Ebook Acquisition Strategy in tertiary institutions in the UK pre- and post-pandemic

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How academic libraries have pivoted acquisitions strategies to meet fast-changing user needs to stay at the heart of teaching and learning.

In January 2020, ProQuest launched a survey to research into ebook acquisition trends in UK universities. Little did we know, shortly after the survey closed, a global pandemic would occur and have a significant impact on every aspect of university strategy and planning. The findings of that survey now seem like a captured moment in time in the way academic libraries organised their ebook budgets and acquisition strategies which are unlikely to return. To better understand those changes and how they were impacting decision-making about ebook acquisitions, we conducted a second survey in September. That survey revealed the extent of the changes taking place in acquisition decisions and strategies post-pandemic.

Changing priorities drive a shift to "e"

In the first survey, library budgets were already moving towards ebooks to meet changing user demands and accessibility requirements. Survey respondents were spending on average 50% of their books budget on ebooks. By September, that number increased to 57% due to exponentially accelerating demand for online support and access to e-resources. Survey respondents also told us that the budget for e-textbooks, which many were increasingly purchasing, was mostly coming out of existing books budgets, although 52% had received some type of central funding for the year.

Again, in the first survey we saw an interest in better supporting distance learning students with ebook acquisition budgets. By the second survey, this had become critical as libraries supported virtually the entire student, staff and researcher community remotely. With the expectations that blended learning is here to stay in some form, these priorities are unlikely to change. However, respondents also highlighted that they expected their budgets to continue

to stay flat or decrease in the coming three years, so the ongoing struggle to do more with less is likely to continue.

With budget pressures increasing and requirement to purchase more content in electronic format, price has become the most critical factor in acquisition decisions (40%), followed by multi-user access (33%) and accessibility (11%). It's important to note that in the first survey, price came second to multi-user access.

E-content and list management link the library with the classroom

One major development that puts libraries at the centre of student learning and support is the increased prioritisation of e-content in resource lists and adoption of e-resource software to manage those lists. 80% of the survey respondents were using resource list software to support purchasing decisions. Respondents also told us that resource lists were changing to improve accessibility, increase access during the pandemic, and to accommodate more content types.

Resource list requirements have also been driving budget decisions with acquisitions librarians focusing on buying primary reading only. About 60% of respondents said that they did not purchase any secondary reading materials last year. One respondent told us *"reading lists, essential and recommended reading are always purchased. Further reading titles are added to DDA schemes. Non-resource list requests are dealt with via separate schemes and are either purchased or satisfied via ILL."*

Aggregation helps libraries contain costs and improve flexibility

The survey also asked respondents to share their decisions around supplier choices. More than 80% said their biggest increase in spend had been with library suppliers and aggregators after the start of the pandemic. Their reasons for choosing aggregators were because of the range of purchase models available, including title-by-title purchases, subscriptions to collections, PDA and DDA schemes. Respondents highlighted the issues caused by limited user access and inflexible business models. Responses included:
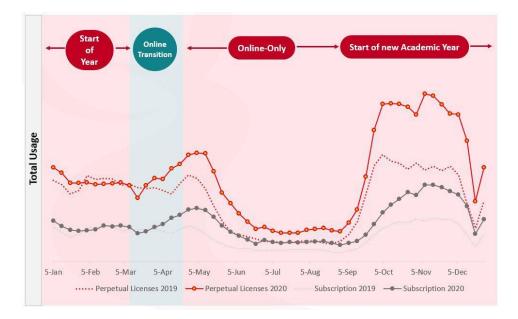
"We've only just taken out an e-book database subscription; before then we used a different database, but we can't afford to purchase individual e-books."

"The COVID pandemic and non-availability of print resources in our libraries for an extended period (plus user behaviour changes prompted by this, which may or may not become permanent)."

The majority of respondents were using multiple acquisition strategies and buying models for ebooks to help manage their budgets and ensure access to the widest range of resources for their students, faculty and researchers. Aggregators and library suppliers continue to play a vital role in simplifying processes and offering the widest range of content and purchasing models.

Pandemic flips spending model from print to "e"

ProQuest has observed dramatic changes in purchasing of books since the start of the pandemic. In January 2020, print accounted for 72% of UK acquisitions. In the pandemic this completely flipped to ebook acquisitions and now, as universities begin to resume some print acquisitions, we are seeing ebooks settle at around 64% of spend and print at 36%. Similarly, ebook usage jumped to an all-time high in autumn 2020, both in subscriptions and perpetual licence models.

UK ebook usage Jan-Dec 2020

So, what's next?

Will student, faculty and researcher preferences continue to be with ebooks if and when campuses fully open? Will we see print return? From the results of our surveys, it's unlikely that print books will return to pre-pandemic levels. However, uncertainty about ebook costs and their availability for some disciplines may make print an ongoing necessity in some cases. One thing is clear: the pandemic, whilst being very challenging, rapidly advanced plans for providing more content electronically and having more engagement from faculty over resource list provision from the library. The surveys illustrate the ability of academic libraries to rapidly pivot their acquisitions strategies to meet fast-changing user needs and ensure that the library remains at the heart of teaching and learning.

To read the white paper and university case studies related to this research, visit https://go.proquest.com/UK-Ebook-Acquisition-Whitepaper

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.