Bursting the bubble: why it's (not) all about the PhD in research support

UKSG eNews 439

22 February 2019

Claire Sewell, Cambridge University Libraries

The changing landscape of scholarly communication has caused something of a chain reaction in academic libraries with increasing numbers setting up dedicated research support departments to offer advice and training to their users. Librarians are excited to see new job opportunities emerging in these departments which on paper seem like an excellent fit for their skills. But in reality are librarians the ones actually taking the roles in these departments or are they being beaten at their own game? Research, 'Where did they come from? The educational background of people working in scholarly communication', suggests that many of those appointed to these new roles within scholarly communication departments come to the library having completed a PhD and that for many their only experience of the library comes as a user rather than a staff member. On the surface the rationale for this choice seems sound - those who have been through the process of obtaining a PhD are intimately familiar with the world of research and are therefore well equipped to offer support to their peers. In contrast, many librarians have done little in the way of formal research aside from a dissertation as part of their under or postgraduate degrees. Having a department staffed with those who understand the needs of the research community in this way lends a sense of legitimacy to the advice on offer as there is a shared language in common experiences. Someone with direct experience of the PhD process is surely better than a stuffy librarian who has sat at a desk for years stamping books. What could they possibly know about research?

Well, I would argue that librarians know quite a lot! They can offer a Liam Neeson-esque *particular set of skills* which serves them well when working in research support. No matter what type of library they have worked in they will have developed customer service skills which allow them to work with a range of people, quickly assessing their needs to provide the help that is needed at that moment. As a result of having limited time with most users, they are masters of stealth advocacy and information literacy training and often plant the seed of knowledge which keeps their users coming back for more help. On a practical level they know a lot about different aspects of research from the collection and storage of data through to an understanding of the publication process. Perhaps one of their most important skills is the ability to be adaptable - something which is crucial in the fast moving world of scholarly communication. One advantage to working in a profession constantly being told that it is out of date and at the forefront for budget cuts is that we librarians know how to upskill and sell our abilities to a sceptical audience.

Even with these arguments it can be easy to wonder if this time librarians have met their match. If the majority of roles in this sector are going to those with a PhD then is it time to ask the tough question - should librarians just admit defeat and stop bothering to apply for these roles? Of course one solution would be to undertake a PhD. There are many opportunities to pursue an advanced degree in information but the average cost of a PhD in the UK is currently £12,000 and librarianship is notoriously not a well-paid profession. Add to this the time commitment involved and undertaking further qualifications is out of the reach of many people. In a sector which already struggles with diversity I'm not sure that creating more barriers to entry is the answer. So what can librarians do?

Librarians continuously work to develop their skills and they will continue to do so without prompting from this article. But perhaps what we need to do is to approach this development more strategically. How can we showcase the skills that are getting those with a PhD hired? What is it about them (aside from the letters after their names) that appeals to hiring managers in scholarly communication? An online discussion at a recent Jisc event highlighted this very issue and suggested that the key may be in how we represent ourselves to the academic community. How can we demonstrate that we as librarians are legitimate players in the scholarly communication game? We also need to look at what librarians can bring to the table that others can't and work to demonstrate this. Our skills in information literacy, customer service and our unique perspective on the publishing process are all advantages here. After all, if having a PhD is the magic bullet that makes you understand everything about the research process then why do libraries need to set up support departments at all? Surely the process of the PhD would tell you everything you need to know?

In all of this discussion we should remember that PhDs and librarians are not enemies. Both groups have much in common such as involvement in sharing research and advancing knowledge but they also both tend to work in their own bubble - researchers work with other researchers and librarians with other librarians. Although seeking the comfort of the familiar is a long standing practice this does mean that we run the risk of forever staying within our bubbles. Researchers have listened to supervisors who are likely working to advice received from their supervisors many years earlier meaning that the system stays the same even as the world moves on around it. At the same time librarians are trying to introduce change into a system they often find closed to them and so continue to shout into the echo chamber. Unless something happens to burst these bubbles we may continue to float side by side never quite making the connection.

So consider this a call to action - to librarians, to PhDs and to those hiring them for roles in research support. Take a step back and look at the role without any preconceptions about job titles or qualifications and see what the individual can bring to the table. Allowing both groups to work together can bring a great deal of value to the research support process but focusing on one over the other will just continue to perpetuate the current issues. In order to effect change we need to start popping these bubbles and moving forward together or risk floating further apart.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.

This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter *UKSG eNews,* published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

To enjoy *UKSG eNews* and other member benefits become a UKSG member.