

English Literary Studies in Sweden 1950-2019: Doctoral Research Projects and Disciplinary Renewal

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Abstract

The focus of doctoral research is of great significance for the development of an academic discipline and the potential for innovation. A significant number of PhD graduates however expect to be employed as university teachers, and the correlation between competence needs as suggested by the undergraduate curriculum and PhD research appears to be weak. Based on library catalogue data and digital archives, this study investigates interrelations between the initial research orientation of individual scholars and the development of English as a university subject in Sweden. Dissertation topics 1950-1999 indicate a gradual shift from a dominance of linguistics in the earlier decades to a dominance of literary studies towards the end of the period. Dissertations in the field of English-language literature between 2000 and 2019 demonstrate a growing interest in literatures outside England and the United States, a predominance of studies of prose and a move towards contextual modes of criticism centred on social or political theories. Studies of modern or contemporary literature dominate greatly whereas there are few dissertations on older literature. Undergraduate course plans and literature lists for 2020 from the major research universities show a strong connection between first-term literature courses and current research, as indicated by the topics of PhD dissertations from the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The teaching of older literature is not supported by new research to the same extent, however, which means that it may become increasingly difficult to ensure the close links between research and study programmes stipulated in the Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434).

Keywords: PhD programmes in English literature, dissertation topics, competence provision, undergraduate curriculum, English studies in Sweden, research-based education

Introduction

Since the distinguishing characteristic of university education is that it is research-based, it seems reasonable that the direction of PhD research should have important implications both for competence provision in the

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short term and for the long-term development of the subjects. PhD students constitute the most research-active academic group, and at least in the humanities, most of them enter the academy as teachers after graduation. To enhance employability, many universities have introduced professional or skills-oriented courses as part of the PhD programmes, such as university pedagogy, project organisation and leadership, but the relationship between the students' research focus and their expected careers is rarely addressed. At least in the humanities, research specialisation is in the main a matter of individual preference and free choice.

The aim of this article is to shed some light on how the micro-event of selecting a topic for a PhD thesis might have long-term ramifications for the academic subject in question. Over the last few decades, there has been a noticeable shift in English literature towards topics concerned with contemporary cultural practices. In relation to the individual PhD student this development could be seen as the result of the academic freedom to freely select a research issue, but as part of a larger trend, it could have unforeseen consequences for national competence provision. The apparently individual selection of a research topic potentially affects the entire research and teaching community of the subject.

PhD theses are expected to make original contributions to knowledge, but there are significant differences between countries and disciplines concerning how the choice of dissertation topic is regulated, from fully prescribed, top-down structures to bottom-up choice (Nerad & Heggelund 2008). In the sciences, PhD students often conduct their research within the framework of an already existing research project, which obviously means that there is little scope for them to select their own topics. In the humanities, it is instead more common for students to conduct their projects individually, on topics of their own choice. Since the competence needs of undergraduate education is not usually a consideration when topics are chosen, there is a risk of an increasing divergence between undergraduate course requirements and the research specialisation of future teachers. At the same time, PhD research has a real potential to influence and gradually change the curriculum. Even though several other factors, such as international research trends, higher education policies and government initiatives affect both education and research, internal developments are of importance for the shape and direction of a discipline.

The question is how far the principle of individual topic selection revitalises the contents of undergraduate courses and whether there are aspects of the curriculum that remain more or less uninfluenced by new research. If the PhD thesis is regarded as a litmus test, even quite general observations such as the number of studies dealing with different historical periods reveal subtle changes within English as a discipline. A comparison of dissertation topics in English literature in the first two decades of the twenty-first century and the undergraduate courses taught or offered at the largest Swedish universities in 2020, gives some information about the interrelations between PhD research, disciplinary renewal and disciplinary needs.

PhD programmes in English literature and the idea of academic freedom
Since 1998, all PhD candidates in Sweden must secure funding in order to be admitted, and in the humanities, this normally means that they must compete successfully for a four-year university-funded position. It has long been the custom that prospective PhD students in English literature—as well as most other humanities disciplines—submit an individually conceived research plan as part of their application. Unless the positions are offered within a graduate research school, there are however few restrictions regarding the choice of research topic as long as there is a supervisor willing to direct the study. The plan is intended to demonstrate the applicant's ability to identify relevant research problems and design a project, and as a selection tool it at least has the potential to identify the best candidate. Some of the reasons behind the selection principle are thus practical, whereas others are more philosophical in nature and related to a Humboldtian ideal of lone scholarship, un-invested thirst for knowledge and individual preference. In this respect, PhD programmes in English literature seem to be governed by an understanding of academic freedom as it is expressed in the Swedish Higher Education Act Section 6: 'research issues may be freely selected, research methodologies may be freely developed, and research results may be freely published' (1992:1434).

In a study of the situation in the UK—where academic freedom is not regulated in law—Terence Karran and Lucy Mallinson conclude that universities that protect the idea of academic freedom are also the ones achieving the highest results in rankings (2019: 413). There is a correlation between creativity and the perception of academic freedom, and a corresponding negative correlation between creativity and external

control. The results of humanities research in Sweden seem to corroborate the idea.¹ According to a report from the Swedish Research Council, the applications for undirected project grants anticipate the questions in targeted calls by three to five years, which suggests that scholars are well able to identify relevant research questions without direction. Thus, it ‘may be more effective to invest in researcher-initiated research’ than to await government directives and policies (Swedish Research Council 2020: 12). Such findings support the view that free topic selection should lead to better research also for the student collective and are perhaps another reason for the continuation of the model.

At the idealistic end of the spectrum, the principle of free topic choice consequently transmits the ethos of academic freedom to future scholarly generations. At the practical end, there remain questions about how PhD research relates to long-term knowledge production, disciplinary innovation and the interrelation between higher education policies and the labour market. After completion, most English-literature PhDs find employment as university teachers, but there is little to suggest that these employment expectations affect their choice of dissertation topic. On the other hand, there is little available information that might guide them in making a market-strategic choice. No nation-wide analysis of future competence needs in the academy precedes the advertisement of a PhD position, and there are no political efforts to ensure the maintenance of established knowledge fields within the subject. There may be political control regarding the number of funded PhD positions in different disciplines, but direct influence on the content remains marginal.

One effect of the absence of control is that the idea of individual topic selection is beginning to affect the availability of specialists in certain areas, particularly older literature, poetry and drama while the number of specialists in modern literature and contemporary cultural practices is growing. The question is to what extent a customary subject content, as represented by overview courses of literary history, period courses or genre-oriented courses, is worth preserving. If such courses are considered important as part of an undergraduate degree in English, the follow-up

¹ It should be noted, however, that in a comparison of the protection of academic freedom in 28 states in the European Union, Karran, Beiter and Kwadwo place Sweden as number six from the bottom (2017: 229). One reason is that Sweden ‘has no mention of academic freedom for teaching in either the Constitution or the law’ although research is protected (Karran et al. 2017: 235).

question is whether the present organisation and control of third-cycle education in English literature can ensure the necessary competence provision. Specifically, it is worth asking what role the PhD programmes play when it comes to fulfilling the requirements of the Swedish Higher Education Act, Section 3: 'The operations of higher education institutions shall be organised to ensure that there are close links between research, and courses and study programmes' (1992:1434).

As it relates to PhD topic choice, the ideal of academic freedom ultimately affects a great deal more than the individual career of the PhD student. As the following will show, curricula are gradually changing as an effect of the research orientation of new teachers. In this respect, individual topic choices can be said to drive research-based, disciplinary renewal, but there is less provision for the renewal and continuation of the historical facets of the subject. As members of the community of university teachers of English, we need to take stock of the current state of research and its potential effects on the future of English literary studies in Sweden.

The organisation of Swedish PhD programmes in English literature

The main goal of the 1998 reform was to increase the completion rate in third-cycle programmes by limiting the study period to four years. To this end, course work was minimised to make it possible for PhD students to concentrate on their research projects, but the time for general reading in the subject was obviously reduced. In many ways this was a necessary change, especially in subjects where the relevant body of knowledge cannot be restricted to the most recent findings but may stretch several hundred years back in time. An inevitable but presumably unintended side effect was however that candidates are able to achieve in-depth knowledge only in areas directly related to their dissertations. In the case of English, the reform cemented the already existing boundaries between linguistic and literary varieties of research so that, for example, the literature branch no longer includes courses in Old or Middle English which might make the reading of older texts more challenging. The reorganisation of the programmes contributed to delimiting dissertation topics since it is no longer possible to embark on a life-long project, but the broad knowledge necessary for a future teaching position can usually not be obtained within the programme structure.

PhD programmes in English literature or wider humanities programmes offering English literature as one of the specialisation subjects are available at Gothenburg University, Karlstad University, Linköping University, Linnaeus University, Lund University, Mid-Sweden University, Stockholm University, Umeå University, Uppsala University and Örebro University.² The course-load at the universities varies between 60 and 90 higher education credits, or one to one and a half years of the four-year programme. Fifteen to thirty credits are reserved for mandatory courses in theory, method, academic writing and other generic skills, leaving thirty to seventy-five credits for specialisation courses. The most regulated course package is included in the Uppsala University programme, comprising a fifteen-credit theory course, three twenty-credit courses in literature from the periods 1485–1744, 1744–1890 and 1890 to the present and one specialisation course connected to the candidate's PhD topic (Uppsala universitet 2012: 9–10). In comparison, the course package at Linnaeus University consists of 22.5 credits of theory and method and 37.5 credits of individually selected courses, decided by the student and the supervisor (Linnéuniversitetet 2018: 2–3).

The PhD programme in English literature is often integrated in a wider context, so that at Linnaeus University it is one of the subjects of the literature cluster, at Umeå University, the literary branches of the modern languages form a group and at Örebro University, English literature belongs to 'Studies in the Humanities' (Örebro universitet 2017: 1). Gathering neighbouring subjects together is intended to increase the opportunities for intellectual exchange and counteract the negative effects of having too small cohorts of students. Another effort to ensure critical mass is the establishment of interdisciplinary graduate schools. Lund University, for example, provides a graduate school in educational sciences specialising in subject teaching (Lund University 2020, *Graduate School*) and a graduate school focusing on the global sustainability goals (Lund University 2020, *Agenda 2030*). At Stockholm University, there is a doctoral school in the humanities, including English, organised according to themes such as the 2018 theme 'Environmental Humanities' and the 2020–2021 theme 'Digital Humanities' (Stockholm University,

² The list refers to the universities offering English literature as the focus of a PhD in 2020. In addition, there are programmes where English literature can be studied as part of programmes in English and Education, but those have not been included here.

Faculty of Humanities 2020). Since 2001, Umeå University hosts a national graduate school where PhD students combine their subject studies with gender studies (Umeå University 2020). All these graduate schools allow English literature as the main discipline for doctoral training, but provide thematic rather than subject-specific courses. For the individual subject, the organisation into research schools or clusters helps to expand the range of possible thesis topics in an interdisciplinary direction, but also reduces the available time for subject specialisation.

The research school idea is partly modelled on the research group organisation common in the sciences where a team investigate the same question, but with the difference that there are usually no research groups with predetermined topics to join. Despite efforts to form larger groups, PhD students in English literature therefore normally conduct their projects individually. There is no co-publishing culture even in the early stages of the process which means that the supervisor or fellow PhD students are not personally invested in an individual candidate's project. Dissertations are normally single-authored and the monograph is still the most common publication format. All these circumstances reinforce the norm of free topic selection and foster a culture of specialisation. At best, the principle may result in a dynamic, vibrant culture and a critical look at the subject resulting in development and renewal. At worst, it could lead to a fractured subject where no research area attains critical mass and the relation between research and teaching is gradually attenuated or even broken.

Selection and method

To investigate possible interrelations between the research orientation of individual scholars and the developments in English as a university subject in Sweden more systematically, I have first looked at dissertation topics from the 1950s until 2000.³ After investigating broader trends, as reflected

³ This first survey formed the basis of a project designed together with Professor Gabriele Griffin, with the purpose to compare governmentality in higher education and the effect on PhD dissertation topics in Sweden, Germany, Singapore, Spain and the UK, countries with very different levels of governmentality. The intention was to compare the degree programmes in English, Gender Studies and History at the major research universities in these countries. The project did not receive funding and was subsequently abandoned.

in dissertation topic choice 1950–1999, I have looked at completed PhD projects specifically in the field of English-language literature between 2000 and 2019. Finally, I have collected course plans and literature lists for 2020 from the major research universities to gauge how far thesis topics in the last few decades have led to disciplinary renewal and whether there seem to be significant competence gaps.

Although there are now digital library catalogues as well as specific databases for Swedish research publications, these tools are not entirely reliable. Most doctoral dissertations are registered in the digital archive DiVA, but the date from which this has been a requirement varies between universities. The database SwePub includes references to research publications registered in databases kept by higher education institutions and other public authorities, but the extent of participation varies. In addition, there may have been mistakes at registration. As a result, separate searches in the main library catalogue Libris and these two databases do not yield the same results. Searches may return results of dissertations that have not, in fact, been published in Sweden or where the subject is not English literature, return a certain result several times or fail to return expected results.

My discussion of the period 1950–1999 is based on searches in an older version of the digital library catalogue at Umeå University Library, performed in 2010. I used the keyword ‘dissertation’ and limited my search to English as a subject and theses published in Sweden. In addition, I used the older SAB classification system and the categories Fe for English linguistics and Ge for English literary history, including the various subcategories of these classes, to group the dissertation topics into the two main research strands ‘language’ and ‘literature’. For the discussion of the period after 2000, I used the database SwePub and the main library catalogue Libris, limiting the search to ‘dissertation’, language English and the category ‘language and literature’, and then checked the matches using abstracts, full-text versions and information regarding the public defence of the dissertation to ensure that the PhD in question was obtained in English literature. Titles alone are misleading, since similar topics occur in neighbouring disciplines like Comparative Literature, Philosophy and Media Studies, for example. Searching for the same categories limited by university institution unexpectedly returned a few more matches which have been included in my sample. A corresponding search in the digital archive DiVA resulted in significantly

fewer individual matches but more results occurring more than once. It is consequently not possible to arrive at an exhaustive list using only these tools, but it is possible to discern tendencies, and for the purposes of the present discussion a general picture is sufficient. This also means, that I will not go into detail about the situation in different university departments or at different points in time.

English as a discipline 1950–2000

At the beginning of the 1950s there were only two universities, Lund and Uppsala, and two university colleges, Stockholm and Gothenburg, in Sweden. English was offered at all of them and it is reasonable to surmise that PhD studies that began or were completed in the decades after 1950 shaped or at least strongly influenced the early orientation of the subject as it began to be more widely taught. English became increasingly important after the Second World War, when it replaced German as the first foreign language taught in schools and in 1956, the subject became compulsory for all Swedish school children, which increased the demand for higher education and teacher training. There was little provision for such professional purposes in the early first cycle education programmes, however, and university professors were free to offer seminars related to their own particular research interests rather than the needs of future school teachers (Axelsson 2005: 33–35; Geschwind & Terrell 2011: 16).

As a university discipline in Sweden, English grew out of Germanic philology in the nineteenth century, and the two subjects were not separated until 1904 (Bratt 1984: 48). Philology is usually understood as the study of language in historical literary material, with a focus on linguistics, the particularities of style, text criticism and textual authenticity rather than hermeneutics. Given these roots, it is logical that English was initially studied as a language, historically and grammatically, although some of the earliest Swedish professorships in English combined language and literature.⁴ Chairs with an explicit focus on English literature were not established until the mid-twentieth century: at Uppsala University in 1948, Stockholm University College 1952, Lund University 1964, Gothenburg University College 1967, and in 1962, a donation from

⁴ The Andrew Carnegie Chair of English at Gothenburg University College was established in 1904 and included both English language and literature (Bratt 1984: 53).

the American Council of Learned Societies meant that a professorship in American literature could be established at Uppsala University (Bratt 1984: 54). Despite these efforts, linguistic topics continued to dominate research and in a report to the Swedish Higher Education Authority in 1968, the professors Gustav Korlén, Bertil Malmberg and Claes Schaar argued for measures to strengthen research in literature (Nyström 2010: 66, 74 note 33). At a time when research in literature was often understood as literary history, based on archival sources outside Sweden, there might have been good reasons to favour linguistics where the material might have been more limited or more readily available (Olsson 2002: 36), but the strong philological tradition was also an important factor. From the 1970s, literary research became increasingly common, in parallel with a change of focus from older literature to modern or contemporary source material. To meet an increased demand for supervision of literary PhD topics, a professor of English literature was appointed also at Umeå University in 1995, alongside the linguistic professorship established in 1977.⁵

The dissertations completed between 1950 and 1999 give an indication of general developments in the subject. In the period, it was possible to study for a PhD degree in English at the universities of Uppsala, Lund, Gothenburg, Stockholm and, from the 1970s, Umeå. Although Linköping University was founded in 1975, its thematic and interdisciplinary structure meant that no PhD degrees in English were conferred until 2004, when the first students graduated from the Language and Culture research school established in 2000. Luleå University of Technology received university status in 1997, including the right to confer degrees in English, but at that time, could only provide supervision of dissertations on linguistic topics. Karlstad University received its university rights in 1999, and the first PhD student in English graduated in 2003.

The total number of theses is consequently relatively small. My introductory reflections are based on a list compiled of the English dissertations produced in Sweden between 1950 and 1999 held by Umeå University Library, correlated with the dissertations listed in the database SwePub and the main library catalogue Libris and the PhD theses

⁵ Before the professorship in English literature was formally established at Umeå University, a 'research lecturer' was in charge of the PhD programme in English literature for a few years.

published in the academic series issued by the universities offering third-cycle programmes in the period.⁶ There may still be gaps in the sample, but the selection should be representative, if not complete. In the period, 115 dissertations deal with linguistic topics and 167 theses with literary topics. Looking at the distribution of topics only along these very broad lines, it is possible to say that there is a perceptible shift in what was considered knowledge in the discipline in the 1950s and what is regarded as knowledge today. It could even be argued that the parameters of the subject have changed. If results are broken down into decades, the gradual change of balance becomes visible (Table 1):

Table 1. Number of Swedish PhD dissertations in English linguistics and English literature 1950-1999

Period	Linguistics	Literature	Total
1950-59	17	11	28
1960-69	14	4	18
1970-79	39	49	88
1980-89	26	44	70
1990-99	19	59	78

The findings show a gradual shift from a dominance of linguistics topics in the earlier decades to a dominance of literary studies towards the end of the period, following a more general shift from philology to English studies both inside and outside the Anglophone world. In England and the US, literary studies replaced philological work in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which among other things moved the focus away from literary works as historical or linguistic artefacts to aesthetic qualities and hermeneutics (Momma 2015, Momma & Powell 2007, Scholes 1998, Scholes 2005). New Criticism and close reading, or the study of literary works as self-contained entities, dominated the middle decades of the twentieth century. A corresponding interest in the interpretation of literature in its own right can be detected in the dissertations produced in Sweden, although the developments came later.

⁶ Essays and Studies on American Language and Literature, Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature, Gothenburg Studies in English, Lund Studies in English, Stockholm Studies in English, Stockholm Theses in English, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensis and Umeå Studies in the Humanities.

In the early decades of the period, language history was still an important specialisation, and there was solid, Swedish expertise in Old and Middle English. Based on the number of PhD dissertations produced, knowledge in this field is weaker today. There were also significant contributions to the history and interpretation of place names, systematic grammar studies and from the 1960s onwards, substantial advances in corpus linguistics (Sigurd 2001: 229, 232, 236). Literary studies normally concerned canonised writers before 1900 or recognised fields such as Renaissance drama or, later in the period, Modernism. There was a significant increase in the number of completed theses across all academic disciplines after the first wave of expansion of higher education in Sweden in the 1960s, and again after the second wave in the 1990s. At least in the 1990s, an important reason for a larger intake of PhD students was to meet the needs of future competence provision in the academy, not least because of the establishment of new higher education institutions (Kim 2002: 89). Given the increased number of PhD students and the requirement to make an individual contribution to scholarship, a greater variety of dissertation topics is to be expected. Towards the end of the period 1950–1999, grammar, sociolinguistics and varieties of English began to gain ground and the interest in historical studies diminished. Within the literature branch of the subject there was a move from historical, single-author studies and editions to contemporary writers and thematic, sometimes diachronic topics. There was also a change from an understanding of ‘English literature’ as produced primarily in England and the US to a global distribution that became even more prominent in the years after 2000. Although the gender dimension is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is worth noting that the majority of the dissertations on linguistic topics are produced by men throughout the period. The increase of literary topics in the 1970s corresponds to an increase of women PhD students in the same period.

Undergraduate teaching in Sweden is a generalist task, and since English belongs to the sub-group of foreign languages at Swedish universities, grammatical studies have remained important throughout. Other areas of knowledge have been lost and gained so that what might be called the knowledge base of English has changed. The question is to what extent the choice of PhD topics is reflected in the curriculum and how far they have structured English as a discipline in Sweden. With a fairly limited range of sub-areas, English used to be reasonably manageable and

it was more or less possible to be a generalist and teach across the board at the undergraduate level. Today, the diversity is much greater and the boundaries between English and other disciplines much fuzzier, but this could mean that there is now a risk that new fields of investigation might splinter English into a cluster of sub-disciplines. Robert Scholes argues that English has become a 'field' that needs to be restructured to become a 'discipline' (1998: 144–145). The goal of English studies, in his view, is to put students 'in touch with a usable cultural past' that can help them 'attain an active relationship with their cultural present' (Scholes 1998: 104). Among other things, this requires a restructuring of graduate studies that encourages breadth, including a grasp of neighbouring fields like philosophy and media, and a broader understanding of literary and linguistic history beyond the necessarily narrow topics of specialisation (Scholes 2005: 733). English PhD programmes in Sweden have become increasingly concerned with the 'cultural present', but sometimes at the expense of a grounding in the 'cultural past' and allowing few opportunities for wider reading, as evidenced by the general study plans and course packages for PhD studies at the universities included in this survey (see above).

There is of course a difference between a PhD dissertation as knowledge production and teaching as at least partly a matter of knowledge transmission. Producing new knowledge necessarily entails venturing into new disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas, employing new theoretical perspectives and scrutinising new literary products. Still, since the majority of PhD graduates today are the university teachers of tomorrow, it is worth asking the question what the directions of their doctoral research will mean for the orientation and re-orientation of English as a discipline. Although definitions of research-based teaching vary greatly, from the inclusion of scholarly articles to training in scholarly method and fostering critical thought, to name a few, integration of recent research results remains an important aspect. Will there be or are there already important aspects of English where Swedish university teachers are no longer able to connect their teaching to current scholarship? What should be the relation between necessary disciplinary renewal and the historical dimensions of the subject? Failure to respond to new trends and requirements will lead to stagnation, but areas of the subject worth preserving might disappear in the process.

PhD projects in English literature 2000–2019

In 2014, an international panel presented their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of literary research in Sweden in the report *Mångfaldig litteraturforskning* (Vetenskapsrådet 2014, *Diverse research in literature*). The evaluation was based on the PhD dissertations produced at Swedish universities and the applications for funding submitted to the Swedish Research Council and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation) in the ten-year-period preceding the survey, and the primary goal was to identify development patterns, not to evaluate the quality of individual projects, publications or research environments. The assessment was expected to provide material for continued discussions about research policies, funding, results, publication patterns and overall research conditions, not only for literature but for the humanities generally.

The material comprises both research conducted in the subject of (Comparative) Literature and in the literature branches of the various language disciplines, although in the latter case, only dissertations from the period 2008–2014 have been included. One of the conclusions is that the research landscape is fragmented, not least because the field is still dominated by individual projects concerned with single works (Vetenskapsrådet 2014: 11). Another observation is that Swedish research in literature is conducted in a variety of departmental frameworks and must ‘be viewed as an interdisciplinary field, in terms of methodological conventions and content’ (Vetenskapsrådet 2014: 16). To respond to and further this development, institutions are recommended to work strategically to promote collaboration and counteract research individualism (Vetenskapsrådet 2014: 11, 40). Solo projects—that is, the kind of studies that seem to be the norm—are discouraged but given the absence of external control of humanities research and the dearth of funding for PhD students within larger collaborative projects, such recommendations seem to have had a limited effect. An exception is the previously mentioned proliferation of research schools as the preferred organisation of PhD studies.

Interdisciplinary approaches, collaboration and international and national networks are thus identified as revitalisation strategies (Vetenskapsrådet 2014: 11, 40). Strong research nodes with particular responsibility for certain aspects of the discipline could be another strategy. A pertinent finding in the report is that at the larger universities,

staff is predominantly recruited among former PhD students whereas smaller institutions recruit more broadly (42). If there is a local research cluster or distinct profile, such a procedure should strengthen the group, in time perhaps resulting in world-leading status.

The Swedish Research Council also regularly commissions reports describing the current position of research and forecasting developments over the following five to ten years, with policy recommendations to promote and strengthen research in the given area. The authors of the ‘Research overview 2019: Humanities and social sciences’ acknowledge that

Strong research environments cannot exist everywhere within all areas. Not least for broad-based programmes that are offered at large number of HEIs across the country, better collaboration between research teams, teacher teams and HEIs is needed to achieve [a] well-functioning research connection. With increased profiling of HEIs, measures must simultaneously be taken to maintain the necessary subject width to safeguard the connection to education. (Vetenskapsrådet 2020: 23)

A key issue here is how ‘subject width’ should be understood and how it can be maintained either if a culture of narrow specialisation continues to develop or in relation to increasing demands on interdisciplinarity. For a subject where undergraduate teaching is a central concern this is not an idle question. At the same time, it could be argued that the principle of academic freedom inevitably leads to the loss of certain knowledge areas to make room for new ones. A case in point is the rapid growth of English and education as a sub-field alongside English linguistics and English literature, following or paralleling the establishment of the Committee for Educational Sciences at the Swedish Research Council in 2001. A result has been the inclusion of pedagogy and educational sciences as part of the PhD course packages, but at the expense or at least reduction of areas and subjects previously regarded as essential, like language history or historical literature courses.

The gradual loss of the historical dimension is discernible in the PhD dissertation topics from the last two decades. Of the 103 doctoral theses in English literary studies retrieved from Swepub and Libris for the period 2000 to 2019, the overwhelming majority treat twentieth- or twenty-first-century material (Table 2).⁷

⁷ Again, the number is based on dissertations registered in these systems and is not exhaustive, although most of the PhD theses should be included.

Table 2. Number of Swedish PhD dissertations relating to different historical periods in English literature 2000-2019

The Middle Ages	16 th and 17 th century	18 th century	19 th century	20 th and 21 st century	Thematic studies
4	3	3	18	70	5

A little more than half of the studies, 60 dissertations, were completed between 2000 and 2009, and to judge by the specific dissertation topics, there are no dramatic developments regarding the choice of writers and periods for study in comparison with earlier decades. Although a majority of the studies deal with twentieth-century material, most of the investigations concern canonised writers and there is some chronological diversity, with literature from the Middle Ages onwards represented. In terms of genre, prose dominates, and there is a slight increase of studies of popular literature as well as greater interest in literature from countries outside Great Britain and the United States, but there are also studies of drama, as well as treatises of medieval and Modernist poetry. The clearest tendency is a development towards contextual modes of criticism centred on social or political theories, which is in line with international trends (North 2017). New Critical close reading is no longer the preferred procedure, but has been replaced by approaches that highlight the social relevance of literature. Instead of studies concerned with the workings of text, there is a move towards thematic investigations such as the representation of gender, power, ethnicity, family, childhood, religion, trauma, ecology and education. A mix of theories is employed, many of them from fields like gender studies, human geography and sociology. These choices largely correspond to Bo Ekelund's findings regarding the use of foreign critical sources in Swedish PhD dissertations in literature (Sw. litteraturvetenskap) 1980–2005, where the emergent theoretical pole in the period draws on 'Anglo-American feminism, social theory and historical-cultural theories of the novel, centered on socio-historical problematics' (2016: 66).⁸ Judging by the dissertations in English

⁸ The other two poles identified by Ekelund are the dominant pole of 'German idealism and French poststructuralism, centered on the problematics of

literature 2000–2019, this ‘pole of secular critique and particularity’ has moved from emergent in the period studied by Ekelund to ‘dominant’ (Ekelund 2016: 66).

The theoretical developments go hand in hand with a move towards genre studies like *The Dynamic Detective: Special Interest and Seriality in Contemporary Detective Series* (Molander Danielsson 2002) and studies of groups of works like *Subject and History in Selected Works by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, and David Dabydeen* (Falk 2007) and *The Sacrificial Child in Maori Literature: Narratives of Redemption by Keri Hulme, Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, and Alan Duff* (Andersson 2008). The latter examples also demonstrate the growing interest in literatures outside England and the United States. Only rarely are there examples of comparative studies of literature from more than one language, geographical region or period. Some more traditional, intra-literary analyses of style and narrative technique are performed, mainly in relation to poetry or Modernist writing as in *The Orphic Voice: T. S. Eliot and the Mallarmean Quest for Meaning* (Strandberg 2002), but in the main, the role of external factors like biographical or historical context seems to have superseded aesthetic questions.

Although developments remain uneven in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the preference for modern and contemporary literature is strengthened. It seems that many PhD students are moving towards investigating their own cultural practices or at least those prevalent in contemporary society, where literature is produced and consumed in new ways. A wider definition of literature accommodates topics that veer towards media studies and digital humanities. There is, for example, growing interest in new genres and cultural forms such as science fiction and fantasy or film and TV that did not form part of the subject before cultural studies began to gain ground. Examples include Stefan Ekman’s explorations of settings in fantasy literature and Claudia Weber’s study of TV experiences in novels, a reverse of the concept ‘novelisation’ (Ekman 2010; Weber 2014). A few new research areas are surfacing, particularly digital literature, eco-criticism and world English literatures, as in Van Leavenworth’s study of interactive gothic fiction, Marinette Grimbeek’s eco-critical reading of Margaret Atwood’s

metaphysics’ and the residual pole of ‘studies of myths and religion, centered on the problematics of a universal anthropology’ (2016: 66).

Maddadam trilogy and Snezana Vuletic's investigation of differing representations of Igbo identities in the production of some Nigerian writers (Leavenworth 2010; Grimbeek 2017, Vuletic 2018). Thematic studies of novelistic prose dominates almost completely, but there is some interest in Modernist and contemporary poetry and a couple of studies of, or relating to, Renaissance drama like Anna Lindhé's tracing of the King Lear motif in some contemporary American novels and Eric Pudney's study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witchcraft drama (Lindhé 2010; Pudney 2016). Interest in modern drama is weak, possibly because a more logical home for such projects might be departments that specialise in drama, theatre and film studies (Göteborgs universitet 2020; Konstnärliga fakulteten, Lunds universitet 2014). There is no such organisational reason for the scarce attention to older poetry, however, and apart from Elisabeth Dellming's phenomenological study of Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are no registered dissertations produced in Sweden between 2010 and 2019 that deal with poetry from earlier centuries (Dellming 2014). The domination of prose studies is an international trend, and in this respect, Swedish PhD students do not differ from their peers.

A little less than a third of the dissertations between 2010 and 2019 deal with material written or published before 1940, but the distribution between periods is highly unbalanced. The eighteenth century and the pre-Victorian nineteenth century are not represented at all which means that a key period like Romanticism receives no attention. It is also rather surprising that there seems to be so little interest in the Middle Ages, given the huge popular fascination with pseudo-medieval fantasy and historical fiction and film. At the same time, the decline of pre-modern studies seems to have gone on across the humanities since the 1890s, including in the subject of History, according to a report commissioned by the Swedish Research Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Collstedt 2009: 19–21).

In terms of research output, the PhD dissertations are important tools for disciplinary renewal and potentially curricular development, but there is also a risk that syllabus needs are not fulfilled, and that, for example, overview courses in literary history are increasingly taught by non-specialists without current knowledge in the field. This is not unique to English literature, of course, and it is worth asking how and who will ensure the 'close links' between research, and courses and study programmes' prescribed in the Higher Education Act (1992:1434).

Advertising PhD positions within certain, pre-defined fields to secure competence provision is one alternative. Organising research schools with a subject focus rather than an interdisciplinary set-up would be another option. Given the international job market for English graduates it could also be possible to rely on an influx of teachers from abroad to fill any competence gaps or to set up national exchange schemes. Yet another possibility, and perhaps the one that seems most probable at present, is to allow new research to influence and reshape the curriculum and eventually the subject, and accept that certain periods, genres and writers have become obsolete or at least less relevant.

Curricular developments and curricular needs

At most Swedish universities offering undergraduate education in English, the first term is organised into 4 modules of 7.5 higher education credits each. One of these modules focuses on literature and introduces literary terms, criticism and theory by applying these tools and concepts to a selection of works. Apart from unspecified poetry and short stories provided by the department in question, the literature lists for first-term courses taught in 2020 at Lund, Linnaeus, Gothenburg, Karlstad, Stockholm, Uppsala, Mid-Sweden and Umeå universities contain modern literature from English-speaking countries across the world.⁹ The first-term focus on modern and near-contemporary literature has been the practice since the 1970s, but the inclusion of graphic fiction and literature from outside Great Britain or the United States is a more recent development. Örebro University offers a diachronic, thematic course on banned or controversial literature from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) to Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), but at the other universities, the emphasis is on English world literature from the latter half of the twentieth century and later.¹⁰

As Katherina Dodou shows in a survey of English literature syllabi in Sweden 2016, there seems to be great national consensus about the general organisation of undergraduate literary studies (2020: 266) but it is obvious that there is no consensus about single works. The different literature lists have remarkably few titles in common, although there are general

⁹ Information for Linköping University is not available.

¹⁰ At Mid-Sweden University, a course in world English literature is also offered during the second term.

similarities. Most universities include a play, but the only drama that occurs more than once is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), one of the times on a long-list from which the teacher and students are to select a number of works. Jeanette Winterson is the most frequently represented writer, with *Written on the body* (1992) occurring once and *Oranges are not the only fruit* (1985) three times, once as possible selection. Apart from *Oranges are not the only fruit*, the only work to appear more than once on a mandatory list is Arundhati Roy's *The god of small things* (1997). Other writers represented more than once are Chinua Achebe, Caryl Churchill, Moshin Hamid, Kazuo Ishiguro and Toni Morrison, either as possible selections or with different titles (see Appendix A). There are no direct correspondences between recent PhD projects and the course material, however, except for what could be described as expertise in the wider context of the selected works.

If the literature lists for the first-term courses seem eclectic, the choices for the second-term course are more conservative.¹¹ Several universities list a comprehensive anthology like *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* as mandatory course literature and although this does not give any specific information about actual course content, it at least suggests that the material consists of canonised writers and works. The second-term courses offered at Lund, Linnaeus, Gothenburg, Karlstad, Stockholm, Uppsala, Mid-Sweden and Umeå universities can be described as historical overview courses of literature and culture from the Middle Ages to the present, with an emphasis on the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to judge by the course literature. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Jane Austen's *Pride and prejudice* (1813) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) occur most frequently, and Charles Dickens is represented by three different titles (see Appendix B). Except when very recent writers and works are included, the combined list contains household names from literary history. Given the reduced time for course work in the PhD programmes and the dominance of dissertations on modern or contemporary literature, it is worth asking how far the historical parts of the curriculum is re-energised by new knowledge and how the research connection in undergraduate teaching is ensured. A research topic is rarely considered exhausted in the humanities, any new treatise instead

¹¹ At Uppsala University there are two different, seven-credit overview courses, one in American literature and one in British literature. The literature lists for these courses also include recent literary works.

regarded as a contribution to an on-going dialogue, which means that knowledge of historical periods is continually revisited and occasionally reframed, both as regards contextual information and new approaches to familiar material. An example is how the rise of eco-criticism has revitalised research in Romantic poetry and made it relevant in new ways. If historical courses are mainly taught by experts in modern and contemporary literature, a research-based revision and renewal of the content of the courses is more difficult to achieve.

The dissertation output of the last two decades suggests that Swedish PhD students as a group have ample special and contextual expertise in modern literature, often from geographical areas outside Europe and the United States. There is consequently a strong connection between first-term literature courses and current research. The same is true about third-term courses which are normally thematically organised and frequently based on or connected to the specific research interest of the teacher.¹² The teaching of older literature is not supported by new research to the same extent, however. Despite the interest in medieval culture fanned by fantasy literature, film and games, only a few studies concern the Middle Ages, and despite the centrality of Shakespeare, as evidenced by the second-term literature lists, the Renaissance period receives scant attention. To some extent the low numbers can be explained by the fact that English is taught as a foreign language in Sweden, and that tackling material written in earlier varieties of the language becomes too arduous a task in the four years allotted. Even so, without expertise in the specific language use, obsolete cultural phenomena, social habits and political contexts, literature from earlier historical periods becomes inaccessible and its influence on later literary developments might be lost. To evaluate the presentism that modern representations of previous centuries is prone to requires knowledge of historical works as products of their own time that neither the course packages of the PhD programmes nor the candidates' topic choices seem to supply.

¹² The literature lists for third-term courses in English literature vary greatly between universities and a comparison shows little more than that they differ from each other in terms of focus, selection and approach.

Dynamic development versus competence provision

The principle of individual topic choice appears to have influenced the knowledge base of English literature so that the subject in the twenty-first century is noticeably different from what it was in the middle of the twentieth century. One of the most striking differences is the strong social relevance of many topics, making the studies valuable not only for the discipline but more generally. Studies of contemporary material, including works published in non-traditional formats, are the rule, whereas previously, authors usually needed to be dead and their literary status confirmed before any study could commence. Present-day literary practices take precedence over perceptions of literary value, and thematic approaches supersede aesthetics. The focus of doctoral research is of great significance for disciplinary innovation and the organisation of the PhD programmes seems to ensure a dynamic or perhaps organic growth of the discipline that opens English literature to interdisciplinary collaboration and new cultural trends. At the same time there is a disjuncture between PhD students' choice of research topics and current curricular demands. Historical dimensions of the subject are losing ground, and it is doubtful that present syllabus needs can be fulfilled unless the research connection requirement is dropped or teachers are given substantial opportunities to master a new field and keep up with current research.

A dynamic, unregulated development has been the rule throughout the history of English at Swedish universities and has led to innovative changes of the undergraduate curriculum. In the past, extensive course packages in the PhD programmes have ensured a reasonably stable knowledge base, but in the current organisation, there is little room for wider reading. Together with the increasing focus on present-day literature in the PhD projects, the lack of historical orientation courses means that certain knowledge areas are beginning to be lost, both on the undergraduate and the graduate levels. Innovation and stability are precariously balanced. If English is to survive as a strong, academic discipline in Sweden, and not be reduced to an auxiliary subject, it is worth considering carefully what the research foundation of this discipline should look like.

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rapporter/2014-05-02-mangfaldig-litteraturforskning.html).
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studier-beslut-2020-03-04.pdf](https://www.oru.se/globalassets/oru-sv/utbildning/utbildning-pa-
forskarniva/allmanna-studieplaner/allman-studieplan-humanistiska-
studier-beslut-2020-03-04.pdf).
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1G?typ=kurs&accept=html&revision=3.0&sprak=sv).

Appendix A

Course literature for first-term English literature courses 7.5 credits, 2020. Titles marked with an asterisk (*) are listed as possible selections, i. e. not mandatory works.

- Abani, Christopher. 2004. *Graceland* – Uppsala University
- Acevedo, Elizabeth. 2018. *The Poet X* – Uppsala University*
- Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart* – Lund University
- Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart* – Örebro University*
- Alexie, Sherman. 2007. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* – Linnaeus University*
- Atwood, Margaret. 1985. *The Handmaid's Tale* – Uppsala University
- Bacigalupi, Paolo. 2009. *The Windup Girl* – Uppsala University*
- Barnes, Julian. 2011. *The Sense of an Ending* – Stockholm University
- Beckett, Samuel. 1952. *Waiting for Godot* – Linnaeus University*

- Bradbury, Ray. 1953. *Fahrenheit 451* – Örebro University*
- Bulawayo, NoViolet. 2014. *We Need New Names* – University of Gothenburg
- Butler, Octavia E. 1979. *Kindred* – Uppsala University*
- Card, Orson Scott. 1985. *Ender's Game* – Linnaeus University*
- Carter, Angela. 1979. 'The Bloody Chamber' – Lund University
- Churchill, Caryl. 1989. *Cloud 9* – University of Gothenburg
- Churchill, Caryl. 2002. *A Number* – Linnaeus University*
- Cisneros, Sandra. 1984. *The House on Mango Street* – Mid-Sweden University
- Coetzee, J. M. 1999. *Disgrace* – Lund University
- Cusk, Rachel. 2014. *Outline* – University of Gothenburg
- Delaney, Shelagh. 1959. *A Taste of Honey* – Linnaeus University*
- Friel, Brian. 1980. *Translations* – Uppsala University
- Gaiman, Neil. 2002. *Coraline* – Linnaeus University*
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1981. *July's People* – Örebro University*
- Greene, Graham. 1955. *The Quiet American* – Uppsala University
- Hamid, Mohsin. 2017. *Exit West* – Linnaeus University*
- Hamid, Mohsin. 2017. *Exit West* – Uppsala University
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. 1989. *The Remains of the Day* – Umeå University
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. 2005. *Never Let Me Go* – Linnaeus University*
- Jong, Erica. 1973. *Fear of Flying* – Örebro University*
- Kincaid, Jamaica. 1983. *Annie John* – Linnaeus University*
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2003. *The Namesake* – Mid-Sweden University
- Lawrence, D. H. 1915. *The Rainbow* – Örebro University*
- Lessing, Doris. 1988. *The Fifth Child* – Lund University
- Mac Laverly, Bernard. 1983. *Cal* – Mid-Sweden University
- Miller, Arthur. 1953. *The Crucible* – Linnaeus University*
- Miller, Arthur. 1953. *The Crucible* – Lund University
- Miller, Arthur. 1949. *Death of a Salesman* – Stockholm University
- Morrison, Toni. 1973. *Sula* – Umeå University
- Morrison, Toni. 1970. *The Bluest Eye* – Örebro University*
- Mtwa, Percy, Ngema, Mbongeni and Barney Simon. 1981. *Woza Albert!* – Umeå University
- North, Anna. 2015. *Life and Death of Sophie Stark* – Karlstad University
- Okorafor, Nnedi. 2008. *Lagoon* – Karlstad University
- Ondaatje, Michael. 1987. *In the Skin of a Lion* – Umeå University
- Otsuka, Julie. 2011. *The Buddha in the Attic* – Linnaeus University*

- Parks, Suzan-Lori. 2001. *Topdog/Underdog* – Karlstad University
Pinter, Harold. 1957. *The Birthday Party* – Stockholm University
Plath, Sylvia. 1963. *The Bell Jar* – Linnaeus University*
Priestley, J. B. 1945. *An Inspector Calls* – Linnaeus University*
Robinson, Marilynne. 1980. *Housekeeping* – Uppsala University
Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The God of Small Things* – Karlstad University
Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The God of Small Things* – Umeå University
Silko, Leslie Marmon. 2011. *Ceremony* – University of Gothenburg
Spiegelman, Art. 2006. *The Complete Maus* – Karlstad University
Stevenson, Robert Louis. 1886. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
– University of Gothenburg
Swift, Jonathan. 1729. *A Modest Proposal and Other Writings* – Örebro
University*
Twain, Mark. 1884. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – Örebro
University*
Wilde, Oscar. 1895. *The Importance of Being Ernest and Other Plays* –
Örebro University*
Williams, Tennessee. 1944. *The Glass Menagerie* – Linnaeus University*
Winterson, Jeanette. 1985. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* – Linnaeus
University*
Winterson, Jeanette. 1985. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* – Lund
University
Winterson, Jeanette. 1985. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* – Stockholm
University
Winterson, Jeanette. 1992. *Written on the Body* – Uppsala University*
Woolf, Virginia. 1928. *Orlando* – Örebro University*
Yang, Gene Luen and Lark Pien. 2006. *American Born Chinese* – Uppsala
University*

Appendix B

Course literature for second-term English literature courses 7–10 credits,
2020.

- Austen, Jane 1813. *Pride and Prejudice* – Karlstad University
Austen, Jane. 1813. *Pride and Prejudice* – Lund University
Austen, Jane. 1813. *Pride and Prejudice* – Umeå University
Behn Aphra. 1688. *Oronooko* – Umeå University

- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. 1862. *Lady Audley's Secret* – Uppsala University
- Brontë, Charlotte. 1847. *Jane Eyre* – University of Gothenburg
- Brontë, Emily. 1847. *Wuthering Heights* – Mid-Sweden University
- Carroll, Lewis. 1865. *Alice in Wonderland* – Uppsala University
- Cather, Willa. 1918. *My Ántonia* – Umeå University
- Chopin, Kate. 1899. *The Awakening* – Karlstad University
- Chopin, Kate. 1899. *The Awakening* – Mid-Sweden University
- Crane, Stephen. 1894. *The Red Badge of Courage* – Uppsala University
- Defoe, Daniel. 1719. *Robinson Crusoe* – Linnaeus University
- DeLillo, Don. 1985. *White Noise* – Uppsala University
- Dickens, Charles. 1843. *A Christmas Carol* – Umeå University
- Dickens, Charles. 1854. *Hard Times* – Karlstad University
- Dickens, Charles. 1860-61. *Great Expectations* – Lund University
- Faulkner, William. 1930. *As I Lay Dying* – Uppsala University
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. 1925. *The Great Gatsby* – Mid-Sweden University
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. 1848. *Mary Barton* – Stockholm University
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1850. *The Scarlet Letter* – University of Gothenburg
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1850. *The Scarlet Letter* – Umeå University
- Melville, Herman. *Benito Cereno*. – Linnaeus University
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar: A Novel* – Uppsala University
- Salinger, Jerome David. *The Catcher in the Rye* – Uppsala University
- Shakespeare, William. 1606. *Macbeth* – Lund University
- Shakespeare, William. 1606. *Macbeth* – Mid-Sweden University
- Shakespeare, William. 1606. *Macbeth* – Umeå University
- Shakespeare, William. 1606. *Macbeth* – Uppsala University
- Shakespeare, William. 1611. *The Tempest* – University of Gothenburg
- Shelley, Mary. 1818. *Frankenstein* – University of Gothenburg
- Shelley, Mary. 1818. *Frankenstein* – Linnaeus University
- Shelley, Mary. 1818. *Frankenstein* – Stockholm University
- Swift, Jonathan. 1726. *Gulliver's Travels IV* – Umeå University
- Talbot, Bryan. 2007. *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* – Uppsala University
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1969. *Slaughterhouse-five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-dance with Death* – Uppsala University
- Walpole, Horace. 1764. *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* – Karlstad University

- Ward, Jesmyn. 2017. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* – Uppsala University
Wharton, Edith. 1911. *Ethan Frome* – Uppsala University
Wilde, Oscar. 1890. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – Karlstad University
Woolf, Virginia. 1925. *Mrs Dalloway* – Karlstad University
Woolf, Virginia. 1925. *Mrs Dalloway* – Linnaeus University
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