

Deputies & Senior Staff Group (D&SSG)

Inaugural Discussion Forum: Meeting Notes

Online Meeting, 23rd June 2020

Present: Janet Weaver (Keele), Alison Pope (Staffordshire), Ant Brewerton Warwick), Selena Killick (OU), Phil Vaughn (Coventry), Kirsty Kift (Coventry), Alan Brine (DMU), Vicki McGarvey (Staffordshire), Benjamin Veasey (Loughborough), Anne Knight (Cranfield), Jo Aitkins (Leicester), Gaz J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

Apologies: John Dowd (Birmingham), Ian Keepings (Birmingham), Jessica Wainwright (UCB), Heather Green (Warwick), Kay Jeffries (Derby)

Kirsty acted as nominal chair for the meeting as none had been previously agreed. After a brief discussion, noting there was no set agenda for the meeting, it was agreed to tackle two main topics: Reopening Academic Libraries and Dawson Books.

Reopening Academic Libraries

Attendees shared their varied experiences, plans and challenges with respect to reopening academic libraries over the coming weeks and months. Some libraries were already rolling out some physical services and had staff on site, while others were some time away from similar steps. Much preparation and planning was clearly evidenced. It was also noted that the government had announced a shorter distancing standard to begin shortly, which would impact on these plans. Some overlapping themes which emerged included:

Access: Gating access to libraries, where space would be less than normal, was noted. Some would be using turnstile controls to achieve this, while other biohazard monitoring systems were also proposed. However, it was noted this would need to be handled well, as for many students it would mean they were not able to access libraries physically as much as they had previously. A shift to a blended campus, with more online activities was a commonly reported strategy.

Accessibility: Some students with special needs were fine with the online environment, but for others with perceptual disabilities this was not so. Staff need to make accommodations in their training and liaison work as they would in physical interactions. Reopened libraries would likely be quieter, which could suit some students with special needs more.

Browsing: Desirable for some patrons and viewed as a balance between risk and benefit. Providing 'decontamination bins' for browsed but unborrowed stock as one solution. Noted patrons would likely adopt supermarket experience comparisons for service levels. Achieving workable and safe traffic flows with respect to browsing would be easier for some library configurations than others.

Click and Collect: Most libraries were working towards or had launched 'on demand supply services', or although practicalities varied. Some libraries had made use of Amazon as a supplier, for items in urgent demand which could not be sourced elsewhere.

Community & Relationships: Relationships could be maintained at a distance but creating new relationships with incoming students in this way was challenging. Shifting to using different media platforms (e.g. YouTube, chat, Facebook Live) was one approach, but there were risks that 'quieter' students might not interact and could become marginalized. Additionally, with all parts of the university shifted to online, the library was no longer as visible as it was physically on campus, which presented new obstacles to achieving engagement.

Electronic Materials: A number of challenging aspects were highlighted. Some material was simply not available electronically, and in other cases suppliers/publishers were looking to withdraw the 'free' access they had provided to some additional resources during lockdown. Consequently, managing the expectations and the reality of service levels was needed. More eBooks offered increased costs, although some savings from closed physical library services were noted to help offset these.

Library Staff: Balancing personal concerns, with operational needs were discussed. Problems with staffing levels were highlighted where key team members (e.g. first aiders, Saturday staff) had higher personal Covid-19 risk factors, as potentially problematic in terms of maintaining service levels. There were also concerns expressed over staff wellbeing (physical and mental) as a result of the lockdown working period, which had knock on effects on managerial workloads to support their team members. Furloughed staff returning were presenting another challenge in terms of overcoming knowledge gaps which developed during their time away and services continued. There were also issues where key staff had been furloughed, and operations had hit blocks as a result (e.g. book ordering).

Policing/Enforcement: Concerns over how new health regulations and social distancing requirements were enforced and by whom were raised. These would be additionally significant as opening hours increased and staff available reduced. Questions around whether library staff would be taking on more enforcement roles or were other staff expected to be responsible were raised. Some members' institutions were amending their student code of conduct, which would spell out how infractions would be handled and what sanctions would be deployed. It was noted that increased distancing and quieter libraries could make a silent environment the new normal and permit an easier way to spot infractions.

Pressures & Expectations: The push and expectations felt by libraries from student community, senior management and marketing to reopen were noted. Achieving a balance between meeting these, while being sensitive to staff well-being and personal concerns represented a challenge. In some instances, a divergence in understanding of how (and why) libraries operate as they do, as well as the steps needed to safely reopen, had complicated planning efficiency.

Returns: Procedures towards safe 'quarantining' of returned items varied. Some libraries were adopting 72hrs (minimum) delay before items received were processed along with using PPE for staff moving stock. Issues around quarantining items being shipped out/made available were also noted as needing to be addressed or acknowledged in risk assessments. Pre-paid postage or freepost routes had been explored as ways for students to return items at a distance, using QR codes rather than printed labels.

Risk Acceptance: One of the key underlying discussions about reopening was that of balancing actual risk vs acceptance of risk levels. By example, it was suggested younger students may be prepared to accept greater risk than those running the libraries, due to their core age groups reduced Covid-19 morbidity hazards. They were also reported as being less concerned with social distancing, which presented a challenge for staff in monitoring and enforcing rules for the safety of all staff and patrons.

Second Wave: The potential for a 2nd Wave of infection, noting the return to lockdown in some countries, was acknowledged as a particular obstacle which would need to be accommodated in reopening plans.

Staff Equipment: More of a lockdown issue but supplying staff with suitable kit had proved challenging. Upon resumption of physical services and staff presence, there would also be a challenge in terms of returning it safely and integrating it back into library resources. It was also highlighted how some ICT had proved especially difficult to work with or configure remotely.

Study Space: Study space booking was a commonly planned for element, using online booking software. Seen to be in high demand from PGT/PGR for some members. Space might not always be set to reopen in main library, but in related study buildings. Again there were issues over how much would and could be made safely available, vs student expectations. 24/7 opening might not be possible for some time, partly for social distancing enforcement but also to permit cleaning staff the additional time needed to carry out greater sanitisation of shared spaces.

Working Practices: Working out for library staff who needs to be on site, and who does not will likely become a more regular assessment post-reopening. It was anticipated that 'agile working' practices would become a new norm, as it had been proved how many staff could deliver on their roles at a distance. A reduced number of staff on site could help alleviate space pressures and distancing requirements but could also be seen as an opportunity for institutions to move non-library staff into these areas.

Dawson Books

With Dawson now in administration, this was a problem for eBooks hosted by them. Platform switches were discussed, as some members had thousands of items for which they needed to find new providers. While many libraries had been increasing their digital collections during lockdown, this was not always practical or desirable for reasons including format (e.g. art folio books) or high costs (e.g. engineering core texts). While it was hoped a portion of Dawson would be acquired and run as a going concern by a new owner, the importance of diversification of eBook suppliers was noted as a good risk mitigation strategy. Assured continued access to online collections was felt to be more important than dealing with multiple proprietary interfaces.

Next Meeting

Ben apologised for not circulating the notes from the earlier meeting (March) – however, it was agreed that as previously discussed the next meeting would be hosted by Nottingham, albeit potentially as an online event. The theme would be research focussed, and potentially scholarly communication managers could be invited to attend. It would be held in October, after some brief preparatory discussions concerning the chair and themes in the meanwhile.

Actions

ACTION: Ben to circulate notes from March meeting

ACTION: GJJ to circulate poll for meeting date

ACTION: All to respond to poll with availability for October meeting