'The Student Experience': the 2009 SCONUL autumn conference, British Library

Reviewed by Hazel Hall
Library and Information Science Research Coalition
Tel: 07969 078 181
E-mail: hazel.hall@lisresearch.org

On 17 November 2009 the LIS research coalition participated in the 2009 SCONUL autumn conference at the British Library's conference centre (which, coincidentally, will be the venue for the LIS research coalition's own conference on Monday 28 June 2010). The delegate list noted 124 individuals, mainly comprising academic library leaders from UK colleges and universities, as well as staff of the SCONUL secretariat and a number of guest speakers.

The conference was opened by Jane Core, the current chair of SCONUL. The British Library's associate director of operations and services, Caroline Brazier, also welcomed the delegates to the conference centre. Thereafter the speakers took their turns at the podium to tackle the conference theme of 'The Student Experience'. Each was expertly chaired by a member of the SCONUL executive board.

David Sadler, director of networks at the Higher Education Academy (HEA), was first on stage to set the strategic context for the student experience agenda. His presentation took into account a range of government and sector reports and proposals, as relevant to the interests of the academic library community. He pointed to a number of issues that he believes merit attention. These included the untapped expertise of external examiners and the need for genuine engagement in web 2.0 for services delivery across the sector. David concluded his presentation by highlighting a number of challenges of specific interest to the SCONUL audience. These included prioritising service delivery; securing funding; making the most of support from external bodies such as the HEA; and fostering further collaborative activity across the academic library community.

Next up was Michelle Verity who spoke of work in her new post as head of student enterprise and development at York St John University. Michelle's explanation of the 'learning reconsidered' approach as adopted at York St John raised some interesting questions related to the discourse of student experience. The question as to whether or not students are 'customers' and the deployment of the word 'services' in academic settings were picked up later in the day in informal discussions and by later guest speakers.

The last session of the morning was presented by two student officers of Queen Mary, University of London's Students' Union: (1) president Nasir Tarmann and (2) Anna Hiscocks, vice president – education, welfare and representation. This was a very positive, upbeat presentation that drew on a small-scale research project completed at Queen Mary's, as well as the presenters' input to proposed changes in information services provision at their university. This session stimulated further conversation over lunch as to how academic libraries meet the needs of their varied student populations, with much interest in the concept of 'library-hopping', as introduced by Nasir.

The session immediately after lunch provided an opportunity for representatives of three organisations to present their perspectives on the student experience agenda. These were: (1) Simon Wright, chair of the association of managers of student services in higher education; (2) Maureen Skinner, chair of the association of aniversity administrators; and (3) Hazel Hall, executive secretary of the library and information science research coalition. The first two presentations revealed just how much the work of professional staff in UK universities has grown in recent years as student needs have changed and as some of the work previously undertaken by academic staff in schools has been moved to the centre. All three speakers highlighted shared interests, which pointed to the potential for their bodies to develop closer relationships with SCONUL. The discussion that followed the panel members' presentations focused on job boundaries, the hybridisation of professional roles in academia and the question of staff willingness to adapt to new work practices. (The detail of my presentation is elaborated in a separate blog posting at http://lisresearch. org/2009/11/18/lis-research-coalition-presentation-at-the-sconul-autumn-conference/.)

The last main set of presentations provided case studies that demonstrated how three universities have made changes to their services delivery in response to factors related to the student experience agenda. Tricia King, who is pro vice master for student experience and director of external relations at Birkbeck, University of London, focused on 'My Birkbeck', a major change initiative at her institution implemented on a tight timescale for one of the most diverse student populations in the UK (where students range in age from 18 to 100!). In Brendan Casey's case, the challenges of managing super-convergence emerged as a strong theme with regard to the role of director of academic services at the University of Birmingham. Graham Bulpitt, director of information services at Kingston University, brought this session to a close with an illustrated timeline of developments at his institution that highlighted the changing role of library and information services staff. As well as outlining the type of frontline activities in which the Kingston staff are involved, Graham illustrated the support mechanisms available to them by showing the audience screenshots from online staff resources.

The final presentation was delivered by Ewart Wooldridge, chief executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. This widened the debate to the theme of higher education leadership, and gave delegates the opportunity to discuss the opportunities for professional staff to reach the highest levels of management in their institutions, and the means of supporting such ambition.

(There is a Twitter back-channel for this the event, accessible by searching #sconul. As well as commentary on each of the presentations, there is a short debate on the engagement of higher education leaders with microblogging. This was prompted following a question to the audience from me regarding Twitter. A show of hands revealed that a large number of UK academic library leaders are indeed Twitter users.)