# Customizing Faculty's Needs: development of a liaison program (a Subject Librarian's priority)

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**Abstract**

When three new positions for Subject Librarians were first established in July of 2003 at the University of Hong Kong Libraries (HKUL), their purpose and the services to be provided needed to be explained and promoted, as this was an unfamiliar concept to both faculty members and library users. The rationale for the establishment of the three new Subject Librarian positions is examined in the context of the HKUL organizational structural changes, while highlighting the responsibilities of their roles. The focus of the paper is to present the results of a survey undertaken to assess the faculty needs for subject librarian. The importance of customization in response to varied needs in formulating the action plans which guide future liaison activities is also discussed.

## Introduction

The University of Hong Kong is a leading international university in Asia, whose language of instruction is pre-dominantly English. The Libraries, which consists of a main library and five specialist libraries, caters to the multi-disciplinary needs of ten Faculties—Architecture, Arts, Business and Economics, Dentistry, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Science, and Social Sciences, as well as its 28 non-faculty academic units, and a number of research centers and institutes, serving a student population of about 19000, including 11700 undergraduate students and 7300 postgraduate students, and a teaching faculty of over 1200 including researchers.

There were two major reasons that led to the development of the faculty liaison program at the University of Hong Kong Libraries (HKUL). Firstly, as a result of a review of the organizational structure carried out in 2003, it was resolved that the Libraries' structure be organized as much as possible around customers and their needs, rather than internal functions. Secondly, it was decided that the Libraries should shift the responsibility for collection development away from the faculty members and into the Libraries, as traditionally faculty members were primarily responsible for selection but many felt burdened and would rather have librarians take it up. The previous system of subject coordinators and selectors, all having other primary functional duties with secondary subject duties, did not work well due to conflicting priorities. A recommendation for a flatter functional team approach resulted in the re-structure. The Collection Development Team was one of the four operational services teams formed (the other three teams were Main Library Services Team, Branch library Services Team, and Technical Services Support Team).

In July 2003, the Collection Development Department was re-structured with three new Subject Librarian positions through deployment from merging of operations in other parts of the library.  Each Subject Librarian was assigned to oversee a disciplinary area, namely Arts, Social Sciences, and Science and Technology.  The goal was to offer more support in collection building, better focus on meeting information needs through research consultation or advanced reference, and to provide current awareness and customized instruction in the use of library resources.

As HKUL moves from a hybrid library to a digital library, where resources are offered in large multidisciplinary packages often with complex licensing issues, faculty members need the expertise of librarians to rationalize print and electronic and to optimize use of funds.   In the networked environment where there is an increased focus on collaboration and cooperation with new opportunities for resource sharing arising, there is also a need for subject librarians to inform faculty about rationalizing between owned resources versus access to resources through interlibrary loan,  document delivery, and shared collections.

It is important to note that the rationale behind the HKUL model was to ensure that the function of collection development, which is to systematically build collections that meet the academic and research needs of the university community, remains user-centered and is directed at existing user needs.   Thus, the reporting structure for the three new Subject Librarian posts is directly to the head of Collection Development rather than to Reference.  The HKUL model aims to deliver the personalized service one associates with special, branch or departmental libraries without the cost of creating the physical branch, but operates within the strategic framework of Collection Development.

From inception, it was considered a priority to develop a liaison program that ensures effective communication with all academic departments.  Establishing an effective library liaison program to guide the Libraries in anticipating and fulfilling changing information needs was made one of the chief objectives of the Collection Development Department.  The Collection Development Team brainstormed and came up with the most relevant activities and services appropriate for such a liaison program.   The first opportunity to collaborate with faculty arose when feedback was sought through a survey, as faculty input and cooperation were considered crucial in successful implementation of the program.  The results of the survey were used to refine the individual action plans aimed to address the particular needs of each department.

**Roles of Subject Librarians**

Firstly, the  definition of library liaison as "someone assigned to specific academic unit as primary contact, works closely with library representatives regarding issues related to library collection development, research, and teaching support in their subject area" (Suresh, 1995) was adopted.  This was necessary as the previous role of the subject coordinators/ subject selectors was redefined to place more emphasis on targeting the

user needs by connecting users to appropriate resources other than purely materials selection.

The Subject Librarians at HKUL assume dual roles of building the collections in their assigned subject areas and also the role of faculty liaison. Subject Librarians communicate information about collection development policies and strategies, such as budget allocations, book approval plan, collection goals and collection levels, acquisitions procedures, as well as information on library services and developments.

As faculty liaison, Subject Librarians are responsible for outreach to faculty and students, which may be through reference interview, specialized research consultation and course-related user instruction. These activities are encouraged as part of their faculty liaison assignments, as they provide the opportunity to stay in touch with the faculty and students and to help Subject Librarians understand the program and information needs. Building relationships with faculty will also enable librarians take a more active role in the education process (Ducas, 2003).

## Purpose of the liaison program

The new liaison program was intended to foster and strengthen links between library and faculty departments. The Collection Development Team identified the following goals to be achieved:

- Improve communication to establish rapport between faculty and librarians to facilitate collection building
- Collaborate with faculty to develop well balanced collections
- Enable library to meet information needs of users
    - Subject Librarians to become more aware of course content and development through course-related instruction (customized and delivered on-site)
    - Subject Librarians to keep current with research interests through the faculty research consultations
- Connect users to the appropriate resources through promotion via web pages or weblogs to increase awareness of library resources and services in support of teaching, learning and research
- Increase visibility and credibility of the librarian's role

The six main areas of duties identified from brainstorming as the most relevant in support of teaching and learning were:
- Collection building
- Research consultation
- Instruction on subject-specific library resources
- Integrating library materials into teaching and learning resources
- Promote library services
- Foster closer collaboration with faculty

**Faculty needs survey**

The identified duties were used to formulate the questionnaire sent to faculty which was intended to survey their needs and preferences for these services. To help faculty understand the nature of these duties, concrete examples were given (see Appendix 1— excerpt from the survey document).  The aim of the survey was to seek faculty input in identifying the help most needed to support their teaching and research, and to help Subject Librarians develop a plan of action to guide their future collection development and liaison activities.  A total of 457 personalized questionnaires were sent to members of the six faculties served by the Subject Librarians, and 143 replies were received (a 31% response rate).

Respondents were asked to rank the six areas [see Table 1] on the basis of their needs for Subject Librarian on a scale of one to five (1-5, 1 being most important and 5 being less important).

Table 1

| Department | Collection Building | Research Consultation | Instruction on Subject-Specific Library Materials | Integrating Library Materials into Teaching & Learning Resources for Specific | Promote Library Services | Foster Closer Collaboration With Faculty |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean ( Ranking ) | | | ** Ranking in descending order ( 1 is most important ) | | |
| Faculty of Architecture | 2.33 (2) | 2.33 (2) | 3.22 (4) | 2.22 (1) | 3.22 (4) | 3.44 (6) |
| Faculty of Arts | 1.48 (1) | 2.64 (2) | 3.04 (5) | 2.76 (4) | 2.72 (3) | 3.28 (6) |
| Faculty of Bus & Econ | 2.69 (2) | 3.00 (5) | 2.69 (2) | 3.15 (6) | 2.62 (1) | 2.92 (4) |
| Faculty of Engineering | 2.04 (1) | 2.17 (2) | 3.48 (6) | 2.87 (3) | 2.91 (4) | 3.22 (5) |
| Faculty of Science | 2.40 (1) | 2.67 (3) | 2.86 (5) | 2.77 (4) | 2.65 (2) | 3.14 (6) |
| Faculty of Social Sciences | 1.92 (1) | 2.27 (3) | 3.00 (5) | 2.08 (2) | 2.77 (4) | 3.42 (6) |
| OVERALL MEAN : | 1.96 | 2.37 | 2.82 | 2.65 | 2.76 | 3.23 |
| OVERALL RANKING : | 1 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 6 |

Generally, results based on the score and comments from the survey indicate an overall need for:
- Collection building for most faculties, especially on identifying resources for emerging areas and new courses/ programs, as well as identifying resources that HKUL lack in specific subject areas;
- More research consultations for post-graduate students, also for final year undergraduates to prepare them for research;

- Assistance in integrating library materials into teaching and learning by helping faculty to identify resources pertinent to their needs, eg. create links to subject guides and/or links to materials on reserve to courseware;
- More promotion of library service especially targeted to the undergraduate level;
- Systematic training for new undergraduates through "subject-oriented" library instruction relevant to them; and
- Closer collaboration with faculty members, since only through close collaboration with faculty (department) can activities be carried out to target their specific needs.

Table 1 shows the mean score at the faculty level, and ranking for each duty is prioritized based on the mean score. It was noted and expected that different Faculties/ Departments have different needs or varying degree for the same needs. For example, where collection building may be deemed at the faculty level as the most important need for Subject Librarian, certain department, such as History, with teachers who possess strong interest and dedication in developing collections may deem another aspect to be more important.

## Customizing the action plans

Subject Librarians further analyzed the results with written comments of the survey at the Departmental level to focus on Department/ individual needs and preferences. Prioritization was given to address the specific individual needs initially, and the larger needs gathered from the input and comments in the survey were to be addressed in a customized action plan. It was noted that some areas of need, eg. systematic training for new undergraduates, may require cross-departmental collaboration with other library departments.

Subject Librarians then met with members of each Department along with the Faculty Library Representative to discuss and to seek feedback on the proposed action plan, which was formulated with the ranking of the duties in mind. Following meetings and consultations with Departments, Subject Librarians were ready to finalize and implement a plan that was practical and effective in addressing each Department's information needs in the forthcoming term.

The activities in the action plans encompass a range of responsibilities that normally includes the creation and maintenance of websites and weblogs, faculty outreach, customized instruction given on-site, advanced reference consultation, and a variety of other tasks associated with public services among the major activities associated with collection development. Activities identified as expected, essential/ preferred and/or desired by faculty include:
- Assist in expending allocation, monitor budget and manage the approval plan, if any
- Identify current information needs via research consultation or other means of contact
- Develop web-pages to promote resources and services
- Developing collections including materials selection and journal cancellation
- Identify status of collection, strengths and weaknesses

- Collection assessment project on selected areas
- Instruction on database searching, research methods, internet training
- Assist with e-reserve, document delivery, use of software for bibliography, online submission of requests, etc.
- meet with new faculty and attend events

## Addressing information needs

The subject librarians have taken on a more proactive role in the development of their collection in a systematic manner via approval plans and firm order selection. The result is a more balanced collection that aligns with the needs of users. Most faculty members expect librarians to use their knowledge about the university programs and research direction, the structure of the literature in the field and the universe of publication to shape the collection and adjust priorities. Selection by faculty used to be a chore most often done as a last minute resort to avoid forfeit of budget, but subject librarians have helped to avoid irrational last minute expenditures.

The completion of a comprehensive collection analysis exercise conducted in consultation with faculty members yielded interesting findings that enable librarians to detect collection strengths and weaknesses and to identify areas that require more development and/or funding support. Depth indicators (numerical values 0-5) which describe a library's collecting activity were assigned across the entire subject conspectus for the first time at HKUL to give an overall picture of the collection (http://lib.hku.hk/cd/policies/Classed%20Analysis.xls). The indicators provide crucial information on how well the collections meet the information needs for teaching and research, and serve as a basis for future collecting priorities. Subject policy statements were also formulated for each of the academic subject areas describing the collections' coverage and areas of focus (http://lib.hku.hk/cd/policies/cdp.html#Sect8). Faculty finds this information on coverage useful for planning new programs when an assessment of library resources is required to implement the new program.

In advancing the digital collections, an advisory committee made up of faculty members and the head of Collection Development, guides the development of digital collections to better target teaching and research needs, taking into account level of usage and acceptance. This collaboration with faculty ensures robust growth in digital collections without neglecting the need for traditional formats. It also promotes a better understanding in how the use of material funds is optimized to enable effective budget shift from print to electronic.

To promote and enhance access of digital resources through instruction, Subject Librarians have developed subject web-pages, subject weblogs (http://lib.hku.hk/cd/news.html) among other promotional programs to target announcement of resources for subject specific groups with the aim to increase awareness and usage of resources. Faculty members find blog contents that deliver added-value information about current research and development in their field, such as

conference/events announcements and enhancements of contents in existing resources, highly informative and desirable.

Through collaboration with faculty, Subject Librarians are able to offer on-site course-related instruction with customized contents that targets specific courses. Through their contact with students and faculty in designing subject-specific instruction, librarians become more aware of course content and the development of the curriculum. Research consultations that target post-graduates help librarians to keep current with the research interests of the faculty.

Although the action plans have only been implemented for just over one year since Fall semester of 2004-5, the above-mentioned are just some of the activities which have yielded positive results. Many of the tasks undertaken would not have been feasible before the re-structure of Collection Development and without full-time dedicated subject librarians working closely in consultation with faculty members.

## Conclusion

The re-structure of subject librarians at HKUL was a timely one that reflects the shifting context of the new digital environment. As HKUL moves from a hybrid library towards digital collections, traditional collections and services are integrated with new digital resources and new information needs to be infused into teaching and learning with user education targeted at subject groups. The greater emphasis on liaison with users, developing digital library resources, connecting users to resources appropriate to teaching and research, involvement in integrating resources into education, and promoting collections and services are factors that attribute to the re-structure of the Collection Development Department with three subject librarians at HKUL.

The survey exercise provided an extra opportunity to promote the roles and responsibilities of Subject Librarians in their new positions. It also helped to break the ice for the Subject Librarians and alleviated much of the apprehension in approaching the faculty members for the first time in their new role. The faculty perception of Subject Librarians was better understood as a result of the exercise. The knowledge gained from the survey about faculty needs provided the framework for Subject Librarians to formulate customized action plans for each academic department. The new public service role of the Subject Librarian in promoting the use of collections, offering course related instruction and research consultations among collection development tasks has generally helped to raise the visibility of librarians.

**References**

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Appendix 1   Excerpt from the survey document

**COLLECTION BUILDING**
- ♦ Provide further help to faculty in the selection of library materials with particular emphasis on new courses/ programs and emerging areas
- ♦ Work with faculty to identify subject areas with weaknesses or gaps in existing holdings and to strengthen the collections

**RESEARCH CONSULTATION**
- ♦ Give small group/ individual consultation tailored to specific research needs / topics for faculty or students
- ♦ Provide Journal Citation Reports to help faculty identify high impact factor journal titles on a specific subject for publication or current awareness
- ♦ Provide citation index report for faculty to show number of times an author has been cited in journal articles

**INSTRUCTION ON SUBJECT-SPECIFIC LIBRARY MATERIALS**
Give instruction on subject-specific library resources to support curriculum
- ♦ in the Department
- ♦ in the Main Library

**INTEGRATING LIBRARY MATERIALS INTO TEACHING & LEARNING RESOURCES FOR SPECIFIC COURSES/ PROGRAMS**
- ♦ Create subject guides/pathfinders/course guides/database guides/ webliographies for specific courses/programs
- ♦ Integrate course-reading materials via the use of electronic-reserve for specific courses/programs
- ♦ Provide assistance in identifying the appropriate library materials to be integrated in course management software for specific courses/ programs

**PROMOTE LIBRARY SERVICES**
Introduce new and/or existing library services by live demonstrations and / online guides / faculty orientation. For example :
- ♦ ILL / Interbranch delivery / HKALL
- ♦ Hing Wai Store monographs / journals/ document delivery
- ♦ E-reserve
- ♦ Book / journal / electronic resources / free web resources / recommendation online
- ♦ My library@hand (PDA applications and resources)
- ♦ MyLibrary
- ♦ Dissertations (for postgraduates)
- ♦ Help set up journal and database table of contents and article alerts
- ♦ New "additions" lists by subject / department., including books, journals, electronic resources and web resources

**FOSTER CLOSER COLLABORATION WITH FACULTY**
In additional to working with members of Faculty Library Committee
- ♦ Attend / speak at departmental meetings
- ♦ Meet with faculty members
- ♦ Meet with postgraduate students