

“Conducting research at universities is becoming more and more like working at a research hotel”

The government wants Swedish research to focus on excellence and innovation, but can the two be combined? Life Science Sweden talks to Anna Falk, a professor at Lund University, about research policy, the constant hunt for funding in academia and what constitutes ‘fine research’.



Anna Falk, professor at Lund University. Photo: Tove Smets/Lunds University

This autumn, the Swedish government will present its research and innovation bill. The keywords the government chose are ‘excellence, internationalisation and innovation’.



Av [Samuel Lagercrantz](#)
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According to Anna Falk, Professor of Developmental Biology specialising in neuroscience, the same person can rarely be considered an excellent researcher and also deliver many new innovations. Therefore, she believes it might be difficult if the government expects to get excellent researchers and innovative inventors in the ‘same package’.

“It’s like saying that one person should be great at running 100 metres and a marathon simultaneously. If that’s what you want, you get someone who is fairly good at both short and long

distances but who is not excellent at either,” she said when we spoke via video link from her office in Lund.

How do you define excellence in the context of research?

“It is difficult to define. Excellence in what? Is it basic research or applied research? If you conduct basic research, innovation takes a long time to materialise, whereas applied research can produce applications quite quickly. For me, as a basic medical researcher, excellence is what I call ‘fine research,’” she says, making quotation marks in the air.

She notes that by looking at a researcher’s publication record, you can get an idea of whether they are considered excellent. Those who frequently get published in top journals such as Nature, Science and Cell are likely to be considered as such.

In your opinion, is there a contradiction in Sweden aiming to excel with both excellent and innovative researchers?

“Both are needed, but you have to know what you are looking for and realise they are not one and the same.”

She adds that, of course, there are researchers who are excellent and outstanding innovators, too, but they only make up “a handful in the whole country”.

Anna Falk trained as a molecular biologist in Umeå and then completed her PhD at Karolinska Institutet. After a postdoc in Cambridge, she returned to Karolinska and started her own research group there. For a couple of years now, she has been a professor at Lund University, but she also works part-time heading a research group at the Karolinska Institute and as CSO at CCRM Nordic.

“I have always pursued what brings me joy and fun. I moved from Karolinska to Lund because I wanted new challenges.”

Anna Falk

Age: 50

Family: Three daughters

Role model: All strong women

Her own field is stem cells. Her group in Lund specialises in growing so-called iPS cells (induced pluripotent stem cells), which were previously normal cells, for example, from the skin or blood, but which have been reprogrammed to go back in development and become stem cells again.

“They are the perfect starting material, as you can get any cells from them and then grow as many as you want.”

Returning to research policy, the government has received numerous responses from various organisations to its research and innovation bill. One of the responses that probably raised some eyebrows was from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, arguing that there are too many researchers in Sweden (see the article in Life Science Sweden no. 4.2023). Anna Falk says that she agrees in a way.

“The whole financial system in academia is built on capitalising on researchers and the money they bring in until they no longer bring in money and are no longer needed. Regarding the money available for academic studies, the number of researchers is too high. There is not enough funding for every researcher.”

What are the consequences of this?

“Many projects are started but never finalised. Swedish science has a lot of open ends due to a lack of money to finish all the projects that have been started. The administration is also expanding and is often gigantic. With fewer researchers, there will be less administration.”

“So, I also support the idea of having fewer researchers, but you must know what you want. It’s important to have various people, both those who prefer to do their own thing and those who want to collaborate and co-operate with others. But ideally, I would like to see more money.”

Perpetual grant applications are part of many researchers’ everyday lives. As a research leader, Anna Falk is responsible for applying for grants for herself and her group. The Swedish Research Council is the main body that distributes money for academic research.

“They might grant SEK 800,000/year for a three-year project, and you can’t even hire one person for that.”

To manage this situation, researchers need to scrape together funds from various funding organisations, and according to Anna Falk, the feeling is that there is always a lack of money.

“Conducting research at a university is becoming more and more like working at a research hotel. Research managers often need to raise money for their salaries, their employees’ salaries, administration, computers, research experiments, etc., and then, of course, for the high rents at academic houses.”

So, what are the great joys of being an academic researcher? For Anna Falk, one is seeing the cells she and her colleagues have grown being used.

“I send my cells off somewhere, for example, to a lab in Japan, and then another research group conducts a really incredible study with them. It is exciting to see. I have this idea that I want to contribute to something bigger.”