An Overview of Information Commons: Current Trend in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Begins with tracing the genesis since evolution of man. Highlights importance of education and library for the mankind. Information is commodity and knowledge is power in the modern digital era. Introduces the concept of Information Commons(IC), a prevalent trend that emerged in 1990s, primarily in academic libraries. Concludes with necessity of proper training and suitable plan before implementation of IC in the educational set up supplemented by well-designed research initiatives.

Key Words: Education, Library, Information & communication Technology (ICT), Information Commons (IC)

Genesis

Men, Women and Children are rational beings. It is rationality that differentiates human beings from other living beings. Human civilization has made significant progress since evolution of man. Human beings have progressed historically from Stone Age to Information Age. Primitive human society has got transferred into modern knowledge based society. Education is essential for mankind. It means learning knowledge, skill and attitude. Education is basically learning how to learn. Prof. R. H. Dave states that education is a process of human enlightenment and empowerment for achievement of a better and higher quality of life. A sound and effective system of education results in bringing out the learner's potentialities, enlargement of their competencies and transformation of their interest, attitude and values.[1] Education makes one and all a well – informed, knowledgeable and responsible citizen, able to contribute for progress and advancement of the nation.

Education and libraries have integral relationship. A Library happens to be the heart of an educational institution. It is the systematic instruction, training or schooling, imparted for the betterment of human life. Library as a social institution brings into relation the writer, publisher, librarian and reader. The relationship may also be viewed as producer, intermediary and consumer. Dr. Ranganathan described books, readers and staff members as the basic trinity of the library and the social function of the library lies in the best interaction among these three basic constituents. Dr. Radhakrishnan in the University Education Commission Report, 1948-49 mentioned that a librarian is the teacher of teachers. In order to fulfill the expectation of the society, librarians must discharge their responsibilities to provide free flow/access of accurate information confidentially and impartially by

maintaining privacy of users and avoiding any biasness.

India has glorious traditions of higher education, research and self-learning. Rich heritage imbedded in composite culture and vast diversity since ancient times kept us intellectually alive.[2] However, Indian Higher education is passing through a crucial phase due to the factors like expansion, transformation, globalization, privatization and competition.[3] Higher education institutions need to play significant role in maintaining the harmony, equity, inclusive policies, social development, and economic growth through the community engagement activities. India's higher education system is the world's third largest in terms of students, next to China and the United States. Higher education sector has witnessed tremendous increase in the number of Universities, University level Institutions and Colleges since independence. However, Indian needs 1500 more universities with adequate research facilities by the end of 2015 in order to compete in the global market.[4] A. S. Kiran Kumar, Chairman, ISRO is of the opinion that knowledge gives us unlimited power and strength to find success in all walks of life. Literature, philosophy and history are great sources of knowledge as they enrich us with the realization of our understanding. Observation, Reasoning, Logical Inferences and Modeling are some methods that have been in use for gaining knowledge. It is for the seeker to decide upon which method to opt, for each method has its own advantage as well as limitations.[5]

The emerging educational technologies, including internet, web technology, computer-based educational games, wearable data capturing devices, software and hardware developments are all forcing changes in the every facet of higher education. These technological changes are particularly affecting the teaching & learning, research &development and assessment process in higher education. Libraries have been an inherent component of the higher education ecology. It becomes inevitable for libraries to change so as to respond positively to the changes in the higher education.[6] Steven Bell has also enlisted top 10 academic Library issues[7] that must get attention of academic librarians during 2015, namely, Alternate Higher Education; Shifting Staff; SCRL information Literacy Frame work; Transition to Openness; Digital Education Accessibility; Library Space; E book; Student Data and Leadership.

Thus computers and networked information resources have become an integral part of academic library collections. Library is no more a mere store house of information. It has transformed itself FROM BRICK TO CLICK. As per users need, different service models have been developed to provide them excellent and timely service. In order to incorporate digital information service in an academic library, a fundamental shift in its management and organizational structure is inevitable. It must be compatible with the new service models, yet flexible enough to adapt to the changing environment in which it operates.

Information Commons (IC)

IC is a relatively new concept in librarianship. It is an evolution of IT centers that already exists in many libraries. It is a

new model of integrated library service in the academic library. It has become an essential part of today's academic library environment. It is a most significant trend emerging in the academic libraries. There is a renewed emphasis on libraries as places of community building. IC is not just about resources but also about relationship and community between creators and users of the information. The overall goal of IC is to improve services to the campus community by offering a seamless environment that supports the way people work. It is a conceptual, physical and instructional space that involves an organizational realignment from print to the digital environment. It consists of two halves- the physical infrastructure as space and the virtual resources and values as a platform for access to and advocacy for ideas.[8] IC is a service model adopted in academic libraries that essentially describes a specific location in which electronic work-stations are maintained by qualified staff members for the delivery of electronic resources for teaching & learning as well as research & development. IC means a central location that provides computers, information resources in various formats and staff assistance. Although they may share similar goals and some common features, academic institutions have taken a variety of approaches in designing, funding and staffing their IC.[9] Thus IC is an especially designed assured open access one stop service facility and collaborative learning environments. It can integrate the internet, computer hardware and software, knowledge base resource including print, digital and multimedia. It can cultivate the

reader information literacy, promote the readers to learn, exchange, collaborate and study under the support of the skilled library consultants, computer experts, multimedia workers and teachers.[10]

The Information Commons appeared first in early 1990s and is being adopted by university libraries at a rapid pace, as it seems to meet the emerging needs of today's students.[11] It happens to be a joint venture between Corporate Information and Computing Services (CICS) and the University Library System. Delivering high quality IT-enabled study space and 24 hour access to student materials, the IC provides a platform for developing innovative learning and teaching techniques. Students spend much of their time learning outside classrooms by reading, exploring, creating, and communicating. The IC creates an environment that nurtures these activities by providing content in a variety of formats, technologies that might not be affordable to individual students. The key purpose of an IC is to leverage the intersection of content, technology, and services in a physical facility to support student learning. It provides the space where patrons are encouraged to stay and work for longer period of time, often collaboratively. Reference and Technical departments work together to create integrated reference and information assistance to patrons.[12]

Planning the IC

Once an academic institution decides to implement the IC service model, supplementing its Library services for achieving the goal of higher education, it is essential to formulate a plan. There are three

phase while planning for IC. First of all, institution should have clear purpose for IC. Planning authority should interact with users in order to identify their needs and priorities. Based on these assessments, goal should be fixed. Secondly, formal assessment of IC is necessary, as it combines both quantitative as well as qualitative data. In order to develop IC, there data are compared which reveal the required changes, justify the contribution to teaching and learning. Finally, the planning of IC focuses on the development of a floor plan and consideration of equipment and furniture. Flexibility is the key consideration in choosing the furniture. Availability of the latest version of hardware and software should be ensured. As a technology-oriented facility, IC is required to develop and change as per technological advancement and changed user's needs. IC can build community in campus. Café bars, art display area and space for films, concerts or academic gathering, etc. all these IC activities foster campus community. Academic faculties incorporate technology into curriculum and they encourage students to use technology in their academic work. The use of IC will increase in times to come and ever changing scenario.[13] Service model IC can meet the users need as long as it is open to as many people as possible. The success of information Commons relies on being truly common and not restricted to certain members of a community.[14]

Model of IC

Five notable characteristics of IC are *active growth, flexibility, innovation, fusion and collaboration.* The primary step for implementation of IC is *modeling*. IC must abide with the development goal of the institution and support the library for better service. IC is composed of physical and virtual environments. Its service model is designed as per its core components and characters.[15]

Conclusion

IC is the emergence of perennial growth in ICT sector. It is the new service model that brings a new development opportunity in the innovative Library Service. In the modern digital era academic libraries are seriously considering for implementation of IC model in order to provide satisfactory users need by the skilled professionals with the help of computer based tools that can search, identify, retrieve and disseminate information in any format. With careful planning, Information Commons can be a collaborative learning space in the academic premise for access, use and creation of information that is one of the most important commodities in the knowledge based modern society of mankind.

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