Current Issues in Research Communications 3: Open Access Adding Value to Research Communication

This is the third in a series of discussion papers on issues in academic communications – with special reference to open access. We ask whether open access has now become widely accepted in the academic community and what kinds of “added value” open access can offer to attract those who are not yet convinced of its usefulness.

The Research Communications Strategy project is a JISC-funded activity working to identify current issues in research communications, to generate responses at a strategic level and to develop an understanding of the processes of advocacy for open access within the sector. We welcome feedback from all interested parties.

We are based in the Centre for Research Communications at the University of Nottingham. http://crc.nottingham.ac.uk
Is the open access battle won?

As the title of a recent event put it, “Where do we go from here?” When talking about scholarly communication, some major figures are now suggesting that the Open Access (OA) battle, at least in theory, has largely been won. This view was expressed by several speakers in October 2010, at the first of a series of discussions on Research Information in Transition, organised by the Research Information Network. Robert Kiley, Head of Digital Services at the Wellcome Trust, surveying changes in OA practice over the last five years, drew attention to the existence of funders’ and institutional mandates, to OA journals (for example PLoS ONE) becoming increasingly mainstream, to the growth of repositories, to increases in institutional funding for OA publication and to a move towards open peer review. Philip Sykes, Librarian of Liverpool University, claimed that while five years ago senior managers saw OA as a kind of eccentricity, now most of them are cautiously in favour — recognising its value for the REF, for increasing citations, for contributing to potential financial savings, especially on the journals budget, and for maximising social and economic impact.

However, while the intellectual battle may be seen by some to have been won, any widespread adoption of the practice of OA still seems distant. Indeed many of the intellectual issues from the debate of the past 10 years — concerns about peer review, for example, or plagiarism — are still live topics amongst researchers. It is also possible to recognise a general inertia within the status quo. Are the developments in policy and the growth of “buy-in” from senior university managers having an effect on the publication practice of individual academics?

The challenge of advocacy

The RCS’s contacts with individual researchers suggest that even if persuaded of an intellectual case for OA, many researchers are reluctant to embrace what they see as a radical and untested alteration in the established methods of disseminating the results of their work. How then can OA advocacy combat the lingering objections among academics? In the past advocacy has concentrated on stressing citation advantages, largely in numeric terms. Metrics have been employed to demonstrate that when researchers use open access, their citation count goes up. Is it time to shift the focus from quantity of citations to quality? Our discussions are showing that researchers are not simply interested in the number of their citations: they need to be sure that the citations refer back to a publication that has high status in their field. Their reputations, and thus their career development, depend on the respect of their peers; and the way this respect is generated and evidenced is tightly tied up with the traditional publishing system.

When discussing OA publication it is not enough to indicate in general terms the potentially wider audience for research output. What researchers wish to be sure of is that OA journals are not a “second-class breed” with which it could be pointless, or in career terms even positively harmful, to be associated. Some OA journals are gaining in reputation. PLoS Biology currently enjoys the highest impact factor of all biology journals indexed in Web of Knowledge. Yet unless or until OA journals assume a similar position of significance in other subject areas, academics will tend to be wary of attaching the label of OA publication to their work.

What we are dealing with here are often not so much national objections as subjective feelings which by their nature are both difficult to combat and highly influential on the behaviour of those who hold them. They may even be unconscious and identifiable only by inference. As has been shown by attempts to change behaviour in relation to developing views on climate change or obesity, the mere presentation of ideas, however apparently compelling, does not necessarily result in action. Common perceptions among the academic and publishing communities create “cultural wrappings” that must be removed, or their significance challenged, if the advocates of OA are to succeed.

Open access: adding value

Is it possible that those academics who still resist OA might be persuaded by its potential for adding value to their research output? Recent contributions to the JISC conference on the Future of Research suggested that there has been a failure to engage with the full potential impact of OA. Responding to a question, Martin Hall, VC of Stafford University, remarked: ‘We haven’t got the message through to vice chancellors in significant numbers. The issue of open access is being narrowly contained as a research issue around publications – but it speaks to the open content agenda too. We have been a victim of compartmentalisation’.

Added value within institutions: joined-up systems for research management

One way in which OA can add value to an institution is in relation to the implementation of integrated research management. HE institutions (often with the forthcoming REF in mind) are increasingly seeing the benefit of systems that link the publications database with the repository and which allow the seamless management of a research project from grant application to output. The Universities of St Andrews, Glasgow and Newcastle, for example, already have such systems in place. Encouraged by a number of JISC-funded projects, this development looks likely to integrate Green open access firmly into the workflows of administrators and academics alike.

Added value in arts and humanities research: non-text materials

Conventional wisdom suggests that researchers in the arts and humanities are less likely than their scientific colleagues to take up OA options. This disinclination to deposit is linked to a publication culture that prioritises book publication over journal articles. Arts and humanities researchers also produce, however, output in non-textual forms: for example images, music, performances and exhibitions; and it is often the case that these are the very outputs likely to figure in any assessment of institutional impact. OA repositories can provide a central place for the preservation and dissemination of such outputs and can be used to link non-textual items to research articles in a way that enhances both.

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Open access to publications is just one part of a developing “open” culture. References to open science and open data are everywhere. On the one hand there are “citizen science” websites such as Galaxy Zoo that harness the enthusiasm of amateur researchers in the interpretation and generation of scientific data. At perhaps the other end of the spectrum are initiatives encouraging the sharing of data among members of the academic scientific community, such as the data management strategy developed for systems biology research data by SysMo, and ChemSpider Synthetic Pages where chemists can share synthetic methods, reactions and procedures. In some research areas open notebook science is becoming established. Meanwhile institutional repositories such as Edinburgh DataShare are equipping themselves to handle datasets.

The next step

These are just a few examples of “added value” services and initiatives that may be of relevance to OA advocacy. In highlighting their possible significance, we are laying the foundations for the next stage of our own research, which will involve direct contact with academic colleagues to test out our theories about what might induce them to take up OA options — and what might dissuade them.

This is an edited version of a fuller report. To see the full report along with associated footnotes and references, please go to http://crc.nottingham.ac.uk/projects/rcs/reports