

Scholarly books and journals at risk

Responding to the challenges of a changing economy

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Research Information Network briefing

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Introduction

Research is fundamental to universities. It feeds directly into the knowledge economy, with positive effects on national wealth, and benefits to all UK citizens. As the UK Prime Minister recently affirmed:

'So the success of our plan for building the knowledge economy as the best route to [economic] recovery hinges on continued investment in science today and on our ability to commercialise its applications – to turn scientific genius into successful technology-led economic growth for Britain. Because this is how Britain will invest our way into the future'.

Scholarly journals and publications play an essential role in communicating, recording, certifying, disseminating and preserving research findings. So researchers in the UK must have access to the fullest possible range of scholarly literature. Otherwise, the UK's ability to support and undertake the research and teaching of the highest quality, for which it is internationally recognised, will be compromised. At the same time, the value chain 'from genius to wealth creation' could be shattered, and with it the UK's economic competitive edge.

The current economic difficulties across the globe bring serious risks to scholarly books and journals. In the UK, the recent dramatic fall in the value of sterling has seriously damaged university library purchasing budgets. This briefing note aims to inform and motivate all key stakeholders – universities, funding bodies, researchers, librarians, and publishers – to work together to find creative, practical and sustainable solutions to this serious (and unforeseen) challenge to the vitality of the UK's research base.

Challenges

Over the last decade – thanks, above all, to the shift to online access and new publishing models – researchers and students have enjoyed unprecedented levels of access to journals and publications, but this is now at risk. The challenges faced are:

- the continued inflation in the cost of scholarly journals, at a rate far higher than the Retail Price Index (RPI)
- the serious pressure on university finances worldwide arising from the global economic crisis, and
- the dramatic fall in the value of sterling – particularly against the dollar and the euro – which has substantially amplified these challenges in the UK.

Inflation in the costs of scholarly journals arises in part from the long-term growth in the volume of research and of the resulting publications: the number of articles published globally each year has been rising for more than a century at an annual rate of 2.5-3.5%. Libraries have struggled for a long time to cope with high levels of inflation and rising expectations. But the renewed pressures – real and anticipated – on the finances of universities as a whole are already making libraries think harder about what they can afford.

To make matters worse, the unexpected and dramatic fall in the value of sterling has put even more strain on library budgets. Scholarly journals constitute by far the largest proportion of the acquisitions budgets of university libraries and many purchase more than half their scholarly resources in dollars and euros. In recent years libraries have benefited from the strength of sterling, but in the last year library spending power has diminished dramatically as sterling has plummeted. The Research Information Network estimates that this has already dented library purchasing budgets by 16%. As a result, many large university libraries anticipate deficits of around £400,000 this year and some contracts have yet to be paid.

Efficiencies and 'big deals'

Some 25,000-30,000 academic journals are currently published each year, and the past decade has seen a revolution in how they are produced, published, and accessed. The investments made by publishers, aggregators and libraries in e-journals mean that researchers now have widespread access to unprecedented numbers of titles. Libraries are increasingly cancelling print in favour of e-only subscriptions, and at the same time the numbers

of 'born digital' publications are increasing. University researchers and students make good use of what is available. In 2006-07 they downloaded almost 102 million articles, and take-up continues to grow fast – total use doubled in the three years from 2003-04.

Meanwhile, centrally negotiated 'big deals' or 'bundles' have now become the dominant model for journal purchase worldwide and have been adopted enthusiastically by academic libraries in the UK. These arrangements provide for all members of a subscribing institution to large aggregated bundles of journals for a term of typically between three and five years. The annual subscription – with an agreed increase for inflation typically at 5% – is often based on the cost of the subscribing library's previous print subscriptions plus a charge for electronic access to a greatly enhanced range of journals. There is also usually a limit on the library's ability to cancel subscriptions to individual titles.

In the UK, JISC Collections negotiates umbrella deals on behalf of the higher education sector, and individual libraries decide whether or not to subscribe. This approach is reckoned so far to have provided good value for money, since it saves all parties from the burden of many separate negotiations, and the collective interests can exert a powerful force when problems arise.

Far more importantly, these big deals give university researchers access to unprecedented numbers of titles. And the evidence shows that they are making good use of this: studies for JISC and others have shown heavy use of journals to which libraries did not formerly subscribe. A recent study for the Research Information Network found that articles from 99% of the titles available in a range of university libraries were downloaded over a four-month period.

Big deals can bring considerable benefits and underpin research by making a far greater range of material widely available, so they are very popular with researchers. But they also bring risks: libraries are often locked for several years into deals that may take up 75% or more of their acquisition budgets, leaving them little scope to spend funds on other materials, particularly monographs.

University library budgets

Budgets for all the services libraries provide now typically account in the UK for between 3% and 4% of university expenditure on teaching and research and over the past decade this percentage has tended to fall. The average across all higher education institutions in the UK fell from 4.3% in 1996-97 to 3.4% in 2006-07.

Whilst the loss of flexibility and control within library budgets associated with e-journals and big deals has been manageable during a decade of expansion, as money gets tighter it is posing many more problems. The scale of the challenge is such that it cannot simply be managed at the margins.

When budgets are being set – in the spring, for a financial year that runs from 1 August to 31 July – libraries must take into account the amount they have already committed for deals running into future years, as well as any renewals that may fall due, typically in the autumn. They must therefore reach judgements (amongst many other things) about likely currency fluctuations six months ahead, and during the course of the year they must work with their finance offices to determine the least worst timing for the payment of foreign currency invoices.

Libraries' budgetary positions may therefore change unpredictably during the year. If librarians are faced with hard decisions about what to cut, they will be forced to cancel what they can as renewals fall due, rather than what their users might best manage without. Arbitrary cuts of this kind would severely compromise library collections and at the expense of the UK's overall capacity to undertake world class research.

The only other option would be to start dismantling the big deals and at the same time to cancel individual titles, which would jeopardise specialist and niche journals and the research communities they serve. Moreover, disproportionate numbers of journals would have to be cancelled in order to make big enough savings in expenditure. Savage cuts in journal subscriptions, with a consequent reduction – even reversal – in access to scholarly resources would run counter to all that has been achieved over the past decade in widening access for researchers and students. Restricting or rationing access to research in this way makes no sense.

Furthermore, library expenditure on journals should not be seen in isolation, separated from library purchasing as a whole. As the proportion of library acquisitions budgets that is spent on journals has risen (from 46% to 53% over the past decade), book purchasing has been ever more squeezed (dropping from £32 to £30 per FTE student over the past decade). Any further reduction in book purchasing would have a disproportionately damaging effect on the humanities, and many areas of the social sciences, where monographs play a much more important part in communicating the results of the latest research than in the physical and the life sciences.

Action: pulling together

University staff and students depend on good access to scholarly publications. Since a key function of libraries is to broker the acquisition of books and journals on behalf of universities, they must be sure that the purchasing decisions they make represent best value for the institutions they serve. The current budgetary challenges could do fundamental damage to research and scholarship, and compromise universities' capacity to pursue their core business: these challenges affect far more than just the library.

To avoid compromising the scope and quality of research and teaching in higher education, and consequent damage to the UK economy, everybody involved – universities, funding bodies, researchers, librarians, and publishers – must work together. Collectively, we must do all we can to minimise the risks arising from the current economic difficulties. We call on all the key stakeholder groups to work together to find creative, practical and sustainable ways to ensure that the scholarly publications link in the chain from genius to wealth creation is not damaged beyond repair.

More information

The Research Information Network aims to facilitate a discussion about how to resolve the issues raised in this briefing and we welcome contributions from any interested party. Please contact Sarah Gentleman, email sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk or telephone 020 7412 7241, website www.rin.ac.uk

Reference

UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. *Romanes Lecture Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford* (27 February 2009) www.number10.gov.uk/Page18472