

Reggie Raju

From “life support” to collaborative partnership

A local/global view of academic libraries in South Africa

South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy has been labeled a success. The growth in democratic institutions, transformation of the public service, extended basic services, and stabilization of the economy have been used to measure this success. Despite these successes, it is acknowledged that far too many South Africans are trapped in poverty, and South Africa still remains a highly unequal society. A major contributor to poverty and an unequal society is the poor quality of K–12 education for the majority and the continuation of that into higher education.

The National Development Plan¹ acknowledges that the higher education system in South Africa ranges from world-class to mediocre. A major challenge for the higher education system is that generally K–12 education is poor, and this has ramifications, such as an increased cost to the state to produce graduates. Further, there is a relatively small number of black students graduating from universities, exacerbating the problem of an already unequal society. In response to the need to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, the South African government developed the National Development Plan. A significant reconstruction tool is a sound educational system in which universities become centers of excellence at the cutting edge of technology.

In this reconstruction process, the Plan aims to increase the number of graduating doctoral students to 72 percent by 2030. Further, there is a need to increase the percentage of PhD-

qualified academic staff in the higher education sector from the current 34 percent to more than 75 percent by 2030.

The ambitious goals of the Plan presupposes an efficient academic libraries system. Unfortunately, academic libraries in South Africa, and it could be assumed that this may be the case in many parts of the global south, are at a crossroads. On the one hand, there are academic libraries that are hanging by the finest of threads (or as Jeffrey Gayton² says, “on life support”). On the other hand, there are those libraries that are reinventing themselves and are moving away from providing a support service to playing a collaborative partnership role. This partnership role paradigm shift has facilitated the redefinition of roles and responsibilities of the academic library, and it is hoped that this would contribute to the ambitions of the National Development Plan.

Redefining the roles of the academic library

As posited by Erin Ellis, Brian Rosenblu, John Stratton, and Kathleen Ames-Stratton, there is a need “to redefine professional roles and

Reggie Raju is deputy director of research and learning at the University of Cape Town Libraries, email: reggie.raju@uct.ac.za

Contact series editors Clara M. Chu, email: cmchu@illinois.edu, and Barbara Ford, email: bjford@illinois.edu, with article ideas.

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functions to strategically position the libraries for the future.³³ It is essential that libraries develop flexible and robust library structures with commensurate services that meet the demands of an ever-changing user community and remain relevant and fit for purpose in a technology-driven age. The demand for librarians to assist users retrieve information is fast becoming a redundant service: subject specialization is fading into the background while the demand for sophisticated librarian services is growing by leaps and bounds.

This movement toward sophisticated library services requires amending the current practice of subject librarian specialization, which has for decades been the mainstay of academic librarianship in South Africa and many other countries in both the global south and north. The practice of subject librarianship is based on the premise that the librarian has generic academic training in the discipline that he or she supports as a subject librarian. What can be said with some degree of confidence is that more than 80% of librarians in South African academic libraries have a humanities/social science background. Therefore, there is no subject specialization for most of the nonhumanities/social science disciplines. This concept of subject librarian, for all intents and purposes, is a misnomer and compounds what has been pointed out by Carol Tenopir, Robert Sandusky, Suzie Allard, and Ben Birch as one of the challenges that contributes to the low level of confidence on the part of the librarian.⁴ This low confidence negatively impacts the services rendered by the librarian.

In a radically changing academic library landscape, the suite of services offered by libraries is fast becoming highly specialized and in many instances are ahead of what is being taught in library and information science (LIS) schools. A typical example of services provided but not currently taught (in the main) in the LIS schools in South Africa is scholarly communication and research landscape analysis. With regard to bibliometrics, librarians are providing far more than the traditional services that they have been providing for many years. Librarians are now expected to provide “intelligence,”

which guides researchers in their funding applications and, in South Africa, applications for National Research Foundation ratings. These bibliometrics skills are being learned through engagement with vendors and through trial and error.

The new services envisioned, when viewed through the National Development Plans lens, could contribute to a reduction in poverty and inequality. The role of the librarian is far more than providing a support service in the teaching and learning and research processes at their academic institutions. In the South African higher education environment, the librarian is a contributor to the country achieving the goals set in the National Development Plan. The transition from life support to a collaborative partner must become an imperative as it is a service that literally supports lifelong learning, information literacy.

Librarians need to adopt a more global view of their roles and responsibilities. Their role in scholarly communication, for example, demonstrates the need to move from local to global. There is a desperate need to move away from the metrics that showcase the research glory of the institution to supporting the glory achieved by sharing research output with communities that directly or indirectly resolve challenges that beset society. Open access, for example, is much more than showing the research output of the institution—it is sharing content for social justice purposes and for the elimination of the commodification of information, which is the one element that grows in value with use. The willingness to share is an innate characteristic of Africans (South Africans included), and this is embedded in the African concept of *Ubuntu* (sharing). The principles of social justice and Ubuntu are part of the fabric of open access.

Open access within a social justice paradigm

Without getting into too theoretical an examination of social justice, it suffices to say that social justice is the provision of equal opportunity for all individuals in society. In the context of open access, it is conceptualized within the ambit of the redistribution of resources to

improve the situation of the disadvantaged. It is a lived concept that encompasses acts of fairness, equality, and justness towards others.

The toll on scholarly output, in the current “distribution of publication” system, restricts those who cannot afford to pay for access to research output, thus marginalizing them from the learning and/or research processes. Further, limited access to scholarly content negatively impacts on research production as information is necessary for the generation of new knowledge. This toll system fuels the exclusionary tendency of the academy and promotes elitism. The ultimate effect of the toll is the systematic exclusion of the “poor” from accessing and contributing to research being done in a particular field. The knock-on effect of this exclusionary practice relegates the global south to the furthest point in the world’s knowledge production chain: the communities from the global south are strangled by information poverty.

Ubuntu and open access

Information poverty is a community’s inability, not only to access essential information, but also to benefit from it in order to meet its basic needs for survival and development. Ubuntu, as a concept, is underpinned by a sense of community: “you are who you are because of your interaction with the community around you, if the community thrives then you will thrive.”⁵ One of the founding principles of Ubuntu is the embracing of human diversity, dignity, and democracy. Ubuntu highlights the essential unity of humanity and emphasizes the principles of empathy, sharing, and cooperation in efforts to resolve common problems. Ubuntu encapsulates moral norms and values such as altruism, kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others.

Ubuntu is firmly enveloped within a communal perspective—the community is traditionally the village. In the current age of the globe being one village, sharing and cooperation has to become common place to resolve common problems; sharing and reciprocity are the norm. The sharing of

information to resolve the challenges of the “village” are unconditional. Therefore, it is safe to say that Ubuntu, social justice, and open access are part of the same continuum, that is, a continuum towards an egalitarian society—a society that is not impoverished by the lack of access to information to meet its development needs.

In response to the Ubuntu need to share research, eight of the 23 South African universities’ libraries are already publishing nearly 50 journal titles. The University of Cape Town has published eight monographs, two of which are textbooks. All of these journals and books are published open access. It should be noted that none of these libraries are publishing via their universities’ presses.

Research landscape analysis service

Clara Riera Quintero, Rosa Padrós Cuxart, and Anna Zuñiga Ruiz maintain that research landscape service has always been a forte of the librarian; but never exploited to the extent envisioned by librarians at the University of Cape Town.⁶ The expansion of the research landscape service addresses the goals of the Plan.

In the South African higher education system, one of the many reasons cited for the low transition from master’s to doctoral studies is the fact that there is very little support for the student until the research proposal is accepted. Some of the challenges en route to crafting the research proposal is identifying the exact topic/area to research. Unfortunately, library support during the preliminary process is very limited, and this contributes to the relatively small number of students registering for PhDs.

A number of institutions in South Africa subscribe to research performance management (RPM) tools such as Thomson Reuter’s InCites and Elsevier’s SciVal Spotlight. To maximize return on investment for these very expensive RPM tools and to justify the expenditure, academic libraries need to exploit alternative uses for these RPM tools. Both tools provide citation data, global metrics, and multidimensional profiles on leading research institutions. The tools also have the capacity to

identify funding agencies, and potential collaboration based on analysis of institutional and individual research performance. The author argues that the capacity of these tools must be exploited for the benefit of individual researchers, especially prospective PhD students in the run-up to their official registration as PhD students.

The exploitation of the capacity of these expensive tools' research performance management is not the purview of librarians at South African institutions only. Librarians across the globe have an obligation to maximize use of these tools that their institutions, as there is growing pressure on library subscription budgets. There has to be an expanded return of investment on such expensive, but extremely important, tools. With regard to librarians in South African institutions, the provision of a research landscape service will contribute to achieving the PhD graduation goal of the National Development Plan.

Conclusion

The transition from being on life support to collaborative partnership is much more than avoiding redundancy. Academic libraries, despite their focus on providing services in support of teaching, learning, and the research agendas of their institutions, have a much broader role to play in society. As can be seen in the role of library as publisher, the Ubuntu underpinning ensures that there is no exclusion of those who cannot afford exorbitant subscriptions. With regard to the second service discussed, that is, research landscape analysis, it is the obligation of the librarian to maximize the potential that these tools provide. In the case discussed, the expansion of the services addresses national imperatives. This is not just a regional imperative, this must be a global imperative as every country must strive to graduate as many quality doctoral students as possible as this is the epicentre of innovators of tomorrow. These services do not only extend the life of the library but society at large.

Notes

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3. Erin L. Ellis, Brian Rosenblum, John M. Stratton, and Kathleen Ames-Stratton, "Positioning Academic Libraries for the Future: A Process and Strategy for Organizational Transformation," Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences, Paper 1 (2014), accessed November 27, 2017, <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2014/plenaries/13>.

4. Carol Tenopir, Robert J. Sandusky, Suzie Allard, and Ben Birch, "Research data management services in academic research libraries and perceptions of librarians," *Library and Information Science Research* 36 (2014): 84-90.

5. Johannes J. Britz and James N. Blygnaut, "Information Poverty and Social Justice," *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* 67, no. 2 (2001): 63-69.

6. Clara Riera Quintero, Rosa Padrós Cuxart, and Anna Zuñiga Ruiz, "Research Librarians in a Virtual Environment: New Skills, New Services," 2012, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://openaccess.uoc.edu/webapps/o2/handle/10609/14221>.

Further reading

Reggie Raju and Lucia Schoombee, "Research support through the lens of transformation in academic libraries with reference to the case of Stellenbosch University Libraries," *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science* 79, no. 2 (2014), DOI: 10.7553/79-2-155.

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