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## Seeking Impact and Visibility

Trotter, Henry, Kell, Catherine

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Trotter, Henry and Catherine Kell.

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# Executive summary

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## The problem

African scholarly research is relatively invisible for three primary reasons:

1. While research production on the continent is growing in absolute terms, it is falling in comparative terms (especially as other Southern countries such as China ramp up research production), reducing its relative visibility.
2. Traditional metrics of visibility (especially the ISI/WoS Impact Factor) which measure only formal scholar-to-scholar outputs (journal articles and books) fail to make legible a vast amount of African scholarly production, thus underestimating the amount of research activity on the continent.
3. Many African universities do not take a strategic approach to scholarly communication, nor utilise appropriate information and communications technologies (ICTs) and Web 2.0 technologies to broaden the reach of their scholars' work or curate it for future generations, thus inadvertently minimising the impact and visibility of African research.

Visibility in this context amounts to more than just “accessibility” – it means *digital* accessibility. It means that a scholarly object is profiled in such a way that makes it easily findable by search engines or databases through a relevant search string. Thus, it requires a communications strategy, one of the ingredients missing in many African universities' and scholars' approach to research dissemination.

A key way to enhance Africa's research visibility, reach and effectiveness is by communicating it according to open access (OA) principles. Making all African research outputs clearly profiled, curated and made freely available to the public would give African research a higher likelihood of not only shaping academic discourse because it would be more visible to scholars, but of getting into the hands of government, industry and civil society personnel who can leverage it for development.

This approach is already taking root in the global North. In the past few years, major funding bodies in the EU, the UK and the USA have legislated open access mandates,

requiring that all research funded by them must be made open access. This will raise the visibility of those regions' research while (comparatively) lowering the visibility of Africa's research, which is not produced under a similar mandate.

However, most of the technologies required for engaging in open access communication are either already available at African institutions, freely available on the internet, or relatively inexpensive to purchase. Most also have access to the same free Web 2.0 technologies that allow individual scholars to enhance their scholarly profiles and collaborative opportunities. But these have not been incorporated into a strategic plan concerning scholarly communication, nor have enough African universities dealt with the skills and capacity challenges that new scholarly communication imperatives demand.

## The research

The Scholarly Communication in Africa Programme (SCAP) was established to help raise the visibility of African scholarship by mapping current research and communication practices in four Southern African universities and recommending technical and administrative solutions based on experiences gained in implementation initiatives piloted at these universities. The universities that SCAP engaged were the:

- University of Botswana (UB)
- University of Cape Town (UCT)
- University of Mauritius (UoM)
- University of Namibia (UNAM)

Funded by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the three-year programme built on the findings of previous studies to address the particular challenges faced by African universities as they attempt to align their scholarly communication practices with rapidly evolving global standards in a manner that still reflects their core institutional values. The two questions driving SCAP's research were:

1. What is the current state of scholarly communication in (Southern) African universities?
2. How can the use of ICTs, technology platforms and open access publishing models contribute to the improvement of strategic scholarly communication, and what institutional structures are needed to support such an approach?

To answer these questions, SCAP conducted extensive research at these four partner institutions, working with the Department of Library and Information Studies (DLIS) at UB, the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at UCT, the Faculty of Science (FoS) at UoM and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) at UNAM. These entities served as our pilot sites. Over the course of four site visits, we obtained rich quantitative and qualitative data through "change laboratory" workshops (in which pilot site participants analysed their scholarly communication ecosystems), surveys, interviews, day-recall sessions, casual conversations and ethnographic observation.

This research was informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which allowed us to approach these sites as historically dynamic and culturally complex systems, requiring us to understand them as comprehensively as possible before recommending interventions aimed at raising the visibility of their research outputs.

## Research and communication practices

To understand the state of scholarly communication in Southern African universities, we explored scholars' values, research processes, scholarly outputs, communication practices, networks and collaboration preferences at our research sites. By comparing them, the diversity of the contexts and practices shaping scholarship in the region becomes clear.

### Values

SCAP research found that, while all Southern African scholars are motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors, the most powerful motivations (when aggregated and ranked) are: compliance with the institutional mandate to produce research (UB FoH), conformity to peer expectation to produce research (UCT Comm), congruence with personal desire (UoM FoS) and the desire to generate new knowledge and enhance teaching (UNAM FHSS).

These differing motivational factors make sense in their given contexts. UB scholars' high responsiveness to an institutional mandate is understood in a context where teaching has long defined scholars' identities and the administration's centralised managerial culture has guided academics' actions. The mandate has served as a crucial mechanism for encouraging scholars to incorporate research into their work. UCT scholars operate in a competitive, comparative and collegial context where there is a high peer expectation to produce research. It is the product of a strong research culture that has been developed over decades and supported by substantial resources. UoM scholars work under an administration that is highly centralised, but also quite weak; they are therefore free to choose how productive they want to be in terms of research. Their activity is shaped primarily by the personal desires that they feel. Meanwhile, UNAM scholars work in a developmental context which is both young and teaching-oriented; thus they are motivated to produce research so as to generate new knowledge and to enhance their teaching.

### Research production

Most Southern African scholars say that they spend the majority of their time engaged in teaching-related activities (timetabling, prepping, lecturing, marking, advising, invigilating, etc.). They also say that they shoulder significant administrative duties. This was certainly the case at UB FoH, UoM FoS and UNAM FHSS, though most UCT Comm scholars were able to balance their research and teaching activities more equitably. Such heavy teaching and administrative requirements would be reasonable at institutions that see themselves as teaching-oriented universities, but for those that seek to become more research-oriented, the high teaching and administrative demands hinder Southern African universities from achieving the objectives of their new research-informed missions.

## Outputs

Every university recognises research outputs differently, weighing each according to the values that it is trying to promote through scholarly performance assessment systems. At universities such as UCT, scholar-to-scholar outputs in high-prestige publication channels (WoS-rated journals, etc.) are prioritised far above outputs aimed at other audiences, while at more development-centred universities such as UB and UNAM, reward and incentive structures encourage scholars to produce a diversity of outputs aimed at local and international audiences, scholars and non-scholars.

## Communication

While the Southern African scholars we engaged were quite interested in finding ways to increase their research productivity, they were far less responsive to the changing communication opportunities that new ICTs offer for disseminating their work. For the most part, they confined their communication activities to traditional modes. At UB, UoM and UNAM, that often meant reading their papers at regional or international conferences, sharing drafts with colleagues who request copies, incorporating insights from their research into classroom teaching or submitting their articles for publication in journals. At UCT (and to an extent at UoM), this meant producing scholar-to-scholar outputs to be published in high impact factor journals, books and conference proceedings. While the open access movement and availability of free online tools have expanded the opportunities for academics to profile their work on the internet and seek out collaborative partners, most Southern African scholars have yet to take advantage of them.

This means that many regional academics typically rely on face-to-face contact for disseminating their work (conferences), or they leave it to commercial publishing firms to handle (journals). They usually do not have a strategic dissemination plan that leverages the online platforms that would give greater visibility to their outputs. Nor are they encouraged to do so by their universities, as they receive no rewards or incentives for publishing in open access journals or profiling their work on institutional repositories. One of the consequences of this is that Southern African research often does not reach the audiences that could most benefit from it, such as government policymakers, development NGOs or community leaders.

## Networks and collaboration

Southern African universities are characterised by highly variable levels of connectivity institutionally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Even though most universities desire to enhance their networks and number of collaborative engagements, each university's network profile is quite unique.

At UB FoH, scholars say that they do not communicate with each other much (due mainly to a lack of time and fora to do so), though they enjoy reasonable levels of connectivity with regional and international scholars (with whom they meet at conference events). UCT Comm scholars are highly networked within their faculty and internationally, but not so much with scholars outside their faculties in their own institution. They

also enjoy good connections with non-academics – such as civil society and industry personnel – as their work has applicability in a variety of contexts. UoM FoS scholars do not collaborate much with each other or others in the country, but enjoy extensive networks overseas (where most scholars who share their research specialisations are located). At UNAM FHSS, many scholars do not feel part of any type of research network yet, but those who do enjoy solid levels of connectivity within their faculty and internationally.

Despite these universities' drive to become more connected with other universities, many face significant financial and practical obstacles in pursuing research collaborations, especially with African partners who must deal with their own constraints. Thus, for a number of understandable reasons, they often end up collaborating with Northern-based research projects that require an "African partner".

## Policy

Southern African universities enjoy varied levels of policy development, not only in terms of their research strategies (which are relatively well established) but also in terms of their communications strategies (which are largely undeveloped and only now receiving attention). How these policies are established and enforced, however, is often the result of the kinds of institutional cultures that define policy-related activities.

## Open access

Southern African scholars have varying sentiments about open access (OA), but within our study, UoM FoS and UNAM FHSS scholars were the most positive while UB FoH and especially UCT Comm academics were cautious. The Mauritians' support was largely due to the fact that OA strategies resemble their normal scientific communication practices, thus they had a practical appreciation for it (as opposed to a moral one). Namibians were keen for OA not only for the benefit they could get from it as information-seeking scholars, but because they also saw how, if their outputs were made freely accessible, other Namibians would benefit from their research. However, despite these sentiments, neither of these faculties' members went out of their way to disseminate their work in an OA fashion because they did not receive any institutional recognition for doing so.

## Institutional culture

The diverse histories, ages, demographics and purposes of Southern Africa's universities have given rise to a multiplicity of institutional types whose dominant characteristics help us to understand the implicit norms of their scholarly communication ecosystems and how managers and scholars operate within them.

UB's institutional culture is "managerial", in that it has a strong, centralised authority that wields power in a paternalistic, top-down fashion. This concentration of power has been useful in helping to speed up the process by which the entire institution falls in line with the new research mission and the OA ethic that the administration has (partially) embraced. But it has also bred resistance by faculty members who feel that their voices are not being heard by the administration.

UCT's institutional culture is "collegial" in that power emanates from the faculties, individual scholars enjoy great autonomy and intellectual freedom, and the central administration is highly responsive to its academic staff. This is useful in that most of the policies that are eventually adopted enjoy great legitimacy because they are the product of extensive consultation across the institution. But the downside is that, because scholars operate in "siloes" faculty structures, it can take a long time for otherwise good ideas (such as open access) to be adopted.

UoM's institutional culture is "bureaucratic" in that is characterised by a highly centralised administrative structure that is nevertheless quite weak. Thus, on the one hand, the administration employs a variety of bureaucratic processes which ensure that even the smallest decisions made by academics refer back to it for official approval ("red tape"), thereby centralising authority within the institution. But on the other hand, it has largely vacated the strategic role that it should play in shaping the policies structuring research and dissemination activity, leaving scholars to decide on their own how much research they would like to conduct and how to communicate it.

UNAM's institutional culture is "developmental" in that leadership is not centralised (in a managerial fashion) nor decentralised (as in a pure collegial sense), but is distributed across faculties where senior scholars (or "elders") act as models who exemplify good research behaviour to others and, in turn, develop their capacity. Power in this system is not top-down (managerial) or side-to-side (collegial), but front-back (developmental).

### **Research culture**

The research, communication and networking conditions in the region have developed what we can call "nascent" research cultures at most Southern African universities. Aside from UCT, which boasts a comparatively strong research culture, UB, UoM and UNAM are still in the process of building up their research cultures. While these universities are taking important strides in developing a more robust academic core based on new research missions, its completion will take time. This description is likely to change in the future as these universities continue to invest further resources into their research missions, and as the national governments build up research capacity through establishment of research foundations, councils and funds.

### **Infrastructure and capacity**

These findings have stressed the importance of motivational systems and policies because, for the most part, the universities we dealt with already possessed the core technology components necessary to strategically address scholarly communication.

That said, the approach towards developing e-infrastructure for scholarly communication at institutional level was found to be largely haphazard, taking place in isolated pockets (often in a reactive sense); rather than being a considered, long-term exercise underpinned by proactive strategic engagement.

At a number of institutions, e-infrastructure for scholarly communication (such as repositories) had been developed as a result of externally funded programmes and implementation initiatives. While these supporting initiatives were deemed to be crucial for growing infrastructure and capacity in the region, the soft-funded nature of this development meant that the institution had not needed to commit to ownership and long-term maintenance of the infrastructure. It also meant that e-infrastructure had often been developed in a piecemeal, “cottage-industry” fashion without cognisance being given to interoperability and cohesive enterprise management of systems across the institution.

In order to fully institutionalise and harmonise infrastructure development and grow capacity, it was seen as crucial that institutions develop a supporting policy framework; a component of which would constitute transformation of existing reward and incentive structures to scale and support new areas of scholarly communication activity.

## Implementation initiative

These implementation initiatives that we carried out at each pilot site give an indication of not only the diversity of scholarly communication ecosystems at Southern African universities, but how they are shaped by history, culture, traditions, capacity, disciplinary norms and visions for the future. Rather than being assumed to share a general set of challenges to be addressed with a single technology or policy solution, each ecosystem had to be researched and understood before an implementation initiative could seek to improve scholarly communication in those contexts. To increase the likelihood of success in each case, we not only carried out extensive research with pilot site participants and university managers and librarians, but we elicited participants’ desires regarding how they wanted their activity systems to change and tried to implement pilots that spoke to their desires. This was not always easy – especially since many scholars were not aware of the various tools, technologies and strategies available to enhance their scholarly communication and visibility – thus we tried to improve their own analyses and insights by sharing with them trends and developments from around the world in this regard. Our relationship was thus a partnership in which we collaborated to improve their scholarly communication ecosystem, with feedback from inside and outside these systems.

## Recommendations

Based on the insights yielded from our research and implementation activities, SCAP believes that four stakeholders can play a key role in improving Southern African universities’ dissemination activity, to whom our recommendations include the following:

### To national governments

- *Establish national research foundations* so that scholars can seek local funding from more sources than just the university research budget.



- *Design a virtuous research funding cycle* in which, for each recognised output produced by a scholar and disseminated in an open access fashion, funds are directed into that scholar's faculty research budget so as to spur further research activities.

#### **To university administrations**

- *Offer a reduction in teaching time to scholars* who demonstrate ambitious research activity.
- *Establish digital platforms for sharing publication success* by university scholars.
- *Develop policies mandating that all publicly funded research be made open access.*
- *Put all university-affiliated journals online and make them open access.*
- *Induce academic staff to create personal profiles on their departmental web pages.*
- *Establish or identify support service providers who can translate scholars' research* for government- and community-based audiences.
- *Develop a network of communication officers/content managers* so that disparate dissemination activity can be pursued in a more cohesive and strategic manner.
- *Encourage scholars to share their research insights on Wikipedia.*
- *Invest in training for library staff* so that they can operate effectively in the new scholarly communication landscape.
- *Train and incentivise scholars to use Web 2.0 platforms.*

#### **To university scholars**

- *Share responsibility with the administration for research visibility.* Communicate research findings to the audiences that could best leverage them for developmental purposes.

#### **To research funding agencies**

- *Determine the feasibility of developing a regional megajournal.*