

NetACT Internet Portal Overview

Background

NetACT (the Network for African Congregational Theology, website: <http://netact.christians.co.za>) is a partnership of about 40 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 and Ethiopia (12 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).

Overall 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.

Development

The NetACT 2017 AGM was held at Scott Christian University, Machakos, Kenya between 3rd and 7th July. Running in tandem with the AGM, a library workshop was held, to brainstorm ideas about the portal, and to present their proposals to the AGM.

The workshop participants were:

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 all but one of the African attendees were from South Africa or Kenya.)

As approved by the NetACT AGM, the NetACT executive staff collected specific details from each partner college regarding the size of their library and the size of their user-base. This questionnaire elicited 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 development of the portal is now being overseen by Mr Fraser Jackson, previously librarian at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria, who has now taken on the role of NIP Executive Director.

July 2018 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.

Portal Elements

The portal will be multi-lingual – users will be able to choose from 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 to hold general discussions or to collaborate on research.

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 or donated by publishers such as Langham.

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 relevant 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 repositories of full-text dissertations and theses (from within and outwith the network)
- a combined catalogue of all the partner libraries, so that users can search each other’s libraries
- a section to highlight African journals, particularly those published by the partner institutions

Learning and teaching resources will include

- links to information literacy tools
- helpguides for students in all forms of study skills (critical reading, essay preparation, etc.)
- links to syllabus creation and curriculum development guides for staff
- links to thesis writing guides for students and thesis supervision guides for staff
- links to downloadable apps, where relevant
- an explanation of concepts such as peer-reviewed journals
- helps with alternative analysis strategies such as spidergrams and mind-mapping
- anti-plagiarism resources such as referencing software and plagiarism checkers
- a workspace where students can do their written assignments, using legal software such as MS Office 365 paid for by NetACT and saving their work on the NetACT platform where it will be securely backed up.

Functionality

The secure area should be protected by username and password. We should aim for “granular” passwords to allow different categories of access (based on user level and on users’ home institutions).

Some students might have to pass an information literacy class before being allowed access to the site, so the authorisation process needs to be able to register this.

Where institutions already subscribe to resources, users should be diverted to access via their institutional logins (to decrease NetACT subscription costs, and to allow users to keep all their saved bookmarks in one account). The base level for this is a simple link to the institutional login page – the ideal is seamless integration, mapping the users’ NetACT authentication details to their institutional authentication details.

The server will need the ability to host databases. We would like to have a union library catalogue using a professional Library Management System, and also host institutional repositories of theses and dissertations for those partners who do not have the capacity to host their own.

There should be a chat-room, with different levels of access, both for the users and also for the library staff who will be managing the portal

Where possible, there should be interoperability with existing institutional systems such as members’ student record systems and online library catalogues.

The portal will be multi-lingual – on first login, users will be able to choose from English or Portuguese. The portal should then “remember” that choice on all subsequent logins. (This is better than choosing the language automatically based on institution, as there may be a future need for users in multi-lingual contexts to choose their preferred language). In addition, the portal should present each user with branding appropriate to their own institution.

In addition to password protection, the entire portal should have appropriate levels of security.

There should be email facilities for partners who do not have institutional email. Users should be able to integrate this with popular communication and scheduling tools such as Outlook Address Book and Google Calendar.

There should be enough server space for all users to save their work on a “home drive.”

NetACT would like to purchase a MOP Licence for all users for MS Office 365. The server needs to accommodate this.

The server should incorporate a federated search engine (i.e. multiple resources can be searched from a single search-box.)

The user interface should conform to accessibility standards such as www3.

There should be a help-desk facility, which will be staffed by library staff from partners across NetACT who have the requisite skills and training. This should include an interactive chat facility to allow real-time response to requests where possible. There should also be contextual help accessible on all screens of the user interface.

The user interface should be branded with the NetACT logo, and also the logo of the user's own institution.

Site navigation should include a "breadcrumb trail" to allow users to keep track of where they are.