
Peer groups for second-tier managers

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INTRODUCTION

This article gives a brief overview of the history, evolution and operation of the peer groups for second-tier managers, often referred to as the 'SCONUL deputies' groups'. Their benefits are analysed in relation to the roles and continuing professional development (CPD) needs of second-tier managers.

EVOLUTION OF THE GROUPS

The first group was formed in the early 1980s through the encouragement of the then chair of the SCONUL Board. It consisted of deputy librarians from what might now be called the 'old' universities. A few members from the 'new' universities joined the group in the mid-90s. It remained the only one of its kind until 2004 when, with a little help from a coordinator provided by the SCONUL Advisory Committee on Staffing (ACOS), two more groups were formed. Members were drawn from across the higher education sector, with 68 institutions having at least one member in a group. A further group was formed in 2005 and a fifth in 2006. In the early days of the groups, SCONUL provided administrative support in connection with contracts, invoices and preparation of packs and badges. This was withdrawn during the review of SCONUL activities in 2007 and following the demise of ACOS. The five groups all continue to meet, however, and have a total of 128 members from 91 institutions at the

time of writing. They are run by the members of the groups. Margaret continued to act as group coordinator until her retirement in 2008, when the role was taken over by Trevor. Trevor maintains the list of group members, provides information on the groups and allocates places; anyone wishing to join a group should contact Trevor in the first instance.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUPS

Membership is open to library deputies or senior management team members – in other words those at the level immediately below, and reporting to, the head/director of library services. (In a converged service this may, in some cases, be the third tier.) The groups are networks of peers and provide a confidential forum for brainstorming and discussion of ideas, developments and problems. For this reason, members are asked to attend a meeting every year if at all possible and to maintain regular e-mail contact with the rest of the group. Each group has about 25 members, so that everyone knows everyone else and the model of mutual trust, confidentiality and support can be maintained. It is for this reason that institutions are not allowed to send a different person each year or to change the person who comes without any reference to the group or to the groups' coordinator. The model also relies on the willingness of all members to take their turn at organising the annual meeting.

FORMAT OF GROUP ACTIVITIES

All five groups use the tried and tested format developed by the first one, with a few variations to suit members' needs. They meet once a year, usually starting on a Friday evening with dinner and ending at Sunday lunchtime. Some groups now meet in the week or from Thursday to Saturday, but the length of the meeting is the same. Meetings are held in June, September or November but each group meets at the same time each year. Some groups also have a brief, one-day mid-year meeting. Each has a closed e-mail list that enables frequent communication throughout the year as well.

The meetings are not conferences: that is, they do not consist of a programme of outside speakers. Sessions are led by group members. They are networking events which enable the discussion of issues of mutual concern and brainstorming. The main purpose is to trigger debate and share ideas and good practice. Sometimes a member will bring a problem and the group will brainstorm

approaches to it. Each session is around 40–45 minutes long, with input from the session leader accounting for no more than one-third of the time. Discussion is open and honest and members promise to maintain confidentiality because in this lies much of the value of the groups. A member has commented, 'I would say one of the most useful things is the Chatham House Rules – to be able to speak in freedom is a rare thing.' The only 'outside speakers' are former group members who have moved on to the post of head of service and are asked to return to talk about their new role. Plenty of time is allowed for informal discussion in small groups outside the scheduled programme. Some groups include an open-forum session, which enables all sorts of topics to be 'bounced around'. These may be taken up by small sub-sets during the meeting or pursued at another time.

BENEFITS

The groups bring together colleagues from across the higher education sector. They mix those from 'old' and 'new' universities and from large and small institutions; those with single campus and multi-campus contexts; those from teaching and research-led universities. They include staff with a library background and those who come from an IT or other learning-resource background, and they mix together colleagues whose specific portfolios vary enormously. Each group has a similarly 'rich mixture' of staff and all testify to the value of this.

At a stage in their career where staff require not courses but the development of critical thinking, decision-making and political skills and the need to learn from the experience and good practice of others, the groups provide a very appropriate solution. They enable individuals to build up powerful peer groups that can be relied upon for support, especially at times when reference to colleagues inside the same institution may not be appropriate or acceptable. They are a source of information and ideas for those whose chosen career is at second-tier level but they also provide the basis for a future support group for those whose ambitions take them to head-of-service posts. The institutions benefit from having senior colleagues who grow in confidence and are able to call on the expertise of others in managing the constant change all services face.

One member has summarised the value of the peer groups as follows: 'For me the key benefit is a group you can ask tricky questions of without

the worry it might get out to someone you might be embarrassed to see get it or ... where you need a quick cross-section of libraries. It saves hours of work avoiding reinvention of wheels and is always a good source of policy papers etc.' Many members testify to the value of the closed e-mail list maintained by each group as a source of information and support throughout the year. One welcomes 'the ability to e-mail colleagues in similar roles about problems or just to ask for advice in a confidential manner – without the worry that people will judge you for asking silly questions!' Another member says, 'The social side (as well as e-mailing) provides a supportive environment – being a second-tier manager can be very isolating.' She also testifies to another benefit: 'having the experience of presenting something to a group of peers – [you] can try things out before doing this within the home institution'.

CONCLUSION

We'd like to conclude by quoting one group member's story:

'To be perfectly honest, I attended the first meeting of the fourth group in November 2005 with a sense of apprehension and with no little hesitation. I was spending a lot of time on service development at "home" and although I recognised the potential for sharing ideas and experience, this I saw as a possible unwelcome distraction.

'However, at the risk of sounding glib, the journey down to Loughborough was the most negative I have been about this group. From the word go, I have encountered nothing but mutual support, genuine interest and helpfulness within a very engaging, friendly and relaxed atmosphere. A most important point to make is that it was and continues to be fun! It has reassured me, broadened and challenged my thinking, and without doubt, being relatively new in the role at the time, has given me greater confidence. It probably goes without saying that the group provides a very useful opportunity to step back and take stock whilst exploring sector-wide issues. So, fun and very useful!

'The mailing list is also an important component of the support network where I know I can get confidential advice, comments and encouragement very quickly. Oh, and occasional silliness and merriment. I genuinely look forward to meeting up every year with colleagues. I consider myself lucky. The only problem: the gatherings appear to be coming around far more quickly!'