

My Observations and Opinions on LIS Profession and its Education in Pakistan

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I feel an important aspect of curriculum development is to prepare the students for life after academia. While the current curriculum appears to be well thought out and quite comprehensive, I feel that there is potential for further development in certain areas. Obviously these thoughts are based on my limited recent interaction with the department after an absence of three decades from the country. Please find my thoughts on the following:



- Education of Librarians:
- Research
- Supply and Demand of Librarian Work Force in Pakistan
- Multiple Disciplinary Approach in Education of Librarians
- Continuing Professional Education of Alumni
- Staff Training and Marketing Library Services
- Professional Associations of Librarians

1. Education of Librarians at Punjab University:

1.1: It was a source of great satisfaction to see that the department has flourished and developed extensively since its beginning. It has been one hundred years since its conception and it has definitely come a long way. I think that while most of its success can be attributed to the exhaustive efforts of its different department heads and faculty, it is also because of the fact that there has been a constant demand for trained library professionals in Pakistan that the department has strived to fulfill.

Pakistan has had massive growth in the education sector in the last 100 years resulting in large number of institutions with full service libraries. Obviously this has resulted in an increased demand for professionals librarians resulting in increased student interest in this discipline. The last two decades in particular have seen an exponential growth in number of libraries in Pakistan.

1.2: The library science training program that initially offered a certificate in library science, has seen the level of qualification offered to the students, progress from a simple certificate to a diploma and then to Master's, Mphil and a Phd. The demand for further training in library sciences is such that the department always has a number of Mphil and doctoral students engaged in post graduate study.

1.3: Separation from main university library occurred in 1973-74 when the department was moved to its independent facility at the new campus. Two permanent teachers were provided to start the Master in Library Science program. It was thus that with all the limitations of space, staff, funding, etc. the master program was started in Punjab University.

1.4: I am not a historian, but the above details appear to me fairly consistence. I must say that till its separation from the main university library, our training program was more practice oriented than theoretical; though it was generally limited to teaching the students day to day routines required to run a library effectively.

This practical hand-on training served the students well when they entered the workforce, as most libraries at the time were only looking for a single qualified librarian to manage all functions of a library.

Our graduates never felt any problem in performing all day to day routine functions in a library. The reason, probably in part was because a large university library was available to our students as a working laboratory. After separation from the library our students were deprived of that facility. I am not sure whether the main university library is used in any capacity, for practical training of our current students these days. However, it is the norm in most foreign institutions to utilize the campus library as a training ground for their students. Perhaps a mutually beneficial relationship between the department and the university library can be explored to take advantage of the vast resources available in the library.

1.5: The internship program currently in place is a very good way to introduce the students to the working of a library and to give them a taste of future professional life. The practical experience gained will benefit them immensely as they enter the profession after graduating from the program.

However, after talking to other colleagues in the profession as well as some students, I feel that perhaps the duration of the internship is not long enough. It either needs to be increased to the duration of a whole semester as in most international universities, or should be supplemented with practical assignments included with their routine course work during their 2 years of studies.

I think that if the student body's level of preparedness to enter the workforce is a concern, then the practical component of the curriculum most likely needs strengthening. This is probably a course delivery issue rather than a purely course content issue. The oversight can probably be rectified by adding small practical work assignments to the regular course work. These assignments should require the students to visit libraries and learn new things by practically doing them themselves.

Such practical work will help the students develop conceptual clarity and garner knowledge for better comprehension of technical issues that arise when theory is put into practice. Furthermore, it will help student improve their communication and organizational skills and help them prepare to work well in a professional setting in their future careers.

2. Research:

2.1: When the master degree program was initially started, very sketchy information existed about different types of libraries in Pakistan. Therefore, it was felt that surveys need be conducted to know the factual facts of existing libraries in Pakistan. A research report / term paper was made part of the methodology of a research course. Quite a few theses were written surveying conditions of various types of libraries in Pakistan during that period.

2.2: I am sure many more targeted surveys must have been carried out by our students by now. I think such surveys should be carried out to fill the gaps left in analysis of certain type of libraries; as well as to update work already done. This will allow the department to perform a comprehensive analysis of conditions of various libraries and develop policies regarding them. There is probably a need to look at the readiness of the students to fulfill the needs of these libraries as well.

2.3: Areas of library practice that need further research need to be actively identified. There should be a concerted focus on local libraries and their users. The changing landscape of this discipline has meant that there should be an effort made to identify the emerging needs of the libraries (automation/digitization etc.) as well as their users (information literacy/digital literacy/ use of e-resources/ advanced searching etc.) and level of readiness/ability of our students to successfully meet these needs.

Master's level students should be encouraged to conduct research. In recent years I think the department faculty and post graduate students have been mainly involved in conducting research in these areas. I

think that like the old days the master level student should also be involved in the research process and they should be encouraged to apply various research methodologies learnt into practice, to do new research and attempt to publish. This will not only strengthen their knowledge base, but also prepare them to cater to the needs of their users, should they decide to pursue a career in an academic setting. It should be stressed that the focus should be on production of quality research and not simply increasing the quantity of research.

3. Supply and Demand of the Librarian Work Force in Pakistan:

3.1: Prior to partition only one school was catering to the workforce needs of libraries in the whole of Indian subcontinent. After partition education of librarians has seen rapid development in Pakistan. In recent years in a very short span of time new degree programs have been started in many new universities. This development and the rapid rate of progression of LIS professional education is indeed remarkable provided this development is planned properly and monitored by authorities.

Library Science has been made part of bachelor degree programs in a lot of educational institutions and many old & new universities are now offering master, MPhil, and doctorate level programs. That is commendable; however, this fast growth in training programs and consequent growth in the number of qualified library professionals entering the workforce does raise some points of concern:

- Is there a big enough LIS job market in our country that will easily absorb the increasing numbers of highly qualified professionals graduating from these universities and entering the workforce every year?
- Was a supply demand analysis of the job market done adequately before offering all these higher degree programs?
- From all accounts there appears to be a surplus of newly trained LIS professionals in the current job market. If that is the case then steps need to be taken by this department to ensure that our students are successful in this competitive job market i.e. increased focus on practical training/ focus on developing soft job skills (communication, leadership, managerial etc.) along with technical knowledge and skills/fostering relationship with future employers etc.
- Is there any advisory or accreditation role of Higher Education Commission, or Pakistan Library Association, or, any other body, on the quality of education being offered by these various institutes of higher learning? Like we see in other professions such as medicine - Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PMDC), and engineering - Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC).
- Is there any collaboration/cooperation among various LIS departments of universities offering higher level programs? I know that the Punjab University LIS department is trying to create such cooperative relationships with other institutes, perhaps we should consider establishment of a central professional body (or encourage PLA etc. to volunteer) to act as a conduit of such collaborations.

4. Multiple Disciplinary Approaches in Education of Librarians:

4.1: Our profession is an all pervasive profession because it deals with all subjects. Universities acquire highly qualified faculty in various subjects resulting in a concentration of subject specialists in various departments. However, in our universities subject specialists/expert faculty and their expertise is mostly confined within the departmental barriers and the beneficiaries of their knowledge/expertise are only students admitted in those departments. Students of other departments have no access to these highly educated and trained individuals.

4.2: Foreign universities have already changed the paradigm and broken these barriers. It is time our universities should consider changing existing structures so that a multidisciplinary approach to teaching can be utilized.

4.3: Faculty, Board of Studies, Deans of faculties, Registrar office, Examination Branch, and many more have to be made to accept changes. Many rules and regulations and other related factors have to be changed and adjusted. Quite a formidable task, but it should not be forgotten that we did change from well-established annual system to the semester system previously. However, if we accept that subject specialty concentration at one department should be utilized by all students; a workable solution can be found. However, lots of details need to be worked out first.

I was happy to read a reporting in Dawn dated 1-6-2015 about a function arranged at the end of the five-day training workshop for non-teaching staff of public universities the at GCU. The workshop was organized by the HEC under its Modern University Governance Program. I would like to quote the chief guest Professor Dr. Khaleequr Rahman, Vice Chancellor GCU "*education and research had become complex and multidisciplinary and it is not possible anymore for a single department to possess all the knowledge, equipment and techniques required for a modern post-graduate program. So it was important to have strong communication and sharing of resources and expertise among the departments of a university*". It is nice to know that the educationists are talking about multiple-disciplinary approaches for higher education.

5. Continuing Professional Education of Alumni:

5.1: Students who graduate from the Dept. are just like our children. At this memorable moment in the history of this Department, I think it will be fitting to compile a comprehensive directory of our alumni along with the history of the Department. If the old records are no more available at least a preliminary listing of alumni from 1947, or since records are accessible should be issued.

5.2: Previously certain universities used to send annually a printed resource list of important research and contribution made during a year to all alumni. This served the purpose of keeping the alumni informed and up-to-date. These days' almost universal availability and access of internet has made the communication between individuals and groups very easy. It requires only a list of alumni with their email addresses and creation of a special email account to serve all addresses.

5.3: These avenues of communication should be utilized to keep the alumni informed about any changes, developments, and departmental news. It can also be used for discussion forums for issues of interest to alumni, online workshops, presentations, training, and job listings or for any other issue of concern. The social media can also be used to bring professionals together.

6. Staff Training and Marketing Library Services:

6.1: Staff training is rightfully considered responsibility of individual libraries. However, there is no harm in introducing the students to the things that they will have deal with in their professional career. Some of the training which might be considered for conceptual introduction among related courses is suggested below:

- Institutional rules and regulations: Students must be informed in general terms how they can get and from where they could access various rules and regulations of the institution which they might need in daily routines.
- Library Staff Manuals: Each library is established to last forever and keeps on changing to adjust with the changes taking place in its environment. Each department of the library performs its functions according to certain policies and any change in policy will effect function of the dept. Library staff comes and goes, but the way work is performed by staff continues.

For the sake of maintaining consistency in work performances as well as to follow certain local policies which were developed to provide for certain local needs; the staff manual becomes the most important guide and training tool for new staff recruited. The students need to be introduced to the concept and functions of various departmental staff manuals used for performance of various functions, its writing and making changes to them time to time.

- Customer Services: I have seen some web pages of different types of Pakistani libraries. I must say they do not create a nice impression of usability and appear to me as not very well designed. Catalog search option is only provided, mostly limited to basic simple search. Very few web pages provide for advanced search option with logic. At the most few libraries do contain a link for 'Ask a Librarian'.

I may be wrong in my judgment, but it appears as if most of these web pages have been designed by web designers in computer depts. with minimum input from the concerned librarians. That leads me to say that our students need to be introduced to the many approaches being used to market library services to the users. (this will probably a long way towards changing the impression of an angry librarian sitting in the library and looking at every new entrant as if he/she is a thief to steal books.)

A brief introduction to marketing and service marketing should be considered. The fact that LIS professionals are becoming information managers, should encourage us to include basic business management and marketing principles in our coursework as well. Our discipline is user focused and we are, in a manner, in the service industry. Our professionals need to know how to cater to the needs of the users in the best possible manner and how to market their services to the users effectively and efficiently. We want people to come in and use our libraries and to keep coming back.

7. Professional Associations of Librarians:

7.1: It is source of great pleasure to find that many professional associations and groups are active on the social media and many have a web page on the Internet. However, Pakistan Library Association, the main body of our profession, along with its provincial chapters, though conducting many relevant workshops and seminars, seem to completely own its role in developing structure of education for librarians in Pakistan.

7.2: My dream & wishful thinking has always been that the PLA must have a permanent secretariat in a city easily accessible from all parts of Pakistan, perhaps in Islamabad

7.3: National Library of Pakistan should be taking a more active role in issues related to our profession, its education and welfare of professional, perhaps it may be prevailed upon to provide permanent secretariat to PLA.