

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE SWEDISH PUBLIC'S VIEWS OF HUMANITIES RESEARCH

English Summary



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This report is an English summary of a report (in Swedish) on a study undertaken by VA (Public & Science) to investigate the Swedish public's views of humanities research. The full report can be found at www.v-a.se.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, the non-profit association Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA (Public & Science), has been investigating public confidence to research and science within the *Science in Society* project.¹ Overall, the results show relatively little change over the past two decades. Swedes have the highest confidence in research in medicine, natural sciences and technology, but less confidence in research in the social sciences, educational sciences and the humanities.

In this study, our aim has been to examine and test the knowledge that has been generated through the project to date. By focusing on confidence-enhancing factors that have previously been identified, we empirically investigate the extent to which these can actually influence the public's views of humanities research.

1 The Science in Society project is based on annual postal surveys to a representative sample of Swedish citizens. The survey is part of the national SOM-surveys and conducted in collaboration with the SOM institute (Society, Opinion, Mass Media) at Gothenburg University.

BACKGROUND

Why is it important that people have confidence in research and researchers? This is a question that can be answered in various ways. If a large part of the population lacks confidence in research, it will be difficult for politicians to justify why we should set aside funding derived from public taxes for research. In the long run, it is therefore about the survival of research. But the results of any research undertaken also need to be accepted by those impacted by it. New medical treatments, teaching methods or ways of generating electricity are perhaps irrelevant if the source of the knowledge is not trusted?

Swedes have high, and over time relatively stable, confidence in researchers as a professional group. In

2020, two out of three Swedes (67 percent) stated that they have a *fairly* or *very high* level of confidence in researchers (VA, 2021a). Confidence in researchers is greater among people with a higher level of education and among people living in metropolitan regions.

Swedes' confidence in research in general is also high. In 2021, three out of four Swedes (77 percent) state that they have *fairly* or *very high* confidence in research (VA 2021b). A notably smaller percentage, three percent, have fairly or very low confidence in research.

Public attitudes to research differ depending on the scientific field, with fewer Swedes having high confidence in research in the humanities compared

FIGURE 1: Proportion of Swedes that have fairly or very high confidence in each research area 2002–2020 (percentage). The question reads 'In general, how much confidence do you have in research that is conducted in Sweden in the following research areas?' Response options: 'Very high confidence', 'Fairly high confidence', 'Neither high nor low confidence', 'Fairly low confidence', 'Very low confidence' and 'No opinion'. Total number of respondents in 2020: 1,831. Source: VA, 2021a.

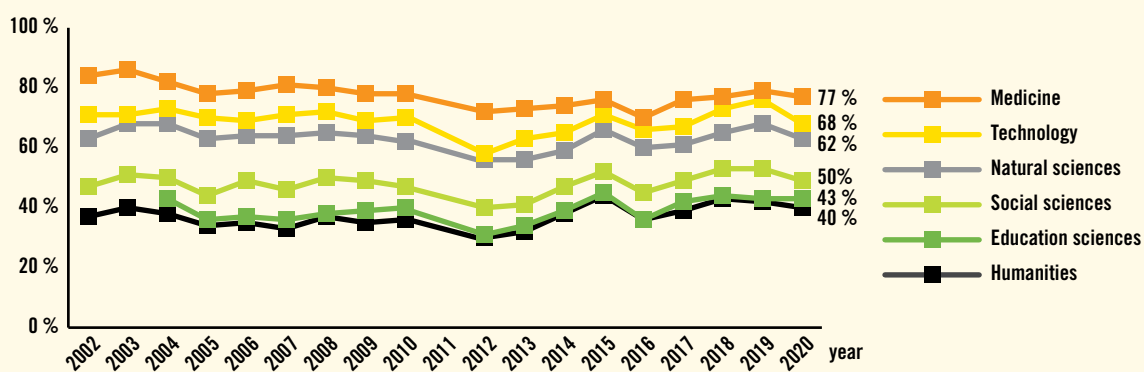
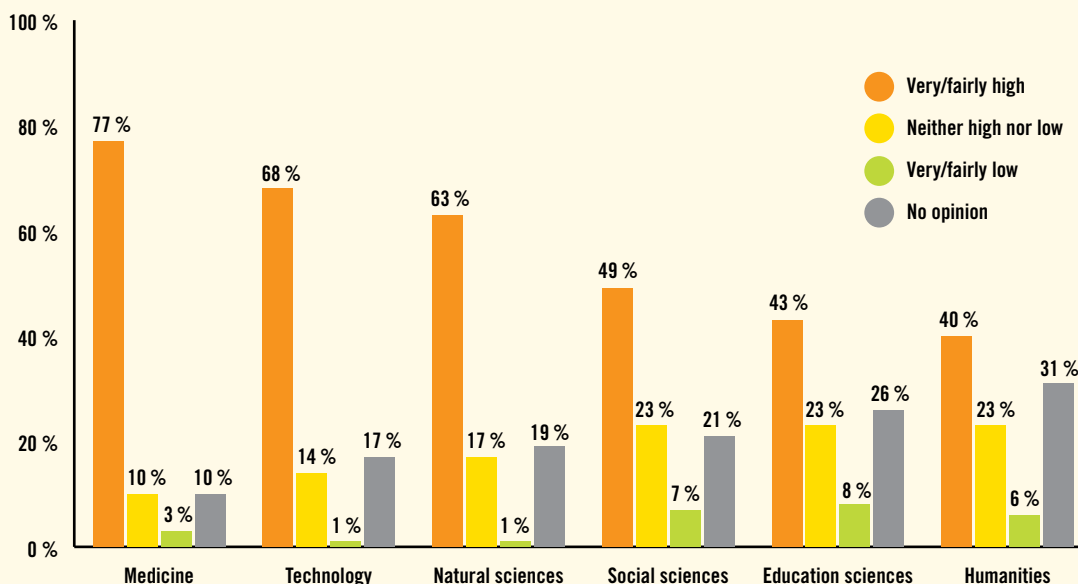


FIGURE 2: Confidence in research in different research areas in the 2020 Science in Society survey. Number of respondents: 1,831. Source: VA, 2021a.



to other research areas. The largest proportion have high confidence in research in medicine (77 percent in 2020). Confidence in medical research is followed by research in technology (68 percent), natural sciences (62 percent), social sciences (50 percent), education sciences (43 percent), and the humanities (40 percent) (VA, 2021a). Confidence in the various research areas is relatively stable, both over time and relative distribution between the research areas. (Figure 1).

However, there are not more people who have *low* confidence in research in the humanities compared to other research areas. Instead, there are many who *lack an opinion* about their confidence. In 2020, three out of ten Swedes (31 percent) were unable to express an opinion about their confidence in humanities research, compared to 10 per-

cent for research in medicine (Figure 2). This suggests that the differences in confidence can largely be explained by a lack of insight/knowledge of the research areas, rather than actual low confidence.

This study aims to gain better understanding about the group who say they lack an opinion about their confidence in the humanities. What is it specifically that they don't have an opinion about? What is needed for them to be able to express confidence in research or researchers, in the humanities? Are these the same factors that are viewed as important for research in medicine, in which the public has the highest confidence? And is it possible to design communication around humanities research so that it is perceived as more trustworthy?

METHODS

The study is based on two data collections:

- A survey, which investigated what lies behind people's lack of opinion about their confidence in research in the humanities, and how important different factors are perceived to be for having confidence in research and researchers in the humanities and medicine, respectively.
- A survey with an experimental design that investigated how the Swedish public's confidence in humanities research is affected by the mention of the research's short- and long-term benefits/applications.

OPINION SURVEY IN AUTUMN 2020

The first survey was conducted during the period 28 September–8 October 2020. The fieldwork was carried out by the market research company Ipsos and participants were invited from a randomly recruited web panel consisting of people aged between 18 and 74 years old across the whole of Sweden. A total of 1,024 people answered the survey. The participation rate was 32.9 percent.

The survey asked the same type of questions about confidence in research in different research areas, as are used in the national Science in Society survey (VA, 2021a). In order to test whether the wording of the question affects the outcome, three different versions were used, where both the response scale (without the option *no opinion*) and wording around the humanities (with the addition of *e.g. history*) were changed. The respondents were also given follow-up questions where they were asked to justify their answers. The results from these

questions are presented here in *Part 1 – Who lacks an opinion and why?*

The survey also asked questions about what affects confidence in research and researchers, based on previously identified factors that increase and decrease confidence (VA, 2018b). The results from these questions are presented in *Part 2 – What affects confidence (according to ourselves)?*

In the questions about which factors influence confidence, corresponding questions were asked about research/researchers in both the humanities and medicine. Research in medicine is the area in which the public has the highest confidence, and therefore enables comparisons to be made between the relevance of the confidence factors for both research areas.

In order to give as representative a picture as possible of the population at large, the responses were weighted afterwards based on gender, age, municipal group and level of education.

EXPERIMENTAL OPINION SURVEY IN SPRING 2022

In order to investigate how the public's confidence in humanities research is affected by mentioning the short- and long-term benefits/applications of the research, an experimental opinion survey was conducted from 6–20 April 2022.

The fieldwork was carried out by Ipsos and the participants were invited from their randomly recruited web panel consisting of people aged between 18 and 74 years old spread across Sweden. The total number of completed interviews was 2,016, which corresponds to a participation rate of 31 percent.

The participants were first asked to indicate their confidence in research in general and then read a short description that briefly outlined the content of a Swedish dissertation on the humanities. After reading one of six possible short descriptions, participants were asked to state their level of confidence and personal interest in the presented research. It was also possible to comment on their response about their level of confidence.

Based on two dissertations, three short descriptions were written, which only differed in terms of mentioning the benefit/application of the research. The first description mentions the benefit of the research *in the short term*; the second mentions the

corresponding benefit, but states that this will be realised *in the future*; the third description is a control version, in which benefit/application is not mentioned at all. A total of six different short descriptions were therefore included in the survey.

Dissertation 1 is on history and deals with how prisoners could influence their living conditions in two different prison systems during the years 1890–1920 (Englund, 2019). Dissertation 2 is in literary studies and deals with 18-year-olds' attitudes and ability to read (Nordberg, 2017). The short descriptions were written by researchers working at VA (Public & Science).

A total of 2,016 people participated in the survey. The respective short descriptions were read by 335–337 people. The respondents were evenly distributed between these groups with regard to gender, age, level of education and location of residence.

Here, too, the responses were weighted afterwards based on gender, age, municipal group and level of education to give as representative a picture as possible of the population at large.

The results from the experimental survey are presented in *Part 3 – To what benefit are we talking about benefit?*

RESULTS

PART 1 – WHO LACKS AN OPINION AND WHY?

As seen in the Science in Society surveys 2002–2020, the proportion of Swedes with high confidence in research in the humanities is relatively small compared to other research areas. However, the proportion who have *low* confidence is not remarkably different. Instead, it is a significantly larger percentage who respond *no opinion* about their confidence in research in the humanities compared to medicine (24 and 9 percent, respectively). The same applies to the percentage who respond *neither*

high nor low confidence in research in the humanities (31 percent) compared to medicine (14 percent) (Figure 3).

When the question of confidence in research in the humanities is supplemented with the addition of "e.g. history" the proportion who respond "no opinion" falls to 20 percent compared to 24 percent in the unmodified version. In addition, the proportion with high confidence increases compared to the unmodified version of the question.

FIGURE 3: Confidence in research in different research areas. Number of responses 341.

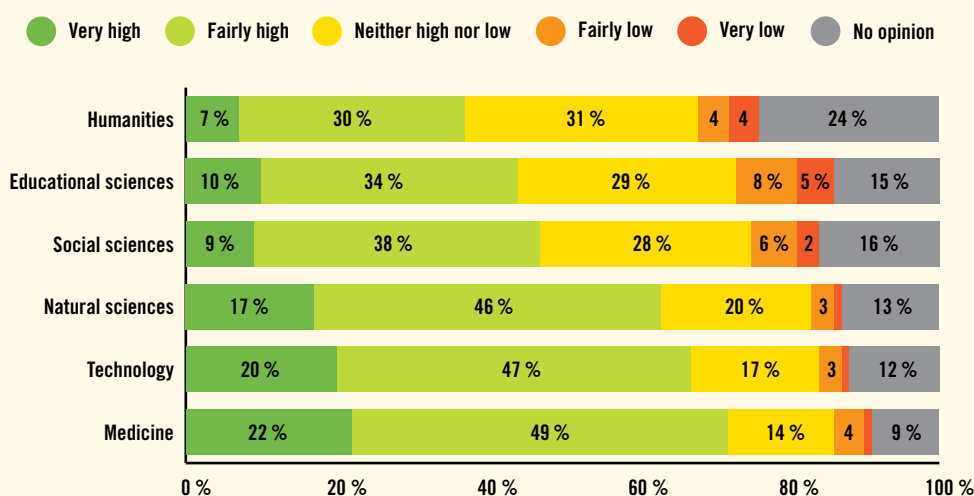
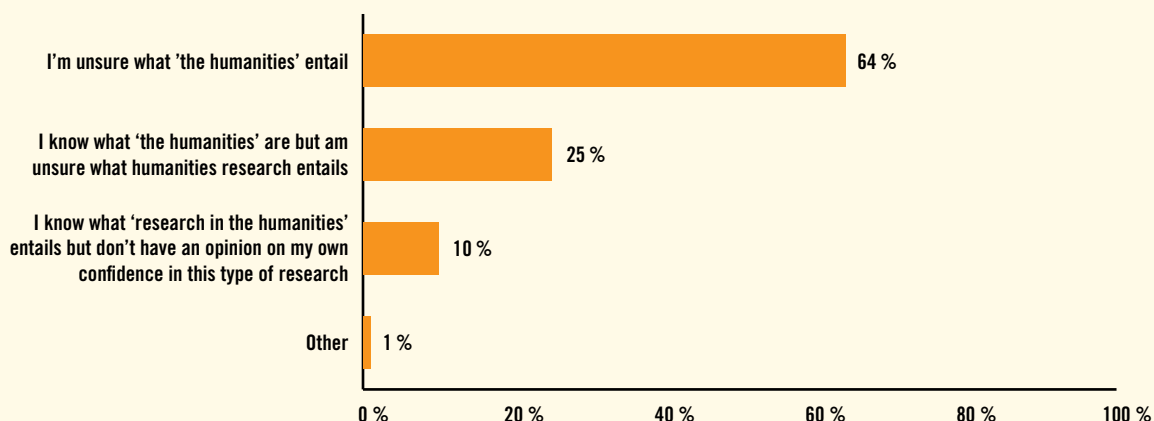


FIGURE 4: Responses to the question "You answered "no opinion" about your confidence in humanities research. What is the most important reason why you chose this option?" Number of responses: 147.



Two-thirds (64 percent) of those who answer "no opinion" about their confidence in research in the humanities state that the reason for this is because they are *unsure what the humanities entail*. One in four (25 percent) state that they *know what the humanities are, but are unsure of what research in*

the humanities entails. One in ten (10 percent) state that they *know what research in the humanities entails, but that they lack an opinion on how much confidence they have in that type of research* (Figure 4).

PART 2 – WHAT AFFECTS CONFIDENCE (ACCORDING TO OURSELVES)?

Three out of four Swedes (74 percent) believe that it is *fairly or very important* that the research follows *ethical standards* in order for them to feel confident in research in the humanities. It is also considered important that the research has a *clear societal benefit* (66 percent), that it *is not motivated by financial profit* (64 percent) and that it results in findings that are *confirmed by other research* (63 percent). It is considered less important that the research *interests you personally* (39 percent) and that it receives *attention in the media* (32 percent) (Figure 5).

The most important factors for having confidence in individual researchers are that they seem *to understand the situation of ordinary people* (stated by 78 percent for researchers in the humanities and

73 percent for researchers in medicine) and that the researcher is *clear about the limitations of the research* (74 percent for researchers in the humanities and 81 percent for medicine). Less important seems to be that the researcher is employed at a *university with a good reputation*, which one in two respondents state is important for confidence. The least important of the five factors, for both the humanities and medicine, is that the researcher is *often seen in newspapers/on TV*, something only one in five considers important for them to have confidence (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5: Responses to the question "For you to have confidence in research in the humanities/medicine, how important or unimportant is it that it ...". The bars show the proportion that respond *fairly* or *very important*. Number of responses: 512 (medicine), 512 (humanities).

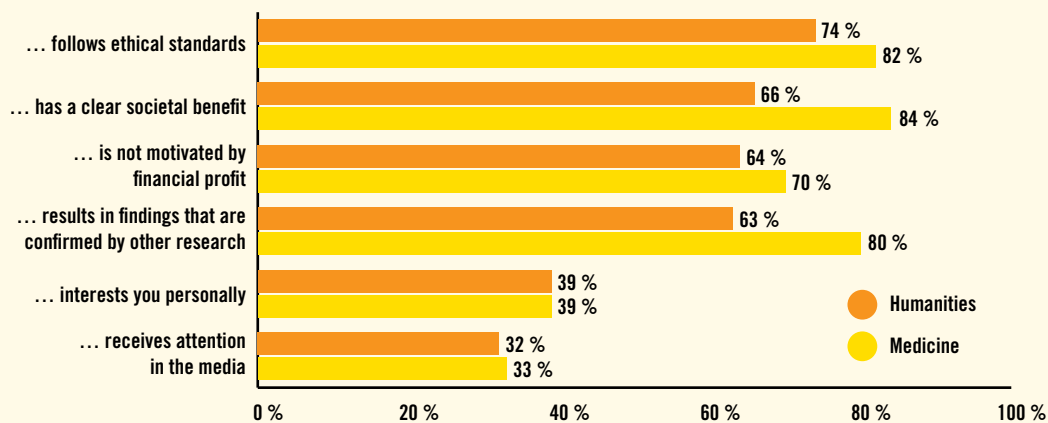
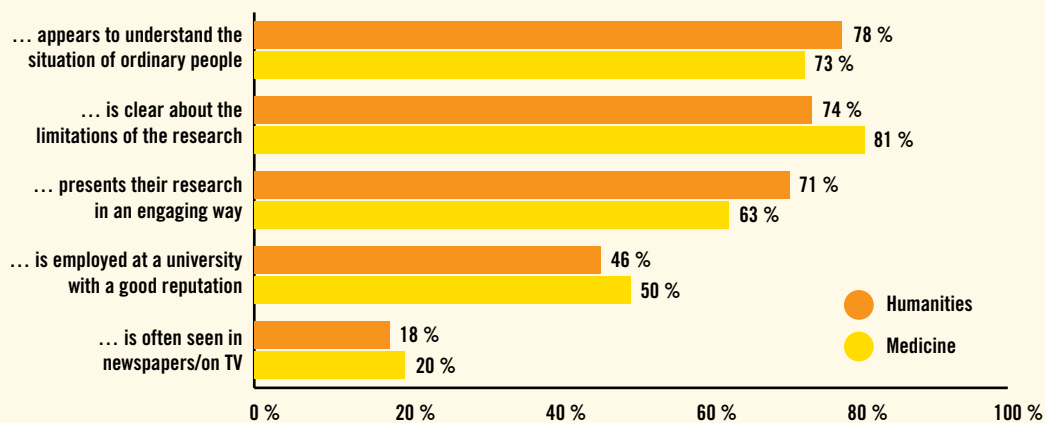
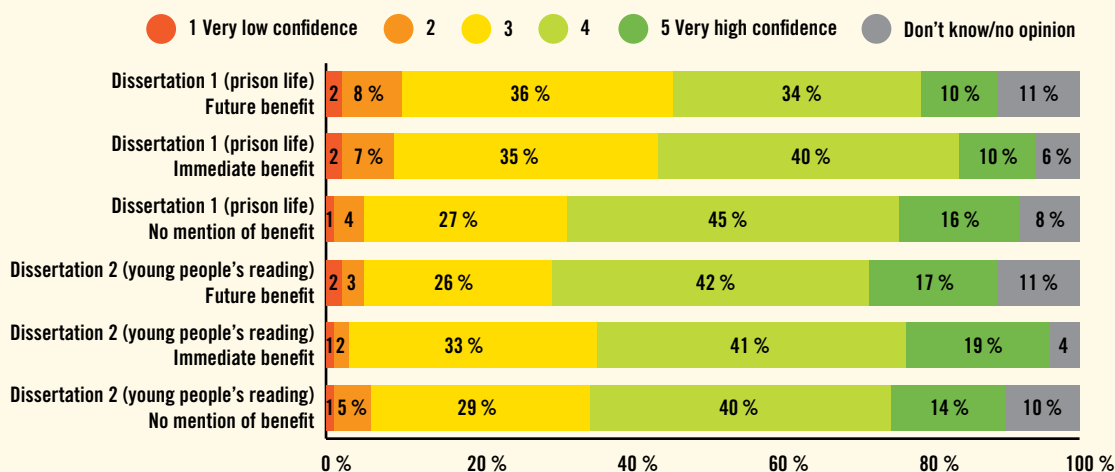


FIGURE 6: Responses to the question "To feel confidence in an individual researcher in medicine/humanities, how important or unimportant is it that the researcher ...". The bars show the proportion that respond *fairly* or *very important*. Number of respondents: 512 (medicine), 512 (humanities).



PART 3 – TO WHAT BENEFIT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT BENEFIT?

FIGURE 7: Confidence in the content/research in each short description. Number of responses: 335 (dissertation 1, no mention of benefit), 339 (dissertation 1, immediate benefit), 334 (dissertation 1, future benefit), 333 (dissertation 2, no mention of benefit), 330 (dissertation 2, immediate benefit), 341 (dissertation 2, future benefit).



Opposite to what might be expected, people do not have more confidence in the short descriptions of humanities research that mention benefits compared to when they aren't mentioned. On the contrary, confidence in the short descriptions that outline the benefits is lower for one of the dissertations compared to when the benefits are not mentioned at all. For the second dissertation, no clear differences are seen between descriptions that mention, or do not mention, societal benefit (Figure 7).

Instead, a clear connection is seen between how interesting you think the described research is and the confidence you feel in it, where you have higher confidence in research that is of personal interest. There is also a positive correlation between people's general confidence in research and the confidence shown in the research described in the short descriptions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When assessing our confidence in individual researchers, some factors have more weight than others. For example, empathy (that a researcher seems to understand the situation of ordinary people) and honesty (that the researcher is clear about the limitations of the research) seem to be more important for gaining people's confidence than if the researcher is employed at a university with a good reputation. The pattern applies both to researchers in the humanities and in medicine and may be worth thinking about when researchers are planning communication activities. In order to strengthen confidence in yourself and/or your research, it is at least as important to appear open and empathetic as it is to highlight your scientific qualities.

As for confidence in the research itself, it is considered more important that it has a clear societal benefit, follows ethical standards, is independent of financial interests and is confirmed by other research than that if it is of personal interest or receives attention in the media. It may seem more difficult to identify the societal benefit for a researcher in the humanities than for a medical researcher, but it is likely that humanities researchers are not used to thinking about and formulating the larger societal question that their research is a piece of the puzzle in solving. Despite this, knowledge from the humanities is a prerequisite for being able to deal with the societal challenges we face. Other factors

that are important for eliciting high confidence work in favour for the humanities. For example, for research not to be motivated by financial profit is often less of a problem for research in the humanities compared to, for example, medicine.

But does what we *believe* we base our confidence on correspond to what we *actually* base our confidence on? If societal benefit is very important for gaining our confidence, the short descriptions that outlined the benefits in the two humanities dissertations would be expected to inspire more confidence than the short descriptions that lack such kind of information. Instead, we saw no difference for one dissertation and an opposite correlation for the other, where the version of the short description that did not mention societal benefit at all instilled the highest confidence. Instead, we see a clear connection between how interesting a person thinks the research is and how much confidence they feel they have in it, contrary to what the participants themselves stated were important for gaining their confidence.

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VA (PUBLIC & SCIENCE) promotes dialogue and openness between researchers and the public. The organisation works to create new and engaging forms of dialogue about research.

VA is also developing new knowledge on the relationship between research and society through surveys and studies. Its members consist of over 100 organisations, including including authorities, companies and associations. In addition, it has around 50 individual members.

Read more at www.v-a.se/english



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