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Wellcome's Open Access Policy Review

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Open Access Policy Development Research – Executive Summary

August 2018

The research programme

19 researchers, each of whom Wellcome had supported with grants in the past, were interviewed in sessions of 1–4 participants in London, Oxford and Newcastle. Participants were sourced and invited by The Wellcome Trust, and were recruited to reflect:

- The balance of Wellcome funding across disciplines
- A range of views on Open Access
- A spread of (publishing) experience and formats encompassing articles, books & monographs

The research centred on the exploration of five propositions (each written by The Wellcome Trust) for potential future Open Access publishing policy in research funded at least in part by Wellcome. The interviews were moderated by independent researchers from The Nursery Research and Planning.

Context and background

Reception of policy changes was influenced by stage of career

- **Young Researchers** were the most accepting of change – Starting out in their careers, they were grateful to those that had funded them, and happy to follow established rules, accepting that funders had a right to impose access criteria on the work they support
- **Established Researchers** were especially concerned about a detrimental impact – More experienced, yet still building a profile, they recognise and value how top journals can elevate their research. They are the most concerned about how limiting access to top journals – a potential outcome of changed policy – would compromise them and those they work with
- **Winding Down Researchers** could cautiously champion change – Experienced researchers with many significant research and career achievements behind them, they were able to consider and balance the needs of researchers and funders with the control and power exerted by publishers

The Wellcome Trust is regarded as a great enabler of significant, influential research

- Researchers are grateful for the support and funding they have benefitted from, with several believing their research would not have happened without it
- They know TWT champions open access and there is instinctive support for the organisation taking a stand - closed access slows development and feels elitist
- It seems reasonable that Wellcome would want to move to a formal and more stringent OA policy than has been observed to date



Journals are important but are not seen to be playing fair

- The importance of journals for reach and recognition is clear – careers and funding can depend on publishing in the right places – and they have the power that can bring researchers fame and validation
- However, journals are often criticised for being knowledge gatekeepers, delaying publication, and holding too much power and influence over the research community
- This control extends to benefitting financially from both researcher and reader
- Yet the ability to publish in a wide range of publications, including the top journals (who researchers feel will be most resistant to change), is the main priority for many researchers. Few feel able to take the ‘risk’ of opting out of journals completely
- Researchers can be concerned that highly restricted or niche publication could lead to a failure to address Impact or REF demands adequately – meaning a potential loss of funding from other sources

Themes underpinning response

No Embargo / Compulsory CCBY –

- Each open access proposition stated that no embargo period would be permitted and that a CC-BY licence would be required. While some researchers noted that this may impact their administrative support more than themselves, there was no negative response to these ideas – both seemed to be central to OA territory, although low level concerns were present that journals may be resistant to this

Pre-prints / Author Accepted Manuscripts –

- Although some bio-medical researchers in particular could recognise – and often value - pre-prints, other researchers had significant concerns about them being a key submission in enabling compliance and accessing grants
- Most researchers were significantly more comfortable with AAMs, however

Journal response –

- There is some assumption that the biggest, most famous publications will resist any initiatives towards open access, or have rules that are incompatible with projected TWT policy
- As a result, researchers' *response was often caveated – how would their key journals respond?*
- There is hope regardless that TWT will work hard behind the scenes to establish a policy that works for Wellcome, researcher and publishers alike

A co-operative of influence –

- In reference to the anticipated journal response, some researchers wondered whether even The Wellcome Trust has sufficient power and influence to drive change. Several advocated and more supported the thought that groups of significant funders should look to work together in favour of open access, with such ideally resulting in once common policy across key sources of funding support



Response to Open Access propositions

The order in which propositions were introduced was rotated across the sessions to ensure as fair and balanced a test of them as possible. Yet it is worth noting that, regardless of the order of introduction, where attitudes started was not necessarily where they finished. **The interview process helped researchers consider the complexities of Open Access and challenged them to think about the issue from perspectives other than their own.**

With such consideration applied, researchers become more sympathetic to Wellcome's situation and challenges. Bearing this in mind, it does suggest that *how* ideas are communicated (as well as what they are) will be important in engendering understanding and acceptance. It also led several researchers to conclude that Wellcome must retain a clear ambition, focus and purpose in introducing any change, and that **while compromise, choice and flexibility shows sensitivity to researcher needs, this should not be allowed to significantly compromise or cloud Wellcome's vision.**

Of the five propositions explored with researchers, two were met with serious reservations:-

- **Mandatory pre-prints and Open Access** – must make pre-print available at time of publication
 - This can feel like TWT is imposing something that creates more work and can undermine reliability (publishing prior to peer review). These feel like compromises that are too significant, even for the cause of Open Access
- **Publish in Wellcome Open Research only** – peer reviewed articles submitted to WOR
 - The bravery is admired and the simplicity appreciated, but the solution being offered is not adequate or wholly reasonable. With such a narrow readership, the appeal of TWT funding is significantly reduced

Three ideas were worthy of further consideration:-

- **Optional pre-prints and Open Access** – funding only available in fully OA journals. When publishing in subscription journal, must make a pre-print or AAM available at time of publication
 - Has some potential as the publishing impact on the researcher appears to be less than elsewhere, but the whole felt complex and compromised, failing to engender a palpable or profound sense of progress or emotional sea-change
- **Fully Open Access publishing: including offsetting agreements** – funding available in journals where Wellcome has approved an offsetting agreement
 - A spirit of compromise and accommodation is appreciated: it feels like TWT are working on behalf of the researcher. While it doesn't send a strong message – it can feel apologetic and beholden to the publishers – such a solution feels almost inevitable to some experienced researchers, given the perceived relative balance of power
- **Fully Open Access publishing** – funding only available in fully OA journals, subscription journals must allow the author to post the AAM at the time of publication
 - A clear and ambitious proposition - it does not seem unreasonable on either researchers or journals given the AAM alternative that is offered. However, ultimate appeal and acceptance will certainly be influenced to a large extent by journal response



In conclusion

The '**Fully Open Access**' proposition creates a significant and positive impact on the Open Access agenda, making Wellcome's views and intention on the issue perfectly clear. The proposition does so with an approach that doesn't seem extreme or unreasonable.

While it is appreciated that the onus now falls on the publishers to respond reasonably and fairly, the appeal of the Fully OA proposition is caveated – as most of the ideas must be – by what is **expected to be a rather intransigent journal response**.

It is anticipated, therefore, that some flexibility may yet need exhibiting – perhaps offsetting behind the scenes in the short-term, with a staggered and time decreed intention to move to Fully OA by an agreed and widely publicised deadline.

The Nursery Research and Planning
August 2018

