



Sustainable Academic Libraries: The Experience of Organizing a Sustainable Conference

Leo F. H. Ma

Abstract:

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Sustainable Academic Libraries: The Experience of Organizing a Sustainable Conference

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library kicked off a conference series with the main theme of ‘Academic Librarian.’ In 2016, the fourth conference of the series entitled *Academic Librarian 4: Sustainable Academic Libraries: Now and Beyond* was co-organized by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library and the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library. The Academic Librarian 4 Conference addresses the multi-dimensional issues of sustainability pertaining to academic libraries under four major themes: (1) Sustainable Environment; (2) Sustainable Resources; (3) Sustainable Technologies; and (4) Sustainable Services. Apart from reviewing the key issues concerning the sustainability of academic libraries brought up by the conference papers, the author also highlights the way in which the Academic Librarian 4 Conference made every effort to make this a sustainable library event.

Keywords: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Library, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library, Academic Libraries, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Library kicked off a conference series with the main theme of ‘Academic Librarian.’ In 2016, the fourth conference of the series entitled *Academic Librarian 4: Sustainable Academic Libraries: Now and Beyond* (AL4) was co-organized by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) Library and the CUHK Library. The AL4 Conference covers a wide range of sustainability issues pertaining to academic libraries: “How do academic libraries drive sustainability in their innovations and day-to-day operations? What are the best practices and emerging trends that help save the environment for posterity while fulfilling at optimal efficiency the current and future needs of library users? What are the obstacles or breakthroughs in advancing these goals?” (About the Conference, 2019). The conference explored four major themes on sustainability, namely sustainable environment, sustainable resources, sustainable technologies, and sustainable services. In this paper, the author gives a brief account of the green strategy adopted by the CUHK Library and a quick overview of the Academic Librarian Conference Series. The author then highlights the key issues concerning the sustainability of academic libraries brought up by

the conference papers. The author also summarizes the way in which the AL4 Conference made every effort to make this a sustainable library event.

CUHK LIBRARY'S GREEN STRATEGY

During the past two decades, CUHK has been actively taking a holistic and strategic approach for integrating sustainability into the management and development of the university. As stipulated in its 2012 sustainability policy, CUHK is “committed to adopting sustainable development in education, research and knowledge transfer, to building a sustainable campus by integrating sustainability in its planning, decision making and day-to-day operations, and to providing leadership in sustainability for the enhancement of the well-being of all peoples” (Sustainability Policy, 2019). This approach is largely defined by developing a campus master plan, drawing up charters, declarations and programmes, and building up strategic partnerships (Our Approach, 2019). In line with the strategic mission of the university, the CUHK Library embraces a holistic and action-oriented approach to sustainability. In the library strategic plan of CUHK Library in 2013 entitled *Partnering for Success 2013-2016*, there are five strategic themes: (1) Realizing the potential of our collections; (2) Transforming our research services; (3) Supporting the student journey; (4) Sustainability; (5) Working in partnership. The strategic plan is structured around these five themes, with objectives underlying each theme. As noted by Louise Jones, University Librarian of CUHK Library, in an interview in an online newsletter, “[a]t CUHK Library one of our strategic themes is sustainability including green buildings but also a wider perspective that embraces staff and resource sustainability” (“How green is my library?”, 2015). Adopting this holistic approach, there are four action-oriented objectives under the strategic theme on sustainability:

- Progress towards environmental sustainability wherever possible;
- Deliver and demonstrate value and fiscal responsibility;
- Optimize collection space, storage and preservation; and
- Secure the organizational structure and staff skills needed to deliver the CUHK Library mission and vision. (*Partnering for Success*, 2013).

The CUHK Library works in partnership with the university's building and facilities office on campus-wide sustainability projects. At the same time, the CUHK Library also prioritizes many internal projects out of its own resources and identifies the following green strategy:

- Raising awareness of sustainability issues among library staff;
- Green library service: printing service, scanning service, and sustainable collection services;
- Green operations: Green Office Programming, energy saving, and waste management; and
- Green building: sustainable design for its new builds and existing premises.

Putting all these efforts together, the CUHK Library has had some success in achieving the objectives of its strategic theme on sustainability (Jones & Wong, 2016b).

ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN CONFERENCE SERIES

The conference series on *Academic Librarian* was launched by the CUHK Library in 2007. The first conference entitled *The Academic Librarian: Dinosaur or Phoenix? Die or Fly in Library Change Management* was held on April 11-12, 2007. As depicted by Prof. Liu Pak Wai, the then Pro-Vice-Chancellor of CUHK, the theme of the conference is indicative in the sense that only the fittest will survive in today's competitive environment. Thus it is crucial not only for libraries but also for any organization to "adapt and change proactively to the demands of any new environment" (Liu, 2007). The conference examines the challenges and opportunities faced by academic library personnel in an ever faster moving and constantly changing academic and technological working environment. The conference has four sub-themes to address these concerns: (1) Academic library change management; (2) Organizational preparation and the changing workplace; (3) The librarians and the faculty, student body, and the general public; (4) The right staff?. Three years later, the second Academic Librarian conference entitled *Academic Librarian 2: Singing in the Rain* was jointly held by the Pao Yue-kong Library of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the CUHK Library on March 11-12, 2010. The main theme of this conference focuses on the skills and positioning of the academic librarian, the impact of the library, its organizational patterns and the values delivered to its stakeholders and clients. In celebrating the 50th Anniversary of CUHK, the CUHK Library and The Joint University Librarians Advisory Committee (JULAC), a consortium that joins together in partnership the eight publicly-funded Hong Kong higher education institutions, held a combined two-day conference on May 30-31, 2013. The theme of the conference entitled *Academic Librarian 3: The Yin-Yang of Future Consortial Collaboration and Competition* covered the academic library consortia governance, co-operative staff development, cutting edge approaches to access and storage of shared paper-based and digital collections, and centralizing collection management and technical services. Jointly organized by the HKUST Library and the CUHK Library, the fourth Academic Librarian conference entitled *Academic Librarian 4 – Sustainable Academic Libraries: Now and Beyond* was held on June 2-3 as a notable event to celebrate the 25th anniversary of HKUST. The AL4 Conference addresses the multi-dimensional issues of sustainability related to academic libraries which will be discussed in further details below.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN 4: FOUR MAJOR THEMES

Co-chaired by Diana Chan, University Librarian of HKUST Library, and Louise Jones, University Librarian of CUHK Library, the AL4 Conference explores four major themes concerning the sustainability issues of academic libraries: (1) Sustainable Environment - to highlight the eco-friendliness of academic libraries; (2) Sustainable Resources - to reconcile the conflicts between growth and sustainability; (3) Sustainable Technologies - to reduce ecological footprint while improving efficiency and experience for users and staff; and (4) Sustainable Services - to stay relevant and proactively design services befitting the immediate and future needs of library users.

Theme 1: Sustainable Environment

In her keynote speech titled *Academic Libraries as Sustainability Hubs: Evolving with Our Campus Community and Within Our Profession*, Charney (2016) emphasized that library professionals can at the same time be sustainability advocates in not only local contexts but also in international environments. Her presentation was supported by a number of excellent examples on library projects and practices on sustainability in the U.S. such as SustainRT. In addition to the keynotes by Charney, there were seven papers addressing different aspects of

the theme such as: providing a sustainable learning environment to support active and constructive learning (Li, 2016); installing sustainable lighting for energy conservation and environmental protection purposes (Chen, 2016); developing a sustainable approach to handle compostable waste in the library learning commons (Hussong-Christian, 2016); including environmental sustainability as part of the marketing strategy of the library (Hauke, 2016); implementing green technologies at the new building of the National Library of Latvia (Vilks, 2016); embedding sustainable planning and design throughout various library processes (Spodick, 2016); and formulating, developing and implementing the library's green strategy to reshape its services (Jones & Wong, 2016a).

Theme 2: Sustainable Resources

Hockx-Yu commented in her keynote speech entitled *Web Archiving: Practices and Options for Academic Libraries* that it is essential to archive web resources for future use. Technologically speaking, web archiving is achievable by using open source technology such as Heritrix, Umbra, Wayback, NutchWAX & SOLR, and WARC. She also suggested four options for web archiving, namely an in-house operation model, an outsourcing model, an in-house plus outsourcing model, and a collaboration model, depending on the strategic approach and resources available for the institution concerned (Hockx-Yu, 2016). There were altogether eight papers on various topics under this theme. Caboara (2016) introduced a project to annotate the digital image of the ancient maps of China collection in HKUST. Oetomo & Kealy (2016) discussed the benefits and approaches of the strategic programs on student recruitment for sustainable growth and resources. Organ (2016) presented a case study on how to sustain a library digitization program within an environment of budgetary constraints and diminishing staff resources. Sorensen & Sarjeant-Jenkins (2016) suggested the use of change management, participative consultation, and grassroots planning for sustainable growth of the library with sustainable resources. Meador (2016) proposed reconfiguring the library organization in a period of flat or reduced budgetary support to ensure sustainable relevance. Tsang & Gelfand (2016) emphasized the importance of sustainable practices in managing the changing landscape of research library collections. Williamson (2016) argued that sustaining and growing the environment of academic librarianship required effective leadership and sustainable workforce strategies at both the institutional and sector levels. Weng and Ackerman (2016) critically examined the perceptions and stereotypes of public service librarians versus technical service librarians through a survey in order to alleviate misunderstandings and misconceptions between them. These presentations cover nicely the sustainability aspects of financial resources, human resources and library collection.

Theme 3: Sustainable Technologies

Helmer argued in his keynote speech entitled *Transformative Collaboration in Academic Libraries* that transformative collaboration will be the way forward for academic libraries. Practically speaking, academic libraries can engage in deep collaboration through transformative consortia by sharing tools (e.g. shared integrated library system) and people (e.g. collaborative workforce) (Helmer, 2016). There were six papers under the theme of sustainable technologies discussing a wide range of technology issues from establishing sustainable workflows for cataloging and metadata services that utilize available metadata technologies (Han, 2016); addressing the topic of Green Computing from central IT service perspective in the context of CUHK campus sustainability (Cheng, 2016); delivering a shared library management system for nine universities together with the National Library of Wales and all National Health Service libraries in Wales of U.K. (Owen, 2016); assessing the effectiveness of the Facebook strategy of selected academic libraries in the Philippines

(Penaflor, 2016); measuring the involvement of libraries and other core contributors to digital humanities through an authorship study (Wong, 2016); and showcasing the application of lean design principles to two unique projects at the University of Alberta Libraries in order to investigate the environmental and financial sustainability of academic libraries (Beasley & Rosseel, 2016).

Theme 4: Sustainable Services

Services are a key component of library sustainability. Priestner in his keynote speech entitled *Employing UX Research Methods to Design Better Library Services* commented that, compared to traditional surveys, UX (User Experience) research is a more holistic approach to explore and understand the experience of our services. User Experience research methods includes a number of techniques including observation, behavioral mapping, semi-structured interviews, cultural probes, usability testing, cognitive mapping, contextual inquiry, affinity mapping, diary studies, card sorting, photo elicitation interviews, graffiti walls, love letters/break-up letters, touchstone tours, and think aloud protocols. Depending on the research context, researchers can employ these techniques individually or more commonly use a selection of these techniques (Priestner, 2016). In addition to the keynote, nine papers on sustainable service were delivered in this session. These papers focused on a wide variety of topics such as conducting a survey to explore the sustainability of an e-learning strategy (Yates & Han, 2016); exploring the research, engagement and planning process of the Knowledge Commons project which makes the Hampshire College Library a renewable and sustainable resource (King, 2016); discussing the challenges of proactively building a non-retrospective digital archive to address the issues of sustainability (Foster & Evans, 2016); transforming the delivery of enquiry services from traditional fixed service desks into a blend of virtual and on-demand services (Hockey, 2016); describing how HKUST Library launched and now sustains high-volume and high quality collaborative information programs using a team-based teaching approach (Caplan & Wong, 2016); proposing three distinctive strategies that are feasible, transferable, malleable, and impactful for sustainable services (Cmor, 2016); discussing the development and implementation of a new model of service delivery by providing equitable, sustainable, curriculum-based learning achieved through collaboration between academics and librarians (Phillips, 2016); reviewing the journey and approach to responding to the needs of researchers in an academic library in a meaningful and sustainable manner (McRostie, 2016); and exploring the need to not only implement a new service philosophy through the lens of disability theory but also highlight a pilot project that was tailored to the individual needs of people with disabilities in a sustainable and scalable way (Pionke, 2016).

ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN 4: A GREEN CONFERENCE

The AL4 Conference made every effort to adopt good practices of an environmentally-friendly event in order to make this a sustainable library project. A green logo was designed for the conference to highlight the key message of sustainability (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: The conference logo for AL4

In practical terms, the AL4 Conference adopted the following green arrangement and logistics which were well received by the conference participants:

- **Communication and Publicity**
 - We minimize printing; electronic files are used whenever possible e.g. e-conference proceedings containing all full papers in USB
 - A mobile app is used to facilitate communication
 - Physical banners are made with paper, no foam board nor vinyl is used
 - The canvas tote bag and the conference USB are designed to be practical and reusable
 - We choose not to use corsages for the VIPs in the opening ceremony.
- **Food and Drinks**
 - We are cautious about the amount of food ordered
 - No disposable cutlery; we avoid unnecessary wrapping
 - We do not provide plastic bottled water. Participants are encouraged to bring their own mugs
 - We work with the conference dinner provider to come up with a menu with ingredients coming from sustainable sources as much as possible
 - Untouched food surplus will be taken by charity
 - Food waste during lunches and tea break will be sent for composting if appropriate
- **Transportation**
 - Participants are encouraged to use public transport or carpooling
 - Coaches are arranged to take participants to the conference dinner venue

CONCLUDING REMARK

In his guest speech entitled *Aligning Student Learning with a Sustainability Mindset*, Bookhart (2016) remarked that “[c]ampuses are perfect places to create good examples for sustainable surroundings.” As a member of the university community, there is no doubt that the library can play a role in developing a sustainable environment on campus. In this paper, the author uses the AL4 Conference as an example to showcase the experience of organizing a sustainable event from the themes of the conference to the practical and logistic arrangement of the event. In addition to the main conference, a pre-conference workshop entitled *A Day of User Experience (UX) Research Methods* was also organized on June 1, 2016 for the conference participants. Andy Priestner, one of the keynote speakers and the presenter of the workshop, discussed in more detail the notion of “user experience” and “ethnography,” and the techniques of conducting user experience research. In brief, the AL4 Conference consisted of a 1-day pre-conference workshop (June 1, 2016) and a 2-day conference (June 2-3, 2016). The speakers were librarians and information professionals from around the globe and over 300 participants from 11 countries attended. The conference evaluation showed an overwhelmingly positive feedback from the participants.

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