Strategies for the employable LIS courses: Emergent issues and need for contemplation

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In the process of implanting contemporary changes envisaged in LIS courses a number of key documents have been published worldwide in last 25 years dealing with the topic of paper. These documents avidly dwell on the changing profile of the profession and the required professional competencies and modeling of LIS Courses. During the last 75 years of LIS Education in India many changes are observed, such as an independent identity for LIS in the 1970s through the establishment of Departments of library and information science in the Universities, and institution of two years integrated MLIS programme on par with other Post-graduate courses. The three UGC efforts on curriculum development and induction of Information Technology in LIS Courses with adequate laboratory facilities are the other efforts that made some headway in the development of professional image to some extent.(1, 2, 3). On the Institutional front, libraries, mainly academic libraries though have not much excelled on basics but on the application of IT and providing access to e-resources of all types has been on the rise. Most university libraries and many college libraries in the country have been computerized and are providing access to e-resources through consortia and many of them are on the intent of building institutional repositories with open access software.

One of the negative notes that professionals all over the country are concerned about is the mushroom growth of Open University and Correspondence Courses in LIS ranging from Certificate courses to Doctoral programmes. In the lifelong learning
process such an open system of education though welcome, but what is lacking is quality and the number of students admitted to the courses and also the mode of implementation of personal contact programmes organized under their umbrella. There is a common place that the proliferation of Open University courses and Open and Distance Learning has to some extent marred the market image of LIS professionals during the recruitment stage amidst the criticism that they are ready to accept the assignment for desirable salary offerings.

Under the circumstances, though the potential employability of LIS professionals has not receded much yet, the overall competencies have retarded in the process. In this background this paper reviews some of the very important documents that have been published during the last 25 years worldwide. The profession has got an excellent opportunity to make its visibility through the "Working Group on Libraries "constituted by the National Knowledge Commission of India, which would have undertaken a similar kind of review of LIS Education and courses as presented in the next sections. The professional associations in the country have been organizing conferences on critical professional subjects but there is an immediate need for the assessment of the relevance of LIS Education in the changing environment and employability of the LIS graduates.

A Review of Issues

The first in the series of documents is the one from Library and Information Services Council, London (LA, 1985). It recommended "review the future manpower training requirements for Library and Information Work". This was followed by a working party deliberating on the topic through keynote papers, and discussion papers to review the report. Beginning with the decade of 1990, the awareness in this context has been on the rise in the task of development of education and research in LIS globally, as a result of the ICT impact and implications of the knowledge-based society. In this context Johnson (1997) has remarked that "schools of librarianship and information studies are not playing the role they might be expected to play in the emerging information society". Further it has stated, "it will be necessary to review the developments which have taken place in teaching, and the extent to
which the schools are involved in relevant research activities.” The second document which has been pursuing on the professional development and working out strategies for LIS education is the ERIC Digest (Eisenberg, Trombly, Carolyn, & Ruth, 1988) which states “There are important emerging roles and responsibilities for information professionals. Two themes related to the expanding roles of information professionals are (a) the need for librarians to take a proactive approach to some of their traditional activities, and (b) the possibilities for information professionals to take on new roles, which are often stimulated by emerging information technologies”. The document succinctly proposes on changes and challenges of professional education as follows:

Professional education programs are being challenged to balance the need to provide training in specific areas while also developing comprehensive, coordinated programs covering all areas of information science. Questions facing professional education in library and information science include: What is information science? How can seasoned practitioners maintain currency and extend their competencies? What prerequisites should exist for those entering the field? What do prospective employers expect from graduates of various programs? What should schools teach to prepare their graduates for productive employment, both now and in the future? Educators must meet specific job market needs, but they also feel a responsibility to provide students with an introduction to a broad information world. Changes in library and information science programs reflect attempts to achieve both goals (Cooper & Lunin, 1988).

Competencies Identified
The third in the series of documents which contemplated on the issues of professional competencies is the SLA Report on “Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21 Century”. Revised edition brought out by the Special Libraries Association (USA) in 2003 (SLA, 2003). The document has identified three categories of competencies of information professionals. They are:
1. Professional Competencies
2. Personal Competencies and;
3. Core competencies.

Under the professional competencies it has enlisted four major competencies each augmented with specific skills.

Managing Information Organizations
Managing Information Resources
Managing Information Services
Applying Information Tools and Technologies

Personal Competencies represent a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession. These competencies range from being strong communicators, to demonstrating the value-add of their contributions, to remaining flexible and positive in an ever-changing environment.

Core Competencies anchor the professional and personal competencies. These two core competencies are absolutely essential for every information professional. The core competencies include

Information professionals contribute to the knowledge base of the profession by sharing best practices and experiences, and continue to learn about information products, services, and management practices throughout the life of his/her career.

Information professionals commit to professional excellence and ethics, and to the values and principles of the profession.

The most recent publication is "Strategies for Regenerating the Library and Information Profession" brought by IFLA in 2009 (Varlejs & Walton, 2009). The volume is a selection of papers from the Bologna conference held in August 2009. Among the topics covered include, mentoring and coaching, communication skills, creating positive work environment, re-skilling and transferability of skills and so on.

These documents are considered for their rich content on the subject, international perspective and dealing with the contemporary
changes in the professional practice and desirable changes sought in LIS professional education.

Employability Skills

'Do the job you love and love the job you do' should be one of the key strategies of the LIS profession. But however it is not so often. There are several components and skills of employability and it should become integral part of every LIS Course in India. The "Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia" (2002) has identified types of skills. 1. Discipline specific skills and 2) Employability skills. The former include:

- Technical ability
- Knowledge (of the discipline)
- Qualifications (relevant)

The Employability skills on the other hand are:

- Initiative
- Communication
- Teamwork
- Technology
- Problem Solving
- Self-management
- Planning and;
- Learning

Muralidharan (2009) has identified three basic components of employability, as Knowledge, Abilities and Presentation respectively. Apart from these components a measure of employability is considered in the Employability quotient (Sardhar). In India its measure in professional courses is startlingly low, as much as only 25% and 23% in Engineering and Management professional courses, B.A., B.Sc., and B.Com. are far better on par with Engineering. So far no such quotient is worked out for LIS courses. It is time to use this also to assess the employability of LIS Courses. It is matter of serious consideration as how many of the above can be included in our LIS Curriculum and teaching or as an external input. A thorough discussion on these issues can be made and resolved.
The Indian Scenario

Several issues contextualizing the India LIS Education scenario can be presented and some guidelines from the above documents can be sought to resolve the strategic issues in the context. On the review of these documents and issues thereon, it is contemplated that there is need for such a study in India to have an overview of the status of the profession, its changing dimensions and the educational scenario thereto. It is now time to think on these lines and the immediate task would be to work on such a comprehensive report sooner the better.

Another important issue that surfaced during the discussion with the LIS educators and professionals is the inputs to the LIS courses is now of a greater concern. With increasing emphasis on Engineering and other professional education, there is a depleting strength of good students seeking a career in LIS profession. The students intake is largely with Arts background and having studied mostly in regional language media. Another issue of depleting interest is the drive of the state governments to stall recruitment to colleges and universities. The professional positions in these libraries have almost come to nil and there are either the retired librarians who are re-employed or recruitments are made only on contractual basis and as such the regular and full time employments have become the dreams of the past.

Yet another serious issue that is harming the professional recruitment is as mentioned the mushroom growth of Open University and Correspondence courses. The output from these courses is not in tens or hundreds but in thousands. The entries are easy and they offer degrees up to Doctorate level. One would need to think on the quality of such of LIS graduates.

Under the circumstances there is a need for a review of LIS Education and employability in India by a high power committee should be the immediate task of the agencies that are concerned with the profession. It is also desirable as how of implanting employability skills in the LIS courses in India.

Unified Approach to LIS Curriculum

Since the introduction of LIS courses there are contemporary changes in its curriculum. The changes are also made in its nomenclature and content. The levels also vary considerably. The
UGC Model Curriculum (2001) through modular approach brought some unified approach to LIS Curriculum which also proposed evaluation parameters. In recent years, Universities in Karnataka have started Choice-based Credit Systems (CBCS) and the implications have still not been assessed. One of the important criteria for introducing the CBCS curriculum lies in the aptitude of the teachers, particularly the domain knowledge, when the students from other disciplines choose LIS credits. The success of attracting students from other disciplines, the main objective of the CBCS, and the image of the LIS depends on such exclusive criterion of the faculty from LIS Courses. So there is need for some introspection in this regard. The integrated curriculum model suggested by Karisiddappa and Asundi (2006) can be considered as one of the means of achieving unified approach to LIS Curriculum. This will help the LIS students for a wider knowledge of the subjects from within and from outside the domain of Library and Information Science. In order to bring in some revolutionary changes in LIS profession, it is now ripe time to constitute a Council for Research in Library and Information Science which was suggested by Dr. Asundi (1982-84) about two decades ago. Such an apex body will be a right platform take up the all the issues relating to the profession in teaching as well as in practice.

Conclusion

The LIS courses in India are unique than most other countries, particularly than those in Africa and South-east Asian nations like Thailand, Korea and so on. Library science as a subject is offered either as a compulsory or optional right from the undergraduate levels and the students are then given a choice to choose a stream. It gives the students at graduate level a fair view of the LIS discipline and awareness of the employment opportunities. It is hard to change the present LIS education pattern in India now. However, some universities in this country started to introduce, optional papers in Library and Information Science at the undergraduate level. Only one university, to the best of knowledge of the authors has survived and is continuing to this date. Despite the exclusive pattern of LIS education in India, the students are in a position to assimilate the subject contents of LIS courses but it takes considerable amount of time. It may be one of the reasons for
students attraction to Open University courses. So to increase the employability of the LIS Courses, it is necessary to undertake a comprehensive research study on the topic sponsored or otherwise as implied in the beginning of the paper. The concept of "knowledge society" though seems to project a high profile of the discipline, yet we have not fully tuned to the concept of "Library Society" since library literacy in this country is on the low ebb and there is need for inculcating "library literacy" among the young minds to attract good students to take up LIS Courses and to resolve easily. Despite one’s intent to add "soft skills" in LIS Courses, the success will result only when there is a marked improvement in the intake. Lack of good students for the LIS courses is the main reason for the most of the ills the profession is suffering.

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