

## [Brute force open-access](#) [1]

Written by [Dr Eamonn Butler](#) [2] | Wednesday 30 January 2013



The fact that governments intervene in one area gives them an excuse to intervene in another. The demand that all car passengers, including those in the rear seats, should be compelled to wear seat-belts was justified by the observation that taxpayers supported the National Health Service, so if a passenger was injured in an accident, it would be a cost on us all. Laws banning smoking, and this week's proposal to put a tax on sugary drinks, are other examples that use the same justification.

Now the universities minister David Willetts is causing a stir in academe with his plans to force through open access. At present, academics do their research and try to get it printed in various academic journals. The more prestigious the journal, the more the paper is scrutinised through peer review, so getting printed in a good journal is some indication of quality. It is a costly process, and the leading journals can be quite expensive for libraries to buy, but at least the research that does get published is reasonably reliable.

However, Willetts takes the view that, since since we have a taxpayer-funded university system and a taxpayer-funded set of research councils, anything the academics produce rightly belongs to the public and should be made immediately and freely available ? what is called 'open access'. The universities will not have to pay to get articles processed, and their libraries will not have to pay for the expensive journals, but they will have to pay to make the research available.

So it is quite probable that many of today's journals, and the learned societies that sponsor them, will simply disappear ? which may help explain why a dozen of them have written to the government to complain about the idea.

Many academics have already opted for an open access policy (a policy practiced by the Adam Smith Institute too), since they want to get their work and ideas out to a wide audience. But often, papers are put online without proper editing ? because the authors are not professional editors ? which means that mistakes creep in (something that can be potentially dangerous in, say, medical or engineering research papers online). And the research goes up without proper peer review that might expose fundamental errors.

Academics will find that it is their university colleagues, not anonymous expert peers in the field from all over the world, who decide what goes online ? but university jealousies can be very bitter. If there is no effective peer review, it will be hard to know which research is reckoned to be reliable and which is not. All papers that go public will have to be treated as potentially suspect. Mind you, in economics, some of us came to that conclusion many years ago. Perhaps David Willetts would be better employed making sure that research projects were a proper use of taxpayers' money, rather than bullying his university

employees about how they present it.

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