As a director of electronic licensing based in Barcelona for Academic Press, I spend a lot of time on the road. At each stop, I visit universities, medical groups or government agencies and there learn first-hand of librarians’ concerns.

Of considerable interest to librarians, academia and publishers around the world right now is “the digital divide”. From my recent journeys, I have gained added insights into this critical issue facing libraries and educational institutions in the world’s poorest nations. And I see that the international publishing, scientific and academic communities must come together to reduce the information gulf between rich nations and those in severe need.

The past year took me to 26 countries on four continents. I know the current library situation pretty well in Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Algeria, Ghana, Nigeria, Iran, Bhutan, Georgia, Belarus, Russia and Moldavia, among other nations.

Through my travels, I have become acquainted with a gamut of difficulties facing libraries in our poorest nations. First, such libraries can afford few high-quality scientific journals. If they can afford some, the mail systems are usually unreliable, which means journal issues arrive late or not at all. If issues are received, there commonly occur losses caused by users cutting out pages and stealing issues. Furthermore, if librarians manage to keep collections intact, paper in tropical areas usually has a short lifespan – presenting an inherent challenge for the archival role of libraries.

The IDEAL Charter for Low-Income Countries, launched this past February, addresses all these problems. Through this initiative, universities, research centers and teaching hospitals in the world’s poorest nations can gain reduced-rate access to IDEAL – the pioneering online resource library for science, technology and medicine (http://www.idealibrary.com).

The charter, a new licensing model, offers unlimited access to IDEAL for higher-education institutions in nations with severely limited resources. As Internet connectivity is becoming more widespread throughout the third world, availability of IDEAL through this model will contribute to development of many organizations in eligible countries worldwide.

To sum up the benefits of the charter, participating countries receive a low-cost yet high-quality collection of more than 300 leading and reputable journals (with a high average impact factor). The IDEAL Charter delivers an impressive scope of research findings in diverse fields and delivers speedy access to this body of knowledge. On average, papers appear on IDEAL six weeks or more before they appear in print in journals.

Authorized users of the charter get access through IP (Internet Protocol) number recognition, which allows flexibility and freedom as these researchers tap into literature on IDEAL. And libraries can issue passwords to authorized users to allow access to IDEAL through proxy servers. IDEAL Charter licensees additionally get archival access to all journals, including Academic Press journals dating back to 1993, on IDEAL.

Qualifications for eligibility are few. The IDEAL Charter is available to nations conforming to the World Bank’s definition of low-income countries (i.e. those with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of $760 (USD) or less), has a national GDP of $50 billion or less, and which have ratified the Berne Convention on copyright. This group includes many sub-Saharan African nations, as well as some in Central America and Central, South and Southeast Asia.

To encourage widespread use of the charter license, sponsorships are being sought. Though the charter model comprises reduced-rate fees, subsidized by Academic Press and Harcourt, some low-income countries may need further assistance to take advantage of this innovative
licensing initiative. Philanthropic organizations, universities with research interests or other links with low-income countries, and corporations are invited to underwrite charter access to IDEAL for specific nations.

So far, the IDEAL Charter is off to a flying start. DANIDA (Danish International Development Assistance) is preparing to sponsor charter access for a group of African countries. Other philanthropic groups are similarly preparing to sponsor the IDEAL Charter for particular nations. More news about charter sponsorships will be forthcoming soon.

The charter is meeting with enthusiasm on the part of recipients. Dr. Einar Eriksen, with the Yekatit 12 Hospital Burn Unit in Ethiopia, recently stated: “As a plastic surgeon working in the capital city Addis Ababa, I mainly deal with burn patients and other individuals in need of reconstructive surgery. Easy access to medical journals through the Internet, as proposed by the IDEAL Charter, will be of great encouragement, motivation and benefit to professionals working in various health institutions in developing countries. I look forward for this initiative to be realized.”

What makes the IDEAL Charter unique? The answer is simple: this licensing model gives access to every journal on IDEAL to all universities, colleges, research institutes and teaching hospitals throughout an entire country. This differentiates the charter from other initiatives. Unlimited access to all sites in a nation for a single low fee, this is quite revolutionary.

Though the IDEAL Charter for Low-Income Countries represents but one contribution towards overcoming the digital divide, the charter sponsorships coming forward and the interest around the world in this initiative are encouraging. Let us hope other publishers will follow suit and similarly make their scholarly peer reviewed journals more widely available on a reduced-rate basis.

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