

The future of academic funding: **Big fish rather than large shoals**

Annual conference of the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF)

How do you maintain research quality in academia? Most speakers at the SUHF conference 2011 agreed that funds need to be concentrated to a few groups rather than spread too thin. Regarding clinical research, Swedish education minister Jan Björklund is considering making clinical trials a requirement for university hospitals.



Jan Björklund.

Conference topics revolved around how to promote research quality in academic institutions. Education minister Jan Björklund outlined intentions for the government bill on Swedish research 2012. “We have 37 universities and colleges in Sweden. If they would all agree on a suggestion of how to distribute the funds, I would accept it without even looking at it!” he joked in his speech.

TOO MANY APPLICATIONS FOR FUNDING

Nevertheless, many on the podium seemed to be in agreement that Sweden needs to concentrate funds to be competitive on an international level. Anna Ledin from the Swedish research council Formas believed that there are too many applications, as only 7% result in a grant. Mille Millnert, head of the Swedish research council said, “Today it is like a system of “tusenbröder” (big shoals of unnaturally small fish). There are too many researchers.”

Björklund stressed that today there is a political consensus about not spreading resources too thinly. The minister also predicted that during the next ten years many small colleges will not be able to survive without merging. Student numbers are now declining in comparison to previous baby-boom levels.

NEW RULES FOR UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS

Jan Björklund addressed the alarming decline of clinical trials in Sweden. In 2011 these have been half of what they were in 2004.

“Partly this could be due to the streamlining of hospital care. When hospitals need to prioritize, time and efforts are directed to shortening queues rather than to clinical trials,” he explained.

The suggested remedy is to impose demands on the seven university hospitals in Sweden.

“In the future, to receive funds for the specialist medical training of doctors (ALF funding) inviting clinical trials might be a requirement. As it is, the amount of money received is not related to the amount of clinical research,” Jan Björklund clarified.

In addition the title “university hospital” will be protected by law. The minister also pointed out that while collaboration with industry is needed, academic research should not be controlled by companies; funds should never be used for product development.

APPLIED RESEARCH OR BLUE SKIES?

In Sweden, a lot of money is invested in research. In relation to BNP, Sweden is the third largest research investor in the world. However, the number of resulting products on the market is low, which is often called “the research paradox”. Jan Björklund questioned this.

“The studies need to be performed again. Maybe this paradox does not exist?” he questioned.

He stressed that he believes in directing funds to basic research, contrary to others in the European Union. “Within the EU everybody is nervous about China. They want quick results, thus they want to fund applied research. But Sweden has been a strong science nation, due to basic research. Astra Zeneca representatives say they need more basic research.”

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