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# Enhancing Pracademia in Business Schools: Designing Systems That Enable Impact

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## Abstract

This commentary builds on ongoing dialogs examining the impact agenda. Its purpose is to (a) demonstrate how pracademia can enhance the impact agenda of Business Schools and (b) apply principles from socio-technical theory, to show how achieving this requires widespread culture change in Business Schools, which must be considered within the wider socio-technical system in which pracademia and impact are embedded. We consider inherent problems, and ways forward.

## Keywords

business and society, pracademia, research impact, socio-technical systems, sustainable development goals

The societal impact that Business Schools strive to deliver, exists at a nexus between academia, business, and wider society, and requires collaboration between these stakeholder groups, and across disciplines (Hughes et al, 2021). While Business Schools generally recognize this imperative (Bansal

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& Sharma, 2022), they are complex outfits that must deliver against a variety of metrics (e.g., research excellence, education excellence, and knowledge exchange), and so must build activities and structures with these—often competing—ends in mind.

*Pracademia* offers excellent value for Business Schools. *Pracademia* is an interdisciplinary term, describing a practitioner, who is *also* an academic (Dickinson et al., 2020). *Pracademic* identities vary across a spectrum, from those who primarily consider themselves practitioners, with academic curiosity; to those viewing themselves primarily as academics, with applied experience; to those with balanced identities. Often, expertise transcends disciplinary boundaries (e.g., Business, Medicine and Law, or Business and Engineering). *Pracademics* are therefore uniquely positioned to facilitate knowledge mobilization between stakeholders within complex systems. Their experiences of operating across spaces enable them to understand stakeholders' competing goals, identify cross-disciplinary synergies, theories, and concepts, and translate these for different audiences, to spearhead, shape, and sustain collaboration. *Pracademic* identities are recognized by accreditation bodies such as AACSB, via "Practice Academic" and "Scholarly Practitioner" categories and are being welcomed by Business Schools in various roles and configurations.

This commentary builds on ongoing dialogs examining the impact agenda. Applying principles from socio-technical theory, it argues that *pracademia's* benefits can only be achieved through widespread culture change in Business Schools, which must be addressed within the context of the wider socio-technical system in which *pracademia* is embedded.

## Pracademia as a Socio-Technical Challenge

Socio-technical systems theory contends that for systems to operate effectively, social and technical aspects of that system should be jointly considered and optimized, with explicit focus on the interconnectedness of components such as goals, processes, technology, supporting infrastructure, people, and culture (Clegg, 2000). This is because decisions about one part of the system (e.g., to recruit *pracademics*) have consequences for others.

Built to deliver against the well-established metrics of accreditors and league tables, the socio-technical system in which impact is rooted in Business Schools remains configured around traditional notions of scholarship, and without *pracademia* in mind. For instance, several ranking and accrediting bodies (e.g., FT50 and EQUIS) exclude *pracademics* on fractional contracts from the submission. Meanwhile, applied research straddling theoretical boundaries and/or building on practitioner insight is deemed out

of scope for most FT50 Management journals, with editors and reviewers typically favoring the focused theorizing that more conventionally represents scholarly contribution.

While Business Schools may appreciate the value added through pracademia, such challenges make it difficult to define key performance indicators for pracademics that embrace the value they add and can be defined within academic reward and recognition systems (since these typically rely on conventional measures such as journal rankings and citation metrics). Consequently, pracademics are often recruited to adjunct or teaching-only contracts to avoid publishing pressures—but simultaneously underscoring an unfortunate view that pracademics would be unable or unwilling to meaningfully contribute to academic dialog.

Such decisions have consequences for culture and values, fueling goal-focused behaviors, and undermining collaborative initiatives, by reinforcing the activities in a Business School that are valued (or not). Rather than being *jointly* considered (in line with socio-technical design principles), often the metrics *themselves* drive other system aspects, perpetuating Business School cultures that place disproportionate value on the industry of publishing, over other vital activities. This is damaging, and unwillingness to tackle the wickedness of this socio-technical problem is stifling pracademia's potential.

## Enabling Pracademia

For pracademia to thrive, cultural step-change is essential: first, through investment in pracademic thought leadership, and second, by embedding pracademia within Business Schools through the alignment of structures, training, processes, and reward systems. This process can be achieved by drawing on Clegg's (2000) socio-technical design principles for developing and maintaining an effective system.

Primarily, it is insufficient to simply recruit pracademics, and assume they can thrive in Business School environments. To enable this, system components must be "*congruent*" (Clegg, 2000), with systems, structures, and culture, that support, rather than inhibit, pracademic activity. In particular, there remains a need to:

1. Identify and define a balanced ecosystem that recognizes a broader range of metrics, indicators, and values through which pracademia can be operationalized and evaluated.
2. Alter ingrained academic cultures and work environments.
3. Create structures to support the alignment of socio-technical system components for pracademia.

Adjusting any aspect (e.g., to metrics or reward systems) necessitates change to other parts (e.g., processes and culture), which can result in *unintended* and intended consequences within the system. For instance, the United Kingdom's "REF 2021" guidance (United Kingdom Research & Innovation, 2020) placed greater weighting on research impact than previous assessments, triggering unprecedented investment in impact-related initiatives in UK Business Schools. However, it was simultaneously reported that REF's requirement to submit all staff with "*significant responsibility*" for research, incentivized the changing of staff contracts in institutions, with those unlikely to meet publishing standards appointed fractionally, or in alternative guises. Changes to system components can nudge new, undesirable norms and gamification—or, lead to fixation with *different* metrics. In each case, aligned with socio-technical principles, efforts are needed to trace the impact of design choices on other system characteristics.

Pracademia cannot be embedded through "one-off" initiatives; system alignment is "*an extended social process*" (Clegg, 2000, p. 467), and different stakeholders must understand, support, and spearhead changes. Any scenario that embraces pracademia requires a program of transformation to ensure alignment of socio-technical components. This needs additional resources (e.g., methods, tools, and capability built in to review and amend the impact of surprises), and we do not underestimate the political challenges involved.

These socio-technical challenges cannot be resolved through regulatory and governance changes alone, although Business School leaders play critical roles. Progress involves changing hearts and minds, which is achieved through "pull," and not "push" (Clegg, 2000). Transformation takes time, requiring those in power positions (e.g., Deans, accreditation agencies, journal editors, funders, and rankers) to become socio-technical thought-leaders, and pracademic allies. System transformation must, however, include input and buy-in from all actors invested in the system, since each operate push–pull power levers on it. Their respective needs, values, and goals must be understood, and they must work together. The following immediate actions can enable this process:

1. We must continue to champion the value of pracademic insight in our journals and Business Schools. Not only must accreditors and quality assurance agencies believe and represent this, academics must too. Journals and funders must therefore be incentivized to promote theory and practice as two halves of the same problem, rather than endeavors to be arbitrarily separated. This may require transparent messaging, broadening reviewing criteria, and journal and funding calls that incentivize transdisciplinary and practice contributions.

2. An international task–force comprising key system actors is required, with a remit to develop mutual understanding and alignment of a broader range of metrics, indicators, and values that should drive universities, and which reflect the needs, goals, and values of all actors. This task–force must comprise representation from the full range of stakeholder groups (e.g., Business School and University leaders, accreditation agencies, journal editors, funding bodies, industry experts, policymakers, members of academic and pracademic communities) and work candidly together to anticipate and mitigate consequences arising from decisions.
3. Individual Business Schools must re-consider the extent to which local technologies, systems, infrastructure and processes promote pracademia and are conducive to collaboration by conducting a thorough socio-technical analysis (cf. Hughes et al., 2021). Where changes are required (e.g., to metrics), they must jointly consider how other components (e.g., people, culture, and environment) will be simultaneously affected.

The socio-technical lens provides a vehicle for understanding the barriers and opportunities of the challenge, but unraveling this requires time and resource investment. Pracademia is not a panacea for delivering impact, but is undoubtedly an underutilized enabler of it.


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**Helen P. N. Hughes** (PhD) is an associate professor of organizational psychology at Leeds University Business School, United Kingdom and a Chartered Occupational Psychologist. She studies the socio-technical nature of workplace relationships, taking an interdisciplinary approach to her research. She is passionate about translating high-quality research into usable insights and strategies, so that it can contribute to the work of academic and practitioner communities.

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**Ged Hall** (PhD) is an academic development consultant for research impact at the University of Leeds. His role includes organizational change projects, to enhance research impact culture, and professional development for researchers and research professionals. He has co-authored articles comparing high and low scoring impact case studies and co-led the development of online research impact training used by 23 international universities.

**David L. Loseby** is a professor of research impact at Leeds University Business School, United Kingdom and a Chartered Construction (MCIOB) and Chartered Procurement (FCIPS) professional. He studies Behavioural Science as it relates to Procurement and Supply Chain as an interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, he supports the Business School in developing and enabling research impact across a broad portfolio of disciplines in ensuring that the research undertaken provides a demonstrable contribution to society and the economy, and the benefits it has for individuals, organizations, or nations.