

Science Europe's Plan S: making it work for all researchers

A commentary by
the British Academy

November 2018

Science Europe on 4 September 2018 published 'Plan S', a set of ten principles which are aimed at 'accelerating the transition to full and immediate Open Access to scientific publications' – explicitly including Humanities and Social Science (HSS) in its definition of science.¹ The ten principles are in addition to, and develop, Plan S's basic principle, which is:

'After 1 January 2020 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.'

This set of principles has already been endorsed by more than ten European research funders, including UKRI – the body which oversees the UK Research Councils, and Research England, successor to HEFCE (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have separate funding councils). Plan S has also recently been welcomed by the Wellcome Trust and the Gates Foundation.

The British Academy is firmly committed to Open Access (OA), as we have stated on numerous occasions. Our own Journal is published as OA, with no author charges. Many of the principles set out in Plan S are admirable as a direction of travel, and we fully support them. One particularly important element of the plan is the intention to cap OA 'Gold' publication fees,² and the commitment that neither individual researchers nor universities with limited access to OA funds should have to pay them. David Sweeney, executive chairman of Research England, who has been named as one of the lead developers of Plan S, has stated that he is a strong proponent of 'Green' OA, which involves no fees to publishers, and some of the players in Science Europe have endorsed this as a possibility.³ Plan S also recognises, importantly, that open archives and repositories need to have a long-term archiving and curation function for the initiative to succeed.

The British Academy is, however, concerned about some implications of the plan, which we believe remain to be fully thought through. We comment on some of the Plan S bullet-points, in turn, in what follows. These comments are aimed at removing ambiguities and other problems, and concentrate on issues which are particularly important for HSS researchers, operating as they do in a different publication environment to that of most STEM disciplines. We believe that, with these ambiguities resolved, Plan S will have significantly more chance of working satisfactorily.

- **'All publications must be published under an open license, preferably the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY.'** All surveys of HSS academics indicate a substantial majority who will insist on the inclusion of a 'No Derivatives' (ND) element in the licence for any OA publication. The Academy thinks their concerns are fully justified, and has set out its reasons elsewhere.⁴ Plan S, clearly, is not mandating any particular licence here, but

¹ www.scienceeurope.org/coalition-s/ provides links to the '10 principles of Plan S' and to a 'Preamble by Marc Schiltz, President of Science Europe'.

² Gold open access refers to work that is immediately available free to the user at the point of publication, usually after the payment of a charge by (or on behalf of) the author, which is sometimes substantial. Green open access refers to work that is available in a pre-publication format in a repository after an embargo period, with no payment.

³ *Research Professional* article, 2 October 2018.

⁴ 'Open access and monographs: Where are we now?' A position paper by the British Academy, May 2018, at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/open-access-monographs-where-are-we-now

it will be important for planners to take account of the concerns of HSS academics.

- **'In case such high quality Open Access journals or platforms do not yet exist, the Funders will, in a coordinated way, provide incentives to establish and support them when appropriate; support will also be provided for Open Access infrastructures where necessary.'** It is generally recognised that in HSS such journals and platforms are few in number, and have little profile. For them to be ready and academically respectable, with proper peer review, in 15 months, across the whole of Europe with some thirty academic languages and numerous disciplinary fields, seems highly unlikely. Such journals and platforms would also have to be able to assure the sector that they are sustainable in the long term; it would do vast damage to science in general and OA in particular if any of them were to fail. There is a further, serious, danger that, in trying to end perceived monopolies on publishing by individual firms, we will open the door to monopolistic platforms, with uncontrollable publishing protocols. The dangers here are very well set out in a statement on Plan S by eight of Europe's Young Academies.⁵
- **'[I]t is understood that the timeline to achieve Open Access for monographs and books may be longer than 1 January 2020.'** We welcome this recognition, not least because such a high percentage of quality research in HSS is published in monograph form. We have however warned in a previous public comment that even to contemplate a timeline beginning in the early 2020s is far too short, given the virtual absence of large-scale providers, or engagement by the sector.⁶ It is not the case that the path to OA monographs is identical to that for articles, just slower; the way publishing works in each case is very different. This is something that will require not only a much longer timescale, but also wide consultation, to achieve a realistic and, above all, workable set of proposals. The British Academy is keen to play a full part in such consultation.
- **'The 'hybrid' model of publishing is not compliant with the above principles.'** We cannot agree with this statement. In HSS, nearly all reputable journals are hybrid, in that they publish articles not supported by funders, for which libraries or private individuals pay subscriptions, at the same time as making possible the publication of Gold OA articles. We cannot accept that attempting to abolish them all would contribute positively to the successful dissemination of scientific research. Nor do we believe that preventing researchers from publishing in the journals which they believe to be the most appropriate is an ethically sustainable position: indeed, paradoxically, the Preamble recognises the need to give 'a maximum of freedom' here. Given, as we have already pointed out, the shortage of fully OA journals in HSS, and the current lack of the resources to bring them into existence, we urge Science Europe to recognise that hybrid journals, far from representing a threat to the full implementation of OA, are themselves essential for extending OA in these disciplines. We would further emphasise that, when funder-supported articles in subscription-based journals are made available through Green OA, there is no danger of double payment for that content.

⁵ <https://globalyoungacademy.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/YA-Statement-on-Plan-S-FINAL.pdf>

⁶ 'Open access and monographs: Where are we now?'

The Preamble to Plan S fills out some of the thinking that the principles of the plan are based on. Some of it reveals what we believe to be misconceptions. It states that 'The subscription-based model of scientific publishing emerged at a certain point in the history of science, when research papers needed extensive typesetting, layout design, printing ... While moving from print to digital, the publishing process still needs services, but the distribution channels have been completely transformed. There is no valid reason to maintain any kind of subscription-based business model for scientific publishing in the digital world.' This does not at all describe the situation in HSS, where publishers (which include independent journals and journals published by learned societies, which wish to maintain high standards) perform essential editing services. The Preamble goes on to say that 'Publishers should provide services that help scientists to review, edit, disseminate, and interlink their work and they may charge fair value for these services in a transparent way.' We entirely agree; but, given the realities of HSS publishing, in our view these services are by no means minor.

Behind this is what is in effect another principle: 'Monetising the access to new and existing research results is profoundly at odds with the ethos of science.' If this is an attack on excessive profits, we are wholly in agreement. But publishing with a proper sense of responsibility to the needs of science (including peer review, data-checking, and clarity in layout as well as editing) is not, and cannot be, free. Any future protocols for OA in HSS, and doubtless in STEM and Medicine, must recognise this fact, which is independent of the possibilities of the digital world.

We are, finally, concerned that Science Europe's belief that OA must be immediate, without allowance for any type of embargo period, is not justified in the text. It comes across as surprisingly dogmatic, and contrasts with the tone of the rest of the document.

We welcome Research England's statement⁷ that it wishes to talk to stakeholder groups about the practical implications of Plan S, and we are very keen to be part of all the discussions which will be necessary.

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⁷ David Sweeney quoted in *THE*, 5 September 2018.