Patron-driven acquisition in a specialist arts library

A trial at the University of the Arts London

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Context

Patron-driven acquisition (PDA) is in routine use as a tool for collection development or one-off expenditure at points in the year by many UK higher education libraries, but it came relatively late to us at University of the Arts London (UAL). The fact that SCONUL now collects data for the annual library statistics on the number of e-books selected by library patrons in this way is indicative of how many libraries are using PDA. Thus this short paper is less about the model of PDA chosen or the mechanics and operation of our trial – there are many interesting articles about this from colleagues in other places – than it is about the potential difficulties around collection development in a specialist arts library when considering using PDA.

UAL is at the same time both relatively large (c.19,000 students) and specialist (six colleges teaching, researching and innovating in arts, design, fashion and communication), which makes benchmarking very difficult. At UAL we have spent a lot of time thinking around what might be unique about our library assets, our users and their use of our resources and spaces in order to inform library services strategy, and make sure that we are reflecting and meeting the needs of the institution as a world-leading university for teaching and research in the creative arts.

In our user profile we have a high proportion of creative practitioners who have a sophisticated level of visual literacy; this undoubtedly influences their information-seeking behaviour. Students seek both inspiration and information from our collections, so there is a great deal of serendipitous browsing and enthusiastic use of printed books and journals on the premises for visual referencing purposes. Furthermore, much of our students' research is project-based rather than driven by reading lists. Students using resources in our six libraries, two learning zones and our University Archive and Special Collections Centre include a noteworthy proportion of dyslexic students (12% as opposed to a 4% average for declared dyslexia across UK universities), another 5% who declare other disabilities, along with a significant number of international and short-course students from more than 100 countries.

Although we need to be careful not to make assumptions, there seems to be some evidence from our own experience and from the Library Impact Data Project that there are lower levels of e-resource use in art and design libraries, but not fewer, and probably more, library visits.[1] We shall be interested to see if this is reflected in the ongoing JISC Library Analytics and Metrics Project, which is looking at all sorts of metrics including the relationship between academic discipline and library usage (of all kinds) with actual data from multiple institutions.[2]

Translated to collections, this differentiation means that although UAL has a generally rising number of e-resources (including e-books selected individually and in databases), it could be said in reality to have a small- to medium-sized collection in relation to its size. We are, however, bucking the trend in that we remain very print-focused, and this part of our collection continues to grow at a significant rate. This is in part due to the nature of the subjects taught, and in part to a marked preference for the printed resource in study and research.

Purchasing and collection building is not only (or even primarily) driven by reading lists at UAL. Rather, the majority of acquisitions originate from stock selection by our academic support librarians in collaboration with course teams and are underpinned by their experience and expertise in both librarianship and the disciplines taught at UAL. Many art and design resources are currently available only as print, and users make heavy use of print in their studies and research.

Use of all our libraries (measured by the total footfall per year and headcounts at specified times during the SCONUL sample weeks) remains relatively high and stable. User feedback also indicates that students view the library as a vitally

important physical space that complements the role of studios and workshops in their learning experience.

Exploring PDA

We first began to discuss PDA in 2012 as we sought to increase our provision of e-books, and the then Bibliographic Services Manager wrote a paper for the Senior Management Team recommending a small trial (£10,000 in value, including the VAT element) to run in the spring term of 2013. This trial was communicated to library staff at the annual staff conference that year as a series of short presentations to small groups of library staff with time for discussion. The idea was presented as offering a limited element of customer selection – alongside title-by-title librarian selection and existing packages – and as an experiment in acquiring items discovered by customers from a pre-profiled selection.

There was some anxiety over this approach from our librarians during these presentations. They were concerned that material selected by students might be unsuitable; that there wouldn't be much relevant material for them to choose from; and they were concerned about losing control over material selection and the potential for imbalance in collections. From the point of view of collection building, there was some apprehension that PDA addresses current rather than future needs – satisfying the immediate rather than the long-term needs of collections.

These anxieties were acknowledged, but were countered by the positive customer focus of PDA: it is responsive (for example it is very much quicker than inter-library loan for material not held locally); it might pick up any reading list items not seen by librarians; and it may reveal cross-disciplinary needs that we have not identified through course librarian liaison. We also discussed PDA as one way of addressing diminishing budgets for multiple-copy items and concerns about space in some of our colleges; we recognised that it is excellent for off-campus and distance-learning customers.

The trial began in March 2013, but was put on hold almost immediately due to technical difficulties with our supplier (including a surprise supplier platform upgrade, which made Adobe unusable on some of our browsers) and a local IT problem, but it was re-launched in May 2013. Although this was frustrating and time-consuming to resolve at the time, it was not a disaster as we had not promoted or publicised the activity to library users, and the PDA process was intended to be invisible to them.

After some limited profiling (using DDC and our in-house classification scheme variations and quirks) to remove some very off-topic material from the original supplier list, we launched with c.15,000 PDA items in our OPAC. For those who are interested, we offered DDC subject areas in the following proportions: 070: 2%; 300: 53%; 600: 11%; 700–770: 12%; 780–790: 22%.

Outcomes

Despite no publicity or promotion of the trial, funds were spent by the end of May (just over three weeks) and records for unpurchased titles removed from view. Purchases by subject area during the trial were in the proportions: 070: 3%; 300: 54%; 600: 12%; 700–770: 19%; 780–790: 12%. Customer selections were generally sensible and analysis of them shows that fears of a narrow focus were largely unjustified, although it remains true that some subject areas are better served than others when it comes to e-book provision.

Following on from the initial discussions, by the time of the 2013 Library Services staff conference, we were able to make an early assessment of the value of this PDA material by comparing it with librarian-selected titles for the same period; we found that the average cost and the average number of uses compare favourably. We shall look at usage again over a longer period this year to see how much these titles are being used and shall report back to staff, who now seem less anxious about this approach to collection development than they were prior to the trial.

As a result of this successful trial, we have included an element of PDA in our ongoing collections strategy, and it has been written into the Collection Development and Management Policy.[3] The spend will be higher in future years, but is still only a small proportion (less than 10%) of our books spend. We think the trial has shown to our staff that PDA can be of use to a specialist art and design institution as part of a balanced collection development strategy and as a supplement to their own efforts. It has also helped us to improve our provision of e-books generally and enabled us to identify material that is available in our subject areas – but it could be argued that this will always need to be a balanced and holistic approach at UAL because of the nature of the subject and the relative lack of e-books for our core subjects.

Having said this, we continue to promote e-books, including with a recently held e-book promotion week intended to increase awareness and generate more demand for these increasingly important resources. We shall do an impact analysis to see if this has happened in due course.

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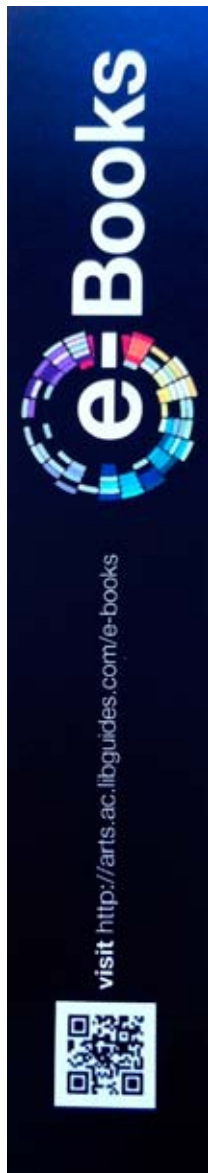
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