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## **Impact of LIS professionals with doctorates on library services**

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### **Abstract:**

*Encouraging patrons to engage in lifelong learning is a core function in many libraries. Librarians themselves also increasingly enrol in an ever greater spread of formal professional development opportunities, including doctoral study programmes. Generally, workplaces see having a PhD as a desirable qualification, but does it really make a difference to the service we provide in our respective organisations? And what is the role of the doctorate in the library?*

*This paper reports on a small-scale investigation (part of a Master's degree in Education) into the perceptions of library and information professionals in the Republic of Ireland regarding the usefulness of holding a doctorate. Ten librarians with doctorates and ten library managers were interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews. Additionally, a focus group was held with librarians who worked with PhD holders. Adhering to a Phenomenographic theoretical framework, data was analysed with the aid of Framework Analysis. A so-called outcome space was created for each group of respondents consisting of three ways of experiencing this phenomenon (conceptions) as well as a number of themes, which were discernible across these categories (dimensions of variations). Results show an overlap of two outcome spaces of the librarian and employer cohorts. This was complimented by data from the focus group. The perceived impact of a doctorate depended on the category.*

*The discussion focuses on the likely implications for library services, the impact on the communities we serve, and what it means for the profession in Ireland. Unlike other countries, the number of librarians with a doctorate is very small and the paths for progression for these individuals are limited. Some recommendations will conclude the paper.*

**Keywords:** library services, doctorate, education of librarians, continuing professional development, Phenomenography

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## **Introduction**

PhDs in Librarianship have existed for nearly a century. The first was established at the University of Chicago in 1928 (Abrera, 1987). In the Republic of Ireland, University College Dublin offers the ‘Doctor of Philosophy in Information and Communication Studies’ (UCD School of Information and Communication Studies, 2018). It is not known, however, how many librarians hold any kind of doctorate in Ireland. According to the latest Census, 110 persons working in libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities in 2016 possessed a doctorate (Central Statistics Office, n.d.).

Librarians themselves have a role to play in doctoral education, especially in university libraries. They are becoming more engaged in teaching research skills and in partnering academics in conducting studies. These activities in turn shape the perception of students and academics of the library and its services. Librarians who can offer this peer-level support help strengthen relationships (Warren, 2018) and therefore secure the survival of the library service into the future. Scholarship, including the dissemination and publication of research, is now part of the day job for many academic librarians (Hoffmann, Berg, & Koufogiannakis, 2017).

In the absence of any Irish research, the literature review looked at international studies. In North America, having a PhD enabled librarians to secure tenure as well as giving them status (Bechtel, 1985). This could lead to enhanced service provision, particularly in academic libraries, where librarians were seen as academic professionals. Not all, however, subscribed to this view. Ridley’s (2018) study of 13 academic librarians asked whether the PhD should be the new terminal degree. Participants (some held a doctorate, some did not) rejected the idea of it being a requirement.

## **Theoretical framework and data collection**

Two research questions developed from the literature review:

- What are the perceptions of librarians and employers of the value of having a doctorate?
- How does having a doctorate impact on library services?

The author chose Phenomenography, a research approach she had used in the past. The outcome of a Phenomenographic study is to understand the qualitatively different ways in which participants experienced a particular phenomenon, distilled into ‘categories of description’. Themes that are common to all categories but are experienced in a diverging manner are ‘dimensions of variation’. The final so-called ‘outcome space’ consists of a description of the relations that categories have with each other and also to the dimensions of variations within each category.

Keith Trigwell, a well-established Phenomenographer, advised using between ten and 15 interviewees as a minimum (Trigwell, 2000). The author interviewed ten librarians with doctorates and ten library managers (one additional written answer was received), and also conducted a focus group with four experienced information professionals who did not hold a PhD but were working or had previously worked with colleagues who did. Participants were recruited through calls posted on various Irish library email lists. Interviews took place between December 2018 until March 2019. The length of the semi-structured interviews varied, ranging from 20 minutes to over one hour, with an average length of 33 mins. The researcher followed two interview guides (one for each cohort), which had received ethical clearance from Trinity College Dublin and had been tested during a pilot interview. All data was transcribed. The

sample revealed varied backgrounds, ages and experiences. None of the librarians held a doctorate in LIS and two of the managers also held PhDs. The focus group consisted of three female and one male participant. All four held a Master's degree in LIS and had additional degrees.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

The researcher used Framework Analysis (FA), a method developed in order to study applied qualitative research questions within a limited time frame (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). FA consists of five steps: familiarisation, identification of thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation.

Data collected from all three cohorts was analysed: the perceptions of librarians and employers were formed into two separate Phenomenographic outcome spaces; the conceptions of the focus group were interwoven, complementing and juxtaposing them.

The categories for the employers and librarians with PhDs were somewhat identical: 'changing perceptions of the library' (leading to better services), 'being an expert', and 'growing as a person'.

Four succinct dimensions of variation were observed: 'motivation' (to do the PhD), 'skills' (developed through the PhD and applied in the workplace), 'benefit' (who benefits from the PhD?) and 'personal attributes' (personality and behavioural aspects). Each one was more to the forefront in some categories than in others.

### The role of the doctorate in the library

Depending on the category, the place of the PhD was perceived as follows:

#### *Librarians*

1. A PhD helps with service improvement in the library: PhD helps me to provide a better service. Skills learned through the research can be applied across the organisation and beyond, which makes me a better librarian.
2. Having a PhD means becoming or being a subject expert: The PhD adds gravitas, and I am being taken seriously and not talked down by stakeholders. It has provided me with a depth of knowledge and clarity of thought.
3. The PhD is a form of professional development: It was not a career move; I did it purely out of interest and personal fulfilment.

#### *Employers*

1. A PhD helps changing perceptions of the library (and of the LIS profession) and its services: it helps with the standing of the profession and enhances its reputation, raises the profile of the library by adding value to the library and its services, sometimes opening up new roles and bringing in additional business.
2. Having a PhD means an employee has become a subject expert: they have experience of the research process - librarians and the library are partners in the educational process.

3. The PhD has led to personal growth of the employee: a love of research led to their sense of self having changed.

The focus group participants saw potential roles for PhD holders in libraries where a specific depth of knowledge was needed, but queried its usefulness in, e.g., a school library. A one-size-fits-all qualification was not a realistic scenario in the library world, according to their view. When the researcher gave them the hypothetical scenario of a government-led push to increase the number of librarians with doctorates, they warned about what they saw as a devaluation of the MLIS and other qualifications. Should that ever happen, they felt that there was a proper structure needed, which should be put in place by the government to counteract any such demotion. They could foresee the establishment of another grade of ‘professional librarian’.

### PhD impact on library services

Different perceptions therefore influenced the perceived impact on library services:

1. PhD as transformative tool for growing future library services by elevating librarians and the LIS profession;
2. The PhD confers academic skills on the individual and this feeds into educational processes within the organisation;
3. The PhD is a testament to personal achievement, which may be used for improving library services.

When asked about their current duties and visions for their respective libraries, the managers all exhibited a strong service orientation and a sense that the work needed to be aligned with the main organisation to help it achieve its goals. This manifested itself again when asked about their decisions to employ PhD holders or support doctoral studies:

- Employees were hired specifically to fill certain roles, where a doctorate was an advantage;
- Other PhD graduates got a job because of their skills and knowledge in the library field and they just happened to have a doctorate,
- Librarians had been working in the institution for a while and then decided to do a doctorate.

This breakdown tallies with librarians’ experiences. Three had been working as information professionals before they started their doctorates. Three more had previous work experience and loved the library environment. Another three switched to librarianship after using libraries and archives during their studies, which they described as ‘moving to the other side of the desk’ (Int. 9) and ‘I jumped over the counter’ (Int. 3).

And one interviewee saw the PhD as one more step to becoming a librarian:

I was offered it and I jumped at it, the reason being, essentially, was that it was [mentions subject area] and I was still on my road to being a librarian! So it wasn’t going to be a waste in that.” (04:30) Int. 7, special/research

## **Discussion**

How do the findings of this study tally with the wider literature? Below are some points of discussion.

### Enhanced credibility with stakeholders

Gilman and Lindquist's (2010) survey of North American academic librarians with PhDs found that, in order of descending importance, the following advantages were mentioned: credibility with the teaching faculty, subject expertise, ability to relate to academic users and in-depth understanding of the research process. This corresponds with category 2 (librarian cohort) in the present study, which stressed the role of the PhD in embedding the librarian within the wider research community.

### Improved library services

McCluskey Dean (2017) examined her own experience of doing a part-time professional doctorate in Information Science. She found that doing a literature review as a practising librarian was easy, but that she could now relate better to her research students struggling with technology. All categories in the librarian cohort accentuated the fact that the skills learned through the PhD had positive ramifications for the services in the library. Categories 2 and 3 (in the librarian cohort) in particular stressed transmission of knowledge between librarian and patrons.

Why do employers take on doctorate holders? Managers in both public and private non-academic organisations taking part in a survey by Haapakorpi (2017) mentioned foremost the enhancement of the professional credibility of the organisation, to strengthen the research and development activities as well as increased collaboration with universities through personal networks of the researcher. Categories 1 and 2 (employer cohort) in the present study confirmed similar reasons.

From the librarians' perspective, being invited onto research committees (category 1) and being co-authors on papers with academics (as happened in category 2) allowed them to establish new services. This mirrored some of the findings from a survey by Hoffmann, Berg and Koufogiannakis (2017), who listed factors that correlated with enabling librarians to become successful researchers in their respective libraries: individual attributes, peers and community as well as institutional structures and support. There was an overwhelming desire to have a supportive institutional environment for research.

### Few graduates with PhDs in LIS

Whether or not someone is undertaking a doctorate still seems to be a personal choice. Scholarships in LIS, though increasingly available, are not sufficient to sustain a student, which means that most would have to work at least part-time. Interestingly, none of the librarians nor any of the employers interviewed held a PhD in LIS. Those who started a PhD in LIS would be part of a very select group, with numbers in Ireland still very low.

Even in larger populations, having a PhD as a librarian is quite unusual. In 2018, a census was conducted by the Canadian Association of Professional Librarians (CAPAL) among its member institutions. Out of a sample group of 1827, they received 920 completed responses,

which means that half of the targeted librarians had responded. 52 of these held a PhD with nine in LIS (Canadian Association of Professional Librarians, 2019). The CAPAL figures showed how few LIS professionals possess a doctorate.

### LIS PhDs in the workplace

This begs the question of how we will proceed as a profession, if we have so few doctorates in our field and none, with a few exceptions, working as professional librarians. Are we educating our few doctoral LIS students in Ireland to work in academia only? As the evidence from this study shows they are not moving into the profession. The author argues that library work and LIS academia should be better intertwined with research informing practice and everyday library issues being examined in a scholarly way.

It could be argued that the viability of LIS as an academic subject depends on its relevancy to the profession as it is happening in other occupations. No doubt, this will be part of a wider, ongoing debate, the continued self-examination happening in LIS. The findings point to one fundamental predicament, which goes to the core of this project: *the value and status of the doctorate in LIS itself*. Librarians with other subject PhDs are, evidently, successful and competent, but this issue seems to be at the heart of the debate between LIS (practical) skills versus PhD (academic) skills.

### **Recommendations for policy and practice**

The hope is that there will always be a place for the LIS PhD – both in academia and in the library workplace. A number of librarians and managers suggested more screening at Master student level to find potential PhD candidates in order to spot talent early. Additionally, as one librarian had suggested, people already working in libraries and who have published a substantial body of literature might be interested in other types of doctorates, e.g. PhD by Publication.

The Library Association of Ireland (LAI) could nourish a culture of research by hosting informal gatherings that allow for debate and exchange of ideas. This could be arranged easily at low cost, ideally in conjunction with the library schools, especially with UCD.

Several library employers expressed an interest in pursuing a doctorate as a result of their interview. Talking about the research other people were doing seemed to (re)ignite a spark.

Another suggestion that came up during a few interviews was running a workshop for students and practising librarians, where PhD holders could outline the different steps involved in gaining a doctorate – a mentoring programme was also mentioned. The researcher has plans to build on this goodwill within the LAI community in the near future.

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