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Thousands of German researchers set to lose access to Elsevier journals

By [Gretchen Vogel](#)

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BERLIN—Thousands of researchers across Germany are bracing for the likelihood that after 31 December they won't have online access to hundreds of journals produced by Dutch publishing giant Elsevier. Negotiations about a massive collective deal with the company stranded earlier this month, and many German institutes seem determined not to budge—even if it complicates the lives of their researchers.

A consortium of hundreds of universities, technical schools, research institutes, and public libraries joined together in 2014 to form [“Project DEAL”](#) to negotiate a new nationwide arrangement with Elsevier and other publishers for online access to journals. Formal talks with Elsevier began in August, with the stated goal to draft a contract that would go into effect on 1 January 2017. More than 60 participating organizations have since canceled their current subscriptions effective 31 December. On 2 December, however, the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany, which coordinates DEAL, [released a statement](#) saying that Elsevier's initial offer did not meet its requirements for open access and that the company was asking too much money.

The German consortium is pushing for an even broader open-access agreement than its Dutch counterpart [managed to wring out of Elsevier last year](#). In the Netherlands, institutes are paying slightly more than they had in previous years for access to the publisher's journals, but in return, Elsevier made 10% of articles authored by Dutch authors open access this year; that will go up to 20% in 2017 and 30% in 2018. “The Netherlands model doesn't go far enough for us,” says Horst Hippler, president of the German Rectors' Conference in Bonn and lead spokesperson for Project DEAL. The Dutch arrangement allows the publisher to “double dip,” he says: “Researchers end up paying twice for many publications: once for publishing them and again for reading them.” DEAL's goal, he says, is to move away from subscription fees and toward a model in which the institutes pay a flat fee for “article processing charges,” so that all publications become fully open access.

An Elsevier statement from 2 December says the company expects to continue negotiations with DEAL representatives “early in the new year.” In the meantime, says Harald Boersma, director of corporate relations at Elsevier's headquarters in Amsterdam, the company is “working with the individual German institutions to ensure continued access in 2017.” Hippler tells *ScienceInsider* that DEAL is not aware of such individual negotiations and does not recommend them.

At least 60 institutions can expect to lose access on 1 January 2017, according to a [statement from the University of Göttingen](#) in Germany, which is one of them. Librarians will try to get

needed articles via interlibrary loan, the statement says. (Researchers could also try to download pirated copies of the papers they need from Sci-Hub, [a practice that is already widespread](#) in many countries.)

Despite the inconvenience, the statement says, the university is committed to holding firm. “All participants in this process are aware of the imminent effects this has on research and teaching. However, they share the firm conviction that, for the present, the pressure built up by the joint action of many research institutions is the only way to reach an outcome advantageous for the German scientific community.”

Open-access advocate Leo Waaijers, a former librarian at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, says that is the only approach that will work. “These negotiations are tough,” Waaijers says. “You must be prepared to step out of the contract. Otherwise you have no negotiation power.”

Two other countries that have recently signed agreements with Elsevier and other publishers gave in too soon, he says. In the United Kingdom, a nonprofit group named Jisc Collections negotiated a deal with Elsevier on behalf of academic and research libraries that was signed in November. The group “tried to get the same type of contracts [as Germany wants], but it failed broadly. It didn’t negotiate hard enough, I must say,” Waaijers says. Jisc Collections says questions surrounding open access and the right of institutes to publicly say how much they pay for subscriptions [are still being negotiated](#). The agreement requires institutes to opt in, so it is not clear how many will accept the offer.

Finnish officials announced yesterday that they had reached a temporary deal with Elsevier, but [were still bargaining over terms of open access](#). Negotiations were also ongoing with publishers Wiley and the American Chemical Society, the FinELib consortium said, while deals with Sage and with Taylor & Francis are done.

Waaijers says that most consortia want an arrangement in which authors don’t have to pay any publication fees themselves. Libraries pay their annual invoice, and authors can publish open access in the journals covered by the agreement. That is a new economic model, he says, in which publishers no longer profit from owning copyrights but become a type of service provider, offering reviews, editing, and distribution services to authors. Authors, in turn, can decide what service is best. But in that scenario, he says, authors have to be able to decide whether the service is worth the price, so costs must be made public. So far, Elsevier has fought against releasing their pricing agreements.

Waaijers and others are using freedom of information laws to force Dutch universities to make public how much they pay publishers under the licensing agreements. Most of the universities and publishers have released that information, but Springer and Elsevier resisted until a court ordered them to do so. On Monday, in response to a request from an Amsterdam student, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands released [data on payments that its 13 members made to publishers](#) between 2011 and 2015. Waaijers wants information on the current contracts as well; he says he has received it from eight Dutch universities so far. A case he has brought against the University of Amsterdam to force it to release the prices of its current agreements is expected to be