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Summary of VA studies, 2005

### **Wanted: communicative researchers!**

Vetenskap & Allmänhet carried out its annual survey into the public's attitude towards science and researchers in 2005. It also investigated the attitudes of journalists towards these matters, as a group of particular interest. A third study looked into the attitudes of teachers towards entrepreneurship. Six reports were published during 2005 and are summarized below. The full reports are available (in Swedish) on VA's website, [www.v-a.se](http://www.v-a.se).

### **Research will help to slow climate change**

Scientific and technological developments are making life better – or so 86percent of Swedes believe. Trust in researchers continues to be high. More than half of all Swedes believe that research will help slow down climate change, a considerable increase from previous years' results. Nine of ten believe that research help find a cure for cancer and develop a vaccine against HIV/AIDS within ten years. However, only three out of ten Swedes believe that research can contribute to reducing segregation within large towns and cities.

More than eight of ten support the funding of research into cutting edge gene-technology where there is the potential to cure diseases, and also research into effective and environmentally friendly energy sources. Above all, people want to see research supported and funded where there are potentially useful applications. As this finding would suggest, more people would support the funding of historical research that could, for example, lead to suggestions for reducing armed conflict, than research within physics into the origins of the universe. At the same time, however, nearly all those questioned believe it is also important to carry out research where there is no obvious practical application.

### **Journalists share the attitudes of the more highly educated members of society**

Journalists in the main share the same attitudes to science and researchers as the most highly educated members of the public. This can be seen for example with respect to trust in researchers and in different scientific areas; which research it is important to fund; and in what subjects they consider to be scientific. Journalists however have a higher confidence that research will lead to economic growth than the educated public in general.

Journalists are particularly interested in research that addresses social issues. They have a high level of trust in researchers at universities, but previous VA-studies have shown that this is not mutual – researchers have relatively low trust in journalists.

Journalists have a great deal of contact with researchers and the majority of their experiences have been positive. However, they would like researchers to be more accessible. In addition,

there were requests for easily understandable information about research results – preferably on the internet.

Journalists consider their own lack of knowledge as being the biggest obstacle to producing satisfactory reports on research, but lack of time, resources and publication space are also limiting factors.

Research and researchers were presented in a positive light in those newspapers and magazines analyzed in VA's survey – at least to the extent that scientific related material was present at all. Within the selection of youth, family and regional publications surveyed, only between two and nine percent of published material had any scientific connection.

The regional press were shown to treat scientific material the most seriously of all the categories, with citations and references to named researchers included in the articles. In these regional publications it was social scientific issues that dominated, whereas the other press categories were mostly interested in medicine and health-related matters. In the youth and family press, different types of experts were quoted more often than researchers.

### **Knowledgeable Swedes**

Swedes are the most knowledgeable people in Europe when it comes to science. We are more interested than any other nationality in scientific research. We also visit museums and libraries the most often.

Even so, 70 percent of Swedes consider science and technology to be difficult for ordinary people to understand. This compares with only 50 percent of journalists holding this opinion.

There is, however, a more negative side to this picture. A fifth of all young women and a tenth of Swedes overall believe that astrology is scientific. It is hardly comforting to learn that these figures are even higher within the EU in general. These proportions do appear to be decreasing, which is encouraging, although the time period we have data for is too short for us to be confident we are seeing a definite trend.

Medicine continues its strong position as the subject area considered most scientific amongst the public. However an even greater proportion of journalists rank chemistry as extremely scientific. Philosophy and economics, on the other hand, are considered less scientific. That so few consider philosophy as "scientific to a high degree" is remarkable when one considers that science thinking is founded on philosophical theories, a fact reflected in the title PhD – Doctor of Philosophy.

### **Students are most creative in their free time – according to teachers**

A teacher's role is complex. Teachers consider it equally important that their pupils learn to function socially as it is that they convey knowledge to their students, develop their imaginations and encourage ideas. The vast majority of teachers agree with the statements

“teachers are responsible for students’ education” (70 % agree) and “students should themselves take responsibility for their education” (85 % agree). A whole 6 percent of teachers however think that teachers have no responsibility at all for their students’ education.

Teachers consider it important for students to develop entrepreneurial skills – ie. creativity, responsibility taking, independence, initiative, drive and energy. Nine out of ten teachers say that it is important to encourage a student’s ability to act on their own initiative, to formulate problems and to put ideas into action. However the majority of teachers believe that it is mainly in their free-time that students learn to take the initiative and develop ideas. Only a quarter maintain that these skills are developed foremost in the school environment.

Teachers believe that co-operation with industry is essential to developing business-minded students. Interest in entrepreneurship has increased within schools in recent years. Six out of ten teachers had contact with business – mainly in the form of study trips, or businesses visiting the school. Teachers would also like to see more contact and cooperation between schools and the business world.

### **Publish only confirmed results to ensure fewer scare stories**

More than eight out of ten Swedes believe that research results with implications for their own health should not be published before they have been confirmed by further investigations. Journalists are more inclined towards the view that research results should be published quickly, but even sixty percent of journalists would prefer to wait for results to be confirmed before publishing. Two thirds of both the public and journalists consider that too many alarmist reports and scare stories are published these days.