

# Discussion Paper: Considering the Implications of the Finch Report Five Years On

## Jisc Collections Content Strategy Group

It is now five years since the publication of the Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (Finch Group), “Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications”<sup>i</sup>.

The Finch settlement quite rightly noted that a transition to open access may not be quick and as such it called for increased funding for APCs during the transition period which has been provided through the RCUK Block Grant<sup>ii</sup>. The report was based on the assumption that the example set by the UK, coupled with increased funding and international leadership would stimulate a set of behaviours internationally leading to a transition.

Five years on and in light of the recent monitoring report from the Universities UK Open Access Coordination Group<sup>iii</sup> this discussion paper examines the impact and consequences of the UK approach, before suggesting interventions that could enhance the transition to open access in the UK for all stakeholders.

Based on the available evidence we make the following observations on the ‘state’ of open access in the UK:

### 1. There has been significant growth of OA in the UK, but at significant financial cost.

As the report demonstrates the volume of UK research output made open access has grown considerably in the last 5 years, by 2016 ‘37% of UK-authored articles were accessible immediately on publication, rising to 54% within 12 months’<sup>iv</sup>, this compares with respective global figures of 25% and 32%. As such the UK is clearly a global leader in terms of the proportion of its research which is open access.

Some particular characteristics of the manner in which UK output has been made OA are:

- Payment for Gold OA via APCs has been the primary model for driving the growth of OA<sup>v</sup>
- Hybrid Gold OA is the most popular with UK researchers, though Pure Gold OA is increasingly popular, the proportions stood at 70:30 in 2016<sup>vi</sup>

All of the above have contributed to a substantial and sustained increase in the costs of open access:

- The average APC increased in cost by 16% between 2013 and 2016<sup>vii</sup>
- The average cost of an APC is over 25% higher in hybrid OA journals than Pure Gold OA journals<sup>viii</sup>
- The gap between the cost of hybrid APCs and Pure Gold APCs is shrinking as Pure Gold APCs are increasing in price at a faster rate<sup>ix</sup>

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- Expenditure on APCs has at least quadrupled between 2013 and 2016<sup>x</sup>
- At the same time expenditure on subscriptions has continued to grow, though at a much slower pace<sup>xi</sup>

This is despite the fact that the overall rate of inflation of the largest journal agreements from major publishers has fallen to an average of 2% per annum over this period and agreements increasingly include an OA component that have played an important role in helping institutions constrain the costs of OA<sup>xii</sup>

## 2. Has the UK approach incentivised a global transition to OA?

Given the increase in costs, in order for the current UK approach to be considered sustainable one would wish to see evidence of a swift global transition to OA, for example, through evidence that:

- Other countries were adopting the UK approach of making additional funds available to cover the cost of APCs
- The number of subscription articles published globally was falling and being replaced by OA articles.

However, the most recent evidence suggests that neither is occurring.

The UK remains an outlier in the provision of a block grant earmarked for the purchase of APCs. Indeed, whilst many European funders allow the payment of APCs from research grants, the two largest producers of published output – the US<sup>xiii</sup> and China<sup>xiv</sup> – make no such funds available centrally. Even in the case of European countries willing to fund OA, it comes with a number of caveats, often limiting or banning funding of hybrid APCs, or only funding hybrid OA when there is a clear ‘offset’ in place on the subscription costs.<sup>xv</sup> (One might note that the only aspect of the UK approach that has been copied elsewhere is the development of offsetting agreements covering subscriptions and APCs).

Rather than OA ‘replacing’ subscription articles, a mixed economy is developing where annual rate of growth in the number of articles published globally encompasses an absolute growth in both subscription and OA articles.<sup>xvi</sup>

As such, the UK remains the only and largest research intensive nation to adopt this approach, and since both the volume of subscription and OA content continues to grow, UK institutions, in particular, research intensive institutions, will bear the cost of both subscriptions and OA for some considerable time.

Since funders only meet some of the costs for and only for limited time, it is unsustainable for UK academic institutions to continue to push for a transition to open access based on a commitment to fund APCs and maintain subscriptions.<sup>xvii</sup>

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## 3. Has the UK approach to funding APCs had negative consequences?

The UK approach, based on the promotion of hybrid OA as the engine of a rapid transition has also had a number of apparently unintended consequences, which would appear to incentivise some of the very behaviours that open access was intended to reform:

- It has entrenched reputation and prestige of journals as a primary signifier of the quality of articles<sup>xviii</sup>
- It incentivises publication as the primary model of assessment and the article as the primary unit of assessment
- It has entrenched the existing market power and financial returns to legacy publishers<sup>xix</sup>
- It has entrenched the subscription model since the main mechanism for constraining costs has been via subscription agreements including APCs<sup>xx</sup>
- It has perpetuated the opacity of the costs of the subscription model<sup>xxi</sup>
- It has reinforced the association of Gold OA with payment of APCs<sup>xxii</sup>
- Not only are APCs for hybrid OA more expensive, hybrid OA is more costly to manage than Pure Gold OA<sup>xxiii</sup>
- The preference amongst authors to publish in journals with the highest reputation and the fact that those journals have the highest prices would appear to incentivise price rises for both legacy and Pure Gold OA publishers<sup>xxiv</sup>
- In the absence of any conditions on the payment of APCs to publishers, there is no compunction on publishers to enter into agreements that limit the combined cost of subscriptions and APCs, limiting the ability of negotiations to do more than constrain cost increases<sup>xxv</sup>

## 4. How can we improve on where we are?

What steps might be taken that improve the situation, but which do so in a way that builds on and consolidates everything that has been achieved so far and avoids unintended consequences?

In February 2016 ARMA, Jisc, RLUK and SCONUL issued a discussion piece around the features of academic journal markets that might promote or inhibit cost-effective progress toward the UK government's aim of open access (OA)<sup>xxvi</sup>. Building on and drawing from that document, as stakeholders to what extent should we advocate:

- I. the imposition of conditions on use of public funds for hybrid APCs to ensure priority is given to expenditure that encourages or demonstrates a transition to open access, such as:
  - Service level agreements that demonstrate a publisher is actively supporting OA through enhanced workflows, standards adoption, licensing etc.

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- Combined subscription and OA agreements that are transitional and meaningfully reduce subscription and APC costs against each other
  - Transparency on costs of subscriptions and OA
  - Participation in infrastructure services such as Publications Router
  - After an agreed period, the removal of historical print spend revenues as the basis of the cost of combined subscription and OA agreements, with costs being based solely on publishing output with all the risks that entails
- II. support for negotiation objectives that make the transition to OA a primary objective and red line
  - III. the active participation of funders in negotiations with publishers
  - IV. financial support for OA infrastructure and initiatives that embed OA as the default approach to the dissemination of research such as preprint servers, new publishing platforms
  - V. development, implementation and support for policies that recognise the responsible use of metrics and how those reward and progression structures can incentivise a preference for open access by researchers
  - VI. support for institutional IPR policies that facilitate the transition to open access.

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- i Finch Group (2012). Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications, <https://www.acu.ac.uk/research-information-network/finch-report-final> (Accessed 26th January 2017)
  - ii RCUK Open Access Policy <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/openaccess/policy/> (Accessed 26th January 2017)
  - iii Jubb M et al (2017) Monitoring the transition to open access: December 2017, Universities UK, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/monitoring-transition-open-access-2017.pdf> (Accessed 26th January 2017)
  - iv Jubb M et al, Page 25, Ref 2
  - v Jubb M et al, Page 27, Ref 2
  - vi Jubb M et al, Page 39, Ref 2
  - vii Jubb M et al, Page 39, Ref 2
  - viii Jubb M et al, Page 39, Ref 2
  - ix Jubb M et al, Page 39, Ref 2
  - x Jubb M et al, Page 40, Ref 2
  - xi Jubb M et al, Page 40, Ref 2, whilst the report quotes an increase of 20% for the period it is important to note that these are not like for like figures and do not take account of institutions signing up to larger content packages.
  - xii According to an analysis by Lawson (2017), “the total value of the six offset agreements in 2016 can be estimated at £8m.” Lawson, Stuart (2017): Report on offset agreements: evaluating current Jisc Collections deals. Year 2 – evaluating 2016 deals. figshare. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5383861.v1> (Retrieved: Nov 17, 2017)
  - xiii Smith M, Anderson I, *Pay It Forward: Investigating a Sustainable Model of Open Access Article Processing Charges for Large North American Research Institutions*, Page 10, 2016, Mellon Foundation: [http://icis.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/UC-Pay-It-Forward-Final-Report.rev\\_7.18.16.pdf](http://icis.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/UC-Pay-It-Forward-Final-Report.rev_7.18.16.pdf) (accessed 26 Jan 2017). The University of California Libraries’ project,

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- 'Pay it Forward' sought to understand 'whether a large-scale conversion to open access scholarly journal publishing funded via APCs would be viable and financially sustainable for this class of large North American research-intensive institutions'
- xiv Zhang, X (2016) Open Access in China, <https://www.coar-repositories.org/files/160413-Open-Access-in-China-new.pdf> (access 27th January 2017)
- xv For examples see the VSNU negotiations in the Netherlands [http://www.vsnu.nl/en\\_GB/openaccess-eng.html](http://www.vsnu.nl/en_GB/openaccess-eng.html) and the recent development of Projekt DEAL in Germany <https://www.projekt-deal.de/about-deal/> (both accessed 26<sup>th</sup> January 2017)
- xvi Jubb M et al, Page 23, Ref 2
- xvii The RCUK Block Grant for Open Access for 2016/2017 was £14million (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/161019/> accessed 26<sup>th</sup> January 2017). Research undertaken by Jisc found expenditure of £18.5million on APCs in 2016 across 38 institutions (Shamash, K 2016, <http://nbviewer.jupyter.org/github/kshamash/Article-processing-charges/blob/master/Autogenerate%20APC%20report.ipynb>)
- xviii Jubb M et al, Page 23, Ref 2
- xix Earney, L., (2017). Offsetting and its discontents: challenges and opportunities of open access offsetting agreements. *Insights*. 30(1), pp.11–24. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.345>
- xx Shamash, K (2017). Article processing charges in 2016. <https://scholarlycommunications.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2017/08/23/article-processing-charges-in-2016/> (accessed 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017)
- xxi Shamash, K, Ref 17, and Crotty D, 16 Feb 2016, What Should we Make of Secret Open Access Deals?, *Scholarly Kitchen Blog*: <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2016/02/16/what-should-we-make-of-secret-open-access-deals/> (accessed 27 January 2017)
- xxii Jubb et al, pp14-15, Ref 2
- xxiii Boyes P and Kingsley D, 24 Oct 2016, Hybrid open access – an analysis, *Unlocking Research Blog*: <https://unlockingresearch.blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=969> (accessed 26 Jan 2017) and Pinfield, S., Salter, J. and Bath, P. A. (2016), The 'total cost of publication' in a hybrid open-access environment: Institutional approaches to funding journal article-processing charges in combination with subscriptions. *J Assn Inf Sci Tec*, 67: 1751–1766. doi:10.1002/asi.23446 (accessed 26 January 2017)
- xxiv Jubb et al, page 39, Ref 2
- xxv Elsevier receives more money for APCs than any other publisher (Jubb et al, page 43, Ref 2) yet has no offsetting agreement in place.
- xxvi ARMA, Jisc, RLUK and SCONUL (2016) Academic journal markets, their limitations, and the consequences for a transition to open access: a thought piece: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/academic-journal-markets-limitations-consequences-for-transition-to-open-access> (accessed 19th February 2018)