Role of University Libraries in Higher Education in India

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ABSTRACT

The role of university libraries in India has been modelled on examples offered by developed countries' model of academic libraries as a cost-effective information service and provider of knowledge product to a resident community of scholars.

Over the last two decades, there has been a gradual erosion of traditional stakeholders' positive perceptions based on collections. Furthermore, Indian universities have tended to develop a culture of relying on donations of library materials regardless of the appropriateness of content to needs of recipients or curricula. This emerging role has obligations, which have been analysed in this paper.

University library education is dependent on availability of published materials, which support the curricula. It has been estimated by various authors that 95% of most university library acquisitions in India are purchased from abroad, through foreign currency. The poor state of national economics and fluctuation of limited access to foreign exchange in universities and their libraries have resulted in the erosion of both the acquisition budgets and the potential role of university libraries as a support of teaching and research through current reading material obtainable abroad. Thus, not only have library materials not been replenished but those that are available are also worn out. Consequently, university libraries are unable to dynamically contribute to the core business of the parent institution through provision of current thought obtained through journals and books.

Keywords: Indian University Libraries, Indian Higher Education, Changing Role

INTRODUCTION

University libraries are located on university campuses and primarily serve students and faculty of that and other academic institutions. They derive their mission from that of the parent organisation of the university. Thus, the historical development of university libraries has been influenced by the contexts in which the parent organisations operate. The vision, mission and strategies that are selected by universities as a guide for meeting the core functions of teaching learning, research and providing community service form the foundation on which the role of a university library is based.

India has a large higher education system. The growth rate of educational institutions in India was very slow before independence in 1947. Today, there are a total of 237 universities, including 116 general universities, 12 science and technology universities, 7 open universities, 33 agricultural universities, 5 women's universities, 1 language university and 11 medical universities along with 12,600 colleges that provide education in all disciplines. The number of teachers is 3.1 million, and 7.8 million students are enrolled in higher education.

Perceptions held by university's stakeholders on the role of a library as a contributor to these core functions influence the environment within which the university library crafts its own mission and role. The commonly accepted perception is that 'University education processes value self motivated discovery on part of students and faculty and assume that libraries and librarian play an important and sometimes essential role in

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education.' The issue is to what extent universities and university libraries in particular subscribe to and support these values.

The role of university libraries in India has been modelled on examples offered by developed countries' model of academic libraries as a cost-effective information service and provider of knowledge product to a resident community of scholars. The early years of university library development focused on the establishment of academic libraries that aspired to compete favourably with those of the Western world, in keeping with the aspirations of the parent organisation of proving good university education within the context (New Delhi, UGC, 1968).

The component of an academic library consists of:

Inputs: staffing, budgeting, collections and accommodation.

Process: collection development, organisation and management.

Output: reference services, usage of finding tools, catalogues, collections and document-delivery services.

Training: continuous training of users and service providers through direct contact.

Feedback: ongoing feedback from stakeholders' students, staff and the public.

The first three areas are interdependent, the foundation for all services to stakeholders, referred to here as outputs. These cannot be developed without prior implementation of activities under inputs and processes. Although ideally these three levels of activities should have been developed simultaneously in an interrelated manner, this was not possible. Qualified human resources with varied skills needed to balance these three areas were scarce. Therefore, priorities were to develop highly visible collections needed on demand such as academic support in the preparation of teaching materials for students and for use by faculty in their research projects. This activity was the all-consuming role on which the Indian university library's success was assessed by stakeholders. Hence,

demands for infrastructural development eclipsed the role of providing information services to stakeholders (ESPERANZA (M), 1991).

A university library's role in enhancing the quality of teaching and supporting research was simply understood as providing access to the world through acquisition of books and journals broadly based on requirements made by the faculty. The last two areas of continuous training of users and providing services based on needs analysis and feedback from stakeholders were eclipsed. The result has been total neglect of customers' needs. The majority of these are students who are not only overwhelmed by social transitions but also by the blistering pace of teaching and intellectual demands of university education. Without any support from library and information professionals in the exploitation of 'vast' library collections for library support, a student's confusion is exacerbated.

The necessity for survival encouraged students to adopt coping strategies, which have proved successful to senior fellow students and to resort to learning modes, which have brought success in the past learning by rote and using the library as a study room, with minimum consultation of librarians. The impact of this neglect of customer needs has been minimal development of reference services absence of user training programmes and minimum require for information not held by the local university library (University News, 2001).

Acquisition of library materials has been the most vaunted role of a university librarian because of its perceived centrality to and foundation for the role of university libraries. The ease with which quantitative growth can be assessed without consideration of the age of collections, i.e., obsolescence, has also contributed to the overvaluing of the custodian role of the university library.

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poor state of national economics and fluctuation of limited access to foreign exchange in universities and their libraries have resulted in the erosion of both the acquisition budgets and the potential role of university libraries as a support of teaching and research thought current reading material obtainable abroad. Thus, not only have library materials not been replenished but those that are available are also worn out.

Consequently, university libraries are unable to dynamically contribute to the core business of the parent institution through provision of current thought obtained through journals and books. Over the last two decades, there has been a gradual erosion of traditional stakeholders' positive perceptions based on collections. Furthermore, Indian universities have tended to develop a culture of relying on donations of library materials regardless of the appropriateness of content to needs of the recipients or curricula. This emerging role has obligations, which need to be analysed (Kumar Krishna, 1987).

1. OBLIGATION OF A UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

I. Development of Documents Collection

A university library is a *de facto* national reference library, by virtue of its collections and the financial investment made through public funds. This emerging role needs to be analysed and coasted in terms of service demands. The experience gained from the management of collection and reaction to user demands has resulted in a gradual emergence of the broadening of the role of university libraries.

However, the role of university libraries in the bibliographic control of grey materials has been neglected basically because of the difficulties in keeping track of these non-published, sometimes ephemeral products of research.

University libraries must recognise their mandate as custodians of copy right for dissertations, responsibilities acquired through legal deposit law, and through its professional leadership develop a role to collect, organise

and make accessible grey literature and papers produced by its academics, researchers and students. However, grey literature collections are yet to be collected comprehensively and indexed or abstracted in most Indian universities.

The systematic development of grey literature collections is not only a viable way of providing relevant, current material though it does not make demands on limited foreign currency, but it also contributes to the support of the core business of a university library. The major role of all locally created information, whether generated through consultancies, student research projects, academic research or government generated data such as statistics and other governmental published documents is toform the nucleus of materials for value addition in the form of abstract indexes, bibliographies and databases on electronic formats.

II. Role in Structural Service-Based Partnership:

The role of a university library in teaching, learning and education is influenced by the university's culture, value and stakeholders' perceptions of the library as an essential pedagogic tool in support of the university's enterprise. In turn, this determines the type of library services developed in support of the teaching and educational process. Currently, however, there is a general absence of teaching methods, which encourage and reward independent learning based on student critical analysis and incorporation of various sources of information to classroom notes and prescribed texts. General reliance by students on lecture's teaching notes, caused by various problems linked to poor libraries and lack of access to textbooks has tended to be the norm, and sometimes these are used by generations of students without consideration of the currency of content. The acceptance and normalisation of this subliminal devaluing of the commonly accepted university culture demands independent research, critical analysis and use of current information as a part of learning.

An essential requirement for the acceptability of production and use of notes in support of learning is

continuous updating and integration of notes with current information to subject fields. Experience has demonstrated that there are possibilities that if such notes are well produced, they might be publishable as textbooks, subject to rigorous review, as is the norm in regular academic publishing programmes (IGNOU, 1995).

2. SERVICE TO STUDENTS

In addition to the above, there are several factors that impose on the provision of basic library information services to students. These may be related to external factors such as private accommodation, distance from the university and transportation, etc. For this analysis, the focus will be on learning-related factors, such as the following:

- Schooling background, training in use and exploitation of libraries as information resources.

- Access to prescribed textbooks and their incorporation in day-to-day learning.

- Faculty expectations regarding students' contribution to their own learning, whether inside or outside the classroom or in a laboratory setting.

It is generally accepted that school libraries in developing countries are poorly developed. Where textbooks are prescribed for schools, they are not available due to various factors ranging from economic constraints to the underdeveloped distribution infrastructure. These two factors have a detrimental effect on the development of independent learning skills for students, which is an essential skill success in education, in general and for the university education process in particular (Khanna, 2000).

Due to a phenomenal increase of student numbers in Indian universities and the inability of governments to maintain subsidised university education, access or ownership of prescribed textbooks by students has become a luxury. Consequently, entrants to a university require more than basic orientation to the way information is organised, accessed and used.

According to the Fjallbrant University, libraries in developing countries provide library orientation for new users and training of students in the efficient use of collections and services. There is a need for instruction, which is linked to student course work and assignments, which will provide the basis for gradual development of expertise in systematic information search organisation and creation of knowledge. University culture needs to include teaching on the conception and value of information in learning and daily living, since it affects lecturers and students as a support to the core business of the university and as a critical contributor to the quality of the university's product and lifelong learning (Kemp, 1976).

3. UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN STUDENT EMPOWERMENTS

Our libraries are much more than just repositories of books and reference materials. They are increasingly vibrant hubs of community life. Through people's networks, libraries are also becoming access points to a nation-wide treasure house of digital content as well as creators of unique digital contents themselves.

Libraries have always been central to education and self-improvement. They also have the power to act as motors for a more dynamic and effective learning, whether for individuals or for groups. At schools, colleges or universities, a library plays a vital supportive role as a place of study. For a lifelong learner, a library can serve a similar purpose and is often the first and most important access point to the world of information and personal development.

Governments drive for better education for our youth, and its determination to make lifelong learning a possibility for all our citizens puts a heavy demand on our libraries. To meet this demand, we must ensure that we have the most efficient coordination of our library resources.

Coordination between public libraries on the one hand and school or academic libraries on the other is inadequate with rare but important exceptions. This means we are

wasting opportunities to achieve a more efficient investment in acquisition to offer better library support to children and to improve the materials and assistance available to lifelong learners.

It is important to note that overall, improving this situation is not so much an issue of increasing funding as of making better use of the funding already available. However, there will be need for sufficient flexibility to allow funding to move across traditions at boundaries. As public libraries on the one hand and educational libraries on the other hand continue to receive their funding from bodies with different priorities, there are little built-in incentives to achieve efficiencies through partnerships. This must be addressed at government and community levels.

It is believed that closer partnerships between public libraries and education would bring benefits (INFLIBNET, 1995).

- Public libraries can increase the assistance and support that they offer to schools and to the national curriculum. They can serve as extensions of school libraries and as centres for managed study, homework or group research.

- Coordinated acquisition of stock and resources could reduce duplicated purchases among libraries in the same vicinity and create a joint focus on filling gaps.

- Public and educational libraries would achieve more impact by synchronising their online networking and digital content creation.

- Closer cross-sectoral co-operation would ensure better support for lifelong learners, giving them managed access to academic libraries in a way they have not had before.

4. FUTURE OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The convergence of information communication technology (ICT) as a basis for provision of information in the educational arena and to society in general has created a need for universities to access and exploit ICT in support of their core business. The accessibility and use of networking technology such as the worldwide web (www), email and real time for video conferencing, communication tools used concurrently, allow distance learning, integration and exploration of information sources in different libraries.

Access to the Internet in India is increasing steadily. This is an indication of the degree of availability of ICT infrastructure, which is the backbone of the Internet. Universities in turn have invested in the ICT if use of electronic mails is an indication for the rate of connectivity to the Internet. The future of university libraries is closely linked to the ability of universities to harness and sustain connectivity to available ICT infrastructures as a base for providing effective and efficient access to information by students and university personnel, at the cheapest equitable rates.

IT exploitation by university libraries for information organisation and access has become prevalent in India. The automation of university library software and the advent of the Internet and other ICTs have provided a golden opportunity for provision of value-added services to the parent organisation. Indexing, abstracting and publication of locally produced research and their digitisation facilitate faster IT-based access to meet researchers' and student' learning needs. Digitisation of local materials provides a window of opportunity as an extension of the technical process, which will facilitate university library contribution to the communication of locally produced researchers globally.

Accessing information held in CD-ROM databases of universities has become common, because of the relative ease of access to and availability of personal computers. However, the problem is one of sustainability of such data, since every time a new edition is released, the CD-ROM database in hand ceases to be accessible. Thus, in spite of its convenience, the cost of purchasing CD-ROM databases should be weighed against the long-term accessibility of the hard copy databases, if recurrent financing of CD-ROM databases is not guaranteed (Khanna, 2001).

5. ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

The rapid escalation of subscription costs for hard copy journals (an essential research support facility) has caused a paradigm shift from paper-based holdings of journal titles to electronic access subscription based. Current developments in the facilitation of access have been invaded by aggregators. These are companies like OCLC, UML, H.W. Wilson, etc., who have obtained the right to abstract journal articles and avail rights to articles instead of journals titles, electronically at a price. Subscriptions are to a stable of journal titles not of individual titles. The result is that affordability of access to sets of journals in select fields is possible only through coalitions among libraries who form a consortium. Through the latter, costs and access to aggregate journal titles are shared. Collective decision-making through representative library boards is the most equitable way to ensure sound choices with broad acceptance by stakeholders. It will also facilitate broad appreciation of financial investments required by a paradigm shift in scholarly communications, as it affects the core business of the university.

Attendant to the rapid increase in the amount of information is the complexity of access and the variety of carriers accessible through a library. There is a need for the library to facilitate customer familiarity with IT as a tool for accessing information. Thus, the role of a library has been extended beyond user education to organisation and access to locally available information to training users in harnessing electronic databases accessible through virtual libraries (Brookers, 1980).

The integration of ICT in the learning environment has exposed the necessity for development of holistic skills for exploitation of information technology and the electronic environment. It is absolutely essential that the future of university libraries is to innovatively harness ICT as a tool for organisation of local information and making it accessible not only in local areas networks but also remotely.

Access to globally available information presents challenges to the role of university library information

management in support of identified research activities and need of customers. Instructionally, services offered by a library include basic computer literacy, which is a prerequisite for acquisition of information exploitation skills. Thus, user education has been extended from knowledge of organisation of materials on various media to their integration as part of the library's role in research support services epitomised by the teaching of information literacy skills (Bose, 1986).

6. TEACHING AND RESEARCH SUPPORT ROLE

Faculty researchers and post-graduate students depend on the library for awareness of development and progress in their research fields and for identification of potential areas of research. It is the library's role to establish a system for raising awareness, such as research profiles and proactive dissemination of information services, which support these research activities. The viability of such services depends on communication channels established between the LIP and faculty, researcher and graduate students about their information needs. It is the library's role to establish interactive needs assessment and evaluation mechanism from a customer's point of view. This ensures a proactive stance in the provision of relevant services (Brody, 1990).

The need for analysis of curricula to the requirements of academic support material ranging from textbooks to the current published materials or suitable Internet sites on given topics, arises out of the exponential growth of information. This is an emerging service role of university libraries based on LIPs as well as establishment of university systems, which facilitate meaningful participation in curriculum analysis and review.

Development of curricula are committee based, originate from teaching developments as contents of degree programmes and are created around the knowledge, strengths and interests of the faculty and finally gain academic approval through governments. The library's parallel role at the curriculum analysis state is to search identity and make known to faculty the available and

accessible academic support materials relevant to a given curriculum. The existing university committee structure thus needs to be developed to approach preparation for student learning in a holistic manner, rather than focusing on classroom teaching as is a common practice (Benjamin, 1986).

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