



Three's (Good) Company: A Comparator Between the Three Regional SCONUL Collaborations' 2019 conferences

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Introduction

This year for the first time, the Mercian Collaboration (MC), along with the Northern Collaboration (NC) and North West Academic Libraries (NoWAL) all held one day conferences in the same year (**Mercian, 2019a; NC, 2019; NoWAL, 2019**). This brief report presents and contrasts information on each conference highlighting commonalities and divergences between each conference in terms of: (1) their themes and delegates, (2) structure and content, (3) sponsor arrangements, and (4) approach to delegate feedback. However, it does not comment on any feedback evaluation for each collaboration, which represents a delegate satisfaction separate assessment (**Curtis, 2019**). It closes with a number of suggested recommendations for consideration by the Conference Group, and by proxy, the Steering Group in facilitating future conference planning.

This report should ideally be read in conjunction with the demographic analysis of MC delegates in 2019 (**Johnson, 2019**) and the Conference Group Chair's evaluative comments to Directors Board (**Mercian, 2019b: p8**).

Author's Caveat

Every effort has been expended to accurately present information on each conference, largely obtained from publicly available data on each organisation's website and supplemented where practical in exchanges with the respective Development Officers. Due to the short time span available to collate this information, minor factual or interpretative errors may be present (**Data Tables**). Notably, with regard to conference income a degree of estimation has been employed and figures should be treated as approximate rather than absolute.

High Level Analysis

While there are variances between the conferences, they each share certain core characteristics. Notably, while they primarily appeal to discrete regional audience poolsⁱ, each brings together a diverse assemblage of regional library staff for the purposes of a themed experiential exchange, alongside various and networking opportunities. All events employ a traditional mix of keynote(s), breakout sessions/papers and interactive workshops, although there are notable variances in how these are configured and scheduled.

All conferences are intended to appeal to a broad library demographic, in terms of speciality, section and seniority; although anecdotally each may draw more delegates from certain communities than others, due to the nature of their respective themes, date, location and perceived appealⁱⁱ. The conferences show marked divergence between their funding and sponsorship arrangements, session structure and diversity of content. Notably, the MC conference derives far less overall funding income, due to its lack of delegate fees. Finally, all three conferences have successfully adopted online feedback as a standard approach for capturing post-event delegate perceptions against expectations, although degrees of successful return vary.



Focussed Analysis

(1) Themes, Fees & Delegates

All conferences deployed a broad central theme, with both NC and MC employing 'Collaboration' and NoWAL 'Diversity' at their thematic centresⁱⁱⁱ (**Table 1**). Uniquely, NoWAL also included four clear 'subthemes', to aid potential submitters in targeting their proposals. All three organisations made use of institutional locations within their regions as host, with NoWAL and NC opting for contrasting locations on the west and east coasts. The MC and NC hosted their events at the start of September, with NoWAL's event appearing before the summer^{iv}.

Both the NC and NoWAL charge delegate fees of comparable but not inconsequential amounts. This means even before sponsorship income is considered (see **Sponsors**), their events likely break-even more readily. Additionally, offering 'external delegate rates' permits ease of attendance by non-member staff, including non-sponsoring commercial representatives, retired staff or people from outside the region. The MC does permit extra-regional attendance, but only after prior discussion and it is not widely acknowledged in conference publicity. NC also offered 'awarded places' to a limited number of delegates, with the expectation that reports would be written in exchange for their funding. Fee levels were comparable for the NC and NoWAL, although NC offered speakers a heavily discounted fee. Notably, the NC intends to raise delegate fees from the present level.

Only the NC offered a formal pre-event activity, with overnight resident delegates treated to social event and meal paid for by the collaboration in a nearby pub. This was well attended by about 30 delegates and sparked some useful early networking. Through informally introducing the conference team and their work, potentially also acted as a recruitment opportunity for the organising team. The NoWAL conference team met for meal the night before, but while funded by their collaboration this was not open to other delegates. However, NoWAL did offer a post-event drinks reception open to all delegates. The MC continued its tradition of no formal pre or post event social, meal or formal networking; although delegates were informally invited to remain and network if wished in the closing address.

All conferences attracted around 100 delegates, with a min (82:MC)/max (117:NC). However, when the delegate number is divided by the number of member institutions, it is clear that a far stronger delegate recruitment was achieved by NoWAL. This may be due to various reasons including their theme, or the relatively tight geographic pool of member institutions from which their core consistency is drawn. While a breakdown of the MC delegate member origin is available (**Johnson, 2019**), it is unclear how well represented each member organisations were within the other Collaborations. Delegate lists were shared to all delegates by the NC and NoWAL, physically and online respectively, although email addresses were not included. The MC displayed a delegate list, and provided it to sponsors, but they were not included in delegate packs or the programme.



(2) Schedule

All three conferences were one day events, with the NoWAL conference being the longest (6h35m) and the MC the shortest (6h) (**Table 2**). All had two main speaker events (keynotes), through only the NC and NoWAL conference keynotes could be considered substantive, while for the MC only the opening keynote could be perceived as such. NC and NoWAL differed in that their second keynote sessions were a closing keynote and panel discussions, respectively. Notably, all three conference keynotes came from MC member organisations^v, although NoWAL and the NC drew on institutional, non-library staff speakers. The MC also diverged in segmenting the day into papers before lunch and workshops afterwards, while NoWAL and NC ran workshop and papers in parallel with each other.

In terms of discrete papers and workshop speaker sessions, the MC offered significantly less variety of content than the other two conferences. Arguably, the MC provided more quality time for individual speakers, but with NoWAL and the NC including more individual speakers, this ensured higher pre-registered delegate numbers alongside an enhanced event content variety. These elements are likely to have contributed to their higher delegate numbers^{vi}.

(3) Sponsors

All three conferences were supported by commercial sponsors, with each organisation obtaining a number of unique and common benefactors (**Table 3**). In total 19 different organisations sponsored the three events in some capacity. It is notable both the NC and NoWAL obtained more than double the number of sponsors acquired by the MC representing a potential greater offset of event costs. However, NoWAL's lower standard exhibitor fee reduced their sponsor income below that of the MC. Exhibitor fees for the three conferences varied considerably, with the MC having the highest standard rates, although the NC and NoWAL had a singular 'title sponsor' at a higher and comparable rate respectively. The NC can be seen to have brought in significantly more funding sponsorship than the other collaborations, whose amounts were at a more similar level. However, the NC and NoWAL both supplemented this income with fees as well, meaning the MC continued to operate at a far lower overall conference income level^{vii}. As noted above (**Themes, Fees & Delegates**), by levying fees along with achieving sponsor income, NoWAL and NC's events are on a far stronger financial footing than the MC^{vii}.

(4) Feedback

All three organisations used online feedback (**Table 4**), which was either requested from delegates during or just after the conference, with some effort to remind people to return their comments. Three different platforms were used, however, a similar mix of forced choice and open questions were employed. The NC asked more questions, but unlike the NoWAL and MC did not employ any matrix response questions. Hence, each survey is of comparable length. Despite being the only organisation to incentivise the return of survey feedback forms, the NC received the poorest return rate (29%), although it is unclear if the level or type of compensation was not considered sufficiently attractive by delegates. The NC also made all their questions compulsory, rather than only some as with the other two, which may have increased delegate frustration and disengagement from completing their feedback survey. By contrast, NoWAL had by far the highest proportionate return rate, although they utilised two reminders against the MC and NC's one, which may have contributed to their success.



Comments

From this brief scamper through three well attended, diverse and engaging conferences there a number of observations which can be made. Firstly, while all three conference themes are relatively broad, they are perhaps edged in conservatism in terms of topic. While this may be a necessary adjustment to ensure their appeal to a wide range of library staff, a powerful, highly original or unique theme could be a major incentive to increase delegate numbers. NoWAL's theme was the most diversified, in topic and structure, given it clearly articulated subthemes. This could represent a useful strategy to adopt in terms of attracting high quality submissions and increasing potential delegate interest to future MC events.

Notably, as no data was obtained with respect to delegate no-shows, this may represent an area for additional investigation. This may be more urgent if they represented a marked proportion of anticipated delegate numbers. However, as to the best of the author's knowledge the 2019 MC conference had a very low level of missing delegates on the day, this is not presently a matter for any Midlands regional concern.

Delegate fees and sponsorship arrangements have already been acknowledged as an area for ongoing consideration by the MC Directors Board, and Conference Group, especially given the MC's relatively low capital reserves and the treasurer's comments on post-2020 financing (**Mercian, 2019b: p3**). Some measure of delegate fees for external delegates could serve to benefit the attendees' diversity and level at future events, alongside further offsetting the conference's costs^{viii}. Even a low estimate analysis of the conference income generated by the other two collaborations, positions the MC far below their levels. However, a related and unanswered question would be: what would the Collaboration desire to achieve, beyond breaking even, with a higher conference income level? To date no clarity on this question has emerged within any of the Collaboration's governance bodies, and arguably resolving this should be a priority before revisiting any fee discussions.

In terms of event richness, content, and variety it is hard to argue against perceptions that the MC provides a lesser offering in contrast to the other collaborations. Minor adjustments to the format and programme moving forward to the 2020 conference could readily accommodate a greater range of speakers, and hence enhance potential delegate appeal and individual attendance. Moreover, given the excess of suitable papers submitted for consideration for both 2018 and 2019 events, clearly a pool of untapped talent exists to provide content within an enhanced programme. Additionally, offering shorter papers may have the benefit of broadening the appeal of the event to less confident or inexperienced speakers, who may find a 45-minute slot too daunting to consider. Given the understandable need to continue enhancing and refreshing the appeal of the conference in its fourth consecutive year, restructuring the programme to accommodate this greater variety seems worthy of serious consideration.

Sponsorship arrangements, in terms of increasing numbers successfully recruited, have been a topic for discussion at the Board, although currently there seemingly remains little will to shift from the MC's default 'member benefit' position. It has been interesting identifying the pool of sponsoring organisations across all three conferences, which provided a rich potential community to approach. However, with the return to Birmingham in 2020, venue size and configuration considerations may once more restrict the MC's hand. Ideally, as with Nottingham 2019, a superfluidity of exhibitor space would be preferable, in terms of maximising our sponsor income and additionally ensuring sufficient ease of delegate flow. The 2018 venue was notably problematic in both these considerations. However, what is not clear from this



information is how much value sponsors and delegates alike place on the presence of exhibitors, and this may need to be empirically explored to balance against the valuable fiscal support they offer.

Considering feedback, the MC lies squarely at the midpoint in terms of return rates. While it may be desirable to increase the level of feedback, by perhaps employing a mixed economy of on-the-day paper and post-event online approach, this is the area where there is the least perceivable need for improvement, assuming a 46% return rate yields a sufficiently inciteful dataset. Nevertheless, in casting the feedback questions for 2020, it would be of value to consider if the data collected remains salient and intelligible, and if any aspects of consideration are missed.

Finally, it must be acknowledged there is no 'ideal' conference format, with all of the conferences contrasted here each offering much which is admirable and creditable. Each conference represents the unique output of the organising committee's vision, the collaboration's strategic and operational aims, the speakers' inputs and the delegates' interactions. While there is something to be learned, examined and even considered for implementation within one another's approaches, it is important that the unique characteristics of each conference remain, to the benefit of each region's membership.

Recommendations

- **Location:** Continue to utilise conference sites situated within institutional member sites
- **Theme:** Enrich future conference themes with clearly demarcated subthemes
- **Programme:** Consider increasing opportunities (slots) for speakers and papers presented
- **Fees:** Reconsider if current sponsor/no-delegate fees model still represents most effective and sustainable conference financial arrangement
- **Sponsors:** Ensure venues do not dictate or restrict exhibitor and delegate opportunities
- **Sponsors:** Include all identified commercial supporters as potential sponsoring organisations
- **Sponsors:** Rebalance fee structures against market norms and necessary income
- **Keynote:** Consider reconfiguring final plenary to offer a more attractive session/content
- **Keynote:** Consider recruiting keynote from NC or NoWAL senior institutional management strata
- **Feedback:** Continue online feedback, dispatched following the conference, no incentivisation
- **Feedback:** Consider if feedback questions/formats remain appropriate and produce valuable data
- **Delegates:** Consider further investigations into conference appeal among member staff

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Sharing

While this report was created to feed into the evaluative and planning cycle of the Collaboration's Conference Group, it will be made available to the NC and NoWAL, as part of ongoing experiential exchange and mutual support arrangements.

References

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Data Tables

Table 1: Conference Themes, Fees & Delegates

	Mercian Collaboration	Northern Collaboration	NoWAL
Theme	Building Bridges: collaboration, partnership and community	Collaborating across physical, organisational and cultural boundaries.	Exploring & supporting diversity in academic libraries
Subthemes	N/a	N/a	(1) Accessibility (2) Collaboration & Engagement (3) Inclusive Workplace Culture (4) Mental Health & Wellbeing
Date	Tue 10 th Sept 2019	Fri 6 th Sept 2019	Friday 28 th June 2019
Venue	University of Nottingham	University of Hull	University of Liverpool
Delegate Rates	None Guests by prior request only	£25 (speakers) ^{ix} £75/85 (early bird, standard member) £85/95 (early bird, standard external)	£70 (members) £80 (external)
Pre-Event	None	Evening meal at local pub open to all overnight delegates, paid for by NC	No formal event, Conference team only pre-event meal, funded by NoWAL
Delegates	82 ^x	117	100
Institutional Ratio^{xi}	3.6	4.0	7.1
Delegate List	Displayed, not shared with delegates Shared with Exhibitor (gold) sponsors	Included for all delegates & exhibitors in physical flyer	Included in online conference programme



Table 2: Conference Schedule

	Mercian Collaboration	Northern Collaboration	NoWAL
Registration	9.30am	9.15am	9.00am
Opening	10.00am	9.55am	9.45am
Lunch	75 mins	60 mins	60 mins
Tea breaks	AM 15 mins	AM 15 mins PM 20 mins	AM 15 mins PM 10 mins (comfort break only)
Close	4pm	4pm	4.20pm
Post event	None	None	Drinks reception 'til 5pm
Duration^{xii}	6 hours	6hrs 5 minutes	6hrs 35 minutes
Keynotes	2 (opening & closing) (1) Library Director Worcester & senior colleague (2) Closing plenary, from Conference Chair	2 (opening & closing) (1) Vice Chancellor Staffordshire (2) Library Director, Teesside	2 (opening & panel) (1) Director of Student Experience, Warwick (2) Panel Discussion, Keynote + 4 other speakers
Streams	4	4	5
Programme details	Papers before lunch, All workshops afterwards	Workshops and papers run in parallel	Workshops and papers run in parallel
Papers	8	19	20
Workshops	4	5	9+ 'wellbeing' slot
Total	12	24	30
Duration	Welcome: 10 mins Keynote: 50 mins Papers: 40 mins Workshops: 1 hr Closing/plenary: 30 mins	Welcome: 5 mins Keynote: 45 mins Papers: 22.5/45 mins ^{xiii} Workshops: 45 mins Closing/plenary: 5 mins	Welcome: 10 mins Keynote: 50 mins Papers: 22.5 mins ^{xiv} Panel discussion: 60 mins Workshops: 45 mins



Plenary	Wash-up session with conference chair	Closing comments from Steering Group	Panel discussion (after lunch)
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Table 3: Conference Sponsors

	Mercian Collaboration	Northern Collaboration	NoWAL
Sponsors	4 exhibitors* 1 programme only	1 title sponsor* 9 additional exhibitors 2 programme inserts ^{xv}	1 title sponsor* 7 additional exhibitors ^{xvi} 2 bag inserts
	Anybook.biz* Browns Books* Cambridge University press* Constant Security Services Talis*	Adam Matthew* Anybook.biz Browns Books Content Online EBSCO iTSL Info Technology Supply Ltd Kortext LibraryHelp OCLC Proquest Springshare Telepen	Anybook.biz Browns Books* CB Resourcing Epale Kortext Mind OCLC ProQuest SirsiDynix Telepen
Unique Sponsors	3	6	4
Rates	Gold (exhibitor) £1,000 Silver (programme) £200	Gold (title) £1,500 Silver (exhibitor) £850 Bronze (programme) £350	Gold (title) £1,000 Exhibitor (standard) £350 Charity £50 Bag inserts £50
Income (aprox)	£4,200	£9,850	£3,550
Incentive	None	Prize draw 'raffle card' for visiting all sponsors (stamped)	Sponsorship Bingo: unusual facts about sponsors for delegates to match by speaking to sponsors – reportedly very popular

Note: Sponsors common to all three, Sponsors common to NC & NoWAL



Table 4: Feedback Questions

	Mercian Collaboration	Northern Collaboration	NoWAL
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forced choice*: Were you a presenter or delegate? Presenter/Delegate • Matrix question*: Please rate the following: Venue, Refreshments, Lunch, Organisation, Keynote, Parallel sessions, Conference overall; Poor, Average, Good, Very Good, Excellent • Matrix question*: Please rate the following Poor, Average, Good, Very Good, Excellent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parallel sessions and workshops: ○ Session quality ○ Topics ○ Length • Free text*: What did you find most useful about the Mercian Collaboration Conference and why? • Free text*: What did you find least useful about the Mercian Collaboration Conference and why? • Free text: How do you think the conference could have been improved? • Free text: What would you say to a colleague about the benefits of attending? Please indicate if we can use this comment in future publicity. • Free text: Do you have suggestions for topics or themes for the next Mercian Collaboration Conference? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed choice: Presenter/Delegate/Other – Fixed choice • Fixed choice: Overall, I would describe the conference as: Excellent/Good/Neither/Poor/Very Poor • Free text: What did you find most useful about the Northern Collaboration Conference – and why? • Free text: What did you find least useful about the Northern Collaboration Conference – and why? • Free text: What will you do as a result of attending this conference? How will this inform your practice? • Forced choice: Did the keynotes you attended meet your expectations? Far exceeded/Exceeded/Equalled/Fell short/Fell far short • Forced choice: Did the parallel sessions you attended meet your expectations? Far exceeded/Exceeded/Equalled/Fell short/Fell far short • Forced choice: Would you recommend the Northern Collaboration Conference to other library professionals? Yes/No/Unsure • Forced choice: How did you find the booking process? Extremely easy/Somewhat easy/Neither/Somewhat difficult/Extremely difficult • Forced choice: How satisfied were you with the organisation of the event (including venue, catering, facilities)? Very satisfied/Somewhat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed choice*: The content of the conference was relevant to me Strongly agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree • Fixed choice*: The organisation of the conference was good: Strongly agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree • Free text: What did you find most useful about the event and why? • Free text: Was there anything you thought could be improved? • Matrix*: Please rate how you feel about the following. Excellent/Good/Average Poor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Booking arrangements ○ Venue ○ Catering ○ Conference organisation ○ Value for money ○ Session formats • Fixed Choice*: Overall, I would describe the conference as: Excellent/Good/Average/Poor • Free Text: Any other comments • Contact details (optional): Name/Institution/Email



		satisfied/Neither/Unsatisfied/Very unsatisfied <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free text: Please use this box, if required, for any other comments you would like to make: 	
Comments	Questions marked * set as required response	All questions set as required responses	Questions marked * set as required response
Sent	11am, Wed 12 th (day after)	3pm, Friday 6 th Sept (during conference)	28 th June (day of conference)
Reminder	Yes, once	18 th Sept	2 (over next 4 weeks)
Incentive	None	Prize draw (voluntary) - £10 high street voucher	None
Platform	Google Sheets	Qualtrics (Manchester)	Jisc Online Survey
Response	45% (37/82)	29% (34/117)	76%

ⁱ Acknowledging the NC and NoWAL have a cross-over in membership, and also make external attendance possible due to their fee-paying delegate basis.

ⁱⁱ For example, it is acknowledged attendance by part time staff to an event necessitating an overnight or cross-regional travel may be problematic. Additionally, institutional priorities (e.g. induction) may preclude or discourage some institutions as a whole from sending delegates.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Discussions at MC Directors Board, 10th October 2019, to move for a 'diversity' theme for the 2020 MC conference

^{iv} Notably, NoWAL has alternated their conference with the NC, and this was the first year they occurred within the same calendar year. This may have impacted on their respective delegate catchment as a result, as the pool of potential attendees may have been more stretched.

^v Why the MC region should be so attractive to the other collaborations for speakers, is left to the reader's imagination. Although, notably having a MC VC speak at another region's conference rather than their 'home' region, is not the best of optics.

^{vi} Anecdotally, the NC was hoping for much higher numbers

^{vii} NoWAL brought in an estimated minimum of £7,000 in delegate fees. NC is harder to estimate but taking 24/117 delegates at speaker rates and the rest at 'early bird member' rates they brought in an estimated minimum of £7,500. This gives a broad estimate of total conference income of: NC: £17,350, NoWAL: £10,550.

^{viii} The conference financially continues to be a loss-leader for the Collaboration

^{ix} For 2020 delegate rates will rise to £100 (members) and £50 (speakers). External TBC

^x Inclusive of committee, exclusive of exhibitor-delegates

^{xi} Delegates / Number of member organisations

^{xii} Opening address to closing address/paper

^{xiii} Some sessions had two shorter papers, some were full length papers

^{xiv} Two papers in one 45 minute session

^{xv} See: <https://northerncollaboration.org.uk/content/meet-our-2019-sponsors>

^{xvi} See (**NoWAL, 2019**) p2