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Editorial

The Relevance of Responsible Research for Project Scholars: Project Research as a Service to Society

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ABSTRACT

International Journal of Project Management (IJPM) has become a member of Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) network to engage with the broader debate on responsible research in business and management towards responsible project research. We introduce Responsible Research as a Service to Society and discuss its relevance for project scholars and for IJPM. We share our commitment to support and publish research which follows seven Responsible Research principles and reflect how IJPM supports and inspires authors to adhere to them. We discuss how IJPM enables the project research community to move past the rigor-relevance gap and improve research and publication practices in the field.

1. Introduction

International Journal of Project Management (IJPM) has decided to follow our colleague's call for responsible research in project management (Unterhitzberger, 2023) and become a member of the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) network. In this editorial we introduce Responsible Research and discuss its relevance for project scholars and for IJPM. We are committed to support and publish research which follows the seven principles of Responsible Research and encourage all authors to adhere to them. By doing so, we enable the project research community to move past the rigor-relevance gap (Ika and Munro, 2022) and improve research and publication practices in the field. We have teamed up with one of the founders of RRBM, Prof Peter McKiernan, to discuss RRBM's evolution, principles and what they mean for project research.

2. Project research far beyond methods and tools

Projects have long been recognised as temporary organisations that facilitate transition and deliver change (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). However, more recently the attention has turned to the role of projects to create value and impact. This goes beyond delivering a new product, service or infrastructure, but views projects as agents of change in the sense of having agency to create desirable futures (Huemann and Silvius, 2017) or as vectors of change between sociotechnical systems without agency due to their dependency on permanent organisations (Terenzi

et al., 2024). Notwithstanding the issue of agency of projects in creating the future, projects and their artefacts are recognised as a means for future making (Whyte et al., 2022; Comi and Whyte, 2018). We observe an emerging research stream how projects and their management contribute to sustainable development (Silvius and Huemann, 2024). Research emerges on how projects are means to addressing grand challenges, which encompass the world's most pressing issues (Ika and Etzion, 2024) and how they shape what our society and environment will look like in the future. Projects are therefore viewed as interventions into social and technological systems as well as nature with long lasting effects (Whyte and Mottee, 2022). This suggests that as project scholars we have a responsibility which goes beyond investigating traditional notions of project management success, success factors and inward-looking project management aspects. We have a responsibility to consider the impact projects have on individuals, organisations, regions and the society at large (Zwikael and Huemann, 2023).

3. The knowledge we create

Taking this into account, the project research community needs to take responsibility in shaping projects for desirable futures. However, Ika and Munro (2022) suggest that we as a community are not well prepared for this challenge and they indicate that project research is suffering a rigour-relevance gap. For over a decade, it has been discussed that research outputs are potentially insufficiently rigorous for academic use whilst at the same time not providing relevant insights for

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practitioners (Reich et al., 2013). This can lead to questions on the relevance of project research as a discipline and the relevance of models and theories for project managers in practice (Pinto 2022). Our project research community has done little so far to engage with the broader debate in business and management research in regard to responsible research which produces credible knowledge useful for addressing real-world problems and commits to responsible science in terms of how research is conducted (Unterhitzberger, 2023; RRB, 2017, revised 2020). Considering the role of projects in creating our future (Huemann and Silvius, 2017; Winch, 2023) and the relevance of projects in tackling grand challenges (Ika and Munro, 2022) we need to rise to this responsibility and commit to responsible research in terms of what we produce and how we do it. This is even more relevant in the current environment with ever increasing publishing pressures and the growing AI use for conducting and writing up research (Unterhitzberger, 2023).

4. The responsibility turn in business and management research

RRBM was born in 2016 into a stream of initiatives that have become known as the 'Responsibility Turn' in academic research. These were designed to wrest back the responsibility from the self-centred, narcissistic research domain that had emerged through the 1990s and 2000s as a result of isomorphic pressures like national measurement systems and internal school strategies that underpinned tenure and promotion through publications that proved incomprehensible to business managers and to the broader public. Put simply, because of the 'publish or perish' culture in academia at the time, much of this research was rushed and lacked scientific rigour and practical relevance. Even if the public could gain access to it, the work was often riddled with *Harking* and *p-hacking*, rendering the validity of the results questionable. Sadly, the voluminous output of a talented generation was almost lost.

A brief trace of its history saw the traditional business schools in the US transformed as a result of recommendations from two influential reports (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) that nudged business and management research towards a social science base coupled to a practical framework. Consequently, there followed a 'golden era' of productivity where the output of business and management academics, either solely or in conjunction with industry or consultancy, produced a flurry of research-based, practical frameworks and tools to support decision making.

In the mid 1980s in the UK, Government's aim to distribute scarce research resources saw major and periodic research audits, that spawned measures for the quantity and quality of research. Schools and departments responded with strategies to reward specific output in specific outlets (usually articles in high-ranking journals) in order to ascend league tables. The era of useful productivity that had something to say to practice was replaced by a race for the top, as academics followed the measures to survive and prosper. Consequently, business and management research became encapsulated in persistent, systemic and institutionalised problems; obsessed with top journals and citation counts and entrenched with inter-twined norms, practices and incentive structures at all levels of the research eco-system that privileged productivity over quality and utility. Quality and relevance were distant cousins.

Worried about value for money for public sector budgets of this research, senior academics queried the cost of this obsession with journal articles, estimating that each one published in a top journal might be as much as \$400,000 when faculty time and research support were included (Terwiesch and Ulrich, 2014); the accreditation agency, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), estimated that \$3.9bn was invested in research per annum by its 70 schools. Considering the problems with rigour and relevance, these significant sums were questioned and stirred the minds of many, including deans, editors and association and academy presidents, who demanded the same transformation in business and management as elsewhere in the sciences. The RRB journey began but it was late to the scene.

A wave of impactful influences had already swept across a broader scientific domain globally, including: the San Francisco DORA (DORA, 2024); the Leiden Manifesto (Hicks et al., 2015); the principles for FAIR data (Wilkinson et al., 2016); and the influential 'science in transition' warning published in Nature (Dijstelbloem et al., 2013). Business and management had benefited with the PRME principles (PRME, 2024) in 2007, that aimed to incorporate sustainability in management education through principles directed at societal benefit and the planet's salvation. RRB followed this trail by developing three principles targeted at the issues around poor science and three targeted at the issues around relevance. Critically, each of these principles focused a seventh essential principle - a *Service to Society*.

5. Principles of Responsible Research in Business and Management

We will now introduce these principles and discuss their relevance to project research and reflect on how we see these principles supported in project research, especially related to IJPM. We start with the principles aimed at the conduct of responsible science, i.e. *how we do research*, followed by the principles aimed at refining practical relevance, i.e. *what we do and produce*. The principles are worded in a normative way to clearly outline what is expected. For a detailed discussion on each of the principles and further background see RRB (2017, revised 2020).

5.1. Principles aimed at the conduct of responsible science

- *Principle 1: Valuing Both Basic and Applied Contribution*

Senior university leaders, journal editors, funders, accreditation agencies, and other stakeholders respect and recognize contributions in both theoretical and applied research. There is a shared recognition that both are important for good science to thrive, each learning from the other and entwined in the search for useful knowledge. Frequently, applied research has been perceived as the poorer relation with intellectual superiority shunning practical work. This has been a challenge for project research for many years. Historically, project research has been perceived as too applied leading to a lack of recognition in the wider business and management arena (Locatelli et al., 2023). While we consider applied and engaged project scholarship rather as a strength of our discipline (Aaltonen, 2022), this opinion is not yet widely shared in business and management institutions and thus the relevance and quality of publications in project management is still not fully reflected in all journal rankings. We argue that project research needs to build on its historical strength of applied contributions and continue to strengthen its theoretical base (Söderlund, 2023), however avoiding the danger to get stuck in the middle (Pinto, 2022).

- *Principle 2: Valuing Plurality and Multidisciplinary Collaboration*

Senior leadership, journal editors, funders, and accreditation agencies value diversity in research themes, methods, forms of scholarship, types of inquiry, and interdisciplinary collaboration to reflect the plurality and complexity of business and societal problems. Frequently, societal issues require diverse research methods to tackle them and such inter- and multi-disciplinarity requires research projects over longer periods of time. Such complex methodology does not suit a quick fix publication culture. Project research is mostly conducted in certain geographical and sectoral contexts (Unterhitzberger, 2023), which provide limited insights and reinforces silo thinking. Project scholars need collaboration with academics from different geographical regions and different sectors and engage with other disciplines to remain relevant to the developments in the real world. To support engagement with other disciplines IJPM is welcoming papers that explicitly reach out to other disciplines and encourages special paper collection that reinforce communication between disciplines for example with strategy (Martinsuo et al., 2022; Martinsuo et al., 2024). To increase diversity of authors, IJPM

reaches out to scholars in different geographical regions and offers workshops to support the development of high-quality paper submissions. These Paper Development Workshops and the newly established IJPM Reviewer Development Programme to train early career scholars in paper reviewing, not only foster excellence but help demystifying academic publishing and thus support more (geographical) diversity in paper submissions.

- **Principle 3: Sound Methodology**

Business and management research implements sound scientific methods and processes in both quantitative and qualitative domains and in both theoretical and empirical arenas. In essence, this principle attempts to expunge the ‘Big and Little Lies’ (Schwab and Starbuck, 2017) from both chosen methodology and deployed methods. The web site ‘RetractionWatch.com’ is replete with examples of each practice across the expanse of the sciences, with few disciplines or geographies escaping malpractice. Project scholars need to ensure that their studies are grounded in sound methodologies and methods. Journal editors of the International Journal of Project Management have written several editorials over the last five years to provide explicit guidance to authors (for example Martinsuo and Huemann, 2021a; Martinsuo and Huemann, 2021b; Pesämaa et al., 2021). To further ensure that the methodologies in papers published in IJPM are sound, IJPM has established the Research Methods Board, which performs research methods checks and assist Associate Editors in decisions regarding research methods. However, overall as a discipline, with project research being published in over 40 journals and many PhD programmes especially in non-business schools still lacking a sound research methods education, there is still a long way to go towards sound scientific methods and processes.

5.2. Principles aimed at refining practical relevance

- **Principle 4: Stakeholder Involvement**

Business and management research values the involvement of different stakeholders who can play a critical role at various stages of the scientific process, without compromising the independence of inquiry. Often, stakeholders who could benefit from a research output cannot understand the format of the output, the vernacular used or the intellectual density of the content. Business academics have spoken to themselves for far too long and must engage purposefully with stakeholders not simply at the end of the process but from the design phase through to dissemination. Project research has some positive examples regarding communicating research to stakeholders such as the Association for Project Management’s research summaries of IJPM papers. However, we often don’t do what we preach to our students. Project research could benefit from early stakeholder involvement in the design of our research projects (Gregor and Zwikael, 2024).

- **Principles 5: Impact on Stakeholders**

University leaders, funders, and accreditation agencies acknowledge and reward research that has an impact on diverse stakeholders, especially research that contributes to better business and a better world. Often, towards the end of their research, authors provide a panoply of stakeholders who may benefit from it without speaking to how it might perform that function. Researchers must begin to think and write about the various impacts that their work might have from the outset of their project and how these impacts might change as the project progresses. Again, project scholars need to do what they preach: research projects need to carefully design the outcomes, ensure benefit realisation to raise the value and make an impact to academia and beyond. A focus purely on outputs, i.e. journal articles, is insufficient. In this notion, IJPM supports researchers to get papers published that apply a transparent and solid co-creation process with practice and other stakeholders by applying for example design research approaches which allow to evaluate impact (Gregor and Zwikael, 2024).

- **Principle 6: Broad Dissemination**

Universities value diverse forms of knowledge dissemination that collectively advance basic knowledge and practice. The traditional outlets of journal articles, books and book chapters are still important. But broader outlets must be considered e.g., popular journals, magazines, radio and television broadcasts, podcasts, briefing notes, sector reports, industry conferences and so on. This may involve new skills and further training but, especially where publicly funded research projects are concerned, they are essential to avoid moral dilemmas. IJPM is co-owned by Elsevier, the Association of Project Management (APM) and International Project Management Association (IPMA), who are professional associations and allow an excellent reach into a wide audience. With more than 1.5 million paper downloads per year, IJPM papers reach a wide readership in the academic as well as the practice community. However, journals such as IJPM have also got an even bigger role to play in this to support authors in reaching an even broader audiences with different dissemination formats, e.g. through free webinars which share insights into recently published articles.

5.3. Principle aimed at business and management research being a force for good in the world

- **Principle 7: Service to Society**

The six principles above are all directed at a service to society. There are many tough issues for academics to influence from global (e.g., poverty, crime, racial and gender discrimination, healthcare and economic inequalities, climate irresponsibility etc.) to local (e.g., homelessness, stubborn illness, toxic workplaces, rigid working practices). Business and management research was a long time silent about many of these issues and yet their talent, numbers and diverse methods represent a prime resource ready for impactful work. In recent years, there have been many special issues of management journals dedicated to such societal concerns and a sense that business and management academics from accountancy to human resources are grasping the responsibility in larger numbers. Through the role projects play in shaping and creating the future (Huemann and Silvius, 2017; Terenzi et al., 2024), project scholars need to rise to this challenge and address issues – global or local – which provide a service to society and create a better future for all. IJPM has a current call for papers for a special collection on *Tackling Grand Challenges with Projects* (Ika and Etzion, 2024) and papers are currently being reviewed for a special collection on *Projecting for Sustainability Transitions* (Winch et al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

This editorial discusses the relevance of Responsible Research for project scholars. IJPM reached the decision very consciously to join RRB as we see a need for publication and research practices to change and evolve. As outlined, IJPM values Responsible Research implicitly and many IJPM activities have been supporting the stated principles over the last years. While we will continue to develop research and publication capacity, we are using the Responsible Research principles and call project scholars to actions.

A high proportion of the submissions we receive every year are desk rejected and the underlying reasons for these rejections can often be traced back to some of the principles of Responsible Research. By explicitly signing up to these principles as a journal, we hope to encourage potential authors to engage more thoughtfully with the research process and consider research outcomes more broadly rather than simply focusing on outputs. Moving forward, project scholars are expected to plan, design and disseminate their research with rigor and relevance and broader range of stakeholders in mind.

We believe that we are moving in the right direction, but more progress needs to be made.

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