

Public Libraries and Distance Education in Tanzania: Issues and Dilemmas

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This work highlights issues and dilemmas facing libraries and distance learners in Tanzania. It is based on interviews carried out with Open University of Tanzania students, deans of the Open University, public librarians, and academic librarians. Inadequate reading materials, inadequate reading

space, charging for services, and lack of qualified staff are some of the issues facing public libraries in serving distance learners. Distance learners are also unfamiliar with the requirements of distance education. There is a need to embark on new approaches to support these students.

Introduction

Traditional approaches to education and library services have proved to be less than successful in Africa. A relatively new development for most of the continent is distance education at the university level. It has considerable potential, in part due to the demand for higher education and the shortages of money and other resources that make the establishment of many more conventional universities unlikely. But given the problems that students attending conventional institutions have in getting hold of up-to-date, relevant books and other learning resources, what likelihood is there that distance learning students will fare any better? Without regular contacts with lecturers, distance learners are much more dependent on learning resources. The challenge for the library and information profession as well as for university educators is significant. This can be well demonstrated by the establishment of the new Open University of Tanzania (OUT). It was established in 1993, and in 1994 it had the first intake of 766 students. By 1998 it had a total of 4,809 students studying for Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Education (BA Ed.), Bachelor of Commerce (Bcom), Bachelor of Commerce Education (Bcom Ed.), Bachelor of Laws (LLB), Bachelor of Science

(BSc), Bachelor of Science Education (BSc Ed.), and Foundation programmes. One significant and essential source of information for them is public libraries. In fact libraries are a key resource for many open learners (Rowntree 1991).

Library Needs/Requirements

In a situation where a distance learner is seen to be autonomous and independent (Sauve 1993), and that separation of teacher and learner is seen as a central characteristic of distance education, libraries play a significant role in supporting the process by, amongst other things, selecting relevant and useful reading materials; organising them in some order so that the students can find materials they need without wasting time; and making learning materials readily available for consultation or borrowing. This suggests that, under normal circumstances, distance education assumes that there would always be supporting institutions such as public libraries to provide support to distance learners. It is maintained that libraries are a key resource for many open learners as they provide “access to an enormous range of information... most of this will take the form of print on paper – that is, books, pamphlets, journals ...” (Rowntree 1991). But the development of

information technology has also made it possible nowadays for libraries to acquire, organise, store, and disseminate information technology related learning materials.

In Tanzania, Tanzania Library Services (TLS) which was established in the early 1960s and its network of regional libraries have had a role in supporting distance learners. In the 1970s and 1980s it played a significant role of providing some of the reading materials to support programmes such as adult education, and correspondence courses. For almost two decades TLS had been the envy of most developing countries. However, from mid-1980s resources for the public library started to decrease considerably. The main sources of income such as government subventions, and international donor organisations' contributions dwindled greatly. This had a negative impact on the TLS system. The plan to develop a public library in every region and district was halted due to lack of money for development. Collection development slowed down, as it started to depend on book donors: there was not enough money to purchase reading materials, even for those published within the country (Mcharazo and Olden 1996). Ever since the system has been operating with a very low budget. The situation is well summed up thus "Africa's governments have lost any initial enthusiasm they had for libraries ... and are placed low on the national list of priorities" (Sturges and Neill 1998). In the light of this, it is clear that distance education students are severely affected, and an attempt is made here to discuss some of the issues confronting public libraries in serving distance learners.

Methodology

As part of his PhD research the author used a case study approach. A total of 56 students representing second year to fourth year of the LLB, BA Ed. and BSc programmes were interviewed in six regions (Dar es Salaam, Coast, Morogoro, Tanga, Kilimanjaro, and Arusha). Interviews with librarians from OUT, TLS, Kibaha Education Centre, University of Dar es Salaam, British Council, and the Institute of Finance Management were also carried out. Both participatory observation and direct observation methods were also used to ascertain the students' public library and service usage behaviours. More details on the methodolo-

gy are provided in the PhD thesis (Mcharazo 1999) and in a paper entitled "Investigating the learning resource requirements of students at the Open University of Tanzania: research methods" (Mcharazo and Olden 1999).

Realisation of the significance of public libraries by OUT students

Distance learning institutions are aware of the need to have well-resourced public libraries. OUT, despite its newness, realises the importance of public libraries, and that is why it advises its students to use public library resources. In recognition of their importance the university has entered into an agreement with TLS to stock, in a separate collection, materials for the OUT students (Open University of Tanzania 1998).

Distance learners too are aware of the need to use public libraries for their studies. The survey of OUT students found that almost every student appreciated their significance, and urged them to stock materials relevant to their needs. But being aware of the usefulness of a public library is one thing, and heavy and intensive use another. The experience of Tanzania has shown that not many OUT students use the public libraries. The reasons for this are twofold: those associated with the public libraries and those associated with the OUT students.

Public library issues

Inadequacy or lack of reading materials

A survey carried out in Morogoro region showed that there were 950 volumes and a few outdated journals housed in the OUT Collection, in Morogoro regional library. These materials were to serve a total of 107 students scattered all over the three districts of Morogoro, Kilosa, Ifakara, and Kilombero who were enrolled in eight programmes: BA Education, LLB, BCom, BCom Education, BSc, BSc Education, BA General, and Foundation Course. However, the survey found out that many students do not use the collections. Students stated that the library lacks some of the essential readings. A third year BA Education student in Morogoro, for example stated that "books for English literature and Education are not available at the regional library". A second

year BSc Education student faced a similar experience and stated that he did not seem to find relevant information for his course. Similar views were shared in other regions. A third year LLB student from Kilimanjaro region stated:

“... No case law books, no law reports in libraries and courts, no statutes available, no updates or amendments! Studying law in Tanzania is like looking for an ant’s foot-steps in the desert at night...”

Others found that the materials available are just not enough for all the students. They feel as if they are scrambling for just a few copies. A second year BSc Education student, for example, stated that they have to depend on previous students who studied for similar courses.

There were some students who have also found most of the materials provided in the public libraries to be out-of-date. This problem is severely affecting LLB students whose subjects require them to refer to new legislation, statutes and case laws more frequently. The Regional Director of Morogoro Regional Centre, F.Y. Mfangavo, confirmed this by reiterating the need for study materials to be supplemented by books from libraries, but finds public libraries lacking the necessary materials.

The elementary level of the material, irrelevance, and outdatedness are the most important reasons for failure to use the public library. Students who are severely affected are those studying for Law and BSc programmes. A number of BSc and LLB students in all regions have found most of the reading materials useful only for A-level education, and perhaps for a very few of the OUT’s first year students.

In fact the problem of shortage of materials has been facing all TLS libraries for years. It has been stated that

“... the shortage of books and periodicals in all kinds of libraries is a major obstacle for these institutions to fulfilling their obligations to the general public as well as to their specialised users...” (Gulbraar and Moen 1986)

Reading space

Readers or users of any library do not go to a library just to find reading materials. There are those who are just interested in doing their own work or reading their own materials. They go to the library because they know that is the best place for working quietly and without any disturbance.

It is possible that this type of environment is missing in their homes, offices, and elsewhere. Demands from spouses, children, friends, colleagues, and sometimes the environment in general can severely interfere with one’s studies.

Apart from the students in Dar es Salaam region, almost all of the respondents who use the public libraries in the other regions have found the space for reading in the libraries to be adequate. Interesting results, however, came from Dar es Salaam based students. Here the results were split: 50% maintaining the space to be enough while another 50% stating that the space for reading in the TLS National Central Library (NCL), Dar es Salaam was inadequate.

At NCL there are two main reading rooms/halls: one located in the Children and Schools Department and another one located in the Adult Lending Department. Children and pupils up to class seven in primary school level use the reading hall in the Children’s Department. The reading hall in the Adult Lending Department is exclusively for adults. By adults is meant all adult learners from students at secondary level, to students at higher education level. The OUT students use this room for their studies. The problem, however, is that the room is shared by mature adults and other less mature students. It has been observed that “about 90% of the regular users are students” (Mchombu 1985).

More frequently the room is occupied by secondary school and vocational college students who are involved in all sort of discussions: from the subjects under study to life in general. It is even more serious during examination times. As this is a study area, mature students such those from OUT find it hard, first to find a chair and a desk, and second to concentrate with their reading.

As for other non-government public libraries such as the British Council Library in Dar es Salaam the OUT students find them better equipped with relevant and up-to-date materials. However, they find their reading space inadequate.

Charging by public libraries

Another issue is that TLS introduced membership fees recently. Adult members of the libraries are charged 3,000/- shillings (equivalent of \$5) per year. TLS maintains that the fees may help to

revive and improve some of library services especially in these difficult times of dwindling budgets. It is debatable whether this is a right decision, as there are several advantages and disadvantages. Even in some of the developed countries this debate continues. Freedom to choose, keeping undesirable people out, subsidising the library budget, and so on have always been put forward in favour of charging. The anonymous author of *Ex Libris* (1986) maintained

“... [Establishing] a right or wrong level of funding ... can only be done where the full costs are recovered through charges and the customer can indicate through his or her spending decisions where they wish to services to be increased or diminished ...”

On the other hand opponents of charging have put forward arguments such as discrimination against the poor, breach of the requirements of the UNESCO Manifesto on Public Libraries, and the fact that a library is a public service.

But Tanzania is a poor country with a gross domestic product of almost 3.4 billion US dollars and a per capita gross national product of US \$120 in 1995. The debt payment it owes to multinational corporations is almost 7.4 billion US dollars (Africa Confidential Newsletter 1997). Low levels of investment in industry and agriculture, which is the backbone of the country, have resulted in massive unemployment. The situation has been made even more difficult for people since IMF and the World Bank imposed a retrenchment exercise. Many of the employees were made redundant, and there is little hope for future employment. Life for ordinary citizens, especially those, who are unemployed, is hard. This means that few people can afford to part with 3,000 shillings to pay a public library for membership. Most of the respondents of this survey are employed. Whereas before they had not found the public libraries adequate due to congestion by secondary school students they now find the situation has eased a bit due to the introduction of the membership charge. Few Tanzanian primary and secondary school students can now afford to part with 1,000 shillings. In fact their parents, who are mostly unemployed or low-wage earners who cannot afford it, also find it unjustifiable as the libraries suffer from inadequate stock. However in Dar es Salaam, the main city, most residents are civil servants and business people. Most of

the parents can afford to pay the membership fees, hence their school children continue to use the public libraries, and the problems facing the mature students regarding their presence continues.

One obvious fact is that most users of TLS libraries nowadays are serious ones. Closely associated with this is the fact that the charges have had a big impact on some of the OUT students. A number of them are not in favour of being charged by the public libraries. Their argument is that the OUT collections placed in the public libraries do not belong to the TLS, but to OUT. They, therefore, do not see any rationale for being asked to pay membership fees to use their own materials. In any case the joining instructions they received before starting their courses did not ask them to pay. As a result of this, therefore, a number of students have decided not to pay, and are therefore ceasing to be members.

The response of the regional libraries' staff is that the OUT students are clients just like any others. In any case it would not be possible to ask them to restrict themselves to the OUT Collection, and not to use the other stock.

Adequacy and quality of staffing

One of the most important resources in satisfying requirements and needs in a library is the staff. It is not enough to acquire the necessary materials required by the users. An important process of organising and making available the acquired information or materials must be performed by the library staff. It is observed that “the staff represent the service, and act as the key to its potential” (Webb 1983).

The library staff carries out all sorts of activities, but the main ones are selection of relevant materials according to users' requirements; acquiring materials; organising them for easy retrieval, storing them for easy accessibility, and dissemination of the information. These, together with other administrative and managerial tasks are complex inter-related and inter-dependent activities performed in any library. Some of these tasks require library staff to possess professional qualities such as experience, adequate training and education. Their qualities and quantities are the most important aspects, which would be required for successfully addressing and satisfying the needs of their clients.

TLS realises the importance of this. There has been training at home and abroad. Between 1989 to 1995, for example, TLS sent ten staff each year for further training at the School of Library, Archives, and Documentation Studies in Bagamoyo. With the present economic difficulties it cannot manage to sustain this. Also there has not been a single person sent outside the country for further studies since 1991. The initiative to introduce an undergraduate degree course at OUT is seen as a saviour for library staff and libraries. This problem was exacerbated when skilled personnel left for greener pastures elsewhere. Service points, sections, and departments are more often staffed by members of staff who cannot articulate the needs and problems facing their clients. Reference and reader advisory desks are the main service points affected by this, and as a consequence it has been affecting its clients. The researcher has experience, on many occasions, of reference and reader's advisory desk being staffed by library attendants, untrained library assistants or library assistants who on a number of occasions have failed to satisfy their users due to inadequate professional skills. Of course this problem faces all users of the libraries, but even more so for the OUT students who depend so much on institutions such as public libraries to provide them with advice, services and reading materials. Specifically on the advisory service, for example, many students rated it as inadequate. In Dar es Salaam, despite being near to a number of resources, many students found that their enquiries were not well served due to lack of experience and expertise amongst many staff.

Students and libraries: issues affecting maximum usage

The above analysis has shown the significance of public libraries, and some of the issues that are affecting the OUT students. It must be stated, however, that the OUT students too face a number of limitations or problems that hinder them in utilising library resources effectively and to the maximum.

Cultural influence

Although there is evidence showing an increased number of people opting for print-based culture,

oral tradition is still predominant amongst the African population. Several methods of oral communication have been used over the years by Africans to communicate messages:

“... The griot's chronicle of events, the sage's myths, legends, cosmological ideas and proverbs, the storytellers' folktales and verbal artists' riddles and tongue twisters, are the constituents of people's cultural data...” (Gbadegesin 1997).

The above experience comes from Nigeria, but in fact, the methods identified are typical and common to other African countries. With this tradition many people see print-based materials as alien and incompatible. As a result agents of print materials such as libraries are not used effectively. In the developing world, especially in Africa not many people use public libraries. For example, it has been found that only 7.5% of Gaborone's (Botswana) 120,000 population use public libraries (Mbambo 1989). In Kenya, only 2–3% of the total population uses public library services (Kihara 1986). And specifically in Tanzania it has been observed that:

“... a country with 23 million people, it was found that the number of library service users is between 1–2% of the population. This low percentage of use is accounted for by a library system characterised by poor library facilities in primary schools, secondary schools and most tertiary colleges. The public library service in turn has directed all its services to urban centres and avoided the rural dwellers who make up 80% of the country's population ...” (Mchombu 1986).

Of course, some of the problems such as unawareness of the existence and significance of public libraries amongst the population, lack of resources, lack of foreign exchange, inadequate staff and so on are some of the main reasons for failure to use the libraries. However, quite rightly as indicated by the above contention, most African countries have not yet got rid of the old fashioned colonial culture of providing social services to areas which were seen strategic to them. This explains why public libraries and services, to date, are highly concentrated in urban areas where the minority of the population lives. However, it has been pointed out that “when there is not a great deal to spread around, it is harder to work out how best to distribute it” (Olden 1995).

The students of OUT come from this background where a library is regarded as a place for

academics only, and immediately after one's graduation he/she would not use it again. Moreover, the majority of OUT students live in rural areas. This unequal distribution of public libraries is having a serious impact or drawback to their studies, which depend so much on the public library support. In fact most of the students who live in rural areas are the ones who do not use public libraries at all because they do not have easy access to them. This illuminates the serious effects of lack of provision of public libraries in the rural areas to distance learning students, or in this case the OUT students. However, it must be stated that for the fee students who have easy access to public libraries, the survey found that the distance learning methods are gradually changing some of the students' behaviour by orienting them to the culture of using public libraries and other resources more often.

Distance

The provision of public library facilities in urban centres was deliberate, and as a result it has disadvantages to students in rural and remote areas. One of this is the distance involved between a public library location and other rural areas. A student would be required to travel a long distance to get public library services. This is not a new phenomenon as experiences even in the developed countries such as the UK has shown that the position of a library has an enormous influence on its usage. But as far as a developing country is concerned, two aspects or issues here need to be considered: first, can the students afford to travel to a public library more frequently? second, is it worthwhile doing so? The answer to the first question is that a majority of them would not afford it. Most of the students are teachers and civil servants whose salaries are just enough for keeping them and their families going for a month. With this salary one is likely to find it hard to spend it on travelling expenses at the expense of feeding the family. As for the second question, the answer to it is that a student is more likely to evaluate whether it is worth incurring all the expenses. In other words one is likely to weigh the usefulness of the library services against the expenses he is sacrificing. With problems such as of inadequate supply of textbooks, lack of reference books, and even lack of copies of study

materials one is not likely to visit a public library frequently. A first year BSc student in Ifakara, Morogoro region, for example, stated that he is "spending a lot of money and time going to the city to find some reading materials". This student is in the minority and lucky enough to be able to afford it, but equally significant he is emphasising the fact that one needs to spend a good deal of money and time to access library materials and services. This makes one wonder whether distance education is cheap in the developing world. It was found by the survey that most of the students would pay a visit to a public library only when they happen to be in the town doing other things as well. There were also a few who have maintained that they only use the public libraries when they happen to be having their face-to-face sessions at a regional centre. What is suggested by this finding is that a majority of students living in rural and remote areas do not intentionally plan for a visit to a public library.

Unfamiliarity of the requirements of distance learning

Distance education and conventional education are two different educational methods. While conventional education depends so much on a lecturer, distance education emphasises separation of a lecturer and a student, and student independence.

For most of the OUT students this is their first experience to study at a distance. This is major a shift from their previous conventional studies, at secondary school and tertiary levels. Although they were made aware of the heavy demands of the course, adjusting themselves to this new learning environment takes time and can be hard. This is demonstrated by the results of the fieldwork where many first and second year students were complaining about failure on the part OUT to provide adequate reading materials for them.

Conclusion

The public library ideal was a "people's university". This undoubtedly is so for the distance education students who depend so much upon it. Its planning, strategies and development should be geared towards serving these and other communities. Reaching out is essential. This can only suc-

ceed if public libraries are well resourced and aware of the needs of distance education students. This is the way to ensure that students receive the necessary support for their studies and in the years ahead make their contributions to the development of Tanzania.

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