

# The Government's policy on open access and scholarly publishing is severely lacking

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The House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills committee's latest report, *Open Access: Achieving a Functional Market*, issued this week looks into the Government's current policy on Open Access (OA) and scholarly publishing in general. The Committee, of which [Ann McKechin MP](#) is a member, unanimously found this policy to be severely lacking in many areas. Here, she discusses her reaction to the Committee's findings, and summarise our key recommendations.



## **Gold Open Access – going out on a limb?**

The Committee's main fear is that the Government's unilateral backing of the Gold OA model risks putting the UK out of sync with other leading nations, which, our evidence suggests, are opting for Green OA in far greater numbers than Gold.

[Open Access](#)

Image credit: biblioteekje

As the [House of Commons Science and Technology committee](#) reported in 2004, 'the UK would put itself at a financial disadvantage internationally if it were to act alone in mandating publicly-funded researchers to publish in author-pays journals'. By accepting the Finch report's preference for Gold OA, the Government fails to recognise a future which will inevitably feature both Gold and Green models. Indeed, worldwide trends show an overwhelming preference for Green OA, and few countries took the Government's position of backing one model over the other. The Government's current policy does not sufficiently take into account the important role Green OA has had in making the UK the world leader in open scholarship (around 40% of our academic research is currently available through OA channels, compared to a worldwide average of 20%). Over 200 active institutional repositories support this investment in Green OA in the UK, and the Government has spent more than £225m in their development, yet both the Finch Report and the resulting Government policy relegated the role of repositories in the OA marketplace. The Government should work to promote standardisation and compliance across subject and institutional repositories. How about a research.gov.uk website portal to facilitate simplified searching of all UK institutional repositories? OA should be about making research not only open, but also easier to find; the Government can play a clear role in doing this to assist both researchers and the business sector.

## **Costs of transition – embargo periods**

If the goal of OA is to make research open and easy to find, lengthy embargo periods on making published research available in institutional repositories is a barrier to this. Innovative SMEs, for example, need access to cutting edge research as soon as it's available, not after a 12 month embargo, as is commonly the case.

The Committee want to see embargo periods in Government and RCUK policies reduced to six months for STEM journals and 12 months for humanities and social science journals. Their current stance seems to incentivise large publishers to simply increase embargo periods so that institutions still have to maintain subscriptions in order to access the latest research.

OA should be about actively pushing the cost of accessing research down for universities and other research institutions. Long embargo periods are a way for publishers to prevent this from happening and the Finch Group and RCUK should consider the need for reduced article embargo lengths at future meetings.

## **Cost of transition – Article Processing Charges (APCs)**

It is obvious to any reader of this blog that there is still a great deal of confusion among researchers about who will

actually pay for their work to be published under a system of Gold OA. The Government has done little to clarify matters. If the expectation is that universities and other generators of research should be setting up institutional funds to pay article processing charges for the research output of their staff, then the Government should clearly communicate this.

We think that it is unacceptable for the Government to have introduced an OA policy which requires considerable subsidy from research budgets in order for institutions to pay for both APCs and journal subscriptions, which they will have to do under Gold OA.

The Committee is wary that the RCUK block payments model could end up having a detrimental effect on researchers and on the drive for OA in general. If RCUK gives money to universities and asks them to allocate funds for payment of APCs, researchers are rightly worried that PhD students and early-career researchers without a strong publishing track record could lose out. University departments have also reported receiving insufficient funding to cover APCs for all articles they wish to publish.

The Committee hopes that the Government closely monitors feedback from the academic community during this transition phase and reconsiders its preference for Gold OA at the end of it.

### ***Achieving a functional market***

The Committee is of the view that the academic publishing market is still badly skewed in favour of a handful of large corporate publishers. Green OA has been a risk for the academic publishing industry all along; it has the potential to dramatically lower their current profit margins. The Gold OA route proposed by the Finch report and readily agreed to by the Government allows things to be more or less 'business as usual' for the publishers in the future.

The frustration that researchers and libraries felt towards the annual, above-inflation price hikes of journal subscriptions was a catalyst which drove academics to push for greater OA in the first place. But could Gold OA simply be a new revenue stream for the largest publishers, allowing them to offer libraries special deals for Gold OA publications? If so, it is highly unlikely that APCs will be reduced. There are simply too few players in the market for real competition to drive prices down.

The Committee recommends that the major method of conversion to full open access should be Green OA, specifically through strong self-archiving mandates set by funders and institutions. The Gold model, on the other hand, allows the large publishers to maintain their grip on the market and doesn't look like it will be successful in reducing the cost of publishing in the long run.

Neelie Kroes, EU Commissioner for Digital Agenda, was asked in 2012 whether the Commission's OA policy would damage publishers. 'They will adapt', she said. 'They've been here for 350 years'. We need to make sure that any adaption is for the benefit of the UK research community and business innovation, rather than simply maintaining the profits of large publishers.

*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. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the Author**

**Ann McKechin** is the Member of Parliament for Glasgow North and a member of the Business, Innovation and Skills select committee.

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