

# Witnessing the Evolution of Higher Education in Hong Kong Through the Eyes of an American Academic Librarian

by Victoria Caplan  
Qianxiu Liu, Patrick Lo & Dickson Chiu

## Introduction

Founded in 1991, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) is known as one of the fastest growing institutions of higher education in the region. It was ranked the number one in Greater China in 2017 for its students' employability, and number twelve worldwide. HKUST Library plays an important role in supporting the teaching, learning and research activities, contributing to the University's missions as well as its unparalleled academic excellence. The library and its library professionals play essential roles in creating an environment that fosters collaborative, experiential learning amongst students from different academic disciplines. This is through a combination of excellent services and collections, as well as welcoming, useful, and beautiful spaces.

In the following interview, Victoria Caplan shares how information instruction services and librarians continue to be needed in the age of Google, and will discuss the pedagogical roles of information instruction librarians/reference librarians:

*Tell us about your career path to becoming the Head of Information Instruction at HKUST.*

After I graduated from university in 1987, I went to Taiwan to study Chinese further and while I was there decided that I might pursue librarianship as a career. When I returned to the United States of America in 1988, I decided to try and get a full time job in a library to test out if I really liked it.



\*Victoria Caplan is an American who started working at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) in 1992. She has served as the Head of Information Instruction & Collection Services at HKUST Library since 2012. Victoria achieved a BA in East Asian Studies (concentrating on China) in 1987 – she has also studied a wide array of subjects, including Geology, Biology, and Environmental Management. She gained an MSc – Library and Information Science in 1991 and an MPhil in Cultural Anthropology in 2005.



*HKUST Information Commons open space*

I was fortunate enough to get a job as a library assistant (library clerk) at what was then the departmental library for Economics and Government at Harvard University. There, I had a mixture of duties: serials clerk (checking in issues, sending in claims for late issues, etc.); book processing; as well as serving at the combined Circulation and Reserve desk; shelving, shelf-reading and overseeing student workers. I also worked on tidying up the Slichter Industrial Relations Collection. I worked there for almost two years and then applied to Library School at the University of Illinois.

I studied there for a full year and graduated with my Master's degree. I then began work at the Chicago Public Library as a multilingual cataloguer (Romance languages, German, & Chinese). But, I was still interested in returning to Asia to work, so when I saw a job advertised for a cataloguer at HKUST, I applied for it and was fortunate enough to be hired. So, I moved to Hong Kong and started work in 1992.

Within a few years, it became evident that my talents lay more in public services than in technical services, so I joined the Reference department. Later on I joined the Access Services department (as Media & Microforms Librarian, and later as Access Services Manager), and then returned to the Reference & Collection Services (now, Information Instruction & Collection Services) in 2012.

*You are currently serving as the Head of Information Instruction & Collection Services? How does your work Collection Services complement your work in Information Instruction?*

At HKUST, all Information Instruction librarians also serve as subject liaison librarians with collection development duties. From 1995, I have been a Humanities and Social Sciences librarian, and when I became the Media & Microforms librarian, I made selections in all subject areas. I think that there is a great deal of synergy between building a collection and helping users to use it (via reference, instruction, and access services): collection development work makes me better at serving users, and serving users makes me better at building the library's collection.

*Describe your job scope and areas of responsibilities as the Head of Information Instruction and Collection Services, and your leadership style.*

I lead, supervise, and support Information Instruction and Collection Services staff in providing information services, library instruction, collection development and research support while contributing to the University Librarian's - and indeed the whole Library's work - to achieve the Library's overall missions and goals. My "style", I would describe it as "band leader" (as in music). I'm both a member of the team, and take an organizing role.

*In the Digital Age, what sort of professional attributes and personality traits should a successful reference or information instruction librarian possess?*

The same attributes as a successful reference librarian or user education librarian has always possessed: curiosity, good communication skills, patience, kindness, wide-ranging knowledge of different subjects, good teaching skills, and excellent knowledge of current academic research tools and processes.

*Have you witnessed any major changes in the demographics of the HKUST academic and student populations over the years?*

I would say the biggest difference is pre-2012 and post 2012, when Hong Kong went from a three year university degree to a four year degree. In 2012 we had a double cohort and the student numbers instantly increased ~30%. This means the student population is younger and they do not have to decide upon their majors upon entry. So, a student may be in the School of Engineering, but may not yet have decided between (say) Mechanical Engineering and Civil Engineering.

The demographics of Hong Kong have changed. In 1992, a good number of HKUST students were the first in their family to finish secondary school and came from large families; more than 25 years later, most of the students' parents have finished high school and the students rarely have more than one sibling.

The nature of university education at HKUST (and in all of Hong Kong, if not the world), has meant more active learning, more collaborative work (students doing teamwork), more experiential learning, and project work.

*In your opinion, what are the most effective ways to tempt students to attend library education programs?*

Via collaboration with course instructors. Embedding information literacy instruction into their courses, when the students have a real research need, makes it relevant and useful to them.

Then, the instructor (professor) gives the instruction librarians class time, or makes attendance at a library instruction session a requirement homework (we take attendance and send it to the instructor). We also work hard to get the “sweet spot” in terms of time: close enough to the research paper or project or presentation due date for the students to understand they need it, but far enough away to give them time to do the research.

*What part of your job (as Head of Information Instruction) do you think is most rewarding, and which do you find most frustrating?*

I love helping people with their information and research needs, helping to build a relevant collection that satisfies current needs and also is “for the ages”; I love working to help create and maintain an excellent environment for learning, study, research, and intellectual pursuits.



*HKUST library classroom*

Hard to say what frustrates me. I guess when people don't approach their work, their environment, and each other with care and concern.

*Have you witnessed any major evolution in terms of the format, nature and amount of reference inquiries and research consultations sought from both students and academic staff in the past twenty years?*

In line with the trends across the world, the overall number of questions at the Information Desk (or Reference Desk) has declined. The substance has changed slightly (less directional, more answers on printing and scanning).

But, the smaller numbers make sense. Our library's web pages make information about using the library easier to find and use. I also find that most undergraduates started to use Google or other search engines in primary school. It's natural, therefore, that if they have a question they will seek an answer online before asking a librarian.

At the same time, HKUST Library's information instruction is a much larger program than it was ten years ago and is very solidly embedded into the curriculum. The e-learning resources the Information Instruction librarians have created on how to search various databases, or how to mind-map for instance, plus the library research guides all mean that students doing research projects have a stronger knowledge base of information literacy and online resources to help them. This I think accounts for a decrease in the area of "subject" help sought.

I must also mention here a new initiative in information services by my colleagues in Access Services: "Rovers". In order to meet library users "where they are," Access colleagues now regularly position themselves at heavy-use areas at busy times. If we add in the Rovers' statistics, we see that HKUST library answers far more questions now than it did ten years ago. This shows the importance of getting out from behind the desk and helping users at point-of-need, whether physically or online. Statistics are available here at: <http://library.ust.hk/about-us/statistics/instruction-information-services/>

*"Active Learning" and active library use go hand-in-hand. Do you think it is because of the increasing emphasis upon "Active Learning" at HKUST – the idea that students must first become effective users of the Library and its resources?*

I agree they go hand-in-hand, but at the same time - for some subjects, at least - active learning and library resource use are not synonymous. We have to beware delusions of grandeur 😊. For example, a lot of active learning in

Physics or Engineering may not require extensive use of library resources at an undergraduate level. But I agree whole-heartedly that an active library is essential to a great university.

*What is the definition of “Active Learning” in the context of HKUST? In your opinion, what are the similarities and differences between “Active Learning” and “inquiry-based Learning”?*

HKUST’s Centre for Education Innovation describes active learning as: “a teaching approach in which students need to engage in class actively through different activities such as discussing, writing, reflecting or questioning.” See: <http://cei.ust.hk/learner-centered-course-design/learning-activities/active-learning-activities> for more information.

In HKUST’s graduate attributes, known as “ABC-LIVE”, it mentions an inquiry-driven curriculum: [http://uce.ust.hk/web/about/about\\_goal\\_abclive.html](http://uce.ust.hk/web/about/about_goal_abclive.html)

Based on these, for me the difference is that active teaching and learning is more about what you’re doing in a session. Whereas “inquiry-based learning” is more to do with what students do on a course or program level and the learning they do by investigating or researching.

So, for example, when I teach sessions to postgraduates on academic integrity and intellectual property, I try to use active learning methods, but we really are not doing inquiry-based learning in it; although I hope the students will take what they learn and apply them in their research and writing and teaching which is inquiry-based.

*Based on your interactions with the first-year Bachelor’s degree students at HKUST, do you think the local secondary school education has equipped them with the necessary information skills that are needed for making effective use of the HKUST Library resources in order to complete their assignments?*

From reading the professional literature, I think entering HKUST students are about as prepared as new first year students at large government universities anywhere. Since the introduction of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) with the liberal studies component, I have found more first year students have some experience in doing simple and basic research using magazines or newspapers. However, I think the most important thing to draw them in, for the purpose of improving their information literacy skills, is their courses and programs. If courses have no assignments that require use of the Library’s resources, most students will not feel the need to learn to do



HKUST Library Learning Commons room

so. It won't be relevant to them. That is why embedding information literacy instruction into the course teaching is so important.

*What would you like to be remembered for when you retire from your work as a librarian?*

I would like to be remembered as a kind and knowledgeable librarian who helped patrons with both their particular information needs, as well as with their information literacy skills, behaviors, and attitudes for their life-long learning (especially through collaboration with faculty members and instructors). I'd also like to be remembered as a good colleague who contributed to developing HKUST Library's resources, facilities, and services; someone who helped and mentored more junior staff to continue the work well after I leave.



HKUST Library Garden