

## SCONUL response to Jisc's Critical Review of Transitional Agreements

The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) represents all university libraries in the UK and Ireland, irrespective of mission group, as well as national libraries and many of the UK's colleges of higher education.

### Our main findings from the report

SCONUL welcomes this timely and comprehensive report from Jisc on Transitional Agreements. SCONUL is in agreement with the findings that although there have been a number of positives from this shift in publishing, such as cost savings from previous subscription spend in many cases and increased open access publishing with little 'grit' for end users, we also agree that there have been a number of unintended consequences, including a reduction in green open access, an increased reliance on the UKRI block grant to pay for these deals, lack of transparency over costs, slow transition rates and low 'flipping' of hybrid titles and no real change to author behaviour.

### The main issues from the report

**Reduction in green open access:** although open access publishing has increased in the UK, faster than global trends, the acceleration of gold and hybrid has largely come at the expense of green publishing, which has fallen 3.9% over the last five years. SCONUL hopes the wider adoption of Right Retention policies will help to halt this trend. Another concern is the stagnation in gold publishing in the UK from 2020 and a marked increase in hybrid, with the UK having double the rate of the rest of the world. Although the number of open access articles has rapidly increased in recent years, the amount of closed content has remained largely static, at around 40%.

**Increasing reliance on the UKRI block grant:** UKRI is currently undertaking a review of their open access policy and we think the findings of this report will be of great interest to them. Jisc's figures indicate a higher proportion of block grant funding being used on an annual basis to support the publish element of the deals and Jisc have modelled 25% of TA modelled costs to be paid from the block grant in 2024, up 15% from 2023. To put this into monetary context, £9.4 million of the block grant was spent on TAs in 2022. This raises huge concerns about the sustainability of article-based models.

**Lack of transparency over costs:** Jisc's survey of publishers showed that most had no open access plans and could not provide any costings around their services. This is unsurprising, especially given that the UK research output is only 4% of global research and two of the biggest players, China and the US, have a far less developed approach to open access.

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**Slow transition rates:** One of the big headlines from the report was that at current rates, it will take the big four publishers over 70 years to transition fully to open access. This figure does come as a shock, despite the small numbers of journals 'flipping' at the moment, which is particularly low in the bigger publishers, who have a huge market share.

**Inequity out with Higher Education:** Another concern from the report is the amount of UK research that is not covered by TAs, including that in the NHS and social care, as well as the UK HEIs that have opted out of these deals.

**Author behaviour has not changed:** Perhaps this is the biggest issue from the report. If authors are still looking to publish with 'traditional' journals and are rewarded by their institution for perpetuating this form of publishing, then it is unsurprising that little has changed in the sector. There are steps that SCONUL calls on academic colleagues to take to help deliver a sustainable and equitable publishing landscape, including challenging instances where promotion or preferment is based on a journal's reputation, rather than the quality of the research itself, holding on to the rights to your own work and also asking publishers what you are getting for your APC. For the full list, see our press release: [https://sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/SCONUL%20RLUK%20Press%20Release%20May%202023\\_0.pdf](https://sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/SCONUL%20RLUK%20Press%20Release%20May%202023_0.pdf)

Ann Rossiter, Executive Director at SCONUL summed it up well:

*"We need to shift the culture of academic publishing to one in which openness is prioritise and costs align more clearly with the value of a publisher's service and less to a journal 'name'"*

SCONUL believes changing academic behaviour is the biggest priority for us as a sector, but that it goes beyond libraries and into the wider institution. Our seven ways to shift the dial will potentially start to shape conversations and change the way academic staff look at publishing.

## Report Recommendations

SCONUL is in general agreement with the three recommendations from the report. Namely:

1. We should have additional indicators to demonstrate a commitment to equity.
2. Investment in open access should demonstrate a commitment to rapidly removing paywalls.
3. Financial divestment in underperforming TAs should be used to fund alternative models.

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A recent SCONUL Content Forum, held in early February, indicated support from our members to look at alternative ways of procuring content and a commitment to alternative models, including diamond open access and subscribe to open. We hope to continue this conversation over the coming months and start to develop a real alternative to TAs that meets the needs of the full sector. Reinvestment from any savings generated will be key to developing this infrastructure.

However, we also need to work with Universities to help to change the research culture and influence author behaviour and this will be the key to our future success.