# Graduates on placement: Perceptions about effectiveness and learned professional skills

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**Abstract:**

*This study aimed to investigate the usefulness of students' 8 weeks placement in a practicum in all types of libraries as part of their Master degree requirement. The practicum, as a part of curriculum, offers benefits to all stakeholders including students, library schools and hosting libraries. The Department of Information Management, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan has been offering a practicum since 2000 and lately changed its criteria, and updated knowledge and learning domains. Therefore, it was decided to measure the perceived effectiveness of this program through students' opinions. The study used questionnaire-based survey method to collect data from the students of three sessions who had completed their practicum from years 2014 to 2016.*
*The findings revealed that respondents perceived their overall practicum experience as 'effective'. However, they perceived that practicum was more effective in term of learning technical skills (such as acquisition, classification, cataloguing, circulation) than acquiring soft and communication skills (written communication, interpersonal, reference service). The respondents suggested that they should have been provided opportunity to learn and practice both communication and administrative skills in libraries.*

**Keywords:** Practicum, Practicum effectiveness, Graduates, Professional skills, Pakistan

**Background**

As we know, early education for librarianship was apprenticeship based on learning under an experienced supervisor in an actual workplace, outside the formal education institution. The apprenticeship model was similar to that of other professional fields including law, medicine and business. A shift in the university's missions converted the apprentice-based professional training into theoretical and research oriented academic model. The move created a chasm between library practitioners who value practice and educators who emphasize theory. Still professional education is usually associated with some form of practical exposure and hands on experience. A practicum is a short-term, professionally supervised practical experience pursued in a library or information agency during the academic program as a part of curriculum and usually entails no remuneration. Library schools can maintain their visibility to practitioners and evaluate the relevancy of curriculum with practice (Coleman, 1989). It is termed as internship and fieldwork also. The practicum, as a part of curriculum, offers various benefits to all stakeholders including students, library schools and hosting libraries. A successful practicum facilitates the students' future professional career development by learning professional skills and attitudes, gaining confidence and building collegial relationships. (Kelsey & Ramaswamy, 2005). Hosting libraries also consider it as a potential opportunity to gain input from new student workers. (Pymm & Juznic, 2014).

Department of Information Management (DoIM), University of the Punjab (PU), Lahore has been offering an eight-week duration practicum since 2000 as a part of its master program requirements; as a credit or non-credit course though. The practicum plan of DoIM is well structured, with explicitly defined learning domains. It takes place in all kinds of libraries included in the approved list by the DoIM. It is supervised by a DoIM faculty member (internal supervisor) and a practitioner (external supervisor) from the hosting library. Usually students are asked to provide three preferences from the approved list of libraries and are finally placed in one of them after acceptance by the placement committee.

A student has to keep daily journal of the tasks, get it checked by the external and internal examiners twice during the 2 month period, and also has to write a report in the end on the learning practices and outcomes. Finally, external and internal supervisors both interview the students and give their assessment on the student's performance.

The practicum structure is aligned with Espelt, Juznic and Molen's recommendations mentioned by de Sumar and Ibarra (2011). They have mentioned the same kind of procedures for practicum by stating that "placement should be structured and supervised by a member of the teaching staff and a practitioner, should take place in approved institutions, should involve clearly defined tasks and goals, and also should include feedback and evaluation" (p.3).

**Literature Review**

A literature review shows an ongoing theory vs. practice debate between educators and library practitioners (Crowley 2005; Gorman, 2004, 2005; Dillon & Norris, 2005; Estabrook, 2005, Rothstien, 1967; Williamson, 1923). Tension between theory and practice can be traced from the Williamson' classic study (1923) to the recent discussions that arose from the Micheal Gorman's 'crisis' of LIS education (Gorman, 2004). Such discussions and debates

over the years have contributed to the recognition of experiential learning as an important component of present entry level LIS education for the profession (Ball, 2005; Coleman, 1989; Hoy, 2011; Juznic & Pymm, 2011; Lacy & Cpeland, 2013; Pymm & Juznic, 2014). Professional associations such as IFLA and ALIA also see the practicum as a key element to enable students to appreciate the application of professional theories into professional practice (Pymm & Juznic, 2014).

Dodge and McKeough (2003) conducted a case study that explored the objectives and nature of practicum and issues such as the roles of internees, faculty and site supervisors, their varying motivations and process of evaluation. According to their opinion, a practicum is a critical component in developing professional skills and bridging gap between the classroom learning and in real situations through hands on practice. Some studies simply report the status, formats and structure of practicum. For example, Kelsey and Ramaswamy's (2005) case study shared the library school field experience that they developed after successful participation as a supervisor and student. It provides a practical model for supervisors and students for creating a highly successful practicum, planning training, mentoring and its evaluation. Sumar and Ibarra (2011) proposed guidelines for designing a practicum in Catholic University of Peru after analyzing the practicum situation and problems faced by the graduates of two LIS programs in Lima.

Authors have established that students find practicum as a rewarding and vital experience in improving professional skills. Paulson (2003) considered work experience condition by employers as one of the big factors in fresh graduates securing jobs. A practicum offers an opportunity to instil professional skills, experience and personality traits vital to begin a professional career (Kelsey, Ramaswamy, 2005). Bird *et al*. (2011) reported, all except two out of 58 ALA-accredited schools offered an internship in their curricula while ten schools had as a compulsory component for degree. Sumar and Ibarra (2009) established the value of practicum by conducting a survey of 41 the Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru alumni and students who considered practicum very or fairly important.

Evaluation of practicum is a needed practice as Brewer and Winston (2001) have emphasized. Evaluating the effectiveness of library practicum is crucial because its results guide to future decisions regarding the continuation and modification of the program. They outlined the necessary components of an evaluation model and the key evaluation factors to be considered for measuring the effectiveness of the library practicum. Another study conducted in the Carlos III University of Madrid presented the students 'assessment regarding the induction process of practicum (as cited in Sumar & Ibarra, 2011). A comparative study by Junzic and Pymm (2011) reported that more than 80 percent LIS students from Australia and Slovenia were satisfied or very satisfied with their practicum experience and considered it a worthwhile activity. Ogheneruemu (2007) conducted a study at Delta state University, Nigeria to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and found out that students of library and information science agreed that time spent on the practicum was worthwhile.

Regarding Pakistan, Ameen (2007) reported for the first time the variations in format, structure, requirements and duration of practicum offered in four out of eight library schools. Malik and Ameen's (2010) was the first specific study based on PU students' perspective on the effectiveness of library practicum offered. It revealed that the practicum was important in

improving their professional skills. However, various issues including a communication gap among three parties (students, external and internal supervisor), loose supervision and lack of focus on professional skills were reported by the graduates. In light of the findings, the chairperson, DoIM (principal author) held a meeting in 2011 with the faculty and practitioners of the hosting libraries to further strengthen the practicum outcomes in future. Based on the discussion and feedback by the students, certain changes were made to the practicum process. The list of practicum sites (libraries) was reviewed, updated, and only those libraries were selected which showed students' satisfaction, had good infrastructure and services. The student evaluation form, which is used by both internal and external supervisors, was revised to add specific areas for work (acquisition, collection development, automation, serial management etc.) and communication skills (written, interpersonal). It was recommended to external supervisors to especially instruct students on these added specific professional areas and business communication skills.

## Research Objectives

This study aimed to obtain students' perceptions about the usefulness of practicum after the changes were made to address the issues. The researchers attempted to achieve following research objectives:

- To measure students' perceived practicum effectiveness
- To examine working relationship with internal and external supervisors
- To investigate overall level of learned knowledge and skills at practicum sites
- To get suggestions for the improvement of practicum program

## Methodology

The survey research method is most commonly and effectively used in social sciences to know opinions, perceptions and experiences of respondents. Therefore, for present study this method was utilized to collect data from last three years (2014-16) graduate sessions. A structured questionnaire using five point Likert scale and one open ended question was constructed based on literature and expert opinions. The opinions of experts and pilot testing results were incorporated to improve the quality of the questionnaire. Five point Likert scales were used to measure the graduates' perceptions. Previous studies (Brewer and Winston, 2001; Sumar & Ibarra, 2009; Malik & Ameen, 2010) used questionnaires successfully to investigate students' practicum perceptions.

The questionnaire was mainly divided into three sections: i) overall learning experience, facilities available at practicum sites, application of theory to practice and working relationship with internal (teachers) and external (site librarians) supervisors, ii) their learning in specified areas and skills (technical, administrative, interpersonal), iii) Finally, students' suggestions through an open-ended question. The survey was administered to 141 Master students from three academic years (2014-16) in both the morning and afternoon programs. The questionnaire was self-administered to make sure the students understood the questions. To present the findings researchers have used descriptive statistics, tables and figures with the interpretation.

## Findings and Discussion

*Section 1: Overall Learning Experience*

The participants were asked about their perceptions of overall learning experience during practicum using eight statements. Table 1 shows that a  majority of student participants (73%)  were of view that practicum provided them learning opportunities to build and refine professional development either to 'moderate extent' (40%) or to a 'large extent' (33%) while 17% participants rated it  to some extent. Only a few (6%) considered their experience useful to a 'very little extent' and 'not useful at all' (4%). The results show that a vast majority considered their practicum experience useful. These findings are in line with other studies (Junzic & Pymm, 2011; Ogheneruemu, 2007). The previous study by Malik and Ameen (2010)  also reported that graduates were quite satisfied with the overall effectiveness of practicum and considered it very important in imparting professional skills.

Table 1. Graduates' perceived overall effectiveness of practicum experience

| Statements | To a large extent % | To a moderate extent % | To some extent % | To a very little extent % | Not at all % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My practicum experience provided me with the learning opportunities, necessary to build/refine my professional development | 33 | 40 | 17 | 6 | 4 |
| My practicum enabled me to apply theoretical knowledge learnt at the department in the provision of library services | 20 | 43 | 17 | 13 | 7 |
| The external supervisor involved me in learning opportunities, informative tasks and gave enough explanation on my practicum assignments | 31 | 30 | 20 | 13 | 6 |
| I felt comfortable with external supervisor in my overall working relationship | 40 | 29 | 13 | 11 | 7 |
| My internal supervisor provided me proper time and guidance during my practicum | 29 | 36 | 16 | 8 | 11 |
|  | Strongly agree % | Agree % | Neutral % | Disagree % | Strongly disagree % |
| The practicum place facilities (resources, equipment, and physical environment) were adequate and updated according to my current learning needs | 24 | 34 | 29 | 9 | 4 |
| I would recommend my practicum place and external supervisor to other IM students | 31 | 28 | 19 | 9 | 13 |

*Note*. Scale One: 1= Not at all, 2=To a very little extent, 3=To some extent, 4=To a moderate extent, 5=To a large extent
Scale Two: 1= Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

A majority of respondents (to large extent 20% and to moderate extent 43%) reported also that the knowledge they gained during courses at school helped them in the experience of providing services at their libraries. A small number thought that the theoretical learning had a weak relevance with real professional practice (13% to a very little extent, 7% not at all).

The difference in opinion might be due to difference in practicum places; types of libraries (public/private) difference in terms of leadership, services, collection and number of staff.

Regarding practicum site's facilities (resources, equipment and physical environment), a small majority of students (58%) opted either 'agreed' (34%) or 'strongly agreed' (24%) with that the facilities were adequate according to their learning needs. It is interesting to note here that 28% students remained neutral on this issue. One possibility of difference in opinion that the question was about overall status of their respective library and librarians varies significantly in this regard. Furthermore, some students were sent to branch libraries and some others in not so advanced libraries--- depending on the availability of sites as well as students' commuting difficulties. Still, only a few students showed their disagreement (9% disagree, 4% strongly disagree) with adequateness and datedness of the practicum sites.

Students were asked about their external supervisors' behavior (Practicum supervisor librarian/s). A majority of the interns (61%) agreed to either large extent (31% or to moderate extent (30%) that their external supervisors provided them learning opportunities and involved them in informative tasks while 20 % found their external supervisors helpful to some extent. Only a small number (18%) reported them as very little extent (13%) and not at all (6%). A large number of respondents (with responses as to a great extent 40%, to moderate extent 29%) also reported that they had developed good working relationship with their external supervisors and became comfortable on the placement. The students felt comfortable perhaps because of the emerging teamwork concept in libraries and a better liaison with the libraries by the DoIM and internal supervisor's visits to the sites. Other respondents felt that they had working relationship with external supervisors to some extent (13%). This finding is contrary to the previous study (Malik & Ameen, 2010), where students complained about supervision issues. Only 17% could build working rapport to a very little extent (11%) and not at all (7%). It may be because some libraries still are headed by librarians who have an autocratic leadership style.

Furthermore, the interns were also asked about their internal supervisors' (faculty member from DoIM) provided time and guidance. According to a large number of students (to great extent 29%, to moderate extent 36%, ) internal supervisors provided them proper time and guidance during practicum. A small number was not fully satisfied with the guidance provided to them by their internal supervisors and rated it as to some extent (16%), to a very little extent (8%), and not at all (11%). These findings indicate that students' internal supervisors' time and adequate guidance still needs improvement, and is also necessary to make their practicum experience successful. The previous study by Malik and Ameen (2010) reported that mostly students (81%) showed that they were comfortable in sharing problems regarding practicum with the internal supervisor while (19%) gave negative response in this regard.

They were asked whether they would recommend their practicum sites to the fellow students? The results show that majority students would recommend their practicum site and external supervisor to their juniors (strongly agree 31%, agree 28%). However, a small number of the respondents (19%) remained silent (neutral) and a few students disagreed (9%) or strongly disagreed (13%) with recommending their practicum experience as it was insignificant to them. Over half of the students (59%) considered the practicum effective and useful to

recommend others. This is mainly because the department has updated list of practicum sites (libraries) and selected only those libraries which showed students' satisfaction and have good infrastructure facilities.

*Section 2: Practical Knowledge and Skills Learning Experience*

In addition to their overall experience, participants were asked specifically about the knowledge and skills they were required to learn during practicum. They were asked about technical, reference, managerial, and communication skills. They were further probed about whether they acquired these skills manually, digitally or in both formats, because some libraries in Pakistan still have manual processing of library functions, some are going through restructuring and a few have automated operations, while others might be running their technical operations in both formats. Figure 1 demonstrates the percentage of actual learning against their perceived expectation. The blue bar shows the combined percentages of responses to a great extent and to a moderate extent perceived by respondents. It can be seen through the bar chart that overall learning experience of respondents was successful (73%). However, the findings of individual learning areas (Manual/Digital/Both classification skills, Manual/Digital/Both cataloguing skills, Acquisition etc.) vary. They learned acquisition, digital cataloguing, manual classification and circulation more than other skills. Only few students reported that they were trained to gain administrative, serial management, written communication and interpersonal skills.

Malik and Ameen (2010) also found that the practicum played a less effective role in developing "library administration" and "written communication skills" among the graduates. The DoIM started a full 3 credit hour course on 'Personality Development & Communication Skills' in 2007. Ameen (2013) investigated the impact of this course on the students and found .that overall the course had a significant influence on students' personality growth, behavior modification and social skills while written communication skills were not improved much.
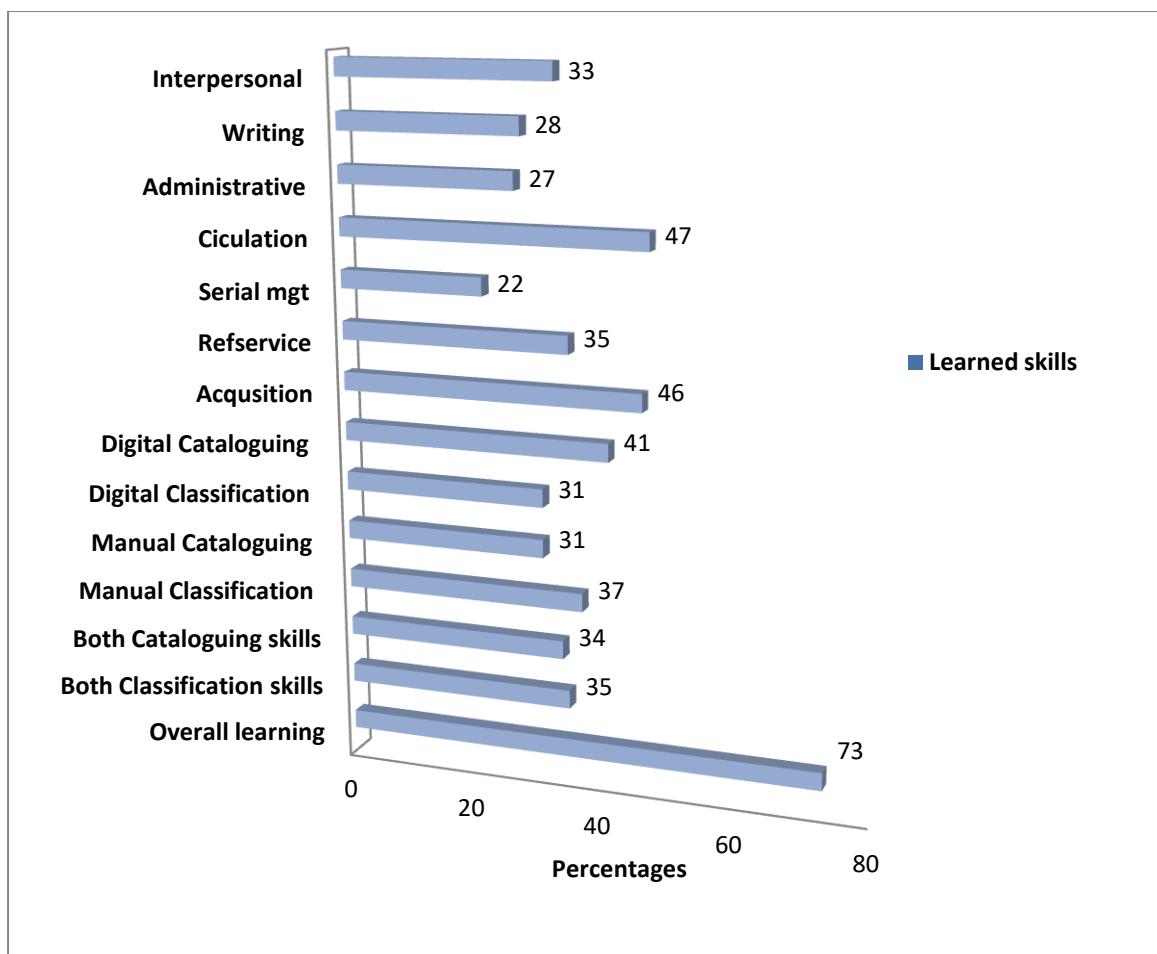
Figure 1: Combined %ages of values only for 'great extent' and 'moderate extent' related to specific skills

In response to a statement about classification knowledge/skill, the respondents reported responded that they learned this skill to a large extent (manually 14%, digitally 17% and both 13%). It is apparent from the results that participants, who perceived their skill enhancement to a large extent, worked in a digital environment. A good number of respondents mentioned that they learned this skill to a moderate extent (manually 23%, digitally 14% and both 22%). Those who learnedto a moderate extent mainly practiced doing it manually and in both formats. It shows that mostly practicum places (libraries) had manual and computerized library functions side by side. It is one of the possibilities that students had access to manual and to electronic library management systems (LMS).

Regarding–cataloging skills' improvement during practicum, a majority of the students mentioned that they learned both formats to a moderate extent (manually 17%, digitally 26% and both 21%). It shows that libraries might have automated cataloging and also maintained manual system.Therest learned this skill to some extent or to a very little extent. They were also asked about getting training on the library management system. The majority reported working on LMS to a moderate extent (35%) and to some extent (22%). These results complement the previous findings of the present study that students practice classification skill to a moderate extent and mostly practice manually and in both formats.

A number of students learned acquisition procedures of print material to a moderate (26%) and to a large extent (20%). They mentioned that they did not learn acquisition of non-print library material. It shows that either they were not involved in non-print acquisition material or these libraries would acquire mostly print library collections. They also at least practiced reference and serial management activities as only 17 % reported learning reference service skills to a great extent and 18% to a moderate extent while merely 9% stated that they delivered reference services and practiced serial management skill to a large extent 10%, to a moderate extent 12%). The one possible reason for these findings could be the summer break (June-August) in colleges and universities when the practicum was offered. Another possible reason might be that reference service is directly related to clients and external supervisors might avoid having interns deal with them. The finding about not much improvementof interpersonal skills further supports this assumption as only 5% felt they improved to a great extent and 18% to a moderate extent.

However, students were provided more chances to work in circulation section. A majority of respondents revealed that their knowledge about circulation (check-in and check-out) improved to a large extent (27%) and to a moderate extent (20%). They were also asked about their training in library administration work (planning, budgeting, staff hiring, decision making etc.), most of them stated that they did not get any such training (12%) or trained to a moderate extent (17%) or to a large extent (10%). It is important that students get a chance to be part of such training to build their confidence before starting their actual job.

As mentioned, DoIM updated the practicum evaluation form and added learning areas, specifically written communication skills, therefore, it was investigated that whether they gained any training regarding written communication skills (office letters, user letters etc.). A few mentioned (to a great extent 9% and to a moderate extent 19%) that they were involved in library written communication; however, majority of them did not get any such training or to a very little extent.

The findings establish that the overall practicum was significant for the students in learning technical skills (classification, cataloguing, circulation) while other skills (interpersonal and written communication, library administration) were still not imparted as desired.

Finally, the respondents were asked through an open-ended question to provide suggestions on improving the experience of practicum. A content analysis of their suggestions revealed that students mostly want direct supervision of external supervisor, and training on administrative, interpersonal and written communication skills. They were of the view that they should be given an equal opportunity to work in all sections of the library. A few students also mentioned that internal supervisors (teacher) must visit practicum sites on regular basis to observe their training. They urged to be treated in a friendly manner, and be considered as a newly hired staff. These results are in line with previous studies (Pacios, 2013) which reported the same issues raised by interns. The findings correspond with the problems and suggestions identified by Malik and Ameen (2010), in terms of equal opportunity for working in all the sections, more internal supervisors' visits to the hosting libraries, and a conducive learning environment.

**Conclusion**

The study results helped in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the practicum program. The graduates overall view their practicum experience effective which trained them significantly in improving their technical skills (cataloguing, classification, circulation). The changes made by the Department proved significant and improved the quality of the program and student experiences over three academic years as Figure 2 shows.
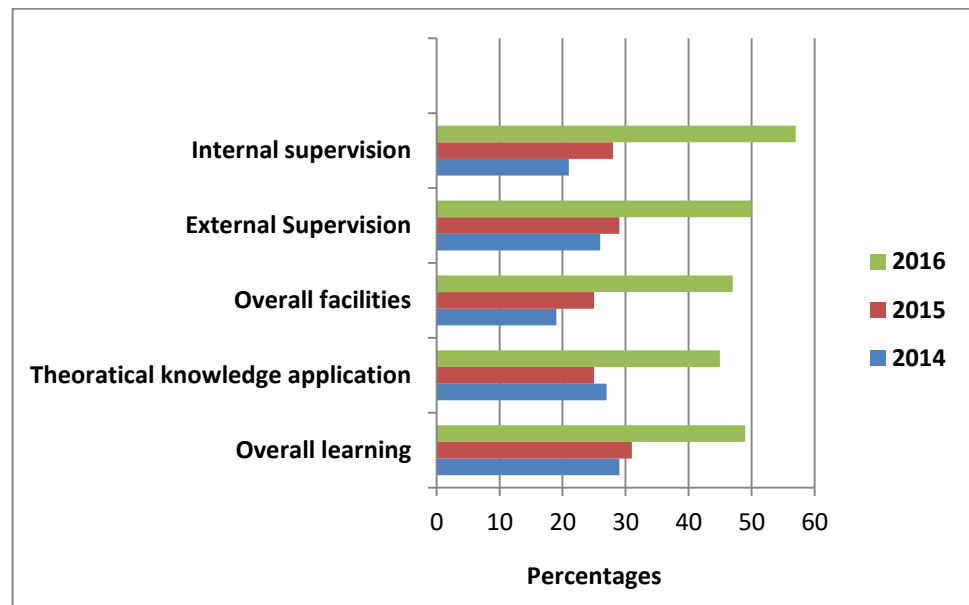


Figure 2, Comparison of practicum effectiveness over three academic years

To demonstrate the impact of the improvements made in the practicum experience each year, a comparison of practicum effectiveness over three academic years has been illustrated in Figure 2. The green, blue and red bars show different years progress of practicum overall experience, application of theoretical knowledge, overall facilities available at practicum sites and working relationship with internal and external supervisors. It shows that changes made to improve practicum program were effective and students' experience got better every year. In 2014 (blue bar) students perceived practicum program effectiveness low and it gradually increased in year 2015 and 2016. It may be concluded here that appropriate decision making based on all stakeholders (students, teachers, site librarians) opinions can improve the quality of the practicum program.

It was suggested by the respondents that they should be supervised by head of practicum sites instead of their juniors, and they should be provided the opportunity to work in all library sections. External supervisors should assist them in gaining more administrative and interpersonal skills. These findings will guide the DoIM regarding the strengths and weaknesses \of the program and the skills needed. Other schools in Pakistan and the region may also get benefit out of the findings because the literature establishes that the sister countries face more or less the same circumstances. The study results have implications for library & information management educators, library schools and site librarians for future planning.

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