

The cost of accessing academic research is way too high—this must change

26 October 2018, by Leti Kleyn And Denise Rosemary Nicholson



There's huge societal value in opening up access to knowledge resources. Credit: Maksim Kabakou/Shutterstock

In the last week of October each year, libraries and open access activists around the world celebrate [Open Access Week](#). It's a week dedicated to increasing access to knowledge resources hosted by libraries, such as online journals and academic books.

Open access is very beneficial to society because research and knowledge is shared widely at no cost to the user. Ordinarily, a great deal of research and information is locked behind paywalls, where it's only accessible at a high fee. Open Access gives users access to material under an open licence. This means that copyright permission need not be obtained each time material is used or reused.

Globally, the scholarly publishing system is in dire need of financial and legislative change. To address this issue, the Max Planck Digital Library in Munich has [produced a White Paper](#) that aims to completely reform the business model of academic journals. The paper proposes that individual

countries change the underlying legal and financial structures that challenge the high subscription fees levied by publishers.

Could a country like South Africa manage the changes as advocated in the White Paper? Getting new financial models going will be difficult because of the complexity of the industry's internal workings and a shortage of data on actual expenditure. However, the country is making headway on the legal framework front.

What's missing

There's been a [marked shift](#) over the past five decades in how academic publishers do business. Initially, every subscriber paid the same price. Then some price discrimination was introduced: libraries pay more than individuals; and consumers are asked to pay a unique price based on how much they can afford.

But the system isn't transparent because publishers require institutions to sign non-disclosure agreements about payment. This is done to protect business models and pricing structures. It means there's no transparency and we simply don't know how much publicly funded universities [are paying](#) to commercial publishing houses.

To get a snapshot of what's being paid in South Africa one of us did a quick survey to establish what the estimated expenditure for resources and copyright would be for South African public universities. We [asked libraries](#) to provide this information for 2018.

Fifteen institutions responded to a request for estimated expenditure in 2018 relating to e-resources, book budgets and copyright fees.

It emerged that 15 of the country's 26 [higher education](#) libraries will pay just over R1 billion (USD\$69 million) in 2018 towards electronic and

printed resources. This amount increases by 5% per year on average with the exchange rate of these international resources adding to the expense. In addition, 14 of the 15 mentioned institutions will pay about R31 million (USD\$1.8 million) to the [Dramatic, Artistic and Literary Rights Organisation](#) for copyright licences on prescribed works.

The fact that knowledge resources expenditure for research and teaching purposes in the South African higher education sector is runs into the billions should be an issue of major concern. But the fact that there's little collated information available makes it difficult for the tertiary sector to lobby for national licences, fee reductions, and sector reform.

Since an estimated 80% of the collections in academic libraries are purchased from international publishers, the majority of money flows out of the country to publishers in developed countries. Moreover a great deal of research produced locally is published internationally and forms part of the cohort of knowledge that is given to international publishers for free. These publishers legally become the copyright holders through publishing agreements and sell back information to libraries and institutions.

Getting new financial models going will be difficult. This is because there's no national initiative tracking payments that universities and research councils make to national and international publishers for books, electronic resources, interlibrary loans, copyright fees, and other costs.

This is a problem because journal publishers [raise about 75%](#) of their revenue from library subscriptions. And the academic knowledge contained in those journals is estimated to be worth billions of dollars.

This knowledge is [controlled by five monopoly publishers](#), despite the fact that the research itself is mostly funded by governments, and paid for by the taxpayer.

Legislative shifts

The [Copyright Amendment Bill](#) offers some hope

only for limited exceptions.

Should the bill pass, it will be the first time in four decades that South Africa has taken steps to update its copyright law. This will align legislation to the digital era with improvements relating to limitations, exceptions, and fair use.

The new law will facilitate access to academic knowledge in the educational and library sectors through fair use provisions. It also introduces a generous number of educational exceptions to the exclusive rights of authors and creators.

These legal flexibilities will help university libraries service delivery, disseminate information, and preserve their collections. The bill has received [overwhelming support](#) from the library, archival, and higher education sectors both nationally and internationally.

This is important because South Africa is party to various international intellectual property agreements that require the same standards to be applied in member countries.

The Amendment Bill, if passed, will allow educators to improve their range of teaching resources. And, finally, it's hoped that access and resource-sharing will improve. This can happen through a more balanced copyright law, the creation of new open access works, and lower subscription fees. This will happen if national site-licences are negotiated, and fair use is enforced.

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