

# Article

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**Submission date:** 25-Sep-2018 03:37PM (UTC+0200)

**Submission ID:** 1008085351

**File name:** Info\_needs\_of\_users\_of\_E\_skia\_Mphahlele\_public\_library.docx (44.1K)

**Word count:** 5308

**Character count:** 29876

**Information needs of users of E'skia Mphahlele public library in the city of Tshwane Municipality, South Africa.**

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**Abstract**

Provision of resources such as libraries to communities continue to be a priority for development, and public libraries continue with their efforts to serve their users' diverse information needs. This paper reports on the information needs of users of E'skia Mphahlele public library and how they are met. It sets out to describe the information needs of the E'skia Mphahlele library users and how the library provides for the users to meet their needs. The paper seeks to determine the information services offered by the E'skia Mphahlele library and the relevance of **information services** offered **to meet the needs of users**. **The** paper further observe that challenges of access and benefiting from the services in the E'skia Mphahlele public library is evidenced by noise, poor internet connection and unavailability of up-to-date information resources, among others. The paper concludes that information needs of E'skia Mphahlele pulic library are not adequately met and subsequently implicate their use of and access to information services. The paper recommends the initiative of regular information needs' surveys, introduction of outreach information services to the community, an increased budget allocation for more materials and library staff continuous training on improved services' provision.

**Keywords:** *Information needs, library users, E'skia Mphahlele Public library, South Africa, City of Tshwane Municipality, library staff, public library services.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the major roles of public libraries is to provide information services in a manner that is user friendly and easily accessible to the public in order to meet their information needs (South African Community Library and Information Service Bill, 2010). This role can assist with community support because public libraries have the fundamental responsibility of catering for the diverse and ever-changing informational, educational, socio-economic and cultural needs of the community (Moodley, 2013). Additionally, Tahir, Mahmood and Shafique (2008:1) state that the present era is called the information era and that information has become the most important element for development in the society.

Thus, this makes the need for information an important asset for survival and growth in a society. To support this, Yusuf (2012) regards information as a vital resource for individual growth and survival. The author further states that the progress of modern societies, as well as individuals, depends a great deal upon the provision of the right kind of information, in the right form and at the right time. Information is needed for citizens to make the correct decisions and to reduce uncertainties (Yusuf, 2012).

Community needs assessment is crucial to ensure that libraries purchase relevant information sources to meet the dynamic and ever-changing needs of the community members. Mackeilar (2016:66) states that if librarians have not done a community needs assessment for an extended period of time, the community could have changed to the extent that the library's mission is no longer relevant to the community. The author further articulates that effective library services and programmes need to meet the real needs of the community and make a real difference in their day-to-day lives.

People visit libraries for different reasons. In a study conducted with an informal survey of Massachusetts public librarians, Margot (2014) asks about libraries as access points for information. Only 10% of the respondents stated that they felt that their libraries were used primarily for internet access, with no need for a librarian. The majority of the 88 respondents indicate that the public libraries in Massachusetts are serving as access to both the internet and librarian assistance in equal measures. Patrons who come into the library solely for computer access, would only navigate to their favourite websites without

much assistance from librarians, unless they are experiencing technical difficulties. <sup>20</sup> Those who do ask for help are the people who need basic help with logging in, printing documents and opening email attachments. Some patrons are overwhelmed by the information pulled up on a website and request assistance from the librarian.

## 2. Contextual setting

The E'skia Mphahlele public library is situated at the corner of Stanza Bopape and Sisulu streets in Tshwane, Gauteng Province. It is one of 57 public libraries in the City of Tshwane Municipality. According to Magoro (2009:3), the focus at the E'skia Mphahlele public library is on the provision of information, supporting education, development and maintenance of a reading culture as well as the presentation and facilitation of various developmental outreach programmes. The author indicates that the vision statement of the E'skia Mphahlele public library is to provide an information service that contributes meaningfully to the improvement of the quality of life of the people of Tshwane. The library's mission is that "the public library and information service shall act as an agent for community development and education by providing services to all people in Tshwane in their needs for lifelong learning, cultural expression and recreation", (Magoro, 2009:3). E'skia Mphahlele is an urban public library serving diverse library users. The E'skia Mphahlele public library operates from Monday to Friday from 09:00 to 17:00, and on Saturday from 08:00 to 12:50. The library has 10 staff members and 6925 registered users.

## 3. Problem statement

Public libraries continue to fight for their relevance in meeting the increasing diverse needs of their users. However, provision of services in these libraries is embattled with limited resources making it difficult to satisfy the users. All libraries exist to provide services, specifically to meet the diverse information needs of their various user groups, however, as observed by Moodley (2013), "public libraries became largely irrelevant to users as they are not meeting the information needs of library users".

Even though there are policies guiding the provision of information and services that meet the needs of users in public libraries, it is evident that some of many libraries still fail to meet the standard. This has aroused interest to learn about the situation at E'skia Mphahlele public library. This paper wishes to improve the relevance of this public library taking into consideration the information needs of its users.

#### 4. Research objectives

The objectives of the paper were to:

- describe the information needs of the E'skia Mphahlele library users and how they are met
- determine the information services offered by the E'skia Mphahlele library
- assess the relevance of information services offered by the E'skia Mphahlele library in order to meet the information needs of users
- establish the challenges faced by users in accessing and using information and services in the E'skia Mphahlele public library
- make recommendations based on the findings on how information needs of users at the E'skia Mphahlele public library could be met.

#### 5. Literature review

In South Africa, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) is a national department of government "tasked with creating an environment conducive to growth, development and flowering of South Africa's art, culture and heritage landscape" (Mnkeni-Saurombe and Zimu, 2013:40). However, it has been noted that even in post-apartheid South Africa, inadequate community libraries are faced with an avalanche of daunting challenges which militate against their mandate-provision of library resources for all (Mojapelo 2017:1). Besides enormous challenges with funding and staffing, Mojapelo (2017:1) indicates that community libraries, particularly in the disadvantaged rural communities are not getting sufficient support from local governments (municipalities).

This problem of public libraries not meeting the information needs is not only encountered in South Africa, but in other countries as well. Sebina and Mazebe (2014:266) opine that “libraries in Botswana are underutilised by communities and this may be one way in which their relevance might be established”. In addition, Dudley (2013:151) indicates that “Harare’s public libraries in Zimbabwe, especially those operated by the city of Harare are suffering from serious financial constraints”. “This has stifled information provision; money to buy new books is difficult to come by as they have thus far depended on free and donations from donor agencies such as Aid International (AI) and United States Information Services (USIS). Most of the out dated materials the libraries harbour have proved to be of very little use to the users” (Dudley, 2013:151).

Public library users include <sup>5</sup> children, young adults, adults and people with special needs, often referred to as people with disabilities (Goulding 2016; Gilton 2012; Koontz & Gubbin, 2010). Goulding (2016:109) opines that “even though 15- to 19-year-olds may not borrow books, they use facilities to study and access resources that are not available in their school libraries”. With regard to people with disabilities, they need special facilities. For example, public libraries that cater to wheelchair bound people have both the stairs and wheelchair ramps.

Kennedy (1997), cited by Thani and Hashim (2011:139), argue that <sup>17</sup> “the concept of information needs is similar to the physiological need for food and water”. <sup>17</sup> In this view, an information need is a situation or task which depends on many factors and changes as a person moves from one stage to another. For example, an information need for a grade 12 student may never be an information need the following year at tertiary level.

It is believed that the information services rendered in public libraries need to <sup>25</sup> be relevant to the needs of the community it serves. <sup>23</sup> In her study, Moodley (2013) indicates that libraries need to be informed about users’ information behaviour, so as to understand <sup>23</sup> users’ information needs and how to fulfil these needs. To provide vital services relevant for the users’ needs, libraries and information professionals need to be in constant touch with the changing needs of clientele, the social forces along with the technologies that influence them (Grover, Greer & Agada, 2010). <sup>15</sup> Knowing the information needs of the users enables the library staff to design services to address and prioritise those needs.

Koontz and Gubbin (2010:37) state that “public libraries are required to provide services based on an analysis of the library information needs of the local community. In planning the services, clear priorities must be established and a strategy developed for services provision in the medium and long term. Services should be developed for identified target groups and only provided if such groups exist in the local community.” To support this, Dent, Geoff and Kevane (2014) indicate that a number of community members have learnt to read and write, both in Luganda and in English in the Kitengesa public library in rural Uganda, due to efforts of the librarians.

Koontz and Gubbin (2010) indicate that in collecting and providing information, the public library should cooperate with other agencies to make the best use of available resources. In so doing, Goulding (2016:14) indicates that the key driver of change in the delivery of services that enable public libraries to extend new services and functionality to users has been information and communication technology (ICT). The rapid growth in the volume of available information and the continuing technological advances, which have radically affected the way information is accessed, have had significant effect on public libraries and their services (Koontz & Gubbin, 2010:5). In addition, the challenge now for public libraries is how they manage their ICT resources to ensure that they are effectively supporting people’s learning activities, opening up opportunities to the socially excluded and enabling engagement with public services through e-government (Goulding 2016:14).

According to Phillip (2001:11), in order to fulfil its roles satisfactorily, the public library should have adequate resources, not just when it is established, but also on a continuing basis, in order to enable it to sustain and develop services to meet the needs of the local community members.

The Department of Arts and Culture pledges “not only to indulge the nation (South Africa) in creative outputs, but to provide access to information in a manner that establishes ties that bind among all people of the land between the citizens and the state” (Mnkeni-Saurombe & Zimu, 2015:41). In view of this, community libraries strive to collect and provide access to information.

Although public libraries are built in communities for the members to have free access to information, there are still cases where people do not make use of the libraries. In their study, Mutshewa, Grand, Totolo, Zulu, Sebina and Jorosi (2010) state that public libraries are established to be used by communities. Surprisingly, many people in communities where there are public libraries do not make use of them. Lack of time, distance to the library and inadequate relevance of the library resources and services to the activities the respondents were engaged in seemed to be the main barriers to library use (Mutshewa et al., 2010).

## 6. Research methodology

This paper took a positivist stance and employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The paper's main target population were users, however, it was important for the librarians to participate as services providers. Using a total number of 6925 library users and 10 library staff from which the sample was drawn, the quantitative data was conveniently collected from 363 library users following the sample size lookup table by Payne and Payne (2004:203), while the qualitative data was purposively collected from 8 library staff. Questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the users and interviews collected primary data from the librarians. All the 363 questionnaires distributed to the library users were returned, giving a 100% response rate. As only 8 librarians were interviewed, the qualitative response rate was 80%. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics which generated tables, frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data was thematically analysed.

## 7. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the scope for this paper. E'skia Mphahlele public library has 6925 library users and 10 library staff from which the sample was drawn. However, the data was collected from 363 library users following look-up table of samples presented by Payne and Payne (2004:203). Data from library users was collected through questionnaires. Data was also collected from eight library staff through interviews. Two library staff members could not participate due to personal reasons. However, Johnson and Christensen (2008) opine that a response rate of around 70% has generally been



acceptable. This recommendation is based on the assumption that respondents and non-respondents are fairly similar (Mertens, 2014:191).

**Table 1: Response rate of the respondents**

<b>Targets</b>	<b>Total number</b>	<b>Target number</b>	<b>Actual number</b>	<b>Response rate in %</b>
Library users	6925	363	363	100
Library staff	10	10	8	80
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6935</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>99</b>

**7.1 Determining the information needs of E'skia Mphahlele public library users**  
 In order to determine the information needs of users of E'skia Mphahlele public library, users were asked to indicate their reasons for visiting the library. Librarians were also asked to narrate what the users request from the library.

**7.1.1 Library users response on their information needs**

Table 2 shows reasons why the library users visit the library.

<b>Reason for visiting the library</b>	<b>No. of population out of 363</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Read and study with personal notes	321	88
Borrow library materials	74	20
Use library based materials within the library	93	26
Meeting with friends	19	5

Search library databases	29	8
Print / photocopy services	15	4
Access internet	215	59
Other	0	0

Library users provided multiple responses with regard to their reasons to visit the library. The majority (321:88%) of respondents visited the library to read and study with personal notes, followed by (215:59%) respondents who visited the library for internet access. A further 93 (26%) used library-based materials within the library. 74 (20%) respondents borrowed library materials. Only 29 (8%) respondents visited the library to search library databases. It was interesting to note was that only 19 (5%) visited the library to meet with friends and 15 (4%) were printing and making copies.

The findings indicate that most of the library users made proper use of library because they study, borrow materials and use library based materials. It is interesting that few visit the library to meet their friends, because if that were not the case, the noise level in the library would be beyond the library security's control. This is in line with Goulding's (2016:109) observation that young adults (15-19 years) <sup>15</sup> may not borrow books, but use library facilities to study and to access resources not available in their school libraries.

### 7.1.2 Librarians responses on users' <sup>28</sup> information needs

<sup>28</sup> In order to discover what the users' information needs are, library staff were asked to indicate the kind of information users ask for when visiting the library. This was an open ended question whereby the respondents were given the opportunity to narrate their views. The following were their responses:

"Users mostly want to find out about autobiographies, tertiary information and children programs".

"Users ask for books, photocopy services and the use of computers".

“Users look for school related information, especially study guides and novels for older people”.

“Users visit the library to request teenage collection, do research on different subject and use of Wi-Fi. Some request school related and community information (directions)”.

“Users ask for assignment assistance, especially the students and school children, they also request recreational books and Wi-Fi connection”.

“Users ask for hard copies, internet access reference materials, both fiction and non-fiction books, toddler books, children books, teenagers’ books and CDs”.

This means that the library offers a wide range of information service to its users and is supported by the South African Department of Arts & Culture (2013) which regards libraries as very valuable social resource, giving job seekers, entrepreneurs, students and learners access to information, the internet and photocopy facilities, in addition to serving the reading needs of the public.

## 7.2 The E’skia Mphahlele public library services

It was important for this paper to determine the information services offered in the E’skia Mphahlele public library. The library staff provided the researcher with a pamphlet which shows all the services that the library offers. They are mentioned as follows:

- General information
- Assistance with school project
- Reference facilities
- Community information
- A variety of books (fiction, non-fiction, large print, audio books, books in foreign and indigenous languages and books for the newly literate)
- Magazines and newspapers
- Internet access, PC and WI-FI use
- Photocopying and faxing
- Story hours and holiday programmes
- Items reservation and interlibrary loans

Apart from the services listed above, the library staff also register users for library membership and renew expired membership for easy access to the library. They also print users' documents upon request.

### **7.3 Challenges experienced by library users when using the library and the challenges experienced by library staff when providing information service**

For this paper to make recommendations on how to improve the library services in the E'skia Mphahlele public library, it was important to find out challenged experienced by both the library users when accessing the library, and the library staff when providing the information service to users.

#### **7.3.1 Challenges experienced by E'skia Mphahlele public library users**

The respondents were requested to indicate the challenges they experience when they access the library. This was an open-ended question where each user had to state their challenges. The findings are presented below with themes:

- **Noise:**

Nearly half (180:49%) of the respondents indicated that the level of noise in the library was unbearable in such a way that some ended up losing focus on what they were doing. The respondents narrated instances where they experienced high level of noise:

"Most of the time when I read, other students make noise with their friends and this makes me lose concentration in my studies".

"There is no noise control; discussions are held in a no group study zone".

"People talk loudly in the reading rooms as if the library is a social centre".

A quarter (89:25%) respondents mentioned that "people using cellphones in areas designated for studying are the ones causing lot of noise and disturbances, together with the ones whispering and laughing with their friends".

Although Wishart (2012:2) opines that libraries should also be a noisy place for the community to gather and exchange information, most of the library users complained about the noise level in the library. Users believe that noise in the library distracts them

from what they are supposed to be doing. Wishart believes that the library is also a centre for socialisation, conversation and communication. A library can be a central meeting place for people to connect, learn and share (Wishart, 2012:2).

- **Unprofessional staff**

Most (190:52%) of the users complained that some of the library staff members had a negative attitude towards them when they required help. The following are some representative responses with regard to staff being unprofessional when rendering information service to users:

“There is one staff member who is rude; she needs to improve on her attitude towards people.”

“The staff at reception are rude, especially ladies, and are not helpful at all.”

“Staff is sometimes unprofessional; they don't know how to treat library users.”

These responses indicate that some of the library staff do not know how to treat library users when they request information. This could be because public library users request diverse information services that may be too much for the library staff to cater for. Sometimes the library staff may not be aware that they are unconsciously treating users as helpless clients rather than as competent citizens or demanding consumers (Johannsen, 2015:38). One of the principal ways applied by library professionals to segment their users is to focus on the specific library's use of patterns and preferences, distinguishing, for example, between the frequency, purpose or nature of library use (Johannsen, 2015:11).

- **Slow internet**

A total of 159 (44%) respondents complained about the speed of the internet. All of them narrated that because of slow internet, most users spend much time on computers and they end up being unable to use the computers themselves, thereby rendering their library visits fruitless.

- **The unavailability of study materials**

A total of 205 (56%) respondents complained about the unavailability of study materials they needed in the library. Because the library runs short of current materials due to the unavailability of funds, it is advisable that the library staff should familiarise themselves with other libraries and request library items through interlibrary loans.

- **Library opening hours**

One hundred and ninety-eight (54%) respondents complained about the time that the library opens. The number of respondents not satisfied with the library opening hours was more than half (198:54%). They indicated that the library's opening hours were not sufficient for them, especially when they need to prepare for examinations. They indicated that it would be better if the library could open at least at 08:00 in the morning and close at 18:00 in the evening. This means the library should review the opening and closing hours in order to satisfy the library users' needs.

- **Insufficient library space**

One hundred and sixty-six (46%) respondents indicated that the library space was insufficient. Some indicated that they would have to sit and study on the library sofas because of limited space in the reading room. This implies that users struggle to study comfortably because of insufficient space in the library.

It is not only E'skia Mphahlele public library users who experience challenges in accessing library services to meet their information needs. Mamafha (2013:105) conducted a study in the use of ICTs at Ekurhuleni municipal libraries in which users also complained about the staff attitude when seeking help, especially first-time users of ICTs who rely in staff for their guidance. Members of staff in libraries need to be available all the times to provide expert guidance to the users as they select the materials they seek to borrow in libraries (Zulu, 2014:133).

Snead (2014:467) opines that public libraries often lack the necessary resources to adequately develop government information services; trained personnel to deliver the services or the financial support from federal, state and local government for their development and delivery of services.

### 7.3.2 Challenges experienced when providing information to users

It was important for this paper to determine challenges library staff experience when providing information service to the E'skia Mphahlele library users <sup>5</sup> in order to improve library services so that the information needs of library users can be catered for. Respondents were asked to narrate the challenges that they experience when they provide information services to library users. The following were the challenges they listed:

- Not enough books in stock and users request books that are not in stock, they normally refer users to the national library because the National Library of South Africa receives copies of all books published.
- Budget constraints, resulting in out-dated materials.
- Users damage library books.
- Users stealing books and unreliable library system (3M Machine).
- Out-dated collection, library staff illiteracy (some cannot even request books on SABINET), lack of basic resources such as a colour printer.
- Sometimes users are afraid to say what they actually want, for example, people looking for information on how to live a good life while infected by HIV/AIDS, library staff have to struggle to understand what the user is looking for, they conduct reference interviews, language barriers, sometimes users are requested to write down their needs as they cannot be heard when talking.

It has been discovered that not only E'skia Mphahlele public library staff experience challenges when providing information service to library users. Zulu (2014:141) mentions that <sup>1</sup> library facilities such as buildings, space within the library buildings, shelves and seating arrangement for the users were found to be not satisfactory in most public libraries in Zambia. Furthermore, electronic facilities such as computers, printers, internet, projectors, scanners, binding machines, photographic equipment, optical storage devices and photocopying machines <sup>4</sup> were lacking. Skarzynski and Nassimbeni (2016:26) indicate that the impact of the collection in the public library is far more difficult to uncover because of the diversity of its member groups and their varying roles as well as the multiplicity of reasons for which the public library might be used. Similarly, Dudley (2013:151) opines

that the other challenge arising from the financial constraints in Zimbabwe is related to low staffing levels, because Harare City Library has two librarians and in the other branches, they only have one each. This makes it difficult to manage day-to-day activities in the library.

#### **7.4 Ways in which the library staff address the challenges experienced when providing information service**

The E'skia Mphahlele library staff were asked to indicate ways in which they address the challenges they experienced when providing information service to users. The following were the ways they indicated:

- They do the interlibrary loans (ILL) when users request books that are not in stock.
- Conduct reference interviews when users are unable to state exactly what they are looking for.
- Gauteng library services have subscribed the E'skia Mphahlele public library to overdrive e-books.
- Conduct in-house training for library staff.
- Refer users to other libraries (when they need materials not in stock) or internet café (when they need colour printer).
- Keeping backup systems for library management.
- Tighten security for lost books and other users' computers.
- Raise concerns during meetings with seniors.
- Keep statistics of books in high demand and purchase them when they have the budget.

Recommend that users buy books at bookstores because of budget constraints in the library.

Zulu (2014:135) contends that the interlibrary loans services <sup>1</sup> involves cooperative activities between two or more libraries where seeking libraries can borrow, on behalf of their members, resources which are not in their collections from other libraries. The aim of this service is to satisfy the needs of the users and encourage them to use the library (Zulu, 2014:135).



## **8. Conclusion and recommendations**

E'skia Mphahlele public library users visit the library for various reasons. The library is mostly used by students who bring their own study materials. However, this study has revealed that there is too much noise in the library, the internet is too slow, there are very limited current materials, the space is also limited and library staff are not welcoming. This paper also revealed that library books are stolen. Therefore, this paper recommends that the library train library staff in non-traditional library services such as etiquette and customer care; library should review opening and closing hours; look for funding from other Non-Governmental Organisations to purchase relevant equipment for the library; the City of Tshwane Municipality should build more libraries for space purposes; monitor the noise level in the library; strengthen the internet connection in the library and ensure that the library books detector (3M machine) is always functional.

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# Article

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## ORIGINALITY REPORT

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