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# Focusing on our members' needs:

a *SCONUL Focus* article on *SCONUL's Focus Groups*

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Pursuing its remit to improve communication within the SCONUL community, the Advisory Committee on Communications and Marketing (ACoCaM) organised six focus groups of SCONUL members in the summer of 2004 to discuss their perceptions of SCONUL and how they would like to see SCONUL activity develop.

## **BRIEFING THE CONSULTANTS**

The consultancy ORC International was commissioned to facilitate the groups, report findings and formulate recommendations. Specifically, ORC International was briefed to consult with stakeholders to obtain their views of SCONUL, the work that it does on their behalf, communication within the organisation, and the direction that it is taking. It was asked to assess stakeholders' understanding of SCONUL, identify areas of strength and weakness and make recommendations on how SCONUL could better serve its members.

## **ORGANISING THE GROUPS**

ACoCaM members Katherine Everest, Jane Harrington and Carole Munro volunteered to organise the groups. They agreed with the SCONUL Secretary and the consultants the topics to be covered in the group discussions; arranged venues; and invited 10-15 people to take part in each group. Sessions were held at Leeds Metropolitan University, Edinburgh University and Westminster University. To obtain a cross-section of views from staff at various levels, participants in the six groups were as follows:

Edinburgh: front line staff; heads of service and deputies

Leeds: front line staff; middle professionals

London: heads of service and deputies; middle professionals.

The discussions were moderated by Helen Reeves or Gavin Ellison, Senior Research Executive and Research Manager at ORC International. Participants were asked about their understanding and view of various aspects of SCONUL's work, including statistics collection, cooperative schemes, lobbying, good practice, training and development, advisory groups and events, the SCONUL website and newsletter and e-mail communication with members.

Feedback from the groups' organisers was that most of the heads of service invited to participate were enthusiastic about attending, and seemed to find the required time more easily than middle professionals or front line staff - the organisers drew no conclusions from this! Everyone enjoyed the professional facilitation, and people were probably more comfortable expressing their honest opinions to someone with a neutral view of SCONUL. The organisers also much appreciated the involvement of ORC International, which meant that after making the arrangements they could leave the moderation, analysis and reporting of the discussions to others.

## **REPORTING THE OUTCOMES**

The consultants' report, delivered in August 2004, is on the SCONUL website<sup>1</sup> Commending the Report to the Executive Board, ACoCaM noted that the findings endorsed those of the 2002 membership survey<sup>2</sup> A key comment was that although SCONUL was thought to do a lot of good work, it did not do enough to get its achievements recognised, with poor visibility and some lack of transparency accounting for a less than ideal level of awareness. There was general agreement that SCONUL should concentrate on its unique 'offering': its capacity to represent academic and national libraries in the UK.

Other points were that reconciling the twin aims of achieving greater participation in SCONUL activity by offering conference attendance and other opportunities to staff other than heads of service, while continuing to engage heads of service, was a continuing challenge. Some focus group participants wanted to see SCONUL integrating the various access schemes - or in some other

way lessening the administrative burden of their implementation.

Using the outcomes

At its October meeting the Executive Board accepted the report's recommendations, and the actions proposed by ACoCaM<sup>3</sup>. Much of the substance of the recommendations was already embedded in the planning of ACoCaM, the Executive Board or the Secretariat, but the emphasis given in the report is useful in helping those concerned to assess priorities. The Advisory Committee and Executive Board are very grateful to those who participated in and organised the focus groups, and look forward to their outcomes continuing to influence the development of SCONUL activity in ways closer to members' needs.

- 1 *Report of findings: Qualitative Sessions for SCONUL, August 2004*  
<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/comms/reports>
- 2 Comments to the Executive Board on the findings and recommendations emerging from the six focus groups of SCONUL members, summer 2004  
<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/comms/reports>
- 3 see 2. above