

POPULATION STUDIES

A Journal of Demography

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Plan S Consultation

Our questions come from the perspective of *Population Studies*, an internationally respected demography journal owned by the Population Investigation Committee (PIC), a small charity, originally a research group, based at the London School of Economics, but not part of the School. It was the first English language journal concerned exclusively with demography, and has been produced continuously by the PIC since 1947.

Currently, the journal is published and distributed on behalf of the PIC by Routledge Journals/Taylor and Francis, but the editors retain complete editorial control via the editorial office based in the PIC office. As a registered charity, surpluses from the PIC's income from the journal are used to subsidize the British Society for Population Studies (BSPS) by providing the BSPS Secretariat at the PIC's expense, and by offering 2-3 scholarships each year for the further study of demography at Master's level.

All papers which pass an initial assessment by editors are sent for external review to expert reviewers. Papers which are accepted for publication (a small proportion of submissions, recently between 9% and 12% a year) are sent to an experienced copy editor, with a doctorate in social statistics and considerable experience of working in the field of demography, for substantive editing. Both experienced and less experienced researchers attest to the value added by our editorial process.

This document addresses the two feedback questions raised, but in reverse order.

I. "Are there other mechanisms or requirements funders should consider to foster full and immediate Open Access of research outputs?"

Plan S proposes that, from 2020, those with research funding from institutions, research councils and other bodies who are signed up to Plan S cannot publish in hybrid journals. We do not understand why **hybrid** journals are considered non-compliant with open access principles, because any paper published gold open access in *Population Studies*, and we assume in other hybrid journals, is immediately available to be read by anyone, subscriber or non-subscriber (and to be downloaded), as soon as it clears production and is posted to the iFirst part of the online *Population Studies* website. Moreover, there is no distinction in the way that gold open access papers and all other papers are treated on submission. Eventual open access publication is not signalled in any way at the submission stage, and it does not become apparent in most cases that a paper will be published as gold open access until it reaches production. This seems an important element in ensuring that, for review purposes and a level playing field, all papers receive equal treatment from the time of submission. It is not clear why cOAlition S' goals cannot be satisfied by open access publication in hybrid journals run along the lines of *Population Studies*.

Neither do we understand the suggestion that the take-up of gold open access is not progressing at a rapid enough rate. In 2016, *Population Studies* published one gold open access paper; in 2017 we published two gold open access papers in regular issues (and also a supplement additional to the regular issues, which was fully open access and funded by an outside body); in 2018 we published (online and in print issues) nine gold open access papers in regular issues. This seems to indicate a rapid growth in gold open access papers being published from 2018. Given that we currently have seven gold open access papers on iFirst, awaiting publication in a future issue, we believe this further underlines our point. As Plan S itself dates from 2018, it is unlikely that 2018 metrics on gold open access take-up were available when the Plan was being devised.

Is there concern that commercial publishers may exploit hybrid journals? Is an important objective of Plan S to regulate commercial publishers and constrain the profits they make from academic journal publishing? We would, however, argue that the proposals amount to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. We accept the argument that commercial publishers are double dipping, by increasing subscription prices year-on-year with little regard for previously agreed formulae designed to ensure this does not happen. Similarly, APCs have also been rising. However, combatting this would require journals with contracts with these publishers to ensure they had clauses in future contracts to militate against unwarranted subscription price rises as the volume of gold open access papers increases. We believe most journals would concur. In

effect, we do not dispute the problem but dispute the solution, which is not only disruptive but appears to have no concrete benefits for anyone.

II. “Is there anything unclear or are there any issues that have not been addressed by the guidance document?”

It is very unclear how the transformation from the present situation to the one envisaged by Plan S would work in practice for a hybrid journal. Most journals run by learned societies are not owned by one of the commercial publishers and are tied to publishing contracts with them, usually for around 5-year terms. If a journal is in the second year of such a contract, for example, they are obliged to continue publishing by the same model until the contract expires unless some form of universal agreement with commercial publishers to get round this is agreed. At present, future funding through Plan S of gold open access papers and gold open access journals is speculative and has not been fully costed. Hybrid journals could not make any transformative plans without full knowledge about funding available to meet the much-reduced income that would follow from a reliance solely on APCs. In the case of *Population Studies*, if Plan S as currently envisaged came into force and editorial standards were to be maintained at the current level, we estimate APCs would have to triple just to maintain the editorial office. How exactly would the proposals work in practice, and how would APCs for researchers from low and middle income countries be covered? How would green open access papers – i.e. most of those ex-USA – fit into the proposed landscape? Would realistic research council funding be available to cover costs?

We submit that without a robust costing of the transformative proposals and without a firm commitment to the amount of funding that would be available were the proposals to be accepted, the Plan as it stands is purely speculative.

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Professor John Ermisch on behalf of the editors of *Population Studies*

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