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Eve, Martin Paul (2017) Open Access in the United Kingdom. In: Söllner, Konstanze and Mittermaier, Bernhard (eds.) Praxishandbuch Open Access. De Gruyter. ISBN Bernhard.

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Open Access in the United Kingdom

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The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been a leader in the advance towards open access (OA) to scholarship and research.¹ Indeed, a combination of centralized, state research-funding bodies, coupled with a nationwide openness and transparency agenda has created an economic and political climate in which discourses of open science and scholarship can flourish. Although different parts of UK policy on open access have not been universally well received by those in the academy and those in publishing, there have also been two official parliamentary hearings into open access; a set of reviews and recommendations, headed by Professor Adam Tickell; and a variety of implementation strategies from different private and public funders and institutions. In this chapter, I will briefly cover the political and economic elements of open access as they have emerged in the UK, spanning: funders, politics, institutions, publishers, and academics.

Government Funding

The UK operates a system of state research funding called “dual support”, underwritten by taxpayers. Owing to the devolution of political powers to the constituent countries in the United Kingdom, the precise mechanism of this funding is somewhat complex but nonetheless important to understand how open access has evolved. Until the reforms to Higher Education proposed in late 2015 that are likely to be implemented in spring 2017, the bodies that administer this funding are called the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding

¹ I write this piece in the week after the UK’s referendum on leaving the European Union. I am, therefore, acutely conscious of the challenges facing the unity of the UK and even the potential for that union to be dissolved by the time that this chapter is published.

Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Department for the Economy (in Northern Ireland), and the Research Councils. With the exception of the Department for the Economy, which allocates funding directly to higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, these entities are non-departmental public bodies and they operate at arms' length from the government. The two elements of the dual support system that these bodies oversee are Quality-related Research funding (QR) or Research Excellence Grant funding (REG) in Scotland, and specific project funding. Every year, the UK government and devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland allocate an overall amount of funding to each of the non-departmental government bodies that oversee its expenditure. Specifically, QR/REG is administered by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC) and Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy as a block grant based on performance, at the institutional level, in periodic Research Excellence Frameworks (REF), previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This can be spent as universities see fit to enhance their research over the year. The second strand of research funding goes to the Research Councils, who allocate their grant on the basis of submitted proposals for specific projects. These are assessed by a process of peer-review, followed by a moderation and decision panel. Through these two channels – QR and specific-grant funding – the UK has a system in which universities are given ongoing and underpinning research funding that can be supplemented when specific project needs arise.

In total, dual support awards approximately £3.7bn of funding per year, including expenditure on knowledge transfer, innovation funding, and capital/estates (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2016). All in all, then, this creates an environment in which universities are heavily reliant upon central government funding to conduct their research. Universities are also, therefore, subject to any regulatory measures that the government deems appropriate for the award of such funds. Among the measures that have been imposed are a set of open-access mandates, to which I will return shortly.

Politics and Transparency

In addition to the centralized state funding of research, which acts as a powerful behavioural lever, it is vital to understand a little of the politics of the United Kingdom to grasp fully its approach to open access. At the time of writing, the last decade of UK politics has been dominated by the two governments of David Cameron's Conservative party, first in coalition with the Liberal Democrats (2010-2015) and second as a single party (2015-2020, unless a general election is called early). The ministers for universities and science during this period have been David Willetts, Greg Clark and Jo Johnson, the former of whom was instrumental in shaping the UK's policies on open access. In fact, it is often recounted that had Willetts not experienced frustration in his inability to access university research while writing his book on intergenerational contracts, *The Pinch*, there would be no open-access policies in the UK (Willetts, 2010). Whatever the truth of this anecdote, the foundations for the policies had been laid almost ten years earlier in an April 2003 hearing at the House of Commons Select Committee Inquiry under Tony Blair's Labour party minister, Alan Johnson. At this hearing, a mere year after the initial BBB declarations on open access ('Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities', 2003; Chan et al., 2002; Suber et al., 2003), the Director General of the Research Councils, Dr John Taylor, was asked whether he supported a request by the Medical Research Council to use its funding to pay open-access publication charges. While Taylor hedged his bets at that time, citing the complexity of the matter, he did also state that it was a "live issue" that was under consideration (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2004b). Meanwhile, in a typically reactionary move, Nature Publishing group submitted written evidence to a full hearing on open access a year later to the effect that, in order for them to maintain their current selectivity and revenue levels, they would have to levy a charge of between £10,000 and £30,000 per article (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2004a).

Despite resistance of this type from traditional publishers, replicated many times over the subsequent decade, the political machine rumbled onwards in the United Kingdom and eight years

later, in 2012, a group chaired by Dame Janet Finch under the Willetts regime published its report on “how to expand access to research publications”. Indeed, this inquiry connected well with the Cabinet Office's boast that the UK administration of 2010-2015 would be “the most transparent and accountable government in the world” (Maude, 2010). The Finch report, often criticized for the way in which its advice conveniently dovetailed with the views of commercial publisher representatives on its membership, recommended a transition to a gold open-access model on article processing charges at a current average rate, at an additional total cost of £50-60m per year for UK universities (Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings ('Finch Group'), 2012, p. 101). The fundamental conclusions of this report – that the UK should continue to transition to a fully gold open-access setup – were confirmed to Jo Johnson's department in 2016 in an independent report by Professor Adam Tickell but this also stressed the necessity of flexibility over the route by which this outcome should be achieved (Tickell, 2016).

Routes to Implementation

The methods deployed by different institutions to achieve the implementation of open access are diverse. For instance, the UK HE funding bodies' policy for the next REF, planned and implemented by David Sweeney and Ben Johnson, is that all journal articles and conference proceedings that are to be submitted should be deposited in an institutional repository (green), at the point of acceptance, with a minimally liberal license and with up to 48 months embargo allowed for arts and humanities disciplines (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2014). This green road, perhaps supported most strongly by UK scientist and open access-advocate Stevan Harnad, is a transitory approach to an implementation of the Finch recommendations that seeks to change researcher and institutional behaviour and attitudes towards open access, noting that researchers, not institutions, must be responsible for deposit while institutions must by necessity have their own repositories. The green road has seen substantial growth in the UK and by November 2015, approximately 450,000 outputs were available across 91 repositories (Tickell, 2016, p. 12).

By contrast, the Research Councils have a requirement that any journal articles that emerge from a funded project must be made available in an open-access form with a preference for the gold road. To facilitate this, the Research Councils award block grants to every institution that has been in receipt of its funding. It is envisaged by the Research Councils that the majority of this funding will be spent on Article Processing Charges (APCs), although support for other models of gold and green open access are not precluded. Once an institution's block-grant funding has been exhausted, the Research Councils allow embargoed green open access as a fallback. The claimed complexity of this decision process has led to the creation of a "decision tree" that neatly visualizes the process.



Figure 1: The RCUK decision tree for open access. Released under the Open Parliament License.

That said, it is still the case that, by the end of 2015, it was estimated that 19% of the UK's research output was made available through a gold route (Tickell, 2016, p. 12).

Finally, additional pressure from outside politics comes from the fact that private/philanthropic funders in the UK have also been keen on open access. For instance, the well-endowed medical research charity, the Wellcome Trust, has also implemented a strong, gold open-access mandate under Robert Kiley; one of the few mandates that also includes (and funds) open-access books/monographs. The Wellcome Trust also announced, in mid-2016, that it would be running its own, in-house, and open-access journal for its funded researchers (Grove, 2016).

Researchers, Societies, and Publishers

Given the strong government and taxpayer -based rationales for open access in the UK, which Peter Suber notes can certainly have mixed effects (Suber, 2003), open-access in Britain has sometimes been criticized as a top-down imposition. Indeed, there have been criticisms from eminent learned societies such as the British Academy, the Royal Historical Society and individual researchers (see, for examples OAPEN-UK, 2013; Holmwood, 2013; Darley, Reynolds, & Wickham, 2014; Mandler, 2013, 2014). However, a number of new open-access initiatives based in the United Kingdom have been driven through a bottom-up or grassroots approach. Initiatives such as Open Humanities Press (led by Gary Hall), Open Book Publishers (Alessandra Tosi, William St. Clair, and Ruper Gatti), Knowledge Unlatched (Frances Pinter), eLife (Mark Patterson), the Open Library of Humanities (myself and Caroline Edwards) and others provide good examples of such efforts. Similarly, librarians in the UK have been proactive in cross-institutional advocacy. For instance, Chris Banks of Imperial College has been working to establish a “UK Scholarly Communications Licence” that translates the basic principles of Harvard-style models into a framework compatible with UK law (Banks, 2016; see Shieber, 2015). Conversely, however, few UK institutions have yet implemented successful individual mandates that are not tied to centralized funder mandates.

That said, the simple fact of the matter is that most researchers in the UK, as elsewhere in the world, have come late to open access and have encountered it in response to government and funder mandates. For most researchers, open access only became a matter of concern when their institution's funding became linked to it as a requirement. It is also the case that disciplinary disparities in implementation remain prevalent, with the humanities disciplines often lagging behind the natural sciences, although chemistry also remains weak (for more on this, see Eve, 2014).

Open access in the UK has been driven by a decade and a half of politics aimed at transparency and openness, although ironically it has also been the era in which tuition fees at English universities have been bumped to their highest-ever levels, precluding other types of access. As the UK was at the forefront of open-access developments, however, it also faced resistance from publishers for apparently “going it alone”. As has now been made clear within the Netherlands' EU presidency statements, this is no longer the case and nations that are not actively pursuing OA will soon find themselves the odd ones out (Council of the European Union, 2016). Of course, where Britain remains within the EU and what becomes of its open-access policies in relation to the Brexit vote is a matter that is, at present, hard to predict.

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