

Pekka Aula

A message from the Secretary General

I HAVE THE JOB that I have always dreamed about. As Secretary General of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters I have a chance to publicize and promote those things that have been important to me for many years. Our motto, “for the benefit of science – for the good of society”, puts what the Academy is doing in a nutshell. Our declared aim is to improve the conditions under which scientific and academic work is carried out. This is a vital role for us to play.

The conditions for doing academic work can be improved by making it and the people who do it more visible. The academic community should not be allowed to hide itself away as an inner circle of academics, universities and research institutes; it needs to open itself out to society at large, enter into interaction with others and make itself understood by the general public. The challenge for us is to make it known and understood just how important a role science plays in people’s everyday lives. The development that

takes place within society, which we often take for granted, is brought about as a result of the achievements and breakthroughs, large and small, that science manages to make.

It is necessary in this respect, however, to remember the significance of basic research, for without high-quality basic research it is not possible to take the crucial steps forward that lead to development within society. It is a great shame that people outside our academic communities are frequently indifferent towards basic research. Its critics claim that it is expensive and that it is slow to yield results, but without the new knowledge that it provides our command of the conditions necessary for decisive commercial innovations or general development within society would soon dry up.

We are also engaged in publicizing science, the results it achieves and the people who achieve them because in this way we can influence decisions that are made within society. It is an unfortunate feature

of our present-day way of life that scientific facts tend to be treated like matters of opinion, that research findings that have been subjected to a rigorous scientific process of verification are equal in truth value to the experiential pronouncements of individual, often somewhat charismatic 'experts'. We can counteract this deceptive attitude by adopting forms of participation in discussions within society that put forward scientifically demonstrable facts that can genuinely help administrators to make correct, wise, sustainable and enduring decisions.

Science can change the world, and the world is undoubtedly changing. This means that the ways in which science functions must also change. Boundaries must be broken down, since it is evident that the conventional boundaries between the sciences constitute barriers rather than sources of strength.

The activities of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters are broad-based in the case of both the Section of Science and the Section of the Humanities. One example of a research need that spans the boundaries between disciplines is the use of 'big data' in the social sciences, and the Academy is committed to promoting new methods of this kind through its own actions.

A great deal of healthy broadmindedness is to be found among young researchers, and this offers real possibilities for transcending the boundaries between the conventional academic disciplines. Our experiences with our own Academy Club for Young Scientists have been highly encouraging in this respect, since it gives the young people concerned an opportunity to meet together and discuss their work without the usual boundary inhibitions. It has often been the case

that a researcher in a different field has been able to offer fresh advice on a problematic topic, or that discussions of this kind have opened the way to new collaboration possibilities. We know that boundaries and interfaces are good places for discovering something new. It is for this reason that discussions between researchers in different fields can be so enormously valuable.

The provision of support for young scientists is one of the Academy's most important functions, as it enables us to ensure that the science that takes place in the future will be of such a quality that it will promote the development of Finnish society on the strength of sound scientific knowledge in all branches of human life. For this reason, above all, the opening of a Young People's Academy of Science and Letters marks a major step forward.

It is typical of academic activity that it is not held back by national boundaries. It is by nature international at many levels, but it always has one and the same set of goals: to construct and participate in a universal scientific community, to be able to take advantage of the latest scientific achievements and discoveries regardless of where in the world these take place, and to interact constantly with the international scientific community.

Just as we regard it as important that we should be of service to Finnish society through the medium of our academic research, we also accept the same role within the European Union, where the collaborative organization EASAC sets out to assist decision-making at the EU level by communicating high-quality research results to those responsible for those decisions.

I have now been in this job for about eighteen months, and as I said at the be-

ginning of this message, I feel that I am doing important work here. I have also learned a lot about the amount of high-level research taking place in Finland. And I have developed a firm belief in the future of Finnish science.

I have been particularly pleased and impressed by the commitment shown by the Academy's Governing Board when it comes to working towards our agreed goals. A great deal of work is done in between the actual meetings of the board. We have defined the Academy's aims more precisely than heretofore and we have em-

barked on a programme to make our own work more efficient in many ways. We have challenged ourselves to make internal changes at the same time as we have tried to open up in an outward direction in order to improve the chances of the results achieved by our members influencing society and its decision-making processes. I have encountered a great deal of enthusiastic devotion to these ends which has also inspired others to take up the same causes and helped them to work unsparingly "for the benefit of science and for the good of society".

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

