

OPEN ACCESS:

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

by Neville Morley

1. Introduction

The general idea of making research publications Open Access is now, I imagine, familiar to most if not all readers of *CUCD Bulletin*, if only because the rules for REF2021 state that all journal articles (and full-length conference papers, if published with an ISSN) must be open access in order to be eligible to be included in a departmental return. Open Access comes in two flavours. 'Green' OA (which is the minimum REF requirement) means that an article is published in the conventional manner, but a version is deposited in a suitable repository (usually managed by the researcher's university) and becomes free to view after an embargo period established by the journal. 'Gold' OA means that a publication is free to view from the point of publication, and usually involves a payment to the publisher (generally known as an APC, Article Processing Charge) to cover the costs of publication, since these will not be recovered through subscriptions or by charging the reader.

The aim of Open Access is to make research as accessible as possible, by publishing it online – still with traditional peer review and other quality controls – and free to read, rather than limiting access to those who can pay journal subscriptions or other charges. This is expected to benefit researchers, by expanding the potential audience for their work and so increasing engagement, impact and citation, and still more to benefit the users of research, especially those outside well-funded universities in the West. Open Access is also seen as, potentially, a solution to the escalating costs of journal subscriptions, which absorb an ever larger portion of library budgets – especially given that the research has already been supported by public funds and that publication often rests on the unpaid labour of academics as editors and reviewers, while commercial publishers reap the profits.

Something which has received less attention in discussion so far, but which is an equal priority for many of those promoting the OA agenda most energetically, is that this is not just about the publication of the results of research. It is envisaged that research data should also be made freely available for others to build upon and develop, rather than their publication being constrained by traditional copyright. This is development intended both to improve peer review (since all the data will be accessible to all readers) and to accelerate the process of scientific investigation and discovery. As may be obvious from this summary, the OA agenda has been driven primarily by the needs of researchers in science and medicine; this sometimes has problematic consequences for research in the humanities, as will be discussed below.

Drivers of Change 1: the REF

The hope of the Open Access movement is that researchers will increasingly embrace this agenda, on ideological grounds (including scepticism about traditional publishing models and the dominance of a few big commercial publishers) and/or because they see the benefits for their own research. Certainly there is an increasing number of online Open Access journals, including in classics and ancient history, as online publishing has significantly reduced the

costs involved. For the majority of researchers in our field, however, the main drivers of change seem to be external, driving the ways that universities manage researchers – and certainly this is the source of current developments which threaten to change the dynamics of academic publishing still further.

Firstly, and with potentially the most far-reaching consequences for us, there are indications that the rules of the next REF will be changing: specifically, to introduce the requirement that monographs as well as articles will need to be Open Access in order to be eligible. Further details on this proposal are currently lacking, presumably because the next REF is scheduled for 2027 – but of course this requirement will apply for any monograph published from 2021 onwards, so including some already in progress and for which contracts have already been signed with publishers. At a colloquium organised on this topic by the British Academy in September, it was noted that far more of the necessary infrastructure and experience was already in place when mandatory OA for articles was introduced for the current REF cycle, and that was a much simpler task.

Publishers are unlikely to be enthusiastic about applying the same embargo periods of 24 or even 12 months for monographs as they are for articles under Green OA, but the idea of much longer embargo periods goes against the whole idea of making research quickly accessible. At the same time, the expected fees (BPCs: Book Processing Charges) for making monographs Gold OA are expected to be at least £6000 for most publishers, if not much more. There is no clarity about where such money might be found. Early adopters who have already published OA monographs have benefitted from the fact that some university libraries have made funds available, but it seems unlikely in the extreme that this will be sufficient in future to support everyone who wants to publish a monograph – implying institutional rationing of publishing opportunities in at least some universities. OA costs, including for monographs, can be included in research funding applications – but the majority of publications, including monographs, in our field is not supported by external funders.

Particular concern has been expressed about the implications of these changes for Early Career colleagues, and those following non-traditional career paths. Established researchers are likely to have better access to funds to support OA, insofar as these will exist, and in some cases can afford not to have every output count for REF. ECRs cannot risk having publications that won't be able to count for REF, but also face greater concerns with respect to the prestige of the publisher (since they are less able to rely on their own reputation), and will face greater difficulty in accessing funds and support when not yet in permanent positions. Discussions at the British Academy colloquium emphasised the need for cultural change, valuing research regardless of where or by whom it was published, and for new attitudes among those making appointment and promotion judgements – but it's asking an awful lot of ECRs to be in the vanguard of this change. The potential benefits of OA in allowing researchers without a permanent university position to access research publications seems unlikely to outweigh these obvious issues.

Other potential problems include the restriction of academics' freedom to choose the most appropriate means of publishing their research, the implications for those wishing to write works for students and/or a general audience, uncertainty for those wishing to publish with overseas publishers who are unlikely to be swayed by the protocols of the REF, and finally concern about the possible rise of 'predatory' OA publishers, analogous to the bogus journals

that have proliferated (mostly but not exclusively in the sciences) since the advent of ‘author pays’ publishing models.

Drivers of Change 2: Plan S

‘Plan S’ is a new initiative, launched in September 2018, intended to accelerate the development of OA in European science publication; it is being driven by the European Research Council, at the direction of the European Commission. To date the national research agencies of twelve European countries, including the UK, have signed up, together with some other major research funders (including the Wellcome Trust, but not to date the Leverhulme Trust). Under this plan, by 2020 all research funded by public grants will have to be published in Open Access journals or platforms, with authors retaining copyright (an unspecified transition period is envisaged for monograph publication). Most significantly, not only must all such publications be Gold OA, but after a transition period only journals that are fully Gold OA will be acceptable venues for such publications. That is to say, researchers funded by the AHRC, ESRC etc. will not in future be permitted to publish their results in ‘hybrid’ journals which publish a mixture of Gold, Green and non-OA articles.

The main implication of this for individual researchers is the restriction on choice of publication venue, especially given that there are not currently many journals or other platforms which are fully Gold OA and which meet the (vague) criteria specified under Plan S. Funding is not at this point seen as an issue, since research funders will provide funding for Gold OA for the publication of research they support (as is currently the case for articles), while research not funded by UKRI or Wellcome is not subject to these requirements. (However, it should be noted that the rhetoric of Plan S seems to envisage a move towards *all* research being published Gold OA, without any indication of where the funding might come from).

There are more substantial concerns for journals, and especially those (like *JRS*, *JHS*, *CR* etc.) whose subscription income helps to support the activities of learned societies. Many such journals are at present debating whether they should become ‘hybrid’, willing and able to make some articles Gold OA in return for a suitable APC. Under Plan S, however, at least in its current form, they will cease to be acceptable publication venues for any research funded by the AHRC or the like if they do not then move to full Gold OA. It seems unlikely in the extreme that such a move would be financially viable, where only a small proportion of humanities research activity in the UK is funded by individual external grants.

There is additional concern – not taken into account by the initial Plan S proposals, since these are clearly driven by the science model – about the expectation that research data will also be made OA, under a licence which allows others to make full use of it as they wish. The REF allows researchers to apply a CC-BY-ND licence to their publications; that is to say, others may copy and distribute the work (including for commercial purposes) but not ‘remix’ it for other purposes. Plan S mandates that only a CC-BY licence is acceptable, allowing anyone to make use of the material, including producing their own derivative works. This raises the spectre of plagiarism, but also raises serious concerns about the use of modern texts and translations as the ‘data’ on which research is based, as publishers will be highly reluctant to grant permissions on a CC-BY basis. Likewise, permission to reproduce works of art and the like in academic publications are normally time-limited and subject to other restrictions, whereas under Plan S licences will need to be open-ended and unlimited.

As with the new REF requirements, these proposals are currently under discussion, and it remains to be seen how they will develop. It is perhaps worth noting that the biggest national research funder, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, has not signed up to Plan S, and this may undermine its aspiration to transform research culture across the whole of Europe. CUCD is maintaining a watching brief on this issue, as a member of the Arts and Humanities Alliance, and future developments will be reported in this Bulletin.

Further Information

UUK has established a [working party on OA Monographs and REF2027](#), due to report this spring

The Royal Historical Society has published some very good briefing papers on [OA Monographs](#) and on the [implications of Plan S](#).

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