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United Kingdom's Open Access Policy Urgently Needs a Tweak

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Abstract

The UK government, under the joint influence of the publisher lobby and short-sighted advice from Open Access (OA) advocates, has decided to make all UK research output OA within two years by diverting funds from UK research to pay publishers extra for (Gold) OA publishing, over and above what the UK (and the rest of the world) already pays publishers for journal subscriptions. This would merely be a needless waste of UK's scarce research funds in exchange for OA, instead of strengthening the UK's existing mandate for cost-free (Green) OA self-archiving. But the UK has also been persuaded to require researchers to pick and pay for Gold OA, instead of leaving the Green/Gold choice to them. This requirement needs to be dropped to prevent perverse consequences, both locally and globally, for both the UK and OA.

Glossary

Open Access (OA): free online access to journal articles (not to other kinds of content, such as books or research data).

Gratis OA: free online access, webwide.

Libre OA: free online access, webwide, plus various re-use rights (such as data-mining, remix and republication rights).

Green OA: OA provided by the author, by self-archiving the final, refereed draft in an institutional repository.

Gold OA: OA provided by the publisher.

Open Data: free online access to research data (not journal articles) plus various re-use rights.

Institutional Repository: online website hosted by a research institution.

OA mandate: a requirement, by a researcher's institution or funding council to make published articles OA.

OA embargo: an interval of various lengths (from 0 to 6-12 months, to many years) during which the publisher prevents authors from making their articles OA.

Since the **beginning** of the global Open Access (OA) movement a decade ago, the UK has been its leader. The UK has now **resolved** to make all of its own research output (6% of the global total) Open Access within two years, but it can only do this – and it can only maintain its leadership role in worldwide OA – if it fixes an unnoticed flaw in the proposed new RCUK (Research Councils UK) OA **policy**.

Despite OA's many **benefits**, most researchers (**80%**) do not make their articles OA unless either their institutions or their funders mandate (require) OA. The only kind of OA that can be mandated is Green OA, provided by authors. Institutions and funders cannot require journals to convert from subscription publishing to Gold OA publishing; nor can they dictate authors' journal choice based on the journal's business model, rather than its quality.

RCUK already has a Green OA mandate, but it has proposed a new one, designed with the hope of inducing journals to either convert to Gold OA or reduce Green OA embargoes. The **new mandate** would forbid RCUK authors to publish in a journal unless it offers either Libre Gold OA or a 6-12 month

embargo (at most) on Green OA. (So far, so good, perhaps.) But if the chosen journal offers both, *the RCUK author must choose the (paid) Gold option over the (free) Green option.*

This last clause, far from inducing journals to convert to Gold OA or to reduce their Green OA embargoes, provides subscription journals with an irresistible incentive to (1) offer authors "hybrid" Gold OA as an option, at a price, and to (2) increase their Green OA embargoes beyond RCUK's limit!

Why? Suppose a journal's total subscription income is £X and it publishes N articles per year. It can enhance its total income by 6% at UK expense by simply "allowing" authors to pay extra for Gold OA, at a price of £X/N per article (about £1000-£3000, the usual Gold OA publication fee today). And, to make sure RCUK authors must pick the Gold option: raise the Green OA embargo to at least 13+.

I think RCUK may have confused the need for Open Data with the need for OA: For Open Data, re-use rights are an urgent necessity – but Open Data faces no publisher embargoes or copyright obstacles.

For journal articles, Gratis OA is the urgent necessity, but OA faces publisher embargoes and copyright obstacles. For most fields, Libre OA, which faces a far bigger obstacle (publishers fear granting republication rights lest rival publishers free-ride on their content), is neither urgent nor even necessary. RCUK has inadvertently conflated the two needs (OD and OA), concluding that Libre Gold OA is worth paying publishers 6% over and above their worldwide subscription revenue (which includes what they are already being paid by the UK subscriptions).

Nor did RCUK reckon with the prospect of author resistance to restrictions on their choice of journal, or resentment at the [diversion of scarce research funds](#) to pay publishers extra for Gold OA, or outrage at the possibility of having to choose the paid-Gold option over the cost-free Green option even when RCUK does not subsidize the Gold OA fee.

Perhaps the most important consequence RCUK failed to anticipate was the global effect of tempting publishers to offer hybrid Gold OA and lengthen Green embargoes. The rest of the world, which produces 94% of the world's research output, is unlikely to have either the resources or the inclination to increase by 94% the subscription income that it is already paying to publishers – instead of relying on cost-free Gratis Green OA mandates. And any resulting global shortfall in Green OA would rebound on the UK too, for UK researchers don't just need to make their own 6% of research output OA: they need OA to the rest of the world's 94% of research output too.

All of this can be very [easily remedied](#). RCUK can [drop](#) the requirement to choose Gold over Green when both are offered: Leave the Green/Gold choice to authors. Leave journal choice to them too. Just upgrade the RCUK compliance verification mechanism.

RCUK already has a Green OA mandate. If the UK wants 100% OA within two years, it need only add the following simple, cost-effective [compliance verification mechanism](#): (1) *Deposit must be in the fundee's [institutional repository](#).* (This makes each UK institution responsible for monitoring and verifying timely compliance.) (2) *All articles must be deposited [immediately](#) upon acceptance for publication.* (Publisher embargoes apply only to the date on which the deposit is made OA.) (3) *Repository deposit must be designated the [sole mechanism](#) for submitting publications for UK research assessment ([REF](#)).*

With this, plus a simple tweak of the new RCUK policy, the UK can continue to lead the way to global OA, instead of leading the EU and the US away from a fair, affordable, scalable and sustainable solution.