

Research Excellence Framework 2029: Open Access Consultation: Response from the Royal Astronomical Society

With a membership of more than 4,000 Fellows, the Royal Astronomical Society is the lead body representing astronomers, space scientists and geophysicists in the UK. Our membership encompasses academia and industry, from undergraduates to senior scientists, and employees in industry and across the wider economy.

The Society's portfolio of journals comprises Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society (MNRAS), Geophysical Journal International (GJI), and RAS Techniques and Instruments (RASTI). In January 2024 the first two of these moved to a full open access model, and RASTI has been operated on that basis since its launch in 2022. Our journals are published by Oxford University Press (OUP).

Question 1: Are you answering on behalf of your organisation, institution or as an individual?

On behalf of our organisation

Question 2: What is your organisation / institution?

The Royal Astronomical Society

Question 3: Country: England / Scotland / Wales / Northern Ireland / Other (please state)

England, but the RAS represents its Fellows in 70 countries around the world

Question 4: What are the most important changes in the open access landscape since the development of the REF 2021 open access policy?

1) How do these differ across disciplinary areas?

All major astronomy journals are now open access, and their papers are free to view in perpetuity. Even before this change, the majority of papers were posted on the arXiv open access repository, and an even higher proportion are now available to read without restriction.

Geophysics is more mixed, with some journals still operating on a hybrid basis that do not meet the open access requirements demanded by the REF.

Both astronomy and geophysics rely on international collaboration, and so it is commonplace for papers in these areas to have international authorship. For example, the NASA Astrophysics Data Service advises the RAS that there were 79,427 astronomy papers with UK authors since 2004, and in the same period only 14,930 papers only had UK authors. Even with caveats on researcher movement and stated affiliation, this suggests that a huge proportion of work and publication involves UK researchers collaborating with their peers in other countries.

Open access policies differ between national jurisdictions, particularly affecting papers with authors from Europe and from the rest of the world. The new policy therefore needs clear guidance on how papers of this kind can be included in REF 2029 submissions.

2) What are the implications of these changes for the REF 2029 open access policy?

Most UK researchers in astronomy and geophysics are able to publish at no cost in our journals through read and publish agreements between JISC and OUP. Where their institution is not affiliated to JISC, they are able to apply for a waiver of the relevant Article Processing Charge (APC).

As a result we are confident that outputs from researchers published in our journals can be included in REF 2029 submissions without impediment.

The confidence of authors and readers in journals depends on more than just metrics, and also requires a rigorous peer review process that maintains the highest standards of scientific excellence in published work. The RAS and OUP both invest heavily to ensure that this remains the case for our portfolio.

Question 5: Should deposit requirements post acceptance be maintained where publication isn't immediately open access?

No comment

Question 6: Do you agree with alignment to the UKRI open access policy in respect of licensing for journal publications by requiring licensing terms equivalent to CC-BY or CC-BY ND licensing for journal publications?

Yes

The CC-BY licence – free re-use with attribution – is the most liberal creative commons licence. Making work available on this basis is of enormous benefit to researchers, educators and industry.

Question 7: Do you agree with recognition of alternative platforms as meeting open access requirements as primary platform for publication?

Some alternative platforms such as arXiv are routinely used by astronomers (there are similar examples in geophysics), but do not meet the full CC-BY licence requirements. We also do not support the use of non-peer-reviewed preprints placed on arXiv for REF 2029 assessments.

Question 8: Do you agree with the proposed changes to embargo periods for journal publications for main panels A and B (12 months reduced to six months) and main panels C and D (24 months reduced to 12 months) in light of changing standards and practice?

No comment

What, if any, negative or positive impacts might there be from this change?

Papers in our journals no longer have embargoes, so are not affected by this change. We do however note that immediate and free access to research benefits the scientific community.

Question 9: Do you consider that tolerance limit for articles and conference proceedings should be retained at 5% of any submission?

Yes

Please provide any further comment

As our journals are open access, we are content with this tolerance limit.

Question 10: Do you agree that changes to the open access policy for journal-based publications should be implemented from 1 January 2025?

Yes

Please provide any further comment

We are content with this change.

Question 11: Do you agree with the proposed exceptions for journal publications?

No comment

Question 12: Do you agree that there should be no deposit requirement for longform publications, but that they should be made immediately available as open access upon publication (or no later than 24 months following publication if subject to an embargo)?

No comment

Question 13: Do you agree with the proposal of a maximum embargo period of 24 months for longform publications?

No comment

Question 14: Is licensing for third party materials not being granted a reasonable ground for exemption from open access requirements?

No comment

Question 15: Is sharing of a version of an output without third-party materials if licensing can't be obtained, mirroring the UKRI open access policy for longform outputs, appropriate to meet the open access requirements for REF 2029 policy?

No comment

Question 16: Do you agree with the principle of a tolerance level for non-compliant longform outputs?

No comment

Question 17: Do you agree with the proposed tolerance level of 10% for longform outputs?

No comment

Question 18: Do you agree with the proposed date for implementation of an open access policy for longform outputs in REF 2029 being for all longform publications for which contracts are agreed from 1 January 2026?

No comment

Question 19: Do you agree with the proposed exceptions for longform publications?

No comment