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Access to knowledge

As we went to press there was a frisson of activity on the email wires following a report on the influential HIF-net (HIFA2015@dgroups.org) that the HINARI platform was beginning to unravel with the withdrawal of some 2500 titles by Reed-Elsevier and others from Bangladesh. Some African countries were thought to be affected too. Many bemoaned the loss, some saw no loss; many simply advocated the growth of open access, others defended the old subscription formula. In the end, Reed-Elsevier relented and rumour of losses for access from Africa appeared to be coincidental operational problems rather than formal acts on behalf of the publishers.

'Phew.... Situation normal' we sighed. But what is normal? Is HINARI the all-singing all-dancing panacea that it is intended to be? Are enough libraries equipped with enough quality computer hardware and broadband access to use it effectively? Over the years we've heard complaints about it being fiddly to use? Or is it the real five-star service it was intended to be? I'd be interested to know. If you have a view, please do write in.

I ask as there does seem to be a lot of conflicting evidence around. We launched our website last year (www.africa-health.com) and still most access is coming from outside of Africa. There was also a report* published by the Association of Commonwealth Universities in November which found that despite an increase in the number of e-journals available in sub-Saharan African Universities, usage rates remain low largely because of poor technology and lack of awareness. The study (University of Malawi, University of Nairobi, National

University of Rwanda, and University of Dar es Salaam) found that many academics and students were not accessing their libraries' collection of scholarly journals because they were not aware of what was offered or because access points via library websites were not clear. Instead, Google was the preferred choice when searching for information. Technology was also cited as a barrier with students at one university reportedly having to wait 45 minutes to download an article only to time-out before finishing.

What is the reality? I've heard reports of some websites specifically set-up up to transfer knowledge, still struggling to generate the traffic from Africa that was anticipated. Is it bandwidth, is it a simple lack of knowledge of what is available out there, is it a preference for paper, or is it a lack of curiosity? I'd be interested to hear some observations because it appears that many of the donors are now acting as if everyone wants and gets information electronically and no one uses paper any more, yet much of the evidence would seem to indicate otherwise.

Let us be hearing from you.

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*Growing knowledge: access to research in East and Southern Africa. Published by the Association of Commonwealth Universities.