

Academic spring – open access policies take the world by storm

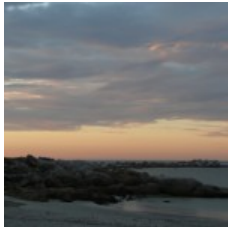


Photo: Eve Gray CC-BY

I would normally count the Easter weekend as a quiet time with little happening online. I was proved very wrong, to my delight. At the same time I was proved right on another front – the period of Open Access as a fringe activity, a protest from the sidelines, is definitively at an end. One reason that this pleases me enormously is that this changes definitively the largely futile game of global catch-up that research universities in Africa seem destined to play. If we really want to emulate the best practices of global scholarly publishing it is now very clear that open access publishing is something that we have to embrace. This is doubly good news, because open access offers African researchers, their universities and governments the opportunity to overcome the barriers that face dissemination of African research in its attempts to penetrate the dominant commercial scholarly publishing block. OA has the promise of real reach and impact – locally and internationally – and it now has the unequivocal backing of major international organisations. But there is also going to be some work to do to ensure that the policies we develop conform to our own needs, not just those of developed countries.

So what did happen this weekend? First of all, [UNESCO's Information and Communication Directorate](#) published its [Policy Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Access](#) to Scientific Information. That UNESCO has launched an Open Access policy initiative is not news – it was launched to the end of 2011. I was familiar with the draft of the policy document from our discussions at the UNESCO Open Access Forum in November 2011, but it was good to have the final version in hand, one that we can use and cite and send to our colleagues and governments.

The Policy Guidelines, written with admirable clarity by Dr Alma Swan, are comprehensive, explicitly intended to inform the development of open access policies for scientific research by national governments. What is going to be needed now is active participation by African organisations, stakeholders, institutions and individual academics so that the policymaking process is really geared to the strategic goals that have been articulated for African research efforts. And, of course, to ensure that these strategies are really aligned to our needs.

Then came the [World Bank's announcement](#) of its Open Access initiative. It has created an [Open Knowledge Repository](#) as a one-stop shop for much of its information. An [Open Access Policy](#) will be applied from 1 July 2012, governing a range of World Bank publications and research outputs that will need to be in the Open Knowledge repository. This applies to monographs, chapters in monographs and journal articles as well as reports, with the former being deposited in their final pre-publication version. Peer review or review by project coordinators is required for all publications that are deposited.

The [Creative Commons](#) licence that has been adopted by the World Bank is the non-restrictive CC-BY that allows for copying, adaptation and distribution, even for commercial purposes. A non-commercial licence will govern only those works published by outside publishers – who will be required to comply with the open access policy.

I was just getting my breath back from these two major moves when the [Guardian report on a Wellcome Trust announcement](#) added to the seasonal celebrations. The Wellcome Trust is launching a new mega-journal, eLife, which will directly compete with the major scientific journals, like Nature and Science. One of the biggest research funders, with a strong commitment to the importance of applied research and its social and development impact, the Wellcome Trust was an early adopter of open access policies, requiring research outputs from the projects it funds to be deposited in PubMed Central. It is now going to strengthen these requirements.


It has to be remembered that these initiatives came hot on the heels of [the boycott of Elsevier](#), now signed by some 9,000 researchers, arising out of [protests against the Research Works Act](#) – an attempt to reverse public and donor funder mandates for open access deposit of publications arising out of this research.

Why should this be relevant to us, at the other end of the world and on the margins of the global scholarly publishing system? At the beginning of this century, African universities and governments needed to rebuild their research systems after the depredations of World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programmes. The focus in this recovery period tended to be on the need to rebuild prestige and so the policy focus and reward systems for researchers gave preference to publication in the big international commercial journals, with their high-impact ratings. This has proved a futile exercise. The volume of African articles in the international indexes remains very low and a price is paid for this participation in the distortion of local research priorities, often sacrificed in order to get into Northern-focused journals.

What we have found in our [Scholarly Communications in Africa Programme](#) is that the universities we are working with are in fact particularly interested in the potential for the development of scholarly publications that can contribute to their strategies for research contribution to national and local development imperatives. That means working not only with journal articles but also with a range of other research papers as well as 'translations', for policy or community impact. The major international policy announcements of the last week offer a powerful affirmation not only of open access, for reasons of human rights and greater social justice, but also for a broader vision of what a research reward system should focus on. In this regard, we are likely to be involved in a policy dialogue in which developing country research organisations can engage in dialogue about the focus of global open access policy initiatives, contributing to the debate rather than just playing follow-on.

by Eve





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