EDUCATING DIGITAL LIBRARIANS: EXPECTATIONS, REALITIES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The training for library and information professional is essential for effective functioning of the libraries and information society in general. It is natural for LIS profession to expect the LIS schools to produce graduates suitable for their needs. Similarly, students have high expectations from their academic programmes. They want the programmes to mould them as Knowledge Managers with high capabilities irrespective of their back ground qualifications. Hence the pressure is on LIS schools or/ departments to cope with the demands. This necessitates redefining and reengineering their goals, subject jurisdiction and programmes. However effective implementation of the set goals depends on several issues. The article presents an over view of the associated issues and their variant format of application. Suggestions have been made on how to handle the issues and cope with the future perspectives of LIS education programmes.

Keywords: Library science education; Curriculum planning for LIS

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of Information Technologies (IT) has revolutionized the way information is generated, stored, acquired, accessed, retrieved and communicated. There is a swift change in information environment from 'human imperative to 'technological' one. The library and information science (LIS) profession and education, which deal with information handling activities, are predominantly affected by these changes. LIS education is always subjected to regular revisions and changes to meet the challenges of information environment from time to time. However, in contemporary times, IT occupies the center stage of all activities and shapes the education programmes. As such, the LIS departments are changing their curricula according to the changing needs, generating IT based modules and courses, bringing changes in teaching-learning strategies, integrating education programmes with global activities in the field, and developing pedagogical guidelines for related practical component, with an aim to develop digital librarians.

The LIS departments are keen to maintain and improve the quality of education as well as revise syllabi in compliance to the recommendations of Curriculum Development Committees and Subject Panels (nomenclature from the Indian context). In spite of this adoption there is diversity among the LIS education programmes offered. "There has emerged in recent years, a broad environment – which includes the library but not limited to it – that offers tremendous opportunities for the application of information accessing and handling skills". (University Grants Commission India, 2001).) Cronin's (1995) statement that, "Two, if not three, distinct population of schools will emerge over the next few years: pace setters which decouple almost entirely from the library heartland; would be bound spanners, balanced delicately between the old and new worlds; and a *Lumpenproliat* of schools lacking resources, imagination and will to reposition themselves for the twenty–first century" is applicable for LIS schools worldwide.

This article explores the expectations of the profession and the students from the LIS education programmes, identifies the issues and inherent problems to achieve them and suggests measures to be adopted by the LIS Departments to develop professionals for 21st century and thus fulfill their social responsibility.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE PROFESSION

The LIS education has to reflect and reaffirm the values and goals of the profession. The LIS professionals who are involved in the information environment have vested interest in the education of new generations of individuals who are well equipped to facilitate the most effective use of vast amounts and kinds of information. They are expecting products from LIS Departments with critical thinking, intellectual and technical abilities to practice the profession. They are explicit in expressing their views through various fora and media. There is a belief among the professionals that the survival of LIS education requires LIS educators to integrate the digital environment into the curricula and create relationship with the real library environs. The professionals' views essentially reflects that the increasing value of information and emerging technologies have changed the boundaries of the profession in developing suitable professionals. To cite a few views,. Sison (1996), Anderson (2002), Brakel (1997), Cox and Rasmussen (1997), Arora and Mujoo- Munshi (2000), and Lahiri et al (2002) affirm the above perspective. A sample survey, conducted to seek the opinions of academic, special and public librarians on the existing LIS educational programmes by the author in the State of Andhra Pradesh (India) supported the above statement (Varalakshmi, 2003). The professionals' expectations are:

- To focus on producing knowledge managers than mere librarians;
- To focus on imparting knowledge on web-based services as the future belongs to the Web / Net.
- To organize more fields of study and interact with working librarians to gain knowledge on real time situations and enables them to blend the learning with working skills.
- To have a more practical component in curriculum as IT. is practice based.
- To offer specialization in the areas of Knowledge Management, Multimedia systems, Web design and development and Digital libraries.

Their expectation is for a high-level performance of the fresh librarian with professional knowledge, technological skills, communication skills, managerial capabilities and attitudinal flexibilities, or in simple term a skilled digital librarian. The reality is,

> *"There will be a rapidly increasing need for information management in all our organizations; Libraries are only one part of the information industry and for many segments of the society they are not the most important part; libraries will become an increasingly smaller proportion of information workers, and; the problems of information management are more than ever, inter-disciplinary- requiring knowledge and skills from areas that were once seen as peripherals to the heart of our field" (Katzer, 1996)*

EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

The LIS education system conceives strategies to bring out products having equal competencies in subject matter and IT skills. However, the students have their own expectations from the system. The feedback from the out going students on the curriculum and training programmes indicate that their emphasis is more on their career and job potential, irrespective of their background knowledge and aptitude towards the profession. They want to be more saleable in the information market. The freshers are being lured by the idea of information consultancy and a sizable percentage of them are interested to practice the profession.

- They expect a curriculum that provides a blend of core subject areas and I.T. components and tuning it to actionable knowledge.
- They are expecting integration of technological competencies and other managerial and analytical skills in the core LIS Curriculum.
- They require a strong pedagogical support system in various ways.

- They want to be trained in knowledge construction, encapsulation and management that help them to take up the profession as a career and facilitate to occupy positions of responsibility.
- They want to have more exposure to real situations through internship or any other such programme.

LIS EDUCATION - A STATE OF THE ART

The purpose of professional education is to prepare individuals competent to practice the profession. The LIS education programmes responded positively to the needs of the information society from time to time. Too often the changes represented new solutions to old issues rather than reconceptualizing the principles, theories and standards of the discipline. Hence, what does the expectations of the profession and students means to the LIS education?

> *"Where are we then with regard to all these? Sad to say. Many of us are still of the traditional mold. We need to change our mind set not only have the vision to overhaul the traditional curricula in the training of information professionals that we have been using for the past several decades. More important, we need to "retool" and upgrade our skills, to enable us to provide such training and the services expected of us by our users."* (Sison, 1996, p.13)

There is a need to rethink on the major issues of the existing programmes with reference to global and national information environment. The major areas associated with LIS education, in general, are:

Nature of information environment

The fundamental changes in the information environment are shaping the LIS profession and education. Two adaptive responses from LIS educators are to develop a digital librarian or hybridization, that is who can manage both traditional and electronic environments. However, there are e-libraries and digital libraries, but not all libraries are digital. In other words the need for technology courses is not universal. Hence, not every one will be a Chief Information Officer/Librarian/Knowledge Manager. The ratio of demand for digital librarians is a matter of concern. Lopsided development of information environment necessitates the Schools to strike a balance between traditional and computerized information environments, while imparting the programmes.

De-institutionalization of education

This is necessary to pave way for the development of individuals who can practice the profession. So far the programmes are tied to an institution/library that is changing or that could disappear. Line (1983) advocated the idea of abandonment of full-time, pre-employment library education in favour of continuous learning and post-experience training, which was further supported by other professionals like Wilson (1993). Brakel (1997) had suggested for decoupling of Information Studies from traditional library science obligations. His contention is that:

> *"In this growing electronic or digital information environment, fewer students are interested in following the traditional LIS venue. In fact, a library oriented career path has for many years been no longer a very popular choice. Proof for this statement can be found in the closure of many US 'library schools', and the current financial constraints of many traditional LIS schools around the globe".*

However, the credentials of the issue are debatable, as it has limited universal applicability. It may require for at least a decade for developing countries to think about information industry and practicing the profession as information consultants and getting rid of traditional libraries.

Levels of IT component in curriculum

There is a persistent demand to be pro-active to the global developments in Knowledge generation, organization, and management in digital environment. It is true that if we do to days job with yesterday's tools we will be out tomorrow. On the other hand, there is criticism that over emphasis on IT mitigates the humanness and service orientation of the profession and as such the profession is moving away from its core components. "Some in the profession assert that technology itself is causing this problem (stress) and that the best way to relieve the stress is to reassert the importance of the 'human imperative' over the 'technological' one. This is a result of variations in the adoption of advances of IT by libraries and information centres and as such both points carries weight age". (Hirshon, 1998)

Assessment of Job Market

There is a need to ascertain the value of the profession in terms of job potential and status. It is the market that plays major role than the profession or funding agencies. Indeed recognition of our professional attainments is still elusive. It is a fact that the profession got a low profile in the society and the librarians are undersold. In general, the market demand is for a professional having skills in

knowledge organization, exploration, communication and presentation, IT literateand who can take different responsibilities.

Professionalization

Though LIS is a professional course, there is need to professionalise it further, to make it more relevant to the society. The need is to have an integrated view of knowledge and application. Understanding and responding to the context, based on relevance, is more important to be successful.

Knowledge base

There is little expansion of the discipline in its core areas and dependence or adoption of peripheral areas makes the LIS profession take the back seat. The contribution is meager, many times not original and novel. Hence, there is a dire need to strengthen the body of knowledge through multi-disciplinary offerings.

The teaching practices

The information society now needs more highly instructed teachers, competent in subject matter and IT. In fact, organization of systematic, multi layer programmes for teachers in the use of IT is central to the success of I.T. based education programmes. There is a need to develop technological competencies of faculty to impart the skills and knowledge to the students through appropriate teaching and learning activities. However, professional education, such as LIS, is a life long education and the teacher alone cannot be the source of knowledge. Hence, the students have to be trained in the techniques of learning.

Profession vs. Education

For a long time the profession and the departments are working independently. There is a need to overcome the gap between educators and working professionals. "A mutually damaging gap exists between the library educators and the working profession. This gap inhibits potentially beneficial interchange of ideas and knowledge that might contribute to the solution of the problems confronting the profession"(Conant Report, 1981).

Educational Consortia

It is necessary to establish collaborative efforts among Departments / Schools of LIS, to develop and share the learning packages, educational materials and expertise of the faculty. Khoo (2001) opined that "other mechanisms can be developed for sharing, cooperation and collaboration among LIS educators, such

as through a listserv, Web site orportal, staff and student exchanges, and exchange of ideas, education materials and publications". The objectives of the European Association for Library and Information Science Education and Research (EUCLID) (Harbo, 1994) and the link among 53 LIS schools in U.S.A. (Chu et al, 2002) are the best examples set in this regard.

In addition to these issues, there are a number of inherent problems encountered by the LIS education programmes and these are listed as follows:

(a) Mediocrity of students entering the profession, due to low profile of the profession coupled with the problems of regional language and differential skills. There is a diminishing demand for the profession and the course as there is no need for intermediary in accessing information, especially in networked environment. Imparting the expected level of education and training to such students is very difficult.

(b) The duration of the course is for 18 workable months in an integrated MLIS programme. It is practically impossible to produce a digital librarian with expected caliber out of an average social science graduate in such a limited span of time

(c) Lack of infrastructure facilities in terms of material and manpower, is lacking in the majority of schools or departments arise due to lack of support from the management, Government and funding agencies. This leads to the prevalence of passive nature among faculty, students and professionals. Consequently, it is not an easy task to prepare individuals as digital librarians or practitioners with definable capabilities. Hence, there is a need to develop strategies that work and monitor to achieve greater diversity in LIS education.

More pressure on the LIS education programmes is coming from the information environment and the university environment. Owing to the developments of the technological society, the expectations from the profession and the students are very high. In reality the education programmes are confronted with the above-discussed issues. The LIS professionals and educators have to analyze and address these issues and suggest suitable alternatives keeping in view the variant forms of information environment in different parts of the globe.

SUGGESTIONS

Everyone wants a meaningful change within the library profession and its related education. There may be divergent opinions and situations in the world, but the basic issues are uniform and standard anywhere. Therefore, the following suggestions may be applicable to the LIS environment in general.

(a) The domain of LIS needs to be redefined to identify the core jurisdiction of the discipline and its necessary adaptability in contemporary times.

(b) There is a need to reinforce the activities. It is essential to enhance the efforts on the national stage by a professional body to rank the University Departments, on the lines of the American Libraries Association (ALA) that will pave the way for their improvement.

(c) There is a need to offer the course at three levels, to prepare students for career at different levels of information society.

- Graduates with basic knowledge to head a small library.
- Post Graduate degree to have supervisors or middle managers of a large library
- Post Graduates with specialisations such as digital libraries, network management, content management to take up lead positions.

Another suggestion from some quarters is to "Design fresh information science degree course to teach IS as an academic subject to end-users and no longer to information professionals as its main target group" (Brakel, 1997)

(d) LIScourses have to be integrated with other courses on campus such as statistics, management, computer engineering, psychology to avoid duplicate teaching efforts.

(e) There is hype about IT and the expectations are inflated. There is a need to assess the realities and strike a balance.

(f) The faculty must change their way. They have to develop a deeper, up-to-date knowledge. This is required of every one in the Department and not just a few. The need is to create centers of excellence for training of teachers of LIS and IT managers. (Neelameghan, 2000)

(g) Further course management teams interconnecting all related fields may be a solution to cope with teaching demands.

(h) There is a need to lay down standards for admission strength, eligibility criteria, and evaluation pattern by a national body. Then only supply can be made according to demand. Leaders can be produced as per the specific requirements of the society.

(i) Focus on vibrant research in basic and applied aspects is necessary for expansion of knowledge base and to find solutions to practical problems.

(j) Last, but one of the important suggestion is, to have more collaborative efforts among LIS schools or departments to share the material resources and human expertise.

CONCLUSION

The last decade has seen enormous change in library and information environment, with the emergence and application of IT, which is expected to be a continuum. However, these changes are not sweeping in developing countries,

as majority of libraries are functioning with traditional print collections or as hybrid libraries with a combination of print and electronic. Hence, the LIS Departments are bestowed with the responsibility of developing the right personnel with high caliber to manage the libraries and information centers of varied scope and nature, ranging from small rural library to a well-established digital library. This requires planning for redefining and reengineering of LIS education programmes. Such excellent educatonal outcomes will enhance the profile of LIS profession.

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