

Chapter 28

Visibility and Accessibility of Indigenous Knowledge on Open Access Institutional Repositories at Universities in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Much research has been done on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) at African universities but the results are inaccessible as they remain scattered all over in researchers' offices, yet IK plays a significant role in Africa's development. Universities are better placed to consolidate, preserve, disseminate and facilitate easy access to such knowledge. This chapter explores the role that can be played by Institutional Repositories (IRs) in fulfilling this goal. Literature was reviewed to provide a conceptual overview of the role of IRs, to establish the challenges faced by universities in enabling access to IK in institutional repositories and explore strategies that can be employed to promote their use. The findings revealed that academics have not fully embraced the IR technologies; therefore, librarians struggle to secure content for their IRs. It is recommended that rigorous awareness campaigns on open access and IRs be done by librarians to obtain stakeholder buy-in.

INTRODUCTION

Academics and researchers in Africa have made milestones in documenting, codifying and recording the indigenous knowledge (IK) held by the various communities in their countries, e.g. Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and so forth (Kawooya, 2006; Msuya, 2007; Njiraine, Ocholla, & Onyancha, 2010). The fields covered in indigenous knowledge research include, agriculture, meteorology, medicine, textile manufacture, education, arts, forestry, law and governance, food technology and metallurgy. Despite the research efforts by academics in institutions of higher learning, few results are visible and accessible on the international arena. An informetric analysis of the growth of IK research output on the global sphere was done by Ocholla & Onyancha (2005) for the period 1990 to 2004 using the EBSCO host databases and the South African Bibliographic Network (SABINET) databases. They found that in 1990 there were only 32 records and the figure rose to 1755 by 2004. Africa's share of IK research output amounted to approximately 152 articles with South Africa leading by 59 articles.

Most of the research from the continent unfortunately is scattered all over and remains marooned in the authors' computers (Jain & Bentley, 2008; Warren, 1991) and desks leaving no reference source point for this information, thereby creating the impression that Africa is not creative and innovative.

This chapter reviews existing literature on IK and IRs and explores the benefits of IRs for authors in Africa, their institutions and countries. Challenges faced by African institutions of higher learning in increasing visibility and enabling access to IK in open access institutional repositories are also established. The chapter then suggests strategies that can be employed to improve accessibility of IK in the repositories and increase its visibility on the international sphere.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The subject of indigenous knowledge (IK) has attracted much interest in academic discourse since the 1980's in Africa and globally (Odora Hoppers, 2005). There is consensus on the significant role played by IK in the development process, hence the call for harnessing such knowledge through documentation and recording or codification of the knowledge for posterity before its extinction. The development of a country involves problem-solving activities aimed at improving the livelihoods of communities through utilisation of local resources (Sukula, 2006, p. 84). Warren (1991, p. 2) postulates that "development projects cannot offer sustainable solutions to local problems without using local knowledge." Indigenous knowledge has sustained African local communities economically, socially and spiritually for centuries, and continues to do so (Odora Hoppers, 2005, p. 5). Such knowledge can be used as an alternative or complement to the conventional scientific methods and techniques for sustainable development especially in agriculture, health, leadership and governance, and environmental management. Despite IK being an important resource in sustainable development, such knowledge is undermined, marginalized (Msuya, 2007, p. 4; Odora Hoppers, 2005, p. 8) and highly underutilized in the development process. It is rather unfortunate that developing countries have devised natural resource and environmental management policies that imitate those of the West, disregarding their indigenous knowledge (Sukula, 2006, p. 84). If IK is to be useful in sustainable development of societies in Africa, there is need for such knowledge to be documented, codified, accessed, shared and disseminated.

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