

cOAlition S, Open Access for academic books, and evaluation

Rooryck, Johan ^{1 2}

¹ cOAlition S, France

² Leiden University, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

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1. Introduction

cOAlition S is a consortium of 27 national and philanthropic funding agencies worldwide that jointly invest €34m in research worldwide with an output of around 150k peer reviewed articles/ year. These funding agencies have committed to aligning their policies on Open Access with the 10 Principles of Plan S. Plan S requires that, from 2021, peer reviewed scientific publications resulting from research grants funded by cOAlition S must be published in compliant Open Access journals or platforms. cOAlition S funders have developed a set of policies and tools to help their funded researchers achieve that goal.

On 2 September 2021, cOAlition S released [a statement on Open Access \(OA\) for academic books](#). Sections 2, 3 and 4 of this text largely reproduce the contents of that statement. Section 5 addresses the relationship between OA books and evaluation, and includes a personal perspective.

2. Context

cOAlition S defines the term ‘academic books’ to include monographs, book chapters, edited collections, critical editions, and other long-form works, recognizing that they are an important mode of publication for scholars, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Several studies have pointed out the benefits of Open Access (OA) book publishing. In 2019, Science Europe published five [principles for OA to academic books](#) and recommendations for six types of research stakeholders. Springer Nature has recently shown that [OA books receive 2.4 times more citations and are downloaded 10 times more than non-OA books](#).

[Principle 7 of Plan S](#) acknowledged that the timeline to achieve Open Access for books requires a separate and due process. The [Implementation Guidance](#) specified that “*by the end of 2021, a statement on Plan S principles would be issued as they apply to monographs and book chapters, together with related implementation guidance*”.

Since the Plan S principles for research articles were published, many cOAlition S funders have developed their own OA policies around academic books. (*For an overview of cOAlition S funders with an existing OA books policy, see [Annex A](#)*). On critical elements, like embargoes and licences, policies of cOAlition S organisations have already converged. Most cOAlition S funders have adopted or advise CC licences, and embargoes range between 0 and 12 months.

cOAlition S recognizes that academic book publishing is very different from journal publishing. Its commitment is to make progress towards full open access for academic books as soon as possible, in the understanding that standards and funding models may need more time to develop. Rather than to decree a uniform policy on OA books, cOAlition S has therefore decided to formulate **a set of recommendations** regarding academic books – in line with Plan S principles – that all cOAlition S organisations will seek to adopt within their own remits and jurisdictions.

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3. Recommendations

1. All academic books based on original research that was directly supported with funding from cOAlition S organisations should be made available open access on publication.
2. Authors or their institutions should retain sufficient intellectual property rights to make their academic books available OA and to allow for re-use.
3. Academic books should be published open access under a Creative Commons licence.
4. Any embargo periods on academic books should be as short as possible and never exceed 12 months.
5. cOAlition S funders should financially support Open Access of academic books via their funding schemes and open access publishing business models via dedicated arrangements.

4. Implementation

In view of the diversity in the book publishing practices – academic book formats, technical platforms, languages, specific national book publishing practices, publishers, and economic models – cOAlition S will collaborate with the OA books community to develop implementation guidelines that respect this bibliodiversity. These guidelines will include a set of technical standards on OA books that mirror the technical requirements cOAlition S has set for OA journals and repositories ([Part III of the implementation guidance](#)).

Existing infrastructures like the [Directory of Open Access Books](#) and information resources like the [OAPEN OA books toolkit](#) and the position paper [Investing in Open Access Books Infrastructure](#) will support the implementation process. The [OA books network](#) will serve as an open forum for community input during that implementation process.

5. Open Access books and the publishers

The biggest problem with OA books is not technical or financial. It is how to make sure that researchers choose this mode of distribution over the paywalled one. Even more than articles, books are viewed as physically tangible prestige objects. There is indeed something irresistible about a nicely bound hardcover book with a glossy paper cover.. The electronic copy of an academic book does not quite have the same effect. And then there is the validation aspect. Especially in very specialized subdisciplines (e.g. oriental

studies, African studies, French medieval text editions), having your book published by specific, even uniquely specialized publishers (resp. Brill (Leiden), Rüdiger Köppe Verlag (Cologne), Klincksieck (Genève), or Honoré Champion (France) confers lasting prestige and validates both the research and the researcher. The prestige of the publisher in turn has a positive impact on the author's career progression. Many smaller publishers do not offer Open Access options for academic books, as there is no pressing need, and authors who are in favor of OA will invariably put prestige before openness when it comes to academic books. So the current prestige of these publishers and the advantages authors derive from that prestige make for a system where there is zero incentive for the change to digital: we have always done things this way, so why change?

There are of course several scholar-led, native digital open access publishers, but these do not yet enjoy the prestige of established legacy publishers. In my own field, linguistics, even authors who are completely in favor of Open Access for journal articles will publish glossy handbooks with Oxford and Cambridge University press because of prestige, while our field is lucky enough to have Language Science Press, a scholar-led publisher that has published 200 OA books since 2014, but is still not as recognized as they should be.

So there are several obstacles to overcome, both on the side of the authors and on the side of the publishers. Publishers need to be convinced that publishing OA books first doesn't harm print sales in most cases" as shown by OAPEN-NL, OAPEN-UK studies, and as many smaller publishers are finding out. In my personal opinion, digital-first publishing with print on demand should become the default model for academic book publishing. That would require coordinated action to bring together smaller publishers and convince them that the transition to digital is actually a good thing, illustrating the greater dissemination, visibility and citation advantage of OA books and how they drive paper sales. I believe this is something that organisations OASPA, OABN, and OAPEN could actively promote. But it is not in the remit of funding agencies, who have no business telling publishers what their production workflows and the relation between digital and print should look like.

6. Open Access books and the evaluation system

Authors need to be convinced as well. The incentives for authors must to a large extent come from a radical change in the evaluation system. This is also why cOAlition S has formulated changes to the evaluation system at the core of its Principle 10: “The Funders commit that when assessing research outputs during funding decisions they will value the intrinsic merit of the work and not consider the publication channel, its impact factor (or other journal metrics), or the publisher.” It is important to point out that this Principle is primarily geared towards the prestige of articles: journal title, impact factor, and metrics. This is because the initial focus of Plan S was primarily on peer reviewed articles. Open Access books lack these numerical markers of prestige and (inaccurately perceived) quality. However, in the case of academic books, the notions of prestige and perceived quality are entirely a function of the good name of the publisher in a given subdiscipline. For both journals and academic books, however, quality and prestige are evaluated by an inadequate proxy: journal or publisher prestige instead of the intrinsic merit of the contribution inherent in the article or book.

Changes in the evaluation system of researchers are now increasingly being adopted by European universities, including Utrecht, and Ghent university. The EC has recently launched an [Process towards an agreement on reforming research assessment](#) to create a coalition that will bring together research funding organisations, research performing organisations, national/regional assessment authorities or agencies, associations of research funders, of research performers, of researchers, as well as, learned societies and other relevant organisations, committed to implement reforms to the current research assessment system.

Changing the evaluation system is an important step in the right direction, and therefore specific incentives should be formulated within evaluation protocols that will actively counteract the current fascination with prestige publishing. This could be done for instance by making it clear that Open Access books will be favoured or even required at evaluation for research grants at the funders or for promotion at research performing organisations. Evaluating institutions could make it clear to researchers that they will converge on a requirement (i) that books should be available Open Access, (ii) that the scientific quality of the book is of higher value than the prestige of the publisher for evaluation purposes, and (iii) that open access is a lever to increase impact of books assessed through citations and reviews. It is clear that this cannot just be a policy led by funders: universities and research institutes will have to be aligned as well in this endeavor. A concerted, focused effort towards Open Access first as a highly valued quality for academic books needs to be undertaken.

The recommendations of cOAlition S for OA books support this move. Even though the timeline for Open Access books is slower and more gentle than that for Open Access articles, and although cOAlition S has formulated recommendations rather than requirements, the direction of travel is clear: cOAlition S funders are converging on ultimately making immediate Open Access for academic books with a CC BY licence and minimal embargoes a hard requirement for their funding.

The timeframe should give the book publishing industry time to adapt to the new reality, and hopefully incentivize more Open Access solutions. By valuing Open Access higher than prestige, evaluating institutions also provide an opening for new innovative, better quality, and less expensive digital publication services.

These recommendations will certainly encourage authors as well, but we have to be careful to use the proverbial carrot in addition to the stick. The stick is that OA publishing of books will increasingly become a hard requirement of the grant contract. And the carrot should be that books published in Open Access will count for more and be viewed more positively than paper books when grants and promotions are being evaluated.

Ultimately, the change away from evaluating research outputs in terms of proxies like the prestige of the journal or the publisher provides the academic community with a unique opportunity to go back to evaluating books for the quality of their contents rather than for the prestige of their publisher. Such a change could be facilitated by putting easily accessible and scholar-curated book review aggregating systems in place on the model of [OpenEdition's 'Review of Books'](#).