

THE ACQUISITION OF ELECTRONIC RESOURCES: a practical approach

1. INTRODUCTION

Let me start by expanding a little on what my position entails and the history of electronic resources at UCT Libraries. In 1998/99 UCT Libraries decided to move to electronic resources in a big way. Due to the tasks involved it was decided to create a post in the acquisitions department for an electronic resources librarian. I moved into the post in June 2000 after several years at the UCT Health Sciences Library. I handled almost everything to do with electronic resources, which is too much for one person. In 2004 the post of electronic resources librarian has been relocated to the collections development department. I still co-ordinate the activities to do with electronic resources, but the acquisitions type functions remain in the acquisitions department with one of the acquisitions staff. Whereas in the beginning of electronic resources in libraries the tendency was to separate the tasks surrounding the electronic resources from the print, it seems libraries are moving toward a more integrated approach. (Lewis, 2001) After all, it is all basically the same rationale, libraries are still providing access to information, it is just now in different formats.

2. THE ACQUISITION OF PRINT MATERIAL

In the world of print resources the acquisitions process might follow the steps as outlined in figure 1. This is very broadly the process as followed in UCT Libraries. Other institutions will follow different steps, but the basic principles remain the same. The acquisitions department at UCT Libraries handles both monographs and serials, and now electronic resources. All technical services activities for all the branch libraries are centralised in the main library. The acquisitions department receives a recommendation for a new title from an academic or a subject librarian. In the case of journals one of the staff in acquisitions requests a quote from one of our vendors, or in certain cases directly from the publisher. If the price is right and the item will add value to the collection the Collections Manager gives the go-ahead to purchase. The same procedure applies to the ordering of books and audio-visual material except that in most cases no quote is requested and the order is placed immediately with a supplier. For journals the new subscription would usually be started at the beginning of the following year, although in exceptional cases it can be started immediately.

After a certain amount of time the monograph, or the first part of the journal, arrives and is sent to the cataloguing department. The piece, and subsequent pieces if it is a journal, is arrived and made available to the library users. The invoice is passed for payment and to complete the acquisitions process the requestor is notified of the availability of the item.

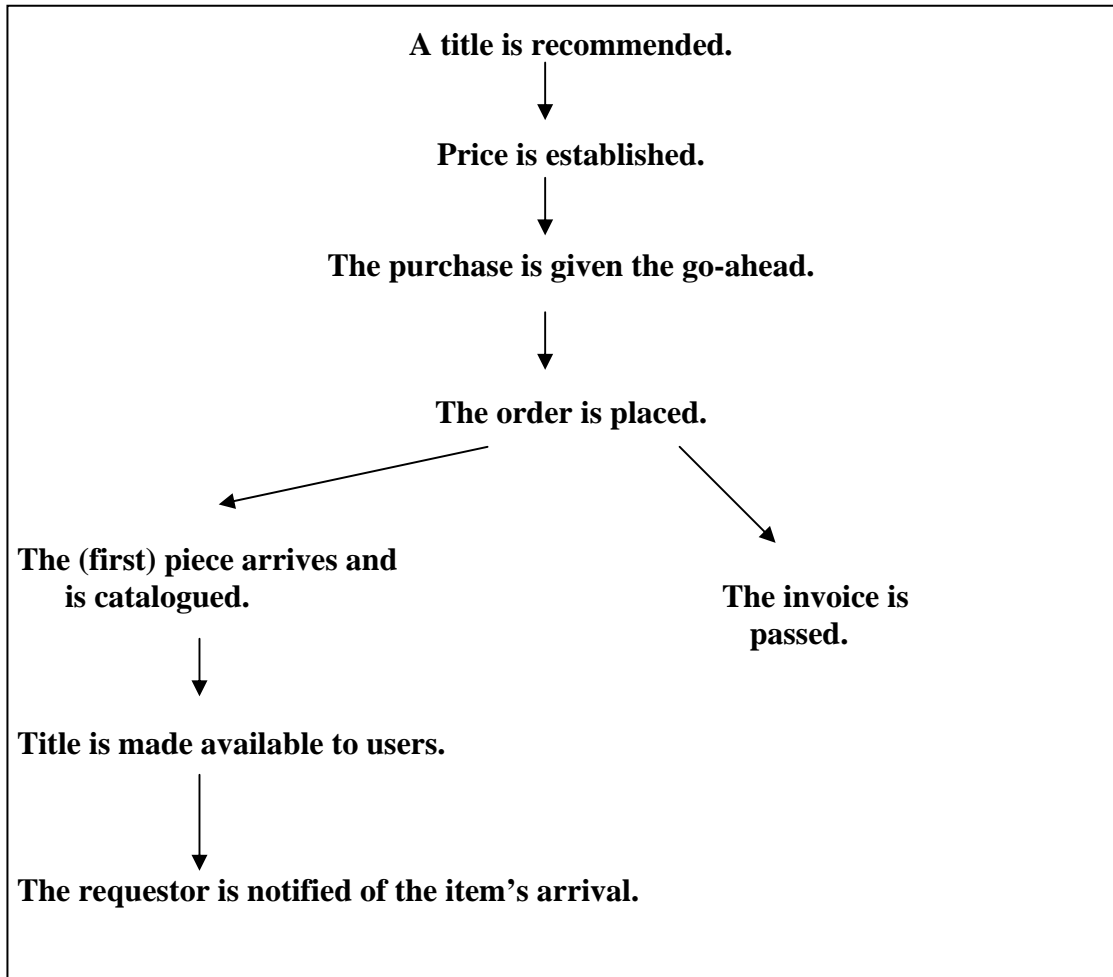


Figure 1: Example of the procedure followed for the acquisition of print resources in very broad strokes.

3. THE ACQUISITION OF ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

The process for electronic resources follows basically the same steps, although there are a few extra inserted along the way.

The term “electronic resources” can be used to refer to resources on the internet or on CD-ROM or DVD and in the following formats:

- 1) databases (fulltext – complete articles, or abstracting and indexing - bibliographic),

- 2) electronic books, and
- 3) electronic journals.

This paper will concentrate on the acquisitions of databases and electronic journals and will follow the process as handled at UCT Libraries, as an example.

3.1 A TITLE IS RECOMMENDED

As in the print environment someone recommends a resource for the library to purchase. In the case of UCT Libraries this would usually be a subject librarian, or an academic, via their subject librarian. Resources come to our attention via publisher's blurbs and catalogues, word of mouth, consortium negotiations, etc. Telephone calls from database providers selling new titles are also not unheard of. At times I feel I need to go on a course on how to say "No thank you" firmly, finally and politely! Was the push to buy so evident in the print only environment? Or have publishers invested a lot in the development of these resources that they are hoping to recoup.

The acquisitions decision for electronic resources involves more people than in the print environment. Often resources, especially databases, cover several subjects so input is required from a number of subject areas. Information technology issues also have to be considered so IT specialists are involved.

3.2 TRIAL

The first additional step when comparing electronic resources to print is the setting up of a free trial period in order to evaluate the resource. It will ideally last at least 30 days, giving the institution sufficient time to explore and use the resource. It is best to use an evaluation form for the trial – in this way resources are evaluated as objectively as possible. At UCT libraries one of our subject librarians designed two forms – one for the librarians to use in their evaluation process and a simpler one for academic staff. The trial form for the librarians includes questions about:

- the search engine – whether Boolean searching and proximity searching are allowed; whether truncation is supported; whether there is an index or a thesaurus
- how results are handled – record layout, sorting, saving, emailing
- the help facility – what topics are covered; can you search it
- what alternative resources are there and what alternative platforms are available

- coverage – subject, years
- and then any other comments

All this is to put into place an objective measure to evaluate resources, but in the end it often comes down to the subject coverage and whether this supports the needs of the user community.

The evaluation form is emailed to the Electronic Resources Group with each new trial that is set up. This Group consists of a representative from each of the subject areas throughout UCT Libraries as well as library IT staff and staff from acquisitions and collection development. Active trials are listed on a Trials web page off the UCT Libraries' homepage (<http://www.lib.uct.ac.za>) and the plan is to make the evaluation form for academics and students available on this page. There will be a clickable link that will automatically email the completed form to me.

After the trial all feedback is collected and a decision is made as to whether to buy the resource or not. At UCT Libraries this is usually done during the Electronic Resources Group meeting, which is held every couple of months.

3.3 PRICE AND SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS ESTABLISHED

Pricing and subscription options need to be established. In the print environment prices are usually set. For journals one often sees prices listed for, for example, the USA vs. the Rest Of the World. For a print subscription the price to be paid is the list price with a vendor's handling fee added on as applicable. For electronic resources the pricing is often not listed in a straightforward manner, but is presented as a model; and these vary.

For academic institutions some of the pricing models are based on:

- FTE of the institution. FTE stands for Full Time Equivalent – this is a term used in business as well as academia. In very basic terms – two half time people make one full time. The actual formula used to calculate student FTE involves credit values for courses and numbers of students enrolled for that course – something not covered in this paper.

- Relevant FTE – in other words the number of people most likely to use the resource. For example, for a database that focuses on Psychology, how many students are there in the psychology department?
- Total user population – How many people are there attached to the institution?
- Number of simultaneous users – Often a license to a resource will grant access to an unlimited number of users at the same time – simultaneously. Some resources structure their pricing and control access to their database in such a way that access is limited to a specified number of people at one time. For more users one buys a more expensive the license.

That is if you want to pay up front for access. Some resources, especially online journals, have a pay-as-you-go option – one pays per article requested. This is easiest if one has access to a credit card.

3.4 AUTHENTICATION METHOD ESTABLISHED

Also to be sorted out is the authentication method. In other words how does the resource know that the user trying to gain access is authorised to do so? The most common means of authentication is by IP address or by username and password. For a big institution like UCT we prefer the IP option. Put very simply each computer that accesses the Internet has an IP number – an Internet Protocol number – that is used to identify the computer and its location. This way the resource at the other end recognises us as a subscriber because the computer our user is working on is on the UCT network and is showing itself to be in our range of registered IP numbers. With this method we feel more secure that our usernames and passwords will not somehow land up in the hands of unauthorised users.

3.6 PURCHASE IS GIVEN THE GO-AHEAD

A purchase is only given the go-ahead if the budget allows. Sometimes buying something new will mean cancelling an existing subscription. At the moment one of the issues under consideration for many libraries with regard to journals is whether to cancel print in favour of electronic. The electronic format is not necessarily much cheaper than the print version – often only around 10%. When thinking about this issue one has to keep in mind:

- the electronic journal might not be an exact duplicate of the print version

- electronic journals that form part of big aggregated databases might not be complete – often graphs and images are not included.

Sometimes licenses for electronic packages do not allow cancellation of print subscriptions, sometimes they do. Publisher policies are not standard across the board and might change from year to year.

3.7 LICENSE IS NEGOTIATED AND SIGNED

The license is read and the terms and conditions evaluated. Ideally someone with knowledge of contracts would be reading these documents, but most often I think it is just librarians looking at them. As a guide there are several model licenses available on the Internet, but the one we at UCT have chosen to follow is the one developed by SASLI as it takes into account conditions in South Africa. I will mention more about SASLI later. The terms of the licenses are sometimes open to negotiation. Issues of great importance to librarians and academics are the conditions surrounding interlibrary loans, walk in users and course packs. Use of the resource and the content is governed by the license. It is important to remember that once a license is signed contract law kicks into place and supersedes the copyright law that we are familiar with. I will not talk about that now, Charles Masango has dealt with that.

3.8 ORDER PLACED

Access to electronic resources can be bought through a vendor or directly with the publisher of the database. Unfortunately some publishers refuse to work through a vendor and, quite frankly, it is more efficient sometimes to work directly with the source. When one has to sort out access problems for example, going through a middleman is very clumsy. And when negotiating license conditions direct contact is preferable. But on the other hand, one then loses the convenience of having all invoicing originating from one place and all the other reasons why libraries started using vendors in the first place.

3.9 INVOICE PAID AND ACCESS INTRUCTIONS RECEIVED

And once we have paid, we await access instructions, as we waited for the item in the print environment. If it is an Internet resource, and depending on the configuration of the institutional network, there might be certain procedures that need to be followed

on the IT side. I do not want to get into very technical aspects, suffice it to say that working closely with the IT department of the institution is vital if one wants to purchase access to electronic resources. If bandwidth is inadequate, Internet access speed might be slow enough to discourage users from using electronic resources. And if Internet browsers are not up to date certain web sites will not display correctly.

3.10 TITLE IS MADE AVAILABLE TO USERS

As with a print item, the information is sent to the cataloguing department for inclusion in the catalogue. In the print environment the item became available to users once it was placed on the shelf. In the electronic environment the item becomes available to users, *really* available, once all the links that are possible have been activated. If the resource is web based, a clickable link can be added to the bibliographic record, which takes the user directly to the resource on the Internet.

Libraries also often have lists of electronic journals and databases on their web pages (eg. <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za>), which have to be maintained. At UCT Libraries we use the electronic resource management services of Serials Solutions. There are similar services available: EBSCO A to Z, TDNet, and Journal Web Cite. (See Szczyrbak & Pierce and Emery for comparisons of some of these services.) These are services that provide a clickable list of the institution's electronic journals including all the titles accessible through the big aggregated databases like Academic Search Premier from EBSCO, InfoTrac OneFile from the Gale Group, or Academic Research Library from Proquest.

Other setting up that can be done, depending on what the resource supports, is linking between resources. For example, linking from a bibliographic database to full text journals. These links are either set up by librarians, or in some cases by the database provider if they have been supplied with the necessary information about titles held and years covered. Of course, this needs to be maintained in order for users to get maximum benefit from the resource.

As users become more sophisticated at using electronic resources they are coming to expect seamless linking between resources. At UCT and in the rest of CALICO we use a context sensitive linking service called SFX and we will be instituting the

federated search facility, MetaLib, within a few months. But that is a topic for another paper.

3.12 NOTIFICATION

Once all the setting up is done notification is sent out that the new resource is accessible. Because of the electronic environment we live in, it is easy to spread the word about new resources to a large number of people via email. We have not often publicised the purchase of new material very widely, but many libraries try to promote the use of electronic resources. This is often because of their expense, but also because of the cross-disciplinary nature of much of the content. This year at UCT Libraries we have started announcing new resources in the weekly institutional newspaper with a short paragraph on their content. Training sessions that are run regularly by the subject librarians are also ideal forums for making the user population aware of what is available.

3.13 OTHER

At UCT Libraries we have an annual exercise where we reconsider all our subscriptions for renewal. The majority of electronic resources fall into this exercise as they are paid on a subscription basis. At this time usage statistics are a useful tool to see how resources are being used. These are much easier to obtain in the electronic environment than they were in the print. That is if the resource provider is able to produce statistics, and statistics that are meaningful. A number of publishers are making their usage statistics COUNTER compliant. This means that the usage statistics they produce adhere to the standards set up by the COUNTER project and this ensures that usage is measured in a consistent way.

(<http://www.projectcounter.org>)

At UCT we still have to work out how to evaluate the statistics. At the one end we may have a very expensive and subject specific database that is used by only a handful of researchers; but they may be the top A-grade people in the country and bring tremendous prestige to the institution; and on the other hand we may have an expensive databases, very general in subject coverage, that is used by every undergraduate student in every faculty. How does one compare the two usage figures?

4. CONSORTIA

I mentioned CALICO a moment ago. The Cape Library Cooperative comprises the libraries of UCT, UWC, Stellenbosch University, Peninsula Technikon and Cape Technikon. In an effort to get better pricing, electronic resources often can be purchased by a consortium. The libraries of the academic institutions in the country are also all part of a national consortium – COSALC – the Coalition of South African Library Consortia. The major project of this consortium is SASLI – the South African Site License Initiative. This is the office that negotiates licences and sets up national deals for electronic resources for COSALC members. Core databases have been identified and bought by most of the academic institutions. And most institutions have all recently participated in an exercise to evaluate some very similar databases against each other in order to decide which best met each institutions' need. For this endeavour we used an evaluation form which was compiled by SASLI and is much more detailed than the one we use in the day-to-day evaluation of resources.

5. CONCLUSION

Let me finish off with something I recently read which I found very challenging and stimulating; something to encourage us as we face the enormous changes taking place in the library environment:

... The issues acquisitions librarians face, the work they do, and the skills required to do it – all have shifted focus. We work in an environment with pricing models that require teams to analyze them, licenses that require legal expertise to evaluate and negotiate, and products whose massive, fluctuating content challenges our ability to provide information about what is being purchased and appropriate, accurate access from our catalogs. We work in an environment in which the very definitions of “serials” and “monographs” have become outdated at best, arbitrary at worst; an environment in which assumptions must be challenged and challenged again. It is an interesting time to be buying library materials.

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6. NOTES

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