Demonstrating value and maximising impact:

**SCONUL annual conference
14–15 June 2012, Hilton Hotel,
Liverpool**

http://www.sconul.ac.uk/news/annconf2012

Conference report by Valerie Stevenson
*Head of Research and Learner Support
Liverpool John Moores University*

Conference team setting up the conference registration desk in the foyer

PANEL DEBATE: EXCELLENCE IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Ann Rossiter chaired a lively panel session with guest speakers Niger Weatherill (Vice-Chancellor, Liverpool John Moores University), Mo Saqib (Humanities Faculty Officer, National Union of Students), Jo Twyman (Director of Political and Social Research, YouGov) and Paul Gentle (Director of Programmes, The Leadership Foundation). Nigel Weatherill began by describing the day he spent as a 'student' at Liverpool John Moores University experiencing at first hand all the facilities for which he is ultimately responsible. His message for the conference was that there are two main principles to stand by in all our work: no two students are the same, and they may forget what we say but not how we make them feel: how we treat students in all interactions is very important. Jo Twyman cited recent polling at YouGov on value for money; this had found some common narratives among students and their parents. There is a strong expectation that young people will go to university to give them the best chance of a good career. Fees, unsurprisingly, are not popular but students are fairly pragmatic in their expectations, expecting good value for money and return on the investment they will make with universities. They expect to see improvements in all areas of their education following the increase in fees. The YouGov figures show that currently students and parents do not feel higher education courses are good value for money and universities have work to do to show how they use the income from fees to provide a good student experience. Mo Saqib was keen to take a step back and reflect on the quality of the student experience. The NUS is eager to see students treated as partners rather than consumers. In any projects we undertake, we should engage students, listen to their views and ensure we remove barriers to participation, for example by avoiding acronyms and jargon. Recognising and rewarding staff, for example in student-led teaching awards, can help to boost staff morale, and the resulting enthusiasm will

The Hilton Hotel, Liverpool

A new format was tested at the 2012 conference in Liverpool with a concentrated programme of presentations and parallel sessions over two days rather than the usual three. I was able to join the local conference team this year and, along with Carol Kay from the University of Liverpool and Susan Murray from Liverpool Hope University, offered library tours and the opportunity for delegates arriving the night before to meet up for a meal. This initiative, also supported by members of the SCONUL Executive Board hosting tables at restaurants near the conference hotel, proved popular as a pre-conference activity and may well be run again in the future. The conference venue, the Hilton Hotel, has very good facilities and the feedback from delegates indicates that the accommodation, including a large foyer outside the main conference hall, provided good opportunities for networking during the breaks.

Networking in the Grace Foyer between conference sessions

be passed on to students. Mo emphasised that all students have different needs and encouraged us to think through the student lifecycle and consider where we can make a difference, for example in welcoming new students, helping to foster a sense of identity and supporting students with children. Paul Gentle talked about what can be done to promote excellence through leadership and management. We should think about the alignment of the learning experience with learning throughout the organisation, and look at whether the management and leadership cultures support learning as a whole. Paul referred to the ideas of Vineet Nayar, a technology manager who developed the 'employees first, customers second, managers last' philosophy, and identified interesting ways of ensuring that managers are perceived as adding value to the organisation. This way of thinking can be a difficult process but can help to involve staff in driving innovation.

During the question and answer session, Nigel Weatherill expanded on his day as a student, which made him think back to his own student experience. Perception of the student experience tends to be driven by day-to-day issues such as frustration at cancelled lectures, the quality of available catering, hidden costs such as printing and the other issues that directly affect students. At LJMU the relationships with student representatives are very good, but perhaps we need to do more to ensure all students are heard. Mo Saqib felt that if expectations are not met and teaching is not seen as a priority, undergraduates can feel ignored and that they are not getting what they signed up for. The debate moved on to the consideration of student expectations and how far these are influenced by other factors such as gender, age and perceptions of higher education. Jo Twyman commented that this is a huge, complex issue and that it is too early to judge the impact of the fees

increase, which will be a game-changer. When new graduates join the workplace, they feel they are prepared but quite often are not: in the new fee régime this will start to be questioned and universities must look hard at how they prepare graduates for their post-university careers. Nigel Weatherill commented that in all our interactions with students we must concentrate on the interpersonal skills that will help students to feel that we care about them as individuals: NSS scores are very complex but still come down to how students feel they have been treated, even if they do not get everything they want. He would want graduates to go away with belief in themselves and confidence that their higher education experience has been intellectually challenging, aspirational, and has given them the citizenship skills to make a positive contribution to society. At the heart of the question is leadership – everyone in the organisation is a leader of some kind and can be a role model. Libraries are centres of student learning and students choose to use them, so it is interesting to observe what they do there and support their transformational learning. Mo Saqib agreed with this view and commented that there is often too much focus on 'getting the numbers up' in the NSS: what we really need are citizens who can contribute to society as a whole. Working out how this can be translated into the teaching and learning agenda is a real challenge. In her summing up, Ann Rossiter thanked all the speakers for an inspirational discussion about students as rounded individuals and the provision of a transformational learning experience.

Day 1 parallel and plenary sessions

After lunch on the first day, delegates could choose from five parallel sessions held in breakout rooms just off the foyer. These were: *LibQual & other ARL initiatives* presented by Stephen Town

and Selena Killick; *Delivering efficiency through effective benchmarking* by Chris Hale; *The balanced scorecard approach to evaluation* by Sheila Corrall and Jacqui Dowd; *Using the SCONUL stats for strategic planning* by Claire Creaser and Julie Berry; and *Sharing best practice in evaluation strategies* with several contributors from different organisations: Kitty Inglis, Librarian, University of Sussex, for SCONUL; Karel Thomas, Executive Director, for the British Universities Finance Directors' Group; John Townsend, Director of Corporate Information Services, Liverpool John Moores University representing the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association; and Ian Munton, Head of Student Support and Development Services at Keele University, representing AMOSSHE, the student services organisation.

Two plenary sessions rounded off the day with presentations from Megan Oakleaf from Syracuse University on evaluation and learning outcomes, and Sholto Lindsay-Smith from Industry Branding on brand, reputation and the student experience. Both these presentations are available on the conference website. Megan Oakleaf considered how we could collect data on student learning much more effectively than we do currently and could articulate what it is that libraries enable students to do. Although there is interesting work going on, it is not yet possible to correlate any student behaviour, such as library use, with attainment or other measurable outcomes. In evaluating our work, we need to think seriously about what is most important to our stakeholders and how we contribute to it. Sholto Lindsay-Smith looked at brand identity and how we can make libraries relevant in the digital age, particularly when students may not had have much experience of using libraries before they come to university. Good branding can help universities to compete and to engage with a wider audience; for example, the University of Kent undertook a rebranding exercise to shift away from lifestyle and towards a more academic focus, conveying passion for subjects and intellectual challenge. Libraries can be an 'ingredient brand' within the institution, signalling something about the student experience and highlighting the value of the 'third place' where people come to socialise, collaborate and create. We can work out the library proposition, a message that conveys the benefits for all users, and think about how to present it. On university open days, for example, people like to experience the library as a communal space with mixed study environments that both stimulate learning and provide a quiet refuge. We need to ensure that the online experience matches up to the physical experience in design, quality and ease of use.

The conference dinner was held in the grand ballroom at Liverpool Town Hall. Although it was rather a wet evening, most of the delegates

Delegates brave the rain to walk to Liverpool Town Hall

Pre-dinner drinks under the magnificent chandeliers

walked to the venue and enjoyed a locally-sourced menu while listening to a string quartet on the tiny balcony high above the tables.

Day 2 Plenary sessions and workshops

The 'ideas slot' on Friday morning was presented by two speakers looking at different aspects of the personalisation of library services. Both presentations are available on the conference website. Elizabeth Tilley described the 'boutique approach', showing how well-managed and efficient services can still make users feel that they matter and can be crucial in demonstrating value and impact. These ideas are described in more detail in her book *Personalising library services in higher education: the boutique approach*, reviewed in this issue. Paul Walk compared the user experience of library services with social media sites, citing research by Gartner that the 'personal cloud' will be the centre of digital life ('*Competitive landscape: consumer personal cloud*', Gartner, 2012   http://www.gartner.com/id=1967316). Users will bring not just their own devices but their own digital environments and we shall need to consider how our services are going to appear in the 'personal cloud'. In the question and answer session Elizabeth Tilley described how the library team can encourage non-users of our services by going out to common rooms and other places where non-users gather,

inviting them to focus groups and using as many communications channels as possible to raise awareness. Paul Walk expanded on using technology more effectively: we tend to make assertions to our users and gather feedback, but newer communications methods will allow us to develop more finely tuned antennae to gather intelligence and join the general conversation.

The afternoon workshops offered a range of different topics relevant to effective leadership, with a mix of speakers from the commercial environment and the library world. There were two sessions on each topic: handling the media (Simon Maule, Director, Linstock Communications, and Lea Sellers, Trainer, Media Skills for Women); professional skills at top table (Jan Wilkinson, University Librarian & Director of the University of Manchester Library, and Michele Shoebridge, Deputy Registrar and Director of Academic Services at the University of Exeter); advice on public speaking (Rosalind Adler, Business Training, and Tommy Hutchinson, CEO i-genius); and expanding your sphere of influence (Christine Fyfe, Pro Vice-Chancellor with special responsibility for Students, University of Leicester, Maxine Melling, Director of Learning and Information Services, Liverpool John Moores University, and Elizabeth Selby Dean, Learning and Information Service, Southampton Solent University).

SCONUL AGM

Fiona Parsons presented an update on SCONUL activities, including the expansion of the programme of events for members delivered by a new events group, progress on the new website to be delivered at the end of 2012 with a new logo and identity and the revised SCONUL strategy for 2012–15. Following elections to the Executive Board, the new members are Kitty Inglis, Jo Norrie, Alison McKenzie and Sue White. The incoming Chair is Sara Marsh and the Vice-Chair Liz Jolly.

Liz Jolly and Sara Marsh