

Unleashing the Potential of Online Information Resources: Who benefits?

Why do institutions need access to online resources?

Higher institutions of learning are constantly seeking for innovative ways on how to address educational challenges related to accessibility of resources. Having access to resources ubiquitously for teaching, learning and research is very pertinent within an institution. Today, there exist a lot of resources that are either open source or commercial. Universities in East Africa need to collaboratively address the issue of accessibility to resources using innovative approaches. By so doing, the institutions are aiming at utilizing the available resources to maximize output. Consortium accessibility should be the easiest and cheapest way of acquiring good online resources for the universities in East Africa. Universities should be in a position to access resources within and outside the region.



Students having access to e-Resources during their free time of study at Makerere University

Policy Message

Institutions need to leverage the potential of collaboration in relation to online resource accessibility as an opportunity to improve on their education, ranking and branding. In return the following benefit would be accrued:

- Accessibility of content is ubiquitous
- No need of physical space to have access to the resources
- Sharable modes through available institution collaborations and consortia
- Availability of cheap and open source online resources
- Improved institutional branding and ranking
- Improved research dissemination

“Universities are discovering to their amazement, that with good online learning materials, effective networks, and proper support, students can learn better from any where, at any time and their own wish”

Context

The business of universities and most other institutions of higher learning throughout the world dwell on training and research. It is evident that information is a critical resource for such institutions to achieve their missions. However, the biggest challenge in many institutions within the developing world is accessibility to good content.



Useful content but poorly maintained and managed in a library corner. Accessibility to it is an issue that technology can easily address

Majority of the institutions have old, not easy to access and inadequate resources. This challenge is attributed to several factors that may include financial constraints, poor planning, poor storage, inadequate physical resources, etc. On several occasions, the resources available are too few, too old and sometimes completely inaccessible.

The challenge of inaccessibility to good content affects the effective undertaking of educational activities (training and research). It is apparent that universities have the role to innovatively provide for their stakeholders irrespective of the resource constraints.

Why do the stakeholders need accessibility to content? Students need access to accurate and timely information to support their learning, teachers need to have access to current information for their teaching purposes while researchers need the existing pool of information in order to design and implement their research programmes effectively.

Therefore, effectiveness of universities in fulfilling their mandates is highly questionable in the absence of supportive information resources. In many cases, universities have stored and managed their few resources very ineffectively; hence access to them become problematic.

Majority of the research works undertaken in African countries is hardly known and published. Therefore even fellow Africans are unaware of what has been researched on by their fellow Africans. There are no formal strategies for a researcher in one university accessing research that is emanating from another university. It is through publication of research that institutions undertaking research are known to the outside world. Such publicity promotes the institutions' ranking and branding. A study was undertaken to assess how universities in East Africa access online information resources for their teaching and research purposes.

Findings

Seven major findings emerged from the study;

- i. Majority of the universities have developed plans to digitize their local content. This is a great leap in availing content to the rest of the world. The universities support the idea of establishing a regional repository to house the digitized content for easy access and use.
- ii. The stakeholders are ready to deposit the following content into the regional digital repository: journal articles, dissertations/thesis, conference proceedings, books, research reports, compendia etc.
- iii. Staff from universities finds it restrictive to access resources from universities other than their own. Scholars hardly get to know the published work of fellow East Africans despite being very close to them as compared to other international scholars.

- iv. More than half of the universities have digitized their library resources. Many of the libraries prefer commercial types of software as compared to open source in library catalogue computerization.
- v. Majority of the universities have visible and accessible websites, only a few have web based library catalogues and institutional repositories. This clearly indicates that despite having a web presence, access and dissemination of scholarly content is still a big problem.
- vi. Most of the universities have inadequate funding allocated for e-resources. This limits access to state-of-the-art academic and research content.
- vii. Subscription to e-resources was made possible through various library consortia, making it relatively cheaper for the universities to access information databases.

*“Africa still lags behind in research content dissemination and this is attributed to the low publications emanating from its institutions. Scholarly research presence online is one of the criteria used in ranking universities.”
Said by one author*

*“African Universities are ranked lowest and hence the indication that the online presence of African universities is very low to say the least and this is something that institutional repositories can address. Development of institutional repositories can ensure the connection of Africans to their own knowledge and information.”
Said by some authors*



Advancement of technology has made it possible for such resources to be easily accessible across borders

Policy Recommendations

We make the following five recommendations:

- 1. Establish policies for information storage and retrieval within the East African universities.** Today, many of the policies utilized within universities in East Africa are not in harmony with each other. If implementation is going to be undertaken communally by the universities, there is a need for generic policies to streamline what takes place.
- 2. Constitute a regional consortium to propel online resource sharing within the universities in East Africa.** Establishment of the consortium would streamline information gathering, storage, dissemination and use amongst the universities.
- 3. Improve basic ICT infrastructure within universities.** This will enable easy access to information resources available locally and internationally.
- 4. Establish a regional digital repository to house scholarly content.** This would enable easy access to scholarly content amongst universities. The regional digital repository would facilitate the capture, storage, preservation and dissemination of the region’s intellectual output.
- 5. Enhance Information literacy levels of university stakeholders.** Information literacy requires relevant information infrastructure as well as propensity of use on the part of users. Propensity is achieved through exposure to information literacy skills to facilitate appropriate and ethical access and use of information.

This policy brief is based on the report of a study on the “Establishment and Management of Online Information Resources for Supporting Member Institutions in Teaching, Research and Public Service”. It was part of the MRCI project entitled “Enhancing the Capacity of East African Universities to Utilize ICT for Sustainable Regional Development”, being implemented by the Inter-University Council for East Africa.

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Twenty eight universities in East Africa were selected to participate in the study.



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