Use and Perceptions of E-books by Academic Staff in Further Education

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study of the awareness, perceptions and use of e-books by academic staff in Further Education (FE) colleges throughout Northern Ireland (NI). It is the first comprehensive study of e-book use by FE faculty in NI and fills a significant gap in the research literature on e-books in education, which has tended to focus on Higher Education and the university setting. Data was collected through an online survey which was distributed to FE faculty across NI. The findings show that although FE academic staff are receptive to e-books and welcome them as a resource, poor reading experience and lack of awareness of relevant titles have had an impact. In particular, the research found that 40% of academic staff, in post less than five years, had not used e-books. Greater availability of titles, promotion, and better integration within teaching and learning emerge as key requisites for effective service delivery and enhancement of e-books within FE, as does the need for better targeted instruction and training aimed at academic staff. Understanding patrons' views, awareness, needs, habits and expectations in relation to e-books is crucial to help direct collection content while budgets remain tight and physical space limited.

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INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations have driven libraries in recent years and e-books have received an increasing amount of attention and compelled many libraries to review their collections and how they provide information services. In 2009, e-books were a relatively new concept within Further Education (FE).[1] In the UK however, Jisc Collections has played a major role by developing an e-book collection specifically for FE.[2] It had become clear that there was a demand for vocation and skill based e-textbook titles. By providing FE colleges with a critical mass of e-books related to their courses, Jisc Collections was assisting the colleges develop their e-book collections for academic staff and students. FE colleges throughout the UK now have an extensive collection of educational e-books across most disciplines, due to the efforts of Jisc Collections.

In Northern Ireland (NI),[3] prior to the development of the Jisc Collections e-book initiative, the majority of FE colleges[4] had limited or little access to e-book collections. Although most had adopted e-journal and e-database resources, e-books had not significantly infiltrated FE library collections.

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[1] The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) provides useful background information on the structure of the FE sector in Northern Ireland. According to their website, DEL is responsible for the policy, strategic development and financing of the statutory FE sector in N. Ireland. FE colleges are free-standing incorporated bodies. Management responsibility lies with each individual college's governing body and Colleges Northern Ireland (CNI) acts as the representative body for FE in N. Ireland (http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/further-and-higher-education/further-education/background-to-the-further-education-sector.htm). In USA, the equivalent colleges are usually Continuing Education or Community Colleges; while in Australia, they are referred to as Technical and Further Education or TAFE. The FE Colleges in Northern Ireland are the main providers of vocational and technical education and training. College provision range from GCSEs and A levels to BTECs, HNCs, Foundation Degrees, Apprenticeships, Degrees (HE) and other specific training programmes.

[2] Historically, JISC stood for Joint Information Systems Committee however the company is now known as Jisc, and Jisc Collections is part of this. According to the Jisc website (http://jisc.ac.uk/about), they are a registered charity that champions the use of digital technologies in UK education and research. Over 80% of Jisc funding comes from the UK HE and FE funding bodies, with additional support coming from higher education institutions. Approximately 3000 e-book titles are available free of charge to every FE college in the UK, via Jisc using an ebrary platform. These e-books are available to support taught courses for both FE students and lecturers and were chosen through extensive consultation between academic staff, library staff and Jisc Collections. For information about their e-books for FE service see: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/e-books-for-fe

[3] Northern Ireland is made up of six counties in the north east of the island of Ireland and is a semi-autonomous part of the United Kingdom (Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/4172307.stm).

[4] The NI FE sector comprises of six colleges (Belfast Metropolitan College; Northern Regional College; North West Regional College; Southern Regional College; South Eastern Regional College; and South West College), spread across 40 + campus sites.

This study, which was undertaken in 2011,[5] focuses on the experiences and perceptions of staff, rather than students, because overall, fewer studies have centred on the academic staff perspective and experience. In FE, e-books have been relatively slow to take off and it is important to have academic staff support, as an influencing factor, to encourage usage amongst their students. Furthermore, library budgets are directly driven by the pedagogical needs of academic staff in FE. Given the potential of e-books to enhance the FE teaching and learning experience, this research is considered to be timely and relevant and provides the foundations upon which to build more investigative work.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Identify the awareness and use/non-use of e-books amongst academic staff in FE in N. Ireland;
- Explore general attitudes, perceived advantages/disadvantages and barriers towards e-books;
- Determine existing preferences for format type (print or e-book) and ascertain overall user satisfaction levels; and
- Attain an understanding of future trends for the effective promotion and marketing of e-books.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, e-books are defined as digitised versions of paper-based books that can be delivered on a variety of electronic platforms, ranging from PCs to mobile devices. They can also be 'born digital'. E-books can have features that include: search options, cross reference functions, multimedia features and links within the text to external online sources (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Courduff, Carter, & Bennett, 2013; Schomisch, Zens, & Mayr, 2013), and as Tucker (2012, p. 40) states, the e-book environment is 'rapidly and constantly evolving'. For a useful summary of current e-book formats and capabilities see JISC (2012). There are, however, crucial differences in e-book functionality for academic use, compared to non-scholarly use, with challenges in areas of licences and digital rights management (DRM) which have an impact on what users are permitted to do with the e-book (Walters, 2013a,b).

There is a scarcity of studies that focus on the FE sector in relation to e-books in the UK or Ireland; instead the research has centred on the higher education (HE) experience,[6] hence this review draws on the literature from that domain. Although it should be noted that most of the Jisc reports reference both the FE and HE sectors with regard to e-books. Early studies provided an understanding of platform features, pedagogy and technology issues and reveal an unsatisfactory experience of e-books due to accessibility and unfamiliarity of e-book interfaces (Walton, 2007), whereas, later works discovered less apprehension with accessibility and more concern with relevant title coverage and availability of e-books for different subject areas (Briddon et al., 2009; de Oliveira, 2012; Nariani, 2009; Walton, 2013).

Ebrary's (2007) global HE faculty survey and some recent studies (for example, Pant & Jindal, 2013; Walters, 2013a,b,c) have found that e-journals are more popular than e-books due to their ease of use and access, and research in Ireland would indicate that e-books have not yet reached 'self-sustaining take off' (Smyth & Carlin, 2012, p. 176) or a 'tipping point' (Pan, Byrne, & Murphy, 2009, p. S12). According to Nicholas and Lewis (2010): 'Enticing faculty to use e-textbooks is a challenge…. This new media may have to prove its reliability and will have a

learning curve'. Nevertheless, 'e-books have the potential to be even more significant for libraries and learners than e-journals' because of the enduring importance of textbooks for learning (Vasileiou, Hartley, & Rowley, 2012, p. 217), and this is particularly true within the FE sector.

A Springer survey (2010), conducted at the University of Liverpool, showed that more than 80% of respondents knew that they had access to e-books through the library and had actually used them. These findings reflect the way in which e-books have become an essential part of the information world within an education context. This growing trend echoes the 2008 JISC funded study on UK e-book usage and perceptions. It reported that 58% of teaching staff at over 120 participating universities were using e-books (JISC, 2008). Also, the majority of graduate students surveyed at York University, Toronto, were aware of e-books and 76% had used them (Nariani, 2009). Jisc Collections (2009) final report of the National E-book Observatory Project agreed that e-books were now part of academia with 65% of teaching staff or students having used an e-book.

Findings show academic staff, like students, prefer to read a few pages, or surf through a chapter, rather than read the entire e-book (Lenares, Smith, & Boissy, 2013; McLure & Hoseth, 2012; Schomisch et al., 2013; Springer, 2010). The global survey conducted by ebrary (2007) found that 79% of faculty stated that they prefer the traditional print format when reading a whole book, while Schomisch et al. (2013) in their study found that essential parts of e-books texts are printed out rather than read on screen.

While 36% of respondents in the ebrary (2007) survey identified that they did not use e-books for teaching, the majority of faculty (81% of the ebrary study) had discovered e-resources, including e-books from the library website and indicated the importance of information literacy and the promotion of e-books (Briddon et al., 2009; ebrary, 2007, 2012; Nariani, 2009). CIBER (2009a) however, found that university teaching staff are using more e-books and are starting to decrease the gap with their 'Net Generation' students. In their study of e-book use in the University of Delhi, Pant and Jindal (2013, p. 320) found that 45% of faculty members used e-books (compared to 76% of students) and e-books indexed in the library catalogue were 'more likely to be used than e-books which are promoted through other media'.

Undoubtedly, users regard 'online access' as the key advantage of e-books (for example, see Jamali, Nicholas, & Rowlands, 2009; Walters, 2013b; Walton, 2013). The consensus is that e-books offer convenience, the ability to view pages from on and off campus and 24/7 accessibility (for example, see Pant & Jindal, 2013). As Jisc Collections (2009) reports, almost a third of e-pages are viewed off campus and at all times of the day. E-books are used like reference books, to locate information and evidence rapidly, viewings are brief, and users do not normally read the entire book (Abdullah & Gibb, 2009; Lenares et al., 2013; Levine-Clark, 2007; Nariani, 2009; Walton, 2013).

Although there is still debate over whether e-books will replace printed books, trends indicate that libraries have been expanding their e-book acquisitions over the past few years. In the educational arena, JISC notes, core text e-books 'can be effectively used alongside rather than instead' of print (JISC, 2012, p. 27), they offer 'a 'safety valve' at times of peak demand, rather than a direct substitution for hard copy' (Jisc Collections, 2009, p. 5).

In the research literature, users are often asked to compare and contrast print with e-books and to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of both. However, as O'Brien (2010) exclaimed, does one have to win? Should e-books be in direct competition with printed books? There is evidence that print books remain more popular than e-books with patrons for specific reasons (Daniel & Woody, 2013; Pant & Jindal, 2013; Walters, 2013b; Walton, 2013). Users have indicated that e-books are preferred for searches, information retrieval and convenience, but print books are preferred for extended reading (Cassidy, Martinez, & Shen, 2012; JISC, 2012; Walters, 2013b; Walton, 2013).

These conclusions are also reinforced by the responses to questions regarding the way students and faculty at the University of Liverpool

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[5] Further details can be found in Mulholland (2012).

[6] Traditionally in the UK, FE colleges have offered vocational learning opportunities and HE universities, academic qualifications at graduate and postgraduate levels. However, the demarcation between FE and HE may seem to be blurring with an increasing number of FE institutions in the UK offering degree courses and an increasing number of HE institutions offering foundation and access courses which are pre-degree level. Further education involves educational opportunities for those aged 16+, following on from secondary education, and can include both formal qualifications and short courses that are not certified. Higher education and learning usually takes place in a university setting and is for those aged 18+. Some of those students who complete an FE course of study will go on to a HE setting.