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Compliance with Open Access Policy in Canada

by Caroline Winter | 2 January 2019 | English, Observations, Observations and Responses | 0 comments



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This observation was written by Caroline Winter.

At a glance:

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The announcement of [Plan S](#) in September 2018 brought the issue of implementation to the forefront of discussions of open access (OA). One issue addressed in the Plan and in a number of responses to it is that of compliance: many funding bodies in North America and Europe have OA mandates, but to what extent are researchers complying with them?

Vincent Larivière and Cassidy Sugimoto analyzed OA compliance in a study of 12 funding agencies in North America and Europe. According to their research, about 1.3 million papers fall under the OA mandate of funders, and of these, about 2/3 are indeed open access, available through OA journals or repositories or both (Larivière and Sugimoto 2018, para. 3). The authors note that their data is by nature “fraught in idiosyncrasies,” but reveals clear trends nonetheless, including the finding that overall, compliance rates are increasing over time (para 2; “Mandates Matter”). Another finding is that compliance rates show great variation, from about 90% compliance for papers funded by the National Institutes of

Health (NIH) and Wellcome Trust to only about 23% for those funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) (para. 3).

In a piece discussing Larivière and Sugimoto's study and the state of OA compliance in Canada, Mathieu-Robert Sauvé notes that about half of all research publications funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) are open access less than a year after publication, and only about a quarter of those funded by Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and SSHRC (2018). Some of these publications may be under embargo, so the figures might be different more than a year after publication (a phenomenon noted by Larivière and Sugimoto), but even so, Sauvé and Larivière and Sugimoto agree that these figures indicate a low rate of compliance with the [Tri-Agency Open Access Policy on Publications](#).

The Tri-Agency OA Policy states that “Grant recipients are required to ensure that any peer-reviewed journal publications arising from Agency-supported research are freely accessible within 12 months of publication” (Government of Canada 2016, 3.1). The exception to this policy is research funded through graduate scholarships and fellowships, the recipients of which are encouraged but not required to publish their findings in e (Government of Canada 2017, Question 9). The Tri-Agency Policy also requires that CIHR-funded research data must also be preserved and, in some bases, submitted to public databases (Government of Canada 2016, 3.2). NSERC and SSHRC do not have similar requirements for data preservation, but SSHRC does have a [Research Data Archiving Policy](#) that points to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) [Portage](#) network. Although the Tri-Agency [Responsible Conduct of Research \(RCR\) framework](#) makes no mention of OA specifically, the OA Policy is one of the conditions under which recipients accept funding, and the guidelines are clear that the process for rectifying a breach of Tri-Agency policy outlined in the RCR framework apply to the OA Policy as well (Government of Canada 2017).

Larivière and Sugimoto identify what they call a “funder effect” whereby compliance varies according to funder rather than discipline or subdiscipline, leading them to conclude that the culture of any one discipline is less significant for compliance than the funder's mechanisms for enabling and encouraging compliance (“Field culture”). Sauvé quotes Larivière as noting that the NIH and the Wellcome Trust require researchers to provide URLs of OA versions of their funded publications in their final funding reports, whereas none of Canada's funders do (“A weblink is required”). In fact, CIHR does ask researchers to provide URLs or DOIs for their funded publications, which are tracked using the [Research Reporting System](#), but the consequence of not doing so or for not publishing in OA venues is unclear (Government of Canada 2017, Question 24).

Larivière and Sugimoto argue that removing barriers to compliance and providing adequate infrastructure are key factors in improving compliance rates. As they point out, requiring work to be deposited in OA repositories at the time of publication, rather than after the fact, leads to higher rates of compliance, likely because researchers are still engaged in the project (Larivière and Sugimoto, para. 7). Providing venues in which researchers can publish or deposit their publications is another important consideration. While in the US, the NIH offers PubMedCentral as an OA repository, CIHR offers no equivalent in Canada; PubMedCentral Canada never gained traction, and was taken offline in February 2018 (para. 8). CIHR's statement about the closure of PubMedCentral Canada states that only 4% of funded studies were deposited in the repository since its launch, and costly infrastructure upgrades necessary for maintaining operation of the repository could not be justified given such low usage (Canadian Institutes of Health Research).

As the example of PubMedCentral Canada shows, the existence of an OA repository does not guarantee it will be used. Hurrell et al. recently conducted a study about whether badges—virtual reward stickers indicating that an article is compliant with the Tri-Agency's OA Policy—would be effective incentives for researchers at the University of Calgary to deposit their funded publications in the university's OA

repository. Hurrell et al. draw upon the [Open Science Collaboration's Open Science Badges](#) initiative and studies finding that badges are an effective, low-cost incentives for researchers, such as Grahe's editorial and Kidwell et al.'s study that recorded a 20% increase in the reporting of open data after *Psychological Science* adopted a badge system (Grahe 2014; Hurrell et al. 2018, slide 7; Kidwell et al. 2016). Through surveys and user experience testing, they found that badges might be effective if they were quick and easy to apply, but that usability of the repository itself was a more significant factor influencing compliance (Hurrell et al. 2018, slide 20–21).

Larivière and Sugimoto emphasize that compliance with OA policies, and not the lack of OA policies themselves, is where the conversation about OA in Canada should focus on, since, as they note, more than 50 funding agencies and 700 institutions across the globe had OA mandates, even before Plan S was announced (para. 1). Calling for greater transparency so that data about compliance can be evaluated more precisely and consistently, they conclude that their findings “highlight the importance to open access of enforcement, timelines and infrastructure,” as well as adequate funding (para. 4). They identify large-scale infrastructure as the most significant factor in ensuring compliance, citing the example of the UK, where compliance rates across the four research councils increased by 20% or more between 2009 and 2016, and will almost certainly increase again since UK funding bodies have determined to consider open access publications only in the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment (para. 9).

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