I'm a scientist, but want to make common cause with the humanities, in deploring the managerial rhetoric that is used in discourse about universities.

My own scientific interests are in astronomy and cosmology -- fields equally far away from applications. So I have some intellectual affinity with many humanities scholars. In the recent UK debates on higher education, I've also had a 'representative' role, as president of the Royal Society -- our academy of science. In that role I've made common cause with my 'humanistic' counterpart at the British Academy, Adam Roberts.

We've jointly confronted the vexing 'impact' agenda. Research has, overall, a massive long-term impact -- on society and culture, not just in narrowly economic terms. That's true not only in science. A report from the British Academy argued compellingly that, in this broader perspective, the impact of research in the social sciences and humanities is impressive and diverse.

But we are deeply sceptical about the attempts of HEFCE in the UK to assess impact in a way that's 'fine grained' enough to be used in funding allocations.

Even in medical science, any major innovation can be traced back to a variety of influences, spanning several decades. And the 'family tree' of innovations in other fields stretches back even farther in time, and is more diversely multi-branched.

It's even less feasible to assess impact in a credible fashion at the proposal stage, as the Research Councils request grant applicants to do.

Even the wizards of venture capital have a hard job assessing the commercial impact of a scientific advance. To expect a research council committee to make any worthwhile judgement --- and make it before the work has even been done -- is surely absurd.

When academics argue for 'free wheeling' research, we risk being accused of an ivory tower attitude that disregards our obligations to the public. But we should resist such accusations. Our choices of research project are anything but frivolous: what's at stake is a big chunk of our lives, and our professional reputation-- we're staking more than money. It's only by enabling leading academics to back their judgement that we can
sustain high-quality universities.

The difference in value between the very best research and the merely good is, by any measure, thousands of percent. So what's matters most, even from a narrow accounting perspective, isn't the few percent savings that might be scooped up by improving efficiency in the 'office management' sense. It's far more crucial to maximise the chance of landmark achievements by attracting and supporting the right people, and backing the judgement of those with best credentials.

In the humanities, many distinguished scholars don't need a research grant. But they may need, just as much as scientists, funds for research assistance, and above all to buy time -- to be in a department with a good staff student ratio.

Our universities are a UK success story: we are, by most measures, second only to the US in the quality and impact of our research. And this success has been achieved despite a smaller investment -- public and private -- than our competitors. We're rank high in 'brain per buck'.

Even if the educational pathways are open and smooth, academic careers won't attract talent unless young people have a positive perception of the profession. Most people of my generation felt that academia, public service or private industry offered challenging opportunities. We need to ensure that tomorrow's scientists, medics and engineers feel the same way. Otherwise we won't play its part in meeting the great 21st century challenges.