All change: job rotations as a workplace learning tool in the Flinders University Library Graduate Trainee Librarian Program

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Abstract:

This paper examines the place of job rotations as a workplace learning tool in the Graduate Trainee Librarian Program at Flinders University Library, Australia. Specifically, it asks two questions: whether job rotation is an effective workplace learning tool for new librarians; and, whether the trainee experience contributed to the retention in the Library and career progression of those in the program. These questions are examined using Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Framework. The findings indicate that while participants rate the trainee program very positively overall, their satisfaction with workplace learning in their placements was lower. The majority of former trainees have remained with the Library and have progressed in their careers.

1. Introduction

The Flinders University Library Graduate Trainee Librarian Program appoints recently qualified librarians on the basis of having a recognised library qualification but little or no professional experience. Trainee positions are for three years, during which time appointees are rotated to at least two different positions in the Library. However, unlike many other graduate entry programs for newly qualified librarians, appointments are continuing. The trainee program uses the linked position provision of Flinders University for appointees to commence at one level lower than the lowest grade for experienced librarians. After three years they are automatically promoted to the next level in recognition of experience gained

through job rotations. The scheme has been in operation for 15 years, during which time there have been 16 trainees.

In Australia, a library and information science (LIS) qualification is an essential prerequisite to becoming a librarian, but there is no requirement to have library work experience before undertaking the course. Although the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) *Recognition of courses* requires "practical experience, through work placements or other appropriate ways, as an integrated component to link theory to the practice of the profession" (2008), the duration of experience is not specified. This means that LIS students may have had little exposure to the professional workplace upon graduating.

A lack of work experience can be a major drawback for new graduates when applying for entry level positions, and even more so when there are few employment opportunities. This was the case in the tight labour market conditions of the mid-1990s in South Australia, when the trainee program was established at Flinders University Library by the then University Librarian, Mr Bill Cations. As noted by Pamment, "the South Australian climate saw a stagnant job market, offering limited opportunities for new graduates. Many newly qualified librarians were employed as library assistants, an unqualified entry level, with little opportunity to move to a professional position, either within or outside their organisations." (2008, p659).

At the time of the trainee program's inception, it was not unusual for entry level librarian vacancies to attract between 60 and 120 applications for a single position (Cations, n.d.). As the selection criteria for such positions inevitably required relevant experience, newly qualified librarians were unlikely to even be short-listed for an interview. This was an obvious concern for succession planning, with Cations stating that "if we could not find a place for them [new librarians] in our organisation ... it would be detrimental to the long term development of our library and the library profession." (n.d.)

The trainee program was thus conceived to provide new librarians "the chance of being competitive in the workforce" (Cations, 2008, p24). Essentially, it allowed new graduates the opportunity of an entry level librarian position without having to compete with more experienced applicants. It acknowledged the applicants' lack of experience by offering appointments at one level lower than the lowest level for experienced librarians, and then gave them workplace learning through job rotations.

2. Review of the literature

To place the Flinders University Library's trainee program in context, a literature review was conducted around the theme of job rotations in the LIS sector and beyond. The literature was also examined for reference to "new librarians" and "new graduates" in the LIS field.

The literature devoted to new librarians has expanded rapidly in recent years, much of it in the context of succession planning. However, many authors have also explored the mentoring and peer support needs for new librarians (Bradley, Dalby and Spencer, 2009; Hallam and Newton-Smith, 2006; Henderson et al., 2003; and Oud, 2008). Those who explore workplace learning often do so in a specific context, such as Mugridge's examination

of newly-graduated cataloguing librarians (2008).   There has also been some discussion of "cadetships" in the LIS literature, whereby non-LIS graduates are offered employment in a library and the opportunity to study for a LIS qualification. Examples of case studies of cadet programs include Engel, Huang and Reiss (2003) and Wright and Lombardi (2006).

Job rotation is just one of the many workplace learning tools (Malinski, 2002). While there have been many definitions of the practice (as described by Earney and Martins, 2009), there is agreement that rotations occur amongst employees at the same level of responsibility within an organisation for a fixed period of time. Job rotation schemes are often used with new graduate employees, especially in medium to large sized organisations, in preparation for appointment to a substantive post (Bennett, 2003, p7). Job rotation can be seen to promote employee learning (in that it makes employees more versatile) as well as employer learning (employers learn about individual employees' strengths through rotation) (Eriksson and Ortega, 2006, p653). However, it has been suggested that rotation is better at building some skills over others; for example, it improves knowledge about the organisation more than technical expertise (Campion, M., Cheraskin, L. and Stevens, M., 1994, p1523). In the LIS context, job rotation has been used as an employee motivational tool (Olorunsola, 2000; Adomi, 2001; Pierce, 2001; Malinski, 2002; and Earney and Martins, 2009), for both professional librarians and library assistants.

3. Methodology

Two tools were used to examine the effectiveness of job rotations as a workplace learning tool in the trainee librarian program. Firstly, a survey was developed to collect data about the trainee experiences of past and current trainees. Secondly, a semi-structured group interview was conducted with three current and immediate past trainees. It should be noted that the author is both an employee of Flinders University Library as well as an ex-trainee.

The survey was distributed online to 14 of the 16 current and former trainees (one former trainee was unable to be traced, and the author was excluded from responding). The survey design captured broad data about the trainees, such as demographic information, as well as mapping the rotations each trainee took through their traineeship. It also included two areas of measurement: the first in relation to the traineeship experience overall; the second to indicate satisfaction with workplace learning as a trainee. There was a 100% response rate to this survey.

In an effort to evaluate the experiences of the most immediate past and current trainees, a semi-structured group interview was held with all relevant participants, two of whom had recently completed their traineeship, and one current trainee. The questions asked were open-ended to allow themes to be explored as they developed. The interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Framework was chosen to evaluate the workplace learning effectiveness of job rotations in the trainee program. First published in 1959, it is now

considered a classic in the workplace learning literature. The Framework consists of four levels:

- Level 1: Emotional reaction - how participants respond to the program
- Level 2: Learning achievement - what knowledge and skills do participants acquire from the program
- Level 3: Behavioural change - how participants apply what they learn to what they do
- Level 4: Organisational impact - what results can be identified from the program

(Kirkpatrick, D. and Kirkpatrick, J., 2006).

However, the trainee program was not evaluated against all of these levels. In keeping with a "bottom line" evaluation model (Smith, 2004), data were collected at levels one and four of Kirkpatrick's framework.

It should be acknowledged that a weakness of bottom line evaluation is its subjectivity and a possibility of bias in the results. Its strength, however, is its direct engagement with participants as well as links between individual performance and organisational performance. (Smith, 2004, p320).
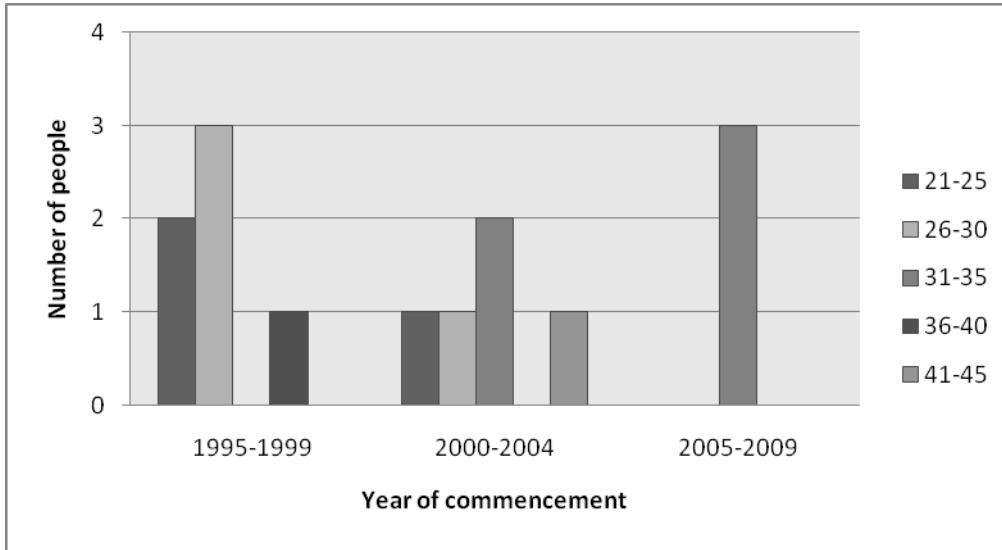
4. Analysis of survey results

4.1 Past and current trainees

Of the 14 respondents to the survey, 12 were female and 2 male (85.7% and 14.3% respectively), which is in line with the gender balance of the library workforce in Australia: the 2008 *NeXus* census found a 85:15 ratio of female to male workers (Hallam, 2008, p14).
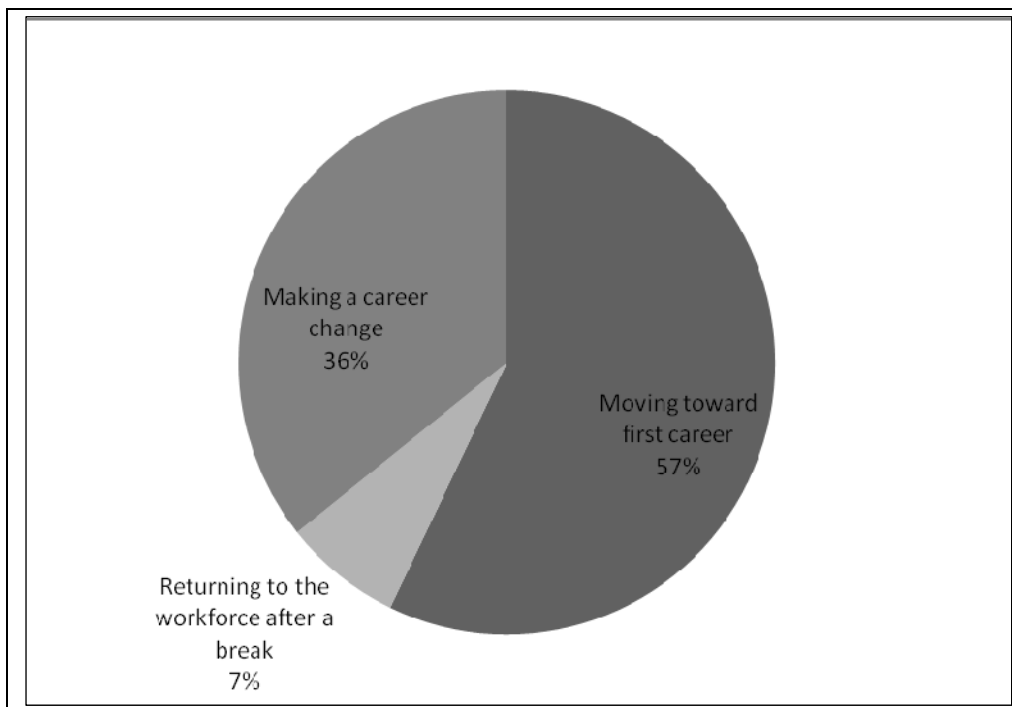
At the time of the survey, five respondents identified as being in the 31-35 age group (35.7%), another five were in the 36-40 age group (35.7%), two were in the 41-45 group (14.3%), and another two in the 45-50 group (14.3%). As the trainee program has been in operation for 15 years, this is not indicative of participants' ages as trainees. The age of respondents on commencing their traineeship is presented in five-year ranges in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Age on commencing traineeship

Hallam has noted that the Australian LIS profession attracts a significant number of career change workers (2008, p35). The survey asked respondents to identify whether they were starting their first career, making a career change, or returning to the workforce after a break. Eight identified themselves as starting their first career (57%), five as making a career change (36%) and one as returning to the workforce after a break (7%). To compare this, the NeXus census reported that 34% of those working in academic libraries were entering their first career, and 47% were making a career change, showing a higher rate of first career professionals for those in the trainee program.

Figure 2: Career stages of respondents on commencing traineeships
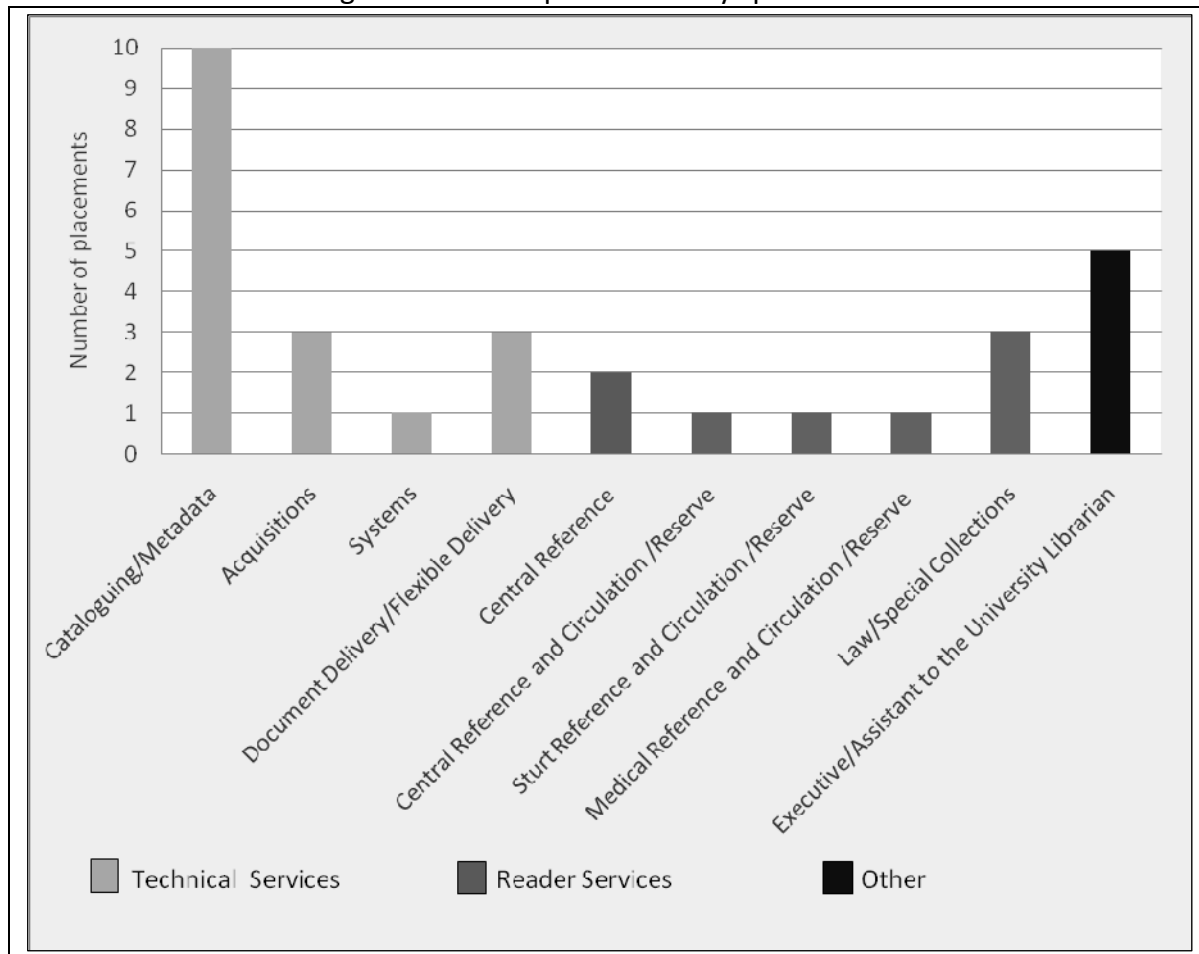
4.2 Trainee rotations and placements

For eleven respondents (78.5%), the traineeship was their first professional LIS job. Most completed two (64.3%, nine of the respondents) or three (21.4%, three of the respondents) rotations, while two had only one trainee position. Most placements were for approximately a year, although it in some cases trainees stayed in the same department for 18 months. Nine (64.3%) of those who started their traineeship completed it, four (28.6%) did not, and one is currently a trainee. Of the four who did not finish, two were promoted in the Library before completion, and two left the Library before completion.

Respondents were asked to indicate their placements as a trainee. Trainee placements were not uniform, but based on a combination of factors, including: the organisation's needs at the time; the individual's capabilities and needs as a new librarian; other staffing movements in the organisation; and, to a lesser extent, the individual's preferences. Figures 3 and 4 show trainee placements at the broad departmental level and specific area level, respectively.

Figure 3: Trainee placements by department

Department	Number of Placements	Percentage
Technical Services	17	56.67%
Reader Services	8	26.67%
Other	5	16.66%
Total	30	100%

Figure 4: Trainee placements by specific area

In total, 17 rotations were conducted through various Technical Services departments, with the cataloguing/metadata services department hosting by far the greatest number (ten, 33.3% of all rotations). Eight rotations were conducted through various Reader Services departments. Five rotations were as the Assistant/Executive Assistant to the University Librarian, a separate administrative department in the Library's organisational structure. Other areas to receive multiple trainees were the Document Delivery/Flexible Delivery department, the Central Reference Desk (in conjunction with the Circulation/Reserve department in two instances), and the Law and Special Collections area, which have all hosted three trainees each. Branch libraries (the Sturt Library and Medical Library located separately from the Central Library on the campus) have hosted a trainee each. This variety has meant that no two trainee experiences have been quite the same.

5. Evaluation

5.1 Participants' responses
Participants' responses to the trainee program were gathered in line with level one evaluation (emotional reaction) of Kirkpatrick's framework. Two areas of measurement were included in the online survey. Respondents were asked to evaluate their overall

experience and the workplace learning experiences in each of their departmental placements.

In asking respondents to evaluate their overall trainee experience, a five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1=extremely negative to 5=extremely positive. The mean rating was 4.43 (with a standard deviation of 1.51) indicating that respondents found the experience of being a trainee very positive. While this does not evaluate their workplace learning as a trainee, it is important because the interest and motivation of participants are critical to the success of any learning process (Kirkpatrick, D. and Kirkpatrick, J., 2006, p40).

Respondents were also asked to indicate their satisfaction with workplace learning of each department in which they were placed. Again, a five point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1=very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied. The data were then grouped into the broadest departmental level in order to make the results anonymous, and are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with workplace learning experiences

Department	Mean rating	Standard deviation
Technical Services	3.61	1.54
Reader Services	3.33	1.45
Other	4.0	1.73

While the departmental ratings indicate that respondents were mostly satisfied with their workplace learning experiences, it is not as strong as the satisfaction with their overall trainee experience. Qualitative data gathered from the group interview of the three most recent trainees supports this. Their comments about the overall trainee experience were unanimously positive; when asked about departmental level experiences, their responses were mixed. Selected comments that are representative of this are included in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Trainees' comments: general versus specific

General comments about the trainee program	Specific comments about departmental learning experiences	
Positive	**Positive**	**Negative**
My managers were very accommodating	It [the department] was an important grounding as a new librarian	I felt my work was always being checked because I was a trainee
It was a highly supportive environment	It was an equitable environment	I felt I was a burden to the department
Traineeships are highly regarded [amongst LIS graduates]	I felt I was able to prove myself [as a trainee]	It [the work] was difficult to sustain
It was good to learn practical skills on the job		I didn't want to stay [in the department]
I felt I had the support of senior staff as a trainee		I wasn't a natural [at the work of the department]
		I had lots of balls to juggle

5.2 Organisational impact

Level four evaluation in Kirkpatrick's Framework measures organisational impact; that is, what results can be identified from the program and the impact they have on the organisation. This has been described as the most important and the most difficult level to implement (Kirkpatrick, 2006, p63). It is often seen as a financial measure, that is, the return on investment (Smith, 2004).

Two organisational impacts of the trainee program were measured: the loyalty to the organisation of participants; and the career progression of participants. It is acknowledged that this is a relatively unsophisticated interpretation of organisational impact and lacks the benefit of a control group against which to compare. The data are analysed with these limitations in mind.

Respondents to the online survey were asked to indicate where they were currently employed. Ten (71.4%) answered that they were currently working at Flinders University Library. Four (28.6%) were working elsewhere: one on secondment, and three employed permanently elsewhere. All four working outside of Flinders have remained in the Higher Education sector: two in another academic library; and two in non-library positions.

Those working elsewhere were asked if their experiences as a trainee had in any way influenced their departure. This was evenly divided, with two indicating no and two yes. Qualitative data reflect this, with one commenting that "the experience… facilitated my move into the broader University [sector]"; and another saying that it was "… unfortunate that the traineeship did not offer some kind of safety net to ensure support and workload were appropriate".

Qualitative data gathered from the group interview of the three most recent trainees indicated they were aware the Library was committing a great deal of resources, in terms of training time and costs, in order to conduct their training. This investment meant a great deal to them; as one succinctly put it, "[the Library] putting the effort in equals loyalty from me".

Of course, there are several, often complex, factors why employees choose to remain with an employer. Participating in a trainee program is likely to be just one of many reasons why the former participants have chosen to stay at Flinders University Library. The survey did attempt to draw this out, by asking respondents to rate the features of the trainee program, again using a five point Likert scale ranging from 1=very unattractive to 5=very attractive. In doing so, there were four conditions that were specific to the trainee program, such as job rotations and linked position capacity, and three conditions that could apply to any appointee to the Library. The results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Features of the trainee program

	Mean	Standard deviation
Specific conditions of the trainee program		
No experience necessary	4.69	2.2
On-the-job training	4.00	1.61
Job rotations	3.91	1.68
Linked position	4.75	2.25
General conditions of appointment		
Continuing position	4.71	2.21
Working in an academic library	4.78	2.27
Salary and working conditions	4.38	1.97

Both the specific conditions and the general conditions were rated highly, although the general conditions were rated uniformly higher (but with higher standard deviations). Qualitative data indicate that both the traineeship and the general conditions were important considerations; one emphasised the working conditions including "the values of the Library", and three others commented on the reputation of the traineeship, such as the fact that it was "highly sought after".

In order to measure the career progression of participants, the survey asked respondents to indicate the level at which they were currently employed. In Australia, librarians employed in universities are appointed as general staff members on the Higher Education Officer (HEO) pay scale, where HEO1 is the lowest and HEO10 is the highest. Figure 8 presents these figures, and has been annotated with Librarian levels as defined by ALIA, to make it more meaningful.

Figure 8: current position

Level of current position	Employed at Flinders University Library	Employed elsewhere	Total	Percentage
HEO5 (Trainee)	1	0	1	7.1%
HEO6 (Librarian grade 1)	4	0	4	28.6%
HEO7 (Librarian grade 2)	3	2	5	35.7%
HEO8 (Librarian grade 3)	2	1	3	21.5%
Other (Researcher Level B)	0	1	1	7.1%
Total	**10**	**4**	**14**	**100%**

The move from HEO (Higher Education Officer) level 5 to level 6 is automatic on successful completion of the three year traineeship. Any promotion after this is in competition with other candidates, often both internal and external. Former trainees have fared well in this respect, with five (35.7%) respondents still at Flinders now working at or above HEO7 level. Those respondents working outside of the organisation have similarly progressed in their careers, with all working at HEO7 or higher. Of those respondents who are at HEO6 level, two have only recently (in the last three months) completed the trainee program.

Respondents of the online survey were asked to indicate where they would like to be working in five years' time, to gauge their career aspirations. Seven (53.8%) answered that they would like to be in a management role. Another useful indicator for potential career progression is involvement in further study. When asked about this, six respondents (42.9%) answered that they are currently enrolled in, or considering enrolling in, a higher degree program: one a Masters by coursework, four a Masters by research, and one a PhD.

Conclusion

The Flinders University Graduate Trainee Librarian Program has been in operation for 15 years, during which time there have been 16 trainees. The aim of this study was to evaluate whether job rotation is an effective workplace learning tool for new librarians, and to examine whether participants in the trainee program remained with the Library and progressed in their careers. Levels one and four of Kirkpatrick's Framework were used to evaluate the program.

Level one evaluation indicated that participants in the trainee program who were surveyed showed a high level of satisfaction overall with the program, with a mean rating of 4.43. However, they expressed a lower level of satisfaction with their workplace learning experiences at a departmental level. This was supported by qualitative data collected in the group interview with the three most recent trainees.

Two measures were used in level four evaluation: the loyalty and career progression of former trainees. The evidence shows that the majority of those who started as trainees are still working at the Library, and have progressed in their careers. Other indicators, such as career aspirations and participation in further study of respondents, point to further career progression of former and current trainees. This evidence shows that the Library's "return on investment" for the trainee program has been positive.

Overall, the data gathered from this study show that the trainee program has had a positive impact on both the participants and the Library. Further evaluation, at levels two and three of Kirkpatrick's framework, could be incorporated into future traineeships. This would evaluate learning achievement (the knowledge and skills participants acquire from the program) and behavioural change (how participants apply what they learn). Using a control group to measure level four data would also give a more indicative picture of the trainee program.

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