

How institutional repositories are already working to solve the Open Access problem

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Last week, [Mike Taylor](#) discussed his concerns on institutional repositories as an adequate solution to the open access problem and asked Green OA advocates to address these problems. In response, [Natalia Madjarevic](#), [Dave Puplett](#), and [Neil Stewart](#) clarify the existing capabilities of institutional repositories and highlight the powerful transitional role they can play in providing greater access and benefits for individuals, institutions and disciplines.



Mike Taylor's recent LSE Impact blog post [on Green Open Access \(OA\) and Institutional Repositories](#) (IRs) provoked us into a defence of IRs. IRs have been around as long as the idea of Green OA, but they have long-since transcended it, becoming important parts of efforts to drive open access, bibliography, citations and data: the [A-B-C-D of Open Scholarship](#).



Self-deposit in a repository was not, as many repository advocates would agree, designed as a complete, permanent solution to achieving universal Open Access. It is however an excellent transitional route for individuals, institutions and disciplines to take. It is this message about transition that has been so often lost in Green v Gold debates, a mistake that is being repeated in the post-Finch discussions. We would like to restate the case for what IRs can do for academics and their research, and to respond to some of Mike's specific concerns about Green OA. The responses correspond to each of Mike's five concerns.



1. Two-class system

The accusation here is that Green OA creates access "haves" and "have-nots" by allowing some (generally those affiliated with large, relatively wealthy universities) to have access to the published paper of record via the subscription model, and others access "only" to the final draft via Green OA. Mike believes that this will result in green OA versions of papers differing from the as-published version. There is a simple solution to this: if authors are serious about OA and care about the integrity of their work, they can and should do the editorial work to make the green OA version reflect the published version as best as possible.

Furthermore, I think Mike's case is over-stated (as he himself seems to admit). Currently we are very definitely in a two-class system, where some people (those affiliated with wealthy universities) have access to lots of research whilst others have little or no access to research at all (with the vast majority of the available research made available via Green OA). Access to the nearly-final version of a paper is always better than no access at all, and Green OA provides a practical and cost-effective way of achieving this.

2. Expense of continuing subscriptions

Indeed! If every publisher went over to a cheaper, Gold OA model overnight we'd all get behind that, right? Well even if they do get there eventually, it's going to take years. And the UK might never match with models adopted around the the rest of the world, particularly in light of the US' recent [recommendation from the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy](#) that research be made available via the Green route. Therefore the academic community is now more seriously than ever looking for a way of making all research OA while the whole scholarly communications machine adjusts.

The issue, as any subscriptions librarian will tell you, is that the cost of subscriptions keeps going up, way above inflation. Gold OA means paying to publish some articles openly now, but there's no guaranteed way of getting

publishers to agree to charge UK subscribers less in the medium to long run. So how can Universities ensure they don't end up paying at every turn? Green OA is how. As a transitional tool Green OA has already begun to work, and it can do a lot more before it could begin to seriously threaten the business models of most publishing services.

Those critical of Green OA must acknowledge that a lot of money is currently leaving HE under the status quo, and that more money would continue to leave the system in the short to medium run if we exclusively use Gold OA (see [Houghton and Swan](#) for the definitive explanation of the economics of this). The green route helps us move towards OA without costing the people who create, review and edit research even more money than subscriptions do now.

3. Embargoes

Agreeing with Mike on his points about embargoes is straightforward. Immediate access to Green OA papers following publication is the ideal model. RCUK's revised guidelines on embargo periods was a confusing aspect of the policy formation – particularly for an issue with such complex processes. Until there is evidence that the no-embargo model or making a paper available during its "shelf life" has a detrimental effect on subscriptions that support scholarly societies, it's difficult to see how publishers can continue to impose significant delays on access to research outputs. IRs, however, are set up to deal with embargo periods during this transition period and have the functionality to automatically make a full-text Green OA paper available upon expiration of the embargo period.

4. Non-open licences

Mike rightly questions why non-open licences, especially NC non-commercial clauses, are accepted in Green OA scenarios, but not in the RCUK-proposed Gold environment. The key to understanding this is that Green OA infrastructure has developed overwhelmingly from the ground-up, and that Green OA via IRs is commonly opt-in. Institutions have rarely required (or mandated) deposit and this means most repository managers are in no position to stipulate deposit rules beyond what is legally required.

There are [insightful posts](#) on this topic on this blog as well as some [staunch rejections](#) of open licences. The reason that repositories don't require certain licences is that institutional positions on the use of repositories vary enormously and rarely go beyond the status of broad encouragement. It's arguable that OA debates have become narrowed to issues of paywall or no paywall, and that endorsing support for open licences is a position repositories should take more often.

5. Practical failings

Mike makes a number of assertions about the "practical failings" of repositories, but these assertions don't seem to be backed up with any evidence. While it's true that examples of individual institutions having problems with their repository can be found, in general the picture in the UK is good, as a glance at the [UK listing of the Registry of Open Access Repositories](#) will show you. He claims that there are examples of repositories that "don't work", but it's unclear what this means without further detail, given that IRs are currently storing and serving large amounts of green OA material. He also claims that "Use of metadata across IRs is inconsistent", but this is not the case – repository platforms use standardised metadata which makes documents easily findable. He also claims that search across multiple repositories is difficult, but this seems to us to be a problem with scholarly literature more generally, and there are in fact some excellent search engines for OA material e.g. [BASE](#), a search engine for open access material, as well as [Google Scholar](#).

Mike makes one more damaging point, in our view. He notes that IRs are often relatively empty, because scholars do not deposit in them, and this is arguably the case, though it is a matter of perspective. Certainly Green OA has not achieved anywhere near "full" open access, but then neither has Gold OA, and the number of papers made open using green OA dwarfs those made gold. Of the repositories at the authors' respective institutions, [City Research Online](#) at City University London has made roughly 1,400 papers openly accessible, and sees 250 downloads of these papers a day. The [Kent Academic Repository](#) contains over 2,000 full-text items, whilst a really big and well

established repository such as [LSE Research Online](#) contains around 7,000 papers and sees an enormous average of 3,000 downloads a day. Can repositories be dismissed when they make papers openly available that weren't previously, and evidently get used by so many people from around the world?

There's a fundamental point here: can repositories be blamed for lack of uptake, when they rely on scholarly engagement for their material? Surely the problem here is that most academics are apathetic about OA, and that without mandates requiring deposit, IRs will indeed remain relatively empty despite the large amount of material they have already succeeded in making available.

Conclusion

IRs are working. They do the jobs they set out to do: enabling a cost-effective long term transition from Green to Gold OA, enhanced search engine visibility for research, and providing consistent metadata – all evidence points to mature systems with an important role to play. IRs also provide additional services such as collecting, sharing and preserving collections such as theses, grey literature and research data. They also contextualise research outputs in unique ways: for example, acting as a record of an institution's research output alongside quantitative data such as download statistics. IRs are much more than “just” databases for Green OA journal articles.

Mike's post proves there are reservations about the capability of IRs in providing a complete solution for comprehensive OA, though we have argued that this is not necessarily what IRs are there to do. They are, however, accusations with some weight, and for us this raises the point: if we IR-types are already developing solutions that address many of these issues, we need to make sure people know about them and the services IRs provide. Although IR content is highly visible in search engine results, institutions themselves must make IRs highly visible, user friendly and embedded across their online presence. Innovative systems will lead to increased scholarly engagement and improve the likelihood that Green OA via IRs are a positive solution in an upside-down system.

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

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