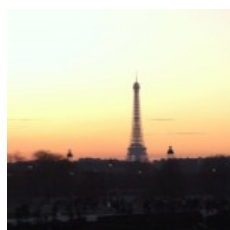


UNESCO takes Open Access into the mainstream – but what about South Africa?



Paris sunset

In 2011 the last event I attended was the [UNESCO Open Access Forum](#) held in Paris in November. I came away with the strong sense that open access was at last in the mainstream, a central component of global thinking, based on access to knowledge as a fundamental human right and on arguments about the effectiveness of open access in contributing to social and economic benefits. At about the same time I was asked to compile an overview of open access in South Africa, bringing me face to face with the variety and the fragmentation of the South African open access scene. What is missing in South Africa was any coherent involvement of government in brokering policies on communication or technology policy for a 21st century vision of higher education in Africa – where South Africa could be leading the way.

As I discussed in my [last blog](#), a new [Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training](#) in South Africa has taken quite a strong stance on policy for open educational resources, drawing on UNESCO's OER intervention as a validation for this policy strand. But what about open access – access to research findings? There is very little about research communication in the Green Paper – as is all too often the case with analysis of research capacity development in South Africa, or indeed in the region. And why should South Africa bother?

The UNESCO OA Forum was important not only because the organization is now putting its weight behind OA – and particularly OA policy development – but also for what we learned about mainstream OA interventions across the world, providing insights into how OA was functioning and what benefits were emerging.

The UNESCO OA strategy was adopted by the General Conference in its 36th meeting in November 2011, building on UNESCO's 'resolve to build knowledge societies through the use of information technologies'. The underpinning vision is that access to information is crucial as a way of reducing the knowledge divide and increasing socio-economic development in a world in which Northern dominance of knowledge production and high prices for technology access and the high prices for peer reviewed research publications act as barriers. The [OA strategy plan](#) places a strong emphasis on the creation of an enabling environment, the fostering of collaboration and the advocacy role that UNESCO could play in national policy development (a set of OA policy guidelines will be published shortly).

On the journal front, the message was that OA journals were growing exponentially, from 560 journals in 2003 to over 7,300 in 2011, as [Lars Bjornshaug of SPARC reported](#), but that there is a problem in the preponderance of small, single-journal publishers. For the latter problem, aggregation services are important, something that does have national policy implications, as is the case in South Africa where the Academy of Science is running the the SciELO South Africa initiative with government support. While the overwhelming majority of journals (71% in general and 87% in Latin America) do not charge article processing fees, there are questions around how to deal with the APC costs for those that do, especially for developing country authors. Again, there is a potential policy issue in setting up guidelines and financial streams for dealing with APCs.

There were some powerful players participating in the forum, including the European Commission, the FAO, WHO, donor organisations like the Wellcome Trust, and professional organisations like IFLA and the International Association of STM Publishers. The EU commitment is to a high level vision of e-infrastructure and a package of policies, programmes and activities for the support of OA, spelled out by [Carlos Morais Pires](#), [Norbert Lossau](#) and [Jean-Francois Dechamp](#). This plays out in two Communities of Practice (CoP), the Confederation of Open Access Repositories (COAR) and Open Access Infrastructure for Research in Europe ([OpenAIRE](#)). Preparatory work is being done on a European Open Data Infrastructure (for EU organizational data). The strategic vision behind all this combines the language of innovation, educational empowerment, resource efficiency, economic competitiveness, employment growth and poverty reduction. In other words, mobilizing top level support in the EU for the adoption of an internet society approach to collaboration and openness is not just an idealistic commitment to human rights, but a hard-headed strategy for competitiveness, growth and social stability. This is based on hard and soft law, is backed up by support services and is worth investing in.

I have had discussions over the years with publishers from the FAO at book fairs over the years and so was very interested to see the comprehensive and powerful programme that is being put into place through the collaborative [CIARD](#) programme – for Coherence in Information for Agricultural Research and Development – presented by [Stephen Rudgard](#). The CIARD partners, a wide range of agricultural organisations – will collaborate to promote common platforms, adopt open systems and create a global network of information. The aim is to ensure effective investment in agricultural research, strengthen capacity for the creation of research repositories and also for the 'creation of networks for formal and informal networks for repackaging outputs' – in other words for ensuring wider access and appropriate communication levels beyond the research community.

The importance of this kind of 'translation' emerged in Robert Kiley's presentation on the Wellcome Trust's open access initiative, which requires the research it funds to be published in an open access journal or placed in the PubMed Central repository. This was also endorsed by a statistic provided by [Alma Swan](#) – that 40% of the users in PubMed Central are ordinary citizens. Kiley argued that the UK would save money adopting OA publishing, if the APC fees were at the level of £2,000 and that for the Wellcome Trust to support publication of all the research outputs produced from its research that it funded would cost only 1.25% of its research funding. There are also arguments for the effect of the open availability of research as an important stimulus for innovation and economic growth, especially for small businesses, [as demonstrated in a Danish study](#). Citing hard-headed figures, this article explores the costs that are incurred when small businesses don't have access to research outputs and the financial benefits that accrue through open innovation when they do.

Against this background, it is striking that so little discussion – and for that matter, research – in South Africa pays attention to the importance of effective communication of research and the need for technical infrastructure and skills to support this. Instead, the discussion focuses on journal articles published in 'leading' journals (i.e. ISI) and

the 'impact' status and competitiveness that this is perceived to bring. The Minister of Higher Education and Training knows the limitations of this system, as I have explored in [a journal article](#). It would be good to open a discussion of the advantages of open access for southern Africa in the context of the Green Paper.

by Eve



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