

SCONUL Leadership Task and Finish Group

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The overarching theme of leadership in this issue of *SCONUL Focus* coincides with the initiation of a SCONUL Leadership Task and Finish Group as part of the delivery of the SCONUL Strategy 2016–19: collaborating for change. The decision to set up a group focusing on issues around leadership was taken as a result of survey feedback from members and subsequent discussion with the Board and Strategy Group. It is important to recognise that members were clear that leadership is not a separate issue from others being addressed as part of the strategy. It relates closely to the need to advocate and demonstrate value on the one hand, and having a clear vision for the development of the library service on the other.



Challenges

The role and shape of the academic library is continually shifting and evolving as we shape our services to meet the current and future needs of our universities and in response to the transformation of the higher education landscape. The Task Group will focus on developing a range of initiatives to enhance the collective and individual leadership capacity across SCONUL to ensure that members are fully equipped to lead through this process of change. It is of course a complex terrain. While it is possible to generalise about the culture of the academic library, there are wide variations in structure, size and mission across the sector. The individuals and teams leading libraries, including new and established directors and deputies, may all have different and specific requirements in developing their leadership capacity. The needs of senior staff joining libraries from other sectors or other higher education departments may be disparate. New directors stepping into a leadership role for the first time also often face particular challenges, which may have a different nuance for deputies moving up within their own organisation. The traits and behaviours that enable success when leading within the library environment may contrast with those needed to thrive and be influential outside the library, for example on the senior management team of the university and in the board room. One implication of the highly collaborative culture of academic libraries is that library staff moving into leadership roles can struggle to make their voices heard in the wider higher education domain where overtly competitive behaviour is tolerated and even encouraged. There can be a tendency for librarians to be seen as 'good citizens' who play by the rules. While this can have positive benefits where librarians are trusted to operate in the interests of the institution as a whole, there can be negative consequences in terms of being more assertive and politically astute. Often the library can be seen as a 'black box' that operates efficiently and effectively with minimum need for intervention and is therefore largely not on the vice-chancellor's radar. Crucially, this may lead vice-chancellors to underestimate the strategic nature of the leadership of libraries, and to under-value library leaders. The danger of this is that status, pay and seniority may lessen over

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time. It is vital therefore that leaders have the necessary tools to be powerful advocates of their library services and themselves.

Although these are identified as some of the challenges, it is important to recognise the considerable talents that already exist within our leadership community. Our members manage and lead complex structures, large budgets and many staff very successfully and they are well respected nationally and internationally.

Objectives

The Task Group will work to ensure directors have the skills and attributes they require to lead and deliver responsive and innovative academic library services. A common theme identified by new and established library leaders is the need to develop emotional resilience – it is lonely at the top. The Task Group will identify gaps in existing support and will seek to set up formal and semi-formal structures for mutual support for heads of service to share information and expertise. As well as more practical interventions, the group will explore ways of responding to some of the longer-term challenges in deepening leadership skills across the whole community.

Next steps

The Leadership Task and Finish Group is at the start of an 18-month project that is due to complete in summer 2017. During the course of the project, further engagement with the SCONUL membership about requirements and priorities will be essential. In the meantime we welcome comments and feedback. Please contact the Group Chair Alison Baud (a.baud@bathspa.ac.uk) or any of the members listed on the SCONUL web pages at <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/leadership-capacity-task-finish-group>

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