

Objectors to impact are not few, but many

David Delpy, chief executive of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, argues that there is “a risk that those outside the academy would believe that all academics [are] opposed to the idea of economic impact because of a vocal, critical few” (“Knowledge-transfer units swamped as they write impact statements for grant-seekers”, 15 October).

As highlighted in *Chemistry for the Next Decade and Beyond*, the report of the recent International Review of UK Chemistry commissioned by the EPSRC, the council sometimes falls short in terms of communication and engagement with the academic community. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that the EPSRC seems unaware of widespread disquiet and frustration regarding the imposition of economic-impact criteria in peer review. The council might, for example, like to refer to the petition “to promote discovery in UK science” at the Number10.gov website, which was highly critical of the impact agenda of Research Councils UK and which attracted 2,294 signatures.

Alternatively, the research councils could gauge the support of university researchers for the impact statement from the sign-up rate to a recently posted petition “to allocate funds solely on the basis of academic excellence” (<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/REFandimpact/>). Or, they could monitor support for the University and College Union’s recent “Stand up for research” statement (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/standupforresearch>). At the time of writing, the UCU statement had been signed by no fewer than five Nobel laureates.

Perhaps, however, the most effective method of assessing UK academia’s opposition to the economic-impact agenda is simply to refer to the responses of universities to the RCUK’s consultation on peer review in late 2006 (http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/peer/efficiency_pr.htm). The University of Cambridge’s description of the plans as “patently silly” provides an accurate synopsis of the overall strength of negative feedback from the sector.

I, for one, find it rather difficult to characterise this sector-wide response as the misgivings of a “vocal, critical few”.

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