

Bringing together the work of subscription and open access specialists: challenges and changes at the University of Sussex

Article (Published Version)

Craig, Eleanor and Webb, Helen (2017) Bringing together the work of subscription and open access specialists: challenges and changes at the University of Sussex. *Insights: the UKSG Journal*, 30 (1). pp. 31-37. ISSN 2048-7754

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Bringing together the work of subscription and open access specialists: challenges and changes at the University of Sussex

The rise in open access (OA) publishing has required library staff across many UK academic institutions to take on new roles and responsibilities to support academics. At the same time, the long-established work of negotiating with publishers around journal subscriptions is changing as such deals now usually include OA payment or discount plans in many different forms that vary from publisher to publisher.

This article outlines some of the issues we encountered at the University of Sussex Library whilst trying to pull together the newer strand of OA advocacy and funder compliance work with existing responsibilities for managing subscription deals. It considers the challenges faced in effectively bringing together Library staff with knowledge in these areas, and outlines the steps we have taken so far to ensure OA publishing is taken into account wherever appropriate.

Background

In common with the majority of UK universities, the last few years have seen the University of Sussex Library staff adapting to changes in workflows and procedures due to the increase in time and effort required to support open access (OA) publishing. We have recently started evaluating workflows and identifying ways of sharing knowledge within the Library to ensure that OA is considered, where appropriate, in the subscriptions workflow.

Sussex is a medium-sized institution; there are currently (in 2017) about 15,000 FTE students, with plans to take on further numbers over the next few years. There are about 1,000 teaching and research staff, of whom 300 are research only. Within the Library, there are no subject librarians and the work of supporting students and academics is split between function-based teams such as Academic Services and Content Delivery.

The Academic Services team includes Learning and Teaching Support, who support undergraduates and taught-postgraduates by delivering teaching and resourcing reading lists, and Research Support, who work with research postgraduates and academic faculty.

The advocacy and support of OA lies within Research Support and is provided by two colleagues, with a temporary, part-time post to support them. In common with similar library teams at other UK institutions, OA is only one strand of the Research Support work but is a growing area.

The Content Delivery team is comprised of Acquisitions, who deal with the acquisition of print and online books and process reading lists (including digitizing individual chapters and articles, cataloguing and inter-library requests), and Digital Content, which covers all subscribed content and online resources. Negotiations and support for journal deals, both with and without an OA component, lie with Digital Content.

The combined approach to supporting journal package deals and OA is being led by the Research Support Librarian in Academic Services and the Digital Content Librarian in Content Delivery.



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Open access at Sussex

Sussex publishes on average 1,300 papers per year, although it can be difficult to obtain a complete picture as the University has no central research information system capturing details about forthcoming publications. Academics are mandated to deposit their publications to Sussex Research Online,¹ the University publication repository. The majority of papers are uploaded by their authors, with administrative support available in some academic schools, and records are reviewed by Library staff before being made live in the repository.²

'it can be difficult to obtain a complete picture'

Advocacy for OA includes delivering workshops, providing background material and guidance information (both online and in print) and answering enquiries. The Research Support team work closely with the Research Office to disseminate information on funder OA policies, which for Sussex authors are most likely to be the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Policy on Open Access³ and the Wellcome Trust OA policy.⁴ The announcement by HEFCE of an OA requirement policy for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF)⁵ has had a substantial impact on the volume of advocacy work and enquiries and the complexity of the message to be communicated.

There is no central University fund at Sussex to support OA, although some Schools have limited pots of their own money from which their academics can make requests for funding. Each School operates different criteria on how this money should be used. The University policy is to take the green, self-archiving route to OA wherever possible⁶ and most schools do echo this in their own requirements.

'The University policy is to take the green, self-archiving route to OA wherever possible'

Research Support administer the block grants given to the University by RCUK and the Wellcome Trust and other charities as part of the Charities Open Access Fund, and complete the compliance and spend reports required by these funders. The team confirm compliance requirements with authors in advance and arrange payment to publishers for article processing charges (APCs), either directly or via a prepayment scheme. There are tentative plans eventually to move responsibility for APCs over to the Content Delivery team who deal with the ongoing payments and support for our other resources, including the big deals. The advantage of this approach would be to bring together all financial data around publishers and resources, potentially making it easier to measure the total cost of our spend on subscriptions and gold OA publishing and to evaluate the benefits of subscription deals which are incorporating OA discounts in some way. It would also allow Research Support staff to focus more on the advocacy and outreach work rather than spending time raising purchase orders and chasing invoices – an activity normally undertaken in Content Delivery for similar transactions.

Challenges

There are risks that removing Research Support involvement from the payment process could perhaps result in missed opportunities to support academics or to ensure their work was actually compliant with funder requirements. The relatively small number of gold OA payments processed by Research Support means it is still feasible to require that academics request funds early on in the publication process, and having this as a point of intervention has given staff an opportunity to engage with academics about appropriate licence choices and research data requirements before publication is finalized. These conversations around payment have also enabled Research Support to raise issues with publishers when it seemed that the information being given to authors was confusing or misleading around whether they actually needed to pay an APC to be compliant with their funder's requirements.

'it is still feasible to require that academics request funds early on in the publication process'

Currently, the Digital Content Librarian is solely responsible for all the negotiation, payment and support for subscribed online resources, although we are building up capacity within the

33 Content Delivery team to have a wider set of people who can answer enquiries and provide support, so making the service more robust.

The element of OA associated with offsetting and the deals we sign up for are also dealt with by the Digital Content Librarian. We currently subscribe to a number of deals, all with differing ways of dealing with OA costs and with varying levels of complexity. We need to understand how the deals work, then try to communicate how they work to colleagues, which is not always straightforward; at times we have had to create flow charts, followed up by a verbal explanation, to convey details of the different deals more clearly. All of the deals are entirely paid out of subscription funds, so there is currently no financial link between the OA element of the deal and the subscription side. For instance, in the case of the Springer Compact agreement,⁷ the cost of the entire deal including the OA element is borne by the subscriptions budget. As a result, OA is free to our users whilst the cost of our deal has risen by 15%. This also means that we do not have a true picture of the total cost of either our subscribed resources, or of our OA expenditure.

'there is currently no financial link between the OA element of the deal and the subscription side'

We are concerned that we are at risk of paying twice for content as a result of paying APCs and subscription costs for hybrid journals. However, we are not yet in a position to cancel any journal subscriptions on the assumption that the majority of the articles will be available open access. The potential fallout from academics and students if we were to cancel subscriptions on this basis would be substantial and, as we are not spending any central University money on OA costs, we are perhaps less likely to be called to account. However, publicity about renegotiations for some deals has recently seen some academics voice concerns about spend on the big deals and how it might place constraints on our budget in other areas, namely in spend with smaller publishers.

'we are at risk of paying twice for content'

How to manage offsetting money?

One of the aspects to look at when considering publisher deals is how the money is offset. The range of publisher deals means it is difficult to take a consistent approach with how to deal with such 'savings'. The current Wiley and IOP schemes return offset money to the University by way of crediting us with a sum of money at the end of the year. Wiley add credit to the Sussex pre-pay account, whilst IOP transfer money to an internal grant code set up for this purpose.

For a time we did not know what to do with the money coming back into the University. It was a relatively small amount of money in the first year, approximately £5,000, so anything we did needed to be fairly small scale. It seemed a missed opportunity to simply feed it back into the RCUK block grant, but equally inappropriate to use for journal subscriptions or general Library spending. Journal spend in the Library is top-sliced, meaning Schools were unlikely to 'claim' offset money from their discipline to be used on spend in their own subject area, so the decision could rest with the Library.

We needed to find a use for the offset money that was transparent and commensurate with the amount on offer, but which could be scaled up if further offset deals resulted in a growth in funds. As a result, we decided on using it to support APCs for postgraduate researchers (PGRs) who did not have any other access to money for gold OA. This small postgraduate researcher fund is open only to PGRs publishing in pure gold journals and, as the fund is small, we are careful to stipulate that they need to agree use of the fund with the Library and with their Director of Research before committing to publish in a gold OA journal.

'We needed to find a use for the offset money that was transparent'

The existence of this fund has given us a small amount of flexibility and has added a welcome opportunity to be able to offer something tangible and helpful in our advocacy dealings with postgraduate researchers, who felt somewhat of a neglected group, for whom

34 the increased visibility of gold OA publications might provide the most useful career boost, but who were the least likely to have the funds available.

It has, however, raised questions in the Library about fairness overall – is it fair to our researchers publishing in Institute of Physics titles that, if they pay an APC themselves, the money eventually comes back to the Library, not to them? IOP have publicized 'free' gold publishing to researchers, but this does not work in practice for Sussex researchers, as the money needs to be paid upfront.

Bringing together subscriptions and OA support

Until recently, there has been no internal ownership of the entire workflow of subscribed resources and open access. The journal deals and individual subscription requests have been evaluated by one group, our long-established Subscriptions Review Group (SRG), on a purely collection-development basis, with the emphasis very much on cost and potential usage.⁸ The approach to individual OA payments is the remit of the Research Support team who initially looked at it on almost a paper-by-paper basis, with the focus on ensuring compliance with funder requirements and monitoring spend. Whilst there is some overlap of staff, with Research Support represented on the SRG group that decides on which new journal and online resources to buy, their contribution in this setting is limited to consulting with academics and commenting on the research value of proposed purchases; the issue of OA was rarely raised in these meetings.

'no internal ownership of the entire workflow of subscribed resources and OA'

Instead, there was a separate Open Access working group which at its inception was much more focused on policy developments, discussing approaches to advocacy, establishing what the role of Library staff might need to be in supporting academics and, even in the early days, considering specific enquiries and situations that had arisen.

As a result, there was a certain compartmentalization of knowledge between the Content Delivery staff responsible for taking out the deals and the Research Support staff who advise on and manage OA and APC spend. It has not always been clear to each team how decisions made by one team will impact the other. For example, Research Support staff may have been presented with an appealing OA offsetting option by a publisher, but may not have the information on whether the increased cost parcelled up in the subscription deal was reasonable or extortionate. Equally, Content Delivery staff might have signed a new subscription deal, considering cost and content, but not thinking about the OA aspect in sufficient detail. The Research Support team are not given any opportunity to feed back to the publisher about their proposed OA scheme, and are then suddenly required to update promotional strategies and communication to academics. We found that OA deals were appearing on an ad hoc basis and we had no system in place to ensure we had enough time to fully consider whether signing up to something was a good idea.

'OA deals were appearing on an ad hoc basis'

Suggestions for OA deals can come from a variety of routes: direct from the publisher, from academics, through Jisc deals and through Library staff identifying possible savings due to the number of APCs we are paying to a specific publisher. Publishers can vary in their approaches to promote their offers to us, with some using their established contacts within Content Delivery and others promoting directly to OA teams. There can sometimes be confusion amongst publishers as to who they should be contacting within the Library about various aspects of OA or subscription deals.

'we needed a better way to capture and evaluate the deals on offer'

As the volume and range of schemes increased, we needed a better way to capture and evaluate the deals on offer.

Sharing knowledge and evaluating deals

We have begun to take a more structured approach to evaluating OA deals. Our Open Access working group has moved from being concerned primarily with advocacy and events to incorporating a more practical approach, looking at evaluating publisher deals and discount schemes in order that we can bring together the necessary knowledge and information to make a decision on whether it is good value.

The Open Access working group includes senior Library management who bring in a wider University perspective and a more active role for the Digital Content Librarian. It also includes Content Delivery staff who are currently not directly involved in OA support in any way, but for whom the group offers an opportunity to build up a body of knowledge around the issues.

Our Open Access working group created a check-list of criteria to be considered as a way of assessing whether a particular OA offsetting or discount scheme is good value for Sussex. This approach was based on the model used to evaluate online resources as part of the Subscriptions Review Group, as it was a familiar framework for most staff even if the subject matter was new. Some of the key aspects we evaluate are as follows:

- Is the scheme based on prepayment or membership?
- What is the cost based on, e.g. institutional spend in previous years or the size of institution?
- Is there a minimum deposit amount?
- How much discount do we get for participating?
- Is the publisher offsetting? If so, how do we benefit? If money is returned at the end of the year, how is this manifested: in an overall discount, vouchers, or credit note?
- What is the average cost of the APC?
- Approximately how much do we publish in these journals?
- Where should the money for the deposit come from? Block grants? Or from a Library pot?
- How easy is it to administer? Is there a dashboard? How much support is there from publishers – can they identify Sussex authors automatically? Is intervention required to get the benefit (e.g. vouchers or a code)? What is the possible cost of Research Support time to administer vs. savings from the deal?
- Eligibility – does any discount apply to all authors or only some based on funding? How easy is this to separate?

The answers to all these questions, if they are applicable to the specific deal, are recorded in two spreadsheets, one for the financial data and one for the rest of the details. The questions are asked by a combination of Research Support and Digital Content, according to the type of OA scheme being discussed and whether it is separate from any subscriptions cost (in which case it might be more of a decision for Research Support), or very much a part of the overall offer (in which case Content Delivery will have a stronger role to play). Decisions are made at the Open Access working group meetings, then recorded in the spreadsheets so we have one single point of information to look to and update.

'we have one single point of information'

Our approach is still more reactive than proactive. We are informed about deals and evaluate them as a result of that fact, rather than actively seeking out deals with some of the smaller publishers which have an OA option. Part of the reason for this is that we have restricted funding, due to the fact that there are no central OA funds at Sussex. If the publisher requires a deposit based on overall spend on APCs in previous years, or

36 offers no way of restricting their prepay account to those funded authors for whom we have money, there is no practical way we can take up and manage the deal. This restriction makes deals with reduced cost vouchers particularly frustrating as, whilst they may represent a substantial saving on the standard APC, paying anything at all may be out of the reach of unfunded researchers or PhD students.

Future developments

We are aware that there is still more work to be done to enable us to take a more holistic approach to understanding and managing the costs of providing access to content through subscriptions and open access. Discussions with academics have shown a developing understanding of the challenges faced by libraries in managing this.

Our involvement with Jisc Monitor⁹ may help to make our APC data more readily available across the Library and so more accessible to Content Delivery staff hoping to understand the OA aspect of big deals. A major requirement will be sharing knowledge and skills between the two teams of Library staff, to ensure that decisions about spend with publishers are made in as wide a context as possible rather than in isolation.

Although our current approach considers subscriptions versus open access, we are aware that there will be many models for providing content in the future, examples of which could include a demand-driven access approach to journal content or a development of the inter-library loan model.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing Interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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To cite this article:

Craig, E and Webb, H, Bringing together the work of subscription and OA specialists: challenges and changes at the University of Sussex, *Insights*, 2017, 30(1), 31-37; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.337>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 10 March 2017