DATA NOTE

Journal subscription expenditure of UK higher education institutions [version 2; peer review: 4 approved]

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Abstract
The academic libraries of higher education institutions (HEIs) pay significant amounts of money each year for access to academic journals. The amounts paid are often not transparent especially when it comes to knowing how much is paid to specific publishers. Therefore data on journal subscription expenditure were obtained for UK HEIs using a series of Freedom of Information requests. Data were obtained for 141 HEIs' expenditure with seven publishers over a five-year period. The majority of institutions have provided figures but some are still outstanding. The data will be of interest to those who wish to understand the economics of scholarly communication and see the scale of payments flowing within the system. Further research could replicate the data collection in other jurisdictions.

Keywords
Journals, subscription, higher education institution

Open Peer Review

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.
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Competing interests: Stuart Lawson works for Jisc Collections, a library consortium which is involved in negotiations with publishers. Jisc Collections was not involved in this research.

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Materials and methods

A list of HEIs was created based on UK institutions which the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, n.d.) collects data about. In order to obtain data which cover the majority of HEI journal expenditure, seven of the largest publishers of academic journals were chosen (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Sage, Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press).

Each institution was then sent three separate FOI requests via the website whatdotheyknow.com, which sends FOI requests on behalf of UK citizens. The site was chosen because it places all correspondence in the public domain indefinitely, thus ensuring that the data will be verifiable. The three requests were grouped as follows: Group 1 - Wiley, Springer, OUP; Group 2 - Taylor & Francis, Sage, CUP; Group 3 - Elsevier. The groupings were chosen to ensure that each request would not be too onerous for an HEI to respond to, as stipulated under the UK's FOI law. Elsevier data were requested separately because the nature of their contract with libraries means that the institution must contact Elsevier when it receives a request, thus increasing the time burden on institutions. An individual known to the authors sent similar requests to Russell Group universities for Wiley, Springer, and OUP expenditure earlier in 2014, so these requests were not duplicated and the data obtained by them (Brook, 2014) have now been incorporated into the main dataset.

The figures should include payments made directly to the publishers as well as any payments made to subscription agents or intermediaries for the purchase of, and/or access to, the publishers' academic journals. Institutions were asked to provide data for the payment for journal packages such as Jisc Collections’ NESLi agreements, as well as for individual journals, and to include VAT where possible. Since the authors are relying solely on data provided by the HEIs it is not possible to independently verify whether all of these aspects of the requests have been adhered to. While this may result in some inaccuracies in individual figures, the authors do not consider that the overall scale will be unduly affected.

Data were requested for five calendar years (2010–14). Some institutions provided data in financial years, which for UK academic institutions is from August-July. In these cases the financial year was mapped on to the second of the two years, for example 2009–10 was mapped on to 2010. This is because although during the financial year 2009–10 it is possible that the money was actually transferred during 2009, it will have been used to pay for subscriptions for 2010. Amounts paid in currencies other than GBP have been converted into GBP based on the exchange rate on 1 January of the year in question. Most figures included VAT, so to ensure consistency VAT has been added to those figures which excluded it (17.5% in 2010 and 20% in 2011–14).

Caution must be exercised when comparing the amount that an institution pays to the amount paid by other institutions, because it is likely that they are not purchasing access to exactly the same ‘package’ of content. In some cases institutions pay for large bundles of titles, and in other cases they pay for individual titles. We did not ask institutions to provide precise details of what they purchased because we believed that doing so could add significantly to the time it would take for them to produce responses to the requests, which may well have led to refusals. A few institutions did not ask institutions to provide precise details of what they purchased during 2009, it will have been used to pay for subscriptions for 2010. Amounts paid in currencies other than GBP have been converted into GBP based on the exchange rate on 1 January of the year in question. Most figures included VAT, so to ensure consistency VAT has been added to those figures which excluded it (17.5% in 2010 and 20% in 2011–14).

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Data availability

Data were obtained from each institution sending separate FOI requests via the website whatdotheyknow.com. Requests can be viewed individually at https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/stuart_lawson#foi_requests and https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/ben_meghreblian#foi_requests.

Author contributions
Stuart Lawson authored the data note and designed, carried out, and recorded the data collection.

Ben Meghreblian designed, carried out, and recorded the data collection.

Competing interests
Stuart Lawson works for Jisc Collections, a library consortium which is involved in negotiations with publishers. Jisc Collections was not involved in this research.

Grant information
The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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Reference Source
Open Peer Review

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Jingfeng Xia
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Data sharing is critical for decreasing duplicated work and increasing the possibility of comparative analyses. Researchers and practitioners will be able to develop diverse thinking and design appropriate collaborations based upon existing data. Data sharing will also allow others to validate one another’s discoveries so as to encourage research accountability and transparency.

Stuart Lawson and Ben Meghrebian made a great effort to open their data on the subject of journal subscription expenditure. Their research design for collecting such data looks sound. People can expect to examine their data and make possible comparisons across libraries.

While using their data, one needs to be aware that journal subscriptions are very complicated in library practices. Many variables may potentially affect the pricing and make comparisons tricky. Furthermore, their published data are aggregated, preventing users from drilling down through detailed numbers. However, it is a good start. We look forward to reading more data published for free access.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
John Dupuis
Steacie Science & Engineering Library, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

The authors have done an excellent job of gathering and presenting data about journal subscription expenditures in the UK. I have no major suggestions for the current version of the article.

The only minor suggestion I would have is that the authors may have wanted to include more information and links to similar data that has already been collected for both the UK and other countries, such as the data collected by Timothy Gowers or Theodore C. Bergstrom et al.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

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Subbiah Arunachalam
Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore, India

Academic and research libraries purchase large number of professional journals from publishers, often in packages (also referred to as bundles). Often publishers insist on non-disclosure clauses in the contracts they sign with subscribing institutions, and they sell journals to different institutions at different prices. Clever negotiators (as those in the University of California system) bargain hard and obtain better deals, but others pay needlessly high prices. Selling the same product at different prices to different consumers is unethical. Till recently it was very difficult or even impossible to obtain information on how much a university pays a (commercial) publisher as subscription to journals. Now people like Lawson and Meghreblian (and Bergstrom, Timothy Gowers) have found a way to overcome this unethical practice of publishers.

This short paper and the data is on how much each university in the UK pays seven publishers by way of subscription to journals. The paper is well written and it makes public the voluminous data they have collected using the Freedom of Information Act.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
The authors have collected a set of data that is likely to be very useful both to researchers who investigate journal pricing and to librarians who want to know more about what others are paying when they make their own bargains with publishers. The methods of collection seem sound and the work appears to be carefully done.

There is one thing that I would like to see clarified. The report states the amounts that are paid to each publisher, but do not make it clear whether all of the reported institutions are buying the same thing from the publishers. For example, Elsevier markets a "Freedom package" which includes a published list of journals constituting most, but not all, of the journals they publish. They also market a "Complete package" which does not include the entire Freedom package, but basically a set of journals to which the university has previously subscribed. Elsevier also separately markets the Cell Press journals, a "clinical medicine package", a series of monographs called "advances in ...." Some of the contract totals that I have seen include all or some of these.

Similarly, Springer sells not only its journal package, but also a large number of textbooks and monographs. Some libraries' total expenditure with Springer may include these. It would be good to know if your totals are just for the journal bundle.

With some of the other publishers, it also is not entirely clear whether the totals reported are from libraries that do not subscribe to the publisher's entire journal bundle but only to some limited subset. Once again, it would be good to have this clarified.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
details in their response; those who purchase access directly from a publisher rather than through Swets appear to find it easier to provide such data.

One way we could highlight this would be to mark the figures in some way to indicate whether an institution has paid for the complete package of content from a given publisher. However, in order to do this consistently, we would need to contact most or all of the institutions again in order to confirm this with them. For some institutions this information can be gleaned from the original FOI response which is viewable on whatdotheyknow.com.

The most accurate way to compare between different institutions would be if we asked for each institution to release the title list of purchased content for each publisher during each year. Through a project I am working on at Jisc Collections, which aims to build an ‘entitlement registry’ of this information for all UK institutions, I have learned that it may be very difficult for all institutions to provide that data.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

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**Comments on this article**

**Version 2**

Reader Comment 06 Mar 2015

**Peter H Uetz,** Center for the Study of Biological Complexity, Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

There is no real data in this paper. Is there a reason for this? Why is all the data in the supplement? A summary within the paper (i.e. pdf) would have been useful.

**Competing Interests:** none

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