

Open access 'excludes' developing world scientists

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A model that charges researchers to publish their work in open access journals hurts many researchers in the global South. Copyright: . Credit: National Institutes of Health, USA

Open access publishing is excluding many developing world scientists as complex fee waiver systems fall short, say leading researchers.

The models, which make research free to read by charging authors to

publish their work, have been promoted by funders as a way to give more people access to [scientific research](#).

The European Union's [Plan S](#) demands that, as of 2021, the results of publicly funded research must be published in [open access journals](#) or open repositories. The prestigious scientific publisher Springer *Nature* recently [announced](#) it will join the movement.

Yet for many researchers in the [developing world](#), who do not have a grant or an institution to cover the fees, the open access system can lock them out of top tier [academic journals](#).

Bonaventure Tetanye Ekoe, honorary dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University of Yaoundé I in Cameroon, says the open access model means African researchers are penalized twice.

"The first time they are penalized because there is no money to fund their research. A second time because even when they manage to do their research, they are asked to pay to publish a paper.

"So that means that, since they don't publish, they will perish," he tells SciDev.Net.

The cost of submitting a paper can be many times a researcher's salary. For example, the monthly salary of a Ph.D. assistant researcher in Cameroon is estimated at just over US\$350.

The initial cost of submitting a paper to *Nature* for editorial assessment under the guided open access model is US\$2,690, while the monthly salary of a Ph.D. assistant researcher in Cameroon is estimated at just over US\$350.

From January, Nature is trialing the guided open access model as a pilot for Nature Physics, Nature Genetics, and Nature Methods.

At *PLOS* journals, the fees start from about US\$800 and can reach US\$4,000, while *The Lancet* charges an article processing fee of up to US\$5,000 for gold open access—which makes final versions of articles freely and permanently accessible while authors retain copyright.

Increasing gap

Mohamed Hashem, head of the National Research Center in Egypt, believes that imposing fees to publish research would increase the burden on researchers in low- and middle-income countries as they search for less prestigious journals to publish in.

"The size of the gap in scientific publishing between the developing and the [developed countries](#) will increase," says Hashem.

He says that research institutions in the Middle East and North Africa region usually offer researchers bonuses for publishing their work, but the value of these bonuses can vary.

"In Egypt we consider several criteria in determining the value of the reward, including the value of the [journal](#), the importance of the research and the value of the results concluded in the research," Hashem says.

Halima Benbouza, founder of Algeria's National Biotechnology Research Center, also says publishing fees will greatly affect researchers in the region, especially with the weak funding allocated to cover publishing costs.

"In Algeria, the Directorate General for Scientific Research and

Technological Development funds the costs of publishing in scientific journals, including *Nature*, and encourages that, but if sufficient funds will not be available, this will inevitably affect the presence of the work of researchers from our region in the high indexed peer-reviewed scientific journals," says Benbouza.

She adds: "Researchers in our developing countries usually struggle when they must decide between publishing in prestigious journals that charge exorbitant fees, or publishing in good journals with less or no fees, but with long waits to obtain responses, which delay publishing."

Waiver weakness

Even though many journals have a waiver system for developing country researchers, this is often underused as it is not well understood, say researchers.

In 2020, 36 percent of authors publishing with *Science Advances*—published by the American Association for Advancement of Science (AAAS)—received either total or partial waivers for article processing charges (APC), according to Bill Moran, publisher of the Science Family of Journals.

Springer Nature, which includes the *Nature* Portfolio journals, also has a waiver system.

"Springer Nature publishes almost 600 journals that are completely open access and have APC waiver and discount policies for authors in financial need," says Jessica Monaghan, head of policy and performance in the open access team at Springer Nature.

"Last year alone we waived over €13.5 million (US\$16.3 million) worth of APCs," Monaghan says.

However, scientists from the global South say they are not always successful in securing waivers from journals with processing fees.

Pedro Lagerblad, a researcher on Chagas disease at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, had two papers accepted by *Frontiers in Physiology* and received an invoice for US\$2,950 per paper. After applying for a waiver, he received a 50 percent concession.

"In biochemistry, most of the journals charge fees, but in Brazil the funds for science have reduced substantially," he tells SciDev.Net.

Andrea Powell, outreach director and publisher coordinator of the Research4Life initiative, says the waiver system is hampered by internal bureaucracy and lack of support for researchers from their institutions.

Powell says another issue is the lack of clarity on how the waiver system works.

"Publishers are not deliberately making the application process difficult to understand, but they do not always appreciate how the system works from the end-user's point of view," she told SciDev.Net.

"Most publishers have good waiver policies, but they are not always clearly explained or consistent, so researchers even sometimes end up paying APCs from their own pocket.

"Ultimately, the result is that scholars in many lower- and [middle-income countries](#) do not submit their work to Open Access journals because [by doing so] they can avoid any question of paying a fee to publish."

Provided by SciDev.Net

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