

Navigating British and American Academic Health Sciences Librarianship: A New Professional's Perspective

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Abstract: The new generation of librarianship is characterized by multi-nationalism; this column discusses the transitional process between British and American health sciences librarianship, as perceived by a new professional who has recently moved from the United Kingdom to the United States.

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Introduction

The new generation of librarianship is characterized by multi-nationalism—whether that is through collaborative multi-national research and publishing, participating in exchange programs, attending overseas conferences, or pursuing internship or employment opportunities abroad. As a new health sciences librarian who has just moved from the United Kingdom to the United States, my career trajectory is an example of this trend. I graduated in December 2016 from a distance learning Master’s program at Aberystwyth University (Wales), having concurrently held a paraprofessional position in the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford (England). I am now an Assistant University Librarian at the Health Science Center Libraries, University of Florida (United States). For any librarians thinking of making a similar transatlantic transition, this column reflects on my initial impressions of the differences between British and American health sciences librarianship, the information resources that helped me navigate the relocation process, and the opportunities and challenges that I experienced along the way.

Work Eligibility

Before considering moving abroad and beginning the job application process, it is of course necessary to qualify for an [employment visa](#). Based on my experiences, I would emphasize the importance of recognizing the complexity and length of the visa process. For me, the duration was one and a half years from submission to approval.

Professional Associations and Career Resources

Before relocating, I joined both the American Library Association ([ALA](#)) and the Medical Library Association ([MLA](#)), with the purpose of becoming more familiar with the policies, initiatives, and trends impacting American librarianship. ALA has eleven [membership divisions](#). Due to my professional

interests, I joined the Association of College and Research Libraries ([ACRL](#)) and the Reference and User Services Association ([RUSA](#)), which enabled me to subscribe to relevant discussion lists, news magazines, and scholarly journals. ALA also offers [career development resources](#), including guidelines on job search strategies, cover letters, resumes, and interview skills. [ALA's JobList](#) was my primary source for position vacancies, as it is possible to search by location, job role, institution type, and level of required experience. As an aspiring health sciences librarian, I also made much use of the [professional development](#) resources available through MLA. MLA's [Career Center](#) includes information on job roles within health sciences librarianship, core professional competencies, networking recommendations for new professionals, and webinars for continuing education. MLA also has an active Twitter presence, a [blog](#), email [newsletters](#), the peer-reviewed scholarly journal [JMLA](#), and a [position vacancies](#) page. Other useful locations for position vacancies include state or regional library association websites, the Association of Research Libraries' [job listings](#) page, and the website [INALJ](#) (which stands for I Need A Library Job).

Mentorship

The most helpful resource throughout the transitional process was my ongoing communication with two American mentors—one the Dean of Libraries at a southern university, the other a Library Director at a northern medical center. The first mentorship connection occurred through a serendipitous introduction by a family member, the second through MLA's excellent [mentoring program](#). Through email correspondence, I learned about some of the many differences between American and British academic health sciences librarianship.

Degree Equivalency

As mentioned, I hold an MLIS qualification, however verifying degree equivalency is a prerequisite for employment in the United States. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information

Professionals ([CILIP](#)) accredits British degree courses by level: Foundation, Undergraduate, Postgraduate Diploma, and Master's. A program's accreditation status is dependent upon adherence to CILIP's Professional Knowledge and Skills Base ([PKSB](#)). In comparison, [ALA](#) has its own [Standards for Accreditation](#). CILIP has a [reciprocal agreement](#) with ALA, stating that "the American Library Association... and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals recognise the Master's-level Degree programmes." In practice, this means that any qualification below a library and information studies Master's degree is not recognized by ALA as a [professional degree for librarians](#). When job-seeking, I found it was important to clearly state my qualification level within my written applications, as well as to provide links to CILIP and ALA's reciprocity statements. It is also important to note, however, that it is still "[up to the employer to determine whether or not to accept a foreign degree as equivalent](#)." Before being invited to interview or offered a position, it is likely that a degree equivalency check will be required. The employer may evaluate equivalency on the applicant's behalf using a [Credential Evaluation Agency](#), or the applicant will be required to pay for credential evaluation services on an individual basis.

Job Application and Interview Process

The job application process also differs in relation to terminology; in the United States the British résumé is known as a curriculum vitae (C.V.) and in the United Kingdom vice versa. Spelling variances and colloquialisms are a potential pitfall, so my mentors reviewed my résumé and cover letter template, which was invaluable. It was recommended that I include my visa status within my cover letter, which in retrospect was appreciated by the interviewer panels. Other features of the U.S. application process that do not typically occur within the United Kingdom are that some U.S. institutions request applicants to write a brief paper on a given topic, a telephone or Skype interview may precede an invitation to interview on campus, a face-to-face interview often occurs over a two to

three day period, travel and accommodations during interviews are often reimbursed by the host institution, interviewees might be required to teach a mock class, and candidates may meet with numerous institutional faculty and staff in addition to the search committee. In contrast, position interviews in the United Kingdom are usually half a day or less, with no interview preceding the face-to-face campus visit. Although travel may be reimbursed, accommodations typically will not be. Instead of a mock class through which instructional competencies and subject knowledge are assessed, a PowerPoint presentation is commonly conducted on a given topic that links to issues and trends currently impacting librarianship—the purpose of which is to demonstrate communication skills, critical thinking, and current awareness.

Tenure or Chartership

In the United States, new professionals may choose to pursue either a tenure- or non-tenure-track position. Although there is variation between institutions, tenure-track positions generally require published research, conference presentations, teaching, grant efforts, and leadership roles on national and/or international committees. This is the case at the University of Florida, where faculty librarians must submit a tenure packet by the end of their sixth year of employment. Non-tenure positions usually have less rigorous publishing and research requirements. There is considerable debate within the profession over which status is preferred for academic librarians. ACRL's [Standards for Faculty Status](#) indicate that faculty benefits should include: eligibility for representation on college and university governing bodies, a peer-review promotion system that encourages ongoing professional development, the opportunity to take sabbaticals, and access to research project funding. In the United Kingdom, librarians are either chartered or non-chartered, and there is a similar lack of consensus amongst British information professionals regarding preferred status and the benefits of [chartership](#). Chartered Membership is the qualification awarded by CILIP to mid-career librarians who

have chosen to submit a portfolio as evidence of continuing professional development. It is generally a two-year process and if successful, the librarian is added to [CILIP](#)'s Register of Practitioners which is maintained under Royal Charter, and the information professional's skills and achievements are publicly recognized.

Academy of Health Information Professionals (AHIP)

[AHIP](#) is MLA's peer-reviewed professional development and career recognition program. New librarians apply at the Provisional level, once they are able to demonstrate they meet a specified set of [professional competencies](#). To my knowledge there is no similar British program, though CILIP's [Health Libraries Group](#) is a useful resource for continuing professional development, networking, and collaboration.

Health Education Systems

Undergraduate health sciences and medical education differs between Britain and the United States, as does the health system. First-year medical students in the United States have a bachelor's degree already, through which they complete a number of prerequisite classes. British medical and health sciences students typically begin their programs directly after completing their secondary education. There are also significant terminology differences, including: clinical rotations vs. clinical placements, interns vs. foundation year doctors, residents vs. doctors-in-training, fellows vs. specialty registrars, primary care providers vs. general practitioners, and attending physicians vs. consultants. One of the most significant challenges I have experienced is understanding the U.S. health system. The British [National Health Service](#) is free at the point of care, and individuals attend their local general practice and are referred to specialists when necessary. The U.S. health system functions as a marketplace where consumers choose an insurance company, a corresponding primary care provider,

and specialists. The precise system varies by state, employer, insurance company, and price plan coverage.

Summary

Overall, my relocation experience has been enormously positive. I look forward to seeing increased collaboration between libraries, as multi-nationalism continues to grow as a trend within the new generation of librarianship.