

Reflections from an outgoing Chair

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Google tells me that my first active engagement with UKSG came in November 2012, when I spoke on ‘The Discovered Collection’ at that year’s November Conference. I went on to chair that year’s FE Conference and became a member of the UKSG Education and Events Sub-committee.

By April 2018, I had been co-editor (with my esteemed colleague and friend **Helle Lauridsen**) of *UKSG eNews*, chair of the UKSG Publications Committee, overseeing its transition to the ‘*Insights* Editorial Board’, and had spent four years as a member of UKSG’s Main Committee playing my part as a trustee.

In April 2018 I became Chair of UKSG and as I come to the end of my four-year term as UKSG’s chair, I was asked by Helle (who continues as co-editor with the wonderful **Josh Sendall**) to write a piece of reflection looking back over my four years as chair, before I hand over to the inaugural Vice-Chair **Joanna Ball** at the AGM in late March.

Joanna will take over as chair for a two-year period and will write a forward looking editorial to follow this backwards look by me.

So, come with me as I present a personal reflection on my time as Chair of UKSG, my experiences of being Chair during a pandemic and what we have done both before and during the pandemic and where we go next as an organisation.

April 2018 seems a lifetime ago and UKSG looks very different as an organisation in 2021 to the UKSG of 2018. Some of that has been planned and some of that has been brought about by the pandemic – a story I think we have all become familiar with these last two years at home and at work.

Early Days 2018-2020

Before the pandemic, UKSG's trustees, then collectively known as the UKSG Main Committee, agreed to rethink structures within UKSG, this led to changes within the staffing profile and changes to UKSG's governance. **Bev Acreman** became permanent Executive Director in August 2019, following a period as our Interim Executive Director (beginning November 2017), while a review of the UKSG's trustees' governance also took place. As UKSG is a charity, this entailed a full review of our Articles of Association, the updated Articles were agreed at an Extraordinary General Meeting in January 2020 and the [new Articles](#) were passed.

From a practical point of view, what difference did this make? Frankly, given what was coming at us, changing the governance structures may not seem to be that important. However, the changes have transformed how the trustees operate and they will continue to bring benefit in the future. So what were they? In essence, they were the following:

- 'The Main Committee' gave way to the Board of Trustees – with a reduction in membership from 17 to nine trustees.
- The length of term served by the Chair of UKSG was reduced from three years to two years.
- The role of Vice-chair was created – this is a crucial role, it is role that is elected by members and is served for two years, the Vice-chair automatically becomes chair at the end of the two-year term.
- The creation of a 'Conference Planning Sub-committee' (given the pandemic, this is planned to take effect after the 2022 Glasgow conference)
- A limit to the length of time a trustee can serve continuously on the Board of Trustees to ensure that we refresh the talent pipeline for UKSG.

All of these were important actions and the plan in early 2020 was to build on the staffing and trustees structural changes by developing a new vision for UKSG to ensure our mission and our activities were appropriate to the 2020s. Then came March 2020 and all our plans shifted slightly..

The Pandemic

In early 2020 I was very much excited about our first Brighton conference, a new venue, with a wide range of events planned. As we moved through the year towards March we faced uncertainty such as this generation had never faced with a virus that was not understood and for which there was no vaccine. As we got closer to the start date, it became clear that we needed to cancel our conference.

It cannot be overstated the ramifications of taking this decision. UKSG is a charity, our trustees must meet and agree to any major decision taken. Financially, the conference pays for all our other events and activities – our [membership fee](#) is low, and it is the conference that brings in the vast majority of our income – no conference, no income. No income – there would be no UKSG. The night we agreed to cancel the conference, the most likely outcome was that we would not be able to keep UKSG going. This was a challenge that was not unique to UKSG, but I felt then and I continue to feel very strongly that UKSG needs to continue for the benefit of us all in the scholarly communication sector.

That it came through that year without a conference came down to two things – the dedication and quick wittedness of Bev and other UKSG staff and the support of so many people throughout the sector who ensured we survived the financial challenges by donating and rolling over delegate, exhibition and sponsorship money. Thank you to all of you – institutions, publishers and other vendors who showed that UKSG matters to them and to the sector. Given the lows of those early days when it felt as though I might be UKSG’s final chair, the galvanising effect that your faith in UKSG demonstrated gave me the determination to repay that faith. Given the challenges of the pandemic and the ongoing uncertainty, I also agreed to the Trustees’ request and remain as Chair for a fourth year.

Going Digital

After the disappointment of having to cancel the conference, we were back for our November conference, albeit in digital form. This was a wonderful experience, and I was delighted to chair it one more time. We had over 400 delegates – a record for the November conference – with delegates joining us from across the globe. The success of the digital November Conference gave us the confidence to proceed with our plans for an all-digital annual conference in 2021. That too was a huge success with a wide range of positive responses for the way UKSG (thanks to our staff) ensured this was not just variety of Zoom webinars, but a fully functioning interactive conference with social areas and events throughout. This approach was important as our physical conference has never just been about the plenaries. It is the social interactions and the exhibition which makes our conference unique. However, given where we were in early 2021, the all-digital conference was the right approach for the circumstances we were in at that point.

Financially, despite the toughness of 2020 and 2021, we came through the challenges with hard work and diligence on the part of staff and trustees and the support of members – ready to face the future and begin to re-consider what the mission of UKSG should be as we look towards a still uncertain future for all of us. The [UKSG 2020 Annual Review](#) outlines the year in more detail.

The Future

I am going to leave it to Joanna to talk about the future, although I won’t be active as a trustee after March’s AGM – I will remain committed to the organisation as a Library Director and as someone who has benefited so much from the existence of UKSG. My time with UKSG may be ending, but the honour of chairing the organisation through these difficult times will never leave me. This will be my last eNews editorial, my first was entitled ‘How UKSG Changed My Life’ – with hindsight, I would only make one change to that title, as UKSG not only changed my life, but it has also enriched it.

Anyone reading this who has wondered about whether to engage with UKSG as a volunteer, please do consider it. Yes, it is hard work, yes, it takes out of hours commitment, sometimes a lot, but the value it brings professionally and personally outweighs that hard work. If you’d like to talk to me, please do – I’m always happy to discuss the joy of being involved with UKSG and can be contacted at: a.c.barker@lancaster.ac.uk

As I come to the end of my tenure as Chair of UKSG, there are a ton of people to thank, and there will be time for ‘thank you’ – but I must thank Bev Acreman here and now for her dedication and management of UKSG these last few years. Without her I am convinced there would be no UKSG, she has worked with staff and colleagues to ensure that we not only continue to exist, but that we remain at the centre of this sector. It has been a joy to work with Bev and I will miss her enormously when I come to stand down.

Finally, I do hope to see you in Glasgow at our in-person conference– there will be further challenges ahead of us, but UKSG will continue to prosper if we continue to come together as one sector to understand each other and to bring new initiatives that benefit us all – something that UKSG has been doing since 1977 long before I came along, and something I know it will still be doing long after I have left the UKSG stage.

These views are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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