



People in the News

Sara Marsh

It is often said that if you want something done, you should ask a busy person, and Sara Marsh is proof of that expression. Her full-time job is Director of Learner Support Services at the University of Bradford but she also finds energy to chair a national organization: The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL).

Your Editor began by asking Sara: What is the objective of SCONUL? Sara explained, "We aim to promote awareness of the role of academic libraries in supporting research excellence, student achievement and employability. We seek to represent the views of academic libraries to government and other stakeholders, and we support libraries in collaborating to deliver services efficiently and to share best practice."

Sara went on to clarify that SCONUL is the organization that represents all university libraries in the UK and Ireland, as well as national libraries and many of the UK's colleges of higher education (HE).

Each member institution has a SCONUL representative who is usually the Director of Library Services or equivalent. The representatives elect an Executive Board whose members work with the Executive Director, Ann Rossiter, and her small team based in London to deliver SCONUL's objectives.

SCONUL is an engaged and interested group of senior professionals who genuinely enjoy working collaboratively. "We believe that sharing knowledge and experience through SCONUL helps us to improve services for our end users, as well as being hugely valuable for our own professional development", says Sara.

As Chair, Sara's role is to lead the Executive Board and to support Ann and the team. She is often asked to represent SCONUL in person, either by contributing to different organizations and initiatives, or by communicating a 'SCONUL view' on matters of relevance to the sector. "In practice we share these responsibilities around the Board, and often draw on the wider membership to make a contribution. One of the nice things about SCONUL", says Sara, "is that whenever we ask for expressions of interest in working for SCONUL in some capacity, our members are always keen to come forward to offer their services, for which we are extremely grateful. Last summer, we elected four new members to the Board and made two co-options, so our current Board is a relatively new team. We are working well together, and my first year as Chair is going very quickly!"

"The new SCONUL Board is working well as a team."

99 At the University of Bradford, Sara is responsible not only for the Library, but also for IT Services and the Careers, Counselling and Disability Services. Sara says, "I have been at Bradford for nearly six years now, and I'm very much enjoying working in a range of professional areas. It's good to be able to develop synergies between our complementary services, and we are all now under one roof (with the Students' Union), which is great. From a SCONUL perspective, being a 'converged' Director helps me to develop SCONUL's partnership working with other professional bodies such as the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) for IT Services and AMOSSHE, The Student Services Organization."



Sara sharing a lighter moment with colleagues at the 2013 UCISA conference in Liverpool. Here, the more serious discussion was around the skills required of IT and information professionals in a session presented by the British Computer Society
 Photo by kind permission of UCISA

Before coming to Bradford, Sara was at Swansea University, where her last role was as Deputy Director of Library and Information Services. She says that Swansea was a wonderful place to live and work, not least because her office had a sea view! Sara says of her time there, "I was fortunate to work for two inspirational Directors (first Andrew Green and then Chris West) who encouraged me to get involved with professional bodies both within and outside Wales, including SCONUL. While at Swansea, I was actively involved in developing the SCONUL Access scheme and its predecessor UK Libraries Plus, enabling students and staff to use academic libraries outside their home institutions."

Sara's first year as Chair of SCONUL has come at a time of significant change for the higher education sector, with the publication of the 'Finch Report' featuring large. Your Editor was interested to know what the implications of this Report are for SCONUL members. Sara explained, "The Finch Report has been a significant milestone in the journey towards improving access to published research for everybody. The high cost of journal subscriptions has increasingly been recognized in the HE media, and researchers themselves have started to explore and promote alternative publishing models, which is great for our members. The Finch Report has provided a focus for a 'full and frank' debate on the issues surrounding academic publishing, highlighting different stakeholder perspectives. Our members need to be fully engaged in this dialogue. It feels at present as though the issues that have been close to our hearts for a long time are now being openly debated across a much wider range of stakeholders – which is excellent, but we need to ensure we continue to make our voice heard."

100 From April 2013, Research Councils UK (RCUK) is providing a new funding mechanism – a block grant to universities and eligible research organizations to cover the cost of article processing charges (APCs). Your Editor was interested to hear what opportunities and challenges this policy presents for the SCONUL membership. Sara explained, “SCONUL representatives are working with research managers in their institutions to help make best use of available budgets, and to try to work out the expected costs of institutional research publication activity. The picture is variable across the sector because of the different funding levels, and library directors have valuable expertise to contribute. And it is complicated by the ever more sophisticated business models being developed by publishers.

The main concern for libraries is that overall the costs of producing and purchasing published research will increase – subscriptions may not reduce as APCs increase. It does seem (anecdotally) that some institutions are having to ‘find’ new money to support publication costs.”

“We are trying to work out the costs of institutional research publication activity.”

Sara went on to point out, “Researchers are concerned about their choice of where to publish being constrained by funding considerations (and indeed by requirements relating to open access). Research careers depend on being able to publish in the ‘right’ journals, and there are particular issues in relation to early-career researchers.

SCONUL members want to support the research quality aspirations of their institutions, while also promoting the importance of free access to published research, and managing budgets at library and institutional levels. It’s a complex picture.”

The UK is now leading a transition to gold open access, with the result that most subscription journals have a hybrid option for open articles. Your Editor asked if this results in confusion for the end user, and if so, how libraries can help. Sara agreed that there is confusion, but pointed out that increasing the quantity of freely available articles is a good thing in principle. “Libraries can help by continuing to implement resource discovery systems that make end-user searching and retrieval as efficient as possible”, says Sara. “One of the big challenges for information professionals is helping users to navigate the range of different ways in which ‘their’ resources can be accessed. We need to work with vendors and experts to find ways of bringing the library (and published research resources) to the user – so that they don’t have to do all the work.”

With the UK government making a considerable investment in gold open access, your Editor asked Sara what her members’ expectations are in terms of journal subscriptions.

“Expectations or aspirations?!” queried Sara. “Our members would like to see the cost of subscriptions come down – in real terms, but also relative to the cost of APCs. The principle should be that the process of producing and making available publicly funded research outputs should be at least cost-neutral, otherwise the value of the government’s investment will not be realized. Our concerns are that the real cost of implementing gold will be greater than anticipated and that for individual HEIs the journals budget could be even more squeezed in order to support the costs of APCs.”

“Making research available through repositories does increase the overall profile of institutional research.”

Sara pointed out that the sector-wide discussion about open access has definitely raised the profile of institutional repositories. “Many of our member institutions have long-established mandates requiring the deposit of research outputs in the repository, though actual practice remains patchy”, explained Sara. “The biggest challenge is ensuring that eligible research outputs are indeed deposited. We know that making research available through repositories does increase the number of hits via Google and other search engines, hence raising the overall profile of institutional research. We need to make the deposit process as easy as possible, and information professionals in our member libraries can help researchers with this. We also need to continue to provide reliable copyright advice, as there can often be misunderstandings in this area.”

101 She continued, “National initiatives are needed to draw repository contents together and enable cross-searching. While institutions naturally want to show the quality of their own research, end users are primarily interested in a subject approach.”

Collaboration and knowledge sharing is a theme that comes over very strongly in Sara’s explanation of the role of SCONUL. This is finely demonstrated by Sara’s response to your Editor’s question about how SCONUL is supporting its membership during this period of rapid transition.

“We try to ensure that members are up to date with all the discussion and debate going on in the sector”, explained Sara. “We are represented on the Open Access Implementation Group (along with RLUK and a range of other bodies) and we have just commissioned some research into open access issues via our Strategy Group on Academic Content and Communication, which is led by Kitty Inglis from Sussex. We are actively involved with the Jisc APC project (supported by JISC Collections and Open Access Key), which seeks to help members manage article processing charges and collect relevant statistics. Of course, our members are also doing a lot to support each other informally by exchanging information and best practice.”

“Sara is keen that SCONUL develops its partnership working with other bodies.”

Leading an organization with membership as diverse as that of SCONUL must be challenging for any Chair, but Sara sees this very diversity as one of the best things about SCONUL in that it represents all HE libraries. However, Sara points out that such a diverse and interesting group can present a real challenge in that it is difficult to speak with one voice. “We represent libraries from all the mission groups, and their needs are very different, especially with something as complex as open access and research funding”, explained Sara. “We have tried hard to ensure a broad representation of institution types across our newly created Strategy Groups, and the Academic Content and Communication Group is also setting up an Advisory Board so that experts from different backgrounds can be included.” Sara is also keen that SCONUL develops its partnership working with other bodies. “Jisc and RLUK are particularly important to us in the context of open access,” says Sara. “Our Executive Director, Ann Rossiter, is very active in meeting with members and seeking to understand their concerns. Finally, we have just recruited a new role to our executive team – the Head of Policy and Member Engagement – and this role will support Ann both in developing SCONUL’s policy and in communicating that effectively to external stakeholders.”

With a demanding day job, and the leadership of SCONUL, your Editor wondered if Sara ever finds time to relax. Due to the reluctant arrival of spring in 2013, Sara says, “Right now my garden is covered in six inches of snow but under normal circumstances I would quite enjoy a bit of digging, mowing and planting. I live near Shipley Glen in West Yorkshire and



there are some lovely walks out from the house, so I enjoy, for example, going up on to Baildon Moor or down into Saltaire for a potter round Salt’s Mill and a walk along the canal. Swansea is my occasional weekend retreat – I visit friends there two or three times a year and very much enjoy getting back beside the seaside. ... And if the opportunity presents itself, I am very happy to curl up on the sofa with a good book!”

Sara enjoys getting blown away on the Gower Peninsula in Wales.