With the help of the CILIPS Professional Development Fund, I was able to attend the 2024 British and Irish Association and Legal Librarians conference in Leeds in June. After a few years of stepping back to make sure people in the library team got opportunities to develop their networks, I felt it was now time to get out and revive mine a bit! Even better, one of my colleagues Sarah Ragg was there to run a workshop on research skills, so I'd have some friendly company.

Working in a double-whammy special library (my workplace falls twice into the 'special' sector, being both a law library and a government library) it can be tricky to find training or events that match with me or the service's development needs, but the BIALL conference ticks a lot of the boxes here.

The conference theme was "Full Steam Ahead: from Industrial to Knowledge Revolution", and the themes ranged from dealing with the present legal issues presented by the past to potential future challenges, AKA Artificial Intelligence (AI).

On the topic of Artificial Intelligence, there was plenty of discussion (as there has been for a few years now) but the discussions and presentations from vendors were moving more into the area of demoing early-stage officially launched products rather than crystal ball gazing and guessing/theorising about what future products could do. There was also generally less doom and gloom than there has been before about all librarian jobs disappearing and being taken by AI, and more of a focus on us becoming experts in using and training others on new tools as they develop, a thing that information professionals have been doing forever.

However, one of the things my colleague and I did notice to be an issue with the AI products is that it often either didn't know or possibly just didn't care about the different jurisdictions of the UK. This is important because a vast amount of the law in Scotland (e.g. criminal, land, family, education etc.) is different from the law in other parts of the UK. So any AI that confidently states it can give information on UK family law is just confidently … wrong. Very wrong. And as we're likely to be the power users of these products, it's something that librarians, particularly those not in the software-prioritised jurisdictions of England and Wales, will need to be aware of on behalf of their users.

Another area where we were unpleasantly surprised is the new approach to verifying the research skills of entrants to the legal profession in England and Wales. One route requires only the equivalent of a 1 hour reading comprehension test rather than the previous comprehensive research skills modules. It's a little concerning that future clients of solicitors in England and Wales could be relying on someone with so little legal research training! Legal research is a very specific and important skill for a solicitor to possess, one which doesn't really come into existence without a lot more than an hour's effort and training.

The information session on indigenous laws in Canada was simultaneously fascinating and saddening, to see how the law was used to attempt to erase the identities of indigenous peoples, and the ongoing efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring about massive cultural and social change through their Calls to Action. Chatting to one of the speakers after about the issues of having appropriate interpreters available in courtrooms for the hundreds of original Canadian languages which are still spoken, and a mention of an upcoming conference being about the languages of the law, led to my colleague being inspired to consider a potential conference presentation about the same issue in Scottish

courtrooms in relation to the use of Gaelic, something which historically was not enthusiastically supported by the courts (to say the least) and which hasn't been tested since the recognition of Gaelic as one of the four official languages of Scotland (the other three are English, Scots, and British Sign Language).

A lightning talk on the access to law resources in public libraries in England and Wales, and academic libraries which the public could access was depressing information, for an audience who have effortless availability of these key socially beneficial resources. However, it sparked an idea with my colleague and I about how we could effectively share our professional knowledge of the free public law resources with Scottish public library staff, as they are the front line of contact for those looking for access to the law. An online training session and potentially a list of relevant links with explanatory information is in the early stage of being planned by my colleague, although as ever, volume of work keeps pushing this down the to-do list!

Overall, BIALL was an excellent experience, with plenty of new friendships being formed and old friends met. I'm delighted that funding from CILIPS made this possible for me. Thanks!