

Access to African Journals: The African Journals OnLine (AJOL) Initiative

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Introduction

The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) was started in 1992 as a programme of the International Council of Science (ICSU). The original objectives of the organisation were to improve the flow of scientific research information by providing a networking service between information providers and information seekers. At this time, it was recognised that the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor had increased and that new information and communication technology – specifically in the form of networked computer technology – could offer huge improvements in information flow.

Although the Internet was adopted throughout the 1990s as a means of obtaining a wealth of information not previously available, it was not until the late 1990s that many of the African countries were able to take any advantage of it due to resource restrictions. Even after access became possible, it frequently remained restricted to the capital cities, and there was little support for training and adoption.

In addition to the information and networking resources provided by INASP, there was an increasing call for an enlargement of services provided to the developing nations. In response to these, several different initiatives were launched, including the health programme which supports networking among health workers, and is most well-known for its active e-mail discussion group, HIF-net at WHO, which it operates in collaboration with the World Health Organisation. This service now has over 1000 participants with about 50 per cent from developing countries. The rural programme (originally known as the South-South programme) also provided a networking service by specifically identifying and listing organisations committed to information sharing. This resource is now available as a directory on the INASP website along the Health and the INASP Directories. A further programme was also developed to support library associations and the development of professional skills. This includes such activities as supporting the meetings of SCAULWA and SCANUL-ECS. Full information about these and the other activities run by INASP can be found on the INASP website: www.inasp.info.

Evolution and Growth of PERI

As the 1990s drew to a close, meetings with researchers, librarians and other information professionals from Southeast Asia and Africa raised a specific need to access the wealth of scholarly information available on the Internet behind controlled access sites (i.e., commercial published information). They also discussed training in how to use these resources efficiently; and how to develop their own information outputs to become more visible to the global research community and do it more sustainably. From these meetings, the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) was developed and launched as a pilot in six countries in 2000.

The programme was specifically developed to encompass different components that would together support information production, access and dissemination using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The components each focus on a different facet of information provision and support, but were developed to ensure equal support for receiving both international and national research information.

The component 'delivering information' builds a bridge between Western publishers and researchers in the developing countries. INASP negotiates preferential discounted rates for access within specific countries, and then work closely with an in-country coordinator to ensure access. Unlike some other programmes, the choice of information sources is very much led by the country coordinator, so that relevant resources are selected. Also, with a view to long-term sustainability, there is a price set for most resources, to ensure that a working relationship (and not a charitable one) is established between the information provider and the recipient librarians, consortia and research establishments. The funding for suppliers is managed through a variety of models, including self-payment from the recipient countries, funding from external donors, or a mix of the two. Most countries are required to identify at least some funds from their own resources (whether from existing budgets or allocated funds) to ensure ownership and commitment to the programme.

To support the delivery of information, there is a recognition that training is required – both for researchers in how to access the information efficiently, and also for the information managers who need to manage the information resources and support their users. Therefore, a series of training workshops has been developed both for the librarian and the research community. Again, long-term sustainability is an important goal, and the workshops have been developed with a view to 'cascading' the skills throughout a country and region. Whilst INASP have initiated the first workshops, thereafter they have been facilitated by a trained local resource person who is also made available to assist with training workshops in other countries within the region. This method has proved extremely successful with over 1000 people from more than 200 organisations trained within the last two years – a number that could not have been reached by using a single organisation's resources. It also ensures the development of a core of trainers within each country to continue to provide training and mentoring. Whilst the language of research is commonly English, support for both French and Spanish speakers is required, and so materials in these languages have also been developed. (And for work within the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union resources are also available in Russian.)

As PERI has developed over time, and in response to developing needs, the projects and initiatives have also developed. In particular, support for research projects aimed at improving access have been required. For example, a recent study into improving the use of available bandwidth has led to a series of workshops to train information managers on how to establish practices that will provide better access for their users. Even now, a project is underway to develop an offline searching mechanism to ensure that online time is maximised for downloading of information, and not spent on time-consuming searches (see Elin@ 2003).

Access to international information is held in high regard, however it is vital that information flow is two-way to avoid bias and irrelevance. Support for local research and publishing communities was repeatedly highlighted during the initiation of PERI, and so separate components were established to support this and ensure that they were not further disadvantaged by the improved access to international research. Publishing within Africa has many inherent problems due to lack of resources, poor infrastructure and support, and a lack of skills. However, it is important for the research community to have a voice within the global research community – and to ensure that local research is made available to those who

need it. For example, the journal *African Health Sciences* was established specifically because the editor was investigating ‘nodding disease’ and could not find any literature on the subject, although it was a recognised illness within Uganda (Yamey 2003). He realised that there were no outlets for papers on this research, and therefore a lack of communication which could lead to a duplication of research, and a waste of resources.

One of the first projects set up by INASP was an online current awareness service: African Journals OnLine (AJOL), to provide a window to the indigenous research that was elsewhere unavailable. This was originally established in 1998, and became online in 1999 with 10 science and 4 medical journals. The original aim of this initiative was to investigate if online presence would bring benefits to the journals, and make them more sustainable – particularly through increased revenue, and also through increased readership and submission. After an initial 2-year pilot the service was evaluated to see if it should continue. The full report is available on the INASP website (Rosenberg 2001), but, in summary, it found that online visibility was considered extremely valuable by both the journals and the users. In particular, the journals reported an increase in international submissions, and a general perception that being showcased among other African journals gave them greater credibility and respectability among their peers. Users reported that they were able to access information that was unavailable elsewhere, and so they also valued the service highly. However, one disappointment was that the journals could not report any increase in subscriptions or other financial benefits from participating in the service. With the benefit of hindsight, this objective was probably unrealistic given the problems inherent within the journal publishing and librarian community worldwide. Budgets are increasingly scarce and unavailable to purchase new, unknown, journals.

By the time of the first evaluation, the service had grown and 45 journals were participating. The criteria for participation has not changed over time, although the range of the journals has increased. The service includes African journals that are scholarly in content, contain some original research and are peer reviewed. For pragmatic reasons the journals are required to provide their material in electronic form, in addition to providing access to the full text content – either in the form of a print copy of each issue or through access to the online journal. The pilot proved that the service was considered valuable, and so funding was secured for a further time.

A second evaluation was undertaken in 2002, by which time there were 71 journals on AJOL. The findings showed that the service was still highly valued by both journals and users, but it also showed that further support to the journals was required, and that the website needed to be updated. From this evaluation, it was decided to undertake a major overhaul of the website, and to increase the support provided to the journals through PERI.

The evaluation also highlighted other areas of importance to both users and journals. These included a desire to see full text on the site and some evaluation criteria to give a quality assurance to the journals. The journals wanted greater promotion of the site, better communication between the participating journals, and greater support for improving their operation through training and resources (see the full report in Rosenberg 2003).

Workshops for journal publishers and editors had been held by INASP for many years; however, there was no programme such as had been developed to support the information providers and researchers on how to use ICTs. Therefore, a series of workshops has been developed, and in the past two years over 100 journals have participated in workshops that cover topics such as editorial responsibility, online publishing processes, improving visibility and financial planning, copyright and strategic development. In addition, online resources are

provided for journals in areas such as how to gain acceptance on Medline, sample copyright forms, how to develop resources for authors, and how to evaluate a journal to ensure compatibility with others.

Consolidation of AJOL

The AJOL journal community has been integral to developments to AJOL, and with the development of the new website, this has been particularly valuable and important to ensure that the service provides what both communities (journals and users) require. There are now 216 journals participating on AJOL from 21 countries, and the new website has provided greater opportunity for them to develop an online presence and benefit from the increased global visibility. The website has become increasingly recognised and used by the research community, with over 3000 new registrations annually, and more than 2000 document delivery requests during 2004. The new website (in response to requests) now provides an e-mail alert service for users, whereby every time a new issue from one or more journal of their choice is published, they receive an e-mail containing the table of contents, with a link to the website. This tool is particularly important in an environment where journals publish infrequently (only one or two issues each year), or experience delays in publication due to lack of resources. The value of this service has been felt at INASP, where most requests for document deliveries come in immediately after new issues are published.

Another new service on the website is a facility to publish full text in addition to the tables of contents and abstracts that were previously available. At present one journal is publishing full text online (*SAHARA-J* a South African medical journal), and one other has posted an issue as a promotional tool (*The Journal of Civil Engineering and Practice*, a Kenyan title). One title that struggles to find funding for printing has decided to recommend to the board that the print journal is cancelled, and that they use AJOL as their publishing platform for an online-only journal; and two Kenyan titles have made the decision to publish quarterly online, and to print the journal twice-yearly.

As part of both the AJOL development and the publishing support training provided through PERI, journal staff are being trained on how to load their own content onto AJOL. The reason for this is to make online publishing part of their operation, and to provide support for online publishing as an additional method of publication – and in some cases as a solution to a problem of finding resources to print and distribute copies. Up to four workshops have now been held in countries like Senegal, South Africa and Kenya, and there are plans for similar workshops ahead. There are currently about 20 journals that are loading their own content directly onto AJOL.

AJOL continues to be developed, and the largest change to the operation took place in 2005. The service is currently managed out of the INASP office in Oxford, UK,. However, as a service for African journals it is more appropriate to manage it from within Africa. During 2004, INASP invited expressions of interest from African organisations to manage AJOL. Fourteen applications were received, and these were short-listed to four organisations, with a choice to be made early in 2005. A similar exercise was undertaken in 2002, but only four organisations expressed an interest, but at that time it was felt to be too early to move AJOL. However, in the past few years there have been substantial developments within Africa that led to an increase in the number of organisations interested in managing it – and an increase in the ability of the applying organisations. It is ironic that the exercise this time has been made harder by the high quality of the applications, and the ability of most applicants to manage AJOL very competently.

AJOL has shown that information published locally is perceived as highly valuable by both local and international researchers, and that services such as AJOL should be promoted throughout the developing world to ensure a voice for local publications. However, for AJOL, longer-term sustainability is now an objective, and there is a need to ensure self-sufficiency. This is one of the objectives that the new managing organisation will have to tackle – whilst at the same time retaining the value of AJOL as an awareness service promoting African journals to the world.

References and further information

African Journals OnLine (AJOL) <http://www.ajolinfo>

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