

Modest revolt to save research from red tape

KNOW THY STUDENTS

by **HAM**

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.

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