



Mercian Disability Forum

Minutes

26th November 2021, Online meeting

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Present: Simon Satchwell-Giles (Chair, Newman), Sarah Pittaway (MSDG, Worcester), Chris Powis (Sponsor, Northampton), Liz Mills (Loughborough), Kathryn Devine (Worcester), Shamal Lahouni (Keele), Rose Roberto (BGU), John Mackay (NTU), Gill Evans (Coventry), Sally Forrest (Derby), Julie Adams (Staffordshire), Richard Hopkins (Aston), Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

Apologies:

Ruth Stubbings (DMU), Carol Keddie (DMU), Bernadette Carter (BCU), Anne Knight (Cranfield), Jenny Townend (Northampton), John Phillips (Wolverhampton)

1) Housekeeping

Simon welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially newcomers and gave everyone an overview of Zoom's functions. Attendees then introduced themselves and highlighted their role and interest in disability and accessibility issues. Simon explained the role of the meeting to share experiences, questions and thoughts on supporting students as well as other users and staff too. He highlighted how good ideas often spring from discussions at the group's meeting, and any information shared was always much appreciated by the members.

2) Minutes from last meeting (March 2021)

Simon took the meeting through the highlights of the last meeting's minutes. GJJ noted a slight typo to Laura's name in one of the actions. These were accepted as an accurate record of discussions.

3) Matters Arising

Simon went through the actions, confirming they were all completed or on today's agenda with the following exceptions:

ACTION: ALL to share examples of charities they are working with

Simon highlighted *RNIB Bookshare*, with their recommended *Dolphin EasyReader* software, which he praised especially for its tablet and smart phone versions. He noted the software allows you to subscribe to various libraires and also has read aloud functions. The Calibre book library is part of this and provides access to fiction materials. It is a free additional source that is worth exploring with users.

4) Updates from member institutionsⁱ

- a) *Discussion: What old and new practices or services have you kept since coming back to campus?*

Each group member provided some personal observations and updates about activities at their own institutions.

Aston: A lot of appointments and teaching now 60/40 online/f-2-f. Revisiting and pausing to consider how to support a wider range of students rather than just those with registered accessibility needs. The university is looking at all teaching materials in terms of making them more accessible and reusable. The library has been joined by a new team member who is a content creator, who is also making video materials.

BGU: An autism support group, founded by students, had held several meetings with Library Director. In particular they are looking for spaces with better lighting. The library has reserved a room for these students to work in over the weekend as part of answering their needs. RNIB Bookshare is being used, but some issues over content not working. As with some other institutions, there was still more work to be done to ensure the library was notified of all new students with disability/accessibility needs.

Coventry: A new group study room and chill out room had been set up. The library was looking into guidance on eBook guides too. There was a particular focus on mental wellbeing with various related activities being lined up for the wider student body, rather than only students registered with disability service. Stress and anxiety remains a major concern among the student body though.

Derby: The university had very joined up systems and were in the process of exploring more about what Derby can and does offer in terms of disability support. RNIB Bookshare is deployed but perhaps could be better distributed or more visible for some users, as could student referral systems also too.

Keele: Shamal took on his current role very recently and was still learning about the services on offer and desired by users. As he was working with students with a range of needs and support requirements, he was very interested in learning more from across the region. Simon suggested it was worth revisiting earlier minutes for some ideas. A lot of digitising work is conducted within the library, and the current focus is on getting ready for the first 2022 term in terms of preparation of materials and support.

Newman: A number of new visually impaired students had arrived which had highlighted a need to shift from a more 1-2-1 bespoke response, to a systematic and integrated support package. A blended learning approach is now standard across the university, and students have mostly adapted to this approach. However, students with online lectures during 'campus' days needed space to access these sessions and naturally gravitated to the library. This presented problems with noise levels, as some autistic students find using headphones 'intolerable' – hence the noise issue. There is a learning commons space, but normally this has been a headphone zone. Additionally, content of lectures may be an issue, as some may be confidential to the students on that course. Sharp rise in number of RNIB Bookshare users, since referrals from student support has become systematised and this has been well received. Although, where content is not available on the service, this had been problematic.

NTU: Similar to BGU, they had been scrambling to get ready for newly arrived students which can impact on their initial institutional perceptions. Pre-pandemic a 'fetch and carry' service for all had been pitched, but declined. However, in the wake of the pandemic this had now been implemented and was very well received by the students. Academic librarians have done most 1-2-1 sessions via Teams, and were having very high attendance rates. Most training and lectures still online, but some physical events. Looking too at spaces and uses, in keeping with what other institutions have highlighted. Noted that users who have been utilising group study spaces as solo-lecture access locations are disappointed to have lost easy access to these spaces. So, study carrels are being investigated as an alternative.

RNIB Bookshare is being used but perhaps could be more visible to the user community. The library is working with academic staff to make reading list materials more accessible. Notably, reading list length (number of items) can be an issue and can impact on mental health of students. There are considerations for making a 'maximum recommended items' standard. Working with the Learning Development Team and others, to produce guides specifically aimed at disabled students but highlighted for all users.ⁱⁱ Looking too at adapting elements of MS Office and browsers for better accessibility. Overall, there has been a greater up of library support and training workshops this year, and more access to them via mobile devices.

Staffordshire: Following a major restructuring of the library and the broader student services, new relationships were being developed which will hopefully improve services. The library physical space has also been reconfigured which has brought some new challenges. A new building is opening in January 2022 (*The Catalyst*) which contains a lot of open access study space, which will potentially be less attractive to students wishing to study on their own. Guidance on eBook accessibility is being updated too. Have been using a product to help students with accessing accessible versions of materials – can convert files and offers a mix of audio, tagged PDF and word conversion from PDFⁱⁱⁱ. Students also like MS Teams meetings as can record and replay the training 1-2-1 sessions or access transcriptions. Teams' functionality improvements have really helped in this respect.

Worcester: Reading list software has a lot of tools with some aimed at those with disabilities. The library is running online discovery sessions including one on eBooks in terms of making reading and using them better for users. The vast majority of 1-2-1 appointments are still hosted on Teams, which as noted elsewhere is beneficial to students who can make use of its tools and/or record and play back sessions. It was recognised that changes resulting from pandemic working practices have had a positive affect resulting in an improved inclusivity and accessibility for all.

Simon thanked everyone for contributing and hoped there were more good ideas for all to take away and think about. Simon highlighted how changes in LMS and reading list systems are a topic which would be worth revisiting with respect to accessibility and disability needs. This, along with ideas of universal design for accessibility, could form a rich vein of experience to explore more within the group or in a regional event.

5) [Staff capacity and wellbeing when dealing with anxious, distressed and difficult students or staff](#)

This topic arose from the Steering Group meeting and discussions with the new sponsor (Aug '21) and was considering situations which had arisen from the pandemic relating to mental health. In particular it was concerned with library staff working more on the front line for dealing with students' mental health crises. As a result of the general anxieties within the population derived from the pandemic and its impact on life, staff too were suffering from impacts and difficulties alongside having to support users undergoing their own difficulties. With libraries often the most visible, and occasionally only, open service on campus this had become somewhat of a 'perfect storm' for staff to deal with. Simon invited comments and insight from the group members.

Chris noted that much of the institutional discussion relating to stress & mental health often focussed on student support. Given the MSDG's staff training focus finding how these areas could be brought together in a constructive and supportive way for library staffers would be valuable.

Sarah noted this was a timely conversation in the light of the COVID driven impacts on services. At Worcester, it had been recognised that staff doing live chat were being impacted emotionally more than in a f-2-f interaction. Reportedly it was harder to manage staff personal wellbeing and balance this against delivering on service and user needs.

Simon noted his institution had recognised some students with high mental health needs, who had been making almost daily use of support services. With rising demands and expectations everyone involved in the interactions was becoming stressed and frustrated. He noted there were no mental health first responders yet, but students expected answers 'now' when they sought help. He noted staff being asked to manage other's stress wasn't something the team could realistically offer. To address some of these concerns, Newman had been offering staff assertiveness training helped to provide tools and strategies for pushing back and better managing user expectations.

Julie outlined how some subgroups, working from staff survey feedback, had generated action plans which included looking at staff wellbeing. While implementation had been slower than hoped, efforts to find ways to support and help people were ongoing. She noted some students with higher personal demands for support had caused some stress and coordination issues for staff.

Gill highlighted Coventry's mental support service for staff and research students which had been operating before the pandemic.^{iv} A *Connections Matter* project had launched during pandemic which had helped realised stress levels for all staff, especially lecturers. As such there would be a focus on mental health of everyone, staff and student alike, going forward.

Rose noted some limited encounters between staff and students in terms of adherence to institutional pandemic safety regulations had been challenging. Although, the institutional Health and Safety Officer had assisted in terms of overall responsibility for policy enforcement (e.g. mask wearing in public spaces etc).

Simon highlighted the ongoing discussions around supporting students with disabilities, but added a huge student population now recognised they needed additional support, but weren't registered to revive it. This also increased the need for library staff themselves being supported in offering this to their students

John noted a resource at Coventry that might be of use.^v

6) Making staff training inclusive (collaboration with Staff Development Group)

Simon noted the previous discussions feed into this point, for example, suggestions of extra training for staff. Sarah offered an overview of the MSDG events programme explaining event accessibility practices have been a topic of concern and discussion for their group. Ideally, she wanted to look towards making MSDG training as accessible as possible for all attendees. It was suggested creating a checklist for all events (physical and online) hosted by the Collaboration, with the aim to making them inclusive and accessible would be a desirable outcome. Additionally, Sarah was keen to collaborate on hosting events which might address topics and themes of interest to members of both groups. Julie commented they had

been looking to develop this kind of guide at her institution, and she would share what feedback and outcomes from this she could.^{vi}

ACTION: Julie to share local guidance on event accessibility and inclusion with the group and MSDG

The topic of staff-wellbeing was raised, and the group asked if there was any expertise which could be shared. This would, for example, form the core of a highly valuable event for the MSDG/MDF, and the Collaboration as a whole. Sarah noted she was happy to support any event format in this regard from formal presentations through to informal discussions.

Sarah also highlighted that with the remote working, a lot of front-line staff/paraprofessionals had not been as well served by her group's programme. Hence, the areas discussed today would be valuable ones to try and attract them to an event to discuss.

Gill suggested invited non-library institutional or external speakers to contribute (e.g. other support services or sector experts) to avoid rehashing same ideas and opinions. It was agreed external speakers/experts would be useful to bring in to help enrich such events with information, ideas and inspiration from outside the academic library sphere.

It was agreed that Simon would coordinate gathering information on these potential future events, along with a smaller joint MDF/MSDG working group to take plans forward.

ACTION: Simon to set up a survey/feedback mechanism for gathering info and ideas on possible collaborative/MDF events

ACTION: Simon to convene a working group with MSDG/MDF in early 2022 to plan for future MDF joint events

7) Possible events in 2022

This had been addressed in the previous item.

8) AOB

a) *Conference Group Survey*

GJJ highlighted that the Conference Group's member survey on future events was still open. Simon encouraged all members to respond if possible. GJJ noted that the 2022 conference was planned to be online once again, with 2023 marking a hopeful return to a physical or hybrid event.

ACTION: All members to respond to conference group survey^{vii}

b) *Video Captioning*

Simon noted this was still a time-consuming task and software on site often cannot cope with even slight accents. YouTube was a good workaround with a higher accuracy, as you can upload videos, caption them and then download the results to local systems. Alternatively you can upload a transcript along with the video to YouTube and their systems will add the right timings in as well, which was very helpful. It was noted that MS Stream and Screencast-o-matic have similar issues

c) Immersive Readers

Gill asked if anyone has used immersive reader for Word. Sarah noted she has an academic colleague who uses immersive reader to help her marking with some success.

d) Next meeting

The next meeting will be held around March 2022, but ahead of this a planned working group meeting to look at events would be called. Simon and GJJ would coordinate dates and arrangements.

ACTION: Simon and GJJ to arrange for dates of future meetings in 2022

Endnotes

ⁱ As Jenny Townend was unable to attend – she provided an update via email: Some of our individual study booths have had their chairs removed and signage affixed stating they are for wheelchair users only (as a result of our Disabled Students' Officer (a wheelchair user) struggling to move chairs from booths in order to be able to use them). Many library staff have attended 'Carers' Champion' training which highlighted issues faced by students with caring responsibilities. This was very thought provoking and has sparked some ideas for how we can better support these individuals. Will report more on this at the next meeting. A number of our frontline staff have attended British Sign Language drop-ins organised by the Disabled Students' Officer. Our wellbeing collection of books continues to grow and our book exchanges are healthy. This month we selected the best/newest books from the exchanges, wrapped them up and hid them around the library for people to find. The idea being that they gave the book a go and if they didn't get on with it then they could pop it back on the book exchanges or pass it on to someone else. This is not an original idea but it was quick and easy to implement and created some good feeling. No requests for our Alternative Formats Service since the last meeting.

ⁱⁱ Study Smarter with Technology <https://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/studysmarter>

ⁱⁱⁱ SensusAccess is a service that some institutions use to allow disabled students to 'self-serve' when it comes to getting accessible materials <https://www.sensusaccess.com/>

^{iv} <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/study-at-coventry/student-support/mental-health/>

^v <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/studenthub/student-help-advice-and-services/health-and-wellbeing/get-help-and-support>

^{vi} This event might be useful too: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/training/accessibility-drop-in-clinic>

^{vii} More on the survey, and how to participate here: <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/future-collaboration-conferences-%E2%80%93-we-want-hear-you> Or contact mercianlibrariescollaboration@gmail.com directly for the survey link.