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## The library: heart of a university

Right at the heart of the university's main campus and the central focus of its teaching is the Gandhi Library, which is not only the administrative headquarters of the library system but also the library for the main campus of the university.

No university can function without a library to provide the books, periodicals, microfilms, maps and other research materials necessary to back up its activities. Although the Gandhi library owns the largest collection of books in Kenya, its stock, estimated at 120,000 volumes, seems insignificant when compared with some of the giant libraries in Russia, the U.S. or Britain, where stocks run into millions of volumes occupying miles of shelving.

No teacher or research worker can carry out his task without reference to the printed word at some stage (after all, one does **read** for a degree) and nowadays the volume of publishing is so great that one would need almost to be a millionaire to afford all the books relevant to one's work and interests. Not only are books expensive to buy, they also occupy a lot of space; so most people prefer to acquire only the books most relevant to their personal use and leave their other requirements to be provided by the library.

The primary function of the university library system is to provide the books which are needed by the staff and students in order to help them carry out their studies, teaching and research.

The growth of the University of Nairobi in recent years has meant that the main campus has become too small to contain all the activities of those who live and work there: the vets and agriculturalists need a farm on which to learn the practical aspects of their studies and budding doctors need a hospital with a ready supply of patients. Around the farm and the hospital have grown separate campuses to house and otherwise cater for those who study there.

The library too reaches out to these students by providing campus libraries containing the necessary materials needed for studies. We now have five sub-libraries at Kabete, Chiromo, the Adult Studies Centre at Kikuyu, the Kenyatta National Hospital and the new Education Library on the main campus which is to become Kenya's national library in this subject area.

To an average user a library can be rather overwhelming at first sight. Rows and rows of books have bewildering numbers and letters written on them which the librarians describe as call numbers; then the staff themselves all look so busy that a shy person would hesitate to disturb them with such a simple query as: where do I find the geography books?

In the case of university students, of course, a knowledge of the way in which the library is arranged and how to use it to the maximum benefit is essential if any intelligent use is to be made of its resources. Busy though the library staff may be they will be pleased to give an explanation of this kind in the hope of encouraging users to make the fullest possible use of the facilities available.

In this university library most of the stock is on open access. This means that users are allowed to go to the shelves and look through the books for themselves and select those they wish to use. The idea of open access was introduced into libraries only at the beginning of this century; before that books were kept under guard (sometimes even chained to tables) and users had to check the book they wanted in the catalogue, fill in a request slip and the book was fetched by a member of staff.

In many university libraries closed shelves are still provided, requiring users to ask staff to fetch the books they need and there are many advantages to this system in that books are not easily stolen and they do not become disarranged to the same extent. On the other hand, closed access gives no opportunity for browsing among the books. This is the only way in which one can fully appreciate the wealth of knowledge contained in them.

At present the only parts of the Nairobi University library stock which are closed to general use are the Africana and Reserve Collections. In both cases users request the items they want which are supplied against deposit of a membership card. These restrictions are necessary to prevent loss or theft of materials which are particularly expensive or may be irreplaceable. During the past two years alone more than £200,000 has been spent on building up the stock of the library, making it the most valuable and expensive piece of research equipment in the university.

In common with most open access libraries, this library needs to have its stock arranged in such a way that books on similar subjects are brought together so far as possible. This process is called classification. Up to 1967 the library was classified by an arrangement designed for scientific and technical libraries known as the Universal Decimal Classification.

The remnants of stock left in this classification can be found on the second level of the Gandhi Library. Since 1967 the library has been changing the classification to a new arrangement: the Library of Congress Classification. This is a more complex system in some ways and many people are confused by the combinations of letters and numbers written on the spines of the books. These are **call numbers** and fulfil a very useful purpose, for not only do they guide the user to the correct place on the shelf where the book may be found and identify one particular book from another but to those who become familiar with the numbers they also indicate the subject content of the book.

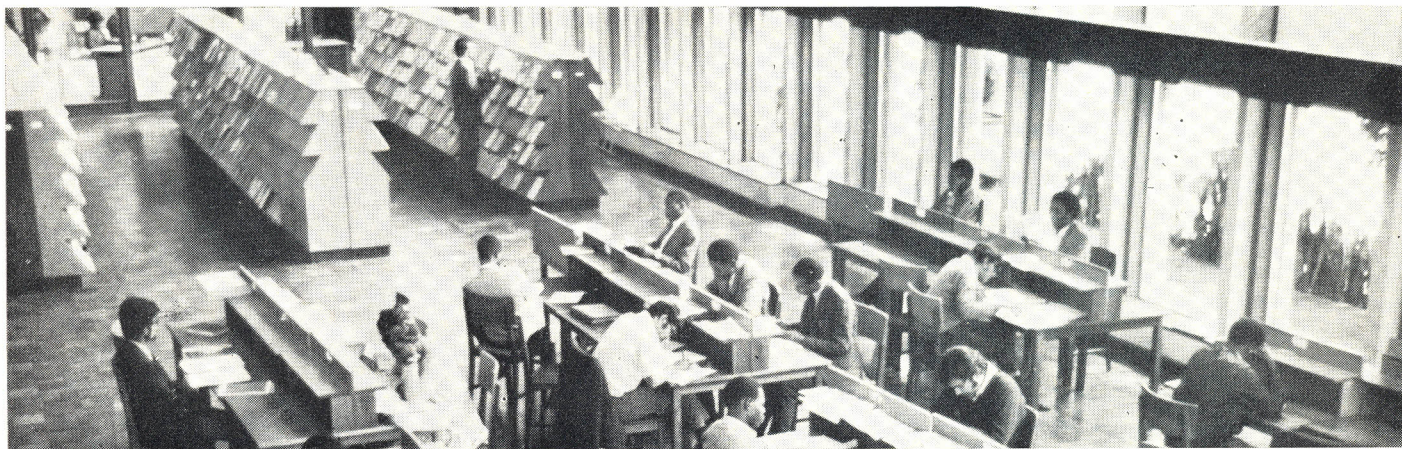
Those who think that these numbers are unnecessarily complex should remember that modern knowledge is also complex and that the arrangement of such knowledge in written form requires sophisticated techniques to handle it. In the United States and other Western countries experiments are being carried out using computers in libraries in an attempt to handle the volume of research material which is published and with which traditional methods are unable to cope.

Meanwhile, here in Nairobi, we continue with the traditional methods, using such aids as are at our disposal and our hard pressed cataloguing section not only processes all new stock but is also making great inroads into the transfer of stock from the "old" classification to the new one. It will be a happy day for us all when the transfer is complete.

As well as classifying the library books, the cataloguing section also does the cataloguing of stock. The library catalogue lists all the books which are available in the library and where they can be found. Because the stock of a library is continually changing, with new items arriving and old ones being discarded, this list is made in the form of cards which can be interfiled or removed without disturbing the sequence of the rest. To find a book in the library it is necessary to know one of three things about it: what it is called, who wrote it or what it is about. With any or all of these items of information it is usually fairly simple to find the card in the catalogue which describes the book wanted.

The cataloguing section makes a card for each book under the name of the person who wrote it, its title and its subject in the anticipation of a search under any of these aspects. Even so, there are times when a book does prove difficult to trace for some reason. Government publications and those of international organisations such as the United Nations are notoriously difficult to identify in many cases and for this reason many libraries set up documents collections separate from the rest of the stock with specialist staff in charge.





The author of a work is not always easy to identify: sometimes several people collaborate to write a book — do we make an author card for each one? Who is the author of the Bible or the Talmud or this Bulletin? This type of query can pose problems both for cataloguers and the users of the library and when meeting a difficulty like this the solution is to ask for help from the library staff who are skilled at dealing with such matters.

Not all the materials in the library are books. Our holdings include a large intake of current periodicals and the back files of these (a valuable source of reference) take up most of the ground floor, maps, microfilms and even a few gramophone records. In recent years books have ceased to be the major format in which knowledge is stored and increased use is being made these days of these other forms especially microfilm and other forms of micro-reproduction.

These microforms as they are called have two major advantages over normal book form: they are much more compact to store and this means valuable savings in space where library stocks are expanding more quickly than the buildings which accommodate them; also they provide a way of obtaining materials long out of print as the making of a microform reproduction is only a fraction of the cost of publish-

ing by conventional methods. They are particularly useful in obtaining back runs of journals and items such as university theses — a valuable source of research material not usually available in any other way. With the introduction of several new courses in recent years the library has been busily acquiring such source materials and the loan of £100,000 from the British Government for the purchase of such materials has given us the chance to buy many basic materials which have long been needed.

The library is an expensive asset — expensive to stock and expensive to operate. To house a library that will give adequate service to its users, large, purpose-built accommodation is needed — sufficient to contain the stock, the number of readers likely to use it at any one time in reasonable comfort and with the layout of the various departments reflecting the flow of work to give maximum efficiency.

At present-day costs the starting price for such a building is around £2 million. In addition properly designed furniture and equipment such as reading desks and chairs, microfilm readers, photographic and binding machinery are necessary. Shelving needs to be strong enough to carry the tremendous weight of books — one of the heaviest of commodities. (Anyone who doubts this statement is invited to carry an armful of periodicals up three flights of stairs.)



But perhaps the most expensive item of all is the staff. In the current year we have an establishment of over 80 staff working in the library, of whom more than 60 are directly engaged in library work of some kind. The remainder are clerical staff, photographers, binders and cleaners.

The primary function of any library and its staff is to acquire and to make available the materials required for its clientele. Librarianship is a mixture of academic, administrative and vocational work which can provide the most satisfying of careers to those who enjoy such a mixture, offering the chance to meet people, help with their problems and give guidance where needed.

In the public areas of the library we need staff with good personalities, even tempers, flexible minds, a gift for accuracy and tons of patience. The people who deal with the library users are those who can make or break the reputation of an individual library, who have the fun of direct contact with users, learn of their interests and where they need help, of tracking down obscure information and the satisfaction of finding it — sometimes.

On the other hand there is a place for the person who prefers a life behind the scenes working on the preparation of book orders or classifying and cataloguing incoming stock where a good memory and a passion for order and detail are essential. Many jobs in the library require special skills and qualifications and suitable staff are in short supply. A top cataloguer can command a good salary almost anywhere in the world, so can librarians who are prepared to specialise in certain subject fields such as law, medicine, and Africana.

Of course, not all librarians are high level specialists and it is sometimes more interesting to have gained experience at several different aspects of this fascinating profession and acquire the ability to fit into a variety of different jobs and to meet the challenge they offer. As with many other jobs, librarianship has its dull and routine aspects: records must be kept — all kinds of records: books on loan,

books on order, decisions made by cataloguers on various types of catalogue headings. All this can be very boring to some people.

There are also unpleasant aspects such as dealing with the enforcement of library regulations in the face of rudeness and unreasonable behaviour of those who should know better and fending off demands for preferential treatment for those who have failed to write essays on time and want to take reserved books away against the regulations.

Regulations are always a nuisance to those who want to break them but, as in other cases, they are made to govern the daily routines of a large organisation and attempt to ensure that all users are treated equally within their membership category. The person responsible for the smooth running of the library is the Librarian who answers to the library committee for his actions. He runs the library on behalf of the committee which directs policy, makes regulations and gives such advice and guidance as the Librarian requires in the interest of offering the best service possible with the available resources.

Money is always a problem. With it the library can afford to pay good staff, purchase what is needed to back up the work of the university and develop its service to the fullest extent. In comparison with many universities in developing countries we are comparatively well off and for a young organisation we can show modest but steady advances. When we look at the great overseas universities with their centuries of book acquisitions, however, we realise that we are only beginning to fulfil the requirements of a university library in size, range and variety of stock. We still have a long way to go for our first million books.