

STANDING CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Gillian Pentelow

The new SCONUL has been formed to represent the interests of the institutions formerly members of the old SCONUL and COPOL. An Executive Board carries out the policy making, legal and financial responsibilities, whilst work on special topics is undertaken by Advisory Committees and Panels. Of prime importance is the lobbying role and its is through representing its member institutions on professional committees and joint working parties with other professional and related bodies, that the new SCONUL aims to emulate the successes of its predecessors. As the new organisation begins its work in support of academic librarianship, the traditions of both the former organisations will be maintained, notably in the new publications programme, the study tours and its close involvement in the changing information scene.

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The Standing Conference of National and University Libraries was founded in 1950, "to represent the interests of member libraries by providing a forum for the exchange of experience and to facilitate collaborative effort". The Council of Polytechnic Librarians was founded in 1970 to coincide with the designation of the majority of the 30 polytechnics. It was set up as "a forum for the exchange of ideas, information and expertise. It also acts as a pressure group on behalf of polytechnic libraries".

Both organisations grew in membership and developed as professional bodies, working on behalf of their respective constituencies while collaborating with each other. The need for one body to represent the interests of university and national libraries was an obvious consequence of the disappearance, in 1992, of the binary divide and the emergence of the new universities.

In April 1994, SCONUL and COPOL merged formally to become the new SCONUL. It is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Its objects are "to promote, maintain and advance the science and practice of librarianship and to improve the overall standards of national and university libraries for the benefit of the public". It will achieve these aims and continue the work of both former organisations by monitoring developments in higher education, assessing the implications for libraries and representing the views of university and national libraries to policy making bodies. It will also provide professional advice and information, facilitate exchange of experience and publicise professional developments to members.

Full membership is open to universities in the United Kingdom which have a Royal Charter and are funded through one of the Higher Education Funding Councils, universities in the Republic of Ireland recognised by the Department of Education of the Republic and funded by its Higher Education Authority, the British Library and the designated National libraries of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In addition parts of federal universities, for example London University School of Oriental and African Studies, which meet the criteria; and national libraries which function as research libraries for the general public and which have substantial collections of national significance, for example, the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum, are also eligible.

Higher education institutions not designated as universities but comparable in nature, mission and size which meet other criteria

can become associate members. At present, there are 120 full members and five associates. It is the institutions which are the members of SCONUL and they appoint as their representative the person who is responsible for information provision. A few years ago it would have been correct to say the Librarian but with converged services new titles such as Director of Information Systems and Services and Head of Learning Resources have emerged.

The governing body is the Executive Board which comprises the Chair and Vice-Chair, both elected for two years, the Treasurer elected for three years, all of whom are eligible for a second term, and eight elected Representatives who serve for three years. The Board functions as the Board of Management and is, therefore, the policy making group with the legal and financial responsibilities of a Board of Directors. At present it meets four times each year and regularly reports to the Conference. In addition the full Conference meets each year in Spring and Autumn. The meetings consist of a business meeting and sessions of professional interest, with the Annual General Meeting included in the Spring Meeting. Advisory Committees undertake detailed work on behalf of the membership and are accountable to the Executive Board. They cover copyright, health services, information access and supply, information systems, performance indicators including a sub-group on statistics, serials and scholarly communication and staff development. All have well defined terms of reference and are required to prepare an annual action plan and budget for approval by the Executive Board. They each have a Chair and Secretary and eight Members including Representatives and up to four co-opted non-representatives either from member libraries or other relevant organisations. Membership is for three years with eligibility for a further term. The brief for the Advisory Committees is to facilitate the provision of expert advice for the Executive Board and Representatives by holding meetings, publications and circulation of minutes. In the course of this they develop a core of expertise which benefits the whole organisation.

In addition there are at present, Advisory Panels on buildings, funding, manuscripts and archives, preservation and relations with the book

trade. They deal with matters on an ad hoc basis. For example, the Advisory Panel on Funding prepared SCONUL's response to the threat of VAT on books. The Advisory Panel on Preservation was consulted recently on the desirability of an international standard for publishers bindings. The Panels are similar in membership to Advisory Committees but do not hold regular meetings.

SCONUL is represented on various professional and professionally related committees, for example, the Library Association's International and the Joint Academic Library Services Committees, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals Library and Information Services Committee, British Standards Committees, Library and Information Cooperation Council and the National Preservation Advisory Committee. SCONUL is a member of IFLA and LIBER and an associate member of EBLIDA. It has a tradition of joint meetings with European and American colleagues and COPOL has held successful study tours to European cities. These traditions will be continued and plans are in progress for a study tour to the USA in 1995.

SCONUL has a Joint Working Party with the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) and the Association of Heads of University Administrations (AHUA). There is also a Joint Working Group on Quality Assurance and Libraries, which includes representatives from the Higher Education Quality Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for England - Quality Assessment Division and the Head of Quality Assessment for the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. Needless to say, SCONUL was heavily involved in the Follett Review¹. The Executive Board, as well as individual Representatives, is taking a keen and active part in the implementation of the recommendations. The Advisory Committee on Staff Development is acting on the Fielden Report². For many years, SCONUL has actively supported a policy of national co-ordination of library services and hopes that the Libraries Commission will treat this issue as a high priority.

The new SCONUL is developing a programme of publications based on those of the

former SCONUL and COPOL. The latter's Newsletter together with the dedicated e-mail list will enhance the flow of information not only between SCONUL Representatives but also to members of their staff. Both organisations have for some years published financial and management statistics and from 1993-94 these will be combined in one volume, annually. The series of COPOL Working Papers will continue.

SCONUL regards its lobbying role as of prime importance and has been encouraged by past successes. Its work was undoubtedly a contributing factor in the grants awarded in 1987 of £10 million from the Secretary of State for Education, for the purchase of materials and in the UGC grant of £1.9 million in support of on-campus networking. It has contributed to the development of the profession in several ways. It was instrumental in the establishment of the JANET User Group for Libraries and is a partner in the Information Networking Alliance, set up on the initiative of Book Industries Communication. Similarly, COPOL actively supported the establishment of the National Acquisitions Group. In 1990, SCONUL, COPOL and the Library Association held a Joint Working Party on Continuing Professional Development which led ultimately to the Library Association's Framework for Continuing Professional Development. SCONUL is now well represented on the Information and Library Services Lead Body preparing NVQs. It will continue its Building Design Award and the COPOL Annual Staff Awards will remain within the new SCONUL.

SCONUL's income is derived in the main from subscriptions. It has a permanent Secretariat, staffed at present by a full-time Secretary and a part-time Assistant, both of whom are professional librarians, and a full-time Secretarial Assistant. This establishment is under review.

Since 1961, SCONUL has organised a trainee scheme, originally to give graduates a year's work experience before attending a formal course in librarianship. In recent years more enquiries have been received from mature graduates. Since the scheme depends on member libraries offering places to trainees, with the number of places dependent on financial circumstances, fewer libraries are now able to offer places, at a time

when the number of would-be participants has increased. Consequently the scheme has been incorporated in the Library Association's programme, which offers places in other sectors of the profession. The SCONUL code of practice has, however, been retained.

The Advisory Committee on Serials and Scholarly Communication was formed in response to SCONUL's growing concern about periodical prices during the 1980s. In 1988 this concern was shared with the Association of Research Libraries (SCONUL's USA equivalent) and other organisations, in the hope that joint action might help to improve the situation. In 1990 a conference sponsored by SCONUL and the British Library entitled 'Scholarly Communication and Serials Prices' was attended by librarians, publishers and academics. Topics covered included the economics of journal publishing, scholarly communication in the sciences, alternative models of scholarly communication and the politics of change³. One outcome of the meeting was the establishment of a SCONUL Serials Task Force. Initially three lines of action were identified: first to obtain a better understanding of pricing strategies with a view to considering further action. Secondly, to investigate possible "redundancy" in the publishing of journal articles. Thirdly, to identify a field in which an experiment in substituting traditional forms of scholarly communication with electronic procedures could be tried. Task Force members attended and reported on events organised by publishers, and others, on the problems of serial costs and a strategy was developed for responding to the more significant price rises. Representatives of serials publishers attended a series of Task Force meetings to the benefit of both groups. SCONUL urged the Universities Funding Council and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals to emphasise quality rather than quantity of publications when undertaking research selectivity exercises. The Funding Councils' policy for the 1996 Survey has taken account of this.

In 1992, the Task Force became an Advisory Committee. 1993 was a very busy year for the Committee, the major concern being that academic libraries were having to cope with the consequences of the collapse of the pound sterling

in September 1992. Representatives were alerted to the certainty of increased prices for foreign serials in 1993/94. To confirm this the Committee collected information on cancellation programmes and representatives were then able to reassure their institutions that the problem was a national rather than a local issue. The Committee supported the "firm prices" initiative which had been launched by Dr D Koepp, Librarian of Princeton University. A positive response was received from some publishers to a letter sent to them and serials agents urging the fixing of prices before the end of the calendar year. The situation is still being monitored.

A project to launch an experimental electronic journal involving the Institute of Physics came to fruition in 1993 and much has been learnt during the planning process. The project continues to be assessed.

During a joint workshop with the Scientific Publishers Executive, several areas where progress could be made were identified. These ranged from standardisation of access arrangements in respect of network licensing, through the development of common technical standards to the joint lobbying of government on funding. A further event is planned.

The Committee is keen to develop the dialogue between librarians and publishers and thereby to pursue network licensing/access

agreements and the economics of document delivery. It is planning to collaborate with UKSG in the establishment of a discussion list or bulletin board on matters relevant to the work of SCONUL and UKSG. It will liaise with the Advisory Committees on Copyright and Information Systems on the vexed question of copyright of electronic publications.

SCONUL membership now covers a wide variety of institutions and is still settling down in its new guise. However, it is determined to support academic librarianship by anticipating and addressing the issues of concern to its members and by retaining relations with the CVCP, the Funding Councils, DNH and hopefully the Libraries Commission and the Library Association.

References

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3. Brookfield, K., *Scholarly Communication and Serials Prices*, London, Bowker Saur, 1991.