



## People in the News

### Helena Asamoah-Hassan

It is almost impossible to summarize the achievements of Dr Helena Asamoah-Hassan in just a few sentences, but she is probably most widely known outside her home country of Ghana for her work championing open access (OA) in Africa. She was in the news recently when she was honoured as the BioMed Central (BMC) Open Access Advocate of the Year at their annual Research Awards ceremony in London. She is currently the University Librarian at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, but also acts as Regional Advisor in Africa for Emerald Publishing, sits on an eye-watering number of national and international committees, and is a past President of the Ghana Library Association.

Your Editor began by asking Helena what it means to receive international recognition such as the BMC award. She replied, "I am delighted about it because I see it as recognition for my work towards ensuring that researchers, faculty and students in my institution have access to a great number of available current research results published in all types of journals, especially those on open access."

Bev Acreman of BMC said, "Open access provides a way for researchers from low-income countries to participate more fully in the international research community and BioMed Central works hard to increase the visibility and output of scientific research from these countries. This work is greatly informed by key individuals – and Helena is a deserving winner of our Open Access Advocate of the Year award. She is an energetic, enthusiastic and tireless supporter of open access in Africa and of BioMed Central. We were delighted to work with her on our annual Open Access Africa conference when we held it in Ghana and have been helped enormously by her wise counsel and insights in continually developing our developing world programme."

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Your Editor was interested to know how the problems facing the academic community in Africa compare with those in more developed countries. Helena explained, "They are different, in that libraries in most institutions in Africa have limited budgets and so are unable to subscribe to an adequate number of research journals published in developed countries." The inevitable downside of this is "... that most African researchers are not able to gain access to the content of journals published in developed countries to enable them to know about ongoing research, current research results, and the possibility for collaboration with their counterparts there to carry out international research in the same field". When asked how initiatives such as Research4Life are helping, Helena said, "It is interesting to know that not all researchers know about Research4Life. Again

228 Research4Life, as some of the researchers tell me, does not include the journals they are interested in and see as high-impact journals. Clearly there is more to be done to include several high-impact journals in it.”

She continued, “This challenge also affects the currency of references some researchers cite when they write articles for publication ...” noting that articles are often rejected by journal publishers because they are not seen as being up-to-date. “The African academic community has a lot to offer in terms of local research they carry out which will be of great use to other researchers in the developed world too.”

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Your Editor was keen to ask why Helena feels that open access is so important. “... OA is important in Africa because through it the academic and research community can gain free access to the much needed research results articles from the developed world, which will help improve the way they present their own research results to the academic and research world.” And, she added, “it also enables their work ... to be published at no personal cost and made globally available ... [which] ... will make them visible on the global platform to enable them to compete effectively with their global colleagues for research grants and funding, scholarships for further studies and placements in international jobs.”

As well as campaigning for OA, Helena has been busy both professionally and academically, gaining a BA Degree in Library Science, an MA in Library Studies, and a PhD in African Art & Culture. She worked in Nigeria for a number of years, beginning in 1977 as Assistant Librarian at the MUCAST Library in Makurdi, then Senior Librarian at both Benue State Public Library Service and the Lagos State Polytechnic Library, and, from 1985–1992, Head of the Library of the National Water Resources Institute in Kaduna.

She later became Pioneer Head of the Library of the Maryam Babangida National Centre for Women Development in Abuja, but her extensive and distinguished career in library services culminated in October 2000 when she was appointed as University Librarian and Head of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Library System, making her the first female, and youngest, University Librarian in its history.

Helena has authored over 20 refereed journal articles, three books and two book chapters, almost 100 conference papers and commissioned studies, and in 2007 edited the proceedings of the Sub-Saharan Africa Colloquium on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

As if that wasn't enough, Helena has served on 49 bodies and committees at university, national and international levels, including being a Commissioner of the Ghana National Media Commission, Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the Africa Section of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) from 2005–2007, and a Member of the Governing Board of IFLA from 2007–2011. She notes that this latter role was especially important to her as she was re-elected to a second term of office in 2009, being the first West African and only the fourth African to do so.

Currently, Helena continues to serve as the INASP (International Network for the Availability of Scientific Information) Ghana Country Co-ordinator for the PERI (Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information) project and as EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) Ghana Country Coordinator, both since 2004. She is also Chairperson of the Consortium of Academic & Research Libraries in Ghana (CARLIGH) – a position which is a personal highlight for her as she led the formation of the consortium in 2004, becoming its first chairperson.

She also works as a member of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World Programme (MoW) for UNESCO, sits as the Chairperson of the Knowledge, Library and Information Services (KLIS) Sub-Committee of CODI VI (6th Committee On Development Information) of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and even finds time to be a member of the Board of the New Times Corporation (the Ghanaian government newspaper).

229 In 2011, Helena became the first Emerald Publishing Regional Advisor for Africa. With typical gusto, she said, "I have consistently made my views known to Emerald on the possibility of offering their products at reasonable cost to African institutions which will ensure a greater number of institutions subscribing to it."

Helena has an enthusiasm that is infectious, and it is clear that it generates a lot of love and respect from the people around her. She recalls, "... an event which touched me greatly was in early 1993 when people working under me at a library, most of whom were very junior members of staff when I assumed duty there, and through my encouragement got trained to achieve higher levels, took my picture and each of them arranged theirs around mine with their names ... and presented it to me ... so that I will never forget them ...". She said, "... I still have that picture and I guess they have achieved their aim of making me never to forget them." She explained "... I like encouraging young people to improve their status in life and I derive a lot of joy when they gain higher education and improve their status in life."

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Helena's contributions to society have been recognized many times by organizations such as the Ghana Library Association, which made her a Fellow in 2006, and the Lions Clubs International, which honoured her as a Melvin Jones Fellow in 2004. And, of course, we shouldn't forget her recent award as BMC Open Access Advocate of the Year!



STOP PRESS: In August 2012, Helena was honoured once again, this time being awarded the IFLA Medal for 'her significant contribution made to IFLA and international librarianship through her work in building bridges across Africa and between African countries and the rest of the world'. With characteristic modesty, Helena said she is "very humbled", noting that "it pays to offer good selfless service..."

But, your Editor wondered, does this hectic lifestyle leave Helena any time for anything other than work. "I like listening to Christian religious and Ghanaian highlife music, organizing events and playing with my grandchildren." (Sounds like a lovely way to unwind after a busy working day.)

While in a wistful mood, your Editor asked Helena how she would use three wishes to get publishers to improve the situation of access to scholarly journals for Africa. She replied:

"it pays to offer good selfless service..."

"Lobby and dialogue with them to:

- provide special (low) pricing for African countries if journals cannot be accessed for free

- make articles in journals which are on subscription open access six months after publication as sometimes it takes as much as that time for subscription to print journals to reach the libraries after publication
- allow authors to archive their published articles in their institutional or other repositories immediately after publication."

Helena shows no signs of slowing down, noting modestly that "to date, I have had a very fulfilling professional life, having started 35 years ago". Looking back, she picked a few personal highlights. Of course, her recent award from BMC ranks high on her list, but she also picked out ... "When I led my University, KNUST, to set up the first open access institutional repository in Ghana, to be the first Foundation member of BioMed Central and the first institution in Ghana to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access" and, on a more personal note, "when I earned my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in 2011 and became the first full-time practising Librarian in Ghana to earn a PhD degree and of course when I was honoured with the IFLA Medal, the first sub-Saharan African to receive such an award ."

And on that very positive note, your Editor rounded off the interview, leaving the last words to Helena herself:

"When, by the grace of God, I retire from public service in a couple of years from now I would like to leave my Library:

- fully automated, where users will have access to electronic information from all parts of the world through several work stations in the library, offices and hostels;
- still hosting an active and very useful open access institutional repository;
- publishing an open access journal (which we are about to start); and
- as a library which is of last resort for science and technology information for Ghana."



[Helena will, I'm sure, be pleased to know that this feature is being made OA by UKSG]