

HEFCE Consultation on Open Access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework

Introduction

This is the official response from the Royal Astronomical Society to the HEFCE consultation on Open Access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework.

With more than 3700 members ('Fellows'), the Society represents the interests of the astronomy and geophysics communities and has a particular interest in UK policy in these research areas. The Society itself has no financial interest in the REF process, but was involved in the recruitment of nominees for the REF assessment panels.

Oxford University Press publishes two academic journals on behalf of the RAS, namely Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society (MNRAS) and Geophysical Journal International (GJI), so the Society has an interest in Open Access policy as a whole (see our policy on publishing at http://www.ras.org.uk/images/stories/Publications/ras_publishing_policy.pdf). Both our journals freely allow authors to publish papers in repositories and on websites at a time of their choosing.

In putting forward this response, we have consulted widely with senior figures in the UK academic community as well as elected members of our governing Council, many of whom are directly affected by these proposals.

As well as the answers to the specific questions, we strongly support the proposal (in paragraph 38) to monitor the impact of the new policy on equality and diversity, particularly on the distribution of funds to different types of institutions and the individual members of staff working in them.

Question 1

Do you agree that the criteria for open access are appropriate (subject to clarification on whether accessibility should follow immediately on acceptance or on publication)?

Do you have any comments on this proposal?

Researchers in astronomy, geophysics and space science are strong supporters of affordable Open Access publishing.

There is however concern, particularly in the astronomy research community, around mandating the use of repositories run by higher education institutions (HEIs). This stipulation ignores the ArXiv and Astrophysics Data System (ADS) repositories, where the overwhelming majority of space science and astronomy researchers place their papers, usually at the time of their acceptance in a peer-reviewed journal such as MNRAS. Scientists in these fields consult ArXiv and ADS in the first instance and so see the mandate for institutional repositories as an expensive and largely unnecessary duplication.

The RAS therefore urges HEFCE policy for future REF exercises to take greater account of the importance of subject-based repositories.

More generally, once the REF policy is established, researchers are keen to see that this policy is applied consistently in the years ahead, so that work published to be compliant with this guidance does then not become ineligible for assessment at a later date.

Question 2

Do you agree with the role outlined for institutional repositories, subject to further work on technical feasibility?

Should the criteria require outputs to be made accessible through institutional repositories at the point of acceptance or the point of publication?

Do you have any comments on these proposals?

We welcome the moves to make the process of compliance as simple as possible for authors and HEIs, though again draw attention to the support for subject-based repositories (see our response to question 1). A further point for consideration is that these could better reflect the needs of different research areas, for example supporting the use of multi-colour images and animations that are so important in astronomy and geophysics.

In HEIs where institutional repositories are already in place, some are set up to automatically link to the ArXiv version of the paper, reducing the burden on researchers. The Society therefore suggests that HEFCE mandates a similar policy in other institutions.

On access to outputs, our view is that the point of publication is the most appropriate milestone as this is when work would ordinarily become widely available.

Question 3

Do you agree that the proposed embargo periods should apply by REF main panel, as outlined above?

Do you agree with the proposed requirements for appropriate licences?

Do you have any comments on these proposals?

Embargoes are largely not supported by the scientific communities represented by the RAS as researchers wish to see their work disseminated speedily and without restriction. While embargoes exist, the HEFCE policy should however align with the Research Councils' position and so we support the consultation proposal.

Question 4

Do you agree that the criteria for open access should apply only to journal articles and conference proceedings for the post-2014 REF?

Do you have any comments on this proposal?

There remains uncertainty over the implementation of open access to monographs and longer publications, so we agree with this proposal.

Question 5

Do you agree that a notice period of two years from the date of the policy announcement is appropriate to allow for the publication cycle of journal articles and conference proceedings?

Do you have any comments on this proposal?

In general, the communities represented by the RAS agree with this proposal.

Question 6

Do you agree that criteria for open access should apply only to those outputs listing a UK HEI in the output's 'address' field for the post-2014 REF?

Do you have any comments on this proposal?

It would not be reasonable to impose the policy on non-UK authors (who move to the UK after a paper is published). The policy should only apply to authors who have UK institutional addresses on the date of publication.

Question 7

Which approach to allowing exceptions is preferable?

If selecting option b:

Do you agree that the percentage targets are appropriate?

Do you believe the percentage target should apply consistently or vary by REF main panel?

Do you have any comments on these proposals?

Some high-impact journals do not yet allow authors to simultaneously publish their work in repositories or on websites. HEFCE should consider making these outputs exempt from the Open Access requirement. The proposal to however allow an arbitrary 30% of outputs not to be published on an Open Access basis is puzzling, given the RCUK guidelines and thrust of Government policy that assumes Open Access publication will become the norm within the next few years. It is also hard to see how universities will be able to guarantee complying with this target if there is a rush to submit publications immediately before the REF assessment deadline.

We therefore believe that universal compliance with the Open Access policy and case-by-case exceptions is thus more appropriate than a percentage target. There also seems no good reason not apply this policy across the different REF panels.