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Recruitment practices of academic librarians in the UK

(Proces rekrutacji bibliotekarzy akademickich w Wielkiej Brytanii)

Słowa kluczowe: proces rekrutacji, bibliotekarze akademiccy, zatrudnienie

Abstrakt: Znacząca liczba instytucji akademickich w Wielkiej Brytanii oraz obowiązek posiadania biblioteki przez każdą z nich wymaga zatrudnienia dużej grupy bibliotekarzy. W artykule przedstawiono procedurę rekrutacji bibliotekarzy w bibliotekach akademickich w Wielkiej Brytanii, począwszy od etapu poszukiwania zatrudnienia, przez proces rekrutacji, aż po wprowadzenie do pracy nowo zatrudnionych bibliotekarzy. Niniejszy tekst przybliża proces rekrutacji kandydatów na stanowiska bibliotekarzy akademickich w Wielkiej Brytanii, a także pozwala dokonać porównania tego procesu z rozwiązaniami stosowanymi w innych krajach.

Keywords: recruitment practices, academic librarians, jobs, vacancies

Abstract: The vast number of academic institutions in the UK and the pre-requisite of a library in each of them calls for employment of a huge workforce. The process is systematic, time bound and free of any bias due to the nature and type of the sub processes involved. This paper seeks to enumerate and explain the procedure of recruitment in academic libraries in the UK right from the advertisement to the selection and induction stage. It is envisaged that this paper will help applicants as well as employers both from the UK and other countries to understand the process and compare it with their own.

Introduction

An academic library is a library that is attached to a higher education institution and serves two complementary purposes: to support the curriculum, and to support the research of the university faculty and students.

There are about 950 academic libraries in the UK Academic libraries serve colleges and universities, they could also be community college libraries or vocational and technical college libraries. Larger institutions may have several libraries on their campuses dedicated to serving particular schools such as law and science libraries, and hence academic librarianship offers a great opportunity to utilize subject expertise. Professional status varies by institution, but many academic librarians have faculty status including tenure.

In 2018–2019, there were 165 higher education institutions in the UK that returned data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In 2018–2019, there were 2.38 million students studying at UK higher education institutions. In 2018–2019, there were 439.955 staff (excluding atypical staff) employed at UK higher education institutions. Staff employed on academic contracts made up 49% of the population.

Need for the study

The need of this study was perceived because of the following factors:

1. The authors were keen to understand the various elements of recruitment practices for academic libraries in the UK.
2. It is perceived that there is no set policy or single website for the advertisement of these vacancies.
3. Different academic institutions follow similar yet slightly different practices.
4. The experience of the authors in applying for varied positions in different academic organizations could provide an insight for new entrants.

Objectives of the study

The following can be enumerated as the objectives of this study:

1. To understand the trend of ever increasing academic institutions in the UK deploying a large library workforce.
2. To delve methodically into the process of recruitment to these academic librarian jobs.
3. To explain the systematic and step-by-step procedures to recruitment of academic librarians.
4. To appreciate the unbiased process in selecting the right candidate for the job.
5. To suggest similar methods of recruitment in other countries and thereby add value to the process of librarianship on a global level.

Scope and limitations of the study

The following are listed as the scope and limitations of this study:

1. The geographical scope of the study is limited to the UK.
2. The scope of academic institutions is limited to Higher Educational Institutions.
3. This study does not differentiate between the different types of academic institutions.
4. There may be other recruitment practices that the authors are unaware of and have not been pursued during the course of this study.

Beneficiaries of the study

It is hoped that this study will benefit both new entrants from other countries seeking to apply for academic librarian jobs in the UK. It will also help current and prospective librarians to gain an insight into the various elements of a recruitment process. It is envisaged that this study will assist policy makers and HR departments of various academic organizations in streamlining and standardizing the advertisements and recruitment process.

Research methodology

The setting out of a research methodology helps to approach the topic in a systematic manner, takes all aspects into consideration, defines what the limitations are, clearly outlines the steps undertaken, methods of data collection, time frame etc. The research methodology involved a thorough investigation of various websites of academic institutions as well as those connected with vacancies and recruitment. The authors have drawn on their rich and varied personal experiences of applying for posts in academic libraries. The method of observation and sharing of tacit knowledge has also been followed in obtaining related information.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Job Description

According to wikijob.co.uk [8] a job description is a document intended to provide job applicants with an outline of the main duties and responsibilities of the role for which they are applying. It underlines the nature of work to be performed. The HR department of the University of Southampton www.southampton.ac.uk [2] explains that a job description is an informative document, detailing the scope of accountability for key duties, responsibilities as well as the working conditions related to the job.

A job description generally includes the name of the organization, department / section, post, subordination, brief description of the purpose of employment and detailed scope of tasks and responsibilities [1]. Most job descriptions also include the rate of pay. The job description prepared in this way is used not only in the recruitment and selection of employees but is also the basis for the training of a newly hired employee, is used for periodic assessment of staff and helps to determine training needs.

Person Specification

A person specification is a list of skills and attributes that the organization looks for in the prospective applicant [4]. It consists of two parts – essential and desirable.

The HR department of SOAS university www.soas.ac.uk [3] explains that a person specification is a description of the qualifications, skills, experience, knowledge and other attributes which a candidate must possess in order to perform the duties of the job.

According to www.reedglobal.com a person specification not only helps job seekers to assess themselves but also ensures that candidates are tested against pre-determined skills, thus making the process free from bias.

All jobs advertised for academic librarians in the UK describe in detail the job description and person specification. This ensures that even though applicants might be confused by the job title, they fully understand the nature of the job and what they are expected to do. This can help them assess if this is the right job for them. This is one step closer to ensuring that the organization finds the right candidate for the post.

Results of the study

The results of this study can be sub-divided into the following:

1. Types of posts.
2. Types of job roles (duration).
3. Steps in the Recruitment process:
   3.1. The advertisement.
   3.2. The application proces.
   3.3. The short-listing of candidates.
   3.4. The interview date and requirements.
   3.5. The interview process.
   3.6. The successful candidate.
   3.7. The post and person matched together.
   3.8. The probation and review process.

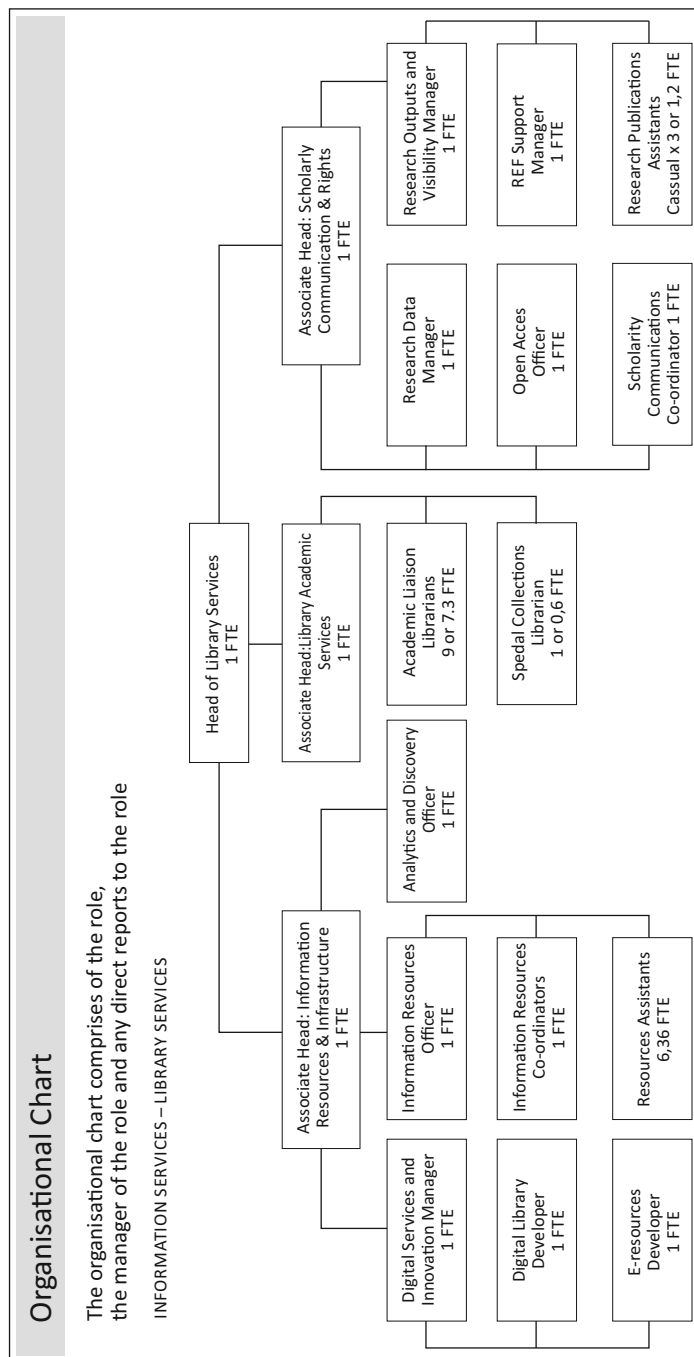Each of these are explained in more detail below.

1. Types of posts

The Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford is the largest university library system in the United Kingdom. It includes the principal University library – the Bodleian Library – as well as 30 libraries across Oxford including major research libraries and faculty, department and institute libraries.

The basic role that is being spoken about here is 'Librarian'. However based on the nature of the instruction provided by the academic institution, the variety of courses, the location of the individual library and the needs of its students, library posts are often varied in nature and hierarchical in structure proceeding vertically and laterally.

A simple structure begins from a less demanding post of library assistant or weekend library assistant and goes upwards to senior library assistant, assistant librarian, deputy librarian, librarian and library director. In between are a number of related posts like Academic Liaison Librarian, Acquisitions Librarian, Cataloguing Librarian, Academic skills coordinator, Subject librarian, Information Management Specialist, Head of Scholarly communication, Library communication and engagement officer, Research Support Librarian, Content Manager, Document delivery co-coordinator, Metadata manager and many more.

Figure 1. An example of organisational chart of academic library

Organisational Chart

The organisational chart comprises of the role,
the manager of the role and any direct reports to the role

INFORMATION SERVICES – LIBRARY SERVICES

Head of Library Services
1 FTE

Associate Head: Information Resources & Infrastructure
1 FTE

Associate Head: Library Academic Services
1 FTE

Associate Head: Scholarly Communication & Rights
1 FTE

Analytics and Discovery Officer
1 FTE

Information Resources Officer
1 FTE

Information Resources Co-ordinators
1 FTE

Resources Assistants
6,36 FTE

Digital Services and Innovation Manager
1 FTE

Digital Library Developer
1 FTE

E-resources Developer
1 FTE

Academic Liaison Librarians
9 or 7.3 FTE

Spedal Collections Librarian
1 or 0,6 FTE

Research Data Manager
1 FTE

Open Acces Officer
1 FTE

Scholarity Communications Co-ordinator 1 FTE

Research Outputs and Visibility Manager
1 FTE

REF Support Manager
1 FTE

Research Publications Assistants
Cassual x 3 or 1,2 FTE

Source: self-elaboration.

The organizational chart of each academic library shows its hierarchical structure. This is often unique to a particular library although there may be some similarities. The chart is available on the library website or is sometimes sent to the short-listed candidates prior to interview. It defines the position of the advertised post in the organization and helps the applicant to understand who their superiors, subordinates and peers are. A typical organizational chart can be demonstrated as follows (see fig. 1).

2. Types of job roles (duration)

The working structure of academic institutions in the UK coupled with the work culture as well as government support allows for different work roles. Although most of the jobs advertised are for permanent posts and often state that they are term time, there could also be temporary positions, part time jobs, maternity cover, flexible working, weekend cover, working on different locations etc.

3. Steps in the recruitment process

Recruitment is a systematic two-way process benefitting both the organization and the applicant. The complete recruitment process, as seen in the UK comprises of the following twelve steps outlined in detail below.

3.1. The advertisement

Job offers for library positions are placed on the respective University websites, or on dedicated job search websites like www.indeed.com, www.reed.co.uk, www.totaljobs.com, www.cv-library.co.uk etc. The advertisement contains the job description and person specification as well as the last date for applying. It also contains the details of the person one can contact to obtain more information about the job.

Prospective candidates are required to apply online by filling out a detailed application form on the University website. CVs are generally not accepted. The makes the process streamlined and free from bias.

3.2. The application process

The application form is often long, consisting of 3-9 pages and requests the following information:

- Personal details – this includes name, surname, email, id number, telephone number, etc. It also requests information about current status in terms of entitlement to work in the UK. This investigates whether the candidate is a British citizen/EEU national/dependent of EU National/has a work permit.
- Professional qualifications – this includes school, college and university qualifications and ensures that the candidate meets the basic requirements.
- Employment and experience – here the candidate lists all experience in chronological order, generally beginning with the current employment first. Sometimes this is

a simple table but often it also includes job responsibilities, reason for leaving and notice period. This helps both the candidate and employer agree that the right job is being applied for.

- Professional development – this a sign that the candidate is keeping abreast of current developments in the field and is asked to list training courses, seminars etc. attended.
- Professional membership – candidates often have the membership of professional organizations like CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) or the ALA, IFLA, etc.
- Other interests and activities – this option gives applicants a chance to mention their hobbies, voluntary work, various causes they support or believe in, etc.
- Referees – employers take into account the opinion of previous employers and other referees, so it is necessary to put their contact details in order to obtain a reference. Academic institutions often ask for the name and contact details of two referees who can vouch for the applicant. Most times the first referee will have to be the current employer. One can also select whether the referee can be contacted before or after the interview.
- Criminal Records Disclosure – the candidate has to disclose all criminal records and any unspent convictions. For certain roles an employer can request a more detailed Disclosure and Barring Service check, for example if the post entails working with children or vulnerable people or in healthcare.
- Equality of Opportunity – this is the state of fairness in which all applicants are treated equally with no prejudice or preference. The idea is that the job should go to the person who is most suited for the post irrespective of sex, race, ethnicity, gender or disability. It seeks to ensure that having high profile connections or knowing people inside the organization will not get you the job unless you are qualified for it. This is the basis of the whole recruitment process – to ensure that the right candidate is selected so as to be an asset to the organization.
- Disability and adjustment – the candidate is asked about any disability in case adjustments need to be made to some of the job responsibilities.
- Recruitment source – the candidate is asked about the source from where this vacancy was noticed. This helps HR to understand where their marketing strategy works best and what is the best medium for advertisement of vacancies.
- Supporting statement – this is one of the most important parts of the application form. It can be either in a question-answer form or an essay form. Sometimes a particular case study might be given. Often it calls for a definite word count. This is where the candidate has a chance to express their viewpoints, strengths, skills and attitude, experiences, etc.

Some examples are:

- experience of engaging with library customers;
- use of library management software;

- experience of working in an academic library environment;
- delivery of key objectives;
- project management skills;
- team management, staff development;
- management of specialist library systems;
- liaison and networking;
- decision making and problem solving approach;
- service delivery;
- analysis and research.

Some questions could be:

- With reference to the person specification for this post, please describe your experience of working with academics to prepare data management plans.
- This post calls for an ability to communicate effectively at all levels of an organisation. Please give examples to show your suitability for this role.
- Tell us how you design and deliver information skills training workshops.
- Describe how you have had to work under pressure in a busy and demanding environment and how you have handled such situations.
- How would you outline your understanding of confidentiality and its particular importance to this role.
- Tell us about your experience of working with budgets and financial control.
- What is your experience in delivering student support services.
- Give an example of an event that you have organized. Explain your role in organising the event, its objectives, outcomes and what you learned from the experience.
- Tell us about the IT skills you have that are relevant to this post and how to use them to be effective in the workplace. What is the most challenging work situation you have experienced? How did you handle it?
- What do you think is the single most pressing issue for higher education and why?
- How do you keep your relevant professional knowledge and skills up to date?

3.3. The short-listing of candidates

Candidates are short-listed based on their information and responses on the application form. The successful candidates are then invited to a face-to-face interview. Unsuccessful candidates have an option to ask for feedback. This is generally done through a pre-arranged telephone call and helps the applicant to understand what skills/experience they might need to acquire over time.

3.4. The interview date and requirements

The candidate receives an email with the confirmation of being shortlisted and an invitation to attend the interview along with other relevant details:

- name of post applied for;
- date of interview;
- time of interview;
- location of interview (often a map of the University and directions);
- personal details of recruiters;
- access arrangements.

The candidate is asked to confirm whether they will be able to attend the same. If the candidate has a disability and needs any specific arrangements for the interview they should inform the employer when confirming the attendance so that other arrangements such as staircases, access routes, drinking water,toilets etc. can be considered.

3.5. The interview process

The interview panel usually consists of three people – Head of the Library (Panel Chair), Manager of the Department and Line Manager or HR Administrator. The candidate is usually invited to a campus tour (presentation of the library building and work space, meeting the team etc.). The interview is quite relaxed and friendly and is aimed to put the candidate at ease. The questions are usually asked in turns and the responses are recorded. The candidate may be asked to prepare a presentation on a particular subject and is given the time limitation for presentation. The candidate may be asked to complete some exercise online for example: test of prioritisation, numerical and non-verbal reasoning, IT skills, organisational and written communication skills or Marc 21 coding test. The interview process generally takes from about 45 minutes to an hour or even more depending on the hierarchy of the post.

The candidate is also asked about notice period, suitability of timings, other parallel jobs, notice period, holidays booked for etc. The panel invites the candidate to put forth questions about any information they might need like remote working, working at different job locations, combining different roles or multiple supervisory capacity, probation period, etc.

3.6. The successful candidate

The successful candidate receives an email offering an appointment to the post. The email explains the position applied for, salary, prospective date of joining, line manager, location, period of probation and other important information.

The offer of appointment is conditional on the following employment clearances:

- The receipt of references which are satisfactory to the employer.
- The proof of identity and right to work in UK. The candidate is asked to arrange an appointment with his HR administrator in order to present the original documents.
- The proof of qualifications as stated in the application form.

- The candidate continuity of fitness to work. The candidate has a responsibility to notify the Occupational Health Service if there are any changes to their health which may impact to his ability to carry out his role safely.

The candidate is informed that in some cases, they can commence work prior to receiving employment clearances. This is especially so in case a handover needs to be done quickly for example maternity cover posts or redeployment. However the candidates' offer of employment would not be confirmed until these have been received, and may be withdrawn if they prove to be unsatisfactory.

3.7. The post and person matched together

The successful candidate, if they are satisfied with the terms of employment as stated in the letter of appointment can accept the same and decide on the date of joining. It is generally set to the first day of the week. This is called induction and deployment. A timetable is worked out taking into consideration introductions, training, location visits, meeting superiors and colleagues, understanding roles and tasks, Health and Safety, Fire Safety, First Aid etc. It is a period of satisfaction both for the employer and employee that the post and the person are matched together.

3.8. The probation and review process

The University of Cambridge website www.cam.ac.uk [7] explains that probation is a formal arrangement at the start of an appointment, whereby new members of staff demonstrate their suitability for a particular job within a set timescale. The probation period for an appointment is set out in the offer letter and contract of employment. During this time, the candidate will be given an induction programme, guidance and training and their performance will be monitored and reviewed.

There are responsibilities for both the employer and the employee during the probationary period. The new recruit will need to demonstrate that they have the capability to undertake the duties of the role to which they have been appointed. On the other hand the line manager needs to be proactive in setting out the requirements of the job, monitoring progress, identifying areas where further training and development are needed, and ensuring its provision within an appropriate timescale.

At the commencement of the probationary period, the line manager and recruited staff will meet together to set targets, which will be reviewed half way through the probationary period and again towards the end of the probationary period. Any support needs should also be discussed at the outset and reviewed in tandem with progress against targets. The length of the probation period usually lasts for six months (it depends on the type of the post) and consists of mid-point review and final probation assessment. At the end of this if all requirements are met the candidate becomes a permanent employee of the organization and the recruitment process is complete.

Advantages of the recruitment process
- The initial process is online and can be done from home.
- The process is free from bias and transparent at every stage.
- It attracts a wider audience.
- Communication channels are open at every stage.
- It costs less both to the employer and employee.
- Better competition and better chance of finding the right candidate for the post.
- Offers can be made confidentially.
- Feedback can be asked for by unsuccessful candidates.

Disadvantages of the recruitment process
- The process is lengthy and time consuming.
- Does not need proof of qualifications or other documentation at the initial stage.
- Needs good communication skills and proficiency in English.
- Increased number of applications.
- Sometimes candidates might use the appointment letter to negotiate with their current employers.
- Candidates might not be able to adjust to the culture, goals and setup of the organization.
- There is no set policy or single website for the advertisement of these vacancies.
- Different academic institutions follow similar yet slightly different practices.

Conclusion

The recruitment process for academic librarians in the UK seeks to advertise, short list, interview, select and deploy the right candidate for the right job. If this match is perfect then both the employer and the employee seek to benefit. The employee brings with them their own skill sets, knowledge and experience and become an asset to the organization. The process is free of bias and consists purely of matching the qualifications and competences of the candidate with the job profile. However since there is no set policy or single website for recruitment, therefore qualified candidates often miss out on the advertisement. Further a number of recruiting agencies might be involved in the process. A professionally conducted recruitment process in British libraries minimizes the risk of mismatching the candidate's qualifications, competences and expectations to the type of work performed. A candidate thus selected derives satisfaction from the work performed and the possibility of using one's own skills and experience which influences involvement in work and identification with the organization this deriving job satisfaction.

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