

## From Trends to Practice - what we learned

*Partnerships are essential to libraries, core both to who we are and what we do. In three sessions at the Information Futures Summit, participants explored what partnerships mean and can mean, and what is needed to make more of them. Thanks in particular to Ashleigh Lowry, Secretary of ALIA Queensland, whose participation and note-taking made this report possible.*

The IFLA Information Futures Summit in Brisbane, Australia on 30 September – 3 October provided a great opportunity to experiment with new formats. One example of this were our three ‘From Trends to Practice’ sessions, all of which looked at a different aspect of library collaboration in the light of the Trends presented on the morning of the first day.

These were run as unconference sessions, with one or two questions at the beginning to stimulate reflection and discussion, but then the course of the debate determined by what those raising their hands said.

The goal was to relate the ‘big ideas’ highlighted in keynote sessions to the lived experience of library and information workers. As such, the sessions marked the start of a new phase in work around the Trend Report – how to ensure that it has as real and practical an impact as possible.

The three areas of focus were partnerships with other parts of the library field, partnerships with communities, and partnerships with external stakeholders.

As highlighted during the sessions, these are as essential as they are interconnected. Working together as a field allows us better to serve our communities, as well as to be credible interlocutors for others. Working with communities allows us to realise one of our unique strengths as libraries, with benefits to the field as a whole and in order to deliver goals that other partners was to see achieved. Finally, working with other stakeholders allows us to do more for our communities than we ever could alone, as so also to deliver on wider policy goals.

In each case, working together allows us to find complements and synergies, making it possible to do things we could not do otherwise.

This article, made possible by the support of Ashleigh Lowry, highlights some of the key themes raised during the different sessions.

### **Partnering with each other**

Our first session looked at experiences of working with other libraries – including other library types – and how the need for this may be affected by the trends shared in the Trend Report. As one speaker underlined, there is a good

reason for being in touch with peers, as 'someone somewhere is having a similar problem, so we should all work together to speak up'. Another suggested that by forming smaller networks, it was possible to develop learning circles, sharing views and experiences, and even constructive criticism, in order to improve practice.

The particular role of school libraries as 'feeders' for other library types came up, with the comment that 'school libraries are creating lifelong learners' – the library users of the future. More could be done to build connections, for example using connections between libraries in school and education institutions at different levels to help children make the transition.

This theme of a 'lifecycle' of library services came up in another session, both in terms of how school libraries could work with children as they develop, but also in what they can do to build awareness of libraries as non-commercial public spaces and the value of the resources offered.

There were also great examples of making use of academic libraries' access to expertise to bring more advanced programming, for example around literacy, into school libraries.

Finally, an example from a library association underlined their efforts to build wider professional awareness, beyond the more practical skills linked to work in any particular library type. It had been clear that this could be hard to understand at first, but often turned out to be the most fulfilling aspect of ongoing professional development, helping to give sense to daily work and put things in context.

## **Partnering with communities**

The connection libraries have with their communities was perhaps the most popular of the three, and indeed went to the heart of how many people saw their role. The special role libraries can play for community members was underlined: 'libraries are a safe space on a whole other level', 'we are valuable as not just a bricks and mortar space but because of the trust that communities have [in libraries] as a safe space'.

Participants also celebrated the diverse roles played by libraries, in addition to 'core' library tasks – as social workers, IT support, public health and safety educators, support teachers and more. Some talked about librarians as being 'chameleons' or 'human algorithms', although noted that it was important not to overburden librarians with tasks they are not resourced to fulfil.

The session focused in particular on blindspots – which parts of the community are we perhaps not yet reaching so effectively. If we want to say we care about community, we need to make sure that we actually are doing so! Notably, it was important to take the time to try and understand community needs, and

identify who wasn't present at the library. We needed to find techniques for gathering information that are appropriate to the communities concerned.

At the same time, the experiences and understanding of library workers themselves could be a huge strength. This was underlined by one librarian – a veteran – who had worked through her connections to ensure that other veterans knew what the library could offer through attending meetings, word of mouth and more. Libraries needed to bring a diversity of experiences in, and draw on this to attract the whole community, in the context of wider efforts to help staff realise their potential individually and collectively.

Importantly, it was important to ask what people wanted. This wasn't necessarily through posing direct questions, but rather tracking resource requests that couldn't be fulfilled, creating opportunities for expression and sharing, and experimentation. Starting a small programme today could open the way to something more significant in future. So too could engagement with community leaders, and indeed being able to let them lead in programming. This could build social currency and trust, as well as correct stereotypes which may hold people back from using libraries fully otherwise.

There was discussion in particular about communication, whose importance was well recognised. We shared examples of successful social media campaigns which took unexpected approaches ('how do you library', #libraryseflie) both to get people into libraries and give a positive impression. It was noted that sometimes, policies applying to public sector workers could be a limitation, and there would be benefits from more freedom. Others noted that word-of-mouth remained very powerful – our users are our primary cheerleaders.

The topic of impact came up a number of times, and in particular how we can measure it. The need for more sophisticated evidence than simply numbers coming through the door was highlighted, as was that for staff with the relevant skills. At a basic level, it was important that patrons know that libraries are there for them in times of need, and provide a space for the community.

Similarly, equitable partnerships matter – libraries should not seek to run or even know everything. We need to value community experience, and look rather to match up what the library and community can offer each other, and be ready to take advice and even criticism.

## **Partnering with external stakeholders**

A final session looked at those organisations, institutions and other stakeholders outside of libraries and the communities that we serve with which we could work. Such partnerships could complement our own strengths, and so deliver more for communities in a variety of ways, from impact and innovation to investment.

Examples of such partners included local business, food banks, non-profits (legal aid charities, the Red Cross), other community organisations (girl guides/scouts), study groups, after-school care groups/ daycare groups, care homes and more.

Similarly at the national and international level, engagement with governments and governmental organisations could help shape the context in which libraries operate, and in particular secure resources in order to meet community needs. Examples ranged from working with defence ministries in order to build resilience against misinformation, work with health and early years ministries, telecommunications companies and more.

Part of the task here was to articulate clearly what libraries can bring. We needed to get beyond the image of them as a place only for passively reading books, and show what we can offer. For example, we can be social spaces, offer valuable skills and enjoy the trust of our communities. We help make for an informed citizenry which brings huge benefits, as well as supporting stability and ensuring that marginalised communities nonetheless maintain some connection to the rest of society. Indeed, libraries are often not just a single institution, but rather a whole ecosystem, itself linked to others. These strengths are not to be taken for granted!

This was not just an issue for public and community libraries. Academic libraries can work with professors to ensure research skills training is appropriate. Special libraries, such as those in the UN, can build a stronger support base, and develop events that end up bringing visibility to the library. Library schools could work with potential employers to place students in a wider range of places, helping ensure people saw the real face of librarianship.

We also needed to be ready to leave our siloes and accept that we can't do everything. As part of this, we can have open conversations – for example with others in the GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums and records) sector to identify blindspots, build connections and develop cross-sector programmes. Similarly, we can work with social programmes to find and reach isolated communities and meet their needs, or with women's organisations to ensure that people in situations of vulnerability can make the library part of their recovery.

Part of the work around external partnerships is of course resources, and we should not neglect the need to make clear to governments and others when we need these in order to deliver. Of course in doing so, we are likely also helping them to achieve their goals, and so here too, it is valuable to talk about partnerships.

## Overall lessons

Across the three sessions, despite their focus on different – if interlinked – types of partnership, a number of core themes did appear repeatedly. These offer some helpful ideas for where we could focus in future if we want to make more of the partnerships we have, as well as extend these to new people, groups and actors. In particular at a time where resources are tight for many, partnerships offer a path to ‘frugal innovation’

It was noted by a number of participants that a barrier to partnerships could be the investment of time at the beginning to look for the opportunities being missed, and to learn how to work with new partners. It did take courage to leave the library and go out into communities, to let someone else take the lead, and to resist the temptation to be territorial – this in itself takes leadership!

Another challenge was the temptation to try and start big, when it could often make more sense to begin with smaller, more experimental initiatives. Nonetheless, even at a small scale, the ‘freedom to fail’ was essential.

Many of these themes are also closely linked to the importance of equitable partnership, where efforts, results, outputs, marketing and financial stakes (if relevant) are shared. We need in our partnerships to consider whether they are really working for us, as well as for whoever we are working with.

Crucially, we talked about how partnership itself is a skill. We can learn how to be good partners, from explaining our own value and contributions clearly to being able to listen and adapt. Bringing evidence to the table is a key part of this, both to convince and to enable partnership planning, but so to are the human skills and the wider ability to show leadership, as well as the capacity to ensure partnerships are equitable and aligned with strategy.

Key takeaways include:

- *The need to recognise the potential of partnerships as a way of driving innovation and impact, and make sure we are investing enough into developing these*
- *The need for equity in partnerships – we have to make sure that these are working for all parties*
- *The strong connection between different types of partnerships – between libraries, with communities, with stakeholders. All have a role to play, none should be neglected*
- *The value of developing skills for partnerships as a potential future goal*