

Recommendations on Plan S by Wageningen University & Research

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The announcement of Plan S on 4 September 2018 has triggered a debate in the scientific community of Wageningen University and Research (WUR) about its pros and cons. In its strategic plan 2019-2022, WUR embraces developments and policies in Open Science, in line with the National Plan Open Science. WUR therefore aims to make scientific publications from our publicly funded research publicly available through Open Access, and Plan S fits in this policy. The transition to Open Access, and in particular of Plan S, serves in our view also as a method to regain control over the publishing process and over the ownership of published research content by academia.

However, at the same time there are serious concerns that scientific domains are not sufficiently able to cope with the disruptive nature of Plan S, and that Plan S insufficiently addresses the quality aspects of the publication process. Many WUR researchers feel that at present, the number of organizations that participate in Plan S is too limited to trigger the anticipated disruptive change in the business models of subscription/hybrid journals. WUR is convinced that the required transition would benefit from a more evolutionary approach, taking into account multiple roads and paying specific attention to quality aspects of the publication process:

1. For the Netherlands, we expect an evolutionary transition to OA to be more effective than the disruptive nature of Plan S. Approximately 50% of the peer-reviewed journal articles authored by one or more WUR staff is currently available OA, which is representative for the Netherlands. The efforts of VSNU and universities over the last years towards transformative hybrid deals and Green OA have already provided significant results that we should not discard:
 - Allow VSNU transformative deals for gold hybrid journals in Plan S as long as the article price is comparable to an APC in an OA journal of a similar quality. Open Access within hybrid deals is fairly priced (for the Dutch big deals with 100% OA, on average around €1700 per article) and ensures for 24% of WUR's research output being OA. This subscription model also includes access to all articles in the journals (hybrid and closed) and thus ensures that scientists keep access to literature without extra costs. Furthermore, a central administrative system as arranged for big deals, has an advantage above a decentral system of paying individual APCs by researchers/chair groups and funding bodies.
 - Allow for Green OA, with a restricted embargo period. Pilot Taverne is an excellent initiative and offers a significant potential for OA. From the perspectives of scientists in our organisation, a short embargo of 6 months does not jeopardise OA. Green OA may also lead to an alternative business model, where a publisher earns money during the embargo period. Furthermore, other options for green OA publishing should be considered, e.g. publishing of preprints and postprints.

Keeping hybrid and Green OA in Plan S would still allow for the freedom in choosing a journal when collaborating with prestigious partners, for attracting excellent scientists to Dutch universities and to allow for career progression of young scientists.

2. The risk of predatory journals in the transition to the OA model becomes more significant. Predatory journals harm science because they publish without careful peer review leading to so-called scientific publications that do not meet with internationally accepted quality standards. We think this danger can be countered by creating more transparency in publishing to regain power on quality of (open access) publishing. This should be achieved by:
 - Compiling and maintaining a white list of journals by academia (in order to control predatory journals).
 - Creating transparency in the review process for safeguarding the quality of the reviews (including making anonymous reviewing public, transparency in rejection rates, etc.), regardless of the publishing model.
 - Creating transparency in journal/article pricing that will make it possible to cap publishing costs. Quality insurance should be available at a fair price (this includes also quality assurance guidelines and methods at a publisher level). This should also lead to a solution for society journals where a part of publishing costs serve as income to societies to the benefit of science.

Finally, changing the way we deal with research outputs also requires a change in evaluation systems with respect to groups and individual scientists. The quality of peer-reviewed publications and the societal relevance of scientific research become increasingly important, whereas the number of publications is expected to become less important. Therefore, a revision of the valuation system of scientific practice is needed, regardless of the OA discussion. We think that Plan S will get more support from researchers when it focusses on putting pressure on commercial publishers to change their business (short term), while the revision of the valuation system is initiated by academia and approached separately (long term).