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Why the UK Should Not Heed the Finch Report

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The UK's universities and research funders have been leading the rest of the world in the movement toward Open Access (OA) to research with "[Green](#)" OA [mandates](#) requiring researchers to self-archive their journal articles on the web, free for all. A report has emerged from the [Finch committee](#) that looks superficially as if it were supporting OA, but is strongly biased in favor of the interests of the publishing industry over the interests of UK research. Instead of recommending building on the UK's lead in cost-free Green OA, the committee has recommended spending a great deal of extra money to pay publishers for "Gold" OA publishing. If the Finch committee were heeded, the UK would lose both its lead in OA and a great deal of public money -- and worldwide OA would be set back at least a decade.

Open Access means online access to peer-reviewed research, free for all. (Some OA advocates want more than this, but all want at least this.) Subscriptions restrict research access to users at institutions that can afford to subscribe to the journal in which the research was published. OA makes it accessible to all would-be users. This maximizes research uptake, usage, applications and progress, to the benefit of the tax-paying public that funds it.

There are two ways for authors to make their research OA. One way is to publish it in an [OA journal](#), which makes it free online. This is called "[Gold OA](#)." There are currently about 25,000 peer-reviewed journals, across all disciplines, worldwide. Most of them (about 90%) are not Gold. Some Gold OA journals (mostly overseas national journals) cover their publication costs from subscriptions or subsidies, but the international Gold OA journals charge the author an often sizeable fee (£1000 or more).

The other way for authors to make their research OA is to publish it in the suitable journal of their choice, but to self-archive their peer-reviewed final draft in their [institutional OA repository](#) to make it free online for those who lack subscription access to the publisher's version of record. This is called "Green OA."

The UK is the country that first began mandating (i.e., requiring) that its researchers provide Green OA. Only Green OA can be mandated, because Gold OA costs extra money and restricts authors' journal choice. But Gold OA can be recommended, where suitable, and funds can be offered to pay for it, if available.

The first Green OA mandate in the world was designed and adopted in the UK (University of Southampton School of Electronics and Computer Science, [2003](#)) and the UK was the first nation in which all RCUK research funding councils have mandated Green OA. The [UK](#) already has 26 institutional mandates and 14 funder mandates, more than any other country except the US, which has 39 institutional mandates and 4 funder mandates -- but the UK is far ahead of the US relative to its size (although the US and EU are catching up, following the UK's lead).

To date, the [world](#) has a total of 185 institutional mandates and 52 funder mandates. This is still only a tiny fraction of the world's total number of universities, research institutes and research funders. Universities and research institutions are the universal providers of all peer-reviewed research, funded and unfunded, across all disciplines, but even in the UK, far fewer than half of the universities have as yet mandated OA, and only a few of the UK's OA mandates are designed to be optimally effective. Nevertheless, the current annual Green OA rate for the UK (40%) is twice the [worldwide baseline](#) rate (20%).

What is clearly needed now in the UK (and worldwide) is to increase the number of Green OA mandates by institutions and funders to 100% and to upgrade the sub-optimal mandates to ensure 100% compliance. This increase and upgrade is purely a matter of policy; it does not cost any extra money.

What is the situation for Gold OA? The latest estimate for worldwide Gold OA is [12%](#), but this includes the overseas national journals for which there is less international demand. Among the 10,000 journals indexed by Thomson-Reuters, about 8% are Gold. The percentage of Gold OA in the UK is half as high (4%) as in the rest of the world, almost certainly because of the cost and choice constraint of Gold OA and the fact that the UK's 40% cost-free Green OA rate is double the global 20% baseline, because of the UK's mandates.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. Publishers lobby against Green OA and Green OA mandates on the basis of two premises: (#1) that Green OA is inadequate for users' needs and (#2) that Green OA is parasitic, and will destroy both journal publishing and peer review if allowed to grow: If researchers, their funders and their institutions want OA, let them pay instead for Gold OA.

Both these arguments have been accepted, uncritically, by the Finch Committee, which, instead of recommending the cost-free increasing and upgrading of the UK's Green OA mandates has instead recommended increasing public spending by £50-60 million yearly to pay for more Gold OA.

Let me close by looking at the logic and economics underlying this recommendation that publishers have welcomed so warmly: What seems to be overlooked is the fact that worldwide institutional subscriptions are currently

paying the cost of journal publishing, including peer review, in full (and handsomely) for the 90% of journals that are non-OA today. Hence the publication costs of the Green OA that authors are providing today are fully paid for by the institutions worldwide that can afford to subscribe.

If publisher premise #1 -- that Green OA is inadequate for users' needs -- is correct, then when Green OA is scaled up to 100% it will continue to be inadequate, and the institutions that can afford to subscribe will continue to cover the cost of publication, and premise #2 is refuted: Green OA will not destroy publication or peer review.

Now suppose that premise #1 is wrong: Green OA (the author's peer-reviewed final draft) proves adequate for all users' needs, so once the availability of Green OA approaches 100% for their users, institutions cancel their journals, making subscriptions no longer sustainable as the means of covering the costs of peer-reviewed journal publication.

What will journals do, as their subscription revenues shrink? They will do what all businesses do under those conditions: They will cut unnecessary costs. If the Green OA version is adequate for users, that means both the print edition and the online edition of the journal (and their costs) can be phased out, as there is no longer a market for them. Nor do journals have to do the access-provision or archiving of peer-reviewed drafts: that's offloaded onto the distributed global network of Green OA institutional repositories. What's left for peer-reviewed journals to do?

Peer review itself is done for publishers for free by researchers, just as their papers are provided to publishers for free by researchers. The journals manage the peer review, with qualified editors who select the peer reviewers and adjudicate the reviews. That costs money, but not nearly as much money as is bundled into journal publication costs, and hence subscription prices, today.

But if and when global Green OA "destroys" the subscription base for journals as they are published today, forcing journals to cut obsolete costs and downsize to just peer-review service provision alone, Green OA will by the same token also have released the institutional subscription funds to pay the downsized journals' sole remaining publication cost – peer review – as a Gold OA publication fee, out of a fraction of the institutional windfall subscription savings. (And the editorial boards and authorships of those journal titles whose publishers are not interested in staying in the scaled down post-Green-OA publishing business will simply migrate to Gold OA publishers who are.)

So, far from leading to the destruction of journal publishing and peer review, scaling up Green OA mandates globally will generate, first, the 100% OA that research so much needs -- and eventually also a transition to sustainable post-Green-OA Gold OA publishing.

But not if the Finch Report is heeded and the UK heads in the direction of squandering more scarce public money on funding pre-emptive Gold OA instead of extending and upgrading cost-free Green OA mandates.