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Como citar: FALETAR, Sanjica; TERRA, Ana Lúcia; PETROVIĆ, Borna; SLOBOĐANAC, Martina; CHAÍÇA, Beatriz; ALVES, Carolina. LIS programs and profession: an overview of Croatian and Portuguese students' perceptions and expectations. *In:* TERRA, Ana Lúcia; FUJITA, Mariângela Spotti Lopes (org.). **Integrating Information Science for Sustainable Development: Topics and Trends.** Marília: Oficina Universitária; São Paulo: Cultura Acadêmica, 2025. p. 373-389. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36311/2025.978-65-5954-624-4.p373-389>



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LIS programs and profession: an overview of Croatian and Portuguese students' perceptions and expectations

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ABSTRACT: Library and Information Science (LIS), as a field of study, research, and practice, has experienced significant transformation in recent years, driven by profound cultural,

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political, economic, and technological shifts. To understand how these changes affect the LIS profession within a global information environment, as well as LIS programs, this paper examines the perceptions of LIS students from Croatia and Portugal regarding the profession and their academic programs. The comparative study, conducted between June and December 2023, used an online survey with multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions to capture the perceptions of undergraduate students from the universities of Osijek and Coimbra. With a sample of 131 participants, 86 from Croatia and 45 from Portugal, the research reveals that most students are women and most had no prior academic experience. The results show that students agree that the librarian profession requires continuous learning, but it is neither well-paid nor widely recognized by the public. The main motivation for Croatian students to enter the field was an interest in working with technology, while for Portuguese students a love of books was a decisive factor. The study highlights cultural differences in the profession's perception, particularly regarding its female-dominated nature, which is more recognized by Portuguese students. These findings are relevant for developing and adjusting LIS curricula, emphasizing the need for greater public awareness and appreciation of the profession.

KEYWORDS: Library and Information Science (LIS), educational program, profession, students, perception

INTRODUCTION

Library and information science (LIS) as a field of study, research and application has been undergoing a major transformation in recent years due to main cultural, political, economic and technological changes in contemporary society. To understand how these changes impact the LIS profession in a global information environment and LIS programs, a number of international scholars have investigated the students' perceptions of the profession, but also their motivation, competencies and satisfaction with their academic programs (Cherry et al., 2011; Cherry et al., 2013; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015; Fraser-Arnott, 2017; Faletar Tanackovic et al., 2018; Ammarukleart et al., 2021; Chaka, 2020; Saunders & Bajjaly, 2022; Sibiya & Shongwe, 2018; Faletar et al., 2023).

Although international LIS education programs vary significantly and the debate about the scope, structure and focus of LIS programs is still intense, there seems to be a global understanding of core professional knowledge and competencies required by LIS professionals working in a dynamic information environment. In 2022, the International

Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published the *IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library and Information Science (LIS) Education Programmes* to be used as a framework for developing LIS education programs and made up with eight foundational knowledge areas (1. Information in Society, 2. Foundations of the LIS Profession, 3. Information and Communication Technologies, 4. Research and Innovation, 5. Information Resources Management, 6. Management for Information Professionals, 7. Information Needs and User Services, and 8. Literacies and Learning) (Chu et al., 2022). The *ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship* defines the basic knowledge gained through LIS education, job on-boarding, and ongoing professional development in early in a library career (American Library Association (ALA), 2022). The ALA's Core Competences can be used to inform the curriculum and include nine core areas of competences (1. Gateway Knowledge, 2. Information Resources, 3. Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education, 4. Management and Administration, 5. Organization of Recorded Knowledge and Information, 6. Reference and User Services, 7. Research and Evidence-Based Practice, 8. Social Justice, and 9. Technological Knowledge and Skills). From an academic perspective, and grounded on the analysis of competency profiles, Fraser-Arnott (2017) developed five competency groups, which are 1. collaboration, client service, and communication; 2. organizational understanding and strategic alignment; 3. programme and service delivery and management; 4. records, information, and knowledge management technical competencies; 5. and personal qualities.

All these approaches are valuable insights to design, analyse and evaluate LIS curriculums. Nevertheless, any conclusions about success (or failure) and long-term strategic decisions about potential changes in the educational programs should be made only after careful examination of relevant literature and evidence-based data collected from all relevant stakeholders (students, seasoned librarians, and employers).

The aim of this paper is to explore students' perceptions of LIS profession and educational programs, as well as their motivations for enrolling in these academic programs. The paper will present a portion

of the findings obtained in a comparative study conducted among undergraduate LIS students in Croatia and Portugal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The LIS study area is constantly changing and altering, always keeping pace with changes in the working backgrounds of professionals (Faletar et al, 2023, p.359). There is a pressing need to prepare future LIS professionals for new social, institutional and technological circumstances to assume new roles, transitioning from an isolationist paradigm to a co-ownership and co-creation one. That is, as stated by Robert Taylor in the late 1970s', our schools are moving from a Ptolemaic information world, with the library at the centre, to a dynamic, Copernican universe with information at its centre and with libraries as one of the many planets revolving around this information core (Marchionini & Moran, 2012). The LIS community, involving both academics and professionals, emphasise the importance of attracting open-minded, innovative, creative, dynamic, flexible, and visionary individuals to the LIS discipline. These individuals will be capable of leading the field in new directions, addressing the challenges of an ever-evolving information landscape, and shaping the future growth and success of the information field (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015). LIS programs, either bachelor's, master's or PhD degrees, must adapt to these rapid changes, recruiting motivated students and responding to the labour market expectations and opportunities. For the Philippine setting, (Lascano, 2021) noted that the most effective way to advertise the LIS program is through career orientation and exploration, which will encourage students to choose LIS as a career. Among the options for promoting the degree, conducting career orientation and exploration is the most effective.

In the European context, LIS education is characterised by a high degree of variance and insulation, as local idiosyncrasies in terms of academic traditions, structural specifics and course profiles arise. Furthermore, Sant-Geronikolou et al. (2019), who undertook a comparison study between Greek and Spanish LIS curricula, summarised some issues regarding the

southern European context, underling the low levels of student satisfaction and decreasing enrolment rates prevail, the profession's identity crisis, the library associations' non-involvement in professional accreditation, and the strong mimetic forces that hinder the influx of new knowledge and therefore innovation. In the South African context, with data from three LIS schools, Sibiya & Shongwe (2021) conclude that LIS is often a fallback field of study for students who did not initially plan to pursue it. However, interestingly, after enrolling, they became satisfied with the program and motivated to continue. In 2010, Cherry et al. (2013) collected data from students in information programs at six Canadian schools, and they reported that students rated most aspects of their programs positively. However, few respondents gave the highest ratings, suggesting substantial room for improvement. Earlier, during a period of four years (2003-2007), Cherry et al. (2011) collected data for a longitudinal study among the students enrolled in the Master of Information Studies program at the University of Toronto, and the data showed that students arrived excited about the information profession and hopeful about job prospects. However, as they advanced through the program, many became dissatisfied with the professional aspects. They were looking for courses that better prepared them for their first professional role and opportunities to gain practical experience, which they believed would enhance their employability. In the Iranian context, Khalili (2020) has found that of 133 undergraduate and master's students, from the Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, more than half did not choose their course based on prior knowledge, but around 70% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their choice. Nevertheless, surprisingly on the Likert scale the statement "the courses of this domain are boring for me" registers an average of 3.19.

These results ensure that programs need to be improved and then evaluated. Students, as an integral part of the primary stage of their professional careers, play an essential role as a decisive factor in the success of any discipline or higher education institution, and they will provide insightful data to better the LIS curriculum (Faletar et al., 2023). It is necessary to question them to understand their perceptions of many related themes. Among several aspects, it becomes imperative to determine the

influences and motivations behind studying LIS, or any related studies, and understand their perceptions concerning the profession (Sibiya & Shongwe, 2021, p.159). Cherry et al. (2011) reinforce this idea underlying we need a clearer understanding of how students perceive the information professions, how their graduate education influences their views and career paths, how they assess the nature and quality of their education, and how shifts in the size, scope, and focus of these programs impact their student experiences.

Involving undergraduates in the assessment process of the LIS program can be seen as a way to address challenges related to scientific and pedagogical alignment and also to support informed data-driven decisions for future curriculum development (Ammarukleart et al., 2021). This approach may help to better align operations with stakeholder needs, resulting in various strategic and practical benefits. Anticipated positive outcomes include the potential to benefit from collaborative efforts, an improvement in organizational morale, and value generation from intellectual capital assets (Sant-Geronikolou et al., 2019). Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2015) also emphasize that gathering and analyzing data on LIS students and the programs they attend can guide the planning of LIS schools and aid in developing marketing strategies to attract high-quality students.

Research about the perceptions of LIS students regarding their field of study and their expectations related to their professional careers followed different approaches. Sibiya & Shongwe (2021) identified three main areas in which these studies tended to focus: students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with LIS; students' awareness of programs and career opportunities; and reasons and motivations to enroll in LIS and choose it as a profession. According to Cherry et al. (2011), existing research mainly focuses on the students' motivations for enrolling in LIS courses, their professional goals and expectations, and their perceptions of the information professions and less on students' perceptions of the programs they are attending. On a systematic literature review about the choice of LIS as an educational path Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2015)

acknowledged three main themes: the choice of LIS, the choice of LIS specialty and career change to LIS.

METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to explore the undergraduate LIS students' perceptions about library profession as well as their motivation for enrolling in LIS academic programs. The comparative study presented in this paper was conducted among undergraduate students at the Department of Information Science at the University of Osijek in Croatia and University of Coimbra in Portugal, from June to December 2023. The study tried to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do respondents perceive LIS profession?

RQ2: What motivated respondents to study LIS?

RQ3: Are there any differences in relation to the findings between Croatian and Portuguese students?

The study was conducted with the help of quantitative methodology, through an anonymous online survey by questionnaire. The questionnaire with multiple choice and Likert-type questions was translated into Croatian and Portuguese. Croatian survey was administered to Croatian respondents and survey in Portuguese to students from Portugal. The request to fill out a self-administered survey was distributed via email to all undergraduate students in Osijek and Coimbra. In the introduction to the survey, the researchers shortly explained to students that they can choose not to participate in the study and that they are free to withdraw at any point. Also, participants were informed about the main purpose of the study and the required time commitment (approximately 7 minutes).

Out of the total number of 150 undergraduate LIS students at University of Osijek, Croatia, 86 filled out a survey (57.3% recall). Out of the total number of 126 LIS students at University of Coimbra, Portugal,

45 filled out a survey (35,7% recall). Quantitative data was analysed with the help of SPSS software package for statistical analysis.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The first section of the survey collected demographic information and some basic characteristics about the respondents, who were all undergraduate LIS students from the University of Osijek in Croatia and the University of Coimbra in Portugal. A total of 131 respondents took part in the survey: 86 were from Croatia and 45 from Portugal. Most of the respondents were female (N=92, 70.2%) in both Croatia (N=60, 69.8%) and Portugal (N=32, 71.1%). The majority of students from both countries (N=99, 75.6%) did not study any other degree at the university level prior to enrolling in the LIS bachelor study program. A slightly smaller percentage of Portuguese students (66.7%) have not been previously enrolled in any studies, compared to the percentage of Croatian ones (80.2%). Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents (N=110, 84.0%) do not have librarians or some other information professionals in their family, with the percentage of negative responses being nearly the same in Croatia (83.7%) and in Portugal (84.4%). (Table 1)

Table 1: Respondents' characteristics

Gender	ALL N (%) ()	HR N (%)	PT N (%)
Male	38 (29.0)	26 (30.2)	12 (26.7)
Female	92 (70.2)	60 (69.8)	32 (71.1)
Other	1 (0.8)	0 (0)	1 (2.2)
Total	131 (100%)	86	45
Prior studying experience			
Yes	25 (19.1)	17 (19.8)	8 (17.8)
No	99 (75.6)	69 (80.2)	37 (66.7)

Information professionals in family			
Yes	21 (16.0)	14 (16.3)	7 (15.6)
No	110 (84.0)	72 (83.7)	38 (84.4)

PERCEPTION OF THE PROFESSION

In the second part of the survey, students were asked to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 (I totally disagree) to 5 (I totally agree) with seven statements about the IS profession in order to identify their perception of the field. Findings have been presented in Table 2. The respondents from both countries agreed least with the statement that library professionals are paid very well (they have a good salary) (Mean 2.56) and the statement that library profession is dominated by women (Mean 2.66). On the other hand, respondents from both countries agreed most with the statement that the library profession demands continuous learning and professional development (after diploma) (Mean 3.89) and that library profession is not well known in the public (Mean 3.84). Croatian students have shown the highest level of agreement with the statement that the library profession has a very important role in modern society (Mean 3.93) and the least level of agreement with the statement that the library profession is dominated by women (Mean 2.20). In contrast, Portuguese students agreed mostly with the statement that the library profession demands continuous learning and professional development after graduating (Mean 4.18), and they agreed least with the statement that library professionals are paid very well (Mean 2.49). Statistically significant difference ($P=0.000$) was identified in relation to the statement "Library profession is dominated by women." Whereas Portuguese students (Mean 3.56) agree more with that statement than Croatian students (Mean 2.20) that library profession is a female-dominated profession. In addition, statistically significant difference ($P=0.011$) was also found in relation to the statement "Library profession demands continuous learning and professional development". Again, Portuguese students (Mean 4.18) agreed more with that statement, as opposed to their Croatian colleagues (Mean 3.73). Taking into

consideration the facts that notably fewer students altogether recognized librarianship to be a female-dominated field (Mean 2.66), that a high number of students perceive that LIS professional play an important role in modern society (Mean 3.84) and that respondents believe that LIS profession requires continuous professional development, it could be said that the respondents' perception of the library profession is not that of a traditional, female-dominated and static field but a profession that is progressive, diverse and dynamic.

Table 2: Respondents' perception of the library profession

Aspect	Mean (ALL)	Mean (HR)	Mean (PT)
Library profession has a very important role in modern society.	3.84	3.93	3.67
Library profession enjoys high reputation in public.	2.74	2.85	2.53
Library profession is dominated by women.	2.66	2.20	3.56
Library professionals are paid very well.	2.56	2.59	2.49
Library profession demands continuous learning and professional development.	3.89	3.73	4.18
Library profession will have very important role in the future.	3.41	3.33	3.58
Library profession is not well known in the public.	3.84	3.90	3.73

Respondents were then asked to rank (on a scale from 1 – the lowest rank to 5 – the highest rank) several different professions, based on their social status and public reputation. Reflecting the local circumstances, respondents were offered slightly different professions. Croatian respondents had to rank the following five professions: IT professionals, librarians, medical doctors, school teachers, politicians. In addition to these five professions, Portuguese respondents had to rank two extra (engineers, and archivists). For both groups of respondents medical doctors are at the head of the list, followed closely by IT professionals. As one can see from the Table 3, librarians assumed the very last place (Croatian respondents) and second-to-last place (Portuguese respondents).

Table 3: Professions according to their social status

Profession Rank	Croatia	Portugal
1	Medical doctors	Medical doctors
2	IT professionals (software developers etc.)	Engineers
3	Politicians	IT professionals (software developers etc.)
4	School teachers	School teachers
5	Librarians	Politicians
6		Librarians
7		Archivists

MOTIVATION FOR STUDYING LIS

Finally, respondents were prompted to choose from a list of reasons (multiple choice question) why they decided to study LIS. Overall, the most popular reason for enrolment seems to be the respondents' love for computers and new technologies (N=64, 48.9%) and love for books and reading (N=38, 44.2%). All values are presented in the Table 7. The least popular reason for deciding to study LIS overall is public reputation and prestige of the LIS profession in society (N=2, 1.5%), where both Croatian (N=2, 2.3%) and Portuguese (N=0, 0.0%) students agree. The most popular reasons for Croatian students were their love for working with computers and new technologies (N=51, 59.3%) and love for books and reading (N=38, 44.2%). Most Portuguese students decided to study LIS because they love books and reading as well (N=19, 42.2%). Interestingly, the same number of Portuguese respondents also said that they decided to study LIS because of good employment possibilities (N=16, 35.6%) and because they could not enroll into any other study program since they had poor grades (N=16, 35.6%).

Table 7: Reasoning behind the decision to study LIS

Statement	ALL N (%)	HR N (%)	PT N (%)
I love working with people.	21 (21.4)	15 (17.4)	13 (28.9)
I love working with computers and new technologies.	64 (48.9)	51 (59.3)	13 (28.9)
I love books and reading.	57 (43.5)	38 (44.2)	19 (42.2)
Recommendation of a family member or a friend.	39 (29.8)	34 (39.5)	5 (11.1)
Nature of the job (dynamic, diverse tasks).	46 (35.1)	32 (37.2)	14 (31.1)
Pleasant working environment.	51 (38.9)	39 (45.3)	12 (26.7)
Good salary.	16 (12.2)	15 (17.4)	1 (2.2)
Good employment possibilities.	53 (40.5)	37 (43.0)	16 (35.6)
Good working hours.	22 (16.8)	21 (24.4)	1 (2.2)
Importance of information services in modern society.	41 (31.3)	23 (26.7)	18 (40.0)
Public reputation and prestige in society.	2 (1.5)	2 (2.3)	0 (0.0)
I have always wanted to work in the library.	23 (17.6)	24 (16.3)	9 (20.0)
I could not enroll into any other study program.	19 (14.5)	3 (3.5)	16 (35.6)
I heard it was an easy study program.	22 (16.8)	18 (20.9)	4 (8.9)

Statistically significant differences (Table 8) were identified in relation to the following variables: “I love working with computers and new technologies.” ($P=0.001$), “Recommendation of a family member or a friend.” ($P=0.001$), “Pleasant working environment.” ($P=0.037$), Good salary ($P=0.012$), Good working hours” ($P=0.001$) and “I could not enroll into any other study program” ($P=0.000$). Namely, Croatian students study LIS more often than their Portuguese colleagues because they are interested in working with computers and new technologies (59.3%), as well as due to a recommendation of a family member or a friend (39.5%). Croatian students also enroll more often in LIS studies because of a pleasant working environment (45.3%), good salary (17.4%), and good working

hours (24.4%). On the other hand, more Portuguese students who study LIS are not able to enroll in any other study program (35.6%).

Table 8: Statistically significant differences

Statement	HR %	PT %	P
I love working with computers and new technologies	59,3	28,9	0,001
Recommendation of a family member or a friend	39,5	11,1	0,001
Pleasant working environment	45,3	26,7	0,037
Good salary	17,4	2,2	0,012
Good working hours	24,4	2,2	0,001
I could not enroll into any other study program (poor grades etc.)	3,5	35,6	0,000

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The demographic data gathered from undergraduate LIS students from the University of Osijek in Croatia and the University of Coimbra in Portugal reveals interesting trends. Among the 131 respondents, a significant majority were female (70.2%), which is consistent across both countries (69.8% in Croatia and 71.1% in Portugal). This gender distribution aligns with broader trends in LIS programs globally, which often see higher female enrollment (Cherry et al., 2011; Faletar Tanackovic et al., 2018; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2010). However, when asked about the statement “Library profession is dominated by women”, Portuguese students agreed much more (Mean 3.56) than Croatian students (Mean 2.20). So, although the percentage of female students is very similar in Croatia and Portugal, the latter expresses a stronger perception of this trend. This difference might be influenced by cultural perceptions or differences in the visibility of gender roles within the profession in each country.

Additionally, most students (75.6%) had not pursued another degree prior to their LIS studies, with Croatian students showing a higher percentage (80.2%) compared to their Portuguese counterparts (66.7%). This trend is not shared by some countries where librarianship represents a second or even a third career for a significant number of professional librarians, as it occurs in Hong Kong and Canada (Lo et al., 2017). Interestingly, Woodford (2024) underlined for the Canadian setting that there was a lack of STEM background students enrolling in Master of Library and Information Science programs.

Another noteworthy aspect is the lack of family influence in their career choice, with 84.0% of respondents indicating no familial connection to information professions. This can suggest a genuine interest in LIS, driven by personal motivation rather than familial tradition, or, on the contrary, may suggest that the Information Science course path is an unintended or unripe consequence because LIS studies were not a first choice. As for example, in 2018, Faletar Tanackovic et al. (2018, p.54) conducted a study showing that the “majority of Croatian students, and all Turkish students decided to study LIS last minute i. e. at the end of their secondary education and not long before they had to decide what to study”. Anyway, according to the systematic literature review conducted by Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2015) the role of parents and relatives appears in some studies, but it does not represent a major influence in the choice of the LIS program. More recently, in the South African context, Sibiya & Shongwe (2021) explained that LIS program was not a first but instead a second or subsequent choice for students, with relatives and friends being a major influence for their choosing after information brochures. On the contrary, in the Philippines, when asked about the best promotional strategies for LIS programs, students ranked in least family, relatives and friends, and also personal contact with librarians (Lascano, 2021).

Regarding the perception of the LIS profession, students from both countries agreed that it demands continuous learning and professional development (Mean 3.89) and that it is not well-known to the public (Mean 3.84), although they think it has a very important role in modern society

(Mean 3.84). This underscores a common recognition of the dynamic and evolving nature of the profession, which requires ongoing education and adaptation to new technologies and methodologies (Marchionini & Moran, 2012). However, the perception that library professionals are not well-compensated (Mean 2.56) seems to reflect a widespread concern about the economic viability of the profession. Faletar Tanackovic et al. (2018) also found less than 10% of the students they surveyed in Croatia and Turkey expected compensation and benefits, such as income, when choosing a LIS education. Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2010) argued that for Greek students coming from lower sociocultural backgrounds and with restricted educational experiences, these employment prospects were of major concern, in contrast with students from intermediate and higher socio-cultural family backgrounds. Furthermore, according to Lo et al. (2017), students who choose LIS as a second career are aware that this is not a high-paying one, but they value instead improved working conditions in terms of stability with a less competitive path, and a work-life balance.

When ranking various professions based on social status and public reputation, librarians were ranked the lowest by Croatian respondents and second-to-last by Portuguese respondents. These results are in line with the findings from Faletar Tanackovic et al. (2018), and also from the Iranian scenario (Khalili, 2020). Such ranking juxtaposes the high social value placed on medical doctors and IT professionals, indicating a need for greater advocacy and public awareness about the importance of the LIS profession. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to enhance the visibility and perceived value of the profession, possibly through targeted public relations campaigns and advocacy efforts within both academic institutions and professional organizations. By improving the public's understanding of the vital role that LIS professionals play in society, it is possible to attract a more diverse pool of students and ensure the profession's growth and sustainability.

The authors believe that the findings of this study can be relevant not only to participating institutions but also to a wider audience as they may indicate trends in LIS education internationally and can inform initiatives

to better LIS study programs and enhance the social knowledge of LIS-related careers.

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