What does Finch mean for researchers, librarians and publishers?

June 2012 saw publication of the Finch report into expanding access to published research findings, the UK Government's response to the report and the issuing of a revised policy on open access publication of research papers by the UK Research Councils. All appear to be driving the UK towards the world's most rigorous adoption of open access publication of publicly funded research outputs. This article looks at the potentially profound consequences of these steps for publishers, librarians and researchers in the UK, and for scholarly communications in general, not least for the centuries-old model of peer review. It concludes that the success of the policy will depend to a considerable extent on the availability of funding and mechanisms to support it.

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At the time of writing this article, in early September 2012, the air has cleared after the initial storm of postings to the listservs on the meaning of the Finch report[1], the UK Government's response to it[2] and its interpretation by the UK Research Councils (RCUK) in their revised open access publication policy[3]. Few reports on scholarly publishing can ever have been subjected to such exegesis. Such was its apparent complexity that one well-known commentator expressed enthusiastic support for the RCUK policy only to recant and reject it a short time later.

Now that the dust has settled, however, we can see that RCUK has adopted a default position of support for open access publication in journals based on payment of a publication fee, or article processing charge (APC). Deposit of the accepted manuscript in a repository, after a short embargo period and without compensation to the publisher, is only required in cases in which a journal chosen by an author does not offer open access publication based on APCs. The preferred path is 'gold', not 'green'.

Before we consider what this policy means for researchers, librarians and publishers, let us remind ourselves briefly of the key Finch recommendations, and of the UK Government's response to them (and I use below the numbering in the Finch report):

i. 'a clear policy direction should be set towards support for publication in open access or hybrid journals, funded by APCs'

ii. 'the Research Councils … should establish more effective and flexible arrangements to meet the costs of publishing in open access and hybrid journals'

iii. 'support for open access publication should be accompanied by policies to minimize restrictions on the rights of use and re-use, especially for non-commercial purposes'

iv. 'during the period of transition … funds should be found to extend and rationalize current licences to cover all institutions in [the HE and health] sectors'

x. 'funders' limitations on the length of embargo periods … should be considered carefully, to avoid undue risk to valuable journals that are not funded in the main by APCs'[4]

The Government has accepted (i) and (iii) and RCUK is implementing them, the latter through the requirement for the use of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) licence, which goes beyond the Finch recommendations in permitting commercial re-use and which

some researchers are uncomfortable with, for example in relation to patents. RCUK is, as I write, working on (ii). Regrettably, the Government has rejected (iv) outright, refusing to make a penny of additional funding available for licence extensions which would make the world's research outputs – not just those of the UK – equally accessible throughout the whole of UK higher education and the health service. On (x), RCUK is seeking a short embargo period only if a journal does not support open access publication through payment of an APC.

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Implementation and scale

The effect of these new policies on scholarly communications will be strongly influenced by the way in which they are implemented and the extent to which they are mirrored in other countries.

On implementation, RCUK has announced its intention to provide 'block grants' to UK universities which will form the basis of institutional funds to be used to pay APCs. RCUK has estimated that 31,000 published papers came out of research that it funded in 2010. At the average APC of £1,727 used in the Finch modelling, that's a total cost of £53.5m, and around 3% of the grant funding it provides. If RCUK commits this level of funding in its block grants, then we can expect its new policy to be quickly and effectively implemented. If it commits less than this, leaving either the universities to make up the difference or researchers to reduce the number of papers they publish, or seek out low-cost and low-quality publishing options, then we can expect its uptake to be slower and more cumbersome.

We also await more detail on how the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) will implement the Government's open access policy. HEFCE has indicated that it will require open access publication of any paper to be considered for the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) but has not set out how the payment of APCs will be funded.

Even if all UK research funders, public and private, mandate open access publication, that will only cover around 6% of the world's research output. While this would double the proportion of global research published on a gold open access basis – analysts disagree on the exact extent of properly funded peer-reviewed open access publication, but I would put it at no more than 6-7% in 2011 – it would require several other major research-funding countries to make the same commitment for the balance to tip irrevocably towards an open access publishing model which would then have profound implications for all players in the scholarly communications chain.

Implications for publishers

The acknowledgement of the critical role that journal publishers play in scholarly communications lies at the heart of the dissatisfaction expressed by some at the Finch report and the response to it of the UK Government and its research funders. They might have hoped that Finch would call for the end of publishing as we know it, to be replaced by some vaguely defined 'overlay model' and spontaneous refereeing of papers by the scholarly community after publication. In their view the journal would wither away in the open access world, to be replaced by institutional repositories which would each disinterestedly put the stamp of quality on the outputs of their own researchers. Finch recognized, however, that publishers provide 'high-quality services to authors and readers' and that 'they make a significant contribution to the British economy, to export earnings and … to the performance and standing of the UK research community'[5].

Scholarly publishing will doubtless evolve in an open access environment, as it has adapted to other changes, not least the movement from print to digital. There are foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences in a large-scale transition from a reader- or library-pays model to an author- or funder-pays model. Under the subscription model, publishers have

two distinct customer groups in authors and libraries/readers, and they seek to balance their services to each. In an open access environment, the author becomes the dominant customer. Publishers will spend less on services to libraries and readers, and more on services to authors. They will certainly need to ensure that their back-office systems can support open access publishing, including the collection of APCs, from multiple funding sources, efficiently and effectively. They will need to adapt their copyright policies to accommodate CC-BY, and give up the secondary rights income that has supplemented subscription income, especially in medical publishing. APCs will need to reflect this. Some journals will fail and new journals will spring up. Open access has already led to the emergence of important new players such as PLOS and Hindawi, and more will doubtless appear. Some publishers will see their income fall, while others may see it increase.

"In an open access environment, the author becomes the dominant customer."

The most significant consequence of a transition to open access may be on the management and function of peer review. Subscription journals have traditionally used pre-publication peer review to assess not just the soundness of the methodology of a piece of research, but its quality, originality and importance to the discipline. Some open access journals use peer review to assess the soundness of the methodology only, and trust in the community to assess quality, originality and importance after publication. However, this post-publication peer review is simply not working, with a very small proportion of papers receiving any post-publication assessment and such commentary that is attached generally being trivial in nature. I believe it would be disastrous if, as open access grows, it were to be conflated with 'light-touch' or 'low-threshold' peer review, simply on the basis that the costs are lower; high-quality UK research deserves high-quality peer review and publishing.

Implications for librarians

The impact on libraries and librarians is also highly dependent on the global scale of open access mandates.

In the short term, and in the UK context, much will again depend on the extent of the funding provided by RCUK and HEFCE in support of their open access mandates. If the cost of APCs is fully met by RCUK and HEFCE then there is likely to be little or no impact on librarians, other than in any role that they might play in the administration of publication funds. If universities are forced to contribute towards the cost of APCs, then that money will need to be found from other parts of their budgets and all too often libraries have been soft targets at times of budgetary constraint; one needs only to consider how the libraries' share of overall university budgets has fallen in recent years, both in the UK and elsewhere.

There is an expectation, of course, that the cost of journal subscriptions and licences will fall in proportion to the growth of open access publication, but as long as the UK is ahead of the rest of the world in its support for open access, then the UK's costs will be higher. The estimate of £53.5m in APCs for papers emanating from Research Council funding could in time be offset by a reduction in subscription and licence charges, in line with the relevant proportion of journal content. If all UK research were eventually published on an open access basis, then subscription and licence charges might be expected to fall by around 6%, the UK's share of research outputs. This would save UK academic libraries only around £7m on their current journal acquisition costs. Corporate libraries will, of course, be beneficiaries, as they will not be contributing to the cost of open access mandates but will see the same savings in subscription and licence fees.

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The fundamental problem here is the Government's keen commitment to open access but its firm refusal to make the additional funding recommended by Finch available – beyond £10m to help universities establish publication funds – which would facilitate a speedy and effective transition to it for UK research outputs. In an interview in *The Guardian*[6], David Willetts, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, spoke of the 'massive economic benefits'

which would accrue to the UK from open access; if Government really believed in these benefits, surely it would have no hesitation in funding them at a time when the UK's economy is in so desperate need of stimulus and growth?

In the longer term, and assuming that open access is taken up on a much broader scale, then the possible implications for libraries and librarians are starker still. If we assume an essentially open access journals publishing environment – let's leave monographs out of it for the moment – in which funding for APCs is provided by the redirection of journal subscription and licence charges, then we can envisage libraries losing up to 75% of their acquisition budgets and a concomitant part of their administrative budgets. John Houghton, in his JISC-commissioned study of the cost implications of open access, foresaw little or no need for librarians in an open access journals environment:

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'OA e-only journal handling expenditure could be considered discretionary, as user communities could discover and access the material independent of their research libraries.'[7]

I disagree with Houghton's dismissal of the role of librarians, as I disagree with almost all his conclusions, but with the redirection of such a large part of the average academic library's budget, one must expect a significant reduction in librarians' positions, leaving aside any possible new roles in administering the payment of APCs.

Implications for researchers

UK researchers will feel the impact of the new policies most keenly, as they will be required to take into consideration the open access policies of their preferred journals when submitting articles for publication. 'Does the journal offer an open access publication model acceptable to my funding body? What is its APC? Is its licence CC-BY? If it doesn't offer the APC model will it allow deposit of my paper in my institutional repository within six months? If so, which version of the paper? Will it undertake the deposit for me? If I don't have research funding will my university still pay the APC?' This all assumes that sufficient funding is provided through the publication fund. If not, and if instead there is competition for scarce funds, what will researchers have to do to ensure that their papers are published?

These questions all assume a single author. How will they be answered if there are multiple authors, with multiple funding sources coming from different countries, with quite different policies on publication, copyright and re-use?

For every researcher conversant with open access publication, there will be several who have never used it before. There will be a steep learning curve for some, requiring the close support of their funders, institutions and publishers. It is incumbent on all these players to make the process as slick and efficient for the researcher as it possibly can be.

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The longer-term implications for researchers are more fundamental. How will a dominant open access model change the nature of scholarly journals and the interaction of researchers with them? In general, scholarly journals have sought to be among the best in their discipline, encouraging submissions of the highest quality and rejecting the large proportion that fall short of their standards. They have provided a high level of service to authors, in pre-publication peer review, copy-editing and the like. Authors have not had to pay for these services, as all costs have been met through readers and their purchasing organizations. Will the author-pays model, especially if it is inadequately funded, lead authors to choose the cheapest option, foregoing copy-editing and giving up rigorous pre-publication peer review in favour of a post-publication peer review which has yet to be shown to work?

Implications for scholarly communications

There are implications for all stakeholders in scholarly communications of the UK's drive towards open access publication of the outputs of its publicly funded research, and of a potential global move in this direction. I served on the Finch working group and am broadly in agreement with its conclusions; I was happy to put my name to its final report. I support the widest possible access to research outputs and I believe that open access publication, funded by APCs, is a perfectly viable and sustainable model for scholarly publishing. The argument that publication of a paper is an integral part of the research process seems to me sound. What concerns me at this point in the movement of scholarly publishing towards open access is the danger of fundamental damage to the process of scholarly communications, and to the interests of UK researchers, through an over-emphasis on cost reduction, to the detriment of a successful transition in which all the good things about scholarly publishing – and I include high-quality and efficient pre-publication peer review in this, along with other services to authors and readers provided by traditional publishing and new services still in development, such as ORCID and FundRef, or yet to be imagined – are maintained or evolved at an appropriate pace. It is desperately short-sighted of Government to expect the transition to be made in the UK at no additional cost, and this myopia risks undermining a successful transition.

"What concerns me … is the danger of fundamental damage to the process of scholarly communications … through an over-emphasis on cost reduction"

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