

UK open-access route too costly, report says

Preference for system of publishing for a fee overlooks role of repositories.

Richard Van Noorden

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The UK government's favoured route to open-access publishing puts unacceptable strains on research budgets at a time of funding shortages, says a parliamentary report released today. It also calls for more transparency and competition in the costs of publishing research.

The [report](#), from the House of Commons' Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, is the latest salvo in a heated international fight about how to afford the shift to a worldwide system of open-access publishing. The United Kingdom had chosen a radical stance, hoping to drag other nations in its wake.

In July 2012, the British government said that [money should be taken from research funds to pay publishers](#) to make UK papers free to read as soon as they were published. The hope was that this 'gold' form of open access would, ultimately, spread across the world. Until all nations were paying to make their papers free, however, the United Kingdom would find its budget stretched: it would have to pay fees to publish its own research while also continuing to pay library subscriptions for non-open-access journals.

Funding agencies in most other places — including the United States and Europe — argue that researchers should not have to pay fees up front. Instead, they should have the option of 'green' open access, making their papers publicly accessible in online repositories within 6–12 months of publication. Under those guidelines, researchers can publish in gold open-access journals if they want to, either using research grants to pay fees or selecting government-backed free journals — but that is their choice.

A June 2012 government-funded study called the Finch Report said that pushing forward the transition to gold open access would cost the UK higher-education sector between £50 million (US\$78 million) and £60 million a year on top of the £175 million that it already spends on journals and providing access to them. But the report argued that [the move was worth the budgetary pain](#), because it would hasten the day when the subscription system would be abandoned and all research papers would be made free immediately.

But librarians and universities argued that the UK policy was an expensive way to reach universal open access, and would needlessly increase publisher profits.

Pricey transition

Today's report opposes the government view. "The evidence suggests that the cost of unilaterally adopting Gold open access during a transition period are much higher than those of Green open access," said Adrian Bailey, chairman of the committee, in a statement. "At a time when the budgets of universities are under great pressure, it is unacceptable that the Government has issued an open access policy that will require considerable subsidy from research budgets," he added.

The report also says that the government has neglected the role of repositories and green open access, which would help to reduce costs.

"One could hardly have hoped for a better outcome," says Stevan Harnad, a cognitive scientist at the University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada, and a long-time campaigner for green open access.

"The report strikes a very important balance between the importance and value of repositories as a mechanism for increasing access and the potential for a fully funded open-access research-communication system," says Cameron Neylon, director of advocacy at the Public Library of Science, an open-access publisher based in San Francisco, California.

But not everyone agrees with the committee's argument for green open access. "We believe that to achieve the shift away from the outdated subscription system, funders must back gold open access now and recognize the cost of publication as an integral part of the cost of funding research," says Robert Kiley, who is in charge of implementing open-access policy at biomedical-research charity the Wellcome Trust in London.

A softened stance

In reality, however, says Adam Tickell, provost and vice-principal at the University of Birmingham, UK, the government's policy has already been softened — thanks in part to heated debates as evidence was taken for the committee report earlier this year.

For example, Research Councils UK (RCUK) had originally mandated that this year, 45% of papers resulting from research that it funded had to be published under gold open access. In May, this stance was changed to permit either gold or green, with the choice left up to researchers.

The government and the RCUK insist that they prefer gold open access, but Tickell says “there is de facto no preference for gold over green at all, although the government would never formally say this”. He continues, “Almost every university is operating on the basis that they will be compliant if their research is published green open access.”

"The reason we have set a clear preference for gold open access is to make sure we do not lose sight of the ultimate destination," a spokeswoman for the UK government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills told *Nature*. “But we agree green has an important part to play and have adopted a 'mixed economy' approach for now.” The department would respond to the report's detailed recommendations in due course, she added.

The committee report also says that the Finch study overestimated the fees required to publish papers openly; prices could be much cheaper than suggested, the committee concluded, and it recommended an independent inquiry into the costs of open-access publishing. The report also says that the publishing market has “dysfunctional” aspects, including opaque pricing as a result of non-disclosure agreements that libraries must sign on subscription contracts. It recommends doing away with these agreements.

The UK government's policy risked increasing the lack of transparency and competition in scholarly publishing, the report said; for example, it might give publishers an incentive to set longer delays for green open-access publishing and to push researchers to pay expensive gold fees.

The Finch committee will hold another meeting on 24 September, as part of an annual review agreed earlier in the year. The RCUK says that it welcomes the report and will consider the recommendations carefully. A review of how it has implemented its open-access policy is due next year.

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