# OA pricing and service transparency workshop 8 October 2019

**A draft of these notes was shared on 11 October with all the participants of the workshop. Participants kindly provided a few clarifications which are now incorporated.**

**Participants:** Chris Banks, Rachel Bruce, David Carr, Louise Curtis, Alison Danforth, Hans de Jonge, Saskia de Vries, Lorraine Estelle, Ashley Farley, Liz Ferguson, Sarah Greaves, Steven Inchcoombe, Paul Kelly, Jasmin Lange, Rebecca Lawrence, Claire Moulton, Chris Pressler, David Prosser, Mary Purton, Falk Reckling, Johan Rooryck, Arthur Smith, Lennart Stoy, Franck Vazquez, Anna Vernon, Sofie Wennström, Alicia Wise, and Hazel Woodward.

In this collaborative workshop – hosted by Wellcome and organised by Information Power –funders, libraries and library consortia, and publishers worked together to develop a framework for communicating OA publishing services. The purpose of the framework is to enable conversations between publishers and customers to build confidence that prices are fair and reasonable. The framework is not focused on costs, overheads, or profits. The project seeks to develop a framework that is transparent, practical to implement, and insightful for users.

Participants were welcomed by David Carr (Wellcome) and Johan Rooryck (cOAlition S) who warmly thanked everyone for giving up their time to contribute. The project was positioned as an important step in building trust between stakeholders and in moving toward more openness. We are not only on a journey toward open access content, but more openness and transparency on editorial decisions and publishing processes too. This is all part of a much wider movement toward open science and open research.

**Sofie Wennström** presented a library view, informed by her role as Chair of the LIBER OA working group. When libraries think about open research, we think not only about opening content but also about how to make practices and processes as open as possible. LIBER members want OA to be the main form of publishing and research data to be FAIR. We want to instil digital skills that can underpin a more open and transparent research life cycle. We want research infrastructure to be participatory and tailored to the different needs of disciplines. In 2017 LIBER published its well-known OA principles for negotiations with publishers.

Transparency is an important issue for librarians. For example, as a public servant in Sweden all one’s emails and work are openly available to citizens. Libraries welcome this open and transparent culture. Those laws are important for building public trust in universities and public trust in research. Our engagement with publishers should be open in the same way. There is sometimes sensitive private information within contracts, and this is why we need to work together to find a common framework for communicating about the agreements and services. There is some discussion about using public procurement processes for journals in order to facilitate transparency, but this is not an easy process and would require a lot of time.

LIBER members are clear that they want perpetual access to content. This is true both for OA content and also for any content libraries have paid to access. Usage reports for all content, including OA content, is another essential service for LIBER members. Usage information helps libraries to analyse the value of investments and informs renewals.

Acquisitions librarians are talking to one another and are learning from one another: what services are included in one contract and missing perhaps from others and why? Principles and frameworks for sharing this sort of knowledge would be helpful and might be one of the outcomes of today’s workshop and project.

**Saskia C. J. de Vries** presented on the work of the Transparent Transition to OA Consortium – brought together by the Fair OA Alliance (<https://www.fairopenaccess.org/>) which has published the Fair OA Principles (<https://www.fairopenaccess.org/the-fair-open-access-principles/>).

They propose the following template for pricing communication transparency:



TTOA partners are in various stages of participation in terms of using the template:

* Publishers that have already published break-down figures: Frontiers, Copernicus Publications, Ubiquity Press, MIT Press
* Publishers that are working on providing their break-down figures: Stockholm University Press, PLoS, OLH, OpenEdition, MPDI
* Publishers that are looking at providing their break-down figures: De Gruyter and Cambridge UP

FOAA is also setting up a TTOA consortium for book and monograph price transparency together with OAPEN, De Gruyter and IntechOpen along similar lines as TTOA.

**Franck Vazquez** – provided a publisher perspective. As an OA native publisher, MDPI sees itself as a service provider and pricing transparency is aligned with the purpose of OA. It is important for researchers to better understand the work publishing entails on the publisher side. While MDPI does not receive requests for pricing transparency from researchers, they do get this demand from librarians.

MDPI has worked within the TTOA consortium for several months to help define the price breakdown list. MDP has not yet implemented the TTOA pricing transparency list as for MDP it is not simple to calculate the prices accurately. All MDPI tools are developed in-house. Staff work flexibly across a range of tools and activities. MDPI needs a bit more time to assign the costs in an accurate way. MDPI publish 208 journals across wide spectrum of disciplines. The publishing service/approach is quite different in each of these, so for MDPI it would be more complicated to create a cost breakdown by journal or subject.

Some important variables to consider for the framework are submission numbers, rejection rates (both desk rejects and rejects after peer review), published article numbers, and APC waivers.

Workshop participants discussed the apparent lack of researcher interest in pricing transparency. This was a more widely shared experience. Researchers, at least some researchers, are beginning to wake up to total price since becoming confronted with APCs which they regard as hugely inconvenient and expensive. However, no publisher present could recall having received a request from a researcher for a more transparent breakdown of this total price. A publisher carried out a survey recently asking authors what services they expect from a journal in exchange for the price. Authors who participated seemed to have an instinctive feel for the value of a journal, and a high price for a higher quality journal made sense to them, as did a lower price for lower quality.

**Break out session 1**Breakout groups were asked to review, and improve upon, a list of publisher services (<http://www.informationpower.co.uk/service-buckets/>) crafted by clustering services listed in <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/02/06/focusing-value-102-things-journal-publishers-2018-update/>.

**Feedback:**

**It is useful to educate people about what publishers do.**

**This list is far too detailed.** For example, article handling could be simplified to:

* peer review
* text and figure work
* ethics checks
* marketing

Or perhaps each publisher could report what customers get if they pay $1-1.5k, 2-.5k, etc.

**This list is missing some important things.**

* Include a tick box for the publisher to indicate whether or not its services are Plan S compliant.
* The in-kind contribution made by universities and researchers for peer review and editing
* Space, facilities, and other overheads which might not normally be costed, for example by university presses
* Complex transition costs, for example for hybrid OA journals
* Complex transaction costs, for example for APCs for hybrid OA journals
* Provision of front section and review articles
* Payments to cover the costs of agents and consortia
* The waiver issue is huge and needs to be acknowledged and factored in
* The relationship between branding and cost –branding is a shorthand for delivered value and requires costs. Even where fees are paid by libraries, publishers need to market and sell to authors to attract them to publish in their titles.
* Other activities that learned societies support
* Cross-subsidies within the publishing house. For example, journals might subsidise unprofitable books, or STEM might subsidise HSS.

**Libraries wouldn’t be allowed to pay for some of these services -** marketing back to libraries to drive sales isn’t an appropriate use of public money.

**Should we have a minimum set of publisher services that customers would expect in \*all\* cases?** This would include good, effective metadata and deployment of standards.

**This list is too article centric.** There are many things that publishers do that are for the community to reflect their priorities and adjust to them, and none of this is considered at the minute. [NB: the activities then provided as examples are listed under other headings on the bucketed spreadsheet and do not fall in the article handling category]. This seems to assume that the process starts and submission, but there are many things that publishers do that start well before this (e.g. identify authors and help them develop manuscripts and attract them to journal).

**This list is too journal centric.** Open publishing platforms are meant to be covered by the framework, and these platforms do not have journals in the same way. Whatever is agreed needs to work for everyone.

**Different types of journals provide different services.** Maybe this framework needs to include types of journals rather than subject areas – let publishers define types?

**Different services are provided in different disciplines, and so how would this be handled?** For example, copy editing only vs language editing too, and provision of camera-ready LaTeX files from mathematicians. Perhaps a spreadsheet could be provided with a vertical axis showing a list of services (e.g. metadata) and on y axis the different disciplines to show different price points.

**Quality matters.** Perhaps focus on service *levels* rather than service *buckets*. Do we really want publishing commoditised? Enable communication of finer quality distinctions: do you do all of these services, and to a good quality? Does it matter that some publishers outsource to countries with appalling labour conditions – yes, it does.

**It would be useful to know what the author/funder/institution expectations are in exchange for APCs/payment and whether these are met.** At the moment libraries don’t have much clarity in our agreements with publishers about what we are getting in exchange for a payment (e.g. we think an article will be published under the right license, but rarely say so).

**It should be about value to authors.** How do researchers assess value for money? The publisher experience is that authors want to know how publishers are going to help them disseminate their work, and how it is going to appear in social media, and how that will be managed/reported back. Is it about how successful their article is, how their reputation is impacted, are they able to secure that next grant? Impact on authors should be our focus.

**It’s not only about value to authors.** Librarians are interested in services received from publishers, and the quality and efficiency of these services. Librarians are also interested in quality and efficiency of article handling and peer review.

**There are implementation concerns**

* Staff do many functions; we would need to estimate how to allocate their costs across services.
* How would one-time vs on-going costs be allocated?
* How often would we need to do this exercise (e.g. every year, or when APC changes?)
* This exercise could incur a lot of overhead for publishers without really enlightening/informing decisions or enhancing the research process.

**There are concerns about equity**

* This exercise would be easier for small publishers. They have fewer titles and so it would be easier for them to describe their services and explain variation between titles.
* This exercise would advantage large publishers. There are real benefits of economy of scale that advantage large publishers in terms of the services they can provide at lower cost points.

**Lorraine Estelle provided an overview of the project survey results so far**, thanking everyone for disseminating the link and taking the time to participate. The survey will be open until the end of November, but responses before the end of October will be most useful to us and she asked everyone to continue to share the link with their networks.

She noted that the survey was launched on 30 September and what is currently available is a quick initial snapshot of the responses so far. The survey approach has limitations and we should be mindful that the finding reflects an entirely self-selected sample of respondents. The survey is just one of the ways Information Power will be consulting and taking soundings.

IPL asked librarians and researchers to rank their interest, first in the service categories, and then secondly, as an example, more detailed lists of services within the Article Handling and Development category. The categories of most interest are article handling and development, rights protection, and library services. All categories were of interest, but there was less interest in sales and marketing, journal development, and print distribution. Within the article handling and development category there are high levels of interest in dealing with data, ethics investigations, copyediting and styling.

The survey asked publishers to indicate for each category if they felt researchers or librarians (or both or neither) would be interested in having pricing information. When matched against input from librarians and researchers, publisher perceptions were broadly correct although librarians are more interested in article handling and development than publishers anticipated.

**Break out session 2 – Participants were asked to take the view of a customer (library, consortium, or researcher) and discussed what services would be of interest to each**

**Library** –

* Article handling (“to a level of detail that may surprise and horrify publishers - we are detailed people and need real detail”)
* Quality of metadata
* Quality of indexing
* Retention of re-use rights by authors in order to increase early public communication of research findings
* Perpetual access
* The cost (in time) to authors of submitting a manuscript
* The cost (in time/money) to libraries in ingesting content into their collection, whether gold or green
* We would like to know in more detail about the care and feeding of peer reviewers, how many are there, what kind of peer reviewers, how many articles accepted/rejected
* Subscriptions – let’s not forget that transparency is great, but we still struggle with enormous subscription prices and price increases
* Contracts should not be subject to non-disclosure clauses and should enable sharing of total price paid, information about pricing for specific services (e.g. read vs publishing ratio, platforms, perpetual access), and discounts and thresholds for discounts.
* Number of submissions, rejections, publications, downloads
* Articles published and prices for APCs for publications not eligible under a transformative deal

**Consortium** –

* Article handling and development
* Compliance with laws and mandates
* Reader engagement (“we want data about this to inform next purchase”)
* Library services including nice workflows and cost savings
* Technology and infrastructure which could include discovery and metadata so that we know content reaches who it should
* If authors are amongst the stakeholders making the purchasing decisions, then consortia need to be able to provide meaningful insight for them as well as for libraries

**Researchers** –

* Saving time and reaching audience
* Manuscript submission
* Time to peer review/publishing
* Peer review process
* Editorial checks
* Actual added value between preprint or accepted manuscript and final version
* Data management
* Inclusion of images and third-party materials (at no cost to author)
* Social media and press release support (not author led)
* Funder mandate compliance
* Profit levels

**Final plenary discussion on implementation issues – recognising that it isn’t at all clear yet what will be implemented**

**Think green OA too** - Today’s discussion has largely focussed on gold, but green OA is real too and transparency here should not be forgotten. Green OA is necessary in order to retain author choice of publication venue and to enable institutions to manage costs. Subscription income funds the ability to offer green OA services and so if transparency around OA is required, transparency around subscriptions is also required. A lot of the effort to make AAMs acceptable to users takes place in the publishing houses long before the manuscripts are made available. The full picture is needed in order to make reasonable decisions about value, benefits, and costs.

**Quality** –

* It would be good to have a quality element in the project framework, and not just a list of services.
* Is there some way that we can surface/expose author perceptions and library perceptions about the quality and value for money of publisher services?
* Do we need to measure activity or impact?
* Researchers are probably not interested in price, but rather the services available and the quality of those services.
* Researchers are more likely to be interested in the value of the publishing outcome rather than the value of activities. However, librarians might want something quite different.
* Publishing time metrics might be of interest to all customer groups, e.g. speed of publication.
* It was noted that slowness, in terms of revisions required, might sometimes be a more powerful measure of quality than rapidity.
* Quality markers might include support for data, size of community of impact (some subject areas are very small and others enormous); respect for the editor of journal and editorial board, level of demand from journal for peer review and revision.
* Online usage as a metric is available more quickly than impact factor, for example.
* Impact in a broader sense could be useful, for example impact on grand challenges, on policy matters, and economic impact.
* There are no generalisable criteria across subject, so there is a need a range of metrics and not a single blunt instrument.

**Keep it simple** – why not just use an open document template with around 7 buckets, asking publishers to lay out their prices and services across disciplines, and publish these templates on an open platform? Ask publishers to repeat this exercise once every 3 to 5 years.

**No, make it robust enough to instil confidence and trust** – How will we know publishers are providing accurate information? What if their prices or services change? Publishers sometimes change their prices, licenses, policies without telling anyone, so there would need to be a check on accuracy, e.g. price and service list. How will we have confidence that we are comparing apples and apples across publishing houses? When we start measuring things, we change behaviours, and people will game the system.

**Qualitative or quantitative validation?** Ticking boxes against a list of services is qualitative and would require one sort of validation. Doing detailed cost analysis in a consistent way would require proper systems development and a proper quantitative audit would be needed. For example, COUNTER requires an annual independent audit to assure compliance with its Code of Practice.

**Keep it simple enough** – An annual quantitative audit could cost millions (if not more) to do and would be a service that only largest publishers could afford. There is a need to keep in mind the implementation burden on small and medium publishers. A focus on outcomes, such as when articles are published, citations and usage may be more feasible.

**Keep it legal** – The framework needs to align with competition law. Publishers cannot signal their intentions relating to future pricing, for example. [NB: Information Power acknowledged this point and noted that a competition lawyer is part of the project team in order to advise on this.]

**A degree of centralisation of evaluation is needed** – some investment from libraries would be required to work with these data; don’t require everyone to replicate the work of validating publisher transparency and quality time after time. We’ll need something like the Cabell’s list or COUNTER.

**Try to reuse an existing service** - There are a suite of existing services that could be tweaked for example SHERPA. [NB: Funders are in conversation with various service providers about pulling these services together into one platform. It is not yet decided whether they would also contain the outcomes of this project.] CrossRef was mentioned as a possible service provider, however many of the publisher participants did not think that an article level service via CrossRef would be feasible. Make a link between this project and the Research on Research Institute (RoRI).

**Maybe we need an entirely new sort of service** - a TripAdvisor for journals, which might overcome the need for any independent audit. Authors and libraries could be encouraged or incentivised to share their experiences of the services they receive. Call it Flip Advisor. Flip Advisor customer roles could include authors, readers, and librarians.

**What could be done with this information? Some publishers are not here today because they are concerned the only possible outcomes from this project are negative.**

* Research impact for societal good is quite difficult to measure (there are a load of ways this is done) but it isn’t currently at all tied in to publishing. It’s a story of the university. It’s not a story of the publishers’ part of the research lifecycle. Some of the data that we’ve discussed today could help us demonstrate our research impact and that could help improve trust.
* This could help people get informed about publishing, if they wish to be. For example, PhD students who are innately curious about this research world they are moving into, and who are hungry for more information. ECRs can feel trapped in the truths (i.e. unquestioned beliefs) of the older generation of researchers.
* We librarians can help quality publishers by ensuring ECRs take informed decisions.
* Could this contribute to a decrease in the size of the Cabell’s blacklist and the number of predatory publishers and spam?
* This information could improve customer relations, by leading to happier librarians and happier funders.
* Perhaps better purchasing decisions, and not just knee-jerk reactions to the cost of an APC.
* This work could potentially leverage a shift from over-reliance on impact factors.
* Libraries could perhaps procure just the subset of publishing services they want and decide which services they can provide to the researchers on their campus themselves. HEIs are looking for efficiency in the way the university operates, not only in how the publisher operates – this is why they need insight about in-kind contributions and an ability to manage these.

**Next steps**:

* Prepare notes of this meeting to share with participants and sponsors
* Soundings from stakeholders at the Frankfurt Bookfair and the Charleston Conference
* Share information about this workshop publicly in some way
* There will be a second survey in November to lay out implementation options, and to assess stakeholder willingness to implement