Ebooks survey July 2021

On behalf of the Cambridge College Libraries Forum (CCLF) by Annie Gleeson, Genny Grim, Amanda Hawkes, Laura Jeffrey, Sarah Preston, Catherine Reid, and John Wagstaff

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Survey background

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a sudden switch to online learning and an unprecedented need to expand remote and online access to electronic resources.

The purpose of this survey was to gather data on students' attitudes towards ebooks, and it is hoped that the results will help to inform future acquisition decisions and strategy.

The survey was carried out between **31st May and 16th July 2021**.

College Librarians were asked to distribute the survey among their student bodies, through whichever channels they felt would be most appropriate.

Most circulated a link to the central Qualtrics survey (the complete list of survey questions can be seen in the appendix). 2 Colleges included the questions in their own library surveys and shared the results, which have been added to the results from the central survey for the purpose of this report.

Survey background

The survey received a total of **751 responses,** 517 of which were from undergraduate students, 64 from taught master's students, and 170 from other postgraduate students.

The survey was aimed primarily at undergraduates and taught master's students, but responses were received from across the student body. None of the questions were compulsory, and not all respondents answered all questions.

The initial questions asked students about their current reading preferences and habits. Towards the end of the survey, we asked those students who would be continuing with their studies next year about their anticipated reading choices in the future.

Throughout the survey, students were given the option to give further comments as free text responses. Several consistent themes emerged from these qualitative responses.

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

Statistical significance

Of the 751 responses, 517 were from undergraduate students, 64 from taught master's students, and 170 from other postgraduate students.

The **response rate from undergraduate students is statistically significant** meaning that we can confidently generalise from these results to the wider undergraduate population.

The undergraduate population of the University of Cambridge was 12,940 in 2020-21.* For a population of this size, over 374 undergraduate responses would be required to be able to generalise with confidence.** Despite none of the survey questions being compulsory or being applicable to all participants, enough responses were received for each question for the results to be statistically significant for undergraduates.

For this reason, in the quantitative data section of this report we have provided the responses from undergraduates for comparison alongside the summarised responses from all students.

* University of Cambridge (2021), *University of Cambridge Information Hub, Student Numbers Summary.* Available at https://www.information-hub.admin.cam.ac.uk/university-profile/student-numbers/student-numbers-summary

** Survey Monkey (2021), *Sample Size Calculator.* Available at https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/sample-sizecalculator/

Survey demographics (College)

Q1 Which College are you a member of?
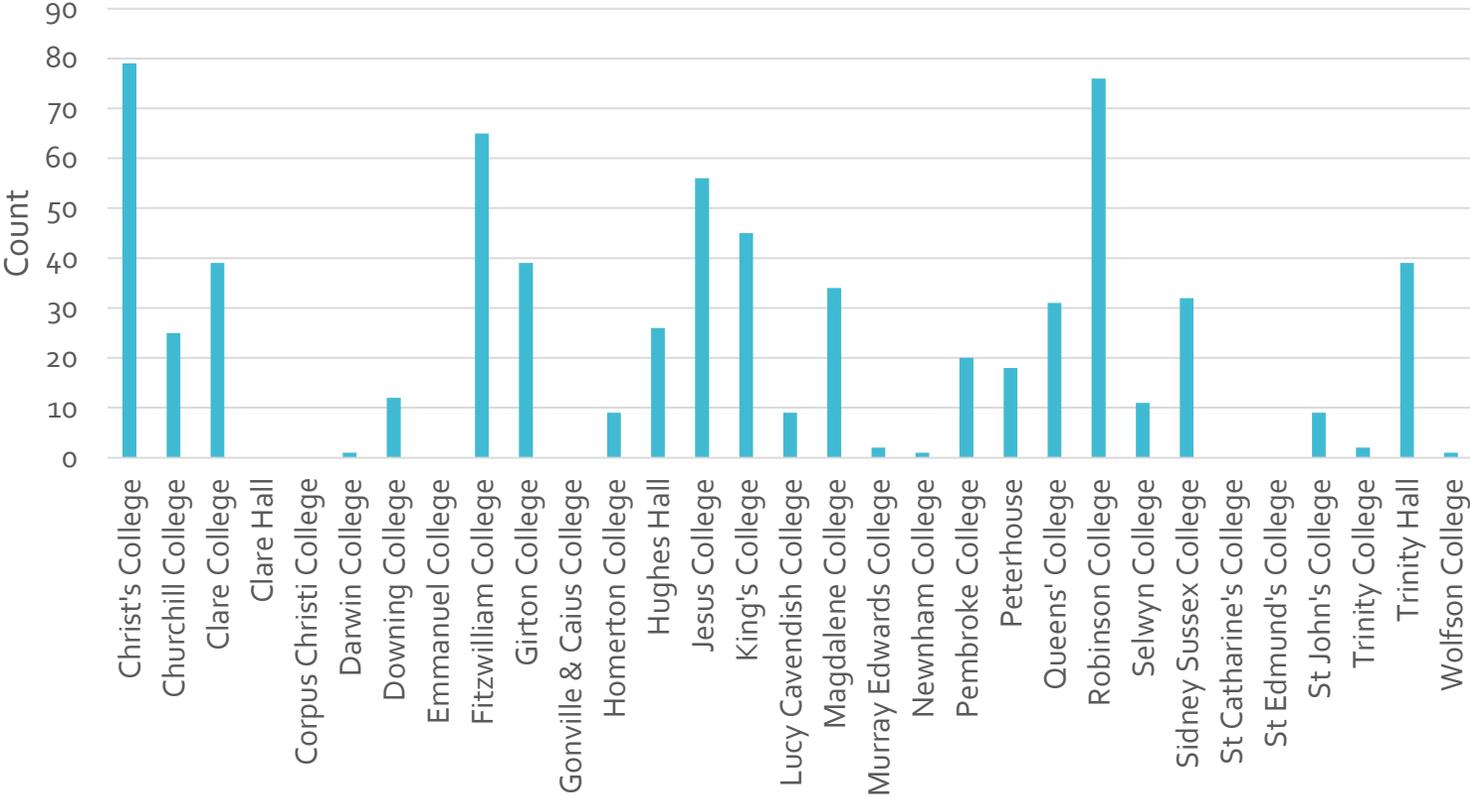


Responses were received from **25 of the 31 Colleges** of the University.

Survey demographics (College)

College	Count	College	Count	College	Count
Christ's College	79	Homerton College	9	Robinson College	76
Churchill College	25	Hughes Hall	26	Selwyn College	11
Clare College	39	Jesus College	56	Sidney Sussex College	32
Clare Hall	0	King's College	45	St Catharine's College	0
Corpus Christi College	0	Lucy Cavendish College	9	St Edmund's College	0
Darwin College	1	Magdalene College	34	St John's College	9
Downing College	12	Murray Edwards College	2	Trinity College	2
Emmanuel College	0	Newnham College	1	Trinity Hall	39
Fitzwilliam College	65	Pembroke College	20	Wolfson College	1
Girton College	39	Peterhouse	18		
Gonville & Caius College	0	Queens' College	31	**Total count**	**681**

Survey demographics (level of study)

Q2 What is your level of study?

- **170 (23%)**
- **64 (8%)**
- **517 (69%)**
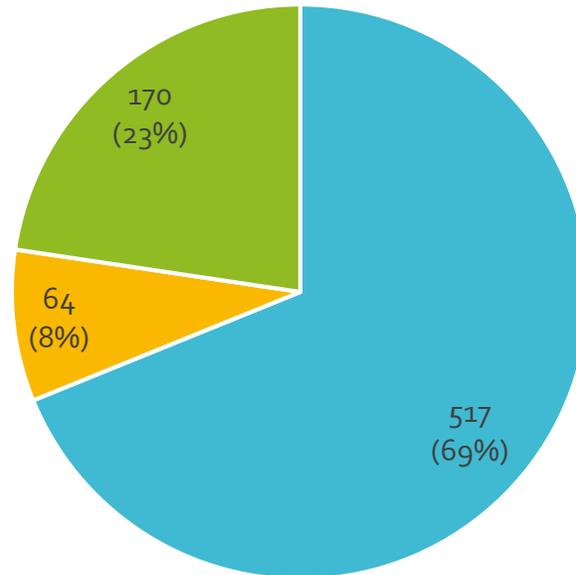
■ Undergraduate   ■ Taught master's
■ Other (please specify)

- The survey was primarily aimed at undergraduates and Taught master's students, who use reading lists.

- The statistically significant response rate from undergraduate students means that we can confidently generalise from their results to the wider undergraduate population.

- Of those in the 'Other' category who gave further detail, 80% were PhD students, with a small number from other courses e.g. Research master's, Clinical Medicine, PGCE

Survey demographics (School)

Q3 Which School are you a member of?
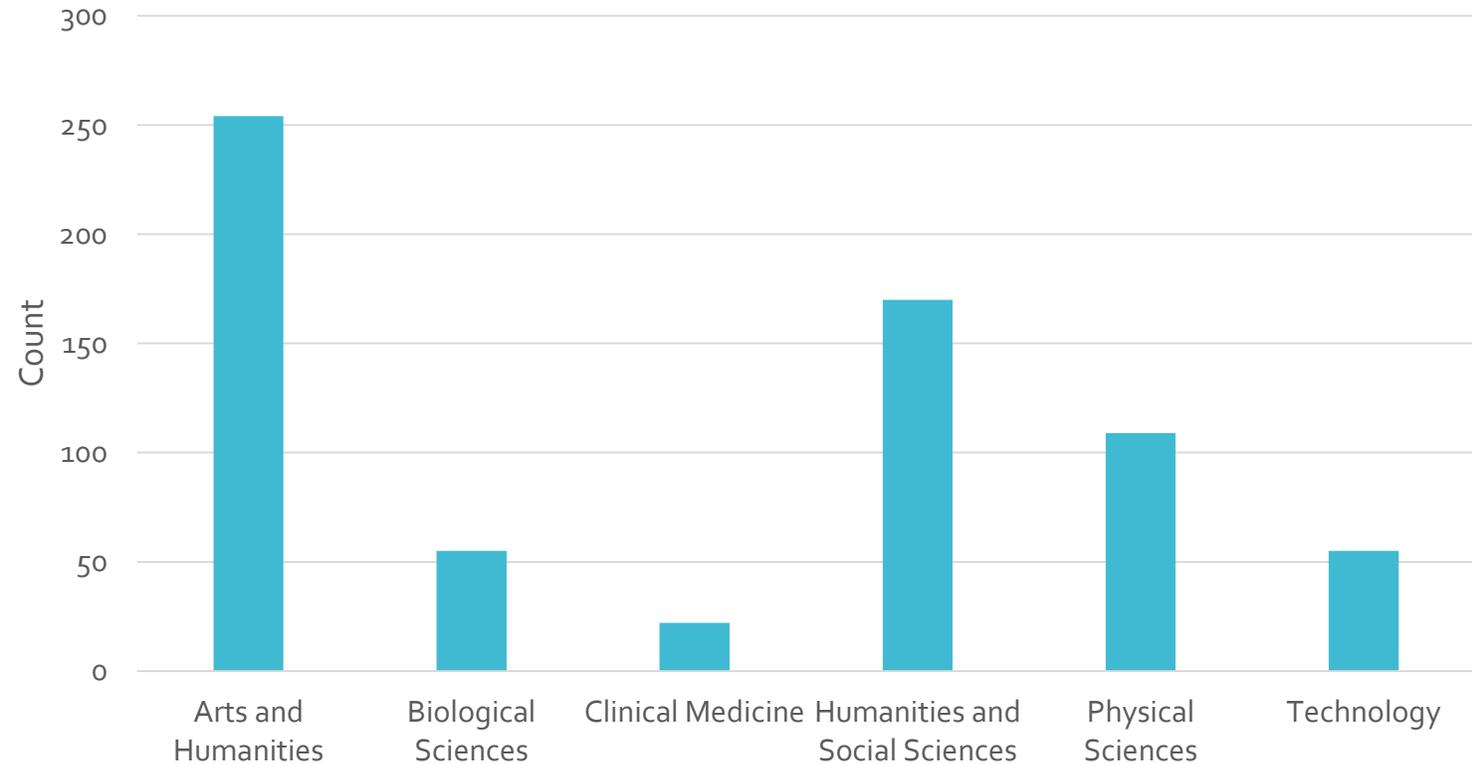
Responses were received from students from all 6 Schools, with a skew towards the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Survey demographics (School)

School	Count	Percentage
Arts and Humanities	254	38%
Biological Sciences	55	8%
Clinical Medicine	22	3%
Humanities and Social Sciences	170	26%
Physical Sciences	109	17%
Technology	55	8%
Total	**665**	**100%**

Survey demographics (on or off campus)

Q4 Where have you been studying during the 2020-21 academic year?

- 42 (6%)
- 79 (11%)
- 262 (36%)
- 340 (47%)
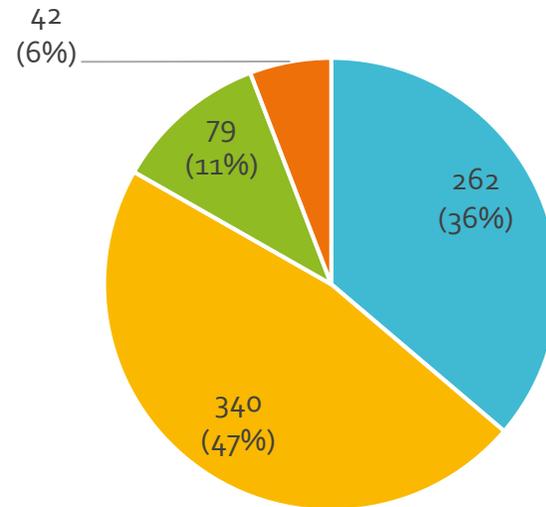
- ■ Studying in Cambridge for the whole academic year
- ■ A combination of the two - majority in Cambridge
- ■ A combination of the two - majority off campus
- ■ Studying off campus for the whole academic year

- Respondents were asked to select the option which best applied to their situation.

- A total of 83% of respondents were studying in Cambridge for either the whole, or the majority, of the academic year.

- A total of 17% had been studying off campus for either the whole, or the majority, of the academic year.

- 64% had spent at least some portion of the academic year studying off campus.

Reading preferences

Q5 In a situation where you have full access to libraries in Cambridge, what are your reading preferences? *(All students)*

Categories (top to bottom):
- For recreational reading
- For a textbook that I need to consult regularly throughout the year
- For reading a whole book or a large part of it for study purposes
- For reading a chapter for study purposes

Legend:
- ■ I do not use either print books or ebooks for this purpose
- ■ I have no preference
- ■ I prefer reading print books to ebooks
- ■ I prefer reading ebooks to print books

X-axis: Percentage % (0 to 100)

Reading preferences

Responses from all students

	I prefer reading ebooks to print books	I prefer reading print books to ebooks	I have no preference	I do not use either ebooks or print books for this purpose	Total
For reading a chapter for study purposes	414 (59%)	198 (28%)	73 (10%)	15 (2%)	700
For reading a whole book or large part of it for study purposes	141 (20%)	474 (68%)	45 (6%)	38 (5%)	698
For a textbook that I need to consult regularly throughout the year	176 (26%)	401 (60%)	47 (7%)	46 (7%)	670
For recreational reading	62 (9%)	541 (78%)	73 (10%)	20 (3%)	696

Reading preferences (undergraduates)

**Responses from undergraduates only**

	I prefer reading ebooks to print books	I prefer reading print books to ebooks	I have no preference	I do not use either ebooks or print books for this purpose	Total
For reading a chapter for study purposes	273 (62%)	115 (26%)	37 (8%)	14 (3%)	439
For reading a whole book or large part of it for study purposes	83 (19%)	298 (68%)	24 (5%)	33 (8%)	438
For a textbook that I need to consult regularly throughout the year	107 (24%)	259 (59%)	35 (8%)	27 (8%)	428
For recreational reading	32 (7%)	348 (80%)	39 (9%)	17 (4%)	436

Reading preferences

- There was a **clear preference for ebooks when reading a chapter of a work for study purposes** (59% of all students surveyed preferred an ebook in this scenario).

- However **for all other scenarios, there was a clear preference for print books** (of all the students surveyed, 68% preferred print when reading a whole book for study purposes, 60% preferred print for a textbook that needed to be consulted throughout the year, and 78% preferred print for recreational reading).

- **Most students had a definite preference** one way or the other for each scenario. Only a small number expressed no preference, or said that they did not use ebooks or printed books for the given scenario.

- The comments relating to this question are included in the qualitative data section of the report.

When do you use ebooks?

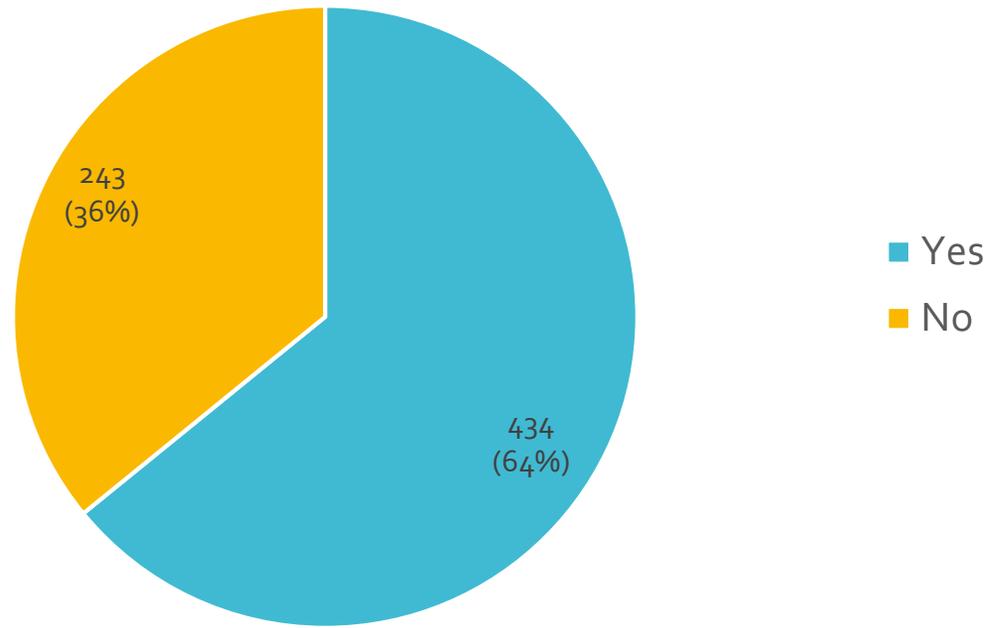## Q6 When do you use ebooks? *(All students)*
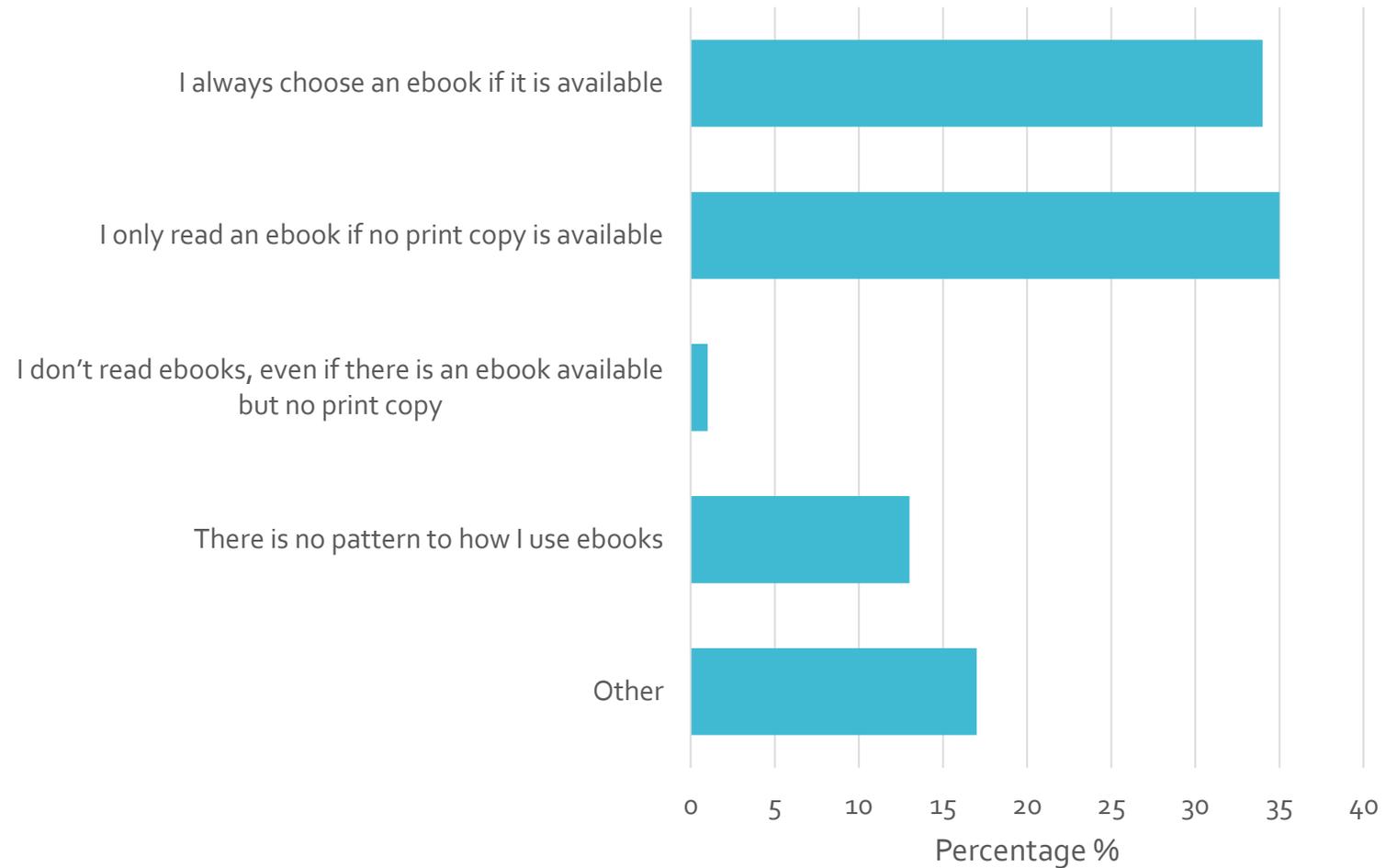
When do you use ebooks?

When do you use ebooks?	Count (all students)	Percentage (all students)	Count (undergrads)	Percentage (undergrads)
I always choose an ebook if it is available	238	34%	144	33%
I only read an ebook if no print copy is available	248	35%	161	37%
I don't read ebooks, even if there is an ebook available but no print copy	7	1%	3	1%
There is no pattern to how I use ebooks	91	13%	56	13%
Other (please specify)	116	17%	71	16%
Total	**700**	**100%**	**435**	**100%**

The comments from those who selected "Other" are included in the qualitative data section of this report.

Reading lists

Q7 Do you feel that enough of the books on your reading lists are available online?

243 (36%)

434 (64%)

■ Yes
■ No

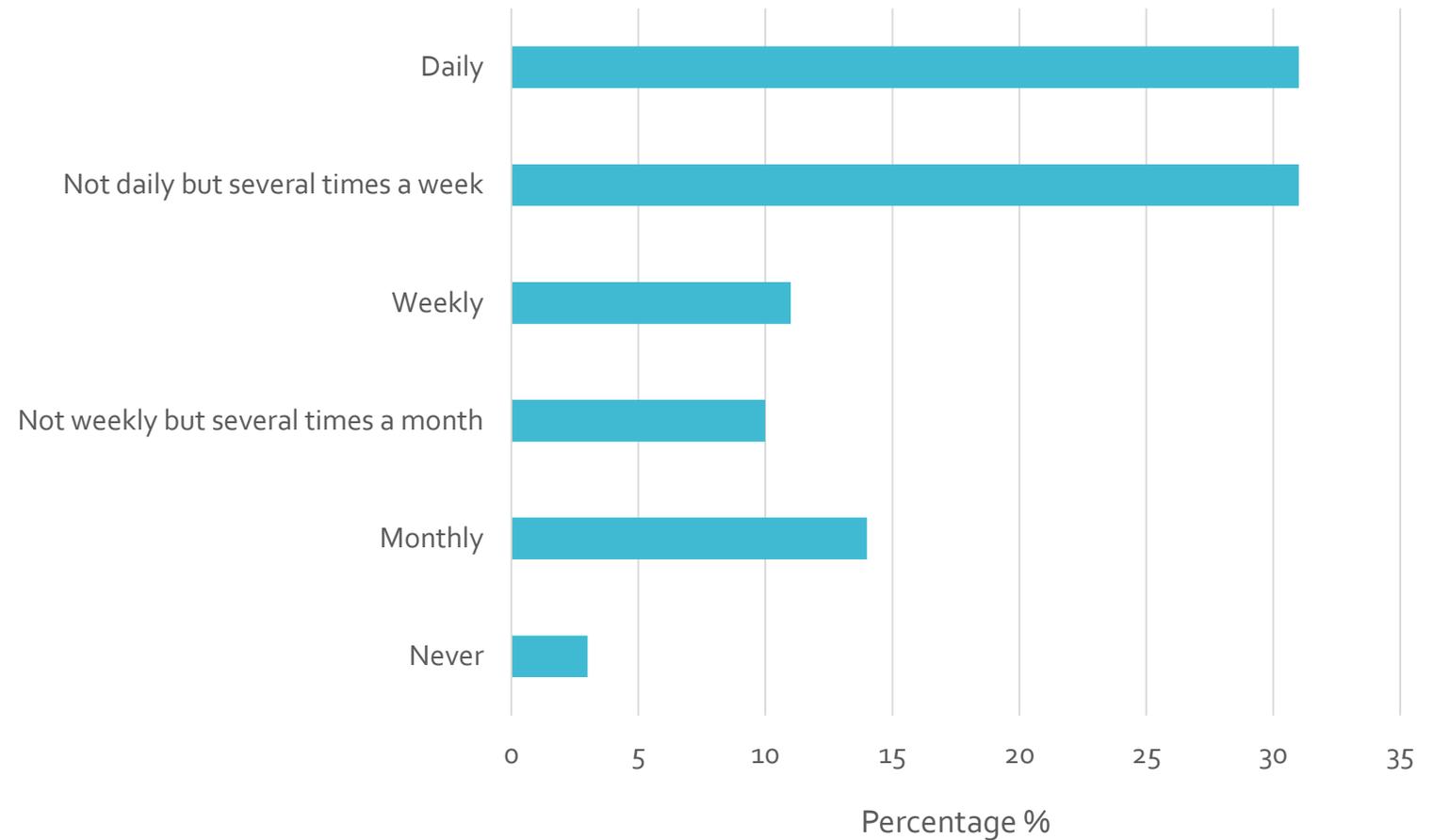We note that not all students use reading lists. This question (like all other questions in the survey) was not compulsory.

When looking at only those responses from undergraduate students, the proportions were very similar - 66% said yes (278 responses), 34% no (142).

Frequency of ebook use in 2020-21

Q8 In the 2020-21 academic year, how often did you use ebooks? *(All students)*

Percentage %

Frequency of ebook use in 2020-21

In the 2020-21 academic year, how frequently did you use ebooks?	Count (all students)	Percentage (all students)	Count (undergrads)	Percentage (undergrads)
Daily	213	31%	149	35%
Not daily but several times a week	214	31%	136	32%
Weekly	80	11%	40	9%
Not weekly but several times a month	69	10%	38	9%
Monthly	94	14%	53	12%
Never	23	3%	14	3%
Total	**693**	**100%**	**430**	**100%**

Anticipated ebook usage post-pandemic

Q9 For those who will be continuing studies in 2021-22: Thinking ahead to the future when all university students are able to return to campus, and lectures and supervisions can take place in person, do you think your use of ebooks will increase, stay the
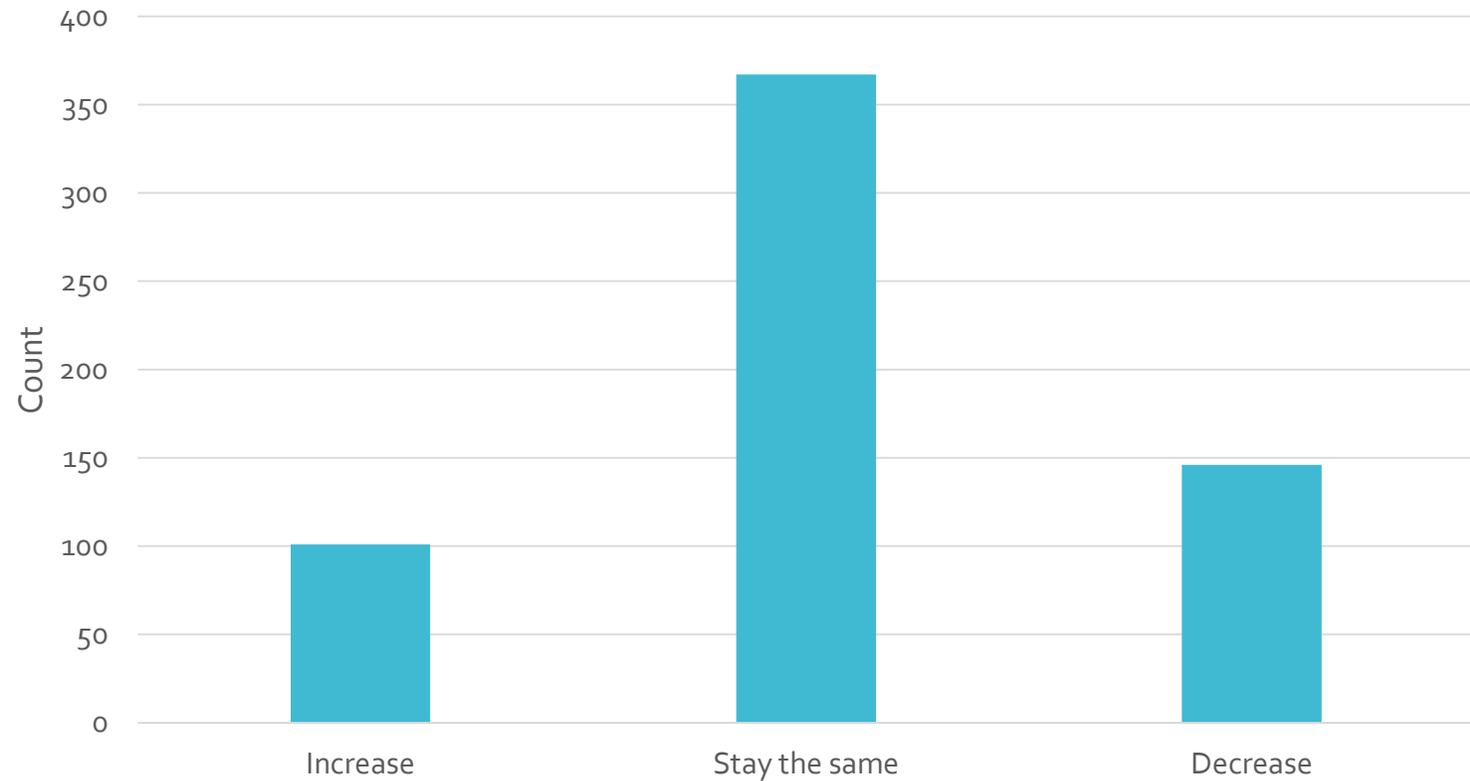
Anticipated ebook usage post-pandemic

Thinking ahead to the future […] do you think your use of ebooks will…	Count (all students)	Percentage (all students)	Count (undergrads)	Percentage (undergrads)
Increase	101	16%	51	13%
Stay the same	367	60%	237	63%
Decrease	146	24%	91	24%
Total	**614**	**100%**	**379**	**100%**

Qualitative data

Throughout the survey, participants had the opportunity to give further comments as free text. A number of common themes arose from these, which will be examined in the following section.

Unsurprisingly, the free text comments ranged from the very positive to the very negative.

Where students preferred ebooks, this was largely due to their convenience, accessibility, and for the features available on the ebook platform.

Negative views of ebooks mostly centred on difficulties reading from a screen, and technical problems with ebook platforms.

A number of comments focused on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students' ebook use (particularly remote study and restrictions on access to physical libraries).

Convenience

The convenience of having instant access to ebooks, from any location, and without having to carry heavy books around were major advantages for many students:

"Being at [College outside the town centre] can be inconvenient to cycle into town to get library books. Also ebooks are available immediately and at any time of day." (Q5)

"Reading ebooks is far more convenient and efficient than print books - it makes my life as a student far easier" (Q5)

"Sometimes carrying a heavy book is just a massive inconvenience." (Q6)

"They take up less space, and are accessible from anywhere." (Q6)

"I prefer ebooks for quick access and text-searching when I'm looking for something specific." (Q6)

Convenience

In many cases, the convenience of ebooks outweighed a general preference for print. This was particularly the case if the student only needed to read a small section of the book or look up a reference.

"I find ebooks indispensable for quickly consulting secondary sources; I tend to check out physical materials if I know a book will be key for my research. I always prefer print books for primary texts (e.g., novels, poems)." (Q5)

"I prefer print books, but if a print book is not available or is fully booked I absolutely will use and love the access to ebooks. The less frequently I need to access the textbook, the more convenient ebooks are, and the more regularly I need to consult it, the more I value paper books" (Q5)

"I definitely prefer printed materials, but have enjoyed the ease and flexibility of accessing ebooks this year, especially as it means not having to worry about recalls or returning materials." (Q5)

"I'll use an ebook if it's more convenient than going to the library, or I only need to consult it briefly." (Q6)

Accessibility

A number of students highlighted that ebooks were easier for them to use, and were an effective accommodation for their disability/disabilities:

"Ebooks offer a great additional infrastructure for those who have special needs and access requirements and it really made my life much easier!" (Q10)

"Ebooks are most helpful for the software that helps with my SpLD, for print books with no ebook available I usually have to scan the book so I can use it with the software that reads the words aloud (Read and twitter)" (Q5)

"While I enjoy print books, carrying them and having them to hand etc. can prove problematic to me, particularly because I have a disability which makes lifting and handling, and mobility an issue. In this context, e-books are FAR more accessible to be and therefore preferable because they enable me to access the texts I need, when I need them, pretty much from anywhere, so this is far more abling and easy for me." (Q5)

Accessibility

However, other students had the opposite comment to make, finding print more accessible:

"Ebooks are difficult for people like me who can't read on screens for long periods of time." (Q10)

A small number of comments from disabled readers suggested that they are not aware that alternative formats may be obtainable for them if they cannot use the versions currently available via iDiscover. In any case, increasing the accessibility of our ebook offering would be better practice in terms of inclusive design:

"I am a disabled student and sometimes struggle to read. Having more ebooks that my software can read aloud would be really useful". (Q7)

Some students would have preferred to read print, but barriers to accessing physical library services drove them to use ebooks instead:

"I much prefer to read printed books, however I also have severe social anxiety that makes getting to the library difficult, so I end up mostly using ebooks." (Q5)

Useful features

Many students mentioned the ability to search within an ebook, highlight key passages, and download the PDF as being particularly useful.

"I find it easier to jump back and forth, or search for key terms, with ebooks" (Q5)

"In particular, if the website the ebook can be viewed on copies the highlighted bits of the text and enables you to enter your email address to get the highlighted bits sent to you (cf. criminal law online textbook interface); I thought this was really helpful as it doesn't force us students to write off the book but rather to recapitulate the content once we copy things into a word document and start structuring them for our purposes; so great!!!" (Q5)

"I can usually download chapters as pdfs and upload it into mendeley so I can annotate directly on the text" (Q5)

"If I am reading for my research I prefer E-Books for easy copying across of reference material/quotes." (Q6)

"In general I prefer printed reading books, but it takes me much longer to read. Using ebooks I can highlight as I go along and smash it out much faster - so I find ebooks much more efficient!" (Q5)

Issues with ebook platforms

Many students described their difficulties using some of the online platforms, particularly when the book cannot be downloaded and must be read within a web viewer. Some students mentioned specific ebook platforms that they liked or disliked.

"This can really vary based on what type of ebook it is. Downloadable PDFs are the best because they are searchable (or most of them are), but lots of platforms that host ebooks only let you read online, which means that you can't navigate through them very quickly at all (especially if internet is slow, since they load page by page and this can take forever). It's much easier to flick through a print book to find what you need." (Q5)

"Various technical issues have emerged whilst using ebooks making the experience highly frustrating. Nothing beats paper" (Q5)

"It's easier to read the printed book as the ebook often times out and logs me out when I'm taking a long time to read something" (Q5)

"It depends on the format of the ebook - some are almost impossible to navigate, some are really helpful, De Gruyter pdfs are very easy for example" (Q5)

Issues with ebook platforms

"*ProQuest is a particularly annoying e-book website. It is one of very few such websites that interacts badly with ad- and cookie blockers. It also makes downloading PDFs for printing difficult. Alternative e-book websites should be used wherever possible.*" (Q10)

"*If an ebook requires bluefire or adobe reader I will avoid it at all costs.*" (Q6)

"*I read an ebook if I can put it on my kindle, otherwise I read a print book or don't read it.*" (Q6)

Another issue was the inability to access legal deposit ebooks offsite or to access ebooks from abroad:

"*I was often disappointed to see that the university holds a digital copy of a book but that it is only accessible from within the UL. If I am not even allowed to be in Cambridge or in the library, a digital copy only accessible from one specific place is of very little use.*" (Q10)

"*international students were extremely handicapped this year versus their in country classmates. We did not have access to the same books because of the legal hold on the books and ip address restrictions. It led us to making lower grades and having to use local newspaper articles instead of sources.*" (Q10)

Difficulties reading from a screen

When reading large chunks, there was a stronger preference for print. A variety of problems relating to reading on a screen were mentioned, including eye strain, monitor size, difficulty in taking in information, distractions etc.

"I find it much harder to take in information from a screen" (Q5)

"Reading long books on screen is extremely exhausting and it is difficult to avoid eye strain for me. I also find it easier to focus on a print book. Apart from that, the way many ebook platforms function (clunky, not optimised for long reading) makes it even less pleasant to read online." (Q5)

"Print books can be particularly useful in law, because there are lots of footnotes. In Ebooks you have to click on the footnote and it takes you to the end of the chapter, but in print editions, it is easily viewable at the bottom of the page." (Q5)

"Reading print books is easier on the eyes and a welcome break after lectures online, but online books are more efficient space wise and can be accessed much quicker and easier. A combination of the two is ideal, especially if studying from home." (Q5)

"Print books are better because it is possible to read a book and make notes simultaneously with only one computer screen" (Q5)

Ebook availability

It was clear from the comments that readers were happy where lecturers could ensure that the bulk of a reading list was available online, or scans made available (particularly while they were not able to use libraries in the normal way). However there were a small number of complaints about lack of availability:

"Ebooks have been extremely useful during lockdown. I would not have been able to work without ebooks. Most of my sources have not come from the University of Cambridge library due to the lack of ebooks available at the library in my field." (Q5)

"often books that I've needed are not available on idiscover or in my college library" (Q5)

"Some of them are but only in a few copies, for example only 5 people can access it at a time, which was problematic during online exams" (Q7)

"I think more awareness should be made about the existence of ebooks for various subjects, as I only found out quite late by chance that a book I needed could be found online." (Q10)

Ebook availability

Availability varied very much depending on the subject area, and varied between particular reading lists even within the same department:

"The online availability of books on my reading list has been generally very good, although some modules / papers were more consistent than others in having online versions accessible". (Q7)

English literature students could not always get the specified edition (or sometimes any) of a literary text, or could not always get the relevant works of criticism. Many standard works for English, History, and Politics, published more than 30 years ago, are not available.

Quite a number of people said they obtained their material from sources other than the University Library, and admitted not all were legal under UK copyright.

While undergraduate and taught master's students were the main target audience for this survey, those in teaching roles were also affected:

"Some older textbooks I like to use for teaching are not always available online, which has been a challenge … as many of my students have been away from campus". (Q7)

Print availability

35% of students responded to Q6 (When do you use ebooks?) by saying that they would only use an ebook if a print copy were not available.

Some expanded on this in their comments:

"I use an ebook if the book is not available at my college library, rather than visit the faculty. I also used ebooks while learning from home." (Q6)

"I choose an online resource if a print copy is not available in my college library, and I only need to read a small section of it." (Q6)

"Not enough books on my reading list are available in print". (Q7)

COVID-19 pandemic

For some students the aforementioned problems absorbing information from a screen had been exacerbated during the pandemic due to the extra time spent online during a working day.

"Because of the pandemic, where so much of life is online, my preference is currently always for print books, to avoid eye-strain." (Q5)

"Especially this year when the time I spend on my laptop has increased so drastically, I try to read print books whenever possible" (Q5)

The restrictions on accessing physical library services has led to some students using ebooks to a greater extent than they would otherwise have done.

"ebooks are often more convenient than booking spots for browsing/reading at the moment." (Q6)

"Since I have not been in Cambridge, I have had no choice but to read ebooks despite printed copies being available in university libraries." (Q6)

COVID-19 pandemic

There was concern raised that some of the material made available electronically was only on a temporary basis, during the pandemic, and would be lost at the end of the year.

"Most of my books are available online now but that is largely a Covid adjustment. They should be available online all of the time as this is more accessible". (Q7)

"In a normal year, I don't think that most of my reading would have been as easily available online". (Q7)

COVID-19 pandemic

A number of students made a point to write a thank you comment to librarians, lecturers and supervisors for their efforts during the pandemic:

"The Faculty of Law has done a commendable job this year … It has been deeply appreciated by students". (Q7)

"Divinity librarians incredibly helpful with this. Thank you!" (Q7)

"I was grateful that most course directors and supervisors made an effort to populate their reading lists with online material". (Q7)

"Thank you so much for your hard work this year and for making so many more texts available online! It has made a very difficult year much easier. Thank you so much." (Q10)

Importance of access to both formats

Many students emphasised the importance of being able to access both print and electronic books, to leverage the advantages of both formats.

"Printed books are easier to read but not easier to take notes from" (Q5)

"I will read an e-book if I need it straight away, but will request a hard copy for books I will be spending more time on." (Q6)

"To have Both is the best option" (Q5)

"depends on ease of access of the book It depends on the length of the chapter, whether I'm going to annotate it, etc." (Q5)

"I like to use a variety of ebooks and print books. I use print books when I want a break from a screen or when I want to read a full book or passages from lots of chapters. Ebooks are extremely convenient for close deadlines and quick consults of specific sections though, and are really great when there are no print copies available as it means everyone on the course isn't competing for one or two print copies." (Q10)

Appendix: Survey construct

Q1 Which College are you a member of?

[dropdown list of Colleges]

Q2 What is your level of study?

[Undergraduate / Taught master's / Other (please specify)]

Q3 Which school are you a member of?

[Arts & Humanities / Biological Sciences / Clinical Medicine / Humanities & Social Sciences / Physical Sciences / Technology]

Q4 Where have you been studying during the 2020-21 academic year? (Please select the option which best applies)

[Studying in Cambridge for the whole academic year / Studying off campus for the whole academic year / A combination of the two – mostly in Cambridge / A combination of the two – mostly off campus]

Appendix: Survey construct

Q5 In a situation where you have full access to libraries in Cambridge, what are your reading preferences: (a) for reading a chapter for study purposes, (b) for reading a whole book or a large part of it for study purposes, (c) for a textbook that I need to consult regularly throughout the year, (d) for recreational reading?

[I prefer reading ebooks to print books / I prefer reading print books to ebooks / I have no preference / I do not use either ebooks or print books for this purpose]

[Space for comments]

Q6 When do you use ebooks?

[I always choose an ebook if it is available / I only read an ebook if no print copy is available / I don't read ebooks, even if there is an ebook available but no print book / There is no pattern to how I use ebooks / Other (space for comments)]

Appendix: Survey construct

Q7 Do you feel that enough of the books on your reading list are available online?

[Yes / No] [Space for comments]

Q8 In the 2020-21 academic year, how often did you use ebooks?

[Daily / Not daily but several times a week / Weekly / Not weekly but several times a month / Monthly / Never]

Q9 For those who will be continuing studies in 2021-22: thinking ahead to the future when all university students are able to return to campus, and lectures and supervisions can take place in person, do you think your use of ebooks will…

[Increase / Stay the same / Decrease]

Q10 Finally, do you have any further comments about ebooks?

[Space for comments]