

Welcome Address

Prof. Alfred Vella – Pro-Rector Academic Affairs

FOSTER & UoM Training Event

Open Access and its Impact on Research and Scholarship

Dolmen Resort Hotel, Qawra, St. Paul's Bay, 29th May 2015

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and a great pleasure to me as University Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs to welcome you here today for this highly interesting training forum on the impact of Open Access on research and scholarship. I feel it is my duty, first of all, to convey my sincere appreciation to the organizing institutions, namely FOSTER (Facilitate Open Science Training for European Research), EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) and the University of Malta Library for working together and pooling resources to organize this event. Special thanks should also go to the various speakers who have generously offered to share their knowledge and expertise regarding Open Access, Open Science and Open Data Sharing.

The leading principle of Open Access is to ensure immediate, free and unlimited access to scientific publications and research information via the Internet, and in so doing, offers an alternative to the traditional model of commercial scientific publishing. The Open Access movement has made substantial headway since the beginning of this century and, to date, a host of scientists and researchers across multiple disciplines have adopted this concept. Moreover, its principal tenets have also become an integral part of the largest European Research and Innovation programme, *Horizon 2020*.

Why are we here today?

I believe that we are here because the norms, expectations and demands of research and scholarship are constantly changing. It is therefore important that we keep abreast and register progress in this sphere because our future is heavily dependent on a knowledge-based society. But to achieve this, we need to confront change. This change does not simply imply that we have a more robust technology - which has become faster than ever before – but also that the world and academe have gone through rapid changes in the way information is gathered, synthesized and disseminated. People are now uploading, and not simply downloading information. People are contributing and interacting, as they do in blogs. In other words, information is being handled, manipulated and treated differently than ever before. Within this scenario the scientific publishing world has already adapted itself by shifting towards online availability of information, especially in the realm of scientific journal publishing. But the scope of today's event is not to review recent adaptations, but to focus on current trends connected with Open Access.

Allow me here to introduce you to a hypothetical scenario: Imagine a world where everyone has online access to peer-reviewed research publications for consultation and scholarly manipulation, without any financial, organizational, legal or technical constraints. The only missing element in this hypothetical scenario is that printing has not yet been invented, until someone hits on the idea of inventing printing type fonts to print characters to produce books and journals out of this venture. *Could anyone imagine a Print Publishing Movement evolving among scholars, in favour of scientific research being published*

exclusively in print format, and available solely through expensive subscriptions? Such a possibility is highly unlikely, given that everyone has been used to publishing one's findings electronically in Open Access!

For the scientific world, Open Access publishing has too many advantages, since:

- it enhances visibility, readership and the impact of scholarly work and current research
- it increases the ability of readers to identify relevant research which is easily accessible via the internet
- it creates new avenues for discovery in a digital environment
- it stimulates the development of new and more powerful search strategies like indexing, linking or text-mining. This applies not only to publications, but also to the underlying data, and
- it enhances interdisciplinary research and accelerates the momentum of discovery and innovation

All of us here today cannot imagine life without universally accessible information on the Internet. Nevertheless, when it comes to academe, the exceptional potential of electronic publications and free access to information and data have not yet been fully exploited. Only a minor proportion of the research material which is published annually is currently made freely accessible to the general public. This becomes all the more surprising and paradoxical when we, with good reason, look upon science as a means of breaking down boundaries.

So, why is it that, to date, Open Access has not yet achieved greater acclaim and support? One major plausible reason why open access has not been widely adopted is due to culture. Neuroscientific research shows that the human brain is very resistant to change and that, in general one tends to adhere to one's current modus operandi. Scholars and researchers are not different when it comes to routine workflows such as their submittance of research publications. This is thus one reason why the culture of scientific publishing, as it has been practised for decades, has not altered substantially since the inception of Open Access. As with any established culture, change does not come easy – particularly because of fear amongst scientists that they may thus be disadvantaged.

I can understand how difficult it is for a scholar to give up the opportunity of having a research paper published in a reputable scientific journal – more so, when research funding often depends on one's prestigious publications. At the same time, I can also understand the publishers' position in that as long as it is essential for a research library to acquire a licence to access online journal subscriptions, publishing houses will continue to maintain the familiar business model with restricted access. Conversely, if Open Access is to gain the popularity and momentum that we all would like to see it achieve, the financing model for publishing scientific research must change fundamentally. Resources from existing subscription models must be transferred into publication budgets from which scientific papers would then be financed. This is a fundamental paradigm shift, which is far more expensive than one might think, and above all needs sustained support.

However, it is pertinent for academic institutions and all stakeholders within the world of scientific research to pool their strengths and resources to ensure that Open Access becomes widely accepted, maintained and supported. Together, we need to make the case for Open Access! Open Access should become a condition for any research grant. Indeed, this is exactly how the European Union put it when

they adopted Open Access. It is now the responsibility of policy-makers to design a legal framework which would support and facilitate this.

The European Commission has been closely following and contributing towards the heated debate on Open Access to scientific information. I am also aware that – although somewhat controversial – discussions on Open Access are taking place between scientific publishers and the scientific community. The digital revolution has led the European scientific community to suggest that an alternative publishing model, with enhanced access to research publications, could further stimulate research excellence and innovation. To this effect, the European Commission is playing an active role in this evolution and has published a set of guidelines on *Open Access to Scientific Publications and Research Data in Horizon 2020*. It has also announced a series of measures on how the Commission would be dealing with Open Access to all research which is funded through EU projects - and how it would exploit its funding programmes to improve access to and the preservation of scientific information.

Subsequently, we all hope and aspire that these ongoing efforts and negotiations between research institutions, the publishing industry and the European Commission would lead to further developments and advancements in this sphere.

Before I give the floor to University Director Library Services Mr Kevin Ellul, I trust that today's event will help us all gain new insights into the great potential and possibilities behind Open Access. We all look forward to your active participation and contribution in this regard.

Thank you