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Abstract

This paper reports findings of three focus group interviews conducted to obtain students' perception about MPhil (Master of Philosophy) leading to PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) program in Library and Information Science (LIS) at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

The results represent four open-ended questions of discussion that comprise, (a) students' opinion about the admission policy and procedure of this program, (b) students' reflection on program of the study, (c) students' view on the coursework curriculum and its relation with writing a research dissertation, and (d) students' opinion about the availability of required facilities.

The key findings reveal that this academic program is a great opportunity for the LIS professionals. Being in initial stage, it has certain skill related challenges ahead. Hence, preparing LIS students for the future leadership roles does involve teaching them technology skills, practical research skills, communication skills, and management and leadership skills. Further, the availability of required facilities needs improvement.

Keywords: Library and Information Science education, Master of Philosophy (LIS) program, Doctor of Philosophy (LIS) program, University of the Punjab (Pakistan).

Introduction

The impact of emerging trends of global information society on higher education is apparent. It has influenced significantly the policy making, governance, organization, content, and instructional methods in higher education. There is a need to combine global tendencies adapting to the local situations. It is noted that higher LIS programs have taken these challenges into consideration and have been revising to stay alive in the competitive environment of a contemporary global information society.

Library education in the territories now constituting Pakistan began in 1915 with the arrival of Asa Don Dickinson, an American Librarian and student of Melvil Dewey. He was appointed as Librarian by University of the Punjab to organize a properly functioning library at the University. Mr. Dickinson realized the need for formal education and training during his stay at the University and initiated a certificate course in modern library methods. This was a postgraduate daytime course, but undergraduate working librarians including non-matriculates were also admitted to it (Khurshid, 1992). Before leaving the University in 1916 he wrote the first library science textbook "Punjab Library Primer."

Before its revival in 1950, this course remained suspended owing to messy partition conditions of British India around 1947. Hence, an attempt to raise the course to diploma level could not be materialized in 1946 (Khurshid, 1992). This certificate course was upgraded to one-year diploma in 1959 and then to one-year post-diploma master's degree in 1974 with revision in curriculum and change of nomenclature to library science. University Grants Commission (UGC; now Higher Education Commission 'HEC,' Pakistan) formed Curriculum Revision Committee (CRC) in Library and Information Science (LIS) in 1979. The University adopted annual system and curriculum for its Master of LIS program in 1980 as proposed by the CRC (Qarshi, 1992).

In 2000 both diploma and master's programs were merged into two-year continuous Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program. In 2002, the MLIS program adopted semester system and courses accordingly as proposed by the CRC.

As per HEC guidelines, MPhil leading to PhD program with coursework was initiated in 2005 after two of the faculty members of the Department obtained their PhD in LIS. The

Department has so far produced thousands of LIS professionals serving across Pakistan and overseas.

Keeping in view the emerging trends, the nature of LIS discipline and profession has also changed to accommodate the needs of diverse situations, public and private enterprises, and a variety of specialization tracks. In this 21st century, the LIS domain has developed systems and tools to meet the users' needs of both environments, physical and digital. Consequently, the name of the Department changed from 'Library and Information Science' (LIS) to 'Information Management' (IM) in 2014.

Literature Review

Literature review reveals that studies have been conducted on obtaining students' perception of academic programs using opinion-based studies. One worth-mentioning work in this region is by Varalakshmi (2006) who reported that there were two influential groups to be considered when analyzing the curriculum of any educational program. First group comprises LIS students, who wish to work in libraries and knowledge management centers. If they do not get the relevant education they do not get promotion. The other group represents library employers, who are concerned about the all-round skills of the graduates from LIS departments.

Another remarkable study by the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) during the period 1998-2000 examines the state of LIS curricula in the United States. The study based on students' feedback focusing curriculum evaluation practices by LIS schools concludes that it is critical and valuable for all LIS schools to implement curriculum evaluation that provides immediate feedback to the faculty to make modifications (Kellogg, 2000).

Bates (1998) indicates that every LIS student should study several courses in which they have to work in a small group and get evaluated as a group. Let the students decide how to allocate the credit. The professor's role is to evaluate not only the work produced but also intangibles, such as how well the group members worked as a team.

Swigger (1991) claim that questionnaires ask library school faculty and/or library directors for their subjective assessment of the schools focusing more on reputation of the programs than

their quality. According to Childers (1989), the library and information field has experienced numerous demonstrations, field tests, and pilot studies intended to assess the feasibility and likely impact of new programs. Many of these investigations have been buried in local situations and have never been published so it is difficult to assess their impact.

Liebscher (1998) concludes that LIS educators have an obligation to ensure that their graduates are competent in research. He recommends that inclusion of an additional research methodology course to the core curriculum would be beneficial. Hildenbrand (1999) urges that LIS programs, professional organizations, and individual libraries and information centers should be encouraged to collect and publish data, even if they only reflect the local scene or provide a case study. Students would learn research design and statistical analysis as well as the politics of the profession.

In the light of gaps as identified in literature review and experts' opinion regarding importance of measuring the impact of an LIS research program, the present study has been designed.

Objectives of the Study

This paper measures the impact of an MPhil leading to PhD program in LIS by seeking students' perception. The objectives of this study are to:

- evaluate the impact of coursework and curriculum of the program,
- know the extent to which the program is helpful in learning research skills, and
- make an overall assessment of this program.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted initially as partial requirement of the course on 'Qualitative Research in LIS' in 2008 as student of MPhil leading to PhD program. Since the target population was a small group, qualitative research technique employing focus group discussion was preferred owing to its benefit of quick data collection with deeper insights for analysis. The principal researcher himself worked as moderator and took notes of the discussion on paper at the spot. Regarding this technique of research, Widdows (1991) asserted:

It is a qualitative research technique involving repeated interviews with small groups of eight to twelve people with the intent of identifying the key concerns or wishes of the groups. He further stated that the focus group interviews have strengths and weaknesses not found in quantitative research techniques. Benefits include the fact that participants tend to give open/frank information, that the technique is fairly economical, and that the whole procedure can be carried out quickly. (pp. 352-357)

Krueger provided further endorsement (cited in Meltzer, 1995):

There are several positive reasons to use focus group for information seeking. `First, focus groups bring people together in a social setting where their ideas can be shared by others. The setting is conducive to free and open discussion. Second, the moderator of such a group can pursue ideas that arise in the course of discussion, follow-up that could not possibly occur through the use of printed surveys. Third, the results of focus groups are framed in lay terminology making them easily understood by others. The fourth and fifth advantages are low cost and the results can be obtained quickly. (pp.400-422)

The principal author worked in three phases. Phase-I involves preliminary preparation of conducting the interviews. Phase-II and III comprise the interviews and analysis of the information collected during the focus group discussions respectively. The principal researcher conducted three focus groups in the LIS Department with students of MPhil leading to PhD program, session 2005, 2006 and 2008 in the months of April and May, 2007 and February, 2009 respectively. The total number of participants in all focus groups was eighteen. The principal researcher is also a student of session 2006 who acted as moderator in these focus group discussions. The notes taking technique was used to collect the opinion data at the spot.

Author asked following four open-ended questions to the participants regarding subject program:

1. What is your opinion about the current admission policy and procedure?
2. What is your reflection on the program of the study?
3. What is your view about the coursework curriculum and its relation with writing a research dissertation?

4. What is your opinion about the availability of required facilities (library resources, computer lab, and so on)?

Findings of the Study

Analysis showed various levels of satisfaction and concerns of students. These are related to admission matters, coursework, curriculum, and availability of relevant physical facilities. The students' perception is analyzed as follows:

Admission Policy

All groups were overall satisfied with the admission criteria. However, they showed concern about the dual entry test. They argued that there should be only one test either from National Testing Service (NTS) or from the Department itself. The entry interview conducted by the Department before finalizing the admission is a good practice. The participants suggested that admission policy or procedure should encourage the fresh graduates instead of the older ones except faculty.

Program of the Study

The participants suggested inclusion of more practical content such as presentations from students, knowledge transfer through interaction with LIS researchers, online availability of courseware on the web, assigning the research projects to students, and participation in conferences and workshops here and abroad.

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion about methods of teaching adopted for theoretical and practical content. All groups unanimously agreed that the faculty members were excellent and helpful and they exhibited good understanding of their subject structure, analysis of current practices in information handling, active learning, and critical thinking skills. One group worried that despite teachers' hard pursuing, the results of students' exam were not as expected by faculty. It was stated that faculty members

Students were satisfied with the evaluation criteria of students learning through assignments, written exam, and presentations. However, they showed some reservations about testing students' memorization of descriptive questions. They suggested logical and analytical reasoning questions in exams instead.

Coursework Curriculum

The students were asked to give their opinion about the curriculum they studied and its applicability to their present job/work environment and future needs. The responses indicated that the curriculum was well designed to cater to the current needs. However, the participants suggested inclusion of recent advances and trends in LIS with more emphasis on research-related activities and practical aspects. They were of the view that old library science concepts in course contents (e.g. as given by Shera and Ranganathan) should be replaced with new ones. The groups proposed development of certain skills in students through coursework, such as research, interpersonal, social, leadership, communication, computing, and professional.

Furthermore, around 80% students opinionated that one course should be taught by one teacher, and may not be divided into two. The participants gave diversified opinions about contents related to IT knowledge and skills in curriculum. About one half of students apprised the syllabus as adequate for becoming knowledgeable and proficient in IT, while the other half suggested inclusion of or more advanced practice of research software packages, e.g. SPSS, AMOS, MS Access, Weka, EndNote, NVivo, LaTeX, and other packages, e.g. Koha, Caliber, DSpace, Greenstone, and so on.

Physical Facilities

The students' opinion about library facilities and available resources was mostly positive. Their opinions are appended below:

Library was rich in resources and collection was user-centered. Most students found library as noisy. They wanted separate area for study where they could meet in groups to discuss class assignments or study for exams. Some observed that library material was not well organized and they were not in favor of separate sections for textbooks and fresh arrivals. They suggested merging textbooks and fresh arrivals into one general stack with open wooden shelf system in lieu of steel cupboards. Only the jackets (or cover photocopy) of fresh arrivals should be displayed on boards. They argued that it is difficult to determine which book is a textbook and which is not and also it may not be possible that three cupboards full of books are all textbooks.

A student after consulting computer catalog, first looks in general stack, then in fresh arrivals and finally finds the book(s) in textbook section and vice versa. Sometimes the students of MPhil and PhD who are also senior library professionals are unable to locate a book without the help of library staff. If it is necessary to keep real textbooks separate then the textbooks of MLIS and MPhil/PhD may not be merged. Several students criticized library employees as apathetic but in general their reaction to library staff was quite positive. The students demanded OPAC, automated circulation, and longer library hours. As a whole the participants observed that the Departmental Library was not reflecting what they studied in coursework. The Library should represent the best example aligned with students' coursework curriculum.

Students' opinion about computer lab facilities was moderately satisfactory. Their demand the provision of:

- A separate lab facility for MPhil and PhD students with latest computing equipment.
- Laptop computers to each student for research work.
- Access to HEC online databases off-campus as well.
- Wi-Fi Internet facility in student hostels as well.

Conclusion

The study indicated that preparing students for the future involve teaching them technology skills, practical research skills, communication skills, and management and leadership skills. It is a known fact that the LIS schools in developing countries are being affected by unresolved issues such as identity and sustainability crises, scarcity of financial resources, unsustainable education policies, and heterogeneous curriculum. These schools have to overcome such limitations and work together towards achieving excellence. The existing Program would become at par with developed countries' programs after eliminating some procedural and system delays. Although the program is in infancy, it is proving to be productive as the students are contributing to research in a more professional and befitting manner. The Department has been successful in producing a research team. This team has contributed national and international papers more than all combined papers of other LIS schools in Pakistan. The Program has also enhanced students' professional identity.

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