Enhancing research visibility of academics: the role of academic libraries

Tihyaunin Luka Dang

Federal University Dutsinma, Nigeria

Abstract

Despite so many researches stemming from most African academic institutions, not many are visible. This may be attributed to low quality of research works and lack of subscription fees. This article offers suggestions on libraries' role in promoting the quality of research in order to increase its visibility. It also offers a brief on the importance of open access and how the results, impact and progress of research is accelerated through open access.

Key words: academic libraries, open access, research, researchers, technology

Introduction

Technology has significantly changed the way information is handled, communicated, processed, shared and preserved. Today, in just a click away one has extraordinary opportunities to adapt, manipulate, build, use and share knowledge in real time to solve and make discoveries. This advancement is also evident in the libraries especially academic libraries whose objective is focused on supporting teaching, learning and research. Advances in technology has created a major shift from the traditional set up of library which focuses on the physical collection of information resources, to a stage where information is predominantly stored in digital formats, and ways users' access information and how libraries provide and manage resources (Dang, 2015). The development has improved access to appropriate, current and rich information at an incredible speed as academic libraries (and libraries in general) can now organise their collections in digital formats such as, electronic books, databases, media resources, electronic journals etc to facilitate easy access to meet their users' information needs. They also provide day-to-day digital services in order to ensure excellent service delivery and satisfy their changing customers' needs (Dang, 2015). This continues to expand daily as new capabilities and services are introduced into the library.

The academic library being the knowledge hub in an institution supports and promotes quality of research. Baxter et.al (1998) noted that research is the basic academic role in the university. Academic norms increasingly have emphasised the importance of publishing research. Research in every institution sets a hallmark for development and increasing the visibility of such institution and its ranking. This also has personal benefits to individual staff members in areas of career development and contribution to the community, building a reputation and becoming an authority in one's field. Thus, a researcher occupies a very

significant position in an institution. Through research, an academic encourages collaborations with other institutions and increases institutional visibility. Impact of research is far reaching as it does not only stop in the institutions but extends to the communities as new knowledge that brings about new ideas and innovations. The core value of higher education according to Sawyer, (2004:215) is the belief that the "strength of Africa's universities and research institutions is a key condition for its development, and their weakness is an index of, as well as a contributor to, its poverty". In the same line of thought, European commission (2012) reports that affordable and easy access to the results of publicly funded research is important to the scientific community, for innovative business and for society. As a result, academic libraries have major roles to play in providing valuable assistance to the research community in their institutions. To continually remain relevant in this thriving technology age, the academic librarian should be more committed in building up a strong research community by providing expertise in organisation and description of information, be engaged in providing knowledge on long-term preservation and expert searching, project inception and grant seeking opportunities. Educate the research community on open access and its benefits.

Several research work are published every day by researchers, however many of these works have remain invisible. This situation is prevailing particularly in Africa. According to Venitha (2015) research capacity in the form of published peer reviewed articles, master's and doctoral output is disturbingly low in Africa, with African Universities producing less than 1% of global scholarly articles. This point to the fact that despite many valuable research findings churned out worldwide, many researchers in Africa were not getting sufficient access to these research findings. Equally, the valuable research findings stemming from Africa were not reflected in the global scholarly articles. Several studies attributed this situation to cost of subscription fees and low quality of research work (Heller, 2013).

In view of the above, it is clear that the responsibility to change this status lies not only with neither the researchers nor their institutions but also with the libraries or the information professional. As it is already established, libraries as knowledge hubs in the academic environment also serve as institution for supporting and promoting research. Librarians and indeed information professionals must take advantage of the available technologies in order to be make researches more visible and equally promote the quality of research, considering the web and mobile technology being pertinent for the dissemination of scholarly information. Also the appearance of the Internet, as a channel for the distribution of contents based on the principles of accessibility, relative confidentiality and safety, diversity, trans-border circulation, and open content have opened opportunity to present and distribute the scientific content in a new way that would be open without restrictions (Internet Governance Forum, 2006). Today, the most significant challenge to realizing the full potential of the Internet lies with the ability to advance Open Access for the benefit of accessing quality information and producing quality research.

Research impact and open access

Researchers, publish in the hope their work will find the widest possible audience, seeking to maximize the impact of their research. Whether that impact means increased understanding, collaboration across borders and institutions, the ability to secure future funding, and/or career advancement, there is a growing need for researchers at universities and other research supporting centres to demonstrate the impact of their work. James (2010) describes it as a need since fields of research have grown beyond scale of personal networks and funding bodies have demanded measures.

There are initiatives to look at the value of research activities particularly those stemming from universities, the wider impact of research and the quality of the research and its outputs in higher education. Increasingly, a number of quality instruments are being used to measure impact and output quality not just for quality, but also obtaining promotions and grants. These instruments often involve information about publications and citations in peer-reviewed journals. Assessing the impact of a scholars work can be measured by evaluating several factors including the number of peer-reviewed publications, citations to these publications and the influence of the publications. There are a number of traditional methods that the scientific community uses to measure academic success. These assessments are tied to the scholarly publishing process and the peer review procedure. Some of the traditional methods to gauge academic success are tied to the journal title itself. For example, the journal impact factor for many years has been the best tool available to determine the prestige of a journal (Donato, 2013). The impact factor also measures the frequency with which the "average article" in a journal has been cited in a particular year or period (Thomson Reuters, 2013). Considering academic libraries go beyond formal education, they take a step further towards encouraging and sustaining literacy while also supporting development. It therefore means the cooperation and assistance of libraries to enhance the quality of research is paramount and necessary. Eysenbach, 2006 as cited in Heller, (2013) stated that the increased visibility afforded by an open-access journal can allow more international recognition and scientific impact in a shorter period. These factors have been proven to lead to increased collaboration and more frequent citations. What then is open access?

Kinel, (2013) defines the term open access as a free access to scientific information to all internet users regardless of their country of origin. More specifically, he added that it is a way to share electronic publications understood in terms of a free, comprehensive or partial information model for the public, in which all the costs of access, i.e. the server, website, convert, and others are borne by the publisher. Openness has tremendous benefits for researchers. Through openness, the progress of research is accelerated and the results of research are shared broadly. This benefits also impact in our daily lives including medical professionals having access to the latest findings, emergency response systems optimized with the most precise data. Heller (2013) added that making research output on health available is critical for developing countries whose health care systems are often financially restricted due to the costs required for developing infrastructure and providing patient care. He added that since the purchase of scholarly articles from a fee-based repository is often out of reach for a significant portion of the world, practitioners are not able to access much of the

current information to develop a true evidence-based approach. Therefore, many health care workers in these situations routinely rely on the accuracy of information posted on the Internet- and entrepreneurs using cutting edge research for new business innovation, agriculturist maximizing knowledge toward savaging future risk and harm to crops. Through openness, the fast, free sharing of information will speed up the pace of discovery and bring new ideas to market faster — preventing diseases, creating new jobs, fuelling economies, and increasing the return on investment in research and education (Open Matters, 2016). Furthermore, educators, young learners and students can leverage an open approach to create customized education programs, using the latest relevant information to improve learning outcomes and make access to quality education more equitable and affordable. This will in time assist in creating new ideas, which will in turn serve as an impetus for knowledge. With open access, more people can read the results of scholarly research, including those who would otherwise not be able to access that information because they cannot afford the subscription to an expensive journal. This goes a long way in covering the gap between the poor and the rich, reducing the information divide. According to Heller, (2013) researchers can more rapidly investigate the existing body of knowledge for a subject by staying current with the information made possible through open access. Furthermore, researchers publishing in an open-access journal have the potential to reach a larger number of readers and a more diverse population compared with even the most popular subscription-based journals. The increased visibility afforded by an open-access can allow more international recognition and scientific impact in a shorter period.

In the academic context, openness comes with the idea of creating a free platform where researchers collaborate, information is exchanged, knowledge is shared and in process enriching education and making literature as useful as it can be. This will in time laid the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge. Open access is offering access to deep web publication which is capital intensive and may require approval of funding by the funding institutions/agencies. Nevertheless, Libraries can assist their researchers by identifying funding sources to help with publication as well as access.

Academic Libraries roles in creating quality research and promoting open access.
Research has greatly evolved due to increasing amount of data involved and the advancement in technology. Therefore, libraries role to support research across all disciplines has to increase in order to match the increasing needs of these researchers while also facilitating open access so that the research output can be widely disseminated. As a result, the librarian or information professional is faced with tremendous responsibilities in the ever changing technological age, he/she must strive to go with the changing time by constantly introducing new products, taking on new services and engaging on new activities, taking advantage of technology and its benefits that will assist researchers in creating quality research so it can gain recognition and visibility. Below are some ways librarians can enhance research quality as well as promote open access:
- **Be involved in the workflow of the researchers:**

Every researcher's need vary in relation to their particular area of interest. However there is a common ground for most researchers and that is the research process or what is often referred to as the researcher's workflow. Pienaar (2009) developed a research circle which she calls a researcher's workflow and indicated that it was developed on the grounds of the researchers' input on how they do their research. The workflow is the description of the entire research process from identifying the need to carry out a research to building up ideas towards solving the need and disseminating the knowledge gathered. This process involves data management, training and mentoring, identification of funding sources and real time communication.

Libraries' commitment to see the researcher has his information needs met at every step of his workflow will go a long way in producing quality research. Their commitment may be in areas of providing expertise in organisation and description of information, provide current and relevant information, and assist in providing a suitable learning environment. Researchers and of course library users look to academic libraries as not just a knowledge centre but a suitable learning environment. Librarians and indeed information professionals must be committed to living up to this expectation. Pleasant learning environments facilitate easy learning, collaboration, discussion and exchange of ideas thereby creating room for new ideas. This can be sustained by sensitive administrators, who are committed to delivering excellent service to users. A librarian concerned with the research community is expected to have trainings and specialized knowledge of his/her patrons' fields of practice, such as where the researchers feel free to conduct their searches (venue), time they prefer to work and other related interest. He should also become familiar with the researchers interest in the journals he/she likes to publish, the social media platforms he uses amongst others and encourage them on the use of those platforms, while also keeping in constant touch.

- **Assist in Dissemination of artefacts and findings**:

The results of a piece of research, be it through writing thesis, journal articles, research report, conference paper, report on performance are clearly a major part of research cycle. A chief concern of researchers is where to publish. The choice of channels is seemingly endless, as are the relative merits such as speed, audience and peer review system, fees, quality amongst others. Knowledge of the best journals in different fields to publish may be particularly useful. Librarians can take advantage of the social media platforms to promote or increase research or researcher's discoverability and accessibility to their works. Social media platforms allow users to connect, create, promote, share and follow interest groups. With these capabilities, academic libraries can make use of Facebook accounts, twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn and blogs. A library can start a blog devoted to researchers which allows for collaboration and information sharing. The library can share works of research with readers and bloggers around the world with the permission of authors or publishers. Using twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, the library can put a message and hyperlink to the article in the authors email signature, post links to manuscripts of publications, conference abstracts, and supplemental materials such as images, illustrations, slides, specimens, and progress reports on the site. Other ways can be to register with bookmarking tools like CiteULike, Zotero, Connotea and Mendeley and start a "library" of publications related to the research. The use of mobile technology cannot be left out, to make it easy for

others to access the work; one can make use of Quick Response (QR) Codes for downloading research guides and easy access to databases, websites and downloadable resources.

- **Creating an institutional repository:**

A repository supports the addition of articles, projects, theses & dissertations, chapters from books, conference papers, working and technical papers, inaugural addresses, public lectures in text , audio, video format, research material (published or non-published) and any other unique collections. The repository is a sure platform towards disseminating research. With efficient management and increase awareness of a repository, it can gain international recognition and reach higher standards while also increasing the visibility of its institution. Libraries should spare no effort in marketing such a venture and ensure effective data management plans in place for the repository.

- **Increase sharing and collaboration between researchers**:

Collaboration plays an important role in a researcher's circle of activities in order to advance knowledge. Collaboration in research can take different forms, from giving advice to colleagues in the laboratory during a single experiment, to collaborative ventures spanning many years. It is well-known that collaboration in research has gradually become more common as evidenced by the increase in co-authored publications (Kyvik, 2012). This trend has been most effective in science field where extensive use of scientific equipment, complex experiments, and large scale research tasks are a prerequisite for scientific progress. Thus, enhancement of international collaboration in research is pertinent in order to keep pace with scientific developments and strengthen the domestic research community.

Aside collaboration, researchers from various disciplines need to be involved in sharing and dissemination of data. For most researchers, frequent communication with fellow colleagues is done through face to face interaction, emails and phone calls. However, social media can form a very effective platform where ideas, results of research and data can be easily exchanged. This pattern as suggested by (Kyvik 2012) can be referred to as networking. Melin (2000) opines that networking is important to get access to information from fellow colleagues; it provides a strategy to overcome the problems of small disciplinary units and gain intellectual stimulation; it is also often a first step towards closer working relationships and research collaboration with other scientists. Librarians can champion this course by organising enlightenment lectures and trainings on the importance of collaboration, while also creating an enabling environment, channels and where researchers can meet to relate and share ideas.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to highlight the roles academic libraries can play in promoting the quality of research stemming from academic institutions in order to increase its visibility. Four tasks have been identified to aid the achievement of this goal. Taking advantage of technology towards increasing value to the works librarians are already committed to, is a fact that must be realised.

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Tihyaunin Luka Dang is a librarian at the Federal University Dutsinma, Katsina.
Email: tihyaunindang@yahoo.com,