

The policy gap – research communication in limbo in South Africa's new Green Paper



South Africa has a shiny new Green Paper on Post-School Education. However policy weary we might be, this is, refreshingly, a good document, with the right ambitions for the overdue overhaul of the higher and further education sector. It quite rightly identifies the country's huge deficit in further education and the failure to provide sufficient training for employment to meet the overwhelming need in this sector. This policy document does not appear to fall into the trap of trying to turn universities into human resource factories, but rather seeks to leverage the strengths of the most functional institutions to help upgrade the under-developed further education sector.

If the Green Paper is implemented as it stands, the universities are facing a considerable upward trend in the number of postgraduate degrees to support sector growth; greater research differentiation between institutions; enhanced attention to teaching and learning effectiveness; effective use of ICT for increased efficiencies in distance and face to face learning; expansion in the number of academics to meet increased teaching and learning and research targets; and the encouragement and nurturing of young academics. Extra funding is proposed to meet these needs. The driving ethos is that of collaboration, cooperation and intra-institutional synergy to ensure that the stronger institutions can contribute to the upgrading of the weaker ones. The Green Paper places itself firmly in the 21st century as it proposes the adoption of flexible and innovative models of teaching and learning delivery, building on the affordances of information technologies. This is articulated as a way of improving access and increasing economies of scale.

This is an enlightened view of university education that includes, gratifyingly, the endorsement of collaboratively developed open educational resources, the idea of collaborative learning networks, online student support, and the suggestion that government might support the production of open textbooks. The support of UNESCO for OER, as part of 'a growing international movement' (p. 59), is clearly an important motivating force behind this radical move. Indeed, as I write, the SA government is co-hosting a [UNESCO Forum on OER Policy in Africa](#). The Green Paper mentions UNESCO's work on open education resources as a motivation for these provisions, but does not respond to the more recent development in UNESCO of an Open Access programme, launched in late 2011 at the [UNESCO Open Access Forum](#).

The UNESCO OA initiative provides some guidelines on what would constitute a more expansive vision of what needs to be done by way of national policy for the creation of a comprehensive approach to research publications and communications. The initiative focuses explicitly on Africa, saying that in spite of improvements in ICT availability, awareness of OA remains low on the continent and in other developing countries. The [brochure](#) produced to launch this initiative summarises the advantages of OA thus:

Through Open Access, researchers and students from around the world gain increased access to knowledge, publications receive greater visibility and readership, and the potential impact of research is heightened. Increased access to and sharing of knowledge leads to opportunities for equitable economic and social development, intercultural dialogue, and has the potential to spark innovation.

In other words, OA is perceived in the UNESCO programme as a driver for the development impact from research that the SA government has persistently asked for. It is also the capacity builder that the Green Paper seeks, a space in which research processes and findings can be shared and these findings made available for the creation of learning and training materials and 'translated' for use by businesses, social entrepreneurs, and communities. As I set out in [an earlier blog on the UNESCO OA Forum](#), UNESCO follows in this initiative behind a number of other organisations and countries that are investigating and adopting new regional and national frameworks for research communication, based on rapidly-changing digital research practices.

The research communications gap in the SA Green Paper

Disappointingly, this is not reflected in the SA Green Paper – a big hole at the centre of its 21st century vision – with no attention paid to the need for national policy to address access to knowledge through the communication and publication of research. All that we get is the statement that the government wants to 'increase the number of patents and products developed by our universities and research institutions' (p. 44). It looks as if we are back in the 20th century industrial economy vision of research 'outputs' (patents and journal articles) driving national economic development, a very limited view of the potential of research in a digital world.

It is not that our government is not aware of the advantages of OA. It has undertaken investigation of research publication in the last decade. The Department of Science and Technology commissioned evidence-based research from the [Academy of Science of South Africa](#) (ASSAF) on a [Strategic Approach to Research Publishing in South Africa](#) (2006) and as a result supports the ASSAF [SciELO South Africa](#) programme for the creation of an open access platform for accredited local journals. The Department of Higher Education and Training has accepted and is implementing an ASSAF [report on scholarly books](#), which includes open access proposals.


These initiatives – as valuable as they are – impact relatively little on the institutions and the ways in which they do or do not support the communication of research. Without the development of more comprehensive national research communication policy, there is room for the persistence of a free-rider syndrome that has the universities and their academics perceive publication as something that someone else does. There is no policy pressure for universities to support the communication and publication efforts of their academics nor to ensure that research investment results in access to the knowledge that has been produced. Where there have been open access initiatives, for the creation of research repositories and, in the case of Stellenbosch University, investment in the creation of an open access journal publishing programme, these have been the result of the hard work of individual champions and forward-looking administrators and so they risk remaining isolated examples in a fragmented system.

What is missing is a comprehensive, nationally-based approach to the communication of research and the infrastructure, skills and support systems needed to support this. This could be the glue that could hold together a really forward-looking South African research effort, one that could do what it does best – operate at the cutting edge of high-technology research development, as it is doing in the [Square Kilometre Array](#) project as well as producing high-level research that impacts directly on improving people's lives and contributes to national development.

UNESCO has outlined the different drivers that need to be addressed in a national policy of this kind – technology network infrastructure; institutional frameworks to reflect changes in scholarly communication; new business models to reflect societal expectations; collaboration within communities of researchers; and alignment with the national R&D system. These all face challenges in the existing system for institutions and governments that need to be met in comprehensive policy initiatives. I will look at these in my next blog.

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