



17 January 2013

Society for General Microbiology Consultation Response

House of Lords Inquiry into Open Access Publishing

Introduction

The Society for General Microbiology (SGM) is a membership organisation for scientists who work in all areas of microbiology. It is the largest learned microbiological society in Europe with a worldwide membership based in universities, industry, hospitals, research institutes and schools. The SGM publishes key academic journals in microbiology and virology, organises international scientific conferences and provides an international forum for communication among microbiologists and supports their professional development. The Society promotes the understanding of microbiology to a diverse range of stakeholders, including policy-makers, students, teachers, journalists and the wider public, through a comprehensive framework of communication activities and resources. Further information about SGM is provided in Appendix 1.

The Society for General Microbiology's academic publishing activities

The Society for General Microbiology (SGM) is a learned society with a membership of about 4,500 microbiologists at all stages of their careers from undergraduate to senior figures in industry and academia.

The SGM publishes four widely-respected academic journals: *Microbiology*, *Journal of Medical Microbiology*, *Journal of General Virology* and *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*.

The importance of journal income to the society's work

The surplus the society generates from the sale of its journals to libraries is the primary source of income for the society. In 2011, the latest year for which data are available, journal income less costs (operating surplus) amounted to £1,921k.

As an independent charitable institution we use this surplus exclusively to support our charity remit, as follows:

1. Working with schools to support their microbiology teaching with training and resources
2. Part-funding the training of undergraduate and post-graduate students
3. Advising parliamentarians and government agencies on microbiological issues of public concern

4. Hosting policy forums that bring together practitioners and scientists from government, NGOs, private sector and universities to formulate solutions to pressing problems, such as infectious disease
5. Organising scientific conferences that foster international knowledge exchange, thus accelerating scientific discovery
6. Funding researchers so that they can develop their careers in fruitful directions, including funding them to travel overseas to learn new skills
7. Organising and supporting events that contribute to the public understanding of science

We therefore believe our journal income to be an important and essential counterpart to government and private-sector funding for a key area of UK science concerned with the control of infectious disease, improvements in agricultural production and food safety, and developments in biotechnology and the bio-economy.

Our concerns

While the SGM appreciates that publicly-funded research should be made publicly available, in line with the first recommendation of the Finch Report, we have concerns about the implementation of some of the remaining recommendations and key actions. In particular, we note Recommendation (vii) on discussion with publishers (including learned societies) on the financial implications; and Key Action (iv) to keep under review the position of learned societies and the impact on services they provide.

Specific issues of concern:

1. Learned societies are likely to lose income which currently supports the whole range of their charitable activities in education, research and public policy.
2. While it may be possible to move to a new author-pays (APC) model which fully replaces income currently obtained through journal subscription, little account has been taken of the disruption to income streams during transition.
3. Embargo periods of at least 6 months must stay in place while income is being received through a subscription model.
4. Only research funded by the Research Councils, the Wellcome Trust, and a small number of other funders will have publication costs appropriately funded. There is a concern research supported by small charities will not be published because such charities do not have the funds to support publication.
5. This public and charitable funding for publication costs may not be sufficient to replace much of the current journal subscription costs from world-wide academia and industry.
6. While Open Access to publications may provide an easier and less-costly route to innovation, particularly by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), there is no guarantee that these will be UK-based companies.
7. There is no indication that the emerging research economies of Asia and South America will support the APC model, to the detriment of UK publishers.

8. The APC discriminates against scientists from the developing world who may not have access to funding. Currently many learned societies provide journal access to developing countries at reduced rate or free of charge.
9. The burden of payment will fall largely on the top 30 UK universities, which publish most of the research in journals of record.
10. It is not clear that the full implications to universities of transfer of funding from the Funding Councils [Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE) and Wales (HEFCW) and Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DELNI)] to research budgets have been considered.
11. A significant number of journals have been established recently to ‘cash-in’ on the Open Access business model. This is putting a significant strain on the expert academic community of referees who provide their services free of charge. The combination of the use of less expert referees and the income from the author-pays models is likely to result in lower-quality refereeing and the increased appearance of sub-standard papers. There could be downstream impacts on the reliability of scientific data with detrimental consequences across a range of areas including patient safety, environmental protection, and industrial innovation.

Society for General Microbiology – President & Chair of the Policy Committee:

- Professor Nigel Brown, Emeritus Professor, University of Edinburgh

Society for General Microbiology – Policy Committee:

- Professor David Blackburn, University of Birmingham
- Professor Martin Cranage, St George’s, University of London
- Professor Colin Harwood, Newcastle University
- Professor Maggie Smith, University of York
- Professor Gill Stephens, University of Nottingham
- Dr Jeremy Webb, University of Southampton

Society for General Microbiology – Chair of the Publications Committee:

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Appendix 1

Vision

A world in which the science of microbiology provides maximum benefit to society.

Mission

To promote high-quality microbiological science, both nationally and internationally, to a diverse range of stakeholders.

Rationale

The potential socio-economic benefits arising from microbiology are substantial. They include:

- A healthier future (for humans, animals and plants) and a better quality of life, within the context of a sustainable natural environment.
- The development of biotechnology products (such as food, drinks, biopesticides, biofuels and medicines), which generate wealth and employment, and so support growth and innovation.
- The advancement of scientific knowledge, as a benefit in its own right, and to allow us to plan for the future and contribute to international solutions for global challenges, such as climate change, the burden of disease and food security.

Strategic priorities

To achieve its Vision and Mission, the Society will work towards the strategic priorities below.

- Publishing: to contribute to the science of microbiology through high-quality publications.
- Scientific conferences: to hold international scientific conferences to disseminate research knowledge and provide a forum for communication between microbiologists and to grow and support communities among them.
- Raising awareness: to inspire and educate people about microbiology, and allow them to make informed decisions which recognize the importance of microbiology and its advances.
- Influencing policy: to ensure that appropriate scientific information and expert opinion are made available to policy- and decision-makers and that the improvement of resources and infrastructure for microbiology is supported.
- Professional development: to promote microbiology as a career from school level onwards and support career and professional development of microbiologists.

The Society is a Charity registered in England and Wales (No. 264017) and in Scotland (No. SC039250) and a Company Limited by Guarantee, registered in England and Wales (No. 1039582).

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