

Academics to take control of copyright

UK universities are preparing to implement an institutional open-access policy that would allow researchers to retain important rights to their work, Research Fortnight can reveal.

The UK Scholarly Communications Licence, which has been the subject of negotiations between universities and publishers for two years, is in the final stages of development. More than 100 universities are involved in the discussions, and about 20 have already agreed in principle to adopt the licence through their governing bodies or research committees, Research Fortnight understands.

Academics at institutions that adopt the UK-SCL will be able to retain the rights to deposit their articles into an open-access repository, and use them for teaching and conferences, while assigning some copyright to publishers where necessary.

But before going ahead, institutions want to coordinate with UK Research and Innovation, which is to carry out a review of its open-access policies by the end of the year.

Chris Banks, the director of library services at Imperial College London, who is leading the UK-SCL initiative, said UKRI “appears to be looking at how the UK-SCL might help open access”.

Stuart Taylor, publishing director at the Royal Society and a member of the UK-SCL steering group, said the

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initiative “is a welcome attempt to speed up the communication of research and helps to simplify compliance with institutional and funder mandates”.

The UK-SCL is based on the so-called Harvard model used by about 70 institutions, mostly in the United States. Publishers can ask for exemptions, but have done so only 5 per cent of the time in the US, according to the UK-SCL steering committee.

The UK Publishers Association has expressed reservations, and has demanded a blanket embargo period in line with the research councils’ current open-access policies. This means researchers may still not be able to make taxpayer-funded research openly available until six to 12 months after publication.

Publishers benefit from a block grant from the research councils to take publicly funded research out of their paywalls. Should UK-SCL not require an embargo, researchers could make more outputs openly available immediately for free.

Emma House, deputy chief executive of the Publishers Association, said concerns remained about “the potential complexity around how waivers and exemptions might be managed”.

Wales told to up its game to replace EU funds

The Welsh government should encourage universities to submit more bids to UK-wide funding competitions, a review of publicly funded research in the nation is set to recommend.

Graeme Reid, chair of science policy at University College London and author of the year-long review commissioned by the Welsh government, presented the preliminary findings on 24 April in Cardiff.

Speaking to Research Fortnight afterwards, he said he was confident that the formation of the umbrella funding agency UK Research and Innovation was an opportunity for Wales “not only to offset the loss of European Union money but to end up with even more than they started with”, as long as the right measures were put in place.

UKRI is to roll out the £115-million Strength in Places Fund to build research capacity and to award additional funding to support the industrial strategy. Wales has made progress in this area with support from EU structural funds: it is set to receive £2 billion between 2014 and 2020, much of which will support research infrastructure. But the EU structural funds will no longer be available to the UK after Brexit.

Reid said he would propose that the Welsh government create a Future of Wales fund, worth £30m a year,

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which would provide top-up funding to institutions that win grants in UK-wide competitions.

Reid also said that the Welsh government should seek greater influence over UK research policy. A Welsh research and innovation office should be created in London, he said, to “get under the skin of decision-making” and “bring a Welsh perspective to the heart of early-stage thinking”.

According to Reid, all Welsh innovation activities should be brought together under a new umbrella fund, called St David’s Investment Fund, to attract investors.

But before doing any of this, the Welsh government should raise quality-related research funding to levels comparable with the rest of the UK, Reid said. The Welsh government said in 2016 that it would maintain QR funding in real terms for the following five years.

Jo Rycroft-Malone, pro vice-chancellor for research at Bangor University, welcomed the preliminary findings and said it was “vital” for Welsh universities to remain competitive at the UK level, especially with Brexit looming.

The final report will be published by July, according to the Welsh government.