

Ever-Evolving To Deliver Greater Value

A Customer Conversation: The Alma Journey



We asked one of the Alma community's longest and most-engaged users to give his perspective on its continuing value, ongoing evolution, and role as an agent of change.

A longtime Ex Libris user, Gijs Noels has managed Alma on behalf of nearly 100 libraries since 2014. That gives him unique insight into how Alma has continually evolved and improved to deliver greater value for his constituents. Moreover, he is actively involved in that effort, playing a lead role in multiple Ex Libris and Alma user groups that drive priorities for new releases.

What's LIBISnet and what is your role?

LIBISnet is a network of scientific libraries with 28 institutions and about 100 libraries in Belgium, and LIBIS, part of KU Leuven University libraries, acts as a services provider to them. We offer tools that manage their collections and make them accessible. All use Alma as their library management system and I'm responsible for the back end that serves around 500 staff users and librarians working in Alma. Together with my colleagues from the Alma team, we set up and configure the system, we implement workflows and optimize things, and create added value through integrations with Alma and for our partners. My official title is LIBISnet product manager at LIBIS KU Leuven. That's my official hat. I have some other hats, too, and am pretty involved in the Ex Libris community.

I'd like to follow up on that. First, I'm interested in a bit of the history. Was LIBISnet using Aleph before Alma? And were you involved in the upgrade to Alma?

Yes to both. It was in 2009 that we became an Alma development partner together with Princeton University, Boston College, and Purdue University. I was quite heavily involved in being a development partner and in 2014, we were one of the first consortiums to go live with Alma.

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What was the impact of switching from Aleph to Alma? Was there anything you could measure?

Before, we had about 6-7 people working on Aleph and with Alma we were able to considerably reduce this. So Alma brought us serious reduction in costs, but the ultimate impact isn't something you can measure. Honestly, I cannot imagine being on Aleph today and I can't imagine life or work without Alma. Too many things have changed. There is an evolution in libraries and now there are all these different kinds of inventory to manage. When we wanted to trigger the shift from print to electronic and digital, Alma enabled us to do that.

That makes it sound like LIBISnet is more than a service provider.

We try to not only support libraries with software and solutions to manage their collections, but also drive innovation and change. One of the most important changes is the principle of unified resource management, and we looked at Alma as a tool for implementing that. When we had Aleph we also had Verde, SFX, and MetaLib, so managing the entire collection required different software and applications. Changing to Alma gave us one system for managing different kinds of resources including electronic, print, and digital, along with uniform workflows across all the different kinds of inventory so that staff could work with any of them. Those were big triggers for us. Ultimately, we want to make work as easy and efficient as possible for our partners and our librarians.

I can see how the shared workflows make the work easy and efficient, but do any more specific examples come to mind?

It's great how Alma not only makes E-workflows as efficient as possible, but also automates them to a degree — for instance, the automated holdings feature that integrates with ProQuest or Elsevier or whatever. The actual KBART file is being exchanged and staff doesn't need to do anything since everything the library owns or has a subscription for is activated on the fly and synced. These kinds of things are really great.

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In addition to making individual librarians and libraries more efficient, I'm curious if there are any benefits that LIBISnet is seeing at the consortium level with Alma.

Something that's being used quite a lot within the KU Leuven libraries as well as LIBISnet is doing overlap analysis of the collections. That's a really great feature. Overlap analysis can make sure that there are not redundancies within a library, within KU Leuven libraries, or within LIBISnet. We're trying to optimize our collections and make them flexible. People and staff who go to one KU Leuven library are able to request items from another library and can pick them up in yet another physical library. Plus, when we combine the overlap analysis with price information and usage data, then we have all the information to make good decisions about what to keep, which subscriptions to renew, and so on.

You mentioned you wear other hats and said you're pretty involved, so I take it you wear more than one.

Yes, I'm the co-chair of the Alma working group representing IGeLU, but actually it's a joint working group representing the entire Alma community. I'm also a lead in the consortia community and a lead member of the UX focus group.

That's a lot. First, I should say thank you. Why do you think involvement is so important?

We're only a small part in a bigger network; that's where we need to be and let our voices be heard. That's why we also engage in the consortia groups and we care about UX. Even if it's on the level of "What will be the color of that button?" the message to our partners is "If we engage, we can make a difference."

Beyond button colors, can you share any examples of making a difference that are more tangible?

Sure. Take the consortia community. There, we bring together the communities of practice of ELUNA and IGeLU and discuss what our priorities are and what we need to have. The central configuration dashboard came out as the most important thing and it's actually being worked on right now.

What about your involvement in the UX focus group?

That's more of a journey. We want to reach outside the KU Leuven libraries and also engage our LIBISnet partners in how Alma is evolving, how it looks, how it's being used, and also engage them in testing. For me, it's a crucial group, but as I said, it's a journey and we're constantly learning and optimizing how we work together.

You have a long history with consortia and how multiple libraries use Alma, and are heavily involved in its evolution. It's a ten year-old system. Is it showing its age?

No, it's a fresh new system where we're constantly working at UX, and it's constantly evolving under the hood. Ex Libris puts a lot of effort into making Alma better and better every day — better tools for indexing, to make searches faster, and so on. Alma is always a new tool. There's a little bit of a hate-love relationship with releases, but in the end, the releases make Alma what it is right now — a next-gen system and a system that is up to date. We need to embrace these changes. Don't be afraid of new things.



About LIBIS & LIBISnet

For fifty years now, LIBIS has been offering library software to both scientific, private and public organizations. LIBISnet is the largest scientific library network in Belgium and was created from the needs of KU Leuven to be able to access and manage its library collections in an efficient manner.

LIBIS provides technical support and operation of Alma and Limo (Primo) within the LIBISnet network, both for KU Leuven Libraries and for external partners. For both products of Ex Libris, LIBIS was development partner, involved in usability testing and LIBIS now also provides regular input on optimization of functionalities and work processes. Different institutions and universities rely on its expertise for the roll-out of their library system.

About Ex Libris, Part of Clarivate

Ex Libris, part of Clarivate, is a leading global provider of cloud-based solutions that enable institutions and their users to create, manage, and share knowledge. In close collaboration with its customers and the broader community, Ex Libris develops solutions that increase library productivity, maximize the impact of research activities, enhance teaching and learning, and drive student mobile engagement. Ex Libris serves over 7,500 customers in 90 countries. For more information, see our [website](#) and join us on [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).

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