JLSC

ISSN 2162-3309 | JLSC is published by the Iowa State University Digital Press | http://jlsc-pub.org

Volume 13, 1 (2025)

"Just Tick the Box": Researcher Understanding of Intellectual Property and Open Access Research Policies in Publication Practices at Australian Universities

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Bowrey, K., Cochrane, T., Hadley, M., McKeough, J., Pappalardo, K., Watson, I. & Weatherall, K. (2025). "Just Tick the Box": Researcher Understanding of Intellectual Property and Open Access Research Policies in Publication Practices at Australian Universities. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 13(1), eP18403. https://doi.org/10.31274/jlsc.18403

This article underwent semi-anonymous peer review in accordance with JLSC's review policy.

ISSN 2162-3309 10.31274/jlsc.18403

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Just Tick the Box": Researcher Understanding of Intellectual Property and Open Access Research Policies in Publication Practices at Australian Universities

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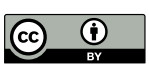
ABSTRACT

Introduction: Australia has achieved limited national progress toward achieving policy goals for more open and rapid access to research outputs. This article provides evidence of the widespread confusion in Australian research practices and policies relating to ownership and dissemination of research publications. This confusion often results in researchers just ticking a box: assigning copyright to commercial publishers.
Methods: Based upon insights from interviews with university researchers, librarians, and research managers, we describe how academics grapple with myriad policies and pressures relating to research and publication.
Results: Subject matter covered includes university intellectual property (IP) and open access policies; research quality and peer review; article processing charges; and funder open access requirements.

Received: 10/18/2024 Accepted: 06/12/2025



Conclusion: The authors propose remedies to improve the ways that IP and open access policies can work better to achieve goals for dissemination. If implemented, these remedies would lead to greater policy harmonisation and ease of understanding within the research sector, as well as a permanent change in the way government and institutions assess research quality. These remedies also align with global policy developments aimed at creating a more open future for research.

Keywords: copyright, open access, intellectual property policy, author practices, research policy

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The work and findings described in this article have multiple implications for the practice of librarianship in influencing and strengthening scholarly practice and behaviour in research outputs, dissemination, and management. In some cases, these findings reinforce but also imply developing practice in some, but by no means all, academic and research libraries. In one or two specific areas, though, the findings suggest a rethink of current directions.

1. In terms of reinforcing developing practice, the findings underline the need for a more comprehensive adoption of strategy in support of open access and, hence, open science practices. These include: deliberate and durable engagement with all relevant parts of the university in developing IP policies that establish and support rights retention; regular vigilance about, and advice to, the university on the true costs of management of fragmented and unaccounted costs of publication, including routine advice about alternative means of achieving open access; eschewing any assumption that the only or main path to open access is via such input charges, and being more aware of the discourse within researcher communities about the inequitable effects of these and the way they are typically managed; advocating, in the context of research quality assessment or reviews, that peer review rather than journal title is the principal evidence of quality; offering consistent help to university executives who may commit to the open science direction but lack time to focus on the task; building out or rebuilding repository approaches to opening up access to the peer reviewed literature.
2. In terms of rethinking practice, the findings suggest that libraries and offices of scholarly communication should consider the lessons learned from faltering or failing approaches to collaboration with publishers on achieving a universal open access environment, and so double down on institution and discipline led initiatives; libraries should review the true value (including value-for-money) of Read and Publish Agreements, and the implications of long term control of the process by the publishers. While some tactical benefit in lifting some administrative burden from researchers has been achieved, libraries should critically consider the longer-term effect of ceding the power and discretion in deciding on open access to publishers.

In short, the academy should, in terms of both institutional direction and individual researcher benefits, reassert its ownership of and authority over research outputs, enabled and supported by a far-sighted library strategy.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores academic publishing practices in the context of Australian research policies that regulate intellectual property (IP) rights, research quality, and open access. A key contribution of the research presented here lies in its investigation of the legal mechanics of research dissemination: how ownership is managed, how well that is understood, and what that means for achieving broader research dissemination. We present participants' views about researchers' capacity to understand legal and policy requirements related to IP and open access, including the question of publisher ownership of copyright in scholarly research. We examine the implications for university rights retention—the rights universities need in order to avoid paying to use publications written by their own staff—and for open access publishing. In light of our findings, we investigate practical ways in which university management can improve contracting practices for publication and achieve ongoing goals for open access and open science. This includes a consideration of sector-wide policy harmonisation, changes to national and institutional methods for assessing research quality, streamlining decision-making processes to relieve individual academics of the burden of negotiating difficult issues with publishers, and areas for improved communication with researchers.

The discussion is based on fieldwork conducted at ten Australian Higher Education institutions from 2020 to 2021,[1] a time of transition in the mechanisms by which Australian research published by commercial scientific publishers is made available open access—that is, available to read without a paywall or payment to the publisher. At the time of the fieldwork, as we investigate below, commercial publishers provided mechanisms by which individual articles could be open access on payment of an Article Processing Charge, or APC. Subsequent to our interviews, publishers introduced in Australia contracts that have come to be known as Read and Publish Agreements. They are also sometimes known as "Transformative Agreements." In these agreements, research outputs from academics at a given institution are published open access in certain journal titles, in exchange for a commitment to a contract price by that institution or group of institutions over a contracted period. In Australia, the Council of Australian University Libraries (CAUL) has taken the lead on negotiating Read and Publish Agreements on behalf of member institutions. Read and Publish Agreements aim to remove the need for

[1] The universities were: University of Melbourne; University of Sydney; Curtin University; University of Newcastle; James Cook University; University of New South Wales; University of Technology Sydney; Queensland University of Technology; University of South Australia; and Flinders University.

researchers to have to bear the cost of APCs by repurposing funds in library budgets from journal subscriptions to Read and Publish Agreements that cover both reduced subscription fees and APCs.

The interviews reflect practices and concerns that precede the emergence of Read and Publish Agreements but are of more than historical interest. Read and Publish Agreements do not cover all journals or all scholarly publications, and in some cases have numerical caps (CAUL, n.d.). More importantly, our fieldwork investigated how researchers understand and grapple with how copyright and open access work with IP and open access policies and funder policies. Australian researchers may no longer be paying APCs as often, but they still assign or license copyright in their research publications. Publishers still seek and obtain key relevant rights through individual agreements with researchers. If anything, questions of ownership and copyright have become *more* pressing with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and debates over whether publishers can or should license their catalogues of scholarly publications to AI developers. Meanwhile, whether through APCs or Read and Publish Agreements, open access publishing via commercially published scholarly journals continues to impose significant costs on universities and, ultimately, public resources.

METHODOLOGY

Our fieldwork involved 52 interviews conducted with 67 participants from 10 Australian universities, representative of the sector.[2] The universities are representative of Australia's older, research-intensive universities (known in Australia as the "Group of Eight"), the younger technology-focused universities, and the smaller regional universities. We also interviewed policy officers from the two largest funders of Australian research: the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medicine Research Council (NHMRC).

The university-based interviewees came from various disciplines across science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS), and communications, business law, and education (CABLE). Interviewees also held various positions within institutions, including university executive management, faculty-level research management, research centre directors, and positions within research administration, libraries, and scholarly communications. Many of our interviewees held multiple roles—for instance, many were active researchers while also holding management positions. Indeed, only four researchers did not hold a management or support role, primarily because they were early career researchers (ECRs).

[2] There are 39 public universities in Australia.

Interviewees were sent a general overview of topics to be canvassed in advance,[3] with two team members stewarding the discussion. Researchers were generally interviewed alone. Those with support and management portfolios frequently preferred to be interviewed together, reflecting their teamwork practices. Group interviews were thus more authentic; they also provided a direct benefit to interviewees in the form of knowledge-sharing. Interviews ran from 30 minutes to over 2 hours. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions about their experiences within their institution or funding body with respect to research practices and policy, IP arrangements, publishing and publishing advice, and use of repositories, data, and metrics. Sample questions for university-based interviewees are provided in Appendix A.

Recordings were transcribed and sent to interviewees to verify accuracy. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and analyse the data, with each interview coded for multiple themes. To ensure rigor, initial coding was undertaken by two project team members working separately, who then compared results. We subsequently refined the coding scheme as a team, with input from subject matter experts. Thematic coding sheets were then evaluated to extract relevant data reported below. All quotations included in this article were shown to researcher participants in context in advance and then anonymised.

One important issue in Australian scholarship research that is not addressed in this article relates to First Nations knowledge, including issues of ownership. While critical to research management, the position of Indigenous research and researchers is dealt with in other research published by some members of the research team (Bowrey et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous empirical studies about academic perceptions of publication choices, including about where to publish in view of promotion and tenure considerations (Niles et al., 2020), predatory publishing (Swanberg et al., 2020), attitudes toward open publishing and commercial reuse (Rowley et al., 2017), data sharing (Zhu, 2020) and APC (Halevi & Walsh, 2021). There are studies of perceptions of open access in music (Scott & Shelley, 2022), of authors in the Global North (Dalton et al., 2020) and the Global South (Sheikh, 2019; Nobes & Harris, 2019; Fadehan & Okiki, 2023; Zia & Nazim, 2023). Various models to improve strategic institutional management of academic copyright in publications have been implemented internationally (Suber, 2021; Moore, 2023). There are also studies into the attitudes of institutional actors, such as librarians and technical staff

[3] The topics included IP policies, research policies, authorship, open access, licensing agreements with publishers and libraries, and how researchers and managers decisions are made about these matters.

(Scott et al., 2021), and histories of the development of open access, including in Australia (Catterall et al., 2025).

Existing studies primarily focus on general behavioural drivers and perceived personal and social benefits. However, research publication decisions essentially involve making a legal decision about copyright ownership and licensing. While copyright has been considered in terms of its impact on libraries (Muir, 2019), scholarly research rarely addresses academics' understanding of IP issues related to publishing contracts, their experience negotiating (or not) with publishers, and the implications for compliance with research publication policies and open access.

Australia has had government research and open access policies, including funder open access requirements, in place for over twenty years (Kingsley, 2012); however, there are no studies of the attitudes of Australian academics about these policies and their implementation, including consideration of copyright management. At the time of writing, only 44% of Australian research published between 2000 and 2024 was available under an open access licence (Curtin Open Knowledge Initiative, 2024; see also Catterall et al., 2025). Australia's previous Chief Scientist identified this situation as one that needs redress (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2024).

Under Australian copyright law, copyright arises automatically under law upon an article's creation, and is owned by the employer, subject to any relevant contracts. Legally, in Australia, the copyright ownership by the academic author needs to be considered in light of the rights retained by their employer, which are defined in university IP policies (Bowrey et al., 2024). Australia is very poorly served by restrictive and complex copyright laws, with fewer exceptions that support research and education than in North America, Europe, or the United Kingdom (ALRC, 2013). This situation further raises the stakes for the strategic management of copyright in publications by academics and universities.

UNDERSTANDING OF IP

Understanding the university IP policy

Universities are institutions of both teaching and research, and these two functions are inextricably linked. Universities rely on the research reputation of their academics, both individually and collectively, to achieve national and global rankings, recruit international and domestic students, and secure funding (ACOLA, 2023). Academics publish their research not only to contribute to the social good by disseminating knowledge, but to build a research "track record," which is essential for promotions, research grants, and fellowships. Research

publications act as signifiers of success, validating an academic's reputation as a creator of knowledge.

Academic publishing is underpinned by commercial publishers who have historically controlled the copyright in journal articles and other similar research works, obtained from academic authors (Puehringer et al., 2021). Control has been and still is facilitated by myriad individual contracts exchanged between researchers and publishers. Traditional publishing contracts have typically required authors to transfer copyright ownership and/or control to the journal publisher as a condition of publication.

Where they apply, Read and Publish Agreements do not remove the need for there to be a transfer of rights from academic authors to publishers. These Agreements vary in their terms and over time, and in many cases, offer a range of different licences dividing rights between authors, institutions, and publishers. It has therefore become harder to generalise regarding the copyright position on any individual publication. Certain important things have not changed, however: (1) Academic authors must still transact copyright in relation to individual publications, dealing with terms presented by publishers; (2) publishers still play an important, if not dominant role in setting the terms presented to authors; and (3) copyright remains a complex issue and Australian universities do not have effective legal mechanisms for retaining rights, despite many universities having open access policies that assume researchers retain sufficient rights to deposit copies of publications in institutional repositories (Bowrey et al., 2024). Indeed, the position has become significantly more complex for authors seeking to understand the copyright implications of their actions.

In Australian universities, the IP policy is the key workplace policy that governs an academic employee's capacity to enter into legal relations with publishers. IP policies may address a range of different kinds of IP (including patent and trademark), but specifically in relation to research publications, they contain complex clauses affecting ownership of copyright and licences for exploitation of different kinds of research outputs. Typically, there are different rules for different categories of publications, such as teaching materials, creative outputs, and scholarly works, but all are based on the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth), which allocates ownership of copyright to authors' employers but allows rights to be both transferred, and split between different stakeholders. At the outset of the project and prior to undertaking fieldwork, we audited the research and IP policies across the institutions of our research team, six in all.[4] Universities usually retain copyright ownership in teaching and learning materials.

[4] These were the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), University of South Australia, University of Sydney, University of New South Wales (UNSW), University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the University of Newcastle.

Some specify the right of the university to hold copies of staff research publications in an institutional repository, but open access is generally governed by a separate policy. These carve-outs and limitations might affect the right of academics to enter into copyright agreements with publishers (Bowrey et al., 2024). While all university IP policies cover similar ground, different technical language is used to ensure that universities can deal with academic outputs.

The IP policy intersects with a number of other policies within the university, including IP commercialisation, authorship, open access, and research ethics, but we found these connections are usually just listed as separate considerations at the end of the IP policy rather than integrated. Another relevant consideration is Indigenous Knowledge rights: usually dealt with through clauses in IP, authorship, and research ethics policies.

Policy awareness

Interviewees were asked if their institution had an IP policy. While all reported that it did, many participants across various university roles volunteered that they had difficulties in understanding IP; they also reported their perception that understanding was poor across the entire sector. Most participants were very uncertain about the precise content of their institutional IP policy. One told us, "It reminds me of … thrashing around in the undergrowth, not being aware of what's actually happening."

Some interviewees asserted that IP was not a matter that needed to be considered by researchers as an everyday matter. The IP policy was felt to be mainly relevant to researchers outside of the social sciences and irrelevant to "80 percent of the Humanities." As a practical matter, the "entire process and systems and approaches" of IP management were thought to be primarily concerned with research commercialisation; as a policy area, IP was seen as mainly concerned with sharing rights to patent revenue. This is an interesting observation, as universities have separate policies for research commercialisation: these two policy areas were routinely elided by interviewees.

> I think there's this underlying [attitude] in the HASS space [that IP] "doesn't really matter" because we're not commercialising anything. There's no real money attached to this. We can just keep doing what we want to do anyway. So does it really matter?

Library staff reported that the IP policy was operating at such an abstract and high level that it was not capable of guiding or regulating what academics do in practice. While some appreciated that there were clauses that impacted all kinds of research publications and teaching outputs, they noted that "it's drafted from the perspective […] of patent rights. Copyright's an afterthought."

Confusion about who owns academic work

Given that university IP policies are not generally regarded as being helpful or relevant, it is not surprising that in many institutions, academic interviewees were uncertain about who owned the copyright in their publications. Several stated that they, and researchers in general, "don't," or that they "had the feeling" based on conversations with others that "academics might own it." Some expressed, with hesitation, a belief that "the university owns it."

The lack of consistency in the sector around management of IP was suggested as one cause for confusion. While all universities assert rights to some categories of publication or reserve licences to themselves for various purposes, there is no standard legal approach to the way in which universities retain the rights they need to achieve desired policy outcomes (Bowrey et al., 2024). Overall, interviewees reported that the complications were too difficult to unravel. Even within IP policy documents themselves, there was a lack of clear communication about what the policy is designed to achieve:

> Every university has a policy around IP in that we're just kind of doing the sort of status quo kind of thing, but the actual position, what are we really trying [to do]? What do we stand for? What do we represent? That's, I think, something that's really missing at [our] uni.

All IP policies reviewed by or reported to us permit authors to submit their articles and manuscripts to publishers and enter into a copyright assignment or licence. It is well understood that, regardless of how IP ownership has been expressed in the IP policy, researchers have enough rights to allow them to choose where to publish without the need for any consultation with line managers. This can mean that any rights the university may have reserved are likely to be disregarded by authors: "If the policy does allow copyright to be assigned to the publisher for the actual product of the written text or whatever it may be, I wouldn't be surprised if it is actually just common that that is signed away."

No researchers felt there was any real limitation on their capacity to enter into publishing contracts, beyond adhering to funder open access mandates. Outside of that condition, researchers suggested that compliance with the IP policy was a matter about which,

> I don't really care. As long as I can publish, and use [the research] in—not whatever way—but in a way that I can share my findings with the world without getting into trouble, I'm happy. I'm not doing this to get rich.

We note that this interviewee here elides questions of what the law allows, what policies allow, and questions of enforcement (what is likely to get them in trouble): the kinds of distinctions that preoccupy lawyers but not necessarily most people. In short, researchers had only a limited understanding of their institution's IP policy, in general, and were not motivated to learn more about it because they did not feel that the policy constrained them from entering into publishing contracts.

Our interviewees overwhelmingly reported that they often did not read publishing contracts properly and did not understand them fully when they did, "I never read them. Why is that? … because I would forget what's in them within ten minutes of reading them, because I've got a million other things on my mind."

Most researchers we spoke to did not even keep a reference copy of publication agreements, although some noted it could be found somewhere in their email inbox, if needed. Whether or not the publication contract offered to them was consistent with the relevant university IP or Open Access policy was not mentioned as a relevant consideration.

WHERE TO PUBLISH AND DEALING WITH PUBLISHERS

Our interviewees reported only one factor as influencing their decision on where to publish—the perceived quality or reputation of the journal. Although it is possible that this has changed in the period since our fieldwork was conducted, and that researchers pay attention to whether their selected journal is covered under Read and Publish Agreements, we are skeptical. The last national research assessment, Excellence in Research for Australia, conducted in 2018, focused on research quality, incorporating heavy reliance on publisher metrics. Publisher prestige is critically emphasised in research assessment (ACOLA, 2023) and hence by universities (Bowrey et al., 2024). New criteria proposed for future assessments, which could include open access requirements, have not eventuated. Any change to past assessment criteria, such as requiring eligible publications to be made available open access, may face resistance from researchers if it has retrospective application, and thus may need to be phased in. Perceived journal quality criteria, without regard to whether the output is openly accessible, are likely to remain an overriding consideration for some time.

It was presumed by the researchers and research managers we interviewed that all researchers would know which journals they should aim for in their field. Some commented that there was not necessarily a great deal of choice:

> I could count the number of journals that I publish in on one hand, or just about maybe, maybe a bit more than that, but it's certainly, you know, I'm not talking about 20. I'm talking about sort of six, seven journals.

Only having a small number of suitable outlets was not considered problematic in itself, but it would be of concern if the university mandated particular requirements such as open access, and this was not catered for, or the fees charged by the publisher were prohibitive.

For academics, quality was associated with specific journal titles, not specific publishers, with the exception of Springer Nature. The prestige of being accepted in a *Nature* publication was frequently mentioned as something that universities would reward so highly that institutions would waive their own policies once a paper was accepted: "That sort of conflict between, say, publishing in Nature versus, you know, retaining the IP. The university, at the moment, would come down on the side of publishing in Nature."

Despite many Australian universities having open access policies, these policies often become secondary to publishing imperatives. Our interviewees felt consistent pressure to publish and reported that the message they received from university management is to publish in 'high-ranking journals' even if they are closed access. Researchers reported that the measure of a high-ranking journal was determined with reference to the general prestige of the title or brand, such as *Nature*, as well as quantitative metrics used in assessment exercises. For example, assessment exercises will often rely on journal indexes and rankings such as the SCImago Journal and Country Rank (Scopus data) and the Journal Impact Factor (Web of Science core collection data), which draw on citation data. We were told, "the primary concern [is] to get published in a good forum, whether it is open access or not." ECRs are particularly susceptible to "pressure to achieve quality" to establish their track record.

Notwithstanding university pressure to publish in prestigious outlets, our academic interviewees did not confuse prestige with quality. One professor noted, "Metrics are a poor proxy for quality. Publishing within impressive places is another poor proxy for quality. But you know, they're used because we're used to it." One reason for researchers' cynicism about journal quality was the perceived lack of correlation between journal rankings and the standard of peer review. Several interviewees expressed the opinion that the standard of peer review is diminishing and that the role of the peer reviewer is not appreciated or respected by many publishers. Editors have also become less effective in maintaining quality standards:

> As someone who reviews all the time, the way in which peer review is requested is as if you are an Uber driver; you need to pick up these jobs. The way in which it used to

> be, that editorial associates or someone on the editorial board used their knowledge and other means to select the right reviewers … is very much eroded.

Many researchers expressed dismay at publisher behaviour and said the overall relationship with academics, from article submission to peer reviewing, editing, and preparation for publication, and (at that time) the limited conditions of circulation without an additional APC, is "kind of exploitative." This also came up in the discussion of APCs, which disregarded the free labour already provided as writers, reviewers, and editors.

Peer review was also not considered to be institutionally valued or rewarded. It was referred to as an act provided out of collegiality, often conducted outside of normal work hours, as service "above and beyond," contributing to increased workloads within academia.

For reasons of career progression and grant success, researchers said they would strive to achieve a "quality" publication, even where publication terms were judged as detrimental: "I think that the desire to get into a good journal often overcomes any imperatives or hurdles to protect your own work."

It was generally recognised that having an article accepted for publication would result in transferring copyright to the publisher, and this would lead to legal restrictions on the researcher's future use of their work. Regardless of the terms and conditions attached, researchers know to "just tick the box." For the many publishing contracts that are offered and accepted online, the box ticking is literal: contracts are digitised in ways that cannot be amended, and researchers must click to accept the terms as part of the process of submitting their manuscripts for review and/or publication. As well as many interviewees admitting to never reading their publishing contracts, many also mentioned delegating the responsibility of managing the publication process to post-doctoral or PhD student team members. Only one researcher said they archived copies of publishing contracts in a systematic way.

Accepting whatever copyright terms are suggested by the publisher was one of the lessons taught to researchers as part of basic research training:

> That's a cultural thing. You know, the first papers, you know, researchers published as PhD students, or whatever, you know, the supervisor says, 'Yeah, don't worry about that. That's just what you do.' And that gets embedded in the culture. So yeah, I'm definitely in that mode of people [who] haven't thought through exactly what that means.

Several interviewees mentioned there was a need for reliance on the publisher's superior understanding of copyright because researchers are "risk averse," "don't want to do the wrong thing," "don't really know a lot about the laws at all, or about the contracts." Copyright was mentioned as an area of expertise where researchers are left to their own devices to make sense of their legal obligations. Even though it is recognised that they do not have relevant expertise, researchers reported they were expected to be the copyright expert, rather than being guided by their institution:

> Because the researchers and academic staff retain the IP and the copyright over the works due to our IP policy, the Copyright Office don't see it as something they offer counsel on. It's sort of outside of their scope, in terms of making sense of a publishing agreement.

Overwhelmingly, IP was described as an area where the university is ineffective in communicating any desirable policy outcome. When a researcher seeks clearer guidance on the IP policy from university management, at least in relation to publications, they often find that no actual help is available:

> No one wants to be the person that says, "You can do this, you can't do that." So the advice, it's often delivered in a very passive way, where they say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah… as per the policy, section 3.2, it states that…" And you're saying, "Yes, that was my question. What does it mean when it states that?"

Discussion of the IP policy highlighted a significant lack of basic understanding of IP rights across the sector, disengagement by researchers from the IP policy, and an apparent institutional disregard of the need for copyright expertise to assist individual researchers who want to do the right thing by their institution. Difficulties become manifest in the design of university structures and roles, the practicalities of managing publication processes, and established research culture and training (Bowrey et al., 2024). It is apparent from interviews that universities have IP policies in place and expect (or perhaps hope for) compliance, but the policies are not generally observed by researchers who may inadvertently fail to retain certain rights. The situation raises an important question: Should the day-to-day responsibility for managing copyright in scholarly publications rest with individual researchers?

OPEN ACCESS

Definitions of open access are not without debate, but for our purposes, we are using the following definition (Corbyn, 2009):

> Open access is, simply, the idea that research articles should be freely, immediately, and permanently available online to anyone, rather than locked away in subscription journals as many currently are.

As documented recently by Catterall et al. (2025), open access has been an important part of the research publishing landscape for at least 20 years. Nevertheless, our interviews with researchers provide evidence that this relatively simple concept can be readily misunderstood.

While all were familiar with the term, many researchers we spoke to were not aware whether their institution had an open access policy or not. Many had published open access, including with international collaborators, and most knew that the two largest Australian research councils, the ARC and the NHMRC, had open access mandates.

With respect to whether or not universities need an open access policy, librarians commented,

> It's also not just the mechanism, but it's that statement of commitment to open access. So I don't think it would necessarily have to be a policy, but a statement from a university that said that we support open access or something. I mean, a policy is binding… but some formal commitment from a university that backs up open access is crucial. Very powerful.

While library and scholarly communications staff were well-versed in open access and policy detail, many noted frustration with how universities were progressing that agenda. Open access was not considered a priority in research policy. Responsibility for open access was usually situated with the library and scholarly communications staff. But researchers often only have indirect contact with library staff, reporting publications to research management systems managed by them after article acceptance. By this point in the publication cycle, there is little opportunity for relevant staff to advise or influence decisions and change academic mindsets about open access. Moreover, some research management systems serve to reinforce publisher-controlled approaches to open access by not accepting post-peer review but pre-published versions of accepted manuscripts (before publisher typesetting).

Understanding of open access

When asked about OA, responses suggest that the sector can be roughly characterised with reference to three categories (with the groups dispersed across different roles). The first group is seriously committed to open access and very aware of the nuances of the concept. Such respondents often volunteered an association with equity and some or all of the FAIR Principles (2016)—research that is findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable. A second

grouping knew about open access from their general knowledge and experience of changes in the publishing landscape. They nominated open access as meaning that the research was accessible beyond a publisher's paywall. Ideally, this would be without the need to pay a fee, but the understanding at the time of our fieldwork, prior to the entry of Read and Publish Agreements, was that researchers usually had to pay an APC:

> Open access to me is primarily associated with the licensing structures for journals. So the first thing I think of when I think of open access is like a $1,500 fee that I want to pay if I want to get more citations and visibility to my work.

A third grouping was quite confused about open access but also generally uninterested in publication terms:

> Most people are just not that bothered, let's be honest. But in other cases, I think there's confusion about the range of open access licences. I mean, there's about you know, when you get the full option menu, there seems to be about 10 or 12, I can't remember.

Some, though not many, associated open access with predatory publishing.

A striking finding from the fieldwork was that in the minds of many researchers, the concept of open access automatically implied the necessity to pay, at that time via APCs. This perception marks a significant conceptual shift from the more open approach to choices of path to open access that characterised discussion in earlier years, which included other options such as institutional repositories (Catterall et al., 2025; Bowrey et al., 2024). We would argue this reflects a successful journal publisher strategy of fostering open access on terms no less favourable than those of the highly profitable traditional subscription model. And when contrasted with the possibilities that were a feature of the earlier discussion, the inference is clear that whether intentionally or otherwise, the research sector as a whole has neglected, if not consciously eschewed, the possibility of re-establishing greater control in its most distinctive tangible product, its research outputs. Although there are clear signs that other jurisdictions are working to improve this situation through strategies involving rights retention by universities (Juan et al., 2023), there is currently no evidence of a similar shift in Australia.

Individual researchers expressed a sense of individual burden and frustration with the way open access and compliance with it had developed. Many of our participants expressed concern and resentment at the idea that the author should pay for open access and mentioned that they had heard of researchers paying from their personal research finances. We were told, "There's a general view that open access is good. But we're also, as we said, broadly, against having the individual researcher responsible for costs associated with that."

Given a general lack of knowledge about IP and disinterest in reading publishing agreements, it is not surprising that libraries and scholarly communication staff "find this space quite tricky." One noted,

> It's like any infrastructure within society: just because you use a bus or road, you shouldn't have to care how that road gets built, you just want to know whether that road functions and it gets you from A to B. And what we're saying to academics, now, is almost, not only do you have to decide whether you want to get from A to B, but you have to have some input into how the road is built, which is clearly ridiculous. We're making them have to do way too many things.

A university or sector-wide solution to decisions about publication terms was widely preferred over leaving decisions about open access to individual researchers or faculty to manage. However, "the appetite at a higher level to have any sort of strategic discussion is non-existent." We note that these findings are still relevant today. Even where Read and Publish Agreements are available, academic authors are contracting with publishers and being asked to choose among different licence terms.

APCs

At the time of our fieldwork, APCs were a common way to make publications open access; today, they are less prevalent, although they have not disappeared. Policies with respect to APCs differed then and continue to differ today across universities, or commonly, there was (and is) no policy. The fact that APCs became the main recognised path to open access put more pressure on academics who were required to navigate this terrain across disciplines and institutions despite the lack of policy commonality. Many institutional frameworks are silent about APCs—"neither for nor against," and the position on funding was equally uncertain. Some universities had special centralized funds that could be tapped, but it was reported that "it's not an easy process and we never seem to have enough money." Often, the ability to access a central or faculty fund was dependent upon the journal ranking or an assessment of the journal being "high impact." Some faculties had prohibitions on the use of particular categories of funds for APCs. For example, using external grant income was approved; using internal faculty funds was not:

> Currently the faculty position is that operating funds can't be used for APCs. People don't [ask their research leaders] because they know the answer is going to be "No, I don't have any money and I'm not going to pay it." But in the context of the move towards these transformational agreements, we should be getting to the point where APCs are built into these Read and Publish Agreements.

Other institutions allowed payment of APCs from researcher discretionary funds, but it would mean foregoing other opportunities, such as conferences and research travel. In several responses, researchers indicated that they had to come up with APC funds themselves, sometimes personally, or on occasion from a special fund or from "leftover" research money. Several senior researchers noted that some staff, including junior colleagues, were sometimes using private income for APCs because of the potential career significance of the publication. This was widely felt as inappropriate.

While researchers were aware that "some universities fund off the top, [there is a] big central pool where the APCs are funded from," this is seen as the exception rather than the rule. In fact, the more research-intensive, larger universities seemed to have the least funding available for APCs and few or no policies for providing such funding.

APCs loomed large in the minds of our interviewees, seemingly because many academics "think [they] have to publish in journals that charge an article processing charge" if they wish to achieve open access. There is an apparent tension here between the principles of open access as initially espoused (to remove or reduce price barriers for the reader when publicly or philanthropically funded research is published) and the reality of open access pursued through APCs (publishers as commercial enterprises maximising profits for their shareholders). Negotiation of APCs is not seen as reducing the cost of access to publications over time, but rather likely to open the way to *increasing* the cost of access because of the power imbalance that exists between large, often global academic publishers and the research institutions or individuals engaged in negotiations (Catterall et al., 2025).

Many, but not all, researchers expressed objections to paying for publication at all:

> [W]e have taxpayers paying my salary to do work. Okay, so that's one. And then I pay with tax money to get it published, and the library pays again to subscribe to the publication and so on and so forth. It's just ridiculous. It's the most horrible thing. It's shameful.

Some researchers called APCs "a scam" or "excessive." Others thought that APCs did not reflect costs incurred by publishers, but rather "what the market will bear" or "what, to be frank, the publishers think they can get away with." It was also suggested that there might be considerable discretion used by publishers in setting the APC fee,

> So we do understand that some universities can get up to 50% discount on an APC if they plead, you know, poverty. And, I guess our concern …[is] that it's possible that… organizations like us pay a lot more APCs than others.

However, some were notoriously high, such as *Nature*, with one senior research manager joking,

> It is a highly, highly handcrafted journal [(laughs)] in which every cent of it, every cent of it is seen in the production values of Nature. You know, I just, yeah, I laugh at that. And I just say there's a kind of naïvety that assumes that there's a pricing segmentation in journals, which is to do with localized artisanal production.

Some interviewees highlighted the logistical challenges involved in sourcing funds for APCs:

> And for some academics, their response was "there's no way I'm giving the publisher my money. How dare they double dip, I hate it. We're not doing that.' And others went, 'Yeah, that's fine. We just pay for it." And I leave you to guess which faculties those people came from. And, you know, others saying, you know, "it's fine for established researchers, but early career researchers miss out" and somebody saying, "Oh, I switched positions on a paper with my colleague because they have a centralized fund for APCs and we don't."

Some noted, regardless of merit, if there is an APC, there may be no capacity to support it. In terms of expectations of students and ECRs, it was suggested that "in thinking about where they going to publish, they need to consider what the cost might be, whether they're going to be able to afford the costs, have conversations about whether that is the most appropriate place."

Managers also expressed ambivalence about APCs because they were uncertain about how to manage researcher expectations, budget constraints, and even simple logistics; for example, there was no financial code for APCs. It was therefore unclear how much people were paying and how much should be allowed. Overall expenditure had been researched by one librarian from a research-intensive university who suggested,

> Of research expenditure overall, it's not very much. But it causes people a lot of headaches and a lot of stress. Which is why I kind of think it needs to be fixed at a central level, not at an individual researcher level.

Talking about a smaller institution, another noted difficulties with tracing APC expenditure, concluding, "We don't know, because nobody started counting it." We note that the challenge of tracking expenditure on open access has not gone away; in fact, it may have become more complex, across APCs where applicable from a range of sources, and Read and Publish Agreements, which will tend to be allocated to library budgets.

Other fees were also mentioned as "raising a red flag,' in particular, organizations that require you to be a paid-up member of the association in order to submit an article for publication. This was described as a "publication fee by stealth almost where, you know, there's no APC supposedly, but you've still got to pay several hundred dollars to be a member of the association."

The role of funder OA policies

Research funders, internationally, have long been interested in seeing the research that their resources support become optimally available through open access. This interest can be mapped over almost 20 years. It was 2006 when the Wellcome Trust first implemented its policy (Wellcome Trust, 2012), and both private and government funding agencies have progressively extended such requirements in varying fields and jurisdictions. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has long required open access publication, and recently reviewed and extended its policy, stating that it will no longer support APCs (Gates Foundation, n.d.).

In Australia, the two largest public research funding bodies have adopted open access policies, but their implementation has been patchy, complex, and uncoordinated, further complicating researchers' lives. Funder-mandated policy aspirations for open access in Australia have also been limited by catering for exceptions to open access, and by assuming a publisher input-fee model as the main method of compliance.

The NHMRC policy provides that all peer reviewed publications supported in whole or in part by the NHMRC must be made open access immediately upon publication and must be licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence (NHMRC Open Access Policy, 2022, Cl. 1.2). It explains that researchers may comply by publishing their research with open access journals or by making author accepted manuscripts (the final, post peer review version before copy-editing by the publisher) available in institutional or subject-based open access repositories (NHMRC Open Access Policy, 2022, Cl. 1.3.1). Notably this is stronger than prior to September 2022, and at the time of our interviews, when the policy only required publications to be made open access within twelve months of publication (not immediately) and only encouraged (without requiring) Creative Commons licensing. Further updates in November 2023 were not significant. The policy now also states that the NHMRC will monitor compliance with the policy, which was a statement previously absent (NHMRC Open Access Policy, 2022, Cl. 1.4). This policy is currently being reviewed.

The ARC open access policy is weaker than that of the NHMRC, and includes a loophole, of sorts, where publishing agreements do not permit open access. The ARC policy (2021, Cl. 6.1), at the time of writing, also under review, provides:

> Any Research Output arising from ARC Funded Research must be made Openly Accessible within a twelve (12) month period from the Publication Date. In cases where this requirement cannot be met for any reason, including legal or contractual obligations, Final Reports must provide reasons why Research Outputs derived from ARC Funded Research have not been made Openly Accessible within a twelve (12) month period.

We asked our interviewees about the NHMRC and ARC open access policies: did they know about them? Did they follow them? Was compliance monitored by their research institution or through reporting requirements to the funding bodies?

Some research managers and support officers noted the differing requirements. One participant asked,

> Why don't the ARC and NHMRC have exactly the same open access policy word for word? I think the fact that they don't may lead to even more divergence. And that's kind of pretty concerning, I think, for academics.

Opinions were mixed about the extent to which compliance was monitored. Some stated that if the ARC or NHMRC wanted to check compliance, they would just "ring the Office of Research" at the university. Others suggested that compliance was not monitored outside of an audit. One participant outlined an elaborate system of workarounds within the engineering field:

> So our engineers will always publish in the top journal that they possibly can within their field, no matter what policies are around them. So, you know, part of that kind of freedom really that's presented is they need to be able to publish where they need to be able to publish, particularly for rankings and citations and their own success. But what we then found happening is particularly when you're disclosing the success of your grant, in say, an ARC final report. What we were finding is that the ARC had a policy of, "all right, you've got to confirm on your final report, which of your research project outputs have open access." And they have this option where you can tick yes or no. Then what happened is if you ticked "No," it would ask you for an explanation of why it is not open access. So that all seemed on the coalface of the final report template to be pretty straightforward. However, when dealing with the post award teams at the council, what the division was starting to see is if an academic ticked "No" with an explanation and we then submitted that final report as complete, the ARC team, looking at the final reports, would de-submit that report back to [the university and] would basically say, sorry, we're not going to

> accept the fact that you've ticked no on your output, even though you've got an explanation, because we don't feel the explanation is justifiable in our eyes… ultimately what [we] ended up doing was deciding that any ARC final report being submitted that had a notice that output would have to be removed from the final report, therefore it wasn't on the final report when it was submitted. Even though what you could do, once the final report was submitted was go back into your profile and still attach that output to that particular project ID, whether it was a DP or a linkage, but essentially, it just seemed to be a pretty crazy way of dealing with the kind of hurdles that the ARC would be presenting to administrating organizations on how they were going to run the day-to-day of their own policies.

The participant here frames the problem as being with the ARC open access policy and its implementation (including ex-post enforcement of the policy), but difficulties arguably arise because of the interaction between the open access goals of funders and research institutions and the closed access business models of publishers.

Notwithstanding the unevenness of open access policy development and implementation, it is generally true that funders have become more explicit in expressing the goal of seeing research resources deliver the best value possible through the widest dissemination of outputs and results. In this, they have been joined by institutions and their researchers. Frustrated at the disappointing development of more open access, funders and institutions (usually through their libraries) have looked at initiatives designed to make a decisive change. These initiatives represent what appear to be good-faith efforts at improving openness through collaborations between research institutions and funders on the one hand and journal publishers on the other. These efforts gathered momentum when both funders and institutions, notably in Europe, sought to be more proactive in pursuing agreements in which journals would open up access on the basis of funded agreements.

The rise of "Read and Publish" or "Transformative" Agreements

At the time of our fieldwork, Read and Publish Agreements had not affirmatively entered the Australian sector, although they had emerged overseas and were understood to be coming. Though intended to be positive, the development of this approach has attracted significant concerns. These include the complexity and pricing of the Read and Publish Agreements; the opacity and confidentiality of the terms and conditions; the imposition of caps by publishers on the number of articles in a contract to be published in the open in this way; publisher discretion in changing titles during the period of a contract; built-in price increments, author contracts not recognising entitlement to publication under the agreement; and accounts

reconciliation suggesting an APC was paid despite the applicability of a Read and Publish Agreement, amongst others.

Our interviews, although mostly conducted in the earliest stages of the recent major push for Read and Publish Agreements in the Australian scholarly publishing market, revealed that there seems to be a consensus that universities need some sort of uniform approach to Read and Publish Agreements. In general, our participants were aware that CAUL was negotiating arrangements with publishers, but there was no awareness of the detail—academics have "no idea what's going on behind the scenes." The complexity of the agreements and the terminology used is mysterious to many academics.

However, there was a sense that CAUL is doing good work, and that Australia needs to be part of the international movement on open access generally. In 2024 the transformational Plan S project to collaborate between publishers and research institutions to "flip" journals to open access faltered, seemingly ending that possible pathway for Australian research (COAlition S., 2018). There was a perception that researchers have no capacity to negotiate with publishers, which are seen as hostile to immediate open access. Some find it "*shocking*" that publishers had so much say about "how research is disseminated and the policy choices of our funding councils." Although,

> We're never going to beat the publishers, so to speak, the models are always going to favour their business and their profits. And it's very hard for libraries and for the higher education sector now to actually make a difference; we've let it go for decades. And it's hard to see how to claw back any real control over all of that.

There are clear disciplinary differences between the science and medical areas and humanities, with the latter now increasingly engaging in use of Read and Publish Agreements, although the there have been concerns in the UK for the future of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences which also face the higher costs of monograph publishing (Fathallah, 2022). The options for innovation in licensing have not been fully explored: "There hasn't been as much of an emphasis on unbundling in the transformative space as perhaps we might've otherwise seen because … the economics kind of fall apart."

CONCLUSION

Our fieldwork reveals that across Australian universities, researchers and research managers often have a poor understanding of the IP policies governing their research outputs. Many lack awareness of the importance of these policies and, in some cases, are unaware that these policies apply to their research publications. Academics are encouraged by line managers to

publish in high-ranking journals and are focused on publishing "quality" research. At the same time, academics feel exploited by the peer review processes at many journals that rely on their free labour.

Australian universities are, in general, committed to open research and open access of research publications, but do little by way of follow-through to ensure that open access policies are actioned in practice. Many of our interviewees expressed concern and frustration about the costs charged by publishers to make research openly available. These concerns were expressed by research managers at the upper levels of university executives, right through to ECRs and library and scholarly communications staff. CAUL Read and Publish Agreements provide some indication of the costs of achieving open access to universities, however universities have not implemented proper financial systems to monitor the costs of open access publishing outside of these agreements, for example, how much is still being paid to publishers for APCs across their schools, faculties, disciplines and research centres; are academics benefitting from 'Read and Publish' agreements as intended? Universities are also not using their institutional open access repositories or rights they might have retained via their IP policies to full effect as an alternative to paying publishers for open access.

The open access environment is changing. In Europe, which has long led the push for open access to publicly funded research, attention is moving away from APCs and even Read and Publish Agreements that focus on working with commercial publishers, to put more emphasis on initiatives such as Diamond Open Access: community-driven, academic-led, and academic-owned publishing initiatives, as well as rights retention and other efforts (Juan et al., 2023).

Our research highlights that for open research to flourish in the Australian tertiary sector, it is necessary for national funding bodies and universities to work together on open access goals and policy compliance. Universities must adopt consistent IP and open access policies across the sector and educate staff about these policies. This will improve knowledge and understanding of IP for all researchers, even where researchers move or collaborate across institutions. It is also not prudent for universities to leave copyright management in the hands of individual researchers, who are juggling many competing demands and who lack the power to negotiate effectively with publishers. As our fieldwork demonstrates, most researchers find it simpler to comply with publishers' standard contract terms so as to secure a publication that contributes to performance metrics, even if this conflicts with their institution's open access goals. Instead, universities should adopt rights retention strategies in their IP policies and actively enforce these rights. This approach will prevent publishers from locking valuable research behind paywalls, ensuring broader access (Bowrey et al., 2024); however, this necessitates collective and consistent action from universities to assert their copyrights in the research they fund.

Australian research institutions and funding bodies should also explore open research solutions outside of commercial publisher structures. By revitalising open access repositories and self-archiving practices, supporting open access publishing models, and developing new citation practices and ways to measure "quality" that do not depend on the name and prestige of a journal, they can foster a more transparent and fairer research environment conducive to open access.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been supported by the ARC, DP200110578, *Producing, managing and owning knowledge in the 21st century university.* Fieldwork cited in this article has been carried out in accordance with QUT Ethics Approval Number 2000000609.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND MANAGERS

Open access policy + repository

1. What does 'open access' mean to you?
2. Do you have a view about the effectiveness of your institution's research repository in increasing or enhancing the profile of your research?
3. Do you think that researchers in your field *do* comply with the open access policy?
4. Do you think the open access policy can be improved, and if so, how?
5. Do you think that there is a better way to disseminate research outputs, and if so, what is it?

Article processing charges

1. Have you ever paid or had to approve the expenditure of research funds on Article Processing Charges?
2. What is your view about this expenditure? (Do you have any concerns?)

IP management and publishing agreements

1. How familiar are you with your institution's intellectual property policy? Do you know who owns the copyright in your research?
2. How carefully do you read publishing agreements?
3. Do you keep copies of your publishing agreements?
4. What is your opinion about publishing contracts that seek assignment of copyright? Does that concern you?
5. Has a publishing agreement ever prevented you from doing something with your work that you wanted to do?

Compliance and mentoring

1. What advice do you give to early career researchers about how and where to publish research outputs/findings? What are your reasons for this advice/what motivates this advice?

2. Do you think that researchers receive consistent sources of advice from across the institution about what to prioritise in their research outputs?
3. How well do you believe that researchers at your institution understand and balance policies and influences on open access to research outputs and measures of quality for research that are potentially in tension?
4. Have any of your mentees ever approached you with problems with understand publishing contracts, publication processes and protocols, copyright issues or open access issues?
5. How important are university rankings, journal impact factor, citation data, co-author institutional reputation and other formal metrics to you and your mentees? What about other forms of "altmetrics", like measures of impact and engagement?

Research involving Indigenous persons

1. Have you managed/overseen/been part of projects that involved working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons and/or traditional knowledge? If so, can you describe any extra steps or processes undertaken because of these relationships or cultural knowledge?