

# UK government report backs open access science publishing

Chris Wickham, Reuters

The report, published Tuesday, strongly backs a move away from subscriptions by readers of scientific journals to charges levied on researchers in order to expand access to published research.

Some 38 million pounds of the extra money being called for is earmarked to help pay the charges associated with open access publishing, with the rest dedicated to an extension of license agreements that allow group access and investment in so-called 'repositories' that enable online searching of archived research.

But the report also says the shift should be gradual and carefully managed to avoid damaging any part of the existing science publishing industry, dominated by the likes of Reed Elsevier, Macmillan's Nature Publishing Group and Springer Science+Business Media.

"Subscription journals will continue to be important for some time yet," Dame Janet Finch, the Manchester University sociologist who led the review group, told reporters.

The debate over open access is raging on both sides of the Atlantic, driven by the moral argument that science funded by governments and charities should not sit behind a pay-wall and generate huge profits for private companies.

The report supports this argument, saying: "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."

Reed Elsevier and other subscription-driven publishers say the criticism leveled at them by some supporters of open access is unfair, and the value added by the editorial process does not come cheap. Attacking the subscription model risks damaging a successful industry, a major employer and a significant contributor to government tax revenues, they say.

The industry is complex. Some publishing groups, Springer in particular, own both subscription and open access journals, and some subscription journals published by not-for-profit science academies like The Royal Society, generate income for their scientific work.

A decisive move to open access would also give free access to corporate customers like the major drug companies, who arguably can well afford to pay, which publishing industry sources say make up nearly a quarter of the revenues from scientific journals.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

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Science is also international. A policy change in the UK would only affect 6 percent of the research published globally and top subscription journals like Nature, Science and Cell draw their content from across the world.

The Finch report acknowledges that complexity but calls for "a clear policy direction" in the UK that supports open access as the main vehicle for scientific research, especially when it is publicly funded.

"In the longer term, the future lies with open access," said Janet Finch, but the current mixed economy of scientific research publishing will continue "for the foreseeable future" with subscription and open access journals co-existing.

She said the pace at which the industry shifts depends what happens elsewhere in the world and one of her committee members, Adam Tickell from the University of Birmingham, says similar moves by other key players in the science world could tip the balance in favor of open access.

"If the EU and the United States are as serious about open access as we are, I would expect the rest of the world to follow very quickly," he said.

Funders of scientific research, the report says, should incorporate the cost of publication into the grants they award, a recommendation that draws support from the Wellcome Trust.

"This will need the support of all of those that fund and support research, who will need to put into place effective and flexible arrangements to meet these costs, which we anticipate being only 1.0-1.5 percent of research costs," said the trust's director Sir Mark Walport.

The report predicts that over time the amount UK universities spend on subscriptions - estimated at about 150 million pounds a year - will come down as the money paying for publication in open access journals increases.

But during the transition period, which could last several years, any embargo rules that force scientists who publish in subscription journals to make their research more widely available within, say, six to 12 months of publication, should take into account the damage this could do to those top journals.

Reed Elsevier welcomed the report, adding: "The recommendations identify real opportunities, as well as risks, and how they are implemented will be key in ensuring sustainable models for scholarly communications."

David Willetts, the UK Minister for Universities and Science, has already set out in-principle support for open access but said the Finch report will feed into a government policy on the issue that will be set out in the near future.

(Editing by Tim Dobbyn)

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**Source URL (retrieved on 12/22/2014 - 6:46am):**

<http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2012/06/uk-government-report-backs-open-access-science-publishing>