

THE STATE OF THE PROFESSION: A NATIONAL REPORT OF THE MALAWI LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (MALA) FOR THE PERIOD 2004 – 2006

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The period between April 2004 (SCECSAL XVI) and July 2006 (SCECSAL XVII) has been a successful one in Malawi library and information circles. A number of achievements have been recorded in the profession in line with the three resolutions passed during the 2004 SCECSAL XVI in Kampala Uganda. Remarkable strides have been in the design and implementation of mother and child project by the National Library Services; drafting of policy and career structure documents for library and information services; and the opening resources centres for HIV and AIDS information in some districts of the country. However, there were some challenges faced during the same period, which this report has also mentioned.

National Library Of Malawi Activities

The National Library Services of Malawi has opened 3 more branch libraries in Nkhotakota, Likoma and Chizumulu Islands and Nkhata-Bay districts in the past two years. During the same period the NLS opened over 300 rural libraries. In a project funded by the National AIDS Commission (NAC), NLS would this year, 2006 establish 12 reading centres in the 12 of the country's 27 districts. These centres are to be stocked with materials on HIV and AIDS information among other information. And in a project funded by NORAD, NLS started a mother and child reading clubs as a pilot phase in the two of its thirteen branch libraries. The project bought relevant reading materials, furniture and introduced story telling to young children. The responses to these two projects have been overwhelming.

Traininig

One the major achievement during the period under review has been the launching of two-degree programmes at Mzuzu University in 2005. These are bachelor's degrees in ICT and Library and Information Science. These programmes follow a diploma programme in library and information studies which the same university launched in 2003 targeting holders of MALA certificate. MALA continued to offer its certificate course, which is becoming more popular and well patronized especially by candidates coming straight from school.

In April 2005 the course's curriculum and syllabi were reviewed at a three days workshop attended by tutors, some former MALA certificate course holders, MALA members, employers, academicians and government officials.

In addition to the bachelor's degrees, University of Malawi will in 2007 start a master's degree in Library and information studies. Plans are already at an advanced stage.

It is envisage that with the launching of these degree programmes, the number of professional personnel will increase. There is an acute shortage of professionals in Malawi resulting from retirements, deaths and others going outside the country to look for greener pastures.

Continuing Education

MALA organized a number of seminars and workshops for its members. Some of these workshops were organized in conjunction with other stakeholders such us Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO), INASP, CTA and AFRIAMSLIC. One of the notable workshops was on Intellectual Property Rights, which was held in August 2005. On this workshop were presentations by officials from Copyright Society of Malawi (COSOMA) and professional librarians.

Library Policy And Career Structure

The country has had no Library policy and a career structure for personnel working in libraries, archives and information services. During the period under review two documents on a policy for libraries, archives and information services; and a career structure for personnel working in these areas were drafted and presented to government for approval. This was an initiative of MALA and National Research Council of Malawi – a government department. Once government approves these documents, they would then be enacted by parliament.

ICT Services

MALICO

The Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO), which was formed in 2003 to coordinate the accessibility of electronic information became fully operational in the period under review. MALICO consolidated its position amongst its 15 member institutions when it successfully acquired and installed four V-SAT equipment in four member-sites, namely Chancellor College, Mzuzu University, Bunda College and College of Medicine. The acquisition and installation of the V-SATs was aimed at increasing the bandwidth so that members are able to access to electronic information effectively and efficiently. MALICO also assists its members in the subscription of e-journals, and in providing training to users on how to access electronic information. For 2006, MALICO subscribed to electronic information for over US\$20,000.

Publications by MALA

The association continues to produce ***MALA Bulletin*** and ***MALA Update***. MALA Bulletin, which contains professional articles from members, comes out annually whilst MALA

Update is produced every three months. MALA with funding from INASP was producing ***MALA Trends*** – a professional newsletter from 2001-2003, but was stopped due lack of funds and adequate articles. All these publications are distributed to its paid-up members for free.

Subscription to Professional Bodies

The Malawi Library Association is almost up to date with its subscription to professional bodies such as IFLA, COMLA and SCECSAL. It has some arrears to pay to IFLA and COMLA.

Challenges

1. Inadequate personnel especially at professional level. This problem might be sorted once the courses at Mzuzu University start producing results.
2. Some libraries are yet to have annual budgets and be funded in real term.
3. Lack of commitment by some members in the activities of the association.

Future Plans

MALA would like to develop its on strategic plan, establish partnership with more stakeholders and strengthen its financial base through engaging in a number of incoming generating activities.

Conclusion

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