

The Case for a Balanced Implementation of Plan S

Plan S should let free online access to authors' final peer-reviewed manuscripts count as Open Access, and publishers should retain publishing rights. This is a win-win solution: the central objectives of Plan S can be safeguarded, the plan can be introduced quickly, and detrimental consequences for European research can be avoided.

The current model for scientific publication is under pressure. The European Economic Association believes the main issues are as follows:

1. Too much of the published scientific research does not have sufficiently good quality control.
2. General access to scientific publications is not sufficiently open. It is important and reasonable that the public can freely access results of research funded by public funds. The public also needs guidance in distinguishing between good and bad research.
3. Commercial publishers reap excess profits through high subscription fees. Public funds therefore pay twice for the same research: first, when the research underlying the publication is performed; then, for the research community to be able to read the published research.

The European Research Council, along with the national research councils in twelve European countries, has recently adopted Plan S, which aims at dramatically changing the current model for scientific publishing. These bold changes are motivated by problems 2 and 3 above.

But Plan S has received harsh criticism from the scientific community, as we discuss below. Our purpose here is to present a concrete proposal for how its implementation can be improved. Our suggestion is to exploit the already established British REF 2021 Open Access Policy and let that count as Open Access. According to this policy, a sufficient criterion for Open Access is that authors' final peer-reviewed manuscript is made available in a searchable web repository when the article is accepted for publication. Moreover, the publisher retains the publishing right for the article. By "final peer-reviewed manuscript" we mean the author's final version of the scientific paper when accepted, but before the publisher's typesetting of the article for publication. There are already well-developed electronic archives for this type of Open Access publishing, see for example arXiv.org. We are convinced that our proposal will safeguard the central elements and principles behind Plan S.

Our proposal has two major advantages. First, it would actually be feasible to implement this balanced version of Plan S by 2020, which is the ambitious time schedule that has been set forth. Without the implementation we propose, there is substantial risk that the transition will take significantly longer time and that it will involve great uncertainty for both the European scientific community and for science itself.

Second, such a balanced implementation of Plan S would shield European research and the European scientific community from most of the dire consequences of Plan S that critics have warned about. Many fear an implementation of Plan S far more extreme than our proposal, where no researcher who receives research funding in Europe will be able to publish the results in traditional subscription-fee journals. Such a radical ban would prevent European researchers from publishing in almost all

leading and mid-level journals in almost all disciplines. Such an implementation would have serious and far-reaching negative consequences:

1. An extreme implementation of Plan S would undermine the current system of quality control of scientific publications, which in turn would amplify the main problem 1 above. Even if errors may occur in the scientific publication process, the current system is an irreplaceable tool in science. It is based on a division of labor within the research community developed over a century. No single researcher has the capacity to read through thousands of articles in their own field in order to identify the best work, and no researcher should spend their scarce research time in such a way. Researchers in all fields of science therefore rely on the help and feedback that journals provide authors and readers in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. That is, to identify the research that meets the highest scientific standards and which has the highest scientific value.
2. An extreme implementation of Plan S would harm young researchers. A well-functioning system for quality control of scientific publications is inherently democratic: it enables young and skilled researchers at less distinguished institutions to publish their work in prominent journals, thus gaining recognition and visibility they deserve. Leading journals provide a seal of quality approval to the work they publish. If the scientific community were to lose such objective signals of quality provided by the current journals, the science community would be forced to resort to much more subjective and unfortunate criteria for scientific visibility, such as the prestige of the researcher's current university, the institution that granted the researcher's PhD, the researcher's network, etc.
3. An extreme implementation of Plan S would not necessarily mitigate the market power and profits of the commercial publishing houses. Commercial Open Access journals could end up being equally profitable as the current commercial subscription-fee journals: they will exploit their market power to extort excess fees from the authors for publishing their work. Therefore, Open Access is no silver bullet for addressing problem 3 above – the public would continue to pay twice for the research. In addition, even if we, after a long and arduous transition, were able to develop top-rated pure Open Access journals, who would be able to afford paying, say, a €4,000 to €10,000 author fee for a scientific publication? Hardly any scientists at underfunded universities and in poor countries! While we agree that excess profits accruing to commercial publishing houses is a problem, we believe this issue can be addressed more effectively by applying the policy tools available to the competition regulators such as the European Commissioner for Competition.
4. An extreme implementation of Plan S would undermine leading journals run by scientific societies, associations, and universities. These society journals are often non-profit and operate with affordable subscription fees. Scientific quality control does not come for free – it requires substantial time inputs from top scholars serving as scientific editors. The society journals must somehow cover these costs. They would not be sustainable if they could not retain the publishing rights to the articles they publish. Forcing these journals to accept Creative Commons licenses (CC-BY 4.0), where the author retains all rights – including the right to redistribute the article for commercial purposes, may therefore cause their demise. Moreover, by banning European researchers from publishing in such society journals, one contributes to marginalizing these journals.
5. An extreme implementation would undermine the opportunities for European researchers to compete with and conduct joint research with non-Europeans in an increasingly global scientific community. Global scientific impact and visibility hinge on publications in highly rated journals. Depriving European researchers of such opportunities would dramatically

weaken our opportunities to contribute to the research frontier on a leveled playing field with researchers in for example the United States, who are not subject to Plan S.

6. An extreme implementation would be detrimental to some scientific disciplines. There are currently large differences across disciplines in the availability of top journals with open access. A “one size fits all” policy is therefore unfortunate. Researchers in economics in Europe will be particularly hurt by an extreme implementation of Plan S.
7. An extreme implementation of Plan S would undermine the ability to recruit the best researchers to our universities and research institutes, because the strongest applicants will prefer countries and institutions not subject to Plan S.

If Plan S is implemented in a balanced manner as we propose – where authors’ final peer-reviewed manuscripts are made available in a searchable web repositories – the central objectives of Plan S will be safeguarded, the plan can be implemented swiftly and smoothly, and the potential detrimental negative consequences of an extreme implementation will be largely avoided. The attention should be focused on strengthening the system for scientific quality control and on reducing publishers' prices and profits through European libraries bargaining collectively with publishers and through the tools of competition supervision authorities.