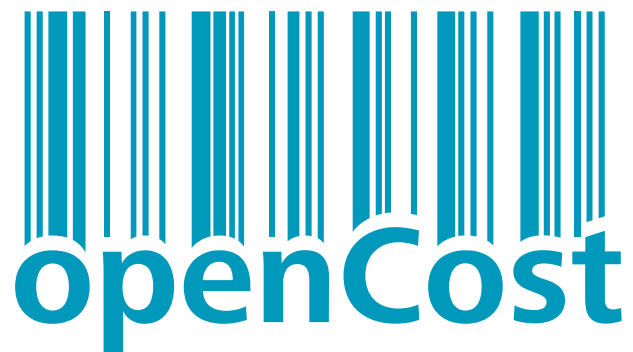


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## **The Road to Publication Cost Transparency**

Proceedings of the Expert Workshop  
Hamburg, October 05<sup>th</sup> – 07<sup>th</sup> 2022



Verlag Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY  
Hamburg  
2023

Proceedings of the Expert Workshop  
*openCost* —  
*The Road to Publication Cost Transparency*



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All presentations are available via

<https://indico.desy.de/event/35620>

Verlag Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY  
Notkestraße 85, 22607 Hamburg, Germany

[DESY-PROC-2023-01](#)

June 2023

ISSN 1435-8077

ISBN 978-3-945931-45-5

doi:[10.3204/PUBDB-2023-02961](https://doi.org/10.3204/PUBDB-2023-02961)



openCost is funded by grant [457354095](#).



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*Typeset by lua<sup>B</sup>TeX*



# Cost Monitoring in Finland

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DOI: [10.3204/DESY-PROC-2023-01/07](https://doi.org/10.3204/DESY-PROC-2023-01/07)

## Abstract

In my presentation, I will look at the current state of cost monitoring in Finland, drawing on my experience as the leader of FinELib's APC project and the chair of an expert group charged with reviewing the total costs of OA to Finland. I will describe our approach including our attempts to harness the Finnish VIRTa Publication Information Service for the purposes of cost monitoring, not forgetting some of the challenges encountered along the way. Some of the questions I will address are: What do we know (or think we know) already and what other aspects should we consider to get a better picture of the various costs associated with scholarly publishing?

## 7.1 Monitoring APCs

In Finland, the discussion on the need for greater transparency and monitoring of APCs started in earnest around 2017–2018, prompting FinELib (the Finnish consortium for universities, research institutions and universities of applied sciences) to initiate a project referred to unimaginatively as FinELib's APC Project (which I coordinated) [107]. Funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

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and modeled, to some extent, on a similar project conducted by our sister consortium Bibsam [108], the project (2019–2020) aimed at exploring the motivations and challenges associated with the monitoring of APCs among our consortium members.

The project also sought to estimate the total APC expenditure of Finnish institutions, while at the same time offering recommendations on what measures should be taken to facilitate the tracking of APCs on a national level. These included, among other things, recommendations to set up specific accounts and accounting codes to enable tracking as well as to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Current Research Information Systems (CRIS) and equivalent for a more streamlined monitoring. Crucially, the report also introduced common minimum standards for data to ensure a consistent, interoperable approach across Finland [107].

As one of the aims of our project had been to explore various ways of sharing Finnish APC data through OpenAPC, it was only natural that the adopted standards and minimum requirements had to be aligned with those proposed by the OpenAPC initiative [109]. Institutions participating in the project also submitted their data to OpenAPC and, at the time of writing this paper, almost all our major universities – and several universities of applied sciences and RIs – share their APC data with the OpenAPC initiative [110] either directly or via Finland’s National VIRTa Publication Information Service [111]. And, I would argue, they do this not just out of solidarity or because they are asked to but because they, too, agree on the importance of cost transparency in creating more informed buyers.

## 7.2 Towards the Total Costs of Publication

With the monitoring of APCs well underway, next up on our national checklist was reviewing the total costs of publication in Finland. This had been one of the responsibilities assigned to the National Library (read FinElib) in Finland’s national policy for open access to scholarly publications [112], and was also acknowledged by our APC project which recommended that a task group under the leadership of the National library be set up to review the total costs of OA to Finnish institutions. In addition, the report proposed that the group would develop a model for monitoring the total costs of publication on an ongoing basis [107].

This we duly did, and in early 2022 a task group consisting of experts from libraries and key stakeholders set out to consider what kind of approach would be the most appropriate for our needs. The monitoring set up earlier by Bibsam again

served as an inspiring example [113], while also prompting us to ask what exactly we mean by the total costs. To put it another way: what are the components that together make up what we refer to as the *total* or *full costs* of scholarly publication as seen from the perspective of institutions? Which costs should (or could) we include and not include in our approach?

There are, of course, a number of tangible and easily attributable costs that institutions already monitor and that should obviously be taken into consideration when talking about the total cost of publication, including APCs. Self-evidently, subscriptions placed at the consortial level had to be part of the equation and, indeed, have been made publicly available in our annual reports [114], while *all* license and subscriptions fees paid between 2010-2017 by Finnish institutions to publishers and vendors (be via FinELib or directly) were collected and shared openly by the Finnish Open Science and Research Initiative ATT, an exercise terminated in 2017 due to lack of funds [115].

Moreover, it can be easily argued that the fees paid to the infrastructures we and our current OA and OS ecosystem rely on so heavily (DOAJ, DSpace etc.) ought to be included, which, of course, is not to say that they can necessarily be easily pulled from an institution's accounting system.

But what about more intangible administrative costs borne by institutions such as staff time spent on processing APC payments, helping authors to navigate an increasingly complex OA environment, negotiating and managing OA agreements [78], or enabling "green" OA (e. g. depositing copies of articles into repositories for storage and access)? These are real, legitimate costs which we often struggle to identify and which, indeed, resist quantification but nevertheless costs that ought to be recognized as part of the total costs of publication.

Further complicating the picture is the fact that monitoring itself comes at a cost. This of course begs the question: even if tracking certain costs would be possible, does it follow that they *should* be tracked? The answer, of course, depends on many things, including what we want to achieve, the value we attach to transparency, and, obviously, the resources we have available.

This is not to argue that we should prefer opacity to transparency or that there is currently enough transparency about costs. Rather, this is to say that while greater transparency is often desirable, there are situations where the benefits of greater transparency are outweighed by the costs associated with achieving it [116].

### 7.3 Defining Costs

To bring some clarity into the jungle of total costs of publication, we might do well to distinguish between three different definitions of costs inspired by the approach by Maron et al. [117]:

- **Basic costs:** Includes “out-of-pocket” (direct) costs such as APCs, BPCs, subscription fees etc. which are relatively easy to track and, more often than not, can be traced to a particular publication. Accounting for Basic costs provides some level of transparency which, for want of a better expression, can be termed Basic transparency.
- **Full costs:** Covers Basic costs and (mostly indirect) administrative costs related to the management and implementation of OA (e.g monitoring, administration, communication, and enabling green OA). The level of transparency achieved is, of course, higher, so much so that the term “Full transparency” might be warranted as long as one takes care not to omit quotations marks.
- **Full costs Plus:** Includes not only Full costs but also incorporates “in-kind” contributions and unpaid (voluntary) work associated, for instance, with the running of Diamond OA journals, the preferred business model for the overwhelming majority of Finnish OA journals. Going for this approach would provide even more transparency (let’s call this degree of transparency “Full transparency Plus”), though tracking the said costs would, of course, prove difficult, if not impossible.

To use a somewhat clichéd analogy, Basic costs are the low-hanging fruits in our quest to monitor the total costs: easy to pick, relatively speaking, and often ripe enough to eat. Hanging on the upper branches of our cost tree are Full costs. These “fruits” are harder to pick but they, too, are within our reach, provided that we are willing to make an effort – and provided that we have proper ladders or a telescopic fruit picker at hand.

Finally, Full costs Plus are the fruits that hang too high on our tree to pick by normal means. However, by observing the tree, we can estimate the number of such fruits, while by giving our tree a proper shake, we might even be able to draw some conclusions as to their quality based on the (presumably ripe) fruits that fall.

## 7.4 Our Approach?

This was, in essence, the approach taken by our task group, though it must be added that I only came up with the above distinction and analogy when writing this paper. Either way, the approach put forward by our group [118] shared many similarities with the framework used by Bibsam ever since 2017 [113]. In addition to the most obvious low-hanging fruits, we, too, asked our institutions to provide data on costs related to the implementation and management of OA (estimated staff time = person years). In keeping with the Bibsam approach, we also included fees paid for printed materials to provide some insights into the possible reallocation of existing resources.

At the same time, we wanted to go a step further by including the costs of OA infrastructure as well as those of Green OA, in particular, the extent to which depositing versions of manuscripts in publicly accessible repositories represents costs to institutions. In addition, and at the risk of trying the patience of our future respondents, we decided to include the fees paid to Finnish scholarly journals, be it subscriptions or APCs [118]. As already mentioned, a sizeable majority of the Finnish OA journals have embraced the Diamond OA model, and by incorporating these costs we were hoping to contribute to the ongoing and, at times, heated debate on their funding basis which, in its current state, is far from being equitable and sustainable.

Data for the monitoring came from a variety of sources:

1. From a survey conducted by the Open Science and Research Coordination in Finland in 5–6/2022 as part of the broader monitoring of the state of open science and research in Finland [119]. The survey was sent to all Finnish universities, universities of applied science, and RIs, and despite some demanding questions, attracted an overall response rate of 100 per cent among universities and nearly 100 per cent among other institutions;
2. From the FinELib office (or to be more precise, from our very own Halti system), and;
3. From the OpenAPC through which, as already stated, a number of Finnish institutions have been sharing their APC cost data [110].

Once gathered, the data was compiled and cleaned by CSC, the Finnish IT Centre for Science, while the results, including interactive charts, and data were published on [research.fi](https://research.fi) [118] and [Fairdata.fi](https://fairdata.fi) [120], both platforms provided by



the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture [118] In future, the monitoring will be conducted biennially to reduce the burden on institutions – unless, of course, we as a community agree otherwise – while possible future changes to the model have to be discussed with the key stakeholders. These could include, for instance, asking additional questions on other publication charges (e. g. page and colour charges), increasing automation, or updating how we display our data.

## 7.5 Lessons Learned

So, what did we find out about the total costs of publication in Finland? This was not known at the time of our workshop, and even though the results of our monitoring have since been published, I shall not discuss them here but, rather, invite the reader to engage with them on [research.fi](https://research.fi), and while doing so, to keep in mind that what they are seeing is an interim version and still under development [118]. (It goes without saying that we would welcome any comments.)

Instead, I would like to end by reiterating some of the lessons learned from our exercise. Firstly, we need to think more seriously about what we are including and not including when the issue of total costs of publication is raised.

Secondly, while data is essential, in every monitoring exercise there is an apparent danger of becoming too obsessed with data gathering. We should, therefore, keep asking ourselves and our poor colleagues why monitoring matters, what roles it is supposed to serve, and, crucially, what it is that we don't know but should know to be able to make informed and effective decisions. To put it more simply, instead of finding questions for data, we should find data for questions. This approach has been called *decision-driven data analytics* by de Langhe and Puntoni in their recent article [121], and I fully agree with their conclusions.

Finally, and as already indicated, reducing information asymmetries tends to have direct and indirect costs. Thus, for all the talk about promoting transparency, we should not lose sight of the fact that maximal transparency, lofty as it may sound, may not be the same as optimal transparency, suggesting that the notion of transparency, too, merits consideration.

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