

RCUK consultation on research outputs

Open access is a thorny issue for not-for-profit scientific publishers. **Ron Fraser** describes the latest UK research council proposals which may have long-reaching effects on journals publishing.

The eight UK Research Councils have recently held a consultation exercise on their proposals for public access to research outputs – that is papers published from work they have funded. Their position is based on four principles:

Ideas and knowledge derived from publicly funded research must be made available and accessible for public use, as widely, rapidly and effectively as practicable.

Published research outputs must be subject to rigorous quality assurance, through peer review.

Mechanisms for publication and access must be efficient and cost-effective in the use of public funds.

Outputs of current and future research must be preserved and remain accessible not only for the next few years but for future generations.

It would be difficult to disagree with the generality of these principles. However, many publishers and learned societies

suggested by editors and referees, but before copy editing and formatting by the publisher.

The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), of which SGM is a member, is concerned that immediate free availability of 'good enough' versions of journal articles would encourage librarians to save money by cancelling subscriptions, especially if other research funders follow the RCUK example. This could threaten the financial viability of journals, and hence their ability to support peer review and other value-adding processes. Many learned society publishers, including SGM, already make older papers freely available online, but recognize that the most recently published papers need to be under access control to maintain subscription income. Those publishers who have experimented with very short periods under access control have had some nasty experiences at subscription renewal time.

There is also concern about the proliferation of different versions of

papers, and the effect of citation of versions other than the definitive published one, as already happens in some areas of physics. Papers in e-print repositories, outside of the publisher's ongoing quality controls on version stability and corrigenda, may be more prone to errors and even deliberate misrepresentation. It also has to be said that institutional e-print repositories still have a long way to go to prove themselves as an effective means of information dissemination, despite the assertions of their more evangelical supporters. By no means all UK universities have chosen to set them up, perhaps because of the significant costs involved. Those that do exist cannot yet compare in functionality and content with 'gold standard' operations such as SGM's online journals.

of cost-effectiveness. However, it then appears that such author charges will be regarded as one of the elements of full economic costing, which is currently being implemented, so it remains to be seen how available such funds would be. RCUK admits that the viability of the author-pays model is still far from certain, and that the costs to research-led universities could be significant. Many learned society publishers are at present grappling with the question of whether and how to experiment with author-side charges. The RCUK statement that they will discuss with the learned societies ways in which they can adapt to and exploit new models of publication may or may not be seen as reassuring.

A group of learned societies who produce their online journals with HighWire Press, including SGM, have written to RCUK suggesting that they should recognize publication in those HighWire-hosted journals that make back content free after an access controlled period as sufficient in itself to represent compliance with RCUK's requirements. This would have the advantage that authors publishing in these journals would not have to make any additional efforts to self-archive their papers, and would automatically be within the copyright

Committee and Council, and as an active participant in outside bodies such as ALPSP, the Biosciences Federation, and HighWire Press, will monitor developments closely, with the objectives of maintaining the high quality of our journals, the high standards of service to authors, editors, referees, readers and librarians, and the wider underpinning of microbiological science. The Society has already shown its willingness to embrace change where this is consistent with sensible policy to the benefit of science and prudent management in an economically sustainable manner. RCUK is being urged by many parties to give further consideration to its proposals, and to engage in a dialogue with learned societies and researchers about the best way forward.

It is worth looking across the Atlantic to see what has happened to similar proposals from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). There, authors were initially to be 'required' to deposit publications arising from NIH-funded work on PubMed Central, and for them to be freely available 6 months after the time of publication. This was swiftly changed to 'requested' to deposit, and publishers' wishes for longer delays before the papers become freely available are now respected. It is highly likely that the relaxation stemmed at least in part from NIH recognition that the earlier requirements would place authors in breach of their copyright and licensing agreements with publishers. Current indications are that the compliance rate, i.e. the number of NIH-funded papers posted on PubMed Central, is only about 3%. This, together with the small numbers of papers that authors in UK universities seem to have posted on their institutions' repositories or departmental websites, suggest that most authors may be content with publication through 'traditional' means in real journals of recognized quality and defined subject area, and that change to a system where authors become quasi-publishers themselves would require a major culture shift.

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The web version of this article at www.sgm.ac.uk/pubs/micro_today/current.cfm includes links to the RCUK position paper and responses from a number of organizations.

Many publishers and learned societies have expressed extreme misgivings about RCUK's proposals