

Blazing a Trail with Library Apprenticeships

Abstract: In this article **Emma Sullivan** and **Sandra Smythe** go through the presentation they gave at the BIALL conference entitled “Apprenticeship pathways into the library, information and knowledge profession”. Emma and Sandra co-Chair the CILIP Trailblazer group, which is currently developing a Level 7 Library, Information and Knowledge Professional Apprenticeship Standard. Here they discuss how and why they became involved with the group and why the apprenticeship route is so important for the profession, both for employees and employers. (For more background to the CILIP apprenticeship schemes see page 140 of the Autumn 2023 issue of LIM.)

Keywords: information professionals; education and training; recruitment; apprenticeships

EMMA SULLIVAN

My role at the Bodleian Libraries focuses on professional and career development for library staff and this includes promoting apprenticeships across all the different roles that we have in our libraries. I oversee our graduate trainee scheme which recruits approximately 12 graduate trainee library assistants to the Bodleian Libraries and I am always looking at ways in which we can support staff in their library careers. Like Sandra [Smythe, see below], I was a member of the Level 3 Trailblazer Group which developed the standard for the role of Library, Archives and Information Assistant, so I was already familiar with the process and what being part of a ‘trailblazer group’ involved.

Given the work that I do, I was very keen to see a higher-level apprenticeship developed for the Library, Knowledge and Information professions. During a chance meeting, this information was relayed to a colleague who was meeting with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) to discuss starting a trailblazer group to look at higher level apprenticeships. I had also completed a CILIP survey about higher level apprenticeships in which I expressed an interest in being involved and so they got in touch to ask me to join the group. Part of the first meeting was asking for a Chair and Sandra stepped up to the role. Then, afterwards, CILIP put out a call for someone from Higher Education to be co-Chair for the group as academic libraries were likely to be the largest employer of apprentices for a higher-level standard. I decided to put myself forward and ever since Sandra and I have co-Chaired the group and shared chairing and note taking duties in meetings.

I have various reasons for wanting to be involved with the group and felt that a higher-level apprenticeship would be beneficial for staff working at the Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford (we have lots of college libraries), as well as the profession more widely.

Over the years, I have seen that the number of trainees going on to do a Library and Information Services (LIS) Masters degree has decreased. Fewer trainees are going on to do the masters and those that do tend to, do it either part-time or via distance learning and continue to work alongside study. This is due to a number of reasons such as: debts from undergraduate studies; a lack of funding for the masters; ineligibility for a postgraduate loan (some of our trainees already have a masters degree or higher); or a lack of finances to self-fund the masters. There are also fewer options for study compared to in the past when it was possible to do an NVQ qualification in librarianship and there were more undergraduate degrees on offer, plus the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) offered funding for a LIS Masters. Whilst there are a limited number of scholarships available, they are few and far between and therefore there is a lot of competition for them. The benefit of a higher-level apprenticeship is that the training costs of the qualification will be paid for from the apprenticeship levy (we already contribute to the levy at the University of Oxford), so this solves the problem of finding the funds for the course. An apprenticeship, by its very nature, also means that you work whilst studying, so can earn whilst you learn. This has great benefits for the apprenticeship training as you can link up the theory of the course with your experiences at work. The apprentices we have at the Bodleian Libraries have mentioned this is a real benefit of doing an apprenticeship, as it means they can put their learning into practice.

We also have existing staff members who would like to develop their careers, but again the LIS Masters is unaffordable for some. For most jobs at the Bodleian Libraries at a Grade 6 and above we ask for a library qualification, so the cost of the masters can be a real barrier to career progression for our staff. The fact that existing staff can do an apprenticeship standard offers an opportunity for career development for those in a role

that matches the duties of the higher-level standard that we are developing. For the profession, offering a Level 3 apprenticeship and a higher-level apprenticeship provides more career options compared to the traditional route that we have in place at the moment, which is to gain some library experience, whether as a graduate trainee or library assistant, prior to doing an LIS Masters. Offering a Level 3 and higher-level apprenticeships offers a definite career development pathway that people can use to enter the profession and then gain additional qualifications later in their career.

We have recently had a few recruitment gaps that we have been wanting to fill, however Oxford is an expensive city and made even more so by the recent economic troubles and cost of living crisis. Some find that they cannot afford to move here to take a role with us, especially at lower grades. This is something we are addressing as a university. We are hoping that apprenticeships may be a way of encouraging applications, as doing an apprenticeship standard is a great way to develop staff and shows them that we are investing in them and prioritising their development. As an apprentice you can demonstrate that you have carried out the duties and developed the knowledge, skills and behaviours for a specific role. This is really helpful for employers and potentially gives someone an advantage over others who may not have undertaken apprenticeship training. The Level 3 Library, Archives and Information Assistant is a great entry point into the profession.

At the Bodleian Libraries we are also focusing on making our staffing more diverse. This is something that CILIP and the wider profession are also tackling. A recent workforce survey from CILIP shows that 75% of our profession identify as female with less than 5% identifying as being of non-white ethnicity.¹ At the Bodleian our *We Are Our History* project focuses on a number of work streams including: the Bodleian and Empire; Collection Description; Collection Development; Digitisation; Public Engagement; Communications; Organisational Culture and Staffing. We have a positive action plan for our graduate trainee library assistant posts which has seen a gradual increase in the number of men and people from ethnic heritage backgrounds being recruited to these positions. Apprenticeships are a great way to increase diversity in an organisation as applicants do not need prior experience or qualifications to do an apprenticeship. At the moment, finding a qualified librarian means recruiting from a pool of people who in the majority identify as white and female. My hope is that the Level 7 apprenticeship scheme will open up the profession to people from a range of ethnic heritage backgrounds.

Our own case studies with apprentices and managers at the Bodleian show that there are a number of benefits derived from apprenticeships for both staff and managers and these include:

For managers:

- Having an engaged and well supported member of staff

- Higher job satisfaction and more flexibility within their teams
- Helpful for succession planning
- Gaining additional skills in the team
- A wider pool of applicants applying for apprenticeships
- Useful for filling recruitment gaps
- Apprentices are not included in headcount and so this can help with recruiting to additional posts
- Apprenticeships are paid the living wage and this may mean budgetary savings
- Working with the training provider to get projects and pieces of work done as part of the apprenticeship

For staff:

- Gaining professional experience whilst learning
- No expectation to know everything from the start
- Variety of experience
- Linking theory to workplace experience
- Lots of opportunities to learn from and network with others (apprentices and colleagues)
- Having time to attend lectures
- Applying learning to work and work to learning

In conclusion, I am really glad that I became involved in the Trailblazer group and ended up co-Chairing it. Not only is it a pleasure to work with a great group of people who are committed to seeing a higher-level apprenticeship developed for the profession, but I have high hopes that this apprenticeship will result in more entrants into the Library, Information and Knowledge professions, more opportunities for career progression and increasing diversification of our workforce.

SANDRA SMYTHE

I initially became involved with the Level 3 Trailblazer Group when I was President Elect of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL). It was a brilliant opportunity to work more closely with CILIP and with other sectors and specialisms within our profession and it chimed well with a personal interest in widening opportunities within our profession. I felt at that time that there was a great need for a higher-level apprenticeship, a view widely shared within the group, and the aim always was that we would gain valuable experience working on the Level 3 which would then allow us to progress with a higher-level standard.

I was, therefore, absolutely delighted when CILIP contacted me in 2020 to say that they were looking to support a group which would look at developing the higher-level standard and would I be interested in joining. Obviously, yes!

As Emma says, I volunteered to take on a co-Chair role for the group as I was very keen to help ensure the Trailblazer Group was formed. I also thought it a good opportunity to ensure representation for the legal sector and knowledge management specialism. Hopefully, no-one from the Trailblazer Group has been keeping score of the number of times I've started a sentence with "Sorry, I'm not quite sure we could make that work for law / knowledge".

Like Emma I have various reasons for wanting to be involved with the group, both professional and personal.

As someone who has been involved in recruitment for a number of years I know firsthand how challenging it can be to find suitably qualified candidates with relevant skills and experience. Historically, there has also been little standardisation of qualifications needed for knowledge management roles, which can make recruitment both easier and harder! However, as the knowledge management profession matures, I strongly believe it is important to establish standard qualifications and I think the higher-level apprenticeship standard is an important step towards this.

I also consider it to be extremely important for employers to offer development opportunities for existing employees who wish to advance their careers. Over the years, I have witnessed a significant decrease in the number of law firms willing to fund employees through the masters. This presents a substantial barrier to retaining or developing bright, committed individuals. The higher-level apprenticeship would address this issue, as the employer will be able to fund the training costs through the apprenticeship levy, benefitting both employer and employee. The employer will be able to retain knowledgeable individuals, thus reducing the costs of recruiting and training new people, as those individuals would have inevitably left to find opportunities elsewhere; and the employee is able to stay with their employer but also progress their career.

We know that it is increasingly difficult for people to study for qualifications through traditional university

routes due to high tuition costs and this is probably one of my main reasons for being so passionate about the higher-level standard. From my own experience, I know how daunting it can be going to university and needing to fund this through student loans as my parents were unable to support me financially. Fortunately, I went at a time when tuition costs were significantly lower, but I remember the challenges of working whilst studying and the pressure to secure employment as soon as possible after completing my degree. I cannot imagine how those today, faced with extremely high tuition costs and other financial pressures, make the decision of whether or not to pursue higher education and I'm sure many individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds simply choose not to do so. The apprenticeship will offer an alternative route into our profession for people which will mean they do not need to incur huge levels of debt while allowing them to earn whilst they learn.

It is also important to acknowledge that university just isn't for some people, and the apprenticeship route provides options beyond traditional education. I hope it will bring more diversity generally, as our profession has lacked it historically and continues to do so. Opening doors for underrepresented groups and people unable to afford university will strengthen our profession and make it more equitable.

I've found working on the Trailblazer Group to be an incredibly rewarding experience and I'm delighted that we are getting ever closer to submitting the standard for approval. The whole group is hopeful that the standard will be available for delivery in 2024 and I've been truly thrilled by the level of interest shown both when Emma and I presented on the apprenticeship standards at the BIALL Conference earlier this year and from colleagues who have contacted me since to ask for more information and to be informed when the standard is ready. I can't wait to see how it benefits our profession in the years to come.

Endnotes

¹ A Study of the UK's Information Workforce 2023: Mapping the Library, Archives, Records, Information Management and Knowledge Management and related professions in the United Kingdom and Ireland <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/research/workforce_mapping/workforce_mapping_2023.pdf> Accessed 12 November 2023

Biographies

Emma Sullivan

Emma is currently Staff Development Librarian at the Bodleian Libraries where her role focuses on development for library staff. She was a member of the Level 3 Library, Information and Archive Assistant Trailblazer Group and is currently co-Chairing the Level 7 Library, Information and Knowledge Professional Trailblazer Group alongside Sandra Smythe.

Sandra Smythe

Sandra is the Head of Knowledge Management at Farrer & Co where she heads up the core KM team and the library and research team and has a particular focus on legal tech. Before joining Farrer & Co in 2023 she spent 16 years at Mishcon de Reya where she built up the Knowledge Solutions team which focused on the management of the firm's knowledge systems and legal tech, sitting as part of the wider Knowledge Services team. She has held various positions within BIALL and was a member of the Trailblazer Group which developed the Level 3 library, information and archive services assistant apprenticeship standard. She is currently co-Chair of the Trailblazer Group which is developing the Level 7 Library, Information and Knowledge professional apprenticeship standard.