



*Extended Abstract*

## **A Critical Examination of Barriers to Open Access in UK Academia**

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### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to present a critical examination of the perceived obstacles operating within the United Kingdom's (UK) academic community to engaging with the praxis of open access (OA) publishing and dissemination. It draws on research currently underway seeking to problematise and challenge some of the orthodox perceptions operating within the academic publishing environment.

It is a given that the academy has long relied on the dissemination of research findings through formally distributed publication to ensure quality assurance, knowledge propagation and engender discourse. This legacy publication model was configured around the distribution of physical (rivalrous) hardcopy material with exclusive reproduction rights transferred to an increasingly industrialised academic publishing industry. The resultant commodified academic dissemination sector has arguably configured an increasingly unbalanced and exploitive relationship between immaterial knowledge producers and publishers [1].

However, due to the increasing ease of digital (non-rivalrous) dissemination, growing institutional financial tensions and ideological pressures to shift from normative modes of intellectual property enclosure, this traditional publishing hegemony has been challenged over the last two decades by emergent moves towards opening access to academic publications [2]. Despite the arguable “*self-evident*” societal good [3] that OA represents and the reported global academic community’s intellectual willingness to engage [4], collectively British academic culture has been perceived to have lagged behind

comparator nations [5]. While some argue that the UK situation has improved [6], typically only fifth of total publication output is deposited within *green* OA repositories [7], although the number of academics utilising *gold* OA publishing routes has risen in the wake of recent national policy shifts [8-10]. Nevertheless, the implementation of the government mandated Finch Group's review [5] and subsequent parliamentary hearings on scholarly communication have revealed the importance to which the national political economy attaches to OA dissemination. Consequently the UK represents a uniquely fascinating environment with respect to university policy, infrastructure and practice as a target for cultural inquiry.

## Methods

This research seeks to address the questions behind this seeming cultural inertia by UK academics towards new paradigms of openness that. Using a qualitative ethnographically framed approach this research began by seeking to establish a grounding in the current institutional OA related praxis, an approach which offered a broad and adaptable range of methods suitable for research into academic cultures. These results will contribute to contextualising and critiquing a systematic analysis of the actors and power relationships impacting on the epistemological foundations of scholarly praxis within the UK academic community.

Prior work into this area has often been predicated on quantitative metrics or a technological deterministic epistemology [11-13], exposing a particular flaw in seeking to propose solutions without sufficient rationalisation of the complex constructs and relationships configuring the UK academy. Particularly there is scant consideration of the impacts on the academy's behaviour from the neoliberal and marketisation ideologies subsuming the UK university sector in the wake of the Jarratt report [14]. Subsequent governments have continued to enact policies in line with neoliberal capitalism's free market competitive ethos, as a result the UK academy's praxis has become subverted from the Newmanian elite scholarly institution ideal to mass-market neo-Taylorist metric driven education factories [15]. Subsequently as the academy increasingly prioritises competitive productivity over authentic scholarship then the quest for capital dominates, generating genuine tensions around the potentialities for embracing openness in academic dissemination praxis. Thus considering the ontological and epistemological questions around the purpose, function and ethos of the academy is crucial in focussing this work's intellectual framework.

Consequently, this research draws on aspects of cultural, social and political economic theory as they encompass how societies change and develop, seeking to explain social behaviour and structures [16]. While the work of free culture scholars around concepts such as the digital commons offer potential resonances with OA [17], much of it is steeped with neoliberal, positivist and technological deterministic epistemology. Methodologically then this research has established that the work of Marx, Gramsci, Autonomism and Foucault provides the most suitable intellectual infrastructure in terms of problematizing and understanding the tensions, conflicts, power relationships and discourses which constitutes the academy's OA behaviour. These methodologies comprise the underlying intellectual framework and analytical lens, shaping both methods used to gather and analyse data.

To establish a baseline of the current discourse and praxis within the academy, a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews [18] were conducted with OA support staff based at a broad cross-section of UK universities, permitting a dynamic and authentic narrative to be generated. Respondents,

through being embedded within organisational structures and cultures provided knowledgeable authentic insights into the local academic corpus' praxis. The interviews focussed on four thematic areas (activities, engagement, influences, obstacles) and established a multi-faceted account of current and historical behaviours. Following qualitative content analysis [19], the data was used to construct a narrative representing current OA praxis across the UK academy. Additionally, respondent quotations were utilised to represent genuine insider-insight, as well as contributing towards a deeper "*revelatory and emancipatory*" [20] analysis exposing underlying mechanisms, cultural conventions and power relationships.

## Results and Discussion

Seven major themes were elicited from the interviews. While these broadly aligned with the thematic areas, the greatest degree of variance was demonstrated around the obstacles to engendering a culture of successful normative OA cultural praxis. Obstacles included procedural uncertainties, cultural attitudes, procedural workloads and the complexity of publisher license regimes. It also became clear that academics across the UK do not comprise a heterogeneous monolithic culture even within a single institution or discipline. Such was the multiplicity of obstacles exposed that attempting to resolve so many competing barriers may in itself represent a significant challenge for those seeking to propagate a coherent enabling OA discourse. While approaches to advocacy were typically uniform within institutions, these results suggest that a greater level of bespoke support is required to resolve these issues.

Additionally, normative OA discourse commonly centres on a disciplinary split portraying those within scientific disciplines as leading on OA praxis compared to arts and humanities scholars typified as reticent or resistant. Orthodox perceptions rationalise this as a consequence of a prior focus on article sharing, insufficiently robust models for OA books and learned societies' influences. These results challenged this orthodoxy, in that exemplars of good or poor engagement were demonstrated across all disciplines. However it was commonly observed that engagement with OA was sporadic across the institutions and had yet to reach a cultural tipping point.

It is important to recall that these interviews were conducted with support staff, working to enable OA among their academic colleagues. Thus perceptions of problems may demonstrate a subjectivity based within the difficulties encountered in their own working environments. The fact that that academic awareness of OA praxis was commonly cited as poor may speak as much to the priority with which support staff ascribe to advocacy work, or may represent an inherent defence of their function's import within the competitive neoliberal university environment.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research has been that efforts towards achieving sustainable OA cultural engagement will be enhanced through achieving a deeper understanding of the praxis, power relationships and discourse operating in the UK academy. What became clear from the analysis was that it is impossible for the UK academy's culture to escape from the pervasive influence of capital, shaped as it is by influences both internal and external. The linking of research income to OA requirements by funders represents a significant further shift towards capital. The interviews made it apparent that this has significantly contributed to recently elevated levels of OA engagement and support from senior

institutional management. Such closer involvement brings with it a perceivable shift towards a creeping pragmatism in institutional OA processes. Thus the maintenance of institutional financial health supplants ambitions of achieving broader ideological goals, such as contributing towards the emergence of an open scholarly digital commons.

From this work a perception is reached that while across the UK university sector great strides are being made towards OA, at the same time its cultural integration remains conflicted. Though this research has constructed a rich overview of UK institutions' cultural responses it is clear that further interviews must be conducted with scholars across the disciplines to contextualise these results with the academic views. Only through this additional contextualisation can any mismatch between the challenges perceived by the key institutional actors be exposed and resolved.

Additionally, efforts towards problematizing the network of actor power relations operating on academic culture, discourse and praxis clearly necessitate broadening the enquiry's scope to incorporate dialogues with publishers, learned societies and research funders. In this way a rationalised contextual picture of the forces shaping the UK academic responses to OA can be created.

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