

An Academic Library as a National Reference Library: Contributions of Makerere University Library in Promoting Civic Literacy

Andrew Mwesigwa

Academic Librarian

Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

Email: amwesigwa@mulib.mak.ac.ug or andrewmwesigwa1@gmail.com



Copyright © 2013 by **Andrew Mwesigwa**. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

Abstract:

According to Kranich, Reid and Willingham (2004), “New civic engagement initiatives on campuses offer a perfect opportunity for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensuring an informed citizenry”. Makerere University Library (Maklib) has made deliberate endeavours to this end. Having been in existence for 64 years, Maklib serves both as an academic library and since 1972, through the fifth National Development Plan as a national reference library for Uganda. Therefore, Maklib does not only serve the university community but also external registered users. Maklib has conducted on-demand information literacy training for officials in the Uganda government such as the army, individual officials, etc. The paper examines the role of promoting access to unique national and regional archives housed at Maklib in promoting civic literacy using the SWOT method. Access to the archival collection has enabled users to peer into Uganda’s and regional history thereby explaining the prevailing political and social atmosphere. Maklib has been involved in school outreach programmes. The school outreach programme has been a highlight in the events that have characterized the annual World Library Day celebrations hosted annually in May at Makerere University. The school outreach has been seen as a source of inspiration to the young generation who will eventually be groomed into civic literate citizens. The paper underlines the successes and lessons learnt during Maklib’s school outreach programmes. The author conducted a follow up mini study to capture the learners’ and teachers’ experience of Maklib’s outreach programme. The study revealed that the learners and teachers from the selected school were greatly inspired by this programme, which has also equipped them to be better and informed citizens. The paper highlights the impact of Maklib’s outreach programme and lessons learnt that other players can adopt for similar initiatives in the quest to continue to civic literacy to the citizenry of Uganda. The paper reveals the enabling environment and strategies that Maklib has employed to this end. It finally, concludes by showing the need to evaluate the various training programmes that Maklib conducts and it calls on more players to join the school outreach programmes underscoring the need demonstrated in the study.

Keywords: School outreach programme, National reference library, Makerere University Library, Information literacy, Civic literacy

1. Introduction:

Makerere University Library (Maklib) is home of great information resources that are housed in the Main Library and nine branch/college libraries. The information resources at Maklib are the basis for the argument that Maklib is positioned to promote civic literacy. In as much as word of mouth (oral) communication is highly needed in knowledge transfer, the written word is needed for reference purposes. In many indigenous societies, the old people used to carry with them invaluable knowledge and information. However, with the reality of the mortality of man, libraries have played a great role in preservation of such knowledge and information. Maklib is one such example of source and pillar of information and knowledge for the African society and indeed the whole world that many can depend on and draw from. This has been evidenced with the ever increasing number of external users at Maklib of which some are international visitors.

2. ‘SWOTING’ the Maklib Role in Promotion of Civic Literacy

The author has employed the SWOT analysis as a method to highlight the strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats encountered by Maklib in playing its role in promoting civic literacy as seen below.

2.1 Strengths:

a) The Unique Nature of Archives/Special Collections at Maklib

Maklib prides in having the best collections in the Eastern African region among academic libraries. This is so because of the holdings of Africana Section of the Main Library at Maklib. The Africana collections are so dear to Maklib that Librarians have always defended their safe custody. Librarians are aware of the mandate of Maklib to collect, organise, disseminate and manage information resources at Makerere University. This mandate is well spelt out in the Uganda Universities and other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 (as amended). Librarians have thus taken the audacity to be custodians and to promote the access of the rich collections at Maklib. Some of the unique collections found in Africana include archives of Buganda Government, Church Missionary Society, a collection of Newspapers published in Uganda (ever since newspaper publishing started in Uganda, in 1900, to-date), a legal deposit collection (materials published on Uganda, about Uganda and by Ugandans), document collections of East African governments, collections of International bodies, Uganda’s history, Rare materials (out of print) etc. All these and many more are the collections that make Maklib different from all other academic libraries in Uganda. On several occasions, government officials have referred to materials at Maklib for major government policy decisions. An example of the much sought after information at Maklib has been the history of the land question that has been a challenge in Uganda and that has great historical ramifications. Such information can be accessed from the archive newspapers and other documents housed in Africana collections. Similarly Maklib has had the opportunity to host several highly ranked Ugandan citizens seeking to improve their knowledge about their country. It is these unique information sources that Maklib prides in, that make it unique in the region.

b) Relationship with Publishers and the Legal Deposit Act, 1958

Maklib has focused on improving its relationship with publishers who are key stakeholders in national reference work. Maklib has kept communication lines open by reaching out to publishers. Publishers have been invited to exhibit their publications at the annual World Library Day celebrations for 5 years now. In the just concluded 2013 World Library day celebrations at Maklib, a sales representative of one publisher was interviewed about what they thought about the occasion. In her response she said it was a nice occasion and more such occasions should be organised to accord publishers the opportunity to display and promote latest publications for the public.

Secondly, Maklib has engaged in sensitization of authors and publishers about their responsibility to deposit copies of works published in Uganda, on Uganda and by Ugandans, in line with the Maklib's legal deposit mandate. Compliance by authors and publishers has contributed to a reach collection at Maklib. Some of the popularly borrowed materials at Maklib have been among those deposited by publishers. Maklib is grateful to the publishers that have complied, which has led to the promotion of civic literacy among the Maklib patrons.

c) Convivial External User Policy

The doors of Maklib are open to the members of the public. The only precondition is external user registration. Users have travelled from far and wide, to come and have access to the reach collections at Maklib. The Reference and Circulation section is tasked with the responsibility of handling external user registration. External users are always welcome at Maklib to register and use the various information resources. However, external users can only use materials within the library. Maklib has recently opened up a fully equipped secretarial bureau which provides photocopying services, among others so that users have the opportunity to photocopy a few pages in keeping with the 'fair use' principle of copyright regulations.

d) Inherited Position at Makerere University

Maklib prides in the fact that it is at the heart of the first and premier university in Eastern Africa. This has given Maklib a competitive advantage. Maklib serves the nine constituent colleges and the School of Law. Makerere University students from all over Uganda, East Africa and neighboring countries all look up to Maklib for information services. This has been seen as a great opportunity for Librarians at Maklib to interface with people from various cultures. As reported by Akiteng and Musoke (2010), Academic Librarians at Maklib are actively engaged in information literacy training for graduate students and researchers. Librarians at Maklib have used such platforms to address the information needs of researchers using students' research topics to demonstrate effective search strategies for electronic resources retrieval and reference management. In such instances the Maklib librarian has been seen as a teacher/trainer who has an opportunity to influence society. Moreover, research topics range from social, political, economic to scientific approaches in dealing with aspects affecting Uganda. Maklib's contribution cannot go unnoticed in support of such research and the emerging breakthroughs thereafter that are making a difference in Uganda. Maklib in this regard is an information and social hub in Uganda. Similarly librarians at Maklib have been trained in the latest information

technology (IT) skills and therefore have had the opportunity to empower the users they interface with. With the known impact of IT on society, Maklib is in a unique position to offer relevant services that could translate into related e-governance skills.

e) Maklib's Public Relations Policy and Visits to Maklib

Maklib has a tradition of having a public relations office. A Librarian at Maklib was identified by Maklib management to be the focal point for public relations work on behalf of the library. The public relations policy at Maklib has enhanced its public image. For the past three years, Maklib has made headlines in the news for being a state of the art library in East Africa, offering an array of information services. Newspaper coverage of Maklib has tremendously promoted the services of Maklib to the public, thereby prompting more visits from several organisations and various members of the public. In one year alone (2012/2013), Maklib has received institutional visit requests ranging from academic organisations to other civil society organisations more than ever before. In 2012, Maklib had the opportunity of hosting both the President and Vice President of the Republic of Uganda on two occasions, as Makerere University commemorated 90 years of existence. The government of Uganda recognized the central role played by Maklib in society. Relatedly, Maklib has continued to enjoy an interest by the government of Uganda. As mentioned earlier, this relationship with the government was born out of the need by several government departments seeking information about Uganda's history and key government documents that Maklib has collected over the years.

f) The changing face of Maklib

Maklib has lived to the expectations of Ranganathan (Noruzi, 2004), who stated that a library is a growing organism. In 2012, Maklib opened its new library building extension to provide more space for patrons. The University Librarian, Prof. Maria G. N. Musoke, who spearheaded a resource mobilization campaign to see this dream come to pass, says the new space added seating capacity and expanded library services (Musoke, 2012). The expansion of such public facilities, such as at Maklib is a demonstration that Maklib is in a better position to contribute towards promotion of civic literacy among the Ugandan citizenry whose population is ever increasing. Maklib therefore is in a better position to handle this role than ever before. Another initiative at Maklib is the planned digitisation for preservation project, which is aimed at promoting digital access to the archives at Maklib. The Maklib board sub-committee on preservation has been set up and has developed an activity plan for the execution of the digitisation of the archives at Maklib. Librarians at Maklib have great enthusiasm towards this project and can only hope for the best in the future of promoting civic literacy. Maklib peers in the future and sees a light at the end of the tunnel. That light is the derivative versions of archives and selected special collections that will be deposited and accessible via the institutional repository, thereby opening up the library to the online public.

2.2 Weaknesses

Operating with Minimal Resources

One of the challenges that Maklib has faced in endeavoring to promote civic literacy has been limited financial and human resources. It is a known fact that with limited budgets, organisations are limited in carrying out their mandated activities. The limited resources have curtailed Maklib's ability to provide more avenues for promoting civic literacy but Librarians at Maklib have innovatively endeavoured to work within limited budgets to accomplish some of the set activities, thereby living up to its mandate of a national reference library. These are some of the innovations at Maklib that Musoke (2009) discusses.

2.3 Opportunities

a) Collaboration

The existence of other national information organisations such as the national archives, national documentation centre as well as the birth of the National Library of Uganda (NLU) in 2003 as reported by Kawalya (2009), provides opportunities for collaboration for the enhancement of the promotion of information access by the general populace in Uganda. A new initiative that is at the horizon that will give Maklib another opportunity to shine has been the planned involvement in the World Digital Library project. In 2012, the World Digital Library project started engaging Maklib with a view to enhance online access to selected materials at Maklib.

b) Readily Available Audience

It is an unspoken assumption for library and information units that there will always be users of their services. For Maklib, this is not a mere assumption. It is a reality that generations in the past, present and future will refer to materials at Maklib. With an ever-growing literate population in Uganda, that has manifested itself in the increasing student populations in all schools and universities in Uganda, Maklib has been thrust at the centre stage of information provision. The only question that several generations of Librarians at Maklib have always and will always need to answer is whether one should remain silent about this treasure of information resources or one will be proactive enough to let the world know what is at Maklib for their access. The good news has been that the current generation of Maklib librarians has been vocal and proactive at every opportunity of interfacing with the public and potential users.

2.4 Threats

According to the author, Maklib has every opportunity to contribute to nation building through promotion of civic literacy save for the environmental factors that have led to a deterioration of the paper archives/collections. Nevertheless, digitisation and microfilming efforts are underway at Maklib to counteract this challenge.

3.1 A Mini Study of the Impact of Maklib’s School Outreach Programme

In 2011 and 2012 Librarians at Maklib donated books to one elementary school and visited libraries of two high schools in Kampala. Maklib librarians assisted the high schools librarians in re-organising their libraries and cataloguing of some of their materials. Maklib also invited teachers and learners of the elementary school to attend the 2012 World Library Day celebrations at Makerere University. The author carried out a mini study to get a feedback from the learners and teachers of the elementary school. Samples of the questionnaires that were used are attached to this paper as appendices. The author was seeking for answers to the question “does Maklib’s school outreach programme contribute to civic literacy”. Data was analysed qualitatively by categorizing responses into themes.

3.2 Themes Emerging from the Mini Study

a) Themes from Emerging from Feedback from Learners

The questionnaire was made up of five open-ended questions. Of the 30 questionnaires given out to learners, 24 of them were returned leading to 80% response rate. The following themes emerged from the study.

1. Book donation was worthwhile

Learners liked the fact that Maklib donated books to their school. Some of them expressed their liking for storybooks; others liked books on games while others felt that the reading of the donated books improved their reading skills and had enhanced their understanding of social problems. Some learners indicated that they had learnt the virtue of giving. In general, the book donation campaign was valuable as it enhanced a reading culture, which is a foundation for civic education. Three of the learners expressed themselves as below:

“I learnt how to help”

“It improved my reading”

“It has improved my English”

2. School participation at the 2012 World Library Day celebrations at Maklib was a learning experience for the learners.

As one of the activities during the 2012 World Library Day Celebrations, Maklib conducted a debate with the motion “Maklib: inspiring, surprising, empowering” in line with the 2012 World Library and Information Congress theme. On the question of how their visit to Maklib and participation at the library day celebration, changed their view of their country the following were some of the responses.

“When you get knowledge, you will be able to advise people in your society”

“The debate is the best thing I like”

“We participated in the debate”

“It changed my academics... it changed my future”.

The responses of the young people from the elementary school who visited Maklib showed that they enjoyed the debate discourse, learnt something new and others had learnt how debate. Some of them simply had enjoyed the fun of the occasion while others appreciated the beauty of Maklib.

3. In the general comments, some of the learners appreciated the book donation by Maklib; others expressed their need for more book donations, while others would like to visit Maklib again as expressed below.

“Thank you for donating books”

“The visit was very exciting... I wish to go back”

“They should invite us again”

“I want the program again in the school”

“The people at [Maklib] showed love to the children”

“We need more books”

b) Themes from Emerging from Feedback from Learners

The author used a random sample of four teachers and therefore issued four questionnaires, which were all returned. The emerging themes from the questions about what the teachers liked about Maklib’s book donation/visit are discussed below:

“I liked the content in the books”

“I liked the choice of the books”.

“As one reads, the book makes one know about places they have never been to”

“It increased the number of books in the library”

“The books were good and within the education level of the learners”

“It encouraged reading as part of learning”.

The impact of Maklib’s book donation is revealed in these voices of the teachers. It was revealed that the teachers appreciated Maklib’s selection of books that were donated to the school and Maklib’s gesture promoted reading skills and encouraged a reading culture.

On the question of how the school outreach programme changed the way the teachers’ viewed their country and society the following were some of the responses.

“It showed the love Maklib has on our schools”.

“It encouraged learners to develop their literacy skills”.

“There was a change of attitude towards reading because after the donation there was sensitization about reading”.

“Maklib is leading by example”.

From the responses, one could tell that Maklib has a pivotal role to play in shaping society starting with the education sector.

The following were some of the responses recorded from the general comments section of the questionnaire.

“We pray that the programme continues because we benefitted a lot...”

“The programme should also reach the rural schools...”

“We shall be grateful if more books could be donated”.

“All schools should benefit from this kind of arrangement”.

Besides, the need for more books in elementary schools that has been expressed by the school that participated in the study, the above general comments also reflected the need for Maklib to continue with the school outreach programme. As thus Maklib is trail blazing. Maklib is therefore tasked with such an awesome responsibility to keep the information and civic literacy fire burning in Uganda.

4. Implications of the Study for Higher Education Institutions

The study revealed the fundamental part that Maklib’s school outreach programme has played in shaping the minds of the young generation in schools. Maklib is engaged in not a small task but one that has far reaching implications for the future of the learners in Uganda. It therefore follows that the demand for Maklib’s involvement is not only a great contribution in promoting civic literacy but just the beginning for other universities to join in the provision of the much needed assistance to schools.

5. Conclusion

Maklib continues to play its leading role in promoting civic literacy because it considers it as a call being at the heart of the East Africa’s most prestigious higher education institution that also has a rich historical heritage. This paper reports only one mini study but it has demonstrated that feedback from stakeholders of every Maklib service and program can be used as a tool to depict their impact and influence on the target audience in order to have input for future programmes.

References

- Akiteng, F. & Musoke, M. (2010, September 8-10). Challenges posed by diversity in academic institutions as they implement Information Literacy: the experiences of Makerere University Library in Uganda. Paper Presented at the Creating Knowledge IV Conference: 'Information literacy and diversity in higher education: mapping the learning environment, Bergen, Norway.
- Kranich, N., Reid, M. & Willingham, T. (2004, July/August). Civic engagement and academic libraries. *College and Research Libraries News*, 65, 381.
- Kawalya, J. (2009). *The National Library of Uganda: its inception, challenges and prospects, 1997-2007*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Musoke, M. G. N. (2010, August 10-15). Reconstruction@Maklib with minimal resources. Paper Presented at the IFLA World Library and Information congress, Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Noruzi, A. (2004). Application of Ranganathan's Laws to the Web. *Webology*, 1(2), Article 8. Available at: <http://www.webology.org/2004/v1n2/a8.html>
- Musoke, M. G. N. (Ed.) (2012). Commissioning of the Makerere University Main Library new building extension: activities@maklib. Kampala, Makerere University Library.

