

A time to choose

UKSG eNews 498

17 September 2021

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There is a lot of conversation in our sector at the moment about the negotiations with **Elsevier** for a transitional read and publish agreement.

By the time this editorial is published the UK HE sector may have received proposed terms, and be undertaking detailed analysis and community consultation.

If that is the case, our scrutiny will be intense.

Yes, the stakes are high in cost alone, with UK total expenditure with Elsevier likely to reach £50 million in 2021, combining journal subscription and open access article processing charges (APCs). Cambridge pays £1.3 million for the annual subscription deal with Elsevier, on top of which we incur APC charges between £120 to £7,800 for an individual article when one of our authors publishes in an Elsevier journal.

The public purse funds the bulk of the latter through block grants, so the question of what is reasonable to pay should not just be a matter of institutional but also wider public interest.

For universities, the importance of transitional agreements with publishers goes far beyond price. We are looking at nothing less than the goal of immediate open access to support the widest possible dissemination of research to drive innovation and the building of new knowledge to the benefit of society.

Public access to information is a mission all of us share as librarians, but as library scholar **Michael Gorman** argues in *Our Enduring Values* (2000), our profession boasts a healthy dose of pragmatism alongside our ideals

It's a quality arguably shared with research funders within the [Plan S Coalition](#), like **UKRI**.

The UK government has a long-held preference that research directly funded by its Research Councils (now combined as UKRI) is made immediate open access through the gold route, and have backed this with dedicated funds to help meet this cost.

Historically, if gold open access were not an option the green route to open access was acceptable, though accompanying embargoes meant a delay to free public dissemination. The new UKRI open access policy is an evolution which continues to support both gold and green routes to open and continues to be backed by block grants to help meet the cost of gold.

But there are important differences material to all future UK negotiations with academic journal publishers, including this year's with Elsevier.

As my colleagues **Sam Moore** and **Niamh Tumelty** explored in last month's **UKSG eNews** Editorial, from the implementation date of 1 April 2022 UKRI will require all eligible research outputs to be made immediately open access on publication whether through the gold or green route. The new policy will fund gold open access in journals that are part of a transitional agreement as well as APCs in a transitional journal or in a fully open access journal.

If this option is not available, then the author may consider a different place of publication, or assert to their chosen publisher that they will deposit a green version of the author accepted manuscript (AAM) in an appropriate repository for immediate open access release on publication.

Why does this matter? UKRI have, after considerable consultation, crafted a policy designed to maximise public dissemination of research through immediate open access. Funds are available to help make this a reality through the government's preferred gold route within transitional agreements.

But if such an agreement is not available (and this may be due to a range of reasons including affordability as all funds are finite and prices must be fair and transparent) then the policy supports an alternative route to immediate public release through green open access. It isn't necessarily the first choice for funder or authors, but it is a practical and compliant alternative.

The parallel to sector negotiations with publishers is clear.

The UK sector has set out this year with a clear goal of achieving a transitional read and publish agreement with Elsevier. It's prepared to pay for this as long as certain terms are met, including a price point that is sustainable for the consortium and its individual institutions.

In other words, the sector wants a deal that meets our read and publish needs, but cannot commit to do so at any cost. That is why we are also preparing [practical and alternative plans](#) for our authors to read and publish in case no deal is reached.

We want a transitional agreement that delivers read access to support the process of doing research and immediate open access publishing to enable wide public dissemination. But, pragmatists as we are, we are also preparing for the alternative.

The scholarly communication landscape is changing, and with it comes choice and power.

Choices for authors about where to publish; choices for academic institutions about what to fund and at what price; and choices for publishers to come to the table intent on meaningful commitment to immediate open access at an affordable price.

By the time this is published, let's see what choices we and Elsevier are ready to make.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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