

AFRICA: The availability of academic journals

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Research requires a good flow of the latest scholarly information - books, journals, data - and Sub-Saharan universities have long faced particular challenges. Academics frequently comment that a major impediment to their own work, including their ability to publish, is the lack of access to the work of their peers elsewhere.

Anecdotes of researchers working hard to complete a paper for submission, only to find something similar was published the previous year or that they have failed to acknowledge important new debates or data, are not uncommon.

But the past decade has shown considerable efforts to address this information gap.

In fact, a study published by the Association of Commonwealth Universities last year suggests that the picture may actually be much brighter than is often assumed. Many accounts lament the empty shelves of university libraries, but they tend to miss the huge volume of information that academics and students can now access online.

The shift to electronic publishing, and the associated reductions in the costs of printing and shipping, has given rise to a number of initiatives for low-income countries.

Notably, these include: the United Nations' managed schemes for health, agricultural and environmental journals - Health Inter-Network Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA) and Online Access to Research in the Environment (OARE); the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications' Program for the Enhancement of Information (PERii); in addition to the work of Electronic Information from Libraries; and a whole host of other smaller programmes.

The scale of what is now available online is impressive.

PERii alone has negotiated access to more than 23,000 full-text journals in all fields, while HINARI counts over 7,500, AGORA 1,900, and OARE more than 2,990. Additional features are the growing number of open access journals: the Directory of Open Access Journals lists some 6,317. Librarians have worked hard to secure this content, too.

Books are still a major gap, and their expense accounts for many empty shelves. However, as e-books come online, print on-demand develops and local publishers grow, these may support a hopeful prognosis.

Comparing journal collections at the universities of Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Malawi and Rwanda revealed that there was remarkably good availability of some of the top Thomson Reuters (Institute for Scientific Information)-ranked journals. In fact, 79% of the top 20 journals, across 15 subject areas, were readily available.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in some fields the status quo was stronger than others. In agriculture, biology, materials science, anthropology and politics availability was over 90%, while in mathematics it was just 25%.

The Thomson Reuters measure is far from perfect, of course. It over-represents titles with Euro-American origins and excludes many regionally or nationally published titles (which may contain work of particular relevance to Africa). Similarly, taking just 20 journals in each area provides only a snapshot.

Yet availability, assuming of course that it is sustained, is no longer the primary problem. African universities are not so far behind their peers elsewhere, either. Two European institutions had 95% availability overall, but it is still a favourable comparison.

Technology is commonly singled out as the principal barrier to access. African universities do not enjoy the same access to the internet and to good computing facilities, as their peers elsewhere, and still pay considerably more than northern institutions for what they do get.

But there have been significant improvements. New undersea cables have brought high-speed broadband to the east African coast, with new west coast cables also being laid. National research and education networks have begun to deliver this across the region, investing in the terrestrial infrastructure and driving down costs.

Computing facilities are also improving, although demand easily outstrips the gains. Most academics, in the four universities taking part in this study, had a personal computer on their desk. Student facilities are a bigger issue. Having thousands of journals available means little to a student who queues (and, in some cases, pays) to use a crowded computer lab.

But infrastructure aside, 'e-readiness' appears to be the greater challenge - the need for universities to change attitudes and approaches to technology.

If availability is good and technology is steadily improving, what else accounts for an academic's inability to get the needed research?

A major obstacle appears to be basic awareness. Academics and postgraduates gave lists of titles that were essential but unavailable; yet, 72% of these publications turned out to be already within current subscriptions.

While librarians work hard to communicate with their users, the messages clearly do not always connect. Partly, this is down to the complexity of routes in - different databases, collections, archives, back files - and insufficiently targeted support where libraries profile their wares by discipline or research theme. The disassociation of articles from their parent publications in online collections means that some academics have relatively little awareness of major journals in their field.

A critical facet of any contemporary researcher is online search skills - more than just an ability to tap words in Google. Screen recordings revealed simplistic search strategies that left much high quality, peer reviewed content and subscriptions undiscovered.

While a great deal depends on technology and individual skills, wider organisation dynamics account for a lot, as well. Many of the departments, whose staff we spoke to, engaged in relatively little research.

The demands of teaching - and in some cases the ability to earn an additional salary through evening teaching - and the lure of better-paid consultancies not only takes academics' time but also erodes research cultures. Likewise, not much use of scholarly journals is required for that matter.

Further organisational challenges exist within and outside of libraries. The de-linking of libraries and academic departments and the resultant low status of librarians, under-developed relationships between libraries and information technology departments - which now have ever-more converging mandates - all seemed to play a role.

Libraries, too, need to increase the skills, confidence and motivation of their staff and to take a more proactive approach. Information skills ought to be a greater part of research-methods courses, for example, and librarians may have a role to play here.

The strength of libraries depends on their links to academic faculties, but the strengths of research and teaching depend on the quality of their libraries, as well.

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