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Information Science Study Program Through the Eyes of Students: The Study into Perceptions and Experiences of Graduate Students at the University in Osijek, Croatia

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Introduction

Library and information science (LIS) is a discipline that has been undergoing a significant transformation for some time. At the global level, policy makers and other stakeholders agreed that the process of curriculum design and development needs to be more evidence-based and systematic. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) launched the Future of Education and Skills 2030 project with the goal to address the issue of competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes and values) students need in today's society as well the issue of designing learning environments that can nurture such competences (OECD, 2019). In the area of European higher education, the European Commission has issued a number of policy documents relevant for all those creating and planning educational programs and competences for the modern society (European Commission, 2019; European Commission, 2020). At the professional level, a number of professional associations and bodies such as IFLA (2022) and American Library Association (ALA, 2021) have been defining (and constantly revisiting) the lists of core knowledge, skills and competences for library and information professionals working in the modern society.

Theoretical framework

As LIS educational institutions plan and design new educational programs and curricula it is necessary to bear in mind that those programs constantly need to be evaluated, and consequently changed and modified to address the needs of contemporary stakeholders (policy makers, professional bodies, but most important ones among them being students and employers). Although there are quite a number of papers on student motivation for enrolling LIS programs of study (Ard et al. 2006; Dukić 2019), the papers on student evaluation/perception of their LIS study

programs are not that common. Cherry et al. (2011) conducted a four-year study of master's students enrolled in the Master of Information program at the University of Toronto and found out that only 34.1% rated the overall quality of the academic program as excellent or very good whereas 55.6% agreed or strongly agreed that the program was preparing them for a professional career. In the follow-up research conducted at six Canadian universities (Cherry, Freund and Duff 2013), the authors found that 90% of respondents believed that the program they attended provided them with education that facilitated growth and development and the mean satisfaction rating for the education received in the program was 6.6 (on a 10-point scale). While researching LIS experience of students enrolled in the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University Dow (2011) found that students with different educational backgrounds had different views of their LIS programs. The students in Thailand think that LIS curriculum should put more emphasis on digital technology (83%), followed by professional and practical experience (78%) (Ammarukleart, Wimolsittichai, and Timakum 2021). A Latvian research on student perceptions of program quality at the Department of Information and Library Studies of the University of Latvia (Holma and Pakalna 2007) found that the mean course quality rating was 8 (on a 10-point scale) and that 78% of respondents would recommend others to enroll into the program. In their research of undergraduate student perceptions of LIS programs in Croatia and Turkey Faletar Tanacković et al. (2018) discovered that the majority of respondents (65% for Croatian and 57% for Turkish students) thought that the LIS training should include more practical training than instruction.

This paper presents findings on graduate students' perceptions of their graduate program (LIS, Information Technology and Publishing) at the Department of Information Sciences of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Osijek, Croatia, which offers accredited undergraduate (3 years) and graduate study (2 years) programs in three specializations: Library and Information Science, Publishing and Information Technology.

Research questions & Methodology

The aim of the study was to understand how graduate students at the Department of Information Sciences of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Osijek, Croatia, perceive the quality of their study program.

The study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students rate the quality of their study program?
2. How satisfied are students with the competences they received by the program?
3. How can study program be improved?
4. Are there any differences in opinions and ratings (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3) between currently enrolled and graduated students?

The study was carried out by anonymous online survey in the period between November-December 2021. In the survey, students were asked to rate the program of study according to its various attributes (learning outcomes, competences, practical work, internship abroad, elective courses, quality of library collection, quality of teaching, teacher expertise, etc.) as well as to rate the competences (communication skills, learning skills, digital competences, social and civic competences) obtained through the program. In addition, the students were asked to convey their opinion about how well the program prepares them for the market requirements.

The results were analyzed by the software package SPSS.

Research Results & Discussion

Table 1 gives the demographic data about our sample. The survey was filled out by 76 respondents: 34 students were enrolled in the graduate program at the Department of Information Sciences in Osijek, and 42 were students who already graduated from the Department.

In the sample dominated female respondents, and those that specialized in LIS and IT, pure LIS or LIS and Publishing.

Table 1. Sample demographic data

Status	N(%)
currently enrolled	34 (44.7)
graduated	42 (55.2)
Gender	
Male	18 (23.7)
Female	53 (69.7)
Unwilling to say	5 (6.6)
Field of study / specialization	
LIS	20 (26.3)
LIS and IT	24 (31.6)
LIS and Publishing	19 (25.0)
IT and Publishing	10 (13.2)
Publishing and Croatian language and history	3 (3.9)

Figures 1 to 3 illustrate respondents' opinions regarding various LIS, IT and Publishing program attributes. As opposed to IT and Publishing, currently enrolled students of LIS are more critical on all accounts toward the program than the respondents who already graduated (Figure 1). When it comes to IT and Publishing, the graduated students are not always more positive than currently enrolled as is the case with LIS. For example, both IT and Publishing graduated students believe

that learning outcomes and core content covered by the program do not meet the employers' requirements (Figures 2 and 3). Since 76.2% (n=32) of graduated students in our sample is either working in the (related) profession, or worked in the past and had the opportunity to 'test' the learning outcomes, their (positive/negative) opinions are extremely relevant for our study.

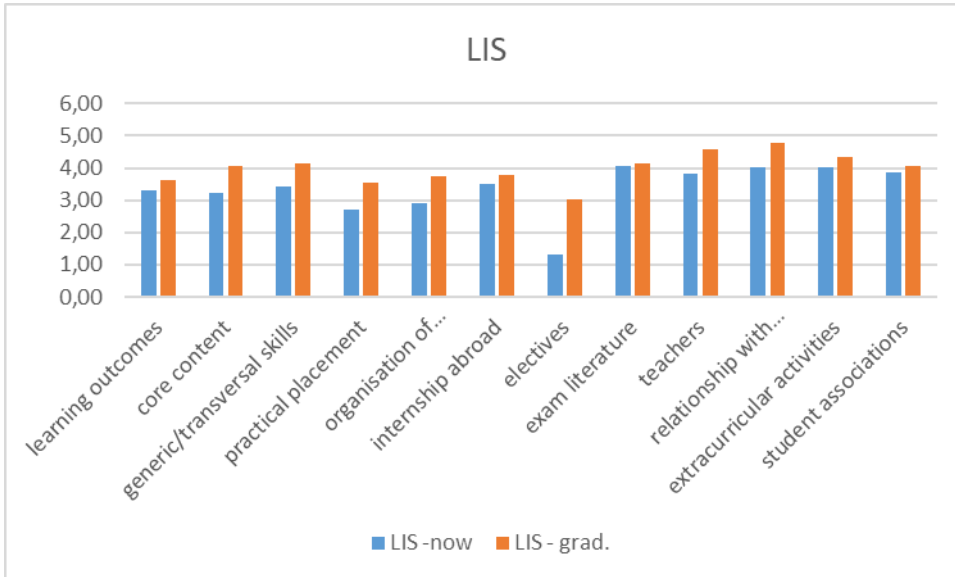


Figure 1. LIS program attribute rating according to currently enrolled and graduated students

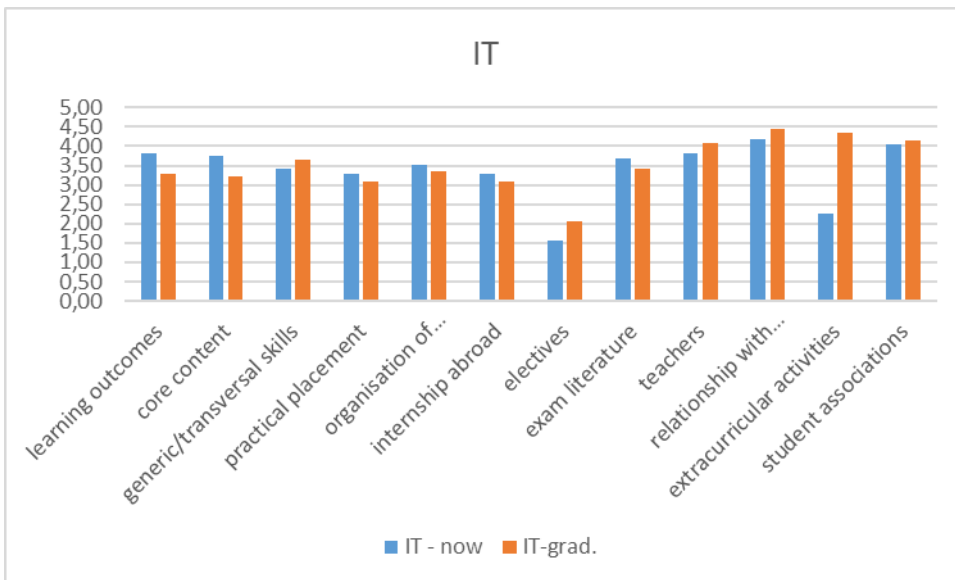


Figure 2. IT program attribute rating according to currently enrolled and graduated students

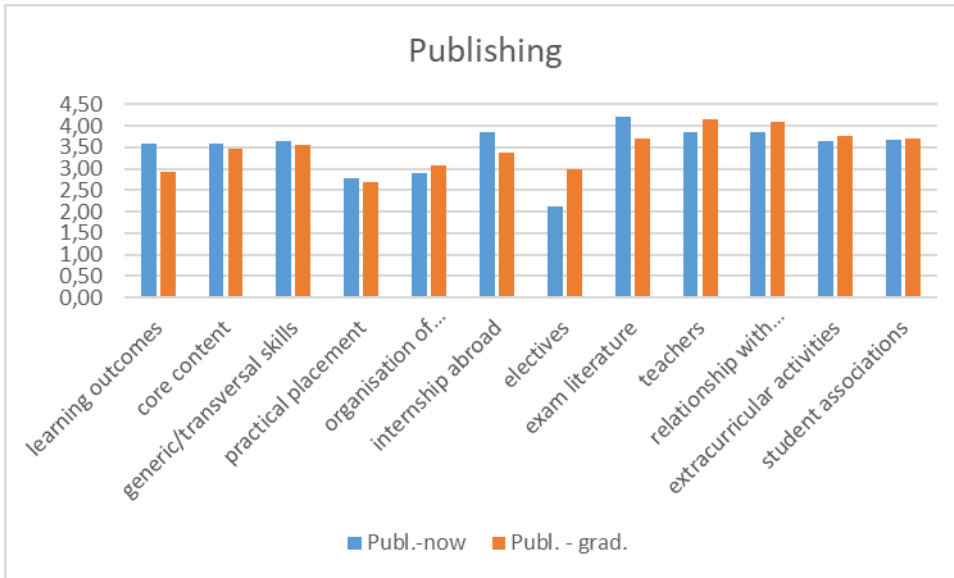


Figure 3. Publishing program attribute rating according to currently enrolled and graduated students

Figure 4 offers respondents' rating of competences acquired during their study at the Department of Information Sciences. Once again, graduated students are more positive and their rating is more favorable for almost all competences (apart for social and civic competences) than the rating of currently enrolled students.

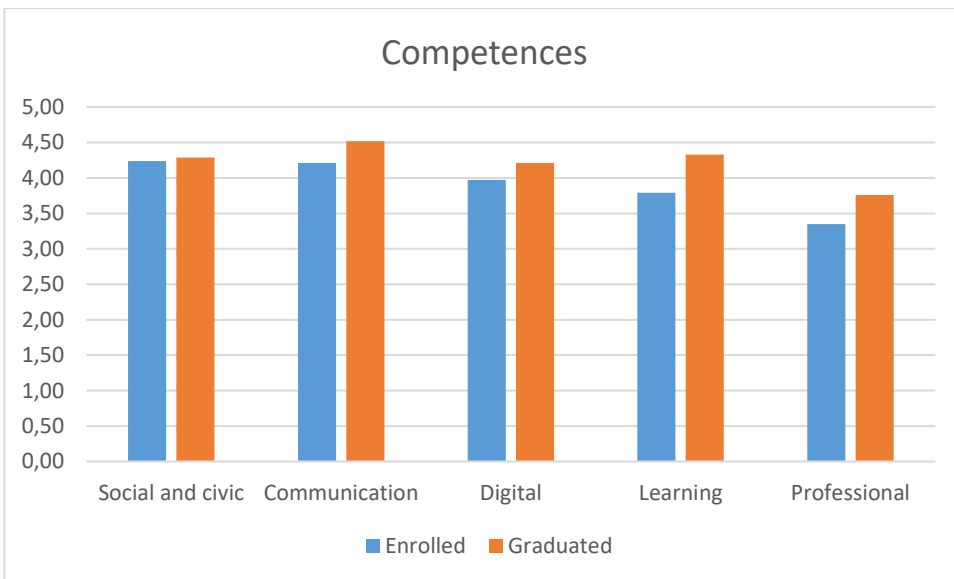


Figure 4. Competence rating in the sample – enrolled vs graduated students

Majority of enrolled students would enroll in the same program if they had to do it again (n=20, 58.8%), but a fairly large number of students would also choose another program (n=14, 41.2%). Graduated students, again, are more satisfied with the chosen profession – 76.2% (n=32) would choose the same program if they had to do it again, and only 23.8% (n=10) respondents would choose to study something else.

These are preliminary findings which will be expanded in the full paper.

Conclusions

Presented findings offer insight into the students' perception and satisfaction with the study program. These are preliminary findings which will be expanded in the full paper.

The paper presents an important contribution to understanding of students' perceptions of the study program at the Department of Information Sciences at Osijek University and will be a useful resource in future redesign of that graduate program.

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