

# COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND ACQUISITION IN ASIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: Some Current Issues

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## INTRODUCTION

Before I start my talk today, I would like to make it clear to you that I am not trying to present you a highly academic or technical paper. Instead, I would like to share with you some of my observations and thoughts on the topic I have chosen, based on my extensive experience for more than 18 years working with academic libraries in Asia. Hopefully, it could provide you with some food for thought on some of the current issues and trends on the topic.

The topic of my talk is: Collection Development and Acquisition in Asian Academic Libraries: some current issues

### *First, the challenge*

At the dawn of the digital age, I strongly believe that the biggest issue for collection development today is the challenge librarians face in our eWorld where everything seem to be going digital. Librarians are adding more and more electronic materials in their libraries and e-books, e-journals and online databases are increasingly becoming more in demand. Traditional libraries are turning into hybrid digital libraries and many may someday migrate to full-fledged digital libraries. I consider most traditional libraries today as hybrid digital libraries as most would have Internet access in their libraries. Perhaps more than 90% of all libraries in the big cities of Asia are hybrid as the Internet today is very common in all types of libraries. It is becoming more and more difficult to find a library that has its collection only in printed materials.

### *Do I need to go to the library?*

I recently asked a university professor at a leading academic institution in Thailand how often he went to the university library. I was shocked to hear his reply. He said he stopped going to his university library, as he did not see any need to do so since all he needed was the Internet and “Google.” If I were a librarian at that university or any university for that matter, I would be absolutely worried that my job could be made redundant very soon. This directly brings us to the question of the collection in a library. Do we still have the collection needed by our users?

### *Do I need the services of a librarian?*

This is a real challenge for all librarians. Librarians today must ask if their jobs are being made redundant and if their services are still in demand. Must they try to change and adapt to a rapidly changing world? A whole new computer savvy eGeneration is growing up with a highly mobile and free lifestyle. Their information need is “quick, accurate, easily accessible at anytime and anywhere.” And the publishing industry seems to be adapting and responding to this need faster than the library community. One apparent example is clearly demonstrated by a recent announcement by one of the Thai publishers that it will enable mobile phone users to download e-books on their phones very soon.

With the advent of a digital boom, the library profession is clearly under threat. How are librarians preparing themselves to meet the new demands and expectations of these eGeneration users? Library professionals must now find ways to adapt, as libraries are going digital in small or big ways sooner or later. The fundamentals and principles of collection development and what is being taught in library schools may no longer be adequate and relevant. Therefore, the training and education of library and information professionals may be due for an overhaul.

### ***Collection development issues –***

#### *Collection development in the digital age: some general considerations*

Given the rapid development in electronic publishing in recent years, some doomsayers have predicted that in 10 years there will be no more print books published. Whether or not that could happen in 10 years or longer is not a big issue as many skeptics can argue that television has never replaced radio and airplanes have never replaced trains. The current big issue we are facing is how much and what digital materials do we need in our libraries today. Do they replace the traditional print materials and do we still need print materials? What is the trend in electronic publishing versus print publishing in view of the fact more than 90% of information today is still in print? Do we need more and separate budgets for acquiring new digital materials, as they could be more costly? What about copyright and access issues? And is it time to completely review our collection development policy? All these plus many other questions undoubtedly will surface in many librarians’ minds. Therefore, I would like to address a few of these questions and issues today within the limited time I have.

#### *Different user expectations call for different collection development policies*

Collection development policies are like constitutions that are constantly being challenged, revised, and updated according to the changing environment. In a digital and knowledge-based environment, users’ expectations are very different from the past. Therefore, it is inevitable that collection development policies and selection guidelines should keep abreast of publishing trends, user expectations and lifestyle changes, and socio-economic developments.

I quote what Demas said 10 years ago: “Electronic publishing has profound implications for collection development, which is defined as the intentional and systematic building of the set of information resources to which the library

provides access. While the principles of collection development, which were developed in the world of print publications, do not change radically with new publishing technologies, methods of decision making and specific selection guidelines must be adjusted significantly to incorporate new publishing formats.”

Therefore, library collection today should include digital multi-media materials to reflect new lifestyles of the new eGeneration. All libraries including academic libraries need to consider having these multi-media collections in their libraries, as the lines separating PCs and other consumer electronics get fainter. New service is being tested now to provide digital multi-media contents for laptops, PC tablets, car devices and TV sets.

*Asia is a multi-culture and multi-language region, therefore library collections too are unique*

Then there is the question of how many books and journals to acquire in languages other than English. In general, academic libraries in Asia have a high percentage of their collections in English. However, in countries like Thailand, China, Korea, and Japan, most students are more comfortable reading and listening in their own native languages; therefore, the native language collection is sizable in comparison with the English language collection.

*Availability of digital material versus print material:*

E-journals versus print journals:

We have seen in the past few years the increasing popularity of online journals among academic libraries worldwide. The simple fact is that only by publishing online can publishers cut down the time to get the publications to the readers, not to mention the advantages of multiple users accessing the same titles any time and anywhere. The process of publishing in print is time consuming as it involves many steps before the materials finally arrive at a printer. A printer usually takes at least a few days for printing and binding, followed by more time and cost for distribution. Up-to-date information on scientific and medical research published in print journals often defeats the purpose by arriving too late for researchers to fully make use of the latest research findings. In future, we will be seeing more scientists and researchers opt to publish themselves online without going to a publisher, if they can overcome the questions of credibility.

E-books versus print books:

Although books by their very nature are less time sensitive compared with news magazines and scientific journals, the trend is certain that more and more titles are being made available in e-book format. More and more players will appear besides the current leading providers such as NetLibrary and Baker and Taylor. As I mentioned earlier, a Thai publisher will be offering e-books for downloading on mobile phones and presumably on PCs as well. The e-books will be in the Thai language. We will be seeing this trend that ebooks will begin to appear in most Asian languages. There is also speculation that many will be published only electronically. This may mean a fewer number of books in print will be published in future. And this trend will directly affect library collection policies as one cannot try to buy what is not being produced. The popularity of e-books among

the public will soon be further enhanced by the newer generation of reading devices including pocket PC, mobile phones, PDAs and other handheld machines.

Despite of this seemingly popular trend, librarians should be constantly aware of their users' habits if it justifies increasing e-book collection and what type of e-books to be included. Recent surveys have indicated that the average time most library users spend accessing e-books was only 10 minutes. This might also indicate that most were using e-books mainly as reference, dipping in and out of them as needed. Very few are actually reading in a sustained manner as they do when reading a print book. Perhaps, it is again the question of technology that has not yet made it as comfortable as reading a book printed on paper. I wonder how many of you would really want to read a book on your mobile phone, PDA or lap top PC today. Perhaps most of you are like me preferring to wait until e-book actually have the look and feel of a print book as I believe that is where the technology is heading for.

#### *Issues of collection quality, evaluation and benchmarks*

Is there such a thing as a perfect collection in any library? Likewise, is there is a perfect library in a true sense? How can a librarian possibly be able to build a collection that will satisfy the unique needs of each of the thousands of users using the same library? Is there any benchmark for an Asian university library's collection and what are the best ways of evaluating a collection? What guidelines are there for such evaluation? And can a foreign consultant without much experience in the country or the region do the job satisfactorily? Collections in many Asian countries are unique as they tend to be composed of local or regional language materials together with some special subject parameters. And materials collected can be very diversified consisting of not only books but also non-print media of local contents.

Despite all these questions, it is important for Asian academic libraries to constantly evaluate their collections to be aware of the status of the collection and its relevance and popularity to users.

#### *Acquisitions issues*

The bottom line of any library's acquisition function is to acquire ALL the library materials the library intends to collect according to the collection development policy and by obtaining the materials in the quickest manner and the most cost-effective way. This sounds simple yet it involves the professionalism of the collection development and acquisitions librarians working together, often with a reliable vendor to achieve the goals.

#### *Bureaucracy and red tape hinder acquisition and impact collection development*

There are times librarians are frustrated by bad policies from the institution or government that hinder their efforts to carry out their task in the most professional manner in order to create a collection that will greatly benefit their users and by using their budget in the most effective way.

Some policies among institutions can mean very cumbersome procedures requiring price comparison between vendors by requesting for price quotations as practiced by some universities in Thailand and open competitive bidding as practiced in Taiwan. As a result of these long complicated procedures in obtaining books, very often many books are out of print or the information may become obsolete by the time the books arrive.

Unfortunately, these are examples of absolutely self-inflicted bureaucracy that can easily be avoided if the top management of an institution recognizes the negative effect the procedures bring to the library at large affecting the quality of their academic programs.

As for negative government policy, the best example perhaps is the Malaysian government directive that all state institutions must buy their books from only the government appointed book suppliers numbering more than a hundred. Most if not all librarians in Malaysia know that the professionalism of the majority of these contract appointed suppliers is at best dubious and their failure to perform professionally directly hinders a library collection development program. Very often libraries are forced to substitute unobtainable titles with other easily obtainable titles, not to mention frequent long delays in obtaining the publications. I strongly believe the government was ignorant of this negative impact on the libraries when formulating such policies more than 10 years ago. Perhaps it is time for librarians to reexamine and reevaluate their position and the policies and bring them to the attention of the authority concerned to make positive changes for the benefits of the users who are mostly students, faculty staff members, researchers and some members of the public.

Incidentally, the government of Abdullah Badawi that prides itself in good governance of accountability and transparency has just won an overwhelming victory in the recent election. I strongly believe this negative policy will not last much longer with such a highly efficient government.

It might be interesting to evaluate the negative impact on collections in some major Malaysian state university libraries (after more than 10 years of operating under such conditions) by comparing the quality of their collections with those in university libraries in countries such as Singapore that enjoy total freedom.

There are also cases of unusual practice adopted by some librarians themselves that hinder good collection development programs in their own libraries. For example, there are some librarians in the Philippines participating in dubious schemes of book shopping trips organized by representatives of various US publishers or distributors based in Manila and Singapore, such as all expenses paid trips to Singapore for as long as a week. One would wonder if all the books bought on such a trip would fall within the criteria of collection development policies. Besides, does such practice contravene the "*Code of Ethics*" for librarians? Thus the collection development policies of these libraries can be highly questionable. Perhaps there are still many academic libraries in Southeast Asia that do not have any good collection development policies properly carried out by collection development librarians.

Libraries in Hong Kong and Singapore are the most fortunate as they are not subject to any such red tape. Therefore, I believe most academic libraries in Hong Kong and Singapore are efficiently managed, with very sound collection development policies that they can always carry out without any undue interference. Their relationships with vendors are also among the best and many have developed long-term relationships with vendors that help them in some way to achieve their long-term goals, such as having established and fine-tuned approval plans for a long period of time.

*Problems in acquiring books published in the Asia-Pacific countries:*

Libraries in Asia generally do not have problems obtaining books published in North America and Europe as they are mostly well distributed in the region. Also libraries are well served by professional American or European book vendors. Ironically, it seems that most libraries often find it hard or impossible to acquire books published in their neighboring countries or other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. There are many reasons for that. First, many books published in the region are from small and medium-sized publishers that cannot afford and do not have a good distribution network. Therefore, many are not too interested in marketing outside their own countries. Second, Asia is such a big diversified region with many different languages and cultures. Communication and transportation can be very complicated. Third, there are very few specialized vendors that can provide satisfactory and cost effective services. Among the very few vendors that have identified this problem, only YBP have made great progress to fill this gap by launching the “World English” program last year with an aim to ultimately cover all English books published in the entire region. The outlook has never been brighter.

*New developments and trends in book acquisition*

One of the new developments and trends in acquisition for Asian academic libraries is the forming of consortia for acquisition to create value and bring maximum benefits to all participating libraries. Forming consortia for online resources is not new among libraries in Asia. Unlike consortia formed in the US, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, these consortia in most Asian countries, in the past, have not included book acquisitions. But there is now a trend toward more and more existing consortia to include books both in print and in electronic format. New consortia are also being discussed in Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, and here in the Philippines. There are many advantages for libraries to participate in a consortium, a sort of buying club, besides maximizing their budget and improving their workflow. The economies of scale provide for a close working relationship with the supplier in getting the books at the most cost-effective manner and fastest possible speed. The professionalism and state-of-the-art vendor system will also greatly enhance the duties of collection development and acquisition librarians. I encourage all of you to take a look at some of the world’s most successful academic library consortia. These include:

*OhioLINK, USA [www.ohiolink.edu/about/what-is-ol.html](http://www.ohiolink.edu/about/what-is-ol.html)*

*ARLAC, Academic & Research Libraries Acquisitions Consortium, Australia*  
[www.caval.edu.au](http://www.caval.edu.au)

*CONZULAC Acquisitions Consortium, New Zealand* [www.conzul.ac.nz](http://www.conzul.ac.nz)

Another trend in academic libraries today is to streamline library selection and technical workflows. Libraries are seeking to integrate these processes through links between their local systems, vendor databases (for selection, order and other functions) and national databases (for cataloging).

Some libraries have gone as far as outsourcing their technical services to their book vendors or working with local allied partners. I like to think of outsourcing as an alternative to keeping of an army capable of draining the library budget when there is no war to be fought. One of the many advantages is flexibility that appeals to many libraries, especially those that are not in a position to hire more staff members.

One other newest trend is the recent launching of books on demand in the US. With the advance of this new technology, the job of an acquisitions librarian may have to be redefined. In this new environment, the role of an acquisitions librarian in future may become somewhat more like a printer and publisher arranging for selected titles to be printed and distributed. Perhaps not all books published are available on demand.

*Finally, some issues related to the library budget:*

Finally we come to the issue of money. I have never met a single librarian among the thousands of them I have met over the years who has ever told me that he had more than enough funds for his library. Librarians are always complaining about the lack of money. If a library does not have an adequate budget for the library materials that are needed to fulfill its collection development policies, there will certainly be a negative impact on its collection. Assuming that a library has an adequate budget for all the materials it needs, there are also questions of how much budget to allocate for various types of library materials as this is constantly changing depending on the prevailing collection focus at the time. There is absolutely no set rule. It also depends on the type of library and its users. For example, a medical library may spend up to 90% for serials (more and more of them e-journals) whereas a typical university central library may be spending most of its budget for general reference materials as various faculty libraries maintain their special collections in their own fields of study. There is also the question of how to properly manage the budget and spend the funds available in the most cost-effective manner. Therefore, the trend of many academic libraries today is to form consortia to streamline the workflow and to acquire library materials including books in the most cost-effective way by creating the best value for all participating libraries.

I have just raised a number of questions and issues related to collection development and acquisitions. I admit I do not have the complete answers nor can I suggest any solution for all of them. I do hope that you, as library professionals,

will be able to think about all these and some other issues that I have not covered and find answers and solutions for them.

One thing for sure, all these changes, trends, and new developments, imply new competencies, new skills, new knowledge to be acquired by librarians and graduates of “Library & Information Science” schools. The curriculum and the continuous professional development programs for librarians should be designed to prepare and equip the profession to face these issues and challenges.

Thank you very much.