

Chapter 2

Open Access Initiatives in Ethiopia's Higher Learning Institutions

Melkamu Beyene

Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Solomon Mekonnen Tekle

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Daniel Gelaw Alemneh

University of Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Ethiopia is one of the world's oldest civilizations with a population of about 120 million (2022 estimate). Ethiopia suffers from declining higher education quality, resulting from the rapid growth in the number of institutions (from three in 1990s to 50+ public Universities and 327+ private higher education institutions in 2022), the rapid expansion in tertiary student enrollment, as well as the lack of basic entrance qualifications. The quality of education in Ethiopia is further impacted by their limited access to critical content or knowledge as evidenced by limited subscriptions to scientific and technical databases. In recognition of open access's (OA's) potential to fill disadvantageous access gaps and enhance the overall educational quality, Ethiopia adopted a National OA policy in 2019. Among other enforcement mechanisms and guidelines, the policy requires universities to deposit all publicly funded publications in the National Academic Digital Repository of Ethiopia as well as in an institutional repository. In this chapter, the authors outline the state of OA policies and practices in Ethiopia's higher learning institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is universal and it must be disseminated without time and space limitations. Open Access (OA) is acclaimed to remove time and space barriers for disseminating research outputs. It has the potential to positively impact research, teaching and learning in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) by facilitating knowledge and information sharing within academic communities. Although OA became an important agenda for HLIs in the late 20th century in developed countries, it is even a more recent phenomenon in developing nations. Because OA is a recent issue for developing nations, knowledge and data sharing policies and procedures are in their infancy.

With further development of OA policies and procedures, greater visibility of HLI research products can be achieved. As it is now, sub-Saharan African countries contribute less than 1% of the world's publications (Piron et al., 2019). Ethiopian universities and research institutions experience a multitude of challenges disseminating scholarly research results. Some of these challenges are technical such as bandwidth, economical (e.g., budget constraints, low staff salary, poor incentive mechanisms) and others are mainly social (e.g., research culture). The lack of infrastructure for science communication significantly hinders developing nations' ability from both actively participating in knowledge generation as well as from enhancing the visibility of their scholarly works. Nonetheless, OA policies and procedures show promise for eroding the barriers experienced by developing nations.

The Ethiopian government has been working ambitiously to expand HLIs and to equip universities with the required teaching, learning and research materials. For example, the government allocated some fund to pay for the subscriptions and/or purchase of books and journals at all public universities and research institutions. This budget is, however, very limited and, hence, does not cover subscriptions to international journals. As the number of journals and cost of journal subscriptions continue to climb, let alone to add new items, it is not possible to maintain even same subscription with the allocated budgets. Accordingly, universities are searching for more access options to meet the needs of scholars (Getaneh, 2009; Chuan & Kaur, 2009). That is not to say that traditional subscription models are ineffective; just that their costs are prohibitive and that supplemental models are needed to overcome financial barriers. Given the overwhelming cost and access issues, the focus on developing OA systems is the concern of MOE and all HLIs. Without increased accessibility and visibility, researchers will not gain recognition nor contribute to the world's scientific outcomes. Likewise, scholars in developing nations will remain distant from scientific knowledge produced by the rest of the world. The transformation from the traditional journal subscription models to OA models is therefore a timely and necessary endeavor.

Although many stakeholders argue that access challenges in low- and middle-income countries are often related to infrastructure, OA would indeed, boost access for researchers at poorer institutions. The introduction of OA in developing countries like Ethiopia has several advantages for scholars and their HLIs. First, OA increases access so that other researchers can use and cite the works of Ethiopian researchers and scientists. Second, the openness of their publications increases the visibility and impact of their scholarship across the globe. Third, with greater visibility should come increased opportunities for networking and international collaboration for Ethiopian scholars. This in turn, promote interdisciplinarity may provide greater professional development and partnership opportunities that ultimately benefit the students they mentor and raises the general quality of education. Fourth, OA reduces journal paywalls that severely inhibit the quality of research, teaching, and learning at Ethiopian HLIs (Ezema & Onyancha, 2006). The promise of OA systems is striking. There is little doubt that mandatory OA

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