Mercian Collaboration Deputies & Senior Staff Group

Outline Agenda: 10th November 2021

Meeting Chair: Kirsty Kift (Coventry)

Present: Alan Brine (DMU), Alison Pope (Staffordshire), Anne Knight (Cranfield), Ann-Marie James (BCU), Chris Porter (Newman), Curwen Thomas (Harper-Adams), George Dimmock (Northampton), Ian Keepins (Birmingham), Janet Weaver (Keele), John Dowd (Birmingham), Julie Partridge (NTU), Julie Robinson (Newman), Kate Marshall (NTU), Katie Mann (Newman), Kirsty Kift (Coventry), Philip Vaughn (Coventry), Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

Apologies: Selena Killick (OU), Ben Veasey (Loughborough), Elizabeth Mallet (Lincoln), Ant Brewerton (Warwick), Heather Green (Warwick), Vicki McCarvey (Staffordshire), Curwen Thomas (Harper Adams), Kay Jeffries (Derby), Jon Granger (Wolverhampton), Bertha Low (BCU)

1. Issues & actions from Previous Meeting

ACTION: Ben to approach Jisc for speaker for future meeting

GJJ would follow up with Ben to check on any progress in this regard. All other actions were perceived as having been completed.

2. Themed Discussions

Working Practices

Kirsty introduced the discussions, noting now we were well into the new academic year and hence new working practices had had time to bed in. She invited comments, reflections and thoughts on what was happening across the region's academic libraries.

BCU: Staff now 40-60% on site, with senior management keen for people to be more on campus. A desk booking system for staff to promote flexible working implemented, but people remain territorial for their old desks. There's also some tensions between different teams due to differences in perceived working arrangement 'norms'. From a management perspective some frustrations remain in reaching staff working offsite, and certainly where possible f-2-f meetings have been beneficial. Issues around DSE and other related accommodations where staff have taken their kit home, means the library is having to buy duplicates, in order to bypass counters to campus working. Additionally, space for online meetings on campus using what are shared spaces remain a general problem.

Birmingham: The university is back to 100% f-2-f teaching and as a result it is now busier in the library than before the pandemic. In part this is due to higher student intake than normal this year. Additional study spaces, including a marquee, have been provided and these are normally very heavily used and close to full occupancy most of the day. Hybrid teaching rooms have also been introduced across campus. Conversely, not all library staff are back on site all the time but with limited exceptions no one is now 100% home or campus. For example, frontline teams work at least one day week remotely, while skills teams are predominantly home based. Team meetings are being used as part of the cohesion process, with staff expected in once per month on campus. The library is no longer using bubbles for frontline staff too.

Coventry: Library staff, with few exceptions, are now back on site at least some of the time. However, some challenges in terms of finding teaching space is keeping some people offsite more. Currently, Coventry students are promised 10 hours weekly f-2-f teaching with the rest online. While academic librarians are adroit at online teaching, conversely finding tasks for front of house staff to do remotely was a struggle. A new agile working policy has been introduced, which is percentage based: 20%/40-60%/80% away from office and 'fully agile'. This has impacted on staff desk/space requirements, but the university expects 'off-site' to include time working in departments and other campus locations. Management impacts here too have been noted, as locating and engaging with staff can be challenging. Student f-2-f engagement is down on expectations, and while this is a student choice, it has been a cause for some concern. However, the library is busier but has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of occupancy.

Cranfield: Hybrid working policy has emerged to provide each individual with a percentage of time (averaged over a month) they should be on site. For example, for frontline staff it is 80%, meaning a day for home working. Staff are rapidly picking favoured days to be working off site, and the weather is sometimes a factor here too. The Shrivenham campus is still not fully open as given it is partly being used for COVID work means restrictions on users and staff who can be present at any time. At Cranfield the library is often full, but this is at its reduced capacity standard. Students are expected to wear masks and keep social distancing but this is creating tensions as many are not following these requirements. Campus teaching locations have has shifted, due to a lack of suitable 'COVID safe' space in certain departments, which has impacted on satellite library traffic.

Newman: Normal place of work has been expected to be campus from 1 Sept which has led to some practical issues. The university has generally moved over to permanent arrangement 1/3 - 2/3 arrangement for teaching (online being the smaller component) as part of a progression to a more flipped-learning strategy. Large lectures were typically online, seminars in person. In terms of footfall, there were far fewer (perhaps 1/3 pre-COVID levels) people using the physical library, although events like graduation considerably increased usage levels. Chat services in high demand, partly due to raised visibility, but competing priorities were making it harder to staff now.

Northampton: The expectation was now that staff would be fully onsite for student delivery. While the blended-learning approach used a mix of online and f-2-f, the push was to provide a 'campus experience' for students. Staff teams have been developing their own 'Smarter Working' agreements, as these arrangements have been devolved by the institution to departments and their teams. These agreements should be business need driven, and include elements of sense-check (for example, no 2am working!) but a possibility of flexibility in timings for the working day is included. However, getting these agreed has been problematic as teams have struggled to successfully align personal and business needs. Moves towards a standard percentage attendance approach may well be a better solution in the longer term. Notably, perceptions from student body have been that online only delivery represented a poorer experience, but moves to push campus f-2-f provision have significantly restored satisfaction levels.

NTU: The VC steer is towards f-2-f teaching as the best student experience. All frontline customer service teams are back on campus, while learning and teaching team are hybrid working. Generally the library is offering both online and f-2-f info skills workshops and appointments. Suitable spaces for undertaking online activities while on campus can be a challenge. Other library teams are also working in a hybrid way with their on-campus time focused around stock work etc. The library is back to pre-pandemic study space capacity. Mask wearing is encouraged but observance is low apart from university staff.

DMU: The new user need for watching lectures in library spaces is impacting on other patrons who are prevented from using the other resources and spaces. Moreover, some of the technologies, strategies and procedures to support this shift are still being fine-tuned. This has been raised with university management as an emerging need to be addressed at an institutional level. Currently, practically resolving these issues is devolved to a library level. Student engagement through these routes is also something which is still being explored. Staff are adjusting to being back to campus more and understanding a business needs driven requirement approach. While some staff benefit from being on site, others can and do work remotely; but wish for more f-2-f engagement with colleagues for problem solving and team working solutions. Notably Systems Team have mastered remote social and work engagement, and remain very cohesive as a result.

Staffordshire: Lack of small working spaces were noted as an issue for students, as well as staff.

Staffing & Recruitment

Alison flagged up the appointing of academic skills tutors for extra skills support elsewhere (outside the region) and was curious if others were appointing extra skills posts to support those students transitioning from online only, to a hybrid/f-2-f learning experience?

BCU: Had recruited seven new staff over the last year, and the perception was around a return to normal in line with the university's direction of travel. Helpfully the institution was invested in maintaining and even increasing library staff levels. However, there have been recruitment queries about agile working policy and some of the current grey areas are proving a problem in terms of attracting candidates.

Coventry: No extra skills posts, but other support services were being well used. Kirsty flagged up the eighty new 'Student Success Coaches', which were potentially addressing similar needs in provided more personalised support for students, as an aid to retention and progression. However, boundaries remained to be more clearly defined due to potential overlap with other services including the library. Reported potential external applicants for roles across the university were perceiving Coventry's flexible working policies as less appealing, which had significantly reduced application pool numbers.

NTU: Kate reported extra student mentors and more academic support tutors within the library, but this is a longer-term development which arose some years before the pandemic. Reduced recruitment applicant numbers for most roles were reported though

Staffordshire: No problem with recruiting as good numbers and quality applicants were reported.

3. General discussions & updates

- Expectation online meetings to continue – for access and in terms of reduced impact on working day.
- Generation of students coming in from schools who have only/mainly done online learning for the past two years. Impressions were these people were happy to carry on with these elements.
- It was suggested that students attending in person to hybrid sessions may feel short changed because session set ups often try and engage online attendees more.
- In terms of prebooked appointments it was reported those wishing to attend online were far more likely to actually appear, than those making f-2-f appointments.
- It was observed academic libraries continue to be well-positioned institutionally post-pandemic due to their efforts and resultant visibility during the pandemic period and beyond.

4. Next meeting

a. Meeting Chair & Date

It was agreed GJJ would arrange a suitable date and call for a meeting chair in the new year.

ACTION: ALL to consider acting as meeting Chair for Spring 2022 meeting

ACTION: GJJ to arrange poll for meeting date for Spring 2022

b. Potential themes & topics

Two themes were suggested and will be discussed at the next meeting

- **National Student Survey**: Including impacts from pandemic, timing of return, differences of institutional approach, promotion and strategy.
- **Future of print collections**: Changing trends, beyond space considerations, print vs electronic, loans statistics, 'sortation' system value for money, circulation policies etc.

5. AOB

None.

6. Annual Report Contribution

GJJ asked the meeting if they were content with him writing the Group return for the annual report, which was agreed.

ACTION: GJJ to make annual report contribution on behalf of the group

GJJ 10th Nov 2021