

# Research Brief

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## Challenges of public libraries in Hong Kong

February 2016

*Usage of local public libraries has faced visible downward pressure, crowded out in part by Internet usage for information search and online reading. At present, per capita library materials in Hong Kong is about 1.9 items, just two-thirds of the average of the developed places. While small procurement spending for library materials may have restrained the development of library collection, the allocation of acquisition spending seems to be not keeping up with the changing needs of library goers, dampening library usage.*

*Distribution of library materials is quite uneven in Hong Kong, and those districts with lower median monthly household income tend to have smaller library collections, including Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Tsing, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long. Paradoxically, residents in some lower-income districts are amongst top library goers in the territory. This prompts concern about equal access to information and knowledge across districts.*

*E-books can address the challenge of a shift towards online reading of the younger generation. Yet progress of e-books is rather lackluster in Hong Kong, accounting for only 1.7% of its total collection and 0.3% in total circulation of local public libraries.*

*Public libraries across the globe are experimenting with new initiatives to meet the changing needs of people, including digitization of library collection, reaching out to those in need in the community and rolling out innovative projects.*

*The subject of public library falls within the policy area of the Panel on Home Affairs.*



Research Office  
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### 1. Introduction

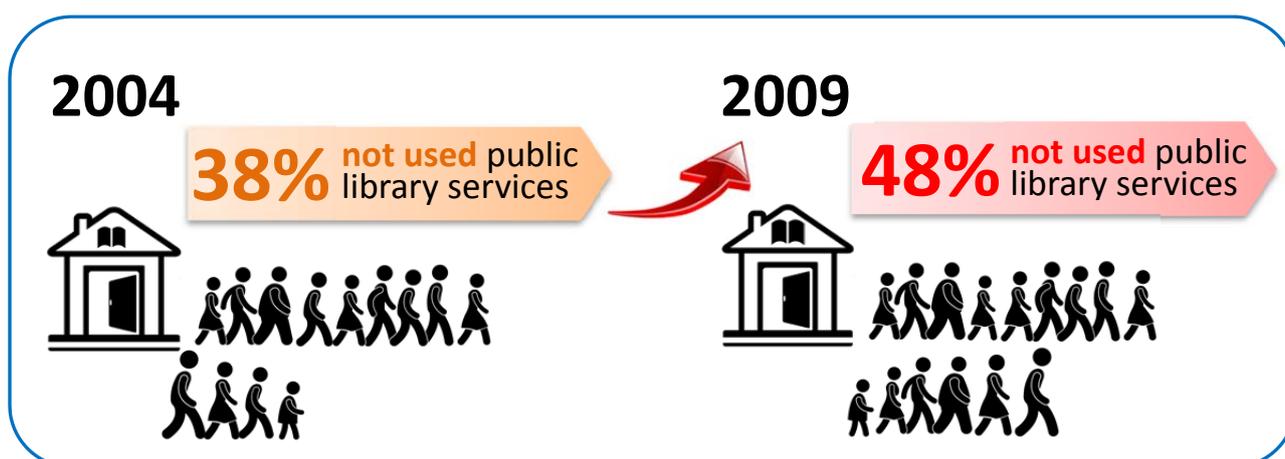
1.1 Public libraries play a vital role in building a knowledge-based society.<sup>1</sup> They act as a vehicle for access to knowledge, ideas and information and are open and available to everyone in society. In Hong Kong, the provision of public library services is the responsibility of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD")<sup>2</sup>. The aims of the services are to meet the community's need for knowledge, information and research, to support lifelong learning, continuous education and profitable use of leisure time, and to promote local literary arts. Since the official opening of the City Hall Public Library in 1962, local public libraries have grown to a network of 68 static libraries and 12 mobile libraries possessing a collection of 14.2 million library items.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Public Library Manifesto of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, public library serves as "the local gateway to knowledge" and "provides a basic condition for lifelong learning".

<sup>2</sup> Public libraries in Hong Kong have undergone two major institutional developments over the past two decades. The first one was the establishment of LCSD in 2000, which aimed to take over the responsibility for providing public library services from the ex-Municipal Councils. The second one was the implementation of the District Council Co-management Scheme in 2008, which aimed to involve all the 18 District Councils in the management of their district libraries, subject to the limits of the statutory powers and resources of LCSD.

1.2 Nevertheless, the conventional functions of public libraries as an almost exclusive channel for the public to have free access to information and knowledge have been increasingly challenged by the ever-expanding Internet since the late 1990s. Based on an opinion survey commissioned by LCSD in 2009, as many as 3.1 million or 48% of persons aged 12 and above had not used public library services and facilities in the past year, visibly up from the corresponding figures of 2.3 million or 38% in the earlier round of opinion survey conducted in 2004 (**Figure 1**).<sup>3</sup> This prompts grave concerns whether public library services need to be re-orientated to meet the changing needs of the public. As the Government has indicated in the Policy Agenda for 2016 that it will continue to enhance "library facilities and services to meet community needs"<sup>4</sup>, this Research Brief aims to review the public library services in Hong Kong.

**Figure 1 — Proportion of persons aged 12 and above who have not used public library services over the past year**



Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

## 2. Recent trends in library usage and Internet penetration in Hong Kong

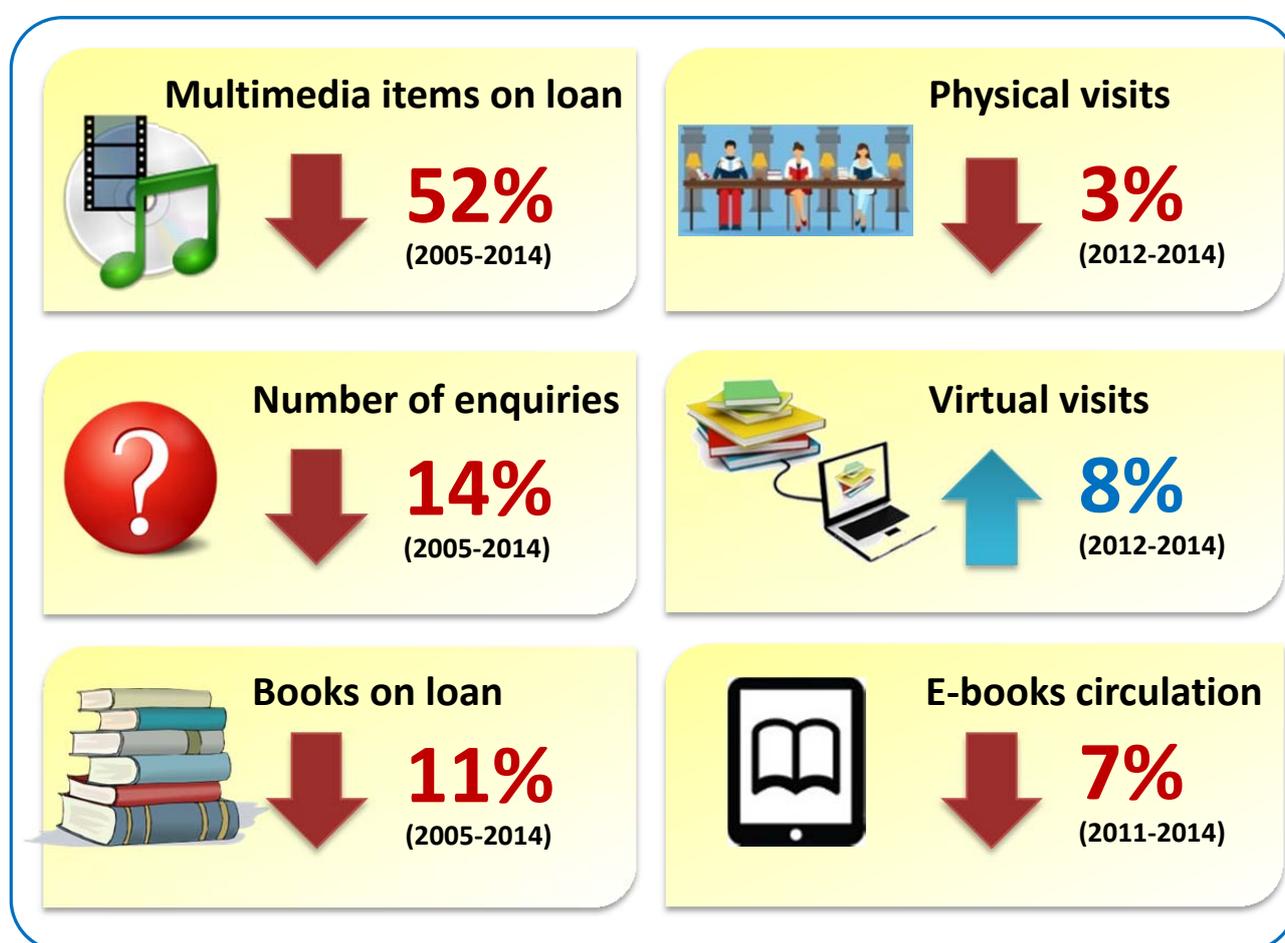
2.1 Since 2005, the number of registered users of local public libraries has surged by 32% to 4.4 million in 2015, indicating strong potential demand for library services. However, actual usage of library services suggested the otherwise, as manifested in the following lacklustre indicators. **First**, the number of books on

<sup>3</sup> A survey company was commissioned by LCSD to conduct an "Opinion Survey on Hong Kong Public Libraries" in 2009. Users are defined as those respondents aged 12 and above who have used the services or facilities of public libraries in the 12 months before enumeration from a telephone survey. LCSD has commissioned another opinion survey on public libraries in 2014-2015, but the survey results are not available. See Consumer Search (2011) and Committee on Libraries (2007).

<sup>4</sup> See GovHK (2016), p.169.

loan has fallen by a cumulative 11% over the past decade to 51.0 million in 2014. **Secondly**, the number of multimedia items<sup>5</sup> on loan has even plunged by 52% to 1.9 million over the same period. **Thirdly**, the number of enquiries about the reference materials at the libraries has dropped by 14% to 3.5 million during 2005-2014. **Fourthly**, the total number of physical visits to the 18 district libraries has declined by 3% in two years to 34.6 million in 2014.<sup>6</sup> **Fifthly**, reflecting the trend of increasing use of the Internet, the number of virtual visits to the website of the local public libraries increased by 8%, from 19.1 million in 2012 to 20.8 million in 2014. Yet, circulation of e-books was not up to par, recording a very low usage and slipping by 7% from 171 500 in 2011 to 159 000 in 2014 (Figure 2).

Figure 2 — Usage of public libraries in Hong Kong, 2005-2014



Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

<sup>5</sup> Multimedia items include audio-visual materials in various formats like laser discs, VCDs, DVDs, CDs and cassettes.  
<sup>6</sup> Data on public library visits in each district are available from the websites of District Councils as from 2012 only. They do not include visits to Central Library and mobile libraries. See Footnote 19 as well.

2.2 To a certain extent, the growing popularity of computer devices and Internet has a major impact on how people access information and hence need for library services. According to the Census and Statistics Department ("C&SD"), as much as 79% of domestic households in Hong Kong owned at least one computer at home which were connected to the Internet in 2014, while the penetration rate of smartphones hit 77%. Moreover, Hong Kong people spend much more time in the cyber world, with average online duration nearly doubled within a decade to 30.5 hours per week (i.e. 4.4 hours per day) in 2014.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, 87% of local netizens cited that online information search was their major purpose of getting connected to the Internet. This is followed by online reading of newspapers and magazines (71%), online video and music programmes (54%), and online reading of books, fictions and comics (18%). As most of these activities are traditional library functions, the substitution effect between library usage and Internet usage is quite visible.

### 3. Library collection and acquisition of library materials in Hong Kong

3.1 This apart, the decline in local library usage could also be attributable to unsatisfactory library collections in terms of both quantity and diversity, which were the top two areas requiring improvements as indicated by library goers in the aforementioned opinion survey.<sup>8</sup> While total collection in local public libraries grew from 11.6 million items in 2005 to 14.2 million items in 2015, the increase was mediocre when translated into per capita basis, from 1.7 items per person to 1.9 items per person. In other words, the increase in library items per person was less than one over the past decade (**Figure 3**). This figure was about one-third behind the average of developed places of 2.7 items and short of the per capita collection guideline of two to three items as recommended by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions ("IFLA").<sup>9</sup>

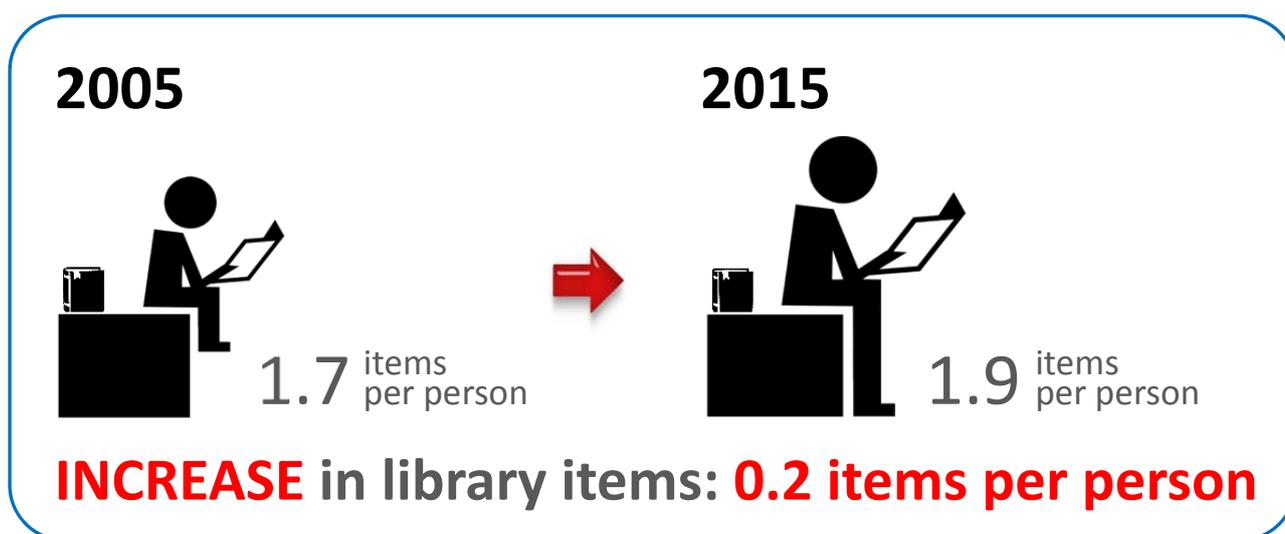
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<sup>7</sup> For children aged 10-14 and overall students who are supposed to have a stronger need for public library services, their time spent on the Internet are comparable to the adults, at 3.2 hours and 4.3 hours per day respectively. See Census and Statistics Department (2015b).

<sup>8</sup> See Consumer Search (2011).

<sup>9</sup> IFLA is the leading global organization representing the interests of library and information services and their users. It compiled statistics on public libraries on a regular basis, covering a total of 62 public libraries across the globe primarily in developed places, including representative public libraries located in San Francisco, Toronto, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Singapore and Hong Kong. See International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2015).

**Figure 3 — Per capita collection of Hong Kong Public Libraries, 2005-2015**



Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

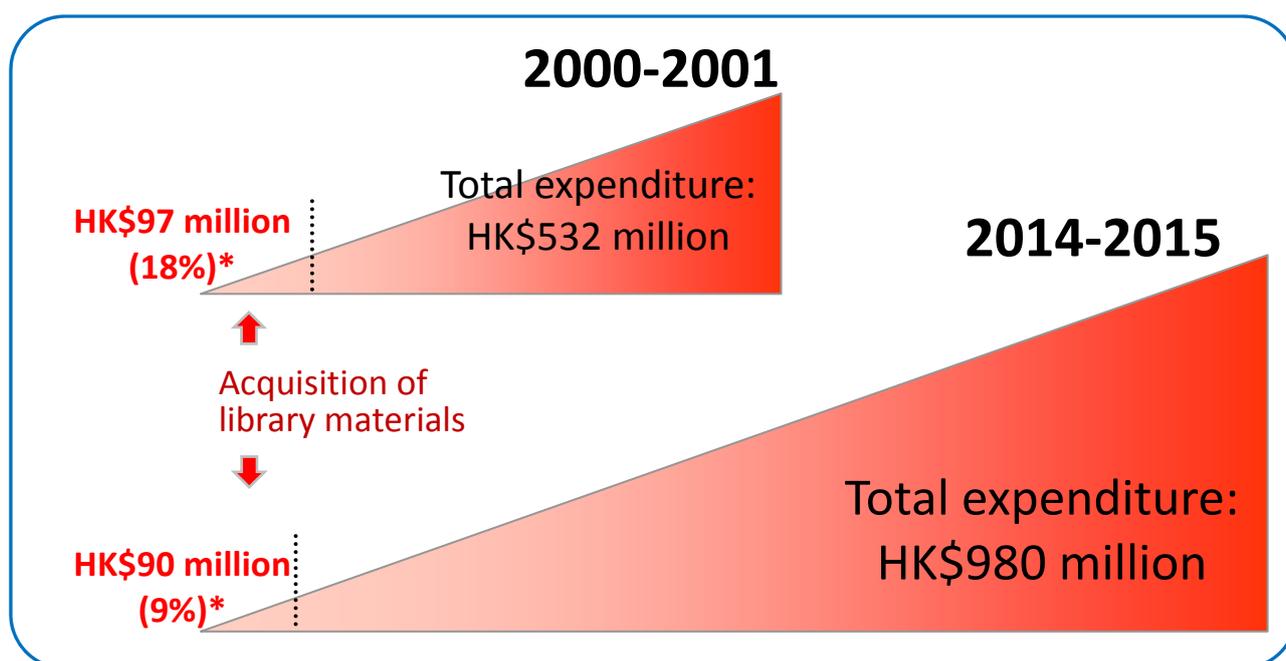
3.2 Library collection is closely related to library spending. In Hong Kong, although annual expenditure on public libraries has almost doubled over the past 15 years to HK\$980 million in 2014-2015, it did not fare well when expressed on a per capita basis. Based on the most recent statistics from IFLA, per capita spending on public libraries in Hong Kong was about €12 (HK\$120) in 2012, just about two-fifths of the average of developed places of €30 (HK\$296).<sup>10</sup>

3.3 More specifically on spending allocated for acquisition of library materials in Hong Kong, it fell from HK\$97 million in 2000-2001 to HK\$90 million in 2014-2015, resulting in a noticeable drop in its ratio to the overall library spending, from 18% to 9% over the past 15 years (Figure 4).<sup>11</sup> This also fared unfavourably when compared with the average ratio of developed places of 14% in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> See reports on annual statistical surveys of IFLA and annual reports of the controlling officers of LCSD.

<sup>11</sup> LCSD does not release other breakdowns on its annual library expenditure. It is nevertheless noted that the size of staff establishment of local public libraries has increased by 60% over the past decade, from 872 in March 2005 to 1 398 in March 2014. This should be related to various service improvements, including the opening of new libraries and the lengthening of the average opening hours of libraries in 2009, from 61 hours to 71 hours per week.

**Figure 4 — Spending allocated for acquisition of library materials, 2000-2014**



Note: (\*) Expenditure on acquisition of library materials as a percentage in total library expenditure.

Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

3.4 A closer examination of the acquisition spending in 2013-2014 shows that purchase of English books took up the largest share of 32%, followed by the Chinese books (25%), newspapers and periodicals (21%), non-printed materials comprising mainly multimedia items (12%) and e-Resources (10%).<sup>12</sup> While this proportional split of the acquisition spending was broadly similar to that seen in 2009-2010, it appears that it was not in line with the pattern of actual circulation of library materials in recent years, as summarized below:

- (a) **Chinese books:** Total number of Chinese books on loan had fallen by 8% to 41.4 million during 2008-2012. Relative to the stock of Chinese books, the average circulation rate<sup>13</sup> of Chinese books had eased from 6.1 times in 2009 to 5.3 times in 2012.
- (b) **English books:** By contrast, total number of English books on loan had increased by 13% to 11.9 million during 2008-2012. Relative to the stock of English books, the average circulation rate of English books had held stable at 3.6 times in the same period.

<sup>12</sup> See LCSD's replies to Questions No. 6412 and 6452 raised in the Finance Committee for the examination of Estimates of Expenditure for 2014-2015.

<sup>13</sup> Average circulation rate is measured in terms of the ratio between the total number of loaned items to the stock of items in a specified category of library materials in a given year.

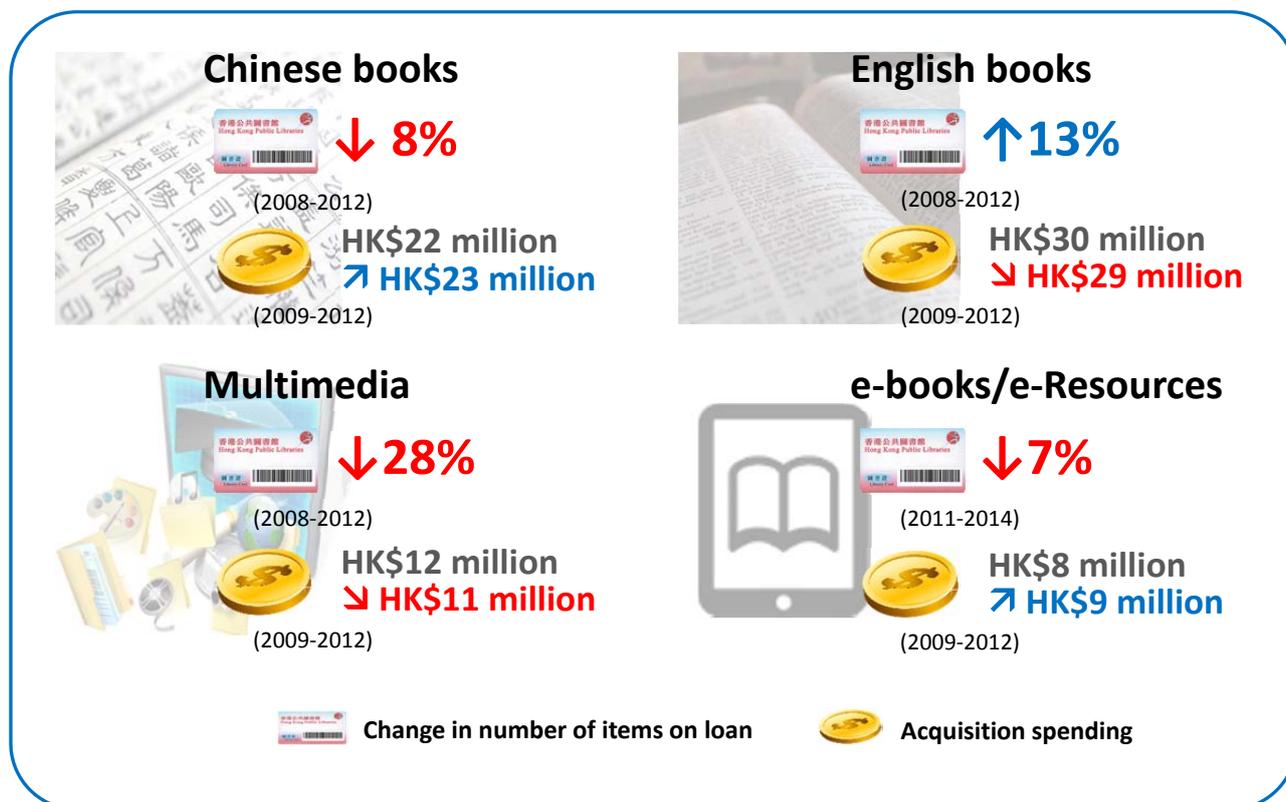
- (c) **Multimedia items:** Total number of multimedia items on loan had fallen steeply by 28% to 2.4 million during 2008-2012. Relative to its stock, the average circulation rate of multimedia items had eased noticeably from 2.1 times to 1.4 times over the same period.
- (d) **e-books and other e-Resources:** LCSD has pledged to develop electronic services as one of its key initiatives in its "Strategic Plan of Hong Kong Public Libraries 2009-2018". At present, there are more than 60 e-databases in the local public libraries, while the number of e-books has increased by around 80% to some 200 000 titles during 2011-2014.<sup>14</sup> Yet the response to the e-book collections appears to be rather lukewarm. In terms of circulation or downloading of these e-books, the number has fallen by 7% during 2011-2014. Relative to its stock, the overall circulation rate of e-books halved from 1.6 to 0.8 during the same period, while the ratio of e-book circulation in overall circulation hovered at just around 0.3% in recent years<sup>15</sup> (**Figure 5**).

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<sup>14</sup> According to LCSD, the Multimedia Information System of the public libraries includes over 2.5 million pages of digitised images and text in more than 20 digital collections. Moreover, the e-Resources thematic page houses over 60 electronic databases, 200 000 e-books, 1 million musical tracks and audio books.

<sup>15</sup> Taking the collection of e-books in Chinese as an illustration, there are altogether some 82 000 copies of Chinese e-books, but 99% belongs to the Apabi collection which were published in the Mainland. Yet these Chinese e-book titles are noted to be too scholarly and may not arouse the leisure reading interest of Hong Kong people. As a result, the average circulation rate of the overall Apabi collection is persistently less than one time per year over the past three years.

**Figure 5 — Change in the number of library material items on loan and acquisition spending, 2008-2012**



Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

#### 4. Distribution of library collection by districts

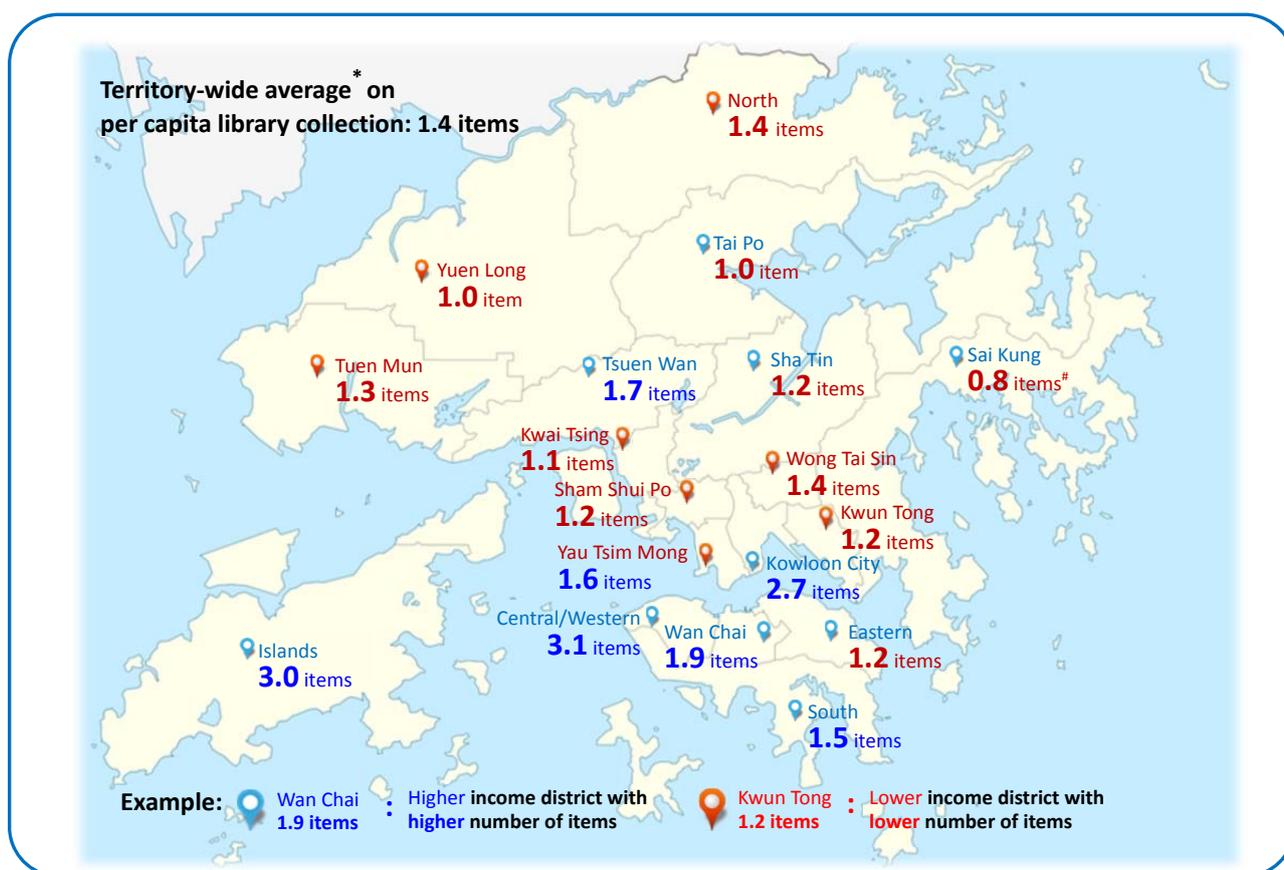
4.1 Turning to the district distribution of library materials<sup>16</sup>, it varies quite widely within Hong Kong, with per capita library materials ranging from a high of 3.1 items in Central/Western to a low of one item in Tai Po<sup>17</sup> in 2013. A closer analysis shows that, for those districts with lower median monthly household income<sup>18</sup>, per capita library collection tends to be lower than the territory-wide average of 1.4 items per capita in 2013. These districts in particular include Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Tsing, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long, implying that grassroots households living in poorer districts may have relatively unfavourable access to information and knowledge than others (**Figure 6**).

<sup>16</sup> Data on library collection in 18 districts are obtained from LCSD's reply to Question No. 6412 raised in the Finance Committee for the examination of Estimates of Expenditure for 2014-2015. Library collection by district does not include collection in Central Library and mobile libraries.

<sup>17</sup> Although per capita library collection in Sai Kung was low at 0.8 items in 2013, it should have been noticeably enhanced upon the opening of the Tiu Keng Leng Public Library in July 2015, with a total collection of 160 000 library items.

<sup>18</sup> Lower income districts refer to those districts having median monthly household income lower than the territory-wide median level, which stood at HK\$22,400 in 2013. There were eight lower income districts in 2013.

**Figure 6 — Distribution of per capita library collection by district, 2013**



Notes: (\*) Excluding collection in Central Library and mobile libraries.

(#) See Footnote 17 on library collection in Sai Kung.

Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

4.2 Residents in many low-income districts are more frequent library-goers. As a matter of fact, amongst the top five districts with highest per capita visits of public libraries<sup>19</sup>, four districts<sup>20</sup> were low-income districts with an average visit frequency of 6-8 times during 2013, compared with the overall average of 5.0 times in the territory. While reservation of library items<sup>21</sup> is available to improve access to library items, this service is provided at a cost of HK\$2.5 per library item. There is insufficient information to ascertain whether this arrangement has improved or affected access to information and knowledge of the low income districts whose library stock is smaller than the average but with more frequent library goers (**Figure 7**).

<sup>19</sup> Per capita visits of public libraries in each district are derived from the data available from District Council websites and LCSD, including average daily visit to the public libraries in each month. They do not include visits to Central Library and mobile libraries.

<sup>20</sup> These four districts were North, Yau Tsim Mong, Wong Tai Sin and Sham Shui Po.

<sup>21</sup> Library registered users may reserve and pick up library books or materials at a user-designated library. A reservation fee of HK\$2.5 will be charged for each library item.

**Figure 7 – Top five districts with highest per capita visits to public libraries, 2013**



Note: (\*) Excluding visits to Central Library and mobile libraries.

Data source: Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

4.3 At present, it is stated in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines that there should be a district library with a floor area of 2 900 m<sup>2</sup> for every population of 200 000 in a district. Yet the Government will also consider providing a major library with a larger floor area of 6 200 m<sup>2</sup> for those districts with population of 400 000 persons, in lieu of two district libraries, as more spacious configuration can allow flexibility in the display of collection and provision of information technology services which is "conducive to learning and reading".<sup>22</sup> As a result of enhanced facilities and services, average usage in major libraries are at least two times the territory-wide average in terms of the total number of visits and borrowed items.<sup>23</sup> However, at present, five out of the nine districts (i.e. Kwun Tong, Kwai Tsing, Wong Tai Sin, Eastern and Sai Kung) having a population

<sup>22</sup> According to the Government, it takes account of the geographical, demographic and infrastructural development of the individual districts in determining the library facilities to be provided for a district, subject to site constraints and resource availability. See Home Affairs Bureau (2007 and 2010b).

<sup>23</sup> In 2013, the average number of physical visits to six major libraries in Hong Kong was 1.2 million, 117% more than the territory-wide average of 540 000. The average number of library items on loan at the major libraries was 1.35 million, 194% more than the territory-wide total of 458 000.

size exceeding 400 000 do not have a major library in close proximity.<sup>24</sup> According to latest projection from C&SD, population in Sham Shui Po will also hit 400 000 by 2016. There are also calls from various districts urging the Government to provide a larger library in their districts.<sup>25</sup>

## 5. Proactive response from public libraries in selected places

5.1 In view of the challenges posed by the fast-expanding cyberspace, most of the global public libraries are embracing the advances in information technology to upgrade their library services on the one hand, and to experiment some new functions on the other. Here are some of the initiatives taken by prominent public libraries in other places:

(a) **Digitisation of collection:** Digitisation of library materials is the most common response of public libraries around the world, although with variation in success. Public libraries in Singapore are probably amongst the most successful, boosted by its strategic plans "Library 2010" released in 2005 and "Library for Life 2020" released in 2014. The plan aims at building a digital library, facilitating "a diverse range of digital content and services easily accessible on users' preferred devices and spaces".<sup>26</sup> With a dedicated e-book policy, the stock of e-books in Singapore has surged by 290% in five years to 3.5 million copies in 2014, and this stock is almost 18 times that in Hong Kong.<sup>27</sup> In terms of the ratio of e-books in the overall library collection, it has almost tripled from 10% to 29%. The ratio of circulation of e-books in overall circulation of public libraries in Singapore also tripled in five years to 24% in 2014. In Europe, the National Library of Norway is even reportedly embarking on an ambitious project to digitise its entire collection.<sup>28</sup>

(b) **Reaching out to the community:** Many overseas public libraries adopt the principle of serving the local community, equipping local

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<sup>24</sup> The six major libraries are located in Central/Western, Kowloon City, Tuen Mun, Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Yuen Long. Some of these districts have a population less than 400 000 persons.

<sup>25</sup> At least three District Councils in Kwun Tong, Kwai Tsing and Wong Tai Sin had requested a larger library. See Annex D of Home Affairs Bureau (2010b).

<sup>26</sup> This was accompanied by more resources for procurement of e-books. According to IFLA, Singapore spent US\$1.28 million (HK\$9.9 million) on purchase of e-books, eight times the respective spending of Hong Kong. The acquired e-book titles include popular novels and self-improvement books. Reading devices such as E-readers, tablets and iPads are offered for loan up to three weeks for those who are in need. See National Library Board Singapore (2014).

<sup>27</sup> See Table 26.3 of the Department of Statistics, Singapore (2015).

<sup>28</sup> See National Library of Norway (2016).

citizens to meet the challenges in an information age. For example, public libraries in Sydney, Toronto and San Francisco provide flexible services for those who are in need (e.g. elderly and people with disabilities), as the requested library items can be sent to users by mail or even delivered to their home free of charge. Meanwhile, some public libraries offer innovative services for children. In San Francisco, the public library has just opened in mid-2015 a digital media centre and learning laboratory for teenagers. The media centre is filled with books, computers as well as visual and audio technologies so that youngsters can interact and create their own pieces of video or music.<sup>29</sup>

- (c) **Nurturing entrepreneurship and smartwork centre:** Riding on the wave of start-ups and innovative technology, some libraries in the United States are establishing "public makerspaces" to promote entrepreneurship, with the pioneering move first seen in the Fayetteville Free Library of the New York State in 2011. Likewise, Chicago Public Library is offering advanced technological services like 3D printing and laser cutters to its library users.<sup>30</sup> In Singapore, the first "Smart Work Centres" were set up in selected public libraries in May 2014, providing professional office support services to those who need to work at home at affordable user fees.<sup>31</sup>

## 6. Observations

6.1 The following observations can be made from the above analysis:

- (a) **Downward pressure on library usage:** Despite the uptrend in the number of registered borrowers, most of usage indicators of the public libraries in Hong Kong (e.g. physical visits, borrowed items, reference enquiries) have registered declines by various magnitudes in recent years. The dilution of conventional library functions may be attributable to the substitution effect of Internet, as Hong Kong people spend some 30 hours per week on the cyber world nowadays.
- (b) **Collection of local public libraries below par:** Lacklustre library usage may also be due to limited collection of library materials. Per capita library collection was only 1.9 items in Hong Kong in 2015, two-thirds of the average of developed places and falling short of the

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<sup>29</sup> See San Francisco Public Library (2015).

<sup>30</sup> See Chicago Public Library (2015).

<sup>31</sup> See Info-communications Development Authority of Singapore (2014).

international guideline. While the ratio of library spending allocated for purchase of new library has been on a steady decline, the allocation of acquisition spending to various categories of library items seems to be unable to keep up with the changing needs of library goers.

- (c) **Lacklustre development of e-books in local public libraries:** Given the growing reading habit on smart devices anytime and anywhere, digitisation of library items appears to be a strategic solution for the development of public libraries. Yet the progress of the development of e-book collections in the public libraries of Hong Kong is rather slow, taking up just 1.7% of its total collection and 0.3% of its total circulation in 2014. Both indicators were far behind Singapore, with the respective ratios standing at around 24-29%.
- (d) **Uneven district distribution of library materials and implications for the low income households:** Distribution of library materials is quite uneven in Hong Kong, with lower per capita collection seen in those districts with lower monthly household income such as Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Tsing, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long. Paradoxically, residents in certain low-income districts are amongst the most frequent library-goers in Hong Kong. It precipitates concerns about equal access to information and knowledge across districts.
- (e) **Proactive response from public libraries elsewhere:** Public libraries in other places likewise face the multi-faceted challenges of the advancement in information technology. Many of them embrace the changes and take on some experimental functions to stay relevant in the information age. Their proactive response include (i) building a digital library usable anywhere and anytime; (ii) reaching out to the community through providing targeted assistance for the elderly and others in need; and (iii) rolling out innovative projects such as assisting entrepreneurship and home office.

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