Managing to Make Impactful Business and Management Researchers in the Anthropocene

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Research Ecosystems, Partnerships and Collective Know-How

We are in the Anthropocene – an age of climate emergency, where "climate action failure and extreme weather …[are] the top two global risks" (Hurlbert, 2021). We have failed in our social contract to provide security from disaster and offer the potential transformative change needed to protect our people and planet. The education and research that business and management schools offer requires an urgent response to this climate emergency.

Many are now questioning the meaning and value of business and management schools (Parker, 2018; Wilson and Thomas, 2012), urging deans to take responsibility not only for educating the next generation of environmentally aware business leaders but also for driving research that is likely to generate solutions to redress the fragile balance of the earth through the way we perform our economy. The climate emergency is acting as a market force, changing what students and society expect and demand from our business schools.

A number of different initiatives have been launched to advance what has become known as the responsible management agenda. For example, the Civic University Charter and the Civic Management School agenda have an explicit role in bringing research expertise to bear in the places where our business schools are situated. UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have focused researchers' attention on an ambitious agenda to solve real-world problems, while the Responsible Research in Business and Management network (RRBM) has established principles of responsible research. The Principles of Management Education network (PRME), calls for the inclusion of this research in our educational programmes.

These Responsible Management movements are a reflection and driver of a broader public debate arguing for significant societal and business practice change, in an attempt to halt the depletion of the planet's ecosystems and to prevent human extinction through restorative action. This represents a real opportunity for business and management schools - not known for their innovative approach to futures - to do something different, bold, and significant.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH STRATEGY

At Lancaster University Management School (LUMS), our aim has been to nurture a new kind of research culture, and a new kind of business and management researcher, to deliver an ambitious research agenda, designed to deliver real-world positive change (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017; MacIntosh *et al.*, 2021). We have developed a model (Figure 1) that helps us understand what our researchers will be doing when, and the kinds of resources they need to enable them to deliver. Our research strategy has been developed by taking multiple scales of action into account: the environment, the University, the School, and the individual researcher.

World-leading Engagement
Including:
• Research and Engagement Support
• Engaged Research
• Anticipating future challenges
• Setting field-leading research aganda

World-leading Impact & Reputation
Including:
• Media outputs
• Policy briefings
• Practitioner toolkits

Lancaster University Management School

Engaged, Impactful Research
[Teams]

World-leading Publication
Including:
• Research journal papers
• Practioner and policy orientated White Papers

World-leading Research Funding
Supporting:
• Discipline-based research
• Multi and interdisciplinary research
• Pathways to impact *designed-in*

World-leading Data & Resource
Including:
• Responsible Research & Innovation/ethics
• Large Data Sets
• Research team: [inter]disciplinary experts and professionals working together

Figure 1 The Engaged, Impactful Research Cycle

The School's vision and shared understanding of the kinds of value we are working to deliver for different stakeholder groups - students, researchers, business practitioners, policymakers and civic communities (*ibid*) - are key to setting priorities and for supporting researchers to design ambitious, meaningful and impactful research.

Lancaster University Management School's (LUMS) vision '*to have a reputation as a leading international business and management school through a focus on research, education and engagement, anchored around the theme of responsible management*', reflects our commitment to rethink the value that business and management schools can deliver for society. In a full-spectrum business and management school such as LUMS, *responsible management* means doing research that has a positive impact on society, the economy and the environment. To build our unique version of *responsible management*, we have been working to generate a deeper understanding of our core capabilities, putting this at the heart of our research strategy development.

In general, an organisation's superior performance can be explained by the distinctiveness of its capabilities and resources (i.e., physical, financial, human) (Barney *et al*., 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984). The most important resources business schools have, are their people. Understanding the way LUMS manages relationships between people, their adaptability, their innovation capacity, their relationships with students, research funders, practitioners and policymakers, and what works in delivering the LUMS vision, has been central to the development of our school's research strategy (cf. Siegel and Leih, 2018).

While we continue to maintain our *threshold* capabilities and resources (i.e., those required for LUMS to compete in the HE Business and Management market), our *distinctive* capabilities and resources help us create our unique research community. Distinctive capabilities are those that make what we do *valuable*, *rare*, and *inimitable* (Barney, 1991). We have invested significant time in understanding these so we can then put in place the right *organisational support* to leverage them. This has become the foundation of our work to further strengthen our reputation for world-leading research with our research stakeholders and beneficiaries (i.e., with business and third sector practitioners, policymakers, researchers and students).

To understand our distinctive capabilities and resources, we looked for patterns of research interest and expertise within and across our School's academic departments. Our department-level analysis revealed five or six themes for each department, with some overlaps. Next, we mapped the interests of external stakeholders: government, funding bodies, and communities that we had a long and significant history of research engagement with (for example, LUMS has a very long history of working with small and medium-sized enterprises and family businesses). We paid careful attention to the language and framing of stakeholders' real-world concerns. We mapped these against the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which helped us understand what kinds of phenomena (and by implication, multi- and interdisciplinary research), our researchers wanted to pay attention to. Then, we mapped the capabilities our researchers have and need to have, to deliver impactful research, against a number of frameworks,

including Responsible Business and Management Research principles, the Responsible Research and Innovation framework (Owen *et al.*, 2012) and the AREA Framework[1]. This helped us understand *how* our researchers could deliver research that would really make a difference. By holding these frameworks against our department-level data, we began to understand better where our unique strengths lay. Three substantive themes stood out: *Sustainability in Business; Social Justice at Work, in Organisations and Society; and Innovation in Place*. Our unique skills included engaged, collaborative and action research. This exercise also revealed a number of skills gaps.

We worked to understand the research concerns and strengths of our university, to see where the opportunities for challenge-led interdisciplinary collaborations might be. We wanted to anticipate where LUMS researchers might be able to bring their expertise and capabilities to bear on big ambitious interdisciplinary research projects in the future. Two areas stood out – *Health and Wellbeing at Work, in Organisations and Society*, and the *Cyber Economy*.

Finally, we worked to understand the implication of our university's commitment to the Civic Universities Charter, for our school (cf. Goddard and Vallance, 2011). We identified research and researchers working with local and regional communities, and with communities attached to specific places. By the end of this exercise our broad ambition, remained the same - '*to work through our disciplinary strengths and interdisciplinary communities, to pursue our strategic ambitions to be world-leading in generating outstanding research insights that transform lives, communities, organisations, practices and thinking globally*'. However, now we had a much clearer idea of what we might look like in five years' time, and the kinds of impactful research our researchers were likely to deliver within the broad domains of sustainability, social justice and innovation.

Using this deeper understanding of our capabilities and resources, we identified five strategic priorities. First, we are working to position LUMS as a leading Civic Management School. This means embedding Responsible Research and Innovation principles and EDIR[2] best practice in our research engagements with collaborators, stakeholders and the public. The aim is to generate an inclusive approach to research agenda development and delivery for our regional, national and international stakeholders. This aligns with our *Innovation in Place* theme and is shaping where and how we leverage our research expertise in *Sustainability in Business, Social Justice at Work, in Organisations and Society*.

Second, we are working to push the boundaries of research excellence. This means shaping and delivering world-leading programmes of research by targeting investments in the emerging disciplinary strengths of our departments and interdisciplinary strengths of our research centres. We are providing active career development support, mentoring, individual goals, seed-corn funding, and incentives to support applications for research funding, quality research outputs and long-term career progression.

Third, we are putting impact and engagement at the heart of our research. This means supporting senior researchers in leading *big bold bids* for research funding, with impact at their core. External funding will be critical if our research is to be delivered on the scale and with the impact of our ambition. We are developing structures to support agile, interdisciplinary research platforms, including centres and teams, incorporating academics, research and engagement professionals and external stakeholders to collaborate on and deliver our impactful, future-critical research agenda. Based on our own interdisciplinary research (Mason *et al.*, 2019; Whitham *et al.*, 2019), we have introduced the *Lancaster Innovation Catalyst* as a platform designed to support academics in engaging with external research stakeholders around a specific challenge.

For example, in 2018 we brought together economic geographers, organisation, operations management and design scholars with professional service firms from the law and accounting professional services sectors, to develop an ambitious research agenda to understand and innovate *Next Generation Services* (specifically, professional law and accounting services). The team secured funding and delivered an impactful project using collaborative design methods, ultimately publishing their findings in world-leading journals, including in the *Journal of Operations Management*, how artificial intelligence based systems are used in professional service operations (Spring *et al.*, 2023); and the *Journal of Management Studies* revealing how professionals adapt when AI is introduced to their everyday working lives (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2023). This network of business

partners and interdisciplinary collaborators and scholars have since secured an additional £2m from the Economic and Social Research Council to further catalyse and accelerate innovation adoption in next generation professional service firms. These kinds of engaged-research teams are assembled by our '*One Lancaster*' research and engagement support team who bring interdisciplinary scholars together with external stakeholders, to develop large, ambitious interdisciplinary research proposals.

Fourth, we are investing in understanding and implementing best practice in impact evaluation and development. We are working across institutional requirements (e.g., reporting for REF, TEF, KEF[3] and HEBCIS[4] and accreditation body requirements) to identify and adopt evaluation best practice and we are using this to generate opportunities that extend the reach and significance of our most impactful research. We are increasingly bringing together experienced researchers with early career researchers, research and engagement professionals, and key external stakeholders to strengthen our external engagement and impact. Large grants provide important opportunities to build these teams and to design-in and secure the resources for important pathways to impact. Our Plastics Packaging in People's Lives (PPiPL) project is such an example, bringing together researchers from organisation studies, consumer behaviour, supply chain management and circular economy to take an end-to-end approach to understanding the production and use of plastics all the way along the food supply chain. Industrial partners are a critical part of this project, and research outputs include policy notes, blogs and articles on the future of recycling, making insights accessible to non-academic research users.

Fifth, and finally, we are working to diversify and grow our research funding. We are investing in professional and academic expertise and working closely with cross-university research institutes to develop grand challenge bids that take advantage of interdisciplinary research funding opportunities and expertise. We have introduced a grant writing programme and are supporting a cohort of a dozen or so researchers each year, from across LUMS, in collectively imagining their research futures, and securing the resources they need to help them achieve, within the context of the school's ambition.

This strategy underpins the school's role in achieving the Lancaster University's strategic goal: to be a 'go to' university for research and teaching that transforms lives, communities, practices and thinking in countries across the globe.

BUILDING NEW SUPPORT STRUCTURES & CAPABILITIES

We recognise that this engaged and impactful research agenda - where larger, interdisciplinary teams come together to address real-world problems, and then seek to publish their findings in world-leading journals - represents a very different way of working for many of our researchers. LUMS, like many other business and management schools around the world, has spent the last 15 years supporting our researchers to publish in elite journals. There are good reasons for doing this. Submitting, getting work reviewed and published in the top two or three journals in your discipline can be an important development process, helping researchers to refine theorising, analysis, and argumentation skills. Such publications can, undoubtedly, lead to new and valuable real-world insights; however, some elite journals have turned their backs on phenomenon-led research where the real-world problem is set up as the driver of the research effort. Rather, these journals privilege theoretical problems, having become the social science equivalent of blue-sky research: scientific research that is curiosity-driven in domains where real-world applications may not be immediately apparent.

In a world where the only thing that matters is the 4* publication, research strategy and resources need to support individual researchers, with narrow discipline-based interests: paying rewards when 4* publications are secured; pump-priming travel, transcription and analysis expenses for research designed for a specific paper in a specific journal.

In a world where real-world research impact matters, research support structures need to be different. To deliver on our ambitious agenda - to generate sustainability solutions for business; deliver social justice at work, in organisations and in society; and to drive innovation in places for socioeconomic flourishing - LUMS has been rethinking how to support complex, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. This kind of research requires significant resources, and agile research teams that can be quickly assembled and pivot to deliver on the demands of external research stakeholders. It needs to be done *with* research stakeholders, not just *for* them (Muff *et al.*, 2013): a new way of working for many researchers. In this new world of collaborative, engaged and impactful research, business schools need to invest in development and training to fill the capability and skills gaps of researchers that have, over many years, learned to work in isolation, focusing on niche and sometimes seemingly obscure theory building. This is not to say that such research is not immensely valuable, rather it recognises that business and management schools are now required to deliver much more than this. Supporting and incentivising engagement with ambitious, impactful

research programmes must be done without threatening the world-leading outputs or the blue-sky research that our researchers currently deliver.

Care is needed. As the responsible management agenda has gained momentum, early career researchers have reported feeling confused and torn between crafting quality papers, and doing 'engagement', and 'impact' activities. LUMS has been working to set clearer expectations for individuals and groups of researchers by, first, changing the discourse and, second, putting in place the right support structures to help our researchers succeed. We have begun to talk about the engaged, impactful research cycle (Figure 1). By setting researchers' expectations about being part of (and sometimes leading) a team, working on an ambitious research project or programme, our researchers are beginning to understand that they will not always be writing papers, but rather, playing different roles, at different times, in different teams. This requires individual, supported discussions. We use our annual Professional Development Reviews for this. While departments have been good at supporting quality publications, they have been less hands-on in shaping the development of interdisciplinary programmes of research.

For these reasons, we focus on making use of our long-established departmental structures to provide a strong disciplinary base where research expertise is nurtured, and capabilities developed. This remains central to our success. Much newer are our interdisciplinary research support structures. In 2012, we introduced interdisciplinary research centres and groups as a second element in our research support ecosystem. These structures are more temporary, amorphous, and agile than departments and aim to generate opportunities for researchers to get involved in phenomenon-based and challenge-led research bids and projects. Together with the University's Research Institutes, LUMS Research Centres act as an important part of our research ecosystem.

Working out how to distribute our finite research-support resource across the research ecosystem is never straightforward. Departments generate income through teaching, much of which, in common with many business and management schools, is returned to our university's central management system. Research centres are different. Their income is generated through [inter]disciplinary research bids and funds research projects and programmes. School research resources are otherwise secured through an annual planning process on a 'use-it-or-lose-it' basis. Some of the research budget is distributed back to departments in the form of travel and conference budgets, to research centres and groups via an internal competition. Other funds support grant preparations, writing retreats, network-building events, proof-of-concept studies and such like. Using this resource in ways that most effectively supports our research strategy has taken some experimentation.

Because our research centres and groups are more temporally bound by their nature, knowing which are the right research centres to support, when research centres should be discontinued, and when to support new ones, is always a challenge. Finite resources mean only a limited number of research centres can be supported at any one time. It has taken time for us to understand how to nurture and make use of our research centres with the resources that we have. We have on occasion, been able to bring research centres together, using them as a 'plug and play' model to prepare large funding bid submissions. What has become clear is that supporting researchers in learning how to lead research centres and interdisciplinary research teams is crucial. We have more capabilities development to do here, and this is becoming an important element of the grant writing programme that we developed and launched in 2021. The grant writing programme focuses on helping researchers imagine the type of researcher they want to be and helps them explore and understand how they can access the resources and capabilities required to help them get there. Another increasingly important part of our research ecosystem structure is our Lancaster University Innovation Catalyst. The Lancaster University Innovation Catalyst draws on LUMS's rich history and experience of developing peer learning networks with practitioners, particularly SMEs, and regional public sector bodies such as the Local Enterprise Partnerships and County Councils. Based on our own research (Beech *et al*., 2022; Mason *et al*., 2019; Whitham *et al*., 2019), the Innovation Catalyst is designed to support ambitious business and public sector leaders interested in connecting with academic expertise

and like-minded peers to address a particular challenge: for example, creating a regional food packaging recyclate; or developing an electronics skills development cluster (two impactful projects run by the Innovation Catalyst).

Innovation catalysts typically run over a six-month period and take the form of a facilitated series of investigative and action-focused 'Innovation Collaboratories' that collectively map out a group's goals, challenges, and innovation needs - drawing in the right academic expertise, at the right time (see for example, Figure 2). The aim of the catalyst is to build an ecosystem of businesses, industry experts, academics, public sector bodies and other interested parties to solve both individual and shared challenges. By creating the space to innovate and collaborate, the catalyst is supporting the development of resilient, sustainable innovation ecosystems in specific sectors across the Northwest of England. The Lancaster University Innovation Catalyst is a proven and powerful way of helping individual firms and regional collectives with shared issues to develop effective long-term solutions that capture greater value for them and for the region.

One Innovation Catalyst initiative, known as the *Blackpool Innovation Catalyst* – was reported in a local newspaper, the *Blackpool Gazette*. This timely opportunity has been generated by two significant investments: the planned expansion of the windfarm off the coast of Blackpool, and the 'landing' of the North Atlantic Loop in Blackpool. The North Atlantic Loop is a next generation, subsea fibre cable system delivering a diverse, high-capacity network connection to the USA and Northern Europe, meaning Blackpool is uniquely positioned to take advantage of ultra-fast internet speeds and super low latency, supporting future technologies such as robotics and smart manufacturing, as well as opening new possibilities for an online gaming industry. Funded by the government's Community Renewal Fund, the catalyst brought together academic advisers, senior council officers, financiers and leaders in sustainable digital infrastructure projects, to create a unique proposition for Blackpool, which was unveiled during a special symposium at Blackpool Conference and Exhibition Centre. The key idea is to build a cluster of ethically powered data centres which operate on renewable energy and redistribute excess energy into social
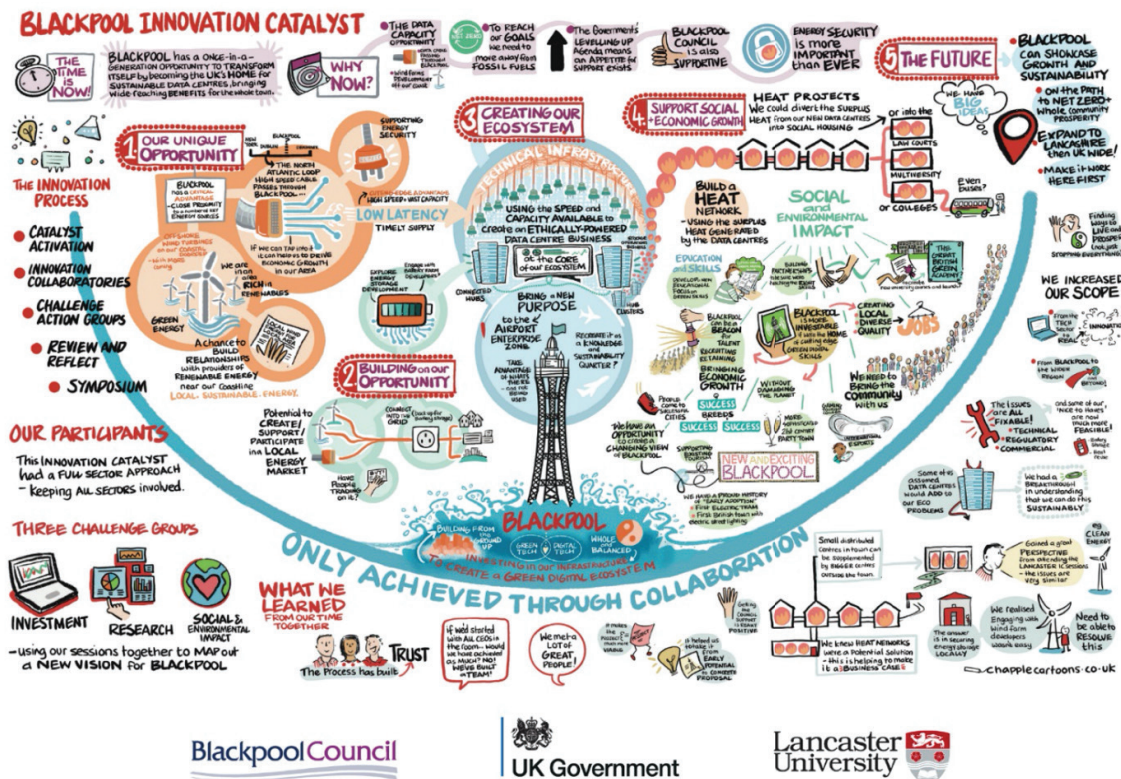

Figure 2 A Co-Produced Conceptualisation and Map of the Blackpool Innovation Catalyst's Goals

heat networks using ground-breaking green technologies; and to use these innovations to catalyse and connect to others. So far, this work has been exploratory. Even so, the ideas created as part of this catalyst could be transformational for Blackpool – not just in creating a thriving digital economy and high-value jobs in the town, but also helping lower income families struggling with energy bills and creating new upskilling and green job opportunities for a green growth regional economy. There is however, much work still to do. In the meantime, we continue to co-develop ideas and practices with keystone actors and communities in Blackpool, so that together, we can make a real difference to our innovative and ambitious communities in this place of astounding natural beauty. We are currently seeking further funding to progress this programme of work.

Our professional research and engagement support teams are helping to make these types of ambitious projects happen, connecting departments, research centres and Lancaster University Innovation Catalysts with keystone actors external to the university, but with a real interest in the concerns at hand. Professional service teams help researchers to navigate the research opportunities landscape, acting as knowledge activists by continuously connecting and choreographing research teams around funding opportunities relevant to the school's expertise and strategic ambition.

Finally, we use our London-based policy think tank, the Work Foundation, as a way of listening to and checking the state of the nation and economy and anticipating future grand challenges. The data the Work Foundation produces using national and regional pulse and rapid response surveys, together with their ongoing conversations with officials, ministers, business and third sector bodies interested in the world of work and the economy, is helping us to become much more anticipatory. As ice hockey legend Wayne Gretzky pointed out, success is often achieved by skating to where the puck is going to be next. Using these insights to shape, review and reflect on our ongoing programmes of research is critical if we are to be truly impactful.

SKATING TO WHERE THE PUCK'S GOING NEXT

The value of business and management research is changing (Davies *et al.*, 2023; Starkey and Thomas, 2022). Three future investments seem critical. First, creating and investing in interdisciplinary challenge-led programmes of research at school level, will help schools build excellence, reputation, and distinctiveness, and will likely have a bigger impact on our society, economy and environment. This is particularly pertinent with the pressures of league tables,

subject QS rankings and research and knowledge exchange quality assessments such as the UK's Research Assessment Framework (REF), the Knowledge Exchange Frameworks (KEF), and to a lesser extent, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), that has put business schools under pressure to be known for something. It is possible that such changes will mark the beginning of the end of academic freedom as we know it. That is for us to decide.

Second, investing in knowledge curation and translation, and making these bodies of work accessible, meaningful and available to research-users will become increasingly important. Third, preparing and developing the capabilities of our researchers to deliver this kind of research, to develop disciplinary excellence and the ability to work in and lead interdisciplinary teams will be critical.

As the consequences of the Anthropocene become more apparent, and work to devise research strategies that develop and direct effective research capabilities and resources for societal, economic, and environmental value, the need for speed will become more apparent too. Rapid change will require collaboration between business schools; regionally, nationally and internationally, as we research new ways to reorganise our economised society and our relationship with our planet (Muff *et al.,* 2013; Parker, 2018).

Business and management schools should strengthen their connection with professional bodies and learned societies. For example, supporting the joint Knowledge Ecosystem initiatives of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK Research and Innovation), the British Academy of Management and Chartered Association of Business Schools which aims to put into practice their shared vision of a business and management-led knowledge ecosystem, directed at delivering a zero-carbon economic recovery. By leading business, science and social science partnerships – supporting engagement across a large community, the initiative aims to deliver productivity, inclusion, sustainability and innovation. Business and management schools can act as a gateway for STEM, humanities and arts faculties wanting to engage in impactful, interdisciplinary programmes of research, and are well placed to orchestrate university-wide engagement and research programmes – even including them in their research strategies.

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Footnotes

[1] The AREA framework is championed by UKRI's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and urges researchers to Anticipate research impact on key stakeholder groups; Reflect on the purpose, motivation and potential implications of the research, and to explore the associated uncertainties, areas of ignorance, assumptions, framings, questions, dilemmas and social transformations these may bring; Engage with academic partners to generate a vision of impacts; and to Act in ways that make research processes influential on the direction and trajectory of the research and innovation process itself.

[2] EDIR (Equality Diversity Inclusion & Respect) is an agenda being pursued by the British Academy of Management to reveal challenges and share best practice. For further information see https://www.bam.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/projects/equality-diversity-inclusion-and-respect.html

[3] The UK Government has three quality assessment frameworks in place in its universities: REF – the Research Excellence Framework; TEF – the Teaching Excellence Framework; and KEF the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

[4] HEBCIS: The Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey (HE-BCI) is the main vehicle for measuring the volume and direction of interactions between UK HE providers and business and the wider community. The survey collects information on the infrastructure, capacity and strategy of HE providers, and numeric and financial data regarding third-stream activity (that is, activities concerned with the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other HE provider capabilities outside academic environments, these being distinct from the core activities of teaching and research).

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