Collection Development Policies and Practical Guidelines for Academic and Research Libraries in Asia

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Abstract

This paper deals with the evaluation and selection aspects of collection development within Asian libraries. Collection development policies must be specific and usage studies conducted on a regular basis. New technology and access options along with budget restrictions are creating opportunities for the networking of regional libraries. As institutions shift emphasis from the local library to the consortia, this directly impacts the policy for selecting materials, too. In light of these changes, the traditional method for purchasing information (and in what format it will be accessed) must be adapted to accept today’s new realities. The goal of this paper is to encourage the leaders of today’s libraries to actively participate in the creation of collection development policies that reflect not only the needs of their own organization and the consortia, but which focus on the ultimate users and their needs.

Definition of Collection Development

The collection development policy is fundamental to the library. Any institution which seeks to have its center of information function as more than a warehouse for old documents must have a formal policy for the selection, ordering, storage and / or access to the materials that are vital to its existence.

Some of the factors that influence which journals should be in a library’s collection include: subscription cost, subscriptions available elsewhere, extent of coverage by abstracting and indexing services, frequency of citation to a title from other publications, extent of recorded library use, frequency
of publication of the item, and relevance to the institutional objectives. I especially like Michael Webster’s recommended guidelines for evaluating a library’s current collection:

Among the acknowledged mechanisms for collection analysis are the following: comparing holdings against recognized authoritative lists; judging the collection in terms of published standards for libraries; assessing the ability of the collection to meet the needs of users at the appropriate study and research levels; analyzing data pertaining to volume count and growth; compiling circulation and in-house use statistics; testing shelf availability of items in the collection; scrutinizing interlibrary loan data; and conducting user opinion surveys.

These are two good lists, but I would not base my decisions on these factors alone. Other important criteria will be introduced later in this paper. Also, the factors given above are not listed in order of importance. Personally, my research has shown me that for established libraries usage statistics are a more reliable measurement of a collection’s usefulness than authoritative lists or published standards. Invariably, detailed usage studies over time have shown that macro-level information (i.e. ISI Impact Factors and published standards or lists) cannot be used as an accurate guide for making collection management decisions in a specific library.

The library should have a list of parameters specifically tailored to the needs of its parent institution. Under normal circumstances, the parameters being used will have been recommended by an information professional(s) familiar with the long term and short term goals of the institution, then reviewed by a committee familiar with the institution and its primary users. Once agreed upon, the collection development policy should be published and distributed to anyone potentially involved with the acquisition of new materials, to be used as a yardstick when deciding what to buy and what not to buy.

Collection development for a library consortium (a group of “related” libraries committed to work as a unit for the purpose of sharing resources, materials, costs, etc.) takes the traditional definition of collection development to a higher plane. The collection development policy of the institution must
now be examined in light of the needs of the consortium and the commitments of the local collection to
the needs of the group as a whole. And this is not a simple step.

I am fortunate to have a job that lets me travel around the Far East and Southeast Asia. Frankly, while collection development is a hot topic with librarians in this region, most libraries still do not have a specific collection development policy. It appears that the goal of collection development for most libraries is to buy as much as they can with the allotted amount of money they will receive for that fiscal year. Only the brand new libraries (some with “unlimited” budgets!) are able to buy whatever they want when they want it, but of course that period of easy money only lasts a few years. Library directors, department heads, and anyone involved with making library policy need to be aware of the materials selection process within their library. There have been major changes in the way information can now be accessed, and the responsible leader must be aware of the options in order to formulate the library’s long term collection policy. It is unfortunate that more of the region’s libraries do not have clearly defined, measurable collection development goals and policies.

**The Goals must be Specific**

Ideally, the library should set as a collection development goal a target to satisfy a specific percentage of user information requests [here a request is being defined broadly to include book loans, journal photocopies, interlibrary loan (ILL), CD-ROM searches, orders for individual articles (DDS), etc.] Depending on the size of a library’s materials budget, and the availability of ILL and DDS, the library should establish an expected fulfillment rate. It may be as high as 99% or as low as 50%. The setting of specific goals must be accompanied by periodic measurement to know if the goal is being attained. The methodical collection of usage statistics and their subsequent analysis will give the collection librarian the hard data he needs to make intelligent decisions with regard to which subscriptions to protect as core titles essential to the research of the institution, and which titles to access on a citation basis only (purchase on an as-needed basis from a document delivery service or ILL).

The Library of the Cetus Corporation in Emeryville, California spent three years collecting photocopy statistics. Each time an article was photocopied, an extra copy of the first page was placed
in a box beside the photocopier. These were then keyed into a database software program (like Microsoft Access) which kept track of the usage statistics. At the end of three years the library had a very clear picture of which in-house journals were being actively used. DDS (document delivery service) requests were also tallied to monitor use of non-library journals. During the three-year study a total of 1,673 journals were accessed. Of these it was determined that only 330 titles were used frequently enough to merit subscription. During a five-year period (starting at the beginning of the study), the total number of subscriptions was reduced from a high of 590 to a final 330 titles. Yet during that period the number of article requests fulfilled from the library’s in-house collection rose from 44 to 66%. The library was also able to determine that for them to satisfy 75% of their users’ requests in-house it would require a subscription budget of $100,000. If a target was set of 85% then a subscription budget of $200,000 would be necessary.

Cost-per-use

In effect, what the Cetus Library was doing was to calculate the cost-per-use amount for the materials being accessed in their library. Cost-per-use should always be the key factor in deciding whether to keep or renew a publication. And measuring cost-per-use is essential to understanding what your users are reading. So often purchasing decisions are made solely based on the annual subscription fee of a journal / database. Invariably, when a title has to be cut, it is the expensive ones that go first. A publication’s purchase price must be divided by the number of times it was accessed over a 12 to 36 month period, and then that amount used to compare the value of different publications to the parent institution.

The obstacle to measuring cost-per-use is that someone somehow has to count usage and analyze the results. Many libraries do not have the manpower to do the job. For many Asian libraries, in spite of significant budget and materials increases, library staffing has not increased. This is especially true in Taiwan. The same number of people are having to do many times more work than they did ten years ago. So when asked about evaluating the relevance of a collection by compiling circulation and in-house use statistics the common response is that there is neither enough manpower nor enough time.
All of which is a shame, because experts agree that continual assessment of the collection is necessary, and advise that a full-scale evaluation (like the one described above) should be conducted every three to four years.\(^5\)

**Collection Development Issues in Asia Today**

Collection development in Asian has become a hot topic in the past few years. Yet, only a few libraries have staff with the title: “Head of Collection Development” (or any other name that would be used to describe such a position). I can still remember the first time I met a collection development librarian. It was Ruth Miller at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Of course, this does not mean that the other libraries in this region do not practice collection development, but rather that the structure is different than what is common in the West. Here in Asia, the reference librarian usually deals with all aspects of selecting (and in some libraries, ordering) reference works such as abstracts and indexes (paper and CD-ROM), directories, and which agents to use for DDS. The serials department handles the orders for subscriptions, unless there is a separate acquisitions department (more the exception than the norm). They also pass publisher advertisements, sample issues, etc. on to the faculties (departments) for their review, since the recommendations to buy new serials usually come from the users (a professor, doctor, researcher, etc.). In most Asian libraries, there simply is no one, single individual with the sole responsibility to analyze the library’s collection and search the world for new publications that will improve the quality of the library’s holdings and help the university meet its goals. In most American libraries there is a full time Collection Development Librarian. The larger research libraries usually have several on staff, and often an entire collection development department, with each librarian specializing in his own specific subject (or format) of expertise.

At first glance some might feel the lack of a designated collection specialist to be a major shortcoming, especially in light of the organizational emphasis Western libraries have historically put on the this position. Many of Asia’s librarians have pondered over the question of whether their library should create a new position for collection development\(^6\). However, recent papers coming out of the U.S. have openly discussed the problems that exist between the collection development staff and the
acquisitions staff in many libraries. And if anything the trend within American libraries is toward less decentralization and greater cooperation among the technical services departments. Some schools have even done away with the acquisitions, cataloging, collection development, and serials departments bringing them together under a single team called Materials Processing.

Today in most of Asia’s universities, each faculty (department) controls its own budget. The library does all the work, but the authority over which materials are bought belongs with the faculty. Logically, they want to supervise the use of their funds, and since the books and serials budget is normally the largest, it is understandable that they would be reluctant to relinquish control. Recently, this has been changing, but not without resistance. Many faculties are still fighting tooth and nail to keep the check book in their hands, obviously out of fear that they will lose power over a large portion of their budget.

The Asian system of collection development does have its advantages. Typically, the librarians concentrate on service (technical or user oriented), and the ultimate users shoulder the responsibility for selection. The selection responsibility is shared between several people and several departments. On a micro-level, everyone concentrates on what they do best, and they become good at what they do. User input is essential for any library to confirm it is subscribing to the correct materials, and in Asia, the users expect to be involved in the selection process. There are established channels for communication between the librarians and the users; communication is beneficial for both parties. Also, the system has naturally built-in checks and balances. With different people responsible for selection, ordering and payment there is little opportunity for unethical business dealings.

But there are weaknesses in the system, too.

To give an example, at renewal time the acquisitions (or serials) librarian will give each faculty a list of that year’s current subscription titles and ask them to cancel those where the cost does not justify the return. It is the users’ responsibility to determine which journals are too expensive or seldom used. The decision is objective and statistics are rarely kept. Depending on the anticipated budget for the next year, there may be an opportunity to add or trade subscriptions (cancel an existing one and replace with another), and again, all this is at the discretion of the faculty. Cost-per-use does not enter into the
decision. Changes to the subscription list may go before a committee at either the university or department level, and the committee has the power to override cancellations which would contradict the collection development policy, but this is seldom necessary. Cancellations are rarely made and new titles are rarely questioned (as long as they are within the budget). The assumption is: who knows better what the user wants than the user himself. And to a degree that is true. Unfortunately, users cannot always articulate their needs. Generally, they know what they want and that they would like to have it now, but they may not always be possible. Past experience has accustomed them to rely primarily on (paper) journals and books as their information sources. This puts pressure on the library to maintain the status quo. Yet librarians realize the value of electronic indexes (with fulltext) and e-journals. The challenge of satisfying user demands within the budget and staff restrictions dictated to the region’s libraries has never been easy, and it is going to get harder. It is impossible to maintain a balance between access and ownership, when all the faculty keep jumping on the ownership side of the scale!

**Increased User Dependence on Electronic Resources**

It is difficult to find a research library in the world today who is not already providing its users with a wide variety of electronic or digital services. And as information moves more and more toward being digitized and stored electronically, you do not necessarily need the physical shape that most of us connect with the library building, and you do not necessarily need the same tools for identifying or accessing what is out there.\(^{10}\)

During the first six months of 1997, 23% of the new serials purchased by MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) were for electronic serials. Unfortunately, those serials were so expensive that they used up 85% of the money that was spent on buying new materials. It is clear that Web-based serials are having a substantial impact on the collection development activities of large American science and engineering libraries (at least at MIT).\(^{11}\)

At many universities more than 80% of all reference questions are answered with electronic products.\(^{12}\) The reasons are obvious, with the search capabilities – and the speed of conducting
searches – electronic media can truly enhance the value of a library’s reference works. If such is the case, then it makes sense that 80% of the budget should be spent on electronic materials. Please note, I am not saying that all libraries should set a goal of spending 80% of their reference materials budget on CD-ROMs and online databases, but I am recommending that your spending should be directly related to the needs of your users. And if your users are demanding online access and retrieval, that is what you should be buying. If we go too long without giving our users what they want they will end up going somewhere else to get the information they need. Today’s users are just too sophisticated and the are too many options available for people to find what they are looking for. If your library cannot give them what they want, they will go to the library next door, or simply surf the Internet until they find it. Loyalty is not one of the character traits of today’s information user.

Collection Development Policies must Change

With the dependence on electronic sources that is prevalent today, the library’s collection development policy must change. It must evolve with the digital age. Libraries and their collections address the increasingly complicated needs of users both current and future. The essential resources are less and less limited to local holdings and represent increasingly varied formats … electronic information is ever more prevalent both in portable formats and as online products. The panorama is confusing and seems destined to become even more complex. Nonetheless, and as in the past, part of the library’s job is to make sense of this abundance. A new world order (for the exchange of information) is upon us. Libraries must be careful that their collection development policies do not reify scholarly distinctions that no longer carry meaning, exercises in obsolescence that cater to nostalgic longings for order, precision, and prescription. There must to be a new awareness that practically all materials are now available in a variety of formats and that the medium is an important part of the purchase decision.

It is obvious that the traditional model for a library to build its collection is not appropriate anymore, except for locally unique items. For today’s information managers a change in perspective is necessary. Traditionally, the responsibility for collection development within Asia’s
universities has been divided up between the Serials/Acquisitions Department, Reference, and the Faculty/User. In the past, each participant has had his own agenda and his own priorities. Within the old system it is almost impossible for one person to weigh all the options and make the best decision. The collection development team must stop thinking: “How much money are we spending on books, how much on serials, or how much on CD-ROMs, etc.” But rather, for the amount of money that is available, which medium will best satisfy my patrons’ needs. The focus must be shifted to the user. Instead of constraining your planning by the limits of each budget (paper versus online versus DDS), the strategy must be to combine all the materials budgets into one centralized fund that can be used to buy the information in whatever format is most convenient to the users at this point in time.

Now is the time for the leaders of information technology in this region to sit down together and hammer out a plan of action to set up a knowledge network that will share resources and responsibilities. There is a window of opportunity now to utilize the technology of today and join forces to prevent unnecessary duplication of holdings and redundant systems. It is no simple task to expand one’s frame of reference beyond the needs of one’s own institution and to think in terms of the group (consortium) as a whole. But there is much to be gained (and saved!), by doing so. That is the essence of the knowledge revolution. It is breaking down the old knowledge hierarchies (based on politics and tradition) and building knew ones with others who share the same interests and the same goals.

I can still remember how ten years ago in Taiwan, when a faculty member requested a new journal for subscription, if the National Union List was consulted before deciding to add the title, it was usually to see if other libraries were ordering the title. The fact that a neighboring library was ordering the journal under consideration gave the title a stamp of approval verifying that it was a valuable resource and worth adding to the local collection. Where as the first instinct should be to use ILL until journal use justified the subscription, ILL usage statistics were seldom kept, and rarely used to dictate new journal titles or cancellations. So for many years, each library’s collection grew ambivalent to the journals on the shelves a few miles away. Even today, how much money is being wasted by institutions who are focusing only on their own goals, and their own agenda?
Unfortunately, most of today’s healthy consortium were created either by government mandate or severe economic shortages. The let’s-be-good-neighbors-and-cooperate approach to building a consortia usually fails. China’s libraries have been forced by their economic circumstances to strictly avoid duplication, and on a regional level resource sharing and ILL is strong. They are a good example to other countries.

In the West, thousands of libraries are being forced into resource sharing due to shrinking budgets and double digit journal price increases. Nine California academic research libraries participated in the Science Translation Journals Pilot Project, a five-year collaborative collection (development) project. The reason for the project was that the libraries were jolted by the sharp increases in journal prices during the mid-1980s, and the University of California libraries began to take collaborative collection development very seriously. The project ended up saving the libraries more than $100,000 a year, but has been put on hold and termed a “noble failure”. Most of the problems stemmed from misunderstandings of the people involved; titles were inadvertently canceled, duplicates were ordered by accident, but most important there was no established policy or procedure for dealing with unexpected problems and sudden disagreements between the library and no forum for solving the disagreements. Hightower and Soete concluded that the experiment failed because the human element was ignored. In any collaborative collections management program, there is a need to develop both technical and human systems that will lead to success … “we did not stress the interpersonal enough.”

Fortunately, not all cooperative collection development projects are deemed failures. In 1991, James Madison University, the University of Virginia, and Virginia Tech formed the Virginia Academic Library Consortium (VALC). The pilot project went well and they were later joined by William and Mary College and the Virginia Community College System. The VALC is now in the process of establishing a state-wide virtual library. The universities have agreed on a joint database of microform holdings and electronic databases that are jointly paid for by the five member libraries and mounted on the network. Some of the keys to VALC’s success were:
1) They received funding for a new full-time person at each doctoral library to handle the increased ILL requests.

2) The members’ ILS systems were all Z39.50 compliant (see below for an explanation of this interface protocol).

3) The system now has the capabilities to accept patron-initiated ILL requests, creating substantial savings and increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

4) They had government funding: US$5.2 million (money helps!)

Allow me to inject a plea from a subscription vendor. If the goal of the consortia is to share resources and reduce costs by avoiding duplication and sharing systems, hardware, etc. This is practical and, I believe feasible. However, if the goal is to increase the libraries’ leverage so that they can negotiate lower service charges from vendors (especially book and serials agents). Then little will be gained. For book and serials agents, our profit margins have been at a historical low for several years now, and there are now prospects for increased profits in the future either. Maybe primary and publisher secondary (index / database) publishers can give discounts in return for increasing their share of the pie, or when it means increased sales in emerging (new) markets. But the book and serials industries are mature (centuries old), and the pressure to further lower our service charges will probably only result in thinner service or less companies (and that aren’t that many of us left now as it is).

There is an Abundance of Services Available to Assist Collection Development

One type of information service that the libraries must use more is inter-library loan (ILL) and document delivery services (DDS). There have been many scientific studies comparing the cost for buying individual articles versus the cost of subscribing to a journal, and for the lesser used titles, the savings are immense. During an eighteen-month period, Columbia University processed 1,062 ILL requests. In total $28,600 was spent on the 1,062 documents. However, if the journals that these
articles were ordered from were ordered instead of just ordering the needed articles, then the total cost to
the library would have been $343,900. For items not too heavily used it is obviously more cost
effective to borrow than to own. Other studies have also found that relying on interlibrary loan or
document delivery resulted in considerable savings. The greatest savings came from relying on access
(via ILL) over ownership in the science and math subject areas.\(^{21}\)

Most of the top vendors today can help libraries collect and analyze usage statistics. EBSCO
Document Services can provide the library with reports that compare the cost of ordering individual
articles on a journal-by-journal basis and show you when the money spent exceeds the annual subscription
rate for that title.

EBSCO’s electronic database products and EBSCO Online provide convenient usage statistics so
that you can know who is accessing which database, or even which titles are being hit and copied the most
frequently. We make it convenient for you to move from paper to online access or to a citation
database that can be the front engine of a document supply service. And we then provide you with the
reporting to measure use and verify (on an annual basis) that you are accessing information in the most
efficient way.

EBSCO can also provide you with bar codes that can be attached to the journal covers, or to the
bookshelves to aid in the collection of usage data. Simple bar code software is available which
will count the number of times an issue is reshelved. These statistics are then downloaded into a
database program (like Microsoft Access) which will show journal-level usage statistics, and which will
enable you to pinpoint your library’s core titles or prepare lists of low-use titles for cancellation. One
important reminder: since much of the information use with libraries is cyclical, usage studies should
be conducted for a minimum of one year, actually two years would be better. Then average out your
results over time.

There is now help for buying and managing online e-journals, too. Our new EBSCO Online
service is an Internet based e-journal management system. In addition to the ability to search and
view all your current online subscriptions (and free of charge titles), your users and / or your staff can
search the citations and abstracts of thousands of non-subscription titles. EBSCO Online will then
give you the options of placing orders either for the fulltext online, or buying a specific article (for offline delivery via DDS). Our online service will also be linked to other indexes and abstracts. The library may also choose to load the URL address for the online fulltext (or EBSCO Online) directly into the OPAC (online public access catalog) for a seamless and fast interface integrating online collections into your ILS network.

**Collection Development Policies Must Lead the Way**

Tens of millions of dollars are being spent throughout Asia to create the infrastructure and electronic access necessary to build the virtual library of the future. It is exciting to see the importance the governments and universities are putting on networking. However, investing money in technology alone will not insure success. The medium is the main attraction for more than half of the online and local based electronic services available today. I remember a CD-ROM database I tried to use one time. It was a collection of theses on Thai minority groups. The data was valuable, but the search engine was horrible. I remember thinking what a shame; it would have been much easier to browse through a print copy of the book. Libraries must be careful not to fall into a high-tech trap. Any library, virtual or stone and wood, is only as good as its resources, paper or digital. The technocrats are paving the way for the virtual library of the next century, but who will manage what goes on the virtual shelves? The Internet appears convenient, but its simplicity is also its weakness. The information explosion has not slowed. Because of the ease in setting up a web page, there are more publishers than ever before. It will be the duty of the librarian to fall back on his professional training and experience to continue the selection of quality (electronic and print) materials. At a recent conference in another part of the world (really not very far away!) the Librarian of Congress pronounced that it is up to the discriminating knowledge navigators --- editors and librarians --- to mediate and rehumanize the flood of unorganized information. And among librarians, no one is better suited for the challenge than the collection development librarian.


4 Ibid. [Note: another excellent piece of scholarship supporting the collection of usage data is: Scales, Pauline A. (1976) Citation Analyses as Indicators of the Use of Serials: A Comparison of Ranked Title Lists Produced by Citation Counting and from Use Data. Journal of Documentation 32(March 1976) pp17-25.]


6 My guess is that the reason most Asian universities have never added collection development personnel is the government restriction forbidding the increase of full time library personnel. Surprisingly, this regulation is common throughout most of Asia. As a result, budgets and therefore materials may increase, but the number of librarians within the established libraries stays constant.


13 Ibid. p 40.


15 Ibid. p.30.

16 Strauch, K. p.4.


19 Ibid., p. 90.


Chapter 2. Collection development and collection management in academic libraries. 2.1 introduction. In sections 1.5.2 – 1.5.3 a clear distinction is made between collection development and collection management. This was done to clarify the parameters of each of these concepts. Any academic library that aims to satisfy the information needs of academics and researchers must take great care with the development and management of its collection. Bonn (1974:265) states: It is generally agreed that both the quantity and the quality of a library’s collection depend almost entirely upon the library’s acquisition program, including its acquisition policy, its acquisition procedures, and, of most importance, its selection methods.