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The Status and Challenges of Information and Library Science Education at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University Since 2010

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ABSTRACT

Background. Since 2010, the Information and Library Science (ILS) curriculum at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University has been developed and revised, regarding various aspects, such as information technology, information environment, and labor market needs. For decades, the program has offered several curricula developed to fit the labor market demand by adding the necessary knowledge and skills needed for preparing our graduates to be ready for working in the profession. However, the number of students admitted to the program is still in flux and the department has faced a series of challenges.

Objectives. This study aims to present the status, challenges, and future directions of ILS education at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Thailand.

Methods. This study employed a mixed methods approach. First, content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data from ILS curricula of Chiang Mai Rajabhat University from 2010 to 2020. Then, a survey was used to study students' perception about ILS course and profession, motivation to choose ILS, career goal and expectation after graduation, and expectation of the development of ILS course in the future. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive analysis, while the qualitative data was analyzed by content analysis.

Results. First, the status shows the restructure of curriculum according to the change of information technology, information environment, and labor market needs. Then, the survey results reflect ILS students' perception about the LIS profession and their expectation for future direction of the ILS curriculum. Then, a series of challenges and issues in ILS Education at CMRU were identified. Altogether, results would inform data-driven decisions for the future curriculum development of the department.

Contributions. The results of study propose suggestions for future ILS education improvement at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University and others who are facing similar challenges. These suggestions offer directions for improving an effective ILS program that attract undergraduate students and fill the gap between the knowledge and skills needed for LIS profession and the labor market needs.



INTRODUCTION

LIS education in Thailand has faced a series of challenges. According to Butdisuwan and Babu (2014) and Butdisuwan (2015), core factors responsible for the crisis of LIS education in Thailand are ranging from infrastructure, curriculum, growth of LIS Education, theory and practice, standards/ quality assurance/accreditation, governance, research, title of the LIS course, students' interest in the LIS course, and employment opportunities for graduates. Currently, many LIS programs, particularly among Rajabhat Universities, have to deal with a serious situation in which the number of students enrolled in the programs has dropped dramatically. Being in a similar situation, the Information and Library Science (ILS) program at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University also has to deal with these challenges and issues during the past ten years.

The Department of Information Science, formerly known as the Department of Library Science, was founded in 2000 (2543). Currently, there are six faculty members (including 4 Assistant Professors and 2 lecturers) and 39 undergraduate students. The department offers a Bachelor of Arts (Information and Library Science: ILS) (4 years). In 2010, the curriculum was updated by adding concentrations, including "Information Sciences" and "Applied Information Sciences". While the first one was a more traditional LIS course, the latter was an alternative for students who did not focus solely on the LIS profession. The curriculum was revised with minor changes in 2015, concerning information management, particularly for local information and local wisdom management. In 2020, the new curriculum was introduced with multi-dimensional modifications. The name of the curriculum was changed to B.A. (Information Science and Library Science), included more digital technology and innovation related courses. Additionally, a shift from theoretical lessons with little training to practical lessons.¹

For the past 10 years, the program has offered several curricula tailored to fit the labor market demand by preparing our graduates to be ready for working in the profession. Even though the department has tried to develop the curriculum to meet the stakeholders' needs, the number of students admitted to the program is still in flux. In fact, the department did not have any students admitted to the program in the 2020 academic year, right after the new curriculum was approved and released.

The success of curriculum development involves input of stakeholders, such as educators/teachers, university, community members, employers, and students. Undoubtedly, students' opinions, perceptions, needs, and expectations are essential for powerful curriculum development. Therefore, students' thoughts and opinions regarding the ILS curriculum and profession should be taken into consideration. Research on ILS education, particularly in the area of curriculum development, should also be devoted to students' perceptions of the ILS program and the profession. Additionally, the content analysis of the ILS curriculum should provide insight into the curriculum, since the curriculum usually mirrors what has been offered to train our students for the past 10 years. Results should inform data-driven decisions for the future curriculum development of the department.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a mixed methods approach. First, the content analysis was used to analyze the ILS curricula offered at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University during 2010-2020. Additionally, self-assessments of the Department of Information Science in 2019 and 2020 were reviewed. Then the survey of students' perception of the ILS program and profession was conducted. The data was gathered by using a self-administered online survey. The questionnaire consisted of closed-end multiple choice questions, covering demographic data, students' perception about ILS course and profession, motivation to choose ILS, career goal and expectation after graduation, and expectation of the development of ILS course in the future. The link to online questionnaires was distributed to undergraduate ILS students enrolled at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University in the first semester of the 2021 academic year. It should be noted that the department did not have any students admitted to the program in 2020; therefore, there were only three classes of students participating in this study. The total population is 39, including 10 freshmen (1st-year students), 6 juniors (3rd-year students), and 23 seniors (4th-year students). The freshmen are working toward the

¹ https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/ILS_curriculum_of_Chiang_Mai_Rajabhat_University/16677283/1



latest ILS curriculum (B.A. in Information and Library Science), while the juniors and seniors are the last two classes in the 2015 curriculum (B.A. in Information Science). Since, there was a small proportion of the population, the researchers took all into account. Thirty-seven completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a total recall of 94.87%. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive analysis such as frequency and percentage, while the qualitative data was analyzed by content analysis. Data was analyzed and presented in the following section.

FINDINGS

ILS Curricula at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (CMRU) From 2010-2020

The ILS curricula at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University were designed based on the mission of the university that aims to develop and strengthen the community. From 2010-2020, three ILS curricula were developed and all required 133 credits, including 30 credits of general education courses, 6 credits for electives, and 97 credits for ILS subjects. The learning outcomes are to produce graduates with knowledge and skills in information science and to advocate for the local community.

The 2010 curriculum offered two different concentrations, comprising “Information Science” and “Applied Information Science”. The information science concentration focuses on the knowledge and skills in library science. In contrast, the applied information science concentration emphasizes information and communication technology and media design. The 2015 curriculum focuses on IT skills, especially in local information and local wisdom management. There was no concentration provided, since the two concentrations in the 2010 curriculum were not much different. The current curriculum was developed in 2020, emphasizing innovation and digital knowledge and skills to shape students with lifelong learning skills and be able to provide information services for the local community. Thus, some courses related to local information management were added. Additionally, five more practical courses were added, making a total of 14 courses as compared to only 9 courses in the former curricula. Since the curriculum aims to enhance students' skills and abilities to work in the real world situation, a total of 250-270 hours for research and 560 hours for internship are still required.

Students' Perceptions about ILS course and profession

The demographic data of ILS students participating in this study shows the predominance of female students (59.5%) over male students (40.5%). Most students were between the ages of 21-22 years old (59.5%), followed by ≤20 years old (21.6%) and 23-24 years old (16.2%). The 4th year students dominated the largest proportion of respondents (62.2%). The majority of participants (51.4%) choose to attend the university/department due to lower tuition fees as compared to other universities, followed by near to home (45.9%) and quality of the faculty (37.8%).

Motivation Factors for the Choice of Librarianship

The most influential factor motivating the respondents to join the profession is to come by chance (67.6%), followed by a diversity of career options (43.2) and like working with computers and new technology (40.5%). It can be seen that factors related to job opportunities such as career options, better work environment, and job security, are the major concerns of the respondents and affect their decision to join the profession. The majority of the respondents (48.7%) view the ILS curriculum as a professional course, 16.2% find that it is academically sound. Whereas 13.5% agree that it is a practical training course.

The Characteristics of the ILS Profession

The respondents were asked to choose only three characteristics of the ILS profession that first come into their minds when thinking about the profession. The highest proportion of respondents 81.1% think about a library and librarians, followed by information technology (56.8%). An equal proportion of respondents (43.2%) view the ILS profession as information and information management and school librarian and teacher-librarian. It seems that the respondents view the ILS profession as a more traditional profession.



ILS as a Primary Career Choice and Occupation after Graduation

When asking the respondents to select up to three occupations that they would want to pursue after graduation, more than a half of them (59.5%) indicate that they would want to work as a freelancer in the ILS field, followed by working as a librarian in a public library and other traditional library environments (e.g., academic, special, and national library) and being a YouTuber and blogger (29.7%). Other respondents (24.3%) express their view to work as a teacher-librarian. Interestingly, some emerging occupations such as YouTubers and bloggers, and digital content creators were chosen by many respondents. All together they can create a higher proportion of participants (51.7%) that are interested in working in this emerging career field.

Future Direction for ILS Curriculum Development

Findings for the future direction for ILS curriculum development show that the highest number of participants thought that the curriculum should put more emphasis on digital technology (83.3%), followed by professional and practical experience (78.4%) and collaboration between other disciplines and practitioners in a broader area (62.2%). Other interesting directions include more online courses for professional development (re-skill and up-skill) (32.4%) and more local information management related-courses and more emphasis on students' projects and research (29.7%).

Major Findings and Discussions

The most essential factors affecting the respondents' decision to choose a specific university or department are lower tuition fees as compared to other universities in Chiang Mai, followed by the location of the university (near to home) and quality of the faculty. Unlike other studies conducted in different contexts, university reputation is not the most important factor for the choice of university in this context. According to Singh & Chander (2013), LIS students in India choose the specific university and department based on three major factors, including the reputation of the university, good faculty, and near to home.

Most students participating in this study did not choose ILS as their first choice. In fact, most of them had entered the ILS by chance. However, factors related to job opportunities such as career options, better work environment, and job security, attract some respondents to join the profession. Similarly, Singh and Chander (2013), Tanackovic et al. (2018), and Sibiya and Shongwe (2021) also found that factors related to employment and job opportunities, such as career options, employment opportunities, and work environment are the most influential factors affecting LIS students to join the profession. If the ILS curriculum can guarantee job opportunities in the labor market, the curriculum will attract more students. This may result in an increasing number of students enrolled in the program.

Although most of the students in our program were admitted to the program by chance, the majority of them indicated that they would choose the ILS as their primary career choice. A similar situation was depicted in the Indian context where most LIS students in five universities choose librarianship as their primary career choice (Singh and Chander, 2013). While some respondents indicated that they are interested in working as freelancers in the ILS field, the others would want to work as librarians in various institutions, including public libraries, school libraries, and others. Results of the study also reflect emerging occupations such as YouTubers, bloggers, and digital content creators as interesting jobs attracting our respondents.

The future directions for developing and revising the curriculum should concern various aspects. For instance, the curriculum should include more digital technology-related courses, focusing on professional and practical experience, collaborating with other disciplines and practitioners in a broader area, developing more online courses for professional development (re-skill and up-skill), offering more courses related to local information management, and considering students' project and research. Similarly, direction for curriculum development, such as emphasis on practical experience, information technology, and greater integration of different areas of study, was also suggested in Croatia and Turkey context (Tanackovic et al., 2018).



Challenges and Issues in ILS Education, CMRU

The LIS program has confronted several challenges as discussed in the following section.

Lack of Government Mandated ILS position

Thailand does not have library legislation as an important part of the national education policy like other countries, such as the USA, Japan, and the Philippines (IFLA, 2012). Although qualified librarians have studied and trained to contribute effective learning and education, the LIS professions were not acknowledged as a vital position in educational institutions in Thailand (Pradit, 2006). Consequently, some information organizations commonly recruit staff without LIS qualifications. An interesting statistic of teacher librarians in Thai rural public schools in 2016 also confirmed that only 1 out of 350 schools had a qualified librarian (0.3%) (Wimolsittichai, 2017). The library legislation not only advantages libraries' set-up and financial support but also helps in the establishment of effective libraries with qualified professionals. If the government establishes the library law and empowers the Thai Library Association for developing the LIS profession qualification and standards, it would be a legal foundation for the acknowledgment of LIS professionals. Then, the professional license may occur and can be used as a reference and assign the LIS professional qualifications as an important requirement for working at any kind of information organizations (Wells and Pleehajinda, 2019). This may secure library and information-related positions in the labor marketplace for only qualified LIS/ILS professionals, as a result, attracting more students to join the profession.

Sustainability of ILS courses

There is not only ILS education in Thailand but also around the world has been confronted with the sustainability of courses. For example, in Australia, the LIS courses at the higher education level in several universities have closed such as Curtin University and the University of Technology in Sydney (Australia Library and Information Association, 2020). In Thailand, some LIS or ILS courses were temporarily closed, particularly LIS courses in Rajabhat Universities, such as Rajabhat Chandrakasem University, Rajabhat Sakon Nakhon University, and Rajabhat Chaiyaphum University. The reasons for closing the program were from low rate of enrollment, a highly competitive admission among LIS programs, the needs for curriculum improvement, and disruptive education technologies have changed the way of learning.

The situation of our program was worse since the program faced several obstacles in the 2020 academic year. Actually, there are 4 LIS programs offered in the northern part of Thailand. One is from the elite university, the others are from Rajabhat universities located in different areas, including the ILS course at CMRU. The course offered by the elite university is more attractive to students, as compared to others. Results from our study show that nearly half of students (48.6%) thought about the LIS course taught by the elite university when they had thought of a Library and Information Science course. Additionally, most of our students did not choose our program as their first choice when admission. Thus, the number of students admitted to the program was less than the minimum requirement of the university (at least 10-15 students). As a result, the department was asked to reconsider opening the program in the 2021 academic year. Also, the notice has been made, if the number of students enrolled in the program does not meet the minimum requirement for the two consecutive years, the program will be closed. Luckily, 10 students were admitted to the program in the 2021 academic year. However, we still need to work on finding more practical solutions in order to survive in this changing environment.

Course Name Creates Confusion

ILS programs in Thailand have a variety of names. Some programs drop out the word “Library”, then use some catchy words, such as Information Studies, Information Science, Knowledge management, and Digital Content and Media (Sacchanand, 2015). Our program also changed its name several times. The program’s self-assessment report 2019 and 2020 revealed that nearly half of students dropped out of the program, because they were confused by the



program name. Since entering the program, most students viewed the program as a more IT-related curriculum. Therefore, they dropped out and chose to pursue a Bachelor degree in other programs (Department of Information Science, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, 2019; 2020). Moreover, the word “Information” makes some organizations not recognize the program. Therefore, they do not allow our graduates to apply for librarian positions. The department decided to add the word “Library” within the program’s name in 2020.

Obstacles of the Curriculum for Working as a Teacher-librarian

Our ILS curriculum is aligned with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, therefore our graduates cannot apply for a teacher librarian, requiring a teaching certificate and license. If the graduates would want to apply for a teacher librarian position, they need to pass the test on Professional Standards of the Teachers Council of Thailand. Then, they can get 2 years granted permission for working as a teacher. After they have had teaching experiences and passed the teaching assessment, they can ask for a permanent teaching license (Teachers Council of Thailand, 2012). The strains for getting a teaching certificate are not only the hardness of the test but also the time, which is set up only 3 times a year (Sangarun, n.d. cited in Wells & Pleehajinda, 2019).

Future Directions

The unstable situation of the ILS curriculum at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University is the primary concern. Results from the analysis of ILS curricula during the past 10 years and the students’ view toward the ILS course and profession inform the future direction of the department. The implications for developing an effective curriculum are proposed as follows:

Highlighting courses with the outstanding feature of the curriculum

The objective of the curriculum is to produce ILS graduates with the ability to create innovation related to information management, information services, and local wisdom for supporting life-long learning. The outstanding feature of this curriculum is local wisdom management. However, only five elective courses are connected with local wisdom (Thai Cultural Heritage Information, Information Services for Cultural Tourism, Local Information Management, Local Museum Management, and Digital Archives Management). In order to highlight this outstanding feature of the curriculum, the department should revise the curriculum and make these five courses as compulsory courses.

Establishing the curriculum emphasizing the labor market needs

A successful curriculum can be clearly proven when graduated students are desirable in labor markets. If the department can establish a curriculum based on the requirements of the local labor market, it will enhance opportunities for graduated students to get jobs. Thus, local needs are significant aspects influencing curriculum development. The local organizations are good sources for providing the supply and demand related to workers such as required skills, knowledge, and essential function and trends of jobs (OECD, 2020). Though the ILS curriculum has been developed based on the study of employers’ satisfaction, the study did not focus on the in-depth details of the essential functions of jobs in those local organizations. Therefore, the department needs to conduct some research emphasizing on the labor market needs thoroughly and apply those findings to improve effective curriculum.



Expanding students target groups

LIS Education Discussion Group suggests 4 models for expanding student target groups (Wimolsittichai, 2021), including:

1) Accrediting program by CILIP

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) certifies the quality of LIS program internationally (CILIP, 2021). The accreditation by CILIP can enhance the admission of Thai and international students.

2) Offering A Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.)

The B. Ed. can attract more students to ILS because the program comes up with teacher certificates, which expand their opportunities for working as teacher librarians.

3) Developing Modular courses

Modular courses integrate learning and working by assigning capstone projects, trainee/internship, and apprenticeships which benefit students in terms of working in the real situation.

4) Providing short courses.

Short courses, non-degree courses for credit banks, and online courses for re-skills and up-skills are flexible for a variety of learners. Our ILS program plans to offer four non-degree courses for credit banks including digital content creation, learning center management in the digital era, organizational information management, and knowledge management of local wisdom.

CONCLUSION

This study applied the mixed methods, including a content analysis to examine the development of ILS curricula in Chiang Mai Rajabhat University from 2010 to 2020 and a survey of students' perception in ILS course and profession. The results reveal that the ILS courses were revised following the national economic and social development strategy plan, the change of technology, the trend of career, and the requirement of the labor market, especially the national and local organizations. Therefore, the courses relating to ICT knowledge and skills were increased in the ILS curriculum as well as the courses related to local wisdom management.

The major findings of students' perceptions show that after graduation, most students would choose the LIS as their primary career choice. The inspirations of job decisions are job opportunities in a better work environment, job security, and a variety of related career options in the LIS field. Therefore, the job opportunity would be the future direction for developing and revising the curriculum, which would convince students to the profession.

This paper also addressed the challenges and issues in ILS education at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, which would be a benefit for LIS scholars to develop the education strategic plan and LIS curriculum. However, the limitation of the study was the small number of the participants. Also, the students who dropped out of the program were not included since the department could not keep contact with them.

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