

Call for Abstracts

Critically organising for 'Grand Challenges'

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July 2027,
Lancaster University**

Session Type

The stream will be curated to encourage intellectual reflection, debate, and interaction. In keeping with CMS's commitment to plural and creative modes of knowledge production, this stream explicitly welcomes diverse session formats. We therefore aim to curate a mix of paper sessions, round tables, and pre-organized sessions around shared provocations, encouraging collective theorizing and debate. Paper sessions will be open to conventional and experimental papers (conceptual, empirical, essayistic), as well as more artistic expressions such as poetry or storytelling. The sessions should be dialogical rather than presentation-driven to foster an evolving conversation, with efforts to connect ideas across formats and participants.

We will run a hybrid presentation stream. This will enable the participation of researchers from the Global South and those without formal institutional support; practitioners actively engaged with grand challenges-type projects, who would otherwise not be able to attend due to fee and visa constraints; volunteers and those working on precarious contracts; and those unable to travel due to care and/or other responsibilities.

Convenors:

Brendan Whitty (he/him/his), Lecturer in Non-Profit Management, University of St Andrews Business School

Daniel Semper (he/him/his), Lecturer in Management, University of St Andrews Business School

Arun Kumar (he/him/his), Reader in Global Development and Management, King's College London

Carole Elliott (she/her/hers), Professor in Leadership Development, University of St Andrews Business School

The organizing team brings together diverse academic perspectives spanning organization theory, development studies, sociology, and management. Its members reflect a range of geographical backgrounds, including British, Central European, Australasian, and Indian contexts. In terms of experience, the team encompasses early-career researchers, mid-career academics, and well-established scholars. They also include fifteen years' professional experience in NGOs and development organisations. They have extensive convening experience having previously organised a variety of traditional conference streams, paper development workshops, and panels at the meetings of the U.S. Academy of Management, Business History Conference, Critical Management Studies, Development Studies Association, among others.

The idea of 'Grand Challenges' has become central to how management and organisation studies engages, with substantial social problems of the day – and thus, self-evidently relevant 'beyond the Academy'. Adapting a term originally used in science policy and elite philanthropy, 'grand challenges' denotes large-scale problems —such as climate change, inequality, and global health— which are complex, uncertain and evaluative (Ferraro et al, 2015). The Grand Challenges framing has raised new research questions within the academy (cf. George et al 2016). It has also prompted institutional and organisational response based on systems thinking, participatory organising and the management of paradox (e.g. Gumusay et al 2022), leading to a preoccupation with coordination across hybrid organisational forms (Ansari et al., 2013; Gumusay et al 2022; Leixnering et al., 2025; Ciambotti et al., 2025).

The stream invites critical engagement with Grand Challenges. We suggest that Grand Challenges' post-ideological framing risks eliding the situated dynamics through which climate change, inequality, poverty and the destruction of the natural environment are produced in the first place. In turn, it produces techno-managerial solutions that are placeless and context-blind. We propose bringing power and politics back into our analysis (cf. Kumar & Cooke, 2025; Ergene et al., 2021; McPhail et al, 2024). We envisage, non-exhaustively, three broad angles of approach.

First, we envisage critical engagements with grand challenges as a concept, building on existing critiques of grand challenges for its "variety and incoherence" (Seelos et al., 2022). What do metaphors drawing on physical sciences e.g. complexity afford and what do they obscure? We understand the term to risk an elision of historical, geographic, and social specificities through an emphasis of techno-managerialism (Kumar & Cooke, 2025), on scale and scalability (Pfotenhauer et al, 2022) and on collaborative organising forms (Grimm & Reinecke, 2024; Leixnering et al., 2026).

Second, we invite empirical contributions which trace the tensions, contestations and resistances required to operationalise grand challenges. These accounts may address the work of problematising and circumscribing the challenges themselves (e.g. Mazzola et al, 2025), of resisting and reopening technical solutions (e.g. Li, 2007), of scaling up (e.g. Pfotenhauer et al., 2022), of suppressing as much as welcoming hybridity (Schuessler et al., 2025) and of managing incompatibilities (e.g. Kok et al., 2019). We envisage contributions drawing on STS, anthropology, critical geography, critical accounting and economic sociology, as well as management and organisation studies.

Third, we propose accounts that engage with the histories and political economies of Grand Challenges, including by drawing on critical traditions of development studies. Critical engagements with development management, for example, have shown that participatory processes serve to mask the operation of depoliticising technical and managerial discourses (see e.g. Li, 2007; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). From a political economy point of view, 'Grand Challenges' risks prioritizing elite actors with resources and legitimacy – governments, multinational firms, elite universities, and global NGOs (e.g. Mazzucato & Collington, 2023; Giridharadas, 2019) whilst simultaneously marginalizing voices and experiential knowledge of affected communities.

The stream will invite consideration of alternative forms of organising for social challenges that are sensitive to the critiques sketched above.

When submitting, please send a title and an abstract of 500 words to Brendan Whitty bw205@st-andrews.ac.uk ; please also indicate whether your submission is in a conventional or other form.

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