

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

All is not good with Library and Information Science (LIS) Education in South Asia. Out of the seven countries in South Asia; India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have provision for Library and Information Science Education, whereas Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives depend upon outside support for educating and training people for looking after their professional turf. Existing body of literature shows that in India there is a mushroom growth of Library and Information Science Departments. There is no professional accreditation, though institutional accreditation is in place in India. Many departments have failed to respond adequately to the ICT-based developments. Nomenclature of the courses offered has changed but the course contents are not consistent with the nomenclature in many cases. Moreover, these departments are seriously suffering from insufficient infrastructure, inadequate faculty, lack of quality research and document support. The course contents are not informed by the emerging employment opportunities in the corporate sector. Even today, the focus is on technical services. Academic Librarianship and Literature survey in social sciences are the only options offered by majority of LIS Programmes in India. Whereas, the core is still stuck to classification, cataloguing, indexing, and vocabulary control, the emerging themes, such as information literacy, knowledge management, elearning, ICT application, use of networks in teaching, and teaching about networks have not been adequately integrated in the curricula. On the top of it, there is limited Internet connectivity available in these departments. Attitude of authorities is also not that encouraging as these departments, being small, are considered liabilities. Above all, these departments have not, till today, internalized the concept and practice of cooperation and collaboration. Globalization and privatization of LIS education under GATS is another threat to the developing countries as it will lead to competition among the unequal. In fact, LIS education in majority of the departments in South Asia is in shambles.

GATS and Globalization

Effects of globalisation on the role of libraries as unique social institutions are being discussed by the professionals as well as the professional bodies. World Trade Organisation (WTO) is seen as one of the main forces behind globalisation along with the IMF and World Bank. There are two main agreements that are being established at the WTO that are having direct implications for libraries and information; GATS (The General Agreement on Trade in Service) and TRIPS (Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights). Especially GATS can lead to privatisation of libraries and education. Any objections to the implementation activities by the WTO member countries can lead to legal action being taken against them not in their own countries but at the WTO Dispute Settlement Process. 'Information for Social Change' has published a special issue on GATS and libraries in 2001/2002. (<http://libr.org/ISC/TOC.html>). GATS is already having implications on public libraries of England by commercialisation, privatisation and capitalisation of public libraries by the multinational and private companies. If GATS has already started affecting libraries in the developed countries, it is implied that it will have serious consequences for libraries and LIS education in developing countries which are highly influenced by international funding bodies that emphasise reduction of public expenditure on welfare services.

"The library" to which library and information science education has been catering to is increasingly becoming irrelevant. Changing social priorities and developments in ICT are driving the emergence of a new library that will be organised in a new way to deliver new services. This implies a need for

change regarding the skills, nature of duties and employment, and the social role of library and information professionals. It also implies changes in the LIS education Asian region accounts for a higher share of global ICT production, but many countries in the region are lagging behind in the usage. As Edwards (2001) points out, Knowledge society is upon us but with formidable challenges and developing the appropriate skills and the content is the real challenge than building infrastructure. Will there be wide and equitable access or a growing divide between the info-rich and info-poor, will content be varied and appropriate or will it be controlled by a smaller group, will all user communities have necessary skills or will there be exclusions, and will we have partnerships of government, private sector and civil society, which is an essential component of knowledge society, are some of the issues raised by this author. He fuses all these issues as digital divide between developing and developed countries.

Nonetheless, lack of relevance of LIS graduates to the world of work is not only common to developed countries. This is true in the developing countries as well. Only dedicated, technically qualified and business-like professionals can lead to better library and information services. Traditional library graduates will not be able to cope with present day challenges because they lack necessary training and leadership qualities. Haider (2004) suggests that universities in Pakistan need to make use of technical managers and business managers for top managerial positions in the university libraries. He claims that this suggestion is revolutionary but necessary in the best interest of the libraries. This is transmitting a signal of danger to the six Pakistani library schools based in universities which turn out 250-300 Masters graduates a year.

Developing countries are implementing a plethora of economic development and poverty reduction programmes and the development of rural sector is being given high priority by many Asian governments. Access to information and technology is a necessary tool for the advancement of individuals. Dearth of information and inadequate access to information in the disadvantaged communities of the developing countries can be answered by the librarians. Not only provision of information but the application of information to empower these disadvantaged groups has to be promoted by the information professionals. (Maloney and Alfaro 2004). LIS education is under a social pressure to address the plight of the info-poor but many of us in the developing countries have negative attitudes towards developing libraries.

Though LIS departments or libraries have been slow in realising their social responsibility, it does not mean that the governments of many developing countries have ignored the necessity of knowledge and information for poverty reduction. Community Information Centres, Community Information Services, Community Computer centres are proliferating but most of the time, outside the boundaries of library profession. For example in India many activities related to community information centres are being implemented i.e. Information Messenger (Gyandoot) which has a multimedia computer, a dot matrix printer and UPS, Gyandoot software and dial-up connection to empower the rural population. (Kumar, Choudhury and Shah 2004). These authors suggest that Public Library system should be developed to become knowledge resource centres or Community Library and Information Centres. But in many countries such Community Information Centres are developed in isolation of existing public library services while the public libraries in many rural areas are limited to a few battered printed material and a reading room.

Sri Lanka's current social and economic plan **Mahinda Chintana** (Rajapaksha 2005) also stresses a variety of activities to empower the rural population including self employment opportunities for rural women, more use technology for agriculture and other industries etc. It also stresses establishing "Nena Salas" (Knowledge Centres), and about 100 pilot Nena Salas have already been implemented. All these new economic and social development activities are based on information, though it is not explicitly stated. Can the library school graduates, who learn more cataloguing and classification cater to the information needs of these new trends, will the South Asian library educators perceive the need to change or will the others such as IT professionals will cross the LIS boundaries to grab the new employment opportunities will remain to be seen.

State of the Art

Current LIS Courses in India range from certificate to Ph.D. level. Certificate, degree, and postgraduate qualifications are popular and conducted by more than one kind of institution. There are five levels of

LIS education programmes in Pakistan ranging from elective at Bachelors level to Ph.D. level. In Bangladesh it varies from one-year diploma to Ph.D. level at universities. In addition there are two, certificate courses aiming to train school librarians. LIS education programmes in Sri Lanka range from a module in B.Ed. programme through certificate level to two-year Masters Programme. Higher academic qualifications are not available. In the other three countries, universities seem to play a major role in LIS education, training more professionals at university level. In Sri Lanka more students are trained at certificate level by the Sri Lankan Library Association (SLLA) and Departments of Library and Information Science (DLIS), while universities play a major role in training a few at higher level. None of these courses, in any South Asian country are accredited by any organisation.

Entry Requirements

Entry requirements are less stringent in Sri Lanka as compared to those of other South Asian countries. To gain admission to Bachelors in LIS, India and Pakistan demand a good Bachelors degree in another discipline, but according to Mangla (1994) most Indian library schools consider candidates with a good Masters degree in another discipline for admission to bachelor's degree. Student in Sri Lankan and Bangladesh need only GCE/AL qualifications to gain admission to Bachelors in LIS. However, in these two countries Bachelors in LIS is a 3-4 year course, while in India and Pakistan it is only a one-year programme. We can assume that, although the duration is of one year, yet Indian and Pakistani BLIS students are more mature than their Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi counterparts because they have undergone prior university training. However, Indian UGC (1993) recommends that an admission test and an interview should become the criteria for selection so that those with best academic qualifications, as well as best personal qualities are selected. In India, the UGC Model Curriculum in LIS, released during 2001, has suggested adoption of two-year integrated M.Lib.I.Sc Course.

Entry requirements for masters degree in Sri Lanka is a good Bachelors degree in any discipline plus one year work experience in a recognised library. In other South Asian countries a LIS qualification (usually Bachelors) is essential for this. Although the duration of Sri Lankan Masters Degree is of two years, only the first year (300 hours) is devoted to theoretical study. Second year is completely devoted to the research and writing up of dissertation of 30,000 - 40,000 words. Masters degree being the highest academic qualification available in Sri Lanka for managerial level professionals as well as LIS educators therefore can produce professionals with only one year of formal training in LIS. Quality of pre-course experience and the amount of research undertaken for the dissertation can vary widely according to the personal qualities, place of work, academic capabilities of the student. Mangla (1978) comments on this aspect, "we have found the fresh students to be more mentally alert with a great amount of curiosity to learn the subject than those who are admitted with some prior experience."

Intake Quality

Recruitment of students has been a problem for many departments. Literature points out to issues, such as lack of good students, lack of students with a science and technology background, and lack of sufficient numbers of students. Many prospective students consider LIS as a "quiet" profession and the applicants for the courses mainly carry this kind of personalities. Many applications are still received from "shy and retiring" persons who are fond of reading and have, therefore, been recommended by their counselors for a career in librarianship. On the contrary, LIS departments expect their students to be of a different nature that is an extrovert personality, entrepreneurial flair, and an ability to work well as a team member. However, in addition to these factors, the evolving status of LIS profession, professionals, and the professional education has become a challenge to the LIS departments. At the same time, the pressures of increasing demand for university education is not extended to these departments as a result of the weak perception of the profession by prospective students and significant others. LIS departments expect enrolment of "good" students, but more often than not, have to be satisfied with the "leftovers", as commented by one of the Sri Lankan LIS course Co-ordinators, to maintain the financial viability of the departments. These issues have led to closer of many schools of library and information science around the world during the recent past.

Course Contents

In India as well as in other South Asian countries, main emphasis is laid on traditional aspects. Cataloguing and classification dominates the curriculum. Library management, information sources and services seem to be equally popular. Though almost all the courses are designated as Library and Information Science, there is very little or no element of information science in these programmes. Any attempt at attitudinal changes or development of service attitude seems to be lacking throughout the region. It is evident from the literature that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have realised the necessity

to change. Moreover, the course contents are not informed by the emerging employment opportunities in the corporate sector. Whereas, the core is still stuck to classification, cataloguing, indexing, and vocabulary control, the emerging themes, such as information literacy, knowledge management, e-learning, ICT applications, use of networks in teaching, and teaching about networks have not been adequately integrated in the curricula. In fact there is lack of consistency between LIS education and Practice (Industry).

Specialization Options

Analysis of course contents reveals that, the LIS programmes in South Asia concentrate on training personnel to manage a library by providing an in-depth knowledge of traditional library practices. Trainees are provided with an introductory or basic level knowledge of traditional library practices. In India and Pakistan, options are provided to specialise. Masters program of Universities in India provide a choice of bibliography and literature in humanities, social science, natural science, medical, engineering or agriculture. Another opportunity is given to select either a dissertation topic or one from computer applications, operations research and systems analysis, or education for LIS. University of Karachi offers a selection of library types in the first semester, and library legislation, library automation, AV materials, archives and many other options are provided in the second semester. But the provision for training placement or internship is lacking in this region.

Syllabus and Curriculum

“Syllabus is a one-dimensional document which lists the subjects and contents outline with broad time allocation. Curriculum is three-dimensional and takes into account the needs of the students, the content, and the instructional methodology”. (Karisiddappa and Sangam 1994, p.36) In the light of the above definition, the other three countries have well defined curricula, but in Sri Lanka, most of the curricula are mere lists of subject headings. They show the characteristics of syllabi rather than curricula. Sri Lankan Library Association’s (SLLA) three-tier course defines the course content in depth without paying attention to the evaluation criteria or instructional methods. The course documentation of the MLS of the University of Colombo provides by-laws, assessment methods and evaluation criteria for the benefit of the students, but do not provide information on instructional methods or details of course contents other than main subject headings

Teaching Faculty

94% of the LIS teaching faculty in Sri Lanka is employed full time in executive posts in Library and Information Services. India and Pakistan had a similar teaching faculty to Sri Lanka at their initial stages. Up to the late 1950s teaching faculty in library schools of India consisted of part time teachers usually drawn from the respective universities, and the university librarian invariably functioned as the head of the library school. But the need for full time teachers was duly recognised by the UGC Review Committee in 1965 in India. Trend over the past 20 years or so has been to employ gradually full time teachers as well as full time Heads of the library schools. UGC (India) Panel on Library and Information Science in 1982 recommended that a university department of library science/library and information science should have adequate full time teaching staff and also a full time Head (Mangla, 1994). Karachi Library School, which was the first started in Pakistan conducted classes with part time teachers. Other universities followed same pattern at the initial stage. However, the position changed during the past 20 years. The university librarian was the head of the respective schools until early 1970s. Yet today they are full-fledged departments. But still the problem is not solved, because of the vast range of subjects that need to be taught and lack of experience by teachers.

Condition in Bangladesh seems to be close to that of Sri Lanka. No provision is made for higher education and training facilities of teachers in library and information science. In 1959 Dhaka library school was opened with part time staff and the university librarian as the Head of the school. At present this school has one professor. Four associate professors and four assistant professors, but Rajshahi University and Library Association of Bangladesh still conduct their courses with part time staff.

The nature of teaching faculty creates several problems in the LIS education field. Because of excessive workload, they have very limited time for preparation. This is further aggravated by the almost limited library and laboratory facilities at the teaching institutions. Moreover, no organisation is directly responsible for their career development as teachers. There is no opportunity for continuing education professional education and training. Traditional chalk and talk teaching method is not adequately supplemented with new teaching aids methods.

Librarians in Sri Lanka are given a basic training to manage library or information centres. The highest qualification (Masters) available to train students with this objective and the curriculum has a limited scope. Those who do well in the local courses are sometimes taken as teachers for the same course. This makes the LIS education a closed system preventing it from expanding its horizon of variety. If the teacher is truly dedicated and possesses inherent teaching ability, only then the students will be benefited. UGC Review Committee of India rejected the practice of employing university library staff as part-time teachers and has recommended one reader and two lecturers for a department conducting bachelors degree and one professor, two readers and four lecturers for a department conducting the masters. (Singh 2003). However, India has experienced the adverse effects of the full time faculty. "It has resulted that full time faculty members have kept themselves aloof from the practical and clinical work in a library, thereby they have become theoreticians. Similarly experienced working librarians have been kept out from the teaching opportunity that could benefit the students" (Kaula 1988. p. 174.)

Conclusions and Suggestions

LIS education system of the South Asian countries has more similarities than differences. They all share the problems of limited teaching faculty, lack of training facility for teachers, poor quality of students, lack of resources, absence of manpower surveys, limited or absent national level planning and lack of recognition. The bottom line is that LIS education in South Asia is faced with many challenges and opportunities. LIS programmes in these countries are required to be fine tuned to the changing needs of the employers. If these countries fail to respond to the market forces, the LIS programmes of these countries will certainly be tendered irrelevant. Therefore, there is an immediate need for a model curriculum based on the cutting edge course contents and ICTs. Professional accreditation is the need of the hour. Adequate infrastructure, competent faculty, sufficient document support, quality research and intake of promising students are the additional requirements. Collaboration with industry and marketing of the LIS courses via the web can go a long way to deliver the goods. There is need for adequate faculty to shed the workload of teaches to give them more time for research and international collaboration. Teaching and evaluation methods must internalize the spirit of the emerging mechanisms. Elearning, information literacy and knowledge managements are the cutting edge concepts. These must be integrated in the LIS courses and reflected as well in the nomenclature. The opportunities made available by ICTs and the Internet must be used to support e-learning, open and distributed learning (ODL), and globalization of LIS education and research. Only this way the LIS courses will enable the future library and information professionals to stay ahead of competition and change.

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