

Implementing e-resource access for alumni at King's College London: a case study

University libraries are increasingly considering ways to develop the library services offered to their alumni in response to growing demand. In particular, there has been a rising interest in how university libraries can extend access to e-resources to include provision of access for alumni, raising a number of challenging questions around the licensing of e-resources for alumni as well as access and funding considerations. This article describes the work carried out at King's College London to investigate extending e-resource access to alumni and the experience of implementing access to JSTOR in 2012. The article then examines some of the barriers that King's have faced in building on this work.

Introduction

Increasingly, universities are exploring ways in which they can support their goals and objectives through their relationships with a range of partners and stakeholders. In today's competitive market in which students are expected to pay fees of up to £9,000 per year, universities are finding that they need to offer much more than a place on a course to attract the best students. As well as widening participation, collaborations and partnerships can help to provide a more interesting learning environment and in recent years, the spotlight has fallen on how universities can improve the provision of services to their alumni. Student expectations are at an all time high and these expectations continue after graduation when former students are often keen to retain a sense of belonging with the academic community. Universities have always been aware of the significance of alumni relations when it comes to fundraising and development activities and recognition of this has increased as public funding for universities continues to decline and universities are forced to explore alternative sources of income.

For university libraries, an increased focus on partnerships and collaboration often translates to a requirement for extended access to e-resources to groups that are not covered by the definition of current students and staff that is typical of a standard publisher licence. The complex issue of partner licensing has become a hotly debated topic as university libraries try to extend access to e-resources to a range of diverse groups that include international partner institutions, visiting students, National Health Service (NHS) partners and university alumni. This article describes the efforts at King's College London to build on the provision of a traditional library service for our alumni to one that includes access to e-resources and explores some of the challenges and obstacles we have faced.



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"... expectations continue after graduation ..."

King's College alumni services

King's College London is a large multi-disciplinary university, established in 1829 and based across five campuses in the heart of London. The University has a remarkable history of producing notable and prominent alumni who have made major contributions to 19th- and 20th-century science, medicine and public life. At King's, we view our former students

258 and graduates as an integral part of the College community and we are keen to create opportunities for them to continue on their journey of lifelong learning after they have graduated. Alumni can be some of our most loyal ambassadors and they have a crucial role to play in selling and promoting the reputation of King's as a world class institution both at home and internationally, and serving as advocates to provide advice and support to current and prospective students. We are also reliant on alumni donations and by maintaining solid ties with our alumni, they can also be potential donors and a major source of fundraising income.

To encourage our alumni to stay connected with us, we provide access to a wide range of benefits, services and discounts. King's alumni are entitled to discounts on travel and accommodation, ongoing careers and study support, opportunities to attend events and reunions, an alumni e-mail address and access to a range of publications including a quarterly newsletter. Alumni are also eligible to register for Alumni Online, an online database which enables them to access a number of digital services. Another important aspect of this package of benefits is continued access to a library service after graduation. Our alumni can continue to enjoy reference membership to the six libraries at King's (one on each campus apart from Denmark Hill Campus, which has two), as well as limited borrowing rights for an annual charge. This provides a valuable and welcome service to alumni, however, as large numbers of students leave London after their studies and many are based outside the United Kingdom (UK), this 'traditional' library service, which primarily offers access to printed material, has limited value as many alumni are unable to visit our libraries in person. Today's students are used to working in a digital environment and many have become accustomed to using predominantly e-resources to carry out their studies. At King's it struck us as inadequate that we were not able to offer our alumni some continuation of this service after graduation to support them in the pursuit of lifelong learning. Early in 2012, we installed a small number of walk-in PCs at our five library sites which would allow alumni visiting the library to access those e-resources that included walk-in access permissions under the licence terms. Although this was a positive first step in providing e-resource access to our alumni, accessing the e-resource content still required the alumni to visit the library in person so it didn't overcome the problem for those alumni not conveniently located for access to the libraries. In addition, we were also receiving increasing numbers of enquiries about e-resource access via our Alumni Relations Team and we recognized that we needed to explore alternative options.

"Alumni can be some of our most loyal ambassadors ..."

JSTOR pilot project

After some initial meetings with our colleagues in the Alumni Relations Team, we set about investigating what options were available for providing e-resource access to alumni. Early in our investigations we became aware of the Alumni Access Pilot program that was being operated by JSTOR. JSTOR was already an established and well-used e-resource by King's staff and students, and as the JSTOR collections spanned a wide range of disciplines, the pilot program seemed to present a good opportunity for us to extend access to content that we felt confident would be positively received by our alumni community. After further discussions with our Alumni Relations Team, we made the decision to participate and in June 2012 we set up access to JSTOR. JSTOR provided a number of different access methods for us to choose from which made authenticating our alumni so they could access JSTOR straightforward, and we were not required to use our existing authentication systems, Shibboleth and EZproxy.

"The reaction was overwhelming ..."

Once we had established access, we worked with the Alumni Relations Team to market and promote the JSTOR access to our alumni community. A news story was featured on the main College web page and information about the journal access was disseminated via e-mail and the quarterly alumni e-newsletter that is sent to our alumni. The reaction was overwhelming and in the first day of going live, the Alumni Relations Team received over 700 requests from alumni to sign up for the Alumni Online database service so they could register for the JSTOR access. The resource continued to prove incredibly popular and this

resulted in over 14,000 accesses from alumni in the first year. JSTOR were able to provide us with a breakdown of usage so we could see which collections and titles were being used most heavily (see Figures 1 and 2) and this has helped us to identify specific subject areas in which we might want to develop alumni access further. What the project ultimately revealed to us is that there was a demand for access to e-resources and that this demand actually exceeded our initial expectations.

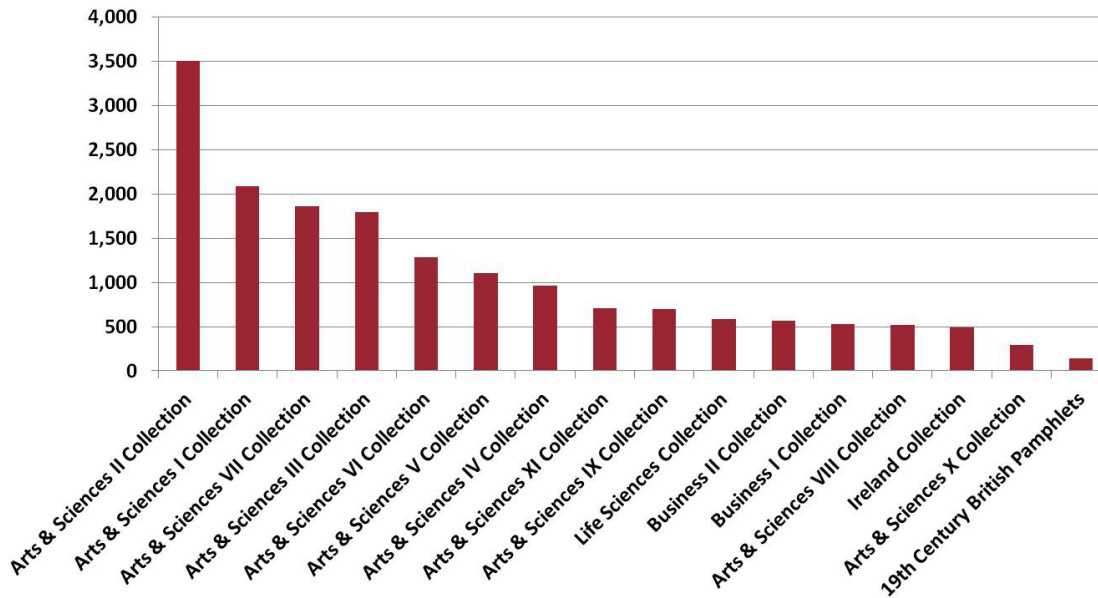


Figure 1. JSTOR usage by collection

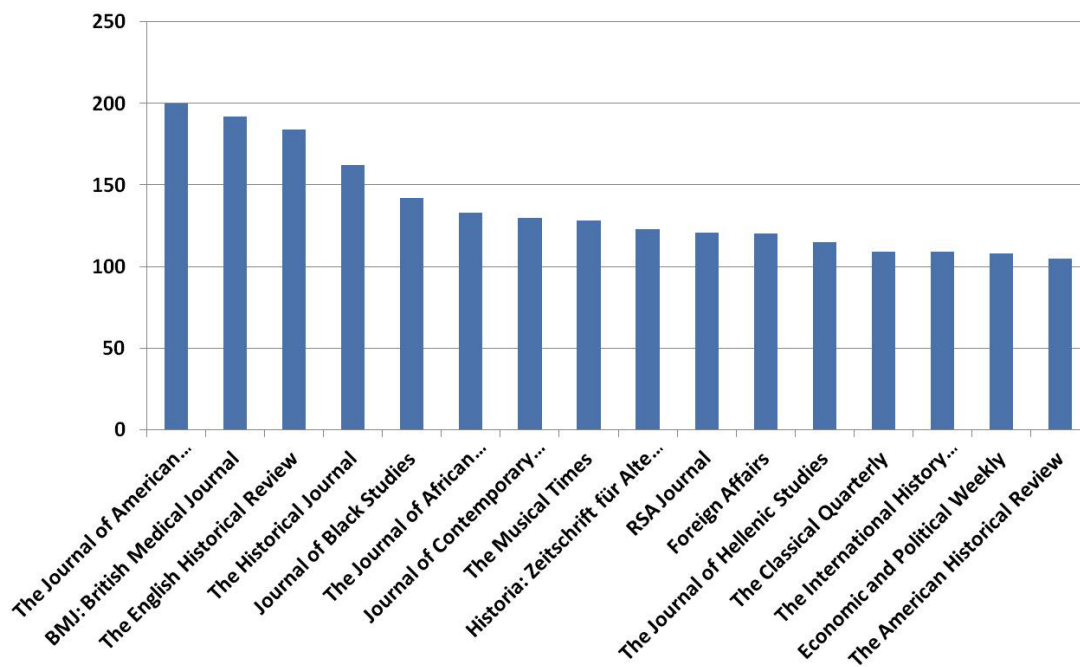


Figure 2. JSTOR usage by title

Following the success of the JSTOR project, we set about exploring what other publishers and suppliers were offering in terms of alumni access to e-resources. We were pleased to discover that a good number of vendors already made provision for alumni access under the terms and conditions of their standard licence. The cost of providing access varied greatly between suppliers. Some suppliers offered the alumni access at no additional cost to the standard licence, others charged a flat rate and some suppliers provided the access for an additional percentage of the licence fee, as was the case with JSTOR.

Authentication and funding challenges

Unfortunately, when it came to the question of how to authenticate our alumni so they could access the e-resources, the picture became much more complicated. Although we had found that a number of vendors offered extended access to alumni as part of their licence, this was almost always under the condition that the institution must enable and manage the access within their existing authentication systems. At King's this meant we would be required to authenticate our alumni using either Shibboleth or our EZproxy server, both of which are only set up to authenticate current King's College students and staff. In order to enable Shibboleth to authenticate alumni, we would be required to add alumni data to the Active Directory where current user information is stored. Due to the volume of alumni data involved, this would be a massive undertaking for our IT Department and raised a number of difficult questions around how we would manage and store the data. Thousands of students graduate from King's every year so we could not possibly add all our alumni, but how should we identify which alumni to add? How would we manage adding further alumni on an ongoing basis? These questions didn't have immediate and straightforward answers. We met with colleagues in our IT Department to discuss how we might overcome some of the authentication challenges but we were unable to agree a solution that didn't involve initiating a large-scale project which would require staffing and funding that was beyond what was feasible. This led us to conclude that any further extension of access to e-resources for our alumni at the present time would require vendors to provide alternative authentication solutions that are reasonably straightforward to implement and manage. Due to the authentication challenges we have faced, we have only succeeded in implementing access to one further e-resource since setting up JSTOR. Henry Stewart Talks is a database of audio visual presentations in the subject areas of biomedicine and management. Access is authenticated via a username and password, which our alumni can find by logging into the secure Alumni Online databases that they are entitled to register for after graduating. Whilst this has been well received, we are still keen to open up access to further e-resource content and are in continued conversations with vendors and our IT Department to consider solutions.

"... the institution must enable and manage the access within their existing authentication systems."

Aside from the issue of authentication, we also need to consider a long-term strategy for funding and managing further e-resource access for alumni. The JSTOR project was funded by King's Library Services but the extension of further e-resources with a cost implication would require some further thought about how the access is funded. As many universities are facing ongoing budget cuts, it is frequently the library that is asked to make savings and often these cuts come in the shape of cancelled subscriptions. Justifying expenditure on e-resources for alumni in the current financial climate may be difficult so a long-term funding strategy would need to enlist the support of the Alumni Relations Team and explore alternative options for covering the cost of e-resource licence extensions.

"... we are still keen to open up access to further e-resource content ..."

Conclusion

Despite the challenges we have faced, King's is keen to build on the JSTOR project to further improve provision of e-resource access for our alumni. The JSTOR project served as a test case for how e-resource access for alumni can successfully work and demonstrated that there is a demand for access to e-resources from King's alumni. Throughout our experience, we have learnt the importance of working with different stakeholders to identify suitable e-resources for alumni and to establish and promote access. Setting up JSTOR required us to work closely with our Alumni Relations Team, IT Department and JSTOR as well as colleagues from across Library Services to make the project a success.

In the future, we feel that providing access to e-resources for alumni will continue to be an important objective for the College and increasingly for other institutions as pressure to provide improved services for alumni continues to grow. Libraries are starting to raise the

issue at a national level in recognition of the demand from alumni and are meeting at networking events such as the annual Alumni Library Forum¹ to discuss the issues and explore ways we might work together to overcome some of the challenges. However, despite many vendors actively engaging with the community, it seems unlikely that the wider question over practical and sustainable authentication solutions will be easily resolved any time soon and university libraries should continue to maintain an open dialogue with publishers and suppliers to try to help them understand our needs.

“... university libraries should continue to maintain an open dialogue with publishers and suppliers ...”

Reference

1. Alumni Library Forum:
<http://barrington.cranfield.ac.uk/alf> (accessed 8 September 2014).

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