



The University of Göttingen's library is one of the facilities that now cannot access some Elsevier titles.

PUBLISHING

Institutes lose access to Elsevier journals

Libraries in Germany, Taiwan and Peru pursue alternative delivery routes after licence negotiations break down.

BY QUIRIN SCHIERMEIER & EMILIANO RODRÍGUEZ MEGA

Thousands of scientists in three countries are preparing for a new year without online access to journals from the Dutch publishing giant Elsevier. In December, contract negotiations in both Germany and Taiwan broke down, while Peru's government cut off funding that had been used to purchase a nationwide subscription.

"It's very unpleasant," says Horst Hippler, spokesperson for the DEAL consortium of state-funded universities and research organizations, which is overseeing negotiations in Germany. "But we just cannot accept what Elsevier has proposed so far."

Universities often complain about rising costs of journals, and sometimes threaten to cancel their subscriptions. But negotiators usually strike a deal to avoid cutting researchers off. In 2015 for example, a consortium of 14 universities in the Netherlands threatened to boycott Elsevier if it could not agree that articles by Dutch authors would be made open access. Eventually the two parties thrashed out

a compromise: 30% of the consortium's Dutch papers would be open access by 2018.

But there has been no such compromise in Germany or Taiwan. In Germany, the DEAL consortium was supposed to broker its first nationwide licence agreement for the beginning of 2017. It wants all German-authored articles to be made open access. But Hippler says that Elsevier's proposed contract cost too much, and didn't include an open-access clause. Negotiations ended in December without agreement; Hippler says they will resume in January. In a 2 December statement, Elsevier said that it had "made suggestions for a path to open access publishing in Germany", and that it looked forward to resuming talks in 2017.

Before the DEAL collective formed, German institutions negotiated their own contracts with Elsevier. Hundreds of universities are still on multi-year individual contracts. But for more than 60 institutions, access licences ran out at the end of 2016. In October, assuming that a nationwide deal would be struck, they decided not to automatically renew. Now, academics in those institutions are set to lose access. The affected establishments could

choose to renew their individual licences, but seem content to ride out the lack of access while DEAL negotiations continue.

In Taiwan, more than 75% of universities, including the country's top 11 institutions, have joined a boycott against Elsevier, says Yan-Jyi Huang, library director at the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST, also known as Taiwan Tech). On 7 December, the Taiwanese consortium, CONCERT, which represents more than 140 institutions, announced it would not renew its contract with Elsevier because fees were too high. Elsevier switched to dealing with universities individually. But the NTUST and many others — including Taiwan's leading research institute, Academia Sinica — each decided to uphold the boycott, from 1 January 2017. In both Taiwan and Germany, affected universities are offering scientists access through inter-library loans.

In Peru, researchers are set to lose online access to Elsevier's ScienceDirect and Scopus platforms from 2017 because the National Council for Science, Technology and Technological Innovation (CONCYTEC) can no longer pay for it. CONCYTEC announced on 14 December that Peru's government had withdrawn its funding, but declined to say why.

Some scientists in Peru say that they can get the papers they need illegally from the Sci-Hub website, which takes papers from behind paywalls and makes them freely available. "I'm not worried. Downloading papers is rather easy now with Sci-Hub," says one plant biologist who didn't want to be named.

Peru had until recently been eligible for free or low-cost access to major science journals under an initiative set up by the World Health Organization. But because of its economic growth, the country lost that route in 2012. Before CONCYTEC started to provide a national licence in 2014, researchers "had to beg for papers" through social media groups or from colleagues at foreign universities, the plant biologist says, but now everyone uses Sci-Hub. "I'm 30 years old, and I would say that around 95% of my generation uses it."

But other Peruvian scientists say they're reluctant to use Sci-Hub, and that it cannot be a permanent solution. "I hope the government realizes that databases are important," says Dionicia Gamboa, a molecular parasitologist from Cayetano Heredia University in Lima. ■

CORRECTION

The News story 'Virtual worlds open doors to bevy of AI programs' (*Nature* **540**, 323–324; 2016) erroneously gave the date for the public release of Google's DeepMind Lab as 3 December. In fact, it was on 5 December. And Open AI's Universe was released on the same day as DeepMind Lab, not two days later.