Directors Board Meeting - Thursday 14th December 2023
Notes and Actions

1. Present and Apologies

Present: Emma Walton (Chair, Loughborough University), Sue Ackermann (Vice-Chair, University of Nottingham), Judith Keene (University of Worcester), Jo-Anne Watts (University of Wolverhampton), Sarah Pittaway (Birmingham City University), Emma Sansby (Bishop Grosseteste University), Phil Brabban (Coventry University), Tim Wales (Cranfield University), Benjamin Veasey (University of Derby), Chris Powis (University of Northampton), Anna O'Neill (University of Warwick), Diane Job (University of Birmingham), Chris Porter (Birmingham Newman University), Deborah Munro (deputizing for Ann-Marie James (Aston University)), Ruth Jenkins (Mercian Collaboration Executive Officer)

Apologies: Pete Maggs (Treasurer, Nottingham Trent University), Ian Snowley (University of Lincoln), David Parkes (De Montfort University), Paul Mahoney (Staffordshire University), Laura Pilsel (Harper Adams University), Gary Elliott-Cirigottis (Open University), Scott McGowan (University of Keele), Steve Williams (University of Leicester)

2. Welcome and Introductions (Chair)

The Chair welcomed those present to the Board meeting, with a particular welcome for new members.

It was noted that it had been challenging to find a date that would suit everyone, and that several people had sent their apologies due to clashes with other commitments.

The Chair invited everyone round the table to briefly introduce themselves. Some Board members mentioned that their job titles had recently changed.

ACTION: Officer to send out an email requesting current job titles of Board members so that these could be updated on the Mercian Member Institutions webpage.

3. SCONUL update (Chair)

The Chair provided a brief update on SCONUL, highlighting how Mercian Collaboration has a role. Key areas included:

SCONUL Strategy 2023-26
This gives us opportunities to engage. We need to align with, but not duplicate, what is happening elsewhere. It is important to be mindful of differences in the different regions, and the different mission groups.

Strategy Groups

- Content Strategy Group - Phil Brabban is a Co-chair

- Organisational Development Strategy Group - Emma Walton and Gary Elliott-Cirigottis are Co-chairs

- Technology and Markets Strategy Group - Anna O'Neill is a Co-chair

- Horizons Strategy Group - David Parkes and Sarah Pittaway are members

- Statistics Steering Group - Alan Brine is a member

Other meetings and discussions convened by SCONUL

- Symposium for national and regional library consortia (Birmingham, 26th January 2024)

- Regular meetings with Chairs/Officers of regional consortia

- Libraries EDI co-ordinating group (online meetings arranged for February, June and October 2024)

4. SCONUL Content discussion (Phil Brabban)

Phil is one of the Co-chairs of the Content Strategy Group (https://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/content-strategy-group).

It is important for Mercian members to participate in the next SCONUL Content Forum on 2nd February 2024 at Goodenough College in London.

The big issue we need to address is that the cost of academic journal content has been increasing over time, despite our ongoing efforts to ensure affordability. We need to try to come to an agreement on where we want to go as a sector and be clear with JISC about what we are asking them to do for us.

We have done well to keep together as a sector in previous negotiations (e.g. with Elsevier and Springer). Publishers have made offers to individual institutions, or sometimes groups of institutions, but we have kept together in the best interests of the HE sector as a whole.

Some publishers will not even come to the table to negotiate for national agreements, which is frustrating.

Phil said that the Content Strategy Group has been discussing scenarios, including:

1. Continue as we are.

2. Core offer for everyone in a national consortium plus add-on subscription package(s) for those institutions who are willing and able to pay extra.

3. Walk Away – possibly with Collective Collecting.

Best case:

- Continue to be unified.

- Have an agreed position.

- Represent the interests of everyone.

Phil highlighted the JISC Review of Transitional Agreements. It was noted that these Transitional Agreements have cost a lot of money but are not actually delivering a transition to Open Access publishing anytime soon.

There needs to be a stronger approach to Rights Retention by authors.

There is also a discussion to be had about the future of Inter-Library Loan and Document Supply. Some institutions have been using RapidILL but there are other institutions that do not see this as an option (e.g. for reasons of cost and/or because of concerns about integration with their library systems). Usage of British Library Document Supply has dropped off.

Tim asked whether the Content Strategy Group and the Content Forum would be discussing e-books as well. Phil explained that the remit includes e-books, and other types of content, but the main focus has been e-journals. Other groups are looking at e-books and Open Access textbooks.

It was noted that another trend is pushback from publishers not wanting their content to be accessible by AI tools.

Ben asked whether we have linked in with UUK as Vice-Chancellors need to be aware. Phil noted that Ann Rossiter and SCONUL were working to ensure that VCs, PVCs and researchers are aware. Diane said there is a need for a short paper explaining the position for VCs.

The British Library is represented by Liz Jolly who is on the Content Strategy Group.

JISC are looking at whether there could be a RapidILL licence for the sector. The British Library does not have an alternative to RapidILL yet.

Diane wondered whether we should be doing more to involve university Finance Directors (BUFDG). Phil noted that it has been estimated that UK HE has spent £240m with publishers on Gold OA.

Jo-Anne emphasised the importance of including voices of different parts of the sector. Some of the 'walk away' options do not scale to all types of institutions.

It was agreed that this had been a useful and engaging discussion and we need to continue to work together at a national level.

5. Mercian Collaboration: Strategic and operational review (Chair)

The Chair tabled a paper 'Mercian Collaboration: A Review and Refresh'. This paper had also been circulated by email in advance of the meeting.

The proposals in the paper were discussed, and the following points were agreed:

Mercian Board

a) We will rename the Directors Board as the Mercian Collaboration Board.

b) We will reword the Terms of Reference to recognise that Directors may substitute a suitable nominee, rather than not have any representative.

c) Board meetings will continue to be held twice a year, and meetings will be scheduled further in advance to allow people to get dates in diaries.

d) At least one Board meeting a year will be held in person. We will also look at whether it would be possible to host a hybrid meeting.

Mercian Steering Group

e) We will put out a call for another member of the Steering Group to support our plans and ensure that there are sufficient Steering Group members to Sponsor our larger portfolio of Special Interest Groups.

Annual Report

f) The Annual Report should continue to include what is expected as part of our SCONUL status with updates on Mercian Collaboration activities and events, including the Mercian Conference and the work of the Staff Development Group and Special Interest Groups.

g) The Annual Report will no longer include updates from individual member institutions. Instead, we will enable members to showcase achievements and initiatives via the website.

Shared document storage

h) We will ask SCONUL for a shared accessible space for storing and sharing of group documents and other resources.

Reviewing Our Special Interest Groups

i) We will review our Special Interest Groups, looking at the nature of these groups and whether there are other formats, e.g. Community of Practice, Task and Finish Groups that would be more beneficial to the groups themselves and the Collaboration.

j) We will review the Collaboration's offer to the groups, considering whether this is the right offer and whether it is clear.

k) We will clarify the expectations of the Board regarding groups, for example in respect of their reporting to the Board, annual report inclusion, etc. This may involve us providing proformas or checklists for reporting.

l)   We will look at what support for groups can be expected from the Executive Officer (0.4 FTE).

m) We will consider whether there are any conditions under which a group should no longer continue to operate, or else should be changed.

n)   We will also consider whether there are significant gaps and whether there are new groups we feel should be formed.

o)   We will review the name and terms of reference of the Deputies and Senior Staff Group to ensure that this is useful to members.

p)   We would like to encourage groups to have more presence at the Mercian Conference and more visibility to the wider membership.

5. Conference Group (CG): Update (Sue Ackermann)

Sue reported that the Conference Group, including Chair Catherine Robertson and Vice-Chair Paul Cavanagh, had started planning for the Mercian 2024 Conference.

A call has gone out for new CG members:
https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/call-conference-group-members-2024
Directors were asked to encourage people to consider getting involved.

Details of the venue for 2024 will be confirmed as soon as possible. We are expecting this to be in the East Midlands.

ACTION: Sue to contact other Directors based in the East Midlands to discuss options for the conference venue so that details of the venue can be confirmed as soon as possible.

There was an initial discussion about potential themes for the conference. We want the theme to be broad enough to appeal to a wide range of potential speakers and delegates, including people who may be participating in a conference for the first time.

It was felt that it would be worth considering whether the conference can do something to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Mercian Collaboration.

ACTION: Sue to follow up discussion of potential themes with the Conference Group Chair and Vice-Chair. Draft ideas will then be circulated to Directors via email for comment before the theme is finalised.

Brief report on Mercian 2023 Conference

- On 7th September 2023 we gathered at The Exchange in Birmingham for our Mercian 2023 Conference (our first in-person conference since before the pandemic).
- Keynote Speaker was Ben Davies from Chimp Management.
- PowerPoint slides for breakout sessions are available here: https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2023/presentations-2023
- We received £4250 in Commercial Sponsorship.
- We would like to thank Jo-Anne Watts (Steering Group Sponsor), Laura Newman (CG Chair) and the rest of the Conference Group for all their hard work on delivering a successful conference this year.

6. Emerging and key institutional and sector issues

The following topics had been suggested for discussion under this item on the agenda:

- Rights Retention

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- Sustainability

It was agreed that these were substantial topics that could not be rushed in the limited time remaining and therefore these items would be deferred to a future meeting.

7. SIG Matters and Reports

i   Senior Staff & Deputy Directors Group (D&SSG)

- Meeting notes of previous meetings available here: https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/dssg-agendas-minutes-reports
- Not met for a while, but want to get going again.
- Deborah Munro has arranged informal meeting for 6th February 2023.

ii   Staff Development Group (MSDG)

- Steering Group Sponsor - Sarah Pittaway
- MSDG minutes of 28/09/2023
- The Programme for 2023 – 2024 (as of 12/12/2023)
- News item on Buddying Benefits to promote the Buddying Scheme

iii   Metadata Group (MMG)

- William Peaden, now at Coventry University, is very keen to rekindle this group, and hoping to arrange a meeting in early 2024.

iv   Mercian Disability Forum (MDF)

- New Sponsor Jo-Anne Watts
- New Co-Chairs Deborah Munro and Manda Laine (replacing Simon Satchwell-Giles)
- [Proposal to update MDF Terms of Reference](#)
- Very positive meeting on 8th November 2023 (meeting notes to follow)
- Active Jiscmail list – with recent discussion on inclusive staff recruitment.
- Continuing to work with MSDG on joint staff development session.

v   Mercian Copyright Group (MCG)

- Meeting notes of [29th November 2023](#)
- Interest in becoming a Community of Practice

vi   Marketing & Communications (MarComs)

- Meeting notes of [1st June 2023](#)
- Arranging next meeting for early 2024

vii   Systems & Technologies Community of Practice

- New Community of Practice, following initial meeting held in March 2023
- Webpage here: https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/activities-groups/library-systems-technologies-group
- Jiscmail list: MERCIAN-TECHNOLOGIES@JISCMAIL.AC.UK
- Arranging next meeting for February 2024

8. Governance and Operations

i   Executive Officer's Update (RJ)

The Officer has been busy supporting the Conference Group and the Special Interest Groups (as reported under items 5 and 7 above).

She has also been keeping the website updated, including the conference microsite. The website could do with a refresh, but it makes sense to wait until SCONUL have transitioned to their new service provider before looking at this.

ii   Treasurer's Update (interim update by RJ)

In the absence of the Treasurer, it was only possible to provide an interim update. A fuller update will be provided at the next Board meeting in the spring, including a report of income and expenditure for 2023.

It was confirmed that subscription fees for 2024 would remain the same as for 2023. Invoices would be issued by SCONUL early in the New Year.

Figures for expenditure on the Mercian 2023 Conference were yet to be finalised because we were still awaiting the invoice from the University of Birmingham for the venue.

An initial budget forecast for 2024 has been shared with SCONUL. This will inform discussions about financial sustainability for the Collaboration.

ACTION: Agenda of next Board meeting to include a full update from the Treasurer and a discussion about financial sustainability for the Collaboration.

iii   Memorandum of Understanding with SCONUL (Chair)

This was an opportunity for the Board to comment on the current version of the MOU before this is signed off.

It was noted that a correction needed to be made to the wording of paragraph 2.2 - the word 'north' needs to be replaced with 'east and west midlands'.

ACTION: Chair to request correction to the wording of paragraph 2.2 of the MOU with SCONUL before signing this off.

Emma Sansby also asked for clarification about the implications of paragraph 4.5, which sets out a requirement for members of the Mercian Collaboration to reimburse SCONUL if the Steering Group should spend funding beyond that available within their designated fund.

ACTION: Steering Group to discuss the need to ensure that there are appropriate checks and balances in place to avoid overspending, and report back to the Board.

iv   Dates, venue & potential speakers for next meeting (March-April 2024 and November 2024)

ACTION: Chair to circulate polls for Board meeting dates in 2024.

9. AOB

Tim asked whether the name and branding for the 'Mercian Collaboration' could be reviewed, as this can sometimes be hard to explain to people who are not familiar with the work of the Collaboration.

It was noted that any proposal to review the name and branding would need to be considered and approved by the Board.

 ACTION: Include a short discussion item on the name and branding of 'Mercian Collaboration' on the agenda for the next Board meeting.

Please see previous Directors Board agendas and meeting minutes:

https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/about-collaboration/agendas-minutes-directors-board

Please see previous Steering Group agendas and meeting minutes:

https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/about-collaboration/agendas-minutes-steering-group

Ruth Jenkins, Executive Officer

March 2024

[Final version uploaded on 17th April 2024]