

Providing reliable information is the strength of universities

The year 2015 was ambivalent

Now that we are celebrating our 376th anniversary, it is an opportune moment to take stock of last year's events, from the point of view of both results and feelings. The year 2015 was, after all, a rather ambivalent year for the University of Helsinki.

While we, again, fared well in our academic core duties, at the same time we were hit by dramatic cuts in funding.

The Finnish government's decisions on cost savings and cuts in university funding, especially the decision to target the University of Helsinki for major cuts, prompted us last autumn to launch a programme bringing significant changes. The Change Programme includes not only large reductions in staff expenses, facilities and purchases, but also measures to seek new sources of funding, especially from international research foundations. After careful consideration, we decided to carry out extensive and painful staff terminations in one blow this spring instead of paralysing the University community with lay-off proceedings recurring year after year. The impact of these heavy staff cuts is not to be understated, not here and now, and not for the future.

In 2015 we also celebrated, within our own community as well as together with our various partners, the distinguished 375-year history of the University as the builder and patron of Finnish education and as the pioneer and promoter of scholarship, research and higher education. The numerous events of the anniversary year enhanced collegiality among the members of the University community and fostered their pride in the University, as well as intensified interaction between the University and its alumni, partners and stakeholders. Excellent examples of successful cooperation include the renamed [University of Helsinki metro station](#), the [Thinkfest urban festival for thought and science](#), [Think Company](#) (which has expanded from the City Centre Campus to the Meilahti and Viikki campuses as well), the [Helsinki Challenge](#) science-based competition, the building of [Health Capital Helsinki](#) and the Life Science Centre, and, of course, the compelling presentations of 375 humanists on the Faculty of Arts website.

As always, in 2015 the University generated a range of new, versatile research results, and many of our researchers received various scientific awards from both home and abroad. Among such significant research fields and results I can cite are climate change and atmospheric sciences, cancer research and lymphatic vessels in the brain, compassion in management theories, the Chinese legal system as well as Russian political trends. The University of Helsinki boasts multidisciplinary research of a high quality, research-based teaching and learning, as well as a solid and extensive academic impact that meets national and international needs. In international university rankings, we place among the top 100 universities: in the most recent Times Higher Education (THE) ranking of European universities, the University of Helsinki featured 28th, making it the **best multidisciplinary university in the Nordic countries**. As usual, the list was topped by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, followed by London's Imperial College and University College, and Zurich's ETH. German universities are now prominent on the list, with 36 universities scoring among the top 200 (Finland and Denmark each have six universities on the list and Sweden 11).

The University of Helsinki has also been commended for promoting an **open operational culture** and for **making Helsinki a more fun city**.

One of our major strengths is that teaching and learning always profit from open and topical research. This allows us to contribute to the general understanding of complex global phenomena and to offer solutions to odious and complicated problems. The thousands of young people who graduate each year from our University represent the everyday impact of the University at its best.

Despite the dire economic circumstances, we wanted to devise a forceful strategic plan of a high standard for the 2017–2020 period. The University Board approved this plan in January 2016. It goes without saying that in the current situation and with the increasingly meagre resources we must carefully consider our focus areas. We also continued the implementation of significant internal reforms, namely the Big Wheel education reform and the University's new service organisation, which were both launched before the funding cuts.

In accordance with the Strategic Plan of the University of Helsinki, we will focus on the student and reform our degree structures in line with the Bologna model. We will also invest in new learning environments and forms of learning. We will be known as a creative, international research university of high quality – an image befitting a founding member of the League of European Research Universities. We will direct our efforts into profiling and will apply for the Academy of Finland funding for strengthening universities' research profiles. We will focus on active and long-term recruitment. Let quality speak for itself!

Open science flourishes here and makes us stronger. We will develop an open and experimental operational culture and the resources for reform through new, often international funding channels. We will revamp operational structures through the new service organisation and the reconsideration of academic units on the campuses. As I already mentioned, openness is our strength: last year, the Open Science and Research Initiative of the Ministry of Education and Culture declared the University of Helsinki to be the top organisation in its assessment of operational cultures in higher education. Of course, there remains room for improvement at our University and at other universities. Openness is a prerequisite for trust and a foundation to build on.

Our aim is to be a top-flight research university and a strong force in Finland and elsewhere. We cannot achieve this alone, and wish to engage in close collaboration with our current and future partners in Finland and abroad, in both the private and public sectors.

Our significant achievements of 2015 in science and research, teaching, and learning as well as in community relations are all due to the efforts of the University community. Thanks to our competent people, who both **as individuals and as a community** engage in cooperation with our partners, we can enjoy such important accomplishments. The motivation, commitment and inspiration of the staff and students must be fostered and encouraged also in difficult times. Openness, trust and mutual support are important.

Reliable information is an asset for universities under information overload

The University of Helsinki, like all universities, has many important duties. Of course, our core duties include producing information through high-quality research and engagement in research-based, state-of-the-art teaching and learning. These also serve to bolster our community engagement and impact. We

contribute to the general understanding of complex phenomena and problems both in Finland and globally not only through research, but also through the thousands of Master's and doctoral graduates who leave the University every year. We are changing our country, and the world.

Universities have always been entrusted with the mission of providing reliable information and better, open-minded knowledge. With the current turmoil plaguing societies and communities and with the information glut we are facing, this mission is more important than ever. Universities must be strong forces in the production of reliable information. This role was bestowed on us, with our acceptance, centuries ago. It must now be cherished and safeguarded more carefully than ever.

We are offered resources and information in all shapes and forms, but we cannot always trust their reliability; nor do we always bother or want to check their reliability. We may then be dealing with erroneous information, either intentionally or not. Faulty information does not increase our understanding of the phenomena and problems around us; on the contrary, neither will it improve our decision-making or problem-solving processes.

And even if resources, information and knowledge are solid and reliable, this does not always lead to understanding, let alone wisdom. And even if it did, benefits are not always gained from this understanding and wisdom, for example, when new research-based information contradicts the policies, programmes and selected measures of decision-makers. Wisdom is left untapped and a better direction undiscovered.

Political objectives and strategic policies may be, and often are, good and sensible, but selecting the correct measures leading to the desired outcomes is difficult. It may be that the environment we are operating in is changing so disruptively and rapidly that the selected measures will prove unsuitable, even detrimental. Another reason may be that the joint effect of several simultaneous objectives and measures is not known or sufficiently understood. Problems and phenomena in Finland and elsewhere are highly complex.

Universities must meet these challenges by producing high-quality research and by giving young professionals and specialists the multidisciplinary expertise to study and assess the problems mentioned here, maybe even to prevent them. We must break solution models based on a single truth and avoid tunnel vision. We have our responsibilities as pioneers.

As we so strongly emphasise in our Strategic Plan, open science and research are important components in the promotion of high-quality, reliable information, because they mean advocating open operational models in academic research. The central aim of open science is that research results, data and methods are made public so that they are available to all who are interested, for further study and use. General practices must include open access to research publications and research data, using open source codes and standards, and open documentation of the research process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Producing reliable information and maintaining trust between the various users of this information are of the utmost importance. Universities must bear this in mind and invest in trustworthiness. Reliability and trust are not self-evident. Building trust and establishing reliability takes a long time, but they can be lost in a second.

Unfortunately, we have lately learned about cases that undermine, if not completely destroy, the reliability of research. In Finland, suspicions of research misconduct at the VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, which may have larger repercussions, are highly detrimental, to put it mildly. In Sweden, the research misconduct and malpractice revealed at the Karolinska Institutet, which most likely caused the death of

several patients, are in many ways almost catastrophic. These individual incidents cast a shadow over the research conducted not only in the fields concerned, but research in general.

Dear audience

As the investigations into these two incidents are still incomplete, I will not analyse or speculate on the causes or guilty parties, or their potential broader or long-term implications. It goes without saying that even as isolated incidents occurring as we speak, they are unfortunate episodes that should never take place.

We must highlight the importance of research ethics. Research data must be authentic and accurate; the methods, measurements and instruments must be reliable and of a high standard; sources must be used critically, carefully and extensively, and they must cover different perspectives and previous research results. Other researchers' work and results must not be appropriated.

As a rule, we must trust our scholars – and so we do. We should not call for policing or additional control over research. Our researchers have solid expertise, motivation and integrity, and they are accountable to themselves and the research community. They want to carry out excellent, reliable research. When they are training the next generations of researchers, research ethics must be an integral part of this training, starting from the theses written by students.

If and when suspicions of scientific misconduct arise, they must, of course, be investigated immediately and carefully. There should be no cover-up or secrecy. At the University of Helsinki, the chancellor is responsible for overseeing research ethics and the necessary investigations, which has proven to be an effective, impartial and reliable system.

The scientific community must be able to make decisions which underline the importance of research ethics and can serve to prevent scientific misconduct within both the Finnish and international academic communities. The guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) feature two categories of violations: research misconduct and disregard for the responsible conduct of research. Examples of the latter include carelessness and the exaggeration of research results.

We can safely say that the Advisory Board on Research Integrity presently fulfils its role, presuming of course that universities and research institutes meticulously carry out their own roles. If, however, we were to notice that the current system is not sufficiently effective and comprehensive in all respects, the system should be improved. It would be worth considering the possibility that the Advisory Board could initiate investigations at its own discretion. It currently lacks this authority.

Trustworthiness and ethics seem to be scarce commodities in other spheres of society besides research. Or what should we think about such cases as Nokian Tyres or Wärtsilä marine engines in Finland, or more globally, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, not to mention the never-ending, if not even increasing, doping cases in sports?

The objective should be to produce top-level, ground-breaking research results as well as good and useful products. But this must be done in a reliable manner. Reliability guarantees quality – and trust. These cannot be achieved quickly, but can be lost in an instant. At the University of Helsinki, quality and reliability stem from a solid foundation that has now endured for 376 years! We can confidently continue to rely on this foundation.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests and colleagues,

I wish you all a pleasant 376th anniversary celebration!