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Case Notes: Open Access Advocacy Workshop: Maximising Research Quality and Impact

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CASE NOTES:
OPEN ACCESS ADVOCACY WORKSHOP: MAXIMISING RESEARCH QUALITY AND IMPACT

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Introduction

Africa has many large and small-scale development challenges, but exhibits very low levels of research output and limited capacity to answer research questions related to these challenges (Looi, 2009).[2] According to Dr Newton Kunwendo, Malawi College of Medicine, Director of the Southern Africa Consortium for Research Excellence (SACORE):

> *The challenges to research in Africa are mostly the lack of resources and infrastructure. Local funding is inadequate, as are the number of qualified researchers able to provide training and leadership. There are also problems with Internet connectivity, research administration and getting proper laboratory facilities and equipment. Yet the major obstacle we face is probably the prevailing limited understanding about scientific research and its benefits. Science is a profession and a long-term commitment, and its returns are not always dramatic, nor immediate (cited in Looi, 2009).*

Malawi has a stock of research output in a variety of forms, including technical reports and journal articles that could have influenced policy decisions and stimulated further research. However, these documents are locked up in the offices, libraries and resource centres of the country's higher education institutions. Consequently, important policy decisions have been made without considering the available evidence. Malawi has been successful in combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although reports of the success stories are available, these have not been widely disseminated within and outside the country. Lives may possibly be involved; for example, the research on prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV in Blantyre clinics could be equally valid in Lilongwe or Chiradzulu – if it were accessible.

The workshop on Open Access: Maximising Research Quality and Impact (MALICO, MAREN, SARUA, eIFL.net, 2009) brought together researchers, research managers and policy-makers, librarians and ICT specialists to discuss how to raise the visibility of research outputs from universities and research institutions in Malawi and how to build their capacities in global

1 Iryna Kuchma and Kondwani Wella report on the 'Open Access Advocacy Workshop: Maximising Research Quality and Impact' which took place at Kamuzu College of Nursing (KCN), University of Malawi in Lilongwe, on 29 and 30 October 2009, organised by the Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO), the Malawi Research and Education Network (MAREN), the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) and eIFL.net. These notes are published for their potential value to researchers in the field.

2 See also the formation of the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA), http://web.wits.ac.za/NewsRoom/NewsItems/CARTA.htm

knowledge sharing. The objective of the workshop was to discuss the benefits of open access for Malawi.

'Open access is sweeping the world', proclaimed Professor Leonard Kamwanja, Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi and Chair of UbuntuNet Alliance, in his welcoming speech. He argued that this provides many opportunities for research organisations, such as MALICO, which, at its founding five years ago, planned to create an open access national digital repository of research in Malawi.

The seminar covered a wealth of diverse topics, including:

- economic, social and educational benefits to making research outputs available without financial, legal and technical barriers to access;
- how open access and institutional repositories can help to maximise the visibility of research publications and improve the quality, impact and influence of research;
- how to disseminate research results and collect and curate outputs in digital format in order to showcase the quality of research in universities.

Practical sessions addressed open access policies and copyright management, including licensing open access content to encourage re-use and sharing, and recommendations on how to plan and set up an open repository.

This report focuses on some key themes presented to the workshop.

Opening access to knowledge in Southern African universities

Many of the restrictions on access to knowledge in Africa, but particularly in the Southern Africa region, revolve around restrictive copyright practices and regulations, a lack of access to Internet-based technologies and outdated paradigms for knowledge collection and dissemination. There is also a lack of creative and effective government supported enabling environments within higher education to match the vision of African leaders for knowledge and innovation in Africa in the 21st century.

The presentation of the report *Opening access to knowledge in Southern African universities* (Abrahams et al, 2008), suggested a series of recommendations to address these challenges. It reflected on the positioning of Southern African universities in the 'knowledge society' and briefly discussed global and local knowledge production, demonstrating the abundance of knowledge versus the scarcity of access to knowledge, the contestation over 'valid forms of knowledge' and the conversion from grey literature to accredited scholarly publishing. Questions were posed and discussed regarding the value of higher education in Africa, compared with a developing country such as India, where higher education is regarded as the basis for development in the new century.

The interactive discussion that ensued on the changing practices relating to research production and dissemination raised a number of issues. Academics are increasingly using the Internet as an aid to teaching and are encouraging students to use this medium to retrieve information and undertake research. Going online is driven by the need to find quick and convenient access to information relevant to research. Journals tend to be most often cited in the student research papers, followed by conference presentations. Health and life scientists tend to cite research papers from the region, but most of the researchers in Malawi are not really aware of research and scientific outputs produced in the region. Even when these outputs are freely available in digital form, there is still a need to better organise the collections and to strengthen curricula with regional research outputs.

The discussion made it apparent that there is still a false assumption that making research outputs publicly available will lower the chances of researchers for success in the fierce competition for limited research funding and promotion. The application of knowledge was another issue raised, as there are often large gaps between theoretical studies and their practical applications. Irrigation engineering was mentioned as one area where there is a need to apply existing findings and to partner with industries to solve the problems in this field. The lack of availability of applied research consultancy reports was noted, as many of these are not placed in the public domain, but held by researchers and donor agencies.

Open Access institutional repositories in South Africa

Ina Smith, a digital librarian now based at the University of Stellenbosch, drew on the University of Pretoria Research Focus Areas to demonstrate the increased understanding of the importance of research. The presentation pointed to the increasing complexity of research questions and the need to leverage existing resources. It addressed the issue of the increased mobility of researchers who need better research exchange opportunities and seek to demonstrate the impact of research on the society in order to be better funded. To meet these needs and to gain greater impact for its research, the University of Pretoria has established UPSpace,[3] a full-text Open Access digital research repository.

In this changing research environment, research libraries need to support education innovations and research excellence, providing a seamless electronic information service to academics, along with facilities that create a conducive and stimulating environment for scholarship. To answer the concerns of researchers in Malawi, the presenter demonstrated that open access institutional repositories in South Africa have contributed to increased h-indexes[4] of the researchers. For research libraries, institutional repositories have brought new roles and responsibilities, created new communities of practice, and required a changed mind-set, greater organisational learning, teamwork and collaboration with the faculty.

Irish–African partnership for research capacity building

Niamh Brennan, Programme Manager, Research Information Systems & Services, Trinity College Library, presented data on the position of Malawi in ISI indexes, showing how in recent years the number of publications has almost doubled and the number of citations has increased significantly, strengthening the ranking of Malawi in respect of clinical medicine, immunology, microbiology, agricultural and social sciences. It was argued that this research should be available via academic libraries in Malawi through the medium of the Internet.

The presentation, a case study of Trinity College, Ireland, discussed the advantages of higher education institutions having a coherent information policy designed to address the needs of library services and e-learning, as well as a system for electronic publications and records management. Trinity's current research information system is CV-driven, with every researcher having a personal URL and research web-page with a live feed to the faculty web pages and links to research publications, e-theses, grey literature and images in the Trinity Access to Research Archive (TARA). TARA is fully integrated with a research support system

3 http://repository.up.ac.za

4 The h-index or Hirsch-index reflects the number of publications and number of citations per publication for a researcher, see http://en/wikipedia.org/wiki/H-index

and brings added value to the records, including links to research profiles, ISI citation records, links to the full text, and more. This successful model of an integrated research information system is being extended to African institutions through the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP).[5]

IAP is a three-year project (2008 – 2010) bringing together the nine universities in Ireland with universities in Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda, in a partnership to develop a coordinated approach to research capacity building. Among the project activities is the development of a research portal to link Irish and African universities in a virtual community. This portal is intended to support collaborative research with African universities and to provide a forum for scientific communication, a platform for electronic consultation, and a digital repository and research register in four key areas – health, education, gender and ICT.

Open Access to research in Malawi

Kondwani Wella, KCN College Librarian and eIFL-Open Access Country Coordinator in Malawi, demonstrated four cases when 'open' information is not necessarily accessible or easily retrievable. Articles published by Bunda College researchers cannot be accessed in Malawi, and the book, *Poverty in Africa*, costs far too much, while conference papers, theses and dissertations may be freely available but are not searchable. He questioned whether Malawi has embraced open access, whether all students and academics can manage information using the Internet, whether researchers still trust librarians, whether librarians are doing their job effectively given the new technologies, and whether there is the necessary level of collaboration between librarians and researchers. He argued for Malawian librarians to address their own weaknesses, not simply to argue that 'the world is unfair'.

A number of universities and colleges in Malawi were shown to already be working on open repository projects – Greenstone and DSpace repositories are being developed in Bunda College, Chancellor College, College of Medicine and Mzuzu University. DATAD[6] theses and a dissertations repository is maintained by MALICO. Furthermore, MALICO, MAREN and UbuntuNet Alliance are working to improve Internet connectivity and to strengthen collaboration between librarians, researchers, policy-makers and ICT professionals. Librarians in Malawi have been trained or retrained to embrace new paradigms. There are open source solutions available as well as government support for tertiary education, research, science and technology. With some funding for capital equipment and the strengthening of MALICO in partnership with MAREN and the National Research Council of Malawi, universities and research institutions will be able to build a national federation of open repositories to maximise the visibility of research publications and to improve the quality, impact and influence of research.

Intellectual property law restrictions, lack of faculty and researcher buy-in, lack of institutional support, and the absence of collaboration and partnerships were cited among the challenges faced.

5 http://www.irishafricanpartnership.ie/

6 DATAD is the Database of African Theses and Dissertations, held by the Association of African Universities, http://www.aau.org/datad/index.htm

Conclusion

Open access is indeed sweeping the world and many countries on the African continent. While progress is noted, as in the discussions and debates at the Malawi workshop, the posing of questions for Malawi and other southern African countries and working out responses which will bring greater accessibility to researchers, academics and students, should remain high on the agenda. The challenges are great at institutional level. However, working towards growing collaboration among higher education libraries such as in MALICO, national research and education networks such as MAREN working with UbuntuNet Alliance, national research councils and regional university associations, could foster a successful movement for change at institutional level for the benefit of researchers, universities and society at large. ❑

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