Employability of Library and Information Professionals: Issues for Post-graduate Departments of Library and Information Science

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ABSTRACT

Opportunities for LIS professionals influenced by digital environment demands new job titles, new roles and skills from them The issue of employability of these professionals is addressed from the view point of departments of LIS. The role of the PG departments in preparing the students as employable professionals is also examined. Observes that the PG departments have to design programs to enhance the employability of these professionals, in the light of brightening the image of the profession, and the present LIS education offered. Issues like curriculum, job market, employers' expectations, infrastructure, input characteristics, choice based credit system, faculty, collaboration, learning outcomes, career and counseling guidance cells have been examined to enhance the employability of LIS professionals. Concludes that though everything is not in the hands of the departments, they can really influence the student community to learn skills and techniques required to survive in the present context with requisite knowledge and that the departments must take lead in inculcating professionalism among student community.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The field Library and Information Science (LIS) is multi-disciplinary in nature as a result of which tremendous changes can be traced in the discipline (Weech, 2005). This has brought radical changes in the outlook of the profession.There are many opportunities for Library and Information (L&I) professionals in traditional and non-traditional jobs which have been influenced by digital environment. This environment demands new job titles, new roles and skills from the profession to provide various library and information services.As a profession the discipline offers a wide range of employment opportunities in different types of settings, be it–public, academic, or special; government or non-government; traditional, hybrid, or digital; small, medium, or large; corporate, non-corporate etc.

The very nature of employment in libraries is also changing as the job market is a fast-changing environment.All those disciplines that have relations with LIS have influenced the employers to expect more from the professionals demanding more knowledge, varied skills and techniques that fits present day library's requirements. In the mean time it is most appalling to know that arguments or debates are floated often on various forums including social media that the image of the profession has gone down and the present L&I professionals lack minimum standards to function in a modern library. This also emphasizes the point that there is an urgent need for creation of new generation of employable professionals. An attempt is made in this paper to address this issue from the view point of departments of LIS. The role of the Post-Graduate (PG)departments in preparing students to work as library and information professionals is also examined in this paper.

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2. WHAT IS EMPLOYABILITY?

From the days of pre-scientific management period to the present day, the term 'employability' has seen a total change in its definition. It refers to capability of getting and keeping satisfactory work, getting work from somebody for pay or state of being employed. It can be defined as "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy"(Knight and Yorke, 2004).Employability means "a group of essential abilities that involve the development of a knowledge base, expertise level and mindset that is increasingly necessary for success in the modern workplace. Employability skills are typically considered essential qualifications for many job positions and hence have become necessary for an individual's employment success at just about any level within a business environment" (Business Dictionary, 2015). From these definitions it is imperative that employment aspirants have to meet the employers' expectations to get an opportunity to work in a particular environment. In addition to this, knowledge, techniques, skills, abilities, values, aspirations, wants, needs, dreams and personal style of a candidate seeking employment also enhance the candidate's employability. As such employability is affected by all those factors of 'demand-supply theory' including those that can be controlled by an individual himself/herself.This also applies to the Library and Information profession and L&I professionals as such LIS educators and more particularly the PG departments have to design programs to enhance the employability of these professionals. But there are many issues that need to be addressed.

3. IMAGE OF THE PROFESSION

The L&I profession is undergoing a major transformation due to technology induced changes and there is a feeling that technology push (de Bruyn, 2007) controls the profession instead of the profession deciding on the relevance and adequacy of technology within the domain. The result is cross section of the professionals firmly believed that LIS has no place without IT and hence it is also being believed that only IT skills and competencies can provide employability to LIS professionals.This is a very serious problem. It is true that the influencing discipline – IT has virtually shadowed the characteristics of LIS, but if the same trend continues the discipline may lose its identity.

Library and information work is not considered as a core activity among the career seekers (Tadasad and Deepthi, 2007). The same observation is also made to the effect that the LIS profession shares the glamour and respect, but relatively less as compared to other professions and librarians did not consider it as a mainstream job (Daiwatabai and Gavisiddappa, 2014). In fact it is considered as one of the worst courses that a student could invest on (Smith, 2011). But Szkolar feels that a Master's degree in LIS is an investment, but one cannot guarantee a certain salary or position upon graduation (Szkolar, 2012).Why would anyone go to pursue such education as it does not help in making an attractive career? The result is mediocre, students enter to the profession. Unless efforts are made to make it an attractive career the situation will continue to go down the line.

4. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION

The PG departments of LIS in India are striving continuously since 1910 to find solutions to the dual challenges of meeting the needs of a growing student body and training students for a profession that is rapidly changing from librarianship to cybrarianship. However the basic objective of LIS education remains unchanged - to equip LIS students for various library activities and provide trained manpower to manage different types of libraries. The departments of LIS, in keeping pace with the developments have brought several changes in LIS education including curriculum, methods of instruction, use of IT in teaching – learning, etc to equip their students with relevant skills and competencies so that they can be absorbed in the job market.

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4.1 Curriculum

A large majority of the PG departments offer core LIS courses, but variations occur at institutional, regional and national level in terms of the scope and depth of the core courses.The curriculum has to ensure that students are learning the knowledge and skills necessary to work in our rapidly changing field (Chow, 2011). The PG departments should focus on getting the employer's sentiments on skills required for library professionals (Mahamod, 2012).The LIS departments must ensure appropriate alignment between expectations and its curriculum.It is an already established fact that ICT skills have been identified as important educational qualities of LIS graduate students. But the biggest question is how much IT expertise is required for LIS education that enhances employability?

The Library schools are teaching a large number of IT components but there are many aspects that are missing from the curriculum in the existing IT curriculum of the LIS schools in India (Vandana Singh, 2013). It is suggested that digital library related curriculum to support the ICT extended information services, such as online references, online library instruction, and information literacy education have to be included in the curriculum (Mei-Mei, 2010).

The LIS departments have to design such a curriculum that can help in imparting the relevant skills and expertise to aspirant LIS professionals to become competent enough to serve in a digital culture. The marketability of ICT skills has to be studied in depth and also exact skills required and priority each skill gets in the market needs to be analyzed, to fine-tune the curriculum. There is no dispute with regard to incorporating ICT in LIS syllabus and most of the departments have done that already. IT skills have to be juxtaposed with the expectations of the employers as well as the graduates of these programs (Singh and Mehra, 2013). It is beyond any PG department's purview to include each and every technological advance required by every single library. Of course the quantity and quality of practical orientation provided by them, varies from one to another.

The curriculum developed and modified over the years is in tune with the modern and contemporary developments in the field. In fact "… among the developing nations, India has the best suited curriculum with orientation to technology applications" (Asundi and Karisiddappa, 2007). In spite of this, the employability of LIS professionals is in question from time and again. They need to be equipped in this context with necessary skills and competency to satisfy the high level, complex and ever growing needs of employers (Karisiddappa, 2004). The PG departments have to take necessary steps and design programs to enhance students' employability and encourage their career planning and management by focusing on the qualities required by LIS students for employability in ever changing library and information sector. There is a need for teaching personality development, social and communication skills as part of LIS education (Ameen, 2013).

4.2 Job Market

In our country, Library and Information professionals are recruited in public enterprises, R&D organizations, industrial establishments, academic institutions, corporate sector including software industries. Today one may find opportunities mainly in the private sector compared to the public sector. Academic libraries, particularly the college and school libraries are still the major employers. Next important players being corporate sector including software industries. During the last twenty years the universities have given jobs (teaching or libraries) for a very few. The same holds well with CSIR, ICSSR, DRDO and other state/central govt. institutions/ organisations. These institutions together have a capacity to recruit a very small percentage of the professionals who are passed out from Indian universities. There are many opportunities and benefits in the job market for those having Master's degree in LIS for traditional as well as non-traditional jobs. An in depth analysis of the actual employment capacity of the profession and true workforce requirements, mobility of professionals and market pressure are to be calculated. Annual follow-up surveys might be useful to establish trend lines so that the intake for the program can be fixed (Jeevan, 2003; Sinha and Pandey, 2014).

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The PG departments have to take initiations to help their student community in their career planning and development as they are still fresh graduates and are unaware of the job market.The alumni association can provide support to the department in various activities relating to enhancing students employability skills. This association can provide a platform to discuss various issues of the profession including job market, employers' expectations, facing interviews, etc. The members of these alumni association can help the learners how to 'show-case' their work/product to receive appreciations from the employers. LIS professionals are good at providing quality library and information services and at the same time they should teach these skills to the fellow professionals, the departments have to get feedback from the alumnus few years after their exit from the department on LIS curricula and its relevance to market needs. Their feedback can be considered for incorporation in the curriculum (Warraich, 2008).

5. WHAT EMPLOYERS EXPECT?

It is said in every forum by every one that L&I professionals need to have various skills, competencies necessitated by technological advances and changing role of the profession itself. They have to manage information resources of varied nature, involving managerial aspects. Besides they are required to perform several information based retrieval and dissemination activities, which range from traditional to most advanced ones viz., reference, referral, online information searching, Internet browsing, digital libraries, etc. It is also said that employers expect library and information professionals to be competent enough accepting challenges and capable of adapting themselves to changes. They want graduates or post-graduates (PGs) who can ably show professionalism. An analysis regarding the employers' expectations of L&I professionals reflected through job descriptions, found that the employers do not have any such specific requirements except that they should have some kind of computer knowledge. A large majority of job descriptions did not carry at least minimum information (Deepthi and Tadasad, 2010). There is less clarity regarding the skills which are required if one is to function effectively as an information professional (Brine and Feather, 2002).

The recruitment process both in Government or public sector gives much emphasis on the minimum eligibility criteria rather than on employability. It is not known what employers seek when recruiting library and information professionals - whether professional skills, generic skills or personal qualities, because there are no set parameters to check and evaluate whether the candidate satisfies employability criteria. It is only the eligibility criteria that get more weightage. At the same time it is very difficult and challenging to identify the employability aspects through few minutes interview of short listed candidates.Lack of proper recruitment system is a major cause of worry to find out what exactly they expect from the LIS professionals.

Hence, responsibilities of LIS departments and teachers are increasing to produce LIS professionals without knowing whom to produce to lead the twenty-first century librarianship. The major responsibility of the LIS departments will be to groom LIS students in the philosophy, knowledge, and professional values of librarianship, as practiced in libraries and in other contexts, and as guided by the vision of the 21st century librarianship (Ramesha and Babu, 2007).

The LIS curriculum requires audit (Varalakshmi, 2006) for its relevance to enhance job marketability in the present context. The revised curriculum can focus on developing a workforce suitable to the demands of the contemporary LIS environment. LIS education programs must provide their graduates with the level of competence commensurate with the demands of entry-level positions in the field. But an analysis (Bharat kumar, 2010) of 58 advertisements appeared in *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times* shows that there is a gap in professional competencies expected versus taught. The LIS programs must ensure inculcation of the core competencies expected of LIS post-graduates rather than the skills which they can learn during their job assignments (Nwakanma, 2011). But they must acquire core key skills to enable them to deal with the information needs of their clients (Brine and Feather, 2002).

5.1 Infrastructure

A statement made fifteen years back with regard to availability of infrastructure, "Widened access to higher education is not supported properly by means of infrastructure and curricular support services" (Neelameghan, 1999) is true even today and his prediction that many of the infrastructure problems might be solved within a decade have also remained unanswered as many PG departments in the country still lack basic facilities and infrastructure.There are many departments as well that even lack basic facilities such as classification schedules and catalog codes.This has resulted in many students with very little or no practicum coming out from such departments every year. As true professionals the teaching fraternity should demand for better infrastructure and human resources in the departments and convince the authorities to build infrastructure in a phased manner. LIS departments are enthusiastic to meet the IT standard but there are many hurdles (Thapa and Sahoo, 2009).A total of 23 universities are running e-learning programs in LIS at Master's degree level, certificate level and bachelor's degree level. Most of the universities run short-term e-learning courses for LIS education without proper infrastructure (Lihitkar, 2013).

A good IT lab with latest hardware and software is still a dream for many of the Departments. Few of them have collaboration with IT / Computer Science departments or making use of central computer facilities. It is the responsibility of the departments to mobilize the resources and create the necessary infrastructure and resources in a phased manner. It is equally important to convince the institutional heads on the infrastructure needs and developing them over a period of time either by utilising various schemes of UGC and other project sponsoring agencies or by generating financial resources through self supporting scheme.

5.2 Input Characteristics

Higher education sector is being widened to include all those who have been excluded over the years. As a result many first generation rural, socio-economically weaker sections are entering the university system of education with unique problems.One such problem is their medium of instruction. At under-graduate level, they have studied in regional languages. But the medium of instruction at PG level for LIS education is English. They draw blank as they cannot communicate well in English. There are examples where in students are allowed to take examinations in regional languages and in some cases the medium of instruction itself is regional language. This adds to the causes of worry. Imparting of LIS education in regional languages impedes the very philosophy of LIS education (Tadasad, 2000) and English should be recognized as the "link language to cope with the global acceleration of LIS subject and to maintain equilibrium to the environment of the system approach to LIS education" (Jana, 2006). Another problem is that the LIS programs lay emphasis on ICT but these students not having been exposed to ICT skills face difficulty in handling ICT tools.

5.3 Choice Based Credit System

Owing to academic reforms initiations of UGC a large number of universities have shifted the delivery of their PG programs from annual to semester to the now Choice Based Credit Scheme (CBCS). The CBCS includes hard core, soft core and open elective components. A hard core course is a course that is fundamental and compulsory which shall not be replaced by studying any other course(s) and a soft core course is a course chosen from the pool of courses in the main discipline / related discipline supporting the main discipline. An open elective is a course chosen from the courses offered for the purpose, by any department of studies other than the parent department with an intention to seek exposure to students of other discipline(s). The PG departments can revise their curriculum by identifying the hard core components that are very much essential for the MLISc program. At the same time, the curriculum can have a pool of all soft courses that may help the students to choose their soft core courses from the pool.

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The PG departments can think of introducing employability skills as a soft core course.Dell-Price and Cotton (2008) have suggested for introducing personal development and employability module in the course curriculum "to aid students in identifying personal skills, abilities and interests". Course module should include developing their skills, knowledge and confidence in both formal and informal ways and situations, such as introducing oneself in an interview, meetings, training sessions, presenting their work in meetings. Individual and small group consultations to students, instructional sessions to specific classes and workshops for specialized avenues may be regularly organized by the departments. These will help in making strong group of people who can support in the implementation of new tools and technology. Another activity that needs to be promoted among the student community is developing skills of elevator speeches (Cox and Marris, 2011), which will really help the community to prepare themselves for precise and situation specific communication.

Under CBCS in addition to the Master's degree program, a candidate can opt for Certificate/ Diploma /Advanced Diploma add-on courses in their respective subject or proficiency certificates in other disciplines provided he / she earns the extra credits. All basics and too advanced concepts can be taught as certificate courses while the minimum required components can be fir into the Master's program. A number of certification/Diploma/ PG Diploma programs can be offered to provide an additional range of flexible learning opportunities. Additionally by providing opportunities for the dual degree master's programs for specialized advanced concepts problems related to enhancement of employability can be solved.

6. FACULTY

The teachers are the real implementers of the program in its right perspective. Scientifically designed program objectives, course contents, teaching learning strategies, educational materials and evaluation procedures will be of no use if these are not delivered properly and effectively. It is the teachers' willingness to work that will make or mar the program. Individual teachers are responsible for keeping their knowledge and skill sets contemporary. They should guide the students to the writings of great LIS professionals, compulsory reading lists, which could include magazines, journals, literary works, scholarly LIS articles, useful website and e-resources. Their primary aim should be over all development of the student. They should not think only of curriculum but every aspect that needed to be given attention (Satyanarayana, 1992). They should not teach merely the established techniques and practices. It is their responsibility to prepare the student to meet new situations (UGC Library Committee, 1957).The teachers have to identify the elements of competencies from various units of competencies that constitute various LIS activities required by different categories of LIS professionals and plan their program to inculcate those competencies among the students (Ghosh and Chakraborty, 2006).

The present method of teaching is overwhelmingly lecture oriented and as such does not help two way communications. There are other tools available through which the teaching can be made more effective. The nature of the discipline recommends combination of different strategies. These include class room lectures, seminars and discussions, assignments, projects, tutorials, visits to libraries, study tours, Internship, hands on assignments, practicum, workshops, colloquia, on site demonstration, web enabled learning etc. A teacher has to effectively make use of these tools.

The age- old practice of written examination of three hours at the end of term is not a best practice to test the performance of a student and thereby not an effective indicator to test the performance of the student. There shall be a continuous evaluation of a student throughout the academic year by combining various evaluation tools to assess the performance of a student through assignments, class room discussions, seminars, projects, observation, study tours, Internship, hands on assignments, practicum, monthly tests and term end examinations with open valuation system.

7. COLLABORATION

The PG departments in isolation cannot do anything without partnerships. The departments have to identify the gaps in the availability of employability skills-related teaching materials and create new materials (Stephens, 2005) in consultation with all stake holders. They can collaborate with practicing librarians and libraries in response to employability skills gaps identified by the library and information sector. PG teachers and working librarians have to bring together to create case study material or teaching materials to enhance existing teaching materials in the areas of employability skills. These partnerships can be done either through collaboration or through alliances with major reputed libraries that do possess such infrastructure. Such collaborations or alliances require mentoring. The mentees gain knowledge related to the work life of academic librarians, job seeking, and workplace expectations in such mentorship programs (Lacy, 2013). This emphasizes the necessity of internships and mentoring within the LIS curriculum and practitioner-based learning (Richardson, 2010). Internships in the library and information field have positive impact on the employability as interns will gain first- hand experience working in different sections of libraries (Ball, 1983).

8. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Whom are we expecting? (Applegate, 2012) As Applegate had put it, it is very much essential to define student learning outcomes. But, it is doubtful that all PG departments have defined student learning outcomes. It is necessary that the learning outcomes approach (Lasic-Lazic, 2011) along with the necessity for specific outcomes and competences should be determined by the teachers on a conceptual as well as an implemental level. Competences that LIS students are expected to attain (defined by the criterion of employability) have to be determined in a way which should facilitate their employment and enable them to compete in the job market. In the absence of this, it is very difficult to expect much from them. It is a dire necessity that the PG departments should frame their student learning outcomes and provide in detail the core course requirements of the various programs. Necessary graduate skills of the programs have to be specifically defined as an answer to the current higher education drive for graduate employability (Towlson and Rush, 2013).

What is essentially required from the student community is cent- percent commitment on their part (Satyanarayana, 1992). They must imbibe the qualities of sincerity, hard work and devotion. They have to inculcate the habit of good reading and passion for learning. They must read the writings of great LIS professionals, including magazines, journals, literary works, and scholarly LIS articles.It is also essential to improve the communication skills and develop good vocabulary. The students have to keep themselves abreast of developments in the field. They must respond to the market expectations very well. Life- long learning is required to keep oneself up to date. Hence, it is the responsibility of every student to take steps to improve their own lacunae in terms of soft skills, communication skills. Only good academic record cannot ensure making of a good professional. Proper aptitude (Ranganathan, 1957) is very much essential and it is solely the responsibility of the student to develop that aptitude. They also have to develop self-confidence, and the skill to think precisely and express precisely, properly and scientifically. Students must understand the fact that employers expect good oral and written communication skills.

9. CAREER AND COUNSELING GUIDANCE CELLS

There are three types of information needs for career seekers.These are career choice or career change information, job-hunting skills, and career development skills (Gehlen, 1986). A university wide comprehensive employability program needs to be organized by the Career Guidance and Counseling Cells or placement cells that have been established in the University.The Cell can aid in the career planning and career development by including information literacy aspects in employability training. It is highly important that the career seekers must remain well informed about current issues concerning

libraries (Appleby, 2006). The Cell can provide information on what types of traditional and non-traditional jobs are available for library and information science professionals and how can LIS students take advantage of theses job opportunities.It can also identify the perceived skills gaps in the library and information sector and work to bridge these gaps. The cell can guide LIS job seekers to craft their bio-data, resume or *Curriculum Vitae* to address the competencies requested by potential employers.

10. CONCLUSIONS

It is true that all is not well. There are various factors responsible for the present state of affairs. It requires commitment, dedication, concern, sincerity, interest and a proper aptitude from all the concerned and everyone has a role in improvising the present condition. LIS education has to cater to the needs of librarianship. It is in the libraries that the changes will be visible in the beginning that paves way for LIS professionals to inculcate among themselves these changes for their survival. Over a period of time departments of LIS will think of incorporating these into curricula. Hence it appears that there exists a gap. It's not a gap rather it has to be viewed as a natural phenomena and has to be redressed as early as possible so that the job market will accept the output of the departments. If the gap is not bridged it will have several implications on the very existence of the PG departments. Hence PG departments have to take lead role in making their students better employable.

Though everything is not in the hands of the departments, they can really influence the student community to learn skills and techniques required to survive in the present context with requisite knowledge. Though a multitude of skills and qualities are required for the profession, generic skills and personal skills give an added value. Ultimately it is the knowledge domain of any individual that enhances the employability.It is true just by adding communication skills and other soft skills one cannot make a student more employable but certainly true professionalism among the students will help them in their way towards success. The departments must take lead in inculcating professionalism among student community and not merely as syllabus completion robots. The department can provide a platform for the students to improve their knowledge, skills and techniques. It is up to the students to use the opportunity and come up to the expectations.

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