

Reflections on Open Access week at the University of Aberdeen

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I was really pleased to be asked to reflect on the events that the University of Aberdeen put on for International Open Access week. The format, breadth and scale of the events we planned was totally outside our comfort zone as a team and I am so grateful to all of our professional and generous presenters who contributed so much to it being successful.

Our Monday event ‘Open Ideas – Fresh perspectives’ was a chance to hear from some very influential speakers on a topic that they felt was current and important. Interestingly, what we heard from the speakers intertwined and exposed different angles and thoughts on fairness and equity both in and through research.

The discussions were really absorbing (if you missed the event, you can watch on our Open Research YouTube [playlist](#)). When **Josh Sendall** spoke about framing Open Research in a global context and the fundamental lack of a meritocracy it really made me take a breath, stop, and remind myself how important the bigger picture is to me. It is so easy to get absorbed in the tiny details, sometimes we need that reset to remember why we are trying to do what we are trying to do.

For me it is about fairness and equity. Open Research supports a fairer society, in a number of ways. Although I’ll be honest, it sometimes doesn’t feel that way. It definitely feels like some commercial publishers change the game as soon as we know the rules. The difference for

research intensive universities is that for us it is mission-critical, whereas for a commercial publisher their priority is their shareholders.

The popular saying goes ‘If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’, the problem is that currently many of those giants are behind a paywall and only a privileged group of people get to stand on their shoulders. Josh also noted how ‘contributions from the developing world are conspicuous by their absence’. As a society we are curbing our progress through adherence to an out of date and inequitable system. Progress is made by constantly building on the discoveries of others and the translation of those discoveries into impact in the real world. By restricting the pace at which findings can be disseminated, how people can use them, who can publish their findings and who has access to which publications, we restrict our societal progress. **Stephen Curry** spoke to this in terms of the responsibility that we have to ensure public funding is used for public good.

Our potential pool of knowledge is diminished by gatekeeping and the list of those affected is long. In much of the Global North structural racism, sexism and ableism spring most easily to mind. Additionally, there’s citational erasure, precious little recognition of how and where marginalised groups may publish and a lack of visibility of research from the Global South. The list goes on, but it all contributes to an artificially reduced knowledge pool which favours a narrow band of researchers.

There’s a third factor which relates to research assessment. The long-established cycle of publication in a prestigious journal leading to career progression perpetuates a lot of the issues above but is difficult to break. Responsible research assessment is necessary to break this cycle and the research community need to look at moving towards measuring what matters to wider society – the quality of research and improvement it brings to society, rather than easy and dubious metrics. This relationship between responsible research assessment and Open Research came up a few times during our session, particularly with Stephen Curry who spoke about the wider impact of research on the public good.

It isn’t a problem we can solve as an Open Research team; it requires a shift in research culture, and it’s an institution wide endeavour. Universities are not renowned for their ability to change quickly, so the task at hand can seem overwhelming. **Cameron Neylon** spoke to this, and I found it very reassuring to hear him speak about how small changes can make a big difference, the slow wheels of a big institution don’t have to be a barrier to change, it is possible for an institution to change its own narrative and become a platform for change.

I’m mindful that making research open is not enough, it needs to be accessible. Individuals and groups need to be able to find it and make use of it, irrespective of their existing knowledge. Research institutions need to be able to feed back the impact and difference that access has made, which seems to me a much more important measure than Journal Impact Factor. We had an event later in OA week featuring our Interdisciplinary research directors where measures of research quality and accessible research featured strongly and passionately in discussions.

On the second day of International Open Access Week we launched **Aberdeen University Press** (AUP) as an Open Access Publisher. Leaning heavily into the University of Aberdeen’s mission of being ‘Open to all’ AUP aims to share quality research without financial barriers. It is my hope that AUP can create opportunities to promote fairness and equity through supporting

publication from disadvantaged research communities. I hope that having that vehicle for Open Research close by will help keep the wider picture in view as we struggle with the many barriers we will continue to face.

At the University of Aberdeen the university strategy for [2040](#) builds on our foundational statement ‘Open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others’. Fairness and equity is important to the university as an institution, as well as me as a person, and we aim to be inclusive in everything we do. Open Research at Aberdeen is a small team, and it is a long road, but there is joy in the journey. As with so much in life, what we learn along the way will change our destination.

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



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