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Assessing and managing transitional read and publish deals: a University of Salford case study

This case study explores the processes and challenges of assessing and managing transitional agreements (TAs) at the University of Salford. TAs are contracts with publishers that shift spending from subscriptions to open access and therefore enable the transition to full and immediate open access for research articles. As a teaching-intensive and research-informed university with a small team, Salford needs to ensure that transitional deals are managed effectively and efficiently to maximize our resources and provide the content and publishing opportunities needed to support our teaching and research strategies. Here we describe our processes and the challenges we have faced working remotely and across teams. Finally, we reflect on future developments and how we can continue to adapt and develop our processes as the scholarly landscape evolves.

Keywords

open access; scholarly communications; research; universities; subscriptions; transitional agreements

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Background and introduction

This case study builds on our presentation[1] at the 2021 UKSG conference, 'A model approach – Salford's frameworks for assessing transformative read and publish deals', and describes how a teaching-intensive, but research-informed University, manages and assesses transitional agreements (TAs). The main focus and source of income at the University of Salford is teaching and our research[2] is centred around areas of excellence and strength such as acoustics, prosthetics and smart digital living – for example we have our Energy House and autonomous vehicle research – and we have ambitions to develop strategically in these areas. We have a small institutional open access fund, with money provided by the research office, and a small UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) block grant.

The open access and scholarly publishing landscape is changing, as reflected in the Plan S 'initiative to make full and immediate Open Access to research publications a reality'.[3] In response to these changes the University set up a small cross-team group with the aim of examining potential deals through the lens of our institution's needs, from both a read and publish (R&P) perspective. The emergence of R&P deals, created in an attempt to help authors and institutions gradually tip the balance of their publishing output towards open access, making the process easier and more financially viable, meant we would need to re-examine our subscriptions, as the majority of deals at the University fall under the traditional subscription model.

The team, systems and processes we have established to manage our open access policy[4] and content licensing, as well as buying content, are part of our effort to challenge the current scholarly communications landscape, where academics support publishing through writing, reviewing and editing. The Library's work to enable sustainable open

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access models supports the University of Salford Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy, which includes a commitment to 'openness to ensure our research can deliver genuine impacts to society'.[5] An important aspect of re-examining deals is engaging with publishers to support the movement away from subscription-based deals towards a more open and equitable model of scholarly publishing. This is based on the belief that TAs should not be simply a change to current business models, with rising, unsustainable costs, especially as we move to making other open research outputs, such as monographs, open access.[6]

When assessing TAs, it is important to ensure they serve the current and future needs of the University and support our teaching curriculum and research specialisms. Like all higher education institutions (HEIs), our budgets are under pressure and deals must represent value for money and facilitate sustainable costs. Furthermore, as a research-informed university we do not want to be paying more than necessary for publishing when our publishing output is relatively small. Salford reads more than it publishes and cannot afford for costs to simply flip from one to the other. In addition, with a small team we need to ensure that transitional deals are managed effectively and efficiently to maximize our resources. As an institution with a smaller research profile, we are making a valuable contribution to sector negotiations with publishers through our responses to consultations and by helping to ensure that deals represent the needs of all institutions, not just those that are research intensive.

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> 'we need to ensure that transitional deals are managed effectively … to maximize our resources'

The process

In 2019, the Library's Content and Research Support teams were brought together through the establishment of the small Collections and Open Access group, to capture both areas of knowledge and develop robust analysis models, and to bring subscriptions and open access data together to inform decisions around TAs. The teams had not worked closely together before, so this was a new initiative prompted by the arrival of R&P deals. All members were new to their roles, so were able to bring a fresh perspective to this process; the only existing R&P deal had been agreed before any of them were in post.

The group has worked together to establish a framework[7] for assessing TAs. Prior to meeting, we collate the relevant data including usage statistics, publishing data, pricing information and coverage, which then feeds into the framework and decision-making process. If we decide to cancel a resource, we will then work in our own areas to plan this, for example the Scholarly Communications Librarian will work with Liaison Librarians to deliver the required information and establish any issues we may have missed, whilst the Collections team will look at usage data and establish which titles we need to purchase separately and whether there will be any impact on the budget.

The Library has also established a Strategic Content group which has a wider remit to establish 'Strategic content priorities including acquisition, creation and curation of content to ensure both continued significant engagement with content and higher returns on investment' (Strategic Content group terms of reference). The Collections and Open Access group has become an operational team which feeds into this group for ultimate decision-making and sign-off for TAs. Membership of the Collections and Open Access group was expanded to include Liaison Librarians in addition to research support and collections staff members, to inform its engagement with academics. The group's remit is to review and purchase TAs, manage the engagement with academics and promote the TAs for research, teaching and learning.

Being a small university brings us challenges in capacity and resources but also opportunities, as we can be flexible in our approach. We can work together easily across teams and departments, and we have developed particularly strong working relationships between the Research Support and Collections teams. We also have good relationships with research leads and keep them informed of developments, working with them to facilitate engagement on new deals and potential subscription cancellations.

Framework

The framework created for assessing deals was based on the Jisc criteria.[8] The framework has been adapted over time as we have developed our understanding of the information needed for assessment. We gather data on subscription usage and use traditional sector average models (for example, acceptable cost per use) to assess the demand and impact on future spend. We also review the amount we have published and the amount we have previously spent on article processing charges (APCs), and review compliance requirements and potential process efficiencies, such as being able to receive records from Jisc Publications Router[9] and the availability of an approvals dashboard.

If the subscription is a renewal of an existing deal, the Collections and Open Access group discusses whether to recommend renewal to the Strategic Content group. If there is not an existing subscription, the deal is considered first by the Strategic Content group. As new deals represent an unbudgeted cost for the University, they need to be assessed alongside all other new subscription requests and go through our standard process for assessing new subscriptions.

The need for engagement with academics is decided on a case-by-case basis, for example whether cancelling a subscription will have a potential impact on teaching and research. Having Liaison Librarians in our Collections and Open Access group ensures we can include engagement at the beginning of the deals review process.

Once the decision has been made to purchase the TA, the subscription is ordered by the Collections team. New subscriptions are promoted to staff and students on our Library's Latest Resources[10] web page and details of the open access deal are included on our Support for Open Access Funding page.[11] The Research team also promotes the open access element to researchers by updating research leads, tweeting via our @OpenResSalford[12] Twitter account and including details of the deal in our open access training sessions.

Challenges

Although the two teams (Collections and Research Support) have worked well together, there have been challenges along the way (as we imagine others have encountered) in the new way of working brought on by the global pandemic.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, our working relationship involved face-to-face meetings and using Microsoft Teams to store information relating to deals. Lockdown meant that we could no longer meet in person, so we had to adapt to this meaning the whole process was conducted via Teams. The information relating to deals is generally received by one of the team via e-mail, this is added to our Teams page and tags are used to ensure messages are delivered and seen by the right people. As we begin to work more on campus and have opportunities to meet face to face, we continue to find Teams a useful tool to manage our processes and communicate with each other.

The Microsoft Teams group acts as a repository for all the deals we assess. However, there has been a lot of information added, which can be overwhelming and, despite having a formalized process for assessing deals, information can get lost. The use of the Teams group has evolved over time and additional channels have been added to help with this, and to help us easily find information. We have a channel called 'General' that contains general information such as interesting articles and updates in the sector, and then we have separate channels for information and updates relating to specific publishers.

Although Teams is very useful in helping us manage these agreements, it is important to note that ad hoc chats, both in person and online, while useful at the time, are not always recorded. Going forward this is something we need to be mindful about and, to mitigate anything being lost, we need to ensure that a note is added to the relevant Teams channel so that we can refer back to it.

Another challenge is the resources involved. While we have processes in place, it is important to note that keeping on top of all these deals and everything they entail can be time-consuming, especially as we are a small team with competing priorities and workload. Analysing R&P deals is only one element of our workload and as such it can be difficult keeping on top of them, especially those where we are given a limited time frame to reach a decision. Deadlines are set by Jisc and publishers for all institutions regardless of size, so we have to commit extra resources to ensure we are making a decision in a timely manner and do not miss out on the deal.

As previously discussed, we need to ensure that these deals are transitional and support the movement away from subscription-based deals towards a more open and equitable model of scholarly publishing. As Widmark[13] remarks, 'most of the publishers aren't ready yet – they most likely would like to keep the business model from the transformative agreements for the future', thus we need to be mindful of this when analysing these deals. As Borrego et al.[14] state, 'The landscape of scholarly communication is characterized by increasing costs and limited access to research output. … Although TAs should establish a time horizon for the transition towards open access, there are serious doubts about whether they are actually doing so.'

> 'we have to commit extra resources to ensure we … do not miss out on the deal'

In our experience, we are still seeing the same money going to the same publishers without cost reductions, which limits the support we can offer to new open access models and pure open access publishers. We have experienced deals being withdrawn for a period of time, for example if the agreed cap on open access publishing is reached in a deal, which makes it difficult to promote to researchers. Another issue is the difference in deal types, for example some deals cover all journals and some offer just their subscription journals; again, making it difficult to promote these to researchers without causing confusion.

> 'we are still seeing the same money going to the same publishers … which limits the support we can offer to new open access models'

Publishers differ in their approaches to read/publish splits within agreements, and to VAT. This creates uncertainty about what the true cost of the agreement is and can create difficulties regarding budget allocation and forecasting.

Another challenge to overcome is the lack of understanding of these deals and any potential issues that come with them, not just with researchers but also with Library staff in different roles. To understand this last point, we have carried out some internal investigations with Library staff, using a survey and following up with training, which we will outline below.

Feedback survey

As mentioned, the team involved in examining these deals was initially small and thus the analysis and work was not widely known. However, these deals have a wide impact on both the Collections team and the Learning and Research Support (LRS) staff; the Collections team due to their role in the purchasing, cataloguing, activating side and the LRS team's role in communicating deals to academics or fielding any queries. As such, in August 2020, a survey was shared (using MS Forms) with the relevant staff within the Collections and the LRS teams. It was sent to three members of the Collections team and nine academic support librarians (ASLs) from the LRS team. To ascertain their level of understanding, we asked about the following:

- the benefits of TAs

- the processes for assessing and acquiring TAs at Salford

- how do they think TAs relate to their role?

When rating their understanding we asked them to use the following rating: 1 = low, 5 = high. We also provided a section for them to add any other comments or suggestions they had to help improve their understanding of the agreements.

Responses

Responses were received from all the Collections staff and six ASLs. For the understanding of the benefits of TAs question, the average rating for the Collections respondents was 3.33, and for the LRS respondents it was 1.83; collectively their understanding was 2.33 (out of 5). For the understanding of the processes for assessing and acquiring TAs at Salford, the average rating for the Collections respondents was 2.66, and for the LRS respondents it was 1.66; collectively their understanding was 2 (again out of 5). Both questions and responses are shown in Figure 1. As mentioned above, we asked staff to self-assess their level of knowledge and so it is important to note this is not a guaranteed level of knowledge.
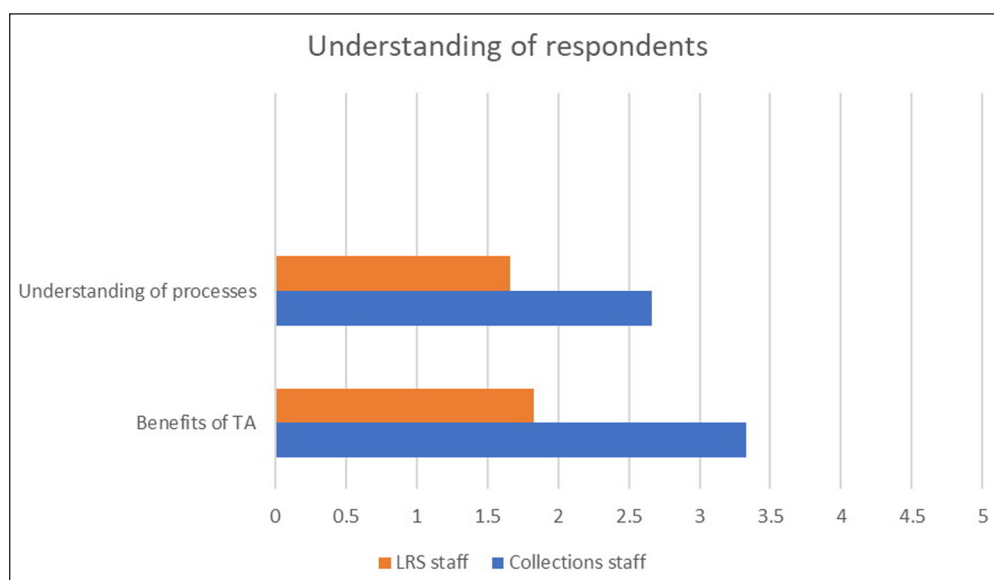

Figure 1. Responses to feedback survey

As you can see from the above, there is a gap in knowledge of both areas between the teams surveyed.

Comments and suggestions mainly came from the LRS respondents who asked for more training and suggested that we add it to our training programme for Library staff. A session was prepared and delivered to both teams, led by staff from the Collections and Open Access group and the Strategic Content group, and presented the topic from both the R&P sides. We provided an overview of the reasons for the development of TAs and their benefits and challenges. This was followed by a group discussion of how they impact the work of the LRS and Collections teams. The session was well attended, and we continue to promote awareness via team meetings and updates on Teams.

'it seems unlikely our APC spend will fall much in the short term'

Reflections and conclusion

We had hoped that TAs would lower APC spend but, whilst we do not have deals with all publishers and restrictions are put on our TAs, it seems unlikely our APC spend will fall much in the short term.

We are developing our networks for engagement on negotiations where there is the possibility that a deal will not be reached or represent value for the University. We are also working closely with research leads and our Liaison Librarians to ensure they understand the issues and they are discussed where appropriate. It is important to build staff knowledge, so an updated survey will be carried out to ascertain the knowledge of the staff in these areas and plan any training sessions as appropriate.

Finally, we will continue to assess our processes at regular intervals going forward, especially as new types of deals become available and as we see the implications for budgets and compliance of the new open access policies for UKRI and the next Research Excellence Framework (REF). Our processes continue to evolve, and we are looking at ways to ensure that we can take up native open access agreements and support innovative open access initiatives for open access monographs. To do this we will need a flexible approach to our budgets, moving away from having separate budgets for subscriptions and open access. Now that UK HEI libraries and JISC have reached a TA for Elsevier,[15] TAs are available with most of the big publishers and so the focus of our work is changing from assessing new deals to reviewing existing deals to ensure they continue to meet our teaching and research needs. We are reviewing our use of the framework and measures so we can undertake more detailed analysis for renewals and include qualitative data through targeted engagement with academics. As part of our strategic content assessment, we need to both ensure maximum return on investment and increased flexibility in order to focus on ever-changing content priorities. The knowledge, experience and team working that we have developed by assessing new TAs have put us in a strong position to adapt and respond to the changes and challenges ahead.

> 'The knowledge, experience and team working that we have developed … put us in a strong position to adapt and respond to the … challenges ahead'

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**.

Competing interests
The authors have declared no competing interests.

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