

# SERVING THE PUBLIC: AFRICAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND OUTREACH SERVICES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Academic libraries are sources of information and services, which serve not only the academic community but also the general public. The libraries serve as preservers and disseminators of information, adding value to the public as they give access to information through outreach services. As such, public users of different disciplines including farmers, entrepreneurs, professionals, household members, industries and other similar groups in the public are the beneficiaries of the information held in the academic libraries. This paper discusses the issues, challenges and solutions of outreach services provided by the University Library of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) in Nigeria and Sokoine National Agricultural Library – the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania. The paper generally discusses academic library services offered to the non-academic community for the aim of extending access to information resources held in the academic libraries.*

**KEYWORDS:** *outreach services, academic library, library services, Nigeria, Tanzania.*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are centres of resources for learning, teaching and research, primarily set to serve a particular learning community. However, for some reasons, academic libraries have for long extended their services beyond the learning community to give underprivileged communities access to information Kodikara, Seneviratne, and Punchihewa (2013). Outreach services for academic libraries differ based on the definition, purpose and objectives. Some academic libraries consider an outreach programme as an extensive library service offered to the academic community such as faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students to impose close collaborations and increase awareness of library services Currie (2009); Cornell University Library (2016). For the rest of academic libraries, outreach programmes mean serving the general disadvantaged population especially surrounding the campus and remote users to meet the information needs, promote new or under-utilized library services and resources. Generally, academic libraries outreach services aim at marketing library resources, increase partnership and collaborations, participating in special events, community relationships, user education, social responsibility and other associated concepts Salamon (2016); Schneider (2008).

Providing a common definition of outreach for libraries is a challenge, the main point of discord being whether a library outreach programme should be for the general community or the learning community Courtney (2003), as cited in Salamon (2016). For this paper, “outreach services” take account of all library services and programmes directed to the non-academic community who could not have otherwise been exposed to information resources and services held in the academic library as defined by Schneider, Kodikara, Seneviratne, Punchihewa and Salamon.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the library public partnership programmes with the surrounding community and outreach services provided by the two academic libraries namely Sokoine National Agricultural Library (SNAL) - the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania and the University Library, the Federal University of Technology Owerri in Nigeria. Thus, it will discuss different outreach programmes offered and targeted population, benefits, challenges and solutions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses some of the publications and case studies of outreach activities in academic libraries.

Research findings by Graham (2005) showed that inhabitants outside the immediate university community prefer the university to play active roles in their communities like educating the staff of the local public library and a further study by Schneider (2008) discussed important factors that drive academic libraries to serve the public through outreach services and programmes. Outreach services can be determined by the need expressed from outside the academic community demanding access to library resources and services. It can also be influenced by the library's mission and obligation to the community with the need for the library to market its resources, create value to the community and more. Besides, the academic library can develop outreach services in response to a specific community problem or crisis.

A case study of the University of Moratuwa library describes unique outreach services designed to meet the information needs of the community surrounding the campus (Kodikara, Seneviratne, and Punchihewa 2013). The library is running two outreach activities namely "Child Development Programme for kids of Sumudu Pre-School" and "Reading Camp for students of Bodhiraja Vidyalaya". The Child Development Programme is focused on entertaining preschool children, identify and enhance the skills and talents of preschool children and fulfilling the educational information needs of the preschool children by exposing them to modern technology. The Reading Camp for students is determined to support students academically through modern technology, teaching information literacy and building the reading culture among school children.

In the point of view of outreach as services beyond library walls but within the learning community, some of the scholars have reported the activities and benefits to the library and academic community. According to Currie (2009), outreach services provided by academic libraries to first-year students as soon as they report for the first time on the campus contribute to an increase in awareness and the use of library resources and services. The study further explored effective methods of engaging first-year students in outreach for American colleges and universities. These methods include librarians' participation in first years' learning communities to foster regular interactions with students through designing information literacy-focused assignments, embedding library resources in the course management system and participation in online class discussions. Some of the universities have developed a stand-alone course for first-year students focusing on information literacy skills. Other methods are open houses, online library instruction and peer-led programmes. A survey conducted by Dennis (2012) on the outreach services for academic librarians in the US shows that they have a significant impact on the academic community.

For outreach to be successful, adequate time is needed for planning. Fontenot (2013) states that in his five years' experience as an outreach librarian, outreaching on a budget, finding people that can network, tailoring the outreach approach, and teaching and looking for help at all levels are some of the best practices to adopt for success, while Phillips (2011) suggests the application of modern technology into outreach services.

## OUTREACH SERVICES AT SNAL, SOKOINE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE

### Mkulima Library

SNAL is committed to serving the public, particularly the farmers within and outside the country with access to information resources and services. The library has a section called “Mkulima Library”. “Mkulima” is a Swahili language word that means “a farmer”. In Tanzania, the English language is used as a language of instruction in all higher learning institutions. Therefore, the academic libraries information resources and services are highly provided in the English language which becomes a barrier to the majority who uses the native language, Swahili. The section was developed to solve the challenge of the language barrier for information literacy and access to the non-academic community SNAL (2019).

Mkulima library started in 2016 to serve the majority local farming community to access information resources relevant to their farming activities. The library is designed to meet the information needs of farmers through the collection of both physically bound and electronic information resources in the Swahili language. Researchers at the university are encouraged to translate their research findings into Swahili for the library to disseminate and to help farmers put the knowledge into practice for improved farming and animal keeping. Farmers are encouraged to physically visit the library and access resources at Mkulima collection or to remotely access Mkulima electronic resources at <https://www.lib.sua.ac.tz/mkulima/>. The content of materials in the Mkulima library is organised into publications covering single subjects with simple language, which helps farmers to follow instructions and understand the topic of their interest.

Farmers who visit the library are exposed to the use of modern information and communication technologies and information literacy training as groups and individuals. To promote the use of the Mkulima library, SNAL regularly visits different regions to a district level to conduct workshops and seminars based on the needs of the farmers in their respective areas. Furthermore, the library participates in different academic and farmers' conferences to market services and resources of Mkulima library in the country and beyond borders.

All the outreach services to the public are provided free of charge by the university library to give the public access to information services and resources. The knowledge is eventually transforming the lives of individuals as they make informed decisions.

**Table 1: Mkulima Library Statistics**

S/N	ITEM NAME	NUMBER OF TITLES
1	Mkulima Collection – Physical items	
	All subjects (1465 copies)	653
2	Mkulima Collection – Electronic items ( <a href="https://www.lib.sua.ac.tz/mkulima/">https://www.lib.sua.ac.tz/mkulima/</a> )	
	Chakula na Lishe ( <i>Food and Nutrition</i> )	31
	Matumizi bora ya Arthi ( <i>Land Use and Management</i> )	30
	Matumizi bora ya Zana za Kilimo ( <i>Use of Farming Equipment</i> )	06
	Mifugo na Uvuvi ( <i>Animal Keeping and Fishing</i> )	81
	Misitu na Nyuki ( <i>Forest and Beekeeping</i> )	22
	Usindikaji na Masoko ( <i>Food Preservation and Marketing</i> )	37
	Uzalishaji Mazao ( <i>Crop Production</i> )	275

### **School reading competition**

Literature has constantly reported on the poor reading culture in Africa and many other developing countries including Tanzania (Wema 2018). In response to this problem, SNAL through its outreach services participates in the school reading competition to build the reading culture among primary and secondary school students in Morogoro municipality. In collaboration with other education stakeholders in the municipality, SNAL is among the sponsors of the so-called “*Saffepa Book Reading Competition*” conducted every year.

The *Saffepa book reading competition* involves all primary school students in Morogoro municipality. About 30 schools both private and government participate in this competition every year. The competition also involves parents, teachers and the general community participation, especially in the closing day ceremony. SNAL as a sponsor is involved in the provision of reading materials both printed and electronic to all the participating schools. It also awards free reading materials to the five best schools on the closing day event.

Teachers and parents have reported on the significant impact of the *Saffepa book reading competition*. Students have built strong relationships with reading materials especially books, and they have raised their level of confidence in reading, particularly in massive audiences. Furthermore, the event creates a good relationship between the academic library and primary schools surrounding the university. SNAL also uses the opportunity of the *Saffepa book reading competition* closing day event to market the Mkulima library to parents, teachers and the general public audience attending the event. Library staff conducts training especially mobile access to electronic materials in the Mkulima collection as many farmers don't like visiting academic libraries.

### **University and national exhibitions**

SNAL is actively involved in exhibitions identified by the university and the national calendar, which involves academic matters, industrial business and farmers' activities. Edward Moringe Sokoine Memorial Exhibition is one of the formal exhibitions in the university calendar, which is organised every year at the university premises inviting industries, businesses, farmers, individuals, government sectors and all agricultural stakeholders. The exhibition normally takes place for a week and closes on 12 April, the day of the tragic accident which claimed the life of the then Prime Minister of Tanzania, Edward Moringe Sokoine. National exhibitions that involve the active participation of SNAL include “*Saba Saba Exhibitions*” which is meant for trade activities, “*Nane Nane Exhibitions*” meant for farmers and the Tanzania Commission for Universities Exhibitions.

Outreach services provided in these exhibitions include marketing of library services and resources, particularly the farming community, information literacy training especially training farmers in accessing electronic information using their handheld devices and consultancy services on general activities of the library and university. Pre-university students normally approach the library desks to seek information that supports their learning and the courses offered by the university and directorate of library services.

## **OUTREACH SERVICES AT FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY OWERRI LIBRARY**

Scholars believe that outreaches are more effective when linked to the goals of the institution to help in staff, budget and time allocation, while Zitron (2013) outlines the activities that can help to plan an outreach that is based on achieving the institution's mission and goals, whereas Bishoff et al. (2015) show how the environment of the institution impacts on the types of outreaches chosen.

The activities of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Nigeria library is basically to support the university in the realisation of its vision and mission. The outreach services likewise started, as a means to meet the University's Corporate Social Responsibility and the “*Town and Gown*” relationship to its host communities. The university is situated on a large piece of land taken from eleven (11) host communities. The

acquisition of this land from agrarian communities generated a lot of controversies between the university and these communities. The areas of controversies border on boundary renegotiation, admission of host communities' indigenes into the university, employment, and contract award, security issues, etc.

It is in line to remedy this situation that the sixth substantive Vice-chancellor of FUTO, Prof. Chigozie C. Asiabaka in pursuance of his vision aimed for FUTO viz: To re-position FUTO to be a top-ranked first-class institution of excellence in technological knowledge production and dissemination, through teaching, research and service to humankind Asiabaka (2011). As encapsulated in his "Quest for Excellence", he created the office of Host Communities Relations Committee in 2011. The Host Communities Relations Committee is to serve as a liaison between the University and the host communities, ensuring good rapport between the two parties.

The Committee, which has a librarian as the head, is to seek ways the host communities can benefit from the programmes of the university, bearing in mind the corporate social responsibility and "Town and Gown" commitments of the university to its host communities. It is through the Host Communities Relations Committee that the university library has pursued its outreach programmes.

### **Corporate social responsibility**

There is a growing interest in the social responsibility of corporations amongst their stakeholders and society in general. Organisations do not operate in a vacuum, thus their activities impact their surroundings which include their stakeholders, society, and other influenced parties.

All humans have moral obligations to preserve the environment and there is no excuse for doing nothing to improve the environmental state of the globe. This also applies to institutions of higher education Christensen et al. (2009).

However, with growing attention and focus on university world rankings, more and more universities are settling their key performance indicators (KPIs) on the number of publications, the number of postgraduate students, etc., without sufficient focus on the applicability of the proposed research and whether or not it will be of any help to the bottom billion.

In Nigeria, most universities are located in rural communities and they are expected to bring about the development of these communities. Universities have the moral obligation to contribute to the development of their host communities.

This was succinctly put by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria, Prof. Joseph Ajiinka, who while speaking about his university's Host Community asked; "This is an agrarian community, when you take land from them, what do you give them in return, what new occupation do you give to them" Asiabaka (2011).

### **Town and gown relation**

Historically, the Town and Gown is used to portray two distinct communities in a "university town". While the town represents the host community or the non-academic population, the "gown" represents the university community Omeire (2010). Babalola (2010) has summarized the purpose of university education in Nigeria as teaching, research and public service commitment. Omeire (2010) supported public service commitment by stating that universities cannot escape the inevitable fact of being part of a local community and supporting the community's growth. Thus the higher education's locus of power is the determination of what role if any, they will play in their community.

Until recently, social issues and the engagement of the local community were hardly priorities for higher educational institutions. They had to remain on the cutting edge of research and development to be competitive in an ever increasingly demanding market-place for prospective students.

This perception, combined with the universities' penchant for making unilateral decisions without community consultation, make the relationship between the two entities discordant. On the other hand, people in the higher educational institutions may feel that the townspeople exhibit antagonism, do not appreciate their effort to educate the populace, frequently do not support them, and do not offer students and faculty special services.

Florida (2006) has argued that universities are widely recognised as beneficial to society and their host cities. Florida (2006) asserts that the most successful metropolitan areas of the United States in the 1990s were, without exception, those that had strong universities. Florida (2006) further indicates that the teaching and research missions of universities are widely accepted and admired by the public, and most people want their children to go to college and earn a degree. However, recent studies on town-gown relationships suggest that universities and host communities still experience difficulties while trying to understand each other. A possible cause of such difficulties is the fact that they perceive each other in different ways and terms Omeire (2009); Onwunari (2010).

### ***Using library outreach to solve the information needs of FUTO host communities***

The concept of rural information services stems from the idea that information is a human right owed as much to the poor, illiterate, isolated and neglected rural dweller, as well as the rich, well educated, endowed and privileged people of the urban elite. Access to information is vital for rural people in maintaining active and independent lives. Okiy (2003, 128) asserts that "rural development is a basis for economic development and information is an important ingredient in the development process".

It is the responsibility of outreach librarians to engage and educate individuals and groups on the importance of the library and the services the library offers, explain how librarians can assist them physically or virtually and emphasise why they have to come to the library, rather than waiting for these people to come to the library on their own Fontenot (2013); Potter (2012) and for years academic libraries have engaged in outreach services which have been accepted as their social responsibilities to the communities Salamon (2016).

In the university-host communities' relation, effective communication is very crucial for understanding, peace, cooperation and mutual development of the university and the host communities. Formal meetings are encouraged to identify problems and challenges, discuss expectations and develop professional relationships. The relationship between universities and communities would be positively enhanced if there existed a well-established channel of communication and information services between the parties. In using such medium, university policies that affect host communities (e.g. employment, contracts, admission, land acquisition, use of the university's library, health, and bank facilities, etc.) are explained. This is where the role of the librarian becomes very valuable. In the case of FUTO, even though the outreach was championed by librarians, it made use of professionals from different units/departments of the university, e.g. School of Agriculture, Directorate of General Studies, Health Services, Guidance and Counseling Unit, etc. as the need arises. The information needs of FUTO Host Communities addressed through library outreach are as follows:

- **Land issue:** One of the critical issues in the university/Host community relationship in Nigeria is land matters. For a university to be established, a minimum land area of 1000 hectares is required by the National Universities Commission (NUC) standard (Omeire 2010). In the case of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Nigeria, an enormous landmass of 4,580.88 hectares Imo State of Nigeria official gazette, Owerri (1982) was acquired. Considering the large expanse of land acquired to establish FUTO in a densely populated agrarian area, many kindred and families lost their farming lands to the university. There were also complaints of lack of compensation or incomplete

payment. This generated a lot of tension between the university and its host communities. The Host Communities Relations Committee led by a librarian had a series of town hall meetings with the different communities where adequate information on the land used, the process of land acquisition, payment of compensation and process of getting some part of their land back if possible were provided. This was done in conjunction with the University Physical Planning Unit who provided the actual details of the landmass and the acquisition processes. The introduction of the use of the university library and the benefit accruable was always a focal point in the town hall meeting. The communities were requested to check the original university map available in the library.

- **Agricultural extension services:** The FUTO host community is agrarian and needs information concerning treated seed/improved varieties, soil conservation, prevention of plant and animal diseases, weather forecast, farm machinery, recommended thinning practices, fertilizer applications, proper storage of farm products, marketing techniques, cooperative activities and other agro-cultural processes. The university library in conjunction with the School (Faculty) of Agriculture and Agricultural Technology (SAAT) organises training workshops on the above-stated areas as the need arises. The University has a well-developed school of agriculture with seven (7) departments and a good collection of agricultural books and journals in both print and non-print formats in the university library. The School (Faculty) of Agriculture and Agricultural Technology (SAAT) also has a well-equipped school (faculty) library.

To facilitate attendance, the university sometimes provides a vehicle to go to the various communities to bring participants. These communities are not into commercial farming but subsistence agriculture. They harvest their crops little by little to feed their families. They, therefore, require special varieties of seeds that can suit their soil and last long without getting spoilt. At the end of the training workshop, new improved varieties suitable for their purpose are distributed to them to go and experiment. A team from the School of Agriculture follows up with the farmers to monitor how they implement ideas from the training. In this training, the main role of the librarian is in creating awareness, coordination and drawing attention to the rich collections of agricultural literature to the participants. To enhance understanding and subsequent application of the workshop fallouts, the training is usually facilitated using the Igbo language, which is the local language of the people.

## **IMPACT OF THE OUTREACH SERVICES**

Many significant testimonies have been given by the farmers on the impact of the Mkulima library in their farming activities. Generally, farmers who have access to information resources and services provided by SNAL have reported changing their old local farming methods to modern agriculture through the knowledge provided in the materials collection. The farmers have also been the good marketers of the Mkulima library to their colleagues to access knowledge for modern agriculture for increased agricultural production.

Exhibitions have been important platforms to attract more public members to visit the library and remotely access electronic resources offered by SNAL. Mkulima library gets around 150 visitors in the physical collections and 1014 every month in the electronic collections. Serving the public with access to information contributes to the attainment of sustainable development goals of quality education and zero hunger due to improved farming. All the outreach services offered at SNAL are important in building an information and knowledge society.

Appreciable impacts have been recorded in all the FUTO library outreaches to varying degrees. The number of visitors from the host communities who patronize the university library has increased but the number is still significantly low compared to the population of the host communities. The issue of university land encroachment by the members of the host communities has reduced significantly. A committee known as

FUTO Original Land Owners has been set up among the host communities who are now liaising with the Federal Ministry of Land for possible boundary adjustment.

There have also been reported improvements in the yields of crops in the host communities following the use of improved seedlings and agricultural practices as evidenced by the agricultural specialist who followed up the projects. This has gone a long way in enhancing the relationship between the university and the host communities.

Many youths from the host communities are now being admitted to study in the university both on merit and catchment area quota after meeting the due requirements. Between 2011/2012, 2012/2013, and 2013/2014, over two hundred candidates from the host communities were offered admission to study at FUTO. An appreciable number of qualified youths from the host communities have also been given employment at FUTO after following due processes. This has practically stopped the regular demonstrations and disruptions of academic activities in the university by the youths.

The secondary schools that received book donations have continued to appreciate the library for the kind gesture as they testify that the books have been of immense help to their students.

## **CHALLENGES OF OUTREACH SERVICES**

Outreach services for academic libraries require resources such as time, staff, and funding Salamon (2016); Kodikara, Seneviratne, and Punchihewa (2013). One of the challenges faced by both SNAL and the university library at FUTO is its outreach programmes in finance. Little support from the parent institution (Sokoine University of Agriculture) has enabled successful outreach services currently provided at SNAL. The university library FUTO has been able to partially solve this problem by liaising with other units/departments in the university. However, due to limited resources, particularly financial support, SNAL and the university library, FUTO has not achieved their full potential to effectively market and take information services to the public. More resources are needed for African academic libraries to attain the mandate of serving the general public.

Outreach at SNAL is focused on ordinary public individuals particularly farmers with minimum knowledge of reading and writing in the Swahili language. Unfortunately, there are still many individuals in the country who cannot read in Swahili due to the high level of illiteracy Nkunguu (2014); Msanjila (2005). It has been a barrier for information access to the target population of the SNAL outreach services such as Mkulima library.

Access to electronic information resources requires basic skills in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the use of computer and mobile devices; and access to internet services. The target population of Mkulima library is farmers who largely live in rural areas where some factors include lack of electricity, poor internet access, lack of access to ICT facilities and lack of information literacy skills are major issues.

The agricultural extension services have the added problem of follow up. This cannot be done by the library alone without the cooperation of the School (Faculty) of Agriculture and Agricultural Technology. Sometimes, the relevant staff from this school may not be readily available thereby making monitoring of progress and reporting difficult.

Most of the beneficiaries of the outreach programmes are old men and women who cannot read and write in the English language. This makes the usage of the library and the reading of articles almost impossible.

The outreach also faced credibility questions as a good number of the members of the host communities viewed the actions as a way of invading offering admissions, jobs and contracts to the indigenes.



## CONCLUSION

Academic libraries are part of the general community; thus they have a role to play to improve life through the provision of information services to the public. Serving the public promotes the effective use of resources held by universities and builds strong relationships for the development of the general community. Outreach services also allow academic institutions to put research output into practice. However, the services should be well designed based on the particular needs and context of the community. From these two case studies, outreach services are offered under minimal resources of the academic libraries. Therefore, African academic libraries should be empowered with more resources such as staff, finance and time to improve outreach programmes, which influences community development.

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