

Innovation and Evolution: Challenges and Opportunities for 21st Century Academic and Research Libraries.

Report on the Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) Conference, 3-4 June 2015, Ireland

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The inaugural CONUL conference attracted 136 delegates from Irish academic and research libraries. There was a very full and exciting programme with well-known library technologist Marshall Breeding and Dr. Sarah Moore, a leading figure in developing teaching and learning in Ireland and beyond, as the keynote speakers. With both speakers obviously well versed in their particular areas, there was plenty of interesting information for delegates to digest from Breeding's depiction of technological innovation in Libraries (and the scale of the industries which assist in this through to Dr. Moore's clarion call for librarians to 'crash the party' and enhance our visibility.

The remainder of the conference was split between parallel sessions, posters and lightning talks. The parallel sessions had four themes: 'Library space', 'Unique and distinctive collections', 'The digital library and resource discovery' and 'Emerging roles and services'. While there was no obvious focus on areas of research support or teaching and learning, the areas proved sufficiently broad to accommodate an interesting variety of talks and (as is always the case with parallel sessions) leaving the delegate wishing s/he could be in two places at once. Although quality was universally very high, particular highlights for this delegate included talks by Crónán O Doibhlin (University College Cork) who ably demonstrated why the idea of Unique and Distinctive Collections equating to 'rare books' is a thing of the past and John Cox (National University of Ireland, Galway) who painting a fascinating insight into the often hidden and occasionally Byzantine systems and networks a University Librarian has to navigate in order to bring projects to fruition.

Complementing the parallel sessions were the lightning talks, each allocated ten minutes. The great benefit of this format is that it allows for attendees to be exposed to a variety of ideas and practices (many of which may not be that familiar) in a brisk and engaging manner. These sessions worked very well and, from the conversations later, it was obvious that the sessions sparked a cascade of ideas. Again, particular personal highlights were Brian Gillespie (Dublin Institute of Technology) who spoke with wit and no small insight on digital literacy and Michael Ladisch (University College Dublin) who, with his colleague Joseph Greene was very informative on the increasingly prominent issue of altmetrics. Bernadette Gardiner and Emma Boyce's presentation on "Using a blog as part of the Maynooth University Quality Review" generated lots of interest, as a number of Irish universities are now in the third cycle of quality reviews. Unlike the parallel sessions, the lightning talks took place in front of the whole delegation and it is to the credit of speakers, many whom were doing this for the first time that they did so well in front of an impressive, though welcoming crowd.

The posters on display testified to the creative and visual skills of so many in our profession. What was particularly striking was how prominently the idea of innovation figured in each one – be it innovation in something tangible, such as 3D printing, or via new services or collaborations. The use of posters in a conference is always welcome, offering an interesting alternative way to present information.

The absence of a truly national inclusive conference for all library staff has been deeply felt in the community in recent years, despite the range of very useful training events and seminars provided by the Academic and National Library Training Cooperative (ANLTC) and other groups.

This was an ambitious and wide range conference. It is to the credit of the CONUL Conference Committee that they succeeded. Every delegate I spoke to found it stimulating and the only regret seemed to be that it could not have gone on longer, than one and half days. High praise indeed and next years' can't come too soon.

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