

Open access

David Ball

The Pendulum Swings?

Considering recent reports on Open Access (OA), we might echo Claudius: “When reports come, they come not single spies But in battalions”.

The first appeared at the end of August, when the European Commission issued the report of a study undertaken by Science-Metrix, snappily entitled [Proportion of Open Access Peer-Reviewed Papers at the European and World Levels 2004-2011](#). According to the Commission “this new research suggests that open access is reaching the tipping point, with around 50% of scientific papers published in 2011 now available for free”.

One may quibble about the importance of this proportion: can it really be seen as a “tipping point”, and what does that actually mean? It seems to imply that there will now be an avalanche of OA articles. However one can see in this proportion the success of the work of the tireless Green OA advocates such Stevan Harnad, and the resulting growth of institutional repositories and mandates and backing from research funders, which will continue organically.

The report is important because it shows the proportion of OA articles to be double that established in previous surveys. It draws attention to the differing growth rates of Green and Gold OA, with Gold far outstripping Green at 24% per year, “which means that the number of gold papers doubles every 2.9 years”. However, Gold OA is starting from a very low base, and while, as the report acknowledges, the impact of Gold should be closely monitored in the future, one cannot at this juncture predict an avalanche of Gold.

Indeed, as suggested in my last column, the pendulum seems to be swinging back towards Green OA. A second report, published in September by the [Business, Innovation and Skills Committee](#) as a result of its investigation of OA, agrees that the ultimate goal should be Gold OA, but holds that the Government is “mistaken in focusing on Gold as route to full open access” as outlined in the [Finch Report](#).

The conclusions and recommendations of the BIS Committee report include:

- Support for the existing and world-leading infrastructure of institutional repositories and for immediate deposit mandates;
- Placing an upper limit of six-month embargoes on STEM subject research and up to 12 month embargoes for humanities and social-sciences subject research;
- A call to the Government to mitigate the effect of universities having to fund a significant portion of the costs of Gold OA.

The question of course is what practical effect the report will have. The Committee has no executive power. However the report notes that “the Minister for Universities and Science and members of the Finch working group are due to meet in September 2013 to assess impact and progress of open access policy” and calls on the Government to “fully consider and address the conclusions and recommendations set out in this Report”.

Watch out for the next *ELucidate*.

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