



Directors Board Meeting

A19, Trent Building, University Park, University of Nottingham

Meeting Minutes - 4th November 2022

Present: Chris Porter (Chair, Newman University), Natalie Baker-Fosker (Mercian Collaboration – Interim cover), Sue Ackerman (Nottingham), Helen Curtis (Aston), Jo-Anne Watts (Wolverhampton), Emma Walton (Loughborough), Ben Veasey (Derby), Phil Brabban (Coventry), Tim Wales (Cranfield), Helen Adey (Nottingham Trent), John Dowd (Birmingham), Chris Powis (Northampton), Judith Keene (Worcester), David Parkes (De Montfort), Ann Marie James (BCU)

Apologies: Simon Dixon (Leicester), Anna O’Neil (Warwick), Ian Snowley (Lincoln)

Introductions

Group welcomed to Directors Board Meeting for November 2022.

Chair thanked Sue Ackerman for hosting the event

22/07 Operations

i. MUAL: Relationship & issues in the face of changes in ALN/NEYAL

Ben Veasey (BV) gave verbal overview of the purchasing consortia, in terms of spend on books and periodicals. NEYAL and ALN constituted in Jan 2021 and are seeking to represent the interest of members on purchasing and procurement. ALN plan to formalise the arrangement.

A viability report is currently being written by Pete Dalton, a consultant at BCU, and is due to be published in December 2022. The report is expected to report feedback from colleagues across various groups; looking at spend, how the groups operate, governance, how to leverage UPC’s, etc. Without pre-empting the outcome of the report, Ben suggested the need for further discussion on how to best achieve relationships between ALN, NEYAL, MUAL, etc, including a contingency plan should NEYAL be enveloped by ALN.

BV did not submit a paper for the Directors Board because he doesn’t have any recommendations at this time, however he gave a verbal update to bring it to the attention of the Directors Board in advance of pending report.

Chair commented that if NEYAL become the purchasing arm of ALN, so MUAL may become purchasing arm of the Mercian Collaboration.

MUAL has enthusiasm about remaining as consortia on the national contract of procurement and acquisition. However, currently within the Mercian region we have no access to procurement advice, therefore chair led discussions on the general appetite for a procurement advice framework.

Viewpoints included:

- Whether we need all these purchasing consortia because they all give same deals.
- Using existing relationships to hold suppliers to account and request procurement advice at contract award time.
- Small institutions have no choice but to go through procurement independently (with no institutional advice), so find it is useful to talk to other colleagues who have similar experiences, such as SUPC.
- SUPC are big, so can’t represent everyone. whereas NEYAL are smaller so can represent smaller institutions.
- Small institutions feel like they have a bigger voice when aligned with others.

- Have conversations with suppliers about content and directions – SCONUL and JISC are having national level discussion, but we need a local approach.
- MUAL representative has spoken to the consultant, so local perspective should be included in the pending report.
- Geographical location needs to be a factor. Is this a regional conversation or national?
- Are frameworks fit for purpose? Can SCONUL or JISC do more to help the regional conversation on frameworks?
- The immediate stakeholders are ALN and NEYAL, but Mercian and MUAL are stakeholders too, so need to be a part of the conversation because there is recognition that membership is broader than just ALN.

It was generally agreed that further discussions are need following the publication of the pending report.

Action: Chair to add to Agenda for spring meeting as standalone point.

Action: Chair asked group to discuss the need for framework with acquisitions teams within their home institutions.

Action: Ben welcomed feedback and dialogue from members after the meeting.

ii. Executive Officer Recruitment

Chair gave update on the recruitment of the replacement Executive Officer.

Job advert and description was written after discussion with the Steering Group. However, advertising the vacancy on platforms such as Jobs.ac.uk has proven to be problematic, due to fundamental differences with home institution's HR practices.

Chair plans to advertise the vacancy via SCONUL, JISC, and Mercian mailing lists.

The job description was heavily influenced by both the original vacancy and the similar role within ALN, but carefully nuanced using the desired attributes as provided by discussions with the Steering Group and SIG chairs.

The vacancy will be a like-for-like replacement of previous Executive Officer, with hours listed as 14 hours per week. Group discussed whether 14 hours is enough considering the workload. Chair noted that the Officers hours were increased from 7 hours to 14 hours per week at the start of her tenure in 2020. Treasurer added that increasing the hours would increase salary too much.

Chair gave summary of next steps in the recruitment process:

- Chair to set application deadline and interview date(s)
- Chair to email Steering Group and SIG chairs with call for volunteers to be on interview panel
- Chair to post vacancy in mailing lists (If no applicants via lists, it can be posted on other platforms later)
- Interviews will be held online
- Place of work will be listed as work from home, with occasional travel within the region as needed. Brief discussions around the ability to offer a campus based working location, but chair noted that the Executive Officer is employed by SCONUL, not the chair's institution, so can't contractually offer a campus-based location.

Chair documented the difficulty of managing files between groups and across the tenures of successive Operational and SIG chairs, so she informed the Directors Board of her plan to approach Ann Rossiter (SCONUL) on the prospect of securing a Microsoft Teams account.

Chair noted from her conversations with colleagues at ALN that they use Teams, via an IT support contract hosted via SCONUL costing approx. £24 per month. Chair thinks this can be reasonably accommodated by the Mercian budget and could potentially be setup by the incoming Executive Officer. A Teams account would look more professional and would make the sharing of files and documents easier. It could also make holding discussions within channels easier, rather than sending out group emails.

22/08 SIG proposals

Chair mentioned that she anticipates either a SIG proposal or a Task and Finish group on the subject of EDI in the near future. Sue Ackerman offered to work with Emma on an EDI proposal.

Chair noted previous reservations highlighted to her, that the Mercian Collaboration may end up with too many SIG's. She questioned whether the creation of more groups would in turn create more work for either the incoming Executive Officer or the need to increase the admin roles within each of the SIG's Terms of Reference.

A question was raised about the expectations of what each group should do and/or accomplish and how these expectations are assessed by the Steering Group. Chair noted that while we have annual reports from each group, the Steering Group don't necessarily review each of the groups' remit in terms of success or failure. Each SIG is generally a group of people with similar interests who come together to talk about things connected to their respective subject areas. Each group requires varying levels of support from the Executive Officer, depending on how active they are.

It was suggested that a framework should be setup to look at the success parameters of the Mercian SIG's.

Chair apologised to group for neglecting to invite representatives for the two new SIG proposals received. However, the papers were circulated prior to the meeting so group discussed the proposals:

i. New SIG Proposal: Libraries Research Support Group - Midlands *

This proposal was originally created via informal discussions with the former Executive Officer.

Chair highlighted section of the proposal form, which implies that the group proposers are in need of more time, funding and admin support, none of which are readily available via the Mercian Collaboration (particularly during this interim period before the new Executive Officer is appointed).

Group discussions and reservations included:

- How does the proposed group fit into the rest of the collaboration eco system? – For instance, CILIP have a similar research group, so what is the driver behind having a Mercian research group that is not met by other initiatives already in place.
- How does a regional Research Support Group link with current CPD group and RLUK?
- Would this group's remit overlap with current Mercian Copyright Group? Only the larger institutions have full time staff available to look at Research, so the reach of this group is limited to the larger institutions only.
- Is there a deliverable outcome? Groups such as Conference Group have a tangible outcome (i.e., the Conference event) - this research proposal has nothing tangible. Would this be better as another format?
- Research Support as a subject area is not exactly a special interest, it's more an operational activity to share best practise; in which case, would this subject matter lend itself to a series of standalone training session via the Staff Development Group, rather than an ongoing SIG?
- Proposal paperwork is vague – It needs more focus on what they want to achieve/deliver, how they plan to do this, and what roles are needed.
- Perhaps go back and ask for more info on the purpose of the group?

It was decided that this proposal is to be put on hold for now.

Action: Chair to add to Research SIG proposal to agenda for next Steering Group meeting - to discuss if there is another format within the collaboration that is more appropriate for this subject.

ii. New SIG Proposals: Library Systems*

Chair noted that the proposed Library Systems group held an initial meeting to gauge interest from prospective members.

Discussions and reservations included:

- Is this group appropriate for a regional platform? – Are there any other regional groups of people looking at systems?
- There are currently many institutions going through various systems changes. Last year, the MSDG had a “bring and share” session about implementing a new LMS.
- There is a dwindling supply of qualified people in libraries to bridge the gap between Library Systems and IT support.
- Due to its niche subject matter, peer support is useful, so group agrees that there is a need for this type of group forum.
- Proposal paperwork is very broad. It does, however, speak to scope of the roles involved in systems support.
- A Systems Support SIG could host sessions on new individual technologies. However, it was felt that that running a systems user group could take up lots of time. While many institutions may be interested in the subject matter, they are unlikely to have the capacity to spare the time required. Especially if they are in the process of implementing new systems themselves.

It was decided that the Systems Group need to improve the paperwork, to more clearly define the scope of the group’s proposed work and outputs.

Action: Steering Group to discuss SIG Framework documentation at next meeting, and decide who should be tasked with designing the framework? (i.e., before the new Officer is appointed? Perhaps a task for the new Officer?)

Action: Steering Group to revisit Systems Support SIG proposal

22/09 Call for members of next steering group

Chair explained that she will step down as Mercian Chair in March 2023, as per the Group’s Terms of Reference. Under normal circumstances, the Vice-Chair is expected to step up to become Chair, for the next two-year term. However, current Vice-Chair, Laura Pilsel is not in position to step up to Chair for the next term. Therefore, Chair put out a formal call for all members of the Steering Group, (including a new Chair and Vice-Chair).

Chair invited current members of the Steering Group to stay on if happy to do so and invited new Directors to submit an expression of interest in the available positions.

Action: Interested parties are invited to have informal discussions with Chair regarding positions within Steering Group.

Action: Chair to decide on a date by which an expression of interest should be put forward.

Action: NBF to promote the call for Steering Group members via Jisc mail, website and social media.

Chair advised that chairing/vice-chairing the Steering Group is usually a straight-forward task - when there is an Executive Officer in post – and gave examples of the types of tasks that the former Executive Officer used to perform on her behalf.

Group discussed the possible time investment needed for such positions within the Steering Group.

Group discussed attitudes towards online vs in-person meetings. General consensus was that there is great value in coming together for in-person meetings, but the cost, time and workload capacity are important factors. Hybrid meetings are a possibility for ensuring greater attendance figures, although it was agreed that hybrid meetings are generally less successful, due to difficulty of engagement. It was suggested that meetings are alternated between in-person and online moving forward.

22/10 Guest Speaker: Ann Rossiter, Executive Director, SCONUL*

Ann gave overview of SCONUL strategy 2023-2025, based on the paper provided prior to the meeting. Ann offered forum for round table discussion on the questions raised within the document.

Discussions included:

- Cost of living crisis. Heating, lighting, IT, building maintenance etc.
- Content vs cost – partly blamed on economic crisis, and open access. How do we utilise a legacy budget model, while also working on budget mechanisms based on new models like e textbooks.
- Ann questioned how we can move to a licence-based model - Budgets and funding tend to be based around Capex, when licences are require Opex
- Financial planning in the context of political instability which is increasingly negative towards Higher Education i.e., freezing student loans. Institutions less likely to spend money on library, when could be spending money on mental health, academics, etc
- Need to offer evidence of benefits e.g. on TEF returns. There are increasing demands to produce metrics for services and tasks that are not easy to demonstrate.

How can/does SCONUL support?

- Sharing best practice
- Having someone from Office for Students (OfS) at conference was helpful to give a wakeup call. Can SCONUL get someone from OfS to come and have a conversation?
- Politicians' ideas of "students" are focussed on Russell Group Universities rather than the more diverse experiences across the breadth of the sector.
- Providing teaching materials is challenging with significant changes to pricing models.
- Expectation to be on campus 9-5 rather than WFH. Some institutions/departments are open to hybrid working, but it is often challenging to get guidance from HR on boundaries of WFH policies. How to create a sense of community during hybrid working. It is working, but only because we are bolting things on following from covid crisis.
- MS Teams – people are communicating well, but it is creating mini silos.
- Recruitment, retention and competitive wages.
 - Digital skills generally are different from specialist digital systems used in metadata, library management systems, etc. Recruiting into traditional systems roles is possible but it is creating silos of teams who have little common ground with broader tech trends. It's not about recruiting technical / IT people, but ones who understand the sector.
 - No clear impression of what is coming out of library schools these days. Is CILIP giving a clear steer in terms of accreditation? Tendency to remove the requirement for library qualifications and certainly to remove the need for chartership. Just need people with interest or skills in the area of recruitment.
Hard to retain well qualified staff, after investing in upskilling and development.
 - Hard to replace the range of skills built up over long careers.
 - Consider new routes in conjunction with CILIP, i.e., Apprenticeships.
 - If Careers services saw the institution as an employer, it would help.
- Flush out emerging uses for existing technology or system.
- Does AI and automation come up in your institutions?
 - Chat services - Springhare are switching on their chatbot before Xmas. Personalisation seems to be the trajectory.
 - Invasive data on individuals. Is this ethical? Not sure of practical applications within library space.
 - Don't fully understand practical aspects of AI. Costs much more than value perceived. Not always about fancy AI, its basically just trying to get our basic systems to talk to each other.
 - No-one has the capacity to play with AI at the moment.

As a sector what are we missing and what do we need?

- Students are starting to expect more from HE as they have become accustomed to it within school/college due to Covid. The student expectations will be difficult to manage, so will then impact student satisfaction.
- Value in careers fairs.
- People who can talk about AI, but in layman's terms
- Teaching students about borrowing books. There is a proportion of this generation who have never used a library or read physical books.
- Academic integrity – e.g., as discussed at SCOUNL conference – libraries want to hang on to physical text to be seen as the “custodians of truth”.
- Twitterverse / social media is creating blurred boundaries of what is fact vs what can be poisoned?
- What academics think we do, vs what library staff think we do. Eg, Academics think they are custodians of information literacy, but libraries provide the referencing workshops.
- Librarians are just seen as “shushers and shelvees”. But we all know that our collective expertise is much more varied than people think. Librarians genuinely want to be helpful, but have we lost our core expertise because we are prepared to enable new institutional initiatives?
- Professional services tend to come below academic services in the hierarchy, but we need to be part of the conversation.
- When IT breaks it causes issue, so it's seen as very important. Library services don't break so often flies under the radar.

Action: Sue to send poll to discuss in person conference

22/11 Guest Speaker: Liam Earney, Managing director, Higher Education and Research, Jisc

Liam Earney gave a presentation on Jisc strategy and priorities.

https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/JiscStrategyMercianCollaboration_041122.pdf

Liam noted that:

- In 2003, Jisc Collections had 10 agreements. Now 150 agreements.
- Volume of OA increased by 500% between 2019-2021. Achieved ‘socialism in just one country’. UK outputs are now 50-60% open access, but globally there is not a substantial move towards OA.
If UKRI withdrew funding, OA would not be affordable.
- CoalitionS was meant to be task and finish. With an end point where its mission was achieved, but it's feeling demoralising and unsustainable.
- Interested in Open research rather than just open access.
- Text books are differentiating themselves by adding learning content. Very few of the publishers actually call them themselves ‘publishers’ now. They see themselves as ‘knowledge providers’
- Jisc's merger with HESA has led to a level of attention from OfS that it has not formerly been accustomed to.
- Difficult three years financially, because they can't increase subscription. There are only a fixed number of institutions that can be members of JISC.
- Will review Jisc core subscription, but no plans to change baseline subscription fee. Need to think about how to attract more revenue.

Questions and issues:

Library Hub and UKRR.

Use of Library Hub has not been sufficient to make it strategically important to develop further.

It is basically being used like a big OPAC, not for its collection development potential.

Jisc is recruiting a new Head of Discovery.

Cost reallocation of big deals.

No decision has been made yet on this. Not looking to review bands at present, but there is no way of moving forward that is palatable across the board.

Essentially, the changes are massive, but the overall budget envelope is not changing. So Jisc will need to continue polling and evaluate options.

May need discussion with BUFDG.

It is a difficult balancing act, as agreements require widespread buy-in across mission groups and institutional types and will fail if any individual group refuses to sign up to it.

Staffing.

Jisc are having real difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff – they spend a lot of time upskilling people, who very quickly move on to higher paid jobs elsewhere. Frequently they can only assume 18 months retention.

22/12 Governance**i. Minutes of the previous meeting, actions and matters arising**

Actions confirmed as completed apart from a couple of items, which were included on today's agenda.

SCONUL update: There are currently three Mercian members on the SCONUL board. Gary, Phil and Emma. Emma is stepping down.

The current focus of the Board is on the revision of the strategy.

A mini conference is being held in London aimed at pulling together strands of the "libraries after lockdown" programme.

There will be more to report in March meeting.

ii. Treasurer's Update

Treasurer noted that recent cost savings have included the absence of the previous Executive Officer's salary. However, some of these savings will be offset by NBF's costs, where an invoice from Newman is expected shortly.

Treasurer was unable to give definitive figures on the Collaboration's reserves at this point, although noted a healthy balance currently. There is a small difference between current income and expenditure, which needs to be addressed if we plan to return to an in-person conference and offer more financial support to SIG's.

Discussion around the possibility of raising Mercian subscriptions fees to increase reserves. Group were divided in attitudes to this suggestion. No unanimous decision was reached but agreed further discussion would be needed to weigh up subscription price vs value.

Action: Steering group to consider a rise in subscriptions fees at next meeting and come up with proposals.

The collaboration's recent income includes £1,250 from this year's conference sponsor.

Next year's Conference Group finances are expected to differ drastically, as it is expected to return to an in-person event. It was agreed that the conference should remain free to delegates from the Collaboration.

Most of next year's costs will go towards venue and catering.

Currently, the conference costs are only partially covered by sponsor income, so it is a strategic objective is to improve income from sponsorship and will require further discussions and involvement from the incoming Executive Officer.

It was suggested that commercial sponsor organisations (particularly publishers) want access to budget holders, therefore it is important that Directors and other senior staff make a commitment to attend the conference as delegates.

Action: Steering Group to discuss the idea of hosting a directors/ senior staff meeting prior to conference, to drive up interest in senior staff attending the conference.

Finally, treasurer stated that the Zoom licence renewal is due in March/April 2023, and queried whether the Zoom licence can be cancelled, if SCONUL agree to the implementation of a Teams account.

Action: Renewal of zoom licence to be discussed at next Steering Group meeting, alongside discussions/decision on acquiring a Microsoft Teams licence for the Mercian Collaboration.

iii. Annual Report 2022: Call for contributions

A call was made for contributions for the 2022 Annual report, highlighting the activities of member organisations.

22/13 SIG Matters and Reports

All SIG updates given by Chair, unless otherwise stated.

i. Senior Staff & Deputy Directors Group: Update

D&SSG have an in-person meeting scheduled at UCB campus on 25th November 2022.

This group is a well committed, well positioned group of (self-designated) deputies, meeting to discuss items of interest to the collective group. The original idea of the group's remit was for the Directors to task the Deputies with activities/discussion points. This may be worth re-exploring.

ii. Staff Development Group (MSDG): Update

Membership on this group is representative of all of the collaboration's member institutions.

(See: <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sdg/representatives>) The group is self-sufficient and have received good feedback on their events and activities.

The full 2023 programme of events has been compiled, but only advertised online until Christmas.

They are currently working with MDF to make training activities more accessible.

iii. Metadata Group (MMG): Update

JK gave update on behalf of MMG. There was a series of webinars this autumn, on metadata, discovery and cataloguing including NACO funnel, UK NACO funnel and central authority file.

The group are active and self-sufficient. They are currently working on ensuring the discoverability of open access books.

iv. Mercian Disability Forum (MDF): Update

CP advised that MDF have recently been working collaboratively with the Staff Development Group.

Next meeting is scheduled for 30th November 2022 and will be held online.

THE MDF hosted a good session at the conference, which was very well received.

The group is active and working well.

v. **Mercian Copyright Group (MCG): Update**

This group lay dormant throughout the Covid pandemic, but came back to life in March 2021 and is moderately enthusiastic now. The Copyright group are a self-sufficient group, with their own small steering group. The co-ordinators are having a meeting on 11th November 2022, and there will be a larger meeting for all group members after Christmas.

All institutions with staff interested in copyright are welcomed to join the group.

vi. **Marketing & Communications (MarComs): Update**

HC gave brief update on the Marketing Group, which was reinvigorated in March 2021.

There is a small committee leading the group of like-minded staff with a special interest in marketing activities for their respective libraries.

Next meeting is scheduled for 9th November 2022.

vii. **Conference Group**

JW gave brief summary of the 2022 conference, which was hosted at Cranfield. The conference group was chaired by Deborah Munro (Aston). The full delegate analysis and feedback analysis reports have been prepared and will be shared with the Steering Group in due course.

Overall, the hybrid conference event was well received. Feedback was limited, but overwhelmingly positive. (140 delegates attended but only 37 delegates gave feedback, despite financial incentives). There were several very well represented institutions and some member institutions not represented at the event – Chair has already spoken to certain institutions to discuss their engagement with the conference.

Based on feedback and delegate analysis, it was decided that we should plan to return to an in-person event next year - despite the obvious cost implications - because in-person networking is the major draw for delegates and sponsors alike. It was decided that University of Birmingham will be asked to host the 2023 conference.

Action: Equality impact assessment needed for in-person conference. Steering Group to discuss and decide who will author this.

Group discussion around possibility of changing the timing of the conference event as many institutions are very busy during the summer period and it is too close to the start of semester one, to spare the time to create papers for the event.

Action: Possibility of altering the timing of conference to be discussed at next Steering Group meeting

Conference Group chair was a big undertaking this year due to departure of the Executive Officer and required a significant contribution. Current chair has stepped down, and Laura Newman (Loughborough) will progress to Conference Group Chair at next meeting on 25th November 2022.

JW put out a formal call for new conference group members.

Action: Directors requested to look at Conference Group [membership](#) and to ensure more institutions are represented on the planning committee.

22/14 AOB

Next meeting: Dates, venue & potential speakers for next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held in March 2023. A doodle poll to be sent out by either new Executive Officer (if in post) or Chair.

It was decided that the next meeting would be an in-person meeting, to be hosted at Aston University. (Chair thanked Helen for offering Aston as the venue)

Substantive items planned for discussion next time, including:

- MUAL NEYAL topic to discuss updates
- EDI could be meaty topic
- Amended proposals for new SIG's (if appropriate)