

TENDERING THE PURCHASE OF OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING

Leif Longva

Open access publishing is about to enter a new phase. For many years now, the proponents have voiced the benefits of open access to scholarly literature. And now, it seems, the arguments have won support also in bodies governing the research. Prominent examples of this is the Research Councils UK (RCUK) who have announced their new policy demanding open access, and the open access requirements in the coming EU research frame program Horizon 2020.

To overcome the disadvantages of article processing charges (APCs) that authors of papers commonly need to pay to publish open access, many institutions are establishing funds to pay the APCs. RCUK, for instance, will do this through a block grant that will pay the APC for papers arising from research funded by RCUK. In their policy document RCUK says further:

RCUK does not specify an upper or lower limit on the level of APCs paid out of the Block Grant. ... At the same time, institutions should work with their authors to ensure that a proper market in APCs develops, with price becoming one of the factors that is taken into consideration when deciding where to publish.

One of the main objections to the RCUK policy, and indeed in general to funds covering the APCs, is that it holds no incentive for the buyer of OA publishing (the authors of research papers) to shop around for best value for money. Thus, the publishers may continue to enjoy abundant revenue streams from the public money of the research and HE institutions.

RCUK recognizes this, as shown in the quote above. But they seem to have no guidance to offer regarding *how* a proper market in APCs may develop.

Tender

When spending large sums of money, a common way to make your money go as far as possible is by running a tender. Why not apply this method in the purchase of open access publishing?

RCUK, to use them still as example, is announcing a block grant for buying open access through APCs. Based on this, RCUK may run a tender, and invite

publishers to enter their bids. In doing so, RCUK would need to define a set of selection criteria to select which publishers to buy from. The criteria may be price and licensing terms, the quality of the journals by some measure, or other important issues. In the selection of publishers to buy from, they also need to make sure all subject areas are well covered.

When the deals are done, and the publishers are selected, RCUK may announce that the grant will cover the APC for applicable papers, so long as the papers are published by publishers selected from the tendering process. Authors insisting on publishing elsewhere need to either cover the APC themselves, or look for publishers accepting green deposit in institutional repositories, with the maximum of 6/12 months embargo.

RCUK is here used as an example – other research funders or institutions with funds to pay APCs may do the same. The funds need to be of some size, of course, or else the hassle with the tendering process will not be worthwhile.

The benefit of a tendering process would be that the publishers need to be competitive on price and other terms, in order to strike deals with the funding body. And thus a market in the APCs will develop.

One objection to this model might be that the smaller publishers, including societies publishing a single or a couple of journals will not have resources to enter into a laborious tendering process. Another objection could be that the tendering model, if becoming widespread by research funders and institutions, may leave new entrants hard off. These concerns could be resolved by letting the fund cover APCs to any open access journal up to a price limit (presupposed that the journals' quality criteria are met). Publishers charging APCs above this limit need to enter the tendering process.

I sincerely believe that a tendering approach, if designed carefully, could work, and lead to a situation where scholarly publishing becomes a competitive market, contrary to the situation of today, and to the benefit of public spending.



Leif Longva University of Tromsø, Munin repository manager