

Introduction and summary

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Background

According to the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), universities have three tasks: teaching, research and collaboration with the surrounding society (§ 2). While teaching and research may seem self-evident in content, collaboration may need some further elaboration.

Collaboration means a mutual exchange of knowledge between the university and the surrounding society. The aim is for the knowledge and skills available at the university to benefit society. Collaboration used to be termed the “third task” as a result of its position in the list of higher education tasks. However, the most recent research bill (2020/21:60) and the Swedish Research Council (2019) argue that the term is misleading, as collaboration is an integral part of higher education’s research and education tasks and no less important than the other two tasks. It is not unreasonable for social science research to have higher requirements for collaboration between academia and society than, for example, natural sciences and technology. Collaboration can even be said to constitute the *raison d’être* of social science research (see Alvesson and Sjöholm 2023).

The aim of the Expert Group on Public Economics (ESO) is to independently contribute to broadening and deepening the basis for future economic and fiscal policy decisions. Under the slogan of being “a bridge between research and policy”, ESO’s core mission is to support and facilitate the ability of research to inform practical policy. This applies to all policy, but particularly finance and tax-

related policy. In this anthology, ESO turns the spotlight on research policy.⁸⁶

During each term of office, the government must produce a research policy bill. This means that in the autumn of 2024, the current government is expected to present a new bill for the period 2025-28. The purpose of the research bill is to outline policy for the next four years, which will give the concerned government agencies a long-term basis for planning and goal achievement (Government Bill 1998/99:94).

In its preparations, the Government has asked six state research funding agencies⁸⁷ to analyse their respective areas of responsibility and submit recommendations to contribute to the new research policy bill (U2023/01317).

Not surprisingly, the submitted recommendations point to the need for a strong and effective research and innovation policy consisting of increased core funding, increased freedom and less monitoring and control to meet current and future societal challenges. The recommendations also call for increasing the competitiveness of Swedish research and to promote sustainable development. Research funders emphasise that this requires significant investment and focus on strategic areas of research. Requests for open publishing, open data and issues of information and data security are also mentioned as important issues in the research councils' recommendations.

In addition to the research councils, universities, colleges, government agencies and other organisations were invited to submit views on the Government's research and innovation policy. Many responded, meaning that the Government now has a huge wish list to take into consideration.

But what do researchers think is important in terms of the mission of universities? Are the incentives in academia sufficient for them to prioritize collaboration? Or do the incentives for a career in academia, such as funding, merit and culture, instead foster a generation of researchers who lack interest in participating in the public debate?

⁸⁶ According to preliminary calculations from Statistics Sweden (2023), the allocated government budget for research and development amounted to SEK 46.8 billion in 2023, corresponding to 3.74 percent of the government budget.

⁸⁷ The Swedish Energy Agency, Formas, Forte, the Swedish National Space Agency, the Swedish Research Council and Vinnova.

The overall aim of this ESO anthology is to highlight both personal and general perspectives on social science research in Sweden through reflections and scientific observations by people with good knowledge of research conditions. The focus is particularly on economics and political science. The anthology is about the conditions of research in general and researchers' wider dissemination of research in particular.

Contents of the anthology

After this introduction, the anthology begins with two chapters that discuss, at a general level, the development of the conditions for teaching, research and collaboration in economics. In both chapters 2 and 3, **Astri Muren** and **Lars Hultkrantz** testify to the influence of internationalization on the economics discipline over time, where especially the value of publications in highly ranked international journals has become a strong career incentive. Being published in such outlets requires not only strong research efforts. We know that journals are rarely interested in insignificant or mundane results. Nor is research on specifically Swedish institutions or problems likely to be of particular interest to the editors of high-ranking international journals.

In chapter 4, **Mats Benner** and **Sylvia Schwaag Serger** write that the “super-specialization” that is occurring in academia as a result of prevailing career incentives clashes with decision-makers' need for information that provides a broader perspective. When researchers focus on having an impact in the research community, research tends to be narrower, more incremental and less groundbreaking. According to the authors, part of the solution could be to give universities a comprehensive task and a single grant to conduct education, research and collaboration with high quality. Today, the different tasks are funded in different ways and provide different incentives and career opportunities. Education is about student completion rates while research is about being competitive in applying for and receiving grants. Collaboration, on the other hand, is down to personal preferences and motivation. The different tasks ought, according to the authors, to be intertwined in academic

practice and the broad societal mission of academia needs to be made clear in evaluations and awards.

In chapter 5, **Annelie Roswall Ljunggren** describes the different ideals and logics that dominate academia and politics from her perspective as Director General of the Swedish Agency for Public Management and former state secretary to the Minister of Civil Affairs. In research, the perspective is often retrospective, fragmented and narrow, which corresponds poorly with the societal complexity faced by politicians. Lead times are often long in research but short in politics. In research, the problem itself may be of greater interest than the solution. Although researchers are keen to explain the complexity of societal problems, they are less prone to take a position on what needs to be done and therefore do not meet the acute or imminent needs of politicians. Politicians, on the other hand, are keen on lending legitimacy from research when implementing measures. In order to increase the exchange of knowledge between politics and academia, Roswall Ljunggren argues it should be easier to switch between research and practice. She also gives some thoughts and suggestions as to how this can be done.

In chapter 6, **Bo Rothstein** argues that the very existence of expert government agencies, such as ESO, indicates that university research does not deliver enough useful results for policy. Rothstein points to the lack of independent researchers, i.e. researchers who have been trained to find questions worth answering on their own (or in groups), as a problem. In addition, university institutions often lack an organizational culture that is supportive and encouraging of employee participation in public debate. Collaboration is not rewarded career-wise, but on the other hand it is not penalized either. In fact, there seems to be no correlation at all between being an internationally prominent researcher and being active in the public debate.

An important part of collaboration is research dissemination. But how does one best communicate complicated research findings to a wide audience? This depends in part on the content of the research, but obvious ingredients in successful research communication are to simplify the reasoning and explain technical terms or altogether avoid using technical language. In chapter 7, **Anna Lund** gives examples of new and innovative research communication. She also

raises questions about self-censorship and the personal risks of communicating research in a polarized world.

Research has always been international by nature, but even if increased internationalization is largely beneficial, there is reason to pay attention to whether the conditions for collaboration are becoming weaker through excessive internationalization. In chapter 8, **Eva Forslund** and **Magnus Henrekson** address the importance of the Swedish language in economics. In academia and the social sciences, Swedish has been increasingly displaced in favor of English in recent decades. What are the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research in a language which is, after all, not native to the majority. Does the use of language influence the choice of research subject or contribute to domestic conditions being overlooked because they are of lesser importance for an international audience? The authors note that Swedish is a requisite for collaboration with society and that according to the Language Act (SFS 2009:600), the use of Swedish is required in university administration. According to the authors, abandoning Swedish in economic research in Sweden is wrong for various reasons.

In order for research to be useful and contribute to positive change, it is fundamental that research results are reliable. In chapter 9, **Anna Dreber Almenberg** and **Magnus Johannesson** write about false scientific results and the replicability of published studies. If an analysis can be replicated, i.e. repeated with essentially the same results using new data, this strengthens the credibility of the analysis and the results can be considered true. Unfortunately, Dreber Almenberg and Johannesson find that the degree of replicability is low, even in cases where original data are used for replication. They therefore propose several measures that funding bodies, researchers and journals can take to increase the reliability of research.

In its efforts to be a prominent nation for research, Sweden competes with other countries to attract and keep competent researchers. How does Sweden compare with others in terms of the conditions for a career in research? In her chapter (10), which concludes the anthology, **Randi Hjalmarsson** compares the conditions for a Swedish career in research with those in the U.S. and the U.K., where she has previously worked. Although the conditions at American universities are tough, she describes a system where the rules are clear. Hjalmarsson expresses that being

dependent on the outcome of application processes for scholarships and grants, as in Sweden, is often more stressful than an academic career in the U.S.

Concluding remarks

This anthology contains several perspectives on the benefits to society of social science research. Some chapters highlight ideas that are difficult to reconcile, at least at first glance. For example, increased internationalization may make it difficult to maintain research pertaining specifically to Swedish conditions and institutions. The pressure on researchers to publish internationally also means that genuinely Swedish problems may be overlooked in favor of issues of greater international relevance. It might, however, be difficult to justify continued public funding of research focusing on problems that lack domestic relevance.

The multitude of perspectives presented makes it challenging to summarize all of this into an overall conclusion. However, there are some recurring themes that we think deserve to be highlighted: merit and specialization, internationalization and conditions for cooperation.

Merit and specialization

A career in research, mainly in economics but increasingly also in political science, requires the publication of scientific articles in international/American journals. In economics there are the “top-five” journals⁸⁸, which are especially important and prestigious. These journals and their editors have great power and influence even on those who want to pursue an academic career at a Swedish university.⁸⁹ For an article to be accepted it must obviously be written in English and focus on phenomena which are not

⁸⁸ These are the *American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and the *Review of Economic Studies*.

⁸⁹ In an article by Heckman and Moktan (2020), the “tyranny” of the top-five is called into question: “Pursuit of T5 publications has become the obsession of the next generation of economists. However, the T5 screen is far from reliable. A substantial share of influential publications appear in non-T5 outlets. Reliance on the T5 to screen talent incentivizes careerism over creativity” (p. 419).

exclusively of (Swedish) domestic importance. The incentives to publish internationally mean that some researchers avoid researching specifically Swedish problems.⁹⁰ Another potential disadvantage of an excessive focus on publications is that the availability of data might influence what is researched. At least theoretically, this means that research on complex socially relevant issues might have to take a back seat to research on more peripheral or constructed problems, simply because there is available data and computing power for advanced model analyses. A one-sided focus on publishing for merit also means that phenomena such as “salami publications” arise, which means that researchers portion out research in as many publishable articles as possible. This can lead to the loss of holistic perspectives and accumulated knowledge. The rush to get published also puts pressure on researchers to find significant results, even where there are none. This can contribute to the deterioration of research ethics and – in the worst case – even cheating.

Internationalization

Internationalization is one of the key words for the new Swedish research policy bill. Promoting increased international cooperation has many advantages but at least one major drawback: reduced use of the Swedish language. An increasing number of academic social scientists use English as their working language. In higher education, language use affects both how students learn and how teachers teach. Although Swedes generally consider themselves proficient in English, their reading speed often decreases when reading in English. Teaching in English by a non-native speaker tends to become more standardized as personal expressions such as humour and anecdotes are reduced or eliminated.

When the written language is English, there is also a looming risk that teaching and research on domestic institutions will be downplayed. This has implications not only for students in the social sciences, but also for research and society at large. Instead of searching for knowledge that can improve the functioning of their

⁹⁰ “For many young economists, if a paper on any topic cannot be published in a T5 outlet, the topic is not worth pursuing.” (Heckman and Moltan 2020, p. 420).

own country, Sweden, there is a risk that researchers will be tempted to write articles on issues that are considered to be of interest to the editors and reviewers of the highest ranking journals.⁹¹

Conditions for collaboration

Collaboration between academia and society is important and can be said to be the *raison d'être* of social science research. However, collaboration is poorly rewarded as a scientific merit. What kind of researcher engages in collaboration? A couple of studies (Alvesson and Sjöholm 2023; Rothstein in this anthology, chapter 5) show that there is no obvious contradiction between academic success and visibility in the public debate. If social science research is not utilized, there is reason to consider how long there is interest in financing it with taxpayer money. In the case of other applied research, such as in technology and medicine, the results are often transferable to investments which yield repayment (either to the state or a private actor) in one way or another. The research councils' calls for funding, which often make demands on everything from the focus of research to the composition of the research group, may be a result of the fact that the research carried out freely (or with the aim of being published in a top-five journal) is not sufficiently interesting for the funding body, i.e. the government. In principle, it is also reasonable for publicly funded research to be available to all interested parties through open access and not only in journals whose access is restricted by high subscription fees. However, in order to reach a wider audience, researchers always need to engage in communication efforts in the form of opinion pieces, reports and lectures in Swedish.

Another aspect of engaging with a wider audience is the personal risks involved in disseminating research results. With information accessible to most at the click of a button, the need for credible analysis and facts from the research community is great. To communicate complex results to an audience of laymen, researchers need to be able to simplify their messages without distorting them.

⁹¹ Heckman och Moktan (2020, s. 422) write that: "*Low turnover in editorial boards creates the possibility of clientele effects surrounding both journals and editors, whereby authors, in an effort to increase their chances of publication, choose to conduct research that caters to the policy and/or methodology preferences of editors.*"

At the same time, however, taking a public stance can expose the individual researcher to inappropriate and unjustified criticism, often on social media from anonymous users. This risk, combined with overall weak incentives to participate in the public debate, may mean that knowledgeable voices are silenced or do not dare to be heard.

Regardless of how grants to universities and colleges are distributed, it is important not to overlook the incentives faced by individual researchers in their everyday lives. It is important to encourage researchers in every possible way to disseminate their results so that they can be made useful to society. For ESO, which operates under the slogan “being a bridge between research and policy”, the utilization of findings from social science is of great importance and the incentives that prevail in academia have on a number of occasions meant that ESO has had difficulties finding researchers to write reports. It simply does not pay off in the academic merit system to write a policy report for ESO when the opportunity cost is time spent on an article for a top journal. It is therefore natural that the average age of authors of ESO reports is quite high. It is often only when a researcher has gained an established position in academia that the interest and time to write a report to ESO exist. Our overall and simple recommendation to the Government is therefore to use all possible means to encourage and reward collaboration so that the incentives in academia steer towards increased utilization of research findings, especially of research results financed with public funds.

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