

“ONE NATION, ONE SUBSCRIPTION” POLICY: NEED TO EASE OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING AS WELL

Bharpoor Singh Sekhon*

Directorate of Research, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana-141 004

As part of new initiatives proposed under the 5th National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, the Govt. of India envisions implementing “One nation, One subscription” policy, in order to ensure free availability of research papers to its scholarly community. The proposed start date is April 2023. There exist numerous examples of such policies being followed mostly at institute, regional level or publisher level to enable researchers and policy makers to scale hefty paywalls erected by many publishers world over. However, if successful, India will become the largest country to give free access to otherwise paywalled articles to anyone present within its geographic bounds. Many countries will then be expected to follow the Indian policy.

Resource constraints have already deepened the digital divide amongst academic institutions. As a result, a significant bias can be noticed in the quality of research output across the institutions; though, buck cannot be passed squarely to this factor only. Science keeps on evolving over the bedrock of the knowledge created in the past. Access to this treasure of information can enhance discoverability and spur scientific temper and entrepreneurship. Making a reference to the work reported earlier reflects the importance of that study. As a result, citation count plays a key role in gauging the research impact of an academic and hence of the institute. However, over the years, this wealth of information has largely been under the control of mega publishers and has been behind hefty paywalls. Subscription model of publication does not attract as many citations as can be attracted by the Open Access model. Thus, most of the scholars prefer publishing their work as Open Access. However, in most of the cases, publishing Open Access requires deep pockets in order to pay high article processing charges (APCs). Though, most of the publishers offer a range of discounts depending largely upon the affiliation (country) of the corresponding author. Quantum of the discount is generally determined by the gross national income based classification by the World Bank or by the Research4life (<https://www.research4life.org/access/eligibility/>). Authors from India do not seem to qualify for

this rebate. There are other waivers as well, which are decided on a case to case basis. Even after exhaustion of all these discount options, most of the APCs remain prohibitively high. Publishers provide other alternatives to moderate the financial burden of APCs. Elsevier has piloted the concept of Mirror Journals. These journals are fully gold open access and share the same editorial board, aims and scope and peer review policies as their existing “parent” journals – and the same level of visibility and discoverability. These journals provide an additional option for open access publishing in the Elsevier portfolio. A mirror journal shares the name with its parent journal; the distinction is suffix – X. The mirrors have their own ISSN numbers and citation metrics. However, uptake of this option has remained somewhat low so far. Similarly, SpringerOpen is Springer’s portfolio of fully open access journals and books. It also maintains an open repository. Despite all the financial pushbacks, however, tide of Open Access publishing has found huge favour with the scholarly community. To dilute financial liability, some scholars have started gaming the system by offering authorships to other scholars, howsoever little they may have contributed to the reported work.

Keeping in view the discoverability/citation potential of the Open Access publications, many funding agencies allow budgeting in this regard. However, in the absence of such guaranteed support, many academic institutes especially in the developing world fail to provide a blanket support for open access publishing. It is hoped that once the currently envisioned plan of providing comprehensive free access to the vast treasure of literature sees the light of the day, the learned policy makers extend open access practices towards open access publishing as well so that the research output generated in the country can be easily discovered beyond the national boundaries. This can be effected not only through budgeting for high article processing charges levied by the commercial publishers, but also by extending liberal financial support to the academic institutes bringing out their own journals, for helping them shift towards diamond open access models, which offer not only their content for free but also do not have any kind of article processing charges. An umbrella national repository also needs to be established.

*Corresponding author : bsekhon@pau.edu

Besides, another major need of the hour is to re-visit the research impact assessment system. Over-emphasis on high impact factor journal publications has made

scholars being continuously haunted by the dread of 'publish or perish'. Broader societal impact of research, especially local impact, needs to be factored in as well.