

# M25 Annual Conference 2022 – All things being equal: the regional contribution of libraries

Since our approach to how we communicate has significantly changed due to the pandemic, it has been especially interesting to gain insight on hybrid methods of working and living. I have been to a few conferences in the last six months, either online, in person, or a clever hybrid of the two, with varying results. It seems clear that being able to reach out to people virtually is here to stay, and so it's key that we delve into how best to facilitate this – what works best for who, and why. The M25 Annual Conference 2022 investigated this matter, keeping in mind the specific requirements of the people involved – who has access to what, and how we can involve those in the community to better reach out to them. This virtual conference showed the benefits of being able to reach out online – it allows us to widen our community by inviting in those who aren't able to attend in person activities.

For this reason, Greg Leurs from Royal Holloway discussed 'Building a digital community: Widening engagement and community participation through virtual events' is particularly timely. He defined a digital community as "digital platform(s) where people can meet and have shared experiences", and explained that although this had come out of a need for contact and communication during COVID (amongst other issues), the future benefits of this are many - for example, building links with other departments, bringing together staff, students and members of the public digitally, all with a shared interest.

As part of a university that is heavily embedded in our local community, it was very useful to see the ways in which Royal Holloway are working to enhance relationships with those around them, including putting on online events on a range of topics, surveys, linking events to social media content, and ensuring that different departments are involved. The logistics of this involve a wide selection of systems, reminders and joining instructions – this resonated with me as part of a CILIP committee which has moved primarily online in the last few years! The lessons learnt are also useful, and it was interesting to see that they reflect my own experience too, and I picked up some practical suggestions from this that will definitely form part of our future plan.

The building of a community with students, staff and the public was also considered by Sandy Macmillen and Esther Wilkinson from the University of Essex, who spoke about Decolonising the Library: the Student Champions Project. They described how decolonising the library benefits the students, the university and the surrounding community, and encourages heightened participation from all parties, as well as increased integration with the local community. Along with a strong mission statement, they gave practical steps that they were taking to decolonise the library, and their approach was wide reaching, with emphasis on the benefits for everyone involved. Their focus is both internal, for example, a specific EDI books DDA budget with a ringfenced amount of money, and external – i.e. a libguide for academic staff and students to direct them towards resources. As with lots of the other talks, there was practical information as well as lessons learnt, and what they plan to do going forward, which is incredibly useful for other universities considering taking a look at decolonising their own libraries. It was also great to see that they had involved students in every step – including the presentation itself – which showed how dedicated they are to ensuring a

collaborative approach with the people that it affects, as well as encouraging longevity for this project.

The thread of community was evident throughout the conference, and it really stood out for me that bringing people together to make a better whole is something that libraries are focusing on, using the digital tools we've now become accustomed to enhance this, and to enrich the relationships we already have. The importance of working with different departments and stakeholders is evident, and it's encouraging that this is likely to continue.