

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE PROFESSION AND CURRICULA: THE EMPLOYERS VIEW POINT

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INTRODUCTION:

Brian Vickery (1987) has opined that Information Science as an academic discipline is normally constrained by pure scientific understanding of the processes of information transfer. However, when we consider the human, socio-economic activities and the application of information technology it becomes increasingly clear that information service can establish a social foundation for future development of a world viewpoint. In teaching any discipline, it is necessary to design a curriculum. Curriculum is the planned contents of a programme of study. It encompasses all teaching and learning activities in a prescribed course of study. Indeed curriculum is what is taught and how it is taught. Generally, the instructional programme implies curriculum and its implementation processes, procedure and services. Curriculum development therefore is the improvement of the instructional activities planned and provided by the school system. In essence curriculum development adds value to the original course structure in order to attain the predetermine educational objectives.

In Library and Information Science, (Vickery 1987 pp.8) gives curriculum a character by relating to the philosophical axiom propounded by the renowned Indian Library philosopher R. S.

Ranganathan's fourth law of Library Services. He states, among other things, that "Libraries are growing organism." Prophetic as this law portends, the field of library and information science (LIS) has witnessed an exponential changing image and development since the time of Ranganathan. (Vickery 1987 pp.10) explains further that Ranganathan's axiom was a healthy reminder that the field of LIS attempts to design, develop and operate information systems. These systems take on lives of their own, changing continually under the influence of the external environment and their own internal dynamism. The system *per se* is a multiplicity of human activities influenced by the aspirations, anxieties, skills, knowledge and ignorance of participants and indeed pressures of social forces acting on them.

From these discourses, we can deduce that LIS is a live subject field which is dynamic and must respond to modern trends. Today's advances in information technology answers the prophesies of Ranganathan and Vickery, a Professor Emeritus of University College, London who has made tremendous impact in the field of LIS. The information society from which libraries take their pride with proactive status is the phenomenon of the next millennium. For these reasons Library educators and practitioners alike, are rightly responding to

the tick of the clock in the arena in which there is a conglomeration of the personal computer or the laptop, Internet and all the paraphernalia that constitute information technology in LIS application.

In this paper an attempt would be made to discuss curriculum development in LIS as a discipline in the University programmes, from the managerial and employer's perspective as consumers of the University's products. In this regard a historical and developmental approach would be adopted in the analysis within the context of experiences in developing countries in general, but specifically in Ghana and Nigeria. The analysis, hopefully would generate views which would help to address problems identified.

Literature review on the topic has shown tremendous growth in LIS with researches and reports presented by Alemna, Clow, Harvard-Williams, Effah, Aina, Enyia and Chaudry. Chaudry (1988) has consistently researched into curriculum development in LIS and covered a wide range of LIS programmes internationally and could be rightly accredited with the global coverage of the topic. Alemna (1991, 1992, 1994, 1998); Harvard-Williams (1977) and Clow (1988) have covered Ghana but Alemna has thrown more light in many respects on the persistent issues that characterise curriculum development in Ghana. In Nigeria, Aina (1988, 1991) has done serious research on African library services with experiences from the sub-region and especially Botswana, Ghana and Nigeria;

and Anglophone East Africa. All these attempts have been from the standpoint of Library Educators and not practitioners, which this paper seeks to address.

BRIEF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In Ghana, the defunct Ghana Library School under the auspices of the Ghana Library Board existed from 1961 to 1969. In October 1965, the Department of Library Studies was established at the University of Ghana, Legon to cater for the education and training of Librarians in the country.

It first offered a three year undergraduate degree programme for ten graduates and phased out. The programme was changed to a two year post-Graduate Diploma under the leadership of Professor John Harris of Ibadan University fame in 1967. The post-graduate programme was again streamlined and the duration was reduced to one calendar year in 1969. In 1970 a Certificate course was established to cater for the training of Library Assistants in the country; and an MA programme was also formally approved by the University in 1971.

It is interesting to note that all the programmes being offered in Ghana was a reflection of those offered at Ibadan University as a result of Prof. John Harris' influence and in the case of Post-graduate and Masters programmes were those of the University College London, apparently because of the historical linkage with the University of London.

Currently the Certificate course has been upgraded to Non-graduate Diploma for middle-level personnel in the Library systems in the country and the Post-Graduate Diploma also upgraded to a taught Masters Course in 1997/98 academic year. An MPHIL programme had been established for the past decade in response to the levels of other academic departments in the University. It is also learnt from the grapevine that an integrated under-graduate programme for LIS and Archival studies is on the drawing board to meet the growing needs of the profession.

The thrust of the graduate programmes responded to the needs of the libraries and information centres in the 1970's when information science element did not treat information technology in depth as seen in the 1980s. Indeed the import of the programmes was to provide theoretical framework for graduates to enable them adapt to the work situations. The entry requirements for that reason demanded working experience certified by sponsoring libraries. In effect the graduates had adequate routine and practical experience before proceeding to the Library School to acquire the theoretical framework within the field of Librarianship.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE CURRICULA

The main features of the curricula for LIS is as follows:

1. Information in society
2. Management of library and information services

3. Cataloguing and classification
4. Information science
5. Reference and Bibliography
6. Anchor course - computer literacy
7. Elective - Research Projects, Long Essays and Dissertations

Apart from the main features of the curricula detailed above, there are inter-disciplinary areas such as Conservation and Preservation of library materials which are taught in combined classes of Archival and LIS Students. There is also practical field attachment to designated libraries to enrich the professional base of students. It has been observed that, this element of the curricula has built confidence in the LIS students. It also enables them to observe different systems of library operations and opportunity to relate their lectures in library management to the real situation. At the apex of the curricula is the anchor course, like Computer Appreciation or Computer Literacy that is compulsory for all students but do not attract examinations. The research projects and dissertations are designed to expose students to research methodology and also allow in-depth specialisation in an area of interest in the field of LIS

MAJOR AREAS OF DISCUSSION

The focus of this paper is to discuss the LIS curricula to enable us evaluate if they meet the demands and standards of employers. In this regard, the discussion will be centred on manpower planning needs, level of general educa-

tion of LIS students, selection of students, teaching methods in the Library school, and expectations of employers.

MANPOWER PLANNING

The reports on LIS education in Ghana by Harvard Williams (1977) and David Clow (1988) have both reiterated that manpower planning for librarians does not exist in Ghana. Harvard Williams, however, made some projections to meet the socio-economic trends in Ghana. He particularly looked at the structure of the Ghana Library Board and its countrywide functions, Government departments, schools and colleges, the Universities and special libraries in arriving at these projections. He recommended in 1977 that for the next decade, Ghana would need 330 professional and 800 para-professional librarians to serve the growing socio-economic needs of the country. These needs were based on the fact that Ghana is relatively an Agro-based country whose GDP is still over half produced in Agriculture. He indeed lamented over the lack of specialist librarians or Information Scientist in the Agricultural Sector. The paradox of these projections is that after two decades, the Department of Library Studies has not even produced 40% of those projections. Also the travesty of these projections is that some of the personnel trained by the University have not been fully absorbed into the Library and information systems in the country. Alemna's (1993) survey on professional educational careers from 1988 to 1990 also confirms the country's inability to employ graduates of the library school.

The underlying factors can be adduced are as follows: Lack of national information policy on libraries and information centres; low growth in the industrial and technological sectors of the economy, lack of managerial appreciation of libraries and information centres and above all, when the need arises, there is always the tendency to ignore professional information specialists and substitute them with non-professionals until the need becomes critical. Alemna's¹ view that the profession is gradually becoming "saturated" is very alarming and challenging and the Ghana Library Association will have to investigate this further in order to allay the fears of the future entrants to the profession.

THE LEVEL OF GENERAL EDUCATION

The level of general education among Library and Information professionals is very crucial for prospective para-professional or professionals. It is generally accepted that a pass at the General Certificate of Education including English and Mathematics is desirable but most students at this level these days are not articulate in the use of the English language for lack of basic reading habits which should have taken place during their formative school years. This is further aggravated by the practice of *pidgin* English spoken in schools. A diplomate may be a potentially good material and technically competent but sheer poor expression to library users is an eyesore and irritating to observers. Perhaps the solution to these is to admit students who have solid lan-

guage base at the GCE 'O' Level or have Advanced level subjects as basic requirement. The practice of nurturing library attendants with weak 'O' levels in English is doing a disservice to our para-professional cadres from the University.

The same phenomenon is applicable to the professionals although it is overcome by long years of education and continuing courses in LIS programmes at the University. Generally the field of LIS professionals is complex and demands high level intellectual capacity. In Africa today, the majority of schools are responding to various responsibilities of the information professionals. The need for high level trainers, researchers and managers in the field is becoming a necessity. Academic programmes leading to the Masters and Doctorate Degrees have been recognised in countries like Nigeria, Morocco, Egypt and in Ghana where the first Doctorate programme has just began.

SELECTION INTO THE LIS PROFESSION

Selection of students at the professional level is also very important for the future career development of the individual. The main problem in selection of prospective professionals is associated with candidates who come to the profession late after dabbling in other professions. These category of entrants have serious career progression problems. Some University graduates spend long youthful years teaching or doing some other jobs before enrolling at the

Library School. Apparently they enter the profession already fatigued and frustrated at advanced ages of between 35 to 40 when they should have been at the peak of their professional careers. Employers find it difficult in selecting such applicants especially when they seem to be as old as the head of their prospective departments. Today's management practices in human resource development look for new-recruits from age 24 to 32. Age 32 is normally the upper limit for new entrants although some applicants with special qualifications may be considered. In the case of LIS, applicants with pure and applied sciences may be considered as applicants with special abilities because of their low representation in the profession.

There is also a peculiar problem of difficulty in the progression of para-professionals to professional status. These category of professionals are worn out or stultified by long duration of practising and attending repetitive University programmes to the extent that by the time they qualify as professionals, diminishing returns may have set into them and reduce their innovative and intellectual capacity to progress further in the profession.

Another problem associated with the selection of professionals is the perceived performance of newly recruited professionals. Essentially, professionals must come into the practice with strong academic background in disciplines they read at the undergraduate level. Oftentimes, those who possess good degrees do perform very well and rise

above the status often described as "technicians" because of narrow professional outlook. On the other hand, those with average passes from the University lack the academic candour and zeal that they will have to bring to bear on the profession. Perhaps we may have to revisit Ranganathan's axiom that "Libraries are growing organism" and would need sharp brains to grow and develop. If a prospective professional is stunted in his reasoning abilities, he or she cannot respond to the growing and dynamic needs of the profession.

THE TEACHING METHOD IN LIS

The education and training that is undertaken at the departments of Library and Information Science in the Universities is very critical and crucial for the professional development. Curriculum Development as explained in the introduction, involves the instructional component which is learning centred. Observations are that the detailed curricula is very impressive but the teaching method leaves much to be desired. The introduction of the two semester system in place of the three academic terms for the year has compounded the problem of LIS students. Lecturers with good intents and purposes prepare their syllabuses, reading lists and draw assignments for the semester. The students, bewildered by sheer pressure of work, are unable to cope and grasp the concepts and theories being taught before being confronted with difficult assignments which they normally do not comprehend. Consequently by the time they go through these processes of teaching and presentation of ill-pre-

pared assignments, the examination period is due and they must necessarily write the examinations.

In effect the learning and teaching process portrays a crash programme where attempts are made to teach everything in the course structure and as a result, the course is so crowded that the topics seem to be treated in survey fashion. This observation is not meant to castigate the teaching faculty but to draw attention to ineffective teaching method caused by pressures from the semester system. Indeed the semester system seems to create a situation where instructions in these courses only touch on different aspects with superficial overview. Coupled with these are doubts as to the effectiveness of tutorial systems in the university. This critique is not expressed in Ghana alone but also elsewhere and the United States as observed by Sceracevic. (Chandry 1988)

EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYERS

The prospective employer like all human institutions is looking for a professional who is well read in the discipline of LIS and can answer to the callings of the profession. The performance must be excellent and total in comprehension. Professionals must be in a position to relate their education to the working environment without difficulty. They must exude confidence and not depend on library attendants to tutor them in simple literature searches for example. Above all, Library and Information Science professionals must portray a competitive status that can be comparable to all other seasoned

professions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ranganathan and Vickery have confirmed the dynamic nature of the field of library and information science profession. The growing tendency as organism is real and today's growth and development in Information Technology attest to this dynamism. The question to ask: are LIS professionals well educated, trained and conditioned to match the exponential developments that are taking place? Whatever the rationality or irrationality of the semester systems of the Universities, the Employer is looking for a well grounded professional who is able to transfer his theories and practices into micro systems should the need arise. For example, the LIS professional should have a deep understanding of classification so that he is able to design a micro classification scheme based on the Dewey Decimal Classification scheme theory by applying arithmetic decimalization projections without necessarily adapting or even calling it Dewey to suit very small environments.

Similarly, professionals should be able to build information systems to meet the needs of neoliterates in a typical rural setting with adaptations from ideal system analysis for sophisticated management systems. Again professionals must be proficient in library softwares, should be able to adapt simple tailor-made softwares for small office libraries without confusing users with the full test of the software.

SUGGESTIONS

From the foregoing discussions, analy-

sis and remarks, it is clear that the Library and Information Science Curriculum Development must have a second look at the following suggestions:

1. **Manpower planning:** The University Department should liaise with the Ghana Library Association to prepare a manpower plan for the profession.
2. **Education and Training:** the education of professionals should emphasize a sound theoretical base and training in Information Technology.
3. **Human Resource Development (HRD):** The University Department must pay attention to the demands of HRD for selection into the school.
4. **Professional Practice:** The University Department must liaise with practising professionals to make input into their curricula. Series of lectures by practising professionals in their area of specialisation must be encouraged.
5. The use of Audio Visual equipment must be encouraged in the University. A technician must be employed to service all teaching equipment including computers.
6. **Short Courses:** the University Department must collaborate with the Ghana Library Association to establish short continuing education programmes.

By and large when professionals have sound training with innovative abilities it would not be long for the profession to take its foremost position as agents of change in the information enterprise in the 21st century.

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