

AsSIST-uk

Association for Studies in Innovation Science and Technology-UK

April 19 2016

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock, MP
Cabinet Office
Westminster

Dear Minister

As a professional body representing over 250 scholars working for many years undertaking research that has not only academic but also policy relevance, the Association for Studies in Innovation Science and Technology-UK (assist-uk.com) has been alarmed at the idea that the blanket restriction on use of taxpayer funds to lobby government being imposed by the Cabinet Office could apply to research grants.

We welcome, therefore, today's confirmation that grants from research funders ultimately funded through the Department for Business Innovation and Skills - the research councils, the four national academies and the Higher Education Funding Council for England - will be exempted from this so-called 'gagging clause'. This restriction, if applied to research grants, would have stopped the government's own 'impact agenda' in its tracks.

However, we still await news of exemptions for research funding channelled into the research base from other government departments, which accounts for a significant minority of total UK government spending on research, funding that is particularly important in a number of fields and for certain groups and institutions and which typically supports research with a strong public good orientation where we would expect to see a particularly high degree of interaction between researchers and policy-makers. At the moment the Cabinet Office position seems to be that each department must decide which exemptions to make on the general restriction and we understand BIS ministers and officials may be trying to persuade departments to put in place an exemption department by department. An inconsistent approach here will generate confusion and frustration and leave government unevenly advised: we call for a single, cross-government exemption for research grants to be put in place by the Cabinet Office itself to ensure a level playing field. In this way the Cabinet Office can make up for the worrying lack of forethought demonstrated in imposing this poorly thought out blanket ban in the first place.

The Association is keen to work alongside scientific institutions and government departments, drawing on its members' extensive expertise in innovation and economic systems to provide evidence about developments in science and technology within the UK and beyond.

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Professor Robin Williams (University of Edinburgh)