

# Keeping up with best practices: Library exhibitions at a university library in a small island developing state

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## Abstract

Libraries over the years have developed best practices for planning, organising, promoting and evaluating exhibitions. Many are based on practices in museums. These best practices have been written into policies and shared with libraries worldwide. However, just as there has been an acknowledgement that some museum practices must be modified to suit the needs of libraries, the same applies to exhibition best practices across countries and libraries with different budgets. Small island developing states are particularly challenged by, among other things, limited resources, high cost of transportation and energy and vulnerability to natural disasters, which can have a direct or indirect impact on libraries and their ability to carry out functions like curating exhibitions. The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Library, located on the island of Jamaica and founded in 1948, has a long tradition of curating exhibitions. Planning and executing physical exhibitions at The UWI are guided by Library-adapted policies and guides, recently formalised in an exhibition policy. A review of some of the exhibitions curated by The UWI Mona show that the physical exhibits are, for the most part, executed in keeping with international best practices, but the Library has had to make adjustments primarily because of financial challenges. These financial challenges affect the availability of resources for exhibits, exhibition space, dedicated exhibition staff, how special collections items are used and the magnitude of exhibitions mounted. Exhibition reports, annual reports, photographs and visitor comments books reveal that the Library

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attempts to follow best practices with regards to planning, designing, executing and evaluating physical exhibitions. On the other hand, the Library is in the early stages of converting its physical exhibitions to digital formats but may have to establish more formal guidelines to ensure that online exhibitions are planned, designed and evaluated in keeping with international best practices to be successful. Successful exhibitions not only satisfy Library organisers and 'edutain' users but also build a good reputation for the Library and lead to further collaboration with faculty and benefit students, administrators and sometimes the general public. These practices at The UWI that are guided by policies can serve as an example to other institutions with small budgets on how to successfully plan and deliver physical exhibitions and build relationships with faculty and the wider community. The Library would need to ensure that formal guidelines and practices are followed for online exhibitions to be as effective and successful.

### **Keywords**

academic libraries, library exhibitions, The University of the West Indies Mona Library

### **Background/introduction**

The United Nations has acknowledged that there are islands with unique characteristics that make them particularly vulnerable (United Nations, 2012). These islands because of their 'size, remoteness, narrow resource and export base, susceptibility to external economic shocks and impacts of climate change and natural disasters' are particularly challenged in their efforts to develop and are therefore classified as small island developing states (SIDSs; United Nations, nd). Jamaica is among the countries listed as SIDSs. SIDSs like Jamaica are also particularly vulnerable to global economic shocks due in part to high dependency on imported food and fuel, whose prices tend to fluctuate (United Nations Department Economic and Social Affairs, 2010: 12). Furthermore, economic vulnerability is evident in Jamaica's high debt and trade deficit. In 2017, Jamaica's trade deficit was US\$4510.6 million (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2017: 93). Net borrowing totalled US\$601.3 million over the same period (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2017: 97). Although most of the discussions on SIDSs tend to focus on environmental issues, the unique characteristics of SIDSs cause vulnerability across all sectors including education and information.

### ***The UWI Mona Library***

Academic libraries in SIDSs operate within the constraints of these environments and The University of the West Indies (UWI) Mona Library is no different. Established in 1948, on the Mona Campus, in Jamaica, The UWI is regarded as one of the top 40 universities in Latin America and the Caribbean and the best in the Caribbean (The UWI Mona Marketing, Recruitment and Communications Office, 2018). The UWI has three main campuses in different Caribbean islands; in addition to Mona, there is Cave Hill in Barbados, St Augustine in Trinidad & Tobago and several other non-campus countries

which fall under the ambit of The UWI Open Campus. The UWI Mona offers a wide range of undergraduate, masters and doctoral programmes in fields such as medicine, humanities, education, science, technology and law. Over the past 3 years, average enrolment at The UWI Mona totalled 18,586 persons (The University of the West Indies Mona, 2019: 9).

The UWI Mona Library like many other academic libraries in Jamaica has limited economic power that results in reduced or stagnant operational budgets (Harris, 2017: 30). The budgets are even more severely affected by devaluation of the Jamaican dollar because a significant portion of the budgets in the libraries are consumed by the purchase of international e-resources (Harris, 2017: 31). The Library, in its 2017–2018 annual report, bemoaned the continued financial constraints that limited its purchasing power (The UWI Mona Library, 2018: 2). Inability to pay vendors and suppliers at times resulted in cancellation and unfilled orders (The UWI Mona Library 2017: 1).

### *Exhibitions at UWI Mona Library*

Although the Mona Library has been in existence since 1948, a comprehensive record of exhibitions curated only dates back to 1985. For the purposes of this article, ‘exhibitions’ will be considered larger scale, physical and documentary curations with a guiding narrative, as opposed to simple displays of books, book jackets and graphics. Yet exhibitions curated by the UWI Mona Library are not on as large a scale as those curated by libraries with dedicated exhibition galleries and teams. Most of the records are from the Main Library, because it is the main space for hosting, but exhibitions are also mounted in the four other branches (Medical, Science and Engineering, Law and the Western Jamaica Campus) of the UWI Mona Library. The types of exhibitions mounted at the Library are similar to those mounted by academic libraries. These include exhibitions mounted to recognise the University’s anniversaries, seminal figures and major events, honorary graduands, library services and special collections, as well as Jamaican/Caribbean current and historical events (Lewis, 2002). The Library also hosts exhibitions for campus clubs and societies, departments and research units whose themes may not necessarily fit into the aforementioned categories. It is worth noting that, although the Library does not create these exhibits, its exhibition policy empowers it to give advice on the design and installation so that they are in keeping with best practices. The Library’s target audience include faculty, students and administrators. However, the Library also facilitates use by visitors not affiliated with the university, so exhibitions are also curated to spark their interest (Lewis, 2002: 40).

This article primarily focuses on exhibitions mounted at and by the Main Library. Most of the examples cited relate to the Dudley Thompson exhibition which was mounted in 2018. By comparing the practices at The UWI Mona Library to best practices delineated in the literature, especially, handbooks, like Matassa (2014), professional association guidelines and The UWI Mona Library’s own policy, the article describes the extent to which a library in a SIDS is able to adhere to exhibition best practices. It also aims to add to the limited literature on exhibitions in academic libraries in SIDSs.

## Literature review

Assessing exhibitions is a valuable yet complex process, because, although standards and guidelines exist, they are not prescriptive, and this allows for a level of subjectivity in the determination of what makes a good exhibition. Nevertheless, best practices are useful benchmarks. They can easily be found in handbooks, manuals, guidelines and standards issued by professional organisations like the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), American Alliance of Museums and National Information Standards Organization (NISO, 2001). A simple Google search shows that several academic libraries have also adapted guidelines and written exhibition policies. Many of these have been geared towards non-library staff who want to exhibit in the library. Handbooks such as Brown and Power (2006), Lacher-Feldman (2013) and Matassa (2014) provide practical guides for executing library exhibitions from idea to dismount. However, these sources are not specific to exhibitions in academic libraries, and Matassa, for instance, does not sufficiently distinguish between guidelines given to libraries as opposed to archives and museums. There are also numerous case studies and journal articles that articulate the major components and latest trends in curating academic exhibitions (Fouracre, 2015: 378).

The evolving role of exhibitions within academic libraries is described aptly by Chen et al. (2015: 63) as a mechanism with the ability to stimulate discussions about the work of the library and increase collection use. As such, one of the first recommendations for robust and successful online or physical exhibitions in academic libraries is the practice of hiring dedicated staff for curation. However, an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) survey in 2010 found that only 19% of respondents had a person or position with primary responsibility for exhibitions (Berenbak et al., 2010: 11). More recently, case studies conducted by Fouracre (2015: 379) into British research libraries that hold rare books and special collections suggest that the practice of employing dedicated staff is becoming more common. The UWI Mona Library incorporates the tasks of an exhibitions coordinator into the responsibilities of a reference librarian assigned to its loans and reference section (Lewis, 2002: 40). The British Library and the Royal College of Physicians Library employ staff to manage exhibitions and this guaranteed the exhibition calendar comprised displays strategically aligned with the goals of the library throughout the year. The exhibition team, confident in the exhibits earmarked for the academic year, target relevant subject specialists and receive expert advice on the projects (Fouracre, 2015: 380). This resulted in more elaborate displays, which increased visitor numbers and engagement with the library's collection. Chen et al. (2015: 69) also advocated dedicated staff and proposed that their traditional library and information studies background would be complemented by skills such as marketing and curation.

Furthermore, on the matter of having dedicated staff assigned to exhibitions, there is added benefit to acquiring librarians with standard training in the care and handling of rare and special collections material. In fact, several journal articles on exhibitions in academic libraries focus on those with special collections (Chen et al., 2015; Dysert et al., 2018; Swanwick et al., 2015; Taylor, 2018) and there is no shortage of literature on the care and handling of special collections materials for displays. Continued

consultation of a library's exhibition policy is also critical as matters like the length of time a particular item is to be on display or how many pieces are to be displayed must be addressed.

In looking at the practical aspects of exhibition curation, Swanwick et al. (2015: 9) postulated some best practices, among them the need for an exhibition guide/policy which would have general guidelines but also facets specific to each institution. Along with a dedicated team who build an exhibition from idea to launch, a policy allows all stakeholders a practical path to follow and clear understanding of their responsibilities. It also shows professionalism and brings credibility to the organisation (Matassa, 2014: 8).

The development of programmes that market and engage the university beyond the exhibition launch is another key recommendation. Exhibition programmes increase visibility and user education (Morris, 1999: 89). The programme could comprise an event launch with an accompanying lecture but could also include workshops or seminars throughout the life of the display once they advance the exhibition's goals and library's mission. Partnered with an established library programme with a guide training component, the visitor experience would be amplified, thereby leading to better returns for the library with increased user engagement and publicity (Morris, 1999: 91). The use of programmes driven by current exhibitions provides academic librarians with the opportunity for advocacy/outreach and new partnerships. Furthermore, with the library playing such an integral role in the university's research and scholarship, the programmes developed should be aligned to the university's goals and the library must market these activities as such (Chen et al., 2015: 77). It is clear that the depth of these programmes would depend on staffing, and most large organisations seem to have the dedicated staff to ensure the execution of programmes (Matassa, 2014: 163).

It is also advised that academic libraries have dedicated exhibition spaces that are able to maximise the viewership and impact of the display. Ideally, this space should be easily modified depending on the exhibition vision and include the use of wall space (Swanwick et al., 2015: 5). Although brief, Johnstone's (2011) description of how the Scottish Poetry Library uses its space to creatively mount exhibitions in a non-dedicated exhibition space without wall space highlights the reality faced by many academic libraries. This narrative also raises questions about where exhibitions begin/end and their integration into spaces where other items would distract from focus on the exhibition.

Within the academic community, accommodating the loan of exhibitions is another key best practice that is featured in the literature. Loans are not only an important outreach activity but also a key way to gain publicity and engender faculty support, engagement and future collaboration. Matassa (2014) covers this topic in detail, and it appears to be the only exhibition topic on which professional library associations have issued guidelines (Association of College and Research Libraries and Rare Book Manuscript Section (ACRL and RBMS), 2012; IFLA, 2004). A library's exhibition policy must speak to an agreement between the library and the borrowing/lending institution, generally through an application form that outlines the conditions under which the loan is being facilitated and this is finalised with a loan agreement (ACRL and RBMS, 2012).

As a matter of best practice, the library also has to periodically evaluate the impact of its exhibitions not only from the visitor's outlook but also staff experiences in carrying

out the project. Both will influence the way forward especially on the matter of the most useful equipment, marketing strategy and so on (Maloney, 2012: 284). The ARL survey in 2010 found that the primary methods of evaluating exhibitions were door counts, visitor comments books and web statistics (Berenbak et al., 2010: 12). The popularity of these methods can be attributed to the ease of data collection (National Library of Scotland and The University of Edinburgh, 2011: 22). The use of electronic feedback platforms like social media and other customised exhibition programmes (Keith et al., 2017) have increased since 2010 but evaluating exhibitions in libraries remains under-developed, limited in the exhibition planning process and in need of greater analysis (Fouracre, 2015: 385). The American Alliance of Museums (2012) lists evaluation among the seven standards for museum exhibitions and recommends the use of peer review methods like the Framework for Assessing Excellence (3). The Framework focuses on the visitor experience by inviting persons to judge and rate exhibitions from their perspective using four criteria: comfortable, engaging, reinforcing and meaningful (Serrell, 2006). The framework was, however, developed for museums, and it does not lend itself easily to evaluating exhibitions of the written word. Following up with circulation statistics and the addition of books to reading lists are some helpful methods of evaluation and measuring long-term impact in these cases (National Library of Scotland and The University of Edinburgh, 2011: 22).

Furthermore, the academic library is challenged with creating innovative ways to broaden the impact that exhibitions have on their audiences and creating online versions of displays is one such approach. Libraries have gone beyond the idea of simply uploading an online version of an exhibition to a library's website and now find novel ways to engage their communities using technology (Dysert et al., 2018; Keith et al., 2017).

Despite the challenges facing academic libraries, most best practices for exhibitions can be adapted to libraries irrespective of size and funding. Matassa (2014: xxiii) contends that a successful exhibition does not depend on 'size, money or visitor figures'. This may be true but the paucity of literature from developing countries and small libraries leaves a gap in the analysis. Although it does not focus on exhibitions, Watson's (2012) paper on the preservation and conservation issues facing Caribbean countries provides a poignant analysis of the environment within which libraries in SIDSs operate and some of the issues that impact the curation of exhibitions. Among the issues identified are natural disasters (hurricanes), the cost of technology, shortage of expertise, 'lack of easy access to and the cost of consumables' and lack of financial support from policy makers. Lewis (2002) in a case study on exhibitions at The UWI Mona Library provides practical information on the why, who and how of exhibitions at The UWI Mona but it is now outdated and does not take into context the preservation and conservation costs that impact the curation of exhibitions at this library. Many of the practicalities outlined in the article – such as evaluation using visitor comments, assigning a dedicated exhibition coordinator and planning exhibitions around a calendar – are still useful. Ogunrombi's (1997) article on the practices of an academic library in Nigeria also provides a useful point of reference on exhibitions in developing countries (countries with similar development challenges faced by SIDSs). Although there is not

much analysis on the context within which exhibitions are mounted, the article delineates many of the similarities in the exhibition process identified by Lewis (2002).

## **Best practices versus The UWI Mona Library experience**

### *Planning*

As with most library projects, the planning stages of an exhibition are the most critical. Often exhibition teams or committees (led by an exhibition coordinator) having been tasked with a theme/topic must now plan for the execution of this project considering stakeholders, resources, timelines and budget. The UWI Mona Library does not have the ideal dedicated exhibition staff and in the past had a dedicated exhibition coordinator (Lewis, 2002). Currently, the staffing of exhibitions fits more into the findings of Berenbak et al. (2010): exhibition teams/committees are formed based on the exigencies of the exhibition; there is no set exhibition coordinator, but the loan and reference section in the Main Library has the primary responsibility for the curation of exhibitions and exhibition work is carried out along with other unrelated tasks.

Most of the exhibitions curated by the Library focus on outstanding UWI graduates and faculty as well as important Caribbean and Jamaican personalities and Caribbean culture. Some titles are *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: the Thought of Stuart Hall; The Haitian Bi-Centenary; Investigating Climate, Inspiring Change; P.J. Patterson-Nation Builder; The UWI Women in STEM; 'From Bunkers Hill to the Vice Chancellery, UWI'; Tourism; Edward Seaga: Statesman, Political Leader and Cultural Guardian*. These require in-depth research and months of planning and careful budgeting to have the desired impact.

Well-planned and academically rigorous exhibitions are time, resource and labour intensive. Matassa (2014) suggests that the principles of project management may be applied to exhibition projects, outlining a five-phase exhibition process. This would include idea generation, evaluation and development, planning, implementation and review. With the project team in place, the task of defining the activities required in the creation of the exhibition must begin. Factors such as budget, time management, collection security and section assignments such as the exhibition outline, research, narrative writing, object identification, reproductions, liaising with external or internal graphic artists and mocking up of physical arrangements and layout plans must be explored. Swanwick et al. (2015) indicate that the viewing of an exhibition may be impacted if the latter is not investigated in the planning process. Exploration of case construction, lighting and display support materials are critical to the planning process and eventual display quality (11).

Exhibitions should be collaborative efforts between library sections or with external stakeholders. Exhibition stakeholders in academic libraries include parties involved in the curation as well as the audience being targeted. In 2017, planning began for an exhibition and handing over ceremony for the Dudley Thompson collection which was to be donated to the Library's special collection. Ambassador Dudley Thompson, best known for his relationship with Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, was also a

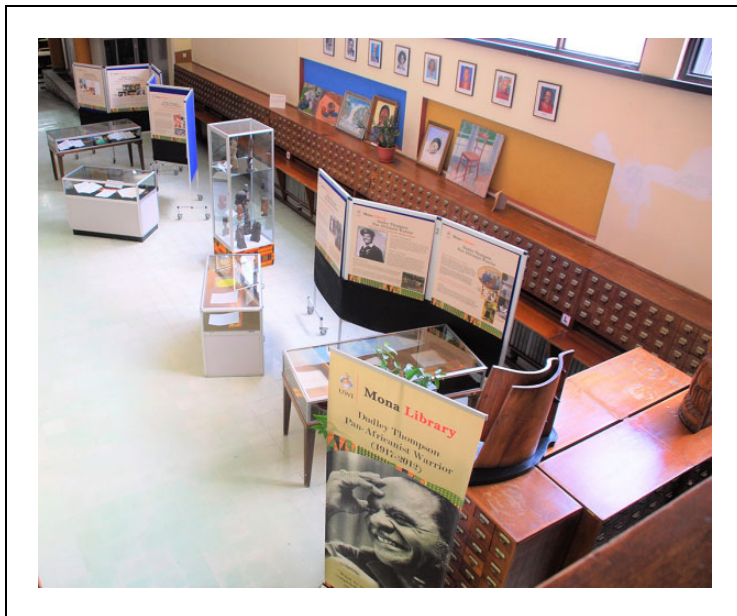
Jamaican lawyer and politician who was a pioneer and advocate of reparations to descendants of enslaved Africans. The collection to be handed over was primarily his papers on reparations for enslaved Africans. The planning team was therefore a collaboration among several offices across the Mona Campus: the Centre for Reparation and Research, the Office of the Vice Chancellery and the Library. Among Library staff on the exhibition planning team were the Head of the Special Collections section, a reference librarian, who was a designated exhibition coordinator and a library assistant. This cross-campus team enabled the sharing of knowledge and experiences: The Library staff brought technical knowledge on curating exhibitions while staff in the Centre for Reparation Research contributed subject matter knowledge and facilitated linkages to audiences and stakeholders involved in reparatory justice advocacy.

Exhibition security is also of high priority in the planning stages especially when exhibitions feature special collections or other high-value materials. Increasingly, physical exhibitions also involve dynamic and non-traditional media and elements like audiovisual materials. These can take the form of television/screen installations or looped audio pieces, which will also require securing with the exhibition layout.

### *Organising, installing, opening and maintenance*

In these stages, the Library considers several factors including design, installation/mounting, location and environment, labels and signage, safety and monitoring and marketing and promotion. The same team involved in planning continues to this stage, but the Library now also contracts the services of a graphic artist. Because textual posters are an integral part of the Library's exhibitions, the design of these posters is crucial to attracting interest and engaging audiences. In the case of the Dudley Thompson exhibition, the Library engaged the services of a printing/graphics company. The absence of an in-house graphic artist was challenging as last-minute changes were difficult to incorporate and when on-site visits were necessary, delays from travelling between offices were time-consuming. Sometimes, there was difficulty communicating the conceptualisation of posters as graphic artists were primarily experienced in design for promotion and marketing rather than academic purposes.

As the Library does not have a dedicated exhibition space, most of the exhibitions are mounted in the Library's 'Catalogue Hall', one of the main, high-traffic hallways in the Library. This space has high ceilings and is walled on two sides by retired wooden card catalogues. This lack of an exhibition 'gallery' means that the Library is restricted in the magnitude and scope of exhibitions that can be installed. Design elements such as lighting, sound and material cannot be easily accommodated. In this type of multi-use exhibition space, The UWI Mona Library is faced with the dilemma described by Johnstone (2011), in which exhibitions must be mounted in a balanced manner that maintains the functionality of the space for Library users but also does not create a distraction from the exhibition. For instance, in the absence of appropriate wall space, paintings used in the Dudley Thompson exhibition were placed on top of the card catalogue (pictured in Figure 1). Although this was not the ideal place, the layout of the



**Figure 1.** Partial overhead view of an exhibition in the Catalogue Hall, Main Library.

exhibition and the use of labels ensured cohesiveness of the entire exhibition and simultaneously facilitated use of the card catalogue.

In some cases, the Library launches exhibitions in an off-site venue before they are mounted in the Library's Catalogue Hall. This usually requires two different layout plans and flexible designs that allow for easy installation. This was the case in the Dudley Thompson exhibition. One of the challenges in mounting exhibitions in two different spaces is that they may be vastly different from each other so two different layouts are necessary (see Figure 2). A simple layout plan was discussed with the team beforehand, but the exhibition coordinator was present to provide a more detailed guide during the installation process as is usually the case at UWI Mona. This approach according to Matassa (2014: 130) may suffice in the absence of detailed plans. Matassa (2014: 72) also advises that a 'good selection of hardware should be ready for installation' and at The UWI Mona this meant having materials such as mounting tape, staple gun, tacks, cloth for lining display cases and so on available at installations.

In designing exhibitions at The UWI Mona Library, consideration is also given to the type of material on which the posters would be printed. Posters are usually laminated or reinforced on foam material or 'hardboard' backing and displayed on  $32 \times 40$  in movable exhibition boards because of the absence of wall space (also shown in Figure 1). However, more recently, standing, vinyl banners have been increasingly used because of their ease of transporting and installation, durability and seemingly attractive qualities. These are, however, more expensive than laminating, hardboard or foam backing. The



**Figure 2.** Partial view of the Dudley Thompson Exhibition mounted at The UWI Regional Headquarters. UWI: The University of the West Indies.

inclusion of audiovisual and new technologies are design elements that the Library incorporates to try to create engaging exhibitions that cater to its diverse audience.

During installation, staff knowledgeable of handling and care of special collections are crucial so additional support staff is pulled from the Preservation and Conservation Department and attendants are also co-opted to assist with the detailed mounting of materials. Because the Dudley Thompson collection consisted of mainly special collections materials, the combined knowledge and expertise of the team was useful in advising how and what items are to be displayed. For instance, the collection included hundreds of pages of transcript of the Jomo Kenyatta trial, which the Library received in digital format. These were printed and bound in the Library's bindery. For display purposes, the conservation/preservation team advised on the angle at which to display these bound texts so that pressure and damage to the spine was minimised. The team also advised on the frequency with which to turn display pages to reduce lengthy exposure to light.

The use of items from the Library's collection is governed by a policy; because many times these are items from its special collections, this policy is very detailed in its coverage. Titled, *A Guide for Exhibiting Special and General Collections at The UWI Mona Libraries*, it prescribes rules for selecting, mounting and labelling items and provides guidelines about temperature, relative humidity and lighting. Most of the rules are standard and achievable by the Library; however, there are some – such as temperature control, lighting and relative humidity – which the Library has difficulty

keeping up with. For example, one of the guidelines states that windows in the exhibition area should be tinted or an ultraviolet (UV) filter should be used to cover windows and another states that items should be exhibited in an area where the temperature and relative humidity are controlled. The guide cautions that these environments are not always possible at the Library (Newman, 2017: 13). The Catalogue Hall, for instance, has transparent glass windows close to the roof, which are not tinted. Some display cases are, however, outfitted with UV filters that offer some degree of protection. In cases where the Library is unable to maintain good preservation practices for items displayed, in keeping with its policy, the decision is usually taken to use surrogates, forego using them altogether or shorten the length of time the item is displayed. Many of the items in the Thompson collection had duplicates, so care was taken to prioritise the display of those. Watson's (2012) explanation of preservation and conservation challenges faced by SIDSs, such as the costs of and access to preservation/conservation materials and the depreciating currency, is an apt contextualisation of the situation facing the Library.

Labels and signage are explicitly covered in the Library's guide. Recommendations – such as preventing direct contact between labels and exhibited objects, the use of light-coloured paper and propping labels on wedges to accommodate all types of users – all follow general guidelines outlined in the literature.

In keeping with best practices (American Alliance of Museums, 2012; Fouracre, 2015, Matassa, 2014), The UWI Mona Library generally identifies objects (artefacts, manuscripts, related monographs) to accompany text-based exhibitions. The narrative around the Dudley Thompson exhibition focused on his work relating to Africa, so African art (which he collected) was a key feature of the exhibition. To get these objects, the Library had to identify and contact external museums and libraries as well as members of the Thompson family for assistance. Monographs were identified from the Library's general collection and audiovisual materials from the University's media/tv department – *UWI TV*. Once identified, the relevant persons were contacted and arrangements made for the exhibition coordinator to visit the sites to examine and select items. Written and signed agreements accompanied objects borrowed externally, but simple emails to the heads of departments sufficed for items from the Library's collection. Furthermore, members of the Thompson family, one of whom was the donor of the collection, were stakeholders in the exhibition and were willing to lend objects without formal contracts and were usually ready to give more than the required number of objects. Care was taken to ensure that objects were properly packaged for transport using newspapers to wrap objects that were then placed in cardboard boxes where possible. Once the items were received at the Library, staff from the Preservation and Conservation Department assessed the objects and carried out appropriate treatment and cleaning in preparation for display.

Budget constraints also meant that the Library had to partner with other departments on campus to borrow additional support materials, like display cases and display boards. However, as was the case of the vitrines borrowed from The UWI Museum, long loan periods were not always possible, so the vitrines were only loaned to the Library for the opening night.

Safety guidelines are adhered to so displays cases are usually locked and although security guards are not stationed in the exhibition area, one is positioned at the Library's entrance and does periodic patrols of the premises. The exhibition coordinator is also responsible for monitoring the exhibition to maintain display quality and to ensure the security of materials. However, other junior staff may be delegated to switch lights on/off and to turn on/off electronic items. At The UWI Regional Headquarters where the Thompson exhibition was launched and first set up (see Figure 2), security guards were on site to ensure safety and other exhibition rules were followed. This was significant because there were objects for which the Library had no suitable display case like a Masai spear and paintings by Thompson, which were on loan from a local museum. When the exhibition was moved to the Library's Catalogue Hall, the team decided not to display the Masai spear for safety and security reasons as it was not possible to adequately recreate the way it was previously displayed. Out of an abundance of caution, the paintings (see Figure 1) were also removed from the Catalogue Hall and locked away in the evenings, though the Library remained open throughout the night. These changes had the undesirable outcome of audiences seeing different exhibitions depending on when and where they visited.

The Thompson exhibition is typical of how most exhibitions that showcase a newly acquired special collection are treated. At the Library receptions/openings are an important kick-off to the promotion and marketing of exhibitions. High-profile events such as the Dudley Thompson exhibition have national impact so the media, stakeholders in the government and the academic and business community are invited to the launch. The result is that the exhibition and the collection receive attention in the national press in addition to the usual promotional strategies, like announcements via the campus-wide email system, social media posts, website posts and flyers. Launches like that of Dudley Thompson also enable Library staff to network and build a relationship with members of government and corporate leaders and provide the platform on which the Library can influence them to donate their collections to the Library.

### **Evaluating**

Integral to a determination of the impact of the Library's exhibition is consistent evaluation. This allows the Library to determine the extent of its role in advancing the productivity of faculty and students, the objectives of the Library and by extension the goals of the university. In the absence of space dedicated for exhibition, it is difficult to determine the number of persons who view the exhibits if they do not sign the visitor comments book. The most crucial data The UWI Mona Library collects on exhibitions are derived from said visitor comments books (see Figure 3). The books capture visitors' name, organisation, date and remarks on the display. This allows the Library to make a limited determination of the number of visitors, the variety of departments or organisations they represent along with patterns relating to periods when exhibitions see greater viewership and the feelings the exhibition evoked. The responses elicited as a result of an exhibition provide useful insight on the impact of an exhibition. By the standard of the American Alliance of Museums (2012: 5), some of the comments shown in Figure 3 would be indications of 'excellence' in its ability to evoke responses of 'transforming experiences'.

	NAMES	ORGANIZATIONS	COMMENTS
20/3/18	[REDACTED]	—	It's really really good... Wonderful UWI
21/3/18	[REDACTED]	U.W.I	What a wonderful window into life here! Very Good!
21/3/18	[REDACTED]	U.W.I	Interesting characters.
22/3/18	[REDACTED]	U.W.I 2	I am inspired by the writings of Buckley.
23/3/18	[REDACTED]	COLLECTOR QOT @ UWI	A great Read! Inspiring!
26/3/18	[REDACTED]	UWI	Fine Exhibition
26/3/18	[REDACTED]	UWI, CARIMAC	Again with the UWI like advise - show case quite through
27/03/18	[REDACTED]	UWI	Inspiring Work
27/3/18	[REDACTED]	ook	Excellent
28/03/18	[REDACTED]	UWI	Brilliant, very informative, very inspirational... A NEW role model

**Figure 3.** Comments from a visitor comments book at The UWI Mona Library. UWI: The University of the West Indies.

Analysing the comments books provides critical information on the relevance of using a thematic approach or mounting displays based on occurrences within the community. This is evidenced in some of the recurring exhibitions mounted at the Mona Library on academic writing, critical thinking and citations which based on faculty feedback and demand are mounted at the beginning of each semester. Qualitative methods are often recommended in evaluating exhibitions and as such data generation should be carried out while the display is mounted (Morris, 1999: 96). This evaluation of the patterns of viewership provided the Mona Library with an understanding of the practices that work best for the Library even within the realm of the generally accepted principles. It is noted, for example, that during the period that the librarians engage with departments to teach foundation writing and citation analysis courses, there is an increase in viewers of the related display. Likewise, numerous first-year students were directed to visit the exhibition in their mandatory library information literacy sessions.

Annual reports also provide a somewhat ad hoc but valuable outlook on the impact of exhibitions. They generally report the projected versus actual number of exhibitions curated, requests for loan of exhibitions or, and perhaps most important, any resulting collaboration with faculty and other stakeholders. This type of qualitative data is useful in assessing a more in-depth type of impact, but it is not always consistently reported. Undoubtedly, more deliberate effort is to be made on the part of the Library in evaluating its exhibitions; this is often given scant regard in research libraries (Fouracre, 2015: 382). A formal or established evaluation process at the Mona Library would be more efficient and capture more informative data if this was incorporated into the Library’s exhibition policy. The exhibition team would benefit from more pointed analysis because, along

with the visitor comments book, there are ways to monitor social media discussions and this big data can be harvested for future direction. While it is proposed that libraries should become more engaged with those viewing the displays by observing and even interviewing visitors, this is not advised as best practice as it is too invasive for viewers (Reece, 2005: 367). Evaluation would also be further improved with the incorporation of more multimedia technology that can digitally assess the sections of the exhibition that receive more traction. New media tools like that used by Keith et al. (2017) would also provide more immediate and effective engagement with viewers and though designed for museum exhibitions, it is worth exploring how Serrell's (2006) framework for judging exhibitions can be adapted to suit the needs of academic libraries in SIDS such as the UWI Mona.

### *Transition to online exhibitions*

The transition to online exhibitions is considered a natural progression in the digital age. As all types of libraries worldwide began to digitise their collections in the late 1990s, the possibility of mounting electronic materials as a part of an online exhibit became a reality. Online exhibitions are also referred to as virtual exhibitions. Online exhibitions now offer an added layer of visibility to the library especially in seeking donor funding as they can be accessed anytime, anywhere. The UWI Mona Library has a growing number of online digital collections but no online exhibitions. There are, however, plans afoot to recreate some old exhibition in online format.

Modern academic libraries create online exhibitions from their digital collections or with the assistance of on-campus digital humanities centres. These creations must now compete with similar outputs from art galleries and museums. Best practices can be gleaned from the literature in different areas; however, there does not appear to be consensus on method, format and software used. Kalfatovic (2002) suggests that online exhibitions follow the same structured path as traditional resources, but now technological considerations come into play. In the 15 years since Kalfatovic's work *Creating Winning Online Exhibitions*, libraries have focused on creating digitised online collections and using these to tell compelling stories. The benefits of modern online exhibitions include accessibility features such as zoom, audio, translation, tags and visitor analytics.

Online collections in academic libraries are mounted using different types of software. The online collections of The UWI Mona Library are available through the CONTENTdm OCLC platform: <https://www.mona.uwi.edu/library/digital-collections-0>. These digital collections of manuscripts, photographs and historic newspapers have been loosely curated/displayed for users to view. There is a simple blurb describing collections but limited additional information. This sort of display can inhibit the user experience due to the lack of story to engage viewers. The platform utilises the gallery mode with a single sliding bar that allows users to peruse multiple images in a single motion. Other software that may be used at the preference of an institution are Omeka (a free, open-source content management system for online digital collections), adobe design, mounted on templated website pages and coded html sites.

## Conclusion

Physical or online exhibitions generate positive benefits for academic libraries and can have a powerful impact on audiences and further the mission of academic support. Academic libraries in SIDSs have the same goals and to a large extent follow the same best practices for achieving this. However, there are constraints, primarily the cost of preservation/conservation tools and materials as a result of dollar devaluation, that restrict the scope of exhibitions. Like many other small libraries, The UWI Mona Library faces reducing or stagnant budgets that affect staff and capital expenditure like building and construction. These have challenged the Library in having a dedicated exhibition team and space – best practices which have been proven to be effective for successful library exhibitions.

Nonetheless, The UWI Mona Library has shown that, irrespective of budget and the size of an exhibition, it is possible to follow most best practices. The use of planning teams, following conservation/preservation practices to protect the display of special collections, evaluating exhibitions, collaborating with faculty and administrators and promoting and marketing exhibitions are best practices which The UWI Mona Library has adopted and utilised for creating impactful exhibitions.

Additionally, this article describes the nature of curating exhibitions in an academic library in an SIDS, and although each of these states may have unique characteristics which distinguishes one from another, economic conditions have negative effects on libraries and efforts at outreach. This is not to say that conditions at the UWI Mona Library are present in all libraries in SIDSs, but it serves as a good reference point on conditions facing libraries in these states.

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