

Library Consortia and Article Processing Charges: An International Survey

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the rapidly changing scholarly communications landscape, article processing charges (APCs) have emerged as a complex issue with many implications for libraries. This paper explores the role of library consortia in relation to article processing charges (APCs) based on the results of a survey of international library consortia. The issues, challenges, and risks identified by respondents are discussed, as well as some of the potential larger implications of libraries' and library consortia's involvement in this area.

## **KEYWORDS**

article processing charges (APCs); library consortia; libraries; publishing; survey

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Article processing charges (APCs) have become a complex and controversial issue in the scholarly communications landscape. APCs can be understood through the lens of economic and societal trends that have impacted the dynamics of publishing - the unsustainable, spiralling cost of scholarly journals; the various funder mandates that are requiring the public dissemination of research funded by taxpayer dollars; the valuing of information as a social good that should be shared freely to allow cultural and social benefits; and the importance for researchers in achieving maximum impact and visibility for their research. In an era of greater choice, the question of who pays, e.g. the author, his or her employer, a granting agency, the library, or a combination of these, has provoked intense conversations in the research community about affordability, equity of access to funding, the societal goals and values of scholarly publishing, and the systemic implications for the future of scholarship. The future role and extent of APCs in the marketplace is intimately linked to the broad policy conversation among governments, the publishing industry, academia, funding agencies, and the broader public on the role of access to knowledge in the digital economy. In this complex landscape of stakeholders and multiple models, what is the role of library consortia? Should they be leveraging their negotiation expertise with publishers to facilitate the open dissemination of research via payment of APCs? What are the issues and challenges? This paper explores the question of library consortia's approach towards APCs based on an international survey of these consortia. The survey was designed to help answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the goals of library consortia negotiating for APC terms? Examples of potential goals may be achieving the lowest cost, setting a precedent, and achieving administrative savings.
2. What are the challenges, risks, and opportunities involved in consortia negotiating APC terms with publishers?

Being exploratory in nature, the survey was intended to obtain a general picture of the kinds of arrangements consortia are involved in, be it those that result in hybrid open access (OA) journals or for other types of APC-based support for open access.

## **2.0. APCs AND THE PUBLISHING LANDSCAPE: AN OVERVIEW**

Suber (2013) provides a clear definition of article processing charges (also known as author processing charges or article publication charges): “A fee charged by some OA journals when accepting an article for publication, in order to cover the costs of production. It’s one way to cover production costs without charging readers and erecting access barriers. While the bill goes to the author, the fee is usually paid by the author’s funder or employer, not by the author out of pocket” (p. 176). This points to some of the key characteristics of APCs - they are typically focussed on publishing journal articles in open access publications, and they shift the cost of publishing from the institutional subscription to the individual author, although it is often the institution that ends up paying (or the granting agency, through the researcher’s grant). This is different from the ‘page charge’ approach that has been used in various science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) disciplines for a long time.

Article processing charges were developed in the early part of this new millennium, with BioMed Central’s OA journals taking the lead in 2000 and many major commercial publishers

implementing the APC model by 2005 (Monson, Highby, and Rathe, 2014). In 2003, David Prosser, director of SPARC Europe, described a strategy that would lead publishers to accommodate open access pressures within existing subscription models: “Authors would be presented with two options: 1. To pay a publication charge – the paper is then made Open Access on publication. 2. Not to pay the publication charge – the paper is only made available to subscribers. This would result in a hybrid journal in which access to each paper would depend on the authors’ willingness to pay the publication fee” (p. 164). While it took several years for commercial publishers to move towards this new hybrid model, it has become a default strategy for virtually all the major players who have co-opted it within their business operations. It is known that a majority of journals do not require any APCs (Bjork & Solomon, 2012; Morrison, 2015) and that the APC phenomenon is discipline-centric; the fact that researchers in the social sciences and humanities receive grants that are very small in comparison with their counterparts in science, medicine, and engineering has shaped the economics of publishing in a significant way. What is considered affordable and acceptable practice in STEM fields is not the case in humanities and social sciences (HSS) disciplines, where article processing charges are virtually non-existent. Importantly, the hybrid phenomenon has also bred widespread distrust of commercial publishers who are seen by some to be implementing article charges to maintain their existing profit margins while charges of ‘double dipping’ (i.e. acquiring revenue from APCs for a given journal and not reducing subscription costs accordingly) have become common. Publishers have denied these charges (Kaufman, 2013; Anderson, 2013) but it is very unclear whether they have an accurate accounting of journal revenue received from all sources given the complexity of the environment and the need for robust administrative workflows to do

this work. Concern over double-dipping has also led to widespread rejection of institutional support for publishing in the commercial hybrid journals. In these hybrid journals, the APC allows the article in question to be openly available while the vast majority of other articles in the given journal are locked behind toll access, thus creating an unequal playing field for access and visibility.

Understanding the costs of production is no simple matter - business models for the wide range of publishers, both for-profit and non-profit, need to be understood in terms of mission, funding sources, business processes, publishing formats, scale of operation, and breadth and depth of market. Furthermore it is widely known that large profit margins are built into the business models of large commercial publishers who control a large segment of the journal marketplace (Larivière, 2015; Goodman, 2004) and as long as commercial publishers are in the mix, the true cost of publishing an article cannot be known, as the APC is certainly factoring in the profit margin associated with the publisher's business model. According to Bjork and Solomon (2012), the data on APCs demonstrates that “. . . the uptake among the biggest commercial publishers . . . is generally very low, below 2%” (p. 1502). There could be various reasons – a perception that the library's subscription covers all costs; uncertainty around the value of paying for open access; high charges; a lack of awareness of open access; and lack of funds.

APCs are extremely variable. Morrison's study above, which was based on information collected from the DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) on May 15, 2014, found that these charges varied greatly by type of publisher: the amount was \$40-\$3,300 for commercial publishers; \$1-\$1,100 for universities; and \$20-\$4414 for societies. The overall average was \$964, while the mode or most common amount was \$0 (i.e. where publishing was free at the time of the sample

collection). The average APC ranged from \$678 for universities, \$1,150 for commercial publishers, and \$1,568 for societies. At least 61% of publishers using APCs are commercial in nature (Morrison, 2015). These findings reflect the marked volatility and diversity in business and production models across the spectrum of scholarly publishers in the digital economy. The overall average is similar to the \$906 USD found by Solomon and Björk in 2010 (based on 1,370 journals listed in the DOAJ that charge APCs), but significantly less than the \$1,418 USD reported by Björk and Solomon in 2014 (which used a sample based on OA publishers in Scopus). We are living in a period of great experimentation with OA business models among scholarly publishers of all types, and this is reflected in the above data.

Funder mandates are one of the key drivers of open access publishing in general and APCs in particular. The diversity of national strategies that have been adopted in the past few years reveals differing approaches to ensuring open dissemination of research funded by public monies. In Great Britain, the Research Councils of the United Kingdom (RCUK) "...has a preference for immediate, unrestricted, on-line access to peer-reviewed and published research papers, free of any access charge and with maximum opportunities for re-use," and they are supporting that preference by providing grants to fund APCs to eligible research organizations (The Research Councils United Kingdom, 2013, p. 1). In Canada, the Tri-Council Agency Open Access policy released in 2015 mandate expresses no preference for immediate open access and requires only that that grant recipients ensure "that any peer-reviewed journal publications arising from Agency-supported research are freely accessible within 12 months of publication in online repositories and journals" (Tri-Agency, 2015, para 3.1). In the US, the Office of Science and Technology Policy memorandum of February 22, 2013 "directs each Federal agency with

over \$100 million in annual conduct of research and development expenditures to develop a plan to support increased public access to the results of research funded by the Federal Government” (Executive Office of the President, 2013, p. 2). In Europe, a recent announcement from the European Union ministers mandates that by 2020 “all scientific publications on the results of publicly funded research must be freely available” (The Netherlands EU Presidency, 2016, p. 2). It is clear that economic, cultural, and political pressures have played themselves out differently in various jurisdictions, and only time will tell which approach will have the greatest durability and the greatest chance of shaping public policy and knowledge production in the years to come. Research has become highly global, interdisciplinary, and team-based in recent years, meaning that project teams often cross national boundaries, whereas on the regulatory and public policy side, borders are still very much in place – thus causing an extremely uneven playing field that exacerbates the problems that have been described above. Therefore the question of who is the principal or corresponding author plays an important role in the distribution of publication costs across the global system.

While there are many opportunities afforded by consortial negotiation of APCs, it is worth reflecting upon Morrison’s speculation about the future (2015) : “It is entirely possible that the current “must have” subscription journals that are immune to market forces will be replaced by “must publish in” open access journals enjoying a similar immunity” (p. 3). In other words, if the new scenarios predicated on a different distribution of costs do not address the dysfunctional scholarly communications market, we may be no further ahead in addressing long-standing issues. Some feel that we may be in the process of replacing one dysfunctional system with another, and thereby not advancing toward the goals of openness, lowering the barriers to

knowledge dissemination, and transparency of use of public funds that are embodied or implied in various funder mandates

### **3.0. CHALLENGES TO THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM**

As OA develops, APCs represent a disruptive force that collides with the traditional dynamics of the market. Thinking of authors as customers who have the power to make choices based on publication fees is a significant shift in economics that raises many questions about pricing, equity, and the impact on other stakeholders. Morrison (2015) found that the volatility of the author-pays model “...would make it difficult to predict APCs for budgeting purposes for libraries, authors and research funders. Academic libraries (and the universities to which they report) operate on fixed annual operating budgets and find it difficult to budget in advance for changing amounts” (p. 14). Influencing the new economics of scholarly publishing in order to create a sustainable model that aligns with open access thinking is a major challenge. Bjork and Solomon (2014) explain that “Funders are rightly concerned that the funding they provide for this purpose is well spent and that the APC funded OA market is transparent, competitive and reasonably priced. In a rapidly evolving market with a significant influx of funding, this is a very challenging problem” (p. 7). However it is difficult to imagine how in the short to mid-term the market could become transparent, competitive, and reasonably priced. The double-dipping problem is well-known and complicates efforts to establish a fair pricing system. A competitive and reasonably priced market would require a functional system where the major stakeholders act in response to supply and demand pressures and respond effectively to market inputs. Developing transition scenarios is an exercise fraught with difficulty around lack of clarity on issues of production costs, revenues, current subscriptions, and assumptions of public policy

funding. Understanding of cost-recovery versus profit is important for modeling scenarios. Here lies an important paradox - while broadening access to information and knowledge is global a issue, the potential solutions, including an APC model, would need specific customization and development to take into account the market circumstances of any specific region or county.

Growing attention to APCs and author-side payments also reflects the growing size of the market. Bjork and Solomon (2014) inform us that, “The APC OA market is evolving rapidly and growing at about 30% a year. The overall APC revenue was estimated to be approximately 182 million USD in 2012 and growing at about 34% a year, though the rate of growth is expected to tail off to about 20% over the next 5 years” (p. 3). While this may be small in relation to the overall market for scholarly journal publishing, which is worth about 25.2 billion dollars a year (Ware & Mabe, 2015), the growth trend is significant. It is important to emphasize here that libraries and their consortia have not seen reductions in subscription costs, meaning that this money is additional revenue for the publishers.

The APC approach carries many potential implications, both positive and negative, as it brings a third party into the commercial relationship between libraries and vendors and thus could call into question the economics of publishing models. Although one possible advantage of APCs is bringing the cost of publication to the attention of the authors, who are then in a position to take this into consideration when deciding where to publish, the reality is that the cost of the APC is only one factor among many that may affect an author’s decision of where to publish, and therefore, the impact of the author’s involvement is unclear

Bjork and Öörni list the major issues that come into play when an author is deciding to publish in an OA journal: the fit of the article topic with the journal’s scope; the prestige of the journal (for

instance, its impact factor); the likelihood of acceptance; the expected time from submission to publication (if accepted); possible mandate of the research funder that the results must be made openly available; whether or not the journal is OA; and the price of the APC if the journal charges one (Björk & Öörni, 2009; Solomon & Björk, 2012). Each decision will be a personal calculus of the relative importance of each of these factors, in relation to impact, visibility, and career implications. Significantly, the existence of APCs is not the major factor in deciding where to publish. Journal quality was of paramount importance, with the wider visibility of open access being an added bonus (Monson, Highby, & Rathe, 2014; Nariani & Fernandez, 2012). However from the vantage point of funders, including libraries, institutions and funding agencies, pricing is a major anchor point in discussions about APCs. How much elasticity is there in publication charges? This reflects several realities – that costs are quite variable; that publishing is not free and costs need to be absorbed by one or more players in the ecosystem; that financing of these charges can come from a variety of sources, depending on the author’s place of employment and governmental policies; and that the ultimate success of APCs as a new business model requires pricing that is seen as reasonable and affordable. Bjork and Solomon (2014), taking a different view from those cited above, inform us that, “Both the full OA and hybrid market demonstrate that the uptake of APC funded OA is highly dependent on the price elasticity of the authors’ willingness to pay certain levels of APCs. This is especially the case when authors have had to meet these costs from their own or their university’s limited discretionary funds as well as from “allowable project costs” in research grants” (p. 16).

## 4.0. APCs AND LIBRARY ISSUES

The momentum towards open access publishing and the advent of APCs in the journals marketplace has posed a dilemma for libraries – is it appropriate for libraries to be negotiating on behalf of author rights (e.g. publication costs) in the context of license agreements with vendors or not? There are those who feel this aligns closely with the library’s mission to develop a sustainable, robust scholarly communication ecosystem that benefits our researchers and institutions. Others argue that this is beyond a library’s jurisdiction, meaning that libraries do not have the authority or mandate to be negotiating rights or privileges on behalf of our researchers, whose academic freedom includes making their own choices about where to publish and under what terms.

Pinfield (2010) describes two realities as motivating factors for library engagement: (1) the emergence of OA policies at many academic institutions, and (2) the requirement of funding agencies like the National Institutes of Health to make grant-sponsored research available in an OA venue. Librarians have recognized the need to respond to these major institutional and societal shifts. There is a significant, though small, number of academic libraries offering a publication fund to its researchers to defray the cost of APCs (Monson, Highby, & Rathe, 2014; Pinfield, 2010; Fernandez & Nariani, 2011).

Although opinions are mixed on whether or not APC negotiations are an appropriate role for libraries, clauses referring to author rights have become increasingly included in model license language. For example, in 2010, a working group from various Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries proposed “Model Language for Author Rights in Library Content Licenses,” which has since been adopted by ARL, the California Digital library, and others. A modified

version of the language has also been incorporated into the Canadian Research Knowledge Network's model license. The implementation of such license language indicates that there is some role for libraries in negotiating clauses surrounding author rights.

## **5.0. LIBRARY CONSORTIA ENGAGEMENT WITH APCs**

Library consortia have played a critical role in the success of academic libraries, whether this means licensing scholarly resources on behalf of their communities or the non-economic benefits of collaborative activity (Bostick, 2001; Westmoreland & Shirley, 2004). Library consortia are generally predicated on a public good philosophy, meaning that strategies to advance open access are generally in line with the mandates and missions of most library consortia (Maskell, 2009). Consortia are working effectively in a wide array of library operations and services. This includes document delivery and resource sharing, open textbooks, integrated library management systems, digitization, shared staffing, and other areas of common activity and interests. Horton and Pronevitz (2015) note that "Many consortia are at the forefront of deep collaborative projects that are transforming the library landscape" (p.10).

One key reason for joining a library consortium is to obtain economies of scale (Horton & Pronevitz, 2015). The past fifteen years or so has seen a meteoric rise in the collective licensing and acquisition of journals, typically via large "big deal" packages. This large scale licensing and acquisition has resulted in a huge expansion of access for researchers to thousands of scholarly journals across all subject areas, as well as access to historic knowledge via investments in backfile purchases. Some of the key advantages of library consortia have been greater bargaining power, efficiencies in licensing, centralized invoicing and payment, multi-year agreements with price caps, and better licensing terms. The thinking is that these same types of benefits could be

applied to the negotiation of APCs, whether within the context of negotiations resulting in hybrid journals or for other APC-related models of funding open access publications. For example, a publisher may have a fully OA journal, which is not included in the suite of subscribed journals, and a library or consortium may negotiate to have discounts on the APC fee, or to have the fees fully waived for their authors.

With respect to the scholarly publishing market, it is clear that many in the profession feel that consortia should exert influence in this market. Cathy Maskell (2009) found that “almost all of the university librarians felt that consortia have a broad role to play in changing the current model of scholarly publishing. This role would likely be fulfilled through academic libraries and academic library consortia playing a more normative role of partnering with other key players in the cycle, specifically scholars and the universities in which they work, to work together to affect changes in scholarly publishing” (p. 173). Scott Gillies (2014) argues that we need to leverage our negotiations expertise to influence the new publishing environment, specifically that “it is both appropriate and necessary for library consortia to demonstrate leadership and to influence the information marketplace for hybrid OA programs and to apply the successful practices of decades of experience in negotiating electronic resources licenses” (p. 233)

While many of the skills and areas of expertise already present in consortia may be well be applied to APC negotiations, it is important to recognize that APCs also pose unique challenges for consortia. The focus on negotiating cost and license terms for access to content has become the default process for many consortia, and switching into a new mode of negotiation may require different thinking, objectives, priorities, and negotiation tactics.

Formulating negotiation objectives also means prioritizing what is important – are member libraries prepared to give ground on ‘traditional’ license issues in order to secure an advantageous agreement on APCs? What are the trade-offs that are acceptable? If publishers give ground on APCs, for example discounting APC charges or prepaid membership discounts, they may attempt to recoup costs elsewhere in the negotiation.

Some consortia are now negotiating ‘offsetting’ agreements (also called ‘open access big deals’ or ‘total cost of ownership’ agreements), where existing subscription spending is leveraged in order to enable researchers to publish as open access in a publisher’s suite of journals without directly paying an APC, thus enabling barrier-free publication. These arrangements usually result in hybrid journals, as it is only articles from the institution or country involved that are made open access. In theory, if enough of these arrangements are in place, it is possible that a tipping point will be reached where the majority of articles in a given journal are open access. These types of agreements have been negotiated in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Austria (Jisc, 2015; Springer, 2015; VSNU, 2015), and signal a new era of consortial involvement in negotiating the terms of publishing and disseminating research, on a larger economic scale. The Springer and JISC agreement, for example, caps the amount paid for full access to the Springer collection while ensuring that researchers’ articles are openly available, thus being compliant with the requirements for several major funding agencies in the UK. The Elsevier agreement with the VSNU - Association of Universities in the Netherlands –and UKB – the Dutch Consortium of University Libraries and Royal Library – means that Dutch authors can publish in Elsevier journals to make their research open access in hybrid journals as well as OA journals. The APC is paid by a central payment scheme. A four year agreement has been reached between

Wiley and the Dutch organizations above, whereby all Dutch authors' publications in Wiley journals will be open access (VSNU, 2016). The APC costs are included in the Big Deal agreement. These approaches make important strides towards fulfilling OA mandates of granting agencies and public policies of governments, although it does so within the current model of commercial publishing, which many in the library community see as problematic. Although these approaches may create immediate benefits, there is also a risk in creating another, less tangible version of the Big Deal, where costs are ever increasing, i.e. less tied to specific articles, journals, or other concrete outputs, and remain unaffordable to libraries in many countries or regions. As the financials of these agreements are confidential, it is difficult to know the total cost of ownership of scholarly communication, and to speculate on the financial sustainability of this approach, though this is a key issue. Furthermore, associating the Big Deal with scholarly communication objectives, in addition to licensed content, leads to challenges in measuring outcomes or benefits that can be determined at an institutional level. In spite of these caveats, it is clear that these agreements represent a lowering of barriers to the publication and dissemination of scholarship and will be of great benefit to authors and readers alike. A useful summary of offsetting agreements in various countries and the major challenges associated with this model can be found at the Efficiency and Standards for Article Charges (ESAC) page, 'Open Access Offsetting under Construction' (ESAC, 2016). A meeting in March 2016 led to a joint understanding of the objectives, mechanisms and tools required for offsetting agreements to function.

Factoring APCs into consortial negotiations means determining objectives based on what is 'reasonable' from a market perspective, which can be challenging as there is no yardstick that

can serve as a common benchmark. Although factors such as list price and history of print spend may be problematic, they at least serve as a relative benchmark to determine the level of reasonableness of an offer. The lack of historical agreements on which to base a standard of reasonableness in APC negotiations is problematic. Negotiating offsetting agreements is also a daunting matter – tracking and accounting for total revenue on the publisher side and tracking author publications on the institutional side may prove to be difficult, or impossible, for consortia to do. For all of these reasons, determining a target APC rate for negotiation is a very complex affair, subject to the art of what is possible and ultimately what is perceived as advantageous. Despite the challenges, Scott Gillies (2014) notes that “consortia have established a proven record of negotiated discounts from publishers and, as such, offer the only tested solution to date to address cost concerns” (p. 247).

The long-awaited launch of Sponsoring Consortium for Open Access Publishing in Particle Physics (SCOAP<sup>3</sup>) is an excellent example of publishers, library consortia, and funders coming together to hammer out a new paradigm for a sustainable cost-distribution publishing strategy in the field of high-energy particle physics. It is also a prime example of an APC-based model of open access that does not result in hybrid journals – all journals involved in the project are completely open access. The libraries, library consortia, countries, and organizations involved are paying the APCs regardless of the author’s affiliation. Although a good example of a successful OA initiative, it is important to note that this initiative took eight years to be achieved, and that scalability is still a significant challenge. This is a good example of the complexity of large-scale international initiatives to reimagine publishing and distribution models.

## 6.0. METHODOLOGY

This research was undertaken using an online survey of library consortia, which was conducted from April to May 2015. As mentioned earlier, the following two research questions were the basis for the survey:

1. What are the goals of library consortia negotiating for APC terms? Examples of potential goals may be achieving the lowest cost, setting a precedent, and achieving administrative savings.
2. What are the challenges, risks, and opportunities involved in consortia negotiating APC terms with publishers?

An online survey was selected as the best way to reach a broad audience, while keeping the administration relatively simple and producing a rapid response. As this research is exploratory in nature, and since this is a rapidly developing area of library consortial activity, this method was an efficient way to get a snap-shot of what is happening in the current environment in order to identify trends and further research questions for investigation.

The membership of International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) was selected as the target group as a way of contacting a large number of consortia located across the world. As an organization that brings together diverse library consortia and that provides an informal venue for discussion on issues of common interest and sharing of knowledge and expertise in the consortia community, the ICOLC community was seen as an ideal group of librarians and consortia staff to survey.

## **7.0. CHARACTERISTICS OF ICOLC MEMBERS**

ICOLC participants are all library consortia, but may serve different library sectors. The communities served by ICOLC members are usually academic libraries, public libraries, special libraries, or school libraries, or a combination of library types. Library consortia have diverse functions that include, but are not limited to, electronic content licensing, cataloging services, collection sharing, preservation, and shared catalogs. Electronic content licensing is one of the most common functions and is usually one of the topics of discussion at ICOLC meetings and on the ICOLC listserv.

The majority (57%) of ICOLC members are North American and roughly a quarter of participants are European, meaning that the vast majority of participating consortia are located either in North America or Europe.

## **8.0. SURVEY INSTRUMENT**

Prior to the survey being finalized, it was pre-tested with four Canadian regional consortia (Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire, Council of Atlantic University Libraries, Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries, and Ontario Council of University Libraries) to ensure clarity of the questions and proper functioning of the survey tool.

The final survey contained eight substantive questions, along with several questions of an administrative nature. Both open and closed questions were employed, resulting in a mix of quantitative and qualitative responses. Four of the questions were yes/no, with open comment fields, three of the questions were open text boxes, and one question employed a scale, similar to a Likert scale, asking respondents to identify the level of interest or pressure to address APC

terms. There was also one additional open text box at the end of the survey where respondents were invited to share any other comments. Please see Appendix A for the full survey instrument.

## **9.0. DISTRIBUTION**

The link to the survey along with a short description of the project was sent to the ICOLC listserv on April 4, 2015 (see Appendix B). The listserv has roughly 680 subscribers associated with the 166 library consortia that are members of ICOLC. Several reminders were sent and emails were also sent to a sub-set of colleagues from various consortia encouraging them to fill out the survey. The survey officially closed on May 31, 2015, with one late survey response provided after the official close date.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations to the survey results. One is that the survey was limited to consortia that participate in ICOLC. Although ICOLC is open to any library consortium that would like to join and that “are in general agreement with the ICOLC statements issued over the years” (ICOLC, n.d.), it does not necessarily encompass every library consortium that may be dealing with license negotiations or APC fees.

Another limitation is the low response rate. There are currently 166 library consortia identified as ICOLC members, but only 34 responded to the survey. Although this is a relatively low response rate (20.4%), the number of consortia that are currently active in ICOLC, based on the number of responses generally received to ICOLC-related surveys and the number of consortia generally represented at ICOLC meetings, is closer to 40 – 60. The other consideration is that not all members of ICOLC conduct negotiations or license content on behalf of their members.

Therefore, an unknown number of consortia included in the total number of possible respondents may not have actually been the target audience for this survey.

The survey and communications regarding the survey were conducted in English, which limited the potential responses to only those respondents with sufficient English language skills to read and respond to the survey. Although many non-native English speakers participate in ICOLC, the survey responses are likely skewed more towards native English language respondents. The majority of responses were received from consortia located in United States, Canada, or European countries, and language may have been a contributing factor. It is also important to note that 95 of the 166 ICOLC member consortia are located in the United States or Canada, so the sample frame itself overly represents the North American context.

Another potential limitation was that the survey was not anonymous. Survey respondents were asked to identify their consortium and provide their first and last name, which may have influenced the level of information that was shared. Although survey responses have been aggregated and anonymized for the purposes of the research report, the researchers were able to identify each consortium's response as the responses were analyzed. This likely had a minor impact on responses, as there is a strong culture of sharing information among ICOLC members.

## **SURVEY RESPONSE**

As we requested only one response per consortium, the total potential number of responses was 166. Not all library consortia conduct license negotiations on behalf of their members, therefore, this survey was not applicable to an unknown number of consortia included in the 166 potential respondents.

We received a total of 34 responses for a response rate of 20%. Not every participant responded to every question, so the number of responses varies depending on the question. One duplicate response from a consortium was received, and thus the second respondent's answers were removed from the survey results in order to avoid over-weighting one consortium's input. The 34 responses represent the final tally of responses after the duplicate response was removed. We can clarify that the survey response that was provided by the Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN) was provided by another CRKN staff member, not one of the authors of this paper.

The majority of responses were received from consortia located in North America and Europe. Of the twenty responses from North American consortia, ten responses were from Canadian consortia, with the other ten coming from consortia based in the United States.

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

### **HAS CONSORTIUM NEGOTIATED AN AGREEMENT WITH A PUBLISHER FOR APC TERMS?**

In order to assess the prevalence of APC negotiations at the consortial level, respondents were asked whether or not their consortium has negotiated an agreement for APC terms. The terminology "APC terms" was used so as to encompass any kind of agreement addressing APCs, including, but not limited to, discounts, tokens, fees paid in advance to cover APCs, and subscription fees "converted" to cover APCs for authors. It is important to note that although many of these arrangements result in hybrid journals, others, such as those that involve tokens or discounts for publishing in a publisher's fully OA journal or arrangements to pay all APCs for a

given journal (such as in SCOAP<sup>3</sup>), do not. Of the 33 responses, only 10 (30.30%) of consortia have negotiated any terms related to APCs.

## **PRIORITY**

Respondents were asked to identify the relative priority of APC terms within the context of determining negotiation objectives. This was an open-ended question where respondents could enter a written response. Thirteen responses were received. Two respondents indicated that APC terms are the top priority, with one specifically mentioning a government policy regarding a required transition to open access. Three respondents indicated that APC terms have not been much of a priority in the past, but that its relative level of priority is increasing. Another three respondents mentioned that cost containment or level of annual increase to pricing is still of more importance.

## **LEVEL OF INTEREST AND PRESSURE FROM MEMBERS**

Respondents were asked to rate the level of interest in, or pressure from, their members to address APC terms in consortial negotiations with publishers on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing very low level of interest or pressure and 10 representing a very high level of interest or pressure. A comments field was also provided. Of the 33 responses, 25 (75.75%) rated the level of interest or pressure as very low to neutral. Eight respondents (24.4%) rated the level of interest as neutral to very high. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, 19 (57.57%) selected 1 or 2 (“very low”) and two (6.06%) selected 9 or 10 (“very high”).

In the comments section, three respondents indicated that APCs have not come up at all amongst their membership. Four respondents mentioned that they predict increasing interest and pressure from their members in the future: “I would say it is becoming more important as time passes.”

## **CONCERNS REGARDING CONSORTIAL INVOLVEMENT**

Given that an APC could be seen as a matter between the publisher and the author, participants were asked if they had any concerns in negotiating APC terms within the context of a consortial license agreement with a publisher. A comments field was also provided. Respondents were evenly split; half indicated that there were concerns, while the other half did not express any concerns.

One common concern expressed in the comments was regarding how these terms would be communicated to authors, especially as many consortia are several times removed from the faculty and researchers at the various institutions. Another concern expressed was the potential administrative challenges that could be encountered including, but not limited to, monitoring, invoicing, and payment. Related to the potential administrative burden, one respondent indicated that there could be a lack of transparency, as the consortium in most instances will not have a way of ensuring compliance by the publisher.

## **DOUBLE DIPPING**

Out of 32 responses, only 12 (37.50%) indicated that their consortium has addressed the issue of “double dipping” in their negotiations with publishers. When asked for details on how “double dipping” has been addressed, the most common response was that it is still at the information gathering stage, where consortia are requesting information on the percentage of articles in hybrid journals that are part of the subscribed package that are published open access. This information is generally being gathered so that future arguments in favor of reductions in subscription costs can be made. Two consortia mentioned one specific publisher that is currently

addressing “double dipping” by applying credits to the cost of individual journal titles based on the percentage of articles in that journal that were published under an open access model.

## **PRE-PAID APC MEMBERSHIPS**

Only three respondents indicated that they have any kind of pre-paid APC membership, suggesting that this is not yet a widespread trend among consortia. When asked about the benefits of their consortium negotiating pre-paid APC memberships, one person noted that their organization had one in the past, but that it had to be cancelled because it “turned out to be a blank cheque and quickly became unaffordable.”

## **RISKS AND CHALLENGES**

Twenty-six responses were received to an open ended question regarding the risks or challenges in negotiating APC terms with a publisher. Several themes arose. One challenge identified multiple times was a lack of experience, information, and data regarding APCs. Some respondents felt their lack of information put them at a distinct disadvantage and could hamper their ability to get a “good” deal, or to even know what a good deal might be. These types of comments were also related to concerns over the lack of transparency or ability to verify that everything is happening as it should on the publisher end of the transaction. On a practical level, many consortia identified the administrative dimension, be that invoicing, tracking, or compliance monitoring, as a real challenge for consortia negotiating APCs. Another common challenge mentioned was communication – ensuring that faculty members, researchers, and other relevant parties are aware of the APC terms that are available to them. Concern was also raised regarding the potential increase in “double-dipping” and the possibility of an overall increase in

costs. The risks and challenges raised in responses to this question echo many of the concerns raised in response to question four, regarding the appropriate consortial role in negotiating APCs. One respondent identified a higher-level risk of consortia or libraries paying APC costs on behalf of authors: “If we cover APCs fully, we will continue as intermediaries and find ourselves beholden to our authors’ desire to publish in the same way that we’re currently beholden to their needs as readers, i.e. our market influence may not be as effective as when individual authors or funders have to make a market-based decision about the level of APC they’re willing to pay”. Another commenter mentioned that they are “not convinced that APCs are a sustainable approach to OA publishing.”

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Following the question regarding the risks and challenges, participants were asked an open ended question regarding the opportunities afforded by negotiating APC terms. Of the twenty-five comments received, the possibility of controlling costs, achieving better pricing, and general cost containment were specifically mentioned by six people. The opportunity to get favorable terms and conditions was also mentioned by five respondents. Interestingly, although “double dipping” was identified as a potential risk, several respondents also identified minimizing “double dipping” as a possible positive outcome of APC negotiations. Another theme that emerged was the idea that negotiating at the consortial level could be beneficial for open access in a broader sense, by freely disseminating more content for end users, by facilitating a more rapid movement towards open access, and by raising more awareness about open access in general.

## **OTHER COMMENTS**

The final question on the survey was an open ended text box asking for any other comments.

Only six responses were received, with no distinct trends. One respondent did indicate that they see APCs as a transitional measure that could be used to change the current publishing model, but that there is a risk that they could also be used by publishers as a justification that the current model “need only be slightly adjusted and not rewritten” and thus hold publishing back from a greater change in the system.

## **DISCUSSION**

One of the key findings of our survey was the low level of priority for negotiating APCs among library consortia. Only two of thirty-three indicated that this was a high priority. What is the reason behind this perceived low priority? Is it because APCs are not seen as appropriate for consortial negotiations or because APCs are not seen as a game changer for influencing the future direction of scholarly communications or that APCs are too complex to negotiate effectively? Could it also be that APCs are still a relatively new phenomenon that has not yet fully made its way into the consortial environment? It could be any or all of the above. It is also important to note that some consortia that are known to be negotiating APCs and other related terms and conditions may not have responded to the survey, thus the results are missing a piece of the consortial landscape. There are many possible strategies to influence the scholarly communication ecosystem, and consortial negotiation with publishers for APCs is only one approach. Other strategies include supporting green OA and self-archiving, greater institutional support for publication fees, providing hosting or publishing opportunities, and negotiating agreements for alternative publishing models.

There were several major concerns that emerged from the findings - administrative/overhead challenges, problems in communication, and double dipping. These will be explored below.

Librarians are very used to engaging faculty in areas of research, information literacy, and collection development. Communication with faculty is a perennial issue – how to capture their attention amid a sea of other inputs, requests, and endless noise. Reaching faculty to communicate the library’s commitment to finance the costs of publishing articles through license negotiations, author funds, or other programs, is critical to the success of any APC-related program.

Universities are structurally large and complex organizations with many distributed functions and services. Many players could be involved in administering and coordinating the payment of publication fees – an office of research, a planning office, a faculty, a department, an individual researcher, and of course the library. If these types of agreements are to be pursued, a holistic, enterprise-wide approach needs to be adopted since the administrative dimension can be very daunting from a logistical perspective. The logistical challenges were reflected in a meeting of a group of 10 UK librarians, along with representatives from SAGE and Jisc (2013), to discuss the role of academic librarians in implementing gold open access article processing charges. “While the academic librarians, and their institutions, represented in the roundtable support the goals of Open Access, the OA mandates from UK funders have created significant practical challenges for them. These include issues about how to apportion funding, challenges about managing many small payments and concerns about quality and quality management” (p. 13). These challenges may prove even more difficult at the consortial level, as consortia are usually a further step

removed from the institutions themselves, and each institution may have its own unique complexities that may be difficult to address at the consortial level.

The problem of double dipping was raised as a significant concern. Most consortia indicated that they were at an information gathering stage on this issue. To demonstrate double dipping requires a comprehensive compilation of data from member libraries. This is complicated by the fact that article publication fees could have been paid from any of a number of campus sources, as was mentioned above. Moreover, it is known that many publishers do not have sound internal record keeping systems in relation to payment tracking (considering the many sources of these payments), and this can complicate the problem of having reliable and comprehensive data compiled at the institutional or consortial level.

Respondents identified risks or challenges that overlapped with the above issues. However one challenge that surfaced in various responses was the lack of experience in the area of APCs.

Library consortia have become very adept at negotiating for licensed scholarly resources.

Negotiating for APCs is new and unfamiliar territory for everyone, and requires a different calculus of goals and expectations. There is a sense that many library consortia feel unsure of how to proceed in a manner that would be most effective. It is difficult to know how best to incorporate goals and strategy into a landscape where the traditional issues, for example, annual price caps, comprehensiveness of content, functionality and platforms, are subsumed within a much larger canvas of negotiations. When issues of enabling faculty research publication are at stake, the value of negotiating on behalf of researchers for APCs takes on a very different color than negotiating to provide access to a specific set of journals or other scholarly material. There

is more at stake, resulting in the library having a much more direct impact on faculty capability to disseminate research, and this could have implications for tenure and promotion.

There are other contextual issues that can be articulated. Price inflation in APCs and the eagerness of commercial publishers to embrace APCs as a new revenue stream has led to skepticism among many in the library community. APCs may be a disruptive mechanism in the economics of scholarly publishing, but the underlying issue is whether we are advancing in the direction of a more sustainable and equitable model or not. One of the risks of libraries getting involved with APCs is that this continues to replicate the ongoing dysfunctionality of the market, since authors are shielded from awareness of the actual costs involved. If the library pays the APC, there is no price discrimination on the part of the author, so the publisher can keep raising fees without the researcher being aware. Thus, the researcher interest in publishing in the journal is focused on prestige or brand and divorced from cost considerations. There is a related risk of distortion; if a library consortium signs a deal with a given publisher to include all APCs in the license agreement, then when an author publishes in that publisher's journal, he or she will likely assume it is "free" even though it is actually being paid by the institution as a hidden cost. This could create an uneven playing field, where some publishers' journals are being privileged over others. It can also be noted that the various funder mandates are driving the priorities and interests of some of the academic community. This is a rapidly changing landscape and it is not surprising that some consortia are taking a cautious approach until the implications of new policy are well understood. It can also be speculated that in this era of financial constraint, many library consortia are wary of taking on a new financial responsibility that could lead to additional costs that their members would not be able to afford.

It is important to mention that there were several opportunities identified by the respondents, namely cost-containment; favorable terms; benefits for promoting and raising awareness of OA; and making more content available as OA. Thus the negotiation of APCs can be understood as an opportunity to promote library and institutional goals in aligning with the broader values of the profession regarding the scholarly communications landscape in general and open access thinking in particular. Some respondents also seemed to have the perspective that irrespective of whether or not APCs are the “best” approach, if the scholarly community as a whole is going to be paying these fees, consortia should at least be trying to get the most favorable deal possible. It is a systemic issue, and the stakes are higher than ever before. Many respondents to our survey reflected this awareness, particularly as they represent the interests of groups of libraries.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is a reflection of a very new and volatile environment, where libraries wish to support open access and lower the barriers to free dissemination of knowledge and research, but the paths to this goal are highly challenging. How this is done, what is affordable, what are the benchmarks of success, and how this impacts the goals and mission of the library in an era of financial constraint are open questions that play out in many different ways depending on local dynamics and priorities. In this era of opportunity and risk, it is natural to ask what role library consortia can or should play in shaping the scholarly communications landscape to meet our goals and our interests.

This survey has demonstrated that while some consortia are taking bold moves in the open access space, many library consortia are taking a cautious approach when it comes to negotiating APCs in the context of license negotiations. Whether this hesitation to address APCs comes from

other negotiation goals taking precedence, feeling inadequately knowledgeable to negotiate APCs, or from a concern about the risks of consortia entering into this realm, the delay in getting involved may be a good opportunity for library consortia to analyze the larger strategic issues and potential long-term implications of consortia negotiating for APCs. Library consortia may want to ensure that approaches to these issues will be well thought out and in line with the consortium's missions and goals and will contribute to a more sustainable scholarly publication system in the long term.

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# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

## Appendix A – Survey Instrument

Respondent Identification

Name of consortium:

Brief description of consortium:

Contact Name:

Contact email:

A preliminary question before we start - May we use/share your responses as part of our research? In using you responses as part of our research, the data will be aggregated, anonymized, and not attributed to your name or consortium.

Yes/No

Questions

1 - Has your consortium negotiated an agreement with a publisher for APC terms?

Yes/No

If yes to question 1, please provide whatever details you are able to share (eg. is it a full or partial fee payment; is it a discount or token system; how will it be managed; which publications are included; length of the agreement, etc.).

2 - If your consortium has negotiated (or attempted to negotiate) an agreement with a publisher for APC terms, how was this prioritized with the context of determining negotiation objectives (eg. is it more or less important than other objectives, such as cost containment or other licensing terms)

3 - How much interest or pressure is there from your members to address APC terms in consortial negotiations with publishers?

# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Rate from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high)

Comments:

4 - Given that an APC could be seen as a two-party matter between the publisher and author, are there any concerns in negotiating for APC terms within the context of a consortial license agreement with a publisher?

Yes/No

Comments:

5 - Has your consortium addressed the issue of 'double dipping' in publisher negotiations? (double dipping refers to "charging hybrid APCs without the corresponding reductions in subscription prices")

Yes/No

Comments:

If yes to question 5, how has it been addressed?

6 - Has your consortium negotiated a pre-paid APC membership model (eg BioMed Central Prepay Membership)?

Yes/No

If yes, what are the benefits of your consortium negotiating these pre-paid APC memberships?

7 - What do you see as the greatest risks or challenges in negotiating APC terms with a publisher?

8 - What do you see as the greatest opportunities in negotiating APC terms with a publisher?

Other

# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Other comments:

Next Steps

Once we have analyzed the survey results and made them available (as a presentation and/or paper) we may be conducting interviews as a second phase of this research, to delve into the question of the influence of library consortia on the scholarly communication ecosystem, with respect to APC terms and issues. We would assure anonymity for interviewees and their insights. Questions would be shared with interviewees in advance. Would you be interested in participating in this research?

Yes/No

Comments:

## **Appendix B – Email sent to ICOLC Listserv April 15, 2015**

Dear Consortia Colleagues,

My colleague [name omitted to ensure blind peer review] and I are working on a research project which examines the role of consortia in negotiating APCs (article processing charges). This is an issue that many consortia are grappling with. The first stage of the research is conducting a survey of consortia in order to better understand the opportunities, risks, and issues involved with negotiating APCs at the consortial level.

We would very much appreciate it if you could take the time to fill out our brief survey. It should take no more than 15-20 minutes.

Link to Survey - Survey closes May 8 [2015]

Thanks in advance for your participation. We intend to share the results of our research as a conference paper and/or a publication. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact [names omitted to ensure blind peer review]

I'll be at the ICOLC meeting in Albany, so if anyone would like to discuss in person, I'd be more than happy

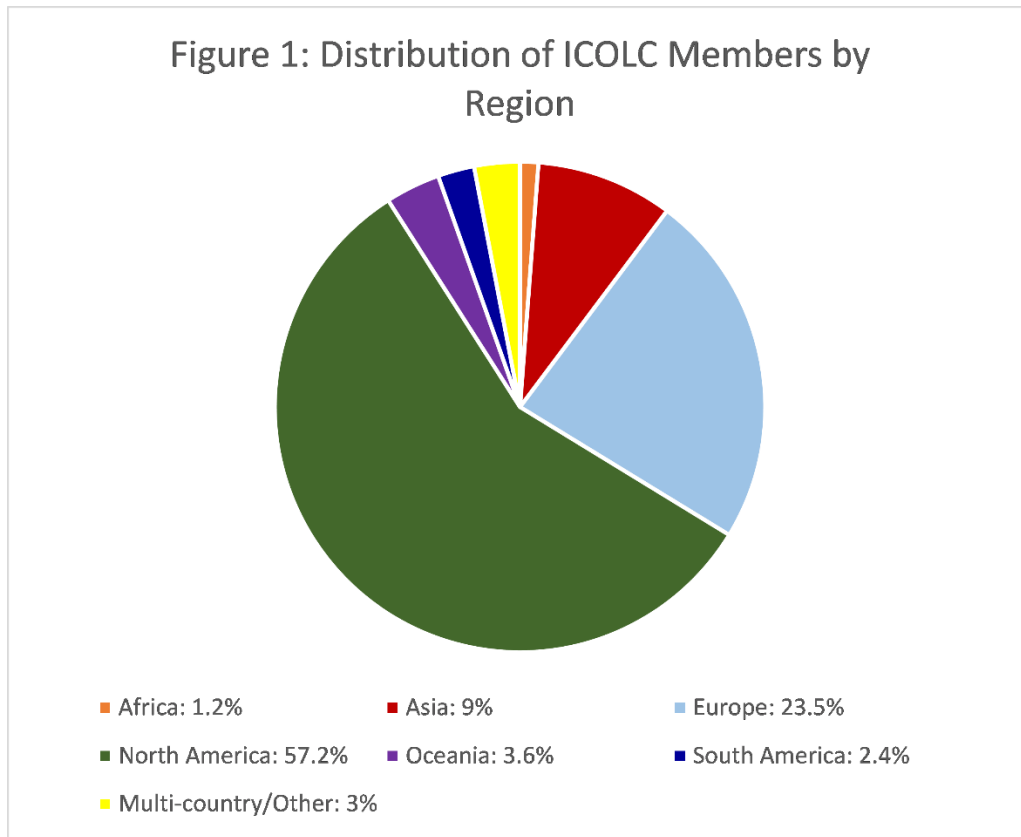


Figure 1. Distribution of ICOLC members by region.

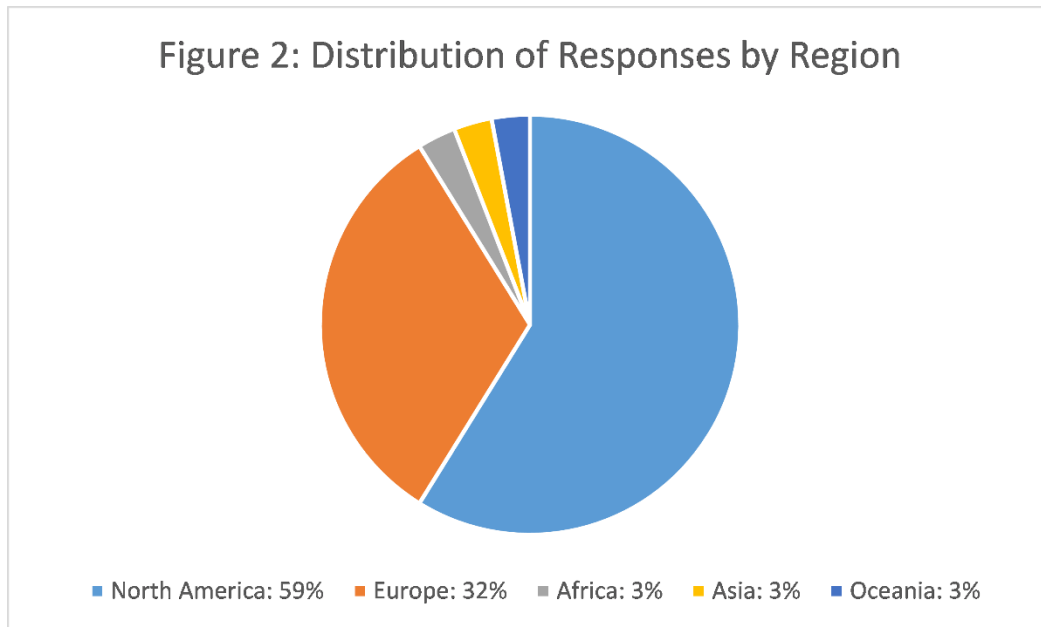


Figure 2. Distribution of responses by region.

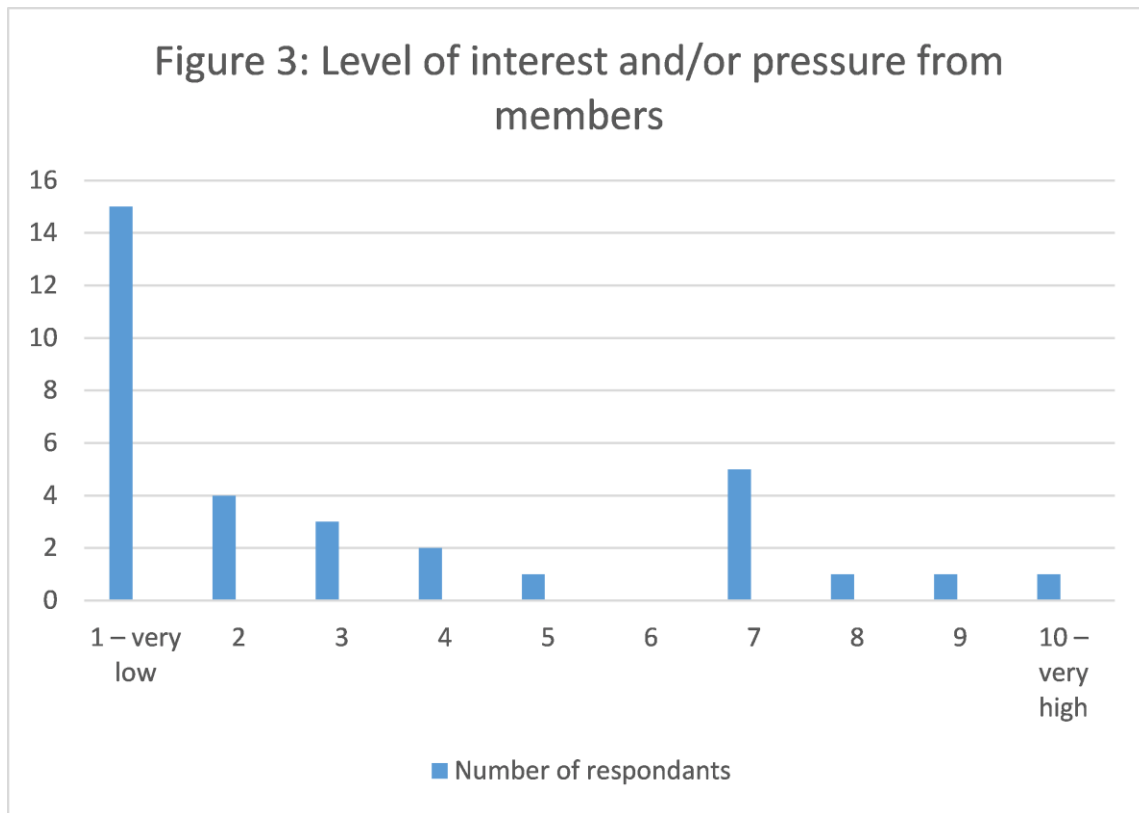


Figure 3. Level of interest and/or pressure from members.