

Ebooks survey July 2021 on behalf of the Cambridge College Libraries Forum (CCLF)

Executive summary

This online survey was conducted by Cambridge College Librarians from 31 May to 16 July 2021, targeted at students who use reading lists, primarily undergraduates and taught master's students. The aim of the survey was to inform future decisions on ebook spending, post-pandemic. It asked students about their general reading preferences, their use of ebooks in 2020-21 (following periods of library closure and remote study for many) and asked them to anticipate their reading choices in the future.

The survey received a total of 751 responses. The response rate from undergraduate students is statistically significant; we can therefore confidently generalise from these results about the behaviour of the wider undergraduate population. Most colleges and all six schools were represented in the responses. The majority of respondents were studying in Cambridge for most, or the whole, of the academic year, however 64% of respondents had spent at least part of the year studying off-campus.

This report presents visualisations of the quantitative data, followed by an exploration of the themes arising from the qualitative data. In summary:

Quantitative Results

- In a situation where students would have full access to libraries in Cambridge, there is a preference for ebooks when reading a chapter for study purposes (59% of all students). However, students prefer print books for all other scenarios (60% for a textbook consulted throughout the year, 68% when reading a whole book for study purposes, and 78% for recreational reading).
- Students were evenly divided between those who always choose an ebook if it is available (34%) and those who only read an ebook if no print copy is available (35%).
- When asked whether enough of the books on reading lists are available online, 64% replied yes and 36% answered no; we note that not all students use reading lists.
- In terms of the frequency of use in 2020-21, 62% of all students who responded used ebooks either daily or several times a week; 17% used them monthly or never.
- Students were also asked to look forward to a time when everyone can return to campus, and lectures and supervisions can take place in person. 60% of all students anticipate that their use of ebooks will remain the same, 16% believe it will increase, whilst 24% predict that their usage will decrease.

Qualitative Results

- Where students prefer ebooks, this is largely due to their convenience, accessibility, availability, and for the features on the ebook platform.
- Negative views of ebooks mostly centred on difficulties reading from a screen, the lack of availability of certain editions or older material, and technical problems with ebook platforms.
- A number of comments focused on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on ebook use. These relate to their usefulness for remote study or when access to physical libraries was restricted. However, other students commented on the difficulty of using ebooks when they have been working online all day. Many students emphasised the importance of being able to access both print and electronic books to leverage the advantages of both formats.