

Comment

Science, policy and academic freedom

IT doesn't do to get paranoid about these things but, even so, a petition launched on the Government's e-petition website last week raises some worrying questions. The petition has been prompted by an announcement from the Cabinet Office last month that, from May this year, the Government intends to insert a new clause into all new and renewed grant agreements to prevent organisations receiving government grants from using these funds to lobby government and Parliament. According to the Cabinet Office, the new clause is intended to 'make sure that taxpayer funds are spent on improving people's lives and good causes, rather than lobbying for new regulation or using taxpayers' money to lobby for more government funding'.¹ The plan has provoked anger among charities and other voluntary organisations, who may be its main target. However, it has also attracted attention from scientists and other researchers, who are concerned about what it might mean for academic freedom and their ability to demonstrate the impact of their work. The arguments are clearly relevant in the veterinary field, where research, by its nature, has practical application, and the results can influence government policy.

The phrase the Government wants to put into grant agreements is: 'The following costs are not Eligible Expenditure: Payments that support activity intended to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties, or attempting to influence the awarding or renewal of contracts and grants, or attempting to influence legislative or regulatory action.' In guidance to government departments on implementing the rule,² the Cabinet Office explains that the clause should be included in the terms and conditions attached to all grant agreement letters issued by public sector grant providers from May 1. The purpose, it explains, is 'to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent appropriately in line with the intentions of elected government'. While the guidance indicates that there might

be some exceptions to this rule in certain circumstances, it also makes clear that these are expected to be few and far between. It is not clear from the document whether grants for universities and research institutes will be covered by the new clause but, by the same token, it is not clear that they will not be, and, in the circumstances, there would seem to be good reason for researchers to be concerned.

Under the heading 'Exempt grants for academic research from new "anti-lobbying" regulation', the petition on the Government's e-petition website states 'The Cabinet Office has announced that a new "anti-lobbying" clause will be included in all government grants from May 2016. This is an attack on academic freedom as it would stop grants for university research being used to influence policymakers. It is bad for the public interest and democracy'. The petition has been created by Bob Ward of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and can be found at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/122957>

In the meantime, the lobbying groups Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE, formerly Save British Science) and Campaign for Social Studies (CfSS) have written to the minister for the Cabinet Office, Matthew Hancock, expressing concerns about the clause and the consequences for publicly funded research. In an article published by *The Guardian* last month,³ Sarah Main of CaSE and James Wilsdon of CfSS drew attention to the importance of making use of evidence gained through research in policymaking and argued that, by limiting the activities of grant holders, the new clause 'flies in the face of concerted encouragement by government over the past decade for researchers to engage more actively with policy'. They also drew attention to the contradictory situation whereby, on the one hand, the Government is seeking to encourage researchers to engage more actively with society by placing greater emphasis on 'impact' in the Research

Excellence Framework (REF) while, on the other, whether intentionally or not, it appears to be restricting this by introducing the new clause. They note that, of nearly 7000 case studies submitted by 154 universities during the 2014 REF, 'informing government policy' was the most common type of impact, followed by 'supporting Parliamentary scrutiny' and 'technology commercialisation'.²

It is worth pondering how a measure such as this might affect the activities of researchers and their influence on policies in the veterinary field, bearing in mind, for example, the experiences of BSE in the 1990s and foot-and-mouth disease in 2001, and, as a result of the various inquiries, the emphasis placed on the need for openness and transparency in the way science is used in government decision-making subsequently. As a current example, what impact might it have on research and policymaking in relation to controlling badgers and bovine TB, and the public's perception of this? And how might it affect the contribution made by researchers across a wide range of disciplines to numerous government and other committees?

In their article in *The Guardian* last month, the representatives of CaSE and the CfSS make no apologies for speaking up about the new clause, which, they suggest, 'has the potential to damage UK research, evidence-informed policymaking, and the wider public interest'. From the information available it would be hard to disagree with that. At the very least, the Government needs to clarify its intentions and make the position clear.

1. www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-new-clause-to-be-inserted-into-grant-agreements. Accessed March 2, 2016
2. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment_data/file/498271/Implementation_Guidance_for_Departments_on_Anti-Lobbying_Clause.pdf. Accessed March 2, 2016
3. www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/feb/18/the-anti-lobbying-clause-will-undermine-evidence-policy-and-the-public-interest. Accessed March 2, 2016

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