SCONUL Vision

Introduction

The Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (SCONUL) is a membership organisation of 135 library and information services in the UK and Ireland. Its members include libraries in higher education institutions (universities and colleges), the British Library and the National Libraries of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and libraries in national museums and other specialist institutions. (the word library is used here as a convenient term to cover the full spectrum of services and facilities represented by our membership, including information services, learning and resource centres.)

During summer 1997, SCONUL organised a workshop to articulate a vision of the networked information world, in an effort to assess the impact of technology and other factors in our environment on the future development of services and facilities. The workshop, involving a small group of representatives and the secretary, was deliberately timed to follow publication of the Dearing report, giving us an early opportunity to consider its implications. The resulting Vision, which has been discussed and adopted by SCONUL members, presents our collective view of higher education library/information services in the future. It does not claim to be a complete or comprehensive picture, rather it attempts to highlight key themes, considered relevant to the entire SCONUL membership, in order to stimulate thinking and assist corporate planning. We chose the planning horizon of five years, aiming to project our thinking to the academic session 2002/3.

Sheila Corrall
28 January 1998

Membership of the SCONUL Vision Group
Toby Bainton, SCONUL
Graham Bulpitt, Sheffield Hallam University
Maureen Castens, London Guildhall University
Sheila Corrall, University of Reading
Andrew Green, University of Wales, Swansea
Mike Heery, University of the West of England
Ray Lester, Natural History Museum
Bernard Naylor, University of Southampton
Bill Simpson, Trinity College Dublin
Nick Smith, Aston University
Ray Templeton, British Film Institute
Roy Williams, University of North London

The SCONUL Vision

The academic library in the year 2002

What will the future look like?

National and university libraries will continue to fulfil their traditional functions, but will offer a broader range of services and facilities to a wider and more diverse audience. Overall, the library will have an enhanced role in facilitating learning and teaching – notably lifelong learning – with continuing emphasis on giving personal help to users; it will have an important but less visible role in supporting research and scholarship, primarily concerned with creating the institutional and national information infrastructure. Electronic resources will proliferate, but many library staff will still be concerned with managing, developing and preserving large collections of printed materials.

Libraries and related services will be acknowledged as key elements in institutional Learning and Teaching Strategies. Many resources and services will be available electronically via the network, but students will choose to use the library as a place to work, both for quiet private study and for group project work. They will see the Library as one of the places where they can get help with using IT, as well as information and advice on the availability and use of learning materials. Electronic resources will have grown in importance, especially tailored learning packages, integrating commercially-produced and institutionally-created materials. Library and related facilities will be a core component of the bundle of services offered to students in return for fees, they will not expect to pay extra for essential services related to course requirements, but will be prepared to pay for personal use of national specialist collections.

The library's role as intermediary between researchers and their material will alter, with a shift towards more individual and decentralised resource discovery. Researchers in some disciplines will rely less on direct use of the library, and expect desktop access and delivery of information. Some academic departments will use specialist staff to support information needs – for example, to locate and manage data, to co-ordinate resources for groups, or to set up alerting services. In some cases there will be library staff working with research groups, in others they will be departmental research assistants without a library background, working in partnership with library staff. Library staff will have a key role in improving access to networked resources, creating information gateways at various levels and working collaboratively within and outside the institution to ensure optimum exploitation of both electronic and traditional research resources. Libraries with unique or highly specialised holdings will have a formal responsibility to preserve and give wider access to their collections, increasingly via digitisation and networking.

Library staff will fulfil several primary roles supporting information provision and use:
–   *collection/resource management and development,* covering both printed and digital media, with particular reference to obsolescence of electronic systems, digital archiving and preservation (in collaboration with academic staff);
–   *resource discovery,* including identifying items at document and collection level, and tracking developments in scholarly communication and learning resources;
–   *metadata management,* including developing local architectures for database access, with links to regional, national and supra-national resources;

- *information handling skills*, training staff, students and other learners to find, use and manage information, in partnership with academic specialists/learning consultants;
- *rights negotiation,* covering both contracts/licences with commercial suppliers and inter-institutional agreements;
- *learning support,* creating and managing an environment for individual and group study, providing personal help to groups and individuals (face-to-face and electronically-mediated) and facilitating the development of learning and teamworking skills among students, including more formalised training and teaching.

In addition, library staff will contribute significantly to academic planning and development activities, notably to the formulation of Learning and Teaching Strategies, and Communications and Information Strategies, and also to courseware design and course development (drawing on their knowledge of learning resources and student behaviour). Library managers will routinely provide accurate and detailed costings of their services, to aid decision-making and facilitate cost-recovery where appropriate, they will manage resources efficiently and entrepreneurially, and will generate income by capitalising on unique assets and developing value-added services. The library workforce will be more flexible and versatile, with different structural arrangements and management practices; significant investment in Continuous Professional Development for all library staff will be required, including development of learning support skills and continual refreshment of professional/technical skills.

Planning assumptions

Technology
- Network capacity, within and between organisations, will continue to increase and be able to handle all types of media (data, text, voice, still and moving images)
- Users will need direct access to computers (their own, the library's or the institution's) and network connections (on and off campus) to take advantage of the above
- The operating environment will become increasingly standardised around Internet/Intranet technologies

Publishing
- Scholarly information will grow in volume, and its supply will continue to be dominated by commercial players
- Digital technologies will increasingly be used for distribution and delivery of published materials, but print-on-paper will continue to be important throughout this period
- Some material may be made available digitally (and free?) by academic institutions themselves; availability of other materials may be restricted to specialist researchers (in invisible colleges)
- The legitimacy of fair dealing in the electronic environment (ie royalty-free copying of digital materials for research or private study) will eventually be confirmed

National libraries
- There will be a continuing requirement for efficiency savings
- Services to support academic research will become more important, owing to continuing pressures on higher education budgets

- There will be an increasing requirement to provide services to the widest possible audiences, including key roles in lifelong learning and economic development, and involving regional activities across the UK to improve access to services
- There will be a need to co-operate more and review relationships with other libraries, and to increase public profiles and international recognition
- Extension of legal deposit provisions to material in electronic and audiovisual formats will be accomplished

Higher education
- There will be a continuing requirement for efficiency savings
- General financial pressure and the introduction of student fees may encourage a tendency to charge for value-added services, but basic/standard library services will remain a central part of institutions' commitment to students; fees will encourage a consumerist approach to services
- Some growth in student numbers will resume; much will be in sub-degree and taught postgraduate courses, and the former may not occur in HEIs
- There will be growth in consortia-based activities, and expectations of stronger roles within their own regions for HEIs
- Higher education will increasingly be drawn into a framework for lifelong learning, which will focus on meeting the needs of individuals and will result in universities working more closely with a range of other institutions – including organisations outside the education sector – to deliver more flexible programmes of study

Teaching and learning
- The current shift of emphasis from teaching to learning will continue and will become more pervasive throughout the sector, with development of formal learning strategies
- Technology will stimulate the development of customised materials and packages, combining externally-published and institutionally-created elements; materials may be organised as course packages to ensure mass student access, replacing traditional short loan collections
- Growth in distance learning will be significant – to serve remote regions of the UK, to improve access and choice, and to compete in continental and global markets (with corresponding development of library services to support this educational change)
- There will be increased emphasis on key skills for students, but libraries may have to argue the case for information-handling skills to be given due prominence, and for their role in this area; the continuous widening of access to HE will accentuate the diversity of student needs for training in the use of IT

Research
- There will be pressure at national level for more formal arrangements for resource-sharing and a developing infrastructure to make this possible, including progress towards centres of excellence
- There will be tensions between expectations of national co-operation and service to multiple constituencies, and institutional pressures to concentrate on their primary clientele
- Library staff contribution in creating the infrastructure to support research will not be fully understood by many academic staff and institutional managers
- Training of research students will continue to be emphasised; library staff will have a role in helping them to develop their information-handling skills
- Lottery funding will be an additional source of funding for specialist collections of national importance

Agenda for action

– Work more closely and deliberately with UCISA to build shared understanding and develop joint agenda, acknowledging need for new relationships at national/representational level to reflect changing arrangements at institutional and operational level
– Work with appropriate bodies to articulate the potential contribution of national and university libraries to the National Grid for Learning
– Engage Departments of Information and Library Studies in discussion to ensure full understanding of the primary roles outlined and appropriate focus in their curricula
– Lobby the proposed new Institute for Learning and Teaching to ensure that information-handling skills are included among the competencies required of higher education teachers, that the key role of Library staff in teaching these skills is acknowledged, and likewise the need for Library staff to develop and seek formal recognition of their own teaching abilities
– Lobby JISC (and its sub-committees) re proposed introduction of charges for C&IT services on a volume-of-usage basis to ensure access to content continues to be free at the point of use
– Work collaboratively, through the SCONUL and CURL memberships, to improve access to and exploitation of research resources (e.g. special collections, national library holdings) both nationally and internationally
– Step up work to rationalise and publicise access policies, including access to electronic/digitised resources and policies in relation to distance learning students
– Maintain a close watch on UK and Irish Government initiatives and on EC developments with a view to seizing opportunities and influencing legislation
– Generally become more focused and assertive in identifying and targeting groups and individuals on particular issues (e.g. Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, Quality Assurance Agency, Staff and Educational Development Association, Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency, Further Education representative, public librarians)
– Put in place mechanisms for regular review and refinement of planning assumptions and vision of the future in the light of developments