

Plan S

Accelerating the transition to full and immediate open access to scientific publications

Key Principle

The main message is that “after 1 January 2021 scientific publications on the results from research funded by public grants provided by national and European research councils and funding bodies, must be published in compliant Open Access Journals or on compliant Open Access Platforms.”

Guidelines

In the UK Plan S has been endorsed by UKRI, the Wellcome Trust and the Bill & Mellinda Gates Foundation. As yet there are no firm guidelines for adoption issued by UKRI but the Wellcome Trust policy will apply to all research articles submitted for publication from 1 January 2021.

Important points to note:

- Research outputs must be published under an open licence (like CC-BY);
- There must be immediate access to publications without any embargo period;
- Funders commit to support Open Access publication fees at a reasonable level; but, Gold open access publishing in subscription-based (hybrid) journals is not allowed;
- Green open access will be compliant if the output is immediately available.

Why Plan S?

“In 2017/18, the University of Edinburgh spent £476,868 with Elsevier from our total block grant of £1,311,724. This only paid for 148 hybrid open access articles – an average of £3,222 per paper.”

The introduction of block grants has meant that research funder open access policies have been extremely successful but it also has some unintended and undesirable consequences:

1. Hybrid is the dominant form of open access

In 2015-16 the Wellcome Trust spent £5.7 million delivering their policy, and we know from their data that 71% of costs go to funding hybrid OA; articles which are published in a subscription journal but can be made OA on the payment of a fee.

2. Unsustainable rising costs

RCUK have reported that the average APC in 2013/14 was £1,580, which has risen to £1,988 in 2016/17. More significantly, the Wellcome data also reveals that their average APC for a hybrid OA article (£2,209) is 34% higher than the average APC for an article in a fully OA journal (£1,644).

3. Increased journal embargo length

Since the policy was introduced it appears that some of the largest academic journal publishers have been intentionally increasing the journal embargo period to prevent authors choosing free green open access and forcing them to pay for gold hybrid open access- paid for from the open access block grants.

“Plan S is partly an attempt to curtail the excesses of Hybrid Open Access.”

Unresolved Issues

There are some big challenges that still need to be addressed:

- Since immediate open access is required, Green OA is not universally viable because some publishers require excessive embargo periods. However, if we adopt a model publications policy, along the lines of the UK-Scholarly Communications Licence (UK-SCL) this could solve this problem.
- As it currently stands Plan S restricts the options for publishing: the restrictions placed on copyright and licences, embargo periods, hybrid journals, final versions, and caps for APCs greatly limit the actual journals currently available for researchers to submit publications (unless we adopt the UK-SCL); for copyright retention and immediate access.
- It is a widely held view that Plan S restricts academic freedom. The choice to not only pick research paths, but where to publish research is felt to be a basic tenet of academic freedom. The reality is that commercial publishers currently enforce many restrictions on availability of publications (such as embargo periods) and the intention of Plan S is to force publishers to relax these rules, rather than to preclude publication in these journals.
- Not all research funders and research are covered under Plan S. What happens to this other research? What should the University policy be towards research that lies immediately outside of Plan S?