



Mercian Collaboration Directors Board

Vidcon, 2-4pm, Monday 5th October

Minutes

Present: Chris Porter (Vice-Chair, Newman), Dave Parkes (DMU), Paul Reynolds (Keele), Emma Walton (Steering Group, Loughborough), Mike Berrington (NTU), Simon Bevan (Steering Group, Cranfield), Robin Green (Warwick), Emma Sansby (BGU), Jo-Anne Watts (Wolverhampton), Neil Donohue (Leicester), Ruth Jenkins (BCU), Gary Elliott-Cirigottis (OU), Judith Keene (Worcester), Sue Ackermann (Steering Group, Nottingham), Paul Mahoney (Staffordshire), Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

Page | 1

Apologies: Helen Curtis (Aston), Diane Job (Chair, Birmingham), Mark Toole (Treasurer, NTU), Laura Pilsel (Harper Adams), Chris Powis (Northampton), Ian Snowley (Lincoln), Phil Brabban (Coventry), Steven Dudley (UCB), Sue Morrison (Derby)

Summary of Actions

- **ACTION:** Paul to let GJJ know of Collaboration contact at Keele ahead of his departure
- **ACTION:** All to consider standing for vacant Officer and Ordinary Steering Group positions in 2021
- **ACTION:** Emma to feedback to the Board online about SCONUL activities, queries & regional representation
- **ACTION:** GJJ to submit new subscription rates to SCONUL for 2021
- **ACTION:** GJJ to share new subscription rates with Directors for information
- **ACTION:** GJJ to clarify mechanics with SCONUL for changes to salary and employment contract
- **ACTION:** Steering Group to arrange and approve automatic salary increments with SCONUL for Officer
- **ACTION:** Steering Group to agree increased FTE for Officer, in the light of potential impacts and costs for the Collaboration
- **ACTION:** Steering Group to negotiate with GJJ and SCONUL with respect to contractual revision arrangements
- **ACTION:** GJJ to send call for annual report contribution to Directors, along with periodic reminders ahead of the deadline
- **ACTION:** All to contribute annual highlight reports for the Collaboration Annual Report 2020 to GJJ by 18th December 2020
- **ACTION:** Steering Group to consider the proposed topics for discussions and consider inviting speakers/discussion facilitators to the next Board
- **ACTION:** ALL those with interest in mystery shopping to contact Judith for an exchange of experience

20/16 Welcome and introductions

Chris Porter, as Vice-Chair standing in for Diane Job as meeting chair, welcomed everyone. Ruth was welcomed as a new Director and Board member, and it was also noted that Paul was retiring, which would mean a change to the representation at Keele.

ACTION: Paul to let GJJ know of Collaboration contact at Keele ahead of his departureⁱ

20/17 Discussions

- a. Progress & Developments: Reopening, New Working Practices
- b. Staffing Changes: Restructuring, New Working Patterns, Team Impacts

Steering Group had agreed while a range of topics were suggested at the previous Board, today's discussions would focus on the two areas most likely be uppermost in Directors' minds. General discussions followed where some of the points made included:

- **Changes in library staffing and structures:** These were arising from institutional restructuring, in the wake of external fiscal pressures. Recruitment freezes, both potential and actual were also noted by a number of members. The organograms held online by the Collaboration would soon be outdated and need revisiting these over the next 18 months. However, currently Covid-19 impacts on staffing arrangements made any efforts to update these now premature.
- **Financial savings:** A lot of savings were likely/being currently asked of academic library services, in terms of staff and resources. Perceptions were there would be further requests for savings over the next 18 months to accommodate. Some libraries were in better position than others to accommodate these requests, but all were under pressures.
- **Student numbers:** Part of the increased fiscal pressures stemmed from the risks of students dropping out from their studies, meaning income from their fees was not guaranteed. Occupancy levels in physical buildings often varied in unpredictable ways, with at times very limited use being reported. This made it challenging to balance staff working patterns and other efficiencies.
- **Study spaces:** Student behaviours in terms of on campus and remote learning had also been less predictable, with some wishing to remain on campus using shared areas to access virtual resources. Prior expectations had been students would access online materials/lectures off-site but timetabling often precluded time to travel between campus sessions and home working. Issues over non-teaching room spaces and lack of clear ownership across institutions were also noted as introducing management challenges. Some institutions were making use of external tented space to provide extra study room.
- **Managing Risk:** With potential large numbers of students seeking areas to study for periods of time, issues around demands groupwork/solo study areas were common: increased given the necessity of restricting occupancy numbers to comply with social distancing requirements. It was noted monitoring student behaviour within bookable teaching and study spaces on campus was challenging, raising concerns over a duty of care in keeping all institutional members 'safe'.

Chris thanked everyone for their thoughts and encouraged continued sharing via the mailing list or directly between Directors.

20/18 Governance

a. [Minutes of May 2020 Board](#)

These were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

b. Any outstanding actions

All actions were completed, a matter of report or on the agenda for discussion.

c. Steering Group Elections 2021

Chris noted that the current Steering Group, with the exception of Vice-Chair who progresses to Chair, would be standing down in March 2021. Current SG members can stand again if wished, but the Vice-Chair stressed the value of new members joining the group too. The current Steering Group members affirmed the value of the experience. Hence, there would likely be vacancies for a Vice-Chair, Treasurer and three ordinary members; the role descriptions for which are available online.ⁱⁱ GJJ will send out a call at the end of the year for self-nominations, and an election will be held if more people are willing to stand than there are places. Chris stressed everyone should think carefully about standing, and she looked forward to working with the new Steering Group from next year.

ACTION: All to consider standing for vacant Officer and Ordinary Steering Group positions in 2021

20/19 Operations

a. Update on SCONUL activities

Emma noted she had not been able to attend the last meeting of the SCONUL Board but would be speaking with them soon for an update and would feedback to the Collaboration's Board. She noted the roadmap for SCONUL has been changed in the light of Covid, but Emma was unclear on which SCONUL task groups now existed. Gary shared some further insights on discussions at SCONUL Board relating to issues including: BAME, funding subgroups, reports, trends and futures.

The prior question of regional collaborations' representation to Board remained unanswered, although Emma would seek to raise it. GJJ noted Diane would hopefully meet with the NoWAL and NC Chairs to discuss this matter in due course also.

Chris noted as the SCONUL AGM has broadened the membership criteria for the organisation, would the Board consider welcoming invite associate members to join the Collaboration? She commented there were some Guild HE Libraries who might already be considering making an approach. It was agreed the Board would welcome any approaches, highlighting benefits to the Collaboration from membership diversity and new perspectives from an increased numbers of library services involved. However, a large influx of new members could potentially be detrimental and may be challenging to manage practically under our current configuration. Hence, member approaches would continue to be addressed on a case by case basis, as some related SCONUL governance issues were as yet unresolved.

A query around the new SCONUL Board chair was raised, and the reasons why the Vice-Chair had not progressed to the role.

ACTION: Emma to feedback to the Board online about SCONUL activities, queries & regional representation

b. Subscriptions 2021

Chris apologised as the Steering Group had intended to discuss these further ahead of today's meeting. A paper from GJJ as acting treasurer previously presented at August's Steering Group, had been shared with the Board and proposed various options for next year's subscription rates. As agreed previously, the overall proposal was to reduce rates for 2021 in light of the Collaboration's reduced operating costs for 2021 as well as in the light of current fiscal pressures on all members. It was agreed a severe cut to rates would make returning to current levels a 'politically tricky sell' for Directors.

Hence, it was proposed to make a rate reduction of 7% for 2021, and this was accepted through general acclaim.

ACTION: GJJ to submit new subscription rates to SCONUL for 2021

ACTION: GJJ to share new subscription rates with Directors for information

c. Officer Priorities & Role Development

As had been previously discussed by the Board and Steering Group, reconsidering the Officer's workloads and priorities was overdue, especially as Chris noted this issue had been batted between the Board and Steering Group for some time. On behalf of the chair, she was seeking firm guidance from the Board on the steps to take. GJJ had provided a report ahead of the meeting detailing areas he felt he was neglecting due to current demands on his time: demands which akin to library staff had increased during the prolonged homeworking period.

Ruth noted from her experience with the Northern Collaboration their development officer was expected to meet a similar workload on a 0.4FTE basis, and hence was surprised our Collaboration only funded a 0.2FTE post. It was noted the Officer habitually worked additional hours over their salaried time, in order to deliver on essential requirements, meet deadlines along with progressing meetings, events and activities. This would only be exacerbated by the return to any travel to venues and meetings, post-Covid. The Board agreed current arrangements were iniquitous, especially given it they had continued for a considerable period of time. Additionally, the Officer was not set to receive automatic salary increments within grade; despite Paul noting he thought this had been agreed in principle over two years ago. GJJ reported it had not been implemented operationally.

As the Board felt it was likely the Collaboration would continue to need more, not less, support from the Officer, for future activities, it was agreed their being routinely over capacity should be addressed as an urgent matter. In the light of earlier subscription discussions, with the Collaboration remaining in a financially advantageous position, funding additional hours for the Officer seemed eminently affordable.

Consequently, the Board proposed that

- (1) Automatic salary increments be implemented immediately for the Officer, commencing with an Aug 2020 increase.
- (2) Additional salaried hours be arranged for the post by Steering Group to cope with the increasing demands, balanced against future costs and income expectations.ⁱⁱⁱ

ACTION: GJJ to clarify mechanics with SCONU for changes to salary and employment contract

ACTION: Steering Group to arrange and approve automatic salary increments with SCONU for Officer

ACTION: Steering Group to agree increased FTE for Officer, in the light of potential impacts and costs for the Collaboration

ACTION: Steering Group to negotiate with GJJ and SCONU with respect to contractual revision arrangements

d. RDMSG: SIG in abeyance

Chris highlighted that following discussions between the outgoing subgroup chair and Steering Group, the Research Data Management Support Group (RDMSG) had been placed in abeyance for the time being, due to lack of anyone willing to keep it operating. With no committee to operate the subgroup, the Board were asked to consider three potential options: (1) reconfigure and relaunch by finding a new committee to run it; (2) launching a broader 'research support group to take its place; (3) Consider the RDMSG to have concluded, and await future demands for any future research-focused subgroup. It was also noted that a non-affiliated Midlands-based Library Research Support Group already existed.^{iv} After discussions it was agreed to take the third option. Board and Steering Group would endeavour to periodically consider if there was a strategic drive, as well as awaiting any grassroots demand, for a new research related subgroup. The group's pages on the website were confirmed as having been archived.

e. Annual Report 2020

Chris and GJJ highlighted the call for member highlight report submissions from member Directors for the Collaboration's annual report 2020. Diane had previously highlighted the importance on '*increasing the emphasis of showcasing what groups and member libraries had done during this unprecedented period of disruption*'. It was hoped member reports would provide a '*powerful message about the membership, but also demonstrate the richness of experience across the Collaboration.*'

Practically speaking, the Collaboration invited submissions from each member library of up to 500 words, plus any suitable images, highlighting noteworthy activities or providing an overview of accomplishments during 2020. Last year 12/23 members contributed, and it was hoped that a higher proportion of members would do so in 2020. GJJ would send out a series of calls for contributions, along with periodic reminders, ahead of a 18th December 2020 contribution deadline.

ACTION: GJJ to send call for annual report contribution to Directors, along with periodic reminders ahead of the deadline

ACTION: All to contribute annual highlight reports for the Collaboration Annual Report 2020 to GJJ by 18th December 2020

20/20 To Receive Previously Circulated Reports

- a. Steering Group Minutes
- b. Current Finances Update
- c. Tangible Values Document: Update
- d. Regional Representation on SCOUNL Board
- e. MSDG Representative Expectations
- f. Operational Groups Updates
- g. Special Interest Groups Updates
- h. Officer's Update

Reports were tabled ahead of the meeting by the Officer, and the Vice-Chair invited questions, comments or responses. None were made, although GJJ noted Robin had fed back some comments via email with respect to the MSDG document, which had been incorporated. Judith noted that having these reports in this format ahead of the meeting was extremely helpful, and it was agreed to continue receiving them like this.

20/21 Next meeting

- a. Themes, speakers & format for Spring 2021 meeting

Alongside the elections for the new Steering Group, Chris invited suggestions for speakers or themed discussions for the March 2021 meeting. Suggestions included:

- Retirement planning for Senior Staff, with Paul offering to make a return appearance to speak on this topic.
- Reinventing libraries and library services
- Evaluation of online experience and re-engaging with different student groups. Considering the impact/added value, not just take up, of changes and new services, along with how libraries were seeking to assess such matters.
- Access, participation and technology – given the dominant current use of blended and online delivery methods within HE. There may be some potential for pre-meeting work and considerations ahead of this topic.
- Decolonising/diversifying reading lists remained a particular topic within certain disciplines and subject support libraries. Issues such as libraries' roles in countering racism and engaging with BLM type movements were related topics. Ruth noted a particular interest in leading on this topic.

ACTION: Steering Group to consider the proposed topics for discussions and consider inviting speakers/discussion facilitators to the next Board

20/22 AOB

- a. Customer Service Excellence

Judith mentioned for Worcester's Customer Service Excellence programme they are running a lot of mystery shopper style assessments, especially on their online support services. She was keen to swap questions and experience with other institutions who were doing something similar and invited other directors to get in touch if they were interested.



ACTION: ALL those with interest in mystery shopping to contact Judith for an exchange of experience

Chris closed the meeting by wishing Paul the best for his retirement and thanking him for his contribution to the Collaboration over the years.

Endnotes

ⁱ In the short term this would likely be Dan Perry. However, in the longer term another member of Keele staff would likely fulfil the role of Collaboration representative.

ⁱⁱ <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Mercian%20Collaboration-Role%20Descriptions%20v1.1.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ The assumption being GJJ is willing and able to take on additional hours if offered.

^{iv} Library Research Support Group Midlands, <https://lrsgmidlands.wordpress.com/>