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FEBRUARY 12, 2009

Is the (Blue) Sky Falling in the U.K?

Calling for a "modest revolt," 20 United Kingdom scientists, including one Nobel laureate and eight Royal Society fellows, have launched a scathing attack on the U.K.'s seven research councils for now requiring grant applications to include a 2-page statement on the economic impact of the proposed work. In a [letter to the Times Higher Education \(THE\)](#), they call for peer-reviewers to ignore those summaries, arguing that they have no business predicting what research may produce an economic windfall. They also blame this financial mindset and a lack of private industry investment for causing a decline in the U.K.'s leadership in science, as reflected in a decreasing frequency of Nobel Prizes.

In a [news story](#), *THE* notes a response by Philip Esler, chief executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, that includes this comment:

Research councils will not be disadvantaging blue-skies research, nor stifling creativity. The impact statement is not designed to ask peer reviewers or applicants to predict future benefits. It is intended to allow the applicant to highlight potential pathways to impact, especially through collaboration with partners, and to help the research councils support them in these activities.

—John Travis

Posted on February 12, 2009 12:21 PM in [Europe](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

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2 Comments

By [Philip Moriarty](#) on [February 13, 2009 6:16 AM](#)

In response to Ryan's comment above, and as been recently discussed at his [Prometheus blog](#), it is important not to take the comments of Research Councils UK representatives at face value!

Philip Moriarty, School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Nottingham

By [Ryan](#) on [February 12, 2009 3:25 PM](#)

This is a somewhat misleading post. True, expecting all research to draw conclusions about economic impacts would be very limiting, but that is not quite what is happening here. A full reading of the article reveals that the new requirements ask for an account of many kinds of impacts, not just economics:

"It covers not only economic benefits, but also those related to public policy, quality of life, health and creative output."

This makes more sense. Almost all government funding for science is justified on the basis that it will contribute to these kinds of outcomes.

An important thing to remember here is that the basic-applied dichotomy is false. Applied research may lead to fundamental breakthroughs in knowledge, and "blue skies" research can lead to useful applications.

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