1. What is ‘open access’?

Most readers of scholarly journals access papers via institutional subscriptions, with the organisation they belong to often paying. For these readers access to research articles is free at the point of use. However, no organisation subscribes to licenses for all scholarly publications and those who belong to an organisation that cannot afford a wide range of licenses, and does not qualify for philanthropic access, often have limited access to academic publications.

Over the last decade there have been calls globally for research to be made more widely and openly accessible. This has been driven by an ethical conviction that all information, particularly that resulting from publicly funded research, should be made freely available; that open access to research will enhance its impact beyond the academy; that data can be more effectively analysed if openly available, advancing knowledge and understanding; and a recognition of increased pressures on library budgets (see Vincent and Wickham’s (2013) edited volume for a more complete overview of the key issues and debates). This has culminated in the open access movement for scholarly publications and the academy has been grappling with how to make research available to anyone who wishes to read or use it.

The landscape is changing rapidly, with a mixed economy of open access publishing options and routes. These are commonly described as:

- **Gold open access**: published papers are immediately made freely available to anyone with an internet connection. These journals typically require the author (or the author’s institution or funder) to pay an Article Publication Charge (APC). A minority of journals cover the costs associated with scholarly publishing through a range of sources other than author APCs, such as grants, philanthropic endeavours and subsidies. This is sometimes referred to as ‘platinum’ open access.

- **Green open access**: subscription journals which permit authors to self-archive the peer-reviewed (but not final) version of their paper in a free-to-access archive after an embargo period.

2. What are the advantages of open access for authors?

As an author, the primary benefit of publishing open access is that your research outputs are available to a wider audience including the general public, media, charities, government employees and businesses. This means your paper can be read by a broader audience, potentially have greater impact and this may lead to collaborative working relationships outside of academia.

Some argue that open access research outputs are cited more heavily (as well as being read more widely) than their subscription access counterparts’ (Kirby, 2013). However, others contest this.

Some journals enable authors to choose from a range of Creative Commons licenses, allowing authors to retain control over how and by whom their intellectual property is used (NC noncommerical; ND no derivatives, for example). This is important because the copyright agreement determines how the author’s work is used and the extent to which it can be reused. However, authors should check their funders’ mandates carefully (see more on this in section 4 below).
3. How to access resources for Article Publication Charges?

In the UK, RCUK provides a block grant to universities and eligible research organisations to cover the costs of APCs. Your institution may have opened an open access account or entered into an agreement with a number of publishers. Do contact your university to find out more about what resources are available.

Many publishers (for example Wiley) also offer waivers and discounts for some authors publishing in gold open access journals through philanthropic programmes. Other funders, for example The Leverhulme Trust, may allow you to claim the cost of APCs as part of your grant application. Please check funder websites for more information.

Perspectives of authors who have published open access are available on the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)’s Guide for Researchers webpage.

4. What are the rules?

The UK and international policy landscape for open access has changed quickly over the last five years and there is substantial debate over the future direction and practical challenges of implementing open access. This section provides information on some of the key open access requirements in force at the time of writing (July 2014).

RCUK policy

RCUK launched its revised Policy on Open Access and Guidance on 24 May 2013. This applies to peer-reviewed research articles and conference proceedings resulting from UK Research Council funding. RCUK has a preference for the gold open access route and for articles to be published under the CC-BY license; the Creative Commons license that allows the most extensive reuse rights.

RCUK have committed to making funding available for APCs for Research Council supported research through a block grant that is awarded directly to eligible institutions.

However, RCUK recognise that there will be insufficient funding available for all authors to pay APCs and so also supports green open access where the pre-publication version of a paper is deposited in a repository following an embargo period. RCUK has committed to undertake a number of reviews of its policy and its implications over the first five years of implementation.

HEFCE policy

HEFCE’s 2014 Policy for open access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework stipulates that journal articles and conference proceedings accepted for publication after 1 April 2016 should be made open access to be eligible for submission. For gold open access, it does not stipulate a particular form of Creative Commons license.

HEFCE’s policy supports the green open access model and requires that the final peer-reviewed version manuscript must be deposited within an institutional or subject repository one month after the end of the embargo period (12 months maximum embargo for REF Main Panels A and B and 24 months for REF Main Panels C and D).

Manuscripts do not need to allow for automated forms of text mining or be published under a particular license. HEFCE have also identified a number of situations where a manuscript may be exempt from its policy. Or, if the manuscript is not subject to embargo, the manuscript should be deposited as soon after acceptance as possible, or no later than three months after the author has received an acceptance letter or email from the publication.
Open Access: a guide for researchers

The international policy landscape

Open access has been adopted unevenly internationally. Wickham (2013) has noted that most other countries do not have a RAE/REF equivalent and so are likely to opt for green open access routes and long embargo periods rather than pursuing gold open access. Nonetheless, a number of nations outside of the UK have announced open access mandates or policies.

For example, in the USA, the Office of Science and Technology’s (OSTP) 2013 memorandum directed Federal Agencies with annual research and development expenditure in excess of $100 million ‘to develop plans to support increased public access to the research of research funded by Federal Government. This includes any results published in peer reviewed scholarly publications that are based on research that directly arises from Federal funds’. The Clearing House for Open Research of the United States (CHORUS), an independent non-profit public-private partnership, was subsequently established to help increase public access to peer-reviewed publications resulting from Federal funding.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ (CAS) Open Access Policy and the Australian Research Council’s (ARC) 2013 Open Access Policy stipulate that any publications arising from public funded research must be deposited, in peer-reviewed form, in an institutional repository within 12 months from publication.

The European Commission supports green and gold open access at the European and Member State level. In 2012, the European Commission published a recommendation that encouraged all Member states to make publically funded research results open access. The Commission is currently considering open access in the broader context of ‘Open science’ and is furthering its work through Horizon 2020 and its Open Access pilot.

References and key policies


Wickham C 2013 Open access in the UK and the international environment: the view from Humanities and Social Science in Wickham C and Vincent N (eds) Debating Open Access British Academy http://www.britac.ac.uk/openaccess/debatingopenaccess.cfm Accessed 11.07.2014

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