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# Serial selection at the University of Botswana Library

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## Keywords

University libraries, Botswana, Collection management, Serials

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## Abstract

Inconsistency and/or a lack of a clear understanding of the criteria for serial selection and evaluation have been observed to characterise the presentation of requests for approval of serials at the University of Botswana Library (UBL). This, on a number of occasions, has made decision taking difficult and sometimes inconclusive. The paper provides a case study of the examination of guidelines in use in other academic libraries. It also describes the process and procedure currently in use at the UBL. The study identified some anomalies and suggests modifications to ensure consistency in the presentation of submissions to guide better decision making by the Serials Selection Committee of the Library.

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## Introduction

Collection development has always been a shared responsibility between the librarians and the teaching faculty under the co-ordination of the collection development librarian, or the designated librarian, in most academic libraries (Middle Tennessee... , 1980; Mount Saint Vincent... , 1998). Serial selection forms an important part of this responsibility. The librarian has the responsibility to maintain a general balance in, and the quality of, the collection. However, the explosion in scientific research is causing a huge increase in the number of journals published, as well as creating problems for information managers in selecting and controlling acquisitions. Added to this, the continual increases in the subscription rates of journals, the lack of adequate library budgets, and difficult fiscal years ahead, have all invariably interfered with any systematic selection process for journals. Notwithstanding these problems, there is still the need to make a careful selection of journals when planning purchases. This paper will compare the criteria and/or guidelines and procedures for serials selection in other academic libraries with that of the University of Botswana Library, with a view to reviewing processes and procedures as they may seem to be appropriate.

## Serials: selection and review criteria

In many academic libraries today materials selection is considered not only on the basis of the total funds available, but also on such criteria as being library materials essential for the instructional needs of each department. Other criteria include the number of faculty in each department, number of courses taught (graduate and undergraduate), new courses to be introduced, deficiencies in the existing collection, the number of students enrolled, and the average prices of books and other materials in the different subject areas.

Serials impose long-term and complex fiscal and physical commitments (Mount Saint Vincent... , 1998). The selection of a serial requires a continuing commitment to the base cost of the title, including maintenance, equipment, and storage space (Codispoti *et al.*, 1997) and so its acquisition presents challenges generally absent in the acquisition

of monographs. The amount of money the library spends on serials has a definite impact on its commitment to monograph purchasing. It is only after the invoices for serials are paid that the balance can be safely allotted among the departments for monograph selection (Mount Saint Vincent. . . , 1998). This, and the fact that the rapidly expanding market demands that care be exercised in reviewing serial titles before they are purchased for a collection, informs the formulation and/or identification of guidelines in many academic libraries which guide the selection process (Middle Tennessee. . . , 1980; University of Wyoming. . . , 1998; Mount Saint Vincent. . . , 1998; Lycoming College, 1999). These guidelines can be divided into two parts. The first part deals with the selection process and includes:

- encouraging faculty members to suggest new serial titles;
- consideration of the Library's current journal holdings in the subject area, and the regional holdings;
- identifying serials with *demonstrated* use (such as the number of interlibrary loan requests for the title, purchases of articles from UnCover, or requests for the title logged at the reference desk) which should have preference over titles with *potential* use;
- identifying serials whose contents can be easily accessed through use of indexing services or internal indexing, which should be preferred over titles that lack this;
- identifying serial titles directly related to the curriculum (teaching needs) and research needs;
- evidence of scarcity of materials on the subject;
- consideration of the number of potential users who might benefit from the serial title; and
- the need for the subject librarian to keep in mind the Library's general collection development priorities (excerpted from collection development policies).

The second part, however, deals with evaluation process and includes:

- requesting sample and/or complimentary issues of the periodicals as a basis for a better evaluation;
- consultations with the teaching department in the evaluation of potential

purchases of serials to determine their relevance to instructional and research programmes, as well as to assess the publications' quality (perhaps through familiarity with the process for review of manuscript submissions to the publication e.g. adoption of a peer review process); and

- the use of reviews – reviewers are usually authorities in a particular subject field and in most cases give objective evaluation of the subject. Such reviews can therefore be relied on.

The above guidelines have been put to use in varying degrees in a number of institutions (Ogunrombi, 1997), some under such terms as usage, research-relatedness, possibility of subscription elsewhere and coverage by indexing/abstracting services (Tsay, 1987).

#### **Acquisitions procedures**

Some academic libraries have also adopted procedures for the approval of serial recommendations. It involves either the design of a serials recommendation form (Lingnan College. . . , 1999) (see Web site), apparently for the purpose of consistency in reporting submissions, or a simple written request for the acquisition of the serial from the librarian. Such written requests would, however, be expected to follow the criteria already laid down by the library. In some cases, the approval of acquisitions is the responsibility of a library committee, which considers submissions based on guidelines set down to assist decision making (Ogunrombi, 1997; Lingnan College. . . , 1999). In some however, the acquisitions librarian simply relies on a report from the subject librarian (Ogunrombi, 1997). Unfortunately, the literature reviewed did not give details of the processes and procedures used for the approval of serials acquisition.

#### **The practice at the University of Botswana Library (UBL)**

The University of Botswana Library combines the functional and subject specialisation approaches in enhancing services to customers. About 17 years ago it introduced a subject specialisation approach to service provision. This was later acknowledged to be justified in terms of

improving service to readers, and in the building up of collections in academic libraries (Bastiampillai and Havard-Williams, 1987). The benefits of the approach were also confirmed by the academics at the University of Botswana in a study by Clow *et al.* (1997). Apart from the Technical and Public services unit, there are faculty subject teams for humanities, science, education, and social science. The science team brings together faculty members from science, engineering and technology. Recently the social science team has also combined with faculty from management and business.

### **Serials Selection Committee (SSC)**

UBL has in place a committee to oversee the development of serials collection. The committee, called the Serials Selection Committee (SSC), has a mandate to ensure the balance of the serial collection as well as ensuring relevance in relation to teaching and research in the university. The committee examines the strength of the current collection and its adequacy for the support of current and new academic programmes, in reaching a decision as to whether to subscribe to a particular serial, or not.

The committee is made up of the co-ordinators of the subject teams and is chaired by the deputy librarian (now the deputy director). The co-ordinators present submissions (justifications) from team members having been adequately briefed by the subject librarians whose titles are being presented for approval by the committee.

### **The process and procedure at the University of Botswana Library**

As a result of the recognition for the need for a policy to guide the various functions, UBL consulted widely with a number of academic libraries, within and beyond the region, with a view to putting in place acceptable and cost-effective/benefit procedures. The selection and/or acquisition of periodicals benefited from such consultations. Many of the criteria for serial acquisition are therefore basically no different from what has been listed above.

### **The selection method**

The library uses a combination of a recommendation form (called serials request form, SRF) together with a grid for the purpose of consistency in recording submissions based on the criteria above. The

form is divided into four sections (see Appendix 2). These two are submitted to the serial selection committee of the library, which sits, as and when it has to approve serial requests.

### **The process**

The Subject Librarian, or a member of the faculty, initiates the process of selection. In the case of the faculty member, the attention of the subject librarian is drawn to a particular title which the faculty member would like added to the collection. The subject librarian then takes the process forward. Among the first things he/she does is to search for the bibliographic details of the periodical. This leads to the acquisition of a sample copy, if the faculty member has not provided one. The subject librarian inserts the basic bibliographic information of the title in the first section of the serials request form. The form is then passed on to the periodicals librarian for a sample copy to be requested from the publisher. The sample copy indicates the physical quality of the publication, presentation of material, the editorial committee and the scope of the journal.

The subject librarian, on receipt of the sample copy, sends it together with the SRF to the requesting department through the departmental representative. The representative sends this to the staff member in the relevant field, for him/her to provide justification for the request in terms of which courses or research the new title will service. He then completes the second section of the form. A third section of the SRF is sent to the head of the department concerned who either supports, or rejects, the recommendation made by the person requesting the title. This is then presented at a departmental board meeting where a decision is made to whether or not to recommend that a subscription be taken out for the title. It is normally requested that the minutes covering this decision accompany the completed form and the sample copy when being returned to the library. Before the endorsement is sought by the departmental board meeting, the departmental representative must have circulated the sample copy among the staff of the department.

Finally, the subject librarian adds his own recommendation in section four. The SRF

thus provides a record of the evaluation of the title.

The subject librarian is required to make an analysis of the existing collection in relation to the curriculum, after which he/she then adds his/her own recommendation in the fourth section of the SRF. This process should yield a grid (Table I) showing the spread of existing titles within the curriculum. Variations have, however, been observed in the grids prepared by the faculty subject teams because there is no standard format that is currently in place. Science grids provide the following information, which has evolved over time.

#### *Explanation of the grid*

The subject coverage column provides information on the subject coverage. Entered in here are the actual courses as they appear in the departmental syllabus. The idea is to relate the courses to the serials in the collection. For the purposes of consistency, there should be an agreement among the subject librarians as to whether to use the information in the CDP, which defines the subject broadly, or the actual courses.

The course-supported column provides information on the course(s) supporting the broad subject areas.

The collection level column is for the codes. The codes relate to the collection level (category) as provided for in the CDP for each area of study and are denoted by the letters A, B, C, D and E.

The titles held at the UBL column indicates the titles held by the UBL. This information is crucial to the SSC to satisfy itself that there is really a gap to be filled by the acquisition of the recommended serial. It provides the committee with the means to compare the scope of the recommended serial against both the subject coverage and the titles held by the library.

The comments column should as far as possible indicate the justification for the need of the serial.

The usefulness of this grid includes the following:

- It shows at a glance, gaps and subject areas that have not been adequately catered for. The objective is for the subject librarian to identify these gaps and then ascertain suitable periodical titles to fill the gaps. With this information, the subject librarian will then search for potential serial titles in indexing sources such as *Science Citation Index*, *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*, *The Serials Directory*, *Magazines for Libraries* (by Bill and Linda Katz), bibliographies and subject lists of professional societies.
- It also allows members of the serials selection committee to see which other titles are currently being acquired. They will then be in a position to ask how the new title differs significantly from similar titles in the collection, or how titles will complement each other. Before the use of the grids became part of the policy, the possibility of adding a duplicate title, or title that did not add a great deal to the existing sources, were high.

#### *Making a submission for a new title*

Table II is the grid used for the submission of new title request, also compiled by the science team. The grid incorporates additional information such as New title, Core, and Indexed.

The "new title" column simply indicates the title being requested for subscription.

The "core column" indicates the source of authority, while the "indexed" column indicates where the title is indexed and/or abstracted.

The two grids (Tables I and II) form the subject librarian's professional input into the process. In addition, the discussions of the serials selection committee have required that the following information be made available to assist them to make an informed decision.

In recommending a title, the subject librarian is expected to indicate if there are no better titles in the same subject field as the one being recommended and, if there are, to

**Table I** Serials analysis grid

Subject coverage	Course supported	Collection level	Titles held at UBL	Comments
Mathematical modelling	M424	ABC	– <i>Mathematical Spectrum</i>	Subject area is inadequately supported, as it is a research area
– Population models			– <i>Journal of Computational &amp; Applied Maths</i>	
– Economic models				
– Urban models				
– Catastrophe theory				

Table II New title request grid

New title	Category	Core	Course supported	Titles in UBL	Indexed	Comments
Mathematical finance	ABC	Yes KATZ	M424	<i>Mathematical Spectrum</i> <i>Journal of Computational &amp; Applied Maths</i>	<i>Mathematical Rev</i> <i>Journal of Economic Lit.</i>	An interdisciplinary Journal providing an interface between maths and finance. Core to research in mathematical modelling which is a major area of research in mathematics department. Will be useful to economics, finance and business departments

indicate why the one being recommended is preferred. The reasons might be that the preferred title is bringing in another perspective, such as a European or African viewpoint, to the subject.

There are times when it is necessary to compare the recommended title/s with the holdings of comparable libraries. This is especially so when new programmes are just commencing and several titles are being requested. In this case it is important to make sure that what is being put forward is core to the subject.

#### *Comparing serial selection forms*

The serial recommendation form of the Lingnan College Library (see Web site or Appendix 1) is of interest to the authors. The form compares favourably with that in use by the UBL (Appendix 2) except for the word “recommendation” being used instead of “request”. The form has two major sections.

The first section, while it compares closely with the University of Botswana Library form, incorporates the following additional fields: “Retention recommended (month/year/permanent)” and “Priority: first, second, third”. The retention field should be considered to be important particularly as it would assist in making a decision as to which serial is to be cancelled at any time when the cancellation of serial has to be considered. The priority field should also be considered as it gives a weighting to the serial requests from the department, thus helping to take an appropriate decision, particularly when funding becomes limited.

The second section of the form is for the library’s use, and is tagged “Library reply slip”. As the name of this element suggests, it is a response to requests made by a department and originates from the meeting of the selection committee. This is seen as being one that can be adopted by University

of Botswana Library. It provides the following reply to the request:

- On order/in process;
- In stock, call number;
- Ceased publication;
- Further information required;
- LISC’s chairman signature required.

The LISC (Library and Information Services Committee of the faculty/school) is equivalent to University of Botswana Library’s own serial selection committee.

#### **Observations and recommendations**

Even though it appears difficult to fault the procedures outlined above, there still appears to be some problems.

Perhaps because of a lack of accepted procedures, different versions of grids are usually presented to the selection committee. For example, some librarians use the course content as given in the departmental handbook when preparing the grid, while others use the general subject category as presented in the CDP. This has been found to make decisions about subscribing to new titles somewhat time-consuming. In this case the departmental handbook describing the course content should be preferred as it is updated annually, whereas the CDP document is not.

Another concern is the growing preference by publishers to provide samples of journals online, rather than sending a hard copy. While this may pose no problem to subject librarians, it will surely affect the review by faculty staff who may not have the patience to search the Internet. They may therefore find their involvement in such an exercise a sheer waste of their time or an obstacle in making the library acquire a “supposed” relevant journal for their use. Perhaps this is the time to begin to sensitise faculty members to the need to get used to reviewing serial samples

online, so that the library is not caught up in any unwholesome politics.

The literature acknowledges the importance of sample copies in the evaluation process as indicated above and it will continue to be a better way of evaluation of serials for a long time. However, for some time this library has been experiencing delays in the procurement of sample copies and, although some are eventually received, others are lost during circulation. In such cases the review gets delayed, especially as publishers are not usually willing to send a replacement. To circumvent this, it is suggested that the departmental library representative designs a circulation slip bearing the names of staff, which should always be signed when the sample copy is collected and/or returned.

Another anomaly observed is that the head of department appends his/her signature before the endorsement of the proposed title by the departmental board, whereas the ideal is that this should occur after the board's endorsement. Signing before the endorsement of the departmental board forces board members into agreement without due consideration being given to the relevance of the title. It is suggested that the heads of department be asked to append their signature only after endorsement by the departmental board.

Finally, even though it has, on a number of occasions, been argued that all senior librarians should be involved in the approval of serials, it is felt that this would be a waste of time especially when most subject librarians will not be presenting any titles for consideration. It is therefore, recommended that the co-ordinators should continue to represent their respective subject teams. This will not only allow the committee to be manageable, but will also strengthen the spirit of team work as well as serve as another avenue for empowering co-ordinators in the management of their teams.

## Conclusion

This paper acknowledged the need to put in place measures to guide the selection and acquisition of serials. It noted the guidelines for serial selection and acquisition in use,

though to varying degrees, by other academic libraries. It also indicated that these compare well with the guidelines in use at the University of Botswana Library (UBL). The paper described the process of selection and evaluation of serials for acquisition at the University of Botswana Library, and offered suggestions to overcome some anomalies observed in the University of Botswana Library process and procedure for serial requests, to ensure the consistency of the presentation of submissions and to guide better decision making by the library serial selection committee.

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## Appendix 1

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### Serials Recommendation Form++

Journal Title:.....  
Publisher:.....ISBN.....  
Back Issues Required  From:.....(Please specify volume/year).....  
Back Issues Not Required   
Retention recommended ..... month/year/permanent  
Recommended by .....Date:.....  
Department:.....Ext.....  
Justification:.....

### Endorsed and prioritized by the chairman of the Library & Information Services committee of the Faculty/School

Chairman:.....  
Name Signature

Priority: 1st  2nd  3rd

- The Library will process serials recommendation subject to the availability of funds\*

### Library Reply Slip

On order/In process  In stock, Call number  LISC's Chairman signature required  
 Ceased publication  Further information required:.....

++Form culled from LINGNAN COLLEGE LIBRARY WEB SITE

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(Appendix 2 is shown overleaf.)

## Appendix 2

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### UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA LIBRARY SERIALS REQUEST FORM

Title:.....

Date first Published:..... Frequency:.....

Place of Publication & Publisher:.....

Price:..... ISSN:.....

Indexed in:.....

Faculty:..... Department:.....

Availability of micro:.....

Back issues requirements: 10 years:..... 5 years:..... Other:.....

Justifications: (Please explain why you are requesting this title. i.e. teaching purposes,  
departmental research, etc. Please compare this title to journals in the subject to  
which we already subscribe)

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Recommended by:.....

#### Recommendation of Head of Department:

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Signature of Subject Librarian:.....

#### Recommendation of Subject Librarian:

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Signature of Subject Librarian:.....

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