

No more business as usual

Scholars need support to move teaching and research on climate change into the mainstream, say Amanda Goodall and Susan Hill



Fifty years ago, students led a youthful rebellion against war, discrimination and exploitation. Universities were by no means exempt from censure, being accused of lagging behind socially and politically.

Are we repeating history? Older generations are being shamed by 16-year-old Greta Thunberg (pictured) and her armies of striking students for failing to protect the planet. And while universities are not currently in the protesters' cross hairs, they might yet be.

Business schools and management departments would be obvious targets. After all, data from the UK's Environmental Protection Agency show that business is indisputably a major – if not the central – contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions. And with about one in seven UK students studying business or management, they are a hugely important audience for climate education – and, potentially, a source of solutions to the problems we face.

So what might Thunberg find if she signs up to a business school for her undergraduate education? Given the centrality of these disciplines to the climate crisis, she might expect environment-related topics to run through much teaching and research. Sadly, she will be bitterly disappointed.

In 2008, one of us published an article in the *Journal of Management Inquiry* that

asked: “Why have the leading journals in management (and other social sciences) failed to respond to climate change?” In the period between 1970 and 2006, just nine out of 31,000 articles in the top 30 business and management journals mentioned either “global warming” or “climate change” in their title, abstract or keywords.

Even as climate change rose up the public agenda during the ensuing decade, the situation scarcely improved. Rerunning the search from 2007 to the present, we find that less than half a per cent of 25,277 published articles mention those terms. The journal *Research Policy* published the most – 20 – followed by *Organisation Studies*, with 19. Interestingly, the next highest were practice-oriented journals – *Harvard Business Review*, with eight, and the *California Management Review*, with seven.

Despite some editorial calls to action on societal grand challenges, only six out of about 6,000 articles that appeared between 2007 and 2019 in the seven prestigious journals of the Academy of Management, which acts as the intellectual epicentre of our field, mention climate change or global warming. Moreover, none mentions “species decline” or “biodiversity”; indeed, just three articles across the 30 top journals mention those terms.

In our rankings-driven discipline, papers in such journals are what secure promotion. Our business schools and management departments are punished in media rankings if we fail to publish in, for example, journals in the *Financial Times*' top 50. But those journals have a narrow focus on advancing theory; problem- and phenomenon-oriented research are given little or no room. One might wonder: if aliens took over our planet tomorrow, would it take 50 years for the top management journals to acknowledge their arrival?

The vacuum in journals is mirrored in our educational programmes. Research by Nancy Landrum of Loyola University Chicago indicates that sustainability teaching in the US has typically adopted an “incremental change” approach, out of step with the climate challenges that graduating students will face – very shortly – in their careers. Social and environmental issues tend to be channelled into electives rather than core modules, or confined to courses on corporate social responsibility, sustainability or business ethics.

We are encouraged by the rise of student-led reviews (such as Net Impact's annual review of US business schools' social and environmental impact), alternative media ranking systems (such as *Corporate Knights*' Better World MBA Rankings and *Times Higher Education*'s University Impact Rankings), and changes to existing ranking systems (such as the *FT* Rankings' introduction of a sustainability component, worth 3 per cent of total scores). But more needs to be done to bring climate into the management mainstream. Importantly, faculty need to feel that they are supported by managers and deans in their efforts to develop new and relevant research and teaching. While specialist studies and electives have a role to play, mainstream modules such as business strategy, entrepreneurship, finance, marketing and operations also need to address these topics.

Our top journals also need the confidence to follow in the long-standing traditions of other sciences and publish problem- and phenomenon-oriented research. Initiatives to ground teaching and research within the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, as advocated by the UN-supported Principles for Responsible Management Education, represent one promising model.

A sensitivity about the climate crisis should also be reflected in our own behaviour and that of our institutions. We should strive to be more online and off-plane. This will require investment in new communication technologies for conferencing, delivering papers and working with our co-authors. And when we do fly, we need to offset our carbon and build this cost into research grants.

The crunch will come within, at most, the next two decades. Business schools and management faculties need to get away from business as usual to become part of the solution. Now.

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