

Reflections on the new UKRI open access policy

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At **Cambridge University Libraries' [Office of Scholarly Communication](#)**, we have been supporting Cambridge researchers to comply with a variety of open access policies for many years. The policy landscape has evolved considerably in the past decade and affects increasing numbers of UK-based researchers, not only through the Research Excellence Framework but also through Plan S and charitable funder policies. Earlier this month, UK Research & Innovation (**UKRI**) – the UK's principal government research funder – released its new [policy on open access](#) relating to publications arising from UKRI-funded research. In this editorial we explore and assess some of the policy's implications.

On journal publishing

With the creation of UKRI in 2018, a new open access policy was sought to simplify and unify the government's approach to open access. In many ways, this policy represents a natural evolution of the previous RCUK policy. Two routes are provided for publishing, one through 'gold' publishing, with the version of record openly available, and the other through 'green' open access, with the accepted manuscript (or version of record, if the publisher permits this), available in an institutional or subject repository at the time of final publication. In either case, the preference is for a CC BY licence although there will be a process for applying the CC BY-ND licence by exception. The continuing provision of block grants for article open access charges will continue to help authors wishing to publish in fully open access journals and will help institutions to meet the costs of transitional agreements.

We are pleased to see that UKRI are explicit in their encouragement of the use of preprints, but does this policy go far enough in these areas? The emphasis on compliance of the accepted or version of record has frequently resulted in challenging conversation with researchers from certain disciplines with some of the most open research practices about why their approach to open access didn't 'count' in terms of funder compliance, and we anticipate that these tricky conversations will continue. We'll look forward to the promised UKRI statement on preprints when it becomes available.

The decision not to permit payment of OA charges in hybrid journals except as part of transitional agreements should strengthen our hand for negotiations, although will lead to some more difficult conversations with researchers. The requirement for immediate open access raises practical questions for us that we hope will be answered as the operational guidance emerges. We are working through possible approaches to supporting our authors with retaining sufficient rights in their own work to be able to comply using the green route mentioned above. Evidence is still emerging about which publishers are willing to publish articles that retain these rights and which will either refuse to publish or encourage authors to sign terms that conflict with their funder requirements. We urge clarity from publishers about these issues.

Another key challenge is that authors rarely know in advance when the final published version will become available online, resulting in the need for members of our Open Access team to manually check back regularly in order to adjust the embargo dates for some published papers. Will it be sufficient in UKRI's eyes for the accepted copy to be on the institutional repository with 'request a copy' functionality enabled until the point of publication? Many journals have ill-defined categories such as 'early access' through which the version of record may be available to subscribers long before the article has officially been published in a journal issue. Does this sort of 'early access' article count as 'at the time of final publication'? Issues such as these will need to be ironed out especially if they are to determine eligibility of articles for inclusion in future research evaluation exercises.

On book publishing

The inclusion in the policy of monographs and book chapters is a big step forward and we welcome this move from UKRI. Models for open access books are less mature than for journals and so greater flexibility and caution is needed here, which is reflected in the policy itself. Consequently, monographs published after 2024 will need to be open access within one year of publication, via either the green or gold routes. UKRI will provide a centrally administered block grant of £3.5 million to facilitate open access for long-form scholarship, and experimentation in models is encouraged. Note also that trade books, scholarly editions and PhD theses arising from UKRI training grants are for the most part excepted by the policy. The approach is cautious but holds great promise.

Yet we await greater clarity on what the block grant can be used for, especially because of the association between previous block grants for journal publishing and the subsequent dominance of article processing charges. We hope that monograph publishing does not go the way of journal publishing towards reliance on processing charges, not least because of the effort that many not-for-profit and scholar-led publishers have put into alternative book publishing models that do not require author payment. We therefore hope that UKRI identifies a way for funds from the block grant to be diverted to non-BPC-charging publishers to support their operations. Without this, there will be a commercial rush to capture the block

grant in the form of book processing charges, which would be disastrous for open access monograph publishing, bearing in mind that the vast majority of humanities monographs do not arise from grant-funded research that could be used to pay BPCs.

Similarly, in the [explanatory notes](#), UKRI mention that the policy provides scope for ‘exploration of delayed open access models, allowing reduced charges to authors to make the version of record open access’. As with the BPC issue above, we hope that the block grant would be used for immediate open access of the version of record, or at the very least that there is a process to ensure that delayed access results in a smaller author charge than immediate open access. There is a possibility here that the policy creates a market for book-processing charges to enable delayed access to long-form scholarship, when we should not be losing sight of the fact that models do exist to support immediate open access to books without such charge. However, these models usually operate at the organisation or collection levels, rather than on a book-by-book basis, which will not easily fit into the systems of support that UKRI are making available. If we are to move to an open access monograph requirement for the next Research Excellence Framework, as is rumoured, it is important that these issues are addressed.

Final thoughts

The UK open access policy landscape has undergone a rapid evolution and now reflects a more simplified and unified approach. The approach to journal publishing is normalised across the disciplines and we are happy to see an emphasis on immediacy of open access rather than continued support for embargoes. The introduction of a books component is a bold step and will require careful and active monitoring to prevent a repeat of mistakes with the dominance of article-processing charges. We look forward to helping researchers at Cambridge to comply with the policy but also hope that UKRI continues to stimulate activity around innovations in publishing culture change, as they have done with their recent grant to Cambridge-based scientific publishing platform [Octopus](#) and previous award to the [Community-led Open Publishing Infrastructures for Monographs \(COPIM\) project](#). While policy compliance is important, it must go hand in hand with the kinds of culture changes that would make open research a normal, everyday practice that all researchers can participate in and benefit from.

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



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