Strategic research and the Strategic Research Council

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The Strategic Research Council is a newcomer to the Finnish research funding field, providing funding that carries greater weight than its relative size suggests. SRC funding is intended to support interaction between researchers and society at all stages of the research process; to advance the diversity and interdisciplinarity of research; and to promote research themes that address the major challenges facing society. The first 16 consortia bring together research fields in new inspiring ways and give reason to believe that this type of funding can contribute to high-impact and high-quality research that has important benefits for society as a whole.

Strategy is an equivocal concept whose exact definition depends on the context. Strategy means different things in warfare, business management and politics, for instance. In an extensive review of the history of strategy, Lawrence Freedman (2013) offers the following definition: “Strategy is about employing whatever resources are available to achieve the best outcome in situations that are both dynamic and contested.”

It is difficult to produce high-impact and high-quality research without making strategic choices. When individual researchers are choosing the university or discipline in which they want to pursue their doctorate, or when a research team is looking to explore a new subject area or applying for funding, they may be making strategic decisions. The researcher and the research team will choose to go with the option that they expect will yield the best outcome. At the same time, the strategic choices made by the research organisation also impact the conditions under which research is done. For example, universities and research institutes make key decisions on resource allocation and staff recruitment as well as on cooperation and division of labour with other organisations. These choices are also based on explicit or implicit conceptions of the current and desired future state of research and education. Likewise, organisations that offer competitive research funding make strategic choices when they decide on the relative allocation of funding between researcher-driven and targeted topics. High-quality scientific research and the practical application of its results can also be promoted by various decisions concerning the application and selection criteria.

The subject areas and conditions for doing research are thus dependent on strategic choices made by both individual researchers and research organisations. On this basis, it might be said that all research, in its own way, is strategic research from the point of view of the researcher, the research organisation or the end-user of research results. This text describes the Strategic Research Council (SRC) and the research funding provided by the SRC in connection with the Academy of Finland.¹ The SRC’s first funding decisions were made in autumn 2015.

Solution-oriented research for informed decision-making

A major rationale behind the creation of the SRC was the recognition that societal decision-making needed a broader and more diverse research base. The knowledge base used in public policy and decision-making (and the knowledge base founded on research evidence in particular) has not always been as good as it might have been (VNK 2011). Lankinen et al. (2012) furthermore point out that many of the grand challenges that lie before us cannot be resolved by tools from one single policy domain.

When decisions recur on an annual basis and when they are prepared by one ministry department, relations with the research institutes and universities concerned have often been quite good. More and more often, however, decisions are increasingly complex and wide-ranging, which calls for a broader knowledge base. Indeed, the Government Resolution on Comprehensive Reform of State Research

¹ The Strategic Research Council was established by the amendment to the Act on the Academy of Finland (482/2014). On 25 September 2014, the Government appointed the SRC to serve a term running from 26 September 2014 to 31 December 2018. The Council members are listed at www.aka.fi/en/about-us/SRC.
Institutes and Research Funding of 5 September 2013 underscores the need for “a systematic approach to ensuring a strong and horizontal knowledge base in support of informed public decision-making”. In addition, the resolution expects research to “serve as a strategic resource for development and decision-making in society”.

Based on this vantage point, the Government has provided the following definition of strategic research in the SRC context: “Strategic research in this context refers to long-term, problem-focused and high-quality research that informs public policy and the development of societal activities and that ultimately is aimed at finding solutions to the challenges and problems facing society.” (HE 25/2014 vp)

It is commonly accepted that finding answers to society’s major and significant challenges requires multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary cooperation (Nature 2015). In recent decades, many countries have launched mission-oriented research programmes aimed at addressing major challenges and achieving specific objectives (Foray et al. 2012, Hicks 2014). The Board of the Academy of Finland echoes this thinking in its position that “major and complex challenges call for creative thinking and solutions based on the latest research. Creativity and solutions are usually grounded in the approaches and achievements of different disciplines, and they may even lead to the emergence of completely new fields of research.” (Mustajoki and Mattila, 2011)

In order to address and resolve society’s grand challenges, it is necessary to transcend both scientific discipline boundaries and policy domain boundaries as well as to introduce new kinds of approaches. The SRC is committed to supporting the development of such approaches, and to this end its funding supports multidisciplinary cooperation and the development of inclusive perspectives through broadly based research consortia. Transcending boundaries is a slow process in science and research, and therefore the SRC’s role is not to provide funding for short-term research or follow-up and evaluation purposes, such as analysis, assessment and research activity grants intended to support Government decision-making, but rather to fund projects with a time span of 3–6 years (HE 25/2014).

It is also noteworthy that the funds now available for allocation by the SRC – which were transferred from the budgets of government research institutes, the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation Tekes – are not intended to meet all long-term research needs for informed decision-making. If the Government feels it needs more information from a specific field of expertise, it can assign additional funds to that field for instance by increasing the resources available to an individual research institute or by reallocating existing resources through performance management. A recent example is provided by legal policy research, which from the beginning of 2015 was transferred to the University of Helsinki and which was bolstered by additional resources from government research institutes.

**The Government decides the themes – the SRC decides the funding**

The choice of SRC research themes is a political decision in that it is made by the Finnish Government. This underscores the funding instrument’s role in producing research evidence for informed decision-making. Although the themes are ultimately selected by the Government, the starting point is a proposal by the SRC. This is a transparent process that is carried out in broad consultation with the scientific community and other stakeholders.

In 2014, the Academy of Finland hosted four meetings with stakeholders on potential research themes, even before the SRC had been appointed. The proposals and views solicited provided major guidance for the SRC as it began in October 2014 to draft its first shortlist of themes. When the SRC organised an open consultation on its preliminary proposal on themes on 27 November 2014, 185 people attended in person and a further 235 online. Some 30 participants took the floor to express their opinions, and 163 tweets were posted. All of the comments and tweets were considered before the SRC submitted to the Government its proposed research themes for 2015. On 18 December 2014, the Government announced

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2 Act on the Academy of Finland (482/2014), section 5 b.
its decision on the 2015 strategic research themes. The three themes were Disruptive Technologies and Changing Institutions; A Climate-Neutral and Resource-Scarce Finland; and Equality in Society.

In compiling its proposal on themes for 2016, the SRC organised an extensive workshop and an online questionnaire to canvass opinions on possible research themes. Participation in the questionnaire was open to all and it yielded 280 proposed themes, most of which were well-founded and serious contenders.\(^3\) Based on the proposal put forward by the SRC in June 2015, the Government announced on 15 October 2015 the following research themes for 2016: Knowledge, Know-How and the Changing Working Life; Health and the Changing of Lifestyles; Global Security in a Finnish Context; and the Dynamics of Urbanisation. At the same time, immigration was identified as a key focus area that cuts across all 2016 research themes.

Once the Government has announced the research themes for the year, the SRC picks up the baton again. In other words, political decision-making is limited to deciding the themes on which the Government feels it needs research evidence. All other decisions are made by the SRC. Indeed, it is clearly stated in the bill that “The Government or its ministries would not participate in allocating funding to individual research programmes or projects.” (HE 25/2014) For this reason, neither government officials nor politicians are represented on the panels consulted by the SRC.

The SRC takes the themes endorsed by the Government and sets up research programmes around those themes, and then announces open calls for applications. The SRC allocates funding to these programmes and selects the projects that will be supported under the programme based on their societal relevance and impact and on the quality of the research. The panels that assessed the relevance of the 2015 applications consisted of both Finnish and foreign experts in research, research funding and knowledge management. The scientific panels were made up of foreign professors and experienced researchers.

**Interaction enhances impact of research**

There has been some scholarly interest both in Finland and elsewhere in understanding why decision-making does not always have the soundest possible research base (e.g., VNK 2011 and Cornell et al. 2013). Often those who are responsible for preparing decisions do not have a good enough knowledge of the existing relevant research. Time pressure may also limit opportunities to study the existing research base. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that the Government has long been making certain decisions that are firmly grounded in research. An example is provided by legislative acts on the hunting of forest grouse, which are based on calculations founded on long-term research undertaken at the Finnish Game and Fisheries Research Institute and universities.\(^4\)

To ensure that SRC-funded research is put to good use in decision-making, one major area of focus in the practical design of this funding opportunity has been the interaction between researchers and potential end-users of research results. The aim is to involve end-users from the earliest stages of the research project so that their information needs can be incorporated in the research plans. For this to be possible, it is essential that information is produced and presented at the right time and in such a way that it can be taken into account in public debates and in decision-making. For this reason, applicants were required to present in their applications not only a traditional research plan, but also an interaction plan.

In the first round of calls, the interaction plans presented in the successful consortium applications reflect a very profound theoretical and practical understanding of cooperation, interaction and communication with stakeholders. The consortium projects will involve communications professors and professionals with extensive experience of communications and its management in major organisations both within and outside the research field. In one consortium, responsibility for interaction is charged to a professor of information research, in another to a professor who specialises in knowledge management, and in a third to the former communications director of the Finnish National Opera. Indeed, the consortia engage not

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\(^3\) For a list of the 2016 proposed themes submitted through the online questionnaire, go to [www.aka.fi/fi/tiedepoliittinen-toiminta/strategisen-tutkimuksen-rahoitus1/teemaehdotukset](www.aka.fi/fi/tiedepoliittinen-toiminta/strategisen-tutkimuksen-rahoitus1/teemaehdotukset) (available in Finnish only).

\(^4\) Vesa Ruusila: “Game stock estimates: making the information quickly available for decision-making”. 5 June 2104.
only in a new kind of interaction, but also in innovative interaction research. One research consortium that is concerned with energy trading and cloud services includes a PhD project on internal interaction within a multidisciplinary consortium.

Projects bring people together in new ways

The SRC announced its decisions on the consortia that will be involved in the first research programmes on 14 September 2015. Following talks at consortium level, it then announced its funding decisions for the 16 participating consortia on 12 October 2015.5 These decisions were based on an overall evaluation that took into account the assessments by the relevance and scientific panels as well as the aims and needs of the research programmes as a whole. Funding was declined for any application that received a poor assessment from either of the panels. In deciding which of those projects should be picked that had received good or excellent reviews from both panels, the SRC’s key criterion was the diversity of the projects from the point of view of the programme’s overall objectives.

The projects funded by the SRC in 2015 involve multidisciplinary teams interested, among other things, in exploring new opportunities for integrating robotics and welfare, the digital transformation of industry and new protein sources in food production. The research projects will also provide decision-makers with new knowledge about different forms of inequality and ways to combat inequality, the prevention of social exclusion, day care and preschool services, the future workplace, and arts as a basic public service for the promotion of wellbeing. Research aimed at promoting sustainable development will be conducted both from the perspectives of the Gulf of Bothnia and forest bioeconomy. In the field of energy production, a major area of focus will be on smarter, decentralised and climate-neutral energy systems.

The consortia funded by the SRC involve professors and researchers in 116 teams from 49 different organisations. These include eleven Finnish universities, eight government research institutes, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland and six other research institutes. In addition, there are teams from 13 foreign universities and research institutes as well as from other organisations, such as universities of applied science. Most of the consortia leaders (12) are from universities and four are from government research institutes. Based on the applications, universities will account for around 60 per cent and government research institutes and VTT Finland for some 30 per cent of the total number of researcher FTE months. Almost all of the consortia will work closely with the private business sector: the number of business partners will range from a few companies to more than 30.

Strategic research funding as part of the Finnish research field

Researcher-driven ideas and research topics emerging from the scientific community are crucial for the continued advancement and regeneration of science. This, however, is in no way in conflict with strengthening the role of science and research in societal decision-making. All research knowledge, regardless of how and from what premises the idea has come about or how the research has been funded, should be used as a basis for policy-making.

The growing complexity of the world and the need to address the challenges faced by societies today also call for new research that incorporates multiple perspectives. To this end, Finland has decided to allocate a small proportion (some 3%) of public R&D funding to research themes that are central to societal decision-making. The existing legislative framework gives the SRC a good foundation to fund high-impact and high-quality research that has significant benefits to society. The 16 projects launched following the first SRC call give every reason to believe that this will be a successful undertaking also in practice.

An article in the journal “Tieteessä tapahtuu” (Science now) 6/2015 pp. 29–33  
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The authors are closely involved in the SRC. Professor Per Mickwitz, Research Director at the Finnish Environment Institute, is currently the Chair of the Council. Riitta Maijala is Executive Director for Thematic Research Funding and has overall responsibility for the SRC’s work at the Academy of Finland.