University of Liège

The rapid evolution of resource sharing at a major public university in Belgium

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With the integration of **RapidILL** and **Alma**, the ULiège library handles interlibrary borrowing and lending automatically and in a matter of hours, saving time and reducing costs.

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> *"RapidILL was the perfect service at just the right time."*
>
> *– François Renaville, Head of Library Systems*

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About University of Liège

The University of Liège, or ULiège, is a major public university based in Liège, Wallonia, Belgium. The university, with four campuses in three cities, has 11 faculties and over 25,000 students. There are 5,500 employees at ULiège, including 1,400 academic staff and 3,000 researchers.

The ULiège library operates 16 branches across its various campuses and has 110 staff members. Strongly involved in promoting information literacy, the library offers access to more than 700,000 ebooks and 83,000 electronic periodicals. In addition, library holdings include 6,500 manuscripts among approximately 1.5 million print resources. The ULiège library has been an IGeLU (International Group of Ex Libris Users) member since 2009 and an Alma customer since 2015.

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Getting the House in Order: Simplifying ILL Workflows

Prior to implementing Alma, Ex Libris' unified library services platform, ULiège library managed interlibrary loans with an in-house solution and 15 staff members at eight of the library's campus branches. In February 2015, as part of the transition to Alma, the library decided to reduce the resources dedicated to resource sharing.

"We decided to keep five libraries and 10 operators to process interlibrary loans," according to Fulfilment and ILL Coordinator Fabienne Prosmans, "but these tasks do not occupy an operator's full time - far from it."

The first attempt at simplification and standardization of resource sharing was successful, with no negative impact on service quality or user satisfaction. With fewer library branches involved, each one handled interlibrary loans with greater flexibility, although still heavily focused on the branch's area of specialization. In 2016, as ULiège library was already familiar with the streamlined and comprehensive workflows of Alma and Primo, it was an obvious step to expand the use of Alma to include digital resources when the need arose to maximize local and interlibrary fulfillment capabilities.

"Each ILL service had more freedom," Fabienne noted. "However, each branch library saw itself as an independent unit. There were very few interactions between operators and also very little communication between the branch libraries."

The problem of silos remained; with different criteria, access rules and workflows in the various branches. For example, some librarians allowed the loan of documents for research, while others only allowed consultation in a reading room.

"So," she continued, "in 2018, we decided to reorganize and centralize the interlibrary loan service to provide a more efficient service for our students and researchers."

ULiège ended the services offered via its library branches and instead activated the default resource sharing capabilities in Alma. The university designated one physical location as its resource sharing library and assigned seven employees to manage ILL services (the operators). Each operator devotes several hours a week to ILL, but they can do so from the library branch at which they are employed.

Collaboration and harmonization of practices improved among the ILL operators, according to Fabienne, because "they are all members of the same virtual team." There is also more fluency in ILL delivery, with a seamless coordination of working hours and more streamlined workflows.

"We believe that this experience and this simplification of the backend proved to be very useful when we decided to join the RapidILL community," Fabienne added.

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The Next Level: RapidILL

The progressive optimization of resource sharing at ULiège library eventually reached an impasse. The operators worked with Impala and Subito, Belgian and German platforms, for interlibrary loan processing and document delivery; however, this required duplicate data entry in Alma to track ILL activity, with no available integration between the platforms. Alma, Impala and Subito remained separate and essentially closed systems, complicating ILL and burdening the operators with manual, repetitive tasks.

When Covid-19 started, Ex Libris established a large RapidILL pod which was an opt-in community of libraries devoted to streamlined resource sharing. The lenders of the pod consisted of libraries within the worldwide RapidILL community who volunteered to fulfill requests for non-RapidILL members. The "COVID-19 pod", which was free to join, became a vehicle through which libraries were able to easily and quickly share electronic journal articles and digitized book chapters.

"It was the perfect service, at the right time," according to François Renaville, Head of Library Systems. RapidILL made it possible to fulfill patron requests even when "all our library branches were closed because of the pandemic and we could only provide remote services. And when our traditional partners, Impala members, were also closing and there were very few ILL collaborators left to provide materials to our patrons."

There were approximately 200 requests met through RapidILL in the space of four months, representing 95% of requests submitted. In addition, resource delivery times were cut down to a few hours on average. Furthermore, feedback from ULiège library staff on the unanticipated RapidILL trial run was overwhelmingly positive.

Joining the RapidILL Community

The ULiège library then decided to become a member of the RapidILL community by September 2020, joining three academic pods (for high research universities; doctoral and research universities; and large MA universities) and the Cosmo pod, which is open to all RapidILL subscribers. The library team then defined their Alma workflows to utilize RapidILL as an automated process to obtain unowned article and book chapter requests. For lending, ULiège library created Alma resource sets and publication profiles to define their collections that are lendable to the RapidILL community.

Notably, RapidILL accommodates both license and security requirements. So that ULiège is able to share resources in accordance with the vendor agreement terms and copyright protections. Through the integration with Alma, requests are able to be sent automatically to the end user, who uses their authentication credentials to securely access them.

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Yes, Resource Sharing Can be Fast and Cost-Effective

Approximately 76% of digital interlibrary borrowing requests from the ULiège community are now handled through RapidILL. In large part this is due to the integration with Alma, making it very easy to implement as a seamless, holistic solution for resource sharing.

The transition to RapidILL has had several beneficial effects on ULiège library's interlibrary loan capabilities. Among them are:

- **Speed:** RapidILL requires almost no manual intervention by library staff as the processes are automatically executed by RapidILL and Alma.

- **Delivery:** Requested items, both as borrower and lender, are delivered in a matter of hours (in accordance with pod-specific SLAs).

- **Simplicity:** The ILL staff only needs to access RapidILL for purposes of tracking or statistical analysis.

- **Cost savings:** A known annual cost, with no additional expenses, means that there is no financial impact regardless of how many or how few requests are handled.

- **Reliability:** Fulfillment is ensured even during local off hours by a routing algorithm that sends the request to a library that operates in another time zone and which immediately takes care of the request.

- **Effectiveness:** With RapidILL's intelligent routing and large, global community, 95% of ULiège requests are quickly and easily fulfilled.

François said, "We greatly appreciate that RapidILL is a worldwide community, including institutions that are not necessarily Alma customers." In this context, he added, "We were also delighted to see Oxford and Cambridge Universities joining the RapidILL Community which will benefit our librarians, faculties and students as well."

At the same time, François noted, it was gratifying to see three other Belgian libraries among the top ten RapidILL members fulfilling ULiège requests.

"This, of course, is a good sign," he said, "because it shows that these members, even though they remain part of Impala, use RapidILL as a priority supplier for many requests."

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About Ex Libris

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