



PERKINS BRAILLERS REHABILITATION PROJECT

EXTRACTS FROM ANNUAL REPORT : 2006-2007

SUMMARY

1. Survey reveals problem as serious as predicted. Itinerant teachers have virtually no brailers. But, overall, more machines in sound working order and more in repairable condition than expected. Therefore less need for new machines and higher demand for spare parts. Quantities of both to be re-calculated. Excellent progress on repair and redistribution programmes. Potential to expand provision for primary schools, partly at acceptable expense of secondary sector. Training programme delayed. Management of project inevitably challenging. Local presence and knowledge invaluable.

BRAILLER STOCK

2. A survey of the stock was carried out by the Project Co-ordinator, accompanied in the North and Centre by the Chief Special Needs Education Officer in the Ministry of Education and in the South by the Principal of Montfort Centre for the Blind. The aim of this exercise was to establish the number and condition of the machines used by the 35 teaching centres and the Itinerant Teaching Programme and stored at the Montfort workshop. Some surprises emerged. The total inventory was 25% larger than anticipated – 343, compared to the Ministry's original estimate of 272. Of these, 95 were in working order, instead of 66; and 248 were broken but potentially recoverable, rather than 206.

3. This outcome indicates that the initial pessimism of our Malawian partners was not fully justified and, in particular, that fewer machines had been written-off following extensive cannibalism than was feared. It also suggests that estimates of the number of new machines required to replace written-off stock (between 105 and 162) need to be reconsidered.

4. A provisional *Needs Analysis*, based on anecdotal evidence and survey data, postulates the procurement of 119 new braille machines, resulting in a provisional total inventory of 462. This figure is marginally below the ideal inventory of 470 anticipated at the outset of the project and is subject to, probably upward, revision in the light of operating experience over the next six months.

5. The *Needs Analysis* took account of the following factors:

- the relative under-equipping of primary schools, especially Chilanga, the biggest special school for the blind and visually impaired (BVI);
- the apparently over-generous provision in secondary institutions, where there are 54% more braille machines than BVI students;
- the impact of the Scottish Executive-funded *Making Wonders* computer learning initiative in secondary schools, which is reducing the dependence by BVI students on braille machines at that level;
- the presumed need to improve the student/braille machine ratio at teacher training colleges;
- the need for each itinerant teacher to have his/her own braille machine;
- the availability of a large number of machines previously thought to be beyond repair.

REPAIR PROGRAMME

6. Perkins, the USA-based manufacturers of the braille machines, gave sound advice on the quantities and types of spares needed to carry out the most common repairs. They also highlighted the cause of a long-term problem the Montfort mechanics had encountered with the replacement of space bar springs on a discontinued model of braille machine. Thus equipped with the right tools, materials and knowledge, the mechanics made steady progress and repaired 200 machines by April 2007. Work on a further 48 had to be suspended pending supply of some less common parts, which neither the mechanics nor Perkins had expected would be required.

PUBLICITY

7. Two articles were written for publication in the July edition of the *ICEVI Educator Newsletter*, the magazine for the international association of vision teachers, and the November edition of *The Lantern*, the in-house journal of Perkins school for the Blind in Massachusetts. In October, some 80 people attended two receptions held in Glasgow for Malawi Tomorrow supporters. A presentation on the project was the centrepiece of each event. The official launch at Montfort Centre in November attracted worthwhile coverage in the English language national press.

MANAGEMENT

8. It was implicit in the rationale for the project – the lack of domestic resources required to prevent the braille system from collapsing – that hands-on management would be essential and that for the time-being the Ministry and Montfort Centre would be incapable of providing it. It was also obvious from the start that the ‘tyranny of distance’ and other factors associated with working on a national programme involving 36 institutions, many in remote, difficult to access locations, would impose an interesting set of challenges. And so it proved. Communication between the Project Co-ordinator in Lilongwe and the mechanics based at Montfort Centre outside Blantyre was a constant problem. Accurate information was not easy to acquire quickly. Thousands of miles were covered at intervals to conduct the data survey, collect broken brailers and then return repaired machines whence they came. These factors all had cost implications that were impossible to forecast accurately at the concept stage. Above all, they highlight the importance in a project of this kind of appointing as Project Co-ordinator a Malawian national who is resident in the country.

ISSUES FOR SECOND YEAR

9. The following are likely to be the main management priorities for year two:

- consider the organisation and needs of the Itinerant Teaching Programme;**
- establish the size of the ideal inventory, including the need for a strategic reserve, and, if feasible, procure the appropriate quantity of new brailers;**
- order parts for the 48 machines awaiting repair;**
- establish the quantity of spares, tool kits, cleaning kits and other material required for a realistic two-year working stock and procure them;**
- create a system for tracking current and future repairs, in part as a tool for forecasting the demand for spares;**
- investigate facilities for the secure storage of reserve brailers and part of the working stock of spares in a limited number of locations in each of the three regions;**
- consult the University of Strathclyde on potential synergies between the sustainability plans for the *Making Wonders* and brailers projects;**
- consider the need to upgrade facilities and equipment at the Montfort Centre workshop;**
- consider the need to make use of commercial workshops in the North and Centre, for reasons of accessibility, and the cost and efficiency implications;**

- **review training requirements, including the specific needs of the Montfort Centre mechanics and the feasibility of their conducting courses in each region;**
- **consult the Ministry on project sustainability, including future budgetary and transport arrangements, and a realistic date for transferring responsibility to them;**
- **draw up a revised budget forecast in the light of the above tasks.**

**Malawi Tomorrow
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