Leadership challenges
Some views from those in the hot seat

As part of this issue focusing on leadership, the SCONUL Focus Editorial Team contacted a number of leaders in our profession to obtain their personal views on leadership challenges as well as their tips on how we should be rising to them. We also asked them to offer advice to aspiring leaders. The respondents' views are featured below.

Mark Toole
Head of Libraries and Learning Resources
Nottingham Trent University

Tell us about your role and professional background

I think you could say that I have had an unusual career path! I started out working in the IT industry in a number of different roles, and my first job in academia was leading the front-of-house services in the IT Services of the LSE in the early nineties. Almost as soon as I arrived, the library and IT converged under the leadership of Lynne Brindley, and my library career was born! I have had leadership roles at five universities since then, mostly as the director of converged library, IT and learning technology support services, and in one case as the IT Director only. My role here at Nottingham Trent is Head of Libraries & Learning Resources, and I am responsible for providing strategic leadership for the university's library services and learning resources; blissfully, I do not have any direct responsibility for corporate IT.

On this journey, which has taken me from London to the south coast, Scotland and now the Midlands, I became increasingly convinced of the power of networking and working closely with the libraries of other universities and in other sectors. (Working with colleagues in the NHS can be very challenging at times, as well as very rewarding when it all comes together.) Because I have advocated over the years that we can do some things better together, I have become associated with 'above campus' shared services. I have been on the Executive Board of SCONUL since 2011 and am now the Vice-Chair. I have a long history of working with the Jisc, chairing advisory boards, project steering boards, being a member of service delivery management boards; I am even so long in the tooth that I was a member of one of the famous / infamous sub-committees.

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges for the sector?

For the higher education sector generally, I see the main leadership challenges as managing change, staying on top of increasing complexity and diversity, responding to increasing student expectations and being sufficiently agile to anticipate and respond to these challenges promptly. These are also challenges for academic library leaders. But possibly the biggest challenge libraries face is the tendency for the role of libraries in the strategic development of institutions to be overlooked by vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and finance directors: libraries are too often viewed as 'operational' or 'cost centres' rather than entrepreneurial services that get things done.

I often get asked whether the university library is still the central learning hub of a university campus. Pointing out both that SCONUL statistics show that the average number of visits per full-time equivalent student to their university library has remained pretty constant since 2006–7, and that we are seeing at Nottingham Trent University large year-on-year growth in the use of library facilities and services, does not seem to put this one to bed. I suspect that for

many, the word 'library' still conjures up a building that is a warehouse of books and nothing much more.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

We need to find more convincing ways to demonstrate the impact of libraries on the core academic activities of our institutions, in particular how we help students and researchers to be successful and how we are fundamental to teaching excellence. We have been trying to do this for a number of years, so we know that it is hard to do! I am hopeful that out of the current big push in analytics we shall get new insights and data that will help our cause. If we play our cards carefully, the Teaching Excellence Framework may also help in this area. We need to advocate relentlessly on behalf of our libraries both within our institutions and with regional and national organisations. One way of raising the library's profile in institutions is to get involved in university-wide strategic projects, even if this takes us out of our comfort zone and normal areas of operation.

People are at the heart of libraries – students, academic staff, researchers, the wider community and of course our own staff. Customer service excellence is now becoming the norm; the next stage is effective customer relationship management. If we get this right then we should be on the front foot for getting others to advocate for the library (for example, the student voice seems very powerful in many institutions in England at the moment) and help us anticipate and lead demand rather than merely respond to it. Furthermore, we need to aim to empower library staff more: in a challenging, more complex world everyone has a valuable role to play in a high-quality agile service.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

Being the senior professional accountable for a major service can be a lonely job. So it is important to build good personal networks of peers at other institutions who can provide advice, help and at times just be a listening ear. All the universities I have worked for have a formal governance and management structure, and the informal one, which is where decisions and actions really take place. The informal networks are different at every institution, so it is important to find out how yours work, who are the key players and then start persuading them to support your causes. It helps to be visible outside the library as much as possible and being seen to contribute something more than the traditional view of what a librarian does.

The core activities of any university are teaching and research: being able to demonstrate that you understand how they work, the opportunities and the challenges, at an institutional level and at the coal face, helps create the belief that you and the library can be considered partners in their delivery and development. This contrasts with being seen as part of the dreaded 'centre', perceived as lacking understanding and simply getting in the way. Finally, when discussing library services with colleagues outside the library, keep it simple: we know there are special cases and a lot of complexity, but once the eyes glaze over you have lost them!

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Susan Gibbons
Yale University
University Librarian and Deputy Provost for Libraries & Scholarly Communication

Tell us about your role and professional background

I had hoped to be a medieval historian, but quickly realized that the job market was not very favourable and my Latin was not strong enough. Knowing that I wanted to stay within the academy, I quickly realized that academic libraries would be a potential career path for me. I have Masters degrees in library science and medieval history. After working in libraries for a few years, I realized that my financial acumen and managerial skills were lacking, and consequently I went back to school to obtain an MBA.

In 2000, I began working at the University of Rochester, in upstate New York. There I held a series of positions: digital initiatives librarian, director of digital initiatives, assistant dean for public services & collection development and, in 2008, Dean and Vice Provost of the River Campus Libraries. During those years, a very good mentor made it clear that if I wanted to become a library dean or director, I would need to get a doctorate, which I did in 2009 in higher education administration.

In 2011, I was appointed University Librarian at Yale, and in 2015, I was given the second title of Deputy Provost for Libraries & Scholarly Communication. Yale University Press reports to me with my deputy provost hat on.

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges for the sector?

There are profound changes impacting on academic libraries, many of which are beyond our control. Our environment requires us to be much more agile and flexible than academic libraries have historically been required to be, and the pace of change can be very uncomfortable for everyone. The challenge of being an academic library leader today is to be able to explain the need for change, articulate a compelling vision for where the library needs to go and provide concrete steps to enable us to get there.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

I think it is essential for librarians to remain very close to their users. At the University of Rochester, and to a smaller degree at Yale, we used anthropological and ethnographic methods to study library users. The findings were always surprising: what we thought we knew about our users was not always correct. I think the desire to help and provide excellent service is deeply embedded in the ethos of librarians and librarianship. When we take the time to study our users and truly understand their various academic work practices, then the need for change can become much clearer and the case for change much more compelling.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

I would advise aspiring leaders to give a lot of thought to understanding what inspires them to want to become leaders. My first foray into managerial positions was disastrous. I understood the role of manager only in the context of authority: I tell people what to do. After that unsatisfying experience, I

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was convinced that I was not cut out to be a leader. Several years later, I came to the realization that leadership is really about service. Library leaders dedicate themselves to serving the library and the university. That sense of service really resonates with me, and it is through that lens that I have come to embrace leadership. I am still a very imperfect leader, but I think grounding my leadership in service makes me a better one.

Pete Ryan
Director of Library and Learning Resources
Canterbury Christ Church University

Tell us about your role and professional background

I work at Canterbury Christ Church University, a post-'92 university in the historic city of Canterbury in Kent, as Director of Library and Learning Resources. As part of the directorate of Education and Student Experience, my role is to lead, develop and support the delivery of an excellent student experience together with academic and professional services for colleagues. I am immensely proud to have been part of the planning team for the development of Augustine House Library and Student Services Centre, opened in 2009, which brought a wide range of student services under one roof. In 2013, Augustine House was the joint winner of the SCONUL Library Design Award. During my time working in both public and academic libraries, I have always contributed to wider professional debate and activity, whether through the Public Libraries Group (as treasurer for five years), the M25 regional consortium (as steering group member for four years) or SCONUL (steering group member since 2014).

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges for the sector?

I believe that academic libraries must continue to demonstrate the value that they add to the academic experience, and to describe this value in a way that links to university priorities, such as retention and progression, whilst also developing evidence and performance indicators that measure this value. The interest that the current government has in higher education, as demonstrated by the recent Green Paper, and the impact of developing government policy, cannot be underestimated. The implementation of the Teaching Excellent Framework, funding changes, technological developments, diversifying curricula to work more closely with employers – all these require a flexible and innovative approach to delivering services in the future.

Technology developments and the need to be more tech-savvy continue to impact and influence both the services we can deliver and the skills we need to develop. An ever-increasing mobile environment means we must ensure our services can be accessed by the wide range of devices used by our users. Never has there been a time when we are working with widest range of user skills – from digital fugitives to digital immigrants to digital natives. The global need for an information- and digitally-literate workforce must be seized by the library sector to develop new responses and solutions within a whole new paradigm.

Our staff remain fundamental to the successful response to all these challenges. As a sector we must develop new leaders of the future. We must ensure that our staff have the relevant competences for the future and motivate them to embrace change and widen their scope of engagement, influence and

responsibilities while supporting them through continual skills development. We must be seen as university leaders rather than just leaders of libraries.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

As an important front-line service in a university, it is the responsibility of current leaders in library and information services to ensure that they are creating roles and providing learning and development opportunities that enable current and new staff to step beyond the confines of their profession. There are many examples of libraries working across wider portfolios, to include computing services, student services or academic development. The focus for library leaders of the future is, I believe, to move from departmental-centred leadership, to a more open and flexible model where leaders are able to take on wide-ranging responsibilities and departments, depending on the needs of the organisation, and focus on the user (or student) experience rather than being limited by traditional university structures. The focus needs to shift from library expertise to leadership skills and attitudes, while looking beyond the local to bring and share experience at a national and international level. Developing cross-national relationships and partnerships will be essential in ensuring services remain in step with, match, and, dare I say, lead user needs of the future.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

The best piece of advice I can give is to seize opportunities to work on university-wide projects, to see the world through the eyes of others and be a big-picture thinker. We all enter higher education with our own professional background and skill set, but it's about breaking down some of those professional limitations in order continually to learn and develop new skills and experiences, drawing upon a set of personal skills based on reflection, trust and self-awareness.

Learn to speak with authority and knowledge on a wider range of higher education issues, engage in conversations on academic processes and development, embrace changes within the university's academic portfolio, seek new ways to deliver library services beyond the safe and traditional, empower and enable your colleagues to represent your services in new and different ways, and in turn empower yourself to extend and develop a range of contacts and connections across the university. We must stay connected to what is happening across higher education, as well as forging links and partnerships with related areas of development, such as technology, market research, health and other public sectors.

Nick Bevan
Pro-Vice Chancellor and Director of Library and Student Support
Middlesex University

Tell us about your role and professional background

I currently manage Library and Student Support at Middlesex University. This is a large service of about 175 full-time equivalent staff, bringing together all aspects of generic student support, including library services, learning enhancement, research support, peer-assisted learning, student helpdesk, specialist welfare and visa advice, wellbeing services, student achievement,

student IT support and reception & switchboard. A key part of my job is ensuring that front-line support for students is integrated with second-line specialist help; that the service we provide to students is seamless; and that we are effectively aligned with School and university strategic objectives. Prior to joining Middlesex in October 2009, I was Director of Library Services at Brunel University. I started my professional life as a law librarian (at Bristol Polytechnic) and, however hard I try, I haven't managed to erase a large number of law report abbreviations and 340 classification numbers from my memory.

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges for the sector?

We think that times have been tough, but from the perspective of much of the rest of the public sector, universities have had an easy ride. In almost any scenario one might think of, funding will be squeezed. We have traditionally managed cuts through efficiency savings within established departments, rather than looking at root-and-branch changes across the institution or sector. In higher education institutions we still think in silos and fail to see the how things connect to make up a system. Across the sector there are inefficiencies as, in a competitive environment, we find it hard to work with other institutions to deliver more for less. This is a big leadership challenge – when one is so bogged down in the here and now, the politics of today, how can one undertake the big thinking that will create new structures for the next decade and take our staff with us?

There is a mismatch between what many students need from their university education and what we actually deliver. University curricula are still too geared towards preparing students for future academic studies (which only a small proportion undertake). How can we re-engineer some of our programmes, whilst still preserving the culture that nurtures some of the world's finest researchers?

The way teaching is delivered will have to change, partly to meet the need for inclusivity in the curriculum, partly to ensure that excellent teaching can be delivered with a shrinking budget. This will be incremental – and there is lots of good practice across the sector – but the pace of change will probably have to accelerate and academic staff will need support through this process.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

First, get the basics right. As a profession we should have sorted out how we can effectively provide the learning resources needed for teaching support. Where it does not work at programme or departmental level, it is often because the various stakeholders are not effectively working together to support students. We should be pushing harder to resolve this, and not assuming that the only solution is more resources (which we are unlikely to get). Secondly, look outside the library. Engage with the teaching and research agendas of your university – try to understand the key metrics and drivers, and how the library can support them. This is a more powerful advocacy tool than comparative statistics, which merely show how we benchmark against other universities.

Finally, librarians have a range of valuable skills that could benefit the university, but, traditionally, have had a tendency to be modest about their abilities and / or have chosen to build walls around their territory (depending on how you view it). We need to reach out more and say 'we can do that, we can lead on that'. The future may be as flexible as we choose to make it.

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What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

You will probably come from a particular professional domain (library, if you are reading this!). At an early stage, spend time trying to understand how the rest of the university works. In retrospect I looked inwards for too long and focused on building up my expertise as a librarian – and then had a steep learning curve as I moved to more senior positions. Once you understand how it works now, stand back and think about how you would ideally like it to work if you were a student yourself. Most leaders fail either because they do not take time to understand the business, or because they are so immersed in the business that they fail to put their head above the parapet and ask 'why?' There are few clear signs of what the next twenty-five years in higher education will look like, so you just have to learn to work with a 'beta forever' philosophy, adapting strategy to circumstances and continually engaging with students and researchers to test the effectiveness of the decisions you make. Oh yes, and never – ever – lose control of your inbox.

Heidi Fraser-Krauss
Director of Information Services and University Librarian
University of York

Tell us about your role and professional background

I have been the Director of Information Services at the University of York since Oct 2015, and in February 2016 I became a member of the University Executive Board. I am responsible for the leadership of, and strategy development across, all aspects of information technology and library and archive services for staff, students, campus visitors and visiting scholars.

Before taking on my current job I was the Director of IT Services in York, a post I held for four years. I have a particular interest in using technology, in tandem with process review, to improve services for everybody in the organisation, and hold a passionate belief that in order to provide good services you really have to understand what your customers do.

The library offers a wide range of services to support the teaching, learning and research of the university. It has a strong focus on customer service and continuous service improvement. The library stock includes around one million physical items in addition to over half a million e-books and over 13,000 print and electronic journals and databases.

The Borthwick Institute for Archives is one of the biggest archive repositories outside London. It has archives from all around the world, from the 12th century to the present day. Borthwick users include academic researchers and a large number of members of the public. The Borthwick also provides records management, freedom of information and data protection services for the university and has a growing role in digital archiving.

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges for the sector?

The real lack of certainty about how the sector will be funded in future – tuition fees have remained fixed for a number of years now and the Teaching Excellence Framework proposals, if followed through, would create a tiered tuition-fee funding model for the first time. On the research side, QR funding is vital to our ability to maintain the infrastructure needed to support scientific

research. If this were to go, or to be substantially watered down, 'big science' would really suffer.

Coping with the burden of compliance and regulation and the new threats posed by cyber security; research data management, REF requirements for open access, Tier 4 visa management, HESA returns, Prevent legislation, not to mention the old chestnuts of freedom of information and data protection – the list is endless and seems to grow in both complexity and number every year. On the cyber security front we face almost daily attacks from phishing; malware and the potential for a major data breach are always there.

Keeping the relationship between academic and support staff positive and productive. In a harsher funding environment and with increased regulation and compliance, academic staff can feel that support staff are trying to make their lives more difficult or are putting barriers in the way. It is essential that we do not start fighting amongst ourselves!

Last but not least, keeping up with student demand for study space, learning resources, and the pace of technology change.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

I'm not sure that I can offer much by way of solutions to the sector-wide challenges I have outlined, nor can I identify specific things that librarians can do in response. I do, however, have some more general observations about librarians. It has been very interesting for me taking over the leadership of a library, as my background is IT, and although I have worked alongside librarians throughout my career in higher education, this is the first time I have had responsibility for a library service.

My first observation is that in order to ensure that they are listened to and understood, librarians need to engage much more with their peers in the other support services: estates, student pastoral and academic support, academic registry, IT services, alumni relations and finance are all vital to a library or its customers. All too often the library is seen as an expensive book-issuing service, and nothing more.

My second observation is that libraries are struggling to demonstrate their value to the sciences generally and to scientific research in particular. I believe librarians need to spend much more time understanding what scientists actually do, and what they need from a library service. In my experience (I am married to a professor of physics), credibility is key – anybody, particularly from central services, who does not appreciate the modus operandi of the sciences will be eaten for breakfast!

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

I have a poster on my office wall that says 'If 'plan A' didn't work the alphabet has 25 more letters. Stay cool!' This gives me a great deal of comfort, especially after a bad day. I wholeheartedly believe that in turbulent times a flexible, what-can-we-try-now-approach is vital to survival and success.

In terms of other advice, I have found that working in partnership with others has brought me much more than protection for my position. After all, finding allies and people to support you is much easier if you reciprocate and are easy to work with. In a similar vein, I do not think of the budget I am allocated as mine, but as the university's, and my responsibility is to spend it to further the university's aims not the library's or mine. If this means giving some of it to another area to support a university goal, experience has taught me that this

brings more in the long run than arguing about why I should keep it. I have also noticed that my boss wants me to bring him solutions, not problems, and I encourage my staff to work in the same way. Complaining about why something does not work is much easier than coming up with a solution, but it won't get you promoted.

Finally, I have found that people work best if they are trusted and respected, regardless of their grade. I try very hard to treat everybody in the same way and have found that this earns me their respect and loyalty, which in turn generates good will and the ability to move mountains.

Cathal McCauley
Librarian
Maynooth University and St Patrick's College Maynooth

Tell us about your role and professional background

I am Maynooth University and St Patrick's College Maynooth Librarian. St Patrick's College was established as a seminary over two hundred years ago and in 1968 it broadened its base to include lay students. In 1997 Maynooth University was established as an autonomous entity as part of the National University of Ireland. The library provides services to both Maynooth University (MU) and St Patrick's College. The university has 9,000 students and eight hundred staff and recently completed a major library extension.

For the last twenty years I have worked primarily in libraries and have also spent some time as a management consultant with a leading Irish professional services firm. My library work was quite varied and has included medical, business and company libraries. Since 2002 I have worked exclusively in academic libraries. In my first senior library role I was responsible for front-of-house services across five sites and three campuses at University College Dublin, and since then I have had a particular interest in the customer experience and how innovation can enhance it.

What do you consider to be the main leadership challenges in the sector?

Doing more with less and developing staff to their full potential to meet our fast-changing needs are major challenges facing university libraries today. Student numbers are growing but resources are not keeping pace; as a result the need to innovate has never been greater. The key source of innovation is library staff. An ability to anticipate student and faculty needs and proactively meet and exceed them is essential. One of the requirements for this is the right skill set, for which recruitment cannot be the only approach – we must all continually develop and broaden our skills.

How should librarians be responding to these challenges?

Doing less with more requires a varied approach, including being creative in our identification of areas for collaboration and sources of funding. Some of our newer roles, for example digital scholarship, are excellent opportunities for this, but many traditional resources such as special collections also present such opportunities. Staff development requires on the one hand having clear knowledge of the skills required, and on the other a sincere commitment to enabling staff to develop continuously to meet them. In many cases the

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fundamental skills and qualities of library staff are highly relevant, and what is required is a refocusing or deepening of existing strengths. I am very committed to developing leadership potential, and MU library managers have the opportunity to complete formal leadership programmes, including the Future Leaders Programme (FLP) and the LIBER Emerging Leaders Programme.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders in higher education?

Everyone's career is different, but my experience as a management consultant, which at the time seemed like a detour, has proven invaluable during my time in library leadership positions. The pace and nature of change that is now the norm in libraries means that the kind of skills and perspective consultants need is very appropriate. Similarly, my commercial experience means that I am not daunted by some of the more business-type approaches and challenges that are now common in libraries and the wider academic sector. In short, I think we need to be open to different experiences and to draw on them throughout our careers.