

## Project Report

# Subject librarian reflections on upskilling to support staff and students with systematic reviews: Our experience at UWE Bristol

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## Abstract

In recent years library staff in the College of Health Science and Society (CHSS) at UWE Bristol have noticed growing demand from students, researchers, and academic staff for support with systematic reviews (SRs). This reflective piece outlines our experiences of how non-health librarians, with no formal SRs training, have met the challenge of supporting our users with SRs. We will focus on the actions we have taken to improve our knowledge and confidence, the challenges we have faced, and we will make recommendations for future career development in this field.

## Keywords

health information; information literacy; systematic reviews

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## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a proliferation in the number of published systematic reviews (SRs) (Hoffman et al., 2021; Page et al., 2018). Restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic have played a significant part, with primary research becoming unrealistic and lab space unavailable for science subjects (Korbel & Stegle 2020; Nassisi et al., 2020; Subramanya et al., 2020). This shift towards desk-based research has brought about an inevitable increase in demand for support from information professionals (Russell et al., 2022; UHMLG, 2024). It has been reported that workloads among information professionals working in this field are often

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unmanageable, in some instances leading to personal or work-based burnout and emotional exhaustion (Demetres et al., 2020). This was an experience faced by information professionals at Lancaster University which ultimately led to them making a successful funding bid for a new specialist role focussing predominantly on supporting SRs (UHMLG, 2024).

Emerging from their experiences, information professionals at Lancaster, Worcester, Aston and Surrey Universities set up a self-taught SR Community of Practice (CoP) initiative that functions as a mailing list (LIS-SRSEARCHERSGOP@JISCMail.AC.UK). This CoP has rapidly developed into a nationwide and international resource for all those within the higher education community who are involved with SRs. It is a safe space where members can freely ask for advice and guidance. The success of this CoP is unquestionable with over 200 new members joining in four months, demonstrating there was a genuine need for more support and knowledge sharing.

As we saw and reflected on what other universities had started to do, we looked at where we were and where we wanted to go in terms of supporting SRs. We were facing barriers that we needed to address, and we needed a new way forward.

## 2. Upskilling SR knowledge

As a group of UWE subject librarians, the thought and process of upskilling ourselves was initially a daunting prospect. We had no background working in health libraries, and no formal training. The need for information professionals from non-health disciplines to upskill, to meet the increasing demand for SR support has been widely reported (Kogut et al., 2022; Reigelman & Kocher, 2018). Although we were not starting from scratch, we were inexperienced. For a number of years the library had offered fairly standard SR advice, partly due to UWE not being a research focused university. It involved meeting individuals to discuss research strategies, relevant databases, and other resources useful for SRs. We did provide an enhanced offer, aimed at researchers with a grant which they could use to pay us to develop a search strategy for them in conjunction with a review team, run agreed searches and deposit results into a reference management tool. This offer has only been taken up once in recent years.

Feelings of pressure rose as we realised that expectations upon us to be experts in this field and to teach this subject more frequently had increased. Feelings of imposter syndrome crept in. The phenomenon of imposter syndrome among information professionals has frequently been discussed in the literature (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017) and the words of Clark et al. (2014) resonated with us, "Striving to be seen as an authoritative figure can lead to internal conflict when the librarian does not feel he or she is knowledgeable or experienced with the subject at hand" (p. 255). However, we began to realise that some academic staff we were working with had not necessarily carried out a SR themselves, and were in fact inexperienced in this research method. This was significant, as they would need training too!

Our initial approach to upskilling was a broad one which involved synthesising information gleaned from module handbooks, teaching materials, online resources, and internal discussions with academics and information professionals at UWE involved in SRs. This enabled us to create a checklist of the SR process. This checklist proved to be a very useful reference during student and staff one-to-one sessions.

Our next step was to look externally for expert advice from an information professional perspective. We enrolled in an online course delivered by the Sheffield Centre for Health and Related Research (SCHARR). The knowledge from the course gave us an excellent overarching structure for how to approach a SR. It also answered some of the questions that had puzzled us, such as “when do you stop searching?”

Attending conferences has been another rewarding way in which we have gained knowledge regarding SRs. We attended the Learn Long and Prosper: 2024 UHMLG Summer Conference which provided very useful information on SRs. Conferences have also been a great opportunity for networking. Speaking with information professionals who specialise in SRs has been valuable and helped us to feel less isolated.

Online forums have been another major source of information and support for us. For example, the SR Community of Practice (CoP) mailing list has allowed us to ask questions of other information professionals and also to get insights from those who are beginning on their SR journey like us.

Feeling less daunted, we used what we had learned to create an [online workbook](#) for library staff to use as support when carrying out one-to-one sessions with students and academic staff on SRs. The workbook is open access. It covers fourteen different stages of the SR process, from initial definitions of the various types of review to writing protocols and creating search strategies, using relevant databases, critically evaluating sources, and decolonising your SR. We promoted our workbook during academic meetings, teaching sessions, and in one-to-one sessions. Over the last two years since it was created, it has proved incredibly popular with over 5,500 views (October 2025). We have subsequently been approached by academics asking for us to deliver workshops. These workshops are being planned to take place in the upcoming academic year and will particularly focus on dissertation supervisors who are supporting students with their SRs.

### **3. Barriers/challenges to upskilling**

There have been several barriers and challenges along this journey. Some have been practical, involving financial and logistical constraints. The current financial climate within the Higher Education sector (Office for Students, 2024) has led to extensive cuts within universities. This has had an impact on our continuing professional development (CPD) budget, which has meant that we have needed to be selective in terms of what we attend, and who attends conferences and training. Online events such as the SR conversations have been very rewarding. Their minimal cost and convenient timing have given us a wonderful opportunity to expand our knowledge. Equally, online forums, such as the LIS-Link systematic reviews, have been extremely useful.

Time constraints have had an impact on our potential learning. In some ways this is linked to the financial situation. A recruitment freeze has left us with more to do, and fewer people available to do it! The literature suggests that financial and time restraints are one of the most common barriers to improving knowledge in SR learning (Crum & Cooper, 2013; Folb et al., 2020). We currently have three full-time staff members who have been able to engage in upskilling their SR knowledge and support, and ideally we hope to increase the confidence and skills of more colleagues in the future. This will take some of the pressure off ourselves.

Another challenge we have encountered involved the terminology surrounding SRs. During student one-to-one sessions, we sometimes discovered that they were not in fact being asked by their module leader to do a SR, but a literature review carried out systematically, or sometimes this was referred to as a “mini systematic review”. We made efforts to address this confusion via our SR workbook, including a section titled, “Are you doing a systematic review?” Within this section, we describe exactly what a SR is and offers information about alternative methodologies. The main reason for confusion may be due to the way academics refer to assessment requirements within assignment briefs, inadvertently referring to a literature or scoping review incorrectly, perhaps because they are not clear about the differences themselves. This is where we need to ensure we communicate closely with academics regarding such details, open any future training sessions to staff and students to raise awareness regarding correct use of terminology to ensure that extra pressure is not placed on students due to confusion about expectations. This will no doubt be an ongoing conversation.

To some extent we have been victims of our own success. We have promoted widely what we can offer, which has led to a steady stream of one-to-one requests from students and researchers, and this has caused us to struggle to meet the demand. Anecdotally we have heard students say that their lecturer has instructed them all to attend a one-to-one appointment with their librarian because the support they receive is invaluable. On the one hand this gives us great confidence that our support is valued, and it helps with the feelings of imposter syndrome we may have had. However, this extra pressure has led us to look at ways in which we can manage expectations around what we can realistically achieve given our staffing structure. We tried to address this by experimenting with an online SR drop-in session over lunchtime, with the aim of attracting several students at once. Unfortunately, only one student attended, which was disappointing. Many of the students doing SRs are doctoral students working full or part-time in other roles while carrying out their SR at the same time, so numbers were never going to be high. We will revisit this in the future and explore further ways in which we can engage more students, without adding too much to our workloads.

#### 4. Next steps

The following offer ideas for the future on what we could all do as information professionals to develop a realistic SR offer.

- **Professional Development:** Explore the latest developments in SRs, including researching and trialing new products and resources. For example, we can look at tools such as ASReviews, which would give us more knowledge about how AI can assist with the SR screening process and reduce workload. The various resources offered by Cochrane also look very useful, including their online interactive learning modules and products such as RevMan.
- **Training courses and conferences:** Ask for recommendations from information professionals working in the field of SRs via the CoPs we belong to. We would be very interested in attending future SR conversation events and exploring the regular events and workshops organised by Cochrane. Networking through the CoP, and other events we attend, will continue to be important for us so that we can keep in touch with information professionals working in this field. Regular reflection and keeping notes about our own teaching and learning experiences concerning SRs will also be valuable.

We recommend UHMLG forums and summer conferences and training offered by Covidence, SCHARR and Cochrane.

- **Knowledge exchange:** Share experiences and what we have learnt with colleagues (academics and information professionals). This can enhance their knowledge, but it is also an opportunity to pick up new ideas and ways to approach SR teaching and learning. We will also consider setting up a UWE SR Teams channel for librarians, academic staff, researchers and students to share knowledge and information and offer support and advice.
- **Promotion:** Explore the ways in which a SR offer can be promoted, and to what extent. It is important to be mindful of workload capacity and ensure there is a balance with all aspects of the role. Taking on too much in one area can be detrimental to other areas and potentially lead to work-based pressure and stress.
- **Demand from other subject areas:** Explore whether other subject areas require SR support, including non health/medical subject areas. If so, learn more about their requirements.
- **Designated SR Information Professional Specialist:** Explore whether the service requires a specialist role that predominantly focusses on SR support. If so, we can start to keep meticulous records to establish the need and carry out evaluations to produce a business case. Liaising with other information services who have made a successful business case may lead to some guidance.
- **Training:** Evaluate the training offer for staff and academic colleagues. Does it need to be more focussed on specific aspects of the SR? Are there alternative ways in which it can be delivered, such as video recordings?

We will continue our work in upskilling ourselves, and we will use the action plan as a guide for areas to develop and explore over the upcoming academic year.

## Declarations

### Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with UWE's guidance on the conduct of ethical research.

### Funding

Not applicable.

### AI-generated content

No AI tools were used.

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