

UK move to 'open access' in publishing 'misguided'

June 20 2012, By Justin Norrie



Library subscriptions to academic journals can cost up to \$40,000 a year. Credit: Flickr/vanherdehaage

Advocates of “open access” publishing in academia say [a UK report](#) that proposes spending £60 million a year to make all publicly-funded research free to access will protect the profits of publishers at the expense of scholarship.

The British government has enlisted the services of Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales in a bid to support open access [publishing](#) for all scholarly work by UK researchers, regardless of whether it is also published in a subscription-only journal.

The cost of doing so would range from £50 to £60 million a year,

according to an independent study commissioned by the government. Professor Dame Janet Finch, who led the study, said that “in the longer term, the future lies with open access publishing”. Her report says that “the principle that the results of research that has been publicly funded should be freely accessible in the public domain is a compelling one, and fundamentally unanswerable.”

But the shift should be managed to avoid damaging the publishing industry, dominated by Elsevier and other publishers such as Springer and Wiley. “Subscription journals will continue to be important for some time yet,” Professor Finch said.

About £38 million will be needed each year to cover the costs of open access publishing fees, the report says. This would allow for UK publicly-funded research to be published under the “gold” open access model, whereby researchers pay an upfront fee to a journal for their paper to be edited and peer-reviewed before being published online, free of charge for readers. The rest of the money would be used to extend licences to public libraries and improve the infrastructure for online article databases.

But supporters of open access publishing say the cheaper and more practical option would be to promote the alternative green model, whereby authors publish in any journal and, usually after an embargo period, self-archive a version of the article in a database run by their university or a central repository, where anyone can read it for free. Journal publishers, who have traditionally covered the cost of preparing articles for publication by charging large subscription fees, say their business model will be destroyed if authors are allowed to archive those same articles elsewhere after short embargo periods of, for example, six months.

Emeritus Professor Colin Steele, former librarian of the Australian

National University, said that although report was supportive of the principles of open access, it proposed a strategy that was unnecessarily costly and could not be duplicated in Australia.

“The way they’ve gone about it almost totally focuses, presumably due to publisher pressure, on the gold model of open access,” he said. “As a result of that, the amount of money needed to carry out the transition – the money needed for article processing charges – is very large. It’s not surprising that the publishers have come out in favour of the report, because it will guarantee they retain their profits.

“It certainly wouldn’t work in Australia because there simply isn’t that amount of research council funding available.

“Instead of saying, look, each university in Britain has its own repository for journal articles, so why don’t we simply encourage the authors to deposit their articles there, they’ve decided to go wholeheartedly for the gold model, which is what the publishers want.”

Stevan Harnad, a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Université du Québec à Montréal, said the report had scrubbed the green model from the UK policy agenda and replaced it with a “vague, slow evolution toward gold open access publishing, at the publishers’ pace and price. The result would be very little open access, very slowly, and at a high price ... taken out of already scarce UK research funds, instead of the rapid and cost-free open access growth vouchsafed by green open access mandates from funders and universities.”

Supporters of [open access](#) say that publishing companies should not be allowed to erect paywalls around scientific work funded by government and charities in order to generate vast profits.

Since January, more than 12,000 academics around the world have

joined a boycott of one of the giants of academic publishing, Elsevier.

In Australia, the National Health and Research Council announced earlier this year that from July, all council-funded research would have to be deposited in an open source repository within 12 months of publication. The Australian Research Council has said it does not plan to introduce a similar mandate.

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Provided by The Conversation

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