Open Research in the Humanities – beyond Open Access

A conversation with Emma Gilby and Rachel Leow, chaired by Matthias Ammon

This session was based on the work of the University's Working Group on Open Research in the Humanities. The main activity of the group, which was formed in summer 2021 and is chaired by Emma Gilby, Professor of Early Modern French Literature and Thought in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics, has been to discuss ways to make some of the underlying principles of Open Research - which have often been based on scholarly communication in STEMM subjects (as for example defined by the League of European Research Universities as the '8 Pillars of Open Science') - more applicable to humanities research. The conversation was also intended – as implied in the title – to explore issues around humanities research that went beyond the mechanisms of Open Access publishing, to consider the production of research as well as conditions of dissemination.

Some of the discussion about applying the concepts of Open Research to the humanities centred around differences between research in the sciences and the humanities. For example, the concept of 'reproducibility' may not necessary be a quality that's applicable to humanities research, which does not aim to produce reproducible results via experiment, but builds on and recontextualises earlier discoveries, methods and debates. Research integrity here comes with a vital element of care – care to represent source material fairly but also awareness of the scholarly ecosystem, the processes behind scholarship and the networks of people involved. For instance, publishing in the humanities in particular relies on the labour of editors, copy editors and typesetters, among others, all of whom share (along with the author) care and responsibility for disciplinary values and standards, and whose work needs to be recognised and acknowledged.

The concepts of care and openness also appeared again in a discussion of what is often considered one of the major benefits of Open Research, namely that it makes scholarship more globally accessible. Careful consideration here needs to be given to the issue of appropriate and fair representation across a diversity of voices and communities. For instance, digital archives tend to reproduce English-speaking structures and skew towards information that is already easy to find.

These are a couple of specific examples which demonstrate that the underlying structures of the way research and scholarly communication are conducted in the humanities require a significant amount of rethinking of the concepts behind Open Research in a humanities context. The Working Group is currently producing a report which will discuss these and other aspects of Open Research in more detail and make suggestions for how institutions such as libraries can support researchers in this context.