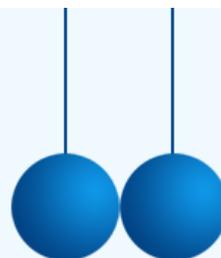


OPENUCT INITIATIVE

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A week of open access conferencing: Part 1

As an OpenUCT intern I was excited to attend my first major Open Access conferences - Open Access Africa and Berlin 10. It was the first chance I have had to hear a wide range of perspective and views from the speakers and participants, several of whom I follow on Twitter and/or whose blogs I read. There is much debate going on in the open access space with several diverse perspectives being put forward and it was a good opportunity to actually witness the discussion unfold in person. There were two back to back conferences with overlapping agendas and themes. In this posting I'll reflect on the themes from the Open Access Africa Conference, and in the next from the Berlin 10 conference.

OA Africa: 4 – 5 November

This was the third annual Open Access Africa conference, hosted for the first time at the [University of Cape Town](#). The conference kicked off with a viewing of the [PhD Comics](#) open access [video](#) – if you haven't seen it yet, I definitely suggest making the time.



The Open Access Africa conference was held from 4 – 5 November 2012 at the University of Cape Town (Photo credit: Sarah G)

A focus on journals

The focus for the two days was largely on open access publishing and journals. Although articles published in open access journals are available free for viewing and downloading after publication, open access publishing is not free. The costs associated with OA publishing include article editing and formatting, managing peer-review, marketing and administration. In gold open access, these costs are largely covered by the article processing charges (APCs) but also by advertising. That being said, there are other [OA business models](#) which cover the costs of publishing, but there is a growing assumption that came up several times during the course of the conference that gold open access funded by APCs are the primary way forward.

I realised that the implications of this are serious as the cost of APCs could potentially favour those who can pay. As OA is becoming increasingly encouraged and even required in the North (e.g. [Research Councils UK's open access policy](#), [Wellcome Trust open access policy](#)), African researchers may soon be able to read and download many articles but may not be financially able to publish in gold OA journals. This could advantage well-funded researchers and researchers from the North, increasing the North-South divide. However, several open access journals currently offer APC reductions or waivers to researchers who can't cover the cost. [PLoS](#) and [BioMed Central](#) (BMC) are both examples of publishers who have lists of countries that qualify for automatic waivers or reductions. These are based on the World Bank's income level classification of the country (low, middle or high income). Being a researcher in a country on the waiver list would remove the financial barrier to many African researchers publishing in OA journals. A point that was raised during discussion was the fact that countries, for example South Africa, with serious persistent internal inequalities may not fall within the automatic fee waiver group of countries but many researchers may still not have the funds to pay. Could there be a better proxy for determining the ability of researchers to pay APCs beyond that of country income level?

Conrad Ononhinmin, from Covenant University in Ota, Nigeria, raised the question of whether OA publishing will increase the flow of journal articles from Africa to the North. The journals that can afford to offer waivers are usually published by richer publishers from the North, which will put pressure on African journals that can't afford to waive the charges. [Marcel Hommel](#), Editor in Chief of BMC's Malaria Journal, quoted revealing figures highlighting this point in malaria research: 90 % of malaria mortality is in Africa but less than 2% of articles published on malaria are in African journals. Cultivating OA African journals across a broad range of disciplines could help to restore the balance and develop research and scholarly communication locally but capacity building is required in several areas to achieve this.

Quality

Another issue that came up was that of quality. The discussion revealed that there are perceptions in the higher education community that anything freely available online may not be of a high quality. The publishers stressed that while OA is a different model, in terms of reputable OA journals, the quality is the same as their non-OA counterparts. To paraphrase [Deborah Kahn](#), publishing director at BMC, OA journal publishing is a different business model but with the same quality and standards. The articles undergo peer review and the same quality checks.

A related issue was the rise of what is sometimes called predatory open access publishing. There was some concern expressed that some publishers get this label unfairly. While [predatory OA publishers](#) can potentially be a problem, once a journal is called 'predatory', it is a difficult label to shake off. Care needs to be taken with this. Researchers were advised to consider a journal's quality for themselves, based on markers of quality such as the editorial board, and not solely rely on such lists.

The Impact Factor Failure

While the [impact factor](#) of journals and by extension, the perceived value of articles published in them, can affect the careers of many academics, it is NOT an accurate measure of an individual article's quality or impact. Honorary researcher [Eve Gray](#) from the University of Cape Town declared the impact factor to be "past its sell-by date" and quoted [Stephen Curry](#), structural biologist at Imperial College London, saying those who use the impact factor are "statistically illiterate" (you can read more on that [here](#)). If the impact factor, as it has been applied to articles and researchers, had actually been present, it may well have been chased out of the conference venue by an angry mob with pitchforks and flaming torches.

Beyond Journal Articles

Scholarly communication is central to academic research. However, according to [Michelle Willmers](#), programme manager for the Scholarly Communication in Africa Programme ([SCAP](#)), there is a tension between prestige and relevance in African research communication (and in my mind, in research communication across the board). Journal articles are the tip of the scholarly communication iceberg, linked to the most prestige – under the water level there are other diverse types of outputs, such as blog posts, policy briefs and emails, often providing a larger impact and potentially of greater relevance than the journal article. Looking only at the traditional journal publishing statistics in ISI indexed journals, it appears that Africa produces hardly any research outputs. However, this is not an accurate picture of the mountain of research output Africa produces – a lot is just below the water line. The real question is what outputs are actually important and should be rewarded – I would vote for openly accessible outputs of broad impact and relevance, not just journal articles in a high impact factor journal locked behind a paywall. Which raises the question: are journals becoming increasingly irrelevant in a world of open access publishing online or are they still necessary to package collections of articles and help us sort through the overload of information that we have to deal with daily? I think the jury is still out on that one.

Open Access and institutions

In terms of universities, changing the institutional environment can be complex and there is no one solution for all institutions. At the University of Cape Town (UCT), the OpenUCT Initiative aims to make freely available as many as possible of UCT's research, teaching and community-focused scholarly resources to those with access to the internet as well as to engage with the agenda of openness in higher education from a Southern perspective. In the talk by [Laura Czerniewicz](#), OpenUCT's Director, OpenUCT's holistic approach was highlighted, with the initiative working at multiple levels within the institution – including within committees, with academics and students. The [signing of the Berlin declaration](#) by Dr Max Price, UCT's Vice Chancellor, was a symbol of UCT's support for open access. But change on the ground requires buy in by the academics. As open access is critical for both research as well as for teaching, as you can only build on and teach what you can access - academics are starting to see the light.

And its not just academics. Daniel Mutonga, a medical student at the University of Nairobi, a member of the Medical Students' Association of Kenya (MSAKE) and facilitator of their OA Advocacy Campaign outlined the growth of OA practices and events at his institution. Students are learning about OA and passing this knowledge onto their peers. To quote from Daniel Mutonga's talk, "Since we can do something, we will do something."

The [World Bank](#) announced earlier this year that it was [going open access](#), with regard to its research outputs. World Bank publisher, Carlos Rossel, talked about why OA is right for his institution. The right mix of good content, a strong brand and an enabling environment meant that OA was a viable option. The Bank's publications are available under a "Attribution-only" (CC-BY) [creative commons license](#).

Open Access is essential to knowledge dissemination, growth and education. As [Tom Olijhoek](#), scientific advisor on research of tropical diseases, said, "all people need access to the information, not just scientists" (and I'd add) or researchers and academics from all disciplines. There is a growing cry for open access, free access to publicly funded research, and I hope that those who produce and publish these research outputs are listening.

Part 2 of "A week of conferencing" will be posted soon.

by Sarah G

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