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Open access & institutional repositories: present & future

Introduction: Institutional Repositories and the scholarly communications ecosystem

Institutional repositories (IRs) have been a vital part of the scholarly communications ecosystem for the last decade, by providing open access to research papers. They do this (by and large) by collecting the research of their home institution as provided by academic colleagues, then making it available via the "green route" to open access: self-archived in the IR and freely available to anyone to download, read, cite and otherwise make use of.

IRs have developed at a phenomenal rate over that last decade- there are now 150 institutional or departmental repositories in the UK alone- and globally they make a huge amount of research available, by one estimate 25% of the research literature corpus. Making these papers openly accessible translates to downloads- in the (relatively small) repository I manage, the 1,800 papers regularly see 400 or more downloads *a day*, whereas a large repository such as LSE Research Online will see 2,500 downloads a day or more. Papers made open access via the green route also receive more citations than those that remain closed, as longitudinal studies have shown.

Green open access also speaks to issues of social justice, by making research that was closed freely available (no charges to publishers!) to those outside wealthy Western universities. Without wishing to play down the effects of the digital divide, all that is required to access green papers is an internet connection, making research far more easily available for those in the so-called Global South.

Green vs. gold open access and IRs

IRs are squarely green open access services, and (without wishing to speak on behalf of fellow professional colleagues) I would characterise repository managers and other librarians as supportive of green open access but sceptical about the gold author-pays model. This is because of academic libraries' long-term support for IRs, but also for ideological reasons. While there are many admirable examples of low- and zero-cost gold open access journals, gold is also perceived to be a Trojan Horse for traditional publishers looking to preserve their revenue streams by charging hefty article processing charges (APCs). By contrast green allows academics to choose to publish where they see fit (thereby retaining their academic freedom) regardless of the cost of any gold APC while *still allowing their articles to be made freely and openly available.*

This is not to say that repository staff do not support gold, and support for and advice on gold will be an increasing part of repository managers' jobs after the decisions made by the Finch Committee and RCUK to prefer that method of open access. But I would characterise repository managers' attitudes as supporting gold, but advocating for green: reminding academic colleagues that they don't necessarily have to pay large APCs to Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell and the rest when green open access, or for that matter publishing in a cost-free or low-cost open access journals, remain useful options.

Getting more green open access content for IRs

Despite the success of IRs in providing access to research, as outlined above, IRs can sometimes be perceived to be relatively empty of content, in that the ratio of green-archived material in a repository as compared to the total output of scholarly journal articles remains low (spontaneous deposit in IRs has been estimated to hover around the 15% mark).

The solution proposed by green open access advocates is the mandate to deposit. An exemplar of such a mandate is the University of Liège (read an interview with Liège's Rector on open access here), where researchers are expected to deposit their articles *as a condition of having that work considered for performance review.* This demonstrates the need to implement a mandate in such a way as not just to be another university policy which may or may not be adhered to, but to ensure that the mandate (and the positive reasons underpinning the mandate) are communicated to academic colleagues and that robust reporting mechanisms are put in place to show that deposit is taking place. In this way over time IRs will fill with more openly accessible content.

As well as this top-down approach, I would argue that there is still a vital role for repository managers (as well as librarians, Research Office staff, IT services colleagues etc.) to provide bottom-up advocacy for IRs to academic colleagues, and for academics themselves to champion the IR. There are success stories where such advocacy has produced positive results. Therefore universities should continue to support their IR staff and others, as their advocacy work makes a real difference to IR deposit rates.

The future of IRs

Despite the huge gains in research accessibility provided by IRs, there are still a number of ways they could be improved. The fundamental way in which this can occur is by increasing the amount of content they include, something that will occur using the measures mentioned in the previous section. There are also a number of services that IRs are currently developing to both enhance the content they hold and to broaden their scope. These include:

- Providing APC-free open access journal hosting for universities, transforming IRs into university presses; working with extant university presses (and new players in this field) to help reclaim publishing for the academy.
- Providing Research Data Management services, both advising colleagues where to deposit and (where appropriate) hosting open data.
- Allowing for inter-operation of content, for example providing 2-for-1 deposit services allowing for local deposit to be harvested to subject repositories e.g. RePEc, ArXiv etc.
- Providing article-level metrics, for example integrating IRs with Altmetrics, then aggregating these metrics to show the value of IRs to scholars in the UK and worldwide.
- Licensing IR content in such a way to allow machine-facilitated data- and text-mining (something that is in the future but is likely to occur as a result of HEFCE's open access consultation for REF 2020, which will probably recommend green deposit under Creative Commons licences)
- Archiving Gold OA material, allowing for a more comprehensive coverage of institutions' research outputs.

Conclusion

The rapidly changing scholarly communications ecosystem still requires IRs as a crucial (and relatively low-cost) method of providing research dissemination, something affirmed this week by the BIS Select Committee's Report on Open Access policy in the UK. Despite the problems with the recommendations of the Finch Report (which did in fact recognise a continuing role for IRs), the future for IRs looks bright, and they and the services built upon them will continue to assist academics, both as producers and consumers of academic literature.