



DARTS8 Conference Summary 2023

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Introduction

In May 2023 I travelled to Devon from sunny Essex for the DARTS8 conference, held on the (disarmingly pretty) Dartington Hall Estate. It had only been three weeks since I handed in my MSc dissertation, and I was feeling somewhat trepidatious about being part of a conference for ‘real librarians’. As an Assistant Librarian at a small university college, I was fortunate to secure sponsorship to attend the conference and had been looking forward to it for weeks.

The theme for the conference was ‘Research Culture’, though it could easily have been a theme of ‘collaboration’. This was in fact the theme for the DARTS7 conference, planned for

2019 – which was unfortunately cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps some of that theme was filtering through to this year?



Photo 3: Mandy Smith opens the conference in the Great Hall, introducing Judith Carr and Katherine Stephan

Day 1: Small teams, big dreams

I am very much a newcomer to research culture, and it seems at times an overwhelmingly broad landscape to get your head around. I was reassured to find, in the keynote on the first day, that I am not the only one who feels that way. Judith Carr (University of Liverpool)

talked about the ‘knowledge burden’. She described the sense that there is so much to learn about the open research landscape that it can be difficult to know where to start. This is one of many reasons that it pays to be collaborative. By working with other people, other institutions, you are sharing the ‘knowledge burden’ and will be drawing on a wider range of interests and expertise. It was also reassuring to find that overwhelm is not unique to small, specialist institutions like mine. Katherine Stephan (Liverpool John Moores University) and Judith Carr gave the keynote, titled ‘Small teams, big dreams: championing open by being collaborative’. In this keynote they summarised a journey over the past 5 years of how they co-created the [Open Research Week event](#). Personally, I think they should have called it ‘From Merseyside to the world’ (one of the many amusing soundbites along the way – but that’s another story).

Open Research Week is a collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University, University of Liverpool and Edge Hill University. Another thing that struck me was how candid they were about their experiences. They didn’t start out thinking they would create an event that would attract 1500 delegates (as it did in 2023), and initially there wasn’t much planning for the year ahead. They have had challenges including Covid-19, timetabling and Strike action, but these have been easier to face due to the team effort. But there clearly has been an enthusiasm and curiosity for all things Open Research. At the end of this presentation, they asked a question that they had started with – “Have you ever thought about running an event but didn’t?” and it was a useful reminder to be open to at least trying, to work collaboratively and not be fearful of what might happen.



Whose research strategy is it anyway?

The theme of starting small yet having big dreams was also apparent in the next two presentations. Samantha King, Researcher Skills Development Manager, shared how the number of research active staff has grown extensively at Northumbria University. In the REF 2021, there were 1095 research active staff, a huge difference from the REF 2014 in which there were 343 research active staff. Having a strategy to become a research-intensive university has obviously been a huge part of this, but this in itself isn't enough. Sam described how having bibliometric data from the library has been really useful in driving forward the strategy, as well as listening to researchers. They have a holistic approach to developing researcher skills, involving all of the professional support services such as the graduate school, marketing team, organisational development and the library. Northumbria are also members of Vitae, a not-for-profit organisation that promotes and assists researcher career development. Sam shared the [Researcher Development Framework](#), created by Vitae and backed by empirical data.

Being open (honest) about SafePod – from application to deployment

After a nice cup of tea and some networking, it was on to a presentation from Zosia Beckles (Research Information Analyst, University of Bristol) about the [SafePod network](#). Again, I enjoyed a candid approach here, as she shared about the set-up of the SafePod at the University of Bristol, with many a logistical challenge along the way. This seemed to me another example of responding to the needs of researchers, and thinking about practical ways to make that researcher journey run more smoothly. At Bristol, she explained, there are very active health sciences and social sciences departments, and a high usage of social quantitative data. Before SafePod, if researchers were working with sensitive data they would have to travel to a specific Data Centre. Having surveyed and interviewed researchers at Bristol they found that 22% just found access too difficult, either because of the cost of travel or the time taken to travel elsewhere. There have been some glitches, some of which were concerned with the Bristol version being an early model – she reassured us that the equipment faults have been worked out now! Crucially, she also mentioned that a funded call for SafePoints is expected later this year, if you work for an institution that doesn't have funding, space or infrastructure for a SafePod proper. The benefits to researchers are described in this [useful short article from the UK Data Service](#).

What is a Pecha Kucha anyway?

We finished up Day 1 with three PechaKucha presentations (20 slides for 20 seconds each) from Liam Hill of [Edge Hill University](#), Tara Healey and Kim Davis of University of Plymouth and Kate Ehrig-Page of the [University of Bath](#). These were a whirlwind of activity, and full of tasty morsels of information. My takeaways from these were that being a small institution isn't necessarily a drawback in the OA game (networking is easier for one thing), a few controversial topics can spark debate amongst researchers ([Research Sparks](#)) and one size doesn't fit all when it comes to open access.

End of the day

Before a drinks reception on the lawn (with thanks to SAGE) we were presented with an overview of [SAGE Campus](#) and how it can assist students and researchers with skills and research methods for all stages of their academic journey. These are all online courses,

which I can imagine would be of benefit to large organisations where it's just not possible to see all students in a face to face setting. Day 1 had certainly exceeded my expectations, though I was quite sure that lots of the little nuggets of information would trickle out of my brain overnight! Luckily I had taken copious notes throughout, and even recorded a session on my phone to digest at a later point.

Welcome to Day 2



OA, the DOAB, UKRI and more

The second day of the conference was off to a promising start with more glorious sunshine. The programme looked even more packed than Wednesday's offering, so I was pleased to have some time for quiet reflection in the morning, exploring the gardens behind the Great Hall after breakfast. Our keynote for the day was from Phil Jones (UKRI-funded Licensing Manager at Jisc), who presented on Open Access books. This was a strong start to the morning sessions which gave a taste of the variety and possibilities for authors in open access publishing. I found these sessions illuminating, knowing that there are researchers at my home institution who will be looking to publish, and the work that is going on to change the culture of publishing. I know this is a contentious issue for some of the academic staff I work with, as well as friends and colleagues from other institutions. For anyone who is aware of the ebook crisis and unsustainable price increases, learning more about open access books and how the publishing landscape is changing is surely of interest.

Phil explained that open access books (or monographs) publishing is still a niche part of the scholarly communications landscape, but that the infrastructure is developing and

improving. Admittedly, while I had heard of the DOAJ (Directory of Open Access journals) I wasn't aware of the DOAB (Directory of Open Access Books), this was echoed by others at my table.

Phil's was the session in which I wrote down the most acronyms, initials and names on which to follow up later! These will give a flavour of just how packed full of useful nuggets this presentation was:

- UKRI OA long policy is commencing in January 2024 ([more about that on their website](#))
- OACF 2023 focused on OA agreements. Details on the Open Access Community Framework from Jisc are [available on the Jisc Website](#).
- PALOMERA – how do open access policies work together? This is a big one, ready? The Policy Alignment of Open Access Monographs in the European Research Area. A good explanation of this can be found on [the Jisc Research blog](#)
- OAPEN – the OAPEN open access toolkit aims to help book authors understand how open access publishing works, [the toolkit is available online](#).
- Thoth – Open Source software that produces open (CC-0) metadata, and also includes an open API (application programming interface) that anyone interested in the data can use. More detail on the software can be found on the [Open Book Publishers website](#). If on the other hand you're interested in Ancient Egyptian deities and want to know more about Thoth, master of knowledge amongst other things, the [Egyptian museum website](#) is a good starting point.

[Nudging towards greatness](#)

One aspect we looked at in groups at our tables, was how we might persuade others at our institutions about the merits of OA book publishing. Phil suggested using behavioural 'nudges', taken from behavioural psychology. It's fairly well known that it can be difficult to change someone's thinking or behaviour, but this theory looks at how people may move from thinking one particular way to being nudged by small changes in another direction. This [interview with David Halpern from 2014](#) describes how the theory has been applied by the UK government.



*Photo SEQ Photo * ARABIC 7: Delegates thinking about effective behavioural 'nudges' in Phil Jones' session on Open Access books*

How Cardiff University Press has followed its own path

Interestingly, academic-led and university press diamond open access is developing quickly. This is something that Helen Sharp (Scholarly Publications Specialist at Cardiff University) picked up on in her presentation on the journey of Cardiff University Press (CUP), [as can be seen on their website](#). She described how this was just one of a number of university presses launched over a 12 month period starting in 2015, in the early days of the OA movement. These included UCL, Westminster, White Rose press and Goldsmiths. Picking up again on the theme of collaboration, the CUP was instigated by a group of academics looking at how to get some specialist research published, alongside a group of librarians trying to find a way of supporting researchers with OA. The outcome was to provide an alternative publication route, especially giving a platform for valuable research outputs that would not fit the commercial publishing model. An example of this being the Journal of Ammonia Energy. Helen also explained that it is about more than just providing an alternative means of publishing, the publication can be a starting point to develop a whole community of practice. This was the case with the student led journal 'Martial Arts Studies' from which there are now conferences being held in this subject area.



Photo SEQ Photo * ARABIC 6: A decent cuppa and freebies make for a happy conference attendee

The Essex Student Journal

Providing experiences of the publishing journey for students and early career researchers is something that Hannah Crago (Open Research Development Librarian, University of Essex) expanded on in her presentation on the Essex Student Journal. This is a diamond open access journal, run by students and published for students. The library took over managing this in 2019, and they have a paid role of student journal editor each year. The journal is multidisciplinary, and they put call-outs for open submissions throughout the year. A particular aspect I found myself talking about with other delegates afterwards, was the educational benefit for students. The research support team have presented this as a learning tool, to the directors of education of UoE. Hannah mentioned how students from minority groups are less likely to go on to do further research, and that this journal gives them an opportunity to experience the publishing journey and to see that it is possible.

Octopus – free, fast and fair

It's not only students and early career researchers that can benefit from alternative routes to the commercial publishing model. In the session before lunch, Dr Alex Freeman gave us an overview of how she developed [Octopus.ac](#). It was clear from her presentation, that this was developed not just as another platform to host research, but to provide a solution to the issues inherent with traditional journals such as a lack of replicability. The difference with Octopus is that researchers are able to publish the full details of their research, making it easier to share knowledge and enable research to progress. Journals are not usually formatted in this way, as she pointed out, the method section is often cut down substantially. I found the idea of a 'primary research record' most interesting, and this is definitely something I will be sharing with researchers back at Writtle. Alex also gave one of my favourite sound bites from the conference "don't do a Darwin", which I believe was in reference to the interplay between the work of Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace. Was this in reference to Darwin working on his hypothesis of natural selection and being unpublished for twenty years? A [short blog post from the Linnean society](#) explains this better than I could... (strangely, written by Eleanor Marsh(all) – what a strange coincidence).

Collaboration, collaboration, and... collaboration!

After a delicious locally sourced lunch, we were straight into Robert Darby's (Research Data Manager, University of Reading) presentation on the [UK Reproducibility Network \(UKRN\)](#) which aims to facilitate researchers, stakeholders and institutions to work effectively together, thus enabling collaborative research practices. His was also another tale of modest beginnings, to something more fruitful and ever evolving. As well as an insight into the UKRN, he described how research services at the University of Reading have grown since 2016. At this point research support for publications and RDM functions were split between the library and research services. Open access wasn't on the university's research strategy. Over the course of about 3 years, they developed a conversation among departments, including senior management and professional services and worked to understand the needs of researchers. They are now in a position whereby the university has an Open Research Action Plan, and the library works towards increasing awareness of open research practices. On their website, the UKRN share how they started with the aim to improve both

the reliability and reproducibility of biomedical research in the UK. In this presentation, Robert shared a useful paper '[A manifesto for reproducible science](#)' which explains well the underpinning evidence of theories for optimising the scientific research process. I conscientiously noted this down for perusal after the conference!

Closing Session

Although the final session from Aimee Waston-Cook (Newcastle University Library) was titled 'Responsible Metrics' the lessons I took from this weren't just about bibliometrics, but more on that later. I think everyone was struck by the idea of 'training a set of moles' to go out on campus and spread misinformation that the library had come up with. From what I could gather, these moles were taught to say things such as "should I even bother with this or that research profile" and "my output is easily four star" which really don't make much sense if you look into them further. They would then challenge people to come up with responses to these "ridiculous statements"... ok, I may be slightly sketchy on the details. But the point being that researchers may get stuck on things such as 'journal impact factors' without fully understanding what that means, or the metrics that are underpinning it. Perhaps this is the LIS equivalent of announcing "75% of statistics are made up on the spot"(I can't remember which comedian brought this to my attention, but thank you [Mark Suster for the inspiration](#)).

For me there were two key points from Aimee's presentation, which have been echoed throughout the conference. Firstly, if you are trying to influence the research culture at your institution and be part of the conversation, you have to give it time and you have to network in an open minded way. She described the 10 year journey from agreeing to sign DORA ([San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#)) to the present day where open access is a part of the university's research strategy and the library is an integral part of research support and development. Secondly, networking cannot be underestimated. For example, working with other professional support services has been instrumental in developing the research culture at Newcastle University. She described how working with HR highlighted how the academic promotions criteria was filled with references to 'journal impact factors' in spite of an update to the university's research policy. Aimee finished her presentation

with some takeaways and recommendations for us all, in which she drew on two main themes.

1. Community and Collaboration

- Find the right people and the right mix to chip in
- Shameless self-promotion
- Share what you're doing with everyone

2. Opportunism

- A little healthy fear-mongering goes a long way
- Over-promise have more confidence!

Concluding remarks

For a newcomer like myself, this conference was well worth it. It was especially timely as well. During the conference I received an email from my line manager, informing me that a new Head of Research has been appointed at WUC, and she would like to meet to discuss the repository amongst other things. I think that attending this conference has given me the confidence to show up for that meeting with some knowledge and insight about the research landscape. There is plenty to unpack, and I'm glad to have recorded a couple of the sessions.

I have plenty of things to look up and investigate, as well as having networked with colleagues from different institutions who have very kindly offered their expertise, insight and support. This was my first conference as an early LIS professional (not even officially qualified) and I feel that my expectations have been set fairly high for any future events!

Thanks again to the ARLG DARTS committee for giving me this opportunity, I thoroughly enjoyed it.