Planning for the Future Decade of Academic Libraries of Taiwan in a Digital Environment

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Abstract

Academic libraries in Taiwan are confronted with many uncertainties in the new millennium. Trends of demographic growth and higher education, dynamics and economics of publishing, hi-tech applications in teaching, learning and scholarly communication all have great impacts on operations of these libraries. Based on a review of recent literature and personal observations, the author first addresses factors of uncertainty and their implications for the future. Then, the paper moves on to discuss emerging changes in collection development, services, space, staff, and calls for preparations for such changes. A final note pleads for taking a humanistic approach in an age of technology.

Keywords: academic libraries; Taiwan; emerging changes

I. Introduction

Twenty years into the new millennium of a rapidly changing environment, academic libraries in Taiwan, confronting many uncertainties, grapple with many problems, some of which appear to be universal and some others tend to have more local relevance. Factors of uncertainty affecting academic libraries are many and they may come from various realms. These include the directions and trends of higher education, dynamics and economics of publishing, hi-tech applications in teaching, learning and scholarly communications, and even demographics. Based on a review of recent literature and personal observations on trends in higher education, academic librarianship, and the broader environment, the author addresses issues to urge thoughts on their implications and to call for preparations and strategic planning.

II. Important Factors Concerning Changes in the Higher Education

On broader terms of the educational environment in Taiwan, changes in some aspects have already emerged or are very influential on the operations of academic libraries. Rapid expansion of higher education institutions, emphasis on research outputs, regular and rigorous evaluation of academic programs, increasingly market-based orientation, coupled with the shrinking financial resources all have contributed to make colleges and universities very exacting and highly competitive entities, whereas libraries serve their communities. In view of impacts on libraries two important factors concerning changes in the higher education (abbrev. as HE) in Taiwan are discussed as follows:

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A. Fast Expansion of HE Institutions in the Face of Low Birth Rate

Among various means of innovations taken in HE in Taiwan, the fast expansion of HE institutions is phenomenal. In 1981 we had a total of 104 colleges and universities, and the number jumped to a total of 163 institutions in 2011. In just thirty years we witnessed an increase of every 35% in the number of HE institutions. (Ministry of Education, 2013)(Fig. 1) The assets, such as land, capital and personnel investments multiplied in founding these colleges and universities are tremendous.

![Fig.1 Number of Colleges and Universities in Taiwan](image)

At the same time family structure showed significant changes, and one change that affects higher education in due course is the low birth rate. In 1981 we had a total of 414,609 newborns or 22.87 per thousand and in 2011 the number plunged to 196,527 newborns or 8.48 per thousand, while the total population more than doubled in the same period. One birth rate has become the lowest in the world. (Ministry of Limite, 2011)(Fig.2, Fig.3)

![Fig.2 Number of Newborns in Taiwan](image)

![Fig.3 Birth Rate (%) in Taiwan](image)

As a consequence of the fast expansion of HE institutions and the drop of birth rate, it was reported that more than 37% of the 104,604 high-school graduates were granted admission to enter universities in 2003. (Huang, 2005) The college education has clearly switched from education for the elite to education for the masses. The soaring admission rate is evading the quality of students admitted into some HE institutions. What are the implications for the academic libraries? Although each campus is unique and may occupy a different status, some libraries may face the strain earlier than others. Will these be mechanisms established by the library to join various departments in essential programs for the needed students? Will there be any amendments about collections, services, and programs should the library decide to address the situations? If the HE system remains the same and the low birth rate continues and becomes a trend, in a decade or two we probably will not have enough students to go around to fill our campuses and many departments and even universities will face the fate of "close-up". What then, will happen to academic libraries on such campuses?

B. Cross-Border Education and Research

As a result of the rapid expansion of HE institutions in the last quarter of the last century and influences of increasingly market-based orientation, universities are preoccupied about recruiting international students, delivering joint programs, exchanging faculty and students and encouraging collaboration in research projects. It is a common experience that while walking around a campus, one will meet people of different hair colors and hear different tongues. The implications of the change of homogeneous campuses to internationalization of HE in Taiwan for the academic libraries are many. Since the Chinese is not the easiest language to learn and many foreign students have language problems. Obviously changes in collections, services and staff training should be made to meet the new needs of the foreign-born users. Take staff training for instance, ability in English or another major foreign language will be valued. Most libraries already have their signs in both Chinese and English. But these provide only the very basic functions. Look into the web pages, one will find that the English version are few and they seldom go beyond the first page to offer a very rough outline. What about the library announcements and bulletins, guided tours, reference interviews, databases or library instruction? Are these offered also in English? How many libraries in the public services department are bilingual? If we are to serve an international community, we have to hasten to make the necessary changes to meet their information needs.
III. Emerging Changes in Library Operations

As we move to the immediate realms of our own operations, we could also spot some emerging changes. An exploration on changes in collection development, services, space planning, and staff and their implications are given as follows.

A. Collection Development

1. Changes in Purchased Collections

Collections, whether they are in print, media, or electronic version, remain an important factor to attract users for their library visits, be they physical or virtual. Thus, they still form the foundation of library services. In the U.S. among the top ten trends noted by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, the first one is on collections: "Academic library collection growth is driven by patron demand and will include new resource types." (ACRL, 2010) The same report goes on to list factors, such as budget reductions, user preference for electronic access to materials, limited physical space, and the inability to sustain comprehensive collections, as factors having great concern about recruiting international students, delivering joint programs, exchanging faculty and students and encouraging collaboration in research projects. It is a common experience that while walking around a campus, one will meet different kinds of staff and students with different languages. The implications of the change of homogeneity campuses to internationalizations of HE in Taiwan for the academic libraries are many. Since the Chinese is not the easiest language to learn and many foreign students have language problems. Obviously changes in collections, services and staff training should make the new needs of the foreseen-who. Take staff training for instance, ability in English or another foreign language will be valued. Most libraries already have staff who can speak Chinese and English. But even so, only the few who will be able to effectively communicate with the students. Look into the library web pages, one will find that the English versions are few and they seldom go beyond the first page to offer a rough outline. What about the library announcements and bulletins, guided tours, reference interviews, database or literacy instruction? Are these offered also in English? How many librarians in the public-service department are bilingual? If we are to serve an international community, we have to be prepared for them. And since these users are with us already, we have to make these necessary changes to meet their information needs.

Thus changes in collections include new resource types. Many university libraries actively engage in training their institutional repositories, e.g., faculty publications and works and special collections in the library. The National Taiwan University Library established digital archives projects, such as Digital Archives Project and Taiwan-Related Archives Project, involving researchers of specialized disciplines, resource sharing between departments and the library, and information technology, to broaden public access to the holdings. (National Taiwan University Library, 2002) The National Chung Hsing University Library built the Taiwan Agricultural History Digital Archives for the purpose. (National Chung Hsing University Library, 2009) These projects were intended for digital preservation as well as enhancing teaching and research. However, without universal programs of promotion, these archives would largely remain dormant, failing to attract attention and users they deserve. Furthermore academic libraries usually invest a large share of resources on their digital projects. Whether they are supported by institutional funds or grants from other sources, libraries still bear costs in staffing, equipment, storage and operations. Under a dire situation of stagnant or reduced budgets, libraries reallocating resources in these digital projects probably need to account for their efforts. With careful planning and proper marketing, the curated local collection of unique items may serve far beyond their own campuses.

2. Enhanced Collaboration Among Libraries in Pooling Resources Together

At the turn of the century various consortia of academic libraries have already been organized in Taiwan to negotiate and purchase e-books, journals and databases. Access to foreign students and their native hearts of many academic libraries, thus many academic libraries still feel that they are losing grip on selection and control of collections. Packaged electronic resources, especially journals, are rather forced on academic libraries by aggregators or publishers and they place great strain on library budgets. As many libraries are short of staff, forming consortia to negotiate and purchase is a welcome relief. Collaborations on management and sharing these e-resources further enhance the scope and diversity of academic libraries. As consolidations in the publishing industry, the demise of a number of smaller publishers in the western world holding academic libraries to pay closer attention to them, these collaborative efforts will also persist. The traditional resources sharing among academic libraries through NDNDS (Nationwide Document Delivery Service), a national interlibrary loan system, pool resources together by supplying needed monographs or articles to users of member libraries. As an improved interlibrary lending service through RapidILL, offering 24-hour turnaround time, is put to use by 10 academic libraries now (National Chung Hsing University Library, 2011). It has proved to work well for research-oriented audiences.

These practices indicated that under the pressure of stagnant or reduced budgets, academic libraries are moving toward more e-resources and intensify their collaborations in an attempt to offer a faster and better information service.
A. Digital Services in Higher Education

In a Digital Environment, universities and their students are not only benefiting from the technology and digital age. They have grown accustomed to accessing learning materials online, and this has fundamentally changed how they interact with the academic student. Information sources that were once held not only in libraries but also in classrooms are now accessible through the internet. This shift has also affected how students approach their academic work. Online resources have enabled them to conduct research and access materials from anywhere, at any time. This has led to an increase in the number of students who now consider the library as a virtual space, using it primarily for online resources and services.

B. Library Services

A frequent challenge faced by libraries is the need to keep up with the changing technological landscape. In the past, libraries were primarily physical spaces where students could access books and other resources. However, with the advent of digital technologies, libraries have had to adapt and evolve to meet the changing needs of their users. This has led to the development of new services, such as online databases, digital archives, and virtual reference services. Libraries have also had to invest in new technologies, such as e-books and e-journals, to remain relevant in the digital age.

C. Exception Required

Many academic libraries are facing the challenge of managing the digital age, where students are increasingly using online resources for their research. This has led to a shift in the way libraries are perceived, with users expecting more personalized and efficient customer service. Libraries are now required to adapt their services to meet the changing needs of their users, which can be challenging, especially in a Digital Environment.

References


