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Turning E in the 21st Century

E-book Management at the University of Bath

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Abstract

This conference paper provides an honest account of managing e-books at the University of Bath. The authors have responsibility for the day-to-day management of e-books and contribute to the overall strategy of this aspect of collection development. The paper outlines e-book holdings, accessibility, problems encountered and developmental work.

Introduction

We have just over 20,000 e-books in our collections at the University of Bath. Most of these have been purchased within the last 2 or 3 years, with titles from Springer and Elsevier particularly well represented. In our definition of e-books, we include reference works such as Oxford English Dictionary online and series such as Lecture Notes in Computer Science – arguably these fall somewhere between e-books/e-journals and databases. We've obtained some of our e-books as a result of subscribing to databases such as OECD iLibrary, which includes over 2,000 e-books as part of the overall package and for single title purchases across many different publishers we use Coutts MyiLibrary.

At Bath, the subject librarians manage their own budgets and decide what to buy in consultation with academic colleagues. Claire's role as Bibliographic Services Librarian is to keep abreast of interesting developments in the e-book market, obtain information on any licencing restrictions and generally oversee e-book provision.

Elly and Katrin, both Information Librarians, supervise small teams of library assistants and look after the day-to-day activities associated with maintaining a good service. Laurence Lockton, Systems Librarian at Bath, also has an important role to play in advising on metadata loading.

Administration

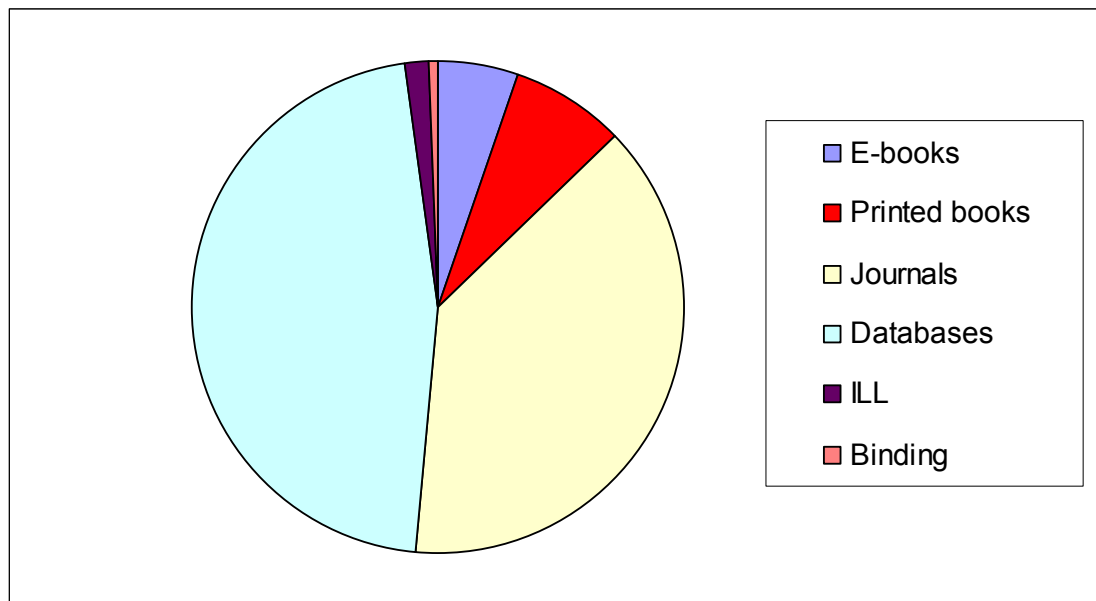Figure 1 details how we apportion the library materials budget at Bath.

Figure 1

There is no central fund for e-resource purchasing. Each subject is allocated a budget for the purchase of books in both electronic and print format. Last year our spend showed a 60/40% split between print and e-books.

To help us keep on top of our growing e-book collections we use a spreadsheet, centrally stored on a shared drive. This gives us easy access to such key information as invoices, tax, and MARC record loading. It also helps us anticipate renewals and chase for the invoice if necessary. This eliminates the need to search for individual order records on our library management system.

Together with the licences for databases and e-journals, we store scanned copies of e-book licences in a databank on our library wiki. This repository provides a single access point to licence specifications.

E-book access

Our users access e-books in a variety of ways. There is an increasing tendency for students to start their research by using a search engine, and there can be the attitude that if it is not found by Google then it does not exist. At the University of Bath we use Moodle as our virtual learning environment. Course content and reading lists are made available through Moodle and lecturers can provide links to the e-book versions of recommended texts. We also use ELIN (Electronic Library Information Navigator) as an aggregator and resource discovery tool for our electronic holdings. It does tend to be more useful for accessing e-journal content because the articles are indexed, unlike the majority of e-book chapters.

We endeavour to get full MARC record coverage on our catalogue. It is still the primary way users search for our holdings and we want it to be a true reflection of what they can access.

Obtaining MARC records

Our records mostly come from the suppliers and publishers who provide their own MARC records, such as Coutts and Springer, and these either get sent via e-mail, or we get notified when there are new ones available to download. Our other main source is OCLC. We have several large collections of e-books from different suppliers but we have ordered all the record sets for them from OCLC.

Just as with our hard copy books we very rarely have to create records from scratch but when we do it is Elly's responsibility. Depending on the resource it can either be very quick and simple or it can turn into a hunt for any extra information in order to enhance the record and make it more searchable and user-friendly.

We have not yet managed to get MARC records for all our e-books. Attempting to get full record coverage is an ongoing project and we are working our way through the e-books management spreadsheet. We are following up on instances where the numbers of titles and records don't match. One of the main reasons for this is because we have access to several *items* under one *title* or record. We are liaising with publishers and our other MARC record suppliers to try and get all the records we need.

Cataloguing issues

The first problem is getting hold of the correct records. Most often they are received directly from our suppliers either via email or website downloads. However, there are some for which we have to submit an order.

One example of the trouble we can face with ordering MARC records occurred this year. In January, following a session reviewing the e-books management spreadsheet, we worked out that we needed to order a large number of record sets from one supplier. The order form was very confusing and the names of the sets did not always quite match up with what we had on our invoices.

We sent off our order and duly received the MARC files which were uploaded to the catalogue. However, the confusion over what to order led to us getting some records for e-books to which we didn't have access. This, in turn, led to both the subject librarians and us receiving complaints from students trying to access them.

With assistance from our Issue Desk colleagues we managed to identify which records were the rogues and removed them from the catalogue. It took us until July to thoroughly investigate and, through liaison with the e-book supplier, determine which sets we actually needed. Since we uploaded the

new record sets we have not had any complaints about access for these particular e-books. We now have catalogue records for approximately 95% of the titles in the collection and this has definitely improved access and usage.

The second problem faced is quality control. The majority of the time the records we receive are of good quality and work properly. Lack of time available to check the quality of the records can prove problematic. If they come in large batches (we recently had one with 1,809 records) it would be too time consuming to check every record and amend them as we would for physical items. The decision has to be taken about what can be amended and what has to be deemed acceptable.

The other issues occur when uploading records to the catalogue. The most frequent errors are reports that we already have the e-book in the catalogue and that the E-ISBN already exists. The former usually happens because we subscribe to several collections from the same publisher. This can be easily dealt with by looking up the title in the catalogue and making sure we have access. The latter can be more complicated: it could be because we already have the e-book or because the ISBN has been written down wrong in one record or the other. Sometimes just the presence of an E-ISBN in a print record can cause this error. To solve this, we check the catalogue and make amendments where necessary.

Troubleshooting

University of Bath Library users tend to report problems to subject librarians or use the 'Ask a Librarian' form available on the library's website.

When a user experiences a problem it is one of access: it is either related to the catalogue record and the link embedded within it or it is caused by access restrictions.

Looking closer at issues that are related to the link from the catalogue record, users tend to either end up with the wrong title being displayed or they reach nothing at all. The most obvious problem is that the record supplied simply contains the wrong link or that since providing the record the platform or way of access has changed and the link hasn't been updated. As mentioned previously, a problem in this category can be that we have records on the catalogue for titles to which we don't have access.

In the cases related to access restrictions users generally reach the desired e-book title and are able to start reading it, but at some point they will be locked out and are usually unable to access the title for the following 24 hours. These lock-outs are caused by the Digital Rights Management (DRM) software which some providers run in the background to monitor usage behaviour. Users are blocked because of improper use of the resource through either downloading or printing too many pages or because their behaviour seems somewhat suspicious to the system. Only one of our suppliers denies access because of too many concurrent users.

We keep a spreadsheet of all e-book problems encountered. We record a lot of different information (e.g. title, problem described, action taken) to help us identify recurring problems and this way we can hopefully find a solution as and when a problem is brought to our attention.

The first thing to do when trying to solve a problem is replicate the user's experience. Unfortunately users aren't always very precise when describing what they have experienced so this can be tricky especially since many issues are reported by distance learners. If nothing seems obvious from the user's description then we always check the catalogue record, the e-book platform and our order information. If we are unable to identify the problem we will contact our Systems Librarian to rule out any problems at our end. After that we'll get in touch with the supplier and one way or the other problems do get solved.

Typical solutions include updating the link on the catalogue record, removing rogue records or asking our supplier to unlock a blocked title. At Bath we mainly use IP authentication to enable access to electronic resources. This unfortunately means that once somebody manages to lock a title, all our users are prevented from accessing it. In an attempt to overcome this, we have trialled Shibboleth authentication. With this method, the lock-out only happens to the individual using the title incorrectly and all other users are able to continue to access it. Unfortunately we are still experiencing problems with the Shibboleth configuration and before these are solved we cannot roll out this form of authentication.

Usage statistics

The main reason for keeping track of usage has always been to fulfil the requirement for SCONUL[1] as part of the annual statistics return. Amongst other things, this covers holdings, costs and usage of e-resources. Data we provide for SCONUL generally helps to provide an overall trend within the UK academic library sector.

Additionally we have started to obtain more detailed statistics for our own purposes if and when needed. We gather usage and turn-away data for particular titles or packages to help inform subscription renewals and future purchasing decisions. This information also enables us to establish long-term trends and examine user behaviour.

Most of our e-book providers give access to statistics on their platforms, but we still have to e-mail a few to ask for reports to be sent to us directly. Even though we are able to get statistics for all our resources, only about half of the reports follow the international code of practice COUNTER[2] which makes it more difficult to compare individual resources with each other.

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[1] Society of College, National and University Libraries
[2] Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources

The other problem about gathering usage statistics is the amount of staff time it takes to check individual websites, to get in touch with suppliers and to finally present and evaluate the data in a useful format.

As we have bought more e-books the overall usage has increased. Looking at detailed data over a longer period there are clearly identifiable ups and downs throughout the academic year.

Statistics emphasise the importance of having accurate catalogue records. Figure 2 shows usage statistics corresponding to the problems we experienced in obtaining records from one supplier, as described in the section 'Cataloguing issues' above. Several hundred MARC records were added to the catalogue in early March and again in July 2010. This resulted in an immediate increase in usage and represents a major improvement upon levels at the same times in 2009.

Feb-09		Mar-09	Jun-09		Jul-09
1080	+ 1.4%	1095	341	+ 10.3%	376
Feb-10		**Mar-10**	**Jun-10**		**Jul-10**
1357	+106.6 %	2804	586	+ 43.9%	842

Figure 2

Recent developments

In early 2010, we were approached by one of our academics who had heard of Springer's MyCopy initiative. This was already live in the United States and he wondered if this was something we could adopt at Bath. We approached Springer and became one of the first universities in the United Kingdom to trial it.

MyCopy offers members of the University the opportunity to buy a personal, black and white print copy, at a reduced price, of almost any Springer e-book purchased by the Library. We viewed this initiative as a means of further promoting the Library's e-book collections.

Our involvement with Phase II of the JISC e-textbook trials gave us the opportunity to examine student preference when offered a choice of access options to two core textbooks, one from Cambridge University Press and one from Cengage.

Several print copies of both titles were available to borrow from the Library. We gave access to the e-version of the Cambridge University Press title via the library catalogue. However, if students wished to gain access to the Cengage title in electronic format, they were directed to the publisher's website where they were able to buy the entire e-book, or individual

e-chapters, at their own expense. At the time of writing, the final report for these trials is imminent. At Bath, we had a modest take-up of the electronic versions, despite the fact that as an institution, our users do generally like to have electronic versions available.

It's no surprise that there is less money available for purchasing books (either in print or electronic format) at present. One initiative we have undertaken in attempt to gain better value for money involves Elsevier. Instead of paying for entire subject collections outright (which we don't have the money to do), we paid a small percentage of the cost of our chosen collections up-front. We gained access to the full collections and the corresponding MARC records were uploaded onto the catalogue.

We will monitor usage over the year and then select titles up to the value of our initial outlay to keep in perpetuity. Catalogue records for the titles we don't opt to retain will then be removed, or kept on if we decide to continue with patron-driven acquisition the following year.