

THE ROLE OF HYBRID JOURNALS IN SUPPORTING OPEN ACCESS

The Publishers Association read with interest the recent paper from Jisc, SCONUL, RLUK and ARMA on the open access journal market: *Academic journal markets, their limitation, and the consequences for a transition to Open Access: a thought piece*. As a thought piece and one designed to initiate debate, we feel it is important to address the number of criticisms levelled at hybrid journals particularly as available evidence and data point to hybrid journals playing a valuable and important role delivering the open access ambitions of the UK Government and the research community, ensuring high quality research outputs in the UK, and crucially providing choice to researchers.

Open Access in the UK

The recent review¹ conducted by Professor Adam Tickell of Birmingham University confirmed that the UK is making good progress in achieving the aims of the UK government's open access policy: to increase access to scientific research outputs in ways that are compatible with sustainability and research excellence. As set out in *Monitoring the Transition to Open Access: A report for the Universities UK Open Access Co-ordination Group*,² 18%³ of UK authored publications in 2014 were published via the gold open access route (up from 12.6% in 2012) and a further 19% of articles from UK authors were posted either as preprints, accepted author manuscripts or final published articles. This, coupled with the fact that three-quarters of journals in which UK authors publish research now offer a Gold OA option and that evidence submitted to RCUK's review of implementation of open access policy⁴ (published in March 2015) found that 94% of higher education institutions had exceeded the 45% open access target set by RCUK for the first year of implementation, the UK remains on course to achieve its public policy aims.

The role of hybrid journals

Hybrid journals are fundamental to the continuing success of UK open access policy measured against the objectives of access, sustainability, excellence and choice.

Access

Both globally and in the UK, hybrid journals are a popular route to open access. According to the *UUK OA monitoring report*,⁵ the UK uptake of the hybrid option grew at an annual CAGR of 61.7% between 2012 and 2014, while the uptake of the fully gold option charging APCs grew at just 15.4%. For some publishers, 95% of RCUK-funded authors that chose to publish on a gold open access basis chose to do so in a hybrid journal. The UUK Report also points to the existence of the hybrid option as a significant reason why the UK is now ahead of the global average in the take-up of immediate-OA models.

Excellence and choice

Authors choose to publish in hybrid journals because hybrid journals are usually established and recognised within the research community with long-standing reputations in their subject areas. In addition, they typically have a higher journal impact factor, being where good quality work migrates to as a result of authors exercising choice. Fully gold open access journals are typically relatively newly launched journals and less well known in the community (by virtue of having been around for less time). The important factor here is choice and thus hybrid journals enable authors to continue to publish in their journal of choice while still publishing open access.

1 The Tickell Review: Open Access to research publications – independent Advice

2 <http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Full-report-FINAL-AS-PUBLISHED.pdf>

3 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/499455/ind-16-3-open-access-report.pdf

4 <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/openaccessreport-pdf/>

5 <http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Full-report-FINAL-AS-PUBLISHED.pdf>

This principal point regarding researcher choice is also made by Professor Tickell. In his independent advice⁶ to the Science and Universities Minister, Tickell comments that academics not only prefer to publish in high status journals or those with long and well-established reputations, but citation practices, promotion processes and peer review in both the REF and research granting bodies may favour such publications. This is intrinsic to the research and scholarly communication system and not a product of publisher design.

Sustainability

Given the importance of hybrid journals to both the success of UK OA policy and to the continuing impact and profile of UK research, where despite representing just 0.9% of the world's population and 4.1% of researchers, the UK accounts for 9.5% of downloads, 11.6% of citation and 15.9% of the world's most highly-cited articles,⁷ one can argue that a world in which hybrid journals did not exist would not be a sustainable way forward: the UK would be pursuing an unsustainable open access policy which would affect authors' freedom to publish in the best journals and which would in turn either reduce compliance with UK policy (thus stymying the success of open access in the UK) or inadvertently threaten the quality of UK research.

The importance of sustainability can also be found in publishers' engagement with Green OA and the fact that while publishers support Green through their policies, Green does not help a move to Gold and potentially risks undermining many good journals. By contrast, the hybrid model does provide a means for subscription journals to move to Gold OA over time, as funding to support gold open access becomes more widely available.

Providing a Balanced Market

If hybrid journals, therefore, are playing such a crucial role in delivering OA in the UK and are a journal format desired by researchers as it means they don't have to compromise on their choice of publication, why is it that these journals are typically the focus of criticism?

The following arguments are typically employed against hybrid journals, and were so in the recent discussion paper, but fail to stack up against the evidence.

1. **Market concentration.** The simplistic distinction between legacy and newer market entrants hides the reality that most if not all publishers are open access publishers. Whilst a significant number of long established publishers offer hybrid gold publication options, these same publishers similarly publish fully gold journals too. The key is choice and most publishers pride themselves on being able to offer a range of publication options for authors to choose from. In fact, arguably there is more competition than ever before as established publishers compete with new entrants and each seeks to compete with each other for the best authors to publish in the best journals. If a characteristic of a well-functioning market is the existence of choice then hybrid journals play a crucial role in ensuring the continuing functioning of the market. The fact that the UK is home to a number of large, global academic publishers, some of whom have been partners with the research community for over 100 years, bringing to the public's attention the very latest in scientific and academic thinking, should be a matter to be celebrated.

2. **Barriers to entry.** The existence of new publishers in the new fully OA market and the relatively few new publishers in the hybrid journal market is offered up as evidence that the academic publishing market is not "well-functioning". This only holds sway if you accept the argument put forward that the 'new' and 'legacy' markets are two separate and distinct markets. This is not the case and is an artificial split. The academic journals market is a single market with different options available for researchers. The publishing options that are available to researchers co-exist and complement each other as evidenced by the fact that many publishers have both 'new' and 'legacy' journals. As noted above, there is more competition between a growing number of publishers than ever before and the emergence of 'new' publishers such as PLOS and Elife and the wide range of publication models offered by publishers suggest flexibility and fluidity in the market.

6 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/499455/ind-16-3-open-access-report.pdf

7 International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base – 2013

3. **Pricing.** The biggest criticism of hybrid journals is around cost, in particular that average APCs are higher for hybrid journals than they are for fully gold journals. However the reason for this, as set out earlier, is around the value researchers place in hybrid journal; seeing them as publications with high editorial standards, higher impact factors, greater levels of citation, higher standards of peer review (and therefore higher rejection rates), and higher production standards. This is clear from the independent review commissioned by the UUK OA Monitoring Group and the subsequent report.

The following table and graph, taken from the *UUK Monitoring report*, indicates how APC prices correlate (and incrementally increase with) FWCI:

Figure 15: Mean APC against average Field Weighted Citation Index score for journals, 2014

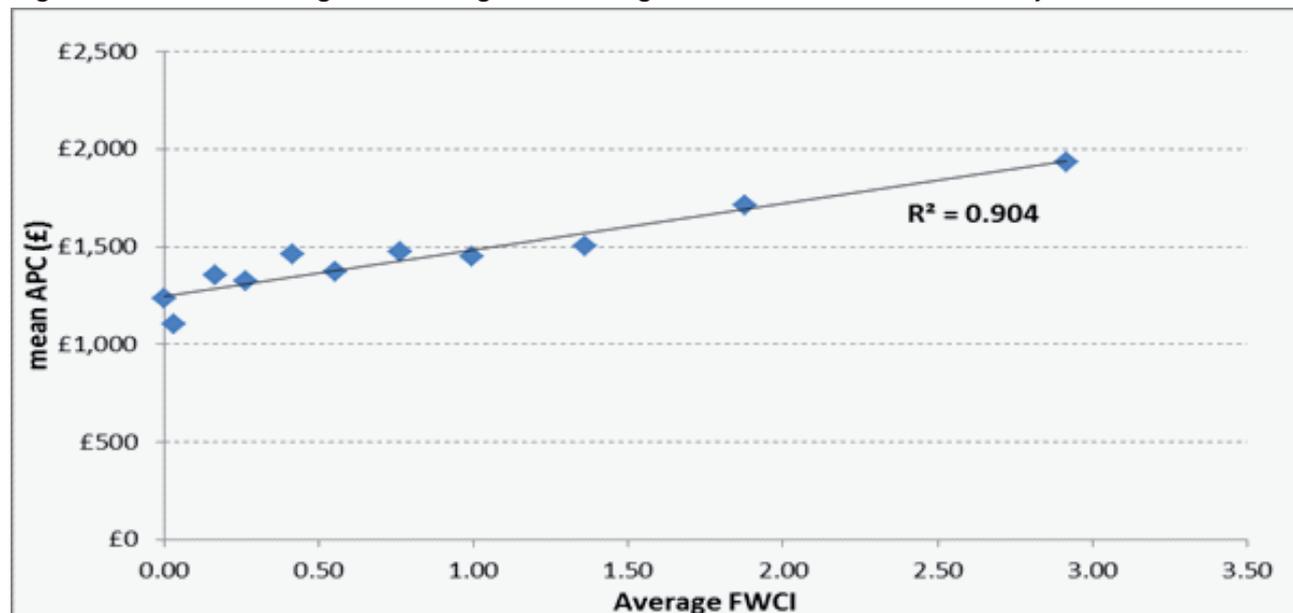


Table 21: APC prices paid and Field-Weighted Citation Index values (based on Scopus data)

Based on all journals		Based on journals in which 24 UK universities published APC articles in 2014						
Distribution of all journals	Quality Tier (by FWCI)	No of journals with APC articles (from 24 UK HEIs)	No of articles with APCs (from 24 UK HEIs)	Proportion of journals	Proportion of articles	Weighted Ave FWCI	Ave FWCI	Ave APC paid (£) including VAT if charged
5%	1.0	266	954	15%	20%	2.92	3.11	£1,936
5%	1.5	288	864	16%	18%	1.88	1.90	£1,713
10%	2.0	475	1,603	27%	34%	1.36	1.37	£1,503
10%	3.0	321	663	18%	14%	0.99	0.99	£1,449
10%	4.0	182	322	10%	7%	0.76	0.76	£1,472
10%	5.0	125	169	7%	4%	0.55	0.56	£1,371
10%	6.0	47	68	3%	1%	0.41	0.40	£1,459
10%	7.0	24	34	1%	1%	0.26	0.25	£1,325
10%	8.0	14	17	1%	0%	0.16	0.15	£1,352
10%	9.0	12	13	1%	0%	0.03	0.04	£1,102
10%	10.0	3	3	0%	0%	0.00	0.00	£1,237

This in turn reinforces the importance of these journals to UK research excellence which, as mentioned earlier, accounts for nearly 16% of the world's most highly cited articles but only 0.9% of the world's population and 4.1% of researchers.

Hybrid journals operate two business models within the same journal: hybrid journals publish subscription articles under the subscription model and separately publish open access articles paid for through article publishing charges or other upfront subsidies, which can lead to the impression that publishers are charging twice for the same content; that they are “double dipping”.

One of the reasons why it is assumed publishers are double dipping is because institutions are seeing an increase rather than a decrease in their overall spend. However, rather than being due to publishers charging twice for the same content, this is in fact due to two main reasons:

- a) The number of articles published each year continues to rise, including under the subscription model, in part because the number of researchers worldwide continues to rise – the increase in publications therefore being market-driven not publisher-driven. Subscription article growth was 1-4% across the industry in 2014.
- b) Institutions are paying two types of cost, as opposed to paying twice for the same thing: institutions are paying to continue to subscribe to the growing number of articles (as set out above) that are being published under the subscription model and which remains the predominant model globally; and institutions are also separately paying APCs to cover the cost of publishing UK research on an immediate open access basis. This does lead to extra costs in the system, but this is built into the UK policy landscape (and was recognised at the time of the Finch review) rather than being due to publishers charging twice for the same thing.

In recognition of the cost burden on institutions of having to pay simultaneously for these two separate costs individual publishers have taken varying steps including:

- The introduction of variable rather than flat APC pricing across journals
- Reducing APCs for articles published in hybrid journals
- Combining APCs and subscription fees into a single annual payment
- Piloting of offsetting schemes
- The introduction of pre-payment schemes and other discounting
- Provision of alternative green open access routes where funding for gold is not available or where the author choose to use this route. This includes reducing embargo periods to meet UK policy and partnering with stakeholders to look at efficiency gains that can be achieved through collaboration on green OA.
- Providing discounts for society members, peer-reviewers etc

None of the above steps are being taken because the hybrid OA model is either ineffective or somehow questionable, but demonstrate how publishers are seeking to drive the best possible value for their librarian and funder partners in a landscape where budgets are being spent on separate costs.

Both the reasons behind the increases in pricing and the measures publishers are taking to minimise double dipping need to be better communicated and this is something The PA and its members are working towards.

Conclusion

The arguments against hybrid journals are supported by no or little evidence. The attempt to categorise the market in academic journal publishing as ‘new’ (fully OA) versus ‘legacy’ (hybrid) is simplistic, and seeks to introduce a false split between the options available to researchers. It fundamentally fails to acknowledge that the hybrid option is the best way to grow open access publishing, and therefore meet government policy objectives, because it meets researchers’ needs by enabling them to publish in the best outlets for their research while meeting their funders’ requirements for open access.

It was acknowledged during the Finch process that there could be no one way to deliver Open Access. The needs of the research community, the learned societies and commercial publishers were going to be best served by the creation of a system based on choice and flexibility, but underpinned by the overall objective of making scientific research outputs visible to all, and, therefore, optimising the impact of research findings and sparking further and future innovation.