



vetenskap & allmänhet

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## Swedes losing confidence in researchers

*Karin Hermansson and Esther Crooks chart the decline*

**Less than half of the Swedish public has confidence in researchers, according to a survey of 3 000 Swedes carried out by the Swedish association Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA (Public & Science).**

This represents a significant percentage decrease over the past two years. The survey also shows a decrease in confidence in research in general and in support for public funding of world class research.

– Increased dialogue between the research community and society is essential if we are to reverse this trend, says Camilla Modéer, secretary general of Vetenskap & Allmänhet. A better knowledge and understanding of people's needs, concerns and values is crucial if the research community is to retain political as well as public support.

The Swedish association Vetenskap & Allmänhet has, in collaboration with the SOM-institute at Gothenburg University, carried out a postal survey of 3 000 Swedes about their views of science and researchers. 48 per cent of the respondents have a very high or quite high confidence in researchers, a drop from 67 per cent five years ago when the question was first included in the VA survey. Confidence levels in research within specific fields have also decreased. This year, 79 per cent (down from 84) expressed confidence in medical research, 69 per cent (down from 71) in technical research, 64 per cent (down from 68) in natural sciences, 49 per cent (down from 52) in social science research, 37 per cent (down from 43) in educational research and only 35 per cent (down from 41) in research into the humanities.

A parallel survey of Swedish members of Parliament shows that in general politicians have a higher confidence in research than ordinary citizens. But there seems to be agreement between the public and their elected MPs regarding what research areas they have confidence in. The "ranking" of research areas, as indicated above, is strikingly similar.

Three out of four Swedes agree that scientific developments over the past few decades have made life better for ordinary people, a slight decrease from almost 80 per cent five years ago. More highly educated people tend to have a higher level of confidence in research. 86 per cent of the more highly educated public indicated agreement compared with only 65 per cent of those with only a compulsory education. Men have a slightly higher confidence in the benefits offered by scientific developments than women.

In previous VA-studies a correlation between public confidence in research and support for the public funding of research has been observed. In accordance with this, our latest study shows a decrease in the public's willingness to spend tax payers' money on research for most areas. 95 per cent of Swedes want Sweden to spend money on world-class cancer research, and nine out of ten consider environmental research to be equally important. For these purposes the support for research seems stable. However, 60 per cent think research on information technology is as important, a decrease from 72 percent in 2002. Funding for research in gene technology is

supported by 57 per cent (64 in 2003), history by 31 per cent (down from 39 in 2002), and space 26 per cent (down from 34 in 2004).

There are probably several reasons for this decrease in confidence in research. One possible explanation relates to the recent cases of fraud within research that have received a great deal of media attention in Sweden over the past year. A second possibility is that the increased media coverage of research – both positive and negative – makes the scientific world seem less mysterious and therefore less intimidating and inaccessible to people.

A survey carried out by VA in 2006 included an open question about the possible reasons for the declining confidence in researchers. The majority of responses related to scientific fraud and academic conflicts. Some answers referred to concerns about scientists' ethics, and others expressed negative feelings caused by alarmist reports in the media:

“Some scientists cheat”

“There was a Korean... it was all fake.”

“They burned some research papers...”

“There was a case when one researcher stole results from another”

“Laboratory experiments on animals”

“Experiments on human embryos”

“One says this, the other says that – you just don't know who to believe”

“All these reports about food, such as mad cow disease”.

These are just a few examples, but media reporting about science certainly seem to affect people, and negative impressions and feelings last a lot longer than detailed memories of what actually happened.

The results of this survey were published in June 2007. The analysis was carried out by Sören Holmberg, Professor of Political Science, and Lennart Weibull, Professor of Mass Media Studies, both from the SOM-institute.

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**Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA** (Public and Science), is a Swedish association aimed at promoting dialogue, openness and trust between the public – especially the young – and researchers. VA uses three main approaches:

*Dialogue* – organising and encouraging meetings in new and unconventional arenas where researchers and the public can engage in dialogue based on what the public is interested in.

*Knowledge* – conducting surveys and studies on how the public views research, how researchers view dialogue and what specific groups of society think about science.

*Experience* – spreading experience of various and diverse activities, organised by VA or others, via its network and website.

Please visit [www.v-a.se](http://www.v-a.se) for information and reports to download.