



## AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

### Licence absurdity

9 April 2015

The proposal by the Higher Education Policy Institute for a UK national open access licence was announced on 30 March. If only Hefi had delayed the announcement by two days, it could have been written off as an April Fool's Day joke, albeit one in bad taste ("[National licence mooted to free up research access](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/national-licence-mooted-to-free-up-research-access/2019451.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/national-licence-mooted-to-free-up-research-access/2019451.article>)", 31 March). Hefi styles itself as "the UK's only independent think tank devoted to higher education", although I note that it routinely partners with Elsevier.

Since the proposed licence relies on recognising UK IP addresses, it invites the name "the Ukip Licence" – which perfectly captures its spirit. It is disappointing that British academics should propose something so small-minded and xenophobic. Let's look at some of the specific ways that it is a terrible, terrible idea.

First, it is not open access by any existing definition of the term. The Budapest Open Access Initiative, which first coined the term, describes open access as "free availability on the public internet" (ie, not a national subnetwork), "permitting any users" (ie, not just British users) "without financial, legal, or technical barriers" (ie, not filtering on IP addresses).

Second, the licence proposal positions the UK as the one country in the world willing to poison the open access well, prepared to destroy value for 199 countries in the hope of increasing it for one. This is a classic prisoner's dilemma "first defector" strategy – an approach that has been shown by multi-algorithm tournaments to reliably downgrade the defector's outcome.

Third, even evaluated selfishly from a national perspective, Britons gain more when hundreds of countries are working on advances in health, education, etc, than when only one is. The Ukip Licence, if adopted, would hobble British innovation, health and education, as well as that of the rest of the world.

Fourth, and most important, the proposal is mean. We have to be better than this. Publishing research about diseases that kill millions in countries in the developing world, then preventing scientists in those countries from reading that research, is not just stupid, it is despicable. It is hard to imagine behaviour more unrepresentative of the values that we like to imagine the UK embodies.

Fifth, the licence plan will not work. Barring access by IP address is a notoriously fragile approach that hides content from Britons abroad while granting access to anyone anywhere who knows how to use a web proxy.

Altogether, this is about the most misguided proposal imaginable. I would like to see its authors withdraw it with all possible haste.

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30