

Enabling Higher Education Development through Challenging Commercial Academic Publishing

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Can you imagine an industry in which the workers who laboriously produce the product are paid by the public purse, those that painstakingly review the quality of the product are also paid by the public purse, and then, the product is sold by a private company back to public institutions at a huge profit? Just as importantly, the private company in question is not even a South African one? It tends to be European or North American, its products are priced in euros or dollars, its publicly paid workforce comes from across the globe, as do its massive profits, all at the cost of beleaguered national budgets of nation states especially those of the developing world. The situation reminds one of feudal relations established in the colonies at the height of imperialism. Yet such an industry thrives in the twenty first century. This is the world of the international academic journals publication industry.

There are huge profits that are made. Reed Elsevier, a UK-based international academic publication corporate, made £1 379 million, while its competitors, Informa (housing the popular Taylor & Francis group) and Springer made smaller, but similarly obscene profits of £305.8 million and €285 million, respectively. But there are huge social costs to these profits. Most academic libraries cannot afford to get all of these journals, so hard choices get made. The most well-endowed universities do manage to get the best of the journals, but the poorest do not. This effectively means that the least well-endowed universities, those that service the poorest of our citizens, do not have access to a quality academic journal base which is an absolute necessity for quality higher education to be delivered. The better of universities are also impacted upon. Their budgets are being stretched, and every rand that gets handed to multinationals as their profits is a rand taken away from a scholarship for a poor South African student with the potential to succeed.

South Africa's higher education is confronted with three major priorities: produce a highly qualified human resource base which is needed for development, develop a new generation of academics to sustain our higher education system; and produce high quality research and innovation that can enhance our global competitiveness. All three priorities are dependent on access to widely used publication outlets – academic journals and books - that enable the dissemination of research results, but, just as importantly, access to the papers published by other scholars in leading journals . Yet this is precisely what we do not have because an international commercial industry of academic publishing has been allowed to undermine the public good of higher education for massive profits.

There is already some movement on the part of the state to address some of these problems. The Department of Science and Technology commissioned the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) to search for solutions. The Academy has recently proposed a set of measures to encourage and facilitate the publication of academic books in and from South Africa. It has also proposed the development of a cost-effective, high-quality indigenous journals platform to serve as an outlet for the free online dissemination of research results worldwide. The platform is called SciELO South Africa, and is embedded in the growing multi-country SciELO system originally created in Brazil.

The main problem standing in the way of a real improvement in the scholarly performance of our researchers, however, is access to the high-impact 'international literature' emanating from North America and Europe. These are published by multi-national companies on highly profitable commercial platforms, and represent most of the more important scientific journals of the planet. Access to these is necessary if our postgraduate students, researchers and academics are to get to the cutting edge of global knowledge in their respective fields. To develop cost-effective access to these journals, DST has requested ASSAf to investigate how other countries have been able to do this, with a view to making recommendations for a suitable local approach. Consideration is currently being given to what Brazil, Pakistan and Chile have done in this regard. In Brazil, one of its science institutions, CAPES, is mandated with the responsibility of

buying access to international journal platforms for most of the public universities with strong postgraduate degree programmes. Pakistan and Chile have a variant of this model which is much cheaper, and provides public universities with access to a smaller range of journals. The implementation of either model would benefit South African universities, for not only would it be highly cost-effective for our higher education system in comparison with the present ‘individual library budget’ system, but it would also provide more equitable access, enabling students in Venda and UCT to have access to the same range of scientific journals.

Despite the progress, however, is ASSAf not being too timid in the reforms it has proposed? Should it not direct public support for only one or two consolidated academic publishing houses in South Africa? Instead of proposing that indigenous journals should be supported by author fees paid by academic institutions, as if there is enough research resources circulating within these institutions, should it not be recommending that such a platform be subsidized directly by a subsidy from DST?

At a higher level of national policy, should ASSAf (and the DST) not be proposing reforms challenging the commercial model of academic publishing in North America and Western Europe? Should we not, for instance, have the Ministers of Higher Education and Training or Science & Technology passing legislation making it mandatory for South African universities to make scientific articles published by their academics available free online within 6 months to a year of appearing in international journals? After all, it is the money of South Africa taxpayers that enabled the research for, and the writing of, the article in the first place.

Some in the ASSAf programme are concerned that the publishers of international journals will stop publishing the research of South African academics if this were to happen. But is this not paranoia? After all, it is hard to imagine that the editors of *Nature* or *Science* would retain any credible academic (or political) integrity internationally if they were to exclude South African academics from publishing in their journals simply because their government is trying to enhance access to quality higher education for its

poorer institutions and citizens? But to ensure that this does not happen, why don't Ministers Nzimande and Pandor ask their colleague Rob Davies, Minister of Trade & Industry, to demand more flexibility in the World Trade negotiations on copyright laws as and when they pertain to the training of students in higher education institutions? It is worth noting in this context that the wars on high prices of drugs and the exclusionary clauses on Intellectual Property in relation to drugs were won by the combined struggles of civil society and progressive governments of the South.

Should one of the rallying cries of civil society and governments in the current round of world trade negotiations not be the prices of, and exclusionary clauses on copyright laws for, international scientific journals? Should South Africa not be engaging its IBSA partners, Brazil and India, and other countries like China, Russia, and Mexico, to develop a common negotiating position on which to launch an assault on the excessive profits of the North American and European academic publishing industry? This would be a far more cost-effective and sustainable route for facilitating access to the intellectual resources required for achieving our higher education priorities. Without this, or the investment of billions of additional rand in higher education, we are unlikely to succeed in developing an equitable, diverse human resource base on which to build the knowledge economy which we all speak so much about.

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