

# SMALLER CAN BE BEAUTIFUL: MAXIMISING ELECTRONIC JOURNALS IN SMALL TO MEDIUM-SIZED INSTITUTIONS

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*Electronic journal development and delivery is often viewed as the remit of large, research led universities. Small to medium-sized institutions, both within the higher education sector and beyond, can also maximise collections, transform learning and teaching, and improve access to information, through the effective management of electronic journals and resources. This paper explores the strategies developed by Edge Hill to manage and develop e-journal services to a primarily learning and teaching based academic community. It will also focus on the impact e-journals can have on teaching and learning strategies, student skills development and the role of Library and Information Services (LIS) staff.*

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## **Introduction: identifying the issues**

Small to medium-sized institutions, whether Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Colleges, Special Libraries etc., are often viewed as small fry in the world of service development, usually because of financial or human resource constraints. However, in smaller organisations – whatever the sector – it can be easier to innovate and to manage change more effectively. This article focuses on the sea change that has occurred in one such organisation – Edge Hill, a Higher Education Institution in the North West of England – with the introduction and proactive development of electronic journals. Outlined in this paper is the development process, by which smaller institutions can successfully implement electronic journal services, but also focuses crucially on the issue of promotion and strategy. The impact of electronic information sources (EIS) – including electronic journals – on the work of library and information service professionals across sectors has been recognised by projects such as IMPEL 2 but many of the services currently available are not being used to their full potential.<sup>1</sup> This has been further reinforced by the recent JISC *User behaviour monitoring and evaluation framework*, first cycle annual report.<sup>2</sup> Initial findings from this snapshot of EIS use within the higher education sector question LIS ability to promote services such as electronic journals. The report emphasises that EIS are not extensively used by staff and students in higher education and are not being integrated into the curriculum. In a survey of over 100 first year undergraduates only 0.98% used electronic journals, with this figure rising to 3.87% for other student years. We must ask, – do the usage statistics warrant the cost and time spent on electronic journals and what can be done about it?

**The context**

Edge Hill has 7,000 students on a range of degree and diploma courses and a further 5,000 on professional development programmes. Library and Information Services is a converged learning services provider (consisting of library and the user support and training arm of Information Communication Technology(ICT)) based on three sites. In the past two years a strong culture of learning support and active curriculum involvement has been developed, including a strategy to integrate the use of electronic learning resources within programmes in order to promote full and appropriate utilisation and to enhance the students’ skills and learning experiences.

**Why electronic journals?**

An interest in electronic journals deals began at Edge Hill in 1998 with the view that such resources could significantly increase existing printed collections with several perceived benefits – flexibility, remote access, plus manageable costs within available budgets after prioritisation. This led to the rapid expansion of collections with 2,600 electronic titles by January 2001 in comparison with 650 current print subscriptions. The purchasing of the new format was, however, only the beginning of the formulation of a strategy to ensure best value. The electronic journals are managed, accessed and promoted via the LIS web pages (*See Figure 1*) and via the OPAC, with an emphasis on large, relevant searchable collections that provide good value for money and are interlinked with subject

areas and curriculum developments. Dissemination of the new service was initially through workshops, academic liaison, and remote access promotion. Such service development, made possible through the prioritisation of existing resources and the availability of good deals for smaller institutions, has led in part to the levelling of the playing field with larger institutions. However, there are still management issues –supporting remote access, how to be seamless, and the need for constant updating.

**Promotion or embedding?**

A great deal of literature has focused on the management and development of electronic collections but not on promotion and user behaviour. The frustration of LIS professionals attempting to encourage use is evident in this JISC report extract:

*‘what staggers me is although we feel we’re trying to promote these electronic resources...we stick up posters and do information skills sessions or user education, whatever you call it, until we are blue in the face...we do a lot of help sheets, we promote things through websites, we try and find as many different ways as we can...we know there’s a really big audience out there who really haven’t got to grips with it...’<sup>3</sup>*

LIS professionals must ask, how effective are the “usual” methods – leaflets, posters, offering training sessions? From the JISC research and the IMPEL 2 project findings, it becomes clear that information skills and contextualisation are the real issues. EIS should be linked to the curriculum, integrated with learning and

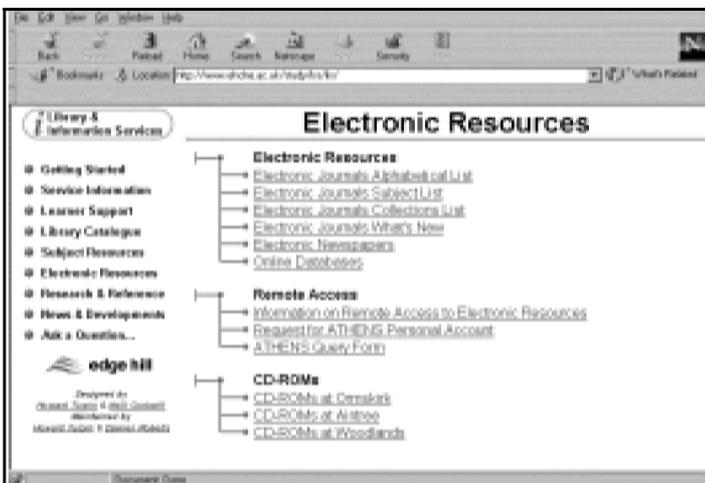


Figure 1

teaching methods and strategies, and not simply viewed as “add ons”. EIS need to be seen as relevant to the subject, if students are to use them and as academics are the gatekeepers to the subject and the curriculum, they have a privileged relationship with our users. Consequently, the promotion or embedding of EIS into the learning process must begin with partnership.

**Changing roles**

This realisation has led to increased involvement in course developments,

increased liaison with subject areas and increased 'learning support', 'user education' or 'teaching', depending on your preferred terminology. At Edge Hill there has undoubtedly been a tangible shift from demonstrating information sources to course design, delivery and some assessment. This has clearly been enabled by the rapid growth of affordable EIS, and particularly by electronic journals, for this new format has opened up new ways of learning and led to the recognition of the need for information and ICT skills in many departments. Undoubtedly, 'Learning networks are transforming teaching and learning relationships, opportunities and outcomes'<sup>4</sup> and as a result 'students need new and different information resources, skills, roles and relationships.'<sup>5</sup> LIS professionals also need new skills, roles and relationships especially in relation to teaching and learning and networked learning support. EIS development provides an opportunity for the reinvention of roles and the repositioning of individuals and departments within existing structures that are themselves constantly shifting.

### Strategies for Collaboration

IMPEL 2 suggests that the aim of LIS is to 'encourage formal and informal links between information services, computing services, academic staff and students'<sup>6</sup>. In order to engage successfully with the curriculum and improve students' learning experiences, we need to do far more than 'encourage.' We need to seek out proactively relationships, opportunities for collaboration and new relationships. Instead of viewing it as integrating electronic journals into the learning process (or EIS in their broadest sense), we can see it as integrating transferable skills. Integration can take many forms and no one mode is 'best' but rather a mixed mode approach can prove most successful, as it can meet a range of learning needs and styles. The following modes have been implemented across various subject areas at Edge Hill:

- electronic journals/collections on reading lists;
- resource discovery encouraged;
- sections in module handbooks;
- web page collaboration/ faculty links;
- integration into virtual learning environments e.g. WebCT;
- one-off workshops;

- modules integrating key skills;
- emphasis on critical evaluation.

In terms of direct curriculum involvement, a variety of models of collaboration are also possible:

- little or no discussion with tutor;
- discussion with tutor re: outcomes and content but tutor not present;
- tutor present;
- tutor supporting/ developing own skills and confidence;
- tutor collaborating;
- learning support staff supporting;
- learning support staff providing advice, materials, web pages and electronic resources.

Different modes and models of integration and collaboration will clearly work with different subjects, academics and groups. Experimentation and creative discussion are needed to progress teaching and learning strategies, if EIS are to be truly embedded and if students' use of electronic journals is to be relevant and valuable.

### The impact of virtual learning environments (VLEs)

A recent feature of the Internet has been the development and growth of VLEs or course delivery systems. It is interesting to look at the growth of VLEs in relation to electronic journal development and changing roles within the LIS profession. Typically these systems will include course materials, assessment facilities, conferencing and chat software, as well as management tools for student administration and monitoring<sup>7</sup>. They are all relatively new but their popularity is increasing rapidly. WebCT, for example, claims that in February 2000 it had over 5.2 million student accounts in over 1150 institutions and 51 countries<sup>8</sup>. WebCt was adopted at Edge Hill as its VLE in 1999 and now has 15 courses with VLEs and around 1600 students registered as course users. WebCT is currently being used at Edge Hill as either a distance learning course tool or to support and add value to more 'traditional' modes of delivery.

The emergence of VLEs offers a further opportunity for growth and the repositioning of roles. It is interlinked with the development and embedding of EIS as it appears to be an ideal match, ensuring seamless accessibility and

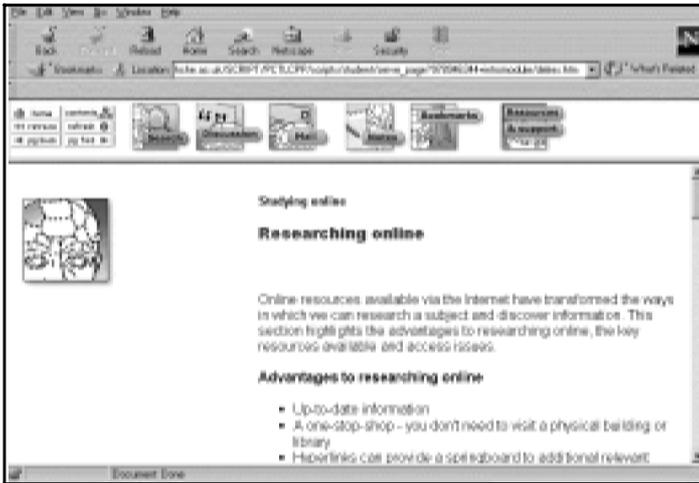


Figure 2

contextualisation to information. For example, electronic resources can be embedded within course materials at the point of need or a resources section can be designed and included to encourage student exploration and identification of their own resources. One example of the marrying of EIS and VLE can be seen in the Postgraduate Certificate for Teaching and Learning in a Clinical Setting, delivered at a distance via WebCT to consultants and dentists. The Resources and Support section encourages resource discovery and online research with discussion, support and interaction made possible through online materials, e-mail and an online discussion area. See Figure 2 for an example of the WebCT pages.

### Issues to consider

LIS professionals in whatever sector, in whatever size of organisation, must ask:

- Are we managing electronic journals for best value and to best effect?
- Are we ensuring most effective and appropriate use of electronic journals?
- Are the tried and tested ways of promotion working?

Small to medium sized institutions can benefit enormously from both current deals and from seizing the opportunity to reinvent services and roles within LIS and across institutions. EIS and VLEs represent a great challenge and opportunity to LIS particularly in the higher education sector but not exclusively so. Change has become the norm with electronic access to remote sources (embodied in the rise of

electronic journals) and the pressure to provide more services with fewer resources bringing new structures, the need for additional skills for staff and users and the need for collaboration with a diverse range of different groups.<sup>9</sup> The JISC recommendations highlight:

- liaison between **all stakeholders**;
- EIS need to be **embedded** in course design and delivery;
- **collaborative** approach between LIS and academics
- the consideration of **user skills**;

- that LIS professionals be more creative and innovative;
- that we help students develop **evaluative/critical skills**.<sup>10</sup>

In order to grasp the intrinsically interlinked opportunities offered by electronic journals and VLEs we must explore contextualisation and collaboration and see the issue as one of embedding skills through new relationships with the variety of stakeholders, rather than simply a matter of access and promotion.

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