

# The Role of Librarians in African Higher Educational Institutions as Central Actors in Embedding NREN Digital Services

A key objective of NRENs is to support scientific endeavour in distributed communities of practice across the higher education (HE) sector in any participating region/country. This has been a major emphasis of two recent Horizon 2020 multi-partner projects, TANDEM (TransAfrican Network Development) aimed at supporting the integration of the West and Central African Research and Education Network (WACREN) community into wider global research and education communities and Sci-GaIA (Energising Scientific Endeavour through Science Gateways and e-Infrastructures in Africa) concerned with promoting Open Science through the uptake of Science Gateways and e-Infrastructures in African scientific communities of practice.

A key part of the above-mentioned projects was the establishment and support of viable end-user communities of practice to provide ongoing institutional support for interconnectivity and shared collaborative resources via RENs. In this case, end-users were defined as eventual beneficiaries of the services that could be provided by the REN infrastructure. A key end-user community of practice that has emerged as a consequence of the TANDEM project is the HE librarian community in Nigeria. Since RENs primarily support the provision of information services and resources in HE Institutions, librarians have emerged as key institutional actors in the identification, provision and dissemination of information resources through the services offered by RENs. The issue, however, is that they lack institutional visibility and legitimacy to undertake this role. Additionally, there is lack of institutional adoption of tools librarians should have in fulfilling their role of information custodians.

Initiatives such as Open Science, Open Access and Open Data, due to their reliance on digital infrastructure and digital resources, require information experts to manage and shape their development. This requirement puts Librarians, as information experts, at the forefront of such activities. The key question that emerges from existing challenges in the HE sector in Nigeria, however is: How to develop sustainable institutional support for HE librarians to play a central role in providing services linked to Open movements through NREN infrastructure.

One of the authors of this paper is engaged in an ongoing online dialogue with the librarian community of practice in Nigeria on this topic and has found the following. Librarians in the HE community in Nigeria see themselves as information experts straddling two main areas of practice. The first area is that of their professional practice, i.e., people who provide information services. Key aspects of this practice involve managing, organizing and translating knowledge for the benefit of other communities of practice. Also key to this aspect is a blurred boundary with technical aspects of this practice such as networking or computing expertise. The second area is that of their educational practice, which involves the delivery of knowledge to others to maintain and support the community of practice. It is to be expected that both focal areas of practice will be supported by relevant research activities. Thus librarians become both producers and consumers of information services with HE institutions, themselves dependent on connectivity and information resources through reliable NREN services. Such a situation suggests that they could be critical actors in sustaining not only their own communities of practice but those of other scientific communities of practice that depend on the availability of reliable information resources.

To progress such an agenda means changing the culture around information service provision in the HE sector by identifying the institutional factors that either constrain or enable a more central role for librarians as information resource managers with more control over the what, how and who aspects of the provision of digital services and infrastructure in HE institutions. This paper is proposing to launch such an agenda-setting study through engaging the librarian community of practice in Nigeria.

## Summary

This abstract proposes to progress an agenda to change the culture around information service provision in the Nigerian HE sector by identifying institutional factors that either enable or constrain the emerging role of librarians as information custodians in an increasingly digital environment. The paper forms a proposal for several workshops aimed at setting out a research agenda to address this issue. One of the first expected outputs will be a wide-ranging survey of the Nigerian HE librarian community of practice.

**Primary author:** Dr ABBOTT, Pamela (The University of Sheffield)

**Co-authors:** Mr OAIYA, Omo (WACREN); Mr IYOHA, Owen (Eko-Konnnect)

**Presenter:** Dr ABBOTT, Pamela (The University of Sheffield)

**Track Classification:** NRENs and communities: Business models, Communities of Practice, Use cases and Collaboration