

Today marks the launch of another report on open access, a topic area that is rapidly becoming saturated. The latest document, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (Hefce) and overseen by the British Academy, specifically focuses on the humanities and social sciences in an international environment. The conclusions are fairly clear:

- Hefce's "green" open access recommendations (research accessed via digital repositories) – with up to 24 month embargoes and allowances for exemptions – meet with approval.
- Research Councils UK (RCUK) is unrealistic and its policies, we are told, "pose serious dangers for the international standing of UK research in the humanities".

While such work is welcome, it must be stressed that there are also some problems with the research here. The most notable problem is the fact that the researchers destroyed datasets in order to preserve commercial confidentiality. Nobody can, therefore, check these findings and they must be treated with caution.

What's the purpose of research?

Although this latest document provides some data on international take-up of open access, it also provides an opportune moment to undertake some basic reflection on the point of our research.

Take this report's focus on the "international standing" and the "international reach" of UK research. The debate on open access sometimes rests on an assumption of shared definitions that simply does not exist. For example, what do we mean when we talk of "international standing"? What does "reach" mean and what metrics support it?

Different sides in the debate use these terms differently: for traditionalists and open access sceptics, international standing and reach seem to refer to peer prestige. On the other hand, for many open access advocates (myself included) and also funders, anything other than online will place a limit upon standing and reach. This seems to be a contradiction.

What does "international standing" actually mean?

Consider the phrase "the international standing of UK research in the humanities". This is taken to refer to a fear that UK research will not appear in journals that are traditionally popular with academics, run by presses whose provisions for green self-archiving do not meet UK policies.

These journals are conventionally prestigious, although the authors of the report are careful to tiptoe around this fact. The research community beyond the UK, in this reading, would presumably then not see UK research because it would not feature in the journals read by international colleagues.

There are two problems with this type of reasoning. First, can the standing of UK humanities research really be said to be held in high regard internationally, if simply by changing publication outlets the research falls off the map? Secondly, there seems to be a far more damaging phenomenon already underway for humanities disciplines: irrelevance.

Confining humanities research to print-only journals – to which, essentially, only academic libraries subscribe – while claiming this as reputation-building, scholarly publishing does not suggest a desire to educate a populace, but looks rather like the work of an archaic ivory tower obsessed with its own importance.

Academics can't continue to publish in the most popular journals

If we protect the desire to go on publishing in the most conventionally popular formats, then entire disciplines lose any kind of respect from the broader public (who cannot access our research material).

Now, of course, such thinking opens up cans of worms with regard to academic populism. This is not my intention. But the idea of the "international standing" of UK research (and potential damage to it) is subjective; whose opinion on the standing matters?

Consider, for instance, the fact that, at meeting after meeting, research council and funding council representatives have parroted the mantra that the broadest possible dissemination must be the key concern for funders.

For funders, it seems that open access provides the largest possible reach, because anyone can access the material, anywhere, simply via the internet. They have also remarked that nobody is forcing academics to take their funding.

Many international journals do not comply with UK policies

This latest report, in noting that an admittedly large proportion of international venues do not comply with UK policies, concludes: "The most serious risk that is confirmed by the research done for this report is that, in some disciplines at least, UK open access policies, if followed too rigidly, will undermine the international reach and thus standing of the country's research."

How can it be the case that the "international reach" of UK research is currently satisfactory, compared with an online, open access alternative, when, in the English subject discipline, "three of the non-UK journals which are most used by UK academic authors in fact still appear in hard copy only"? Contending definitions of "reach" are at play here.

In his recent book, Michael Bhaskar, digital publisher, has argued that publishing has a threefold function of "filtering", "framing" and "amplification". Many academic publications worldwide do a good job of filtering (peer review screening) and framing (providing a context for) research.

They are also good at amplification – but only to those who have subscriptions and are based in academic institutions, and to those with power. This is desirable on a personal level for academics, who need such credentials for their career.

They cannot be blamed for this – it is the system of rewards that needs to change. And this is what UK funding councils are doing: changing the structure of rewards to favour those who are willing to amplify their work to anybody with an internet connection.

The UK should be proud of leading the way towards a future where there is no conflict between being read and respected by those who can afford subscriptions, and being read and respected by those who can't.

Martin Paul Eve is lecturer in English Literature at the University of Lincoln – follow him on Twitter @martin_eve