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An assessment of the status of open access resources in Kenyan university libraries

Jotham Milimo Wasike

Introduction

Background of the study

Today, access to scholarly research is improving as a result of the growth of institutional repositories (IR) and associated IT developments (Abangi, 1995). For example, an increasing number of universities are encouraging students to submit their theses and projects to open access (OA) platforms in electronic formats. Information has therefore become a key resource in contemporary social and economic life upon which universities depend in managing their affairs (Liz, 2007). Information output is an indispensable ingredient in education, innovation and diffusion of knowledge, and thereby acts as a bridge for turning the results of knowledge into realistic productive entities. University libraries are centres for collection, processing, and storage of traditional materials as well as for distribution of information resources in OA, and are important ideological and cultural forces with far reaching implications for society (Kavulya, 2010).

The university library has been seen as an instrument of OA, alongside lecture and discussion methods, with the librarian serving as a teacher and a guide to students in the ways of investigation and research (Bakewell, 1991). This has been achieved by first acquiring information materials through OA that support every course in the curriculum and every faculty research project, and second by organizing the content for easy free access, while ensuring that such OA is facilitated by giving users the necessary skills to retrieve the required information. It is widely believed that university education values self-motivated discovery on the part of

students by presuming the existence of large collections of information resources that will provide a rich variety of ideas and diverse viewpoints to the user. All of these make the library an instrument of education through OA by contributing to the intellectual development of the user (Adeya, 2000).

OA to up-to-date scientific information resources is the first condition for quality research, and it is only through a library well-equipped and endowed with print and electronic information resources that scholars can keep pace with developments in various disciplines and transmit the same to students (Audrey, 1996). Indeed the creation of academic centres for undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes cannot be achieved without OA and good library facilities. A strategy to develop a university OA service is therefore a fundamental component of ensuring high standards of teaching, learning and research processes in the university (Kavulya, 2004).

Literature review

According to the BOAI definition, Bailey (2006) reiterates:

Open access applies to publications that are freely availability on the public Internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the Internet itself.

Suber (2006) advises that information users are free to use OA publications as long as they give due credit to the author.

OA does not require a subscription or any other form of payment, either personally or through a university for use, nor does it require copyright and licensing restrictions (Herkema, 2003).

OA initiatives take advantage of modern communications technology (Munatsi, 2010) to make relevant and up-to-date scholarly information more accessible and affordable to the public worldwide. Therefore, it enjoys a wider audience enforced by authors' expanded participation and distribution of their work to a more diverse audience (Albert, 2006). In this regard, the public benefits from having access to the best and most up-to-date information available, including medical research and scientific discoveries, with studies showing a correlation between OA publication and increase in citation-count ranging between 50 and 250 percent (Oren, 2008). OA initiatives acknowledge the public's right to access the findings of research that is paid for by their taxes, for example, many major publicly-funded granting agencies, including the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the National Research Council have adopted OA policies requiring that the results of funded research be made freely available in an OA repository (Young, 2001). However, supporters, of OA argue that OA, is not self-publishing, nor a way to bypassing peer-review and publication, nor is it a kind of second-class, cut-print publishing route, but simply a means to make research results freely available on-line to the whole research community (Katebere and Kate, 2008). Proponents of OA think that most of the research is paid for by taxpayers through government grants, and therefore they have a right to access the results of what

they funded (Okoye and Ejikeme, 2010). This is one of the primary reasons for the creation of advocacy groups such as The Alliance for Taxpayer Access in the US (Suber, 2006).

Methodology

The study employed descriptive research by engaging in formal interviews, informal discussions as well as review of the existing related relevant literature in the four universities in Kenya: namely Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), University of Nairobi (UoN), Strathmore University (SU) and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT).

The university librarians four were interviewed face to face, while the top university administrators two and students two from each participating university were involved through discussions. The study therefore had a total of 20 respondents. The study focused on ascertaining the status of university libraries in Kenya in the implementation of OA and what the respondents thought were the key advantages of having OA resources in their respective universities.

Study findings

The responses from interviews and discussions carried out during the study in the four universities included 20 (100 percent) respondents. The study findings had a number of outcomes which included: OA has not yet been embraced fully by the universities as indicated by the majority, 14 (70 percent) of the respondents. However, the study noted that the ministry of information and communication in conjunction with other relevant stakeholders have sponsored, and are providing, an enabling environment for the establishment of OA platforms as indicated by half, ten (50 percent) of the respondents. The initiatives of OA have drastically improved the university library information dissemination as stated by nine (46 percent) respondents. Subsequently, seven (35 percent) respondents argued that OA has enhanced scholarly research, while seven (35 percent) respondents indicated that it has grown tremendously with a broadened

audience worldwide. The respondents, 13 (66 percent) also stated that scientific research is increasingly being built on the ideas and knowledge of others within and without the university, while the Internet continues to offer the possibility to make research results in the form of electronic publications freely accessible worldwide as observed by majority, 15 (75 percent) of the respondents. One librarian argued that:

[...] public access to the World Wide Web and the low-cost distribution technology has fueled the Open Access movement by prompting both the “green open” access self-archiving of non-open access journal articles and the creation of “gold open” access journals.

Another university librarian stated categorically that conventional non-OA journals cover publishing costs through access tolls such as subscriptions, site-licenses or pay-per-view and some non-OA journals provide OA after an embargo period of six to 12 months or longer.

OA has provided the means for researchers to make their research results available to anyone, anywhere, at any time as argued by 14 (70 percent) respondents. This applies to journal articles regardless of whether or not their library has a subscription to the journal in which the articles were published as well as to other types of research output such as conference papers, theses or research reports. One of the university administrators observed that “authors who publish in OA journals retain their copyright and control their own work”. Research findings indicate a citation advantage for OA papers since they get noticed and cited at higher rates than other articles, and this was emphasized by the majority of the respondents. However, the majority, 13 (66 percent) of respondents viewed OA articles as those articles that were freely available to the public and to researchers from the global community, while 16 (80 percent) thought that OA articles fulfill the mandate of certain funders. For example, funders such as the CIHR or the NIH require that research generated from their grants be made freely accessible within a certain period of time.

Discussion

University libraries in Kenya were found to support OA in several ways, including establishment of OA author funds, which, even though limited, cover payments for OA journals that have submission fees. They have also started developing IR namely, DSpace and Greenstone, while including them in library collections in support of learning and teaching.

In one of the universities, the library was found to house the institutional repository, which provides free access to scholarly work of the university’s faculty, while at the same time hosting services for OA journals. These developments are in line with one survey by the Association of Research Libraries that found out that 79 percent of surveyed libraries in Canada either are involved in journal publishing, or are planning to become involved in the very near future (Hahn, 2008).

The majority, three (78 percent) of the librarian respondents were found to be vocal and active advocates of OA. These librarians believe that OA promises to remove both the price and permission barriers that undermine library efforts to provide access to the journal literature. This may have been the reason why the majority of them were found to have either signed major OA declarations, or created their own with the intensive education to the university community about the accruing benefits of OA. There is therefore need for a university OA initiative to consider developing a scholarly communications toolkit for increased access to scholarly information (Russell, 2007). A good example are the librarians of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, who have joined the ranks of the worldwide open-access (OA) movement by voting to make their scholarly articles freely available in the university’s institutional repository and Scholarly Commons.

Research output visibility is very low in these universities as the most common avenue of sharing research information is through academic journals and books. This form of distribution has not been effective as it does not have the desired global reach. For any university worthy of its goals, research is one of the major pillars

of growth. This can be exemplified by the University of Nairobi which has put research as its key driving pillar after teaching. In its collaboration with electronic information for libraries (EIFL) it conducted a one day workshop to sensitize the university management about OA and IR (Vlachaki and Urquhart, 2009). The objective of the workshop was to enhance the visibility of research output, and improve the quality and impact of research; to enhance the visibility and profile of the researchers as well as that of the university; to sensitize participants on the role of OA in reducing plagiarism and to advocate for the adoption of an OA policy in the university.

Kenyan universities' ambitions to become Africa's information-technology hub have received a boost from the US technology giant IBM, which has established a research laboratory in Nairobi's CUEA. The laboratory will play a crucial role in promoting OA in the teaching and research goals of the university. To fulfill this role successfully, information professionals must continue to collaborate with lecturers, students and researchers in creating environments that facilitate OA and sharing of knowledge. While OA debates continue, librarians in university libraries in Kenya can basically play an important role to help achieve faster and wider dissemination of research discoveries and new knowledge of which they have been disseminators and keepers for many years.

JKUAT has recently adopted an OA policy as part of the strategic goal of the university to invest and engage in productive collaborations with national and international institutions and industry to enhance knowledge creation and exchange. This not only has positive impacts on social-cultural, economic and political development, but also facilitates dissemination of research results and innovations to target users for application as envisaged in the university strategic Plan of 2009-2012. The JKUAT commitment to disseminating the fruits of its research and scholarship as widely as possible, has made a requirement that all research output should be deposited, subject to the

submission procedure, with JKUAT Digital Repository in an electronic format in order to provide open on-line access. Through this initiative, the university has also contributed to a growing international corpus of refereed and other research literature harvested by internet search engines and available through the World Wide Web in keeping with that commitment.

SU has an OA policy that stipulates how faculty members can make available their articles in an OA system in line with copyright law. This is achieved by each faculty member providing an e-copy of the final version of the article in PDF format. The policy further states that each faculty member is granted by the university an nonexclusive, irrevocable, license to exercise any and all rights under copyright relating to each of his/her scholarly articles, in any medium, and to authorize others to do the same, provided that the articles are not sold for a profit. The policy applies to all scholarly articles authored or co-authored while the person is a member of the university except for any articles completed before the adoption of the policy and any articles for which the faculty member entered into an incompatible licensing or assignment agreement before the adoption of the policy. However, the chancellor/vice chancellor has the power to waive the application of the policy to a particular article for the mutual benefit of the university as per the Harvard University Open Access policy of, 2010.

Challenges of OA

University researchers were found to publish their research findings in the OA platforms. However, in the case of journal articles, none of the universities surveyed had been able to afford to subscribe to a reasonable proportion of all the scholarly journals published and so accessing and using these resources has been difficult for the information seekers.

Research outputs from Kenya as a whole should be available, accessible and applicable. This is the only way research can have an impact on the lives of the millions of Kenyans, and contribute to global innovation systems. One of the pathways being used to enhance the visibility and

accessibility of content from Kenya is through OA to information resources stored in digital IR. Several initiatives are underway in universities and research institutes. However, individuals involved in the initiatives face several challenges, including lack of motivation and incentives, and absence of institutional policies and strategies to support open sharing of information resources.

OA initiatives are seen as additional responsibilities to normal university library duties and do not receive the attention required by the librarians, thus there is absence of appropriate skills, especially IT skills, clear structures/policies, and copyright guidelines on self-archiving for licensing digital content in line with OA models.

Law, technology, and cost have constrained the dissemination of scholarly work in universities in Kenya. This has caused shrinking readership resulting from the rising cost of scholarly journals as well as impediments to the provision of free online access to scholarly work. This situation has resulted in a worldwide OA movement which is not accessible by many people who want to use it. This is because, although information technologies have profoundly changed human behavior and expectation, the legal framework that surrounds access to information has not significantly changed (Marouf, 2004).

Although OA is basically free access to information, there is an urgent need for provision of funding to take care of subscriptions, designing of tools, management, and availing technology. Kenyan universities, with other basic priorities beckoning, would only invest in OA if their budgets have a surplus.

Resistance to change has been seen as another challenge. There are many university librarians, researchers, readers and authors who have resisted the change to the e-world. Some of them have no valid reason to back their resistance. Other librarians believe that if they embrace the electronic version completely, their jobs are at risk. This is serious, considering that the study independently established that are university researchers who have held onto their findings until they are overtaken by time! The findings simply become obsolete because of the fear that others will know about

their findings. No wonder an old proverb states that “the richest place on earth is the graveyard, where you find many unexploited ideas buried with their owners”.

Recommendations

University libraries should provide much assistance in helping faculties manage their copyrights and provide OA to their work by providing tools and support, including model addenda for publishing agreements and IR. This can effectively be achieved if faculty members can attach their addendum to their copyright transfer agreements to retain their rights necessary for them to adequately provide OA to their work. With the necessary rights, they can legally deposit their work on departmental servers or, preferably, in an IR where the library will disseminate, showcase and subsequently preserve it (Olaka, 2010).

The university libraries surveyed were found to be large and complex in their functions. However, they were noted to be in advanced stages of implementing or licensing repositories, identifying and acquiring content and leading or participating in initiatives to develop campus IR policies. It is therefore recommended that suitable, stable, well tested and tried OA be used in order to enable research processes to take place. However, open source software is a growing technology that needs to be adopted fully to support these initiatives. Nevertheless, librarians need to be aware of OA resources available that provide an avenue of interoperability and resource sharing and matching expertise in applying the standards, for instance in creating their digital repositories among other tasks for the benefit of the users.

Librarians and lecturers should do more in keeping their students abreast of existing/available OA information resources, while ensuring that they have effective and efficient skills in the use of retrieval tools such as internet search engines. This can be achieved through user education programs, handbills, pamphlets, brochures and workshops/conferences.

Conclusion

There should be collaboration, standardization, copyright considerations, user education and training of university library staff and users OA and use. If Kenya's 2,030 vision of:

[...] a globally competitive and prosperous nation with a high quality of life is anything to go by then there is more need to wholesomely embrace open access initiatives in university libraries in Kenya.

However, the progression so far indicates that OA in university libraries will become a reality sooner rather than later. The progress of OA initiatives does not lie with various library associations to enhance and improve the availability of OA to scholarly and cultural digital content to varied university information seekers only, but every modern librarian. However, active debates over the economics and reliability of various ways of providing OA continue among researchers, academics, librarians, university administrators, funding agencies, government officials, commercial publishers, editorial staff and society publishers who are all seeking to find common ground in OA to information.

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