

# Champions and e-books: using student Library Champions to inform e-book purchasing strategies

How students really use e-books is a subject of much interest to library professionals. This has particular relevance when it comes to selecting suppliers and e-book platforms for institutional use. The question of preferred formats (print versus digital) has been asked exhaustively, but technology develops fast and is here to stay in higher education, so a more pressing question is how we evaluate which platforms offer the best user experience for our students. At the University of Exeter we used our student Library Champion volunteers as a focus group, repeating the process over two years, to help determine which platforms were preferred. Champions examined multiple interfaces, but concentrated primarily on aggregators. They were encouraged to use their own laptops and tablets to access the e-books, which proved particularly valuable as it allowed interfaces to be rated for their compatibility across devices. Positive and negative feedback was collated, sent to providers and also used directly to inform and alter the Library's purchasing preference list.

## Background to the Champions scheme

The Library Champions scheme at the University of Exeter has been running since 2011. It is intended to be a conduit between students and the Library, helping us promote our services and resources, as well as feeding back on relevant issues. The Champions have a budget to spend on library resources and have a fixed timescale in which to spend it. They are expected to consult their peers on what to get, and to respond to student requests sent directly to them. More details on the scheme and how it was set up can be found in a previous article.<sup>1</sup>

Champions are given a budget of £1,000 per subject to spend on any library resources: the Library has a 'digital first' purchasing policy for all our usual acquisitions, but we give the Champions free rein to decide on format when it comes to their own budget. If asked, our liaison librarians provide advice on potential formats (and purchases, where necessary), but the final decision is down to the Champions themselves. Initial figures on the Champions' spend this year show a decreasing tendency to favour print, with 70% of purchases in print format and 30% in digital format (as of mid March 2016), whereas in 2015 only 18% of the total budget was spent on e-books by the Champions' spend deadline.



CAROLINE GALE  
Library Liaison  
Manager  
University of Exeter



## E-book purchasing at the University of Exeter

The Library has pursued a strongly digital first acquisitions policy since 2014, purchasing an e-book wherever possible in preference to print. This has partly been driven by increasing National Student Survey (NSS) comments asking for more digital material. We purchase from a number of suppliers, preferring resources free of digital rights management (DRM) wherever possible. Where it is not possible to purchase DRM-free e-books, we obtain e-books via aggregators, including VLeBooks, dawsonera, MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBL and EBSCO. In many cases there are choices to be made, as the selected titles can be available on a variety of different platforms. Price of course is an important factor, but issues of usability are perhaps even more crucial. There is little point in a cheap e-book if it is made unusable by the format it is delivered in. As the choice of vendors has

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increased, so has the need to evaluate the platforms on offer and decide which the preferred options are. Librarians can only go so far in evaluating the resources – we recognized the need for actual users of the material to give us their input and consequently influence our decision-making.

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## Focus groups

Since we have been running the Library Champions scheme, we have held regular focus groups on a variety of issues. We also use a closed Facebook group to obtain quick opinions on current issues. This latter method has been incredibly helpful in directing our services, as we are still able to consult students on projects with tight timescales. The face-to-face focus groups have generally concentrated on larger key issues including study space, library skills teaching provision and preferred routes to digital resources. Over the last two years we have used them for a different purpose: informing and directing our e-book purchasing strategy.

In 2015 and 2016 all Library Champions were invited to a series of face-to-face focus groups. Several were run over the period of a few weeks in March in order to maximize possible attendance by Champions. These focus groups were designed to be identical, so Champions needed to attend only one of the sessions.

In the first year we took a very hands-on approach, encouraging students to bring their own laptops as well as providing a number of netbooks for attendees. The idea was to look at a set of examples in the session and comment on interfaces whilst using them. This approach was cumbersome and did not provide the feedback we were hoping for: students became absorbed by the interfaces and spent more time looking rather than talking. We had provided post-it notes to record comments. This gave useful feedback, but interaction within the session was minimal. To obtain more feedback, we canvassed more of the Champions via e-mail, and then incorporated the responses into our results.

In the second year we tried a different approach, sending out a sample list of e-books before the focus groups and asking the Champions to have a good look at them beforehand and come prepared to talk about them. This also enabled Champions who were unavailable for the focus groups to contribute via e-mail in advance. Although there was still some examination of interfaces in the sessions, the Champions were able to contribute to discussion more and debate advantages and disadvantages with their peers. They had also had the opportunity to view the e-books on their own devices in advance of the session, so came prepared with details of any problems they had experienced. This approach resulted in more feedback than previous years and also more information on learning styles and preferences.

Sample e-books from each supplier were chosen for their generous credit allowances/multi-user access/low cost to enable repeat viewing of the interfaces without affecting information budgets. DRM-free e-books from publishers were also included, though views on these interfaces would not affect purchasing decisions (unless there was very strong feeling against them) due to the preferential access provided.

## Feedback from the 2015 groups

In year one there was very low take-up of the sessions: only four students attended, though we did get some further feedback via e-mail later on from three other students, which was incorporated into the results. Most of these students were infrequent or non-users of e-books, preferring print where possible, but using e-books if they had to. We asked them about what they liked and disliked about e-books. Likes included the speed of access and acquisition, whilst dislikes encompassed difficulty around finding references, using online indices and adding bookmarks/notes.

Platform-specific feedback was particularly useful: as we encouraged students to bring their own devices or use their own regular browsers, technical issues surfaced that we might not have known about otherwise.

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183 Viewing some e-books on tablets was particularly problematic, especially if the text was framed in a viewer by the provider. Some browsers would not work at all with one provider, highlighting the difficulty of supporting e-books when our users have so many different modes of access.

Ultimately, the Champions showed a particular preference for one of our newest e-book providers, rating their interface as the easiest to use, noting their accessibility-friendly features including screen tint options, and preferring the larger display that the provider used. This confirmed our own experience of the e-books as this aggregator was already our first choice. However, Champions were less positive about one more long-standing supplier, disliking the layout and finding it hard to use, particularly on tablets. Feedback on other platforms was mixed, with some students liking certain aspects of the platforms, whilst others really disliked them. All these comments informed our supplier purchasing preference list and we adjusted it accordingly, moving some suppliers up and some down.

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### Feedback from the 2016 groups

In year two we had a higher number of students attending: 14 students attended the face-to-face sessions across our campuses and three others contributed via e-mail. This time we asked them to pick their favourite and least favourite interfaces as well as comment on all of them. General impressions from the Champions were very different from the previous year: though some still preferred print where possible, Champions felt that access to the content was more important. This reflects Becker's<sup>2</sup> assertion that take-up and skills in using e-books are developing as fast as the technology. The literature review on the University of Manchester's e-books project blog 'Books Right Here Right Now' also highlights this, the more negative responses being generally from older studies.<sup>3</sup> The most notable general response was the lack of interest in the additional functionality that e-book platforms provide: only one Champion liked the note-making functions, with all the rest preferring to use their own paper notepads rather than relying on provider-based or other online options. Ultimately, they were only interested in the content of the e-books, preferring downloadable PDFs that they could highlight and then keep. Some Champions stated that they felt providers should not be investing in flashy interfaces ('monstrosities') or filling them with 'clutter', as it interferes with reading. Personalization and the extra features available were not seen as particularly useful when you had to register separately and log in with each interface. Whole book download was also seen as highly desirable rather than the section or chapter downloads that are generally available. Interestingly, some Champions said that they would not trust the information provided by some of the online features, e.g. citation options, though others said that they found this function really useful.

The Champions did see a need for further e-book help and suggested that the Library offer advice on complementary digital tools to use whilst reading, e.g. light control software for reading at night, as well as more troubleshooting information for e-book platforms.

Once again we asked for platform-specific feedback, which was particularly helpful for us. The Champions liked the providers who gave initial summaries of the book on the page you clicked through to. They said these helped them decide how relevant it would be and whether to actually use it or not. A clear reading interface and quick loading times were seen as particularly important. There was generally a positive response to the idea of the notes functions, though the ability to highlight the text in relation to this was seen as essential. This aspect was not always present in every interface. As previously mentioned though, most Champions still preferred to handwrite their notes anyway, with one stating that he wanted to be able to use them after he left University and if they were attached to an online e-book he would not be able to get at them. This complements the opinion given by other students at the UKSG One-Day Conference in 2015, that e-books are not seen as a tangible asset in the same way as print.<sup>4</sup> The largest issue coming out of the focus groups was the technical issues experienced whilst

'A clear reading interface and quick loading times were seen as particularly important'

184 trying to use particular providers. Some interfaces had additional functions that did not work, some just would not load, some were stopped from loading pop-ups, some crashed laptops when a download was attempted and some users had problems viewing the text on smaller screens. Usability is a key issue that providers need to address, and not only in terms of resilience: e-books need to be functional on a range of mobile devices as well as standard computer screens. Our findings reflect those of other studies, e.g. Glackin, Rodenhiser and Herzog<sup>5</sup> found that 40% of students in their study experienced technical issues when using e-books on mobile devices. Jacoby<sup>6</sup> also found that only 66% of e-book users in her study were satisfied with their ease of use.

'Usability is a key issue that providers need to address'

We have fed back the comments from the Champions to the e-book providers, including all the issues encountered. Surprisingly, we also found that browser security warnings actually prevented use of e-books from one supplier. Although it is simple to add an exception when you click through (and we do provide advice suggesting students do this), students said that the browser's message about a potentially unsafe site would be enough to stop them going any further, despite the fact that it was a well-known publisher. This has led us to re-evaluate our access procedures for this and similar resources that use the same access mechanism.

In terms of preferences for suppliers, we asked for votes on favourite and least favourite interfaces from the aggregators. Once again, there was a clear favourite and the favoured supplier from 2015 was the students' top choice for 2016. Another platform had been extremely problematic the previous year, but a major upgrade had improved student opinion of it. Other platforms once again prompted mixed responses. The least favoured provider from 2015 was still at the bottom of the list: Champions reported problems loading and screen resolution issues interfering with their reading experience. As before, the Library has incorporated this feedback into our purchasing preference list and adjusted our practices accordingly.

## Next steps

We intend to keep this process going to ensure that our e-book purchasing is meeting the needs of our users. Running the focus groups has given us a wealth of valuable feedback, some of which we would not have otherwise heard: students reported that they would not always complain about problems with access, but would simply move on and try to get something else instead. This could then lead to dissatisfaction with library resources and have an impact on surveys like the NSS. We may experiment with different methods of obtaining feedback, as face-to-face sessions do not always bring the numbers of students we would like. Previous experience of using a Facebook group to gather quick opinions has been good, so we could try a more targeted opinion-gathering campaign using this method instead.

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One issue for providers to consider would be to align and simplify their interfaces, perhaps even looking at options for one single user account across providers, which would retain notes and bookmarks and generally enable the extra online features to be more usable. Foote<sup>7</sup> suggests the need for this in relation to schoolchildren, as does Jacoby<sup>8</sup> for students. Providers do need to be considering this if they wish to be more successful. Institutions will need to pick and mix their content according to educational and research needs, not based on what is available from their favoured provider. When there is a choice, better integration of platforms will be an advantage.

One aspect is clear though – the technology is developing quickly and because of this we cannot always rely on the literature to inform us about student preferences: by its very nature, it is often out of date by the time it is published. Our own focus groups have shown a change in usage in the space of one year and NSS comments have increasingly requested digital formats. We all need to keep the conversation going with our own students to inform our own purchasing strategies.

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**Abbreviations and Acronyms**

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

**Competing interests**

The author has declared no competing interests.

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Caroline Gale

Library Liaison Manager  
Forum Library, University of Exeter  
Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4PT, UK  
E-mail: [Caroline.A.Gale@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:Caroline.A.Gale@exeter.ac.uk)

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4213-7684>

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