



Risto Nieminen

A greeting from the President

IT HAS BECOME obvious that more guidance and encouragement is required regarding cooperation between academic researchers and the organizations that finance their endeavours and regarding dialogue between these and the political instances responsible for decision-making. The latter is particularly important as closer dialogue would strengthen the processes of planning and directing strategic and socially relevant research and would serve to combat and dispel the criticism frequently levelled at the academic community by politicians. The arranging of open discussions between the various actors in a manner that would respect the roles played by all those involved could help to construct a natural way of ensuring that the knowledge generated by academic research could serve as a better

basis for decision-making than is the case at present.

Why is this so important? Democratic decision-making processes call for sound argumentation based on demonstrable facts. One topical example of this in modern-day Finland is the planning of a new health and social services system to cover the whole field of medicine, care and social work and the myriad issues that these entail. Other questions for the future include on the one hand automation, robots and artificial intelligence, and on the other the preservation of biodiversity, i.e. the prevention of species loss in the plant and animal kingdoms. The answers to these and many other questions will require choices to be made within society's system of values, but the answers and the resulting decisions will

Academician Risto Nieminen began his term of office as President of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in January 2018. In 2016-2017 he was Vice President.

have to be grounded in reliable research findings.

Government ministers and other leading politicians seldom have time to foster contacts with those carrying out research, so that it is up to the civil servants and political advisors to gather information and work it up into draft papers and political memoranda, and this often has to be done at very short notice and in fields that lie beyond their actual expertise: the accent is on rapid availability at the expense of reliability. In practice, the information given may be outdated, biased or simply mistaken.

The extent and reliability of the information available as a basis for decision-making could be improved considerably if the connections and interactions between researchers and decision-makers could be strengthened and founded upon regular procedures. One problem at present is that the capacity of the academic world for fruitful interaction with others is limited and there is no smoothly functioning infrastructure for this purpose. It is thus no surprise that those active in political spheres feel that the researchers are frequently clumsy and naïve in the way in which they fulfil their role. Meanwhile, scientists and those evaluating the work they do scarcely pay any attention to whether the results of research projects have any relevant impact on decision-making.

The national research institutes in various fields, the Academy of Finland's Strategic Research Council and the research and assessment projects set up by the Prime Minister's Office generate a vast amount of knowledge on broad-based themes to meet the needs of society at large, but this research is frequently di-

rected towards the distant future and needs to be filled out with more specific data on more urgent matters. We need a "rapid reaction force" capable of organising the best possible body of data for backing up informed political decisions on matters of current importance.

The members of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters represent the highest academic standards and levels of expertise in this country, and as a thriving general academic body their interests cover a broad and constantly adapting range of academic and scientific subjects. Together with the country's three other private academies, the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, the Finnish Academy of Technology and the Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences in Finland, it has formed a joint consultative body, the Council of Finnish Academies (CoFA), which attempts in all possible ways to improve the social status, visibility and impact of science and academic studies in Finnish society. CoFA also has close links with corresponding bodies in other countries and is able to make their opinions and expertise known in Finland. The European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM) similarly leans in part on the network of national academies of science for its contacts.

The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters wishes to improve the accessibility of research findings and encourage their use as a basis for political decision-making. We should be more aware of our contacts with those responsible for the preparatory work that goes into such decisions and should be ready to foster these contacts with actors in the political sphere in order to ensure that dialogue of the kind described above does arise and

that reliable information in the form of research results can be fed into the political machinery as a raw material for decision-making. The methods for doing this could include commissioned reviews of the “state of the art” with regard to specific themes and the arranging of informal

meetings with experts or more formal panel discussions or hearings. The ultimate goal should be the creation of a “Finnish SAM” together with the other actors in this field. The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters is prepared to take up the challenge.