

'...or equivalent experience' Revisiting subject librarian job descriptions



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Do our current job descriptions reflect the skills, knowledge and experience we require of our subject liaison teams now and in the future? _____

The 'traditional' subject librarian role in academic libraries is changing. There seems to be a definite shift towards a more strategic 'partnership' approach to academic liaison and an increasing need for collaborative working with key stakeholders external to the library. All of this requires a mix of both 'traditional' and evolving skills and experience.

Recent research findings, commissioned to ascertain which skills are required of our current and future workforce, also suggest the need to respond to this evolving environment by adapting existing roles and reskilling our workforce.

Context _____

The organisational structures and strategic aims of academic libraries have changed significantly in the last few years, with some libraries now moving towards 'functional' teams (Hoodless & Pinfield, 2018), and where 'strategic engagement' rather than subject specialism is becoming increasingly important for academic liaison teams (Eldridge *et al.*, 2016). This shift in focus will require significant changes to working practices and existing skillsets, as recent research findings indicate.

Research commissioned by SCONUL (2017) and CILIP (2018) indicates the need to respond to our rapidly evolving higher education environment by adapting current roles and reskilling our workforce. Pinfield, Cox and Rutter emphasise the 'need for libraries and library professionals to adapt'. They stress that 'developing an organisation with the right skills base is a crucial part of securing change' (SCONUL, 2017, p.7), with strategic management, an understanding of the research process, relationship management and negotiation all identified as 'critical' to academic libraries in the future (*ibid.* p.43).

CILIP's review identifies as important now and in the future an increasing need for so-called 'soft skills', such as advocacy, diplomacy, influencing and resilience, alongside more 'technical' skills such as project management, research support, repository management, digital skills / literacy, teaching and data analysis (2018, p.12).

So, what are we doing to ensure our current and future workforces are equipped with the skills required to serve our academic communities well?

Crucial' skills in current roles _____

Of necessity, job descriptions primarily reflect the associated duties of specific roles, but they also outline the skills and experience required to fulfil them. So it seems logical to surmise that they would provide the necessary information to ascertain whether the crucial skills outlined by SCONUL and CILIP are reflected in the role requirements of current posts in UK universities. This article outlines research conducted in early 2019 into the expectations and skillsets relating to the role of subject librarian, as defined by current job descriptions.

The resulting content analysis is closely aligned to Brewerton's 2008 analysis of subject librarian job descriptions (SCONUL, 2011) and uses a similar approach to sampling and methodology, to ease comparison of results.

Undertaking this type of review could help inform support / training provision for existing established teams, identify where there are currently skills gaps, and assess what additional support might be needed by staff new to their role.

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Sample and methodology

In February 2019 emails were sent to three SCONUL Deputies Groups and the main LIS-SCONUL mailing list requesting recent (revised within the last four years) job descriptions / person specifications for the role of subject / liaison librarian or the equivalent. In total, 34 institutions responded. A small number of advertised job descriptions were included to further increase the sample size.

A range of job descriptions was shared and, although some respondents admitted that these were in need of review, all were keen to participate in the exercise and see the results. Only one job description per institution was analysed, with those most closely aligning with the 'traditional' subject / liaison librarian role being selected for ease of comparison.¹ The final sample of 37 was drawn from three sources: 9 from SCONUL Deputies groups, 20 from the LIS-SCONUL mailing list, and 8 which were advertised between 2016 and 2019.

Duties and activities listed in these job descriptions alongside the person specification criteria were categorised² using similar designations to Brewerton's; several additions were made, however, in order to reflect changes in this type of role across the institutions sampled.

Analysis and results

Job titles

Job title	Frequency of occurrence
Academic liaison librarian	10
Subject librarian	5
Academic librarian	3
Academic engagement librarian	2
Academic support librarian	2
Faculty librarian	2
Liaison librarian	2

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The 'traditional' subject librarian role

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Academic liaison	37
Collection management / development	33
Marketing and promotional activities	26
Enquiry support	25
User-focused support (e.g. induction, gathering student feedback, 'one-to-ones')	18
Budget management	18
Data collection and analysis	16
Quality assurance / external audit support	16
Subject expertise	15
Production of print / online guides	15
Staff management / supervision	9
Sharing good practice	9
Effective communication	8
Cataloguing / classification work	2
Staff recruitment activities	1

Unsurprisingly, 'liaison' remains the prevailing responsibility, though the way in which this manifests itself seems to have evolved. From simply being the 'principal channel of communication' between library and faculties, across many institutions liaison librarians are now being asked to build 'positive', 'productive' and 'effective relationships' with designated schools and departments as part of an ongoing consultative and collaborative working practice. Explicit mention of building or maintaining relationships with schools was mentioned by 49%.

It is perhaps not surprising then that 'communication and interpersonal skills' are an essential requirement in 34 person specifications; seventeen stipulate 'relationship management' as an essential skill; sixteen also list negotiation and influencing skills as essential.

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While the need to understand staff and students' resource requirements remains a core part of the role, a good understanding of strategic and academic teaching, learning and research priorities is also necessary to inform the development of new services and support. One institution sets out a clear expectation that spending a significant amount of time in the school should be standard practice, so that the post holder 'becomes embedded within the daily life of the school'; another that the post holder ensures 'that the Library is highly visible beyond its physical sites through frequent presence in Schools'.

Collection management and development is still high on the list of duties. This predominantly involves collaborating with faculties / schools to ensure that resources meet their current and future learning, teaching and research requirements; making evidence-based decisions around stock management based on school priorities; and liaising with collections teams on the acquisition and relegation of material. Eighteen roles mention having oversight of a budget, but only a few specifically refer to the postholder purchasing stock. This aspect of the role seems to centre around the evaluation and selection of relevant resources rather than the acquisition process itself.

Seventy percent of the job descriptions cite marketing and promotional activities as part of the role, mainly involving the advocacy of library services and resources. Some also make explicit reference to the use of social media in this context.

The need for 'expert' or specialist enquiry support does not seem to have changed significantly since Brewerton's 2008 survey, and mainly involves a mix of face-to-face or virtual support; only four institutions refer to staffing a desk in this context. Although developing expertise in relevant subject areas is seen as important in 40% of the roles reviewed, the fact that it is a requirement in less than half perhaps indicates that the observations of Eldridge et al. that subject alignment is 'in retreat', giving way to an 'emergence of relationship management functions' in libraries (2016, pp.169–70), is becoming more apparent.

Data collection and analysis responsibilities were cited by sixteen institutions. These related both to the monitoring of resource usage and to evaluating service delivery against KPIs, service level agreements and other quality assurance initiatives, and would no longer appear to be a developing part of the liaison role (Brewerton, 2011, p.63).

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Learning and teaching: design and delivery

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Information and digital skills: development and delivery of training	18
Information skills: development and delivery of training	16
Collaborative curriculum development	16
Blended / e-learning / VLE support	10
E-resource expertise and training	10
Current awareness of emerging technologies	8
Current awareness of pedagogic practice	6
Academic staff training	6
Teaching innovation	5
Study skills: development and delivery of training	4

Delivery and development of information skills training is still core to the role, although increasingly institutions are referring to the development of combined information and digital literacy skills. It is perhaps unsurprising then that an understanding of pedagogic practice in higher education is also in the person specification of fifteen posts, and having a teaching qualification desirable in eighteen.

The development and delivery of embedded / curriculum-based information / digital literacy skills training was required by eleven institutions. Creating opportunities for collaborative working on curriculum planning and development with academic colleagues was also encouraged by several.

A blended / e-learning approach was advocated by ten institutions, with contribution to the development of online learning materials and content a significant part of this work. Experience of e-learning / VLE support was also reflected in the person specification criteria for a further eight institutions.

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Emerging roles

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Strategic planning	11
Reading lists system support / advocacy	9
Action planning	7
Benchmarking	7
Web authoring	6
User experience research design and implementation	1

Emerging roles are rather more difficult to determine. For this exercise, those duties not specifically identified in Brewerton's initial analysis have been included, though some might argue that a few of them have been a feature of academic liaison for a number of years.

Whilst supporting university and library strategy has always been a longstanding aim, the requirement to participate actively in the strategic planning activities of the library in this role might be considered relatively new. Action planning and benchmarking again relate to strategic planning and, whilst benchmarking has been an exercise undertaken by academic libraries for many years, its specific mention in the core duties of some liaison roles perhaps underlines the metric-driven environment in which we now operate. There is a clear need across a wide range of activities and levels of responsibility to consistently measure performance and demonstrate the library's impact at our home institutions.

With the rise in the number of institutions making use of reading list systems, it is inevitable that supporting academics (and students) in the use of these is now a necessary requirement of the role, as is system advocacy in order to effect widespread engagement.

User experience techniques are cited in SCONUL's 2017 report as an emerging 'critical' skill (p.43), although it is only specifically mentioned by one institution, that particular job description also dating from 2017.

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Working with other departments/agencies

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Service planning and development	25
Representing the library at faculty / departmental level	16
Project work	14
Representing the library at university level	12
Working groups	10
Collaborative working with other services	9
Policy compliance (e.g. health and safety, copyright, equality, university professional behaviours etc.)	8
Project management	6

Many of the duties / responsibilities detailed in this section offer no surprises. Libraries are looking to work more collaboratively with other professional support services in their institutions in addition to having staff representing the library at formal faculty / departmental committees. Expectations around representing the library at university level appear in one third of the job descriptions reviewed. Project work and project management largely centred on cross-library (rather than university-level) projects and working groups or task and finish groups, but still require a level of inter-team working.

Service planning and development mainly focused on the need for continuous improvement of library resources and services. Given the nature of this role, this work was largely centred around assessing the needs of staff and students in designated schools / faculties, with some post holders also having responsibility for a library-wide function or service in collaboration with other library teams, the 'matrix work' scenario that Brewerton also describes (2011, p.64). In several instances, monitoring and evaluating impact was stipulated as part of this.

Research roles

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Research support	16
Institutional repository advocacy	3
REF (Research Excellence Framework) support	3

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Thirty-three institutions responded to Brewerton's 2008 request for job descriptions; 62 were received. Fifteen of these, roughly 24%, referred to 'research support' as a key activity. In 2019 'research support' is cited in 40% of the job descriptions used in this analysis. However, jumping to any conclusions about the increasing importance of research support in this role might be a step too far. The 'research support' described appears to be similar in many ways to that required ten years ago (Brewerton, 2011, p.65), that is, it is based around offering researchers more advanced level information skills and reference management training.

The nature of this research support is also somewhat open to interpretation. Some job descriptions merely assert that the post holder will be 'providing appropriate support' to researchers or will 'offer additional support to researchers', without expanding on this or offering specific examples. However, while expectations around the skills required to support researchers may not have changed radically, it seems that a greater understanding of the research process is now required.

Several job descriptions describe a blended approach to research support activities whereby the role of subject / liaison librarian is not only to provide guidance or training on 'resource identification and information retrieval' and assessing the 'information needs' of research staff and students, but also to play an advocacy role for open access initiatives and use of the institutional repository, research data management, copyright and the support offered by scholarly communications teams.

A small number of institutions anticipate that the postholder will develop and deliver training on areas such as research data management, copyright and bibliometrics, and two expect post holders to be able to determine that faculty-level or subject-specific 'research requirements' are identified, assessed and 'fully understood'. It was unclear whether this centred around the promotion and effective use of library collections and resources, rather than anything more substantial in support of the entire research cycle.

Generally, it is probably fair to say that a more strategic / holistic approach to supporting researchers (beyond information skills training and resource provision) was less apparent from the activities being described, and that the 32 wide-ranging skills 'required' of subject and liaison librarians to support the evolving information needs of researchers effectively (Auckland, 2012, pp.35–38) are not fully represented.

However, this may just reflect the situation that many academic libraries experience in which research support at an institutional level is split across a range of services and stakeholders or that this is the work of a separate scholarly communications team within the library where a 'functional' model has been adopted.

Librarians as researchers, rather than supporters of research, are not entirely overlooked, however. Hearteningly, one institution is encouraging its staff to engage actively with the research process by 'participating in / contributing to research projects', as appropriate, in order to raise the research profile of the service.

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Continuing professional development (CPD)

Duty / activity	Frequency of occurrence
Professional activity	22
Current awareness	14
Library staff training and development	12
Reflective practice	2

CPD, in relation either to professional activity or to current awareness, features in 84% of the job descriptions used for this study, external networking in particular being a core activity in over half. Attendance at external and internal training events is also prevalent, and membership of committees, specialist interest groups and professional bodies is explicitly encouraged, as is being actively involved in networks and events.

Seven institutions would like staff to make presentations at conferences or events (raising the institutional profile, as well as their own), and two make reference to writing articles for publication. The overwhelming message appears to be that active contribution to the wider library community and building up networks to develop knowledge and share professional practice are an expectation.

Current awareness remains an important aspect of CPD, and keeping up to date with developments in the higher education and wider library sector are seen as key to fostering new initiatives and services in the employing institution. Two institutions also made particular mention of reflective practice as part of the continuous review process, to 'apply good practice to continually improve academic liaison'.

Any other duties

No job description can hope to reflect all the duties and activities expected of a particular role, so it is unsurprising to find the universal need for undertaking 'any other duties as required' reflected in 23 of the 37 job descriptions. As Brewerton observed, it is also reflective of the 'rapidly changing environment' we now work in (2011, p.66), where flexibility is expected and roles develop and change very quickly – an inevitable outcome when looking to meet the rapidly evolving needs of our academic community.

Having informed, adaptable – and resilient – staff who are able to respond positively to these new challenges requires a wide range of skills and experience that cannot be satisfactorily translated into defined activities or duties. That's the purpose of the 'person specification', after all. So are the knowledge, skills and experience outlined in these specifications reflective of recent research recommendations, or are we still focusing on the more 'traditional' skills that have been our stock-in-trade for so long?

Knowledge and experience

Predictably, experience of delivering training / teaching was the overriding requirement of 35 of the 37 institutions surveyed, 29 specifying this as 'essential'. Knowledge of the higher education environment and experience of working in an academic library followed on closely, with knowledge / awareness of relevant information resources and an understanding of

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pedagogic practices within higher education being specified in approximately 40% of cases.

In relation to those 'technical' skills identified by CILIP as being important now and in the future (2018, p.12), project management features in some specifications, although more as a desirable criterion than an essential one. This may only reflect the changing nature of the role and, perhaps, project management is just emerging as a requirement rather than being embedded in the traditional skillset.

Although 70% of the job descriptions describe some form of marketing or promotional activities, very few request previous experience or knowledge of this, and only five institutions require prior experience of either web authoring or social media.

While experience of research support is mentioned in the main duties and activities of 40% of the job descriptions, knowledge or experience of supporting researchers beyond the delivery of skills training sessions was surprisingly absent in the person specification in all but a few cases. Knowledge / experience of bibliometrics, repository management and an understanding of research data management and the scholarly communication process were directly referred to in only eight cases. This might just reflect inconsistencies between our understanding of the evolving needs of the research community and the language we are currently using in our job descriptions to indicate how we support them. It could also indicate that responsibility for supporting researchers lies elsewhere in the university or the library, and that this type of 'specialist' support is no longer within the remit of the subject / liaison librarian.

Skills and capabilities

An increasing need for 'soft skills' was also identified as being of critical / high importance in the research commissioned by CILIP (2018, p.12) and SCONUL (2017, p.43). Predictably, for a job involving 'liaison', interpersonal and communication skills were the most essential requirement, though in the vast majority of cases, these are still confined to 'excellent written and oral communication' skills.

However, the need for a more complex set of communication skills is beginning to filter through to person specification criteria. Sixteen institutions also specify negotiation and / or influencing skills as an 'essential' requirement. Advocacy is mentioned in four person specifications, and 'relationship management' or building effective relationships features in eighteen, which represents 49% of the participating institutions. Diplomacy was not explicitly mentioned, although one specification requires the ability to explain complex issues in a 'tactful' way.

Being flexible, adaptable or having a positive attitude to change is a requirement in 22 of the person specifications and is perhaps indicative of the increasingly pressured environment in which we work. It comes as no surprise then that time management and the ability to prioritise is the second most desirable skill after communication, on a par with the need for good IT skills.

The ability to collate and analyse data and statistics or have an evidence-based approach is explicitly required by twelve institutions. This perhaps reflects the increasing importance of evidence-based decision making, in addition to generating meaningful metrics to demonstrate value and impact.

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As you would hope from our profession, a commitment to CPD is also considered to be of continuing importance, although only 57% of institutions make explicit reference to this in their person specification, despite 84% listing CPD in their job descriptions.

A greater awareness of equality and diversity is also reflected in some job descriptions, with eight institutions explicitly requiring a commitment to equality and diversity in relation to the diverse nature of the academic communities at these institutions in their person specification criteria. While this may just reflect university policy, given the number of library-related training events, conferences and campaigns currently addressing equality and diversity, it might also signify a move within the profession to make a commitment to equality and diversity more explicit in both the learning and working environments we provide.

Qualifications

Thirty institutions require their postholders to have a library and information science (LIS) qualification or a 'LIS qualification or equivalent experience', with a 50/50 split between the two. As the cost of higher education at postgraduate level becomes increasingly prohibitive for many members of our workforce, it will be interesting to see if this continues to remain a requirement of prospective academic library employers or whether more emphasis will be placed on equivalent experience.

Membership of a professional organisation was specified by twenty institutions as desirable – CILIP or the Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) being the most commonly cited. Only five asked for the postholder to have already gained Chartered membership of CILIP, although a further three asked for Chartered membership or a commitment to work towards it. A subject-related qualification was an essential requirement in only five institutions, though seven more considered this to be desirable.

Conclusion

Inevitably, coding qualitative data in this way is a subjective process, and it may be that someone replicating this exercise would interpret many of the activities, duties and person criteria in these 37 job descriptions in a different way.

However, in my view it would appear that many of our job descriptions and personal specifications do not make extensive reference to the wide range of 'crucial' skills that library directors, academics, consultants and other participants in both the SCONUL and CILIP reviews cite as being core to our current and future professional skills base. While elements of these, such as those referred to by CILIP as 'general business skills' (p.11) and 'soft skills' in particular (p.12), are becoming increasingly apparent, this is not overwhelmingly so.

Many of the 'technical skills' around the use and support of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, text and data mining, and providing services in areas such as the digital humanities, digital archiving and other areas of 'datafied scholarship' (Pinfield, 2017, p.16) are not mentioned at all. However, these might arguably be prevalent in other dedicated teams or roles, such as 'research support'.

If we are to take seriously the recommendation that 'developing an organisation with the right skills base, through staff development or recruitment or both, is a crucial part of securing change' (ibid. p.43), then perhaps the job descriptions and person specifications, which are fundamental to our recruitment processes, also need to change.

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- 1 A very small number were from institutions which have adopted a 'functional team' model; in these cases the job description used for analysis was drawn from the area of academic engagement.
- 2 If the same 'category' assigned to an activity / criterion occurred multiple times in the same job description / person specification, this has only been reported once per institution in the 'frequency of occurrence' column.

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