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Open Access Publishing in Kenya: The challenges and successes of transitioning to Transformative Agreements, and opportunities for these agreements to continue benefiting Kenyan researchers.

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Commonplace • Series 1.3: Global Transition to Open

Open Access Publishing in Kenya

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Introduction

The Kenya Libraries and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) has been at the forefront of championing and spearheading Open Access initiatives in Kenya. The National consortium — which boasts over 130 member institutions through a combination of university libraries, research institutions, and public/national libraries — was established in 2003 with an aim of collective subscriptions to electronic resources to cope with the increasingly unsustainable cost of information resources. All members pay a certain amount of money every year towards the acquisition of electronic journals and eBooks, depending on and guided by their FTE's. This means that institutions with lower FTE's get to pay lower amounts compared to those with high FTE's. At the end, however, all these institutions benefit from equal access to the same resources.

During the formative years of KLISC, strong partnerships were established with International Network for Access to Scientific Publications (INASP) and Electronic Information For Libraries (EIFL).¹ The idea behind this collaborations was to bridge the knowledge gap in LMIC by providing free access to scholarly resources with a view of slowly introducing subsidized rates as the respective GDP's improve or stabilize.

Libraries and other stakeholders in Kenya quickly embraced Open Access judging by the current OA outputs such as Open Access publications, Open Access Institutional Repositories, Open Access publishing portals like OJS.² The idea of less subscriptions and more payments of Article Processing Charges (APCs) is one that will ensure scholars across the borders access the same resources without being disadvantaged by affordability with TAs. On the other hand, it will also challenge the countries that produce less research output to up their game so that their research can also be discovered across the divide. KLISC having signed the OA2020 Expression of Interest, is a strong believer of free access to information resources for all, with a view of transitioning to an all non-paywalled content model, beneficial to library users, researchers, and publishers.

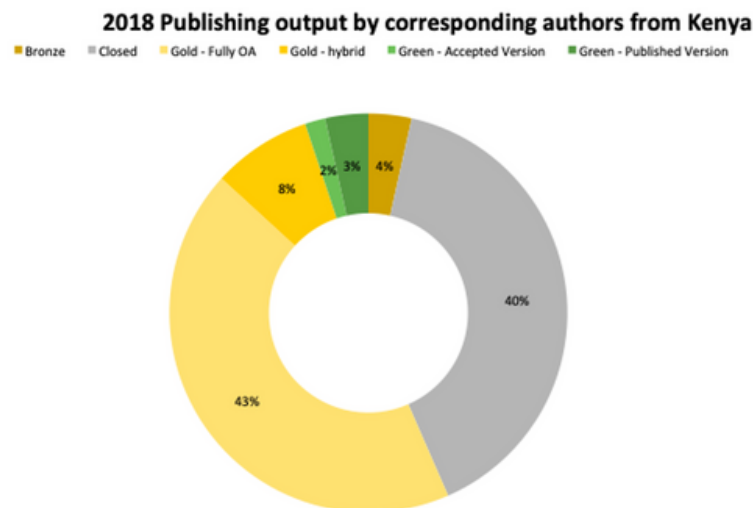
Open Access Publishing in Kenya

In an effort to establish the open access publishing trends and investigate the potential for and impact of transformative agreements in Kenya, the [OA2020](#) working group

through Romy Beard (EIFL) commissioned a survey in collaboration with KLISC in 2019. The objective was to:

1. establish where authors in Kenya publish
2. if they get discounts in APCs
3. whether they would welcome the idea of transformative agreements leading to open access to resources vis-à-vis paying for both subscriptions and for publishing.

KLISC supported this study by writing to all Kenyan corresponding authors who published in Open Access journals in the year ending 2018, informing them of the survey and inviting their cooperation. The OA2020 working group used Web of Science to identify open access articles published from 2016 to 2018 by corresponding authors affiliated with an institution in Kenya in journals published by Springer Nature, Wiley, and Elsevier. 384 authors were contacted and 132 provided responses. With a 34% response rate 80 authors indicated they received a waiver for a total of 102 publications, 37 indicated how much they or their funder paid in APCs, 15 didn't know how much was paid.



The above graph considers articles indexed in Web of Science, but, of course, WoS does not capture all scholarly journals. The understanding of the publishing landscape in Kenya is that the authors tend to publish with Gold fully OA journals and Gold hybrid journals when supported by their parent departments or research offices. In the case of universities, research offices usually have a research fund that helps pay part of the article processing charges for articles to be published Open Access. In research

centers, this is sometimes a requirement by donors who provide grants for projects whose outputs are publications in peer reviewed journals.

Web of Science and Scopus may not authoritatively provide the actual publishing landscape in Kenya because many authors fall prey to predatory publishing and others publish in local journals which are not yet indexed in WoS or Scopus. Moreover, a quick check on [Elsevier's Scival research trend](#) tool in Sub-Saharan Africa shows Kenya is ranked third in terms of publishing outputs, behind South Africa and Nigeria.

Challenges

Many Kenyan corresponding authors would prefer publishing in Open Access. However, the lack of sustainable budgets for APCs of Gold OA publications remains an influencing factor for closed access publishing where no costs are incurred by authors. Most authors will opt to publish in an APC-less journal or those that give waivers. This is evidenced by the many papers that are published in paywall/subscription journals because these venues do not make it the responsibility of the author to pay to publish but instead of the reader to pay to access. In Kenya, it is almost certain that an individual author publishing openly will never use their own money to pay for APCs unless sponsored by their employer, a donor, or other funders.

The Future Role of the Librarian?

The big elephant in the room is what will happen to librarians when transformative agreements eventually take shape and subscriptions are no longer in place. Currently, research offices of universities and deans of faculties hold the budgets for APCs and other publishing costs while University libraries hold the budgets of journal subscriptions and access to paywalled resources. In an ideal setting, no one would want to relinquish their vote holding or budget lines as this would also create room for irrelevance or redundancy in some positions. To ensure a smooth transition, libraries could still be in charge of paying for APCs on behalf of authors and this could be done in a model which sees libraries pay specific amounts to publishers based on potential publishing output in a year. Librarians have already established long-standing relationships with publishers and aggregators, and they are better placed at negotiating for transformative agreement deals. Additionally, based on the fact that they are mostly involved in compiling data on publication output of the institution and other relevant publication metrics, librarians definitely have a jump start.

High Rejection Rates in Peer Reviewed Journals

For transformative agreements to benefit all authors and readers across the globe, there needs to be an important discussion about high-rejection rate journals that mostly deny researchers from LMIC's from getting published. As long as the rejection rates of most high impact factor journals — where many researchers would wish to publish — remain high, then many authors in LMIC will be at a disadvantage, as regards the pay to publish OA model. Publishers might need to be more accommodating in terms of acceptability especially for authors in LMIC. We have very good research output that unfortunately never gets published because of such frustrations. The available citation indexes e.g., Web of Science, Scopus, etc. might also need to relax their conditions a little bit so that more local journals in LMICs can be indexed and thereby promote Open Access publishing. Alternatively, LMIC's can establish their own citation indexes of peer reviewed journals to fill the gap and build trust in local journals that have robust peer review processes but unfortunately still do not get indexed on Scopus or WoS. This will allow for more diverse, inclusive, open, and nuanced definitions of impact that LMIC's can define for themselves based on their goals.

Perceived Bias in Rejection of Authors from Africa

[Breetzke & Hedding, 2020](#), in their paper on changing and challenging the research landscape in South Africa, established that the National Research Fund (NRF) rating by race from 2005 to 2015 showed fewer journal articles published by Black African, Coloured, and Indian authors as compared to the number of journal articles published by white authors. Notably, the percentage of black African academics who have an NRF-rating had increased steadily over the study period with almost 15% (n = 524) of all NRF-rated researchers being black African, up from five percent in 2005 (n = 73). This is in direct contrast with the percentage of NRF-rated researchers who are white which has dropped markedly over the same period from 90% in 2005 (n = 1405) to 74% (n = 2496) in 2015.

Based on my experiences and conversations, there is a strong perceived bias in acceptance of manuscripts by scholars from Africa which in turn informs the level of research output from our countries. This is a significant challenge in the publishing landscape in Kenya and ultimately the Open Access movement. This is because most researchers opt to publish in local journals which are also not indexed widely. The publish or perish culture also leads faculty and researchers to publish in predatory journals because they feel that they will easily get rejected in the peer reviewed

journals with impact factors, yet they require publications in order to get promotions in Universities or even graduate with PhDs. For the transformative agreements to impact the African populace, there is a need to address the perceived bias in acceptance of manuscripts for publication. Publishers should create a level publishing field where non-English native speakers who are rich in research content are regarded in the same way as native English speakers. You will find that most reviewers who reject papers by authors from Africa base their decisions on grammar and not necessarily content. With the 'pay to publish' model, the APCs could be used to pay copy editors who can transform good research into good research written in English.

Opportunities

The opportunities in open access brought about by transformative agreements definitely outweigh the challenges and fears. Below are some of the opportunities that we can leverage:

Green Open Access

Over the last 10 years there has been a rise in Green Open Access because scholars and researchers want to maximize discoverability. Academics' engagement in OA publishing is related to their awareness of OA policy and OA repositories, their attitudes towards the importance of OA publishing, and their belief in OA citation advantage, reports [Zhu, 2017](#). In Kenya, there are over 70 institutional repositories that have been established through capacity building and support programs by KLISC, EIFL, and INASP. The opportunity in green open access is that most resources will be discoverable and also cited by the relevant readers. Currently, authors publishing in paywalled journals get fewer citations because the findings of their research are mostly relevant to their local region, but accessed and read by readers from overseas, whose libraries can afford subscribing to these journals. With transformative agreements leading to less paywalls, citations of Kenyan authors will go on an upward trajectory within a very short time.

APC Discounts & Waivers

Authors in Kenya have benefited from waived and discounted APCs negotiated by EIFL as well as those provided by publisher's own waiver programmes. A list is circulated by the EIFL country coordinator to all KLISC member institutions who in turn share with their scholars and researchers wishing to publish in OA. From the survey that was

done on publications by Kenyan authors in 2018, one respondent noted that they didn't pay any charges, because they got a waiver. They noted that if they didn't receive the waiver, they would most likely have published their paper elsewhere. I believe that OA journals that lack a waiver for LMIC such as Kenya will receive fewer submissions from these countries, if not none.

Balance Between Read and Publish Fees

According to [Borrego, Anglada, & Abadal, 2021](#), transformative agreements, also known as 'offsetting', 'read and publish', or 'publish and read' agreements, have shifted the focus of scholarly journal licensing from cost containment towards open access publication. In Kenya, the KLISC has already started using open access output by Kenya-based authors to negotiate for subscription discounts with publishers. A case in point is the Emerald deal for 2020 where the Executive and the licensing and negotiations committees of KLISC suspended a subscription to Emerald in 2020 because of increased and unaffordable/unsustainable prices. Armed with data on the number of articles published OA by corresponding authors from Kenya, the consortium was able to negotiate for a better deal and save up to USD \$40,000. Based on this experience I encourage consortia to always make reference to their country OA publishing output when negotiating with publishers for subscriptions. This is an example of how consortia can create a balance between read and publish fees, because the same authors who make up the majority of the content in the publisher journals are the same who read journals from the same publisher.

Conclusion

Transformative agreements are a huge advantage to LMICs simply because they spell free access to research information, equal to the developed nations. This will create a good environment of learning and research, leading to a bridged knowledge gap and a more informed society. As for the publishers, it will give them a chance to do things right and correct some wrongs from an increasingly costly and unsustainable financial model that relies on subscriptions to content developed by scholars and researcher in the same subscribing institutions. It is important to create a balance between the roles of departments in the transformative agreement model, since with less or no subscription fees, the library budget and mandate on e-resources still needs to be maintained. This can be done by creating policies and declarations that ensure the management of APCs still remains under the library department.³ International library

groups such as ICOLC, IFLA, AFLIA working hand in hand with global forums of University and research organizations management units can make policy declarations that can be used to institutionalize the new mandate of librarians in regards to managing APC budgets.

The author is an Associate University Librarian & Regional Librarian, East Africa at The Aga Khan University. He is also the country and the licensing coordinator of Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) and currently serves at the Executive Secretary of the Kenya Libraries and Information Services Consortium (KLISC). He is a standing committee member of IFLA's Environment, sustainability and libraries section.

Footnotes

1. These organizations have been instrumental in the current successes of the consortium by providing capacity building programs for librarians from KLISC member institutions; strengthening the licensing and negotiation skills of the officials of the consortium and most importantly, creating long lasting networks with publishers. Through this robust partnership, KLISC has benefited from low /discounted rates of electronic resources from aggregators and publishers such as EBSCO, ProQuest, Taylor & Francis, Oxford University Press, JSTOR, Wiley, Springer among others. EIFL and INASP through their licensing programs negotiated for KLISC to pay affordable rates that are applicable to countries in Lower- and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC). We even have agreements that see KLISC member institutions access high quality peer reviewed journals for free for a period of three to four years. [↵](#)
2. Every year KLISC partners with like minded organizations to hold sensitization workshops on OA initiatives during the AGM. Majority of the Institutional repositories in Kenya were implemented through partnerships by KLISC and EIFL or INASP. [↵](#)
3. International library groups such as ICOLC, IFLA, AFLIA working hand in hand with global forums of University and research organizations management units can make policy declarations that can be used to institutionalize the new mandate of librarians in regards to managing APC budgets. [↵](#)

Citations

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