

Master of Christmas trees

Niels Stern
OAPEN Foundation

Abstract

The article describes the highly collaborative process of the creation of policy recommendations for Open Access books within the EU-funded project PALOMERA (Policy Alignment of Open access Monographs in the European Research Area). Johan Rooryck played a leading role in this specific project task. Extensive stakeholder involvement and iterative validation exercises ensured greater recommendation alignment and created community engagement, which in their turn increase the recommendations' chances for being implemented. The recommendations are an important stepping stone for the policy development of open and equitable academic book publishing.

1. Introduction

The first time I heard the analogy of a Christmas tree for a shared document with a margin full of comments, questions, and suggestions for edits was in the EU-funded project PALOMERA (cordis.europa.eu 2025). Johan Rooryck was the editor of the document, and the analogy was made by him as far as I remember. It was indeed a compelling analogy, easy to visualise and hard to forget. Furthermore, as any good analogy it has several layers of meaning. The “Christmas tree document” was the culmination of the PALOMERA project’s data collection, research analysis, stakeholder consultations, validation exercises, and internal discussions turned into a 45 pages long document consisting of policy recommendations for Open Access (OA) Books. It was a specific task of the project, and it was led by Johan Rooryck in collaboration with me. The lavishly commented document bears witness of a long and thorough process leading up to it and the ambition of referencing all the evidence and feedback gathered throughout the project. It required eloquence, editorial experience, and diplomatic skills to turn such a highly decorated “Christmas tree” into a final document. Under Johan’s firm leadership, we succeeded in making it a remarkable set of useful, actionable, and evidence-based recommendations for OA books that has been viewed and downloaded over 5,000 times from Zenodo. This article reveals the process that led to this eloquent result which has become an important stepping stone for the policy development of open and equitable academic book publishing.

2. The PALOMERA project

The PALOMERA project (Policy Alignment of Open Access Monographs in the European Research Area), funded under Horizon Europe from January 2023 to December 2024, had academic books and policies as its primary focus. In the project we defined academic books as scholarly peer reviewed books including monographs, book chapters, edited collections, critical editions, and other long-form scholarly works. We set out to investigate and address a longstanding imbalance in European research policy. Whereas journal articles have, over the previous decade, been subject to increasingly coordinated and binding OA mandates, academic books and monographs have remained underrepresented in the policy environment despite their important role in scholarly production and research communication, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. This continued importance of scholarly books has often been emphasised in studies about the status of the monograph, for instance by Crossick (2015) and Ferwerda et al. (2017).

PALOMERA’s central objective was to explore the policy landscape for OA books and understand why so few OA policies include books. Based on that investigation and analysis, PALOMERA would then produce evidence-based and actionable recommendations that could align the relevant stakeholders that we had in focus (research funding (RFO) and research performing organisations (RPO), policymakers, scholarly societies, academic libraries and publishers, researchers, and infrastructure providers) to increase the number of good and efficient OA policies for academic books.

2.1. *Project objectives*

The distinctive contribution of PALOMERA lay not only in the scope of its empirical work, which combined comprehensive data collection (finding policies, doing surveys, conducting interviews) and systematic mapping of policies across thirty-nine European countries, but also in the collective manner in which this work was undertaken. A sixteen-member consortium brought together universities and research institutes, library and publisher organisations and infrastructure providers, each contributing disciplinary and professional expertise from across Europe. The diversity of stakeholders in the consortium ensured that the research design was never narrowly framed from the perspective of one stakeholder group, but instead evolved through dialogue, and continuous feedback from several stakeholders.

From the outset, the guiding principle was alignment across stakeholders, i.e. taking into consideration the perspectives of the different stakeholders when developing and implementing policies. But also, alignment on key policy elements that must be included in policies to make them efficient.

Alignment, therefore, should *not* be understood as making all policies the same *but rather* ensuring that all policies address a set of key policy elements in a structured way that takes into consideration a multi-stakeholder perspective. How the policy elements are defined and described in a given policy will obviously always depend on the objectives and the political, economic, and cultural contexts of the policymaker.

2.2. *Data collection*

The project was divided into three phases (data collection, analysis, and recommendations). After each phase, an event was planned to validate the outcome of the phases. This proved to be a very useful and engaging methodology.

First, we investigated the landscape across 39 European Research Area (ERA) countries. This systematic investigation resulted in a collection of over 650 documents of which 246 were analysed as policy documents. Sections in these policies that addressed books were marked and translated into English if in another language. Moreover, around 40 in-depth interviews were conducted. These were anonymised and the transcripts were manually tagged based on PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental) indicators for later analysis. All the 650 documents, besides the interview transcripts and the results of ERA wide surveys, were stored in an open, well-structured and fully searchable Knowledge Base.¹ The first validation event invited a diverse group of stakeholders from across Europe to assess the comprehensiveness and usefulness of the Knowledge Base and to help us fill the gaps wherever possible and to give us feedback for future work (for more information about the validation methodology and practice, please see Rabar and Mounier 2024).

2.3. *Analysis*

By deconstructing each OA policy into its core elements, we were able to develop a detailed overview of both the differences and similarities between OA book policies. This analysis revealed that many policies were vague or ambiguous in terms of their requirements for OA books. A further fundamental challenge was that many OA policies explicitly excluded books altogether, indicating that significant work remains in establishing an initial foundation for such policies within many organisations.

The interviews carried out during the project provided essential contextual insights into national circumstances, processes, ongoing initiatives, and challenges that are not evident from existing OA policies alone. We identified a range of barriers and enabling factors affecting OA book policy development. National coordination emerged as one of the most significant enablers, with effective coordination and alignment at the national level proving crucial to progress. Our survey findings also suggested that individuals seem more willing to engage at the institutional level when a clear national strategy is in place. Another major theme highlighted in the interviews was funding, which, when insufficient, constitutes a key barrier to advancing OA book policy development.

¹ <https://knowledgebase.oabooks-toolkit.org/>.

The online survey demonstrated a strong desire among respondents for increased activity in OA book policy development, not only within their own stakeholder group but across all groups. Respondents indicated a need for improvement in most areas, including funding, infrastructures, and the availability of information on OA publications. The survey of national libraries further showed that national differences continue to dominate, particularly in relation to data usage, the extent to which licensing information is collected, and even the definition of an “academic book”.

Our country analysis across the ERA revealed wide disparities in policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, publishing options, infrastructure, and legal provisions, with only a few countries introducing measures such as secondary publishing rights. We generally found that OA book policies could be improved by providing greater clarity, shared terminology, and stronger definitions, i.e. alignment as described above.

The analysis of our data confirmed that OA book policies are far less developed than those for journal articles. We also found that policies for OA books were frequently vague, lacking clear definitions, responsibilities, and timeframes, and while less common than journal policies, those that did exist could be similarly comprehensive but often fell short on detail around OA models and funding. Furthermore, we saw that RFO policies are generally more prescriptive – often requiring OA and providing funding – than RPO policies who tend to *recommend* OA, usually via self-archiving. Before publishing the research findings, a second validation event took place. This time in the form of an open and in-person full day peer review meeting between experts and the main author and leader of the analysis work supported by the scientific coordinator and the organisers of the event. This was a rewarding and highly constructive engagement and feedback process method.

The research findings were published as a comprehensive 150 pages report by Laakso et al. (2024). These findings that constitute the main bulk of the evidence for the recommendations, were also further disseminated as short and easy to read articles in the OAPEN OA Books Toolkit.² Some articles give an overview of the policy and funding landscape in Europe including best practices and case studies. Other articles delve into the Policy Life Cycle developed by the project, with short descriptions of each of its six stages, providing examples of how these are managed in real life situations based on interviews with research funders. Moreover, there are descriptions of how some RFO and RPO fund OA books with links to a catalogue of examples. All the articles have references back to the Knowledge Base.

2.4. *Co-creating the recommendations within the community*

PALOMERA’s findings, the most comprehensive of their kind in Europe, aimed to guide policymakers, funders, and institutions in shaping more effective policies to expand access to OA books. This guidance was anticipated as a set of evidence-based and actionable recommendations.

However, we did not proceed immediately to drafting recommendations. Instead, the project placed great emphasis on iterative validation exercises. After the initial mapping and analysis, findings were circulated within the consortium where early drafts of recommendations were issued. These were then discussed with external experts, for example the project’s Advisory Board, the LIBER Open Access Working Group, and the EUA Open Science Expert Group. Their feedback on the draft recommendations was highly valuable. Furthermore, the analysis findings and prospective recommendations were also discussed in the Funder Forum that was established early in the project. This forum involved research funder representatives from twenty-four countries, and as key stakeholders their opinions were highly relevant to the drafting of the recommendations. Early recommendations were also tested in workshops on several occasions, and as part of the methodology a formal validation event was set up to give direct feedback on the recommendations.

These many validation events served several functions. First, they verified the accuracy of the consortium’s findings from the different stakeholder perspectives. Second, they enabled refinement. Critical feedback led to adjustments in the framing of problems, ensuring that recommendations would not be perceived as unrealistic or inattentive to context. Third, they created community engagement and helped raise awareness of the work of the PALOMERA project. Finally, validation exercises fostered alignment.

² <https://oabooks-toolkit.org/>.

By involving stakeholders directly in the iterative development of outputs, PALOMERA ensured that the recommendations would resonate with the community and therefore stand a greater chance of being implemented.

2.5. *Finalising the recommendations*

Within the PALOMERA project group an important task was to structure and manage all this community feedback into one single document of recommendations. This was handled by delegating responsibilities. Project members were allocated to oversee and develop draft recommendations for specific stakeholder groups. This meant that for each of the eight stakeholder groups that we were addressing, there was a small team of 2–3 group members who would present draft recommendations building on the evidence base and the community feedback for their stakeholder group. This would then be discussed during task meetings and changes would be recorded. These internal discussions were intensive, constructive, and highly interesting from a co-creational point of view.

From those inspirational conversations where agreement could be hard to find – but was found – the colourful “Christmas tree” document slowly but steadily turned into a clean and well-structured document with recommendations at three levels: General recommendations, Common recommendations for RFO, RPO, and Policymakers, and Stakeholder-specific recommendations.

The recommendations are both strategic and practical. For example, they call upon funders and policymakers to include books explicitly in their OA mandates, thereby providing the clarity and coherence that had hitherto been lacking; they emphasise the importance of sustainable funding mechanisms, advocating not only for transparent calculation of book processing charges but also for models that avoid disadvantageous disciplines or institutions with fewer resources; they highlight the need for infrastructures that are open, interoperable, and publicly supported, rather than leaving the ecosystem dependent on commercial providers and subject to vendor lock-in; they encourage national and regional alignment, arguing that fragmented approaches undermine both efficiency and equity; and they stress the importance of inclusivity, urging that OA book policies take account of linguistic diversity, smaller publishing markets, and the needs of scholars in under-resourced settings.

The final report with the recommendations by Bandura-Morgan et al. (2024) was presented at the PALOMERA conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia in October 2024. Since then, they have been presented at many international conferences and webinars. Furthermore, a booklet was produced to share them in a more digestible way. However, the real value lies in the detailed descriptions of each recommendation which are found in the full report. Those detailed descriptions summarise the many conversations and discussions and reflect the community feedback. Stakeholders get very concrete and detailed guidance to how they can advance OA for academic books.

3. **Beyond PALOMERA**

The PALOMERA project ended 31 December 2024. It had delivered four key exploitable outcomes – to use the European Commission (EC) terminology. These were 1) the Knowledge Base, 2) the analysis findings, 3) the Funder Forum, and 4) the recommendations. But equally important it had fostered a strong and skilled community around OA book policies and generated unprecedented awareness. In hindsight it is not so surprising that the formal review performed by an external expert on behalf of the EC was very positive. However, at the time we were of course prepared for any type of criticism. One very thoughtful recommendation from the reviewer was to really ensure the implementation of the recommendations and basically to exploit as much as possible the results of the project. However, the subsequent EC Work Programmes did not call for any such follow-up projects. Still, we have managed to make good use of the results. The Knowledge Base has been improved, and guidelines have been developed to invite RFOs, RPOs, and policymakers to upload their policies. The OA Books Network³ showcased this in a policy-athon in the early summer of 2025 and in a webinar on services for policymakers.

³ <https://openaccessbooksnetwork.hcommons.org/>.

3.1. *A new Policy Forum on OA Books*

During the project period, four Funder Forum meetings were held. At the last of these meetings it was decided by the participants to explore ways to continue the forum because it was seen as a useful way for RFOs and other policymakers to convene and discuss challenges and opportunities for OA book policies and to exchange knowledge and experiences. A conclusion of the meeting was to let Science Europe, cOAlition S, and OAPEN explore pathways for the continuation of the forum.

Therefore, Bregt Saenen (Science Europe), Johan Rooryck (cOAlition S) and I sat down and developed a concept note for a new Policy Forum on OA Books jointly coordinated by the three organisations and hosted by Science Europe. Considering their engagement in this space the boards of the respective organisations approved the concept note and in May 2025 the first Policy Forum meeting took place. This forum is uniquely positioned to implement the PALOMERA recommendations both at the strategic and practical levels. Work in this direction is already taking good shape and includes engagement with the OPERAS Special Interest Group on OA Books.⁴

3.2. *International engagement and new Christmas trees*

Beyond the Policy Forum we have also experienced other stakeholders like publishers, libraries, and societies engaging with the recommendations – also outside of Europe, for example in Africa and North America. We have invited stakeholders who engage with the recommendations to share with us what they do by filling in a simple form.

Getting thus far with the PALOMERA project is the success of a large group of skilled and friendly people working very well together. Johan Rooryck played an important part in that group effort by balancing voices and concerns with mastery, diplomacy, and editorial equilibrium.

He is now mastering other “Christmas trees” due to his deep engagement in diamond OA projects, for example in the ALMASI project⁵ and the preparation of the AEGIS-OA which will be further developing the European Diamond Capacity Hub (EDCH).⁶ Due to his co-coordinating roles in these projects, he has also been applying all his editorial skills in the writing and co-writing of those proposals.

The latter project proposal, AEGIS-OA, also includes books and therefore our paths are crossing again, which is wonderful. The idea is to include books in the EDCH and more generally to develop quality schemes, training modules, communities, and funding opportunities for diamond OA books. This will not be an easy task, but our evidence base is wider, our directions clearer, and our community is stronger than ever before. And we have the Master of Christmas trees on our side! So, I remain optimistic.

Acknowledgments

Perhaps not so well-known to many, Johan speaks and understands some Swedish. Since I am Danish and this piece appears in a Nordic journal, please allow to congratulate Johan in my mother tongue: Kære Johan, hjertelig tillykke med fødselsdagen! Jeg er taknemmelig for din åbenhed, gæstfrihed og vores venskabelige arbejdsfællesskab, som jeg håber vil vokse i dybde og omfang. Jeg ønsker dig alt det bedste!

⁴ <https://operas-eu.org/special-interest-groups/open-access-books/>.

⁵ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101188192>.

⁶ <https://diamas.org/>.

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