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A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO INFORMATION LITERACY ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract

While it is an international trend to integrate information literacy into the university curriculum, it is not yet a standard practice in Hong Kong. Furthermore, there is currently no territory wide stipulation on information literacy in Hong Kong higher education, and concepts of information literacy remain unfamiliar to the university community. This paper describes the first large scale cross-institutional project that aims to enhance information literacy in Hong Kong higher education through firstly assessing information literacy education needs of students across eight institutions, and then to use such data with input from faculties to inform the development of a shared interactive multimedia information literacy courseware and self-assessment tool. "Course Enhancement Funds" will also be provided to individual courses to promote faculty-librarian partnerships for embedding information literacy elements into them. To deepen information literacy embedment, a professional capacity building programme will be organised to aid librarians from participating institutions in building collaborative partnerships with faculties. By using a broad, evidence-based approach, through cross-institutional partnership, to provide relevant learning experiences appropriate for local student needs and collaborating with faculties across the eight largest higher education institutions in Hong Kong, the project seeks to bring about a paradigm shift in Hong Kong higher education leading to a valuing of information literacy among university management and faculty, and in-depth embedment of information literacy into the university curricula.

Keywords

information literacy, cross-institutional project, education needs, evidence-based, shared interactive multimedia courseware, self-assessment tool, course enhancement funds, professional capacity building

The core mission of higher education is to prepare graduates for a knowledge-based society, by fostering skills for independent and lifelong learning. Information literacy, defined as the ability to find, evaluate, use and disseminate information in order to "learn how to learn" (ACRL, 1989, p. 1), is the foundation for learning, and is pivotal to academic development and lifelong employability (Candy, Crebert and O'Leary, 1994; Hager and Holland, 2006). In the *Prague Declaration: Towards an Information Literate Society*, UNESCO (2003) positions information literacy as a basic human right in an Information Society for lifelong learning, for building a competitive workforce, and for closing the digital divide and reducing inequities among people and countries. Information Literacy should be an integral part of *Education for All*. In Hong Kong, in the *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* released in 2000, the Education Commission made "Learning for Life, Learning through Life" the aim of education for the 21st Century. The reform targets to equip students with a broad based knowledge, independent thinking, high adaptability and the ability for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world. To facilitate lifelong learning, information literacy should be embedded into the university curriculum, making students aware of the vital role of information in the learning process.

While Hong Kong's Education Department initiated some information literacy education in primary and secondary schools via its *Information Literacy Framework for Hong Kong* (2005), a study conducted by the author (Wong, 2011) found that university freshmen of Hong Kong had very limited experiences in information use in their school years, and these past learning experiences had a strong impact on both their information literacy competency and perceptions in developing and refining search strategies for academic research topics at university. They were weak in using a variety of scholarly information sources and search tools, but had a tendency of heavy reliance on quick web information for their research tasks. They also lacked the awareness and capability to evaluate information and acknowledge the sources.

Their scarce past experiences and inadequate competency in using scholarly search tools for more authoritative and reliable information sources prevented them from using these valuable resources for complex research. The study revealed that university freshmen in Hong Kong urgently need proper information literacy learning experiences to facilitate them to abandon the unhealthy habit of using brief and incomprehensive web information, and to use scholarly information effectively for in-depth research instead. Furthermore, studies among postgraduate students in Hong Kong show that even PhD students start out ignorant of many important scholarly sources in their disciplines and need help to develop their information literacy skills (Chu & Law 2005, Chu & Law 2007a, Chu & Law 2007b, Chu & Law 2008; Ting, Chu, Chiu, & Yau, 2011).

While it is an international trend to integrate information literacy into the university curriculum to facilitate student-centred inquiry-based pedagogies and lifelong learning, this is not yet a standard practice among Hong Kong universities. Furthermore, in contrast to a number of countries around the world, there is no territory wide stipulation on information literacy in higher education, and concepts of information literacy remain unfamiliar to the university community. According to a survey conducted by the Learning Strategies Committee under the Hong Kong Joint University Librarians Academic Committee (JULAC) in 2012, out of the eight University Grant Council funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong, only one university offers a one credit mandatory course on IT skills with a small portion of information literacy elements and one university provides a one credit compulsory research ethics course with 1/6 on information literacy components. Other than these, it all relies on the scattered effort of individual librarians and faculty members to embed information literacy into their programmes and classes. Some proactive librarians are able to deliver one or two classes on information literacy in individual teaching programmes, and such provision of information literacy learning experiences all depends on the good will of individual librarians and faculty members, and the programmes are mostly non-credit bearing (JULAC LSC, 2012).

In addition to the lack of a territory wide stipulation on information literacy in Hong Kong higher education, there is a substantial gap in the in-depth understanding of information behaviours of Hong Kong university students. Only a few studies had been performed, namely those of Chu and Law (2007a, 2007b, 2008) examining the information search processes of postgraduate students of one local university, and the study conducted by the author (Wong, 2011) on information literacy competences, perceptions and past learning experiences of university freshmen in a university in Hong Kong, as cited above.

To deal with the above, libraries of all eight University Grant Council (UGC) funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong worked together to propose the very first large scale cross-institutional information literacy project to the Hong Kong University Grant Council for project fund support. The proposed information literacy project, with the author as the principal investigator, will last for three years, spanning from 2015 to 2018. It was fully supported by the eight UGC funded tertiary education institutions in Hong Kong, and has successfully acquired the project funding from the Hong Kong University Grant Council.

In the coming three years, a comprehensive assessment will be conducted on the information behaviours of university students across faculties from the eight participating institutions covering all subject disciplines to form the knowledge base of the educational needs for information literacy among students. Such knowledge base will in turn inform the development of a shared interactive multimedia courseware and an information literacy self-assessment tool, to address the local information literacy educational needs and to provide relevant information literacy learning experiences for students in all participating institutions. Small amount of funding in terms of "Course Enhancement Funds" will be provided to individual taught courses to promote faculty-librarian partnerships for embedding information literacy elements into them. To deepen information literacy embedment, a professional capacity building programme will be organised to aid librarians from participating institutions in building collaborative partnerships with faculties. By using a broad, evidence-based approach, through cross-institutional partnership, to provide relevant learning experiences appropriate for local student needs and collaborating with faculties across the eight largest higher education institutions in Hong Kong, the project seeks to bring about a paradigm shift in Hong Kong higher

education leading to a valuing of information literacy among university management and faculty, and in-depth embedment of information literacy into the university curricula.

At the end of the project, learning outcomes will be reviewed by various channels, including formative assessment built into different modules of the multimedia information literacy courseware, usability studies on the courseware, reports submitted by recipients of the Course Enhancement Funds, and surveys for faculty and students at various stages. A validated instrument used by over fifty higher education institutions in the US (The Research Readiness Self-Assessment) will be customized for Hong Kong students and administered to 1,600 students from participating institutions to evaluate their information literacy competencies before and after implementing various information literacy intervention activities. □

Composition of the project team exemplifies its collaborative nature. The project team composes of all the library directors of the eight institutions in Hong Kong, as well as three faculty members from the three largest institutions in Hong Kong. Consultancy will be provided by the world renowned information literacy scholar Professor Christine Bruce of the Queensland University of Technology in Australia. Facilitator of the information literacy capacity building programme will be recruited internationally. Expertise of faculty members and librarians, local and overseas information literacy scholars, would be shared and promoted through this collaboration project. Faculty collaborators would contribute their knowledge and experiences in educational assessment, courseware development and implementation. Librarian collaborators would be responsible for facilitating the need assessment such as recruiting student participants, developing the courseware contents, implementing and promoting the shared interactive multimedia information literacy courseware elements to various stakeholders of their institutions, developing the information literacy assessment tool, and would continue to update and maintain the courseware in the future. An honorary consultant will provide expert advice all through the project.

To ensure the sustainability of the project deliverables, the Joint University Librarians Advisory Committee (JULAC) Learning Strategies Committee, with information literacy specialists from libraries of all eight participating institutions, will be involved to provide support by offering its information literacy expertise to the project team. The Committee is a well-established standing committee under JULAC to provide a forum for JULAC member library staff to share best practices and new developments related to information services in the broader context and related to information literacy services as one specific area of interest. After the completion of the project, the Committee, working under JULAC, will continue to work on the further development and implementation of the courseware to ensure long-term sustainability of project outcomes across UGC funded institutions. In addition, the courseware comprises digital learning objects that can be incorporated separately into learning management systems, as stand-alone objects or as parts of coherent sequences of learning under different instructional context, thereby increasing the courseware's reusability, portability and transferability. A paradigm shift in appreciating the significance of information literacy among UGC funded institutions will ultimately help extend the development and use of the shared interactive multimedia information literacy courseware.

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