Open Access and the German Academic System: Common Perspectives of the Alliance of Research Organisations

By the Working Group of the Open Access Commissioners of the Alliance of Research Organisations

An important step in implementing the principle of Open Access in Germany was the 'Berlin Declaration' which was adopted following a conference hosted by the Max Planck Society on 22 October 2003. Amongst the first to sign were the presidents of the seven large German academic organisations: the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz), the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), the German Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat), the Max Planck Society (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft), the Fraunhofer Society (Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft), the Helmholtz Association (Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft) and the Leibniz Association (Leibniz-Gemeinschaft).

A joint working group of these seven alliance organisations regularly discusses the prospects of Open Access in the individual organisations and in the German academic world. The degree of implementation of the Open Access principle varies depending on the structure and tasks of the organisations. They all have the common goal of supporting the transition to Open Access and allowing a productive handling of openly accessible research results. A number of measures are supposed to contribute towards achieving a comprehensive and freely accessible representation of knowledge.

Approaching academics

Scientists and scholars, as the producers of high-quality information, are central to the Open Access debate. Only if the best publications are also freely accessible via the Internet, will they be able to achieve their full potential. Therefore, scientists and scholars should not just be offered an Open Access infrastructure which they can use to publish their research results; they should also be informed about their technical, organisational and legal options. Higher education institutions, research organisations and research sponsors should create incentives to make Open Access publishing even more attractive, and ascertain whether and to what extent they can obligate their scientists to use this form of publication.

Involving scholarly associations

Different areas of science and scholarship have different publishing habits as well as different methods of assessing research contributions. By including scholarly societies and associations in the development of an Open Access publication culture, these differences can be accommodated.

Recognising publication costs as research costs

One of the prerequisites for Open Access is the coverage of publication costs. Publication costs are research costs and thus must be firmly anchored in the budget of every research endeavour. These means should preferably be used for the authors' fees of Open Access journals or hybrid publications. By paying a publication fee they make the contributions that would ordinarily require a licence, freely accessible.

Ensuring quality

Since Open Access publications are accessible for every Internet user, they are, in theory, subject to critical assessment of the worldwide academic community. Exploiting new forms of review, such as the open peer review, offers a means of sustained quality assurance. Open Access journals in particular should take advantage of this in order to increase their acceptance in the community.

Network publishing

The Internet offers the possibility of networking the data and sources that underlie a piece of academic research with the actual publication in a multitude of ways. This makes discovery processes easier to understand. At the same time, the integration of primary sources into publications makes a contribution to quality assurance in the spirit of good academic practice.

Identifying models

It has long been routine for many scientists to make their own research results available as Open Access publications. As the Dutch 'Cream of Science' project has shown, an information platform giving free access to publications by leading German scientists such as Nobel Prize and Leibniz Prize winners could be used for targeted advertising of this new form of publication.

The legal base

For publications created within the context of teaching and research activity largely financed with public funds, a simple, non-commercial right of use or exploitation should be granted to academics and their institutions. This will ensure that research results can be viewed, for the most part, without obstacles.

Supporting transformation processes

The mere distribution of research results at minimal cost via the Internet poses a particular challenge for academic publishing. The only possible reaction to this is the creative design of the academic information space: discipline-specific value-added services must be developed on the basis of freely accessible publications in order to support work with digital information in an efficient manner.

Korinna Bauer, Helmholtz Association
Michael Erben-Russ, Fraunhofer Society
Johannes Fournier, German Research Foundation
Ralf Schimmer, Max Planck Society
Elmar Schultz, German Rectors' Conference
Robert Steegers, Leibniz Association