University of Exeter: “Our digital resources have a much wider reach than we ever imagined”

Six years ago the University of Exeter’s library launched a programme to improve student and researcher access to primary digital resources and it has made strategic investments year on year in quality collections. The ripples from this are spreading widely into the academic community, helping library users achieve more and enhancing the library’s reputation.

“We’ve had feedback that shows the impact our collections are having,” says Caroline Gale, the university’s library liaison manager.

“For example, one researcher said that their work would be impossible without a particular set of resources. Another said a different collection has made a big difference to the quality of undergraduate dissertations.”

Cost savings
For the last four years Exeter’s library has used the digital archival collections group purchasing scheme (jisc.ac.uk/digital-archival-collections-group-purchasing) to save money and time when buying digital collections. And in 2021/22 they made their largest ever purchase through the scheme – 13 British Online Archives history collections from Microform (https://microform.digital/boa/series/24/jisc-group-purchasing-scheme) – unlocking a 30% discount on the total cost and making it possible for other institutions who buy the collections to get the same.

The scheme works on a simple principle, leveraging the power of group purchasing to drive down costs for everyone. Participants have saved nearly £1m through the scheme so far. And cost savings aren’t the only benefit.
Easier and faster
“The scheme gives us a shop window where we can see what’s available and it makes procurement quicker and simpler,” explains Caroline. “The discounts are pre-defined, depending on the number of sales the provider makes. And because this is transparent we save time and effort at the start of the process.”

The simplicity helps publishers, too. Institutions buy their collections via the licence subscriptions manager (https://subscriptionssmanager.jisc.ac.uk/) tool and the model licence (https://subscriptionsmanager.jisc.ac.uk/about/jisc-model-licence) takes a standardised approach to procurement across the range of participating publishers and providers. Importantly, purchases are made on a one-off basis, with no recurring platform or hosting fee.

“This is a massive benefit,” explains Caroline. “As our collections have grown these fees could have grown along with them but, instead, we are able to reinvest our money in new content rather than spending it on supporting what we already have.”

And does the community aspect of the group purchasing scheme appeal to the library?

“Oh yes,” says Caroline. “When budgets are squeezed it is hard to invest in primary collections and we’re lucky at Exeter to have had the budget to spend on them. Driving down the costs for the sector brings resources within the reach of more people and that’s part of our remit as an institution and especially as a library.”

Now, Exeter’s library is awash with valuable content. So, to make sure it can be discovered and used, the library has a website that lists it all, including a LibGuide (https://libguides.exeter.ac.uk/primarysources) devoted to primary sources. Academics asked for this guide so valuable nuggets don’t get overlooked, and the resources are being grouped in different ways – for example, by theme, dates, source types etc – to make it easier to spot complementary items.

Library staff also market collections directly with academics, highlighting content that aligns with their teaching and research interests.
Impact
As we saw earlier, the primary collections have been making waves and library staff selected the latest acquisitions to do the same. All are on history topics, but other specialisms will be interested too.

“We've been keen to acquire more from a British context,” says Caroline. “Our new collections include British officers’ diaries from WWI as well as material related to prosecution of The Holocaust and British Government propaganda from 1939.”

“We also wanted more from the viewpoints of the colonised, rather than the colonisers, and now we have Indian newspapers as well as a large South African history collection focusing on apartheid.”

The library surveys users about the impact of its collections and the feedback informs purchasing decisions.

“It’s fascinating to see who has used what, and how. The impact is much wider than we imagined it would be,” says Caroline.

She points to an academic in the Business School who reports how access to historical newspapers provided a dissertation student with rich seams of information to mine when researching the history of gold extraction in Colombia. And she highlights how the availability of rich digital resources enabled students to stay on track with their dissertations during successive COVID-19 lockdowns.

What’s next?
The University of Exeter library took part in the research and development project that preceded the launch of the group purchasing scheme, looking into how Jisc could support members to improve acquisition of digital archival collections (jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/improving-acquisition-of-digital-archival-collections). It has purchased through the scheme frequently and, as the initial four-year group purchasing framework nears its end, we asked Caroline how we could improve it. She said:

“Persuade more publishers to add in even more resources, and even wider resources. As librarians, we always want more content.”

If you’d like to find out more about how we make it easier and cheaper to buy digital archival collections, please visit our group purchasing scheme (jisc.ac.uk/digital-archival-collections-group-purchasing) page, or go to the licence subscriptions manager page (https://subscriptionsmanager.jisc.ac.uk/) to see what’s available.

For more information, please contact your account manager (jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager).