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University of Wollongong Library preparing recent graduates for a professional career in librarianship

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Abstract

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UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG LIBRARY PREPARING RECENT GRADUATES FOR A PROFESSIONAL CAREER IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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Abstract. A strategic approach to succession planning, a commitment to the profession of librarianship and a genuine desire to provide authentic learning opportunities for students committed to postgraduate studies in librarianship, resulted in an innovative professional cadetship program being established at the University of Wollongong Library. The program development, overview and preliminary evaluations will be shared in this paper.

Introduction

During recent years the University of Wollongong Library (UWL) has found it increasingly difficult to attract professional librarians with the relevant skills, knowledge and attributes to fill vacant positions. This supports the literature which concludes that, in general, librarians are an ageing demographic in our population and there is a genuine need to nurture and encourage young people to enter the profession. Identifying and developing these potential leaders is critical for effective succession planning.

In developing UWL's professional cadetship program, research was conducted into established programs at other Australian university libraries as well as traineeships and cadetships from a range of other professions. This paper tracks the process of selecting the preferred aspects of these established programs to inform a model which would suit the needs of the UWL. The resulting professional cadetship program includes unique elements such as the funding model, workplace rotation, supervision and ongoing evaluation.

Having established a potentially best practice model it was important to ensure that the selection process was rigorous and would assess the most important attributes required of the cadet by including, for example, a Personal Characteristics Inventory test, which would help to identify leadership potential. The authors will provide details of the recruitment process and its relevance in ensuring that the best candidate was selected.

The paper concludes with some preliminary evaluations of the program and some insights into improvement opportunities.

Succession Planning

A critical factor affecting succession planning in libraries is the lack of qualified, experienced librarians who are personally and professionally prepared to replace the retiring baby boomers.

The research of Whitmell (2002, p. 124) indicates "The majority of the world's baby boomers were born in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and United States during the period 1946 to 1964." In Australia this accounts for 20% of the population, with the oldest of these baby boomers retiring now or thinking about retirement in the next few years. These figures indicate the urgency for dedicated succession planning. Whitmell (2002) observes that it is only at the point of urgency that many professions become concerned.

Whitmell (2002) and Schrader (2005) comment that succession planning has not been a priority amongst the profession, however in recent years it has become an increasingly important issue in Australia and internationally. Other commentators (Engel, Huang and Reiss, 2003: Singer, Goodrich and Goldberg, 2004) refer to the need for all library professionals and their associations to actively recruit the next generations of librarians.

UWL has established a culture of learning and development, which is an essential underpinning for effective succession planning as described by Singer, Goodrich and Goldberg (2004). When new positions are advertised at UWL, in areas where in-house expertise has not been developed, the significant lack of qualified and experienced librarians becomes increasingly apparent.

Whitmell (2002) encourages a realistic and strong vision of succession planning. The professional cadetship program, which now forms part of the UWL vision for succession, will introduce a new cadet each year ensuring a continual flow of new professionals to contribute and broaden available expertise.

Whilst employment with UWL cannot be guaranteed, the cadets will be favourably positioned for future employment.

The Importance of Leadership Potential

At UWL, middle management positions requiring leadership skills have been more difficult to fill than other positions. The authors concur with Bridgland (2005, p.105), that "If libraries are to be effective, their succession planning should encompass replacement and leadership development at all levels, not just at the top…" and Whitmell (2002, p. 123) who states that the process of succession planning must be one that identifies future leaders. The professional cadetship program will add a further dimension to the existing range of leadership development strategies at UWL.

From the outset, UWL realised the importance of exploring the leadership potential of the professional cadetship applicants. The introduction of the *Personality Characteristics Inventory* (PCI) test, which measures leadership potential, as part of the recruitment process at UOW, allowed the interview panel to identify results of the cadet's leadership potential/preference. Whilst this was not an overriding criterion in selection, it was seen to be significant in the final deliberations.

The model described below is designed to develop leadership potential by exposing cadets to a range of leadership styles. Ritchie et al (1999) discovered benefits in this approach through their mentoring program, where new graduates were mentored by a variety of experienced staff members.

Developing the UWL Professional Cadetship Model

Prior to designing the UWL professional cadetship model, the authors explored existing programs in Australia and internationally in both the library profession and in industry, to assess attraction strategies, conditions of employment and support provided for study.

Like Whitmell (2002), the authors found very few recruitment programs in North America and Canada. However, two well established programs in Australia, several in the UK and two in the US, were identified, assisting the process of designing a unique program for UWL.

Flinders University Library offers trainee librarian programs, which are for newly qualified and inexperienced librarians (Cations,1998). Curtin University of Technology Library recruits students from the library schools of both Curtin and Edith Cowan Universities as trainees who work approximately ten hours per week for one year. Their experience is predominantly working on the information and reference desks. (Barwick, 2003)

The University of Oklahoma Libraries has a *Librarian Development Program,* which targets current employees at paraprofessional level who are enrolled in library school. (Engel, Huang and Reiss; 2003, p. 229) This is a 12 to 24 month program.

Wilson and Gibbens (1996) surveyed sixty UK libraries to gauge the extent of trainee positions offered. All institutions that responded offered places for 12 months. Similar to the UOW model the trainees were paid at the level of a library assistant. Their research showed that most libraries tried to provide the trainee with a range of experiences and not just use them as an extra assistant.

Cadetship programs at BlueScope Steel, BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance, and Electronics Industry Association were explored to gauge the level of study support provided, the type of job experiences offered and the academic progression expectations of each company.

Whilst the UOW program is significantly different from the examples above, the research influenced the direction of the model, particularly in cases where the vision for the program was congruent with that of UWL.

The UWL Professional Cadetship Model

The main focus of the UWL model is to encourage new, young graduates of any discipline to take up postgraduate studies in librarianship. Whitmell (2002) highlights the importance of encouraging young people to join the profession and enrol in library schools. She encourages those of us in the profession to seek out and find the right people and assist them to acquire the skills they need.

The importance of this is highlighted in Bridglands's (1998) research. Whitmell (2002, p. 123) has also found that "job rotation and regular movement between departments and positions" is valuable for effective succession planning. The UWL program provides the opportunity to gain the broadest range of skills by moving the cadet through all divisions in the library. Offering the three-year cadetship in tandem with postgraduate study allows for a very practical approach to work place training.

Lack of relevant experience, Kennan, et al (2005, p. 22) observe, is often the reason new graduates find it difficult to secure their first appointment. This was clearly evident in the number of recent li-

brary graduates who applied for the UWL professional cadetship position. Approximately one third of the 23 applicants had completed or almost completed their library qualifications making them ineligible for the cadetship program. Interestingly many of these applicants, although new graduates were of mature age. A fact supported by the research of Schrader (2005) who comments that, on average, librarians are ten years older when entering librarianship than people entering other professions.

According to Whitmell (2002), the generation Xer's (born in 1964 to 1981) are much less likely to choose one profession for life and will therefore need a variety of skills, including the ability to work well with others. The opportunities created for UWL professional cadets will ensure that they are equipped with a range of skills and are able to adapt quickly to new situations and work in environments with a range of different people.

Hale (2005) also expresses that multi-skilled employees who are willing to adapt to a fast changing world will be highly sought after in the profession. It is noted by Hale (2005) that the ability to develop web-pages, for example is highly valued and UWL professional cadets will have the opportunity to develop this skill.

Program establishment

The concept of a cadetship or traineeship is not new at the University of Wollongong. The University has had Information Technology (IT) and Management cadet programs for many years. The Library had sought involvement in the IT cadetship program in 2002 but unfortunately that program had recently ceased. In 2005 a fresh proposal was approved as it would be cost effective, would provide meaningful work, be well coordinated and would replace some casual staff.

Final approval for the position was granted by the University's Personnel Department with a requirement to add the word *Professional* to the original position title of Library Cadet. This more clearly identified the postgraduate status of the program, which distinguished it from the University's well-established undergraduate Management cadetship program.

Recruiting

Recruitment was based on the following criteria: recent completion of an undergraduate degree; strong communication skills; ability to work in a team and quickly adapt to new situations; leadership potential and strong interpersonal skills.

Bridgland (1998) refers to the work of Sinclair (1995) who surveyed managers to identify the important generic skills required of new graduates. Communication skill was top of the list (1998, p. 22). During the UWL recruitment process, communication skills were tested by requiring the candidates to deliver a brief powerpoint presentation on a project in which they had been involved. This was a powerful means of ranking the communication skill of the candidates. Capacity for co-operation and teamwork was listed by Sinclair (1995, as cited in Brigland, 1998, p.22) as the second most important attribute. Interview questions were designed to gauge the ability of the candidates to operate effectively in a team environment. This was critical to succeed in UWL'S team based structure.

Financial aspects of the program

The provision of a tuition and textbook allowance (see appendix one) was a strong attraction for the applicants, due to the cost of postgraduate study. Wilson and Gibbens (1996) found that some trainees did not take up professional studies because they were unable to obtain funding for their courses. Bridgland (1998, p. 13) refers to the research of Clare and Johnston (1993) who say "Australia needs education and training that is cost-effective, high quality and user friendly". The professional cadetship program offered by UWL aims to ensure a high quality learning experience as well as a regular income and fee support to make postgraduate study more affordable.

Preliminary Evaluations

The UWL program is in its infancy and modifications and improvements are inevitable. For example, the advertisement for the next round of interviews, will emphasise the specific requirements of the applicants, particularly the fact that library science graduates are not eligible to apply. Consultation with EEO and Recruitment units will be required to target young graduates without contravening the principles of EEO.

Supervisor feedback

Initially, the professional cadetship program was regarded with scepticism from some team leaders. It was critical therefore that the program was supported by a lead supervisor, who is responsible for coordinating ongoing review and feedback from all participants.

Success to date is illustrated in the following examples of feedback from the team leader, who managed the cadet's first placement.

We (the team) embraced both the cadetship concept and then the cadet during her time with us. We wanted her to feel very much part of the team.

I think the concept of six-month rotations is ideal (this) has given us time to show her the full range of tasks.

Cadets meet monthly with their current team leader, as well as the lead supervisor, in separate meetings to discuss goal achievements and career planning. This is similar to the Oklahoma model where cadets meet at least monthly with their supervisor. (Engel, Huang and Reiss; 2003) UWL cadets maintain a portfolio of evidence, self-reflection and feedback to assist with this development process.

Cadet feedback

In addition to the feedback given and received at the monthly meetings, cadets are asked to respond to a series of questions designed to assess the program to date. The following examples highlight the value of the program to date.

The range of knowledge I will need for my future career will be accumulated over the cadetship, as I am required to learn new skills and adapt to new surroundings in each team.

In my first week of the cadetship the Lending team gave me the ownership of a task called 'Missings' - looking for and reporting missing books

The monthly review process helps me to determine my strengths and interests; it also helps me to acclimatise to the managerial processes of the library.

Wilson and Gibbens (1996, p. 13) found that many of the programs in the UK were lacking in mentoring and giving and receiving feedback to the trainees. A survey of the trainees found that "48 percent felt that the work they undertook was *seldom or never intellectually stimulating* and a substantial minority felt that they were used *as cheap labour*". The lead supervisor of the professional cadetship program will ensure that the UWL cadets have authentic, meaningful work which will be valued by staff members. The continuation of this culture will be critical to the success of the program and the retention of the cadets for their full three years.

Conclusion

UWL, five years accredited as an Investor in People, is recognised for its innovative people management and development. The professional cadetship program is the most recent example. The distinguishing feature of this program however is that it aims to support the profession of librarianship not just a single library. The authors agree with Whitmell (2002, p. 128) who states that "It starts with every one of us taking the responsibility for encouraging students to choose the profession, for hiring graduates and for making our organizations ones that listen, mentor, provide feedback and training, that know where they are going and have a good idea of how to get there and encourage all staff to get involved."

Ongoing evaluation of the program will determine the return on investment for UWL, the profession and the cadets. Will there be permanent positions for the cadets to move into at the conclusion of the three years, particularly at UWL? Will they be more successful in gaining employment than other graduates? Will UWL be able to sustain the program over time? Responses to these critical questions will be tracked over time as the program matures.

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Appendix 1. Library Professional Cadets – Conditions of Appointment

1. Granting of Study Time

Study time will be granted in accordance with the University Study Time Guidelines, without the 12 month waiting period.

2. Academic Progress

The Library requires a satisfactory level of academic performance and progression.

The Cadet will be required to provide the University Librarian, or delegate, with a plan of study within their first three months of employment. The Library understands that this plan may change in the three year period, if it does, the Cadet will be required to submit a revised study plan.

If the Cadet withdraws from study the Library reserves the right to terminate the appointment.

3. Funding support

3.1 The Library will provide an allowance of $1,000 to partially support tuition fees. This will be paid through the payroll system in February each year and will be grossed up to ensure an amount of $1,000 is received after tax.

3.2 The Library will provide an annual text book allowance of $250. Students must provide receipts for reimbursement. If students prefer, this allowance can be used for a combination of document delivery and text books.

4. Workplace Performance Reports

4.1 Cadets will be required to maintain a Job Portfolio, which includes supervisors' comments and feedback, from each team coordinator in their rotation.

4.2 Cadets and the Cadetship Coordinator will be required to prepare reports on their progress similar to the annual Development Review process.

4.3 Cadets must sign the supervisor's report on their workplace performance to indicate that they have read the report prior to it being sent to the University Librarian.

4.4 Supervisors must sign the Cadet's report to indicate that they have read the report prior to it being sent to the University Librarian.

4.5 Where it is deemed that a Cadet is not performing duties in a satisfactory manner, they will be counselled accordingly and given an opportunity to improve their performance. If their performance has not improved to the required degree within a specified period of time, and they are deemed unsatisfactory, the contract of employment may be jeopardised resulting in termination of employment.

4.6 Reports are considered seriously. Points raised in the reports may be discussed with either the University Librarian or the Associate Librarian, Client Services for further action if necessary.

4.7 Workplace performance reports and academic progress are considered separately.

5. Annual Leave

5.1 The Cadet will be required to take 4 weeks recreation leave in each completed year of service.

5.2 The Cadet may take leave at any time of the year, provided this is approved by their team coordinator.

5.3   In accordance with the University's General Staff Limited Term Employment Policy, annual leave must normally be taken within the term of the appointment.

6. Permanent employment

6.1 The Cadet may apply for permanent employment with the Library during the last 6 months of their contract should a suitable position become available.