

Harvard: Journal subscription fees are prohibitive

April 25 2012, By Justin Norrie



Publishers have made journal subscriptions prohibitively expensive, says Harvard Library. Credit: Frederik Questier, Yanna Van Wesemael

Harvard Library says it can no longer afford the vast cost of academic journal subscriptions, and has advised staff at the university to support open access publishing instead.

In a [memorandum](#) posted on the website of Harvard University, the world's richest academic institution, the Faculty Advisory Council has accused large journal publishers of making the current system prohibitively expensive and academically restrictive. "This situation is exacerbated by efforts of certain publishers (called "providers") to acquire, bundle, and increase the pricing on journals," the council wrote.

Subscription prices for online content from two publishers have increased by 145% over the past six years, far in excess of not only the consumer price index but also the higher education and the library price indices, the council said in its memorandum. The annual cost to the university for journals is now close to \$3.75 million, which is more than 20% of all periodical subscription costs and just under 10% of all collection costs for everything the library acquired in 2010.

“Some journals cost as much as \$40,000 per year, others in the tens of thousands,” the council wrote.

It conceded that “scholarly output continues to grow and publishing can be expensive”, but said the publishing industry’s profit margins of 35% and more suggested that “the prices we must pay do not solely result from an increasing supply of new articles.

“It is untenable for contracts with at least two major providers to continue on the basis identical with past agreements. Costs are now prohibitive. Moreover, some providers bundle many journals as one subscription, with major, high-use journals bundled in with journals consulted far less frequently.”

The memorandum advises faculty staff and students to “make sure that all of your own papers are accessible by submitting them to DASH in accordance with the faculty-initiated [open-access](#) policies [and] consider submitting articles to open-access journals, or to ones that have reasonable, sustainable subscription costs; move prestige to open access.”

The comments by Harvard, which last year reported an endowment of \$32 billion, are likely to heap more pressure on journal publishers, who are already under fire from a growing community of angry researchers. Elsevier, which publishes more than 2,000 titles, is the target of a boycott by more than 10,000 academics worldwide.

Some funding bodies, such as Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), have begun to mandate that all research carried out with grants they provide be made available for free within a certain period of time – in the case of the NHMRC, 12 months – after initial publication.

But in an interview with The Conversation this week, outgoing Australian Research Council (ARC) boss Margaret Sheil said the ARC had no plans to follow suit.

Among other reasons, forcing researchers to cover the cost of editing and preparing their work for publication in a free [journal](#) would place an unfair financial strain on them, Professor Sheil said.

But Peter Suber, the Director of the Harvard Open Access Project, and a Senior Research Professor of Philosophy at Earlham College, said that Professor Sheil's comments revealed "deep misunderstandings".

In a comment posted online, he wrote that Professor Sheil "thinks OA [open access] mandates require grantees to publish in OA journals. They don't. They require grantees to deposit their peer-reviewed manuscripts in OA repositories. There are good reasons not to mandate gold OA (through journals), and she lists some. But that's why there are no gold OA mandates anywhere in the world. All OA mandates require green OA (through repositories), and she gives no reasons to oppose them."

He went on to write that Professor Sheil "thinks OA mandates interfere with the commercialization of patentable discoveries. But this problem has long been solved and the solution is easy. Write the [mandate] policy so that it only applies to published articles. Grantees who have reasons to wait before publishing (e.g. so they can apply for a patent) can wait. When they voluntarily choose to publish, the policy kicks in."

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Source: The Conversation

Citation: Harvard: Journal subscription fees are prohibitive (2012, April 25) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-04-harvard-journal-subscription-fees-prohibitive.html>

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