British Academy response to
the RCUK position statement on access to research outputs

1   The British Academy welcomes the opportunity to comment on the RCUK position statement issued on 28 June. The British Academy responds as the UK national academy for the humanities and social sciences, as a funder of research (with both public and private funds), and as a learned society with its own publishing programme.

2   In April 2005 the Academy published a policy review document on *E-resources for research in the humanities and social sciences*, which addresses the issues raised in the RCUK statement (see www.britac.ac.uk/reports/eresources). The report supported 'the principle of wide and ready access to research outputs and other research resources'. In particular it stressed how important it was for the humanities and social sciences to engage with open access issues, so that the agenda was not over-dominated by the natural sciences.

3   The RCUK position statement appears to be driven primarily by considerations that relate to the natural sciences. The concerns of the humanities and social sciences may differ, to varying degrees. For example, practice in some social science subjects will be similar to that in the natural sciences; and some individuals are familiar with posting work on the web. In the humanities, the dissemination of scholarship is less dominated by journal articles and conference proceedings: monographs continue to play a key role. Scholarship can be less driven by the very latest published findings: articles published 30–50 years ago remain important. And there is probably more value placed on the definitive 'gold standard' published version of an article than on any 'pre-print' or other version.

4   RCUK accepts that the existing system of academic journal publishing has served scholarship well. Its peer review mechanisms are crucial to the scholarly process. All journal output has been archived. And much is now available electronically. The RCUK position implies that an alternative system will have to be devised and implemented. The statement acknowledges that new models will require new solutions, but provides little firm evidence in support of its optimism that these solutions will be found. There are doubts that need to be addressed.

5   The cost in money and time of establishing and maintaining institutional or other repositories should not be underestimated. The statement is vague about likely costs, where the funding will come from, and indeed whether this will be more cost-effective than the existing model. This applies at all levels, from that of the whole institution, through departments, to individual researchers. In particular, for whatever model is adopted, will there be adequate support for individual researchers seeking to deposit their material? And it is surely doubtful whether learned societies across the humanities and social sciences are equally willing or geared up to take on any 'kite marking' responsibilities — at least without any reimbursement of the associated costs.

6   The statement is also vague about the costs associated with open access journals. A typical 'author-pays' fee of £1500 might not constitute a significant addition to a typical research grant in the natural sciences, but it would form a significant percentage increase on the small individual grants that are common in the

humanities and social sciences. Where is this additional funding to come from? Indeed much output in the humanities does not derive from research grant funding at all: is it likely that funds will be available just for fees?

7   And real problems lie in access in the future. It is all very well to put results up as soon as possible, so that others working in the field can see what is current. It is quite another matter for other people, several years in the future, to be able to access this work. This applies, with more or less force, across the board throughout the humanities and the sciences. It relates to questions of what facilities for access are available. There is also the question as to whether institutional repositories are best suited to meet the needs of individual researchers, and whether parts, or even all, of the academic community might be better served by subject repositories. Not everyone has ready and free access through university websites. Established researchers have easy access to free printing; for students, this can be prohibitively expensive. All libraries (including the British Library) are acutely worried about the stability of data, and particularly about the stability of metadata. This apart, e-search methods are in their infancy, once one gets away from the most obvious subject guides or existing general purpose tools, as current work to provide widely available means to get 'beneath' Google demonstrates.

8   With such doubts about future models, one would expect that the existing publishing model should not be undermined in the meantime. The RCUK position accepts that articles should be deposited in e-print repositories 'subject to copyright and licensing arrangements', but makes clear its view that such restrictions should be as liberal as possible. The Academy is not surprised that some university presses are continuing to assert limitations to defend the value that they provide through the peer review process — for example, imposing a delay in access. The assertion in the RCUK statement that unrestricted access to subscription-journal content is unlikely to have adverse consequences for the future of those journals again contains more optimism than firm evidence. If the requirement to deposit were extended in the future to scholarly monographs, it would almost certainly prove fatal to much academic monograph publishing and not necessarily improve research.

9   An equivalent requirement to deposit articles is not being imposed on British Academy research grants awarded in the academic year 2005/06 because the terms and conditions have already been set and publicly announced. The position will be kept under review, particularly in light of the availability of suitable repositories.

10   The Academy believes that individual researchers should have a role in shaping repository development, and that the interests of researchers in the humanities and social sciences need to be represented in the development of any repositories. The Academy would be interested in exploring the possibility of holding a workshop soon, jointly with the AHRC and the ESRC, to discuss how concerns such as those raised above can be addressed in any future developments.

11   The Academy agrees that developments, both technical and financial, should be reviewed at the end of 2008.

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