
House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Tenth Report of Session 2003-04, *Scientific publications: free for all? (HC399-1)*

A response from CURL and SCONUL

The joint CURL/SCONUL position

- 1 This response to the Select Committee report on scientific publications (*Scientific publications: free for all? HC399-1*) is issued jointly by the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL).
- 2 CURL and SCONUL welcome the publication of *Scientific publications: free for all?* and strongly support the general thrust of the report's recommendations. We believe the recommendations have the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of the UK Knowledge Economy by improving research communication, enhancing knowledge transfer and increasing public access to scientific information. We look forward to a positive response from Government, and a speedy implementation of the recommendations by all relevant bodies. The Joint CURL/SCONUL Scholarly Communications Group and member institutions of CURL and SCONUL are keen to work with Government and other key stakeholders over the coming months to implement the report's recommendations.
- 3 We have summarised our comments below under a number of key headings. We have concentrated on the recommendations which we believe are most likely to lead to major improvements in the impact and effective dissemination of scientific research results.

Access to information

- 4 We believe that publicly-funded research should be publicly available. We see our role within our organisations, nationally and internationally, as encouraging and facilitating the widest possible access to relevant information for research, learning and teaching in UK universities and elsewhere. We therefore support general recommendations in the report that relate to the aim of making scientific information more easily accessible (for example 2, 7, 8, 10, 11). We also endorse the view that this is an international concern, noting that the Committee's report has generated great interest worldwide, and that there is an opportunity, if recommendations are implemented quickly, for the UK to exercise a leadership role, and at the same time increase the impact of UK research (3, 53).

The scientific journals market

- 5 We share the Committee's unease at the current workings of the journals market, and support recommendations on profit margins (17, 26), bundling of subscriptions (20-22), and transparency of costs (27-28). In particular, we support the recommendation (33) that the Office of Fair Trading conduct a biennial review of the state of this idiosyncratic market, with special reference to the impact of mergers and acquisitions, and of bundling deals. We agree that it may be necessary to look again at the available methodologies and statistics for measuring trends in journal prices (16). We are keen to work with the OFT and other stakeholders on this issue.

Institutional repositories

- 6 Self-archiving in institutional, or subject, repositories is one important route towards opening up access to the UK research output (42-58). Recommendation 44 (making the deposit of articles resulting from Government-funded research mandatory) is particularly important and welcome. We believe this recommendation would cost very little to implement and it would transform the availability of scientific literature in the UK. Universities and research institutions would quickly see the benefits, and the minority of publishers that do not permit this at present would find it prudent to change their policy, given the international spread of similar arrangements (for example, current discussions involving the National Institutes for Health in the USA).

- 7 We welcome the recommendations relating to institutional repository initiatives such as SHERPA. In particular, we welcome the recognition of the requirement for further funding (43, 55) and the need for co-ordination and standardisation (56). The exact form to be taken by a repository co-ordinating body will require detailed discussion among relevant stakeholders (including JISC and the Research Libraries Network). We believe that the expanded digital repositories programme being sponsored by JISC in the coming months could provide a basis for such co-ordination. Many CURL and SCOUNL member institutions have already set up institutional repositories or are committed to doing so, and would welcome further co-ordinated initiatives of this sort to help ensure that local developments move forward in line with a coherent national strategy.

Intellectual property rights (including copyright)

- 8 Universities are taking a greater interest in the broad question of intellectual property rights (including copyright), and we welcome the Committee's contribution to this issue (49-51). Restrictions on copyright should not be allowed to inhibit researchers from self-archiving their research papers and other research output. Exclusive rights do not need to be transferred to publishers in order for them to publish a paper. We support the recommendation (50) that Government funders should mandate their funded researchers to retain copyright (or, we suggest, should at least not allow them to transfer exclusive rights to publishers). Some publishers already do not require exclusive rights to be transferred to them and operate like this without any practical problems. We therefore recommend that Government should implement such a policy without delay.

Open-access journals

- 9 Another additional and important route towards increased availability of research output lies in open-access journals funded by publication charges. We recognise that these cannot be promoted in the same way as institutional repositories. It is not feasible or sensible for funders to require researchers to publish only in open-access journals. There would need to be a massive rise in the number of open-access journals before such a move could be envisaged. Nevertheless, we believe that the development of open-access

publishing should be encouraged. We, like the Committee, support initiatives from organisations such as JISC to pump-prime open-access journals (70) whilst recognising that this must be a transitional stage. We welcome recommendation 64 in particular, encouraging the Research Councils and other research sponsors to set up funds that can be drawn on for publication charges. As publishers change their business models, such charges should come to be seen as a normal part of the costs of carrying out and disseminating research. In this context, we support the commissioning of independent research on publication costs (60). We also support the Committee's view that peer-review is an essential feature of scientific publishing and should not be compromised as business models change (66).

Learned societies

- 10 We recognise the importance of the role played by learned societies within the scholarly communication process, and understand that some societies have concerns relating to open-access publishing (69). Others are already pushing forward in this direction and should be encouraged to share good practice. We would welcome continuing open dialogue with society publishers, as well as increased resources from JISC to enable transition funding, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. We also recommend that a study be undertaken to map and evaluate the options for learned societies in an open-access publishing environment.

'Free rider' issue

- 11 CURL and SCOUNL note the 'free rider' issue (68) and suggest that a study be undertaken to ascertain the significance of commercial and industrial subscriptions to the turnover of commercial publishers. CURL and SCOUNL also note that the DTI has established an Academic Publications Forum in the wake of the publication of the report and suggest that this new body could be tasked with undertaking this activity. The results of the work should then be fed into the ongoing debate about the viability of open-access publishing models.

VAT

- 12 We welcome the Committee's recognition of the anomaly resulting from differential VAT rates (30-31). We strongly support the exemption of educational institutions, including their libraries, from liability to VAT on digital

publications (31). Like the Committee, we see no obstacle in principle – nor indeed in law – to applying the zero rate in the UK to digital publications, since the VAT Act refers in Group 3 to 'newspapers, journals and periodicals' without reference to their format. We agree that a change in the way VAT is applied is an urgent need, and we favour exemption for educational institutions as the solution most likely to be quickly implemented.

Library budgets

- 13 We welcome the recommendation that the Funding Councils commission a study on library funding (35), and establish a code of good practice (36). However, we would observe that although budget increases are important, and indeed necessary in order to provide the level of information service required within our universities, we do not believe that the level of library budgets is the root cause of the present scientific publications crisis. US university libraries, for example, are on average very much better funded than their UK equivalents, but still strongly advocate the implementation of major changes in scientific publishing. Addressing the issue of inadequate library budgets should not be seen as an alternative to addressing the fundamental structural problems in scientific publishing dealt with in this report.

British Library (and other legal deposit libraries)

- 14 We strongly endorse the report's recognition of the importance of the role of the British Library, and of the other legal deposit libraries, relating to document delivery (5), repository provision (46), and particularly digital preservation (76-81).

Research Libraries Network

- 15 We look forward to the launch of the Research Libraries Network as a stimulus towards increasing co-ordination and provision in the area of scholarly communication and publishing.

Research Assessment Exercise

- 16 The report's final recommendation relates to the RAE (should be 83, but omitted from the list of recommendations). We share the Committee's view that it would be very helpful for the Funding Councils to remind panels that it is the quality of the individual article that is important in assessment, not the impact

factor of the journal where it is published. Even more importantly, documentation and publicity should make this clear at the 'research grass-roots' level, as the perception is widespread that the journal's impact factor is what counts in determining RAE outcomes, even when panels may in fact be correctly carrying out current RAE policy.

Conclusion

- 17 CURL and SCONUL welcome the publication of the Science and Technology Committee report and are keen to work with Government and other stakeholders to implement the report's recommendations. We look forward to building on work already carried out by CURL, SCONUL, and their member institutions (as well as other agencies) in order to enhance this important component of the developing UK Information Society.

APPENDIX

CURL, Consortium of University Research Libraries

Established in 1983 to bring together the larger research-based university libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland, CURL has grown from a fairly informal grouping of seven university libraries into a strong, nationally and internationally recognised partnership of 25 major research libraries participating as full members, including 22 major university libraries and the UK's three national libraries. CURL's mission is to increase the ability of research libraries to share resources for the benefit of the local, national and international research community. More information is available at www.curl.ac.uk.

SCONUL, Society of College, National and University Libraries

SCONUL, founded in 1950, is an association representing the heads of library and information services in all universities, and most colleges of higher education, in the UK, together with the directors of national libraries. (SCONUL also represents their counterparts in Ireland, and its membership includes the CURL libraries). By sharing good practice, and facilitating collaborative schemes for the benefit of library users, SCONUL (www.sconul.ac.uk) promotes excellence in its constituent library services.

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