

# Equity of access to library and information services and education support at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality: the case of King William's Town, South Africa

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*Access to library and information services is a major element in the growth, stability, independence and empowerment of communities. The study sought to investigate the equity of access to library and information services and education support at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, King William's Town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were employed in a descriptive survey. The main research instrument was a questionnaire, supported by face-to-face interviews with librarians. A total of 297 questionnaires were distributed and 200 were returned, giving a response rate of 67.3%. The quantitative data, which were collected through questionnaires, is presented using graphs and tables, while the content of the qualitative data was analysed manually using the notes that were taken by the researcher from the respondents during the interview sessions and, in some instances, is reported verbatim. The findings showed that most respondents, 130 (56%), use the library for schooling. Only thirteen (5.6%) respondents said they used the library for leisure, while fifty-two (22.4%) respondents used the library for personal development and thirty-seven (15.9%) for work-related activities. In addition, findings of the study revealed that the Buffalo City Metro public libraries had a diversity of users, ranging from different age groups and social standing. Additionally, Buffalo City Metropolitan public library users had little knowledge about literacy programmes that were taking place at the library. The study concluded that Buffalo City public libraries should create an integrated system for all libraries in the metropolitan municipality that encourages adult literacy programmes to raise awareness of information literacy.*

**Keywords:** Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), equity, information literacy, library and information services, public libraries

## 1 Introduction

Several scholars are of the opinion that public libraries play a pivotal role in the improvement of the quality of life of citizens in all countries of the world (Gould & Gomez 2010, Vakkari & Serola 2012). Davis (2009) opined that public libraries enhance quality of life, promote educational development, enhance moral values, eradicate illiteracy, ameliorate poverty and promote societal democracy. They serve as a driving force for cultural, educational, and information development. Further, librarians play a prominent role geared towards informing, developing, empowering and educating societies (Fourie & Meyer 2016). Nkondo et al. (2014: 53) stated that a public library is "an essential component of a modern democracy, an enduring agency uniquely tasked with providing opportunities for education, culture, literacy and information provision to reach all citizens free of charge". Furthermore, the essential role of libraries and librarians encompasses informing, educating, entertaining, equipping, empowering and enlightening individuals and society for lifelong learning for the purpose of knowing their rights and responsibilities in their communities, and thereby fulfilling their social roles (Ocholla & Ocholla 2007).

According to Mathiesen (2015), library and information services should be equally, equitably and readily accessible to all library users. Libraries and librarians should not deny access to information resources and services on account of contentious content or due to the librarian's personal views (Kuah & Wong 2011, Drake & Bielefield 2017). Hence, library information resources and services should be constitutionally protected, except if perceived otherwise by a court with appropriate jurisdiction (Lucchi 2011). Imoro, (2017) opined that that libraries must enhance access to information on all topics relevant to the needs, interests or wellbeing of users, irrespective of the content of the material or the user's age.

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Libraries and librarians should not limit information access exclusively on grounds that the information is considered to be lacking in value (Morrissey, 2012). According to Magnum, (2012), in order to avoid information loss and preserve cultural records, libraries may be required to expand selection or collection development policies in order to promote preservation in appropriate formats, most especially information in digital form.

## 2 History of South African public libraries

According to Keswell (2004) and Mnkeni-Saurombe and Zimu (2015), the South African Public Library (which is currently the National Library of South Africa) was established in Cape Town in 1818, with its main mission centred on education and the youth. South African libraries developed from being private reading organisations to government-subsidised private and public subscription services (Satgoor 2015). Despite the fact that such developments were influenced by laws of segregation, with separate facilities and training for different races, Satgoor (2015) concedes that libraries played an all-important role in the actualisation of South Africa's liberation and national life. According to the National Library of South Africa (2014: 5), the Department of Arts and Culture (the custodian of the community library grant) allocated R1.8 billion for the development of libraries for the 2014–2015 financial period, and to date has seen provinces establish fifty-three new national libraries and upgrade 229 others and appointed about 1,575 new staff members in public libraries across the country.

## 3 Access to library and information services

Access to library and information services is a major element in the growth, stability, independence and empowerment of communities. The theory of access, as postulated by Ribot and Peluso (2003), pronounced that 'access' refers to the propensity to derive benefits from things, such as persons, objects, materials, symbols and institutions (in the case of this study, from public libraries), and it can be premeditated or unpremeditated. Ribot and Peluso (2003: 154) further elucidated that "people and institutions are positioned differently in relation to resources at various historical moments and geographical scales". They cautioned that there are diverse mechanisms, processes and social relations which enable access (Kulenovic 2011). These change, however, as times change and thus the nature of power and forms of access are affected (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 154). In this case, their definition of access is more like a "bundle of powers" rather than of rights (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 173). For example, according to them, "political-economic circumstances change the terms of access and may therefore change the specific individuals or groups most able to benefit from a set of resources" (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 158). They further explained that due to political-economic platforms, access control and access maintenance are applied in order to mediate, check, regulate and direct access (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 160). Similarly, when users access information, they consume it and it transforms their thinking and their decision-making, among other things. Users may transfer information to or share it with other people. For libraries to facilitate access to information services, and be effective tools for empowering communities, we need to be aware of the realities of the public library context. This study was borne out of the need to enhance equity and access to library and information services and educational support. The aim of this study and the research questions are stated below.

## 4 The aim of study

The aim of this study is to investigate the equity of access to library and information services and education support at Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) in King William's Town, Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The specific objectives were:

- To find out how public libraries in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality ensure equity of library and information services provision to the user communities.
- To find out how public libraries in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality support education and lifelong learning.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do public libraries in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality ensure equity of library and information services provision to the user communities?
- How do public libraries in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality support education and lifelong learning?

## 5 Research methodology

The study used both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. A descriptive survey research design was used to collect quantitative data with the use of a questionnaire, and qualitative data were collected using interviews. The population for this study consisted of public library users and the librarians of the King William's Town public libraries in the

BCMM, namely, Schornville, Berlin and King William's Town . Both probability and non-probability sampling were used, which led to the use of a systematic random sampling technique and purposive sampling respectively. The population size of the study was 1,303 and sample size, 297. A total of 297 questionnaires were thus distributed and 200 were retrieved, giving a response rate of 67.3%. Descriptive statistical analysis was used for the quantitative data using the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS). Inferential statistics were also used, and generalisations were made about the study population. Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data obtained from face-to-face interviews with two librarians.

## 6 Results and findings

The results cover biographical information of study participants and findings about their access to library and information services.

### 6.1 Biographical details

This first section of the questionnaire collected biographical information on the respondents. Participants were asked to indicate their gender as reflected in Figure 1 and their age, as seen in Figure 2.

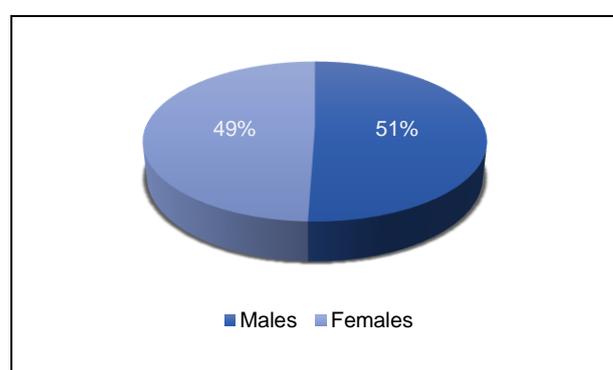


Figure 1 Gender of respondents (n=186)

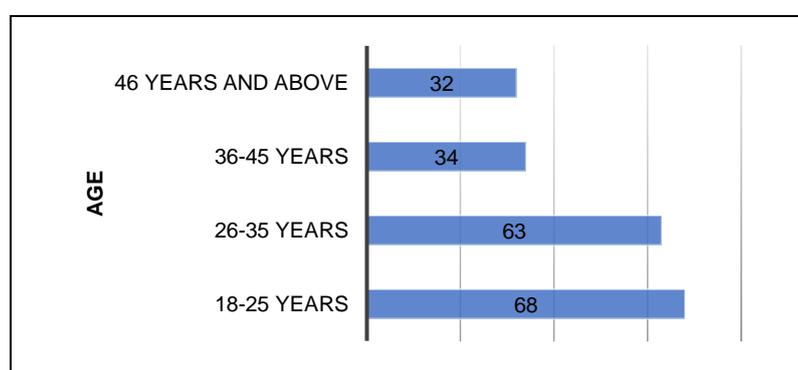


Figure 2 Age of respondents (n=186)

As revealed in Figure 1, ninety-two (49%) of the respondents were females and ninety-four (51%) were males. This may imply that more males than females made use of the library. The study constituted a fair mixture of respondents, with male users representing 1% more than the females. This is deemed to have reduced the chances of bias in the study as, according to the social justice and inclusion theory, there should be equal access to information services regardless of gender (Pliner & Johnson 2004). Public libraries serve the community irrespective of race, age, gender, language, region and educational attainment (Srikanth 2017), as shown by the diverse users in the BCMM libraries. This equity is in line with the National Department of Arts and Culture which operates with the guidance of the South African Public Library and Information Services Bill of 2012 that is aimed at ensuring consistency in the delivery of library and information services in the country (Paton-Ash, 2013). The Bill is aimed at putting measures in place to redress inequalities in the provision of public library and information services. In the current study, findings indicated that the majority of the users were between the ages of 18 to 25 years (Figure 2). These findings indicate that the public libraries in the BCMM attracted young adults. As stipulated by Rubin (2010), public libraries, by nature, are concerned with early and adult literacy. In addition, the findings corroborated a study that was done in Zimbabwe which found that public libraries act as an extension of the school library or the educational curriculum, as the highest number of users were youths (Musingafi & Chiwanza 2012); students tend to make greater use of the public library on a daily basis.

### 6.2 Employment status of respondents

The employment status of respondents showed that seventy-nine (39.5%) of the respondents were employed, while seventy-four (37%) were at school and forty-two (21%) were unemployed. The rest, four (2%), were pensioners. Figure 3 illustrates the findings.

### 6.3 Equity of access

This section answers the question of how the selected public libraries in BCMM ensured equity of library and information services provision to the user communities. As shown in Figure 4, 181 (91%) of the respondents agreed that they had equal access to library resources and services, while eighteen (9%) respondents stated that they did not have equal access to library resources and services. Interviews were conducted with two librarians who reported the following views:

Librarian 1: *We maintain the Dewey classification so that services and resources will be accessible. We treat every member equally to uplift the standard of the community.*

Librarian 2: *Unfortunately, we do not have rooms for disabled users, but we do have easy access for our users.*

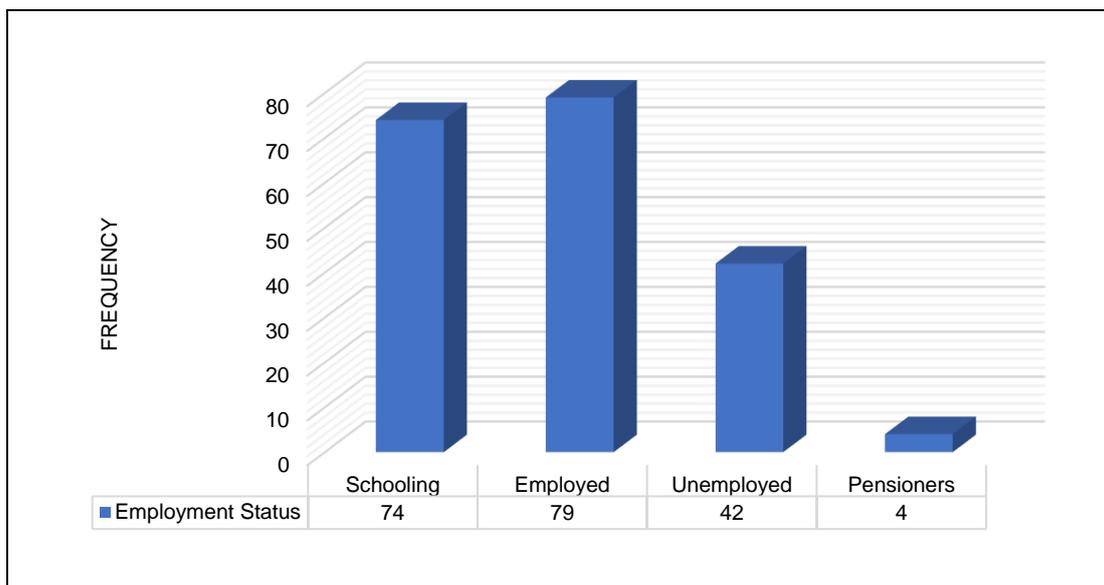


Figure 3: Employment status of respondents (n=199)

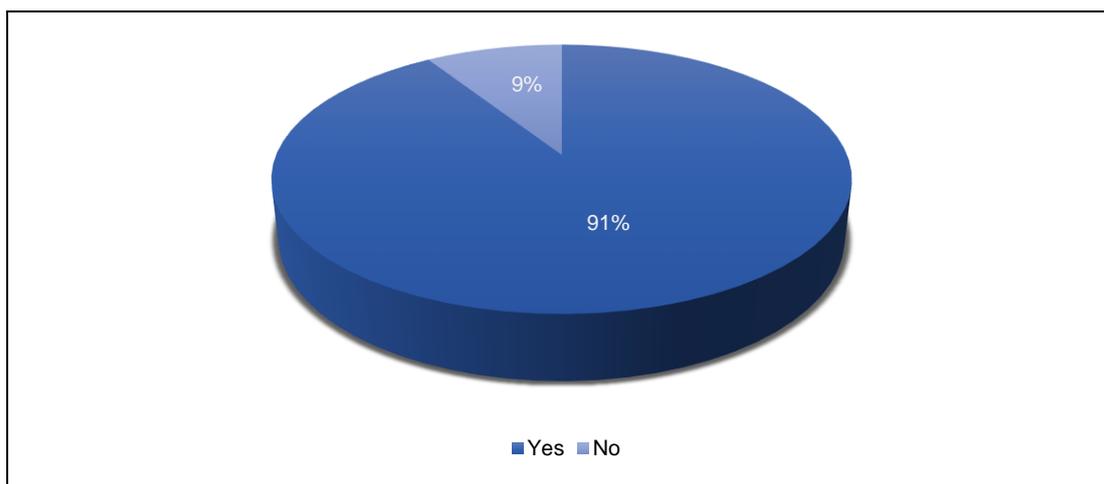


Figure 4 Equity of access to library resources and services (n=199)

Public libraries and information services should be available and accessible to everyone. To help to realise this goal, libraries should provide services to specific groups of citizens, such as older people and people with disabilities, to help them overcome their exclusion and allow them to be more active and informed. In addition, the *Library and Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter* by Nkondo et al. (2014) postulates that most South Africans are excluded from the benefits of the information society and that the key function of a public library in South Africa is to provide access to the information society to marginalised groups. Hence, it is sad to note that there are still some libraries in South Africa that do not accommodate people with disabilities. Social justice demands that everyone receive equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social justice also aims at opening doors of access and opportunity for everyone without any exclusion or discrimination in society.

#### 6.4 Access to library resources due to age, gender and disability

The researcher aimed to find out to what extent the library users were able to access library resources due to age, gender and disability. Figure 5 indicates that the majority of respondents, 182 (93%), had the ability to access library materials regardless of age, gender and disability, whereas fourteen (7%) indicated that they were not able to do so because of their age, gender or disability. These findings show that most respondents had the ability to get library materials with little or no help. It is noteworthy, however, that some users were still facing challenges in accessing library materials because of their age or disability. In contrast to social justice and inclusion theory, findings revealed that not everyone has equal access to

library resources and the causes can be attributed to lack of funding, as outlined by Britto (2014). It is clear that there are still some libraries in South Africa that do not yet heed the *South African Public Library and Information Service Bill* (2012) that stipulates:

Services must be provided on the basis of equal access for everyone; special measures must be taken to ensure equitable access to services, including measures to facilitate, promote and ensure access by people with disabilities and other categories of persons disadvantaged by unfair discrimination.

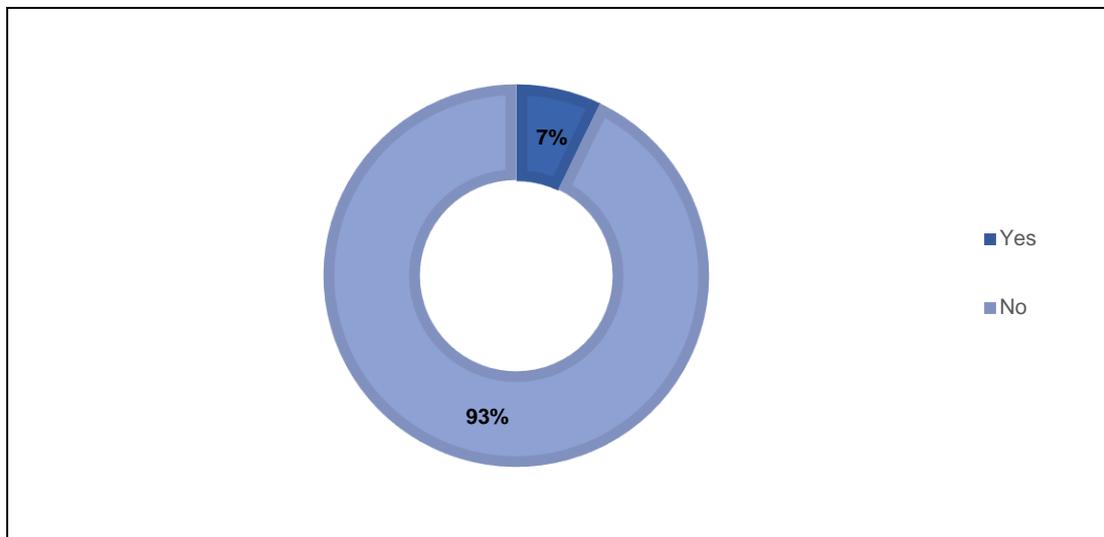


Figure 5: Access to library resources due to age, gender and disability (n=196)

### 6.5 Education and lifelong learning

The second objective of this study sought to investigate how public libraries support education and lifelong learning. The researcher felt that it was imperative to point out the importance of libraries to the community as this may influence the way people view the library. All services that are rendered by the library should be designed and implemented with care so as to cater for every user of the library regardless of age, disability or race. Public libraries are a focal point for the provision of information services in the community. As such, they have an important role to play in helping to combat social exclusion and promote lifelong learning.

### 6.6 Attendance of library programmes

The researcher sought to find out whether respondents attended library programmes offered by libraries. Figure 6 reveals that the majority of respondents, 173 (88%), had never attended any library programmes and only a few, 24 (12%), had. A follow-up question was asked to find out the reasons for not attending the library programmes and the results are presented in Table 1.

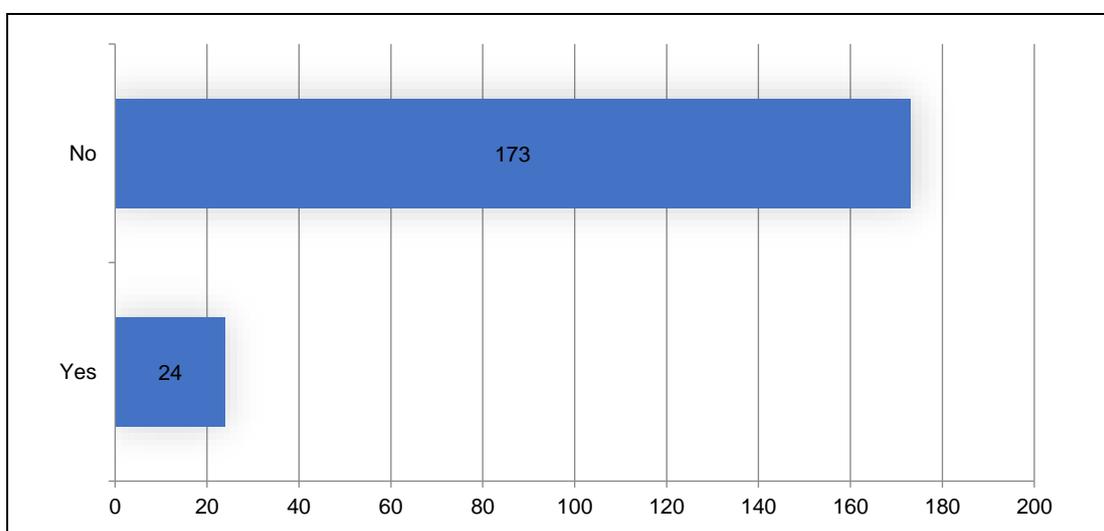


Figure 6 Attendance of library programmes (n=197)

### 6.7 Reasons for not attending library programmes

The reasons given by respondents for not attending library programmes included: lack of awareness, lack of time, lack of resources and absence of trained personnel. Table 1 illustrates that the majority, ninety (49.2%), of the respondents claimed that they were not aware of any library programmes, seventy-four (40.4%) showed that they did not have time to attend, while eleven (6.0%) respondents indicated that they did not attend because they believed that there was a lack of resources in the library. The last group of respondents, eight (4.4%), indicated they no longer attended the library programmes because they viewed the librarians as unprofessional. It is possible that some of the respondents had attended the library programmes in the past and had stopped because of the reasons mentioned above. In general, variations in responses may be attributed to lack of communication about the activities that took place at the library.

**Table 1 Reasons for not attending library programmes**

	Responses	
	N	Percentage (%)
Lack of awareness	90	49.2%
You do not have time	74	40.4%
Lack of resources	11	6.0%
No trained personnel	8	4.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100%</b>

### 6.8 Involvement of respondents in library activities

The respondents were asked to indicate with which library activities they are involved. In this study, library activities are programmes or activities designed for children and adults to help develop their educational and vocation skills. As shown in Table 2, the majority, 118 (85.5%), of respondents were involved in reading and writing activities. Meanwhile, fourteen (10.1%) respondents were involved in community programmes, five (3.6%) in work exhibitions and one respondent attended story telling. It is important to note that one of the librarians attested that the library activities were well known by the library users. However, the findings from the questionnaire contrast with the assertion of the librarian, as it is evident there was a lack of awareness of library activities. Akparobore (2011) reiterates that public libraries complement educational activities by assisting adults who are no longer of school age by developing their literacy skills and by assisting them to acquire necessary technical or vocational skills. Therefore, it is imperative for librarians to create awareness of such activities so that users can attend them.

**Table 2 Involvement of respondents in library activities**

	Responses	
	N	Percentage (%)
Reading and writing	118	85.5%
Story telling	1	0.7%
Work exhibition	5	3.6%
Community programmes	14	10.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

### 6.9 Relevance of library information

Respondents were asked to state if the information that they received from the library was always relevant to their information needs. Figure 7 shows that seventy-five (38%) respondents agreed that they always got the important and relevant information from the library, however eleven (0.06%) respondents claimed not to get the information they were looking for, while 110 (56%) respondents sometimes got relevant information.

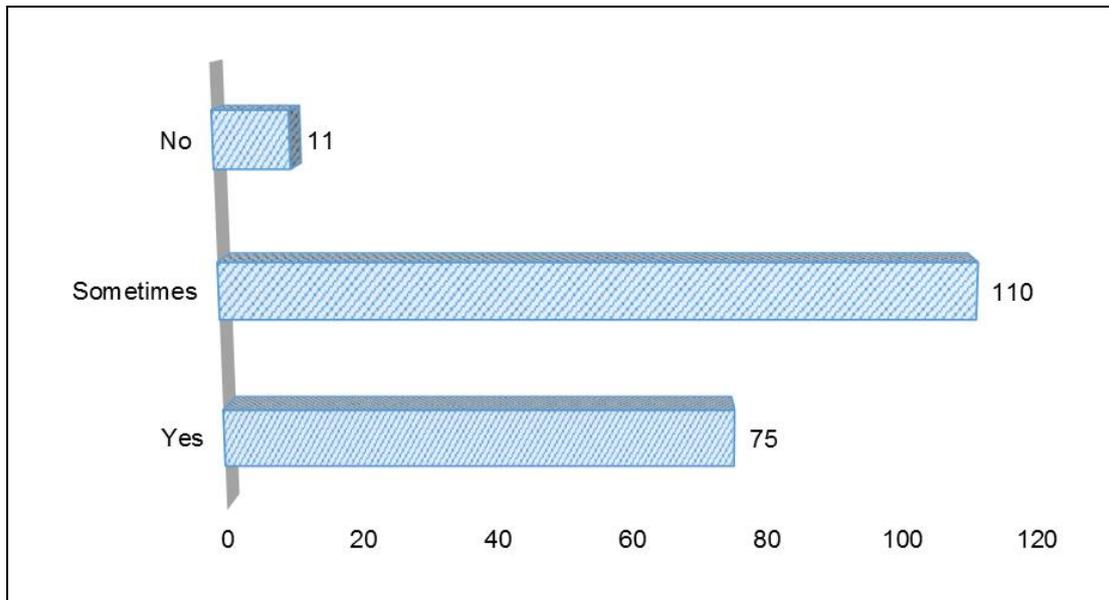


Figure 7: Relevance of library information (n=196)

### 6.10 Help on information needs

As a follow-up question, respondents were asked to indicate if the librarians helped them to meet their information needs. Figure 8 shows that the majority, 127 (64.8%), of the respondents consult the librarians for help when searching for information, 15 (7.7%) respondents never consulted librarians, and 54 (27%) respondents occasionally consulted the librarians. The majority of respondents consulting librarians might suggest that the respondents are not trained on how to look for information, hence, they consult the librarians for help. However, this might also imply that the librarians are helpful, approachable and knowledgeable.

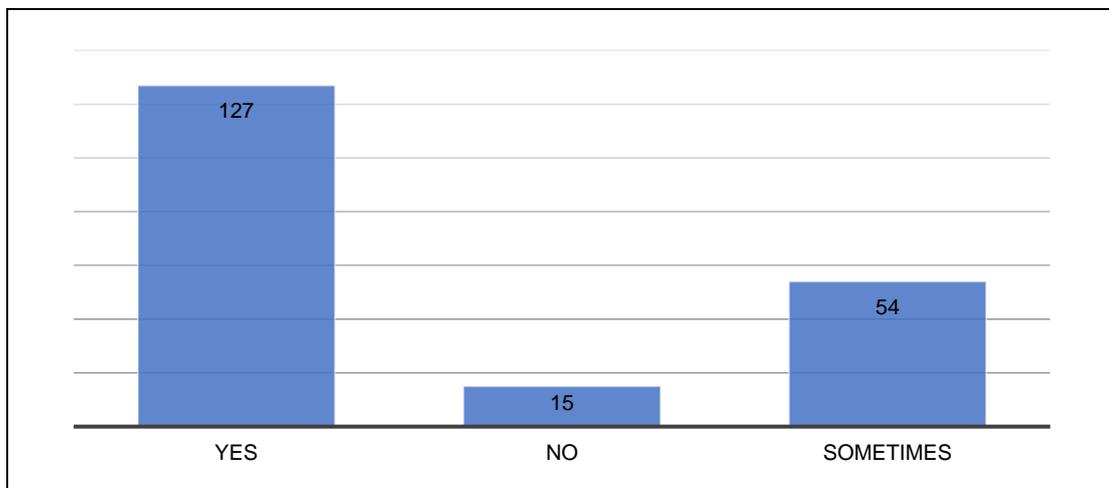


Figure 8 Librarians helping with information needs (n=196)

### 6.11 Library contribution to the lives of users

The researcher also wanted to know how the library contributed to the lives of the respondents; to find out the positive effect libraries had on their users. Respondents were asked to indicate in what way the library contributed to their lives. The question had three response options: 'positive', 'negative' and 'no change at all'. As seen in Figure 9, the majority of respondents, 187 (94.4%), indicated that the library contributed positively to their lives, while two respondents attested to libraries having a negative impact on their lives, and nine (4.5%) respondents stated that they did not see any change in their lives by using the library. It is interesting to note that, even though they claimed that the library did not have an effect in their lives, the nine users still use the library. It can be concluded that the majority of respondents are happy with the services they receive at the library.

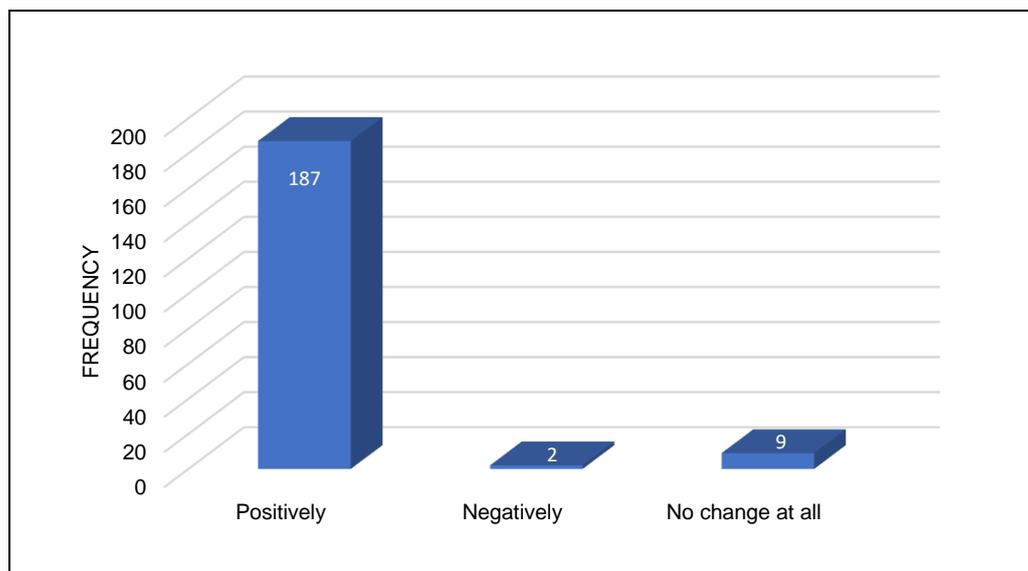


Figure 9 Library contribution to users (n=198)

## 7 Conclusion

The study sought to investigate how public libraries in BCMM ensure educational support and equity in their provision of library and information services to their user communities. The library is one of the few institutions that has reasonable access to information resources and has the potential to access material from other libraries and from the rest of the world. It is imperative for public libraries to be creative in their attempts to bring as much information to their users as possible. Given that public libraries are significant contributors to education, they have, over the decades, earned the respect of their communities. In an environment where there is a scarcity of informational material, the library is one of a few institutions that has reasonable access to materials. In an environment of limited finances, it is incumbent on libraries to be resourceful in bringing as much information to their user communities as possible. Libraries also have access to expertise: personnel have the training to retrieve information and to package that information in a format that is easily adopted by the information seeker. Libraries also have the infrastructure to acquire, process and make information available.

The results from the current study show that, despite the South African LIS environment containing contradictions resulting from years of apartheid, most of the Buffalo City library patrons experience fair and equitable access to library resource and services. In addition to participants' quantitative responses, the qualitative responses from librarians attested to the library having a classification system that allowed easy access to library resources. The librarians also confirmed treating every library user equally to uplift the standards of the community, although they revealed the lack of availability of rooms for disabled users.

It is clear from literature that public libraries have shaped and redefined their roles to include acting as community activity centres, community information centres, formal education support centres, independent learning centres, collectors of popular materials, a portal to learning for pre-schoolers, reference services, and research centres. In broadening their role, public libraries assure equitable access to information and knowledge to the public. Koneru (2008), as quoted in Raju and Raju (2010: 4), said that the role of public libraries is one of "information gateways for uninterrupted and equitable access to information and knowledge resources just-in-time, fostering 'Right to Information'; 'Information for All'; 'Information for Development'".

To understand the public libraries' support of education and lifelong learning, it was necessary to investigate whether users attended library programmes. Findings of the study revealed that most of the respondents attended library programmes in the BCMM public libraries. This study also revealed that the majority of the respondents were involved in reading and writing activities. Other studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Mery, Newby and Peng (2012) and Voogt et al. (2013), revealed that libraries and other information resources routinely conducted programmes that were described as information literacy, although they were often little more than user education or reader education. In recent years, computer centres in educational institutions, in corporate and business settings and in the community, have likewise offered short courses, helpdesks and consultancies to assist clients with information retrieval projects. However, such initiatives are commonly limited to the generic aspects of information literacy and it is, accordingly, necessary for subject-matter experts to be involved in providing additional and supplementary education in the structure of particular disciplines or fields of study and practice.

The study also investigated how the library contributed to the lives of users and results indicated that, to a great extent, the library contributed positively to the lives of the users. Libraries play a considerable role in the lives of the people who

use them. Many people use the library every day or multiple times in the week. These people primarily use the library to support their formal education. A small number of young adults also use the library to read the newspaper and to search for jobs. In this way, libraries are living up to some of the promises of the Public Library Manifesto (Ferguson 2012). A public library, as an essential pillar in democracy, provides opportunities for citizens to develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds in the generation of new knowledge and to put information to effective use for active participation in society, for economic well-being and for good health.

## 8 Recommendations

This study recommends that library literacy programmes be further encouraged with a view to informing and assisting with information seeking, selecting information sources, evaluating information, comfort in the use of a range of media, awareness of issues to do with bias and reliability of information, and transmission of information to others. Access to information through public libraries empowers every citizen and embraces the notion of social inclusion, as the librarian will become an active facilitator of education and lifelong learning in the society. Furthermore, it is also recommended that public libraries take full advantage of the annual South African Library Week to showcase the library and information services they offer. In addition, as we are living in a digital era where everyone is connected virtually, they should engage with their users via social network platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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