

view from the top peter mandler

Six things humanities scholars need to do about open access

With the announcement of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's open-access policy for the next Research Excellence Framework, we now have an open-access mandate for all publicly funded research on both sides of the dual funding structure. Unlike the Research Councils UK policy, HEFCE's reflects the reality that humanities scholarship is different from science and that an equitable mandate cannot be based on practices in the sciences.

Even so, the HEFCE policy is scattered with ambiguities and loopholes that will require constant vigilance and monitoring. The differences between the HEFCE and RCUK policies will also foster a probably untenable diversity of practices, which the recently announced RCUK policy review must address.

Unlike RCUK, HEFCE has not assumed that we are 'on a journey' to gold open access. Humanities scholars, and for that matter many scientists, object to gold open access on at least two grounds: it favours the wealthy, and it gives publishing decisions to managers. Both endanger academic freedom and quality.

HEFCE acknowledges that gold and green open access have equal validity. The question is whether the terms set for green will sustain freedom and quality. Here there are grounds for optimism. RCUK's embargo periods have been retained, but HEFCE accepts that not all high-quality journals will be able or willing to accept them.

Many international journals in the humanities will not feel bound by UK mandates to set embargoes that will endanger moderate levels of subscription income. Some, especially in the United States, will not offer an author-pays option on principle and will thus be subject to even shorter embargo periods, which they will not tolerate.

Unless we wish to ban UK authors from these journals, we must provide some exemptions. This is just what HEFCE does in allowing publication in "the most appropriate"

outlet. Here we must insist that the author, not a manager, is the best judge of appropriateness. There are also exemptions where third parties retain the right to restrict access, applied to much artistic, literary and archival material.

There are reasonable exemptions, too, for independent and early-career scholars who may not have institutional repositories or the means to pay charges. And after vigorous argument from humanities advocates against the CC BY licence favoured by RCUK, which allows any form

of reuse, HEFCE's policy includes the 'no derivatives' option. This prevents the normalisation of plagiarism.

Having made allowances, however, HEFCE tries to claw them back by letting institutions claim extra credit for not taking advantage of them, thus displaying their commitment to open access. It will be important for the bodies responsible for humanities and social sciences in the next REF to make clear that institutions that use exemptions necessary for the health of their discipline and for the publication of the best scholarship will not be penalised.

Even so, managers have a tough choice to make: to use exemptions, or to gain extra credit by not using them? Experience suggests that risk-averse managers might forbid their staff from using exemptions, regardless of the cost to research. We have seen this already in this year's REF, in which some managers refused to allow staff to take advantage of double-weighting for monographs, even though there was no risk involved in double-weighting and not doing it may have damaged submissions.

In other words, the open-access mandates are just the beginning. First, to make open access work, scholars must get used to automatic deposit of accepted manuscripts in institutional depositories. Second, they must learn to stipulate to their institutions the embargoes and licences agreed with journals. Third, they must make sure the institutions stick to these stipulations.

Fourth, scholars must communicate to their managers that the ambiguities in the HEFCE policy should not undermine the exemptions available. Fifth, REF panels will need to ensure that this doesn't happen, and when they produce their criteria we must all communicate to managers that the system embodies different norms for different disciplines.

Sixth, every effort must be made in the RCUK review to ensure that the research councils converge on HEFCE's policy, so that research council grants do not become a hindrance to humanities scholars publishing under an earlier, ill-conceived mandate.

This is a lot for hard-pressed academics to take on. It will pay off if we can make open access a reality without undermining the academic quality and freedom that make research worth disseminating in the first place.

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