ACCESS TO ONLINE DATABASES AT PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Describes a survey of 26 libraries at private colleges and universities (PCU) in Malaysia to ascertain the types of access given to online databases. The PCUs include (a) private colleges that offer franchised undergraduate programmes in collaboration with foreign universities; (b) institutions that are branch campuses of foreign universities; and (c) Malaysian-based PCUs that are owned by Malaysian corporations. Out of the 26 PCUs, only 8 out of 19 colleges and 7 local private universities and foreign branch campuses provide access to online databases to their students. The types of access given are: (a) the private universities provide access to online databases that they subscribe through their own funding and control usage through a mixture of user name/password and IP-based access; (b) the foreign universities with branch campuses in Malaysia provide access by three modes (online databases subscribed from branch campus's own funding; online databases subscribed by foreign partner university; online databases subscribed by local branch campus own funding as well as those subscribed by the foreign partner university). Almost all PCUs provide their undergraduates with computer facilities to access the databases. A variety of methods are used to promote usage, which include library induction, library brochures, library notices and providing links through the library's own web pages. Most PCUs do not charge for access and provide users with the option to print, download or receive documents.

Keywords: Online databases; Private colleges and universities; Malaysia.

BACKGROUND

The concept of access connotes an agent serving between information producers and information users that supports the smooth transfer of information between both parties (Dougherty, et al, 1991). New information and communication technologies have affected access to documented information traditionally housed in libraries. The organisation and control of prints have changed to the management of access and ownership of electronic resources (Anderson, 1991; Budd, 1998; Wilson, 1998). Branin (1998) observed that libraries have shifted to the management of access to remote materials and maximizing online access

from multiple remote locations instead of building collections for long-term use. The *Gale Directory of Databases* (2000) records the existence of about 6,333 types of databases available in the international market. The directory also highlights the rapid growth and use of full-text online databases, citing 750,000 searches in 1974 to 90.30 million searches in 1998.

While technology paves the way for better access to information, it also creates possible barriers of access for the library users if the necessary infrastructure to support the technology is inadequate. With the growing number of commercial databases, barriers emerge due to the variety of access models which these databases offer (Krieb, 1999). These access control models create effective barriers in the usage of online databases depending on the number of subscriptions undertaken by the libraries (basic bibliographic or articles in specific issues or full text to whole issues) (Woodward and McKnight, 1995). To ensure usage, libraries often park their online databases in their portals where users are informed of what are available and instructed on how to get access (Woodward and McKnight, 1995; Ashcroft and Langdon, 1999; Rich and Rabine, 1999; Arant and Payne, 2001). As each online database offers its own search options, training in searching becomes crucial to maximize utilization by users.

Another new development is the emergence of the mega-university, comprising of large university set-ups that support local and foreign campuses. One such example is Monash University in Australia, which has 6 campuses in Australia and two off shore campuses in Malaysia and South Africa. In such a set-up, online databases subscribed by the parent university are also made available to their offshore campuses. Monash University for example, makes available the 250 online databases that they subscribe in Australia to their Malaysian campus. (Monash, 2000). The Monash library model typifies the set-up adopted by other mega-universities in Malaysia such as Nottingham University in Malaysia (Malaysia, 1998) and other private institutions of higher learning, which offer twinning degree programmes with foreign partners.

It is estimated that there are about 600 private colleges and universities (PCU)s in Malaysia (Disney, 2000a, 2000b), which offer various types of professional, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The PCUs supplement the public universities in promoting education regionally to meet the Malaysian government's aim in making Malaysian institutions of higher learning a regional centre for educational excellence (Malaysia, 1996). The Private Higher Education Institutions Act, 1996 provides for the establishment of PCUs and foreign university off shore campuses in Malaysia.

The libraries in these PCUs share common features with other Malaysian academic libraries in terms of playing a supporting role in the teaching, learning

and research of their parent institutions. Most PCUs are recent establishments and invest in a variety of electronic resources to support their institutional teaching and learning activities. This paper aims to describe the types of access to online databases provided at selected PCUs in Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three types of PCUs are examined and these are:
(a) private colleges that offer franchised undergraduate programmes in collaboration with foreign universities (such as the Sunway College with American, British and Australian universities);
(b) institutions that are branch campuses of foreign universities (such as the University of Nottingham Malaysia)
(c) Malaysian-based private universities that are run by business corporations (such as, University Tenaga Malaysia –UNITEN, owned by the Malaysian power corporation, Tenaga Nasional Berhad).

The study focuses on ascertaining the types of collaboration between institutions in type (a) and (b) in providing access to online databases to their students. For institutions in category (c) the focus is on identifying provision to online databases for their users. This paper aims to provide the following information:
(a) the types of access to online databases provided to undergraduates by the various types of PCUs;
(b) the provisions of computer facilities to facilitate access;
(c) the types of promotion undertaken to increase use of the online databases;
(d) the types of links provided to the online databases; and
(e) the charges imposed for access.

The PCUs offer various types of degree programmes either alone or with various foreign partners, especially those from the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. As such, the students from the different programmes have different library privileges given to them. All the PCUs are required to provide adequate library support for the teaching and learning activities and are subjected to accreditation by the National Accreditation Board. This study, therefore assumes that the PCUs provide library services although they might differ in size and degree of sophistication. Academic libraries at the PCUs with franchised programme partners cooperate in providing library services to the students enrolled in the respective programmes offered. This study uses the questionnaire as the instrument to obtain data from selected PCUs and the targeted respondents are the librarians and administrators from these institutions. A total of 33 PCUs were approached, comprising 25 colleges, 4 private universities and 4 branch campuses of foreign universities (Table 1). The questionnaire used comprises 8 sections, and solicited the following information:

(a) information on the courses offered;
(b) the online databases subscribed by local and foreign partners;
(c) the online databases subscribed by individual PCUs;
(d) computer facilities and library websites provided;
(e) promotion of usage of the online databases subscribed;
(f) integration of the online databases into the library OPAC;
(g) charges for accessing online databases; and
(h) output options.

Sections (a), (b) and (c) focus on information about online databases subscribed. Sections (d) to (h) deal with the availability of facilities (computing, and reference service training programmes that support as well as enhance the level of usage.

Table 1: List of PCUs who Responded

Counts	Private Colleges and Universities	Type of Institution
19	Informatics Klang Centre Inti College, Nilai and Subang Jaya Inti International College Penang Kolej Bandar Utama Kolej Damansara Utama Kolej Disted Stamford Kolej Teknologi Cybernetics Kolej Uniti L & G Twintech Institute of Technology LimKokWing Institute of Creative Technology Metropolitan College Nilai College Perak College of Medicine PTPL College Sedaya College Sunway College Systematic Management Resource Center Taylor's College	College
3	International Medical University (IMU) Multimedia University (MMU) Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR)	Local Private University
4	Curtin University of Technology Sarawak Campus Malaysia FTMS – De Monfort University Monash University Malaysia Nottingham University of Malaysia	Foreign University Branch Campus

The survey forms were sent out to 33 PCUs and 26 responses (78%) were returned. However, several follow-ups were required after the initial distribution since some librarians and administrators were reluctant to respond. This situation is expected due to the competitive and cautious nature among the PCUs.

RESULTS

Provision of Online Databases

Out of the 26 PCUs, 8 out of the 19 colleges provide access to online databases. All the PCUs (7) in the "local private university" and "foreign branch campus" provide access to online databases to their students.

The 3 private universities provide their students with "access by subscription" model. All three PCUs subscribe to the online databases through their own funding and access is controlled by using a mixture of user name/password and IP based access. The foreign universities with branch campuses in Malaysia provide access by three modes:
(a) branch campus provide access to online databases subscribed from its own funding (Curtin University of Technology Sarawak);
(b) branch campus performs the role of a surrogate centre for students to online databases subscribed by the parent university (FTMS-De Monfort University and Nottingham University of Malaysia);
(c) branch campus provide access to online databases subscribed on its own as well those subscribed by the parent university (Monash University Malaysia).

The 8 colleges that offer online databases provide a mixture of undergraduate programmes, which include 3+0 foreign university degree franchised programmes; local university degree franchised programmes; franchised external programmes; franchised distance learning programmes; franchised split degree programmes; franchised twinning programmes; credit transfer programmes and advance standing programmes. Because of these varied programmes, the online databases offered are also varied. This is summarized in Table 2.

In the second type of access model indicated in Table 2, the situation is explained by the following example. At Informatics College, only students who are enrolled for the University of Southern Queensland, Australia (USQ) programme are given access to databases subscribed by USQ. At Sunway College, only students enrolled with the Victoria University, Australia are given access to online resources subscribed by the Victoria University Library, Australia. This indicates that "who you are" is crucial in determining who accesses what in terms of access to online databases provided by their institutions.

Table 2: Provision of Access to Online Databases by Colleges

Types of Access	Number of Colleges
(1) Provide access through own subscriptions to all their undergraduates. Uses username and password or IP based access control. (INTI college; Perak College of Medicine; Sedaya College, Sunway College; Taylor's College)	5
(2) Provide access through partnership with programme partners. Gives access to only undergraduates enrolled for specific programmes offered through partnership and not to the rest of the library users. (Informatics College, Klang; INTI College; Kolej Damansara Utama; Sunway College; Systematic Management Resource Center)	5
(3) Provide access through own subscription as well as through programme partners (Sunway College; INTI College)	2

The third access model to online databases is exemplified by Sunway College – Monash University Malaysia set-up. These two institutions are housed in the same campus, serviced by one library (Tun Hussein Onn Library - THOL). The library resources are therefore shared between the two PCUs. The Library manages three types of access to online databases to three different user groups within the same campus and they are:
(a) undergraduates registered with Monash University Malaysia have access to both databases subscribed by THOL as well as those subscribed by Monash University Library in Australia;
(b) undergraduates at Sunway College registered with Victoria University Programme have access to databases subscribed by THOL as well as those by the Victoria University Library in Australia; and
(c) other undergraduates of Sunway College who are registered in any twinning programmes have access to databases subscribed by only THOL.

The access model provided by the Tun Hussein Onn Library typifies the kind of technological convenience that online databases can offer to increase access. Also, the model shows that by capitalizing on the convenience of remote access that is allowed by the online databases technology and the smart management of access controls, the usage of the databases can be extended to a wider group of users.

Provision of Computer Facilities

The number and types of computing facilities can enhance or hinder usage of the online resources. Almost all the PCUs provide access to both online databases and computing facilities to their users. The number of computers provided goes as high as 500 units for the campus and library. Only one of the 26 PCUs indicated not providing their undergraduates with computer facilities. This is because the students are pursuing a distance-learning programme and students do not come to the campus for computing facilities. In such a situation, remote access to the online databases is already given or undergraduates are expected to rely on their own computing facilities at remote locations.

Promotion of Usage of the Online Databases

The 26 PCUs were asked to indicate the types of methods employed in promoting the use of the online databases among their undergraduates. Table 3 indicates the use of a variety of methods, which include library induction, orientation sessions, library brochures, as well as notices in the library and within the campus. Other methods used include sending notices to undergraduates through email, working with lecturers to hold special awareness classes and providing online interactive tutorial for its undergraduates. It is assumed that promotion would increase usage of the online databases.

Table 3: Methods Used in Promoting Usage of Online Databases

Methods of Promotion	Number of PCUs
Library induction / Orientation	12
One to one training	8
Library brochures	10
Notice board in the library	10
Notice board within campus	4
Others	8

Links from Library Homepages to Online Databases

Not all the PCUs have their own library homepage (only 10 libraries provide this) although all have their own institutional homepage. Those that provide library homepages provide links to the online databases for their users.

Charges for Access to Online Databases

Most of the PCUs do not charge their undergraduates for access to the online databases because the costs have been worked in as part of total library services provided for the undergraduates. Three PCUs (Sunway College, Taylor's College and Monash University Malaysia) charge for articles downloaded from

the NSTP E media database (the Malaysian daily newspaper - New Straits Times Press online database). All 26 libraries provide users with the option to print, download or receive documents as email attachments. Seven PCUs charge their undergraduates for printing to cover the paper cost incurred by the library.

CONCLUSION

The results provide some insight on the provision of access to online databases by selected PCUs. However, given the small number of respondents, the results cannot be extrapolated to a larger population. The models given in Table 4 explain the type of access provided. Students registered at branch campuses of foreign universities are in a more "winning" situation, since they obtain access to databases offered by the Malaysian PCUs as well as those offered by the foreign partners. In the later situation, the students could access online databases subscribed by the parent university.

Table 4: Access Models to Online Databases at Branch Campuses of Foreign Universities and Colleges

Provision of Access	Parent University Provide Access	Parent University does not Provide Access
PCUs provide access	**Undergraduates:** Access obtained as local and off campus students	**Undergraduates:** Access obtained as local students
	Library: Library manages own subscription to online databases	**Library:** Library manages own subscription to online databases
	Library is not involved in the subscription process of online databases subscribed by parent university but acts as a surrogate centre for access	
PCUs do not provide access	**Undergraduates:** Access obtained as off campus student	**Undergraduates:** No access at all
	Library: Library does not manage any subscriptions to online databases	**Library:** Library does not perform any role in the provision of online databases
	Library is not involved in the subscription process of online databases subscribed by parent university but act as a surrogate centre for access	

When access to online databases is provided by both the parent university and the local PCU, the local library manages the access to both online databases which are subscribed locally and act as a surrogate center for the provision of online databases provided by the parent university. The library is not involved in the subscription of databases offered by the parent university. Provision of access in this manner is maximized by both parties to the benefit of the undergraduates. However, when access to online databases is given by either the parent university or the local PCUs, the undergraduate will only gain one type of access. In this case, the library at the local PCUs will focus on either performing the role of the surrogate centre to databases provided by the parent university or become the sole provider of access to the online databases through their own subscriptions. Where access is not provided by the parent university and the local PCUs, the undergraduate has no access at all to any online database.

The access model indicates two types of access mode: provision of access through PCU's own subscription; and provision of access through collaboration with external partners. It also implies that the effective access requires the provision of adequate computing and networking facilities, promotion of user awareness, training of user skills, and the creation of links from library web pages or online catalogues. The provision of links to electronic journals or other e-resources from the library's online catalogues or web pages would provide the one stop searching centre for users' convenience (Woodward and Knight, 1995; Bao, 2000). Arant and Payne (2001) also proposed the seamless interface provided by creating such "hot" links to all resources held by the library.

The findings suggest that the role of libraries remains challenging in the electronic environment. In the Malaysian context, the advent of increasing number of twinning degree programmes between local PCUs and foreign partners and the setting up of Malaysian branches of foreign universities have created a whole new role for academic libraries. This would result in an increase inter-library collaboration that involves sharing of resources and access to online databases. Libraries need to handle the problems and issues of identifying user needs, keeping users informed, constantly be aware of new developments and to constantly increase efforts to improve user skills in this new environment (Mercado, 1999; Kebede, 2002).

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