



Moving away from APCs: a multi-stakeholder working group convened by cOAlition S, Jisc and PLOS

[cOAlition S](#), in partnership with [Jisc](#) and [PLOS](#), are seeking to establish a multi-stakeholder working group to identify business models and arrangements that enable equitable participation in knowledge-sharing. The aims of this working group and the eligibility criteria that interested parties must meet in order to apply are outlined below.

We anticipate that the group will consist of a maximum of twelve individuals and will represent the three key stakeholders – funders, institutions/library consortia and publishers - in roughly equal proportions.

Once established, the working group is expected to convene up to six times. The key outcome from this collaborative effort will be the development of a model (or multiple models) that, if implemented, would enable equitable participation in knowledge sharing.

Interested parties should apply using the form available at <https://coalitions.typeform.com/MultiGroup>.

Applications must be submitted by 25th August 2023.

The organising committee will review the applications and strive to ensure a well-balanced representation of different stakeholders within the working group. Efforts will also be made to achieve a broad and diverse membership. The first meeting of the working group will be held by videoconference on Thursday, 14th September, from 14.00 BST to 15.30 BST.

Multi-stakeholder working group overarching aims

1. To identify business models and arrangements that enable equitable participation in knowledge-sharing
2. To consider how the 'per unit' payment model (i.e. APCs) can be replaced by more equitable payment models
3. To explore how funds made available by research funders to support Open Access can be used to best support a non-APC publishing ecosystem
4. To address the possible unintended consequences of publishing funding streams being locked up in individual grants
5. To encourage Open Science practices

Background: from Open Access to Equitable Participation

The OA movement aimed to provide equitable access to research outputs. The push to include the cost of publication in research budgets was intended to reduce the overall cost of access to published research.¹ Twenty years on, what we see is that:

- APCs are established as the predominant OA business model in those countries /regions/ disciplines where this economic argument worked but also where they create barriers to participation for those with limited funds.
- The rate of article growth is leading to ever-increasing costs for funders and research-intensive institutions.
- The article embedded as the research output of value, blocking progress towards an Open Science ecosystem.

Viewed through an economic lens, separating responsibility for choice (the researcher) from responsibility for payment (the librarian or funder) creates a dysfunctional system, as has been raised by funders, including Research England. Giving researchers responsibility for the budget to cover the cost of their publications on a 'publication-by-publication' basis, at first sight, appears to address this problem. However, this approach overlooks the deeper incentive system at work while simultaneously negating the ability of libraries or funders to engage in collective negotiation on researchers' behalf.

The incentives problem

We continue to operate in a world where:

- The majority of research outputs are not accessible, either because they are behind a paywall (in the case of articles) or because they are not shared (non-article outputs).
- The research assessment and incentive systems rely on numbers: number of articles published and Journal Impact Factors (or journal names/'prestige') in a hypercompetitive environment that rewards quantity and prestige (or falsely equates it with quality).

These factors reinforce each other, leading to a self-perpetuating state in which the research community feels shackled and is resistant to change. The current model, firmly centred on the event of publication of an article's Version of Record (VoR) as the desired outcome of research and marker of scientific achievement, exacerbates this problem.

In this current system, the majority of scholarly publishers operate, in the words of Uli Dirnagl,² as 'an industry mining the currency of the academic reputation economy' and, as such, 'a lifeline for those who want to keep the status quo.' Publishers defend themselves from this criticism by positioning themselves to be in the service of the research community, unable to move until researchers change.

¹ As the PLOS founders stated: 'Because publishing is an integral part of the research process, a natural alternative to the subscription model is to consider the significant but relatively small costs of open-access publication as one of the fundamental costs of doing research... If these research sponsors also paid the essential costs of publication—amounting, by most estimates, to less than 1% of the total spent on sponsored research (statistics found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.0000036.sd001>)—we would retain a robust and competitive publishing industry and gain the benefit of universal open access.' Brown PO, Eisen MB, Varmus HE (2003) Why PLoS Became a Publisher. *PLoS Biol* 1(1): e36. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.0000036>

² Founding Director, QUEST Center for Responsible Research, BIH, Charité, Berlin; talk at APE conference January 2023

Of course, none of us is free of constraints and incentives: funders need to show that they have invested in worthwhile research; institutions need to generate funding income and need the prestige of researchers and research outputs to attract students; researchers need money, infrastructure and support networks to carry out research; all publishers need a revenue stream, submissions and stakeholder partnerships for sustainability and stewardship of the community's trust. And everyone in the system expects a salary and recognition in some form for work done.

What are we aiming for?

APCs have got us this far. They have usefully shown that OA is possible. But they create perverse incentives, administrative expenses, and burden for researchers, and they embed the article as the primary research artefact. Waivers are not a sustainable solution: researchers do not want to be viewed as “charitable cases” in need of funds.

At the same time, libraries unintentionally perpetuate this situation, with existing (decreasing) budgets predominantly going towards the largest publishers via “transformative agreements”, a model which locks in the APC/published unit payments and locks out those publishers trying to progress different (more equitable) OA business models.

So, if we weren't 'starting from here', how would we design a model, or models, to support born-digital Open Science?

What can research funders, publishers and libraries/consortia do to drive change?

In this section, we outline what the three key stakeholders in scholarly communication - funders, publishers and institutions - can do to drive change and develop new publishing models and arrangements that are not based on per unit payment systems such as APCs.

Research funders and research performing organisations

Although many research funders are providing financial support to cover publication costs for articles which arise from their funding, in many cases, this funding is held in the research budget.

However, if we are to move away from a per-unit business model - and empower institutions to negotiate arrangements which are non-APC based and have equity at their core - funders will need to explore how their funds can be made accessible to institutions (and not tied up in individual grants).

Research funders interested in applying to join this working group must be committed to taking the two steps outlined below and can demonstrate initiatives that they are already taking forward in support of all of these:

1. Ensure that funds made available to cover publication fees are NOT allocated to individual research grants but instead are aggregated and directed to those who procure publishing services, typically the university library.
2. Incentivise Open Science behaviours in research dissemination in line with Open Science best practices and [research assessment reform](#) by emphasising in the grant application process that all research outputs – preprints, articles, data, peer review reports, methods etc. – are valuable and will be recognised via the research assessment process.

Publishers

Publishers are another key stakeholder, as ultimately, it is in their gift to develop and implement new business models which are not based on APCs.

Publishers interested in applying to join this working group must be committed to supporting **all** the actions below and can demonstrate initiatives that they are already taking forward in support of all of these:

1. Developing financially transparent business models which are not based on 'per published unit' payments (such as APCs) and which place equity at their core.
2. Supporting Open Science practices, for example, by enabling the publication of a wide variety of research outputs, including data, negative findings etc.
3. Reimagining quality assessment and peer review processes, for example, by supporting journal independent peer review.

Libraries/consortia

The third key stakeholder for this working group is libraries and library consortia. They are key players in negotiating fully OA publishing agreements and thus can play a critical role in supporting the move to non-APC based business models.

Libraries/consortia interested in applying to join this working group must be committed to taking the two steps outlined below and can demonstrate ways in which they are already working toward their implementation:

1. Allocate a growing portion of (aggregated) budgetary spend for OA business models, which are not based on a per published unit' payments and which place global equity at their core.
2. Support and facilitate Open Science practices, for example, by encouraging the sharing/deposition of a wide range of research outputs.

Potential questions for the group to consider

- What other stakeholder groups might need to be involved in the discussion?
- What does an equitable business model look like?
- How can each stakeholder group facilitate business models that move "beyond the article" and "beyond APCs?"
- What are the costs to each stakeholder group of swimming against the current tide of an APC/article-based economy? What incentives are barriers to change?
- What are the current financial flows? What would need to change in terms of processes to enable new agreements to work?