

John Harnad's comments on the **UK Government Response to the Finch Group Report**:

1) Finch report recommendations:

i) “support for publication in open access or hybrid journals, funded by APCs, as the main vehicle for the publication of research”

ii) “Research Councils and other public sector bodies funding research in the UK should establish more effective and flexible arrangements to meet the costs of publishing in open access and hybrid journals”

“The Government agrees with both these recommendations”

2) “This funding will come out of existing research funds.”

JH: This is bad policy from nearly every point of view. It makes sense solely from the viewpoint of profitability of commercial publishers. It benefits publishers by guaranteeing a source of funding to them that would compensate for any possible loss in revenue from subscription charges, hence providing an “insurance policy” and removing the risk of transition from one mode of charging (to subscribers) to another (to authors and their research institutions), at the expense of overall research funding. This means: at the expense of researchers, by subtracting funding from previously available research sources.

At least, in the current situation, researchers are free to choose if:

1) They wish to use up what may be a substantial chunk (at least, in certain disciplines) of their already much beleaguered research funding in order to pay publishers for publishing their work either at lower cost (hybrid model) or no cost (“Gold” OA) to subscribers; or,
2) They prefer to publish their work, at little or no cost to themselves or their ever shrinking research funds, in journals that have good distribution and provide credible standards of refereeing, while seeing to it themselves that there is widespread free access to the essential content of their work by archiving it in a freely accessible public repository (such as ArXiv, or, alternatively, linked institutional repositories that are able to provide equally effective distribution and access).

The latter is what is meant by “Green OA”, it clearly provides the most accessible, least costly route available to the scientific community, who are the most pertinent players in the process of discovery, verification and propagation of knowledge: authors/researchers, reviewers and readers. It is their interests that should be viewed as primary - not that of profit-oriented commercial publishers whose objective, in one way or another, is to be guaranteed at least the currently existing, often excessive revenues, whether at public expense, or otherwise.

It has been demonstrated time and again, e.g., via recurrent scandals such as the “El Nachie affair”, how complete is the contempt that large commercial publishers, such as Reed-Elsevier, have for editorial or refereeing standards. It is hard not to conclude that such publishers in fact have no regard whatsoever for the interests or priorities of the scientific community; the latter is simply their clientele, and hence it is politic to preserve an illusion of shared priorities, when no such thing exists, except in the sense that a shark has shared interests with its prey. The scientific community serve to provide the raw material (at no cost) for the journals, the additional labour, (through unpaid, anonymous, uncredited referees) which allows the publisher to provide an “imprimatur” of validation (often with no genuine validity) and, finally, they are the “clients” (whether subscribers or authors) who guarantee the publishers revenues.

Under the newly proposed policy directives, the currently existing freedom of choice open to authors, as described above, is removed from researchers, since the funding is subtracted at source from available research funds, and transferred to a fund to pay the publishers, either directly, or via an institutional mechanism. The losers, clearly, are the researchers and their funded work.

3) Finch report recommendation:

ix) the infrastructure of subject and institutional repositories should be developed so that they play a valuable role complementary to formal publishing, particularly in providing access to research data and to grey literature, and in digital preservation.

The Government response:

“UK Research Councils have already invested in a number of successful repositories”, mentioning

- the Economic and Social Research Council’s Research Catalogue
- UKPubMed

This makes no mention of other well functioning, well-known repositories, such the ArXiv, which has long been the most widely used resource preferred by physicists, mathematicians, and computer scientists worldwide. This publicly funded resource (based physically mainly in the U.S., at Cornell University, with mirror sites elsewhere, but serving the needs of scientists worldwide) has been in place, and very widely used within in these domains, since over twenty years, effectively providing for “Green open access” to all within these disciplines through freely available pre- and post-publication distribution at no cost to authors or readers.

4) Finch report recommendation:

x) funders’ limitations on the length of embargo periods, and on any other restrictions on access to content not published on open access terms, should be considered carefully, to avoid undue risk to valuable journals that are not funded in the main by APCs. Rules should be kept under review in the light of the available evidence as to their likely impact on such journals.

The Government response:

“We prefer the ‘gold’ over the ‘green’ model, especially where the research is taxpayer funded so the Government agrees with the sentiment expressed in the Finch Report.”

Furthermore, the directive declares as reasonable “embargo periods” of up to two years imposed by publishers not receiving Article Processing Charges, (shorter if the publisher themselves choose not to take up this “preferred option” - which could only mean even those that do not offer “gold” OA, but would like to impede any form of OA dissemination, such as the publicly funded, freely accessible repositories as mentioned above.

Unquestionably, this is the worst possible directive of all. It cuts across the bow of even the best currently accepted practices, and is highly prejudicial to the goal of free dissemination of the results of scientific research. It is beneficial only from the viewpoint of profit-guaranteeing to even the most rapacious of commercial publishers.

To begin with, the words “Green” and “Gold” OA are misleading characterizations here. There is nothing “Gold”, for science, in the “Gold OA” alternative. This sort of policy will only help assure “Gold” for the already well endowed coffers of commercial publishers, while serving, effectively, to stamp out even the existing benefits provided, at little public cost, by the existing, effective mechanism of “Green OA”. The latter is in fact the only mechanism that has been well tested, in domains where it has long been utilized, and convincingly shown effective in facilitating the rapid, wide dissemination and free availability of the fruits of scientific research at relatively small public expense. It is in the best interests of science, and enables the widest sharing of results involved in its advance, providing a low cost, effective alternative mechanism for free dissemination of knowledge.

The current UK government directives will encourage the exact opposite: the destruction of such functioning, viable, low cost mechanisms. This misguided conclusion has doubtless been reached under the influence of high-handed lobbying by representatives of the publishing industry who have cleverly contrived to co-opt the slogan “Gold OA” for their own advantage. It is not in the public interest nor in the interest of widespread, free dissemination of the results of scientific research. If fully implemented, it will in fact impede the continued use of the only existing effective mechanism for guaranteeing genuine Open Access to scientific research literature.