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Event summary: Career Pathways in Academic Libraries

By **Robyn Price**, Bibliometrics Manager at Imperial College London and EARLL Events Manager

In December 2021 EARLL, with the support of UKSG, hosted a careers panel that explored practical and systemic barriers in the sector, diversity in the workforce and the value of library postgraduate study. Each of our 5 speakers brought their own experiences and advice to provide a summary of their career and answer questions on getting into and progressing through the academic library sector. Almost 80 attendees joined us virtually from across the UK as well as North America and Europe.

A summary of the discussion is below, and a recording of the event can be found on [our YouTube channel](#).

Speakers:

- **(SG) Sonia Gomes** Librarian (London School of Economics) @SgomesMaria
- **(TC) Tom Cridford** Scholarly Communications Librarian (Royal College of Art)
- **(PL) Peter Lund** Librarian (Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge)
- **(SSG) Susana Sanchez-Gonzalez** Special Collections Reader Services Coordinator (John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester) @theTLtweets
- **(JN) Janan Nuri** Customer Services Specialist (Royal College of Nursing Library) @Ephemeral_Nuri

Chair: Robyn Price, Bibliometrics Manager (Imperial College London) and EARLL Events Manager @robyn_price_

Host: Hannah Boroudjou, Research Data Librarian (London School of Economics) and EARLL Co-Chair

Some responses from the live session have been edited for clarity and some questions or responses that there was not time for in the live session have been provided by the panellists after the event.

Q: Do any of you perceive barriers towards getting into the industry, or barriers towards people already in the industry to be able to succeed and get senior positions (if that is what they are looking for)?

JN: A main one that people often talk about is getting the Masters. (Sometimes) unless you have one, you can't progress into a more senior role, and it's frustrating. It's an expensive course- you may end up working somewhere that will partially or fully fund it, but that is not available for everyone). That's the biggest barrier.

SSG: (if you are missing experience or skills for a job role) think laterally about all the things you've done throughout your life and bring that into the person specification in the personal statement. But you've got to be clever about how you do that too, to demonstrate that you have actually got the skills... But if you've got any doubts, get in contact (with the hiring manager). Don't cut yourself off to a job before you apply for it!

PL: I have hired for library assistant positions that have received applications from candidates with PhDs. Where these candidates were not shortlisted and requested feedback as to why, my response is that primarily they could have been overqualified for the role. But, this wouldn't have necessarily stopped them reaching the interview stage, it was that other parts of the application did not match the person specification. It's about matching your skills to the job spec and demonstrating it, rather than being the best qualified person by other measures.

Q (in response to panel discussion that a job application that states attention to detail in the person specification can be demonstrated with good spelling/grammar in the application)

TC: I don't think it would be right for example a candidate to be rejected only on the basis of spelling mistakes and for this to infer a lack of attention to detail. On the basis that a written application is essentially only measuring certain skills- I think interviews, practical assessments and other kinds of activities can also be useful depending on the role. The employers are potentially missing out on great candidates if they make an assumption like this.

Q: What are the best skills to have as an academic Librarian, and what is the entry criteria?

TC: "Listening and communication. You need to be able to interpret the needs of students and staff even if they aren't addressed clearly and explain strategy"

SG: "Communication is essential. Ability to self-manage and organise own work. IT skills."

Q: How do you view giving jobs to candidates who have an unseen disability? What support do you believe libraries offer to those who have an unseen disability?

JN: As someone with an unseen disability, I'm always thinking in my head (are) they good enough for me as well as seeing if I'm good enough for them? I want to work somewhere where I know I am going to be supported. So, look and see what staff networks they have on the job website, organisations will usually list that. Staff networks can be a really good way to offer peer support within an organisation. And trade unions.

SG: At LSE, candidates are invited to declare their disability and if selected for post, they are asked how best they can be supported. Managers make necessary arrangements so employee can offer their best. Arrangements can range from having instructions in writing, regular breaks, workspace, etc depending on the needs.

Q: Is the MA in Librarianship preferred over the PGDip?

TC: My experience is that employers value both fairly equally... I am just finishing a PGDip and have asked this question myself(!) I have always received the answer that one wouldn't be favoured over the other. A dissertation can be really valuable if directly related to your role or an area you want to go into. Judge whether a dissertation is worth it or not based on what it is offering you, rather than your employer.

Q: As library workers in academic or research institutions, how do you feel your skills are valued by the research institution? Do you see changes?

PL: At my institution and previous institutions that I have worked at I've always found academics to value our skills hugely. There's an element of we're saving them time. At Loughborough I taught presentation skills to Maths students. If I hadn't done this, the department would have had to teach this themselves. They're looking for support wherever they can find it. Myself and other colleagues did the Higher Education Academy teaching portfolio qualification (now Advance HE Fellowship) alongside academics. I think this helps with our credibility, having skills and training to teach.

SG: I think they do value us, however, I don't think they consider us as equal partners. We're there and we can support them... but most of them don't include or embed us in their plans. As open access and research support open up, I believe we will be able to make the case more strongly that we are the partners needed for academics to be able to do the work they want to do.

TC: With open access and research data management we can help them understand policies and pressures. Academics are very busy people and we can present information succinctly to save them time and define the benefits to them. The pandemic has also possibly driven an appreciation of library services. We have been problem solvers throughout this, making materials and space available for students and staff.

Q: Any tips for gaining experience in project management? If this is not possible to gain inside the workplace due to being in a lower level role?

SG: As Janan mentioned staff networks. They are a place to exercise creativity and have the freedom to try different projects and engage colleagues. In particular, EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) is out there for involvement with policies, training and implementation... If you put yourself forward to get involved, there's plenty of projects to start, run and show on your CV.

JN: Also, if you have done a Master's then you will have done a dissertation and this is basically project planning. Don't forget about transferable skills and think about all the little bits of work you have done. It's how you word it in your application.

Thank you to the panellists for sharing their time and experience and UKSG for providing the webinar technology.

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