

Cultural diversity in health libraries: An International Book Collection initiative

George Jerish Choothamparambil Joseph MA, MLiSc, BLiSc, BSc 

Knowledge and Library Services,
University Hospitals Coventry and
Warwickshire NHS Trust, Coventry, UK

Correspondence

George Jerish Choothamparambil Joseph,
Knowledge and Library Services,
University Hospitals Coventry and
Warwickshire NHS Trust, Coventry, UK.
Email: georgejerish5@gmail.com

Abstract

The 'International Book Collection' was established to foster cultural diversity among the staff community at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. The initiative focused on building a collection of world literature that reflects the traditional values, beliefs and cultural perspectives of the individuals working in the organisation. The key challenge encountered during the development of the collection was ensuring the true representation of the staff community within the organisation. In order to start putting the collection together, promotional strategies were designed incorporating the user's needs. In August 2024, the collection was launched as an initiative through which users can recommend books that represent their cultural heritage. It has remained active since August 2024 and, as of June 2025, a total of 32 recommendations have been received.

KEYWORDS

collection development; health disparities; learning; libraries, health care; library services; marketing and publicity

BACKGROUND

I had the privilege to introduce the International Book Collection (IBC) initiative to the staff community at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire (UHCW) NHS Trust. My cultural background as well as the collaborative experience gained from inter-departmental events that promoted diversity and equality within the organisation inspired me to launch the scheme in 2024. I was supported by the Knowledge and Library Services (KLS) team to create and develop the project following my professional transition from an academic to a health library setting.

Exploring the sources on the internet to find information on similar services within the health library settings was not helpful. Besides, the KLS team at UHCW had an extremely successful diverse collection that featured titles on health and wellbeing, LGBTQ+, and Black and ethnic

minority themes. However, the necessity for such a programme was inevitable when considering the NHS values, particularly including everyone by maximising the resources for the benefit of the whole community (NHS, n.d.). Additionally, We are the NHS: People Plan 2020/21 - action for all of us statement (2020)—'The NHS must welcome all, with a culture of belonging and trust. We must understand, encourage and celebrate diversity in all its forms' firmly upheld the central principle of the IBC.

The collection was introduced expecting to create an impact on diverse communities as UCHW NHS Trust is one of the largest acute teaching hospitals in the UK with staff from multicultural backgrounds. Moreover, the workforce Race Equality Standard report (2021) identifies that over 21% of the NHS workforce belongs to multiple ethnic groups, which significantly supports the notion of the initiative. Developing such a diverse and inclusive collection in health libraries is substantial for promoting

equitable healthcare and fostering cultural awareness among medical professionals (Brillant et al., 2022). The IBC focuses on world literature, including fiction and non-fiction books that aim to promote cultural diversity and provide a platform for staff to showcase their cultural heritage.

OBJECTIVES

A collection that is both inclusive and representative can foster diversity in the organisation along with achievements in enhanced clinical outcomes (NHS England, 2024). The development of the IBC was guided by a commitment to celebrate and promote the invaluable aspects of the native countries of each individual working in the organisation through literature from different parts of the world. Thus, the project idea was established, inviting users to recommend books by authors that represent cultural beliefs, traditional values and other fundamental aspects of life in their homeland. Considering the purposes of the initiative, necessary objectives were developed to deliver a collection with high quality. The initial aim was to foster cultural awareness and empathy among the staff working at the hospital by offering a platform for Black and ethnic minorities and immigrants to showcase their literary heritage. The fundamental aspect of the study is to challenge the stereotypical perceptions on understanding diverse communities working across UHCW, along with the goal of enhancing information literacy through a wide range of global perspectives and proposing strategies to build an effective and diverse collection in the library.

INTERNATIONAL BOOK COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

A project proposal was presented to the Library Operations Manager for approval, outlining the overarching objective. The aim is to provide access to a purposefully curated book collection exclusively from user recommendations that explore and exchange a broad spectrum of human experience from a variety of countries and cultural traditions. The proposal was approved and was included along with the ongoing general collection management processes. Although the project was a new approach from a health library perspective, the construction of the scheme did not necessitate additional funding, as it was effectively facilitated through the pre-existing book fund. In addition, the KLS team feedback on the project influenced the concept of delivering the collection with available funds. The foremost issue encountered at

the beginning of the project was ensuring the actual representation of staff. In order to achieve a true representation of staff's cultural backgrounds, it was evident that the library should gather recommendations from the users with their stories and experiences on their interested literature.

The KLS already had an effective policy in place for collection management and frequently received recommendations based on users' educational requirements. Thus, selection criteria were developed for gathering, managing and selecting books for the IBC by incorporating the expertise of the Head of Knowledge Services and the Library Operations Manager. The criteria emphasised the relevance of representing and including all ethnic communities, ensuring the collection does not dominate any specific cultural narrative. Literacy quality and excellence, diversity of perspectives and inclusion of works from various communities were the key components of the selection procedures. Availability of English translated versions of recommended titles was carefully evaluated to enhance accessibility to a wider audience and to avoid language barriers.

As initial steps, online and printed forms were created for users to recommend books for purchasing. The forms consist of required questions related to the book for the IBC, including title, author, country, genre and components of a book that connect with the values, culture and other aspects of users' home country. Prior to the official launch of the project, the forms were initially shared with the KLS team and subsequently received four book recommendations. Notably, two were already available in the library's existing collection. It was an encouragement to formally initiate the project and introduce the service to users in August 2024.

OUTREACH AND PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Acknowledging the high-paced environment and challenging schedules of health professionals working in the NHS, it was essential to design a comprehensive strategy to promote the service among the users. Consequently, a promotional plan was implemented to maximise awareness and service engagement, beginning with sharing the core details of the IBC across multiple channels. In the first place, a dedicated news item was created encompassing the purpose of the project and published on the UHCW library website with a link to the online form. Additionally, information about the IBC was featured in the UHCW staff weekly newsletter 'ThisWeek@UHCW' to ensure the new initiative and its objectives had been effectively communicated to the stakeholders.

Additionally, the UHCW KLS team included the initiative poster with their email signatures to provide visibility to the service.

Incorporating fundamental purposes of the service, further promotional efforts were developed, and it was crucial to collaborate with inter-departments for successful outreach. Therefore, active collaboration was initiated with other departments, including the People Support Team, Research and Development and Internationally Educated Nurses. As a result, the IBC was effectively promoted during the organisation and celebration of key events at UHCW, including Black History Month Celebration, International Mother Language Day and International Nurses Day. These occasions provided meaningful opportunities to engage with diverse audiences, highlighting the value of participating in the ongoing IBC development. The most essential promotional campaign occurred during the celebration of the UHCW Library Week held in the first week of October 2024. In the weeks prior to the event, over 550 books were withdrawn from the collection as part of the collection management project. Subsequently, those books were offered as complimentary items during the UHCW Library Week, with each book containing an IBC bookmark poster created for the occasion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International Book Collection—Recommendations

The recommendation forms for the IBC were distributed to the staff members through different platforms, including social media accounts and the UHCW library website and print forms kept beside the IBC display in the library. Since the launch of the initiative, a total of 33 book recommendations have been received from the users. Of those, 80% were fiction books, while the remaining 20% were non-fiction titles. Among the recommended titles, five represented multicultural aspects of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, four recommendations each illustrated the cultural backgrounds of India, Nigeria and the United States. Two recommendations each were related to Afghanistan, Australia and Portugal, while individual recommendations highlighted the presence of other countries, including Malaysia, Japan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Germany, South Africa, the Czech Republic, Syria, Ireland and Brazil.

After a careful review and analysis of the established selection criteria, 20 titles were selected for inclusion in the collection. Seven of the recommended titles could not be added to the collection; six were unavailable from the

library distributors such as Tomlinsons and Blackwell's, and one was rejected because of the unavailability of an English translated version. Four titles in the recommendations did not align with the objective of the initiative and were forwarded as general library recommendations. The seven recommendations received were part of the existing collection. Ultimately, 13 titles representing perspectives from multiple countries were purchased and added to the collection. One title was out of stock, and another is currently on order.

Selection process

While analysing the quality of books added to the collection, selection procedures played a pivotal role in the assessment. Factors such as the reputation of the author, critical reviews and responses on platforms like Goodreads and recognition through literary awards were considered during the selection process. Notable examples include 'God of Small Things' by Arundati Roy and 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' by Khaled Hosseini.

Reviews from Goodreads emphasise the depth and impact of these works on cultural and traditional aspects. For instance, Ubhaykar (2015) observes that 'God of Small Things' powerfully portrays the social constructs and historic movements of Indian cultural dynamics, while Daniel (2013) states that 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' depicts to convey Afghan history and cultural perspectives through a family narrative.

User statistics

Since the launch of the initiative, the 20 IBC titles have been collectively borrowed 27 times. A dedicated IBC display prominently placed near the library entrance further distinguishes the initiative and draws attention to its unique focus. 'Where the Crawdads Sing' by Delia Owens is the most popular selection, issued four times, while 'God of Small Things' by Arundati Roy, has been borrowed three times. Although seven recommended titles were already present in the existing collection, inclusion in the IBC collection has substantially increased their visibility. Four titles among the collection, however, have not been issued to date.

Feedback

Feedback on the initiative was collected from the UHCW staff while promoting the initiative at various events, resulting in 12 responses. When asked about their

satisfaction with the service, 25% of participants responded as very satisfied, while 67% indicated they were satisfied. Remarkably, no respondents expressed dissatisfaction. Regarding collection preferences, 60% of the participants preferred fiction, 27% favoured non-fiction titles to be added to the IBC and 13% expressed interest in poetry. In regard to the service quality, 58% rated it as good and 33% considered the initiative as excellent. Most prevalent suggestions from the feedback indicated accommodating a wider selection of books written in various native languages.

In evaluating the success of the initiative based on user engagement, it is observed that the number of recommendations received was lower than anticipated, despite the extensive promotional activities. These attempts include immense efforts to organise the International Mother Language Day event, distributing bookmark posters with giveaway books during the UHCW Library Week celebration, and sharing information regarding the collection at inter-departmental meetings to encourage word-of-mouth publicity. Moreover, the challenge to incorporate books written in users' mother language is reflected as one of the key obstacles in the selection criteria. Although the opinions were suggested through feedback, as they did not correspond with the objectives of the IBC, the approach was not pursued. Despite the limited recommendations and challenges, the initiative succeeded in achieving its core values, such as fostering cultural awareness among the staff at UHCW and providing a platform to showcase the literature heritage of their homeland.

Peer suggestions

To enhance the quality of the service, I decided to seek opinions from my professional peers. Accordingly, a semi-structured survey was designed and disseminated among the librarians working across the NHS via the Jisc Mail list. The survey consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions aimed to elicit in-depth insights and constructive feedback on improving the service. The closed-ended questions in the survey were intended to understand health librarians' perceptions on implementing such an initiative within NHS environments and to gather information regarding similar existing collection services in other NHS libraries. A concise overview of the initiative, along with the list of IBC titles added to the UHCW library collection, was included in the email sent to the participating librarians. The motive of providing this information was to ensure that the recipients comprehend the scope and purpose of the initiative. The online survey remained active for a

period of 1 month and was reshared a couple of times on the mailing list to provide participants sufficient time to respond.

Thirty-seven anonymous responses were received from the library professionals working in the NHS. Of these participants, 35% reported having over 16 years of experience working in the NHS libraries. When asked about the presence of comparable collections, 57% responded that their libraries maintain similar collections like the IBC to promote the exchange of cultural heritage and highlight cultural diversity. In contrast, 24% stated that they did not have such collections, while 19% are unsure about the existence of such initiatives within their organisations.

Regarding the collection development process, 54% of responses noted that the collections were selected based on a combination of both user and staff recommendations. Other approaches accounted for 38% of responses, with 5% relying on staff recommendations and 3% (1 respondent) depending exclusively on user inputs to curate their collection. 62% affirmed the importance when asked about the significance of similar efforts in NHS libraries, 30% were uncertain and 8% (3 respondents) did not perceive it as necessary for enriching diversity in health libraries. Participants considered increased cultural awareness and better representation of diverse perspectives as the primary benefits of the initiative.

Budget constraints appeared as the most substantial challenge, responded to by 40% of participants, followed by lack of expertise in selection and space limitations while developing such an initiative. Additionally, 7% (6 responses) expressed concerns about potential controversy or pushbacks while implementing similar projects. As the IBC was initiated with the existing funds, expert advice was requested to get suggestions on potential funding opportunities to further enhance the scheme; however, no actionable responses were received through the survey. Participants emphasised collaboration with other departments, themed displays and integration with existing library programmes as the most efficient strategies to engage users in the recommendation process. Pointedly, 78% affirmatively responded that such an initiative could contribute to the values of their NHS Trusts, while 22% remained uncertain.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The initiative holds significant potential to widely strengthen social connections within NHS Trusts. Achieving this impact, however, will highly depend on effective engagement with the stakeholders, which can be facilitated through strategic

collaborations and innovative promotional activities. While addressing the user collaboration challenges, it is essential to consider time limitations and competing priorities of professionals working in the healthcare institutions when planning and implementing collaborative projects in the NHS libraries. Satisfying user needs should remain elementary to the initiative, particularly when the objective involves challenging perceptions of diverse communities. A promising path for further development is establishing focus groups that discuss the cultural and traditional values depicted in selected books. Involving individuals from countries representing these works could foster cultural awareness and fortify understanding among colleagues.

Enhancing information literacy from a wide range of global perspectives is another vital intention of the initiative. According to CILIP (2018), information literacy is defined as the ability to think critically and make a balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to developed informed views and to engage fully with society. The objectives of the IBC align with this concept, as inclusion of new titles from a range of countries will provide the audiences with broader cultural perspectives and an opportunity to critically evaluate the values and experiences of their colleagues within the organisation.

CONCLUSION

Health libraries have increasingly adapted creative collections and services to engage users and support their well-being. Initiatives such as the IBC, which offers a unique opportunity for users to contribute to the collection and is exclusively developed based on their recommendations, represent a valuable addition to efforts that promote user well-being and information literacy. In the context of the evolving healthcare sector, the creation of inclusive platforms that enable sharing and appreciating individual values is necessary for nurturing a cohesive and empathetic society. The existence of the IBC stands as a meaningful contribution to this goal, demonstrating the relevance of collaboration and mutual support in the wider healthcare communities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

George Jerish Choothamparambil Joseph  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1373-1219>

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