

Plan B

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A revised Plan S is now available. The objective of open access remains, but more time for preparation has been provided, and clearer requirements are made for the journals. Paywalls are not the only barriers to be torn down.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

The transition to open research was moving too slowly, according to a number of European research councils, including *our own*, when they joined forces to form Coalition S (1). In September 2018, the group launched Plan S. From 2020 onwards, all publications funded by them should be openly available from day one. This would put an end to the practice of hiding results behind the paywalls of the traditional subscription-based journals.

This was asking for trouble: nobody likes being told what to do, and researchers least of all (2). The requirements were too numerous and too unrealistic, freedom of expression was violated and the Public Administration Act was possibly breached (3).

In November, the principles were specified in a manual, on which Coalition S requested written feedback. In late May, the revised plan was published (4). The coalition has listened – to a certain extent. Plan S has been postponed by one year. In Norway, for example, the requirements will apply to calls for proposals from the Research Council of Norway from 1 January 2021. In addition, it has been made clear that the funding agencies will support multiple forms of open access.

There are three alternative routes to Plan S-compliant publishing (4). The first is through journals or platforms with open access, with or without a publication fee (gold and platinum open access respectively). The second involves publishing in subscription journals that permit the researcher to deposit an article version with identical content in a knowledge archive. Plan S does *not* accept payment for individual open articles in subscription-based journals. The third publication route involves open access through

so-called *transformative arrangements*: money from the funders of Plan S can be used to redeem articles if the publisher has signed an agreement for transition to open access by 2024. Irrespective of channel, the researcher or institution must retain copyright and publish under an approved Creative Commons licence (2, 4).

Some are concerned that the transition to open access will cause a decline in the quality of publications (5). Coalition S 'disagrees fundamentally' with this notion and claims that detailed requirements for the journals to publish their financial affairs, editorial policies and procedures for peer review will ensure that the authors can choose journals of high quality (6).

The objectives of Plan S include applying pressure on the large publishing houses to do away with expensive subscription contracts (5). There are strong indications that this has already had an effect: since last autumn, Norwegian institutions have entered into publish-and-read agreements with among others Wiley and Elsevier, and are engaged in negotiations with other major publishers (7). Such agreements will free individual researchers from having to think of publication fees. Elsevier-owned *The Lancet* is indeed exempted from the agreement but they have agreed to concede copyright to the author's version of the article to permit it to be deposited (8). Researchers may thus still publish in compliance with Plan S in (certain) high-impact journals.

However, *high-impact journals* is a term that Coalition S would prefer to let disappear, because the motivation behind Plan S is not only to make research more openly available, but also to change the ways in which its quality is assessed. When a researcher applies for funding from a funding agency that adheres to Plan S, the committee should assess the content of each publication without any regard for what journal published the work. The committee should adhere to the principles in the *San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment* (DORA), which the Research Council of Norway signed already last year (9). Unsurprisingly, such a view is met with opposition from the journals concerned, which resist being stripped of their brand commodity, and despite a certain measure of vanity rightly insist on being something more than mere publication channels (8).

«Open access is primarily a matter of how knowledge should be shared with everybody»

Although a number of large funding agencies have declared their support for Coalition S over the last year, many are not yet on board. There may thus still be cause for concern about reduced competitiveness and problems in collaboration. This means that we need to stop focusing on the trees and look at the woods, as Alison Muddit of PLOS reminds us (10). Open access is primarily a matter of how knowledge should be shared with everybody. Here, much is still left to do.

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