



MSDG Events Programme & Virtual Events Survey

Dr Gareth J Johnson, May 2020

Executive Summary

A survey was conducted on behalf of the MSDG (Staff Development Group) and the Collaboration in March-April 2020, concerning insights into future event programme preferences. It was open to all staff within the Mercian Collaboration, and provided some indicative results. As well as feeding into the MSDG's 2020/21 programme of events, while establishing insight into willingness and ability to travel, under normal circumstances, to events. The survey identified interest in virtual events, which has been used to develop a pilot programme of events alongside informing the online 2020 Collaboration conference. A greater need to consider the strategic fit of event themes alongside meeting emerging needs and a greater embracing of a hybrid delivery programme, are key recommendations emerging from this work.

Page | 1

Introduction

As part of their annual planning process, the Mercian Staff Development Group (MSDG) routinely seeks input from its member libraries and their staff, to shape their future events programme.ⁱ For academic year 20/21 as well as discussions hosted in-house by MSDG representatives as to suitable themes, the Development Officer conducted an online survey of the membership to explore desirable topics for events. The survey also took the opportunity to canvas member's staff on their willingness to travel to venues, thoughts on online vs physical events as well as identifying individuals interested in participating in an informal online networking pilot event. Any personal data gathered was used under the auspices of the Collaboration's data privacy policy.ⁱⁱ Questions posed in the survey are presented at the end of this report (**Appendix**).

Results & Analysis

The survey was open for a five-week period in early-mid 2020, overlapping with the start of the lockdown period in the UK and closed Monday 20th April. It was run in an online only mode, although options for paper-based responses were made available. However, no staff took up this alternate route.

Demographics

Fifty respondents participated¹, representing comments from staff at eighteen out of the twenty-three member institutions (78%, **Figure 1**). However, breaking down the responses shows many institutions were represented by a single response (**Figure 2**). No responses were seen from Bishop Grosseteste, Cranfield, Nottingham Trent, Staffordshire or Wolverhampton, with Aston returning the highest number of institutional responses. Therefore the results presented here are from a self-selected, if random sample, which offers some validity as being *indicative* of member desires. However, they do not comprise a statistically large or broad enough sample to be considered *definitive* of interests and intend across the entire membership base.

¹ It is presently unknown approximately how many member staff (individuals) are employed by the Collaboration's twenty-three institutions. However, even the most conservative estimate of numbers would indicate this is a tiny proportion of the potential community.

Figure 1: Percentage of Member Institutions Represented in Survey

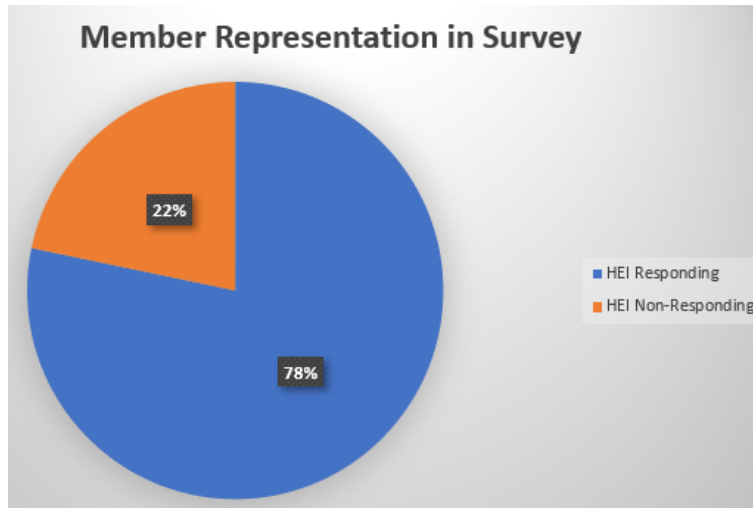
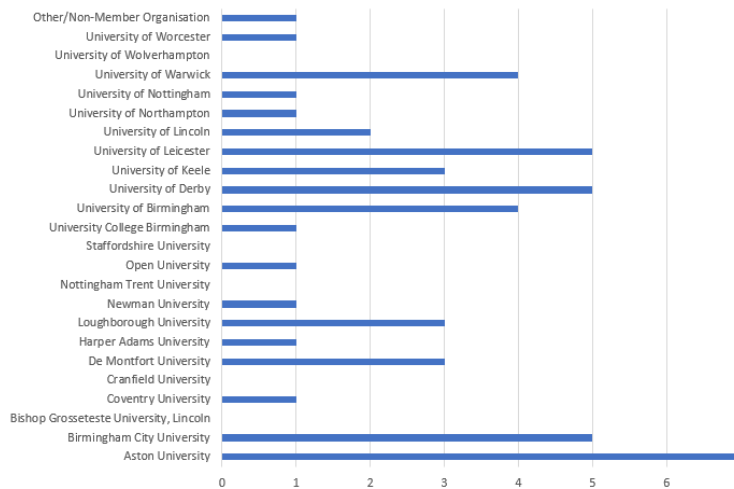


Figure 2: Survey Responses Broken Down by Institution



Themes

The following are the broad themes identified in free text by respondents, grouped by the strategic aims of the Collaboration.ⁱⁱⁱ Within these themes, they have been arranged into suitable subthemes suggested by the responses, for clarity. In many places they have been conflated with comments by others or otherwise clarified, although the raw text is available for consultation on request. Due to time constraints a more sophisticated content analysis was not practicable.

Table 1: Suggested Event Themes

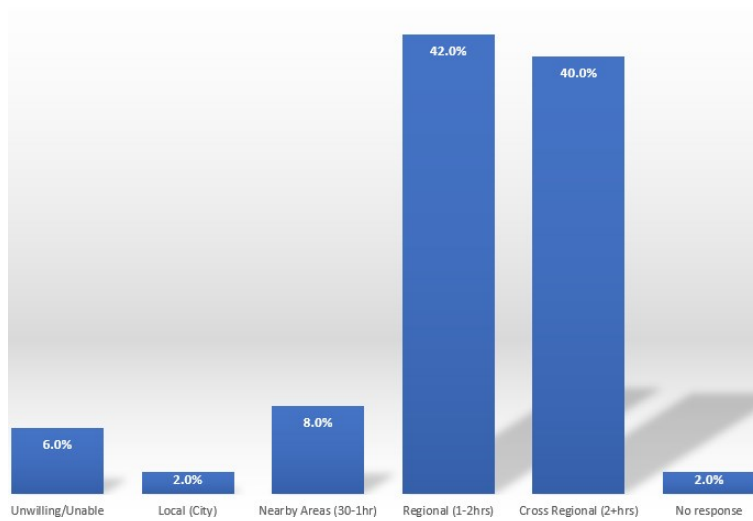
Collections & Data	<p>Accessibility: Alternative formats services & workflows, approaches to accessibility regulations.</p> <p>Acquisitions: Effective & efficient practice, collections management workflows, reading lists, digitisation.</p> <p>Circulation: Policies & benchmarking who does what and why</p>
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	<p>Library Systems & Technical work including: management systems, self-service, metadata, acquisitions, resources, collection management, RFID, APIs & metadata analytics, Resource access from a technical perspective (authentication, discovery etc)</p> <p>Virtual services: including enquiries, document supply services</p>
Learning & Teaching	<p>Online learning: Creating engaging material using different platforms, e-learning for non-techy staff, creating accessible learning resources, effective use of eResources, reference management software</p> <p>Teaching Practice: academic skills/writing and subject librarians, library games-based teaching, digital literacy, student induction, systematic reviews</p>
User Experience	<p>Access: developing services for enhanced services students, remote services, supporting online students</p> <p>Buildings: library design, best use of library space, improving, measuring success, improving facilities, modernising libraries</p> <p>Front of House: Effective frontline services, frontline experiences (all levels), customer service for library assistants, staff/student/customer engagement</p> <p>Marketing: Social Media, Marketing Campaigns, Publicity design, students as partners, communication in a crisis</p>
Workforce Development	<p>Management: Crisis management, collaboration, lockdown and front-line services, staff management/supervision, diversity, managing customer services, modernising staff roles</p> <p>Personal Effectiveness: Critical thinking, dealing with difficult situations, project management, coaching mentoring & leadership development, career development and promotion, creativity, innovation</p> <p>Services: Customer service/excellence, digital shift working, relationship management,</p> <p>Staff Training: Effective library staff development and training approaches, meeting new challenges & related developmental needs, improving staff digital capabilities</p> <p>Technical Skills: Webpages for beginners, basic coding, remote working, technologies for working smarter, digital health and libraries, staff digital literacy</p> <p>Well-Being: Personal mental health, hidden workplace illnesses</p>
Research	<p>Academic Engagement: Supporting research integrity, REF support, supporting responsible research assessment, external membership (other than SCONUL scheme)</p> <p>Data: Research data discovery, open data, RDM, FAIR research data</p> <p>ICT: Library AI, data and libraries, space and data, digital preservation, research systems/repository environment post-REF</p> <p>Innovation: Discovering new ways of doing things, KPIs for research support</p> <p>Open Access: Future trends, responding to evolving OA policies, transitional Publisher deals, increasing repository content visibility</p>

Travel

Forty-nine (98%) of respondents answered this question, concerning their willingness to travel to events; under 'normal' conditions. The vast majority (82%) were willing to travel across the region for over an hour to attend a Collaboration event. With the rest looking to stay closer to home (10%), interestingly there were a small number (6%) who were unable or unwilling to travel to events at all.

Figure 3: Distance Willing to Travel to Events

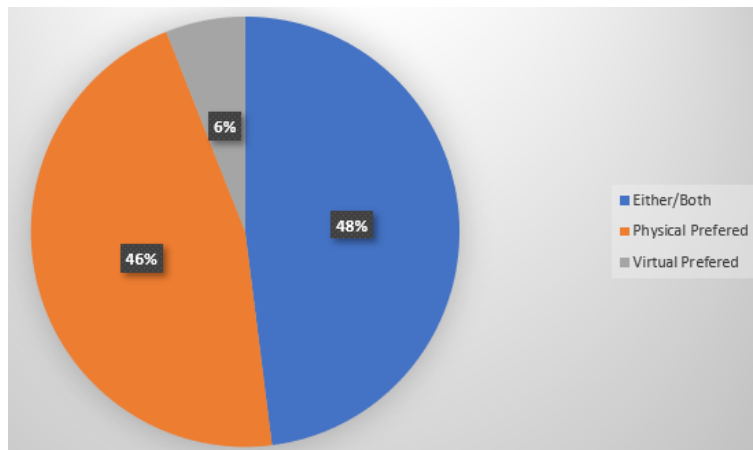


Notably one respondent commented ‘*Travelling under an hour limits attendance options due to location, while prefer to attend a session in person happy to look at online options if distance/travel costs a hindrance*’. Another, referencing the draw of the conference said ‘*I’d travel further [if] the conference [was] particularly relevant*’

Online vs Physical Event Attendance

All fifty respondents answered this question, which sought to identify a preference for online or physical events, or any ambivalence. A marginal majority (48%) were ambivalent and preferred either option. The next biggest group (46%) preferred events where they physically attended. A tiny proportion (6%) preferred online only events (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Desire for Online, Hybrid or Physical Events Programme



Virtual Networking Event

Twenty-six people expressed an interest in attending a pilot online networking video conference event. Regrettably, two of these failed to supply working email addresses, but the remainder were engaged in follow up conversations.

Comments

Finally, a few further comments were included by some respondents, some of which are interspersed above. From the remainder one respondent suggested that NoWAL's programme offered 'topic' rather than 'role' based events, which offered opportunities in bringing people in a lot of different roles coming together. Another reinforced the importance of learning exchanges during lockdown noting '*opportunities to share learning gained because of our enforced change of circumstance ...would be good.*' Another reinforced this point, noting it '*would be great to have some meetings of Research Data Management Sub-group [RDMSG]*' during lockdown, or similar 'research support' related activities². Finally, one person suggested the value for events which united front-of-house and behind the scenes staff as '*events tend to favour the public services side of the Library rather than back room staff.*'

One respondent added they had no understanding of the Collaboration, or what it did. However, as they were unaware if they had attended any events, nor were willing attend any future ones, it is puzzling why they took the time to respond to a Collaboration survey.

Discussion

It is regrettable, but understandable, only a relatively small number of member library staff responded to the survey (**Figure 1 & Figure 2**). How many library staff (individuals, not FTE) employed across the Collaboration's members would be a useful figure for future studies to establish the overall constituency represented. However, to be functionally successful in attracting more respondents, considerations over timing and format, along with degree of local support and promotion of involvement from member managers and directors, would need to be explored.

In terms of themes (**Table 1**) two things are clear. Firstly, there are more potential events and areas of interest that the Collaboration could host, than would be practical in a normal year. As 2020 is not a normal year, this presents an additional challenge in terms of delivering against desires. Secondly however, it is heartening that there is a strong representation of event themes that match against all five of the Collaboration's key strategic aim themes. In terms of developing a more holistic approach to the events within the Collaboration, it may be necessary to consider the overall programme over a longer timespan than a single academic or calendar year. With five years of continual Collaboration activity, some thought by Board and Steering Group should be given to exploring how effectively each area is being served by our programme. In this way any emerging gaps in our provision which need attention will become clearer, moving our programme from a *reactive* to *strategic* approach.

It is heartening, as has been the experience during the past five years of events, that delegates from across the membership, continue to be willing to travel to events³ (**Figure 3**). While the current lockdown precludes such travel for the foreseeable period, future events should clearly continue to be distributed around the region. There is likely some greater granularity that could be gained here, in seeking to explore the geographic destination preferences against specific institutions. There are many underlying assumptions with respect to the location of the events programme (e.g. staff diminished willingness to travel east to west, north to south etc) that could prove valuable in ensuring some staff, especially those

² It should be noted a non-affiliated and non-corresponding library research support group exists within the Midlands.

³ Under, it should be noted, normal circumstances where threats to personal health and well-being are minimised.

unwilling/able to travel far are not disenfranchised from future events programme. It can be extrapolated that the current marked preference for the 'core' locations (Nottingham, Leicester and Birmingham) for many SIG events, may therefore preclude a certain proportion of staff from attending.

That the Collaboration has, pre-lockdown, only offered events where delegates physically attended, was supported by the preferences of 94% of respondents (**Figure 4**). However, by the same measure, 54% would be happy engaging with online only events, which is heartening given the current national social distancing health imperatives and pivot to online only events. It suggests while online provision will not satisfy all member library staff, a sizable proportion will be prepared to engage virtually. However, a return to physically attended events will likely satisfy a larger overall staff contingent. Nevertheless, in future offering a hybrid event programme, with physical and online events may ensure or enable a larger demographic's ability and wiliness to engage.

A clear interest in a virtual networking pilot event was been shown, and as of this report been successfully run.^{iv v} Exploring further events in this series seems, from initial feedback to this event, by SIGs and the Collaboration as a whole, a desirable approach.

A final thought: This report was developed on behalf of the MSDG and Steering Group. However, these are far from the only agencies who now recognise member need and deliver events under the Collaboration's aegis. As a result, while the Development Officer provides a backbone of communication across the entire Collaboration, further efforts in this respect are desirable from Board, Steering Group and Group Chairs. In this manner, alongside ensuring events offer a greater strategic fit to the Collaboration's plans, SIGs will benefit from mutual support for the organisation and delivery of their activities.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations suggested from this study's data, presented for consideration by the Steering Group, Board, and SIGs alike:

- Development of a greater and iterative evidence base. E.g. follow up work comprising to (a) test against desirability of approaches to events or (b) better contextualise opinions suggested. An exploration of event themes and coverage over the lifespan of the Collaboration, may also offer insight into underserved areas of need.
- Event programmes, especially from the MSDG, should continue to seek to address training needs identified within all five of the Collaboration's strategic key areas.
- Consideration within the Collaborations events programme is needed of how to engage those member staff 'unwilling or unable' to travel. For example, hosting more events outside the 'core' cities should be made, to facilitate access to staff who may be currently poorly served by local or online events.
- The Collaboration and its SIGs should offer a hybrid programme of events, to meet personal preferences, facility to travel and therefore maximising potential delegate engagement.



- A virtual networking pilot event should be held, with further events hosted should this prove popular⁴.^v
- Ongoing, regular discussions between Group Chairs, as well as with their Steering Group Sponsors, should be encouraged to ensure an efficacy of programme delivery and meeting strategic goals.

It should be noted, some of these recommendations will require adjustment as the lockdown era continues.

⁴ Authors note: Since this survey and report was underway, an event has been held and has proved to be very successful. Plans to replicate this are now underway.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. What topics, themes or areas would you like to see the Collaboration organise over the next 12 months? * [free text]
2. How far are you willing/able to travel to attend our events? (when it is safe to do so) [*multiple choice, single answer*]
3. Under normal conditions, do you prefer to participate in our events physically or by joining online? [*multiple choice, single answer*]
4. Please indicate your institution [*multiple choice, single answer*]*
5. Any other comments [*free text*]
6. If you would be interested in joining an online networking event in the coming weeks, please add your email. [*free text*]

*Indicates a required response

References

ⁱ Mercian Collaboration, 2016, *SDG Events*. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sdg/events>

ⁱⁱ Mercian Collaboration, 2018, *Data Privacy Policy*. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Mercian%20Data%20Privacy%20Policy%20v1.0.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mercian, 2020. *Strategic Plan 2020-2024*. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Strategic%20Plan%20Jan%202020%20v1.0.pdf>

^{iv} Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Inaugural Online Networking Event a Virtual Success*. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/inaugural-online-networking-event-virtual-success>

^v Johnson, G.J., 2020. *Virtual Networking Pilot: Feedback*. <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Virtual%20Networking%20Pilot%20May%202020.pdf>