

Geological Society response to Plan S

The Geological Society of London (GSL) is a not-for-profit learned and professional Society, based in the UK and with a membership of over 12,000 earth scientists in the UK and abroad. It undertakes a wide range of services in support of its community, including education, outreach, library and information services, conferences and events, research grants and awards, policy advice to Government and scholarly publishing. It also offers professional accreditation in the form of Chartership, and its members make an active contribution within academia, industry and society.

Scholarly publishing is one of the Society's key activities and is integral to its key strategic goal of serving and supporting geoscientists and the public by facilitating the distribution of high quality science. GSL's publishing operation currently makes a surplus, and this money is wholly reinvested in activities to further support geoscientists. The Society supports the principles of sustainable open science and offers a hybrid approach to open access in all of its titles (including the entitlement to publish accepted manuscript in repositories, fully in line with green OA arrangements), in addition to encouraging and facilitating the posting of all data underpinning and supplementing the research outputs published in Society journals.

While the eventual goals of Plan S may be laudable the Geological Society is concerned that the details of the Plan, the restriction on publishers and authors and the intended pace of change will have unintended consequences which will undermine many successful and valued aspects of the scholarly community. Specifically:

- The Geological Society has made substantial progress towards open access publishing since the publication of the Finch review via its hybrid OA model, with all articles qualifying for green open access. GSL's gold OA uptake (benefitting from a range of discounts, including to authors from developing nations) is in the region of 10-15% of all published output but has not been higher because researchers have not been sufficiently funded to pay APCs. There is no certainty that researchers will be fully funded under Plan S and there is a very real danger that the requirements will make Gold OA via hybrid journals impossible, while failing to adequately fund OA in high quality fully OA titles.
- Our titles have rejection rates as high as 85% and we fear it will be impossible to maintain this level of selectivity (ie of the highest quality articles) in a wholly APC-driven model. We note that Plan S envisages an APC cap (though, as yet, no details have been provided), and this is likely to further damage our ability to invest in the quality of our publications and the services which support them.
- GSL brings together and fosters niche communities and is able to provide for their particular needs and interests. In order to work wholly OA publishing requires scale and it is likely that the interests of specific niches would have to be diluted, to a lowest common denominator level, in order to make the publishing economics work.
- The Society is concerned that a one size fits all approach will damage some communities in ways which are not intended by the authors of Plan S. For example, while Plan S is articulated around the perceived interests of the academic research communities, some of our titles deliver the outputs of research by both academics and those in industry. Authors from industry do not necessarily have any access at all to funding for APCs, and so these journals work exceptionally well on a hybrid basis. To publish these journals on a wholly gold basis would leave these authors unable to publish, to the detriment of the entire community in those disciplines.

- GSL is concerned that Plan S compromises the fundamental freedoms of researchers, often working in collaborative groups across institutions, funders or national boundaries, to publish in journals which they consider best suited to their work. It is important that scientists are free to publish in journals which provide a clear voice in their communities, and which are recognised for their adoption of high standards, but this may no longer be the case if publishing criteria are imposed top-down on researchers and publishers alike.
- All publishers require time to adapt to new funder mandates, and the schedule adopted by Plan S (effective from 2020) provides insufficient time to make required changes. This is particularly true for smaller society publishers which do not have the scale or capacity to weather sudden changes to the business environment. There is a general point to be made here that it is likely to be the large commercial publishers which can make the required adaptations, and the smaller, independent society publishers which will be unable to do so in time. It would be ironic, indeed, if the outcome of Plan S were to strengthen the hand of large-scale commercial publishers serving shareholder interests, while putting large numbers of not-for-profits (including all the work they do to support the work of their communities) out of business entirely.
- While societies can and do work on “transformative arrangements”, such as read and publish deals, such agreements are much more easily negotiated by commercial publishers with broad portfolios and significant sales and marketing resource at their disposal. Most not-for-profit publishers simply do not have the scale to negotiate at this level and read and publish is regarded by many as simply the “new big deal” – something which has always been out of the reach of most society publishers.
- Gold open access is not universally regarded the best way to deliver a voice for the researcher. Many in the “global south” have reservations about the model and see it as essentially a “pay-to-say” model suited to the well-funded institutions of the wealthiest nations. At a time when the contribution of academics worldwide is more important than at any time before, a forced migration of the publishing model may well be seen as a diversity issue. Plan S does acknowledge this issue, but does not give detail or provide solutions to the difficulties it will present to authors and publishers alike.

The Geological Society of London asks cOAlition S to reconsider key elements of its plan and, in particular, to:

1. Adopt a collaborative approach to the next steps in open access publishing, so that decision making is made by the full range of stakeholders including funders, researchers, librarians, publishers and society representatives.
2. Revisit the proposed schedule to allow time for the required adaptation to the evolving open access environment.
3. Consider the adoption of differential requirements for commercial and not for profit publishers in order to ensure the protection of the wide range of activities that learned and professional societies make to their diverse communities.
4. Retain a place for hybrid publishing in journals. If the aim is to accelerate the transition to a publishing system characterised by open access to scholarly research outputs, the mandating and full funding of all research outputs supported by funders backing Plan S would do just that.