

Political Studies Association

Response to Plan S Consultation

The Political Studies Association is the UK's learned society for academics who research and teach in the broad area of political science. We have nearly 2000 members and we publish four academic journals. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and to highlight the areas of most concern to us regarding the implementation of plan S.

We welcome the principle that the outputs of publicly funded research should be accessible free of charge to the wider public. However, without considering the wider implications of embracing that principle there is a danger of inadvertently damaging the very research structures and eco system that gives rise to high quality research outputs in the first place. For example, in its current configuration, Plan S threatens to have a significant impact on researchers in politics, and the social sciences more broadly, as they are less likely to have access to large grants or conduct research requiring such grants, which would provide funds for article processing charges (APCs). In addition, many academic journals are owned by learned societies for whom this is traditionally an important source of income that allows the societies to carry out a wide range of charitable and scholarly activities that benefit both their members and the wider public.

There are a number of key issues that we wish to flag:

1. Access to Funding

(i) Impact on social sciences and humanities

The financial model underpinning Plan S is that the current cost of journal subscriptions will be replaced by APCs so could simply be seen as a re-allocation of resources within university budgets. However, disciplines in the social sciences and humanities receive proportionately less direct grant funding than those in STEM – in the UK only about 10% of current research council funding goes into those areas despite their representing about half of the research active workforce. This means that researchers in our discipline have less access to APC funds provided as part of a grant. Our members have also expressed concern specifically over the definition of 'publically funded research'. Politics researchers could be forced to depend upon, for example, favourable university priorities for the reallocation of subscription savings in order to publish cutting edge, small n, or theoretical research.

(ii) Impact on particular academic staff groups & types of research

In an era of austerity and centrally determined national priorities, a large proportion of university academic staff do not have grant funding. Therefore, if the definition of 'publically funded' research is taken to be staff salaries, those without grant income would be more at risk of having little or no access to APCs or publishing. This could hit particular researchers harder than others. For example, access to APC funds is likely to disadvantage early career researchers and those on fixed-term contracts. Those conducting research requiring less funding for example, for theoretical work, policy analysis, small n empirical work or qualitative work would also find it difficult to access APC support.

2. Choice of publication outlet/academic freedom

At present, researchers are able to decide for themselves which journal is most appropriate for their particular research area and the ability to make such a choice is seen as a key element of academic freedom. Such flexibility would be constrained at least in the short to medium term as there are likely to be far fewer OA only outlets than the current range of OA and subscription-based routes. In addition, this could have a negative impact on international/non-UK focused work as UK scholars covered by Plan S funders would be prohibited from publishing in non-compliant international journals even where these might be the world-leading journals in their particular field.

3. Impact on Quality

A major concern is that these proposals will have a negative impact on the rigour of the peer review process and the quality of the published work. At present the PSA's journals have an overall acceptance rate of 25% demonstrating the high quality thresholds in place for a submitted piece to be published. Undoubtedly, with this new financial model, journals may be encouraged by publishers to sacrifice quality for the financial rewards.

4. Impact of loss of income

There would be significant unintended consequences if the volume and or cost of subscriptions to our current journals were reduced. It is not the case that the only financial beneficiaries of the current model are the publishers themselves. The PSA, like many other learned societies, depends upon publisher contracts for a significant proportion of its income. This allows us to support a diverse range of activities to promote political science and engage with the wider world that would otherwise not be possible. These activities include:

- Visits to schools and supporting post-16 students and teachers with resources and events such as our schools video competition
- Funding for early career researchers such as training opportunities, travel grants to attend conferences and present their research and placements for PhD students to work in Parliament
- Events for the general public such as lectures and panel discussions
- Professional development activities for our members in areas such as media training and impact
- Information to inform public debates through the material on our website such as the PSA blogs; our magazine 'Political Insight'; and the posting of audio/video material

It is important to note that much of this is delivered at very low cost as it draws on volunteer labour from elected (but unpaid) trustees. In most learned societies the number of salaried staff involved in providing these benefits is relatively small. In terms of the journals themselves, our journal editors work for a very modest annual stipend but essentially this work and that of the peer-reviewers for individual articles is based on good will and a recognition that this is part of an academic's workload. Under a predominantly APC based model it is not clear that such a view would still prevail and there might instead be an expectation that peer reviewers and editors for journals would be paid at a 'market' rate appropriate to the APC income.

5. Dangers of state funding rather than independent income

One option that has been mooted is that income lost through publishers' contracts that is then used for wider beneficial purposes could be replaced by public funding. There are, however, some significant concerns about the potential impact of such an approach. It is unlikely that the current overall volume of income would be provided. There may be a temptation to favour STEM subjects. If such funding were allocated through a competitive mechanism this could disadvantage smaller or less mainstream organisations and reduce the diversity and range of current activities. Most importantly it would undermine the independence and autonomy that learned societies currently have and there would be a greater risk of requiring our activities to meet some centrally defined criteria relating to perceived national priorities.

6. Timescale and Transition

The proposal that all researchers supported by Plan S funders should be compliant with these requirements by 2020 seems unfeasible. It will require a major change in practice and indeed levels of knowledge on the part of individual researchers and their institutions and in the current journals and their publishers. This could have a number of possible consequences – the closure of some journals; the imposition of penalties for non-compliance; or allowing non-compliance to occur without sanction. None of these would be desirable.