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Reading Promotion in Swedish Academic Libraries

Abstract

The aim of this study is to discern to what extent, and for what reasons, Swedish academic libraries engage in reading promotion, aiming to increase leisure reading. Based mainly on a survey directed at Swedish academic libraries, the study maps the proportion of libraries involved in reading promotion of any kind, how these activities are designed, who their target groups are, and what arguments are made for engaging—or not engaging—in such work. Theoretically, the study draws on Carol Bacchi's WPR-analysis. By analyzing the motivations behind reading promotion activities, for example the "proposed solutions", the study seeks to uncover the implied "problems" they are intended to address. The results show that 60% of Swedish university libraries engage in reading promotion. Most commonly, this involves the display of fiction in various ways. Many libraries organize book clubs. When asked why they promote reading, respondents most frequently cited declining reading skills among students as the primary reason. This decline is perceived as negatively affecting academic literacy and increasing the risk of student dropout. Another key argument is the desire to foster a broader educational ideal—one that emphasizes holistic student development, in which fiction and reading for pleasure have a meaningful role. Among 40% of universities do not engage in reading promotion, and the most common reason given was that the issue has simply never been raised for discussion. A lack of time and resources was also cited as a contributing factor in a significant number of cases.

Keywords: reading promotion, academic libraries, sweden, mixed methods-study, survey, wpr-analysis, leisure reading

Introduction

In a debate article, published on the 29th of April 2025, 21 Swedish academic library directors argue for reading promotion becoming a core mission for academic libraries (*Biblioteksbladet* 2025-04-29). As reading, in particular the declining reading abilities amongst young people and students, are defined as a societal challenge, academic libraries should be part of the solution and pursue reading

promotion activities, the library directors argue. While public libraries have a long tradition working with reading promotion, academic libraries have not. Traditionally academic libraries have focused on supporting skills in relation to information literacy and academic writing. However, to what extent reading promotion activities exist in academic libraries is not well known. As the debate article and international research indicates there seems to be a shift where reading promotion activities have become more common in academic libraries in recent years (Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Camargo-Rojas, 2024). The question is how Swedish academic libraries have responded to this trend. To what extent has it reached Sweden? This article presents results from a mixed methods study, mainly based on data from a survey of how widespread reading promotion activities are today at Swedish academic libraries and what reading promotion activities are carried out. The overall aim of the article is to discern to what extent and why Swedish academic libraries engage in activities explicitly aimed at reading promotion. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. *How are the reading promotion activities structured in practice—what do they entail, and who are the target groups?*
2. *For academic libraries that do not organize reading promotion activities, what arguments are used to justify this position?*

Furthermore, by analyzing responses in the survey, the article discusses the assumptions the reading promotion activities rely upon to understand the motivation behind having or not having reading promotion in academic libraries.

Previous Research

Historically, reading promotion is not new in academic libraries. Scholarly literature has documented related activities in the North American context since the 1920s (Brookbank et al., 2018; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Rathe & Blankenship, 2006). The trend declined in the 1950s due to reduced budgets, an increased demand for scientific publications, a diminished emphasis on reading promotion in library science departments, and the belief that books would become less important with new technologies (Dewan, 2010; Elliott, 2007).

This negative perception began to shift at the start of the 21st century, with a resurgence of reading promotion activities in North American academic libraries (Dali & McNiff, 2019; Dali & McNiff, 2020). Since then, the literature has recorded similar efforts in the UK (Gladwin & Goulding, 2012), Spain (Sánchez-García & Yubero, 2015), Greece (Michailidis, 2024), Latin America (Franco et al., 2024; González & Martínez, 2017; Ramírez & Ibáñez, 2017), Ukraine (Kolesnykova & Demidko, 2023), South Africa (Bangani, 2024), the Philippines (Flores & Soriente, 2023), Sri Lanka (Perera & Somaratna, 2024) and Türkiye (Kavak & Feride Kop, 2025). In China, such programs have recently grown in response to state policies promoting reading (Zhou, 2024). Although these activities are documented in the scholarly literature, international organizations such as International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and American Library Association (ALA) do not include reading promotion within the official mission of academic libraries (Camargo-Rojas, 2025). When they do exist, such initiatives are often short-lived, lack dedicated staff, and are not aligned with institutional strategic plans (Camargo-Rojas, 2024).

The literature suggests that one reason for this is the traditional view among library staff that associates reading promotion with public and school libraries. From this perspective, the primary role of academic libraries is to support the institution's curricular and research needs, rendering extracurricular services or collections unnecessary (Dewan, 2013; Sánchez-García & Santos-Recuenco, 2014). Surveys and interviews conducted with library staff in 2002 (Odess-Harnish, 2002), 2009 (Elliott, 2009), 2010 (Gilbert & Fister, 2010), 2012 (Diers & Simpson, 2012; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012), and 2018 (Brookbank et al., 2018) reveal concerns that promoting recreational reading could

undermine their image as information specialists and associate them too closely with public librarianship (Elliott, 2007). These concerns often underlie arguments about budget constraints, staffing shortages, or lack of staff interest (Elliott, 2009).

According to the literature, this perception stems from two key factors: the information science orientation of library professionals and a dominant view of reading as a purely instrumental activity. Within the information science framework, reading for pleasure or personal growth is viewed as secondary to information retrieval (Van-Fleet, 2003), leading to a marginalization of reading studies in academic research (Dali, 2015a). Furthermore, the structure and training of academic library staff are usually anchored in a utilitarian concept of reading focused on academic study (Ramírez, 2015).

However, some researchers view reading promotion in a more positive light, considering it a valuable means of supporting the core functions of universities and benefiting both users and libraries (Camargo-Rojas, 2024). Several studies advocate for academic libraries to play a significant role in promoting recreational and critical reading (Dewan, 2013; Nicholson, 2012; Ramírez, 2015; Sánchez-García & Yubero, 2015; Van-Fleet, 2003; Ding, 2019; Xu, 2018). They argue that libraries are well-positioned to offer leisure reading collections, dedicated reading spaces, and activities that encourage dialogue and engagement with non-academic texts (Sánchez-García, 2019). Ultimately, these authors contend that reading promotion should be recognized as a core function of academic libraries (Sánchez-García & Santos-Recuenco, 2012).

In this context, reading promotion can support universities' missions—teaching, research, and extension—in novel ways. In teaching, such initiatives are seen as supporting pedagogical goals and surpassing them (Smith & Young, 2008). According to Sánchez-García et al. (2010), developing reading skills is essential to holistic education, and libraries should nurture these abilities to contribute meaningfully to that goal. They also argue that these services meet both the educational and recreational needs of students. Dali and McNiff (2020) highlight that universities' growing focus on student well-being and the education of the "whole person" may be the argument for promoting recreational reading, even if such initiatives are not necessarily tied to tangible educational benefits and goals.

Regarding the extension function, some researchers argue that academic libraries should serve both teaching and research and a social and cultural role (Sanders, 2005; Zou et al., 2021). Torres (2005) asserts that academic libraries can act as cultural and scientific forums, supporting holistic education through recreational reading.

Moreover, leisure reading collections and activities may increase library foot traffic, help reduce academic attrition, enhance library visibility, and improve the public perception of academic libraries (Brookbank et al., 2018; Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Dewan, 2013; Elliott, 2007; Nicholson, 2012; Parlette & Howard, 2010; Sievert et al., 2018). They also help users adapt to academic library services and integrate into campus life (Bosman et al., 2008; Dewan, 2013; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Lackner et al., 2023; Reno, 2017), foster a sense of belonging (Gauder et al., 2007), and increase the library's interaction with its community (Kavak & Feride Kop, 2025). Addressing the community's need for lifelong recreational reading services shifts the perception of reading from being purely utilitarian to a more holistic, ongoing practice. This evolution can reposition the library as an organization responsive to diverse individual needs (Brookbank, 2018; Dewan, 2010), as a social and cultural center (Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Kavak & Feride Kop, 2025), and help reduce lingering skepticism toward such services (Mack Freeman et al., 2023).

Arguments in favor of reading promotion in academic libraries also reference pedagogical studies that highlight the importance of fostering leisure reading habits in university populations. These studies

show that not all students arrive with established reading habits and that an instrumental view of reading predominates among the various reading profiles (Applegate et al., 2014; Brookbank, 2023; Elche et al., 2021; Jarvio Fernández & Ojeda, 2018; Nicolosi & Reiter, 2024; Sánchez-García, 2019; Yubero & Larrañaga, 2015).

There is growing recognition of the value of recreational reading in developing reading habits, lifelong learning, and overall well-being. Studies have shown that reading for pleasure fosters the reading habit (Larrañaga, 2004; Camargo-Rojas, 2025)—critical for university students due to its correlation with reading competence and academic development (Elche et al., 2018; Gallik, 1999; Lee et al., 2014; Martin-Chang et al., 2021)—, lifelong learning (Buyukgoze, 2023), second-language acquisition (Beglar et al., 2011; Bordonaro, 2011), and the promotion of humanistic thinking (Dali & Dilevko, 2006; Watson, 2015). It also helps reduce symptoms of stress (Watson, 2015), anxiety (Biswas, 2023; Levine et al., 2022), and depression, while contributing to personal enrichment (Brookbank, 2023), general health and well-being (Haslam, et al., 2024), more satisfying leisure experiences and a deeper sense of social commitment (Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Caride et al., 2018), and promoting cultural and aesthetic experiences (Franco et al., 2024; Lingmei et al., 2024). Therefore, the need to promote recreational reading in the university environment is clear for some researchers who believe academic libraries are well-positioned to play a key role in this effort.

The academic literature also underscores the challenges of sustaining reading promotion initiatives. To be successful, such programs should be integrated into library policy and strategic planning (Banou et al., 2008; Dali, 2015b; Sánchez-García & Yubero, 2015; Camargo-Rojas, 2025). There is also a need for more research on the reading behavior of university communities (Banou et al., 2008; Dali & McNiff, 2020), the presence of properly trained staff (Dali, 2015b; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Meléndez, 2024; Flores & Soriente, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2022), the inclusion of diversity-oriented approaches (Dali & McNiff, 2020; Ramírez, 2015), and the integration of reading promotion with information literacy (Zhou, 2024) as well as with other university units and external institutions (Camargo-Rojas, 2025).

The international literature shows that although reading promotion was once perceived negatively in academic libraries, this view is shifting. Libraries around the world are increasingly recognizing the recreational reading needs of their communities, aligning with a broader focus on user experience and holistic education. Although the international research in this area is fairly extensive, it is almost exclusively concerned with studies of various types of local initiatives and projects. Broader investigations—such as national overviews or cross-country comparisons—are lacking. There is just one study that made a survey to 49.5% of UK libraries (Gladwin & Goulding, 2012), and a survey made by the Network of Spanish University and Scientific Libraries to 39 Spanish academic libraries (Rebiun, 2018).

Moreover, there is almost a complete absence of research focusing on Swedish conditions. Swedish research is limited to Andrén (2024) who analyzes a book club program organized by the Malmö University Library for students in selected degree programs, drawing on interviews with participants and librarians. Bakker (2015), in a bachelor's thesis, examines the role of fiction in Swedish academic libraries, using interviews with library staff.

It should, however, be mentioned that some literature also exists, focusing on literary activities integrated into higher education — especially within certain professionally oriented programs — but mostly without direct ties to the academic libraries. In 2001, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education conducted an evaluation of the so-called core curriculum courses, particularly those within the business law program at Jönköping University. These courses did not include subject-specific literature but a range of other texts, including fiction, with the aim of broadening students'

perspectives on knowledge and cultural literacy (Agéll, 2001; see also Alsheimer, 2004). Recent Swedish research in this area includes, for instance, Rydén Gramner (2022) on the use of fiction in medical education, and Berhardsson and Törnqvist (2022) on literature discussions in medical education and creative writing programs using the Shared Reading method (a particular method for group-discussions of fiction).

In summary, this study addresses a gap in existing research on academic libraries and reading promotion in two distinct ways. First, it focuses on the Swedish context. The previously mentioned debate article by 21 library directors advocating for enhanced reading promotion initiatives at Swedish academic libraries, together with the fact that a national workshop on reading promotion in academic libraries was held for the first time at Malmö University Library in 2024, indicates a growing interest in this issue in Sweden. This development underscores the need for further research on Swedish conditions and how it dialogues with previous research. Second, the study adopts a comprehensive perspective, seeking to map the situation across the entire Swedish higher education library system. Very few international studies have taken such a broad, nationwide approach to this issue.

Theoretical Framework and Concept Definitions

In light of previous research one key question is what we define as *reading promotion*? Focus in this article are activities that aim to stimulate leisure reading — e.g., different kinds of reading activities that people engage in voluntarily in their free time. We refrain from a more precise definition of reading promotion and have instead chosen to examine the concept of reading promotion empirically, where the aim of the article is to understand how academic libraries perceive and define reading promotion. Our theoretical approach has been inspired by Carol Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR). Bacchi's WPR-analysis provides a framework for examining how problems are constructed and addressed in policy and practice. We draw in particular from the concept "problem representation", a key term when conducting WPR-analysis. It refers "to the form of a problematization or the problematized phenomenon in a specific site" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 17) and can be used to understand how issues are problematized.

In relation to the study at hand the concept can be explained as follows: What academic libraries propose to do about reading indicates what they think needs to change and what they think the "problem" concerning reading is. Through analyzing their motivation for carrying out reading promotion, e.g., their "proposed solutions", we can understand the implied "problems" (see Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 18–19) that reading promotion in an academic library context aims to solve. It has therefore been pertinent to critically analyze the arguments underpinning the decision to have or not have reading promotion activities in academic libraries. To frame our discussions about reading and reading promotion in a wider societal and political context, we draw on Åse Hedemark's and Linnéa Lindsköld's study of reading politics in Sweden from 1945 until present time (2025).

Methodology

This study is based on a survey directed at the libraries of Swedish universities and university colleges. We used the Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ) official list of institutions authorized to award academic degrees (UKÄ, 2025) as our starting point. From this list of 49 institutions, we selected the 38, where the library director is part of the library network connected to The Expert Group for Higher Education Libraries (Expertgruppen för lärosätesbiblioteken) within the Association for Swedish higher education institutions (SUHF), a collaborative organization. The goal was to include all large universities and university colleges. The universities that do not participate in the library network are all very small and specialized, with comparatively limited library resources.

The result of the selection was that all 18 Swedish universities, all 12 major university colleges, 4 of the 5 university colleges of the arts, and 4 of the 14 small, specialized higher education providers were included in the study. In this context, it should be noted that all higher education institutions in Sweden are state-owned, with the exception of two universities and one major university college, which are foundation-governed, and the small specialized providers, which are mostly privately owned. Higher education in Sweden is tuition-free, and even the foundation- and privately-owned institutions mainly receive some public funding. Almost all Swedish university colleges call themselves universities in English, although they officially are not. However, we have chosen to use the word university for all institutions included in this study.

The library directors at the selected institutions were contacted via email and received information about the survey along with a link to the questionnaire. The survey had 19 questions and was administered through Uppsala University's digital survey tool, "Kurt". It remained open for three weeks in March 2025, and by the end of the response period, all universities and major university colleges had completed the survey; in total we got 44 answers from 35 universities. Libraries are organized in slightly different ways at different universities. In some cases, there is a very decentralized library organization, and therefore in two cases we received several answers from the same university. Two of the included university colleges of the arts and one other, very small, specialized and privately-owned university college did not respond. This corresponds to a response rate of 92%, which must be considered an excellent result. All responding universities are listed in Appendix 1. The survey was conducted in Swedish; Appendix 2 contains an English translation of the questionnaire. As can be seen, a few questions were open-ended, and respondents had ample opportunity to provide their own comments in addition to the predefined response options. This allowed for some qualitative analysis.

Apart from the survey, which gave a picture of the situation in spring 2025, Swedish library statistics also provided some information to the study, making it possible to study changes in reading promotion initiatives, over time. The statistical data are collected annually by the National Library of Sweden, compiled by Statistics Sweden (SCB), and made freely available as an excel-file through the National Library's website. Since 2015, the statistics include information on the various types of activities organized by academic libraries. We picked out the activities relevant for our study, collected figures on a national level for the years 2015–2024 and presented them in table 2.

Only two universities have produced any written documentation concerning their reading promotion activities, that we were able to use in our study (Fröberg, 2021; Fröjd, Tejera, & Mogensen, 2024). However, in three cases there were some valuable information on the university websites (Stockholm School of Economics; Linnaeus University; Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences). Finally, we also received information from Sara Kjellberg, Library Director at Malmö University, regarding the conference on reading promotion in academic libraries, organized by the Malmö University Library in November 2024. She also provided us with a list of the members of the library network connected to the Expert Group for Higher Education Libraries in SUHF, including contact details to the representatives from all member universities, which we could use to inform them about the survey.

Analysis

How and for whom are reading promotion activities carried out?

In their survey responses, 21 academic libraries reported engaging in reading promotion activities. Fourteen libraries indicated that they do not conduct such activities (Appendix 2). The results also show that reading promotion activities are not necessarily new in the Swedish context. According to the responses, activities have been conducted in eight libraries for more than five years. However, interest in such initiatives appears to have grown in recent years. This is reflected in the fact that five libraries began these activities three to five years ago, six started one to two years ago, and three

initiated them this year. This suggests that if there was a negative perception of such activities among Swedish library staff, as recorded in Bakker's (2015) work, that perception seems to have shifted over time.

Despite the growing interest, most libraries organize short-term initiatives throughout the year: 14 host activities a few times per semester; 4 do so once a month during the semester; and another 4 only once or twice a year. Only one library organizes weekly or biweekly activities during the semester.

Table 1: Reading promotion activities in Swedish academic libraries, survey result 2025

Type of activity	Number of universities
1. Exhibitions and displays of literature for leisure reading	17
2. Book club-related activities	15
3. Book talks	10
4. Book recommendations in social media	8
5. Author visits	5
6. Collection development, fiction for leisure reading	3
7. Book exchange activities	3
8. Other activities	5

Source: answers from the respondents in the survey

The reading promotion activities described by the libraries in an open question (Q8) have been categorized into eight different groups, as outlined in Table 1. It is important to note that a single library may organize several different activities, which means it can be represented in several categories. Group 1 includes various initiatives that involve the physical display of literature with the aim of encouraging leisure reading. Seventeen libraries have those kinds of activities or arrangements. Examples mentioned by the informants are book exhibitions, displays of newly published books in strategic locations within the library, book tables placed around campus, or a designated "reading interest shelf" featuring recommendations for fiction. One library posts book suggestions on the inside of restroom doors on campus. The exhibitions often have a specific theme and may be tied for example to notable dates throughout the year. One library reported having a children's literature theme in conjunction with the Swedish schools' autumn break, while another organized a "Banned Books Week."

Book club-related activities form one category and are also common. Fourteen libraries reported organizing book club meetings. Seven of them report focusing on students. One targets international students specifically, and one was initiated at the request of the Faculty of Education for teacher students. One book club includes staff participants and one book club is held in English. A few libraries also lend out book club kits to community-based groups, containing multiple copies of a book along with guidelines for discussion. One library supports student associations that wish to start their own book clubs, by offering meeting spaces and literature suggestions.

Book talks and similar events represent a third major category with 10 libraries. Several of them involve faculty members in recommending books, four libraries run a special initiative called "book relays," where individuals share their most memorable reading experiences in brief oral presentations. These events are often followed by related displays and written reflections on the books. Other examples include short story readings in read-aloud sessions. Author visits form a separate category and are offered at six libraries, in some cases in connection with a book club (Andrén, 2024; Linnaeus University, n.d.).

Social media book recommendations are also classified as a separate category and are found at eight libraries. Some informants mentioned that, leading up to the winter holidays, their library has organized an “advent calendar,” where a new book is introduced and raffled off each day.

Collection development is another category. Three academic libraries reported actively working to enhance or highlight their fiction collections with the goal of promoting recreational reading. One notable example is a university that has been actively engaged in reading promotion through various initiatives for an extended period under the heading “SSE Literary Agenda,” and where collection development plays an important role (Stockholm School of Economics). Book exchange initiatives also constitute a category. At three libraries, efforts are made to encourage book exchanges among students and faculty by organizing book exchange days or weeks, or by providing a designated book exchange cabinet or shelf where visitors can leave a book and take a new one.

Finally, under the category “Other activities” falls one library’s live streaming of the announcement of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Another library offers “Summer Bingo” — a concept borrowed from public libraries — in which users pick up a bingo card filled with reading challenges designed to encourage the discovery of new books and authors over the summer. Participants who return a completed card after the summer have the chance to win prizes. There are also activities mentioned by the informants, aimed at supporting students’ reading and writing skills, although not focused specifically on recreational fiction-reading. One library offers “reading workshops” in which students read and discuss scholarly literature and course materials together. Another hosts creative writing workshops.

The results can be compared with data from *Swedish Library Statistics 2015–2024* concerning on-site activities at academic libraries, which puts the results from the survey in a wider time context. In the statistics, these activities are divided into 15 different categories, of which we picked out the 5 related to literary activities. They are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Activities with literary connection in Swedish academic libraries, 2015–2024, total numbers

Year	Closed book club meetings with literary connection	Book-, reading- or crossword-café, open meetings with literary connection	Book talks and book discussions	Author visits	Exhibitions
2015	1	41	4	13	164
2016	-	1	2	14	147
2017	11	19	6	8	179
2018	8	-	3	18	241
2019	10	1	6	10	229
2020	14	78	6	5	128
2021	37	28	18	17	146
2022	24	55	18	13	231
2023	28	2	28	14	250
2024	16	9	43	11	279

Source: National Library of Sweden (2025), *Sweden’s official library statistics 2024*, Table (Excel): Univ-högskola, aktiviteter

While it is important to emphasize that the activities underlying the statistical categories may not always be directly connected to reading promotion or fiction, the data nonetheless provide an

indication of the growing interest in literature promotion among academic libraries over the past decade. It aligns with the survey results indicating that an increasing number of libraries have begun engaging in reading promotion. At the same time, it seems that libraries have changed the focus of their activities somewhat over time. For example, it can be observed in the statistics that closed book club meetings, open literary-themed events and author visits have become less frequent in recent years, while book talks and exhibitions have increased. A possible explanation to that could be that the general downturn in Swedish public finances has placed increasing strain on university budgets. This has also affected library operations and may have led some institutions to reduce their activities not directly tied to their traditional core missions, or to replace some of them with less costly alternatives or with alternatives that reach a wider audience. As already mentioned, reading promotion activities are not very frequent in most of the libraries that reported having them.

Based on the survey results, more than half of the academic libraries that promote reading target both students and university staff. Only five libraries focus exclusively on students, and one library specifically targets Swedish-speaking students. Additionally, one library includes alumni, and six extend certain activities (such as events) to the general public. One library explicitly states that reaching international and doctoral students is a priority. Most initiatives are led by library staff. Nine libraries have designated personnel for this role, while in seven, staff members engage in these activities primarily out of personal interest and have limited time for them. Furthermore, 19 libraries indicate that the staff involved have prior experience with reading promotion from other contexts, while 4 report no such experience among their staff.

Most libraries (13) carry out the reading promotion activities independently. In some cases, the activities are organized in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as student health services, faculty members, or individuals responsible for broader cultural programming at the university. A few libraries also mentioned collaborations with public libraries—for example, in organizing book clubs. In terms of teaching, one library notes that, due to their literature studies program, they frequently create fiction displays. Another library reports that teachers have shown interest in incorporating fiction into course literature. Notably, one library has developed a gender equality collection, aligning with diversity and inclusion goals. The informants were also asked whether they knew about readings and discussions of fiction organized within educational programs or courses where this would not traditionally be expected, *without* any collaboration with the library. Ten libraries knew of such examples within their university. Among the programs specifically mentioned here were medical education, teacher training and business education.

Finally, 11 universities reported plans to expand or improve their reading promotion activities in the future, with some including new approaches such as bibliotherapy. One university, where most students study remotely, emphasized the importance of using these initiatives to foster social connection.

What arguments underpin the decision to have reading promotion activities?

The results indicate that the most significant motivation for initiating reading promotion activities is the broader national debate on reading in Sweden, particularly concerns about declining reading skills. This decline is perceived as impacting academic literacy and increasing the risk of student dropout. This reason was reported as *very important* by 11 libraries and *quite important* by 10. In one of the reports (Fröjdh et al.) it is emphasized that a large proportion of their students are first-generation university attendees, where the reason to arrange book clubs and author talks is firmly anchored in the fact that many of them lack reading literacy which affects their abilities to succeed in their studies. The report clearly states that academic libraries should promote academic literacy which includes being able “to read, understand and to process texts of different genres, on different levels” (p. 2). The implied “problem” (see Bacchi & Goodwin, p. 18–19) reading promotion aim to

solve is thus the declining reading abilities amongst young people. This indicates an ambition of remedying broader societal challenges. In current reading politics and debates, decreased reading is described as the cause of societal problems. Deficiencies in reading are often presented as a societal risk, where the importance of reading is linked to both economic and social security issues (Hedemark & Lindsköld 2025). In this argumentation reading is defined as something instrumental, leading to certain clear competencies you need in order to become a productive member of society.

Another way of motivating reading becomes obvious in the second most important reason to promote reading. This reason relates to an educational ideal that emphasizes holistic student development, in which fiction and reading for pleasure play a role. This reason was described as *very important* by 9 libraries and *quite important* by 11. In relation to this, two libraries note that reading activities provide students with pressure-free, enjoyable moments without the fear of being judged. In one of the reports (Fröberg, 2021) the reason is defined as an ambition to contribute to a more general informal education, where reading literature is seen as important in its own right and for the development of the individual. Reading appears within this perspective as something that cannot be measured, with references to *Bildung* and the view of the arts as transformative for the individual. What is problematized in this argumentation is that students do not devote enough time to leisure reading, but mainly associate reading with performance. The academic libraries therefore nurture the ambition of making students discover the pleasure of reading for its own sake, and design reading promotion activities supporting this.

The third reason is the current Swedish Library Act. This legal framework was identified as *quite important* by 12 libraries, *very important* by 5, and of *low significance* by 4. This motivation implies the need of living up to demands stated in the law, not only library policy and strategic planning at the university level.

The fourth reason is the idea of promoting the library as a space for cultural activities to attract more visitors. This reason was considered *quite important* to 10 libraries, *very important* to 9, and of *small significance* to 4. Three libraries report that they want to make the library more appealing to students and foster positive relationships. One library mentions that this motivation has evolved, now aligning their activities with the national reading promotion debate. This motivation suggests that the library as a physical place is seen as important, the perceived problem being a lack of visitors or a negative or outdated perception about the library that creates barriers to engage its services. Reading promotion activities are thus regarded as a solution, potentially contributing in building a long-lasting relation between students and the library, changing perceptions of the library in a fresher and more approachable way, and opening the door to its cultural role, as other studies have stated (Sanders, 2005; Torres 2005; Kavak & Feride Kop, 2025; Zou et al., 2021).

The fifth reason is the belief that reading promotion can help students form new social connections. It is *very important* to seven libraries, *quite important* to six, and of *little importance* to seven. One library also notes that the COVID-19 pandemic played a major role, as many students felt isolated, and social reading created new opportunities for connection. The social aspects of reading are the main argument in this problematization where reading promotion activities are framed as a solution in providing opportunities for students to meet each other and counteract loneliness and isolation. This is related to the necessity to integrate students into campus life, have well-being and a sense of belonging, specially to avoid academic drop out, as stated in other studies (Bosman et al., 2008; Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Dewan, 2013; Gauder et al., 2007; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Lackner et al., 2023; Reno, 2017).

The sixth reason involves inspiration from international library trends and practices observed in other Swedish libraries. Nine libraries rated this as *quite important*, one as *very important*, while nine indicated it held *low significance*, and three considered it *completely unimportant*.

The least common reason is to stimulate increased use of the academic library's fiction collections. This reason was marked as *very important* by four libraries, *quite important* by seven, of *low significance* by four, and *completely unimportant* by seven. One library explicitly stated that its primary goal was to promote the use of its fiction collection. Additionally, another reported that the activities originated from the personal interest of library staff in literature and reading.

Moreover, in reports from two libraries, several challenges in promoting reading in academic libraries are identified. First, one emphasizes the importance of having support from university leadership, with one stating that reading promotion should be part of the academic library's mission. They also stress the need for a student-centered approach, aiming to engage students from all faculties, particularly male students. They recognize the considerable behind-the-scenes work required to run these activities, and simultaneously that it takes minimal resources. One also noted that students may expect librarians leading Shared Reading sessions to be literature experts. Finally, one points out that reading promotion in academic libraries is an emerging field of research.

What arguments underpin the decision not to have reading promotion activities?

As previously mentioned, 14 of the 35 responding universities, i.e., 40%, do not organize any reading promotion activities at all. No clear pattern emerges as to which institutions belong to this group. All three privately owned specialized colleges, as well as the university colleges of arts, fall into this category; one possible explanation is that they are all very small, and thus have relatively limited resources for library services compared to the larger universities. However, two of the largest academic libraries — at Uppsala University and Stockholm University — are also among them. The rest of the group includes both university colleges and newer, smaller universities.

When asked why they do not engage in reading promotion activities, the respondents gave a variety of answers. Only one library (at one of the newer universities) stated that reading promotion does not fall within the remit of academic libraries, but should instead be the responsibility of public libraries. Another library reported a lack of support from university or faculty leadership for such initiatives. The most common reasons, however, were that the issue has simply never been discussed or that there is a lack of financial resources.

Final discussion and conclusions

The results show that reading promotion in academic libraries are defined as important for a number of different reasons such as remedying declining reading abilities in society, enhancing Bildung and social well-being amongst students. The argumentation for not having reading promotion activities is more diverse. The reasons not to have reading promotion range from a perceived lack of financial resources to not having discussed the issue or claiming reading promotion activities not part of the libraries' mission.

In Swedish society in general, the value of reading has increasingly been instrumentalized and is today assessed in relation to what it is capable of resolving in other areas. Reading promotion can thus be seen as a solution aimed to solve challenges mainly in other societal areas such as in educational and labor market areas, where reading ability plays a role in how productive a person is expected to be and in the long run improve the country's economic productivity. Increased reading is assumed to improve language development, which in turn can help reduce segregation and social exclusion (Hedemark & Lindsköld, 2025). This societal view of reading, dominating reading politics and public debate, is to some extent reflected in the academic libraries' reasoning behind promoting reading.

But another way of arguing for reading promotion activities, which initially may appear to be the opposite of the aforementioned, is also found in the libraries' argumentation. Central tenets in that

line of reasoning is the view that reading plays an important role in its own right and for the development of *Bildung*. It is stated as pivotal to provide opportunities where students can read without the pressure of being measured or graded. However, the two problem representations, where reading is either seen as the solution for remedying other societal problems or as a way of nurturing general *Bildung*, both firmly link reading to fundamental values in the democratic society of today. The promotion of reading thus becomes a central issue for more and more stakeholders, organizations and activities in society (Hedemark & Lindsköld, 2025). Academic libraries' interest in reading promotion can thus be viewed in light of this development. These two main arguments can also be seen as supporting reading promotion in academic libraries in other parts of the world. The first has been predominant, particularly in the North American context (Dali & McNiff, 2020). This argument has shaped the nature of that inclusion, where non-academic reading is justified insofar as it supports educational and professional objectives. The second argument relates to educating the "whole person" and promoting well-being, even when such initiatives are not tied to tangible educational benefits or goals. This perspective has begun to gain importance in the current university context (Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Dali & McNiff, 2020).

Another potential answer to academic libraries' increasing interest in reading promotion might be the development of library education in Sweden. Historically, Swedish library education was divided into two tracks: one for public librarians and one for research librarians. In the early 1990s, however, the education changed into a generalist program in Library and Information Science (LIS) for the entire library sector. This means that today's LIS students view public and academic libraries as part of a shared labor market, and it is now entirely unremarkable for someone to begin their career at a public library and later move into academic librarianship — something that was not common in the past. When asked whether one or more of the staff members engaged in reading promotion at their academic library had prior experience in such work — e.g., from public libraries or as book club facilitators — 83% of the universities answered in the affirmative. The conclusion must be that personal engagement on the part of academic library staff, combined with experience and skills acquired elsewhere, is likely a key factor in explaining why reading promotion activities have become increasingly common in Swedish academic libraries in recent years.

In this context, it can also be noted that the growing interest in various types of reading promotion activities appears to be part of a broader strategic objective among libraries: to emphasize the significance and value of the physical library space at a time when many services are otherwise available digitally. This trend is particularly evident in public libraries, which now offer a wide range of activities of very different kinds — many of which are not directly related to the library's traditional role in promoting reading, but rather reflect a broader cultural mission. The literary activities currently found at academic libraries — such as book clubs, author talks, exhibitions, and book discussions — suggest a similar development in this part of the library sector. Library statistics from 2015 to 2024 show a significant increase in *all* types of on-site-activities at academic libraries, not just those directly related to reading promotion. In 2024, the number of such activities was nearly three times as high as in 2015. An illustrative example is the library at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, which offers a wide variety of reading promotion activities, such as book clubs, poetry walks, book relays, and author talks. In addition, it hosts knitting and crafts cafés, yoga, sewing circles, workshops where participants learn how to repair clothes using embroidery techniques, and provides art kits for students and staff interested in exploring their creative abilities (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, n.d.).

It may be that for anything to happen there needs to be someone who is truly passionate about the matter. In response to the question of where the initiative for reading promotion activities typically originates, the overwhelming majority reported that it came from the library staff themselves. At several institutions, staff members had been formally assigned to work on such activities as part of

their job. However, at quite a few institutions, those responsible for the activities had become involved based on personal interest, without any specifically allocated work hours for this purpose.

Compared to the situation in other parts of the world, where academic librarians often lack the skills and passion needed to carry out reading promotion activities (Elliott, 2007; Sánchez-García & Yubero, 2015; Dali, 2015b; Gladwin & Goulding, 2012; Meléndez, 2024; Flores & Soriente, 2023; Sánchez-García, 2022), academic libraries that do reading promotion activities in Sweden tend to have librarians who are quite well prepared for such initiatives. This difference likely reflects the influence of each country's library science education (for example, if it is a master and undergrad, or if the person studied a humanities career before) and the individual librarian's prior experience with reading promotion. However, it also confirms findings from previous studies (Camargo-Rojas, 2025; Dali, 2015b): these activities often depend on the enthusiasm of a librarian for whom reading is a lifestyle. When that person leaves, the initiatives frequently end as well.

In general, as documented in academic literature from other parts of the world (Camargo-Rojas, 2024), reading promotion initiatives in Sweden tend to be short-lived and are not typically included in library strategic plans. Compared to the results from Rebiun (2019) in Spain, where 46% of the 39 libraries surveyed carry out initiatives regularly, in Sweden only one reports doing so. However, one library that has carried out small-scale reading promotion activities for several years has incorporated them recently into its operational plan. This suggests that when such activities are sustained over a long period (and accompanied by broader public discussions, such as the ongoing conversation in Sweden about reading) libraries may begin to integrate them into their strategic planning and develop more robust programs, as other studies have also indicated (Camargo-Rojas, 2025; González & Martínez, 2017).

The results also show that reading promotion activities made Swedish academic libraries expand their public to university staff and externals, as other international studies have shown (Camargo-Rojas, 2025). The collaboration with other university units or external organizations, which has been documented as crucial to long-term and strong programs (Camargo-Rojas, 2025) is in its early stages. The inclusion of diversity-oriented approaches, that has stated of real importance in other studies (Dali & McNiff, 2020; Ramírez, 2015) is only identified in one Swedish library.

The results of this study are limited with its focus mainly on a quantitative method. Research that delves deeper into qualitative methods, where institutional, material and social aspects are taken into consideration is needed to fully understand why Swedish academic libraries engage (or not engage) in activities explicitly aimed at reading promotion. However, the results show, as previous research indicates, that although reading promotion was once perceived negatively in academic libraries, this view is shifting. Activities appear to have grown in recent years and are more common than what one might expect. The first conference on reading promotion in Swedish academic libraries, organized by Malmö University library in November 2024, where 12 of the universities in the survey of this study took part (Clemens, 2024; email from Kjellberg), also shows that there is a desire to raise the issue, as does the fact that Chalmers University of Technology in 2025 dedicated its annual network conference, Chals, to reading promotion and academic libraries (Röshammar, 2025). As stated in the debate article by academic library directors: "When reading is raised as a societal challenge, shouldn't we, as academic libraries, also be part of the solution?" (*Biblioteksbladet* 2025-04-29). The development towards more reading promotion activities, identified in this study, might be an indication that academic libraries have risen to that occasion. However, this study shows that even though there is a change in perception, not necessarily all academic libraries of a country decide to do it. The percentage in this study, 60% yes and 40% no, shows that this is an option for academic libraries, but not necessarily something mandatory. Although it is not demonstrated to be a core function of academic libraries, as argued by authors such as Sánchez-García & Santos-Recuenco

(2012), it is seen as an important option, and for some, it should indeed be part of the library's mission.

Acknowledgements

We thank the survey respondents at Swedish universities for their participation.

References

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Email from Sara Kjellberg to Kerstin Rydbeck 2025-01-02 with the following documents:

- List of participants at the conference at Malmö University Library on November 13, 2024, on reading promotion and academic libraries
- Notes from the discussions at the conference at Malmö University Library on November 13, 2024, on reading promotion and academic libraries.
- a list of the members in the library network connected to the Expert Group for Higher Education Libraries in the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF), with contact details.

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Appendix 1: Universities taking part in the survey

Name	Location	Ownership	Activities ?
Universities			
Chalmers University of Technology	Gothenburg	Foundation	Yes
Karlstad University	Karlstad	State-owned	Yes
Karolinska Institutet (medical university)	Stockholm	State-owned	Yes
KTH Royal Institute of Technology	Stockholm	State-owned	Yes
Linköping University	Linköping and Norrköping	State-owned	Yes
Linnaeus University	Växjö and Kalmar	State-owned	Yes
Luleå University of Technology	Luleå	State-owned	Yes
Lund University	Lund and Helsingborg	State-owned	Yes
Malmö University	Malmö	State-owned	Yes
Mid Sweden University	Sundsvall and Östersund	State-owned	No
Mälardalen University	Västerås and Eskilstuna	State-owned	Yes
Stockholm School of Economics	Stockholm	Foundation	Yes
Stockholm University	Stockholm	State-owned	No
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences	Uppsala, Umeå and Alnarp	State-owned	Yes
Umeå University	Umeå	State-owned	No
University of Gothenburg	Gothenburg	State-owned	Yes
Uppsala University	Uppsala and Visby	State-owned	No
Örebro University	Örebro	State-owned	No
University Colleges			

Blekinge Institute of Technology	Karlskrona and Karlshamn	State-owned	Yes
Dalarna University	Falun and Borlänge	State-owned	No
Halmstad University	Halmstad	State-owned	No
Jönköping University	Jönköping	Foundation	Yes
Kristianstad University	Kristianstad	State-owned	Yes
Swedish Defence University	Stockholm	State-owned	Yes
Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences	Stockholm	State-owned	Yes
Södertörn University	Stockholm	State-owned	No
University of Borås	Borås	State-owned	Yes
University of Gävle	Gävle	State-owned	No
University of Skövde	Skövde	State-owned	Yes
University West	Trollhättan	State-owned	Yes
University Colleges of Arts			
Royal Institute of Art	Stockholm	State-owned	No
Royal College of Music	Stockholm	State-owned	No
Other small and specialized university colleges			
Marie Cederschiöld University	Stockholm	Private-owned	No
Red Cross University College	Stockholm	Private-owned	No
University College Stockholm	Stockholm	Private-owned	No

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

This survey is for staff in leading positions at university and university college libraries in Sweden. The purpose of the survey is to collect information for a scientific study on Swedish university libraries' reading promotion activities intending to stimulate leisure reading of fiction. Reading promotion activities have become increasingly common in academic libraries in other parts of the world. We simply want to see how common this is today in Swedish university libraries, and what the activities look like. Reading promotion activities can be of many kinds, e.g.: book clubs of various types, author talks, book cafes, book tips about fiction on social media or in the library, exhibitions of newly published fiction, reading aloud of fiction, stage poetry, celebrations of World Book Day.

Responsible for this study are Professor Kerstin Rydbeck and Associate Professor Åse Hedemark, Department of ALM, Uppsala University, and PhD student Lucía Camargo-Rojas, University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain.

By answering the questions and submitting the questionnaire, you give your consent to participate in the survey. The answers will be handled and stored securely within Uppsala University, in accordance with the GDPR rules.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Kerstin Rydbeck, kerstin.rydbeck@abm.uu.se

1. Name of the university: (Must be answered)

2. Name, position and e-mail address of respondent: (Must be answered)

3. Do your answers refer to your ENTIRE university library, or only a part of the library organization, e.g. a faculty library? (Must be answered)

- My answers refer to the entire library at my university.
- My answers refer to the following part of our library organization:

4. Does your university library organize any type of literary activities, to promote leisure reading of fiction? (Must be answered)

(Such activities can include e.g. book clubs of various types, author talks, book cafes, book tips about fiction on social media or in the library, exhibitions about newly published fiction, reading aloud of fiction, stage poetry, celebrations of World Book Day.)

- No.
- Yes – go directly to question 7.

Questions only for those of you who do NOT have reading promotion activities at your university library:

5. Which of the following statements is most correct?

1. We have never arranged reading promotion activities at our university library and have no plans to do so.
2. We used to have reading promotion activities but no longer do.
3. The issue of reading promotion activities has been up a little for discussion, but so far, we have not tried it.

4. We plan to start reading promotion activities quite soon. We will have the following activities:

6. Why don't you organize reading promotion activities? Mark the reason you consider most important. WHEN YOU HAVE ANSWERED THIS QUESTION, GO DIRECTLY TO QUESTION 18!

1. The question has simply never come up for discussion.
2. At the library we don't think it is the task of university libraries to work on reading promotion. It is primarily the task of public libraries.
3. We do not receive any support from the university management / faculty management for this.
4. We do not have the financial resources for it.
5. We have tried but the response among users was small.
6. Other _____ reasons, _____ namely:

Questions only for those of you who HAVE reading promotion activities at your university library:

7. How long have you been organizing reading promotion activities?

1. This is the first year.
2. 1–2 years.
3. 3–5 years.
4. More than 5 years.
5. I don't know.

8. What type(s) of reading promotion activities do you have? Briefly describe them in your own words.

9. Who is the target group for these activities?

1. All students at the university.
2. Students and staff at the university.
3. Certain categories of students, namely: _____
4. The following groups: _____

10. Approximately how often do you arrange reading promotion activities at your library?

1. Once or twice a year.
2. A few times per semester.
3. Once a month during semester.
4. Every week or every other week during semester.

11. Why does your library arrange reading promotion activities? Mark on the scale how well the statements below agree with your reasoning.

a. A broader ideal of knowledge (bildningsideal) should be pursued in higher education, one that is not so instrumental and narrowly subject-oriented but takes into account the development of the whole person. In this case, fiction and recreational reading are also important.

Completely	Not very	Quite	Very	Don't
unimportant	important	important	important	know

b. The general debate on the importance of promoting reading in Sweden is playing a role. Decreasing reading skills and reading comprehension, as well as reduced general interest in reading, have also

been observed among university students and can contribute to reduced academic literacy and a greater risk of dropping out.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

c. The current Library Act designates (especially in the portal paragraph, § 2) all types of libraries as a common field with a mission to work for democracy, the promotion of reading and public enlightenment/popular education.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

d. Many students lack social networks and feel lonely at their place of study. Reading promotion activities based on social reading in the library can be a way to help them make new social contacts.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

e. It is important to promote the library as a place. It is not only a resource for support and service for studies and research, but should also be a place for cultural activities. This is a way to attract more people to the library.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

f. This is a way to stimulate increased use of the university library's fiction collections.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

g. Inspiration from international library trends and other university libraries in Sweden has made us want to try it.

Completely unimportant	Not very important	Quite important	Very important	Don't know
------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------

Please comment if you want, especially if you think there are more reasons why you organize reading promotion activities:

12. Where did the initiative to start this type of activity(ies) come from?

1. From students.
2. From the library staff.
3. From teaching staff and researchers.
4. From faculty or university management.
5. From _____ the _____ following:

6. Don't know.
 Clarify _____ here _____ if _____ you _____ wish:

13. Does the library collaborate with other units/organizations/individuals when it comes to planning and implementing reading promotion activities? If so, with whom? (Several options are possible.)

1. No, the library handles this entirely on its own.
2. Yes, with student organizations.
3. Yes, with teaching staff and researchers from these programs/disciplines:

4. Yes, _____ with _____ the _____ following:

5. Comment _____ here _____ if _____ you _____ wish:

14. The library staff who work with reading promotion activities, how do they do it?

1. This is a clear assignment with time allocated during working hours.
2. The staff has engaged in this mostly out of personal interest and has little or no special time allocated for it.
3. In _____ another _____ way, _____ namely:

15. Do any of the librarians involved in your reading promotion work have experience of this from other contexts? (For example, from previous work at a public library, from commitment as a book club leader.)

1. Yes, one or more of them have it.
2. No, as far as I know, none of them have it.
3. Don't know.

16. How do you finance the reading promotion activities?

1. From the library's own budget.
 2. We receive special funds from the university management / faculty management.
 3. In _____ another _____ way, _____ namely:

- Comment _____ here _____ if _____ you _____ wish:

17. Is there any written material describing your reading promotion activities that we could have? If so, who can we contact?

1. No
2. Yes. _____ You _____ can _____ contact:

Closing questions for all informants:

18. Do you know if your university organizes readings and discussions of fiction within educational programs or courses where this would not traditionally be expected, and where the library is NOT directly involved?

1. No / Don't know.
2. Yes – in _____ the _____ following _____ courses _____ or _____ programs:

19. Any other comments or information you would like to give us, related to reading promotion and university libraries or to the questions above?

There are no more questions! Thank you for your answers.