

October 2021

EQUITY IN OPEN ACCESS

ALLEA Statement

on the occasion of the 2021 International Open Access Week

The European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA) welcomes the choice for this year's theme of the International Open Access Week, "It matters how we open knowledge: building structural equity"¹. Open access becomes a hollow promise if, at the same time as the library door is opened, inequitable structures within academic research get reinforced.

From a barrier to access to a barrier to participation

Regrettably there appears to be some danger of this happening. The "gold" open access route requires authors to pay substantial "article processing charges" to get their work published in immediate open access. While for obvious reasons this route is promoted by commercial publishers, it effectively replaces a barrier to access with a barrier to participation.

This strategy has driven the emergence of large "read and write deals" negotiated between library consortia and commercial publishers. These deals, while advantageous for individual researchers affiliated to the large institutions whose libraries can enter into such agreements, effectively incentivise such researchers to publish in the journals covered by the deal, which are often expensive journals that trade on their high 'impact factor' – a metric noted as problematic by Open Science initiatives. This tacit incentivisation risks further increasing the market dominance of the big commercial publishers and clearly disadvantages smaller specialist and learned society publishers².

Inequity in disciplines, career stages and geography

In addition to this threat to bibliodiversity, there is an obvious inequity in this situation. It takes no account of the fact that, at least in the humanities, there are still a significant number of researchers not affiliated with institutions covered by the deals, nor in some cases with any institution. It privileges established over early career researchers. It ignores the needs of researchers based in the Global South, in smaller institutions, or in industry. It favours well-funded areas of research over equally important, but less well-resourced areas. And it risks perpetuating the myth that the best research is only done in large institutions and published in the commercial prestige journals with all the well-known damaging effects on research assessment. From

1 <http://www.openaccessweek.org/profiles/blogs/2021-theme-announcement-english>

2 Haucap J., Moshgbar N., Schmal W.B. (2021). The impact of the German "DEAL" on competition in the academic publishing market. DICE Discussion Paper. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/231802/1/1752010183.pdf>

the perspective of the social sciences and the humanities a particular concern is that similar structural inequalities can be anticipated as open access extends from journals to book publishing.

Towards equitable Open Science

While we appreciate that “gold” open access journals and the associated big deals have been promoted and negotiated in good faith, and recognise that they do open up significant amounts of research output for public consumption, the fact remains that they are not in the spirit of an equitable Open Science where active participation in the generation of knowledge and understanding through rigorous academic research is a basic human right to which all are entitled³. Offering waivers and discounts to those unable to pay is no real solution to this fundamental inequity and is demeaning to those forced to ask for them.

It does matter how we open knowledge⁴, and issues of equity and diversity need to be central to any discussion of how the scholarly communication system should be structured. It is a false framing of the discourse to say that either the reader or the writer has to pay; in most cases it is actually a third party (the library consortia in the case of the big deals) and ultimately it is the taxpayer for most publicly funded research. There are alternatives such as “subscribe to open”, funder sponsored platforms such as the EU’s Open Research Europe, national open journal communities, and federated institutional repositories as in Latin America⁵. Until adequate resources and infrastructure are available to support an equitable approach to open access across all disciplines, it is important that a hybrid model which includes and values more conventional publishing routes be maintained.

3 Universal declaration of Human Rights, Article 27.1: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

4 <https://allea.org/portfolio-item/allea-response-to-plan-s/>; <https://allea.org/portfolio-item/ethical-aspects-of-open-access-a-windy-road/>; <https://allea.org/portfolio-item/allea-statement-on-enhancement-of-open-access-to-scientific-publications-in-europe/>

5 Open Research Europe: <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/>. National open journal communities: for example <http://journal.fi> or <http://openjournals.nl>. Federated institutional repositories as in Latin America: <http://www.lareferencia.info/en/>.

About ALLEA

ALLEA is the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities, representing more than 50 academies from over 40 countries in Europe. Since its foundation in 1994, ALLEA speaks out on behalf of its members on the European and international stages, promotes science as a global public good, and facilitates scientific collaboration across borders and disciplines. Learn more: www.allea.org

About this Statement

This ALLEA statement has been prepared by ALLEA’s Open Science Task Force. Through its Working and Expert Groups, ALLEA provides input on behalf of European academies to pressing societal, scientific and science-policy debates and their underlying legislations. With its work, ALLEA seeks to ensure that science and research in Europe can excel and serve the interests of society. Read more about the ALLEA Open Science Task Force and its members: <https://allea.org/open-science/>
