**Scottish Journal of Open Research**
**Article**
10.36399/6svheh97

# IRRP implementation in practice: an Open Research Scotland collaboration

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**CITE THIS ARTICLE**
**De-Castro, P** (2025) IRRP implementation in practice: an Open Research Scotland collaboration. *Scottish Journal of Open Research* **1**. https://doi.org/10.36399/6svheh97

**SUBMITTED**
27 February 2025

**ACCEPTED**
26 June 2025

**PUBLISHED**
07 November 2025

The Scottish Journal of Open Research is an Open Access journal published by the University of Glasgow.

## Abstract

The rights retention strategy involves the deposit of embargo-free author accepted manuscripts in institutional repositories under a Creative Commons licence. At a time when five Scottish universities have run their institutional rights retention policies (IRRPs) for at least a year (if often for much longer) and five additional institutions are planning to pass their own policies in 2025, this is a good moment for a cross-institutional discussion on the various technical areas that would benefit from some level of consensus. Several key areas were addressed during the Open Research Scotland-held "IRRP implementation in practice" session on 16 January 2025. This paper provides a summary of the discussions, together with some institutional best practices identified during the session and some thoughts on how the application of rights retention could result in more visibility for research publications. This overview of the current state of IRRPs in Scotland will hopefully further our discussions on the uptake and implementation of this important tool for open research.

## Introduction

Five Scottish universities have already passed their institutional rights retention policies (IRRPs) at the time of writing, see table 1, and have been running them for long enough to be able to discuss their practical implementation. On top of these, five additional institutions in Scotland are expecting to have their own IRRPs passed in the course of 2025.

| **Institution** | **Date IRRP came into force** | **IRRP URL** |
|---|---|---|
| University of Edinburgh | 01/01/2022 | https://information-services.ed.ac.uk/about/policies-and-regulations/research-publications |
| University of St Andrews | 01/02/2023 | https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/policy/research-open-research/open-access-policy.pdf |
| University of Aberdeen | 01/05/2023 | https://www.abdn.ac.uk/library/open-research/rights/ |
| University of Glasgow | 01/09/2024 | https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/strategy/ourpolicies/publications-policy/ |
| University of Strathclyde | 01/01/2024 | https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/cs/gmap/academicaffairs/policies/Institutional_Rights_Retention_Policy.pdf |

**Table 1.** Scottish universities currently operating institutional rights retention policies (IRRPs)

This means that there is an interest within the Open Research Scotland group not just to discuss how to best approach the adoption of an IRRP but also how to implement these policies in a coordinated way across institutions once it has been passed (De-Castro 2023).

This is the main reason why a two-hour "IRRPs implementation in practice" online session was held on 16 January 2025 with over 30 attendees representing institutions in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England. Short updates were delivered at the start of the session by the five Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) that have been applying rights retention for some time as a way to identify the workflows applied by each institution, and to highlight common best practices others may wish to replicate.

The rights retention strategy as defined by the cOAlition S group of research funders (cOAlition S 2020) involves the deposit in institutional repositories of embargo-free author accepted manuscripts (AAMs) under a Creative Commons licence. Funders within cOAlition S that have included this immediate Green Open Access route in their OA policies – which in the UK include the Wellcome Trust since 1 January 2021 and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) since 1 April 2022 – expect it to be applied to their funded manuscripts when no Gold Open Access route is feasible for them. These UKRI- and Wellcome-funded publications usually make up a relatively small subset of institutional research outputs. However, the previous UK Scholarly Communications Licence initiative (UK SCL) (Baldwin and Pinfield 2018) encouraged UK institutions to "expand" these funder rights retention policies into fully fledged IRRPs that apply to *all* of their research publications.

cOAlition S funders did not “invent” rights retention policies – these had already been running for quite some time at US-based universities like Harvard (Harvard Library s.a.). However, the adoption of the rights retention route by this cOAlition S group of funders boosted the adoption of this immediate Green OA route. There has also been recent progress in this area in the United States, where the so-called “Nelson memo” (Winter 2024) passed in 2022 included the rights retention strategy. However, since most cOAlition S funders are in Europe, discussions on rights retention have

particularly abounded in this latter region. As a result, different initiatives are taking place in different European countries to explore how much the varying national copyright frameworks may allow rights retention to be applied. The KR21 (Knowledge Rights 21) 5-year programme managed by IFLA in partnership with LIBER and SPARC Europe is a good example for a wide-scoped advocacy effort around rights retention (Knowledge Rights 21 2025). The Rights Retention Project Retain II launched by SPARC Europe in August 2024 within the KR21 programme activities has recently published a report examining the progress of institutional rights retention policies across ten European countries (Treadway et al 2025).

## 2. Implementing IRRPs: some technical aspects

A number of technical aspects around the implementation of institutional rights retention policies were discussed in the January 2025 Open Research Scotland session. Some of the topics addressed in the discussion are summarised below.

### 2.1. Institutional systems and their configuration

The discussions on rights retention have so far devoted little attention to the institutional systems that will support the adoption of these policies. However, this choice of system is a critical aspect to explain the diverging IRRP implementation workflows across institutions. It is worth noting that four[1] of the five Scottish HEIs that presented their progress around the implementation of their IRRP during the 16 January 2025 session use the same system as a basis for their technical workflows, namely their PURE-based institutional Current Research Information System (CRIS). Most of these PURE systems are coupled to an Eprints- or DSpace-based Open Access institutional repository, so this is actually a CRIS+repository configuration in most cases.

This similarity in system configuration may offer opportunities for alignment, some of which – such as record tagging in the CRIS – are explored below. Other institutions use different systems and configurations, both in Scotland and beyond. For example, Universities sometimes use their institutional repository as a basis for the implementation of rights retention, and this will typically lead to differences in the workflows[2].

As an example, the University of Glasgow (UoG) uses an Eprints repository (Enlighten) to record information about submission dates, manuscript version and funding. Enlighten is linked to the Unit4 project module as an underpinning research information system. The UoG rights retention policy is the only one among the IRRPs discussed in the Open Research Scotland session that relies on the author having included the 2-line rights retention statement in their paper (University of Glasgow 2024).

### 2.2. Candidate rights retention record tagging

Since most Scottish HEIs currently implementing rights retention are using PURE, it's worth noting that this institutional CRIS platform allows the tagging of its bibliographic records via library

[1] The Universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Strathclyde all use PURE as their institutional CRIS.

[2] Since openly available repository records are created upon the reception of the full-text accepted manuscript from the authors, it is often unclear at point of creation whether papers will be published Gold Open Access or will follow the rights retention route. This typically results in the inclusion of internal notes in the record metadata calling for the final Open Access route to be confirmed upon first online release of the paper. When CRIS systems are used for this same workflow, the records are not made openly available until papers are first released online, thus removing the need for these early-stage notes on the repository records.

keywords defined for the purpose (De-Castro 2024). These library-defined keywords are typically not part of the metadata set publicly displayed on the Pure portal, which suits the way institutions would wish to implement their IRRPs. Moreover, this tagging mechanism allows institutions to differentiate instances for funders' rights retention (RRS-F) from instances for 'general' institutional rights retention (IRRP-G). This differentiation will allow the reporting on how widespread the application is for each of these two routes. For tagging purposes, all that is needed is to use a different tag depending on the funding acknowledgements that a specific accepted manuscript carries.

Figure 1 taken from the report on the implementation of the Strathclyde IRRP 12 months into the policy (De-Castro 2025) shows how the way funders' rights retention and the institutional rights retention policy can be independently monitored via library-defined keywords in PURE. It is worth highlighting that no IRRP is needed to apply rights retention to UKRI- and Wellcome-funded papers, so all pre-IRRP rights retention instances will be for RRS-F. This also means that institutions are likely to have rights retention publications regardless of whether they have already passed their IRRP or not. Once an IRRP is passed, the instances for IRRP-G will quickly outweigh those for funded papers.

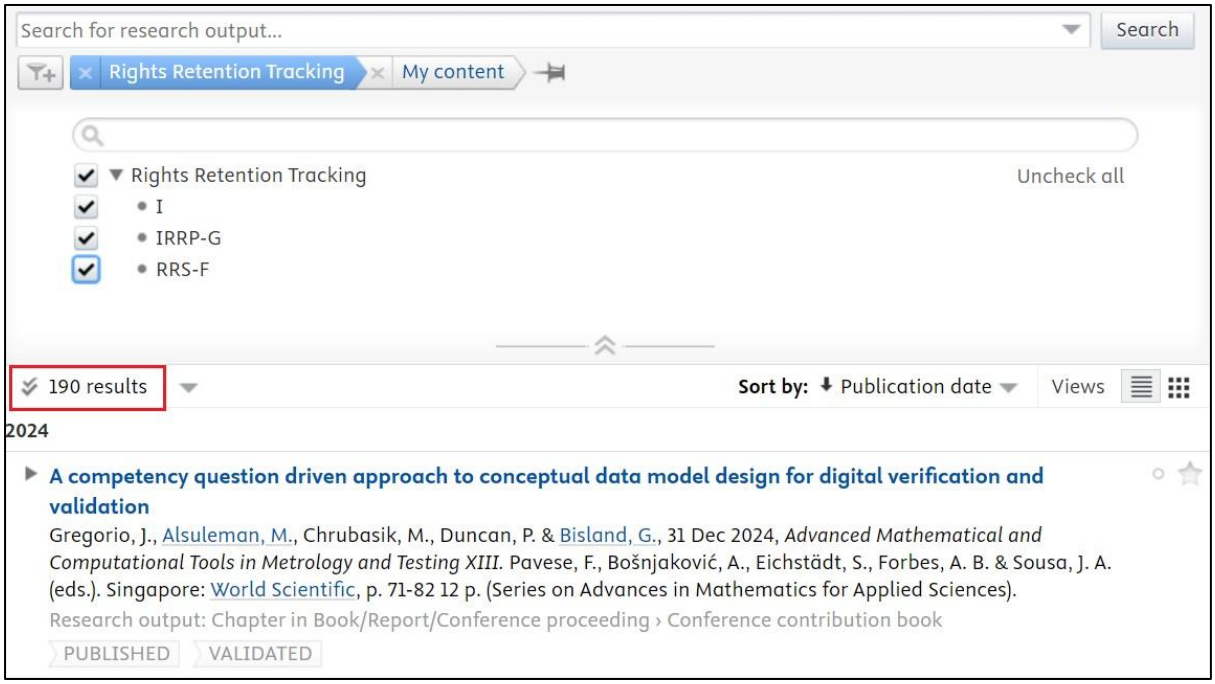


**Figure 1.** Tagging mechanism for rights retention publications at the University of Strathclyde PURE

Other institutions have chosen to develop an open-source add-on for tagging purposes, which they run on top of PURE but independently from it. These bespoke solutions (Ganeshwaran 2022) allow them to tag both the rights retention instances and the data accessibility statements[3].

Finally, most research information management systems underpinning the institutional scholarly communications workflows will allow this kind of tagging for rights retention. There are best practice case studies for Worktribe, for example, albeit these are unpublished and largely kept internal at institutions at present.

[3] The tagging mechanisms for Data Accessibility Statements (DAS) and rights retention publications are remarkably similar, with both tending to be applied by research support staff post-manuscript acceptance. The effort to surface the implementation of both workflows may eventually follow similar lines too.

## 2.3. Issuing DOIs for embargo-free accepted manuscripts

The cross-institutional discussions held within the Open Research Scotland group led to the conclusion that it is *not* mandatory for embargo-free AAMs deposited in institutional repositories under a Creative Commons licence to be issued a digital object identifier (DOI). The UKRI Open Access policy – to consider just one example of a cOAlition S funder's policy wording – states in the section 'Technical requirements for institutional and subject repositories' that, 'PIDs for research outputs must be implemented according to international [sic] recognised standards. Examples of international standards include DOI, URN or Handle.' (UKRI 2023)

This does not therefore necessitate the use of DOIs. Repositories – especially DSpace-based repositories, which some of the Scottish universities that have passed an IRRP operate – already assign a Handle ID to all their items by default. Where a PURE CRIS underpins the implementation of rights retention, the system also automatically assigns a persistent identifier to its record, based on Universally Unique ID (UUID) DOIs in this case. This said, repositories occasionally enable the DataCite-based feature 'Fabrica', which automatically allocates a DOI to every new item created in the system, and subsequently assigns DOIs to records for embargo-free AAMs[4]. Some Scottish institutions running their IRRP have also chosen to issue DOIs for their rights retention publications regardless of the system configuration they run[5].

This arguably risks creating multiple DOIs for different versions of the same publication, which is potentially an issue when these are supposed to be unique identifiers. However, this should not mean a problem for citation purposes provided the DOI for the Version of Record (VoR) is added to the repository item as soon as the published-version DOI is available. Moreover, mechanisms are becoming increasingly available (Mierz 2022) that allow the ensuing PID graph to automatically link VoR DOIs to AAM DOIs, and vice versa.

Connected to the discussion on whether or not to mint DOIs for embargo-free AAMs is the topic of the landing (or cover) pages for the full-text files deposited in repositories. This is again an area where practice varies across institutions and systems. Such cover pages allow to easily identify an openly available full-text AAM as an accepted manuscript for a final published version available elsewhere. The licence information (typically a CC BY 4.0 for rights retention AAMs) and the DOI or alternative persistent identifier may also feature on such a cover page, allowing a full-text paper randomly discovered online to be traced back to the metadata set with which it is associated.

Technical experts on accessibility raise concerns around cover pages, as they may hamper the discoverability of the document that comes from its indexation if any additional text unrelated to the content of the document is included at the top (Tonkin et al 2013). This is why many repositories will instead choose to include the reference to the final published version either on the heading of the actual AAM or as a footnote to it. As is the case for other technical areas explored here, the purpose of this piece is not to say which approach is the "right" one, but rather to explore the different ways different institutional teams are dealing with the same issues.

[4] See for instance the practice at the DSpace-based Apollo repository at the University of Cambridge, https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.115898.

[5] See for instance DOI https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00082136 issued by the University of Strathclyde to its first-ever instance of rights retention in August 2022. As mentioned above, this was a case for funders' rights retention (RRS-F) which significantly predated the passing of the Strathclyde IRRP in November 2023.

## 2.4. Opt-out workflow

IRRPs will typically come with an opt-out mechanism that authors can follow to request their institutional Open Access support team not to make their AAM openly available embargo-free[6]. There are again various ways to operationalise this opt-out workflow, but institutions are often making available a form (University of Edinburgh Library 2024) to simplify the process for the researchers, and to allow additional information to be collected on the reasons for the opt-out request. Other institutions, however, simply include a note in their IRRP wording asking researchers to please get in contact with the Open Access team if they wish to opt-out from the policy.

Opt-out workflows and their uptake were frequently discussed topics at the 16 January 2025 session. Several institutions offered figures for their (typically low) number of opt-outs and their distribution per department/school/discipline. The opt-out forms mentioned above allow additional information to be collected on the reasons driving researchers to request such an opt-out; for example stating whether the primary issue was the CC licence or rather the lack of an embargo period.

The networking between frontrunner HEIs and those following them has been very effective on several aspects of the process for having an IRRP passed by an institution and getting the policy ready for its implementation. The workflows for the submission of notifications about just-passed IRRPs to the most usual publishers at an institution and whether these notifications should be issued in print or just electronically provide an example for such an effective coordination. This cross-institutional collaboration should arguably continue and be applied to other areas, such as the design for a common opt-out form. This would allow all institutions to collect the same information, particularly on the drivers for the opt-out requests, and to compare it across HEIs.

## 2.5. Two-line rights retention statements

The way the implementation of the rights retention strategy was operationalised by cOAlition S members, the release of embargo-free AAMs under a CC licence required the inclusion of a 2-line rights retention statement in the funding acknowledgements section of the manuscript. The UKRI Open Access policy states for instance:

> For the article to be published under [rights retention] route 2, submissions must include the following text in the funding acknowledgement section of the manuscript and any cover letter or note accompanying the submission: "For the purpose of open access, the author(s) has applied a Creative Commons attribution (CC BY) licence (where permitted by UKRI, 'Open Government Licence' or 'Creative Commons attribution no-derivatives (CC BY-ND) licence' may be stated instead) to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising" (UKRI 2023).

However, most IRRPs do *not* require the inclusion of a rights retention statement on the manuscript. Formal notifications to publishers about the passing of the policy are considered to supersede any need for academics to re-state that they are applying a CC licence to any version arising from their submission.

One of the side-effects of the lack of an institutional mandate for manuscripts to include the rights retention statement is that it 'protects' researchers from any publisher backlash arising from the

[6] Universities have occasionally used an opt-in workflow for their institutional rights retention policies, especially when implementing a pilot, see for instance the University of Cambridge approach at https://www.coalition-s.org/blog/how-to-make-it-right-a-rights-retention-pilot-by-the-university-of-cambridge-ahead-of-shaping-a-full-institutional-policy/ or the University of Bath's at https://library.bath.ac.uk/c.php?g=665389&p=5258228. Both institutions switched to an opt-out approach for their full-fledged IRRP.

inclusion of such wording in their papers. Many publishers have specifically stated that they agree with the application of the rights retention workflow[7] – which makes particular sense when there is a generously paid Read & Publish agreement running in the background that will cover many of the institutional publications with a specific publisher. However, some other publishers will seek to have this statement removed from the manuscript as a precondition for acceptance or will suggest submitting the manuscript to an alternative Gold Open Access title of theirs that will charge a mandatory Open Access publishing fee.

Another less welcome side-effect of the lack of rights retention statements on publications is that it makes it much more difficult for these publications to be identified by external aggregators. Services such as the CORE national aggregator in the UK have traditionally used a text-mining strategy for the rights retention statement on manuscripts as their default strategy to identify publications asserting rights retention. However, this strategy has several limitations:

- **False positives.** Publications are identified as rights retention by an external aggregator even when they are fully Open Access if the authors chose to include the 2-line rights retention statement in them[8]. This would typically happen because authors mistakenly believed this was a funder requirement.
- **Missing identifications.** Most rights retention publications arising from the application of an IRRP that includes no requirement for a statement will not be identified as rights retention, since the text-mining strategy will as a rule fail to identify any such statement.

## 3. Identification of rights retention publications by an external aggregator

Very little discussion has been held to date on how to maximise the visibility of embargo-free AAMs providing a suitable alternative for accessing research outputs held behind paywalls. However, if no effort is made to expose these outputs beyond their open availability in institutional repositories (or on e.g. Google Scholar), then the effort invested in identifying these publications early enough, securing the AAMs and making them openly available embargo-free could be considered wasted.

Two main mechanisms to further showcase these embargo-free AAMs to the outside world could be available:

1. Aggregators of all kinds, either national (e.g. CORE in the UK, HAL in France, Recolecta in Spain, etc) or international (OpenAIRE, BASE or even wider services like Unpaywall or OpenAlex) *directly identifying these embargo-free AAMs from some metadata element in the repository records*. This seems the ideal solution, as it would require no specific action from institutions beyond adequately tagging their metadata. Some cross-institutional

[7] See (e.g.) the statement "For authors who may need to follow the Rights Retention Strategy to comply with funder/institute mandates, we do allow this route to self-archiving of the Author Accepted Manuscript (in an institutional or subject repository immediately under a CC BY license) in cases where none of our standard routes (outlined above) comply with the relevant mandate" on the Company of Biologists Open Access webpage for the *Journal of Cell Science*, https://journals.biologists.com/jcs/pages/open-access.

[8] Most references on this early list of rights retention publications at rrs-language-including-outputs/RRS-outputs-asof-2021-09-01.csv at main · rossmounce/rrs-language-including-outputs · GitHub are actually for fully Open Access publications that carry the 2-line rights retention statement.

harmonisation may be possible on metadata-based mechanisms to identify rights retention publications. This would allow the general uptake of rights retention to be monitored.

The key risk posed by this approach is that if aggregators were able to identify these rights retention publications, then so would other external stakeholders. The caution currently presiding over the implementation of rights retention is mainly arising from the wish of institutions not to risk publisher pushback in this area. This means no takedown notices to the institution and – especially – no threatening messages to their authors about embargo-free manuscripts that (allegedly) breach a contract that the author may have signed with the publisher. The downside of this cautious approach is the lower visibility of these embargo-free AAMs, and a certain lack of action on the dissemination front for rights retention publications.

2. An alternative (and safer) option could be institutions sharing with aggregators lists of DOIs for publications to which they have applied rights retention. This could replicate the OpenAPC information exchange workflow (Pieper and Broschinski 2018) into an "OpenAAM initiative" that could either (i) aim to have those "rights retention publications" highlighted or tagged on the aggregations or (ii) have all of them added to a specific OpenAAM platform where all contents would be embargo-free AAMs. Each of these options has its own logistical challenges: a dedicated platform would need to be hosted and maintained by somebody, whereas the workflow for exchanging lists of DOIs would need every institution implementing an IRRP to be able to internally collect these and to be willing to share them with the external aggregator. None of this can be taken for granted at this point.

A broad estimation for the number of embargo-free AAMs available as a result of the uptake of IRRPs in the UK alone suggests that it may well be in the tens of thousands already. No study has yet been conducted at this very early stage on how much visibility embargo-free AAMs may be able to offer to research publications as an alternative route to openly available Versions of Record (VoRs), but it is easy to see that there is ample room for improvement on the current siloing of publications in their repositories. This scattering also makes it very difficult to gain aggregated usage statistics for rights retention papers.

A single, *international* platform for rights retention publications (playing broadly the same role as OpenAPC plays for APCs paid worldwide) would make usage statistics much more visible, allowing a comparison against delayed Green OA. Critically, it would also enable monitoring the uptake of the rights retention strategy across countries.

This is particularly important at a time when European consortia are increasingly choosing to join 'Read & Green' type agreements with publishers whereby institutions are *specifically allowed* to apply rights retention to their publications[9]. These agreements will boost the number of contractually allowed rights retention publications internationally, and, while countries may be able to introduce national-basis tagging mechanisms for rights retention publications of their own, some international coordination would be very helpful to map the uptake of rights retention across countries (besides significantly enhancing the role and value of Open Access repositories).

## 4. Monitoring IRRP uptake

[9] The 3-year Read & Green agreement signed by the French Couperin consortium with the American Chemical Society (ACS) for the period 2024-2026 is a good example, https://www.couperin.org/negociations/accords-specifiques-so/acs-american-chemical-society/, as is the UK Jisc consortium's 2025 agreement with the IEEE.

While it is presently very difficult to monitor the uptake of rights retention via external aggregators, institutions are ideally placed to monitor the successes of their own policies. It is very early days in this area, and there is no standard approach to identifying the various indicators that should be monitored as part of the effort to measure the uptake of a given IRRP. As a result, each institution is adopting its own approach to monitoring, and, while there are some cross-institutional commonalities, there are also significant differences across IRRP uptake reports. Some of the areas that are being monitored by the Scottish universities that presented their progress at the January 2025 Open Research Scotland session include:

- Total number of rights retention publications. As stated above, institutions are best placed to measure this indicator, at least until some mechanism is found for external stakeholders (such as repository aggregators) to accurately identify the embargo-free AAMs available in repositories under a CC licence. All institutions presenting at the OR Scotland session reported on their figures, some independently monitoring funders' rights retention and institutional rights retention as different categories;
- Distribution of rights retention publications by faculty, department and/or school. Possible explanations for the higher uptake in some disciplines were discussed in the session;
- Distribution by publishers. Only one presentation provided this breakdown, which could arguably be of much use if consistently monitored across institutions;
- Distribution of opt-outs by faculty, department and/or school. Perhaps unsurprisingly, opt-out requests seem to be largely arriving from departments in the social sciences and humanities.

## Conclusion

While there has been a solid cross-institutional collaborative effort to share and reuse the experiences of having IRRPs passed, the actual implementation of such policies raises even more acute challenges and needs for coordination. It is still early days in this domain, but initiatives to discuss the ways in which IRRPs are being implemented should allow this necessary conversation to happen within partnerships that have taken a stance in this area, such as the N8 Research Partnership (N8 Research Partnership 2023) in the North or the GW4 Alliance (GW4 Alliance 2023) in the West of England and Wales. In Scotland, where the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL) have released a statement (SCURL 2023) supporting the adoption of rights retention policies by its member institutions, it is the Open Research Scotland network that has taken on the challenge of promoting a cross-institutional conversation on the numerous aspects that need to be discussed around IRRP implementation in practice. As the number of Scottish universities with an active IRRP steadily increases in the run-up to the REF2029[10], the discussion on the implementation of these policies will address a growing range of institutional systems and uptake monitoring mechanisms.

## List of abbreviations

AAM: Author Accepted Manuscript
APC: Article Processing Charge

[10] The Open Access policy for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF2029) research assessment exercise in the UK includes a requirement for shorter embargo periods that can only be systematically achieved through the application of an IRRP. This is one of the main drivers for the widespread adoption of such policies at UK institutions.

CC BY: Creative Commons Attribution [licence]
CRIS: Current Research Information System
DAS: Data Accessibility Statement
DOI: Digital Object Identifier
HEI: Higher Education Institution
IRRP: Institutional Rights Retention Policy
IRRP-G: 'General' institutional rights retention
KR21: Knowledge Rights 21
OR Scotland: Open Research Scotland [group]
PID: Persistent Identifier
RRS-F: Funders' rights retention
REF: Research Excellence Framework
SCURL: Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries
UK SCL: UK Scholarly Communications Licence
UKRI: UK Research and Innovation
URN: Uniform Resource Name
UUID: Universally Unique Identifier
VoR: Version of Record

## Data availability statement

All underpinning data is present in the article and/or its references. No additional data was specifically produced for this piece.

## Competing Interests

Any opinions shared in this article are the author's own based on his daily practice as Open Access Advocacy Librarian at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. The piece is informed by consultancy work previously done by the author on the impact of Plan S, which included numerous interviews with institutional Open Access advocates, research funders and publishers.

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