CONUL (Consortium of National and University Libraries) is a consortium of
Ireland’s main research libraries.

The theme of the second annual CONUL conference, which was held 1–2 June
2016, in Athlone, Ireland, was ‘Going further together: Collaboration in Irish
academic and research libraries’.

The 2016 conference had a lot to live up to following the inaugural conference
in 2015, and it managed to meet and exceed the success of 2015 with a range
of speakers and presenters in parallel and plenary sessions over the course of
the two days.

The theme of collaboration was interpreted and presented in many practical,
interesting and thought provoking ways. Presentations and posters covered
the many topics suggested in the call for papers, including collaboration in
teaching and learning, collection development and management and user
experience (UX).

Collaboration was interpreted to include sharing storage, personnel and
platforms, both within and between institutions, and between institutions and
the communities in which they exist. The collaborations highlighted at this
conference were about building on existing research and projects and trying
to solve problems and achieve outcomes which, for reasons of constraint
in terms of finance, space or expertise, could not be achieved by individual
organisations. Challenging times, with budgetary constraints and competing
demands, were seen to stimulate collaboration.

The keynote speakers were Ivy Anderson, Director of Collections at the
California Digital Library (CDL), and Dr Susan Gibbons, University Librarian and
Deputy Provost for Libraries and Scholarly Communication, at Yale University.

Ivy Anderson reflected on the riches and challenges of our print legacy, which
forms the record of our intellectual heritage. With the shift from a print-based
to a digital culture, the CDL offers shared services, from online collections to
innovation in scholarly communication and shared storage facilities. A key
challenge for the CDL is how best to preserve and protect the intellectual
legacy for scholars of today and historians of tomorrow in the face of budgetary
and space challenges.

Some of the themes highlighted by Ivy Anderson, such as shared storage
facilities, shared collections and economies of scale, were also mentioned
by Michelle Agar of TCD Library in her presentation of her experience of the
CAVAL consortium in Australia.

Shared storage, collections and a union catalogue were topics high on the
agenda of the conference as they are key areas in the CONUL strategy
and were topics for discussion in at least two of the parallel sessions. Eoin
McCarney of University College Dublin considered a why Ireland needs a
CONUL union catalogue and Peter Guidling of the Library at TCD presented
on the Legal Deposit Libraries shared cataloguing programme.

Susan Gibbons’s keynote presentation elaborated on an ethnographic study
of library users, which originated at the University of Rochester and continued
at Yale University. At its core was the question “How can we stay aligned with
the user of the library as their research practices changes?” An anthropologist
joined the library team, and students were observed using the methods of
anthropology and ethnography. Susan emphasised the importance of making
changes based on the findings in order to encourage students to continue to
collaborate in the process.
Siobhan Dunne, of Dublin City University, had also undertaken research into how the library caters for students based on their actual behaviour. Siobhan emphasised the importance of capturing the student voice. The findings have been used to improve undergraduate study skills modules.

Collaboration between faculty and library was the subject of a number of presentations. Lorna Dodd, Maynooth University (MU) Library, and Brian McKenzie, MU Department of History, presented on the new interdisciplinary curriculum that MU have introduced, which includes a programme on critical skills. Every single one of the skills in the programme relates to information literacy in some way – for example, understanding plagiarism forms part of understanding academic standards.

Collaboration with MU Department of History’s MA in Historical Archives focused on the library collections. Hugh Murphy and Barbara McCormack of MU Library spoke of recognising the expertise of library staff in areas such as project management, financial management, applying for funding and leadership.

John McManus, from the Library of TCD, and Dr Brendan Power, also from TCD, spoke of a collaboration with the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the British Library to archive websites relating to the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland. They learned many lessons which will be useful when it comes to framing web-archiving legislation in Ireland.

All speakers emphasised the benefits of collaboration to the library and academic staff.

Speakers from the National Library of Ireland (NLI), Katherine McSharry and Elizabeth Kirwan (who is the curator of the National Photographic Archive – part of the NLI), illustrated how ‘community collecting’ and exhibitions are ways to connect in a relationship of equals with people who hold important pieces in the jigsaw of our national story. These are ways to collaborate with new and longstanding communities, grow the collections of the NLI and NPA and bring out what is held by local communities.

Laura Rooney-Ferris of the Irish Hospice Foundation and Jane Burns of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland had harvested tweets on the hashtags #bereavement #hospice #palliative #grieving #grief #, complicatedgrief; they presented a well-received and fascinating paper on new rituals around grief, using evidence from social media platforms.

The CONUL directors took the opportunity to present ‘Ireland’s memory, Ireland’s discovery’, the CONUL strategy for Ireland’s major research libraries 2016–19.

The conference featured more than twenty sponsors and exhibitors offering information on a wide range of products and services.

Prizes were awarded to the CONUL ANLTC Library Assistant Award winners and runners up and to the poster presenter winners and the first time poster presenter bursary winner. (See Kathryn Smith’s article, ‘The ANLTC Library Assistant Award’, in this issue of Focus.)

Overall the conference highlighted that those involved in collaborations were fulfilling the theme of the conference and ‘Going further together’.

Useful links


Report on the Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) Annual Conference


Livestream videos on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLp6Pui4M5LhHTJLfp1fHpsTeK1KqLdOq [accessed 12 July 2017]

Conference presentations on SlideShare: http://www.slideshare.net/conulconference/presentations/2 [accessed 12 July 2017]


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