

Transforming library collections in a pandemic: the perspective from Edge Hill University

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on Higher Education (HE) libraries, requiring them to rapidly overhaul their services and accelerating the shift to digital in a short space of time. One of the most significant challenges has been how to provide students and other library users with continued access to resources previously only available in print, when libraries have been closed or are operating with restrictions in place that limit access to the physical library space. This has led many libraries to increase investment in digital content to better support students in the current climate. This article shares the perspective from Edge Hill University in the UK and focuses on work undertaken by the library to implement university-wide e-textbook access for the first time. The article explores some of the barriers the library has faced sourcing textbooks and concludes by reflecting on how 2020 may shape the library's purchasing strategies in a post-pandemic information landscape.

Keywords

e-textbooks; libraries; digital; resources; Covid-19; transformation

Introduction

In March 2020, the UK Government announced that universities, along with many other businesses in the UK, would be required to close their physical premises in an effort to stem the spread of Covid-19. At Edge Hill University, we went from being a hive of activity to shutting up shop in a matter of days. The lockdown that followed resulted in significant and rapid change as the University began the unenviable task of shifting its entire operation to an online model. Not an easy feat when most of your services have been designed around face-to-face contact and in-person transactions. This article shares the response of Library & Learning Services, with a focus on the work that has taken place to transform our library collections by adopting a 'digital first' purchasing strategy and introducing an e-textbook programme to better support students during the pandemic.



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A pre-pandemic collection

Edge Hill University is a campus-based university located in West Lancashire, close to Liverpool and Manchester. Established in 1885 as the first non-denominational teacher training college for women, we have developed into a multi-disciplinary university with strengths in health and the social sciences. Edge Hill has a long-standing commitment to widening access to higher education and the theme of opportunity for all is a key component of our institutional vision. Today we cater for over 13,000 full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In 2018 we opened the Catalyst, a state-of-the-art building which brought together the three functional areas of Library & Learning Services, Student Services and Careers under an integrated service model. With a café located on the ground floor and a myriad of social spaces, the building has been designed to encourage social interaction, group study and

2 collaboration. The Catalyst quite literally is the heart of our campus and since opening, student feedback about the space has been resoundingly positive.

As a campus-based university many of our students live on-site or in the local region, and so visiting the library to borrow a print book is typically straightforward, unlike at larger multi-campus universities where students may be more disparate and have a greater reliance on digital access. An analysis of our holdings in early March 2020 demonstrated that 58% of our book collections were available in print vs. 42% in electronic format, and so prior to the Covid-19 pandemic it would have been reasonable to describe our collections as print focused, a significant proportion of which would have been high-demand material on course reading lists. As a teaching-focused university, Edge Hill does not have the extensive print collections that are a feature of many of the research-intensive institutions and, before the move from our old library building into the Catalyst, the collection had been heavily weeded so that very few books on our shelves did not get borrowed. Our e-book collection was expanding, but it would be fair to say that our transition to digital had up to that point been gradual.

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Responding to lockdown

This all changed in March 2020 when we were faced with the sudden prospect of transferring all our services online. One of the most immediate challenges for academic libraries was how they could continue to facilitate access to much-needed resources that were only available in the library in print, and in particular those items that fall into the category 'textbook'. What exactly constitutes a textbook and how they are used to support learning may not always be clear¹ but from a library point of view, textbooks typically feature as essential or core reading on a course curriculum and demand for copies tends to be high. To meet this demand, libraries spend vast sums of money on buying multiple copies in print. In introducing digital textbooks, publishers have largely sought to replicate the print model of a copy per student, resulting in a market in which the cost of institution-wide digital access is extremely prohibitive, if indeed access is available at all. Although writing for a US audience, Gaby Del Vale's article for Vox on the high cost of textbooks articulates some of the key issues well.² Put another way, the word textbook or its digital counterpart 'e-textbook' has become a byword for expense. Conversations around inadequate and costly e-textbook access have been rumbling on for years but the pandemic further exposed these issues, bringing them into focus and creating a sense of urgency that had not previously been seen. Fortunately for libraries, many publishers and suppliers threw us a lifeline by enabling temporary free access to their resources. By taking advantage of these offers we were able to provide short-term access to a range of additional content, including some e-textbooks. Although we had some concerns about raising expectations in the longer term, our immediate priority was to ensure that our students could access the resources they needed over the crucial exam period, enabling them to complete the rest of the year and, in the case of final year students, graduate. As our initial response to the pandemic had been quite reactive, it also gave us some much-needed breathing space to think more strategically about our plans for 2020/21.

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Two things soon became clear. Firstly, that the impact of the pandemic would be long-term and far-reaching, and the adjustments made to our services during the library's closure would need to be extended and modified into the next academic year. Secondly, an already stretched resources budget would not come close to covering the additional cost of the e-textbooks and other new resources that would be required to support the blended model of teaching that the University was devising for the new academic year. It is worth mentioning that in the months leading up to the pandemic we had already begun to review our approach to collection development. As well as expanding and updating our demand-driven acquisition (DDA) profile with ProQuest, for the first time we had started to experiment with evidence-based acquisition (EBA) and had initiated several publisher-direct

3 programmes focusing on education, computing, medicine and business. Following this, it felt like a natural progression to start looking at e-textbooks.

We put together a business case outlining the need for investment in e-textbooks, arguing that continued access to digital material would be essential to guaranteeing a good student experience under a blended teaching model, especially in the event that library access was restricted, or students were unable to visit the library in person. Using a combination of print circulation and reading list data, combined with usage statistics from free access provided during lockdown and intelligence gathered from our Academic Engagement team, we settled on an initial list of around 400 titles that we had not been able to source digitally through our usual suppliers under an institution-wide licence. Alongside this, we submitted a related business case to purchase a subscription to Elsevier's ClinicalKey Student which would cover many of the e-textbook requirements for our Faculty of Health, Social Sciences and Medicine. Both business cases were successful, and funding was allocated.

Implementation

Following discussions with several suppliers, we selected the digital textbook and monograph provider BibliU for the project and agreed a deposit for access to the titles under their user activated acquisition (UAA) model. We felt that the UAA model would provide us with flexibility should we decide to swap titles in or out and would be more cost-effective as we would only pay for the access we used. We already had a handful of e-textbook licences with BibliU and so students were familiar with the platform. Furthermore, BibliU's 100% ASPIRE accessibility score³ was evidence that the company viewed the accessibility of their platform as a high priority, aligning with one of our own strategic goals to enhance and improve the accessibility of content and systems for our users.

The summer months were spent working with BibliU to refine our title list and agree which titles would make the final selection. It soon became apparent that many of the titles would cost significantly more than we had anticipated due to high student full-time equivalents (FTEs) and their occurrence across multiple reading lists. Many of these titles were from Sage, a key publisher of texts required by students on programmes in our Faculty of Education. After some discussion with Sage, an agreement was reached with them to provide institutional access to all titles via the BibliU platform for an agreed bulk fee. The remainder of our budget would be used to provide access to titles under the UAA model. Access went live on 28 September and the initiative was promoted to departments through the Library's Academic Engagement Team. At the time of writing, we are almost three weeks into the new academic year. Early indications suggest that the access is being well received. There has been an increase of over 1,300% in new readers registering on the BibliU platform and usage is rapidly rising as the semester gets under way. The initiative is also helping us to raise awareness of the challenges we face sourcing e-book content within our academic community, resulting in a growing appreciation of our efforts.

'The initiative is also helping us to raise awareness of the challenges we face sourcing e-book content'

Challenges

The six months between March and September 2020 were not without challenges. Whilst we were successful in securing access to many titles, we were unable to negotiate access to everything on our initial list. Whilst the issues around e-textbook access are complex, the overriding barrier to making these titles available to our students has been one of cost and some of the prices quoted to us for individual titles have been shocking. Additionally, since one of the key factors in determining our selection of titles was prior demand for print copies, this has meant that most titles selected for our initial UAA profile are supporting programmes in our Faculty of Education and our Faculty of Health, Social Sciences and Medicine which tend to have the largest cohorts of students. This raised concern that access would disproportionately benefit some students more than others and

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4 that those studying subjects in which there is less of a focus on core texts, such as history or creative arts, may lose out in a digital environment. In these subjects and in other arts and humanities disciplines, reading lists are typically longer and students may be encouraged to read more widely 'around' the subject. Whilst we have endeavoured to purchase e-books on an institutional licence across all our reading lists, there are still many titles, particularly on lists for programmes in our Faculty of Arts and Sciences, that are only available in print, and requesting a digital copy through a supplier like BibliU isn't always practical if only a small number of students may need access. At Edge Hill we have tried to counteract this by investing in other types of content for these subject areas and by working closely with departments to understand their unique needs. We have come up with alternative solutions which have included purchasing print copies for students, suggesting electronically available alternatives and optimizing digitization by taking advantage of the temporary amendment to the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) Higher Education Licence that allows institutions to copy or digitize up to 20% during the 2020–21 academic year.

However, falling back on print copies is far from ideal and there is also a danger that, if much of the library budget continues to be eaten up by e-textbooks, our ability to invest in other types of content is diminished. Whilst the library has been fortunate enough to secure funding for e-textbook access this year, there is no guarantee that additional money will be available in the future. The full extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university finances is not yet known, but it is likely that budgets will be squeezed for some years to come, leading universities to call on publishers to urgently provide discounts.⁴ Library budgets are facing pressures from all angles and for many higher education institutions (HEIs) the money to sustain the current e-textbook market is simply not there. That is not to say libraries expect access for free and we understand publishers need to make some level of profit, but the current market is visibly unfair and if libraries cannot afford this type of material then ultimately this will stifle learning and research. This has negative consequences for publishers as much as it does for universities. Despite these concerns, we believed that the risks of not providing e-textbook access in the current climate were too great. Although our physical library site is open at the time of writing, between increased restrictions, self-isolating students and further lockdowns, e-textbooks will continue to be a high priority for the foreseeable future.

'The full extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university finances is not yet known'

On a more positive note, the number of university and academic-led publishers that are publishing open e-textbooks in an effort to improve access and demonstrate that e-textbooks do not have to cost the earth is growing.⁵ The pandemic has also triggered a collective call to action from academic libraries, led by Jisc who have been advocating on behalf of the sector for more affordable and sustainable e-textbook pricing. Whether this will result in any palpable long-term change remains to be seen, and some may be unconvinced that discussions will be enough to drive a fall in costs of the scale that universities require. However, there are signs that some publishers are increasingly sympathetic to the needs of libraries and are open to change. The support we have received from many publishers and suppliers over the course of the pandemic has been fantastic and we hope this has paved the way for a more constructive discourse around e-textbooks going forward.

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Conclusion

Over the coming months we will begin the process of evaluating the e-textbook initiative and thinking about how we can demonstrate impact and, crucially, provide evidence to the University that will support a case for ongoing investment. BibliU provides us with access to an analytics dashboard where we can monitor a range of usage and performance data and use these to understand how our students are engaging with the content and, perhaps, eventually even look at potential correlations between e-textbook access and student progress and attainment. It is worth noting that university libraries are currently operating in

5 a heavily regulated sector where the 'outcomes' of HEIs are closely scrutinized by the Office for Students (OfS) who will not hesitate to respond to the smallest sign of perceived weak performance. For the library at Edge Hill, we see e-textbooks as a crucial part of a package of services that will improve student satisfaction and success through these difficult times and beyond. Even so, it is clear that the cost of e-textbooks is not sustainable and unless publishers are willing to adopt fairer and more affordable access models, libraries will be hard-pressed to find the funds in increasingly strained budgets. This presents a considerable risk to libraries and their parent institutions.

Post-pandemic, we believe print will continue to play a role in our future collection development strategy at Edge Hill, particularly for some disciplines, and we are looking forward to the days when we can once again encourage students to make full use of our physical library facilities and collections. However, we expect to see that print will be increasingly augmented by digital provision and, for the time being at least, our primary approach to purchasing will remain a 'digital first' one. Although the pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated the adoption of digital, the benefits of e-textbooks to students have been acknowledged by academic libraries for some time⁶ and at Edge Hill we believe that establishing an e-textbook programme is more than just a means to an end. E-textbook access is framed in the context of a broader institutional philosophy that aspires to provide an inclusive and accessible education for all our students. These values are more important now than ever.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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