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'... and any other duties deemed necessary:' an analysis of subject librarian job descriptions



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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years at Warwick we have enhanced our marketing in the library. We have increasingly used segmentation, targeting and positioning to identify specific user groups, develop services to meet their needs and then produce messages to encourage take-up of those services. One such group with which we have been keen to develop such relationships are academic colleagues, whom we want not only as clients of our services but as advocates, promoting us to their students, and as our partners, to develop new services that embed information provision and skills into the curriculum. One such 'service' that we want to market to them is our academic support as librarians.

It seemed natural, then, that when we put together a publication aimed specifically at academic staff, the centre page spread should be given over to our subject teams.

As well as getting the teams to introduce themselves, I was tasked with providing a brief introduction explaining what subject librarians can offer. But what do they actually do?

My attempt at a synopsis read thus:

Subject staff:

- liaise with academic staff on course planning and delivery

- work with colleagues to ensure that courses are appropriately resourced, buying books and electronic resources
- help to identify module seminar readings for digitisation by the library's scanning team and provide deep links from reading lists to online resources using permanent URLs
- produce listings of quality web resources of value to teaching and research
- provide teaching sessions to help students locate and effectively manage information, including referencing and guarding against plagiarism
- produce e-learning packages for students who prefer to develop their information fluency in an online environment
- offer tailored current-awareness services aimed at academics and students
- provide support for specialist subject enquiries
- offer one-to-one support for dissertation students, researchers and anyone requiring more help with finding and using information.¹

Not a bad overview in user-focused language, I thought.

But what are we doing as a sector?

At Warwick we are always reviewing how we can develop our support of the academic offering, so this question is close to my heart. On top of that, with a RLUK (Research Libraries UK) hat on I am also involved in looking at what skills – and assistance – subject librarians will need to support the research agenda. We are currently undertaking research to survey existing provision and to assess future needs, identifying the skills gap to be filled and how the profession might start to fill this void.²

To aid me in my thinking for these developments I put a plea out on lis-sconul (in October 2008) for colleagues to share their job descriptions for subject librarian and allied roles.³ The results were very interesting.⁴

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW, ASK A LIBRARIAN

I heard from 33 institutions and received details of 62 posts. I also received other comments, many expressing support for the concept of 'subject librarians'. Responses spread across the spectrum of UK universities from Russell Group to post-'92 universities, from the research-focused to those

institutions proud to be known for their teaching. Some librarians were keen to share what they considered to be examples of good practice. More colleagues happily shared data but admitted that their job descriptions were somewhat traditional. More still wanted to hear about my findings so that they too could develop their 'subject librarian' roles.

So what did I find out? Although things have obviously moved on since late 2008 I thought the following might be revealing and of interest to colleagues.

JOB TITLES

Although 'subject librarian' remains the most popular term (and the shorthand I will use throughout the rest of this article), other job titles include:

- academic subject librarian
- academic support librarian
- academic support consultant
- academic librarian
- academic liaison librarian
- information librarian
- information specialist
- senior information adviser
- liaison librarian
- faculty liaison librarian

Some 'traditional' subject librarian roles have been taken over by posts focusing on specific elements of service delivery, for example, enquiry services librarian.

Some positions, as we shall see below, have started to focus specifically on research support:

- research support librarian
- research support specialist
- research liaison manager

Despite some variation, these titles all seem to be essentially quite traditional, with no attempts at thrusting, dynamic alternatives. Perhaps this is rooted in realism. Just as we have sometimes tried to refer to libraries in different ways in the past, our 'Commons' and 'Learning Centres' are still called 'the library' by the students. So perhaps we *should* just stick with something traditional-sounding?

But perhaps not. Recently at Warwick we asked some students to make a video giving advice to freshers on how to get the best out of the library.

We did not provide a script. In fact, we provided very little guidance at all: we just wanted to see what they would come up with. We were pleased that one of the messages in the (two-minute twenty-second) video was that students should get to know their academic support librarian. However, the phrase the students used was: 'Use the help that you can get from tutors; they have tutors in the library dedicated to each subject'.⁵

So perhaps we *can* afford to be a bit more adventurous.

THE TRADITIONAL SUBJECT LIBRARIAN ROLE

As a profession we also tend to be quite traditional in what we include in 'subject librarian' job descriptions. Again, this is probably realistic. No matter how we develop our liaison librarian roles there will always remain the 'bread and butter' activities. Key roles and frequency of occurrence (amongst the job descriptions surveyed) are set out in figure 1.

job description duty	frequency of occurrence
liaison/user-focused approach	50
collection management/development	47
budget management	36
information skills training	53
enquiry support	36
production of print/Web guides	28
blended/e-learning/VLE support	15
current awareness	3

Figure 1: Core 'subject librarian' activities in job descriptions sampled

Central to all these posts is *liaison* and having a 'customer-' or 'user-focused' approach. As one job description nicely puts it, the purpose of the subject librarian is:

to be proactive in establishing effective communications with the designated subject areas, identifying and responding to their information needs, and informing the development of ILS[Information and Learning Services] facilities and services in support of teaching, learning and research.

Some posts are very focused on *collection management/development* (and the allied skills of *budget management*). Some job descriptions see stock dominating the 'major activities' and quite a few subject librarians are still responsible for cataloguing, classification and indexing, which I found quite surprising.

Not at all surprising is the dominance of *information skills training*, though I was somewhat perturbed to see the phrase 'user education' still cropping up from time to time. For me this seems old-fashioned, patronising and – for those outside the profession – meaningless. I much prefer this description of this core activity:

to contribute to the design, delivery and evaluation of a range of information literacy and retrieval skills programmes and learning support materials.

Some job details make it clear to staff that it is not just the students in their subject discipline who need assistance:

to design and provide seminars for academic staff, to keep them up-to-date with new services, and to provide one-to-one support and advice as required .

Other job descriptions make it clear just how far some institutions have got (or plan to get) in embedding information skills into the curriculum:

to design examination questions for inclusion in assessment as required

to design and mark assessments

to ensure that teaching is embedded in the curriculum wherever possible and that it has sound pedagogical foundations.

Enquiry support still features quite heavily, though the nature of this is changing and this library activity (be it desk-based, roving or virtual) often now appears outside the subject librarian's function. Having said that, many of the posts surveyed are still involved with delivering a 'high quality enquiries service for library users'. Some post-holders are part of the enquiry-desk rota and provide generic enquiry support, but there is also an emphasis on providing 'in-depth information enquiries' and 'specialist advice'. Given changes in the profession⁶ it will be interesting to see how this element changes in the coming years.

One area that is definitely changing is *support for blended learning and e-learning*. A few years ago we would not have had references to developing innovative communication tools, mention of e-newsletters, blogs or RSS feeds, or statements about

providing advice on pedagogical aspects of e-learning, particularly with respect to the inclusion of electronic information resources.

PERSON SPECIFICATIONS

Again, the person specifications are largely what I would consider ‘textbook’ versions: degree, professional qualification, chartership, library experience (essential), experience in higher education (desirable), communication skills, interpersonal skills, team-working skills, ability to work without supervision, etc. Some person specifications show more radical thinking: some do not demand librarianship qualifications, others demand a teaching qualification or desire ‘a research degree in a relevant subject’ (‘the PhD librarian’).

But apart from the odd glimmer of difference or glimpse of the future, most are typically traditional. Let’s be honest: this isn’t the place you would expect to see theatrical flourishes. At the end of the day you want something to make sure you are going to get the right person to do the right job.

But then again, perhaps this is the very place we need to review.

NEW SUBJECT LIBRARIAN ROLES

Developing roles

There are, however, some developments, and several job descriptions contained references to activities I would not consider ‘core’, or at least not what has been traditionally ‘core’ to the subject librarian portfolio (see figure 2).

job description duty	frequency of occurrence
staff management	28
management data collection	6
Quality Assurance Agency / Quality Assurance / external audit support	8
marketing	35

Figure 2: Additional ‘subject librarian’ activities in job descriptions sampled

Staff management and supervision are traditionally associated more widely with ‘front-of-house’ customer services activities; subject librarians have sometimes been seen as quasi-academic figures, not concerned with ‘management’. This no longer seems to be the case with 28 of the sampled roles containing some element of **staff management**. Some are team leaders, some are involved with supervising projects, most carry out staff management functions ‘as required’.

Data management is again not traditionally associated with subject librarians. Relationship activities and key performance indicators are not easy bed-fellows. However, demonstrating value for money and a return on investment and developing a customer-focused offering is something increasingly relevant to all of us, especially in this post-Browne world.⁷ It was therefore reassuring to see responsibilities:

to monitor the use of services, provide statistical and management information and use this to develop and improve services

and
to organise the collection of management information and analyse it to inform policy and procedure; develop, manage, monitor and evaluate quality assurance procedures.

Indeed, several posts mention the need ‘to contribute to **quality assurance**’, or – more specifically – ‘QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) assessment activity in assigned subject areas’. Most explicit of all, one post-holder is expected:

to participate in quality assurance activities associated with the specified curriculum areas and ensure that the provision of the relevant learning resources is developed to meet the requirements of the university’s quality agenda and those of external bodies such as HEFCE [Higher Education Funding Council for England] and the Higher Education Academy.

Although the government bodies and agencies overseeing this may change, I suspect this is an area of activity that is likely to grow in the coming years.

Another function that has become more prominent is – I am very pleased to say – **marketing**. Some job descriptions include the ‘m’ word itself, others refer to what are widely considered to be marketing activities: promoting services, aware-

ness and resources, using a variety of communication channels.

Some make reference to what I would call a wider definition of marketing: understanding users' needs, developing services accordingly ('elicit and respond to user opinion') and creating appropriate messages to promote these services. Indeed, the CIM's (Chartered Institute of Marketing) definition of marketing: 'the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably'⁸ seems to be embedded in one subject librarian's duty

to develop effective LRC (Learning Resource Centre) provision and support for learning, teaching and research within the designated Faculty, working with academic and research staff, with other service and support departments and students to anticipate needs and to develop appropriate resources and facilities.

Working with other departments/agencies

job description duty	frequency of occurrence
project work, project management and other matrix management approaches	35
work with other support agencies	20
representing the library on university committees	32
support university strategy	25

Figure 3: Stakeholder engagement activities in job descriptions sampled

Another aspect of this developing role involves the stakeholder groups with which subject librarians work. I am sure we have all heard stories of subject librarians who have sometimes been so aligned with their academic departments that other relationships have suffered. This is addressed in several job descriptions (figure 3).

Matrix work with other library colleagues is encouraged by some roles having a 'functional responsibility' (web-site management, VLE coordination, and so on) or responsibility for projects (sometimes in a leadership capacity):

to contribute to the overall development of LIS [Library and Information Services], the Library Service and the Information Team by participation in or leading projects relating to information services or resources

or

to undertake leadership for a specific area of whole-service development.

Working with other support agencies is also documented (IT services, e-learning colleagues, research support staff) along with other library teams.

Working under the directive of the university and support for and development of strategy featured very heavily in many cases. In one description the 'job purpose' states that all activities should be 'in accordance with the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy'. Some post-holders are part of their library's management team. Others are expected 'to contribute to the broader strategic development of... [Information Services] through membership and/or facilitation of strategic teams'. In some posts the subject librarians are expected to develop their own strategies for the support of 'innovative learning and teaching' or specifically for researchers.

RESEARCH ROLES

My primary interest in this trawl of job descriptions, as mentioned above, was to identify how the increasingly crucial area of supporting research and the research process is covered by subject librarians (figure 4).

job description duty	frequency of occurrence
'research support'	15
IR (Institutional repository)/IR advocacy	8
promotion of special collections	4
bibliographic software support	8
RAE/REF (Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework) support	2
bibliometrics/impact measurement	3
copyright	4

Figure 4: Research support activities in job descriptions sampled

I was excited to see that '**research support**' appears in the job purpose or key activities of fifteen of the posts reviewed. How this is delivered varies immensely. At one institution, one subject librarian per faculty has special responsibility for research. At another, the library had developed a

research-support marketing plan to be executed by the academic subject librarians. Some subject librarian posts have key activities supporting research alongside key activities supporting teaching and learning. For example:

to design and present courses at undergraduate, postgraduate and research levels on information retrieval and management techniques in the specified subject areas

is followed in one job description with

to liaise closely with staff in the specified subject areas to provide information services in support of research, including alerting services tailored to the needs of research groups and/or individual members of staff.

Some roles are specifically concerned with research support. One (temporary) post has the primary role

to ensure that ...researchers gain maximum benefit from the library's resources and information services.

Another temporary, three-year post has the intriguing challenge that if the post-holder can make the role 'indispensable' to the research community in that time the post could become permanent!

One or two examples of good practice provide useful illustrative examples of what research support librarian posts could look like. One has the excellent 'job purpose'

to be responsible for developing and implementing a research support strategy across all library user groups to ensure that the needs of researchers are met

along with

to ensure that the library fully supports the [institution's] research strategy.

Key activities cover working with the research office, supporting colleagues with the **RAE** (Research Assessment Exercise)/**REF** (Research Excellence Framework), taking part in systematic reviews and promoting the use of **bibliographic management software**.

Some of the job descriptions include quite detailed support of the research process and scholarly communications. Promoting the Open

Access agenda in general and **advocacy for Institutional Repositories (IR)** is clearly becoming more high profile in some institutions with key activities expecting staff to 'promote and support... use', 'provide advice and support for institutional repository activities' or 'populate and promote the University Institutional Repository'.

Copyright and Intellectual Property Rights get mentioned a handful of times and **bibliometrics/increasing impact** even less.

Despite some notable examples of good practice, I must admit that my initial excitement at finding fifteen posts concerned with 'research support' was not always maintained when I progressed from the 'job purpose' to the 'key activities'. The specific points of specialist research support that I would expect to see are more thinly represented than I would have hoped (Figure 4). Indeed, it seemed as if some of the subject librarian activities outlined above had been upgraded and pushed out to researchers. A list of the traditional information support offerings of subject librarians often seemed to be the starting point, rather than the researchers and their emerging information needs.

This all confirmed for me the need to review our thinking about research support at Warwick (increasingly a strategic priority for the university) as well as – in light of changes in scholarly communications and the research agenda – reiterating the importance and timeliness of the Research Libraries UK project.⁹

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

The developing information landscape and evolving user needs means that **CPD** features in many job descriptions (figure 5). One post makes reference to the library's **training schemes** for charter-ship of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) and revalidation of charter-ship. Others are more generally concerned with staff **keeping abreast of developments** and bringing new ideas back to the work place. In one the job purpose includes:

to be proactive and develop best practice models of support, through knowledge of experience elsewhere in the sector.

Others require the post-holder to 'identify and initiate innovative development' and feed ideas into 'suggestions for service development'.

job description duty	frequency of occurrence
CPD	21
keeping abreast of developments	11
professional activity	39
staff training and development	17

Figure 5: Professional development/professional activities in job descriptions sampled

In others **professional activity** in local and national networks is positively promoted and at one institution staff are expected

to engage in a full range of staff development activities including attending and presenting at conferences and seminars, write articles, engage in professional development and scholarly activity.

Sign me up now!

...AND ANY OTHER DUTIES DEEMED NECESSARY?

Traditionally, all our job descriptions (and I am not just talking about subject librarians here) end with a phrase along the lines that the post-holder should expect to carry out (to quote one typical example from my batch of job descriptions): 'such other duties temporarily or on a continuing basis, as may reasonably be required, commensurate with your grade'.

Obviously a job description cannot cover all the things we do but this 'catch all' phrase means that other duties (which may not have been apparent when the job description was drafted) can be carried out, hopefully without argument or the need frequently to revise job descriptions.

Some of the job descriptions I received, though, did include duties that were far from common for subject librarians, ranging from site management and responsibility for branch libraries to fundraising and even teaching on an MSc Information and Library Management course.

Roles are also expected to develop. For example, recent years have seen a trend towards 'librarian in the lobby' activities: librarians working physically in their liaison departments.¹⁰ One of the job descriptions refers to this development, stating that 'a significant amount of time is spent within the School'. Others point out that the post-holder

is expected to develop the library offering and to work 'imaginatively to improve the service the Library provides to the Faculty'.

Some job descriptions point to personal change, even more explicitly than the references to CPD already mentioned. A job purpose of one imaginative trainee post is to get chartered! In another, the post-holder:

will receive a personal Induction Award of £1,500, to be used for any purpose that will allow the appointee to become established and productive in the University in as short a time as possible.

Other references to change are at an organisational level. Some job details make reference to the rapidly changing environment and the fact that post-holders cannot expect the role to remain the same. A couple of the posts contain a 'review clause' noting that 'this is a description of the job as it is presently constituted' but that duties are periodically (and consultatively) reviewed. Others refer to structural changes and to the fact that any job descriptions may be subject to change. This is very much in line with what some commentators refer to as the 'fluid' nature of the posts.¹¹

Although this may sound unsettling to some staff, it is intended to make sure that the subject librarian's role remains a relevant and indeed crucial role. As one job description makes clear in the aims and objectives of the post:

The Subject Liaison Librarian approach to supporting Schools, whereby each School has [a] dedicated subject librarian responsible for managing the Library's collections to keep them effective and relevant, providing information skills training, offering specialist subject support and acting as a channel of communication between the Library and the School, has been seen by the University as an effective model for central service support of academic activities. Subject Liaison Librarians therefore play a crucial role working simultaneously as part of the Library and as part of academic schools within the University, to identify and address the library and information needs of staff and students.

They play a key role in ensuring that the Library meets its strategic aims of close integration with the teaching, learning and research processes within the University and embedding information skills within the

curriculum. It is a high profile role within the Library service.

By our constantly reviewing user needs and then developing our offering and the 'subject librarian' role – be this at a local level or nationally – long may this continue.

NOTES

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10. Lee A. Pedersen, 'Librarian in the lobby – connecting in their space', *Sci-Tech*, 2008 SLA Seattle, Washington, USA, 17 June 2008, pp1-8 (available via <http://units.sla.org/division/>

[dst/Annual%20Conference%20Contributed%20Papers/2008papers/Pedersen.pdf](http://units.sla.org/division/dst/Annual%20Conference%20Contributed%20Papers/2008papers/Pedersen.pdf)).

11. John Rodwell and Linden Fairbairn, 'Dangerous liaisons? Defining the faculty liaison librarian service model, its effectiveness and sustainability', *Library management*, 29 (1/2), 2008, pp 116-24 (see p119).

All websites accessed in October 2010