

A charter for e-books?

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Preparations are underway for a new Joint Consortia Agreement for Books, E-Books etc. This is a key opportunity for the community as a whole to coalesce around its priorities for e-books.

I was prompted to write about this following @librarygirl79's recent tweet – "£15 for a print copy of a book that has been requested for stock. £833 for the library e-book" – highlighting real concerns around the sustainability of some e-book models.

Increasingly the community is articulating the need a more centralised and collaborative approach to feedback to e-book suppliers who are not always providing fair models, licences and overall user experience for academic libraries and their users. This is well articulated by [Sarah Rayner and Desmond Coyle](#) (Insights July 2016) from the University of Manchester who argue that ". . . there is a heightened need for expertise in negotiation with publishers and for a central point of co-ordination in order to secure the best deals".

However I've also been wondering if we should be doing more to *specify precisely what it is we are looking for rather than just accepting what we are given?* So at the University of East Anglia (UEA) we have started to draft a charter of our top ten priorities that we look for when evaluating e-book suppliers. This acts as a useful checklist to inform our local decision making at UEA, but we also wonder how this compares with your own institution's priorities for e-books?

Priority 1: perpetual access models

Preference should be given to suppliers that offer perpetual, and ideally unlimited, access models rather than those with limits on 'number of users' or 'number of uses'. This is to avoid inadvertently penalising the user as they come up against invisible barriers to access.

Priority 2: licensing must cover every part of the supply chain

Preference should be given to suppliers that provide assurance that their offering is backed up by appropriate licences covering *every* party in the supply chain, ie:

- the supplier with whom the e-book order is placed
- the aggregator of e-books (if different from supplier)
- the publisher who provides the actual e-book content for the aggregator's platform

This is because without adequate licensing, it would be possible for each party in the supply chain to blame each other when something goes wrong, rather than taking responsibility to resolve.

Priority 3: dark archive

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators/publishers who have appropriate archival arrangements in place with each party in the supply chain, to act as a backstop if one of the parties goes out of business or is taken over, eg access then provided through Portico, CLOCKSS, etc.

Priority 4: longevity of licensing arrangements between aggregators and publishers

Preference should be given to suppliers who can guarantee that content previously purchased/licensed by the institution will never be withdrawn. This assurance would help academic libraries justify replacing print books with digital books rather than having to buy a print copy as well, 'just in case'.

Priority 5: easy access

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators who provide, or have negotiated, away barriers such as:

- intrusive digital rights management
- proprietary software requirements
- proprietary authentication, ie authentication that is not Shibboleth or OpenAthens compliant or that restricts access to 'on-campus' only

This is because patrons report that these are acting as significant barriers to their use of e-books. For example, see [Lorraine Estelle](#), 'What students told us about their experiences and expectations of print and e-books' (Insights March 2016).

Priority 6: e-book usability

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators/publishers who provide:

- clear 'on screen' reading, since we estimate that typically approximately 75% of reading at UEA is done this way
- a user friendly download option in a format that is 'easy to read and navigate' with little likelihood of content expiring unexpectedly during use
- mobile friendly, responsive content
- appropriate display of all charts, tables, images, diagrams, etc, as good as in the print equivalent, eg EPub3
- compatibility with widely used accessibility software and tools

Relatively poor quality on screen presentation concerns students and faculty as they reflect on library provided e-books in comparison with e-books they may have bought themselves, perhaps through Apple's iBook (.iBooks) or Amazon's Kindle (.AZW3) proprietary interfaces for example, although those are not always up to scratch either.

Priority 7: e-book pricing

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators who provide, or have negotiated, transparent and affordable pricing models, avoiding:

- pricing instability, such as excessive annual price rises
- pricing models changing frequently or with disproportionately high pricing for perpetual access in comparison with other models
- prices that are unreasonable when assessed against the price of the print version

Priority 8: patron/usage driven (PDA/DDA/EBA) models

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators whose services provide the ability to restrict 'accidental' downloads/purchases, ie through adequate and transparent provision of a browse period. This is to protect library budgets and collections from unnecessary purchases.

Priority 9: e-book ordering

Preference should be given to suppliers/aggregators who provide clarity about which edition/version is being ordered so libraries buy the correct edition and so that academic requirements around accurate referencing can be met. For example, see [Vivien Ward](#), 'So what's the problem with e-books?'

Priority 10: record quality

Suppliers should provide accurate downloadable MARC records and/or DOIs, at the point of the order being placed, for populating discovery services/catalogues/VLEs. This is to ensure the timely and accurate delivery of e-books.

What about e-textbooks?

Many aspects of the charter above could also apply to the purchase of so called 'e-textbooks' as well. In many respects, libraries should be able to purchase e-textbooks on a 'one to many' model, just like other e-books, if those textbooks are just one part of wider reading for the module or course. Indeed it is arguable that is the most appropriate pedagogical approach anyway, since any textbook should simply be a starting point for wider reading.

However where students are being expected to carry out sustained reading and activities around a particular e-textbook, and/or where there is particularly "inventive content . . . being delivered to a high standard" – [Tifaine Dickinson](#) on the CILIP blog – then there may be occasions where a 'per student' pricing model is appropriate. There are case studies that suggest considerable 'value add' from such models, not just in terms of marketing but also in terms of academic engagement with the material. More research needs to be done to consider whether the 'value add' is sustained throughout the student lifecycle and whether the cost per user represents good value for money for the institution as a whole. Institutions like Plymouth, Manchester and others are pushing the boundaries here and trying to challenge the "traditional conventions of publisher RRP" (Dickinson) or, even worse, Digital List Prices (DLPs).

Perhaps what we can agree at this stage is that the best e-textbook providers focus on:

- cross-device functionality and apps
- high quality presentation of the reading material, with potential for embedded multimedia and/or scripted interactivity, eg EPub3
- in perpetuity downloads for reading offline
- use of institutional authentication
- tools for navigating, highlighting and sharing
- stable pricing models, ideally single payment
- appropriate text-to-speech options for accessibility
- licence and digital rights management implementation that is seamless as far as the user is concerned

By contrast, the worst e-textbook providers continue to rely on one or more of the following:

- minimum institutional spend or minimum core user models
- complex subscription and/or pay per access models

- lack of transparent or stable pricing
- disproportionate pricing in comparison with print RRP
- proprietary authentication
- licence and digital rights management implementation that confuse user

Thought by no means exhaustive, hopefully these reflections on e-books and e-textbooks offer food for thought at a time when UK national e-book negotiations begin again and many institutions are considering how best to implement 'digital first' collection policies in the context of declining physical space.



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