

Access to scientific journals in low-income countries

Why I like the PERI model

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The term 'knowledge-based resources' refers to resources that can be distributed electronically, keeping the overheads for additional licence provision low and encouraging providers to be benevolent. Otherwise, it is well known that while providers may be willing to donate hard copy resources, covering just the basic shipping costs can prove difficult. The Programme for Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) – set up by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) – has completely revolutionised access to e-resources in Bangladesh.

Just a few years ago, most researchers in Bangladesh had very limited access to professional journals. Libraries were struggling to subscribe to the necessary resources, mainly for financial reasons, but also because of administrative and other obstacles. Today, our access is comparable to that of the average institution in a developed country, not just in one but in almost all subject areas. Within the space of a few years, the Bangladesh INASP-PERI Consortium (BIPC) has reached more than 80 per cent of university teachers and researchers in the country.

However, the idea is to share not the achievements of PERI, but the model on which it operates. This contains certain features that are key to long-term sustainability and which may be applied to knowledge-based resource initiatives in other low-income countries.

Traditionally, such initiatives tend to be focused on donations and free or open access. While open access is certainly a most welcome paradigm that is rapidly gaining ground, it is not difficult to envision a future in which commercial providers with useful resources are unable or unwilling to simply *give away* these resources to low-income countries – at least, for a significant period of time. In fact, there is the sense that some providers only take part in free access or donation programmes in order to create a customer base from which they can reap commercial benefits in the near future.

How the PERI model works

By contrast, the PERI programme actually works with providers (in this case, publishers) as the stakeholders and is able to negotiate subscription rates that are mutually satisfactory. Although the publishers are required to provide large discounts, their interests are by no means overlooked in the process, since they gain a customer base in an area where they previously had none, or are at least able to increase it. In a few cases, existing subscriptions may be higher than the PERI country price; however, those are

likely to have been unsustainable and liable to being discontinued. By working towards establishing consortia, PERI ensures that publishers gain a customer base that is more likely to be stable and sustained. With such an arrangement, the customer base is more stable, since an individual library may discontinue a subscription easily, but it is more difficult for a consortium – even if only a few institutions use a resource – to do so. The publisher or provider can therefore anticipate that this subscription will continue for many years with little or no marketing overheads. This is another significant issue for providers – in the absence of PERI, subscriptions (if any) would cost the publishers significantly in terms of marketing and support.

How the PERI model could attract software providers

Additionally, such initiatives encourage the in-country growth of capacity and willingness to allocate money for knowledge resources, moving away from piracy and other such malpractices. For example, take the software scenario. There is very little opportunity to afford the prices sought by software companies through the existing mechanisms in low-income countries. In countries such as Bangladesh, use of pirated software is so widespread that institutions sometimes have zero budget allocation for software. Software companies, realising that the market is not lucrative enough, are not motivated to fight the trend. Additionally, academic integrity is corrupted, young generations grow up never caring about copyright or intellectual property rights, and institutions continue to fail to budget for even the most essential software purchases.

This leaves researchers who require specialised software to either compromise on the quality of their research by using whatever is available or arrange to bring in pirated copies from abroad. They may even leave their home countries, contributing to a brain drain.

To deal with a similar scenario in publishing, the PERI model uses the innovative idea of variable pricing for different countries, whereby the pricing differs even among low-income countries according to the per capita gross national product (GNP) and/or human development index (HDI) score. This opens up the opportunity for each country to obtain a deal that might be within their reach. Furthermore, this also rationalises the high discounts for the provider.

If the model is applied also to software, a situation may emerge whereby the countries involved are paying an amount that, though

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Vision

The guiding philosophy of Kano University of Science and Technology (KUST), Wudil shall be the provision of community-based education that will facilitate the production of graduates who shall fulfil the stipulated requirements in learning and character to graduate in their various fields of specialisation. The graduates shall also be groomed in such a manner that they will be able to effectively function in the community. Programmes of study will be student-centred and faculty-based with interdepartmental and interfaculty inputs where necessary.

At the end of studies, KUST graduates would have acquired sufficient knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to:

- Practise the profession for which training was obtained in any urban or rural setting.
- Perform professional services within the concept of the needs and requirements of the community.
- Develop personal characteristics required of a professional in the relevant field of training.
- Undertake postgraduate or continuous education in any chosen area of study, especially in the field of training.

Mission

The Mission of Kano University of Science and Technology, Wudil is to provide the highest possible quality academic and professional training aimed at producing graduates that can function in, and creatively adapt to, the challenges of a fast-changing society in an increasingly complex and gender-conscious world.



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small compared to worldwide revenues, is sustainable in the long term, again with little marketing and administrative overheads.

Another positive aspect of the PERI model is that, although subscription negotiations are handled separately, access is not provided via any special new platform. Instead, institutions have access to the resources in the same way as any other subscriber. This gives the institutions some standard rights available only to subscribers, such as the right to perpetual access. The level of technical support is also standardised – institutions that pay less should still get exactly the same level of service as Harvard or Cambridge.

The PERI model – a benefit to all

In summary, as opposed to models based on donations or free access, the PERI model offers a mechanism that:

- Provides access to knowledge-based resources in low-income countries.
- Builds in-country capacity.
- Facilitates the introduction of a new paradigm in these countries.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly for long-term sustainability, PERI creates a situation where the providers can see:

- Some, albeit small, commercial benefits.
- The creation of a stable customer base in countries where it would be difficult to obtain long-term customers at their own prices and through their own marketing channels.

The PERI programme may be seen as creating a win-win scenario that is acceptable and can be taken forward by all parties. It would therefore be interesting to see if this model could be applied more widely, particularly to academic software, in an effort to bridge the knowledge divide between low- and high-income countries.

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