

German scientists regain access to Elsevier journals

Publisher restores access as negotiations for a nationwide licence continue.

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A stand-off in which dozens of German universities declined to pay for access to journals from publishing giant Elsevier has been partially resolved.

For more than 40 days, [thousands of scientists were cut off from Elsevier journals](#). But the Dutch publisher said on 13 February that it had chosen to restore their access even though underlying negotiations for a nationwide German licence have not yet been settled.

“The continuing access for the affected institutions will be in place while good-faith discussions about a nationwide contract carry on. This reflects our support for German research and our expectation that an agreement can be reached,” the publisher said in a [statement](#).

Asked whether or not it was charging for the access, Elsevier said that it is customary in these situations for institutions to retain access to content after a contracted period is concluded and as long as renewal discussions are ongoing.

Around 60 universities and research institutions decided not to renew their expiring subscriptions to Elsevier’s content at the end of 2016. They anticipated that a new consortium, called DEAL, would negotiate a nationwide licence with the publisher.

But discussions between DEAL and Elsevier broke down last December after disagreements about costs and about whether, under the new agreement, all German-authored articles could be made open access.

The universities that had cancelled their individual contracts decided that it still wasn’t worth making new access arrangements. From the start of 2017, their academics were cut off from new Elsevier articles, and in some cases to archived issues.

Irritating situation

The loss of access to Elsevier content didn’t overly disturb academic routines, researchers say, because they found other ways to get papers they needed, or because Elsevier journals happened not to be of prime importance in their fields. To help scientists cope with the situation, librarians organized speedy inter-library loans.

“Most senior scientists are closely networked with colleagues in other countries. Students and young scientists who aren’t have been hit harder,” says Hans-Ulrich Humpf, a food chemist at the University of Münster. Humpf asked colleagues in the United States to e-mail him a couple of papers while he had no access.

Robin Korte, a PhD student also at the University of Münster, was finalizing a list of references for his thesis on allergens in processed foodstuffs when his university lost access to Elsevier journals. Being blocked from journals highly relevant in his field — such as the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* and the *Journal of Proteomics* — prompted him to cite other sources instead. “I managed to cope somehow,” he says. “But it was an irritating situation, for sure.”

Despite the disruption, many German scientists say they welcome the DEAL consortium’s firm stance in negotiations with Elsevier. Licensing negotiations between the consortium and other publishers, including Wiley and *Nature’s* publisher, Springer Nature, are expected to begin later this year.

Nature’s news team (which is editorially independent of its publisher) has asked the DEAL consortium for comment.

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Updates

Updated: Updated to include comment from Elsevier.