

Open access developments have necessarily elicited response from the entire scholarly community. Here, **David Prosser** (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/?p=7681#author>) of Research Libraries UK (<http://www.rluk.ac.uk/>) clarifies the valued role of libraries in informing the debate and raises specific concerns over how the newly pledged £10 million by the Government is to be spent.



The open access (OA) debate has been ongoing in the UK and around the world for over ten years now. It bursts into activity occasionally as a new report is issued or a policy announced, but rarely have we seen as sustained a period of discussion as took place over the summer.

The starting point, of course, was the Finch Report (<http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/>) and its recommendation that we focus our attention on the Gold route through OA journals. One feature of the Finch Report was that it looked in detail at how the UK might manage a transition to OA in a world that was not moving at a constant rate. With the UK producing about 6% of the world's research literature, do we face a problem whereby we pay OA publication fees to make UK research available to all while still having to pay subscription fees to gain access to the world's literature? Finch modelled this transition and concluded that there may be a temporary increase in the system costs as we go through the transition. (Headline writers have put the transition costs at up to £60 million a year, but the report is actually more nuanced in its scenarios than this figure might suggest.)

The Government, and specifically David Willetts in the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills who commissioned the report, broadly welcomed the recommendations in a statement (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/science/docs/112-975-letter-government-response-to-finch-report-research-publications.pdf>) that confirmed the Government's commitment to the principles of OA, but significantly did not promise any additional money to help during the transition period.

It was this lack of extra cash that RLUK and SCONUL highlighted in their joint response (<http://www.rluk.ac.uk/content/rlukscnul-response-bis-statement-access-publicly-funded-research>) to the BIS Statement. We indicated that we were "disappointed [...] that the Government has not announced any new funding to facilitate the transition, but has assumed that any additional transition costs will be met out of existing budgets. This can only act to slow the rate of transition and to reduce the budget available for new research."

It is clear that Mr Willetts does not like to see a disappointed librarian as last week at the British Science Festival he announced an extra £10 million will be made available (<http://news.bis.gov.uk/Press-Releases/Government-invests-10-million-to-help-universities-move-to-open-access-67fac.aspx>) to "help universities with the transition to open access to publicly-funded research findings." All of the details are not yet clear – is this a one-off injection of cash or an annual fund? – but we do know that the money will be targeted to 30 of the most research-intensive universities.

This has already reignited the debate around the concentration of research effort in the UK – but that is a debate that we probably do not want to get into here. Potentially more damaging is the accusation that this is 'wasting' precious resources in a time of austerity, but I feel this rather missed the fact that for Mr Willetts £10 million is loose change. It is 0.33% of the total funding RCUK distributes annually and about a third of the cost of the Olympics opening ceremony!

So, is it all good news? Well, additional money is always welcome. However, I do have concerns as to the manner in which it is spent. One of the contributing factors to the serials crisis over the past three decades has been the disconnect between readers and the prices of journals. Academics say "we must have journals X, Y, and Z" but often leave the job of finding the funds to pay for those journals to the library. They do not care if the annual price rises for those journals are well above inflation or budget increases – they need the journals. This has led to higher and higher prices and a 'market' where there is little correlation between a journal's price and the quality of the papers it publishes. (Of course, price disconnect is only one of the factors that have contributed to the serials crisis.)

A potential benefit of OA and article processing charges (APCs) is that the researchers are now exposed to the costs of publication. They can make decisions based on pricing information – information that researchers as subscribers have never been exposed to. So imagine two journals offering OA (either as a complete OA journal or a hybrid journal): journal A charges APCs of £1000, journal B charges £4000. The question for the researcher now becomes “do I get four times the benefit in publishing in journal B?”. The answer may be “yes” – greater reputation, higher impact factor, faster publication, etc. But at least there is a question to ask and if journal B is not four times better than journal A then there will be downward pressure on the price journal B can charge and still attract authors.

That is unless we create systems in our universities that engender a disconnect between authors and the prices. Central funds, for example, which pay the fees on behalf of authors without any of the consequences of the authors’ decisions coming back to the authors. In that case journal B could be only twice as good as journal A but the author will still want to publish there despite the price being four times greater.

In an environment of author-APCs disconnect then pumping extra money into the system will result in higher costs as many publishers will naturally increase their APCs to ‘mop up’ the extra cash. My fear with this additional £10 million is that we are pumping money into a transitional system without first ensuring that we have a true market in place. Having lived through the serials crisis we have a duty to ensure that we do not create the conditions for an ‘APCs Crisis’ (for which we’ll need to invent a snappier name!). OA offers us the possibility of reducing the total cost to the UK of scholarly communications, but only if we are vigilant. In this case, cash will not cure all – we need to be canny as to how we spend it.

*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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