



Conference Group Member Survey 2021

Dr Gareth J Johnson, Collaboration Officer

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Executive Summary

A survey was distributed to library staff at member organisations sought input and opinions on Collaboration conference planning, with, 44 respondents during a five-week period. The results indicate half of the respondents had never attended a Collaboration conference, offering an opportunity to explore the disengaged potential delegate community. In terms of rationalising non-attendance, the date for specific individuals remains the biggest problem. Differences in what attracts speakers or delegates were also exposed, with the former more drawn by themes and audience and the latter by specific content, sessions or speakers. In terms of the format while online events remain the least popular option, hybrid ones are strongly supported as alternatives to the purely physical event. Keynote speakers drawn from the HE sector remain the most desirable figures for academic library staff audiences to hear from during Collaboration conference events. Finally, after discussing the findings in some depth, a number of recommendations are made within this report, to shape the planning for the Collaboration's conferences in 2022, 2023 and beyond.

Overview

This document provides information and insight arising from the membership survey conducted online Nov-Dec 2021, by the Development Officer. It was commissioned on behalf of the Conference Group and was designed to inform their future event planning activities. The report will also go to Steering Group and Board for information but does not form part of their operational processes.

Question design emerged from discussions at the Conference Group wash-up meeting ([22nd October 2021](#)), and through later exchanges between the Group Chair and Officer. Google Forms was used to host the survey, although a paper version was also set-up to provide a reasonable alternative for anyone unable to access the online version. The survey link was distributed via internal mailing lists, including the Directors and general Collaboration lists with recipients encouraged to cascade to their colleagues. It was also promoted on twitter and the Collaboration websiteⁱ, although to minimise access by non-Collaboration members, no direct access link was included.

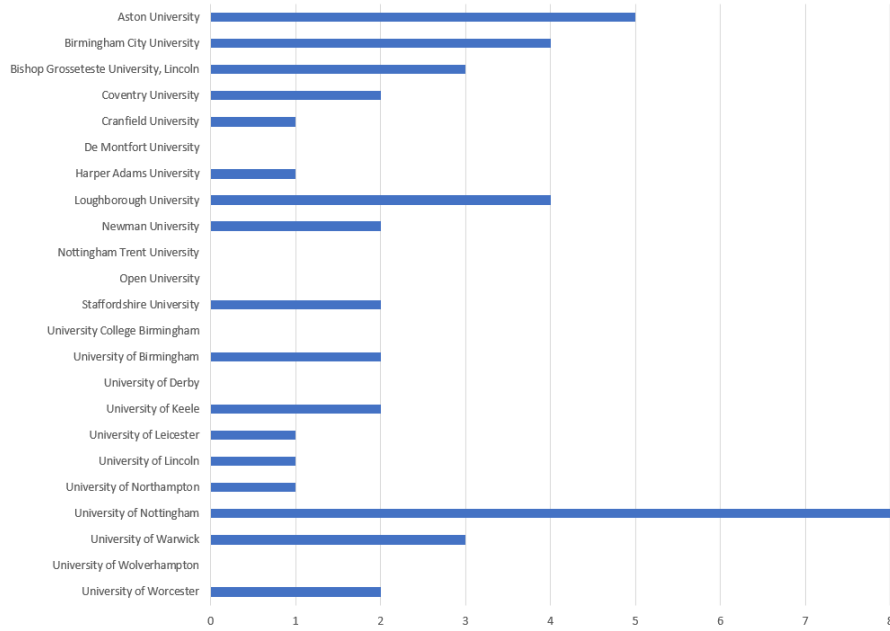
In total 44 responses were received during the five-week period the survey was live.ⁱⁱ A light but robust data analysis was conducted on the outputs, with results summarised in the following sections. Where free text answers were obtained (see **Appendix A**), a simple qualitative content method was deployed. Deeper investigations with the dataset are possible but are currently outside the scope of available time for the author.

Respondent Information

Institutions Represented in Data

From the 44 respondents (**Figure 1**), the highest number were seen to come from Nottingham (8). No responses were seen from DMU, NTU, OU, UCB, Derby or Wolverhampton. However, responses were both received from staff spread across the region and as well as based at different institutional configurations to offer sufficient validity to the dataset. However, on average, as only a few individuals engaged at each institution these results and this analysis are presented as *indicative* only.

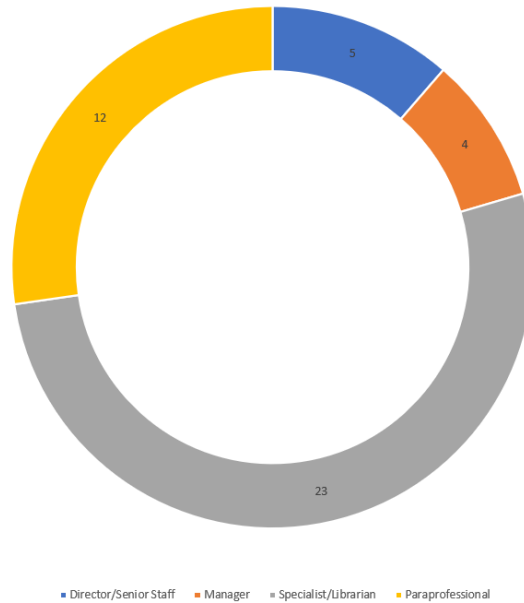
Figure 1: Responses from Member Institutions



Respondent Job Roles

Comparable with the delegates attending the most recent conferenceⁱⁱⁱ, most respondents came from the professional grades (Figure 2). However, paraprofessional grade respondents still comprised 27% of all respondents.

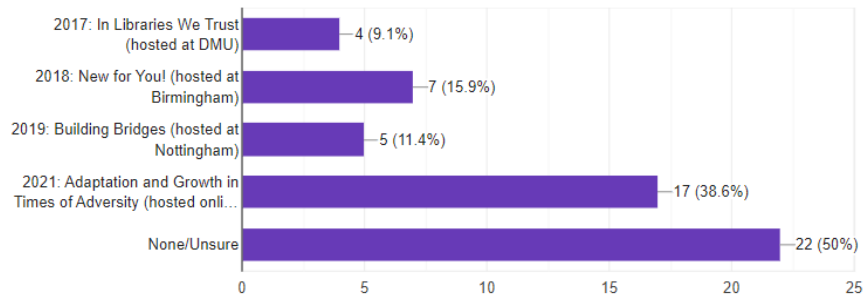
Figure 2: Seniority & Role



Prior Conference Attendance

While some respondents had attended a previous conference (50%), an equal number had not – or were unable to recall attending (50%) an event (**Figure 3**). Notably, where an event had been attended it was most often the most recent one (2021), with the smallest number of respondents having attended the first Collaboration conference.

Figure 3: Previous Conference Attendance

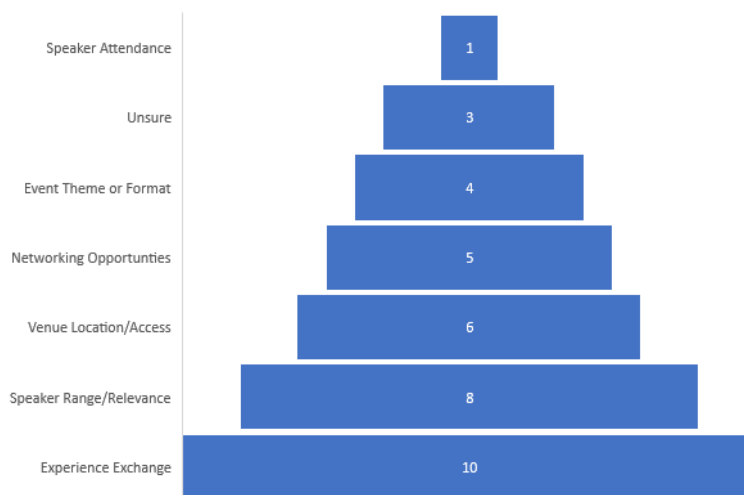


Conference Engagement

Attractive Elements

Where respondents had previously attended a Conference, they were asked to identify what event elements had drawn them to attend (**Figure 4**). The most attractive elements were identified as the chance to exchange experience with colleagues, alongside the range of speakers and talks on offer. To a slightly lesser degree the accessibility and venue location, along with networking opportunities were also valued by past conference attendees.

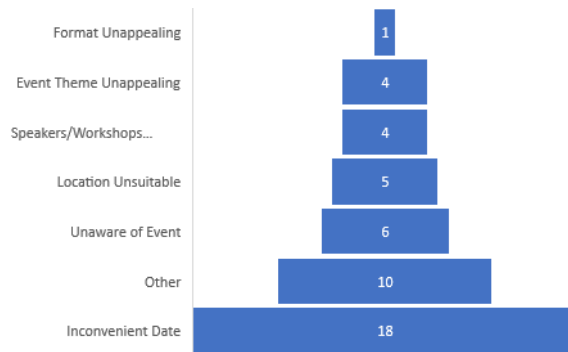
Figure 4: Attendance Attractive Elements



Attendance Barriers

In contrast, where respondents had not attended a previous event, they were asked to indicate their reasons, selecting as many options as were relevant (**Figure 5**). The biggest barriers to attendance were suggested as the event date, any awareness that the conference was being held and the chosen venue. Other suggestions included staff only recently employed at MC HEIs (6), workloads and staff availability (3) and event relevance to role (1).

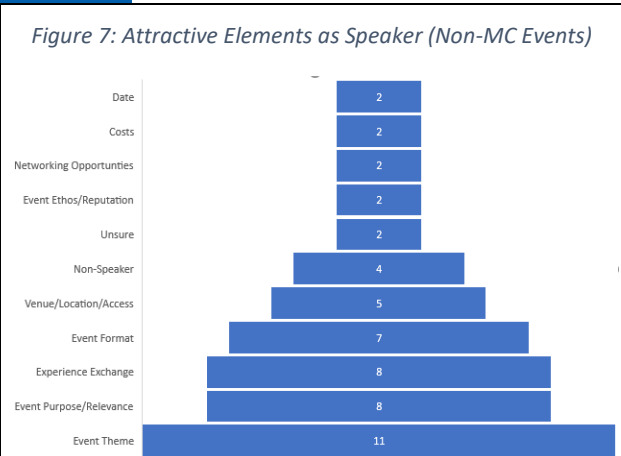
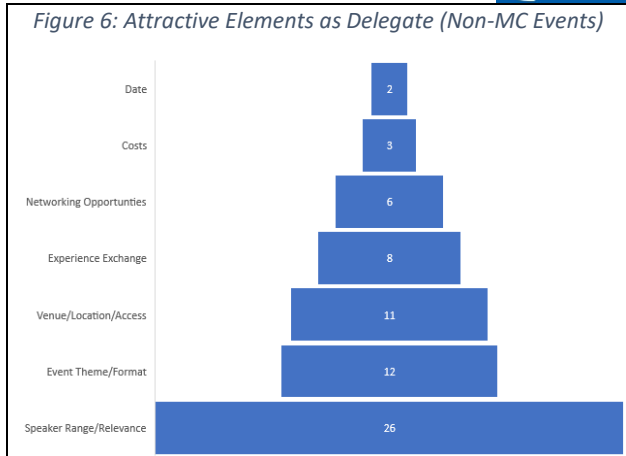
Figure 5: Reasons for Non-Attendance



Non-Collaboration Event Attraction

Respondents were asked to contrast their prior answers with the elements at other events which were seen to attract their attendance, as speakers or delegates. Overwhelmingly, delegates are attracted to attend (**Figure 6**) due to the range of speakers and talks on offer (26), and how relevant they were to their roles or professional interests. While the theme, format (12), location (11)^{iv}, networking and experience exchange opportunities (8) were important to some, this was less frequently reported. Costs and event dates were only a concern to very few respondents (2)

For most speakers (**Figure 7**) the overall event theme and purpose, along with the audiences they could exchange experience with were most frequently key attractors.^v However, the event format^{vi} (7) and ease of access in terms of attendance and registering their desire to talk (5) were also of reasonable importance. Notably some respondents (4) indicated they were unwilling, or unable due to lack of capacity, to engage as speakers. Interestingly, 2 respondents extolled the importance of a ‘friendly atmosphere’ or ‘supportive environment’ at an event, as a rationale for their future attendance.

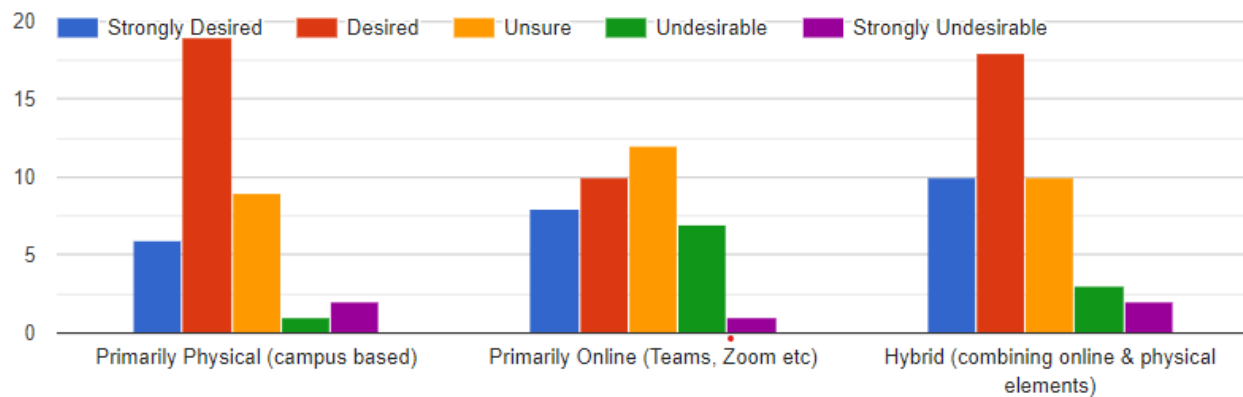


Future Formats

Format

Respondents were asked to express their degree of interest in future event formats being hosted physically (campus), online (Teams, Zoom etc) or a mix of the two (**Figure 8**). From this study 68% desired physical events, 47% online and 79% hybrid. Conversely, 21% found online and 8% saw physical or hybrid events as undesirable, respectively. As such, online events were the least preferred option^{vii}.

Figure 8: Future Conference Format Desirability



Some respondents praised online conferences for their lack of required travel to access, and the opportunities this offered in attending a greater number of events. The delivery of some events were even noted as being ‘easier and better online’ and permitting an enhanced ‘inclusivity’ for delegates alongside reduced or negligible costs to access. However, others cautioned explaining how networking was more effectively conducted in a physical environment or reporting poor online networking experiences. Serendipitous encounters or experiences were also seen as hard to replicate online.

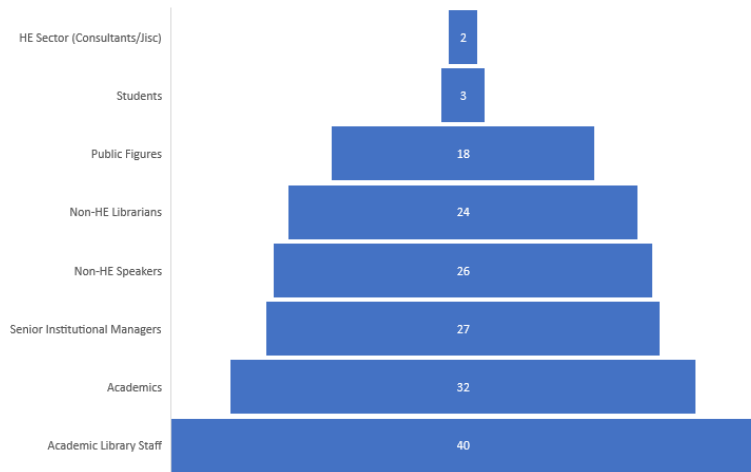
Fatigue from online engagement within their roles and professional development activities was also cited as one reason for the diminished desirability of the digital delivery format. Additionally, given the ongoing pandemic and future uncertainties a number of respondents noted despite a desire to return to physical events, for personal health and safety reasons a continued preference for continued engagement at a distance. While there was strong support for a hybrid mode of delivery, others cautioned in comments

how 'hybrid [delivery] doesn't work well' or how they 'appeal to different audiences' in contrast to other delivery routes.^{viii}

Keynote Speakers

Respondents were asked to indicate from a list, the kinds of keynote speaker they saw as most desirable at future conferences (**Figure 9**)^{ix}. Academic library staff (93%) and academics (74%) were the most popular, with senior institutional managers (63%), non-HE sector speakers (60%) and non-HE librarians (52%) close behind. There was some support for public figures (42%) such as people in the media, celebrities or politics, and very limited interest in students (7%) or other HE sector speakers (5%).

Figure 9: Keynote Speaker - Sectors of Origin Preference

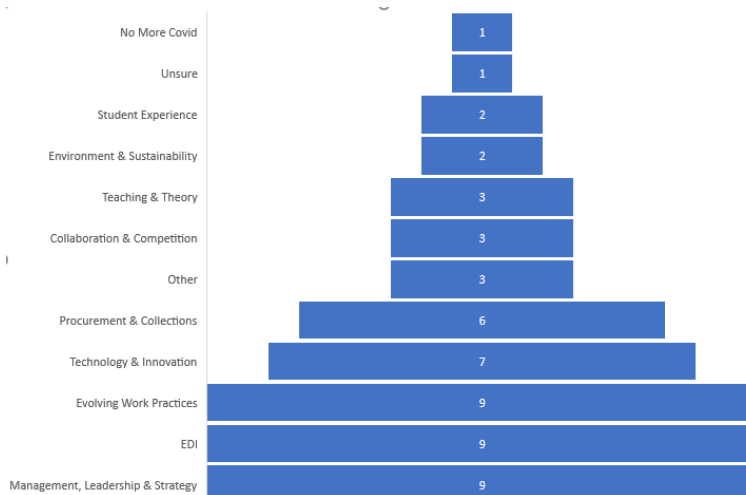


Future Themes

Finally, respondents were asked to provide an indication to the principal theme a future Collaboration conference should adopt (**Figure 10**). This was another free text response. Three key themes were equally popular with EDI, Management, Leadership and Strategy, along with Evolving Work Practices (9) topping the poll. Technology and Innovation (7) alongside Procurement & Collections (6) received reasonable support.

Under the other headings respondents suggested customer services, effective liaison and researcher support, and library refurbishments as specific topics. Notably, one respondent also called for 'no more COVID' themed events; perhaps understandable given their proliferation elsewhere in the past two years.

Figure 10: Future Conference Theme Preferences



Discussion

While not all member institutions were represented in the data, the survey received sufficiently broad engagement across the Collaboration to provide an indicative analysis; although as always more input would always be desirable. As a route to achieving a modicum of insight to inform the Conference Group though, it was sufficiently robust, although as noted below and in the comments, additional investigations might shed further light on some areas. It was especially interesting at least half of respondents had not knowingly attended a previous conference. Consequently, this means this survey has obtained information which would not normally be forthcoming from past-attendee feedback, increasing the value of its insight. For maximum contextualisation this report should therefore be read in conjunction with the feedback analysis of previous conferences.

The Collaboration conference has always striven to be an event which brings together library staff from across the region to exchange experience, alongside listening to talks of general relevance and interest. In this regard, those who had attended clearly valued these elements in terms of securing their attendance. However, the overall theme seemed to have a diminished attraction for delegates in contrast to the actual range of content and speakers available. Future marketing should therefore almost certainly seek to emphasise therefore the content first and foremost as a rationale to attend. This perception was strongly supported in responses concerned with what attracts delegates to other conference events. However, aspects like the theme, venue, accessibility, networking and the chance to engage with other library staff should not be entirely disregarded, as clearly for many delegates they are key attractants.

Conversely, those unable to attend past Collaboration conferences were most frequently hampered by a specific date being problematic. Although it is clear some unawareness of the event was also present, suggesting marketing efforts and communication channels from the Collaboration to member staff remain frustratingly imperfect. From this, it can be inferred, as has been the previous practice of the Conference Group, that great care should be taken in terms of selecting a date suitable to as many member organisations as possible. Nevertheless, in the longer term, from 2023 onwards, serious consideration should be made towards shifting the date to better accommodate these considerations.^x

Given the likelihood it would address a tiny number of respondents in the broader dataset, the survey did not specifically ask what attracted speakers to seek attendance. However, extrapolating from the broader question concerned with speakers at other events, it is clear the theme and relevance to potential speakers is paramount. Thus, in contrast with attracting delegates, speakers need to feel comfortable that they will be able to justify the time and commitment in preparing their talk, to be presented at an event which resonates closely with their interests. Interestingly, more than one respondent noted a desire for a more detailed breakdown of what topics might be suitable for event presentation, rather than a general 'theme' or 'talk about anything relevant'. Hence, marketing to this group must be crafted to meet suitably different information and emotional resonances than delegates.

While the survey was conducted in the midst of a lengthy high-pandemic working period, it was promising to see that 'online fatigue' had not entirely worn-down respondents wish to engage in this way. However, it was notable a sizable minority feel online conferences to be a far less desirable format, meaning if they are to be used more effort needs to be taken to overcome the shortcomings experienced at 2021's event^{xi}. However, despite some trepidations there is strong support for a hybrid event model for the future, even more than the physical, which for 2023 onward is something the Conference Group should strongly consider adopting.^{xii}

In terms of the origin of desirable keynote speakers strong support existed for academic library staff, within or outside the region, along with slightly lower levels of support for other key figures within the regional or national HE sector. In contrast to earlier efforts in 2021 to attract a public figure to address the conference there was some, but only at a relatively low level of interest. As such, the Conference Group would likely best meet their potential audience's need by recruiting a keynote from the HE sector instead. Notably, the idea of students addressing the conference as a keynote, was not a popular one, and for now, is probably not worthy of serious consideration.

Themes are not the overriding reason why delegates attend, but while clearly resonating more strongly with speakers they do matter in terms of justifying attendance either with managers or within individuals' professional development aspirations. As such, some careful consideration is needed in shaping future conference themes. Certainly, caution needs to be deployed in terms of ensuring any theme is broadly inclusive to library staff, and that the breath of this scope is communicated in different ways to the different audiences the conference is intended to attract^{xiii}. In particular, a balance between an inclusionary and exclusionary theme should be sought, although with a reasoned awareness no single theme will be entirely attractive to every member of library staff^{xiv}. However, with continued care and due diligence by the Conference Group in formulating its plans and marketing strategy, the author can foresee a strong conference package devised which accommodates one or more of these thematic areas.

The author notes how in reviewing the data it became apparent how many respondents did not clearly grasp the intended holistic nature of the Collaboration conference and seemed more focussed on suggesting themes which would meet their own professional subgrouping's interests. Hence, continued vigilance and promotional effort is required by the Conference Group in communicating the broad church of interests for which the Mercian Collaboration conference is intended to represent.

As a final caveat, some follow up explorations or discussions concerning the outcomes from this survey and report, especially with institutions unrepresented in the data may be of value in helping inform ongoing planning for the Conference Group.^{xv} However, this is a matter for further discussion between the Group Chair, Sponsor and Officer to consider.

Recommendations

- Conference Group should ensure future event delegate marketing emphasises speakers, content and topics, more than the overall theme.
- Steering Group and Conference Group should look towards revising the conference date to better match member needs and availability from 2023 onward
- Conference Group should ensure event marketing to potential speakers is more granular and detailed in terms of suitable areas and subtopics to be presents
- Conference Group should continue to strive to maximise the positive experiences when using online conference facilities to balance the concerns about the format
- Conference Group should principally seek keynote speakers for 2022 and 2023 within the HE sector
- Conference Group should take care to consider a conference theme with a sufficiently inclusive and attractive demeanour to the broadest of audiences, to match the conference's intentions
- Conference Group should reiterate the broad and inclusive trans-specialty nature of the conference in all promotional literature and engagements with delegates, potential speakers and sponsors alike
- Conference Group Chair and Sponsor should consider if follow on work is required to supplement the data expressed in this report

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Conference Group for their feedback on the draft survey, along with all participants for their time in completing the form.

Appendix A: Questions

1. Indicate your institution [*drop down list*]
2. What is job title/primary role? [*free text*]
3. Which previous Collaboration conferences have you attended? [*checkboxes*]
4. If you have attended one of our conferences, which elements most attracted you? [*free text*]
5. If you have not attended any of our previous conferences, what prevented you from attending? [*checkboxes*]
6. Thinking about other external workshops, training events and conferences what generally attracts you to attend as a delegate? [*free text*]
7. Thinking again about external events, what attracts you attend as a speaker? [*free text*]
8. Currently, in what formats would you prefer future Collaboration conferences to be hosted? [*multiple choice grid*]
9. What is the reason for your answers above? [*free text*]
10. For future conferences would you prefer keynote speakers who are [*checkboxes*]
11. Finally, what broad themes should any future conferences embrace? [*free text*]

Survey distributed and collated on Google Forms.

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ⁱ Johnson, G.J., 2021. [Future Collaboration Conferences – We Want to Hear from You!](#)

ⁱⁱ The survey went live 10th Nov 2021, and was closed 16th December

ⁱⁱⁱ Page 3: Johnson, G.J., 2021. [Conference 2021: Outline Analysis & Delegate Demographics.](#)

^{iv} For some it was specifically the closeness of the event venue and for others the length of travel.

^v One speaker highlighted that the demographics of speakers at past Collaboration conferences, being dominated it seemed by some of the larger universities, might be a disincentive for speakers from smaller institutions.

^{vi} I've split theme and format up here, as unlike in the delegate attendance results, it was far clearer when respondents meant one or the other.

^{vii} People may have responded here with an aspirational rather than *realpolitik* perception here. A return to physical may be desired, but practically may not be possible or easy to plan for in the light of the past two years' experiences.

^{viii} The data could be queried to look specifically at comments and how they relate to people's rationale, although within the timescale available to this report's synthesis it was not practical to explore this dimension.

^{ix} While it was not an option, and no one suggested it, a subsidiary question might be 'Do we need a keynote speaker at all?' This could be perhaps explored in follow on work, conversations or group meetings.

^x The ALN conference for example is moving to an early summer date in 2022, from its previous September/November scheduling. In some regards the Collaboration's September date is a palimpsest of decisions taken in 2016, and hence is long overdue for a re-examination.

^{xi} See: Johnson, G.J., 2021. [Conference 2021: Delegate Feedback Analysis.](#) Especially pages 6-7

^{xii} Assuming, that is, public health, exterior environment and institutional finances permit it!

^{xiii} Largely, delegates, potential speakers and sponsors.

^{xiv} For example, EDI is important area, but based on the experiences of the 2020 conference call, can disengage large sections of the community who may view it as of only marginal professional interest within their roles.

^{xv} There are also questions which went unasked due the length of the survey already. For example, 'What makes a good conference closing session?' remains a datum frustratingly uncaptured or explored in other conference feedback or analysis work.