

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Katerina/Unsplash

Thousands of paywalled research papers could be freed with this simple fix

Published: February 16, 2026 11.34am AEDT

Siegfried Gudergan

Professor of Strategy & Associate Dean (Research), James Cook University; Aalto University

Wayne Bradshaw

Adjunct Lecturer in English, University of Tasmania

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.63vw5v4t4>

<https://theconversation.com/thousands-of-paywalled-research-papers-could-be-freed-with-this-simple-fix-275205>

Publicly funded research underpins much of daily life, from policy decisions to innovation and public debate. When research remains inaccessible, its value is diminished.

Australia has made real progress on open access to research. In 2024, around 59% of papers authored by researchers in Australia were freely available online.

Yet a large and mostly invisible gap remains. Hundreds of thousands of Australian research papers remain locked behind publisher paywalls, even though many of them could legally be shared right now.

This is because much of our open-access potential is never activated. However, there are simple ways to fix this, as we have shown with a recent university library initiative. Our results are now published in IFLA Journal.

The hidden potential of green open access

When people picture “[open access](#)”, they often think of journals that make articles free to read immediately. Sometimes the publishers charge steep fees to the authors in return for making the article free.

But there’s another pathway that has existed for decades: [green open access](#). This option, also known as self-archiving, allows authors to share the accepted manuscript of a paper – the peer-reviewed version before journal formatting – through a university repository. Most publishers permit this, often after an embargo period.

In theory, this makes green open access one of the most scalable and cost-effective ways to improve access to research. In practice, however, it remains underused.

Many researchers are unsure which version of the paper they’re allowed to share. Others simply never return to older work stored on personal hard drives or in email archives. Over time, eligible manuscripts accumulate in forgotten folders, old attachments or cloud storage.

The result is a growing stock of publicly funded research that could be shared, but can’t be accessed by the public.

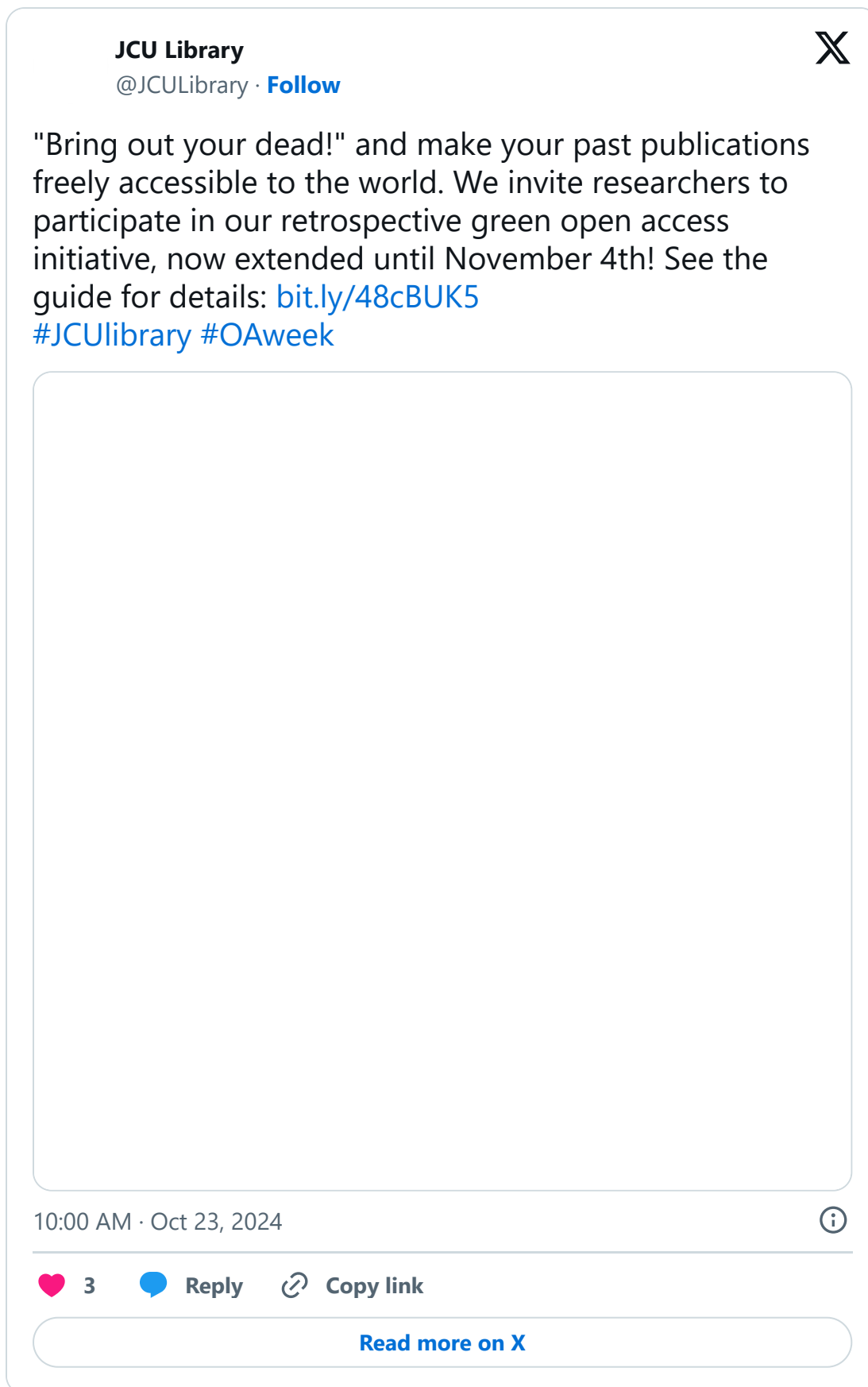
‘Bring out your dead’

At James Cook University, librarians suspected the issue of not submitting manuscripts to the repository was not resistance to open access. Researchers have competing demands on their time. While most academics support sharing their work, after publication their focus moves on to teaching, grants and new research.

Without a prompt or hands-on support to turn good intentions into action, depositing older papers rarely happens.

Rather than introducing new compliance rules, the university tested a different approach: a short, time-limited campaign to prompt action.

The initiative, called “Bring Out Your Dead!”, invited researchers to locate and submit older accepted manuscripts to the university’s repository. It ran for four months in 2024, leading into [International Open Access Week](#).



The framing was deliberately light-hearted, but academics were offered substantial support to complete their submissions.

Librarians provided hands-on assistance with copyright checks, embargo rules and processing. Researchers didn't need to navigate publisher policies themselves – just submit what they had.

During the campaign, researchers submitted 169 manuscripts. Across the full year, 233 papers were deposited – more than double the previous year’s total, and the highest annual deposit rate since the repository was established in 2006.

No new funding was allocated, nor did the library need to renegotiate any publishing agreements. By simply putting out the word and providing administrative support for the researchers to deposit their work, dozens of papers were made available to the public.

This approach could be easily scaled to any university and other publicly-funded research institutes and centres.

Small interventions, huge gains

In recent years, Australian universities have expanded immediate open access largely through “read and publish” agreements negotiated collectively with major publishers.

Through these arrangements, universities pay an agreed fee that combines journal subscription access with the ability for their researchers to publish a certain number of articles openly, without paying individual publication charges. This collective bargaining has increased open access across many high-volume journals and has removed upfront costs for many individual authors.

However, these agreements don’t cover all publishers, journals or disciplines, and their benefits are uneven. Not all researchers publish in journals included in the deals, and not all articles fall within the negotiated quotas. This is why green open access remains the most inclusive pathway.

For the wider public, the lesson is simple: much of the research you have already paid for exists, but remains unnecessarily hard to find. Studies that could inform healthcare decisions, education practice, environmental management, regional planning and public debate are often locked away – not because access is forbidden, but because no one has prompted or helped their release.

When research is easier to access, its value increases. Policymakers can draw on stronger evidence, practitioners can apply research findings more directly, journalists and community organisations can engage with original sources, and citizens can see how public funding translates into knowledge and impact.

Our work shows that small, low-cost changes to encourage green open access inside universities can unlock decades of research and make it available to everyone.

The authors acknowledge research collaborators Jayshree Mamtora and Tove Lemberget from James Cook University.