THE STORY SO FAR: E-JOURNALS IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING

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Although the usual selection criteria apply to e-journals, the process is complicated by the additional need to consider licences, pricing policy, access and archiving. At Newcastle University a task group was set up to examine the decision-making process and to streamline it. The outcome is some additional criteria and a lot of promotional work.

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It was once generally assumed that in academia, books were for teaching and journals for research. This was always a very simplistic distinction and is certainly not a true reflection of current practice. The move in recent years towards more student-centred learning, (which some cynics regard as a euphemism for, "how we solved the problems of over-crowded lecture theatres by sending them off to use the Library"), means that most undergraduate students are required to use journals as a key resource for extended essays and other assignments. Nationally, the HE sector currently spends around £46m[1] on journals – a significant sum. The average spend per library is around £500k, with research-led institutions typically spending significantly more on journals than on books.[2] What these figures do not show, is the proportion of journals spending which goes on electronic journals. Thus I would like to use expenditure data from my own library to illustrate how this has changed over the last three years.

	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98
Print journals	£0.9m	£1.3m	£1.25m
Electronic journals	£0.1m	£0.13m	£0.21m
Total journals spend	£1.0m	£1.43m	£1.46m

Journal expenditure at Newcastle University Library

Three years ago, we were spending around £100,000 on electronic journals, which represented approximately 10% of the total journal budget. By last year, expenditure on electronic resources had grown to £210,000 (14.4% of the journal budget) and is likely to be closer to 20% by the end of the current fiscal year. I should point out that I have interpreted electronic journals expenditure here in its widest sense and have included expenditure on electronic abstracting and indexing services purchased instead of the printed equivalents. However, whilst we are continuing to acquire these major bibliographic resources, it is full text electronic journals which represent the greatest area of current demand.

In 1997/98, we conducted a major review of our journal portfolio, which took the form of a consultation exercise involving all members of academic staff. This resulted in over 900 new journals being recommended for purchase, but only 11 of these requests were for electronic journals. This suggests that printed journals are still the format of choice for most academics. Subsequent dialogue with our departments as part of a major e-journals promotion has confirmed this still to be the case, and whilst they are becoming more interested in the latter, they prefer to have the printed version as well as the e-journal.

We have a journals budget of circa £1.5m, and we take considerable care over how we spend this. We accept recommendations for new journals from academic staff all year round. If students wish to put forward titles for consideration, we are happy to look at those too, provided the student's tutor supports the request. All new requests are reviewed in August, when the next year's budget is known. We usually work on a substitution basis, that is to say, cancellations of similar value are sought, but we do have some scope to accommodate new titles in key areas, even if a matching sacrifice is unavailable. Typically, we receive around 30 new journal requests per annum. Every three to five years we carry out a major review of the journal portfolio, where everything is put into the melting pot and we invite academic staff to vote for the old and new titles that they consider to be most important for current teaching and research. This usually results in around 500 title changes, which accounts for approximately 10% of the portfolio.

When deciding which new titles to buy, there are several factors we take account of. The most important of these is which teaching and research interests the journal will support. We also consider how well these interests are supported by the current portfolio. Preference is generally given to subject areas where our current collection is weak, and titles of an interdisciplinary nature also count highly. Our Faculty Liaison Librarians, who have an excellent working knowledge of our current collections and are well attuned to the teaching and research interests of their departments, usually carry out this part of the assessment.

We also look at the ISI impact factor for the title - partly because our academics are very keen on these at present. In the run-up to the next Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) many Heads of Department are using impact factors to check that their staff are placing articles in the journals which they believe are more likely to contribute to high research ratings. Of course, impact factors have their limitations, not least in relation to new journals, which obviously have not had time to acquire any citations. Also, certain subject disciplines are poorly represented in them. However, they are useful as a yardstick, for example when requests come in stating that "we must buy this - it is the one of the top ten journals in my field!" This perception may be borne out by the impact factors, but not always.

Of rather more importance to the library is the track record of the publisher. When considering new subscriptions, we check to see if we have had any problems with other titles produced by this publisher, and consider whether we feel they represent good value for money. It is fair to say that in certain cases (and I am not going to name and shame!) we actively encourage our academics to accept a similar title produced by a more library-friendly publisher. Last, but by no means least, we consider the cost of any new journal, and if we think it is too expensive, then we will not buy it. The decision making process for print journals looks rather like this:

> Academic staff recommend
>
> Faculty Liaison staff assess
>
> Sub-Librarian approves
>
> Periodicals Librarian orders

Our aim is to provide balanced, sustainable growth and development of our portfolio. The process is as simple as we can make it, and generally it works very well. In essence, when it comes to deciding which print titles we should subscribe to, we ask three simple questions:

> is it relevant?
>
> is it good?
>
> can we afford it?

Unfortunately, it is not quite so simple when it comes to e-journals. First of all we need to look at the licence terms. What are the conditions of access? Are the terms acceptable to us? Are there any constraints? If so, are they acceptable to us, and can we enforce them? We then consider the hardware and software requirements, taking into account not just the Library PCs and servers, which tend to be of a fairly high specification, but

our knowledge of the IT provision in the departments where the journals are most likely to be accessed. As far as software is concerned, we need to know if special software is required to access a particular journal and if it is, we must determine how this is to be made available to users. For example, do they have to download it themselves from the publishers Web pages, or is it something which could/should be made available via the University Computing Service? We also consider how the software will be supported and who will handle technical queries. Other key concerns for us are how the end user will gain access to the journal and how they will be validated. Wherever possible, we prefer access to be governed by the range of IP addresses pertaining to the University with ATHENS3 providing individual validation. This is infinitely preferable to having dozens of different methods of validation and access control, which users find frustrating and confusing. Library staff do not care for them much either, as they take up a considerable amount of time to administer.

We also look very carefully at how the e-journal is priced, and whether we feel the cost is justifiable and affordable. Given academic preference for print plus e-journal access, most of the e-journals we currently promote via our Web pages relate to existing print subscriptions. Thus cost is a key factor, and we inevitably prefer those, which provide e-journal, access either bundled free with print or for a very small additional charge.

Another question we ask is whether there is a policy for archival access. Whilst it is clearly less important when we have a corresponding existing print archive, we do not envisage maintaining dual subscriptions for ever and the availability of a reliable, readily accessible electronic archive would help to make the electronic only option more attractive. At present, apart from a few notable exceptions, such as ECO and JSTOR, archival access to electronic journals seems to be extremely patchy. Finally, we have to consider which aggregator we are going to use. This is not simply a question of deciding which interface we prefer, but also takes into account of the number and type of journals we are already offering using particular aggregators, and how reliable this service has been.

We very soon realised that the additional questions we felt we needed to ask before we

decided whether or not to subscribe to a particular e-journal were making the decision making process far more complex than it ever was for print. Consequently we set up an Electronic Journals Task Force to examine the process and see if we could streamline it. This group, which is chaired by myself, includes all three Sub-Librarians in the Library, together with the IT Librarian, Library Web Master, Head of Cataloguing, and not forgetting the Periodicals Librarian. Our aim was to bring together representatives of all the sections with an interest in e-journals to work on the following key tasks:

a)   to determine the best routing mechanism for e-journals;

b)   to maintain a watching brief on new e-journal developments;

c)   to advise and inform the Library Management Team (which includes the three Sub-Librarians) of any strategic implications for the Library pertaining to or arising from, e-journal developments.

We have already achieved our first objective, and our current e-journal request process now looks something like this:

> Academic Staff recommend
>
> Faculty Liaison Staff assess
>
> IT Librarian assesses (technical requirements)
>
> Sub-Librarian assesses (cost and licencing terms)
>
> Web master activates and adds details to file
>
> Periodicals Librarian adds URL to catalogue
>
> Liaison staff check it all works, before promoting to departments!

The start of the process is just the same as it is for print, with Academic staff and Faculty Liaison Librarians providing the recommendations and determining subject relevance. However, the next stage is a new one – the IT librarian checks the licences to see whether there are any hardware or software implications, for example, will a subscription to this title result in her hard-pressed technicians being inundated with requests from academics to help install new software on their PCs. She also considers the registration process and will comment on any she feels are impractical; for example, those which require us to register individual IP addresses, or which are confined to PCs within the library. If the IT Librarian is happy

that the subscription will cause no problems for her staff, and is compatible with the rest of the University's IT structure, the request is then passed to me. My key requirement is to ensure that all our bone-fide users can use the e-journal. Increasingly, this includes our off-campus users too, as the growth in part-time and distance learners together with all the traditional work placements and sabbaticals, means that more staff and students than ever are spending significant periods of time away from the campus. I also consider the cost of the journal, and the methods of access, including availability as part of a national or regional deal, as well as via the publishers' Web site or one of the aggregated services. If all of these checks prove satisfactory, the subscription is approved and activated, details are added to our Web pages, the URL is added to an appropriate catalogue record, and the Faculty Liaison Librarians test out the links before promoting them to the relevant departments.

The main differences between our print journal selection process and that for e-journals can be summarised as follows. Whilst we are still asking:

is it relevant?

is it good?

can we afford it?;

we are also asking:

can we support it technically? (not just within the library, but across the University)

can all our users access it?

which is the best access route?

So what have we learnt from all this? The most obvious point is that it takes an awful lot longer to approve and set up an e-journal subscription than it does a print one! And it is not just that it takes us longer in the Library; we have found that even when we have done all our work it can take weeks or even months for some subscriptions to be activated. The process takes longer because more staff need to be involved, although as we gain in experience and e-journals themselves become more standardised, we envisage that we will need less senior staff time. There is still much work to be done to promote take-up of electronic journals by academic staff, many of whom are journal authors and editors, as well as users. Thus they may be aware of electronic developments in journals which they use and to which they contribute, but they still have a strong allegiance

to print. If they are to become more widely adopted, e-journals must be at least as accessible as printed subscriptions. That is to say, access should not be dependent on high specification PCs, unusual software, or complicated authentication controls. Such barriers can actively disenfranchise some groups of users, as well as deterring the IT novices and technophobes.

The Library's Web pages are used to promote electronic journals to our users. From the main library Web page, users are directed to a general page about electronic journals, which includes an A-Z list of those we currently subscribe to, a Subject List of titles, (which tends to be the most popular searching route) and a page of Frequently Asked Queries (FAQ). The subject list is structured broadly by Faculty, and titles of interest to more than one Faculty appear on both lists. Records for the individual e-journals indicate our current print holdings, the source of the e-journal, i.e. which aggregator we are using, the general URL, whether or not the journal is peer reviewed, together with any notes regarding the format and software requirements. If passwords are required, we refer users to their Faculty Liaison Librarian, or the general Information points on the subject floors. The content and layout of our e-journal Web pages, which we feel works very well, owes much to the pioneering work of Tony Kidd and his colleagues at Glasgow University Library.

I would now like to focus on the people in whose interest we are undertaking all this work – the library users. Our experience to date suggests that there are indeed some enthusiasts amongst academic staff, particularly in the fields of Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, and Water Resources. This enthusiasm may in part be due to the fact that these subject areas are very well provided for with e-journals. There is also a degree of scepticism about e-journals – some staff regard them as merely another passing fad which is of no interest to them. Others claim not to have been aware of these developments at all, often saying they are too busy. In many cases, it is the lack of IT skills which puts them off, particularly if they are older staff. Or it may be that the department simply has not got an appropriate level of PC provision – not every member of staff has a PC on their desk, and even if they have, they certainly do not all have Pentiums linked up to laser printers. And, of course, there are those who could use e-journals if

they wanted to, but simply prefer to stick with print. At one of our promotional sessions a senior researcher stated that he really did not want e-journals delivered to his desktop because the walk to the Library and the time spent browsing current issues of printed journals was one of the few opportunities he had to 'escape' from the Laboratory!

Although we believe that it is worth continuing to invest a considerable amount of staff effort into developing and extending our electronic journals resources, we want to ensure that the range, content, and speed of development of our services takes full account of users needs and preferences. To that end, we have sought and gained approval from the Library Committee to carry out a major consultation exercise with academic staff. This will take the form of departmental roadshows to promote e-journals in the various subject areas, followed up with focus groups where academics views will be sought on topics such as their likes/dislikes concerning e-journals, how they feel about electronic-only access, archiving, whether they have any technical concerns, and whether there are any specific e-journals that they want the library to subscribe to. Once the results of these focus groups have been analysed, we will prepare and deliver a new programme of workshops and drop in sessions on e-journals, specifically focussing on issues raised by academics. We will also prepare a new publicity campaign, and consider producing more helpsheets (both in print form and on the Web) to address common concerns and queries. [At the time of writing, we have taken our e-journals roadshow to 30 academic departments. The response in all cases has been extremely positive, and we have gained a great deal of insight into what academics want from e-journals.]

We hope that this project will increase awareness of and interest in e-journals [and the flood of new recommendations now coming through suggests that this is already happening.] We also believe it will help us to focus on building up subject areas where academics would welcome more e-journal provision. Given that our resources are finite, it makes sense to concentrate efforts where there is likely to be the greatest pay-off. We can then use this experience to inform and develop our e-journals strategy over the next few years.

The management of e-journals in academic libraries is a challenging and fast moving area. Whilst we are interested in exploiting the potential of e-journals, we have major concerns about costs. It is not simply the fact that electronic subscriptions attract VAT at 17.5%, but we have to be sure that the IT infrastructure of the library, the campus and individual departments is capable of exploiting e-journals without necessitating major reinvestment in new IT kit. Librarians and users want to see a satisfactory and reasonably priced solution to e-archiving before we can feel confident enough to ditch our print archives. And it is not just the Arts and Social Sciences disciplines that say that archives are important to them. At one of our recent e-journal sessions an academic responded to our question about e-archives by stating that sometimes the archive was more important than the current data– and he was a medical researcher.

It is true to say that, as librarians, we feel we must take a lead with e-journals, although it often feels like a blind leap in the dark. This is one of the reasons why we are so interested in consortia purchasing, whereby we share the risks as well as the costs. E-journals represent one of the most exciting and challenging developments librarians have faced for years. They are also infuriating, time-consuming and there is much work to be done before they can be effortlessly interfaced with our print collections to from a truly hybrid library. On a bad day, when delays with registrations and log-ins are driving you mad, it might be tempting to cling to the comfort of print. But e-journals won't go away if we ignore them, and why should we want to do that anyway? We must articulate our requirements, stand firm on the issues, which matter to us, particularly with regard to licencing, and above all GET INVOLVED with e-journals. That way we can help to shape our electronic future, rather than simply be swept along by it.

References

1. SCONUL Annual Library Statistics 1996-97, SCONUL, 1998

2. Ibid.