

Library Education in Mauritius: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract: *This article appraises the library education development in Mauritius. Also it traces the origin and discusses the various available programs and institutions that offer with a critical note on it.*

Keywords: Library Education, Mauritius Libraries, Library Certification Programmes

1. Mauritius : An Overview

Mauritius is an island state of volcanic origin, covering an area of 1865 square kilometers, located in the South West of the Indian Ocean, 2000 kilometres off the eastern coast of Africa. Although known to Arab navigators around the 10th century, it was officially discovered in 1505 by the Portuguese. The Dutch landed in 1598 and occupied the island until 1712. French colonization lasted from 1715 to 1810. Thereafter, the British took over following the French capitulation and ruled until 1968 when Mauritius achieved independence. The country became a Republic within the British Commonwealth in 1992. The multi-ethnic population comprises nearly 1.3 million inhabitants of Indian, African, European and Chinese origins.

2. Brief History of Libraries in Mauritius

«Les colons aimaient à lire et les boutiques des libraries étaient bien fournies ... »

In the light of this statement made by Dr. Pierre Brunet (1770-1832), a medical officer, describing Isle de France (the former name of Mauritius) in the early nineteenth century, it is obvious that the love of books and reading was a characteristic of the white oligarchy (Bourde de La Rogerie, 1934). Bookshops were well stocked and there were some private libraries owned mostly by bibliophiles. In 1805, literary societies such as *La Société d'Emulation Intellectuelle* and *La Société Littéraire de l'Île Maurice* already existed. In 1816, *La Librairie de Maurice*, a private subscription library (basically a public reading room) was set up by Baron and Souvigne - two rich traders. These were restricted to the elite class of the Mauritian society. In 1839, the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, a library which was open to the general public saw the light of day in Port Louis. Although Adrien d'Épinay was the official advocate of the white planters and a staunch opponent of the abolition of slavery, he generously contributed towards library development by bequeathing 2,500 books to this library. He also fought for the freedom of the press and founded the Mauritius Commercial Bank. (Toussaint, 1977). Around the same period, another private library – the *Bibliothèque Desjardins*, a rich collection of natural history was set up. The municipal library of Port Louis was established much later in 1851 (Benoît, 1977). In the mid-nineteenth century, there were no more than ten commercial printing establishments in Mauritius (Toussaint and Adolphe, 1956). At that time, most of the books found in Mauritius were printed, published and imported from abroad. According to the Directory of Libraries, Documentation Centres and Bookshops in Mauritius and Rodrigues (2000), during the British colonial era, there were only six public libraries, namely the Municipality of Port Louis library (1851), the Mauritius Institute library (1902) the Carnegie Library (1917), the Municipality of Beau-Bassin /Rose Hill library (1946), the Municipality of Quatre Bornes library (1948), the Municipality of Vacoas- Phoenix library (1966) and only two special libraries, viz., the Supreme Court Library

(1875) and the MSIRI library (1961). Today, there are twenty public libraries, seven academic libraries, around thirty five special libraries and a national library.

3. The First Librarians

During the first half of the twentieth century, the main qualification for becoming a librarian in Mauritius was proficiency in writing. Thus journalists, poets and playwrights such as Léoville L'Homme, J. Olivier Bijoux, Oscar Grandcourt, and Edouard Maunick were at one time in charge of the municipal library of Port Louis. This trend continued until 15th March 1952, when L. E. Rose who joined the Mauritius Institute on 1st March 1948, was appointed librarian after successfully completing a two-year course of study in librarianship at the Loughborough college and qualified for becoming an Associate of the Library Association (U.K). His studies were made possible thanks to a scholarship which was granted to him. Regrettably, after specialising in this field, he was transferred to the Colonial Secretary's Office as Assistant Secretary as from 1st July 1959. He was replaced by Sydney Jean Francois, a B.A holder who was promoted to the post of librarian on 11 July 1960. Rose may be rightly considered as the first professionally trained Mauritian librarian. Meanwhile, Madeleine Ly-Tio Fane, Assistant Librarian at the Mauritius Institute since 21 December 1956, resigned from the Civil Service to assume duties of librarian at the MSIRI in 1961 (Administrative Reports, 1960-62). Georges Mayes who was also trained in the modern techniques of library science in the United Kingdom succeeded Edouard Maunick as librarian at the Municipal library of Port Louis in 1960. He remained at the helm of this library for a period of nine years. (Benoit, 1977). It has also been unofficially reported that in the 1970's, some primary school teachers who, for some reasons or another were found to be unfit for teaching, were transferred to the former Teachers' Training College library in Beau Bassin. This sheds light on the poor image and the status of the library profession prevailing in Mauritius at that time. Nevertheless, history bears testimony that some of the above mentioned literary figures who became 'librarians' at the Municipality of Port Louis without holding the appropriate qualifications, were indeed good administrators. They managed to develop their libraries despite the fact that they did not attend any formal library school and had to face financial constraints. Léoville L'Homme (1857- 1928) in particular, was a remarkable personality. He initiated interesting reforms such as the extension of library opening hours and retired after twenty seven years of meritorious service. Other professional librarians followed. They all graduated from foreign universities. Prominent among them was Gaëtan Benoit, who wrote a book on the contribution of Eugene Morel for the promotion of public libraries in France and an essay on the Afro-Mauritians or the Creoles. He also has to his credit the publication of an index to local newspapers. Moreover, he used to lecture at the University of Mauritius. It is noteworthy that he was the first Mauritian to be awarded the prestigious title of Fellow of the Library Association (FLA). Unfortunately, he died at a relatively young age. But he has left the image of a vary capable, dynamic, passionate, warm and foresighted librarian as opposed to the stereotype image of a librarian being an austere intellectual, secluded in his office and cut off from his patrons and staff.

4. Library Education in retrospect

4.1 Certificate in Library Studies (1981 - 1995)

When a UNESCO expert visited Mauritius in 1978, he reported that there were no formal library education and training at any level (Harrison, 1978). Some self-motivated candidates used to study for the Library Assistants' Certificate of the City and Guilds of London Institute by means of private tuitions. However, the standard of this course was considered to be high while the syllabus was entirely based on the British library system.

The need for a Mauritian equivalent programme started to be felt to cater for the personnel of the increasing number of secondary school libraries, in addition to those of the existing public libraries, the academic libraries of the four tertiary education institutions and the special libraries of several Ministries. In 1978, the University of Mauritius started planning a course in librarianship for library assistants. This institution secured the necessary funding from the International Development Research Centre of Canada and launched a part-time, in-service course initially extending over fifteen months. The chief librarian of the Carnegie library, Mrs Marie C Benoit, a fully qualified information professional holding the Associateship of the Library Association of United Kingdom (ALA) was

seconded for duty for two years to take charge of this project (Harrison, 1978). The total number of library staff who have benefited from this training amounts to sixty nine. This certificate course was offered for the last time in 1995.

4.2 Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science (MCA)

After the University of Mauritius upgraded its Certificate course in Library Studies into the Diploma in Information and Library Studies, there was a void left in the training of library assistants. Thus, in June 1999, the Open University of Mauritius (previously known as the Mauritius College of the Air) started to run a one and half year part-time distance learning course leading to the Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science. To date, enrolment amounts to over four hundred students, out of whom two hundred and sixty nine has successfully completed this program. This course which is serviced by local tutors is still going on.

4.3 Diploma in Information and Library Studies (1993-2012)

Holders of the Certificate in Library Studies of the university started to feel the urge to upgrade their skills and knowledge base in order to be able to aspire to higher positions such as Documentalist and Library Officer. Despite mounting pressure from library assistants, it took the university twelve years after the launching of the certificate course to start offering a two-year part-time in-service Diploma in Information and Library Studies programme in 1993. The first intake amounted to twenty five students. To date, nearly three hundred library personnel have already enrolled in the DILS course – the successful completion of which, may entitle one to become a para-professionals or library technicians. Most of the staff of secondary school libraries and documentation centres of various Ministries are diploma holders. After a number of years of service as Library Officers, diploma holders may be promoted to Senior Library Officers.

4.4 Higher Certificate in Librarianship & Information Science – Napier University

Almost at the same period when the Diploma course of the University of Mauritius was launched in 1993, the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with the Napier University of Edinburgh, Scotland to offer the Higher Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science – a part-time, distance learning course jointly with the then Mauritius College of the Air, mostly to staff of state and private secondary school libraries. Some marked differences between the diploma course of the University of Mauritius and Napier's Higher Certificate course were: the latter was mostly a distance learning course requiring minimum face to face interactions with tutors, it covered less modules and ended by an open book examination. However, for the purpose of recruitment and promotion, it was granted the same status as the diploma, i.e. holders can aspire to become Library Officers and Senior Library Officers. Nevertheless, there is still a perception among certain members of the library profession in Mauritius that the Napier course was more or less a replication of the Diploma offered by our university and as such, was not totally justified. Official figures indicate that one hundred and twenty seven library staff was enrolled in the Higher Certificate course which ceased to be offered in 1998. Out of them, one hundred and eighteen successfully completed it.

4.5 Diploma in Library and Information Science

The Open University of Mauritius has launched this new distance learning course in 2010 despite the fact that the University of Mauritius (UoM) is already running a similar one by the face-to-face mode of learning since 1993. It is aimed mostly at holders of the Certificate in Librarianship offered by the Open university. To date, no less than thirty eight students are enrolled in this new programme, the duration of which is two and a half years covering a total of eighteen modules.

4.6 Bachelor of Art in Library and Information Science

Most of the fifteen or so professional librarians who were practising in Mauritius prior to the launching of the B.A (LIS) course by the University of Mauritius in 1999, graduated in Britain, Canada, France, U.S.A, India and South Africa. This was probably due to a lack of local expertise or resource persons to run an undergraduate course here. There was a pressing demand from diploma holders who wanted to further upgrade their qualifications and climb the professional ladder. Their struggle was not an easy one due to the fact that some narrow-minded conservative librarians from the old establishment, who happened to hold top positions, were opposed to this project. A small group of daring enthusiasts from among the younger generation of diploma holders founded the Library Diplomates

Association (LDA) in 1997. The latter started to lobby in favour of a distance learning course in Mauritius leading to the Bachelor of Arts degree. It did not take them long to establish contacts with Charles Sturt University of New South Wales, Australia following a recommendation made by the Library Association of United Kingdom to whom the initial request was made and to convince the University of Mauritius. No stone was left unturned to obtain exemptions or course credits with CSU, to reduce the course fees to the lowest possible level and to initially reserve it to library staff holding the diploma in library studies. Finally, after intense negotiations and much perseverance, their efforts were crowned with success. Ten subjects were exempted from the syllabus, a partnership agreement was signed between the Australian university and the University of Mauritius for running this programme jointly over a three year period. Registration for this course began in December 1998. A first batch of thirty six diploma holders enrolled for the B.A (LIS) course which started in January 1999. In all, twelve modules were studied: seven library modules and five non-library modules. The initial cost amounted to no less than Rs 120,000 equivalent to USD 4,000 per student inclusive of textbooks. A second cohort of twenty-four students successfully completed the same programme and graduated in 2008, but at a much higher cost, i.e. USD 10,000. This achievement is rightly considered as a milestone in the history of library education in Mauritius. This pool of graduates can pave the way to more professionalism in libraries of all sectors although merely holding an appropriate academic degree from a recognised university does not in itself automatically make one a competent, proactive, dynamic and fully-fledged professional librarian. The University of Mauritius,, the oldest library school is currently exploring the feasibility of launching a cheaper, yet equivalent alternative under-graduate programme worthy of its name in order to satisfy the demand from diploma holders who are aspiring to higher positions within the profession.

Table 1. The various LIS courses offered

COURSE	INSTITUTION	DURATION	ENROLMENT	MODE OF TEACHING	DATE STARTED	DATE LAST OFFERED
Certificate in Library Studies	University of Mauritius	1 Yr	69	Part-time face-to-face	1981	1995
Certificate in Librarianship & Information Science	Open University of Mauritius	1.5 Yrs	408	Part-time distance learning	1999	On-going
Diploma in Library & Information Science	University of Mauritius	2 Yrs	292	Part-time face-to-face	1993	On-going
Higher Certificate in Librarianship & Information Science	Open University of Mauritius	2 Yrs	127	Part-time distance learning	1993	1998
Diploma in Library & Information Science	Open University of Mauritius	2.5 Yrs	38	Part-time distance learning	2010	On-going
Bachelor of Art in Library & Information Science	University of Mauritius/Charles Sturt university	3 Yrs	60	Part-time face-to-face and DL	1999	2007

Courtesy: University of Mauritius: Faculty of Social Studies & Humanities and the Open University.

4.7 Postgraduate Course in Library and Information Science

The University of Mauritius does not presently offer any course leading to a master's degree. Should the need arise in future; it is desirable that appropriate academic linkages be established with reputable tertiary institutions overseas. This will enable UoM to benefit from foreign expertise, secure international recognition for the programme and ensure that quality is always maintained at a high standard.

5. The Role of the Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians

The establishment of this Council has been made possible by the enactment of a legislation in 2000. As such, it is the highest authority for all registered professional librarians in Mauritius. It must be stressed that some of its statutory objectives are directly concerned with the improvement of library education, although it is not itself responsible for the delivery of appropriate courses. The Act provides at section 4 (d): *“to establish appropriate linkages with any educational body in Mauritius or outside Mauritius with a view to upgrading the standard of education in librarianship”*. Furthermore, section 4(f) stipulates that the Council is mandated *“to approve programmes of training leading to registration of librarians in Mauritius.”* It is desirable that the MCRL works in close collaboration with both the Open University and the University of Mauritius for the periodic revision of the curriculum so that students can remain abreast with the latest developments in the field of library and information science and for the continuing professional development of LIS graduates. However, a necessary precondition is that the Council must rise up to the expectations of its members by taking bold initiatives and acting more proactively.

6. Revisiting the curriculum of existing programmes

One vital aspect that is too often overlooked by policy makers is the need to reconcile course content not only with the requirements of the local labour market, but also with recommended guidelines and best practices from recognized institutions and library schools worldwide. This issue was recently raised at the first African Library Summit held in Johannesburg in 2011. There is urgency on the part of library education providers to seriously consider reviewing on a periodic basis, the syllabus for the certificate, diploma and degree courses in order to bring those more in tune with the latest trends. In this respect, the assistance and expertise of the IFLA Section for Education and Training and of some of the best library schools across all continents need to be solicited. For instance, in addition to the traditional core modules such as classification, cataloguing, indexing, abstracting, collection management, user services, the application of ICT to library operations, library management, information seeking and retrieval, records and archives management, and bibliographic control, emerging topics like web publishing, web design, digitization, online user services, Resource Description and Access (RDA), metadata harvesting, institutional repositories, ought to be introduced so as to equip the new generation with the required skills and competencies to enable them to transform their traditional libraries into hybrid, ubiquitous learning centres. Joint-ventures with reputable foreign universities in scarcity areas also need to be tapped. Library schools, library associations and the Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians must take the lead and work together in partnership to achieve this objective failing which libraries will continue to lag behind and never be able to play their legitimate role in this knowledge-based economy.

7. Continuing Professional Education

Bill Gates rightly predicted as far back as 1995 that *“the pace of frenzied technological change is so fast that sometimes, it seems that the world will be completely different from one day to another. More than once, people will be pushed out of their comfort zones.”* He advocated education, training, and re-training as part of the solution. Continuing professional development is the shared responsibility of library schools, library associations and individual information professionals. Regrettably, CPD has remained a much neglected area for too long in the library profession in Mauritius. Only a handful of LIS graduates have been lucky enough to attend training courses, conferences and workshops abroad. In these times of economic downturn, such opportunities have become even more scant. Interacting with foreign peers is indeed a boon not to be missed as it broadens one's intellectual horizon, enable one to remain abreast with the latest issues, fosters professional networking and knowledge sharing. Alternative options such as inviting resource persons from abroad to conduct training for the benefit of our members

on a regular basis, joining Listservs, and participating in webinars must be fully explored. In this respect, two recent initiatives are worthy to be mentioned, namely the half-day interactive training session organized by the Association of Professional Librarians (APL) in collaboration with two staff of the University of South Africa library who dilated on : *How to prepare a strategic plan for a library* and *Digitization: some practical considerations*; in November 2012 and the workshop conducted by a resource person from IFLA on the theme '*Re-skilling of Library Staff in the 21st Century*', held in December 2012 at the initiative of the Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians. Such laudable endeavours ought to be replicated as often as possible.

8. Conclusion

It is hoped that no stone will be left unturned by existing library schools to carry out objective evaluation of all courses on a regular basis with a view to update their content, make sure these programmes are serviced by highly competent professionals with a proven track record and make them more responsive to the latest trends in library and information science education worldwide and to the needs of the local labour market. The Tertiary Education Commission must also see to it that any duplication of resources and energy in the provision of library education is eliminated. It is high time that a concerted approach involving the various stakeholders such as universities, library associations and the Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians work relentlessly for the betterment of the profession. It is only at this price, that the future of librarianship in Mauritius will be more promising.

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