

Communicating knowledge:

How and why UK researchers publish and disseminate their findings

A Research Information Network report

September 2009

Communicating knowledge looks at how researchers publish and why, including the motivations that lead them to publish in different formats and the increase in collaboration and co-authorship. It also explores how researchers decide what to cite and the influence of research assessment on their behaviours and attitudes.

Researchers want to develop new knowledge and understanding of the world we live in and to communicate their findings to others. Increasingly, however, they are being pulled in different directions in deciding which channels of communication they should adopt, from professional society journals and conferences to less formal means such as social networking tools.

So just how do researchers decide when, where and how to communicate their work? Based on evidence gathered from an extensive literature review, bibliometric analysis, focus groups, interviews and an online survey, our report presents a comprehensive view of how researchers communicate their work across the range of disciplines in the UK.

The report examines the motivations, incentives and constraints that lead UK researchers in different subjects and disciplines to publish and disseminate their work in different ways. It explores how and why they cite other researchers' work, as well as how their decisions on publication and citation are influenced by past and anticipated research assessment.

This research has been carried out at a time when there has been considerable debate about the format of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). We hope that the key findings identified in the report may help to illuminate some of the issues raised in the continuing discussions about the structure of the REF.

A summary of the key findings is overleaf.



The full report is available at
www.rin.ac.uk/communicating-knowledge

Key findings

1. Researchers need better guidance on the value of different communication channels

- Many researchers are confused by the mixed messages they receive about how to communicate their findings.
- To make best use of the communication channels open to them, researchers need more consistent and effective guidance on the value attached to the different channels they see as appropriate to their work.
- If funders and policymakers want to encourage researchers to publish and disseminate their work through channels other than scholarly journals, they need to give stronger and more positive messages about how they will be valued when it comes to assessing researchers' performance.

2. The attribution and listing of multiple authors varies widely between disciplines

- It is important that everyone involved in assessing research – whether through bibliometrics or peer review – is well informed about different listing conventions and their meaning, and how they are changing.
- Funders, learned societies and publishers may also wish to consider whether they could become more involved in helping to devise good practice guidelines.

3. Citation behaviour and motivations are related to research discipline and the researcher's age or experience

- Younger researchers are more likely to be influenced by an author's credentials or familiarity, a journal's reputation and how easy it is to access an article.
- If such differences persist as young researchers progress through their careers, funders and others involved in assessing research performance may need to take account of significant changes in citation patterns.
- Some high-status journals impose limits on the number of references that can be included in an article. If such limitations become more common, one effect could be to reduce the usefulness of citation data for bibliometric and assessment purposes, even in fields where citation data is currently considered robust.

4. The influence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a major concern for researchers

- The RAE and related institutional policies have a major influence on researchers' decisions to publish in scholarly journals and in which particular journals they try to publish.
- For many researchers, the RAE is a disincentive to any form of dissemination other than scholarly journals. Since journal articles are the publications most readily measured in any form of performance assessment, there is a risk that their dominance will increase.
- The timescales for research, recognition and impact also vary widely across different disciplines and kinds of research. Research timescales need to be carefully considered in any arrangements for the assessment of performance.
- Possible changes in citation practice will need to be closely monitored as the REF develops.

Your feedback

The Research Information Network will work with the academic research community and other stakeholders to raise awareness and understanding of the issues raised in this report. We welcome feedback and input from any interested organisations. Please contact Sarah Gentleman by email on sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk or telephone **020 7412 7241**. You can find further information about our current research projects at www.rin.ac.uk or follow us on Twitter to stay up to date @research_inform

