

## TRACING GRADUATES TO ASCERTAIN CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper describes the study of 26 past graduates of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), at the University of Malaya in order to find out the relevance of the content of the MLIS programme as well as the degree of satisfaction graduates feel about the programme. Description focuses on graduates' (a) place of work; (b) work history; (c) work descriptions and responsibilities; (d) level of satisfaction with the programme undertaken at the Faculty; and (e) the perceived relevance of courses undertaken in the programme to their current work place. Graduates job history falls into four categories: those who used the MLIS degree to obtain their first job; those who continue to work in the government sector after graduation; those who continue to work in the private sector and those who switch sectors after graduation. Graduates worked in a variety of posts drawing salaries of between RM1000 to RM4000 per month. Those who worked in library and information related work describe their job as developing collections, administration, preparing bibliographies, cataloguing, managing loans, readers services, library education and automation. Those who work in other areas indicated that the MLIS programme has made them more able in finding and locating needed information. Graduates are satisfied with the courses in the MLIS programme especially in the more practical oriented courses such as Organisation of Information, Information Sources and Services, Information Retrieval, and Computer Applications in Library and Information Systems. Graduates indicate their perceived usefulness of information science related courses.*

**Keywords:** Tracer study; Master of Library and information science; Graduate satisfaction survey; Graduate employment.

### INTRODUCTION

It is essential for any programme of study to constantly evaluate its curriculum to ensure that its content remains relevant, of high quality and is in tune with the demand of the job market. (Peng and Zhang, 1997). One of the ways institutions do this is through tracer studies and this is recommended to be carried at least a year after students graduated (Kumar, 1991). Ideally, the target students should not be too long on the job so as to achieve an effective tracer feedback since it is often difficult to remember courses taken up to 10 years previously (Loughbridge, 1990). Furthermore, tracer studies could indicate how far students from a particular

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programme could occupy jobs from outside their main domain. Genoni, Exon and Farrelly's (2000) tracer study found that the graduates from the MLIS programme at Curtin University of Technology, Australia were occupying jobs in sectors outside the realm of information work. This was also found by Ocholla (2000) in a tracer study of graduates from a South African university programme. Tracer studies would also highlight which areas of library and information work are most in demand. Latham, Burnett and Burnett (1996) found that most graduates from the library and information field from Florida State University worked in Information and Communication Technology fields. A tracer study would also indicate the employing sector, whether it is public, private or academic (Ocholla, 2000; Moahi, 1999; Rugambwa, 1998). The question of mobility is also captured in tracer studies. Loughbridge, Oates and Speight (1996) had mapped job destinations of the Sheffield MA graduates and found that academic and special libraries were becoming the main source of employment and less have gained employment in the public and government libraries. All the studies discussed above are mainly programme centred.

In order to correct this imbalance, tracer studies have begun to include student satisfaction questions. The study carried out by the University of Sheffield (Loughbridge, Oates and Speight, 1996) found high satisfaction rate among their MA graduates. Aina and Moahi (1999) found that 74% of their respondents (former students of Botswana Library School) indicated being satisfied with their library work and indicated that their training had prepared them to work in the various jobs in book stores and as records managers, information brokers, indexers, information system managers, database managers as well as editors. This was also found by Rugambwa (1998) among his M.Sc Information Studies graduates who were working in research, consultancy corporations and publishing houses. This high satisfaction rate concurs with other earlier studies (Onadiran, 1988 at Ahmadu Bello University and Alemna, 1991, 1993 at the Department of Library and Archival Studies, University of Ghana). If there were unemployment, it was voluntary due mainly to family commitments (Detlefsen and Olson, 1990).

Past students' perception of the relevance of the programme that they have followed previously have also been the focus of some tracer studies. The earlier studies have indicated the relevance of subjects such as cataloguing and classification (Alemna, 1991, 1993; Kisiedu, 1993). Later studies have indicated a wider range of subjects perceived as relevant. The respondents in Aina and Moahi's study (1999) felt that Marketing of Information, Research Methods and Information Technology were the most relevant core subjects and were relevant to their work place. The respondents have chosen Information Retrieval as a relevant elective subject and offered suggestions for the inclusion of other subjects such as Publishing, Conservation and Storage, Statistics, the Economics and Budgeting for Libraries. Most respondents also preferred a balance between theory and practice. The past graduates of an African Information Studies School indicated the following courses relevant as core subjects:

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Introduction to Information Science, Information Systems and Services, Information Analysis, Analysis and Design of Information System and Services as well as the Dissertation (Rugambwa, 1998). Relevant electives were Library Automation, Geographic Information System and Business or Industrial Information Systems and Services. Some studies have revealed changes in the perception of relevance as respondents worked for longer years or move jobs. The respondents in the study undertaken by Loughbridge, Oates and Speight (1996) felt that the subjects found relevant for their first jobs were also relevant for subsequent jobs, but some subjects became more so in their subsequent jobs. For example, practical computer use as well as information sources were more relevant for their first jobs but management and information sources continued to be relevant in their subsequent jobs.

No reported tracer study has been carried out in Malaysia. The studies by Fuziah, Indahshah and Mohd. Sharif (1993) and Abrizah dan Edzan (2001) were institution centred, whereby courses identified as relevant were based on either institution's feedback or comparing curriculum content with published recommended standards. This paper attempts to present the viewpoints of selected graduates from the Master of Library and Information Science programme at the University of Malaya.

#### **THE TRACER STUDY**

This paper describes an exploratory study of past graduates of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) at the University of Malaya. As the University has obtained the ISO 9001: 2000 certification for its teaching, learning and research, faculties are required to carry out tracer studies to ensure relevance of curriculum content offered to students. Thus, this is an early attempt to find out the relevance of the content of the MLIS programme as well as the degree of satisfaction graduates feel about the programme. Description will focus on graduates' (a) place of work; (b) work history; (c) work descriptions and responsibilities; (d) level of satisfaction with the programme undertaken at the Faculty; and (e) the perceived relevance of courses undertaken in the programme to their current work place.

The MLIS programme was first offered at the University of Malaya in 1988. This programme was discontinued due to the lack of qualified teaching staff but was revived in 1992 with an allocation for four teaching posts. The degree was initially designed to cover a two-year programme with a dissertation as a compulsory component. The 12 credit dissertation was subsequently made optional in 1996. Up to 2003, the programme has produced 93 graduates, 13 of whom are non-Malaysians from countries such as Sri Lanka, Sudan and China. The students were traced through various means such as getting their contact numbers from lecturers, from current students of the programme who knew past graduates, searching the Internet, the telephone directory and administrative records kept at the Faculty. Problems occur

especially when graduates have moved jobs or address. This study traces only the 48 Malaysian graduates as it was not possible to trace those from abroad.

Out of the 48 graduates, 16 (33%) work as librarians, 11(23%) are teaching in schools, 6 (12%) are lecturers, 3 are information officers, 2 are executives, and 1 is an information system executive. The employment status of 10 other graduates could not be ascertained. The type of employment agencies the graduates worked with is indicated in Table 1. Out of the 48 graduates identified, only 42 addresses were ascertained and were subsequently sent the questionnaire. Only 26 questionnaires were returned and these form the basis for this paper.

Table 1: Employment Agencies of Graduates (n=48)

Type of Employers	Count	Percentage
Institution of Higher Education	18	38
Secondary Schools	11	23
State Library (Sabah)	3	6
Book shop	1	2
Government Department (Manpower Department)	1	2
American Embassy	1	2
Astro Broadcasting	1	2
Malaysian Aids Council	1	2
News Agency (Bernama)	1	2
Cannot be ascertained	10	21

## **JOB HISTORY**

There were four categories of job history revealed by respondent's responses. The first type of graduates used the MLIS degree to obtain their first job. This was exemplified by one graduate who did not work after obtaining her first degree and have chosen to continue her studies in the MLIS programme before her first job.

The second category comprised those who worked in the government sector and continued to do so after graduating from the MLIS programme. Seven respondents who were working as secondary school teachers before they undertook the MLIS programme continue to work as teachers after graduation. A number of those in this category have since moved schools. Five respondents who were school teachers have moved careers, one respondent reported working as a librarian at a state library, two graduates reported working as librarians at academic libraries of public universities and two became lecturers at teachers training colleges. One was a tutor at a public

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university prior to the MLIS programme and subsequently became a lecturer at the same university. One respondent was an engineer in the private sector and subsequently became an assistant director at the Educational Technology Department, Ministry of Education.

Those who worked in the private sector or non-government corporations and continued to work in this sector after graduation form the third category. Three respondents in this category worked in private colleges, consultancy firms and the Bar Council of Malaysia in the capacity of either librarian or information officers. One respondent started her career as a product analyst prior to the MLIS programme and subsequently worked as a librarian at an embassy after graduation. One respondent worked as the manager of a book store and continued to work for the same company upon graduation. Her responsibility has however extended to include taking care of the company's publishing activities of Chinese books.

The fourth category comprised those who changed sectors after graduation. Two respondents in this category worked in private companies prior to the programme not as a librarian or information officer. After graduation these two respondents became assistant librarians in academic public university libraries. One respondent who was a librarian in the private sector became a librarian in a public university. One teacher moved career to become a librarian at a private college. One respondent who was a tutor became a lecturer at a private local university. One respondent moved jobs as a librarian in a number of government departments and subsequently became an assistant manager at the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

The results indicate that graduates from the MLIS programme worked at a variety of jobs before and after they graduated. All graduates are holding tenured positions. More than half hold their current posts within the last 5 years. Respondents indicated that their current posts were either new appointments or a promotion. About 16 of the 26 respondents indicated that the MLIS degree was used to obtain their current post while the rest was hired based on their first degree qualifications, indicating that the postgraduate degree does help graduates to obtain their first or better jobs.

### **JOB DESCRIPTION**

The graduates worked in a variety of posts, which includes librarians, information officers, teachers, lecturers, and managers. Those who worked as librarians and information officers described their job as developing collections, administration, preparing bibliographies, cataloguing, managing loans, readers services, library education, developing and maintaining the library's automation system. Among the tasks undertaken by those who are teachers includes coordinating and managing schools resource centres. Those who worked as managers were involved in

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information handling related work such as promoting and marketing services, supplying documents, managing company's knowledge and publishing specialized publications.

The salaries obtained from these various jobs ranged from Malaysian Ringgit RM1000 – 2000 up to more than RM4000 per month depending on the number of years respondents have been appointed to the job. As a result, the majority (96%) of the graduates indicated being satisfied with their present jobs and did not intend to change jobs (22, 84.6%). Those who indicated wanting to change jobs were those in the younger age group who expressed that they might want “a change of environment” later or want to move to a more challenging job.

Even though the respondents have successfully completed the MLIS programme, less than half (42%) felt that the MLIS degree have made them able to obtain their current posts or feels that it has increased their career development. This was especially felt by those who made a career change. Those who answered “no” and “not sure”, comprised younger graduates who have just entered into the information profession or those who did not make a career move after graduation.

## **VIEWS ABOUT MLIS COURSES**

Overall, most graduates indicated that the courses they followed were relevant and this is especially influenced by current job responsibilities. For example, a secondary school assistant head indicated that the automation course is not relevant to his current job since he has delegated most administrative tasks to the school clerk. Those core courses where more than 60% of respondents indicated relevant are Organisation of Information, Information Sources and Services, Information Retrieval, Computer Applications in Library and Information Systems, Library Automation and Information Services. Just over 50% indicated Collection Management, Research Methods and Library Practicum as relevant. The responses for elective courses were more elusive because many indicated that they could not remember the courses that they have taken. The results indicated that respondents do felt that the core courses on offer were relevant in their current jobs. However, those who have a Bachelor Degree in Library and Information Science (BLIS) indicate that there was some duplication of courses taught with those they have taken in their undergraduate programme. The list of core and elective courses offered in FCSIT is indicated in Table 2.

Only two out of twelve respondents indicated being satisfied with their practicum attachment. The rest felt that practicum is important but they were placed in an institution, which did not provide them with a comprehensive exposure to all aspects

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of LIS work. Some were placed in the cataloguing division throughout their training period.

Dissertation is an elective option for the MLIS programme and therefore only 10 respondents gave their response regarding this course. All felt that the experience of dissertation writing was priceless, interesting and was glad that they have contributed to the field of LIS in Malaysia. They indicated the need to have a more hands on approach to an automated data analysis system.

Table 2: Core and Elective Courses at FCSIT, University of Malaya

<b>Core Courses</b>
Information Retrieval
Information Sources and Services
Management of Information Environment
Organization of Information
Research Methods in LIS
Technologies for Information Management
<b>Elective Course</b>
Development of Information Collection
Digital Libraries
Directed Individual Study
Electronic Publishing
Enterprise Reengineering and Restructuring
Human Aspects of Information Systems Design
Indexing, Abstracting and Thesauri Construction
Information System Management
Information Systems: Fundamentals, Procurement and Operational Issues
Knowledge Management
Legal Issues in Information Science
Management of Internet Resources
Multimedia System Development
Practicum in Information and Library Services
Special Topics in Information Science
User Needs and Behaviour
Visual Programming: Concepts and Application

Overall, all respondents felt the courses in the programme were well presented and relevant to their work. This is especially indicated by those who worked in the library and information field. Those who did not work in this field felt that the programme have taught them how to search for information, which is relevant in their everyday duties. The respondent also felt that the programme was challenging, and taught by a committed, professional and sensitive teaching staff. The programme has exposed them to the realm of the field of librarianship and information science. One

respondent commented that more subjects in information science should be offered and FCSIT has subsequently improved the MLIS content to this effect (Table 2).

## CONCLUSION

The MLIS at the University of Malaya is a fairly young programme. Since 1994 up to 2004 the programme has produced 93 graduates out of which 13 were foreign students. The enrolment trend is steadily increasing since enrolment is twice a year in June and November each year (Table 3). The duration of the programme normally takes 2 years.

Table 3: Enrolment and Graduation Trends: MLIS Programme

<b>Year</b>	<b>MLIS Intake</b>	<b>MLIS Graduates</b>
1992-1994	5	4
1997	18	4
1998	18	20
1999	11	17
2000	21	9
2001	31	5
2002	36	21
2003	39	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>93</b>

The difficulty in locating every graduate from the MLIS programme becomes evident because there was no previous attempt to trace students, some of whom have changed addresses, changed jobs or gone overseas. Also, a number of those located was not willing to participate. This study is based on the responses from 26 respondents and therefore the result cannot be generalized to all graduates from the programme. It is suspected that the general trend for job descriptions and salary structure received would be similar. Even so, the results from this small study can be used as evidence for future course planning and review of course content as highlighted by Loughbridge (1990).

The job status of MLIS graduates seems to be good as no unemployment was reported, other than those who voluntarily did not work because of family commitments. This may be due to the specialized and narrow field of LIS in Malaysia and the expanding job opportunities in new institutions of higher learning, which is



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mushrooming at a fast pace and the opportunities afforded in information in large local and multinational corporations in Malaysia. The predominance of graduates in institutions of higher learning (public or private) was similarly exhibited by previous studies (Ocholla, 2000; Aina and Moahi, 1999; Rugambwe, 1998; Kisiedu, 1993; Alemna, 1991, 1993). All respondents are also in tenured posts. Even though there are job mobility the movement is not frequent. A large number of respondents remained as teachers after graduation (7 out of 26) even though some have moved to different schools or moved from schools to administrative post at the Ministry of Education. The number who worked as librarians or information personnel is about 40% (12). The rest are lecturers, executives or managers. Many of the teachers followed the course because of personal interests even though they knew that there would be no career change and have expressed the advantage of being more able to locate and find information as a result of the course. Very few among the 26 respondents indicated wanting to make career changes and seem fairly satisfied with their present posts. This may be related to not only that the post they hold are tenured, which ensure security but also the salaries they are paid are satisfactory. A total of 17 respondents out of the 26 draw salaries that ranged from RM2000 and RM4000 per month, with five obtaining a salary of above RM4000. Another factor may be due to the gender status of most graduates from the programme, where about 59% (29) are women, who did not want to make drastic career change

A high number of respondents indicated that the courses they undertook were relevant either to their current job or for personal development. However, a number volunteered opinions, such as the need for a more balanced approach between theory and practice. As a result the more practical oriented courses are rated as highly relevant, which includes Organization of Information which covers the cataloguing and classification of resources, Information Sources and Services, Information Retrieval and Computer Applications to Library and Information Work. These courses are core courses in the current MLIS programme. A more practical approach to the teaching of Research Methods and Management of Information Services and Centres also need to be considered. This recommendation was also proposed by Rugambwa (1998) and Latham, Burnett and Burnett (1996). Courses that cover current needs in the field of information studies were also considered important. To this effect, the MLIS programme has expended its elective courses to include courses such as Knowledge Management, Information Systems Management and Enterprise Reengineering and Restructuring. The increasing popularity of opting for the coursework mode rather than coursework and dissertation is also a cause of concern since the programme aims to encourage contributions to research in the LIS field in Malaysia. The National Librarians Association has also helped in allocating a prize of RM500 to the best dissertation each year to encourage research in LIS.

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This small study has highlighted the importance of “tracing” past graduates of the programme in order to ascertain the employability of graduates as well as the relevance of courses taught.

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