Directors Board

Online meeting, 2pm, Monday 4th October 2021

Minutes

Present: Chris Porter (Chair, Newman) Laura Pilsel (Vice, Harper Adams), Emma Sansby (BGU), Judith Keene (Worcester), Emma Walton (Loughborough), Simon Bevan (Cranfield), Ian Snowley (Lincoln), Jo-Anne Watts (Wolverhampton), Phil Brabban (Coventry), Ruth Jenkins (BCU), Scott McGowan (Keele), Helen Curtis (Aston), Diane Job (Birmingham), Robin Green (Warwick), Paul Mahoney (Staffordshire), Matthew Greenhall (RLUK), Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

Apologies: Susan Ackermann (Nottingham), Chris Powis (Northampton), Robert Hall (NTU), Joanne Dunham (Leicester), Selena Killick (OU), Sue Morrison (Derby), John Hill (Derby), David Parkes (DMU)

Summary of Actions

ACTION: Emma to write up notes on her leadership comments and share online

ACTION: GJJ to share Matthew's slides along with the minutes

ACTION: Steering Group seek ways to continue development and debate around leadership discussions

ACTION: Chair to update MoU wording, sign and submit to SCONUL on behalf of the Collaboration

ACTION: Chair and Steering Group to revise Strategic Plan and present at March 2022 Board meeting for approval

ACTION: Helen to clarify Collaboration reserve policy details to Board via email

ACTION: Helen to share update on finances via email alongside the minutes

ACTION: Helen to share subscription proposal and justification via email to the Board

ACTION: All to discuss, comment and approve online 2022 subscription levels

ACTION: All to review conference feedback reports and feedback any comments to Jo-Anne/GJJ

ACTION: Emma to share notes/update on SCONUL meeting ahead of March Board.

ACTION: All members to contribute local reflections contributions to annual report

ACTION: All to propose speakers for the March 2022 Board, to the Chair

ACTION: Steering Group to discuss and agree themes and speakers for March 2022 meeting

ACTION: Chris and GJJ to explore realistic possibilities for hosting a hybird/physical Board meeting in 2022

21/08 Discussions & Speakers:

a. Leadership Perspectives (Discussion)

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed everyone in attendance, before ceding the floor to Matthew Greenhall (Deputy Executive Director, RLUK). Matthew presented a talk entitled *Leadership, Blended Working and Emerging Risks*, which began by outlining the function and purpose of the RLUK. He stressed they want to collaborate as an outward looking organisation, and are keen to work with members and non-members alike. This function would be clarified in their new strategy to be launched in November 2021. Matthew highlighted a number of initial points in his talk as context:

- Changes in technology drives change in tools and techniques (the 'digital shift).
- Comfort with change culture is important.
- Sensitivity to digital poverty and environmental sustainability is also crucial.

In terms of the response to the COVID-19 lockdown/remote working environment:

- Early library lockdown experiences mirrored those concerned with the digital shift.
- It challenged some assumptions for services and collections, while also highlighting strengths and weaknesses.
- Some institutions, systems and services were revealed as more resilient and adaptable than others. Additionally, some blind spots (e.g. digital divide and poverty) exposed from a campus perspective.
- Elevated user expectations though are not always matched by user capabilities/digital literacy in terms of using resources/services.
- Digital dividends were evidenced for some RLUK members for STEM subjects due in part to the richness of their eContents. AHSS strong collections tend to have more limited online availability and hence were not able to capitalise as much.

Leadership in libraries is undergoing a moment of crisis and challenge:

- Libraries have never been as exposed or as high profile as they were/are during the pandemic and in terms of the institutional efforts to maintain continuity of service to their communities.
- A continued emphasis has emerged with respect to the need to develop skills and competencies within library staff as well as their supported user communities.
- In the longer term COVID has been a catalysis/accelerant for processes perhaps already emerging (e.g. flexible/hybrid working practices).
- New models of working focus more on outcomes and flexibilities but has some new resonances within staff recruitment (e.g. if roles are/potentially as fully remote do staff need to be local?)

Libraries too have opportunities to reconsider operations in the light of the last two years' experiences:

- Pre-covid libraries were operating beyond operating capacity in terms of foot traffic. Specific demands on them have changed in past two years, but are still high.
- Revaluation is needed in terms of how users interact and need physical library spaces which means new questions of design, function and purpose arise.

- Libraries need flexibility in their spaces in terms of being better able to deal with future pandemics, accommodate changing working needs and engaging with emergent student usage patterns.
- Library spaces have increasingly become 'lecture space' for accessing online teaching/lecture materials with reliable and speedy wifi.

Concluding his presentation Matthew stressed:

- This is a 'moment' to reboot dialogue and reposition libraries within institutional discussions and perceptions, capitalising on the 'good work' achieved by library staff during the pandemic.
- Libraries as physical spaces, for some users, continue to be important but services and collections beyond this are now highlighted for more end-users than ever. Not all of whom are as equipped or able to take advantage of them.
- This is also a fertile ground/time for collaboration to grow, and hence RLUK continues to look to work with colleagues across the sector in these considerations.

Next Emma Walton provided some context from an non-RLUK library perspective:

- Loughborough has a very on-campus experience culture, although emerging (hybrid) working practices seem to run counter to local campus culture.
- Pandemic represented longest and toughest challenge to meet for the library: almost overwhelming. A greater perspective has been gained through reflection, conversation and resources made available from external bodies.
- High premium attached to 'authentic' leadership but what does flexibility look like in a leadership capacity? Uncertainty makes it challenging – with limited 'experts' to call on, so sharing and working with others has been crucial. A safe space for sharing vulnerability, exchanging advice and voicing frustrations has been essential.
- Flexible leadership means addressing and adapting to rapid change. (e.g. Asynchronous teams and communication).
- But there have been new issues to address, confront or seek to resolve in this space (e.g. racism, EID or rapid change) meaning finding and managing time to deal with these new priorities, alongside established roles, is a particular issue.
- As leaders we need an awareness of personal limits and resilience: balancing addressing these areas is a key developmental area for current and emerging leaders alike.
- Director of Service job role is clearly changing, and how we support each other in this development within the region and the Collaboration is important. Hence, is there space for work with the Deputies & Senior Staff Group or SCONUL task-groups here?

The Chair thanked Matthew and Emma, noting this seemed to suggest a seismic shift but questioned how much it was an acceleration of extant trends. She commented on university executive management perceptions how 'everything' was or could be online, along with the library being viewed as an 'obstacle' to a digital transition and adherent to traditional modes of support and education: when the truth was very different. She opened the floor up to comments and discussions:

Development: Digital poverty of staff is a new area, as is understanding how this impacts on peoples' career paths or abilities to remote work. Additionally, peoples' wellbeing affects the ways in which they are able to (or willing to) work, and may close off pursuing opportunities for some.

Digital Shift: Has escalated workload for some staff: e.g. hybrid teaching means twice the workload for the same level of staff resource. User expectations are that digital and physical support both need to continue, meaning an evaluation of services and staff roles, and concomitant redeployment or restructuring to address (assuming no additional resource).

Evidence Base: Being clearer on and having evidence to support what patrons actually want/need is difficult, and in any case likely extremely varied. Additionally, building an evidence base for staff experiences and expectations is also important in terms of achieving future planning, recruitment and development goals.

Inertia: Moving forward is hard because academic/staff focus, attention and personal priorities continues to be split across their personal/professional lives. Advancing opportunities or initiatives might be harder in such an environment, especially now the instigating 'crisis point' is almost two years behind us.

Leadership: Are library directors focussed on outputs and service levels, or are we trying to build a community of practice and excellence? In either case hybrid and remote working practices may run counter to one or the other, creating tangible service, resource and staffing tensions.

Opportunities: This is clearly a time for new thinking/working and ideas, but capitalising and understanding what are the best opportunities is uncertain. Some 'knee-jerk' responses from academics have been pushed forward in some quarters, but often the impacts from these haven't been fully thought through.

Personnel: Staff anxiety about returning to campus work is real and needs to be acknowledged. The number of people who have been bereaved in some way is high and must be supported sensitively. A return to 'normal' is a long way off for people in their personal lives, and this is true for their workplace experiences too.

Recruitment & Retention: Flexibility and working practices (hybrid) impacts on recruitment pools and attractiveness of institutions to work for. Risk of 'brain drain' to those institutions more willing/able to offer flexibility, creates stresses in terms of staff retention too for those outside the 'sector norm' or with more modest financial inducements. This impacts too on collegiality and buy in of institutional identify (e.g. 'just a job' vs a great commitment) of the staff community.

Staffing/Working: Staff and their practices/habits are the biggest shift in working cultures for academic libraries. Work/life balance has been recalibrated for most people and is unlikely to return to a pre-pandemic status quo. There is also an issue of institutional equity and equality where some staff (e.g. 'star' academics) may find rules and institutional flexibility more adaptable than for 'standard' staffers, which builds resentment and damages morale in the short, and impacts perceptions and recruitment in the longer term.

The Chair thanked all for the discussion and comments, especially Matthew for prompting the debate. It was agreed we need to find a way to develop discussions and work around these challenges moving forward. Emma W noted she was keen to help facilitate this if possible, with her SCONUL Board hat on. Slides from Matthew's talk will be made available following the meeting.

> **ACTION: Emma to write up notes on her leadership comments and share online**
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> **ACTION: GJJ to share Matthew's slides along with the minutes**
>
> **ACTION: Steering Group seek ways to continue development and debate around leadership discussions**

21/09 Governance

a. [Minutes of March 2021 Board]§

Two corrections were noted:

> 21/01: *Remembering Mark*, should have read *Remembering Mark Toole*.
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> 21/07 (b): *Diane formally handed over the role of Chair to Chris Porter, who on behalf of the new Steering Group. The past chair and Steering Group for their work over the past two years.*
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> This should have read: *Diane formally handed over the role of Chair to Chris Porter, who on behalf of the new Steering Group offered thanks to the past chair and Steering Group for their work over the past two years.*

Other than that, the minutes were accepted as read.

b. Any outstanding actions

All outstanding actions had been completed, were in progress or were reporting today. The Chair noted that since the Board meeting Helen Curtis had agreed to take on the role as Treasurer, and Laura Pilsel as Vice-Chair. She thanked them and all new Steering Group members for their participation.

c. Strategic Plan & MoU: Update

The MoU had been circulated ahead of the meeting, with a couple of suggestions which had been incorporated into it. The Chair and Helen had discussed the MoU with the SCONUL Directors, and raised questions of closeness of alignment with SCONUL Policy, representation on their Board, reserves policy and the annual reporting cycle. SCONUL restated its role in making life easier, in terms of staff employment, website hosting etc, for its subgroups (ALN and the Collaboration). Any influence on the Collaboration's priorities and direction of travel was marginal at best, beyond sense checking overlaps and synergies as they arose. As such they were happy with the Collaboration's approach. However, SCONUL declined to include a formal Board representative from the subgroups. Instead they hoped members would continue to channel comments and feedback via those in their region who were on the Board.

Following a brief discussion the Board approved the revisions to the MoU.

> **ACTION: Chair to update MoU wording, sign and submit to SCONUL on behalf of the Collaboration**

The Collaboration's Strategic Plan was not discussed, and would be returned to following the next Steering Group meeting.

ACTION: Chair and Steering Group to revise Strategic Plan and present at March 2022 Board meeting for approval

d. Collaboration Reserves Policy: Update

The Chair reported on behalf of Helen, that the Collaboration's reserve policy resonated with SCONUL's, and that this had been adopted. The question had arisen originally as a result of an internal audit at SCONUL in the light of COVID. However, the Collaboration had very few recuring commitments and hence had little financial risk of exposure.

ACTION: Helen to clarify Collaboration reserve policy details to Board via email

e. ToR Update (Membership)

The updates to this had been shared ahead of the meeting and had emerged following discussions with the SCONUL Director and Steering Group. The new MoU was very slightly updated to more accurately represent the Collaboration and SCONUL's mutual interests. The Chair noted that this would need reviewing once more in three years' time. The Board approved the changes to the wording, which GJJ noted as already being live on the website.

21/10 Operations

a. Treasurer's Update & Current Finances

Helen had unfortunately been called away by a local emergency and was not able to report directly. However, GJJ and the Chair noted that finances were currently healthy.

ACTION: Helen to share update on finances via email alongside the minutes

b. Subscriptions 2022

As Helen was unable to speak to the item Chris reported following discussions at Steering Group it had been recommended that 2022's subscriptions return to 2020 levels, after the cut for 2021. While the Collaboration's finances are healthy this is largely due to a reduction in outgoings during the pandemic period (e.g. no travel or physical events). With a return to more physical events and meetings, a prospective increase in the Officer's hours and potentially a physical conference more demand will be made on the finances it was suggested. It was commented that if subscription levels are reduced for a number of years, it might be more challenging to justify an increase within institutional budget lines.

However, the Board asked Helen to make a formal case for the subscription levels for the forthcoming year to be distributed and agreed via email.

ACTION: Helen to share subscription proposal and justification via email to the Board

ACTION: All to discuss, comment and approve online 2022 subscription levels

c. Conference 2021: Outline evaluation

Ahead of the Board GJJ had shared his initial report on the conference.[i] In summary, despite the switch to online only the event had been a success, with more delegates and speakers registering their interest than ever before. Feedback from delegates on the event was currently being collated, and a report analysing

this would follow. Jo-Anne, as Group Sponsor, welcomed comments from the Board to be passed to the Conference Group. The Chair and Board noted their congratulations to the Conference Group's members for their efforts in hosting this year's conference, and additionally to BGU for the provision of the online platform.

ACTION: All to review conference feedback reports and feedback any comments to Jo-Anne/GJJ

d. Update on SCONUL activities

Emma Walton reported as a SCONUL Board member how the Libraries After Lockdown programme had been a major focus of recent discussions. It was noted that SCONUL was remained keen to advocate on behalf of members in terms of various key issues. SCONUL was also currently reviewing its risk register, and was considering a return to in-person events/meetings. Emma offered to share briefing notes on SCONUL Board discussions ahead of the next Board meeting.

ACTION: Emma to share notes/update on SCONUL meeting ahead of March Board.

e. Annual Report 2021

GJJ reported work had begun on the 2021 Annual Report, as part of our governance requirements for SCONUL. As in previous years all members are encouraged to submit a brief (max 500 word) report on their own local activities in the past year. Photos were especially welcome, where possible. These should be submitted via email to GJJ. Ideally the deadline for these was early January 2022.

ACTION: All members to contribute local reflections contributions to annual report

21/11 To Receive Previously Circulated Reports

    a. Steering Group Minutes (Apr & July 21)
    b. Operational Groups Updates
    c. Special Interest Groups Updates
    d. Unlocking our Sound Heritage Project (Simon Dixon & Colin Hyde)
    e. Officer's Update

These had been circulated ahead of the meeting, and the Chair invited any comments or questions on them. None were forthcoming. The Chair encouraged all to provide feedback to the Sound Heritage Project if appropriate.

21/12 Next meeting

    a. Themes, speakers and format for March 2022 meeting

There was a brief discussion concerning the next Board meeting. Suggestions for themes/speakers for the next Board included:

- Changes in circulation policy (e.g. changes in fines structure and automatic renewals, encouraging positive student behaviour for the return of stock etc)
- Student poverty (digital/fiscal) and equity of access and experience
- Managing print stocks and collections

The Chair asked for suggestions for speakers for these. The Steering Group will discuss these and outline a plan of action at their next meeting in late November.

GJJ 27th October 2021

ACTION: All to propose speakers for the March 2022 Board, to the Chair

ACTION: Steering Group to discuss and agree themes and speakers for March 2022 meeting

The question of hosting a physical, hybrid or online event was also discussed, and it was agreed to explore the potential for a meeting where some people will be physically present. However, this would depend on circumstances in the month running up to the proposed March 2022 dates. Via email Sue A had offered Nottingham as a potential venue, and the Chair would follow this up. A final decision on the format would be taken nearer the time.

ACTION: Chris and GJJ to explore realistic possibilities for hosting a hybird/physical Board meeting in 2022

21/13 AOB

a. Inter-Collaboration Meeting

The Chair commented she had met with representatives of WHELF, SCURL and ALN to discuss consortia matters. This had been a useful exchange but nothing directly applicable to Collaboration business had emerged.

b. Return of Books

There was a discussion about strategies and approaches for managing the return of books from departing (graduating) students. Linked to this were comments on fines and automatic renewals, and ongoing changes in student library behaviours.

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[i] Delegate Demographics & Overview Report:
https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/pictures/Conference%20Attendance%202021.pdf &
Delegate Feedback Evaluation Report:
https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Conference%20Feedback%20Analysis%202021.pdf