Alma – A Cataloguer's Experience

Siân Thomas, National Library of Wales, Amy Staniforth, Aberystwyth University, & Jane Daniels, Cardiff Metropolitan University

This article presents the experiences of 3 members of the WHELF http://whelf.ac.uk/ Shared LMS Consortium who implemented ExLibris' Alma & Primo products during 2015/16.

Siân Thomas
Systems Manager
National Library of Wales

While NLW's collections cover a broad range of materials, including archives, photographs, film, sound recordings, maps and many more, print materials still form the vast majority of our holdings, particularly due to our status as a legal deposit library. Over 2,000 printed items arrive here each week (121,186 items in total were received for 2015/16). Journals, which comprise under half the total, are received shelf-ready, requiring little intervention other than for new titles. The books however are individually processed by staff, and with such large volumes it is vital that the LMS allows us to implement efficient and reliable workflows.

The majority of books are processed by a team of three following an end-to-end workflow; staff search for a record via Z39.50 (usually from the British Library), and having found a suitable match they import the record, create holdings and item records, apply labels and then shelve the books in batch. This workflow was easily implemented in Alma with very little change involved for the staff.

A proportion of each weekly delivery, those books from Welsh imprints or with titles beginning I-O or W-Z, are filtered out for cataloguing from scratch by more senior staff. The high-quality records that are created for these items are our contribution to the Legal Deposit Libraries Shared Cataloguing Programme to create the British National Bibliography http://www.bl.uk/bibliographic/natbib.html and in 2015/16, we exported 4,228 records including 1,931 authorities to the British Library. Previously we had a bespoke script which would collect locally-saved records from various staff PCs, combine them into a file, and send the file via FTP (a frequently error-strewn process requiring significant ICT input). With Alma we add a simple textual flag in a local field, allowing the records to be collected by a saved search set, which in turn is published via a saved publishing profile. A process which used to take half a day can now be completed in minutes, a significant time saving allowing staff to concentrate on meeting record creation targets.

Another significant change since our implementation of Alma is that we have decided not to create and maintain local authority records. This has had a particular impact on our non-print cataloguers, who were used to undertaking quite detailed internal authority work, but this effort can now be channelled into increasing our contributions to NACO, ensuring greater benefit. The previous authority data has all been retained for future re-use. We have some work to do still in analysing the results of the automated matching of headings and authorities, but staff are very excited about the possibilities offered.
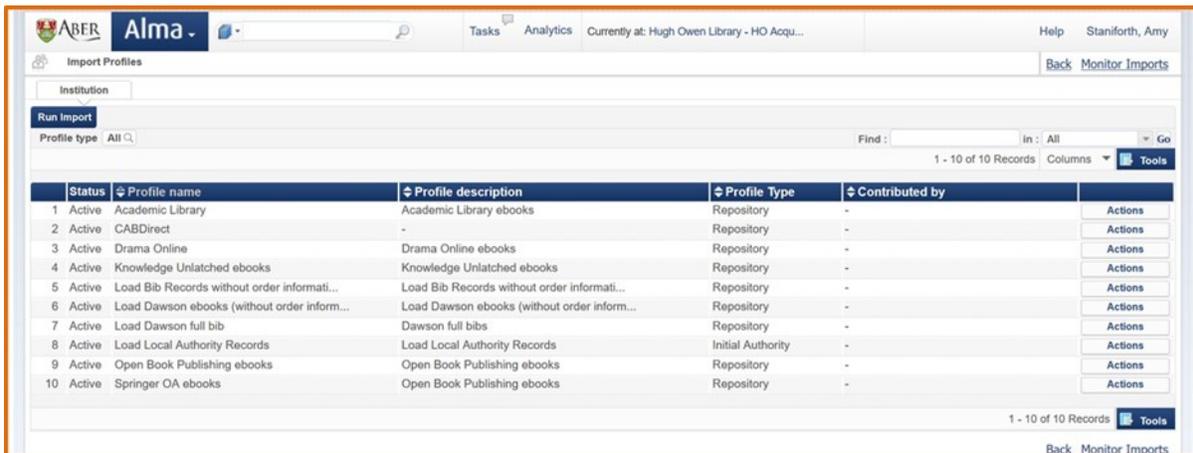
As a systems librarian, my personal favourite aspect of Alma is the power it provides to manipulate and correct data. Having over the years worked on migration of several legacy datasets, and on trying to mitigate the discovery problems often inherent in legacy data, I was used to needing to write detailed mapping documents to be scripted by developers, and endless testing of the data outputs. On Alma, utilising sets, indication and normalisation rules and running jobs, I can personally implement data changes and corrections that would have taken weeks previously. Already we have been able to resolve long-standing issues using these tools, and I look forward to being able to systematically improve both the quality and discoverability of all our records in the future.

Amy Staniforth
Institutional Repository & Metadata Team Leader
Information Services, Aberystwyth

We went live with Alma in July 2015 and although it has been an up and down experience it has proved to be a useful learning curve for us in the metadata team. Two areas, in particular, that have changed for us are bibliographic record Import Profiles and e-resources.

In Voyager our team worked in a bit of a bubble. We retrieved individual records, did what we had to and then saved them, and if they merged strangely or not at all we didn't worry much. Creating and using import profiles ourselves means we are more aware of what happens either side of our part of the acquisition process now. We can and do identify and often solve problems ourselves in Alma because we know what an import process should be doing to a set of records, and because of the reports received for each import.

This means that we are able to be more proactive. I have been able to add processes to import profiles (although Ex Libris say we are unable to add multiple processes as yet) which saves time in running jobs to sets of records after import, for example. 0.5 of my role is in Open Access and I have also been able to use import profiles to import open access book collections and acknowledge vendors such as Open Book Publishers – something I couldn't have done before. Vendor names also allow us to much more quickly resolve user e-book issues because quite often we have several differently supplied versions and need to differentiate them in the user interface.
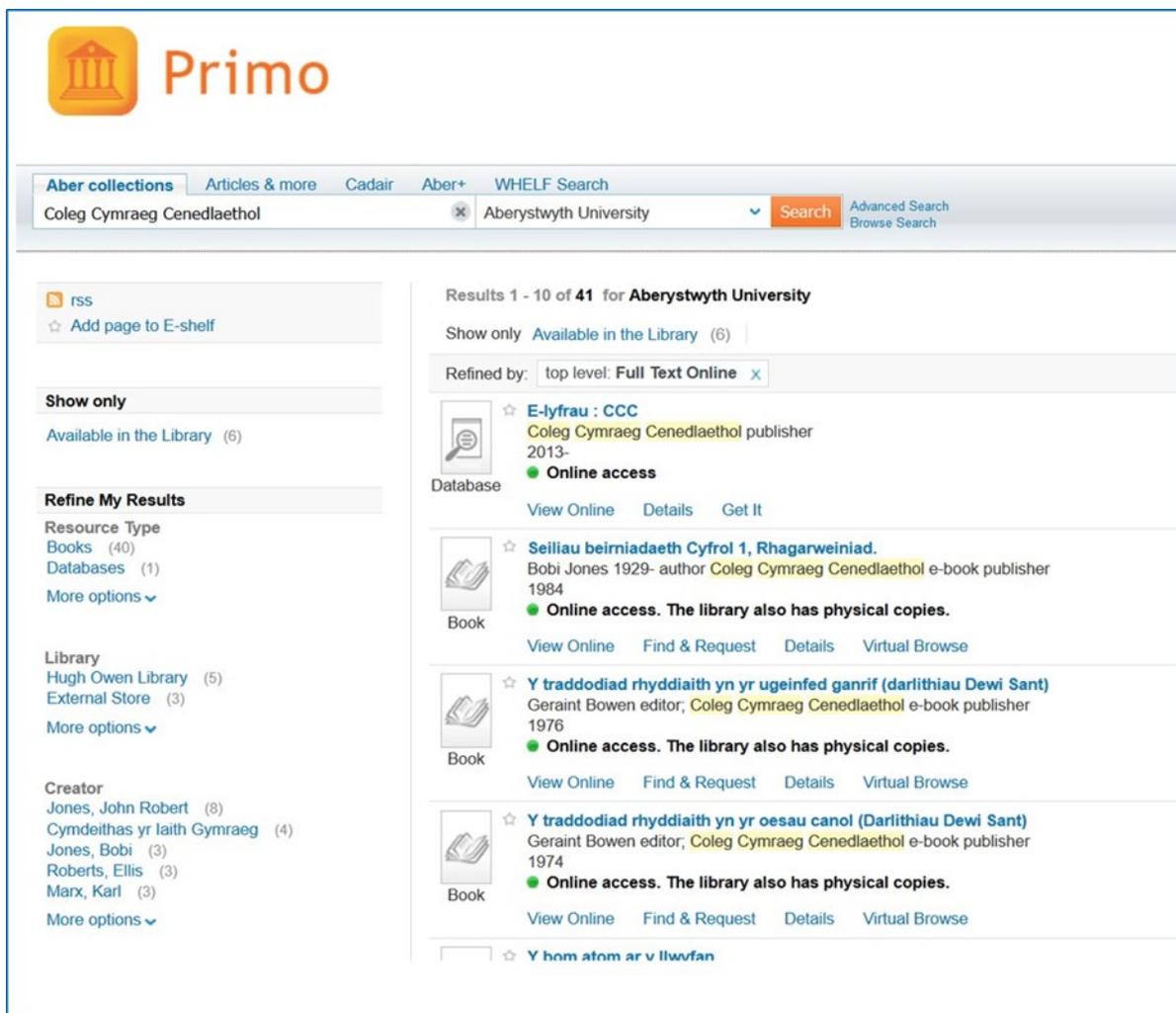

Import profiles for vendors, including open access vendors

In the past we haven't been very involved in e-book imports and description – records do come via us now and we have a say in whether or not we use Alma's Community Zone (CZ) records. With a collection like Proquest Elibrary (formerly Ebrary) for example, we couldn't keep on top of new and withdrawn books when we hosted records locally. Being able to link to dynamic Community Zone (CZ) collections was part of Alma's attraction for us and the move has been effective. However (!) the CZ records are often very poor so we see our role now as advocating collectively for better quality metadata across the CZ so we take part in WHELF discussions between vendors and Ex Libris and we see more of this work on the horizon.
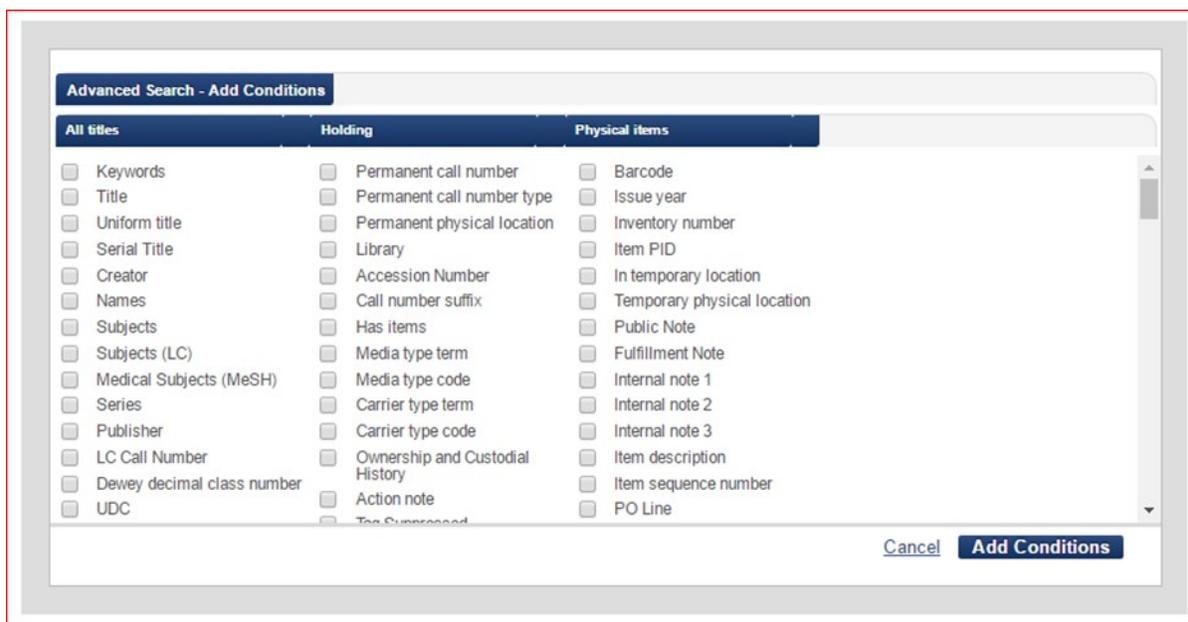
Finally, working closely with e-resources colleagues to create a new e-book collection has taught us a lot about how to collaborate to get the best out of Alma. Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (CCC) - E-lyfrau is a Welsh language collection that has been digitised by CCC and is available via their webpages. We wanted to have the e-books available through Primo so have created records and portfolios and have started the process of having the whole collection available to all Alma users through the CZ. While doing this has been fraught with strange problems – we have already made the collection accessible but then couldn't add any new portfolios/books, for example—it has been a useful learning experience that we could never have tackled before; perhaps a good summary of our Alma experience so far!

Primo screenshot of the E-lyfrau : CCC collection level and individual e-books

Jane Daniels
Bibliographical Librarian
Cardiff Metropolitan University

I started using Alma in March 2016. From the outset the features that grabbed my attention, opening up long vistas of cataloguing possibilities, were the advanced repository search & creating and managing sets of records. I used the advanced repository search extensively during data migration testing as it provides a method of querying titles, (physical, electronic and digital), holdings, items and authorities (if you are managing these locally), in real time.

Alma Advanced Repository Search Physical Titles - Add Conditions

It's not as granular as Analytics reporting, which I have still to get to grips with, but it has been invaluable for identifying post-migration data cleansing tasks e.g. items with no barcodes or no item policy; holdings with no items; bib records for print resources containing 856 tags; bib records with resource type "undefined" etc. Getting to know our data has helped me to establish cataloguing housekeeping and collection management processes and routines.

We are weeding rigorously ready for RFID implementation so monitoring withdrawn items and suppressed bibs and items required for reclassification is important. There are many ways to query the data and you can then save sets of records for further analysis or bulk processing. Once created the sets can remain private or be shared. They can be logical (real time i.e. search results are refreshed each time that you view the results) or itemised (static list of records.) You can edit sets adding more conditions or combine sets but I think that my favourite feature is the ability to choose to catalogue a set of records. This option moves the set contents into a separate folder in the Metadata Editor ready for further work. So suddenly, combining the advanced repository search and mange sets functionality, it was possible to identify and re-catalogue artist's books that had been purchased prior to the creation of our Special Collections.

The possibilities for reviewing and editing records are endless!

These are some of the practical benefits that Siân, Amy and I have realised within our respective institutions but implementing as part of a consortium presents many exciting collaborative opportunities.

WHELF Consortial Cataloguing Opportunities

We are now part of a group of cataloguers using Alma so we can forge closer relationships, share expertise, devise standards and hopefully reinvigorate cataloguing training activities in Wales. The first meeting of the WHELF Cataloguers Group took place in November 2015, even before all the consortium partners were live with the system.   We were briefed by ExLibris about the creation of a WHELF Network Zone which would allow us to share and contribute catalogue records to a centralised database.   There is support in principle for this but not at the risk of jeopardising our metadata. There may be other initiatives that we can tap into to realise our ambitions!

Collectively we anticipate quicker cataloguing of standard materials hopefully releasing time for cataloguing special collections & donations; and metadata enrichment projects e.g. for legacy data, institutional repositories. Reclassification project work is highly desirable to ensure that the virtual browse functionality in Primo can expose more of our collections. It might also be possible to found a NACO funnel for Wales to improve our authority control and open up some exciting opportunities for CPD.

We also collected data on cataloguing tools and services in use across the Consortium; the number of cataloguing staff in each partner institution; special cataloguing expertise e.g. languages, formats. The meeting resulted in the creation of a Yammer community where we have continued to ask questions, comment on documents and share ideas e.g. examining the quality of records for eResources in the ExLibris Community Zone and working with the Company and our vendors to improve the search and discovery experience in Primo for our users.

It's possible that we could share the costs of purchasing library resources and services. For Cataloguers this might mean negotiating discounts for cataloguing tools e.g. RDA Toolkit subscription or records for copy-cataloguing. Perhaps enrichments for Primo or even Training/CPD to ensure that there is a skilled workforce to create, assess and manage metadata now and in the future.

We hope to agree cataloguing standards for AACR2 and RDA records, as well as how we handle hybrid records. We need agreement on the use of local tags across the Consortium (important for a cross-WHELF search in Primo.) Then there's the creation and maintenance of Library of Congress name and subject access points & the use of other specialist vocabularies e.g. AAT (Art & Architecture Thesaurus.)

One of the more exciting opportunities is the possibility of developing generic cataloguing training for use across WHELF based on best practice and agreed standards. We would also like to incorporate accredited cataloguing training available via distance learning from UK Library Schools or possibly organisations based overseas e.g. ALCTS, Library Juice.

So exciting times ahead!

Roles & responsibilities may change but we believe that consortial cataloguing and the anticipated freedom to embark on new and exciting projects provides many new opportunities for those willing to grasp them.