Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

Open access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework

1. This letter and the publication ‘Policy for open access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework’ (HEFCE 2014/07, available on our website at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201407/) set out the policy for open access in relation to the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). This follows a formal UK-wide consultation on a set of proposals during autumn 2013 (HEFCE 2013/16, www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201316/).

Background

2. The four UK higher education (HE) funding bodies believe that research arising from our funding should be as widely and freely accessible as the available channels for dissemination allow. Open access to research enables the prompt and widespread dissemination of research findings. It benefits the efficiency of the research process and allows publicly funded research to drive economic growth. It delivers social benefits through increased public understanding of research.

3. In 2012 the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (‘the Finch group’) published its report ‘Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications’ (www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/). Following this report the four UK HE funding bodies consulted extensively with the HE sector and other stakeholders on how we should rise to the challenge of delivering increased open access to the research we fund.

4. In July 2013 we published proposals for a requirement that research outputs submitted to the post-2014 REF be available in an open-access form. The consultation received nearly 200 formal written responses from UK higher education institutions, representative bodies, learned societies, subject associations, publishers and other individuals.

Key elements of the policy

5. The core of this policy is as follows: to be eligible for submission to the post-2014 REF, outputs must have been deposited in an institutional or subject repository on acceptance for publication, and made open-access within a specified time period. This requirement applies to journal articles and conference proceedings only; monographs and other long-form publications, research data and creative and practice-based research outputs are out of scope. Only articles and proceedings accepted for publication after 1 April 2016 will need to fulfil these requirements, but we would strongly urge
institutions to implement the policy now. The policy gives a further list of cases where outputs will not need to fulfil the requirements.

**Context and approach**

6. The funding bodies share the view of Government and of other research funders that the UK’s transition toward open access is best supported by policies that respect a mixture of models. The Finch group and Government have stated that publisher-provided, or ‘gold’, open access, is the most sustainable and preferred model for the long term. We share this view, and welcome publishers’ efforts to offer sustainable and cost-efficient open access options to the research community and to convert existing titles to open access. We also welcome the arrival in the market of new open-access publishers.

7. The Finch group and Government also recognised that author-provided, or ‘green’, open access, can play an important role in driving increases in access to and the availability of UK research. We recognise that many institutions are concerned about the risk that a rapid transition to gold open access will increase publication costs in the short term. We also note the letter of 23 January 2014 from the Minister for Universities and Science to Dame Janet Finch, encouraging publishers adopt initiatives to offset institutions’ journal subscriptions against the payment of article processing charges.

8. We stress that researchers and institutions can comply fully with the requirements of this policy using a combination of the gold and green routes, without incurring additional costs. Institutions may use quality-related research funding, or the equivalent, to pay article processing charges in association with gold open access, should they wish.

**Effect of this policy on the REF**

9. We have been mindful of views within the research community that this policy should not undermine a key aim of the REF, which is to assess the quality of UK research irrespective of the publication in which it is found. To this end, we have taken an approach to compliance that respects the publishing decisions of individual authors, and preserves institutions’ ability to submit their best outputs to the REF.

10. Our analysis of the current landscape reveals that it is possible for a policy to achieve this aim while substantially increasing the proportion of UK research that is available in an open-access form. Our analysis of a sample of journal articles and conference proceedings submitted to the current REF shows that authors could have achieved 96 per cent compliance with the access requirements in this policy, had the policy been in place for REF2014. The remaining 4 per cent of outputs would have remained eligible for submission to the REF as exceptions.

**Development and evaluation**

11. Like other funders, we fully recognise that the UK is on a journey to open access, and that this transition will take time. The effectiveness of this policy will depend on awareness and commitment from academic staff, and on the continued commitment of publishers to author-driven open access. We are committed to keeping this policy under review throughout its implementation, with a view to making any adjustments that might be required as a result of feedback from institutions and others. Our policy seeks to represent an ‘outer boundary’ of other funders’ current open-access policies, making it simpler for authors who receive research grants from national and international funders to comply, and will be reviewed with this aim in mind.

12. We are committed to supporting the further technical development of institutional repositories to enable them to support these requirements fully. To this end, we are working closely with Jisc to provide support for institutional repositories, including establishing a detailed technical specification of
the reporting and data requirements of this policy. We have included a set list of exceptions that can be implemented by university repositories, making reporting on the small percentage of outputs that may not meet all of the requirements as simple and straightforward as possible.

13. The policy makes a number of assumptions about aspects of the next REF that have not yet been formally decided. This has been necessary to provide due notice of the policy requirement to the HE sector. The main assumption is that there will be a post-2014 REF that operates on substantially the same basis as the 2014 REF. We commit to keeping the aspects of this policy that are dependent on detailed assumptions about the next REF under close review.

Contact information

14. For further information, please contact Ben Johnson (tel 0117 931 7038) or e-mail openaccess@hefce.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

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