

---

## **IASL Conferences: An Evaluation of the Attendance Pattern of Participants 1998-2010**

**Paulette Stewart, Lecturer**

*Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica*

*Telephone: +1876 891 5640, Fax +1876 970 4903*

*E-mail: [Paulette.stewart@uwimona.edu.jm](mailto:Paulette.stewart@uwimona.edu.jm)*

---

*There are many reasons for librarians' attendance at professional conferences and equally many why their attendance is either regular or irregular. This research was conducted to find out the push and pull factors that affected members' attendance at annual conferences from 1998-2010. It also sought to ascertain whether virtual conferences would be accepted as an alternative to face-to-face conferences. A quantitative approach was used to conduct the research. Four hundred-fifty five members were randomly selected as the sample. Eighty-eight (88) responded. The findings revealed that participants attended mainly for professional development and only a very small number attended regularly over the 13 years. The main reason identified for the irregular attendance was the geographic location. A slight majority mentioned that they would recommend virtual conferences although there were disadvantages. Among the recommendations was the need for IASL to group countries by geographical regions to give members a better opportunity to attend more regularly.*

### **Introduction**

One of the main activities of library associations is the holding of conferences yearly or bi-annually to facilitate professional development of librarians in their country, region or in the international community. Some of these associations are the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the American Library Association, (ALA), the Australian School Library Association (ASLA), the Association of Caribbean University Research and Libraries (ACURIL) and the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL).

Unlike the other Associations, IFLA focuses on all types of information units including school libraries and 'call for papers' are sent out separately to each sub-division by the head of the respective information units. Librarians may attend sessions that relate directly to the information unit in which they are employed.

There are also library conferences that have a subject focus, for example in 2010 the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) hosted a Cataloguing and

Indexing Group Conference titled “Every Cloud has a Silver Lining? Changes in Cataloguing in ‘Interesting Times’”. These subject-related conferences aim to offer in-depth presentations and discussions within constituent groups, thereby offering opportunities for interaction with experts in the field, training and professional growth and peer contact that leads to collegial interaction and research (Tomaszewski & Macdonald, 2009).

The International Association of School Librarianship which began in the Caribbean island, Jamaica, in 1972, appears to be the only international library association that caters to school library professionals exclusively. The population of IASL is worldwide and comprises school librarians, teachers, library advisers, consultants, educational administrators, and others who are responsible for library and information services in schools. The membership also includes professors and instructors in universities and colleges where there are programs for school librarians, and students who are undertaking such programs (IASL, 2012, para.1). The membership is divided into three Zones namely Zone A, Zone B and Zone C. A country is placed in a particular Zone because of the published gross national product indexes for that country. The IASL flagship activity is its annual conference which is held in the country that successfully wins the proposal to host the conference for that particular year. The Table below shows the countries by Zones.

**Table 1: Countries by Zones**

Zone 1	Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Belgium, Brunei, Canada, China/Hong Kong, China/Macao, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Qatar, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Kingdom, UK/Bermuda, UK/British Virgin Islands, UK/Cayman, UK/England, UK/Gibraltar, UK/Falkland, UK/North Ireland, UK/Scotland, UK/Wales, United Arab Emirates, USA, USA/Virgin Islands
Zone B	Algeria, Angola, Antigua & Barbuda, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Cook Islands (New Zealand), Costa Rica, Croatia, Czech Republic, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Estonia, France/French Guinea, France/French Polynesia, France/Guadeloupe, France/Martinique, France/New Caledonia, France/Reunion, France/St. Pierre & Miquelon, Gabon, Grenada, Hungary, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, Lithuania, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia (USA), Nauru, Neth. Antilles, Oman, Panama, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russia, Seychelles, Slovakia, South Africa, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UK/Anguilla, UK/Montserrat, UK/Saint Helena, UK/Turks and Caicos, Uruguay, USA/American Samoa, USA/Guam, USA/Northern Marianas, USA/Palau, USA/Puerto Rico, Venezuela.
Zone 3	Afghanistan, Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina., Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Rep, Chad, China, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (Australia), Colombia, Comoros Islands, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Dem Rep of Congo,

	Djibouti, East Timor, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Fiji, France/Wallis et Futuna, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lesotho, Liberia, Macedonia, Madagascar, Malawi, Maldives, Mali, Myanmar, Marshall Islands (USA), Mauritania, Moldova, Mongolia, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Niue, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Philippines, Rwanda, Samoa, Sao Tome/Principe, Senegal, Serbia/Montenegro, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Surinam, Swaziland, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Vietnam, West Bank/Gaza Strip, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe
--	---

Source: [http://iasl-online.mlanet.org/member\\_info.htm](http://iasl-online.mlanet.org/member_info.htm)

In an article titled ‘Professional Networks and Development’ the writer notes that regular attendance at annual conferences by professionals is likely to reap greater, long term benefits than most spasmodic, ad hoc, participation. Conference attendance satisfies the demand for sustained professional development of librarians who work in academic environments across the world. The benefits include exposure to best practices, innovations, visits to various libraries and networking so that after the conference librarians can continue to share ideas and resources. Tomaszewski and Macdonald (2009) further stated that “conferences also provide opportunities to identify trends in collection development, attend workshops, connect with vendors and network” (p. 4).

In addition to professional activities, IASL’s annual conferences include an awards ceremony, auctions and a conference dinner that cater for the social aspects of the lives of participants. Although the benefits gained from attending IASL conferences are very meaningful, some participants attend only once or a few times while not many attend frequently.

It is against this background that the findings of an examination of the attendance pattern of conference participants in recent years, 1998-2010, can help to guide the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) in the area of strategic decisions relating to planning, programming and organizing its future conferences to ensure that participants’ interest remain vibrant, their attendance constant and they are able to attract new attendees.

This research therefore sets out to gather data from IASL members who attended conferences during the period 1998 to 2010 to determine what factors influenced their attendance and to ascertain why their attendance pattern was regular or irregular. The researcher also sought to find out whether virtual conferences should be considered as an option or should be alternated with the face-to-face conferences. Recommendations have been made that should lessen the number of challenges participants encounter in their effort to attend IASL annual conferences.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Factors that motivate participants to attend conferences**

#### *Professional development*

Vega and Connell (2007) conducted a survey among 794 librarians mainly from academic and public libraries in the USA to determine what motivated these librarians to attend conferences. The result of this study showed that the main reason respondents attended conferences was to achieve professional rejuvenation (56%). This finding was associated with age: the older the librarian, the higher he or she would rate the need to stay updated in librarianship. The researchers also ascertained from the results that men, when compared to women, ranked rejuvenation as less important and respondents who visited more conferences tended to rate rejuvenation as more important.

The result of a pilot study that was conducted among 198 conference attendees of the Fifth Annual Conference of Asia Pacific Tourism Association by Ngamson and Beck in 1999 (2000) to determine conference motivation, facilitators and inhibitors that influence association members in attending international conferences support the findings of Vega and Connell (2007). They also discovered that one of the six factors that motivated association members to attend international conferences is professional development (105). Severt et al (2006) also conducted a study to assess the motivation, performance evaluation, and behavioral intentions among 400 attendees at a regional conference hosted by a national trade association in a regional conference setting (402). Respondents were asked to evaluate the conference performance using a 5-point Likert scale, with "1" indicating poor and "5" excellent. The mean and standard deviation of the evaluation show that the two highest performances were reported for educational purposes and educational information at exhibits (404). The result of Rittichainuwat, Beck and Lalopa (2001 study on Understanding Motivations, Inhibitors, and Facilitators of Association Members in Attending International Conferences was consistent with that of Severt (2006) in that the result showed that one of the top five motivating factors for attending a conference was education (50).

Davis mentioned that she always brought back a notebook of new ideas and new ways of seeing things (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para.3). She saw this as a way of filling in the gaps left by her MLS program and of keeping her professional training on the cutting edge. In addition to this, Davis stated that she was motivated to attend because of the training programs offered at pre-conference sessions. A survey on library conference attendance conducted by Adomi, Alakpodia & Akporhonorinin (2006), was reported by Eke (2011, p. 3, 4). The survey result showed that most of the Information Specialist professionals in Nigeria attend conferences in order to keep up-to-date with developments in the profession.

Steinhauser (2011) in listing five of her top reasons for going to library conferences listed the third reason as professional development. She commented that there is nothing like a library conference for great professional development. She listed the speakers and authors who gave great presentations and commented that the great presentation done by librarians across the country made it "professional development in heaven". Professional development is one of Alaimo's (2004) top six reasons for attending conferences. She pointed out that she selected breakout sessions that exposed her to new technology issues of which she has limited knowledge.

The Evaluation & Assessment Committee of the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) conducted a survey in 2008 among 515 librarians to get feedback on issues related to conference attendance. One of the aims of this study was to get feedback on related conference

attendance. The results showed that professional development was listed as one of the factors indicated by participants (North American Serials Interest Group [NASIG], 2008, para. 1)

### ***Networking opportunities***

Vega and Connell (2007) conducted research which showed that forty percent (40%) of the respondents attended conferences because of networking. Derik (2010), a blogger on *Group Posts*, is motivated by the socializing and networking opportunity. The NASIG research result showed a 33.3 rating (rank 3 out of 14) which indicated that networking was one of the factors that influenced the attendance of these participants' at conferences (para.1).

### ***Presenting a paper or a poster***

Vega and Connell (2007) discovered from their research that poster sessions and roundtables appealed to academic librarians because of the opportunities for presentations and publishing that they present. Giving a presentation or doing a poster session was rated at 2.61 in the NASIG 2008 research. This is ranked 12 out of 14. Ellie was also motivated by this factor because being a speaker has definitely made the conference more interesting, engaging, and rewarding experience for her (cited in Group Posts 2010, para. 4).

### ***Making acquaintances and new friends***

Davis was also able to make acquaintances with creative librarians, meet new colleagues and renew friendship (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para.3). Steinhauser (2011) described her first reason for attending library conferences as “Good friends and good fun, along with good ideas” (p. 1). She mentioned this by recalling getting assistance from her room mates, assistance that “only other librarians can offer. They can help you think through a problem or idea” (p. 1). Alaimo (2004) saw this as peer-to-peer learning. She mentioned that, “just by listening to her peers helped to generate new ideas and activate her sense of what is possible” (p. 1). She commented on a conversation that alerted her to subscribe to the School Library Journal through her periodical budget rather than her personal funds and to use it for collection development and personal growth. Badman mentioned that “I always get excited to see friends again and I always come back from it with new friends ...the real draw is just hanging out with other people in the field and those connections lead to places, be it personally or professional” (cited in Group Posts,2010, para. 1). Ellie, another blogger on the same site was motivated because she always walked away with new friends and new ideas and the fact that the library conferences that she has attended included all local librarians that she knew, or knew someone who knew nearly everyone there (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para. 2, 3).

### ***Financial assistance***

Davis, in her blog, (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para.3) added that pre-conferences are costly but the conference that she attends offers a healthy set of travel awards and stipends to help offset the cost burden. Support from employer was also rated highly, (second position) in the NASIG 2008 research as 3.45 of the participants indicated that this was the factor that influence their conference attendance (para. 5).

### ***Theme of the conference***

The theme of conferences with their related strands is also a push factor. Of interest to Badman was the theme of conferences. He commented that the focus of the conference theme helped increase the social interaction and the informational content, as did the participatory pre-conference scheduling where attendees suggested topics ahead of time on a wiki. In this scenario everyone was encouraged to participate and everyone was there because the specific theme was of interest to them (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para. 1, 2). Mardis (2009) confirmed that information skills and literacy were the most frequent research paper topics during 1998-2009. This was followed by information technology and reading and reading promotion. Some of the least presented topics were principal support, censorship and national surveys (12). Over these years there were no presentations on scientific and professional communication and information storage and retrieval. This indicated to some extent what the interests of participants were during those years and the efforts put in by conference organizers to cater to their interests.

### ***Geographic Location***

Each year the IASL conference is held in one of its Zones. However, wherever it is held, it is expected that members from every zone will attend. Information from the IASL website indicates that from 1998 and 2010 a period of thirteen years IASL conferences have been held in ten (10) Zone A countries, two (2) Zone B countries and one (1) in Zone C countries (IASL, 2012). Since IASL members are located all over the globe it is expected that every year many participants have to travel great distances to attend these conferences. Davis indicated that geographic location of the conference was a consideration, in that her library conference was held at the same venue every year so it was easy to plan for lodging and dining (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para.4). In the NASIG research, geographic location was also a factor that influenced conference attendance. This ranked 7 out of 14 with a 2.90 rating (2008).

### ***Challenges that prevents regular attendance at library conferences***

#### ***Geographical location***

Leeder admitted that his attendance at library conferences has become irregular not from lack of interest but largely because of the inability to travel to the country where it was being held. He mentioned that travelling is time consuming and expensive usually because of the distance from where he lives to the conference site (cited in Group Posts, 2010, para. 1). In the NASIG (2008) research report, geographic location (2.94 rating) was also cited as a challenge. This was ranked 4 out of 12 with one being the lowest score. The problem with geographic location was also discovered by Ngamson and Beck (2000) in their research. The participants in this research mentioned that this was one of the criteria used by them to decide whether or not to participate in an international conference (106).

#### ***Lack of funding***

According to Eke (2011) the cost to participate had an impact on conference attendance. This cost includes cost of registration, transportation, accommodation and food. This cost could be alleviated by sponsorship but Eke (2011) commented that the lack of sponsorship discouraged librarians from attending conferences. Although there were sponsorships from institutions, Eke (2006) pointed out that there was competition among librarians for these because they were

insufficient. As such he recommended that these sponsorships should come from the institutions where these librarians serve.

Eke (2011) highlighted the survey conducted by Rotkin in 2008 which reported on a professional development fund survey. Of those responding, almost three-quarters (73%) said they had spent money out of pocket to support attendance at professional meetings or for other professional development activities. Almost two-thirds (64%) said they had decided not to attend otherwise important, or appropriate conferences or not to pursue other job-related professional development opportunities, because of the lack of sufficient professional development funding. He further stated that it was difficult to make a good argument for spending either the library's money or his money on more than two conferences per year. Insufficient support from employer (3.20 rating) was the number one factor that the NASIG 2008 research participants indicated as a reason for not attending conferences.

### ***Rejection of Submitted Papers***

Eke (2011) pointed out that papers for NLA conference are accepted primarily because of quality. However, when some papers are rejected and others are accepted, those whose papers were rejected may not wish to attend the conference. For some librarians this does not seem to be a serious problem. The NASIG research reported that "not giving a presentation or "not doing a poster session" (2.12) was rated last on the list of reasons for not attending.

### ***Other challenges***

Challenges	Rating	Rank
Travel	3.12	2 out of 12
Hotel costs	2.95	3 out of 12
Conference dates	2.90	5 out of 12),
Personal reasons/conflicts	2.89	6 out of 12
Registration fee	2.75	7 out of 12
Programs offered	2.59	8 out of 12
Not required by employer to attend	2.35	10 out of 12
Not serving as an officer or committee member	2.19	11 out of 12

The result of Mair and Thompson (2009) research on The UK association Conference Attendance Decision-making Process indicated other challenges such as, time and convenience (7. 89%). For example, date clashes with family holiday or another conference. They also discovered that health and security were concerns for 7.4% of its respondents (np).

### ***Virtual conference option***

In a technologically driven environment with librarians who possess technical skills and access to the Internet, the holding, of virtual conferences should be a viable option. The ever increasing harsh economic climate is also another factor that makes one consider the possibility of virtual conferences as a means of increasing attendance at conferences.

In the NASIG (2008) survey, one of the objectives was to determine the level of interest in offering some or all conference activities online. It was discovered that 69.2% of the

participants was not convinced that an online only conference was a suitable alternative to an in-person conference. A smaller number (20.2%) indicated virtual conferences could be considered if travel costs rose significantly and just 10.6% pointed out that it was a good idea regardless of travel costs.

Participants lamented that the in-person networking which is a benefit derived from the face face-to-face conference would be lost in the on-line environment. However some expressed the view that an online conference would be better than nothing, but should only be used as a last resort. The majority of participants (58.2%) were uncertain if they would be willing to participate in an online-only conference. Almost a quarter (23.3%) indicated they would participate, while 18.4% said that they would not.

Responses were sought from participants about having selected conference programs on webcast. This idea was favourably received by 55.4%. A significant number (39.2%) were uncertain about the option but only a small number (5.4%) were opposed. The support for paying a special fee for online content was somewhat less well received. Just 34.6% were in favor, while 20.7% opposed and 44.7% were uncertain. Participants conceded that virtual conferences could be an important benefit for those who are unable to attend face-to-face annual conferences.

### **Research objectives**

The research objectives that guided the study therefore are to:

1. Determine what factors motivate participants to attend IASL conferences.
2. Ascertain why IASL members attend conferences regularly.
3. Identify the challenges that prevent IASL members from attending the IASL conferences regularly.
4. Investigate if virtual conferences should be considered as an option to face-to-face conferences

## **Methodology**

The survey method was employed to gather the data because it is useful in facilitating the collection of a large amounts of data from a large population in a relatively short time. The data collection instrument was an electronic questionnaire that consisted of ten items one of which was open ended. Question 4, “What made you attend your first conference during the period 1998-2010 and question 9. “If you did not recommend virtual conference, give your reason(s), were the two open-ended questions. These questions allowed participants the opportunity to express their views on the question asked. The questions were pretested to identify items that were likely to be misunderstood; would not obtain the information that was being sought, or were poorly constructed. After this exercise, the questionnaire was edited for clarity. The number in the population was two thousand one hundred twenty (2,120) and was taken from the conference participants’ lists of 1998-2010 except for 1998-2002 and 2009 which were unavailable. Although the e-mail addresses were not on the lists from 1998-2002, participants who attended conferences during this period would have been included because they attended one or more other IASL conferences. There was a sample bias towards participants that attended the conference sessions over the last twelve years and whose e-mail addresses have not changed within the same period. The researcher however believes that while the sample is biased and



small, the objectives of the research were not compromised as the data analysed remain relevant in relation to the population it represents.

### ***Limitation***

The researcher did not explore the option of the geographical proximity of the IFLA and the IASL conferences and the effect this had on the conference attendance pattern of the IASL members.

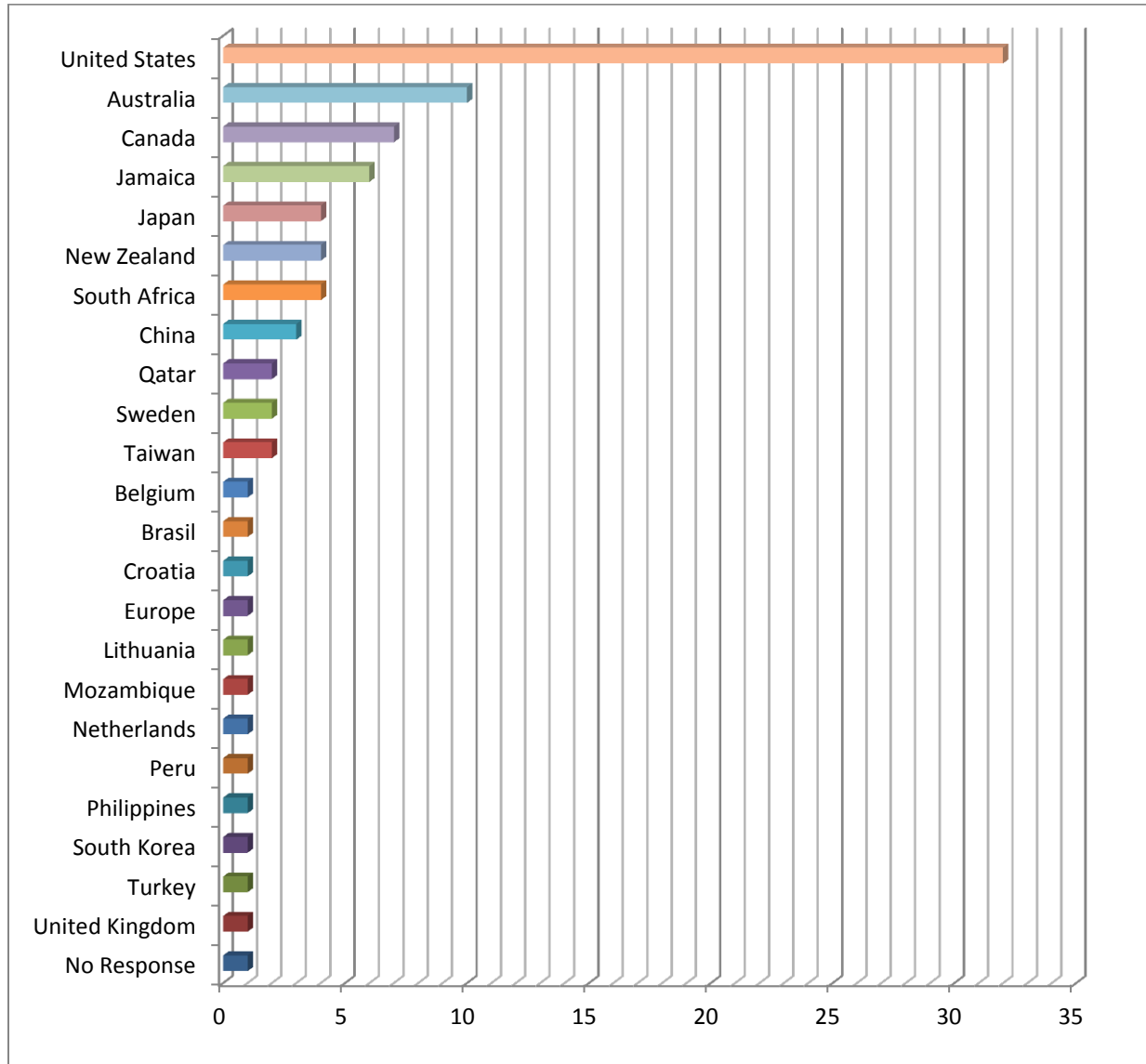
The number of conference sessions held from 1998-2010 is thirteen (13). The average number of participants for each year was two hundred (200). Simple random sampling was used to select thirty five (35) participants from each year, making a total of four hundred and fifty-five (455). Participants from the host country outnumbered the other participants; therefore to ensure that there was a balance in the selection of participants, not all of these participants were included in the sample frame. All the participants from Zones B and C were selected from the lists because they were small in numbers.

The questionnaires were e-mailed using Survey Monkey. A letter ensuring confidentiality, time frame for the completion and submission of the questionnaire accompanied the request for participation. The data collection period was one month. Eighty eight of the sample selected responded and 93 e-mails were returned showing that these members' e-mail address no longer existed.

### **Analyses and Findings**

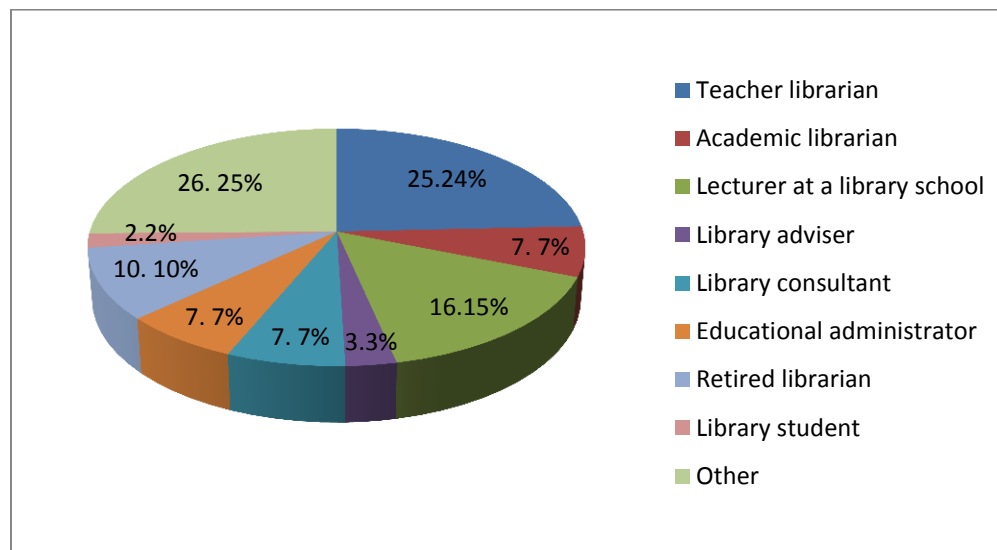
The data collected were analyzed according to the research objectives. The key findings revealed data on the number of participants by countries; job titles of participants; conference participants' attendance from 1998-2010; participants' attendance pattern; reasons for attending the first conference; reasons for attendance and non-attendance at the annual conferences and thoughts on the virtual conferences.

*Figure 1: Number of Participants by Countries*



The data indicated that the majority of participants who responded are from North America which is classified as Zone A according to IASL. The USA had the highest number of participants and was followed by Australia, Canada and the European Countries. In fifth position is Jamaica which has always had at least two representatives at every IASL conference. The conference participant lists from 1998 and 2010 show that USA and Canada have always had a high number of participants attending the conferences.

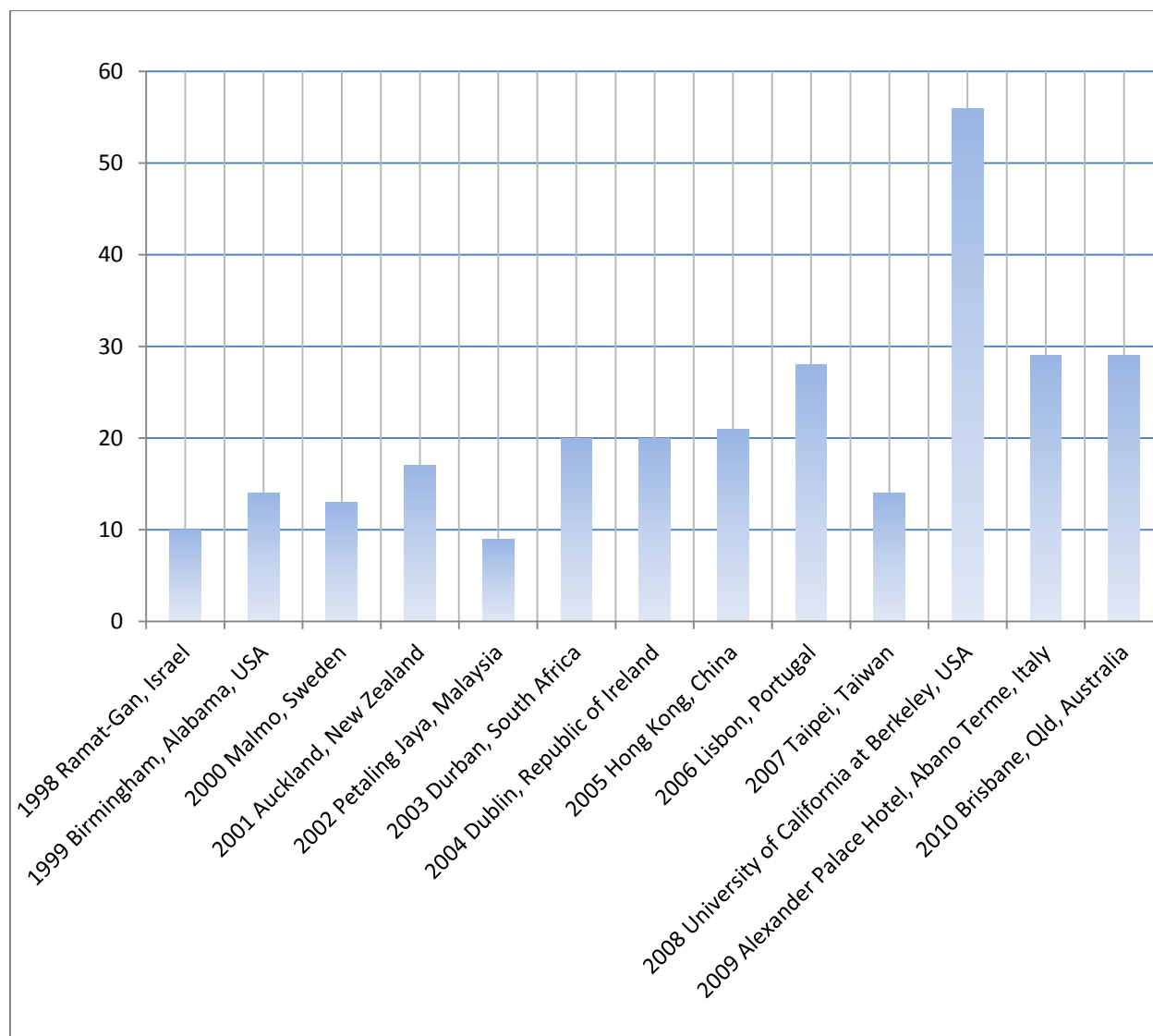
**Figure 2: Job Title of Participants during the period 1998-2010**



The findings indicated that a wide cross-section of library professionals attended these conferences. Figure 2 shows that 25.4% of the participants were teacher librarians, 7.7% were academic librarians, and 16.5% were lecturers in library schools and retired librarians (10.1%) were also participants as well as 2.3% public librarians. Other job titles listed under others were: professors in library schools (8%), library administrators (4.4%), editor (1.1%) senior library clerk (1.1%), and publisher 1.1% and library software provider (1.1%).

It is expected that the majority of participants were school and academic librarians and professors of library schools. In some countries the public library is in charge of school libraries and this could be the reason for the attendance of the public librarians. Editors of journals were obviously present to identify potential publications. The library software provider was likely to have been one of the vendors.

**Figure 3: Conferences participants' attendance from 1998-2010**



Participants were given a list of the conferences held in 1998 to 2010 to select the years that they attended these conferences. The data shown in Figure 3 illustrates that fifty-six (56) of the participants attended the 2008 conference in California USA. This is followed by twenty (28) who attended the conferences in Padova, Italy and Lisbon Portugal. The data also indicated that the United States of America attracted more participants in these years. It is possible that the members found it easier to travel to USA or to countries in Europe. Countries such as Australia,

China and South Africa may have experienced high attendance because participants may have put out special effort to attend as these are countries they would not normally visit.

The data also show an imbalance in where the conferences were held from 1998-2010. Ten (10) conferences were held in Zone A, two (2) in Zone B and one (1) in Zone C. It must be noted however, that IASL does not dictate where conferences are held. The host country is decided by a bidding process. Based on the findings it appears that countries in Zone A are most times seen by the IASL Board as the most appropriate bidder.

### ***Participants' attendance pattern***

To determine the attendance pattern, participants were asked to select the years they attended IASL conferences during the period 1998-2010. Participants were considered to have attended regularly if they had missed a maximum of two years since their first conference. Those who were categorized as irregular attendees were those who had not attended a conference at least three to five years in between conferences. Examples of these are shown below.

***Table 2: Regular attendance pattern of four participants***

Year	Venue	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 9	Participant 16
1998	Ramat-Gan, Israel	√	√	√	√
1999	Alabama, USA			√	
2000	Malmo, Sweden	√		√	
2001	Auckland, Australia	√	√	√	√
2002	Petaling Jaya Malaysia	√	√	√	√
2003	Durban, South Africa			√	√
2004	Dublin, Republic of Ireland	√	√	√	√
2005	Hong Kong, China		√	√	√
2006	Lisbon, Portugal	√	√	√	√
2007	Taipei, Taiwan		√	√	√
2008	Berkeley, USA	√	√	√	√
2009	Alban Terme, Italy	√	√	√	√
2010	Brisbane, Australia	√	√	√	

Table 2. indicates four participants who are considered to have attended regularly. The data was closely observed and it was noted that fourteen 18% (20) participants attended regularly since their first conference. The data also showed that geographic location was not a problem for

those who attended regularly because they were willing to attend conferences despite the locations.

***Table 3: Irregular attendance pattern of eight participants***

Year	Venue	Partici- pant 1	Partici- pant 10	Partici- pant 11	Partici- pant 34	Partici- pant 36	Partici- pant 38	Partici- pant 39	Partici- pant 65
1998	Ramat-Gan Israel								√
1999	Alabama, USA						√		
2000	Malmo, Sweden	√				√			
2001	Auckland, Australia				√				
2002	PetalingJaya Malaysia						√		
2003	Durban, South Africa		√	√		√			√
2004	Dublin, Republic of Ireland		√	√					
2005	Hong Kong, China	√						√	
2006	Lisbon, Portugal				√	√			
2007	Taipei, Taiwan							√	
2008	Berkeley, USA	√	√	√	√	√	√		
2009	Alban Terme, Italy	√							√
2010	Brisbane, Australia		√	√				√	

Table 3. indicates the examples of irregular attendance. The data shows that 56% of the participants attended irregularly. There was no attendance pattern that could be determined for thirty (30) participants who attended only one conference, nineteen (19) of whom attended the conference in USA (Berkeley) in 2008.

These findings should be of great interest to the IASL Board because having more new participants than regular participants at each conference could threaten the continuity of certain objectives of IASL. Participants who did not attend regularly would not have developed a bond within the Association. This could also affect the election of members who are required to hold various positions in IASL as they would likely possess limited knowledge of the background and functions of the Association.

### *Reasons for attending the first conference*

**Table 4: Participants' reasons for attending first conference**

<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Reasons for attending first conference</i>
26	Geographic location
12	Poster or paper presentation was accepted
10	Encouraged by someone
7	Professional development
6	Broader network opportunities
6	On the IASL organizing committee
5	Date of the conference
5	Received funding
4	Had friends residing in the area where the conference was held – did not to pay hotel accommodation
3	It was held in Israel – a great way to see the country
2	Was impressed by the advertisement
2	Affordability
2	Interested in IASL
1	Was chosen by the institution where I worked to attend
1	Had activities to do at the conference
1	It's the appropriate group to join
1	Long time involvement in IASL
1	Meet researcher
1	Wanted to become an active member

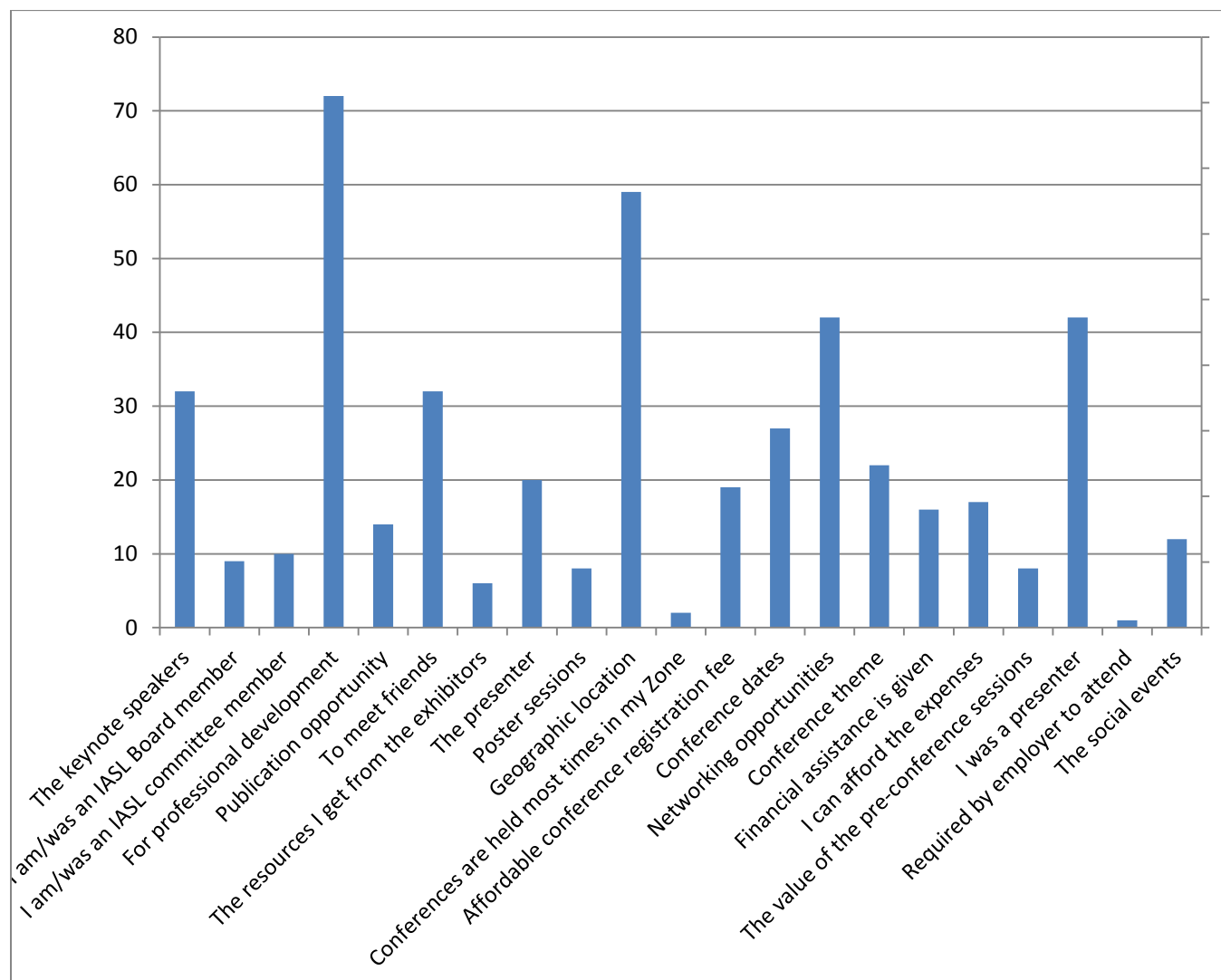
The data shown in Table 4. highlight the reasons why these participants attended their first conference between 1998 and 2010. As can be seen 29.6% (26) attended their first conference because it was held at a location near to where they reside. This is followed by 12 or 13.6% of the participants whose reason was the acceptance of their paper or poster for presentation. Of significant interest is the third highest ranking reason mentioned by 10 or 11.4% of the participants who stated that they attended the first IASL conference because they were encouraged to do so by another IASL member. Professional development was ranked fourth as the reason for attending the first conference.

In the literature review Vega and Connell (2007), Davis (cited in Group Posts, 2010), Adomi, Alakpodia & Akporhonorin (2006) indicated that the majority of library association members attended conferences mostly for professional development. However this finding shows that geographic location is the major reason for first time attendees. The possible reason for this is that these members attended because they could afford the cost of the conference because it was in their location.

### *Motivating factors for attending conferences*

In order to determine the factors that motivated conference attendees, a number of options were given. They were also asked to indicate any other factors that were not included. Figure 4 shows how participants responded.

**Figure: 4 Factors that motivate members to attend conferences**



The data illustrated in Figure 4 show that seventy-two (72) of the participants attended IASL conference because of professional development. This is followed by fifty-nine (59) who declared that the geographic location was the reason they attend the IASL conferences. Both networking and being a presenter were indicated by forty-two (42) as a motivating factor. Meeting friends and the keynote speakers was each selected by thirty-two (32) of the participants. The dates the conferences were held was one of the factors considered as this was indicated by twenty-seven (27) participants followed by the presenters with twenty (20). The



ability to afford the expenses that the conferences incurred was indicated by seventeen (17) of the participants and financial assistance given shown by sixteen (16) participants. The opportunity to publish was selected by fourteen (14) participants.

### ***Professional development***

The majority of participants attended IASL conferences for professional development a finding which is similar to that of Vega and Connell (2007), Eke (2009), Adomi, Alakpoda & Akporhonorin (2006) and Steinhauser (2011). This finding is an indication that IASL has been providing good quality professional development for its members on a yearly basis. This is important because participants will remain on the cutting-edge and will be able to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. In addition to this they will be able to provide up-to-date library instructions in library schools and similarly those who manage school libraries will always have something new to add to their curriculum.

### ***Networking***

Networking is the second reason for attending conferences. This is an indication that these participants found networking important because of the professional exchange that they continue to maintain after the conferences have ended.

### ***Keynote speakers***

Literature was not found regarding the impact of keynote speakers on conference attendance; however it is reasonable to conclude that IASL has had excellent keynote speakers over the period 1998-2010. It would appear that the selection of the keynote speaker is therefore very important and host countries should find this data useful.

### ***Presentation of paper and publishing opportunities***

This finding is consistent with the research findings of NASIG (2008), Davis (cited in group Posts, 2010) and Steinhauser (2011) which showed that many of these attendees were working in academic libraries where they were faced with the requirement to “publish or perish”. These participants will therefore grasp every opportunity to have their papers published

### ***Meeting friends***

Meeting friends was selected above items such as ‘affordable conference registration fees’, ‘presenters’, and ‘I am an IASL member’. This is a clear indication to IASL that these conferences provided a venue for collegiality and was cherished greatly by members. This has helped the researcher to understand why networking was given as the main reason for attending a library conference in Vega and Connell (2007) research. It is apparent that the relationships formed were maintained through networking. This finding is supported by Davis who said that renewed friendship was one of the reasons he attend conferences (cited in Group Posts, 2010).

As seen in Eke (2006) research result, many of the participants who attended conferences had financial difficulties. This is a clear indication that these participants found mean of obtaining the funds to attend the conferences. This could have stemmed from the fact that these

members are dedicated to IASL as one participant in commenting on this question said; “basic concern for IASL” was the reason for attending IASL conferences.

### ***Conference themes***

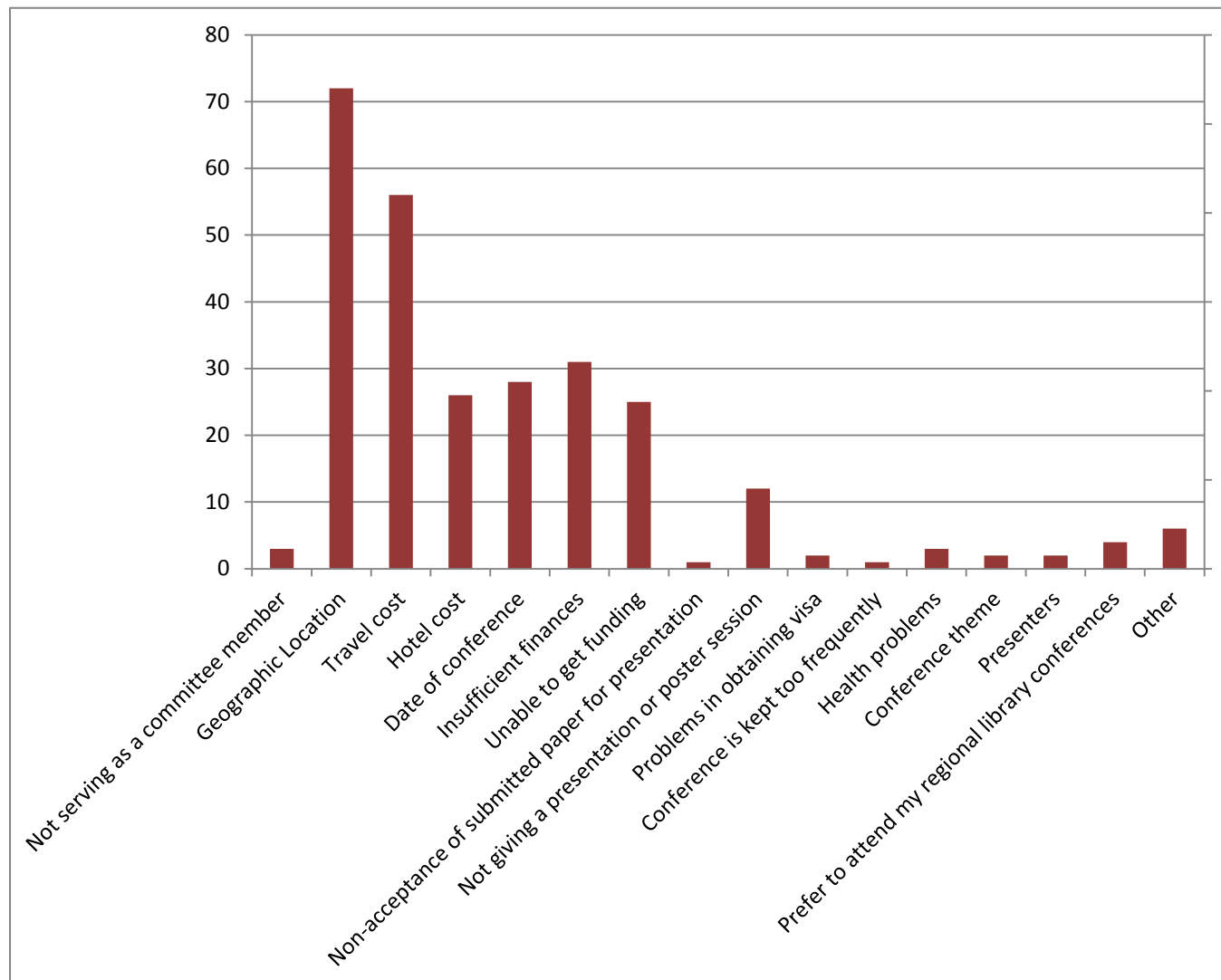
It does appear that the conference themes play a significant role in getting members to attend conferences. Mardis (2011) findings on conference themes indicated that in 2009, the theme was: “World Class Learning and Literacy through School Libraries”. That year 56% of the participants presented papers on information skills and literacy. This data should alert IASL of the importance of guiding host countries in the selection of conference themes that will be a pull factor to the conferences. This result also suggests that the host countries need to be aware of its members’ immediate professional development needs and select a theme that will meet this need.

The other reasons given for conference attendance are also worthwhile as IASL should take note of them with a view to including them when planning their conference programs. One such example is the social events to which 16.5% (13) of the participants look forward when they attend an IASL conference. Not to be overlooked is the 9.1% (8) participants who value the pre-conferences. The small percentage could stem from the fact that most of the conference participants do not attend pre-conferences and cannot attest to their value.

### ***Reasons participants did not attend a conference***

To determine the attendance pattern of these participants, they were asked to check the reasons they did not attend a conference. Figure 5 shows that 70% (56) of the participants checked travel cost as the number one factor why they have not attended a conference. This was followed by geographic location 81.8% (72), insufficient finances 39.2% (31) of the participants, conference dates 35.4% (28), and unable to get funding 31.6 % (25) of the participants. The cost of hotel accommodation was indicated by 32.9% (26) of the participants, and not giving a presentation (paper or poster) was also a negative factor.

**Figure 5: Reasons participants have not attended all conferences from 1998-2010**



The reasons given by participants are similar to those mentioned in the literature review (Eke 2006). Figure 5 gives an overview of these reasons. The geographic location was ranked first as the factor why participants did not attend conferences followed by the travel cost. The distant participants lived from the country in which the conference was held was dependent on where the participants lived. A close look at the countries where the conferences were held from 1998 to 2010 shows that all except two of the conferences were held outside of the USA. These were mostly held in Asia and in few cases Europe. It was likely that the members of IASL were concentrated in the Americas, Canada and Europe and therefore, for most of them the distance was far.

### *Cost affiliated with conference*

The findings also show that many IASL members were not able to afford the cost to attend these conferences and that funding was sought but was not achieved. When these two findings were combined it showed that 74.5% (56) participants had difficulty attending because of lack of funds. These findings should be of great concern to the IASL Board. They need to initiate some strategies that will make attendance to the IASL conference more affordable to its members. Members who were likely to afford the airfare found a problem with the high cost of the hotel accommodation as this is mentioned by 36.6 (26) participants as a deterring factor. One participant mentioned that attendance at a regional conference was preferred because it was more cost effective. There is no doubt that the cost to attend the international conference was a major challenge for many would be attendees.

### *Other reasons*

Participants were asked to indicate other responses other than those given by the researcher. The summary of these other responses showed that some of these members had a choice of conferences and they selected the ones that were more appealing and the ones that were held their location because they were more cost effective. There was the problem of the inability to obtain permission from employer to attend and retired members had financial problems. It was evident that some of these participants 15.2% (12) did not attend because they were not giving a paper or poster presentation, 2.5% (2) did not like the conference theme and 2.5% (2), were not attracted by the presenters. The date of the conference was a concern by 39.2% (28) of the participants. The other reasons such as health problems 3.8% (3) and problem in getting visa 1.3% (1) were also reasons that affected regular attendance at IASL conferences.). One participant mentioned that non-attendance was due to poor leadership in the organization and the un-wise use of funds.

These reasons strengthen the point that cost plays an important factor in conference attendance. The problem with the dates of the conference was supported by Eke (2006) research findings. Based on these findings IASL will have to ensure that at all times its conferences put forward an attractive package that will encourage members to make it their first choice. In cases where IASL members have difficulty in getting permission to attend, IASL Board should be able to intervene on the member's behalf. The leadership quality and the use of IASL funds mentioned by one of the participants could be a perception. It is recommended that rather than ceasing to attend conference this participant could seek audience with the IASL Board to clarify the perception. The personal reasons such as health and visa problem are beyond the control of IASL.

It should be noted that it is difficult to select a time convenient to everyone each year to host the conference because IASL members reside across the globe and the academic holidays and seasons of the year do not occur at the same time across the Zones. The host countries in most cases selected the summer season in their country when participants are likely to feel comfortable. If the summer is too hot as in the case with the 2012 conference in Qatar, a time that is comfortable to the participants was selected. Host countries also take into consideration the vacation period for schools so that librarians can attend the conference. However, this does not always work. A typical example was the conference in Australia in 2010 in Australia. It was held at the end of October to the first week in November when schools were not on vacation in

other countries. In this instance members could only attend if they were able to get leave from work. This is a problem that is difficult to solve, therefore, members who are able to attend will have to support the conferences when the date becomes an issue.

### *The possibility of virtual conference*

Participants were asked if they would recommend that IASL hold virtual conferences. To this question 59.1% (52) responded positively and 40.9% (36) replied negatively. This is an indication that most of the participants would like to have virtual conferences. This means that some of the participants would be willing to forgo meeting their friends face-to-face in order to reduce the cost of attending the conference. Of those who gave a positive response to having virtual conferences 50% (27) said that they should be held annually and 50% (27) said bi-annually. The others who did not indicate annually or bi-annually stated that the virtual conferences should be held two times per year on a smaller scale. Another was unsure as to how often it should be held. Yet another suggested that the virtual and the face-to-face could be held simultaneously.

The data from those who opposed virtual conference showed that 95% of the participants commented on the lack of social interaction that this type of conference would create. Participants had varied reasons which had to do with interaction such as “the charm of IASL conferences are the locations”, “much better to deal with live presentation”, “you can mingle/socialize before and after at the venue”. One participant mentioned that “virtual conference does not afford collegiality that the face-to-face affords.”

There is also the concept of a virtual conference taking away the ‘international flavor and culture’ of the host countries. One participant explained that experiencing the culture of the country and assisting the schools were important. Another mentioned that virtual conferences “defeat the purpose of an international association providing opportunities to meet face-to-face, providing regional IASL conferences, to share work together collaboratively for global promotion and issues for the school library profession.” Another participant remarked that, “listening to a presenter and being able to ask questions in the room with the speaker means one listens, learns, and gets new information from others in the room. For someone who taught in an online environment nothing compares to face-to-face interaction. Further you are committed to the time which is less likely to be the case if you have to log on”.

These participants were also of the view that many IASL members do not speak English well enough to participate in a virtual conference. It is the belief of these participants that the virtual conference would be costly especially for members who live in the poorer region. Not only was the cost considered but the technological skills of some of the IASL members and the fact that technology could fail in the midst of a virtual conference causing the participant to lose out.

When it comes to professional development, 20% of these participants added that a virtual conference was not an option for their professional development and that there were already more than enough online professional development available in the form of webinars such as blogs etc. One participant mentioned that virtual conferences would not generate funds for IASL.

Participants have justified their reasons for opposing annual virtual conferences. Those who agreed to IASL hosting virtual conferences might have taken into consideration the cost of attending face-to-face conferences as well as the benefit of a conference over not having one all. IASL needs to take a careful look at these findings which indicate that members prefer to attend face-to-face conference although they are finding it difficult to attend regularly. The IASL Board needs to implement various activities throughout the year to generate funds to increase the allocation of grants for members who are trying to make their first appearance because there is great potential in the likelihood of spinoffs.

Participants were asked whether they would attend virtual conferences. Sixty-two or 72.1% said they would while twenty-four or 27% said they would not. A summary of participants' comments showed that 30% of the participants stated that they could participate in the virtual conference depending on the cost and the time the sessions would be available in their Zone while 20% responded that they would participate depending on the theme and the ease of access to a virtual platform. It would however be difficult for IASL to hold virtual conferences for all members at the same time because of the difference in the time zones.

### **Conclusion and implications**

Participants who attended IASL conferences from 1998-2010 attended mainly for professional development. This suggests that every effort should be made to continue to host its annual conferences despite the challenges being faced by organizers. Participants have also placed a premium on the opportunity that these conferences offer them to renew their friendships and to socialize. The fact that these have a great impact on members' attendance pattern means that IASL has been catering for the social needs of its members through the social events such as the IASL dinner and auction at all its conferences. This result is also suggesting that members place the fulfillment of the social needs almost as highly as they do their need for professional development.

Most participants do not however attend conferences regularly enough because of geographic location and travel cost. Geographic location was the single most reason that affects the regular attendance at conferences. IASL is an international association therefore the challenge with the geographic location has been constant. It is essential that members who live in the Zone where the conference is being held give significant support to the conference for that particular year. There is also the challenge of the date of the conference as well as financial problems.

The survey results imply that IASL conferences are important to its members and IASL needs to ensure that these conferences are kept within the financial limits of its members so that members can attend regularly.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this survey the following recommendations are put forward:

The findings show that the majority of the conferences are held in Zone A. It is therefore recommended that the IASL Board consider regrouping the countries into three regions according to geographic locations instead of Zones and alternate the conferences according to the regions so that the attendance pattern can be more regular. Each member will attend at least once

in every three years because the geographic location of the conference would be in his/her region. This would possibly solve the geographic location problem that prohibits regular attendance at conferences.

Members will always have financial difficulties that will prevent them from attending conferences. IASL needs to actively promote the Adopt-a-Member campaign. At each conference anyone who wishes to support a member could apply to do so and pay the requisite fees.

Some members have indicated that IASL implement virtual conferences to improve the attendance pattern. However, due to the difference in time zones, this might not be possible for everyone to tune in at the same time but IASL can video tape the conferences and have members who are not able to attend register for webinars at a reasonable price. Members would pre-register for the specific sessions they would want to attend virtually. The presenters who conduct these webinars would be the original presenters who would consent prior to the conference to have these webinars. The presenters who are able to do this should be paid a fee.

IASL has a global reach and like its sister associations is making an important contribution to the library and information profession. It is therefore necessary that the governing body makes every effort to deal with the challenge of irregular attendance at its annual conference and to institute new programs that will sustain regular attendance. If this can be achieved IASL's annual conferences will be the conference of choice among school librarians.

## References

- Adomi, E., Alakpodia, O., & Akporhonor, B. (2006). *Conference Attendance by Nigerian Library and Information Professionals*. Retrieved from <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/conference-this-lead-pipers-compare-conference-experiences/>
- Alaimo, R. (2004). Top Six Reasons to Attend a Conference. *Knowledge Quest*, 33(1).
- Eke, H. N. (2011). An Empericial Study of the Impact of NLA Conefernce Attendance on Librarians' Professional Development. *PNLA Quarterly*, 75(4).
- Group Posts. (2010, April 28). *Conference This! Lead Pipers Compare Conference Experiences*. Retrieved from <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/conference-this-lead-pipers-compare-conference-experiences/>
- IASL. (2012). Retrieved from School Libraries Online: <http://www.iasl-online.org/>
- Mardis, M. A. (2011). Evidence or Evidence Based Practice? An Analysis of IASL Research Forum Papers, 1998-2009. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 6(1), 4-23.
- North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG). (2008). 23:4 (2008:12) *Report of the NASIG Conference Attendance Survey*. NASIG Newsletter.
- Steinhauser, C. (2011). *Top Five Reasons to go to a National Conference*. Retrieved from Massachusetts School Library Association: <http://maschoolibraries.org/content/view/772/405>
- Tomaszewski, R., & MacDonald, K. (2009). Identifying Subject-specific Conferences as Professional Development Opportunities for the Academic Librarian. *University Library Faculty Publications*.
- Vega, R. D., & Connell, R. S. (2007). Librarians' Attitudes Toward Conferences: A Study. *College and Research Libraries*, 68(6), 503-515.



Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.