



Mercian Collaboration Synergies, Priorities and Challenges: A Review from the 2015/6 Development Officer Visits

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Purpose

This document represents a summary of an analysis conducted on the outputs arising from visits to Mercian Directors¹, which were conducted during 2015/2016 by the Mercian Collaboration Development Officer (MCDO). An overview on these engagements outputs was previously reported on to the Steering Group, and the Directors Committee [1], but this was largely drawn from the MCDO's impressions rather than the data gathered. The current Mercian Chair (2017-2019) requested a more detailed analysis from the data, in order to provide insight for the Mercian Steering Group (SG) into the issues, contrasts and potential synergies existing within the Collaboration. Importantly it will serve as an empirical aid for future action planning, in terms of satisfying member needs, identifying potential synergies and supporting further collegiality within the Collaboration.

Executive Summary

- 21 Mercian Directors and their organisations were visited in 2015/16
- Organisational strengths and challenges, as well as the benefits and issues perceived from their Collaboration involvement were discussed
- Many varied strengths and nodes of expertise across the Collaboration were exposed, which could provide a basis for facilitating future events, experience sharing or collaborative projects
- A strong vein of partnership and collaborative activity exists across most member organisations, and limited concerns about competitive interactions were encountered
- Development of staff skills and experience exchanges facilitated by the Collaboration are especially strongly desired by member Directors
- Additional avenues of activity and tangible outputs which proffer demonstrable ROI² would be welcomed by the membership, within the Collaboration's developing portfolio
- The Collaboration's emerging agency as a representative body was strongly supported, but currently has yet to be utilised to any demonstrable effect
- The Collaboration and its efforts are strongly supported by most member organisations, with limited concerns, which may diminish over time, and in the light of new activities

¹ 21 of 22 organisations were formally visited, with the then Chair considered too subjective to include. While the appointments were made with Directors, visits often met with Deputies and other senior members of staff at some institutions. The decision on whom to include during visits, was left to individual Directors.

² Return on investment, essentially, 'bang for their membership buck'



Data Collection and Segmentation

At the instigation of the first Chair, Caroline Taylor, the MCDO endeavoured to personally visit all Mercian Collaboration Directors for the purposes of introduction, and to explore their perceptions and outlooks. The qualitative data used for this report was generated from the comments made by Directors, and in some cases their senior staff, during visits to 21 of the Mercian member institutions³. While the MCDO made extensive notes, these did not take the form of verbatim or interview transcripts. Rather the visitations were intended to provide an overview of local perceptions, considerations and context, rather than to generate a detailed interrogative narrative. Nevertheless, since the data gathered comprised over 21,000 words⁴ concerning the Mercian member organisations and their lifeworlds, it represented a rich source of narrative data for further interrogation within an ethnographically framed evaluation⁵.

Hence, the anonymised statements were segmented through being subjected to a low level qualitative content analysis [2,3]. This reconfigured the broad discursive narratives and generated a range of systematised conceptual concepts (themes). In this manner, it was possible to readily expose commonalities, and provide a quantitative impression of relative importance or frequency of concepts across the collaboration.

Analysis

For ease of analysis, insights and perceptions from Directors (and staff) were broken down into four broad areas, deriving from the areas of main enquiry. These coded thematic categories and their definitions for each of the four main topics are discussed in the individual analysis sections. A broad narrative overview for each area is also provided, highlighting and commenting on some of the features which this process has exposed.

- **Local Strengths:** Perceptions of the areas of strengths, advantages, specialities or unique features from which local institutions and their library services benefitted
- **Local Challenges:** Perceptions of the problems, issues, restrictions or difficulties that specific institutions and/or their library services faced.
- **Collaborative Benefits:** The benefits, opportunities or advantages which individual institutions saw conferred by the Mercian Collaboration. These may have been in the process of being met, or represented aspirations for future activities
- **Collaborative Issues:** Concerns, difficulties, problems or areas in need of development perceived to exist with the Collaboration's structure, functioning or activities

The author notes that due to time constraints, only limited pilot coding and iterative data consolidation was possible. This accounts for a greater than desirable overlap between some conceptual concepts, and additionally the lack of secondary or tertiary conceptual structure.

³ As the Chair at the time was the Library Director of the University of Leicester, no formal visit to this institution was included in this data.

⁴ 21,330 words to be precise.

⁵ Much as the MCDO would be delighted to conduct some deeper ethnographically driven content analysis, regrettably time available for such work is heavily limited by normal operational concerns.

Local Strengths

Each library visited had clear strengths, some of which were derived from within their own staff, facilities or working cultures, or from their position within their host institution. This was a rich vein of discussion, with much to be proud of within all member library services.

Theme	Definition	Instances ⁶
Partnerships	The member organisation enjoys fruitful and productive partnerships with internal/external stakeholders or actors	20
Working Cultures	The <i>sine non-qua</i> , unique cultural configuration and/or working practices of the library/institution are beneficial in terms of meeting new challenges or delivering effective services.	18
Agency, Influence & Communication	The library operates from a strong position of committee, procedural or informal power within the organisation, enabling effective working and communication for its staff, and host organisation.	17
Physical Fabric & Structure	Enhancements to the library building, locality, internal configuration or geographic relationship within the university are areas currently being prioritised or enacted upon.	16
Staff Skills & Resources	Developing the member's library staff, in terms of their abilities, knowledge, experience and efficiencies, are a core and important aspect within the organisations priorities.	13
Stock & Collections	The library is actively working on developing its physical and digital collections, including access, rules and regulations or augmenting specific collection strengths.	12
Student Recruitment & Engagement	In matters relating to engaging with, and/or recruiting students, the member library has a strong and active participation.	11
Metrics & Perceptions	Matters relating to institutional internal/external metrics or benchmarks, are ones in which the member library is strongly represented or involved. E.g. TEF, NSS, REF etc.,	11
ICT Systems & Management	The member library has a strong and recent heritage in dealing with matters of ITS, including LMS, VLEs and digital collections etc.,	9
Student Training & Competencies	Training and developing the student body in terms of information literacy, digital competencies, study skills (etc.,) are a core and well represented organisational activity	7

⁶ Throughout, figures displayed do not represent the discrete number of MC institutions, but the number of separate statements encountered in the anonymised interview discourse pertaining to each topic



Staff Recruitment & Retention	There is a strong history or culture of good staff being recruited and retrained by the member organisation, and possibly also a culture of promoting from within	5
Open Access, Data & Publishers	The member organisation has a good handle or focus on dealing with matters relating to research publication, especially in terms of open access to articles and data	4
Regional Collaboration	The member organisation has a focus on achieving collaboration, rather than formal partnerships, with local bodies or actors	2

Working with partner organisations, or internal departments, along with the institutional working custom and practices and influential ability of the Mercian member libraries was strongly represented in this discourse. This underlies the common perception of libraries as facilitators and initiators of collaborative behaviour, and underscores the implicit ideological embrace of the ideals of the wider regional Collaboration, which many member Directors expressed. Conversely, few organisations recognised any ability to engender their own regional collaborations, underscoring the value of belonging to a regional organisation who can facilitate such efforts on their behalf.

It is interesting to note, while many organisations recognised they had a strong tradition of developing their staff, fewer considered themselves able to retain staff for significant periods of time. These may simply be geographic anomalies, in that some areas are for reasons of living costs or environmental conditions, are more desirable localities. However, it may offer proffer insights into wider sectoral issues on motility, mobility and migration of librarians and library staff⁷.

Additionally, this data provides useful indicators which could be used as the basis of forming an expertise directory, or potentially to recognise nodes of excellence within the Mercian Collaboration on which events or exchanges could draw upon. However, given that the data was anonymised, in both cases further work would be required to formally identify and codify where such experience lay.

Local Challenges

All libraries face challenges in their operation, and it was unsurprising that this aspect presented a very varied selection of issues. This was expected given the diversity of the Mercian Collaboration member libraries, the organisations they are hosted within and their unique teaching, learning and research cultural environments. However, it was possible within the discourse to code these challenges into fourteen discrete key themes.

⁷ E.g. Are the midlands a desirable region for library staff to develop their professional career

Theme	Definition	Instances
Working Cultures	Developments to the library or institutional working cultures are proving a challenge for staff and management to address	20
Physical Fabric & Structure	The location, buildings or environment of the library and institution are an issue affecting library operations	18
Student Recruitment & Engagement	The demography, recruitment or engagement with the student body, presents a particular issue	11
Partnerships	Issues regarding current/potential internal or external partners, cause challenges for the library services	11
Agency, Influence & Communication	The power and communicative relationships enjoyed by the library, are subject to influences which adversely affect their functionality	10
Financial Issues	Problems with current or future funding levels, present distinct challenges for the libraries	10
Staff Skills & Resources	The need to develop the skills base of library staff, coupled with the amount of them required, presents challenges to library operations	9
ICT Systems & Management	Issues relating to working with IT Services, online systems or their management cause challenges to library services	9
Staff Recruitment & Retention	Recruiting and maintaining library staff within the service is a challenge	8
Stock & Collections	Issues centred on accessing or locating items within the physical stock, or collection management in general	7
Metrics & Perceptions	Concerns around the public and assessed perceptions of the library and institutions achievements	5
Open Access, Data & Publishers	Challenges centring around the various emergent open agendas	5
Regional Competition	Concerns around institutional regional comparators	4

The two overwhelmingly most common issues member Directors perceived they faced, centred on changes/evolution of working cultural practices within their institutional settings, and concerns around the physical location, fabric or maintenance of their libraries. Given the staff training and development ethos at the heart of early Mercian and MSDG work, it could be argued that at least one of these challenges is currently being actively addressed within the Collaboration. However, it is notable to date other than facilitated tours of organisational libraries, there has not been any focused support for members and their staff in terms of the physical library experience. This perhaps represents an area which the Steering Group may wish to address themselves or task a SIG to consider.

There are a number of other issues which many institutions perceive they are challenged by or struggle with: recruiting and engaging students, developing effective partnership relationships, creating and enacting effective intra and inter-organisational agency, as well as the perennial fiscal issues⁸. Notably, and perhaps satisfactorily, the matter causing the least concern were issues around dealing with other institutions are competitors for staff, students or resources. This seems to have been reflected in the moderate to strong support for collaborative engagement within the Mercian Collaboration nearly all

⁸ This work took place both before and after the UK's Brexit vote, and hence some later comments concerning the amplification of extant fiscal stresses on HE in its wake were noted.



Directors expressed. Hence, this indicates that members support the ideological underpinnings of the Collaboration, and suggests that it will continue to enjoy a robust existence within the current configuration.

Collaborative Benefits

This section collated comments relating to the potential benefits which organisations perceived that membership within the Mercian Collaboration offered. In some regards, this was an especially critical area of perception, given that members have an understandable desire to extract a value, or ROI, from their subscriptions and staff contributions. Given the Collaboration was still in its formative years when this work was conducted, by the time of this report some of these areas may already be under consideration. Nevertheless, these do provide a strong indicator as to where the majority of members expect the Collaboration to support them and to focus its time, resources and efforts.

Theme	Definition	Instances
Shared Services & Experience	The sharing of insights or potentially service loads within the Collaboration's members, is to the benefit of the membership (fiscally, or otherwise)	25
Staff Skills & Resources	The Collaboration can enhance or develop the skills and experience of member staff, or provide new and effective ways of working.	22
Agency, Influence & Communication	The Collaboration offers benefits in terms of representing or communicating member interests to external organisations, including potential partners, funders or suppliers.	16
Conference & Events	The potential stemming from the conference and/or the coordinated events programme, is of significant benefit.	8
ROI & Tangibles	Benefits from the Collaboration are either specifically suggested, or are recognised as an emergent property.	7
Open Access, Data & Publishers	The Collaboration could enables us to better deal with matters within the evolving publication and research dissemination field (data, publishing etc)	5
Comparators & Competition	Being a member of the Collaboration enables us to benchmark or compare ourselves in useful ways to our fellow institutions	3
Stock & Collections	Benefits centred on acquisitions, cataloguing or provision of access to library stock, potentially enhanced via the Collaboration	3
Financial Issues	The fiscal cost of Collaboration benefit, both tangible and ephemeral, are of value to us as an organisation	2
Metrics & Perceptions	Concerns around the public and assessed perceptions of the library and institutions achievements	2
Partnerships	The Collaboration engenders benefits towards engaging in productive partnerships, beyond the member organisations	2
Student Recruitment & Engagement	The Collaboration can assist with recruitment or engagement with the student body	1



Given the Mercian Collaboration’s Terms of Reference [4] state that it seeks ‘seek efficiencies’, the benefits which arise from sharing are unsurprisingly strongly represented. Members clearly regard the potential of the Collaboration to act, partly, as a senior staff experiential exchange or as a forum to develop joint-services, as other collaborations have done, as beneficial to their own organisations and senior managerial stakeholders. Such collaborative efforts are also reflected in responses concerning *Staff Skills* and *Tangible ROIs*.

Considering the prior work of the progenitor organisations EMALink and WesLink’s, whose functions were absorbed into the Collaboration and the ongoing efforts of the Staff Development Group (MSDG), unsurprisingly benefits from facilitated staff training and the events/conference programme were strongly represented. This strongly supports the ongoing programme of events the MSDG largely facilitates as a central spur of welcomed collaborative activity.

However, it is also pleasing to note the benefits from establishing a representative member organisation possessing a greater agency than individual institutions within the library and HE domain was also considered of significance. The SG should consider that the Collaboration now represents a significant representational regional actor, whose collective voice may need to be heard in response to national or international events or policy developments. While the Collaboration has, as of yet, made little use of its agency to affect external change or enact influence, there is clearly strong member support in this area.

The issue of tangibles is an interesting one, and an area where more granularity may be of value to future SG discussions, in terms of formulating the ongoing action plan. Notably, while some comments concerned the lack (to date) of concrete tangibles, many noted the nascent nature of the Collaboration and their hope for benefits yet to come. Notably, the ability to engender savings or shared-load services, to benefits to their readership and other internal stakeholders were proposed as areas of interest.

Collaborative Issues

This final section deals with problems, potential or realised, Directors perceived presented a challenge to the Mercian Collaboration’s operations or aspirations. It should be noted, in contrast to other sections, there were far fewer topics discussed. Nevertheless, while this may indicate there are a smaller number of governmental or operational concerns to be address, it does not represent the relative criticality or degree of risk any pose to the Collaboration. Hence, the Steering Group is advised to consider each careful in the light of current and anticipated future operations, as well as ongoing member discourse. Broadly speaking, only eight key themes arose under this heading, as follows.

Theme	Definition	Instances
Agency, Influence & Communication	Issues with the strategic direction, continuing momentum or recognition of the value in belonging to the Mercian	14
Comparators & Competition	Concerns that member institutions are not comparable, or dissonance between disparate libraries may create problems in engendering collegiality	10
HE Environment	Issues in the broader HE environment need addressing by the Mercian	5
Geography & Time	The geography &/or time pressures, mean contributing and engaging with the Mercian are problematic	5
Libraries & Publishers	The evolving publication field is a challenge to library operations on a regional/national level	4



Mercian Subgroups (SIGs)	The operation or formulation of subgroups within the Mercian is as of yet, not ideal	4
Workforce Development	Engaging with workforce development is a more complex, and sectoral issue, than can be assumed and the role of the Mercian is unclear	4
Experience Exchanges	The value of the Mercian Directors gathering does not justify the time commitment expended	3

Unsurprisingly, the major issue, given the point in the MC's evolution that these visits took place, centred around unrealised desires to understand the function, purpose and direction of the collaboration. While, even within these concerns directors perceived value stemming from communication and exchange of mutual beneficial material, the lack of tangible outputs offering an ROI on membership were clearly a matter in need of attention. Given, since this empirical work was conducted the Collaboration has expanded from one SIG to four, and has recently hosted its first, highly successful, annual conference, along with the launch of the buddying scheme [5], potentially some of the demand for tangibles may have been sated. However, the SG is advised to consider this issue carefully, as it is critical to member retention that directly attributable value is seen to return from the membership⁹.

The other major issue grouped comments concerning the comparability of experiences from within a very disparate HE library grouping. Part of this issue also concerned the changing roles of HE libraries, and their position within universities, something which was less a Mercian issue but rather a broader sectoral concern. Attention may be needed, as the SG has previously noted, to considering the needs of all members in terms of events, location, support and collaborative direction to help alleviate these concerns. This, in part, should be satisfied through continued member communication and engagement at formal Director meetings, and between SIG committee members and events. However, the role of the Collaboration's website, social media presence and critically the liaison role of the MCDO should not be diminished in also addressing this need.

Most pleasingly though, only a few critical comments were noted relating to the value extending from Director engagement or attendance at events or meetings. Given a strong criticality was placed in the collaborative benefits to exchange of experience, such insights may reflect personal or professional circumstances, rather than indicating any deep problems. Nevertheless, it does emphasise the need to ensure any gatherings of senior staff are delivered in a focussed, informative and effective manner.

⁹ In this regard, the annual review/report may help to demarcate some of the member benefits enjoyed, and be used as a document by directors to inform and demonstrate to their own senior managers the value returned.



Conclusions & Recommendations

Limited time and other work commitments mean that this has been only an extremely light touch content analysis, although some important trends can be seen to have emerged. While these have been touched on above, the following is a summary of the key findings from this work.

- There are many strengths scattered across the Mercian member organisations, and while some commonalities exist, there remain discrete and unique nodes of excellence in each.
- Partnership and collaboration within and beyond organisations, excluding the Mercian Collaboration, is a particularly well represented common trait of most libraries. However, engendering effective regional collaboration individually is rarely seen as a common trait.
- Nevertheless, libraries rarely perceive other Mercian institutions as competitors, despite the neoliberal environmental and policy shifts endemic to UK HE [3].
- The necessity of evolving staff working practices and protocols and dealing with the physical library environment are common issues to most Mercian member organisations.
- The Mercian Collaboration does possess many perceived member benefits. Nevertheless, there is a strong interest in establishing further tangible and demonstrable, rather than abstract and aspirational, ones.
- The exchange of experience among Directors and their staff, and the development of their skills base are very strong benefits recognised by most member organisations.
- The ability of the Mercian to enact a greater agency, and voice, on behalf of its member organisations is well supported by many members, even if, to date, such agency has not yet been utilised. Potentially, this is a rich area for further efforts by the Collaboration or its constituent SIGs to explore, and may offer further tangible member benefits.
- Issues with the Mercian are recognised, but by no means as strongly as the membership benefits. Issues around organisational coherency and direction were most commonly recognised. However, it is likely that the Collaborative maturation process, along with continued development of clear tangible outputs and member benefits will help, in part, to address these concerns.
- Very few members considered the commitment of time and resource to Mercian to be of questionable benefit. Nevertheless, efforts must be expended to ensure member benefits are recognisable, and that engagements with Directors are handled in an effective manner.

While time, and the Mercian Collaboration, have moved on since this fieldwork was conducted, nevertheless there are still lessons which can be drawn. This narrative picture clearly represents a regional collaboration, even in its infancy, already engendering benefits and ROI to its member organisations. This is a highly satisfying outcome, and demonstrates that the Collaboration was already beginning to satisfy its potential and meet member expectations. Likely, were this work to be repeated¹⁰, it is perceptible that a greater shift in favour of collaborative benefits would be recognised. It may, perhaps, be of more value

¹⁰ Not something the author is especially recommending, unless the SG wishes to devote significant resource to its furtherance.



to follow up on some of the issues or areas development suggested in the above analysis, in terms of rationalising or clarifying future action plans.

Hence, in final conclusion: this work has been able to demonstrate the rich diversity of the Mercian Collaboration's membership, the value they extract from it as well as areas of potential concern. It perhaps also represents the closing of the inaugural epoch of the Collaboration's evolution, and a benchmark against which its future success could be judged. As a snapshot of member perceptions, this report represents an artefact which the current SG would be well advised to reflect on during their continuing strategic and operation planning cycle.

Gareth J Johnson, Mercian Collaboration Development Officer, October 2017

References

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