

Report on NetACT AGM and Library Portal Workshop at Scott Christian University, Machakos, Kenya, 3rd-7th July 2017

Background

NetACT (the network for African congregational theology, website: <http://netact.christians.co.za>) is a partnership of 38 African theological colleges, seminaries, and theology faculties at universities, formed to provide support and encouragement to the members in their academic administration and practice and in their missional vocation. These institutions are formed into 4 clusters, each of which is anchored by a major South African university (Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Free State, and North West) and a major Kenyan university (African International University, Daystar, St Paul's, and International Leadership University). The theological institutions are based in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi and Uganda (14 countries in total). The two main programs are currently community development (what impact can an institution and its courses have on the surrounding community?) and libraries, with the development of the NetACT Internet Portal (NIP). The portal will be a central space where users from all 40 partners can access digital library resources, and also various learning and teaching guides on topics such as study skills (for students) or how to develop a syllabus (for staff).

Attendees

Running in parallel with the AGM, the NIP Workshop comprised 16 specialized librarians (or IT trained members), as follows:

Monica Chimsinde, Africa Bible College, Malawi
 Dr Ephraim Mudave, Africa International University, Kenya
 Hope Kapumo, Bishop Harrington Institute, Kenya
 Ephrine Ubaga & Samuel Kung'u, Daystar University, Kenya
 Donald Garvie, Jos ECWA Theological Seminary
 Fraser Jackson, Mission Africa
 Hester Lombard, North West University (Potchefstroom campus)
 Mary Maina, Scott Christian University, Kenya
 Dr Peter Gichiri & Irene Muthoni Kibandi, St Pauls University, Kenya
 Heila Maré & Magriet de Villiers, Stellenbosch University
 Senovia Welman, University of the Free State
 Dr. Leti Kleyn & Christine Nel, University of Pretoria

(The state of libraries within NetACT can be gauged from the fact that most of the specialized African attendees were from South Africa or Kenya.)

Purpose

NetACT have a vision for an internet portal where all members of all partner institutions will be able to access all available online resources to assist them in their studies, their academic careers, and their on-going ministries.

The meeting had two main tasks:

- i. Brainstorm ideas about what should be included in such a portal
- ii. Present proposals to the AGM for the way forward over the next year

Portal Elements

The portal will be split into a library resources section, and a learning and teaching section. The library section will have links to open (free) resources, and also links to password-protected resources, which either belong to NetACT or where access is being paid for by NetACT.

The library resources will cover:

- Electronic books, electronic journals, audio-visual material;
- Links to other theological websites (either to individual resources or to lists of resources);
- Links to downloadable software;
- Lists of core texts and reading lists from around the network so that partners can compare their practice with others;
- A complete list of African theological publishers;
- Links to institutional repositories¹ of full-text dissertations and theses (from within and without the network);
- A combined catalogue of all the partner libraries, so that users can search each other's libraries;
- There will be sections to highlight African journals, particularly those published by the partner institutions;
- Some of the major South African universities involved in the project are keen to help with converting print journals published by NetACT institutions into electronic form as well as institutional repositories of member schools who do not have the knowhow or equipment to do so (free of charge).

Some thought is being given to making some of these resources downloadable so that they can be held offline by partners for times when internet connections become unreliable.

Learning and teaching resources will include:

- Links to information literacy tools;
- Help-guides for students in all forms of study skills (critical reading, essay preparation, etc.);
- Links to syllabus creation and curriculum development for staff;
- Links to thesis writing guides for students and thesis supervision guides for staff;
- An explanation of concepts such as peer-reviewed journals;
- Helps with alternative analysis strategies such as spidergrams and mind-mapping, and anti-plagiarism resources such as referencing software and plagiarism checkers;
- One strategy we are considering is to use the portal to fill gaps in the information literacy provision in the partners, by making students undergo an information literacy course and pass a test before they can access the rest of the site.

NetACT would also like to source funds so that the portal would provide users with a workspace where they can do their written assignments, using legal software such as MS Office paid for by NetACT and saving their work on the NetACT platform where it will be securely backed up. All staff and students of NetACT partners will be eligible to use the portal, as will external research fellows and active alumni. Different levels of users will have access to different areas, and in general, users will only have access to resources that their institutions do not already subscribe to (this will primarily be the four South African universities.)

The portal will be multi-lingual – users will be able to choose from Afrikaans, English, French, or Portuguese. It will be intuitive to use, with various e-library concepts included, such as a capacity to search across all the different resource formats from a single search box. The aim is to have trained library staff taking it in turns to respond to help requests in real time, possibly with a chat facility. There will also be discussion areas for the library staff who are steering the project, and for users. In the future,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutional_repository : An institutional repository is an archive for collecting, preserving, and disseminating digital copies of the intellectual output of an institution, particularly a research institution; Deposit of material in an institutional repository is sometimes mandated by that institution.

we hope to expand to include a Virtual Learning Environment where users can take courses online with video lectures and remote upload of assignments.

Next Steps

The next step in the process (as agreed to by the NetACT AGM) is the creation of a feedback questionnaire to be circulated to all NetACT partners. This is the first stage in an iterative process of gaining sufficient information about the partner libraries to identify precisely the resources that the portal should include. The initial questionnaire should elicit enough information to allow three processes to take place:

- i. Create an “invitation to tender” document which will be circulated to South African web-developers, one of whom will be chosen to do the technical build of the portal
- ii. Identify potential “champions” for the portal (ideally one from each partner institution) who will receive the initial training when the portal is built
- iii. Paint a picture of the current state of partner libraries which NetACT can use to show potential donors what a key element in library provision the portal will be.

The questionnaire was drafted during the workshop and finalised soon after it. The target timetable is to circulate it to all partners by the end of July, and receive the completed questionnaires by the end of August.

Next July has been identified as a realistic date to have the portal ready for training. (The build process will of course include a “beta-testing” phase where the portal will be made available to certain competent users to try it out.) The first phase of training will bring together the afore-mentioned “champions” at the University of Pretoria, as the most convenient location. This first phase will also include more detailed feedback sessions, where the partner staff will be interviewed to get a fuller picture of their individual circumstances, so that the resources available, and the matching of particular resources to particular cohorts of users, can be fine-tuned.

Once the “champions” have been trained, they will return to their institutions to train other staff, some of whom will only need to know how to use particular areas of the portal. From there, training will be cascaded to all end-users.

Staffing

NetACT has chosen Mr Fraser Jackson as the person they want to run the portal. They have identified that he has the necessary blend of library skills (particularly cataloguing and systems librarianship), electronic resources management, IT skills, and experience of theological librarianship in an under-developed African context. Further, he has a range of contacts built up from his time in Scotland whom he can draw on for advice. For this to work, he needs to be based in South Africa. Explanation of the concept to the web-developers will require his presence in the meetings, and the build process will be iterative, with constant come-and-go between him and the developers as the technicalities and the “look and feel” are developed. He will play a key part in the training, especially the first phase in Pretoria, but also in at least some of the local training sessions. He will also have a day-to-day role in building some of the library elements such as a combined catalogue.

Fraser is currently employed by Mission Africa, based in Belfast, UK (www.missionafrica.org.uk/). We requested Mission Africa to continue to support Fraser, and recognise that sending him to be based in South Africa as a missionary is the way forward.

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