

...e at a Swedish field centre with my
...th-old son, who was still breast-
...was sitting outside the auditorium,
...my grizzling infant, when an
...n professor arrived late, sat down to
...convenient moment to go in, then
...s and enquired whether my husband
...e session! My calm response, that I
...y husband was in Edinburgh
...to our three older children, made the
...realise his enormous gaffe.
...e story does not end there. Back at
...modation block, a fellow delegate
...s holding the baby while helping me
...Scandinavian cot that our hosts had
...ally supplied – in 20 or so separate
...pieces complete with Allen key.
...ademic concerned has probably
...that spontaneous act of human
...academic solidarity, but I never
...there may also be far-reaching and
...effects on the UK's social science
...ty, for that individual, 16 years later,
...been recruited by the Economic and
...search Council as its chief executive.
Cleery
Professor of geography and director of research
Napier University

...diments to excellence

...rpe does a good job of explaining
...research is of the highest quality and
...great benefits to society ("Listen out
...mpact", 30 September). This success
...acy of a funding regime in which
...had yet thought up the concept of
... . Are we really supposed to believe
...rpe and his colleagues at the research
...are going to engineer a better system?
...broken, don't fix it.
...mpact agenda is already distracting
...om research. Academics everywhere
...g up the challenge to market their
...ents and themselves. This is a recipe
...stry, hyperbole and mediocrity.
...ds of ordinary academics signed
...saying so, but those who administer
...have carried on regardless.
...while, most senior academics in the
...humanities have failed to speak out
...mpact and call the administrators
...bullshit. Hence, the British Academy
...mpaigns for 15 per cent not 25 per
...mpact in the research excellence
...rk, instead of taking a stand and
...g the integrity of scholarship.
...est predictor of the positive impact of
...e work is academic excellence. All this
...ial nonsense only gets in the way.

Lyman
Professor of philosophy
University of Bristol

...ved but useful tool

...e letter from Tom Hickey et al about
...urses' outstanding National Student
...results with disappointment ("NSS

result: unsatisfactory", 30 September).

We at the University of Brighton Students' Union agree that the NSS is an imperfect tool. It does not explore levels of engagement against which statements of satisfaction can be assessed. There are issues with Likert-scale midpoints that may confuse ambivalence with neutrality. Questions should also be raised about the way data are aggregated to reach figures such as 100 per cent satisfaction, where it may be fairer to differentiate those who agree strongly from those who agree a little.

We accept these frailties and don't advocate blindly chasing percentage-point improvements or league-table rankings. However, we welcome the opportunity to engage with a wealth of feedback that informs our work supporting students and their representatives in contributing to the curriculum and promoting deeper engagement with the transformative opportunities a good university offers.

So, rather than celebrate potentially flawed results (although some congratulations are due) or boycott a flawed but useful tool, I suggest we look behind the headlines and explore the rich commentary we have access to. I specifically look forward to working with colleagues to address student views on improving library resources, the physical estate and some aspects of the organisation and management of humanities courses, while sharing what can only be described as excellent teaching practice with scholars throughout the university.

Emily-Ann Nash
Vice-president, academic affairs
University of Brighton Students' Union

His dark materials? Denied

Thank goodness the UK Border Agency is protecting universities from undesirable aliens ("Visa stranglehold chokes recruitment", 7 October). We all know that a little knowledge transfer is a dangerous thing.

Nonetheless, the visa rules for highly skilled immigrants can challenge our capacity for innovation. For example, recently our Young Extraterrestrial Intelligence (Yeti) programme had a most promising application from a recognised dark matter cloud just beyond the Andromeda galaxy. The applicant, -1 Nietsnie A, wished to apply his antimatter reversal expertise to generate the government's "Big Society" instantaneously.

Combined with our university's expertise in economic time travel, Nietsnie also developed a plan to send the UK budget deficit into the distant past, near the original "Big Buck". Sadly, under immigration rules that exclude most economic migrants, he can't comply with the requirements for biometric information, such as fingerprints and photographs, as he is invisibly "dark". His communications with Earth are composed of tachyonic particles generated from Andromedan superconducting bodily fluids. The UKBA insists it is used to looking for loopholes, not wormholes.

Woody Caan
Anglia Ruskin University

Fabric unravels

The news that Robert Gordon University, on the advice of some consultancy, is considering outsourcing its information technology provision is another nail in the coffin of the idea of "academic community" and a further step towards a commodified idea of education ("Outsource the source code? Robert Gordon considers it", 7 October).

IT is so embedded in the fabric of the learning and teaching experience that for a university to opt out from any responsibility in the matter of its delivery is short-sighted to say the least. Unfortunately, Robert Gordon, "the professional university", is no stranger to controversial decisions: it recently made Donald Trump an honorary doctor of business administration, a move harshly criticised by one of the institution's former principals, among others. One only hopes that the arrival in March of the new principal, Ferdinand von Prondzynski, will restore its wisdom.

Anna Notaro
Programme leader, contemporary media theory
Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design

Elephant in the room

While Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo is left to complete the first of his 11 years in prison, *THE* proceeds to feature no fewer than three pieces on student-recruitment issues in China (7 October) – as if freedom of inquiry and speech there were guaranteed. Your denial is palpable and disturbing; why do you insist on casting yourself as the ingénue?

Abbott Katz, London

Gap in the record

Why are there no natural science books among "The Canon"?

Martin Luck
Associate professor of biosciences
University of Nottingham

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Times Higher Education
26 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4HQ
Fax 020 3194 3300
letters@tsheducation.com

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