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The view from Salford: perspectives on scholarly communications from a research-informed university

This article presents a range of perspectives on the current state of the scholarly communications sector through the lens of a research-informed university, beginning with a short overview of research at the University of Salford and followed by our assessment of what we feel is working, and indeed not working, with the current system. Based on this, we assess what we feel are the current barriers to change and both how these can be overcome and what we are doing to overcome them. Finally, we provide some commentary on what we feel is the changing open access paradigm and where all this should take us next.

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Research at Salford – a brief overview

From its inception as a university in 1967 – and back through its almost 125-year history as an institution delivering technical education – the University of Salford has been immersed in research and its applications within industry. Today, the University has expertise in interdisciplinary research in digital, robotics and smart living, with a world-leading Energy House facility and excellence in augmented and virtual reality. It is focused on the practical challenges facing industry and society and facilitating a 'two-way knowledge exchange pathway from excellent discovery research, through applied research in partnership with industry, to exploitation, impact and teaching'.[1] In this sense, the principle of opening our research to the world is already at the heart of what we do at Salford. And we are focused too on our research systems and environment, including implementing an inclusive new career framework that values quality and impact over publication metrics, as well as producing our action plan for the implementation of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). However, the relatively modest size of our research support team amplifies the challenges of responding within a fast-changing research environment.

> 'the principle of opening our research to the world is already at the heart of what we do'

Salford's research activity, profile and values shape not only how we work as a library to support research across the institution, but also our perspectives on the current state of the scholarly communications system, in particular open access (OA). Our relatively small size is both a challenge (in capacity terms) and an opportunity (in flexibility terms). In this opinion piece, we articulate our views through the lens of our institutional context.

The system: what is and is not working

From a certain perspective, and especially from a publisher perspective, the current scholarly communication system works. Academic staff conduct and publish the outputs of their research, for which they and their universities are rewarded with professional esteem, future funding and citations which inform university rankings. Publishers generate a profit in return for providing the editorial process and vehicle for delivering these publications to audiences. University staff and students can use these publications to generate new work thanks to their institutions' payment of library subscriptions. In the case of OA publications, a wider audience gets access thanks to green OA repositories and gold OA funding. This additional funding (or redirection of existing funding streams) and infrastructure for open access helps to fulfil both a moral imperative to increase and democratize access to research and a strategic drive to evidence its impact.

> 'the current … system represents an unfair, unsustainable and intractable imbalance of both power and profit'

From another perspective, however, with which many librarians and researchers identify, the current scholarly communications system represents an unfair, unsustainable and intractable imbalance of both power and profit. As a university, largely funded through student fees and public funding, we pay the salaries of researchers and otherwise subsidize the cost of research activity. We train, develop and support our staff and provide a positive research environment. Our researchers not only conduct research, but also lend academic publishing its unique value by donating their time, energy and highly specialist expertise for peer review and editorial work. Our libraries and research offices develop teams, systems and processes to manage the complexities of OA policy compliance and content licensing, at substantial cost. However, the considerable effort and expense generated by all this activity does not necessarily result in positive financial terms. Our budgets then pay for 72% of the €726 million spent on periodicals alone every year across 31 consortia surveyed in 30 European countries. Of this, €475 million are spent in 'big deal' contracts with five of the largest publishers (Elsevier, Springer Nature, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, American Chemical Society), and contracts with the largest five publishers are subject to an average annual cost increase of 3.6%. Also, on top of the millions in subscriptions fees, we now pay millions in article processing charges (APCs).[2] Yet, still some publishers refuse us the right to share the products of our academic labour openly via our repositories and thereby leave us non-compliant with the policies of the funders upon which the system relies. Furthermore, these publisher policies can sometimes lessen the ability of universities to support the ultimate impact of research upon society, which is the positive change we all seek to make and the reason for much research and academic labour in the first place.

> 'academic culture and academic progression still associate research excellence with the perceived prestige of a publisher'

We are locked into this system, in part, because academic culture and academic progression still associate research excellence with the perceived prestige of a publisher and, as Lizzie Gadd has argued, because university rankings reinforce it through their reliance on narrow measures of research excellence based on citation rates.[3]

Of course, alternatives have been emerging for years. This includes academic-led initiatives (e.g. the Open Library of Humanities [OLH], arXiv); university-led OA presses; a drive to retain authors' copyright and enable reuse (the UK Scholarly Communications Licence); the responsible metrics movement; funders engaged and driving change (e.g. through Plan S in Europe) and, taking a different approach, SciELO in Latin America; and publishers themselves adopting fully OA models (e.g. PLOS, the Institute of Physics).

Recent developments have seen Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Norway and the University of California reviewing and, in some cases, withdrawing their big deals with publishers after negotiations to deliver a financially sustainable read-and-publish model broke down. In Germany we have seen successful negotiations between Wiley and the national consortium, Projekt DEAL, and in the UK, the transformational agreement with Springer. With the development of transformative agreements and the shift to OA being driven by our major research funders (who are signed up to the principles of Plan S), the opportunity for real change seems finally to be opening. At Salford, while aware that our individual bargaining power may be constrained by our positioning outside the larger research-intensive universities, we are determined to play our part in influencing for a more sustainable future for scholarly communications that works for all research institutions. We are conscious, here, that the recent emergence of new transformative agreements, which have different financial implications for different types of institution, will require that we balance both institutional and national need.

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Barriers to change and how to overcome them

Many barriers exist for institutions in the UK that are seeking to achieve change in scholarly communications and include those listed below.

- Transformative agreements are simply a shift in the business model of publishers. In our opinion they are likely to drive further consolidation in the market as big publishers are better positioned to manage the shift from subscriptions to OA.

- With transformative agreements, the overall level of spend by institutions in the UK will be maintained. So, while these agreements help achieve OA, they will not deliver a financially sustainable scholarly communications system.

- The UK forms a small proportion of the academic global publishing market and, even within our negotiating consortium, we have different (and potentially competing) interests. To be successful, we need sector-wide buy-in and co-ordinated activity.

- As open access broadens into open research, this will demand new ways of working, potentially new roles, responsibilities and services, and will increase both costs for institutions and new forms of publication output.

- There is a wider lack of clarity and cohesion amongst publishers, many of whom are struggling with their offer and pricing.

- As the agenda for change really shifts beyond journals onto data, monographs and other forms of dissemination, the question of financially viable models for delivering full openness is still unanswered. This poses a major challenge to institutions with limited resources and limited access to grants which cOAlition S funders may make available.

- If reputations, academic careers and university rankings – which are necessarily global – are tied to the prestige of journals or publishers, the system will continue to be weighted in their favour and in favour of the status quo.

This means our limited library and institutional resource must contend with numerous changing factors, whilst our systems and processes are struggling to respond to ever-changing requirements. The different funder policies, approaches, systems, costs and licences also make it difficult to get robust and clear data, which libraries and institutions need in order to fully understand the impact of transformative agreements and OA publishing. These data also enable them to engage in effective negotiation and informed decision-making.

Transformative agreements are the catalyst for full OA under Plan S. Based on current models, it is anticipated that institutions such as the University of Salford will ultimately pay less and benefit more. As we read more than we publish, our OA publication costs should be lower than our subscription costs. But this is not the case for all. Currently, this flipped

model simply shifts costs while maintaining publisher revenue levels; it fundamentally does not address the problems and inequities in the scholarly communications system. At Salford, we support new transformative agreements as part of the sector's effort to progress the OA agenda over the medium to long term. However, we both expect to see, and will demand, lower costs aligned with meaningful OA publishing models to ensure we also see a benefit as an institution and a sustainable future.

Looking beyond the transition phase, we would welcome a more radical, holistic overhaul of scholarly communications: one that seeks to reduce the financial burden on institutions, more accurately reflects the extent and value of academic labour, returns ownership to authors, and moves away from a formal and outdated publishing process to something more flexible, agile and responsive. In summary, a system that addresses the inherent structural limitations present in academic publishing, and that rewards and incentivizes quality and impact of research over the venue of publication.

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What are we doing?

At the University of Salford, we have taken the opportunity prompted by Plan S to raise both awareness and debate within our research community. Starting with our Professoriate, we are engaging in conversations about how a full transition to OA will mean major changes both to the systems and values underpinning research, and to everyday decisions like 'Where shall I publish this?'. We are also raising our voice externally, by responding to the Plan S and UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) consultations, through our Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research engaging with Jisc and UKRI around the future of OA policy, and by our active participation in the work of Jisc and UKSG to influence publishers on behalf of the sector.

We have brought our Library Collections and Research Support teams much closer together, developing robust analysis models and bringing subscriptions and OA data together to inform decisions around transformative agreements. Here, our relatively small size has allowed us much-needed agility.

> 'a full transition to OA will mean major changes both to the systems and values underpinning research'

Addressing one of the systemic issues affecting scholarly communications, the Library has led the move towards responsible research assessment, resulting in signing DORA in 2019 and a current cross-institutional project, which is producing a meaningful and detailed action plan to be implemented under the steer of our research committee. The principles are already in place well beyond the Library: within our robust process for determining significant responsibility for research for REF 2021 (Research Excellence Framework – the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions) and within a new academic career framework, which is in the process of being rolled out.

But we also experience the challenges of driving this kind of transformation from an institution where Library, bidding, impact and research administration teams are smaller and which has less capacity to invest in research infrastructure in, for instance, open journals, OA monograph platforms or building an OA university press.

The changing OA paradigm – where to next?

While open science began as a grass-roots researcher-led movement, to date the most effective drivers for change in the OA landscape have been the policy mandates set by research funders (especially REF 2021 policy and Plan S proposals). Universities and research organizations have different priorities from research funders. As a sector, we could usefully start by setting out a collective commitment for the future of sustainable open research in the context of Plan S. This vision should foreground priorities such as fair recompense for academic labour (e.g. editorial work and peer review), reproducibility,

equality and diversity, responsible research assessment and the increasing pressures on university budgets. It would also need to take account of the differences between research organizations in terms of scholarly communications activity.

There are areas where universities and research organizations are already working to deliver open research and where, with a sustained, collective approach, we could really drive change by:

- **considering where we publish**
  Alongside funders, we can empower our research communities to fully engage with the benefits and options for OA research dissemination. We can proactively manage our budgets to support positive, sustainable OA models (e.g. not hybrid).

- **embedding responsible research assessment**
  We all need to drive change in the culture of research assessment (building on DORA, the Leiden Manifesto, etc.), including university rankings, which currently reinforces the power of the publishers and incentivizes prestige-driven publishing.

- **retaining copyright**
  We can drive the implementation of collective initiatives that tackle the issue of authors retaining their rights, e.g. the UK-Scholarly Communications Licence.

- **supporting alternative OA models**
  We can help foster alternative publishing models. University OA presses offer one alternative,[4] but we need to recognize that this is not easily resourced in smaller, less research-intensive institutions. Free-to-read, free-to-publish models including 'diamond OA' journals, or shared platforms such as the OLH,[5] arguably open more inclusive and progressive routes. These might require us (as well as funders and societies) to think broadly and innovatively about future models for funding content. There is also a wider debate on the need for or desirability of top-slicing a percentage off library budgets to pay for shared infrastructures.[6] Our view is that libraries should assess and then, where they can, support all advances and initiatives towards true and fair OA, but that this must lead to real and transformational change.

- **enabling open access to all forms of research outputs**
  In particular, given that open data are essential to the reproducibility agenda, we should expand existing research data management services to increase the open sharing of research data across all disciplines. In addition, we could look at non-standard outputs, such as practice-based research. Again, this comes with the recognition that delivering these services can be challenging for smaller institutions, and there is an important potential role for Jisc and/or other shared services in enabling this move forward for the wider sector.

Universities and other research organizations should also take a bold stance to ensure that, as Plan S ushers in a new era for OA, we see the benefits and:

- **use our collective buying power**
  The rising costs of OA are of significant concern to universities, affecting both research and library budgets. Funders hold the purse strings for research funding, but universities hold the purse strings for the bulk of publisher spend and academic salaries; arguably we are only just starting to leverage this buying power. If we can work together, then this – coupled with the fact that our researchers provide their academic labour at almost every step of the publishing process – gives us a strong platform from which to drive change in publisher policies (including costs, CC BY licences, zero embargos).

- **reject agreements with publishers that are not in our best interests**
  UK consortia, or even individual institutions, could reject future deals with publishers such as Elsevier, following the example of the University of California and others, where they are not moving fast enough towards transitional agreements, continue to charge high APCs, or insist on long embargoes.

- ***think globally***

  Global collective advocacy and action from research organizations is needed to drive the transition to OA, and universities already have strong international partnerships that give us a vehicle for this work. We need to recognize the different drivers and priorities across the world in terms of scholarly communications. While Western models exist on the availability of OA funding, in Latin America, for example, the lack of resources has necessarily led to more innovative approaches to OA.[7] But we also need to identify our common goals and interests so that we can make sure that institutions like ours, where research activity, outputs and budgets are smaller in scale (yet still vital), develop our own collective voice within national and global conversations.

The authors actively welcome thoughts and comments on this piece as we look to move the debate forward, ideally developing solutions that suit all the varying needs of our range of stakeholders.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

Competing interests
The authors are all employed by the University of Salford.

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