

WHAT IMPRESSIONS DO YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE OF LIBRARIANSHIP AS A CAREER?

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to discover young people's impressions of librarianship as a career, what barriers there are to young people entering the profession, and what appeals to them about librarianship. Two questionnaires were used: the first to a sample of young people aged 18 to 24, who were making choices about their professional futures; the second to MA Librarianship students at the University of Sheffield who had already chosen librarianship as their career. The questionnaires asked about impressions of librarianship as a career and perceived barriers to entering the profession.

It was found that both a lack of understanding of what the role of a librarian entails, and a lack of awareness of librarianship as a professional career choice resulted in young people not wanting to become librarians. The MA students identified a number of barriers to young people entering the profession and suggested possible solutions to the situation. Due to young people's impressions of librarianship, it is not a career that appeals to them. Librarians should promote their roles in order that misconceptions can be eradicated; increased understanding may lead to young people finding it a more appealing career choice.

INTRODUCTION

This research was undertaken in response to data collected in the *Library Workforce Survey 2005* of 71 authorities in England and Wales.¹ This national survey reveals that 8.2% of the total library workforce (in 41.2% of England and Wales) is made up of under 25 year olds and a mere 0.9% of professionals are aged 24 or under. Over half of the total library workforce, 56.6%, is made up of staff aged between 40 and 59 years, with a further 6.0% aged between 60 and 69 years. These statistics indicate that over half of the people who work in libraries are soon to be reaching retirement age and not enough young professionals are coming up to take their places. The aim of this research is to ask why young people are not attracted to librarianship as a profession and what can be done to attract them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Staffing Crisis: The *Library Workforce Survey 2005*¹ shows that, in the UK, there are not nearly enough people to fill the roles of those who will be retiring in the next few years. Ard et al. commented on a similar “staffing crisis” in the United States of America (based on 2002 reports).² The study found that by 2009 over 25% of librarians will reach or pass age 65, and nearly two out of three current librarians will retire by 2017.² The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) also reported a potential crisis with 60% of librarians in Australia aged 45 or over.³ These statistics indicate that the profession is suffering worldwide with a problem in recruiting young people.

Young Librarians: It seems from the literature that many people do not decide to pursue a career in librarianship from the start,⁴ suggesting that librarianship simply does not appeal to young people:

In the eyes of many youth, maybe librarians lack the glamour of...other disciplines, or perhaps people with more life experience have had more opportunities to develop a deeper appreciation of the nature of library work.^{2 (p239)}

There are initiatives to encourage those young people who do become librarians. Love Libraries, a campaign to promote public libraries in England, held an award in 2006 for the “Top Ten Young Librarians of the Future.”⁵ The same campaign also holds an annual award for the “Top Ten New Librarians.”⁶ Many of the winners were people in their early twenties, chosen because,

They are challenging the traditional stereotypes of the types of people who work in libraries and as individuals are transforming public libraries with their fresh ideas, creativity, drive, passion and enthusiasm.⁶

This shows the importance of young people in the library workplace.

Young librarians may seem in short supply due to the qualifications process. In the UK, a degree and a postgraduate qualification, often following library work experience, are all required in order to become a professional librarian.⁷ Unless librarianship has been decided upon from the outset of a person’s career, it is hard to complete this educational process and become a librarian before the age of 25.

Perceptions: The problem of the lack of new, young talent entering the library profession may be due to public perceptions of libraries and librarians. In a Canadian survey of over 2000 new university students, “fewer than 40 per cent recognized that librarians require a university education” and this job title was rated as a low prestige job.⁸ There exists a misunderstanding of what the librarian’s role entails. It is likely that young people have only encountered public, school or academic libraries and have no knowledge of other sectors, or wider information

roles. This leads to a lack of awareness of the profession and a lack of appreciation of the librarian and their environment.

Careers Advice: Lack of awareness may also come from a lack of information. A study of how students view librarianship in the United States revealed that career counsellors or advisors at either the high school or college level do not commonly advocate the field of librarianship, with one student noting, “librarians were not listed in a career directory he had consulted.”^{1(p85)}

Information about librarianship as a career is available from careers websites aimed at young people, such as Prospects¹⁰ and Connexions Direct.¹¹ The Internet is considered to be the most useful information resource amongst school students, and so these websites, and others, may be a common place for young people to go to look for careers advice.¹²

Stereotypes: The perception young people have of what librarianship entails may also come from the common stereotypes of librarians as old women shushing, shelving, and stamping.¹³ Young people’s perceptions of librarians may link to their interest (or lack of) in taking up the role as a career. Welsby calls for awareness programmes to be established in areas where there is a clear lack of understanding and appreciation of what librarians really do, highlighting “the need for a much higher profile for this oft-unappreciated band of people.”¹⁴

The stereotype of the librarian and the problems it causes, are worldwide. At the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Pre-Session Seminar in 1992, library and information professionals from around the world gathered to discuss the image, status and reputation of the library and information profession.¹⁵ Today, concerns are still being raised about the future of the profession and the stereotypical images accused of holding the profession back. This is shown in Harris and Wilkinson’s study:

The cultural ideas surrounding information and computer technologies affect perceptions... and, as a result, affect the flow of new entrants to computing-related occupations (as well as those occupations that are seen to be non-computer-intensive).⁸

This review of the literature identifies obstacles to overcome in encouraging young people into the library profession. Though there are initiatives to promote libraries, such as the Love Libraries Campaign,¹⁶ they do not outweigh the deep-set stereotypes embedded in people’s minds.

METHODOLOGY

The research took a qualitative inductive approach, as the conclusions are guided by research responses rather than a predefined theory. Qualitative research was appropriate to this study as it suited the reflective nature of the profession of li-

brarianship and the questionnaires gave respondents the opportunity to state their own memories and opinions in their own words. The data was analysed thematically using open coding.

Two different surveys were conducted and then examined, compared, and discussed. The first questionnaire was aimed at young people who have not chosen librarianship as a career or who had not decided upon a specific career path. This survey used a convenience sample sent electronically via e-mail to contacts of the researcher who were requested to forward the survey by snowball technique to other young people who met the age criteria of 18 to 24. The second questionnaire was aimed at students taking the MA Librarianship course at the University of Sheffield. These participants had already decided upon librarianship as a career. This approach enabled different viewpoints to be considered and evaluated.

Both of the questionnaires were designed using Survey Monkey, a tool that enables questionnaires to be designed and administered electronically.¹⁷ This tool allows for different types of questions to be used, including multiple-choice boxes for closed-end questions and comments boxes for open-end questions.

As this research called for respondents' personal opinions and encounters, many open-end questions were used in both questionnaires, with large text boxes in order to encourage detailed answers. The analysis of the data in the open-end questions takes on an open coding approach; for each question, common themes are drawn out of respondents' answers. These themes, or categories, were ranked in order of most popular, giving an ordered list of answers for each question, which can then be tabulated and analysed.^{18, 19} As the aim of this study was to gain impressions from young people, determining participants' ages was important. The age ranges in both questionnaires were chosen in order to correlate with those used in the *Library Workforce Survey 2005*.¹

The MA Librarianship questionnaire was emailed to everyone registered on the MA Librarianship course at the University of Sheffield, ensuring that all 42 students received the questionnaire. For the young people, the survey was sent electronically via email to 10 contacts, aged between 18 and 24, with the request that recipients forward it on to anyone else they knew within the specified age group that they felt may also be interested in completing it. This method of identifying appropriate participants is known as snowball sampling, where respondents may act as informants to identify other potential participants.¹⁸

RESULTS – YOUNG PEOPLE

The purpose of this first questionnaire sent to young people was to gain an insight into the impressions 18 to 24 year olds have of librarianship as a career.

Profile of the respondents

Of the 19 respondents:

14 (73.7%) were female

5 (26.3%) were male

8 (42.1%) were teenagers (aged 18-19)

11 (57.9%) were in their twenties (aged 20-24)

10 (52.6%) were students

9 (47.4%) were in work

Table 1: Profile of respondents to first survey (non-library students)

Age	Gender	Occupation
18	Female	Student (college)
24	Female	Teacher
23	Female	Student (Trainee Teacher)
24	Female	Administration
20	Male	Ice-cream van driver
23	Male	IT Operations Assistant
19	Male	Sales Assistant
18	Female	Student (university)
18	Female	Student (university)
24	Female	Teacher
24	Female	Teacher
18	Female	Student (college)
24	Female	Student (university)
18	Male	Student
18	Female	Student (college)
22	Male	Student (university)
22	Female	Administration
18	Female	Student (university)
24	Female	Teacher

Question: *In your view, what do librarians do? What does their job entail?*

The most popular answer to this first question were comments to the effect of “keep libraries organised,” ranging from “Put books back on shelves when returned,” suggesting a library assistant’s role, to “managing staff and resources,” Other popular answers centred around users and their needs, such as “organising

events for the library” and “researching.” Some answers, such as “till work” and “keep track of borrowed books” indicate a miscomprehension of the difference between the librarian and library assistant. “Keep libraries organised and structural” could indicate an understanding of the management responsibilities of librarians or could simply mean that they keep books organised and in order. One response, “Shout at people,” indicates that this respondent has a very negative stereotypical view of librarians.

Question: *Did you know that librarians work in...? (Please tick all places that you are aware of a librarian working in)*

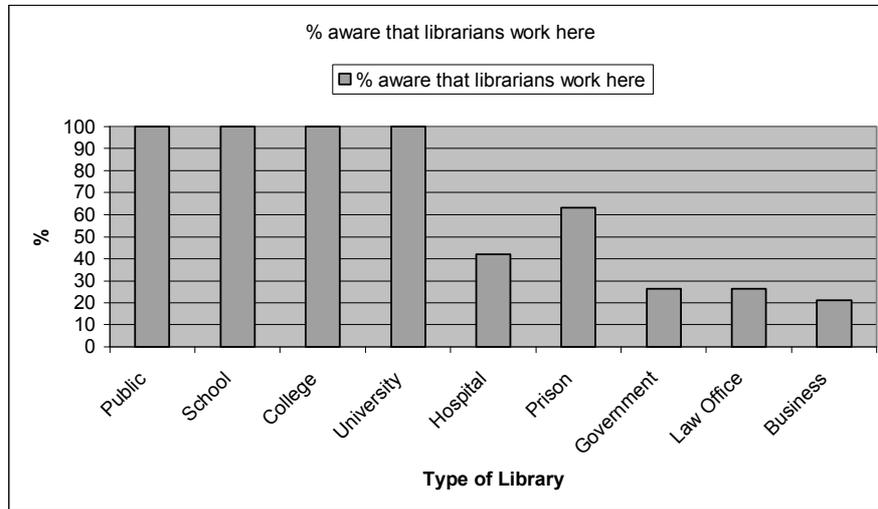


Figure 1: Awareness of library sectors

Respondents were asked to tick the box next to any sector that they were aware of librarians working in from the list of nine suggestions. Figure 1 shows that every respondent knew that librarians work in public, school, college and university libraries, and this is not surprising since the young people are most likely to have had personal experiences of these libraries. Over half (12, 63.2%) of respondents were aware of librarians working in prison libraries and eight out of nineteen (42.1%) knew that librarians could be found working in hospitals. There was limited awareness of librarians working in specialist sectors such as government, law and business.

Question: *Have you ever considered becoming a librarian? If yes, can you explain why it appeals to you? If no, can you explain why not?*

Three (15.8%) respondents replied positively to this question, all saying that the job might appeal to them due to their love of books. Two of these three people

knew people who worked in libraries. The 16 (84.2%) negative responses to this question produced the following reasons, in order of most frequently occurring:

1. Boring/wouldn't suit my interests
2. Lack of careers advice
3. Already decided on a different career

One interesting response was that librarianship “Seems an unintellectually challenging job”, which displays a lack of understanding about what the job entails; this is based on the respondent’s understanding that librarians “Keep the books sorted and in order. Order more books. Customer Service” (response to question one). These answers show a lack of understanding about the role of the librarian leading to a lack of interest in librarianship as a career. This relates to the second most popular reason for not considering librarianship as a career: lack of careers advice.

Five (26.3%) of the 19 young people admitted that they do not really understand what the job of a librarian entails. One respondent answered, “No, because not a lot of information seems to be given on the job at school or careers advice”. This questionnaire may have been the first time the respondent had been prompted to think of librarianship as a career.

Question: *Have you ever or do you currently use any of the following libraries? (Please tick all that apply)*

This question was designed to ascertain whether use of different libraries makes any difference to knowledge of librarianship. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who answered that they had used public libraries or libraries in the education sector.

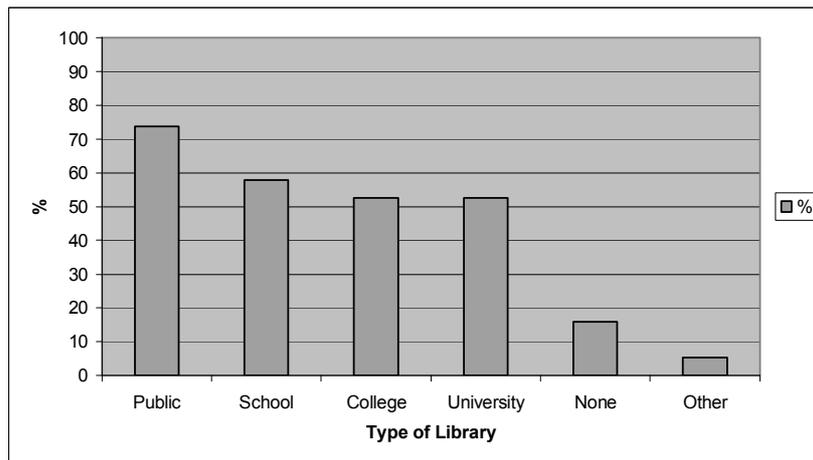


Figure 2: Respondents’ use of libraries, by type

Of the 19 young people who answered this questionnaire 14 (73.7%) said they had used a public library. A slightly lower number, but still over half (11, 57.9%), said they had used their school libraries. Nine of the 19 are currently students, either at college or university, with at least a further 4 (teachers) having been to university. It is somewhat surprising, then, that only half (10, 52.6%) of the respondents have used college and university libraries. Libraries have clearly not been promoted or available in some of these young people's lives, which may explain the lack of understanding about librarianship.

Three of the 19 (15.8%) respondents to this question said they had never used any type of library and one selected the 'Other' option and commented "no I owe them all money", which suggests that in fact he has used a library in the past but has had a negative experience.

Question: *Do you know anyone who is, or has been, a librarian? Or do you know anyone who works, or has worked, in a library? If yes, please give details.*

This question was asked to determine any influence from knowing someone in the profession. Eight (42%) answered yes, 11 (58%) answered no. Those who answered 'Yes', stated *who* they knew, for example "my mother" but they did not state in what capacity that person worked. This may show that even having a family member or friend who works in a library does not mean that young people understand or appreciate the different roles.

RESULTS – MA STUDENTS

The second questionnaire was administered to MA Librarianship students at Sheffield. Its purpose was to assess the attitudes towards librarianship of those who are interested in it as a career and to compare them to the young people's impressions as revealed by the first questionnaire.

Profile of the respondents

Four (26.7%) of the 15 respondents who answered this question were aged between 18 and 24 years. Eleven respondents (66.7%) were aged between 25 and 39 years, with one respondent being over 40. Given their ages, it is clear that the majority chose to become librarians, not directly after leaving school, college or university undergraduate courses, but after having worked for a while, either in a library environment or elsewhere.

Question: *Library use.*

The MA Librarianship students were asked about their use of libraries as children and young people to determine whether this may have affected their choice to become librarians: 46.7% had used their libraries at both primary and secondary school; 100% used their public libraries up until the age of 11, 80% between the ages of 11 and 18.

Question: *Why do you want to become a librarian? Did anything in particular influence your decision?*

The 16 respondents gave a range of answers to this question, with many similarities. The top reasons (each stated by 9 respondents, 56.3%) were: wanting to develop a career or progress within libraries and wanting to work with and help library users, be they the public, students, or professionals. Many said “I was influenced by people I met who were librarians.”

Another popular answer, stated by 7 respondents (43.8%), was a passion for books and reading: “I think that reading and the notion of access to knowledge to all who want it are two very important things, and the opportunity to be involved in this seemed too good to pass up.”

Three (18.8%) of the MA students had chosen librarianship for its variety, mix of skills and interest, with one clearly stating that, “I wanted to become a librarian as I wanted a job that would be interesting and varied.”

Other responses were:

- An interest in education (31.3%)
- Positive experiences as a library user (18.8%)
- Relevance to first degree (18.8%)
- Suits a social and creative lifestyle (6.3%)

Question: *At what age or stage in your life did you make this decision?*

Nine respondents (56.3%) stated an age at which they decided to become librarians. Five (55.6%) were in their twenties, between 21 and 26 years. Three (33.3%) were in their thirties, between 30 and 34 years, and 1 (11.1% of the nine) said, “I decided to become a librarian from quite a young age while still at secondary school.” Whilst others who didn’t state a specific age said they had considered librarianship as a career earlier in life, they didn’t take it seriously as a career until after university and/or after some work experience, either in a library or elsewhere.

Question: *What perceptions did you have of librarianship before the start of this course? For example, what did you think that the job of a librarian would entail? Have your perceptions changed now, at the end of this course?*

Almost all of the respondents felt they had learned more about librarianship from taking the MA Librarianship course, with 50% of respondents admitting to an increased awareness of and interest in different sectors within the library and information profession. Respondents were surprised at some of the course content, e.g. the inclusion of information technology and information literacy teaching (see course prospectus).²⁰

Question: *What perceptions did you have of librarians before the start of this course? For example, what kind of people did you think were librarians? Have your perceptions changed now, at the end of this course?*

Eleven of the respondents (68.8%) said they have learned more about the type of people librarians are from taking the MA Librarianship course. Eight (50%) ex-

plicitly said that it was their fellow course mates who have changed their perceptions of what librarians are like, or at least what future librarians will be like.

The 11 respondents (68.8%) whose perceptions of librarians had changed, all mentioned an awareness of the stereotypical image of librarians as “Boring people who wore cardigans.” However, these respondents felt that, “Although I had seen this stereotype, it didn’t deter me, so I must have known somehow that this wasn’t universal.” All respondents had positive perceptions of themselves as the librarians of the future.

Question: *What barriers do you see facing young people wanting to enter the librarianship profession? Please also give any other comments relating to young peoples’ impressions of librarianship as a career.*

Responses to this question tended to be lengthy, showing a deep understanding of the different barriers for young people entering librarianship *and* the barriers of the profession in attracting young people. This seemed to be a passionate subject for many of the respondents. The answers are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Barriers facing young people wanting to enter the librarianship profession as identified by MA Librarianship students

Barrier identified	Example quote
Invisibility of the Profession	“Lack of awareness of it as a choice; lack of depth of understanding about what is involved in it.”
Negative Stereotypes	“I think the stereotypical image of librarians as women in their 40’s and 50’s would put off young people and particularly young men from entering the profession.”
High Level of Qualifications Required	“Another possible barrier is that to actually become a librarian you are required to undertake a postgraduate course. This I think would put off some young people because of the financial costs and amount of time involved.”
Poor Careers Advice	“It is not promoted by careers services. I have never seen a stand at a careers fair about library work.”
Lack of Job Opportunities	“Another issue I’ve noticed is that I’ve found it very difficult to get a job: people seem to stay in jobs for many years and not move on which means it is difficult to find that promotion opportunity and progress in your career.”

Low Salary

“When you’re younger (and often older!) you want to do a sexy job that pays a fortune... It’s hard to sell librarianship on these grounds.”

Question: *What sector did you hope to work in before the start of this course? What sector do you hope to work in now/on completion of this course?*

In all but 2 cases, the course has opened up students’ options or changed their minds about the best sector for them. In 6 cases (40%), respondents had changed their preferred sectors completely. Six respondents (40%) gave 2 or more sectors in which they would be interested in working. Three respondents (20%) did not state any particular sectors, with one response being “The library world is my oyster. I’ll see what grabs me.”

DISCUSSION

Both sets of respondents noted barriers facing young people in joining the library profession. The MA Librarianship students felt that a lack of awareness of librarianship as a career choice, coupled with the poor careers advice on offer, were important factors in librarianship not appealing to young people. The young people demonstrated a lack of awareness of what a career in librarianship entails.

Due to increased exposure to libraries and librarians, the MA Librarianship students had a different attitude towards the profession than the young people. While the young people generated impressions of librarians’ roles such as “Put books back on shelves when returned” and “shout at people,” the MA students recognised and dismissed these as false stereotypes. Library use, both as children and as adults, was higher in the MA Librarianship group (100%) than in the young people’s group (73.7%). The MA students had learned the most about the profession from the content of the course and their peers as future librarians.

The MA Librarianship students identified a number of things that attracted them to the profession including wanting to help users, a love of books and reading, the variety that the job entails, and the positives influence received either from library professionals or from being a library user. These responses highlight key areas where librarians can exploit their roles in terms of excellence in customer service when interacting with users, and promoting books and reader development. These are roles that should be second nature to practising librarians.

Making young people aware of the variety within the job, and the wide range of opportunities available within the profession is a more difficult issue. This is the responsibility not just of the individual librarians, but also of organisations and professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), careers advice professionals, and schools to educate young people when selecting careers.

The stereotypes surrounding the age of librarians is one of the big barriers in attracting more young people to become librarians. There are numerous statistics and studies supporting this, such as those in the *Library Workforce Survey 2005*, which relate to age in the public library workforce.¹ In a study of independent school libraries 43.7% of school library managers were aged between 46 and 55, with just 4.9% aged 26 to 35.²¹ In Brabazon's article on school libraries states that "a recent survey discovered that the average age of school librarians was 50", and school librarian Anne-Marie Tarter reveals a worrying fact: "fewer young professional librarians are seeking employment in the schools sector."²² Only 2 of the 15 (13.3%) MA Librarianship students explicitly mentioned that they were looking to work in a school library on completion of the course.

As public library visits drop in the teenage years, it is in the school library where most young people are likely to interact with library professionals, and as one MA Librarianship student identified:

I think the stereotypical image of librarians as women in their 40's and 50's would put off young people and particularly young men from entering the profession.

A lack of awareness of what the librarian's role entails was identified as a barrier by both sets of respondents. This lack of awareness is again likely to reinforce stereotypical views of what librarians do. Educating people about the roles and responsibilities is critical. We should play to our professional strengths, ensuring that we excel in every exchange with all customers young and old. Leading by example, showing users that librarians are supportive, encouraging users, helping them with their information needs – requires not just customer service skills, but the time to spend with users, which gives those responsible for staffing levels and budget a challenge in the current economic environment.

If the stereotypical image is a barrier, then things need to be done to break that down, either through direct action such as employing not just younger staff but a greater diversity of staff or through education and advocacy. Innovations in library buildings and use of space particularly in the higher education sector and in schools may encourage young people to use libraries and have positive experiences there. This will also give them an opportunity to see librarians working with technology and teaching, not stamping books, therefore dispelling the stereotypical views.

The issue of invisibility is compounded as librarians increasingly take a "back-room role" pushing out electronic information, making it difficult for the user to see who has supplied that information and to fully understand the librarian's role. Ways need to be found to market that role, making the librarians' intermediary role in the electronic supply chain clear to the public.

Lack of awareness of a librarian's role supports what the MA librarianship students identified as "invisibility of the profession". The young people reported that they did not realise it was a career choice. This lack of careers advice could be ad-

dressed by making the profession more visible by school and college careers advisors and at university careers fairs. The students on the MA Librarianship course did not see themselves as stereotypical librarians. The younger generation entering the profession can play a role in changing the image of libraries and librarians, perhaps through involvement with groups such as CILIP's Career Development Group, which is active in a number of regions in the UK.

There are a number of public library promotions currently in place in the UK, including Love Libraries, "a campaign to make England's public libraries even better"¹⁶ and 2008's National Year of Reading, which included a "Library Membership Campaign" for public libraries in England.²³ However, there do need to be more positive images in the media, such as librarian characters in programmes aimed at young people, and generally more promotion of librarianship as a career choice. In the USA, past First Lady Laura Bush "enacted a new student grant program" to provide initiatives for students to join the profession of librarianship.² Such campaigns may make a difference if implemented in other countries.

Based on the data from the two questionnaires, school libraries have had less of an impact on the respondents than public libraries; this is an area that could and should be improved upon. With children and young people seeing librarians involved with all different types of new technologies, the image of librarianship may start to change; the new generations will start to see the librarian with an interesting role and providing services that are not confined to the lending counter. If school librarians can become even more visible to students, students will not only benefit from increased information skills but also awareness of the importance of the library and the role of the librarian. This should benefit the library profession by attracting more young people. Many of the MA Librarianship students had been influenced by practicing librarians.

At the IFLA pre-session seminar in 1992, it was stated,

...there is "Little understanding amongst the general public of what library and information (LIS) workers do and what responsibilities they undertake"... It was then suggested that this might be the responsibility of "the profession itself to put right."²⁴

This responsibility has been echoed in more recent literature, such as Welsby's¹⁴ call for librarians to market librarianship and Totterdell's statement that, "library staff need to add the skills of self-publicizing and political astuteness to their professional expertise and dedication".²⁵ The MA Librarianship students who contributed to this study seem willing to rise to this call; one respondent commented, "the future of librarianship should be very positive with such enthusiastic people wanting to enter into it".

CONCLUSION

The findings from both questionnaires reinforce many points from the literature. Staffing problems are likely to continue in a profession that is failing to attract young people in sufficient numbers. Moreover, those young people entering the profession are expressing concerns about the lack of opportunities for them with entry-level posts and opportunities for career progression, with many jobs being low paid.

The library students have the advantage of increased exposure to libraries and an increased understanding of the profession through their educational programme. This has enabled them to reject traditional stereotypes that are more difficult to dispel with the young people who had negative perceptions of the profession and librarians. Part of this misunderstanding comes from little or poor careers advice in schools. The lack of careers advice reinforces the invisibility of the profession. Librarians need to take up the challenge to extol the profession more widely as individuals through their professionalism and customer service, and by increasing involvement with their professional bodies and professional networks, and partnership with schools, colleges, universities and careers advisors and organisations.

This project is limited by the small sample; a large-scale study would provide more valid data. This project is limited to the UK, though the literature suggests the issues occur worldwide: for example, Ard et al. in America, the Australian Library and Information Association, and Harris and Wilkinson in Canada,^{2,3,8} so further research in other countries would be beneficial. It would be interesting to do a similar study in a number of years time to see if young people's perceptions have changed, and also to follow up on the librarianship students to see if and how they have championed the profession of librarianship.

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