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Eve, Martin Paul (2017) It's time to heed the drive towards open books.
HEFCE Blog ,

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It's time to heed the drive towards open books

Professor Martin Paul Eve

One of the less remarked upon aspects of the Consultation on the Second Research Excellence Framework (REF) ([HEFCE 2016/38](#)) is the quiet but bold statement in Annex C that the UK funding bodies intend the current open-access policy to be extended to monographs for the as-yet unannounced third exercise in the mid-2020s.

At present, HEFCE's policy for green open-access (OA) deposit applies only to journal articles or conference proceedings with an ISSN. Ten years from now, we have been warned, the situation will look very different and books will be included.

The set of needs here is formidable; when it comes to books, we are not talking about depositing author-accepted manuscripts. So institutions need to begin thinking **now** about the strategies that they will deploy to meet these forthcoming obligations.

Ten years is both a long time and the blink of an eye. While a decade is a substantial portion of a human lifespan, monographs often take many years to write and a couple of years to publish. That there are monographs being worked upon today that will find themselves subject to the future mandate, I do not doubt.

At the same time, it is not acceptable to say that there has not been fair warning. Two Open Access Publishing in European Networks (OAPEN) studies on open-access monographs have been conducted; Professor Geoffrey Crossick published a lengthy and sensible report on the subject; Knowledge Unlatched has successfully made a wide range of books open access through its consortial model; and younger entities such as Open Book Publishers, Open Humanities Press, and Punctum Books have demonstrated new business models.

Yet monographs were excluded from current open-access REF mandates out of an acknowledgement that monographs are harder to make OA. But the starting pistol has now been fired and we need to work out what to do about it.

Sensible institutions will already have been thinking about how it might be possible to unlock the unspecified 'extra credit' for exceeding the open-access requirements of REF2021. This apparently nebulous reward – in its ambiguity, clearly designed to stimulate a range of innovative responses – seems to be an area to which open-access monographs are well suited.

Yet there is an economic challenge here and the REF cannot simply reward the institutions that can afford to throw up to £11,000 at a publisher to achieve an OA monograph. Indeed, if every institution did this for just the books submitted to the last REF, we would have exhausted the entire Society of College, National and University Libraries purchasing budget simply on open-access academic monographs.

Instead, I would hope to see examples of experimental or new business models for open-access monographs in environment statements for REF2021. If we are going to achieve a transition to open-access books, we need to have a range of funding routes to compensate the labour of publishing.

To see lateral thinking in this respect could point us on the way to the diverse business ecosystem for publishing that OA monographs will require.

I would also like to see leadership and risk-taking from the larger publishers who have the funds to do so. It is clear, for example, that academic perceptions of open-access monographs still have a long distance to travel.

There is a persisting erroneous belief that OA books are somehow less rigorous or 'real' than a monograph sold as a commodity item or are reviewed to a lesser standard. There is also a wrongly-held belief that publishing digital, open-access books means eradicating print. Big publishers should do more to counter these falsehoods actively.

But, more than this information campaign, big publishers need to try new models. The author-, institution-, or funder-facing charges that have worked in the natural sciences for journal articles are not going to cut it in the book space.

The costs are too great for the concentrating models of book processing charges to work at scale and in an international environment. Without such trials and experiments, claims in a decade's time that there are no evidenced models will rightly be dismissed as laughable.

Despite the near-universal consensus that OA would be good for humanities books, managing the transition will not be easy. The new policy needs to tread carefully around trade-crossover works, books of creative writing, and the tricky interactions of third-party material with galleries, libraries, archives and museums.

At the same time, university and library leaders need to begin thinking about their budgetary configurations. Would it be too ridiculous to suggest that, if each library re-apportioned 10 per cent of its yearly monograph budget exclusively for expenditure on OA monographs, year-on-year, over the next decade, this would sharpen minds?

This could even still be spent on print copies for a library, on the condition that there **was** an OA version available. It is not the only reconfiguration that is needed, and getting such sector-wide solidarity would be difficult. But it would be an important start.

These are the types of questions that circle around HEFCE's signalled intention to mandate open-access books for the REF-after-next. I would urge institutions to begin the difficult internal conversations that are needed to make this work and to respond with positive suggestions for how the barriers might be overcome.

It would be disheartening to see reactionary responses that suggest the forever-impossibility of OA monographs. What we need instead are ideas for ways in which we can fairly extend the ability to read research work to anyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

For the enlightenment dream of the universal library awaits. Its time is coming.

The [REF consultation](#) document includes Annex C: 'Open Access and Monographs' which outlines principles for a future policy on open access monographs. Comments on these principles are invited by email to openaccess@hefce.ac.uk by midday on Friday 17 March 2017.