Stellenbosch takes open access lead

ELLEN TISE: COMMENT  | STELLENBOSCH, SOUTH AFRICA - Oct 29 2010 10:27

Last week Stellenbosch University became the first African university to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge, which is aimed at making scientific research freely and widely available to society.

This is an important step towards sustainable human development. Societies can grow only if they have access to trusted and relevant information and, in the interests of democracy, peace, security and stability everywhere, it is critical to ensure that everyone has equitable and unhindered access to information.

Unfortunately, information is an expensive commodity and consequently not easily accessible. This commodification of information has become a key challenge in our 21st-century "Information Age".

The high cost of academic journals means that the cancellation of journal subscriptions and monograph purchases is becoming the norm among universities.

In developing countries the situation is catastrophic, with many large tertiary institutions in sub-Saharan Africa holding just a few hundred serial titles, many of which they receive free of charge.

Barrier to access
Publishers have a right to recover costs and make a profit but the cost factor is frequently a barrier to access.

This is unfortunate, because knowledge has overtaken gold, diamonds, platinum and oil in importance for society and is the one commodity that increases in value with use.

The open access movement, a global initiative fuelled by the growth of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, promotes unrestricted access to articles in scholarly journals.

Open access literature is defined as digital, online, free of charge and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions. It is subjected to the same rigorous peer review process as the traditional publishing model.

The sharing of information is nothing new — it is part of the academic ethos. But, as Peter Lor, South Africa’s first post-apartheid national librarian, pointed out in 2007, an old tradition, a new technology and a new role have now converged to make possible an unprecedented public good.

The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish their research in scholarly journals without payment, the new technology is the internet and the new role is
that of the librarian as the publisher of scholarly information for the sake of human development.

**Poor access**

Surveys have shown that sub-Saharan Africa has not made a significant contribution to the global body of scientific knowledge -- it has supplied only 0.7% of research findings, with a large percentage of that coming from South Africa. This is less than other developing areas such as India (1.9%) and China (2%). Part of the reason for the low profile of scientists in Africa is the poor access to scientific publications.

In 2003, following a workshop in Germany at which international experts concluded that the internet offers humanity an unprecedented opportunity of making knowledge universally accessible, the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities was adopted. It encourages authors and rights holders to grant all users a free, irrevocable and universal right of access to their contributions. They should allow their work to be used, reproduced or disseminated in digital form, with the only proviso being the correct attribution of authorship or copyright ownership.

On Wednesday last week Stellenbosch University signed the declaration.

This is a demonstration of its commitment to sharing its research and other scholarly material with research communities, especially those on the African continent.

The declaration calls for the complete version of a work -- with the supplemental material and a declaration of the right of use -- to be made accessible in at least one electronic online archive. Stellenbosch has created SUNScholar, an electronic archive for the collection, preservation and distribution of digital theses, dissertations, research articles, inaugural addresses, conference proceedings and other material.

Built with open source software, SUNScholar can be accessed by anyone with an internet connection.

It is important for the university to share its knowledge with others. This aim is part of the university's recently launched Hope Project, which Stellenbosch vice-chancellor Russel Botman described in the *Mail & Guardian* earlier this year.

Open access has the potential to deliver critical information to change the lives of people. We invite others to come on board and support this movement.

**Ellen Tise is the senior director of Stellenbosch University's Library and Information Service and president of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions**

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**COMMENTS**

Finally! We are heading in the right direction:) This is a huge milestone for the continent. I expect the transaction cost of acquiring information to be reduce significantly. Shuttleworth for Ministry of Science and Technology. Forget Ms Pandor! The future is right here. now:)

**Thobile Lindelwa Ntaka on October 29, 2010, 10:45 pm**

Great idea. I'm looking forward to seeing all our universities follow suit.

**Judy Backhouse on November 1, 2010, 8:26 am**

Congratulations to Stellenbosch University. Great to see South African universities joining the fray in this very exciting global movement of sharing online content. The University of Cape Town has an exciting (and rapidly growing) list of open educational resources available at http://opencontent.uct.ac.za/.

**Michelle Willmers on November 2, 2010, 11:49 am**

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