research information network

Overcoming barriers:
access to research information content

The Research Information Network's report, *Overcoming barriers: Access to research information content*, finds that many researchers are encountering difficulties in getting access to the content they need and that this is having a significant impact on their research. Based on the findings of five studies, the report investigates the nature and scale of key restrictions on access to information resources of importance to researchers; the impact of these restrictions and the ways in which they might be alleviated or overcome.

Researchers seek access to a wide range of content – books, journals, artefacts, sound and image files and data – and they want access in a variety of ways, from their libraries, laboratories, in their office or home and in person. The amount of material researchers can now access on their desktops is vast compared to what was available ten years ago. However, no library or institution is able offer access to all the resources their researchers might need.

The report examines the frequency with which researchers encounter problems in accessing content; researchers' perceptions of the ease with which they can gain access and the issue of researcher access to information resources in the public and private sector which are not formally published and which are often subject to copyright restrictions. It also reviews academic and research libraries arrangements to provide access to researchers who are not members of their institutions.

The report's key finding is that access is still a major concern for researchers. Although researchers report having no problems finding content in this age of electronic information, gaining access is another matter due to the complexity of licensing arrangements, restrictions placed on researchers accessing content outside of their own institution and the laws protecting public and private sector information. This means that research into important information resources can be missing. Researchers report that they are frustrated by this lack of immediate access and that this slows their progress, hinders collaborative work and may well affect the quality and integrity of work produced.

The key findings and recommendations are available overleaf.

The full report is available at **www.rin.ac.uk/barriers-access**

Key findings

The report shows that researchers often encounter difficulties in accessing the relevant information required for their research. There are various reasons for this: content is not available online (either through failure to be digitised or lack of licence purchasing) and licences for online content are seen to be too complex and sometimes restrictive of access for non-members of institutions; and institutions lack the technical and administrative capacity to overcome these issues.

Recommendations

Enabling improved discovery and access

- The RIN, JISC, SCONUL and others should do further work on the nature and scale of the access problems faced by researchers and the costs associated with overcoming those problems.

- The RIN, JISC and SCONUL should examine the Scottish experience of collaborative acquisition, with a view to extending this across the UK if appropriate.

- Publishers should build on the open access business models being developed and consider more innovative licensing models that address researchers' and librarians' concerns about current restrictions (such as the level of charges for pay-per-view access to content)

- JISC, SCONUL, RLUK and others should promote and support work to eliminate library cataloguing backlogs and ensure all remaining card catalogues are converted to an online format.

- Libraries should ensure there is comprehensive coverage of their holdings online, via electronic catalogues and discovery services.

- Libraries and institutions should seek to relax as far as possible the financial and administrative barriers when they cannot provide content from their own holdings.

- Institutions and libraries should provide training and guidance for researchers on resource discovery and access, and increase awareness of the full range of services they provide. This should be done in collaboration with researchers, to ensure their behaviours and needs are taken into account when designing services and resources.

- JISC and SCONUL should continue their work on a UK-wide procurement of a common library management system and discovery tools.

Overcoming access issues for external researchers

- With the help of SCONUL and RLUK, institutions and libraries should extend their efforts to make researchers aware of the content and services they can access in other libraries, by providing comprehensive and accessible information and support for researchers visiting from other institutions.

- Institutions and libraries should promote the SCONUL Access scheme to their researchers, particularly by ensuring that information on the scheme is available on library websites.

- SCONUL should continue work to enable researchers and libraries to manage their online membership of the SCONUL Access scheme.

- The RIN, SCONUL and others should examine the feasibility of a UK-wide higher education library membership card to enable access to for all researchers at UK higher education institutions.

- The JISC Registry of Electronic Licences (RELI) project to establish a central database of licensing terms for librarians and others to use should continue be supported and developed.

- Publishers should standardise their terms and conditions and ensure the terminology within them is clearer and easier to understand.

Dealing with technical issues

- Librarians, IT services and institutional managers should implement the recommendations of the HAERVI (HE Access to e-Resources in Visited Institutions) report and toolkit to provide effective services and access to electronic content for external researchers.

- SCONUL, UCISA and others should continue their joint programme of work on simplifying arrangements for access to electronic content for external researchers.

Ensuring access to public and private sector information

- The RLUK, SCONUL, UUK and others should keep a close watch on developments in the intellectual property regime, to ensure that the interests of researchers are taken into account.

- The RIN, working with others, should sustain efforts to ensure researchers are well informed about access to public sector information, including the Public Records Act, the Freedom of Information Act and the work of the Office for Public Sector Information.

- The RIN should support organisations seeking to ensure that information and datasets created with public funding are accessible to researchers.