

Monday January 06, 2014

Interview with FNU University Librarian, Dr. Chaminda Jayasundara.

Q.1 Please explain the academic qualification standards and requirements adopted and practiced by your institution in selecting applicants for (a) professional (b) para-professional library positions?

For the University Librarian post, a candidate must have a doctoral degree in the field of LIS with 4 years experience in a senior managerial position in a library of a university/academic organisation or a masters degree in LIS with 8 years experiences in a library of a university/academic organisation. The candidate also needs to demonstrate a greater contribution to the body of knowledge of Library and Information Science with substantial number of research and publication evidences. The Chief and Principal Librarian position goes to a person with a PhD in LIS with 2 years of relevant work experience or a Master's Degree in LIS with at least 4 years experience as Librarian. Applicants should also have a demonstrated ability to make a significant contribution to the discipline through research and scholarship. All librarian positions are considered as professional positions in the university. MQR of the Library Assistants and Assistant Librarian, which are paraprofessional posts, is a Certificate/Diploma in LIS and the applicants with prior library work experience will be given the priority.

Q.2. Library and Information Studies (LIS) courses pitched at Certificate and Diploma levels have been offered by USP for many years; the latest development is the LIS Degree programme offered by FNU beginning this year. What your views about these programmes in terms of job opportunities are for graduates in Fiji as well as overseas?

Certificate/Diploma level programmes are inadequate for professional librarians' educational/professional requirements. Professional librarians need to have at least a bachelors degree in LIS with adequate experience. Thus, FNU bachelors programme will meet the educational requirements of the future professional librarians in the country. FNU and USP certificate and diploma level programmes are beneficial for potential job seekers who are seeking jobs to be paraprofessionals in the field of LIS. Paraprofessionals mean Library Assistants, Library Attendants etc but they are not professional librarians. Approximately 170 secondary schools are available in Fiji but only some have librarians. All most all are not qualified to be school librarians. Thus, bachelors degree programme in LIS at FNU is an ideal opportunity to all school librarians to be professional librarians. Apart from these school librarians, we can find another category of librarians in schools in the outside world. They are teacher librarians who must have professional LIS qualifications and teaching qualifications together. Currently none of the available programmes in the country have targeted to train teacher librarians and I trust that FNU is yet to take a leading role to produce teacher librarians being the national premier university and having a school for teacher training. Thus, we are now in the view of advancing the existing LIS prorammes integrating teaching facets with the objective of introducing teacher librarianship to the country.

LIS market in Fiji is small but it is not insignificant. Even though it is comparatively small, it doesn't mean that Fiji is unneeded any professionally qualified librarians. Until FNU introduced its bachelors programme in LIS, the two other universities namely USP and Unifiji and leading institutes such as FIT before merging to FNU were unable to take a headship role to produce qualified professional librarians to the nation. Even if the domestic market of LIS professionals is small compared to bigger countries, it is dedicated. New libraries are yet to be developed and established to cater the demand of the country as a number of needy organisations do not have libraries due to some factors which include absence of qualified librarians. Let me further elaborate what I said. According to my view, the reason for having less number of libraries in Fiji is due to four factors. Non-availability of professionally qualified librarians as there was nonexistence of

educational / professional development opportunities for librarians to face for the changes emerged in the global economic sector. Information management field has not been developed in Fiji based organizations unlike in the other countries. Also, I have noticed that the fields such as knowledge management, archive and records management, Business informatics, information brokering, clinical librarianship, healthcare information etc have not been so far established in Fiji. Absence of enthusiasm of many librarians is also a factor. Specifically the librarians who are from the periphery between the profession and the policy makers need call for an initiative to make policy makers aware about emerging requirements of librarians and libraries to advance the profession and our society as a whole. In general, most of the policy makers are tend to make decisions regarding the contributions of librarians based on their general perceptions towards the passive librarians that they have usually interacted with. Finally, the contribution of the local responsible bodies is also an issue. These bodies should also play a vital role to bring the importance of libraries to the wider community and to lend a hand to organisations to develop their information management areas for the enrichment of the quality of their products, services and internal and external transactions. Public libraries should also be developed by these accountable bodies to foster a love of reading and prepare people for higher education and lifelong learning.

However, these existing educational programmes can serve as an attractive base for LIS professionals in the South Pacific regional markets as well as foreign markets. If I talk about Fiji market particularly, FNU advertises LIS positions several times a year but it is very hard to find qualified people for professional or paraprofessional positions. I know USP started its LIS programmes many years ago but then where are their products now? So, my question is then how can we say that LIS market in Fiji is too small? If the market is really small, my assumption is that most USP trained LIS products may have migrated to some other countries to work in libraries as paraprofessionals which in turn designates that Fiji can produce LIS professionals and paraprofessionals to the demand of foreign markets too. I have also found that majority of students here in Fiji are intelligent and capable children. Due to the high course fees and higher living expenses, they cannot pursue their higher education in New Zealand or Australia. As such, the professionals already in LIS field in Fiji should support their future counterparts to receive better professional qualification within Fiji as FNU has already started bachelors level programme for producing qualified librarians to the country. Unlike USP diploma holders, FNU products with bachelors degree in LIS will easily find opportunities to work in outside world as professional librarians with better monetary and other perks. So, I hope that school leavers will make use of this first-class opportunity to register at FNU and get the qualifications to bridge the gap of the shortage of professional librarians in the country.

Q.3. A major challenge facing Pacific Island Countries is the lack of students pursuing library and information studies. What are your views on how this can be addressed?

There is a commonly agreed upon notion that students with good merits usually go to medical and engineering studies and on the other hand, students from lower middle class and the students who are basically from rural areas go for LIS courses. This is because of the market is usually unable to offer better perks due to lack of funds, and the perceptions of policy makers regarding Librarians. Also, school leavers and their parents think that libraries are facing drastic competition from the emerging information services, whose proximity to the relevance of content is increasingly rendering library services irrelevant to most people. I don't know to what extent these factors have affected to the decisions of people but I believe that these factors have, to some extent, contributed to not accepting LIS programmes in Fiji too. To tell you frankly, it is difficult to envisage how people think but I guess some people may think that the low pay rank and estimated growth rank make library and information science a worst qualification for jobs right now. It is true that many librarians are not paid for the full value of their work. Pay rates and growth

are the only valid reasons for selecting a career or seeking advanced studies. While it is true that for some individuals these factors are the principal focus, for librarians the primary motivation is job satisfaction derived from the opportunity to make a significant difference in the lives of others. But the problem here in Fiji, even though we do have substantially large number of vacancies, we can't find trained people. Honestly, I know some organisations offer huge salaries to librarians compared to other professions. But these employers need capable librarians with qualifications, experience and "know how". I know some librarians in the country receive more than FJD 80,000.00 a year. So, it is a timely requirement to prepare students to take up the positions with confidence and caliber to meet the demands of the employers. Also, it is quite obvious in outside countries that besides career opportunities in libraries, there are rapidly growing career opportunities in the non-library sectors. This emerging market has forced most LIS schools to re-orient their curricula to the new market requirements. We have seen that educating and training of LIS graduates with wider knowledge and skills in the broader information disciplines is realistic, viable and rewarding. To face for such emerging requisites of the new market force expectations, FNU LIS programmes focuses heavily on knowledge management, archive and records management, information policy, Information Technology etc. I find that these skills can be readily applied to other industries and our trained products can easily find information related jobs such as web developers, web masters, content developers, proof readers, researchers, information brokers, system analysts, business analysts, knowledge workers, information consultants, information designers etc.

Q.4 What options are there for those who are working in libraries and who may wish to up-skill their qualifications to become a professionally trained librarian like you?

Well-trained information professionals are essential in any country, both in the developed and developing nations, thus there is no exception for Fiji. Fiji needs to have professionally qualified librarians to cater the emerging needs of the country and for the development of the country. Our primary responsibility is to develop the county producing well-informed citizens. I have seen, the American Library Association's Guideline for the appointment, promotion and tenure of academic librarians confirm that the appointment of librarians follow the same procedures that are established for appointing faculty members. The nomenclature used for the Library Faculty is Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor. In many major universities including Universities of Illinois, Mississippi etc the Librarian Post is considered as that of a Professor and in most American universities Library faculty is headed by a Library Dean or Director of libraries. In view of the other organisations around the world, librarians are executives and sometimes senior executives. This kind of work environment and recognition should be developed in Fiji too. America, Canada and UK are not the only cases but many developing countries let's say India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, China and all most all African countries have also developed better culture for librarians recognizing the importance of the profession for the advancement of the citizens, organisations and country as a whole . Thus, opportunities are already there in the outside world and Fiji will also have the same state of affairs in the near future, our obligation is to lobbying the policy makers and influence stakeholders to establish, develop and sustain libraries and library related wok and also to train our librarians as per the international standards enabling them to take any kind of responsibilities and challenges in order to provide excellent information service and produce informed citizens to the society. A prominent librarian/researcher named Peele has stated in 1984 that teachers have specialized knowledge in one discipline, whereas librarians have general knowledge in different disciplines in order to assist its patrons in every possible aspects. Thus, the librarians must have a multi-faceted education and multi-faceted role in their work in par with other professionals. FNU now has 5 professional librarians who have completed their studies in UK, Japan, South Africa, Australia, Sri Lanka and India. LIS programmes at FNU

are excellent for anyone who wishes to enter into the profession by which the students can grab the essence of “know how” from these professionals who have qualifications, experience and international exposure. We are more than happy to initiate any kind of development and training initiatives to develop LIS related human resources in the country. We hope to work closely with two other universities in the country, library services department and Fiji Library Association and I do strongly believe that we all together can go for a long journey in Fiji to produce professionally qualified librarians with high caliber in order to make well-informed citizens for the development of the country.

For more information please contact Communications Office on 3393110.