

# CURRENT AND FUTURE LIS COMPETENCIES – PERCEPTIONS OF SLOVENIAN PRACTITIONERS

## DANAŠNJE I BUDUĆE KOMPETENCIJE KNJIŽNIČARSKIH I INFORMACIJSKIH STRUČNJAKA: PERCEPCIJA SLOVENSКИH PRAKTIČARA

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### *Abstract*

**Objective.** The study provides a report on the perceptions of the Slovenian library practitioners of the competencies needed for their work today and those that will be needed in the future. Two groups of competencies were considered: generic and professional, the latter in four groups: library management and library operations, library materials and information resources, work with users, organization of knowledge and information.

**Approach/Methodology/Design.** An online survey was used. To cover practitioners in all types and sizes of libraries, random sampling of libraries was used and snow-ball sampling from there on (N = 132). We discuss the general overview of the results

through descriptive statistics, and the differences in the perception of competency importance between the current and the future situation, using paired samples T-test.

**Results.** The results have shown that competencies, in all groups, were rated high, for both today and future work, no criticism was detected over the choice of the competencies, only certain suggestions, the practitioners believe that nearly all competencies will gain importance in the future, and none will become less important. The highest valued area is work with users, followed by the areas of work with library materials and resources, and library management, while organization of knowledge and information was, surprisingly, rated the lowest.

**Practical implications.** The results will be used in the formation of at least a draft competency model or models and to inform further work on the reformed study programme at the Department of LIS & BS at the University of Ljubljana.

**Originality/value.** This study offers the first comprehensive insight into the opinions and perceptions of the practitioners in all types of libraries in Slovenia of the competencies needed for their work today and those that will be needed in the future.

**Keywords:** competency model; generic competencies; library practitioners; professional competencies; Slovenian LIS

### **Sažetak**

**Cilj.** Članak predstavlja studiju o percepcijama slovenskih knjižničara o kompetencijama koje su im za rad potrebne danas i koje će im biti potrebne u budućnosti. Razmatrane su dvije skupine kompetencija: generičke i stručne, raspoređene u četiri skupine: vođenje knjižnice i knjižnično poslovanje, knjižnična građa i informacijski izvori, rad s korisnicima, organizacija znanja i informacija.

**Pristup/metodologija/dizajn.** Korištena je *online* anketa. Kako bi se obuhvatili stručnjaci u svim vrstama i veličinama knjižnica, korišteno je nasumično uzorkovanje knjižnica, a zatim uzorkovanje metodom snježne grude (N = 132). Raspravljamo o općem pregledu rezultata kroz deskriptivnu statistiku te o razlikama u percepciji važnosti kompetencija između sadašnje i buduće situacije, koristeći T-test uparenih uzoraka.

**Rezultati.** Rezultati pokazuju da su kompetencije u svim skupinama visoko ocijenjene kako za sadašnji tako i za budući rad. Nije uočena kritika na izbor kompetencija, samo određeni prijedlozi. Praktičari vjeruju da će gotovo sve kompetencije biti značajne u budućnosti, a nijedna neće postati manje važna. Najviše je ocijenjeno područje rada s korisnicima, zatim područja rada s knjižničnom građom i resursima te upravljanje knjižnicom, dok je organizacija znanja i informacija, začudo, najslabije ocijenjena.

**Praktične implikacije.** Rezultati će se koristiti za formiranje nacрта jednoga ili više modela kompetencija i u daljnjem radu na reformiranom studijskom programu na Odjelu za LIS & BS na Sveučilištu u Ljubljani.

**Originalnost/vrijednost.** Ova studija nudi prvi sveobuhvatan uvid u mišljenja i percepcije praktičara u svim vrstama knjižnica u Sloveniji o kompetencijama potrebnim za njihov rad danas i onima koje će im biti potrebne u budućnosti.

**Ključne riječi:** generičke kompetencije; knjižničari; kompetencijski model, Slovenija; stručne kompetencije

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the light of the rapid technological development and the accompanying changes in society, it is also appropriate to reflect on the need for continuous development of professions as well as programmes of study. This also applies to the library profession, as libraries, in the context of justifying their role and value, need to be able to provide relevant services to their users, which calls for constant development of new skills and competencies and, consequently, the updating of formal curricula.

This includes the assessment of the competencies, acquired through education, and the competencies required for quality work in libraries. For this purpose, it is necessary to determine how to assess competencies and how to identify those that are important for a particular area of work within the library (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Ammons Stephens et al., 2009; Chan, 2013; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013). There is a range of competency models, which can offer the framework for research on competencies (Vilar et al., 2017). These models usually consist of broad categories, such as individual characteristics, generic competencies, ethical and professional competencies. However, the composition, structure and content of competency models are not universally accepted (Ammons Stephens et al., 2009) and are often related to a particular area of work or type of library (Vilar et al., 2017).

In this paper we report of an investigation of the perceptions of the employed library practitioners in Slovenia of the competencies that are needed for their work today and those that will be needed for library work in the future.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A common definition of competencies is that it is a dynamic set of knowledge, understanding, skills, abilities, and attitudes or behaviors that enable a person to effectively perform specific tasks in a particular context – in our case a library (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Chan, 2013; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013, Zabukovec, 2014). Chan (2013) adds four other aspects: beliefs, motivations, values, and interests. He also notes that the concept of competencies can be defined differently depending on the area or context of research.

As technology and society evolve, so does the set of knowledge and skills that librarians need in order to keep up with all these changes. For librarians, it is not only important which competencies are relevant, but it is also necessary to constantly improve and upgrade the acquired competencies, so that librarians can follow and competently respond to the development. Many competencies are related to the development of technology, computers and online databases, where the most important contexts are finding information and providing it to the users (see, for example, Machala, 2015; Yadav, 2021). According to Machala (2015), the development of society and technology not only changes the roles and requirements of librarians, but also bring important responsibilities.

As such, these issues are also relevant to the development of educational programmes, both formal and informal (Živković, 2009; Huckle, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). However, not all study programmes have implemented such changes, so outdated educational programmes can pose a serious development problem globally for libraries as well as entire communities where libraries operate (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013).

Another important question is how to assess competencies and how to identify those that are relevant to a particular area of library work (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Ammons Stephens et al., 2009; Chan, 2013; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013; Vilar et al., 2017; Yadav, 2021), as the identification of the necessary competencies is the first important step in introducing them to the educational programmes. One of the recommendations of the Tuning project (2004) in the context of the Bologna reform of the EU higher education was that each study programme should aim for generic competencies, which are transferrable to all fields, and subject-specific competencies, which are important for each specific field.

Setting up competency models requires a thorough investigation of the relevant domains and skills (Machala, Nebesny & Horvat, 2009). Marelli (2001) defines a competency model as a combination or set of knowledge, skills, abilities and individual characteristics. Knowledge is what a person understands (facts, principles, concepts, theories, and guidelines) and is divided into concrete/abstract, general/specific, simple/complex. It is acquired through experience and memorization. Skills are abilities that enable the execution of a task at a concrete or abstract level and can be effectively developed and improved through repetition and correction in different situations. Abilities are cognitive and physical potentials needed to perform a task. As such, they tend to be complex and can be developed through more demanding types of learning. Individual characteristics (personal dispositions) are beliefs, values, and personality traits influencing the so-called enabling behaviour, which includes characteristics such as work habits, communication, self-direction, and self-management, and can only be developed in social situations. Marelli (2001) thus defines a competency model as a framework for the competencies required to perform tasks in a particular work environment. Such a

model also guides educational programmes by defining the required competencies, which, in a teaching environment, become learning objectives. According to Roe, there are four steps in developing a competency model:

1. Analysis of work, description of roles, tasks, obligations, etc.
2. Definition of the competencies, required to carry out the defined tasks, linked to a set of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and individual characteristics (abilities and personality traits).
3. Formation of a competency model that defines the relationship between individual competencies, i.e. knowledge, skills, beliefs, and individual characteristics.
4. Verification of this model with practitioners, field observations, etc., which can lead to confirmation or (partial) reformulation.

Competency models for information specialists identify relevant competencies and can help us shape study programmes, job descriptions, etc. The models most often consist of groups of competencies, usually generic or personal competencies, ethical competencies, and professional competencies, and each group of competencies is further divided into subgroups. There are many similarities between competency models in LIS, although their structure and certain groups of competencies differ to some extent. This means that competency models are not universally accepted and the differences between them are often related to the type of libraries or the area of work (Ammons Stephens et al., 2009; Machala, 2015; Barbarić, 2009; Vilar et al., 2017). For example, the American Library Association's (ALA) Core Competencies of Librarianship (2009) list specific skills, qualities, and areas of knowledge structured into eight groups: foundations of the profession, information resources, organization of recorded knowledge and information, technological knowledge and skills, reference and user services, research, continuing education and lifelong learning, and administration and management. In research, it is therefore important to identify important competencies and divide them into meaningful and relevant groups according to the researched LIS area (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Ammons Stephens et al., 2009; Chan, 2013; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013).

For librarians, not only professional competencies are important, but also well developed personal competencies, often called individual characteristics or personality traits. These, as Zabukovec (2014) argues, are those abilities or skills, which are important for good work in general. Among them are instrumental (analysis, synthesis, planning, organization, use of language and ICT, problem-solving, decision-making), interpersonal (self-criticism, teamwork, tolerance and acceptance, ethical conduct), and systemic skills (practical use of language, learning, independence) (Tuning, 2004).

Some debates have been initiated as to whether individual characteristics can be considered competencies because they are, in principle, innate, not acquired characteristics of the individual (Ammons Stephens et al., 2009, Zabukovec, 2014). However, they can also be developed or strengthened through education and training, therefore, in principle, it is considered that individual characteristics are a very important part of the set of characteristics required for quality work and can be as such considered as competencies (Marelli, 2001). Recent research has also confirmed that generic and personal competencies are important among graduates of librarianship and information science (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013), as they strengthen professional self-esteem, as well as enable gaining credibility and acceptance among colleagues (Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017). Similarly, Yadav (2021) confirmed the immense importance of the so called “soft skills”. As the most important competencies of special librarians Peyvand Robati and Singh (2013) found that these are competencies related to knowledge of information technology, followed by those related to information organization and the field of library operation, as well as research, while most important generic competency is communication. Yadav (2021) adds to these also knowledge of library liaison services, technical services and foreign languages.

In addition to the necessary constant evaluation of LIS competencies, it is also necessary to determine which competencies are required for certain professional areas of operation in the library (e.g. work with resources and materials, library management, work with users, processing) and what are the differences between library types. At the same time, it is very important to anticipate, as much as possible, which competencies will be important for librarians in the future, so that they can be included in curricula in a timely manner.

### **3. RESEARCH**

#### ***3.1 Research problem and research questions***

Generic and professional competencies, developed through lifelong learning as part of theoretical and practical learning, are important for successful work in any profession, the same applies to LIS (Abotalebi and Beagle, 2017; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013, Vilar et al., 2017; Zabukovec, 2014, Yadav, 2021). As technological and social changes have also changed the LIS profession and thus created the need for new knowledge and new ways of practice, it is necessary to re-evaluate and update the LIS study programmes. The reform of study programmes, however, necessarily requires the definition of a set of competencies, needed today, and, even more, competencies that will be needed in the future.

We believe that study programmes should be shaped, among other things, based on the opinions and perceptions of Slovenian information professionals,

who are mainly employed in libraries, are aware which competencies are needed in practice and have an insight into future needs of the profession. Our goal was to investigate this in our study. We wanted to shed light on what competencies librarians need today and what are those they will need in the future.

As we have shown, existing competency models include a set of various competencies that librarians need to do their job. Slovenia has not yet adopted competency models that would uniformly define the competencies required for the profession or for the work in particular types of libraries, so we used existing competency models as the basis for shaping a set of generic and professional competencies (described in the next section and elaborated in the results section), relevant to the design of the reformed study programs. This draft was reviewed and further developed within the research group for the purpose of this study. The model consisted of two groups (generic and professional competencies), and its structure was as follows:

A) Generic competencies:

- a. individual characteristics (communicativeness, people skills, innovation, creativity, self-initiative, adaptability, etc.),
- b. general skills (analytical thinking and problem solving, general allround knowledge, research, teamwork, project work, various types of communication, reading skills, etc.),
- c. technical skills (knowledge and ability to use and keep up with modern ICT, programming, etc.)

B) Professional competencies:

- a. library management and library operations,
- b. library materials and information resources,
- c. work with users,
- d. organization of knowledge and information.

The aim of this research was to create a set of competencies (draft competency model) that practitioners perceive as relevant and necessary for work in libraries and other information institutions. We wanted to find out which competencies are perceived as important among practitioners today and which will be important in the future. Based on the final set of competencies, the study programs would then be adjusted and updated.

We formed two research questions:

1. Which generic competencies do library practitioners consider important for their work in the library today and which will be important for their work in the future?

2. Which professional competencies do library practitioners consider important for their work in the library today and which will be important for their work in the future?

## **3.2 Methodology**

### *3.2.1 Method and instrument*

We used the survey method for data collection<sup>1</sup>. In order to reach a large and diverse sample, we opted for an online questionnaire. The draft questionnaire was pilot tested with 3 practitioners, to check the clarity of the questions and their content (whether any important topics were omitted). Following their response, we changed some visual elements, and supplemented and split some questions.

The final questionnaire consisted of 18 questions. The first 8 were demographic, and the rest were related to competencies. For demographic questions, the additional sub-questions were offered according to what respondents chose initially. In the first competency question, which referred to generic competencies (and included some individual characteristics and some general skills), the respondents had to select 8 of the 13 competencies that they considered most important and then rank them according to importance. The following five questions referred to general professional competencies and professional competencies by areas: organization of knowledge and information, library materials and information resources, work with users, and library management and operation. It is necessary to note that we had to join certain answer options in order to avoid too lengthy questionnaire. For these questions, respondents rated competencies on a 5-point Likert scale of competency from 1 (completely irrelevant) to 5 (very important), both for their perception of importance today and in the future. The respondents could also choose the options ‘I do not know’ (intended primarily for the possibility that the respondents did not know the competency or knew it too poorly to be able to assess it) and ‘Other’. The last question (optional) was open-ended and invited the respondents to add their insight into subject matter. The respondents could suggest competencies that they felt might be important to librarians. In this way, we wanted to gain insight into whether we omitted any competencies in our competency model that would be good to include when revising the study programme. The questions regarding the competencies were offered to the respondents in random order – in this way, we tried to ensure as balanced coverage of all content areas from all respondents and avoid influence of the previous questions on subsequent answers. The questionnaire was available from November 18 to 30, 2020, average solving time was 14 minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> The research in the paper was partly conducted as part of courses of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Master Degree Programme at the Department of LIS&BS, University of Ljubljana.



### 3.2.2 Sample

We wanted to cover practitioners in all types and sizes of libraries. As it would be impossible to obtain the contacts of all librarians employed in Slovenian libraries, we decided to randomly sample libraries, and use snowball sampling from there on. The data on libraries were obtained on the BibSiSt Online website,<sup>2</sup> where statistical data on Slovenian libraries are available by the type of library. The research included public, academic, special, and school libraries (including libraries in music schools and student dormitories). As there are big differences in the size of libraries, we decided to include them proportionately to obtain as balanced numbers of respondents as possible. We only included the libraries which, according to BibSist data, had at least one professional librarian employed. We sent the survey invitation to the libraries' e-mail addresses and, according to the snowball principle, asked the recipients to share, if possible, the questionnaire with their colleagues in the library. This means that one librarian or several librarians per library could participate. The entire population in Slovenian libraries in 2020 is presented in Table 1, but due to the sampling procedure, we cannot estimate what ratio of the population was targeted nor the response rate.

*Table 1: Slovenian librarians in 2020 (population and study sample)*

	No. of professional certified librarians	No. of professional librarians	No. of libraries	Population of librarians	No. of respondents	
National	99	101	1	146	5	3%
Academic	266	293	83	368	23	6%
Special	104	121	95	152	21	14%
Public	958	968	60	1266	40	3%
School	/ <sup>3</sup>	5752	632	808	43	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1427</b>	<b>2235</b>	<b>871</b>	<b>2740</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>5%</b>

132 surveys were completed and another 37 were partially completed (N=169). Over half of responses came from public (n=53) and school librarians (n=52). As the invitation was sent to 15 public libraries, this means that they provided the most responses per library. 31 responses were from academic librarians, 7 from the people in the national library, and only 26 from special librarians. 44 responses

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://bibsist.nuk.uni-lj.si/>

<sup>3</sup> Due to different regulations, school librarians are not required to have professional certification.

came from a one-person library, 40 from libraries with 2-4 employees, 39 from 5-16 employees, and 41 from large libraries with 16+ employees. Over half of respondents (105) had 11-30 years of work experience in the library, 2 had over 40 years (-10 = 37, 11-20 = 60, 21-30 = 45, 31+ = 26). Over half of the respondents are between 41-60 years old (20-30=6, 31-40=37, 41-50=55, 51-60=59, 60+ =11), which is a relatively accurate representation of the age structure of the library workers. 69 respondents were librarians by profession (61 with a postgraduate degree and 8 with masters or a PhD), another 18 were school librarians with additional LIS education.

### 3.2.3. *Analysis*

In this paper, we show and discuss the general overview of the results through descriptive statistics, and the differences in the perception of competency importance between the current and the future situation, using paired samples T-test. We need to note that a great majority of paired sample T-tests were statistically significant, meaning that in our discussion we primarily focused on the instances where either there were no differences or outstanding or surprising findings were observed.

Of course, it is also interesting to analyse the relationships between demographic variables (such as library type and size, respondents' age, experience, education) and content variables, but since this exceeds the scope of the paper, we will present these analyses in a separate paper. The results will serve as the basis for designing a competency model relevant to Slovenian librarianship.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 *Generic competencies*

Within the context of research question 1, the librarians answered two survey questions connected to individual characteristics and generic competencies.

#### 4.1.1 *Individual characteristics and general skills*

Respondents were asked to select 8 out of 13 competencies and rank them based on their importance for the work they do in the library. This was the only question that focused solely on librarians' current or more general perception of competency importance. Figure 1 shows the frequency of selecting each option (first four ranks) and the mean rank of each category (the lower the value, the more important the competency).

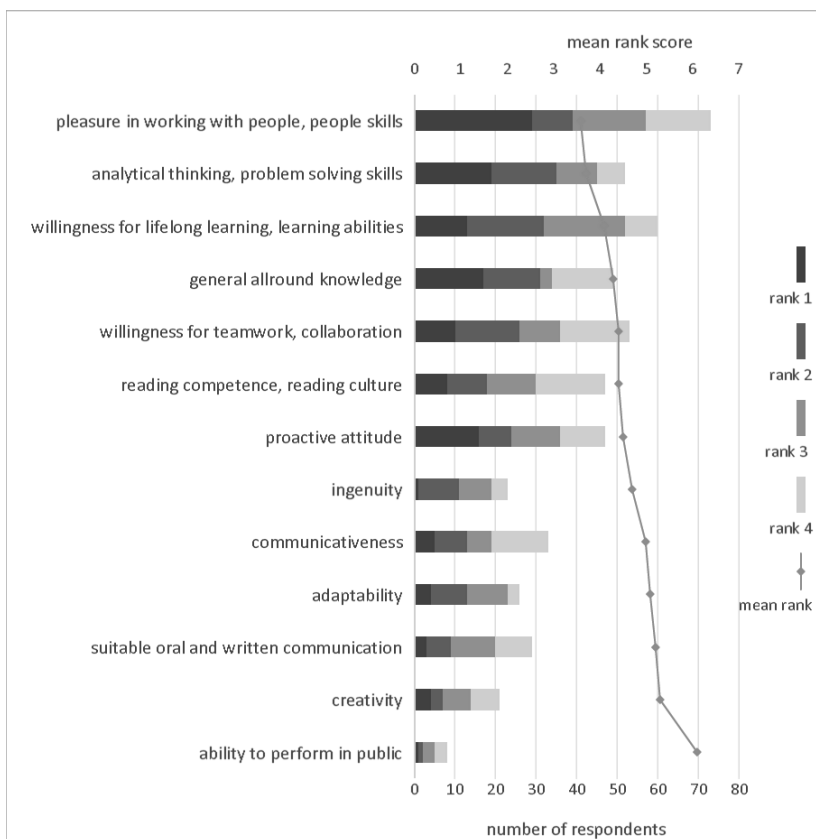


Figure 1: Ranking of individual characteristics and general skill importance: frequency of selection by the first 4 ranks with the mean rank (n=132)

The respondents ranked “Pleasure in working with people” as the most important competency, followed by “Analytical thinking and problem solving”, “Willingness for lifelong learning” and “General all-round knowledge”, while “Ability to perform in public”, “Creativity” and “Suitable oral and written communication” were at the bottom of the list (Figure 1).

However, there are no major differences between the mean scores (all between 3.6 and 4.6), with exception of the last place (“Ability to perform in public”), which was the only category with a mean score above 6 and thus seems to be the least important to the librarians. This indicates that most, if not all, general skills and individual characteristics are perceived as important for the efficient performance of library work. This is in line with the surveyed literature where some authors found generic and personal competencies, sometimes called also soft skills, to be important in LIS field due to their positive influence on quality of work and

persona satisfaction (Yadav, 2021; Abotalebi and Biglu, 2017; Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013). Along with the ability to work with people and general allround knowledge, librarians' view as most important competencies that enable individuals to be effective and to continually adapt and progress (although adaptability itself was not rated as highly). Teamwork was not rated as highly important (5<sup>th</sup>), and, interestingly, communication skills were rated similarly low.

Within the context of presenting the results from Likert-type questions, which follow, we should note that all competencies, both from present perspective and in the future, were rated above 3,3 on average (the higher the average, the more important the competency), meaning that all were identified as important or very important and that, consequently, there were very small differences between today's importance and importance in the future. However, the respondents do believe that nearly all competencies will gain importance in the future and that none will lose it or become irrelevant. They also gave some valuable additional suggestions regarding relevant competencies in all five groups – interestingly, nobody used the option 'other' – instead, many gave rather extensive comments to the final open-ended question.

#### *4.1.2 General and technical skills today and in the future*

The respondents see “Information Literacy” as the most important skill today, where literally no one had a negative or neutral opinion (Figure 2). We should note that, according to the statistical analysis, all general and technical skills were assessed as more important in the future. These findings also confirm some previous studies where competencies related to knowledge of information technology and to conducting research were found as important, albeit in the context of special libraries (Peyvand, Robati and Singh, 2013), while Yadav (2021) confirmed the importance of technical skills for all LIS graduates.

Besides “Information literacy”, the two most important competencies in the future will be “Ability to use modern ICT” and “Ability to keep up with new technologies” (the latter does not seem to be as important today). With “Ethics”, which ranks fourth in importance, the differences between today and in the future were the smallest, although still statistically significant. The biggest difference in the importance between today and in the future is observed in “Basics of programming”, which respondents believe is not very important now, but will become much more important. Beside “Basics of programming”, there is also a rather large difference between current and future importance for the competencies “Ability for project work”, “Knowledge of research process”, and “Ability to conduct advanced analysis of research data”. As for competencies that have a mean score above 4, four competencies are relevant today and six in the future. What is also interesting are the shares of those who rate a particular competency as ‘important’ and ‘very important’: we see that most competencies received larger shares of the

‘very important’ opinion for the future. Of the 13 competencies on the list, three relate to technology and two of them are rated among the four top-ranked competencies today and in the future (“Ability to use modern ICT” and “Ability to keep up with new technologies”). It is also very obvious that research-related skills are not so relevant, which might also be related to the type of library in which the respondents work, as the majority of the respondents came from libraries outside academia (public, school).

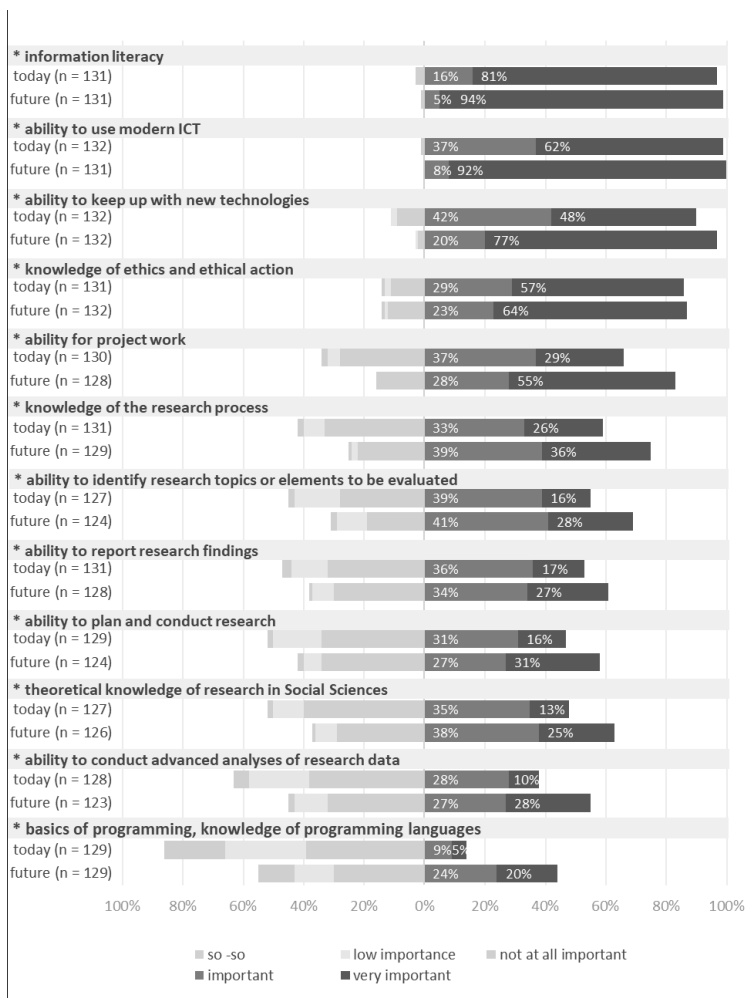


Figure 2: Importance of general and technical skills today and in the future (n = 132) \* marks statistical significance of Wicoxon Signed Ranks Test, p < .05

## ***4.2 Professional competencies today and in the future***

Research question 2 was answered with results from the four Likert-type questions, each for one group of professional competencies.

### *4.2.1 Library management and library operations competencies*

Within the perceptions of professional competencies in the field of library management and operation (Figure 3), where all but one paired sample T-tests were statistically significant, currently, the most important competencies are “Understanding the role, mission and importance of library in society”, “Positioning the library in its environment” and “Ability to evaluate services and identify the needs of the environment”, closely followed by three competencies in the area of development of library services and space, and strategic planning. It is interesting to compare with the future, where respondents perceive all competencies as more important than today, the most important being “Positioning the library in its environment” and “Ability to evaluate services and identify the needs of the environment”, followed by the “Ability to plan services strategically and proactively”.

The perception of the most important competencies thus slightly changes in the future towards, we might say, more proactive library operation. As the respondents were not only library directors (although many were from one-person libraries), we can conclude that they show good insight into library management and the social role and significance of libraries in general. Literature also confirms this, as Peyvand, Robati and Singh (2013) found library operation skills important, while Yadav (2012) added to this library liaison services.

Among the least important competencies are “Knowledge of basics of library buildings and equipment”, “Knowledge of basics of marketing for promotion of the library and its services”, “Ability to prepare and conduct promotional campaigns through various media”, and “Understanding of importance and ways of building strategic partnerships”. The last three competencies are also the ones that will gain the most importance according to the answers of the respondents, alongside “Knowledge of concept of advocacy and its use to emphasize library and its mission”. This is good, because it means that the respondents are aware that libraries need to strengthen their presence in the society and look for partners and allies. We can be somewhat dissatisfied regarding lower interest in knowledge of library buildings and equipment, and promotion, simply because these areas are of immense importance for smooth and quality work, as well as future of libraries.

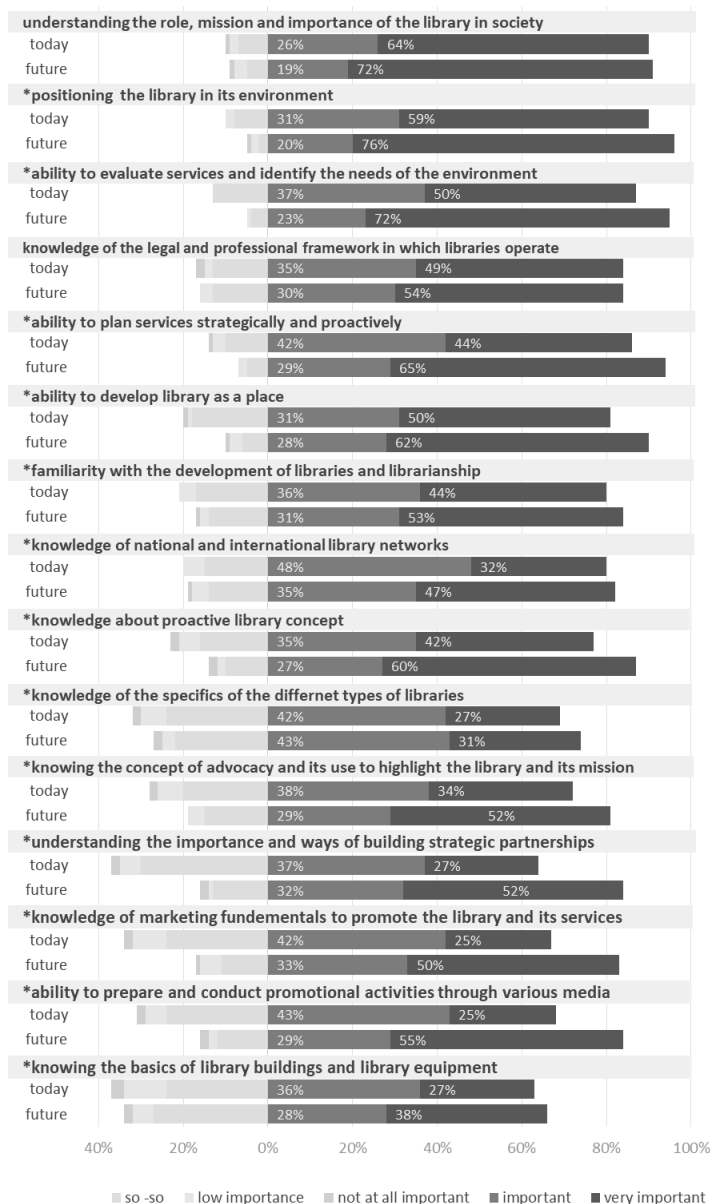


Figure 3 Importance of competencies in the area of Library management and library operations today and in the future (n=132) \* marks statistical significance of Wicoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $p < .05$

#### 4.2.2 *Library materials and information resources competencies*

For competencies in this group (Figure 4), where, again, all but one paired sample T-tests were statistically significant, both today and in the future the most important competencies are “Knowledge of library materials and collections (in-house&out)”, “Knowledge of information sources and collections (inhouse&out)”, and “Knowledge of copyright and intellectual property”. The respondents assigned the lowest importance to the competencies in the scientific field and publishing processes. This, we believe, can again be assigned to the fact that majority of the respondents work in libraries outside science (public, school). The biggest difference in perception of today and in the future is the “Understanding of digital archiving”, which means that the respondents are aware of the need to develop this area. Similar perceptions were found for “Ability to evaluate and design IR systems and digital libraries”, »Ability to create and maintain own collections«, “Understanding new models of acquisition”, which all have to do with developing the current library offer, and for “Knowledge and ability to participate in digital humanities projects”, which is again an area pertaining to science.

#### 4.2.3 *Work with users competencies*

Undoubtedly, the competencies analysed here got the highest values of importance among all groups (Figure 5), which is not surprising, as the work with users is a common field to all library types, and obviously very highly valued. This is in line with some other findings, such as Machala (2015) and Yadav (2021). In our results all paired sample T-tests, with exception of two, were statistically significant. The two most important ones today were “Ability to choose appropriate information sources” and “Appropriate communication skills”, the latter being somewhat surprising, since suitable communication did not rate very high among generic competencies. The least important were knowledge of “basics of psychology” and “pedagogy, didactics and andragogy”, “Ability to advise and motivate for leisure-time reading”, “Ability to plan and conduct cultural, educational and leisure-time services”, and “Knowledge of specifics of work with vulnerable groups”.

Although the differences were small and all competencies were considered important, it is still surprising to see that teaching competencies and those for work with vulnerable groups do not seem to be very high on importance list of library practitioners – perhaps this, too, can be attributed to the participants’ library type, as can be the opinions on the competencies related to leisure-time, culture and education. Especially the last competency “Ability to advise and motivate for leisure-time reading” is clearly relevant only to school and public libraries.



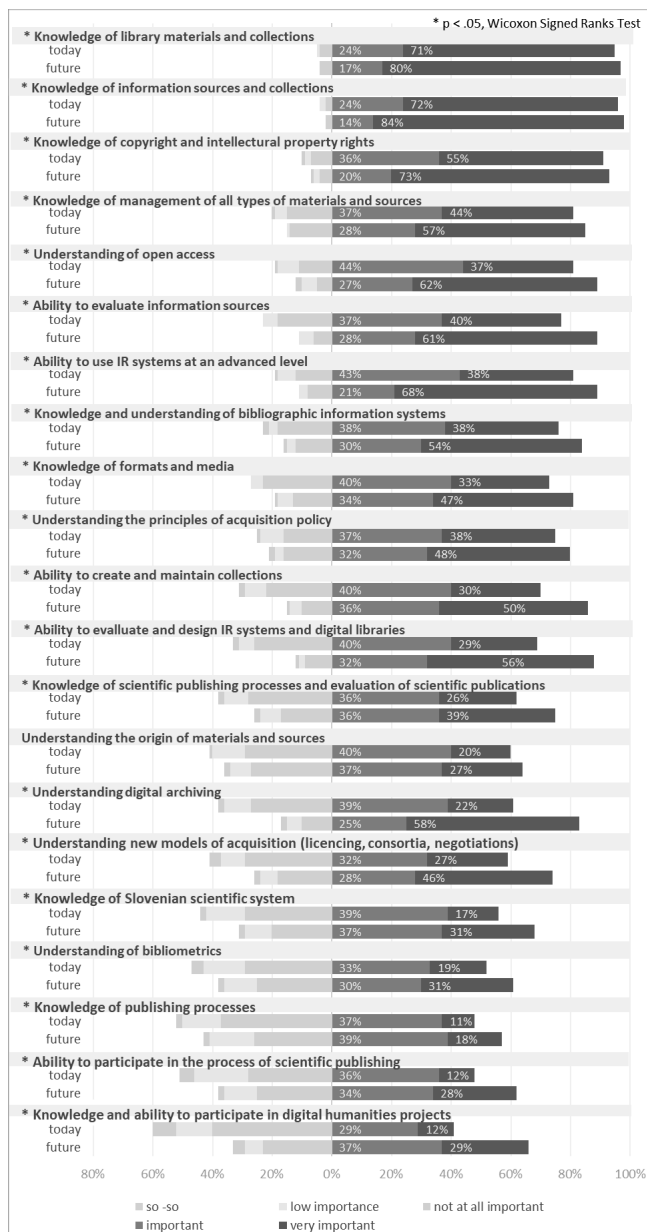


Figure 4: Importance of competencies in the area of ‘Library materials and sources’ today and in the future (n=132) \* marks statistical significance of Wicoxon Signed Ranks Test, p < .05

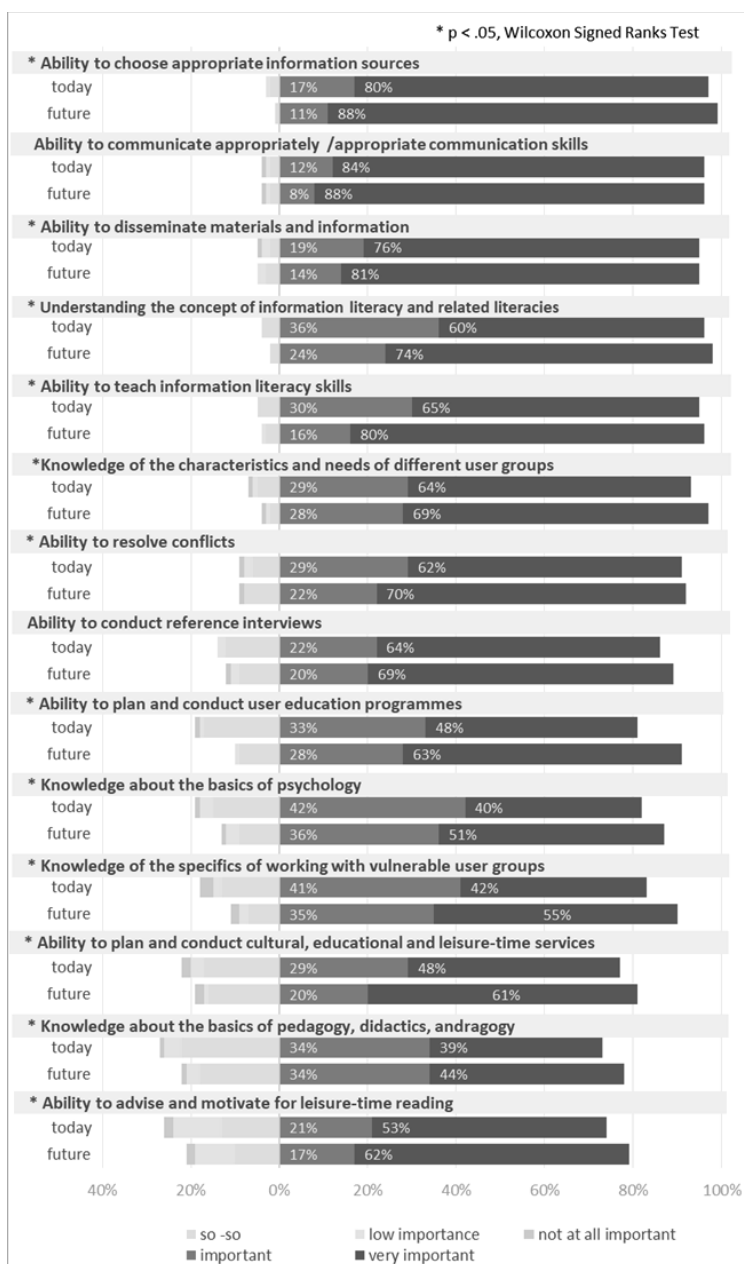


Figure 5: Mean ranks – competencies in the area of ‘Work with users’ today and in the future (n=132) \* marks statistical significance of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, p < .05

#### *4.2.4 Organization of knowledge and information competencies*

Interestingly, frequencies and averages in this group were lower than in others (Figure 6), indicating that the librarians do not consider these competencies as important as the other four groups – a surprising fact on its own, as organization of knowledge is supposed to be one of the core areas of librarianship and as such one of the cornerstones of the professional identity, and is also confirmed by some authors (Peyvand Robati and Singh, 2013). Slovenian practitioners do not seem to be so convinced that this is indeed so, especially when it comes to metadata, data modeling, data structures, interface design, etc. But, as in the other four groups, the respondents do believe that these competencies will gain importance in the future. Three paired sample T-tests were not statistically significant, the rest were. The lowest average for both today and in the future (also the lowest rating overall) was given to the competency “Knowledge and use of metadata standards for resource description (e.g. Dublin Core, MODS ...)” – this question was also answered by the lowest number of respondents (115 for today / 111 for the future). Similarly, low is the perception of “Ability to prepare and implement a data model”, answered by 120/119 respondents. Low frequencies (although not so low averages) were also observed in the options “Understanding key models and technologies for bibliographic databases and data structures (e.g. semantic web, IFLA FRBR...)” (120/115) and “Ability to design search and display facilities in user interfaces” (122/119). The highest averages were given to “Ability to use databases”, “Ability to use tools for descriptive and subject cataloguing”, “Understanding of the principles of descriptive and subject cataloguing” and “Ability to categorize content for websites and digital libraries” (also answers with highest frequencies, above 130). From this we can conclude that library practitioners feel more comfortable in the areas of use of information systems than their design, with possible exception of practical cataloguing.

#### *4.3 Suggestions from respondents*

The answers to the last open-ended question were interesting and provided valuable additional suggestions. Namely, although the respondents did not use the option ‘Other’ in any of the question groups, subject analysis of their open answers enabled us to divide the answers that represented an addition to our model, into the same five groups. We have to note that we did not include answers which only repeated what was already in the questionnaire, or simply stated that they had nothing to add.

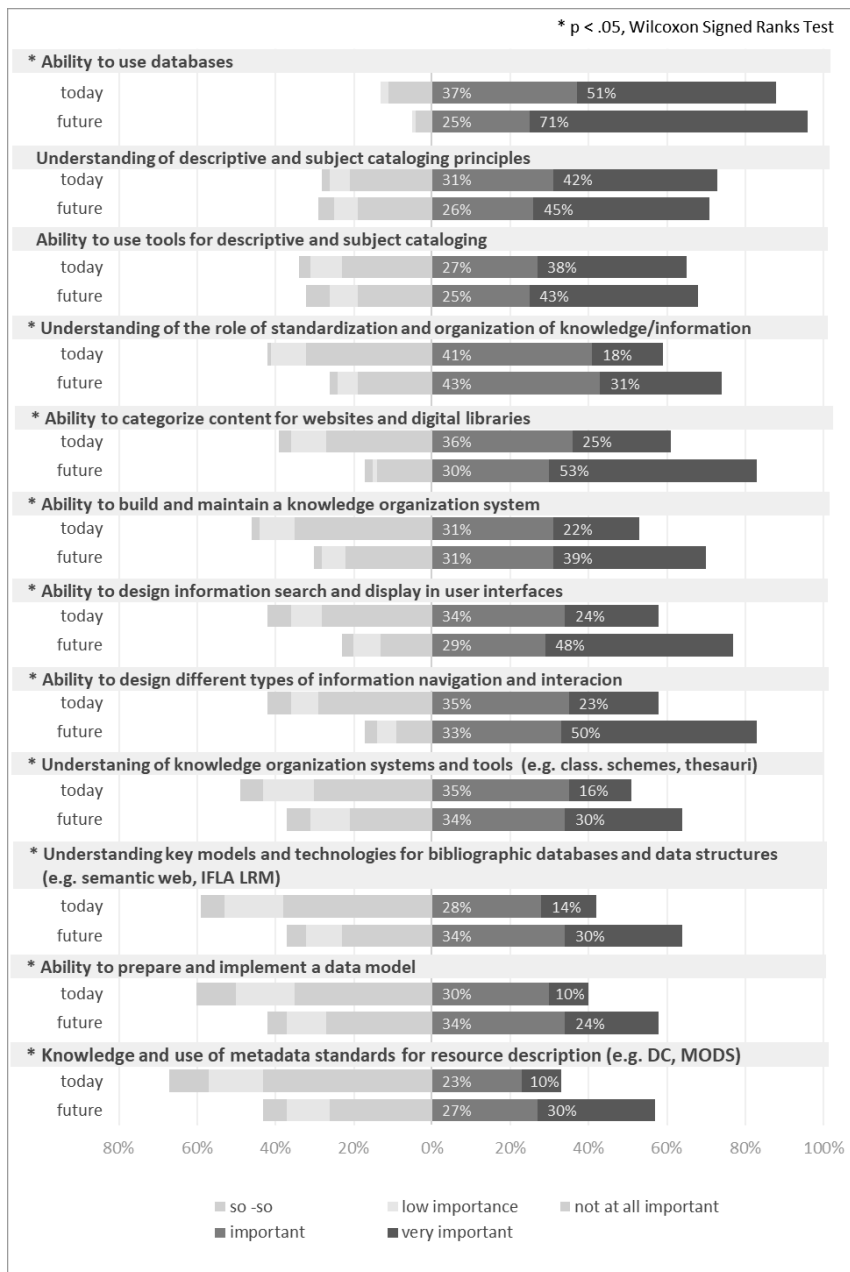


Figure 6: Importance of competencies in the area of ‘Organization of knowledge and information’ today and in the future (n= 132). \* marks statistical significance of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $p < .05$

Among generic competencies the practitioners emphasized curiosity, fast responsiveness, good literacy (all literacies, including visual), love and mastery of reading, non-conflict-ness, connectivness, respectful attitude (to users and colleagues), dilligence, professional awareness and identity, interest and readiness to work, knowledgeability, support and activity in national and international library associations, connections with other (foreign and domestic) libraries, constant education and training, handling basic office software (e.g. Excel, Word), knowledge of foreign languages (including minority languages where necessary), being humane, empathetic.

We also received valuable comments in the field of professional competencies. In the group *Library management and library operations*, the respondents mentioned competencies for business communication, public relations, resolving conflicts, mediation, human resource management, handling of public tenders and business offers, finance procedures and accounting, time management, stress management and care for health at work-place. In the group *Library materials and information resources* they see as also important building overview of the information offer, thus reducing the information overload of the users, all aspects of open science and open data, good searching skills, good knowledge of literature, literary theory, literary history and current literary production for quality reader advisory, quality work in the area of local history and exhibitions of various materials. The *Work with users* group was enhanced with operating as an “interdisciplinary hub” to help the users who cannot keep up with all the fields that influence their work, well-developed advisory and bibliotherapy skills, pedagogical knowledge for school library (with a few observations that it is not well covered in current studies). It was also emphasized by some respondents that for a librarian it is necessary to have good knowledge of all fields of cataloguing, as well as cataloguing software, which of course pertains to the *Organization of knowledge and information* group.

One answer emphasized that studies should include more practical work and contact with practice. Similarly, one respondent observed that competencies are built as-you-go during work, and another that libraries do not only need professional librarians but also experts in other fields (who are possibly also trained in LIS). Some observed that it strongly depends on the management and on the collective culture, how and which competencies will develop in the work environment (depending on which are encouraged), and that libraries are caught in the stereotypic image, which influences decision-makers and is difficult to overcome.

We received quite a number of observations that work in libraries of different types and sizes is practically uncomparable and thus requires different competencies, even profiles. Some emphasized competencies that were already in the questionnaire as very important for their type of library, i.e. a small one-person public library (e.g. allround general knowledge (culture, politics), handling ICT,

strategic planning, marketing, public relations, etc.). Another observation worth mentioning was that it is very difficult to possess all the competencies in one person (especially for a small library).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

From the presented descriptive results, we can draw a few general conclusions. The first one is that we have obviously included relevant competencies, in all groups, as all were rated high, for both today and future work. We also did not receive criticism regarding placement of certain competencies in particular groups or any gaps and omissions. Some meaningful suggestions and observations were given by the respondents.

Another noticeable finding is that the library practitioners believe that nearly all competencies will gain importance in the future, and that nobody thought that any of the competencies would become less important. On the one hand, it is a good sign, as it signals their positive attitude towards their profession, as well as an optimistic view of the future. However, this could also be viewed as worrying, since it could imply that current practitioners are to some extent unable to look objectively into the future, as some more technical library operations and services may be reduced in the future. In this respect, our initial assumption, namely that practitioners' views should be observed when designing future LIS curricula, could even be brought under scrutiny.

Without a doubt the highest valued area is work with users, followed by the areas of work with library materials and resources, and library management. While the former two are obviously important to all library workers, the latter perhaps carries lesser importance for some of them. What is also worth mentioning is that practitioners had the lowest appreciation for the competencies in the area of organization of knowledge and information, and the lowest predictions for these competencies in the future. Since this area is supposed to be one of the cornerstones of LIS and of the librarians' professional identity, the question arises as to where lies the so-called market advantage of LIS compared to other related fields and organizations, and whether librarians are letting go too easily the very area where they indeed have no real competition. At the same time this also poses a dilemma how to approach this issue in the new study programmes and which areas to emphasize, i.e. either (and to what extent) to follow these opinions of practitioners or try to raise the image and value of this field in the eyes of future practitioners. In other words – this is the core question: What kind of expert is a librarian, what is their expertise, compared to other professions, i.e. what is the identity of the profession?

The results also clearly indicate that the highest valued competency for library work today and in the future overall by Slovenian librarians is Information litera-

cy – namely, it received by far the highest number of positive opinions among all generic and professional competencies in all categories. In order to interpret this finding, we would need to investigate their understanding of this concept and its role in library work.

The results presented here require a further deeper analysis concerning the relations between demographic and content variables, which would offer more insight into the answers and perceptions of practitioners from different types and sizes of libraries, of different ages, experience and education. In this way, these general conclusions can be enhanced to enable us to come closer to two goals: formation of at least a draft competency model (perhaps several for various library types), and further work on the reformed study programme at the Department of Library and Information Science and Book Studies at the University of Ljubljana.

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