Not Just Quality Information: HINARI Drives Desirable Change In Teaching & Research

For the past 30 years libraries in the world's 100 poorest countries have had very restricted access to quality STM publications. When available at all resources have tended to be irregular and outdated. with serious impact on the quality of research and education available, and on the local retention of able scientists and doctors.

The HINARI/AGORA/OARE (HIN-AG-OA) projects have made full-strength information systems of the highest quality freely available in the world's poorest countries. Take-up is high and growing rapidly (5m downloads and 50% growth in 2006), and almost all the major publishers in the health, agricultural and earth science areas are enthusiastic participants.

The project philosophy has been to provide institutions in developing countries with exactly the same access to electronic journals and delivery platforms as their G8 equivalents enjoy. This has been predicated on the assumption that the nature of information needs does not vary between universities across the world. Technical, economic and cultural barriers have had to be overcome, but in three years' operation the model has proved itself beyond doubt.

The availability of quality information and quality delivery systems is beginning to drive desirable change in participating institutions. It is now easier to provide good, contemporary scientific and medical education. In Africa the benefits of HINARI access are appearing in the development of pioneering problem-based learning programmes in medical schools, in evidence-based practice in hospitals and health centres, in the development of a culture of literature use – all of which previously were practical impossibilities. It is still too early to see if the project is succeeding in encouraging local authorship and fostering quality research in the developing world, but anecdotal reports are encouraging. Librarians are now able to use their skills more fully to support research and learning and to play a more central role in the life of their universities.

HIN-AG-OA aligns itself with the UN's millennium goals the challenge now for all partners in the programme is to build on this sound base. 2007 is seeing improved user support, a substantial broadening of the range of e-resources available, and above all a serious attempt to address the training gap – driving up usage and maximizing the benefits.

The paper ends with an analysis of what needs to be done in the next 2-3 years in order to maintain the momentum of these programmes, which are already delivering substantial benefits to their user communities.