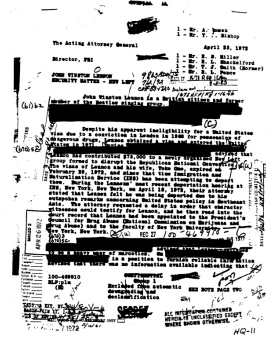


# Freedom of Information requests uncover the lack of transparency in journal subscription costs.

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/10/15/foi-requests-uncover-lack-of-transparency/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/10/15/foi-requests-uncover-lack-of-transparency/)

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**Stuart Lawson** and **Ben Meghreblian** have been compiling a useful dataset via Freedom of Information requests on how much academic publishers are charging higher education institutions for journal subscriptions. Their goal is to highlight the scale of the academic publishing market in the UK and for this to inform policy discussions. Some of the barriers they came across in obtaining data on expenditures were the infamous non-disclosure agreements by Elsevier and also subscription agents, which handle the costs on behalf of libraries.



Academic publishing is going through a relatively turbulent time of late. The transition from print to electronic – and from subscription access to open access – has been taking place in different areas at different speeds, leaving the overall scholarly communication environment a rather mixed one where genuinely transformative new publishers sit alongside their more staid predecessors. Academic culture does not exactly move at a lightning pace so the economic, technological, and political changes of recent years have been taking some time to filter through to everyday practice. So although librarians have been warning of a ‘serials crisis’ – a large, continuous, and **unsustainable growth** in libraries’ expenditure on academic journals – for a couple of decades now, we seem no closer to a resolution.

For those of us who are actively working to try and **set the default to open access** one of the frustrating things about the academic publishing market is the lack of financial transparency. Unless it’s possible to see how much money is being spent and who it is going to, there is no way of knowing either the overall shape of the market or whether any given institution is receiving good value in their purchases from a specific publisher. This lack of transparency can partly be explained by the fact that academic libraries just don’t publish accounts to that level of detail, and perhaps haven’t seen a need to in the past. But with increased scrutiny on the business practices and **profit margins** of academic publishers, the opacity is frustrating and no longer acceptable.

This is especially true given the transparency that is starting to emerge in the article processing charge (APC) market. APCs are fees that are sometimes paid to publishers in order to make articles open access, thus forming an alternative funding stream to subscriptions. In the UK a large proportion of the APCs that are paid are done so from money made available by the research funders **Research Councils UK** and **Wellcome Trust**. The fact that recipients of these funds need to report back to the funders on how much they have been spending has encouraged institutions to record their APC expenditure data and release it openly, often **through figshare**.

Journal subscriptions, on the other hand, remain opaque, and this is leading to attention being focused on the cost of open access rather than the continued far higher cost of subscription publishing. With no mandates to release subscription data, and with one major publisher – Elsevier – even insisting on non-disclosure clauses in its contracts with libraries, it seemed time to redress this balance. Making use of the UK’s **Freedom of Information (FOI) law** we sent FOI requests to over 100 higher education institutions via the website **whatdotheyknow.com** asking them to release their data. Using this website has the dual benefit of making the process simple to scale up when sending multiple requests and also ensuring that the responses are in the public domain.

## Journal subscription costs - FOIs to UK universities

	A	B	C
1		Total for these six publishers	Wiley
2			2010
3	University of Aberdeen	3489722.99	226277.18
4	Abertay University	44981.05	0
5	Aberystwyth University	2127088.0	152430.84
6	Anglia Ruskin University	1129549	109138
7	Arts University Bournemouth	35277.24	521
8	Aston University	38163.14	255.13
9	Bangor University	2277243.53	123129.35

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Stuart Lawson

Responses **WileySpringerOUP requests** T&FSageCUP requests

**Full dataset available on FigShare: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1186832>**

In two rounds of requests we asked for the amount of money that these institutions had paid to six of the largest academic publishers – Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Sage, Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press – over a period of five years. The results have been collated and over £80m of subscription expenditure has been [openly released](#). This process was for the most part straightforward and just required a lot of persistence and a little knowledge of library processes, which allowed us to know how to phrase the request and how to respond to any queries from the institutions.

This exercise was not undertaken in order to form the basis of specific further research but was primarily intended to highlight the scale of the academic publishing market in the UK and also encourage others to explore the data and make their own connections. The initial findings from the data did not throw up many surprises in terms of which publishers receive the most money, with those publishers with the highest turnover tending to attract the highest subscription income. For example, over the five years £30,522,118 was spent with Wiley and £3,507,874 with Cambridge University Press.

The figures are still incomplete and certain anomalies with the reporting of data mean that it is still difficult to make too many inferences regarding comparisons between different institutions. For instance, in 2013 Leeds Metropolitan University spent £116,379 with Taylor & Francis and University of Portsmouth spent £18,487, but [Leeds Metropolitan University included expenditure via intermediaries](#) whereas [University of Portsmouth did not](#). So based solely on this data we cannot know for certain that Leeds Metropolitan University's expenditure was higher. One of the interesting things to learn was that some libraries *do not know* how much they spend with any given publisher if they purchase most journals through subscription agents. Since one of the two largest subscription agents has just [filed for bankruptcy](#), retaining greater control over the process would seem to be a sensible step.

One publisher which stands out as missing from the above list is Elsevier. It is the largest academic journal publisher and for many libraries it is the one they spend the most money with. Those with an interest in the cost of subscription publishing often focus on Elsevier for these reasons. Unfortunately it is slightly more complicated to obtain data regarding expenditure with Elsevier because as mentioned above they insist on having a non-disclosure clause in their subscription contracts. The wording of the clause does not prevent institutions from disclosing their total spend on Elsevier journals (as evidenced by the [University of Edinburgh's previous response](#) to a request) and appears to be largely a bluff to discourage institutions from releasing the data which they are entitled to do when

subject to an FOI request.

Thanks to the work of Tim Gowers earlier this year where he [sent FOI requests to all Russell Group universities](#) asking for expenditure on Elsevier journals, it is possible to get an idea of both the scale of payments and the variation between institutions. We have now launched [a further round of FOI requests](#) asking over 100 institutions for their expenditure with Elsevier. This should provide a far more comprehensive (although by no means complete) view of the overall scale of UK higher education's expenditure on subscription publishing.

This data could be put to use in many different ways. Individual libraries may be interested to know how their expenditure compares to other institutions; this is already known in terms of total subscription expenditure through the [annual library statistics](#) collected by [SCONUL](#), but not at the level of individual publishers. It is also of great interest to those who are currently tracking APC expenditure and are concerned about the 'double dipping' that occurs when libraries pay both subscriptions and APCs to the same publisher. Since that particular issue is a concern for research funders, they may choose to use the data to investigate the scale of the problem. But these are merely some of the more obvious future uses of the data. The reason for making it public in the first place is to increase transparency in the system and allow informed discussions to take place.

*This research is being undertaken by private citizens, Stuart Lawson and Ben Meghreblian, and is not related to or endorsed by the authors' employers. We are obliged to state this because Elsevier's lawyers have been sniffing around.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the Author**

**Stuart Lawson** is a librarian who currently works as a Research Analyst at Jisc Collections. Research interests include open access, library publishing, Wikimedia, and the politics of openness.

**Ben Meghreblian** is an independent researcher, who most recently worked on the AllTrials campaign for greater clinical trial transparency. His interests include psychology, human rights, technology, open data, transparency, medicine, and science-related topics.

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