

The Challenge of ebooks (JISC) project

Curation of ebooks: Case study

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Background to ebooks in the University of Newcastle

The University of Newcastle were early adopter of ebooks and have more than a decade of experience of working with these resources. The early mismatch between publishers' offerings (largely e-reference) and users' needs (e-textbook) meant that usage was initially low, but rose considerably when e-textbooks and other e-book collections purchased. The library currently provides access to over half a million ebooks and they were early implementers of Patron Driven Acquisition (PDA) policies.

Why ebooks-what problems do they solve?

The library wants its users to have access to all core materials at the time and point of need. Ebooks are a vital aid to fulfilling this aim as they provide levels of access that it would be impossible to emulate with print alone.

Ease of access:

Students are now very comfortable with using e-journals so it felt a natural progression to move into ebooks.

Physical access

While 24/7 opening during term time provides enhanced access to print collections, e-access provides 24/7/365 and ensures that many users can access the same resources at the same time.

Concentrated demand over short time scales

large numbers of students may require access to chapters or sections of books at the same time, for example, when they are preparing for a seminar. The library could never buy sufficient numbers of paper copies to satisfy this demand, and as the usage period is intense but relatively brief, it would be nigh on impossible to optimise the loan periods of print copies to match demand.

Access to research materials

Final year undergraduates are amongst the heaviest users of the PDA e-book services. The library suspects that this is linked to their dissertation studies. It may also be coincidental that the emergence of PDA has coincided with a marked decline in Inter-library loan requests for monographs, but they consider it highly likely that final year students are using PDA instead of ILL. Students also comment that the ebook collections purchases are really helpful.

Buying resources which readers want to use

Ebooks are greatly enhancing the range and extent of book collections. Implementing PDA systems (patron acquisition) has allowed the library to move from a just-in-case stock acquisition model to a just-in-time model. Purchase models for print materials are largely based on academic staff recommendations augmented by library selection to build coherent collections. However, in common with many academic libraries, relegation activity suggests that significant numbers of books purchased under just-in-time provision will never be loaned. At times of budget pressure, it is hard to justify investing so much resource on what are effectively speculative purchases. PDA is ensuring higher net usage, user demands are being met more effectively and satisfaction amongst users has increased. The first year of

PDA operation was challenging, as the initial usage was very high and the library had to work closely with the service provider to ensure that spending patterns became sustainable.

How successful have ebooks been in addressing those issues?

Usage and adoption figures of ebook show the collections are very well used especially the PDA. It is hard to measure the impact of ebooks on learning and teaching activities as there are so many other factors to be taken into account. However, virtually all academic schools at Newcastle are using PDA and it has been noted that the NSS scores for 6 of the top 10 schools using PDA increased this year. It is essential that the library does everything it can to secure good NSS results. By working in partnership with academic colleagues to deploy ebooks where there are large numbers of students requiring access to the same material, and allowing students a say in which ebooks are purchased, the library feels it is making serious efforts to address the perennial challenge of responding to “there aren’t enough books” comments. PDA has attracted very positive feedback from end users and the service has now been extended to provide PDA for print books using a fast track request system.

Scope of ebooks

- E-textbooks: E-book purchases are mostly etextbook - the digital equivalent of print books. This material has traditionally been the hardest to secure because publishers believed that licensing this material to libraries would have a negative impact on individual sales to students. Now that ebooks are now proving so popular in the general marketplace, provision of academic material is beginning to improve.
- Mixed collections: the EEBO and ECCO databases have been extraordinarily popular from the outset. The ACLS history collection is also very popular.
- Publishers’ collections: The library was wary of these initially as they were uncertain whether they would attract sufficient interest. However, having trialled a number of collections and obtained very favourable responses, they have now purchased collections such as those offered by Springer and RSC.
- Reference materials: only a limited amount of this material is purchased, as they tend not to attract much use.
- Hybrid products: the most popular example of this material is Knovel, which is bought for the engineering schools.
- Individual ebooks are bought at title level.
- VLE – where appropriate, lecturers can upload selected e-chapters which have been licenced for use on a specific module.

Scale

The library has around half a million ebooks – 350,000 owned or leased and the rest exposed through our PDA service. There are currently circa 1.2million print books so the ecollections account for circa 30% of the total book collections.

Ebooks are bought in variety of models:

- Publisher collections - Springer ebooks, RSC ebooks ORO Oxford language dictionaries
- Individual title level through – Taylor & Francis, OECD statistics, Safari books
- Aggregator collections – via Ovid, DawsonEra

- PDA via EBL
- anything the library can source that will fit specific requirements

Allocating resources for ebooks

Allocating resources for ebooks is becoming quite challenging as many of the collections are sold as annual subscriptions, and so behave just like serials, plus of course they attract VAT. Traditionally, when allocating budgets, serial subscriptions were allocated first and the flexible portion of the resource budget was what was left for books and AV. In the early days, circa 2002, the library struggled to spend the funds allocated for ebooks, whereas now, the challenge is in juggling budgets to ensure that there is enough to go round. PDA limits have to be carefully controlled; otherwise they could absorb the lion's share of the budget. Currently, the library spends between £300,000-£350,000 on ebooks and between £400,000-£500,000 on print books. It would be very easy to envisage a time when the split is 50:50 and at some point in the next 5yrs, for e-book spend to exceed print.

Ebook usage is analysed at the end of the academic year to see if subscribed content is earning its keep. E-book metrics are still a work in progress, and there is still some variation in what is reported. Some publishers are better than others at producing COUNTER compliant statistics, and the library is very wary of purchasing products where good usage statistics are not available. There is really no excuse for not providing them.

The management – ‘curation’ of ebooks.

Workflow

Ebook purchases are now well embedded in acquisitions workflow, and the main differences are with PDA, where there is more monitoring and approval of expenditure. New products are trialled throughout the academic year, and liaison staff work closely with colleagues in technical services and digital library services to ensure that any new collections being considered for purchase are compatible with library systems.

Training

The shift to e has inevitably required staff to enhance their IT skills, but experience gained from managing e-journals has greatly assisted the embedding of ebooks.

The declining work involved in maintaining print collections has allowed the focus to be shifted into e-collection maintenance.

How ebooks are discovered and accessed

In the early days, when the library was trying to build its e-collections, the main route in to collections was via publishers or vendors websites. Where bibliographic records were available, they tended to be poor in quality, and where large collections were involved, it was impractical to embark on in-house cataloguing. However, experience suggested that where title level bibliographic records were available in the catalogue, usage of ebooks was much better. This is exemplified by the difference in usage of major collections like EEBO and ECCO, where usage soared once bibliographic data was loaded. Now it would be unthinkable to acquire ebook content without bibliographic data. The implementation of

our discovery layer, PRIMO, this academic year, has already seen a significant increase in usage of all our e-resources as they are being exposed much more thoroughly than they were via the standard catalogue interface.

Issues and lessons learnt

- The multiplicity of interfaces and platforms for e-content can be very off-putting to library users, and liaison librarians spend a lot of time helping users become proficient in exploiting an ever-expanding range of e-resources.
- It is essential to ensure that out-of-hours staff feel comfortable and confident responding to queries about e-resources as users don't appreciate having to wait for help until the day staff are back.
- It was initially thought that the growth of the e-library would lead to a reduction in the number of users visiting the physical library. Yet whilst usage of e-resources increases significantly year on year, so does footfall in the physical library.
- PDA has been like a breath of fresh air and despite the need for care in managing the expenditure; the library is committed to retaining an element of PDA in its book acquisition policy.
- PDA is good for the NSS.
- PDA profiling and expenditure models: it is important to invest the time to profile your PDA offering and manage the risk. Develop systems to ensure that the money allocated does not go all in one go. Profile the content to ensure that as far as possible, the publishers and subjects are aligned to your subject interests.
- If you are concerned about the speed or ease with which ebooks are purchased – which will impact on how long your funding lasts -talk to the vendor. There ought to be flexibility to adjust the trigger point for purchases to match your institutional need.
- Monitor ebook usage: ideally, you need to be able to identify which schools or departments are using the service in order to link feedback to NSS scores. Just knowing the subject area of the book is not enough as some subjects, such as management, can be relevant to departments across several faculties.
- Be prepared to experiment with PDA, ideally with some ring-fenced project funds, preferably for a full academic year. The knowledge gained from this experience will make it much easier to incorporate a PDA strand in the general bookfund.

Thoughts for the future

For creators

- Publishers initially developed business models for ebooks based on print sales models. This created a disjoint between what libraries required and what publishers made available. Rather than see e-book sales to libraries as a threat to sales to students, publishers should see e-book sales to libraries as an opportunity to develop new or complementary revenue streams, especially when most surveys of student book buying habits suggest they buy as few as they possibly can.
- In the print world, academic text books are always going out of print, which causes huge frustration to librarians when academics still wish to reference such material.

In the e-book world, this should never really happen, which would save an enormous amount of time and money spent scouring out of print suppliers web sites.

- More harmonisation and standardisation of in platforms – end users don't really distinguish between books and journals. E-journal platforms have had more time to develop, and are generally more sophisticated and more intuitive than e-book platforms. Where publishers offer both e-journals and ebooks they should ideally be all offered via the e-journal platform.
- As the e-world becomes more the norm, we should see some clear water emerging between print and emodels. Thus far, e-texts have been cloned from print, whereas we ought to see some innovative e-products which offer views and options which were never available in print. As a generation of authors and creators who have more experience of e than print moves into the workplace, we should see some truly innovative developments.
- New licencing arrangements to make it easier to accommodate students working or based overseas, especially when these are relatively small scale activities, would be much appreciated
- Create more open access textbooks, with the capacity to add and track comments, annotations and discussions. The print heritage should not restrict the capacity of the e-environment to innovate and expand.

For curators

- There is still much we need to learn about what users want from ebooks and how they use them.
- Reliable ways to measure the impact of ebooks on learning and teaching would be useful. Demonstrating impact and value is vital in the current climate but evidence of the impact of ebooks is largely speculative and data is time-consuming to collect. Qualitative and quantitative data is needed.
- New need the time and resources to be early adopters and experimenters.
- Preferred platforms: The library would welcome research into the devices used by students to access ebooks. Tablets appear to be the dominant device, but what are students using? Where and what are they downloading, and how are they using it? Are there functions they would like to see which are not currently available? Which publisher/vendor products best meet their needs?