

ARTICLE

Paying twice for Gold

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Abstract

5 februari 2014 - EU governments seem to prefer gold in the debate on Open Access. The problem with 'gold' is that often subscription fees for universities persist while authors now pay too. The League of European Research Universities raises critical questions.

'Green' is the route where research outputs are made freely available on the web, using an Open Access repository, alongside formal published versions. 'Gold' in an Open Access sense means that the costs of publication are usually met by the author and there are no subscription costs. But a big part is played by hybrid commercial journals that universities have to subscribe to and let authors pay a fee too.

Paul Ayris, Chair of the LERU (League of European Research Universities) Community of Chief Information Officers, responds to the speech of The Dutch State Secretary for Science, Sander Dekker.

Speech of Sander Dekker

"The Dutch State Secretary for Science, Sander Dekker, recently launched a call at the APE 2014 Conference in Berlin for a concentration on the Gold route to Open Access:

'For me, the Green Road is like coming fourth in a major championship. A great achievement, without doubt, but if you are going for gold, fourth place is the most frustrating place you can achieve. Ultimately, it is only the winner that everyone remembers.'

It is welcome to see such a strong policy position on Open Access to publications. In many ways, it mirrors the position taken in the United Kingdom (UK) in the Finch Report and mirrored in the Open Access policy of RCUK (Research Councils UK). RCUK too has a preference for Gold over Green.

Some commentators have seen a conflict between the Dutch Minister's statement on Open Access and the position taken by LERU (League of European Research Universities) in its Roadmap Towards Open Access. Is this really the case?

Philosophical roots

In 2011, LERU published its Roadmap Towards Open Access and I acted as chair of the Working Group which drafted the document for the LERU Rectors. The Roadmap is an

attempt to offer advice and examples of Best Practice for LERU members, indeed for any European University, which wishes to develop a policy position and Implementation Plan for Open Access.

The LERU Roadmap sees the move to Open Access as one which embraces the traditional values of the academy:

‘Open Access brings benefits for a variety of constituencies. Open Access has its philosophical roots in the traditional values and goals of the academy – collegiality, research and knowledge creation as a shared endeavour, a collaborative approach to enquiry, the furtherance of human understanding and the diffusion of knowledge to the benefit of Society at large.’

The Roadmap surveyed all Open Access activity across the LERU members and found a marked preference for Green OA, founded in repositories, rather than Gold. For many sorts of research outputs, Green Open Access has brought significant visibility to institutional research. This is true for research theses leading to a doctoral degree.

In University College London the university measures the top downloads from its repository UCL Discovery every month. In January 2014, 7 of the top 10 downloads were for PhD theses. PhD theses receive far more consultations as OA outputs online than the paper equivalents would have received, stored in remote warehouses because of pressures of space. So popular are research theses housed in repositories, and so made available via the Green route, that UCL maintains the DART-Europe portal giving access to over 450,000 OA research theses in over 550 universities across Europe. So Green Open Access is a winner, as far as PhDs are concerned.

Fast-changing landscape

What about other forms of research output, notably journal articles? The LERU Roadmap acknowledges that the OA landscape is fast-changing. It certainly looked at the potential of Gold OA to change the way research is disseminated. The picture is complex. There are fully Gold OA journals, where the costs of publication are usually met by the author paying an Article Processing Charge (APC), although this cost is often met by the research funder. There are no subscription costs.

However, there are other sorts of Gold OA journals - hybrid journals. These are commercial journals which universities buy under subscription, and which offer a hybrid option where individual articles can be made OA by the payment of an APC. In this scenario, university libraries pay subscriptions and the authors pay APCs if they want to or need to have their articles available as Gold OA.

Paying significantly more

This is the difficulty over Gold OA. If subscriptions and APCs are paid for the same article, how do individual universities see any relief on the level of their costs? Lowering subscription costs at a global level does not sufficiently help the individual institution which is meeting the

cost of the subscription and the APC. LERU universities produce a lot of research and, under his model, fear they would find themselves paying significantly more.

This is why on 31 January 2014 David Willets, UK Minister of State for Universities and Science, was reported as saying publishers should encourage adoption of gold open access by reducing individual universities' subscription charges as they pay more in article fees:

'The government therefore "looks to the publishing industry to develop innovative and sustainable solutions". He suggests this should involve a "meaningful proportion of an institution's total [article charges] with a publisher" being "offset against total subscription payments with that publisher" on a sliding scale up to a set limit.'

New business models necessary

This is the nub of the challenge for all those involved in research production, dissemination and publishing. The future may well be Gold, but fundamental changes to existing business models need to be made for this to happen. Working together in partnership, all stakeholders have an opportunity to create a dynamic new business model for the future.

This is also what the LERU Roadmap acknowledged when it says of the Green and Gold routes: 'The adoption of either or both routes could lead to a transformation in the means of disseminating research outputs by LERU and other universities across the globe'.

The calls by the UK and Dutch governments for serious discussions on the future of Open Access are welcome. It is for the stakeholders to take these discussions forward."

Paul Ayrís is Chair of the LERU (League of European Research Universities) Community of Chief Information Officers.

LERU is an organisation of 21 research-intensive universities in Europe. Founded in 2002, LERU advocates education through an awareness of the frontiers of human understanding; the creation of new knowledge through basic research, which is the ultimate source of innovation in society; and the promotion of research across a broad front in partnership with industry and society at large.

The purpose of the League is to advocate these values, to influence policy in Europe and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience. LERU regularly publishes a variety of papers and reports which make high-level policy statements, provide in-depth analyses and make concrete recommendations for policymakers, universities, researchers and other stakeholders.