Co-operation Among Academic Libraries in Hong Kong:
A Review and the Way Forward

Paul POON
City University of Hong Kong Library, Hong Kong
CO-OPERATION AMONG ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN HONG KONG:
A REVIEW AND THE WAY FORWARD

Paul W.T. Poon (Dr)
Librarian, City University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Co-operation among libraries is a time-honoured tradition, and can achieve more but with less. Library co-operation has had a long history in Hong Kong, particularly among academic libraries. Activities such as inter-library lending, co-operative cataloguing took place as early as the 1960s after the Chinese University of Hong Kong was established in 1963. However, co-operative programmes have grown in quantity and complexity in the last decade or so as more institutions of higher education have been established, and as the demands on academic libraries have become greater. This paper will review these activities, and also, looking into the future, propose that more innovative co-operative programmes should be devised instead of repeating what has been done in the past.

United we stand, divided we fall.
—John Dickinson, Liberty Song in Boston Gazette, 18 July 1768.

Introduction

Co-operation among libraries is a time-honoured library activity, and it has been practised for as long as we can remember. The basic rationale for this activity is that no library, no matter how large and how well-endowed it is, can ever hope to possess every single publication that its readers want; however, what a library does not have may be available in another. It follows, therefore, that by co-operating with one another in resources sharing can libraries become more effective in meeting their readers’ demands. Or, as succinctly summarized by Barbara Allen, the purpose of library co-operation is "to provide better, faster, and easier access to more information for the patrons of a group of libraries.”

1
If co-operation was a necessary part of the library operation in the early days of library development, it has become even more so in the present electronic age. The reasons may be enumerated as follows:-

- **Economic pressures**

  During the past few decades, libraries have encountered economic pressures on two fronts. In the first place, the price for publications, especially for serials, has escalated beyond anybody's ability to catch up with. According to the statistics released by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), from 1985/86 to 1995/96, the unit prices for serials and monographs had increased by 147% and 63% respectively. The annual average increase rates were 9.5% for serial unit price and 5% for monograph unit price since 1986. Both were indeed higher than the general inflation trends in North America during the same period. Electronic resources - which have become part and parcel of library collection in recent years - are also very expensive.

  Secondly, the money that goes to libraries has constantly shown a decline. What makes the situation worse is that the purchasing power of the shrinking budget also dwindles while the number of new publications increases. ARL data show that from 1986 to 1996, ARL libraries bought 7% fewer serials even though the annual average serial expenditures increased by 8.4%. The serial expenditure, however, was increased at the expense of monograph expenditure, given an unfavourable budget environment. Expenditure on monographs had been deliberately cut in order to accommodate the ever-increasing serials subscriptions. During the same period, the number of monographs purchased reduced by 21%. Considering that "the number of new titles or new editions released by the world's publishers for any given year probably exceeds one million" in recent years, libraries are actually acquiring or subscribing to a less and less percentage of the world's new publications.

- **Increasing use of information technology**
Application of information technology is rapidly assimilating itself as part of the library operation in recent years. On the one hand, it has enhanced library effectiveness and enabled libraries to introduce services which would otherwise be impossible. On the other hand, however, use of information technology is an expensive enterprise, and represents a drain on our already reducing budget.

But, it has to be pointed out that in many cases, information technology is also a driving force, or a catalyst, for greater and more effective library co-operation. With its power of networking and other technical capabilities, information technology has revolutionized the way that libraries co-operate with one another.

- Demands from users

Users in the electronic age are more sophisticated in their perception and needs of the library services. Their demands on libraries have been greater and more varied, both in terms of service efficiency and information quality. As a result, libraries have to change the aged-old way of operation to meet the users’ demands. Many new management concepts and techniques, which have largely been used in the business arena are now being adopted in libraries. Examples of these concepts and techniques are benchmarking, re-engineering, total quality management and continuous improvement mechanisms. The objective is to provide efficient and quality information services for the users.

As can be expected, the same set of factors discussed above is also driving libraries in Hong Kong to co-operate with one another. Indeed, the history of library co-operation in Hong Kong may be traced back to the 1960s (if not earlier) when the Hong Kong Library Association, established in 1958, ordered standard interlibrary loan forms from the American Library Association and sold them to member libraries to encourage them to practise interlibrary loans.
As years progressed, the level and nature of library co-operation in Hong Kong have grown to be more sophisticated and complex compared to the situation in the early 1960s. This paper, focusing on the academic libraries in Hong Kong, will firstly review the existing scene of library co-operation, and then attempt to pinpoint the future direction.

**Tertiary Education in Hong Kong**

Tertiary education in Hong Kong experienced tremendous growth in the past decades. In the early 1960s, there were only two publicly funded institutions of higher education, namely, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with altogether 4,100 full-time equivalent students. By 1996-97, however, there were 8 universities and colleges, all under the aegis of the University Grants Committee (UGC), with a combined student population of 69,000 full-time equivalent.

The actual take-off stage, indeed, started in 1989 when the Government endorsed an education strategy to expand access to the tertiary education for the 1990s. A new university, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was founded in 1991. The two polytechnics, namely, the Hong Kong Polytechnic and the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, as well as the Hong Kong Baptist College were upgraded to universities to offer both degrees and higher degree courses in subsequent years. Lingnan College, though not given the name of a university yet, was allowed to offer some degree courses and is expected to be upgraded to university status in the near future. The Hong Kong Institute of Education also came to existence in 1994. From 1990/91 to 1996/97, the enrolment of full-time equivalent students increased by an average annual rate of 10.5% for undergraduate studies, by 12.1% for taught postgraduate studies and 27.4% for research postgraduate studies.

**The Call for "Co-operation"**

Such an expansion in the tertiary education system has exerted much pressure to institutions concerned. To ensure that the infrastructures and resources are sufficient to cope with the
increased clientele is now the major task of the university administrators. The role of libraries, as the hub of information resources in the universities, becomes more prominent. To support the academic and research mission of the universities, individual libraries will have to make sure that they are well-equipped in terms of their collection, facilities and services.

However, as noted above, proliferation of published materials as a result of information explosion, soaring prices for monographs and serials subscriptions, increased reliance on expensive information technology for materials in electronic format, users’ increasing consciousness about “quality”, greater emphasis on research and postgraduate studies, accelerating infrastructures demand, together with budgetary forces which require "doing more with less” have jointly made it almost impossible for a single university library to meet the needs of its own institution alone. The call for "co-operation” is just natural and necessary.

**Co-operation among University Libraries - The Current Scene**

From the late 1980s onwards, co-operative efforts among UGC libraries have gradually developed into tangible projects. The following is an account of how libraries co-operate with each other to meet the challenges presented during the past decade or so.

(1) **Joint University Libraries Advisory Committee (JULAC)**

Although advisory in nature, JULAC may in many ways be regarded as the driving force of the academic library co-operation in Hong Kong. Chief Librarians of the eight universities and colleges are all members of this Committee which meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern and to formulate strategies of co-operation. Throughout the years, a number of co-operative projects have been worked out and subsequently undertaken by member libraries. Some of the more notable projects are discussed below.

(2) **Joint University Libraries Advisory Committee (JULAC) Card**
As an agreement endorsed by JULAC, teaching, administrative and research staff, as well as postgraduate degree students from the member libraries can access and utilize resources and facilities in each of the university libraries free of charge with JULAC Library Cards, applicable at their own institutions. With this Card, a user may register for a barcode with each individual university library in person to obtain borrowing privileges.

To provide further convenience to users, books borrowed with JULAC cards can be returned to the lending library via the home library of the JULAC card holder concerned.

(3) Interlibrary Loans (ILL)

James Thompson and Reg Carr regarded ILL as "the most important, the most common and certainly, as far as library users are concerned, the most evidently productive" of all the types of co-operative activities. Naturally, as mentioned earlier, ILL in Hong Kong has existed for a long time and its history can be traced back to the 1960s. However, the volume of interlibrary loan transactions in those days was of no comparison to that of the present. Also, as pointed out in one of the article on the subject of ILL in Hong Kong, in those early days, the handicap for ILL was the absence of a union catalogue, and "as a result, when making an ILL request for a book, forms have to be sent around to the libraries that are thought likely to have the books."12

However, in recent years, exponential growth in the number of new publications, soaring prices of serials and monographs, popularity of bibliographic index and abstract tools have added sophistication and complexity to the ILL operations. Another major difference is that, compared to those days when there was no union catalogue, locating the availability of library materials is now more convenient as all 8 university libraries are currently using INNOPAC, thus constituting in some respects a virtual union catalogue. The Z39.50 software - although with some limitations - allows users to conduct broadcast search in all the OPACs of the university libraries with a single query. Compared to the past when a user had to search each library catalogue one by one to locate a certain item, Z39.50 software had definitely contributed much to ILL operations in Hong Kong academic libraries nowadays.
Currently, the ILL system among the university libraries in Hong Kong is supported by the DHL courier service which signs a contract with JULAC to ensure prompt and accurate delivery of ILL items to all the participating libraries everyday. The responses to urgent requests are normally sent through fax transmission.

(4) *The Hongkong Academic and Research NETwork (HARNET)*

If Joint University Libraries Advisory Committee (JULAC) is regarded as the driving force of library co-operation in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Academic and Research NETwork (HARNET) may be considered as the backbone.

HARNET is the wide area network that links up the campus networks of all the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. It was established by the Joint Universities Computer Centre (JUCC) in 1985 and as time goes by, it has now developed into an indispensable part for all the university libraries in Hong Kong.

HARNET provides important network services to all the 8 tertiary institutions. Through it, library users can search the OPACs and electronic databases of the other UGC institutions, gain access to various resources available on the Internet, and transmit files via electronic mail. The operation of interlibrary loans indeed depends heavily on the HARNET to locate the availability of materials in other university libraries. It is not exaggerating to say that without the HARNET, co-operation among university libraries in Hong Kong may be severely handicapped.

(5) *Pearl River Delta Collection (PRD) Project*

The Pearl River Delta region in Southern China has attracted much attention from researchers with its rapid economic development. To support the research, the Library at the City University of Hong Kong launched a special collection project together with the Lingnan College, with a special grant awarded by the Research Grants Council (RGC) in mid-1993.
A Collection Project Management Committee, with representatives from each of the UGC institutions, was formed to advise on matters related to the building up and usage of the Collection. The lack of a model collection on which to emulate, the ephemeral nature of most of the research materials, and inadequate channels of acquisitions (especially in Hong Kong) for this type of materials have made developing of the Collection a difficult task.¹³

The spirit of co-operation in the Management Committee, however, helped solve quite a number of the problems. Experience related to the acquisitions of Chinese or China-related materials were shared and members were generous in contributing bibliographic data of PRD-related materials in their own libraries to the City University of Hong Kong for the establishment of a co-operative database - the *Union List of PRD Collections in UGC Libraries*. At that time, multiple searching of UGC libraries catalogues was not possible as Z39.50 software was not yet introduced. The *Union List*, small scale though it is, has proved to be very handy for both the researchers and also the library staff in making acquisition decisions.

The PRD Project involved co-operation not just among local libraries, but across the border with libraries and other agents, e.g. universities, research centres, government departments, publishers, in the PRD region as well. Joint acquisition field trips made by librarians from both the City University of Hong Kong and the Lingnan College have proved to be fruitful in this respect.

(6) *Shared Cataloguing of Chinese Language Materials Project*

To facilitate the cataloguing of Chinese language materials and to make effective use of the cataloguing efforts of all the UGC libraries, the JULAC recommended the formation of a Task Force on Cataloguing of Chinese Language Materials in mid-1995.

The Task Force, comprising representatives from each of the participating libraries, worked on the possibility of sharing cataloguing data of Chinese language materials
among all the UGC libraries. It studied and made recommendations on the establishment of a central resource database which contains CN-MARC (China), C-MARC (Taiwan), and LC CJK MARC. It also negotiated and liaised with Innovative Interface Inc. (III) to enhance the Z39.50 functions in INNOPAC for the purpose of shared cataloguing, to ensure that Chinese MARC records in the central resource database can be transferred and downloaded onto individual sites of participating libraries in an appropriate way.

The hardware of this Project was installed in October 1996 at the University of Hong Kong and the software contract with the vendor was signed in December 1996. Testpac was available in April 1997 for evaluation. As of now, the Project is in good progress; all the participating libraries are making use of the databases and are benefiting from the Project.

(7) Co-operative Efforts for Access to Electronic Databases

Electronic databases have proliferated during the past decade or so. They are useful and welcomed by users, but fairly expensive to acquire and maintain. Considerable efforts have been made by JULAC libraries to move towards co-operative acquisition and maintenance of these electronic databases.

In 1994, a special grant was awarded by the UGC for all the university libraries to jointly subscribe to the magnetic tapes of the Environmental Sciences and Pollution Management Databases from Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CAS). The magnetic tapes were mounted at the University of Hong Kong to provide access to all UGC members.

The subscription to the Databases was renewed with CAS in mid-1997 at a special consortium price. This time, however, the subscription costs were shared among all the UGC libraries.

In early 1997, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology purchased the Client/Server and Web Gateway software from Ovid Technologies, Inc. to provide comprehensive database access to users, not just on its own campus, but in the other
universities as well. The University serves as the Facilities Management Site of Ovid Technologies, Inc. in Hong Kong. Other local universities which have subscription agreements with Ovid Technologies, Inc. can therefore access Ovid databases through the mirror site at the University. With the availability of such a local server, the access has proved to be very efficient in terms of response time.

To further co-operation in this regard, the JULAC is considering to ask UGC for some central funding for it to subscribe to some expensive electronic databases as a consortium whereby subscription fees are cheaper than an individual subscription. As a first step, a master holding list of locally-mounted databases in all JULAC libraries has been compiled as a reference aid.

Co-operation among University Libraries - The Future

As noted at the beginning of this paper, constant changes in relation to economics and technology have greatly impacted the library and information service of this day and age. Therefore, when looking into the future, one has to bear these changes in mind and forego the assumptions and way of operation of the yesteryear. When writing in *The Academic Library in the Year 2001*, Michael Gorman stated that we are "entering a Golden Age of Co-operation" because of the influences of technology and economics. This sentiment of facing up to the changes of today and tomorrow was also shared by David Kohl, when he wrote that co-operation among libraries is now "a far cry from the traditional ILL agreements or co-operative arrangements allowing patrons reciprocal use and borrowing privileges between libraries"; rather, it is "a much more highly integrated operation where key central functions of the co-operating libraries are linked." The future trend is that individual institutions will become part of "a superlibrary information mosaic".

Superlibrary Information Mosaic

There are many examples of "superlibrary information mosaic". To name a few, there are ILLINET in Illinois - the consortium of 45 academic and public libraries, the University of
California system MELVIL, and the more recent one - OhioLINK (Ohio Library Information Network).

OhioLINK's membership includes 17 public universities, 23 community/technical colleges, 1 private college, and the State Library of Ohio. The glue that binds OhioLINK libraries together is the INNOPAC library system of Innovative Interfaces Inc. (III). While libraries of the consortium all maintain their own library catalogues, they passed, at the same time, their bibliographic and holdings information to the OhioLINK to form an integrated central catalogue which is the platform for all sorts of consortium-wide operations which include consortium cataloguing, circulation, collection development and document delivery.

**OhioLINK as a prototype for Hong Kong?**

OhioLINK may be a model for academic libraries in Hong Kong in their further efforts for co-operation, because it enables effective co-operation among its members. All the university libraries in Hong Kong are using the INNOPAC system; there is indeed a possibility that we may come together and form a technically and functionally integrated consortium, similar to OhioLINK. In the process, of course, some suitable system enhancements may have to be required.

(1) **A Consortium-wide User-initiated Circulation System**

One of the distinct benefits that OhioLINK offers to its users is the user-initiated circulation functionality. Individual users of the Consortium can search OhioLINK's central catalogue at their own campus. Once desired items are located, the users may enter their names, ID numbers and home institutions to place holds on the items at other OhioLINK campuses. Supported by Pony Express - a fast delivery agent, the items will then be delivered to the users within 48 hours. No librarian intervention is required during the process.

Can the same process be applied to Hong Kong? Given that none of the UGC libraries can be self-sufficient in meeting the information needs of their users due to all sorts of reasons
mentioned earlier, interlibrary loan arrangements become indispensable. However, traditional interlibrary loan operations involve quite a number of operating procedures and are very labour intensive. Will it now be time for us to move some of the responsibilities to the users and let them carry out the process themselves since information and telecommunication technology has already provided us with the opportunities?

To do this, it requires that the library systems of all the 8 UGC institutions be integrated in such a way that there is a single consortial circulation system with a common user database. In that case, "circulation" is no longer a local function but a system-wide function. For example, a user from the City University of Hong Kong may hold a book held by the University of Hong Kong just by entering his or her personal particulars for verification in the consortial circulation system. Then the book will be ready for collection at his or her local library within 48 hours. Similarly, photocopies of articles may also be requested in this manner.

However, in practice, there are quite a number of policy issues that would have to be straightened out. The most basic one is loan rules. Should circulation loan rules or interlibrary loan rules be used to monitor user-initiated circulation? Whose loan rules are we going to use, that of the lending or the borrowing libraries? Or, do we need a new set of rules that applies to all participating libraries? How do we handle fines? Are all categories of users be allowed to initiate consortium-wide circulation themselves? For example, according to the current practice of interlibrary loans, undergraduate students at the City University of Hong Kong cannot borrow books from the other institutions. Without library intervention, how are we going to ensure that this part of the library regulations is enforced? Also, how are we going to ensure return of items? There are indeed a number of issues that would have to be discussed and resolved.

(2) A Consortium-wide Central Catalogue

Up till now, there is still no integrated central catalogue, similar to the one at OhioLINK, although all the 8 UGC libraries have already shifted to INNOPAC. The success story of
OhioLINK is mainly attributed to the availability of a central catalogue with both bibliographic and holdings status information. However, as each institution in Hong Kong has already developed its local cataloguing practice that is rather unique, merging records from different institutions into a central database may not be easy. This was also the experience of OhioLINK when it was establishing its central catalogue.

Although individual library catalogues of the 8 UGC institutions are somehow linked together with the Z39.50 software to form a virtual union catalogue thanks to the broadcast search feature of the software, its reliability is still under question because of inconsistencies in the indexing practice of different libraries. Moreover, there is a high probability that at least one participating system will be out of service at any given time. However, the need for a union catalogue with holding status information is paramount if functions like consortial circulation and cataloguing are to be performed. Since all the UGC institutions are using the same automation software, they should go one step further to build a consortium-wide central catalogue.

(3) A Consortium-wide Document Delivery System

The current situation is that the interlibrary loan automation systems of UGC libraries are totally independent. Most of them are simple in-house databases developed by library staff themselves and they are not integrated with one another in any sense. Moreover, each library has a lot of ILL procedures that have to be followed. However, should all the libraries share the same interlibrary loan automation software under a consortium-wide document delivery system, many of the tedious procedures may be eliminated and the ILL process be greatly facilitated.

In a consortium-wide document delivery system, ILL requests can be sent to the other libraries electronically and be loaded into the system of the counterparts automatically. The requesting libraries can keep track of the current status of their requests on the
consortium-wide system without ringing up the counterparts to enquire. In addition, statistics of interlibrary loan transactions among all the UGC libraries can be kept centrally for the reference of the collection development decision makers.

The interlibrary loan module of INNOPAC can be a possible candidate for such a consortium-wide document delivery system. However, the functionalities of the module still need further improvements and fine-tuning in order to suit the setting in Hong Kong.

(4) *Consortium-wide Collection Development*

Indeed, some sort of co-operation in this area has already been pursued by academic libraries in Hong Kong. Examples are the subscription of the Environmental Sciences and Pollution Management Databases as well as Ovid databases. However, more can be done in this respect considering that budget available to the tertiary education system is shrinking and that university libraries are now increasingly reliant on expensive electronic resources. As noted above, JULAC is already planning to move in this direction.

There are definite advantages for consortium collection development. Consortium is in a better position to secure government funding and also to bargain for better contract terms and discounts from vendors and publishers. With electronic databases, a consortium set-up will also likely to save on the hardware and subsequent maintenance cost.

**Conclusion**

Library co-operation has been practised for a long time. The impetus for co-operation and the nature of co-operation, however, may be quite different at different stages due to changes in the information environment.

In this day and age, the tightening economic condition no doubt makes library co-operation imperative. Fortuitously, today's technology enables co-operative efforts technically possible. Thanks to technology, the trend of co-operation today, as different from the past, is to shift
the work from the library to the users - there is less and less intervention and a diminishing intermediary role on the part of the library. Users will initiate the request and send it to the agents other than their home library; in return, these outside agents will directly send the requested items to the users. The advantages of doing this are two-fold -- (1) it speeds up the process, and (2) it saves up the staff cost. That the OhioLINK is successful is due to the availability of advanced technology, coupled with co-operative good-will among its members. Academic libraries in Hong Kong are also well-endowed with a state-of-the-art information technology infrastructure. An added advantage that Hong Kong has is that Hong Kong is a geographically compact community which makes it easier for library co-operation. I am confident that given the determination, commitment and good-will, Hong Kong will create another success story in library co-operation.

References


3. Ibid., 9

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


17. Ibid., 456.