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Research wrecked by 'bean counters'

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Outraged scholar's analysis reveals that even a Nobel winner would fail on new 'productivity targets', reports Phil Baty

Academics' careers are being wrecked by crude performance targets, it was claimed this week as an analysis showed that a Nobel laureate would have failed to meet the minimum "productivity" targets at Imperial College London.

Scholars warned that new systems for judging staff performance are reducing academe to a series of narrow output measurements, including publication volume and research grant income. They say this distracts academics from pursuing truly ground-breaking ideas in favour of low-risk options.

A senior academic who analysed Imperial's system said that "bone-headed bean-counters" were threatening the sector's ability to produce top research stars.

As *The Times Higher* went to press, the issue was set for debate at the University and College Union annual conference in Bournemouth, where a number of motions address the loss of academics' freedom to pursue research of their own choosing.

Sally Hunt, UCU general secretary, said: "What is of real concern is an obsession with filling in forms. What we are crying out for is people who understand what makes academia work, and that is rarely going to be a consultant with the latest foolproof output- measuring device."

Academics at University College London have set up a blog to raise concerns about the issue.

At Imperial College, staff have been given a "score" for their publications output, based on where their names appear on the list of authors in journal articles and the perceived status of the journals. They are expected to publish three papers a year, with at least one in a "prestigious journal".

An analysis by David Colquhoun, professor of pharmacology at University College London, argues that Imperial's system values his most important publications much less highly than other, more trivial work.

He said that Bert Sakmann, winner of the Nobel Prize for Physiology in 1991, with whom he has worked, would have failed to meet Imperial's target during six of the ten most important years of his career.

Imperial said the system was "objective, rigorous and transparent" and was only the starting point for performance reviews.