

The impact of university research: public or private good?

Philip Moriarty asks whether the practices now followed by UK research councils are doing little more than enabling the government's policy to further commercialise academic research.

In his first keynote speech as Universities and Science Minister back in May last year, David Willetts' words on the societal role of academic research were markedly, and encouragingly, out of line with the prevailing wisdom of the UK research and funding councils: "I'm all in favour of curiosity-driven research whose applications may take time to emerge, if [they do] at all. Intellectual enquiry is worthwhile for its own sake – whether it's devoted to engineering or to Shakespeare..."¹ (Note the all-important proviso: "if [they do] at all").

The idea that academic work might not necessarily have an impact outside a particular discipline, or that there is an intrinsic, non-utilitarian value associated with university research is now anathema to Research Councils UK (RCUK), the umbrella organisation for the seven UK research councils.² RCUK has, since 2009, required that all grant applicants submit a 'Pathways to Impact' statement along with their proposal, which should predict how the research proposed will impact on "global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK; ... the effectiveness of public services and policy; ... the quality of life, health and creative input".³

Unsurprisingly, Willetts was back on message only a few months later, stating⁴ that "we have to accept that people are looking for a long-term economic return" – the intrinsic value of intellectual enquiry and exploratory research is not a concept easily sold to the Treasury (nor, rather more worryingly, to the research councils). There are, of course, intriguing parallels here with the Coalition's stance on other aspects of higher education. Just as tertiary education is now viewed as a private, rather than a public, good and its value discussed only in terms of the return-on-investment for a student, university research increasingly must demonstrate strong potential for short term (socio-)economic impact for it to be considered worthy of funding.

RCUK argues, of course, that the 'Pathways to Impact' component of grant applications will not affect in any way the funding of fundamental, non-applied research and that it is simply designed to encourage academics to think about the societal and economic impact of their research. The research

councils annually distribute of order £3 billion of taxpayers' money, so what could be wrong with expecting those funded from the public purse to consider the wider implications of their work?

This is, at face value, an argument with which few, especially those who are concerned about the societal responsibilities of academic scientists, could quibble. It is essential, however, before blithely accepting the RCUK party line, to examine the motivations for, and the minutiae of, the impact assessment strategy.

The 'Pathways to Impact' requirement was not introduced because RCUK suddenly became concerned that academic researchers were not engaging with the public or not considering the impact of their research on wider society. It is straightforward to source the origins of RCUK's impact drive: the Warry Report,⁵ the Lambert Review,⁶ and the Leitch review⁷ (among other government reports over the last decade) all stressed the need for academic research to become significantly more business-facing. For academic science in particular there was a clear imperative to 'change the culture' so as to encourage entrepreneurship.

The RCUK 'Impact Champion', David Delpy, has used precisely this language, arguing that the research councils need to "shorten and strengthen the innovation chain", that university research would have to be "taken further down the innovation pathway", and that a "culture change" in academia is required.⁸ There has thus been a rapidly growing focus on the importance of 'user-targeted research', to the extent that a defining principle of the scientific method – disinterestedness – is disturbingly being eroded.

The number one tip in RCUK's *Top Ten Tips on Completing the Pathways to Impact Statement*⁹ reads as follows: "Draft the Impact Summary very early in your preparation, so that it informs the design of your research." That single sentence speaks volumes. It proposes that academics first identify their beneficiaries and users, and *design their research project accordingly*. That strategy is simply not compatible with fundamental scientific research. It is not science. It is instead a description of the 'D' component of 'R&D', or, at best, of highly targeted applied research, and thus, rather conveniently, better suited to the delivery of near-market objectives than the pursuit of exploratory research. RCUK has been particularly canny in marketing its impact

agenda as a mechanism to enhance the public value of research when it was primarily devised to improve the responsiveness of academia to private sector requirements.

As Scientists for Global Responsibility highlighted in its influential 2009 report, *Science and the Corporate Agenda*,¹⁰ key defining elements of the ethos of academic research are being progressively eroded by RCUK and HEFCE.¹¹ What is perhaps most frustrating about these developments is the supine manner in which universities align their strategies with RCUK/HEFCE policy, with little concern for the long-term health of academic disciplines. SGR and, for example, the recently established Campaign for the Public University¹² therefore have an essential role to play in building consensus and coordinating activities to reclaim the public good character of academic research.

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Notes and references

(web links correct as of 15 September 2011)

1. Jump P (2010). Impact Scepticism. *Times Higher Education*, May 18.
2. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has also introduced a consideration of the short-term socioeconomic impact of academic research into the Research Excellence Framework, the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In order to keep the discussion relatively focussed, I concentrate here only on the RCUK-specific aspects.
3. RCUK (2010). <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/Pages/meanbyimpact.aspx>
4. BBC Radio 4 (2010). *Ivory Tower*, broadcast December 15.
5. Warry P (2006). *Increasing the Economic Impact of Research Councils*. <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cms/files/DTI-Warry-Report-July-2006.pdf>
6. RCUK (2003). *Response to the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration*. <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/prcukdrdhleech150403.pdf>
7. Leitch S (2006). *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*. HMSO. ISBN-13: 978-0-11-840486-0
8. Corbyn Z (2009). *Research councils unveil future vision*. *Times Higher Education*, April 9.
9. RCUK (2010). <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/Pages/top10tips.aspx>
10. Langley C, Parkinson S (2009). *Science and the Corporate Agenda*. Scientists for Global Responsibility. <http://www.sgr.org.uk/publications/science-and-corporate-agenda>
11. See note 2.
12. <http://publicuniversity.org.uk>