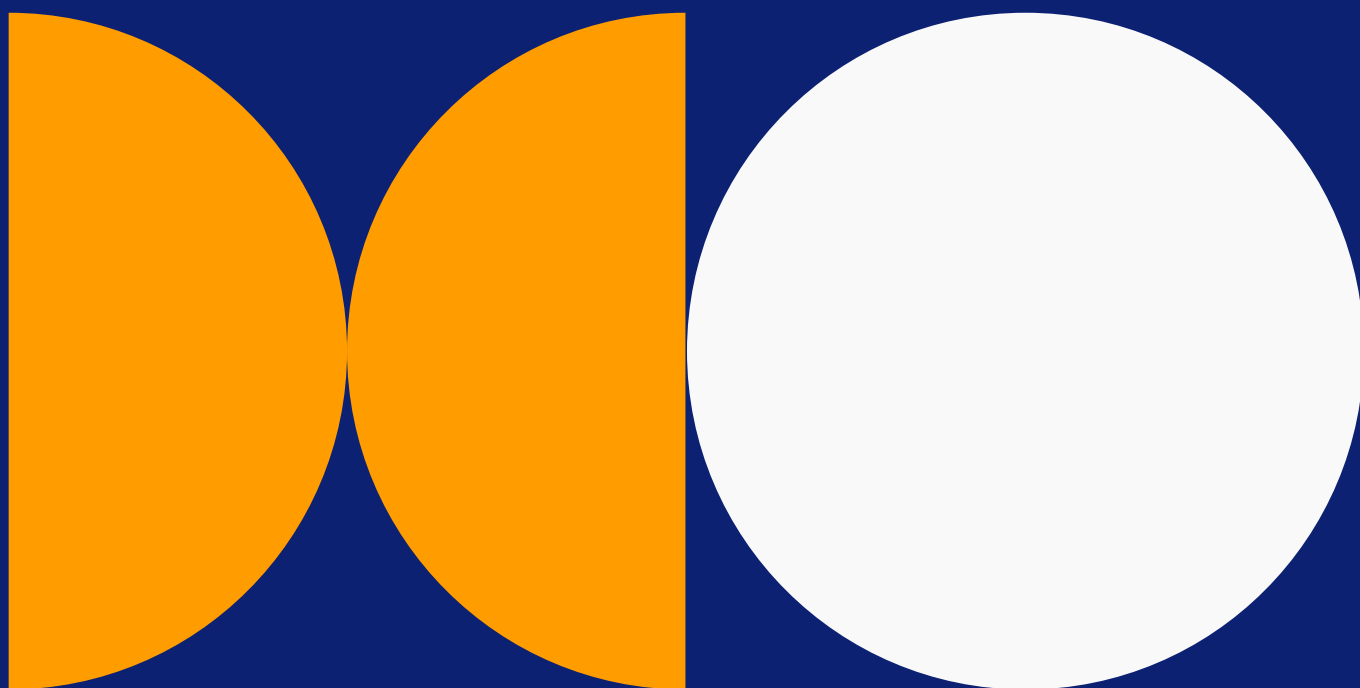


# Research review 2023

Humanities and social sciences



# **Research review 2023 Humanities and social sciences**

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## Foreword

This report contains recommendations for initiatives to promote research in the humanities and social sciences in Sweden, based on analyses of the current situation and trends for research in the field. The research review has been produced by the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences. Together with reviews of other scientific fields, this report will form the foundation for the Swedish Research Council's strategic work. It will also form central background material for the Swedish Research Council's input to the Government's upcoming research policy bill.

The Scientific Council appointed a work team at its statutory meeting on 4 February 2022, which was tasked to prepare draft versions of a research review and to present these regularly to the Scientific Council. The work team consisted of the Scientific Council members Bengt Jacobsson, Åsa Lundqvist and Helene Whittaker. Stefan Svallfors, Secretary General, Anders Sundin, Coordinator, and Sara Packalén, Review Coordinator, assisted in the work. The team presented its work and received opinions from the other members of the Scientific Council at meetings held on 30 March, 23 May, 19 September, 27 October and 28 November 2022. These opinions have gradually been worked into the document, which was adopted *per capsulam* on 9 December 2022.

The team's work was reconciled with that of the other scientific councils and committees via the Secretary General and the Chair. The research review was the subject of opinions from the Board at its meetings 8 June, 29 September and 10 November 2022. Opinions from the Board and the other scientific councils and committees were taken into account before the research review was finalised.

The Scientific Council arranged an open hearing on 1 September 2022, where a draft version of the research review was discussed. At this hearing, Professor Anna Dreber Almenberg of the Stockholm School of Economics, Professor Anders Ekström of Uppsala University, and Professor Ruth Mannelqvist of Umeå University served as commentators. This draft was also the subject of an open internet consultation during the period 25 August to 7 September 2022. The Scientific Council wishes to thank all those who have provided opinions on the research review in conjunction with the hearing or the internet consultation.

Malin Rönnblom, Chair of the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, Swedish Research Council

Stefan Svallfors, Secretary General of the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, Swedish Research Council

## Summary

This research review for the humanities and social sciences highlights what is needed to create a long-term approach in the humanities and social sciences, to facilitate and develop sustainable working conditions for researchers, and to assure the integrity and autonomy of the research.

In its recommendations, the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences focuses on:

- Independent research in humanities and social sciences is in great need of strongly increased funding.
- The current mix of small and medium-sized research grants has been successful and should be retained.
- Thematic initiatives should be used sparingly, and should focus on the most urgent societal challenges, should be long-term and broad, and should be designed in collaboration with the research community.
- Inter-disciplinary projects and environments should be encouraged and developed, and should be determined by the needs of research and the nature of the research problems.
- Research funding bodies and higher education institutions should jointly develop better preconditions for careers that span different scientific fields.
- Better functioning career paths and open, meritocratic recruitment focusing on research quality should be strengthened.
- Merit assessment should be based on what has actually been achieved, and not on where or in what form the research was published.
- The funding of national graduate schools should continue and be strengthened, with particular emphasis on smaller subjects with problems of retaining competence in the long-term.
- Infrastructure funding corresponding to the scientific field's needs for medium-sized infrastructure should be safeguarded, which includes a distinct "portfolio" approach, so that cost increases for large-scale international infrastructures do not put at risk the funding of humanities and social sciences infrastructure.
- A large-scale initiative should be implemented for digitising the collections of libraries, museums and archives, to ensure they are preserved and made accessible.
- Systematic and long-term efforts should be made to make it more attractive for Swedish researchers to apply for and receive research funding from the European Research Council and other EU funding bodies.
- Evaluations of the quality and impact of research should to a greater extent focus on strategically interesting fields, rather than being organised per discipline or per higher education institution.
- Issues relating to research ethics and research integrity should continue to be subject to in-depth and continuous reflection.

- The legal regulation of research ethics should be reviewed, to ensure it protects personal integrity and dignity without contributing to urgent research being made disproportionately difficult.
- The integrity and autonomy of research should be defended against too far-reaching demands for collaboration with stakeholders.
- The governance of higher education institutions should not limit the creativity of researchers through a one-sided focus on benchmarking and ranking.
- Administration should not be allowed to take up too large a proportion of researchers' time.
- The research community and research funding bodies should promote a sound research culture, where career considerations or role confusion do not tempt researchers to adopt inappropriate practices.

# 1 Introduction

Research in the humanities and social sciences focuses on fundamental issues relating to what it is to be human and how the spirit of community and conflicts in society can be explained. The research covers everything from the human brain to global geopolitics, from the actions of individuals to long-term cultural changes. Our thinking, our language, our joint actions and organisation, our economic circumstances and our existential belonging – all these and more constitute areas for humanities and social sciences research. This research is of fundamental inherent value to society in that it describes and explains humans as social and cultural beings, thereby forming the ways in which we understand ourselves, our society and our fellow human beings.

Such research is also of crucial importance for successfully addressing important societal problems and challenges. Society's institutions, historical memory, cultural perspectives and practices, as well as the allocation of resources and differences in living conditions, are all factors that in a fundamental way enable and limit improvements and societal advances. Increased understanding of how such conditions arise and change are therefore of significant importance for the continued development of society. The societal challenges that we are now facing, both in Sweden and at a global level, will require major inputs from humanities and social sciences research to create solutions and routes to success. However, it is often difficult to predict and plan what research will prove to be valuable when attempting to create a better society. For this reason, there is a great societal need for broad and long-term knowledge accumulation within this wide-ranging scientific field.

This document is a research review of the scientific field, produced by the Swedish Research Council's Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences. The intention is not to carry out any comprehensive and detailed mapping of the total research – which is truly an impossible task, and perhaps also less meaningful. The purpose of the review is instead to identify central challenges and development opportunities against the overarching background of the state of the research in Sweden today. The purpose is also to make a number of recommendations for improving conditions for humanities and social sciences research. The review is therefore analytical and primarily forward-looking, even if it is based on descriptions of current conditions and trends. Our purpose is to emphasise what is needed to create a long-term approach in humanities and social sciences research, to facilitate and develop sustainable working conditions for researchers active in the scientific field, and to safeguard the integrity and autonomy of the research.

This research review builds on the previous research review for the humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Many of the results and recommendations included in the

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<sup>1</sup> [Research review 2019 Humanities and social sciences – Vetenskapsrådet \(vr.se\)](#)

previous research review are still as topical today, but this review also introduces several new areas and arguments.

The review consists of three main sections. The first section describes some important preconditions for Swedish research in the humanities and social sciences. The emphasis is on the research funded by the Swedish Research Council, but with sideways glances at other important research funding bodies as well as at the funding of higher education institutions (HEIs). The second section of the review identifies central challenges and development opportunities for the scientific field, which relate to both the scope and structure of the research funding as well as to other challenges of an almost research-cultural nature. The concluding section presents a number of recommendations for the research field to improve the conditions for and quality of the research.



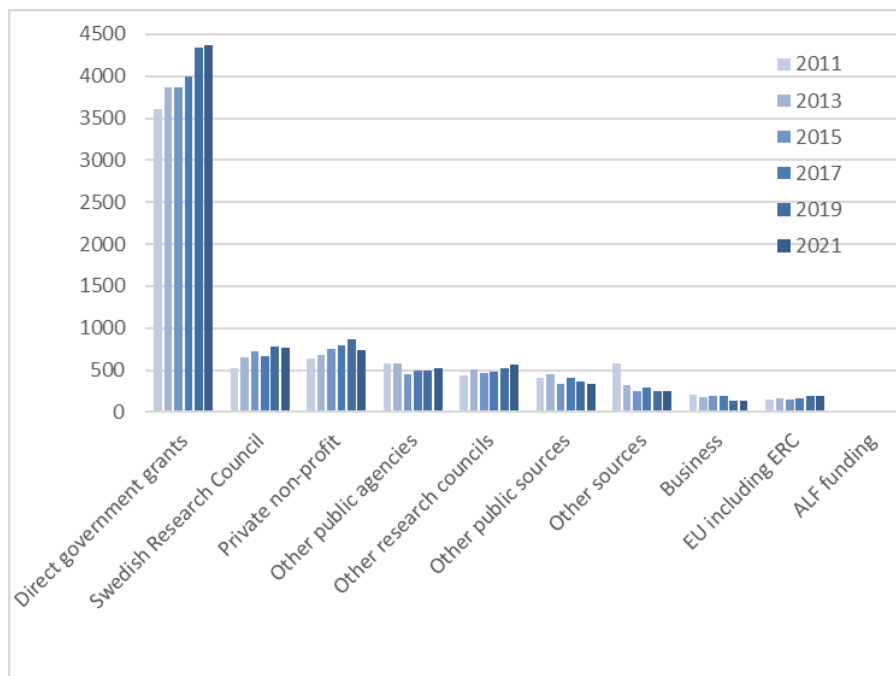
## 2 The conditions, quality and impact of research

Research in the humanities and social sciences is greatly affected by the general institutional conditions at Sweden's HEIs. These include a considerable educational task, both for the sector as a whole and for individual employees. Many senior lecturers at universities in Sweden have relatively little time to conduct their own research in their employment, for example. The research is scattered across many research environments, and a large proportion of these are relatively small. Competence provision for many small subjects, particularly in the humanities, is precarious in many places, not least because the number of doctoral students that can be funded is too small. These preconditions make the scientific field strongly dependent on external funding from research councils and foundations.

Diagram 1.1 (SEK) and Diagram 1.2 (Percentage allocation) show the allocation for the humanities and social sciences between the HEIs' direct government funding and external funding, and how it has changed over the last 10-year period. As shown in the figures, the HEIs' framework funding covers a relatively large part of the overall research income, and this has increased slightly in recent years. However, it has to be remembered that a large part of this direct government funding is currently used to fund doctoral students rather than researchers with doctoral degrees. The figures also show that both the Swedish Research Council and the private foundations are important funders of the scientific field, and that this funding has increased slightly during the 2010s.

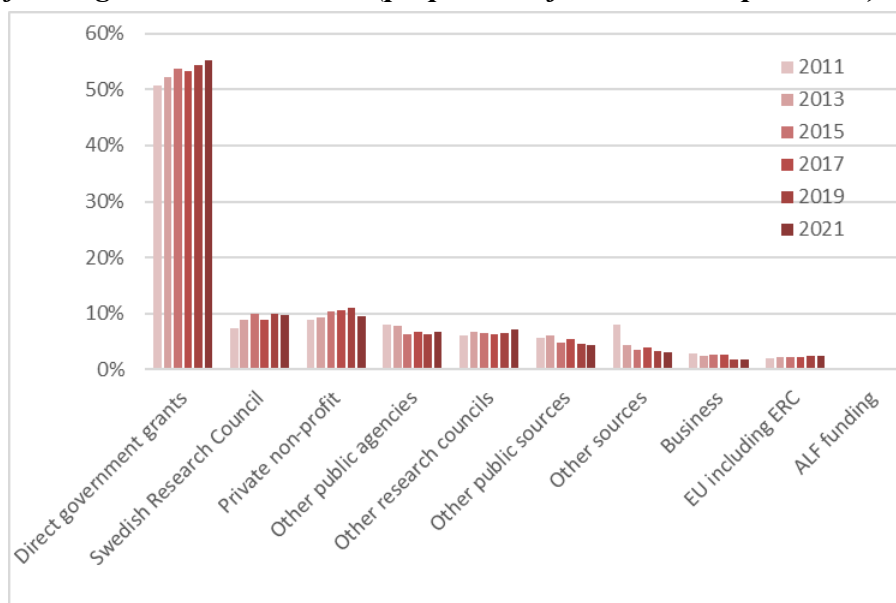
Diagram 2.1 and Diagram 2.2 below show the funding sources for various disciplines and areas in social sciences (Diagram 2.1) and the humanities (Diagram 2.2). The overall funding is shown as well as the funding via the Swedish Research Council. The diagrams indicate that different disciplines and areas are dependent to varying degrees on funding from the Swedish Research Council. For example, the area "Finance and business" receives a considerably larger proportion of the overall funding than it receives from the Swedish Research Council. This is a reflection of the fact that this scientific field has more funding sources besides the Swedish Research Council and other governmental funding bodies.

**Diagram 1.1. Higher education sector's R&D expenditure in humanities and social sciences (excluding educational sciences) per funding source, 2011–2021 (2021 prices, million SEK).**



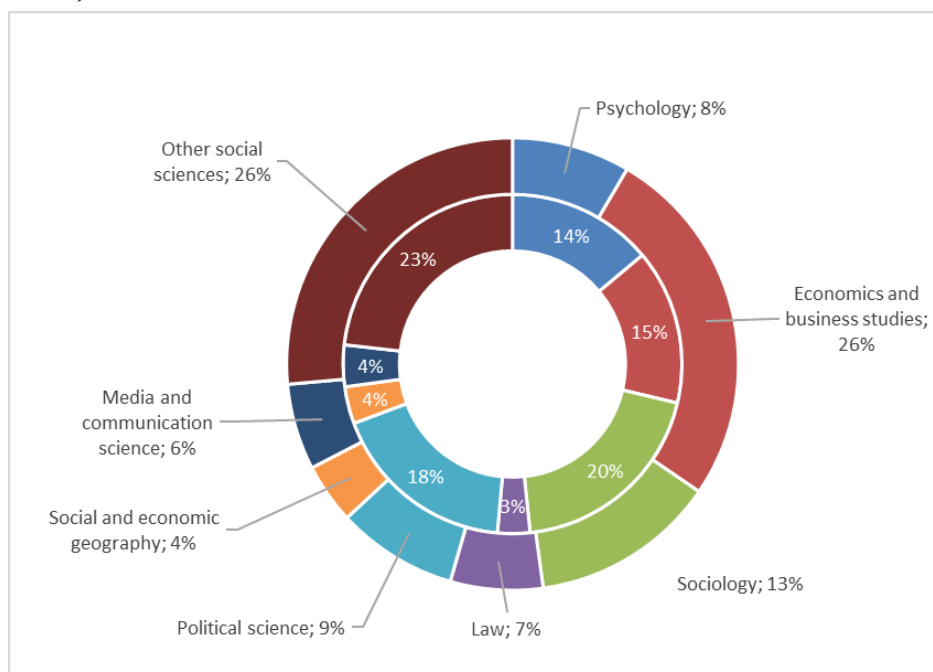
Source: Statistics Sweden and the National Institute of Economic Research (forecast database, September 2022). Note: Other research councils consist of Formas, Forte and Vinnova.

**Diagram 1.2. Higher education sector's R&D expenditure in humanities and social sciences (excluding educational sciences) per funding source, 2011–2021 (proportion of total R&D expenditure).**



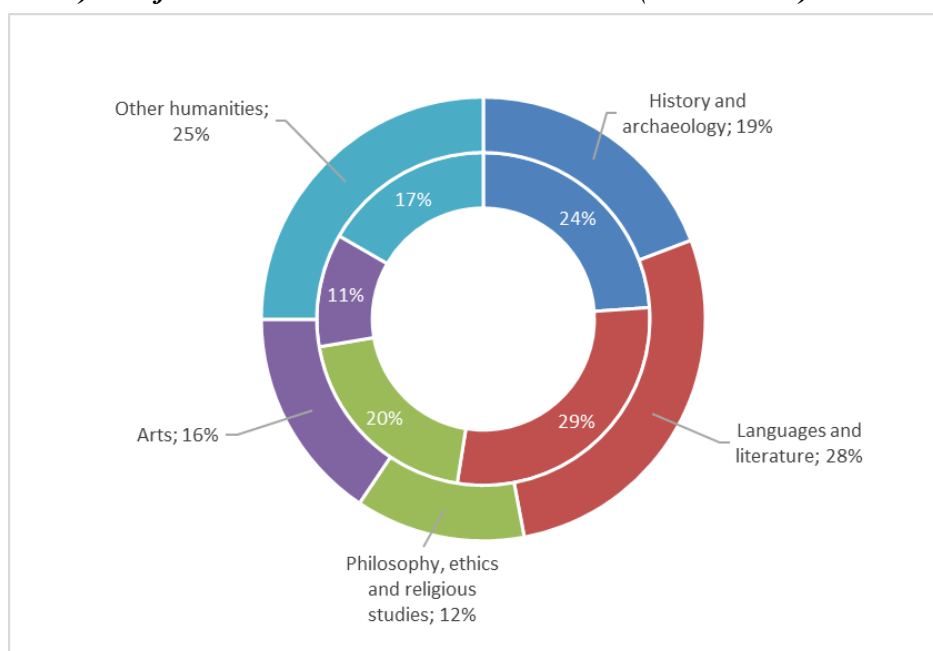
Source: Statistics Sweden. Note: Other research councils consist of Formas, Forte and Vinnova.

**Diagram 2.1: Higher education sector's allocation of R&D expenditure in social sciences (excluding educational sciences) from all funding sources (outer circle) and from the Swedish Research Council (inner circle) in 2021.**



Source: Statistics Sweden.

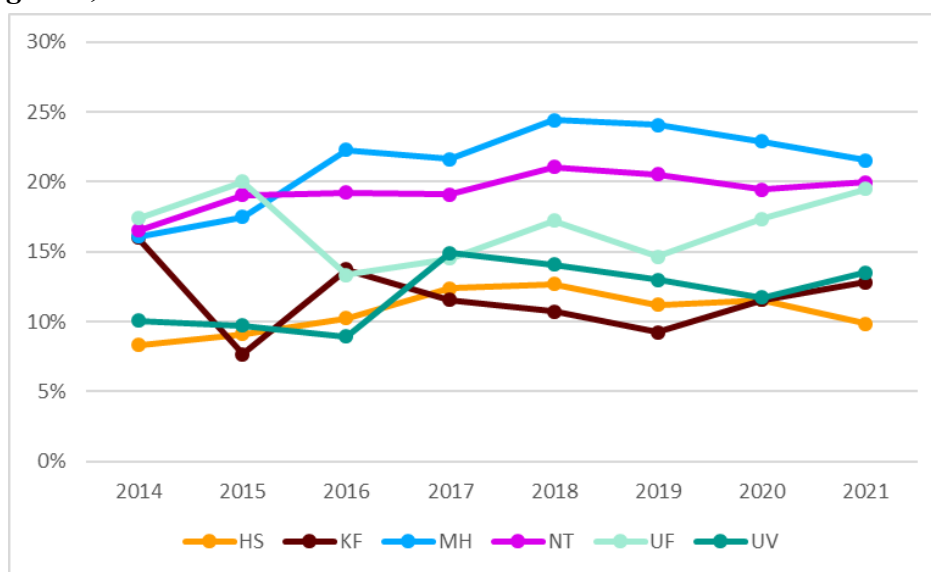
**Diagram 2.2: Higher education sector's allocation of R&D expenditure in the humanities and artistic sciences from all funding sources (outer circle) and from the Swedish Research Council (inner circle) in 2021.**



Source: Statistics Sweden.

Diagram 3 shows approval rates in the humanities and social sciences compared to those in the Swedish Research Council's other scientific fields. As shown, the humanities and social sciences (HS) have the lowest approval rates of all scientific fields, at around half of the approval rate for the other two main areas of medicine and health (MH) and natural and engineering sciences (NT). HS also has a lower approval rate than educational sciences (UV), development research (UF) and artistic research (KF).

**Diagram 3. Approval rate per scientific field for undirected project grants, 2014–2021.**



These low approval rates are entirely dependent on the allocation between the fields determined by the Government. During the period 2017–2021, the humanities and social sciences approved project grants amounting to around 450–550 thousand SEK per applicant (all applicants included).

As shown in Table 1 below, this is the scientific field that has the lowest amounts awarded per applicant.<sup>2</sup> Educational sciences and natural and engineering sciences form an intermediate group, with around 600–800 thousand SEK per applicant. The highest amounts awarded per applicant, at around 1 million SEK, are found in medicine and health. To this skewed allocation caused by the Government should be added that the scientific fields of medicine and health and of natural and engineering sciences have more and deeper sources of funding among the foundations funding research than do the humanities and social sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the amounts related to amounts awarded per **total number** of applications, not per **approved** applications. This is the most relevant measure of relative resource allocations between scientific fields.

**Table 1: Total amount awarded per applicant per scientific field. Undirected project grants, 2017–2021.**

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>HS</b>	497 001	536 709	480 376	493 431	435 355
<b>KF</b>	448 500	466 071	433 976	482 083	462 295
<b>MH</b>	920 945	1 134 215	1 071 000	913 988	986 158
<b>NT</b>	702 866	778 742	776 877	747 627	816 730
<b>UV</b>	742 684	699 659	705 032	625 219	692 866
<b>Total</b>	<b>702 097</b>	<b>798 570</b>	<b>760 476</b>	<b>710 204</b>	<b>736 526</b>

Funding from governmental research councils and private foundations comes in differing sizes and formats. The entirely dominant funding instrument is project grants. Such project grants usually cover 2–4 years’ of funding for small research teams or individual researchers. There are also a number of other funding instruments used by the Swedish Research Council and other Swedish actors. These include the “medium-sized” research environment grants, which are awarded by the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (typically covering 5–6 researchers for 5–6 years), and the programme support grants awarded annually by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (typically covering 5–10 researchers for 6–8 years).

Since 2022, the Swedish Research Council has also funded graduate schools, both those that create coordination between HEIs and departments and those that partly fund third cycle higher education. In addition to this, Swedish funding bodies award a number of grants aimed at supporting the career development of individual researchers, such as postdoc grants and grants for subsequent career consolidation. On the other hand, Swedish funding bodies use specific support for leading senior researchers only on a small scale.

As far as gender equality between men and women is concerned, it is relatively good in this research field, as shown in Table 2 below. The table shows that, in recent years, the approval rates have been almost identical for men and women. According to Table 3 and Table 4 below, however, there is a small but constant under-representation of women applying for funding from the Swedish Research Council when compared to the proportion of women employed at HEIs.

**Table 2. Gender equality. Approval rates 2017–2021.**

Year	Women	Men	Total
2017	14%	16%	15%
2018	13%	14%	14%
2019	14%	13%	13%
2020	12%	12%	12%
2021	12%	10%	11%

Table 2 covers the grant forms undirected project grant, research environment grant, focused project grant in HS and international postdoc grant in HS + UV.

**Table 3. Gender equality. Gender distribution in numbers applying 2017–2021.**

Year	Women	Men
2017	47%	53%
2018	45%	55%
2019	47%	53%
2020	48%	52%
2021	49%	51%

Table 3 covers the grant forms undirected project grant, research environment grant and focused project grant in HS.

**Table 4. Gender equality. Gender distribution in full-time equivalents at HEIs 2017–2021.**

Year	Women	Men
2017	49%	51%
2018	50%	50%
2019	51%	49%
2020	51%	49%
2021	51%	49%

**Table 4 shows the full-time equivalents for researching and teaching personnel with third cycle qualifications in the fields of the humanities and social sciences. Source: Swedish Higher Education Authority.**

Most of the Swedish Research Council's funding is entirely undirected and thematically independent. This indicates great trust in the ability of the research community to formulate the most urgent research questions by itself. There are good reasons for this trust. For example, the previous research review by the Scientific Council showed that the research community was able, on its own and considerably faster than the political system, to identify the central societal challenges that later became the subject of special Government initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

Similar circumstances can be noted also for the new national research programmes in criminality, segregation and the societal consequences of digitisation. Considerable research was being conducted long before any national research programme for these areas was in place, as shown in analyses carried out as part of the work on the strategic research agendas for the national research programmes.<sup>4</sup> This arose as a result of the researchers' own orientation towards important societal issues. The research community's interest in these areas increased long before they became the subject of specific initiatives. The link between specific initiatives and the identification of central societal challenges is therefore slightly unclear, even though such initiatives can be justified in other ways.

The research funded within national research programmes and other thematic initiatives often has a multidisciplinary character. The reason for this is that the societal challenges identified are often complex and require collaboration between different researchers with differing perspectives and skills. In other respects too, research in the humanities and social sciences today has a noticeably interdisciplinary character. There is quite a lot of research collaboration, both between individual subjects in the same field and, increasingly, with other research fields. In several respects and in many areas, it is even difficult to speak about interdisciplinary research as opposed to intradisciplinary research, as problem perception and approaches are of a completely integrative character.

Research that includes different scientific disciplines is encouraged by many funding bodies, not least the Swedish Research Council. There are specific funding instruments, both within the humanities and social sciences and for collaborations with other scientific fields. It can also be noted that

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<sup>3</sup> [Research review 2019 Humanities and social sciences, Appendix – Vetenskapsrådet \(vr.se\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Forskningsagenda för det nationella forskningsprogrammet om brottslighet, Vetenskapsrådet, 2023. Forskningsagenda för det nationella forskningsprogrammet om segregation, Vetenskapsrådet, 2023. Forskningsagenda för det nationella forskningsprogrammet om digitaliseringens samhällskonsekvenser, Vetenskapsrådet, 2023.

multidisciplinary research on the whole does well in the peer review process, with slightly higher approval rates than those of intradisciplinary research.<sup>5</sup>

Swedish research in the humanities and social sciences also compares well internationally. The research has a citation impact on a par with that of the most prominent countries, for example.<sup>6</sup> The proportion of highly cited publications is, of course, not at all the same as quality. This applies in particular for the humanities and social sciences, where only part of the overall research is included in the international databases, and where the publication and citation culture varies markedly between the different subjects. But the citation statistics still show that Swedish research attracts international attention to the degree that can be expected in comparison with the world average. Spot checks and more content-based evaluations also indicate that Swedish research in this field is of good quality in a comparative perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Swedish research in the humanities and social sciences has major international competitive advantages in terms of access to data. For example, Swedish person-based registers have few, if any, equivalents elsewhere. The same applies to Swedish historical data, where the scope of the time series in terms of time span and wealth of detail lacks any international equivalents.

The good access to personal data is of great importance for building up and operating national infrastructures for creating, curating and providing data. But having relevant infrastructures for the field, of course, also includes laboratory environments with experimental equipment, as well as archives and libraries for preserving and providing text-based data material. Here, there is a division of the work between research funding bodies and HEIs, where the former (primarily the Swedish Research Council) funds infrastructure of common national interest, while the HEIs to varying degrees fund local infrastructure.

The research community has largely begun to see funding of common infrastructure as a collective good or utility, where new research ground can be broken by joining up into larger clusters. At the same time, there remains a great need for infrastructure initiatives in the humanities and social sciences that are currently not covered by research funding bodies or HEIs. For example, by far most of the relevant text material provided by libraries, museums and archives is still not digitised, which makes the provision of this material for research both vulnerable and complicated. The need for further infrastructure initiatives for the field is also underlined by the fact that only a minor part of the funding for national infrastructure is of benefit to the humanities and social sciences.

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<sup>5</sup> Datapaket till ämnesråd och kommittéer, Ämnesrådet för humaniora och samhällsvetenskap, May 2022, pp. 19–21.

<sup>6</sup> Datapaket till ämnesråd och kommittéer, Ämnesrådet för humaniora och samhällsvetenskap, May 2022, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> See for example [Quality and impact of research in political science in Sweden - Vetenskapsrådet \(vr.se\), 2021](#)



When it comes to the funding of international infrastructure, only a very small proportion of this is for the humanities and social sciences. This funding is dominated by major international facilities in the natural and engineering sciences. On the other hand, for international infrastructure with emphasis on the humanities or social sciences, expenditure is almost negligible. This is despite us witnessing a very positive development of international data collaborations over the last few decades, where Swedish researchers have often played a decisive role in their establishment and development.

For other international collaborations in research funding, the framework programme in the European Union in particular is of great importance for research in the humanities and social sciences. This covers both the European Research Council's calls for funding for prominent researchers at different career stages (Starting Grants, Consolidator Grants, Advanced Grants), and also the thematic calls for multinational teams of researchers. In addition to this, Sweden participates via the Swedish Research Council in Nordic research funding collaborations within Nordforsk, and in multilateral European collaborations in research funding in social sciences (NORFACE) and the humanities (HERA).

An important change in the research landscape is that, from the viewpoint of politics, greater weight has been placed on the research funded being communicated more clearly to decision-makers and the general public. This includes encouraging interaction with actors outside academia when the research is designed, conducted and communicated. Sometimes there is even a requirement for collaboration included as a condition for funding the research. The Swedish Research Council has, however, been more restrained regarding this aspect, and considers that collaboration should be encouraged when it clearly contributes to the quality of the research. Instead, emphasis has been placed on communicating the societal relevance of the results of undirected research more clearly. In general, it should be noted that researcher-initiated research in the humanities and social sciences has always featured a great deal of collaboration with actors outside academia, such as public agencies, companies and other organisations, as well as groups directly affected by the research in question.

Monitoring of research ethics in Sweden has seen great changes in recent years. While the relevant legislation for researchers has remained unchanged in all significant respects since 2004, sanctions for breaches of the law have become more stringent. However – according to the clarifying supervisory responsibility it was given in 2020 – the Ethics Review Appeals Board has in recent times been conducting more active and self-initiated supervision. This has resulted in legal considerations being given a much more prominent role in how research ethics are managed in practice at HEIs and in the research community.

## 3 Challenges and development opportunities

### 3.1 Research funding and thematic initiatives

For the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, by far the most important challenge is the low approval rates for the scientific field. As stated above, the funding rate of independent and undirected research in the humanities and social sciences is far too low compared with other scientific fields. This results in several unfortunate consequences. One of these is, of course, that quite a lot of high-quality research cannot be funded, given the tough competition. Another is that the low approval rates may be demoralising for potential applicants and those who review the applications. When approval rates are very low, researchers are deterred from applying for research funding, as the chance of getting funding is assessed as being very small. Very low approval rates can also mean that it is pure chance that determines which junior researchers can become established as researchers in the years after they receive their doctoral degree. A measure of chance also tends to find its way into the sorting of applicants into those who are awarded funding and those who are not.

The budget increase that has benefitted researchers in the humanities and social sciences in recent years has mostly arrived in the form of specific thematic initiatives, such as national research programmes and other more short-term initiatives. This means that the balance between undirected and thematically oriented research funding is in the process of becoming skewed. The proportion of the Swedish Research Council's funding with a thematic focus in the humanities and social sciences is expected to rise from around one fifth in 2020 to one third in 2025.

The many and partly overlapping special initiatives have also increased the fragmentation of the research funding. It is becoming ever more difficult for researchers to orient themselves in the range of funding opportunities at the same time as the administrative burden on the research funding bodies has increased noticeably. This is hardly something that benefits the quality of research.

There is also a risk that the many thematic initiatives conserve and standardise the effect when multiple research funding bodies are targeting funding towards the same areas; this could result in too much attention being paid to yesterday's problems rather than those of tomorrow. It takes time to set up special initiatives and, once the research starts, other societal problems might arise that are more urgent.

On the other hand, the thematic initiatives have entailed more funding for social sciences research in the first instance, as many of these special initiatives are focused on exactly these areas. Without thematic initiatives, the funding situation for the researchers would probably have been even worse. The thematic

calls also have an advantage in that they make it easier for researchers in particular areas to find each other for exchanges and collaborations and, at the same time, the research becomes more visible to decision-makers and other stakeholders.

It is very important how these thematic initiatives are managed by the research funding bodies. As a way of managing special initiatives within the space allowed by the Government mandates, the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences has chosen to make the calls as broad and open as possible. The Scientific Council has also created a review process that is as similar as possible to that of open calls. In this way, the research community's competence and ability to formulate productive research problems can be best utilised. Calls that are too narrow in scope and have explicit requirements for mandatory collaboration with actors outside the research community risk limiting the freedom of research and thereby impeding its full potential.

### 3.2 Interdisciplinary research and infrastructures

As pointed out above, different forms of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research have become ever more important, and there are various funding instruments aimed at strengthening such research. The Scientific Council is positive towards this development and considers it probable that many scientific advances will be based on such research in the future. At the same time, it is important that calls and other funding opportunities are governed by the nature of the research problems and not by dictates from the funding bodies.

Purely intradisciplinary research projects are, of course, also important for in-depth research and concentration. Strong disciplines and successful interdisciplinary collaboration are also not contradictory to each other. On the contrary, successful collaboration requires knowledge and skills that are deeply anchored in their subject, and it is often within scientific disciplines that such knowledge and skills are transmitted. The important thing is to ensure that the funding instruments do not make interdisciplinary mustering and focus more difficult where they are justified. It is also important that those researchers who develop a clear interdisciplinary profile early on in their careers do not have difficulty finding employment at HEIs and other research institutions. Today, merit accumulation as an associate professor or professor is often so clearly tied to a subject or department that it is difficult to forge a career that spans different scientific fields.

Radically interdisciplinary research – where subjects that rarely come into contact with each other can find productive collaboration formats – are potentially extremely valuable. Calls to create such clusters of researchers are now issued both by the Swedish Research Council and by other research funding bodies (such as Nordforsk's initiative for "interdisciplinary research") and have created very promising collaborations. In such collaborations, it is very important that all the disciplines and perspectives included are given equal weight and status. There has been – for example, in the challenge-driven parts of the EU's framework programmes – an unfortunate tendency to reduce the

humanities and social sciences to support functions in projects that have mostly had a medical or natural sciences focus. This is not a constructive foundation for productive collaboration between different scientific fields.

If interdisciplinary research is one important collective matter for the research community, then investment in common infrastructure is another. Here, it is important to find formats for funding such infrastructure that are suitable for the humanities and social sciences.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes this field, just like other scientific fields, is in need of major national and international initiatives that require a high degree of coordination and mustering of strength. At the same time, infrastructures of national interest in the humanities and social sciences are often medium-sized. To be considered for national funding, these medium-sized infrastructures are often required to join together into large clusters. This often results in increased bureaucratisation and increased transaction costs, which are not necessarily balanced by major research coordination benefits. Furthermore, personnel nearly always constitute the greatest cost for humanities and social sciences infrastructures, while the investment costs are often very small. The national funding of infrastructures therefore needs to take into account the differing characters of the different scientific fields and to adapt the structure and formats of the funding accordingly. Such a distinct “portfolio approach” would also reduce the risk of cost over-runs for major international infrastructures in natural and engineering sciences crowding out important infrastructure investments in the humanities and social sciences.

An infrastructural problem of major importance for researchers in the humanities and social sciences is that such a small proportion of the collections of libraries, museums and archives are digitised. This makes the system vulnerable, which became almost too evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, for a long while, researchers could not access the collections of prints, handwriting and objects that their research depended on. An ongoing weeding-out process of printed collections is also being carried out at libraries, which is neither entirely systematic nor entirely transparent. This weeding out sometimes takes place without consulting the research community. With no over-arching national coordination strategy for this weeding-out process, there is a risk that research of vital importance may never happen.

Better care of existing collections also needs to be paired with higher quality when putting together collections. Here, improved interaction between researchers and memory institutions is of the greatest importance. Correspondingly, it is entirely necessary for the research community to be consulted when Statistics Sweden and other statistics producers weed out their time series and indicators, so that data material of importance to research is not destroyed.

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<sup>8</sup> The sections on infrastructure are based in part on a report by Maria Stanfors and Stefan Gelfgren: "Rapport till RFI angående forskningsinfrastruktur inom humaniora och samhällsvetenskap", Vetenskapsrådet, 2020.

It should be underlined that increased funding for infrastructure must not be at the expense of funding for undirected research. The risk that major infrastructure investments are made at the expense of researcher-initiated research must continually be monitored so that resources are not allocated wrongly in the overall research system.

### 3.3 The EU's research funding

The Scientific Council sees two challenges in particular for the Swedish research community to address in relation to the EU's research funding. One is that far too few Swedish researchers in the humanities and social sciences apply for grants from the European Research Council (ERC).<sup>9</sup> There is good reason to believe that more applications from Sweden would also lead to more grants being awarded. This is because, at the aggregated country level, there is a strong correlation between the number of grant applications made to the ERC and the number of grants that are eventually awarded. The situation is in no way precarious, but there still seems to be considerable room for improvement.

Important opportunities therefore exist for Swedish research funding bodies and grants offices at the HEIs to encourage Swedish researchers even more strongly than at present to apply, and also to provide them with the support they need in the application process as well as help to administer any grants awarded. But the local research environments play a role that is just as important – if not even more so. It is primarily here that researchers are encouraged to apply for ERC grants, or are discouraged from doing so. Many researchers appear to believe that it is very difficult to obtain one of these grants and that they are very complicated to administer. Neither of these perceptions is true – in fact, the approval rate is approximately the same as for project grants from the Swedish Research Council. With adequate local support, the administrative burden is not significantly greater than for national grants; this is something that could be emphasised more clearly in strong local research environments.

For the more challenge-driven research funding within the “second pillar” of the EU's framework programme Horizon Europe, there are other challenges. These have a very noticeable top-down character, where defined societal challenges are specified and incorporated in calls that often have a very detailed focus. This focus can, in turn, make it difficult for researchers to formulate the questions that are best justified from a research point of view. Sometimes it is also difficult to see exactly where the detailed calls originate from and why these in particular have been deemed urgent. Opinions on programmes and calls are often requested at very short notice, and it is difficult to trace whether the opinions have any effect on programme texts and calls. From an administrative point of view, these grants are also relatively burdensome to conduct and report on, which takes up valuable time that could be used for research.

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<sup>9</sup> This section is based on the report [“Söktryck och framgång vid Europeiska forskningsrådet. En analys med fokus på humaniora och samhällsvetenskap i Sverige”, Vetenskapsrådet, 2020 \(pdf\)](#).

Taken together, this means that the strongest researchers in Sweden – who can find other funding for their research – do not apply under these calls to the extent possible. There is room here for considerable improvement, which requires long-term and systematic work, in order to influence the design of the EU's research funding in the long term.

### 3.4 Research integrity and research ethics

The standpoints and recommendations in this research review reflect our great trust in the ability of researchers and the research community to identify and address the most urgent societal issues. In order for such trust to be justified and possible to maintain also in relation to the general public and decision-makers, the research community does, of course, have to maintain its ethics and its integrity.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, cases of scientific misconduct have attracted attention and raised questions about whether research can be trusted and whether researchers are honest, which has led to demands for action.

Scientific misconduct is, of course, a problem that must be counteracted and stopped. But the issue of research integrity is much larger than that. In many cases, it is about more subtle circumstances. It might be a strong wish to find exciting research results that drives a researcher to handle data and analyses in problematic ways. It might also be difficulty in separating the researcher role from the role of activist or adviser. It can also be about research fields that researchers avoid because their personal discomfort becomes too great.

Another aspect of research integrity relates to the ever more “marketised” governance of universities. Quantitative indicators for successful research and increased emphasis on competition between HEIs risk favouring certain types of projects and certain types of publishing, while more long-term research has to take a back seat. In combination with the significantly increased administrative burden this places on researchers, this development risks making conditions more difficult for independent truth-seeking, as well as for joint collegial responsibility.

In other words, there are strong reasons for continued systematic reflection by the research community and for establishing (incentives for) structures that strengthen rather than undermine the integrity of research.

As mentioned above, the legal supervision of research ethics has hardened. Some aspects of this have caused great worry among researchers and led to

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<sup>10</sup> Questions about research integrity were considered at a separate one-day conference arranged by the Swedish Research Council on 16 March 2022. [Temadag om forskningens integritet - Vetenskapsrådet \(vr.se\)](https://www.temadag.om/forskningens-integritet-vetenskapsradet-vr.se)

considerable debate about possible negative repercussions from the legal regulation and supervision of the area.<sup>11</sup> This worry is based on uncertainty within the research community about how the current legislation should be interpreted, and what legal practice applies.

With closer supervision, the research community has learnt that the legislation covers more types of research than was previously thought. For example, many researchers have been surprised that no exception is made for handling sensitive personal data that the person in question has themselves made public, or that are used indirectly or in de-identified form in public material.

Another problem that has become topical is the question of how personal data collected inadvertently in conjunction with interviews and observations should be handled. This might be the case for research that was not intended to include sensitive personal data and has therefore not been the subject of ethical review but has still come to include some such data. It is difficult to know in advance what interview subjects will tell you or what, exactly, the observations will make visible. Once data have been collected, it is too late to carry out an ethical review of the project. No researcher wants to end up in a situation where data collection has to be paused while ethical approval is obtained, where interesting research results cannot be published, or where research material must be discarded because it includes sensitive personal data. For this reason, ethical approval may need to be obtained for a very large proportion of data collections that include open interaction with humans. The question is whether this was really what the legislator intended.

A further problem relates to what exactly “sensitive personal data” consist of. The law states that issues such as political views, religious faith, health and membership in trade unions constitute sensitive personal data, but it is far from clear how this is meant to be put into practice. One example: What constitutes a question about “political views”? A narrow interpretation would indicate that it is about how people vote or what party they support. A broad interpretation would include every statement of an opinion on any political issue, which would mean that a very large proportion of research must undergo ethical review. The

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<sup>11</sup> See for example the debate and reporting in *Universitetslärares*; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/02/09/det-var-en-chock-att-bliatalsanmald/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/02/09/bade-onep-och-aklagare-famlar-i-det-nya-systemet/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/03/25/klargorande-fran-onep-om-kansliga-personuppgifter/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/04/07/stora-konsekvenser-for-doktorand-som-stoppades-i-etisk-granskning/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/04/28/ny-tillampning-av-etikprovningsslagen-orimlig-kostsam-och-tidsodande/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/05/12/bortom-forskningsetiken-skymtar-omdomesformagan/>; <https://universitetslararen.se/2022/06/09/ministern-jag-nas-av-oron-kring-etiklagen/>; panelsamtal i tidskriften *Sociologisk forskning*, <http://du.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1638970/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; <https://www.dn.se/debatt/lat-inte-fallet-macchiarini-strypa-forskningen-i-sverige/>; <https://www.tidningencurie.se/debatt/lat-onep-slippa-anmala-lindrigare-brott-mot-etikprovningsslagen>

putting into practice of what constitutes sensitive personal data appears to be neither crystal clear nor stable over time, and it creates great uncertainty among researchers about what actually applies.

A third aspect that has created worry is how divergences are dealt with. At present, the Ethics Review Appeals Board can see no alternative to reporting actions that are in breach of the law to the prosecutors. However, in most cases the courts have chosen not to try these cases. This means that the supervisory agency has been left without guidance about exactly how the applicable law should be interpreted. Among researchers, the prosecution requests have led to great uncertainty and a palpable fear of legal consequences.

A final problem relates to how research should be managed where data are collected abroad. Here, the practice appears to have changed, from the position that such research should be handled by the permit-issuing authorities in the country where the data are collected, to claiming that it should undergo ethical review in Sweden if any part of the research process (such as data analysis and report writing) takes place in Sweden. As the law has not changed, only the practice, this creates uncertainty that can be particularly difficult to handle in international collaborations. Furthermore, the practice that applied at the time the data collection was done may differ from that which applies when the data is to be analysed and later on archived, which also creates uncertainty. The fact that applications for ethical review must be written in Swedish can also complicate international collaborations.

It is not always easy to assess the extent to which the problems reported are based on incorrect perceptions by the researchers, are the result of a precautionary culture among HEI lawyers, or are real problems with the current legislation. Everyone strives to do the right thing, but problems remain. A small, but telling, example is that many researchers believe that, to obtain consent from interviewees, they are required to use the templates provided by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, even though these can make interaction with the interviewees more difficult.

The uncertainty and worry about ethical review also risk making the transition to open access to research data more difficult. Many researchers – and in particular those that use interview and observation data – hesitate to make their data accessible to other researchers. The reason is that they are afraid that traces of sensitive personal data may be included, potentially causing them to be reported and face legal consequences.

In general, there is a risk that the current legal regulations and supervision of research ethics are leading researchers towards a “juridified” and rule-focused approach, where importance is attached to doing the right thing from a purely legal viewpoint rather than applying good ethical and professional judgement. What we wish for from the research community is a carefully reflective practice in the area of research ethics, where the question of how to avoid causing damage or discomfort to research participants is kept alive throughout the research process. Here, research funding bodies also have a responsibility for



ensuring that this type of reflective consideration is included in the design of research projects and is assessed as part of the general quality of the research.

### 3.5 Strategic evaluations

Another challenge for the research field relates to the scope and focus on special evaluations of the quality and impact of research. These days, all HEIs carry out some form of periodic evaluation of their own research. In addition, the Swedish Higher Education Authority scrutinises the universities' quality work, while the Swedish Research Council has a Government mandate to carry out national evaluations of disciplines and research fields.

It is unclear to what extent this evaluation really contributes to raising the quality and impact of research. It is not clear how the results can be used by the HEIs, research funding bodies and research environments to strengthen their operations. The results are usually limited to establishing that certain factors are, or are not, in place, or to "league tables" of the performance of different environments. The latter are often used by HEIs for external marketing of unspecified nature and thereby contribute to an unhealthy fixation on market-emulating rankings. It is almost impossible to get any clear picture of success factors or practical guidance from these evaluations relating to how research environments should be organised, or how researchers should be recruited. Today, the evaluations have an almost exclusively legitimising and marketing function, by presenting to decision-makers the research that is being conducted using taxpayers' money and assessing whether it is of good quality. This is, of course, not insignificant, but the question remains whether so much effort should be spent for such a limited purpose.

An alternative to the current national evaluations might be to focus these more on strategically interesting areas and research environments. Here, it might be interesting to study internationally successful environments, areas seeing rapid expansion ("take-off" areas), areas that have declined or stagnated, and areas that have long been dealing with problems relating to quality and activity. It is also possible to get a picture of the factors that create success or adversity, and of the strategies and attitudes that are the most suitable for improving an area or retaining a strong position.

Identifying such strategically interesting areas is, of course, a delicate and complicated task. The Scientific Council does, however, consider that such a focus for evaluations can have a potential for strengthening research environments and improving research quality that the current evaluations do not really have. We want to be clear that this alternative is exactly that – an alternative – not an addition to the current national evaluations. The research community would not be well served by more evaluations, only by better ones.

### 3.6 Merit accumulation and recruitment

A central matter for the future of the research field is the issue of how merit is assessed and how recruitment to the research environments works. Here, the Scientific Council would firstly like to support the movement at the European level that strives towards a broadened assessment of merit and a reduced dependency on quantitative indicators (such as citation indices and impact factors) in the assessment of publication merits.<sup>12</sup> The current situation is displaying some dysfunctional features, such as publication frenzy, one-sided favouring of specific publication forms and channels, meaningless and time-wasting rankings of individuals and research institutions, and under-investment in significant research tasks over and above pure publishing.

The latter, for example, relates to the merit value of building up and maintaining significant infrastructures, or of sustaining central factors in a well-functioning research culture (supervision, seminars, and so on). Quantitative indicators can be useful if they are used sensibly and as one of several factors in assessments, but they must never replace assessment of the published content nor an assessment of merits that includes factors other than publications.

At the same time, it is important to be cautious when making changes to the assessment of merit. The central feature must always be the quality of the research, and the inputs that benefit this. Loosely defined criteria for merits risks placing too great a weight on what the researcher says about their merits rather than what has actually been achieved. Loosely defined criteria would probably also have negative consequences for gender equality and diversity. Nor must any changes to the merit assessment system foment the tendencies towards confusion of research, marketing and business activities that have come to characterise parts of the Swedish research system.

The Scientific Council wants to underline the importance of the fact that better functioning employment positions for all career stages can be provided through clearer collaboration between HEIs and research funding bodies. The issue of recruitment and clear career paths is largely owned by the HEIs. This does not, however, prevent the use of dialogue and the power of good examples to find common ways forward – ways that create working conditions and career opportunities for researchers that are sustainable in the long term, and that stimulate mobility and intellectual renewal. For example, there is an opportunity here for research funding bodies to stimulate increased mobility by issuing calls for research grants and other support where the importance of mobility is clearly emphasised. Today, the formats for recruitment vary significantly between different research environments. Some recruit successfully on the international academic labour market, while others mainly recruit internally. On the whole,

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.scienceurope.org/our-priorities/research-assessment/>

there is relatively little mobility between HEIs and research environments in Swedish research, and this applies also to the humanities and social sciences.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, the Scientific Council wishes to point out the serious situation for competence provision in many of the smaller subjects within the scientific field. In the previous research review, the Scientific Council underlined the need for national graduate schools, both to strengthen the funding of third cycle higher education in smaller subjects and to increase the quality through national coordination.<sup>14</sup> These graduate schools have now become reality and will begin their activities in 2023. They are a welcome addition to the funding of third cycle higher education at the HEIs but of course do not by themselves solve the long-term problems with competence provision. There is reason here for long-term investment in expanded and strengthened national graduate schools, funded either by research funding bodies or through coordination between HEIs.

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<sup>13</sup> [Forskningsbarometern 2021, Svensk forskning i internationell jämförelse. Vetenskapsrådet, 2021, pp. 56–57 \(vr.se\)](#) ;  
[Rekrytering av forskare och lärare med doktorsexamen vid svenska lärosäten." Vetenskapsrådet, 2016, pp. 17–18 \(pdf\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Forskningsöversikt 2019 Humaniora och samhällsvetenskap, pp. 24–25, Vetenskapsrådet \(vr.se\)](#)

## 4 Recommendations

The first and most important recommendation from the Scientific Council is that independent research in humanities and social sciences is in need of greatly increased funding. The 2019 research review stated a funding increase of 50 per cent as a reasonable level, a conclusion that we stand by also in this research review. As far as the Swedish Research Council is concerned, this would enable an increase in the approval rate from the current 10–11 per cent to 15–16 per cent. This would significantly reduce the disadvantage that researchers in the humanities and social sciences have compared to researchers in other scientific fields and thereby contribute to much potentially valuable research being conducted that cannot currently be funded.

For the future funding, the Scientific Council considers that the current mix of small and medium-sized initiatives has been successful. Both individual research projects (typically with 1–4 researchers, and 5–6 million SEK over 3–4 years) and broader medium-sized research projects (typically with 4–8 researchers, and 15–20 million SEK over 5–6 years) should be included in the mix of what is funded. With this, the initiatives the Scientific Council is responsible for can also form a valuable complement to the larger programme and excellence funding for which the Swedish Research Council's Board, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the European Research Council issue calls.

The Scientific Council intends to continue being very restrictive about launching any thematic initiatives of its own within its area of responsibility. This research review, as well as previous ones, shows that the research community is able to identify central societal challenges in its research by itself and to rapidly redirect the research towards urgent contemporary questions. The quickest and most efficient way of making research societally relevant is, therefore, to invest more in independent, researcher-directed research.

The Scientific Council considers it important that the thematic initiatives that will still be made in the form of specific Government initiatives (such as national research programmes and other special initiatives) are long-term and broad in nature and designed in such a way that the research community's ability to formulate adequate research questions is best utilised. The content and structure of thematic initiatives should be designed in dialogue with the research community, based on clearly defined long-term knowledge needs. It is therefore important to establish formats for consultation with the research community if the thematic initiatives are to result in research of the highest quality. Calls under such specific initiatives should, as far as possible, be modelled on the research funding bodies' open calls. The Scientific Council also emphasises that research initiatives should not be governed by a political will to highlight specific societal issues as particularly deserving, or specific groups as particularly vulnerable; instead, they should be based on long-term needs for

knowledge about central societal challenges. Because of this, such initiatives should be limited to the most urgent areas.

Interdisciplinary projects and environments should be encouraged and developed. Funding instruments should be designed to facilitate multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Such integrative approaches should, however, be justified by the needs of the research and the nature of the research problems rather than be prescribed by funding bodies. Research funding bodies and HEIs should try to develop better conditions for careers that span different scientific fields, for example, by revising rigid merit accrual systems (such as having to link associate professor or professor qualifications to specific subjects and departments).

The Scientific Council considers it a priority to strengthen better-functioning career paths and open, meritocratic recruitment focusing on research quality. Investment in postdoc grants and other forms of support for persons with newly awarded doctoral degrees is important, but it is also important to ensure that there are positions at later career stages that can be applied for and be filled in open competition. Merit assessment should be based on what has actually been achieved and not on where or in what form input has been made. The funding of national graduate schools should continue and be strengthened, with particular emphasis on smaller subjects with competence provision problems.

The Scientific Council would also like to emphasise the importance of flexible and nationally coordinated infrastructure funding. For the humanities and social sciences, this is about establishing infrastructure funding that also corresponds to the scientific field's need for "medium-sized" infrastructures in the form of databases, laboratories, repositories, and so on. The Scientific Council wants to support a distinct "portfolio" approach to infrastructure funding so that cost increases for large-scale international infrastructures do not risk crowding out national funding within the humanities and social sciences field.

The Scientific Council encourages the Government to make a large-scale investment to digitise the collections of libraries, museums and archives to ensure that the collections are preserved and made accessible. In addition, physical access to archives, libraries and museums should be safeguarded in the event of a societal crisis. It is also of the greatest importance to ensure, together with libraries, archives, museums, statistics producers and HEIs, that the research community is systematically consulted both when putting together and weeding out printed collections and statistical indicators, so that significant research materials are not lost, or never see the light of day.

Swedish participation in international contexts should be strengthened. This applies in the first instance to the large amounts of funding mediated via the EU's research systems, such as the European Research Council. Systematic and long-term efforts should be made here to make it more attractive for Swedish researchers to apply for and be awarded such research funding. The local research management, HEIs and research funding bodies have important roles to play here.

The Scientific Council furthermore proposes that evaluations of the quality and impact of research should focus to a greater extent on strategically interesting fields rather than being organised per discipline or per HEI. In this way, lessons can be learnt both from areas with strong growth and a prominent international position and from areas that have lost ground or where stagnation has set in. Such areas rarely coincide with discipline borders or the HEIs' organisation; instead, they usually apply to more specific partial areas and subsidiary disciplines.

Last but not least, the Scientific Council would like issues relating to research ethics and research integrity to continue to be the object of in-depth and continuous reflection. While personal integrity and dignity must of course be protected, the legal regulation of research ethics should not contribute to urgent research being made disproportionately more difficult, nor to researchers ending up in legal trouble through no fault of their own. In this respect, some elements are of particular interest.

Firstly, dialogue needs to be established urgently between politicians, research funding bodies, HEIs and supervisory authorities on whether the current legislation and practice actually fulfil their purposes.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, information and support measures aimed at the research community need to be strengthened in consultation between research principals and supervisory authorities. Thirdly, the entire ethical review system appears to be ripe for review in the light of the overall experiences of the area.<sup>16</sup>

Over and above this, while collaboration with external stakeholders is encouraged if it increases the quality of research, we also have to defend the integrity and autonomy of research against too far-reaching demands for collaboration. It is also vital that the governance of HEIs should not limit the creativity of researchers through a one-sided focus on benchmarking and ranking, and that administration should not be allowed to take up too large a part of researchers' time. Finally, we have to promote a sound research culture in a broad sense, where the independent search for truth is central, and where career considerations or role confusion do not tempt researchers to adopt inappropriate practices. Here, research funding bodies have an important role to play in creating incentives for open, transparent and reliable research.

It is the Scientific Council's view that, if these recommendations are implemented, it would significantly strengthen the long-term approach of research and research funding, create greater sustainability in relation to

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<sup>15</sup> As a stage in establishing such a dialogue, the Scientific Council, in collaboration with the Swedish Research Council's Committee for Educational Sciences, held a one-day conference on the theme of research ethics 1 March 2023.

<sup>16</sup> A view that is shared by the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions' expert group on ethics issues. [Replik: Se över hela etikprövningssystemet - Tidningen Curie](#)

researchers' working conditions and career opportunities, and also safeguard the integrity and autonomy of research.



Swedish  
Research Council