
Welcome to the new Executive Director of SCONUL: an interview with Ann Rossiter



Can you give us a brief career history?

I have spent my career to date working in a variety of public policy roles, including as the Director of a think-tank looking chiefly at the provision of public services; as the Board Director at a communications consultancy; and as a researcher in Parliament and at the Political Research Unit of the BBC. Most recently, I worked as a special adviser for the Rt. Hon. John Denham MP, including at the short-lived Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills where I worked on higher education policy. Although I am not a librarian, I hope that I bring some useful skills to SCONUL which will help promote the value of libraries to Vice-Chancellors and beyond.

What attracted you to the post of SCONUL Executive Director?

For me, higher education is one of the most important, perhaps the most important, part of our public services. It is the major engine we have for improving people's chances of making a success of their life: of fulfilling their capabilities, intellectually and in terms of personal satisfaction and prosperity. It is also a driver for, and a barometer for, the health of our society and our economy. For all these reasons, the health of our universities is of critical importance. I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to play a role in its on-going success.

What are your first impressions of SCONUL?

SCONUL, and representatives of its member institutions, have been very welcoming and very

ready to share their knowledge and time. This seems entirely characteristic of a sector whose approach is overwhelmingly collegiate. I have also been struck by how good professionals within the sector are at sharing knowledge and information with each other – perhaps not a surprise. However, this doesn't always extend communications beyond the sector: librarians seem reluctant to blow their own trumpet. This is something I hope to help SCONUL members address.

Do you have any initial thoughts on how SCONUL will need to respond to the cuts in public sector finances?

The coming months and years are going to be very challenging for all academic libraries but there are a number of things that SCONUL can do to help support member institutions through this. This will include making sure that everyone involved in making decisions about funding understands the importance of library and information services to students' achievement; to their satisfaction and the health of universities, our economy and our society. We will also look at practical measures of support to make the most of fewer resources; to manage the process of change as smoothly as possible and to make sure that the sector's instinct for collaboration is not swamped by drive towards greater competition.

In an ideal world, what would SCONUL look like in five years' time?

What is your favourite library?

I would pick three. First would be Peckham public library, close to where I live in south London. This is a marvellous example of what great design and architecture can do to put a public library at the heart of a community. Second is the Protestant Dissenters' Library, founded early in the eighteenth century and now in Gordon Square. For me, this represents the capacity of learning to liberate. Finally I would choose the mobile library which each week used to visit the Welsh village in which I grew up each week. This was where I developed my own love of books and learning.

If you were showing a visitor round your home town, where would you take them

I have lived in Brixton, in south London, for the last ten years, and it is somewhere I am very attached to. I would take them to its street market, open every day, where you can buy everything from fish from the Caribbean to fruit from China.

I would also take them to Brockwell Park, a wonderful green space used by the whole community and to the Tate library, where you can still catch a glimpse of the genteel Victorian suburb that Brixton once was.

What is your most treasured possession?

I have very few things of much material value, but I do own a bowl from circa 2,500 BC from Cyprus and which was originally used to hold milk. It is fragile and beautifully decorated, but is basically utilitarian in design. Holding it I feel connected to the human beings who once owned it and whose lives are in some ways unimaginably remote from ours but whose central humanity is no different.

Who would play you in the film of your life?

No-one I hope! Since most of my life has involved sitting in front of a computer, I can't imagine it would make very gripping viewing.

What single thing would most improve the quality of your life?

Like many other people, the thing that would most improve the quality of my life is more time. Beyond that, I am currently convincing myself that an iPad would make all the difference.