

Royal Economic Society

Response to Plan S Consultation

The Royal Economic Society (RES) supports the principle of open access (OA), under which research publications are available to all. However, as indicated below, the RES has a number of concerns about the medium- and long-term consequences if Plan S is implemented in the way outlined in the document “Making full and immediate Open Access a reality”. Although the RES is the principal UK-based learned society for economics, the concerns expressed are neither related specifically to our discipline nor solely to the UK context. Indeed, more than half the RES’s members reside outside the UK.

Within economics, and we anticipate more widely, the current situation under green OA is that many papers are freely available without embargoes. Paradoxically, and as articulated below, Plan S may make research less easily available due to competition for funds for Article Processing Charges (APCs). Rather than enforcing a ‘one size fits all’ OA model, we propose that funders should work with current publishers of “hybrid” journals to embed and develop the green OA model, including the liberal use of preprints, to ensure both that academic freedom is maintained for researchers and that recent research can be accessed readily by all users.

Academic Freedom, Research Quality and Diversity

Under an OA model, the financial costs of publication are shifted from the reader to the producer or funder of the research. With limited resources, it should be expected that many institutions will ration the amount they are willing to contribute towards OA costs. The consequence is a restriction on the academic freedom of those who do not hold external grants on where (or perhaps if) their research can be published. In other words, the academic freedom of both grant-holders and those who do not hold grants is affected.

A consequence of a world in which academic publication outlets are predominantly OA is that institutions may vet papers to select those allowed to go forward for publication. Such additional vetting could deter staff (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) from pursuing certain lines of research, potentially acting to stifle criticism of discipline norms and discouraging the emergence of diverse and innovative approaches. A number of heads of economic departments have told us that, in their institutions, staff already in receipt of external funding, or who are ‘REF-able’, are currently more likely to receive APC

funding. We are concerned that the policy as written in Plan S could further perpetuate and reinforce the gap between those with and without funding.

Research in humanities and social science disciplines is more labour intensive and less reliant on external funding than in the sciences. Since requiring grant-holders to publish the results of their funded research in “fully” OA journals/platforms is a restriction of their academic freedom, the requirement could be a disincentive for researchers in these disciplines to apply for such grants. The medium-term consequence may be a lowering of the quality of research that is funded from these external sources in some disciplines.

The San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment (DORA) states that “research needs to be assessed on its own merits rather than on the basis of the venue in which research is published”. Publishing in certain journals carries high research prestige primarily because these journals have been shown to have high editorial and refereeing standards over long periods of time. For this reason, journals (including broad-scope journals such as *The Economic Journal* and field journals such as *The Econometrics Journal*) play an extremely important role in research quality control and signaling.

Relatively few fully OA journals/platforms of recognized quality (namely with high refereeing, editorial and quality control standards) currently exist in the humanities and social sciences. In economics it is estimated that well under 5 percent of “renowned” journals are OA¹. If Plan S is to be successful, incentives (whether financial or not) that will lead to availability of such journals/platforms would need to be known well in advance of its implementation.

Financial Considerations and Implications

An undesirable consequence of a situation where academic journals are predominantly fully OA is that research inequality across institutions within a country is likely to increase compared with the present situation. This is because, irrespective of the inherent quality of their research, institutions have different relative financial positions, and hence differ in their abilities to pay APCs. Although APCs could (and are likely to) be set at a lower rate for developing countries, it is difficult to see how rates could be set to distinguish between different institutions within a country.

The need to finance APCs in humanities and social science disciplines (and perhaps parts of STEM, such as mathematics) will require an overhaul of the funding models used by all funders of higher education institutions. Current arrangements within the UK, based largely on QR funding, do not address the issues that will arise. These are not only administrative issues, since they involve issues of equity both within institutions (between subject fields and individual scholars) as well as across institutions.

We have consulted UK heads of university economics departments about current APC arrangements at the institutional level. It appears that current arrangements are largely ad

¹ <https://open-access.net/DE-EN/open-access-in-individual-disciplines/economics-and-business-studies/>

hoc, with clear differences between institutions on how APCs are managed, who controls the budget and the basis on which APC funding decisions are made.

Equitably managing the implications of a primarily OA model will require careful analysis and consultation, at both national (or international) and institutional levels. We are concerned that the implementation timescale proposed does not account for the significant work required to undertake such a change, and that the plan does not account for the ongoing administrative work that would be required.

With funders in only a subset of countries imposing Plan S requirements, it is plausible that some highly regarded journals will move to a full OA mode, but not that all journals will do so within the medium-term. In this case, academic libraries will need to continue to subscribe to journals that are not fully OA while institutions which support OA for their staff will also pay the APC for OA submissions. This could lead to total costs to institutions rising rather than falling.

Early Career Researchers

If currently recognized high quality international journals do not move to full OA, European-based researchers subject to Plan S will be put at a serious disadvantage relative to those from other countries (including the US), and this will be particularly felt by younger researchers who are early in their careers and for whom publications are particularly important. That is, at the stages when decisions are made on initial appointment, tenure and promotion, because of the outlets in which they are able to appear, the quality of publications of researchers subject to Plan S may be less evident and have less impact on policy than those who are not subject to publication constraints.

The academic world has high international mobility of talent. If there is a perception that taking up a post in countries where there are OA requirements for externally funded research could restrict freedom to publish in certain journals, then young scholars from some overseas countries, including the US, may be deterred from applying for posts in these countries. The consequence may be that Europe is unable to attract the best academic talent from overseas, or even to retain the best home-grown talent, when the high achieving early career researchers can move internationally. Being able to attract and retain international talent is particularly important for economics, where the latest data show two-thirds (65.7%) of academic economics staff in UK higher education institutions in 2016/17 to be from overseas (36.8% from the EU and 27.6% from non- EU countries)².

Learned Societies

Learned societies often own journals with high academic reputations in the humanities and social sciences. These societies use the surplus generated by their journals to support their

² *Higher Education Workforce Survey 2018*, published by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, December 2018.

(academic and non-academic) communities, especially early career scholars. The following are examples of how RES distributes its publishing surplus:

- Grants to enable researchers to attend conferences
- Grants to enable researchers to run workshops
- Funding for outreach activities in schools
- Funding to improve diversity in the discipline, including a mentoring scheme for female economists
- Funding an annual Postgraduate meeting
- Funding an annual Job Market for final year PhD students
- Part-funding our Annual Conference
- Part-funding an Easter Training School for early career researchers and policymakers

Unless APCs are set at a level that ensures a sufficient income stream, a move to full OA would adversely impact on the work that learned societies such as RES perform.

Conclusions

While supporting the principle of OA, the RES strongly cautions against its implementation as currently envisaged under Plan S, as we believe it could have a number of unintended and undesirable consequences, particularly in the humanities and social sciences.

One of the RES's strategic priorities is to improve diversity in economics, across several dimensions. We are concerned that Plan S as stated will adversely affect groups with less access to funding, thereby exacerbating differences between the haves and have-nots.

It is clear there are costs, not all of which are necessarily financial, to the provision of high-quality academic journals/platforms, with these including administration, editing and refereeing. Currently the financial costs of publication are mainly borne by libraries or individual researchers, with "hybrid" journals allowing OA with the payment of an APC. Under full OA, financial costs would be borne by publishing authors or their funders/institutions through the APC. As stated in the opening paragraphs, we urge funders to work with publishers of "hybrid" journals to embed green OA and to develop an equitable distribution of charges across funders, libraries and individual researchers. We believe that the latter discussion should include what role, if any, should be played by submission fees and the 'Read & Publish' arrangements being developed by publishers.