
The university library of the future

SCONUL autumn conference
8 December 2011, British Library
Conference Centre

Conference report by Lys Ann Reiners and Valerie Stevenson, *FOCUS* editorial team

Presentations available on the SCONUL events website:
<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/events/egm2011/presentations/>

CONFERENCE WELCOME ADDRESS

This year's conference was designed to take a look at the future of higher education, bringing together informed opinion, experience from other countries and the results of recent research to help build up a picture of the developing landscape and the key challenges for the sector. The final report of the *Libraries of the future*¹ project was presented at a pre-conference seminar, and Caroline Brazier, Director of Scholarship and Collections at the British Library, in her welcoming address described the outcomes as both 'gloomy and optimistic' visions of the future. In her view there is a real need and opportunity for dialogue about future directions across the library profession, learning from each other in our responses to change through innovation and collaboration. We are starting to experience the impact of disruptive changes, both in the funding models for higher education and in technological advances, with pressure on us to be more agile and responsive to change, like companies such as Google and Amazon. Other sectors are also undergoing huge change, particularly the publishing industry, which may evolve very differently from the way it looks today. There will be pressure to deliver more for less, face the challenges robustly and explore new ways of delivering services by playing to our strengths. Not all change can be predicted and there will be some painful adjustments as we move away from traditional models. We shall be looking at new attitudes to operating at scale and exploring shared services. New initiatives such as the digital public library have helped start debate relating to a national higher educa-

tion digital library. The SCONUL autumn conference provides an opportunity to start engaging with these issues. It is easy to complain about the difficulties but our challenge is to realise the new vision and develop the new business models that will operate in the future.

INTRODUCTION: SCONUL CHAIR

Fiona Parsons, Chair of SCONUL, made a convincing case in her introductory remarks for 'the end of the beginning'. The overall shape of the various higher education régimes operating within the UK is still undergoing considerable change and the implications are unclear. We do not yet know what student attitudes to the new funding régimes will be and how these will affect behaviour patterns and the number of applications. In a more competitive environment, hard decisions will have to be taken on what we value and what we can let go – and who will pay for the things that we decide we do value. We may, for example, need to look more to the community to fund subscriptions and services rather than bodies such as JISC. There will be more challenges than we are used to and everything will be scrutinised. It will be important to emphasise our strengths: our contribution to skills and employability, expertise in providing infrastructure and content, track record in providing a good student experience, iconic buildings that provide brand recognition, reputation and a 'wow factor', and leading the way on efficiencies, values and outcomes. In many ways we are better placed to face scrutiny than other areas of our institutions.

SCONUL is working on a number of activities to support members through the changes. These include:

- a pilot project this year to speed up the production of the SCONUL statistics, due to report in spring 2012
- lobbying activities, for example on the JISC transformation and higher education changes, talking to stakeholders about the value of libraries, dialogues with the National Health Service (NHS) on the role of libraries and responding to the Hargreaves review of copyright
- conducting a series of member surveys, reporting in early 2012
- from January 2012, providing a regular briefing on current topics
- The task and finish group on walk-in access to e-resources will report in early 2012.
- A project board is in place for redevelopment of the SCONUL website and a project man-

ager will be appointed soon, with completion anticipated by autumn 2012.

SCONUL will contribute to the shaping of the environment by running a number of workshops on scholarly communications, e-books and journals. Although the shared services project on library management systems did not go ahead as planned, the Knowledge Base Plus (KB+) project is now taking shape. The *Libraries of the future* scenarios will help members to think conceptually about the future and plan ahead. SCONUL will contribute to the JISC Digital Literacies project for staff and students and is putting forward proposals for a UK national digital library. The SCONUL strategic plan is being reshaped and views from members are welcome.

PANEL SESSION

The second segment of the morning's programme was devoted to a very interesting and informative debate on the possible shape of UK higher education in 2021. This session is reported in full on page 8.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN A HIGH-FEE WORLD DOWN UNDER



Andrew Wells

Andrew Wells, Chair of the Group of Eight Libraries, Australia, and University Librarian, University of New South Wales (NSW), gave the keynote address, in which he described the Australian higher education system, which has operated in a high-fees environment for a number of years. The high-fees régime has had a major impact upon Australian universities and student

behaviour, resulting in new challenges for many areas. Andrew outlined these challenges, and also the response of his own institution, in seeking to overcome them.

There are 39 universities in Australia, and the Group of Eight (of which the University of NSW is a member), is a coalition of research-intensive institutions. Domestic students generally pay a student contribution, which currently ranges from approximately £2800 per year, to attend courses identified as national priorities, such as mathematics and science, to around £6000 per year for courses including law, dentistry, medicine and business. The Government pays a variable contribution to support these places, ranging from £1200 to support law and business, to £12 700 to support medicine and dentistry. International students pay tuition fees, which vary across the sector. At the University of NSW, international students are currently charged over £20 000 per year for popular courses such as law.

Despite the high-fees environment, Australia has experienced a large increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education. In 1970 there were just over 160 000 students – by 2010 this figure had increased to over one million. The Government is aiming for participation of 40% of 18 year-olds by 2025. Large numbers of international students also choose to study in Australia. The income gained from charging fees to international students makes a very important contribution to the Australian higher education sector, currently amounting to an average of 15% of total revenue; for some universities, this figure is as much as 40% of total revenue. There is intense competition for international students, and Andrew is personally involved with a project that is seeking to increase international student numbers at NSW.

Academic staff numbers have not increased at the same rate as student numbers, and the student experience has been affected by the worsening student/staff ratio, which increased by 52% between 1990 and 2007. The change in the student/staff ratio has resulted in much larger classes, and also in students having less direct contact time with academic staff. With regard to international students, it was noted that there is a lack of diversity, both in the subjects they choose to study (mainly law and accountancy), and in their countries of origin; for example, NSW enrolls large numbers of Chinese students, while Victoria is dominated by students from India. This lack of diversity can leave institutions particularly

vulnerable to changes relating to these countries or subjects.

Another consequence of the high-fees régime is that universities are now run as 'big businesses', and are considered to be a major export industry in Australia. All universities aspire to be rated as excellent research institutions, and there is significant competition within the sector. Continuing with the business theme, university governing bodies now tend to resemble company models, and operate as relatively small boards, with few staff and student representatives. Finally, both international and home students increasingly view themselves as customers; this applies particularly to international students, who are protected by the Educational Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (consumer protection legislation).

In addition to the constraints of working in a high-fees environment that is heavily dependent on international students, the library at NSW has also been faced with the challenge of supporting a 30% increase in student numbers with a 9% increase in budget over the same period. It has responded by concentrating on developing digital services and resources, and by removing print collections where possible, to make space for flexible learning areas. The library staff have been restructured and retrained to enable them to support the new services.

These sweeping changes have met with opposition from some academic staff and have attracted a certain amount of adverse publicity, including an article in the Sydney Morning Herald with the headline: 'Books get the shove as university students prefer to do research online', which stated that the University of NSW Library was turning into a Starbucks by throwing away books and creating café-style lounges. However, this article did not influence the Vice-Chancellor's views, and it was reported that he thought that it was good publicity as it showed that the library was contemporary, student-focused, and mainly digital – exactly as he thought it should be!

This timely and relevant presentation provoked a number of questions:

Q. Janet Peters, University Librarian, Cardiff University asked if NSW was considering developing special collections as a means of attracting students.

A. NSW would target digital special collections, but in his experience Australian students value

speedy, efficient services more highly than special collections.

Q. Ann Rossiter, Executive Director, SCONUL asked about the licensing and copyright situation in Australia.

A. The Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000 allows libraries to digitise up to one chapter, or 10% of a text.

Q. Sheila Cannell, Director of Library Services, Edinburgh University, asked if libraries should be doing more to improve the academic staff experience.

A. At NSW, they try to give academic staff a first-class rather than an economy service, by encouraging librarians to go out to the academics, rather than waiting to see them in the library. The library is now responsible for many of the functions previously undertaken by the Research Office, and this has also helped to build links with academics.

Q. Paul Gentle, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, asked how the changes in working culture were introduced and embedded.

A. The library developed preferred scenarios showing what the library would look like in five years, and identifying what they would need to do to make these changes happen. The scenarios were discussed with key stakeholders, including library staff and academics. The changes took around five years to implement, during which time staff were supported with training to gain the necessary skills.

WORKSHOP SESSIONS



Rosemary Lynch, Ben Showers and Leigh Garret led the workshop on bidding for funding

For the first session of the afternoon delegates split into three groups covering different topics:

an introduction to outcomes-based accountability, bidding for JISC funding and an update on the KB+ project. Presentations from all three sessions are available on the conference website.

DEBATE: A NATIONAL DIGITAL LIBRARY FOR THE UK



Ann Rossiter and Rachel Bruce

Ann Rossiter, Executive Director of SCONUL, and Rachel Bruce, Innovation Director, Digital Infrastructure at JISC, outlined the thinking behind the case for a national digital library. This was one of the key themes of SCONUL's response to the Government's higher education white paper in September 2011. Slides from the conference presentation are available on the website. Ann referred to digital library models that already exist in different forms, and argued that unless we engage with this concept and grasp the opportunity to shape it, others may step in to fill the gap, not necessarily in ways we shall welcome. There are different ways of conceptualising the digital library, all quite complex, and a very clear vision will have to be developed before thorny issues such as licensing can be addressed. Rachel summarised the incremental development of the digital information landscape from the 1990s ELib projects through to the 2011 JISC Infrastructure, which encompasses Web 2.0, virtual research environments and working in 'the cloud'. We may be looking at the broader concept of knowledge experience, rather than a digital 'library', aiming to build a common infrastructure, developing skills and capacity and sharing silos of data so that they can be reused. If we can develop a clear vision there will be opportunities to link to and engage with other initiatives such as the BBC Digital Public Space, the British Library 'Growing Knowledge' work and projects outside the UK such as DigitalNZ in New Zealand. If starting with a blank sheet of paper, we might design systems with more people at the centre, promote the

use of nano-publications (documents which are atomised, open, linked, annotated and machine-readable) and 24x7 multi-platform availability in a completely personalised environment. Comments on the national digital library concept are very welcome and can be sent to Ann Rossiter at SCONUL.

FINAL KEYNOTE AND CLOSING REMARKS

Michael Gorman, University Librarian Emeritus, California State University, gave a thought-provoking final keynote address on maintaining our professional values in a competitive environment; it is reproduced in full on page 11. Responding to questions following his presentation, Michael argued that professional organisations and library schools should try to get a really good picture of what people want from libraries, including the needs of researchers. We should not automatically accept that everything will be digital – it may be better to concentrate on the digitisation of really valuable manuscript or archival items and for some legacy print collections to be fully catalogued and available on demand. Good metadata records should not be abandoned in favour of free-text searching.

Sara Marsh closed the conference by thanking the inspirational speakers for providing inspiring big-picture contributions which will provide the basis for much further thought and debate. There are certainly opportunities for bodies such as SCONUL and JISC to work on collaborative activities that will start to join up pieces of the jigsaw leading to the creation of the right sort of digital library. One message that has come through strongly is that the fundamental activity of learning will not change much, but access and technology will: we can enhance the student experience by improving the ways in which students interact with us via technology. We have the skills to provide leadership within our institutions and need to hold onto our traditional core values in a period of great change. Sara also thanked the conference sponsors, the British Library and all the conference organisers for their contributions to a very successful day.

NOTES

- 1 *Libraries of the Future* project web site <<http://www.futurelibraries.info>>, accessed 12.1.12