

Global Growth, Green Goals: Shaping Sustainable Futures in International Business Education and Research

Jeremy Lawrence Clegg¹ , Cyntia Vilasboas Calixto Casnici¹ 

¹ University of Leeds, United Kingdom

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Corresponding author:

Cyntia Vilasboas Calixto Casnici
Room 1.05 - 20 Cromer Terrace, Leeds, United Kingdom
c.casnici@leeds.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

In the ever-evolving landscape of international business, pioneers and thought leaders continually redefine its boundaries, prodding at its concepts and frameworks to ensure they remain relevant and reflective of the world's dynamic tapestry. In this sincere conversation, Dr. Cyntia Calixto, a lecturer in international business from the University of Leeds, engages with the eminent Professor Jeremy Clegg, Jean Monnet Professor of European Integration and International Business Management, also from the University of Leeds. Together, they embark on a deep dive into the currents shaping the future of research in international business, the implications of the sustainability movement, and along the way include some invaluable guidance for budding scholars looking to make their mark in this expansive discipline.



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As an established scholar in the field of international business, what key trends and developments do you see shaping the future of research in this discipline? (Cyntia Calixto)

Jeremy Clegg: International business (IB) is, of course, a discipline or a subject field, really, which attempts to inform our understanding of real-world events. It's not an entirely theoretical discipline or subject field on its own. But what we are trying to do is to make more sense of the world around us, so often my colleagues describe IB as phenomenon driven. In other words, we see something, and we try to explain it.

We're trying to basically fit theory with observation. The question is: What things do we see as happening in the world? Of course, if we look at the way in which international business as a subject field has developed since the end of the Second World War, it was developed as a way of trying not only to explain trade but extending this explanation to foreign direct investment (FDI), and to unify them within the theory of the firm. We've got a sort of framework based on first principles, which is that the firm is at the center of everything.

I think anybody today, or most people, would recognize that the emphasis has been a little bit too much focused only on the firm. That we've emphasized the firm is very important and it has paid dividends to us as researchers and to policy and practice. The firm is the agent, but it's also, of course, a player, or an element, in a very much bigger picture.

It's perfectly possible, you see, to take a different approach to international business, and one that — once you think about it — is equally reasonable. Here I am talking about the human dimension to international business. It is something that has always been written about, but we lose sight of it when we fix on the firm and more concrete business and 'economic' angles. Yet we know culture, and cross-cultural management, must be a big part of the picture of international business. It is odd that it is treated, if you like, almost like a special theory as opposed to part of a new general theory of international business. A special theory is something that 'bolts on' to an existing framework but doesn't actually challenge or change the existing framework. It just says that under special conditions there are distinctive effects. For example, if the difference between cultures — 'cultural distance' — is high, then such and such an effect might be observed. My point is that, in IB, we tend to 'bolt on' when the challenge of reworking an overarching framework is too much of a labor. This leads me to my next point, where the labor in prospect is Herculean.

The grandest of grand challenges for me is the climate change crisis. I would say, 'crisis' — the green agenda. And how are we going to deal with that? Well, we know we have certain goals, for example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and firms may have environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) objectives regarding corporate social performance (CSP) beyond financial return and shareholder wealth maximization. But what I see as shaping our agenda in the future is theoretically to try to unify these different contributions to what, after all, is our common subject field of international business.

How does the human dimension inform the theory of the firm, in particular the multinational enterprise? How do the political dimension and the geopolitical dimension inform the way in which the firm at the center is part of our research problem? By calling our subject field 'international business,' you see, we're pretty much circumscribing it as being to do with business and to do with firms. But business is not only to do with firms and, ultimately, as we have to understand what firms do and what firms react to, we have to understand the bigger picture. This includes people, the social domain and society. So, in a sense, we need a bigger theoretical canvas. Our theoretical canvas at present is too small. Also, 'policy development' is going to be really important for us to consider at the same time.

When I came into international business research, I remember talking to people in official circles. I would talk to people in the European Commission, and they would extemporize about trade all the time. And I would say, "Why are you talking only about trade? What about foreign direct investment?" They would reply, "We don't get information or get taught about the operations of firms abroad." And I said, "Well, this is the problem, isn't it?" The problem was, IB just hadn't got into the curriculum. And so, we always have to think about ways in which we can get these things into the curriculum, both historically and today, to keep up with developments. In the old days, nobody in official circles or policymaking circles had heard of foreign direct investment, the theory of foreign direct investment or how the multinational firm operates. Yet, we now know that MNEs and internationally operating firms unify almost all of the relevant international commercial decisions within the orbit of one decision-making unit, be it a single firm or a number of firms. Just by extension from that, we should think about the way in which that earlier limited reasoning might persist today. What are the equivalent blind spots of today? What are the things that we don't know? We must always keep asking ourselves, what are those things that we don't know? I think the agenda is always going to be derived from asking ourselves that question.

How do we make sure we encourage all the things that contribute to making a world economy function well, in which cooperation is prioritized and conflict is minimized? For sure, our research agenda is going to be a bigger canvas than it is even today, and it's going to be a more interesting canvas. And ultimately, it's going to be a more realistic canvas. When I came into our subject of IB in the seventies, that was actually where international business research was. It was much bigger picture stuff, less technical — yes, but more holistic. That's a point recently made by one of the biggest contributors to the idea of the multinational enterprise as the firm at the center of everything in IB — Mark Casson. (Casson, 2023) While there appears to be an irony in that, there is not. Professor Casson always had his gaze on more than the MNE alone. It was those that picked up on his and other foundational contributions who then jettisoned the richness of IB. I think the technical advances that have been made are great, but ultimately, we must never lose sight of the big picture. The Academy of International Business's house journals (JIBS, JIBP and AIB Insights) are now far more oriented to the way our scientific work related to real world problems, after our subject field went through a low point in being rather too removed from reality.

How might the increasing focus on sustainability influence the trajectory of international business research? (Cyntia Calixto)

Jeremy Clegg: I would like to say that the green agenda is really imperative, and we need to think how we can make more rational use in academia of the new technologies that exist in order to cut down our negative impact on the world. Now, my big problem with this is that organizations of all descriptions, universities, governments, international organizations, are very fond of sustainability programs. Big programs. And they 'blaze' these programs. They like to claim, "We have a sustainability program." And so, we must ask, "What does it add up to?" Well, actually, usually not that much, and little different from what they would otherwise have obtained. So, what I would like to see academics do is to research not the big programs, not to talk to the big leaders. Well, not to talk only to the big leaders and listen only to what's coming out of their mouths. It would be better to look at the actual actions that are taking place, or that could take place. Then we should link back to what should be on our research agenda. Think about what an effective policy would look like. Not just what 'a policy' would look like but what would be an effective one? 'Effective' means getting the result that you say you're going to get as opposed to not getting the result you're saying you're aiming at. We've got a world full of targets, haven't we? We have a target for this, a target for that, a target for everything. Do we ever meet these targets? No! Do we ever expect to meet the targets? No! So, why do we have targets? We have targets because we like to claim that we've got targets. And then, hopefully, by the time anybody looks to check, it's all been forgotten, and we have new targets.

The role of academic research in dealing with these issues includes researching our own frailties, also those of firms, of governments and of international organizations. In my notes for our talk I have written down that I must emphasize doing genuine research into these hard-to-deal-with challenges like the green agenda, and not to be bamboozled by the superficial, i.e., the big programs. What we need to focus on are actions that might really make some difference that we can measure. Then you will be able to see the benefit of doing genuine research into, for example, how to improve gender equality and inclusion. I'm not just listening to the leaders, not just interviewing leaders who are just going to play the public relations speak back. If, as researchers, we are not interviewing the people who are not leaders, that is, the only ones who can tell us what their lives are really like, then we are falling down as social scientists. So, our challenge is to avoid the easy option of replaying what the vested interests, the powerful groups and the elites are telling us. We've got to stop taking the soft option in international business research, we have to start taking the tough options. That's not making you a Marxist or a revolutionary, that's making you a scientist. That's a completely different thing. And that, I believe, is why we came into this area of inquiry. Why we came into this field is to do objective research. Research that makes a difference. And if you want to make a difference, that, in my view, is how to make a difference.

I would like to ask you to give one piece of advice to young scholars who are just beginning their research careers in international business. What do you think will be the future changes they will encounter in their careers? (Cyntia Calixto)

Jeremy Clegg: Well, I guess you could say, "It depends on which country in the world you're doing your research in." And it does. I'm very mindful of the fact that the more I know about the different conditions in different parts of the world, then I understand the difficulties of getting onto the academic ladder in different places. And if that's what we're talking about, if we're talking about young scholars who are just beginning their research careers in international business, then the country you're in makes a huge difference to your options and your

opportunities. It will inevitably be a different trajectory. I'm sorry to say, I am now painfully aware that for many female researchers the options are limited for reasons of gender discrimination. Without naming names, some – though not all – countries in East Asia spring to mind. But, certainly, in the United Kingdom today, almost everybody does a PhD at the outset of their academic career. I mean, there's no getting away from that. This was not necessarily the case in the 1970s and earlier.

If you look at the university environment, then there is research, teaching and what we call 'administration,' which is basically just performing routine functions that nobody else really wants to do. I shouldn't say that, but I did! But what I mean to say is, "administration" is things where, ultimately, if you were in a lucky position of being able to ask somebody to do it for you, then you would. Some people might crave so-called 'leadership roles.' That's a different matter. If you can lead on some initiative or project that would be a good thing, and you are likely to find it rewarding. In the best case, you would have control over your actions. But with routine administration, often you have little control, and little control is a stress factor. So, I think really early in your career as a young scholar, it would be best to play to your strengths, whatever your strengths are. So, let's say you've done a PhD. You've got a certain amount of knowledge in that area. Find out what applications your research has, as I said before, in the policy domain. But, yes, why not think about the value and potential use of what you've already done? Because you probably are an expert in that field. Then think about where that can have impact, because impact is actually quite important. I was talking about impact a few moments ago, and its relevance to the real world. Generally, at the point when you've just done your PhD, you're thinking about publishing journal articles, and that's fine and essential. But think about the implications of what you've done and what that might have for real world applications. It could be quite surprising to you to realize what the possibilities are. You might need to connect with other people in order to get the full value out of the work that you've done. I say, "do that," although I didn't do it myself – but then the world was rather different when I did my PhD. Today, early career researchers (ECRs) post-PhD have far greater opportunities and routes to impact.

Today, I would say to young academics (who should properly be referred to as ECRs) – start 'differentiating your product' as soon as you can try to establish your own academic identity. What is it about you that is distinctive that other people don't know. And if you think about it, it's likely to be your PhD research. That's something, surely, that other people don't have. But you have, and you may well find that it's got an outlet somewhere. Look for those places where there is an outlet. Pursue those places where there is an outlet and pursue those people who might help you get into those outlets. I have already mentioned the AIB, which is an academy that can offer precisely such channels. The AIB shared interest groups (SIGs) in various specialties can be invaluable in this regard, and I would encourage all researchers to make use of them, or the one that relates most closely to your interests. Also, the AIB has opportunities to present your research to international forums and international organizations, such as the World Investment Forum – a high level conference organized biennially by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

But from the point of view of finding an outlet, a practical outlet for your work and working on that practical outlet, you may be able to then get research funding in order to do that conversion to developing your expertise and impact. In the United Kingdom, for example, which is the country I know best, there are research grants for early career researchers. Certainly, if you are in the European Union, and I dare say in many other parts of the world, there will be research funding for early career researchers. And this is an extremely important thing to consider. The mobility of researchers across geographical space and people getting experience in different countries could be really valuable for all ECRs. So, my message is, as we say in English, "the world is your oyster!"

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Authors



Interviewee

Jeremy Lawrence Clegg 

University of Leeds
Room G.11 14-20 Cromer Terrace, Leeds, United Kingdom
L.J.Clegg@lubs.leeds.ac.uk



Interviewer

Cyntia Vilasboas Calixto Casnici 

University of Leeds
Room 1.05 - 20 Cromer Terrace, Leeds, United Kingdom
c.casnici@leeds.ac.uk