

Beyond the Stacks: A Sneak Peek into Library Staff Engagement with Job Shadowing (Case Study)

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Abstract

This case study examines the implementation and impact of a job shadowing scheme at University of Nottingham Libraries. Job shadowing, as a low-cost staff development initiative, was introduced to address issues of staff engagement and retention in academic libraries. The paper outlines the scheme's development, from its inception to full-scale implementation, highlighting its role in fostering cross-departmental understanding and breaking down silos. Key aspects include the commitment to inclusivity, the

logistics of running the scheme, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback from both shadowees and hosts.

The study shows how job shadowing contributes to staff engagement by providing opportunities for professional growth, networking, and a broader understanding of library operations. It also demonstrates the scheme's potential for improving staff retention by offering insights into different roles and career paths. The paper concludes with key recommendations for other academic libraries seeking to implement similar initiatives and notes that, while developed in a university context, the model has the potential to be adapted by other organisations.

Keywords: Job shadowing; Staff development; Academic libraries; Staff retention; Staff engagement

1. Introduction

In 2020 a staff survey carried out at University of Nottingham (UoN) highlighted the fact that staff were not engaged in career development and had low career aspirations. Internal teams were created to look into these issues and come up with solutions. Two such teams were the Engagement Team and the Training and Development Group.

One issue that was highlighted at the time was the difficulty in moving into posts at different departments, for example, from Customer Service to Learning Technology. We had also noticed a high turnover, especially with staff members in Customer Service. Three major categories lead to high staff turnover: external factors, work-related factors, and personal factors (Heady et al., 2020).

Broader research shows that many academic libraries are facing significant workforce pressures, including large-scale retirements and shifting skill requirements. These demographic changes have increased the need for initiatives that support retention, development, and long-term organisational stability (Freedman, 2009).

When it comes to academic libraries, some of the factors leading staff to leave academic libraries include their relationship with their supervisor, career goals, and compensation. While these studies were undertaken in the US,

other studies including academic libraries in Ethiopia, showed a very similar trend (Heady et al., 2020).

The above tendency was noticed at UoN Libraries, and the Training and Development group decided to mitigate, at the very least the career progression issue, while at the same time leaning into the UoN policy for staff retention and development.

2. Background and Rationale: The Case for Job Shadowing

2.1. Institutional Context: Presenting University of Nottingham Libraries

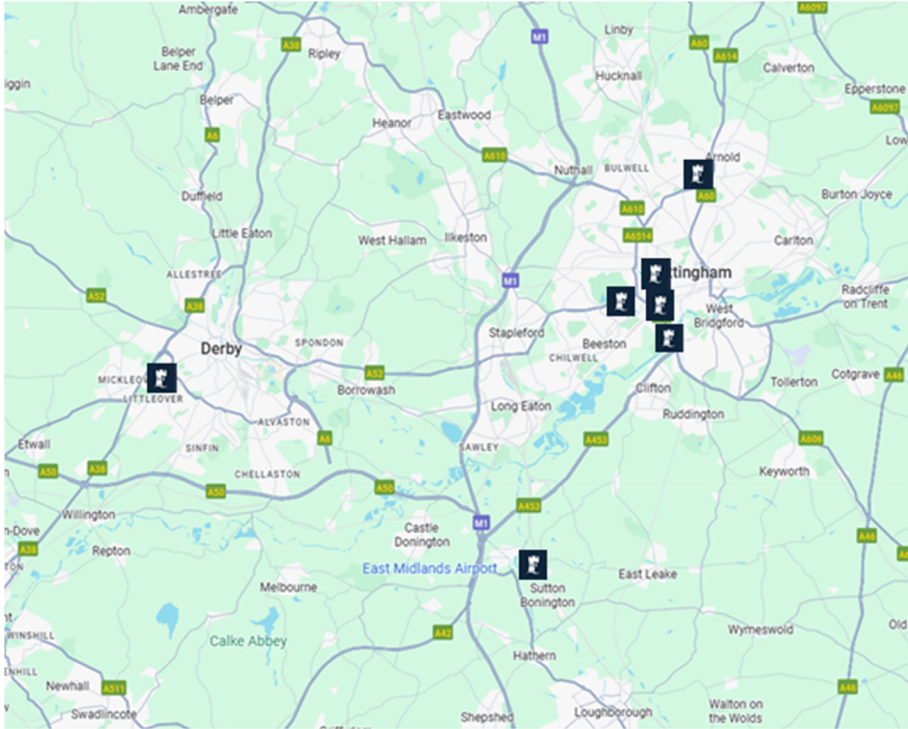
University of Nottingham (UoN) is a public research university located in Nottingham, England and is part of the Russell Group being a research-intensive institution. The University has four campuses across Nottinghamshire, as well as two international campuses in Malaysia and China (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). It also operates three medical schools in the local area.

Figure 1 shows all of UoN's campuses and satellite sites across the East Midlands.

UoN has five sites in Nottingham itself: University Park Campus, Jubilee Campus, King's Meadow Campus, Queen's Medical Centre and City Hospital. Outside of Nottingham, there is the Sutton Bonnington Campus which houses the Schools of Bioscience and Veterinary Science as well as a library. In Derby, there is the Royal Derby Hospital, which houses one of the medical schools.

University of Nottingham has eight libraries across its campuses serving students, staff, and external visitors. UoN Libraries has around 250 staff (*About Libraries*, n.d.). The below organisational chart illustrates the complexity of the service, which operates a functional library model. While this approach brings clear efficiencies, it also reduces opportunities for cross-team interaction. Combined with a large number of geographically separate library sites, this structure (Figure 2) has contributed to the development of siloed ways of working.

Fig. 1: Map data © 2025 Google, showing UoN campuses and satellite sites (Google Maps, 2025).

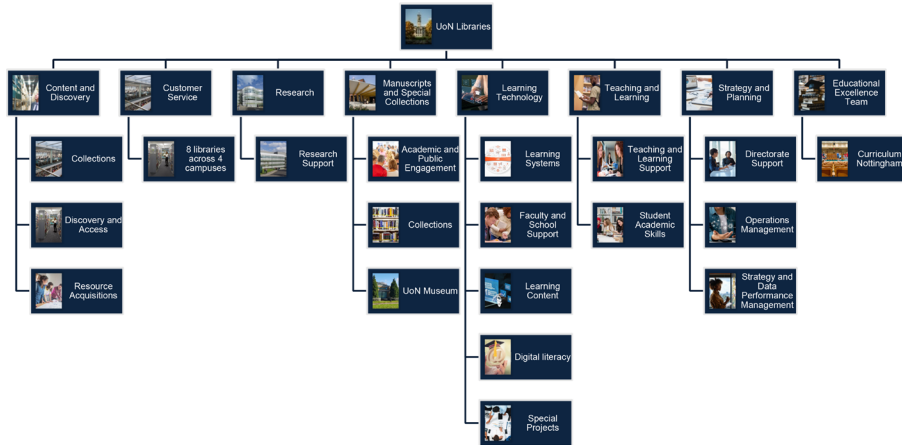


2.2. Job Shadowing Inception: Reasoning for the Creation of a Job Shadowing Scheme

Job shadowing, sometimes referred to as work shadowing, is an activity which involves accompanying and observing a person's day to day activities at work, for a short period of time, in order to gain insight, understanding and potential training for such work (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.).

Job shadowing offers the chance to spend a day observing a professional at work. Paris and Mason (1995), as cited in Cho and Gao (2009), describe it as a form of work experience option in which a person accompanies a skilled practitioner throughout their daily tasks. This short-term, unpaid opportunity allows people to gain direct exposure to a workplace aligned with their interests. Through firsthand observation, they encounter real-world working

Fig. 2: Organisational chart.



environments, see employability and job-specific skills in action, and develop an appreciation for professional training and potential career pathways. Job shadowing is intended to broaden career awareness, model professional behaviours, and strengthen the connection between academic learning and workplace expectations (Cho and Gao, 2009).

At University of Nottingham (UoN) Libraries, job shadowing has become a key tool for staff development and engagement. This paper presents a case study of the scheme, outlining its development, implementation, and impact on staff engagement and organisational culture.

Job shadowing offers multiple benefits for both the organisation and the staff involved by:

- Providing a snapshot into another person's work life;
- Helping the shadowee decide if they wish to move to that department/job role if a vacancy becomes available;
- Identifying both skills and skill gaps;
- Providing a chance for networking and removing siloed working;
- Creating a quick, short-term, effective and low-cost opportunity for staff development (University of Nottingham, Leadership and Management Academy, 2019).

The benefits of shadowing are wide-ranging. It supports career exploration, challenges assumptions about professional roles, and can be used as a practical training tool. Hosts also gain value, for example, by reflecting on their own practices or strengthening cross-departmental understanding (Cho and Gao, 2009).

Research on reflective practice in academic libraries shows that opportunities to pause, analyse experiences, and consider future improvement are central to meaningful professional development. Structured reflection, whether individual or collaborative, enhances self-awareness, problem solving, and professional growth (Goosney et al., 2014).

Studies on mentoring highlight that structured, guided workplace learning helps staff develop confidence, navigate organisational norms, and acquire new skills more effectively. These findings support the idea that job shadowing, although distinct from mentoring, similarly provides staff with a supportive environment in which to learn, ask questions, and explore new professional pathways (Freedman, 2009).

The low-cost part of job shadowing is important to highlight, taking into consideration the challenging financial environment Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the UK are currently facing (Adams, 2025).

Of course, job shadowing does have a cost, and that is staff time. Hosts will have to give up a few hours of their working day to support shadowees, whilst there is also a time investment required by those that organise the scheme. However, we have found that this is manageable for all parties and should not deter other organisations from starting their own scheme. As with all new schemes, initial set up will take more time, but the ongoing time investment required to run a job shadowing scheme is not onerous. This case study therefore aims to show that even with all the difficulties currently taking place across HEIs, staff development and engagement is important and can be set up easily and done with minimal disruption. It will also show how both hosts and shadowees benefit from the exchange.

Existing literature suggests that job shadowing is widely valued, though more comprehensive studies are needed. Cefai et al., as cited by Cho and Gao, 2009, for instance, report positive outcomes from a shadowing

initiative at Anglia Ruskin University Library, where staff used the experience to better understand colleagues' roles and how these contribute to the wider library service (Cho and Gao, 2009).

This project has been presented at the Mercian Collaboration 2024 and the UK Serials Group (UKSG) 2025 conferences. At both conferences it has garnered interest and excitement among the attendees. Many attendees have already begun planning job shadowing schemes within their own organisations, from UK and European universities to academic publishers, all recognising the benefits such schemes can bring. The presentation is available to view and download, on Loughborough University Research Repository (Addleton et al., 2025).

3. Designing the Experience: How the Scheme Took Shape

3.1. Behind the Scenes: Setting Up a Job Shadowing Scheme

Job shadowing schemes have been a popular way of engaging staff in career progression. The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) have published a series of case studies looking at how to get into senior leadership roles in libraries ("How to get ahead in libraries: Case studies," n.d.).

The case studies look at internal job shadowing, external job secondments, and internships, with the University of Manchester taking a very similar approach to the one we in the Training and Development Group decided to follow ("How to get ahead in libraries: Case studies," n.d.).

Members of the Training and Development Group simply started talking to our colleagues to gauge whether such a scheme would be of interest. A survey was sent out by the Engagement Team to assess both the willingness to participate as a shadowee (staff member observing another role) and as a host (staff member facilitating the shadowing experience). The answers provided were overwhelmingly positive. Here are some comments from the survey:

"This (shadowing), would be a brilliant opportunity to find out what people in other departments do on a day-to-day basis. This will help staff to see whether a

move sideways, to another team, would be an interesting move for them, as there is not always the desire or the opportunity to move up the scale."

"Continuing professional development and also an increased understanding of roles across the section could improve performance within my own role as I would be better informed."

"Interested to know what another team does, especially what systems they use. How it fits in with other teams."

"As a relative newcomer to the team, I'm interested to learn about what others do to help me understand how that fits with my role and how the teams fit together. Also thinking about career progression, so interested in shadowing colleagues in areas I might be interested in moving into at some point (e.g. metadata or repository management), as well as senior managers to learn more about moving up to that level."

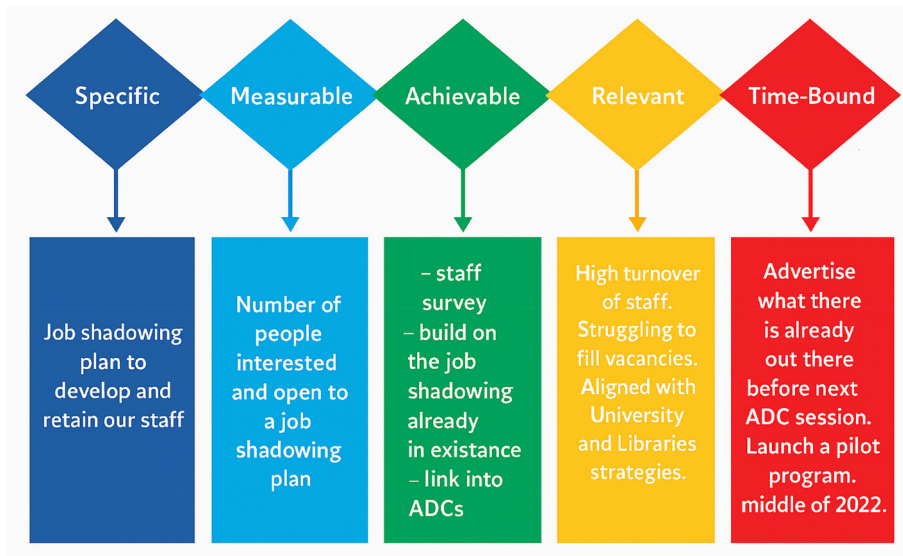
This information made us feel that we were on the right path and gave us the impetus to present it to our Senior Management Team (SMT). We understood that they were a key stakeholder as they would unlock the supply of hosts – the most important part of any job shadowing scheme. We decided to write a business plan to present our reasoning for a job shadowing pilot scheme specifically for Libraries. The business plan itself was a short document highlighting the need for a job shadowing scheme and why we, as the Training and Development team, thought it would be a good idea. Of course, as this was an important step into receiving SMT approval, we also set realistic and SMART objectives (Figure 3).

The pilot proposal received prompt support from senior managers, who recognised its value for staff engagement and development at relatively low cost. The senior team were also encouraged that we were trying to make it inclusive and available for all colleagues.

With SMT backing in place, a sub-team of the Training and Development Group was established to focus on the creation and delivery of a dedicated job shadowing scheme for UoN Libraries.

Studies of peer-based mentoring programmes highlight that voluntary participation is critical to sustaining authentic engagement and open

Fig. 3: SMART objectives for job shadowing scheme.



conversation, a factor reflected in the enthusiasm our staff expressed when applying to participate (Goosney et al., 2014).

3.2. Commitment to Inclusion

From the start, inclusion was one of the key aims for our job shadowing pilot – an aim based upon listening to colleagues. We heard from colleagues who felt they often missed out on such opportunities, due to their working hours (especially our Library Advisers working outside the typical 9-5 shifts), as their shifts were not compatible with the availability of hosts. Such risk of discrimination is summarised by the following quote from our pre-pilot listening exercise:

“An overarching theme was a desire from staff to see more opportunities for career development – across the department not limited to Customer Services. Within this was a desire to have access to secondments, shadowing and mentoring and to have some clarification of who/how people might get access to these. There was also reference made to these opportunities to be available to all staff – part time and full time as opportunities are mostly full time.”

To ensure we made the pilot as inclusive as possible, we completed an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA). Through this work, we identified that the following characteristics required our consideration:

- Age
- Disability
- Socio economic
- Caring responsibilities (an additional characteristic identified by the university)

At the time of writing our EIA we had a departmental Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) plan that was focused on taking positive action to be a more diverse environment in terms of ethnicity. Our positive action was focused on our job adverts, where we encouraged applications from candidates who identify as ethnically diverse. However, we did not want to limit this to recruitment, and as we saw job shadowing as a developmental opportunity (that would encourage retention), we also included positive action statements in our job shadowing material. The inclusive spirit remains embodied in the ongoing scheme, as the action statement shows:

“The job shadowing scheme is open to all staff within Libraries regardless of job level. As always, we will continue to support part-time colleagues who want to job shadow by trying to find solutions when contracted hours do not match the shadowing hours. We also want to encourage applications from colleagues where we are currently underrepresented at levels 5 and above. Specifically, we would welcome applications from colleagues who are ethnically diverse and/or identify as part of the Global majority.”

Through our EIA we took the following action to make our shadowing pilot as inclusive as possible:

- The Training and Development Group provided clear guidance on how job shadowing can be an inclusive experience for all staff. We talked to line managers and explained the benefits of shadowing, articulating our aim to make this an inclusive practice. This included advice on how to support colleagues who identify with a protected characteristic.
- For the pilot group to be as diverse as possible, the Training and Development Group encouraged staff with the aforementioned protected characteristics to apply.

- To support our part time and “out of office” hours staff, we provided the option of lieu time (TOIL) or paid overtime. This was presented to SMT who authorised this option.
- For staff with caring responsibilities the Training and Development Group asked the hosts to be as flexible as possible when accommodating their visitors. As the sessions were designed to be no longer than three hours long and can be planned at any point in the academic year, we supported hosts to find a solution.
- We promoted awareness of the Conference and Training Care Fund (a UoN internal fund), which allows employees to reclaim reasonable additional costs for the care of dependants while participating in work-related training.
- We ran a Spotlight Session (internal webinar to present the work of a team or a project to increase understanding) for all staff to highlight our inclusion principle. We advised that it was open to all Libraries staff no matter their age, contract length, grade or experience.
- We supported staff who are disabled or neurodiverse by working with the host to make any necessary reasonable adjustments.

The work that was framed by the completion of the EIA, allowed us to make our pilot and eventual job shadowing scheme an inclusive one. We received positive feedback from applicants who had previously felt less able to participate in such a scheme.

3.3. The Pilot

For the pilot we chose Learning Technology and Content and Discovery – two teams which recently had a high staff turnover and were struggling to fill vacancies. We decided on a pilot for multiple reasons: it was scalable, easy to set up, easy to test and if the demand was low, we would know that job shadowing would not be something that would be useful. All job shadowing requests were authorised by the line manager and documented on the potential shadowee’s annual review. As a guide we suggested that the shadowing should last for two or three sessions for a specific team within the relevant section.

To drum up interest for the pilot and our new scheme, we presented it at the Spotlight Session mentioned above, and in internal blog posts.

If the pilot was successful, in year two we would launch it across all of our teams within Libraries. Our aim was for our staff members to view job shadowing as a career development opportunity and have the confidence to discuss it with their line managers during their annual review conversations.

In real terms, the timeline (Figure 4) for setting up the job shadowing scheme in pilot form, was one year. This takes into consideration that the staff involved in the creation of this scheme would also have their regular work commitments.

4. Stepping into Each Other's Shoes: Running the Scheme

4.1. Implementation of the Scheme

The successful implementation of the job shadowing scheme depended not only on the motivations, aims and pilot phase already described, but also on the careful coordination of day-to-day logistics. This section outlines how we designed and managed the scheme from an operational perspective, ensuring that colleagues across Libraries could access an inclusive and meaningful opportunity for learning and development. The process is broken down into three phases – pre-shadowing, during shadowing, and post-shadowing – reflecting the practical steps involved.

Fig. 4: Timeline for the job shadowing creation and implementation.



4.2. Pre-shadowing: Building the Foundations

The first step in running the scheme was to secure the engagement of managers and team leaders. Without their support, it would have been impossible to unlock the supply of hosts or to ensure the necessary flexibility within teams. To achieve this, we worked closely with the Senior Management Team and section heads, presenting the scheme as a low-cost but high-value way to support staff development. Their endorsement reassured teams that hosting shadowees was both supported and encouraged at leadership level. All library teams were expected to host a shadowee at least once a year.

Research on reflective and peer-mentoring initiatives in academic libraries has shown that time commitment is one of the greatest barriers to sustained participation. By keeping shadowing sessions short and flexible, our scheme aligns with evidence-based recommendations for sustainability (Goosney et al., 2014).

With managerial support established, attention turned to designing the processes for participation. Two Microsoft Forms were created: one for potential hosts and another for prospective shadowees.

The host form collected details of which sections and teams were available to host, the number of shadowees each team could accommodate, and any preferred time windows for hosting. Hosts were also invited to share additional comments or considerations for the organisers. This information gave us a clear overview of capacity and availability across the service, allowing us to build a pool of placements that could be matched with staff interest.

The shadowee form collected information on which team(s) staff members wished to shadow, their current team, and their motivation for applying. Applicants were also asked to note whether they worked part-time. This information helped us to understand individual aspirations and circumstances, and to match staff with hosts in a way that supported both professional growth and practical feasibility.

Marketing the scheme was a further priority. We publicised the opportunity through internal posts, Spotlight Sessions, and targeted email communications. By promoting the scheme as open to all staff, regardless of role or

contract type, we aimed to maximise uptake and to signal that the initiative was intended as a genuinely inclusive opportunity.

Finally, once applications were received, the Training and Development sub-team managing shadowing carried out the matching process. Here we balanced preferences, host capacity, and scheduling considerations, while also ensuring that shadowing placements aligned with the scheme's developmental and inclusive aims. Whilst we originally gave priority to applicants that specified a disability, a caring role or were part-time, we now give priority to those that have not shadowed before. However, we have always tried to ensure that as many people are matched with a placement as possible, with very few people having to join the waiting list for the subsequent round of shadowing.

4.3. During Shadowing: Facilitating Connections

Once matches were confirmed, communication became the basis of smooth delivery. Shadowees were provided with clear information about their host placement, including contact details, and information on the accessibility of the site and buildings, while hosts received parallel communications confirming the identities and expectations of their shadowees. This two-way information flow reduced uncertainty and ensured that both parties were prepared. At this stage it was left to the hosts and shadowees to arrange mutually convenient times for the shadowing to take place thereby allowing maximum flexibility.

The design of the scheme allowed up to three sessions of a maximum of three hours each. These were intended to be short, focused engagements that minimised disruption to daily work but still provided meaningful exposure. In practice, placements ranged from observing customer service shifts to shadowing managers in strategy meetings or learning about specialised systems.

The shadowing sub-team remained closely involved throughout. Hosts were given contact details and encouraged to get in touch if they required any support. Regular email check-ins with shadowees allowed us to monitor progress, respond to logistical issues, and provide reassurance – particularly important for part-time colleagues whose timetables required extra

negotiation. In some cases, timetabling challenges emerged, but these were addressed by encouraging flexibility. This ongoing support was important for maintaining trust and ensuring continued engagement and support.

4.4. Post-shadowing: Reflection and Evaluation

After each placement, both hosts and shadowees were invited to provide feedback via online forms. These forms asked participants to reflect on what they had learned, what had worked well, and what could be improved. Collecting this feedback served multiple purposes: it enabled immediate adjustments to the scheme, provided testimonials to share in newsletters and reports, and helped us demonstrate the impact of the scheme to senior management.

Feedback was very encouraging. Shadowees mentioned they learned a great deal about how different teams work and about possible next steps in their own careers, while hosts appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own practices and to showcase the work of their teams. In some cases, shadowing even prompted longer-term career decisions, with colleagues subsequently applying for and securing roles in areas they had explored through the scheme.

The evaluation phase also involved critical reflection by the organising team. We identified practical lessons – for example, the importance of making the limited number of placements transparent in advance, and the need to clarify expectations around time-off-in-lieu for part-time colleagues. These insights fed directly into the design of subsequent rounds of the scheme, reducing friction and enhancing inclusivity.

5. What We Learned Along the Way: Insights from Staff

5.1. Gathering Feedback

To support the longevity of the shadowing scheme, we continued to collect feedback after each round. This allowed us to confirm that participants found the scheme useful and to refine its delivery so that it runs in the most effective way.

At the time of writing, nearly a quarter of our 250 staff have taken part in the shadowing scheme as a shadowee and even more have been reached by taking part as a host. Therefore, we always try to capture as much feedback data as possible. The form sent to all shadowees asks questions about their experience (see appendix). The form sent to hosts measures the impact the scheme is having on those delivering it.

In the three years since the inception of the scheme, we have collected 140 pieces of feedback in total, across both our shadowees and our hosts. Of those 140 pieces of feedback, only two have raised concerns about their experiences of the scheme. While small in number, these responses provided valuable pointers for improvement.

5.2. Shadowees' Feedback and Outcomes

We have listened to all the feedback we received. This is especially pertinent if the feedback is critical, as we would like our shadowees to have a good experience. For example, in our first year we received the following piece of feedback:

"I found the sessions fairly generic and superficial. The sessions I was offered were not unique to the job shadowing experience, and I could have (and already had) independently accessed some of the sessions prior to the initiative."

On investigation, we agreed that the sessions were not delivered as expected. To ensure that this didn't happen again we contacted the host and reiterated what was expected from a shadowing placement. Subsequent shadowees to this team have rated their placements highly since changes were made. This shows that placements are only as good as a host makes them. Therefore, we try to ensure that every host understands what a good placement looks like.

Predominantly, the feedback we have received from our shadowees has been glowing. With regards to the content of the scheme:

"It was a good way to get an overview of the work of another part of the section. I spoke to all members of the team and gained an understanding of the workflow throughout the year with lots of practical examples of the work."

But also, praise for the organisation and the work that goes on behind the scenes:

"All of the sessions were well organised to fit with my work pattern. The team were very welcoming and eager to let me engage with the processes. I was always given an opportunity to ask any questions throughout all the sessions."

From the feedback it is evident that our shadowees take part in the scheme for two main reasons. Firstly, as a way to make connections between their own teams and those that they are shadowing with:

"This scheme is really informative, a good opportunity to interact with other teams, it provides us with a better understanding of the various cogs that make the University work, whilst also being a refreshing and enjoyable experience."

Whilst others take part in the scheme as a way of improving their career prospects. The information that they acquire during shadowing can help them with future application forms and interviews.

"This is an excellent scheme, especially for people in early stages of their career, so that they can decide which area they would like to progress and what suits their skills."

As part of the feedback, we always ask shadowees if they have any suggestions for improving the shadowing scheme. Subsequently we have made a number of changes to our processes. Firstly, we were prompted to clarify the Time off in Lieu (TOIL)/overtime options for part-time staff taking part outside normal hours. Financial pressures dictated our preferred option of TOIL.

Applicants mentioned that they were not aware how many shadowing places were available each term, thus leading to disappointment if they didn't get their first choice. By simply adding the number of placements next to each team on the application form, applicants are now fully aware that some teams offer fewer placements. This managed their expectations and encouraged shadowees to apply to more teams to guarantee they were awarded a place.

Although the adjustments were relatively small, they had a noticeable impact on the experience of our shadowees. These changes helped participants to feel more informed and supported throughout the process, with feedback suggesting that participants valued not only the opportunity itself, but also the sense that their concerns were being listened to and acted upon.

5.3. Hosts' Feedback and Outcomes

Initially we were worried that hosts would see the scheme as a quandary and an additional pressure to already busy workloads. However, the feedback started to tell us that the Hosts were finding the scheme a useful experience.

"I had been concerned about the amount of time this would take up, but it was organised and run in a very sensible and realistic way. I am completely won over. This was a great initiative to be involved in."

Many hosts highlighted the benefits they themselves gained through participating.

"Having a scheme such as this helps build those connections between people who might not normally have anything to do with each other in their day-to-day work. I felt it was mutually beneficial because as well as getting to share details of my work, I was also able to learn more about the participant's role and understand how things operate within their team."

As people across teams start to make these connections, more staff begin to understand what their colleagues' roles entail. This in turn leads to better service delivery, as staff now know the correct person to approach with queries. Hosts even mentioned that delivering sessions for the scheme has helped them to clarify their own roles and identify their tasks, in a way that they never have before.

From the hosts' feedback, we saw teams excited to take part but also feeling the pressures from the number of shadowing sessions they were delivering, especially following a reduction in staff numbers. It was decided, therefore, to move the scheme from a termly occurrence to semesterly. This reduced the number of yearly sessions from three to two. With this change we have seen

an increase in the number of placements offered by some teams for each session. This is a win for all those involved.

As the Shadowing scheme develops, we will continue to gather feedback and act on it as required. It is imperative for shadowing to continue operating successfully, that both shadowees and hosts feel heard and represented.

6. From Pilot to Practice: The Impact of the Scheme

6.1. Engagement

Our job shadowing scheme has had a positive effect on staff engagement. People from all teams now better understand how their role fits in with the wider library structure. Spending time with another team following their day-to-day work allowed them to see first-hand how different roles connect with their own, thereby creating more cohesion across the department. Staff members recognise the benefits of the scheme and appreciate its inclusivity. Shadowing is available for all library staff at all levels, and this helps to break down the hierarchy.

Because of the scheme, staff are feeling more motivated, as senior management endorsement and the visible allocation of time clearly demonstrates the department is willing to invest time into their development. This is evidenced by the fact that currently demand for placements far exceeds supply. All teams are taking part as hosts and staff from most teams are coming forward to shadow.

From the outset, the scheme was designed to inspire and engage the shadowees. However, as previously mentioned, there are also clear benefits to hosts in taking part. Our shadowing scheme is being talked about in other parts of the University, with some departments asking how they too can replicate it.

Co-mentoring research shows that when professional development is reciprocal, both parties gain insight, confidence, and a stronger sense of agency, an effect mirrored in our shadowing scheme, where hosts frequently reported learning from explaining their processes (Goosney et al., 2014).

6.2. Networking

Taking part in the scheme gives Library staff the chance to spend time in teams they have not previously worked with. These placements create personal connections that extend beyond the sessions themselves, making it easier to approach one another in future. As a result, staff are beginning to feel part of the wider department rather than just their immediate team. This greater sense of belonging carries over into library-wide events, where colleagues report feeling more at ease and more willing to engage. In this way, the scheme directly contributes to breaking down the silos that have built up over the years and encourages the kind of cross-team collaboration that has been one of our key aims from the outset.

Similar to research-informed models of professional learning communities, job shadowing can function as a cross-departmental learning structure, allowing staff to encounter diverse perspectives and develop shared understanding across the organisation (Goosney et al., 2014).

Additionally, staff now have a greater knowledge of what different teams do, and who is the correct person to turn to with a question or query. This enables issues to be directed to the right department a lot quicker than previously, and results in a better outcome for the end user. Thus, our students and academics are indirectly benefitting from the scheme as well.

6.3. Outside the University of Nottingham

Having presented the scheme at two different UK conferences (The Mercian conference in 2024 and UKSG in 2025), our impact has not only become national, but also international. After delivering our paper, many people from other institutions approached us to ask questions, obviously thinking this was something they could replicate. The simplicity and low cost of the scheme were particularly appealing, as colleagues saw how it could be adapted for their own organisations without significant resources. These included librarians from several European countries as well as the UK. Additionally, a number of publishers attended our talks and also showed an interest in setting up similar initiatives within their companies. Subsequently we have had library leaders arrange meetings with us asking for advice on

how to set up a scheme at their institution. This gave us the first insight into how powerful this scheme might be and how far its reach might spread.

In subsequent months UKSG has published several articles by attendees of their conference, many of which spotlighted our presentation and how useful it was for them. This suggests that the impact of our scheme is far wider than we ever thought and is continuing to grow. Some of these are mentioned below:

For Monday, I must also give a special mention to ... 'Beyond the Stacks: A Sneak Peek in Library Staff Engagement with Job Shadowing' [...]. (Griffiths, 2025)

For example, the session 'Beyond the Stacks: A sneak Peek into Library Staff Engagement with Job Shadowing', was so useful and directly applied to the engagement element of my role. [...] (Davey, 2025)

The ... Libraries Training and Development Team Libraries Job Shadowing scheme is something other workplaces should aspire to putting into place at their institutions. Noticing that for some staff, career progression was difficult and that they were losing talented staff because of this, the scheme sought to address some of these issues. [...] (Ng, 2025)

Mentoring scholarship also highlights organisational benefits, noting that supportive development programmes can boost retention, speed up staff induction, and help build future leadership capacity. Job shadowing similarly contributes to organisational resilience by strengthening staff familiarity with different roles and sustaining engagement across teams (Freedman, 2009).

7. Reflections and Recommendations: Lessons Learned Along the Way and Next Steps

7.1. Reflections on the Scheme

Looking back, one thing that stands out about the job shadowing scheme, is how much it exceeded our expectations. What began as a small pilot quickly

grew into something that not only supported staff development but also brought colleagues closer together. We were struck by the generosity of hosts, who gave their time and welcomed shadowees into their teams, and by the enthusiasm of shadowees, who came with open minds and genuine curiosity. The result was a shared sense of teamwork and mutual learning.

7.2. Reflections on the Process

As organisers, we gained a great deal ourselves. Coordinating the scheme gave us insight into the breadth of work across Libraries and a deeper appreciation of the challenges and opportunities facing different teams. We learned the value of being flexible, of listening carefully to participants, and of adapting the scheme as we went along. Most of all, we learnt that creating opportunities for staff to connect and learn from each other need not be complicated or expensive – it just requires some thought, a little coordination, and the willingness to try.

One of our early concerns was how much time pressure would this “additional work” create for us as organisers. We are all busy and this was an additional role to our day to day areas of responsibility. However, it has always been manageable from a time perspective, mainly because there are three people organising rather than one.

Having three people organise the shadowing provides flexibility. If one of us has a difficult month in terms of workload, the others can step in, so the day job does not suffer. As a measure of time investment not being an issue, our individual line managers do not see this as interfering with our day job. They have been fully supportive and recognise the developmental benefits (for us), by taking on this extra responsibility.

7.3. Reflections on Our Success

At the start of our work, we wanted the scheme to have a positive impact on our KPI's such as turnover and engagement. However, as we have come

to understand how many different factors influence such KPI's the quantitative impact of job shadowing has proven difficult to measure. So much has changed since 2021 and big events (the restructure of our department, voluntary redundancy schemes, and recruitment freezes), have had far more influence on our KPI's than we could have foreseen. From a KPI perspective, we have no real idea how much of an impact job shadowing has had.

Relying on quantitative feedback, it is a sensible conclusion to say it has had a positive impact. It is also sensible to conclude that if we are only relying on a job shadowing scheme to improve turnover and engagement KPIs, we are going to fall short. We now understand it has to be part of something bigger and not an isolated operation.

7.4. Next Steps

These reflections are helping us to shape our next steps. Our immediate priority is to continue embedding feedback into the way the scheme runs, using our annual review meetings to reflect on experiences and make adjustments. A recent example was listening to the experience of colleagues who shadowed the Senior Management Team in the first half of 2025. This has been a success, helping our staff to understand what our senior leaders do on a day-to-day basis. Our aim for the academic year 2025/26, is therefore to build on this success, and encourage all of our senior team to offer job shadowing host availability, further widening the opportunities available to staff.

Peer-mentoring research suggests using light-touch reflective prompts (short questions, checklists, or conversation starters) to support deeper learning without creating administrative burden. Similar tools could complement future rounds of our shadowing scheme (Goosney et al., 2014).

Looking further ahead, our ambition is to keep running the scheme so that everyone in Libraries has the chance to take part, whether as a host or as a shadowee. Maintaining regular dialogue with both groups will remain essential, ensuring that the scheme adapts to their needs and continues to feel relevant. In this way, we hope that job shadowing will become a routine part of professional development.

Ultimately, we would like to reach the point where the scheme becomes embedded into line management, annual development conversations, and an overarching retention plan. If job shadowing can simply become part of how we do things, its impact will be both more sustainable, deeply rooted in everyday practice, and easier to measure from a KPI perspective. Going forward, we want our scheme to be included as part of an overall retention plan that is measured by our turnover and engagement scores.

7.5. Recommendations for Others

- **Build in flexibility.** Flexibility underpinned the success of the scheme. Scheduling can be difficult, especially for part-time colleagues or during busy periods, so being willing to adapt is vital. We found that spreading sessions across the year, combining individual and group shadowing, and allowing departments to host in ways that suited their workload made a huge difference. Flexibility also allowed us to respond quickly to unexpected issues, keeping the scheme practical, inclusive, and sustainable.
- **Good communication is essential.** Clear information before, during, and after placements helps to set expectations and prevent misunderstandings. Regular check-ins, even brief ones, reassure both hosts and shadowees that the scheme is being supported and that any issues can be raised easily. Just as important is offering support – making sure that participants know they can contact the organisers if something isn't working or if they need guidance.
- **Keep it simple.** The strength of the scheme was in its straightforward design. Using familiar tools and limiting the commitment to short sessions made the process easy to understand and accessible for everyone involved.
- **Listen to and work with hosts.** Hosts are at the heart of any shadowing scheme. Taking the time to understand their availability, preferences, and constraints helps to build trust and ensures that they feel supported. Recognising their contribution is equally important.
- **Make inclusion a priority.** From the start, think about how to involve colleagues with different working patterns, caring responsibilities, or

access needs. Offering flexibility around timing and format helps to ensure that no one is excluded from taking part.

- **Secure management support.** Having visible backing from senior staff gives the scheme credibility and makes it easier for teams to release time to host. Management endorsement also signals that staff development is valued and taken seriously.

8. Conclusion

The job shadowing scheme at UoN Libraries has shown how a straightforward initiative can generate meaningful results. By giving colleagues the chance to experience the work of other teams, it has helped to reduce silos, build stronger connections, and give staff greater confidence in their own development. Feedback from both hosts and shadowees has been consistently positive, underlining the value of creating space for colleagues to learn directly from one another.

As organisers, we have learned that running such a scheme does not require complex systems or significant resources. What matters most is maintaining clear communication, offering flexibility, and ensuring that all colleagues feel included and supported. With these principles in place, the scheme has been able to operate effectively, requiring minimal coordination, while still delivering benefits across the service. Just as importantly, the initiative has fostered cultural change: beyond individual career development, it has encouraged openness, curiosity, and collaboration across UoN Libraries, strengthening both staff engagement and organisational cohesion.

Looking ahead, we believe job shadowing has the potential to become a sustainable part of professional development in academic libraries, and a model adaptable to other organisations. It is scalable, and the time investment necessary for initial set up and ongoing organisation, should not be onerous – as suggested by our reflections. Implemented correctly, our job shadowing scheme has shown that when colleagues are given the chance to step into each other's shoes, the benefits are shared not only by individuals but also by the wider institution.

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Appendix

Shadowing Scheme Host Feedback Summer 2024

This feedback form is for all Hosts, so that we can understand the experience of Shadowing from your perspective. Feedback will be shared (anonymously) with SMT and the T&D group. Learnings and outcomes may also be shared anonymously via Shelflife or on Libraries Sharepoint.

* Required

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. How many shadowing participants did you have visit your team this term (Summer 2024)? *

2. Did you provide sessions in person or online? *

- ☐ In person only
- ☐ Online only
- ☐ Mixture of both

3. Did the participants spend time with various members of your team? *

- ☐ Just me
- ☐ Myself and one other
- ☐ Several members of the team

4. Did you feel that the participants were engaged and interested when they spent time with you? Please explain. *

5. How did you find the organisation of the Shadowing Scheme and the allocation of participants to your team? *

6. Did you feel that the Training and Development team were able to support you with any questions, and/or supplied you with enough information? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. What other support would you have liked?

8. For how many terms has your team now offered a Shadowing placement? *

☐ One

- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three or more
- ☐ Unsure

9. Thank you for Shadowing on three or more cohorts – your shadowees (and us!), have really appreciated your support. However, rather than just assuming this has been ok for you. we would appreciate your thoughts on how this was from a time commitment? Specifically, has this been too much of a commitment or has it been ok? *

10. Do you feel that the Shadowing Scheme was a useful initiative to be involved with? Please elaborate. *

11. Would you recommend for your own staff to take part in Shadowing of a different team in future? *

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Shadowing Scheme Attendees Feedback Summer 2025

Thank you for applying for the Shadowing Scheme this Summer. We hope that you enjoyed your time taking part in the scheme, and that you found it both useful and informative.

We are gathering some feedback from all attendees to help inform and shape the Shadowing scheme for future years.

Please feel free to write as much or as little in the fields below, but please do give us your honest thoughts so that we can make improvements if necessary.

Some feedback will be shared anonymously with SMT and the Training and Development group in order to shape future iterations of the scheme. Feedback will also be shared anonymously with Hosts so that they can improve their offering for future participants. Anonymous quotes may also be used in Shelflife.

* Required

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. Which team did you shadow with? *

2. In what ways did you find your shadowing placement helpful and/or interesting? *

3. How did you find the initial organisation of the shadowing scheme and the process of placing you with a team to shadow? *

4. Please comment about the sessions you were given by the team you were shadowing. For example: were the sessions well organised, were they arranged quickly, did you feel welcomed into the team, were you given chance to ask questions? Please go into as much detail as you wish regarding the actual sessions. *

5. How do you feel about the number of sessions you were offered? *

- ☐ Too few
- ☐ Too many
- ☐ About right

6. Were your sessions all in person, all online or a mixture of both? *

- ☐ All in person
- ☐ All online
- ☐ Mixture of both

7. Did you find this format useful and did it work for what you were being shown? Would you have preferred a different format? *

8. Is there anything you think could have been done better or you would change about the scheme? *

9. Have you shared anything you learnt with colleagues? *

10. Would you recommend the scheme to colleagues? Why/why not? *

11. Would you take part in the scheme again to shadow another team? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Maybe

☐ I don't feel I need to shadow another team

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