

The N8+ Consortium: how Unsub helped UK university libraries to strengthen their bargaining position in negotiations with Elsevier.

1. The Problem

The biggest financial problem UK university libraries have faced for decades is inflated journal costs, particularly in STEM areas. To give an example, journal costs at the University of Liverpool went from constituting a sixteenth of Liverpool University's total pay and non-pay costs in the 1990s to nearly a half by 2015.

The price increases were not caused by cost pressures on the publishers: this was a period during which costs plummeted with the transition from print distribution to electronic. Rather, they were the result of the fact that universities were in a very weak bargaining position in relation to the publishers. In particular, publishers knew that if a "Big Deal" were to be cancelled in UK universities, library staff would face hostility and anger from researchers who had lost access to essential readings, and would be likely to come under considerable pressure to revoke the cancellation.

2. Fightback from N8+

The N8, a group of eight major research libraries in the North of England, resolved, just before the Covid pandemic began, to fight back against STEM publisher exploitation. The focus of their activity was the renegotiation of the "big deal" with Elsevier, conducted in the UK by Jisc Publishing, and intended to come into effect in 2022. JISC set itself the aim of securing a 15% decrease in overall payment to Elsevier, with the cost of most open access publishing to be included in the overall subscription price, rather than paid for through additional APC payments.

The focus of the eight N8 libraries was on enabling its constituent libraries to cancel the Elsevier big deal without catastrophic consequences – in other words to ensure that researchers and other users would still have a reasonable spread of access to research writings after cancellation, and reasonably timely access to them. If this could be achieved, libraries would have a much stronger bargaining position, because the threat which had given Elsevier such power in negotiations would be removed.

3. The method used

The strategy devised by the N8 libraries had two principal features:

- Use of UNSUB to paint an accurate picture of the *collective* availability of Elsevier articles in the post-cancellation holdings of the eight universities (see 3.1).
- Use of RapidILL to enable rapid delivery of articles between members of the N8+ consortium (see 3.2)

3.1. Use of UNSUB to paint an accurate picture of the *collective* availability of Elsevier articles

At the point when the N8 libraries began to develop their strategy, Unsub was already proving an invaluable tool for individual libraries to use to assess their likely position after a cancellation - in terms of open access availability, post-cancellation access to titles, and re-subscriptions to particular high value titles. Unsub enabled Liverpool University, for example, to show that Liverpool researchers would still have immediate access to about 60% of the articles they needed after an Elsevier cancellation.

*The innovation Unsub supported N8 libraries to make was to treat the holdings of the N8 libraries as a single collection, and work out what the consequent level of article availability would be from the *collective* collection. When the N8 modelled the collective availability of articles among the eight libraries, rather than the 60% level of availability Liverpool would have achieved acting alone, the availability level leapt to 80%. This startling result heightened the profile of the N8 work in the UK and, soon, most other major research libraries wanted to be involved too. This, in turn, meant that availability of articles increased still further, because of the greater number of libraries involved and the wider spread of post-cancellation holdings available in what now became the N8+ Consortium.*

Post-cancellation article availability had thus gone from 60% in a Liverpool-only scenario, to 80% among the eight N8 members, to 95% among the 31 members of N8+. The use of Unsub to show that article availability, even after cancellation, would be so high across the consortium gave N8+ members the confidence to take a robust stance in negotiations. This led directly to the successful outcome described in section 4 below.

3.2. Use of RapidILL to enable rapid delivery of articles between members of the N8+ consortium

On average, N8+ libraries were each, individually, able to provide immediate access to 65% of Elsevier readings in a post-cancellation situation; but in order to achieve the 95% availability figure indicated above, the remaining 30% of articles had to be supplied by other members of the consortium. It was essential to the success of the project that these articles would be supplied quickly: researchers habituated to instant delivery would not accept delivery times of several days.

The mechanism used to achieve this rapid delivery was RapidILL. The original aspiration was to achieve a two hour turnaround time, and this seemed ambitious enough. In fact, in a series of three trials of the delivery mechanism, the average time between an article being requested and its landing in the requestors inbox was 36(?) minutes. Moreover, the average amount of labour input required from the supplying library was only one minute's worth. This latter figure meant that libraries would be able to cope, reasonably easily, with the substantial number of inter library loans that would need to be supplied in the event of a cancellation.

4. Outcome

In summary, Unsub enabled N8+ to demonstrate to its members that, after an Elsevier cancellation, on average:

- 65% of articles would still be immediately available to researchers instantly
- A further 35% would be supplied by other N8+ members in less than forty minutes.

This took away much of the fear of cancellation and enabled library directors to gain the support of both senior managers and researchers for vigorous action, in a way that had simply not been possible before. This, in turn, crucially enhanced the bargaining of JISC Publishing, because they could be confident in telling Elsevier that the largest research libraries in the country would cancel if a good deal were not forthcoming.

It would be wrong to imply that N8+ was the only decisive factor in the negotiations. The campaign by JISC staff was remarkably effective, and a major factor in getting senior staff on side; and JISC also developed a “Core Plus” approach, based on a smaller core of big deal titles, which exerted effective pressure on publishers and helped to boost confidence among libraries. N8+, however, must have been a crucial advantage and helps to explain the remarkable outcome of the negotiations: a 15% reduction in price, with the cost of most open access publishing included in the subscription price, rather than paid for through additional APCs.

Phil Sykes

Formerly University Librarian at the University of Liverpool

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