

Regular Feature - Reflections

A Reflection on Forty Years Working in Libraries

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BACKGROUND

Helen Fallon retired from her post as Deputy University Librarian at Maynooth University in 2022 and here she reflects on a life in librarianship and shares insights and advice for those at all stages of their career.

INTRODUCTION

My library career began in 1979, as a student shelver in what was then St. Patrick's College Maynooth (SPCM), and is now Maynooth University (MU). I retired in September 2022 from the post of Deputy University Librarian, a senior leadership post, at Maynooth University.

I'm pleased to take this opportunity to reflect on those years and hopefully distil some insights/thoughts that might be of use to librarians what ever stage they are at in their career. For convenience and to help me gather my thoughts together I've given topics headings.

BE PHYSICALLY VISIBLE

Librarians have certainly increased their physical visibility since my career started, but in my view it is an area that needs more development. This can be as straightforward as meeting people in your organization – outside the library – for a coffee and conversation about their work. I was fortunate that in the early stages of my career I was encouraged to get out and network, although the term network hadn't come into usage at that time. People were usually very happy to talk about their work/research. I was frequently struck by the lack of knowledge of the academics I met about what the library could offer them.

Back in 1986, I was somewhat apprehensive to learn that in my post as Business Librarian in what was then NIHED (National Institute for Higher Education Dublin), now DCU (Dublin City University), I would sit on programme boards for courses offered by the Business School. My manager suggested I bring up the library where possible at these meetings. I came to meetings with what I wanted to say written down and more or less memorised. This might have been information about a new journal or service. Later, when I was more confident, I served on university committees and tried to make myself visible, again being well prepared, which is really key to being an effective member of a committee. Take time to study the agenda before the meeting, and see where you might be able to have useful input. This applies to both meetings in person and on zoom.

BE STRATEGIC

While libraries were always involved in planning, it wasn't until the 1990's that I encountered the concept of strategic planning. This process gave time to reflect and identify priorities using established tools such as SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. I was one of the theme leaders of the first DCU Library Strategic plan. One of my tasks was to set out the current and future trends in higher education, as background to the plan. Through sourcing statistical data, I was able to identify trends and projected future developments both in Ireland and internationally. This was my first formal experience of using data for planning. It made me realise that evidence-based context is key to planning.

I think that library strategic plans improved in the following years in that they became more closely aligned to organisational strategy and goals. In smaller libraries it might make sense to integrate the library strategic plan into the broader organisational one, rather than have an individual plan. Even if there is a library plan, the library should be visible in the organisational plan.

Of course strategy doesn't just relate to strategic planning. You can plan your work and your career strategically. In relation to day-to-day work, it's worth taking some time to reflect and monitor how you spend your time. On occasion, I spent too long on tasks that did not merit the time and effort. Something that could have helped me was having greater clarity around a task, asking more questions from the requestor/delegator and having a clearer idea of the purpose and expected outcomes. Also consider what the impact is of the task(s) you are doing – for the requestor, for the library, for the organisation, for you. Is it low, medium or high?

PLAN YOUR CAREER

I began working fulltime in libraries in the very depressed 1980's. There was an air of gloom about with high unemployment in the country. It was just a decade since the marriage bar – where women in civil service positions had to resign on marriage – had been lifted. When I got my first permanent post as Assistant Librarian in NIHE Dublin, three years after finishing the library course, I was thrilled and didn't think beyond the joy of having a permanent job in a time where many people were emigrating. I continued working happily for three years, learning a great deal and really enjoying being part of a dynamic team in what was a very young and enthusiastic organisation. But after three years as Business Librarian I felt I needed to do something new. I had worked for two years in a medical library in Saudi Arabia after finishing the library course and felt I'd like to work overseas again. I was fortunate to secure a career break for two years and this time I opted for a post with Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) teaching librarianship at the University of Sierra Leone, which was a sharp contrast to the expatriate experience in Saudi Arabia. When I returned to DCU I moved sideways to the post of Science and Engineering Librarian. Even though it was a sideways move, it offered the opportunity to learn about a new field of librarianship. It's worth thinking from time to time about potential moves, be they sideways or upwards, and consider the advantages and disadvantages. If it's not possible to move, consider whether it is possible to take on a new area of responsibility and perhaps drop or delegate something you are very familiar with. Most of us find it hard to give up projects we've initiated, but it is really important to delegate effectively and develop staff. Perhaps ask yourself, how much you are learning from a particular task/area of responsibility.

In recent years some Irish librarians have moved into senior administration posts in their organisations. This offers a really good opportunity to experience your organisation from a different perspective.

AVAIL OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In 1994, three years after returning from Sierra Leone, I began an MA in Women's Studies as a part-time student in University College Dublin. This was my first significant educational endeavour since completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship at UCD in 1982. Studying and attending classes at night time for two years, was very demanding. It was a different experience to my degree, which I had completed in 1980, and which had been based on examinations. Here, I was doing modules in a choice of subjects and writing 5,000-word essays. Now, instead of helping people with their research, I was the researcher. I received 50% funding from DCU towards the degree. It was a big commitment but it was worthwhile and I believe it helped me in my application for a more senior post in DCU.

These days quite a lot of librarians have Masters Degrees and the PhD is increasing in popularity. It is worth considering doing a PhD and if possible aligning it to an area of research within your organisation. If it's of value to the organisation they might fund it. The taught doctorate is worth considering, especially if, like me,

you like the idea of a structured programme. If doing further study isn't possible, there are lots of short courses – online and in person, professional reading, learning new skills on the job and also academic writing. Writing for publication offers an opportunity to explore a topic and there is no financial cost involved. It's also a really good way of sharing your knowledge with others, and helping to build up the body of knowledge on a topic.

In 1996, having finished my Masters Degree, I applied for a temporary sub-librarian post in DCU. This post was then called Head of Reader Services and involved managing all frontline services and the subject librarian team. While this was a contract for two years, when the post came up as permanent I was fortunate to have gained really valuable experience managing people and was successful in my application. Two years later I left to take up the post of Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University. It's important to try to get some people management experience if you are going to go for senior posts. Managing people is challenging but ultimately very rewarding.

CREATE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

A significant development in my career was the arrival of an English librarian to DCU in 1992. He was extremely outward looking and encouraged us to attend conferences in Ireland and overseas. Fortunately, this coincided with airline deregulation, so air fares dropped in price and travelling to the UK was no longer prohibitively expensive. The Library became involved in projects with other European universities as part of the European Union (EU) Libraries Programme, which was established in 1990. These projects helped us to engage in the broader European academic library discourse and to create European and international links. I was fortunate to have a role in the EQLIPSE project, which focused on developing software to support quality management and performance measurement in libraries. This developed my understanding of quality measurement, which was to become a requirement under the 1997 Irish Universities Act. I enjoyed meeting librarians with different backgrounds and experiences and had the opportunity to present at meetings in Barcelona and Greece. The engagement helped us to look outwards and measure the service against international standards, understanding we were part of a bigger story.

Much later, at Maynooth University, I participated in the ERASMUS programme, visiting a Swedish university library. These programmes are typically from three days to one week. If you are not in a position to travel, the LAI (Library Association of Ireland) Job Swap initiative allows for one day visits to libraries. It is worth exploring if there are similar opportunities in different library sectors, and if not perhaps initiate discussion and explore what can be achieved.

WRITE FOR PUBLICATION

The DCU Librarian who joined us from the UK had a strong track record of academic publishing, which was unusual for librarians in Ireland in the 1990s. He encouraged me to send my first article on working as a librarian in Sierra Leone to An Leabharlann: The Irish Library. The subsequent publication of the article was a source of great joy to me. I realised that I didn't need to be a senior librarian to publish: I just needed to be committed to putting the time and effort into writing and, through the process, learn, develop and extend my skills. There were no formal programmes and any librarians writing were, like me, doing it outside of work. I wasted a lot of time initially – putting everything I knew about a topic down, over-researching and not having a clear idea of where I was writing for and what I was writing. Later, I learned to clarify with myself what it was I was writing and where I aimed to publish, before I began.

I subsequently ran workshops on writing for academic publications. I wrote and published the key information/practical guidelines from these workshops (Fallon, 2009; Fallon, 2010), which I hope will be of use to others in their academic writing or when running academic writing programmes. I also ran two academic writing months in Maynooth University (with different groups of library staff). The details of how I

structured these are in the final referenced article (Fallon, 2022), which might be handy for anyone wanting to replicate them.

JOIN THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND (LAI)

I joined the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) in order to engage with the profession and also because we had been advised to do so on the postgraduate course in UCD. I was certainly of the impression that it was something that I should have on my CV. I undertook both the Associateship (ALAI) and the Fellowship (FLAI). I found these reflective processes gave me an opportunity to consider where I was at in my career and what new skills/knowledge I needed to acquire. I would recommend undertaking the LAI qualifications and also serving on LAI committees, which is a really good way to develop your skills and knowledge.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At a conference, I remember a speaker giving the advice “Don’t wait for clarity, keep moving” and that has stayed with me. You are, to some extent, trying to operate strategically in a world that is shifting, so it’s important to keep on going on. Enjoy the journey and remember the saying attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson “Life is a journey, not a destination.”

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