

ACADEMIC VALUES – DO WE NEED TO FIGHT FOR THEM?

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Distinguished members of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for this great honour and opportunity, on this festive occasion, to reflect on a current hot topic at the political level which also profoundly affects the academic world. I am here referring to the following issue: What are the roles and duties of universities and our academic research communities in advancing the welfare and progress of our societies?

The pressure to see scientific research as an integral part of the national and supranational innovation systems has been mounting throughout this century, and there are few signs of this pressure ending soon.

Research is seen as the prime stimulus for economic growth, therefore public research funding should to a growing extent be under political control.

By the way, I am using "science" in its widest sense – (Wissenschaft, vetenskap) which includes in its scope all fields of learning, social sciences and humanities as equal partners with natural sciences.

This is obviously not always the case. The role of the scientific adviser of the previous EU commission was to report only on developments in natural sciences and technology.

What, then, is happening to our traditional academic values in this political framework – do we need to fight for our values? What is happening to academic autonomy and freedom of research and expression?

Is it no longer enough for the academic community to just defend the academic freedoms; is there a need to go into a more proactive phase and fight for them?

Of course, the situation is not novel, nor unheard of. Throughout history, academic freedoms have been challenged, by the church and by despotic rulers, totalitarian governments that have claimed to know what is best for

us and what kind of research findings are useful and acceptable for the world order of the time.

Ethical concerns about the dark side of science are naturally a different matter, but I am not going to dwell on them in this context.

The French Academy of Sciences in Paris was set up in 1666 so that scientists could pursue independent research, "free from having to pander to the whims of kings, queens or popes". (I am here quoting Simon Singh, *Big Bang 2005*, p. 89, Harper Perennial 2005). The Academy thus became a safe haven for many prominent European scientists of that time and later. However, it took over 300 years before women were admitted as members to this honourable institution.

The first female full member was elected in 1979, but that is again a story to be reflected on in a different context.

History also shows us that whenever academic freedom fighters have lost a battle about the right to pursue their scholarly curiosity, it has not advanced our knowledge and understanding of the world, and it has taken a long time to recover from the setbacks.

I think that it is necessary now to make it clear that despite my belligerent rhetoric, I believe in the power of words and convincing argumentation. But are we aware of who the current opponents or adversaries to academic freedom and freedom of research are, and where they lurk at the moment? Who should we take seriously, and what should be our weapons?

- Totalitarian governments who want to control what their scholars say and even put them in prison for their opinions are still all too common in the world and maybe even on the increase. (Look at what is happening in Turkey at the moment.)
- Pseudoscience thrives in social media and religious groups, and commercial interests result in libel cases against whistle blowers exposing false claims.
- Hate rhetoric tries to shut the mouths of individual researchers working in sensitive areas, such as immigration issues, the refugee crisis, human rights, even women's rights.

These adversaries need to be taken seriously, they need to be exposed and their false claims fought against, but I still think that they do not present the biggest threat to freedom of scientific progress and freedom of thought.

I am most concerned about the empty mantras of political rhetoric implying that research is only worth funding if it is relevant and more or less

immediately leads to innovations resulting in economic growth.

In other words, I am most concerned about such democratically elected politicians who are inspired by a philosophy that is economically justified and that extolls the managerial virtues of efficiency in academic contexts and even ranks research results by counting the number of research outputs. In other words, I am worried about that type of political leadership which believes that they know best what kind of research results are needed in the future and how they can be achieved.

These aims are promoted through a stricter financial control of funding and by increasingly directing public funding to strategic research. This is particularly worrying when it happens at the cost of "free" funding and a broader understanding of the significance of all research fields.

And worse still, the academic community has been forced to play along. Money talks, and individual researchers are in our times no longer gentlemen of independent means, but to an increasing degree hard-working young researchers with families and temporary contracts, who are trapped in a vicious circle of having to prove their value at regular intervals through yet another funding proposal that has to have a different focus from the previous one.

I am very sorry that I am these days able to use my own country, Finland, as a case in point to exemplify my worries. I do not think that our biggest concern is the severe cuts in the public funding of universities, even though they are hitting our universities very hard. The worst thing is the fact that the government thinks that it alone knows best what kind of research is useful and relevant for Finland in the future and arrogantly undermines the value of higher education and the protests from the academic community.

The slogan is no longer science in the service of society, but science in the service of innovation. The argumentation starts from the wrong end of the stick, starting with the desired end products and then determining the types of research needed to produce them.

To my mind, this quest for predetermined results has a stifling effect on creative thinking and curiosity-driven research. This is also why the concept of research waste has become increasingly common among the critics of current research funding systems. A simple definition of research waste could be – to repeat what has already been done because that is what you get funding for.

The lack of a holistic view about how new knowledge is created is blatant in many current policies, and they almost totally ignore the importance of social sciences and humanities in the building of societal strengths and welfare.

Today, national academies and their international cooperation organs urge governments and the EU to be open to science advice and pay attention to evidence-based knowledge in their decision-making when they aim to solve major global and national-level problems.

Personally, I prefer the expression evidence-informed decision-making, because it acknowledges that politicians and governments need to take into account different types of concerns in their decision-making, as well as the fact that it is rarely possible to obtain total agreement on any issue in the scientific community.

Therefore, the most important contributions to potential solutions of major global problems are the result of collaborative knowledge created through the cooperation of experts in different fields.

The aims of science advice are based on the science-for-policy principle and this is the main means for the scientific communities to exert their influence in societal debates.

For many political decision-makers, however, a predominantly policy-for-science approach is a much more lucrative way to move ahead. This approach can be based on whatever the prevailing political leadership believes in. These beliefs are then readily supported by obliging think tanks or consultants.

Today, we are also engaged in an on-going debate about the importance of basic research vs applied research. A more fruitful division might, however, be that of user/researcher-inspired and use-inspired research. Both approaches are curiosity-driven which I think is a prerequisite for all meaningful research.

Political decision-makers are naturally entitled to invest in strategic research, but they should not try to dictate what the results should be, and how they should be measured in managerial terms. In order to thrive, science needs to be accountable, but self-regulatory, and the public funding schemes need to have a fair balance.

Science has a right to make mistakes and learn from them, and have long lead times to potential applications. Serendipitous, paradigm-changing discoveries and findings are still possible. We can still aim towards finding a direct route to India but bump into America by chance. Patience and collaborative environments are keys to future success.

I wish to finish my reflections on a positive note. I am an optimist and believe in the strengths and perseverance of the academic values, but they cannot be taken for granted.

Pressure is mounting in the global research community, and the voices are getting louder against managerialism, new public management and the measuring frenzy as a new form of pseudoscience.

To summarize, those who no longer believe that the basic task of science and scholarship is the quest for knowledge and better understanding of the world, have only learned the first part of the proverb – Curiosity killed the cat. They have not contemplated the meaning of the whole proverb (slightly modified for the current context) – Curiosity killed the cat, but intellectual satisfaction brought it back.