

What about the authors who can't pay? Why the government's embrace of gold open access isn't something to celebrate

by Blog Admin

July 17, 2012

Dismayed by news that the Government has embraced the Finch Report findings, [Mark Carrigan](#) asks what will happen to authors and early careers researchers who have not yet secured a steady stream of funding and cannot pay the upfront fees required of gold open access.



Sometimes I worry that Twitter is an echo chamber, reflecting my own prejudices back at me and shielding me from contrasting views. On other occasions though, I find this same characteristic immensely comforting. Such as when reading that the government has [officially embraced](#) the recommendations of the [Finch report](#) and finding that other PhD students and early career researchers were just as dismayed by this news as I was. Leaving aside the broader issues pertaining to [gold open access](#), which in practice simply redistributes costs within a broken system without challenging the underlying commercial premise, there's one particular question posed by this chain of events which is the cause of my current dread about the future of academic publishing: **what about the authors who can't pay?**

I fear that academic publishing could come to resemble the perilous landscape that PhDs and ECRs are only too familiar with at present. The competition for postdoctoral funding is ever increasing, leading to continual inflation of the things you need on your CV to stand a chance, yet without funding it's very difficult to actually achieve these prerequisites. Or in other words: the best way to get postdoctoral funding is to already have it. Could we see something similar happening with publications? If authors are dependent on their institutions and/or funding bodies to pay the substantial fees required under gold open access then those who already have a job and funding will find it easier to publish and thereby increase their chances of getting another job and more funding. Much as the post doctoral funding climate creates virtuous cycles, so too will the publishing climate, as a whole swathe of early career academics will find themselves untroubled by article processing charges. From their perspective, open access of this form will be great: it doesn't pose problems and it means their research is freely available. On the other hand, what of those who find themselves excluded? If your funding is patchy or non-existent how can you compete? Is it even going to be possible to be an independent researcher in any meaningful sense?

In a climate where [freelance, part-time and fixed term contracts](#) are increasingly the norm within academia, the extent to which the government's announcement is retrograde cannot be overstated. Such a radical increase in the dependence of researchers upon their institution has profound consequences for those who do 'make it', leaving aside the many who seem likely to be wholly or partially swept aside for the reasons discussed above. With funding bodies increasingly focused around narrow priority areas, often [tied to short term political whims to a truly abominable degree](#), themselves falling into homology with priority areas within universities, naturally aiming to increase their success in winning funding from these bodies, what becomes of research that falls into a non-priority area? What becomes of independent research full stop? Will there be funding available to cover author fees? Will there be conditions attached to it? How will the inevitable rationing work?

Even assuming the best will and highest managerial acumen in the world, these yet unanswered questions paint a picture of the future university, which I find far from appealing. What of the willingness to dissent and speak up at a time when economic instability looks set to continue indefinitely? With academics even more reliant on universities, as one of the two potential sources of author fees, will they be willing to resist? Or will the disciplining of academic labour, already entrenched in [multifaceted ways with many personal consequences](#), simply continue?

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

This post was originally published on Mark Carrigan's personal blog, which you can [read here](#).

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