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# Modest revolt to save research from red tape

Gefällt mir 0

12 February 2009

Research councils recently reminded us that they are required to demonstrate the impact of the research they fund. These bodies, our proxies for protecting the health and development of academic research, could adopt a wide range of approaches to meet that remit.

They could, for example, decide that the national interest can best be served by fostering the environments in which creativity can flourish, as they did until relatively recently.

The payback, in terms of international recognition, was enormous. Between 1945 and 1979, UK researchers won 41 Nobel prizes in the sciences - perhaps the ultimate in international accolades.

That is an average of more than one a year, an extraordinarily high rate for such a relatively small country. For most of this period, tenured researchers were usually given modest funds that they could use to tackle any problem that interested them without the need for external approval.

In those days, society trusted academics to make the best use of their freedom, and our proxies fostered that trust. Above all, they had the courage and ingenuity to defend this system to their paymasters.

They seem to have forgotten these talents. Between 1980 and 2006, during which they introduced a host of ever-more stringent controls designed to increase efficiency, UK researchers won ten Nobel prizes, one every 2.6 years.

However, six of those prizes were awarded to scientists based at such institutes as the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology, which strive to protect scientific freedom, and one worked in industry.

Thus, the changes have resulted in almost a tenfold decrease in the rate at which researchers at UK universities win Nobel prizes.

But what is the point of having a second-to-none academic sector if its commitment to innovation is not matched by commerce and business? British industry's relatively low investment in science and technology has long been a serious problem that our proxies and governments have consistently ignored. Academics are a much easier target.

While understanding that our proxies are often in a difficult situation, they must become more courageous in dealing with Government or they won't have an enterprise worth protecting. In recent years, they have acquiesced in subjecting academics to withering barrages of control, and researchers' lives have become bureaucratic nightmares.

The latest turn of the screw inflicts yet another distracting burden, namely that of requiring prospective researchers to write "a two-page impact plan in addition to the case for support".

We the undersigned suggest that it is time for a modest revolt. We would urge that reviewers for grant applications decline invitations to take these additional pages into consideration and confine their assessments to matters in which they are demonstrably competent.

Indeed, in research worthy of the name, we are not aware of anyone who would be competent at foretelling specific future benefits and therefore in complying with the request in any meaningful manner.

Donald W. Braben, University College London, and the following who also sign in a personal capacity: John F. Allen, Queen Mary, University of London; Tim Birkhead FRS, University of Sheffield; David Colquhoun FRS, UCL; Adam Curtis, University of Glasgow; John Dainton FRS, University of Liverpool; Andre Geim FRS, University of Manchester; Pat Heslop-Harrison, University of Leicester; Tony Horsewill, University of Nottingham; Sir Harry Kroto FRS, Florida State University, Tallahassee and Nobel laureate; Peter Lawrence FRS, Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge; Philip Moriarty, Nottingham; Andrew Oswald, University of Warwick; David Ray, BioAstral Ltd; Ken Seddon, Queen's University Belfast; Steve Sparks FRS, University of Bristol; Nick Tyler, UCL.; Claudio Vita-Finzi, Natural History Museum; Phil Woodruff FRS, Warwick.

## Readers' comments

- Svetlana Pertsovich** 12 February, 2009

Bravo! Down with dominance of bureaucracy in Universities and all Science!  
I wish you Victory, colleagues.

- Svetlana Pertsovich** 12 February, 2009

The point is not that the bureaucrats require the prognostications and plannings. Clever (!) prognosis is enough useful thing.  
It is terrible that the BUREAUCRACY TRIES TO RUN SCIENCE! Bureaucracy have not the right to do it.

- jon crowcroft** 26 February, 2009

I asked the EPSRC if they had an evaluation plan for this - do they know how they will tell what the impact of requesting impact plans will be, they don't, hence they can't tell if it is worth doing or not, the fact is it is a waste of time, in fact they can already tell the impact of \_past\_ funded work, which is all they need to justify the funding requests they make on our behalf to the treasury for RCUK, this is laziness beyond belief asking us to give them hundreds of bogus predictions made by people unskilled in making impact predictions, then evaluated by people unskilled in evaluating impact predictions, for people in government agencies who wouldn't understand an impact plan if it landed on their head from a great height.

- Robin Hob** 17 March, 2009

I see that previous commentators favour immoderately authors of the article. Could I bring one sober note into this concordant chorus of fevered excited voices?

Well, Government ("unskilled" as you determined it here) can't make impact predictions. Research councils ("bureaucrats" as you called them) can't make impact predictions. Nevertheless, their requirements about making predictions are not idle inventions of overfed functionaries. The society in crisis now. Who must drag out society from this morass? Government (because to save society is its main role ) appeals to cleverest and wisest - to scientists - and asks them merely to write two (!) pages about possible social impact of their investigations.

But what do these wiseacres answer? They answer that they can't do it and don't want to do it. They answer that they don't care a straw for crisis in society - it is business of politicians ("stupid politicians" as these wiseacres say). And they don't want to know - whether their own scientific work is useful or not. They want only one thing - they desire to get money without any limits like before 1979!

No, the commentator above is wrong - they don't want the power to be transited from bureaucrats to the clever and educated specialists! Not at all! The power of the unskilled and half-educated persons is all right for them. They simply desire like ancient Roman plebeians - " Panem et circenses!" Yes - it is scientific plebeians, vitiated by luxury and permissiveness of 50 - 70s, when sceptred moneybags fed them like pets and didn't ask nothing from them excepting cat-like purr of scientific reports about blue-skies investigations. Selfish eggheads, unused to think about other people and society.

Are you scientists? Indeed? Do real scientists think above all about filling of their own maws? Do real scientists suffer a power of fools over themselves? Do real scientists hysterically mewl and scrape the wallpapers when they find that their trough is empty? ;)

No!  
Real scientists think about other people, find the way to rescue the society from trouble, run society and lead other people.  
Do you agree?

- Don Quixote** 18 March, 2009

Ah! we have sight of the giant we must forever do battle with. His number is Legion and his shape is Formless. His disciples are armed with powerful mind-numbing dogma - the sacred words that bring mind-numbing paralysis. "I'm only doing my job", "accountability", "targets". These utterances are carefully designed to hobble inspiration, curtail creativity, handicap the thoughtful.  
Force will not bring down this giant; there is only one weapon against this dark force - the bright light of clear thinking, we must continually highlight every bit of idiot thinking, misbegotten metaphor and just plain "noise"  
"Impact predictions" - sounds plausible until you examine the concept. No research scientist can predict the "impact" of their work. "Impact speculation" would be a more appropriate term, but might thereby lose its "impact". Even then, nothing happens in isolation; the culmination of a particular line of enquiry might be so far into the future that other circumstances will probably change outcomes immeasurably. Hence the assessment of impact is likely to be wholly, or largely fictional. In this respect, then, scientists are being asked to make statements which they know cannot be true - anathema to those who dedicate their lives (AND much of their spare, unpaid time) to uncovering truth.  
So, Robin, you seem to have misunderstood the situation when you write "...asks them merely to write two (!) pages ..." - have you any idea how much so-called research funding is diverted to paying for the "evidence trail" which, it turns out, is not what scientists (or indeed, lawyers) would call any kind of evidence at all?  
As for the selfish eggheads living in luxury... many researchers earn less than trainee teachers or nurses. They don't complain, it's not the worst job in the world. But by far the most significant detriment - to progress, motivation and so on - is the interminable bureaucracy which appears designed to impede, rather than facilitate, research. Basically, the people who design targets and accountability mechanisms should have to conform to the same stringent standards of truth that the scientists do. In other words, if they can't prove that the systems they propose and enforce will have the outcomes they are designed to, then it's back to the drawing board. Not because the scientists should be entirely unaccountable, but because any attempt at accountability that actually muddies the water is counterproductive - and why should we, the public, be paying for that?  
The way to rescue society from trouble, then, has always been available to us - pursue the truth with utmost diligence, ruthlessly stripping away the pretense and the noise.

- Don Quixote** 19 March, 2009

Seriously, though we continually underestimate (!) the pernicious influence of red tape, as though it's just a case of brambles that need cutting back a bit. And it does seem that a few privileged (in that they have a job) ivory tower inhabitants are moaning about two pages when the world is going to hell in a handcart. But actually, the very reason that the world is in such a state is exactly the same one that they are complaining about; 'twas ever thus. Empires fall because, somehow, they lose the ability to be effective, to actually get things done. They become swamped by people and organisations whose power is in wielding the word 'no'. Ironically (given many people's parochial view of 'ivory tower academics'), academia was one of the few remaining bastions of actually doing things, rather than sitting in on procrastinating committees. Sadly, as academia becomes big business, more and more money is siphoned off into nay-saying systems. The ubiquitous arthritis that spreads through the 'thinking industry' signifies ominous portents.  
So, who is going to save the world? The world of finance (not a furniture store or a theme park, but banks)? -I think not; the business world? - not looking too healthy, I'm afraid. The political world? - well, they got too close to the first two for their own good. Our one hope now would be to think our way out... oops, the thinkers have been coralled and are being prevented from doing what they do, distracted by demands that they spend their energies producing false evidence for the audit business. So there we have it - it's down to the audit business to save us....unless the journalists..?

- Don Quixote** 19 March, 2009

I forgot to say - a modest revolt indeed; too modest, perhaps?

- **Robin Hob** 20 March, 2009

Yep! Just so. You said a truth at last, the Knight of the Sad Countenance! Too modest. It must not be revolt, it must be Revolution. And I criticize my colleagues-"Ivory tower academics" only for their spinelessness and weak argumentation in debates.

The crisis dictates wolfish laws. I fear that administration will not cancel the rule of "two pages" and any consensus is not possible.

Revolution...

- **Svetlana Pertsovich** 24 March, 2009

I agree with Robin Hob.

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