

Acquiring e-books for academic libraries – a modern Grail quest?

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Initial attempts by academic librarians to build e-book collections may be seen to have certain parallels with the traditional Grail quest. Like the knights of old, we know what it is we seek, but there are many challenges to be overcome before we can achieve our goal. Changes in teaching and learning methods, expanding student numbers, and the growth of CPD are amongst a number of key factors which are driving librarians' pursuit of e-textbooks. The success of e-journals means that many users now expect 24/7 access to a much wider range of library resources. Thus far, the market has been comparatively slow to respond. We need better dialogue with publishers to identify the e-book content which libraries and their users want, together with further work on licensing models and usage data. Only then may our quest be fulfilled.



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When preparing this paper, I happened to be reading one of the *Edgeworld Chronicles*¹ with my son, which contain some wonderful characters called 'librarian knights'. The image of librarian knights struck a chord with me, and I found myself wondering whether our search to secure appropriate e-book content for academic libraries was somehow akin to the knights of old and their quest for the Holy Grail. Like them, we know exactly what it is that we seek but, thus far, the goal has proved very elusive. From time to time, we think we have the target in our sights, but costs and licensing issues inevitably emerge to divert and beguile us like faerie sprites, and then we find that the long-hoped for conclusion to our quest proves but an empty dream ...

What are the key drivers behind academic libraries' determined pursuit of e-book content? One of the key factors has to be the need to develop practical and sustainable strategies to support increasing student numbers. Whilst I think it is true to say that few universities are achieving the levels of expansion we saw a few years ago, student numbers are still increasing. In addition to steady growth in the UK sector, many universities have now specifically targeted the international market as a key area for growth. This can be expressed in several different ways. It can lead to

an increase in overseas students recruited to study on courses in the UK; the expansion of degree programmes run by UK universities in partnership with overseas institutions where students are largely, or wholly, based in their home country; or, in some cases, the establishment by the UK university of a completely new overseas campus.

There have also been considerable changes to the structure of academic courses and the methods by which core skills and knowledge are imparted, which have required matching responses from academic libraries. For example, in medical sciences there is now a much greater emphasis on evidence-based learning, where students are set assignments which require them to develop and use their investigative and deductive skills. Core modules may be studied by large numbers of students, and can appear on more than one degree programme. Popular modules may have several hundred students enrolled on them and demand for key texts is often intense over comparatively short periods of time, then it drops off dramatically. Many courses now include assignments which aim to develop transferable skills. Students are often set project work where they have to work in teams to research and prepare a group assignment which may include a presentation to their colleagues as well as a written report. At the end of the exercise

they may be asked to reflect on what they have learnt about teamwork and to consider what each member (including themselves) has contributed to the team. In all disciplines, the learning process itself has become more flexible, in recognition of the fact that people learn in different ways, and at different times. Thus there may be several ways of accessing or delivering the same core learning materials.

Distance learning is another significant driver for change, and should be interpreted in its broadest sense. For example, many traditional, campus-based students are now learning at a distance for at least part of their studies. Medical students spend time out in hospitals, language students have a year abroad, and in other disciplines there may be industrial placements for a term or a number of weeks. This is in addition to the more traditional distance learning students, who may be studying part time, based anywhere in the UK and, increasingly, overseas.

A parallel development is the growing interest in continuing professional development (CPD). Many professions now require practitioners to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to maintaining and developing their professional skills, and universities consider themselves well-placed to provide courses and credits which meet these needs. Inevitably, CPD is undertaken part time, possibly at a distance, and requires similar support strategies and resource provision to those needed by students who are learning at a distance.

Not surprisingly, this demanding agenda for change requires librarians to think on their feet and adapt their service provision to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse user community. One of the most obvious, practical consequences of the growth in student numbers is that there is increased pressure on library resources. At its simplest, this can mean there are insufficient copies of printed textbooks to meet intense periods of demand (such as when 350 students all need to read the same chapters of a key textbook within a week). It can also mean that the heavily used textbooks rapidly become worn out or damaged. But increasingly, it

can also mean that although the recommended books are in the library, they are not readily or conveniently accessible to the users because they are working at a distance from the library.

I believe that these core drivers are affecting all of us in the academic library sector but I would like to amplify and illustrate these points by reference to our experience at the University of Newcastle.

Table 1 shows examples of large student numbers on modules at Newcastle. These numbers constitute a logistical nightmare – and not just for the library. It is a huge challenge to find enough large lecture theatres to accommodate them, and this has led to an increase in seminar-based activity in some disciplines, where the students can be split up into smaller groups. When I was a student, a seminar group typically comprised 10 or 15 people, but we are now routinely dealing with seminar groups of up to 50 students who all need to read the same key texts in the same week. Sometimes, the library receives very little notice of when a seminar is running and what resources it requires, which means that there may be insufficient time to deploy traditional strategies of moving key texts into short-loan collections to help ensure maximum circulation.

In business studies, there is a similar-sized intake to the arts degree programmes but business textbooks tend to be much more expensive, so that creates an additional challenge when resourcing programmes. Demand is intensified when the same resources appear on several different reading lists, often on programmes run by different faculties. For example, books on environmental issues could appear on reading lists in politics, law or agriculture. In certain disciplines the same texts appear on reading lists for undergraduate students and taught postgraduates, which can cause problems when both groups require access to texts at the same time.

Medical sciences not only has large numbers of students, but their core textbooks are in demand across all five years of the course, and students spend an increasing amount of time based in hospitals as their degree programme progresses.

Historical studies, English literature	150–350 students per module
Medical sciences	945 students on some form of clinical placement across years 3–5
Business studies	300–350 students per module. Some modules common to undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes

Table 1. Academic subjects with large numbers of students on modules

When our fourth-year medical students go out on their clinical placements they are assigned to hospitals around the region. Whilst some of them may be based at one of the large teaching hospitals in the city, others will be much further afield, at one of the smaller hospitals. The level of library provision and access for students in the hospitals varies enormously. As an academic service, we have an obligation to ensure parity of access to key library resources, wherever our students are based, and this inevitably leads us to seek digital versions of core medical textbooks as this is the most efficient and practical means of delivering core content to these users. Similarly, our Postgraduate Certificate in Education students spend a significant proportion of their time working in schools, and whilst they can of course visit the library in the evening and at weekends, they increasingly expect to have electronic access to the resources they require. Indeed, user expectation is in itself one of the most important drivers for change. It is no longer simply the case that the library sees electronic textbooks as a key resource to help it meet user demand. Increasingly, our students themselves are asking for electronic textbooks, as indeed are our academics. Nor should we be surprised at this. After all, we have successfully delivered electronic journal content to our users' desktops for several years.

Whilst academic staff and students are still our core business, university libraries are also paying increasing attention to their wider community of users. Although Newcastle is still developing its portfolio of courses to support CPD, we are already becoming aware of the specific needs of this user community. CPD courses are undertaken by people who are fitting their studying around their job, and they may well have family commitments as well. Typically, their workplace may be some distance from the library. Hence these people want and need flexible learning – anytime, anywhere, any place. They are often extremely motivated – they may be making personal sacrifices to undertake the course, or their career progression may depend on successfully completing it. And of course they are paying a considerable sum in fees. All of these factors mean that CPD students can be quite demanding. A particularly complicating factor for the library is that the book resources required for CPD courses may well be the same as those required for our standard undergraduate programmes. Loan categories and levels of print

copy provision developed to meet the needs of an on-campus community will not necessarily match the needs of CPD users, which is another reason why we are so keen to explore electronic provision.

The desire for off-campus, 24/7 access expressed by CPD students is of course even more of an issue with our truly distance learning community. For example, we are running an MSc in biodiversity and ecotourism jointly with a university in Thailand. The programme is delivered by staff in both universities, and the students are registered here, but they are all physically based in Thailand. Newcastle staff go out to Thailand to teach, and students are expected to use relevant resources in our library as well as their local one. Given the distance involved, they can only access our e-resources, and both books and journals are of paramount importance. We also run an MSc in oncology and palliative care which is aimed at practising clinicians. The current cohort is based at 15 different hospitals and the entire course is delivered via the web. We took great pains to select journals and electronic textbooks to support this course as the participants are fitting in the study around their clinical work and rarely come into the library. Whilst all our distance learning courses are slightly different in terms of structure, content and delivery, they all require access to library resources at the time and point of need. This may well be outside library opening hours, and is invariably going to be at a distance – whether near or far.

In the current climate, we are finding that all our users have increasingly high expectations of what the library should do for them – we even get grilled by the parents of prospective students about how we are going to support their proposed course of study! However, one particular user group to have become increasingly articulate about their needs and expectations is our international students. Issues about access to library materials often come up at Boards of Study, and in discussion with academic colleagues we have become aware that international students feel very strongly that the books they need should always be available in the library when they need them. These students are highly motivated and may often have made considerable personal sacrifices to come abroad and study. They are also paying higher fees than UK students. Thus they are keen to secure all the books that are relevant for their course as soon as they start and get quite angry when books are recalled for other readers, or are not on the shelves when

they come to look for them. They see this as a failure of the library to meet their reasonable expectations regarding access to resources.

An inevitable consequence of the pressure on physical resources is that the books themselves suffer. It is not just that they begin to fall apart after being handled by large numbers of students; pages are cut or torn out of them, they get hidden away in dark corners, they are sometimes stolen and the net result is huge frustration on behalf of the students who require access to those texts. There are also costs (and frustrations!) for the library, as we have to decide whether to secure replacement copies or endeavour to effect repairs in a timely manner. This places considerable pressure on library staff because it is invariably in the midst of a period of peak demand when problems with the physical copies become apparent, so we are always battling against the odds to get the stock back in place before the need for access is over.

For many years, libraries have developed and implemented policies for multiple copy provision to meet demand for key titles. We all have slightly different approaches, but they are often based on a ratio of copies to student numbers. At Newcastle we have a range of options, depending on the subject area and the cost of the book. In some subject areas we aim to buy one copy for every 10 students, in others we go for one copy for every 15. We also employ a range of different loan categories, ranging from four weeks to four hours. Where the basic textbook is very expensive, we aim to provide a higher level of copy provision as we assume it is highly unlikely the students are going to buy it for themselves. We tend to stop at around 40 copies because being a research-led library, the more we buy of a particular title, the less unique stock we can afford to buy in terms of maintaining the breadth of reading. Loan periods are designed to be flexible, so a standard four-week loan can be shortened to overnight or four hours if the item becomes in high demand. However, feedback from users suggests that many students do not like the shorter loans. They say they are deterred from taking the books out because they worry about forgetting to return them on time (thus incurring hefty fines) and those who are studying at a distance, or on placement, often cannot get in to the library in time to pick them up and return them within the time-frame of the loan period and our opening hours. When we look at the usage statistics, the return on our investment

for these copies is not really good enough. Students complain that the book was not there when they needed it, but they often mean that they could not get hold of a standard loan copy so they just ignored the short-loan version. In this climate, it would be quite inappropriate to keep buying more print copies, or even to completely abandon the very short loan periods because the lucky users who secured the copies would still hog them, and we could never afford to buy enough copies to meet peak demand.

Libraries are highly sensitized to user feedback. We are an academic service and we take the results of our own surveys, as well as any other ones which include comments on the library, very seriously. Student satisfaction surveys are everywhere these days, and the recent National Student Satisfaction Survey² suggested that access to library resources was one of the most important factors students took account of when assessing overall satisfaction with their university. All of our academic modules have formal assessment, which includes a significant section on access to library resources; the library has comment forms that we invite users to submit; we encourage them to tell us what they think at Boards of Study and at formal review sessions, so there are many ways in which they can make their views known to us. A common theme which comes up in all of these feedback mechanisms is that students want more and better access to textbooks.

The start of the quest

So, will e-books provide the solution? When we first started experimenting with e-books at Newcastle six years ago, we were fortunate to have some separate project money so did not need to transfer money from print book funds, which were already under considerable pressure. Initially, we found it very difficult to spend our e-book budget. Most of the books that were available were reference works and encyclopaedias and this is not the material that is in high demand. We did, however, buy some reference works, for example, the *Oxford Reference Collection*, and a selection of *Wiley Encyclopaedias in Science and Engineering*. When we first subscribed to these resources, we just had collection-level entries on our catalogue, together with a small section on the library web pages to highlight e-books in general and invite

feedback. However, we soon realized that this was not good enough, as the usage was very low, so we liaised with our technical services team and got them to add bibliographic records for all of the individual titles in the collections. We now routinely add catalogue records for all our e-book purchases, apart from when there are significant additional costs to buy in the records for a very large collection; for example, several thousand pounds to buy records for one of the large research collections of e-books. We would of course prefer to have all of these records in the catalogue, but in the current financial climate it is impossible to find or justify

the additional funds, which are often significantly greater than the annual cost of the subscription to the content itself.

As we have gained experience of managing e-books we have also refined our publicity. We have set up e-books as a logical base on Aleph,³ our library management system, so that users can search using e-books as a format to see what we have. Figures 1 and 2 show how students can search by subject, or browse through an A–Z listing.

We have also changed the way we display e-versions of printed texts and now ensure that the

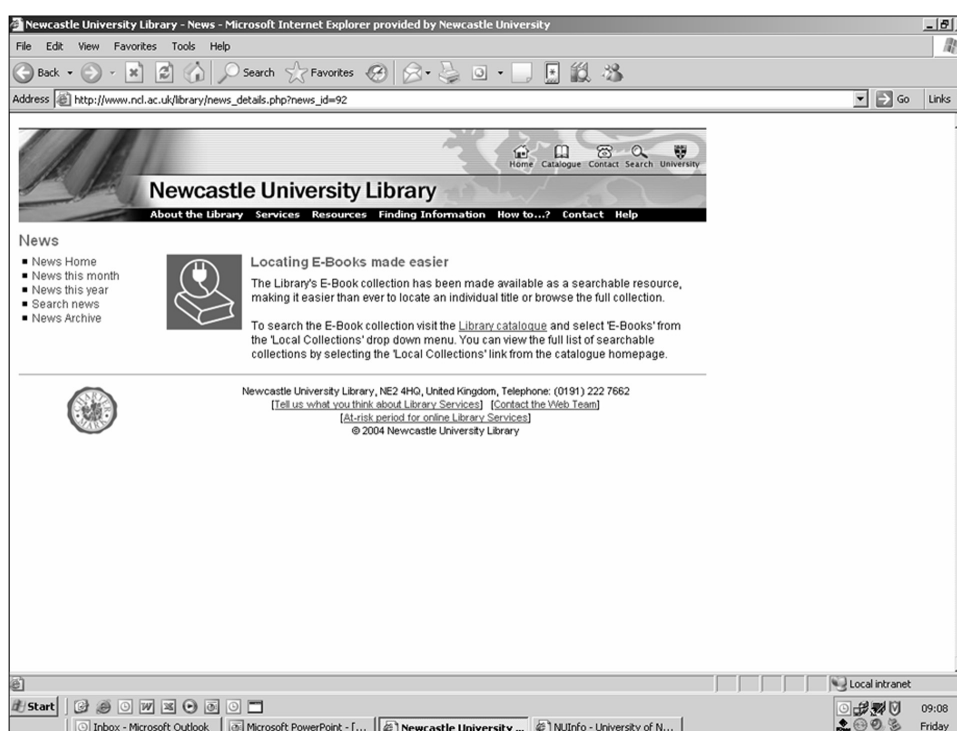


Figure 1. Searching for e-books

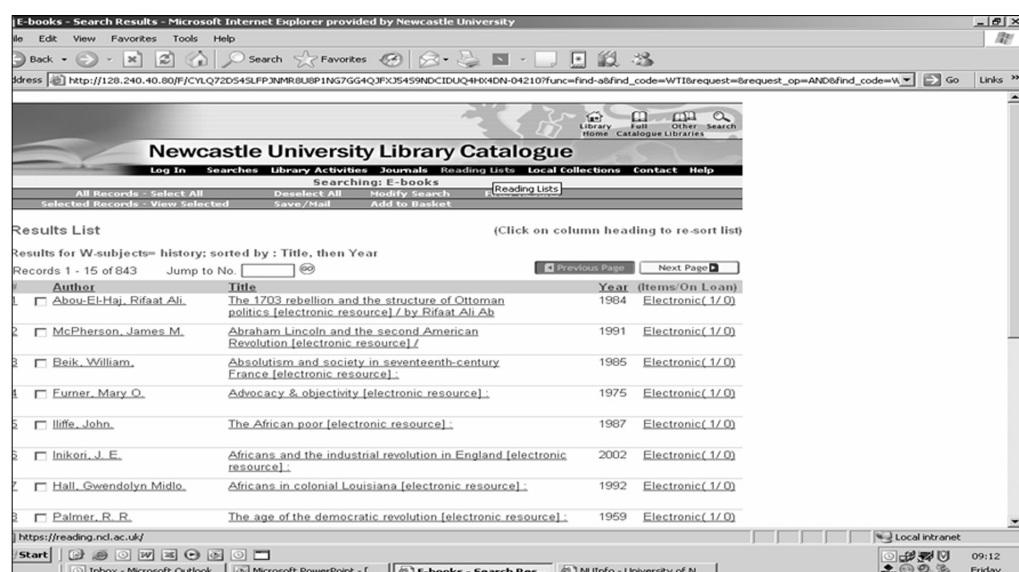


Figure 2. Subject search for e-books

bibliographic record for the print version has a link in it to show there is an e-copy (see Figure 3).

We feel this is a much better way of ensuring that users know we have both, and if the print copies are out on loan, they can immediately see that there is an e-equivalent. We have added a

section on e-books to our library web pages, where we describe particular collections and how to access them, promote trials and invite feedback and suggestions for new acquisitions (see Figures 4 and 5).

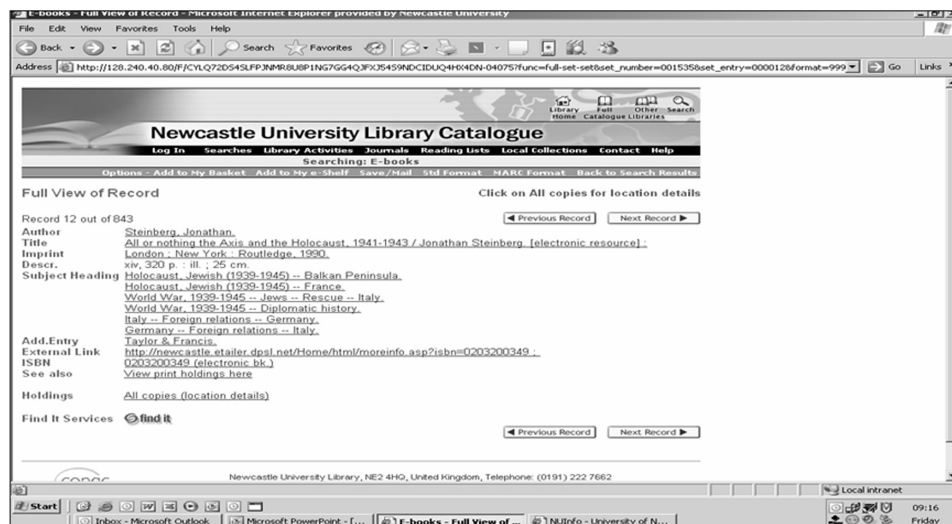


Figure 4. E-book collections

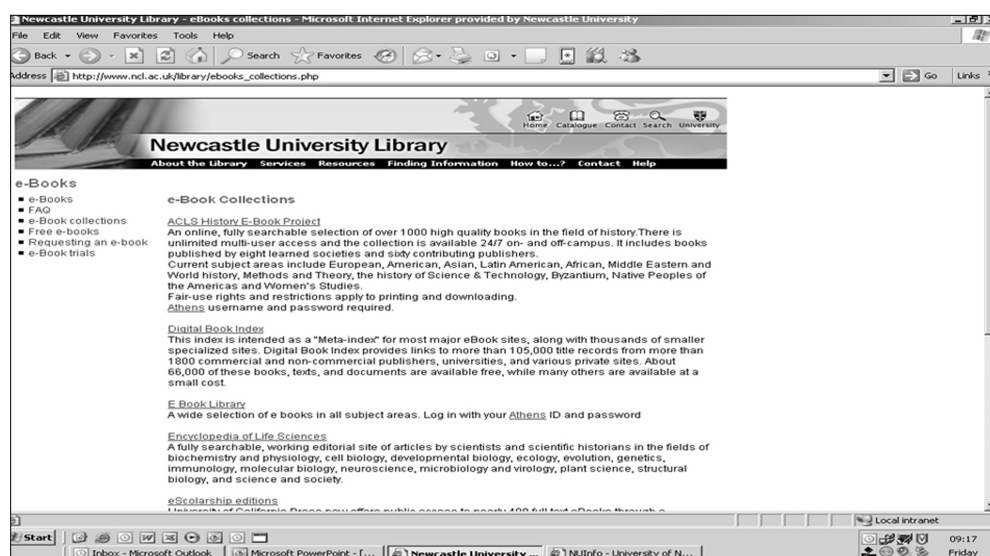


Figure 5. E-book publicity

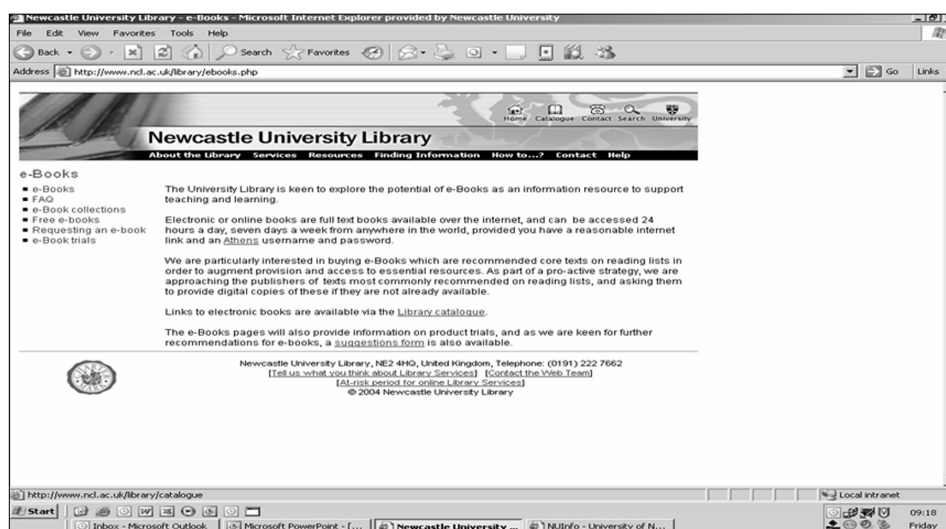


Figure 3. Catalogue record highlighting e- and print versions

Liaison Librarians make use of these pages when they are promoting library services and resources to academic schools. We also feel it is of great benefit that the general university news pages, which appear on all campus PCs when you first log on, harvest news items from our web pages. This is really helpful when we are trialling new e-book products or promoting new acquisitions because everyone logging on to a University PC will see the news, whether they want to or not.

Further adventures

In more recent years, we have been able to acquire some of the e-textbooks we so desperately require. We have bought over 400 Taylor & Francis titles, and a selection of medical textbooks via Books@Ovid, all of which are proving popular. What has been particularly important with these collections is the ability to select exactly what we wanted, rather than buying pre-selected subject clusters, or indeed 'big deals' along the journal collection model. Another interesting example is Elsevier's Kumar and Clark, *Clinical Medicine*. This is the standard textbook for clinical medicine in our university and also in several other medical schools. It is used through all five years of the course. The initial subscription that was offered was an institution model and it worked like a dream. When the new edition was proposed there was an announcement from Elsevier that they were no longer going to sell an institutional licence, it was only going to be sold direct to students. The library community was very unhappy about this, and to Elsevier's credit, they eventually listened and agreed to restore the institutional access. I use this example to make other publishers aware that whilst we have no problem at all with them selling e-books to students, we would be very unhappy if they were to make this their only sales model. Nor is it just library staff who are concerned about this type of approach. All universities are pursuing the widening participation agenda to encourage more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to university. In disciplines such as medicine where the core textbooks are generally quite expensive, there is a strong expectation amongst academic staff that the library can always be relied upon to provide adequate access to core texts. In

this way, those who cannot afford to purchase their own copies will not be disadvantaged. With the additional requirements to support off-campus periods of study, CPD courses and distance learning initiatives, there is an implicit expectation that access to library resources will be digital as well as print. Increasingly, the availability of e-versions of core textbooks will become one of the important selection criteria for inclusion on reading lists.

Are we nearer to our goal?

There are many factors which are combining to shape and inform library interest in securing e-textbooks. Where we have large numbers of students requiring access to the same texts, and the need to support off-campus access to resources, electronic formats have the potential to meet user needs in ways which cannot be supported by traditional print formats. Some progress has been made in securing access to desirable content, but many more titles are needed. Our current e-book wish list runs to several hundred titles, with more being added all the time. Initial feedback suggests that the textbooks we have managed to acquire are popular with academic staff and students, but we need to do more work to compare and contrast usage of e-versions with print equivalents to help us determine the most effective balance of provision. Academics are increasingly asking us if we can secure e-versions of their core textbooks and they get very disappointed when we say that they are not currently available. We are also being asked for more interactive books. They want books with added value, perhaps with datasets that can be manipulated or which can be incorporated into practical exercises for students. They want multi-dimensional images, online assessment exercises and, of course, they want to put links to all of this additional content in their WebCT modules.

From the library perspective, we require e-book subscriptions with multi-user licences. It is still too early to tell what the best purchasing models would be from a library perspective, but we are keen to experiment with publishers to develop models that work for both of us. We also want reliable usage data so that we can see whether the resources we have bought are helping to satisfy the demand we already know exists. In particular we want to see if having 24/7 e-access enables users to

get hold of resources at a time and place which suits them, not dependent on library opening hours.

One of the problems with e-book usage data is that there is no common reporting standard at present. We have reports that refer to user sessions, page views, hits, prints, downloads, title visits and secure chapters viewed – and that is just a selection of the terms used to describe and measure access. There is also considerable variation in how you access the data – for some titles we have admin passwords to log in to publisher websites, for others we have to e-mail individuals and ask them to run a report which is then forwarded to us. Of course, one of the first things we want to do is compare different publisher products and this is currently virtually impossible because of the widely divergent ways that usage is reported. Ultimately we also want to develop a set of key performance indicators for e-books, similar to those we have already developed for e-journals. We are currently considering what these might include. Cost per printed page would be interesting, as would the cost per view and the number of turnaways. What is clearly needed is a common standard for reporting, and this is where the recently launched COUNTER Code of Practice for books and reference works⁴ should be of enormous benefit.

So, where do we go from here? Certainly, libraries want more dialogue with publishers to secure access to the content that we need. We also need to experiment with different pricing models and one thing that should be stressed to publishers is that whilst it is understood that they are concerned about the potential loss of print sales to students if the library has e-access, that should not deter them from testing the water with e-textbooks. Also, do not base any purchase models on the assumption of retained print spends with add-on fees for e-access, which has been one of the dominant purchasing models for e-journal collections. It would be really helpful from a library perspective if we could look at the e-content as a completely separate entity and consider different pricing models, possibly for banded groups of concurrent users. Clearly it would be helpful if we could secure more content through the JISC E-books Working Group⁵ as they can help to make larger collections of material available to the HE and FE community at affordable prices.

Something we are very keen to do is compare the usage of print and e-versions. At the moment,

we have no idea how they would, or should, compare and we would like to know if the patterns of usage are inherently different. For example, are users more likely to print off pages from an e-version than they would be to go and photocopy the same pages from the print version? Will usage of print versions decline if we have readily accessible e-versions, and will user frustration over the lack of access to print be assuaged by the availability of e-versions? Is there an optimum balance of print to e-provision? We would also very much like to carry out a range of user studies, possibly in partnership with publishers, to find out more about user views and behaviour in relation to electronic and print books. The outcomes of these studies would be a key driver to the future development of our e-book strategy and would be of benefit to publishers.

Will we be successful in our quest?

To return briefly to my motif of the pursuit of desirable e-book content as a modern Grail quest: will the contemporary librarian knights be successful? Yes, we will, provided that publishers are prepared to work with libraries to see how their e-book content can be sold and how its usage can be effectively and consistently monitored. Arguably most important of all, it is imperative that libraries and publishers listen to and respond to the needs of our customers, who are ultimately the people who will decide whether e-books are a long-term success.

If all these factors are taken into account then we, too, may achieve the traditional happy ending:

*"So aftr the quest of the sankgreall was fulfilled ... was there grete joy in the courte."*⁶

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