

## Interview with Christine Cother: an International Delegate

### Michael Upshall

Some of the delegates to the UKEIG conference 2009 travelled long distances. This doesn't mean Aberdeen; we are talking Australia. There were no fewer than three delegates from Australia and NZ. I asked one of them, Christine Cother, why she had travelled all those thousands of miles.

M – Christine, most of us feel it's an achievement to spend a couple of hours on the train or motorway to get here. Was it worth coming all this way to the UKeiG conference?

C – Yes. Actually, I was lucky enough to win an Award from my university, a Vice Chancellor's award for Professional staff excellence, and that provided a helpful subsidy that enabled me to come to Europe for a trip combining business with pleasure (my daughter lives in London). I presented a paper at the IATUL Conference taking place in Leuven, and I then came to England to visit a number of universities: Cranfield, Salford, Sheffield Hallam (because of its distance learning experience), and City of London University.

M – Why these in particular?

C – Well, Cranfield is very interested in the work we are doing at the University of South Australia in providing a virtual reference services (VRS). We created this using OCLC Question Point software, and it enables students to post questions by e-mail, and staff to redirect these comments to relevant staff, or share the question among two or more staff, as well as keeping a record of all the enquiries

M – Fascinating. So this is something like the reference desk of big public libraries from years ago, where you could ask them any question, such as the capital of Armenia<sup>[1]</sup>?

C – Not quite! The students can find this sort of thing out for themselves. The questions we get tend to relate to courses, such as “what are the set books for this course?” We can then

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<sup>[1]</sup> A question in the quiz at the UKEIG Conference dinner that had several of the attendees stumped.

either point them to pre-existing information resources, such as reading lists, or pass the question to the relevant lecturer. We can embed links in e-mails and keep track of enquiries until they are fully resolved. Plus, we have records of all the questions.

M – Sounds impressive. And I suppose you can add up all the questions and produce an FAQ?

C – Well, since the questions are quite specific, an FAQ doesn't really apply. But in addition to answering the students' questions, we can show that the library staff are providing a valuable service, which I think is very important.

M – I imagine the VRS keeps you quite busy.

C – In addition to managing the VRS, my team also support something called the Centre for Regional Engagement. This is an initiative that is targeted at schools and public libraries in some of the areas of Adelaide that have a lower proportion of entrance to higher education.

M – What does this involve?

C – The University works with the schools and the Library works with the public, school and TAFE libraries in the region. Plus, we provide free access to the University library for students and teachers of these schools. Although anyone is welcome to use the library as a walk-in user, borrowing usually costs A\$110 per year. We waive this fee for educational users in these zones.

M – Do you have distance learners at the University?

C – And how! We have sites that are approximately 500 km north of Adelaide, and another one 550km south, without a library. We also have many thousands of external students across Australia and in offshore locations including Singapore, Hong Kong and Canada. We are also part of the Open University Australia. Our Academic Library Services Teams are responsible for developing online resources in support of the teaching and learning programs of the University.

M – Have you noticed any difference between UKeiG and similar groups in Australia?

C – I find the information community is more involved in social media here – blogs, wikis, Facebook, that kind of thing. I was also very interested to see such a wide group of users

represented in UKeiG. You have librarians from higher education, from public libraries, from professional associations, and all kinds of institutions. There's no similar organisation in Australia that mixes all these categories up.

M – Do you think that is an advantage or a drawback?

C – An advantage, because you can see the similarities and differences between issues and how they are addressed in a variety of sectors. Each can learn from the other, in much the same way as I do from working with my partner. He and I run a Management Consulting business. While I work full-time for the university, I am involved in his work as well. The consultancy has an interest in action learning and promotes this via <http://www.leanactiolearning.com.au>. Cother Consulting works with companies on a range of issues from organisational change, to process improvement and the development of teams to develop better human organisations systems in the workplace.

M – Sounds like you have no shortage of things to keep you busy. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in England.

C – Thanks.