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# 'Managing academic library services in tough economic times': the 2010 SCONUL autumn conference, British Library

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*British Library Courtyard*

The SCONUL autumn conference was held a little later than usual on 2 December, and the early snowfall meant that some delegates were delayed or unable to travel. Dame Lynne Brindley's phrase in her opening remarks to describe the economic climate ahead – 'challenge and a little bit of misery' – could equally have been applied to the weather conditions, but there was a good turnout at the British Library for the timely consideration of the current threats and opportunities faced in the higher education sector. Slides from several

of the presentations are available on the SCOUNL web site at <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/events/egm2010/presentations>

#### **ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL CONTEXT**

Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library, set the context by outlining both the risks and opportunities presented by the difficult financial climate and the speed of change, with thought-provoking reflections on the power of the UK higher education brand overseas, the power of the 'customer' – which must now include students' parents or funders – and hopes for greater diversity in higher education but fears of increased convergence on the norm. In her welcome to delegates, she stressed that the British Library is keen to work with the higher education sector on partnerships, collaborations, cost-effective delivery and continued debate.



*David Sweeney, HEFCE*

In an update to his talk at the SCOUNL summer conference, given before the publication of the Browne report and the government's comprehensive spending review, David Sweeney from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reflected on how government policies on higher education are evolving in quite sophisticated ways. In his view, UK higher education institutions are generally healthy and have been storing up surpluses for the future in anticipation

of the new, innovative business responses that will be required to take advantage of opportunities to make up the shortfall in teaching income. The higher education sector will not be affected in the same way as other parts of the public sector that will suffer drastic cuts, and the difficult balancing act will be to make savings while still presenting a high-quality offer to students. There will be a white paper on the Government's future strategy for higher education in March 2011 and HEFCE will be trying to ensure that the transition to the new ways of working is managed successfully with minimal damage to existing institutions and to students.

A very informative paper from Andrew McConnell, Chair of the British Universities Finance Directors' Group provided the financial perspective using data from the HEIDI (Higher Education Information Database for Institutions) data portal. Andrew disagreed with the HEFCE analysis of the sector's financial position, arguing that small operating surpluses and high staff costs are not good for sustainability. It is important for institutions to be aware of their relevant financial positions using the HEIDI data and to assess the impact of the reduction in teaching income, as most universities will face a funding gap. Actions to be taken include reviews of the teaching portfolio, staff qualifications, the student journey and the physical environment. For library services, there will have to be a fundamental culture change to reduce costs and waste, maximise income generation, benefit from the interesting initiatives on shared services and perform much better on procurement, especially of periodicals. This last point was picked up in the question and answer session by Debbie Shorley, who endorsed Andrew's view and assured the audience that RLUK (Research Libraries UK) will be making very strong representations to the publishers. In a welcome offer of collaboration and support, Andrew advised that finance directors can help library services with financial advice, advice on preparing business cases and HEIDI benchmarking.

#### **THE STUDENT VIEW**

Dora Meredith, president of the University of Birmingham Guild of Students, looked at the impact government cuts will have on students. Those who choose to go into higher education in future will have a very high academic focus and will want to ensure they get good grades. Expectations will be high but students are aware of the possible impact of the cuts on library resources and



*Dora Meredith*

services such as opening hours. Feedback from students indicates that they place a high value on good core text collections and e-resources, access from home, the availability of computers both in and away from the library and the avoidance of high charges. Going forward, we should keep in mind how much library resources contribute to student success: good communication between library managers and student representatives will be vital.

#### **VIEWS FROM THE SHARP END**

Two speakers in the afternoon session brought perspectives from different areas where economic recession and policy changes have already had a big impact. John Cox from the National University of Ireland, Galway, spoke about the situation in Ireland, already two years into a period of 'austerity' following more than ten years of high public spending. This sobering account illustrated very clearly the issues that other libraries may face such as funding cuts, job losses, pay cuts, increased workloads and low morale in a period of uncertainty. At Galway, the management response to 'doing less with less' has been to respond positively and optimistically to the uncertain climate, using the crisis to focus very clearly on strategic objectives, restructure into functional groupings and make tough decisions based on process reviews and solid evidence.

Andrew Holden from the Museums and Libraries Association (MLA) spoke with very direct experience of policy change and uncertainty, as the announcement concerning the abolition of the MLA had been made just a week earlier. His topic

was the London Libraries Change Programme (LLCP), a wide-ranging initiative to support the reduction of high costs and variable service levels in the public libraries. Following the Government spending review, London is facing the possible closure of 130 branch libraries, and action needs to be radical and immediate. The current phase of the LLCP is a strategic options framework to challenge performance, check strategy and assess options, offering peer support to libraries to help them prepare benchmark statements and articulate their case in language that stakeholders will understand. The issues being addressed by the LLCP will be common to all libraries: the need to stop doing more of the same and prepare for fundamental change, the integration of customer-facing services, place-based integration, the shift from print to digital publication, a move away from grants to strategic commissioning, and putting the customer first.

#### **ONE MODEL FOR THE FUTURE**

There has been a great deal of interest in the Worcester Library and History Centre, a joint university and public library project due to open in July 2012. Gillian Slater, Director of Personnel, and Dr Judith Keene, Assistant Director of Information and Learning Services, both from the University of Worcester, provided fascinating insights into the planning process. The shared building project was conceived when the county library service, the record office and the university library were expanding and looking for new space. There was a shared vision for integrated services in Worcestershire and a great deal of enthusiasm for working together as well as an opportunity to take over a site in a regeneration area of the city. The project had a great deal of public support and work started in 2004. After a long planning process building work has started and the shell of the building is now almost complete. Benefits realisation has been an important part of the process – the shared services approach has enabled the partners to access different funding streams, plan for joined-up services for a whole community (recognising, for example, that students do not live in isolation and need to access local public services), take advantage of economies of scale to offer longer opening hours and provide a showcase for all the partners. The local community will benefit from the existence of a centralised gateway to heritage and history, from the new meeting places and from learning experiences the joint services can provide. In their presentation Judith and Gillian outlined the key challenges and benefits identified in the development of this project,

which will be valuable to anyone embarking on a location-based shared services project. They identified three key lessons learned: keep the vision clear, identify our core values and aim for service improvements as well as cost reductions. Following the presentation, one question addressed the question of access to university library stock: if students are paying higher fees, will they rebel at free access for members of the public? This has been considered during the planning process: parts of the stock will be protected, priority booking of PCs for students will be available and of more social learning spaces will be created for students in other campus buildings. No doubt when the Worcester Library and History Centre opens in 2012, many of us will be keen to visit to see what can be achieved with good local collaboration.

#### **THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL BODIES**

Ann Rossiter, Executive Director of SCONUL, and Annie Mauger, Chief Executive of CILIP, moved into their new roles in 2010 and have already discovered many common themes and concerns.



*Annie Mauger and Ann Rossiter*

Ann Rossiter has spent the first few months talking to SCONUL members and observing the climate in UK higher education. Her key message was that academic libraries do a good job, but need to be challenged to do more to promote their value. In a time of reduced resources, libraries are facing increased demand and must respond with good hard evidence, convincing stories and case studies and lobbying at the right level, all activities that SCONUL can help with. As a group we need to engage with the publishers, as it seems they are not hearing the messages about reduced budgets and the 'value' of what they provide; we also need to address the issues around National Student Survey 'satisfaction' results and gather the examples of the good practice and personal stories that make a real impact with politicians. Ann will clearly spell out the activities that SCONUL carries out for members, such as the

provision of training via the Leadership Foundation. Good communication by e-mail, the revised website and other media will continue to develop. She has discovered an enormous spirit of cooperation and voluntarism among members, which is very valuable, but she has also perceived the dangers of too much closeness and sharing of common views. Part of her role will be to challenge that thinking, remain slightly detached and engage in a constructive dialogue with SCONUL members.

Annie Mauger had been in post for just eight weeks, but had already identified areas of common concern between CILIP and SCONUL such as professional development, job security and providing opportunities for the librarians of the future as they enter the profession at an uncertain time. CILIP itself has experienced the impact of the recession with a drop in income from business activities, including recruitment, and will require major reorganisation. Members want CILIP to help them understand the new working environments, provide professional development activities in appropriate skills and engage in advocacy, leadership and networking. There are questions to be addressed about the identity of the profession, with many new professionals very actively engaged in social media not identifying themselves as 'librarians', and CILIP will be working hard to bring people together despite a more fragmented working environment. Although not a trade union, CILIP will help support members where possible by lobbying and campaigning, challenging policy on library closures and gathering the stories, successes and evidence of impact to present to government. An All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Libraries, Literacy and Information Management has been formed to raise the profile of libraries and challenge policy, which SCONUL has been invited to join. Annie feels that we are at the start of a big culture change and she will be promoting the key benefits of CILIP membership that will help members through the uncertain times.

#### **RECOGNITION OF SUCCESS**

The conference ended on a high note with the presentations to the winners of the SCONUL Library Design Award, covered in detail by Sheila Cannell elsewhere in this issue. As always, the winners provide a great deal of inspiration to others and will be popular destinations for visits from other library staff in 2011. The closing reception was another good opportunity to talk to the award winners and other speakers, all of whom showed us glimpses of the challenging times ahead and provided strategies for responding to them.