

THE STATE OF THE PROFESSION: A NATIONAL REPORT OF THE
MALAWI LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (MALA) FOR THE PERIOD 2002
– 2004

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The period between April 2002 (SCECSAL XV) and July, 2004 (SCECSAL XVI) has been a very tumultuous one in Malawi library and information circles. A number of notable professional figures have died, some of the lucky long – serving librarians have retired and new appointments to various top positions have been made. Remarkable strides have been in the acquisition and application of ICT. This paper will highlight what has been achieved following the resolutions of the last SCECSAL as well as developments in the running of MALA as an association and changes which have taken place as a result of deaths, retirements and other vicissitudes.

INDEGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IKS)

Not much has been achieved by way of research and documentation in IKS in the library and information circles. However, in the course of 2003, a conference was held in the Mangochi District of Malawi on sensitizing the Malawi Nation on intellectual property rights (IPR). This author and other librarians were among the participants. Issues of IKS featured highly at the conference and among the resolutions was a fresh call on library and information scientists to take strong interest in the documentation and preservation of IKS. The Conference was hosted by the National Research Council of Malawi, a Government body which works very closely with MALA.

The failure to carry surveys of existing IKS and document it has largely been due to the unavailability of financial and human resources. The former is obvious for it applies to almost every library in the development world. However, the latter needs a little explanation. The high mortality rate among qualified library and information professional and the almost non – existent graduate training opportunities for new recruits has left the few living professionals with an immense task of professional managing (at sometimes) single handedly big library establishments. This leaves such individuals

with very few, if any, opportunity to go beyond daily routines and do research.

TRAINING

The major achievement during the period under review has been the launching of a Diploma in Library and Information Science Programme at Mzuzu University. This programme was launched in August 2003 with its first intake largely drawn from the holders of the MALA Certificate in Library Studies. This long awaited tertiary programme has come as a relief to those who, over the years, have been asking different MALA governments (MALA Executive Committees) the question “After the MALA Certificate Course, what else is there?” Needless to say that the said programme is a brainchild of MALA through its various activities and the championship of some of its veteran members such as Professor Joseph Uta of Mzuzu University. Plans are underway to start a Bachelors degree by the same university.

It is envisaged that with the launching of this diploma course, the sky will be the limit for Malawian librarians and information workers in terms of furthering their professional education.

It is worth mentioning that the MALA Certificate Course which has been running for the past twenty-five years still continues. Every advertisement in newspaper of a new course attracts lots of applications for admission.

ICT SERVICES

MALICO

One of the major events over the past two years was the formation of Library and Information Consortium which is known as the Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO). MALICO was formed in May 2003. Its main objective is to unite librarians and other information centers to work together for the enhancement of delivery of electronic information resources. For illustration, one project which is being championed by MALICO is the acquisition of four V-Sats sponsored by OSISA (Open Society Initiative Southern Africa) through eiFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) to be situated in four different key sites of Malawi to improve internet services. Currently the speed of internet services is hampered by the limited bandwidth allocated to key libraries by their current internet service

providers such as SDNP. MALICO will have a memorandum of understanding with members to meet recurrent cash. It is pleasing to note that the government through Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) has granted 98% discount on Vsat licenses. In addition MALICO has signed three e-licenses and raised limited funds to pay INASP/PERI contribution.

TRAINING IN ICT

There have concerted efforts to enhance ICT literacy in different institutions. Of special mention are those held to promote the utilization of electronic journals. INASP/PERI programme has been the provider of the funds for the hosting of these workshops. One such workshop was held at Chancellor College on Accessing electronic information for Deans of the various faculties of the University of Malawi and Mzuzu University. Since that time there has been an upsurge in the number of both university staff and students who utilize electronic journals.

OBITURIES

The period under review has been one of the saddest ones in the history of MALA as indicated earlier on in this report. Many outstanding personalities have died between SCECSAL XVI and the present time. Of those who were household names at SCECSAL conferences, Steve Mwiyeriwa, University of Malawi Librarian was probably the most well known one. He died on 27th October, 2003 and was laid to rest on 30th October, 2003 at his home, Namitambo in Chiradzulo District. Steve Mwiyeriwa was one of the founding fathers of MALA in 1976 and he served the Association in various capacities. He died while he was one of the ex-officio members of MALA Executive Committee. The other colleague who departed in May 2004 is James Chuma, one of the founders and head of the National Documentation Centre.

RETIREMENT

The year 2003 saw the retirement after long distinguished careers of three prominent Malawian Librarians. They are, Dr Augustine Msiska, College Librarian of Chancellor College, Paul Kanthambi of the Polytechnic in Blantyre and Ralph Masanjika, College Librarian of the College of Medicine in Blantyre. These veterans of SCECSAL have made tremendous

contributions to the library and information profession in Malawi. It should be pointed out that though they have retired, they are all engaged in fruitful ventures, some relating to their beloved profession. Dr Augustine Msiska has been very instrumental in the setting up of the newly launched University of Livingstonia in Northern Malawi. Ralph Masanjika and Paul Kanthambi are serving on contract with the College of Medicine and the Malawi Polytechnic respectively in Blantyre.

NEW MALA EXECUTIVE

The Malawi Library Association elects a new Executive Committee every three years. In line with this tradition, elections were held on 29th February, 2004 at an Annual General Meeting held in the Little Theatre at Chancellor College. The new President of MALA is Geoffrey Salanje, College Librarian of Bunda College who took over from D. B. Vuwa Phiri, College Librarian of Chancellor College. The full line up of the new MALA Executive will appear soon in the MALA Trends Newsletter which is sent to a number of sister library associations in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The library and information profession in Malawi is thriving inspite the many odds highlighted in this report. As the journey into the future continues, every challenge is taken as an opportunity.