

Libraries, Citizens, Societies: Confluence for Knowledge – Report from the 80TH IFLA General Conference and Assembly

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Abstract

Each year CILIP offers funding for members to allow attendance at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress (WLIC). This report provides a flavour of the conference which took place in Lyon in August and highlights two sessions of relevance to healthcare librarians.

WLIC is a conference where the global library and information community comes together. It is a time for launching important statements, for example August saw the unveiling of the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development. (IFLA, 2014) It acts as a forum for inspiring keynotes from leaders in our profession. It attracts high profile figures like the UNESCO Literacy and Development Special Envoy HRH Princess Laurentien from the Netherlands. WLIC is a place to learn about sector-leading developments and exciting projects from around the world, while forging new friendships, widening professional networks and taking opportunities to discover the libraries of the host nation.

The scale of WLIC is unlike any UK library event. In numbers there were:

- Almost 4000 delegates
- Representatives from over 130 countries
- Over 300 volunteers
- Seven official languages and many sessions with simultaneous interpretation
- Over 200 meetings and parallel sessions
- Almost 200 posters
- Tens of thousands of tweets sent with the official hashtag
- Six days of events including a day devoted to library visits. Over thirty options were available from libraries within Lyon or the south of France and as far away as Paris and Switzerland.

The city of Lyon definitely embraced the conference. The main Part Dieu station was adorned with posters welcoming delegates and signposting the way to the conference venue. Adverts for the event could be found throughout the city centre at bus stops, traffic lights and in the prestigious Galleries Lafayette department store. The conference venue itself was well staffed with multi-lingual volunteers to escort delegates between sessions. Free public transport in the Lyon area was provided as was free entry to several of the top local museums.

Diversity characterises WLIC. Deciding which sessions to choose could be a challenge as so many potentially interesting options were available. The diversity means that inevitably delegates will need to attend parallel sessions outside their immediate sector. In many cases papers were made available online prior to the start of the conference to aid decision making. Timetables for the event could be customised via a conference app. Over the course of one day delegates could attend workshops on

topics as diverse as: cultural responsiveness in libraries, research in the big data era, creating content with children, access to law in the digital age, residency models in librarianship, services for users with dyslexia, digital preservation, interface challenges for audio visual resources, information literacy in agricultural productivity and food security, mass internet surveillance and privacy – how does it affect your library, libraries for children in Africa, collaborative thinking in libraries – science and art, LIS education in developing countries, how libraries can serve the needs of their LGBTQ users, green and sustainable libraries and the semantic web and linked data. (IFLA,)

As demonstrated above, WLIC might not be the most appropriate conference to attend if only one sector of librarianship is of interest, or a conference devoted to one topic is preferred. However, for librarians prepared to venture beyond their immediate sector to learn about innovative projects from all corners of the profession and parts of the globe then WLIC is *the* conference to attend.

All IFLA groups (IFLA,) run parallel sessions at WLIC and the Health and Biosciences Library section partnered with the Information Literacy section to deliver “It’s public knowledge: understanding health literacy from an information science perspective.” Over the course of a morning delegates were treated to presentations about health literacy projects from America, Canada, Uganda, Iran and Turkey. While all presentations were of a high standard, two in particular demonstrate the power of information to transform communities and lives.

Firstly Sigrid Brudie from Alaska, who started with a (much appreciated) crash course in the history of Alaska, and subsequently described a project to train ‘Peer Language Navigators’ (PLN) who help Alaska’s immigrant and non-native English speakers locate relevant and accurate

health information. This partnership project initially trained four PLN who then helped over a hundred people with limited English or low literacy to access reliable information on topics such as breast and cervical screening.

Secondly, Maria Musoke from Makere University Library in Uganda spoke about a project, supported by the Elsevier Foundation, to help rural Ugandan healthcare workers and local community members get access to quality health information. During 2012 over 1000 individuals were trained to find relevant health materials for their communities.

Health professionals were trained in locating materials about diagnosis, treatment and management of conditions, while sessions for community members concentrated on symptoms and prevention of illnesses. A current awareness newsletter, backed up with document supply from Makere University, was launched to complement the training sessions. Both of these sessions demonstrated the roles librarians can play in providing access to information for isolated or deprived communities. (Musoke, 2014)

Over two hundred posters were displayed at WLIC, with only four hours allocated to viewing. The variety of topics covered was impressive. From a public library scheme to put books on long distance coaches in Estonia, to changes to Australia's equivalent of CILIP's Chartership, the organisation of LIS education in Switzerland, new library buildings in Pakistan and Latvia, projects to encourage and incentivise boys to read in Singapore, the provision of library materials to hospital patients in Lyon and customer service training with impact in Denmark. Meeting the poster presenters was a real highlight of the conference as all were full of enthusiasm for their projects and were keen to learn about any comparable library initiatives in the UK.

Attending such a large conference provides almost endless opportunities for networking. A CILIP-organised caucus for UK delegates the evening before the start of WLIC was a useful opportunity to meet the other funded delegates as well as the other seventy attendees from the UK. However, making international connections was a real feature of the conference. Informal discussions with other academic librarians from France, Hong Kong and India demonstrated the similarities, opportunities and challenges faced in different countries and continents. Meeting those working in parliamentary libraries in Australia and Thailand, or public libraries in Germany and finding common ground highlighted the shared values of the library profession. Several delegates were interested in the upcoming Scottish referendum and many delegates had not previously met anyone with a vote. Several people were keen to debate the pros and cons of independence and the potential impact on libraries and higher education.

As would be expected the trade display and exhibition at WLIC was vast. Many library companies took the opportunity to demonstrate their goods and services to a global audience. One of the most inspiring library products was Bibliothèques Sans Frontières' Ideas Box. (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières,) This easily transportable four crate 'box' contains a satellite internet connection, physical books, e-readers, digital cameras, tablets, laptops, games for children, tables and chairs and even a portable cinema and is deployed to refugee camps. The average length of time a refugee spends in a camp is seventeen years and the contents of this box allow those affected by disaster to record their experiences, access information, read books, play games with children and help to promote a sense of community cohesion. Bibliothèques Sans Frontières is a French NGO launched in 2007 whose mission is to create libraries,

facilitate access to information and promote heritage and culture. (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, 2014) Ideas Boxes are currently deployed in Burundi, with plans to take them to Syria shortly. This incredibly simple product, which has been a great success, demonstrates how access to information has the power to change the lives of some of the world's most needy communities.

Attending WLIC was an unparalleled opportunity for personal and professional development. After six intensive days of learning and exploring different sectors of the profession delegates will have made many notes: new resources to explore, new international friendships to nurture and new projects to research further. It would be unlikely that anyone left Lyon without a renewed pride in the work of librarians or affirmation of the power of information to transform lives. The WLIC 2015 takes place in Cape Town and CILIP's funding opportunities will be advertised in the new year.

References

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