

# Print or e preference? An assessment of changing patterns in content usage at Regent's University London

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This paper assesses usage statistics of print and e-book titles at Regent's University London and suggests collection improvements that could be made on the basis of these results. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'usage' denotes access to a specific text in electronic or print form; this is represented by loan statistics of print materials and downloads of digital titles. In terms of e-books, 'usage' refers to physical clicks on an e-book, including online access, downloads through our e-book provider DawsonEra and full-text downloads through our discovery service, hosted by Ebsco.

The 'print or electronic' question is a perennial one among librarians, publishers, booksellers and e-book suppliers. The initial notion that e-books threatened to render print obsolete been subverted to convey the opposite. Robert Coover wrote in 1992 on 'The end of books', describing print as 'a doomed and outdated technology [...] a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries' (1992, para. 1). Luckily Coover's words have not come to fruition; the decline of e-book sales became apparent only a handful of years after the release of the first-generation Kindle in 2007, and its subsequent UK release in 2011, with *The Telegraph* reporting in 2015 that print books had 'risen phoenix-like from the ashes of some burnt Kindles' (Wallop, 2015, para. 1). Similarly, in 2016 *The Guardian* reported an overall decline in e-book sales of 2.4% across the five biggest UK publishers between 2012 and 2015, and it therefore appears from the national media that commercial e-book sales have failed to compete with the print publication (Flood, 2016, para. 1).

However, there are certain observations to make in relation to this data; first, it is important to distinguish between the e-book and the device when discussing declining sales. It makes sense that Kindle and e-reader sales might decrease: once a consumer owns a Kindle, there is no need to purchase a second. Certainly in a commercial setting, e-books are a premium product; reading an e-book requires the consumer to purchase a compatible device before making the purchase of the e-book itself, which is then locked to that device only, while print can be easily borrowed for free from libraries. The major distinction is that discussions such as those of Wallop and Flood do not take place in an academic context; devices such as Kindle rely on the user purchasing each title, whereas e-usage in an academic context relies – or certainly should rely – on the institution purchasing that material, the end-user incurring no additional cost. The academic context of the usage of any book will be different from usage in a commercial context; while students might read an entire academic e-book online, users might also access a page or a chapter and jump around within a text, whereas reading for pleasure generally assumes the user will read the whole book from beginning to end. Lastly, because links to reading list content are embedded in reading list systems and VLEs, access to content in an academic context largely begins with an electronic device; if a user is accessing a reading list online, there is no longer any need to make a physical trip to the library and borrow a print book – they can click straight through to an electronic copy of the text. E-books have significant benefits in the academic sector; they allow users to search for exact phrases in a text, provide instantaneous access where licensing models allow, and are an absolute necessity for distance learners and students with accessibility requirements. For this reason, assumptions cannot be made about the performance of e-book sales generally, as the context in which they are relevant varies widely across sectors.

Academic libraries worldwide are assessing the value of e-publications over print. The Graduate School of Education in New York stopped purchasing print journals in 2005–6 and amended its acquisition policy in 2009 so that the purchase of print materials was considered 'a last resort', citing archival purposes as their major reason for preference of e-books (Haugh, 2016, p. 255). In their 2017 report on the emergence of the challenges and opportunities of e-books, Jisc emphasised 'the growing importance and use

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of e-books in academia, with a higher proportion of the monograph budget now being spent on e-books and policies that prioritised e-book purchases over print' (Jisc, 2017, p. 5). There are certainly arguments for the growth of electronic resources in academic libraries, and at Regent's, we also have policies that prioritise the purchase of e-books over print; the interactive capabilities of e-books enable access by students and staff with special accessibility requirements, such as visual impairment. E-books offer a clear benefit in their ability, where a credit model is available, to allow multiple users to access content at once. However, in practice this is often not feasible due to the higher cost of e-books over print and access options such as managed user access (MUA) restricting usage to single users. In many ways, MUA can be more restrictive than print access; with time allocated to each student at the front of the 'queue' being twelve hours at Regent's, users could potentially wait for hours or even days for their requested title to become available. While the same is true of print titles, a fundamental purpose of e-book purchase for us is to enable instantaneous access to content regardless of location, and the MUA model negates this. Many e-book vendors such as GOBI allow libraries to avoid these constraints by enabling PDA on the first access of an e-book, as opposed to requiring three rentals before the trigger of PDA, as is our current system. While this ensures instant and uninhibited access to online content for every user every time, the cost implications of such a model are significant and have to be weighed against the impact on student experience.

PDA at Regent's follows a set procedure of approval or refusal; requests below our £40 rental and £150 purchase threshold are automatically approved, while those above are automatically declined. However, we are aware of the constraints of our current system, which is undergoing review; it may be necessary to accept rental requests over our threshold where the student has accessibility requirements, is studying a specialist topic inaccessible through other content or is studying at postgraduate level.

While PDA texts form a significant proportion of our collection, we still experience high usage figures for our print collection, which dominates our owned collection. When assessing staff and student engagement with print and electronic content, it is necessary to begin by understanding the distribution of our collection across the two media. In August 2017, print books comprised 77% of our collection, while owned e-books represented 14%; our remaining owned content comprised print journals, dissertations, DVDs and databases (fig. 1). These figures exclude loanable hardware such as laptops, and non-owned content, such as PDA titles.

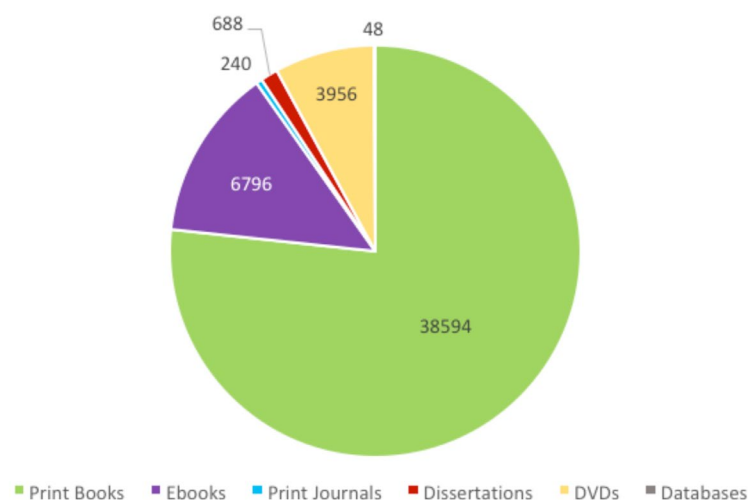


Figure 1 Total items by medium across our owned collection, excluding PDA

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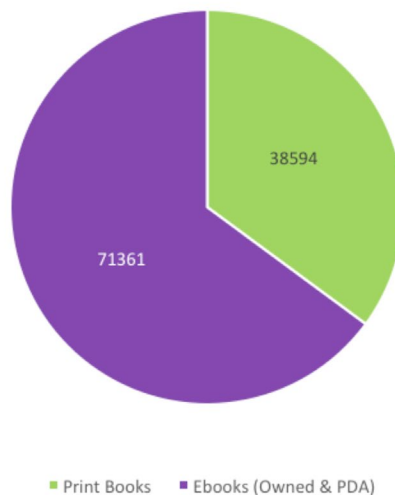


Figure 2 Distribution of print against e-books including PDA profile, August 2017

Considering print and e-books, the proportion of electronic content rises significantly when we take into account our PDA profile, which enables access to a further 64,565 e-books and causes e-books to represent 52% of our available books (fig. 2). In addition, we subscribe to 48 independent databases, many of which are searchable through our discovery service, 64,783 journals being discoverable through our Ebsco platform. These journals comprise both independent database subscriptions discoverable through Ebsco and titles that form part of our Ebsco subscription. While estimating the ratio of electronic to print material would be impossible, the amount of electronic content we provide significantly outweighs what is available in print when online database subscriptions, journal access and owned and PDA e-books are taken into account. Our figure for total print loans for 2016–17 (14,600 loans) is far outweighed by our total full-text downloads through discovery (60,500). In an age of information overload, where discovery mimics services like Google, it is unsurprising that our discovery service is by far our most heavily used method of research discovery and access.

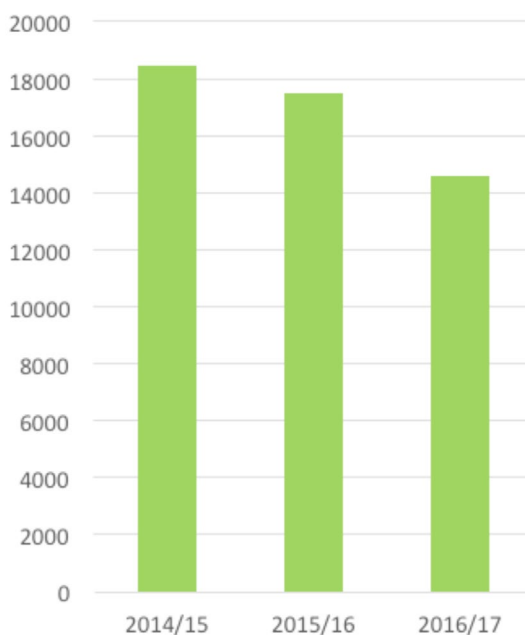


Figure 3 Print loans 2014–17, showing a steady decrease over three years

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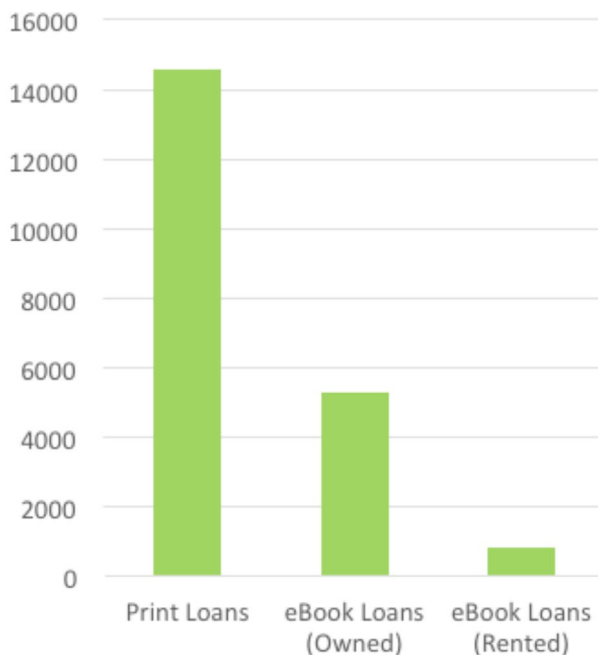


Figure 4 Print vs. e-book loans 2016–17. Print loans are still significantly higher than e-book loans, yet loans of rented e-books through our PDA experienced the largest increase, with owned e-book and print loans decreasing on the previous year.

Our print usage has steadily declined over the past three years, with an overall decrease of 20.9% since 2014–15 (fig. 3), but it still dominates our content usage (fig. 4). The decrease in our student numbers may be a cause of the decline in print loans, yet this does not appear to be a trend across all media, as the number of e-book rentals increased by 66.7% over the same period. However, with our PDA being triggered only once in the past year, it is interesting to note that the same e-book will almost never be rented frequently enough to trigger PDA. This may indicate a preference for PDA take-up in the research community at Regent's, as PDA enriches a collection by providing access to texts on niche subjects, and also appeals to our largely international student body. While expectations for 'Google-style' immediate access to digital material on any subject imaginable will certainly be a contributing factor to the

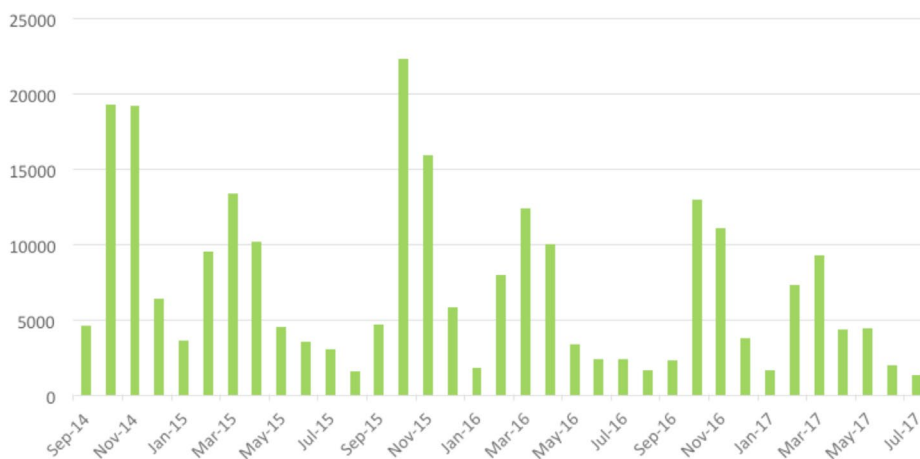


Figure 5 Full text downloads through RULDiscovery (Ebsco Discovery Service) 2014–17

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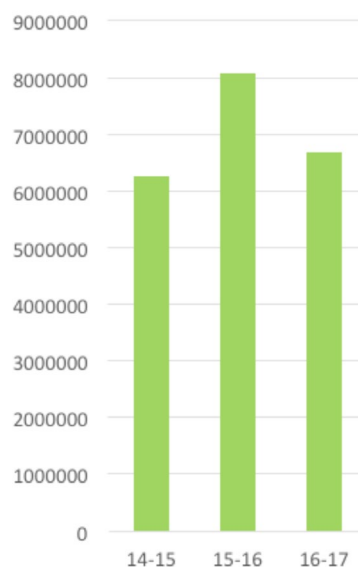


Figure 6 RULDiscovery searches 2014–17, showing an increase in 2015–16 and a decline in 2016–17, yet overall searches have increased in three years.

success of PDA, it would never be feasible for PDA to form the core content of a collection. For this reason, it is the role of the librarian to ensure core reading is available in owned content, while PDA sufficiently enhances and fills gaps in the collection that meet the needs of researchers and dissertation students, where purchasing of a text would not be necessary or financially viable. Owned e-books experienced a minor decline in loans in 2016–17, which may be the result of declining student numbers; and there were 5,296 downloads of owned e-books in 2016–17 as against 6,796 total titles in the collection, user engagement with e-books in relation to collection size is fair.

Expectations of information discovery cultivated by platforms such as Google have certainly affected the way we design our systems, with our discovery system using a simple Google-style text box to address the information-seeking preferences of our students. Our e-book and PDA usage are healthy, and the primary method of access to this material is through discovery, rendering an analysis of search and download statistics necessary. RULDiscovery, hosted by Ebsco, was implemented in 2013 and has experienced a 37.9% decrease in full-text downloads of electronic content since September 2014 (fig. 7). Conversely, RULDiscovery searches have increased overall and experienced a spike in 2015–16 before declining sharply in 2016–17 (fig. 6). Much of this may relate to changes in student numbers, but may also indicate changes in information-seeking behaviour. With two search platforms available at Regent's, users are able to search the majority of our resources through RULDiscovery, while only owned content such as books, e-books and DVDs are accessible through our library catalogue. Discovery is popular; despite experiencing a decrease on the previous year, we still had over 6.5 million searches in 2016–17, and it is unsurprising that discovery is a popular tool as its Google-esque design caters for preferred information discovery tools. With embedded search boxes in the VLE, RULDiscovery is also presented to students through a familiar platform, which encourages increased engagement.

Analysis of information-seeking behaviour based on electronic and print collection engagement is challenging for many reasons; declining student numbers will inevitably cause a decline in usage, but it is difficult to make definitive judgements about the extent to which student numbers are the cause. Challenges also arise in the lack of discernible patterns – while full-text

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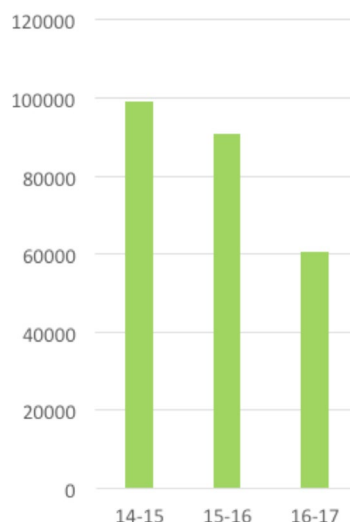


Figure 7 Total full-text downloads through RULDiscovery 2014–17, showing a significant decrease in 2016–17

downloads through our discovery service have declined steadily since 2014, discovery searches rose and fell. Print loans still dominate over e-book loans, but the volume of print content in our collection significantly outweighs the number of owned e-books. Rentals through our PDA profile have experienced the greatest usage increase since 2014, and Regent's needs to consider the causes of this and assess our usage patterns in the coming years. Perhaps our PDA collection fills gaps where the purchase of an item cannot be justified, but access is still needed by the student, such as for dissertations and research. Our current procedure of capping requests at £40 for rentals and £150 for PDA may be inhibiting access to resources through the access method that has shown the greatest growth in recent years, and it will be necessary to review this procedure. With e-book rentals representing our greatest triumph in terms of collection usage in recent years, models such as EDA or DDA may be equally successful. A study at Kent State University Libraries in 2013 deduced that their DDA does not form the bulk of their collection, but does 'align the library's collection with current user requirements [and] serves as a valuable free supplementary source of readings to users'; this idea of PDA, EDA and DDA aligning a collection with user need is particularly relevant in relation to our findings at Regent's (see Downey, K. *et al.*, 2013, p. 158). The answer here may be a move away from a static collection to a dynamic collection, with less owned content and an increase in rental collections, which would enable greater access to a wider range of research material and would reflect changing research needs. By ensuring reading list and supplementary material are available in print and owned e-book format while also providing access to a wide and varied PDA collection, we can ensure that our collections enable enriching research opportunities for our students.

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