Development of Resource Sharing Services at Helsinki University Library

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Abstract:

Background:

In 2019 the ILL services at Helsinki University Library were spread across many systems: web forms, a ticket management system, an in-house ILL software and Voyager. The systems were not communicating with each other. Information was copied manually between them. Patrons could not see interlibrary loans in the library system. Invoices were created manually.

Helsinki University Library migrated from Voyager to Ex Libris Alma in 2020. Testing Alma resource sharing started the same year. The aim was to find out if we could replace the various ILL components with Alma. Initial results were promising, and we started a development project to implement Alma's resource sharing functions in 2021.

Implementation:

We set up a resource sharing library in Alma that serves all our libraries on different campuses. Alma user records for libraries as well as records from in-house ILL system were converted into resource sharing partner records using Alma API.

ILL request forms were replaced with two new forms. The Primo resource sharing form is used for borrowing requests. For lending requests, we created a form for libraries. The form uses Alma API to send lending requests directly to Alma.

Bilingual resource sharing letters (Finnish and English) were configured for email communication in Alma. Alma Analytics is used for reporting and collecting statistics. We are working to create invoices automatically based on the reports from Alma analytics.

Results:

Patrons can now make ILL requests directly from the discovery system and manage their requests by logging in. For ILL staff there is less of copying information between systems. In conclusion we succeeded in bringing the entire ILL workflow under one system, Alma.

Future:

Future prospects include moving from email protocol to ISO protocol, user-oriented requests from the National Repository Library, linking document delivery services to Alma resource sharing.

Keywords: Development projects, Resource sharing, Integrated library systems

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Background

Helsinki University Library is the largest university library in Finland. The library provides services to an international academic community of over 50 000 students and staff on four campuses and online. The library services are also open to any member of the general public.

Regarding interlibrary loans Helsinki University Library is the biggest borrower and the second biggest lender in Finland (the biggest lender by far is the National Repository Library). The ILL team at Helsinki University Library handles about 3000 to 4000 orders per year.

In 2019 a combination of various systems was used for interlibrary lending services at Helsinki University Library. Web forms were used to collect interlibrary loan requests from both patrons and other libraries. The main web form was on the library home page. In addition, there were several tailored web forms spread across the library's online services. All the web forms functioned in the same manner, sending the requests via email to a ticket management system (Efecte).

An in-house ILL system was used to manage the requests. This system also produced reports for invoicing.

For book loans the borrowing libraries existed as patron records in the library system (Voyager and later Alma). Otherwise, the library system was not involved in the ILL services.

All in all, the ILL services were spread across many systems. The main problem with this was that the different systems were not communicating with each other. The web forms were not connected to the ILL system. Instead, the requests had to be copied manually from the ticket management systems to the in-house ILL system. The ILL system did not communicate with the library system so patrons could not see their interlibrary loans in their user info. Invoices were created manually in SAP based on the reports from the ILL system.

Helsinki University Library migrated from Voyager to Ex Libris Alma in 2020. This provided an opportunity to reconsider how the library provides the ILL services. We did research in Alma resource sharing already before the migration, in

2019. However, we decided to not switch to Alma resource sharing straight away. We wanted to give more time for testing and planning as the resource sharing system is quite complicated.

Initial tests with Alma resource sharing using the ISO protocol were started after the migration, in 2020, with a group of Finnish Alma libraries. The aim was to find out if we could replace all or some of the various systems we were using for ILL with Alma's resource sharing capabilities. Since the initial test results were promising we decided to start using Alma's resource sharing functions for ILL in 2021.

Implementation

We formed a project team that consisted of five specialists: a project manager, an ILL services developer, an ILL customer service operator, a software developer and a communication specialist. The main task of the project was to clarify our ILL process and update the systems. The project was scheduled from March to September 2021 and the go live day was September 7th.

Alma resource sharing is based around partner records with a defined protocol for communicating with each partner. Communication includes sending borrowing requests, requesting renewals, answers to lending requests etc.

Borrowing and lending requests have separate workflows. Other elements include temporary items and bibliographic records for borrowed material and a resource sharing library that delivers material to and requests material from other libraries.

We chose to set up one resource sharing library that serves all the libraries on different campuses. Physically the ILL services are located at the Main Library and all shipments are handled there by the ILL team.

The information needed to create the partner records was found in both the Alma user records and the in-house ILL system. There was some overlap but both systems held unique records. We decided to import the partner information from the Alma user records first and then add the remaining unique records from the in-house system.

In both cases we used the same method. We exported the data of the existing records and mapped that data with the Alma partner record fields. We then imported the data to create the partner records using the Alma API. The result was about 560 partner records for resource sharing.

Request forms for ILL

Previously we used the same web form to collect ILL requests both from our patrons and other libraries. In the Alma resource sharing model the borrowing and lending sides of resource sharing are two separate workflows. We replaced the existing ILL request forms with two new forms - one for borrowing and one for lending. We use Primo VE as our discovery service. Primo includes a resource sharing form for borrowing request. The customization options are somewhat limited, but we found the Primo resource sharing form adequate for our purposes.

No form is provided for collecting lending requests from other libraries. However, it is possible to import lending requests via Alma API. We created our own form that uses Alma APIs to send the lending requests directly to Alma. In addition to this general lending request form we created tailored versions of this form for contractual customers.

Communication and resource sharing letters

Although we tested the ISO protocol, we implemented Alma resource sharing using the email protocol. This is because Finnish interlibrary lending relies heavily on email and there weren't any other libraries using the ISO protocol. There's also no national interlibrary lending system in Finland.

We went over all Alma's resource sharing email letters and checked which fields should be included in each letter. We also revised the texts in the letters and made the letters bilingual (in Finnish and English).

Regarding communication to users, we focused on revising the instructions on the library web site, redirecting the users from the old web form to the new service and making the service easy to discover and use. The idea was to design the service so that it guides the user in the process.

Results from the patron's perspective

Looking from the patron's perspective, the ILL service is now easier to find. There's a link to the ILL request form on the front page of Helka, the library database. Patrons also see the link to the resource sharing request form in Helka when they find material that's not available in Helka. In these cases, the bibliographic reference is automatically copied to the ILL request form. The users can also automatically copy the bibliographic information to the form using the DOI or PubMed id.

Patrons can now find their interlibrary loans and requests in the same place as their local loans and requests when they log in to their Helka account. They can see what the status of each request is and request renewal for interlibrary loans. They can also cancel requests that have not yet been processed by the ILL staff.

Results from the staff perspective

The ILL service team was also part of the planning and implementation of the new resource sharing system. Training was done during summer 2021. After going live we have continued to hold regular meetings with the ILL team together with the library customer service. This has helped in developing the workflows further and in solving practical issues.

From the staff perspective there's now considerably less manual copying as we receive the requests directly to the list of borrowing and lending requests. We can also send the request emails as well as queries to patrons directly from Alma. Of course, we still use external systems such as Subito and NLM Docline that do not accept email requests and for which Alma integration is not available at the moment.

Analytics is used for reporting and collecting usage statistics. The library is working on a solution to create invoices automatically in SAP based on the reports from Alma analytics or using Alma API.

All in all, our development project was successful in replacing the various systems our ILL services were built around with a more integrated system.

Interlibrary loan services during COVID-19

All the while for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic Helsinki University Library has tried its best to secure access to print material for the users as well as provide access to electronic materials.

At worse times the library premises had to be closed and most of the staff was working remotely. Even during those periods University of Helsinki students and staff were able to pick up reserved printed material from the library.

When the epidemic situation was better the library could open its doors to the general public again. Limitations such as reduced study spaces, limited access to collections and a recommendation to wear a face mask were used to ensure safety.

Helsinki University library provided interlibrary lending services throughout the pandemic, but we informed our users that there may be limitations or delays due to lockdowns and closed libraries in different countries.

Looking at the number of interlibrary loans and articles delivered during the pandemic there's a 21% decrease in lending and a 9% decrease in borrowing in 2020 compared to 2019. However, this is in line with the general decreasing trend for several years. In fact, the percentual decrease is nearly the same as in the previous year (20% in lending and 8% in borrowing in 2019 compared to 2018). So, we cannot directly draw the conclusion that the decrease in 2020 was caused by the pandemic.

In 2021 the numbers kept decreasing. However, the percentual decrease in 2021 was considerably smaller than in the previous years: 5% in lending and 6% in borrowing. A closer look revealed that the decrease in the total number was caused only by the decrease in articles ordered and delivered. The number of book loans had in fact gone up on both the lending and borrowing services. This was unusual because the decreasing trend in previous years has affected both book loans and articles.

We suspect that the increase in book loans on the borrowing side could be partly because in recent years Helsinki University Library has been sending large amount of print material to the National Repository Library. It is interesting to see if this trend continues and further study is required as to what has caused it.

Future prospects

In the future we are interested in moving from the email protocol in resource sharing to the ISO protocol whenever possible. The National Repository Library currently has a project with the aim of providing a system for user-oriented requests from their collection. We are especially interested in linking Alma resource sharing to this coming system. This system could also form the basis for a national ILL system in Finland. Other plans include linking document delivery services such as CCC Get It Now and Article Galaxy to Alma resource sharing.

However, as open access progresses we believe that interlibrary lending services in the future will focus more on the material that's difficult to obtain, such as older non-digitized materials.