

# 1 A research institution framework for publishing 2 open code to enable reproducible science

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## 5 Abstract

6 Reproducible science is greatly aided by open publishing of scientific computer  
7 code. There are also many institutional benefits for encouraging the publication of  
8 scientific code, but there are also institutional considerations around intellectual  
9 property and risk. We discuss questions around scientific code publishing from  
10 the perspective of a research organisation asking: who will be involved, how  
11 should code be licensed, where should code be published, how to get credit,  
12 what standards, and what costs? In reviewing advice and evidence relevant to  
13 these questions we propose a research institution framework for publishing open  
14 scientific code to enable reproducible science.

15 **Keywords:** archiving, code, version control, open science, programming

## 16 Introduction

17 There is evidence of a ‘reproducibility crisis’ in science, with few scientists  
18 able to replicate and therefore confirm the findings of other scientists (Baker  
19 2016). Therefore, the calls for research to be transparent and more reproducible  
20 are growing. Two key components of transparency and reproducibility of a  
21 scientific method are (i) access to the original data sources used, and (ii) an exact  
22 description of the method provided by computer code (Nosek et al. 2015). When  
23 scientists analyse data or create models by programming computer code instead  
24 of navigating around graphical user interface, they not only can do more novel  
25 science faster but they also create an efficient way of providing the exact analysis  
26 method to others such that it is more easily reproduced (Baker 2017; Ince,  
27 Hatton, and Graham-Cumming 2012). To support this, open and citable data  
28 and scientific code is required. However, while there has been discussion of how  
29 research institutions may support scientific data archiving and citation (Renaut  
30 et al. 2018), we feel a similar research institution focussed discussion needs to  
31 occur for scientific code. There are many institutional benefits for encouraging

32 scientific code archiving and citation that include: supporting transparency  
33 and reproducibility, preservation of effort, opportunities for collaboration, and  
34 management of intellectual property (IP) and risk. There are also tools and  
35 advice available on best practice that can be called upon. These come from both  
36 the formal (private) software sector and increasingly, the scientific coding and  
37 data sharing communities. We provide a unique perspective on these issues by  
38 discussing questions around scientific code publishing from the perspective of a  
39 research institution. In doing so we present a research institution framework for  
40 publishing scientific code that leverages community accepted tools to minimise  
41 the institutional effort required and maximise the benefits of their scientist's  
42 computer programming.

## 43 **Who will be involved?**

44 There are two primary groups involved for institutional publishing of scientific  
45 code, scientists and managers. Scientists need advice and assistance, including  
46 tools, to support their code management practices. The primary needs of this  
47 group are solutions that are easy to use, access to simple guidelines, and support  
48 that doesn't get in the way of doing their research. They also need some advice  
49 on how to make decisions on IP, what to publish and not, how to licence code  
50 correctly, and where to store it. Managers within an institution will be interested  
51 in bringing these topics together into a standard operating procedure that helps  
52 articulate obligations for staff. We felt the second group was more likely to be  
53 focused at a company perspective, especially concerned with issues such as IP,  
54 risk, preservation of effort, standards, and reporting. The important point here  
55 is that we expect that scientists will be better able to publish scientific code  
56 with the support and engagement of other members of their research institution,  
57 and as such any code publishing framework will include members of staff other  
58 than the scientist-programmer.

59 If we assume that all code is accompanied by a paper (either an associated  
60 research paper or a dedicated software paper), then making these decisions can  
61 most likely be supported by an existing internal pre-publication review process  
62 that most research institutions are likely to have for publication of papers. The  
63 scientist-programmer would then submit their paper for internal review, and any  
64 intent to openly publish code could be reviewed by managers simultaneously  
65 with other considerations such as data, ethics, and IP to ensure publication  
66 decisions are appropriate. Therefore, we do not foresee that the publishing of  
67 code should require any additional managerial workflows, other than highlighting  
68 the intention to openly publish code during an existing internal review procedure.

## 69 How should code be licensed?

70 It is worth noting that with respect to licencing and IP we are focusing our  
71 discussion on publishing research code and not commercial code. This is an  
72 important distinction as unlike commercial code for which the right to use must  
73 be purchased, much of the value in scientific code is in its openness to support  
74 the scientific method, as demonstrated by higher rates of citation for free rather  
75 than commercial software (Pan, Yan, and Hua 2016). It is also important to  
76 note that many science funders now expect that any code developed as part  
77 of a project will be made openly available. Therefore, our starting point for  
78 discussing publishing scientific code is that it is made free and open by default,  
79 and we consider proprietary licensing to be out of scope. Such a decision will  
80 need to be supported by the research institution which is likely to own the IP of  
81 any code (Morin, Urban, and Sliz 2012), but as most scientific code will have  
82 minimal value for direct commercialisation if any (Barnes 2010), this should not  
83 be problematic. Also, as long as the code is developed carefully to ensure that it  
84 does not contain sensitive information such as embedded data, network paths,  
85 or passwords, there should not be any issues around privacy or security that  
86 would preclude open publishing. Regardless, the scientist-programmer should  
87 still begin the process of code publishing with a discussion with their project  
88 leader about any requirements or stipulations that would prevent or require open  
89 publishing.

90 Choice of an appropriate software licence is of fundamental importance to code  
91 publishing as leaving code unlicensed can be hugely problematic, as it exposes  
92 a scientist who developed or uses that code to possible legal issues at a later  
93 date, and potential difficulties in controlling how the code is used (Morin, Urban,  
94 and Sliz 2012). Indeed, without a licence most potential collaborators and  
95 open source participants will not reuse such code as the IP risk is too great  
96 downstream, so not attaching a licence to open code can prevent the intention of  
97 making code open so it can be reused or developed further. It is also important  
98 to note that in our later discussion of coding standards we have taken the view  
99 that a research institution cannot guarantee code correctness, so a licence is  
100 absolutely essential to protect against any possible liability. There are a wide  
101 variety of software licences available, and there is online guidance for choosing  
102 one (<https://choosealicense.com/>). Keys points of difference for open licences  
103 are perhaps differences between permissive licences that have no restrictions on  
104 use or copyleft licences that ensure development of the code has to be shared  
105 (Morin, Urban, and Sliz 2012). Scientists may even choose to pursue bespoke  
106 licences, but in our opinion this approach is not ideal. Developing a bespoke  
107 licence will require additional effort and legal support. A bespoke licence may  
108 also be off-putting as potential users must be confident that they understand  
109 the licence conditions, and this will be much more likely and easy through the  
110 use of a widely recognised and accepted licence. Ultimately the choice of the  
111 most appropriate licence is likely to be project specific, so that is a decision best  
112 made by the scientist-programmer and project leader.

## 113 Where should code be published?

114 We envisage two main options for places to publish scientific code: version control  
115 hosting services (such as GitHub, GitLab, Bitbucket, GNU Savannah, etc), and  
116 archiving services (such as Zenodo, Dryad, FigShare, etc).

117 While the focus of much discussion around open code involves version control  
118 services such as GitHub, it is important to recognise that code put into these  
119 services do not necessarily have guaranteed permanence (White 2015). Reposito-  
120 ries can be deleted and renamed at any time, meaning that code may become  
121 lost, or links to code broken. Therefore, it is important that each release of code  
122 is also published in an appropriate archiving service (White 2015).

123 It may also be the case that a version control repository is not the best place  
124 for code to be published. Openness is certainly at the heart of version control  
125 repositories, but there is a very strong emphasis on facilitating development and  
126 collaboration, which relates very strongly to scientific software. However, in an  
127 instance where a scientist has coded a computer program to analyse some data,  
128 while the code should be published alongside the data to enable reproducibility,  
129 it is unlikely that there will be any desire to develop the code further as it should  
130 remain a static documentation of the analysis underlying a scientific publication.  
131 In these instances, simply publishing the code in an archiving service alongside  
132 the data may be the best option. Publishing static code in a version control  
133 service would mainly serve the purpose of enabling other researchers to easily  
134 create copies of the code (clones) with the intention to improve it or adapt it  
135 to their applications. Read-only repositories on a version control service pose a  
136 viable option to share non-changeable code as they can be copied by other users,  
137 using built-in tools cloning and forking tools of the underlying version control  
138 system, to create their own trackable code repository.

139 Ultimately, we don't think there is any way to clearly define which publishing  
140 route is best. Rather we choose to pose the scientist-programmer the following  
141 series of questions that may indicate if a scientist's code is more suitable for  
142 a version control service (given the potential for further development) or an  
143 archiving service (as it represents a static analytical workflow) and then leave  
144 the scientist-programmer to decide on the best course of action.

- 145 • Have you chosen a permissive or copyleft licence?
- 146 • Does your code come with instructions, examples, and tests?
- 147 • Would someone else find your code useful, and be able to use it easily?
- 148 • Your code doesn't link to closed-source or local data or bespoke data  
149 formats?
- 150 • Can you install your code on a computer?
- 151 • Are you hoping the code will be developed further?
- 152 • Are you hoping people will let you know about issues and errors?

153 The more times a scientist-programmer answers yes to these questions, the more  
154 likely it is that putting the code into a version control service will be a worthwhile

155 effort.

## 156 How to get credit?

157 There is some evidence that making data open alongside a paper increases  
158 citations (Piwowar and Vision 2013) and we can easily envisage that this would  
159 be true of code as well. Therefore, having published code openly, it would be  
160 sensible for some consideration to be given to gaining credit for this effort by  
161 being able to demonstrate impact. We have already discussed the importance  
162 of putting releases of code into an archiving service to ensure permanence. But  
163 putting code into an archiving service also helps with citations, as on deposit of  
164 the code an archiving service will generate a digital object identifier (DOI) that  
165 can then form the basis of software citations (Poisot 2015). Also, as scientific  
166 community norms for citation are based on the citation of papers, software papers  
167 are often published and cited in addition to the software (Smith et al. 2016).  
168 However, the focus of a software paper should be in demonstrating how the  
169 software can be used for actual research, rather than documenting functionality  
170 which is best done with formatted comments (docstrings) embedded in the source  
171 code describing code segments that can be easily extracted to form a technical  
172 manual (Poisot 2015). Software papers are a growing trend, and a list of journals  
173 publishing software papers is actively maintained by the Software Sustainability  
174 Institute ([https://www.software.ac.uk/resources/guides/which-journals-should-](https://www.software.ac.uk/resources/guides/which-journals-should-i-publish-my-software)  
175 [i-publish-my-software](https://www.software.ac.uk/resources/guides/which-journals-should-i-publish-my-software)). Regardless of how a scientist chooses to publish code,  
176 some evidence suggests that software is more likely to be cited when information  
177 about how to cite the software is provided (Pan, Yan, and Hua 2016), therefore  
178 citation instructions should be included with the published code.

## 179 What standards?

180 A clear concern for any institutionally branded form of published code, is an  
181 assurance that the code has been peer-reviewed to ensure it meets some form of  
182 standard, i.e. quality standard and language-specific coding style. How exactly  
183 code should be peer-reviewed remains an active debate, but what is agreed is that  
184 it is too large a task to expect another scientist to conduct a line-by-line review  
185 of code to verify the code is correct (White 2015; Poisot 2015). Institutions  
186 may also have problems in that there is the potential for staff to be using a  
187 variety of programming languages, and given language choice can be domain  
188 specific there is no guarantee that there will necessarily be another scientist  
189 within the institution that is sufficiently fluent in a specific language to conduct  
190 a review. Institutions could consider imposing language choice to a set of official  
191 institutional languages, but this may be an overly restrictive approach that could  
192 limit scientific progress. We would also note that there are artistic differences in

193 the way code is written and that there is no single best way to program (Knuth  
194 1974). Therefore, it will be important to recognise and accept different styles  
195 of coding, and avoid getting bogged down in discussions (or arguments!) about  
196 how the code has been written.

197 We believe that a pragmatic review process should focus of checking that the  
198 code is structured and presented in a way such that someone can, if they wanted  
199 to, delve into the code to understand and check exactly what the code is doing,  
200 and potentially then correct or develop the code further. Essentially our view is  
201 that it is better to have code made open such that errors are more likely to be  
202 found and fixed. Publishing erroneous code is clearly not ideal, but we consider  
203 it preferable to the alternative where the erroneous code stays on a scientist's  
204 computer where it may be applied many times to produce incorrect science. Also,  
205 there is evidence that suggests making data underlying studies open reduces  
206 errors by encouraging greater scientific rigour (Wicherts, Bakker, and Molenaar  
207 2011), and we can imagine that the same may well be true of scientific code, and  
208 that working in an open manner will encourage programmers to aim for higher  
209 standards (Easterbrook 2014).

210 While accepting that a line-by-line review of code to verify correctness is un-  
211 feasible, research institutions will clearly want to uphold some standards for  
212 code published under an institutional banner. There are well recognised best  
213 practices (Wilson et al. 2014), but given the lack of formal training scientists  
214 have received in computer programming (Merali 2010), setting a best practice  
215 standard may well be perceived by the average scientist as an impossible task.  
216 Hence, demanding best practices may result in a counter-productive result of  
217 scientists choosing not to engage at all with coding standards. Therefore, we  
218 would recommend focusing more on good enough practices (Wilson et al. 2017),  
219 and recommend the following minimum standards:

- 220 • README file (including: project overview, installation requirements, setup  
221 instructions, dependencies),
- 222 • LICENSE file (permissive or copyleft),
- 223 • citation instructions (either included in the README or as a citation file),
- 224 • example data and script,
- 225 • documentation embedded within functions,
- 226 • good coding practice (such as: commented, indented, white space, logical  
227 variable names, function definition),
- 228 • sensitive information removed (including: usernames, passwords, appli-  
229 cation programming interface (API) keys, full paths to files on network  
230 drives),
- 231 • version control history removed.

232 Note that where code relies on hard-coded credentials such as usernames, pass-  
233 words, or API keys, it is best practice to place these in a separate file (commonly  
234 named 'credentials') that is referenced by the rest of the code but excluded from  
235 the version control system. In this case it is a good idea to include a note in  
236 your README explaining the expected format, or even an 'example' credentials

237 file, to make it easier for users to recreate it on their own system. Also, while  
238 removing the version control history can also help with issues of security, we  
239 believe that in the context of publishing the first release of code is probably best  
240 done without the underlying development history which can often be complex,  
241 tangential, and possibly irrelevant to the first release.

242 Software journals such as the Journal of Open Software Journal (Smith et al.  
243 2018) can impose greater standards such unit-testing and automated dependency  
244 checks as they are not obliged to accept code that is submitted and so the  
245 scope can be quite focussed and hence the standards very high. In contrast,  
246 a research institution may often have a very broad scope as there may be a  
247 variety of coding activities within the organisation, and there is a responsibility  
248 to provide a code archiving service and to facilitate maximum uptake by staff.  
249 Therefore, while an institutional repository may ensure a basic standard, if a  
250 scientist wishes to achieve greater evidence for the standard of their code, then  
251 we would recommend engaging with external processes and publish the code  
252 more formally through the publication of a dedicated software paper that is  
253 likely to demand higher standards of coding.

## 254 What costs?

255 Depending on the solution that is required for individual research institutions,  
256 there may be ongoing financial costs to purchase access to (or host and maintain)  
257 a version control hosting and archiving service. For institutions beginning to  
258 explore these options there are possibilities to make use of free service options.  
259 For example, at the time of writing, GitHub provide free team accounts as  
260 long as all code is made open, and free individual accounts that support private  
261 repositories with up to three collaborators. Scientist-programmers could therefore  
262 use a free private repository for version control of project code without exposing  
263 their development process (and possible intellectual property) publicly, and  
264 then use the research institution's free team account to openly publish the code  
265 (or parts thereof). Similar options are available from other providers such as  
266 BitBucket, or if version control is not required then archiving services such  
267 as Zenodo also provide a free option for archiving code. Given these options  
268 exist, we do not see financial cost as an obstacle for research institutions to start  
269 engaging with these issues around code publishing.

270 What may be more of an obstacle is recognition that there can be significant  
271 time costs to making code sharable and reusable, over and above that required  
272 to develop well-structured code to answer a science question. This means that  
273 careful consideration needs to be given to justify the amount of effort that  
274 would be required to produce a well-documented and thoroughly-tested software  
275 package which is useful to others. Where projects are expected or required  
276 to openly publish reusable code the cost of staff time to do this should be  
277 acknowledged, in both the project budget and time-line. However, given the

benefits of publishing code, we do not necessarily see this burden as being too arduous, especially if institutions are willing to invest in hiring staff or training scientists to support this activity. The Research Software Engineer (RSE) is a relatively new role in a research institute which describes someone who specialises in the production and publishing of scientific code and software. This is typically (though not necessarily) a ‘science support’ type of role, where RSEs are typically hired to both write code for others as well as boost the quality of others code via training and/or collaboration on a given project. Enabling scientists to publish code, either assisted by an RSE or through upskilling, facilitates more transparent and thus more credible research with a more rapid impact on the science community which translates to both higher scientific quality and more successful funding in the long-term, offsetting initial costs.

## A framework for publishing

Clearly from our discussion establishing a research institution framework for publishing of open and good enough scientific code will require effort from both the scientists and managers. However, we expect that the advantages:

- enables reporting to funders,
- better outreach for the scientist and the institution,
- stimulates collaboration with other researchers,
- quality control and transparency of science,
- greater visibility of code projects compared to personal accounts,
- provides repository exemplars useful for other scientists,
- other research institutions are already doing this,
- provides long-term support or at least access of published code,
- access and continuity of institutional knowledge if the person responsible for a repository leaves the research institution;

will significantly outnumber the disadvantages:

- services such as version control hosting and code review procedures need to be administered,
- scientists like to have freedom and may prefer to use another platform or like to publish code personally,
- ongoing institutional costs associated with version control hosting and archiving services,
- increased project costs to factor in staff time to make open code well documented and supported,
- accounts and repositories could become abandoned if nobody is using them.

As this will be a new initiative for many research institutions, we have summarised a framework that outlines a potential workflow for the scientists and managers that will need to be involved in publishing scientific code (Figure 1). As has been recognised with institutional data archiving, a supportive corporate environment



and training is will be important for making such an initiative succeed (Renaut et al. 2018). The same will be true of expecting higher standards of computer programming publishing from research scientists, and while it may be challenging for research institutions to provide training, there are initiatives such as Software and Data Carpentry that can support this (Baker 2017).

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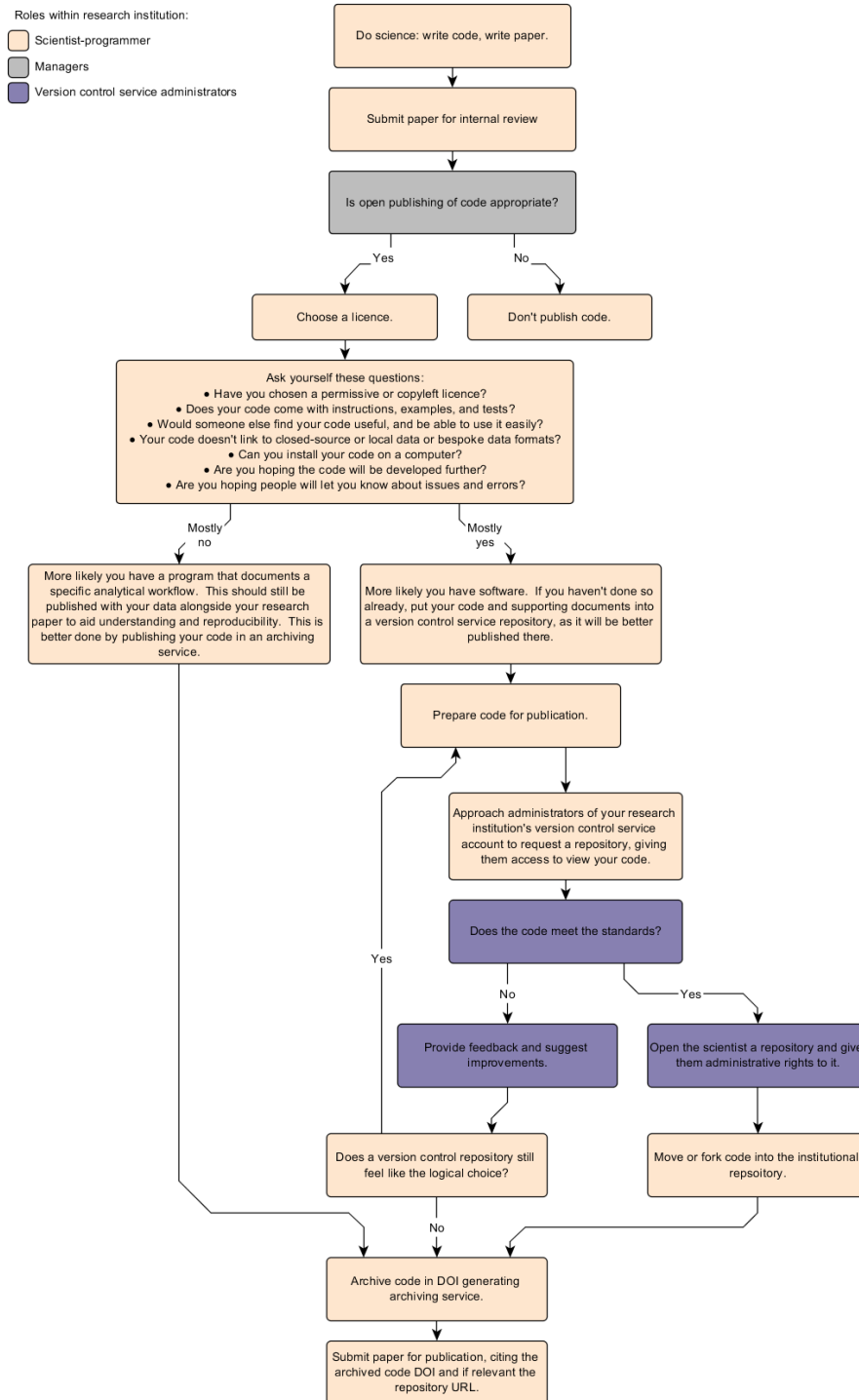


Figure 1: A research institution framework for publishing of open code in support of reproducible science.

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