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Open access in Switzerland

An institutional point of view

Switzerland may be a small country, but it has a complex academic landscape. Research and teaching is conducted in several languages: the official state languages French, German, Italian, and Romansh, plus English as the academic lingua franca. Higher educational institutions (HEIs) range from international giants such as the ETH Zurich to specialized, cantonal institutions such as the Bern University of Teacher Education. There are private research facilities, a wide variety of funders, academies, societies, and colleges, not to forget the international research hub, CERN, in Geneva that may be housed on Swiss soil but is considered a European institution. This lively and heterogeneous academic landscape exists within a political context that is also complex: Switzerland is a fiercely federal country, and the twenty-six cantons conduct their affairs—including their academic culture with its laws and customs—with a considerable degree of independence from each other as well as from the federal umbrella in Bern.

It is therefore remarkable that in 2018 Switzerland rolled out a national open access policy, according to which all taxpayer-funded research will be made available in open access by 2024.¹ This decision continues to have significant repercussions on all levels of academic endeavors, not least for the institutions who are faced with the task of providing the framework for turning nationwide open access into a practical and practicable reality. The deadline is close, so it is worth taking stock. This article sketches out the institutional landscape of open access in Switzerland with a particular focus on academic libraries, before pointing to some current concerns regarding its development. It will close with a brief look at what lies ahead.

Open access in Switzerland—The context

The main actors in Switzerland's open access landscape are, unsurprisingly, researchers, publishers, and institutions. Much like their colleagues abroad, the former find themselves in a field of tension between the latter two: while publishers and institutions (funding agencies, governments, universities, and the like) are vying over the means of moving the country's academic output toward open access, authors have to negotiate an ever-changing maze of rules, regulations, demands, and incentives while juggling the traditional—and still widespread—expectations in the academic prestige economy.

The role of Swiss HEIs and national organizations

HEIs, where most researchers and authors are employed, also find themselves in a tricky situation: on the one hand, they have to address the open access needs of their researchers,

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for example by providing infrastructure, publishing services, or read and publish agreements (more on that later); on the other hand, they are part of and operate within the context of the National Open Access Strategy. This can lead to challenges because the interests of these different parties do not always align. Furthermore, the playing field is anything but level: some HEIs have yet to come up with an open access policy, while others are already updating existing ones. Consequently, the HEIs' approaches to meeting the 2024 deadline vary widely.

In view of this heterogeneity and to help shepherd HEIs toward the national goal, swissuniversities²—the rectors' conference of all Swiss HEIs and the body that represents the interests of Swiss HEIs at a national and international level—provided guidelines for open access policies in 2019.³ Founded in 2015, swissuniversities is a Swiss academic umbrella organization that is crucial in the transformation to open access. Based on a dedicated implementation plan with various action lines, its Open Science funding initiatives have been specifically geared toward facilitating the development of the necessary infrastructure.⁴ It was swissuniversities that was tasked with developing Switzerland's National Open Access Strategy in 2015 by the State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation (SERI).⁵

SERI made clear that the strategy should be developed in close cooperation with Switzerland's primary research funder, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).⁶ The funder's commitment to open science goes back to 2006, when it signed the Berlin Declaration.⁷ Ever since, the commitment to making funded research results openly available has steadily grown. It contributed to the National Open Access Strategy, implemented an open access requirement in 2018, and, in the summer of 2022, signed PlanS, which means that as of January 2023, newly funded projects will have to make their results available in open access immediately upon publication under a CC-BY license. Last, but not least, the significant impact of Swiss scientific academies on the development of open access needs mentioning. In 2016, for example, the Swiss Academy of the Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW) ratified its open access policy and supported the transition of journals funded by it.⁸

Role of Swiss academic libraries

Libraries at Swiss HEIs are responsible for helping researchers navigate these measures and policies. They build institutional repositories and publishing platforms, offer support and services, and establish processes to accommodate the new (and often changing) parameters such as funder requirements or publisher workflows. Swiss academic libraries organize themselves in the Swiss Library Network for Education and Research (SLiNER) to exchange best practices and develop strategies for challenges that affect all Swiss HEIs. Founded in 2019, SLiNER represents all academic and scientific libraries and, as an expert committee, "is available to swissuniversities as a central contact for all questions and activities related to the topic of scientific information."⁹ Many of their services are geared toward supporting the National Open Access Strategy.¹⁰

Role of Arbeitskreis Open Access (AKOA)

SLiNER is supported by the specialist working group AKOA, which comprises library representatives from across Switzerland who focus on open access. It is a forum where current but also strategic issues can be addressed. AKOA grew from a group of emerging experts in Swiss libraries who recognized the growing relevance of open access in the first half of the

2010s. By the middle of the decade, it became apparent that formal policy input was needed on how to deal with this change in scholarly communication. In 2015, the group was officially formalized into the AKOA. Its white papers with statements concerning topics such as hybrid open access publishing and secondary publication rights played an important role in the development of the national open access strategy. As open access in Switzerland developed, AKOA grew. It now regularly consults with both the consortium and the Swiss National Science Fund to ensure that practices can be coordinated and streamlined and will continue to contribute to the development of open access in Switzerland beyond 2024.

Example of OA support and services at an institutional level: University Library Bern

Over the last ten years, the University Library Bern built up a wide-ranging program of services and infrastructures to accommodate and support its researchers with their open access publications, while continuing to provide classic information resources ranging from books, journals, and subject databases to e-journals and e-books. There was also a significant investment in the expansion of spatial infrastructure with new libraries and reading rooms.

Today, the library's Open Science team keeps researchers informed on all aspects of open access and open data with workshops, lectures, consultations, and websites, along with its various communication channels; the team provides researchers with technical infrastructure and organizational support for publishing open access books, journals, and dissertations as well as research data. It also administers an open access fund, which serves as a resource for researchers who are looking to finance APCs for publications in pure open access gold journals and books.¹¹ Last, but not least, the Open Science team cooperates closely with its sister-team E-Library, which is responsible for the library's read and publish contracts, to comprehensively inform researchers about the open access options available at the University of Bern.

Open access in Switzerland: Current concerns

As the development of open access continues, Swiss institutions and their researchers are grappling with many issues ranging from equity to monitoring, and quality guarantees to technical feasibility. Two examples of these concerns are sustainability and the continued differences in academic publishing cultures.

Sustainability

With the increasing importance of open access, Swiss HEIs had to reroute existing or invest additional resources to meet the new challenges. Each Swiss institution meets these new demands in its own way. This is reflected, for example, in the read and publish deals that the consortium negotiates with publishers and from which each institution is free to choose suitable contracts.¹² For example, the University Library Bern allocates significant resources to open access services and infrastructure, but it currently subscribes to comparatively few read and publish deals from the more than thirty available agreements.¹³ Other Swiss institutions follow a different strategy and invest more in read and publish options than in services and infrastructure. What troubles everyone, however, is the question of sustainability, since there is no fixed cost that can be associated with providing open access solutions. The development is far from over, and the tug-of-war over resources, not to

mention profitability, is fierce. The increasing apparatus needed to administer and manage open access as well as the ubiquitous annual price hikes of APCs and the lack of transparency of the pricing policies that propel them, will make any finance department nervous.

Libraries are constantly preparing for difficult scenarios such as how to rework budgets and staff hours to accommodate additional workloads and what to do if negotiations with big publishers fail or result in unfeasible price tags. Since neither the SNSF nor swissuniversities' National Open Access Fund support the cost of hybrid open access—thus excluding most journals covered by read and publish deals with legacy publishers—the main burden of financing this path to open access falls to the universities, their libraries, and their budgets.

Continued differences in publishing cultures

Some research disciplines are further along in the adoption of open access than others. For example, charging APCs is an uncommon financing model among German- and French-speaking scholarly journals. Additionally, open access publishing is still more readily practiced in the natural and life sciences than in the humanities and social sciences. At the University of Bern this can be seen, for example, in the 2022 applications that the University Library Bern's open access fund received. Of 215 applications for journal APCs, 60% came from medicine and 15% from the veterinary school. The remaining quarter was shared by the other six faculties and the graduate schools. Of these applications, only one was for a German-language article; there were none for French-language publications.¹⁴

The differences in open access uptake can also be observed in the usage of green open access options, the spread and inclusion of digital identifiers in everyday practice, and the development of publishing options for open access books. With the goal of 2024 getting closer, the balancing of such practices across campus will need continued engagement throughout Switzerland.

What lies ahead

For several years, Switzerland has been pursuing its goal to make all taxpayer-funded research output available in open access by 2024. How far along Switzerland is in that process is hard to gauge because open access monitoring is not yet fully established. The SNSF, for example, estimates that as of 2020, 63% of research articles that emerged from its funded projects were made available in open access.¹⁵ Given this estimation, while a lot of progress has undoubtedly been made, there still is some way to go to achieve complete open access. The various institutions are now pooling their expertise to design a path forward. Based on the lessons learned thus far, they will need to address issues such as equity and sustainability but also rights retention strategy, scholar-led diamond open access and the financing that goes with it, as well as comprehensive monitoring of costs—including “costs in the wild.” These are challenging topics, but Switzerland's institutional network is well positioned to ensure that the transformation of the Swiss academic publishing landscape toward open access can be completed. ∞

Notes

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