2020

{ Mercian Collaboration

Annual Report 2020

Contents

At A Glance

- 4th Annual report (2020)
- Formal name: The Mercian Collaboration
- Informally: The Collaboration
- Governing body: Directors Board
- Parent body: SCONUL
- Founded in 2013/4
- Chair: Diane Job (Birmingham)
- Subgroups: 2 operational, 5 special interest groups
- 15 visits, workshops & networking events
- 22 committee & group meetings
- 23 academic library members

Chair's Introduction

It is hard to believe that this is the 4th annual report of the Mercian Collaboration. We have come a long way in such a short space of time and yet we are still a relatively young organisation. 2020 was an extraordinary year. In January 2020, COVID-19 was something happening in a distant part of the world. By March we had gone into lockdown. I doubt that anyone had 'global pandemic' on their local risk register at the start of the year! And if you did we all need a lesson in scenario planning with you!

Diane Job
Chair (2019-21) & Director of Library Services, University of Birmingham

What we achieved within our individual libraries, as a collaboration, as a sector and as a global community of libraries was truly remarkable. Remarkable 'Yes', but I think predictable. I'd argue because we look to the future, always look for better ways of doing things, and constantly want to improve our services and our skill sets we were able deliver in ways that even the most ardent library advocate has been amazed by. That we have been able to adapt is testament to the way we work in 'normal times'- sharing best practice, never imagining we have all the answers and believing that progress lies in collaboration.

The transition we all made when the doors closed in March 2020 was hard, we had to deal with things that happened literally overnight, a change to VAT rules, children back at school one day and all change the next and we live with a considerable degree of uncertainty still.

2020 was the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was also the year of the tragic death of George Floyd. The *Black Lives Matter* movement resoundingly reminds us that that equality, diversity and inclusivity is not ubiquitous. The CILIP Ethical Framework contains the words '*to uphold, promote and defend…Human rights, equalities and diversity, and the equitable treatment of users and colleagues*'. [i] Whether we individually are members of CILIP or not I believe the ethical principles are ones which will help us move forward.

I think 2020 is the year when we should be proud of the all the great things we have achieved, but also humbled in recognition of all the ways we should strive to do better. Through collaboration, I believe we will.

Preface

Welcome to the fourth Mercian Collaboration annual report. As with our earlier reports, this document is designed to provide insight into the Collaboration, our activities and those of our various subgroups throughout 2020. [ii, iii, iv] Obviously, the past year has been a challenging and very different one in the academic library sector, and everywhere else. Hence, while the reader may find fewer activities highlighted than in previous reports, nevertheless, we still hope this document provides some interesting insights for our members and their staff. Additionally, this report should also prove of some value to those organisations in comparable higher education settings beyond the UK Midlands region. As it only represents a snapshot of activity, for a more detailed view of ongoing and future activities then the Collaboration's website should be consulted. [v] Notably once more, following a successful response to last year's inclusion, we've chosen to offer space to our member libraries to highlight the events and accomplishments which have shaped their year. Member organisations are not required to provide these, but for those that have opted to participate, our hope is they provide a taste of the diversity and range of academic library activities across our region.

On behalf of the Collaboration, I'd like to thank all report contributors, especially officers, group chairs and those providing member updates, a list of contributors can be found at the report's end. Additionally, a hearty thanks to everyone who helped organise, facilitate or participate in our events programme, especially those who took the time to contribute a post-event report for our news pages.

Dr Gaz J Johnson*, Collaboration Development Officer*

About the Collaboration

The **Mercian Collaboration** is a regional library network based in the UK Midlands. Founded as the *Midlands Academic Library Group* in 2014 with the initial 22 academic library members joined in 2017 by Cranfield University, as the first non-founding member. Member libraries provide the Collaboration's operating capital through an annual, institutional subscription model. Contributions are proportionate to member's income as reported to SCONUL, with levels reviewed annually by the Treasurer and Steering Group, and any changes subject to agreement by the Directors Board.

Directors Board

The Board is the Collaboration's ultimate governing body and is comprised of member libraries' directors, or equivalent senior leader, representatives. It meets twice annually, normally March and October, to discuss high-level issues and exchange experiences, along with deciding on the Collaboration's future strategic direction. Where directors are unable to attend, a senior staff member is normally deputised to appear in their place. Minutes, agenda and reports relating to these meetings, and indeed all Collaboration groups, can be found online on our website. [v]

Steering Group

Operationally, a Steering Group oversees and advances the Collaboration's agenda and activities outside of the Board meetings. The Board nominates, and where necessary, elects Officers and Ordinary Members from within its own ranks to serve on the Steering Group for a two-year term of office. The

Steering Group also has responsibility for monitoring and supporting the activity of the Collaboration's operational and special interest subgroups. Individual Steering Group members act as group sponsors for particular subgroups and represent their interests to the Board and Collaboration at large. The Steering Group includes three officer roles (Chair, Vice-Chair and Treasurer) as well as three non-officer member director positions. Apart from the Vice-Chair, Steering Group members serve two-year terms. The Vice-Chair serves a four-year term, normally progressing to Chair after the first two. The next iteration of the Steering Group will be appointed to serve from late-March 2021.

Mercian Collaboration member Locations

Map data: © 2020 GeoBasis-De/BKG (©2009), Google

Steering Group Members (3/2019-3/2021)

Left to right: (top row), Diane Job (Chair, Birmingham), Chris Porter (Vice Chair, Newman), Mark Toole (NTU, Treasurer), (bottom row) Sue Ackermann (Nottingham), Simon Bevan (Cranfield), Emma Walton (Loughborough), Gaz J Johnson (Development Officer).

Development Officer

A Development Officer, is employed part-time on behalf of the Collaboration by SCONUL, reporting to the Chair. Their role is to provide executive management of the Collaboration, assisting in realising its objectives, projects, groups, services and developments. The Officer leads on coordinating governance and formal reporting requirements by and to the Collaboration's governing and parent body. Crucially, they facilitate operational matters including communication, liaison and relationships between subgroups and their officers, as the Board and Steering Group's representative. Consequently, they are an ex officio member on all special interest group committees and organising bodies, where they seek to advise, inform and guide activities within the Collaboration's overarching goals. Additionally, the Officer is the primary point of contact for all external enquiries along with maintaining the Collaboration's online and social media presences.

Strategic Plan

After five years of the Collaboration's existence, the Steering Group sought to devise a more formalised strategic plan during 2018. This *Strategic Plan* seeks to clarify how the Collaboration delivers membership value through enabling collaborative solutions and support within a changing policy, practice and societal context. It also provides a statement of intent against which future activities can be aligned and successes measured. Following a series of discussions and engagement with the membership, the Plan was finally launched in early 2020, with the Board's approval. [vi] While the Plan was devised to account for anticipated challenges and development of the academic library sector, impacts from ongoing COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored. Hence, the incoming Steering Group will conduct a review of the Plan during 2021, to accommodate altered circumstances and changing anticipated membership needs in the light of the considerably reconfigured academic library environment. The development of the Plan instigated the creation of two further strategic documents. The first, *Tangible Membership Value* highlights the benefits deriving from membership and is publicly available for consultation. [vii] The second, a *Risk Register*, was designed to provide risk mitigation routes for the Collaboration and its operations by the Steering Group, and is a reserved document shared within the Board only. It is anticipated both documents will be updated as part of the updates to the Strategic Plan in 2021.

Treasurer's Report

2020 has been an unusual year for the Collaboration, and one with a far lower degree of expenditure than was originally anticipated. With the cancellation of all physical events and meetings from March onward, the Collaboration's running costs have diminished. The cancellation of one of our single biggest annual expenses, the September conference, has significantly contributed to this reduction in costs. However, its loss also precluded any sponsorship income for this year. With an income of £18,821.00 and an expenditure of £15,814.34, our resultant out-turn for 2020 was a gain of £3,006.66, leaving reserve funds of £24,686.02 as of 31/12/20. Consequently, our income for 2020 has exceeded our outgoings, in marked contrast to our expectations a year previously. In the light of this, and current financial pressures faced by members, the Board agreed to accommodate a modest reduction in membership fees for 2021 (7%).

With the assumption that any resumption of physically hosted events remains some way off in the future, and even taking into account current considerations to increase the Collaboration's Officer's FTE hours, for the next year at least, the Collaboration will continue to operate in a reasonably financially secure position. Nevertheless, the Collaboration will need to revisit subscription levels against anticipated operations during 2021 as we move towards any semi-normalised events and meeting programme in a hopefully post-pandemic environment. This review and monitoring of outgoings and commitments will comprise an important task for the incoming Steering Group to address.

Gareth J Johnson
Acting Treasurer, Mercian Collaboration [viii]

Events

Early in 2020 the Collaboration agreed to pivot to online only events, ahead of the formal UK lockdown period. This shift, along with the increased demand on subgroup members' time from supporting staff, students and colleagues during lockdown, and latterly during post-lockdown reopening, precluded the same level of events hosted as would normally be expected. Nevertheless, a number of events (15) still took place, albeit in an online mode. [ix]

Event Title	Date	Venue	Associated Group	Organiser
All the Same, But Different: Newman University	21st Jan 20	Newman	MSDG	Gemma Dixon & David Crozier (Newman)
Mercian Metadata Group 'End of Year' Meeting	22nd Jan 20	Leicester	MMG	Richard Birley (BCU)
Marketing & Communications Group Meeting	24th Jan 20	BCU	MarComms	Jakkie Carton (Wolverhampton) & Stewart Sandilands (BCU)
Skills Development for New Managers	29 Jan 20	Loughborough	MSDG	Matt Cunningham (Loughborough)
Delivering Information Literacy Skills Online	3rd Feb 20	OU, Milton Keynes	MSDG	Jude Bennett & Cheryl Coveney (OU)
Supporting Your Users Undertaking Systematic Reviews	4th Mar 20	Coventry	MSDG	Chris Bark (Coventry)
Virtual Networking Pilot Meeting	13th May 20	Online	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Virtual Networking Meeting	10th Jun 20	Online	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Decolonising Academic Libraries	16th Jun 20	Online	MSDG	Keith Nockles (Leicester) & Kaye Towlson (DMU)
Virtual Networking Event (Remote Support & Post-Lockdown)	29th Jun 20	Online	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Shelf Ready & EDI eForum	19th Aug 20	Online	MMG	Will Peadon (Aston) & Richard Birley (BCU)
What's it like to be Back on Campus?	20th Aug 20	Online	MSDG	Matt Cunningham (Loughborough) & Teresa Jordan (Birmingham)
Virtual Networking Event: Collections, Access & Support	28th Oct 20	Online	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Virtual Networking: Upskilling for an Online Norm	1st Dec 20	Online	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Customer Service Accreditation	16th Dec 20	Online	MSDG	Kirsty Kift (Coventry)

A notable new event format was introduced this year, in the form of the series of virtual networking sessions organised and hosted by the Development Officer. These were organised to ensure a continuance of activities in place of those normally organised by our constituent subgroups. Following an exploratory pilot session, these continued to be organised throughout the year, based around informal, small group conversations on salient topics of professional interest. [x] The events were usually

co-hosted by the Officer and one of the subgroup chairs (Staff Development, Disability Forum and Conference Groups).

Most, if not all, of the Collaboration's membership institutions were represented by delegates (as shown below). While for reasons of practicality the delegate numbers were kept small, these virtual networking events were warmly received and received excellent feedback. Hence, given the continuing uncertain period in the UK it is planned to continue to organise them throughout 2021.

Virtual Networking Delegates (2020, by Institution)
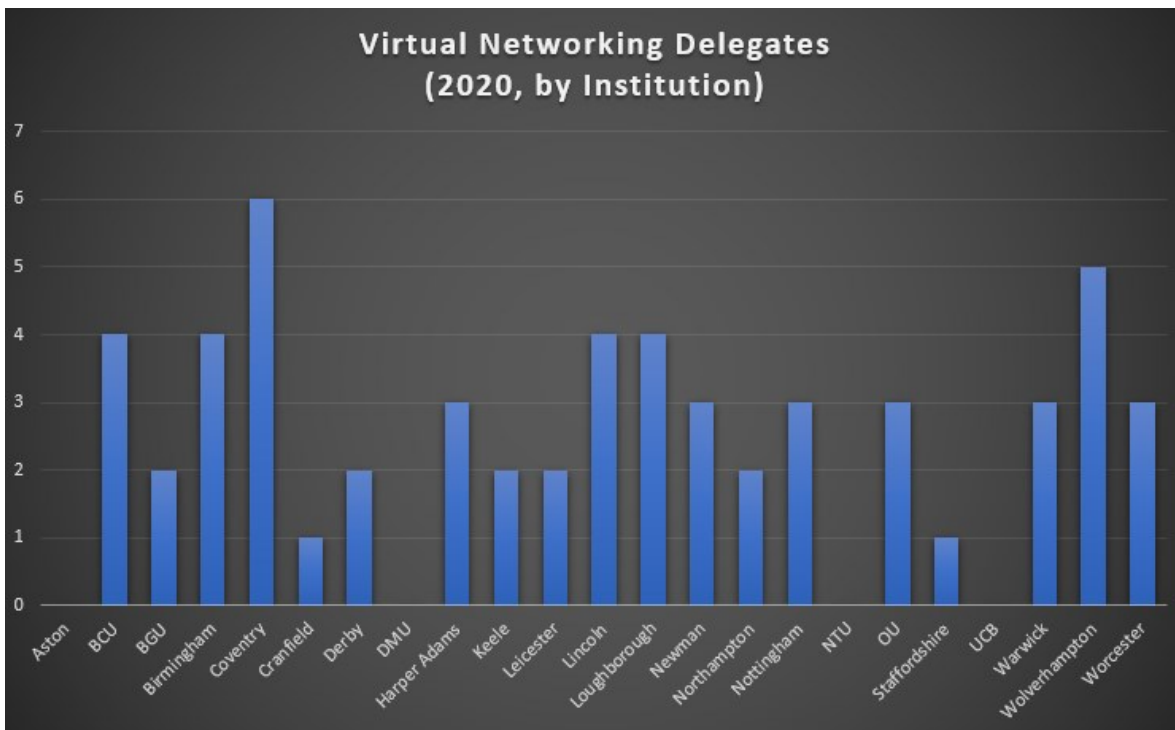
Online Communications

Website, Mailing Lists & Social Media

Launched in early 2017, the website continues to provide a location member organisations' staff and the wider community to learn about the Collaboration, our events, activities and key figures. It also provides access to supplementary information including: forthcoming events, news items, reports and governance documentation. The website's contents also reflect the transparent governance embraced by the Collaboration, with agendas, minutes, reports and policy documents from across its constituent committees being freely available. The site is overseen by the Development Officer, with platform hosting outsourced to SCONUL's web provider.

The Development Officer also manages a twitter social media presence to further promote the Collaboration and its activities, highlighting new web content, alongside raising the organisation's visibility to its members' staff and the wider community. A general distribution Jiscmail list, exclusive to staff from member organisations, is also maintained as a further source of information on events, meetings and developments. A monthly newsletter, collated by the Officer, is distributed via this list, and draws together all significant developments, announcements and forthcoming activities. The mailing list is also sometimes used to promote vacancies within member organisations, and some

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unaffiliated regional events. The Collaboration's subgroups, along with the Directors Board and Steering Group, also maintain their operations thorough various Jiscmail private distribution lists, typically maintained by the Officer.

> **Website**: merciancollaboration.org.uk
>
> **Twitter**: @MercianCollab
>
> **Mailing List**: mercian-collaboration@jiscmail

News & Announcements

Despite 2020 being anything by business as usual for academic libraries and the Collaboration alike, the website continued to highlight activities and developments through its news pages. As usual news items including reports on events, announcements and calls for participation, with the majority produced this year created by the Officer.

Headline	Date	Associated Group	Author
Call for Contributions: Decolonising the Academic Library	12th Feb 20	MSDG	Keith Nockles (Leicester)
Opening New Doors with a Visit to the Open University	12th Feb 20	MSDG	Joanne Culpin (Loughborough)
Stand Up and Be Included as a Conference 2020 Sponsor	4th Mar 20	MCG	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Mercian Collaboration & COVID-19	18th Mar 20	Steering Group	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Adapting to the New Normal	25th Mar 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
The New Collaboration Conference Emerges	29th Apr 20	MCG	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Inaugural Online Networking Event a Virtual Success	13th May 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Mercian Conference 2020: Call for Session Proposals	20th May 20	MCG	Claire Browne (Birmingham)
Post Lockdown Planning Resources	10th Jun 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Well-Being, Reopening, and the Homing Instinct: A second virtual networking event	10th Jun 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Spotlight on new Governance Documentation	23rd Jun 20	Steering Group	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Collaboration Conference 2020: Regretfully Cancelled	2nd Jul 20	MCG	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Reflecting on Decolonising the Academic Library	7th Jul 20	MSDG	Kaye Towlson (DMU)
Third Virtual Networking Event Explores Staff and Student Experiences at a Distance	2nd Sep 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
So What HAS it Been Like to be Back on Campus?	23rd Sep 20	MSDG	Matt Cunningham (Loughborough)
Off the Shelf Metadata: Challenges, Experience and Quality Control	23rd Sep 20	MMG	Richard Birley (BCU)

Staff Development Group Announces New Outline Events Programme for 20/21	5th Oct 20	MSDG	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Collections, Access & Support Form Heart of the Conversation at Networking Event	4th Nov 20	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)
Final Virtual Networking of the Year Brings Reflections on Staff Learning Journeys	21st Dec 2020	N/a	Gareth J Johnson (Mercian)

Policy & Reports

In addition to the Strategic Plan and related documents detailed earlier, a number of other reports and policies were launched by the Collaboration. Two revisions of the Collaboration's Sponsorship Policy were launched, to reflect the planned 2020 conference's priorities, and then once more as a result of its subsequent shift to an online format. A number of reports by the Development Officer, covering their activities but also pieces of research in support of the Collaboration's objectives were also produced and made available. A limited number of closed-access reports were produced for the Steering Group and Board, with limited circulation due to the operationally sensitive nature of their contents. However, wherever possible all reports and policy documents are all made openly available on the Collaboration's website, as per the organisation's underlying transparency and open access ethos. [xi]

Vital Statistics

Members: 23 Academic Libraries	**Events in 2020**: 15
Subgroups: 7	**Meetings in 2020**: 22
Steering Group: 3 Officers, 3 Representatives, 1 Ex Officio	**Twitter Followers**: 226
Most Northly: Bishop Grosseteste University	**General Mailing List Members** 155
Most Southerly: The Open University	**Site Page Views in 2020**: 11,718 (-6%)
Most Western: Harper Adams University	**Site Unique Visitors**: 4,204 (-7%)
Most Eastern: Bishop Grosseteste University (just!)	

Subgroups

Since its formation, the Collaboration has established several subgroups, beginning with the Mercian Staff Development Group (MSDG).[xii] These groups sought to enable experience exchanges, form communities of practice and offer a locus of expertise within the region. Moreover, many of these subgroups seek to contribute to an ongoing professional development environment for library staff, within their particular areas of focus. Consequently, subgroups contribute significantly to furthering the Collaboration's aims and objectives in line with its strategic plan, along with representing a key tangible and highly visible membership value.

Two changes of note occurred during 2020. Firstly, the Board and Steering Group agreed a refined distinction between subgroups focussing on operational outputs (events) and those whose remit were more concerned with experience sharing within the subgroup's membership. The former subgroups, the Conference Group and Mercian Staff Development Group, are now referred to as *operational groups*, while the remainder retain the prior *special interest groups* (SIGs) nomenclature.[xii] It should be noted SIGs may, and do, organise successful events for their members and other interested library staff, but it is not expected of them. In contrast, operational groups' remits are strongly focussed on hosting events and engendering a professional development environment across the Collaboration. The second occurrence of note in 2020 was the discontinuation of an established subgroup, with the dissolution of the RDMSG, as detailed below. As a result, by the year's end the Collaboration had two operational groups and five special interest groups currently operating under its umbrella.

All subgroups benefit from regular liaison with the Development Officer, who in turn provides them with support, guidance, communication and updates as part of his Collaboration coordination activities. He also sits as an *ex officio* member of all subgroup committees. Each subgroup benefits from a *Steering Group Sponsor* who alongside providing further channels of communication and support, operate as each the group's representative to the Steering Group and Directors Board.[xiii] Sponsors also help in identifying topics of cross-Collaboration interest and assist in facilitating exchanges between other subgroups.

Operational Groups

Conference Group (CG)

> *The Conference Group's role is to plan, develop and deliver the annual Mercian Collaboration conference. Because of the need to deliver on such a time-sensitive and crucial Collaboration output, committee members are proposed by their Directors. The group's sponsor is* **Emma Walton** *(Loughborough) with the group's chair for 2020 being* **Claire Brown** *(Birmingham). Because of their own contemporaneous events programme, the MSDG provides an observer,* **Matt Cunningham** *(Loughborough), to provide liaison and support between the two groups.*

This year, with regret, the 2020 physical conference to be hosted in Birmingham was cancelled. Despite exploring alternative options for an online only event in September, due to the clash with many academic libraries reopening and concomitant lack of submissions, this was not pursued. The Group was grateful to those speakers who had submitted potential papers and since the event's cancellation has been in touch to consider other routes to present their work.

Nevertheless, the Conference Group plans to launch the Collaboration's next conference in September 2021. To help in this the committee has retained most of its members for going into 2021, although is also seeking some new faces from across the region to contribute to delivering the event. However, group chair Claire Browne (Birmingham) has reached the end of her term as group chair, and group vice-chair Damien Pugh (Nottingham) has taken over the role from late 2020.

Claire Browne, Outgoing Conference Group Chair, University of Birmingham

Staff Development Group (MSDG)

The MSDG was the first subgroup formed by the Collaboration. It has a remit to organise an annual programme development and training events for library staff within member institutions. Additionally, it manages the Mercian Buddying Network, which aims to partner staff with more experienced contacts at other regional institutions. Membership is representational, with staff usually occupying a staff developmental lead role within their own organisation. The group's sponsor is **Chris Porter** *(Newman), and the current chair is* **Sarah Pittaway** *(Worcester).*

Mercian events in 2019-20

Dec '19
OU
All The Same But Different

Jan '20
Newman & Loughborough
ASBD & Skills development for new managers

Feb '20
OU
Developing IL skills online

Mar '20
Coventry
Supporting users with systematic reviews

Apr '20
COVID-19 lockdown started, events cancelled

May '20

Jun '20
Leicester trialled 1st online event
Decolonising academic libraries
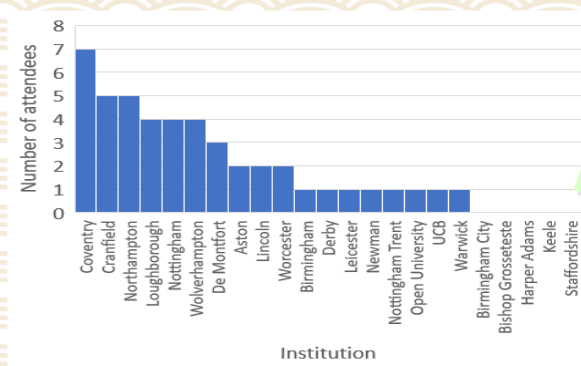
Events facts & figures

- 5 fewer events than 18/19 due to COVID
- 96 attendees across events, down on 230 in 18/19
- 99% said sessions were good or excellent
- First online session had highest engagement for last 3 years!

Events facts & figures

Coventry staff are still some of the most engaged with Mercian events

powered by
PIKTOCHART

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Events 20/21

The 2020/21 programme is slimmer than usual and is likely to be more reactive and adaptable to changing needs and demands in the ongoing pandemic environment and pressure on staff capacity. Given the success of the pilot online event, the MSDG Committee feels confident in delivering an online programme for the foreseeable future with events anticipated on implementing online booking systems, reviewing induction during COVID, Customer Service Excellence, online staff recruitment, and trans awareness. We are also exploring the viability of offering a virtual version of the *All the Same But Different* events, as these are much valued by frontline staff.

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The MSDG have also reviewed their terms of reference, including clarifying expectations for institutional representatives, and committee role descriptors. This information is available for review on the Collaboration's website.

Buddying Scheme

The Buddying Scheme, first introduced in 2017, as a way for new or relatively new library staff to find an experienced and informed colleague at one of the other member institutions, may be the Mercian Collaboration's best kept secret! [xv] Managed by the MSDG, the scheme facilitates the partnering of participants (*buddies*) with a corresponding library staff member at another member institution for a six-month period of peer-to-peer support. Unlike mentoring, which includes more formal monitoring and reporting arrangements, buddying is designed to be light-touch, flexible and mutually beneficial for all participants. There are no specific requirements in terms of how frequently buddies should be in contact, although a number of exchanges during the six-months is encouraged. While the scheme has only a limited traffic annually, feedback from participants continues to be positive. [xvi] More information on the scheme is available in the MSDG section of the website, or by following the link above.

Special Interest Groups

Copyright Group (MCG)

*The MCG is a network of library staff with a responsibility for Copyright guidance and advocacy at their institutions. Membership is representational and largely self-selected by individuals within membership organisations. The group's sponsor is **Chris Porter** (Newman), and the current chair is **Yvonne Budden** (Warwick).*

The group had not met during 2020, and traffic on the mailing list had been relatively quiet. The copyright community has come closer together at the national level during the pandemic with a regular series of webinars organised by lis-copyseek that enables the discussion of specific copyright challenges. There continued to be considerable traffic on that list including post from and responses by group members. Both those fora will continue to provide high levels of support during this period. There were hopes that a future meeting of the group could be held in early 2021, to kick off a new period of exchange, however this may need to be delayed until further into the calendar year to accommodate priorities and availability.

Deputies & Senior Staff Group (D&SSG)

*The D&SSG is a forum for senior managers and leaders, residing below directorial level. Membership is open to all staff in senior graded roles within libraries, with members coming together a number of times each year to exchange experiences. The intent is for members to participate in horizon scanning, obtain support for strategic planning and gain insights into the operationalisation of national agenda items. The group's sponsor is **Diane Job** (Birmingham), with the group's meetings normally facilitated by the Collaboration's Officer. The position of meeting chair rotates among members present.*

The Deputies & Senior Staff Group met three times in 2020, twice virtually and with an early March meeting representing one of the last physical events facilitated by the Collaboration this year. Early on the group established its draft terms of reference, before moving to address issues of current concern among the membership. Unlike other subgroups, attendance at D&SSG meetings and membership of its mailing list is open to all staff working at a senior (sub-director) level within an academic member libraries. Attendance at meetings is usually dictated by available workloads and the central theme of each gathering. Topics discussed during 2020 included: COVID-19 preparedness and reopening, Dawson Books and scholarly communication. The group is looking towards a meeting in early 2021, examining learning outcomes and how services have changed in the wake of the remote working/lockdown experience.

Marketing & Communications (MarComms)

*The MarComms group comprises library professionals with a particular interest in the marketing, promotion and reputational enhancement of academic libraries. Membership is representational and largely self-selected by individuals within membership organisations. The group's sponsor is **Mark Toole (NTU)** and the current chair is **Stewart Sandilands** (BCU).*

Like many other subgroups, the Marketing & Communications Group's plans for 2020 were placed on hold due to the lockdown, and later reopening period. As such for this year there is little to report beyond an ongoing willingness by the committee to move forward with activities in 2021, as the environment and other demands permit.

Mercian Disability Forum (MDF)

*The MDF comprises library professionals working within member institutions with an interest in, or responsibility for, supporting disabled students. Membership is representational and largely self-selected by individuals within membership organisations. The group's sponsor is **Diane Job**, and the current chair is **Laura Waller** (Warwick).*

The Forum had met three times during the year, online each time, allowing members to exchange their experiences relating to disability and accessibility support. Especially with the shift to online learning and support there had been a lot of issues for library staff working in this area to deal with, and as a result the Forum had provided a highly-valued route to exchange experiences, expertise and solutions to common challenges. Looking to the future, the Forum is looking to host an online event early in 2021, alongside a new chair to help guide the group.

Mercian Metadata Group (MMG)

*MMG group members have particular interests in around the creation and management of metadata. Membership is representational and largely self-selected by individuals within membership organisations. The group's sponsor is **Susan Ackermann** with the current organisers being **William Peaden** (Aston), **Richard Birley** (BCU) and **Ed Kirkland** (Warwick).*

Despite the lockdown and remote working period, the Metadata Group had enjoyed a modestly successful 2020 with a number of events. These had started with a face-to-face event held in Leicester

in January, during which the committee was formally ratified by members, along with the regular exchange of experience. An e-forum on shelf ready materials and EDI (electronic data interchange) was co-hosted by the committee in August, to considerable success. The group continues to interact with other sectoral bodies, notably the CILIP's Metadata and Discovery Group, Northern Collaboration and the SUPC, and hopes that 2021 will see opportunities for other routes to bring their membership together once more.

RDM Support Group (RDMSG)

The RDMSG aimed to provide a forum for local support and exchange of experiences within membership organisations relating to research data management practices. Membership was not representational but largely self-selected by individuals within membership organisations with comparable interests. The group's sponsor was **Simon Bevan** *(Cranfield), and chair was* **Gareth Cole** *(Loughborough).*

Having lost two-thirds of its coordination group in 2019, this year saw local work demands increase on the remaining member to the point where they sought to stand-down. Efforts in 2020 had centred on seeking to recruit successors for the coordination group to continue the subgroup's activities. Regrettably as this could not be achieved, it became impractical to continue the group's momentum. Following discussions with the Steering Group, it was agreed while there may still be a regional need for a Collaboration subgroup within the research domain, that the RDMSG had reached a natural end point. As such its operations were concluded in September 2020. [xvii]

Membership Highlights

Each year the Collaboration seeks to present highlight reports from our member libraries, which have been warmly received by the community previously, and serve to provide an overview of selected activities across the region. [xviii] This year the Collaboration believes showcasing what member libraries have achieved during this unprecedented period of disruption is more important than ever. It provides a powerful message about the diversity of member experience and accomplishments and helping demonstrate the richness of experience across the Collaboration. Hence, late in 2020 member directors were asked to provide brief reports highlighting notable activities, events or responses enacted during the preceding year. Submission of a report was not a requirement, nor is it possible to provide an overview of all activities within each member library, hence the following are only a taste of the regional academic libraries' achievements. For more information on specific member libraries, their goals and activities, readers are advised to approach the appropriate Director of Library Services, or equivalent.

Birmingham City University

The year began on a positive footing after a glowing full CSE reaccreditation in December 2019 with plans to replace the LMS also gathering momentum. Then March arrived…

Like many HE library services, we were well equipped to make the transition to an online only service when the first national lockdown was announced in March. Our 24/7 Chat, eResources, online tutorials and website formed the core of the service. Other measures introduced included extending item loans to 30th September 2020, increasing our e-resources (taking advantage of some publishers offering digital content free of charge for a limited period) and upscaling our digitisation of reading list items.

For the duration of our building closures, a distinct 'Bringing the Library to You' LibGuide was developed to promote our enhanced virtual offer. This has since been adapted to promote our on-campus services and virtual engagement events; aligned with online teaching delivery. A 'Library Explorer' guide was also developed to promote our service and resources.

Embracing new ways of working such as Microsoft Teams continue to help our colleagues remain connected and, in many ways, has improved engagement and participation in the activities of the service.

We continued with plans to introduce automatic renewals after considerable deliberation and evaluation. With our students away from campus with many not in a position to return their loans, it seemed like an appropriate time to introduce this change to our service. We also made the decision to suspend fines from this initial disruption onwards.

On campus teaching resumed in September albeit with a target of 50% building occupancy. Colleagues worked incredibly hard to get the service ready for the reopening of our campuses with several new services introduced for Semester One, all operating with minimal staff presence onsite. A space booking system has been implemented with bookings made mandatory for use of library facilities, items on the catalogue can be reserved on a Click and Collect basis with collection points outside our main library

entrances. We took the decision not to re-open two of our smallest sites, the School of Art and the School of Jewellery libraries, due to the difficulty in maintaining social distancing practices.

Colleagues continue to show great effort and dedication in what has been a very long and tiring year for all. Our usage figures for online Chat have shown a 172% increase compared to the same time last year (Sept/Oct) with the new services introduced also showing steady improvements in uptake.

This year's CSE accreditation process continues with a view to the assessment day in January 2021. For those involved in the process it is yet another reminder of all the ways we have managed to keep the service going and also progressing through the year.

Figure 1: Ruth Jenkins, BCU Library Director

Final thanks go to our Interim Director Margaret Weaver who provided valuable guidance and experience through the year. We welcome our new permanent Director, Ruth Jenkins who began her role on the 7th September.

Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln

Having reclassified our entire collection, implemented RFID and installed new self-service and security equipment in summer 2019, the new academic year saw us introducing returning students to the changes, dealing with anomalies generated by the project, and rationalising discrete collections of resources. The vast majority of this work was successfully completed by early 2020.

Figure 2: BGU, Constance Stewart Hall

To enhance our user support services, over the winter we developed a number of video and PowerPoint tutorials showing students how to perform basic tasks like finding a book on the shelves, operating the self-service machines, and searching the catalogue. We also published a list of fifty fun activities for a 10-minute study break and a list of sixteen ways to refresh and re-focus the mind when assignment writing and created three information literacy development activities linked to the University's Graduate Attributes Excellence Award.

Throughout the year we continued to implement Talis Aspire reading list software across the University (badged internally as *My Reading*). 84% of all lists were transferred by the end of summer 2020; we aim to complete the project by spring 2021. It was pleasing to note that satisfaction levels were high amongst those using the new system, as evidenced by survey data.

In spring and summer 2020 the challenges of the global pandemic were many and varied, but we rose to the challenge. Like many other libraries, during the spring lockdown we endeavoured to offer as many core services as possible remotely; facilitated online access to key supplementary resources (open and temporary access); deployed existing systems we were yet to make use of (LibChat); and introduced new technologies like LibKey Nomad to help students discover BGU resources more effectively from home.

From late June, when the campus slowly started to re-open, we developed rotas to facilitate a mixture of on- and off-site working; adapted spaces, undertook risk assessments and acquired PPE; designed new services like Click & Collect (offered from mid-July) and study space bookings (offered from early August); set up a quarantine zone and related protocols; and explored ways to retrieve loans from students who had recently completed their studies.

As the end of the academic year approached, we continued to revise and adapt services, with a view to introducing additional facilities such as Browse & Borrow for the new academic year. The end of the academic year also saw the retirement of a highly-respected colleague, Teaching Resources Librarian

Janice Morris. Janice worked with us for 17 years and was instrumental in developing and curating our popular Teaching Resources Collection.

Figure 3: BGU's Teaching Resource Collection

In conclusion, this was a year like no other. However, in the midst of all the worry, uncertainty and sacrifice we all experienced – and, at the time of writing, continue to experience - from a professional perspective I was proud to observe how resilient, flexible, creative and caring the BGU library team was when it really mattered.

De Montfort University

The strangest year. A workforce now mostly of homeworkers providing radically different methods of learning, teaching and support, enhanced digital content, revamped websites and interactivity. Enforced digital capability, greater online engagement and attendance. Adaptive use of physically distanced spaces, convergence culture, collaboration and online participation at scale. Questions about what post-COVID libraries should look like, what skills should we possess, patterns of work, how we engage and communicate. Anxiety, concern, team coherence, community, bafflement, exasperation, adaptation, exhaustion, creativity, curiosity, resilience.

Loughborough University

Through these difficult times it has been and remains important to both celebrate our achievements and remember the positive initiatives that began in back in 2019. We launched our new integrated Research Repository in the Summer of 2019 and held a launch event in December 2019 to coincide with our institutional Open Research Position and an award ceremony for our internal research awards with our Pro Vice Chancellor (Research). It is lovely to look back on this event and the gathering that took place.

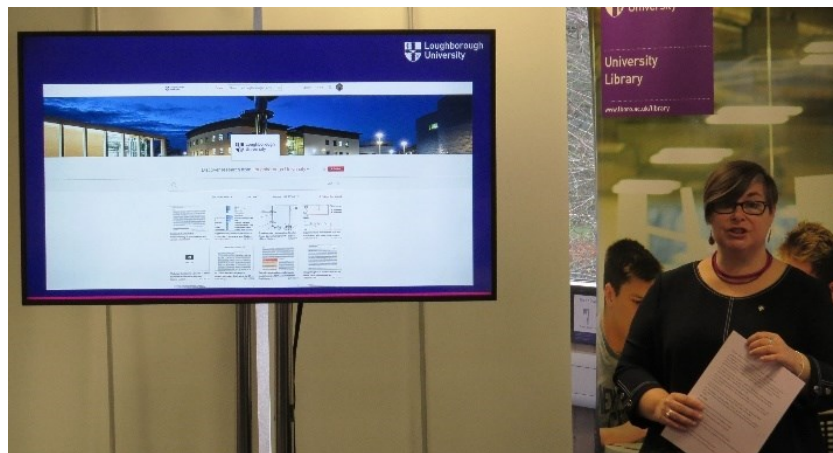*Figure 4: Research Repository Launch, Loughborough Dec 2019*

Figure 5: Emma Walton, Director of Library Services, Loughborouugh

Initiatives to support Learning and Teaching in 2019 and early 2020 included launching our newly redeveloped subject guides ready for the start of the new academic session and working closely with our Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching) to run a series of Dissertation Retreats. And then…

In terms of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, moving everything online was a massive effort. We have been a very in-person service, reflecting our University campus culture, and I am deeply proud of the Library Team and the way in which we all adjusted our practice to work remotely and continue to enhance and improve our online offer. I am also proud of how those staff involved in front line services adapted and managed in a very challenging environment.

A small group of staff returned to our Loughborough campus Library in May 2020 and, with the support of our colleagues in Health and Safety and Facilities, managed a small bookable space external to the Library to support students who had remained on campus or locally who needed network access and a quiet, safe space from which to do their assessments. We were also keen to be able to offer services that we had necessarily needed to temporarily suspend, access to print resources for example. Alongside the increased focus on digital provision, we introduced a number of measures in respect of our print collections such as a *click and collect* service for print items. Being able to deliver these services provided us with some good practical experience of working with PPE and other measures and we were able to use this knowledge to inform our plans to reopen the building which we did on July 6th. We,

like the whole of the sector, remain awash with yellow COVID signs, one way floor stickers and other measures including Perspex screens.

For the start of the new academic year 2020/21 we extended our offer in the building to include *Browse and Borrow* and *Stay and Study* with a reduced capacity of 35% but maintained our opening hours until 2am 7 days a week. At our London campus we were able to offer *Stay and Study* but retained a *Click and Collect service*.
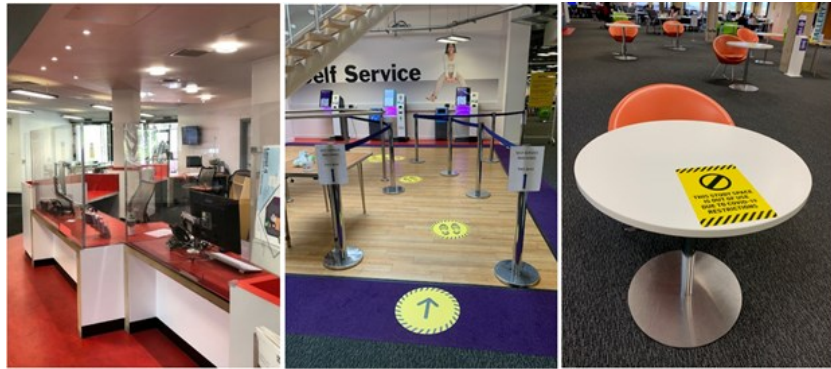

Figure 6: The Pilkington Library space, following introduction of COVID-19 safe measures, including: help desk screens, one way issuing system and socially distanced study spaces

Many services and an extensive range of support remained online throughout 2020 and continues in that mode. Colleagues have also been able to develop services including the launch of the *Academic Research Kit* (ARK) ready for the 2020/21 academic session; concentrating on Library led areas of discovering, evaluating, managing and referencing information we have been able to support users more fully and innovatively in these areas. We have also been developing our digital provision, taking advantage of the free access to material and then looking at ways to maintain access where possible, particularly with regard to e-text books.

As we moved through 2020 we adapted our in-building services as government guidance changed and have altered and amended workflows, practice and services, developed new ones and continue to support our user community. I am really appreciative of all colleagues' time, efforts and creativity.

Newman University

The Covid pandemic has shaped our thinking and reflection on 2020 to such an extent that it is easy to forget the other issues that added to the complexity and creativity of the year.

Two of the last moments of 'normality' prior to the pandemic were hosting a Mercian 'All the same but different' event in January 2020 and the Sconul Content Forum in February, as we began to get our minds around the new transformative read and print deals.

The whirl of activity and innovation that accompanied the first lockdown did not let up as we moved from that initial frantic period, through to the end of the academic year with its panicked dissertation students and onwards to planning online induction and all the challenges of introducing services to new and confused starters.

In addition to the considerable work in managing and communicating the large number of graced resources offered by the publishing community and the licence variations agreed by the CLA, we also engaged with the changes to VAT on electronic resources, the collapse of Dawsons and setting up our first Demand Driven Acquisition (DDA) trial.

Alongside the challenges of introducing new services and novel ways of working, we have been assiduous in keeping our website up to date with the latest changes to our service, to avoid confusion, and have maintained a constant flow of social media messages throughout the year.

The most popular tweets / Facebook posts of the year were our Zoom photos of Easter bonnets and Christmas Jumpers.

Figure 7: Newman's Easter Celebrations

As with others, we moved smoothly from organising the digital pivot and the associated new and enhanced services, including a Chat service which went live on the weekend before the first lockdown, to planning the reopening of our physical service. At the end of June we started with a Big Book Drop to allow our departing students – the majority living within 30 miles of the University – to return their library material. This segued into twin Click and Collect / Click and Study services. We returned to our standard opening hours from the start of semester 1 with a Click and Study / Click and Visit arrangement, using individual study places booked through the new LibSeats application, and booked browsing slots. As with the rest of the sector, this took place with lots of hard work, and an abundance of risk assessments.

Figure 8: Newman's Guidance Signage for Visitors

We are delighted that we remained the most popular library service in Birmingham for the third year in the National Students' Survey. It will be interesting to see the views and comments of this year's graduating class. We know we have made a real difference in helping students progress and succeed, but whether they will feel so positive in the face of all the uncertainty and stresses that they have faced, we will find out!

Looking back at all that we have achieved – the new systems and services, the flexibility and good will shown by staff, and the cooperation from the sector and the region – it makes me proud of the profession and of the colleagues who have made it all possible.

Open University

Compared to others, we have had minimal disruption to our education and service this year. All staff commenced homeworking in March; with virtually all library services unaffected. We continued to run live online training sessions for OU students and staff throughout the pandemic, and attendance has been higher than ever.

OU Librarians presented several online [webinars on how to take teaching online](#), targeted at Librarians, in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. Already known for their expertise in this area, the demand to join the sessions from around the world was high.

The Library Helpdesk webchat and email remained available 24/7 throughout the pandemic. We haven't been able to take incoming phone calls, but we are piloting an outbound call back service when an enquiry can't be answered using webchat or email for any reason. Outside our office hours webchat is offered through SpringShare. A planned migration to a new supplier was performed after we'd all moved to working from home so seamlessly that enquirers won't have experienced any interruption to the service.

The University Archive also continued to operate throughout the pandemic. Access to the physical archive materials was not available, but some materials have already been digitised and are available

through the OU Digital Archive, and the team will be digitising materials when they are able to return to the building.

The Library's Intellectual Property team worked with the Association of Colleges alongside the OU's Business Development Unit and the team behind the university's free online learning platform, OpenLearn, to provide some Open University course content in Further Education colleges to help with their pandemic response.

Figure 9: Digital skills promotional image

Our Badged Open Course (BOC), *Digital skills: Succeeding in a digital world* was revised and refreshed to include a variety of content updates reflecting changes in the digital landscape over the last few years. The BOC covers topics at an introductory level such as staying safe online and thinking about your digital footprint.
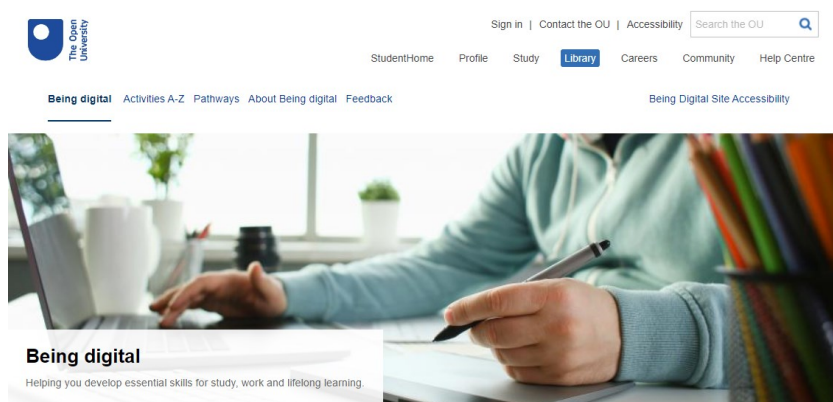

Figure 10: Front of the 'Being Digital' website

We updated and relaunched our Being digital website, giving it a cleaner, more modern look and updating the activities whilst improving accessibility, usability, and user experience. Being digital is a collection of short, easy-to-follow activities on finding, using, and creating information online. They are

designed to give users the confidence to work successfully online and develop essential digital literacy skills for study, work and everyday life.

We have refreshed our Digital and Information Literacy Framework, which underpins all our teaching, to reflect changes in employer expectations of graduates, as well as the thinking in HE, using the language behind Jisc's digital capabilities framework. We hope to relaunch the framework early next year. We have preserved the elements that make it so useful and valued, for example the focus on critical thinking and the way that the skills progress across the levels of study. Our academic liaison librarians mediate the use of the framework with academic staff, with the aim of starting conversations about student skills development, rather than providing a 'tick list' of skills.

Staffordshire University

2020 has seen the planning and undertaking of significant change at Staffordshire University libraries. In 2021 the university will see a 'Library Transformation' which includes:

- A relocated main library
- A new library management and reading list system
- Increased library learning resource spending, particularly to support the digitisation agenda
- A new Library and Learning Services staff structure.

The team have worked incredibly hard to form the initial plans and put in place the necessary structures and workflows to allow us to make these transitions. For example, the whole team have united to cleanse and re-organise our physical collections to make ready for building moves. They have worked with academic colleagues to ensure a much higher rate of completion for electronic resource lists. And they have also reworked and simplified acquisition workflows.

We have also of course dealt with the pandemic and the team have done an incredible job of adjusting delivery to allow for the best possible library service for our students. For example, by the date of the first lockdown all library and academic skills appointments were being offered online with extended hours. The physical libraries managed to open shortly after the end of the first lockdown (early August) in response to student demand. Also, the work involved in making extra resources available online was incredibly swift and the communications were clear and widely understood by the university community.

Alongside this (and continuing as we move into 2021) is the work to support the Research Excellence Framework, work to welcome and support our students as the disruption continues to their studies, and a variety of topics and themes to communicate with our academics on such as decolonising the curriculum.

It has been an exceptional (and exceptionally busy) year, and I'd like to take this opportunity to praise colleagues (and indeed colleagues at all member organisations) for making sure students received the best service they possibly could.

University of Keele

2020 has been a year like no other. The Coronavirus pandemic has dominated to such a degree that it is sometimes difficult to think back to pre-COVID priorities and to envisage what working life in libraries will be like when things return to something approaching normal, whatever and whenever that might be!

Here, as everywhere, the switch to digital was extremely rapid and it is to the credit of Library staff that they managed to adjust so well in such a short time frame. Workloads grew exponentially for some members of staff, for example dealing with the avalanche of access to 'free' e-resources and moving to offering entirely virtual support and teaching. For others, it was a difficult time dealing with the almost overnight loss of the physical side of our services. We were also required to furlough a significant number of staff for a period which was unsettling for many of those concerned.

Planning to reopen both our libraries started soon after lockdown though it took a long time to bring these plans to fruition. We became all too familiar with the demands of writing apparently endless risk assessments, sourcing PPE and redesigning our services in a COVID secure way.

Our Health Library reopened at the beginning of July courtesy of our NHS Library colleagues who were permitted back on site before Keele staff were, but from August a click & collect service was available from the Campus Library which has been supplemented since the start of semester by access to bookable study space.

The need to continually adapt our services has required great flexibility from staff in terms of changing their patterns and modes of working, often at very short notice. Physical use of the two libraries remains well short of what we expect in normal years, and both study spaces and opening hours are still significantly reduced. However, at present they seem to be able to meet demand from those students who are on campus and we will obviously look to increase access when this starts to grow again.

In light of the pandemic, it is easy to lose sight of other achievements in the last year. However, these have included successfully supporting our new Vet School, a joint venture with Harper Adams University; we have been collaborating successfully with our Library colleagues at HAU to do this.

We have also started to re-align our services more closely with the rest of University's Information Services Directorate, for example bringing together Library and IT front of house services under a single manager and introducing new services like self-service laptop loans. More integration is expected next year.

The Library continues to perform well in measures like the National Student Survey and, in spite of everything, it was pleasing to see some positive feedback about our services in a recent 'pulse' survey of Keele student opinion. This reflects the Library's strong and ongoing commitment to offering the best possible service, especially in these unprecedented and challenging times.

University of Leicester

In Autumn 2019 we launched our new integrated data and publications repository, powered by Figshare. This was a culmination of a 4-year project from procurement to final integration. Reception to the new platform has been fantastic with 2020 cumulative downloads hitting over 1.5m.

As part of the ongoing development of our Estate, the Library contributed to the development of a new e-sports lab based on the ground floor of the David Wilson Library. This was an opportunity to try out new design principles, working with Estates, IT and our Student e-sport society. Sadly, the pandemic has meant the room was only in use for a few months, but it will be re-launched when safe to do so.

There has also been some senior staffing changes. In April Caroline Taylor retired as University Librarian after over 6 years at Leicester. During her time at the University Caroline oversaw the development of a new division of Library, Learning and Information Services and played a leading role in sector bodies such as SCONUL. [xix] Following an internal recruitment process Neil Donohue was appointed Interim University Librarian, initially to 30th September 2020 but now extended until 31st July 2021. Neil's substantive post is Associate Director: Academic Engagement and Scholarly Communications.

University of Northampton

It is difficult to think past COVID-related issues so I'll get those out of the way first. We closed in March along with everyone else, but the transition was perhaps easier because of Northampton's previous embrace of Active Blended Learning. This applies to the library as much as anyone, so we transitioned to delivering all of our support including academic and information skills workshops, tutorials and drop-ins overnight. Take-up of, and attendance at, these were slightly higher than previous years with Academic Librarians and Learning Development Tutors reporting improved engagement in many cases.

Northampton's integrated Learning Hub meant that we don't have a separate library building and therefore the discussions about opening back-up were at campus-level rather than individual buildings or services. LLS was part of the University Critical Incident Group from the beginning and fully involved in all decisions about Waterside. We reopened a Click and Collect Service in early June and then open access to print and learning spaces at the start of August, although we have also retained Click and Collect in parallel. Front line staff who had been furloughed returned in August and operated in bubbles. PPE and other safety measures were coordinated centrally and staff trust in this and in the University has remained consistently high. Use of learning spaces on campus were controlled by removing furniture rather than booking and this has worked well with no overcrowding or negative feedback. The January lockdown has seen no changes to this service model.

We took full advantage of the excellent and timely publisher offers over the summer and have gone with a Kortext model for this academic year. We were given flexibility with our budgets but did not lobby for a one-off increase that would then be unsustainable going forward. So far, so good, although the workload in our academic services teams has been tremendous in delivering access to resources.

In other news, the Dean of Learning and Teaching left in August and the central Institute of Learning and Teaching was transferred into Library and Learning Services. This includes ownership of learning

and teaching strategies and polices and academic staff development. They were joined in December by Educational Linguistics who bring English Language support as well as a load of courses, including a couple of Masters. This all meant that, following an internal selection process, I was made Director of Library and Learning Services and now have a place on the University Management Team. Interesting times indeed…

University of Nottingham

The focus at Nottingham has, unsurprisingly, been upon 'fire-fighting' this year. However, while current circumstances have led to pausing some plans, we haven't stopped trying new things. The pandemic has meant thinking afresh about keeping Libraries' staff both informed and connected.

Information Sharing

As we transitioned into Lockdown in March, it was vital to ensure all staff were kept up to date. A new SharePoint site was launched which contained both department-wide and tailored, team-level information. For those staff who were furloughed, bespoke communications were developed to ensure they were appropriately informed of any changes, and training materials and return-to-work readiness materials were shared via the site as we approached re-opening.

As Director I sent weekly communications to all staff sharing updates as well as personal reflections, with the aim of creating a sense of togetherness and reassurance in what was a challenging time for everyone – whether they were working remotely or furloughed.

Sense of Community

To foster a sense of community, a Libraries Yammer Group was created for all staff, including those on furlough. In addition to general posts, staff from across the department contributed to a programme of regular activities, including a popular weekly book club, wellbeing activities, and lunchtime games. 'Libraries Shout outs', which are published on the SharePoint site, were established as a way to express thanks and highlight work going on across the department. All staff can 'shout out' anyone they felt was deserving of a bit of a spotlight, from doing a great job, to making a difference, or just being really kind and helpful. The initiative has been shared as best practice across the University.
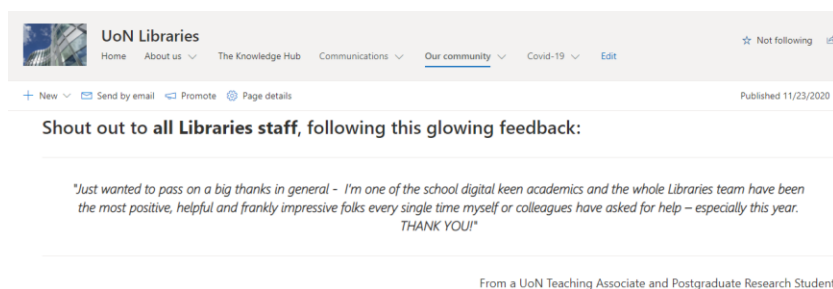

Figure 11: Example of 'Libraries Shout Out'

University of Warwick

One of the few good things about Christmas 2020 was that there were fewer 'round robin' messages in Christmas cards as everyone had (essentially) had the same year: toilet rolls, clapping, putting on weight, Joe Wicks, eating out to help out, staying in to help out…

Likewise, we have probably all had a similar 2020 at work, so rather than report on how often I was told 'you are on mute' or explain our dalliance with e-textbook providers, we'll focus on a few specific developments.

Like most of you we moved from being a 'normal' service, to being an 'online' service, to Click &

Collect, to being 'open'. All of this took a huge amount of planning and some exceptional work from the staff involved. Our students sometimes struggled with this new and evolving world, though, so we provided help with a flurry of Web pages, videos and blog posts. Some of the tools that proved most popular were:

- A video on how to stay safe in the post-COVID Library by one of our student Library Associates, Jemimah. [xx]
- Web pages and a blog post on using assistive software from home. [xxi] [xxii]
- A blog post to help students with group working virtually by Fay, another one of our Associates. This was soon being promoted by academic staff as this wasn't just a Library issue. [xxiii]
- Students also struggled with focusing on work, so we ran regular (and popular) 'shut up and write' sessions, such as our PG 'Write Here, Right Now Online'. [xxiv]
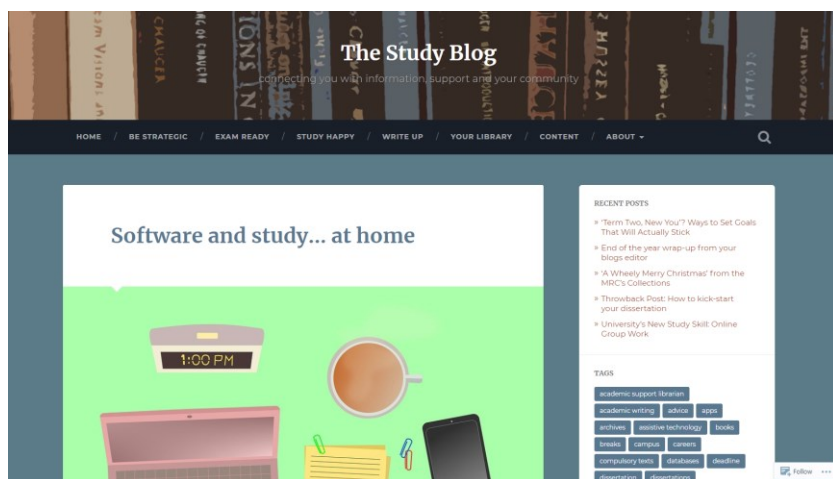

Figure 12: Warwick's Study Blog

Helping students with their wellbeing

Several years ago, the Library set up its Community Engagement teams to help students to grow a sense of belonging, develop skills sets and better manage their wellbeing. As you can imagine, 2020 was a busy year in this regard, with increased demand and the need to move services online.

One of the many developments undertaken by the team was LOL – the Library Online Lounge. This Teams forum provides Library Resources, an informal way to learn about what the Library can offer, and Events, including popular Mindfulness sessions and Cat Café events with Rolf the Campus Cat. The space also provides a Hangout Space where students can talk to staff and other students – a bit like a physical library.
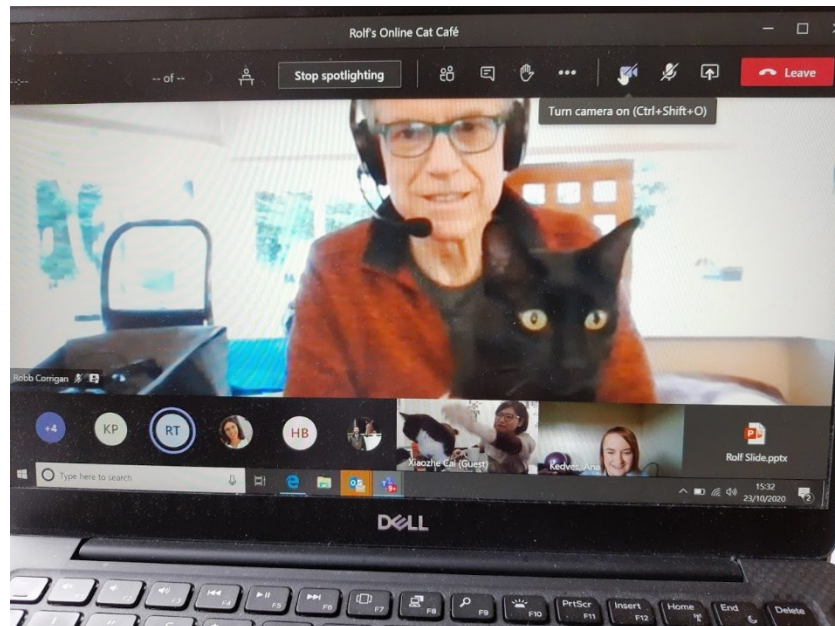

Figure 13: Rolf's Cat Café

Other channels include a Living Well channel and our student book club. The Library also hosted Reading for Resilience, an 'advent calendar' collection of readings up to Christmas, and some of our Study Happy student ambassadors shared tips on self-isolation. Check out the Library's Facebook and Instagram accounts for more.

Developing the physical as well as the virtual

Not all our developments have been virtual, though. We have continued with some physical developments. Our planned Main Library refurbishment and the development of a new store at Wellesbourne were both cruelly halted at the point of pressing the button. We are hopeful work will begin in earnest in 2021. Fortunately, works to re-site and expand our postgraduate facility – the PG Hub – were well underway before COVID called so we now have a lovely new facility for our PGTs and PGRs. [xxv]

Figure 14: Inside Warwick's PG Hub

Helping staff with their wellbeing

Like the rest of you, we have had more staff meetings this year to keep staff on top of developments and to check in on their wellbeing. One thing we have all missed is seeing colleagues from across the Library that we would bump into in the corridor or staff room. We therefore set up a Virtual Library Staff Room in Teams where staff could share home schooling tips, fitness advice and (possibly most popular of all) recipes through the Library Bake-Off channel.
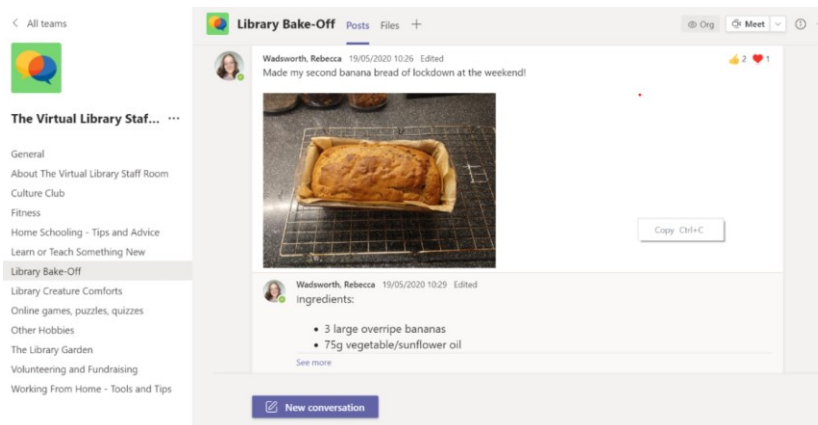

Figure 15: Warwick's 'Library Bake-Off' channel

Although some of the baking, garden make-overs and exercise regimes were impressive, this was nothing compared with the impressive work undertaken by all staff to work in new ways to develop new services to support our students and staff in these new circumstances.

University of Wolverhampton

In this strangest of years, we've placed supporting students as our top priority.

Library staff have learnt new skills, launched new services, and volunteered to support brand new initiatives across the institution. There has been a real collegial approach in overcoming the many challenges. Our staff tell us they feel much more connected working in a virtual environment and have adapted extremely well. It's true to say that despite the difficult times many opportunities have arisen.

Student support and engagement

All areas of the library have successfully adapted their face-to-face services for delivery online.

Over the year more than 9,000 students have been supported remotely via live chat, with 94% of queries receiving good or excellent satisfaction ratings. Hundreds of students have benefitted from the remote delivery of skills support, through 1:1 appointments; workshops and embedded sessions. The Skills Certificate, a new initiative currently being piloted, offers students the chance to work towards a "certificate of achievement" after successfully completing a series of our workshops. We've found that students especially appreciate the relative ease of access and flexibility that virtual delivery of support affords. Recorded sessions "enable reflection and absorption" (student quote) and we've seen increased engagement with evening workshops. Again, feedback has been extremely encouraging: over 96% of students surveyed felt their workshop and/or appointment was 'good' or 'very good', while 94% felt the support had positively impacted their grades.

> *'It's a fantastic opportunity to get assistance remotely. I'm glad that the university provides this support for us. I'll definitely join other workshops as well. Thank you very much!'* (Student quote)

The Library Customer Services Manager led a cross-institutional project to provide on-campus 'Welcome Points' for new and returning students. This brought together staff from the Library, Student Support & wellbeing, Digital Services and Faculty Student Services to provide a single-point of contact to support students. Library staff also lent support to monitoring an email inbox and creating an online knowledge base to support this shared service approach.

As restrictions eased, we were gradually able to re-open sites with a reduced service including a 'click and collect' scheme and bookable study spaces. We also led a small working group to oversee the safe re-opening of multiple informal COVID-secure study spaces across campus, working with colleagues in Estates & Facilities, Health & Safety, Digital Services and the SU.

Digital Developments

All the upheaval of the year has not deterred development. Improvements were made to enable easy access to resources including upgrading authentication systems for sign-sign on to databases, and the roll out of LibKey Nomad. We wrapped up the second phase of our Digital Library Project, rolling over Leganto reading lists for the first time and launching online ILLs. Live chat moved to Lib Answers, enabling superior triage of enquires and advanced FAQ functionality – an area we are keen to explore further in 2021.

One of our biggest accomplishments this year has been the introduction on a laptop loan scheme, offering long-term loans supporting students in digital poverty. We now have around 300 devices available for students to borrow, with plans to upscale further next semester.

University of Worcester

New Strategy

We were due to renew our Strategic Plan this year and decided to go ahead despite COVID, in order to align to new university, L&T and RKE plans. In addition, Worcestershire County Council published a new libraries plan, and we had the opportunity to review core management and other posts at The Hive to maximise what it can deliver for both partners in the context of the wider county library network.

The outcome is a strategic plan with 3 overarching themes: New Approaches; Making a difference; and Hive as Gateway. It has proved to be flexible enough to allow us to respond to COVID as well as setting goals for the next 5 years. The annual action points arising from the plan are combined with those from the County Library Service. Along with some new posts at The Hive, this is already helping us to drive increased collaboration and communication, opening up ways to extend the University's reach and impact not just in the Hive itself and the city of Worcester but throughout the region.

With the REF almost behind us, and some imminent retirements from the team, we're currently consulting on our research services offer which we're looking to expand over the next period.

Focus on EDI

The values that library staff identified as important to them during the strategic plan development revealed a widespread interest in EDI. When we collated the activity that is already going on, we were really surprised and excited at the diversity of initiatives across a number of teams within the library. We have developed an action plan to progress this work further.

New Webpages

A major project this year was the complete re-do of our webpages. The driver was meeting the accessibility requirements, but we took the opportunity to look at the architecture and content of the whole site. We've improved information for partner students and included an instance of Summon for them to avoid the problems of turnaways from content that isn't licensed for them. We've also implemented LibCal and LibSeats for improved appointments bookings, study space booking (invaluable in the present situation) and events management. Take a look at https://library.worc.ac.uk (the library strategy can be found under "About Us").

And Finally…

I couldn't finish without at least some reference to COVID. I'm sure much of our response and experiences have been similar to those of colleagues, informed as we all have been by each other via SCONUL and other routes. Initial anxieties that our requirements or regulations would be incompatible with the public library, and that we would be forced into differentiated services fortunately did not come to pass.

Like many, we successfully transitioned to online or blended induction and teaching and have not noticed a drop in engagement from course teams. Online chat went through the roof and I am sure our enquiries model will be different going forward.

Maintaining student engagement in projects and service design has been a challenge, but the team have found innovative ways to do this online. We were for instance given access to the advanced management information from our Talis system and used this and focus groups with both staff and students to increase our good practice guidelines. The creativity and competence of librarians never fails to amaze and impress me!

Looking Ahead

As we put 2020 happily behind us, we turn to 2021 with a fresh enthusiasm, fired up by the confidence we have found in ourselves, having risen to the challenges we faced last year in ways that would have been unthinkable a year ago.

The Mercian Collaboration – together with SCONUL, our national body – has been a beacon of support, encouragement and inspiration through these long months, and as we face the challenges and opportunities of 2021, I fully expect that the partnership it fosters will be at the heart of our reflection as we reshape our services for a post-pandemic world.

The success of our virtual meetings and networking events is likely to change the way we meet together and support one another for the foreseeable future – making it easier and more possible for us to engage more effectively with one another.

Chris Porter
Vice Chair (2019-2021),
Director of Library & Learning
Services, Newman University,
Birmingham

Our conference faces fascinating opportunities in reshaping the way we share our good practice and hard-won successes.

For all our members, but especially those with fewer staff, or located at a distance from the central areas of our region, our newfound ability to engage virtually promises to make active involvement much more convenient, bringing the collective wisdom, the energy and the inspiration we share more easily within reach of all of us.

Whatever our institution, and whatever our role or position, the Mercian Collaboration gives us a collective strength and a space to shape our thinking alongside supportive colleagues. We have interesting challenges ahead of us – as individual services and as a Collaboration – but we are stronger together and I, for one, am looking forward to making the journey with all of you!

The Mercian Collaboration is a regional library network based in the UK Midlands. Originally founded as the Midlands Academic Library Group in 2014, it currently comprises 23 academic libraries.

Contact

For more information, visit our website or contact the Development Officer.

Email:	mercianlibrariescollaboration@gmail.com
Tel:	+44 (0)7825-813393
Website:	merciancollaboration.org.uk
Twitter:	@MercianCollab
Mailing List:	mercian-collaboration@jiscmail.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

Endnotes & References

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https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/2017%20Mercian%20Annual%20Report.pdf.

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[v] Mercian, 2020. *The Mercian Collaboration: Homepage*. The Mercian Collaboration. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/.

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https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Strategic%20Plan%20Jan%202020%20v1.0.pdf.

[vii] Mercian, 2020. *Tangible Membership Value*.
https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MC%20Tangibles%20and%20Value%20-
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[viii] Regretfully, our official Treasurer, Mark Toole (NTU), was on a long-term leave of absence throughout much of 2020, and most tragically passed away early in 2021. As a result, the Officer has been acting up in their role until the appointment of the new Treasurer in April 2021.

[ix] In contrast, we hosted 14 visits and events in 2019, not including the conference. It is notable that figures for 2020 have been considerably bolstered by the Virtual Networking sessions organised and hosted by the Development Officer.

[x] Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Virtual Networking Pilot: Feedback*.
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[xi] Mercian, 2020. *Key Documents*. The Mercian Collaboration. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/key-documents

[xii] Mercian, 2020. *Activities & Groups*. The Mercian Collaboration. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/activities-groups.

[xiii] Mercian, 2020. *Subgroup Sponsors*. The Mercian Collaboration. https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/subgroup-sponsors.

[xiv] Editor's note: The MSDG events programme is organised by academic year, rather than calendar year.

[xv] Mortimer, J., & Johnson, G., 2019. *Buddying Scheme Trumpets 2 Years of Success Stories*.
https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/buddying-scheme-trumpets-2-years-success-stories.

[xvi] To 11/Nov/2020 4 people had placed buddy requests via the Collaboration's website

[xvii] There are two unaffiliated 'special interest groups' pertaining to research related activities operating in the Midlands region. The *Midlands Research Support Group* (https://lrsgmidlands.wordpress.com/) and a nascent *Preservation Group* (https://anoldhanddigital.wordpress.com/2020/07/30/introducing-midipres/). Neither group has any direct or corresponding relationship, beyond staff within member organisations being involved, with the Collaboration.

[xviii] Mercian, 2020. *Mercian Collaboration Member Institutions*. Mercian Collaboration.
https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/about-collaboration/member-institutions.

[xix] And notably, as founding chair of the Mercian Collaboration itself.

[xx] Warwick, 2021. *Covid-19 and Libraries Services*. University Library. https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/library-re-start.

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https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/using/accessibility/assistive-software/.

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https://studyblog.warwick.ac.uk/2020/05/14/software-and-study-at-home/.

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https://studyblog.warwick.ac.uk/2020/12/10/universitys-new-study-skill-online-group-work/.

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https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/pghub/skills/writeherewritenow.

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