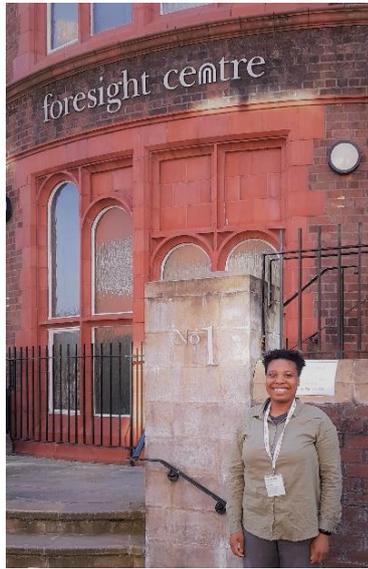
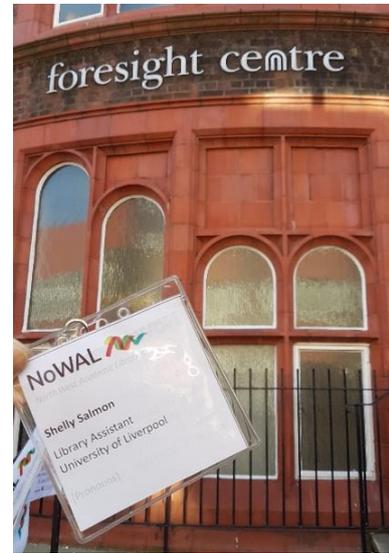


NoWAL 
North West Academic Libraries

NoWAL Conference Blog by
Shelly Salmon



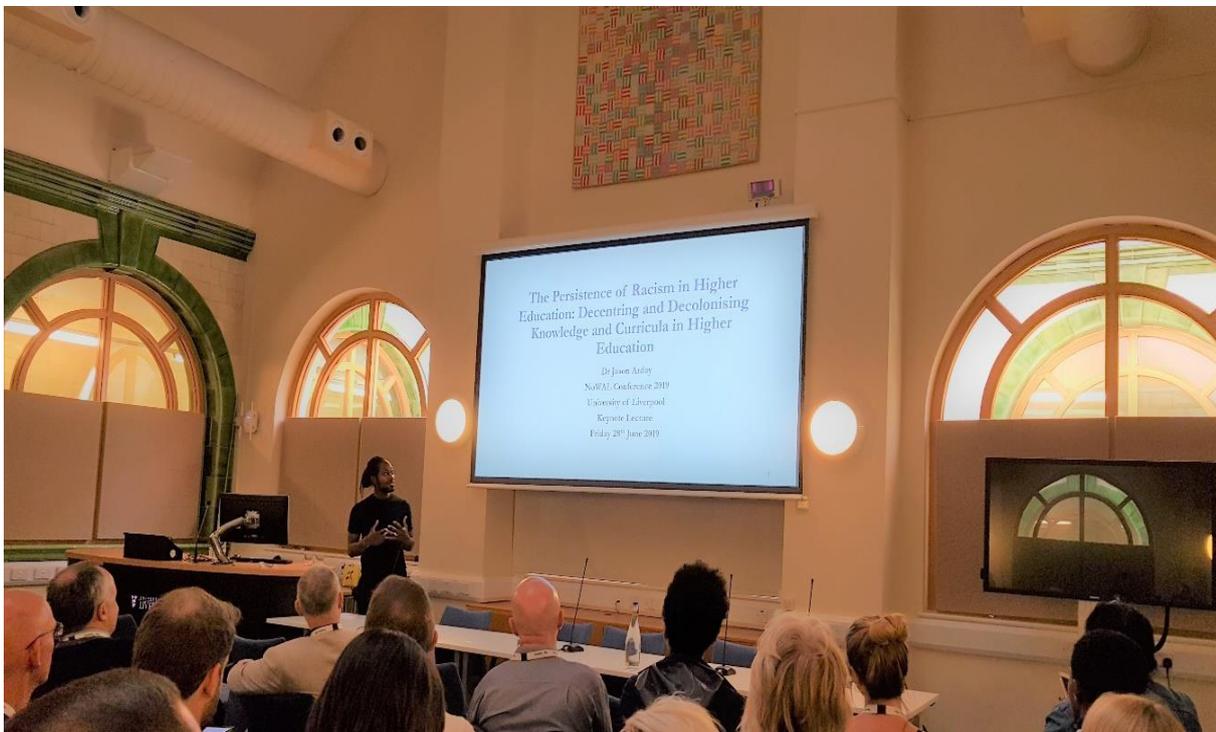
Outside the conference venue



My pass for the day

I have just finished my first NoWAL conference and as a newbie with no idea what to expect. Overall, I had a great time. My very limited experience would have me believe conferences were stuffy affairs chocked full with industry jargon. However, all the content was very accessible, the delegates very friendly, the sponsor bingo fun and the refreshments delicious!

I was looking forward to the Keynote delivered by Jason Arday Assistant Professor in Sociology at Durham University, he did not disappoint.



The Keynote Dr Jason Arday

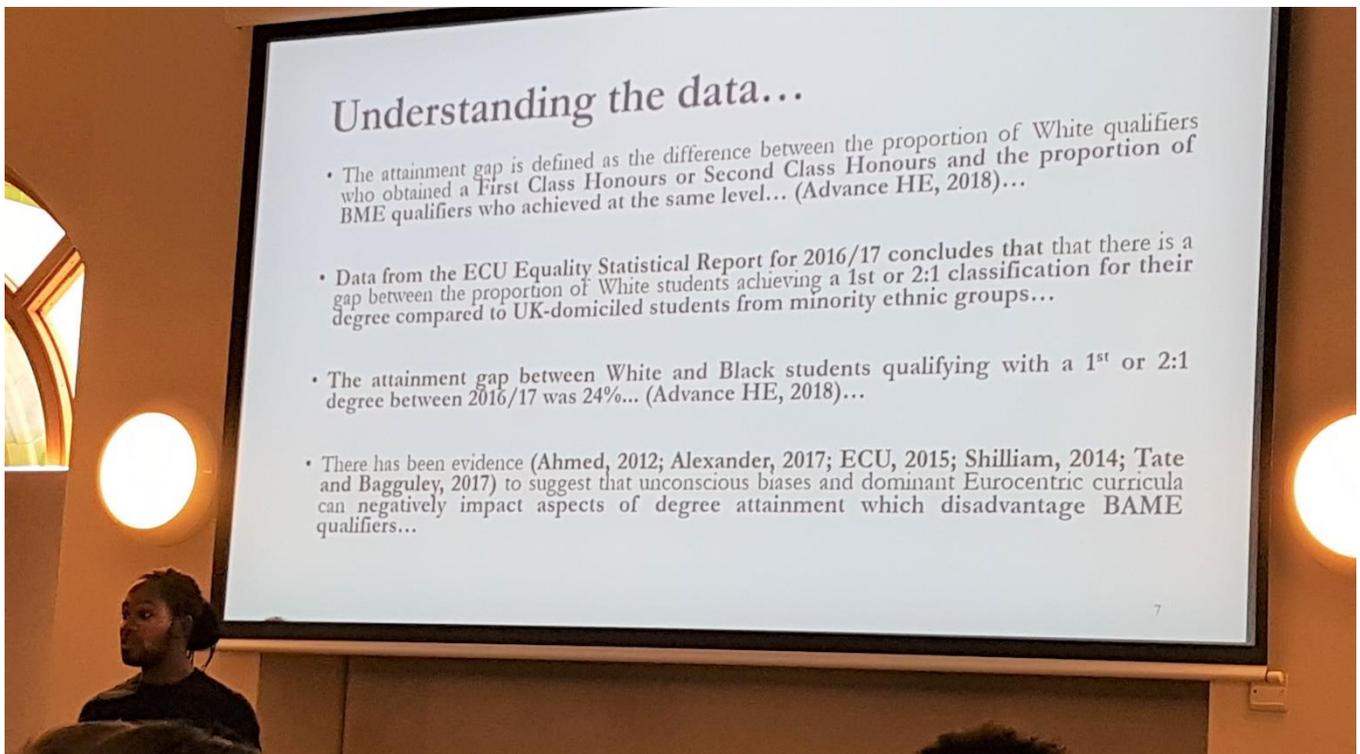
He was engaging and incredibly disarming. My takeaway from his speech was that he is interested in genuine change. He talks about diversity and inclusion within the university with passion and with kindness. He noted that it could be uncomfortable topic for discussion but imagine it being your day-to-day lived experience!

As an industry, we are doing students and staff a disservice by not engaging with issues meaningfully.

In a sector, which is overwhelmingly white, what message are we sending to those students who use our facilities?

Unfortunately, students have to pay for their education, which means their verdicts on the service they receive and the curriculums delivered will hold more weight. I have noticed this rhetoric, in overheard conversations, among the students who use the library I work in. Rightly or wrongly, they believe because they are “paying for a service” they should be afforded certain opportunities.

It begs the question; should students of colour be disadvantaged by the very fact of who they are, especially when they are paying the same as their white peers? Should they systematically be coming out of university with a 2:1 rather than a 1st?



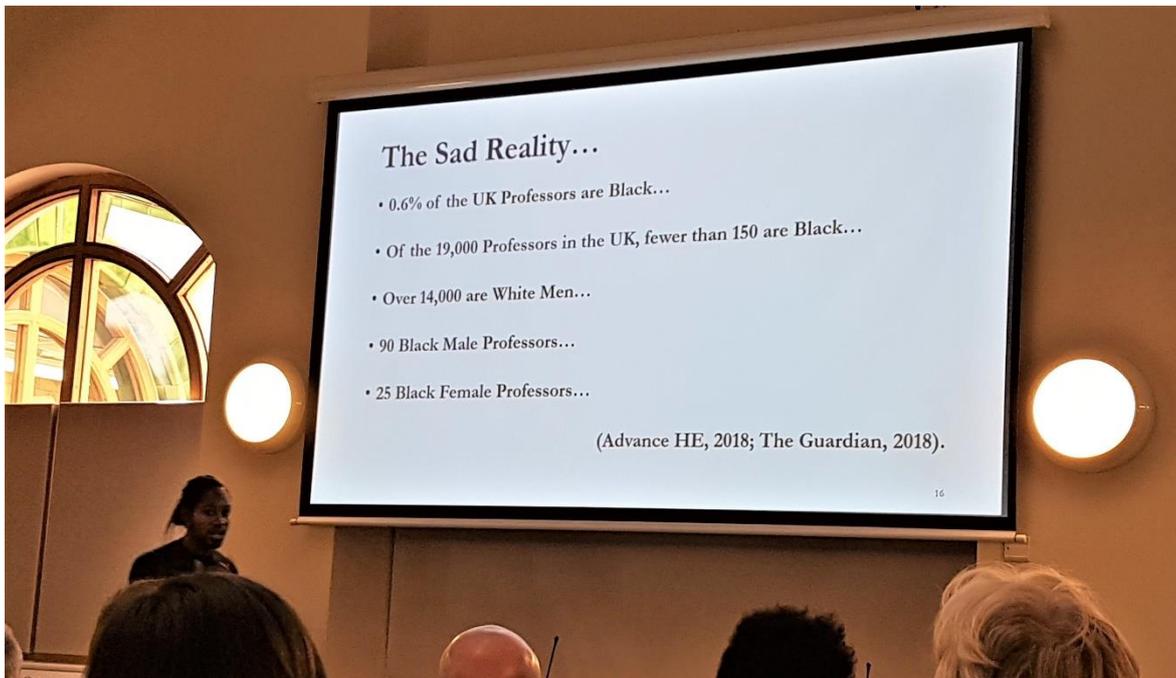
The issues as they stand

Jason reasoned it was unacceptable and change is needed from all of us, to really tackle the issue head on. Personally, I don't think it can be expected that you will achieve your highest potential when you're made to feel as though you don't really belong.

He asked the audience to think about why this was happening, and why students of colour were reporting feeling like this more often.

Unconscious bias is one explanation, it is something we all carry with us through every facet of our lives and university is no different though we might like to think so.

We all need to be challenging our biases at every opportunity. If we can stop and think before we police maybe we can start to make everyone feel welcome.



The (unfortunate) state of affairs

This treatment doesn't just extend to students. Staff treatment at universities was another point Jason raised. He mentioned an example from his own life where in an interview situation the first question asked was about his hair. I heard most of the audience gasp in shock about this but there were a few knowing groans from some of us in the audience. It was interesting to witness that disconnect.

Our experience as POC in academia needs sharing. We need opportunities like this conference to share those experiences and to feel comfortable expressing ourselves. We need allies who are willing to listen, to stand with us when we raise issues, and to resist denying us our experiences.

Optimising Change...

- Understanding the importance of diversifying academic teaching staff to ensure better representation...
- Thinking about refining defining canons of knowledge within academia...
- Listening to BAME student voice and engaging them collaborative endeavour regarding the curriculum design process to ensure a more inclusive curricula...
- Understanding the importance attributed to inherent unconscious biases and how this can unintentionally effect our perceptions of BAME students...
- Recognising some of the cultural expectations and burdens that are placed on BAME students, in particular female BME students....

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Ways to bring about change

The library is integral to our collective academic and working life, it is currently failing to support many of the people that rely on it. In order for us to change that in real terms, we all of us are going to have to actively engage with the process.

If we want to see long lasting change, it's going to take a lot of work to get there but this conference was a really positive first step. At the end of the day, we are all in this together.

Concluding Thought...

- I am he as you are (s)he as you are me... and we are all together...

(I am the Walrus, The Beatles, 1967).

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The keynote fired me up for the rest of the day and I looked forward to the sessions. The first “Engaging with Student communities to Build Confidence and Resilience UG and PG” and “Empowered collaboration: A toolkit for authentic change” delivered by Phillip Sale (UG) and Aysa Qzcan (PG) of Warwick University and Jasspreet Thethi of Manchester University respectively.

Philip and Aysa spoke about building their project to improve student wellbeing. The project started from one termly session to a university wide initiative. They were doing similar sessions to that of our Knowhow space at UoL minus the campus cat :(



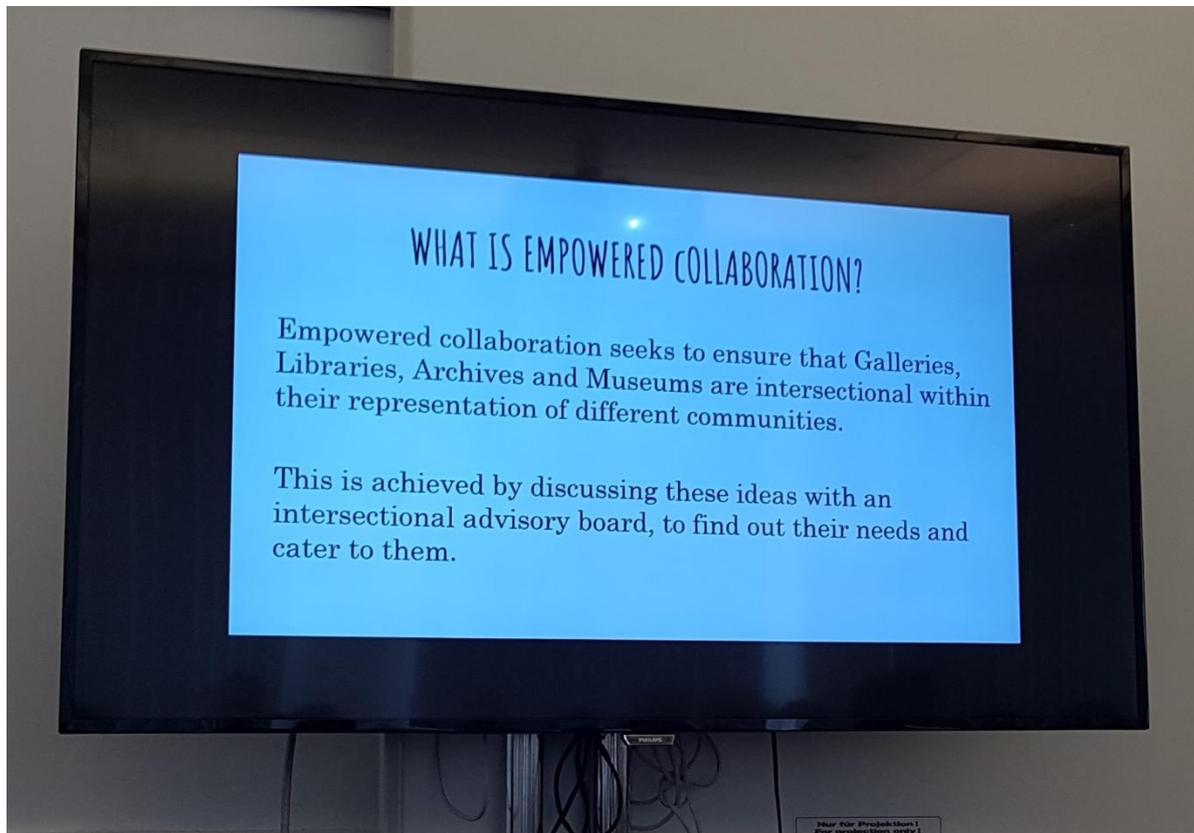
Rolf - The Campus Cat

They both talked about wanting to build a student community that went beyond the sessions and one that reflected the student’s needs. They asked the students what they would like to see and got peers to lead activities.

They have health and wellbeing of the students at the centre of what they do and it seems to be working as they reported various students meeting up without the framework of the sessions and it was encouraging to hear that the students were not feeling as isolated.

There were many ideas here that we could adopt especially at the Harold Cohen, which is the STEM library. Our students are doing very content heavy subjects and having an opportunity to engage with students from different subjects, different communities it could help lift with those feelings of isolation.

Jasspreet delivered the next short paper, hers was an interesting idea that I do not think many organisations take into account. Intersectionality asks you to look at how the parts of one's identity make up a whole person and how those parts, linked with social and political discrimination, overlap.



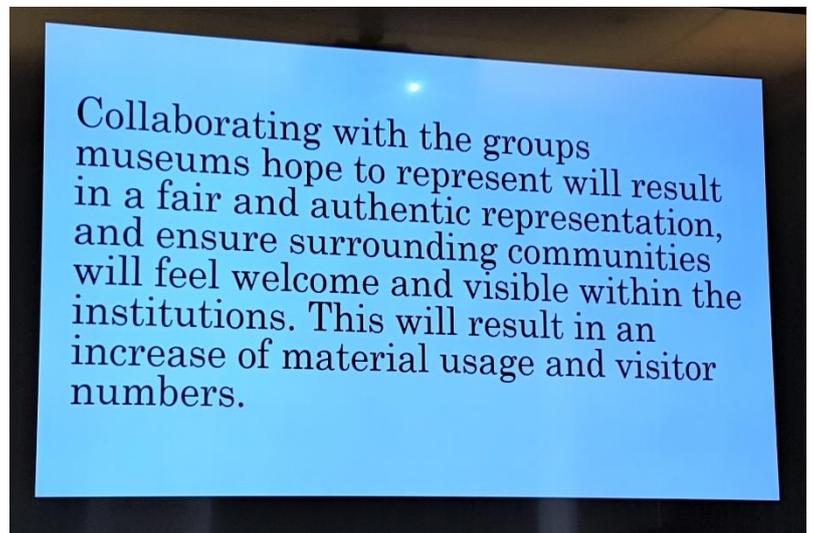
What is Empowered Collaboration?

I am a black woman and I am gay. My needs will be different to that of a black man. However, policies are generally written in a piecemeal fashion and they do not necessarily help to combat the additional issues I face as opposed to a man. Her charge was institutions must empower their audience and challenge those with power and privilege to understand their biases and in doing so you will have a richer more fulfilled organisation. Jasspreet had a way of expressing herself that demonstrated that she cares sincerely that voices are not erased and that everyone should be held up to account and heard. We all have something to offer and to exclude doesn't serve anyone.

It is easy to dismiss or give platitudes to this idea but it works and an example she gave of a museum in Atlanta, Georgia where they formed a panel of **paid** intern curators were representative of the community they served.

Community cannot go on doing this type of work without remuneration; their ideas should not be pilfered and profited from under the guise of progress.

The result of these changes brought about visitor numbers tripling in 2 years. It is not only good for your employees; it is good for business and the community. It pays to invest in people.



The benefits

Session 2 in the Waterhouse room was presented by - Berrisford Edward's "Addressing Representation Inequality: A university of Manchester Library Working Group" and Elaine Cooke and Corryn Walker's Love to Read: How Manchester Met Library engages Students with a book giveaway.

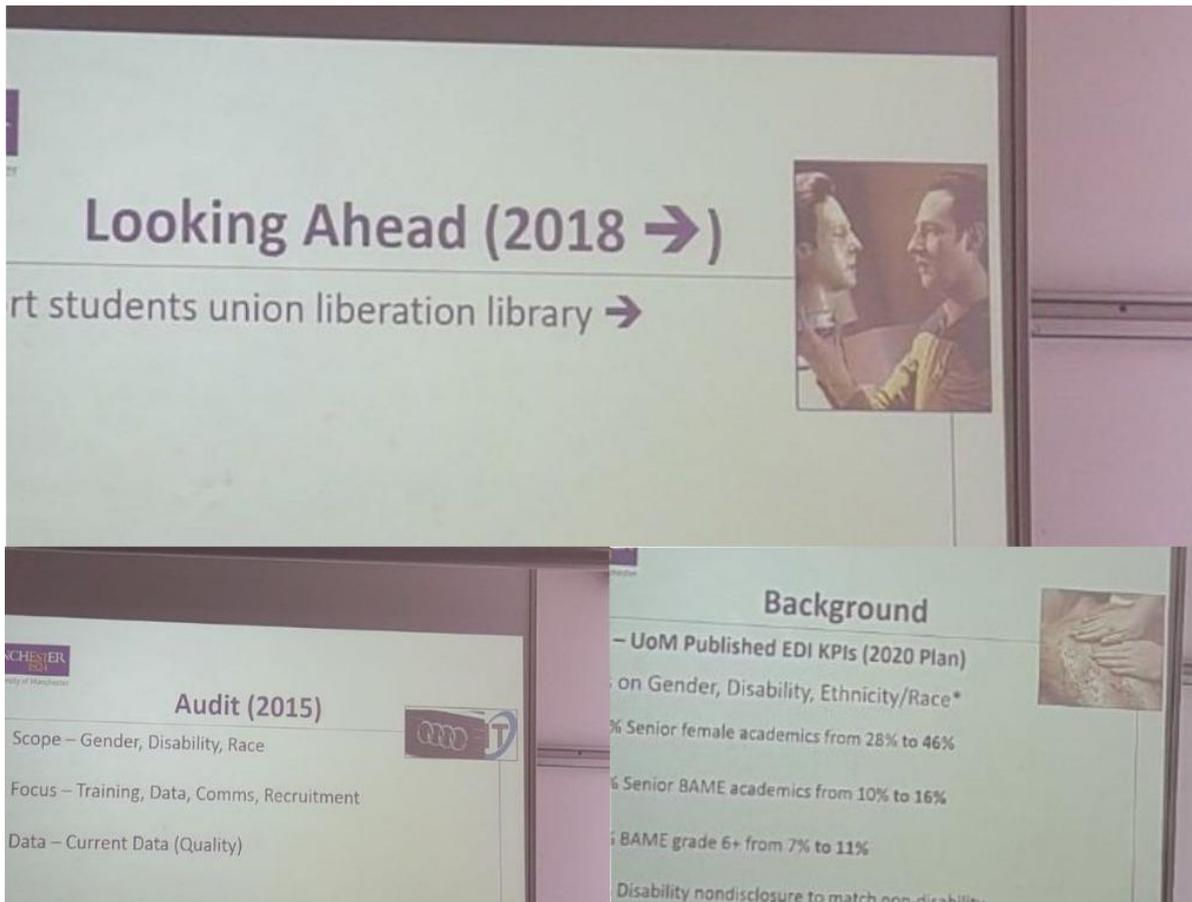


Berrisford's Presentation

Berrisford's presentation focussed on how the library working group started in 2016 looked to improve the recruitment process. They looked at the number of women in higher grades, lowering the percentage of people not disclosing disability and BAME people in senior positions by 2020.

The working group Berrisford was a part of concentrated on these issues to try not to split their focus too finely and risk not hitting targets. This gave them the ability to find their way through the system and better placed in the future. They have a greater understanding of the process when they tackle issues for other protected characteristics. They collated data and made some real headway with certain issues such as getting more diverse recruitment panels but there was still a long way to go.

(One of the highlights of this presentation were the accompanying slide pictures that made me chuckle.)



My particular favourite is Data looking at a head

Elaine and Corryn discussed a book giveaway at Manchester Met University Library. Research by the students union highlighted that students felt lonely and had difficulty making friends and they looked for ways to tackle this.



Reading has shown to have a positive effect on wellbeing and anxiety. They decided to select books which aligned with the university's equality and diversity agenda and they had 2250 books to give away.

They attended welcome events and hosted a panel to have a discussion around the book and get people together. The project was immensely successful and they will be running it again with a few tweaks such as a UK based author so they are able attend the panel discussion which should bring more students to the event.

They have made strategic links with publishers, with groups around the university and it is very much a collaborative process.

Something else that I have taken away from the conference that in order to achieve these big projects there needs to be a lot of collaboration and teamwork and engaging with departments that you might not otherwise. I think it is something that seems underutilised within my university.

The 3rd session 2 short papers on “Striving for and sustaining an inclusive workplace culture and team within Collection Care” presented by Jim Duff and Riza Hussaini and “Building resilient communities at the University of York” by Ruth Elder and Alice Bennett.



(L-R) Jim, 5ways of working, Riza

Jim discussed how they have built an inclusive team and the process they went through in order to implement the 5 Wows (ways of working). They wanted the team to learn from each other and understand that they all have different skills and experiences to bring to the table and they are all valid.

They created an open and encouraging environment where everyone is treated as an individual and hearing from Riza Hussaini it seemed to have worked. She was the product of that recruitment process and spoke highly of her team and Jim. She felt very much supported in work. She stressed that it is an ongoing exercise and it is everyone’s responsibility. Managers owe it to their teams to keep reviewing the process and be willing to listen to conflicts.



Building resilience and Ruth and Alice



The Staff from York University, Alice Bennet and Ruth Elder presented a paper about building a supportive community to help staff and students cope with mental health issues. Alice trained as a Mental Health First Aider, it is an organisation which trains people to have a better understanding of mental health issues to reduce stigma and to better support themselves and others.

With this training Alice created a mental health working group that was to focus on staff wellbeing. It was to act as a signposting service for staff and support neglected staff such as Out of Hours teams.

Ruth spoke about what they put in place to cater to those needs. What they could do to make staff feel comfortable talking about their mental health with managers?

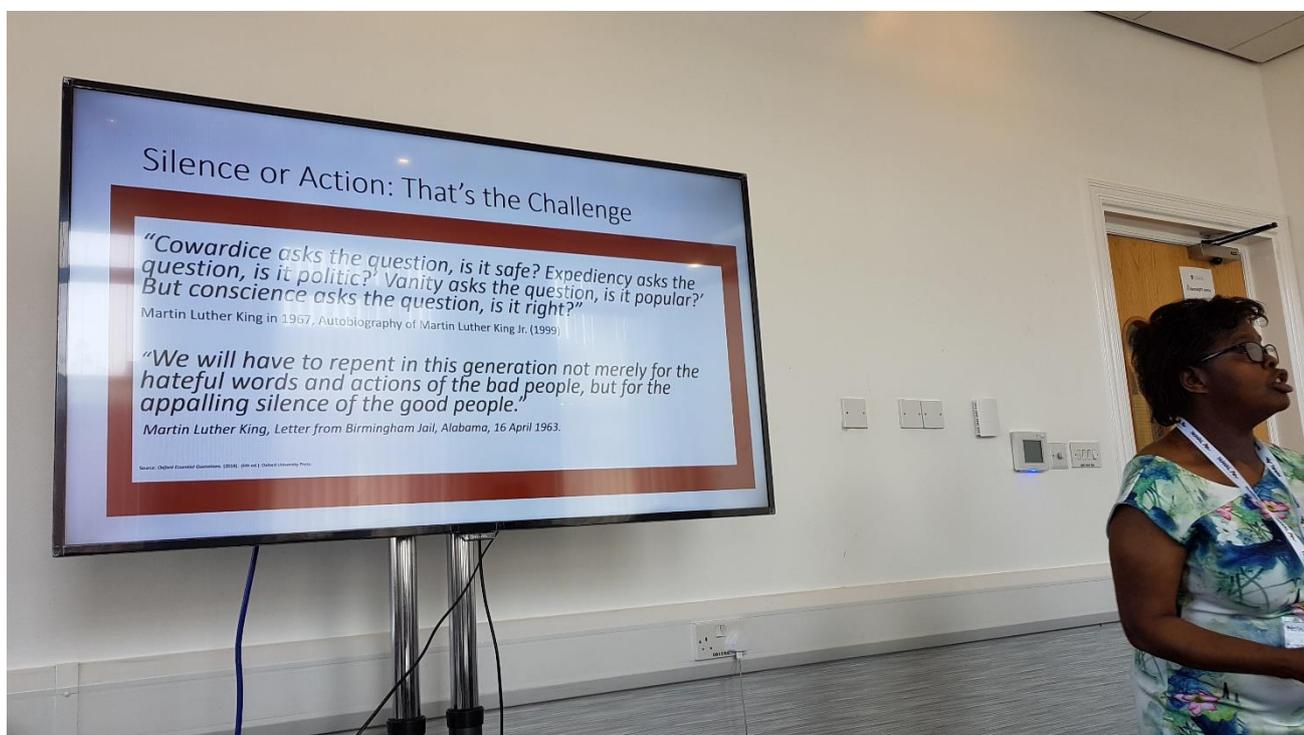
Wellbeing activities that were set up such as guide dogs coming to campus and creating a course on the MOOC. They also talked about how they utilised social media to promote what they were doing and had a festival focussed on staff wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing for the staff in my library is on this year's plan and this paper gave me many ideas that we could work on.

I think there can be a tendency to lump wellbeing of staff and students together but I think this session highlighted that the pressures on staff and students can be different and I think there should be a greater effort to recognise that we do not necessarily have the same issues.

The last session was a workshop facilitated by Shirley Yearwood-Jackman "Allyship and BAME underrepresentation in the LIS profession: I don't know what I can do- Help"

I was unsure if I should have attended as it mentioned Allyship but I thought I would support my colleague and it turned out there was a lot of us BAME people in attendance, which was reassuring.



Thought provoking MLK Jr. Quotes

She spoke about what steps we could take as individuals in our organisations. She acknowledged that it could feel intimidating but that it was vitally important that everyone takes responsibility and "[exhibits] the values from our ethics".

Our workshop task was to think of ways in which we could effect change. As a grade 4 member of staff, I found it hard to see how I can affect change in my workplace.

In the group discussion one of the members said that he has found asking questions in public forums, such as staff meeting or university wide meetings a really effective way to address issues. Giving senior leaders an opportunity to talk about how they are addressing matters is important. If they don't have an answer maybe they'll take the steps to find out or rectify. They are the one who can change policies we need to let them know we want to see change.

Another option we discussed was becoming a member of forums and working groups, being a part of these groups can give almost direct access to senior leaders compared to going through conventional channels such as line managers during which messages can get diluted and ideas or grievances being weakened or lost completely.

I found both of those ideas helpful and it feels good to know I can make some difference in my workplace.

These sessions made up the bulk of the day and were super interesting. The presenters were all very engaging and knowledgeable and the bite size length of the sessions made everything digestible.

Overall, I have learned that all these staff members were able to follow through with their ideas because they had advocates and management on their side. This requires organisations to let staff know that rocking the boat is exactly what's needed. The status quo does not serve anymore and it stops everyone reaching their potential.

It's OK not to get it right first time or have all the answers but organisations need to listen to what their staff members are saying and making changes. It's not just about making life better for a BAME person or any other protected characteristic - making changes is good for everyone and if you're inclined to look at the bottom line it is good for business.

It feels like I had an amazing opportunity and privilege to engage with these people and to learn from them and I will definitely be looking to put some of the things I learned into practise.



Panel Discussion Top Tips



1 Intersectionality

It is becoming vitally important that Universities look at staff as individuals in a holistic way. Policy needs to be flexible enough to be able to help the people it is meant to serve.



There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

Audre Lorde

2 Recruitment



Organisations need to look at the process and access where changes could be made to demystify roles. Managers and HR should look at managerial roles and decide whether every role needs to have a Library qualification. This could open up opportunities to greater numbers of people.

3 Champions and Advocates

Champions and Advocates at every level who are guiding policy in the right direction. If all the people who are affected by policy at on the lower rungs of the hierarchy how will the senior leader team know if it is having the desired effect.



4 Listening



Senior leaders need to be open enough to listen to when things haven't gone right. Resist the desire to be defensive. They should want to hear about conflicts. Policy will need constant updating and adjusting and input from the people it effects.

5 Taking the Initiative

To engage with diverse groups, engage with them. Don't wring your hands wondering why they don't come. Invite local groups to use the library. Get POC to speak at events. Facilitate those conversations. Gear events towards the group you are trying to engage with. Above all be sincere.

