

Umbrella 2013: a student perspective

2-3 July 2013, Manchester University

Archana Deshmukh, University of Brighton

A student perspective of the CILIP Umbrella 2013 conference, focussing on some of the common themes discussed by the speakers and delegates.

In March of this year I was delighted to receive a bursary from UKeIG towards the cost of attending CILIP's Umbrella conference in Manchester on 2-3 July 2013. This biennial event brings together librarians and information professionals from a range of sectors, and aims to highlight the impact of good practice and promote innovation.

According to delegates who had attended previous Umbrella conferences, there was a marked difference in the approach used to organise this year's event. Firstly, instead of requesting submissions through the CILIP sub-groups, the conference organisers had put out a general call for papers. Secondly, the conference featured speakers from beyond the library profession. This meant that there was an interesting diversity in the style, content and viewpoints expressed at the event.

The presentations were grouped under four strands: "Future Skills and Future Roles", "Information to Best Support Society", "Beyond Information Matters" and "Partnerships for Progress". Over the course of the conference, I was interested to note that a number of sub-themes seemed to be echoed across all four strands. Instead of summarising the content of the presentations which are available via this link: <http://bit.ly/14GqLeS>, I will therefore focus on discussing my perceptions of these sub-themes.

A blurring of the boundaries between digital and physical library services

The impact of digital technologies on the information environment was viewed from different professional perspectives, including media production and software development. However, the

opening keynote speaker for the conference was Roly Keating, CEO of the British Library. He highlighted how the organisation is embracing opportunities to widen access and enjoyment of its existing physical collections, content and expertise, through digital projects such as its Sounds Archive. Moreover, he discussed the opportunities that the digital environment presents for creating new collections, as demonstrated by the project to archive the personal emails of the poet Wendy Cope. This positive view of digital technologies was somewhat contrasted by a discussion following a presentation by Ka Ming Pang about #UKLibchat, a discussion forum on Twitter for librarians. Some delegates expressed concern about using social media in the workplace, seeing it as a predominantly social rather than a professional activity. However, the debate session entitled “Where Does the Internet End and the Library Begin?” highlighted how today’s information environment has no defined boundaries; users now act as creators, sharers and archivists. In order to meet their requirements, information professionals need to be engaged with the full range of physical and digital information sources adopted by users. This was aptly demonstrated by Suzanne Tatham of University of Sussex, who has integrated the use of Twitter in the teaching of information literacy to undergraduate students.

Adapting to a changing economic climate

Although it can be argued that the information environment is constantly evolving and that information professionals are frequently early adopters of new technologies, the economic recession has focussed attention on the need to

review and update the skills required in a competitive job market. Thus, Karen McFarlane, Government Head of Profession, Knowledge & Information Management, discussed how the role of Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) has changed over time, and explained how the KIM remit now includes newer areas such as information architecture, data management and information rights. Janice Lachance, CEO of the Special Libraries Association in the US (and a former Cabinet Member of the US Government under Bill Clinton), echoed this issue by advising librarians to consider broadening their career paths by making use of sought-after analytical and data management skills beyond the library sector. Both speakers emphasised the need for staff to actively promote information services and demonstrate their value and expertise to senior management by aligning service objectives to those of the organisation. The speakers’ sound advice was inspiring on a personal level, although their words provided little comfort to staff working in the public libraries sector, where despite the evident need for the provision of information services to the public via a community hub, library services are being eroded due to cutbacks in funding. This issue was raised after the presentation by Keri Gray, Consultant from Sue Hill Recruitment, who discussed strategies for “Managing Change and Changing Mindsets”; delegates expressed concern about adapting willingly to changes that diminish a service rather than enhancing it.

Collaborative practice

A number of presentations highlighted projects where collaboration has led to the development of innovative and relevant services. For example,

Ruth Carlyle, whose role at Macmillan Cancer Support currently includes that of Acting Head of Information, discussed the partnership between Macmillan, NHS Choices and public libraries, with the aim of supporting the creation of personalised information prescriptions. This user-centred initiative also benefits participating information services by providing opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise from their respective areas. This form of inter-service collaboration can increase the perceived value of information services amongst stakeholders. The joint presentation by Victoria Treadwell, Clinical Librarian and Dr. Girendra Sadera, Consultant in Critical Care & Anaesthesia at Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, was an example of a working collaboration which exists in a number of NHS hospitals, whereby the Clinical Librarian (CL) is integrated into a clinical team. The CL undertakes a range of activities which can include providing information on ward rounds, researching guidelines, supporting staff development and supporting funding bids. Although clinical librarianship has been an aspect of NHS library services since 1978, it is the active promotion and championing of the CL role by a senior clinician that has led to the recent coverage in the national media, and contributed to a wider understanding of the role of information professionals in the health sector.

Successful, localised initiatives

The conference highlighted a wide range of innovative practices being undertaken by academic, legal, health and government information services in the UK. Within the public libraries sector, it was clear that librarians continue to play a key role in the community, as demonstrat-

ed by a number of initiatives, such as the project run by Surrey County Council Libraries for people experiencing or surviving domestic abuse, which won the CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award for 2013. It was evident that despite straitened economic times, information professionals continue to provide innovative, relevant information services to their users. Nevertheless, as a newcomer to the profession, I was concerned that many of the initiatives were local in nature and that the longer-term aims of some projects seemed to be unclear. It may be that a more cohesive and focussed approach to the advocacy of library and information services at a national level may lead to less fragmented initiatives.

Benefits of attending the conference

Attending the 2013 CILIP Umbrella conference was an opportunity for me to hear about and reflect upon best practice from experienced information professionals in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Moreover, it enabled me to gain a greater understanding of some of the issues and viewpoints regarding the current and potential future of the information profession. It is certainly the case that the overview I have gained from attending the conference, has served to contextualise the research project that I am undertaking in a health library. I therefore hope that my experience of the conference will contribute towards the library service's ongoing development.

Many thanks to UKeiG for enabling me to attend the 2013 CILIP Umbrella conference.

Archana Deshmukh is an MA Information Studies student at University of Brighton, currently on

*placement with the Library and Knowledge
Service at Brighton and Sussex University Hospi-
tals NHS Trust.*