



## The future of the systems librarian



## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction .....	2
2.	Executive summary .....	4
4.	Systems teams.....	8
5.	Library systems support structural models.....	10
6.	Strengths and weaknesses of library systems support models.....	12
7.	Pay .....	15
8.	Key systems librarian attributes .....	16
9.	Recruitment challenges .....	19
10.	Evolving requirements for a systems librarian .....	23
11.	New approaches to recruitment and succession planning .....	26
12.	Appendix: Future of the Systems Librarian questionnaire.....	30

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises the findings of a survey conducted by SCONUL<sup>1</sup>, the professional association for academic and research libraries in the UK and Ireland, on the future of the systems librarian. This is a strategically important role for libraries which are heavily automated and digitised environments relying on a very wide range of technologies to support their students and academic colleagues. For further information on the complex technology landscape for libraries please see The Library Technology Landscape<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.2 SCONUL's Board and Technology and Markets Strategy Group had identified the role of the systems librarian as critical for the digital maturity of the library sector including the adoption of new AI tools, and for maximising the value to students and researchers of the considerable investment libraries make in their digital infrastructure. To ensure these are used to maximum benefit, institutions need technical support which combines high levels of IT skills and a deep understanding of libraries' operations and users' needs.
- 1.3 Early analysis had identified some potential vulnerabilities for member libraries in relation to this role, particularly small teams or single person delivering support; challenges around pay parity with similar roles within and beyond HE; training, support and progression; and succession planning.
- 1.4 A project group was set up to lead the work, looking at the evolving nature of the role including the implications of AI and other developments in library systems; the nature and breadth of the skills required and implications for role descriptions, grading and salaries for systems librarians; effective organisational models for deploying these skills within institutions, including the experience of peer professional services and the pipeline for recruitment of, and career development paths for, systems librarians.
- 1.4 A Future of the Systems Librarian webinar<sup>3</sup> was held on 31 October 2023 to scope out the project, which was attended by over 170 delegates, and a community of interest group was established in Autumn 2024 to provide a focus for practitioners to share practice and to inform the work of the project.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sconul.ac.uk](http://www.sconul.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sconul.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/library-technologies/the-library-technology-landscape/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sconul.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/library-technologies/the-future-of-the-systems-librarian-webinar-31-october-2023/>

- 1.5 We will be debating the survey findings and considering the scope for further action in this space at the SCONUL conference on library and digital transformation on 3 March 2025. This is likely to include advocacy about the critical nature of this role; role specification and pay; progression and succession planning; and consideration of models of provision including shared roles between libraries alongside shared platforms.

## 2. Executive summary

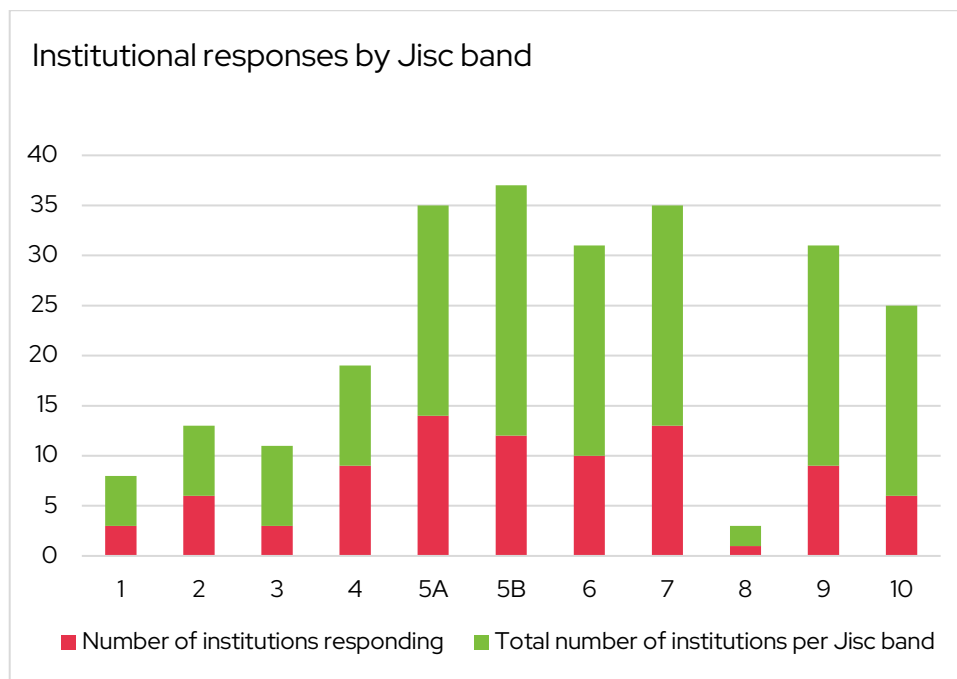
- 2.1. The Future of the systems librarian survey received 165 responses from librarians across the UK. 87% of responders represent institutions with library system support, but a significant 13% have none at all.
- 2.2. The average size of a library systems team is 3.4 FTE and we calculate at least 44 system areas for which library systems teams are responsible.
- 2.3. Responders reported a range of different structural models for systems teams: floating teams; fixed teams with a clear hierarchy; dispersed systems support; centralised systems support; and externally provided systems support.
- 2.4. Experience and expertise are highly valued in libraries where there is a clearly identified individual or team responsible for systems support. There is also concern about communication failure when it isn't clear who should be contacted about library systems or how contact should be made.
- 2.5. Centralised and externally provided systems support raised the most negative comments from responders, but irrespective of the strengths and weaknesses of any particular model of support there is common concern about low levels of capacity and the knock-on effects across the service.
- 2.6. The single largest concern across the responses, however, is the risk to the library service of a single point of failure where (often) one individual has the knowledge, experience and expertise, but no time, structure or opportunity to pass it on.
- 2.7. Almost half of the responders (47%) said they thought the roles were graded about the same as similar roles within the institution, but this dropped to 26% when compared to similarly technical roles outside of the institution. Within the sector at least, pay is seen to be a significant factor in retention and recruitment, but not necessarily more so than other working conditions such as hybrid working, opportunities to progress, and job security.
- 2.8. Responders made it clear that the skills required to engage effectively with local institutional contexts are increasingly diverse with the highest scores being given to tacit skills and approaches. The systems librarian is seen as a key 'in-between' role, acting as a translator and bridge between different stakeholders.
- 2.9. Challenges to recruitment are seen to be due to a wide range of issues, but particularly important are lack of career progression opportunities and a lack of potential recruits with suitable library systems and IT knowledge.

- 2.10. Responders suggested that systems librarians will continue to need problem-solving mindsets as well as specific skillsets, scoring 'managing of interconnected systems', 'building and managing relations', 'training, and 'horizon-scanning' highly.
- 2.11. When asked about new approaches to recruitment and retention the responses do not offer a silver bullet, but they do emphatically confirm that library systems support should not be moved to central IT departments.
- 2.12. Although often seen to be misunderstood by colleagues and potential applicants and unacknowledged by wider organisations, the job is considered by those who do it as interesting and satisfying.
- 2.13. The responses suggest that a focus on working conditions – pay, hybrid working, career progression – and the development of a better understanding of the role at the institutional and sector level would help recruit and retain systems librarians.

### 3. The survey

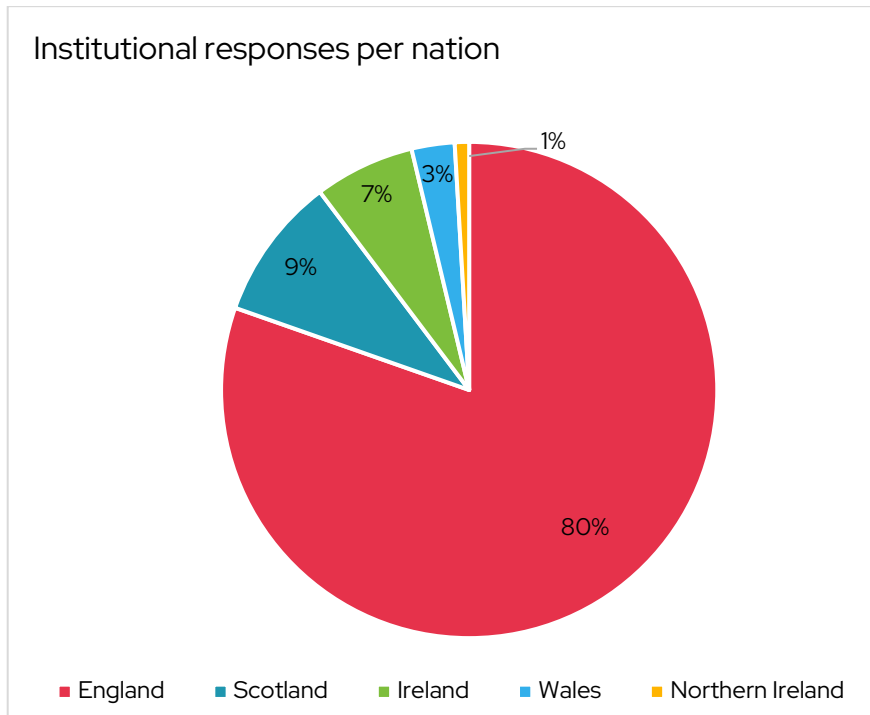
- 3.1 The survey was conducted in September and October 2024 and was open to anyone in the library community. The project group particularly aimed to reach library systems managers and their teams, but also adjacent library teams with a high dependency upon library systems (e.g. collections teams, library customer support and front-line teams) and to understand their perceptions of library systems support within their institution.
- 3.2 The survey received 165 responses from librarians across the UK from 107 institutions. Responders largely came from librarians in higher education, but also from further education, health, government, public, parliamentary, museum, specialist and national libraries. The responses came from a broad range of institutions across the Jisc bands where these apply (see figure 1).

Figure 1.



- 3.3 Although 76 of the responses were the sole response from an institution, many institutions had multiple responders, with the highest being seven responses. It is important, therefore, to see most of the data in terms of ‘responders’ rather than ‘institutions’.
- 3.4 Responses came from all five nations that SCONUL represents, with the majority (86) coming from England (see figure 2).

Figure 2.



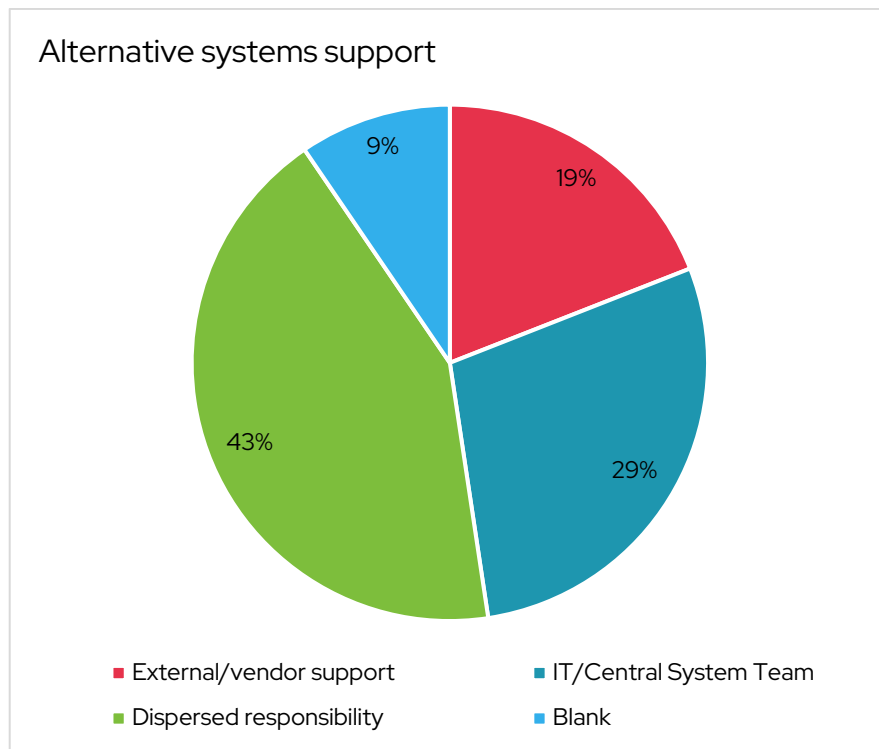
- 3.5 The survey successfully reached systems librarians and adjacent teams as well as senior managers and library directors, with 58 responders' job titles including the word 'systems' and 15 'systems librarians'.
- 3.6 The survey consisted of fifteen questions including a number of free text questions, six of which were optional invites to share thoughts and suggestions. Responders offered full and thoughtful insights and we are particularly grateful for this engagement.



## 4. Systems teams

- 4.1 77% of responders said that their institution had a systems team and 23% said that they did not. However, it was clear from the additional comments that the interpretation of the word 'team' had led to differing responses. If we allow that seventeen of those who responded 'no' actually do have systems staff, but at one FTE or less, then 87% of responders represent institutions with library system support. A significant 13% have none at all.
- 4.2 Of those without systems 'teams' (21) 43% report a dispersal of responsibility for systems; 29% said they receive support from central IT services; and 19% rely on vendor support (see figure 3).

Figure 3.



- 4.3 The smallest system team reported was 0.25 FTE and the largest was 11 FTE. The average size of team is 3.4 FTE but these numbers reflect a great range in terms of responsibility (with some of the larger teams having a broad 'digital' remit, supporting systems outside of the library and sometimes even outside of the institution) so it is a difficult figure from which to accurately extrapolate.
- 4.4 Perhaps more illustrative is the huge range of systems that responders listed under the systems teams' remit. The survey offered seven types of systems (library management system, library discovery system, reading list system, library website,

institutional repository, library self-service, current research information system), but together with the additional systems listed in 'other' we calculate 44 system areas for which library systems teams are responsible in different institutions across the UK.

- 4.5 Some of these may be highly specific (museum systems, for example), but many are mentioned in multiple responses, authentication for example, and library web applications (such as LibGuides, LibAnswers, Springshare software and so on).

## 5. Library systems support structural models

Responders reported a range of different structural models for library systems support.

### 5.1 Floating teams

Although these did include teams with more than one FTE, many responders used this part of the survey to highlight that one individual often takes responsibility for library systems support, acting as a sort-of 'floating' team working with and between other library teams.

*I am the library systems support! I liaise with our IT department if necessary, but we have a fully hosted LMS and discovery layer, so if there are any issues that I can't fix, I contact our vendor. If staff find any issues, they bring them to my attention.*

### 5.2 Fixed teams with a hierarchy

Other responders described a clear hierarchical model, where for example, the:

*Systems Librarian reports to the Head of Content Management and Open Scholarship who reports to the Library Director.*

Some of the above systems librarians also manage team members on lower grades.

### 5.3 Dispersed systems support

Dispersed models of library systems support were sometimes described as largely contained within the library and based on product or functional area.

*...support for various systems has been devolved to the staff/library sections supporting them e.g. institutional repository system is looked after by the research(er) support team. For the central systems (LMS, access control, Discovery) there are still roles who function as de facto systems librarians.*

Whereas other dispersed structures refer more explicitly to a dispersed library systems model with support from IT services.

### 5.4 Centralised IT systems support

A small number of responses described a centralised systems support model under IT, and in some cases this IT support is delivered in conjunction with external vendor services for cloud-based systems.

## 5.5 External systems support

A smaller number again reported a total reliance on external systems support from vendors.

## 6. Strengths and weaknesses of library systems support models

- 6.1 Experience and expertise are highly valued in libraries where there is a clearly identified individual or team responsible for systems support. Visibility is also seen as a strength in this context.

*As a single full-time role, the systems librarian is a consistent and visible point of contact for all Library colleagues.*

- 6.2 Many responders with systems support based in the library valued the library expertise this leverages.

*It is a strength having librarians within libraries managing the LMS [Library Management System] - they have insight into customer needs and library processes. They are involved in various library groups with other library staff so we can have an integrated approach to developing systems.*

- 6.3 There was also an appreciation for the productive nature of the collaboration between these librarians and teams and colleagues in IT.

*The collaboration between the IT department and library systems ensures that both technical and user needs are addressed. The IT department may not always have specialised knowledge of library systems, leading to communication gaps.*

- 6.4 Maintaining systems expertise within the library is seen to offer hands-on, adaptable library-focussed development.

*...to have a library systems person situated within the library structure itself (and not in the institutional IT department) is a strength. They know the context and needs of the systems, are expert at what they do, can respond quickly and knowledgeably to issues and to a certain degree we can make continuous improvements without the need to go through any central processes or order of institutional priorities.*

- 6.5 Libraries in this position still find that when external support is needed, however, it can be slow and difficult to be prioritised. Whatever model exists, there is a real sense that relationships with IT colleagues remain key.

*...as library systems are still embedded within the wider university IT ecosystem, we cannot operate independently and remain reliant on a good relationship with IT Services. Where we have a strong relationship, this works well but we are dependent on those relationships being maintained and on IT staff having the capacity to support the library systems in those areas which we can't do ourselves.*

- 6.6 Much clearly depends upon capacity, both in library and IT teams. Being centrally supported offers some libraries opportunities for prioritising library projects.

*We can call on a large pool of specialists in the IT department.*

- 6.7 But this model offers no guarantees and suffers from pressures on capacity.

*Central IT does not understand library systems and support can be poor. Library projects are often held up through lack of server support. Integrations have not been completed when new systems come in.*

- 6.8 Responders from libraries with dispersed systems support had a different focus. There was praise for the reduction of bottle necks and risk of single point of failure, but systems support models without clearly identified teams or individuals, also reported problems with communication.

*Sometimes not clear which one (of named contacts) to contact and via which method (raise a ticket, email, Teams etc).*

- 6.9 And these communication issues are further complicated for dispersed teams when they face a similarly dispersed wider institutional system landscape, beyond the library.

*...different systems that integrate into the library systems are owned by other areas of the University, so the roles are increasingly those of discovering and negotiating between various parties.*

- 6.10 Responders from libraries relying on external support value the specialist expertise they have access to while recognising the constraints on custom solutions and in-house expertise development.

*...danger that some knowledge is held externally and will be lost if the support vendor is changed.*

- 6.11 Irrespective of the strengths and weaknesses of any particular model of support there is common concern about low levels of capacity and the knock-on effects across the service. There are clear concerns that systems aren't being maximised efficiently.

*Unfortunately, with only one systems librarian covering not only the LMS but also room bookings, footfalls, book sorter, and self-checkouts, we are unable to maximise the use of these systems which we are spending a lot of money on.*

- 6.12 In this context, some responders say that it is difficult to plan and develop. Many responders addressed the lack of opportunities for career progression with so few roles available in a context of outsourcing to IT and external suppliers.

*Very poor opportunities for advancement for Library Technologies Managers who have no line management responsibilities and are fundamentally disadvantaged for promotion.*

*I am no expert but my job does demand quite a wide skillset and doesn't pay a great deal, so I might be difficult to replace when I leave (e.g. need to have coding/data analytics skills, AND teaching/course design skills, AND front-desk customer service skills).*

- 6.13 The single largest concern across the responses, however, is the risk to the library service of a single point of failure where, often, one individual has the knowledge, experience and expertise, but no time, structure or opportunity to pass it on. There were 18 references to the term 'single point of failure' across the responses to this question.

*We have a single point of dependency and this is a weakness and a risk. Our systems are well-documented and if our systems member of staff was unavailable for an unplanned or significant amount of time, our institutional IT team would probably be able to use that documentation to keep things running for a while but we would lose access to a huge amount of specific expertise, the speed with which we could respond to urgent incidents would drastically decrease and we would lose any ability to make continuous improvements to our library systems.*

## 7. Pay

- 7.1 The survey asked how systems librarians are graded in relation to similar technical job roles both within and outside their institution. Almost half of the responders (47%) said they thought the roles were graded about the same as similar roles within the institution, but this dropped to 26% when compared to similarly technical roles outside of the institution. 31% said that the roles were graded lower internally and 43% externally.
- 7.2 With a high degree of wider sector knowledge needed to answer these questions effectively there is an understandably high number of 'don't knows' (20% and 27% respectively).

Figure 4.

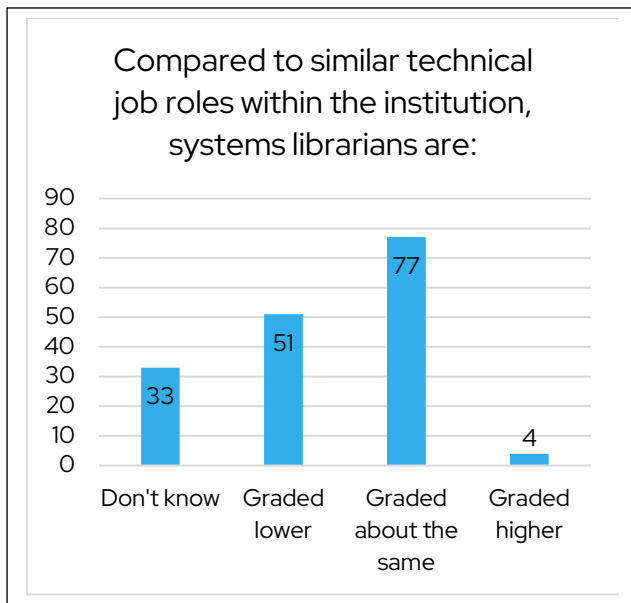
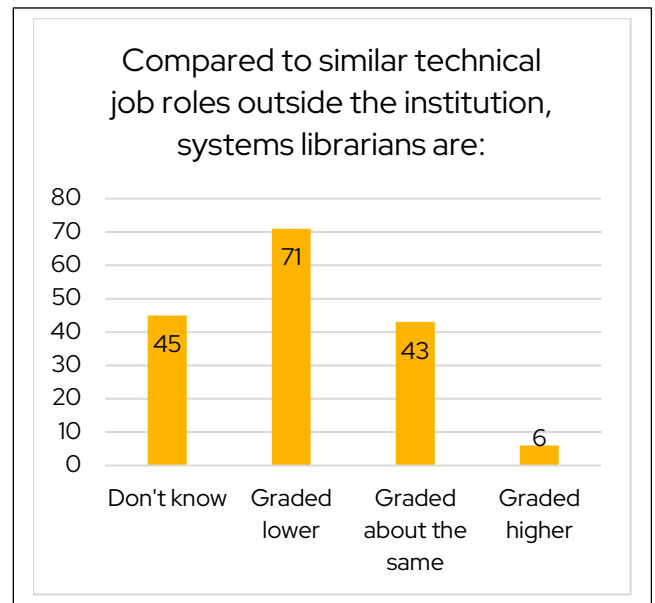


Figure 5.



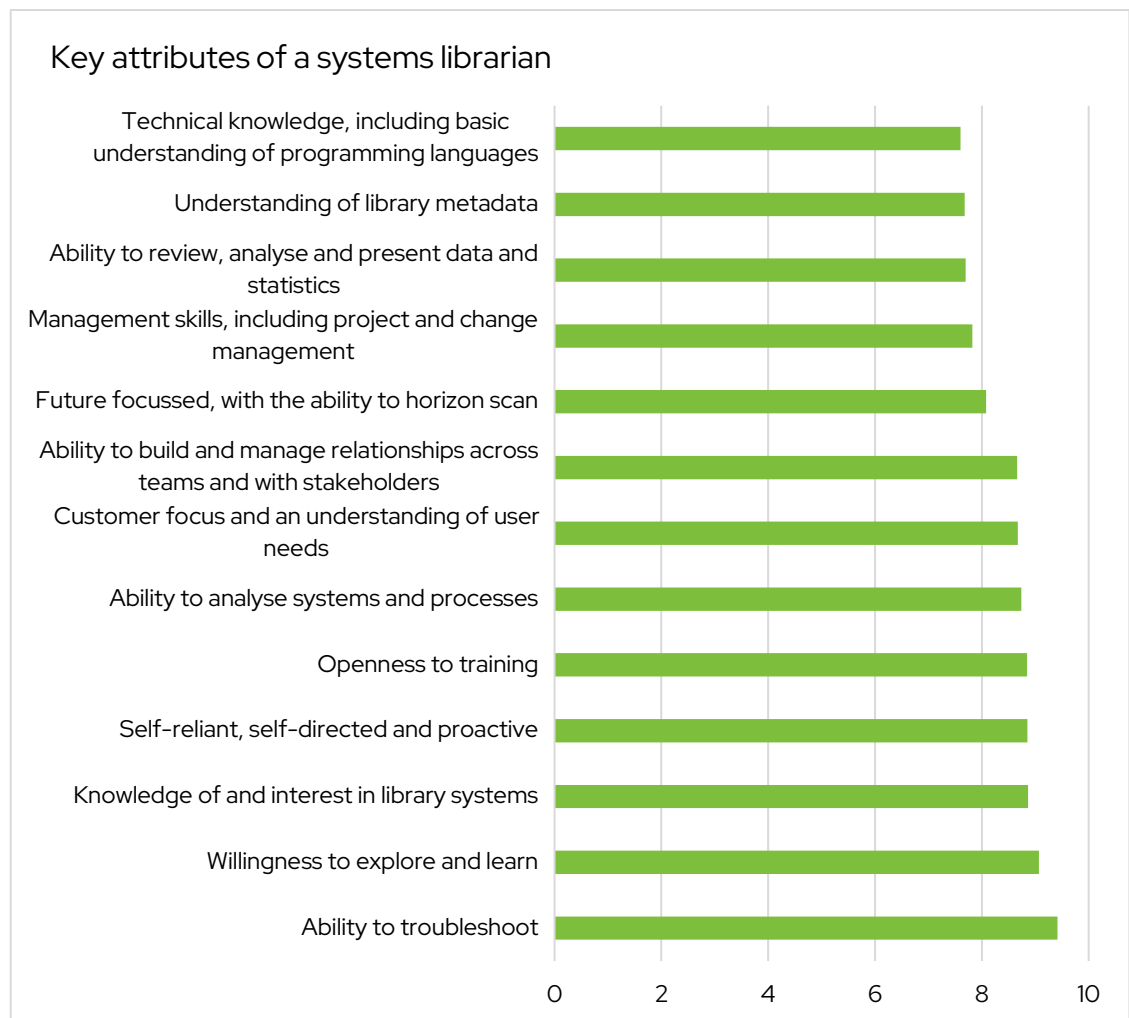
- 7.3 These responses might suggest that although a significant factor, existing pay structures are not having a major impact on retention, at least not significantly more important than for other technical roles within the sectors represented.



## 8. Key systems librarian attributes

- 8.1 The remainder of the survey asked responders to consider four key areas, generating a number of statements and offering clarifications and alternatives.
- 8.2 The first two areas reflect on the current landscape and ask about key system librarian attributes and recruitment challenges that libraries are facing.
- 8.3 The second two questions look to the future and ask what evolving attributes systems librarians will need and what approaches libraries should take to recruitment and succession planning.

Figure 6.



- 8.4 The fact that all of the listed attributes achieved an overall score of 7.5 or more suggests that systems librarians are expected to embody an increasingly diverse range of skills.

- 8.5 This is supported by the 71 detailed responses given in the optional 'other' and 'other comments' questions. These illustrate a confident understanding of the systems librarian role and its complex positioning in the wider institutional setting.
- 8.6 The attribute with the lowest score was 'technical knowledge, including basic understanding of programming languages', but this was closely followed by, 'understanding library metadata', and 'ability to review, analyse and present data and statistics'. The two highest scored attributes reflect mindsets rather than specific skillsets, 'ability to troubleshoot' (9.4) and 'willingness to learn and explore' (9.1), perhaps in recognition of, as one responder put it, that, "these are multi skilled roles that suit intelligent generalists who have experience of many things not just Library, technology and systems."
- 8.7 The key knowledge areas identified in the free text 'other' option included a range of technical expertise:
- local context, library context, complex IT operations, inter-dependencies between systems, coding systems, networks, larger systems, security, vendors.*
- 8.8 The responders described a dynamic systems librarian, who is able to:
- adapt, innovate, explain, train, communicate, collaborate, facilitate, change, juggle.*
- 8.9 There is a sense across the responses that the key attributes of a systems librarian need to prepare them for a range of system set-ups and local contexts, where they need to be:
- calm, open, flexible, persistent, jack-of-all-trades, resilient, curious, empathetic, passionate.*
- 8.10 The balance between the need for different skills is clearly something institutions are deliberating, particularly when recruiting.
- It is difficult to find individuals with the combination of, technical, communication and planning skills to fully succeed in the post.*
- Whilst strong IT skills and an understanding and awareness of IT system support issues is important, it really helps if the systems librarian understands the specific context of library systems and databases, in particular metadata.*
- 8.11 But there is also a recognition that it is the local context that dictates the shape and direction of each systems librarian's role.
- The relative importance of these traits would naturally vary in different library team structures - a lone systems librarian at a small institution would likely weight these differently to one of a team in a large institution.*

*All of the above [see figure 6] depends on what the needs of the service are, what the wider systems support structure is etc.*

- 8.12 Many responders referred to colleagues and teams and the potential for the key attributes to be spread across multiple staff members.

*All of these attributes are equally important to have within the team, but the point is to have a team which collectively has and continues to develop these attributes, no-one individually is good at everything.*

- 8.13 A number of responses talked about the systems librarian as a key in-between role, acting as a translator and bridge between different stakeholders.

*It's a very broad skillset, but one area not always acknowledged is for the systems librarian to act as a 'translator', being able to speak both provider/corporate, service lead/FoH staff and end-user/patron languages and be able to bridge between them.*

- 8.14 Ultimately, what comes across in the additional comments is the sense that the systems librarian role, and its complex positioning, needs acknowledgement.

*IT staff unfairly have more recognition of being 'specialists' than systems librarians do when they often have same/similar skill levels.*

*We are undervalued and underpaid considering the skills we need to perform our role well. We are constantly reskilling and juggling many different projects. That does make the role an interesting one.*

## 9. Recruitment challenges

9.1 The survey acknowledged that many institutions are not in a position to recruit but asked responders to respond as though they were.

Figure 7.



9.2 Perhaps understandably, these 'recruitment challenges' elicited a broader range of scores than the 'key attributes' question (which could be seen as a 'wish list') with the lowest rated statement receiving 5.3 and the highest 7.8 out of ten.

9.3 Responders scored concerns about potential recruits with enough library systems knowledge and IT knowledge, similarly (7.7 and 7.2 respectively), but the highest scored concern was 'progression opportunities once within a library systems role' (7.8). The relatively high scoring of all the statements, again, suggests that the library systems landscape is accurately understood but also paints a difficult picture for recruitment.

- 9.4 Again, respondents were keen to comment with 72 responses across the 'other' and 'other comments' options with a number expanding on the career progression problem.

*Our grade 5s usually progress to higher grades outside of the systems team within a few years, as their technical potential is always curbed within the role.*

*The role can be a cul-de-sac and opportunities scarce.*

- 9.5 Responders also pointed towards a problem of institutional understanding of the systems librarian role.

*There is a general lack of awareness of what a systems librarian does particularly in comparison to other university systems managers.*

- 9.6 In 'other comments' responders reflected again on the difficult balance of technical and interpersonal skills needed for the role.

*I think it can be a challenge to know what balance of technical IT, customer service and librarian specific knowledge you would be looking for.*

*...it can be hard to recruit to a professional role that requires a high level of technical expertise and also good people management skills.*

- 9.7 It is clear that this is an issue with no obvious answers. Some responders favour prioritising specialised technical skills like programming while others favour prioritising specifically library systems skills and knowledge, but responses also suggest that the institutional understanding of the landscape isn't helping recruitment in this area.

*I am finding it impossible to persuade our HR to assign the role grades I think are necessary for development, retention and progression, meaning we are constantly at risk of losing key personnel. The skills and value of the role are not understood.*

- 9.8 Again, many responders elaborated on the issues of career progression.

*I think the role and career path of the systems librarian seems less defined than other roles/paths in libraries (e.g. collections, academic engagement) and potentially less opportunities to progress.*

*It is a hard sell as once a systems librarian is trained they are unlikely to see progression beyond the role. There are not many break through senior library staff who started life in the systems teams.*

- 9.9 Responders also commented on related career progression issues such as entry level roles, training opportunities, pay, and remote and hybrid working and the issues these may pose for potential applicants.

*There aren't often 'entry level' systems positions. Quite often a library will have a designated systems person, and if recruiting to this role, experience is required.*

*Like many, I suspect, I rather fell into systems work by being in the right place at the right time and being "good with computers". It's hard to see any other path into systems work for new library professionals...*

- 9.10 There is a general agreement that a lot of systems librarianship involves on-the-job training and adapting to specific local set-ups, systems and workflows, but there is concern that there isn't an appreciation of how constant learning and passing on of knowledge needs time and support.

*"Full training will be given" is often used, but seldom implemented.*

*There's also a limited number of providers of library systems, but this doesn't seem to facilitate much staff transfer between institutions and I suspect it's less system knowledge, and more unique workflow knowledge that's a) hard to share b) non-transferable, and c) boring to a lot of staff!*

- 9.11 As we have seen, disparities in pay across sectors is an acknowledged issue, one perhaps exacerbated by a poor understanding of the systems librarian role.

*Library systems roles can't compete on a salary level for other IT roles outside the sector, despite sometimes asking for similar skill sets. We need properly qualified tech people but aren't paying for it, or often don't have the in-house knowledge to train up others.*

*My university has recently recruited for systems support roles (product owner, business analyst etc.) in the central IT team at a band higher than our library specialist.*

- 9.12 The impact of lower pay can be alleviated by other positive working conditions such as job security and hybrid working, but responders describe a landscape where these are challenged too.

*Remote working is an attractive benefit and in the main the majority of systems librarian work can be achieved remotely...and so by not providing comparable flexibility HE Libraries are perhaps not attracting candidates from that technical background/ attracting in new professionals who can find more flexible working options in other fields of tech/systems development.*

- 9.13 And yet, as low staff turnover indicates, the systems librarian role is one that is enjoyed. The very aspects of the role that are difficult to describe and recruit for can be experienced by systems librarians as interesting challenges and a good degree of autonomy. Looking forward to the “new approaches to recruitment and succession planning” section later in the survey, there may be potential for the role to be articulated in these terms.

*As someone who came from a computer science background...I feel there is great scope to hire in more with a similar history, to a job they will find very fulfilling and interesting, and one where they can apply their skills in a very direct and expedited manner with a lot of freedom to innovate and be appreciated for it.*

- 9.14 Finally, although education and qualifications weren't directly referred to in the recruitment statements several responders talked about problems and potential solutions for entry into the role.

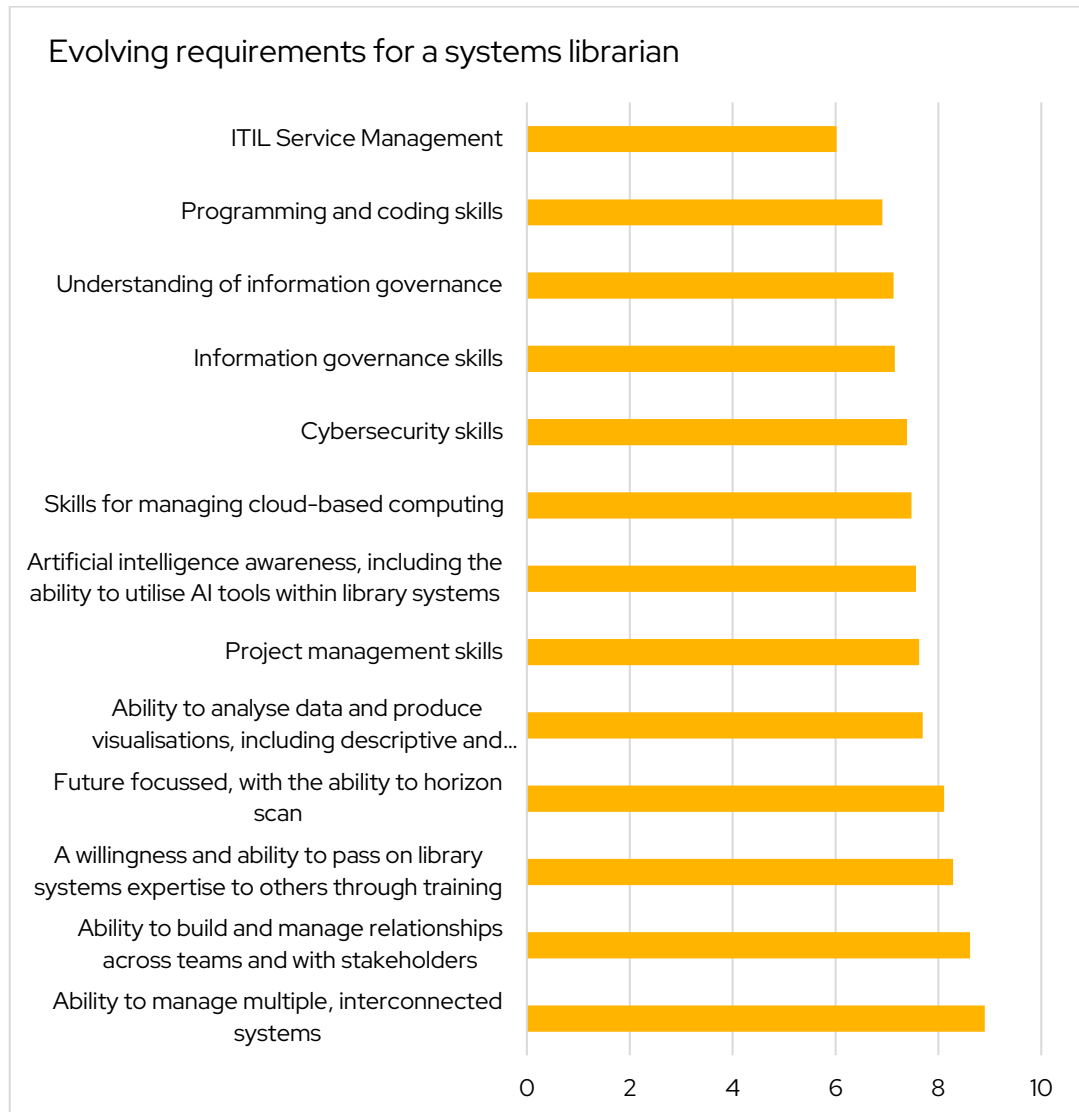
*Many who apply for the roles do not have a computer science background. This is a necessary educational background for a systems librarian to problem solve and talk to technical partners.*

*...lower grade entry points are required so that staff can be trained and progress, acquiring knowledge and skills as they go. A de facto apprenticeship, in other words!*

## 10. Evolving requirements for a systems librarian

- 10.1 For this section, responders were asked to think about what new and evolving skills and knowledge systems librarians need.
- 10.2 The lowest scoring requirement was ITIL service management (6). While this was informed by some responders not knowing that ITIL stands for Information Technology Infrastructure (a framework for IT service assessment and asset management), it was perhaps surprisingly followed by 'Programming and coding skills' (6.9).

Figure 8.





- 10.3 Both statements refer to much more specialised skills and practices than the four scoring eight and above, 'ability to manage multiple, interconnected systems', 'manage relationships across teams and with stakeholders', 'a willingness and ability to pass on library systems expertise through training' and 'future focussed, with the ability to horizon scan'.
- 10.4 It might be that responders value these overarching mindsets because they allow for specific skill development where appropriate, in response to local context and need.
- 10.5 There were fewer additional comments and suggestions for evolving requirements for a systems librarian (30), but these do show general agreement. While one responder suggested that systems librarians also need to be able to develop business cases and another suggested that the role is moving into digital leadership, most indicated that the development and reach of the role is very context dependent.

*the importance of this [list of requirements in figure 8] depends on the internal structure as in some institutions these skills are divided differently.*

*In our organisation, skills such as cybersecurity and cloud-based computing are managed by other areas of our IT dept. However, it is important that we have a good awareness of the subject, even if we don't require the technical skills.*

- 10.6 In the 'additional comments' section, responders continued to emphasise that library systems support is context dependent.

*This is so dependent on the institution where there may be other teams or individuals picking up some of this work.*

- 10.7 Aside from one comment on the importance of working with integrating systems and another on coding skills, responders focused on describing local set-ups over suggesting specific skill requirements. Together the responses describe a role that varies according to each institutional context. Similarly, there is agreement that the role is already one that is characterised by constant change and a need for diverse skills.

*Still require those core skills of problem solving, communication and user focus.*

*Systems librarians are increasingly expected to be able to do everything. Smaller teams require us to do more with less. I am constantly learning and evolving skills to match new challenges as they are presented.*

- 10.8 Perhaps the comments addressing AI best illustrate this familiarity with new library system challenges and the expertise that systems librarians can offer institutions.

*Trying to convince leaders that the emperor's new clothes might not be worth the significant time investment (as well as finances no doubt).*

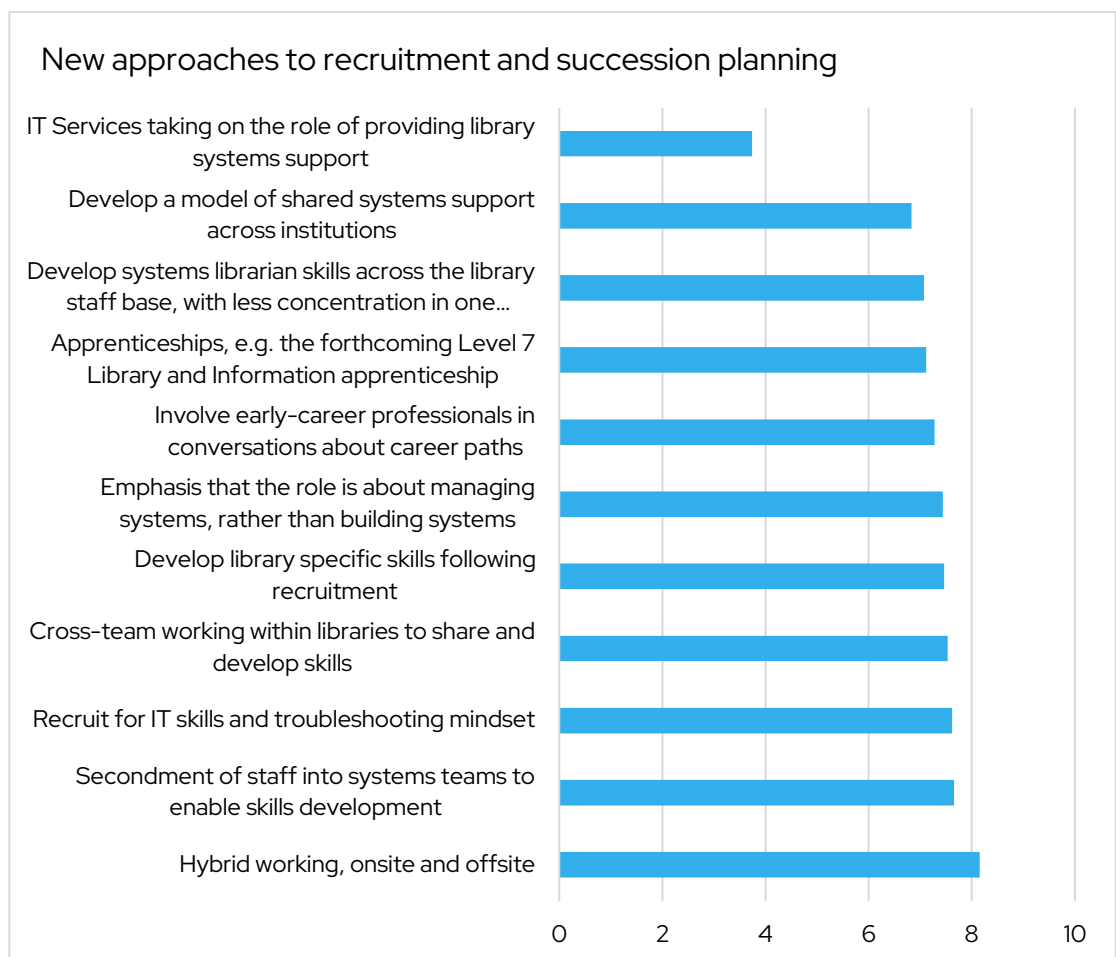
*Artificial intelligence applications such as LLMs are very fashionable right now, but it is such a new and evolving area that the systems librarian may struggle to keep up-to-date.*

- 10.9 The headline takeaway from responses to the questions about evolving requirements for systems librarians is that the skills and attributes required are not actually new, but they are increasingly important.

## 11. New approaches to recruitment and succession planning

- 11.1 Most of the statements in this section received similar scores, with the second lowest suggestion, which potentially represents a significant shift in practice, to 'develop a model of shared systems support across institutions' receiving a score of 6.8.
- 11.2 Almost all the other statements scored 7 or more, with 'hybrid working, onsite and offsite' scoring the highest at 8.2. These approaches span working conditions, education, internal skills development, recruiting for IT skills, developing career opportunities and re-thinking how the role is perceived.

Figure 9.



- 11.3 The statement 'IT services taking on the role of providing library systems support' was given the lowest score across the entire survey, at 3.7. Five responders scored this statement with a ten while 42 scored it a one. Several comments followed up on the approach.

*I think involving IT services in library systems is a recipe for treacle and innovation stifling. Wider IT support in HE institutions tends to be spread too thin in resource for example, access to programmers being via a queue and projects considered more important getting developer resource first with regular queue jumping.*

*It's fine to draw on IT support for purely technical matters (as I frequently do), but the IT approach often prioritises streamlining of systems over user needs, without the user-focus inherent in library work and library people.*

*My experience of allowing IT Services to assume responsibility for digital library or archive applications is that the service suffers. IT may have the technical skills, but do not know enough about the 'business'...*

- 11.4 There is no silver bullet for recruitment and retention, but the range of scoring does suggest that there are a few complementary actions that can be taken to address recruitment and succession planning.

- 11.5 The 'other' and 'other comments' sections attracted a total of 43 additional responses and these included confirmation of the importance of some of the statements, like hybrid working, support for apprenticeships and secondments.

*"Secondment of staff into systems teams to enable skills development" - great idea, although probably harder to enthuse people to engage with it, unless you can track down the 'keenies'.*

- 11.6 Responders again returned to the importance of recruiting for library specific knowledge.

*We have tried in the past to recruit based on general IT skills and this has proved unsuccessful because of the unique nature of library systems. We have found it important for candidates to have a background/knowledge of the library sector, particularly important in understanding library metadata and workflows such as circulation or collection management.*

- 11.7 And this was expanded upon in responses that include suggestions for how to develop library skills once in post.

*Placing systems teams geographically within library spaces would help with visibility/de-mystification and interest in their activities from staff in other areas of the library. Generally cross departmental communication about what teams do and how they work should be beneficial.*

*...being embedded in the library team is crucial in my opinion to build relationships and a deep understanding of requirements.*

- 11.8 More than one responder liked the idea of working with current set-ups and colleagues to shift libraries' understanding of, and responsibility for, systems librarianship.

*Developing early career library staff to be less scared of systems librarianship and to recognise the skills and aptitudes they already have as adaptable into systems roles seems a better way.*

*Develop systems librarian skills across the library staff base, with less concentration in one individual. I think this would really help avoid failure when staff leave and support staff across the service to develop important skills.*

- 11.9 Another responder does warn however, that the need to mitigate against single points of failure, is not without its own risks. And perhaps responders' suggestions to improve career progression and develop opportunities to train and network is as important for recruitment and succession planning as reducing the risk of individual single points of failure.

*A better balance of terms and pay needs to be given to attract new candidates to the role/profession, rather than trying to disperse responsibility onto a wider library team who in most instances are already absorbing increasing workloads (although some tasks such as reporting, data analysis and general problem solving within systems could be more explicit requirements in other roles).*

*[there is a need for] networks for systems librarians that aren't supplier-specific, the landscape feels very fragmented.*

- 11.10 Some comments indicated an interest in the idea of shared library systems support and while they also voiced concerns about it in practice, there is a suggestion that there might be scope to develop collaborative training opportunities.

*Shared systems support is an interesting idea but might be difficult to achieve given increasing cyber-security threats and tightening up of access to system elements.*

*I think the idea of shared systems support is an interesting one. But I think that it would end up with staff having multiple demands on their time and institutions not being able to get the focus that they need - much like where systems support has been absorbed into IT.*

*For smaller organisations with only one person in the role there is little room for learning from others so working across Institutions would be helpful from a training/learning point of view. For example, a short placement similar to work experience.*

- 11.11 One responder, based on their own experience, talked about the lack of systems-based modules in library school, seeing this as a fundamental piece of the puzzle linking up applicants with available jobs.

*Really, I think the key thing here is having sufficient focus within library schools on developing those skills - and also selling the idea. We are in a situation where lots of graduates are coming out with a library MA, with extreme competition for jobs (and perhaps I speak unfairly, lots of people wanting subject type roles), when actually there are these roles which we really struggle to recruit to...*

- 11.12 Each of the suggestions for new approaches seems to imply that the systems librarian role is needed and that it is interesting and satisfying, but that there is work to do to ensure that the role of library systems support is understood internally and externally.

*In my experience from four institutions, IT Services thought they understood the requirements of the library but their picture was incomplete and based on a picture of libraries as they were 30 years ago. The idea of libraries having multiple interconnected systems managing networked rather than physical resources and having extensive authentication and authorisation requirements is not widely understood.*

*Recognising that the demand for systems skills has increased, and is not going away, would be a good start. We have more systems, and more complex systems than twenty years ago, and yet we try to get away with downsizing systems teams because the system is now supposed to be user-friendly and not require technical expertise to run. That is a misapprehension in my view.*

## 12. Appendix: Future of the Systems Librarian Survey questionnaire

### SCONUL Future of the Systems Librarian Survey Introduction

Last Autumn, the SCONUL Technology and Markets Strategy Group launched its Future of the Systems Librarian project to look at the role of the systems librarian in supporting the evolving needs of the library. Some institutions in the sector are reporting difficulties in recruitment, and succession planning remains challenging as staff in systems roles retire, while the role, and the systems themselves, continue to evolve. As data and learning analytics increase in importance to universities, the project will look at how systems librarians can also add value to their institutions in this area.

The project commenced with a webinar looking at the Future of the Systems Librarian. Over 170 delegates attended and contributed their insights onto a Padlet looking at:

- Challenges in recruitment and employment
- Key attributes of the systems librarian role
- Evolving requirements
- New approaches

The SCONUL team have themed and analysed the responses. Using data from that analysis, we now wish to undertake a wider survey with the library community to calibrate the results.

This survey is open to anyone in the library community. We particularly want to reach library systems managers and their teams, but also adjacent library teams with a high dependency upon library systems (e.g. collections teams, library customer support and front-line teams) and their perceptions of library systems support within their institution. This survey is not just for library senior staff, managers or those who work in library systems. Submissions from different individuals at the same institution are permitted.

SCONUL also acknowledges that due to the financial difficulties affecting the sector, many institutions are no longer recruiting staff, and this is the overriding challenge. Please answer this survey as if your institution were in a position to recruit.

This survey follows SCONUL's privacy policy. For quantitative data, only aggregated survey results will be made publicly available. For qualitative data, any individual responses and comments will be fully anonymised before publishing.

This survey should approximately take 10 minutes to complete.

Should you have any questions, please contact Lisa McLaren at [lisa.mclaren@scnul.ac.uk](mailto:lisa.mclaren@scnul.ac.uk).

### Your Context

1. Job Title
2. Institution
3. Do you have a systems team within your library? Yes /No /Don't know
- 3a. If yes, how many full-time equivalent staff are in the team approximately:
- 3b. If yes, which library systems does the team support:
  - Library management system
  - Library website
  - Current Research information System
  - Other (Please specify)
  - Library discovery system
  - Institutional repository
  - Reading list system Library self-service.
- 3c. If No, who provides support for your library systems? Please specify:
4. Please describe the structural model in place at your institution for library systems support (if you're unsure, please write 'don't know' in the box below)
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your library systems support model?
6. Compared to similar technical job roles **within** your institution, how do you feel library systems roles are graded:
  - Graded higher
  - Graded about the same
  - Graded lower
  - Don't know.
7. Compared to similar technical job roles **outside** your institution, how do you feel library systems roles are graded:
  - Graded higher
  - Graded about the same
  - Graded lower
  - Don't know.

### Key attributes of a systems librarian

8. What do you think are the key attributes for a systems librarian?



Please rate the options below from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the **least** significant and 10 represents the **most** significant:

- Ability to troubleshoot
- Willingness to explore and learn
- Technical knowledge, including basic understanding of programming language
- Understanding of library metadata
- Knowledge of and interest in library systems
- Ability to build and manage relationships across teams and with stakeholders
- Customer focus and an understanding of user needs
- Ability to review, analyse and present data and statistics
- Ability to analyse systems and processes
- Management skills, including project and change management
- Future focussed, with the ability to horizon scan
- Self-reliant, self-directed and proactive
- Openness to training
- Other.

9. Do you wish to make any other comments regarding the key attributes of the systems librarian role?

### Recruitment Challenges

10. What do you think are the biggest challenges to the recruitment of systems librarians? Please rate the options below from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the **least** challenge and 10 represents the **greatest** challenge:

- Entry level roles within library systems teams
- Progression opportunities once within a library systems role
- Lack of interest in the systems librarian role
- Low staff turnover within the library systems area
- Potential applicants with suitable library systems knowledge
- Potential recruits with suitable IT knowledge
- Availability of external training programmes
- Availability of in-house training
- Capacity of library systems teams/libraries to train new systems staff
- Motivation of library systems teams/libraries to train new systems staff
- Pay and conditions
- Other

11. Do you wish to make any other comments regarding the challenges of recruiting systems librarians?

### Evolving requirements for a systems librarian

12. What do you think are the evolving requirements for a systems librarian? Please rate the options below from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the **least** significant and 10 represents the **most** significant:
  - Project management skills
  - Ability to manage multiple, interconnected systems
  - ITIL Service Management
  - Understanding of information governance
  - Cybersecurity skills
  - Skills for managing cloud-based computing
  - Ability to build and manage relationships across teams and with stakeholders
  - Information governance skills
  - Artificial intelligence awareness, including the ability to utilise AI tools within library systems
  - Programming and coding skills
  - Future focussed, with the ability to horizon scan
  - A willingness and ability to pass on library systems expertise to others through training
  - Ability to analyse data and produce visualisations, including descriptive and predictive statistics
  - Other.
13. Do you wish to make any other comments regarding the evolving requirements of the systems librarian role?

### New approaches to recruitment and succession planning

14. Which new approaches do you think could help to improve recruitment and succession planning? Please rate the options below from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the **least** helpful and 10 represents the **most** helpful:
  - Hybrid working, onsite and offsite
  - Apprenticeships, e.g. the forthcoming Level 7 Library and Information apprenticeship
  - Secondment of staff into systems teams to enable skills development

- Cross-team working within libraries to share and develop skills
  - Develop systems librarian skills across the library staff base, with less concentration in one individual
  - Recruit for IT skills and troubleshooting mindset
  - Develop library specific skills following recruitment
  - Involve early-career professionals in conversations about career paths
  - Emphasis that the role is about managing systems, rather than building systems
  - Develop a model of shared systems support across institutions
  - IT Services taking on the role of providing library systems support
  - Other.
15. Do you wish to make any other comments regarding new approaches to improve recruitment and succession planning of systems librarian roles?

Thank you. This is the end of the survey