

How to run a successful intern program: a case study from UNSW Australia Library

Abstract

As with other complex organisations, having the right mix of staff is always a challenge in libraries. In recruiting staff, library managers look for particular skills, knowledge and aptitude and make decisions based on candidates' qualifications and relevant experience. If candidates are new to the profession without the required experience and/or the right qualifications then many doors to a fledgling library career will remain firmly shut. Conversely, library managers think about succession planning and want to encourage new people to the profession. Some managers also want staff to join the "revolving door" by creating opportunities to gain experience in all sorts of library work. So how can library managers open the doors and build revolving ones? One strategy that UNSW Library has used is to run a successful intern program. The program consists of employing final year/just graduated librarians or library technicians for twelve months to work in the Client Services Unit. To date, twenty graduates have participated in the program with all but one gaining permanent work in libraries, including at UNSW Library, either during the internship or immediately after. This is significant as the interns state that prior to this experience, they had never even made it to interview stage. As interns are treated as regular Client Services team members they are paid the same, do the same work and have the same training and professional development opportunities as everyone else. This arrangement is beneficial to both interns and the Library as the interns come to UNSW full of new ideas and enthusiasm and are hungry to learn

as much as they can, which in turn inspires the permanent team members. To date Interns have contributed to activities as diverse as working at the Help Zones of the three campus libraries, developing the enquiry management system, participating in a university-wide client services project, user interface testing for web services, and assisting in the Document Services Unit.

This paper will describe the intern program in detail, including rationale, recruitment, training, costs and outcomes. It will also explain how implementing an intern program does not have to be complex or time consuming for any library and how its ongoing impact can be extremely beneficial for participants, the organisation and the library profession.

Introduction

UNSW Australia Library's Client Services Unit (CSU) has operated a successful intern program since 2012. The program employs newly qualified library graduates (in final year of study or within the first year of graduation) on twelve month fixed-term contracts. CSU recruits interns from either the library technician (para-professional) course at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions or from university degree courses— no differentiation is made between these groups when deciding who to recruit. During their time with CSU, each intern works across all three physical library locations and participates fully in all activities of the Unit. The intern positions are full-time and the participants are paid the equivalent entry level salary and receive the same benefits, including undergoing a probation period, as new permanent CSU library team members.

Background

UNSW Australia (UNSW) was founded in 1949 and is a leading research and teaching institution with a diverse cohort of staff and students. The University currently has approximately 55,000 students from over 120 countries and over 7,500 staff work in its various schools, research centres and administrative departments.

There are three libraries within UNSW Library: the Main Library at the Kensington campus, which houses collections in the fields of arts and social sciences, built environment, business, engineering, medicine and science; the Law Library, located at the lower Kensington campus; and the UNSW Paddington Library, located at the UNSW Art and Design campus in Paddington.

At UNSW Library, CSU provides frontline library services to clients. These services are offered face-to-face at the Help Zones, online using a sophisticated enquiry management system, and by telephone. Staff from CSU deal with a wide range of queries ranging from traditional lending services questions to more general university-oriented enquiries. CSU staff are also allocated a range of back room duties and projects during quieter times of the year.

Review of Literature

In reviewing the literature, library intern programs most commonly describe activities that are part of a library course requirement that require students to work in a library for a period of time with the work used for course credit and/or work experience.

This is deemed important not only for future employability but also so that students can learn from professional librarians. Kelsey and Ramaswamy (2004), for example,

discuss the program at Louisiana State University Libraries (LSU) that is offered to LSU School of Library and Information Science students. As this is a field experience exercise, the internship is highly structured and time consuming, involving the intern (student), their supervisor from the course and the library advisor/mentor in the library. Each intern's individual level interests are identified, relevant activities then planned, and participation monitored and reported. Though such programs have proven to be beneficial to the student and to the library, the work is additional, or in tandem with, the library's day-to-day business. As the work is part of a university course, interns are not paid or treated as a permanent staff member.

In a more recent case study, library school interns who were working with librarians at San Jose State University were interviewed to evaluate the program (Sargent, 2011). The interns in this program were used as additional staff to assist in library work. In particular "in a difficult period of shrinking library resources and large student enrolments, the interns are making an important contribution to the instruction program." (Sargent, 2011 p32). Feedback from the interns indicated that they felt the program was worthwhile as they gained valuable practical experience. They did, however, state that during the experience they did not feel part of the library and that the quality of feedback they received from librarians varied according to who they worked with. They recommended that it would be useful to have a single point of contact in the library who could speak up on their behalf.

Grealy and Hall-Ellis (2009, p132) argue that a service learning experience is vital as without this, "new librarians may encounter significant challenges when trying to find a job after graduation from library school." Wu's (2003) states that this is why it is valuable to employ library and information science (LIS) assistants. She argues,

however, that they are often not treated as regular employees and this impacts on morale and motivation resulting in high turnover, particularly after the students graduate. She suggests that if libraries do wish to employ students it is important to recruit well, treat them with respect, adequately compensate, provide meaningful work, and commit to necessary training and support.

Rationale of the internship program at UNSW Library

Due to reductions in transactional activities and other changes within UNSW Library, in 2011 CSU undertook a review to reduce its staffing levels and to change its staffing profile. A key consideration was to create a very strong client focused team that would deliver a consistent and high quality frontline service across the three campus libraries. To achieve this aim requires staff to be highly motivated and engaged and this can be a challenge to maintain consistently over time, particularly when there is not a high attrition rate of library staff. One strategy to assist with this challenge was to introduce the intern program. This program required four of the permanent full-time team member positions to be re-purposed into four twelve month fixed-term team member positions. It was envisaged that by regularly introducing fresh faces of all ages into CSU, the whole team would benefit through the introduction of new ideas and enthusiasm. It was also thought that permanent team members would relish the opportunity to share their own experiences and expertise with the interns. Of course, an additional and important intention of the intern program was to give new graduates an opportunity to work in a modern and progressive academic library. This positive experience would enable them to build

new skills, thinking and attributes that would, in the short-term, improve employability and in the longer-term, create new leaders for the profession.

Recruitment

For a number of years, UNSW Library has used the recruitment agency, Zenith Information Management, to recruit staff in positions where there is high attrition, such as with shelvers. This has significantly reduced the amount of time spent by UNSW Library managers in recruiting staff. Zenith, being a key player in Australian library and information services recruitment, is well placed to identify emerging talent in the sector and hence it made sense to use the company for the intern program. The Library has had a contract with Zenith to recruit as many interns as required each year for a set fee. Zenith advertises for the intern program and interviews and assesses all potential candidates. The relationship with Zenith has proven hugely beneficial as the company now keeps watch for potential candidates throughout each year and encourages them to apply for intern positions when they become available. From mid-2016 UNSW Library will continue this relationship with the recruitment team in their new venture, Affinity people.

When intern positions become available and after the initial screening, the Library is provided with a shortlist of candidates and candidates are selected to interview. The formal interview process for the intern program is exactly the same as undertaken for any permanent vacancy in CSU. This is considered vital as it fair and equitable, and gives candidates valuable experience in applying for future positions. The process includes providing unsuccessful candidates with sound feedback. Due to the screening process, in most cases candidates are unsuccessful due to limited

positions rather than unsuitability. In these circumstances, an unsuccessful candidate may be offered the next vacant position if this occurs within a few months of their formal interview.

Induction and Training

The interns undertake the same induction and training processes used for all new CSU staff members. Indeed, it is made clear to interns, and to all library staff, that interns are CSU team members rather than as something 'different'. This is considered important to ensure that, just like any staff member, the interns are respected and valued for their own experiences and knowledge that they bring to the workplace. This is reflected in the position descriptions with the Client Services Intern position description being almost identical to that of the Client Services Team Member position description.

As with all newly appointed CSU staff members, formal training is only part of the training program, and new staff very much learn "on the job", working alongside more established staff and dealing with real questions from real clients via all communication channels. Due to the regular changeover of interns, a tangible benefit is that training documentation is in a constant state of review.

As with all new CSU staff, usually interns are in the role for two-three months before they are allocated a Saturday shift as this relies on them being able to work independently. Interns are not required to work on Sundays, although they have the opportunity to do so.

When the first interns were recruited in 2012, all four successful candidates started at approximately the same time in the early weeks of March. This start date proved to be a challenge as inducting and training four staff at the beginning of first semester, the busiest time of the academic year, was difficult and stressful.

However, since the first intake, this does not occur as frequently. This is due to the fact that an intern may leave the program for various reasons before the full twelve months has been completed, and as recruitment generally takes place immediately an intern leaves, recruitment is now spread more evenly throughout the year.

However, it is inevitable that new interns sometimes do start at the busiest times of year, and in these circumstances additional support is now provided.

Costs

As the intern positions are costed as part of the CSU staffing budget, the program does not add to the Unit's headcount in any year. The CSU intern positions are not graded as professional librarian positions, they are considered para-professional entry level positions. In 2016, an additional intern position has been created by re-purposing a vacant permanent full-time position. There is the additional recruitment cost of using a recruitment agency, but doing so substantially reduces time and costs generated by senior library staff having to short list large numbers of candidates before moving to the interview stage.

There is also the high level commitment in training new staff. However, the benefits of the program outweigh this overhead and as already stated, regular training means processes and procedures are kept up-to-date and are continually improved.

Discussion

The intern program is now in its fifth year of operation and twenty new library graduates have participated in the program, with another three joining in the first half of 2016. The interns have made a wonderful contribution to the CSU team. As one CSU team member says:

The intern program has been very beneficial. Personally I have really enjoyed meeting new people who each bring different experiences and new ideas to our team. We have always benefited from each intern who has been with us, and we have gained much from the time together, as have they.

As envisaged, the interns have definitely brought with them enthusiasm and a desire to be fully committed to delivering a high quality client service. Being recent students themselves, they understand the importance of providing the right information at the right time and are willing to not only learn from their colleagues but provide their own suggestions to issues or challenges in developing client services. Their enthusiasm is infectious and has certainly helped in developing a strong culture of client service amongst all CSU team members. A Client Services Coordinator recently observed:

The intern program brings new staff with a lot of ideas and knowledge to CSU. They come from a range of work backgrounds and have great customer service skills and bring energy and vitality to our unit. It is a very successful program for UNSW Library.

Intern feedback has been consistently positive. As one participant stated:

I've never been able to picture myself with a career. I've always had jobs, not thinking I had any useful skills other than being a people person. I think I now

have a career, and though the path I'd like to take may change, it's thanks to the internship program that I am where I am. Library jobs for rank beginners are very hard to come by which makes the internships so important. That's five people who are super bright and keen and have the potential to be great in various aspects of libraries, but may have only worked in a café or bowling club or car rental joint, who are given a chance to learn in one of the best academic libraries in the country. And that is pretty cool.

The interns appreciate that they are treated the same as all CSU team members and are exposed to relevant training and professional development opportunities. In 2015, for example, all four interns actively participated in an-invoke only "think tank" three-day conference at Macquarie University that brought together librarians, academics, authors and researchers to discuss the future of scholarly publishing. The interns relish working at the different library locations and the chance to learn on the job. They value the trust given to them to work unsupervised and to undertake work that is meaningful and important. As one intern from 2014 remarked:

The opportunity to learn on the job, and then to be trusted to work alongside permanent staff members and indeed alone at times, was very satisfying and built my confidence to the point that I feel I can handle any client service situation and perform well.

Since the program began, 60% of the interns have since gained permanent positions or different fixed-term positions in CSU and in other areas of UNSW Library. In a very strong affirmation of the success of the program, three of the CSU interns who stayed on at UNSW Library have been appointed into librarian positions in the Academic Services Unit. Of the remaining 40%, most are now employed in

other libraries (corporate, public, academic) with two moving outside the sector - one into personal fitness and the other to motherhood. Interestingly, for those interns that gained employment elsewhere, they all stated that their new employers were very impressed with the UNSW Library internship experience and that this experience was a significant factor in successfully reaching interview stage and eventually gaining the position. A 2015 program participant reported that:

The program was very beneficial to my career. I have found that potential employers have been very impressed with the fact that I have on my application that I was an intern at UNSW Library. I gained valuable skills that I have built upon, and had a really good experience.

Suggestions by the interns to improve the program have generally been about the desire to experience work in other units of the Library, and also the need for someone who the intern can turn to in the first few weeks of their internship for advice and encouragement. One participant from the program in 2015 commented:

I would introduce a mentoring program...particularly at the beginning of the internship, I would like someone willing to show the interns around and make introductions, people who new staff are going to feel they can approach with questions or ideas.

While a 2014 participant recently said:

When I finished my internship I recommended that future interns work in other library units to provide more industry experience as well as a holistic of idea of the way the library works.

New developments for 2016

After taking into account the intern feedback, changes have been made in 2016.

Firstly, the number of CSU interns has been increased from four to five. This allows CSU to offer each intern a ten week placement in another UNSW Library unit while maintaining regular CSU staffing levels. The placement in can be scheduled for any suitable time after the first three months of the internship, and while the interns own preference is taken into account, the Client Service Manager, together with the Client Services Team Leader, will make the final decision. The decision is based on each intern's attributes and qualifications as well as the needs of CSU and the other units. It is envisaged that the opportunity to work for an extended period in another area of the Library will enhance the intern experience, and ensure that they gain deeper experience that will benefit them as they move forward in their library careers.

All new interns will also now be given an informal mentor for the first few weeks of their internships. These mentors will, wherever possible, be former interns who have stayed on with CSU in permanent positions. Feedback from interns is that this would be a beneficial, as sometimes they felt a little isolated and shy in approaching a supervisor or an experienced staff member.

Conclusion

It is clear that the UNSW Library internship program has been and continues to be a great success. There is no doubt that the Library has benefited from the new ideas and enthusiasm that the interns bring to the role. Their contribution has been significant and has been a wonderful opportunity for UNSW Library, and the Client

Services Unit in particular, to have a workforce that is forward thinking, keen for new challenges and excited to be working in a library. It is also pleasing that the calibre of interviewed candidates has been consistently high and it is very rewarding to be able to provide that initial employment experience that is so important for graduating students. Word about the program is spreading – evident from this year’s shortlisting of candidates that revealed a much higher percentage of candidates from interstate than in previous years.

Though there is some additional work and costs in operating an intern program, UNSW Library’s recruitment practice and experience of embedding the program into well-established “business as usual” training and work programs of the Library means these issues are minimal. Most importantly, the benefits of such a program are so significant and valuable that including interns as part of its staffing profile should become an essential component for any modern library.

References

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