

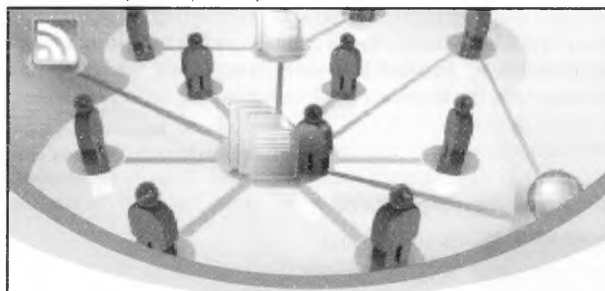
Energise>>Enthuse>>Inspire

From here to infinity

For a recent graduate, academic libraries are an excellent place to hone the librarian's craft.

For someone who loved being a student, working in an academic library is the cat's pyjamas. My route to becoming a librarian had been slightly circuitous, stopping off in tertiary administration after many years as a student, and I was open to the type of information career I would follow once I completed my training. Soon after qualifying, I took a job as a reference librarian, and realised that I enjoyed the thrill of the chase: the detective work involved in reference. It was not dissimilar to delving for information for my own assignments. There was also scope for assisting researchers with potential cures for cancer, satisfying my slightly idealistic tendencies. As I settled into my role and started to learn the ropes, I began to realise how my experiences as a student would equip me in my quest for knowledge as an academic reference librarian.

As a student, possibilities are endless – life can take any direction. Stepping into an academic library is much the same. A new librarian can specialise in any of the numerous aspects of the profession, from systems to cataloguing to reference. There are opportunities to focus on particularly special areas, such as working with rare materials and ensuring the preservation of Australia's cultural heritage, or developing high end repositories to develop scholarly publishing boundaries. As a subject librarian, it's possible to immerse in medicine, law, medieval history, music, or any one of a variety of subject areas. Each subject differs in its style of research and resource management, yet each lends itself to innovative solutions in providing access to information. I currently work with medicine, and am rapidly learning about evidence-based practice, which involves searching for and assessing evidence from the literature to inform clinical decision-making, combined with clinical experience and considering patient values. Working with medicine has also opened up hospital libraries to me through liaison with hospital librarians. It has been interesting to venture to the edges of this area with its focus on supporting medical and primary care practice.



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Secondments are common in universities, and are a wonderful opportunity to try different jobs within the same organisation, with the safety net of a substantive position available at the end of the transfer. These allow the new librarian to explore different roles, such as front and back of house careers, or to test the waters of a higher level position. A secondment from my substantive position as a reference librarian to a subject librarian role allowed me to develop experience in designing and running classes, and to hone a greater knowledge of my particular subject areas, psychology and social work. I had no direct background in these areas, and although it was quite a jump to become an 'expert' in both topic and resources in a relatively short period of time, there are many highly experienced librarians in academic libraries who have been more than happy to help me to understand the quirks of systems, or techniques to uncover obscure references. My experiences have been of generous people who will spend time explaining and discussing solutions, ideas, and the odd cake recipe.

There have been avenues for an array of my interests while working in an academic library, from education to technological developments, and from science to communication. There are elements of marketing and promotion in publicising services and resources available in the library, and developing relationships with academics in the faculty is an important part of my subject specialist role. Tailoring information literacy classes and resources to particular units has taught me much about how different students operate and challenges associated with education. My consultations with academics and postgraduate students give me an insight into their research, and allow me to develop their skill and independence as researchers. It is satisfying to show them an exciting feature of a database and to demonstrate the power of a good search, or to move into new territory and give them tips on managing their research data.

Academic libraries are dynamic institutions. New librarians have been tutored in the latest trends and issues in the information industry and can capitalise on this by bringing fresh ideas into the organisation. Academic librarians also have many opportunities to develop their ideas and to work on projects related to industry innovations, such as changes to chat reference software or applying other web 2.0 tools to the work environment. There is often time to think and explore, and I have been fortunate to apply some of these new technologies, such as in developing online tutorials. This combination of tasks and opportunities makes for a steep yet satisfying learning curve.

What have I learned from working in an academic library? Every day, there is something new – new projects, new resources to consider, a new reference problem to solve. New graduates can be adaptable. They're used to learning, and can apply what has been learned, translating theories into practice. There's always something going on, and drawing on the support of an expert network of librarians, from subject specialists to systems programmers, they can be at the cutting edge, pushing the boundaries of research and innovation. Like the world of the student, the possibilities are infinite.

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Fiona Russell has spent the last thirteen years in universities in various capacities, but the last two as a librarian. She is currently working with a great team of medical librarians, and has an array of interests in information literacy, communication, medicine, and the future direction of libraries.



Fiona Russell

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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Naomi Doessel, naomidoessel@gmail.com