

The cost of research: are academics paying the price?

Senior academics are under increasing pressure to generate research funding in the higher education sector. With government investment in research still sitting well below the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average in the UK, academics are feeling the strain and seeking alternative methods of funding. How will a change in the funding process affect the work produced by researchers? Currently, the pressure to secure funds has resulted in academics focusing on turning research into profitable business; this can boost university income and also help continuation of further studies.

The new Research Excellence Framework (REF), which will assess the quality of research in UK higher education institutions from 2015, states that institutions will now have to prove that their research has an impact outside of their own university to receive funding.

In the UK alone, several large universities have already started to develop strong links with businesses to boost their income and show the government the impact of the work with economic gain. Could the marketing of higher education be positive? Interestingly, the lecturer's trade union, the University College Union (UCU), has expressed concern at the lack of traditional funding and indicated opposition to the shift to commercial based research under the new framework.

“There is a real concern that the new system will put pressure on staff to pursue research that will be of benefit to business. 18,000 members signed our petition...which illustrates the unease and concern about this agenda,” the UCU's policy officer for higher education, Rob Copeland, told the Guardian newspaper. “That puts pressure on them to look elsewhere for money, whether private contracts or consultancy. I expect the pressure to go up,” added Copeland.

Alarming, the lack of high-status research funding has not only altered some academics methods, it may have affected their health: university counselling workers have seen a steady increase in people seeking help for mental health problems in the last few years.

Recent research from the UCU shows that nearly half of academics show symptoms of psychological distress. The pressure and difficulty in securing sufficient research funding means academics will often sacrifice personal relationships or engagements to prepare proposals; failure could be hugely detrimental to their career.

Many experts believe that it could be this imbalance in personal and professional life, related to the need to secure research funding, that is contributing to mental health issues.

In summary, the current research funding system certainly has room for change, particularly when stress and dissatisfaction levels seem to be running so high. University research is one of the greatest assets of the developed world; it inspires many of the discoveries, ideas and inventions which create growth and further development.

It should be in a government's interest to help universities with their research and ensure that the health of an academic is never compromised as a result of the pressure.