Want to know more?

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

Current Issues in Research Communications 2: Open Access and Institutional Benefit

What are the benefits that open access can offer to HE institutions?

In this, the second of our occasional discussion papers on developments in academic communications, we look at some of the ways in which the open access (OA) dissemination of research results can contribute to the financial, organisational and intellectual agendas of research-intensive universities. We ask how widely these benefits are recognised within the academic community.
Seeing the savings, counting the costs

In an age of new austerity, the question of the cost of scholarly communication – and particularly the cost to libraries of journal subscriptions – remains paramount. How far can open access help keep costs down in the dissemination of research?

Institutional costs and benefits

A JISC-UUK event in June 2010 for senior managers explored this issue by considering the potential costs and benefits to HE of a national move to open access – using an economic model derived from the Houghton Report and refined for individual institutions by Alma Swan. This was followed up by a series of workshops around the country, funded by JISC through RCS, aimed at research support staff and senior library managers. What happens to costs within individual institutions if UK research becomes open access? Participants came supplied with data to allow them to look at actual institutional effects from the model.

The results of the workshops showed that the headline Gold1 model of open access (as an entire sector model) would end up costing a few principal research-led institutions more because they would have to pay for publication of the research they produce. However the headline figures mask the current willingness of funding councils to pay OA publication costs, rather than the institution.

This underlines the idea that Gold OA can only succeed if publication is recognised as a necessary research expense by funders – so that dissemination becomes part of the research process. Although this seems a reasonable idea, it remains to be seen if funders continue to concur when faced with budget reductions. For Gold OA to succeed, they have to. For this to be scalable, there will also need to be a balance between OA costs and subscriptions. The current additional funding model, of paying OA publication costs as well as existing subscription costs, was first proposed as transitional while publishers moved to OA models. Thus far, there is little sign of this, with publishers seemingly content to see OA costs as an additional revenue stream. Funders have to clearly state their expectations in this area. It would be tragic if, for the lack of a clear long-term intention by funders, OA ended up as an additional cost on top of the already unsatisfactory system.

There is an alternative. We are fortunate in the UK to have a network of repositories that already provides the infrastructure for an OA Green2 model, which does not have the costs of the Gold model. Repositories have been established for some years within the Russell and 1994 Groups, which together address over 80% of research funding. This is becoming a mature structure but repositories are not yet fully integrated into university systems.

Open access publication funds

Can academic concerns about the financial implications of open access publishing be dispelled by the introduction of centralised institutional funding? Stephen Pinfield, long a champion of open access, has returned to this topic in an article describing the setting up of a fund at the University of Nottingham. He concludes that:

- It is essential that institutions and others monitor activity in this area and share their experiences with other key players in the scholarly communication community in order to ensure good practice norms emerge and achieve widespread acceptance.
- The University of Birmingham is trialling a publication fund to help with Gold OA, but reports rather slow (but increasing) uptake from academics. At the Centre for Research Communications we are undertaking work to clarify researchers’ publication habits, which may cast light on their apparent reluctance to seize the opportunity for subsidised OA publication.
- Managing research for the REF and beyond

Despite ongoing uncertainty about the format and timing of the REF, it continues to exercise a defining influence on institutional activities and brings with it associated anxieties about the definition and scope of “impact”.

Open access, especially Green open access, is a potentially effective method of increasing impact. An institutional repository can also provide the basis for collecting data for the REF and form part of a system for recording research outcomes. But how should the repository be populated?

From our discussions with colleagues in the sector, it seems that there are differing views about the best approach. Research managers, for instance, are inclined to question the idea that institutional repositories should be dedicated to full-text items – for managing research they may believe that it is more convenient for the repository to act as a publications database (i.e. largely populated by metadata-only items). However, if OA searches are more likely to return metadata than actual research output, the benefit of changing to OA search for material disappears and the rationale for academic use in research is undermined. In the RCS project we believe that repositories should aim at full-text collection if OA is to succeed.

Linked with this issue is the need to develop workflows that help to embed open access dissemination of results as part of the research lifecycle. One of the key points coming out of discussions with research managers and other university support staff is the need for co-operation between different university departments (the library, the repository, the research support unit) to facilitate open access processes within the institution. Glasgow, Newcastle and Birmingham are three institutions working on this but our discussions indicate that they are not typical.

Increasing impact, breaking down barriers

Within HE strenuous efforts are being made to identify and promote examples of impact, so it should surely be possible for advocates of open access and other forms of innovative research publication methods to get a hearing in the academic community. Yet our conversations suggest that many researchers still have reservations about the value of open access. These reservations represent significant barriers to the take-up of open access options – though (as is indicated by work currently being carried out by the RCS on the publication habits of economists and chemists) they are more significant in some disciplines than in others.

Some researchers do advocate greater openness. Philip Ashton, in a blog on the RIN site, has called for a more relaxed attitude to citations from web sources in the name of a “full and frank communication of ideas and results.” In general, however, advocacy of open access still comes up against what Esipeth Hyams has described as “the real elephant in the room: the current reward system for academics’ pay and promotion.”

This view was endorsed by several of the library managers and research managers consulted for this paper. One senior librarian suggested that the main block to the development of (Green) open access was what she described as a “schizophrenia” within the academic community: wanting everyone else’s research for free while themselves publishing in Nature3. A similar view was taken by another librarian who suggested that academics “would be happy to endorse open access if it became the generally accepted method of publication but were worried about what would happen during the period of transition.”

It seems from our discussions that academic staff share a general, unvoiced suspicion that citations from open access publications or repository deposits somehow carry less academic weight and provide less kudos than those from traditional publishing outlets. Of course, a citation is a citation, irrespective of where it was first sourced. However, unfounded fears and concerns can play a major part in the acceptance of any new process, technology or product. We suspect that unless and until fears about the academic validity and impact of citations from open access sources are dispelled, progress towards open access is likely to be slow.

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

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1 Publication in open access journals, or in traditional journals that also allow a paid for open access option.
2 Deposit in an institutional or subject-based online repository.
3 Nature was being used as an example of a high-profile journal: as it happens, Nature itself supports OA archiving, albeit with a 6 month embargo.