

**Independent review of the implementation of
RCUK Policy on Open Access
A response from the Society of Biology**

September 2014

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice, representing a diverse membership of individuals, learned societies and other organisations. We are committed to ensuring that we provide Government and other policy makers – including funders of biological education and research – with a distinct point of access to authoritative, independent, and evidence-based opinion, representative of the widest range of bioscience disciplines.

The Society of Biology welcomes this early review, and is pleased to offer comments, gathered in consultation with our members and advisors, for consideration. The Society has a diverse membership that includes authors, editors, reviewers and readers of journal articles and other research outputs. Our college of organisational membership includes learned society publishers (some although not all of which are learned publishers through their independent operations or under contract with commercial publishers), research funders, libraries, academic institutes, contract research organisations, and small to medium enterprises (SMEs). The dissemination of research is not done in isolation, but involves a range of users and producers, represented in part by our broad membership. We therefore welcome the opportunity to engage with the RCUK's independent review of their open access (OA) policy, highlighting these perspectives.

A number of our member organisations will also be responding to the Review independently, citing evidence of compliance, the uptake of gold and green OA, and the impact on costs and revenues of the transition to open access. In this response, we present an over-arching view of the landscape, focusing on three questions posed by the Review: the impact on learned societies; the effectiveness of the communication of the policy; and the impact on the wider OA landscape.

Summary

1. A sustainable model of scholarly communication is vital to ensuring that the UK remains a world leader in science and innovation, and in scholarly publishing. Equally, the invested support of our active learned society community is a key element of its growth, development and excellence. It is therefore essential that RCUK policy developments enable a functioning market of journal publication without any loss of support for the scientific community.
2. We recommend that RCUK highlights emerging examples of good practice by institutions to maximise compliance by their researchers.
3. We ask that RCUK collates descriptions of functioning models for allocation of the block grants and disseminate these as appropriate in order to promote good practice.

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4. It is too early to know the full extent of the effects of the RCUK policy but the Society urges RCUK to monitor this situation closely and take action as appropriate. We are concerned that the RCUK policy should not restrict UK researchers' ability to act as prominent authors in international collaborations.
5. We urge that further careful monitoring of the impact of RCUK's OA policy, particularly as we have found that this review is regarded as too soon to truly reveal the effects on the community, as they have thus far been gradual. We recognise the wise foresight in pre-arranging an early review in case of early disruption but as this has not occurred we would welcome further periodic reviews to fully monitor the evolving impacts.

1. The impact of the RCUK policy on learned societies

6. Maximising access to research outputs is an important way for learned societies to meet their charitable objectives, and our learned society members, both those that publish independently or with partners, are firmly committed to finding and establishing sustainable OA pathways as part of this.
7. Our members have in recent years been undertaking a suite of changes to their publishing business models, including the conversion of many subscription-only journals to hybrid models with both subscription and author-funded OA content; development of wholly OA journals; and the introduction of Creative Commons licences.
8. In light of the introduction of the RCUK mandate, the British Ecological Society (BES) through its publishing partner Wiley, introduced the CC-BY licence as one of the options available to authors. They have established a 12-month embargo period for research council-funded authors to enable them to comply with the green route OA requirements. Since the mandate was introduced on 1 April 2013, 35% of BES research council-funded authors have opted for the gold OA route, paying APCs and publishing under the CC-BY licence.
9. Portland Press Limited (PPL), the wholly owned trading subsidiary of the Biochemical Society, has observed an increased percentage of papers from the UK where the authors have chosen to make their papers open access over the last 3 years. In its flagship journal, the *Biochemical Journal*, the proportion of papers from the UK¹ published as OA has increased from 35% in 2012 (all) to 52% in 2014 to date.
10. The Finch Report highlighted the importance of learned societies and the investment of revenue they generate from publishing, which provides vital support to the scientific sector². It also outlined concerns that this activity could be threatened by OA policies that did not facilitate adaptation and sustainability.
11. Thus far our learned society community appears to be absorbing the impacts of the latest RCUK OA policy without major revenue detriment. However, our member organisations have indicated that this comes after a time of uncertainty and contingent planning. This left many reluctant to develop new activities in the last years in support of the research community that would have relied on the commitment of investment, simply because of the doubt cast over projected available surpluses.

¹ Defines on the basis that the corresponding author has a UK address

² [Finch report](#), page 61

12. Alterations to the proportion of research published under the previously dominant subscription model of journal publishing will inevitably impact on learned societies. Continued gradual change in publishing economics may provide time to plan and adapt to the market changes but it is not yet possible to determine whether there will be thresholds and tipping points in market movement with more dramatic effects, in some cases perhaps existential.
13. It is too early to report on any impact of green open access publishing and embargo periods on Learned Societies. However, it is important to note that insufficient embargo periods have the potential to undermine journal subscriptions and thus affect the sustainability of key journals and Learned Societies in the long term.

2. Communication of the RCUK policy

14. The Society of Biology is concerned that there remains considerable variation in the effective communication of the policy and its implications at institution level. We are aware of inconsistency and wide disparity in the advice given to authors by different universities; some offer very little information on compliance and how to fund publication charges, whilst some ably support and advocate 100% compliance. This ranges from an institution that maintains its own list of RCUK policy-compliant journals to aid researchers and promote the policy, to others that do not recommend author payment (broadly gold OA) and instead favour reliance on embargo periods (broadly green OA). One institution that advocates green OA as the preferred route for publication does so because they perceive this to 'provide a level playing field where everyone can participate without having to rely on access to publication fund'.
15. It is our understanding that many authors still only consider OA options at the point of manuscript acceptance, which is late in the process, leading to a confused and hasty interaction with the policy.
16. As authors use the system and encounter the policy more often, these issues will decrease. However, there is still a high degree of misunderstanding and lack of awareness about the RCUK requirements in the academic community. The appearance of the HEFCE policy has focused further attention and broadened awareness but communication remains necessary.
17. There are excellent examples of best practice regarding the communications of OA policy for authors. For example, one university has developed and maintains an institutional list of compliant journal options, and will appoint a Head of Open Access.
18. We recommend that RCUK supports the national visibility of good institutional level implementation practice to guide an overall improvement in effective communication with authors.
19. There remains a problem that available aggregated information on compliant journals is not yet entirely accurate or reliable although significant progress has been made on some databases. In a rapidly evolving market this is challenging, however it is important to support early author choice and institutional governance.

2.1 APCs

20. There are a variety of models in operation for the communication and allocation of the block grants for article publishing charges. For instance, in some cases, this is on a 'first come, first served basis' while in other institutions funds are redistributed to selected research groups within the university.
21. We ask that RCUK collate functioning models for allocation of the block grants and considers how best to disseminate this in order to promote good practice.

2.2 Licences

22. The requirement for a CC-BY licence served to make some authors nervous initially due to the implications of liberal sharing, re-use and building upon a work that they have created, but the bioscience community appears to be gradually adjusting to this and its implications. This perceived nervousness is reflected in the recent Taylor and Francis author survey³ which probed researcher attitudes to the different licence types. It found that CC-BY continues to be the least popular licence with CC-BY-NC-ND the most popular.
23. A number of our Member Organisations active in publishing are actively monitoring concerns expressed about the CC-BY licence by the academic community and will be reviewing this in due course.
24. We have published a note explaining the different types of 'Creative Commons licences' to explain the differences between the commonly used versions of the licences, the implications for authors upon publishing work under one of these licences and why the funding bodies wish to use the CC-BY licence⁴.

2.3 Review articles

25. The consideration of review articles remains an area in need of greater clarity in the RCUK OA policy. Authors of review articles are asked to list their funders prior to publication, and therefore are expected to comply with that funder's OA policy. Review articles are often not written in relation to directly funded primary research, complicating the requirements in the view of authors. Review journals are less likely to offer OA options, and can have costly APCs. The suitability of using the block grant for publishing charges in these cases may not be clear. Greater clarification and extended guidance is needed on the OA requirements for review articles. Review articles are an important aspect of scientific research, contributing synthesis and perspective and establishing expertise, they are also an important part of career progression, including for early career scientists. It is important that RCUK-funded scientists have the funds to publish reviews in key journals.

2.4 Author communication

26. The corresponding author carries much of the responsibility in communication about OA policy and may require support when the reported research is funded by different sources through co-authors or collaborative projects. However, while there remains ambiguity surrounding the compliance obligations of different authors, the need for well communicated advice remains.
27. Many of our member organisations have revised and improved the information on OA available to authors. The Society for General Microbiology, a self-publishing society, have substantially updated their instructions to authors; have developed an Open Access set of FAQs; and have provided a table summarising their journal's compliance with funding body requirements. They have also published a policy regarding preprints and postprints in light of the RCUK mandate.

³ <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pdf/open-access-survey-march2013.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.societyofbiology.org/about-us/committees/research-dissemination-committee/rdc-activities> and at https://d1g8qexchac5be.cloudfront.net/images/Creative_Commons_licences_Society_of_Biology_Guidelines_for_Authors_and_Users.pdf

28. The Society of Biology is committed to championing sustainable and equitable practices in the circulation and curation of research outputs, and to sharing information and best practice with our member organisations and individual members. We are happy to discuss how RCUK can work with learned societies to communicate with the research community and ensure adequate widespread understanding of OA policies and their implications.

3. The impact of the RCUK policy on the wider open access landscape

29. When seen in the wider context of OA policy in the UK, it is difficult to disambiguate the impact of the RCUK policy from the recent implementation of the HEFCE, HEFCW and SFC OA policy for the 2020 REF. Thus, any changes in the research culture in the UK with regards to OA are difficult to attribute to the RCUK policy directly; it is likely that all the recent policy changes have and will contribute collectively to the overall outcome.

3.1 Journal choice

30. The UK Government has been a strong advocate for accommodation of a mixed model with a preference for author-pays gold OA. The RCUK policy, with its preference for gold OA, has spearheaded the implementation of this model in the UK, and this has made progress in assuring tangible support.
31. The publishing landscape has become significantly more diverse since the implementation of RCUK's OA policy, ranging from the excellent to the highly questionable. Learned Societies and Research Councils can play a role in communicating with early career researchers about desirable characteristics when choosing a journal, and how to identify and so avoid the questionable ones. Indeed RCUK may wish to embed training regarding good publishing practices within their DTP and CDT doctoral training programmes if it is not already.

3.2 International OA

32. The Society remains concerned about the impact of the policy on international research collaborations. Of the 6% of peer-reviewed papers published each year by UK researchers,⁵ nearly half of them are produced in collaboration with colleagues from overseas. An international collaborator is unlikely to be research council-funded but, in many cases, will be the corresponding author and may not have the requirement or funds for OA. We are concerned that the RCUK policy may serve to make UK researchers less attractive as prominent authors in international collaborations. It is too early to know the full extent of the effects of the RCUK policy but the Society urges RCUK to monitor this situation closely and take action as appropriate.
33. The RCUK's policy has an important bearing on the international publishing landscape. While the UK arguably remains the most ardent champion for gold OA, the focus on new publishing models has been emulated in Horizon 2020 funding calls and a number of European countries, as well as

⁵ [Finch report](#), page 18

the USA and China, are investigating the formulation of their own distinct OA policies. However, a number of these have opted to advocate the embargo-dependent 'green' model.

4. Closing remarks

34. The decision to review the operation and impact of the RCUK policy in 2014 is welcomed. However, we recommend that further careful monitoring of the impact of RCUK's OA policy is required, particularly because we have found that this review is regarded as too early to truly reveal the effects on the community which have transpired to be gradual. We recognise the wise foresight in pre-positioning an early review in case of the emergence of early disruption but as this has not occurred thus far in the biosciences we would welcome further periodic reviews to truly monitor the evolving impacts. We look forward to engaging with RCUK regarding future review processes.
35. The Society of Biology has a number of outputs⁶ which seek to ensure that our community remains up to date and well aware of changes and discussions which may affect them in terms of the publishing landscape. These include our Research Communication newsletter, a series of advice notes and hosting of relevant meetings. We will continue to engage with and support our individual, learned society and organisational member community in this way.

The Society of Biology is pleased for this response to be publically available. For any queries, please contact the Science Policy Team at Society of Biology, Charles Darwin House, 12 Roger Street, London, WC1N 2JU. Email: policy@societyofbiology.org

⁶ <https://www.societyofbiology.org/policy/policy-issues/research-dissemination>