

The Finch Report on open access: it's complicated

by Blog Admin

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While some scholars may be disappointed with a smaller step towards open access publishing than they hoped for, **Stephen Curry** finds that the Finch Report pushes just hard enough at a door that is opening to open access.



This post was originally published on Stephen Curry's blog, [Reciprocal Space](#).

A committee set up by government was never going to foment a revolution. And so it has proved to be. The recommendations of the Finch Report [released today](#) mark a cautious, measured step in the right direction, but it is nevertheless a significant one.

The [Finch committee](#) was [set up](#) by science minister David Willetts at the end of 2011 and charged with examining “how to expand access to the peer-reviewed publications that arise from research undertaken both in the UK and in the rest of the world; and to propose a programme of action to that end.”

I have had sight of the report for the past few hours on a busy day and so have only been able to quickly digest the executive summary. It may give you some idea of the complexity of the issues considered if I tell you that the summary runs to nine closely typed pages.

It starts out promisingly, recognising that although established modes of publishing have served science well for a long time, “the internet has brought profound change across all sectors of society and the economy, transforming interactions and relationships, reducing costs, sparking innovation, and overturning established modes of business.” This, the committee recognises, has wrought a cultural change in scientist's relationship with information. Simply put, we want better and faster access. And the public deserves better access too. Perhaps the most important statement in the summary enshrines the key to the ongoing debate:

*“The principle that the results of research that has been publicly funded should be freely accessible in the public domain is a compelling one, and **fundamentally unanswerable.**”*

That sounds like an excellent starting point. But the committee has had to grapple with the complexities of the associated issues, which have been rehearsed here and elsewhere in recent months. Their summary is worth quoting in full (with my emphases in bold):

*First, **there are tensions between the interests of key stakeholders in the research communications system.** Publishers, whether commercial or not-for-profit, wish to sustain high-quality services, and the revenues that enable them to do so. **Funders wish to secure maximum impact for the research they fund, plus value for money.** Universities wish to maximise their research income and performance, while bearing down on costs. **Researchers themselves wish to see speedy and effective publication and dissemination of research results, but also to secure high impact and credit for the work they have done.***

*Second, there are potential risks to each of the key groups of players in the transition to open access: rising costs or shrinking revenues, and inability to sustain high-quality services to authors and readers. Most important, there are risks to the intricate ecology of research and communication, and the support that is provided to researchers, enabling them to perform to best standards, under established publishing regimes. **Concern about these risks may***

restrain the development of wider access if it is not managed in a measured way.

*Third, **research and its communication is a global endeavour.** Measures to promote open access need to be similarly international in scope if they are to deliver their full potential. **The UK has played a leading role in promoting open access, but there are limits to what the UK can achieve alone.** Although researchers in the UK are among the best and most productive in the world, they produce only 6% of the research papers published in journals each year.*

*Fourth, **is the question of cost.** Current funding regimes focus on providing access to research literature through libraries, via payments for subscription-based journals. Arrangements to meet the costs of APCs for open access publishing tend to be ad hoc and unsystematic. **In the period of transition there are bound to be additional costs as both systems exist side by side.***

Some of these points may rankle with those in the vanguard of open access but they seem to me to reflect important concerns of the wider scientific community, especially those embedded in scientific societies. I remain hopeful that some of the difficulties on the issue of cost can be addressed by the advent of innovative and nimble publishing solutions, but we shall see.

The committee's understanding of the nature of the problem has clearly informed its recommendations. They are a mixed bag (see below for commentary):

1. **a clear policy direction** should be set towards support for **publication in open access or hybrid journals, funded by APCs, as the main vehicle for the publication of research**, especially when it is publicly funded;
2. the Research Councils and other public sector bodies funding research in the UK should – **following the Wellcome Trust's initiative** in this area but recognizing the specific natures of different funding streams – **establish more effective and flexible arrangements to meet the costs of publishing in open access and hybrid journals**;
3. support for open access publication should be accompanied by **policies to minimise restrictions on the rights of use and re-use**, especially for non-commercial purposes, and on the ability to use the latest tools and services to organise and manipulate text and other content;
4. during the period of transition to open access publishing worldwide, in order to maximise access in the HE and health sectors to journals and articles produced by authors in the UK and from across the world that are not accessible on open access terms, funds should be found to extend and rationalise current licences to cover all the institutions in those sectors;
5. the current discussions on how to implement the proposal for **walk-in access** to the majority of journals to be provided in public libraries across the UK should be pursued with vigour, along with an effective publicity and marketing campaign;
6. representative bodies for key sectors including central and local Government, voluntary organisations, and businesses, should work together with publishers, learned societies, libraries and others with relevant expertise to consider the terms and costs of licences to provide access to a broad range of relevant content for the benefit of consortia of organisations within their sectors; and how such licences might be funded;
7. future discussions and negotiations between universities and publishers (including learned societies) on the pricing of big deals and other subscriptions should take into account the financial implications of the shift to publication in open access and hybrid journals, of extensions to licensing, and the resultant changes in revenues provided to publishers;
8. universities, funders, publishers, and learned societies should continue to work together to promote further experimentation in open access publishing for scholarly monographs;

9. ***the infrastructure of subject and institutional repositories should be developed so that they play a valuable role complementary to formal publishing, particularly in providing access to research data and to grey literature, and in digital preservation;***
10. ***fundings' limitations on the length of embargo periods, and on any other restrictions on access to content not published on open access terms, should be considered carefully, to avoid undue risk to valuable journals that are not funded in the main by APCs. Rules should be kept under review in the light of the available evidence as to their likely impact on such journals.***

Points i-iii look good: clear support for gold open access with proper funding mechanisms (following the Wellcome model) via — if I have understood correctly — modes that permit text-mining.

Point v, on walk-in access journals in libraries for the general public continues to make no sense to me in the age of the internet (now concurrent with an age of austerity that is seeing the closure of libraries across the UK).

Point ix on institutional repositories will represent a significant advance only if they can be properly linked and indexed via the web. It remains to be seen if publishers will comply with this; at present they resist such added value.

And finally, point x appears to suggest that the committee has shied away from laying down a recommendation on the embargo period for papers published via green open access (where no Author Processing Charge is paid). The committee expand on this in a later paragraph where they state that institutional repositories should:

*“Consider carefully the balance between the aims of, on the one hand, increasing access, and on the other of avoiding undue risks to the sustainability of subscription-based journals during what is likely to be a lengthy transition to open access. Particular care should be taken about rules relating to embargo periods. **Where an appropriate level of dedicated funding is not provided to meet the costs of open access publishing, we believe that it would be unreasonable to require embargo periods of less than twelve months.**”*

Is this a sop to publishers or a reasonable compromise? I think the key will be how research councils respond to the report and what conditions they will lay down on their funded scientists. There is no mention in the summary of ‘mandates’ but I wonder if the committee is banking that its report, while lacking in some specifics, nevertheless marks an important cultural shift.

I think — and hope it is not wishful thinking — that the committee has been wily enough to read the runes and push just hard enough at a door that is opening. I was struck by their analysis of the cost implications:

*“...one of the advantages of open access publishing is that it brings **greater transparency about the costs, and the price, of publication and dissemination.** The measures we recommend will bring greater competition on price as well as the status of the journals in which researchers wish to publish. **We therefore expect market competition to intensify, and that universities and funders should be able to use their power as purchasers to bear down on the costs to them both of APCs and of subscriptions.**”*

These are arguments that have appeared more than once on [my blog](#) so it was heartening to see them echoed in the report.

The step forward is smaller than many might have hoped for but all in all the report represents a positive move towards the goal of full open access. There is the realistic appreciation that a shift to open access

will not happen overnight, even now. But it *is* coming:

“Implementation of the balanced programme we recommend will mean that more people and organisations in the UK have access to more of the published findings of research than ever before. More research will be accessible immediately upon publication, and free at the point of use. Our recommended programme will accelerate the progress towards a fully open access environment in the UK, and we hope that it will contribute to similar acceleration in the rest of the world.”

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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