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Understanding Librarians' Experiences of Copyright: Initial Findings from a Phenomenographic Study of UK Librarians

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In 2014/15, two researchers undertook a survey to investigate the 'copyright literacy' of over 600 librarians in the UK (Morrison and Secker, 2015), following reform of copyright legislation. The survey highlighted gaps in librarians' knowledge, identified training requirements in the sector, and provided comparative data to a number of other countries. The research originated from a project funded by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, reported previously at ECIL (Todorova et al, 2014). This paper presents findings from several focus groups to explore copyright with academic librarians.

The survey results suggested that the confidence of UK librarians compared favourably to other countries in terms of their copyright knowledge and UK libraries were more likely to have a copyright officer. However, the level of knowledge about copyright across the sector was mixed; copyright played a small part in the role of many information professionals. The survey indicated that many respondents were keen to develop their knowledge but that librarians found copyright to be a source of anxiety. With this in mind, we decided to gather qualitative data to explore these issues further. Drawing on literature in the education (Akerlind, 2005) and information literacy fields (Yates, Partridge and Bruce, 2012), we decided to use phenomenography to explore variations in how librarians experience copyright. In early 2016, we undertook several focus groups with academic librarians to test out this methodology. Our interim findings suggest that librarians experience copyright in different ways dependent on their role. There are clear pockets of expertise. For example, research support librarians routinely advise academics about open access, whereas librarians supporting teaching often provide advice about copying under the UK's collective licence issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. However, many librarians find copyright queries challenging. They appear to view copyright queries differently than other library enquiries and often feel giving a clear-cut answer can be more difficult. The ambiguity surrounding copyright and the need to make a risk assessment often causes them to doubt their knowledge, leading to anxiety. The research also considered the impact of a specialist copyright officer and whether having access to an in-house expert affects of librarians' confidence when dealing with copyright queries.

In our research we considered the value of library and information science qualifications and Continuing Professional Development to develop librarians' knowledge of copyright. Our findings suggest that many librarians rely on colleagues for advice and support. The key to understanding copyright and intellectual property rights is to embed learning within the librarian's specific work context. We will discuss how understanding the variation in experiences might enhance copyright education. Initial findings suggest that these variations impact on the ways information professionals interact with library users and shape conversations about copyright issues. We will also share their experience of using an interactive, games-based approach to copyright education, that aims to tackle issues of anxiety but also helps to build supportive communities of practice. Finally, we suggest ways to embed copyright more fully into information and digital literacy programmes.

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