

A commentary by the British Academy on c0Alition S's final version of Plan S

including its 'Rationale for the Revisions
Made to the Plan S Principles and
Implementation Guidance'

July 2019

Executive summary

- At the end of May 2019 cOAlition S issued a final version of Plan S, together with guidelines for implementation, in response to the extensive international reactions to the September 2018 version which announced that grant-funded research would in future have to be published immediately in an Open Access (OA) format. These guidelines have subsequently been supplemented by a work plan. We have previously commented on the earlier version of Plan S; here we assess its successor, finding that many of our initial criticisms remain.
- We welcome some aspects of the revised scheme. One is the delay of a year until 1 January 2021 before it is implemented; another is the relaxation in the technical specifications required of platforms which will host OA publications. Even here, however, concerns remain. Eighteen months is a very short period of time for essential changes in the landscape of journal publication; another is that very little is being done as yet to the development of platforms which will be essential for the success of Plan S.

Our commentary highlights three issues of particular concern.

- The first is the continuing failure by the proponents of Plan S to address its implications for issues of Equality and Diversity, and we highlight the particular problems which it may cause for Early Career Researchers, BME researchers, scholars outside universities, and retired but still active academics.
- Secondly, though we welcome the willingness to allow Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs licences (CC BY-ND) on a case-by-case basis, we believe that this should be automatic and not subject to individual application. In the view of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) scholars, ND licences are essential to prevent misrepresentation of data by third parties.
- Finally and most importantly, we are concerned about the implications of Plan S for journals in the Social Sciences and particularly in the Humanities, where most research is not grant-funded with an allowance for Article Processing Charges (APCs) and where many journals are owned by learned societies rather than international commercial publishers. It does not seem to us a sustainable position to prevent researchers publishing in what they believe to be the most appropriate journal. We are particularly disappointed by the ignoring of widespread concerns expressed about 'hybrid' journals (subscription-based journals which also accept APCs to publish articles immediately OA), since these make up almost nine-tenths of all HSS journals. We fear that these latest Plan S proposals will actually inhibit the further development of OA publishing and be to the detriment of HSS researchers.

Introduction

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; it then revised these principles after initial reactions. The ten principles are in addition to, and develop, Plan S's basic principle, which was that 'after 1 January 2020 [now revised to 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.' The coalition of funders who have signed up to Plan S is now called cOAlition S, and it is this coalition that is now driving forward the plan, as it appears in its new and final version, dated 31 May 2019.¹ UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – incorporating both Research England, which runs the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its resultant QR allocations, and the Research Councils – was one of the earliest bodies to sign up to the plan. The earlier iterations of the plan are now no longer accessible, but the finalised principles have been issued, which also contain more detailed guidelines.²

The British Academy has commented³ on cOAlition S's previous two iterations of Plan S, which prescribes the ways authors can publish in Open Access (OA) formats if they are funded by grants from the coalition's members. The Academy has a long-standing commitment to OA publishing, and wishes to extend this. All the same, we were critical of these prescriptions, which seemed to the Academy unnecessarily restrictive. Now cOAlition S's final version of its plan has been set out in response to feedback as a result of an international consultation in the early part of this year. This new text, together with the more recently issued work plan,⁴ are presented as the coalition's final word on the subject, so it is appropriate for the Academy to comment again.

Here, we first summarise and comment on the general aims of cOAlition S's plan, as set out in particular in its earlier iterations, drawing on our previous commentaries; and then, in a second part, we discuss what changes they have made as a result of the very extensive feedback the coalition received.

We do not here comment on monographs, which are in scope for future OA rules both at the national and international level. We have done so before, but the monographs landscape is so different from that of articles that it is generally accepted that the parameters for developing OA have to be substantially distinct. The coalition recognises that academics, particularly in HSS, frequently publish in monograph formats, but it does not plan to bring forward proposals for OA monographs until the end of 2021; it will not require grant-aided monographs to be in any OA format before that date at the earliest. UKRI's work on this is further advanced, but not yet complete. We will react to these proposals when they are made public.

¹ <https://www.coalition-s.org/rationale-for-the-revisions/>

² <https://www.coalition-s.org/principles-and-implementation/>

³ All the British Academy's statements on open access matters can be found via <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/british-academy-and-open-access>

⁴ <https://www.coalition-s.org/workplan/>

Part 1. The aims of Plan S

The overarching principle of Plan S, as of 31 May 2019, is:

With effect from 2021, all scholarly publications on the results from research funded by public or private grants provided by national, regional and international research councils and funding bodies, must be published in Open Access Journals, on Open Access Platforms, or made immediately available through Open Access Repositories without embargo.

The ten additional principles may be summarised as follows:

Authors or their institutions retain copyright to their publications. All publications must be published under an open licence, preferably the Creative Commons Attribution licence (CC BY), although the coalition now (after initial hesitation) accepts the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs licence (CC BY-ND) if a case is made for it. The coalition expects repositories to be of high quality, and sets out exacting specifications for them. OA publication fees are to be covered by funders or research institutions, not by individual researchers; they must be commensurate with the publication services delivered, and the structure of such fees must be transparent to inform the market and funders' potential standardisation and capping of payments of fees. The funders in the coalition reject the 'hybrid' model of publishing (see below). However, as a transitional pathway towards full Open Access within a clearly defined timeframe, and only as part of transformative arrangements, funders may contribute to financially supporting such arrangements.

It needs to be clear that the text quoted above, when it refers to public and private grants, means the grants given by the specific public or private funders who are part of cOAlition S, such as, in the UK, UKRI and the Wellcome Trust respectively. Grants from other funders are not covered by the plan. But it is also recognised in the Plan S materials that each funder in the coalition will make its own choices as to how completely to adopt the plan. UKRI is developing its own version, as part of its current Open Access Review. How close the requirements of the UK Research Councils will be to the full set of Plan S principles remains to be determined. It may be assumed that future rules for the REF may be different again, especially given that a very large part of UK-published research (and the vast majority of HSS research) is not funded by grants; but we can expect some elements of alignment, at least. Indeed, both the Research Councils and the REF already require most articles to be OA, with some exceptions and restrictions (more generous ones than those stipulated under Plan S).

One particularly important element of Plan S is the intention to cap publication fees for OA Gold articles – that is to say, articles funded by an Article Processing Charge (APC) to pay for instant open access – and the commitment that neither individual researchers nor universities with limited access to OA funds should have to pay them. 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 in full support of both of these objectives.

The Academy was more critical of other aspects of the principles, and of other details set out in the proposals of Science Europe/cOAlition S. In particular, we thought, and think, that it is generally recognised that in HSS OA journals and platforms are few in number, and have little profile. For these to be got ready – capable of maintaining high standards, with proper peer review – in a short period of time, across the whole of Europe with some thirty academic languages and numerous disciplinary fields, seems highly unlikely.

We also were and continue to be concerned about the coalition's hostility to 'hybrid' journals, that is to say journals which continue to charge a subscription but also publish Gold OA if funded to do so. As we said initially and still wish to stress,

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. ... 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.⁵

Overall, we also took – and continue to take – issue with the statement in the Plan S materials that '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.

And we further raised the issue of Equality and Diversity. We said:

It is not clear to us whether Science Europe, or any of the members of cOAlition S, have undertaken any kind of equalities audit related to Plan S. This should be a first step before a major change of this kind can be contemplated, and indeed in the UK it has been a statutory requirement since 2010. At this stage we are particularly concerned about one clearly defined group of potentially disadvantaged individuals, Early Career Researchers (ECRs) – which is also a group in which women and BME researchers, both protected categories under UK law, are more numerous. If cOAlition S is successful in its stated aim, to create an environment in which all research is entirely open from the start, in non-hybrid and APC-funded journals, where will ECRs, who in many cases do not have a permanent position, frequently move employment, and will not have easy access to

⁵ 'Science Europe's Plan S: making it work for all researchers. A commentary by the British Academy' (16 November 2018).

funds unless they are established members of grant-funded research teams, be able to publish? Plan S's plans to require compliant journals to reduce – preferably cancel – their APC fees for members of low- and medium-income nations are admirable, but they need also to consider the effect of the plan on low- and medium-income researchers in Europe. If they do not do that, Plan S will exclude exactly the cohort which needs to be part of the project from the outset, for they will carry it into the future.⁶

We would add in that context that non-university researchers and retired academics are other significant categories of people who would suffer if all of the coalition's aims come about.

This is to us a vitally important issue, which has still not been addressed in any of the coalition's recent statements, and it must be. Indeed, the British Academy would welcome, and be supportive of, any study of the equality and diversity dimensions of Plan S. And we are glad to learn, separately, that UKRI is commissioning such a study.

Part 2. Revisions to Plan S

Taken as a whole, Plan S emerges as of June/July 2019 as very little changed after many thousands of pages of feedback. As a result, there are not as many novelties here as we would have wished to see. But some are positive steps.

Repositories

We are pleased to see that the coalition has relaxed its technical requirements for repositories for OA articles. It remains to be seen how many repositories actually meet even these revised requirements, and whether they actually cover all subject areas. It is not clear to us that the coalition has made much attempt to see whether all subject areas actually are included; this is of particular relevance to HSS, which the British Academy represents. Subject repositories are rare in this area, which covers some 50% of practising academics, and not all universities and similar institutions have repositories meeting even the revised technical standards set out here. The coalition remarks that 'It remains our intention that the technical requirements we describe should underpin a route towards a new generation of repository platforms.' That is laudable; but it needs also to be practical. But we assume that there will be greater clarity on this matter at a later stage.

CC BY-ND licences

We also welcome the coalition's recognition that there is widespread unease about any funder not permitting CC BY-ND licences for published work, and its new recommendation that funders should allow it on a case-by-case basis. A clear majority of HSS academics have indicated to us the importance they place on the -ND licence. The 'misrepresentation of contentious work', as the new

⁶ 'A commentary from the British Academy on "Guidance on the Implementation of Plan S"' (7 February 2019).

guidelines put it, is not something that is going to go away. Indeed, with the sharp rise in the last two years of concern about the distortion of evidence, both written and visual – for example in ‘fake news’ campaigns – we foresee that people will become more concerned about such misrepresentation, not less; as we are also worried about it ourselves. We do not see allowing CC BY-ND licences as a temporary measure; far from it. The CC BY-ND licence sends an unequivocal signal of what is acceptable – something that a separate set of protocols (as yet, anyway, unwritten) could never achieve unless they were themselves established as part of the licence. Oral evidence set out in articles on contentious and/or sensitive topics is only one example of text which should never be allowed to be modified by third parties without permission (the essential protection which an -ND licence provides). We would strongly recommend that the consent of funders to CC BY-ND licences should in practice be automatic, rather than laboriously given (or not) on a case-by-case basis. We are not convinced that the CC BY-ND licence is as prohibitive of text- and data-mining as is often asserted. And given that, we believe there is no justification whatsoever for not allowing such licences.

‘Hybrid’ journals

We are, however, disappointed that the coalition has not responded to the concerns widely expressed (including by us, but far from only us) about ‘hybrid’ journals, as the coalition still describes them. Rather, it has been confirmed that funds from cOAlitionS members may not be used to pay for Gold OA publication of articles in ‘hybrid’ journals. We remain entirely unpersuaded that such journals represent a threat to further progress towards OA, and we would add that they serve many purposes of value to academic communities, such as the publication of book reviews and editorial matter, for which there will never be a Gold option, and which therefore have to be paid for somehow. So-called ‘hybrid’ journals also make up nearly nine-tenths of all journals across all disciplines, so cannot be set aside as easily as that. It is true that cOAlition S has amended its time-line for change to start at the beginning of 2021, not 2020; this is welcome, especially as few moves towards the upgrading of repositories – an essential part of Plan S – have been visible, nine months after the initial publication of the plan, and only six months before the initial deadline. All the same, the coalition still envisages that journals should give up the subscription model and ‘flip’ to Gold-only OA by the end of 2024; we see that as too tight a time-line, and we believe that many journals will not be able to observe it even with the best will in the world.

It is possible that few HSS journals will actually make this change. It must always be remembered that articles published in most HSS disciplines overwhelmingly (that is, between 80 and 90%) do not arise from the sort of grant funding that includes an allowance for APCs. As a direct result, in HSS disciplines, we have found very few journals which could under any circumstances ‘flip’ to Gold-only OA without failing financially. That is to say, in practice such journals will cease to be ‘hybrid’, for they will not publish grant-funded articles. The net result of this will be the exact opposite of what cOAlition S seeks, for authors funded by grants will find themselves at a considerable disadvantage when seeking to publish the results of their research.

Other aspects of Gold OA

One of the concerns that has been expressed about the journals that accept Gold articles but still charge subscriptions is 'double-dipping' – that is to say, not reducing the subscription price, even though part of the publishing cost is paid for by the APC. We fully share this concern. This can, however, readily be dealt with in less draconian ways, and work is currently under way (e.g. by the Society Publishers Coalition) to develop protocols to reassure funders that 'double-dipping' is being avoided.

We find in paragraph 5 of the cOAlition S's work plan that – implicitly as part of the coalition's campaign, which we fully support, to reduce the costs of Gold OA publication – the coalition plans to 'work with publisher representatives and other stakeholders to define the various services (e.g., triaging, peer review, editorial work, copy editing) publishers will be asked to price'. We are glad that the coalition accepts that there are legitimate costs in publishing, and that publishers cannot be expected to work for free. But, in our experience, publishers do not tend to price in this way at all. Nor does the coalition have the power to demand that they do so; and we are concerned that to ask for such calculations to be made public may be a breach of confidentiality in a commercial context which is not that of formal public tender, but one where cOAlition S is but one amongst a myriad of potential global customers (both readers and authors) for publisher services. Paragraph 5 of the work plan should therefore be regarded as a policy aspiration rather than a practical requirement of any future planning for OA.

Some publishers have recently embarked on 'read-and-publish' agreements with universities, or consortia of universities, or in a few cases whole countries. These are agreements in which 'an institution (or consortium) has an arrangement with a publisher for journal material at the price of £x. For that price, plus any adjustments for new materials, inflation, etc., the institution will continue to pay the publisher, which now agrees as well to make all the articles [published by that publisher] by that institution's authors OA to the world immediately upon publication.'⁷ We are pleased to find that these agreements – which provide a mechanism for repurposing existing revenues from subscriptions (and APCs) – are regarded by members of the coalition as being compliant with Plan S. This is a very interesting and positive development, but it is too early to say whether it will solve enough problems. Every individual publisher (and there are many hundreds of smaller ones, especially outside the UK) will have to participate in such agreements with a wide range of consortia. Not nearly all will manage, and not all academics will have access to such consortium agreements. This will only exacerbate the problem of the fragmentation of international academic knowledge, by creating two-tier access to academic work. Read-and-publish deals may also prove problematic for states and jurisdictions where there is a significant imbalance between authorship and reading (in HSS journals, for example, UK institutions are bigger sources of authors, non-UK institutions are bigger sources of readers).

⁷ This explanation of 'read-and-publish' is by Joseph Esposito, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/06/20/counting-holes-swiss-cheese-read-publish-discovers-america/>

Furthermore, at least in the initial moves to read-and-publish, larger publishers are very much making the running. If this continues and becomes the norm, large publishers will further benefit, and smaller ones will be disadvantaged. Smaller publishers are a necessary part of the scholarly ecosystem; they often focus on specialised domains of scholarship which larger publishers avoid as lacking global financial impact. The survival of these specialist imprints is essential; it should not be either the intention or the effect of an OA policy to restrict the range of intellectual enquiry and its diffusion.

Embargo periods

To deal with cases where journals may not be able to transition away from the subscription model, cOAlition S has made much more explicit than before its policy on Green OA articles. An article by a grant-holder may be published in a subscription journal, *on condition that* the author's version as accepted for publication – i.e. before any further revision, copy-editing or typesetting – is made available with a zero embargo, that is to say immediately, *and* it is put in a repository with the right technical specifications. Some journal publishers have accepted this as an alternative with which they are happy; many have not. Our discussions with editors of HSS journals, many of which are published by learned societies which control the terms of their own publishing, suggest to us that, here too, in many disciplines many journals are not prepared to comply with a zero-embargo policy. Some are prepared to publish with a 12-month embargo, but they are concerned that a shorter embargo will undermine their business model too considerably for it to be sustainable.

The coalition states: 'Many respondents identify as supporters of Open Access but it is clear from their comments that their definition is satisfied by delayed or partial Open Access. We reiterate our view that delayed access, or that which does not give licenses for wide re-use, is not full and immediate Open Access.' It is not wrong about that, obviously, by definition (delayed excludes immediate); but it is our view – and the view of the HSS academics we represent – that this is an essentially ideological position, without a basis in an understanding of academic practice. Although in medicine and some sciences the half-life of research findings may be only 6 months or less, in HSS disciplines 12-month embargoes do not significantly hold up the dissemination of academic knowledge. We repeat that we are very concerned, if funders who have accepted Plan S do in practice demand zero-embargo for Green OA, that grant-holders from funders who have accepted Plan S tenets will be seriously disadvantaged when it comes to publication, as a result of the lack of available venues. We note that the only specifically HSS funder which was part of the original coalition, the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, has withdrawn from it, citing concerns which parallel our anxieties. The HSS academics with whom we have been in contact see no reason or need to have embargoes shorter than 12 months, and we strongly endorse their view.

Conclusion

For these reasons, we can only give a very reserved welcome to the new position set out by cOAlition S in its 31 May 2019 document. The concerns we have expressed in our previous commentaries remain pertinent. We remain very keen to engage with these issues, however, whether at an international or a national level.

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