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Eve, Martin Paul (2018) Dial S for Strategy. *Research Fortnight* , ISSN 1358-1198.

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Dial S for strategy

UK Research and Innovation's endorsement of Europe's plan for open access looks like a move to maintain relations post-Brexit. The issue now is how it will be implemented, says Martin Eve.

On 4 September, Science Europe, an association of research funders and performers, unveiled [Plan S, a strategy for full open access](#) to publicly funded research work by 2020. The document is an eyebrow-raiser.

As well as ruling out support for publication in hybrid journals—which charge for both open-access articles and subscription content—the plan demands that authors retain full copyright “with no restrictions”. The article processing charges levied in return for open-access publication should be “standardised and capped”, the plan says.

Most significantly for Britain, [UK Research and Innovation \(UKRI\) has signed up](#). This means that the plan will cover work funded by the research councils and Research England, and so potentially the vast majority of UK researchers.

Given these organisations' former reluctance either to stop funding hybrid open access or to cap processing charges, one suspects that the pressure to come to a post-Brexit funding agreement with the European Union may have played some role.

It is difficult to see this announcement as anything but UKRI doing its utmost to remain on board with EU funding programmes. Whether as part of a voluntary harmonisation exercise or a more strong-armed approach behind the scenes, the current state of UK politics and the nation's forthcoming isolation must have played some role in discussions.

There are, however, many unanswered questions about the details of the policy, which is being left to individual signatories to implement.

For example, who decides the level of the cap? What does this mean for policies on green open access, where publications from subscription journals are placed in open repositories sometimes after an embargo period? How will smaller institutions whose libraries lack the funding to cover article processing charges comply?

The devil is in the details, and until we know how UKRI plans to implement this strategy it is not clear whether the tectonic implications will truly come to pass. What is clear is that the European Commission, which has also endorsed the plan, will play hardball: “The funders will monitor compliance and sanction non-compliance”.

This will delight many, but it will also restoke the flames of academic anger against open access. It appears to restrict author choice, although when authors continue to use that choice to paywall their work for personal career advancement, this is a questionable argument. It applies to all types of output, including monographs, albeit with a longer deadline for implementation.

Predictably, publishers' reactions have been largely negative, perhaps out of a fear that, to quote Nature's headline: “Radical open-access plan could spell end to journal subscriptions.”

This is undoubtedly the intention. Learned societies may also be anxious about their financial futures; many derive substantial revenue from their subscription publications.

If publishers see the plan as an attack, they have only themselves to blame. Instead of implementing a transition and offsetting revenue from processing charges against subscriptions, several large publishers have treated open-access revenue as an additional cash cow.

Arts, humanities and social science researchers, who typically lack the grant funding needed to pay processing charges, will also be nervous. There has been far too little experimentation with business models, leaving those without concentrated central pools of funding more vulnerable.

That said, since researchers across Europe will all be in the same boat, it is likely that newer open-access options that do not involve processing charges will now become far more appealing to researchers in these fields. These include the [Open Library of Humanities](#), with which I am associated, [Open Book Publishers](#), [Open Humanities Press](#), and [Punctum Books](#).

After all, researchers in these disciplines will still seek national-level project funding but will have to comply with the funders' terms, regardless of whether their institutions will pay processing charges. Institutions will probably also apply some pressure, since the sums involved are too great to ignore.

With other funders such as the Wellcome Trust also reviewing their open-access policies, Plan S comes at an important time. Attention now turns to the United States. Its funders and universities are highly decentralised, and other nations' policies have done little to change publication cultures.

But for Europe to act as a block is significant, and could drive worldwide change. The question is whether US-based publishers will retreat into isolationism or venture out of their subscription-based comfort zones.

In short: Plan S is a bold, radical vision for the future of scholarly publishing. It adopts a deliberately interventionist strategy designed to allow the payers to call the pipers' tunes. At present, it is hard to say whether its promise will bear out. With its alarmingly short timescale for implementation, however, we will not have long to wait and see.

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