



Summary of VA studies, 2003

## **Researchers should talk to the public – and to each other**

During 2003, Vetenskap och Allmänhet VA! carried out studies into what attitudes the public and researchers have towards science and science dialogue. Three studies into the public's perspective and two into that of researchers are summarised below.

### **High confidence, but research should be useful**

Confidence in research is high. Eight out of ten Swedes believe that scientific developments have made life better for ordinary people over the last twenty years. Almost nine of ten think the same about technological developments.

Research that may yield useful results should be prioritised, according to two thirds of Swedes. But trust in the ability of research to solve problems varies between research areas. Nearly all have confidence that research can help cure serious diseases. But only a third share this confidence when it comes to reducing world hunger. Only forty per cent of Swedes believe that climate change can be slowed with the help of research, although nine out of ten think the state should support research into efficient and environmentally friendly energy sources.

Another interesting result is that every second Swede has high confidence in researchers at companies. Only two per cent say they have no trust in them at all. In this respect, researchers have an inaccurate picture of themselves – only one in four believe the public has confidence in researchers at companies.

### **Researchers lack self-confidence!**

Researchers believe that the public has a high interest in research in general, but that interest in their own area is lower. With regard to their own field, only a half believe that the public considers it interesting, and even fewer believe that people would want it supported.

### **Dialogue with the public is important – but is it happening?**

Researchers are remarkably positive towards dialogue with the public. Nine out of ten find it both interesting and stimulating, Eight out of ten say dialogue with the public gives them new perspectives on their research, and also consider it the obligation of every researcher. Only one in ten considers it too onerous and time consuming. Over half have themselves held conversations with members of the public at least six times in the last year, but one in ten researchers have never had one conversation.

### **Do researchers talk to each other?**

It has been shown that the researchers questioned are very positive towards dialogue with the public. But they don't believe other researchers are equally as positive. For example, only one in ten researchers regard dialogue as too onerous, but a third consider other researchers to be of this opinion. In general the difference between perceived and actual attitudes is between fifteen and twenty percentage points.

This difference becomes even more pronounced when young researchers are asked about their older colleagues. Here the difference in opinion is a full 30 percentage points. More senior researchers judge the attitudes of their younger colleagues somewhat more accurately, with the difference being around 15 percentage points on the negative side.

This marked discrepancy between what researchers say about their own attitudes to dialogue, and what they believe their colleagues' attitudes to be raises many questions around openness and dialogue within the research community. Is the existing research culture such that contact with the public is not valued especially highly, or not even talked about? Are people reluctant to express their opinions openly, outside an anonymous interview?

### **Do different researchers have similar opinions?**

There is no difference in opinions towards dialogue between male and female researchers, researchers in small or large towns, researchers born outside the Nordic countries or between large or small research groups. However, differences are seen between scientific areas, academic positions and the type of university.

Medical students and professors have the greatest self confidence, and PhD students are great optimists. Researchers in the humanities do believe in dialogue but are not especially active themselves. Natural scientists don't consider it to be especially important if there are obvious benefits to research, and technologists are the least interested in dialogue. There is a greater self confidence amongst researchers at larger universities compared to smaller academic institutions.

### **Who should be responsible for dialogue?**

A half of all researchers believe that dialogue can be held about all types of research. A similar proportion do not think it is necessary for the public to have prior knowledge of a subject for effective dialogue. However, one in ten believe the public must have a basic understanding first, and that it is not possible to have dialogue in all subject areas. The majority of researchers consider it up to the researchers themselves and to the media to create dialogue with the public around research.

### **Superstitious young people**

As many as one in five Swedes consider astrology to be a science, and only a third consider it not at all scientific. Young people are even more superstitious. A third of young people consider astrology to be scientific and only 17 per cent consider it not at all scientific. The question of whether parapsychology is scientific gives the same picture. However as expected nearly all researchers consider these subjects completely unscientific. More remarkable is the fact that only 58 per cent of researchers – and a half of Swedes overall – regard economics as scientific.

### **Popular science is popular**

Nearly four out of five Swedes often watch popular science programmes on TV and nearly as many read articles about science in the newspapers. But young people are considerably less interested. Only a half often watch such programmes and less than three out of ten go to science museums and exhibitions. Researchers take an interest in articles, programmes and events about science and technology to a much greater extent, although this is also naturally a part of their job.

Neither the general public nor researchers have a great deal of confidence in journalists. Around two out of five have confidence in journalists on quality morning newspapers, but only a few per cent trust journalists writing for the Swedish evening tabloids.