Shared value
Collaborative evidence-based ebook acquisition in Scotland

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SHEDL background

Led by the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL), the Scottish Higher Education Digital Library (SHEDL)[1] has collaborated successfully since 2009 to procure access to almost 3500 electronic journals for the eighteen Scottish Higher Education institutions, the National Library of Scotland and National Museums Scotland. The SHEDL model has many advantages, including allowing institutions to extend their e-only journal coverage at no, or minimal, additional cost and to cease buying print except where demonstrably required. There are efficiency gains, increased usage and reduced operational costs. Overheads are reduced for publishers as there is a single negotiation with a single point of contact for administration and invoicing. In 2013, a small group of interested SHEDL members investigated the possibility of expanding the SHEDL journal portfolio to include collaborating with publishers to procure access to Digital Rights Management (DRM) -free electronic books (ebooks). Existing aggregator models were not wholly satisfying the noticeable desire for both increased access to ebooks across Scotland and an improved student experience, with more user-friendly texts for both teaching and research. Additionally, some institutions were under pressure to free up space in library buildings. An existing Scottish framework agreement for individual title purchase of ebooks via aggregators was already in place and institutions had experience of working with Advanced Procurement for Universities and Colleges (APUC)[2], set up in 2009 as a procurement centre of expertise for all Scotland's universities and colleges.

Collaborating with publishers

A consultation exercise was undertaken across all institutions to discuss extending collaboration to include direct publisher relationships to procure ebooks. The response was positive and a decision was taken to extend the existing ebook framework agreement (due to expire in 2014) to include a separate lot for DRM-free packages purchased direct from publishers. APUC would continue to provide procurement support.

As this was a departure from the normal ebook acquisition approach, it was necessary to undertake some market investigation with publishers to ensure they were willing to collaborate with the Scottish institutions. From a previous analysis of ebooks purchased in Scotland, the institutions had a list of preferred publishers they were able to target to measure interest. Calls and meetings soon established that there was definite interest, and a project plan and strategy were put together to advertise the next Scottish ebook tender opportunity to include DRM-free packages purchased direct from publishers.

Crucially, all library directors guaranteed collective institutional financial commitment to allow publishers to bid for a portion of a collective pot of money. A group of experienced SHEDL members was tasked with drawing up the statement of requirements and scoring the subsequent bids. It was recognised that this was a departure from the existing consortium ebook approach, very much reflecting a changing environment in this marketplace.

The statement of requirements for this section of the tender document required a great deal of thought. The following are examples of criteria measured:

- quality of content
- title inclusions / exclusions
- DRM-free content
- platform functionality
- metadata
- business models

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Business models generated the most discussion. The institutions wanted to ensure value for money, but they were also prepared to be innovative in their approach to identifying suitable models. A number of models were included in the tender specification, including (but not limited to) outright purchase, full lease and access- and evidence-based selection.

The institutions were very interested in the access- and evidence-based selection model, which normally offers annual lease with a proportion of the lease fee being allocated for the acquisition of heavily used titles in perpetuity at the end of the lease period. There was some experience of using this model at an institutional level amongst SHEDL institutions and there was positive feedback. Outright purchase can be prohibitively expensive, and lease can give good access with no retention of titles after cancellation. Evidence-based selection can offer a good mix of access, ownership of content and affordability. The market investigation with publishers concluded that although evidence-based acquisition was becoming increasingly popular at an institutional level, there were fewer consortium deals, and some publishers were not at the stage of even offering this model.

It was recognised that each publisher's offer could be unique, but the tender process forced them to compete for available funds by offering content on attractive, affordable models. There was a great deal of interest from publishers in the process, and ten of them were allocated a place on the framework agreement. A further mini-competition process eventually narrowed down six affordable deals with key academic publishers: Palgrave, Springer, Elsevier, Wiley, Sage and Oxford University Press. These six deals offered access to over 35,000 DRM-free ebooks for all SHEDL institutions. The deals varied in nature and both lease and outright purchase were included. Several publishers put forward offers for an evidence-based model, and three (with Sage, Oxford University Press and Palgrave) were successfully implemented. Most did not have existing models in place but were willing to work with SHEDL on this innovative approach.

Evidence-based model

Most SHEDL libraries had experience of applying evidence-based selection, but they had not done so collectively, so careful thought was required in order to ensure the correct approach. While it was felt that all SHEDL members should benefit, it was noted that larger institutions were making a greater financial contribution in cash terms, and were also making most use of the content. Ensuring that all contributing libraries saw a material benefit and could point to successful perpetual ownership of key content for their own institution was important.

The value of the evidence-based selection varied from publisher to publisher. One of the key variables between the bids was the 'multiplier' applied to the value of the selected work to allow access for all. Another was the amount of lease fee permitted to acquire content in perpetuity at the end of the contract period.

While the collaborative selection process ensured that all SHEDL members have access to all selected titles, this benefit may not be obvious to a small specialist library with more niche requirements. Equally, larger sites may not see the benefit of having access to more esoteric material. A balance between these two apparently competing factors was important in planning the selection process.

Process

Given this apparent conflict, the methodology used to agree the final selection of titles under the evidence-based model used a combination of approaches:

- *Collective use*. Titles with highest use across the sector. The larger institutions tend to benefit most here as larger user bases generate more use.

- *Subjectivity*. Individual libraries were asked to submit their own 'selections' according to their own criteria – e.g. presence on reading lists, local use data or local subject interest.

In deciding which titles to retain, a number of additional factors were considered, such as:

- Multi-library use: use across a high number of libraries pushed items further up the selection list.

- Recent use: when evaluating use across the whole framework period, as we had to do for one publisher, recent use scored more highly than high use that was a year or two older.

- Cost: very high cost items, unless used by all SHEDL members, tended not to make the selection. Paradoxically, very low cost items without cross-library use were also eliminated, as they were easier for individual libraries to afford.

Representatives of the SHEDL group were then tasked with collating this data into a final agreed evidence-based selection, up to the agreed value and taking account of any multiplier, before submitting to the group for final approval. They were also responsible for ensuring libraries were informed of any titles that had not 'made the cut' and for which local arrangements would need to be made.

Reflection

There have been many benefits to evidence-based selection at a consortium level. However, there are also many challenges, some of which require considerable thought before further agreements are entered into.

Benefits

- SHEDL has consistent extended access to DRM-free ebook content from key academic publishers. This supports teaching and research.

- In addition to a heavily discounted average cost per title, there are also cost reductions and efficiency gains for processing orders.

- SHEDL has developed closer working relationships, with successful collaboration between libraries of differing sizes and specialisations.

- There is encouraging use for these titles across Scotland.

- The evidence-based approach has delivered content that we know is of value to our users and we are able to use the success of the initiative to promote the work of the library. Many of us have access to content we could not have afforded otherwise – our e-collections have more depth as a result.

- The number of items retained in perpetuity is now in the thousands, in terms of processing, so this is a much more efficient way of growing collections than title-by-title selection.

Challenges and lessons learned

- Usage data: standard COUNTER data was not always helpful and we relied upon publishers to provide timely bespoke usage information to aid the decision process.

- Metadata (specially once the SHEDL-specific portfolio of titles was agreed): some publishers struggled, and continue to struggle, to deliver MARC records for the collections we now have as a consortium.

- Publisher volatility: two publishers merged during the course of the framework, causing some confusion over ongoing arrangements and limiting future agreements.

- Some publishers were receptive to negotiations on renewals and changes to pricing (sometimes in line with modifications to content available), so that deals were successfully renewed, some on a multi-year basis. However, it is clear that in some cases they used the model to create demand. First-year pricing was made very attainable and usage made the content so attractive that it could not be ignored in subsequent years, when pricing was increased significantly. This was very challenging.

- Some deals did not signal good value for money, due either to unrealistic pricing or to low usage, and had to be terminated. A lesson learned is that SHEDL has to be prepared to walk away from these deals, and this could be perceived as a risk.

- There is some evidence to suggest that, contrary to what we might have assumed, there is relatively little content that is of common interest to all SHEDL members. This could support driving down the multiplier factor in future tenders.

- Support on the various deals was not the same from all publishers, particularly around the supply of suitable quality metadata and the timely delivery of usage data to agreed standards (i.e. COUNTER stats available when we need them).

Future and next steps

SHEDL has retained multi-year agreements with Oxford University Press, Elsevier and Springer Nature. It should be noted that not all are on the evidence-based selection model. Work is ongoing to analyse the value of the deals and improve the processes involved.

A new ITT will be issued in the summer of 2017 to invite new bids from publishers and, while funding is constrained across the sector, it is hoped that we can make attractive deals available, either to SHEDL as a whole, or to groups of libraries within SHEDL using this new framework.

References

1   http://scurl.ac.uk/what-we-do/procurement/shedl/
2   http://www.apuc-scot.ac.uk/