

Open access journals: the reality

Description

In 2011, the [University of Cambridge](#) came top in the World University Rankings. And according to the Scopus database used to supply the citations data used in the Rankings, it produced 32,900 journal articles and other scholarly outputs in that year.

But run your eye down the rankings to 400th slot, the last university before we start publishing in bands rather than in individual positions. We are in Siberia, at [Novosibirsk State University](#). In 2011, it had 1,670 scholarly outputs counted by Scopus.

Now the publishing system that allows experts from both institutions to get their work seen around the world is likely to change. Vexed by high journal prices, research funders are urging the scientists they support to publish instead in "open access" journals that are free to the reader. It is an idea that sounds fine if you say it quickly enough, but what would the reality be like?

Publishing costs money. Even in the era where electrons have largely replaced sheets of paper, there are still the costs of editing and refereeing articles and of creating and marketing a journal as the place to be seen in a specific subject area.

So open journals charge. Instead of charging readers, they charge the contributors "page charges." Some even charge for submitting an article, which they might reject the same day.

Because Cambridge published about twenty times as many papers last year as Novosibirsk, a change to open access would cost it far more money. Things would be even grimmer for Harvard, which published 69,995 items in 2011, making it the top publisher apart from the Russian and Chinese academies of science and the French research organisation CNRS.

[Harvard](#) said last week that it is no longer willing to pay journal publishers' prices. But if they are replaced by page charges, the top-ranked universities will have the biggest fees to find, because they publish the most. Novosibirsk might save some money but Harvard might not. In any case, Cambridge and the others cannot stop buying journals. Their academics will go on needing them. And Harvard's journals bill of \$3.5 million is not a massive budget item for the world's richest university.

Despite these issues, open access is set to grow as research funders insist on it. This might squeeze small research groups and less prosperous subjects. Most of the pressure for open access comes from the monied world of biomedicine. And it could mean fewer papers from the developing world in the top journals, unless special rates are agreed. Journals cost too much, sometimes five-figure sums for an annual subscription, but it is hard to see open access as a complete answer.