



Research Communications Strategy Project

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>

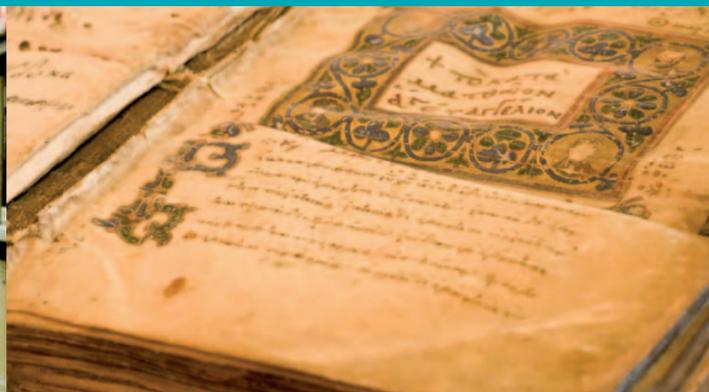
Current Issues in Research Communications 5: Open Access – the View from the Academy

How do researchers in the academic community perceive open access? This fifth discussion paper in our series on issues in academic communications looks at how researchers' attitudes to open access affect the way they choose to disseminate their research. If they are sceptical about open access, what might change their minds?



JISC

The Research Communications Strategy project is carried out at the Centre for Research Communications, University of Nottingham. The work is funded by JISC to look into the strategic adoption of new forms of communicating research outputs.



Open access: new opportunities, continuing doubts

The publishing world has recently seen a number of initiatives to expand opportunities for Gold¹ open access (OA). As *PLoS ONE* becomes arguably 'the largest peer-reviewed journal on earth', other publishers are moving to establish new OA publications. Nature Publishing Group claims to be founding 'a new era in publishing' by creating the OA journal *Scientific Reports*, covering all fields of the natural sciences. Given the profile and brand-value of *Nature*, this is a significant development.

Advocates of (Gold) OA have been keen to welcome these initiatives and to see them as heralding a real change in the scholarly communication process. Yet many researchers seem reluctant actually to use OA when it comes to publishing their own work. What are the reasons for this cautious approach?

The RCS has had discussions with a number of senior university policy-makers and administrators on the subject of attitudes to OA. We have also conducted a survey of the views of researchers in two subject areas: Chemistry and Economics. This discussion paper draws on their responses.

Gold OA: the problem of prestige

Among the chemists and economists who responded to us, more than 90% of those who had not made use of OA options said they had not done so because they needed to publish in high-impact journals – implying that they do not believe OA journals to be sufficiently prestigious. Our discussions with PVCs and Research Directors revealed a similar story: most of our correspondents felt that uptake of OA publishing options was hindered by the lack of quality associated with OA journals. This may be an objective assessment of the journals in question, or it may be influenced by the culture within which the researchers are working. But as we are continually finding, cultural factors are the main drivers of practice – and the hardest to change.

¹ Publication in open access journals, or in traditional journals that also allow a paid-for open access option.

Gold OA: the problem of cost

According to our survey, next on the list of reasons not to publish by OA methods comes the fact that it is believed to be too expensive. Again, this was echoed in our conversations with PVCs and Research Directors, many of whom identified cost as a negative factor. And again, this may be a question of belief rather than knowledge – of researchers ignoring, or being unaware of, the fact that publication costs can often be met from grants or institutional funds. Or is it that researchers shy away from the idea of paying to publish because of their distrust of 'vanity' projects?

It might, indeed, be argued that the cost of Gold OA publishing, while sometimes significant, is small relative to the overall cost of research. Figures from the OA publishing support fund at the University of Nottingham for 2009/10 give an average cost per article of £1300. In what sense is this 'too much' in the context of research grants of hundreds of thousands of pounds?

Green OA: the problem of awareness

Green² OA should not be subject to the same strictures. It facilitates the deposit of work that is already peer-reviewed, thus solving the prestige problem, and it is free (for the researcher). So what reasons do researchers give for not using repositories? Among those of our economists and chemists who had doubts about OA, many were worried about copyright and the terms of their agreements with their publishers. Other concerns were all based on a lack of knowledge of the system: 'It takes too much time and effort', 'It's not a concern of mine', 'I don't know much about OA'.

This brings us to the point that despite all efforts over the years, it would seem that advocacy for OA has still, for significant numbers of researchers, not succeeded in making a noticeable impact. In our survey of chemists and economists, 36% answered 'no' or 'I don't know' to the question 'Does your institution have a repository?' – though all the institutions concerned do have one. Nearly 30% of those who did not make their work OA claimed one of the reasons was that they did not know how.

² Deposit in an institutional or subject-based repository.

What might change their minds?

Despite the researchers' anxieties described above, OA is clearly becoming more widely accepted – publishers would not be hurrying to create OA journals if they did not think there was a growing market. Green OA is now facilitated by 186 repositories in the UK and the trend is still upwards. Yet there remain people unaware of, or indifferent to, the opportunities that OA offers. What might change their minds?

Mandates

In our survey of chemists and economists, the existence of an institutional or funder's mandate was identified as a motivation by a minority of those who made their work OA. For some respondents there is no mandate. In other cases researchers may be ignoring a mandate that does exist. What seems clear is that where there is a mandate, many researchers are unaware of it. Of respondents who replied to the question 'Does your institution have an open access policy or mandate?' from institutions that do have one, 41% answered 'no' and 46% answered 'I don't know'. Similar responses came from those who had a mandate from their funder – many claimed not to know of its existence.

These results, on the face of it, invite us to query the widely-promoted view that such mandates result in rising deposit rates. The received wisdom is that high-level buy-in to OA, demonstrated by the existence of an institutional and/or funder's mandate, is crucial for developing an OA-friendly culture within the academy. Our research does not disprove this, but it does confirm a suspicion that the mandate alone is not enough. Ongoing and pro-active publicity, perhaps allied to some form of high-visibility compliance checking, seems to be required.

Citations

Advocates of OA have devoted considerable effort to demonstrating an increase in citations when research is made OA. Yet the strong message that we are getting from our surveys and discussions is that citation or download numbers are not the main focus of researchers' attention. What researchers care about is the prestige attached to certain journals in their field. And since the absence of such prestige is mentioned so often as a block to the adoption of OA, it seems the message that in many cases Green OA can be employed as well as traditional publication is not getting through. Once again, OA is being held back by what people think they know about it, not by what is actually the case.

Managing costs

It does seem likely that publicised, systemic help with publication costs for Gold OA, or a better understanding of how to ensure that costs are met out of research grants, might persuade researchers to adopt it more readily.

The public good

What of the moral argument for OA? Our survey of chemists and economists shows that of those who make their work OA, around 75% do so because, or partly because, they believe that the results of publicly-funded research should be publicly available. Of course, these are the converted. However, this finding may indicate that the moral argument is perhaps the most telling and is one which could be further emphasised.

Many of the intellectual arguments for OA have been won, and the practical implementation problems resolved, but issues of cultural change remain. Our experience in this field, and a comparison to other culture-change movements (climate change, public health), suggest that sustained, persuasive and targeted promotion and support will continue to be required.

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>