

Learned Publishing Opinion Piece - Author Submitted Version

PlanS and Purpose: The future direction for UK learned societies

Jon Treadway, Great North Wood Consulting Limited (0000-0001-9577-0283) and Sarah Greaves, Sarah Greaves STEM Consulting Limited (0000-0001-7802-0261)

Summary

Change may be the only constant, but as COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on research, education, work and every other corner of our lives, the macro trends affecting publishers – the transition to open access, the growth of preprints, the ongoing diversification and internationalisation of research (Baker 2020) – have also been impacted.

The impact on these trends have not left learned societies unaffected but we currently have little systematic understanding the impact of COVID-19 on UK societies (Inge 2020, Parry-Giles 2021), their members and activities and how that has affected their considerations around, or responses to, revenue diversification, increasing use of preprints, and the rise of open access, Plan S and COAlition S. Our findings indicate that in the short term UK societies are more concerned with revenue income from buildings and events than the transition to open access.

Introduction

To understand this in more detail we anonymously interviewed the leadership teams of a small set of STEM focussed UK-based learned societies to determine how different trends are affecting their mission, strategy and operational plans, and how they are adapting to the changes around them. Although the numbers interviewed were small compared to the number of UK learned societies, the broad trends and responses can be used to comment generally on the impacts being seen within this segment of the publishing ecosystem.

The responses we received are unexpectedly consistent given the broad range of voices they represent, but perhaps more interestingly the societies are currently less driven by the challenges of addressing Open Access than we might expect especially in

a post-COVID19 era where the 'big five' publishers are driving forward Open Access at an accelerated rate.

The transition to Open Access publishing has apparently accelerated (Michael & Pollock, 2021) under the influence of the higher priority afforded to it by many research funders (cOAlition S 2022)¹. The growth of preprints has also continued (Brierly 2021) rapidly during the last 18 months and the peer review of COVID 19 articles has been complicated (Hurst & Greaves 2021)⁴ Although interviewees share concern about the viability of their publishing enterprises during the transition of business models, they expressed no desire to 'shake up' existing relationships with their big corporate publishers. In fact, the societies stressed their reliance on them to steer them through the change they are experiencing.

As discussed below in more detail there was a significant lack of desire to engage directly with cOAlition S. We believe this is a strong signal that Plan S will likely continue to consolidate the market power of large commercial publishers, perhaps counter to the original desire to disrupt academic publishing expressed upon the announcement of Plan S by many Open Access advocates and those who state they are against the perceived control of scholarly communications by a limited number of large commercial publishers.

In addition, each society, regardless of their field, age or size, had a clear focus on continuing to evolve their mission to the needs of their academic communities as the worlds of research, education and work change, partly as a result of the pandemic. Issues around premises were more pressing and significant for societies going forward than any publishing industry changes.

Study & Findings

Following the COVID pandemic we contacted about 30 UK based societies to understand their priorities going forward and to investigate the impact of COVID, Brexit and Open Access - and whether this had shifted since the pandemic. We held virtual interviews with 10 UK society Chief Executives and had email conversations with another 4. They represented societies (old and new) and across the breadth of STEM subjects but were primarily focussed in the life sciences. The interviews all took place between Spring and Autumn 2021. The significant majority (over 75% published their journals via a corporate publisher. However, their answers were remarkably similar.

Focus on mission & purpose

Overall our interviewees were extremely consistent in their belief that their Societies' missions remain appropriate and relevant. These missions find articulation in the

charitable objectives and visions / mission statements of the Societies; they invariably articulate that the purpose of the organisations is to support academics within the relevant subject area or academic field, and the dissemination of knowledge.

Societies' rarely refer to their publishing enterprise or their premises directly in their missions or statements of purpose. However, in some cases the Society acknowledged that the organisation has become over time synonymous with the publishing operation or iconic building, often partly because the revenue generated by the journal or events in the building subsidise and sustain all of the activity of the society. Whether the Society sees the dissemination of knowledge as their mission or merely an expression of their mission will affect long term publishing decisions, especially if there is less revenue. Several interviewees also express their importance of the public to their missions - ensuring the public are aware of the relevance of the Societies' discipline, or communicating important or cutting edge research beyond the Society itself

Open Access & Plan S

These concerns ranked more highly with interviewees than the growth of Open Access or requirements of Plan S with almost all interviewees, albeit with differing priorities depending upon individual Societies' circumstances. There is substantial variation in the conceptualisation of value created for members between different societies around how each society delivers value for members and drives interest and engagement in their organisation.

And although, as mentioned above, we discussed the impact of Open Access (OA) with all interviewees, it was not the highest priority for any of them.

However it is worth noting that all the interviewees understood the worth in increasing OA and the merits behind it, often connecting it to their societies' missions to communicate research. As mentioned above societies believe their very existence is to support the dissemination and reach of the academic research their members, and others in their research community, publish. In the past this was usually provided through the launch of journals which under subscription models have been hugely successful for all the societies we spoke to. Journals make up between 30% & 70% of the revenue of the societies we surveyed, which allows them to support other activities across their society; this is a huge amount of revenue from one single activity which is driving society missions in a much broader context than research publishing.

Open Access as a movement aligns perfectly with the traditional academic society missions to support the distribution of academic research, so one might expect societies to be fully embracing the move to open access as it increases readership. However, this is not the case from the interviews we conducted. All the interviewed societies

agreed that the Open Access movement aligns with their mission as an organisation but all are concerned about the financial impact this transition will have on the society.

Commercial prospects and impact on revenue

Our interviewees felt OA had helped commercial publishers diversify income and drive growth. Many do not see, or perhaps have not yet been introduced to, the opportunities of journal expansion without printed page budget constraints or the ease in which they could launch new titles. There was also caution about diluting the society mission through more journal publications or increasing volume so the financial opportunities many have found from OA could be harder for societies to realise. The message communicated to them by commercial publishing partners has been to expect reduced income over the next 3 to 5 years.

To help mitigate against that expected reduction in revenue, societies may need to look at diversifying their open access offerings to help minimise the impact - for example Transformative Agreements and Subscribe to Open - could become more important in the society market than a straight switch to charging Article Processing Charges. The group we spoke with had a range of experience of OA publishing with some of the smaller societies keen to perhaps embrace diamond OA publishing (the Diamond OA model has proven popularly with some societies who have small publishing portfolios or are launching new journals, but has yet to be embraced for societies with larger publishing portfolios (Bosman et al 2021)) but have no current idea how to create a sustainable business model from this strategy. Some mentioned initiatives such as CAP from PLOS and Read and Publish deals used by many big publishing houses, but without having fully examined these in the context of their own society.

And finally due to the high level of engagement with publishers on Plan S (cOAlition S 2022; Estelle, Jago & Wise 2021) it was surprising that most of these smaller societies have not publicly commented on Plan S or OA, nor have those we interviewed been directly asked for their opinions. Only one society we spoke to had a publicly-stated position on Open Access as related to PlanS.

Conclusions

From a relatively small set of interviews with UK-based learned societies around what we thought would be a conversation firmly fixed on dealing with Open Access, it is clear there are consistent issues much more pressing for societies in a COVID-19, post-Brexit, OA world. All are significantly impacted by the loss of revenue from events and building hire, with many dealing with loss leading buildings in central London which have quickly

gone from financial asset to financial liability. Navigating that, whilst anticipating dramatic decreases in income from any OA transition, means societies move to embracing open research may well be slower than we might have otherwise expected. Although the aims and ambitions of OA naturally align with each society's mission, they are not as driven to implement this change as we expected and would rather be guided on this by their publisher partners.

The long term impact of a dramatic shift in revenue income driven by COVID-19 on learned societies is hard to predict but it is clear this will include changes in how they physically operate from their historical buildings, the services they provide to their members, how they increase that membership on a global basis and how they increase revenue whilst embracing open access. The time since each society was launched ranges from 25-over 100 years, but it is clear their aim to serve their members and increase the dissemination and reach of science to all remains at the centre of what they are all aiming to do - with decisions made on revenue and policy embracing those challenges but all with the aim of a lasting legacy for the next 100 years.

In summary, these UK learned societies seem to be focused on their long established missions to support their researches and continue their financial viability, and whilst aware of open access, and potentially concerned by the impact it may have on their finances, they are relatively happy to delegate the transition of publishing businesses to their existing publishing partners. Their focus, collectively, remains as it was when each society was established - serving their community, disseminating research and ensuring financial viability.

References

- Baker, S (2020, August 7). *How covid-19 is Reshaping International Research Collaboration*. Times Higher Education (THE). Retrieved October 17, 2022, from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-covid-19-reshaping-international-research-collaboration>
- Bosman, Jeroen, Frantsvåg, Jan Erik, Kramer, Bianca, Langlais, Pierre-Carl, & Proudman, Vanessa. (2021). OA Diamond Journals Study. Part 1: Findings. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4558704>
- Brierley, L (2021): Lessons from the influx of preprints during the early COVID-19 pandemic. The Lancet, Volume 5, Issue 3, E115-E117. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00035-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00035-8)

Estelle, Lorraine; Jago, Dave; Wise, Alicia (2021): How to enable smaller independent publishers to participate in OA agreements. Wellcome Trust. Online resource.

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14731308.v1>

Fox, J. (2022, January 18). Work from home is becoming a permanent part of how jobs are done. Bloomberg.com. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-18/work-from-home-is-becoming-a-permanent-part-of-how-jobs-are-done>

Hurst, P. and Greaves, S. (2021), COVID-19 Rapid Review cross-publisher initiative: What we have learned and what we are going to do next. *Learned Publishing*, 34: 450-453.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1375>

Inge, S. (2020, March 20). *Learned societies restrict activities as a result of covid-19*. Research Professional News. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from

<https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-charities-and-societies-2020-3-learned-societies-restrict-activities-as-a-result-of-covid-19/>

Michael, A., & Pollock, D. (2021, October 19). *News & Views: Open access market sizing update 2021*. Delta Think. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from

<https://deltathink.com/news-views-open-access-market-sizing-update-2021/#:~:text=Growth%20in%20OA%20will%20remain,total%20journal%20publishing%20market%20value>

Murray, J., Trausch, F., Walters, M., & Chandra, M. (2021, August 16) *Commercial real estate: The office market in a post-COVID world*. Pacific Investment Management Company LLC. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from

<https://www.pimco.co.uk/en-gb/insights/viewpoints/commercial-real-estate-the-office-market-in-a-post-covid-world/>

Parry-Giles, T (2021) *Building Resilient Learned Societies in an Age of Pandemic and Fear*. Scholarly Kitchen

Retrieved October 17, 2022, from

<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/06/02/guest-post-building-resilient-learned-societies-in-an-age-of-pandemic-and-fear/>

cOAlition S (2022) *Accelerating Open Access: cOAlition S 2021 Annual Review* Retrieved October 17, 2022 from

cOAlition S (2022) *Plan S Supporters*. Available at: <https://www.coalition-s.org/supporters/> (Accessed: October 17, 2022).