

SCONUL Focus is the journal of SCONUL, the Society of College, National and University Libraries.

SCONUL Focus aims to bring together articles, reports and news stories from practitioners in order to generate debate and promote good practice in the national libraries and the university and college sector. As well as the paper copy, the current issue of *SCONUL Focus* is also available electronically via the SCONUL website (<http://www.sconul.ac.uk>). Contributions are welcomed from colleagues in all fields and at all levels: we merely request that the items contributed are concise, informative, practical and (above all!) worth reading.

Opinions expressed in *SCONUL Focus* are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of SCONUL.

The Subject Librarian issue

At my library at the University of Warwick we have recently articulated what business we are in with a new mission statement. Our aim for our members is to be “connecting you with information, support and your community”. All three elements are hugely important for us but – as Head of Academic Support – I suppose I would give the edge to the ‘support’ part of our trinity. I am oft to quote the comment in the OCLC *Perceptions* report by the Australian undergraduate who points to this as his chief positive association with libraries:

“Being at University allows you membership of a large and well respected library on campus. There are librarians and other staff who can help you if you need advice, whereas searching online you can’t ask anyone for help.”¹

Although this may be slightly overstating the case, I think we as librarians should more readily recognise this as a key element of our USP.

But what is the nature of this support? With a Research Libraries UK hat on I recently put a plea out on library lists for colleagues to send me copies of subject librarian job descriptions to see what support they are offering, especially for research.

I was frankly astounded by the response. I heard from 33 institutions and was sent details of 62 posts. I also received a lot of messages from other colleagues wanting to know about my findings – so expect an article in a future issue of *Focus*.

Although I still have to do more to really work through the detail of this collection I can share some headline messages with you now.

Nearly all the posts contain the ‘traditional’ aspects of the subject librarian role that you would expect. These typically include:

- liaison with the academic community;
- collection management/development;
- budget management;
- information skills training;
- enquiry support;
- production of guides/Web pages, etc.

Most are concerned predominantly with teaching and learning support but some roles are now starting to focus on meeting the needs of researchers, with responsibility for the IR, RAE and REF (to name a few letters) appearing in some post details.

The richness found in these documents is reflected in the testimonials of subject librarians contained in this special issue of *SCONUL Focus*, with staff at all levels describing what the role means to them. Colleagues at Nottingham Trent University, Leeds Metropolitan University and Dublin Institute of Technology describe what they typically do, whilst Helen Riley from my own library describes a more atypical week, albeit one based on the core skills of liaison, networking and teaching information skills.

But there are also new aspects to be found in the job descriptions I have collected. There appears to be an increasing emphasis on e-learning, staff management, project work, work with other agencies, and – I am most pleased to say – marketing.

Change looks to be a constant in many of the posts reviewed. This is reflected in articles by Reedy and Belk, Lucas and Quick, and Cipkin and

Stacey, who contrast the experience of different liaison staff at different points in their career.

This theme continues even in the conference reviews in this issue, with details of the NoWAL Conference which looked at “the changing role of library and information professionals within the academic sector” and the SCONUL Autumn Conference which highlighted yet more opportunities to support the research agenda.

Not so long ago – in the dark days of the ‘Bangor Eight’ – it seemed the ‘subject librarian issue’ concerned the future of this creature ². Four years on, the articles collected in this ‘subject librarian issue’ of *SCONUL Focus* illustrate the richness of the support our liaison staff offer. Something of which we should be proud.

Antony Brewerton
SCONUL *Focus* Editorial Board

NOTES

1. Cathy De Rosa et al. *Perceptions of libraries and information resources: a report to the OCLC membership*, Dublin, Ohio: OCLC, 2005, p.B-27
2. Polly Curtis. Bangor librarians face internet threat, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2005, at www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2005/feb/16/highereducation.careers [accessed 20.01.09]