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Issues of Book Acquisition in University Libraries: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Introduction

Acquiring information resources is a core activity of libraries. University libraries all over the world still acquire and maintain massive book collections while managing other formats. Despite prophecies of vanishing print collections and emergence of the digital paradigm, printed books still have a central role in library collections and publishing industry (Kanwal 2005; Carr 2007)

Until 2005, collections in Pakistan's university libraries (UL) mainly consisted of books (foreign), when the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan provided access to thousands of digital databases (Government of Pakistan. Higher Education Commission). A doctoral study found that in Pakistan, university libraries annual collection funds are mostly spent on new books and serial publications (Ameen 2005a). These funds have increased each year under the present regime; however, the book market has never been capable of efficiently supplying the imported current and research material for libraries. This researcher's experience as university librarian, as faculty member, and a review of literature establishes that university libraries face serious problems in the acquisition of books and journals. Despite the gradual adoption of information and communication technologies, libraries still find it hard to acquire current books through vendors or direct purchase, which makes it difficult to meet clients' needs quickly, efficiently, and economically.

Statement of the problem

There is a need to explore the basic issues in the acquisition of books through purchase in the emerging paradigm. The study explores these issues with reference to major university libraries in Pakistan.

Research Questions

- What are the prevailing strategies of book acquisition in the university libraries of Pakistan ?
- What are the major problems in acquisitions?
- What kind of interaction prevails among vendors and acquisitions librarians?

Research Methodology

The study uses a multi-method approach. The data was collected in 2003 and 2004 as part of the author's doctoral research. Questionnaires and interview guide were developed to collect quantitative and

qualitative data. The questionnaire was sent to the central libraries of 40 major accredited universities in Pakistan. Thirty responses were ultimately received. After initial analysis of that data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 librarians using the interview-guide. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and the text was analyzed and categorized using a thematic approach.

Review of Literature

The literature on acquisition, access, and management of library collections continues to grow. Most of the discussion revolves around access versus acquisition and other issues related to electronic collection management (e.g., Cassell 2004; Horava 2005). Acquisition of print materials is also still of interest. For example, Paulos and Holley (2006) explore the relationship between African studies programs and the acquisition of African imprints in four selected American academic libraries. Dali and Dilevko (2005) portray the ways that collection development specialists in North American libraries acquire books from Slavic/Eastern Europe countries.

A review of local literature reveals the situation after the creation of Pakistan in 1947, when libraries suffered from a lack of human and material resources including collections. The slow rate of book production in the country has also created a problem in acquiring quality books at a competitive price. Razzaque (1971) states that the local market cannot supply 25% of the needs of the libraries and acquiring foreign materials is also difficult. Haider (1975, 1986) addresses the issue of insufficient collections in university libraries and suggests ways of improving cooperation. He found that only a fraction of professional, scientific, and advanced knowledge is produced in Pakistan, establishing that acquisition of material is largely based on imports (either directly or through local book dealers). Acquisition through this method is almost totally directed and controlled by availability of materials in the market, leaving only a limited choice for systematic collection building. Imports through local book dealers, favoured by special libraries in the mid-1950s and 1960s, is no longer employed because of "red tape" in the process. The direct import system, which has proven beneficial in many respects for university libraries, has also gradually been given up. The reasons include: an uncertain import policy, import restrictions and trade embargoes against some, the fluctuating rate of the Pakistani rupee, hurdles in customs clearance, and, above all, the departure of acquisitions experts to positions in OPEC countries. Libraries under this system concentrated on what is available at bookstores in the country. At present, this is the most popular channel of book procurement in Pakistan. Most books in libraries, including large public and university libraries, are purchased from local bookstores. These are mostly located in Lahore and Karachi (p.111)

Khurshid (2000) includes a chapter on book production in Pakistan and problems of library purchases. It concludes that better mutual relationships between the book industry and libraries are crucial for both of them. Mirza (1990), a prominent bookseller and importer, discusses the problems of supplying books to libraries. The focus of discussion in literature remains on the insufficient size of collections in university libraries and problems of acquisition. The present study aims to probe into the issues associated with book acquisitions in university libraries in the 21st century, and attempts to find out whether the emergence of a digital paradigm has brought any improvement.

Findings and Discussion

The author discovered a number of issues during the course of this study. Visiting the libraries and interviewing librarians was a rewarding experience for data collection. The following section presents quantitative and qualitative data analyses.

Issues in Book Purchase

Type of collection

The collections in the libraries who responded to the survey consist largely of print and are mostly American or British books and journals acquired from the local market. The timely acquisition of current publications has had been a serious problem. University libraries must depend on imported foreign publications to build collections. The data from this study demonstrates that the situation for collections and acquisitions is still nearly the same as reported by Haider.

Buying market

Libraries were asked about the approximate average of acquisitions from local vendors and direct from foreign publishers/vendors. The responses of 27 libraries in Figure 1 show that still there is no significant change in the acquisition pattern, since 18 (67%) libraries still buy 100% of books from the local market and do not use online sources.

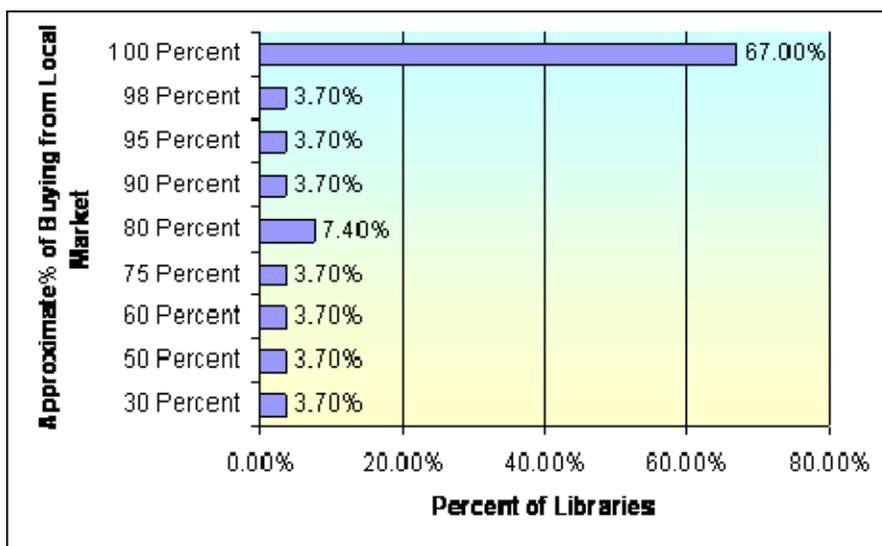


Figure 1. Approximate percentage of books bought locally

Three libraries provided no answer; however, it appeared from their responses to other questions that they purchase material, by and large, from the local market. Six libraries purchase from 80% to 98% and four libraries from 30% to 75% material from the local market. The answers to the question of approximate percentage of purchase from foreign market reveals (Figure 2) that only 9 of 30 libraries replied affirmatively. Only one library among them was buying 70% material directly from the foreign market, while 8 libraries were buying from 5% to 50% of the materials.

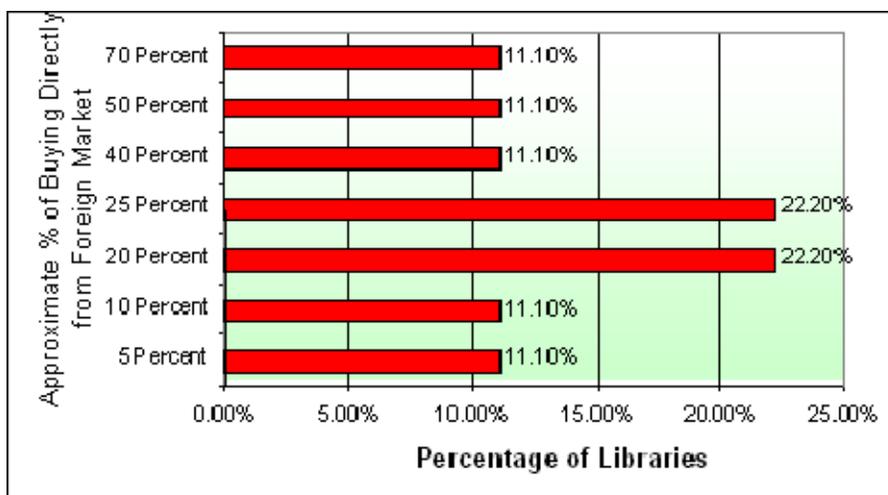


Figure 2. Approximate percentage of buying from foreign market

A large majority of libraries continue to depend on local vendors to build their book collections. A few reasons for this phenomenon are reported in the qualitative analysis of the study, based on extracts from the interview transcripts. Four chief librarians pointed out the scarcity of material in the local market to meet student's needs. The following comments are illustrative:

LUMS special focus is on collecting local grey literature, reports, statistical data and government reports. We have no problem in acquiring foreign literature, but the procurement of local quality literature presents all sorts of problems. Then the government departments and ministries do not provide free access to micro-data. We have money to spend on purchase of government publications but it is difficult to locate this kind of material and to get access to unpublished reports. This kind of literature is direly needed for our readers. At last, after a meeting with Director General, Federal Bureau of Statistics we have succeeded in receiving 50% of micro data which comes through the Bureau.

The book market is not evenly organized in all major cities of Pakistan. The cities of Lahore and Karachi cater to the book supply needs of the country. Haider (1993) shows serious concern about this situation, saying:

At present, more than 85% of the English language book trade in Pakistan is dominated by about a dozen publishers-cum-booksellers located in Karachi and Lahore These importers prefer to import those titles that give them the maximum profit. With no import of their own, libraries are totally dependent on them for their purchases. At present libraries are building their collections on the simple principle of what is available in the market rather than what is needed. This is a point of concern for all. In essence this handful of book importers dictates the readership habits of the people of the nation. (p. 154)

The results of this study establish that the situation has not changed much despite the emergence of electronic means of communication. For example, the chief librarian of Peshawar University mentioned in his interview that "finding latest, quality books in the city is very difficult and they have to contact vendors in Lahore or Karachi." Nonetheless, in the universities in larger cities, where librarians use the Internet for selection and acquisition, the quality of collections is improving.

Malpractice

Several interviewees mentioned the problem of malpractice on the part of both librarians and booksellers in the acquisition process. "The booksellers want us to buy what they have in their stock and

at times older editions at new prices,” said one librarian. He described some booksellers selling old books from “jumble sales” (old, foreign, weeded, or defective books) at high prices to libraries. Booksellers on the other hand, blame librarians for receiving kickbacks. A number of librarians forcefully denied these charges. The Punjab University acquisitions librarian, who was also an officer of the Pakistan Library Association (PLA), said that, “the selection procedure in the university libraries is so foolproof that no librarian can dare to ask for such a favour. Faculty makes the selection and not the librarian.” He continued, “these are only allegations. We have asked booksellers many times that just tell us the name and we will blacklist the librarian but they never came up with a name.” The then chief-librarian of Karachi University stated that, “some librarians might have gotten merely a dictionary or some other books for personal use, but even this should not be done.” Though selection in university libraries is mostly in the hands of teaching faculty, this state of affairs has made university librarians vigilant and conscious of purchasing procedures. Even without being asked, interviewees would refer to their fair dealing. Two interviewees mentioned that they did not have any favorite booksellers and buy the needed material from anywhere, because a little carelessness can cause problems.

Online Purchase of Books

Obviously, the use of ICT reduces the time lag in acquiring quality current titles and facilitates buying what is needed instead of buying merely “what sellers/vendors have in their stock” (which is the common practice in Pakistan). Only four libraries out of 30, at the time of data collection, were buying online using credit cards. These libraries were getting the latest editions at a reasonable price and further saving money by paying the bank exchange rate for foreign currency. The then chief-librarian of Quid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, stated that “publishers usually offer 30% discounts on order of five or six titles.” Other libraries depend largely on local booksellers, who make every effort to sell their existing stocks. Furthermore, these vendors opt for the low-cost book shipment rates which results in delayed delivery.

Summary of Responses

- Insufficient number of book shops in cities other than Lahore and Karachi.
- Undersupplied foreign current academic and research stocks in the market on medicine and health sciences necessitates buying directly from foreign vendor.
- Poor number of local publications to meet educational needs.
- The acquisition of government publications and research reports is very difficult.
- Lack of funds
- Attempts by booksellers to supply old books at new prices.
- Local vendors are very good and cooperative people.
- Delayed supply of foreign books.
- Lack of trust toward librarians and lack of delegation of authority for making acquisition decisions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The book market, acquisition practices, and library collections have not been changed much despite the emergence of a digital paradigm. Acquisition librarians have neither the needed authority to select nor to purchase the books online from the international market. Furthermore, the working relationships between vendors and librarians are not truly professional.

Keeping in view the findings of the study, it is suggested that certain practical and realistic steps be taken by the government to promote local book production as well as to improve the import procedure for a smooth flow of acquisitions. The undue “red-tapism,” causes delays. Chief or acquisition librarians should be trusted to devise a strategy for buying books online. University libraries are receiving improved funding for print material. This money must not be spent in simply buying what is available in the local

market but what is needed. The use of online resources should be explored to achieve efficiency, economy, and speed.

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