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Fake, Michael [orcid.org/0000-0003-1120-3025](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1120-3025) Three is not a crowd: working collaboratively across institutions: the White Rose Libraries partnership at the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York. *SCONUL Focus*, 65. pp. 4-8. ISSN 1745-5790

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# Three is not a crowd

## Working collaboratively across institutions: the White Rose Libraries partnership at the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

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### Introduction

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The White Rose Libraries, consisting of the libraries of the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York, have worked together since 2004 on a number of collaborative projects. In 2015 new permanent staff and a new service model meant that we have stepped up our commitment to collaboration. This article outlines how the partnership now operates and what it has been able to achieve. It considers both the challenges that such collaborations face, and the reasons for the White Rose Libraries' ongoing success.

### Historic development

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The universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York have a long-standing strategic partnership, based partly on their geographic proximity to one another in Yorkshire, and partly on their shared interests as large research-intensive universities. Since 1997 this partnership has been managed through the White Rose University Consortium, which supports collaborative activity in research, enterprise, innovation, and learning and teaching. In 2004 this partnership was extended, with the three university libraries coming together as the White Rose Libraries.

As a partnership, the White Rose Libraries' historic focus has been on the development and support of White Rose Research Online and White Rose eTheses Online – the two jointly-run institutional repositories that store open access full-text articles and electronic theses of Leeds, Sheffield and York academics and postgraduates. The two repositories are among the most heavily used in the UK, with combined full-text downloads of more than two million items per year. In addition, the partners have, in the past, managed a number of other joint projects and services, including RDMRose (a Jisc-funded project to produce learning materials in research data management, tailored for information professionals); the LIFE-SHARE project (exploring digitisation skills and strategies across the partnership); and the development of joint collections management approaches (including original development of the Copac Collections Management tools in partnership with the British Library).

### The new service model

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The success of the partnership in delivering – and maintaining – a range of key projects hinted at some of the broader potential behind the collaboration, and towards the end of 2013 the directors of the three libraries agreed on a new service model, designed to further leverage the individual specialisms and collective strength of the White Rose Libraries. This new model was designed to link White Rose activities more effectively with the strategic priorities of the three institutions, and ensure that resourcing was shared equally.

The greater focus on strategic coordination meant establishing a number of new coordinating groups, focusing on specific strategic themes and pulling in key specialists from across the libraries – each group being led by a senior manager from one of the partners. This was to ensure that responsibility for the strategic development of the partnership was fully embedded in and across partners, and to achieve a greater involvement of a wider group of staff across the whole of the White Rose.

Crucially, the new service model also included the appointment of permanent staff – an executive manager and an administrative assistant – tasked with focusing on collaborative activities, coordinating joint working, and developing and embedding joint services. The White Rose Libraries already had a technical officer, who supports the repository software, and in the past a repository manager had led on the implementation and advocacy for the systems; but the new posts were to be dedicated to a broader implementation of collaborative activity, with a service-wide approach that went beyond the existing focus on repository management and embraced all the potential areas for collaborative

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working across the three libraries.

I joined the White Rose Libraries as executive manager in December 2014, based at the York campus, and Tom Grady was appointed shortly afterwards as administrative assistant. With John Salter as our technical officer in Leeds, the White Rose Libraries Office is now a small team of three – and throughout 2015 we've been working hard to implement the new vision of partnership to deliver value to each of the three libraries.

### How it all works

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The starting point of the partnership is the White Rose Libraries Memorandum of Understanding – our founding document which, whilst not a legally binding constitution, gives the collaboration a formal underpinning. In a few short pages of plain English it describes our mission and outlines the broad principles of how we want to work together.

The memorandum establishes two principal groups: the first is the Directors' Group, which brings the three library directors together on a termly basis. This group provides a strategic steer for the partnership, makes major strategic decisions about the development of services, and keeps an eye on value for money. The relationships within this group are key – the White Rose Libraries consortium has no legal existence or independence, and therefore the partnership relies heavily on trust between the directors to ensure continued commitment to its aims.

The second group is the Service Development Group, comprising two senior managers from each library. This group meets more frequently – usually every five to six weeks – and provides operational oversight for White Rose Libraries activities, setting my priorities as executive manager, reviewing service proposals, and passing recommendations on development projects to the directors as appropriate. This is the key coordinating group in the day-to-day running of White Rose Libraries activities and so, like the directors, staff in the Service Development Group have to work closely together for the collaboration to be effective.

Reporting to the Service Development Group are the strategic subgroups, which investigate and coordinate planning around four key areas of collaboration: scholarly communication and research data; continuing professional development for library staff; collaborative collection management; and customer services and user experience. One further subgroup oversees repository development, managing and coordinating development activity on the repository software. The subgroups meet at different frequencies, according to need, but are an effective way of bringing together key stakeholders within a coordinated White Rose framework.

As executive manager I regularly participate in all of these groups, which means I spend a lot of time travelling between the three partners (we try to rotate meetings between sites in order to share the burden of travel, thus hosting equally across the partnership). My role is to facilitate collaborative activities that could benefit the three libraries, identifying potential new services and initiatives, and helping to drive them through. In that capacity my remit is to talk to a wide range of staff, meeting with colleagues in different parts of the libraries across the consortium, and in a variety of roles; encouraging collaborative activities, and working with staff to identify and deliver partnership working that benefits all three sites.

### What we've achieved

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This new phase of collaboration has already started to bear fruit. By bringing together different groups of staff through the subgroups and related activities, we've been able to take advantage of a wider range of perspectives on

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common challenges; by sharing experiences at all levels of the organisations, we're able constantly to learn from each other, and to build on the successes (and failures) of our partners rather than reinventing wheels; by making a commitment to pool resources on particular projects, we've been able to kickstart new initiatives that would have been much harder for us to get going as individual institutions.

Some of the new projects we've begun to develop, across a range of different aspects of library services, include: building a set of shared training resources for bibliographic management; experimenting with a collaborative approach to providing research data management training for arts and humanities students; running joint research projects to evaluate our customer service provision, with a three-way 'mystery shopper' exercise; running a cross-institutional Erasmus scheme for visiting professionals; developing a mutual support agreement, committing the three libraries to supporting each other in the event of a major disaster; working together to develop effective methodologies for using the Copac collection management tools – and looking at other ways of managing our collections cooperatively; and setting up cross-institutional action learning sets for managers and team leaders, to support staff development.

Perhaps most excitingly, the White Rose Libraries have agreed on a major project to develop a new, jointly-run digital university press – intended to support new models of scholarly communication through publication of open access journals, monographs and textbooks. This will be the first example of a jointly run university press in the UK, and is an example of how the three libraries have been able to pool resources to enable them to do something that would have been significantly riskier to attempt on their own. White Rose staff are currently working hard putting together the infrastructure to support this exciting new venture.

Of course we haven't forgotten our original core service, supporting the White Rose repositories – in 2015 we've done a lot of work around refreshing and revising some of the governance structures to ensure that we can more effectively identify and prioritise long-term development requirements – as well as meeting the immediate pressures of ensuring the repositories are fit for purpose for the next REF exercise.

Alongside all of this, one of the key activities we've been focusing on has been building a sense of the White Rose Libraries as a community of practice – trying to facilitate cross-links between staff at all levels of the partnership, and to embed collaborative thinking into all aspects of library services, so that staff embarking on a project at one site will instinctively pick up the phone to their colleagues elsewhere in Yorkshire to pick their brains and share their ideas. We've been doing this through a number of facilitated knowledge exchange events, supporting meetings of staff working in a variety of different areas, from copyright and open access, to special collections and digital preservation, to marketing and communications. We continue to work with colleagues across the libraries to bring staff together in one-off meetings, cross-institutional visits and staff workshops.

### The challenges of working collaboratively

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Working as a consortium is not always easy, and when struggling to pull together the disparate aims of three independent institutions the benefits can sometimes be hard to discern. There are a number of challenges that we face when working as a partnership.

The first is that the libraries are all working to slightly different sets of priorities, and at slightly different paces. No matter how much the directors and the Service Development Group work to coordinate strategic activity, it is usually the case that, on any given issue, one institution will be further ahead down

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one particular route than the others, and this creates an inevitable tension between the partners. When they are directed towards a collaborative solution, staff at one institution may feel that they're pursuing an approach that works better for their partners than it does for their own library. It is no coincidence that our biggest historic success (the repositories) and our largest current project (the university press), are both focused around areas where all three institutions are more or less at the same development point.

Each library is also facing a different set of local challenges, including: integration with a different set of local IT systems; different organisational and political relationships with internal partners like registration and student services; and differing financial pressures. This all makes collaboration exponentially more complicated – we can assume very few universals when we get staff from all three libraries in the same room, and part of the work around community-building is about building an awareness amongst library staff of each other's circumstances and limitations.

On a very practical level, we also face organisational challenges, coordinating staff from three different partners: travel times make it hard to arrange face-to-face meetings as often as we would like, and accessing three different sets of calendar software can be tricky. With a large group of stakeholders we have to work harder to keep everyone informed about progress, and no matter how streamlined we want to be, big decisions can end up requiring multiple sign-offs, taking more time to ensure we have equal buy-in from all three institutions.

### Why it works

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Despite these challenges, however, the White Rose Libraries have been an exemplar of collaborative working for many years, and in our new phase of partnership – as outlined above – we're already beginning to deliver on a variety of new initiatives.

Part of the reason for our success is that the institutions have more similarities than they do differences. The libraries serve broadly similar demographics and a similar range of subject areas, and have a similar approach to how they balance the competing demands of supporting research, learning and teaching, and the student experience. That commonality of approach makes it easier for the libraries to find common ground to work on, and means that we have broadly similar strategic aims – ideal foundations for collaboration.

We also benefit from our relatively small size. The White Rose Libraries are just three institutions – tiny in comparison to many of the library consortia that operate in the rest of Europe, or in the USA – but that small size means there are fewer stakeholders to satisfy and relatively few decision-makers to be consulted. For all the difficulties of coordinating activities within the White Rose, we have it considerably easier than larger consortia that are working with many times the number of partners. Larger groups may be able to tap into a wider pool of resources, but as a small partnership we can be relatively nimble in our decision-making, and it is feasible for us to develop cross-institutional relationships in a way that becomes impossible for bigger collaborations.

That leads on to the third reason for our continued success, which is the trust that exists at many different levels within the White Rose Libraries partnership. At its very highest levels we can rely on support from the Vice Chancellors of the three universities, and the framework that already exists for institutional collaboration through the broader White Rose Consortium. At the library level the core groups meet regularly, meaning that members know each other very well and have been able to develop close and effective working relationships. As executive manager I meet regularly with all of the key stakeholders, including in monthly one-to-ones with the deputy directors at each of the

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institutions, as well as reporting to directors and Service Development Group. That makes it easier to keep everyone involved in and aware of partnership activities. That trust is particularly important at library director level; however, the partnership structures and relationships already in place make it relatively easy for personnel to change without jeopardising the collaboration. In 2015 two of the three White Rose Library directors retired; their successors have been able to rely on both the formal group structures and the informal relationships at all levels of staff to ensure that their speedy integration into the partnership approach.

Finally I believe a key ingredient in this new phase of collaboration has been the appointment of permanent staff, and the establishment of our small White Rose Libraries team. With dedicated staff we're able to spend time and energy on keeping collaborative activities going, in a way that is much harder for other library staff, burdened as they are with the competing pressures of their day jobs. We can facilitate partnership activities; coax, cajole and lead staff towards potential collaborative solutions; and, by managing new projects, ensure that time and effort are shared equally across the partnership. The White Rose Libraries team in that sense is the focal point for joint initiatives, and acts as a visible and tangible sign of the institutional commitment to this long-standing partnership between Leeds, Sheffield and York.

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