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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Attending IFLA was amazing': benefits of conference attendance as reported by delegates*

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Implications for best practice

- Highlights the benefits of conferences attendance for library staff across all sectors.
- Offers evidence for library staff seeking to secure organisational support to attend large international conferences, such as IFLA.
- Informs library managers of the importance of conferences as a professional development tool, which can be used in requests for financial support from their parent bodies.
- Discusses conference attendance as a means for libraries to remain relevant and innovative.
- Provides a better understanding of the topic and outlines the need for further research in the area.

Introduction

Exact numbers of Australian librarians attending conferences are difficult to obtain and the only study located that provides data on the topic was conducted by Hallam and Lee (2008). They found that 28% of professional staff in Australian libraries attend formal training and development (which included conferences and workshops) either *very often* or *often* (2008, p. 66). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that conference attendance remains an important professional development tool for librarians in Australia, a notion supported by the sheer number of conferences that are organised by various regional, national and international bodies. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) lists for instance around 90 conferences relevant to the field of library and information science (LIS) organised in 2016 (CAUL, 2016).

One of the larger conferences is organised by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Their annual conference 'brings together over 3,500 participants from more than 120 countries' in order to 'set the international agenda for the profession and offer opportunities for networking and professional development to all delegates' (IFLA, 2016a). In 2016, IFLA's annual conference was held in Columbus in the United States, and was attended by 49 Australian delegates (IFLA, 2016b). This number highlights the scope and reach of IFLA conferences, but very little is known about the benefits of conference attendance in the LIS field. As Moreillon, Cahill and McKee (2012) remarked 'a review of research on library and information science revealed few studies related to conferences' (2012, p. 3).

The purpose of this paper is therefore to add to the body of knowledge on the topic of conference attendance in LIS. It reports on the findings of a pilot study conducted in the context of a PhD research project and identifies the benefits that librarians attribute to their attendance at an IFLA conference. A thematic and qualitative approach was taken in the research approach and the findings are then linked to the notion of innovation and to the importance of motivated and culturally aware library staff.

Literature review

A review of the literature about the benefits of conference attendance in the field of LIS reveals very few papers that deal with attendance at an IFLA conference. In 1998, Egholm, Johannsen and Moring conducted a study evaluating the 63rd IFLA conference and found that a substantial proportion of the respondents to their questionnaire 'stress the importance of networking, personal and professional contacts and the exchange of knowledge and ideas' (1998, p. 51) when talking about motivating factors to attend an IFLA conference. Pors (2001) tested a number of variables in regards to participants' satisfaction levels with the IFLA conference series. Basing his analysis on data derived from a questionnaire that has been systematically distributed to IFLA attendees since 1997, he found satisfaction levels to be independent from gender or age of the participants.

Writing about an event for new graduates at an IFLA conference, Barry and Garcia-Febo (2012) list suggestions to assist other members of the profession willing to organise similar events. They comment on the multiculturalism of IFLA conferences and state: 'new professionals attending international conferences benefit by being exposed to different views through the interaction with colleagues from other cultures, religions and library sectors' (2012, p. 20). Similarly, Thull (2014) discussed the multicultural aspect of IFLA conferences in an essay that encourages librarians to attend international conferences, noting: 'exposure to librarians, especially those in developing nations, who meet the needs of their patrons, manage their libraries and support their staff on overall budgets smaller than some libraries' budgets for staff parties or printer ink provides a perspective and appreciation that cannot be underestimated' (2014, p. 18). IFLA carried out a review of their annual conference in 2010, using an online survey and interviews to analyse participants' and members' opinions about the event. Part of this evaluation process focused on the reasons for attending an IFLA conference. The review found that over 40% of the respondents indicated that 'professional development, networking opportunities and the worldwide aspects of the programme and attendees' were reasons for attendance (2010, p. 19).

King (1961) and Harrison (2010), although not writing about IFLA conferences specifically, mention them in the context of their ability to 'bring out understanding between the various national member bodies' (King, 1961, p. 6), and to "bring together LIS professionals from across the spectrum, allowing them to interact in ways they rarely would outside the conference environment' (Harrison, 2010, p. 6). As far as could be established, these are the only papers that focus on IFLA conferences or make reference to them. Conference attendance in general in the field of LIS is slightly better documented and includes papers about advice as to which conference to attend, barriers to conference attendance and reasons to attend.

Ojala (1999), for example, wrote an editorial about databases and various other tools to locate a relevant conference, and Lyons (2007) advised librarians with collection development responsibilities to attend academic conferences outside the field of LIS. In a very similar approach, Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2009) suggested a method to enable subject librarians to identify conferences that align with their responsibility to support their assigned faculties.

Focusing on barriers that prevent librarians from attending conferences, research by Adomi, Alakpodia and Akporhonor (2006), Corcoran and McGuinness (2014), Eke (2011), the Australian Library and Information Association ALIA (2014a), Schmehl Hines (2014) and Terrill (2014) indicated that lack of funding was the most significant element inhibiting conference attendance. Time constraints were found to be another barrier by researchers such as Schmehl Hines (2014), ALIA (2014a), and Corcoran and McGuinness (2014). Adomi et al. (2006) and Eke (2011) also identified lack of awareness of an event preventing library staff from attending conferences. Stewart (2013) and the North American Serials Interest Group NASIG (2008) note that a conference location can

also deter librarians from attending; a factor that is linked to the costs involved in attending a conference held in a distant destination.

The reasons that motivate librarians to attend conferences make up another theme in the literature. The acquisition of knowledge and ideas is referred to by Egholm et al. (1998), Adomi et al. (2006), Vega and Connell (2007), and Anderson and Orsatti (2008). The same four studies also found that networking was an important reason for attending conferences. Although it was only the participants in the study by Vega and Connell (2007) that stated motivation and inspiration as reasons for conference attendance, other authors mention the notion of hoping to be motivated and inspired by a conference in their papers and blog posts (see for example, Anderson & Orsatti, 2008; Rundle, 2014; and Taylor, Bartindale, Vines & Olivier, 2014).

There are very few studies conducted in the field of LIS that investigate the benefits librarians attribute to conference attendance. Palmer (1996) explored this topic when confirming that scientists bring back specific information from conferences. Ocholla investigated a similar idea in 1999 when conducting a study into the information seeking behaviour of academics in South Africa. Participants in this study listed conferences as one of the tools they use to generate new ideas and to disseminate information.

In a Nigerian context, Adomi et al. (2006) found that increased productivity, having learnt new skills and networking were rated highly by librarians in regards to perceived benefits of conference attendance. Eke (2011), also in Nigeria, analysed data derived from a questionnaire sent to conference attendees, with participants reporting that they had updated their existing knowledge at the conference, learnt how to service clients better and how to write scholarly papers (2011, p. 32). Saka and Haruna (2013) conducted research into the relationship between professional development activities and job performance of academic librarians in Nigeria. The authors claimed that their findings illustrated a strong correlation between seminar/conference attendance and job performance of staff (2013, p. 16). These findings, however, should be treated with caution because the authors did not provide an explanation as to how job performance was measured and nor did they make the research instrument available to readers.

In summary, the literature on conference attendance in the field of LIS falls short in regard to quantity and quality of research papers, although there are many editorial pieces and essays commenting on the many advantages of conferences (see for example Farkas, 2006; Abram, 2008; Brier & Lebbin, 2009; and Yucht, 2011). Specifically, there has been little examination of benefits of conference attendance as reported by attendees, and ILFA conferences are not well documented at all. Lyons (2007) concurs with the notion that this is an under-researched field, commenting: 'although it is quite common to find general reports from events or detailed results from specific meetings and workshops, there is very little literature directed at the conference circuit as a topic per se' (p. 181). Eke (2011) and Moreillon et al. (2012) agree, with Eke stating that 'a literature review on the impact of conference attendance on professional development identified few articles' (p. 27).

Research methodology

This paper is based on data from a pilot study conducted to test research instruments for a PhD thesis designed as a qualitative analysis of the benefits of conference attendance as perceived by librarians. As academic librarians are the focus of the main project, participants from other sectors of the profession were selected for the pilot study. This is consistent with Gorman and Clayton's suggestion that a pilot study should be undertaken at a "neutral location that will not be used in the

actual fieldwork” (2005, p. 98).

Both the thesis project and the pilot study used qualitative methods, following Punch who notes that these ‘are the best way we have of getting the insider’s perspective’ (1998, p. 243). In the pilot and full PhD study the insider’s perspective corresponds to individual librarians’ experience of their conference attendance. Data from the pilot study was not intended to prove that conference attendance has measurable benefits; rather, it was to provide evidence of participants’ perceptions of benefits from attending an IFLA conference.

Preparations for the pilot study were completed in May 2013, meaning that attendees of the IFLA conference in August 2013 in Singapore were a timely and available population. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to a Western Australian email distribution list and advertised on Twitter in June 2013. The data collection stage commenced in September 2013 when all participants had returned from the conference. In total, five librarians were interviewed, some of them twice, which is consistent with an approach Walliman (2011, p. 99) describes to track development and allowed follow up on themes and topics that emerged during the first interview. The following table provides an overview of the participant profiles.

Participant	Nationality	Occupation	First time attendee	Presenter at IFLA	Years worked in LIS
1	AUS	State government librarian	No	No	> 16 years
2	AUS	Public librarian	No	No	6-15 years
3	AUS	Public librarian	No	No	6-15 years
4	AUS	Library student	Yes	No	n/a
5	NZ	Special librarian	No	Yes	6-15 years

Table 1. Profiles of participants

In total eight interviews were conducted, five initial interviews and three follow-up interviews. Although the sample for the pilot study was small, the qualitative data collected was extensive (in total over 33,500 transcribed words) and allowed for an in-depth analysis of how these librarians perceived benefits of attending the IFLA conference.

The interviews lasted on average 32 minutes, and were conducted face-to-face or, in the case of the participant from New Zealand, over the Internet using Skype. They were semi-structured and used a series of open-ended questions based on themes identified in a literature review. All interviews were transcribed using DragonDictate, and were loaded into the qualitative analysis software programme NVivo.

The constant comparative method was used for analysis, which Westbrook (1994, p. 246) states is ‘the most effective means of content analysis’, describing the process as involving ‘coding and analysis during the continual review of data to gradually form categories’. Bradley (1993, p. 445) refers to the same method as a ‘systematic comparison technique’ and states it is the ‘emergence of meaningful units from close examination of data’. Ethics approval was sought and received from the author’s institution prior to conducting the study. Information sheets were provided to the participants who were then asked to sign consent forms .

Results

Knowledge acquisition

The participants in this study reported on general knowledge they gained from the conference, such as a better understanding of the host country Singapore, and awareness of other sources of information, such as the IFLA blog. Not surprisingly, the participant who had attended a large, international conference for the first time also reported learning about 'how a conference works' and what to expect from a conference.

Participants spoke extensively about the knowledge they gained from papers presented at the conference. They reported that the papers broadened their knowledge and understanding in certain areas, that they learned new terms and expressions, or deepened their understanding of concepts they were already familiar with. Participants also talked about learning how other libraries deal with certain issues and having acquired 'background knowledge' that they can fall back on should similar issues occur in their library. In addition, knowledge about applications of new technologies was remarked on as part of the learning experienced at the conference.

One participant expressed a sentiment echoed by others, in that acquired knowledge might not be directly applicable in the day-to-day work of the librarians immediately but can add to the emotional value of conferences as enjoyable experiences:

So hearing about those kinds of things was really good, you know, and I enjoyed that, so it's not something you are necessarily going to take away and apply to your own work, but it was just interesting to have the opportunity to learn some new things as well.

The participants also reflected on the process of knowledge acquisition and its potential impact, which is possibly linked to the fact that they were encouraged to talk about knowledge acquisition during the interview. A participant reported annotating his/her notes with questions such as 'What can we do about this?' or 'What do we know about this?' which indicates an engagement with the knowledge acquired that goes beyond merely passive consumption.

The terms used by participants when describing the entire process of having been exposed to knowledge at the conference included phrases like 'mind-opening'. One participant said that the knowledge gained at the conference 'changed a few views', and that they were now 'thinking outside the box' a lot more.

The kinds of knowledge that participants reported having brought back from the conference varied in regard to their nature, ranging from definitions of certain terms to broad themes currently discussed in the profession. In addition, participants did not report having applied acquired knowledge straight away in their workplace. This supports the notion that knowledge brought back from a conference can sometimes appear to be intangible, but the idea of framing it as 'background knowledge' (as one participant put it) suggests its potential in supporting idea development in a specific area at a later stage.

In summary, the findings in regards to knowledge acquisition as reported by the participants confirm the theme of knowledge and ideas being brought back from a conference to the workplace. Participants felt they had acquired new knowledge and broadened their understanding in regard to existing knowledge, both in the field of LIS and in terms of general facts. The way the participants described the process of knowledge acquisition at the conference indicates a sense of enjoyment about learning new things. Participants also reported that some of the ideas they were exposed to at the conference changed their ways of thinking and challenged them to be more open-minded about certain topics.

Networking

All the participants described their networking experience at the conference very positively. One participant stated, for example, that the conference was a 'great opportunity to mix and meet colleagues from around the world working in the same area', with another adding that it was 'good to meet people in the same profession and have informal friendly discussions'. A third participant pointed out that 'networking, that is probably the biggest thing that I brought back from the conference', and another commented on the benefits of the timeframe of the conference, which made it easier to connect with people: 'because it is over a number of days, the opportunities to see a face, recognise them, carry on the conversation you might have had before makes it a lot easier, because you kind of already know them'.

In terms of the kind of contacts the conference enabled them to make, all participants reported having met and spoken to previously unknown people. In addition, some of them were able to renew old contacts and 'reconnect' with people they knew already. For others, the conference also provided an opportunity to meet a person the participants knew of, but had not had the chance to meet personally before. One participant reflected on the fact that conferences can aid in connecting with people that seem otherwise unreachable because of their status and position:

They are not in their office at the top floor or wherever they might normally be, you get that opportunity to meet those people.

Professional connections were not the only networking opportunity reported, with one participant stating: 'I feel like I have made friends, not just colleagues, but also friends'. Another reflected that conferences can also aid in changing an existing relationship: 'deeper connecting, I guess, from somebody that you recognise and say hello to, to somebody you stop and have a conversation with'.

In regard to the types of connections they were able to make at the conference, the participants reported that some contacts were of the kind that can be relied upon for assistance at a later stage; for example:

You create a bit of a link there, so now when I start thinking about papers and things like that, I got that email from that person that I can get back to and say: 'What's happened here with you guys because I am doing a paper on this now' and you know: 'How is it going?', - you kind of make connections.

Another aspect of networking that emerged was networking using social media tools. The use of social media during the conference (especially Twitter) was commented on by a number of participants, but one librarian particularly focussed on the big difference social media made to their experience of networking at the conference:

Social media was vital, the connections over Twitter throughout the conference were just incredible in terms of meeting new people, you talk to people and you realise..., you are tweeting somebody and you realise they are in the same session as you ... So aside the more traditional means, going for drinks and dinner and having lunch together and all the traditional networking, being able to continue this on Twitter was a novelty, and something I guess is

happening more and more at library conferences.

To summarize the findings around the theme of networking, the participants found the networking aspect of their conference experience very positive and enjoyable. They met new people or reconnected with people already known to them, and they also reflected on the fact that conferences provide opportunities to meet professionals that otherwise might be more difficult to access. One participant remarked on extending acquaintance relationships to friendships, and another reflected on how and for what reason these new connections might be useful in the future. While social media was mentioned by a number of participants, one participant in particular reflected on how Twitter enabled them to extend the networking opportunities provided by the physical conference setting.

Emotional outcomes of conference attendance

The participants of the study described their attendance at the conference as a very positive experience in emotional terms. They used the following expressions when referring to the general atmosphere at the conference: fun, pleasure, relaxing, exciting, enjoyable, fantastic, very positive. Further comments included: 'people were sharing, people were laughing, talking, it was very informal' and 'people were just friendly, and they were talkative, so it was a good feeling'. One participant described the opening ceremony as 'quite spectacular'.

Other than commenting on the experience as a whole as very positive, the participants' descriptions of their experience indicated several themes relating to the emotional reactions to the conference. Firstly, consensus could be seen in remarks about the conference being inspiring and energising. The following comments highlight this sentiment:

- The conference 'reignited my passion'
- It was 'just really inspiring to see that there are other people out there that care as much about libraries and library associations as I do'
- The conference 'brought back a lot of energy in terms of the library association and what we do'
- 'You think, should I move on to do something else, but, when you go to things like this, you realise what you are there for, and it gives you that kind of spark back'

Apart from feeling inspired and energised by the conference, the participants also reported that the conference made them feel like they were part of 'a greater library community': 'I think it was good for people to get together, that we share the same dream or goal we want to achieve, so that was really good.'

Another positive outcome of their conference attendance was receiving affirmation that what they are doing in their libraries is meaningful. One participant stated: 'I have come back feeling really good about the marketing work we do internally at my place of work, after speaking to a number of other people in the marketing group.' This comment can also be understood to refer to an unofficial 'benchmarking exercise' that happens when librarians compare what they do with their colleagues from other institutions at a conference.

Their conference attendance made participants feel valued by their workplace, which was illustrated in comments such as 'I see that that is a good thing, that they care enough to send me to these things'. It also increased their confidence, for example 'knowing that I can conduct

conversations with professional people about current issues and not feel out of my depth, that has kind of encouraged me to feel confident'. Participants also reported that they felt more motivated in their jobs after having attended the conference, although most described themselves as highly motivated individuals to begin with.

In regard to negative feelings about their conference experience, one participant stated that the conference was sometimes overwhelming and another talked about feeling nervous: 'I was as nervous about having to talk in front of a crowded room than I was having to introducing myself to one person and ask them a question.'

The findings around the theme of emotional benefits of conference attendance indicate that all participants thought of the conference as a very positive experience. Although two participants expressed feeling nervous and overwhelmed at times, they were in agreement with their colleagues in using various positive terms like inspiring, energising, affirmative, and motivating to describe the benefits of the conference in emotional terms. The participants also added that the conference made them feel part of something bigger, valued and more confident as members of the profession.

IFLA as a large, international conference

The thematic analysis of data revealed certain themes that can be linked to the fact that the participants attended an IFLA conference, rather than a smaller national event. They reflected on the size of the conference, describing it as 'huge' and saying 'everything about it is on a large scale, it's enormous, it's big'.

In terms of benefits that contributed to their conference attendance experience, participants reported that attending various standing committees and special interest group meetings meant that they came back with a better understanding of how IFLA and its subgroups operate, and 'what IFLA actually does'. The conference papers and presentations made participants feel exposed to and more aware of international research in the field of LIS.

By virtue of IFLA's scale and international nature there is a large mix of attendees from many different countries and the study participants reflected positively on that, stating that they found it interesting to experience so many different languages. In addition, they reported greater awareness of the many different backgrounds librarians can have: 'I just got to see a lot of how the title of librarian means so much but yet it is different in every place'. Conference attendees at IFLA were described as a very diverse group of people that share perspectives and principles: 'It's good for people to get together from all over the world and see that we are all working towards the same goal, just in different ways'. Hearing stories from librarians coming from less privileged parts of the world also made one participant gain perspective and reflect on the fact that 'sometimes the small issues we think are huge are actually nothing compared to some to the things that third world countries face'.

The fact that these benefits of conference attendance are linked to participants attending a specific conference is important, as it highlights that any research on conference attendance benefits must consider the particular characteristics of a specific conference and the influence that may have on the conference experience of attendees.

Discussion

As has been outlined in the literature review, the studies that investigate the reasons for librarians to attend conferences typically fall into the three categories of wanting to acquire knowledge and ideas, networking, and hoping to be inspired and motivated by the conference. This study confirms

these three themes as benefits of conference attendance as experienced by the participants who attended IFLA 2013. Participants highlighted different areas of knowledge they brought back, reported having networked and described the event in mostly very positive emotional terms, which is consistent with the findings of the few studies that deal with conference attendance benefits.

The three themes of knowledge acquisition, networking and positive emotional benefits are also linked in some ways. For example, participants reported learning from interacting with people at the conference, and being inspired by meeting new people and feeling part of a group that shares values and beliefs. The IFLA specific themes of multiculturalism and multinationalism were also confirmed, and the findings show that participants learn about the principles and structure of IFLA by attending the IFLA conference. Social media and its importance at conferences was strongly highlighted by only one participant and has not featured strongly in the literature to date, but might be a topic that gains more importance with the increasing popularity of social media and its integration into the organisational structure of conferences.

The findings of this study are beneficial to library staff and their managers in regard to finding arguments to justify the costs of conference attendance to their institutions and parent organisations. In addition, they contribute to other current discussions and relevant topics in the field of LIS. For instance, ALIA states in a document on core knowledge, skills and attributes that 'critical, reflective and creative thinking' and 'ability to build partnerships and alliances' (2014b, p. 5,6) are, amongst others, part of general core competencies that are essential to all library staff. As has been shown in the results of this study, conference attendance can encourage reflective thinking and provide a platform to build networks, making conferences an important professional development tool for librarians in order to retain core competencies.

To make a case to attend IFLA conferences in particular, large, multicultural conferences expose attendees to various cultures, languages and norms, as has been confirmed by the participants. Staff who are able to operate in a multicultural environment can be a significant asset to libraries in Australia's diverse population: as of June 2014, 28% of Australia's estimated resident population was born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

In addition, there is agreement in the field of LIS that libraries need to be innovative in order to stay relevant. Strange (2008, p. 1), for instance, titled her report on a politician speaking at a conference in the UK as 'public libraries told to innovate or die out'. Another example is evident in Rubleske, Kaarst-Brown and Strobel's paper (2010, p. 1) that states 'a library's ability to innovate remains crucial to its sustained success'. Their study produced a model that explains the generation of new service ideas, and although conferences per se are not mentioned in the paper, 'mindful interactions beyond the library with vendors, partners and other libraries' (p. 3) is noted as one of the prerequisites for generating ideas at a library. This comment highlights the importance of facilitating conference attendance for library staff, as this study has confirmed that knowledge acquisition and networking are important benefits of conference attendance. Arguably, the bigger and more diverse the conference the better, as larger and international conferences can provide exposure to a wider range of ideas.

Apart from the potential of conference attendance to promote innovation, libraries also profit from motivated and engaged staff. Marcum (2009) for instance wrote about the importance of engaged staff in libraries, describing the term 'engagement' to mean more than mere motivation: 'engagement involves learning, persistence, a social context, a high sense of empowerment and self-organization, and an evident sense of confidence and self-efficacy' (2009, p. 76). Marcum continues on this theme, noting that engaged staff is a 'crucial workplace component of effective

organizations' (2009, p. 76). This research has shown librarians feel more motivated, engaged with their profession, and confident as a result of their attendance at the ILFA conference, which adds another argument for facilitating conference attendance.

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that librarians attribute many varied and important benefits to their conference attendance, with most of the findings aligning with or expanding on themes evident in the literature on the topic. The implications of the study in the context of the broad LIS landscape have been discussed, highlighting that professional development activities like conference attendance remain important as libraries strive to remain relevant and thriving cultural institutions.

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Appendix

(Please note: depending on the progress of the interview and the answers provided by the participants, not all questions were asked of all participants).

Q1	What are the first 3 words that come into your mind when you think about the conference you have just been to?
Q2	What was the best thing that happened to you at the conference?
Q3	Was there anything negative that happened at the conference?
Q4	What did you bring back from the conference?
Q5- Q11	Participants prompted about following categories (if not already discussed earlier): Knowledge distribution, learning, new skills, networking, motivation, feelings, materials, impact on Institution
Q12	Are there any other outcomes of your conference attendance you can think of?
Q13	Tell me how you ended up going to this conference?
Q14	Did you present a paper/poster/session?
Q15	Were you involved in organising the conference?
Q16	Did attend the whole conference?
Q17	Did you attend all of the social events?
Q18	Did the library fund all of the conference?
Q19	Did you go with a colleague/colleagues from work?
Q20	Do you think there are other factors that had an influence on your conference experience?
Q21	What does the library require you to do now that you have returned from the conference?
Q22	Do you have any other thoughts in regards to your conference attendance you would like to share?