Evaluation Report: Mercian Collaboration Conference 2017 'In Libraries We Trust'

Emma Walton, Mercian Collaboration Conference Group Chair, October 2017

Overview

This report will provide some evaluation, analysis and reflections on the first Mercian Conference held at DMU @ The Venue on September 12th, 2017[1]. The survey of delegates, together with an attendee analysis paper has enabled the group to make some recommendations for both the Conference Group (CG) and the wider Mercian Collaboration.

We had 98 attendees at the conference, of these;

- 88 were delegates (including speakers)

- 10 were members of the Conference Committee (ex officio members)

Delegates were drawn from 21 Mercian member institutions.

Survey Results: Quantitative Metrics

Following the conference, a survey was sent to all delegates. Of the 88 possible returns we received 43, representing a little under 50% return rate. This rate exceeds reported SDG return rates, where electronic post-event submission has been utilised.

- 100% of respondents were satisfied with the conference overall

- 81% of respondents rated the conference overall as excellent or very good

- 98% of respondents were satisfied with the organisation of the conference

- Over half of respondents rated the organisation as excellent

- 33% rated the keynote as excellent

- 81% were satisfied but 19% were unsatisfied with the keynote

- 100% of delegates were satisfied with the topics and the quality of the parallel sessions

NB respondents were asked to rate excellent, very good, good, average or poor. We have taken *excellent*, *very good* and *good* to represent *delegate satisfaction*.

Survey Results: Qualitative Comments

The survey also asked several questions permitting delegates to provide free text comments:

1. *What did you find most useful about the conference and why?*

2. *What did you find least useful about the conference and why?*

3. *How do you think the conference could be improved?*

4. *Do you have suggestions for topics or themes for the next conference?*

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[1] See https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2017-programme

1) Most Valued Elements

Comments around the most useful or valued aspects of the event, fell broadly into several categories: networking, content (keynote and sessions) and sharing ideas.

> *"Networking, meeting people - the range of delegates from different Mercian unis present was excellent, would hope this could continued next time"*

> *"Chance to talk to colleagues at many different institutions"*

> *"The speakers were of a good quality and it were all interesting topics - very interesting to get perspectives on familiar themes from other services. Also had a couple of very useful conversations with fellow professionals working in similar areas."*

> *"Chance to meet colleagues from other libraries and to share ideas"*

The CG were pleased delegates highly rated the provision of networking and sharing opportunities, given that facilitating such exchanges between members' staff was one of the conference's main aims.

2) Least Valued Elements

Comments against this topic were very varied, but surprisingly mostly concerned the keynote speaker. This went against the statistical return noted above (81% satisfied). Qualitatively, comments focussed on the keynote address not embracing the conference theme, along with others expressing a preference for a speaker from within the sector.

> *"The keynote was engaging and charismatic but I'm not sure how much it added to the day; it felt like repeating messaging that I've heard a lot before and can be picked up elsewhere. By his own admission he was from outside the library sector and new to the UK HE sector so his messaging, to me, came across as a little shallow."*

> *"Personally, I prefer to hear people from within the profession (or more closely related) so I can hear about either things they're doing or even just their opinions on where the sector is headed"*

Finding a keynote speaker who will appeal to a wide range of people is not an easy exercise, and the group will seek suggestions from across the Collaboration earlier and search more widely, both within the sector and external to it.

Additionally, there were also several comments about the plenary not being structured and *"fizzling out"*. Regrettably, the unanticipated early departure of the keynote speaker impact on the originally planned session. Hence, the CG accepts that these are fair comments, and the CG Chair personally acknowledges that this session could have been better delivered. Future conferences will carefully reconsider how to more effectively structure and deliver a final session to better satisfy delegate needs, and to accommodate any unexpected speaker absences.

3) Future Improvements

Again, we received a huge range of comments covering everything from having juice at coffee break to seeking poster presentations. We did receive many requests for longer time to network (including lunch) and the length of breakout sessions. Comments such as these will certainly feed into the planning of future conferences, particularly around time for networking, given this featured so prominently in the comments against the *Most Valued* question. We are also thinking about varying the number, type and length of sessions to better accommodate potential workshop slots alongside spoken papers, and enhance overall programme diversity.

Future Themes

We received a great list of suggestions which future conferences, papers or workshops could centre around. These will be invaluable for the CG, in terms of selecting a theme which authentically resonates with Collaboration member's staff. Suggestions included:

- Digital and eLearning

- Effective communication, team building, motivation

- Innovation

- Listening to our users/UX

- Research services

- The 'Perfect' Library

- What Libraries can learn from other sectors/industries and what they can learn from us

- Working together

When selecting the next conference theme, the CG will keep in mind the importance of maintaining a good delegate representation from Collaboration members, and from across range of staff roles and seniority. Ideally, the theme will need to be broad enough to allow for a range of submissions, while also being of interest to a variety of prospective delegates and representing professional development value to their managers.

Conference Group Reflections

The Conference group found the experience of planning and running the event a positive one, albeit hard work. In planning for the next conference there are a number of key lessons and knowledge we can draw upon:

- **Onsite Support**: It is of incredible value to have '*onsite group members*', that is CG members associated with or geographically local to the venue. Having two members from DMU was hugely beneficial for the organisation of the conference and the group feels this would be of value in the future, having group members that are members of the host institution or close to the venue.

- **Project Management**: Using more effective organisational tools to manage the process. This is currently being explored by group members, and may help to standardise and streamline organisational activities and task management.

- **MCDO Support**: We would significantly benefit from more of Gaz's time, as the MCDO, noting he contributed considerable unsalaried hours to support the conference. Perhaps being able to purchase additional MCDO time during critical conference planning phases (June-Aug), would alleviate some of the organisational challenges. Certainly, we anticipate such an arrangement would make a massive impact in terms of coordination, communication, promotion and website presence.

- **Timing (programme)**: Whilst the timing of the conference was carefully worked out, so it didn't clash with other events, organising the majority of the conference during vacation introduced a greater planning and coordination challenge than anticipated. However, it also demonstrated that the CG needed every bit of time available within the year 10-month planning cycle, to deliver the conference. Hence, we would suggest the same timing would be needed again to deliver on a comparable event in 2018.

- **Timing (schedule)**: We will never find a perfect time for all member libraries but will aim to avoid induction periods, and comparable regional collaboration conference dates.

- **Logistical Aspects**: Running this conference provided a large amount of valuable information in terms of: knowing what to ask venues, potential costs, workplan timings through to organising the call for papers. Whoever possible, this information has been captured for the subgroups documentation and future planning purposes.

Costs

- Venue   DMU gift[2]

- Catering   £1,314.00

- Mugs (promotional delegate item)   £315.00

- Speaker   £1,200 +127.10

- Extras (badges etc)   £18.74

- **TOTAL cost**   **£2,974.84**

Actions

We are a relatively small group and have lost some members along the way[3], we will need to recruit at least two more members, ideally if possible, from the West Midlands. This will ensure the CG remains viable, and importantly, representative of the Collaboration's members' interests.

We are also looking to write a statement about the purpose of the conference and the target audience, both for intent and to be used as a marketing tool. Our aim was very much to provide an event that would appeal to broad spread of delegates in terms of seniority and region. We feel we did that[4] but being transparent about this may be of value going forward.

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[2] Note: Venue costs at other regional, comparable venues in 2017 ranged (approximately) between £2,600-3,600, although this cost may have included some catering provision (varying between venues).
[3] Due to promotion, relocation and life changes
[4] For a detailed overview of these points, see Johnson, G.J., 2017. *The Mercian Conference 2017: Delegate Regionality, Representation and Session Preference Analysis*. Leicester. Mercian Collaboration.

In addition, drawing on this statement, the group will propose some KPIs against which we can measure the relative success of future conferences. We anticipate that these will concern delegate representation across the Mercian membership, attendance numbers and costs. These will be reported to the Steering group and in future evaluative reports.

We intend to provide some further information for the Mercian website including some visual representation of the key figures along with some point-of-view pieces from delegates and conference group members. The latter is hoped to provide potential new CG recruits and their managers with an appreciation of the value and experience of participating in our activities.

Recommendations

Following the CG's recent conference evaluation and review meeting, and in the light of the above points, we seek the Mercian Directors agreement and support for the following recommendations:

1. That the conference be held at the same time of year – September 2018

2. That a conference venue be found in the West Midlands

3. That we look to find sponsorship to help with costs

4. That we continue efforts to encourage attendance from amongst those in Library assistant roles

5. That we further clarify and document the conference's aim and purpose

Related Questions and Discussion Points

- Do we want to charge fees? If we do we can charge more for non-Mercian members.

- Do we want to invite non-Mercian members and if so what proportion?

- Are we happy with an annual conference or is there value in running it biennially?

- How do we encourage a range of roles to both submit papers and attend?

We aimed for between 80-100 delegates for our first conference, we are aware that with sponsorship we will need to provide a space for sponsors to exhibit and spaces for them. If we open the conference up to non-Mercian members this will also require spaces. We are then looking at increasing delegate numbers and attendee numbers which will have consequences for size and cost of venue.

Conclusion

The first Mercian conference went well, we almost met our attendance goal, had great representation from across the region, received broad and varied submissions allowing us to offer a wide-ranging spread of parallel sessions and received excellent feedback. There are things that we will work on for the next conference from the feedback and our own reflections. I'd like to record my thanks for all the encouragement and support given to me and to the members of the Conference Group.

Acknowledgements