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Effects of Accountability

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DOI:

[10.6084/m9.figshare.4246307.v1](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.4246307.v1)

2016

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nästesjö, J. (2016). *Effects of Accountability: How performance-based evaluation systems affect research practices, publication practices, disciplinary norms, and the subjectivation of scholars at the faculties of Humanities & Theology at Lund University*. Poster session presented at 21st Nordic Workshop on Bibliometrics and Research Policy, Copenhagen, Denmark. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.4246307.v1>

Total number of authors:

1

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Effects of Accountability

How performance-based evaluation systems affect research practices, publication practices, disciplinary norms, and the subjectivation of scholars at the faculties of Humanities & Theology at Lund University

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Introduction

In order to enhance the accountability and legitimacy of public research, performance-based research funding systems (PRFS) have been introduced in numerous countries during the last decades. Although this development has gathered considerable interest in recent years, it is thus far not clear how performance measures shape research practices and academic subjectivity.

This study investigates how scholars at the faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University respond to the implementation of a PRFS. The aim is to provide an in-depth study of how research practices, disciplinary norms, and academic subjectivity is affected by the increased role of bibliometric measurement in research evaluation.

Background

The current model for evaluating research in Sweden was introduced in 2009 and the bibliometric part of this model uses normalized citation scores from Web of Science. The system was intentionally constructed to provide “strong incitements to increase activity on the global publication market” (SOU 2007:81:418).

Mixed-methods approach

- The publication database LUP (*Lund University Publications*) was used to extract data on publications patterns of scholars at the faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University between 2002 and 2014.
- 11 qualitative interviews with humanities scholars was conducted. The informants differ in disciplinary backgrounds as well as academic age.

Quantitative Results

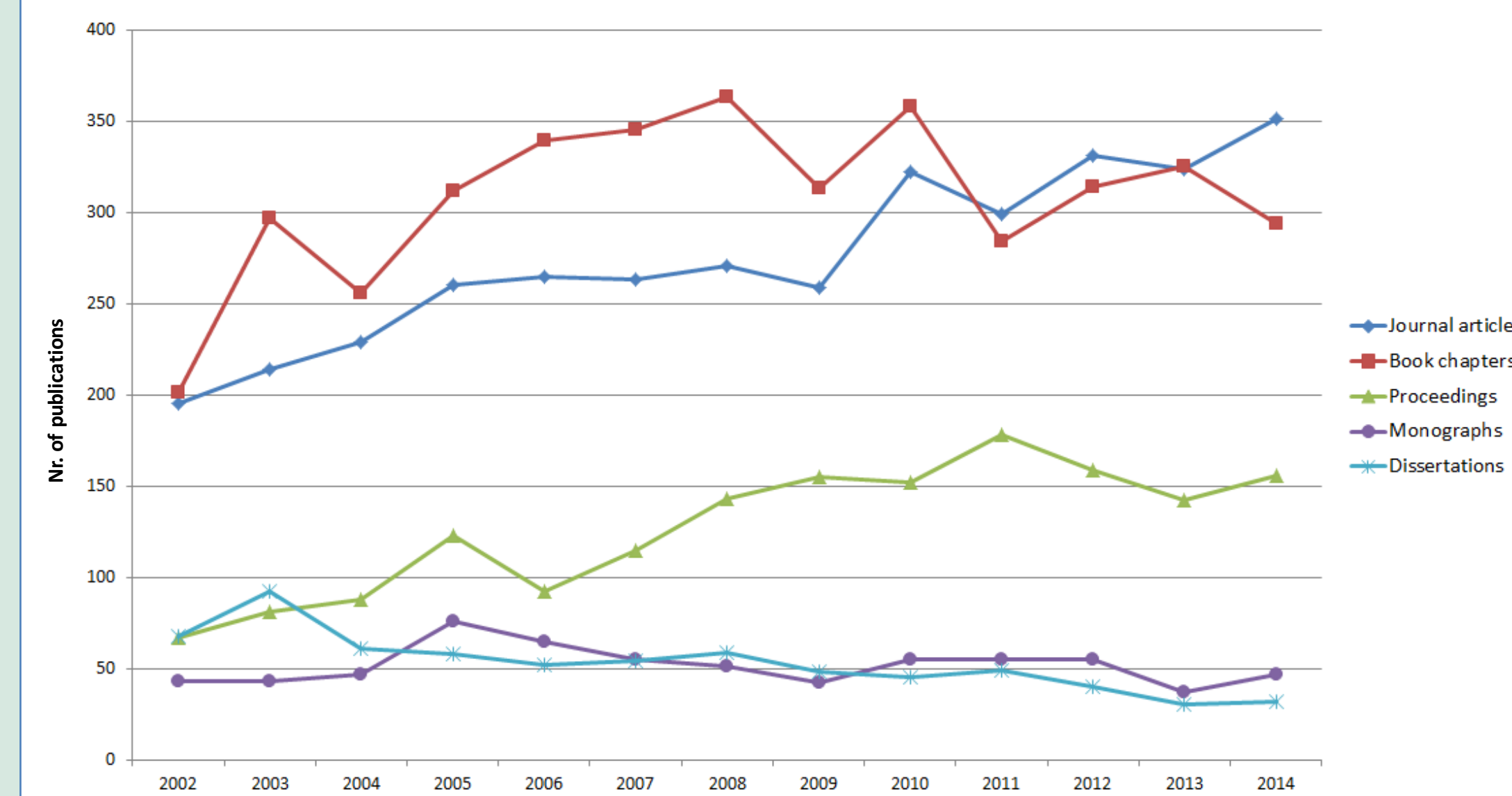


Figure 1. Publication channels used by scholars at the faculties of Humanities and Theology, 2002-2014.

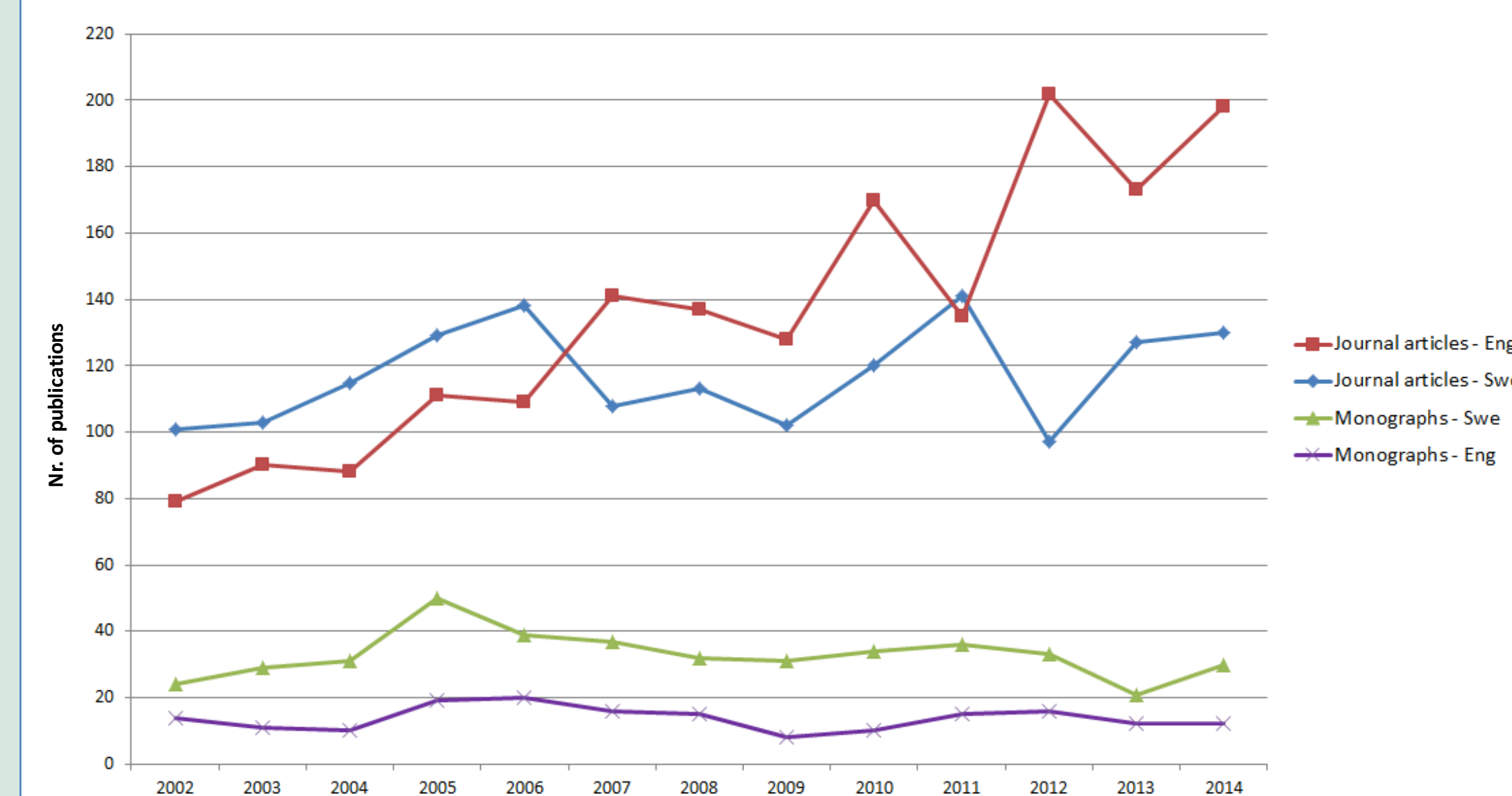


Figure 2. The amount of journal articles and monographs written in Swedish and English, 2002-2014.

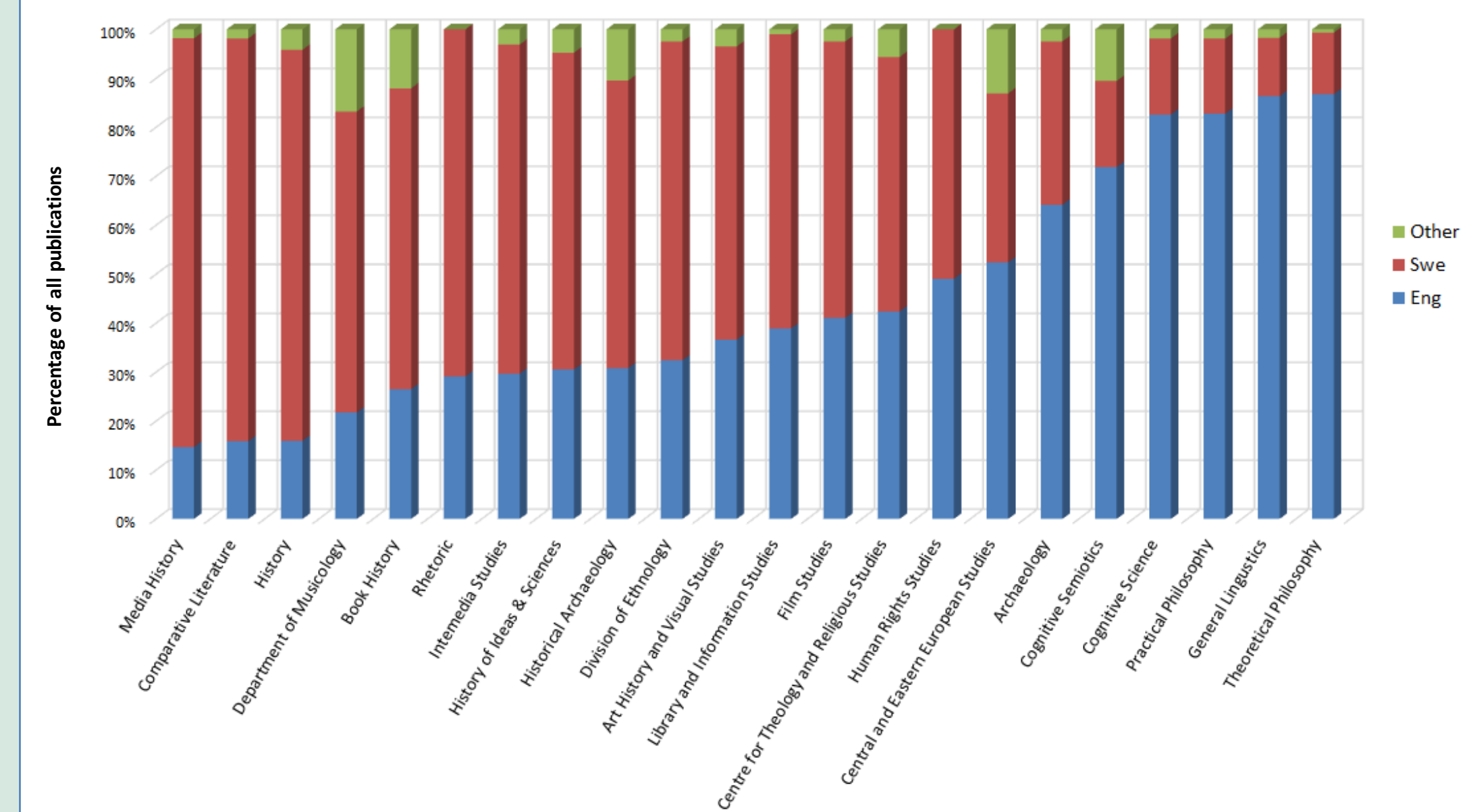


Figure 3. The proportion of publications written in English and Swedish in Humanities disciplines, 2002-2014.

Qualitative Results

Disciplinary differences

In my discipline, almost everyone writes a thesis by publication, and when you have finished, it is journal articles that matters. [...] And the language is not really a choice, it is English.

Junior scholar 6.

There is a strong conflict with new norms coming from other disciplines, because this creates different hierarchies and different valuations of what good research is. In my discipline, we have a strong tradition that a monograph written in Swedish is more valued than an article written in English, but in this new merit system it is not – and that is a very strong conflict.

Established scholar 4.

The academic career

From a career perspective, international publications are something that you must have. [...] Without international publications, you do not stand a chance.

Junior scholar 2.

To publish in English is a much greater merit than to publish in Swedish. A successful scholar today is an international oriented scholar. [...] It gives you a different kind of status.

Established scholar 4.

There is a pressure to publish as much as possible in as short time as possible. [...] Regarding this, the academic system has undergone great changes during the last decades.

Established scholar 5.

To play the (bibliometric) game

My experience is that this [the use of bibliometric indicators] is something that is primarily discussed among younger scholars who are thinking about how to survive in academia. [...] If you are in this system, you better learn how to play the game.

Junior scholar 2.

There is a great strategic awareness about how to publish and how to qualify yourself using metrics. [...] The conditions are not the same for junior and senior scholars. Junior scholars must to a much greater extent be flexible and cope with new norms coming from other disciplines.

Junior scholar 3.

Junior scholar: 0-10 years in academia, no permanent employment (6 informants).

Established scholar: 15 years and more in academia, permanent employment (5 informants).

Conclusions

- While publication patterns from 2002 to 2014 depicts a series of gradual changes that are in line with the incentives of the evaluation system under study, no radical shift in publication practices can be detected. Thus, it seems as the evaluation system primarily strengthens already existing tendencies in the academic field.
- Disciplinary differences, career stage and academic age are important factors in understanding how evaluation systems can affect research practices and academic subjectivity.
- The use of bibliometric indicators in research evaluation does not only evoke a conflict between disciplinary norms and external demands, but also affect the disciplinary norms as such by constituting a powerful discourse of what a good academic subject is. This is particularly applicable for international publications, which the informants perceive as a hierarchical mechanism in research assessment, essential to their future career.
- This career driven mind-set, comprehended as a survival driven mind-set, impels humanities scholars to adapt to dominant trends in academia; trends that are enhanced by the implementation of an evaluation system unilaterally defining researcher’s achievements and professional subjectivity in terms of international publications.
- The study demonstrates that evaluation systems and performance indicators exists as an instrument of governmentality, producing a field of realities that scholars must act upon as they constitute themselves as a good and successful academic subject.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Fredrik Åström, Lund University Library.