'The biggest concern is going to be money': the SCONUL Top Concerns Survey, 2010

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INTRODUCTION

Each spring, SCONUL sends out a Top Concerns Survey to all of its directors and librarians in the UK and Ireland. The survey is web-based and is deliberately brief, taking no more than five minutes to complete. It attempts to obtain an impression of the issues that SCONUL directors and librarians think will predominate in their work over the next twelve months. SCONUL can then match its strategies and activities to its members' concerns.

There were 135 responses to the 2010 SCONUL Top Concerns Survey. This was the highest response rate since the survey started some six years ago and reflected the views of over three-quarters of SCONUL's institutional members.

For the last four years, the survey has used the *e-inform* web survey software developed by Priority Research Ltd. SCONUL is very grateful to Priority Research Ltd for their continuing partnership and support in library-based surveys.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The full report of the survey, along with the datafield summary and the full text of the questionnaire, is available on the SCONUL website.[1] As in 2009, the world economic downturn and its knock-on effects on the higher education sectors in the UK and Ireland means that *Fund-*

ing and financial management continues to be the predominant concern of SCONUL directors and librarians: 97% of survey respondents rated this issue as either a very high or a fairly high concern, with 84% of respondents rating it as a very high concern. Can the sanguine 3% who have not let diminishing budgets and currency depreciation dominate their lives let the rest of us in on their secret?

The next two top concerns were some way behind, with the *E-environment* receiving a rating of 86% and Policy and strategy receiving 80%.

Question 6 of the survey attempted to get more detail on issues to do with *Funding and financial management*. The three top concerns in this area were the rather gloomy trio of:

- *Prioritising expenditure areas, including possible reductions in resources, facilities and/or services*: 87% of respondents rated this as either a fairly high or a very high concern
- *Planning for a reduction in overall resource*: 84%
- *Reviewing staff deployment and staffing totals*: 79%.

Perhaps surprisingly, only 40% of respondents rated *Developing strategies for income generation* as either a very high or a fairly high concern, along with only a 46% rating for *Developing shared services and joint provision with other libraries*.

TOP CONCERNS OVER THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS

The top concerns of SCONUL directors and librarians over the coming year are summarised in the chart in Figure 1.

Figure 1. 2010 Top-concern percentages for the next twelve months

The concerns over financial issues were reflected in most of the free-text comments in the survey, which included:

Current financial concerns touch on everything.

I'm afraid that by far the biggest concern is going to be money or more precisely the lack of it!

Exploiting technology to free staff time.

Driving forward strategic changes and developments, rather than being engrossed with the negative financial outlook.

As in 2009, the *E-environment* was the second-rated top concern, with a rating of 86%. *Policy and strategy* issues jumped from fourth in 2009 to third in 2010, with a rating of 80%.

Trends in SCONUL top concerns

As the SCONUL Top Concerns Survey has been run in the same format for the last four years, it may be possible to discern some longitudinal trends (see Figure 2). Given the relatively small sample sizes, some caution is needed in this analysis.
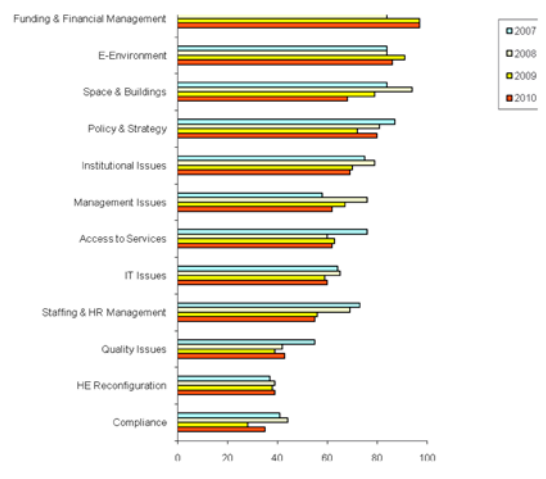

Figure 2. Trends in top concerns, 2007–10

The trends in top concerns over the last four years indicate the following:

- Most issues have remained relatively constant. Examples of this include *IT issues*, which received a rating of 64% in 2007 and 60% in 2010, and *Management issues*, which was at 58% in 2007 and 62% in 2010.
- *Funding and financial management* along with the *E-environment* have increased as concerns over this four-year period.
- In contrast, *Quality issues* and *Staffing and HR management* have declined as concerns since 2007.
- *Space and buildings* was the top-rated concern in 2008, with a rating of 94%. Probably

reflecting the difficult financial situation, this had declined to the fifth-rated concern by 2010, with a rating of 68%.

Top concerns of sub-groups

The survey also included four brief demographic questions. Respondents were asked to indicate their home country, their type of institution (based on the SCONUL *Statistical return*), the size of their institution in terms of full time students and their type of organisation (again, based on the categorisation in the SCONUL *Statistical return*). This allowed cross-tabulation of this data against the top-concerns ratings over the next twelve months. The demographic response rates broadly matched the make-up of SCONUL members but, as some of the sample sizes were small, there should be a cautious interpretation of these results.

As in previous surveys, the similarities in response across the sub-groups were far more evident than any dissimilarities. As an example of this, the responses by type of institution show a broadly similar response to issues, despite the significant disparities in institutional type (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Top concerns over the next twelve months by type of institution

Conclusion

The SCONUL Top Concerns Survey continues to give a useful insight into the issues that will be of most concern for SCONUL directors and librarians over the coming year. It will come as no surprise at all that these issues will be dominated by financial management and funding. SCONUL will continue to adapt its strategies and activities to support its members through this potentially dif-

ficult period, with the current initiative on shared services as just one promising example of this.

REFERENCE

1 http://www.sconul.ac.uk/members/topconcerns/