

# Correspondence

## Trump cannot crush Iran's scientists

US President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; JCPOA) in May attracted international condemnation. As vice-dean for research in the Faculty of Medicine at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, I stand behind Iran's scientists, who have resolved to work even harder to maintain the country's scientific progress (see also *Nature* 557, 287–288; 2018).

After the imposed war in 1980–88 and decades of Western sanctions, Iran has made remarkable advances in research, ranking 17th in the world in 2012. The JCPOA did not have much impact on scientific productivity, in part because many US sanctions remained in place. These continued to affect the purchase of books, journals, lab equipment and materials; the payment of publication charges; membership of scientific bodies; and travel to conferences and meetings. Furthermore, the US treasury department clamped down on publication in US journals of papers from Iranian government scientists (see S. Akhondzadeh *Avicenna J. Med. Biotechnol.* 5, 203; 2013).

In the face of Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, I hope that the international scientific community will support Iran's efforts to contribute further to international science.

**Shahin Akhondzadeh** *Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Iran.*  
*s.akhond@tums.ac.ir*

## Exit interviews and lab-member awards

As leader of a large research group, I would like to share an effective strategy for collecting negative feedback and constructive suggestions from lab members on leadership issues (see *Nature* 557, 294–296; 2018). Following the practice of

many commercial companies, I organize an exit interview with every postdoc, graduate and undergraduate student when they leave the lab. I find that people are generally more open about problems when they are leaving, because they no longer have to worry about reactions from their seniors or colleagues. Identifying likes and dislikes from a variety of viewpoints helps me to reinforce good practices and modify unwelcome ones.

Another industrial ploy I use is to run semi-annual votes for the best lab member, along the lines of company awards for 'employee of the month'. Lab members vote on three performance criteria: helpfulness, work ethic and productivity. The person who obtains the highest collective score from their peers is treated to a free lunch.

Although the winners value their peers' respect over a free lunch, the award helps the lab establish a culture of helping one another, working hard and with integrity, and honing scientific findings for publication.

**Z. Hugh Fan** *University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA.*  
*e-mail: hfan@ufl.edu*

## Evaluation woes: we saw it coming

The cry of anguish from John Tregoning asking how his research should be judged, if not by the journal impact factor (*Nature* 558, 345; 2018), reflects a profound malaise in the university system. So what did we do before journal impact factors were invented, when career advancement flourished anyway?

The transition from traditional rigorous intellectual assessment of research to bibliometric indices and box-ticking coincided with the transition to the corporate university model and the rise of the university bureaucrat. These administrators showed less interest in assessing the intellectual merit of research

than in deploying competitive metrics for the marketplace.

Governments are much to blame because of their decreasing budgets for tertiary education. However, the professoriate (to which I belong) should have seen the danger these shifts posed sooner and, when it did, it should have fought harder for the intellectual heart of the system.

Some evidence-based metrics are useful. In my view, however, a return to the methods of peer-driven intellectual assessment that worked well for centuries should remain part of the answer to evaluation woes — even though that could mean retrieving the system from the grasp of university bureaucrats and the burgeoning bibliometric industry.

**Andrew Beattie** *Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.*  
*andrew.beattie@mq.edu.au*

## Evaluation woes: start right

In our view, we need to move from a single system for assessing research performance (see J. Tregoning *Nature* 558, 345; 2018) to a prospective model implemented at the start of a research initiative. This would engage stakeholders in defining metrics for the project's mission and agenda.

An example is the European Commission's MULTI-ACT project, which is a collective research-impact framework of multivariate models for health research and innovation (see [go.nature.com/2mdkqgt](http://go.nature.com/2mdkqgt)). This integrates conventional metrics related to excellence with new measures relating to economic and financial efficiency and to social efficacy.

Although not the "quick fix" Tregoning mentions, such multidimensional measures should help early-career researchers to tie their work more effectively to a meaningful research agenda.

**Paola Zaratini** *Italian Multiple*

*Sclerosis Foundation, Genoa, Italy.*  
**Marco Salvetti** *NESMOS, Sapienza University of Rome, IRCCS Neuromed, Italy.*  
*paola.zaratin@aism.it*

## Evaluation woes: metrics beat bias

We disagree with the contention that publication metrics should be condemned as the bane of research-evaluation practices (see J. Tregoning *Nature* 558, 345; 2018). In countries with a long-rooted tradition of nepotism and patronage, such metrics provide objective and consistent evaluation — particularly advantageous for early-career researchers. They can also help overstretched funding agencies and review panels to arrive at fast, fair and transparent decisions.

The conventional combination of qualitative review and quantitative metrics can be expensive and time-consuming, not least because it is hard to find genuinely impartial reviewers and to achieve consensus.

We acknowledge that misuse of metrics such as journal impact factors and citation counts can discredit creative research, encourage citation gaming and provoke research misconduct. But the striking increase in the popularity of metrics as an evaluation tool worldwide indicates that they offer benefits, too.

**Li Tang** *Fudan University, Shanghai, China.*  
**Guangyuan Hu** *Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, China.*  
*litang@fudan.edu.cn*

### CONTRIBUTIONS

Correspondence may be submitted to [correspondence@nature.com](mailto:correspondence@nature.com) after consulting the author guidelines and section policies at <http://go.nature.com/cmchno>.