

On Open Access in The Netherlands

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15 July 2014

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Subject
Open access to publications

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To all member of the Dutch academic community

Dear members of the Dutch academic community,

The rise of the Internet has radically changed scholarly communication. New
Yesterday, I received a letter from the [Association of Universities The Netherlands](#) (VSNU, [@deVSNU](#)) about Open Access. The Netherlands is for research a very interesting country: it's small, meaning we have few resources to establish and maintain high profile centers, we also believe strong education benefits from distribution, so we we have many good universities, rather than a few excelling universities. Mind you, this clouds that we absolutely do have excelling research institutes and research groups; they just are not concentrated in one university.

Another important aspect is that all those Dutch universities are expected to compete which each other for funding. As a result I have experience rather interesting collaborations between universities. That's a downside of a small country: everyone knows each other, often in way to much detail. But my point is that the Dutch can be rather conservative. That kills innovation, and is in my opinion a key reason why [we are not breaking into the top 50 of rankings](#), more than concentration. Concentration of funding in Top research institutes has not been extensively evaluated, but I think the efficiency is not proven higher than previous funding approaches.

Anyway, this letter I received is part of [their Open Access program](#). Here too, the Dutch universities are conservative (well, relatively from my views, at least). Now, the Open Access debate is not so interesting, because it primarily ends up about who pays who (boring) and whether we should go gold or green (besides the point, see below), and, sadly, here too many people think about who pays who again (still boring).

Therefore, giving the outlined importance and impact of Dutch research, I found it relevant to post about the progress of Open Access in my small country. The letter is [available in English](#).

Basically, the letter is an answer to an earlier letter from our government about Open Access, and it warns about actions that will soon be undertaken (so, not really pro-active). However,

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“[they] are also appealing to you to continue to advocate free access to your own scientific publications.”

Well, I have, not so actively, and maybe this post can be the start of a change. Because what basically bothers me is that the Open Access discussion, also in The Netherlands, is biased. And indeed, the letter continues with a section about gold and green access. If the VSNU really wants to promote free access to **research**, it should not even accept green. We all know that it is not about being able to look at (free), but to be able to mix and improve. Reuse. Continue. Stand on shoulders. The fact that this letter focuses on publications only, does not spend a word on reuse, is rather depressing and not giving me even the slightest hint that The Netherlands will break into that Top 50 any time soon.

Overall, the latter is relatively positive for the Open Access movement, though reactive. [They still have some explanation to do:](#)

“The golden route is more complex. However, many believe that in the end it is a more sustainable route to Open Access.”

(Or maybe readers can explain me what is complex about the golden route?)

The following is a rather interesting section, but really only when they had focused on Open Access in its pure form that allows research reuse. I think it now leaves you with a low starting point bargaining with resistant publisher lawyers and managers that have long [lost the interest of the academics in favor of that of the share holders:](#)

For the past ten years, publishers have been offering journals in package deals referred to as Big Deals. Shortly negotiations with the major publishers about these Big Deals Will take place, including Elsevier, Springer and Wiley. The Dutch universities have expressed their wish to make agreements with these publishers about the transition to Open Access as part of those Big Deals. Universities expect publishers to take serious steps to facilitate that transition.

I hope the VSNU will clarify with what they mean with “serious”. Because they all came up with “me too” solutions (setting up new OA journals) without seriously changing their model. No large publisher dared making the flagship journals full gold Open Access. That is serious business; all we see now is scribbling in the margin.

Perhaps that is the reason of the wish to be in the top 50. Maybe the VSNU just wants a better bargaining position.

The letter ends with what researchers can do. And with that, they are spot on:

As a researcher, you can play a vital role in the transition to Open Access. We have mentioned the possibility of depositing arXiv preprints in the repository of your own university. But there is more. It's important to consider that researchers play a key role in the publishing process: as providers of the scientific content, as reviewers and as members of editorial and advisory

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boards. We hope that where ever possible, you will ask publishers to convert to an Open Access model.

What any researcher can already do to promote (proper) Open Access:

1. stop reviewing publishing closed-access papers (you have way too much review requests already, and some filtering will not hurt you)
2. stop reviewing publishing for non-gold Open Access journals (step further than the first item)
3. submit only to full-gold Open Access journals (plenty of options; importantly, the quality and impact of your paper is not dependent on the journal, but on you. if not, you're just a bad author and researcher and should go back to school or start learning from feedback on your Open Notebook Science, so that you improve your act before you submit; really, it happens to the best of us: multidisciplinary research is hard: you cannot excel in biology and chemistry and statistics and informatics and computer science and data analysis and materials science and as perfect and creative linguistic (well, not all of us, anyway))
4. put your previous mistakenly closed-access papers in university repositories (most Dutch universities have solutions; not all yet)
5. make previously published closed-access papers gold Open Access (yes, you can! I am in the process of doing this for the CDK I paper, and other ACS papers will follow)
6. [get an ORCID](#)
7. use [#altmetrics](#) to see that gold Open Access gives you more impact for your papers too (service providers include [ImpactStory](#), [Altmetric.com](#), [Plum Analytics](#), etc)

Of course, it is not only about publications. Again, the VSNU would do good to learn that research is not the same as publications. Besides sending letters, I think the VSNU can do this to promote Open Science, which is what I hope they are after:

1. negotiate with the government and major science and funding agencies (KNAW, NWO) to stop focusing on publications as primary output
2. start focusing on output other than publications (e.g. data sets, software) even if you have not ended negotiations with other, just to set a proper example
3. make research outcomes machine readable (read [this interesting post from our national library](#))
4. actively explore business models around Open Science (and not have your universities' spin-off departments only know about patent law, ignore the rest of the world)
5. adopt the ORCID nation wide, starting Jan 2015
6. start using [#altmetrics](#) to get a better perspective of the performance of your members

Of course, I am more than willing to help the VNSU with this transition. I can be reached at the [Department of Bioinformatics - BiGCaT, NUTRIM, FHML, Maastricht University](#). There are many options I have missed here (like data repositories, data citing, DOIs, and whatever).

PS. [my ImpactStory profile](#) will tell you that more than 80% of my publications are Open Access. Not all gold yet, but I am working on changing that for some old papers.