

Pragmatic scenario for transitioning the publication system towards open access

November 18 2016



Credit: Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)

A study has developed scenarios for transitioning Switzerland's scientific publication system towards Open Access (OA). It recommends a model that proposes a pragmatic and flexible way of making publicly funded research freely available at no charge and with no delay. The study was initiated by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) in collaboration with the funding programme 'Scientific Information' (SUC P-2) run by swissuniversities.

In 2015, the libraries at Switzerland's higher education institutions paid a

total of 70 million Swiss francs in licences and subscriptions to publishing houses in order to make more than 2.5 million scientific articles available. Researchers spent a further 6 million Swiss francs on article processing charges so they could have their results published in [open access](#) mode in a scientific journal. These figures were generated by an initial analysis of financial flows in the Swiss higher education system.

Scenarios for transitioning towards Open Access

Research results obtained with public funding should also be readily available to the public at no charge – this is the principle underlying European efforts to restructure the current publication system towards Open Access (OA). The financial flows analysis commissioned by the SNSF in association with SUC P-2 (a funding programme set up by swissuniversities) has produced data on the cost of transitioning the system to provide immediate, unrestricted electronic access to publicly funded publications at no charge by 2024. On this basis it outlines possible scenarios for transitioning the Swiss publication system so that it meets these requirements and identifies the financial impact of each. Every year, more than 30,000 scientific articles are published in Switzerland alone. Internationally, 21 per cent of published articles are currently available free of charge; the corresponding figure for Switzerland is an above-average 30 per cent.

From savings to substantial extra costs

The financial flows analysis differentiates between the costs associated with various scenarios for implementing Open Access. According to the report, the "blue road" would generate savings in excess of 2 million Swiss francs annually. In this scenario, the post-print version of all articles would be placed in publicly accessible repositories after a certain

embargo period. At the other end of the scale is the "gold road". This involves the immediate release of articles in scientific OA journals, usually after the author or another sponsor (university, research funding organisation) has paid an article processing charge. If this scenario were to be implemented in full today, it would lead to additional costs of about 27 million Swiss francs annually in Switzerland. The additional costs would be even higher with a "hybrid" OA model, in which licensing fees would be charged in addition to the fees for making an article available on an OA basis in a conventional subscription journal – or in other words a scenario in which the article would basically have to be paid for twice.

A mixed model as a pragmatic and flexible approach

The authors of the study, Cambridge Economic Policy Associates Ltd., compared the costs associated with the various scenarios with the current standard costs. The actual costs for Switzerland depend heavily on how quickly the changeover to the "gold road" of Open Access takes place worldwide. As a comparatively small research location, the costs incurred by Switzerland in all scenarios are lower the more rapidly the entire world reaches the 50 per cent mark on the "gold road". In their report, the authors recommend a combined approach that makes both the "blue road" and the "gold road" to Open Access possible. They calculate that this pragmatic, flexible model for transitioning the publication system towards Open Access would limit the additional costs in Switzerland to 13 million Swiss francs annually. The systematic implementation of a model of this kind would show other countries that Switzerland is serious about making publicly funded research publicly available without delay.

Joint action plan needed

The authors also recommend greatly improving the quality of the data on physical and financial flows in the publication system. Moreover, they feel that a national strategy and corresponding action plan are needed to coordinate OA activities. Efforts in this direction are already being made in Switzerland under the leadership of swissuniversities. Switzerland should also play an active role in international discussions. In the medium term, the costs of transitioning towards Open Access will depend heavily on whether bargaining power vis-à-vis the major publishing houses can be established nationally and internationally. In addition, the necessary infrastructure needs to be developed in Switzerland, and scientists have to be brought on board.

The SNSF and swissuniversities take note of the study results. Possible scenarios for the transition in Switzerland will be discussed within the scope of the national strategy and the OA action plan.

Provided by Swiss National Science Foundation

Citation: Pragmatic scenario for transitioning the publication system towards open access (2016, November 18) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-pragmatic-scenario-transitioning-access.html>

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