquish them or admit the value of others that might question the currency of these.
 - I would think that no one that has worked in a business school would deny this if they have even the slightest relation with people from other disciplines – especially neo-classical economics, the most hermeneutically impermeable of disciplines.

6. Reliable knowledge

- Of course, there can be no argument in principle; in practice what is constituted as reliable is an effect of the disciplinary practices in play and these are rarely in concordance across different social science approaches: positivists, realists, phenomenologists, etc., may agree on the importance of reliable knowledge but have little agreement on what constitutes it.

7. Broad dissemination

- With this canon there can be little argument.
 - Books, blogs, articles, all media, aid researchers in communicating findings
 - But: broad dissemination does not mean broad agreement or acceptance – the case of climate science should be a caution that, as Habermas advised, knowledge cannot be disassociated from human interests

License to practice

- Distinctively amongst professional schools, the Business School does not produce or police a license to practice.
- Lacking these powers its reach into the constitution of knowledge is disciplinarily weak – it can classify but it cannot easily frame – while its reach into practice is weaker still.

Current problems

- Current problems are diagnosed as:
 - A lack of relevance for business practice
 - A-ranked journal fetishization of incentives
 - Privileging of theory
 - Bias against refutation and problem-orientation,
 - Inadequacy of textbooks

Who benefits?

- Not business and the broader society it is suggested but ourselves and our careers.
- I would not have thought this unusual professional practice.

What topics should be studied?

- The topics are laudable:
 - Value beyond shareholder value
 - The changing nature of work and the workforce
 - Social sustainability
 - Environmental sustainability
 - Diminution of distributional differences of poverty, prosperity and inequality.
- These topics are highly laudable but also highly contestable – each implies the relation of knowledge and human interests in a manner most political

The White Paper frames the direction of change that is overdue

- It is proposed that without that change the future looks increasingly one of decline and decay.
- Business Schools have a key role to play in being social science midwives to the birth of better prospects for a better future world.
- It is a prospect that Saint-Simon would have cherished – a new class of Business School technocrats as harbingers of the future

In conclusion

- It is not enough to be for ‘society’ or ‘business’ but to be specific about what kinds of society and what kinds of business one is for and against and why, for what reasons.
- And technocracy can never answer these questions.
- They are questions of values, of politics, and it is these that should be at the centre of debate rather than anodyne notions of being for ‘business’ and ‘society’ which merely mask the politics in play.