The institution as e-textbook publisher

Providing students with sufficient copies of core textbooks is an increasing challenge in an age of ever higher fees, economic realities and heightened student expectations regarding provision of library resources. This article outlines the partnership between the University of Liverpool Library and Liverpool University Press (LUP), which has progressed from the creation of a library advisory board to the co-creation of two bespoke and open access (OA) e-textbooks as part of a Jisc-funded project. It tells the story of why we have gone down this route at Liverpool and what we hope to gain from the creation of these e-textbooks.

The textbook challenge

When I am struggling to get to sleep, it is often the phrases 'textbooks at point of need' and 'the right books, in the right numbers, at the right time' that get my brain whirring in the wee small hours of the morning. Now, it may well be that I need to relax a bit and wait for sleep to come, but the challenge of providing 'appropriate' numbers of textbooks to undergraduates at the University of Liverpool, where student numbers are growing, demand on space is increasing and where we must remain a first-rate research library, is an enormous one.

Picking that apart a bit, in the last few years student numbers have grown at Liverpool, just as they have at many other universities in the UK, and for Liverpool, that rise is projected to increase. Nationally, there has been a new student fees regime in place since 2012/2013, and at Liverpool, tuition fees have been set at £9,000 per year. Unsurprisingly, this increase in the cost of studying on undergraduate courses has led to a growth in student expectations, with a (perhaps not unreasonable) expectation that the library should provide appropriate numbers of core textbooks and that these textbooks should be available to them when they need them.

The challenge at my University is to provide sufficient copies of core textbooks to students. It is the more professional-based courses, such as law and management, that are growing the most rapidly and which make the greatest use of textbooks. Therefore the main problem is that when modules have hundreds of students enrolled on them, even a seemingly generous ratio of books to student numbers of, say, 1:10 would probably be deemed insufficient by the students. To take the example of one of our management courses with 900 students, this ratio would only provide for the purchase of 90 print copies of a text. Those 90 copies would cost a significant amount of money, would take up a not insignificant amount of space, and would still not satisfy the needs and demands of the students.

Two other significant challenges are also causing us problems: the availability and the desirability of electronic textbooks. Many of the core e-textbooks are not available for the Library to buy from publishers in the traditional way. An even larger challenge is that our students tell us they just do not like e-textbooks, they prefer print. Their view is that too often a flat PDF electronic version of the printed page gives them no additional value.

ANDREW BARKER

Head of Academic Liaison
Special Collections & Archives
Sydney Jones Library
University of Liverpool
UK

> 'The challenge at my University is to provide sufficient copies of core textbooks to students'

The dilemma here for us in the Library is that we just cannot keep buying huge numbers of print textbooks on an annual basis. Economically that makes very little sense, while the space the books take up leaves us unable to provide adequate numbers of study spaces for our growing numbers of undergraduates.

So, in essence, our dilemma is how to provide sufficient core textbooks, in a format that meets student needs and which is available for purchase by the Library, but which is economically viable and does not take up a huge amount of physical space.

There are some really interesting ways in which an institution might attempt to solve this dilemma, and certainly in the UK there is a lot of interesting work happening. However, at Liverpool, we are in the very fortunate position of being part of an established partnership with Liverpool University Press (LUP), a partnership which allows us to think slightly differently. It is by developing this partnership that we have sought to be creative about the provision of e-textbooks at point of need.

A partnership of equals

Liverpool University Press was founded in 1899, making it the third oldest university press in the UK. In 2005 it was reborn as a limited company. This gave LUP the freedom to go beyond just being the University's press and to publish the work of authors from outside the University of Liverpool. The rebirth enabled the press to expand and grow rapidly. LUP now publishes around 70 books and 25 journals a year, with its traditional specialisms being in literature, modern languages, history and visual culture. Under the leadership of its Managing Director, Anthony Cond, LUP is an ambitious and forward-thinking press, while University of Liverpool Librarian, Phil Sykes, encourages partnership and collaboration both internally and externally. This environment has facilitated over recent years an opportunity for the librarian and publisher at the University of Liverpool to look for areas of common interest.

So, the partnership between the Library and LUP had existed for several years before my arrival in 2013. A Library advisory board had already been in place for several years. The board, like every aspect of the relationship, was established as a partnership of equals and not part of a formal management structure, and this is fundamental to its success. The role of the board is to discuss and select ongoing, mutually beneficial collaboration that is centred on the needs of the University, while each separate entity continues to do its core business independent of the other partner.

In addition to the advisory board, the Library and LUP worked together to establish an open access (OA) journal, *Modern Languages Open*, for the dissemination of interdisciplinary research in modern languages. The development of the journal as a partnership between press, library and academic staff positioned Liverpool very strongly in this area. Perhaps, most interestingly, it demonstrated that such a partnership could make a significant impact in the world of scholarly publications.

Given that this is an established partnership, it was always likely that discussions would go beyond the setting up of an advisory board and the creation of *Modern Languages Open*. The inevitable direction that our discussions took was towards 'doing something with e-books'. I have touched on my own personal dissatisfaction with the current models available for e-textbooks and this was certainly a personal driver for our discussions. However, beyond that was the shared belief that it is universities that are the primary producer of the content of scholarly publications through the research, writing and peer reviewing of their academic authors and editors, while it is the university library that is often the primary home to those publications, whether they are monographs or textbooks. It is crucial to note that as both a producer and consumer of content, the university has a significant investment in academic publishing. With external economic pressures, advances in technology, the growth of open access and some dissatisfaction with e-books already in existence,

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it makes sense for a university to think in more detail about the possibilities of the university as book publisher.

Given the challenges of providing copies of relevant textbooks in sufficient numbers, as mentioned above, any decision about whether to publish monographs or textbooks was a straightforward one for the library: the greater impact on student experience would, for reasons already outlined, undoubtedly come from the creation of core textbooks. The Press also felt that the widest benefit to publishing would come from publishing textbooks. So we had an alignment of strategy. We had the ideas and the people in place. Unfortunately, we just did not have the money to move from concept to publication.

Getting the call

As unlikely as it seems now, and unbeknownst to us in Liverpool, the timing of our discussions was perfect. Only a few weeks after we had begun informal discussions about creating textbooks, Jisc put out a call 'inviting UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) to participate in a three-year national project to explore the viability of institutions becoming e-textbook publishers'.[1]

'Jisc put out a call . . . to explore the viability of institutions becoming e-textbook publishers'

This was a perfect opportunity for us to pilot the idea of developing our own textbooks, written by our academics and developed specifically for University of Liverpool students. It would allow us to test the level of interest and the economic viability of developing our own textbooks. Quite simply, we wanted to discover whether we could develop textbooks that would improve student experience and not cost us any more than we were already paying out each year to buy insufficient numbers of print books.

That a call for participation came along just as we were beginning to have concrete thoughts about developing our own concept for becoming e-textbook publishers was incredibly exciting. However, the call had a really tight deadline. We had very little time to move from the idea to having a successful bid in place. It was because we had already established a partnership of complementary skills that we were able to meet the deadline and deliver a successful bid.

Quite frankly, if, as a librarian, I had been working on my own, I would not have been able to meet the deadline. Likewise, if the Press had tried to do it alone, they would not have made the deadline either. It was only by working on the proposal together that we developed a serious bid, which provided enough supporting evidence that the outcomes would make a significant impact.

Heading up academic liaison for the Library, I have the contacts and the relationships with academics and senior managers across the university that LUP, as a separate company operating slightly on the margins of the University, just does not have. Having done some work on student satisfaction and having access to Library surveys, I also knew which subject areas might benefit from the creation of bespoke textbooks. Anthony and his team at LUP have an array of skills that we in the Library do not possess. Its editorial expertise meant that very quickly it could put out a call to Liverpool academics for expressions of interest, assess the likely impact of each submission, price up the proposal and complete the bid in the requisite timescales. I cannot overstate the fact that without the established partnership, we would not have been able to respond to the call for participation in time.

With the partnership in place, we were able to turn 11 expressions of interest into two workable proposals. Our bid was built around two proposed textbooks, both of which came from academics from within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The first, *Essentials for Financial Management,* a textbook to be written by Jason Laws, an academic from the University of Liverpool Management School, would be used on the largest taught course in the institution (replacing a £56 textbook). The second textbook would be *Using Primary Sources*, to be edited by Jon Hogg from our History department, with 30

contributors from both within the University of Liverpool and beyond, and which would be used across 20 modules in the School of History.

Crucially, the proposal for *Using Primary Sources* would make use of material held within our Special Collections and Archives. So, for the Library these two proposals would be closely aligned to our Library strategy of improving student experience whilst also enabling us to raise the visibility of our collections. It was absolutely central to our plans that any proposed textbooks would bring real value to our stakeholders. The project was not worth pursuing unless we could create textbooks that would have an impact. Both of the textbooks that we chose for the project would do just that.

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The primary focus for the development of the textbooks would, inevitably, be on improving services for University of Liverpool students. Not only would this project give us the opportunity to provide our students with two core textbooks, but by creating textbooks that went beyond just a flat PDF we would be able to make great strides to improve our students' library experience.

As we developed the proposal for the project bid, we agreed that the textbooks would be open access under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC-ND)[2]. A print-on-demand copy would be sold alongside the OA digital textbooks. Although the prime focus of the development of the textbooks would be for University of Liverpool students, other institutions would, of course, be able to use the OA materials, but they would be LUP branded. The Library would be responsible for supporting the technical infrastructure, with *Essentials for Financial Management* being produced on the openly available 'Xerte' platform developed by the University of Nottingham; *Primary Sources* would be made available via 'BiblioBoard' developed by BibliobLabs, a company based in the US.

Managing the project

Once we received word from Jisc, in April 2015, that our bid (along with those of four other institutions) had been successful, the hard work began on writing the books, with publication planned for 2016. I had imagined that the Library would take a back seat at this point, with LUP managing contracts and the academics getting down to actually writing the books. However, Library staff have been involved throughout the writing stage to support the transition from the written page to the e-textbook platform. They have been working hard with the authors to advise on the technology, choose images, demonstrate the platforms and generally to provide support as required. It is fair to say that the amount of work required even in the early stages of development has been significant. Once the texts are written, we will be piloting a beta version of both books with the students on the relevant modules to ensure that they meet their needs. We need to know that the books we produce are relevant to our students' needs and are economically viable: having students available to road test the books will help us to do that.

> 'Library staff have been involved throughout . . . to support the transition from the written page to the e-textbook platform'

Although the books are yet to be published, both Press and Library are now looking at how we can expand beyond this initial project of developing two textbooks. Even at this early stage, the feedback from authors and their colleagues has been very positive and we are convinced that we must find a way to continue to develop textbooks using this model. Clearly, funding for any further development will be a challenge, as we have only been able to pilot a project of this type because of the Jisc funding. Without it, we would still be talking about the possibility of doing 'something' with textbooks. Now we have begun to develop these books and we can see the benefit they will bring, we remain convinced that this model can work with other disciplines. To develop bespoke textbooks and to make them available to our students in sufficient numbers and at point of need would not only ensure that our students had access to their core textbooks when they needed them, without taking up much needed library space, but might well also help me sleep at night.

Competing interests
The author has declared no competing interests.

References

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2   Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC-ND):
    https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ (accessed 21 September 2015).

Andrew Barker

Head of Academic Liaison, Special Collections & Archives
Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool L69 3DA, UK
E-mail: Andrew.Barker@liverpool.ac.uk

ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1382-7042