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DATA NOTE

Journal subscription expenditure of UK higher education institutions [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

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Abstract

The academic libraries of higher education institutions (HEIs) pay significant amounts of money each year for access to academic journals. The amounts paid are often not transparent especially when it comes to knowing how much is paid to specific publishers. Therefore data on journal subscription expenditure were obtained for UK HEIs using a series of Freedom of Information requests. Data were obtained for 139 HEIs' expenditure with seven publishers over a five-year period. The majority of institutions have provided figures but some are still outstanding. The data will be of interest to those who wish to understand the economics of scholarly communication and see the scale of payments flowing within the system. Further research could replicate the data collection in other jurisdictions.

Keywords

Journals , subscription , higher education institution

This article is included in the **Data: Use and Reuse** collection.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ✓✓✓✓

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version 1 13 Nov 2014	✓ view			

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

The amount of money paid by higher education institutions (HEIs) to access academic journals is of high interest to the academic community, and academic libraries in particular as they are responsible for the vast majority of journal purchases. In light of current trends within academic publishing towards open access models rather than subscription models, the economics of the publishing industry have come under increasing scrutiny, but accurate data about the flow of money within the system is difficult to come by. Libraries do not usually publish details of their expenditure with individual publishers and there is no official source of these data. This situation led to undertaking this research to make journal subscription expenditure openly available.

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were sent to HEIs to obtain the data. While the authors considered using a diplomatic approach and asking individual libraries to publish their data, this would have taken a considerable amount of time, and while some libraries may have been happy to publish the data themselves, others may not have seen the value in it. The situation is also complicated by the fact that some publishers insist on having non-disclosure clauses in their contracts with libraries, which prohibit them from disclosing some aspects of the deals. The UK's [Freedom of Information Act \(2000\)](#) overrides these clauses and allows full data to be obtained by sending FOI requests.

It is hoped that the data contained within this [dataset](#) will contribute to a better informed discussion surrounding the issue of how scholarly communication could or should be funded. Further research could undertake a similar endeavour in the 100 other countries ([McIntosh, 2014](#)) which have FOI laws, in order to work towards understanding the costs of scholarly communication on a global scale.

Materials and methods

A list of HEIs was created based on UK institutions which the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, n.d.) collects data about. The list was not fully comprehensive because it excluded some Welsh universities which have recently undergone restructuring, and the authors were unclear on how to represent the expenditure of merged institutions across different years. In order to obtain data which cover the majority of HEI journal expenditure, seven of the largest publishers of academic journals were chosen (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Sage, OUP, and CUP). An individual known to the authors sent similar request to Russell Group universities for Wiley, Springer, and OUP earlier in 2014, so that these requests were not duplicated and the authors hope to incorporate that data at a later stage.

Each institution was then sent three separate FOI requests via the website [whatdotheyknow.com](#), which sends FOI requests on behalf of UK citizens. The site was chosen because it places all correspondence in the public domain indefinitely, thus ensuring that the data will be verifiable. The three requests were grouped as follows: Group 1 - Wiley, Springer, OUP; Group 2 - Taylor & Francis, Sage, CUP; Group 3 - Elsevier. The groupings were chosen to ensure that each request would not be too onerous for an HEI to respond to, as

stipulated under the UK's FOI law. Elsevier data were requested separately because the nature of their contract with libraries means that the institution must contact Elsevier when it receives a request, thus increasing the time burden on institutions.

The figures should include payments made directly to the publishers as well as any payments made to subscription agents or intermediaries for the purchase of, and/or access to, the publishers' academic journals. Institutions were asked to provide data for the payment for journal packages such as Jisc Collections' NESLi agreement, as well as for individual journals, and to include VAT where possible. Since the authors are relying solely on data provided by the HEIs it is not possible to independently verify whether all of these aspects of the requests have been adhered to. While this may result in some inaccuracies in individual figures, the authors do not consider that the overall scale will be unduly affected.

Data were requested for five calendar years (2010–14). Some institutions provided data in financial years, which for UK academic institutions is from August–July. In these cases the financial year was mapped on to the second of the two years, for example 2009–10 was mapped on to 2010. This is because although during the financial year 2009–10 it is possible that the money was actually transferred during 2009, it will have been used to pay for subscriptions for 2010.

The [dataset](#) is now well-populated but incomplete because at the time of writing, out of the 429 FOI requests that were sent there are still 91 outstanding for which data has not yet been provided. Further data will be incorporated into the [dataset](#) as it becomes available.

Data availability

Data can be accessed directly via Figshare at http://figshare.com/articles/Journal_subscription_costs_FOIs_to_UK_universities/1186832, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1186832> (Lawson & Meghreblian, 2014).

Data were obtained from each institution sending separate FOI requests via the website [whatdotheyknow.com](#). Requests can be viewed individually at https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/stuart-lawson#foi_requests and https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/ben_meghreblian#foi_requests.

Author contributions

Stuart Lawson authored the data note and designed, carried out, and recorded the data collection.

Ben Meghreblian designed, carried out, and recorded the data collection.

Competing interests

No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information

The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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Freedom of Information Act 2000.

[Reference Source](#)

Lawson S, Meghreblian B: **Journal subscription costs – FOIs to UK universities.** *Figshare*. 2014.

[Data Source](#)

McIntosh T: **'Paraguay is 100th nation to pass FOI law, but struggle for openness goes on'.** *The Guardian*. 2014.

[Reference Source](#)

'Overview'. HESA. 2014.

[Reference Source](#)

Open Peer Review

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The authors have collected a set of data that is likely to be very useful both to researchers who investigate journal pricing and to librarians who want to know more about what others are paying when they make their own bargains with publishers. The methods of collection seem sound and the work appears to be carefully done.

There is one thing that I would like to see clarified. The report states the amounts that are paid to each publisher, but do not make it clear whether all of the reported institutions are buying the same thing from the publishers. For example, Elsevier markets a "Freedom package" which includes a published list of journals constituting most, but not all, of the journals they publish.

They also market a "Complete package" which does not include the entire Freedom package, but basically a set of journals to which the university has previously subscribed. Elsevier also separately markets the Cell Press journals, a "clinical medicine package", a series of monographs called "advances in" Some of the contract totals that I have seen include all or some of these.

Similarly, Springer sells not only its journal package, but also a large number of textbooks and monographs. Some libraries' total expenditure with Springer may include these. It would be good to know if your totals are just for the journal bundle.

With some of the other publishers, it also is not entirely clear whether the totals reported are from libraries that do not subscribe to the publisher's entire journal bundle but only to some limited subset. Once again, it would be good to have this clarified.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 17 Nov 2014

Stuart Lawson, Hove, East Sussex, UK

Thank you for your comments, you're right that it would be best to clarify what is actually being purchased in each instance, as far as we are able. When one institution pays a different amount to another institution, it is likely that they are not purchasing access to exactly the same 'package' of content. We did not ask institutions to provide this information as part of the FOI requests because we believed that in some cases it would add significantly to the time it would take for them to produce responses, which may have led to refusals. Some institutions did provide this level of details in their response; those who purchase access directly from a publisher rather than through Swets appear to find it easier to provide such data.

One way we could highlight this would be to mark the figures in some way to indicate whether an institution has paid for the complete package of content from a given publisher. However, in order to do this consistently, we would need to contact most or all of the institutions again in order to confirm this with them. For some institutions this information can be gleaned from the original FOI response which is viewable on whatdotheyknow.com.

The most accurate way to compare between different institutions would be if we asked for each institution to release the title list of purchased content for each publisher during each year. Through a project I am working on at Jisc Collections, which aims to build an 'entitlement registry' of this information for all UK institutions, I have learned that it may be very difficult for all institutions to provide that data.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

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