

Finch 18 months on: a review of progress

Based on a paper presented at the UKSG One-Day Conference, 'Open Access Realities', London, November 2013

Since the Finch Report was published in 2012, research funders, universities, publishers and learned societies in the UK have all instituted new policies and procedures to accelerate the transition to open access. This paper reports on a review of progress undertaken by the Finch Group, and points to some areas, including monitoring of costs, licensing, but above all co-ordination between the different stakeholder groups, where further action is required.

Introduction

When the Finch Report was published in June 2012, it represented for me the culmination of nine months of intensive work as secretary to the Finch Group. But I was not allowed to rest on my laurels. The Group recognized that the task of implementation would be complex, involving work from many different stakeholders, and it pointed to the need for an implementation strategy that would involve all of them. Perhaps it should have been firmer in recommending how such a strategy should be developed and implemented. Nevertheless, the Group decided that it should as its final act meet in a year's time to assess progress. I was slightly apprehensive when I was asked to prepare a report for the Group to consider at that meeting. This paper – based on a presentation made at the UKSG conference in November 2013 – considers the findings of that report¹, which was published the following week.



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The Finch Report

It is worth starting by reminding ourselves of some key features of the Finch Report and its recommendations. The key lies in its title: Accessibility, sustainability, excellence. What the report sought to achieve was a balance between those desirable, nay essential, characteristics of a scholarly communications system. That was not easy, since both the perspectives and the interests of the different stakeholders represented on the Group – funders, universities, libraries, learned societies and publishers – were not and are not congruent. Hence no single interest group got everything they wanted: there were compromises on all sides, and what emerged from the discussions and the wide range of evidence the Group considered was a 'best-fit' set of recommendations which every member of the Group could live with. In essence, the Group recommended accelerating the transition to open access (OA) through a balanced package of moves towards gold and green OA as well as extending – for the period of the transition – the access to scholarly content through licensing arrangements.

“What the report sought to achieve was a balance ...”

The balanced package thus involved recommendations covering

- a clear policy direction towards publication in open access or hybrid journals, funded by article processing charges (APCs), with better funding arrangements to support them

- the need for minimal restrictions not just on access but on use and reuse
- moves to develop the repository infrastructure to support green OA, coupled with caution in setting maximum allowable embargo periods
- a recognition that costs would increase during the transition period, but the need to bring together in negotiations between publishers and universities questions relating to subscription costs on the one hand and levels of – and amounts paid in – APCs on the other
- moves to extend and rationalize current arrangements for licensed access to content in subscription-based journals, to give individuals and organizations outside the higher education (HE) sector a much better chance of gaining access to that content on reasonable terms.

“...considerable progress has been made ... But we must also recognize that progress has been uneven”

So what has happened?

The main conclusion the Group reached at its final meeting in September is that considerable progress has been made – more perhaps than it would have been reasonable to anticipate. The speedy acceptance by the Government of all our key recommendations was very welcome; and it was rapidly followed by new policies from the Research Councils (RCUK) to take effect from 1 April 2013, and then by a consultation from the Higher Education Funding Councils on OA requirements for publications to be submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise expected in 2020. These moves, and publishers’ and universities’ responses to them, have established a real momentum behind the shift to OA in the UK.

But we must also recognize that progress has been uneven, that not everything has happened quite in the ways that many members of the Group anticipated, and that – as the Group *did* anticipate – many detailed issues of policy and practice have yet to be fully resolved. Implementation has thus been accompanied by lively debate, as represented in the submissions made to two Parliamentary Inquiries, the first by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, the second by the House of Commons Business Innovation and Skills Committee (the reports of which do not point in quite the same direction). As I reflect on the debates, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that many of the contributions have been driven more by entrenched attitudes than by new evidence, or an attempt to engage with the kind of balanced package the Group recommended. And in terms of balance it is also clear that much more attention has been paid to ways to extend worldwide access – whether through gold or green OA – to articles published by UK authors, than to how to extend access in the UK to articles published by authors from across the world. As we stressed in our report, that is important in a context where UK authors are responsible for around 6% of the global output of articles each year, and hence the UK cannot achieve a global OA environment on its own. That task is going to take some years.

International developments

International developments are therefore of critical importance, not least because of the effects they have on the volume and proportion of publications accessible free of charge in the UK, and on costs. For to the extent that the UK is ahead of the rest of the world in the transition to OA, it bears a disproportionate share of the costs.

In this context, the Government and other bodies have been active in discussions with agencies including the European Commission, Science Europe, the Global Research Council and the G8 meeting of Science Ministers. There have been important developments in all those forums, as well as in Australia and the USA, particularly in the form of the memorandum issued by the White House Office for Science and Technology Policy in February 2013. Some commentators have seen these developments as representing an

“International developments are ... of critical importance ...”

13 overwhelming preference for green OA, and thus putting the UK out of step with the rest of the world in its support for gold. We believe, however that policy developments across the world are more nuanced than a simple rush for green and that it is too early to predict changes in the international publishing market. Nevertheless, it is important for Government and other agencies to remain active in seeking to influence and co-ordinate appropriate policy at an international level and share the emerging evidence as to the impact of policies in the UK.

Pace of change

The pace of change has posed difficulties for all parties, universities, publishers and learned societies especially. Universities found it challenging to develop the policies, systems and procedures necessary to meet RCUK's requirements in time for 1 April 2013, not least because there were some significant changes to those requirements – introducing some much-welcomed flexibility – in the preceding months. Important matters such as the operational arrangements for the payment of APCs had in some cases to be developed and implemented from scratch. Such matters have posed challenges for publishers too, along with others such as decisions on whether to introduce an OA option for articles published in subscription-based journals (thus making them hybrid); on whether or not to introduce CC BY or other Creative Commons licences (and how to make licence arrangements transparent); and on whether to change embargo periods to meet funders' policies.

These and a host of second-order policy and operational issues have often required dialogue between different players, since inter-connectedness is a core feature of the scholarly communications system as a whole. But the pace set for implementation, combined with the lack of a formal mechanism to ensure co-ordination, have not made it easy to keep all the stakeholders on board as they seek to deal with these issues.

Green and gold OA

The Finch Report largely eschewed use of the terms green and gold OA, which are still not well understood, or even recognized, in the wider research community. But much of the debate over the past few months has been set in terms of green vs gold, which seems to me to elide many important issues, but also the important roles that both gold and green will play during the accelerated transition we recommended.

A welcome development over the past year has been the very significant increases in volumes of full-text articles deposited in the institutional repositories of some universities, including major research-intensive ones such as UCL and Manchester. Often this has been associated with university procedures relating to the current REF, and expectations about the Funding Councils' requirements relating to the next REF. Progress is far from uniform across the HE sector, but it seems likely that the role of institutional repositories will increase over the coming years. This has led some to assume that green OA, with ever-shorter (or zero) embargoes is the simple, cost-effective way to achieve OA. But the restrictions on access and use associated with green OA in most cases, and the risks to the sustainability of journals if those restrictions are removed, mean that we believe that gold is preferable as the long-term goal.

Evidence so far suggests that take-up of options for gold OA and the payment of APCs has been relatively slow in many universities; and it will be interesting, and important, to monitor this over the coming year, including the balance between publication in fully-OA and hybrid journals. Nevertheless, the Group still believes that a transition via a mixed economy to gold OA, where publication costs are met mainly by the payment of APCs, is the most effective way of balancing accessibility, sustainability and excellence; and it welcomes UK funders' support for that position. Neither we nor they, however, recommend an immediate move to an exclusively gold model; rather, we see its adoption arising from organic growth towards a fuller OA world, internationally as well as in the UK. And it is clear

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14 that proper development of the mixed economy depends on effective funding for gold OA and the payment of APCs. That does not imply favouring gold to the exclusion of green. Rather, in a context where green is already being funded through subscription budgets and through support for repositories, it is the essential means of creating balance within a mixed economy.

Funding and costs

Costs are of course a critical issue. The Group was pleased that RCUK accepted the need for new arrangements to meet the costs of APCs in the form of dedicated block grants to universities; and also by the Government's announcement in September 2012 that £10m was to be made available to 30 universities to support the transition to OA.

"...development of the mixed economy depends on effective funding for gold OA ..."

The Group was and is clear that the costs of publication are integral to the costs of doing research; and we are pleased that the Wellcome Trust, RCUK and other funders accept that proposition. We hope that other funders will come to accept it too. But in the UK's dual support system, a large proportion of research funding comes to universities in the form of a block grant intended to meet the costs of the infrastructure, including labs and libraries as well as salaries for research-active members of staff. In such a system, and in a time of financial uncertainty and constraint, the transitional costs of OA – particularly of APCs – represent a challenge for universities. For unless APC costs are met out of a new flow of funding – as with RCUK – they constitute an additional cost burden to universities, the scale of which is for many reasons uncertain. That is one of the reasons why many universities have expressed a preference for green OA. But it is also why questions relating to the potential for offsets between APC and subscription costs are going to be critically important in the coming months and years. Some informal discussions with publishers have already begun on issues such as how the scope for such offsets might be calculated and achieved, and it is important that they are taken forward as a matter of urgency. All parties recognize both the significance and complexity of these issues.

Embargoes

The Finch Report did not make specific recommendations about embargoes. It suggested that where dedicated funding is provided to meet the costs of APCs, it would be appropriate to implement, over a period of time, a requirement for embargo periods of 12 months or under; that where dedicated funding is *not* provided, imposing embargoes of under 12 months; and that any embargoes should take account of disciplinary differences. That was translated into an RCUK requirement for maximum embargoes of six months in STM subjects and 12 months in humanities and social sciences; but with those periods extended to 12 and 24 months respectively if funding is not available to meet APCs. There are clearly both sticks and carrots involved in such policies, and a balance between the desirability of speedy access on the one hand, and risks to the sustainability of journals on the other.

"... offsets between APC and subscription costs are going to be critically important ..."

The compromise seems reasonable for the time being. But there is room for continuing debate as to the principles on which decisions on allowable embargoes could or should be made, and on the evidence that might support such decisions. Half-lives in different disciplines are one important source of evidence, but there may well be others. This will be a matter that RCUK will have to consider in its review later in 2014 of its policies and their implementation.

Licences

RCUK's and the Wellcome Trust's requirement that when they meet the costs of an APC, then articles should be published under a CC BY licence, is clearly still the subject of some controversy. Some of the issues are to do with researchers' fears (especially but not solely in the humanities and social sciences) of loss of control over their publications. But they are also to do with concerns about the disadvantages as well as the advantages of making the

15 content of articles available for commercial as well as non-commercial use, the legitimacy of creating derivative works, and also the accessibility of large aggregations of content for text and data mining. The response of many publishers has been to make CC BY available as an option for authors, but not a requirement. Again, this is a matter that RCUK is committed to consider in its 2014 review.

Extensions to licensed access

An important development here is the launch in January 2014 of a scheme to provide walk-in access to the vast majority of journals in public libraries in the UK. Even with all the limitations associated with walk-in access, it nevertheless means that many public libraries will be able to provide access to more journals than many university libraries. Even the British Library will have fewer journals licensed for access in its reading rooms than St Pancras Library opposite on the Euston Road.

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On the other hand, the visible progress on extensions to licensing in the health service, voluntary organizations, SMEs and so on is rather less than we had hoped. Some pilots will be launched in 2014, but we had hoped that with some government funding, rather more would have been achieved by now. So the Group urges some further action on that front.

Infrastructure

Realizing the full benefits of OA and ensuring that the new policies are implemented efficiently depends on an effective infrastructure. But there is much to be done in seeking to ensure interoperability across systems both within universities, and between them and publishers and funders. A key priority must be to facilitate, and automate where possible, the flows of information between different systems. This depends to a significant extent on developing and promoting the uptake of metadata and technical standards. Jisc is working with others to that end, but this work will take some time to come to fruition. Jisc has a similarly key role to play in developing the infrastructure of repositories for UK publications in a co-ordinated and interoperable fashion, working at international as well as UK-wide levels. Technical innovation is a key feature of the repository landscape at present, but investment has been patchy, and has not reached the scale we envisaged. There is a need for more work here.

Co-ordination

One of the key themes of the Group's work has been the need for co-operation and goodwill between all the key stakeholders, none of whom can deliver a sustainable system on their own. The past 18 months have seen co-operation on some issues, such as metadata standards; but such activity has tended to be ad hoc and unco-ordinated, since no single body has been identified to take on the co-ordinating role. There is now an urgent need for a formal structure to ensure engagement and active co-ordination of efforts across all stakeholders in the research communications system; to avoid duplication of effort and divergent work-streams; to deal with problems as they arise; and to oversee the collection and collation of data from different parties. Such a structure is essential for dealing with many of the difficulties that are still arising, as well as for supporting learned societies, and co-ordinating communications with the research community. Universities UK (UUK) has agreed to convene representatives of the different stakeholders into a structure of this kind, and we look forward to further progress in the coming year as a result of that work.

“UUK has agreed to convene ... the different stakeholders into a structure ...”

Reference

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