

Access to research publications: Universities UK position statement

Introduction

Publicly funded research undertaken in UK universities lies at the heart of a productive economy, as well as supporting the physical, social and cultural health of the nation. A substantial amount of this research is also of high international standing, driving forward the research agenda at a global level. In this global research environment the UK also benefits from exposure to research from throughout the world. Therefore, ensuring that the main outputs of research - ideas and knowledge - are disseminated widely and are freely accessible is of prime importance.

The problem

The current subscription-based system of scholarly communication, which has served the research community well in the past, now operates at a sub-optimal level and is reaching the point where it is no longer sustainable in the modern research context.

In the past the dissemination of, and access to, research findings has been limited because of its print-based nature. Developments in electronic publishing and the internet have made it possible to envisage a fundamental change in the way scientific articles are published and accessed, addressing many of the problems and inefficiencies inherent in a print-based system. However, the potential presented by the new electronic/digital world has not always been realised to the full, and many of the constraints inherent in the old system still pervade.

A key problem for universities is that subscription prices of journals have increased rapidly threatening their ability to provide wide and universal access to researchers and students. The average price of an academic journal rose by 58% between 1998 and 2003, while the UK Retail Price Index increased by 11% over the same period. These increases, seen within the context of historical cuts in institutional funding, mean that sustainable provision is unlikely in the long term. Universities UK are convinced by evidence which shows that these price rises are a symptom of a poorly performing market resulting in inefficiencies and a restriction on the access to publicly funded research¹.

UUK position

The last few years have seen a healthy debate within the research, publishing and library communities on how to best to meet the challenges outlined above. This has led to the development of new models based around the principle that the output of scientific research should be available to all without charge. UUK believe that it is in the long-term interests of UK research for institutions, publishers, funders and researchers to continue to actively engage in this debate and embrace these new

¹ *Economic analysis of scientific publishing: A report commissioned by the Wellcome Trust, The Wellcome Trust, October 2003*

developments. The points below represent Universities UK's views, and outline what we will endeavour to do to facilitate change and further debate within the higher education sector.

This statement will be kept under review.

Key principles

- Universities UK support the principle that the outcomes of publicly funded research should be made available as widely as possible with no barriers to access.
- Advances in electronic publishing present new opportunities to ensure research outcomes can be disseminated and freely accessed as widely as possible, these should be embraced wherever possible. Universities UK believe that the current structure of the publishing market does not always ensure that this happens or that the system works in the best interests of academic community.
- The research community and publishers are developing new models, which provide efficient and sustainable ways forward. Open access repositories (which provide unrestricted access to copies of research papers) and open access journals (where the researcher or funder meets the costs of publication) have been developed, along with associated business models. Any future scenario is likely to include a mixture of new models with elements of the current system providing institutions, funders and researchers with greater flexibility and choice when looking to publish research outcomes.
- Robust peer review mechanisms remain the best way to ensure quality of publication outputs across different publishing mediums and should therefore be an integral part of the emerging publication and dissemination models. We would concur with the RCUK statement that there is no reason in principle why emerging publication and dissemination models should adversely affect either the key processes or the quality of peer review.
- Institutional repositories provide an excellent example of how universities can work to ensure the results of research are disseminated more widely. The work of SHERPA and JISC provide substantial evidence on costs, workflows and technical requirements. Institutional repositories can also have clear practical benefits for institutions, for example, in managing RAE submissions. UUK stands ready to work with these bodies to disseminate the outcomes of this work as widely as possible to ensure that institutions are able to make sound evidence-based judgments on future policies. Universities UK will also work with all stakeholders to facilitate further discussion within the higher education community on principles and practice.
- Open access encourages authors and their institutions to take a more proactive position in regard to the management of research output and intellectual property and this is to be welcomed as the UK develops a knowledge economy.

- The current arrangements are rarely satisfactory for the purposes of teaching and learning. Open access can help ensure that all teaching can take place with in a research-informed environment.
- The impact on the learned societies of a move towards new models of publishing should be monitored closely. Such societies and institutions, on a not for profit basis, play a crucial role in supporting the science base through their publishing activities. Learned societies may themselves often be disadvantaged by the dominance of large publishers and are working to respond to a changing environment, though we would not want to see the emergence of a publishing environment that undermined their valuable publishing activity. UUK would therefore encourage the funders of research, the scholarly communications community and learned society publishers to work together to develop a better understanding of what the potential impacts of open access publishing on the learned societies might be.
- Universities UK welcome and support moves by research funders, notably RCUK on behalf of the Research Councils, and the Wellcome Trust, to promote open and unrestricted access to the published output of research they fund.

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