

The Subject Specialist in Higher Education: Professional Engagement

Introduction

Professional engagement works on a number of levels in higher education institutions (HEIs) contributing to personal development, individual and institutional recognition, wider professional engagement and informing communities of practice. All HEIs are unique to some extent, although there are points of commonality amongst parts of the sector; for example new as opposed to old universities or single campus compared to multi-campus institutions. Because of this variation and differences in job descriptions and responsibilities, the parameters of professional engagement vary both for individuals and for institutions. This chapter will attempt to indicate the areas where professional engagement occurs, identify some of the challenges and offer some indicators of possible developments and opportunities. Libraries according to Radford (1998) are “the ultimate realization of a place where each item within it has a fixed place and stands in an a priori relationship with every other item”. This rigidity is in stark contrast to the students who are using academic libraries, as Prensky (2001) observes “today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach”. The chapter will also consider the role of the librarian as knowledge broker, working collaboratively with academics to support students, (Thomas et al. 2004, p. 25). The importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the contributions of communities of practice to individuals and to the information profession (Wenger 1998, p. 73) will provide the underlying theme to the chapter.

Institution based engagement

Formal and informal interaction with colleagues in the information and other professions provides subject librarians with opportunities for personal and professional development. Whilst some of this engagement is structured and very public, other contacts are not only unstructured but happen almost accidentally and without the participants sometimes being fully aware of their importance. Unless these engagements are properly identified and recorded, there is a danger that the contribution of individuals' CPD, to their institution, to the information profession and to other professions is lost. In the increasingly competitive environment of higher education (Hughes, 2000) any omission can constitute a wasted opportunity to raise the profile of an individual or their service; the experience at the University of Wales described later in this chapter has been a salutary one. Training diaries, logs, and learning journals (Moon 1999, p.39) are all mechanisms that subject librarians can use to maintain motivation, inform their appraisals, develop their CV, and where appropriate contribute to research and publication. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) launched a framework in 2005 to encourage CPD and better reflect the breadth and depth of professional engagement that is undertaken by information professionals. At this very early stage the success of this development remains to be seen.

The many and increasing forms of electronic communication have facilitated the development of professional contacts. Librarians and other information professionals have for some years used JISCmail and its predecessor Mailbase as a forum for debate as well as for information sharing and

dissemination. More recently weblogs have provided additional and sometimes alternative means of communicating and sharing project news. These can be on an intranet, as at the University of Greenwich, where a weblog was used on an e-learning project as well as on the World Wide Web (WWW) as a means of disseminating information across the profession, of which Sheila Webber's Information Literacy Weblog (Webber, 2005) is an example. There are other tools, for example podcasting which is a way of publishing sound files to the internet, allowing users to subscribe to a feed and receive new audio files automatically (Wikipedia, 2005) being used and developed that will change to a greater or lesser degree not only how we engage with our users, but also how we engage with our own and other professions. Virtual communities of practice within the information professions continue to flourish on JISCmail while online communities such as Informationcity provide a range of online services including networking, training and (perhaps a worrying development) retail opportunities. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the regional development agencies provide interdisciplinary and regional examples of how information professionals can work with other colleagues in virtual communities of practice, but the full potential of cross-sectoral communication is probably still to be fully exploited.

Development is a two-way process; as well as being receivers of developmental opportunities professional staff also have a duty to provide learning and developmental opportunities to colleagues. Personal professional development and the responsibility to "encourage colleagues....,

to maintain and enhance their professional knowledge and competence” is embodied in CILIP’s Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Practice (2003).

Staff Development programmes within an institution provide opportunities for CPD as well as opportunities for contribution to training sessions, research seminars and conferences. In-house training sessions are relatively safe environments in which newly qualified professionals can develop their presentation skills and allow themselves to get used to the culture of their organisation (Hyde, 2000), whilst more experienced staff can use colleagues as internal peer reviewers for work destined for wider promulgation. The contribution of subject librarians to the learning and teaching agenda encompasses working with academic colleagues on curriculum development, embedding information literacy into teaching programmes, involvement with the HEA and successful competition for national awards such as the National Teaching Fellowship Award to 2004 to Chris Powis of the University of Northampton.

Professional engagement with other disciplines brings added richness to subject librarianship. This is wider than the all-important relationships with academic disciplines which will be dealt with elsewhere in this chapter, as it includes other support staff. This synergy is growing in importance as support staff no longer provide relatively isolated islands of service but work together to provide a seamless service to enhance the learning environment (Hart, 2004). Examples include support for additional learning needs, IT support and

staff development. Experienced information staff who contribute to the wider student support arena can benefit from re-invigorating ideas and new contacts as a result of these interactions.

Regional, national and international engagement.

Beyond the home institution there are a number of regional and sub-regional groups; the M25 Group, North West Academic Libraries (NoWAL), and the Scottish Academic Libraries Cooperative Training Group (SALcTG) are examples but there are many groups, effectively communities of practice, offering opportunities for librarians to further their own development and contribute to wider issues that concern them and the profession. CILIP has regional and special interest groups that respond to professional issues be they subject, functional or regional. The Framework of Qualifications (2004) laid down some important directions for the profession; encompassing support and mentoring, chartering, and continuing professional development with the intention of "...raising the status of the professional body to one that views its validation as a current dynamic activity, not one rooted in history".

The role of CILIP and the debate concerning its value to the information profession has been described by, amongst others, Corral (2002) and Owen (2003), as well as extensively (and frequently less positively) in online discussion lists during 2004/5. On an international level, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) provide diverse opportunities for professional engagement with information professionals from around the world. The value of conferences organised by these, and other,

professional bodies is considerable, both in terms of professional development and networking. However the cost of sending staff to these events means that institutions are increasingly selective, and attendance even to present a paper cannot be assured. The information community has responded to this in part by the creation of awards and bursaries to encourage wider participation. This practice extends to some institutions and subject librarians need to be proactive, and apply as appropriate to ensure that external opportunities are available to them.

Many subject librarians in the UK are also members of the HEA, established in 2003 by the merger of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, the Learning and Teaching Support Networks and the National Coordination Team for the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. This forum enables subject librarians to engage not only with other information professionals involved with learning and teaching but also the wider academic community. Powis (2004) noted that "involvement in teaching bodies enhanced our credibility within our organisations and gave us a shared language to speak with academics..."

CILIP, SCONUL, IFLA, HEA and other professional organisations give subject librarians opportunities to work in communities of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) as "...an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community. Thus, they are united in both action and in the meaning that the action has, both for themselves, and for the larger

collective". Subject librarians have responded to the academic community, the "larger collective", through involvement with both centrally funded projects such as those run by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Resource Discovery Network (RDN), and institutionally funded projects such as the KnowledgeShare project (Dale et al, 2005) to develop group bibliographic software at Bournemouth University. Mentoring schemes, CILIP special interest groups, and regional groupings provide further opportunities for participation based on confidence, understanding and co-operation, shared language and mutual support (Price, 2005).

The literature describing different aspects of professional engagement amongst subject librarians is extensive, but what seems to be lacking is wide and sustained debate and reflection upon the value of these activities. Other professions within the social sciences appear to engage more freely in this type of analysis. This may be because of the nature of the literature (or even the nature of subject librarians!), it might also be an indicator of the post-modern environment in HEIs that drives a continual reinvention of the role, leaving little space or purpose for this level of analysis. Harley (2001) identifies student attitudes, the WWW and consumerism as indicators of post-modernism in academic libraries. The information literacy debate, the introduction of a realistic CPD framework and the possibilities presented by electronic communication might signal an opportunity for subject librarians to review the purpose and value of professional engagement.

Whilst engagement has connotations of participation, sharing or collaboration, it also has an alternative definition as a meeting of opposing forces. The literature suggests that the reality lies somewhere between these two definitions with the extent and quality of engagement dependent upon factors such as the skills and personal attributes of the subject specialist, institutional structures, and the attitude of academic staff.

Recruitment and development of subject librarians should focus on reinforcing interpersonal skills and innovation together with a commitment to continuing professional development and current awareness. In this way subject specialists will be encouraged to create and embrace opportunities for engagement with academics, proactively selling the library, its services and the contribution that they can make to the learning and teaching activities of the institution. Hughes (2000) discusses the notion of the “competitive space” as academic librarians now find themselves working in competition as providers of information services and support, and need to be outgoing and creative in order to successfully meet this challenge.

As noted earlier in this chapter, institutional structure in HEIs also necessarily influences the level of engagement between subject specialists and academic staff. Since the publication of The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) (hereafter the ‘Dearing Report’), higher education has increasingly focused on supporting independent learning. This change in the academic climate, as well as funding issues, rising student numbers and government policy initiatives such as widening participation, has stimulated

many university libraries to respond by restructuring in recent years, developing proactive, user-focused services.

For example, Wilson (2003) suggests that since the Dearing Report “information services within higher education have undergone enormous change” and found that 48 per cent of surveyed respondents’ job titles had indeed changed. Pinfield (2001) also highlights this change suggesting that “in recent years, the roles of subject librarians have been reprioritised in many libraries”, with an increasing emphasis on faculty liaison “which has often been reflected in the new titles for subject librarians: ‘Faculty Team Librarian’, ‘Liaison Librarian’, even ‘Learning Advisor’ “.

Restructuring does not, however, always have a positive impact on subject specialists’ engagement with academic staff. The University of Wales in Bangor Executive (2005) has proposed a radical restructuring of library provision arguing that “support to the academic and student communities from the qualified subject librarians, whatever its contribution to the teaching and research roles of the institution, is hard to justify in value-for-money terms at a time when the process of literature searches is substantially deskilled by online bibliographical resources”. Under the proposed structure a single ‘User-Support Officer’ will replace the majority of subject specialist positions. If adopted, this structure is likely to significantly impact on the engagement of the library with academic staff, as a single user-support officer is unlikely to be able to engage to any significant extent with academics.

A useful analysis of institutional structure is provided by the Deliberations project (London Metropolitan University, 2005) which identified three primary models of liaison between academic staff and librarians. In the 'Running Behind' model, liaison is characterised by uncoordinated communication and a reactive response to teaching and learning requirements. In the 'Partnerships' model, liaison is more formalised with the librarian proactively engaged with the academic departments, whilst in the 'Sharing Assessment' model, the librarian is sufficiently involved in the academic structure to contribute to the assessment process. In reality the engagement experience of any individual subject specialist is likely to be a mixture of these three models, with the level of collaboration with academic staff varying according to academic level, discipline and the attitude of individual academics.

How academic staff perceive the library is crucial to the quality of professional engagement. Whyley and Callender (1997) reported that many support staff "felt that the academics they worked with did not recognise the importance of the service they provided". While academics may understand the value of traditional library-related activities such as collection development and promotion of services, evidence suggests that information literacy skills training is undervalued. In a US survey of academics Yang (2000) found that while significant numbers of academics ranked activities such as "updating faculty of the services available in the library" and "ordering books or serials for faculty" as "very important" only 17.5 per cent of respondents considered "conducting bibliographic instruction to the students" to be an important aspect of the librarian's role. Similarly, Gonzales (2001) found that "the fact that faculty members received library research instruction from a librarian did

not relate positively to the faculty members' decision to ask a librarian to give instruction to their students".

Nimon (2002) supports the view that to succeed in having the learning support role – information literacy - taken seriously, librarians must "be equipped with refined skills and the conceptual knowledge which enables them to perform with an educational competence, and professional confidence, equal to that of their academic peers". It is a view echoed by Bell and Shank (2004) who highlighted the fact that academic librarians lag in "understanding of pedagogy and adoption of instructional design theory and practice". Training and development in this area will enable the subject specialist to develop knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning to facilitate engagement with academic staff.

The subject specialist should also investigate institutional sources of funding for initiatives, such as e-learning, which could be used to consolidate their professional skills and engagement with academic staff, especially if these are sources of funding for which non academic staff have not been traditionally considered. Publishing, especially in non library journals, will also raise the professional profile of the subject specialist. One way to gain recognition for the teaching role of the subject specialist is to seek accreditation by the HEA, "means by which existing professionalism in diverse institutional contexts to support continuous professional development and evaluation of practice can be recognised and rewarded".

Maintaining current awareness of issues relating to teaching and learning and building a strong professional relationship with institutional directors of research, learning and quality will enable the subject specialist to effectively market their skills and knowledge to academic staff. The Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAA) (2001) places emphasis on encouraging “students to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning experiences and plan for their own development” through “Personal Development Planning”. Kempcke (2002, p.538) points out that information literacy “serves both vocational and more traditional academic purposes”. The QAA goal to encourage students to “become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners” is at the heart of information literacy programmes and thus there is scope for subject specialists to engage with academic staff and work as knowledge brokers towards a shared agenda.

The subject specialist also has a knowledge brokerage role in supporting the research and teaching information needs and interests of academics. The librarian must establish what these needs are so as to determine what information is appropriate, and then develop the skills to effectively disseminate this information. This may be either formal – for example, participation at programme committee meetings, staff notice boards within a School, creation of web pages and blogs or informal through socialisation.

JISC funded projects such as Big Blue Connect (2003), and JISC Usage Surveys: Trends in Electronic Information services (JUSTEIS, 2004) have identified a skills gap with regard to academics’ information handling competences. Yang (2000) noted, in a study of academic staff perceptions of

library-faculty liaison, that when encountering problems in conducting their own research only 12.5 per cent of respondents would consult their subject specialist in the first instance, and that the majority preferred to use either the library or the Internet to locate information themselves. Price (1999) describes the "Invisible College" where "conferences, discussions over coffee and phone calls to colleagues have been joined by e-mail as the most effective ways of keeping up with the field." In the same paper Price quotes research by Barry and Squires (1995) which suggests that "academics only learn and use the IT-assisted information systems where they perceive themselves as having a need that can be met by that system". This highlights the important role subject specialists can have in developing the information literacy skills of academic staff. This support could be through formal development opportunities such as leading or participating in staff training events, to more informal methods such as personal communication, newsletters, and email.

The subject specialist also has a key role in providing academic staff with current awareness of the resources and services offered by the library. Anecdotal evidence suggests that student misconceptions about library services can in part be attributed to out of date information provided by academic staff. In keeping academic staff aware of service developments and effectively marketing new services, misconceptions amongst staff and students can be challenged and corrected.

To be successful, engagement between subject specialist and academics has to be a continuing and collaborative process. As Nimon (2002) has said

“cooperation between academics and librarians to promote mutual goals commonly occurs, but there is evidence that more can be done not only to improve general understanding of the potential contribution of librarians but simultaneously to enhance it”. Successful engagement with academics can only promote the role subject specialists have to play in developing Webber and Johnston’s (2004) concept of the Information Literate University.

Engagement with students

Information skills programmes provide perhaps the most formal contacts that subject librarians have with students and these contacts and the issues of information literacy that go with them are covered substantially elsewhere in this book, notably Chapter 4.3. Information literacy is about more than information skills (Price 2005). On one level it is about being able to find information in a timely and efficient manner, but it is also about knowing what to do with the information once it is found. Bundy (2005) points out that Information literacy is not the same as information skills or user education. Harley (2001) suggests that librarians are operating in a post-modern condition characterized by consumerism, superficiality and knowledge fragmentation and that “bibliographic instruction” must recognize this. The challenge is therefore to equate Harley’s assertion that “most students are not interested in knowing how a library is organized, or which reference sources to use. They simply want the information required for their course assignments” with the need to encourage deep thinking and reflection (Biggs 2003, p.16). The framework that Harley (2001) suggests to resolve this apparent conflict concentrates on facilitating critical thinking and spending less time on explaining resources, organisations and structures. Oberman

(1991) observes that context promotes critical thinking, and that student learning needs to be a progression towards self-reliance. At Bournemouth University the library induction programme has evolved into an academic services wide induction, with an emphasis on the context; who to ask, where to look and how to find out, rather than the specifics of using any of the services. Post-induction information skills programmes are embedded closely into teaching programmes and subject librarians have undertaken a benchmarking exercise to map onto the QAA framework. In a model from the US, the University of Maryland (UM) has all information literacy sessions based on marked assignments, and library induction programmes are no longer delivered. Information skills programmes at UM are delivered by a range of staff including para-professional and technical staff, freeing professional staff time for the preparation of learning materials and getting students involved in the research process.

It is probably unrealistic to expect students to learn all they need to know from formal situations, whether "real" in the sense of real time information skills sessions or "virtual" via a virtual learning environment (VLE). Informal opportunities can present themselves at the enquiry desk or from a chance meeting in the corridor or coffee shop. Some institutions have adopted "roving" (Gill and Newton 2002) as a means of reaching enquirers who do not approach the enquiry desk, whilst attendance at course committees is another way of making informal, as well as formal, contact.

Engagement with students : widening participation

Widening participation, lifelong learning, legislative changes and financial imperatives are contributing factors to the diversity of students that subject librarians are engaging with. From 2006 top-up fees will add to the increasingly consumerist culture of HEIs although fee paying students have played an increasing part in the UK University system for some time, not only at postgraduate levels but at undergraduate levels as institutions compete for the revenue generated by international students. Overseas students, mature students, distance learners, students with additional learning needs and the many others who come into the wide and imprecise category of widening participation may have particular, yet very different, problems engaging with the concept of information literacy. There is also the possibility that ALL students are part of the widening participation agenda; a delegate at one of the Libraries Without Walls conferences observed that we are all distance learners now. What is certain is that most students today think and process information differently from their predecessors, Prensky (2001) refers to “digital natives” or students who have grown up surrounded by the toys and tools of the digital age. Unless subject librarians can understand their different and diverse needs, many students will not engage with information literacy, perceiving it as unconnected with their study, work or professional practice (Rutter and Dale 2004, p. 87). If students see information skills simply as a means to an end, they are taking the surface learning approach as described by Marton and Saljo (1984) and they will have missed an opportunity to acquire good information handling skills that are transferable to both the workplace or study at Masters level and beyond.

Harley (2001) identifies two “paths” that librarians could create to bridge the gap between “those most in need of research assistance and guidance and those most able to provide it”. His first path is to attract more students and find ways of engaging them once they are inside academic libraries, whilst the second path is explore ways of delivering resources and services outside libraries. Martell (2000, p.104) predicts that librarians will deal with users almost exclusively in a virtual environment; this assertion is supported by the growth of means of electronic communication; VLEs, blogs, podcasts and so on. Engagement with students is fast becoming one of human and computer interaction. The design and accessibility of websites, the management of electronic books, journals, issues surrounding authentication and interoperability are all as important to the process as a knowledge of approaches to learning and different styles of learning (Biggs, 2003, p17). However, there are still students who Prensky (2001) describes as “digital immigrants” who have not grown up with a high level of exposure to technology, who are wary of it or who simply cannot afford it, so engagement with students continues on a real as well as virtual level.

Conclusion

In conclusion there are some themes that indicate possible opportunities for subject librarians and the ways in which they engage not only with academic and other professional colleagues but also with students and the development of information literacy. One theme is post-modernism, as by examining the contexts in which students learn, subject librarians can “enable the reader... to frame knowledge without constraints rather than on understanding an

imposed, external organization of that knowledge” (Anderson, 1992, p.114). Developments in electronic communications will facilitate this process, but subject librarians must be prepared to fully engage as knowledge brokers with information literacy at the core of learning and teaching, and to do this, opportunities for training and CPD need to be available. Currently, there are no CILIP accredited courses at either undergraduate or postgraduate level that cover learning and teaching, therefore to gain these skills librarians have to either commit to a PG Cert or PG Dip in Learning and Teaching or find their way through distance learning, short courses offered by professional organisations or, in some institutions, in-house training. Once the skills are in place, HEA accreditation is a way of giving them validity and recognition. However there is a arguably a need for further provision, perhaps using short courses and distance learning, to enable subject librarians to acquire the learning and teaching skills and pedagogy. Information literacy in the learning and teaching agenda is seen as a political development by Owusu-Ansah (2004) and Bundy (2005) who have called for librarians to challenge the educational system and drive change, whilst Webb and Zhang (1997) urged librarians to make a “revolutionary response” and move from organisation to the production of knowledge in order to counter the new technologies that threaten the existence of libraries. The role of communities of practice is established in the library profession; however in the climate of change and challenge that subject librarians are working in there might be scope for some re-evaluation and perhaps consolidation. The communities of practice of which subject librarians are part need to reflect the role of knowledge brokers,

and support not only subject librarians but also students, academics and other support staff.

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