UKSG

E-book purchasing: the Open University's experience

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The Open University's Library Service has witnessed a huge shift away from print in order to at first drive and then meet the growing demand for e-books. Processes and workflows have grown responsively and almost organically as Library staff strive to manage this change operationally on what has felt like an internal and external landscape of shifting sands. This article presents a case study that discusses issues faced by Open University Library Services around the acquisition of e-books and some of the ways that these issues have been, and continue to be addressed. It concludes that the best solution to meet future demand for e-books from students, tutors and researchers lies in the collective expression of requirements and collaborative provision of solutions across all relevant sectors of the information supply chain.

With the introduction of a policy to buy e-books rather than print, The Open University Library Service's Content and Licensing Team has worked hard to ensure that processes change and grow to enable us to deal with the new complexities of e-book acquisition and use.

This article outlines the experience of e-book acquisition at the Open University Library, how staff there cope with the fast changing and unstable business environment, growing demand from students and academics and how we evaluate and address the University's needs in the context of course development, learning, teaching and research.

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The Open University and its Library

The Open University is the UK's largest distance learning institution with over 200,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students, nearly 33,000 (16.5%) of whom have a disability. The University delivers a broad curriculum. Most courses are delivered online and students have no need to visit any of the University's physical sites. Courses are developed by specially appointed course teams, and a module can be in presentation, with periodic revision, for up to ten years. In order to give our students a seamless study experience, third-party content is often used in the course, embedded alongside Open University-authored content, presented as course packs or linked to on the course Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) site.

CLAIRE GRACE
Head of Content and
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Staff in the Library's Content and Licensing Team source appropriate new content to recommend to subject librarians and academics. They negotiate with publishers on price and licence terms. They also evaluate existing resources to make sure they continue to meet changing needs and provide value for money. Their role is to inform and influence publishers and information providers at a strategic level; working in a collaborative way to meet current and future needs.

High quality content is sourced and licensed in a wide range of formats, such as sound, visual images and video, as well as text. Publishers are approached for flexible licence terms to meet changing needs. However, this has been very challenging when it comes to e-book acquisition.

"Publishers are approached for flexible licence terms to meet changing needs."

How and where we purchase e-books

We have been trying different ways of acquiring e-books. The 'easy' way has been to purchase them as collections from publishers. The advantage of this model is that publishers normally offer unlimited user access, which is really key for a university with large student numbers. However, we also have evidence that shows that this type of purchase often comes with a 'long tail' of titles that are not well used. Content providers often argue that if we were only purchasing the well-used titles, we would probably pay the same but by taking the whole package, we are providing a good range and breadth of content. This can be true and such packages do help us address the wider and sometimes unforseen needs of students. We of course need to assess the relevance of the titles in a package as well as their quantity! Some packages provide better value for money than others and, increasingly, we find that it is hard to justify the up-front spend to provide 'just in case' access for purchased e-books that might then sit on our virtual shelves in the same way that print books have sat on our physical shelves.

> "… we find that it is hard to justify the up-front spend to provide 'just in case' access …"

There is also a need to purchase individual e-books. These are often not available as part of an existing package or only available as part of a package, so in order to purchase the relevant titles we have to purchase others that are not required too. They can be required for research, course production or student use and it is crucial that we know why the book has been requested before we begin the process to acquire it. The Content and Licensing Team is spending increasing time and effort on individual e-book purchases as the complexity of the process and volume of requests increases.

Before ordering any e-book, clarification must be obtained about how the book content is going to be used. This helps us to determine the most appropriate place and method of purchase. There are very different decisions to be made for e-books requested for research, course production and student use, and when it goes wrong it can be catastrophic! Imagine 500 students on a course trying to access a library e-book purchased on a single user licence! We have produced a checklist that outlines the questions that must be asked in different scenarios, namely:

1) All students on the module will need to read the whole book.

2) All students on the module will need to read a single chapter of the book.

3) All students on the module will need to read more than one chapter of the book.

4) The book will be one of a small selection. Students will be able to elect to study a particular option for which each book will be core.

5) The book will be background reading.

6) Students will be required to search the library and find relevant e-books in their subject area.

> "… when it goes wrong it can be catastrophic!"

7) The book is for personal research (don't expect students to be interested in it).

8) The book is for a research team.

9) The book is required to write the module and then students will be expected to make some use of it too.

If a book is requested for research purposes or course writing, the policy is to default to the e-version on the best most cost-effective licence. Sometimes this will mean buying a single user licence but the decision depends on the subject area and whether the book title is assessed as being of possible wider interest to students. Obtaining print is of course not an option for student use!

Where a book that has been chosen as essential reading in a course is only available on a limited user licence, we will compare the market and try to negotiate with suppliers to obtain suitable multi-user access. For example, if a book sold on an aggregator platform is needed for a course with 400 students for essential reading, we will try to negotiate a multiple concurrent user licence with the aggregator or direct with the publisher, and pay for that access.

If the publisher will not sell the access through their normal library platform route we have to refer the course team to our University Licensing and Acquisitions Department to source and pay for the title as a textbook, delivered on a major e-textbook platform. Access to the title is then completely separate to the Library's content.

> "More publishers are now offering individual e-book purchase options …"

We tend to favour purchasing e-books directly from publishers, as they own the rights for their own titles, making them, in their own words, 'DRM-free' (i.e. free from digital rights management issues). They can therefore offer better, more flexible licence terms: unlimited concurrent access, content can be imbedded into course packs, titles can be downloaded. More publishers are now offering individual e-book purchase options which are welcomed because this helps us to respond quickly to individual needs.

In many other cases, we purchase from e-book aggregators who supply e-books from multiple publishers. New suppliers, platforms and models have been assessed as they have become available in this extremely fast-changing and volatile area of the e-book market. The rapid growth of e-book availability through aggregators has driven up the functionality of the platforms and the range of licence options available to libraries. We are still evaluating options for subscription vs purchase, packages vs individual titles, trialling models such as patron or demand-driven acquisition (PDA or DDA) and evidence-based purchase with a view to developing a clearer strategy for e-book purchase at the Open University. In practical terms, depending on the answers to our initial questions about how the book is going to be used, we check availability from several e-book aggregators. We keep a checklist of our preferred and least preferred options:

Likes:

- multi-concurrent access option

- clear and easy to understand options for printing multiple pages

- no personal login needed when downloading and copying

- books can be downloaded to mobile devices

- clear options for purchasing additional copies when usage limits reached

- EPUB format

- platform and content is fully accessible

- excellent MARC records, data available in OpenURL resolver and discovery system.

Dislikes:

- no multi-user access available

- only one page can be printed at a time

- need to download platform-specific software to read e-books offline

- unclear messages displayed to library users or automatic cut off when usage limits reached

- platform and/or content is not accessible

- no metadata available.

We have solicited and assessed feedback from library users to develop an ever changing list of preferred suppliers, both e-book aggregators and publishers. These suppliers have been assessed and reassessed against a checklist covering areas such as accessibility and usability, functionality, price and licence model. E-books are mainly ordered from the supplier who best meets our needs and the choice of supplier has changed as platforms and licence models have developed. We receive feedback via the Library Helpdesk about what Library users like and dislike about different e-book platforms, which we use to help inform our supplier assessments. Essentially, Library users expect 'Amazon-like' e-books, downloadable to handheld devices, available to read offline and kept for when they are needed. We have witnessed some huge improvements in how library-sourced e-books can be used compared to two years ago.

> "… there simply has not been enough stability in the market …"

However, there are still many factors preventing the Library Service from fully meeting user requirements for e-books. There are a lot of e-book platforms for our users to contend with. Whilst from this point of view it might have seemed better if we had chosen a single supplier and had a policy to only buy from them, there simply has not been enough stability in the market for us to have considered this as a viable option. Our favoured supplier of 12 months ago is not the same as our current favoured supplier, so the logical conclusion is that if we had had a single supplier policy, we would now be providing our users with a sub-standard service, both in the purchase and use of e-book content.

Publishers have developed their own platforms and so have e-book aggregators. There are platforms for 'library' e-books and platforms for 'e-textbooks'. E-books sit in silos which make no sense to students or other Library users. What's more, we have become increasingly aware of the amount of 'experimentation' that publishers are doing with business models which causes content to appear and disappear under different licence terms and on different platforms. This has the potential to damage our ability to meet the needs of course teams and students. We welcome the growth and availability of metadata about e-books in OpenURL resolvers and discovery systems. The University also buys e-textbooks but users want seamless authenticated access between them and the Library's content as well as content that students purchase themselves.

Current purchase process

In early 2013, the Content and Licensing Team undertook a major review of the Library's e-book ordering process with the aim of saving staff time but providing a more responsive service. A database has now been designed with a web form as its front end. All book requests will be sent via this web form, which becomes an online order form. Information from the requestor will automatically populate the database and alert library assistants via e-mail when a request is made. The current status of the order can be monitored easily for each title. The following flow chart shows the basic steps of the current book purchase process (Figure 1). The boxes displayed in blue are the two key stages required for e-book purchase which demand a large input of staff time.

> "E-books sit in silos which make no sense to students …"

Our first check is to see whether the book is available from the publisher. If it is, then it can sometimes take a while to obtain a price because not all publishers have this information available for librarians to look up themselves so we have to contact our account manager for this detail.

Once the direct-from-publisher option has been eliminated, data is needed about the availability from aggregators. Although we tend to favour the supplier we have assessed as most able to meet our needs, library assistants often have to compare the details from more than one e-book aggregator. It can take a considerable time for staff to check just a few book requests. There are some sources of e-book information designed to collate data about availability and pricing from different suppliers. We might be able to rely on these for our options appraisal, were they more comprehensive, so we welcome any initiatives
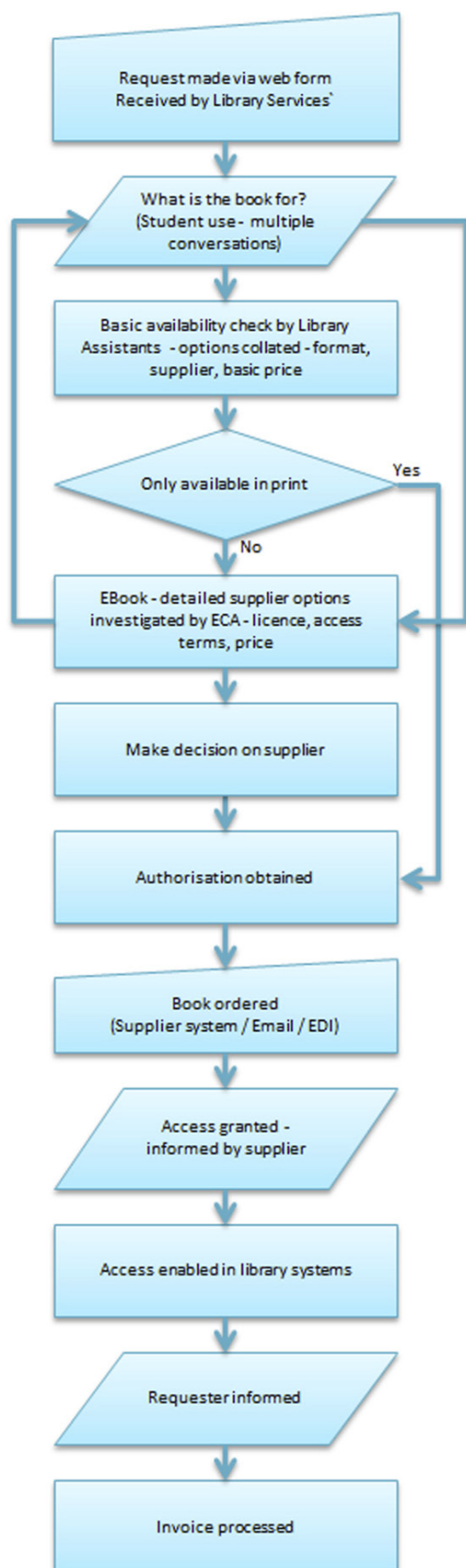
Figure 1. E-book order process workflow at the Open University

by companies, such as our subscription agent, to provide a single source access to comprehensive data. There is a huge need from libraries for a 'one stop' look-up service that supplies comprehensive, up-to-date, reliable data about e-book suppliers and availability, including licence and pricing options.

The e-book acquisition process also requires an investment of time in discussions between librarians and requestors to clarify the use of the book and identify the best possible solution. This tends to be more 'expensive' time as discussions are held between requestors and librarians rather than library assistants. Overall, the Content and Licensing Team has been spending 15% of its total available time on e-book acquisition, which is not sustainable.

> "… the Content and Licensing Team has been spending 15% of its total available time on e-book acquisition, which is not sustainable."

Conclusions

The e-book world continues to change and develop rapidly, in terms of its business models, methods of delivery and the way that the content is presented to the user. This has produced instability and volatility but also perhaps increased the rate of development by publishers and suppliers. Developments have progressed a long way to help us meet the growing demand for e-book content by library users. In this article, we have focused on the issues concerning the current acquisitions processes that we have been grappling with. Open University Library Services has also been trying different purchase models with different suppliers, for example, patron- or demand-driven acquisition (PDA/DDA), evidence-based acquisition, and assessment of lending versus purchase options, subscription versus purchase and package versus individual title purchase. As Terry Bucknell's study in 2010 evidenced[1], each has its place, and this is still true today.

In our efforts to improve the process to make it more sustainable and to provide a better service to meet the range of different expectations across the University, there is a need to take stock, to form a clearer and more strategic vision of where the e-book world is going. This should begin with the requirements and expectations currently being expressed by our 'customers', the library users: undergraduate and postgraduate students, academics, researchers, lecturers, course designers and others. We then need to predict a direction of travel.

"… there is a need to take stock, to form a clearer and more strategic vision of where the e-book world is going."

We need to ensure that we are working with publishers and aggregators to promote the reasons that we need them to provide robust, comprehensive evidence (such as usage data and turnaway reports) for us to use in evaluating options in order to decide whether it is good value for us to buy and own e-books, to keep them on our virtual shelves, or whether we should be funding access to a broader range of e-book content so that library users can find and use it when they need it. Furthermore, we need to harness our collective voice to articulate and present our requirements that in turn represent the needs of library users. We welcome opportunities presented for discussion among libraries to highlight the needs of their users with aggregators and publishers in the quest to improve our own experience of acquiring and using e-books.

Reference

1. Bucknell, T, The 'big deal' approach to acquiring e-books: a usage-based study, *Serials*, 2010, 23 (2), 126-134; DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/23126 (accessed 26 September 2013).

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