

President's Annual Report, Society for Latin American Studies AGM

Lucy Taylor, University of Manchester, April 2013.

This has been a busy year for SLAS since the last AGM at the Annual conference in Sheffield, especially in response to the fast changing and increasingly difficult times for the Higher Education sector. This report focuses on the pressing issue of Open Access, but ends with happier news of an invitation to join us for our 50th anniversary conference in 2014.

Like many Learned Societies, we are very concerned about the impact of Open Access on our journal, the Bulletin of Latin American Research, and also on the Society. Open Access as you all know is a government initiative which seeks to shift the financial focus for the dissemination of research in academic journals from the user (libraries and individual subscribers) to the producer (authors). At present there are three tracks being discussed; the 'green' track which would allow all published work to become available following an embargo period; the 'gold' track in which all authors must pay to have their work published; and a 'hybrid' model which allows both options to operate. The 'gold track' supposes that authors will have built the costs of publication into their RCUK funding budgets or will have successfully applied to their university's publication fund. The implications of this seemingly simple shift are extraordinarily far-reaching. It will affect the financial structure of universities, the publishing industry and individual research careers as well as consolidating sharp hierarchies in the university sector.

Legislation has just come into effect which obliges all those holding RCUK grants to ensure that their work is Open Access. As a consequence, Wiley/Blackwell which publishes BLAR has drawn up conventions and new copyright agreements, which we have scrutinised and approved. It is worth mentioning that Wiley/Blackwell was part of the Finch Commission which drew up the Draft Report on Open Access, and they played a key role in representing not only the view of the publishing industry but also of Learned Societies. Wiley have a large portfolio of Learned Societies like SLAS, for whom they provide membership services as well as publishing their society journal. Learned Societies therefore play an important role in their business model, so the interests of SLAS and Wiley coincide on many, though not all, points.

Open Access affects SLAS directly in two ways. Firstly, we are concerned about the impact on BLAR. At present, BLAR offers a 'Gold' (fee-paying) option (OnlineOpen) priced at \$3000 per article which is available for those RCUK-funded scholars who must make their work Open Access. However, around three quarters of our authors come from universities outside the UK and it is very unclear whether they would be willing to pay the fee required under the 'Gold' option, given that their own Research

bodies or universities may not recognise the necessity of this expense. (Of the 94 authors who have published BLAR articles since 2010 only 25 authors were UK-based while 39 were from the USA, 14 from Latin America, 11 from Europe, 4 from Canada and one based in Malaysia). For many Latin American colleagues in particular, such costs may well be absolutely prohibitive at a time when we are actually seeing more submissions – and published articles – from colleagues in Latin America. Open Access therefore threatens BLAR by restricting the pool of prospective authors, and more seriously it compromises the purpose and ethos of BLAR which is to promote a global community of scholarship on Latin America.

Secondly, the Society itself is threatened by Open Access. Around 88% of our income comes from Wiley-Blackwell most of which derives from BLAR sales via libraries. We are therefore highly dependent on the current financial arrangement. If this funding stream shifts wholly to author-payments our income will be very adversely affected because far fewer articles will be submitted and published. How this new arrangement might affect our financial relationship with Wiley/Blackwell is also unknown. A move towards a hybrid system, which is looking most likely in the short term at least, will mean that some – probably most – of our articles would become open access following embargo and BLAR should continue to be an economically viable purchase for many libraries. However, the impact of this future scenario is extremely difficult to predict. Our income as a society is very unlikely to increase and is much more likely to shrink significantly, putting in jeopardy our grants schemes and other activities.

We have responded to this fast-moving situation in a number of ways. Firstly, we have worked with colleagues, joining the chorus of discussion and criticism being generated by larger Learned Societies, the British Academy and UKCASA. We have also been working closely with Tom Pater, our key liaison at Wiley Blackwell and have developed a co-ordinated approach between the SLAS and BLAR teams. In addition, we have set up a rolling working group. This group is tasked with a) keeping a weather eye on new developments and b) considering alternative ways of generating income and developing a different business model in order to keep SLAS viable as a society.

It seems that we are drawn into a language and practice of the market by this legislation which I personally regret. However, I believe that we can also struggle hard to maintain the hallmark of SLAS: its collegiality. It is essential, in my view, that we foreground our intellectual endeavours, our curiosity and passion, and celebrate the tight-knit and open-minded community of scholarship that characterises SLAS. Our mission to promote junior scholars through the postgraduate and postdoctoral grant schemes, to enhance intellectual networks through the seminar, conferences and events grants and to facilitate Latin American participation in our conference remains a priority for the Committee.

However, our news is not all doom and gloom. The Conference at the University of Manchester which is about to take place looks to be one of the biggest and intellectually strongest that we have seen in recent years. I thank Par Kumaraswami and Peter Wade for their hard work in organising the conference and Rohan Jackson of NomadIT and his team for providing excellent conference organising service.

Moreover, next year's conference will certainly one to celebrate – SLAS will be 50 in 2014! To commemorate this remarkable event, we will be holding the Annual Conference in London, hosted by Jasmine Gideon and Silvia Posocco at Birkbeck College. We hope to make this a high-profile event which will re-establish the importance of SLAS as the leading society for Latin American Studies in Europe. Our colleagues at both the Institute for the Study of the Americas and the Institute for the Americas at UCL have kindly agreed to organise two flagship keynote events and we look forward to welcoming a record number of participants.

I should also add that BLAR is going from strength to strength. We have appointed Tony Kaptcia to the post of Commissioning Editor for the BLAR book series and our editorial team has been joined by Ann Varley from UCL and Matthew Brown from Bristol. Also, Jasmine Gideon is taking over as Co-ordinating Editor from David Howard who is leaving the BLAR team after 5 years of sterling service. We offer our heart-felt thanks to David who has strengthened and expanded the journal with a winning combination of vision, insight and great good humour. Working with him has been a very happy and productive experience.

This is my final year as President, so I would like to close this report by thanking my colleagues on the SLAS Committee for all their support, ideas and encouragement. I wish the new President and her team the very best of luck over the next few years. I feel confident that the collegiality which makes SLAS so special can endure these changing times and look forward to sharing research, ideas and a glass of wine with all the delegates at this conference – and at our 50th in Spring 2014.