

Multidisciplinary and cosmopolitan: how openness influences the academic impact of a scholar's research



*The academic impact of a scholar's research remains of great importance to institutions, particularly business schools. **Hyungseok (David) Yoon** and **Mustapha Belkhouja** report on research examining how scholars' openness to other disciplines and broader collaborations influences their academic impact, as determined by citation analysis. Findings suggest that the career stage of academics is an important factor, with early-career researchers encouraged to be open to multidisciplinary work (up to a tipping point) and to collaborating with academics from different institutions, while academics who are more established in their careers should also continue to diversify their research domains but ideally focus more on internal collaborations.*

What is the best way to produce impactful academic research? This question bears a great importance for business academics, because producing high-impact research is a growing expectation of business schools. Our study, [recently published](#) in *Research Policy*, focuses on explaining the yearly citations of over 30,000 business academics (e.g. accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, etc.) as a measure of academic impact. While not all highly cited research papers produced by academics equate to their impact in a societal sense, it is not difficult to argue that they have been very important for academic progress – this *academic impact* is what we refer to in this study. Our analyses show how discipline coverage and co-authorship strategies should evolve over an academic's career that can help business school leaders and academics enhance their academic impact.

Key questions:

- How does the multidisciplinary background of an individual affect the individual's academic impact?
- How does collaborating with scholars from different institutions affect an individual's academic impact?
- Are there differences between how early-career and established academics should conduct research in order to create academic impact?

Today's greatest challenges are not bound by a single discipline

Developing a highly specialised skillset early in your career can be beneficial, as others in your field look to you for advice. But developing this skillset through the same disciplines can limit your creativity. The worry is that those who draw on the same pool of knowledge or academic discipline when formulating new research topics quickly reach a plateau, and don't have the novelty factor that will result in highly cited research. Counter to this, those who engage with high levels of multidisciplinary could be seen, or even become, a "jack of all trades", as knowledge of a variety of fields may dilute expertise and cloud the academic identity of an individual.

For established academics, our findings show that the more disciplines an individual has covered, the higher the academic impact. Unfortunately for early-career academics there is a peak in the benefits of multidisciplinary working, and passing this point (i.e. publishing in too many disciplines) can see your yearly citations fall. For early-career researchers at least, this scenario becomes rather like the story of [Goldilocks and the Three Bears](#) – with academics on a quest to identify a level of multidisciplinary working that is "just right".

Nevertheless, the benefits of multidisciplinary working should be promoted in order for academics to actively engage in tackling both research and societal challenges. Besides, for those who have experience working in different subject areas, the likelihood is that they will be better able and feel more comfortable communicating their research findings to a broader audience, a route that often leads to higher research and societal impact. Being open to multidisciplinary working can enhance curiosity, triggering a desire to learn more about different areas of research and provide the motivation to do so.

Are you a "local" or "cosmopolitan" researcher?

To further investigate the route to produce highly cited research, we looked at whether it was best to work as a “local” or “cosmopolitan” researcher. Someone who co-authors publications with others based at the same university or institution would be seen as a “local” researcher, whereas “cosmopolitan” is a term saved for those who publish with external academics. So, in order to produce highly cited publications, at what stage in your career is it best to look inside or outside of your own institution?

Our findings suggest that individuals at an early career stage should aim to not only collaborate with academics from the same institutions but also with external academics to increase academic impact. However, for more experienced and established academics, collaborating with those based at their own institution (rather than externally) has proven to be the most effective route to academic impact. This means that whilst early-career academics should aim to be cosmopolitan researchers, established academics should turn to their local connections.

Citations – frozen footprints on the landscape of scholarly achievements

Our findings support existing knowledge that researchers who are productive, publish in high-quality journals, have a good academic reputation, and are affiliated with prestigious institutions tend to have a higher number of citations. Most notably, we show that there are differences between how successful collaboration is achieved and differences between early-career and established academics. In summary, our findings suggest:

Early-career researchers:

- Should be open to other disciplines in a moderate manner and be able to collaborate with academics from different institutions.

Established academics:

- Should increasingly diversify their research domains and ideally focus on internal collaborations.

Advice for academics and professionals

Our research shows that when looking to understand academic impact, it is important to consider the basis of the authors' knowledge, as well as their co-authors' physical locations. University and business school leaders should look to put measures in place to foster and sustain impactful academic research. Strategies should also be devised to foster the academic impact of an individual's research based on the stage of their career. There should be moderate levels of multidisciplinary and internal/external activity for those early in their career, and for established academics our data suggests a high level of multidisciplinary working and local collaboration is the key to enhancing their academic impact.

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