

Believing in the best: experiences from the Danish National Research Foundation

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Abstract

In many parts of the world, science, technology and innovation are seen as critical drivers of economic growth and national well-being. We look towards research hoping to find the solution of many of the problems – current and future ones- we face and which cannot be solved without major breakthroughs. The challenges created by poverty, climate change, infectious diseases, and health challenges across the years of the human lifespan produce a sense of urgency to find solutions. Hence, as tools become available and financial resources become more limiting, research funding is increasingly viewed as an end to a means. Because this view assumes it can recognize the appropriate endpoint, it ignores the role that research directed by the need to understand basic processes has played as the engine of new discoveries to fuel new technologies and combat challenges not yet imagined.

I believe it is necessary and natural for a nation to set aside specific means to address major challenges or to explore already acknowledged promising areas. However, they also share the view that a nation should commit itself to support what might be described as frontier research that push the boundaries of knowledge and hold the potential to transform science itself and ultimately change the way we live and think. In order to push the frontiers one must enter new fields and leave the beaten track. This demands that not only researchers but also funders are courageous and adventurous and ready to take risks. Forging new paths in barely known territory often takes longer than the usual length of project funding. Mistakes must be allowed as well as change of direction.

The presentation will discuss why it is necessary to trust the best researcher's talent and how transformative research is best identified and supported.