

# Diversity, collaboration and renewal: reflections on the 2014 UKSG conference

Summing up his experience of the three packed days of the 2014 UKSG conference in Harrogate, Gareth Johnson said that he had three key take-away words: diversity, collaboration and renewal. This short article, based on the report he wrote after attending the conference as a sponsored student, explains these lasting impressions and also highlights the way UKSG itself has continued to expand, bringing together the disparate stakeholders and engendering a real dynamic and at times electrifying atmosphere of cross-fertilization and possibility.

It is perhaps difficult to sum up the three packed days of the 2014 UKSG conference in Harrogate in a few hundred words. For a start, the scale of the conference compared to most other events I've attended was almost an order of magnitude greater, with close to 1,000 delegates packing into the expansive venue. True, many of these were suppliers, publishers and those in the trade rather than library and information science (LIS) people, but there was no shortage of these in attendance too. However, it is through reflecting on this scale that the first of my three key take-away words first became apparent to me – *diversity*.

Back in the day, the UKSG conference had a reputation in much of the library world as a place where serials librarians, or more commonly their bosses, would come to meet with publisher agents and thrash out their journal deals for the coming year. It was an environment where the serials serf met publishing liege lord, and begged for their blessing or forbearance over the coming year. Perhaps this was a somewhat cynical view from someone outside of the serials side of librarianship, but glancing at the conference programmes from days of yore, it never seemed to be an event that screamed diversity.

This is demonstrably no longer the case, because it was clear from just some of the encounters and presentations I experienced in Harrogate that there were librarians from all parts of the sector gathered together; not to mention more than a smattering of researchers and academics in attendance too. This diversity should be celebrated, and UKSG commended. In bringing these disparate stakeholders together, they engendered a really dynamic and at times electrifying atmosphere of cross-fertilization and possibility together.

It also brings me to my second word, which cropped up in more than one of the plenaries, lightning talks and breakout sessions – *collaboration*. In a conference when much focus was given to emerging paradigms and shifting routes to research publication and dissemination, there was thankfully much talk of the need for stakeholders in this process to collaborate to reach a future status quo. Over the years, a lot has been written and discussed from differing ends of the industry in terms of the increasing polarization in the discourse around this topic. At UKSG 2014, this aspect was certainly reflected on, as well as embodied in multiple calls being made for all parties to work towards collaborative solutions to the currently turbulent scholarly dissemination environment. That we are living through a tipping point or evolutionary phase in research dissemination, brought about in part by technologically determined but also through



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126 socially engineered eventualities, is something no speaker denied. Nevertheless, it is in the determination of that final state that there remains perhaps less agreement but, thankfully, much discussion.

And here once again was a strength of the 2014 UKSG conference: the bringing of these diverse stakeholders together in a spirit of collaboration to air their thoughts, ideas and possibilities in a mutually supporting atmosphere. If there was any weakness here, it was perhaps the lack of thought from the publishing sector represented directly in the talks. It would have been emboldening to have heard their own collective visions for their perceptions of the future form of scholarly dissemination. To have been able to question this, and engage directly with them in an open forum, would have perhaps been the cherry on the conference cake, and I suspect a strong consideration for a challenging presentation at a future event.

“... re-energized,  
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invigorated ..”

This brings me to my final key word, and that is the sense of *renewal* that the conference offered to its delegates. I'm speaking here in the personal, rather than in a subscription sense, even though I suspect there may have been an element of this going on for many. While the heart of the conference was the business of knowledge and information sharing, of personal expansion and exchange of experiences, it is important to remember that in bringing together so many of us with overlapping interests, the conference offered so much more. It is all too easy working in the day job, or trapped in the home office as a remote-working PhD student, to lose sight of the fact that there are others who share our professional interests and outlooks. Within our organizations many of us are isolated from any like-minded compatriots, and in coming together as an assemblage of spirited and engaged knowledge professionals, it was impossible not to emerge blinking in the spring sunshine at the end of the conference re-energized, refreshed, invigorated – and with a passion for our work renewed.

While this is arguably true of many professional gatherings, the UKSG 2014 conference offered this perhaps more than other events. Why? Because of the diversity of delegates. Because of the collaborative spirit of the conference. And because of the fine work of the conference organizers in constructing such a heady, challenging, provocative and satisfyingly emboldening brew of intellectual delight. As a result, as I write these words a week later, I am still continuing to absorb the discussions I had around the conference as much as in the conference talks and breakouts.

No conference is perfect and, speaking as a former conference chair myself, I am aware of just how hard the UKSG team will have worked to keep everything as smoothly running as it was. Thankfully, the small niggles (such as misbehaving WiFi) will soon fade from memory. What will stay written large in my mind are the lessons I learned, the inspiration I gained and, above all, the sheer professional pleasure I enjoyed from attending UKSG 2014. To that end, I am deeply grateful to the organizing committee and sponsors for allowing me that opportunity, and hope that this will not be the sole time I am able to attend.

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