Adopting a Sustainability Framework in Re-visioning Library and Information Science Education

Jiselle Maria Alleyne

Abstract

Ecological theory states that survival of a population depends on its fit with its environment, more specifically with its niche…the larger, more varied and more flexible a population, the greater its ability to spread to new niches (Wilson, 1992, para. 24, as cited in Van House, 1996). Nancy Van House, School of Information Management, University of California, in speaking about 'The Ecology of LIS Education' declares that the changing information niche necessitates LIS schools become more varied and extend their borders into new information niches. The theory continues, "The larger, more varied, and more flexible a population, the greater its ability to spread to new niches species with narrow ecological niches and/or an inability to change risk extinction as their niches disappear." (Wilson, 1992 as cited in Van House, 1996 para. 27). The correlation is that for LIS schools to escape extinction, there must be a strategic plan to diversify.

*This paper seeks to showcase strategies employed by LIS schools in adopting a **sustainability framework**, through such practices as competitive branding, internal mergers, curriculum restructuring, and developing new programmes. Nicole Cooke agrees with this view as she states, "We have to make sure students are adaptable. . . we have to continue learning and growing" (Cooke, 2016 as cited in The Future of LIS Education para. 11).*

KEY WORDS: *: Sustainability framework, LIS education, re-visioning*

Introduction

Adopting the tenets of competitive advantage has become an imperative for the survival of any entity. Library and Information Science schools (LIS) have not been exempt from this trend, as this is seen as integral for developing new information for professionals. A definition of competitive advantage states, "Competitive Advantage is when an organisation possesses some advantage over its rivals in a given sector or market, making it more profitable or sustainable than other organisations" (Erbe, 2014, p. 236). By adopting an acumen of competitive advantage, LIS schools ensure sustainability and adaptability because they would be investing in developing sustainable, hard-to-replicate information professionals (Abrams, 2008). Linda Smith, Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Programmes at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, spoke about remaining competitive and producing information professionals who are viable. She said, "We are committed to keeping LIS education viable…LIS professionals must not only be aware of diverse information needs, but ensure those needs are met. As educators, we need to equip our students with the necessary skills to build supportive and broad information services" (Smith, 2016 as cited in The Future of LIS Education, para. 3).

Why should Library and Information schools be concerned with adopting a sustainability framework? This switch in focus is necessary since the very organisations that train information professionals must be able to translate their major product 'information' into one that is sustainable for current and future populations. Bowler (2012), from the School of Information Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, supports this view as she states, "Sustainability, therefore, is not just about recycling and using fewer resources, it is about ensuring that libraries and their services, collections and ideas are kept alive for future users. . .and so librarians need to learn about sustainability so that they can create libraries that will meet the needs of present library users without compromising the ability of future generations. . . " (Bowler, 2012, para. 1).

Literature Review

Current Environment

One of the indicators that prompted LIS schools to be adopters of a Sustainability Framework was the demands of accreditation that would ensure the quality of their programmes. A few accreditation criteria included admissions procedure, curriculum, faculty development, teaching and learning methodologies, student performance and alumni reach. The American Library Association's accreditation system is viewed as a symbol of quality assurance for LIS programmes; however, the future of accreditation and the impact on the sustainability of LIS programmes are being reviewed. A white paper on the value of the ALA accreditation asked the following questions:

- Are the same standards used to ensure accreditation able to ensure the sustainability of the programme?

- What is the value of an ALA accredited Master of Library and Information Studies degree to industry?

- What aptitudes, competencies and abilities do MLIS holders possess that are unique?

As a result, LIS programmes are in a state of flux as they seek re-accreditation of their programmes. The main concern is whether these traditional standards of accreditation ensure sustainability or if they are stifling innovation by maintaining the status quo in an era that requires expansion.

In recognising the need to restructure the accreditation process by making it more relevant, the American Library Association Office of Accreditation sent its members a short survey, which indicated a shift in the type of 'education' Library and Information professionals should receive.

Two questions should be noted:

- Given the dynamic and transformative nature of the field of library and information science, what do you believe will be the most important skills and/or competencies needed by future librarians and other information professionals?

- Given the dynamic and transformative nature of the field of library and information science, do you feel there is a current disconnect between skills taught in current curricula of LIS programmes and what will be needed by future librarians and information professionals (Granger, 2016, para. 5).

These two questions show a shift by accreditation agencies in their assessment of the needs of the LIS industry and in the understanding of the needs and requirements of sustainable education. This shift also warrants an understanding of what should be the measure or standard by which to attain sustainable education, as well as what is necessary to produce industry-ready professionals.

Competitive Branding

Another indicator of the necessity for the adoption of a Sustainable Framework is the realisation of the need to maintain a competitive brand in the information environment. According to Tom Storey, "Re-inventing or repositioning a brand involves marketing activities designed to give an existing company, product or service a

new position in customers' minds in an attempt to change a product or company's market potential…" (Storey, 2006, para. 8). Applying this concept to LIS schools, two questions must be asked: Will the library and information professional continue to be a necessary and desirable occupation? and What can we do to attract future professionals to our schools? In industry, in order to ensure brand quality is sustained in a product, the needs of the customer are seen as priority and incorporated into the market strategy. The same rule applies to LIS Schools and the use of competitive branding. The first result of this strategy is seen with the name change or re-branding from School of Library and Information Science to the I-School. The re-branding sought to address two issues: firstly, the profile of academic programs and the graduates entering the job market, and secondly, the graduates' influence on the way in which the information environment evolves (Lorenz, 2014).

Certain characteristics of I-Schools make them more appealing and relevant to the sustainability framework: firstly, schools' multidisciplinary or inter-disciplinary composition allows students to explore new subject areas in addition to the traditional 'library' courses; secondly, is the diversity of the faculty; and thirdly, the modality of these programmes –   mainly online – appeals to the needs of the consumer. Dr. Michael Stephens, Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies at San Jose State University, agrees that the objectivity of sustainability in education can be achieved only with the exploration of new modalities of teaching and learning. Stephens states, "Libraries and librarians are faced with a technological and societal wave of change that is ever increasing as we move farther into the 21st century. Preparing new graduates to deal with constant change, to use current and emerging technology tools to further the mission of their institutions, and to meet the needs of communities of library users while never losing sight of our foundational values and principles are of utmost importance to me as an LIS educator. . ." (Stephens, 2016, para 1).

Another component of re-branding is removing the word 'library' from the name of the school. For example, my Alma Mater, the Dalhousie School of Library and Information Studies, changed its name to the Dalhousie School of Information Management. This change gave the school a stronger standing in attracting potential students who may not necessarily work in a libraries but still within the information field (J. Makani, personal communication, November 3, 2016).

Curriculum Restructuring

Developing a LIS curriculum that would 'keep track of the latest trends in the market as well as advance the competencies needed in the work world' has received the lion's share of attention in any LIS school's bid to adopt a sustainability framework (J. Makani, personal communication, November 3, 2016). If one uses the Dalhousie School of Information Management as an example, he will discover that a full restructure of the curriculum has taken place to include courses focusing on emerging areas like open data, data management, digital creation, digital preservation, information security and information risk management (S. Toze, personal communication, November 3, 2016). A review of market trends reveals that there are fewer jobs in traditional library and archive settings and that LIS education needs to change in order to prepare students for new opportunities working with data. As a result, the Dalhousie School of Information Management has embedded into the curriculum restructuring the introduction of new degree programmes, such as the 2015 Master of Information Management degree option, which seeks to support the focus on working with data.

A similar restructuring of curriculum took place at the School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, Australia. According to Hider et al. (2011), the courses were redesigned to:

• address the long-term sustainability of the courses and their abilities to respond to the professional landscape;

• allow them to maintain their relevance to the school's established librarianship market, while developing significant application to other information fields;

• acknowledge the changing knowledge and skill requirements of the employers; and

- produce a graduate not dependent on libraries only for employment, but one confident in handling information in the online world (Hider et al 2011, para 1).

Sustainable Partnerships

Another implementation of a sustainable framework for LIS Schools is the merger with other schools. The question being answered is, "How would a different organisational structure affect the competitiveness of Library Schools?"(Helregel, 2013, para. 2). Some notable examples of mergers include:

- Catholic University of America merged their I School with the College of Arts and Sciences.

- Indiana University merged with the School of Informatics.

- Drexel University merged three entities: The College of Information Science & Technology, the Department of Computer Science, and the Department of Computing/Security Technology.

The above-mentioned mergers represent the ideology that the new entities would allow training of the information professional to be gleaned from the broadest context of Information Science. The merger at the University of Pittsburgh, with the creation of the School of Computing and Information, is one to observe. The intent of this merger is that it "will create a dynamic, multidisciplinary environment that supports discovery, innovation and entrepreneurship driven by data and technology. . ." (Beeson, 2016, para. 3). There are clear benefits that far outweigh the relinquishing of turf by the library school. One such benefit is to expand the research capabilities of LIS students by giving them opportunities to conduct studies in new areas, and thereby add to the body of LIS literature.

Another advantage of these mergers is that the new entity can not only benefit internally from the expertise of faculty from the merged schools, but also target and recruit instructors with specific market specialisations (J. Makani, personal communication, November 3, 2016). At the Dalhousie School of Information Management, one of the latest faculty recruits specialises in 'geospatial information, visualisation and mental imagery, and multimedia representation of information and cognition' (APLA Report, 2015, para. 3). This sort of diversity is needed to create the type of graduate for the new information environment.

Emerging Information Societies

The necessity to adopt a sustainability framework has not escaped emerging information societies such as those within the Caribbean region. The progress of these emergent organisations may be considered basic, but shows the ability of these societies to embed sustainability into their agendas. In a reference to the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona, for example, Mark Shane-Scale, in a presentation entitled, "Adapting to Changes," states, "DLIS experiences in the Caribbean have been responsive to international trends in library education and manpower requirements…upgrading and restructuring programmes to meet demands" (Shane-Scale, 2009, para 2). The programme has now introduced dual modalities, face-to-face and online, for its Master's in Library and Information Studies and, in response to the market needs, has also included a Master of Arts in Archives and Records Management. The DLIS programme is still in a unique position as the sole instructional course to train Library and Information professionals in the Caribbean region. However, the instructors should not allow this position to lull them into a false sense of security, as potential students are being drawn away by the options available to them via North American institutions, where programmes are more versatile.

Conclusion

Advocating for the adoption of a sustainability framework in LIS programmes can only intensify as the information environment changes. To achieve sustainability in the educating of LIS professionals, 'a change of educational

culture must be achieved, one that embodies the theory of sustainability as a transformative paradigm…' (Sterling, 2008, para. 4). A concerted effort must also be made to measure sustainability, by looking at alumni, the changing job specifications and alternative career paths of graduates; continuing education and professional development must also be examined to assess whether graduates re-tool themselves within the LIS field. Bertot et al., state, "A credentialed information professional is an asset; there is no other professional degree programme that focuses on the combination of information, people, learning and technology…and this is the core of sustainable education" (Bertot et al, 2016, para 55).

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