Conference 2021: Delegate Feedback Analysis

Dr Gareth J Johnson, October 2021

Introduction

This report outlines an analysis of the feedback received from delegates to the 2021 Collaboration conference. It follows the earlier Outline Analysis & Delegate Demographics report,[i] presented to Board (Oct 2021). As usual, some suggested recommendations to Board and the Conference Group are included in terms of future event planning

Executive Summary

- Only 20 feedback forms were returned from a potential 100, despite fiscal incentives.
- Overall, the conference was perceived as a successful event and strong viable alternative to a physically hosted one by respondents.
- Most event elements were positively received, although networking clearly needed improvement.
- The moments of joy insert videos were unsuccessful in reaching an audience.
- Keynote and longer sessions were seen as of an appropriate length, while shorter papers may have been too brief.
- Ease of access and cost-free elements (no fee) of the event were seen as especially advantageous to delegates.
- Despite positive perceptions of the event, the loss of face-to-face engagement was a particular concern for many delegates.
- Sharing of experience and insight across the region, along with diversity of session contents were seen as being of particular value.
- While suggestions for improvements were made, beyond networking, there were no major areas of common concern.
- Recommendations for the Steering Group, Conference Group and to a degree other subgroups have been drawn from this feedback.

Introduction

Feedback forms were distributed to attending delegates (109) via email the week following the conference once data on attendees had been made available. As for previous physical conferences, a Google Form was used to capture this information (See **Appendix A: Survey Questions**). As the total attending delegates included the conference team (8 attendees) and the keynote speaker, the maximum return was anticipated as 100 responses. A prize drawer of vouchers for 10 delegates was offered by the Conference Group, with the agreement of the Steering Group.

A follow up email two weeks later was sent to all pre-booked delegates notifying them of the availability of session recordings, and reminding those who had attended to provide feedback. One request for an alternative format (paper) feedback form, due to inability to access the Google Forms version, was received but not returned. The feedback collector closed Wed 13th October, 4 weeks after distribution and 5 weeks after the conference had been hosted. A total of 20 delegates made responses, giving a return rate of 20%.[ii]

General Perceptions
Attendance Dates

*Figure 1: Conference Attendance Dates*

20 responses
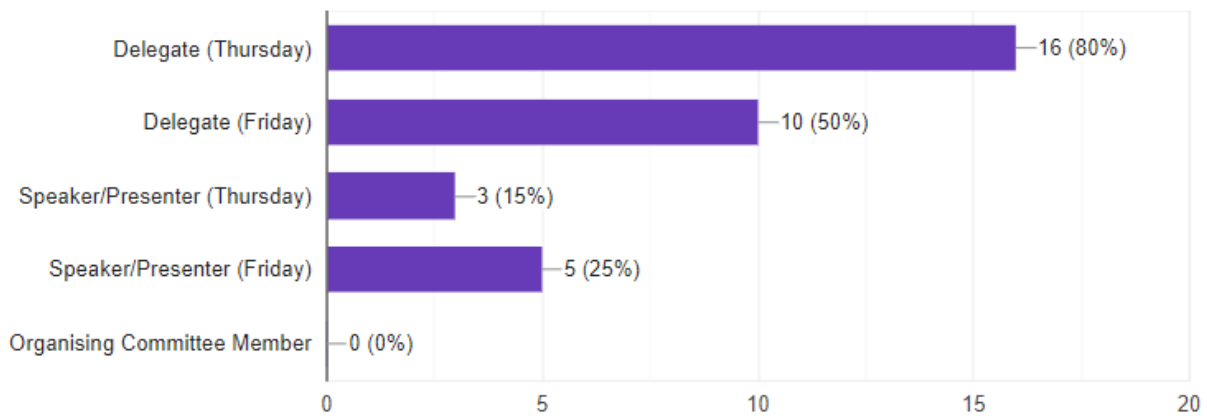
A slim majority of respondents attended the conference's opening day, over the second one. Additionally, it can be inferred from this information that no committee members offered feedback via this route.[iii]

Conference Aspects

Figure 2: Evaluation of Conference Aspects

Please rate the following conference aspects:
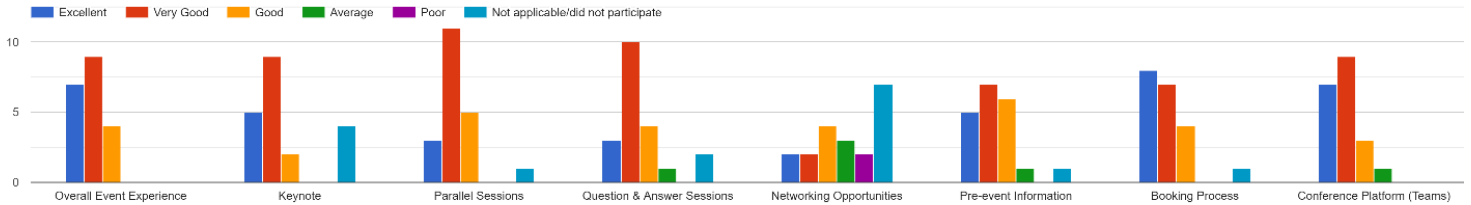
For the most part the various aspects of the conference were well received. There is the clear exception of the networking opportunities which were rated average or poor by 25% of respondents, with only 20% perceiving them as excellent or very good. Conversely, the best received elements were the conference platform (MC Teams) and event overall rating which were rated excellent or very good by 80% of respondents.

Session Duration

Figure 3: Conference Session Length Appreciation

How did you find the length of the various conference sessions
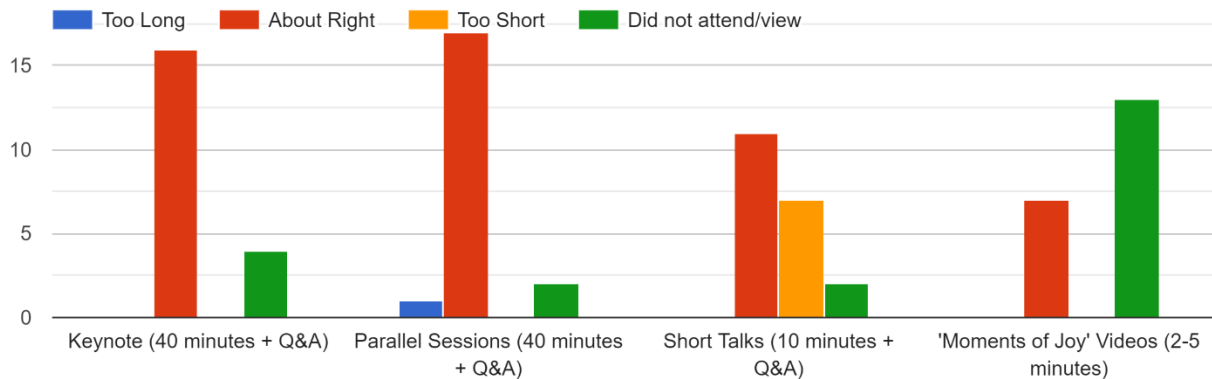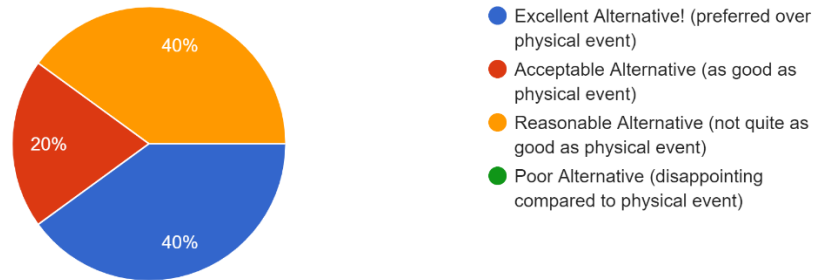

Keynote and the longer parallel sessions were overwhelmingly received as being at a suitable duration (80% & 85% respectively), although for the 10 minute papers, there is a some desire (35%) for lengthening them to a degree. Noting comments elsewhere, the *moments of joy* short videos, were largely not accessed by respondents (65%).

Conference Experiences

Online Experience

Figure 4: Online Format Experience

How did you find the experience of the online format this year, compared to a physical event?
20 responses

- 🔵 Excellent Alternative! (preferred over physical event)
- 🔴 Acceptable Alternative (as good as physical event)
- 🟠 Reasonable Alternative (not quite as good as physical event)
- 🟢 Poor Alternative (disappointing compared to physical event)

As suggested above (see Figure 2) the online format and platform was well received by participants, with 60% considering it as good as or better than a physical event. None of the respondents found it to be a disappointment (poor alternative), which is gratifying to note.

Table 1: Rationale for Overall Experience Vote

	Aspect	Respondents
Positives	Ease of access/no travel	9 (45%)
	Cost free (travel, delegate fees, expenses etc)	4 (20%)
	Well organised/hosted/facilitated	4 (20%)
	Good alternative to/benefits over physical event	2 (10%)
	Split into two-half day events	2 (10%)
	No institutional delegate number limits	1 (5%)
Negatives	Loss of face-to-face networking & interaction	11 (55%)
	Ability to be 'away' from home office or library/be fully present	3 (15%)
	Engagement with/by speaker	2 (10%)
	Lack of freebies/stalls/supplier engagement	1 (5%)

Respondents were also asked to quantify the rationale behind their rating of the online experience.[iv] The ease of access, event facilitation and lack of associated attendance costs came in for particular positive attention. Conversely, and resonating with comments elsewhere, the loss of physical networking was the overwhelmingly (45%) most adverse element of the online experience.

Most Valued Element

A non-mandatory question asked delegates to reflect on which aspects of the conference had been the most valuable or useful for them.[v]

Table 2: Most Valued Conference Element

Aspect	Respondents
Experiences shared and/or exchange of practice	8 (40%)
Specific individual sessions or speakers	5 (25%)
Range/diversity of topics and themes addressed	4 (20%)
Accessibility and facilities of the online format	3 (15%)
Overall event experience was valued	2 (10%)
Networking and interaction with regional colleagues	2 (10%)

The opportunity to hear from speakers, sharing their experiences at other institutions was most valued by attendees, although the diversity of topics and online format also came in for some praise. Networking, though noted elsewhere as being less effective online, was still noted as the most valuable element for some delegates, underscoring its importance as an event component.

Areas for Improvement

Respondents were asked to highlight any areas of the event which would benefit from re-examination at a future conferences.[vi]

Aspect	Respondents
Networking opportunities/time	3 (15%)
N/a – event met expectations	3 (15%)
Programme format/event navigation clarity	3 (15%)
Revision to focus/theme of papers/speakers[vii]	3 (15%)
Event format (hybrid and/or physical event desired)	2 (10%)
Extension of shorter session timeslots	2 (10%)
Space/time for discussion and questions	2 (10%)
Change platform from MS Teams	1 (5%)
Date/calendar scheduling of conference	1 (5%)
Integration of pre-recorded content	1 (5%)

As expected from previous years, the feedback for improvements was varied, and resonated in some areas with comments elsewhere. Given no single item has more than a small proportion of the respondents requesting improvements, no overwhelming weak element is identifiable.

Favourite Speaker/Session

Respondents were asked to indicate if they had attended a standout or especially enjoyable session (**Table** 3), although an answer was not required. Notably a number selected the keynote session, with one respondent wishing it had been a longer contribution.

Table 3: Favourite Conference Session

Session	Speakers	Title	Votes

2A	Scott Chesworth	Escape [to] the Library Goes Digital	5*
Keynote	Emma Cragg	Coach yourself through challenge and change	4
5A	Helen Curtis & Claire Townsend	Any other duties: personal perspectives from the last service standing	3
No preference	N/a	N/a	2
1A	Gillian Siddal & Hannah Woods	Blurring boundaries: supporting our students from home	1
2B3	Alison Ashmore & Beth Montague-Hellen	Covid-19, digital technology and sharing research data – the perfect storm?	1
3A	Ruth Curtis, Jane Freeman, Catherine Shipley & Ella Wharton	Creating a virtual and screen-to-screen service to replace face-to-face information skills teaching during COVID times and beyond.	1
3B1	Dave Palmer	"You're always bringing your work home with you!' Running the Enquiry Service from home.	1*

*Indicates commenter highlighted a vote for their own contribution

Future Considerations
Future Themes/Topics
There were a limited number of suggestions for future event themes which included:

- Data literacy and learning analytics
- Digital collaboration and communication with students, staff and colleagues
- Research support including open access, REF, policy and RDM
- Using LMS functionality to improve workflows

Prize Draw and Committee
Finally, respondents were also asked if they wished to be:

- Entered into the prize draw for vouchers   (14)
- Considered for conference committee membership   (0)
- Added to the general collaboration mailing list   (9)

Comments
The low return levels on the feedback are both extremely disappointing, and additionally render the feedback of limited qualitative authenticity. However, the comments received remain of modest interest and should be of benefit to the wash-up and review activities of the Conference Group.

Incentivisation failed to create a greater level of completed feedback forms, with the return rate half the lowest previously recorded (~43%) for physical conferences events. Consequently, the investment of a significant portion of Collaboration funds to support this element of the conference offered a poor return.

Despite trepidations that shifting to an online format might be off-putting, the conference's overall perception by delegates was a positive one with many elements being warmly received. The only marked exception to this were aspects of the networking facilities and opportunities offered. Interestingly this perception resonates with previous physical conference feedback where networking time was often noted as a much-valued aspect, which would benefit from enhancement.[viii] Perhaps in the transition to

online, networking was squeezed from the programme at the expense of content time, and hence arrangements should be revisited for 2022, no matter the chosen platform or format.

Longer sessions and keynote were seen as suitable, although shorter sessions received support for some mild lengthening, perhaps up to the 15 minute mark to provide a more space for development of themes presented.[ix] The moments of joy insert videos appear not to have been viewed or received much attention. While they are available post-event on the Collaboration's site,[x] their positioning and visibility in the programme was perhaps unsuitable. No respondents commented on them directly, which makes it difficult to assess their reception in any depth, but from this lack of commentary it can be inferred they were not deployed in a sufficiently visible way within the 2021 event format. More thought ahead of any future use of short-insert media alongside core content is clearly required.

The perceptions of the online format were highly commendable, with delegates being able to identify many tangible and intangible benefits. However, as discussed above networking remained a highly charged flaw in the event, and underscoring the need to revisit for future online or hybrid events.

Given the aims of the Collaboration conference, the elements coming in for the most praise are those integral to its operations, underscore the need, desire and value of such a diverse event for the member library staff. It also, by extension, highlights the value added to the membership through subgroup events. Conversely, in terms of areas for improvement clearly there are some lessons to be learned, but all the comments were made in the spirit of constructive criticism.

It is disappointing to note despite their praise for the conference, none of the respondents felt willing to join the future organisation committee.

Finally, given the low return rate of feedback forms, some additional survey or audience research with Collaboration member library staff may be invaluable in developing, exploring, countering or supporting the conclusions reached from this feedback.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations suggested from this feedback, largely for consideration by the Conference Group and its sponsor, but also Steering Group in its overall role of directing the Collaboration's activities. Conference Team members are invited to draw their own lessons from the full text of the feedback contained in the appendices.

- Future incentivisation should be limited to more modest levels.
- More networking time and opportunities should be baked into future conference schedules.
- Short paper duration should be revisited and potentially lengthened at future events.
- Future short insert videos (moments of joy) should be discontinued or extensively reconsidered as programme elements.
- All subgroups should reflect on the experiences and themes highlighted in the feedback and consider incorporating them into their own events and outreach activities.
- All current and incoming Conference Group members should read and reflect on this and the previous evaluative report to shape their event planning practice.
- A wider member survey to seek clarity on suitability of future elements could be considered to clarify areas of uncertainty, desire and demand among the broader Collaboration membership (including event non-attendees).

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Conference Group, the author notes thanks to all delegates who took the time to return comments and perceptions on this event.

Appendices & Data

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Based on the format of the previous conference (2019) feedback, and updated to reflect the online nature of the event, questions were asked as follows.

Mercian Collaboration : Conference 2021 Feedback

This is the evaluation and feedback form for attendees at the 9-10th September online conference. Thanks for attending! Feedback will help us shape our plans for future events. Questions marked * are required answers

How did you attend the conference? (select all options that apply) *

- Delegate (Thursday)
- Delegate (Friday)
- Speaker/Presenter (Thursday)
- Speaker/Presenter (Friday)
- Organising Committee Member

Please rate the following conference aspects? (check/mark one box per row) *

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	N/a, or did not participate
Overall Event Experience						
Keynote						
Parallel Sessions						
Question & Answer Sessions						
Networking Opportunities						
Pre-Event Information						
Booking Process						
Conference Platform (Teams)						

How did you find the length of the various conference sessions? (check one box per row) *

	Too Long	About Right	Too Short	Did Not Attend/View
Keynote (40 min +Q&A)				
Parallel Sessions (40 min + Q&A)				
Short Talks (10 min + Q&A)				
Moments of Joy videos (2-5 min)				

How did you find the experience of the online format this year, compared to a physical event? * (highlight one option)

- Excellent Alternative! (preferred over physical)
- Acceptable Alternative (as good as physical event)
- Reasonable Alternative (not quite as good as physical event)
- Poor Alternative (disappointing compared to a physical event)

Why did you give the answer above?

Conference Experience

What was the most useful/exciting/valuable aspect, and why? *

What elements would you like us to improve or revise at a future event, and why? *

Who/what was your favourite speaker/session at the conference?

Do you have any suggestions or themes for future conferences or events?

Prize Drawer & Committee

I would be interested in (highlight all that apply):

- Entering the feedback prize draw to win one of a number of vouchers
- Joining the conference planning group to help plan, organise and run the 2022 conference
- Joining the Mercian Collaboration general email distribution list

If you ticked any of the above options, please leave your full name here. We will only use your details as indicated above.

Thank you for your comments & attending the 2021 Mercian Collaboration conference!

Appendix B: Online Experience Comments

- Easier to get to
- Easy to access, free and no institutional limit on attendees.
- I have never attended the Mercian Conference before - having it online enabled this.
- I haven't attended in previous years but it seemed as if it were working as well as a physical event would
- I like the opportunities to network with others in a face to face setting. I also like the opportunity to be 'away' from the office/desk to really focus on the CPD opportunity.
- I really missed the networking and informal conversations that are so much easier at a physical event
- I think the conference worked really well on teams and, of course, being online has the added benefit of not having to travel. That said I still do like seeing people face to face as well! (Both have their pros and their cons)
- It can be a hassle trying to get approval for travel costs (which may not always be forthcoming). A virtual event is a lot easier to attend.
- It was very good as an online conference as it was very well organised and structured. Worked well over two mornings to avoid digital fatigue and afternoon slump. Would still prefer a physical event as a speaker I missed not being able to see and really engage with everyone in the session in the same way. It's a good medium for content but less so for connection.
- It's a bit too easy with an online event to get side tracked by on site pressures which is why I ended up not attending much for which I sincerely apologise!
- It's personal preference, I know, but I genuinely just prefer a f2f event - it's too easy to get distracted by other work when online, and I do less networking
- More accessible as no travelling costs/time
- Networking is different and difficult in a group Teams meeting as you are conscious of either hogging the chat or feeling as though you're intruding on someone else's. It was good to break the conference into two half days, though. Full days can be a bit exhausting, especially online ones. It was also really good not to have to travel to the event and enjoy it from the comfort of my living room!
- Not the same opportunities for networking with colleagues
- Physical event allows for better networking, and nicer to see actually see people in person
- so much easier to attend- not always possible for me to do the physical ones.
- **The conference was great, but it is not quite the same as meeting in person with the networking opportunities, the freebies, supplier stands etc.**
- There is no real way to replicate the networking online - not a comment on Mercian, I've found that for every online conference over the past couple of years. Serendipity just isn't possible!
- This was a tricky one - for listening/interacting with the speakers, I believe online if preferable to physical events. I could easily follow the presentations without worrying about distance or distracting noise. However, while the opportunity to talk to other attendees was present in the 'main room' and before the start of individual sessions, I felt that was lacking to physical conferences and networking opportunities suffered.
- Well done to the BGU Hallford-Busby for their support with using teams!

Appendix C: Most Valued Element

- Ease of access and range of sessions
- Generally just seeing the conference happen this year and how much work the conference team put in. I also think the theme was perfect and allowed some much needed reflection on the past year.
- Having a mix of sessions of sessions to choose from
- hearing from other institutions the positives they gained as gives ideas for service improvement
- Hearing other people's experiences and lessons learned.

- Hearing what is going on at other unis
- I found Emma's activities useful - if anything personally as much as professionally
- I loved presenting and being able to use the chatbox to take questions as it was much easier than the hand raising function etc.
- I really enjoyed the session from the University of Nottingham as I'm looking into something similar. Having the chance to chat and discuss best practice is always welcome.
- It was good to see the range of different sessions and experiences, though I was only able to attend the first morning of the conference.
- Learning more about best practice from other librarians
- Library communication session from Birmingham - some practical elements here we may be able to implement in our own comms practice
- Listening to colleagues
- Listening to the talks- I found the short talk on research data management really useful as it relates directly to my work.
- Really good to hear from other people share their experiences about what they have been doing over the last 1-2 years. Lots of ideas we can try here.
- Really interesting hearing how libraries and staff adapted to the change in situation necessitated by Covid
- The ability to dip in and out at own pace; meant the day was easier to plan.
- The conference really captured the mood of academic libraries in the Midlands right now. I enjoyed the chance to see and chat with Midlands colleagues particularly.
- The escape room! An excellent demonstration, wonderful hands on activity as well as a considered talk about the transition from physical to digital.
- to hear what others have been doing

Appendix D: Areas for Improvement
- Back together physically so we can complain about the refreshments next year ;-)
- Blend of physical/online - both suit different people differently
- For online sessions - make it clearer which 'room' for which session.
- I didn't find it easy to access the recorded parallel sessions and it might've been easier to just make the recorded sessions accessible outside of the conference schedule.
- I know it defeats the point but longer short talks! Maybe 15 minutes- I would have loved to have heard a bit more about some of them
- I prefer to use zoom over teams - I find some of the aspects of Teams very limiting
- I think more opportunities for networking would have been good, but I understand that this is difficult to replicate in an online environment
- If doing online again might be good to have a social element with lower barrier to entry. I was happy to pop into a room and start talking, but I knew a lot of faces.
- It would be good if there was more of a focus on research support in libraries- most of the talks related to customer service so weren't directly relevant to me.
- Maybe make the 10 minute sessions a bit longer, I think they may have been a little bit too short and it may have been better to have fewer speakers at this session go into more detail
- n/a
- N/A, I didn't find anything lacking in my experience at this conference
- Not make it all about front line staff. As back office (acquisitions/cataloguing etc) there was not a huge amount that was directly relevant. Throwing in a couple of talks from back office staff would be great
- nothing
- Slightly more time for the Q and A on the short sessions to do them justice.

- Some form of general chat - possibly longer at the end of sessions for comment/discussion on themes.
- The programme. It looked really good, but the hyperlinks weren't always available/visible. It was also difficult to read that there were two speakers in parallel. A lot of other conferences have the 'streams' vertically, so you can see one column for choice A and another for B. Other online conferences have had a GoogleDoc with links that mean you have only one place to maintain links.
- The sessions were very much geared more to teaching and learning teams I thought. I think continuing to try and encourage all staff to speak would be good but I know from my own institution that there is some reluctance there so I think this is a near impossible one to solve! My only other comment that for us this was the week before term started so I really struggled to attend and another staff member apologised that he has found himself in the same position.
- To facilitate more opportunities for online networking.
- Would have been useful to have the programme a bit earlier as I only really had time to attend one day but had to book for both initially as the schedule was not yet available.

Endnotes

[i] Johnson, G.J., 2021. Outline Analysis & Delegate Demographics.

[ii] That is 20/100 anticipated, as conference team members and the keynote speaker were not expected to return feedback.

[iii] Assuming an honest self-representation!

[iv] See **Appendix B: Online Experience Comments** for raw data. For this and the next two sections I've deployed a light qualitative content analysis framework to summarise the themes for clarity. Readers are invited to read the raw comments to inform their own interpretation.

[v] See **Appendix C: Most Valued Element** for raw data.

[vi] See **Appendix D: Areas for Improvement** for raw data.

[vii] Notably those asking for changes to session themes/focus were generally those who viewed the event as not catering to their specific area of interest e.g. some saw it as customer service biased, while others as more focussed on professional service activities. Likely perceptions varied by the days attended and parallel sessions chosen.

[viii] I'd especially draw readers to the 2017 evaluation Johnson, G.J., 2017. Evaluation Report: Mercian Collaboration Conference 2017 'In Libraries We Trust', pp. 3.

[ix] The author, as a 2021 conference short session speaker would agree – 10 minutes was a challengingly short period of time for a session.

[x] See https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/conference-2021/recordings