

UCL Plan S Town Hall meeting (8 January 2019)

Notes made of presentations with no slides, questions, and panel discussion

David Price introduction

Principles and implementation of Plan S

Paul Ayris presentation

After Paul Ayris/Jan-Robert Smits's presentation concluded, the question of whether research not funded by participating Coalition S funders will be bound by the Open Access conditions mandated by Plan S was posed. The answer was that it will not (but see discussion below).

Robert Kiley presentation

Catherine Sharp presentation

Disciplinary perspectives on Plan S

David Shanks (Brain Sciences) presentation

David Shanks is a keen advocate of and believer in Open Access, and supports Plan S. He first promoted the broad Open Access movement from a moral perspective, on the grounds that the wider goal of the medical sciences is to improve global health, and that locking up research outputs behind paywalls inhibits this. He illustrated this point with an example of the Liberian government being unaware of research about the potential impact of an Ebola outbreak within their country when the epidemic actually occurred a few years ago.

He then moved onto the argument that the transparency inherent in the Open Science movement – open data, open peer-review etc. – is an ideal measure to uphold academia during the current zeitgeist of scepticism of “experts”, e.g. the election of populist leaders such as Donald Trump, and Brexit.

Finally, he posed a challenge: should UCL go above and beyond the scope of Plan S, by mandating its Open Access requirements for all its research outputs, not just those supported by Coalition S funders?

Margot Finn (History) presentation

Tony Kenyon (Engineering) presentation

Tony Kenyon began by confirming the moral imperative underlying the Open Access movement and his appreciation of the principles underpinning Plan S.

He then noted that the principles conflict, or have the potential to conflict with, other principles and practices in academia generally and within his specific discipline: first, the freedom of researchers to publish where they wish (especially for early-career researchers looking to build their careers); second, the potential for geographic inequality between Plan S signatories (i.e. Europe) and uninvolved parties (USA, China?); and third, the challenges resulting from imposing the single model on Plan S when different departments within his faculty publish in differing ways, e.g. Computer Science researchers tend to publish conference papers, rather than journal articles.

Panel Discussion

David Price (DP), Paul Ayris (PA), Robert Kiley (RK), Catherine Sharp (CS), David Shanks (DS), Margot Finn (MF) and Tony Kenyon (TK). Q = question/comment from the audience.

Q: Why has UCL's Open Access funding been cut off with so little notice?

CS: Clarification of the distinction between UCL and RCUK funding and different timescales. Very difficult to give notice as impossible to predict current and future publishing behaviour across UCL.

DP/PA: Mention of planned UCL OA megajournal, scheduled for launch next month – no APCs (comment from audience: “no impact factor!”)

Q: Plan S’s aims are laudable, but does the speed of its introduction and the practicalities of major publishers needing to change their OA policies infringe on academic freedom? Suggestion of compromise on issue of no embargo periods. Endorses MF’s earlier comments that one approach will not fit all disciplines and their publishing practices. Why is the German national funding body not a signatory?

Q: From the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences perspective, Plan S does not cover the important contributions made by many ECRs, retired academics, and researchers outside of academia entirely, as they are extremely unlikely to be funded. Is there a danger of the “STEM tail wagging the wider academic word dog”?

Q: The rapid approach of Plan S risks destroying current academic publishing and practice for the sake of “a nice idea”. Making more content OA will not help researchers as there are already too many articles to read. Journal quality is the best indication of what to read, not an article’s OA status.

Q: How will funding of research conducted in the “Global South” be covered in practice, given that Plan S demands a wholesale shift towards the “pay-to-publish” model?

MF: The German funding body is unable to sign up to Plan S, despite supporting it in principle, as the country’s constitution contains a clause guaranteeing researchers’ freedom to publish. Agrees that the timescale for introducing Plan S is too fast, and that it would have benefitted from the undertaking of pilot studies.

PA: Confirms MF’s comments on the German situation. Expectation that the new UKRI OA policy (to be released later this year) to align with Plan S requirements, and hence for the post-2021 REF to align as well.

RK: The timescale for Plan S is rapid because OA advocates have been attempting to effect change for approximately fifteen years with limited results. Hybrid OA models, previously advocated by Wellcome, must now be abandoned, as they have failed to achieve their original intention of being transitional arrangements, and have stagnated. On the point of academic freedom, this comes hand-in-hand with academic responsibility to disseminate one’s research, especially if publicly funded.

DP: Emphasis on MF’s earlier theme of science (in the broad European sense of all academic disciplines) being a “mansion with many rooms”.

CS: Observation that there is provision in the guidance for implementing Plan S for when a research output contains third-party copyrighted material, a common concern for AHSS researchers.

Q: I welcome the breaking down of the old publishing models. OA will increase the quality of scientific research due to the increased scrutiny inherent in the greater transparency that will result. Established subscription journals will be forced to change their policies if researchers and funders act with a common purpose. Academic freedom in practice is already limited by the necessity of securing research funding.

Q: In Open Science, where should the line be drawn with regards to making all aspects of research OA? For instance, if it is necessary to explain underlying data and methods to a non-expert reader, this would be a great burden.

Q: Where does the burden of compliance with the Plan S requirements fall? What will it cost, and who will pay for it? Who will monitor and police compliance? What will the sanctions for non-compliance be?

TK: Countries outside Europe (USA, China) must sign up to Plan S in order to make the established journals “flip”, otherwise change will be limited. If countries outside Europe do not sign up, the careers of ECRs moving from Europe to these countries may be inhibited, as they will be judged by more traditional metrics (e.g. JIF), which will suffer if they can no longer publish in the established journals in their fields due to their funders’ Plan S requirements.

DP: Reminder that UCL and many other institutions are signed up to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which should assuage this concern.

DS: Many of the established publishers are journals are, in fact, overrated. Concern that in a “fully OA world”, the distinction between unrefereed (e.g. papers in preprint servers) and refereed works will be blurred.

MF: Suggestion that feedback to the Plan S consultation should involve a focus group of ECRs and researchers on fixed-term contracts. Very surprised at China’s apparent interest in Plan S, given their government’s reputation for restricting academic openness.

PA: Previously put the question of the Plan S instigators’ alleged lack of engagement with researchers’ needs and opinions to David Sweeney (UKRI). His response: they have been advocating Open Access for fifteen years with limited success, so it is time to press on with the more radical approach of Plan S. Restatement of previous encouragement to submit individual responses to the consultation.

CS: Reiteration of the importance of no embargo period and a CC BY licence within the Plan S requirements.

RK: Restatement of why hybrid is no longer acceptable.

Q: The coercive measures against researchers arising from the Plan S requirements threaten academic freedom and may result in class action lawsuits against funders by publishers.

RK: Restatement of moral imperative underlying the OA movement. Reassurance that peer-review is an integral part of OA publishing.