

Per the report, educational books dominate the publishing market in Uganda.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

A new British Council report titled "Publishing Futures" revealed a study of the publishing landscapes of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The research for this study was conducted between January and June 2024.

"The report's focus was on six countries where [the] British Council has a presence, representing East, Southern, and West Africa to achieve a geographical spread and a range of market sizes. As publishing continues to evolve and respond to contemporary opportunities and challenges it remains a vibrant expression of the continent's creativity and resilience of its young people," Farai Ncube, regional director Arts, Sub-Saharan Africa, British Council, writes in the foreword of the report.

Rachel Stevens, the director of literature at the British Council, also chips in, noting: "This research has been designed and led by experts across the African continent in consultation with industry leaders, who have generously shared their insights and experience."

The report is an in-depth study of the trade publishing and literature sectors in the following sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

It offers an up-to-date overview of the sectors in each country, with a particular focus on recent developments, and the creative individuals working within these fields.

The research identifies innovative practices, opportunities for collaboration and challenges faced by publishers working in each country.

Research on African literatures—especially relating to creative writing—is frequently covered in the academic press, but studies on the trade publishing and literature sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa are much less available.

Uganda's publishing landscape

According to this British Council report, in 2023, the inaugural issue of the journal, *The Weganda Review*, was published. Founded by author and journalist Rodney Muhumuza, the publication features fiction, poetry, essays, art and more.

The Weganda Review is a Pan-African publication that welcomes contributions from across Africa as well as the diaspora, while having its roots in Uganda.

Also in 2023, award-winning Ugandan novelist Goretti Kyomuhendo republished her novel *Whispers from Vera*.

In an interview published in *Brittle Paper*, Kyomuhendo disclosed that the new edition was available in different formats.

The first edition, which was published in 2002, only appeared in paperback and was mostly distributed in Uganda.

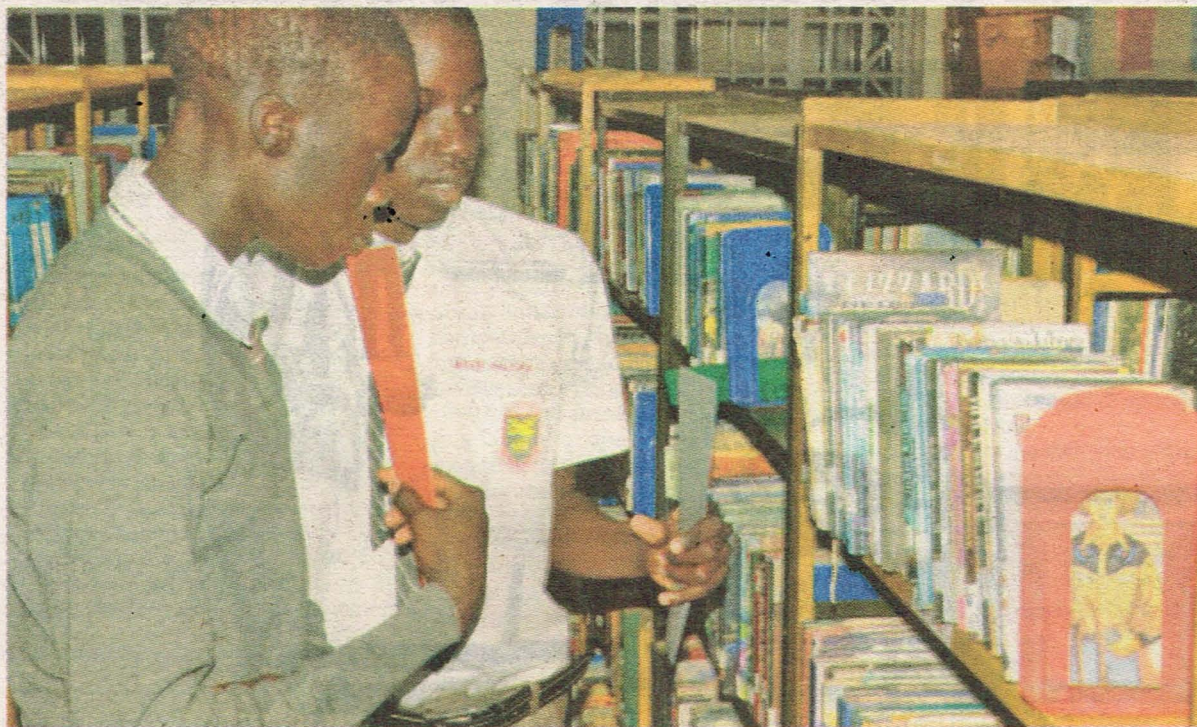
Per the report, educational books dominate the publishing market in Uganda. The government prioritised education since independence as a means to severing the link between ignorance and poverty, the report reveals.

However, according to the report, there is an emerging set of non-traditional publishers who are eager to promote new voices.

To a large extent, their emergence has expanded publishing in the country and increased access to books.

According to the World Intellectual

British Council report sizes up future of publishing in Uganda



Students look at some books in a library. Research on African literatures—especially relating to creative writing—is frequently covered in the academic press, but studies on the trade publishing and literature sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa are much less available. PHOTO/FILE

Property Organisation (2023), a total of 1,523 books were deposited at selected legal repositories in Uganda. Publishers in the country are mandated by law to deposit any new book in the library. The types of books submitted to the library include educational, religious, cultural, self-help, leisure and fiction.

For many years, self-publishing was seen as a humiliating indication that a writer wasn't good enough to be signed on by a traditional publisher.

With few traditional publishing opportunities available, even for talented authors, industry professionals have stepped in to offer guidance to self-published authors so that the quality of their work can be enhanced.

In 2024, African Writers Trust in Uganda organised a seminar on the theme: 'Self Publishing in Africa: What you need to know' to discuss how self-published books, not just those published in Uganda but also across SSA, can meet in-

ternational publishing standards.

The discussions were facilitated by Goretti Kyomuhendo, an author, Bieke van Aggelen, founder of the African Literary Agency, and Susan Kiguli, a poet and professor of Literature at Makerere University. Authors from Uganda, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and South Sudan attended the programme.

Uganda had its first major international conference, the first African Writers Conference, shortly after gaining independence in 1962.

The historic event was held at Makerere University. African writers, who would later become well known, attended this conference, including Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe.

Rajat Neogy, the creator of *Transition*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Lewis Nkosi, and Ezekiel Mphahlele were among the other well-known African writers who attended.

There are few notable literary awards to reward innovation and celebrate the publishing and literature sectors in the country. In 2023, The Writivism Literary Initiative relaunched its literary prizes after a three-year hiatus. Its first literary event was held in Kampala in 2013.

The categories for the 2023 awards were short fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry in translation. The National Book Trust of Uganda Literary Awards (NABOTU Literary Awards) was last held in 2020, but organisers plan to resume the awards in 2025.

In 2016, the Okot P'Bitek Prize was launched as a one-off prize to mark the 50th anniversary of the book *Song of Lawino*. The Janzi Awards was held for the first and only time in 2021, to celebrate outstanding achievements and innovation in the arts, including writing.

Some key players

The trade sector is relatively small in

Uganda. Only a couple of long-established independent publishers can perform the dual role of publishing both educational and literary books. These publishers have been able to give a voice to some underrepresented groups and document the country's history.

Fountain Books was established in 1988, following a national campaign for the creation of an indigenous publishing house. Prior to this, Uganda depended on books imported from Kenya and Europe.

Some respondents in this study have acknowledged the role that Fountain Books has played in the country. Fountain did a lot of publishing of Uganda's seminal works around history, novels and poetry.

A publisher, FEMRITE, the Ugandan Women Writers' Association, has also been very visible in the country's publishing sector and on the continent. Since its inception in 1996, the organisation has focused on developing women writers in the country.

Driving innovation

Uganda launched the Digital Transformation Roadmap in 2023. In line with Uganda's Vision 2040, the roadmap envisages Uganda as a digital society.

In this dispensation, 90 percent of households should have an Internet connection by 2040, according to the roadmap, and 90 percent of residents should be able to access government services online.

Enhancing digital infrastructure and connectivity, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship, and boosting digital literacy and skills are some of the ways the government hopes to achieve the objectives of its digital strategy.

In 2024, African Writers Trust launched an online bookshop called Tubaze African Books. The mission of the store is to sell books by African writers published outside the continent at an affordable price in Uganda.

Customers can purchase books by making bank transfers or using mobile money. Upon receipt of payment, orders are delivered within a day, depending on the location.

In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, two women; Phyllis Katembwe and Crystal Mugimba, founded an online bookstore—Mahiri Books—to support African writers and increase accessibility to literature. Payments for books can be made via mobile money, cash on delivery and credit cards.

Some publishing enterprises in Uganda have deliberately refrained from adopting digital technologies due to their corporate mission.

One of the core missions of Oasis Book Project is to produce affordable print books. Its target audiences are financially underprivileged and could view the technology needed to consume digital books as luxuries.

Beyond digital technology, publishing entrepreneurs in the country have also created innovative practices. The Kampala Book Market was established as a street market for writers, readers, publishers, literary performers and book-sellers to come together in an open and engaging environment.

Its primary goal is to enhance the visibility and accessibility of Ugandan and African literature as a whole.

CONTRIBUTION TO CREATIVE ECONOMY

A Culture and Development East Africa (CDEA) 2023 report 'Mapping the Current Landscape of the Culture and Creative Industries in Uganda' identifies five sub-sectors that make up the creative economy: fashion, creative technology, film, literature and publishing, music and performing arts and the visual arts and crafts.

The report notes that there is no specific fund established by the Ugandan government to assist the creative industries operating in the country. Therefore, funding for creative spaces comes from the business sector, development partners, or individual creative entrepreneurs.

In terms of employment, the report suggests that most jobs in the literature sector are with

publishing houses. The report also reveals that many authors in the country are self-published and that some of the jobs in the sector have low pay, while others are part-time.

There are a handful of publishing and creative writing programmes offered in universities in Uganda. Makerere University, one of the leading universities in the country, offers the editing and publishing course as a module in the Bachelor of Arts with Communication Skills programme.

Topics covered in this course include copy editing, proof reading, working with authors, making editorial decisions and developing skills in critical reading.

Bugema University's editing and publishing in Luganda module teaches students editing and

publishing and introduces them to a range of skills needed in the industry, while also supporting indigenous language publishing in the country.

The Islamic University of Uganda also offers a postgraduate module on the theory of editing and publishing. Makerere University offers an introduction to creative writing module at the undergraduate level.

Author-led writing programmes have also been operating in the country.

The writer Jackee Batanda founded Success Spark Brand Ltd, to provide writing, coaching, book writing, editing, and book marketing services to Ugandan authors.