

Attracting Young People into the Profession

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Introduction

In May 2009 a national news story appeared about the staffing crisis faced by the nursing profession in the UK. 200,000 nurses – almost a third of the total workforce – are due to retire in the next decade (Rose, 2009), according to report findings, and not enough young people are joining the profession. These figures are based upon a survey published by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), who asked over 8,600 children aged from seven to seventeen years old if they would like to join the nursing profession. Only one in twenty said that they would (Rose, 2009).

Librarianship is facing the same fate. A survey looking at the public library workforce in 71 authorities in England and Wales, published by the Employers Organisation in 2006, revealed that 41.2% of *professionals* were aged 50 or over. Further, this survey stated that 8.2% of the *total workforce* was made up of staff aged between 18 and 24, with just 0.9% of professional librarian posts held by people under 25 (Employers Organisation, 2006).

The story is similar in America, where two thirds of librarians are due to retire in the next decade (Ard et al, 2006) and Australia, where 60% of librarians are aged 45 or over and just 14% are under the age of 35 (ALIA, 2005), suggesting that librarianship is suffering worldwide with a problem in recruiting young people into professional roles, which will have implications for the future of the profession.

The Barriers

In response to these worrying statistics, I designed a questionnaire to find out what new professionals think are the factors stopping young people from choosing librarianship as a career. I sent this electronic questionnaire via email to the students on the MA Librarianship course at the University of Sheffield – a group of people of varying ages who *have* chosen to become library professionals. I received sixteen responses; four (26.7%) were in the 18-24 age group, although all responses were valuable and valid.

I immediately noticed some common themes emerging from the responses. Each of the 16 answers I received to the question “What barriers do you see facing young people wanting to enter the librarianship profession?” fell into one or more of these six core themes:

- Invisibility of the profession
- Negative stereotypes
- Qualifications required
- Poor careers advice
- Lack of job opportunities
- Money - low salaries

The following table gives one example of what respondents said relating to each barrier.

Barrier identified	Example quote
Invisibility of the Profession	“Lack of awareness of it as a choice; lack of depth of understanding about what is involved in it.”
Negative Stereotypes	“I think the stereotypical image of librarians as women in their 40's and 50's would put off young people and particularly young men from entering the profession.”
High Level of Qualifications Required	“Another possible barrier is that to actually become a librarian you are required to undertake a postgraduate course. This I think would put off some young people because of the financial costs and amount of time involved.”
Poor Careers Advice	“It is not promoted by careers services. I have never seen a stand at a careers fair about library work.”
Lack of Job Opportunities	“another issue I've noticed is that I've found it very difficult to get a job: people seem to stay in jobs for many years and not move on which means it is difficult to find that promotion opportunity and progress in your career.”
Low Salary	“When you're younger (and often older!) you want to do a sexy job that pays a fortune... It's hard to sell librarianship on these grounds.”

This all correlates with the professional literature and results from similar studies that have been carried out around the world. For example, in Canada, 2000 new university students were questioned about different career paths they might follow on completing their first degrees. “Fewer than 40% recognized that librarians require a university education” (Harris & Wilkinson, 2007), which shows that there is a lack of awareness of librarians as professionals and a lack of understanding of what the role entails. This may be due to a lack of careers advice: studies in America have shown that school and university careers advisors do not advocate the field of librarianship (Stanley, 2007). This may also be linked to the negative images people have of librarians as women in their 40s and 50s who “shhh, shelve, and stamp” (Sarkanen, 2005) and nothing more. With regard to salary being a barrier, CILIP’s salary guidelines state that a newly qualified professional in the public library sector can expect between £19,145 and £23,000. This goes up to £28,000 when chartered and £47,000 plus for Head of Service (CILIP, 2008). Of course, different sectors offer different salaries, some much higher than this example. So for professionals wanting to move up to the higher responsibility, managerial roles of librarianship, there are opportunities to earn high salaries.

The Solutions

It is important that young people enter the profession in order to avoid a potential staffing crisis so we need to show that the job can appeal to young people (and both men and women). So I asked the MA Librarianship students if they could see any possible solutions to these barriers. The participants came up with a number of suggestions to help promote the role of the librarian and increase understanding in young people. Solutions identified included:

- Better self-promotion of librarians in order to increase awareness of what librarian roles entail
- Actively increase visibility of the librarian – in libraries, workplaces and society
- More engagement with Web 2.0 technologies to engage with young people
- Banish negative stereotypes in order to promote the profession

All of these factors can be achieved through better communication. The CILIP council met in May 2008 to discuss the need for better communication within CILIP, saying that communication “should be at the heart of what we do” (Hyams, 2008). “Lack of public awareness is often behind under-appreciation of the LIS sector” (Hyams, 2008) and so communication needs to be improved not just within the library community but also within society as a whole.

This was echoed in the MA Librarianship students’ comments calling for ‘better marketing and promotion of librarianship as a career’. As it was already noted that there was lack of presence of LIS displays at careers and university fairs, many students said that becoming more visible at events such as this would increase librarianship’s profile to graduates. Making young people aware that librarians require a postgraduate qualification may act, not as a barrier, but as an incentive to those who are looking for a professional career path and wouldn’t otherwise have thought of librarianship.

Some students went further to suggest that schools can play a more active role in recruiting young people into librarianship. One suggestion was for the CILIP branches to give careers talks in schools, while others suggested that the school librarian has a role to play in attracting young people into the profession by becoming more visible within the school. However, it is not a requirement of schools in England to have a professionally qualified librarian, or even a library! So before we can promote librarianship in schools through role model librarians we need to fight to get them into all schools in the first place! And young, newly qualified librarians in schools could help to promote the profession better than others; however, “a recent survey discovered that the average age of school librarians was 50” (Brabazon, 2008), so perhaps the first step is to encourage young new professionals into school librarianship.

Promotion in schools may be one way of promoting librarianship to young people, but librarians can probably make the biggest impact in the Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sectors. New library buildings are no longer stereotypically stuffy and silent places; they are designed to meet the needs of new users in order to attract young people to use them. Librarians in these buildings need to follow suit and provide services that will attract and benefit young people. If librarians can become visible in these settings, for example through subject liaison or teaching, they will be helping to promote what modern librarianship is really about.

One of the most effective ways of communicating with young people is through the technologies they use daily. First of all, the implementation of self-service machines takes librarians away from the issue desk and therefore away from the old stereotypes. Further, by using web 2.0 technologies, librarians can become more visible to young people whilst at the same time promoting to them the fact that being a librarian means having an understanding of how these technologies are useful in an information society. If young people start to think of librarians as people who work with computers, not just books, it may become more appealing and help to break down old stereotypes. Librarians can also become more visible by using these

technologies if they take on a teaching or advisory role, particularly in the HE and FE sectors. Librarians will then be promoting themselves as modern, knowledgeable and relevant, not grumpy old women sat in an office with a stack of dusty books.

Some of the suggestions mentioned so far are daily achievable solutions that all librarians can start to implement. However, some other suggestions from the MA Librarianship students called for bigger, national action. For example, one student noted that there are national campaigns in place to attract people into certain professions; take the example of teaching, where there are posters and TV advertisements highlighting what a great job teaching is – showing it to be a fun, varied job and breaking down stereotypes. A national campaign could do the same for librarianship. Another idea is inspired by the nursing story mentioned at the start: we should ask young people around the country of varying ages what it is about librarianship that does not appeal to give us a better idea of what needs to change. Also, this report was released on Nurses' Day (12th May, the anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birthday); so what about Librarian's Day? In Australia they have a Library Lovers Day on 14th February, but we need something that promotes the profession more than the building. Maybe we need to find an equivalent to Florence Nightingale; are there any cool, young librarians from history, or even the media? Finally, could we take examples from the media in terms of appealing to young people? Hollyoaks is a soap that appeals to young people, so should we follow their example by producing a calendar of young librarians at work?

All of the solutions I have discussed - self-promotion, increasing visibility and using new technologies – focus on trying to rid young peoples' minds of the negative stereotypes associated with librarians. We must show that we are highly qualified professionals, embracing new technologies and relevant in today's information society. This points to the fact that it is OUR responsibility, as new professionals, to attract young people into the profession. Unlike nursing, librarianship doesn't make the news, so we'll have to do something about it ourselves.

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