

Competing Interests – On the Financing of Research

Temporary and external project funding, for example, from sector-specific bodies, has become one of the main funding sources for research done in the public sector during the last decades. This is the case also in social and behavioral alcohol research, not least so in Sweden. With Sweden as an example I will here concentrate on two arguments that have been raised in the discussion around positive and negative aspects of external funding, whether it be governmental, regional, or private. The first is the claim from scientists that their research must be without too much steering; the second is the fear that sector-specific research will be too applied and therefore not allow any development of basic knowledge.

The social and behavioral alcohol research is organized a bit differently in each of the Nordic countries. About Sweden it can be stated that this research up to now has been organized within the traditional academic departments and most of the research has been externally financed by project funding. There are three professorships in social and behavioral alcohol research, one of them a medical faculty placement, and all three created in 1981. Apart from these professorships there are no permanent posts for social and behavioral alcohol or drug research. The alcohol and drug research is either carried out within the scope of the ordinary post, or the salary cost is covered by temporary, external project funding. In Finland and Norway alcohol research is dominated by research centers which have no formal connections with the universities. In

Finland there are more permanent offices for alcohol research than in Sweden but less external grants for project support. In Denmark the alcohol research is quantitatively less developed than in the other three countries and as a whole it is organized within university faculties.

Although a special center for social alcohol and drug research will be created in Sweden, the funding system will not change. The center will be connected to the faculty of social science at the University of Stockholm, but it will constitute its own department. In the investigation which preceded the decision to create the center a looser connection to the University was suggested, but according to the academic traditions in Sweden the solution described above was preferred.

The fact is that research initiated by the scientists themselves does not always answer the needs within a field. It must then be legitimate for external bodies to commission work to be done to cover such blind spots. A lot of basic research should be initiated by the scientists themselves and financed by research councils or other public bodies in open competition, without limitations as regards research areas or problems. Other research, however, has to be funded from other sources, for example, sector-specific bodies. It is then legitimate for these bodies to influence the research area in more detail.

On the other hand, there is not always a clear dividing line between applied and basic research. There are many examples of how applied science has developed into important basic research and ploughed new furrows in scientific fields. I do not believe that we should continue to preserve a strict division between basic and applied research as an axiomatic and dogmatic rule. The risk is that not only will applied research have a lower status, and therefore fail to attract good researchers, but also that so-called project work will be even less scientifically based than it is now.

In addition to the research financed by sectorial external bodies, some of these bodies also support many project activities which are based on poor theoretical and empirical knowledge and carried out with deficient evaluation, or with no evaluation at all. In economic terms such projects often make up a larger proportion of the activities than does research proper. In discussions about methods for improving the quality of project work, one often hears the argument that project activities have nothing to do with research and therefore the strict demands put on research are not relevant. The consequence is that this area risks becoming a protected workshop for temporary activities of little importance for future work in the field in question.

When the Swedish National Institute of Public Health, created in July 1992, started to promote research into alcohol and narcotics, it was declared that the institute's activities should have a scientific basis. This means, for instance, that the methods used in primary prevention work within the field of alcohol and narcotics must be scientifically based and evaluated. I believe that there is a definite need for applied research in this field. On the other hand, basic knowledge is often limited as well, not only as regards specific methods but also when it comes to defining problems. Therefore, in order to achieve these aims, much research is needed, not only applied but also basic. A government investigation previous to the creation of the Swedish Institute of Public Health had come to the conclusion that there was a lack of knowledge in the important areas of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, and alcohol policy.

The institute decided that the first research grants for three consecutive years were to cover three different areas, namely: (1) research about primary and secondary prevention in the field of alcohol and narcotics; (2) studies of the economic, social, and psychological causes and effects of alcohol consumption,

and studies of how the alcohol habits of individuals develop; and (3) research about trends in the use of alcohol and narcotics in a European perspective.

The experience gained from this funding process may be of some general interest. Firstly, I believe that the institute's financial support has had an important impact on alcohol research in general within the social and behavioral sector. However, the increase in knowledge that can be put into practical use by the National Institute of Public Health in its prevention work has been less significant.

Secondly, there is an inherent problem in financial support that comes from a sector-specific body. Long-term support must be guaranteed, both for the research program as a whole and for the individual projects. It takes a long time to build up competence in a specific field and continuity is essential. The investment in research must be based on an agreement within the organization that the funding will continue for a fixed period of time, five years at a minimum. During that period the research activities in question should be given high priority. This is not always easy in an organization that does not have research as its top priority.

One of the main problems, however, is what impact the fact that an organization is rather close to the political system may have on the research it wants to initiate and stimulate. Can research initiated in this way be as free as research initiated by the scientific society itself?

In one way the answer is obvious. The selection of research problems is a bit more limited, but, as the research areas are broadly defined, this steering will not set any special limits for the individual researcher. It is, and perhaps it should be, difficult to steer research in a more detailed way. There is a greater risk, however, that the organization will not initiate research

in areas that are politically sensitive. It is therefore very important to have a pluralistic system for funding research. On the other hand I believe that research *accomplished* in an organization very close to the political system is running the same risk of being steered as research in private enterprises or in organizations with commercial interests.

One of the most important tasks for the public sector as initiator and funder of research is to disseminate research results to the political system and to professionals working in the applied field. Here a conflict can arise if the results oppose the policy of the financing body. It is very important that the results belong to the researcher and not to the body that has financed the research. I believe that a stable organization can afford research that has a critical attitude towards its policy and activities.

However, from our own experience of four years of financing I regard the communication of research as the biggest problem, not in an ethical but in a practical sense. How can we disseminate the results of important research to professionals, politicians, and others interested in research on alcohol and other drugs? Here I see *Nordisk alkohol- & narkotikatidskrift/Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* as an important medium through which research is presented in a way that can be understood by most of the interested persons in the field.

It is also important to describe the ongoing research to scientists and other parties involved outside the Nordic countries. Therefore, I regard the annual publication in English as an important opportunity to make research on alcohol and drugs known to researchers and others in the rest of Europe.

The selected articles in this issue reflect well the ongoing research and the discussion about alcohol and drugs in the Nordic countries.