
WIT Books for Africa Project – 10 years a-growing...

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When you give someone a book, you don't just give paper, ink and glue. You give the possibility of a whole new life. (Christopher Morley)

INTRODUCTION

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) is a third-level academic institute in the south east of Ireland with 6000 full- and 5000 part-time students and over 1000 staff. Down through the years WIT has been committed not only to being of service to its students and staff but also to reaching out to worthy international projects.

The work of the Meitheal Third World group is a case in point. (Meitheal is Gaelic for *working party*.) Formed in WIT in the mid 1990s by a group of interested academics, its mission statement involves working with colleagues in WIT towards promoting, managing and coordinating projects with colleges in developing worlds. In a bid to engage the institute community fully in its efforts, the Meitheal group is always open to suggestions for projects. The WIT Books for Africa project grew out of one such suggestion.

The project was initiated by the College Chaplain and then Deputy Librarian at WIT Libraries who had become aware of Book Aid International in the UK and who was keen to involve the library in its projects.

Book Aid International (<http://www.bookaid.org/>) was founded in 1954 by Hermione, Countess of Ranfurly, and was originally called Ranfurly Library Service.¹ It is a British non-governmental organisation whose main objective is the advancement of education and literacy in developing countries. Its work is focused in twelve countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Each book received by Book Aid International is checked for suitability by one of their librarians to ensure that the most relevant books are matched to the information needs of each country. In order to be as accessible as possible, the books are then sent to libraries within local organisations.

'We believe that, by working in close partnership with local organisations, and taking the time to carefully match books to information needs, we do help to build more literate societies'.²

IN THE BEGINNING: 2001–2

With the support of the Meitheal Group and in conjunction with Book Aid International, the Books for Africa project got under way in the 2001–2 academic year.

Based on the criteria outlined by Book Aid International, which requires books (less than ten years old) and journals (less than five years old) in good condition and of academic interest from any academic discipline, a call was put out to the college community requesting donations of recently published second-hand textbooks and journals across all subject areas. Marketing and promotional materials received from the Book Aid International Office helped to kick-start the project. Posters were displayed in and around the library, flyers were distributed in the staff postal area and an information page was established on the library website with details of the project and featuring the Book Aid International logo.

Donors were asked to deposit items at the main library desk for dispatch to the Book Aid Office in the UK. The librarian who led the project was overwhelmed by the volume of donations and the generosity of WIT staff from the word 'go'. In the first five years of the project over 3000 books were collected for projects in the developing world. The support of a local transport company must also be acknowledged, as the company provided free shipping of the boxed-up materials from WIT to the Book Aid depot in the UK.



NEW DEVELOPMENTS: 2007–8

Staff with a batch of donated books ready for collection

In 2007, due to funding cuts and limited warehouse space, Book Aid International stopped accepting second-hand donations. They had indeed by then already received more brand-new books from UK publishers than they could accommodate and ship. This meant that WIT's Third World Group needed to source a new distribution partner for the Books for Africa project.

We were delighted to become aware of and to partner with Read International (<http://readinternational.org.uk/>), a young and vibrant UK-based organisation founded in 2005 by a group of passionate and visionary students whose mission statement reads as follows:

'...through collaborative, student led initiatives we will empower young people to secure a poverty-free future for themselves by improving their access to education'³

This mission and vision marries well with that of the WIT Third World Group and WIT Books for Africa project. Our first shipment to Read International of over 800 books took place in 2008.

FURTHER CHANGES: 2009

By 2009 a number of library staff had become involved in the Books for Africa project. Having more staff on board meant we could spread our wings a bit and move the collection points beyond the library desk. A more proactive approach to gathering books involved setting up collection points around the campus as well as in both the main and branch libraries. Key areas such as staff post rooms were chosen as central collection points. Empty boxes and promotional posters and flyers were set up in these areas to assist staff donations.

Over 800 books were dispatched to Read International for developing world projects in 2010. In line with former donations, the majority of books were in the business, engineering and science fields, with a smattering of humanities titles also included in the shipment.

BON VOYAGE: 2012

We decided to make our most recent collection coincide with World Book Day on 1 March 2012. We set up a display at the library entrance to highlight the event and to draw staff and students' attention to both World Book Day and the Books for Africa project. The MACTrans lorry arrived in the afternoon to collect the shipment of over 900 books. On-the-spot feedback from students was very positive and staff responded well to the promotional photos that were published in WITNESS, an in-house publication at WIT.

CONCLUSION

In the ten years since the project started, we estimate that up to 8000 textbooks have been dispatched as far afield as Tanzania through the Books for Africa project. We are currently collecting materials for our next shipment and hope to continue to work with the Meitheal Third World group in WIT to facilitate the donation of academic textbooks to the developing world for the foreseeable future.

REFERENCES

- 1 S. Blue, 'Book Aid International: relieving the book crisis in developing countries', *Library review*, 43:2 (1994), pp. 37–45

- 2 B. Murphy, 'Book Aid International: core work and new directions', *Focus on international library and information work*, 39:2 (2008), pp. 65–68
- 3 Read International <http://readinternational.org.uk/> [accessed 13 August 2012]