Campus library goes hi-tech

By Evan Mwangi

The Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library has installed Information Technology (IT) facilities for students' use, the management has revealed.

As academic institutions the world over move full throttle into the information super-highway, University of Nairobi students are no longer at ease with old methods of research, says Ms Salome Mathangani, the university librarian.

Posters on the main door of the library say that the university is now connected to universities, libraries, information centres, and publishers world-wide. There are Internet and e-mail facilities at a fee and CD-ROM services for free. "Take advantage of our affordable charges to browse the net and access the vast quantity of information in the global village cheaply," the notice says in part .

However, Ms Mathangani admits the university is experiencing teething problems. It is not generating enough income and the room is not enough. "With only one surfer, the project can only meet telephone costs and part of the subscription fees," she adds.

Nevertheless, Ms Jacinta Were, a senior librarian in charge of the computer department, says that e-mail facilities are shipshape. The department is also offering word-processing (the computer patois for typing). According to the administration, the data bases in the library have a network from many universities across the world. In a few minutes, the library is able to compile a bibliography of the studies carried out in a certain field, the computer department says.

But what about Internet? The library management says that the facility has been suspended so that the library can gather momentum to provide the service in full force. Ms Were, told *The Anvil* in an interview that plans are underway to bring in more surfers so that many students can surf at once.

The facility is very popular with students, necessitating suspension to enable the management acquire more computers as surfing terminals, she said.

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In a two months' pilot study between December and January, the service proved "extremely popular" especially with engineering students, says the librarian.

"Even without the Internet, the library can download material for students from the United States Information Services, says Ms Mathangani, adding that plans are underway to create a web-site for the giant library in the premier institution of learning.

She is optimistic that Internet services will resume soon. With more surfers, the project will be able to stand on its own because one surfer use the same telephone time as five surfers networked from the same frame. "However, it will be a process because we need some networking from the Institute of computer Science," she said.

Observers are skeptical about the promise that Internet services will resume 'soon'. In the digital communication age, there is nothing like soon. To a computer, soon means a fraction of a second, but to a university bureaucrat it may mean a millennium.

Dubbed the "nervous system of society", the Internet is a must to any university that considers itself not yet dead. Most courses in the university are taught in one semester, and the students will never have a chance to go back to them in a lifetime on campus. This means that a student who has no access to the Internet for a semester will have no on-line information for the more than eight units covered in that period.

In an ideal university, according to Prof. Felix Gutierrez, whose views *The Anvil* got on-line, a student does not have to depend fully on the professor for knowledge and evaluation. As the new millennium approaches, "students come to class with different technological knowledge obtained in different ways... and the students may know something the faculty doesn't." Not so in Nairobi. Professors, some of whom do not know the difference between a byte and a browser, are still the uncontested sources of knowledge.

While other universities are instructing students to submit their work electronically, and the work is, in turn, graded electronically, University of Nairobi still depends on paper and pencil methods. This outdated method should be replaced by the computer.

Further, in a university where the exchange programme at the level of students is uni-directional (foreign students come to the university but very few local students have ever been to an airport) the Internet can be used to team up students with others in the country and around the world.