Patron-driven acquisition: the experience of three university libraries

INTRODUCTION

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Patron-driven acquisitions (PDA: sometimes known as demand-driven purchasing) is a supply model in which users select ebooks from their institution's chosen supplier's lists, which are usually integrated into the library catalogue. Users are provided with a free preview of the item, and are then allowed further access either on a request or on an automated basis, according to the supply model. Libraries can select from a range of purchase or rental models, and are also able to specify price limits. PDA has been piloted in a number of university libraries, and the experiences at Northampton, Nottinham Trent and Lincoln related in this article identify common themes and issues.

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Why PDA?
Ask students what they want from their university library and it is likely that 'more books' is high on the list. At the University of Northampton, the perception that there are 'not enough books' is reflected consistently in National Student Survey (NSS) feedback. Investment in ebooks

has improved access to reading list items, but not enough to impress students. PDA is an exciting development that has the capacity to challenge student perceptions about the availability of books in the library. This dynamic tool enables students to explore and access a much wider range of titles than is usually available, also giving them the opportunity to become partners in the collection development process. By introducing this service, we anticipate a positive impact on the student experience and increased satisfaction. Our question is not so much why PDA, as why not PDA?

Which supplier(s) / model did you choose and why?
Dawson Books has been our main supplier of ebooks, through the Dawsonera platform, for a number of years. Extending our provision to PDA was a natural progression. It was a convenient 'next step' and students were already familiar with the interface. Our approach was experimental as we opted for full integration of the Dawsonera catalogue into our own library catalogue. The model offered students the opportunity to rent, or in the case of items we had already purchased, to download or read online. In terms of rentals, should two or more students rent an item, this would trigger an automatic purchase. Limits were imposed on the cost: rentals over £5 and automatic purchases over £50 had to be authorised by an academic librarian.

Approximate monthly spend on PDA
It is fair to say that we had no idea how quickly the money put into PDA would be used up. For the 2011/12 academic year we top sliced £75 000 from the resources budget in the hope that it would last for the academic year. In actual fact, the money was used up in just sixteen weeks, making the average monthly spend £19 000.

Problems during launching/maintaining the PDA service
PDA was initially launched in the latter part of the 2010/11 academic year, using funds that were released to help boost the NSS scores. We like to think of this as our pilot, as it brought to our attention the following issues:

- There were technical problems when uploading the initial ebook records to our catalogue. The volume of records caused the system to 'fall over'.
- The catalogue lacked an intuitive link to the ebook. A prominent 'Access this ebook' button was later added.

- We did not formally market the service because we were concerned that active promotion would cause the funds to run out quickly. This led to some confusion about what was going on in the catalogue and queries from both staff and students.
- There was an immediate impact on the workload of the academic librarians in terms of time spent explaining the system and carrying out interventions on rentals/acquisitions.
- Many items had publisher restrictions, allowing only a five-minute preview, rather than full access. These records clogged up the catalogue and caused frustration for students.
- Some items were considered too expensive for a rental, one item costing £300. However, only four items were actually declined on price.

In readiness for the new academic year, we launched the service properly on 1 August 2011, with the cost based on expenditure during the trial period. As mentioned previously, the money was used up quickly despite there being no formal marketing campaign. PDA was turned off in December, leaving only purchased ebooks in the catalogue and no 'on-demand' titles.

The plan has been to turn PDA on whenever there are funds available; however, there has been some concern expressed by students who have noticed that it is no longer an option in the catalogue.

How have you evaluated / will you evaluate the effectiveness of PDA?
We have been analysing the quantitative data available in relation to PDA. Interlibrary loan requests have almost halved since introducing the service, which suggests a positive impact. Through the administrator function on the Dawsonera website we also have access to statistics; this has enabled us to capture meaningful data about how PDA is being used.

A main driver for introducing this service was that we believed it would increase satisfaction with our resources. A significant indicator of this will be improved scores in the 2012 NSS.

What next – will PDA be a permanent part of your library service?
There is a clear demand for PDA at the University of Northampton. Following our research into the student experience, we intend to make improvements to the service. It is particularly important that we establish how we can make PDA sustainable for the future. Profiling, either by Dewey

classification or publisher, and the removal of particular items, such as old editions, could help us to achieve this. PDA is definitely in our future plans, but we need to feel confident that access will be continuous when we roll it out and market it properly to our keen users.

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Why PDA?

NTU primarily decided to trial PDA as a response to feedback from users dissatisfied with the provision of access to core learning resources. It was seen as a measure aimed at increasing the level of satisfaction expressed in student surveys for improved access to the resources they need; we hoped it would also help generate the following benefits:

- fill gaps in the collection with ebooks selected by users
- extend the take up and adoption of ebooks
- help to support and develop our policy of acquiring resources on a 'just in time' basis.

Which supplier(s) / model did you choose and why?

Libraries and Learning Resources (LLR) at NTU selected Coutts / MyiLibrary as the initial PDA supplier because:

- Technically it was easy to set up.
- LLR had already established acquisitions procedures for our resource list acquisitions of both ebooks and shelf-ready print stock and have implemented electronic data interchange (EDI) ordering and invoicing with Coutts, so the underlying systems and supplier relationships were already in place.
- We liked the PDA model that Coutts / MyiLibrary offered – for the library it offered the benefits of multi-user access to ebooks and a seamless method for users to select

stock without realising that they were doing it. We had decided not to publicise PDA during this pilot period and did not want to use a PDA model that made it obvious to users that they had triggered some sort of transaction.
- We considered the seamless access experience for students to be of paramount importance and rejected other PDA plans that required staff intervention or mediated approval.

Approximate monthly spend on PDA

An average of £22,000.

Problems during launching / maintaining the PDA service

We have now called a halt to the PDA plan with Coutts whilst we review the outcomes of the pilot and try to establish whether the PDA model appears to give value for money compared with other more conventional approaches to library-initiated book acquisitions. We found that the money we had set aside was used up very quickly and are concerned that the threshold for triggering a purchase may be set too low to deliver really excellent value for money. A significant number of our PDA purchases have been triggered by the minimum threshold but have not been used subsequently. For NTU a major drawback of the MyiLibrary system is their use of a local ebook ISBN in a field that should be used only for the publisher's ISBN. This local 'ISBN' has caused significant problems when trying to de-duplicate catalogue records with other PDA and ebook suppliers and it is an issue that we are working hard to resolve with Coutts.

Including ebook records that can be bookmarked by academic staff and added to resource lists within our resource discovery environment has added an extra layer of complexity. This has resulted in the need for sophisticated record keeping of which PDA ebooks have been purchased and management of records to ensure that bookmarked but un-purchased PDA records were not withdrawn at the end of the plan.

Our very broad initial pilot PDA plan had no set upper price limits and with the benefit of hindsight we would not make the same decisions in the future. Lack of upper price limits meant that it was very easy for our users to unknowingly trigger some very expensive purchases that have barely been used.

Probably the biggest problem is to identify how funds can be made available to continue to offer PDA as a model against a background of shrinking budgets when every resource needs to demonstrate its value.

How have you evaluated / will you evaluate the effectiveness of PDA?
We have carried out some extensive analysis on average price of PDA purchases; usage data of PDA vs. resource list recommended ebooks; snapshot cost per use figures (although we hope these costs will change and be reduced if the PDA purchases continue to be used); spend on PDA by subject and class number ranges. By its very nature, it is not possible for us to assess directly the effectiveness of the PDA plan from a user's point of view because they are not aware that they have been using the service.

On a more general level, we shall also see whether student satisfaction with the book collection improves in overall terms as a result of PDA.

What next – will PDA be a permanent part of your library service?
Our next steps are to try some pilots with different PDA suppliers and models. We are about to conduct a much smaller pilot for the smallest of NTU's site libraries with Ebrary and have plans to trial the evidence-based PDA model offered by Elsevier. Having spent a very significant amount of money in a short period of time, we would like to monitor the usage of the PDA purchases to see whether there is evidence of sustained usage before embarking upon PDA more widely. If we can find a way of resourcing it on a regular basis we would like to be able to offer selective PDA plans, possibly concentrating on those parts of the collection that appear to be weakest and where there has been limited take up of ebooks to date.

If, as expected, we continue with PDA, it will work alongside specialist librarian selection, which will focus on collection-building in a more holistic way to ensure balance.

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Why PDA?
At the University of Lincoln, feedback from student surveys and focus groups over the last few years have identified as a priority the wish to access a wider range of print and e-books. Additionally, we wanted to put student choice at the heart of collection development, and felt that PDA would allow us to give our users direct influence over what we purchase. With limited space to develop our printed book collection, we believed that the 'just in time' opportunities offered by PDA would answer some of our requirements.

Which supplier(s) / model did you choose and why?
Initially we launched our pilot using the Dawson purchase model, which allows a free five-minute preview, with an option to buy outright if the user wishes to continue reading (subject to our own price cap of £100). We ran our pilot from November 2011 until January 2012, and spent in the region of £42 000 + VAT.

At the end of our pilot, because of budgetary constraints, we changed to the Dawson 'suggest for purchase' model, in which the user is given a five-minute preview, and if they wish to continue reading after this, they suggest that the library purchases the item on their behalf.

We selected Dawson because they offered a range of models, and were also prepared to work with us to modify our chosen model to ensure that, as far as possible, it met with our needs.

Approximate monthly spend on PDA
During the course of our initial direct purchase pilot, we spent approximately £30 000 in the first month. Currently, using the 'suggest for purchase' model, we are spending in the region of £1500 per month. We allocated budgets to our academic subject librarians to enable them to approve users' suggestions. We do not operate a price cap – it is up to the academic subject librarian to decide if the suggestion represents good value for money.

Problems during launching / maintaining the PDA service

When we implemented PDA we experienced some difficulties and delays with the initial upload of MARC records, because of problems with customisation and provider ICT issues. Dawson has informed us that there is now a faster, improved process to upload records.

With regard to maintenance, financial administration can be time-consuming because it is necessary to run a daily report showing what has been purchased if we wish to obtain an up-to-date expenditure account. There are also two issues relating to the user interface. Firstly, when in the automatic purchase model, if an item exceeds our £100 price cap the user is not given an explanation for not being allowed to proceed beyond the preview (the user does not see the price of the item). Secondly, if a user views an item for five minutes and does not immediately wish to proceed beyond this point, they are refused access for 24 hours, again without explanation. We have discussed these issues with Dawson and they are working to provide solutions.

How have you evaluated / will you evaluate the effectiveness of PDA?

We shall examine the feedback from student surveys and focus groups to evaluate the impact of PDA. In addition, we shall identify the cost per use of each item, by comparing individual prices with numbers of users. Contrary to our expectations, we have not yet experienced a significant decline in interlibrary loan requests; in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that students are requesting interlibrary loans for PDA requests that have been refused on grounds of cost.

What next – will PDA be a permanent part of your library service?

We have requested additional funding to support PDA and expect to offer periods of both the 'automatic purchase' and the 'request for purchase models during the course of next academic year.

Conclusion

The experiences of the university libraries outlined above demonstrate that PDA is very popular with students. However, it is also apparent that due to budgetary constraints and the need to provide good value for money, it is important for libraries to continue to work with suppliers to develop purchasing models which are appropriate to the needs of their institutions.