Plan S and Society Publishers: What to Know Now

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Plan S is one of the most written-about current initiatives in STM publishing. It was unveiled in September 2018 and “requires that, from 2021, scientific publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant Open Access journals or platforms.” For STM societies, the impact that Plan S will have on their publishing programs varies based on three factors:

— Society Resources: How many of the society’s initiatives and programs are dependent on the revenue from the publications program?
— Funders: How much of the publications program is dependent on the funders who have signed on?
— Member Education: How many resources are needed to insure understanding and compliance?

Before addressing these, it’s useful to review the timeline for the implementation of Plan S. Because the plan has changed multiple times since it was first launched, society publishers should check on the Plan S site every few weeks to note any changes. As of now, the Plan S organizers state that they will publish a final version of the implementation framework by the end of March 2020.

Society Resources

To make a realistic assessment of the impact that Plan S could have on a society’s publishing program, knowing the distribution of society resources is a critical first step. The first and most important task is to determine how much of all society activity is dependent on revenue produced by publications. Based on the findings, the society can assess the degree to which the publishing program should react. If a significant number of society activities are supported by journal revenue, then it’s necessary to become familiar with the current details of the Plan S requirements and map out possible internal changes when the final plan is published at the end of March 2020. If journal revenue is not as critical to the society, the details of Plan S should still be absorbed so society staff can provide the best options to the researcher/author community. In either case, the pricing and licensing changes that Plan S requires must be carefully assessed by each society’s financial team.

Societies with multiple journals might have more flexibility when implementing Plan S requirements. Until the final implementation requirements are known, however, specific planning is difficult. If your society is considering adding journals, keep the current Plan S requirements in mind as you move forward with financial modeling.

Funders

At this point, the list of funders who have signed on with Plan S remains limited and in some cases geographically focused. It’s important to note, though, that three larger organizations—Wellcome, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and World Health Organization—have signed on. There doesn’t appear to be a huge, universal rush to sign on to Plan S, but this could change when the final plan is published.

All societies would benefit from doing an assessment of the funders that support their current author base, as well as the authors they would like to attract. The Plan S funder list might grow—or not—but the identities of the participating funding groups have a huge impact on the decisions made by an individual society. If a society determines that an insignificant number of published papers are supported by these funders, then that should inform their next steps.

The basic requirement of Plan S (“scientific publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant Open Access journals or platforms”) fails to make clear that not all “research funded by public grants” must adhere to Plan S. It’s only research funded by Plan S endorsers that must adhere to Plan S. If a funder hasn’t signed on, the requirements don’t apply.

Member Education

When the final version of Plan S is released and society publishers can create clear, specific steps for compliance, it’s important to remember the role that the society plays in member education. Most society members are busy professionals who are not always able to keep up with the details of funder and publication requirements. Each society

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publisher must decide what level of guidance they’ll give to ensure understanding and compliance from authors.

A balance must be struck between trusting the authors (and their institutions) to know applicable funding requirements, and providing enough information so authors new to Plan S won’t be left completely in the dark. If the society provides highly detailed information on Plan S, they’ll need to keep their instructions constantly up-to-date to reflect the changes that are bound to occur in the Plan S program.

Approaching the Plan S member-education question with a bit more distance and reliance on the institution to guide the researcher might provide the appropriate middle-ground that serves the researcher—and society resources—best.

Plan S clearly did not emerge in September 2018 as a fully formed and widely supported program. It has undergone controversy and revision and will continue to evolve. At this critical point, societies must stay aware of changes to the plan and know their options.