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## Open-access publishing finds official favor

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Open-access publishing received official support this month when UK funding bodies agreed on a deal with BioMed Central (publisher of *Genome Biology*).

And in an effort to stimulate discussion about the steps needed to promote open access more broadly, an international group of scholars, funders, librarians, editors, and lawyers - both scientists and nonscientists - [released a draft definition of open-access publication](#) on the Web on June 20. The definition is part of the "Bethesda statement on open-access publishing," drawn up as a result of a meeting held in April at the headquarters of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Md.

In a separate development last week, US congressman Rep. Martin Sabo (D-Minn.) [introduced a bill](#) in the House of Representatives (June 26) that would prohibit copyright protection for any works stemming from substantially federally funded research.

Under the terms of the deal with BioMed Central, the [Joint Information Systems Committee \(JISC\)](#), a committee of the UK's further and higher education funding bodies, is making a blanket payment covering university membership of BioMed Central. As a result, from July 1 university researchers in the United Kingdom whose work is accepted for publication in one of the company's peer-reviewed, online journals will not have to pay an author fee. In these journals, all research articles can, of course, be accessed free of charge by anyone with an Internet connection, and copyright is retained by the author.

In both its commercial guise, as pioneered by BioMed Central, and the not-for-profit version being developed by, among others, the [Public Library of Science \(PLoS\)](#), open-access publishing is gaining increasing attention in the current international debate about scholarly communication. It is one option for making research more visible and reducing the cost to academia of journal subscriptions.

"What's not to like about the idea?" asked [Gerry Rubin](#), vice president of the HHMI, "Why would you want to publish a paper if you don't want people to read it?"

For JISC the deal is part of a wider agenda. "The current scholarly communication system is unsustainable," said Alicia Wise, head of development at JISC, "and the JISC is committed to stimulating debate about its future while actively experimenting with a wide range of innovative models to inform this debate."

As an organization, JISC is concerned about the costs of accessing published research. These can be prohibitive in developing countries, said Kenneth Dick, chair of the library committee for the [Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council](#).

And even in wealthier countries the squeeze on university funding coupled with the increasing number of journals mean there is pressure on library budgets. "To give you an example," said Dick, who is also the librarian at the [John Innes Centre](#), "70 to 80% of our budget for library resources (excluding staff costs) is spent on journal subscriptions."

"I can believe that," said Jill Taylor-Roe, head of liaison and academic services at [University of Newcastle upon Tyne](#), "We [librarians] were delighted by the deal with JISC, but it will only work if academics buy into the idea."

For that to happen, a number of obstacles need to be overcome. Among these are up-front author charges, which the JISC deal addresses for UK researchers and which the delegates at the Chevy Chase meeting acknowledged is a problem, saying that proponents of open access internationally will have to find a way to meet those costs. Already, said Jan Velterop, BioMed Central's publisher, the company is in the early stages of discussion about further deals in Europe and Australia.

In addition to blanket deals with government bodies such as JISC, funding bodies can permit researchers to use some of their grants to cover publication costs, something already permitted by certain funders, including the HHMI and [National Institutes of Health](#). At the UK's [Medical Research Council](#), a spokeswoman said that although the council has no official policy on open-access publishing, it is generally favorable and has recently amended its rules to allow researchers to spend part of their grants on publication. The [Max Planck Society](#), [Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale](#), and [Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique](#) cover their researchers' author fees for publication in BioMed Central journals.

Given the attendees at the Chevy Chase meeting, it is likely that ways will be found to resolve this issue. Delegates included Harold Varmus, president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and Mark Walport, [incoming director of the Wellcome Trust](#). All were attending in a personal capacity rather than as representatives of their organizations, and they will not release a final version of their conclusions until later in the year. Walport, for example, was prepared only to make a written statement to us, saying, "The publication and widespread dissemination of the results of scientific research is an activity the Trust considers to be fundamental to its charitable mission," adding that scientific publishing "is an issue that interests me and one which the Trust will be looking into over the coming months."

Another and perhaps more intractable obstacle to the success of open-access publishing is the fact that in many countries researchers are assessed for funding and promotion on the basis of the impact factors of the journals in which they publish. As many open-access journals are too young to have acquired an impact factor, this is an important barrier to any shift away from publishing in traditional, subscription journals.

Academics spoken to for this article are well aware that this system is flawed and that researchers ought to be assessed on the basis of the content of their papers, not the journals in which they publish. HHMI already does this, and in the United Kingdom there is a possibility that [changes to the Research Assessment Exercise currently being discussed](#) will bring in a different system of assessment.

Despite the current support for open-access publishing - both in its commercial and not-for-profit guises - it is not the only option for enhancing the visibility of research. Others include [institutional repositories](#) and researchers posting papers they have published in subscription journals on their own Web sites, where they can be picked up by search engines. But both of these depend on whether copyright assignment allows deposition there.

Clearly, such approaches could, together, make research more visible and searchable, but they would need to be standardized and, said Taylor-Roe, "We would need to listen to academics to be sure we are developing the most appropriate search engines and user interfaces.

"These are exciting times," she added, "it will be interesting to see which means of scholarly communication prosper."

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