This year’s seventh annual SLA Conference, which was aimed at library assistants, focused on the idea of future-proofing your library.

A keynote speech was delivered by Jessica Crilly (Associate Director and Head of Resources for Library Services, University of the Arts London). This was followed by a choice of visit to the Royal College of Nursing Library, London College of Fashion Library, Regent Library, University of Westminster and the Royal Institute of British Architects Library. The afternoon consisted of ‘themed breakout’ sessions to define future-proofing and to discuss ways in which this can be achieved.

In her presentation Jessica discussed how the role of the library should evolve to meet the new demands of students and researchers as we move toward a more customer centred culture. The desire for more access to the library is evident.

Libraries are more than collections, more than technology and more than furniture. The reader’s relationship with the library is crucial. Libraries should be part of everyday student life, and communication and cooperation between institutions is vital. Interestingly Jessica noted that library assistants tend to have the biggest impact on users in the library environment as they have the most visibility and contact.

The speaker highlighted ways to equip ourselves to deal with the new demands of the rapidly changing information landscape. The Gartner Hype Cycle (Gartner, 2013) is a tool that could be useful in guiding decisions about the introduction of new technology. We were reminded of the difficulties of understanding and demonstrating the value of library services.

In the breakout sessions delegates had the opportunity to discuss the following themes in small groups:
What do we mean by future-proofing and why would you or your institution want to do it?

How do we future-proof?

Keeping libraries relevant, enhancing reader experience, supporting research and competing with other universities were highlighted as important reasons for future-proofing.

Communication featured prominently as a way to future-proof libraries. Identifying readers’ needs and wants by creating a feeling of approachability, keeping the dialogue open and inviting feedback is crucial to tailor library services to readers. Library outreach programmes can be a way to engage with students who have yet to discover the library and its facilities.

The attendees discussed a number of communication-related tools and techniques:

- Pop-up libraries, which have been used to great effect in organisations such as the University of Westminster
- Roving library assistants and librarians
- Information skills training programmes
- Promoting the library as a student support for academic success

Future-proofing library staff in a variety of ways is essential to ensure that they feel well equipped to do their jobs in a rapidly changing environment. Staff development, in the form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and career development, helps library staff to change with needs and times. Networking, collaborating and sharing knowledge also contribute to this, while looking after staff health and well-being is also important.

Libraries should be closely integrated with the organisation as a whole, collaborating and communicating adequately with other departments. Aligning library strategy with organisational strategy and projecting value to the organisation in order to ensure adequate funding are crucial.

Technology can make library resources and services more intuitive and user-friendly. The following examples of technology use in the delegates’ organisations were considered:

- Intuitive discovery tools
- Customer service through social media
- Reading list management software
- Query management software
- Integrating information skills training into the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- E-books

Library facilities can also play an important role in future-proofing libraries. Readers seem to want a variety and abundance of spaces to suit their needs, for instance 24-hour access reading rooms and group study rooms.

Libraries need to look for solutions to readers’ problems, taking their motivations and expectations into account when developing services. They should attempt to become attractive as a natural place for students to gravitate towards as part of their everyday activities.

The sharing of knowledge and skill sets between colleagues is vital in the pursuit of future-proofing and evolving as a library. Supporting one another, and identifying and utilising specific skills in team members are extremely important.

It is clear that there are several steps that can be taken in the continual endeavour of future-proofing your library, for the benefit of library users and staff alike.

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