

## NoWAL Conference 2019

This year's NoWAL Conference 2019 theme was diversity, equality and inclusivity in academic libraries. The theme was explored through a mix of workplace case studies and own voice accounts, with a focus on real practical change. Attendees were challenged to continually evaluate their own library practice and its impact on others, with talks throughout the day providing valuable prompts and tools for reflection. As a sponsored student attendee, I had the opportunity to learn from current practitioners and experts.

To find out more about the conference, search for #nowal19 on Twitter or look at the [conference presentations](#).

### Keynote: Dr Jason Arday on The Persistence of Racism in Higher Education: Decentring and Decolonising Knowledge and Curricula in Higher Education

Dr Jason Arday's keynote focused on the experience of BAME university students in the UK, and the need to address the systematic attainment gap impacting BAME students.

[Advance HE's 2018 report](#) on equality in higher education found that the attainment gap between white and black students qualifying with a 1st or 2:1 degree between 2016/17 was 24%. Dr Arday put forward several features of academia that perpetuate this inequality:

- **University structure:** Decisions about funding and support create hierarchies that dictate how inequality is prioritised and addressed. BAME students and staff are frequently not prioritised within these structures.
  - **Curriculum:** Institutional academic spaces hold huge power to gatekeep, shape and exclude knowledge, which often fails to mirror society and prepare students to navigate their way through a multicultural world. For BAME students, this means that their learning environment and material often does not reflect their experiences. To address this, Dr Arday argues that we need to provide students with agency in the curriculum design process. This includes libraries including students in shaping their collections.
  - **Exclusionary spaces:** BAME students contribute to these academic spaces equally through their learning and financial input, but the way we shape these spaces mean they often do not get the same value out of them as white students. For example, bias means that library staff are more likely to police and exclude BAME students, creating an exclusionary pedagogical space.
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Nothing about us without us: the benefits of employing disabled staff in libraries' from Elaine Chapman & Sarah Anne Kennedy (Technological University Dublin)

**Challenge:** *Technological University Dublin aimed to create a more inclusive library environment, providing a safe space that supports students in disclosing disabilities and therefore finding and using accessible services.*

#### **What can we do?**

- Prioritise the employment of disabled staff in order to better reflect the student body and draw on staff members' knowledge and experience to improve accessibility.
- Use inclusive design and communication such as representative images, accessible hashtags, and image descriptions on social media.
- Move away from a model of accessibility that requires medical proof of disability to access accessible services.

'Supporting a cohort of marginalised mature students to find their academic voice at a Russell Group University' from Christine Bradford & Lauren Elmore (University of Warwick)

**Challenge:** *The University of Warwick aimed to address many mature students' experiences of feeling excluded and isolated in university spaces. This involved identifying key barriers for mature students' participation in university spaces, and finding ways to reduce their impact.*

#### **What can we do?**

- Diversify representation, rather than only having images of traditional students on the library website and marketing materials.
- Implement spaces and practices that enable students to structure their learning around other commitments, such as 24 hour opening and spaces that allow children.
- Mature students often feel pressure to appear independent, preventing them from asking for help. Warwick is developing peer guidance as a way to implement a more effective support system for mature students.

'Queering Reading: discovering and developing diverse library collections' from Kerry Webb (University of Reading)

**Challenge:** *The University of Reading aimed to support research into LGBT+ topics by increasing the discoverability and awareness of its LGBT+ collections.*

**What can we do?**

- Question traditional cataloguing and classifying of LGBT+ topics, and acknowledging the frequently problematic approach of classification schemes such as DDC and LC.
- Reading has developed a [LibGuide](#) for LGBT+ resources.
- Reading has designated specific funding for developing diverse collections, particularly based on student recommendations.

'But what does critical evaluation mean?: promoting student inclusion through language use in the teaching of academic skills' from Sam Thomas (University of Northampton)

**Challenge:** *How we interact with students can affect how they view themselves and their studies. In particular, language at university can cause barriers to learning, especially the use of unfamiliar or exclusive academic language.*

**What can we do?**

- Identify the most common phrases we say frequently, and what concepts, ideas and things we repeatedly explain. Evaluate the impact of these phrases, and identify what students find especially confusing or important.
- Centre the student in each interaction - for example, asking 'what would you like help with today?' rather than 'how can I help you?'. This enables the student to take agency in their learning.

'Opening doors: supporting Open University students in prison' from Geri Huzar (The Open University)

**Challenge:** *Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) have limited or no internet access, restricting their access to some courses and library services.*

**What can we do?**

- The OU's new initiative means that non-SiSE student volunteers mediate searches for SiSE students. The volunteers receive search skills training and requests from SiSE students, who are then sent resources in print form.
- The next step will be finding ways in which to support SiSE students in developing research skills.

'Listening to student voices: collaborating with groups of marginalised students to shape inclusivity in library policies and services' from Ange Greenwood & Helen Dickinson (University of Sheffield)

**Challenge:** *The University of Sheffield library team evaluated their website and found that lots of services that were aimed at specific groups were in fact very similar and would benefit students outside those groups.*

#### What can we do?

- Apply an intersectional approach to the library service and website, focusing on useful services instead of categories of students.
- Ask focus groups to describe their 'Perfect Library', focusing the conversation on what students want and need, rather than problems with the current service.

'Allyship and BAME underrepresentation in the LIS profession: I don't know what I can do – Help!' from Shirley Yearwood-Jackman

Shirley Yearwood-Jackman's workshop on allyship summarised the theme of the conference, presenting key thoughts and actions through which library and information workers can support BAME staff and students, and other marginalised groups of people.

- **Take action:** Allyship is more than refraining from prejudiced behaviour. It is about taking real action to end inequality and promote the rights of marginalised people.
- **Seek to understand:** Knowledge about others' experience won't come to us automatically as it's not part of our experience. It is crucial to actively seek out learning and listening opportunities.
- **Self-reflect:** It is essential to reflect on our deep views and socialisations. Even if we think we are good allies, unconscious biases impact how we act and respond to people.

It is now possible to join [CILIP's BAME network](#), or support the network by joining the Allies Forum.