REVIEW ARTICLE

Indian Academic Libraries in the Doldrums of Digital Era

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Abstract

21st century technological breakthroughs have kept all the sectors of economy on the edge of innovative technology. Educational sector – the factory system, producing the building-blocks for constructing tomorrow's sound future of any country – is forced to be fastened and modified to keep up the pace with the rocket-speed technology. Consequently, the Power Houses of Knowledge in the Education sector, i.e. the Academic Library and Information Centres (LICs) are forced to start a forward march aiming to supply and fulfil the necessary educational demands in the ever changing digital era. The present paper discusses the nature and scope of academic libraries and the laborious work carried out in them by the Library and Information Science (LIS) Professionals. It also delves into the advantages offered by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and IT Enabled Services (ITES). This paper educates the LIS Professionals about the uses of ICT application in academic libraries and encourage them to overhaul all the LIS policies and procedures so as to revamp and rejuvenate the working of LICs to meet the increasing demands, challenges and needs of digital era on one side and to provide right information to the right information seeker at the right time.

Introduction

"In order to function and provide timely information at a faster speed to lecturers, researchers and students, it would appear that administrators of academic libraries realize the important role Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play in their job performance and so made ICTs available to their workforce" – Yacob Haliso [1].

Academic Library and Information Centres (LICs) are attached to their respective educational r academic institutions. They are mainly established to take care of residents of that particular institution such as students, faculty members, researchers, scholars, professors, management and all those related to their respective fields of study. Main aim of academic LICs is to offer up-to-date quality information to the students, academicians and intelligentsia connected to a particular educational academy. That is the reason why since the ages, the LICs are attached to educational institutions which ought to function according to certain policies and procedures.

However, the 21st century developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) have created an ever expanding *Digital Universe* flooded with information. This information explosion was triggered by addition of trillions and billions of bytes each day through various electronic devices. Despite creating various challenges for the existing systems, Thanks to the dynamic ICT that enhanced the chances and gave impetus to more in-depth and consolidated research across the globe. It further creates much more information.

Thus, in the face of this information surge, the information sources are beyond the reach of the information seeker, because of unawareness of the paths leading to that information resources. At this juncture, the academic LICs have to play a major proactive role in bridging the gap between the exploding information and the real information seeker – the student, researcher, professor or any other teaching and managerial personnel – to bring the right information to the right information seeker at the right time.

Academic Libraries: A Bird's Eye View

As the education plays a vital role in the development of any nation, the academic LICs play a crucial role and contribute directly to the furtherance of education and indirectly to the development of the nation as a whole. As a matter of fact, the academic LICs provide information related to various subjects taught and the scope of research carried out in a particular educational or research academy with which the library is attached.

The main clients of any academic library include the students, researchers, professors or any other faculty members as well as the managerial personnel. Regular duties at academic LICs include classification and cataloguing by using Dewey-Decimal Classification (DDC) or any other classification system, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) or Sears List of Subject Headings (SLSH) for indexing and processing information. Apart from this, they have to deal with the daily chores of issuing and receiving books, journals, magazines, newspapers, etc.

In addition, some LIS Professionals at academic LICs also conduct Library Orientation Programmes to make the information seeker know how to find the information sources – primary, secondary and tertiary. Sometimes, the needs of the information seekers – particularly those of the researchers – also force the LIS Professionals to offer Reference and Referral services.

Among some growth oriented professional institutions, the LIS Professionals, apart from regular duties, have to create timely periodical innovative special information products such as Current Contents, Abstracting & Indexing Services, etc., that may sometimes act as instructional materials also. All this is very laborious work and time consuming. However, the dawn of digital era has brought about sweeping changes across the floor of information management. Many an intelligentsia have noted the impact of Globalisation and ICT in academic libraries [2]. According to them, the ICT has raised high tides in the ocean of information completely transforming the information seeking behaviour across the globe.

Promising Fruits of ICT

As the *Digital Universe* is expanding at the spur-of-the-moment, the LICs – more particularly the academic LICs – also have to change the working patterns. They have to apply the ICT in order to cope up with the dynamic behaviour of information seeker.

On the other hand, the ICT also offers significant benefits to the LIS field such as work measurement, cost reduction, job performance, productivity improvement and better services to information seekers and other clientele. Information served through ICT provides work efficiency and process effectiveness while enhancing service provision to library clientele. Therefore, the LIS Professionals, importantly the Librarians, have to lead the process of transforming a traditional library into much sophisticated 21st century library by channelling the resources and services through digital means.

ICT empowers the LIS Professionals to automate and digitalise the functions such as collection management, cataloguing and classification, referencing, indexing and abstracting, serials management, circulation management and budgeting in order to improve the efficiency and promptness of services to the user community. Focussing on the benefits offered by ICT in information processing and management, Buddhi Prakash Chauhan has pressed the immediate need for launching ICT enabled LIS services in the academic libraries [3].

Commenting on the application and impact of ICT in college or academic libraries, Vijay Kumar and Jaison Thomas have enlisted the main factors necessitating the automation of

LICs. They mentioned that ICT application helps in handling large amount of data and information, quick information processing and retrieval, flexibility in information search, standardisation of LIC rules, regulations, policies and procedures, participation in network programming and resource sharing, better bibliographic control at local, regional, national and international levels, better quality performance, elimination of duplication of work, facilitation of interdisciplinary research, overcoming geographical and other barriers to communication while promoting economic implications of cutting edge technology, which further improves quality of existing services on the one hand, and reducing laborious time consuming clerical work on the other hand [4].

However, a research conducted at Calicut University, Kerala, by Mohamed K. Haneefa and C.K. Abdul Shukkoor proved that the mindset of some of the LIS Professionals sticking to the age old manual library operations and practices without learning ICT methods, attract user dissatisfaction and complaints of poor information services delivery by the academic LIS Professionals [5]. Therefore, the LIS Professionals have to take up some risk of learning new technologies.

Fine-Tuning to Face Challenges

In order to offer more efficient services to satisfy the user community in the present Digital Era, the LIS Professionals have to change their mindset to get accustomed to the ICT methods. Commenting on this, Vishala B. Mallapur and Ramesh R. Naik states, "This new reality has forced academic libraries to give serious thought to how they can best realign resources to meet the challenges of the library in the 21st century.

This means a significant cultural change requiring rethinking operational processes, as well as resource reallocation and the development of completely new services" [6]. It means that there should be ICT acceptance by individual LIS professional towards an integrative viewpoint [7]. However, even if the LIS Professionals are not readily dealing with the ICT and ITES, they can gradually change their traditional libraries into modern LICs by adopting certain simple measures step-by-step.

Overhauling Academic Libraries

In order to implement ICT in LICs, particularly, the academic libraries, the procedures are to be revamped and overhauled by a series of steps. It motivates the work culture and helps in delivering right information to the right information seeker at the right time. The LIS Professionals have to take note of the details pertaining to the size of the library and its collection, number of users, types of information products that are in demand, the services offered, methods of reporting and budgeting.

All this information helps in selecting and buying effective library software that fits to their institutional needs and setup. In addition, the LIS professionals also have to brainstorm over the competitive edge offered by the library software based on various factors such as the size of the library, budgetary constraints, installation and functioning of software, short-term and long-term benefits offered by the software, etc.

Automating the Library

Libraries can be automated through any of the library software available in the market such as Computerized Documentation System/Integrated Set of Information system (CDS/ISIS) developed by UNESCO, WINISIS – Window Version of CDS/ISIS, TULIPS, SANJAY, LIBSYS, WILISYS, MAITRAYEE, LIBRARIANS, NIRMALS, TECHLIB Plus, Library Suit, SOUL, etc.

Otherwise they can be automated simply by collaborating with University Grants Commission (UGC) through INFLIBNET, which aims at the establishing inter-university network at the national level. It facilitates library automation while promoting learning and academic pursuits through information transfer, resource sharing and cooperative development among the academic libraries and other Research and Development (R&D) libraries across the country so as to provide access to the scholars and researchers to global information.

Nurturing Technical Skills

Once the library is automated, work of LIS Professionals become easier and the user can get their information at right time. However,

it all depends upon how well-versed the LIS Professionals with the library software they adapted. Therefore, the existing LIS Professionals should undergo thorough training dealing with the software and the methods of creating databases and retrieval systems offered by the software. Without developing such technical skills the entire automation programme proves to be a futile attempt and a catastrophic disaster.

Appointment of Technically Qualified

Technically qualified and competent manpower having computer skills should be employed who can easily learn the functioning of adopted library software. In addition, the LICs management must also employ modern library techniques, devices, policies and procedures so as to offer quality deliverables and to save the time of user community and the staff.

Orientation Programmes

Library orientation programmes are to be conducted periodically without fail not only to impart knowledge to the user community, but also to learn about their basic needs and necessities. It helps the LIS Professionals to train themselves in ICT application to meet the needs of users. Workshops, Seminars and other ICT awareness programmes are to be organised at frequent intervals in order to make the staff aware of the modern trends of Digital Era.

Barring the Obstacles

It is the well-known fact that the major obstacles impacting the effective adoption of ICT in academic libraries are inadequate funds and the poor state of electricity. Fixing the problem needs a number of time-taking deliberations with the management as well as the service providers. Therefore, the LIS

Professionals should develop proper communication skills not only to remove the communication barriers for free flow of information, but also to freely discuss the matters of importance with the management such as budgetary allocations and the state of electricity without fear or fuss.

Thus, by implementing the above measures initially, the academic libraries can be automated to offer effective digital services. Further developing and inculcating the methods of ICT, the LICs can be improved and can be brought up to the ranks of national and global library networks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the LIS Professionals at academic levels can take advantage of the bourgeoning ICT and ITES. Information processing and retrieval, flexibility in information and user management, bibliographic control, network programming, quality performance, economies of scale, reduction of laborious time-consuming clerical work and provision of effective timely information services-all engulf into one single word i.e. ICT.

As a blessing descended from the heavens, the ICT helps the academic LIS Professionals to channel their intuition to deliver more proactive and creative information services to their user community. If the LIS Professionals fully get thorough with the latest cutting edge technologies and get connected with the global information systems to give impetus to R&D activities, then they can create better prospects for the institution they are working with – to develop it into a major Centre of Excellence.

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