



# Librarian messages to publishers

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## **Background**

Maybe the sun and sea at Bournemouth was to blame, but the idea for a piece of work around librarians' messages to publishers arose from a chance conversation between us (Bernie Folan and Claire Grace) at the UKSG Conference in 2016. We talked about opportunities for interaction and feedback between librarians and publishers such as library advisory boards, ad hoc workshops, official consultations about deals etc, and their effectiveness. It is not always clear, when librarians are asked to contribute, what the aim of the meeting is, and many other factors can also remain opaque. Does attendance require specific, specialist knowledge? Is the meeting operational or strategic – or both? Who should best attend to represent the university? Who else has been invited? Are there opportunities to learn from peers in other libraries? Are there opportunities to help shape the agenda for the meeting? Are we going to be 'sold' to?

All of this leads to an inconsistency in our interactions which has the potential for unclear messages going from libraries to publishers.

We felt it important to have a forum where publishers could hear librarians' thoughts – so we decided to do some research. The research is straightforward. That it is not done regularly probably tells us something.

## **What we did**

We put together a questionnaire. We deliberately tried not to lead in any way and, apart from asking for some basic demographic information, allowed respondents to add free text for up to three messages they wanted to provide.

The questionnaire was publicised via various listservs and via social media and to some individuals identified for their potential to reach into other library-related networks.

## **Responses we received**

There were 235 respondents, overwhelmingly from the UK and Ireland (over 80%), providing 667 messages to publishers. A clear majority were from HE, and from people employed at both operational and strategic levels.

We coded with as few labels as we could to help group messages into categories. Name and organisation name was optional but 85 of the 235 provided their contact details – just under a third.

## **Key messages to publishers**

Clear and consistent themes emerged from the data. Of the major themes, the top three issues are discussed in more detail below.

### **1 Publisher pricing strategy and business models, and library budgets**

These were two separate but overlapping themes in the data but we have combined them for reporting purposes. Issues reported, often by directors and senior managers, include:

- Library budgets are not like they used to be. Even where universities are growing, libraries are not. Libraries are expected to do more with less and in many cases cuts are being made year on year. Libraries want publishers to know that they have not have seen the worst of this yet.
- Complaints about above inflation price increases without good explanation or with rationale that didn't appear to take the customer into account, eg platform redevelopment or an increased volume of content in the resource.
- Usage-based increases year on year that appear to penalise effective use and become unsustainable.
- Textbooks published in new editions with minimal changes.
- Charging for previously available archives – libraries explain that this leads to a lack of trust between the library and the supplier and, crucially, the library and its customers (students and academics).
- Pricing needs to be tailored to other sectors, smaller institutions and FE who feel very disadvantaged by one size fits all pricing models based on library budgets in HE.

### **2 E-book licensing, pricing and business models**

E-book issues rose high in the response table. There is confusion and mistrust about different models being used by different publishers and aggregators, dissatisfaction with the technologies, printing, downloading and DRM, and above all the pricing:

- Libraries want multi-user licence models that enable broad access.
- There is a need for greater standardisation and consistency in platform functionality to ensure that library users can use library e-book content with minimal, if any, support.
- Libraries need vendors to respond quickly, both with purchasing and supporting issues that arise – students need access fast!
- Libraries don't want pricing based on the cost of print copies – this doesn't make sense to them. There needs to be new, collaborative thinking about 'born digital' e-book opportunities that take full advantage of technologies and ways that today's students are starting to work.
- There needs to be greater interaction between systems that support the availability of library e-books, print (including print on demand) and textbooks (print and e). Libraries don't see why they should pay for the same book twice in different formats at increased cost.

### **3 User experience (UX) and access issues**

Libraries want publishers to understand that their customers (students and academics) require fast responses to access issues. Customers expect content to be stable and available and they need publishers to resolve their queries quickly, with effective systems for communication:

- Libraries do not want to pay for publishers' platforms – just the content. Library users have little or no interest in your brand, your technologies etc, they just want easy and accessible access to the content without needing to ask for help from a librarian.

- When publishers do make changes to their platforms, libraries need them to communicate effectively and with a far greater lead-time than many publishers realise and to allow customers to test, test, and test again before rolling out!
- Alumni access featured large in the messages from libraries. Alumni are seen as key members of university / college communities with an ongoing relationship with them post-graduation. Libraries have traditionally served this group with ongoing access to physical, on-campus services and need to be able to move this provision to online access to key content and services. Libraries need publisher engagement with their growing initiatives and active groups such as ALF, the Alumni Libraries Forum.

This is just a snapshot of the messages we received, there is a lot of data that we would encourage publishers, librarians and any other interested parties to look at. Other top themes such as communication and collaboration, all things open access, discoverability and customer service were expressed multiple times by respondents and are no less important.

Libraries and publishers are partners in research communication, teaching and learning, so must talk more openly and regularly. Publishers, use your time with librarians wisely. It's not just about sales. There are opportunities for rich collaboration.

### **What are the takeaways for publishers?**

Innovation is great but getting the basics right should be a given for publishers supplying a service. The overwhelming messages about pricing models and strategies and declining or flat library budgets are food for thought. Just because we've heard it before, doesn't mean we should discount the large number of comments provided. We hoped for more comments of a strategic nature from senior librarians and there are a good number but it feels like e-books challenges are taking up too much time, headspace and cost at many levels.

This is an opportunity for publishers to take time to have a conversation internally about the messages. Are there surprises? What improvements are possible to make? What are the barriers to change that would improve the work lives of librarians and access to research and pedagogy by library users? Smaller publishers need to find a way to communicate and listen whilst explaining their practices and differentiating themselves. Can they join forces to enable better communication?

### **What are the takeaways for libraries?**

Ask yourselves collectively why your messages are not being heard? Are library staff confident that they can represent the breadth of these messages? With so many different roles in libraries, do you always send the right person – eg to publisher advisory groups? Should there be different questions being asked and answers given? Where are the blocks to understanding? What can be done differently to move forward? Where are the good examples and how can they be shared – eg where the budget message has been heard, what were the enablers?

Smaller institutions need to find a way to communicate to explain their challenges. Can they join forces to enable better communication?

### **What's next**

There has been a great deal of interest in the study and lots of delegates at the UKSG conference were keen to [review the data](#).

Future research could drill down in different ways, perhaps by organisation type or by role. We might also like to expand the research more broadly in some areas to ensure a greater input from other sectors. But what we'd really like to do is the reverse of this . . . ask publishers for their messages to librarians. That could be a very interesting study – watch this space.

We are keen to find a mechanism for longitudinal studies, tracking the same few themes over time and welcome ideas and suggestions for the themes we need to track.

So please grab a cup, mug or glass of something nice, find a comfortable place to sit, and [peruse our PowerPoint slides and the dataset organised into themed tabs](#). We enthusiastically welcome your thoughts and suggestions.



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