



# Conference 2021: Outline Analysis & Delegate Demographics

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## Introduction

This report outlines details concerning this year's Conference, hosted online by Bishop Grosseteste University on behalf of the Collaboration, 9-10<sup>th</sup> September 2021. It provides an overview of delegate bookings and actual attendance, along with sponsorship levels. Delegate evaluations of the event are ongoing at time of writing and will form part of the Collaboration's annual report. Some suggested recommendations to Board and the Conference Group are included.

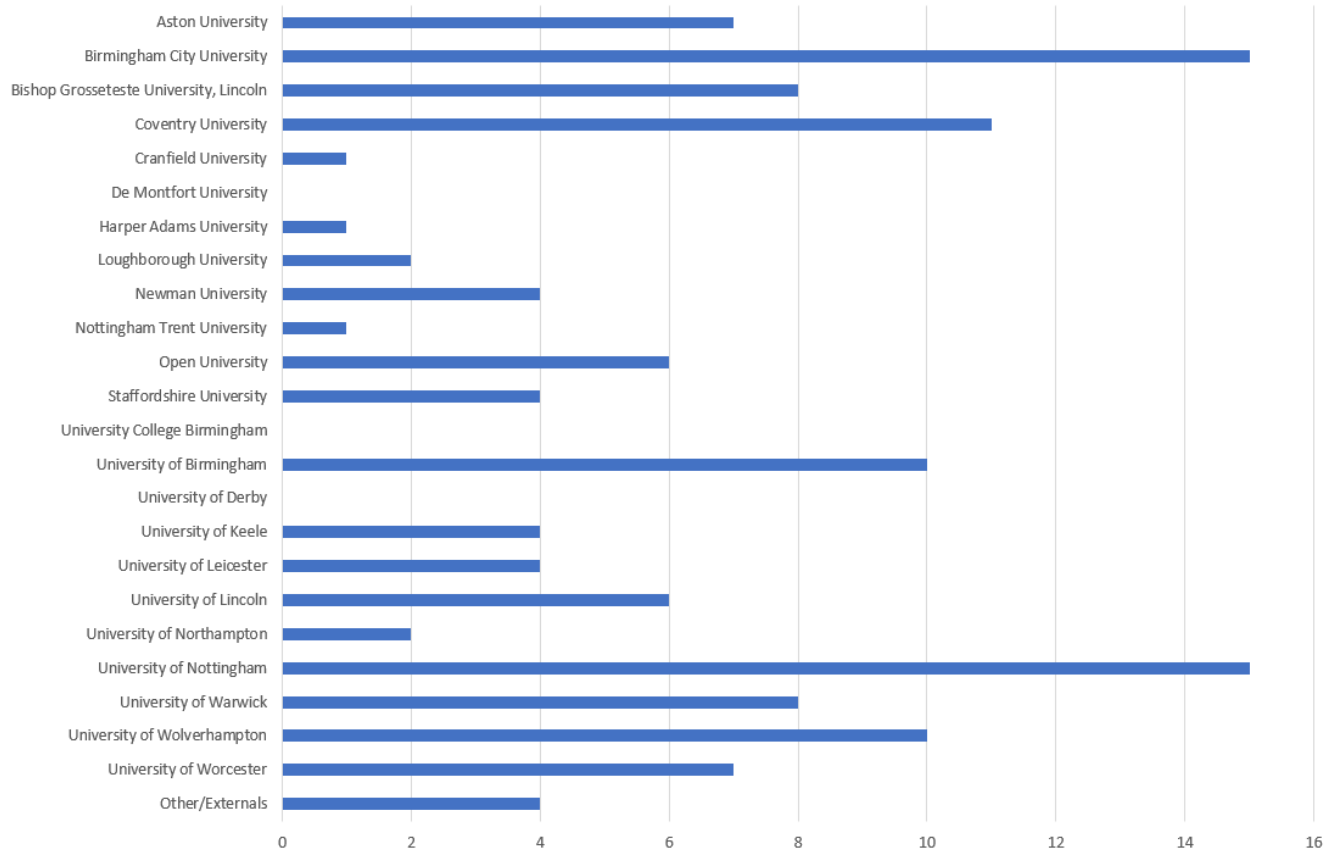
## Executive Summary

- The 2021 conference was a marked success in terms of attendance, speaker recruitment, delegate diversity along with content delivered and captured.
- 130 delegate places booked, with 109 delegates attending over two half days, from 20/23 member institutions.
- 22 papers, with speakers from 10 member institutions were presented.
- Delegates online peaked at 80, with a low of 20, per session.
- Most delegates were professional grades, although paraprofessional numbers rose contrasted with 2019's event.
- £1,000 from two sponsors supported the event's costs, notably feedback incentivisation, and highlighted the conference's value for commercial outreach activities.
- Recommendations for future event planning include considerations of delegate and speaker appeal, communication improvements, re-alignment of sponsorship policy and closer cross-subgroup working by the planning group.

## Delegate Bookings

A record 130 places were pre-booked to attend at the conference <sup>i</sup>, which contrasts most favourably with the previous 2019 event where 82 delegates were scheduled to attend. <sup>ii</sup> Four externals were registered <sup>iii</sup>, with the rest being drawn from 20 of the 23 member institutions. <sup>iv</sup> Averaged across the Collaboration this equates to an average of 5.5 delegates prebooked per represented institution. <sup>v</sup> 102 delegate places were booked for both days, with an additional 12 registering for Thursday only, and 16 for Friday only.

Figure 1: Booked Delegates Collaboration 2021 Conference



### Additional Needs

The Conference Group made efforts to ensure the event was accessible, with all live and pre-recorded sessions made use of either auto-captioning (via Teams) or script transcripts. Delegates were asked at booking to declare any additional needs or support to attend, but none were requested.

### Sponsorship

Despite the online nature of the event, and limited associated costs, two sponsors were attracted to contribute funds in support at the Gold (£500) level. <sup>vi</sup> A third potential sponsor had approached the Collaboration ahead of the event, but discussions regrettably failed to reach an agreement. Some of this funding will be used to incentivise feedback return. However, despite this the 2021 conference has emerged with small net gain in funds to support the Collaboration’s ongoing business.

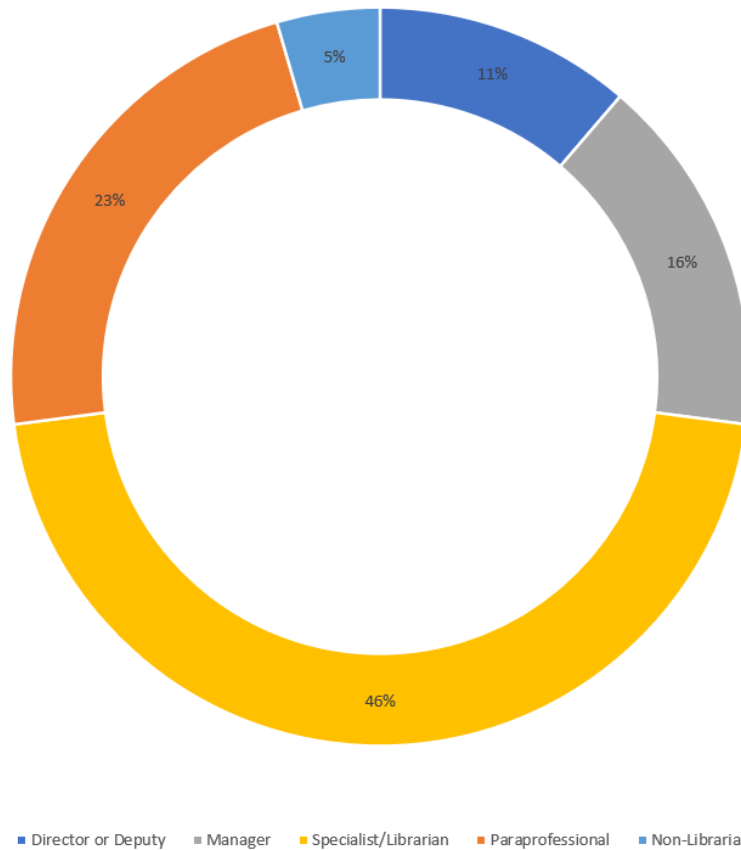
## Delegate Attendance & Engagement

A grand total of 109 unique individuals logged on to the conference at some point over the two half-days. As this number included eight members of the Conference Group, the actual total of non-organiser delegates for 2021's event is 101 people.

### Seniority

While a seniority question is not asked as part of the booking process, a role or job title is requested. From this, as in previous years, a rough extrapolation can be made of the seniority level of attending delegates.

Figure 2: Delegate Bookings Conference 2021 by Role Seniority



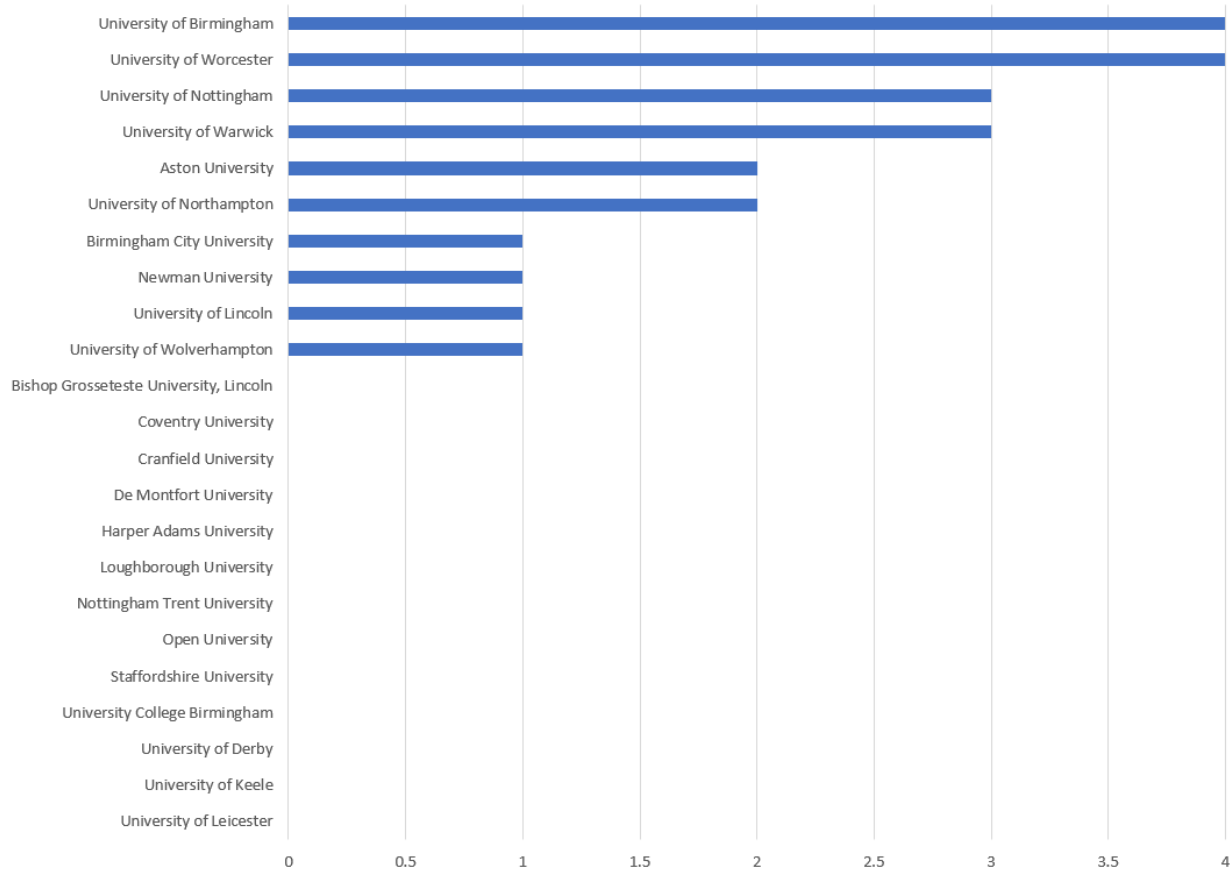
As in past years the majority of bookings came from within the professional grade staff. However, a marked increase on the last hosted (2019) conference can be seen in terms of the degree of the paraprofessional delegates attending.<sup>vii</sup> Notably, in the early evaluative feedback at least one delegate has highlighted the 'online format allowed me to attend for the first time', underscoring the increased access to the event the non-geographic location permitted.

### Papers

Discounting the keynote, delivered by a speaker external to the region, sessions were hosted by staff from 10 out of the 23 member institutions (**Figure 3**). A total of 22 different papers were delivered, with 6 long (40 minutes + questions) and 16 short (10 minutes plus questions).<sup>viii</sup> There is a marked bias towards those institutions in the West Midlands delivering around three quarters of the papers numerically. As it was reported by the conference group that virtually all submissions were accepted this year, some conclusions

may be reached about the event or theme’s appeal to those institutions not represented by speaker participants.

Figure 3: Number of papers by member institution

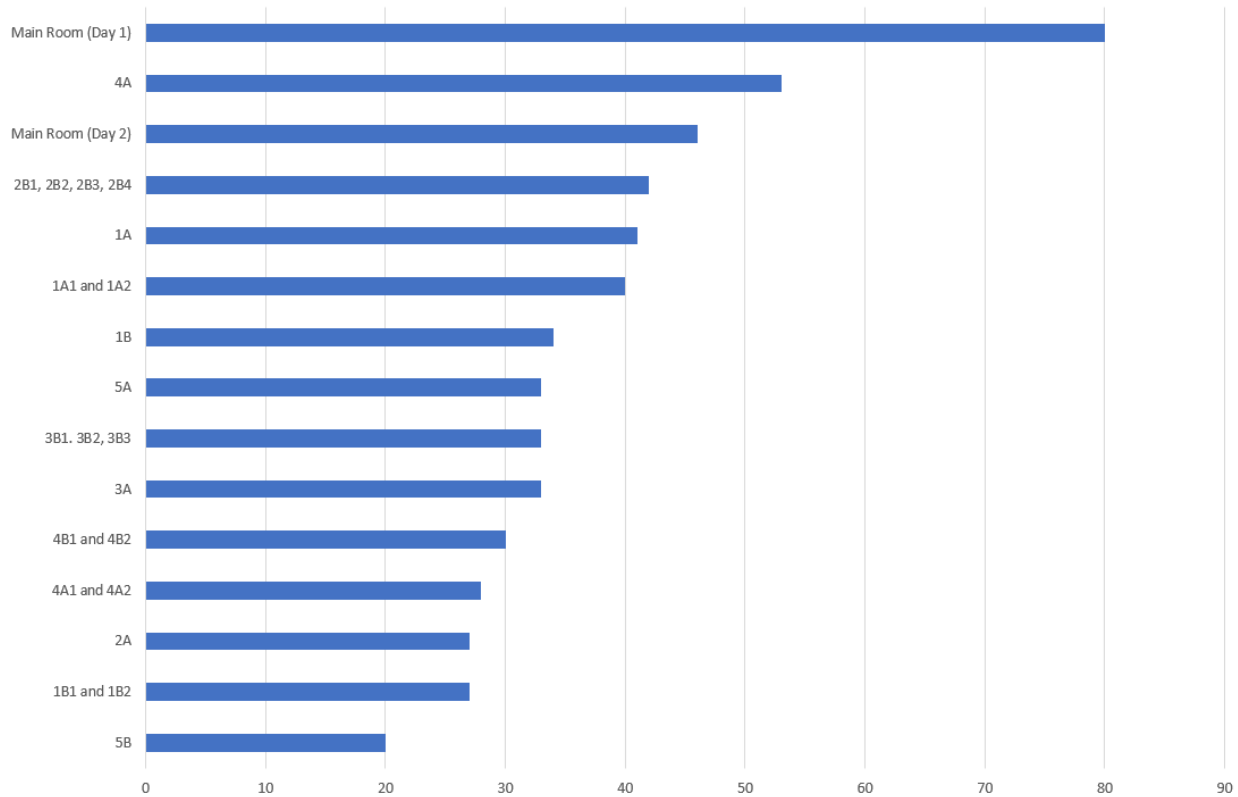


### Session Engagement

The highest attendance seen at the conference was in the main room during the first day (Figure 4) with 80 unique delegates accessing this space at some point. As this room was used for both keynote and general discussions, along with the ‘Moments of Joy’ videos, this is unsurprising. The most popular non-keynote session was 4A, (*Library Communication at University of Birmingham in Times of Adversity*, Steve Bull and Claire Browne) with 53 unique delegates.

Even the least well-attended session, 5B still registered 20 unique delegate visitors which compares very favourably with past physical conference sessions. Unsurprisingly, aside from 4A, delegate attendance seems higher on day one of the conference (Main Room Day 1 + Sessions 1A-3B) than on day 2 (Main Room Day 2 + Sessions 4A-5B).<sup>ix</sup>

Figure 4: Unique Attendees by Conference Session



## Comments

Firstly, the Conference Group members should be commended for their efforts over the past 10 months to develop and produce an online conference of this nature, especially given the necessity of all planning and discussion taking place solely online. Undoubtedly, the conference was a success by our standard aims of gathering numerous delegates and speakers from across the region for a day's exchange of experience and discussion. The highest ever delegate bookings validates the theme and online format's general attraction, and feedback received to date has been uniformly positive. That said, there are lessons to be learned in terms of continuing to improve the quality, professionalism and appeal of the Mercian Collaboration conference, suggested from this data and analysis.

The demographics and proportions of staff attending from across the membership raises some questions. For example, the absence of delegates from Derby, De Montfort and University College Birmingham is concerning; especially given UCB does not appear to have ever booked delegates to attend a Collaboration conference<sup>x</sup>. Additionally, four further institutions (Northampton, NTU, Loughborough, Harper & Cranfield) only sent one or two delegates. The absence of more delegates from these institutions will be most likely attributable to reasons including: clashes with student inductions, local priorities, communication weaknesses or local awareness alongside potential disinterest in the event theme or content. For smaller institutions, staff size will have proved a challenging disincentive to attend. However, some smaller member institutions fielded considerable delegates numbers.

That no additional needs were requested is pleasing, although possibly some potential delegates chose not to attend due to unknown barriers (e.g. online format etc). This inadvertent exclusion is a topic of



discussion which should be addressed through conversations with the MDF subgroup, as online events continue to be utilised within the Collaboration.

The generation of sponsorship for an online event underscores the value to which commercial organisations ascribe to the conference as a location for outreach, and hence direct fiscal support. With the smaller outgoings of the online event, it has been positive in terms of fund raising for the Collaboration. However, when contrasted with our direct counterparts (ALN) questions in terms of equivalency and comparable value, especially in terms of charging structures arise. The Conference Group should be encouraged to revisit the sponsorship regime deployed for future events, and consider harmonisation with ALN's approach.

The unique delegate attendance is excellent and directly comparable to levels at the 2019 conference, further validating the online format. Here too the diversity of delegate seniorities is pleasing, with the increase of paraprofessional roles attending especially gratifying.

A goodly body of content was presented at the event, and thanks to the Teams format, much of it has been captured and is in the process of being made available online. This is not something which had previously been achieved, and for any physical or hybrid future event, an area for consideration in terms of increasing both the Collaboration's visibility and the reach across the region and beyond.<sup>xi</sup>

Regarding speakers, it is perhaps of concern there was not a greater spread across the membership. With only 10/23 institutions' experiences represented within papers, questions arise concerning the appeal and attraction of the conference to staff at these venues as a locus to share their knowledge. Some previous conference themes have been, anecdotally and in feedback, noted as problematic for attracting some potential speakers. However, unlike the poorly-received (in terms of submissions) 2020 'diversity' theme, the 2021 'adaption and growth' one clearly proved more attractive to a higher number of member staff, as reflected in the record submission levels. Perhaps in regards of attracting speakers and delegates challenges remain within communication or outreach approaches. The Conference Group could consider collaboration with the Marketing and Communications Group in seeking ways to better advocate their message to the community. Additional background research with the member community might also be a further way to inform future themes, promotion and speaker-calls.

Finally, it is pleasing to note that all sessions had a healthy number of delegates in attendance. Previous conferences have seen single figure attendance in some rooms, but this was not a problem in 2021. Clearly, the programme's content was appealing to the majority of delegates who attended for them to devote their time to listening and engaging with it.

There will be a subsequent report based on the delegate feedback, this in turn along with elements of this document, will form part of the Conference Group Chair's annual report contribution.



## **Recommendations**

- The Directors Board should reflect on the conclusions and, as necessary, provide guidance and steer to the Conference Group for future events via the group Sponsor.
- The Conference Group should likewise reflect on these findings, and seek to address them within their future operations.
- The Conference Group and their Sponsor should consider directly engaging with staff at under-represented institutions to illuminate areas for improvement in attracting them to future events.
- The Conference Group should consider running audience research to explore what elements, activities or content appeals to different demographics of potential delegates.
- The Conference Group should consider the benefits in aligning with comparator organisations in terms of sponsorship fees and approaches.
- The Conference Group should consider collaboration or close working with the Marketing and Communications Group in terms of raising awareness and outreach for their speaker and delegate calls.
- The Conference Group should consider engaging in discussions with the MDF group with respect to online accessibility issues to future planning activities.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author notes thanks to the conference group members for their efforts over the past year. He would like to especially accord particular thanks to Nial Halford-Busby in facilitating the collation of the data for this report, alongside his extensive efforts in coordinating the platform aspects of the conference. Thanks are also due to BGU as a whole for their remarkable generosity in hosting the 2021 conference on behalf of the Collaboration.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Five delegates booked twice, and have been deduplicated in this data.

<sup>ii</sup> [Johnson, G.J., 2019. Mercian Collaboration Conference 2019: Delegate Demographics.](#)

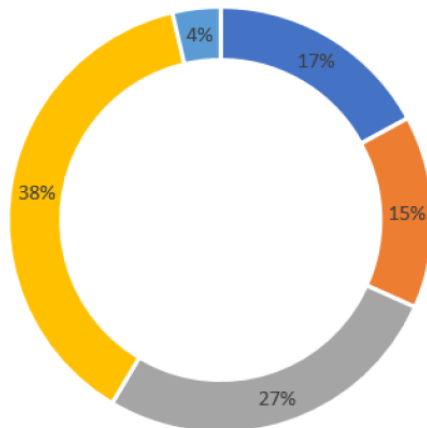
<sup>iii</sup> These comprised the Keynote speaker, a sponsor representative, a student from Pakistan, and the WHELF Officer

<sup>iv</sup> Notably delegates from UCB have failed to be attracted to the 2017 and 2019 conferences as well, which presents a particular concern. Data for 2018 was not readily available. See <sup>ii</sup> and [Johnson, G.J., 2017. The Mercian Conference 2017: Delegate Regionality, Representation and Session Preference Analysis.](#)

<sup>v</sup> For contrast the ALN (Academic Libraries North) online conference (8-9<sup>th</sup> Sept) which adopted a similar two-half day structure had 452 pre-booked delegates, or roughly 13.7 per institution (33 members). Their attendance was highest on day one with 243 delegates engaging, and day two a maximum of 184.

<sup>vi</sup> By contrast the ALN 2021 conference attracted 1 (gold), 4 (silver) and 3 (bronze) sponsors, with a fee of £1,500, £1,000 and £500 respectively levied for a total income of £7k. See [ALN, 2021. New Beginnings: Aspirations and optimism for the future.](#), pp. 13-15.

<sup>vii</sup> For contrast below is the 2019 data, using the same coloration. While proportionally there are more paraprofessionals, the most senior librarians were thinner on the ground. Only 7 out of 23 Directors were in attendance.



■ Director or Deputy ■ Paraprofessional ■ Manager ■ Specialist ■ Non-Librarian

<sup>viii</sup> This equates to around 400 minutes of content, plus discussion time, was delivered at the event, outside of the keynote. The keynote itself was an additional 40-45 minutes of content.

<sup>ix</sup> Thanks to Teams, it is possible to identify exactly which delegates attended particular sessions and indeed the time they remained engaged. However, time does not permit this level of granular analysis.

<sup>x</sup> See <sup>ii</sup> & <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>xi</sup> Material from the event can be found here, and on the Collaboration's YouTube channel. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2021/presentations>