**The e-book in Swedish academic libraries: report on a survey**

**Introduction**

A questionnaire survey of Swedish academic libraries was undertaken in March/April, 2015 to determine the extent of provision of e-books and the factors affecting their use. Those libraries whose Websites did not show that e-books were available were excluded from the study, leaving a total of 32 university colleges and universities to be surveyed. One library failed to respond and one is late in responding: the data from the latter, however, are unlikely to affect the overall statistics presented here. Respondents were contacted directly by telephone and asked if they would be willing to participate and all those approached agreed to do so.

**Acquiring and managing e-books**

The first set of questions related to the proportion of the resource budget spent on e-books, the main driving force for adopting e-books, the business model employed, and satisfaction with the terms under which e-books could be acquired.

***Proportion of the resource budget.***

There was very wide variation in the proportion of the resource budget assigned by librarians for access to e-books, from 0.6% to 25%. Figure 1 shows the distribution of libraries by budget proportion. Four libraries failed to provide this information.

Figure 1: Distribution of libraries by e-book share of the resources budget

Two-thirds of the libraries believed that the proportion they spent was likely to increase, while one-third believed it would remain the same.

***The driving forces***

Respondents were presented with four potential *driving forces* for the adoption of e-books: economics – cost per use and storage costs are lower; demand from students; demand from teachers; and a need to make the latest technology available. The possibility was offered to write in any other *driver*. Twelve libraries opted to write in a different driver, which, in most cases can be represented as ‘Ready access and availability’. Figure 2, below, shows the distribution of libraries according to their perception of the main driving forces. (Note that the forces are abbreviated in the figure.)

Figure 2: No. of libraries by forces driving the adoption of e-books

From Figure 2, it is quite clear that the two main forces perceived as driving the adoption of e-books are the need to keep abreast of new technologies and the opportunity technology gives to make information resources available and accessible. This compares interestingly with the situation in the USA, where economic factors are said to be dominant.

***Sources of supply***

Figure 3 shows the number of libraries using publishers and aggregators for the acquisition of e-books. Notable is the fact that while one library used publishers for 98% of its acquisitions, eight libraries used aggregators for 100% of their acquisitions. Overall, the median values were that libraries used publishers for 20% of their acquisitions and aggregators for 80%.

Figure 3: Number of libraries using publishers and aggregators for e-book supply

***‘Business models’***

Libraries were asked to identify the main and subsidiary *business models* they employed in the acquisition of e-books. Figure 4 shows that the dominant model is the use of subscription services such as EBSCO, Dawsonera, etc.

Figure 4: Business models used in e-book acquisition

Respondents were able to say whether or not they used other business models in addition to the main model and Figure 5 shows that virtually all of them did so (only one library did not report on this item.)

Figure 5: Additional business models employed by libraries

It can be seen that the most popular option was to buy e-books for permanent retention in the libraries resources. This is not surprising, given the problems experienced with licensing access, which are dealt with later in the report.

***Number of providers, collections and titles***

Respondents were asked how many suppliers were providing access to e-books, through how many collections and what number of titles. Almost half were unable to give a figure for the number of collections, but most were able to provide answers to the other two parts of the question. The number of providers ranged from one to thrity-nine. Table 1 shows the distribution.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **No. of providers** | **No. of libraries** | **% of libraries** |
| 1-4 | 9 | 30 |
| 5-9 | 7 | 23 |
| 10-14 | 6 | 20 |
| 15-19 | 3 | 10 |
| 20 and more | 5 | 17 |

Table 1: Number of providers

It can be seen from the table that more than half of the libraries (53%) reported using fewer than ten providers; one library, however, reported using thirty-nine.

Thirteen respondents did not say how many collections they had access to, and the remainder varied from one to 100, with a median value of forty-six collections.

The number of titles to which access was provided ranged from 155 to over 700,000. Only two libraries reported the same number of titles (50,000); the median value was 135,000

***Criteria to be satisfied by suppliers***

An American librarian has suggested five criteria that a supplier should satisfy when a contract is negotiated and respondents were asked about the extent to which these criteria were satisfied in their negotiations with *publishers*. Figure 6 shows the results when we merged the two values indicating some degree of dissatisfaction and the two values representing satisfaction. From Figure 6, we can see that most dissatisfaction is experienced with the inability to use e-books in inter-library lending and that there is greater dissatisfaction than satisfaction in relation to the pricing of e-books. On the other hand, more respondents are satisfied, rather than dissatisfied with the terms of access to the e-books, with DRM-free downloads and with the ability to purchase individual titles.

Figure 6: Extent to which supply criteria are satisfied by publishers

Figure 7 presents the results relating to supply by aggregators and shows that libraries are much less likely to find the criteria satisfied by aggregators. The reason for the small number shown for the “reasonable prices” criterion is that fourteen respondents chose the mid-point of the scale, suggesting a neutral opinion on the issue.

Figure 7: Extent to which supply criteria are satisfied by aggregators

Overall, the results from this pair of questions suggests that, ideally, librarians might prefer to deal with individual publishers because better terms of use can be negotiated. However, the selection and negotiation processes are so time-consuming that they are more likely to negotiate deals with aggregators.

***Swedish language books***

Respondents were asked approximately what percentage of their e-book resources were in Swedish and the modal (or most common) response was zero, reported by seventeen respondents The summary table below shows the distribution

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **% Swedish books** | **No. of libraries** |
| 0% | 17 |
| Less than 5% | 9 |
| 5% | 1 |
| 10% | 1 |
| 20% | 1 |

Table 2: Percentage of Swedish language books in the e-book resources

Only one library reported that the percentage shown satisfied its needs for Swedish language titles, somewhat surprisingly, this was not the library with 20% of its collection in Swedish, but one that reported having only 1%.

When asked what could be done to improve the situation, the written-in responses suggested a limited number of strategies. The most common response was that the academic libraries needed to negotiate with Swedish publishers and persuade them to develop *library-friendly* business models. Secondly, and sometimes in combination with the first, it was suggested that academic libraries in Sweden should work together to negotiate with publishers. Two respondents specifically suggested trying to reach agreement with the publisher Studentlitteratur; one suggested that Elib might be persuaded to include more course textbooks in Swedish in its offering; two suggested that publishers should simply change their practices and one suggested that nothing could be done by libraries and that the market had to change. One respondent pointed out:

*University libraries in Sweden have recently initiated a working group that is trying to improve communication with Swedish course book/academic publishers. We need to know more about each other’s’ business.*

Only one library reported using Elib (the main supplier of e-books to public libraries) for the acquisition of Swedish language e-books and only three reported needing to acquire e-books in languages other than Swedish and English. All three reported needing e-books in French, Spanish and Italian, with individual libraries reporting an additional nine languages. The suppliers used for foreign language materials were Ebrary, Dawsonera, EBSCO and the Italian company, Casalini.

***Discontinued resources***

More than half of respondents (16 or 53%) had discontinued subscribing to specific collections or had changed from one aggregator to another (Ebrary to EBSCO, for example). The most frequently discontinued collections were those from Oxford University Press, with a total of four unsubscribing from Oxford Art, Oxford Music, Oxford Medicine, Oxford Reference and Oxford Scholarship. In most cases (11 respondents) the reason was economic, often associated with low usage.

***Cataloguing practice***

In the greater majority of cases (25 or 83%) the library’s e-book resources were recorded in its online catalogue and in most cases (14 out of 25) this was done not automatically but by downloading MARC records from various sources, or by manually updating the records.

**Use of e-books**

***Problems caused by multiple providers***

As noted earlier, 53% of respondents reported using fewer than ten suppliers, but, of course this means that almost half were using more than ten and, when asked whether there were problems in using many suppliers, two-thirds (67%) responded, Yes. The problems can be summarised as arising out of the differences between one supplier’s platform and another: there is no such thing as a common platform. There are different interfaces, different conditions of access, different rules on downloading and printing. Respondents commented, for example:

*Different technical solutions, different interfaces, different acquisition methods.*

*Different ways and rules for accessing and printing from the books.*

*Olika affärsmodeller, olika plattformar, olika e-boksformat, olika villkor…*

*---it makes the overall view of ebooks negative. It is so complicated.*

Sixty-three percent (19) of respondents also reported that the users of their systems had problems as a result of the multiple suppliers and their different platforms. The nature of the problems was very similar to that experienced by the libraries, e.g.,

*Olika villkor för olika leverantörer, inte alltid tydligt på plattformarna vad som är tillgängligt material*

but there were additional difficulties for users, for example:

*No access due to limited number of simultaneous users. Not being able to download books.*

*Different possibilities regarding ‘loan period’, downloading, etc.*

*Dawsonera only allows printing of one page at a time.*

***Barriers to the full use of e-books***

Publishers put in place a variety of barriers that inhibit the full use of e-books by libraries, some of which have been referred to as problems above. Respondents were given a list of such barriers and asked to indicate how little or how much these barriers were used by publishers and aggregators. Figure 8 shows the result.

Figure 8: The barriers to effective use of e-books

The most significant ‘barriers’ are readily identified from the figure: taking scale points 4 and 5, the, limits to the number of pages that can be printed is perceived as a barrier by 83% of respondent, the lack of the ability to use e-books in inter-library lending by 73%, DRM limitations by 57%, the removal of books from packages by 53%, and limits to simultaneous loans by 50%. Only two additional problems were presented by respondents:

*Not making attractive books available, or only as single user licence*

*Tillgängen mobile enheter, dålig FAQ, otydliga instruktioner.*

***The consequences of the barriers***

Respondents were asked to identify the consequences of the barriers they experienced but, in response, many simply re-iterated that a specific barrier was a problem, without saying what the consequences were, e.g.,

*Inter-library loan not allowed.*

Some, however, did state genuine consequences, which usually related to user satisfaction, e.g,

*The book is not available to every who needs it at a specific moment.*

*Dissatisfaction, confusion.*

*‘Turn away’ på e-böcker.*

*Loss of access, not available to all users – that is why we prefer purchase from publishers.*

*Osakerheten om en viss e-bok är tillgänglig eller inte.*

In responding to this item one librarian noted:

*We say no to licences with bad terms regarding content, simultaneous users, administration, prices, etc., consequently not giving access to e-books when terms are not met.*

***Loans of e-books versus printed books***

We were aware that asking about the relative proportions of loans of printed books and e-books would be a problem, because an e-book is accessed, rather than borrowed and logs record the occasions upon which a section of text has been accessed. Ten libraries failed to respond to the question, citing the difficulty of comparing *oranges and apples.* However, twenty did make the attempt and, overall, the median value was 65% printed books and 35% e-books.

***User complaints – academic staff***

Respondents were asked whether they ever received complaints from academic staff about having to use e-books, rather than printed books, and 87% (28) reported that they did. Asked if there was any variation by discipline, 50% responded that there was and 50% that there was not. The 50% responding ‘Yes’ found that those most accepting of e-books were in science, engineering, computer science and medicine, with an occasional respondent citing social science, economics and business administration. The disciplines least accepting of e-books were in the humanities, social sciences, nursing and teacher education, and in one case, physics.

***User complaints – students***

The same question was put in relation to students and here 79% reported complaints, but 75% reported no variation by field of study. One of the two saying that there was variation did not respond to the question on the most accepting and least accepting fields, while the other cited medicine, economics and behavioural sciences as the most accepting, and humanities and teacher education as the least accepting. In relation to the latter, the respondent made the important point that it was the lack of Swedish texts that caused the problem for these students.

***Distance learners’ problems***

Eleven respondents said that they were aware of problems experienced by distance learners: the specific problems had mainly to do with technical issues, e.g.,

*Access problems with platforms. Problems due to users’ computers.*

*Ett flertal mindre tekniska problem.*

*Technical – VPN access to the network*

The other main category of problem related to the general problem of dealing with multiple supplier platforms, e.g.,

*Understanding the whole process of using different platforms and access differences.*

The experienced problems were generally resolved by communication with the student, by e-mail, phone or chat. Access problems were resolved by buying more copies of a text, or by trying to find texts with unlimited users, e.g.,

*Finns “unlim user” köper vi det. Annars får de ”köa” på e-boken.*

***An optimum system***

Question 20 asked, *In your opinion, what would be the optimum system for access to e-books in universities?* Given the problems that are currently experienced and the barriers that publishers put in place, it is not surprising that an optimum system would be one in which these problems and barriers were not present. Typical responses on this theme included:

*One single, user-friendly platform for all accessed e-books, with an easy account management for end-users. And DRM-free, of course, with guaranteed long time preservation.*

*Nationell e-boksplatform, samma villkor för all böcker, samma gränssnitt, läsas enkelt på all typer av enheter – PC, mobilt. DRM-fritt.*

*Ett system som är så enkelt for användaren som möjligt. Boken ska vara sökbar via vår Discovery tjänst. När man klicker direkt till bokens fortaside/titelsida. Men ska kunne välja att läss boken online alternativt ladda ner den.*

*One national system in which all students can find, download and use the books they need. Univeresities pay a lump sum based on disciplines and the number of FTE students (not on usage) and then we share all the e-books.*

Of course, the librarians are aware that the notion of an optimum system of the kind they describe is probably a Utopian ideal and, as the responses to the follow-up question on what prevents the attainment of the ideal they identify competition in the market place by both publishers and aggregators as the main factor preventing attainment:

*I presume the publishers’ need to make money and the fear of losing money.*

*Costs and lack of cooperation among vendors.*

*Publishers’ business models. Economic reasons.*

*The publishers and their restrictions.*

*Publishers need to have their own platforms for branding purposes. Fear of piracy (publ.). Fear of loss of income (publ.).*

**Open access and locally produced resources**

***Links to free resources***

Respondents were asked whether they provided links to free resources such as Project Gutenberg or Hathi Trust and 63% (19) said they did so. Overall, the advantage perceived by the respondents was that to do so was to provide access to potentially useful resources and, in some case, to texts that were required for courses. However, very few kept any record of the extent to which these links were used: three reported that they were rarely used, and two that they were regularly used.

***Digitising existing resources***

Eighty percent of respondents(24) reported that they did not digitise any print materials for the purpose of preservation or replacement of stock, the six that reported digitising materials made those materials available to all through their Website.

***Production of e-textbooks***

Fifty-three percent (16) of respondents reported that their university produced its own e-textbooks, four reported that the books were published in Swedish, the rest in English, some in both Swedish and English. Two universities sold these textbooks, while fourteen made them available through open access and when this was done, they were openly available to anyone, not simply to academic staff and students in the local university.

***Other issues***

Finally, respondents were asked to identify any other issues that might be explored. Eight responded to the question but, in most cases, the comments simply related to issues that had been explored in the survey. However, one respondent identified e-book formats as an issue deserving more attention, and another that the cataloguing issue could be pursued in more detail.

**Conclusion**

The results of this survey reveal that e-books represent a continuing problem for academic libraries in Sweden, as they do in the rest of the world. The legal status of the e-book as a ‘service’ rather than a product and the consequent licensing arrangement for the use of the service, but barriers in the way of effective use of the resource for teaching and research present both financial and administrative problems for institutions. The results show that academic librarians in Sweden are well aware of the problems and of the difficulty in resolving them and the fact that a committee has now been established to try to work more effectively with publishers gives some hope for a resolution to at least some problems. Even allowing unlimited simultaneous use would remove a significant amount of the frustration experienced through existing licence agreements.

There is a wider issue, however, and that is what the universities in Sweden might do, collectively, to overcome the problems. Over the past century many universities, world-wide, have abandoned their university presses and handed to the commercial publishers responsibility for the production of textbooks and scholarly monographs. The latter are known to bring little financial return to either authors (whose main aim is not profit, but exposure of their work) or publishers. Perhaps the time is ripe for a collaborative e-publishing house for Swedish universities, which would make academic resources openly accessible to all and which would find other means of rewarding academic authors.

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