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# What makes an outstanding library team? The Times Higher Education leadership and management awards

Peter Williams  
*SCONUL Focus Editorial Board and  
Assistant Campus Library Manager,  
University of East London*  
Tel: 020 8223 7843  
E-mail: P.J.Williams@uel.ac.uk

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What makes a good team? This will be a thought familiar to supporters of West Ham United. It's also a question that *Times Higher Education* sought to answer last year with its inaugural leadership and management awards. The awards seek to honour achievement by university support staff, with a range of prizes for different departments, including human resources, estates management, registry, ICT and library teams. At the first award ceremony, a black-tie event held at the London Hilton hotel in June 2009, the University of Bournemouth picked up the prize for the outstanding library team; also shortlisted were City University, the University for the Creative Arts, the University of Salford, the University of Sheffield and the University of Wolverhampton.



The awards will run again in 2010 and look set to become a regular event. So how did *THE* go about deciding what constitutes an outstanding library

team? In order to answer this question I contacted one of the judges – Chris Cobb, pro vice-chancellor at Roehampton University – and some of the shortlisted libraries, and their insights and comments inform this brief description of the process.

## **CRITERIA**

The award seeks to recognise ‘outstanding work within library and information services’ during the previous academic year. In particular, candidate libraries are asked to demonstrate how they ‘personalised’ the delivery of their services and space; developed their digital environment; exploited physical and virtual space; and improved upon ‘standard practice in the sector’. Evidence of collaboration with other administrative and academic departments is also looked upon favourably by the judges.

Entry is surprisingly (or deceptively) easy. The evidence is entirely paper-based and no site visits are undertaken. Applicants must submit an online statement of no more than 500 words and may also provide supporting images. Brief additional notes are also allowed.

## **WHO WERE THE JUDGES?**

In addition to a pro-vice chancellor, the panel (which judged the range of leadership and management categories, not just the library award) included *THE*’s editor and deputy editor, the chair of the Association of University Administrators, the CEO of the Leadership Foundation and a partner at Grant Thornton accountants, among others. As this list suggests, the judges would have had varying levels of knowledge of academic libraries. Chris Cobb, for example, has substantial experience of working closely with library colleagues over many years; others were perhaps less familiar with our sector.

## **WHAT SORT OF EVIDENCE WAS SUBMITTED?**

Given the weight put on a relatively brief statement, most of the shortlisted libraries chose to enlist the help of their institution’s marketing teams to write their submission. However, a combination of this concise application format and the rather broad criteria led to differing approaches, with some libraries emphasising particular initiatives and others providing an overview of their services and achievements. In the words of one library director: ‘The criteria were very general so it was difficult to know exactly what to include.’

For example, Wolverhampton’s application focused on a specific service: ASSIST, their online chat service, described in *SCONUL Focus* 46.<sup>1</sup> The submission described how this real-time support helped to address the needs of a student body which includes a large number of part-time and overseas students. Likewise, City University’s entry described their law library team’s acclaimed portal, Lawbore. The others, including the winners, provided evidence of a wider range of initiatives and services. However, even here there was some variation, with Sheffield highlighting ‘culture and partnerships rather than services’, the University for the Creative Arts focusing on high levels of student satisfaction and Bournemouth supplying a more straightforward overview of their activities.

These varied approaches reflect differing interpretations of the criteria and a slight ambiguity at the heart of the award. While it seeks to recognise the best library team, it is perhaps less about ‘softer’ teamworking or cultural attributes – internal communication or staff satisfaction, for example – than a team’s effectiveness and its ability to deliver innovative services. After all, the awards ultimately seek to recognise leadership and management. Similarly, most of the entries seem to have been put together by library directors, often in conjunction with other senior university managers and with minimal input from the wider library team.

Examples of the evidence used included external professional recognition; benchmarks such as SCONUL statistics; student satisfaction; success in obtaining external funding; metrics on repository usage, digitisation and the use of technology; collaboration with academic staff (for example in developing online teaching materials); innovative learning spaces; and engagement with the wider community.

## **WHAT IMPRESSED THE JUDGES?**

Chris Cobb remembers being impressed by Wolverhampton’s chat service. Other libraries scored with examples of collaboration with other support services and the development of downloadable MP3 and mobile devices. He says the final decision was a ‘close call’ but that the judges were particularly impressed by Bournemouth’s achievements in a range of activities. They scored highly for their award-winning library building and made strong use of comparative SCONUL statistics. The judges were also impressed by their collaboration with the Higher Education Acad-

emy on the eRes project and the fact that they had obtained Heritage Lottery funding to lead a local community project called 'Streets of Bourne-mouth'.

#### **WAS IT WORTH IT?**

Predictably, all the shortlisted libraries felt that the process had been worthwhile and that it had increased the service's profile within their institution and provided a boost to staff. All would apply again. Additionally, most appear to have enjoyed the ceremony. One librarian remembers being 'joined at the table by our vice chancellor while being entertained by Rory Bremner'. Heady times!



#### **CONCLUSION**

The leadership and management awards look set to become an annual event and, as they become established, it is likely that more libraries will enter for them. As this brief survey shows, potential applicants might try a range of approaches, since it seems that either concentrating on a particular service or listing a wider range of activities will score highly with the judges. In reality, of course, many of us are doing the same things as the shortlisted libraries and so perhaps the most important element of a successful entry lies in its presentation – and getting that 500-word statement right.

#### **REFERENCE**

- 1 Wendy Haynes, 'ASSISTing you online: creating positive student experiences at the University of Wolverhampton', *SCONUL Focus*, 46, 2009, pp86–90, available at [www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/46/23.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/46/23.pdf)

#### **PHOTOGRAPH NOTE**

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