



Mercian Board Meeting 12th April 2024 Notes and Actions

1. Welcome and apologies

Present: Emma Walton (Chair, Loughborough University), Sue Ackermann (Vice-Chair, University of Nottingham), Pete Maggs (Treasurer, Nottingham Trent University), Judith Keene (University of Worcester), 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), Chris Porter (Birmingham Newman University), Ann-Marie James (Aston University), Paul Mahoney (Staffordshire University), Gary Elliott-Cirigottis (Open University), Joanne Dunham (deputizing for Steve Williams, University of Leicester), Luke Fowler (deputizing for Jo-Anne Watts, University of Wolverhampton), Ian Keepins (deputizing for Diane Job, University of Birmingham), Ruth Jenkins (Mercian Collaboration Executive Officer)

Apologies: Ian Snowley (University of Lincoln), David Parkes (De Montfort University), Laura Pilsel (Harper Adams University), Scott McGowan (University of Keele).

The Chair welcomed those present to the Board meeting, with a particular welcome for those who were deputizing for their directors.

It was noted that it had been decided to hold this meeting online and treat it as a shorter business meeting. It had originally been hoped that it would be possible to hold a 'hybrid' meeting, to accommodate those who were keen to meet in person as well as several people who would find it more convenient to join the meeting online. However, no suitable meeting room was available on this date.

2. Minutes of the meeting of 14th December 2023 and matters arising

The [minutes of the last meeting](#) were confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting (subject to a couple of minor corrections).

Given time constraints, the Chair recommended deferring the discussion about the name and brand of the Mercian Collaboration to later in the year. Tim suggested that it could be

helpful to hold a poll about the name at the Mercian 2024 Conference to canvas the views of the wider membership.

Other matters arising were already included under the Chair's Report or other agenda items.

3. Chair's Report

The Chair envisaged that the next Steering Group meeting would focus on producing a plan of action to deliver on the 'Strategic and Operational Review' as discussed under item 5 at the last Board meeting.

3.i) Annual Report 2023

The Mercian Collaboration Annual Report for 2023 was in progress, and a final draft will be shared with Board members for comment before it is published on the website.

The annual report will include what is expected as part of our SCONUL status with updates on Mercian Collaboration activities and events, including reports from the Mercian Conference and the work of the Staff Development Group (MSDG). There will also be a summary of highlights from the Special Interest Groups and Communities of Practice.

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 and the conference.

SP mentioned that the Staff Development Group had asked about the cycle of the annual report, noting that it covers the calendar year rather than aligning with the academic year. They wondered if it be more useful to produce annual reports for the academic year.

It was noted that the SCONUL Annual Report covers the calendar year, and Mercian Collaboration may need to align with SCONUL on this.

It was also noted that the Mercian Conference is normally held in September, so can be reported on more quickly in an annual report covering a calendar year than if we were to change to reporting on an academic year basis.

ACTION: Chair to check with SCONUL on the requirements for the Mercian Collaboration Annual Report, and whether this should cover the calendar year.

3.ii) Additional Steering Group Member

It had been agreed at the last Board meeting that we would put out a call for an additional Steering Group member “to support our plans and ensure that there are sufficient Steering Group members to Sponsor our larger portfolio of Special Interest Groups”.

The Chair proposed to put out this call for an additional SG member via email. If more than one person expresses their interest in this SG role, then we will proceed to an election.

Steering Group: Nominations & Elections Procedures:

<https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MC-SG-Elections%20Procedures-2.0-March%202017.pdf>

ACTION: Chair to put out a call for additional Steering Group member via email. If more than one person puts themselves forward for this role, then we will proceed to an election.

4. SCONUL Update (Chair)

The Chair confirmed that the most recent Memorandum of Understanding with SCONUL has now been signed off.

The Chair reported that SCONUL has convened a Symposium for National and Regional Library Consortia. The first meeting was held in Birmingham on 26th January 2024, with the Mercian Collaboration represented by its Chair, Vice-Chair and Executive Officer. It was helpful to see what other consortia are doing, and we gained ideas on what else we might be doing, as well as recognising that we should avoid duplication. The next Symposium has been arranged for January 2025.

4.i) SCONUL Content Strategy Group

PB gave a brief update on the SCONUL Content Strategy Group and the Content Forum held in February.

He noted that there was interest in exploring options for ‘Collective Collecting’ and other alternative mitigations if it becomes necessary to ‘walk away’.

The sector is under ever increasing financial pressures, with some institutions facing particular challenges. Being equitable across the sector is seen as very important.

Article Processing Charges and Transitional Agreements are additional costs for universities, and usually come out of the same budget as library subscriptions.

JISC has published 'A review of transitional agreements in the UK'

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/a-review-of-transitional-agreements-in-the-uk>

WONKHE article by Libby Horner: 'Transitional agreements may not be the whole route to open access'

<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/transitional-agreements-may-not-be-the-whole-route-to-open-access/>

TW noted that some of the existing agreements are coming up for renewal and asked if there was any advice for library directors on how to proceed.

It was felt that it would always be preferable to act together if possible.

PB confirmed that Ann Rossiter is continuing to liaise with UUK to ensure that Vice-Chancellors are aware of what is happening.

CP reminded colleagues that not all HEIs are in UUK. Birmingham Newman University is a GuildHE member, for example.

4.ii) SCONUL changes to support and hosting of Mercian Collaboration Website

The Officer reported that SCONUL had made changes to the support and hosting arrangements for the Mercian Collaboration website with effect from 26/03/2024.

This may involve some temporary disruption to our website. We have also been advised that it will be necessary to upgrade the website from Drupal 7 to Drupal 10 before the end of 2024, and there may be an additional cost for this upgrade.

5. Operational Group Matters and Reports

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

SA reported that preparations for the Mercian 2024 Conference were going well.

The conference theme is 'Collaboration, Evolution and Sustainability' and the conference will be held on 11th September 2024 in The Venue @ DMU in Leicester.

The Conference 2024 homepage is here:

<https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2024>

The Call for Speakers has gone out and is available here:

<https://www.merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2024/call-for-speakers>

The Call for Posters will go out soon. We are hoping to receive poster proposals from member institutions, as well as SIGs and individuals.

The Platinum Sponsor is Mark Allen Group and EBSCO and Taylor & Francis have signed up to be Gold Sponsors. It is hoped that a few more sponsors will sign up.

There was a discussion about suggestions for the keynote speaker. We need to confirm the keynote speaker in good time so that we can announce this. Directors are happy to approach potential keynote speakers to check whether they are available on the date and whether they are interested. This can be done in order of preference.

ACTION: Directors to encourage team members to submit speaker proposals before the deadline.

ACTION: Directors to encourage team members to submit poster proposals.

ACTION: Any Directors with suggestions for potential Sponsors should forward these to the Conference Group.

5.ii) Staff Development Group (SDG): Update (Sarah Pittaway)

SP reported that the SDG met in February and this year's SDG programme is going well.

The programme includes some new sessions on AI and UX. We are also continuing to run 'All the same but different' events, aimed at Library Assistants and other support staff.

There is ongoing evaluation of the events and the programme.

Following on from the UX event, there may be a proposal to create a UX Community of Practice.

6. Mercian Collaboration Financial Sustainability (Pete Maggs)

PM presented a paper on Mercian Collaboration Financial Sustainability to start the discussion. It was noted that expenditure is exceeding income and this is not sustainable.

There are no easy answers.

Everyone is mindful of the considerable and increasing financial pressures on member institutions.

We also need to agree fundamental(s) about/of what we want Mercian Collaboration to be moving forward. The Value Proposition needs to be clear, both to current members and potential new members.

Subscriptions

The main source of income is membership subscriptions. Chris Porter provided some background on the history, noting that the Steering Group had recommended, and the Board had agreed, to keep increases in subscription fees to a minimum over the last few years.

The subscription fees for each institution were set by the original treasurer, based on size and ability to pay. Subscription fees are not based on JISC bandings but perhaps they should be.

AO suggested it would be helpful to do modelling of subscriptions. Pete agreed and said that this should be the next step as a Steering Group.

It was noted that other organisations are increasing subscriptions. Things have been held and are now increasing to cover increased costs.

LF said it would be helpful to understand the bandings. He also noted that people are volunteering time as well as contributing money through subscriptions.

TW would support an inflationary increase in subscription fees but felt that the current banding of subscription fees seems inequitable. Too large an increase may mean that institutions leave.

BV could support an increased subscription if value of membership was demonstrated.

EW and PM agreed value piece is critical and the Steering Group is already planning to pull this together.

Potential for other members to join the Collaboration

There was a discussion about whether we could invite other members to join the Collaboration.

EW noted that parts of the country not representing by a regional consortium - e.g. South West England.

SP wondered whether members from other regions would want to pay subscriptions to join given that everyone is under financial pressure. The value for money aspect would be key.

New entrants to the sector and private providers may be interested in signing up for some kind of associate membership if this gave them access to staff development or other benefits to justify the cost. It would also be necessary to check with SCONUL as to whether it would be possible offer associate membership under the SCONUL guidelines.

Conference costs and income

Everyone agreed that it would be good to keep conference free to attend for all delegates from member institutions.

SA said that the Mercian Conference is one big visible thing we do and therefore very important.

CP was also reluctant to charge for conference as this would just be moving costs around and any conference fees would still come from the same library budgets.

Others commented that they would prefer an increase in membership subscription fees to charging conference fees. Conference is a benefit of membership.

PB felt that the conference needs to fund itself, if at all possible.

RJ noted that the Mercian 2023 Conference had received sponsorship from five commercial sponsors. However, the total cost of the venue and the keynote speaker had exceeded this income.

JK suggested we could consider holding the conference is alternate years, rather than annually. Or we could alternate between an online conference and an in-person conference. It was agreed that we should explore these options.

Ideas to broaden the remit of the Collaboration

There was a brief discussion about whether there were any ideas to broaden the remit of the Collaboration to increase value to members, for example regional procurement and collective collecting.

Other comments from Board members

G E-C spoke about the relationship between fixed costs, activity and income. New members should not be invited to join just for the sake of increasing income. We need to articulate value to justify increased subscriptions.

Instead we need to ask ourselves

- What are the challenges?
- What can we do to make the most difference to us as members?
- What are our relationships with other collaborations and working in particular ways?

JK emphasised the importance of added value, including, collaborative content, services, etc. She noted that the conference is fantastic value. However we need to look at costs.

PM and EW felt it would be worth looking at the funding models used to manage different consortia (including RLUK, ALN, etc.). EW noted that we need to find out more about this by contacting the consortia directly.

TW suggested it would also be worth looking at non regional groups. Perhaps there is potential to merge with other groups.

The important question was: what would happen if Mercian didn't exist? Gary also suggested people should think about what they would miss and how much would it cost us to provide the same services ourselves in our individual institutions.

IK agreed we need to look at the value proposition and the subscription model. Would it be possible to have an interim increase in subscriptions for this year rather than waiting until 2024?

EW encouraged Board members to send any further comments, ideas or suggestions directly to her and/or PM.

NB: the Officer role was not discussed as part of this conversation, but questions were raised about FTE etc.

ACTIONS related to sustainability conversation.

- To look at modelling subscription increases and banding.
- To investigate other forms of income generation.
- To maintain “ free to attend” status of the Mercian Conference but to explore other aspects related to it,
 - Alternately online/in-person
 - Costs related to sponsorship (paying for itself)
- To work on value proposition which is essential for the membership.

7. SIG Matters and Reports

It was not possible to have a full discussion on SIG matters due to time constraints.

LF noted that there was interest from the Copyright SIG in becoming a Community of Practice. Clarification on the difference between a Special Interest Group and a Community of Practice would be useful.

8. AOB

There were no items raised under AOB, partly due to lack of available time.

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

June 2024