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# Challenges, Opportunities, and Progress in Librarianship since the Great Recession: An Examination of Graduate ALA-Accredited Curricula, the Workforce, and Professional Development Trends

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**Challenges, Opportunities, and Progress in Librarianship since the Great Recession: An Examination of Graduate ALA-Accredited Curricula, the Workforce, and Professional Development Trends**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The article asserts that practical experience is a critical and too often neglected component in Master of Library and Information Science/Library and Information Studies (MLIS/LIS) graduate programs. It advocates for the necessity of enhancing professional development initiatives such as mandating internships as a condition of graduation, which will offer students a significantly greater chance of successfully transitioning from graduate study to professional employment. It investigates U.S. workforce trends from 2008-2020, which reveal the competitiveness of the field and the difficulties experienced by graduates attempting to obtain employment in the absence of concrete, hands-on, library-based experience.

**Keywords:** Great Recession, Internship, Practicum, Library Science, Employment, Curricula, workforce, professional development

## 1. Introduction

The professional role of librarians has evolved alongside and in relationship with technological

and educational developments in the areas that impact the library field. In spite of this evolution

and corresponding growth in the skill sets and subject knowledge for which librarians are responsible and that are intrinsic to professional growth in the field, public perceptions of library work and of librarians have stagnated, often to the point of regression.

The employment outlook for library program graduates has continuously fluctuated over the two decades we are examining. For example, the 2016-2017 edition of the Bureau Labor of Statistics stated that the job growth rate for librarians between 2012-2024 had been projected at 2%, which at the time was slower than the national average growth rate of 7% (Bureau Labor of Statistics, 2016-17). The recent study reveals that as of 2021, the employment outlook for librarians from 2019-2029 shows a growth rate that is 5% greater than average, which can be considered a positive development for the field (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021 B).

Nonetheless, various articles focusing on the future of employment in the library field have been similarly mixed. In 2016, *Forbes* magazine ranked a degree in Library and Information Science as one of the least-desirable degree choices because of low or non-existent growth projections (Dill, 2015). Library program graduates themselves were coming to realize that their degrees were necessary but not sufficient for obtaining professional employment, and, just as significantly, that an absence of practical experience placed them at a disadvantage in the market. It was then as it is now compulsory to ask whether these graduate programs are adequately preparing students to meet job market demands.

Studies have indicated that many Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS/LIS) curricula have not been explicitly designed with an orientation toward students' workforce readiness. A study conducted by Hall (2009), for example, touched on the need to restructure LIS curricula to match students' professional aspirations and preparedness. In particular, many

MLIS/LIS programs do not include a mandatory internship, practicum, or mentorship experience within their various concentrations of study. In the absence of mandatory internships or practica, students do not gain opportunities for becoming meaningfully connected with the realities of the library workforce skills that are articulated in job advertisements, and that are necessary for new employees who are expected to hit the ground running. A study led by Eamon C. Tewell, for example, indicated that recent graduates with no experience had only a 9.1 percent chance of obtaining an academic librarian position (Tewell, 2012).

In our study, we show that this situation has especially impacted students in online MLIS/LIS programs, whose numbers have grown sharply over the last fifteen years. Studies have pointed to a significant disconnect between online students' and on-campus students' access to professional development, networking, and interpersonal opportunities. According to Oguz (2015), "The prevalent issues online MLIS/LIS students experienced were a sense of isolation from peers and instructors, and a lack of professional development and networking opportunities with peers" (213). It is evident that MLIS/LIS graduate programs have displayed areas of weakness that require consideration and improvement.

Nonetheless, there is evidence of some very positive strides in the area of students' professional development and job-preparedness in library graduate programs. In this paper, we are focusing on the following areas: 1) Employment Trends in the field of librarianship from 2008-2020; 2) Analyzing all ALA-accredited graduate programs in 2020 that have a mandatory internship or practicum requirement; 3) A current assessment of ALA-accredited graduate schools' recent professional development initiatives.

**2. Literature Review**

A number of studies have shown that ALA-accredited curricula have struggled to effectively prepare students to meet the expectations of a continually evolving profession. Writers in the field have raised concerns about LIS programs' ability to keep up with ongoing technological and professional changes. (Hall, 2009) says, "In some ways, one has to worry that LIS programs are not evolving quickly enough to keep up with the demands of the profession, and in other respects perhaps the programs are abandoning venerable skills too quickly [17–19]" (66). Hall's own recommendation calls for "steadfast monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of the core curriculum" (66).

In 2002, Ray Irwin examined the study of Guy A. Marco (1994) titled "Demise of the American Core Curriculum." Marco's study provides an historical analysis of the changes in LIS core curricula. The study describes the difficulties of identifying the types of coursework that will most benefit students when they begin to apply for open positions. Irwin provides a comparative analysis that touches on these curricula's core frameworks. Irwin (2002) states, "Marco's concern about the content and direction of the LIS core is one of many expressed in the past decade. Most of the argument has centered not on questioning whether mandatory, common educational experiences for future information professionals are a good idea, but rather, on asserting what they should, in fact, be" (p.177).

The exploration of both current and historical research on ALA curricula has provided this study with alternative ways to dissect the issue using different variables. Studies have identified inconsistencies across all MLIS/LIS programs in their implementation of practicum-based core requirements. The result has been a lack of career-readiness in the field. Cunningham et. al. (2015) addressed this issue by raising concerns about students' preparation for the workforce both at the point of entry into the program and at the point of exit. The authors stress

that library experience before or during graduate school impacts the probability of obtaining a position post-graduation. And they emphasize that newly-graduated librarians, although they possess the requisite MLIS degree, often do not qualify for entry-level positions based on other key criteria focused largely on experience and/or preferences for candidates who are perceived as able to transition easily into a new position.   This point was further confirmed when the authors state that a quarter of their respondents noted a requirement for experience before employment in their survey responses (Cunningham et. al. (2015), p.16). Yet, as we have seen, there are no consistent standards or practices with regard to practical, professional development and internship opportunities among ALA-accredited graduate LIS programs.

Another way that researchers in the field have assessed the adequacy of MLIS/LIS program requirements is by investigating library employment advertisements. Beile et al. (2000) observed that fifty-seven percent of listed positions required previous library experience. And Tewell's (2012) article overwhelmingly demonstrates that for entry-level positions, practical experience was regarded as on par with or even more important than the required degree. He notes the fact that entry-level positions only make up approximately a quarter of library job openings, and that the majority still require previous library experience. This creates a potentially frustrating and counter-productive circumstance for recent graduates, especially ones who have never worked in a library in any capacity (Tewell 2012).

In the 2007 article *E-Education: Does an Online Degree Make a Difference to Academic Employers?* data examined by Gonzalez et al. lead them to conclude that 73 percent of employers placed experience above the degree. For academic library search committees, the article concludes, "…experience trumps education…As long as the degree is attained at an ALA-accredited program, no questions are asked" (Gonzalez et al., 2007, p. 291).

**2.1 An Assessment on the Field of Librarianship and Unemployment Trends from 2008-2020**

The Great Recession can be defined as a financial crisis that began in the United States before subsequently spreading to other countries in 2007-2008 (Duignan, B. 2019). This recession led to one of the most significant setbacks that the library profession has ever experienced, and its impact continues to be felt. Data from the *Bureau of Labor Statistics: Libraries, Archives, and other Information Services* have shown a significant fluctuation in library employment between the years 2008 and 2021 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021 A). This source identifies January of 2012 as having the second highest rate of unemployment for librarians and information specialists. At that time, the unemployment rate was 8%. This rate of unemployment in 2012 can be interpreted as following upon the 2008 recession, although it almost certainly also stems from multiple and possibly related variables: budget cuts, layoffs, and other factors. The subsequent data show a sharp drop in unemployment, culminating in a low of 1.6 in 2014. After 2014, the unemployment rate rises and falls unsteadily until 2016, when it climbs uninterruptedly and then rises sharply in 2019. In the year after the start of the pandemic in 2020, that rate rose from 3.3 to 8.3 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021 A). The data demonstrates the fluctuation and uncertainty to which employment in the MLIS/LIS field is subjected (See Appendix 1). Especially notable is the precipitous surge in unemployment in the year following the start of the pandemic. What can account for such a sudden and steep increase in the unemployment numbers? Libraries across the country pivoted from in-person to electronic materials services and lending, but is it possible that such a significant number of librarians were let go from their jobs during that time? Did the demand for library work in all its variety decline to that extent?

During the time of the recession, there is also evidence that graduates were compelled to accept part-time employment due to the unavailability of full-time positions. This reality was professionally and fiscally problematic for library graduates who were, like all people who have completed a professional degree, seeking long-term stability in the workforce (Maatta, 2010). Nevertheless, in the absence of permanent, full-time openings, graduates have been stepping into those more limited, part-time positions. Maatta and other writers have demonstrated that since the recession, graduates have frequently started their professional careers in part-time or temporary positions (Maatta 2011). Understandably, entry-level librarians have tended to view part-time positions as opportunities to "get a foot in the door" (Wilkinson, 2015).

More recent data (Allard, 2020) shows an expansion of full-time and permanent employment opportunities. However, continued unemployment levels and other variables such as gender-related compensation disparities have continued to be causes for concern. According to (Allard. S 2020) "Many indicators, such as salary levels and full-time appointments, are moving in a positive direction for the class of 2019, however there are also areas for concern, such as unemployment levels and increasing gender salary disparity" (1). Overall, both the data and the related literature make it apparent that employment rates dropped significantly over the time period of 2008-2020, and that this state of affairs continues to be a problematic issue in the field. In the same study, (Allard. S 2020) points out that the landscape of librarianship will see drastic changes in graduate support, as well as potential hiring freezes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2.2 Student Assessments: The "gap of knowledge" between graduate students and areas in librarianship**

The literature in this section explores gaps that exist between MLIS/LIS students and the demands of the field they are preparing to enter. A quantitative assessment by Sare et al. (2012)

focused on the need for LIS students to settle on specific specialties within the broad field of library work. Questionnaires given to library students asking them to identify their specific interests produced mixed results. Participants were also asked about their perception of the tenure process for academic librarianship. According to Sare, et.al (2012), "The new librarians did not appear to know what to make of tenure; it loomed on the periphery of their current professional life, and none of the librarians felt sufficiently prepared by the school or on-the-job training for resolving the ambiguities surrounding its meaning and details. The participants found the process generally frustrating" (p. 197). Although the results and open-ended participant answers were not unusual, the puzzling aspect of the study was the participants' "gap of knowledge" about the basic requirements of academic librarianship. Sare et al. (2012) concluded that lack of knowledge about differing areas of library work and the specific skill sets required may be leading to premature decisions about program concentrations and professional aims. A survey conducted by Chapman et al. (1999) titled *The GSLIS Future of the Profession Survey: Report* indicated: "50 percent of the respondents on this question answered yes, they had changed their mind about what area of librarianship they wished to pursue or which track they wished to study since enrolling in the GSLIS program." (p.5) Chapman also mentions in the study that students were simply not familiar with the different concentrations within the library profession (Chapman et al., 1999). Knowledge of these specific components is, of course**,** critical for sound, long-term decision-making about career objectives. An absence of assessment by graduate programs of their enrollees is an important factor. In a study conducted by Moran et al. (2009), the authors state: "Less attention has been paid to retention of LIS professionals at various career stages, although this is another strategy that is worthy of consideration, given the nature of the workforce challenges that lie ahead" (122). The absence of detailed evaluation of

students' employment backgrounds, skill sets, and academic standings on a semester-by-semester basis makes career decision-making and advisement ineffectual at best.

## 3. Data and Methods

In 2021, a study was conducted that reviewed a total of 63ALA-accredited library and information science curricula from the United States, Puerto Rico and Canada to determine whether schools were implementing mandatory internships as a requirement for graduation. The dataset was collected through the *Directory of ALA-Accredited and Candidate Programs in Library and Information Studies*, and programs' curriculum requirements published on the graduate program's website (American Library Association, 2020). The objective was to examine graduation requirements and to determine whether a form of internship or practicum was a component in these requirements. Graduation requirements fell into two categories: 1.) programs that required a formal internship or practicum; 2.) programs that did not incorporate such a requirement. The framework for the assessment was based on the following measures:

- The curriculum evaluation methodology determines how many graduate schools offer a mandatory internship before graduation. The data will be classified as mandatory internship: Yes or No.

- The second criterion of the curriculum assessment determines the percentage of graduate schools that do not require students to complete an internship or practicum before graduating.

## 4. Findings and Recommendations

In 2021 (figure. 1), only 16 out of 63 ALA-accredited graduate programs require a practicum/internship before graduation. The percentages of the data show that 25.4% of library MLIS/LIS graduate programs were found to require mandatory internships or practica as a graduation requirement. The remaining 74.6% ALA-accredited schools provide students with alternative options such as practicum, internships, a thesis, or capstone projects.

During the time we worked on this paper, two programs elevated practical experience from elective to mandatory. Other MLIS/LIS programs have very detailed practical experience requirements, involving signed contracts, a specific number of hours, and a final project or portfolio. Furthermore, some schools even list locations from which previous graduates obtained practical experience or future employment.

**Figure 1:** 2021 ALA-Accredited Graduate Schools in the United States, Puerto Rico and Canada Assessment of Mandatory Internship, Field Work, or Practicum Requirement for Graduation
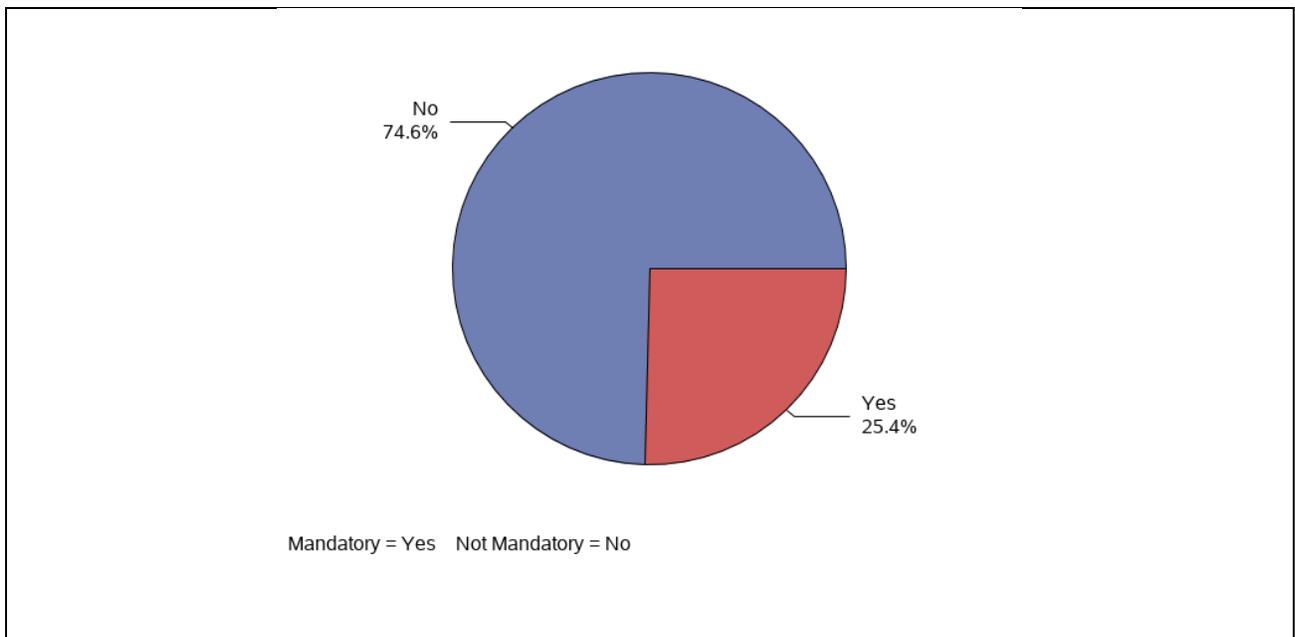


## 4.1 ALA-Accredited Library Graduate Schools' Approaches to Professional Development: Ideals and Opportunities

Current literature suggests that incorporating practica increases students' chances of obtaining employment. An assessment conducted by Orolando Duffus and the University of North Carolina-Greenboro Libraries on Reference Internship programs Library Information Students states: "Eighty-three percent of respondents felt that the program helped them develop skills that made them highly competitive on the job market" (Duffus 2017, 260). Furthermore, 95% of

students in this internship program were employed in public and academic libraries (Duffus, 2017). This study also indicated the UNC-Greensboro reference interns earned higher than average regional salary of $42,390 (Duffus, 2017).

Graduate library programs have become aware of the importance of promoting and making specific provisions for workforce-specific experiences for their students. An example of a library graduate school that has made strides toward developing course-based learning with emphasis on workplace practices is the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) and the University of Information Faculty internship program. Stevenson, S., & Hannaford, J. (2019) discuss Workplace-Integrated-Learning (WIL), which is described as "experimental learning in the 21st century" (p.235). The program involves a paid competitive internship that concludes with a formal assessment prior to graduation. Stevenson, S., & Hannaford, J. (2019) describes it in the following way: "In the fall of 2016, we developed a set of assessment tools to evaluate program outcomes and as another means of communication between the library administration, its interns, and the iSchool. We developed pre- and post-internship surveys, an exit interview protocol with the library's HR department and supervisor focus groups" (p.237). After the students completed the Workplace-Integrated-Learning program, they were asked to reflect on their goals related to gaining job experience in professional settings. The first question posed in the survey was: "Now that you have completed the program, please reflect back on your original goals. Do you feel that they were met: Yes? Partially? No?" 77% of respondents felt "yes" their original goals had been met; 23% indicated partial fulfillment; and no one reported that their goals had not been met" (Stevenson, S., & Hannaford, J. 2019, p.237). Overall, the approaches mentioned in Stevenson, S., & Hannaford, J. (2019) demonstrate the need to integrate concrete job experience that is structured around student coursework, major concentrations, and individual evaluations by

faculty, human resources personnel, and library administration. All these components combine to enhance the employability of students in MLIS/LIS programs.

**4.2 A Case for Mandating Practical Experience as a Requirement for Graduation**

In today's complex and competitive professional environment, practical experiences are crucial for securing long-term library employment. Literature dating from 2012 to 2020 indicates that this lack of experience is a cause for concern. In the publication by Shontz, P. K., & Murray, R. A. (2012). *What Do Employers Want? A Guide for Library Science Student*, Clint Chamberlain states:

> "To be honest the lack of knowledge and experience that some recently-minted MLS grads bring to the table is shocking. It seems as though some students emerge from their graduate programs with little idea of what day-to-day life in a library setting is like. Students who have some kind of practical library experience will rise to the top of the resume heap when applying for jobs" (19).

Library curricula have often been criticized for being too theoretical. A study conducted by Goodsett, M., & Koziura, A. (2016) states explicitly that students were seen to favor practical experience over theory. Goodsett, M., & Koziura, A. (2016) states, "An overwhelming number of respondents commented on the value of obtaining practical experience during library school, even saying that library school should be structured around obtaining practical experience rather than learning theory and concepts" (p.712.). Further studies by Dillon, A., & Norris, A. (2005) indicated that the quality of ALA-accredited graduate programs should be evaluated based on the presence of *both* practical and theoretical requirements.

A strong emphasis on practical engagement for work-related skills and initiatives is

highly desirable before graduation (Loughridge & Sutton, 1988). As far back as 1988,

Loughridge & Sutton commented on the importance of pre-library school experience, which,

they were certain, made a profound impact on students' experience when enrolling in the

Sheffield (UK) library studies program. They wrote: "One of the entrance requirements for the

MA Librarianship programme at Sheffield is that all candidates must have had at least one year's

practical work experience in a library or information service, a requirement which the

Transboundary Group report recommended for all postgraduate programmes (12)" (pp.264-265.)

Furthermore, the study indicated that 90 percent of respondents regarded this practical

experience as advantageous preparation for their course at the University of Sheffield

(Loughridge & Sutton, 1988). Subsequent studies indicated that the value of practical experience

far outstrips the value of strictly curriculum-based experiences such as portfolios, independent

studies, or theses (Rathbun-Grubb, S. 2016.) Rathbun-Grubb's study specifies that early career

success correlates with practical experiences and strengthens the core qualities of future library

job candidates.   In a statistical analysis of LIS survey respondents, the authors demonstrated that

of 80% of respondents who completed an internship (n = 2581), 46% were required by their

program to complete it, and 67% received academic credit for the work experience." (Rathbun-

Grubb, 2016, 47). According to the study, many MLIS/LIS students gravitated toward internship

opportunities. Percell, J., et. al (2018) states, "Pairing hands on experience with classroom

learning could help MLIS students understand how the theoretical background of MLS/LIS can

serve as a springboard for informed decision-making and service. Explicitly asking students to

let our professional core values drive the experiences they have in their MLIS/LIS programs has

the potential to better integrate them into the field and motivate them to continue improving their

communities long after graduation" (p.105).

**5. Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation we encountered was in the form of not having 2020 unemployment data from the two Bureau Labor of Statistics. Nonetheless, we succeeded in accomplishing the purpose of the study, which was to examine ALA-accredited programs and employment trends from a 12-year span starting from the 2008 recession to 2020. We conducted an extensive amount of research from the start of our work in 2015,  and could not find any significant changes to the curricula, internships, or field work related to ALA-accredited programs that were mentioned in this study.

**6. Conclusion**

Our study shows that MLIS/LIS graduate programs must continue to enhance professional development initiatives and embed them into program curricula in order to improve students' future employment opportunities. It is vital, therefore, that programs begin to more vigorously and consistently provide opportunities for practical experience. It is startling to realize that in library and information science education, only a quarter of ALA-accredited programs require some sort of practical experience for graduation. The alignment of student goals with internship experiences must become a stronger priority (Bird, N. J., Chu, C. M., & Oguz, F. 2015).

It should be noted that our study in this paper has determined that the authors cited were not able to correlate high unemployment trends during the recession with components that were absent in MLIS/LIS program.  The factors that have contributed to graduates' inability to secure full-time employment have been multi-faceted, and it has not been the objective of this paper to account for all of them. However, studies we have cited point to notable absences of uniformity among MLIS/LIS curricula. While students pursuing degrees in other professional fields find a

high degree of standardization among the respective curricula in programs across the U.S., with definitive prerequisites and course sequences, no such uniformity exists in MLIS/LIS curricula. It is imperative, therefore, that MLIS/LIS programs improve employment prospects for *all* students by revising their curricular requirements to include mandatory courses focusing on professional development.

Further findings show that library graduate programs are heading in the right direction. (Stevenson, S., & Hannaford, J. 2019). It is hopeful that ALA-accredited graduate programs will continue to take steps toward developing stronger practical requirements embedded into their curricula, increasing the likelihood that students will succeed in a complex and ever-evolving work environment.

**APPENDIX 1:** U.S. Bureau Labor of Statistics Household Data Annual Averages: 26. Unemployed persons by industry, class of worker, and sex. Libraries, Archives, and other Information Services 2008-2020.
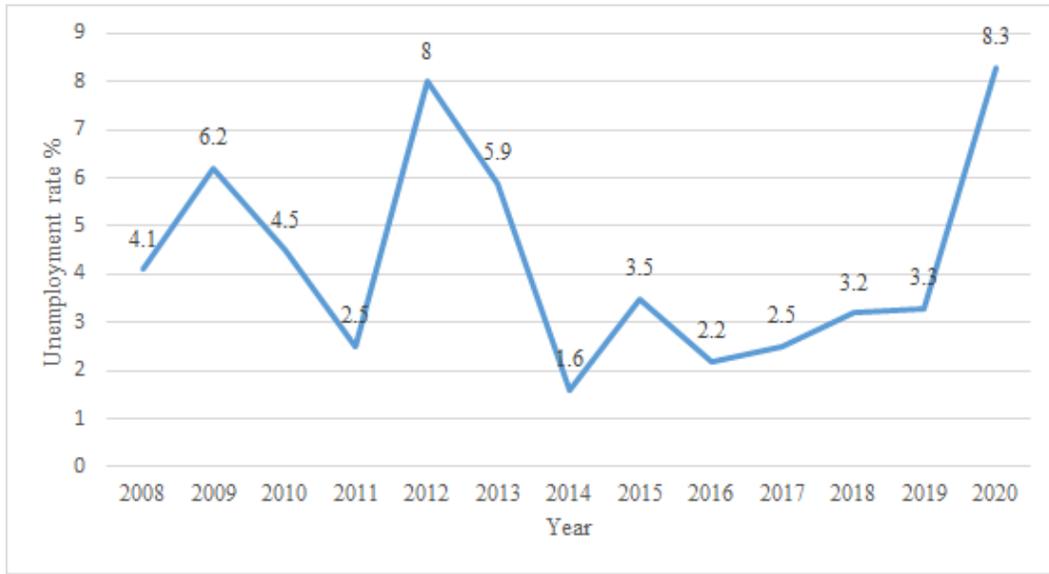
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