Enhancing employability in higher education libraries

Anglia Ruskin University Library is making concerted efforts to support its library and information science students into employment and **Libby Homer** explains how the policy is helping to develop new skills among existing staff.

FOR a long period, Universities have been benchmarked amongst themselves using measures such as the DLHE (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education) survey which analyse employment six months post award and more recently the Longitudinal Education Outcomes survey which measures earnings at intervals post award.

The importance of employability has increased dramatically with the advent of the TEF and more scrutiny of the "value for money" a degree offers to students. Whilst gaining a graduate level job at the end of a degree may not be an objective for all students, successive Governments have seen this as a mark of "success" for students, hence why this measure is a highly pressured metric within higher education.

Libraries have traditionally contributed to graduate employability by offering Graduate Trainee roles. However, it could be argued that this has been on a relatively small scale and, within higher education, the number of trainee roles has diminished as a result of HERA grading exercises and cost saving exercises across the sector in recent years. In addition, arguably Graduate Trainee roles were created to provide opportunities for experience to those who wanted to undertake a post graduate qualification in Librarianship or Information Science, growing our profession and "giving

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something back", rather than to satisfy the requirements of a Key Performance Indicator around employability. Within this context, at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), the University Library have set ourselves the objective of responding to this employability challenge in a variety of different ways which contribute to both the graduate employment opportunities for our graduates and promote the opportunities which joining the wider profession presents.

Anglia Ruskin's context

ARU is set across four campuses – Chelmsford, Cambridge, Peterborough and London, all of which have a library or learning resources presence. The University has just over 18,000 students from 185 countries and is ranked in

the top 350 institutions in the world in the *Times Higher Education's* World University rankings 2020. We hold a TEF silver, and are the second biggest provider of degree apprenticeships in the UK. The University Library consistently performs at around benchmark in the National Student Survey for question 19 on library resources. In the past year, our Customer Services Team has won a Vice Chancellor's Award, team members have won internal funding for teaching focussed projects and the team has represented ARU externally through speaking at events, mentoring colleagues and contributing time, knowledge and experience to groups such as Sconul, Customer Services Group UK and cpd25.

Careers in Information Event

Our drive to promote careers in Librarianship and other information related professions was started with an event in March 2019 held in our Cambridge Library, which brought together a spectrum of people from across publishing, data analytics, librarianship and human resources. With speakers from ARU, AstraZeneca, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge University and

Schlumberger, the event showcased the routes and opportunities a career in information can provide. We had support from colleagues within our Careers Service and took the opportunity to promote our Graduate Trainee position which we were recruiting to using an ARU First policy (see below).

The purpose of the event was to demonstrate to our students (and staff) the wide pool of roles which can be available as an information professional. The speakers certainly showcased different routes in the profession and gave our delegates opportunities to reflect and ask questions. Unfortunately the event was not particularly well attended by students, however those in attendance engaged in discussion with the speakers and were positive about the experience. This event may not be run on an annual basis, but we can see it being repeated in the future.

ARU First Policy

In 2019, the University Library made a commitment to attempt to recruit an ARU graduate to our Library Graduate Trainee post. This is something which had not happened for a number of years, but we recognised the benefit for one of our graduates as well as ARU's returns in the outcomes surveys previously mentioned. We launched the advertisement for this role at the careers event and offered this role only to ARU students and recent graduates. In addition, we guaranteed a bespoke service for those that applied – if they made an application for the role and were not shortlisted for interview, we gave them feedback on the application and the opportunity to apply again having reviewed this. A number of our students applied (including some of those who attended the careers event) and went through this process. Unfortunately due to changes within the University Library we were unable to recruit to this role, however we hope that the feedback provided to applicants proved helpful for other roles they were making applications for.

Internship Opportunities

In addition to these activities, in the summer of 2019, the University Library provided two internship opportunities for current students. These paid placements lasted between eight and 12 weeks and helped the service move forward on vital projects. The projects the interns concentrated on were the delivery of a new electronic core textbook scheme

for Level 4 students and the creation of a new wildlife themed induction video for Level 4 students new to ARU and the University Library (https://bit.ly/3a4Yo13) The interns were recruited via our in-house employment bureau who shortlisted prospective students and then the Library interviewed them. The two students selected were able to give us a valuable insight into the projects and helped us deliver more student focussed services. Furthermore, the scheme gave some Library staff the opportunity to recruit and manage an individual – developing new skills and experience for themselves. We can definitely see the Library repeating this programme in the summer of 2020.

Ambitious Futures

Early in 2019, ARU signed up to the Ambitious Futures Programme, which is a collaboration across a number of higher education institutions in the UK aiming to provide participants with an excellent grounding in professional university management. All applicants must be graduates and they are to undertake a placement lasting 18 months, at two different institutions. ARU decided to recruit two graduates and those who applied undertook a series of selection processes including a video

CHE journals area.

interview, teamwork exercises and individual face-to-face interviews. The successful candidates at ARU included one of our own graduates and the Library was involved in the recruitment process. The Library, along with other Professional Services and Faculties, was also able to pitch projects which we wished an Ambitious Futures Trainee to undertake. The service pitched two ideas, one of which was then shortlisted (in a list of three projects) by our Chief Operating Officer and his team, and it was from this list that our two trainees then picked their first placements. Katie Jardine, a graduate from the University of Cambridge, picked our project which is focussed on the experiences of degree apprenticeships and utilises UX methods.

Katie says: "I am currently nearing the end of my first Ambitious Futures placement within ARU's library at the Cambridge campus. I decided to apply to Ambitious Futures for a variety of reasons. During my undergraduate degree I worked with a variety of services (mainly admissions and outreach) and I've always been drawn towards the education sector. Admittedly, for a while I was contemplating studying for a PGCE and going into teaching. However, it was the structure of Ambitious Futures which appealed to me. Through the scheme participants undertake three six-month placements across two institutions and a variety of service departments with a diverse range of projects.

"Whilst I was studying throughout my undergraduate, I saw libraries as a place to find books, to ask for help if I needed anything and one of my go-to study spaces. Since starting my placement I can safely say I've been surprised by the sheer variety of roles and tasks which the library oversees. Whilst my main project is researching how degree apprenticeship students utilise the library, I have also been able to engage with a variety of different projects both internal and external to the library.

"To start, I've helped our Research Services Manager with the REF effort, joined the inclusivity group and helped create displays for various events such as Black History Month (and the related effort to diversify the curriculum), learnt about the wider library profession through shadowing ARU's University Librarian to Sconul meetings and researched the current attitude towards Open Access and publishers. I've really enjoyed being exposed to how the ongoings of the ARU library sits within broader trends of the university itself, the wider sector and society.

"Whilst I have two further placements to complete, I've already found Higher Education (and libraries) to be extremely diverse and interesting, and I would definitely recommend both to anyone who asks! I hadn't considered working in a library prior to this placement, showing how important opportunities to try out different roles/environments are. I think it's vital to break down the dominate perceptions individuals have of librarianship and emphasise the variety of work you can do."

The placement has been extremely beneficial for the Library, Hannah Fogg (Assistant Director, Customer Services) states "Our trainee was tasked with using UX approaches to gain insights into the challenges faced by students on our degree apprenticeships. It's proven really beneficial to get an 'outsider' perspective – someone who's new to libraries and to university management, who won't be making assumptions or judging the students' responses, and with fresh ideas for change. As it's her primary project during the six months she's with us, it also means we can allocate as much time as needed,

depending how things progress. This is something we just wouldn't be able to do within our normal staffing resource – it's certainly demonstrating the potential benefit of using intern-type posts for specific larger-scale projects."

Further to this, as a University we have not engaged with Degree Apprenticeship students as much as we would have liked, and therefore Katie is sitting on our Degree Apprenticeship Steering Group and helping to inform the University's service provision to this group.

Next Steps

We will continue to offer the employment opportunities described here, but also seek new alternatives and avenues. We are actively responding to the recommendations made in Sconul's BAME staff experiences of academic and research libraries report (https://www.sconul.ac.uk/publication/bame-staff-experiences-of-academic-and-research-libraries) and assessing the inclusivity of our job descriptions and recruitment practices. We are also committed to the professional development of our Library staff and offer regular learning hours, visits to other libraries and will be holding a Staff Wellbeing event in May 2020.

Further to this, we have begun discussions on areas we can collaborate on with Cambridgeshire libraries and the University of Cambridge. Whilst these are in their early stages, it seems that creating opportunities for both employees in these services and graduates, whilst demonstrating the benefits of entering the information profession would be a good starting point for joint working. **IP**