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ONE NATION ONE SUBSCRIPTION AS A NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMONS: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S JOURNAL ACCESS MODEL

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Abstract:

India's One Nation One Subscription (ONOS) scheme, approved by the Union Cabinet on 25 November 2024 and operational from 1 January 2025, consolidates ten pre-existing library consortia into a single centrally negotiated national licence backed by an outlay of ₹6,000 crore for the calendar years 2025 to 2027. A substantial descriptive and SWOT-based literature on the scheme has already accumulated. This paper makes a different contribution: it applies the Institutional Analysis and Development framework, in the knowledge-commons formulation developed by Hess and Ostrom, to treat ONOS as the deliberate construction of a national knowledge commons, and analyses the scheme's rules-in-use rather than merely its provisions. The method is documentary policy analysis conducted through a transparent selection protocol yielding a corpus of 74 documents, coded deductively against the framework and assessed for authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Reported first-year performance is examined, including the concentration of downloads by publisher and by institution. ONOS is then compared against a typology of national access arrangements distinguished by eligibility basis and by whether the licence secures reading alone or reading and publishing, with Brazil's CAPES Portal de Periódicos rather than Germany's Projekt DEAL adopted as the primary comparator on grounds of scale, developing-country context and institutional longevity. The analysis identifies seven structural gaps, each expressed as a defect in the boundary, position, choice, payoff or information rules of the commons. It is argued that ONOS equalises the ability to read while leaving the terms of publication and the underlying enclosure untouched, and that the scheme is best understood as a transitional instrument whose principal risk is the weakness of India's renewal position after 2027. Twelve recommendations follow, together with the empirical studies required before the Phase I review.

Index Terms: One Nation One Subscription; ONOS; knowledge commons; institutional analysis; national licensing; library consortia; INFLIBNET; open access; scholarly communication; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to current scholarly literature is the foundational input of academic research. Where that access is unevenly distributed, research capacity is unevenly distributed with it, and the resulting inequality compounds: institutions that cannot read cannot cite, cannot review, cannot benchmark and ultimately cannot publish. For the greater part of three decades, Indian higher education carried precisely this stratification. A small number of well-funded central institutions enjoyed comprehensive subscription portfolios while the vast affiliated college sector operated on holdings that were frequently a generation out of date. The difference was not one of intellect or of institutional quality. It was a difference of budget lines.

The concept of a national subscription first appeared in the Indian policy discourse when drafting the Science, Technology and Innovation Policy in 2020. Mallapaty (2020) reported that the Government intended to negotiate with the world's largest scientific publishers for a nationwide subscription in place of the numerous institutional agreements that benefited only a fraction of the country's scholars, and that the ambition was, in principle, to extend access to all residents of the country. The proposal attracted considerable international attention because of its scale: no country of comparable population had previously attempted to provide a universal right to read commercial scholarly literature.

Four years of negotiation followed. The scheme approved in November 2024 is considerably narrower than the original conception. It covers government higher education institutions and central government research bodies rather than the citizenry; it covers journals rather than the full range of scholarly resources; and it secures reading rights rather than publishing rights. It remains, nonetheless, one of the largest single public interventions in scholarly communication attempted anywhere.

The scholarly response has been divided. One body of writing treats the scheme as a decisive democratisation of access and concentrates on implementation, the role of library professionals and user training. A second, largely originating from the open science community, treats it as a strategic error that entrenches the market position of commercial oligopolists while deferring the transition to open access (Koley & Lala, 2022, 2024; Madhan, 2024). Both readings capture something real. Neither, on its own, explains why the scheme took the particular institutional form it did, or what would have to change for it to achieve its stated long-term ambitions.

This paper approaches the question institutionally. It treats ONOS not as a procurement exercise but as the deliberate construction of a national knowledge commons, and asks what rules that commons operates under, whom those rules include and exclude, what they permit and prohibit, and how durable they are likely to prove. The analysis is offered as policy analysis rather than impact evaluation. Impact evaluation remains premature: the scheme has completed a single operational year, the utilisation data in the public domain are aggregate rather than disaggregated, and the institution-level studies that would permit causal inference have not been conducted. What can be done, and what is done here, is to examine the scheme's institutional design against its own objectives, against the comparative record, and against the structural features of Indian higher education.

2. PRIOR LITERATURE AND THE RESEARCH GAP

The ONOS literature has grown rapidly and now presents a genuine risk of duplication for any new contribution. Locating this paper accurately therefore requires an explicit account of what has already been established.

2.1 Early proposal-stage analysis, 2020–2023

The earliest substantial treatment is Munshi and Arora (2021), a foundational document produced when the proposal was still being designed and notable because Arora had directed the INFLIBNET Centre. Rathinasabapathy and Veeranjaneyulu (2022) traced the trajectory from library consortia towards a national subscription model and set out anticipated prospects and challenges. The most consequential early scholarship is that of Koley and Lala, whose analysis in Scientometrics (2022) used Scopus open-access trend data to argue that a subscription-only national contract disregards the open-access publishing options that were reshaping global scholarly communication, and whose subsequent article in the Journal of Librarianship and Information Science (2024) developed the argument that the proposal limits its own scope by considering subscription alone. Chari and Nagaiah (2023) examined the implications for the sustainability of the existing consortia.

2.2 Post-approval descriptive and evaluative work, 2024–2026

Following Cabinet approval, a second wave of writing appeared. Chhetri (2024) examined the contribution of library and information science professionals to implementation. Naik and Naik (2025) evaluated the initiative's implications for access and emphasised professional roles in policy formulation, collection oversight and effectiveness evaluation. Kadam (2025) considered the scheme's significance for the research ecosystem. A SWOT-based analysis appeared in the Annals of Library and Information Studies (2025). Das and colleagues (2025), writing in Learned Publishing, situated ONOS within the wider economics of Indian scholarly publishing.

2.3 Comparative work and the residual gap

Two contributions bear directly on the comparative dimension. Sreelakshmi and colleagues (2026), writing in The Serials Librarian, undertake a comparative study of ONOS and Projekt DEAL. A 2025 article in Policy Reviews in Higher Education compares ONOS against Plan S, Projekt DEAL, the Egyptian Knowledge Bank and other national arrangements. Kalbande (2026) reads the scheme through the lens of soft power and knowledge diplomacy. Comparison of ONOS with Projekt DEAL and the Egyptian Knowledge Bank can therefore no longer be claimed as novel.

What has not been done is the following. First, no published analysis applies an explicit institutional-analysis framework to the scheme; the literature is predominantly descriptive, SWOT-based or advocacy-oriented, and reviewers of policy scholarship have long identified the absence of an analytical lens as the characteristic weakness of such work. Second, no published analysis integrates the first full year of reported operational data, including the distribution of usage across publishers and institutions, which became available only in March 2026. Third, the comparative literature has anchored itself on Germany, a high-income country operating a read-and-publish model in a mature open-access environment, rather than on the middle-income national-access models that resemble the Indian case far more closely; Brazil's CAPES Portal de Periódicos, in operation since 2000 at comparable scale, is almost entirely absent from the Indian discussion. Fourth, the critiques advanced to date are largely thematic rather than structural, identifying problems without locating them within the institutional design that generates them.

This paper addresses those four gaps. Its contribution is the combination of an explicit knowledge-commons framework, first-year operational evidence, a comparator typology anchored on Brazil, and a structural taxonomy of seven design gaps expressed as defects in specific classes of institutional rule.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Why an institutional framework

Scholarly literature possesses an unusual economic character. It is non-rival, in that one reader's use does not diminish another's, yet it is legally excludable through copyright and contract. Resources with this combination of properties are not adequately described either as private goods or as pure public goods, and Hess and Ostrom (2003, 2007) proposed that they be analysed instead as commons: shared resources whose governance is determined by the rules a community adopts rather than by the physical properties of the resource. Their work applied the Institutional Analysis and Development framework, developed originally for natural-resource commons, explicitly to scholarly communication and to libraries, and they argued directly that commons research and the IAD framework could illuminate the dilemmas of scholarly communication. The framework therefore carries established precedent in precisely the domain of this paper.

Applying it to ONOS yields an analytical gain that a descriptive account cannot. A national subscription is, in commons terms, an act of constructing a commons by purchase: the state buys back, for a defined community and a defined period, access to a resource that copyright has enclosed. Once the scheme is described in this way, the questions that matter become institutional rather than administrative. Who is inside the boundary and who is outside it? What positions do actors hold and what may each do? What information is available to whom? And what happens when the purchase expires?

3.2 The framework applied

The IAD framework locates an action arena, comprising an action situation and the actors within it, at the centre of analysis. The arena is conditioned by three sets of exogenous variables: the biophysical characteristics of the resource, the attributes of the community and the rules-in-use. Interaction within the arena produces patterns of interaction and outcomes, which are assessed against evaluative criteria and which feed back to modify the rules. Figure 1 sets out the application to ONOS.

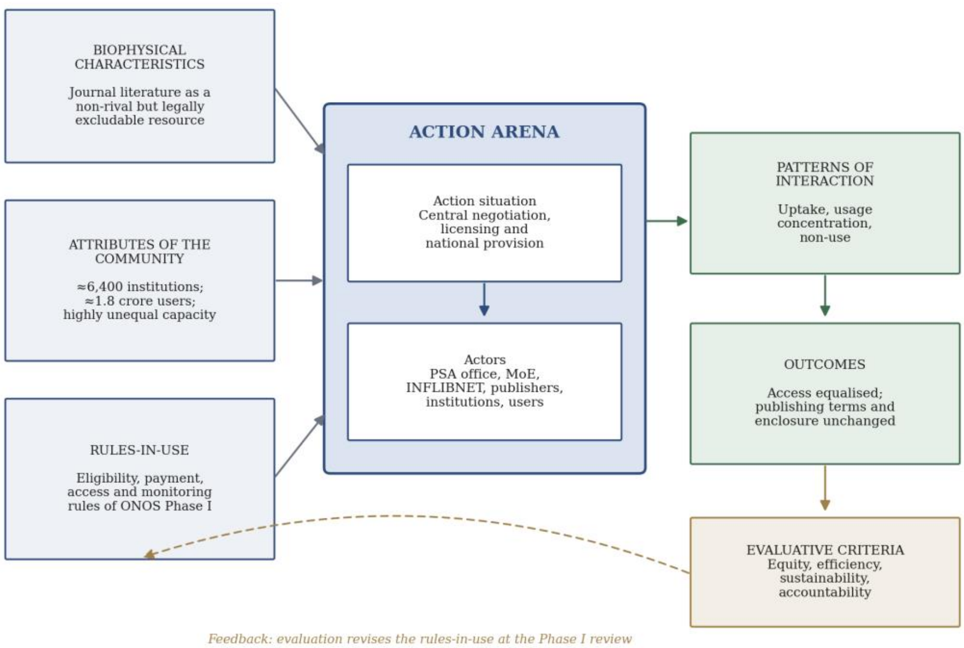

Figure 1. The Institutional Analysis and Development framework applied to ONOS Phase I.

Ostrom's typology of rules-in-use provides the structure for the critical analysis in Section 10. Five classes are of particular relevance here. Boundary rules determine who may enter the commons; in ONOS these are the eligibility provisions. Position rules assign roles; here they distinguish the executing agency, the participating institution, the nodal coordinator and the end user. Choice rules determine what each position may do; the decisive choice rule in ONOS is that users may read but may not, by virtue of the licence, publish openly. Payoff rules distribute costs and benefits; in ONOS the cost is borne centrally and the benefit accrues to the eligible institution. Information rules determine what is known to whom; these govern the publication of pricing and usage data. Each of the seven gaps identified in Section 10 is a defect in one of these five rule classes, and expressing them in this way distinguishes structural problems, which follow from the design, from operational problems, which do not.

3.3 A supporting lens for the comparison

For the comparative section the analysis draws additionally on the policy transfer literature, and specifically on the categories developed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000): who transfers policy, what is transferred, from where, in what degree, and whether the transfer is voluntary or coerced. Their distinction between copying, emulation, hybridisation and inspiration is used in Section 8 to characterise ONOS as a selective emulation of the national-licensing model, adopting its purchasing architecture while declining its publishing component.

4. OBJECTIVES, METHOD AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

4.1 Objectives

The study pursues six objectives:

1. To locate ONOS within the institutional evolution of centralised journal access in India;
2. To reconstruct the rules-in-use of ONOS Phase I across the boundary, position, choice, payoff and information classes;
3. To examine reported first-year performance, including the distribution of usage across publishers and institutions, and to establish what may legitimately be inferred from it;
4. To situate ONOS within a typology of national access arrangements differentiated by eligibility basis and by the rights the licence secures;
5. To present the strongest available case in defence of the scheme’s design choices before advancing a critique;
6. To identify the structural gaps in the present design and to formulate recommendations for the Phase I review.

4.2 Research design

The study employs qualitative documentary policy analysis, a design appropriate where the object of enquiry is an institutional arrangement rather than a behavioural population, and where the authoritative evidence resides in official documents rather than in respondents. No primary data were collected. The design is therefore vulnerable to the criticisms customarily directed at document-based policy scholarship, and the procedures set out below are adopted specifically to address them.

4.3 Document selection protocol

Searches were conducted between June and August 2026 across four source classes. Official sources comprised Cabinet communications, Press Information Bureau releases, the programme pages of the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser, the ONOS portal and INFLIBNET documentation, Parliamentary questions and answers, and Ministry of Education reports including the All India Survey

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on Higher Education. Peer-reviewed literature was retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using the search terms ‘one nation one subscription’, ‘ONOS India’, ‘national licence’, ‘national subscription’, ‘library consortia India’ and ‘transformative agreement’, in each case restricted to the period 2020 to 2026. Comparative material on national licensing arrangements was retrieved by country. Grey literature comprised institutional reports, professional commentary and news reporting, admitted only where it supplied factual information subsequently traceable to an official source, or where it was itself the object of analysis as an expression of stakeholder position.

Records were screened first on title and abstract for relevance to national-scale journal access policy, and subsequently in full text. Documents were excluded where they were unrelated to ONOS or to national licensing, where they duplicated a source already included, where the full text was not retrievable, or where they were purely derivative of an included source without independent contribution. The procedure is set out in Figure 2 and yielded a final analytical corpus of 74 documents.

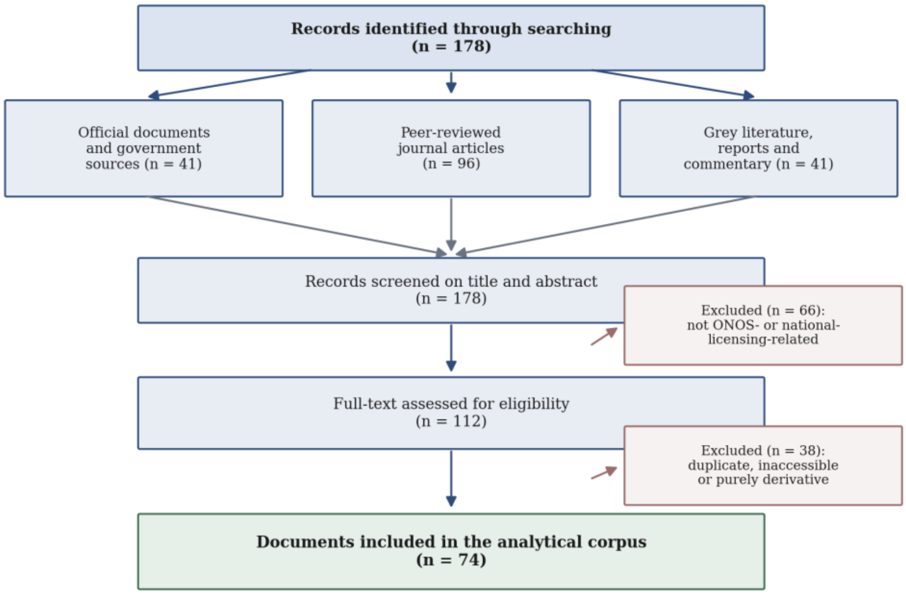

Figure 2. Document identification, screening and inclusion procedure.

4.4 Coding

Coding was deductive, using categories derived from the framework set out in Section 3. The coding scheme is presented in Table 1. Each document in the corpus was coded against these categories, and a document-to-category matrix was maintained to ensure that every analytical claim in Sections 6 to 10 could be traced to identified sources. Where a category was supported by only a single source, the claim is reported in the text as attributed rather than established.

Table 1. Deductive coding scheme derived from the analytical framework.

Code	Rule class or dimension	Indicative content coded
BND	Boundary rules	Eligibility criteria, institutional categories, exclusions, registration requirements
POS	Position rules	Roles of PSA office, Ministry, INFLIBNET, nodal coordinators, publishers, users
CHO	Choice rules	Permitted uses, reading rights, publishing rights, APC provisions, licence restrictions
PAY	Payoff rules	Funding quantum, payment routing, cost distribution, savings and value-for-money claims
INF	Information rules	Price disclosure, usage reporting, monitoring arrangements, transparency provisions
OUT	Patterns and outcomes	Registration, downloads, usage distribution, non-use and barriers
CMP	Comparative material	National licensing arrangements in other jurisdictions and their evaluation
JUS	Justification and defence	Official rationale, stakeholder endorsement, arguments in support of design choices

4.5 Validity and source appraisal

Documents were appraised against the four criteria proposed by Scott (1990) for documentary research: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Authenticity was addressed by preferring primary official documents over secondary reporting of them, and by tracing every quantitative claim to its originating source where retrievable. Credibility was addressed by treating figures issued by implementing agencies as reported claims rather than as audited statistics, and by recording rather than resolving divergence between sources. Representativeness was addressed by deliberately including sources hostile to the scheme alongside official material, and by devoting a full section to the case in its defence. Meaning was addressed by reading official documents in the light of the institutional context of their production.

Where sources conflict, the divergence is reported. The number of participating publishers is variously given as thirty and as thirty-two. Reported download totals for 2025 vary between 11.3 crore and figures above 11.5 crore depending on the date and basis of reporting. Estimates of pre-ONOS government expenditure on journal subscriptions differ substantially between sources, as discussed in Section 6.2. Estimates of Indian expenditure on article processing charges are contested in the published literature, as noted in Section 10.2. In each case the paper reports the range.

4.6 Positionality

The first author is a doctoral researcher in library and information science at an Indian university whose research concerns the use of digital resources in state-sector colleges. This position affords direct

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knowledge of the conditions under which access operates in resource-constrained institutions, and it also carries an implicit interest in the expansion of access. Readers should weigh the analysis accordingly, particularly in Section 10.1, where the argument concerning institutional eligibility bears directly on the sector in which the authors work.

4.7 Limitations

- No primary data were gathered; the paper reports no user survey, interview or institutional case study.
- Utilisation figures originate with the implementing agencies and have not been independently audited.
- The scheme remains in Phase I, so any conclusion about its longer-term sustainability is necessarily provisional.
- The quality of comparative data is uneven: information on the European consortia and on Brazil is well documented, whereas coverage of several cases in Asia and West Asia is sparse.
- The contractual agreements between the Government and individual publishers lie outside the public domain, which places a firm constraint on any assessment of value for money.

5. THE INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION OF JOURNAL ACCESS IN INDIA

ONOS did not emerge in a vacuum. It rests upon an institutional inheritance without reference to which its design cannot be understood. That trajectory is summarised in Figure 3.

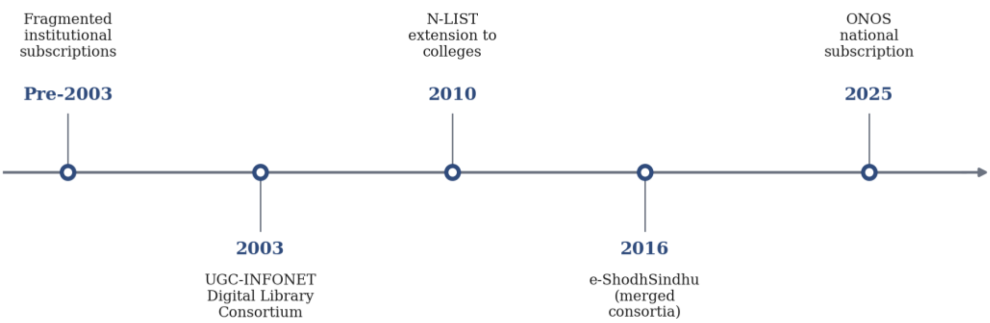

Figure 3. Evolution of centralised electronic journal access in India, pre-2003 to 2025.

Before 2003, access was overwhelmingly institutional. Each university negotiated separately, paid list or near-list prices, and accumulated a portfolio determined by its own budget. Duplication across neighbouring institutions was extensive; coverage in the affiliated college sector was negligible.

The consortium era began in 2003 with the Indian National Digital Library in Engineering Sciences and Technology, serving the technical education system (Arora & Agarwal, 2003), and with the UGC-INFONET Digital Library Consortium for the university sector. The model produced two benefits that are easy to underestimate in retrospect. It aggregated demand, converting many weak individual negotiating positions into a few strong collective ones, and it created a professional cadre with experience of licence negotiation, usage analysis and vendor management that had not previously existed within the Indian library system.

Its limitation was equally structural, and in the terms of this paper it was a boundary-rule limitation. Consortium membership was tied to institutional category and funding ministry, which left the numerically dominant affiliated college sector largely outside the arrangement. The N-LIST programme, launched in 2010, partially addressed this by extending a subset of resources to colleges, but the basket available to a college participant remained substantially thinner than that available to a university member.

By the middle of the last decade the multiplicity of consortia had itself become the policy problem. Ten consortia, operating under different ministries with different member lists and different negotiating teams, were purchasing overlapping content from the same publishers: e-ShodhSindhu under the Ministry of Education, the National Knowledge Resource Consortium, DeLCON, ERMED, DERCON, CERA, and the consortia of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, the Department of Atomic Energy, the Department of Space and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. Together these subscribed to approximately 8,000 electronic journals, with a substantial number of titles purchased more than once. In 2016 the UGC-INFONET and N-LIST programmes had themselves been merged into e-ShodhSindhu, a consolidation that reduced duplication within higher education but did not extend across ministries.

The first and least contested rationale for ONOS was therefore the elimination of this duplication. Whether the consolidation has delivered net financial savings is examined in Section 6.2.

6. THE RULES-IN-USE OF ONOS PHASE I

6.1 Position rules: governance and executing agency

ONOS was approved by the Union Cabinet on 25 November 2024 as a new Central Sector Scheme, funded entirely by the Union Government without a state matching contribution. The Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser played the principal role in conceptualisation, and the Principal Scientific Adviser chairs the Core Committee of Secretaries overseeing implementation. Operational responsibility rests with the Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education, which maintains the unified access portal.

The INFLIBNET Centre at Gandhinagar, an autonomous inter-university centre of the University Grants Commission, was designated implementing and executing agency. Institutionally, this is one of the sounder choices in the design. INFLIBNET had already operated UGC-INFONET, N-LIST and e-ShodhSindhu; it maintained established relationships with publishers, possessed an authentication infrastructure and brought more than twenty years of licensing experience. The scheme therefore builds upon rather than replaces existing national capability, and its position rules place negotiation in the hands of the actor best equipped to conduct it. The resulting structure is set out in Figure 4.

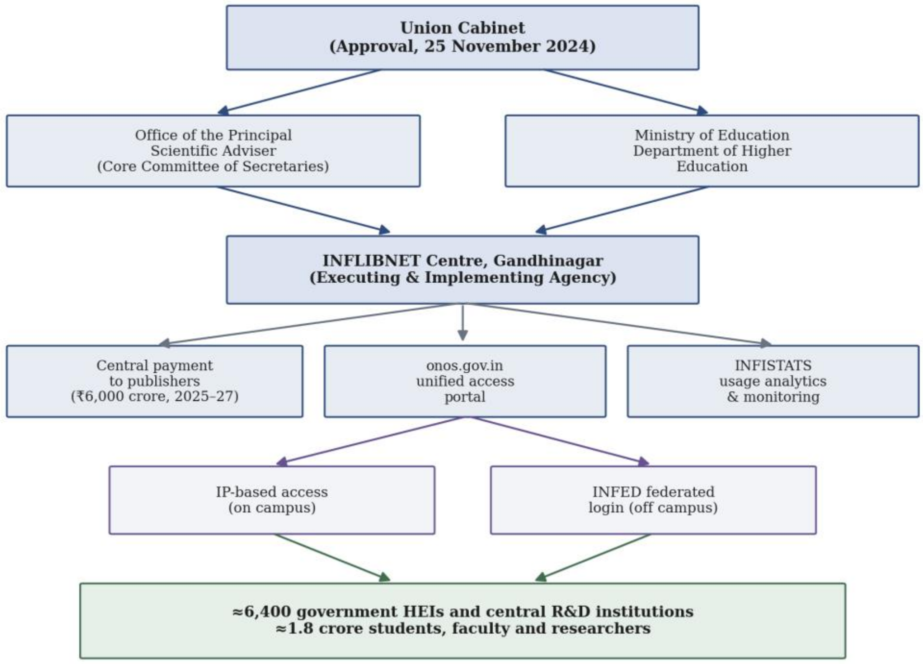

Figure 4. Governance and delivery architecture of ONOS Phase I.

6.2 Payoff rules: financing and the value-for-money question

An outlay of ₹6,000 crore has been allocated for disbursement over the three calendar years 2025 to 2027. Annual subscription expenditure is reported at approximately ₹1,800 crore, with the remainder directed to article processing charge support, reported at ₹150 crore a year, and to administrative costs. INFLIBNET makes payment centrally and directly to the publishers, and neither the institution nor the individual user is charged a subscription fee.

The central payment mechanism carries an administrative implication that deserves emphasis. Under the consortium model, a participating institution had to budget for its share, process the payment and account for it. Under ONOS that entire transactional layer disappears. For a small state college staffed by a single librarian and possessing no dedicated procurement capacity, this is not a peripheral simplification; it is the difference between participation and non-participation, and it is the most probable explanation for the rise in institutional uptake reported in Section 7.

Whether the scheme delivers savings is a more difficult question than the official framing suggests, and the answer depends entirely on the baseline adopted. The combined annual expenditure of the earlier consortia has been reported at approximately ₹850 crore. An answer placed before Parliament indicated that a survey by the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser had estimated total government expenditure on journal subscriptions in 2022 at approximately ₹995 crore. A committee report of April 2020 cited a figure of ₹1,500 crore per annum. Measured against any of these baselines, an outlay of approximately ₹1,800 crore a year represents an increase in absolute expenditure rather than a reduction.

This is not to suggest that the scheme represents poor value. Title coverage has risen from an estimated 8,000 to approximately 13,000, and the number of eligible institutions has increased several times over, so that expenditure per institution and per title has fallen substantially even as aggregate expenditure has risen. The point is a narrower but important one: the scheme is properly defended as the purchase of wider coverage rather than as a saving, and the continued framing of consolidation as a cost reduction is not supported by the baselines available in the public record.

6.3 Boundary rules: coverage and eligibility

Phase I includes the government institutions of higher learning, which include the central and state universities and colleges (including medical colleges) as well as the research and development institutions of the central government. The eligible base is estimated at approximately 6,400 institutions, covering some 1.8 crore students, faculty members and researchers. Institutions that receive no central or state government funding are not eligible, and the ONOS portal states this restriction explicitly.

Content coverage extends to journals published by approximately thirty international publishers, including the four largest commercial houses. All journals of an included publisher are accessible rather than a curated subset. This removes title-level selection disputes but equally removes any mechanism for excluding low-value content, and it means that the composition of the package is determined by publisher portfolios rather than by Indian research priorities. The number of accessible titles is reported at approximately 13,000. Books, magazines, economic and statistical databases and bibliographic databases fall outside the scheme. Table 2 summarises the principal parameters.

Table 2. Principal parameters of ONOS Phase I.

Parameter	Provision under Phase I
Cabinet approval	25 November 2024
Operational from	1 January 2025
Scheme type	Central Sector Scheme, fully funded by the Union Government
Duration	Calendar years 2025, 2026 and 2027
Total outlay	₹6,000 crore; annual subscription outlay approximately ₹1,800 crore; APC support reported at ₹150 crore annually
Executing agency	INFLIBNET Centre, Gandhinagar, an autonomous IUC of the UGC
Oversight	Core Committee of Secretaries chaired by the Principal Scientific Adviser
Consortia consolidated	Ten pre-existing consortia including e-ShodhSindhu, NKRC, DeLCON, ERMED, DERCON and CERA
Eligible institutions	Government HEIs, including central and state universities and colleges and medical colleges, and central government R&D institutions; approximately 6,400
Excluded institutions	Institutions receiving no central or state government funding
Publishers	Approximately 30, variously reported as 30 or 32

Parameter	Provision under Phase I
Titles	Approximately 13,000 peer-reviewed journals; all titles of an included publisher
Content excluded	Books, magazines, economic and statistical databases, bibliographic databases
Estimated beneficiaries	Approximately 1.8 crore students, faculty and researchers
Access mechanism	IP-based authentication on campus; INFED federated login off campus
Publishing support	APC assistance for selected gold open-access journals, reported at more than 430 titles
Usage monitoring	INFISTATS portal providing title-level usage statistics

6.4 Access and information rules

Access operates through the unified portal. Institutions register and thereafter provide access by two routes: IP-based authentication against the registered address range for on-campus use, and institutional credentials through the Indian Access Management Federation, INFED, for off-campus use, with credentials issued by the institution's nodal coordinator. Institutions lacking their own IP infrastructure may use INFED as their primary route.

This last provision addresses a real and widespread condition. Many colleges in India possess no fixed range of institutional IP addresses at all, and under a purely IP-based model these institutions would in effect have been excluded. The federated route removes that exclusion, but at the cost of creating a dependency on the nodal coordinator to enrol users and issue credentials, an administrative burden that not every college is able to sustain reliably.

Usage monitoring is carried out through the INFISTATS portal, which provides statistics at title level. Aggregate usage figures have been published; the allocation of expenditure across individual publishers has not.

6.5 Choice rules: the publishing component

Alongside reading access, the scheme meets the article processing charges of researchers who publish in a selected list of gold open-access journals, reported to comprise more than 430 titles and to be supported by approximately ₹150 crore a year. Scholars whose manuscripts have been accepted may apply for this funding through the portal.

It is the form of this provision that is important and not its size. It is a discretionary grant, for which the researcher must apply and which may be refused, rather than an entitlement written into the publisher agreements and conferred automatically by institutional affiliation. In the terms of the rule typology adopted here, ONOS assigns a right to read to the whole community but a publishing benefit to a few. That is precisely what distinguishes it from a read-and-publish arrangement, and it is the single design feature that most clearly separates ONOS from the German model discussed in Section 8. One qualification should be noted: the ONOS publisher list already extends to at least one read-and-publish arrangement, which suggests that the boundary is less absolute in practice than in principle, and that publishing entitlements can be negotiated where the will to do so exists.

6.6 The phased design

The Government has consistently presented ONOS as a phased programme, in which Phase I establishes the framework and subsequent phases extend it first to private institutions and then to the general public through libraries. The announced and envisaged phases are set out in Figure 5. They should be read as a statement of policy intent: Phase I alone has been approved and funded, and no budgetary provision had been made for the later phases at the time of writing.

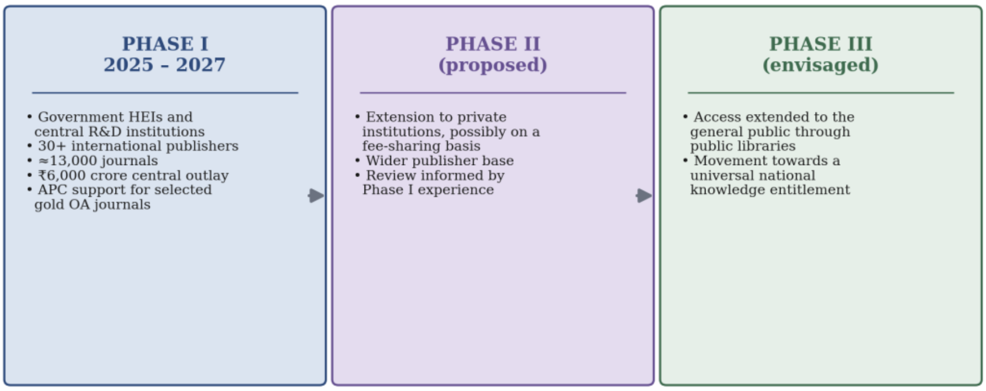

Figure 5. Announced and envisaged phases of ONOS. Phase I alone has been approved and funded.

7. PATTERNS OF INTERACTION: REPORTED FIRST-YEAR PERFORMANCE

7.1 Aggregate uptake

The figures released in March 2026 indicate substantial uptake in the first year of operation. Downloads of research articles exceeded 11.3 crore in calendar year 2025, with monthly volumes reported at approximately one crore. Institutional participation rose to nearly 5,800 institutions, against approximately 2,300 under the earlier consortium arrangements, and the beneficiary population rose to approximately one crore users from some 55 lakh. The change in the three headline parameters is shown in Figure 6.

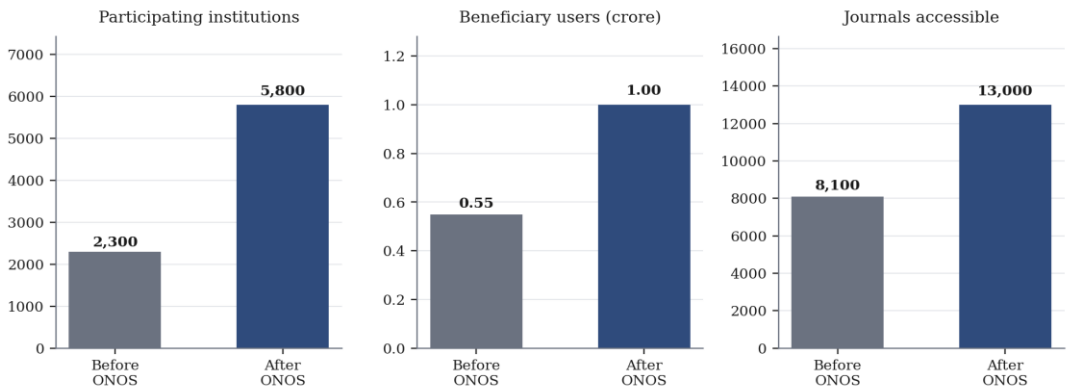

Figure 6. Reported changes in institutional participation, beneficiary users and available titles. Figures as reported by the implementing agencies.

Two observations follow. The most obvious achievement of the scheme is the growth in institutional participation: a more than twofold increase in participants within a single year, in a system whose record of institutional onboarding has been slow, indicates that the removal of the payment barrier addressed a genuine constraint on participation. The volume of downloads indicates that the resource is being used and not merely made available, which offers a preliminary answer to the concerns about under-utilisation raised at the design stage. It should be noted, however, that onboarding remains incomplete: approximately 5,800 institutions are participating, against an eligible base of approximately 6,400.

7.2 Concentration of usage by institution

The distribution of usage is more informative than its volume. The Indian Institute of Technology Madras recorded the highest institutional usage at 40.3 lakh downloads, followed by the Indian Institute of Science Bengaluru at 28.3 lakh, Banaras Hindu University at 15.3 lakh and the University of Delhi at 14.2 lakh. Figure 7 presents the leading institutions.

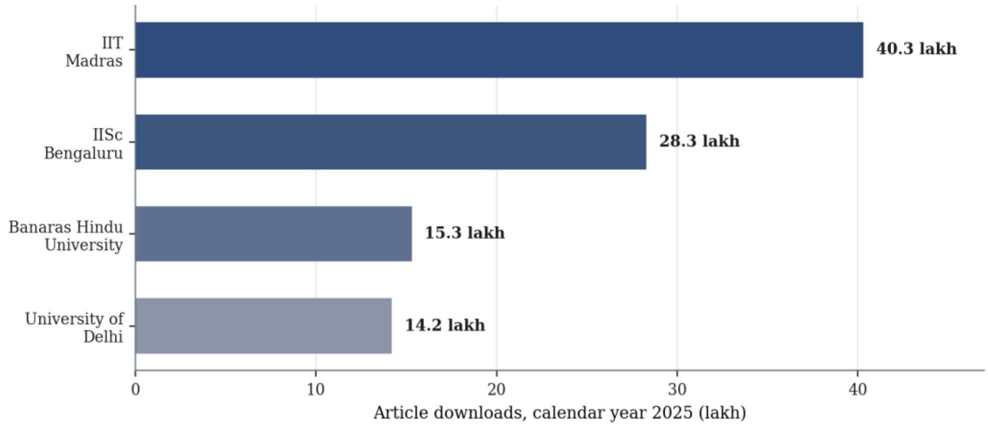

Figure 7. Reported article downloads at the four highest-usage institutions, calendar year 2025.

That the highest-usage institutions are precisely those which already possessed comprehensive subscription portfolios before ONOS is unsurprising, but it carries a direct policy implication. The institutions gaining most in entitlement are not the institutions generating most of the usage. In the framework adopted here, this is a divergence between the boundary rules, which have been successfully widened, and the patterns of interaction, which have not correspondingly broadened. The gap is not an access problem. It is a problem of research culture, user awareness and professional library capacity, and it is examined in Section 10.7.

7.3 Concentration of usage by publisher

The distribution across publishers is equally revealing. Elsevier ScienceDirect accounted for approximately 4.4 crore downloads, or some 37 per cent of the total, followed by Springer at approximately 2.2 crore or 18 per cent, the American Chemical Society at approximately 1.4 crore or 12 per cent, Wiley at approximately 1.1 crore or 9 per cent, Taylor and Francis at approximately 0.8 crore or 6 per cent and IEEE at approximately 0.6 crore or 5 per cent. Figure 8 presents the distribution.

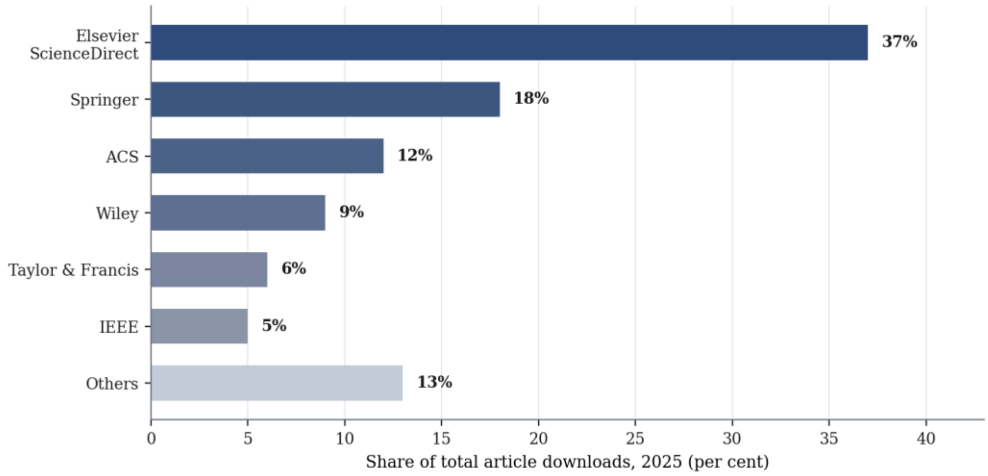

Figure 8. Reported distribution of article downloads by publisher, calendar year 2025.

Two publishers therefore account for approximately 55 per cent of national usage, and six for approximately 87 per cent. This concentration is the most analytically significant figure in the first-year data, and it has not previously been brought into the ONOS literature. It confirms empirically what the critical literature had argued on structural grounds: that the scheme's dependence on a small number of commercial suppliers is a feature of actual demand and not merely of the contract. It also establishes that the renewal position discussed in Section 10.6 is considerably weaker than a count of thirty publishers suggests, since the withdrawal of either of the two largest suppliers would remove a substantial proportion of national usage.

7.4 What may not be inferred

Download counts measure activity, not research outcome. They are sensitive to the denominator of enrolled users, to disciplinary composition, to the counting conventions of different publisher platforms and to duplicate retrievals. Claims linking ONOS to changes in citation performance or to India's share of global research output within the first eighteen months should be treated with considerable scepticism, since the causal chain from access to publication runs through a research and peer-review cycle substantially longer than the period observed. The first-year figures support statements about uptake. They do not yet support statements about impact.

8. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

India is not the first country to negotiate access at national scale. Read through the policy transfer categories of Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), ONOS represents a voluntary and selective emulation rather than a copy: it adopts the purchasing architecture of the national licence while declining the publishing entitlement that the most-cited European examples embed. Establishing that claim requires comparison with a wider set of cases than the literature has so far used.

8.1 Brazil: the CAPES Portal de Periódicos

The most instructive comparator for India is not Germany but Brazil. The Portal de Periódicos, created in 2000 by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel under the Ministry of Education, replaced paper subscriptions with a centralised national digital library across a continental-scale, federally organised, middle-income higher education system. It is reported to serve researchers and students at more than four hundred public institutions, providing several tens of thousands of journals together with extensive database and patent collections, at an annual cost to CAPES of the order of several hundred million reais and with download volumes of the order of fifteen million a month.

The case is instructive in four respects. First, the institutional form is closely similar: a central agency, federal funding, institutional rather than universal eligibility, reading access and no publishing entitlement. Second, Brazil has now operated the model for a quarter of a century, a horizon far longer than the three-year period within which India's Phase I questions will be settled. Third, the Brazilian experience offers a transferable lesson in political sustainability: the Portal became secure only once the scientifically dominant institutions of the state of São Paulo, previously served by separate state funding, were brought within it, which made the arrangement indispensable to the national academic community as a whole rather than to its periphery alone. The implication for India is that the exclusion of a large and influential segment of the higher education system, discussed in Section 10.1, is not only a question of equity but a question of the scheme's own political durability. Fourth, Brazil demonstrates the vulnerability of such schemes to fiscal contraction, having sustained significant science-budget reductions during periods of austerity, which bears directly on the renewal risk analysed in Section 10.6.

8.2 Germany: Projekt DEAL

Projekt DEAL was established in 2014 by the Alliance of Science Organisations, with the German Rectors' Conference tasked with negotiating nationwide agreements with the three largest commercial publishers. Its objectives were threefold: permanent full-text access to the entire portfolio of the selected publishers; automatic open-access publication of all articles by authors at German institutions; and pricing based on a transparent model tied to publication volume rather than to historical subscription spend.

The second and third objectives distinguish DEAL from a conventional consortium. The agreement concluded with Springer Nature with effect from 1 January 2020 entitled authors at participating institutions to publish immediately open access in the publisher's hybrid journals, with a publish-and-read fee of €2,750 per article paid from central subscription funds (Springer Nature, 2020). The mechanism inverts the conventional logic: the country pays for what its researchers publish and receives reading access as a consequence. A comparable agreement with Elsevier followed in 2023 after protracted negotiation, requiring a minimum opt-in threshold before taking effect (Vogel, 2023).

The German model is not beyond criticism. Because negotiation was confined to the three largest publishers, the arrangement creates an incentive for authors to publish with those same three houses, which may concentrate the market further. Its relevance to India is nonetheless direct: DEAL demonstrates that it is possible to negotiate nationally, to secure publishing rights and not merely reading rights, and to achieve transparency in the per-article price. It is, however, a high-income comparator operating in a mature open-access environment, and the assumption that its terms are straightforwardly available to India should not pass unexamined.

8.3 Egypt, Turkey and the eligibility question

The Egyptian Knowledge Bank, launched in 2016, provides access to scholarly and educational content on the basis of citizenship rather than institutional affiliation, with registration through national identity credentials, and UNESCO has described it as a core pillar of Egyptian education. Two features are instructive. The eligibility principle is precisely the universal model that the original Indian proposal contemplated and that Phase I does not implement. And subsequent transformative arrangements concluded for the Egyptian system have extended open-access publishing entitlements across public, private and national universities alike, addressing both of the gaps identified in the Indian design.

Turkey's EKUAL programme, operated by TÜBİTAK ULAKBİM since 2006, provides a further instructive contrast. It serves a large national research population across both public and foundation, that is privately established, universities. Turkey therefore demonstrates that the inclusion of private institutions within a nationally funded licence is administratively practicable, which weakens the implicit argument that the Indian exclusion is a matter of feasibility rather than of choice.

8.4 Other cases and the limits of the transformative model

Several further arrangements inform the typology. The Netherlands operates among the most advanced transformative models, in which national agreements have made the overwhelming majority of Dutch output with major publishers immediately open access. Sweden's Bibsam consortium demonstrated the exercise of genuine bargaining power in its cancellation of a major publisher agreement over price and open-access terms, and has more recently moved away from hybrid read-and-publish arrangements, indicating that the transformative model is itself contested in the jurisdictions that pioneered it. Poland's Virtual Library of Science operates a centrally funded national licence closely analogous to ONOS in form. South Africa's SANLiC has concluded transformative agreements that have shifted a measurable proportion of national output to open access, providing the closest middle-income precedent for a transition of the kind India has deferred. Table 3 presents the resulting typology.

Table 3. Typology of national and supranational access arrangements.

Arrangement	From	Eligibility basis	Rights secured	Funding	Distinguishing feature
ONOS (India)	2025	Government HEIs and central R&D only	Reading; discretionary APC support	Union Government, ₹6,000 crore for three years	Largest single-country reading entitlement by population
CAPES Portal (Brazil)	2000	Federal and public institutions	Reading only	Federal agency (CAPES)	Closest structural analogue; 25 years of operation
Projekt DEAL (Germany)	2019–20	Opt-in research institutions	Reading and automatic OA publishing	Central consortium funds	Published per-article publish-and-read fee

Arrangement	From	Eligibility basis	Rights secured	Funding	Distinguishing feature
EKB (Egypt)	2016	All citizens by national identity	Reading; OA publishing via later agreements	Government of Egypt	Universal eligibility rather than institutional
EKUAL (Turkey)	2006	Public and foundation universities	Primarily reading	TÜBİTAK ULAKBİM	Includes privately established institutions
UNL/UKB (Netherlands)	2015–	Universities and research institutes	Reading and OA publishing	University consortium	High proportion of national output made OA
Bibsam (Sweden)	1996	Member institutions	Reading; OA terms contested	National Library of Sweden	Demonstrated willingness to cancel a major agreement
WBN (Poland)	2010–	Higher education institutions	Reading; some transformative deals	Central government	Centrally funded national licence comparable in form
SANLiC (South Africa)	2023–	Public HEIs and research councils	Reading and OA publishing	Consortium and institutional	Middle-income transformative transition
Plan S (Europe)	2018	Funded researchers	Publishing conditions; no reading licence	Research funders	Mandate rather than purchase

Two axes organise the typology: whether eligibility follows institutional membership or citizenship, and whether the arrangement secures reading alone or reading together with publishing. Figure 9 positions the principal cases.

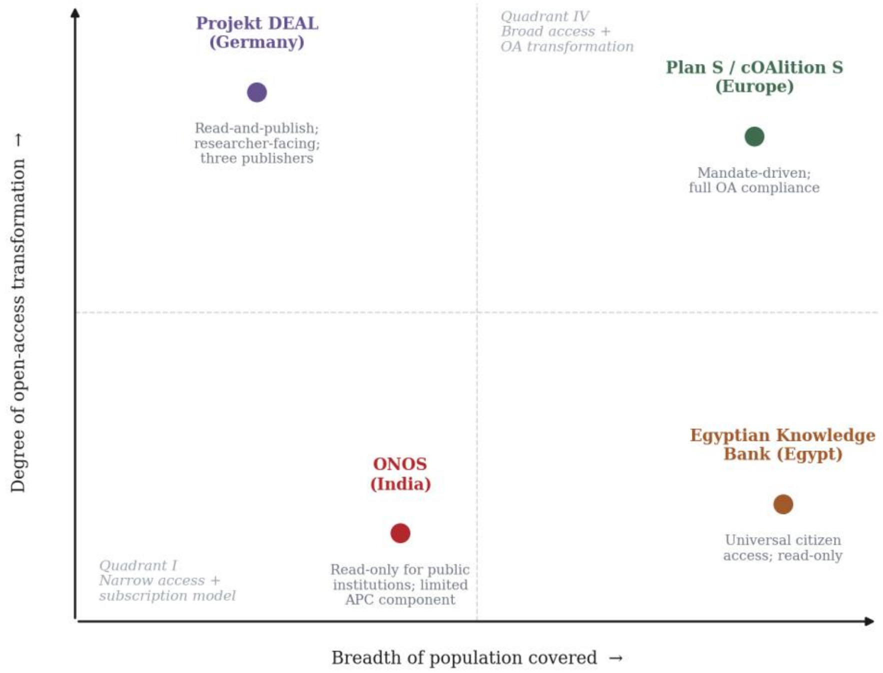

Figure 9. Positioning of national and supranational access models by breadth of eligibility and degree of open-access transformation.

ONOS occupies the lower-left region on both dimensions. This is not in itself a criticism, since a first-phase instrument may reasonably be conservative and the Brazilian case demonstrates that a reading-only national licence can be sustained for decades. It does, however, indicate the direction in which subsequent phases would need to move if the scheme's stated long-term ambitions, which include extension to private institutions and ultimately to the general public, are to be realised.

9. THE CASE FOR THE PRESENT DESIGN

Before advancing a critique it is necessary to state the case for the scheme as its architects and supporters make it, both because balance requires it and because several of the arguments are strong.

The efficiency argument is the official one. The Principal Scientific Adviser has framed the scheme as preventing overlap between subscriptions and reducing inefficient utilisation of funds, while extending access to institutions in tier-two and tier-three locations that the consortium model had not reached. The amalgamation of ten separate consortia operating under different ministries into a single arrangement is a genuine administrative achievement, and the scale of first-year participation reported in Section 7 indicates that the earlier arrangement was not meeting demand in full.

The negotiating-leverage argument holds that a single national buyer can secure terms unavailable to fragmented institutional purchasers. This is contested, and commentators including Madhan (2020) and others have argued that publishers tend to prevail against a centralised buyer whose alternative to agreement is politically unavailable. The argument nonetheless has force in the Indian case, where the counterfactual is not a strong distributed negotiating position but a very weak one.

The pragmatic argument deserves particular attention because it is the strongest response to the open-access critique. Writing in the Scholarly Kitchen shortly after the Cabinet decision, Rick Anderson characterised ONOS as an example of the victory of pragmatism over ideology, observing that the access gains for Indian researchers are real and immediate whatever the scheme's implications for the longer transition. The force of this position lies in its timescale. A researcher in a state college who could not read the literature in 2024 can read it in 2025. An open-access transition that would deliver the same result in a decade is not, from that researcher's standpoint, an equivalent good.

Finally, the principal alternative advanced by the critics is not costless. Diamond open access, in which neither reader nor author pays, faces documented difficulties of its own: surveys of diamond journals identify financial constraint as the most common threat to their sustainability, and closures have been reported even in well-resourced systems. To recommend a shift towards community-led publishing, as this paper does in Section 11, therefore carries an obligation to acknowledge that the alternative model has not yet demonstrated the stability that a national guarantee of access would require.

10. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: SEVEN STRUCTURAL GAPS

The gaps set out below are structural rather than operational: each is embedded in a particular class of rule within the design, and none would be resolved by better execution of the present arrangement.

10.1 Boundary rules: the exclusion of privately funded institutions

The eligibility boundary is the most consequential feature of Phase I. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education for 2021–22, India had 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges and 12,002 stand-alone institutions, with total enrolment approaching 4.33 crore. Government universities constituted 58.6 per cent of all universities and accounted for 73.7 per cent of university enrolment, while private universities accounted for the remaining 26.3 per cent of that enrolment. The great majority of colleges, where most Indian students are in fact enrolled, are privately managed.

The consequence is that a scheme whose declared purpose is equitable access has created a new inequality along an axis that did not previously carry this significance. The prior inequality was one of institutional wealth: well-funded institutions had access and poorly funded ones did not, irrespective of sector. The new inequality is one of institutional ownership. A poorly equipped private college in a district town, drawing its students from much the same social and economic background as the neighbouring government college, has no claim at all, while the government college has a full one. Where the objective is framed in terms of equity between learners rather than between institutions, an ownership-based boundary is difficult to defend in principle.

Two further considerations weaken the case for the present boundary. The Turkish arrangement demonstrates that the inclusion of privately established institutions within a nationally funded licence is administratively feasible. The Brazilian experience, in turn, indicates that a national scheme acquires political durability precisely by becoming indispensable to the whole of the academic community rather than to a part of it. The exclusion is defensible on grounds of fiscal prudence in a first phase. It is not defensible as a settled position, and it may prove imprudent even on the scheme's own terms.

10.2 Choice rules: the read-only character of the licence

ONOS secures the right to read. With the limited exception of the discretionary APC facility, it does not secure the right to publish open access. Indian researchers in receipt of ONOS access who wish to publish in an open-access venue continue to face article processing charges paid separately, whether from project funds, institutional funds or their own resources.

The scale of that continuing burden is contested but not trivial. One published estimate placed Indian expenditure on article processing charges for gold open-access articles at approximately seventeen million United States dollars for 2020, with the large majority flowing to a small number of commercial publishers; that estimate has been challenged in the same journal on methodological grounds, and the figure should therefore be treated as indicative rather than settled. What is not in dispute is the direction: India pays twice, once through the national subscription for reading and again, article by article, for open publication.

This is the core of the critique advanced by Koley and Lala (2022, 2024), who argue on the basis of open-access publication trends that a national subscription contract limits its own scope by considering only the subscription option. The counter-argument deserves statement: a read-and-publish arrangement is considerably more expensive per unit in a country whose publication volume is large and growing, and it commits the exchequer to a liability that scales with national output. A first-phase instrument that fixes the reading cost and defers the publishing question is a defensible sequencing decision. The difficulty is that the sequencing has not been made explicit, and no published timetable commits the Government to renegotiating on publishing terms at the Phase I review.

10.3 Boundary rules: restriction of coverage to journals

The scheme covers journals. Books, magazines, economic and statistical databases and bibliographic databases are excluded. The exclusion of bibliographic and citation databases is the most serious omission, because such databases are the instruments through which the journal literature is discovered and evaluated. An institution with comprehensive full-text access but no indexing and abstracting service is in the position of possessing a library without a catalogue, and the institutions least able to compensate through independent subscription are precisely those the scheme was designed to assist.

The exclusion also carries disciplinary consequences. In much of the humanities and in substantial areas of the social sciences, the monograph remains the principal vehicle of scholarly communication. A scholar in these fields therefore derives considerably less from the scheme than a researcher in the experimental sciences does. The skew of first-year usage towards the science and technology publishers recorded in Section 7.3 is consistent with this imbalance, although it does not by itself establish it.

10.4 Information rules: the absence of price transparency

The total expenditure is in the public domain; its distribution among publishers is not. An external observer therefore cannot determine the cost per publisher or per title, whether the terms secured compare favourably with those obtained by other national consortia, or how effective the Indian negotiating effort has been.

The contrast with Germany is instructive. The publish-and-read fee in the DEAL agreements is a published figure, which permits independent scrutiny and provides a benchmark for other negotiating consortia. The absence of comparable disclosure in the Indian case probably reflects the confidentiality clauses customary in such contracts, but its effect is to place a large sum of public money beyond the ordinary procedures of public accountability. The usage data discussed in Section 7.3 sharpen the argument: it is now publicly known that a single publisher accounts for some 37 per cent of national downloads, but not what share of national expenditure that publisher receives, and it is precisely the relationship between those two shares that an assessment of value for money would require. Publishing the aggregate annual cost per publisher, without disclosing full commercial terms, would improve this position materially without prejudicing future negotiation.

10.5 Payoff rules: weak articulation with domestic and diamond open access

ONOS directs a very large stream of public money towards international commercial publishers. It contains no corresponding provision to strengthen the Indian journal system or to subsidise community-based publishing in which neither reader nor author pays.

The consideration here is one of opportunity cost. National investment on this scale, sustained across successive phases, might instead endow domestic open-access infrastructure constituting a permanent asset, rather than purchase access that lapses when the subscription ends. The objection that the two are not mutually exclusive is well taken: the appropriate response is not to abandon the subscription but to ensure that a defined proportion of the expenditure is channelled into domestic capability. The present design contains no such earmark. The difficulties of diamond open-access sustainability noted in Section 9 suggest that the transition must be planned and financed rather than merely declared as an objective.

10.6 The sustainability of the arrangement beyond 2027

Phase I is funded to the end of calendar year 2027. Renewal will require fresh Cabinet approval and a fresh allocation, and the renewal negotiation will proceed from a materially weaker position than the original one.

The reason is structural and is well documented in the consortium literature. Once a national licence is in place, institutions dismantle their own arrangements: subscriptions are cancelled, local licences are allowed to lapse and the capacity to negotiate independently atrophies. The realistic alternative to agreement at renewal is therefore not a return to the previous arrangement but an interruption of access across the whole of public higher education at a stroke. A negotiator with no politically available option of walking away does not negotiate from strength.

The first-year usage data make this exposure sharper than the number of participating publishers would suggest. Where two publishers account for approximately 55 per cent of national downloads, the Government’s exposure at renewal rests on two bilateral relationships rather than on thirty. The Brazilian experience of sustained science-budget contraction during periods of austerity indicates that the risk is fiscal as well as commercial. Managing it requires either a credible fallback, in practice sustained investment in repositories and national open-access capacity, or a multi-year ceiling on price escalation agreed in advance. Neither is publicly evident in the present arrangement.

10.7 The gap between entitlement and use

Entitlement is not use. The gap between them is mediated by conditions no licence can supply: reliable campus connectivity, functioning institutional authentication, a librarian trained to configure and troubleshoot access, faculty awareness that the entitlement exists, and student information literacy sufficient to exploit it.

These conditions are unevenly distributed, and their distribution correlates with precisely the institutional characteristics ONOS was designed to compensate for. An institution that lacked subscription budget is disproportionately likely also to lack bandwidth, technical staff and a professionally qualified librarian. The usage concentration reported in Section 7.2 is the first empirical indication that this concern is well founded: the institutions generating the largest volumes are the institutions that were already research-intensive. Chhetri (2024) argues that library and information science professionals occupy the decisive position in closing this gap through user training, orientation and continuous outreach. That judgement is endorsed here, and the corresponding professional capacity is, in the authors' assessment, the most seriously under-resourced element of ONOS implementation. Table 4 summarises the seven gaps.

Table 4. Structural gaps, associated rule class and indicative policy response.

No.	Rule class	Gap	Consequence	Indicative response
1	Boundary	Exclusion of privately funded institutions	Inequality reorganised around institutional ownership; scheme's political base narrowed	Phased inclusion in Phase II on a graduated contribution basis
2	Choice	Read-only licence	Indian authors continue to pay APCs separately; no progress on publishing terms	Negotiate a read-and-publish component at the Phase I review
3	Boundary	Journals only; no citation or bibliographic databases	Discovery infrastructure absent; humanities and social sciences underserved	Extend to citation databases and subsequently to e-books
4	Information	No published per-publisher pricing	Expenditure insulated from scrutiny; value for money unassessable	Publish aggregate annual cost per publisher
5	Payoff	No support for domestic or diamond open access	Public funds flow outward with no permanent domestic asset created	Earmark a defined proportion of the outlay for domestic OA infrastructure
6	Payoff	Post-2027 renewal exposure concentrated in two publishers	Weak negotiating position once institutional	Multi-year escalation cap and parallel

No.	Rule class	Gap	Consequence	Indicative response
			subscriptions are dismantled	investment in repositories
7	Position	Entitlement not converted into use in weaker institutions	Formal equality of access coexisting with unequal effective access	Funded national capacity-building and information literacy programme

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations follow from the analysis and are addressed to three audiences.

11.1 For policy authorities

1. Extend eligibility to privately funded institutions in Phase II on a graduated contribution basis, with the contribution scaled to institutional enrolment and fee structure, so that the equity objective is defined in relation to learners rather than to institutional ownership, and so that the scheme's political constituency is broadened before renewal.
2. Introduce a read-and-publish component at the Phase I review, beginning with the publishers accounting for the largest share of Indian output and of national usage, so that reading access and publishing entitlement are secured within a single negotiation.
3. Publish the aggregate annual cost per publisher, without disclosing commercially sensitive contractual terms, to permit independent scrutiny, benchmarking against other national consortia and assessment of value for money against usage.
4. Earmark a defined share of the overall outlay, of not less than five per cent, for domestic open-access infrastructure, including institutional repositories, national preprint capacity and the long-term subsidy of Indian journals that levy no charge on authors.
5. Secure a ceiling on price escalation in the renewal contract and maintain parallel investment in repository infrastructure, so that the country holds a credible alternative at the point of renewal.
6. Publish the criteria and the schedule of the Phase I review, so that the decision to defer the publishing question is identifiable as a sequencing decision rather than a rejection.

11.2 For the executing agency

7. Accord priority to the inclusion of bibliographic and citation databases, since discovery infrastructure determines how far the full-text entitlement can be exploited, and its absence falls most heavily on institutions without independent subscriptions.
8. Publish disaggregated utilisation statistics by institutional type, state and broad discipline, so that the distribution of use, and not merely its total volume, becomes visible to policy.
9. Complete the onboarding of the remaining eligible institutions and report separately on those that remain unregistered, since non-registration is itself a diagnostic of institutional capacity.
10. Establish a funded national capacity-building programme to train library staff at participating institutions, with particular attention to institutions in tier-two and tier-three locations and to colleges without dedicated technical staff.

11.3 For the profession

11. Treat the conversion of entitlement into use as a professional responsibility, through structured orientation, embedded information literacy instruction and sustained faculty outreach.
12. Undertake and publish institution-level utilisation studies, since the empirical base required for the Phase I review does not presently exist and will not be created by the implementing agency alone.

12. CONCLUSION

One Nation One Subscription resolves a problem that Indian higher education had failed to resolve for three decades. The removal of the payment barrier more than doubled institutional participation within a single year and extended access to a class of institution that consortium arrangements had consistently failed to reach. Judged against the objective of equalising the ability to read the international journal literature within the public higher education system, the scheme has succeeded, and the scale of that success should not be understated by those critical of its design.

Judged as an act of commons construction, the assessment must be more qualified. ONOS purchases access to an enclosed resource for a defined community and a defined term. It does not alter the terms on which knowledge is produced, owned or disseminated. Its boundary rules exclude the larger part of Indian higher education by enrolment; its choice rules grant reading without publishing; its information rules withhold from public scrutiny the very data on which value for money would be assessed; and its payoff rules commit substantial public expenditure without building any permanent domestic asset. The first-year data add a further consideration that the existing literature has not registered: national usage is concentrated to a degree that leaves the renewal position dependent on two bilateral relationships rather than thirty.

The appropriate conclusion is therefore neither endorsement nor rejection but a judgement about the kind of instrument this is. ONOS is transitional. It is well suited to the problem it was designed to solve and poorly suited to the problem that will present itself at the end of Phase I. Whether it is judged successful in the longer term will depend less on its own performance than on what is built alongside it: publishing entitlements secured through negotiation rather than purchased article by article, a domestic open-access infrastructure with permanent asset value, a boundary wide enough to make the scheme politically indispensable, and a library workforce equipped to convert formal entitlement into actual capability. The scheme has bought India three years. The question that matters is what is constructed within them.

Two research priorities follow directly. The first is a disaggregated utilisation study establishing how use is distributed across institutional categories, states and disciplines, since the aggregate figures presently available conceal precisely the variation that policy needs to see. The second is a systematic assessment of institutional readiness in the weaker segment of the eligible population, covering connectivity, authentication capability and professional staffing, since it is in that segment that the gap between entitlement and use is likely to be widest and the case for complementary investment strongest. Neither study has been conducted. Both should be, before the Phase I review is concluded.

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