Open Access, Plan S, and researchers’ needs

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Since its launch in 2018, Plan S—a proposal to enforce open access publishing by cOAlition S, an international consortium of research funders—has been discussed intensely. A wide range of views have been expressed, and a request for feedback generated responses from more than 600 individuals and organizations which are publicly available on the open platform Zenodo (cOAlition S, 2019).

One of these responses was an open letter organized by Bas de Bruin and myself, which outlined several concerns about Plan S and attracted 1,790 signatories from all career stages and 52 countries (de Bruin & Kamerlin, 2020). Our main concerns were, first, the complete ban on hybrid journals, which would greatly limit publishing options for many disciplines. Second, the fact that cOAlition S comprises only a subset of European and a minority of global funders. Although the majority of global funding agencies have less restrictive mandates, Plan S could still limit researcher mobility and collaboration. Third, Plan S structure encourages Gold (pay-to-publish) Open Access. The revised implementation guidelines present a variety of “Green” routes to compliance (cOAlition S, 2020a), but the requirement for zero-embargo CC-BY deposition of the accepted manuscript in a repository is not accepted by most journals, because it would undermine their business. Moreover, Plan S shifts paywalls from a reader-pays to an author-pays model, which can restrict the dissemination of research for authors with limited funding. Fourth, Plan S, with its “one-size fits all” model, appears to ignore the different practices of different research fields, and differences in funding for scientists.

The scientific council of the European Research Council (ERC) recently announced that they will withdraw their support for Plan S (European Research Council, 2020a) following a similar decision by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond in 2019 (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, 2019). Specifically, the council called for Open Access Plans to respect researchers’ needs, in particular those of young researchers (European Research Council, 2020a). Their statement also outlines the need to preserve equity among research communities and among European countries, given the challenges for countries with more limited national funding of research. In addition, they share our concern (de Bruin & Kamerlin, 2018) about the detrimental impact of an all-out ban on publication in hybrid journals outside of transformative agreements and its impact on early-career researchers, researchers working in countries with fewer funding opportunities, or working in fields which will find the implementation of Open Access policies challenging (European Research Council, 2020a).

As a former ERC grantee, and a strong proponent of Open Science, I welcome the statement by the ERC. Their concerns are similar to those raised in our Open Letter, as well as the detailed Plan S risk analysis performed by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) (Carling et al., 2018). The ERC has been a strong proponent of Open Access publication since its inception (European Research Council, 2020b) and introduced an Open Access clause into grant agreements as early as 2012 (https://erc.europa.eu/managing-project/open-access). They have also reiterated their ongoing commitment to full and immediate Open Access (European Research Council, 2020a). Plan S is one of many potential paths toward Open Access, and withdrawal of support from cOAlition S is not synonymous with withdrawal of support for Open Science.

In a response to the ERC (cOAlition S, 2020b), cOAlition S has addressed concerns about hybrid journals by emphasizing the newly announced Plan S Rights Retention Strategy (cOAlition S, 2020c). It requires cOAlition S grantees to apply a CC-BY license to all future approved manuscripts, stating that this obligation takes legal precedence over any later agreement that may be imposed by the publisher, thus allowing grantees to publish in any venue that they would like (cOAlition S, 2020c). However, while this strategy does indeed create a legal obligation for the grantee, it is unclear that it would also create a legal obligation for the publisher. This would heavily depend on publishers’ willingness to modify their existing agreements. Should a publisher decide not to do so, this could create a very difficult situation for grantees, trapping them between one set of legal obligations to the funding agency, and another orthogonal set of legal obligations to the publisher. It is therefore not obvious that this strategy will necessarily solve the concerns raised by ourselves or by the ERC Scientific Council, and may instead cause a new set of problems for grantees. In addition, by introducing a zero-embargo green CC-BY requirement for all cOAlition S grantees, cOAlition S is forcing authors with whom they do not have a direct relationship to adopt the same mandate if they collaborate with researchers funded by cOAlition S. Finally, as is clear from the Implementation Roadmap of cOAlition S organizations (cOAlition S, 2020d), not all cOAlition S funders will adopt this policy at the same time, nor apply it in the same way, thus likely creating great confusion.

Open Science, which encompasses openness across the entire research process, is extremely important for the research ecosystem. The research community, at least in STEM subjects, is pushing strongly in this direction with the increased uptake of preprint servers, the proliferation of...
repositories for data sharing, journals with increasingly liberal policies with regard to preprint updates, and general awareness of the importance of open science among researchers and its uptake in practice. The research landscape is changing, and the research community appears to be eager participants in this change. All stakeholders—researchers, publishers, funders, libraries and librarians, and the general public—need to be active participants in this change, and researchers in particular need to become aware of the benefits of practicing open science, rather than being driven by top-down mandates that heavily restrict dissemination practices. It is important to bring researchers, broadly defined and not just individual representatives, to this table, and to listen to their needs and concerns.

The ERC has called for Open Access plans to respect researchers’ needs (European Research Council, 2020a). I hope this call will be seriously taken into account when implementing current and future Open Access plans.

Conflict of interest
The author is on the Editorial Boards of Electronic Structure (IOP Publishing) and Chemistry—Methods (Chemistry Europe), as well as the Editorial Advisory Boards of ACS Catalysis, the Journal of Physical Chemistry, the Journal of Chemical Informatics and Modeling, and ACS Omega (ACS Publications). She is also a member of the F1000Research Advisory Board.

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