

Digital Transformation: Janet Peden interview

Janet Peden, University Librarian and Deputy Chief Digital and Information Officer (CDIO) at Ulster University will be speaking at CILIP's Digital Transformation Event on 3 and 4 November. In this interview she discusses the benefits and challenges of developing an E-First Collection and Information Access Policy alongside a process to digitise services. For details of the Digital Transformation Event and to book, visit www.cilip.org.uk/DigitalTransformationEvent.

ULSTER University is a widening access institution, the Library Service has a critical role to play in providing access to information in a variety of formats to allow learning, teaching and research to take place at a time, place and pace of the user's choosing.

This student-focused approach, supported by new ways of working, will be at the core of library service delivery in Ulster's new state of the art Belfast campus which is scheduled to open in September 2021.

Against a backdrop of significant challenges to include Brexit, Covid-19, spiralling eBook costs and the ever-shifting landscape of HE, Janet Peden, Ulster University Librarian and Deputy CDIO, is overseeing the opening of a new library at Ulster University's new city centre campus which will welcome 15,000 students in September 2021.

"It's an exciting time for me to be a leader at Ulster," she says. "Not every university librarian gets the opportunity to be part of a team working on a transformational development which is one of the largest higher education projects of its kind in Europe. This summer will see the fulfilment of eight years of hard work, not just on my part, I am simply one element of a large library services team. The Library Service at Belfast will be the result of a collaborative effort,



Rob Mackinlay (@cilip_reporter2, rob.mackinlay@cilip.org.uk) is Senior Reporter, *Information Professional*.

teamwork at its very best. But it is my responsibility to get the library environment right and make it accessible for everyone. We want to deliver a 21st Century library service which will meet the needs of staff and students at Ulster University for a long time into the future."

E-first

"Ulster University is a geographically dispersed institution with four campus libraries, this number will reduce to three with the opening of the new Library at Belfast. When you have a finite budget with which to meet the information needs of all

users regardless of location, the most advantageous way to ensure that a critical mass of information is available to users at their point of need is to provide it in electronic format. Put simply, we are taking the library service to the user by pushing the service outside of the boundaries of a physical building.

The current economic environment is challenging for many students and Ulster University is committed to encourage young people who wouldn't normally consider HE as an option. As a core central service, the Library Service has a key role to play as an enabler to support retention and progression. We have been focussed on an e-First service delivery model for the last eight years at least. This is about delivering added value services to the end-user beyond the confines of the physical library space. It's about 'minding the gap'. There shouldn't be a gap between the service we provide and what students need to help them to complete their academic studies.

Moving forward, flexibility and adaptability of service delivery models will be key as we seek to support users across a variety of learning environments, whether that is electronic or face-to-face. One size will not fit all, a blended service delivery model will be required. Whilst many users are very comfortable working in an electronic environment others are less so. As Librarians we have



Janet Peden.

a responsibility to ensure that we can we meet users at their point of need wherever that might be. This of course challenges traditional service delivery models and requires creative approaches to service delivery. As a service we need to ensure the accessibility of information professionals and the added value service that they provide to users to help them to navigate the complexities of digital information environments."

E-first challenges

There are some immediate problems with e-First: "Content is not always available in electronic format," Janet says. "So a hybrid model of information provision will be essential, but eBook costs have also recently increased exponentially. This has been very noticeable during the Covid-19 lockdown period. As a general principle we buy one

textbook per 20 students and we manage demand using a variety of loan periods. If demand is high, we supplement with additional print copies and the same applies to eBook licensing, we purchase additional licences. I am now seeing more requests than ever before to authorise increased costs for the licensing of eBooks."

Janet added that "if all HE institutions are in the same position why are we paying more? Costs appear to be rising in parallel with demand. I think pricing models need to be reviewed. The change to the VAT rate has helped somewhat, but that is missing the point – the point is why are eBooks so expensive?"

Change and management

The success of a digital first approach to information provision and the delivery of a new library space at the enhanced Belfast campus will not be predicated on cost and



One of the largest construction sites in Europe will give rise to Ulster University's new campus at Cathedral Square, Belfast.

the application of new technology. It will be driven by the “can-do attitude” of the library team that Janet leads and their ability to flex and change. However, the current speed of change and level of disruption in the HE environment does not lend itself to conventional top-down work cultures, according to Janet.

“I have a team of around 100 staff spread across four campus libraries. Each campus team varies in size and out of necessity there will be a considerable amount of multi-tasking across smaller teams. A blanket approach to skills development is not always appropriate. As one way of supporting change, Ulster has introduced an innovative Self-Directed Achievement approach to CPD whereby employees take responsibility for identifying developmental needs which will support them in their role. This encourages personal responsibility and a sense of ownership for professional development.”

In addition, giant shifts in working practices are no longer far-fetched: “If Covid-19 can ever be said to have had a positive impact, it has helped the Library Service to accelerate the pace of change in relation to the way that services are delivered which hitherto would not have been considered possible. Had we been asked to implement a new service or way of working within a compressed time-frame, we would have said ‘absolutely not,

we can’t introduce a library chat service within three weeks’ or ‘you can’t redesign service delivery effectively in three weeks’. But we discovered that you can.”

Leadership

Although disruption has flattened hierarchies and unsettled top-down leadership structures, leadership during periods of change and disruption is critical. Janet sees self-awareness as one of the most important qualities for those aspiring to leadership roles in the future.

“There is an assumption that if you get beyond a certain grade you must instinctively know how to lead. I don’t believe that is necessarily true. I would certainly never have said it was true for me. Leadership is a muscle that needs to be exercised on an ongoing basis. I have benefitted immensely from the leadership training offered as staff development opportunities at Ulster. I was also very fortunate to be selected to participate in the AHUA (Association of Heads of University Administration) Leading with Impact programme.

“In terms of my personal and professional development this was one of the best things that I have ever done. The opportunity to meet with and learn from a group of like-minded people in leadership roles across Professional Services in Higher Education was a completely liberating experience. The programme was supported

by action learning sets where I had access to a wide range of perspectives and expertise, we all had a lot of lightbulb moments! Not only did this course help me with my current role, but I also felt much better equipped to contribute to the corporate agenda at Ulster.”

Start early

“I firmly believe that you don’t have to be in a leadership role to demonstrate leadership. If you have an aspiration to move into a leadership role, there are steps that you can take to prepare yourself for the future.”

She says that encouraging this responsibility and grassroots leadership thinking, benefits existing leaders: “We can all learn from each other. It is important to seek feedback across the structure at all levels and all grades, the person who has face-to-face contact with the user will be able to provide an insight into service delivery that you may not get from your leadership team. This is a two-way process as it also encourages members of staff to consider the opportunities that are available to them to develop their skill set in preparation for the time when they can step up into a leadership role.

“If you find yourself promoted to a leadership role for the first time it is important to identify a trusted colleague

who can act as a mentor to support you to develop into the role. A safe space to discuss issues and concerns with a more experienced colleague is invaluable. Leadership can be a difficult, lonely place and you do need people to talk to that you can trust and who will give you an honest, impartial perspective. I'm a very strong advocate for coaching as an aid to leadership development and we have a very active coaching network at Ulster. I am a qualified coach myself and coaching has been adopted as a strategic enabler for leadership development across the Library Service at Ulster."

Finding roles

Janet says: "I do have a training matrix for every role in the library but that will only help you to a certain point. Beyond that, team members who aspire to leadership roles are taking personal responsibility for their development in preparation to move into leadership roles."

The rapidly evolving HE environment and the application of digital technology in the library environment has had a significant impact on the skill set for academic librarians. This poses a significant challenge for those Institutions who deliver Library and Information Management courses to prepare the work force of the future.

"At Ulster we are fortunate to have a close working relationship with colleagues who deliver the Library and Information Management course with several members of library staff actively contributing to curriculum delivery. Whilst we can't predict the future with any certainty, traditional roles in libraries are changing and evolving. The skill-set of librarians is evolving, adapting and flexing to meet the demands of working in a digital information environment. Covid has accentuated this. The shift away from face-to-face teaching has accelerated the uptake of new tools and software to support learning and assess understanding. The role of the academic Librarian has become even more important as they play a vital part in establishing communities of learning in their respective institutions and



The Lantern creates a new landmark for the city.

equip students at all levels with the skills to succeed as citizens and professionals in their respective careers. Roles will be more digitally focussed; communication skills will be critical to support interaction with users – and not necessarily in a face-to-face environment."

CILIP's role

"I firmly believe that the role of the Information Professional is critical in today's information rich society. I have been part of this profession for over 30 years and the role of an information professional is even more valuable today than it was at the start of my career."

But Janet says the new information environment has disrupted established relationships including those of professional bodies. She adds: "I am a chartered member of CILIP. That was very important to me when I was starting out in my profession. I have also mentored several individuals towards chartership status. I believe strongly in the importance of the professional status of librarians along with adherence to a code of conduct which reflects the ethical and standards of a professional body. As the professional body, CILIP has a key role to play in supporting

and advocating for the profession. It is important that as information professionals we play our part in safeguarding the value and relevance of our professional status in the future."

Janet said: "I've had positive discussions with CILIP Ireland, about its Virtual Mentoring Network which could benefit my staff team and the profession in Northern Ireland as a whole. I am a strong advocate for the sharing of information and learning from each other. The Virtual Mentoring Network will provide a platform for this to happen and will support staff to identify a mentor outside of their own organisation. Ulster will be a key stakeholder in this process and I will be actively encouraging my staff, especially early career professionals make use of this facility. I'm also considering other initiatives and interactions with CILIP Ireland to offer further opportunities for staff to develop and enhance their skill sets. Professional development is a journey, there is always something new to learn."

For further information on CILIP Ireland's Virtual Mentoring Network check out our blog <https://cilipireland.wixsite.com/blog/post/virtual-mentoring-programme>. **IP**