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Development of Information Commons in University Libraries of Pakistan: The Current Scenario

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ABSTRACT

Rapid advancement of information technology, evolving student needs and change in higher education's teaching methods have greatly affected academic libraries. These challenges have caused the academic libraries to reshape their services, resources and physical spaces by adopting a new service delivery model referred to as Information Commons. This study analyzes the current condition of Information Commons in the libraries of different universities in Pakistan. It also explores the motives of these commons, identifies the problems encountered by Pakistani library professionals in the adoption of this service model and assesses their level of awareness about the concept. 117 university central libraries were invited through e-mails to participate in an online survey. There were 97 libraries who actively participated with a ratio of 82.90%. Findings indicate that Information Commons with advanced information and communication technology equipment and other allied facilities, services, staff are few in number. It also reveals that Information Commons in Pakistan are in the process of development as, in spite of limited finances, libraries have started to add technology equipment in their resources. Moreover, many library professionals also plan to set up Information Commons in the near future.

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INTRODUCTION

The revolution of information technology has increased the production of information in digital format and created an environment of information explosion. Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts (2010) report that the lives of today's students are saturated with digital media. Consequently they have grasped this technological innovation to a great extent as they are the first generation to grow up in this digital environment. Ultimately their habits, information needs and information seeking behavior are influenced by it. The students and faculty members at present are increasingly relying on information technology for their study and research work. Likewise Gibbons (2007) points out that there are a number of labels to describe the young people currently studying at schools, colleges and universities. They include the digital natives, the net generation, the Google generation or the millennials. All of these terms are being used to highlight the significance and importance of new technologies within the lives of these young people. On the other end, "emphasis on cooperative learning and group study is gaining popularity in higher education and causing a demand for new library resources" (MacWhinnie, 2003, p. 11).

These developments have resulted in changing the concept of traditional use of libraries as now they are perceived by the users as spaces of collaborative learning. The whole scenario has forced libraries to transform their services from traditional to modern methods and

come up with innovative ideas to cope with the future demands. As a result libraries have started adding more and more technology equipment and electronic resources in their services. At the same time they have redesigned their services, resources and physical spaces by adopting a new service delivery model referred to as Information Commons. Since the conceptualization of Information Commons in the 1990s, its implementation in academic libraries has become a popular solution, as it has been perceived the most successful service model all over the world, especially in America. The motive of Information Commons is to offer one-stop services to users that include a combination of information resources and technology resources allowing them to accomplish their academic tasks at one place.

The concept of Information Commons has evolved considerably for the last two decades and libraries in developed countries have moved to employ its advanced type as well, the Learning Commons. However, in Pakistan it is still a novel idea for academic libraries, due to lack of research in this area. Hence there is a need to investigate and promote this modern information service delivery model, as this is the premier study on the topic of Information Commons in Pakistan. So, it can be assumed that it will contribute a great deal to provide Pakistani library professionals a better understanding of this concept as well as motivate them to take it up in any possible level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"The relationships between libraries and technology were developed in 1990s. Computer labs became common in libraries as scholars

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Fig. 1. Information Commons spaces.

recognized the value of technology instead of merely relying on wired furniture” (Accardi, Cordova, & Leeder, 2010, p. 311). Wood and Walther (2000) describe that “our society’s digital revolution has transformed the traditional quiet world of libraries” (p. 173). Similarly, MacWhinnie (2003) reported that dependence on technology for accessing information has expanded students’ demands from libraries as they want help in using technology, understanding how information is organized, and finding resources. He also claims that these demands have caused a change of information resources and physical places in academic libraries. Likewise, Seal (2005) makes the point that the last decade has seen several major trends in academic libraries all over the world, but worth mentioning in all of these is the trend of Information Commons. This is a new service model which has revolutionized patron services and converted the academic library into a learning hub. “The idea of the academic library commons originated in the 1990s, mainly in universities across the USA” (Daniels, Darch, & De Jager, 2010, p. 117).

Beagle (1999), one of the pioneers of the Information Commons concept, initially used this term on two levels, “virtual and physical.” The virtual level represents “an online environment in which users can access a variety of digital services by using single graphical user interface.” Whereas, the physical level refers to “denote a physical facility specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around the integrated digital environment.” Malenfant

(2006) asserts “indeed, Beagle’s, 1999 work provides a convincing and well-illustrated basis for why academic libraries need to change to an integrated Information Commons model and a graphic conceptualization of the merging of services” (p. 280). Beagle (2002) urged that “the IC must find its optimal strategic fit within the library just as the library must find its own within the university” (p. 288). Later on, Beagle, Bailey, and Tierney (2006) elaborated the Information Commons concept as, “a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning.” Bennett (2008) describes that “The purpose of the Information Commons is to support learning” (p. 183). Bailey and Tierney (2008) defined, “the Information Commons as a model for information service delivery, offering students integrated access to electronic information resources, multimedia, print resources, and services” (p. 1). “It is generally a specific location designated to deliver electronic resources for research and production that is maintained by technically proficient staff” (Cowgill, Beam, & Wess, 2001, p. 432). “Other IC features generally include collaborative learning spaces, multimedia workstations, hi-tech classrooms, and group study spaces. These features are designed to enhance group learning, to encourage faculty to incorporate technology and new information resources into their curriculum” (MacWhinnie, 2003, p. 244). It is a gateway through which users can access traditional services and print

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