

Keynote Address: Indian Higher Education: Role of Library Professionals



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Esteemed Prof. B.K. Choudhary, my teacher, Prof. Biswajit Satpathy, Chairman, PG Council, Sambalpur University, Prof. Bulu Maharana, Head of PG Department of Library and Information Science, other dignitaries, fellow professionals, students of the University and ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed an honour and privilege for me to be here in my alma mater after almost 30 years. It is a matter of chance than design to have got this privilege, and thanks are due to social media technologies and Prof. Maharana for making this possible. As part of my role at the Commonwealth of Learning, I am visiting some partner institutions, including the Odisha State Open University and I am glad that I could be part of this seminar today apart from performing my duties. Over the years, my professional roles have drifted quite a lot from the Sambalpur University library to the current position at COL, where I promote the use of technology-enabled learning to improve access to quality education and training in the Commonwealth countries. To know more about my organisation and our work, I urge you to visit our website. Today, my brief presentation is a reflection on Indian higher education and role of library professionals.

At the outset, I would like to make two disclaimer announcements: (i) one, the views are personal and does not reflect the opinion of my employer, and (ii) two, opinion expressed are for reflection and not necessarily a criticism of any existing rules or provisions. To quote the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca “I am neither wise nor close to wisdom; but in the words of Cicero, only a great conjecturer”. Not necessarily ‘great’ though in my case.

My plan is brief, and will cover context, an explanation of what is higher education, the key issues before us, and roles of library professionals.

Now let’s start with the context.

According to UNESCO Statistics, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education in India is at 26.9%, while the All India Survey of Higher Education 2016-2017 says it is 25.2%. The global average is 32.78. GER in tertiary education in North America is 83.8, and in Europe it is 70.3. These are way above the GER of India. With about 50% of population below 25 years of age, the GER is too low for a country like India.

There are over 52,000 higher education institutions in India, of which only 2% are universities. So, the bulk of higher education happens at colleges with 76% institutions. Most stand-alone institutions are either education colleges or management institutes covering about 22% of the total number of higher education institutions.

There are 35.7 million students in higher education in India as per the All India Survey of Higher Education 2016-2017, of which 47% are female students and 53% are male students. Interestingly, the number of student enrolled is slightly less than the total population of Canada, and is equivalent to the population of 86 small populated countries of the world. The size of the system brings in many of its challenges.

The All India Survey of Higher Education 2016-2017 also shared some interesting facts: there are 68 female teachers per 100 male teachers; Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) is 22 in colleges, whereas in Universities it is 19; 28,779 students were awarded Ph.D. during 2016 with over sixteen thousand male and over twelve thousand female doctorates. This clearly shows gender disparity in faculty recruitments or it may be that not many women are coming forward to choose higher education as their profession. While the pupil teacher ratio looks good in statistical average, the situation is not similar everywhere, and this may not be treated as universal. India also produces substantial number of PhDs, and most of these are in social sciences and humanities.

In 2016, according to SCImago country ranking, India stands 5th in research productivity. However, in terms of h-index the rank goes up to 21. As per the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) report 2017, about 90% of contributions comes from the top 100 universities. So, 88% of universities contribute only about 10% of research. Further in addition to this, NIRF indicates that India produces about 3.5% of global research, of which 68% comes from top tier universities. Only 5 higher education institutions from Odisha get mention in one or more lists in the NIRF 2017.

Let me now reflect on what is higher education in my understanding.

What is 'higher' in higher education? Is it just level of the education, synonymous to tertiary education? Is it synonymous to university education? For centuries, the university has been a place for teaching, research, and extension activities in all domains of knowledge. Most of the times, we use higher education to mean university, and conflate an institution to be viewed as a concept. Universities provide higher education, but they may also do many other activities, including providing vocational education. However, a higher education provider may not be a university. It can be a college, a research centre, etc. So, providing higher levels of teaching is just one aspect of higher education. Higher education "educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it" (Newman, 1873).

According to Professor Ronald Barnett (1990):

"A genuine higher learning is subversive in the sense of subverting the student's taken-for-granted world, including the world of endeavour, scholarship, calculation or creativity, into which he or she has been initiated. A genuine higher education is unsettling; it is not meant to be a cosy experience. It is disturbing because, ultimately, the student comes to see that things could always be other than they are. A higher education experience is not complete unless the student realizes that, no matter how much effort is put in, or how much library research, there are no final answers."

This implies higher education is something that is amorphous and metaphysical. In other words, we can relate this to 'excellence' or 'quality'. It is not just about providing education at a higher level, but about creativity, critical inquiry, truth, discovery, discussion, development and scholarship. Therefore, higher education is a process that provides the environment for scholarliness.

Boyer (1990) refers to four components of scholarliness:

1. Discovery – as creation of new knowledge in a specific discipline, often used synonymously with research and closely related to scholarly communication.
2. Integration – as making connections across the disciplines by bringing in new insights, giving meaning to isolated facts and interpreting data together in an integrated manner to extend the boundaries of human knowledge.
3. Application – as service activities that are tied directly to one’s special field of knowledge and flow from the expertise of the scholar. Weller (2011) says this “can also include the time spent peer-reviewing journal articles and grant applications and sitting on various committees”.
4. Teaching – as a scholarly enterprise beyond the mundane transmission of facts. Teaching is at the highest level of scholarly activity because teachers must be well informed and have expertise in their field to teach. Twelve hours of classroom teaching every week can be heavy workload, if we consider the rigour needed for careful pedagogical planning and preparations needed to deliver each hour of lecture or engagements with the students. Certainly, teaching is about ‘inquiry into learning’ than simple transmission of knowledge.

Therefore, higher education is not about university or college education only; it is about how education is transacted, and how they strive for excellence to promote scholarliness. We should look into the role of library and information professionals in the light of a higher understanding of university and higher education.

While the many of the changes that we see around us are outcomes of our common heritage of the higher education systems around the world, for centuries the way we teach has not changed. It is also time that apart from changing the world around us in higher education, higher education systems take steps to change themselves. It is possible to do so, provided educational leaders and all of us think ‘out of the box’.

What are these key issues that need us to think out of the box? Let me reflect on just a few.

The discourse in higher education these days are focused around ranking as a panacea for all the problems of higher education. We are concerned about rank of Indian higher education institutions in the Times Higher Education ranking and QS World ranking systems. There is a need to understand the business of ranking as quality. While there is some truth about what the rankings show, there are also concerns about the methodology as well as statistical errors in the processes. A quick analysis of the criteria adopted by some of the well-known ranking systems will show that these are not contextual, and therefore, Indian universities are bound to face the difficulty of being on the top of the list. In most of these rankings the quality of research is the main focus. These also look into the income from the industry and number of international students and faculty. While exchange rates will have impact on the parity of calculations of the earnings, local policies, cost and quality of living have impact on recruitment of foreign faculty. Just to make a point, the total higher education budget for India in 2018 is about 13 billion USD. Harvard University’s endowment fund alone is over 34.5 billion USD. So, for quality to be ingrained, it is better to focus on the processes than to the indicators of the ranking industry. Recognising the challenges, we now have our own National Institutional Ranking Framework developed as a response to the criticisms of the existing rankings or we can also say that our inability to be part of the existing systems. What it does at the end is to tell us what we mostly know as anecdotal evidence. It is also important to understand that comparing universities, just because they are universities make no logical sense. They are different entities with different characteristics. Rural urban bias in establishment of the universities also affect availability of good students and teachers, and disparity in the level of financial resources allocated to these institutions are sufficient reasons to create different ranks. These do not require much efforts to understand. In turn what it will do is to create categories of institutions leading to misuse of the ranking

system and put unnecessary hardship on the part of the students in terms of parity in employment opportunities.

There is a serious skills gap or problem of unemployment. The recently launched India Skill report 2018 indicated that only 45.60% of graduates are employable or are ready to take-up jobs. While employability is increasing, the major challenge is lack of soft skills that are required in current job environments. Universities are not paying enough attention to these aspects, while the curriculum remain heavy.

Universities and higher education systems are supposed to follow meritocracy. However, there is sufficient fuzziness in recruitment of quality human resources, even though the University Grant Commission specifies some criteria to be followed. As library professionals, you know that the impact factor (It is just the average number of times that a journal's articles are cited over the past 2 years) was developed by Eugene Garfield to rank journals so that selection of journals can be objective at times of fiscal crisis. It was never meant to be a tool for assessing quality of a publication or for that matter the work of a scholar. But, impact factor is part of the criteria for promotions. Using appropriate scale to measure impact is important for research as well as teaching. Measuring good teaching is also important, but there is always objection to student evaluation of teaching from teacher associations. But, what stops the universities to measure student satisfaction of teaching and learning as a whole and take steps to improve? As a generic tool, student evaluation of teaching and learning may be an effective tool for improving quality within the institution.

Some years back, I wrote a short introductory manual on quality assurance in higher education for the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), and the framework of NAAC provides a robust mechanism to assure quality. But, are we doing these exercises as ritual? Has quality become an institutional policy? Do all our activities demonstrate excellence? Quality in higher education is a continuous quest for excellence that depends on inputs such as quality student and teachers, good infrastructure, laboratories and libraries, and above all a culture of learning. It also needs good process management such as highly relevant curriculum, academic freedom to think, research and teach, and cultivate inquisitive minds that question status quo. Because of the input and the transformative processes, what we should be able to demonstrate is impact on society, graduate participation in economic progress, and institutional reputation. If we are not able to do these, then university education becomes an art of compromise to maintain the status quo.

No let me turn to the role of librarians. In this section, I would like to paraphrase John F. Kennedy and emphasise -- "Ask not what your profession can do for you – ask what you can do for your profession".

In his monumental work entitled "The Foundations of Education for Librarianship", Jesse H. Shera says the unique responsibility of librarians that no one else does is "a mediator between man and the graphics records that his and previous generations have produced, and the goal of librarian is to maximize the social utility of graphics records for the benefit of humanity". I think this remains true even in today's world of technology and Google, except that librarianship is probably now a more feminine profession than in 1970s! To unpack what Shrea said in today's context, library and information professionals undertake bibliographic control (knowledge about where you can find knowledge), process knowledge in various formats to help easy retrieval, optimise available resources (through collaboration), and create enabling environment for learning and research.

Considering my role as a teacher to promote the use of information and communication technologies in teaching and learning, I would focus on this aspect little more. I strongly believe that role of library professionals in teaching and learning is not limited to academic libraries. This can happen in any type of library, including the public libraries. In fact, library should be a place for both formal as well as informal

learning, fostering continuous professional development in various disciplines in collaboration with other departments. Modern day library professionals are part of curriculum design committees and collaborate with teachers to strengthen their teaching and research by providing access to the world of research literature and digital resources for teaching and learning. I will focus on two specific ideas where library professionals can play significant role.

High cost of textbooks is a major problem for students around the world, and the emergence of open educational resources (OER) in 2002 has the potential to solve the crisis of textbooks. For the uninitiated, OER are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits their free use and in some instances, re-purposing by others. These are free, openly licensed materials that you can adopt/adapt for any purpose.

Those who are interested to know more about OER, I would request you to do a short 2 hours course on OER available at COL's technology enabled learning lounge (<http://tell.colvee.org>). Library professional all over the world are playing active role in promoting OER use by teachers and students, evaluating the quality of OER for use by specific students and teachers, and by curating OER in different disciplines. In fact, the INFLIBNET's ePG Pathshala has over 17,000 modules of OER in over 75 disciplines. How are they being used?

Another key area that you as library professional may be familiar is open access, which is the provision of free access to peer-reviewed, scholarly and research information to all. It envisages that the rights holder grants worldwide irrevocable right of access to copy, use, distribute, transmit, and make derivative works in any format for any lawful activities with proper attribution to the original author.

While you can be champions of open access in your institution by making all freely accessible books and research materials to your clients, I would urge you to use several free resources available on open access itself to understand the field better. As library professional, if you want to learn about open access, you can download a full course or participate in a free online course on open access available at UNESCO. There is also a course for researchers in any discipline to understand open access. In fact, to promote open access, catch them young is the key. It is early exposure to open access and its benefit that helps making more research information available beyond the pay-wall systems.

The modern library professionals in the universities are therefore undertaking several activities beyond their traditional roles. They are now active researchers in bibliometrics to support institutional needs, they use technology innovatively to support teaching and learning (many libraries manage learning management systems), undertake teaching quality assessment for quality assurance and keep record of institutional research by managing institutional repositories. I hope some of my reflections will resonate in your thoughts and action afterwards.

Thank you very much for your attention.