

Enhancing the visibility and accessibility of research

Demystifying and Promoting Open Access at the University of Nairobi

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Universities play a key role in the advancement of knowledge which is vital for the development of key economic and social sectors in any country. The Kenyan Government has identified key priorities for the research sector and has set them out in the framework of Vision 2030 as strategic issues that will drive the country in the achievement of national and global competitiveness. Universities and research organizations in the country have been identified as major players in intensifying innovation through research and development and the government has committed to increase funding for these activities.

At the University of Nairobi, the largest university in the country with a student population of over 55,000 (10,000 at graduate level) and over 1,600 teaching staff, activities revolve around four strategic issues: resources and governance; teaching and learning; research, innovation and technology; and competitiveness.² To achieve competitiveness in research, innovation and technology, it has been necessary for the university to reposition itself on the global map 'to be at the cutting edge of intellectual and scientific development'.³ This can only be achieved by ensuring that our researchers have the best access to scientific information and that their own research output is widely visible and accessible.

Open access

As part of its research strategy, the university has identified open access as an important way of drawing attention to its research output. The library plays a vital role in this. Open access is the provision of free access to peer reviewed scholarly and academic literature, enabling researchers anywhere to access and read it. The major channels to achieve this are through publishing in open access journals and depositing scholarly materials in institutional repositories. Evidence suggests that institutions benefit from open access through higher usage of their research and that the greater visibility of their research can result in higher rankings, thus enhancing the profile of the institution. Open access also has benefits beyond academia through the diffusion of knowledge to other social and economic sectors ⁴.

The role of the library

The University of Nairobi library is mandated to provide quality information services to empower the University in carrying out its core activities of teaching, learning, research,

and community service/consultancy. The library identified a lack of awareness of the potential of open access resources amongst staff and students as a genuine barrier to the advancement of knowledge in the institution.

Open access activities

Strategic planning

One of the University's strategic issues is resources and governance. Within this strategic area, increasing the utilization of library resources is identified as a key objective. To achieve this, the library has committed to increase the percentage of students and staff using library resources. To increase the number of resources available to the university community, the library has undertaken to create awareness not only of subscription resources but also of those which are openly available. Numerous links to such resources have been uploaded on to the library website, which is updated on a daily basis. The library has put in place structures to ensure that the university community is continually made aware of the latest updates through different communication channels, including email broadcasts, liaison with college champions, and social media⁵. The library also uses the undergraduate communication skills programme to reach all students.

Performance contracting

In 2005/2006, the Government of Kenya introduced performance contracting in state corporations and government ministries as a way of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.⁶ As a state corporation, the university adopted performance contracting in 2005 which was cascaded to all the departments, including the library. The University of Nairobi has continued to perform well in comparison to other public universities and it emerged at the top of public universities in its performance score in 2010/2011.⁷ In 2009, the library adopted the training of students and academic staff on how to use electronic resources as a target in its performance contract. This target has since been included every year. Among the topics included in the training curriculum is the awareness of open access, and each college library is assigned a target commensurate with the population of its users. The library started with a training of trainers programme for library staff, to ensure that those entrusted with cascading this training were well equipped for the task. Training materials were

compiled and shared with all the trainers. A presentation on open access, which is regularly updated, has also been developed, and is available on the library website for trainers and users.

Capacity building

The library has worked with students and staff to raise awareness about digital repositories as a route to open access. With funding from the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), the library has sent staff to international conferences, and they have in turn shared information on open access and institutional repositories. Following a workshop on institutional repository development at the University of Pretoria, two members of staff took a leading role in setting up the University of Nairobi Digital repository, with support from the ICT department.

Collaborating at national level

The library has worked closely with the Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) since its formation in 2003 and it houses the Consortium Secretariat. With funding from partners such as INASP and EIFL (www.eifl.net), library staff have taken a leading role in capacity building for members of the Consortium.⁸ Several workshops have been held for members where digital repositories have been discussed. More than 40 institutions including universities, research institutions and public libraries have been represented. The use of DSpace, open source software for digital repositories, has been discussed at these workshops and already more than 30 member institutions have adopted this software and are at various stages of setting up their own institutional repositories.

Advocacy

The library has advocated strongly for open access, targeting the senior management of the institution as well as students. In 2011, with funding from the university management, the library participated in the global event 'Open Access Week' for the first time. Presentations, training sessions, exhibitions and a one day workshop on open access were organized.

In August 2012, in collaboration with EIFL, and with support from the Vice-Chancellor, the library held a one day workshop on open access for university management. The workshop was intended to create awareness of open access initiatives so as to enhance the visibility of research output, to sensitize participants about the role of open access in reducing plagiarism, and to advocate for the adoption of an open access policy. Facilitators were drawn from EIFL, Glasgow University, Ubiquity Press, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and also from the student community. A total of more than fifty members of staff in senior management attended the workshop.

Policies

The library management realized that "policies serve to promote the aims and objectives of open access, to engender interest and action and to serve as examples for others"⁹. In early 2012, the library submitted a draft open access policy to the Vice-Chancellor. Following this, the Vice-

Chancellor constituted a committee to develop a university policy on open access and tasked the library to chair it. After several months of deliberations the university adopted its open access policy in Dec 2012. The policy mandates staff to upload research articles and other academic materials into the university's digital repository.

Conclusion

The library's efforts have continued to bear fruit. The university's management has recognized open access as a means to advance research, and enhance the visibility of what the university itself produces. At national level other institutions have intensified their own efforts to promote open access. The Government of Kenya has also identified access to information as a universal human right and efforts are under way to provide such information through different channels like the open data portal¹⁰ and Kenya Law¹¹. The library is committed to continue with the role of providing leadership in this area not only for the University of Nairobi but also for the entire academic community in Kenya.

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