

German and Swedish libraries shrug off Elsevier shutdown

No sign of breakthrough as boycott yet to have significant impact on publisher

Losing access to new content from the world's biggest academic publisher might sound like a nightmare for university libraries.

But, a month after being cut off from new Elsevier articles, librarians in Sweden have reported only a handful of complaints, while in Germany, institutions said that they have had to deal with relatively few requests for blocked papers.

The two countries are being watched closely by librarians in other countries to see how feasible it is to ditch big publishers, either permanently or as part of a contract-negotiating strategy, as they push for periodicals to move towards an open access model. It is one of the first big tests of university resilience in the face of no access – Elsevier had previously [stopped short](#) of cutting off Germany.

In Sweden, libraries have been without access to content published since 30 June after the country's university negotiating consortium [decided in May](#) to end its contract with Elsevier because of rising costs and what it saw as an insufficient offer on open access.

In Germany, meanwhile, talks over a new national contract that had dragged on unsuccessfully for more than a year and a half [broke down](#) last month over similar issues, and libraries have been without access to new material since 10 July.

Demand for articles is relatively low during the summer holidays, while librarians arguably have an incentive to downplay any problems to strengthen their negotiating hand, and pressure on libraries could grow as an ever greater proportion of Elsevier material becomes unavailable.

But so far, Swedish librarians surveyed by *Times Higher Education* have reported a handful of complaints, at most.

“Up until now, three researchers have made complaints [that I am aware of],” said Jakob Harnesk, library director at [Karlstad University](#). “Researchers that express support for the cancellation by far outnumber the negative ones.”

One library head, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that they had received one call from a researcher concerned about not being able to access new issues of a specific journal. “The rest of the very few comments we have got have been supportive,” they said.

Swedish libraries are able to get around the blockage through inter-library loans – borrowing papers from libraries that still have access, for example those abroad. “So long as inter-library loan is an option, I see no problem,” said David Lawrence, director of [Linköping University](#) library.

Wilhelm Widmark, director of [Stockholm University](#) library, said that he had not yet received many requests for loans, and suspected instead that scholars were sharing articles. “We haven't had any complaints yet,” he said. “We have only received some feedback from researchers who support our cancellation.”

In Germany, Bernhard Mittermaier, a member of the negotiating team for Project Deal, the country's national negotiating consortium, said that, judging by a recent internal survey of about 30 institutions, there are on the whole “no complaints and no reactions” to the lack of content.

In the weeks since new content has been unavailable, German institutions on average have had to request 20 papers on loan from other libraries, he said. “That's no problem at all,” he said. “This can be done by the director of the library in the evening, from the sofa”.

Each loan costs €6 (£5.34), he said – an expense dwarfed by the savings that libraries were making by not subscribing to Elsevier journals. Depending on their size, some libraries had been paying up to €800,000 a year for Elsevier content, he said; they now therefore had a lot more money in their budgets and some were now investing this saving into open access publishing instead.

But, if Germany and Sweden are not under any immediate pressure to seek a deal, neither seemingly is Elsevier. The share price of its parent company, RELX, rose during July, and in the last week of the month it posted results for the first half of 2018 that [reassured analysts](#) that the dispute in Germany and Sweden had not slowed revenue growth. Until it cut off access in July, the publisher had in effect been providing [free access](#) to more than 200 German institutions since the beginning of 2018.

The German strategy is still to wait for the pressure to build on Elsevier and ultimately strike a new deal with them, rather than make the current state of affairs permanent, said Dr Mittermaier. He did acknowledge that there was a “risk” that some libraries, happy with the savings that they were currently making, would decide not to join any new national deal.

But German researchers were stepping up pressure in other ways, by declining to submit articles, conduct peer review and stepping down from the editorial boards of journals, he added.

An Elsevier spokeswoman said: “Trends in access requests show nothing unusual in Germany and Sweden. Trends in paper submissions are not discernible after such a short period of time.

“We remain open to constructive talks to find a sustainable national solution in both Germany and Sweden.”

david.matthews@timeshighereducation.com

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