OPINION

Enhancing the efficacy of the ‘DBT and DST Open Access Policy’

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We need to take serious cognizance of the document titled ‘DBT and DST Open Access Policy’ released jointly by DST and DBT on 12 December 2014. The focus of the document is on ensuring that knowledge created through the use of public funds is available to the public. This document stipulates that papers resulting from funds received from DST or DBT from the fiscal year 2012–13 onwards are required to be deposited in institutional repositories or in designated central repositories (dbt.sciencecentral.in and dst.sciencecentral.in). It stipulates that institutes receiving core funding from DST or DBT must set up institutional repositories. Most of this document discusses modalities, etc. for the repositories, but it makes two interesting statements that we should discuss. One is a view about an outcome of such open access, viz. ‘providing free online access by depositing them in an institutional repository is the most effective way of ensuring that the research it funds can be accessed, read and built upon’. The other statement makes a judgment call on the use of journal impact factors (IF). The document states ‘The DBT and DST affirms the principle that the intrinsic merit of the work, and not the title of the journal in which an author’s work is published, should be considered in making future funding decisions. The DBT and DST do not recommend the use of journal impact factors either as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual scientist’s contributions, or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions’. I shall discuss these two statements in some detail.

I wish to first discuss what is said about the IF of journals. The use of IF as a ‘weight factor’ for the list of publications of a researcher is a current trend, and is now being contested by many (see, for example, refs (1–3)). As the Editor-in-Chief of INSA, Lakhotia has lamented the vicious circle that low IF journals get trapped into. Chaddah has, on the other hand, brought out a negative consequence that the desire to publish in high IF journals has on the ability of a young researcher to claim path-breaking research. He argues that ‘by putting a premium on publications in such journals we are asking our young researchers to be more compliant to the thinking of the reviewers and editors of that journal. This causes our scientists to refer to specific papers and support specific ideas, to dilute their conclusions and make them more in line with those suggested by the referees, etc. It lowers the level of our research output by dilution at the publication stage.’ The failure of ISRO to claim priority for the discovery of water on the Moon by its Moon impact probe, and becoming only supportive to the same claim by NASA’s Moon Mineralogy Mapper, can be attributed to their desire to have a publication in a high IF journal. The need to stop worrying about IF of journals must be accepted if Indian research has to have path-breaking claims. I am emphasizing the word ‘claims’ because we appear to lack the courage to sometimes be wrong. A path-breaking paper must initially be a claim and, even if published in a high IF journal, remain a claim until it is supported by post-publication reviews.

I also wish to emphasize that the IF calculation is biased against path-breaking papers since it revolves around quick citations. Path-breaking papers, especially from emerging bylines, are received with initial disbelief and start receiving citations only after post-publication reviews; they do not contribute to raising the IF of the journal.

The second statement is about the role a repository can play in ensuring that our research output is accessed, read, followed-up, and accepted or rejected. This is a role that is the raison d’etre of any preprint archive, and I have long argued that we should have a national preprint archive that actually covers all subjects in which research is done in Indian universities. The DST–DBT document does discuss uploading papers in the disciplines of science, technology and medicine (STM) and also in arts, humanities and social sciences.

I now discuss the intentions behind setting up electronic repositories.

• The UGC considers that an open access repository of electronic thesis and dissertations ensures psychologi-
were uploaded in the period falling between the dates when the original and revised versions of their manuscript were received by the publishers. So, internationally, repositories graduated some years ago from enabling free dissemination of research results to enabling claims of priority. The arXiv is acknowledged to have had, in this sense, a positive effect in favour of physicists from the developing countries.

The DBT and DST Open Access Policy has created two central repositories \url{http://dst.sciencecentral.in/} and \url{http://dbt.sciencecentral.in/}, and will create many institutional repositories.

Both these sites display a link for more information on publishers’ policies on self-archiving pre-print and post-print research papers. The linked site is \url{http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/}

It provides detailed information on preprint archiving policies for almost all journals. The possibility to use a preprint repository to establish and claim priority is obvious. It is not clear why there is no emphasis on using the two central repositories for uploading preprints and claiming priority. As mentioned earlier, we should cover all subjects in which research is done in Indian universities. The DBT & DST Open Access Policy document (p. 3) does refer to ‘Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences’ in addition to its continuous reference to ‘Science, Technology and Medicine’.

It is imperative that academics seriously discuss this document to ensure that it does serve all purposes that a national preprint and reprint repository can and should. It must help our research scholars gain visibility and claim priority with preprints. In addition to mandating those whom it funds, it should also permit voluntary uploading by other Indian researchers who consider uploading on the repository helpful.


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