

# Ebooks at the University of Portsmouth: a ten year success story

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The University of Portsmouth Library has been making ebooks available since spring 2004, so we can now look back across ten years' provision. From an initial three suppliers and around 15,000 ebooks, Portsmouth staff and students can now access over 476,000 ebooks from 15 suppliers, and in certain subject areas ebooks are an essential part of the curriculum (the 15 suppliers are a mixture of aggregators such as ebrary and MyiLibrary, and individual suppliers such as Oxford University Press, Emerald and MIT Press, plus Jisc Historic Books). Not only do we have a significant number of ebooks, but national data shows that students and staff at Portsmouth access ebooks more than in most other UK universities (SCONUL Strategic Planning Data, 2012/13) with just over 4.7 million ebook section requests in the 2012/13 academic year. In addition to monitoring usage data closely, we have carried out surveys to track student reaction to ebooks in 2005, 2009, 2012 and 2014, with the latest survey gathering views from 1846 students. This case study will include selected results from our surveys.

## Early success

Our initial offering of 15,000 ebooks, rather than just a few hundred, led to early success because it meant there was something for most subject areas.

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### How to cite this book chapter:

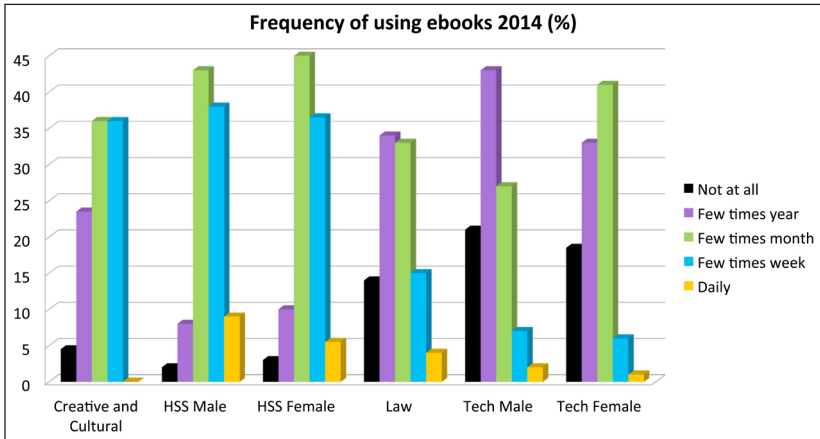
Worden, A. 2014. Ebooks at the University of Portsmouth: a ten year success story. In: Woodward, H. (ed.) *Ebooks in Education: Realising the Vision*. Pp. 71–77. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bal.h>

We also made sure that all our ebooks were in the catalogue to aid discovery; Nicholas *et al.* (2008) note that use of catalogued ebooks is double that of those not catalogued. A 2005 survey, together with Athens authentication data broken down across departments, showed us at this early stage that it was humanities and social sciences (HSS) students who were leading the way in the uptake of ebooks. This contrasts with the findings of Abdullah and Gibb (2006) at the University of Strathclyde, although Chelin *et al.* (2009) report HSS students at the University of the West of England coming second to law students in frequency of use of ebooks, and Levine-Clark is reported as finding that social sciences students use ebooks much more frequently than science and technology students (ProQuest 2014).

As there was proven student interest, we targeted HSS academics with hands-on ebook training at the end of academic year staff conference, and we arranged subject cluster training for groups who were less well represented at the conference. Academics could see at first hand the useful features available on ebooks and conversations sprang up across the room about how ebooks could be integrated into teaching. We believe these sessions were instrumental in leading to the continued high usage figures for ebooks at Portsmouth, because they convinced academics of the value of ebooks, and led to the adoption of ebooks as key weekly reading on various taught units. We continue to offer hands-on training on ebooks and other electronic sources before the start of each academic year for new lecturers and those who want a refresher. Gravett (2011) and Chelin *et al.* (2009) both stress the importance of promoting ebooks to academics to achieve success with them in a university setting.

In addition to this training for academics, we provided practice on ebooks as part of information literacy sessions for new undergraduates and postgraduates. As a result of this hands-on practice, students who might otherwise have been put off ebooks because of the technology involved saw how easy it was to search and find something relevant to their work. (Our 2009 survey showed that “Put off by technology” was the most common reason for not using ebooks; this reaction has mostly disappeared now, apart from with some mature students.) It is interesting to note from successive survey data that students in the Faculty of Technology – computing, maths and engineering – who do not have these hands-on introductions use ebooks (and e-journals) much less frequently, with their written comments indicating that some are not even aware of our ebook provision, e.g. “What are ebooks?” (first year mechanical engineering).

A further factor in our success with ebooks is the large number of distance learners registered at Portsmouth – around 1,000 in criminology and approximately 500 across the rest of the university. Extensive online support – including daily monitoring of student online discussion boards – is provided for these students in order to help them use ebooks. Naturally, the factors which make ebooks ideal for providing academic reading to distance learners, particularly 24/7 availability at any location across the world, also help students



**Figure 1:** Frequency of using ebooks 2014 (%).

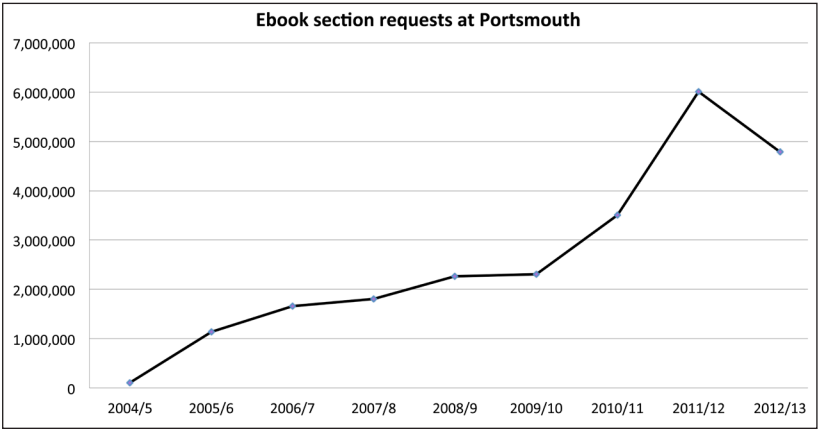
on campus who for one reason or another cannot get to the library. A second year campus-based criminology student provided this comprehensive comment in our 2014 survey of ebook usage (**Figure 1**):

“I use ebooks for different reasons; bad weather/severe winds or pouring rain; I’m running out of time and have to find the info I need quickly; the books I need are already borrowed by someone else; key words and terms/definitions are easy to find and highlighted in yellow; ...or I feel lazy and want to stay in bed all day so I search for what I need online ☺; when I’m home and I can’t take the books with me because I have luggage limits because I’m flying to get home for the holidays.”

For several years our usage statistics showed that titles required by distance learners dominated the top 30, but this domination has dropped off over the last three academic years as campus-based students make even greater use of ebooks, perhaps because of the factors referred to in the next section.

### Driving usage even higher

From 2004/05 to 2008/09 we saw a steady rise each year in use of our ebooks. However, in both academic years 2010/11 and 2011/12 we experienced steep increases. These steep rises coincided with deliberately buying ebooks to meet reservation requests (e.g. a book on the European revolutions of 1848 bought because of multiple reservations just before Christmas 2011 had 17,099 section requests in January 2012) and sustained work on increasing the number of online reading lists available to our students. Over the last three academic years we have been systematically checking reading lists to see whether ebooks are available, then linking them into the list if

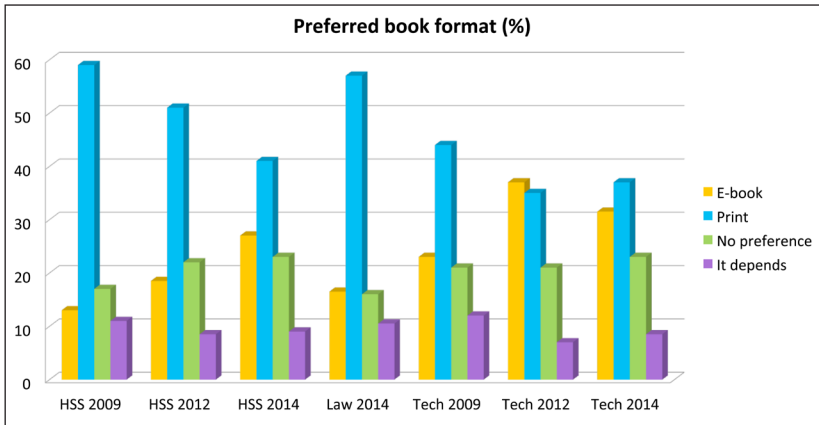


**Figure 2:** Ebook section requests at Portsmouth.

they are and attempting to buy them if not. Usage data for individual ebook titles in this same time period shows that the majority of books at the top of our usage tables are titles which we deliberately bought either for a reading list, or for a reservation: in 2012 for example, 92% of the ebooks in our top 50 via ebrary were ebooks which we had bought outright, with 76% being on reading lists. Our 2014 survey showed that 39% of HSS respondents and 36% of those in Creative and Cultural Industries (CCI) found ebooks via online reading lists whilst, just as reported by Bucknell (2012) and Chelin *et al.* (2009), the most common method of finding ebooks was by searching the library catalogue, at 76% of HSS and 79% of CCI respondents. In contrast, technology students most commonly use Google (46%), with the catalogue coming second at 39%.

**Figure 2** charts the use of our ebooks over the last ten years. Although there was a drop in 2012/13, we believe this is accounted for by a combination of three factors: a smaller number of students in the final year than in the preceding two academic years; a change in the tally of ebook page views as a result of the move to the COUNTER 4 standard of recording ebook use; and a complete restructuring of the curriculum across the university which deliberately tried to reduce some of the assessment burden for students.

From ebooks being an “added extra”, used to grab quick quotes or if the print copy was out on loan according to our 2009 survey, our 2014 results show that ebooks are now mainstream, a key part of student activity, certainly for students in HSS subjects (see **Figure 3**). Evidence from our 2014 survey leading to this conclusion includes: in 2009 40% of male HSS respondents and 42% of female HSS respondents claimed to use ebooks for every assignment, whilst in 2014 these figures have risen to 74% and 70% respectively, with figures for history being 87% of males and 89% of females. One male first-year history



**Figure 3:** Preferred book format (%).

student stated “I can’t get enough of ‘em!”; over 80% of HSS and CCI respondents now say that ebooks are either very useful or quite useful for their course, with the figures reaching 93% of male history respondents and 98% of female history respondents (there were 122 replies from history). In 2009 58% of HSS respondents and 44% of those from technology said that, given a choice, they would prefer a print book, whereas in 2014 this had dropped to 40% for HSS and 37% for technology, with only law out of those subjects surveyed remaining above 50% preferring print. The biggest turnaround can be seen in history, where in 2012 56% of respondents expressed a preference for print books; in 2014 the figure had dropped to 38% for males and 24% for females, with only 10% of first year female history respondents saying they would prefer a print book. A factor which could explain this turnaround in history is that, in response to their subject area having the highest number of students in HSS complaining about not enough copies of books in the National Student Survey in 2011, we worked intensively with history lecturers to ensure that all history reading lists were available in our online reading list system. The online lists include links to as many ebooks as possible, plus scans of chapters from those not available as ebooks, and the lecturers ensured that the weekly seminar readings for core units were items available electronically. (History lecturers had been slower than others to adopt this practice in the past.)

Before concluding this section, we touch on our findings regarding the devices used to access ebooks. Contrary to expectation, PCs or laptops are still the dominant means of access, with 73% of technology students surveyed and 82% of HSS students stating they use those. HSS students aged 24–29, male technology students and those from CCI were most likely to use mobile phones at 17%, 13.5% and 13% respectively, compared to 7.5% for 18–23 year old HSS students and 4% for law students. HSS students aged over 30 were

most likely to use an iPad, followed by HSS students aged 24 – 29 year-old and female technology students at 23%, 21% and 20.5% respectively, compared to 13% for 18 – 23 year-old HSS students and 11% for CCI. Use of other tablets was 5% or below for all groups except HSS students aged 24 – 29 at 10%, HSS students aged 30 and above at 8.5% and male technology students at 6.5%. These results indicate that mobile devices have, so far, played very little part in the success of ebooks at Portsmouth.

### **Addressing the problems created by ebooks**

Despite the success of ebooks at Portsmouth, there have naturally been some problems too. Each of our surveys has highlighted concerns, many of which have been resolved by the time of the next survey. However, there always seem to be some people who simply do not like reading from a screen, although the number who mention this problem drops with each survey: “I don’t really use them because I find them hard to read off the screen” (year two Illustration).

In 2009 students wanted a greater variety of ebooks and expressed frustration with the instability of the browser and login processes for ebooks, especially at home: “Whilst access is convenient, it is not that easy for off campus students – better options would be good!” (final year politics); “I have found that it crashes a lot” (final year history); “I find it a lot harder to access at home and it often takes ages to load up” (year two sociology). The browser issues were addressed by actions taken by our main ebook supplier, ebrary, who made changes which resolved the problems previously experienced. The issue of more ebooks was also partially resolved through ebrary adding thousands more ebooks to their Academic Complete subscription collection; faculty librarians also began buying more individual ebooks to complement our subscription holdings.

In 2012, students were still not satisfied with the number of ebooks available and wanted to download ebooks to any device they owned. The download problem was again solved via the actions of our ebook supplier, who introduced features enabling students to download the whole book for offline reading for a short period of time (typically two weeks); previously, our ebooks had only been accessible whilst the user was connected to the internet. Meanwhile, as publishers made more of their back-lists available as ebooks, faculty librarians were able to address the issue of quantity of ebooks by buying increasing numbers of titles from reading lists as ebooks. As mentioned earlier, we also tried to buy more ebooks matching reservation requests. Tackling reading lists and reservations finally seems to have resolved complaints over quantity, as this issue became insignificant in the 2014 survey.

In 2014 the big issue for students was the problem of not being able to access an ebook because someone else is already reading it, i.e. turnaways: “Don’t understand the online book queuing system? Why do you need to wait for an

online book?” (year one criminology); “When you have to wait in a queue for an ebook it is really irritating!” (year two criminology). From the beginning of 2014 we began addressing the problem of turnaways by generating a monthly report of top turnaways so that faculty librarians could purchase additional licences where possible. We hope that students will see the benefit of this in the next academic year. However, there remains concern over a small number of titles which prove impossible to upgrade.

## Conclusion

Over the last ten years, ebooks have become firmly embedded at the University of Portsmouth, with lecturers and students being equally enthusiastic. Although initially the convenience of any time, any place access to a large variety of ebooks was a key attraction, over the last three years purchasing specific ebooks both for online reading lists and for reservation requests has led to even greater success. Since summer 2013 we have been experimenting with patron driven acquisition of ebooks, and it will be interesting to see what effect this has on our usage statistics.

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