

Key Questions for Open Access Policy in the UK

by Blog Admin

September 12, 2012

While recent policy developments have made huge strides for open access publishing, there is still great uncertainty over how the transition will play out. [Stephen Curry](#) distills the key questions that have emerged over translating open access policy into practice.



This article originally appeared on Stephen Curry's personal blog, '[Reciprocal Space](#)'.

It's not even two months since the tectonic plates shifted underneath academic publishing in the UK. But in the few weeks since the [government's response](#) to the [Finch report](#) and the announcement of the [new open access \(OA\) policy](#) of the UK Research Councils (RCUK), the ground has settled. The contours of the new landscape can be more clearly discerned but still lack definition in places. Not everyone is happy with what they see.

From April 2013 RCUK will require all its funded researchers to publish in OA journals. They will be able to do this by paying an article processing charge (APC) from funds awarded by the research councils to their institution so that the publisher makes the paper freely available on publication (gold OA). Alternatively, the researcher can go down the green OA route, in which the author's unformatted, peer-reviewed manuscript can be posted online, typically in an institutional repository, several months after journal publication. This route is free but permitted under the new policy only if the publisher's embargo is less than 6 months (12 for papers in the humanities and social sciences).

In principle, both gold and green routes to OA comply with the RCUK new policy, but in practice the emphasis is on gold.

Although I raised questions about the [costs](#) and [implementation](#) of the new policy, I was generally [positive](#) in my initial response to what I saw — and still see — as a bold move. But I have been reassessing in the light of analyses of Finch and the RCUK policy by people who have thought about open access for a lot longer than me: [Alma Swan](#), [Peter Suber](#) and [Stevan Harnad](#). Between them, these three have written a great deal about the ramifications of policy changes in the UK. Their analyses are well worth reading but they are pretty long, so I thought I would try to distill the key questions as we start to figure how the policy will work in practice, something that RCUK acknowledges [still needs to be sorted out](#).

Is gold OA the best route to worldwide OA? In [Going for Gold \(PDF\)](#), published in June this year, Alma Swan and John Houghton looked at the likely costs of gold OA for a range of APCs and universities with different levels of research output. They concluded that *all* institutions — even the most research-intensive — would save money from worldwide Gold OA as long as APCs were kept under £2000. Savings would be considerable if the APC were to be held at the current average, which is £571.

But this refers to a post-transition world where there are no journal subscriptions and we are some way from that. The same report finds that use of green OA *during the transition* would be about 80% cheaper than the cost of gold OA.

RCUK have gone for gold OA because, if I have understood the [argument on their blog](#), they want to insist on a CC-BY licence for papers to maximise their re-use since that “allows others to modify, build upon and/or distribute the licensed work, including for commercial purposes, as long as the original author is credited”. Certainly the licence facilitates exploitation of the research literature **but should CC-BY be a priority for the transition?**

In the comments on the RCUK blog Peter Murray-Rust has [argued](#) that ‘billions’ are wasted because the current literature is not machine accessible (which requires CC-BY), but Harnad sees licensing as a secondary issue and [countered](#) that the current restrictions due to expensive subscriptions costs ‘trillions’.

For him the absolute priority is to establish free green OA so that the research community (the primary user of the academic literature) can get access. But who is right? Where do these numbers come from? The importance of text-mining has been [analysed by JISC](#): they see clear benefits but don't attach numbers to them. This is hardly surprising given the forecasting difficulties but clearer acknowledgement of this by opposing sides of the CC-BY argument might lead to more productive discussion.

Can we pave the transition with gold? Swan, Suber and Harnad all have concerns that the emphasis on gold OA for the transition period is too costly. Finch estimated that £50-60m per year would be needed to cover excess costs during the transition (when APCs and subscriptions would both have to be paid), but these figures are [very uncertain](#). In any case, just as important is the need to consider how the RCUK policy is likely to affect the behaviour of publishers.

[Harnad](#) and [Suber](#) have both expressed the fear that the policy is a gift to publishers because they could simply extend their green OA embargo period to beyond 6 months in order to oblige authors to pay gold OA APCs to comply with the RCUK stipulations. The temptation to adopt this stratagem seems irresistible; it makes good business sense, especially for journals that [trade on their impact factors](#). The policy could therefore simultaneously inhibit the spread of green OA options *and* lead to hikes in APCs. Suber also [points out](#) that journals that currently offer free gold OA publishing will be induced by the new RCUK policy to start charging. These are perverse outcomes for a policy designed to promote open access.

Swan sees a threat to costs from another direction, [arguing](#) that RCUK's preference for gold over green OA favours the status quo by protecting the income streams of publishers and so inhibiting the entry to the market of publishing innovators who are likely to offer better value for money.

We shall have to see how that plays out — much remains frustratingly uncertain — but the development of the market will depend very much on the behaviour of purchaser and under the new policy these will be researchers' institutions. To fund APCs the research councils will allocate block grants (from existing budgets) to the institutions where their grant-holders work. **But how will APC funds be determined by research councils and how will universities allocate them?** Given that the over-stretched UK research budget is in decline, it is unlikely that universities will get all the funds they need and I see scope aplenty for administrative headaches. Universities and their researchers will be torn between maximising value for money and — [as ever, alas](#) — chasing after expensive high impact factor journals to feed their REF returns and grant applications.

These tensions will be exacerbated if publishers move to eliminate green OA options in the quest for gold OA fees from UK researchers.

Swan, Suber and Harnad all agree that incorporation of a strong mandate for green OA in the RCUK policy would help to remedy many of the problems that have been identified. The lack of emphasis on green OA is seen as the direct result of the influence of publishers on the Finch working group, who were understandably seeking to protect their interests. But the trio of commentators agree that UK policy should first serve the interests of researchers (and the taxpayer) rather than those of publishers. The government is oddly conflicted in its attitude to the policy: although keen on value for money and the winnowing power of market forces, it appears to want protect publishing companies based in the UK from the storms of uncertainty that the push for OA is creating.

The lack of resolution of the gold vs green emphasis is problematic, particularly because no-one, and I really mean no-one, has an idea how long it will take to complete the transition to worldwide OA (when subscription monies can finally be transferred to pay APCs). For how many years is the UK prepared to pay excess transition costs? That question immediately raises another one: **why isn't the RCUK policy aiming to minimise the length and therefore the cost of the transition?**

Part of the answer is surely that we cannot calculate how long it will take other countries to make the same commitment to OA as the UK. It is clear that concerted international action will be important, as Science Minister David Willetts has already [acknowledged](#). But if coordination between governments is so crucial, [asks Swan](#), **why is the UK pursuing a policy that is out of kilter with the US, the EU, Denmark**

and Australia where green OA mandates are gaining traction?

I wish I knew the answers to these questions. I remain upbeat about policy developments in the UK: we have made huge strides this year. But in my darker moments I fear that we will still be arguing about these issues in 10 or 20 years time and we cannot afford to do that. I hope that all sides will recognise that the current position cannot be final, that the landscape is still shifting and that it needs to be shaped by us to make sure that worldwide OA works.

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

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