



*Pekka Aula*

# A message from the Secretary General

**THE VALUE OF SCIENCE** and academic scholarship to society at large is widely recognized, and research at the highest levels in these fields has enjoyed the confidence of both the general public and other actors within society. Certain threats have emerged in recent times, however, and confidence in academic study has dwindled in many countries. Published results have been questioned and their impact on society has been doubted. At the same time the reputation of academic institutions has been marred by ethical blunders, scandals of various kinds and negative outbursts in the media. Scientific truths have been viewed on a par with the opinions of charismatic experientialists and their legitimacy has been called into question in a whirlwind of fake news and talk of a post-truth era.

The most brutal of sceptics have declared war on science.

The response to this, in Finland as elsewhere, has been a rise in the level of science communication on the part of those engaged in academic scholarship and more widely on the social agenda, with the intention of making science and its results more understandable to those outside scientific circles. This is looked on as a means of increasing the impact of science and advanced learning and of rendering it more acceptable to society in general and thereby more deserving of financial support. It is sometimes the case that the publicity achieved by scientific communications amounts to social impact as such. At any rate, guidebooks, recommendations and training courses have been devised to help researchers fulfil their media

*Professor Pekka Aula was appointed as the Academy's first full-time Secretary General as of 1st January 2016.*

obligations, and science communication studies have appeared on the curriculum of at least two universities. At the same time, many sources of finance now demand that applications for funding should be accompanied by communication and interaction plans, and this has in turn opened the door to public relations consultants who actively engage in discussions on the impact of scientific work and lay down plans for what scientists should be doing in their publicity efforts and in their actual scientific work.

It is an excellent thing that people will talk about academic scholarship and research and that researchers both wish to tell outsiders about what they do and also are capable of this. Science and learning in general belong fundamentally to the public sphere and should remain so, and thus it is desirable that scholars should launch themselves into interaction with the media and with the public at large. It is difficult to communicate well, however, and thus it is good that advice and training is at hand. At its best, this communication of scientific information could become part of the process of providing advice for those preparing material for the discussion of technical, social and political decisions and for those responsible for taking those decisions.

On the other hand, it is good to be on the alert for unexpected consequences. It would not be right for good scientists to be distinguished from bad ones on the

basis of their communication skills. An ability to negotiate the maelstrom of the media should not be a compulsory requirement for the conducting of research. Star performers are needed, but even in this age of the social media much of our best research is taking place well out of the reach of the spotlights, and an eye for publicity can be a serious drawback if it means that that the outside world is allowed to decide what is worth studying and what research is worth financing. When it needs branding, hyping and spinning to attract funding for projects we will know that we have gone too far.

Science doesn't have to be 'cool' in order to be socially relevant, nor does a scientist need to enter the circus of the social media to be competent and convincing. Similarly, it is not necessary for a research paper to contain 'sexy sound bites' in order to make itself attractive, nor does it need the marketing jingo of advertising consultants to boost its impact. Visibility in the media is not the same thing as scientific impact, and as in other aspects of the academic world, it is quality that should be decisive with regard to what is made public.

Discussions over the role of communication in science will continue within the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, and we will be arranging a panel discussion on the subject at the Science Forum in January 2019 under the title of 'Courage to Remain Silent'.