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Students' Perception about Their Master's Program in Information Management

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the student's perceptions about the reasons of joining the Master's degree program in Information Management (MIM). It also seeks their insights regarding the quality of academic and professional aspects of the program along with the recommendations for further improvements. The quantitative research design, based on a self-administered survey was employed. The population of the study was consisted of MIM students from sessions (2018-2020 & 2019-2021) at the Institute of Information Management, University of Punjab. The questionnaire was designed using Google Form and distributed online through WhatsApp and Facebook groups among all 113 students enrolled in the program during July and August 2020. We got 105 filled responses which were analyzed using SPSS (version 24). The findings revealed that the mostly students were pursuing this program taking it as an interesting choice of career and were highly satisfied with academic and professional quality of the program. The results also showed the students' future goals were typical one, which was to seek employment in the same field after completion of the degree. The students recommended that more practical work and technological courses should be added in the curriculum to make them well prepared for future information market.

Keywords: LIS education, information management, LIS students, motivation, career plans, Pakistan.

Introduction

Library and information science (LIS) education programs have been undergoing a paradigm shift and pace of this change has escalated particularly during last couple of decades. Information revolution is considered as key factor in orchestrating this change in LIS landscape

and leading it to broader horizons of information. The rapid emergence of massive information technologies is continuously introducing new sources and formats along with easy and speedy means of creating, storing, sharing and transferring information. There are new career opportunities within and beyond libraries such as knowledge management; information architecture, research data management and digital humanities (Cherry, et al. 2011; Tanackoviæ et al. 2018). Even in a traditional library context, new information roles such as digital librarians, metadata professional or web content manager are emerging (Tammaro, 2009; Wise, Henninger & Kennan, 2011). These developments are reorienting the focus of LIS schools from a library-centric to an information centric approach. There is an increasing trend of incorporating and infusing information technology, users' perspective and multi-discilnarity into curricula of LIS schools (Cherry, et al. 2011; Pettigrew & Durrance, 2001). Amidst this transformation, the debate over the education is intensifying. LIS schools, associations, and scholars are continuously conducting careful examination of activities to monitor the nature and speed of transformation happening in LIS profession and academia by collecting data form all stakeholders including employers, LIS faculty, students and professionals. However, in developing countries like Pakistan, there is less culture of tracing, recording and anticipating such transitional phases. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap by taking into consideration the students' opinions, perceptions, needs and satisfaction about LIS education program they are pursuing. Undoubtly, students are one of the key stakeholders, and their perspective should be taken into consideration for education related strategic decisions.

Literature Review

Prior LIS research in developed countries has explored students' perceptions of LIS profession, their motivations of joining programs, their satisfaction with the academic aspects along with their professional goals and future plans.

A very early study in this context was conducted by Van House in 1988 at US Berkley to identify the students' reason of pursuing LIS degree, their work and salary expectations. The findings of the study indicated that majority of the students choose the degree because they liked to work in library settings. Interestingly, students underestimated their expected salaries. Later on, a career survey of LIS students from the University of Alabama by Ard, et al. (2006) reported that most of the students had decided to pursue their degree in LIS while in college and main motivation for their choice was their idea of getting an interesting job. Findings revealed that LIS

was not a preferred choice of the students as only 3% considered information profession as their lifelong dream. Furthermore, a number of students (34%) indicated that a personal recommendation from teacher, friend and family influenced their decision. Like Van House's study, Ard's survey also reported the students' belief of earning low salaries. Various other studies also indicated that students enrolled in LIS program expected to earn low salary in job market (Dickenson & Williamson, 2005; Wallace, 2000). A longitudinal 4-year survey of master's students enrolled in the Master of Information Studies program at the University of Toronto was conducted by Cherry et al. (2011). The analysis of 1000 collected responses indicated that students were excited about the information professions and optimistic about employment opportunities at the time of enrolment. However as they progressed through the program, they became more realistic and many were not satisfied with professional aspects of their program. They wanted courses that prepared them for professional positions, provided them with more opportunities for gaining experience that would enhance their chances of employability. Kundak (2017) investigated final year LIS students' motivations for enrolling in LIS programs. Employment opportunities and influence of an individual (mentor, professor, family or friend) were the major factors behind their choice of profession. Many other studies also reported the employment opportunities as a key motivational factor for joining the LIS programs (Singh & Chander, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010; Shannon, 2008).

A recent survey by Tanackoviæ et al. (2018) explored Turkish and Croatian student perceptions of LIS profession and LIS programs, their motivations for enrolling in these programs, their career plans and expectations. The findings indicated that students from both countries admired the importance of LIS profession in the society. Though LIS was not their preferred choice, they were generally satisfied with their choice of profession. Majority of them were willing to recommend it to their friends and were quite optimistic about employment opportunities. Insufficient amount of IT courses and practical training were the aspects where they were dissatisfied with their LIS program. Previously, Berry (1999) reported the results of a survey asking North American LIS schools' students to assess various aspects of their program. The findings showed that students were highly satisfied with their programs with regard to course content, quality of the faculty, and preparation for a library career. However, another study found that 68% Canadian LIS students were satisfied with overall program quality, while only 46% agreed that their program was providing them with an understanding of a career in the

information profession. Infusion of more practical training was the most common suggestion offered for program improvement (Cultural Human Resources Council, 2006).

Profession prestige and image in the society is another important aspect that influences students' perceptions of profession and career choice. This social image and status of the profession is strongly associated with tangible as well intangible factors. The qualification and income level associated with the profession heavily influenced the status of the profession within society and are more tangible factors while the value of the profession to society is less tangible (Blishen et al. 1987). Research regarding the image and status of LIS profession and professionals indicated that society in general and librarian themselves were less in favor of rating their profession high. The librarians had a poor self-image and low perception of profession reputation and prestige (Kundak, 2017; Prin & de Gier, 1992; Tanackoviæ et al. 2018; Wilson, 1982). Research has also been conducted to investigate the perceptions of non-LIS students about librarians, librarianship and information professionals. The findings indicated a low status and image of the profession and professionals as majority of them considered librarianship as a very low status profession that required less qualification and offered less remuneration (Fagan, 2002; Harris & Wilkinson, 2001, 2004; Majid & Haider, 2008; Wilkinson & Harris, 2002/2003).

The above discussion can be sum up with a comment from Cherry et al. (2011) that “the literature presents a mixed view of perceptions of the information professions and LIS programs, and raises more questions than it answers” (p.122).

The Study Context

The study was conducted at the Institute of Information Management (IIM), University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. University of the Punjab (PU) has historical legacy and contemporary importance of its library education program. PU is considered first in Asia and third in the world offering regular training for working librarians in 1915 under the supervision of Asa Don Dickinson (Kaser, 1992). This was a certificate course for working librarians, comprising a series of one month lecture and three months practical training in library work. He also authored “Punjab Library Primer” which is considered first ever textbook of library science (Kaser, 1992). The Dickinson's course remained suspended for two years after his departure from PU in 1916 and was revived in 1918. After the partition of Sub-continent in 1947, this course was again suspended for three years due to political turmoil and was revived in 1950

(Qarshi, 1992). This certificate program was raised to diploma in 1959 while in 1974 a Master's program was started. From 1915 to 1973, the classes were adjacent to the PU central library while in 1973 two were separated and independent department of Library Sciences was established. In 1996, the name of the department was changed to Department of Library and Information Science. In 2014, the name of the department and degree changed to "Information Management" (Malik & Ameen, 2020). Presently, it is called as "Institute of Information Management" (IIM) and offering three programs including a two year Master's degree, MPhil and PhD in Information Management. Master's degree program is the hallmark of the Institute. It is being offered as a morning program and a self-supporting program. Except timings and fee structure, all the other aspects of both offerings are same. Total 76 seats are available for students' enrollment. There are 72 credit hours in the program. During sessions 2018-2020 & 2019-2021, nine full-time faculty members were available along with two visiting faculty members. All full-time faculty members are PhD including 4 post-docs. Graduates of the Institute find jobs mostly in libraries, while less in information centers and archives due to lack of such organizations in the country. A few of them also get recruited in teaching cadre either in universities or colleges. The Institute has produced thousands of professionals serving throughout Pakistan and abroad. It is the only Institute in Pakistan with highest number of PhD faculty members and highest number of research publications in international and national well reputed research journals. The Institute is undergoing a transitional phase; there is a pressing need to explore the perceptions of all the stakeholders to support strategic decision within individual school and across the discipline. Students are key stakeholders and this study is an attempt to understand the students' perception of their MIM program, their motivations of seeking admission and their satisfaction with its academic and professional aspects.

Research Questions

Following research questions were devised to achieve the objective of the study:

1. What are the students' motivations of pursuing Master's program in Information Management at PU?
2. What are the students' perceptions regarding the quality of academic and professional aspects of their Master's program in Information Management at PU?
3. What are the students' future goals and plans after completing their Master's program in Information Management at PU?

Methods

The quantitative research design, based on a self-administered survey was employed. The population of the study was consisted of students from the degree program, “Master in Information Management” (MIM) at IIM, PU. The questionnaire was designed using Google Form and distributed online through WhatsApp and Facebook groups among all 113 students from two sessions (2018-2020 & 2019-2021) enrolled in the program were approached during July and August 2020. The online survey method was chosen due to locked down during COVID-19 when all the institutes were closed for containing the spread of virus. The survey questionnaire comprised demographic information, their motivations for getting enrolled in the program; their perceptions about the academic and professional aspects of the program and their future plans after completing the degree. Questionnaire was developed after reviewing the literature and particular help was taken from the studies by Cherry, Duff, Singh and Freund (2011) and Tanacković et al., (2018).

After multiple reminders, we got 105 filled questionnaires with 92% response rate. The received responses were analyzed using SPSS (version 24). Descriptive statistics were applied to see the patterns of data. The findings are presented and discussed below.

Findings

Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents by gender, session, residence location, and information or library related work experience. There were 70 (68%) female and 35 (32%) male. The overall strength of female students is also higher than male students at IIM. The participants from both sessions were almost same as 51 respondents were from the session 2018-2020 while 54 respondents were form the session 2019-2021. More students (59%) were from the urban area as compared with those form rural area (41%). A number of students (49%) reported that they had library or information related experience before getting admission in the program.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants (N- 105)

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	35	33.3

Female	70	66.7
<i>Session</i>		
2018-2020	51	48.6
2019-2021	54	51.4
<i>Residence Location</i>		
Rural	43	41
Urban	62	59
<i>Library/information related work experience</i>		
Yes	51	48.6
No	54	51.4

Reasons for Pursuing a Master's Degree in Information Management

The students were asked to indicate their “main reason for pursuing master’s program in information management”. They were provided with nine options and table 2 shows the frequency distribution of their responses. The most of the students (35.2%) considered this program as “an interesting choice of career”. “Seeking gainful employment” and “this was the only study program I could enroll” were options on the second position with same response rate of 14.3%. All the remaining options were selected by a few students ranging from 1 to 11.

Table 2

Reasons for Pursuing a Master's Degree in Information Management (N-105)

Statements	Frequency	Percentage
I thought this would be an interesting choice of career	37	35.2
Seeking gainful employment	15	14.3
This was the only study program I could enroll	15	14.3
Personal recommendation (i.e. teacher, family, friend etc.)	11	10.5
Public image and the status of the professionals in the society	8	7.6
Following my dream	7	6.7
Seeking graduate degree	6	5.7

Necessary for career advancement	5	4.8
Seeking a second career	1	1.0
Total	105	100.0

Knowledge and Skill Set

The participants were asked to give their opinion about how successfully their program was inculcating required knowledge and skills on a five-point Likert-type scale (i.e. 1=strongly disagree to 5 =strongly agree). The skill set was divided into three broader categories i.e. hard skills, generic skills and personal skills. The responses are analyzed and presented in table 3. With regard to hard skills which were related to subject knowledge and skills, analysis revealed that, the students were strongly agree that MIM program was successfully inculcation subject related knowledge and skills such as collection development and management (mean=4.12), understanding users' needs (mean=4.12), information organization & retrieval (mean=4.07). However, they were agree with the remaining asked subject knowledge and skills including information literacy, research, data base management, digital archiving and preservation skills. With regard to generic skills, the students were strongly agree that MIM program was imparting adequate technological skills (mean= 4.10) and team work abilities (mean=4.10). They agreed that the program was appropriately equipping them with other generic skills such as time and task management, problem solving, oral and written communication, leadership and critical thinking skills. As far as, personal skills were concerned, self-motivation (mean=4.18) and self-learning (mean=4.15) were on the top among all the other skills asked in three categories with the highest mean score. The overall results indicated a very positive attitude of the respondents about their IM program in terms of imparting required knowledge and skills to its students.

Table 3

<i>Knowledge and Skill Set</i>	<i>(N105)</i>	
<i>Subject Knowledge and Skills</i>	Mean	SD
Collection development and management	4.12	.863
Understanding users' needs	4.12	.781
Information organization & retrieval	4.07	.763
Information literacy skills	3.94	.853
Research	3.80	1.069

Database management	3.80	1.023
Digital archiving and preservation	3.75	1.072
<i>General Skills</i>		
Technological skills	4.10	.952
Team work	4.10	.956
Time and task management	4.00	.855
Problem solving	3.97	.945
Communication (written and oral)	3.82	.886
Leadership	3.81	.942
Critical thinking	3.79	.958
Marketing	3.67	1.035
<i>Personal Skills</i>		
Self-motivation	4.18	.998
Self-learning	4.15	.978
Soft skills	4.02	.843
Analytical thinking	3.97	.945
Adaptability	3.89	.954
Flexibility	3.88	.978
Creativity	3.83	.904

Curriculum of the Program

Though knowledge and skills are also related to curriculum, here the respondents were asked to assess the adequacy of number and range of course contents, teaching methods, practical training etc. The respondents believed that course contents were adequately challenging. The pedagogical approaches adopted to deliver the contents, range and number of core and elective courses were also adequate while amount of practical training got the least score in this regard.

Table 4

Curriculum of the Program

(N-105)

Items	Mean	SD
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Course content (e.g., lectures, discussion, readings) is intellectually challenging	3.90	.940
Teaching methods and pedagogical approach	3.80	.955
Range and number of core courses	3.73	.800
Range and number for elective courses	3.64	.833
Amount of practical training	3.12	.971

scale 1= very Inadequate, 2= Inadequate, 3=Neutral, 4= Adequate, 5= More than Adequate

Academic Quality of the Program

The students were asked to assess the academic quality of the program. The analysis of the collected data revealed that intellectual quality of the faculty was excellent while obtaining highest mean score (4.14). The quality of relationship between faculty members and students (mean=3.97), as well as academic and career advising (mean=3.92; 3.79) was considered as very good. The quality of available physical and technological infrastructure was also very good with mean score (3.93) and (3.73) respectively. The overall calculated quality of the MIM program was rated as very good.

Table 5

<i>Academic Quality of the Program</i>		(N-105)
Items	Mean	SD
Intellectual quality of the faculty	4.14	.739
Relationship between faculty members and students	3.97	.965
Availability of physical infrastructure	3.93	1.031
Quality of the academic advising	3.92	.948
Quality of the career advising	3.79	.968
Availability of technological infrastructure	3.73	1.068
Overall quality of the program	4.00	.866

Scale: 1= Poor, 2= Fair, 3= Good, 4= Very Good, 5= Excellent

Professional Aspect

The students were asked to express their feelings about the professional aspects of the program five point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. They agreed that the program was preparing them for a professional career (mean=3.90), opportunities for fostering a sense professional community (mean=3.76) and intellectual diversity (mean=3.72).

Table 6

<i>Professional Aspect</i>	<i>(N-105)</i>	
Statements	Mean	SD
Program is preparing me for a professional career	3.90	.898
Program activities foster a sense of professional community	3.76	.872
Program fosters intellectual diversity	3.72	.976

Future Plans after the Degree

The students were asked to share their future plans and goals after completing the degree. The analysis of the collected responses is presented in table 7. It was found that most of the students (53%) planned to seek employment or wanted to pursue education in this field (11.4 %). A number of students (22) shared that they would do something else such as starting their own business or preparing for Central Superior Services (CSS) exams. A very few students had their plan to change the field either for job or further education.

Table 7

<i>Future Plans after the Degree</i>	<i>(N-105)</i>	
Statements	Frequency	Percentage
Seek employment in this field	56	53.3
Do something else (i.e. preparation for CSS exams, start/run own business)	22	21
Pursue education in this field	12	11.4
Seek advancement at in my current place of employment	6	5.7
Seek employment in another field	5	4.8
Pursue education in another field right away	3	2.9
Total	105	100

Suggestions for Further Improvement in the Program

Lastly, an open ended question was asked form the students to give their suggestions for further improvement in MIM program. Almost fifty students responded to this question and gave their suggestions in one or two sentences and many of them simply write “no” in response box. The acquired data has been analyzed manually using content analysis technique. The data

has been refined and categorized into themes. Mostly students (n=21) felt the need of adding more duration to practical training (that is currently eight week practicum program to qualify the degree) and more emphasis to practical aspects of the program. Inclusion of more ICTs related contents such as web development, data science, research data management etc. into curriculum was the second highest suggestion. A few respondents emphasized on creating awareness among employers regarding the degree name. A few respondents suggested that there should be more co-curricular activities such as, seminars, guest lectures, conferences and job fairs to broaden the exposure of the students.

Discussion

The study was aimed to identify the student's perceptions about the reasons of joining the MIM program at PU. It further explored their insights regarding the quality of academic and professional aspects of the program and sought their recommendations for further improvements. The analysis revealed that mostly respondents found this program as an interesting choice of career. 'Seeking gainful employment' and 'this was the only study program' was second most frequently mentioned motivations. While seeking a second career and necessary for career advancement were the least mentioned motivational factors for pursuing the MIM program. As far as knowledge and skill set is concerned, the students were very much satisfied with the program. Overall, the students were agreed that MIM program was successfully inculcating the required hard, generic and personal skills. With regard to hard skill, the respondents were strongly agreed that their master's program was imparting knowledge and skills regarding collection development and management, understanding users' needs and information organization and retrieval. They were strongly agreed that technological skills, team work from generic skills; self-motivation, self-learning and soft skills form personal skills were being imparted to them. In relation to academic and professional aspect of the program, the findings suggest that respondents were satisfied with intellectual level of course content, teaching methods and pedagogical approach while considered the intellectual quality of the faculty as excellent. Overall, the results indicate a very positive attitude of students towards their MIM program. With respect to their future plans after completing degree, more than half students showed their interest in seeking job related to LIS profession while a few indicated that they would seek higher education in LIS. It is interesting to mention that almost 29% respondents did not show any interest or future plan in continuing this profession in any way. They were

planning to change their profession. The respondents suggested that duration of practicum should be enhanced and more emphasis should be given to practical training. Currently, MIM program has a component of internship or practicum of eight weeks. The students are placed by the Institute in some library settings where they get hand on training of functions and services. Previously, Malik and Ameen (2010) also found that the duration of practicum should be enhanced. More inclusion of ICTs related components is the need of hour due to emerging new digital formats of information. It is also quite logical to create awareness among employers regarding the degree as the Institute has changed its nomenclature recently. Malik and Ameen (2017; 2020a) believed that the change in the name of the Institute and the degree requires a thorough review of curriculum, more inclusion of ICTs elements and employers' awareness and acceptance in the job market. IIM needs to develop a comprehensive approach to market and promote the MIM program and thereby attract better students (Malik & Ameen 2020b; 2021).

The research from this study solely focused on Master in Information Management program at University of the Punjab using a survey research method. Additional research with other LIS/IM Master's degree programs at different universities in Pakistan can add more insight into literature. Additionally a longitudinal study involving other LIS schools programs of various levels (i.e. BS, Master, MPhil & PhD) in the country would be beneficial to reveal the fluctuations over the years.

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