Library associations: making connections to enable effective change

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Abstract

Decisions by library associations impact on everyone involved in library and information services. The committee of the Library Association of Ireland, Health Sciences Libraries Group conducted an online survey about association and group membership. Our 49 responses and literature review provide a useful guide to what is wanted and needed. We learned about the value of taking a holistic, connected approach to enhancing expertise through continuing professional development, progressing the interests of our profession, and supporting collegiality and knowledge exchange by uniting us as a community. Our findings show the importance of belonging to a professional group that not only provides comprehensive tangible supports but also facilitates a network of stakeholders with whom we can engage, share and collaborate.

Key words: *library associations; information services; community networks; continuing professional development.*

Introduction

The Health Sciences Libraries Group (HSLG) is a specialist group of the Library Association of Ireland. Although a relatively small group of about 50 members, we have an email discussion list, e-newsletter, website, virtual journal club, annual conference, annual general meeting, regular continuing professional development (CPD) and networking events. The six committee members are responsible for governance so wanted to ensure we were effectively meeting members' needs and expectations. To do this we needed to explore different sources of evidence, including the views of members and current best practice.

In our brief study, we learned about the valuable role associations can have. The results are guiding our strategy and are relevant to others who govern library groups and associations. They are also relevant to members, and potential members, who may want to reflect on the benefits of membership and how they can communicate their needs to decision-makers. Here, we present some key results and how we are using them to guide our new CPD framework.

Methods

In November 2021 we conducted an anonymous online survey with the aim of gaining insight into the issues of relevance to membership of our group and national association. Our objectives were to: enable HSLG members to give their views on the group; understand what aspects of a library association are important to librarians in Ireland; and learn about reasons for and against membership. Our questionnaire was developed based on a literature review including a search of ProQuest Library Science database in September 2021 using the term "library association", checking article reference lists and a search of library association websites. The review provided useful literature from previous surveys of librarians and commentaries on the role of library associations. We use an inclusive definition of "professional", which includes those who do not hold a professionally accredited qualification but who are actively engaged in development (1).

Our questionnaire included questions on demographic and work-based information, evaluative questions about the HSLG and library associations, reasons for joining, and the importance of specified factors related to membership. To create options for the latter, we identified four themes related to what members may expect to contribute and receive through association membership: 1. expertise - professional development, 2. community - connecting and engaging, 3. profession - sustaining and strengthening, 4. support - financial and organisational supports. For more information on the literature review, questionnaire development and themes, see forthcoming article (2).

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Results

We received 49 valid completed surveys. There were 21 responses from group members (46% response rate). The remaining 28 responses were from (21) other members of the national association or another library association, and (7) non-members. Although numbers were small, responses provide a useful guide to what is wanted and needed. This article focuses on results from the HSLG.

Eighty-one percent of HSLG respondents had worked as an information professional / librarian for 12 or more years. Although 86% of members indicated that their library or organisation paid (fully or partially) to attend CPD events or courses, only 29% said they paid for their association membership. Thirty percent said they belonged to two or more library associations. Ninety-five percent agreed or strongly agreed that group membership was important for, and had improved, their practice; that the group fulfilled their expectations; and offered sufficient opportunities to contribute. All members agreed or strongly agreed that the HSLG provides community support (*Figure 1*).

When asked to rate the importance of specific factors related to association membership, all were rated as somewhat or very important by most members (*Figure 2*). Categorising by our four themes shows the role of community was regarded as of paramount importance.
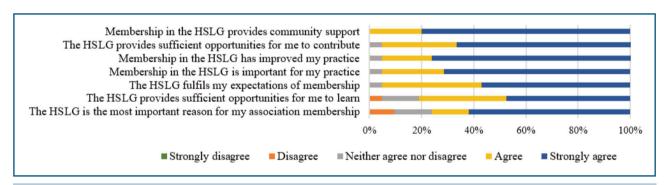

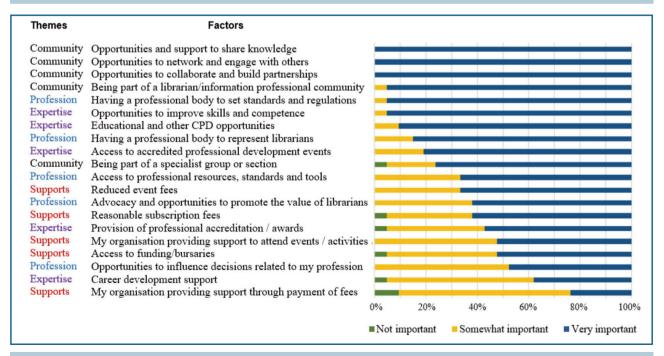**Fig. 1.** *Value, impact and effectiveness of the HSLG for members (n=21).*

Fig. 2. *The importance of factors related to library association membership for HSLG members.*

Discussion

Library associations should aim to provide the services and resources that those involved in the library and information sector need to function comfortably and effectively. Results for HSLG members show that, overall, membership is providing sufficient support and opportunities, fulfilling expectations, and having an impact on practice. The importance of all four identified themes for most respondents indicates that those making decisions on behalf of members need to consider them as connected and interdependent.

These themes can underpin many processes, such as our role in contributing to sustainable development goals or tackling the climate crisis. And results have already changed the way that our committee makes decisions. For example, traditionally in terms of CPD we have focused on content (what topics members want to learn about) and provided a related course, workshop or conference. Now, as we develop a new CPD framework, we have expanded our considerations to include the whole interconnected process of training and development provision, such as: the supports to enable members (and non-members) to attend; the processes to communicate about the importance of these activities to stakeholders; and the mechanisms for attendees to share their learning with others (*Box 1*).

Box 1. *HSLG committee: developing a CPD framework by connecting four identified themes.*

Supports. One of the first tasks in developing a CPD framework is to understand the context in which it will take place and be applied. CPD should be of value to members but also our organisations or funding bodies, therefore choice of competencies and topics must match what employers view as valuable. There is no point in offering opportunities if people can't take part, so CPD provision involves communicating with managers to ensure that it is seen as integral to the work profile of staff, and they are given time and funding to devote to development. Where funding is lacking, mechanisms (such as bursaries) need to be in place to support members. Choice of format (online or in-person) needs to be considered in terms of appropriateness, inclusion, affordability and preference.

Support action. Connect with those who enable our work (organisational managers and other funders) and specifically with those who enable members to engage in CPD (library, HR and other managers). Do a needs assessment and draw attention to the value of professional development and IFLA standards in relation to employers' responsibilities (3). Consider facilitators for attendance at activities, such as timings, formats, funding and managerial support.

Expertise. We can all access MOOCs (massive open online courses), YouTube and other instructional videos online, yet *opportunities to improve skills and competence, educational and other CPD opportunities*, and *access to accredited professional development events* were all rated in the top ten most important factors for membership in a library association (*Figure 2*). Associations should understand how we can effectively meet members' needs. Gaps we may address include a lack of quality assessment and reputable source-provider lists, courses adapted to local contexts, consistent evidence-based approaches, and accreditation for attendance.

Expertise action. Connect members with relevant learning content to enhance practice in formats that maximise attendance and engagement. Consider how to maintain consistent training standards, accreditation and provision across the sector.

Profession. Provision of practice and education standards is a core function of most library associations. Formal guidance needs to be supplemented with shared knowledge derived from personal study, reflection and practice. Consistent standards and knowledge exchange may contribute to the sense of belonging that membership in an association can bring (4). For our new CPD framework we must consider how our planned activities, and consequent enhanced skills and specialist knowledge, will strengthen our profession.

We need to communicate with key stakeholders about these professional developments, thereby enhancing our reputation and respect. The work of other library groups and associations also provides useful evidence. *Profession action*. Connect again with members and other stakeholders to reinforce and communicate the specialist skills, knowledge and values that define us as a profession. Consider how we can disseminate our knowledge and abilities to others to strengthen our individual and collective identity as professionals.

Community. Our top membership factors of importance related to community: *opportunities and support to share knowledge; to network and engage with others*; and, *to collaborate and build partnerships (Figure 2)*. The term community-based professional development (C-PD) describes professional development using social engagement through communities and groups. Based on a social theory of learning, C-PD emphasises that learning takes place through social interaction, such as, in communities of practice, peer learning communities, and learning and teaching networks (5). Associations like EAHIL have recognised the importance of collective learning through the provision of interactive workshops (though understanding that traditional conference design still suits other learning styles). The HSLG must incorporate elements of knowledge exchange and collaboration into our deliberations on CPD provision. Our virtual journal club is an example of informal information sharing where we explicitly acknowledge that the act of coming together periodically to discuss our experiences and views is as important as the content which guides those discussions (6). The provision of communication fora, such as open access newsletters and blogs, for attendees to share learning summaries is also useful.
Community action. Connect with members to ascertain needs and expectations. Provide opportunities for them to make connections with each other and effectively share learning from formal CPD and experience. Develop mechanisms for members to consult and collaborate with others.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that developing a professional community should be a priority of library associations. This community needs access to relevant, quality development opportunities to enhance expertise, must be supported to participate in these activities and to share learning within and outside the profession by having access to internal and external professional networks. In a virtuous, holistic circle, this work should lead to a better understanding of our value as a profession, thus increasing support and giving us a better sense of connection.

It is valuable for members to feedback their needs to governing bodies, and for the views of non-members (potential members) to be included. These views can be considered and acted upon using the four interdependent themes: community, expertise, profession and support.

Associations should provide tangible resources and services but also facilitate a network of colleagues with whom we can engage, learn, share and collaborate. Even outside times of isolation, we should all have access to a strong, effective professional community.

Acknowledgements

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