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Tackling Big Deals: the experience of Maastricht University

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe the experiences of the Maastricht University Library in The Netherlands with regard to the evaluation of electronic subscriptions. For the evaluation of Big Deals, a tool was built to obtain an overview of the value of the package. For individual subscriptions, ways were investigated to keep rising costs under control.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper shows the ways in which the library staff endeavoured to gain more control over the renewal of electronic content. Several options were investigated and tried out in practice.

Findings – To use the evaluation tool, the faculties delivered core title lists of journals. After combining these with usage statistics, the titles in the package and the list prices of these titles, the staff are provided with a report. This report is very helpful for making a decision about the renewal. However, it is clear that it is difficult to control something the steep annual price increases of individual journals subscriptions.

Originality/value – This is one of the very few papers published on attempts to control journal price increases. The paper describes a subject that libraries worldwide encounter and thus will help to meet the needs of library staff involved with collection and license management.

Keywords Collection management, Consortia, Electronic journals, Subscriptions, Licences, Big deals

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Like most academic libraries, Maastricht University (UM) Library aims to limit expenses while still offering users an all-round high-quality collection. This presents staff charged with managing the collection and licenses with an interesting challenge. Over the past two years, we have tried several ways to control our budgets; one of them was the development of a tool that helps in evaluating Big Deals.

Dutch universities

In The Netherlands, there are 14 government accredited and funded research universities. Eight of these have an academic hospital attached to them. They work together in a consortium called UKB together with the National Library of The Netherlands.

Maastricht University

UM and its library, located in the south of The Netherlands, were founded in 1976. This makes UM the youngest university in The Netherlands. Originally, it only had a medical faculty, but today UM offers 17 bachelor programmes and 56 master programmes at the following six faculties:

- 1 law;
- 2 business and economics;

- 3 health, medicine and life sciences;
- 4 psychology and neurology;
- 5 humanities and science; and
- 6 arts and social sciences.

The University is an attractive employer for its 3,500 staff members, who take care of all the facilities that create a welcoming environment for more than 16,000 students.

UM is well known for its teaching method, known as problem-based learning (PBL): a student-oriented method in which problems are presented to students in tutorial groups. After defining a problem, the students search for additional information outside the group. They then meet again and work to solve the problem.

The University library comes in the pictures when the students need to investigate possible solutions to the problem.

The university library

The University library has two full service locations and two learning spaces (offering study facilities only), located close to the faculties for which they provide resources. There are 127 staff members working in five departments, one of which is the University Language Centre.

What does PBL mean for the University library? The most obvious consequence of offering PBL is that our library locations

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provide study accommodation and work stations of all kinds and sizes. Students can work in groups or individually. The University library has a learning-and-resource-centre for every faculty, with many copies of books that are required for courses. These books are for reference only. For PBL sufficient high-quality digital facilities and support also needs to be available. In one of the locations, a learning grid offers movable furniture and large computer screens for group work.

The University library is a member of the UKB national consortium, in which the 14 university libraries of The Netherlands partner with the National Library of The Netherlands. Agreements with major publishers are negotiated by a Licensing Bureau for information in higher education, called Surfmarket. The UKB members insist on purchasing joint licenses to get good content at the best price and conditions.

Some numbers give an impression of the size of the university library are as follows:

- 600,000 books;
- 28,500 eBooks;
- 300 print journal subscriptions;
- 28,000 e-journals;
- 180 vendors; and
- 37,850 loans per year.

Besides managing our own library, we collaborate closely with the Open University Netherlands. As we take care of their electronic library, the Open University's negotiations, licensing and daily administration are actually done by the University library's acquisition staff.

The collection

UM Library subscribes to a vast number of journals in the form of packages from all major publishers. The total number of titles in these so called "Big Deals" exceeds 25,000. Negotiations for these packages are mainly carried out by Surfmarket. In addition to the Big Deals, we subscribe to smaller packages with individual publishers as well as to individual electronic titles. We subscribe to almost 1,000 titles from publishers all over the world. For these titles, we do the licensing and further administration ourselves. Finally, we also subscribe to a small number of hardcopy journals (compared to a decade ago their number has declined dramatically). Our subscription agent was Swets for almost 30 years, but after their bankruptcy in 2014, Ebsco now takes care of our hardcopy journals.

The budget for the content is provided directly by the faculties, which pay for and decide on the content in close collaboration with the University library. Every faculty has a library committee in which staff, students and a delegate from the University library discuss the coordination of the budget and the collection – always with the wishes and demands of the users in mind.

All these subscriptions and Big Deals involve substantial sums of money. Prices have been rising for years, and in many cases were raised without prior notice. Combined with decreasing budgets, this means that evaluating content has become more and more important in recent years. Faculties and libraries should ask themselves the question: do we really need this journal?

Big Deals and evaluation

Budgetary problems, but also the problem of considerable and inexplicable price increases forced us to take a closer look at renewals of individual electronic titles and licenses of small e-journal packages. For a period of one year, we approached the publishers whenever the price increase exceeded 6 per cent relative to the previous year, of which more later.

As at all libraries which provide scholarly information, a major part of the budget is spent on the large packages of e-journals. The University library has multi-year licenses on packages from over 15 major publishers. For most of them, Surfmarket negotiated with the publishers on behalf of the consortium of which UM is part.

In 2014–2015, we faced the renewal of five major Big Deals at the same time. During these renewals, the universities added a very important new element to the negotiations, namely, Open Access. Besides Surfmarket and the library directors, the Association of Universities in The Netherlands became involved in the negotiations with the largest publishers after the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science made a strong statement in favour of Open Access in 2014. State Secretary Sander Dekker called upon universities and publishers to make a serious effort towards achieving 100 per cent Open Access. The goal is to ensure that 10 years from now, all scientific publications by university researchers should be available through Open Access. A lot of scientific research is funded with public money and should therefore be publicly accessible. The proposal of the universities to the publishers is to come to an Open Access agreement. This new route would mean that licenses are based on payment for publishing instead of reading (a publishing fee as distinct from a reading fee). It will take some time for the publishers to make this change. Some of the negotiations were put on hold last year, but the negotiation teams have reached agreements with an increasing number of publishers on the transition to Open Access. Due to these new agreements, individual researchers with a Dutch affiliation face no additional costs if choosing to publish Open Access in the journals within the scheme. The costs for the APCs (a sum that an academic pays for the open access publication of their article) for authors with a Dutch affiliation have been bought off in these agreements. For the next four years, the costs fall under the Big Deal, provided that publication is in a selected journal. The contract is based on payment for publication rather than for the right to read. In a few other cases, a list of journals will be composed in which university researchers can publish a considerable number of articles without any costs for the authors.

One of the other lines of approach was that the costs should not rise in the way they did in the past years. This also turned out to be a major challenge.

Role of the library

Whenever Surfmarket arrives at an agreement with publishers, the universities are invited to join the Big Deal. These are mainly multi-year deals. A cost allocation model clearly shows every member of the consortium what it has to pay.

What do we (the University library) do during this whole process? We need to be ready when the proposal for a new deal

comes, and we want to provide the faculties with sound advice about renewals because they will have to pay for the content.

We have tried to evaluate packages for some years. To obtain a good picture of the value of journal packages, we combined a large amount of data by hand which took much time and effort. And because we liked the idea of being more in control of renewals, we decided to take a further step and build a tool which could do the job for us. Our aim was to input all the data we thought were important for the evaluation, push a button and then [. . .] have the answers to all of our questions (or at least those concerning the renewal of a Big Deal).

What do we need to evaluate?

When we decided to build our evaluation tool, we spent some time identifying what we really need to know before renewing e-journals or Big Deals. Who are “we”? Two collection managers were involved (one of whom had wide experience with statistics and manual evaluations), plus an IT specialist and myself: the serials librarian/license manager.

When we talked about what is important for our evaluation, we found that it is possible to make endless lists of data. But then it is important to ask the following questions: “Does this parameter really make the difference? Do we need it to decide about continuation?” It turned out to be important to keep the model as clear and simple as possible.

The first step was to ask each faculty to create a core title list of their most important subscriptions. We used these lists as a point of departure with respect to content. Every faculty created its own core title list and agreed to update it every three years. We decided that an important evaluation factor is how many of these core titles are in the package? We can monitor this for each faculty.

Once a year, we gather the usage statistics for the main journal packages. We definitely wanted to involve these COUNTER compliant reports in our evaluation.

We decided that an overview of the content of current deals was necessary for which we used SFX from ExLibris.

We would also like to have a list of titles which will be part of the *next* license (title lists provided by Surfmarket). However, in most cases, this component is not available and because packages generally stay the same over the years, we decided to start with the current titles.

We collected the list prices of the individual titles in the deals, although it is not always clear how real those prices are. Indeed, on one occasion, a publisher charged 44 per cent of the total price of the package for just one title. This shows that libraries are right when they have serious concerns about being forced into Big Deals. It also confirms Mike McGrath’s conclusion (McGrath, 2012) that the monopolistic pricing practices of commercial publishers are one of the reasons that subscribing on a title-by-title is not affordable, when looking at alternatives to Big Deals. Nevertheless, we decided to include them in our evaluation tool.

We include the impact factors of the various titles in the package and in the outcome show the impact factors of the faculties’ core titles.

In summary, we included the following parameters:

- core title lists of the six faculties;
- usage statistics;
- list of current titles;
- list of future titles;
- list prices of the titles; and
- impact factors.

We decided not to include the following parameters:

- usage per user, faculty or subject heading;
- number of articles by our University researchers in the journals;
- percentage of used titles in a package; and
- total of the list prices of used titles (minimum of one full text download).

In our view, these parameters were too detailed and not sufficiently decisive.

A staff member of the IT department designed the tool which makes use of the SQL server on which several lists are stored and updated every month (the output table is not easy to read, but is converted into Excel).

How does the ‘tool’ combine these parameters?

There is a match of these data behind the scenes (based on ISSNs), and the outcome is a report which provides us with the information we need:

- a column per faculty;
- number of core titles in the deal per faculty;
- number of core titles that have an impact factor;
- how many successful requests for full text articles;
- how many successful requests for the core titles;
- how many requests for the remaining titles;
- cost per request; and
- finally, the list prices of individual titles.

The main question to be answered in connection with this report is: what does the package deal cost and what would it cost if we subscribe to the core titles only? And what additional benefits do the Big Deal offer that would justify a renewal?

Outcome of the evaluations

We discovered that we pay up to 40 per cent less for a journal package, in comparison with individual subscriptions to the core titles. A package contains more titles, some of which our users will never need. However, the reports demonstrate that, besides usage of the core titles, many of the extra titles are being used very well, so the overall package is of great value.

Having said that, the price increases remain a problem for many libraries. In our opinion, renewing Big Deals is no longer as obvious as it used to be. Indeed, some universities in The Netherlands have already cancelled packages. Tough negotiations are needed and that is what the national teams have been doing over the last two years.

Price increases of individual journals

In addition to evaluating package deals, we have also examined the individual subscriptions. What did the acquisition staff and the license manager do to try and keep the increasing prices under control?

We approached almost 100 publishers and collaborated with collection managers and delegates of the faculties. The main question was: what is the reason for these frequent and sharp price increases and what can we do about this?

- We asked the library collection managers to critically examine our subscriptions and cancellation options.
- We also asked them to do this for a specific group of titles: the most expensive subscriptions, based on the title list produced by the acquisition staff.
- We chose to approach the publishers proactively to obtain the prices for the coming year in September rather than in December, when it is too late for cancellation.
- Whenever a subscription price rose more than 5 per cent, we approached the publisher and asked it to explain the increase. Over a period of one year, we made about 100 approaches.

With regard to this last point, publishers offered a wide range of reasons:

- “we refrained from price increases in the last few years, but it has become inevitable” (even if that means the price goes up by 20 per cent at once);
- “more issues/pages, which means more content than last year”;
- “we have to keep pace with other publishers”;
- “rise of the costs incurred (staff, building, production)”;
- and
- “we no longer calculate our prices in EUR, but have changed to GBP” (but still charge the same amount, which meant a rise of 25 per cent when we converted the GBP into EUR).

Some of the explanations put forward by publishers were quite curious:

- the rise in postal charges (for an e-journal); and
- the rise in fuel prices (also for an e-journal).

Which barriers (or do we call them challenges?) did we encounter?

In the end, we were able to identify several obstacles that prevented us from demanding lower price increases for renewals:

- we cannot cancel core titles, which makes it harder for us to negotiate;
- the publishers of individual titles were mostly small companies with little room for negotiation;

- next year’s prices are not set before December and by that time it tends to be too late to cancel; and
- of course, we face adverse exchange rates (USD, GBP, EUR).

Other important things to consider during the renewal process:

- Check the usage statistics. There is no point in paying for a subscription if nobody uses it.
- Is there any overlap in content? Are two products offered that are very similar?
- Is there any demand from the faculties for this product? This is where the core title lists and library committee meetings play an important role.

Overall conclusions

There are considerable advantages to be gained from evaluating subscriptions effectively and gaining insight into the costs and benefits. Working closely together with the members of the consortium and the licensing teams is very important in order to drive prices down and to negotiate good conditions.

Some additional conclusions are:

- Keep those who pay for the content informed (i.e. the faculties in the case of the UM) and consult with them about renewals. Discuss with them that cancellation could provide them with space in their budget and it might even persuade the publisher to make a better offer.
- Be prepared to cancel subscriptions when the price increase is unreasonable and beyond the budget, and the publisher has no room or no intention to meet your needs.
- Keep talking to the publishers and tell them what issues you encounter in your library.

And whatever you do, always keep the users in mind.

Reference

McGrath, M. (2012), “Fighting back against the Big Deals: a success story from the UK”, *Interlending & Document Supply*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 178–186.

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