A graduate trainee in library services

A generalist perspective in a specialist environment

Caroline Hetherington
Student Experience and Quality Assurance Officer
University of Birmingham
(former Graduate Management Trainee)
c.a.hetherington@bham.ac.uk

Introduction

Like a growing number of higher education (HE) institutions, the University of Birmingham runs a graduate management scheme in Professional Services. The two-year programme is about to enter its sixth round of recruitment. It offers four placement rotations in a variety of departments, generally delivering project work, alongside a training and professional development package. Graduates can come from any academic field and no particular experience is necessary, although working at a university does help. The aim is to produce well-rounded, generalist HE professionals with the breadth of skills and experience to progress quickly into management positions. With this in mind, there is ongoing debate about the value of trainees undertaking specialist placements. Of course, every department will be specialised in one way or another – but is there value in placing trainees in a department where the majority of staff will hold professional qualifications, or where they would struggle to return after the scheme and pursue a career without retraining?

As a former graduate trainee, I undertook placements in some fairly specialised areas, including corporate accounting and library services, and my experience was very positive. Whilst working in the library, I learned not only about cataloguing and resource provision, but also about the way HE provision is changing – the focus on e-learning, the change in student demands, and the relationship between professional and academic staff in providing high quality learning experiences. This understanding is so important for almost any job in the HE sector (and was crucial to me in securing my current position). However, the benefits are definitely more than personal. Whilst moving so regularly around the university, trainees can counteract the too-often established silo mentality, and bring with them best practice from other departments, a fresh perspective on the problem at hand and, sometimes, a helpful challenge to current systems.

The project

I joined the library in May 2015, when Talis Aspire had just been announced as the product for Birmingham's new resource list system. I became project officer, supporting the project manager and the team of library, IT and e-learning staff to implement the system (now ResourceLists@Bham) and launch it in time for the start of the academic year.

My particular focus was on process improvement for the acquisitions team, working out how our current workflows would (or wouldn't) fit with the introduction of the new system, and how we could manage the import of current data into the system, while keeping the range of list types intact. Due to the range of resource needs across all the academic schools in Birmingham, there was no easy one-size-fits-all approach.

As the only full-time resource person assigned to the project, I also undertook a range of other duties, from working on the design team to delivering training and creating test lists and looking for broken links. By not sitting directly in any team, or holding a substantive role, I was able to change and shift my focus more easily and to respond quickly to the needs of the project.

Getting up to speed

Before any of this could be delivered, I faced a steep learning curve. My only real (and still limited) experience of a university library was as a student, and with only four months to deliver this piece of work, there was a lot of ground to cover in a short space of time. This was managed successfully, due largely to the well-planned and intensive induction programme which awaited me upon my arrival. It included training in every stage of the acquisitions process, meetings with most of the other library teams, and, of course, some background reading.

A graduate trainee in library services

A generalist perspective in a specialist environment

All of this was focused on the task at hand and relevant to the resource lists project. Wider context was helpful, and in some cases necessary: making changes to acquisitions processes would have a knock-on effect across the library. Nevertheless, it was important for my supervisors and I to recognise how much I needed to know. In some cases, an overview of the department and a contact person for future queries was enough to get by, whereas in others I needed a more thorough grounding. As the placement progressed, my knowledge of the most relevant topics developed, and I was able to recognise what I needed to know to deliver the project successfully. I never came close to becoming an expert, or a library professional, but this had never been the intention.

Bringing a fresh perspective

Busy teams often lose the opportunity to step back, examine the way they work and explore how they could improve. There is also a commonly held belief that one needs to be an expert in an area to understand team needs and contribute meaningful suggestions for improvement. However, as my project demonstrated, the opposite is very often true. This approach is encouraged at Birmingham, with general support / consultancy services offered by the projects office, the strategic change team and the coaching academy.

As the major part of my placement centred on improving current workflows, I did make sure I understood how things worked and organised a process-mapping workshop with the team. Not only did this help me, but it was also a good opportunity for everyone to think about how they worked. As the non-expert, I kept asking questions – 'Why do we do it this way?' 'What happens next?' 'What if this should happen instead?' Some of these questions may have been too obvious for anyone else to ask, but some prompted real discussion. Getting people to start thinking about the reasons behind the current processes made clear to me where there really was room to change and improve, and where some systems were ingrained but not always as efficient as they could be.

For example, one of the very first things that struck me was the complexity of some paper-based ordering systems, which could be moved online. The current process was not widely understood outwith the team, whose priority was processing the high volume of orders on time. Because of this, there was limited understanding of the other options available, and whether the particular needs of the team could be met through a web-based system. The risk of changing anything and consequently delaying orders, or making mistakes, was obviously a concern. However, from my previous placement in the university finance office, I had experience of using shared mailboxes and collaborative working spaces such as Sharepoint to do equally complex tasks, and still maintain a system for authorisation and accountability. By observing the team working during peak time, I was able to make suggestions for process improvement to be implemented at a quieter point in the year. This wouldn't have been possible for any member of the team to do – there was simply no time.

Impact

The work I contributed to the resource lists project has had a positive impact on the library. ResourceLists@Bham was launched for the 2015–16 academic year and usage has been steadily increasing. After the placement ended, I was also able to use my graduate scheme presentation to the university senior management team to raise the profile of the project amongst the colleges and promote further engagement.

Within the acquisitions team, the process-mapping exercise was an important step in preparing the team for the changes that the ResourceLists@Bham system would bring. In the short term, we did make adjustments to start using

A graduate trainee in library services

A generalist perspective in a specialist environment

the new system, but the more significant change is still under way, as the team familiarises itself with new practices and minor kinks are worked out. In the long term, this will be important to sustained and successful change that better supports the changing needs of the staff and students who use the library. For me personally, the placement had a real impact on my future development. It gave me exposure to a different side of the university from what I had experienced previously, and to an entirely new set of challenges. My project management, collaborative working and IT skills were all tested and improved during the placement, and I am proud of the whole team for what was achieved. Further than this, it helped me establish what I wanted to do next. Throughout the project, we were constantly balancing the needs of the library users with the practical limitations in order to deliver the best possible experience for students. Both the challenge and the goal drew me in and I have just started a student experience and quality assurance post in the College of Social Sciences. I will often be working with the library on how to deliver the best for our students, but with the knowledge and understanding I now have of how the library works, this will be a much more effective relationship that it could otherwise have been.

I would recommend any department to consider what opportunities it has for bringing in a trainee, intern or placement student. The benefits of a fresh perspective on an unsolved problem can be really significant. There are also so many projects which lose steam due to the workloads of the team members, and having an extra resource to pick up work and bridge some of the gaps between different teams can make all the difference. I am also fairly confident that my colleagues in the library would agree – at least, I certainly hope they would!