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Alumni Participation in LIS Program Review: The Case of MLIS at University of the Punjab

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Introduction

Emergence of the digital era has posed rapid social, cultural and technological changes and challenges to the human society. The library as a social institution and librarianship as a service-oriented profession are now at the focal point of revolutionary changes. These changes not only added a new dimension of information science to the library education during the mid 1960s but further crystallization of the information and retrieval systems during 1970s caused the information science component to gain an upper hand, transforming the discipline and introducing new concerns, issues and challenges. Keeping this reality in view Rehman [1] pointed out that in today's world we have no choice but to be open, creative and enterprising in our outlook. The process of curriculum design and implementation is complex and intricate. However, if we do not tread this difficult course, we will become irrelevant.

Department of Library and Information Science at the University of the Punjab, Lahore is the oldest LIS education provider in Pakistan. It initiated a certificate program for librarians in 1915 in the British regime under the supervision of Asa Don Dickinson, a pupil of Melvil Dewey. After independence this program was converted into a postgraduate diploma. A master program was started in 1974. Since then more than 1500 students got master degrees and have been serving various types of libraries, information centers and library schools throughout the country. Lahore is the second largest city of Pakistan having an approximate population of 10 millions. A large number of LIS graduates are working in Lahore. The second largest cluster of the graduates of this department is Islamabad, the country capital 288 kilometers away from Lahore. Other graduates are mainly working in university and college libraries in cities and towns of all sizes in the Punjab province. The remaining professionals serve some organizations in other provinces and even in abroad particularly the oil rich countries of Middle East.

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan is responsible for revision and recommendation of a common curriculum. It has set up a National Curriculum Revision Committee LIS consisting of representatives from all library schools and some working librarians. The last revision made by this committee was in 2002. This committee is only a recommendatory body and it is up to the individual universities to implement the curriculum as such or further revise it. The Department of LIS at the

University of the Punjab immediately implemented the new curriculum. After some time, the senior professionals, particularly from large university and special libraries, started to insist for further revision and effective implementation of the LIS curriculum. Flaws in LIS education have been a common topic in professional gatherings and seminars. Practitioners were criticizing the quality of education by claiming that library schools were not keeping pace with the technological and environmental developments in libraries. They were feeling difficulties in finding manpower possessing required knowledge, skills and attitude. Even graduates with good grades were lacking in some basic skills. Keeping in view the situation the principal researcher conducted some surveys to assess educational needs at entry level and experienced manpower (i.e., References 2 and 3). Meanwhile, the principal author got an opportunity to become head of the department. He decided to conduct a thorough review of the MLIS program and design and implement a new curriculum. The review and design process included seeking practitioners' feedback through an LIS listserv, a questionnaire survey of the alumni, a detailed literature search, a review of course contents of LIS schools all over the world available on the World Wide Web, and two focus group interviews of chief librarians considering them the potential employers of the department's graduates. This paper presents results of the alumni survey conducted for this purpose.

Review of Literature

Library and information science (LIS) education focuses on developing a workforce suitable to the demands of the contemporary information environment. There is a need to audit the LIS curriculum for its relevance to the twenty-first century hybrid environment [4]. This reality is also pointed out by many authors. For example Singh [5] stressed that if we look around, we find that there is a paradigm shift from traditional libraries to digital/virtual libraries, from standalone libraries to library and information networks, from printed publications to digital documents, from ownership to access, from just-in-case to just-in-time access, from linear to non-linear interaction, from intra-active to interactive systems, from exclusive to inclusive society, from analogue to digital documents, from atoms to bits, from intermediary to end-user, from hot to cool medium, from library to web, from order to chaos, and from open source to WIKI-Space. But these changes are not comprehensively visible in the LIS curricula of the developing world.

Most Third World countries are lacking behind to prepare themselves to face the new problems and fulfill rapidly changing requirements of library and information science profession. One such country is Pakistan, where the scene is not very different. Mahmood [2] stated that the literature of LIS in Pakistan did not show an encouraging view of LIS curricula in the country. Curriculum development was not taken seriously in library schools and practitioners always criticized library schools in Pakistan for not producing manpower of quality. Out-dated and irrelevant curriculum was one of the charges they leveled. While criticizing the teaching methods used in the library schools of Pakistan, Haider [6] pointed out that the traditional lecture method was the most common form of teaching in our universities. Teachers spent hours standing in front of the class discussing different reference sources without having a practical use of them. According to him, the courses on management were taught without making use of case study method. The cataloging of special material was taught without using the actual material; the course on "Comparative classification" was taught without having necessary classification schedules. The courses on "Bibliography" were taught without sources like *CBI*, *BNB*, *Book Review Digest*, *Ulrich*, etc. Even the old editions of these bibliographies were not available to the students. The same situation was found in the courses on "Library automation." Students were just theoretically introduced to the basics of computing without any sort of demonstration, and no hands-on experience. Only one library school had, in the true sense, the facility of a computer lab and a part-time teacher qualified in computer science. The other schools only had two to four computers each, which were not used for instruction purposes. Similarly, Ameen [7] mentioned many factors hindering the curriculum revision process in Pakistan. According to her it has been due to the non-availability of senior faculty members/experts in new disciplines, lack of faculty development opportunities, as well as poor infrastructure to implement changed curricula and lengthy procedure of curriculum reviewing through different bodies of the universities. Furthermore, some faculty members did not exert themselves to keep abreast with the new developments in their area of specializations. She believes that this state directly hampered the quality of Library and Information Science Education programs at all library schools in Pakistan.

In spite of these gloomy glimpses few efforts were made in the near past for overcoming such problems. Qarshi [8] reviewed the curriculum revision efforts at DLIS, PU. He categorized these

revisions in four phases. According to him, the first phase is spread over the initial 32 years of 1915-1947. The curriculum almost remained constant despite major advancements in the professional field. In the second phase of 1950-74 although curriculum designers departed from the initial framework of Asa Don Dickinson but again the changes were minimal and inconsistent with the concomitant pace of changes in the field. The third phase, 1974-90 was significant due to the introduction of Master's degree. Although during 1980s, this curriculum had become obsolete. An initiative taken in 1989 resulted in an overall change in the thrust and content of the academic program. In 1997, a curriculum was designed on the basis of revision by the National Curriculum Committee in the subject of Library and information Science, which took three years to finally implement it. In the year 2002, the Department decided to shift to semester system and the courses were designed according to the requirements of the system. Another revision was incorporated in 2004 [9]. Shafique [10] conducted interviews with the students of DLIS, PU to find out their views about the future trends in the field. According to her the future professionals believed that LIS curricula would be changed completely. It would be more ICT focused and comprehensive knowledge of the field of specialization would be provided using state of the art equipments and technology labs. They out looked that dependence on continuing education programs would increase and online multimedia resources would be integrated into the learning process. These trends would enable the students to choose to study at their own time, place and pace. Moreover professional chat rooms, online instructions, guides, workshops and seminars would expand.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to review and improve MLIS program of DLIS, PU in the light of feedback provided by its alumni. The specific objectives of this study are:

- To survey the nature of job currently performed by various alumni of the program.
- To seek alumni feedback on usefulness of various courses offered in MLIS program in their present jobs.
- To explore alumni perception on effectiveness of different delivery and teaching methods.
- To seek alumni suggestions to improve the quality of MLIS program.

Method

To achieve the objectives of this study a survey of the alumni of the MLIS program was conducted. In the absence of a comprehensive directory of librarians in Pakistan 250 graduates of MLIS program at DLIS, PU were identified in the cities of Lahore and Islamabad with the help of current MLIS students. The survey instrument was distributed through e-mail by the authors and personal visits of MLIS students. An 84 percent response from the alumni was received (n=209). The high response rate shows higher level of affiliation and concern of the alumni towards their alma matter.

Results and Discussion

Personal profile of the participants

According to the results (shown in Table 1) most of the participants of this study belonged to university libraries (49%), while others were from special libraries (21%), college libraries (15%) and public libraries (11%). It was found that the participants passed their MLIS/MLS during 1975-2007. Most of them (46%) passed their masters during recent years, i.e., 2001 to 2007. The participants' professional experience varied between one year and above 31 years. The largest group (43%) had experience up to five years. These figures reveal that most of the participants of this study were young librarians who were fresh graduates of the DLIS and had less professional experience. However, senior professionals also participated in a reasonable number.

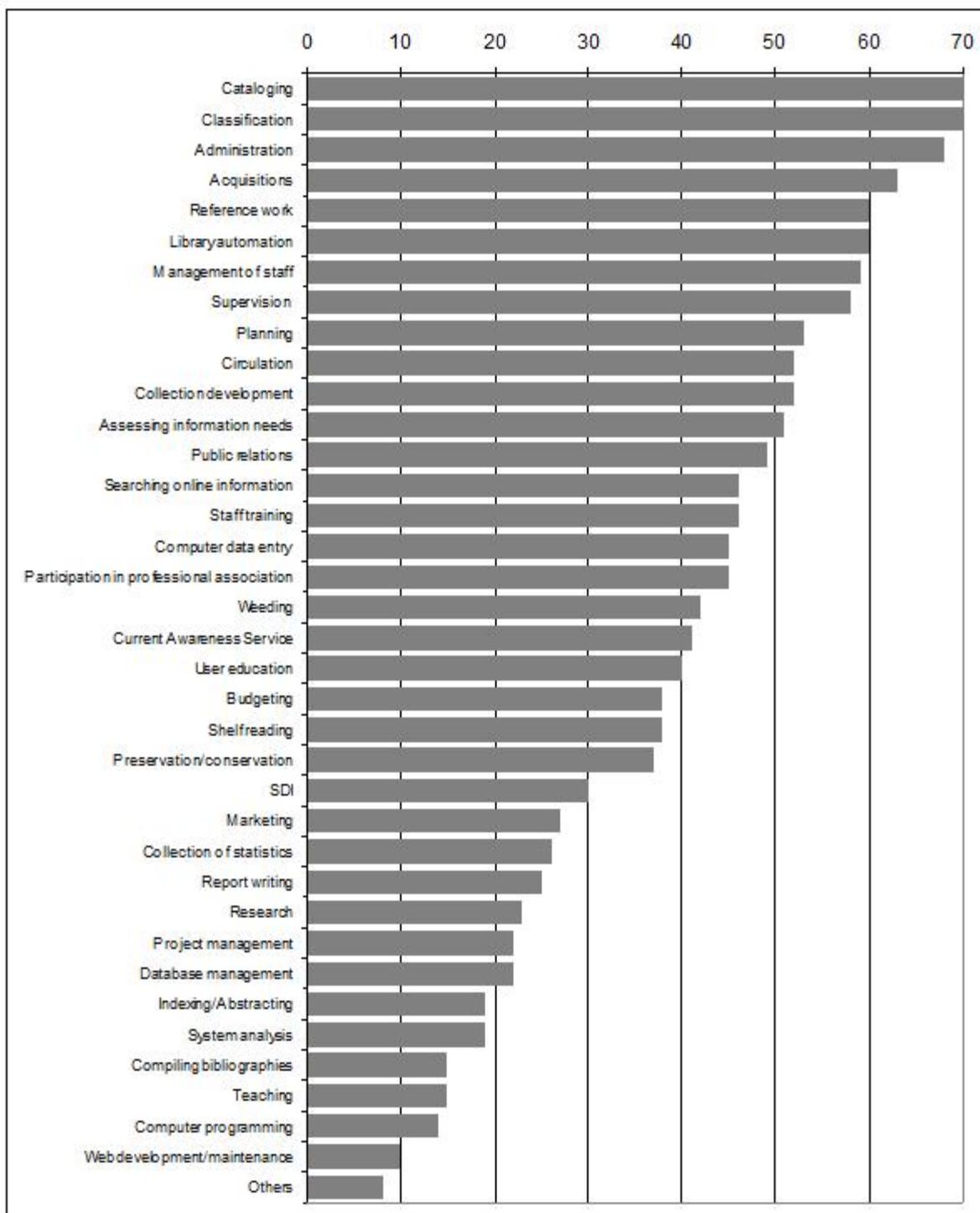
Table 1. Personal profile of the participants

	Percent

<i>Type of institution:</i>	
University library	49
Special library	21
College library	15
Public library	11
Information Center	1
Others	1
<i>Year of passing MLIS:</i>	
Up to 1980	5
1981-1990	20
1991-2000	19
2001 onward	46
<i>Professional experience:</i>	
Up to 5 years	43
6-10 years	14
11-15 years	8
16-20 years	7
21-25 years	7
26-30 years	7
31 years and above	2

Present job activities

All participants were librarians by profession. They were provided with a list of activities most of the librarians do in their job. Figure 1 presents a bar-chart of the job activities they performed their libraries with a percent score of the respondents. The activities performed by at least 50 percent of the respondents include cataloging, classification, administration, acquisitions, reference work, automation, management of staff, supervision, planning, circulation, collection development and assessing information needs. This list mainly includes the house-keeping routines and management of a library.



Usefulness of MLIS courses in present job activities

The participants were asked to show their perception on the usefulness of various MLIS courses in their present job activities. Percent scores given in Table 2 reveal that the courses found 'very useful' by at least 70 percent of the respondents include 'reference services and sources,' 'information science,' 'information technology and libraries,' 'management,' 'applied library automation,' and 'applied classification.' The courses which were found useful by most of the librarians belong to the areas of technical services, technology and management. This trend corresponds with the previous studies on needed competencies of librarians in Pakistan.

Table 2. Usefulness of different MLIS courses in present job activities of the participants (Percent)

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Rank	Course	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	No opinion
1.	Reference services and sources	86	10	1	4
2.	Information science	84	11	1	5
3.	Information technology and libraries	79	11	1	10
4.	Management	76	17	3	4
5.	Applied library automation	73	13	2	12
6.	Applied classification	70	20	0	10
7.	Collection development and management	64	20	4	12
8.	Applied cataloging	62	23	4	11
9.	Resource sharing and networking	61	16	7	16
10.	Practicum	57	20	6	17
11.	Advanced management techniques	56	23	6	16
12.	Theory of classification	55	36	3	7
13.	Research methods	54	28	6	13
14.	Theory of cataloging	51	40	4	5
15.	Database structure and design	51	22	7	20
16.	Management of serial publications	50	32	5	13
17.	Marketing of library & information services	47	29	6	18
18.	Academic libraries	46	28	8	18
19.	Communication and media librarianship	46	28	8	19
20.	Indexing and Abstracting	45	32	6	17
21.	Thesis and viva voce	42	21	8	30
22.	Web publishing	41	24	11	24
23.	Special libraries	39	34	11	17

24.	International and comparative librarianship	39	30	10	22
25.	Public records and their conservation	36	30	12	22
26.	Public libraries	35	29	15	21
27.	Foundation of librarianship	35	38	16	11
28.	Literature of science and technology	34	39	10	18
29.	Literature of Islam and Pakistan	31	36	13	20
30.	Theory and practice of bibliography	30	48	8	14
31.	Science and technology libraries	28	37	12	23
32.	Literature of social sciences	24	47	12	16
33.	Health and medical sciences libraries	24	30	23	23
34.	School libraries	24	33	21	23
35.	Children libraries	21	28	22	29
36.	Literature of humanities	21	43	15	22
37.	Law libraries	19	37	22	22
38.	Agricultural libraries	14	35	26	24

Effectiveness of delivery and teaching methods

The participants found multiple delivery and teaching methods effective. The methods which could attract the attention of more than 70 percent respondents include class discussions, class lectures, hands on computer practice and student presentations (Table 3).

Table 3. Effectiveness of different delivery and teaching methods (Percent)

Rank	Delivery and Teaching Methods	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective	No opinion
1.	Class discussions	82	12	0	6
2.	Class lectures	81	13	0	6
3.	Hands on computer practice	76	13	1	10
4.	Student presentations	75	17	1	7
5.	Books and journals reading	67	23	2	8

6.	Library tours	64	32	1	3
7.	Consultation with teachers outside classroom	55	34	2	10
8.	Home assignments	50	27	3	20
9.	Guest lectures	48	43	2	7

Suggestions to improve the quality of MLIS program

The participants' opinions were sought on a list of measures to improve the quality of MLIS program. Most of them strongly recommended that teachers should be trained in latest technologies (92%) for improving the quality of MLIS program. They also strongly recommended that more hardware and software should be provided in computer lab (89%), more books and journals should be provided in library (83%), more focus should be given to research (79%), and curriculum should be revised more frequently (73%). They also emphasized on the provision of more physical facilities, evaluation of MLIS program by employers, and co-curricular activities. While the alumni were not clear on the change in entry requirements and the introduction of admission test (Table 4).

Table 4. Suggestions to improve the quality of MLIS program (Percent)

Rank	Suggestion	Strongly recommended	Somewhat recommended	Not recommended	No opinion
1.	Teachers should be trained in latest technologies	92	3	0	5
2.	More hardware and software should be provided in computer lab	89	8	0	3
3.	More books and journals should be provided in library	83	12	0	5
4.	More focus should be given to research	79	14	1	6
5.	Department should coordinate with other organizations to share resources	76	13	1	10
6.	Curriculum should be revised more frequently	73	18	2	7
7.	More physical facilities (Building, air-conditioning, etc.) should be provided	67	25	2	5
8.	MLIS program should be evaluated by employers	67	22	7	5
9.	More focus should be given to co-curricular activities of students	57	35	1	8
10.	Entry requirements should be changed	37	34	12	16
11.	Admission test should be introduced	34	32	23	11

An open space was also provided to the participants to give their suggestions to make MLIS program better and in line with the requirements of practical librarianship. A reasonable number of respondents (67%) gave their suggestions in this regard. Most of the respondents suggested that more emphasis should be on practice of theoretical contents. They also suggested that IT and communication skills (written and oral) of students should be improved and teachers' training should be a regular component along with the revision of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that alumni were performing a wide range of tasks in their job settings. They perceived not only the traditional course contents as very useful in their present jobs but they have also mentioned a variety of IT and communication related contents as very useful for their work. They stressed on new teaching and delivery methods and class discussions besides the routine class lectures. They believed that the quality of MLIS program will improve only when teachers will be trained according to the changing trends. Besides this they recommended the provision of more and latest facilities and more focus on practice.

The researchers found the results of this alumni survey very useful to review and improve the standard of MLIS program of the department. In the light of the findings of this study and some other research activities an entirely new curriculum was designed which was successfully passed through a long journey for its approval (Departmental faculty – Board of Studies in LIS – Board of Faculty of Economics & Management Sciences – Academic Council) and now has been implemented. On the request of the department the Higher Education Commission has also provided some amount to purchase ICT equipment and reference tools. Following the example of the University of the Punjab two library schools at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur and Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad are also making arrangements to update their MLIS curricula on the same lines.

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