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BOBCATSSS 2010 @ Parma, Italy

Dates: Monday 25th, Tuesday 26th, Wednesday 27th January, 2010

**Bridging the digital divide:
libraries providing access for all?**

Alumni of the Faculty of Communication: career opportunities of Library and Information Science graduates

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Vilnius, 2009

Summary

Library studies have long traditions in Vilnius University. In 1991, when the Faculty of Communication was created, it meant a new stage of library studies within communicational paradigm. Since then, the number of library and information studies (LIS) graduates reached almost 1000. It is believed that LIS professionals, who graduated Vilnius University, not necessary start their employment in libraries; they also might successfully apply their knowledge and skills on other spheres like journalism, public information, administration and other. However, till 2009 there was no systematically collected information on their careers, job positions, and payment levels. Purpose of this paper is to present first attempt to survey of LIS graduates career experiences in Lithuania. Research project was carried out in 2009 as a bachelor project by one of the authors² and was aimed at looking into career trends and experiences of Vilnius University Library and Information Science Institute LIS graduates during 1992-2008. During data collection 318 out of 901 graduated persons responded to the questionnaire. In order to avoid geographical and work place bounds, survey was conducted through web-based questionnaire. Lithuanian survey was build upon the experience and findings of similar LIS career research projects undertaken in USA, Pakistan and Canada.

This paper might be interesting to lecturers for improving study program and process; to former and future students for strengthening their motivation and knowledge about possible career opportunities; potential employers for understanding the opportunities of LIS students; and a wider academic community.

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² Komunikacijos fakulteto ALUMNI: baigusiųjų bibliotekininkystės ir bibliografijos (informacijos) studijas karjeros keliai: bakalauro darbas [Alumni of the Faculty of Communication: career opportunities of Library and Bibliography (Information Science) graduates: bachelor thesis. In Lithuanian] / Raguotis, Mindaugas, mokslinė vadovė Petuchovaitė, Ramunė; Vilniaus universitetas. Komunikacijos fakultetas. Bibliotekininkystės ir informacijos mokslų institutas. Vilnius, 2009. 52 p.

Introduction: Why LIS graduates career research?

Each year, large number of graduates in different programs gains scientific degrees. Preparation of this significant intellectual force for the labor market is costly in terms of money and time. However, a large proportion of graduates go unnoticed. Constantly explore different areas of study graduate careers situation in any country labor markets is necessary for many reasons. First of all it may provide information for quality improvement of the curriculum and enhancement the competitiveness of university graduates in the labor market. Alumni career research allows gathering knowledge on graduates' work positions and changes, their earning levels, satisfaction with their job and profession as well as knowing graduate's perspective on the impact of the studies on personal careers. It also may reveal status and situation of library professionals in the labor market. Universities might raise the prestige of the librarian profession and attracted more students by publishing successful stories of LIS graduates.

However in Vilnius University, and probably in many other higher education institutions, there is no tradition of monitoring graduates path into the labor market. The role of universities usually ends with the students' completion of the study program and acquiring diploma / degree. In general there is no or very little information on what graduates do after the studies.

Lately an interest in the LIS alumni studies, employability and career opportunities is growing, recently an issue of LIS student recruitment in relation to career opportunities was raised in the program of 74th IFLA general conference and council. While constructing Lithuanian survey, presented in this paper, findings and methodologies of three research projects made in USA, Pakistan and Canada were analyzed.

Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science also known as WILIS research project covers the longest period of six North Carolina's graduate programs (from 1964 to 2007), and is probably the most extensive research in the subject. US findings allow an in-depth understanding of career patterns using a life course perspective. Results have shown that 81 % of respondents had a job, but some of them were of retirement age. It was also found that most LIS graduates tend to work in libraries and consider themselves to be working in the LIS field. Almost all graduates, who left the field, state using LIS skills in their work. LIS is an aging workforce and overall employment is high. Respondents may work in a variety of workplaces but the traditional library settings (school, academic, and public) still is dominating (University of North Carolina, 2005).

In 2007-2008 research project *LIS Graduates Employability-Needs and Expectations of the Library and Information Science (LIS) curriculum at the University of the Punjab (PU): An appraisal of Pakistani LIS Professionals* investigated the mutual understanding of LIS graduates and employers' of the LIS relevance to labor market needs, thus aiming at increasing employment opportunities. The

study was based on the interview method. Respondents were asked their opinion about the usefulness of the studies curriculum, job skills, job satisfaction and levels. The interviewed LIS employers considered that the graduates should improve market-orientation skills for meeting the changing information world market conditions. Also, it was suggested that there is a need to improve communication skills, problem-solving approach, a good understanding of IT, information storage and search, presentation skills, English language proficiency. In addition to employers' approach, LIS specialists believed that they have no enough practical skills and that they face problems because of sufficient competence in *office communications and writing, interview skills, database management, Internet search and IT skills*. Also they complained of too short practical placements (Nosheen Fatima Warraich, 2008).

The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries research was carried because of the library community concerns of personnel retiring tendencies and lack of new staff in the libraries. And these conditions are probably present in any other country. Study was aimed at researching a lot of R issues in Canadian library context: recruitment, retentions, remuneration, repatriation, rejuvenation reaccreditation, retirement, restructuring. Interviews by mail and electronic means with 4 693 graduated librarians and other professionals, regardless of obtained scientific degree or completed academic programs, for the first time provided a comprehensive picture of the human resources situation in libraries. Researchers draw attention to general problems of career research such as availability of respondents due to changes of residence and work places, names, and low responsiveness of respondents (Ingles, et al, 2005).

A study of Vilnius University LIS graduates' career opportunities

Though the first attempts to introduce bibliography, librarianship and other related courses into Vilnius University education goes back to the beginning of 19th century, the start of library studies as a separate program should be related to establishment of Department of Librarianship in 1949. Since then the library program evolved through several paradigmatic shifts, emerging from traditional humanitarian paradigm and growing within the information paradigm. In 1990 the 5 year study program at Vilnius University splitted into two level of education – Bachelor's and Master's LIS studies. And in 1991 the Faculty of Communication was founded on the basis of two traditional majors – Library Science and Journalism. Library and Information Science program together with new study programs in Information Management, Public Relations, etc. were integrated into the emerging field of information and social communication in the knowledge society (Glosiene, Gudauskas, 1999).

Hence Library and information studies curriculum is intended to develop library and information professionals, capable of independent planning, organizing and providing user-oriented library and information services to different user communities of the knowledge society. During 1991-

2008 almost 1000 graduates were awarded diplomas/degrees with LIS qualification. Since 1991 full and part time LIS programs at Vilnius University attracted various numbers of students, this was mainly influenced by Lithuania's general political and social transformation. But also a question, whether LIS graduates acquires relevant and useful knowledge and skills were periodically raised in discussions within the Library and Information Science Institute and in wider discussions within library community. There were also speculations, that LIS graduates find an employment in any other field, but libraries. Those discussions and speculations led to the first attempt surveying LIS graduates career trends and experiences in Lithuania.

Methodology. Research project is aimed at finding out the career paths and employment related issues of Vilnius University the Faculty of Communication library and bibliography (information) science graduates. Therefore research time scope is defined by 1992, which is the first graduation year of newly established Faculty of Communication, and the most recent graduation year in 2008. Survey was conducted during March-April, 2009. Total number of LIS alumni in 1992-2008 year was 901 (Faculty of Communication, 2009).

The questionnaire, developed for this survey, contains 22 close-ended questions, in some cases providing an opportunity to comment or insert an open answer. Based on experience of the other abovementioned studies, it was decided that anonymous electronic questionnaire that may be delivered by e-mail and accessible on the internet is the most appropriate to collect information.

As there was lack of contact data, for reaching the graduates directly, a „snowball” approach was employed (Kardelis, 2005). First, graduates were searched on social networks like KLASE.LT (classmates), GOOGLE.LT search engine, social network FACEBOOK.COM. Thereafter, the identified graduates were asked to spread the message about the survey and the URL of the questionnaire. Thus, it meant a group of subjects increasing as the Snow Ball.

Overall 490 messages or e-mails were sent, 50 failed letters or messages returned. Apparently some search error occurred due to similar or change of names. Approximately half of found respondents from social network KLASE.LT last login dates were older than one month. In total 318 filled questionnaires were received. Response rate 35.3 % of the whole group (901). Simple statistics analysis was applied to collected data.

It appeared that majority of respondents (92.45 %) live in Lithuania. Only 23 respondents currently live abroad. 92.8 % of all respondents (295) were women and 7.2 % (23) were men. Distribution of respondents by graduation year is presented bellow in Figure 1.

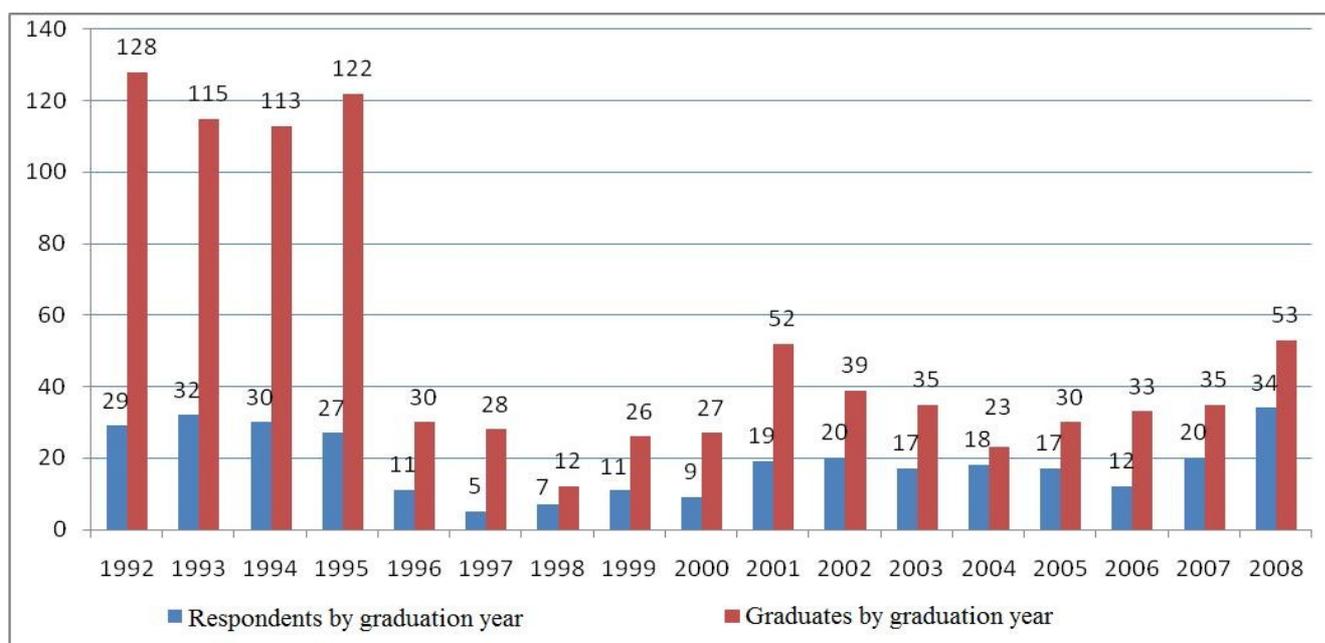


Figure 1. Respondents by graduation year

Over eighty per cent of all respondents (258) were involved in full-time studies, 18.9 % (60 respondents) graduated part-time LIS study program at Vilnius University.

Results and discussion. Survey showed quite high percentage of LIS graduates employment. – 83.65% or % as 266 respondents declared as currently having a job. 27 were working, but looking for another job. 18 respondents marked an open ended option. At the time 7 respondents were unemployed.

By career change job stability factor that is understood as change of place of employments or career field respondents mainly fall into two groups. One group consists of respondents who from the graduation are working in the same place (97 respondents – 30.5 %) or have changed the work one or two times in their career (107 respondents). Another group consists of 110 respondents who had changed jobs 3 times and more frequently.

Data shows that 11 respondents work in leading – mainly directors – positions (one of them has started his own business). 71 respondent held middle management positions, i.e. work as heads of the departments. More than half of respondents (180 or 56.6 %) are employed in specialist positions. 57 (17.9 %) graduates marked an open ended option, stating they held following positions: senior specialist – 5 graduates; project manager – 9, manager – 5 (one of them is an Information Manager), Deputy Head – 4, administrator – 7, consultant – 2 respondents.

When asked about possibilities of self-realization in the place of employment. Though 91 respondents (29 %) claimed fully realizing themselves in the work, more of them - 188 (59%) – only partially realizes their potentials. %) chose the answer “Partly, yes”. 34 graduates at all do not have opportunities for self-realization in the place of employment.

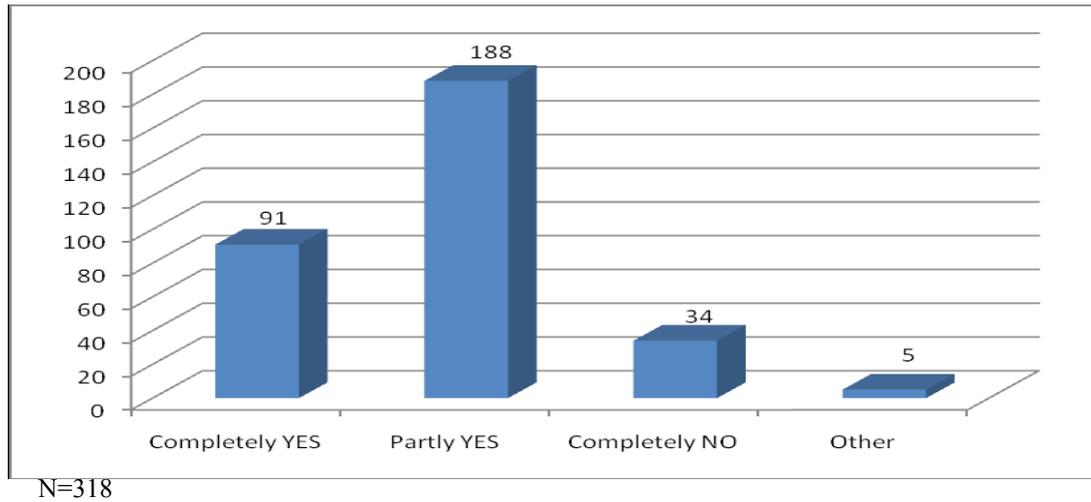


Figure 2. Self-realization at work

The survey showed that 165 respondents are working in the libraries, and this is more than half of all respondents (51.9 %). In addition 70 respondents have worked in a library before. About 78 LIS graduates (24.5 %) have never worked in the library. One respondent pointed out that, though he doesn't work in the library, but he provides software and training to the libraries, another one respondent works in a few positions, those are university library manager and a lecturer.

239 respondents provided information on the length of their work experience in libraries (Figure 3). 85 respondents has worked in library more that 10 years; 52 respondents – 5-10 years, 33 respondents – 3-5 years, and 69 graduates worked in a library less than 3 years

Respondents answering to the question *What type of library you have worked or are working now?* could use multiple response options. Open (other) option was marked by 42 respondents; however, the analysis revealed that some of these answers fit into the listed types of libraries. Thus, 106 respondents have worked in academic libraries, 89 respondents – in the public libraries. Respectively 24, 23 and 23 respondents have been working at the Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas library, school libraries and special libraries.

Definitely salaries of the LIS professionals differ, depending on place of employment and the position. 43 out of 165 (26 %) working in libraries currently earns more than 1,500 litas a month. And 131 from 153 (nearly 86 %) employed in the libraries (this figure includes previously worked in libraries) earn more than 1,500 litas. An overview of the payment level of whole group is presented bellow.

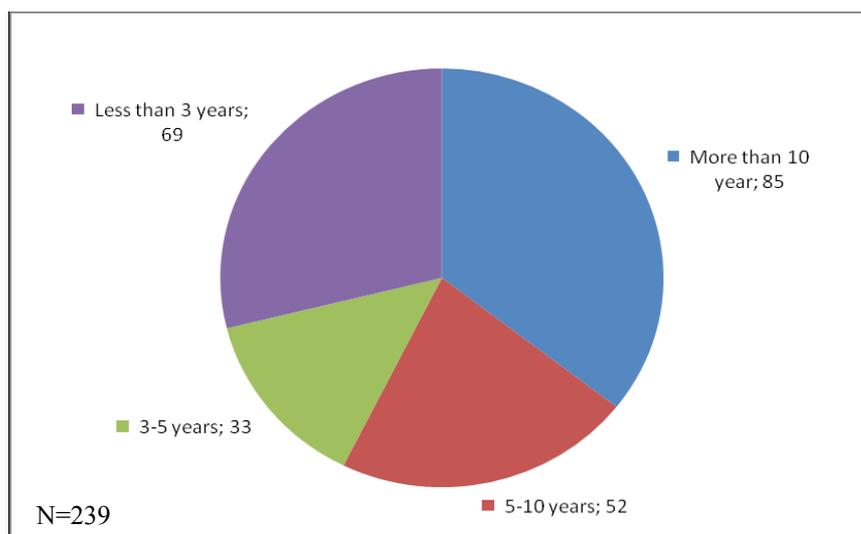


Figure 3. Work experience in libraries

97 respondents stated that LIS education and skills were useful for their professional careers. (Figure 4). 157 chose the answer *more yes, than no* and 7 said *Absolutely no*. Quite big group of 51 graduates assess LIS education in the context of personal career more negatively than positively. A different (open ended option) was selected by six respondents.

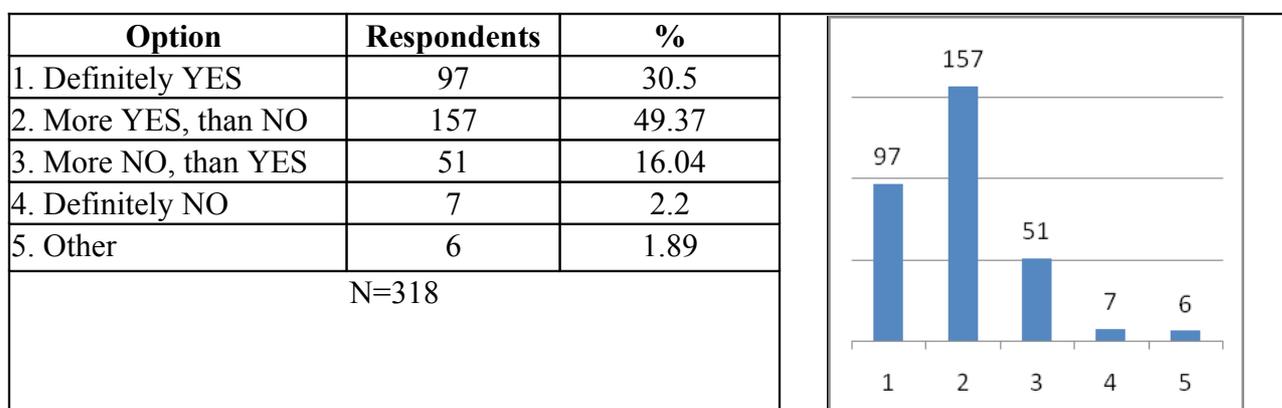


Figure 4. LIS skills are useful in graduates' careers

74 respondents (23.3 %) think that skills and knowledge acquired in LIS program fully satisfied their employer's needs. 9 graduates believe that, what they learned at university, did not meet employers' needs. Furthermore, majority of graduates (181) stated that employers were more satisfied than not. 37 respondents said that their employers were not happy with their skills, i.e. chose the answer *More no, than yes*. It is true to say that major part of respondents thinks that their skills and knowledge in LIS program satisfied their employers needs. An open ended option was selected by 17 respondents.

Respondents were asked, what reasons encouraged them to enter LIS program at Vilnius University. The answers distributed as follows (there was a possibility for multiply answer choice, therefore total is 397):

Reasons	Respondents choice
Recommendations by friends, teachers, parents, etc.	88
Good reputation of the Faculty	78
Guaranteed employment opportunities	36
A strong curriculum	25
Good reputation of the program	20
Other reasons	150
Personal qualities – pleasure to read, love books, the need for information and knowledge.	29
By accident (failed to enter another program, etc.)	23
Other	66

Survey results provide evidence that graduates' opinion about the LIS study program has improved during the study. 102 respondents (32%) stated that it improved significantly; slight improvement of opinion manifested by 89 respondents. 83 graduates stated that their opinion didn't change. 32 respondents declared that their opinion of the LIS studies became slightly worse, and 3 said it significantly worsened.

Data shows that Vilnius University LIS graduates have quite good employment opportunities after graduation and in some cases even while studying. After graduation 151 respondents (48.5 %) had found a job easily; 95 said it was quite easy. Some difficulties experience 23 respondents and it was very difficult to find a work for 8 graduates. 22 respondents have started working before graduation.

In Lithuania LIS studies is not considered as of very high status, sometimes students and graduates are tended not to reveal, what program they are in, instead providing a generalized heading – communication and information studies. To see whether this approach continues after graduation, the question on how it easy for you to tell others, what study program you graduated. Contrary to speculations 79 % of respondents stated that they do not have difficulties to say, that they studied LIS. It is interesting to note that 10 of 11 respondents, who held director positions are in this group.

Survey provides that 146 respondents (45.9 %) after graduation didn't pursue higher degree. 37 graduates continued studies in the same field and obtained their Master's degree, 59 got degree in another field. 11 graduates gained their second Bachelor degree in another field and 18 graduates were involved in other than LIS professional training or retraining courses.

Figure 5 shows the monthly earnings of the respondents. Respondents create two bigger groups, which crosses the boundary of 35 %. 121 graduates (38.1 %) earns in the range between 1000 and

1500 litas (1 Euro = 3.4528 litas) and 112 graduates (35.2 %) are paid more than 2,000 litas. Up to 1000 litas earn 23 (7.2 %) graduates and 62 (19.5 %) earns between 1500 and 2000 litas. At the time of study Lithuanian Department of Statistics data on the average salary in Lithuania was 1773,70 litas (after taxes) (Vidutinis mėnesinis bruto darbo užmokestis, 2009).

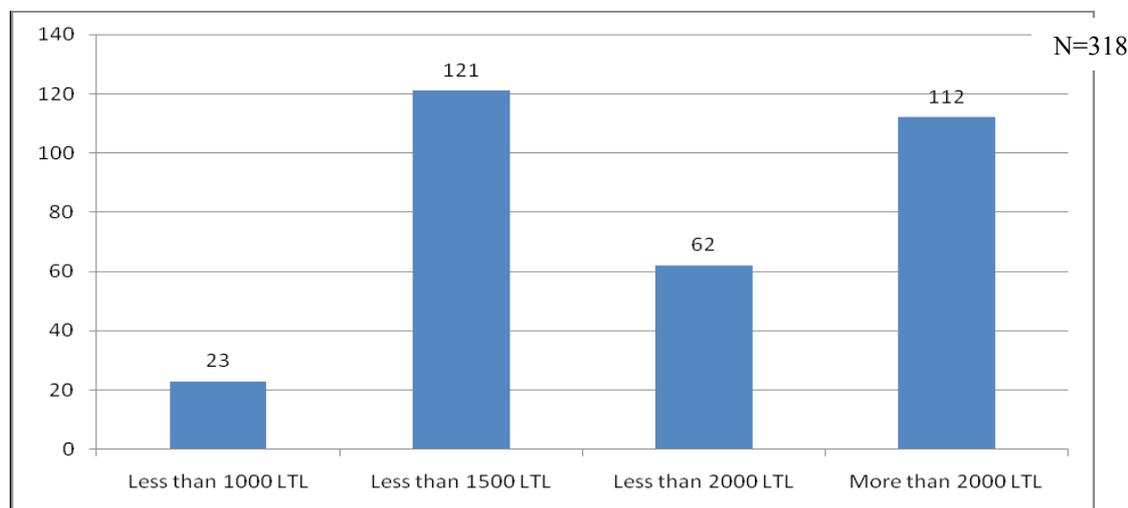


Figure 5. Graduates by earnings

The undertaken research shows that in general Vilnius university graduates' employability level is quite high. Over half of respondents at the moment of surveying were working in library or had worked for some time after they graduated from University. There is a need for in depth qualitative research for understanding why some graduates meets difficulties finding the job and what reasons make some of them to turn to other fields, after working experience in the library. Nevertheless the data provides evidence that traditional library sector, especially academic and public libraries still play an important role as employers of LIS graduates.

LIS graduates in Lithuania are not frequent job changes the data suggest as only one third of them fall into the average range of job changes, which as suggested by experts is between three and seven times (Rosenberg McKay, 2006). However it shall be noted, that for generalization of significant evidence the study time span (1992-2008) is too short. Thus there is a need for repeated studies, taking into the consideration the condition that frequency of career changes in people life-span is increasing.

Around one quarter of graduates are in top or middle management positions, though majority of respondents hold the specialist positions, which is also may be explained rather slow job rotation within library field.

Even if majority of graduates responded admits benefit of LIS education to their professional career, there is a warning sign for consideration that around 20 % and 10 % of respondents do not recognize LIS program benefits respectively to their personal career and the employer.

It seems that payment differences in traditional library sector and other fields is an eternal issue for consideration. This is still true in Lithuania.

And the last important note is that the majority of graduates (222) was intrigued by this research, and expressed an interest to hear the findings. This shows that by small initiative a platform for further and deeper research may be built as career studies are important for graduates themselves.

Conclusions

For institutions of higher education career experience and related issues studies provide feedback and information about graduates employability and their adaptation in the labor market. Multiformal and full value to LIS education and practical field this kind of research may bring only if data collection is systematical and consistent.

First attempt to survey LIS graduates confirms that due to lack of contact data it is difficult to reach bigger group of the alumni, especially those, who are not working in libraries. To overcome this barrier it is recommended to establish early and closer collaboration between the faculty and potential employers. This from another side may open more opportunities for graduates' employment. It is also important to promote research benefits to Alumni clubs and profession based social networks. For comparative purposes and for building more credible contact data bases, it may be useful to start surveys on career expectations and program satisfaction during the studies period.

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