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## SOUTH AFRICA: Huge journal profits hit universities

Adam Habib\*

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Can you imagine an industry in which the global workforce is publicly-funded but their product is sold back to them by a private company from Europe or North America at a huge profit?

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There are huge profits made. Reed Elsevier, a UK-based international academic publication company, made £1,379 billion (US\$2.3 billion) net profit last year, while its competitors Informa and Springer made smaller but similarly massive profits of £305.8 million (US\$511 million) and 285 million euro (US\$431 million) respectively.

But there are huge social costs to these profits. Most academic libraries cannot afford to get all of these journals, so hard choices get made. The most well-endowed universities do manage to get the best of the journals, but the poorest do not. This effectively means that the least well-endowed universities, those that service the poorest people and countries, do not have access to a quality academic journal base that is an absolute necessity for quality higher education to be delivered.

The better universities are also being affected. Their budgets are being stretched, and every dollar that gets handed to multinationals as their profits is a dollar taken away from scholarship for a poor developing world student with the potential to succeed.

South Africa's higher education is confronted with three major priorities: produce the highly qualified human resource base needed for development; develop a new generation of academics to sustain the higher education system; and produce high-quality research and innovation that can enhance the country's global competitiveness.

All three priorities are dependent on access to widely used publication outlets - academic journals and books - that enable the dissemination of research results and, just as importantly, access to the papers published by other scholars in leading journals.

Yet this is precisely what South Africa does not have because an international commercial industry of academic publishing has been allowed to undermine the public good of higher education for big profits.

There is already some movement on the part of the South African state to address some of these problems. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) commissioned the Academy of Science of South Africa to search for solutions.

The academy recently proposed a set of measures to encourage and facilitate the publication of academic books in and from South Africa. It also proposed the development of a cost-effective, high-quality indigenous journals platform to serve as an outlet for the free online dissemination of research results worldwide. The platform is called SciELO SA and is embedded in the growing multi-country SciELO system created in Brazil.

The main problem standing in the way of a real improvement in the scholarly performance of local researchers, however, is access to the high-impact 'international literature' emanating from North America and Europe.

These journals are published by multinational companies on highly profitable commercial platforms, and represent most of the more important scientific journals of the planet. Access to them is necessary if postgraduate students, researchers and academics are to get to the cutting edge of global knowledge in their respective fields.

To develop cost-effective access to these journals, the DST asked the academy to investigate how other countries have been able to do this, with a view to making recommendations for a suitable local approach.

Consideration is being given to what Brazil, Pakistan and Chile have done in this regard. In Brazil a science institution, Capes, is mandated with the responsibility of buying access to international journal platforms for most public universities with strong postgraduate degree programmes. Pakistan and Chile have a variant of this model that is cheaper and provides public universities with access to a smaller range of journals.

The implementation of either model would benefit South African universities, for not only would it be highly cost-effective for the higher education system in comparison with the present 'individual library budget' system, but it would also provide more equitable access, enabling students at the [historically disadvantaged] University of Venda and the [leading research] University of Cape Town to have access to the same range of scientific journals.

Despite the progress, is the academy not being too timid in the reforms it has proposed? Should it not direct public support for only one or two consolidated academic publishing houses in South Africa? Instead of proposing that indigenous journals be supported by author fees paid by academic institutions, as if there is enough research resources circulating within these institutions, should it not be recommending that such a platform be funded directly by a subsidy from the Department?

At a higher level of national policy, should the academy (and department) not be proposing reforms challenging the commercial model of academic publishing in North America and Western Europe?

Should we not, for instance, have the ministers of higher education and training or of science and technology passing legislation making it mandatory for South African universities to make scientific articles published by their academics available free online within six months to a year of appearing in international journals? After all, it is the money of South African taxpayers that enabled the research for, and the writing of, the article in the first place.

Some in the academy are concerned that the publishers of international journals will stop publishing the research of South African academics if this were to happen. But is this not paranoia? After all, it is hard to imagine that the editors of *Nature* or *Science* would retain any credible academic (or political) integrity internationally if they were to exclude South African academics from publishing in their journals simply because their government is trying to enhance access to quality higher education for its poorer institutions and citizens.

But to ensure this does not happen, why don't the ministers of higher education and of science and technology ask their colleague, the minister of trade and industry, to demand more flexibility in the world trade negotiations on copyright laws, as and when they pertain to the training of students in higher education institutions?

It is worth noting in this context that the wars on high prices of drugs and the exclusionary clauses on intellectual property in relation to drugs were won by the combined struggles of civil society and progressive governments of the south.

Should one of the rallying cries of civil society and governments in the current round of world trade negotiations not be the prices of, and exclusionary clauses on, copyright laws for international scientific journals? Should South Africa not be engaging countries like Brazil, India, China, Russia and Mexico to develop a common negotiating position on which to launch an assault on the excessive profits of the North American and European academic publishing industry?

This would be a far more cost-effective and sustainable route for facilitating access to the intellectual resources required for achieving higher education priorities. Without this, or the investment of much more money in higher education, South Africa is unlikely to succeed in developing an equitable, diverse human resource base on which to build the knowledge economy we speak so much about.

*\* Professor Adam Habib is Deputy Vice-chancellor of Research, Innovation and Advancement at the University of Johannesburg.*

*\* This is a slightly edited version of an article by Adam Habib, "**Learning suffers in a textbook case of excessive profits**", published by the national daily **Business Day** on 23 November 2009. It is reproduced with the permission of the author and newspaper.*