

QUALITY OF STUDENTS ADMITTED TO LIBRARY SCHOOLS – A CASE STUDY OF MEGHALAYA, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The nature of Library and Information Science (LIS) education is such that admission to this Post Graduate University course is open to college graduates from various subject backgrounds. Thus the Science graduate is as welcome here as the Social Science or Language graduate. The cream of the crop in any of the graduate courses seeks and obtains admission to post graduate courses in their own subject fields, for example, a Sociology graduate will seek and usually obtain admission in the Sociology Department of the University. The rest of the crop that hasn't made it to the course of their specialization or choice is the one that ends up seeking admission in the Library School. Thus it is not out of a life aim of becoming library professionals that these candidates seek admission in the Library School, but as a last resort. None of these has had prior knowledge of Librarianship save for the (mostly) vague experiences they have had at the college library. Experience (as admissions in-charge) has shown that the quality of students that seek admission to the Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS) is poor, most of them having low, if not abysmal levels of knowledge. The 'better ones' amongst these somehow scrape through the entrance test and obtain admission to the Library School. A certain percentage of these admitted students do go on to serve the library profession fairly competently. Yet many continue with their mediocre performance throughout the course and carry on even in the library they are recruited in. All these issues are a strain on the administration and faculty of the Library School and are also tell tale pointers to the quality of education prevailing in India, starting from pre-primary school. This paper describes the issues connected with admission of candidates to the Library School with special reference to the system followed in Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS), North Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, India.

WHAT LIBRARY SCHOOLS DO

A career in Librarianship requires a cocktail of competencies, from information searching skills to communication and technical skills. "LIS departments expect their students to be of a different nature that is an extrovert personality, entrepreneurial flair, and an ability to work well as a team member. However, in addition to these factors, the evolving status of LIS profession, professionals, and the professional education has become a challenge to the LIS departments." (Singh and Wijetunge) "I want librarians sharp as tacks who are relentless and kind and innovative. Librarians who came to library school despite grave warnings about median salaries, a diverse group with fresh ideas and a willingness to work hard. People who know that building a worthwhile career in any field takes grit and gumption," says Brianna in her thought provoking blog

THE 'DUMPING GROUND' SYNDROME- WHO JOINS LIBRARY SCHOOLS?

Fortunately or unfortunately, Library Schools welcome 'everyone' with open arms owing to the fact that in most countries, there are no undergraduate courses in Library and Information Science. Brianna is of the opinion that "SLIS as an entity that accepts pretty much everyone, and students who don't understand the concept of personal responsibility. Hello, dangerous combination!" She further vents her disgust saying she doesn't want "students who apply to a known easy program merely to stave off adulthood and job hunting, who are then accepted, complain about how easy it is while they do nothing to move themselves forward, and clutter up the department with their bad vibes."

Singh and Wijetunge found that entry requirements to Library Schools are less stringent in Sri Lanka as compared to those of other South Asian countries. Entry requirements for masters degree in Sri Lanka is a good Bachelors degree in any discipline plus one year work experience in a recognised library. In other South Asian countries a LIS qualification (usually Bachelors) is essential for this. They also found that to gain admission to Bachelors in LIS, India and Pakistan demand a good Bachelors degree in another discipline, but most Indian library schools consider candidates with a good Masters degree in another discipline for admission to bachelor's degree.

The 'fortunate' part stems from the existence of a heterogeneous, multidisciplinary group of students who could bring variety into the classroom. They could. But they usually don't. Because this group with varied subject backgrounds that enters Library Schools is usually the 'dross,' the 'leftover,' the 'reject' from the various disciplines. They could not have made much valuable contribution in their own mother discipline, not to speak of contributing anything to Library Schools and Librarianship. "LIS departments expect enrolment of "good" students, but more often than not, have to be satisfied with the "leftovers", as commented by one of the Sri Lankan LIS course Coordinators, to maintain the financial viability of the departments." (Singh and Wijetunge) AO Issa, KIN Nwalo also observed that in Nigerian universities, not many undergraduates apply to study library and information science unless as a last resort. His Close contact with new entrants into some Nigerian library schools showed that many of them would have preferred other courses of study to library and information science. It seems also that many fresh students in these schools offered to study the course only after being rejected by the department of first choice owing to low scores obtained at the University Matriculation Examination. They probably have tried in vain to secure admission into other choice courses and opted to study library and information science only as last resort. Observations have shown that only a few undergraduate students in Nigeria usually apply to study library and information science as a first choice course. Many of those who are eventually admitted into the library schools came on account of their failure to secure admission to other preferred departments. This development tends to turn library schools in Nigeria into dumping grounds for candidates who could not be admitted to study their preferred courses. That the majority of prospective undergraduates choose to study this course only as a last resort is undesirable for the future of a profession as dynamic as librarianship especially in the 21st Century Nigeria. Agumanu (1989) surveyed the second, third and fourth year students at the Imo State University library school with a view to identifying factors that influenced their choice of the course; and found it was not a typical first choice for these students as 80% respondents had the initial choice of Law;

In the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) issues arise in Departments where the subject is not taught at the graduate level. Subjects like Library and Information Science, Linguistics, Creative and Cultural Studies are amongst those that fall under this category. They thus have nothing to base admissions on. They are forced to admit candidates having any subject background. Thus a Science graduate is as 'welcome' in these Departments as a Social Science or Commerce graduate.

The ugly truth is that candidates that apply for admission to these Departments usually do so as a last resort. The reasons for applying for a seat in any of these 'unfortunate' Departments range from failure to obtain a seat in one's own subject, to keeping one's self occupied in between jobs, to partaking of the scholarships provided by the Government. Only a tiny minority amongst the applicants opts for these Departments out of curiosity, treading the unfamiliar path even when their percentage of marks at the graduate level could have secured them a seat in their own subject in the post graduate level. It is this last group that is the saving grace of these Departments.

WHAT DOES THE ADMISSION PROCEDURE IN LIBRARY SCHOOLS INVOLVE?

Admission work in Library Schools -A lot, for sure. And anyone who has been placed in charge of admissions in Library Schools, emits reactions between aaaargh!!! And Heeeeelp!!! For, admissions work here is not as simple as the 'snap of a finger' or 'wave of a wand' system practiced in other Departments. Seats are usually limited (between 25 and 50) but any number of applications is entertained, there is no ceiling. In NEHU there can be up to 300+ applications for the thirty seats, in any given year. Sorting this jungle of applications takes about one month and the total procedure, from setting up of the admission committee to hanging the list of names of selected candidates on the notice board can go to over two months.

Admission work in other Departments -A Physics Department in a University would simply shortlist names of Physics graduates on merit, inform the selected candidates and begin the session within two weeks time.

THE TEDIOUS PROCESS

The North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) through its Acts and Ordinances has framed criteria and regulations for admission to its courses at the Post Graduate level which are made available in its Prospectus and website. These criteria and regulations are being adhered to by all the Disciplines or Departments of the University to the fullest extent possible although the Departments are given some flexibility to tweak the regulations to suit their purpose. Decisions at the Department level are usually made by admission committees comprising faculty members of the Department.

A typical stepwise admission procedure for any Department in NEHU would go something like this:

Step 1.

Formation of Admission Committee comprising all or some of the faculty members of the Department with a convener heading the Committee

Step 2

Admission forms are received in the Department office. Forms start trickling in after the graduate degree (Bachelor of Arts/ Science/ Commerce) results have been declared between June and July of every year. They really start pouring in before the last date for accepting forms has expired.

Step 3

Sorting out of submitted admission forms takes place. This is a hell of a job that is physically and mentally taxing. The admission forms are submitted with the mandatory mark sheets and certificates from sundry sources including school, college and governmental authorities. Sifting through each document to check for authenticity and to calculate percentages of marks is a herculean task. And when the forms number over three hundred (as is the usual case in certain Departments), the headache of the admission committee members only worsens. The insertion of incomplete or even fake documents by some candidates is another irritant the committee members have to be alert to.

–Seats in each Department are allotted as follows:

BREAK UP OF SEATS

Category	Percentage of Seats
Open (i.e. those that do not fall under the reservation policy of India)	40% (Forty per cent)
For Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Caste (reserved category)	50% (Fifty per cent)
The Physically Challenged or Differently Abled	3 % (Three per cent)
University Quota (Spouses/children of NEHU employees, Sports persons who have represented Meghalaya at the National Level and active members of the National Service Scheme (NSS)	7 % (Seven per cent)

Step 4

Shortlisting of candidates. Out of the jungle of admission forms, eligible candidates are shortlisted. It is here that Departments frame criteria to suit their purpose. Most Departments prepare a list of eligible candidates purely on merit, keeping a ratio of say two candidates per seat. Since the category of applicants is homogeneous (i.e. Political Science graduates), the job of the Department is made easy. It merely selects applicants on merit and starts classes on schedule.

Step 5

Lacking any Library Science graduate degree to base admissions on, and also adhering to University Grants Commission of India requirement, the Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS), NEHU, tries to test the competence of the applicants at the entry level with questions on current events, general knowledge and English

language skills. This is another headache involving setting up question papers, arranging seats invigilating during the test and finally correcting the answer scripts. And this is where the quality or lack of it in applicants is evident. The answers that most of them provide to the simplest of questions are cause for exasperation and even hilarity amongst the admission committee members. There are factual, grammatical and spelling errors galore. This begs the question, “Wither undergraduate education in India?” “Learning by rote,” “spoon feeding” and “copy and paste” (especially from Wikipedia) are still the order of the day in many schools and colleges in India. By the time the students graduate, their minds are quite numb and they usually enter the University blank. This is lethal for a people and information profession like Librarianship.

WHAT’S THE USE?

After the rigmarole of the admission procedure, members of the admission committee are still asking “what’s the use.” They have ‘handpicked’ the best amongst the worst and then there’s still the two years of taming this group – a really frightening task. Because, many of these that are admitted, float through the course like zombies and enter the profession with a jumble of information which they then inflict on the expectant library member. Shudder!

In Nigeria, many youths go into unsuitable careers due to ignorance, inexperience, peer pressure, advice from friends, parents and teachers or as a result of the prestige attached to certain jobs without adequate vocational guidance and career counselling. Consequently, many of them are unsuited for their careers as they usually find themselves in jobs where they could not satisfy their value needs. When this occurs, they constitute nuisance to themselves and their employers. They are usually unable to contribute meaningfully to the society and ultimately become liability to the nation. (Salami, 1999). This same argument can be applied to Library Schools and Librarianship in India.

WHAT IS THE WAY OUT?

Until directives come from higher authorities, changing the system would be a stressful process. Stressful because even if brilliant ideas emerge for solving or minimizing the issues, opposition cannot be avoided. Neither can mistakes. There’s also the concern that true future library professionals might be weeded out in the process of admitting only ‘eligible’ candidates to the library schools. After all, who can say for sure who is eligible for entry into library schools and the library profession and who is not.

A.O. Issa has garnered the following recommendations from the results of his study:

1. Adequate and sustained publicity, especially among the youths in the primary and post-primary schools should be made by the Nigerian Library Association in order to increase awareness on the benefits of librarianship to society and so popularize the profession. This publicity must be made in collaboration with government and other non governmental agencies to reach the grassroots especially primary and secondary schools. The guidance/councillors in schools will have an important role to play in this regard.
2. Since young people are attracted more by what they can experience than mere rhetorics, it is necessary to enforce the existing provision in the 6th National Policy on Education that every school should have a well equipped library and media resource centre. These should be manned by well trained personnel who can render modern library services to children and youths. The encounter with seasoned librarians and libraries in schools at a tender age could positively influence the disposition of the children and youths to librarianship.
3. Accomplished librarians—both academics and practitioners—should take up responsibilities in organizing and sponsoring mass media publicity programmes on the librarianship profession. Apart from its obvious advantage of wider outreach, this strategy can help to jump-start great public awareness about the programme and the profession among a wider audience. Public awareness on the librarianship profession is very vital if the profession must attract some of the best brains in the country who can meet the challenges of 21st Century librarianship in Nigeria.

A. M. Fasick found that because of the widely varied undergraduate backgrounds from which library school students come, it is difficult to envision specific undergraduate courses being set as prerequisite by many schools. Few schools could afford to limit the available pool of applicants.

There have been some attempts to set prerequisite undergraduate courses. In 1984 the University of Toronto instituted a placed requirement for a statistics course as a prerequisite for the MLS program

Fasick (1986) quoted Bernard Franckowiak who has suggested the levels needed by students entering a program:

1. Familiarity with computer data processing telecommunications

terminology, hardware and software, including strengths and weaknesses, and how the various pieces of technology relate to each other;

2. The ability to use standard office automation systems including word processing, text editing and formatting, and to operate printers, terminals, disk drives, and other pieces of equipment;
3. Acquaintance with the construction of individual databases using database management systems;
4. Knowledge of one or two computer programming languages, not in order to become a programmer but in order to understand how the program functions and the art it plays in applying technology to processing the information.

CONCLUSION -ALL IS NOT LOST

Nobody really grows up with an ambition for Librarianship, unlike the case with medicine and engineering. Issa found that library and information science is still largely unpopular among prospective undergraduate students in Nigeria. This is so especially when compared with such other high profile courses as accountancy, medicine and law. Most people join Library Schools as a last resort, on the recommendation of others or out of curiosity. The quality of most of these that join Library Schools is not up to expectations. Some leave at the beginning of the session itself. Amongst the rest that remain, there are those who will sleepwalk through the course, merely occupying space. There is a minority however, that slowly develops a passion for librarianship along the way and goes on to do the Library School and the profession proud. The little respect and praise that comes librarianship's way is due to the giftedness and dedication of this minority.

Issa's study did find evidence of improved popularity of the Library and Information Science course among the study's respondents. He also found that the diverse subject background of the admitted students ranging from social sciences, arts, humanities to commercial is, after all, an advantage to the profession. This will allow for the much desired subject specialization in future career pursuit.

S.R. Ranganathan, the father of Library and Information Science in India whose work is also world renowned and acknowledged, earned his bachelor's and Master's degree in Mathematics. He was a Mathematics teacher and entered librarianship only because the pay was better than what he received in his teaching job. He was about to revert back to teaching when the quietness of the library got to him. His employers at the Madras University had other ideas. They sent him to London for training in Librarianship and though the transition was slow, the rest is history. Eugene Garfield in his tribute, said of Ranganathan - "It's ironic that this man, who later became so single-mindedly devoted to library science, was practically forced into the field against his will." Enough said.

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