



Virtual Reading Rooms: transforming access to collections through remote technologies

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**Archives West Midlands Virtual Seminar
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@RL_UK

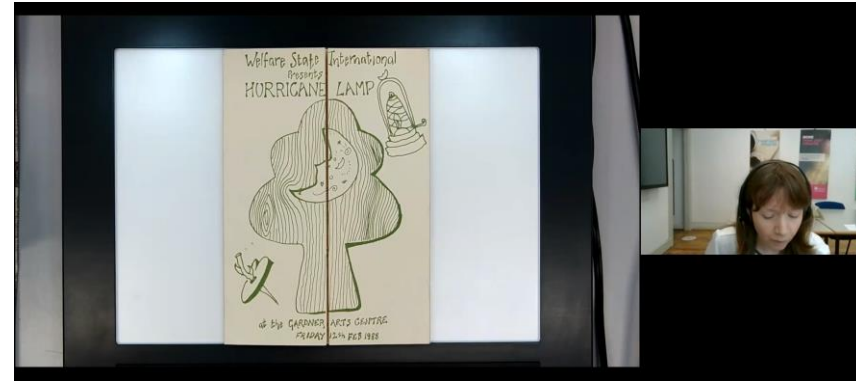
www.rluk.ac.uk

Definition: VRRs

Virtual Reading Rooms provide human-mediated remote digital access to collections which do not depend on digitisation.

*Through the use of **live streaming** via hi-res **visualisers** positioned within physical research spaces, scholars, teachers or members of the public can view and digitally engage with an institution's heritage and cultural collections, asking for these to be positioned and repositioned by a member of staff, to enable their research.*

*These are emerging and **bespoke services** which provide another means of user-responsive access to non-digitised collection materials.*



VRR demonstration, University of Bristol, Theatre Collection, DCDC conference 2021

An Overview: Research Libraries UK

Research revealed: 45 institutions created or planned to create a Virtual Reading Room and Teaching Service (April 2021-Jan 2022)

- Republic of Ireland, UK, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, USA, Australia and New Zealand.

Covid-context of Virtual Reading Rooms and Teaching Spaces

- Grew out of the conditions of lockdowns and partial re-opening during the Covid-19 pandemic

Three reports available on the RLUK website: www.rluk.ac.uk

- Case studies
- Conference workshop
- VRR symposium & toolkit



Photo courtesy of Eric White, Princeton University

New Frontiers of Digital Access

First survey: May-June 2021

- 32 institutions: Republic of Ireland, UK, USA, Germany, NLS
- 18 had VRRs, 14 intended to launch shortly

These were emerging services

- Variety of organisations utilising these, small > large
- Mixed economy of approaches
- Internal funding most significant source

- Pragmatic **lockdown response** > bespoke **research service**
- Steady growth in user numbers (c. 30 appointments a month)



Image courtesy of John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester

New Frontiers of Digital Access

Diversification

- **Internal** audience > **external** researchers/students
- Diversification of application: Archival and special collection bias, expansion to mixed collections.

Staff / researcher dynamic

- Catalyst for collaborative research
- Showcase staff expertise and knowledge
- Mutually beneficial and co-creative
- Research libraries as **research partners**
- VRR time being included within funded research applications



Dr Richard Oosterhoof delivering a virtual seminar at the Centre for Research Collections, 2020, courtesy University of Edinburgh.

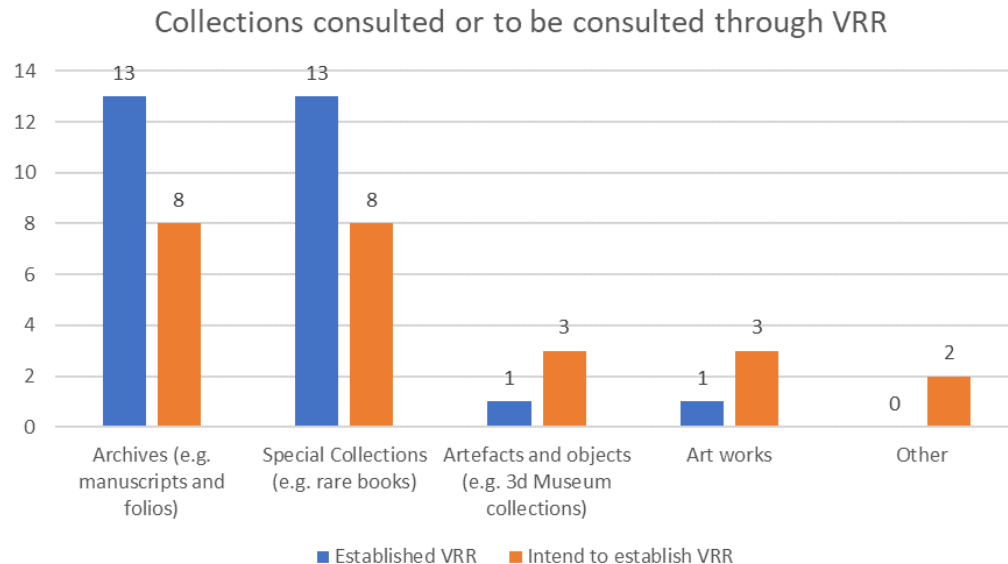
VRRs in Collection Holding Institutions

Second survey: November-January 2021/22, of RLUK & non-RLUK members.

22 institutions responded [13 new library and archive institutions from UK, Ireland, USA & Australia]

Overview

- Purpose: as response to the Covid-19 pandemic vs. supporting remote researchers for private study, scholarship or research
- Mostly special collections & archives – increasingly, other types of collections are used
- Equipment: mobile visualisers widely used, but fixed visualisers and mobile and adjustable lighting also popular

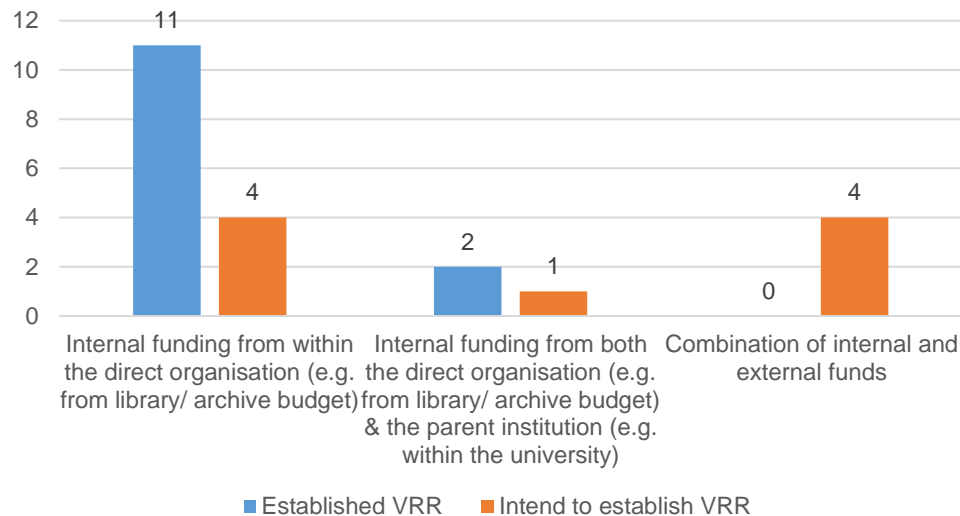


VRRs in Collection Holding Institutions

Developing a funding proposal

- Rolling out alongside other virtual services
- Long-term potential of VRRs as an alternative way of accessing collections
- Appealing to users concerned with travel, cost or little experience of collection use
- Diversification of digitisation offer
- Easier to capture images of large items through a ceiling-mounted visualiser
- Streamlining of staff resources
- Benefits of visualisers in other cases, e.g. VTS

Funding and resourcing of VRR services



VRRs in Collection Holding Institutions

Spatial Requirements

- Established VRRs: space availability & adaptability, security
- Intend to establish VRRs: space availability, service availability, adjacency to collection store
- Still not permanent homes for services
- Next steps: flexible spaces to support the delivery of various session types, e.g. hybrid & blended

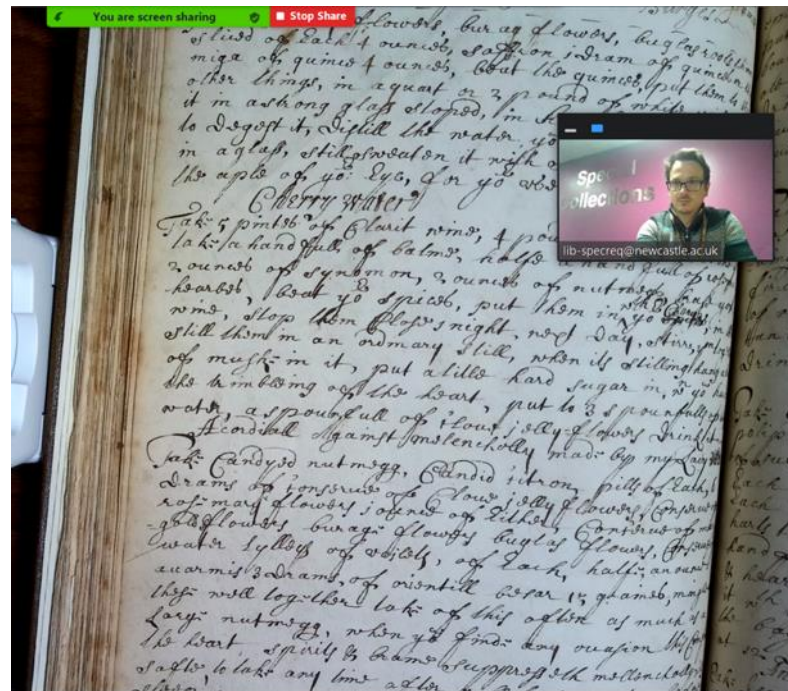


Image courtesy of Newcastle University, Special Collections and Archives

VRRs in Collection Holding Institutions

Towards Sustainability

- Integrating VRRs into existing service offering
- Re-promoting to audience groups that would most benefit
- VRRs as part of a hybrid and blended approach to work and learning
- Processes and lessons learnt become embedded in strategic plans, e.g. around digitisation or collections and cataloguing
- Resourcing and investing in skills development
- Cross-institutional collaboration



Supporting researchers virtually at Leeds University Library

Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

Third survey: April-May 2022, of international academic & research community

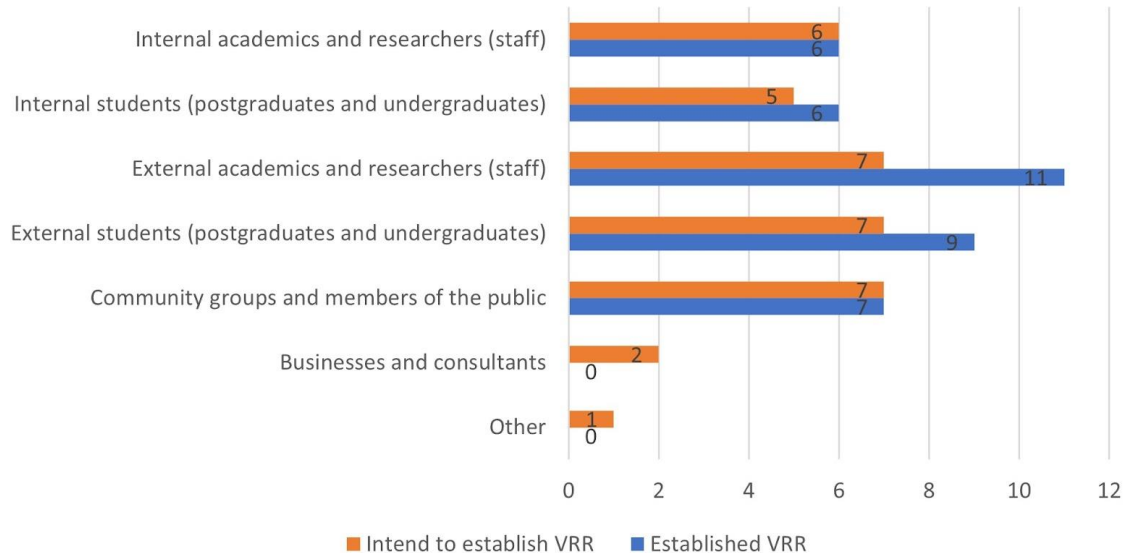
VRR Audiences

- Mainly external academics & students
- Mainly, Arts & Humanities disciplines

Connecting with users

- Zoom or MS Teams mostly used to establish a connection with VRR users.
- Mostly single person visits.
- Length of session <1 hour.

Audiences of VRR services



Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

Working with users & meeting their needs

- Library staff, often, became active participants in research by working closely with researchers and providing advice and support during VRR sessions.
- Some institutions have allowed researchers to run their own VRR sessions.
- Most institutions either had consulted or were planning to consult with their user communities to develop and further improve their offering.



Dr Richard Oosterhoof delivering a virtual seminar at the Centre for Research Collections, 2020, courtesy University of Edinburgh

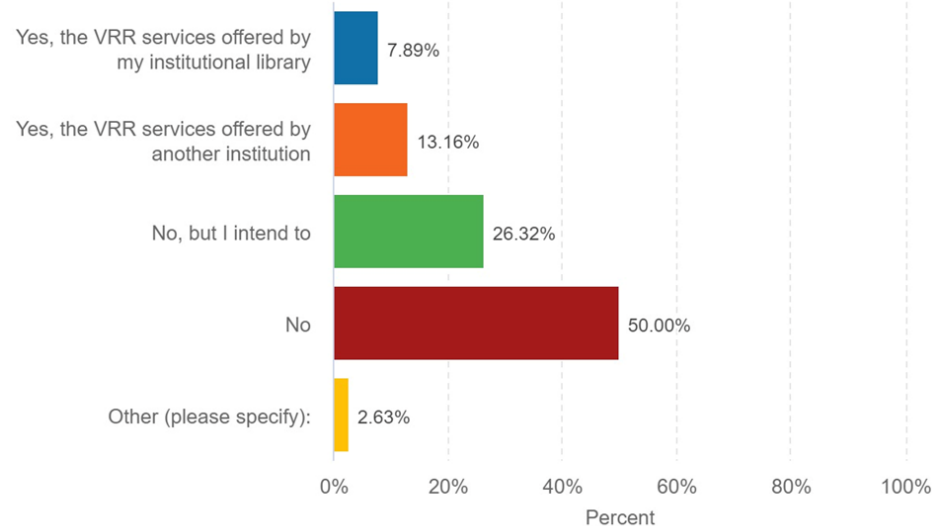
Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

38 academics, researchers, and PhD students responded [UK, but also in South Africa, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, & US]

Perceptions and Use of VRRs

- Mostly non-users
- Existing users had positive experiences – use of VRRs by institutions nationally
- Use for reference checking & confirming document contents
- Consulted mostly archival material
- Libraries and their staff play key role in awareness raising

Have you ever used VRR consultation services?



Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

Benefits of VRRs/VTSSs:

- Quick and reliable access to material that was not digitised or catalogued in detail
- Opportunity to consult an item when difficult/ expensive to visit in-person
- Environmentally-friendly experience
- Opportunity to zoom in and view details difficult to see with the naked eye
- Increased student experience during a teaching session. Students were motivated to learn more about collections
- Collaboration & networking with library staff

Areas for improvement for VRRs/VTSSs:

- Time limitation
- Delay to get an appointment
- Lack of flexibility to flick backwards and forwards
- Not always possible to see the material as clearly as in an in-person research visit
- Possibly not suitable for reading long texts – it would be helpful to have some guidance on what kind of reading the VRR is designed to facilitate
- Research is being filtered through a curator's interpretation of what might be of interest
- Greater consideration for certain groups of disabled users (e.g. hearing impaired)

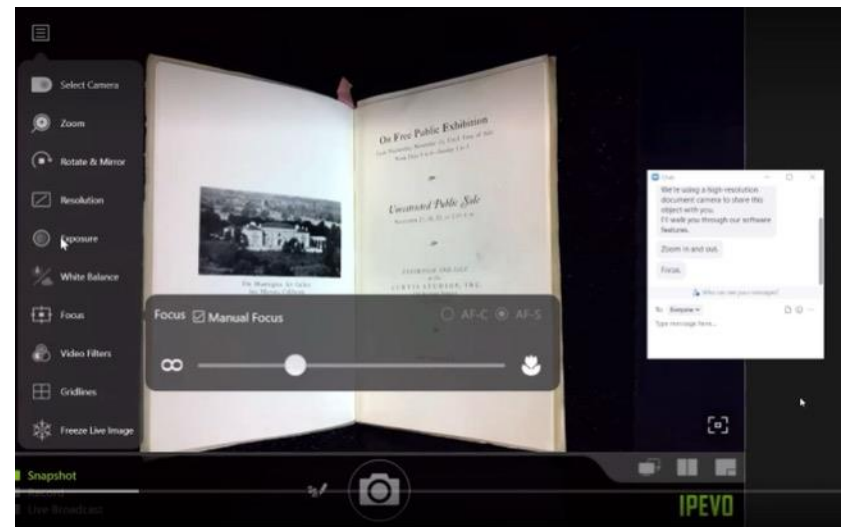
Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

Possibilities of using VRRs

- Opportunity to view material that is otherwise difficult to access
- Large range of collection material to consult
- Greater awareness of VRRs and their possibilities
- Opportunity to order digital copies of material
- Viewing more than one collection/ item per session

Value of VRRs

- Collection items required are not digitised
- To limit travel
- To evaluate the need for an in-person visit



The Virtual Reading Room (VRR) in use at the The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, California.

Academic awareness and experience of VRRs

Libraries and archives are now more aware of **the potential of VRRs to transform collections (without relying on digitisation) through making them accessible** to a variety of audience groups.

- VRRs can facilitate inclusive engagement with institutional collections and can benefit a range of user groups, e.g. remote researchers and learners, users with mobility issues, users concerned about travel (including environmental impact) and cost.

Developing a **successful VRR service**:

- Better understand user needs when using VRRs.
- Promoting (& re-promoting) the services to the audience groups that would most benefit.
- Use VRRs as part of a hybrid and blended approach to work and learning.
- Invest in skills development for staff to support and work with users effectively.
- Support cross-institutional collaboration to maximise benefits to users.

IARLA VRR Working Group

IARLA working group convened to explore collaborative opportunities

- Convene international community around the development and delivery of services
- Further information, membership and remit: www.iarla.org



Potential collaboration:

- Skills development: approaches for staff and users.
- Knowledge sharing: of best practice and lessons learnt.
- Benchmarking: regarding the use of these services.
- Common standards: to support interoperability between VRRs.



VRR International Sprint Relay Symposium

IARLA International Sprint Relay Symposium

- Held virtually in October 2022.
- **Spanned the globe** through a series of three connected, sequential, and iterative seminars in Australia/ New Zealand, Europe, and North America.
- Community-driven toolkit for the development and delivery of Virtual Reading Room services amongst collection-holding institutions: <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/vrr-toolkit/>

Next Steps:

- International directory of VRRs
- Raising awareness amongst the research community
- Focus on sustainability of VRRs/ VTSs, issues around copyright and licencing, as well as on frameworks and best practice



Access the VRR toolkit

RLUK



IARLA



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