

E-books at the University of Worcester: a case study

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Abstract

Purpose

To describe how an e-books project was set up at the University of Worcester Information and Learning Services with the aim to improve user access to the range of textbook materials available.

Methodology/Approach

Details of the background and circumstances of the University and the effect of these on the process undertaken by the e-books project group are described. The selection of an e-books provider and subsequent ordering, cataloguing and promotion activities are outlined.

Findings

This paper outlines the importance of tailoring the approach to e-books acquisition to the individual institution. It is found that authentication is a major issue and that for e-books packages to be successful, technical problems need to be kept to a minimum.

Practical Implications

Examples to assist others in setting up e-books provision are given. Technical difficulties and the range of titles available are both impediments to providing a full e-books service.

Originality/ Value of the Paper

E-books appear to provide greater access and flexibility to library users. Information and Learning Services fully intend to extend the range of e-books available to students. This paper looks at the practicalities of setting up and expanding such a service.

Keywords

E-books; Acquisitions; Academic libraries; MyiLibrary; UK

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1. Introduction

In early 2006 Information and Learning Services (ILS) at the University of Worcester began to investigate the acquisition of e-books to supplement its print stock. This case study will examine the processes undertaken by the ILS team in order to choose appropriate e-book resources and the current state of e-book acquisitions and usage.

1.1 The University

In line with other Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK the University of Worcester (UW) faces pressure on its current print book stock, with rising student

numbers and limited space. A project group was set up in early 2006 to address the lack of book resources available.

The make up of the University was fundamental to the decision to buy e-books and the types of choices made about e-book subscriptions and packages. UW is one of the smaller higher education institutions in the UK, with approximately 8,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students and is a relatively unusual institution in that its student body is made up of approximately 60% part-time students and 60% mature students.

With a high proportion of part-time students UW has a large number of individual people to serve. While numbers of part-time students have little effect on the usage statistics of e-resources, having many part-timers means that books go out more often. Each individual student has the same borrowing rights regardless of part or full-time status and is able to keep those books for the same length of time. Being part-time does not mean students only borrow books for part of the time, and these books still take up the same amount of shelf space.

Geography also contributes to the accessibility of print titles. There is a high proportion of students drawn directly from the local area. UW is the sole provider of higher education for Worcestershire and Herefordshire, an area of 1516 largely rural square miles (Hereford Web Pages, 2002). While this is not an enormous geographical size by some standards, travel from Herefordshire to Worcester in particular can be difficult. Student comments have shown that there is a large psychological, if not physical, distance between the two counties, with students often unwilling to travel to the campus in Worcester from Herefordshire unless absolutely necessary. Students also come from the surrounding counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Shropshire and West Midlands and beyond. Additionally many students have young families, jobs and other responsibilities that affect their ability to come to the campus.

Academically, UW focuses on vocational subjects with two of the largest areas being nursing and teacher training. Only approximately a third of UW consists of more traditional undergraduates studying for degrees in a variety of areas including arts, humanities, social sciences, sport, business and computing. The preponderance of vocational courses means that many students are out on work placements for considerable periods of time. These placements can take students anywhere across the two counties, again meaning that they are unable to access the campus library and often accrue large fines on print books, especially if those books are recalled.

As with many HE institutions in the UK, space is also a big concern. UW currently has one library (Peirson) which reached its present size with an extension built in 1996, when the University's student body numbered approximately 1500 FTEs. As numbers have risen to nearly 8,000 and are still growing with every September and February intake of students, the pressure on physical space is clear. A new Worcester Library and History Centre, jointly funded and built by the University, Worcester County Council Library Service and the local Chamber of Commerce, is due to open in 2012 giving UW a second library space, but clearly ever rising student numbers and current space concerns will continue to pressurise space available.

1.2 Current provision of materials

The final motivation for investing in electronic over print books came from clear feedback from the National Student Survey - NSS (<http://www.thestudentsurvey.com>) carried out at UW. The general responses to the NSS for Worcester are available at the Teaching Quality Information (TQi) website (<http://www.tqi.ac.uk>) but they don't go down to individual comment level. The comments are kept confidential by TQi and only released to the individual universities. It was apparent from a broad range of responses from the third year students questioned, that lack of books was becoming a serious issue. Further investigations with focus groups, at course committees and with face-to-face student interviews demonstrated that although our range of books needed improvement, the largest concern was lack of multiple copies of books.

ILS already held a subscription to Oxford Reference Online Premier, providing users with excellent electronic access to dictionaries, encyclopaedias and a range of Oxford Companions. Additionally, students are taught and encouraged from an early stage in their course to be able to use the Internet efficiently to find good quality reference information. It is the view of ILS that users are going to use Google™ as a giant encyclopaedia regardless of the other more traditional, authoritative resources made available to them. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all students are equipped to locate successfully the information they require and to evaluate what they find. On this basis it was decided that current provision of reference materials was sufficient and the focus needed to be upon text books and recommended reading.

The ILS website alerts students to the large range of e-books that are freely available on the Internet from such sources as Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>), the Modern English Collection (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/>) and the Digital Book Index (<http://www.digitalbookindex.com/search001a.htm>) There are a number of quite comprehensive directories of e-books available, mainly listing classic literary and historical texts and many of these were potentially useful to English, Drama, History and Archaeology students (<http://www2.worc.ac.uk/ils/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=365&op=page&SubMenu=>)..

2. Background research for the e-book project

Research was carried out by staff in ILS in order to give the e-books project a strong foundation. This included attendance at the UK Serials Group E-books Study Day at the British Library where several publishers presented their products. Many of these included 'big deal' bundle packages where many e-books are purchased together, often by subject area. It was quickly decided that these bundles were inappropriate for the kinds of e-book provision UW needed to give. Many of the packages were not focused sufficiently on the type of subjects which are taught at UW. Additionally, such collections tend to include a lot of American publications which are largely inappropriate for health and education students at UW. It was also felt that such packages do not encourage wide reading. Instead, it was believed that 'big deal' packages may well be used like large journals packages: interrogated for specific paragraphs on a student's essay topic rather than assisting wider learning.

A literature review was also carried out, mainly searching Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts – the free abstracting and indexing service from

Ebsco Publishing (<http://www.libraryresearch.com>). This was used to find useful case studies and opinion pieces to give insight into potential pitfalls and areas of interest for e-books. Drummond (2004) stressed the need for e-books to reflect the textbooks required by the curriculum rather than alternatives, and it seemed clear to the project group that this would be the best use of the funds available.

Cox (2004) highlights the importance of ‘discoverability’ of e-books and notes that the key route is the library catalogue. It was clear to the project group that although static lists, such as that set up for freely available e-books, could be useful, it was key to ensure that all paid for e-books appeared on UW’s OPAC – TalisPrism. UW agrees with Holder (2006) that students want the information contained within the book. They do not particularly care what format the book comes in, so they are unlikely to decide to search specifically for an e-book, rather to search for a title and discover its e-book status.

3. The project

A project group was set up in late 2005, bringing together Subject Librarians, Collections Specialists, the Electronic Resources Librarian and library assistants responsible for the restricted loan collection. Armed with the above information there was a clear remit to gain access to specific text books for individual subject areas where ILS would otherwise have needed to purchase multiple copies or would have lacked provision. The project group was fortunate to have a small amount of money set aside (about £4,000) specifically to establish e-books as a resource, enabling the purchase of platform fees, one-off payments and so forth as required. The library uses Talis as a library management system and has made extensive use of the in-built Talis List reading list management system. Any e-books purchased would need to be accessible via the library catalogue and reading lists. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the student view of the TalisPrism interface for searching for the book *Accounting for Managers*.

Take in Figure 1

Figure 1. Search of the TalisPrism catalogue at UW

All registered UW students access resources including TalisPrism, citations databases, full-text journal subscriptions and the UW network using a single log-in. This one username and password uses Athens devolved authentication (Athens DA) for all of the University's Athens resources. A potentially complicating factor was that staff are on a separate network and still use personal Athens accounts. Any e-books subscriptions would need to be compatible with this dual system.

3.1 Provider selection

As well as Athens authentication and the ability to catalogue the e-books easily the project group also decided on other criteria. The project group members were particularly keen to avoid restrictive models of access involving checking in and checking out e-books in a fashion similar to print materials. It was felt that one of the main objectives for the e-books project was to facilitate easy access to information rather than enforcing antiquated and restrictive systems which just appear inexplicably cumbersome to the user. Clear pricing was also essential due to limited budgets and the need for transparency as to where monies had been spent.

Several e-book providers visited the University to describe their products. Both library and academic staff were in attendance at the presentations and the academic input was invaluable in our choice of system. Key selection criteria in order of importance were:

- easy access for users
- the ability to purchase individual titles rather than bundles
- appropriate coverage
- ease of ordering
- quality of MARC records available from the provider.

The users' requirements were of paramount importance in line with the student-centred approach of ILS. Information and IT training time is at a premium within the University and the project group did not wish to add complicated access systems for e-books to the issues already encountered by users.

Ultimately, the contract went to MyiLibrary, the e-books service from Coutts (<http://www.myilibrary.com>). According to its website, MyiLibrary is described as offering content from:

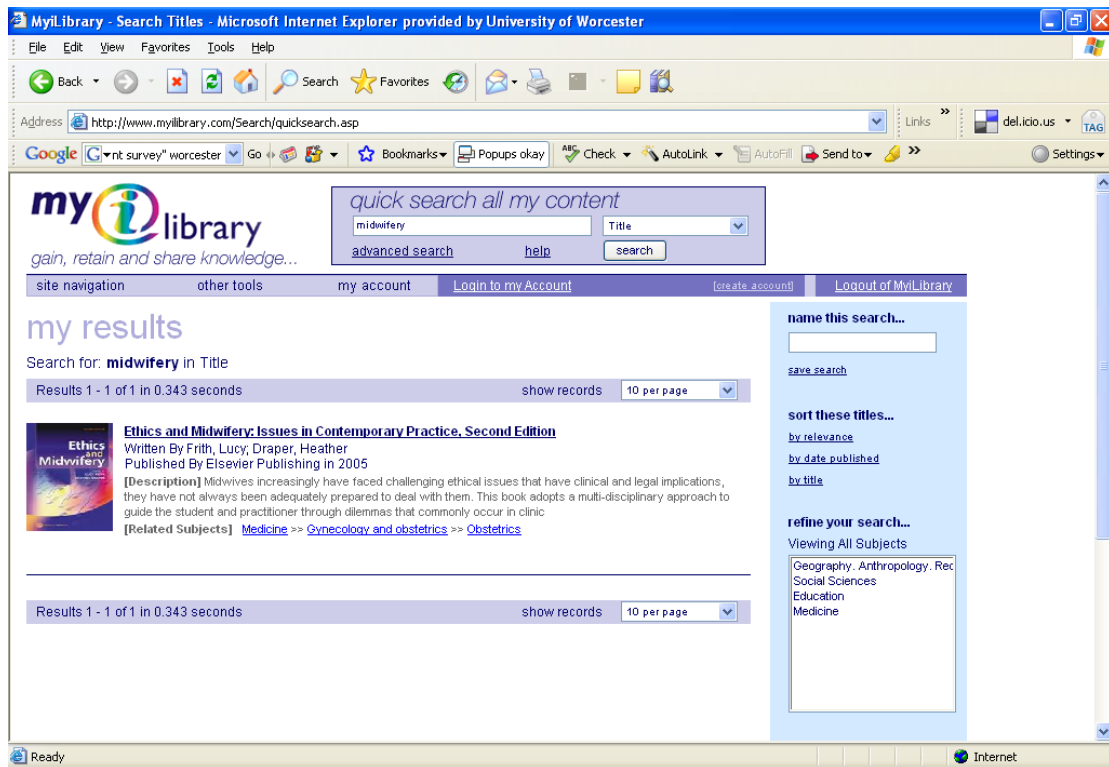
“leading commercial publishers, such as, McGraw Hill, John Wiley, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Springer and Elsevier, as well as exclusive access to intergovernmental publications from groups such as The International Atomic Energy Agency, and the International Labour Organisation” <http://www.myilibrary.com/company/home.htm>).

In total there are some 60,000 titles covered by MyiLibrary with new titles being added regularly. MyiLibrary also offers a cross-search facility to search for information across the range of e-book titles.

There were several ways in which MyiLibrary suited our particular needs. Coutts is already the main book supplier for the University of Worcester, which leads to familiarity with the ordering process as well as simplicity. It was also possible to buy titles individually. MyiLibrary also seemed particularly strong in e-books covering midwifery and sport, two subject areas where teaching staff had expressed the most interest in e-books. It was possible to make a one-off payment and to purchase a title in perpetuity which suited funding arrangements for this project. No minimum purchase was required. Also, there was a relatively high number of books in the Open eBook format (which is based on XML), rather than books in PDF format and this makes e-books more accessible to visually impaired users. MyiLibrary is also very flexible in its approach to multiple users. It was possible to purchase a single-user licence for each title, safe in the knowledge that should one user be accessing an e-book and another person attempts to access the same title, the second user would not be turned away and there would be no need to alter the licence agreement. Additionally, both the National Health Service and the Royal College of Midwives subscribe to MyiLibrary. Many of our staff and students also have links with these two organisations and are entitled to use their library resources, so it was logical to invest in a resource with which they would be familiar. The only misgiving expressed (and which later proved to be unfounded) was the questionable quality of the publisher supplied MARC records. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of the results of a search of MyiLibrary for items with midwifery in the title.

Take in Figure 2

Figure 2. Screenshot of results of a MyiLibrary search



3.2 Title selection

Titles were chosen by a variety of means. Reports were run on Business Objects, a management reporting tool used in conjunction with Talis. This helped identify which titles had had multiple issues, long queues of reservations or had been on loan for extended periods of time. TalisList reading lists were analysed to identify key texts where we had few copies or those which were on multiple reading lists. Academic staff were sent lists of available e-books and asked for any select preferences. These methods sought to reinforce the quantity of available texts but also add something, if possible, to the breadth. An initial core collection of 50 books, mainly consisting of midwifery, sport and business titles, was selected in early 2006. The range of books available from all suppliers was initially disappointing; from an original preference list of 67 titles for health subjects for example, only two were available in electronic format. There is a need for greater range, particularly for British titles.

3.3 Ordering and cataloguing

A bulk order for the first 50 titles was placed. Since then it has been the collection policy to check for the availability of e-books whenever a request for multiple copies arrives. It is also possible for academic staff to request an e-book if they feel it will be particularly appropriate for a group of students. Ordering is easily done via the Coutts Oasis database and Talis Altolibrary management system in the same way as for a print title. The MARC records are imported into Talis Alto. Collections librarians have been very satisfied with the quality of the MARC records purchased.

All e-books have been put onto the library catalogue and have separate entries from any matching print titles. There is a clear link instructing users to 'Click here to access

E-Book' in order to make opening the book as easy as possible. The default setting was for 'E-Resource' which was too vague for practical use. E-books have also been added to TalisList reading lists where appropriate. Figure 3 shows the result of the search for a specific title as shown in Figure 1.

Take in Figure 3

Figure 3. Results of a search of the OPAC



It can be seen in Figure 3 that there are two titles satisfying the search request – one a print book and the other, by a different author, an e-book. The catalogue record for the e-book is shown in Figure 4.

Take in Figure 4

Figure 4. Catalogue record for an e-book

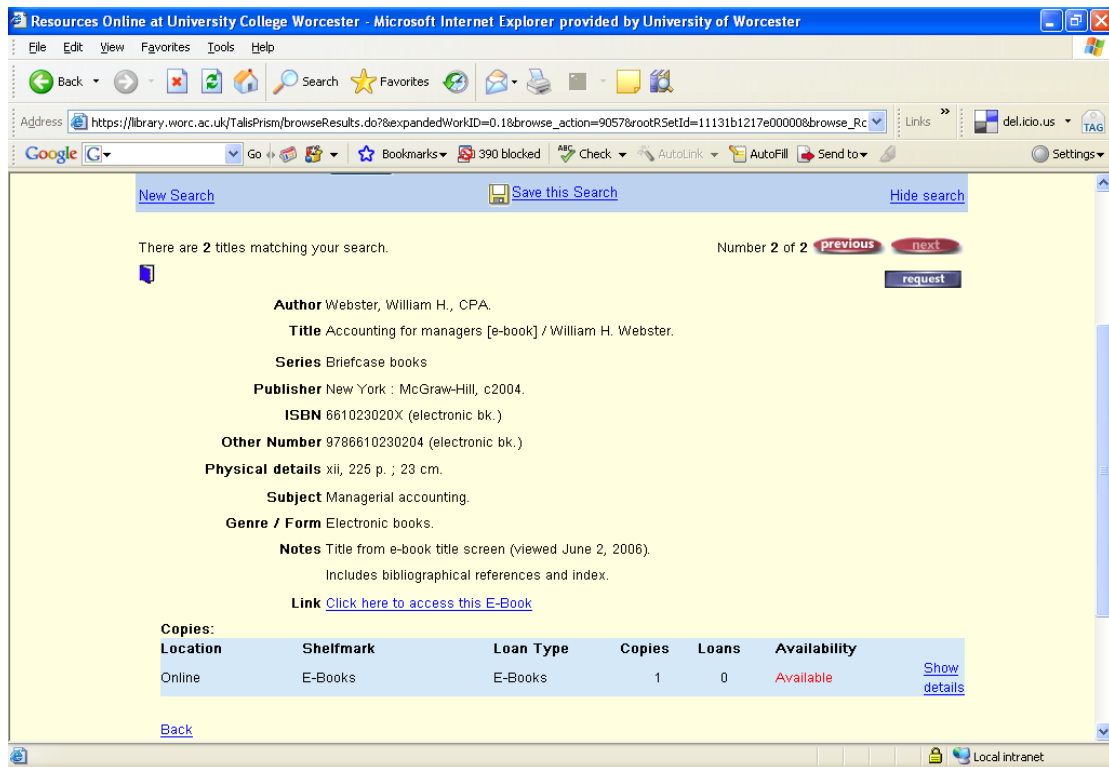


Figure 5 shows an example of part of the e-book, *Ethics and Midwifery*, accessible via MyiLibrary.

Take in Figure 5

Figure 5. Screenshot of part of *Ethics and Midwifery* e-book.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the MyiLibrary Reader interface. The address bar shows the URL: <http://www.myilibrary.com>. The page title is "Ethics and Midwifery: Issues in Contemporary Practice, Second Edition". The current page is 40, and navigation buttons for "Back", "Go to page", "Previous page", "Next page", and "Citation" are visible. On the left, there is a "Browse Table of Contents" sidebar with a tree view showing the book's structure, including sections for "PART 1 Everyday issues" and "PART 2 Technological issues". The main content area displays the chapter title "Chapter 2 Legal and ethical issues in midwifery practice" by Jean V. McHale. Below the title is a "CHAPTER CONTENTS" table with links to "Introduction" (40), "Pregnancy" (41), "Delivery and birth" (45), "Postnatal care" (50), "Conclusion" (51), and "References" (51). The "INTRODUCTION" section begins with the text: "Pregnancy gives rise to a host of ethical and legal dilemmas concerning the status of mother and fetus. Women have the right to make choices during pregnancy and the right to choose has been bolstered in a series of guidelines such as the Department of Health document *Changing Childbirth* in 1994 (DoH 1994). This document stressed the need for respect for maternal choice during pregnancy and birth. The report noted three principles: first, that the woman should be the focus of maternity care provision, second, that maternity services should be readily accessible to all and third, that services provided should be both effective and efficient. While this document provides a rhetorical backdrop to the current practice, what choices do

4. Evaluation

The main concern with e-book subscriptions has been authentication. Because the University has two different types of Athens passwords currently in use, access is easier for staff than for students. Staff simply enter their Athens username and password and proceed. The ideal situation would be for all users to be taken directly to the e-book title they require, but the system fails to recognise Athens DA. DA users are given a general MyiLibrary log-in page with the option to 'Access through Athens'. This is of little use as single sign-on users are not aware that their password incorporates Athens databases. They are taught to access named products appropriate to their course like Academic Search Elite or CINAHL (the abstracting and indexing database covering the nursing literature), not a mass of 'Athens' resources. There is no large bundle of e-books to search so students tend to look for a specific title on the catalogue rather than head directly to MyiLibrary on the off chance there is a relevant book available. Currently the access difficulties are discouraging students from using the system and usage statistics are not as high as hoped.

The objective for the project was to provide increased access to specific textbooks to ease the strain on print resources and facilitate teaching and learning. This has only been achieved to a certain extent. The range of titles available, from all suppliers, has not been sufficient to allow us to buy many of the titles we require. Certain titles have been well used, largely due to especially persistent lecturers issuing group work to students on titles they know are available. The link with lecturers has been the most successful way to promote the e-books. However, the problems with authenticating and accessing the system have meant that the system has generally been underused, particularly for any type of browsing. Further promotion and monitoring of the system

needs to take place but this has proved difficult while there are still authentication issues.

On a positive note, there have been no other technical problems of any sort, we are happy with the interface and ordering and cataloguing have been easy. Additionally, users report that they find the e-books readable. While reading on screen clearly is not as user-friendly as reading in print, users are happy to sacrifice a little usability for extra access.

5. The future

In terms of books the library is still very print reliant. In order to move away from total print dominance, the intention is now to purchase e-versions of any expensive titles that are requested in case of vandalism or theft, as well as focusing on multiple copies. Bennett and Landoni (2005) highlighted the importance of raising awareness for e-book services within academic institutions, particularly as this can lead to innovative use of the resource and wider dissemination. We intend to promote the service further, particularly to academic staff as their reading list suggestions and coursework are instrumental in deciding which resources are used. When our authentication problems are solved we intend to increase availability by adding links to relevant texts from our virtual learning environment, WebCT. Extra promotion will be necessary in all areas to improve awareness and to assist less technologically able users in finding e-books. In the long term, changes in practice will be needed so that an e-book is not (as it is currently) a rather inconvenient surprise, but more part of the normal range of services expected of the library. It is helpful that the e-books project has started quite small as it enables any problems to be ironed out without inconveniencing users too greatly.

Taylor-Roe (2006) describes e-book acquisition as “a modern grail quest”. We know what we seek but the search has proved elusive. At Worcester, we have not quite found the perfect solution to all our space and access issues, but we are pleased that we were able to buy e-books on a small scale, focusing specifically on the titles we required. Different packages and pricing models will suit different institutions. We have not quite located the Holy Grail, but we are in the vicinity.

Editor’s Note: This article is based on a presentation given to the West Midlands Talis Independent User Group in November 2006 at the University of Derby.

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