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Squeeze on academics poses threats to learned societies

Even though nearly every UK academic belongs to at least one learned society, the part these bodies play in the ecosystem of knowledge exchange and dissemination is poorly understood. This blind spot makes them vulnerable to the unintended consequences of actions by others in that system. One such threat is the disruption of the economics of journal publishing by open access models.

We have just published the results of a study of the state of 44 learned societies, carried out in 2012-13 for the Academy of Social Sciences with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council. We looked at what societies did, where their income—totalling £40.8 million during 2012—came from, and what risks they faced.

At the time, there was concern that open access publishing would deprive societies of a vital revenue stream. However, that apocalypse seems to be arriving more slowly than seemed likely in 2012. Instead, the greatest present threat to learned societies is that universities are no longer granting academics the time and resources needed to sustain them.

All societies operate to different degrees in three main areas: providing public benefit; promoting a discipline; and serving members. Public benefit is a condition of charitable status under UK law. It involves activities like contributing to policy debates, international outreach, certifying members, working with schools and media engagement. Promoting a discipline and serving members go on through conferences, publications, networking, advocacy in higher education and research policy, early career support, small grants, and awards.

Societies’ unique niche comes from their independence as member-owned organisations. They form links across the international research system, helping to build connections
between national governments, universities and research councils. As such, they can aid collaboration and provide neutral fora for competing interests to meet.

This does not necessarily mean societies are loved by central planners or university managers—they are a rival source of esteem and recognition. Independent voices may be important for a dynamic research ecosystem, but may be troublesome for more powerful actors.

Janet Finch’s 2013 report into open access publishing, for example, criticised learned societies for not signing up to its vision—but why should they? Societies are not subject to direct government pressure: their primary accountability is to their members.

We found that the risks to societies are more complex than a simple business disruption from open access publishing. With some exceptions in continental Europe, open access has slid down governments’ priorities. In the social sciences, limited grant funding and university budgets mean that many institutional open access policies are largely symbolic, with little bite on what faculty actually do.

In any case, the five largest societies are not heavily dependent on journal revenue. A more significant concern across the board—even for large societies with significant office support—is the pressure on academics’ time and resources for voluntary work.

One large society calculated that volunteered time was worth around £1 million per year. Small and mid-range societies are proportionately even more dependent on volunteered time and resources.

Mid-range societies have some paid staff, but would struggle to pay them if journal income declined. With academic salaries stagnant, raising subscriptions is not an option. Similarly,
the pressure on university budgets for conferences and professional development makes it difficult to charge more for meetings, workshops or other events.

Many small societies seem to benefit from some diversion of department administrative or clerical time. But university reorganisations are centralising these staff and removing the ‘slack’ resources that made this possible. Societies are vulnerable to university managers questioning commitments that seem peripheral to core teaching and research.

One strategy to manage these risks might be for mid-range societies to cut costs by sharing back-office functions like subscription or event management. Packaging journal franchises might also extract better deals from publishers.

However, as member-owned organisations, societies are highly independent and autonomous bodies. Co-operation does not come easily.

Another strategy might be to create incentives for universities to value the work involved in running societies. If such engagement were recognised in the teaching and research excellence frameworks, for example, management would shift in response. Such a change would, though, depend on central planners and managers recognising the value of having some grit in the oysters they are trying to farm.

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