

Making Publicly-funded Research Accessible to the Public

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A vast number of students, teachers, researchers and members of the public are unable to access research papers and data due to prohibitive terms imposed by publishers of international journals.

We are in an unconscionable situation today where Indian taxpayer-funded research is unavailable to the Indian public because it is published in private foreign journals with restrictive copyright and subscription terms.

To make knowledge more inclusive, to make education more open and to promote globally competitive innovation, it is proposed that the Government of India institute a National Public Research Database and a family of Open Journals of India.

This is consistent with developments in the United States and elsewhere where the prohibitive nature of prices and conditions imposed by a small number of international publishing firms has been recognised as an inhibitor of innovation and knowledge diffusion.

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Disclosure: The Takshashila Institution (a public charitable trust) and its partners conduct policy research and education in public policy. Its faculty and students would be a potential beneficiaries if the recommendations herein are implemented.

RATIONALE

Students, teachers and researchers in India are locked out from access to scholarly journals because the latter are under the control of a small number of foreign publishers whose charges are unaffordable for most of our educational institutions. India cannot be a serious player on the international scene in any discipline as long as a vast majority of its human resources are kept out of these mainstreams of knowledge.

Worse, even outputs of research funded by the Union and state governments is unavailable to the public when published in international journals. Students, teachers and researchers in India are thus unable to access the best taxpayer-funded work produced in our own country.

PROPOSAL

MHRD must take the initiative. In line with developments in the United States and elsewhere in the world, it is imperative that the Ministry of Human Resource Development take the initiative to unlock knowledge-sharing to provide the necessary basis for innovation and excellence. The private sector is unlikely to have the incentives and the coordination necessary for the market to throw up a solution, necessitating government investment.

It is proposed that MHRD start a National Public Research Database (NPRD) and a family of Open Journals of India (OJI) to create inclusion in education and knowledge.

National Public Research Database. The NPRD will be a repository of research output produced in India (and also in the rest of the world). The outputs from all government-funded research (working papers, published papers and data sets) must be shared with public on this platform.

All government agencies that finance research, with the exception of military and strategic research, must enforce this requirement on the institutions that they support.

The NPRD can be open and welcome contributions from privately-funded research as well as research from elsewhere in the world.

Publicly funded researchers who publish papers in international journals must be required place their papers on the NPRD within 6 months from the date of publication. This will require them either to negotiate the copyright

arrangements with the international journals to enable this, or choose such international journals that permit it.

Open Journals of India. The NPRD itself will not be sufficient to ensure inclusive access to the outputs of publicly-funded research. It is proposed that MHRD start a family of high-quality Open Journals of India (OJI), in various disciplines and sub-disciplines, to provide researchers with a credible open access platform to publish their research.

The OJIs must be constituted with editorial boards and peer review panels comprising of top-class academic experts from India and abroad.

The OJIs will ensure that there is always a high-quality platform that will publish their research on open access terms. The decision of whether or not to publish will remain a prerogative of the editorial boards based on their assessment of its suitability. In other words, open access is not a substitute for quality and excellence.

As in the case of NPRD, and perhaps even more so, OJIs should remain open and welcome excellent research regardless of where it is produced. Publication of output of privately-funded research and international research should be welcomed.

The OJIs shall be published in electronic formats only, with open licensing for those who wish to distribute these in print form.

CONCLUSION

Can we afford it vs Can we afford not to have it? This preliminary memo does not examine costs. However, even a rough comparison of paying digital subscription fees for all of our university and college students against the costs of setting up and managing these journals would suggest that NPRD and OJI will be more cost effective even in pure accounting terms.

The true economic costs however are about making cutting-edge knowledge accessible to our public against leaving them, literally, in the dark. It should be unconscionable that Indian taxpayer-funded research is locked in proprietary journals accessible to Western institutions that can afford to subscribe. The rationale for the government to finance research is not merely to create researchers but also to diffuse knowledge and make it inclusive to the public. The latter is a more important policy goal.