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Open Access Publishing: The AVU Online Journal

Issue at-hand

Since its inception, the AVU has primarily focused on the design, development and delivery of ICT-integrated academic programs. But in recent years, it has expanded its activities to include research. One of the research activities has been the launch of an online open access peer reviewed journal entitled the *Journal of Research in Open, Distance and e-Learning (JRODeL)*. The journal seeks to publish articles on issues pertaining to open, distance and eLearning (ODeL) and like other AVU activities seeks to serve both an African and global audience of researchers, academics, practitioners and students engaging with issues to do with the role of ODeL in addressing the demand for access and quality education within the context of Africa's socio-economic development. Launching a journal like this a decade or more earlier would have required significant investment of expertise, time and resources. However, thanks to open access and developments in technology such as platforms and software that make it possible to publish online, publications like JRODeL are now possible within much more affordable means.

What is open access publishing?

Open access publishing is an alternative publishing and distribution model that makes scholarly research literature—most of which is already funded by taxpayers around the world—freely available to the public online, without restrictions. Harnessing the power of the internet, open access brings the results of academic research to unprecedented numbers of scientists, university professors, medical researchers, patients, inventors, students, and others (OSF 2014).

Before the open access model existed, almost all peer-reviewed articles based on scholarly research were published in corporate-owned print journals, whose subscription fees were often prohibitively expensive—despite the fact that authors are not paid for their articles. Publishers

rarely invest in the actual research and typically provide little added value in the articles' preparation and distribution. These journals were available to the general public only at university libraries in wealthy countries. This meant that doctors treating patients with HIV and AIDS in remote regions of Africa, for instance, could not access complete articles describing the results of the latest medical research on treatments, even when the research upon which these articles were based was undertaken in their remote regions (OSF 2014).

Some of the notable users of open access publishing

According to (OSF 2014), about 30 percent of peer-reviewed articles today are open access. Nearly 10,000 academic journals are accessible in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and more than 2,500 archives are included in the Directory of Open Access Repositories. The Wellcome Trust in the United Kingdom was the world's first funder to mandate open access for publication of the research it funds. More than 300 institutions followed suit, including the largest funder of research in the world, the National Institutes of Health in the United States. Many of Harvard University's schools have adopted open access mandates. One of the market leaders in scholarly journal publishing, Springer, vindicated the model in 2008, when it acquired open access publisher BioMed Central. In 2013, the Obama Administration issued an executive directive instructing the largest U.S. funding agencies to provide public access to federally supported research (OSF 2014).

Launching an Open Access Journal

In this current climate, it made sense for the AVU to launch its first journal – JRODeL - available at <http://journal.avu.org/index.php/JRODeL> Making a new journal open access affords an instant connection to readers around the world. A journal can make a significant contribution to research by opening access to its content. This level of international availability and access makes the potential audience far greater than what would be possible with a paper-based publication (Stranack 2008). This makes sense for the AVU which operates as a consortium working with partner universities and academic across Africa and beyond.

Publishing online significantly lowers production and distribution costs. Compared to a print journal, online publishing does not require the printing, distribution, and all the production costs that go along with a print journal. The savings made available by electronic publishing have allowed for a dramatic growth in high-quality, scholarly online publishing, that would not have been possible otherwise. In addition, the time required for production and distribution are much less when publishing online. An issue can be assembled as soon as the final edits for the articles are received. A further advantage to the open access publishing is the elimination of the need for the time consuming and costly subscription management functions. Without

subscriptions to register or payments to collect, more time can be dedicated to producing the high-quality content (Stranack, 2008).

Open Journal System (OJS)

To publish its online journal, the AVU has adapted and implemented Open Journal Systems (OJS), a free, open source publishing management software, being used by over 8,000 journals around the world with over 300 in sub-Saharan Africa (Stranack 2015). OJS was developed by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) through its federally funded efforts to expand and improve access to research. It offers an effective method of managing the workflow of the entire publishing process to facilitate the submission of new articles, the peer review process, the editorial lifecycle of the article, and the ultimate publication of the final version. One of the advantages of publishing software such as OJS is that they can significantly streamline the entire publishing process, to help reduce costs to an absolute minimum. There are other websites claiming to be OpenJournalSystem, therefore for those wanting to explore the original OJS this falls under the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) hosted by Simon Frazier University, Canada < <https://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs/>>

Sustainability

Unlike a book, which is published once, a journal represents an ongoing commitment requiring a continuing base of support, both financially and from the efforts of editors, authors, reviewers, and readers. While open access journals do not generate revenue from subscriptions, many alternative sources of income can be explored. Some receive funding in exchange for advertising on their web site, others require payment from their authors for article submissions, publication, or peer review, to help offset the costs of publication. Some journals provide free access to the HTML versions of its articles, but charges reader fees for the PDF files. The funding of open access publication is an area of great experimentation, with many different models being tested. In the case of the AVU journal, the initial seed funding to start the journal was availed through the African Development Bank (AfDB) grant for the second phase of the AVU Multinational Support Project. A sustainable financial model can consider all the options mentioned above, but important for sustainability will be the collective engagement of the partner universities.

Conclusion

Though still in its infancy stages, JRODeL seeks to be the primary publication for research and practice of ODeL in Africa. Developments in open access conventions and technology has made it possible to launch the journal in a short period of time including build a database of peer-reviewers, accept and shepherd papers through the peer review and production process, and publish its first issue. Its growth and sustainability will be dependent on its quality. The editorial

board is made up of a diverse group of international experts representing the three language groups (English, French & Portuguese) of the AVU, so is the database of peer-reviewers who are experts in research, education, technology, leadership etc. Their work ensures that the publication of high quality of content important for a successful publication.

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For more information, please visit AVU's Website: <http://www.avu.org/avuwweb/en/>

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Working Across Africa

Beyond Technological, Language and Cultural Barriers
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