SCONUL 50

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So *SCONUL Focus*, previously *SCONUL Newsletter*, has reached its 50th issue. If we were produced by Channel 4 we would probably have a celebration, possibly over a bank holiday weekend, with Jimmy Carr hosting a countdown of the 50 best articles in *Focus*.

As we are not produced by a big media company but by a few volunteers (ably supported by Maureen, our copyeditor; Steve, our desktop publishing maestro; and SitMui in the SCONUL office), we cannot offer anything so exciting ... but we can still provide a review of the first fifty issues.

To quote another Channel 4 staple – '*SCONUL Focus*, let's have a look at your best bits.'

SCONUL NEWSLETTER IS BORN

The first issue of *SCONUL Newsletter* came out in Spring 1994, 33 pages with a black-and-white cover announcing that it was 'replacing *COPOL Newsletter*'. COPOL, the Council of Polytechnic

Librarians, merged with SCONUL when the polytechnics became universities and thus the newsletter became part of this new empire. The then editor, Lyn Turpin, called it 'Number 0', 'an interim issue' falling between *COPOL Newsletter* and *SCONUL Newsletter* but lacking the 'new SCONUL visual identity' (p 2). Issue 1 (or 0) mostly covered SCONUL business such as the Joint COPOL/SCONUL advisory committee on staff development. There were a few articles, including one from (future editor) Mike Heery called 'Why do academic librarians write articles?' (pp 14–17) – something this editor ponders in his article 'Writing for the professional press' in this fiftieth issue. Mike sums up what is for me the *SCONUL Newsletter/Focus* philosophy very neatly:

> *'Presumably, the primary purpose of our professional literature is to help practising librarians. It is to communicate on practical matters so that we can learn from one another.' (p 15)*

Issue 2 had a far more familiar look, with a dark blue band across the front of the cover along with '*SCONUL Newsletter*' in capitals, the SCONUL logo and the number/season/year in red. The editor begins this 30-page issue with a heartfelt comment: 'First of all, many apologies to all who met my deadline for this issue and expected to see their contributions in print months ago. This issue has been plagued with delays of one sort or another' (p 2). How I can empathise! Again SCONUL/COPOL news dominated, with a review of the spring conference in Bath and a full-page picture of the delegates in the historic city. Most of the items were news pieces, though there was an article from Bruce Royan (pp 26–8) on 'The scholar workstation' which 'would support the personal productivity, interpersonal communication and information access needs of academic staff via a single, consistent and intuitive user interface'. The illustration looks strangely like a cross between a VLE, iGoogle and Facebook. Amazing stuff.

Number 3 was far more substantial (66 pages) and was something of a themed issue, with quite a few pieces on customer-satisfaction surveys. The editor also announced – in a rather relieved fashion – that she was now surrounded by an editorial team of Janet Gardner, Mike Heery, Angela Horrocks, Karen Stanton and Stephen Town. The issue also announced that one Toby Bainton was leaving the University of Reading to become SCONUL Secretary – 'Congratulations, Toby!' By issue 4 the *Newsletter* was including more illustra-

tions ... including an advert for something intriguingly called 'French Book Services'.

Issue 5/6 (a combined issue) saw Lyn leaving. I feel for her comment that 'When I started, the *Newsletter* was very much a solo production.' I am only glad that I have always had an editorial team with which to share the load. I am also surprised to note that 5/6 heralded my first appearance, contributing news from Reading.

From issue 7 the editorial came from Mike Heery, noting that this was very much a team effort ... albeit a 'time consuming' effort. There was also the claim (hope?) that after 1996 editorial control would pass to the SCONUL office. Despite one full-page picture (of the learning centre at the University of North London) the issue was very text-heavy. Issue 9 saw a slight move away from news and SCONUL issues to more articles, largely with the practical emphasis you would expect with Mike at the helm.

TEENAGE YEARS

The next few issues really saw the publication develop and grow. The covers started including three bullet points to highlight key articles/themes. Issue 14 was the first time *SCONUL Newsletter* appeared with a glued spine instead of staples, as it reached a massive 86 pages. Illustrations started to feature more heavily. By issue 17 the *Newsletter* really started to feel like a journal,

with the 89 pages arranged with articles at the front and news items at the back.

Issue 13 (1998) saw an article heralding a new web site for SCONUL. 2010's SCONUL conference in Leeds (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) saw a poster announcing a new web site for SCONUL.
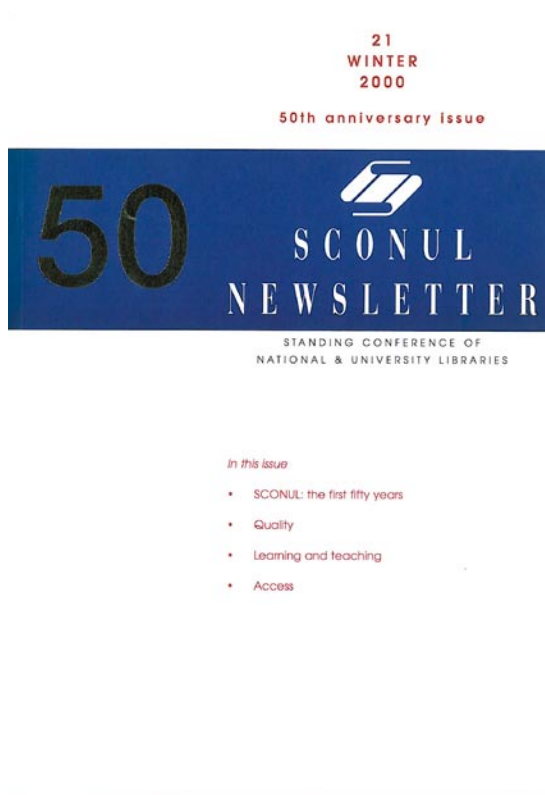
Issue 13 also saw Sheila Corrall introduce the 'SCONUL vision' (pp 3-6) and a view of libraries in 2002. SCONUL's 'vision' was not far out and still sounds relevant for 2010:

> *'Many resources and services will be available electronically via the network, but students will chose to use the library as a place to work, both for quiet private study and group project work.'*

> *'Library staff contribution in creating the infrastructure to support research will not be fully understood by many academic staff and institutional managers.'*

> *'There will be a continuing requirement for efficiency savings.'*

COMING INTO *FOCUS*

21
WINTER
2000
50th anniversary issue

50
SCONUL
NEWSLETTER

STANDING CONFERENCE OF
NATIONAL & UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

In this issue
*   SCONUL: the first fifty years
*   Quality
*   Learning and teaching
*   Access

Issue 21 was my first issue holding the blue pencil (after a couple of years on Mike's editorial team). I had inherited an issue that would be a special issue celebrating the first fifty years of SCONUL – hence the big gold '50' that appeared

on the cover. Included were various group photos of the SCONUL chiefs from conferences over the years. Spot Philip Larkin! Spot the woman!! We also collected together short essays as the 'True confessions of SCONUL trainees', had reflections from Bernard Naylor on 'SCONUL – fifty years young' and a brave piece of future-gazing from Jean Sykes called 'SCONUL: the next 50 years' (pp 15–18). Despite Jean's conclusion that one day someone could write a pithy piece highlighting how the SCONUL community got its predictions wrong (I was going to try, believe me!), like Sheila I think Jean flagged up issues that probably will still seem prescient in 2050:

*   regionalism
*   collaboration
*   putting the user at the centre
*   change-management ('we badly need to educate our staff to embrace change and risk rather than fear them')
*   self-promotion ('we do not market our successes nearly enough').

Some of these themes you will find in the 'Libraries of the future' scenarios currently being developed for the community (again see the review of this year's SCONUL conference in this issue of *Focus* for more details).

These years saw *SCONUL Newsletter* look to the future as well. Issue 24 was the first to look like a sizable journal, the first with over 100 pages. It was also the first copy to be available electronically as well as in print. Issue 25 was a bumper issue of 128 pages. This is because we announced it would be a special issue on staffing matters. Boy, did the articles flood in!

Special issues have become an important approach for this publication, with themed issues over the last few years on staffing (issue 25), surveys (29), marketing (31), buildings (38 and 46), web 2.0 (43), reflections on 'what made me the librarian I am' (36) and observations from 'future librarians' (40). The marketing issue went on to form the basis of the SCONUL working paper 'Marketing library services'. One issue of which I am particularly proud is issue 42, our international issue with contributions from librarians and SCONUL's sister organisations from across the globe.

In issue 27 we charted how *SCONUL Newsletter* had grown. The editorial (p 3) outlined recent developments:

- 'a new statement of purpose that appears at the front of the *SCONUL Newsletter* and encourages contributions from staff at all levels
- the addition of editorial columns designed to encourage more of a dialogue with the readership
- a push to encourage the submission of more photographs and illustrations to make the *Newsletter* more visually appealing
- the grouping of articles by themes and special themed issues
- to complement our established '*News from member libraries*' column, a new '*News from SCONUL*' section added to highlight many of the good things SCONUL is achieving for its members
- a new series on 'skills for today's information professional', providing practical tips on topics relevant to the modern information worker (planning a conference, presentation skills and mentoring have been covered so far and a guide to getting published should follow shortly), plus an occasional series focusing on special interest groups
- a new web version of the *Newsletter*, with the latest issues available on the SCONUL web site at http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter.htm: this has proved immensely popular with over 1,550 hits for issue 26 so far, almost 500 on one day alone.'

The publication had steadily grown in size (from an average of 30 pages per issue to an average of 130) and moved from being a collection of reports on SCONUL activities to an organ that predominantly enables SCONUL members to share good practice (via articles and news from member libraries), as well as providing what is one of the many ways SCONUL has to get news of its myriad activities across to the membership.

By issue 31 (spring 2004) it was certainly no longer a 'newsletter' so we changed the name. After a competition that invited suggestions for new titles – entries included *The SCONUL journal*, which I liked for its simplicity, and *The SCONUL standard*, which I liked for its complexity – we plumped for *SCONUL Focus*, which won its suggester, Christopher Cipkin, a bottle of champagne (see picture in issue 33, p 4).

'ARTICLES, REPORTS AND NEWS STORIES FROM PRACTITIONERS ... TO GENERATE DEBATE AND GOOD PRACTICE'

SCONUL Newsletter/Focus has now run hundreds of articles, reports and news stories written by

practitioners, for practitioners, with the aim of generating debate and promoting good practice.

Some issues – like the poor – are always with us. Worrying about the level of our fines (see issue 35) and about not being sent reading lists (see Philip Pacy's 'The missing link? Reading lists and academic libraries' in issue 7) and getting complaints about the price of photocopying ('people will complain, however cheap the service is' – Helen Pickering and John Crawford in issue 5/6) will always be in fashion.

Other articles were very much of their time. Issue 19 was the self-issue and -return issue, issue 16 saw the first mention of metadata and in issue 21 I thought I was being very novel when we first explored noise management. 26 was 24x7 and by issue 48 – despite the problems Sheila Corrall foresaw – we were calling on researchers to survey their information needs. Technological developments can also be charted in Focus. In issue 27 (winter 2002) Angie Donoghue could still ask 'VLE information adviser – what's that?' In issue 34 we ran a review of Google Scholar (good but with 'serious limitations' was our man's conclusion) and by issue 40 we were braving web 2.0: 'Podcasting: if Terry Wogan can do it so can we'. In issue 34, hot on the heels of Bangor dispensing with subject librarians, Phil Sykes was making the case for getting more. And in issue 32 (summer/autumn 2004) of this journal the 'Cephalonian

method' of library induction was introduced to the world.

As well as classic articles like this, *SCONUL Newsletter/Focus* has seen some pretty classic titles over the years. Some are frank and heartfelt. We can guess what lay behind pieces like Frances Hall's 'How to install an access control system in less than four months and live to tell the tale' (issue 25) and Judith Stewart's guide to managing the people side of moving a library: 'Basically, you do miss your mates' (issue 29). And Peter Moutjoy's article in our tenth issue does exactly what it says on the tin: 'What worked and didn't work in planning a learning resource centre'.

Some titles display a sly wit. A remark from SCONUL's user survey of 2002 gave Mary Morley the title for her review in issue 28: SCONUL is famously described as 'A private club for lonely chief librarians'. Even slyer is Gail Merrett's description of a well-being course developed by Oxford University library services in 29: 'A healthy Bod'.

Other titles are just bizarre. Steve Morgan's guide to interview techniques in issue 35 was called 'What would you do if I asked you to shave your beard off?' (Steve's author picture shows he must have declined the offer). I attempted to pep up an article on peer observation and review for issue 31 with a title about my peer group of three: 'How I joined the triads'. On reflection, I suppose the title could have been worse ....

Even more worrying is John Field's article 'Is lifelong learning better than sex?' in issue 16. I won't give away the answer here but I will say I am somewhat relieved that we didn't become an online journal until *after* issue 16.

Strangest of all, though, has to be Aidan Turner-Bishop's eye-opening 'Left-handed library users: an internet-based mini-survey' in issue 5/6.

Over recent years we have added a series called 'A week in the life' to review the richness of our professional lives. The first 'Week' came from Toby Bainton at SCONUL (issue 36), the second from Bob McKee at CILIP (37), the most poignant from Saad Eskander, director of the Iraq National Library and Archive. Read it (issue 39, pp 4–7) and you will complain less about your working week, believe me.

SCONUL FUTURE

So here we are at SCONUL 50. What of the future? Like Jean Sykes, I do not wish to open myself up to ridicule in future issues (I do plan to read the editorial of SCONUL 100 very closely so be warned, future editors!) but there are some things that I hope will change, and others I hope will remain the same.

I think the changes will come with technology. In this issue we have featured details of technological developments past and present. I want *Focus* to grow, facilitated by new and developing applications. We need to embrace web 2.0 technologies now to facilitate debate and get more of a flow in communication in the journal. Although the paper issue has many benefits, technology provides the opportunity of including 'value-added' elements and enhancing the reader experience. I hope we can make the most of this with a new SCONUL web site.

But something should remain the same and this – if I may use the term – is the 'journalism'. I go back to the first bullet point in the editorial of issue 27 – the statement of purpose that appears at the front of each issue of *SCONUL Focus*. I was having a bit of a Citizen Kane moment when we put this together. But unlike Kane (who spent his career betraying his principles and learning to regret) I still believe in this article of faith:

> '*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 ... 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.*'

Long may this continue.