

UKRI's support for green open access is the right way forward

New guidelines have rightly rejected publisher claims that gold is the only sustainable path for open access, say Stephen Eglén and Rupert Gatti

August 11, 2021

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Even before UK Research and Innovation unveiled its revised rules (<https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-announces-new-open-access-policy/>) last week, legacy publishers were keen to stress that the only sustainable route for open access was gold open access.

This hugely expensive, but apparently inevitable, approach involves authors paying an article processing charge (APC) for a paper to be made freely available – with some titles charging as much as €9,500 (£8,600).

As Steven Inchcoombe, chief publishing officer of *Springer Nature*, put it in *Times Higher Education*

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/going-gold-must-be-ukris-open-access-priority>), gold OA provides the “best, most complete and most sustainable route to open science” and was what researchers wanted. “The research community doesn’t value green OA, with its continued reliance on library subscription payments, as much as gold OA, and is concerned that rights management and a proliferation of different versions of articles make life more difficult for researchers,” he claimed.

With the publication of its revised rules, it seems UKRI disagreed, and rightly so. These points represent publishers’ interests, rather than the views of some mythical single “research community”.

There are many of us, for example, who find some of the consequences of gold OA to be problematic, such as the escalating costs associated with APCs combined with continued subscription payments by libraries for reader access to hybrid journals.

In contrast, green OA is a pragmatic approach to rapidly and affordably sharing our research immediately upon acceptance. Likewise, there is a growing recognition of the importance of authors retaining rights (<https://www.coalition-s.org/rights-retention-strategy/>) to their works. The days of blindly signing over our rights to publishers need to come to an end.

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We also take issue with publisher claims that researchers cannot cope with different versions of the same manuscript. In their world, there must be a definitive “version of record” that will be the only thing to cite and that only they can produce and look after. The computer industry solved this problem long ago with software versioning (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_versioning) (a “record of versions”), and likewise researchers can discriminate and appreciate the differences between a preprint, an author-accepted manuscript, and the publisher’s version of record.

The technological solutions to these problems are already available – it is the cultural adoption of them that is lacking. We are glad to see a growing number of early career researchers embracing these new ideas rather than sticking to outdated publishing methods.

The revised OA policy from UKRI therefore gives us reason to be optimistic. It allows green OA as an equal alternative to gold OA, and requires grant holders to license their author-accepted manuscripts under CC-BY without embargo.

We do however have reason to be cautious. After the UK’s Finch report in 2012, several legacy publishers were quick to react, inventing structures with complicated pathways to open access and finding new revenue streams. Elsevier, for example, chose not to reduce embargoes (https://www.elsevier.com/_data/promis_misc/external-embargo-list.pdf) on author-accepted manuscripts to meet compliance with the six-month rule (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/open-access-will-cause-problems-for-learned-societies-journals-accepts-finch/422395.article>) for science papers, with a 12-month embargo recommended for humanities and social science papers.

While early days, Springer Nature has signalled (<https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/expert-reaction-to-ukris-new-open-access-policy/>) that UKRI authors will not be able to publish in *Nature* under the new rules, although this is disputed, and Taylor & Francis has said (<https://newsroom.taylorandfrancisgroup.com/taylor-francis-response-to-the-ukri-policy-announcement/>) it will not support zero embargoes. This is predictable positioning by publishers prior to their negotiations over the costs associated with new transformative agreements.

The UKRI policy revolves around block grants to individual universities (which will need administering) and focuses on so-called transformative agreements with publishers (which are typically negotiated nationally, through Jisc). We must wait to see further details of how the block grant will be allocated, but this fund should not be used simply to reinforce transformative deals with the largest legacy publishers at the expense of forward-thinking alternatives. We are concerned that large publishers are using the transformative agreements as just another way of locking in researchers and libraries to a “big deal”.

It seems unlikely that UKRI alone can change the course of legacy publishers away from their dominant gold OA viewpoint. However, given that other large funders, including the European Union and the Wellcome Trust, are adopting similar principles and have simultaneously signalled their willingness to support alternative publishing infrastructures, there is hope that open access will become more sustainable for everyone.

The revised policy also comes just in time to influence ongoing negotiations between Elsevier and the UK, with the UK negotiating committee aiming for a transformative deal as a pragmatic way to meet funder compliance. The new policy puts green OA on an equal footing to gold OA, and prohibits payment for APCs unless a transformative deal is in place.

We hope that these changes will bolster the UK negotiating team to hold out for a deal that leads to significant overall reductions in reading/publishing costs, and empowers them to be able to walk away (as many German, US and other research institutions (<https://sparcopen.org/our-work/big-deal-cancellation-tracking/>) have done) if such a proposal is not forthcoming.

Another approach that has been shown to bring significant savings is choosing to subscribe to individual journals (<https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jlsc/article/id/12899/>) rather than to a whole collection.

It will be interesting to see what strategies will evolve to decide whether to take the green or gold route to open access if both are available. If asked whether to pay €9,500 to make a paper gold open access in *Nature*, or to simply make the author-accepted manuscript available immediately, we hope that authors will decide to go green.

Any savings could then be invested in sustainable infrastructure and resources for research communities to develop journals that are free to publish in and free to read. This in turn will help the development of much-needed innovations in scholarly publishing; on the same day that the UKRI policy was revealed, Research England announced funding (<https://www.ukri.org/news/funding-agreed-for-a-platform-that-will-change-research-culture/>) for the Octopus system that allows for a more collaborative approach to producing and reporting research.

Overall, we believe that the policies put forward in last week's review represent a bold move by UKRI, and hope that others in the research community will also support them.

Stephen Eglen is professor of computational neuroscience at the University of Cambridge (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-cambridge>), where **Rupert Gatti is a lecturer in economics**.

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