Open access debate report

In the afternoon of June 21, Wageningen Young Academy and WUR Library organized an interactive debate on open access publishing that attracted over 50 WUR researchers. Important Funding Organizations such as EU or NWO require the research they fund to be published Open Access which may lead to publishing not in journals of researchers’ choice. Open Access in publishing is the topic of a heated debate. Some see it as the only way forward, others worry about quality control and costs. But what is it? What are the pros and cons of Open Access publishing? And who will benefit from Open Access (OA)?

After an introduction by dr. Tijs Breukink, prof.dr. Gerard Meijer, the chairman of the board of Radboud University, opened the afternoon with a talk about his experiences as chief negotiator on behalf of Dutch Universities with the publishers. His argument was that a lot of objections against OA are based on misunderstandings. When you are better informed, there are actually no good reasons to object to OA in case of (partly) publicly funded research. The principle that the dissemination of results should be paid for by science as part of the research budget is also completely justified in his view. He did admit that the road to OA is complex and that there are currently a number of legitimate concerns about quality control and predatory open access journals. Prof.dr. Marcel Dicke continued the debate with a number of arguments that are more critical of OA. Specifically, he argued that the fact that research is funded with public money does not automatically imply that the results should be publicly available: interviews with publicly paid government officials in newspapers are not freely accessible, and neither are publically funded museums. Dicke's main concern with OA was quality control. When the business model is based on paying for reading articles, publishers have an interest in only publishing high quality work. However, the OA business model is based on paying for publishing, replacing an incentive based on quality with one based on quantity. Dr. Maria Forlenza, an assistant professor at WU who is in the tenure track, continued the discussion by explaining how tenure track demands influence your publishing choice. CVs are judged on the basis of publication records with a strong focus on impact factors of journals. Most of the OA journals are not the top in their field. Combined with the costs of making articles open access in traditional journals, these are strong incentives against OA publishing for tenure track staff. Dr. Kasper Kok, an assistant professor at WU, continued by echoing some of Gerard Meijer's arguments but then highlighting the important role of publishing initiatives outside the traditional large publishing companies. His experiences as an editor of an open access journal published by a scientific society show that it is possible to manage a high quality open access journal with reasonable page charges. Finally, Jochem Jonkman, a PhD candidate at the Operations Research and Logistics chair group, stated that among PhD candidates there is little awareness of the issues around OA. In his experience, the biggest challenge is to figure out in which journal you can best publish your work and attract an audience.

Interestingly, there was a general agreement among the audience on many concerns that were raised, whether in favor of or against OA. This confirms that OA publishing is a complex issue with no easy solutions and that there is a need for information and awareness raising, as well as continued discussion.

Two issues stood out:
1 There are serious quality concerns. Both the current publication system and open access publishing currently face incentives that might threaten quality.
2 There is a tension between the move to OA and the way in which scientists are evaluated within and outside university, which points to a need for consistent policies and strategies.

For practical information over Open Access publishing, please consult the WUR Library website at www.wur.nl/library/open-access.

Written by: Esther Turnhout, Anna Besse-Lototskaya, Theo Jetten and Jan Willem van Groenigen