E-books in academic libraries: lessons learned and new challenges

Based on breakout sessions held at the 32nd UKSG Conference, Torquay, March/April 2009

The breakout sessions were aimed at library staff with some experience of managing e-books, or anyone seeking an overview of issues being faced by libraries.

We aimed to give a wide-ranging overview of the main issues associated with managing and administering e-book in libraries, looking at purchasing models, cataloguing and licensing issues, software tools (e.g. ERMS and link resolvers), and how staff are adapting. Through open discussion we also looked for examples of best practice and lessons that can be learned from e-journal management.

Before the event we circulated an informal survey to delegates who had signed up to our breakout sessions, in order to find out more about current practices in libraries as well as the main topics attendees would like to see addressed. We then incorporated the results of that survey into our presentation.

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We all know why we are buying e-books! (Don't we?)

In a questionnaire sent out to delegates prior to the workshop we had suggested a number of reasons for buying e-books and asked the respondents to rank them; the results (with 1 being the highest) were as follows:

1. Convenience for the user (24/7 and off-campus access)
2. Strategic move towards electronic access
3. To satisfy student demand for more copies
4. Searchability
5. Lack of space on shelves for more print copies.

Librarians obviously have a clear view of the benefits of e-books, but, in academic libraries, comments showed that customers (students, researchers, academic staff) do still appear to be very attached to print, and it is clear that in many institutions the move to e-book provision is being driven more by the library than by user demand.

However, after a slow start, e-books are becoming an integral part of academic library provision in the UK. As libraries acquire more and more e-book titles, they are encountering various challenges; some similar to those experienced when managing e-journals, others very different.

The acquisitions process

The lack of a single 'E-books In Print' cross-publisher portal that allows libraries to search for available e-book content means that it can be extremely difficult to find out which titles are available as e-books, which platforms they are available on and what they cost. In the absence of such a service, libraries are making use of book suppliers' and aggregators' databases, but these are restricted to the publishers that are currently

available through that supplier, so often searches have to be duplicated across a number of sites. With publishers, book suppliers, serials agents and other intermediaries all selling to libraries, the picture can get very confusing and the availability of some titles as e-books might well be missed by some libraries. Until a cross-publisher portal is developed, publishers need to improve the visibility of e-book information on their websites in order to maximize sales. Libraries can't buy what they don't know about!

In most libraries, one-off e-books are purchased from mainstream library book suppliers by the same acquisitions staff who order print books. E-books are routinely purchased alongside print copies, so the ability to search for both formats in a single portal is a major efficiency gain.

In questionnaire responses, almost 90% of respondents said they preferred the one-off purchase model to the subscription model, though some choose to take out subscriptions to titles that are likely to be updated regularly. This can affect which library staff deal with the work, with subscription purchases more likely to be handled by serials/e-resources than book acquisitions staff. As has been learnt from working with e-journals, reskilling of staff is a key issue for libraries. The skills set needs to be broadened to allow staff to move freely between administering the print and online versions. As the boundaries between books and journals blur, so might any boundaries that exist between acquisitions and serials teams in libraries.

Statistically, the majority of e-book expenditure at present is on subscription titles. This may be a reflection of the fact that libraries are purchasing subscription packages to build critical mass, but the fact that they are currently purchasing in this way may not be an accurate indicator of how they will purchase titles in the future. It is worth remembering that the purchasing model chosen may also depend on how the purchase is funded, for example year-end money, one-off gifts or benefactions.

When it comes to integrating e-books into long-term collection development policies there is no clearly prevalent model, with libraries adopting a range of differing local policies. For example, at Leeds, the number of print copies purchased is reduced by one if an e-book is available to purchase. However, as e-books tend to be priced at the equivalent of a hardback book (+ VAT), this does not offer a financial saving unless the number of print copies is substantially reduced. It does however widen access greatly. As budgets in many institutions come under increasing pressure, these purchasing guidelines may have to be revised.

Commercial availability is another of the key factors affecting library purchasing of e-books. Much of the content that is currently being purchased is scholarly monographic material, not the core textbooks that are really needed by library customers. It has long been understood that publishers rely on the revenue they get from selling textbooks direct to students. According to the Publishers Association's Academic & Professional Market Statistics, undergraduate student expenditure on books in the UK amounts to over £200m per year, so it is understandable that publishers are not yet making e-textbook material widely available in electronic format. However, current market forces mean that it is necessary for both publishers and libraries to review the model. In the UK, JISC has recently embarked on the JISC e-Textbook Project, engaging with both libraries and publishers to examine current provision and assess the potential sustainability of a range of business models for e-textbook provision, through a series of trials.

Some UK libraries are digitizing their print holdings under the new CLA licence, and this could lead to the creation of increasing amounts of bespoke lecturer-selected packages of content. At both Leeds and York the libraries are starting to digitize chapters of high-demand materials. Some libraries are also starting to look at the possibility of rental of chapters from aggregators to meet specific peaks of demand or inter-library loan requests.

Preferred purchasing models

In the pre-workshop questionnaire we suggested a number of purchasing models which respondents had been asked to rank in order of preference; the results (with 1 being the highest) were as follows:

1. Individual titles purchased via aggregator
2. Individual titles purchased direct from publisher
3. Aggregator packages
4. Publisher packages
5. Reader-driven acquisition (purchase triggered by use).

These preferences appear to be changing over time. Certainly at York, we first acquired several publisher and aggregator packages, enabling us to build a substantial e-book collection fairly rapidly. We then began to acquire individual titles which were either in high demand as print books, or which were identified on reading lists as being 'core' or 'essential'. However, as already mentioned, it is time-consuming to establish whether a title is available as an e-book, on which platform(s), and how much it costs. We are now beginning a pilot to try reader-driven acquisition, where thousands of titles will be opened up to our users, and the library will only purchase what is actually being used – ' just in time' acquisition rather than 'just in case'.

Cataloguing and metadata issues

It is essential that all individual e-books are catalogued and available via the library OPAC, and that good-quality MARC records should be provided to libraries when they purchase packages. As with e-journals, there can be an issue of bulk deletions or withdrawals if a package is cancelled, so library management systems need to be capable of dealing with bulk uploads and bulk deletions. Practice varies among libraries as to whether the e-book version of a title should have a separate MARC record to the print. Some consider individual catalogue records for print and e-books to be essential, because merged records generate too much work in adding (and deleting) links to the e-book version; separate records allow for much more efficient bulk uploading and deletion. However, 'easier for the library' is not necessarily 'easier for the customer'. Merged records allow customers to retrieve a single search result showing them both print and e-book formats, making the search and retrieval experience more straightforward. Separate eISBN and ISBN numbers for the same titles are vital in order to facilitate accurate linking.

What is clear is that libraries need to work closely with publishers and aggregators to ensure timely notification of titles being added or removed from packages, which will allow catalogue edits to be made and links from virtual learning environments (VLEs) or similar to be updated.

The transient nature of some e-book content is one of the main reasons that very few libraries catalogue freely available e-books; some will catalogue those which appear on reading lists or are otherwise recommended, but most don't have the resources to do more than that.

Platforms and licence management

Libraries try to limit the number of platforms that they use, if possible. However, if content is only available on one specific platform, they might be obliged to purchase from that – and soon find themselves in the situation of having more platforms than they would have wished. They also try not to purchase the same title from multiple platforms, though this can sometimes be difficult to avoid. More platforms also, of course, mean more annual platform fees.

As library e-book collections continue to expand, platform stability will be a further key issue of concern for libraries.

Different workflows are needed if you have multi-platforms, creating an extra layer of complexity for the staff dealing with the purchases. Furthermore, experience with e-journals has shown that having titles available on different platforms creates greater problems in explaining access rights to customers.

Delegates at the breakout sessions shared their experience of publicising these differing licence terms (e.g. Terms & Conditions, number of concurrent users, printing/download restrictions) to library customers. Very few felt that their library was achieving this successfully. These comments reflect some of the responses to the pre-workshop questionnaire and comments in the breakout sessions:

"We just do not! I guess we have more e-journal platforms and we just hope the users will find the platforms intuitive."

"We have nine different platforms, and have created an explanatory webpage for each one."

"We try to explain them if they ask."

"With some difficulty – it's not straightforward; neither is describing and supporting users in getting to grips with the functional and operational differences between the platforms."

"Special homepage called 'How to use e-books' with examples of platforms. It is not possible to explain all and everything."

"The differences in printing/cut-and-paste allow-ances can be particularly difficult to explain, and for users to understand."

"We are concerned that too many variations could actually turn users off using e-books."

One current e-book invitation to tender (ITT) document is taking a more proactive approach to this problem, and is specifying the terms and conditions that providers must agree to.

Use of ERMs

Many libraries have learned lessons managing e-journals and are using their Electronic Resource Management (ERM) system to record information regarding their e-book platforms. ERMs might be of help in keeping a record of individual e-book titles we buy in perpetuity. They can also be used by the library and its customers to view lists of titles available at a particular site – providing the knowledge base is accurate and up to date. Ideally, the ERM will share the same knowledge base as the link resolver to ensure consistency of data.

E-Journal? E-book? Who cares?

This use of ERMs is one part of libraries' strategies to make searching of content as seamless as possible for their customers. Students are interested in content, *not* format; if they have to know whether something is a journal article or a book chapter in order to search for it effectively, the potential discoverability of resources is adversely affected. Interestingly, it could be argued that this 'seamless' searching could, in part, account for low reported usage of e-books. Customers simply don't realize what it is they are finding in their search results!

In order to facilitate this 'seamless' searching it is crucial that e-book platforms adhere to inter-nationally recognized interoperability standards. Libraries have experience of using e-journals over a number of years and are able to apply that knowledge to e-book content. They want and need to integrate e-books into:

- library catalogues
- link resolvers
- federated search engines
- next-generation search and discovery tools, e.g. Primo, Verde, AquaBrowser.

Usage statistics

Librarians are now being pressed by their funders to justify what they are purchasing for their library. Used to calculating cost-per-usage statistics for e-journals, they are now being expected to do the same for e-books. However, there has been a slow adoption of COUNTER compliance by e-book publishers, meaning that it is more difficult to compare like with like.[1]

One problem that is more prevalent with e-books than e-journals is that, unlike journals which tend to be purchased for a whole calendar year, e-books can be purchased at any point during the year, so getting 'like for like' statistics easily is much more difficult. It is a great help if the statistics received include the purchase date as one of the data fields. However, this still presents extra complexity in calculating cost-per-usage metrics for e-books.

As institutions will ultimately have more e-book titles than journal subscriptions, the amount of time taken to collate and analyse usage statistics will increase exponentially.

Marketing your e-books

Libraries are very aware nowadays of the value of marketing in increasing usage of materials. Having MARC records in the catalogue is the most effective way of increasing use of e-books, and (rightly) customers expect to find title-by-title access in the OPAC. They are used to doing simple author-title searches for print books, and including e-book MARC records allows search results to include e-books too. As an example of the value of MARC records, one library reported that they had the ebrary Academic Complete collection for 18 months before they were able to load MARC records into their catalogue, after which usage tripled.

Libraries want to be able to brand e-book plat-forms so that users realize who is providing them, and suppliers are urged to build this facility into their platform functionality.

It is also vital for libraries to engage with academics to ensure that they realize the potential and availability of e-books, in order that they can recommend them to their students.

Some marketing ideas already tried successfully at different institutions include:

- having an 'e-book of the month' on the homepage (where the title is randomly generated)

- intercepting library customers to mention e-books to them and offer a demo
- a dummy print book placed on the shelf in the appropriate place, advertising the availability of the e-version
- an e-books event is being considered at one library, after a recent successful e-resources workshop, where a variety of publishers/vendors were represented.

So, why have e-books been relatively slow to take off in libraries? Is it down to some of the issues outlined above – or could there be another reason?

> *"If sex were invented tomorrow, the species would be extinct before the skeptics gave it a try. Seemingly by nature, humanity is slow to embrace innovation. We are disposed to resist disruption of the familiar, clinging against all odds to the comforts of sameness."* [2]

References

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