

# Research in progress: the institution as e-textbook publisher project

The advent of e-book and open access publishing has not yet been as potent as some would hope (and others fear) in its disruption of commercial textbook publishing. However, universities are under increasing pressure to provide students with all the resources they need for their courses, without further cost to the student. Jisc is funding four teams to produce eight e-textbooks to test the processes, expertise required and outcomes when universities take on the job of publishing course texts themselves. With five books now published, and two years since the start of the project, some of the differences in the strategies adopted by the teams are starting to emerge. Teams have reflected on what they have learned and might change if they published more titles, and offer some advice for others considering similar projects.

## Introduction

Jisc's mission is to enable UK further and higher education to exploit the full possibilities of technology and content and get the best value for money. Open access (OA) publishing and digital publishing may offer the promise of possible cost savings and an enhanced user experience as compared to traditional print models, but progress in the area of core textbook publishing has been slow. Jisc has been interested in the evolution and use of e-books for a long time, and undertook an in-depth study of a range of course texts in the Jisc national e-books observatory project<sup>1</sup> from 2007–2010. Of the many findings, it noted that course texts as e-books were popular with students due to the convenience they offer, with almost a third of use off campus and at all times of the day to fit busy lifestyles. The study highlighted the important role the library plays in provision of e-textbooks, with more than half of users using library-provided copies. E-textbooks were also deemed a potential solution by the libraries that participated in the study – offering an opportunity to support those high-demand, short-loan titles and overcome student dissatisfaction at peak times of use. The report suggested that the availability of e-textbooks had little impact on print sales to students and that as sales of print textbooks were under pressure with students having less disposable income, the need to find viable and sustainable business models would only intensify. The later e-textbooks business models trial<sup>2</sup> attempted to find such a model with commercial suppliers, but results were inconclusive.



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Since the observatory project, we have seen the introduction of higher student fees and a rise in students' expectations that their fees should include all essential course materials. Universities, under pressure to improve their scores in the National Student Survey and to present an attractive offer to prospective students, have implemented new policies such as 'no hidden costs' and have been experimenting with textbook provision. Three notable examples are Coventry University,<sup>3</sup> University of Manchester<sup>4</sup> and Plymouth University.<sup>5</sup>

Although successful, these schemes are not suitable for every institution or course and require high levels of investment in both the acquisition of the content and administration of the schemes. An alternative to commercial offerings would be to harness OA offerings, although most activity to date in the UK has been in journal or monograph publishing, rather than in textbooks. In the USA, however, there are a number of schemes that aim to replace expensive, commercial textbooks with home-grown alternatives, most of which are freely available OA and have been written and published by the institution. Amongst these,

274 MERLOT II<sup>6</sup> is probably the oldest and largest, with OpenStax,<sup>7</sup> that has some interesting commercial partners, being one of the newer entrants.

Yet there are differences between textbooks produced for a European audience and those published in the USA that sharing a common language cannot remedy. Over the last two or three years there has also been renewed interest, particularly in the library community, in re-establishing the concept of the university press, with some notable new presses appearing in the last year or so.<sup>8</sup> With the introduction in the UK of higher fees for courses, students expect to find their required reading available at no extra cost, so the idea that the university itself should produce their textbooks seems entirely logical. It is therefore an interesting and appropriate moment for Jisc to be providing the funding that enables a few universities to experiment with publishing their own textbooks. In the institution as e-textbook publisher project, the overarching question the project seeks to answer is: Will the institution as e-textbook creator help students by providing a more affordable higher education, and promote a better, more sustainable information environment for libraries, students and faculty?<sup>9</sup>

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## The project

Following a call for participation (CFP), four teams were selected to take part in a three-year project from April 2014. Teams were expected to commission, produce and publish two textbooks each, in their chosen disciplines and topics, using the production methods, business and licensing models, distribution and marketing channels they had selected. The CFP did not stipulate what these should be, but the textbooks had to be benchmarked against commercial alternatives and provide the kind of functionality expected by lecturers and students to support a range of contemporary learning activities. The project plan was that the books should be written and produced during the first year and published soon after, leaving a further one to two years for evaluation and data collection to assess the effectiveness, suitability and sustainability of these particular books and the underlying project concepts themselves. The project books are very varied. We have short, lower-level texts for undergraduates through to complex, lengthy books aimed at practitioners, in both niche topics and popular disciplines with large enrolments.

'the textbooks had to be benchmarked against commercial alternatives'

The team from the University of Liverpool is working in partnership with Liverpool University Press. They selected an undergraduate business module with large home enrolments and a distance-learning cohort in China that makes it both difficult and expensive if they rely on supplying commercial texts for the course. *Essentials of Financial Management* by Jason Laws will be published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. The book will be OA and freely available using the Xerte platform which is open source software created by the University of Nottingham for interactive learning resources.

The Liverpool team's second book is aimed at undergraduates in History, again with a large home enrolment and competing with a range of commercially produced texts. However, *Using Primary Sources*, edited by Jon Hogg, takes a different approach, utilizing the University of Liverpool Library's special collections as an integral part of the book to present a visually rich experience. It will be published on a CC BY-NC-ND licence OA, on the BiblioBoard platform, which is a commercial platform used by museums and libraries to curate digital collections. Both books will be marketed using the Press's normal promotional channels and distributed alongside the rest of their lists.

The team from Nottingham have already published both their books. *Applied Ethics* by Christopher Woodard and Isabel Gois is for philosophy undergraduates and suitable as an introduction for more general readers. Commercial alternatives tend to cover more topics and so represent poor value to students (and the university) because students are not

275 required to go beyond the module's content. It was published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA) licence. The team chose two main distribution channels, Apple iBooks and Smashwords, and the book is available in multiple formats: EPUB, iBooks Author (.iba), MOBI, PDF, RTFLRF, PDP, .text and HTML.

Nottingham's second book was chosen to support a new module from Nottingham Business School which has close links to the Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability (ICRS), which is a new, not-for-profit organization. There are commercial alternatives, but this was seen as an opportunity to create something more dynamic than existing texts. The business model chosen was freemium – some parts would be available OA, with other parts available only to University of Nottingham students (at several different levels), or members of the ICRS. *Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability in Practice*, edited by Paul Caulfield, is suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students and professionals. It was created with Xerte, Nottingham's open source software, and the preface and first three chapters are OA. Distribution and promotion are via the University's courses and the ICRS, whose members are granted access to the full content.

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UCL (University College London) Press is a university-supported, new venture in OA publishing. The two books from this team are both in more niche topics where commercial alternatives are not completely suitable for UCL's courses and can be expensive. *Textbook of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* is edited by Deepak Kalaskar, Peter Butler and Shadi Ghali and was published in July 2016. Written by experts from the Royal Free Hospital London, it is a lengthy and highly illustrated book with comprehensive coverage, making it suitable for practitioners who wish to further their careers. The text is available OA as a PDF, or to purchase in ePub or print options from the UCL Press platform. It is also available as a free YUDU app.

The UCL team's second textbook will be published in part in late 2016 on the UCL Discovery platform and fully in 2017. *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology*, edited by Gabriel Moshenska, is aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students at UCL and a growing number of students of this field internationally. Each chapter can be used independently to allow maximum flexibility. Publication options will be the same as for the plastic surgery text once fully published. Both books use a CC BY-NC-ND licence and will be marketed and distributed in the same way. In addition to featuring these titles on the UCL Press website in PDF format, they will also be featured on/uploaded to: Jisc project website, UCL Discovery (repository), UCL Press enhanced monograph platform, Apple/Google app store, OAPEN, Internet Archive, Unglue.it, JSTOR and Ingenta Open (from late 2016). UCL Press will be selling commercial versions of the book (through their distributor, NBN International) in hardback, paperback, EPUB and Kindle formats.

The Scottish team is a collaboration between the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and Edinburgh Napier University ('Napier'). Both their books have published, and are short, introductory-level texts in the area of undertaking research. *How to Write a Research Dissertation* by Frank Rennie and Keith Smyth is a practical guide to the main steps in the process and has advice for all stages to be completed. It is complemented by *Undertaking Your Research Project* by Keith Smyth, Frank Rennie, Gareth Davies, Matt Sillars and co-authors, which is a broad overview of the main research stages and full of practical advice. Both books are suitable for undergraduates and postgraduates on a wide range of courses, aimed at offering practical guidance and boosting confidence rather than detailed discussion of different research methodologies.

Each is supported by an OA website offering multimedia, extra resources and activities to supplement the books. The books themselves are published on Amazon's Kindle platform at low cost (£1.99) to encourage the widest possible uptake internationally. There are a number of possible commercial alternatives, ranging from more comprehensive volumes around £25 to similarly brief versions at low cost. This approach allows comparisons to be made of Amazon rankings in appropriate genres of all comparable titles.

Our four teams are covering a range of possible approaches to e-textbook provision for different students whose needs and levels vary. There is no one 'correct' approach because not only do students and courses vary, but each institution has its own priorities and goals, and these should be taken into consideration alongside the actual process of producing the texts themselves.

'There is no one "correct" approach'

## Lessons learned from the first two years

The project has now been running for over two years. In the last year, five of the eight books have been published, and the remaining three are in the final stages of development with publication or internal university publication imminent. At this stage it is too early to judge the success of any title by use or sales, because modules usually run only once per year and sometimes less frequently than this. However, teams have gained some valuable insights into the processes and possible pitfalls involved.

All teams had selected the books they would produce when responding to the CFP, and many had based their selections on existing course materials to make the writing process as efficient as possible. Despite this, the most obvious lesson is that writing a book takes longer than you think. The biggest challenge so far has been the delay to schedules because the content was not available at the times predicted, delaying the next stages in producing the book. And for the project, this also means that the evaluation stage of the project has been delayed.

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It is always a good idea to build in some extra time to allow for the inevitable delays that a proportion of authors will experience due simply to life intervening – illness, house moves, new jobs, extra responsibilities and the like. However, the most striking aspect for project authors has been the difference where proper allowance against other duties (teaching, management, admin) has been made according to the university's work load model and those where it has not. If institutions are to scale up such initiatives, or even if running a trial, it is essential that proper allowance is provided to authors and editors to ensure that schedules can be met and the project run efficiently.

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Even with proper allowances made, authors are often a little optimistic in their estimates of writing. Course material may seem comprehensive, but the work involved in turning it into structured, flowing prose with the right kind of pedagogical signposting can take longer than expected. The approach to using third-party material is frequently somewhat lackadaisical in the lecture theatre, but this will not do once the content goes public. Tracing, clearing and sometimes finding suitable alternatives for third-party items (such as tables, diagrams, photographs, extracts and so on) can be time-consuming. Inexperienced authors may not even be aware of the need for this job at all when they embark on book writing.

Other delays have been due to the nature of particular books being produced. Unsurprisingly, the simplest, shortest volumes have been quicker to complete than longer, more complex ones. Liverpool's *Using Primary Sources* for example is over 200,000 words long, has multiple contributors and the requirement that each chapter has appropriate archive items scanned from library resources. In total, there are more than 200 of these. The majority are from University of Liverpool Library's own special collections, but not all. Some have required liaison with other libraries and some of Liverpool's own material turned out to be so fragile that in-house scanning could not be used, necessitating the use of specialist, external scanning services. This has added time to the schedule that was not anticipated at the start of the project.

277 All our teams have embraced the idea of e-textbooks (as opposed to print) with enthusiasm, and all had some experience of producing either electronic learning resources or entire e-books. However, all have found opportunities for learning new skills. In part this is because the project funding has enabled some innovative experiments, rather than sticking to the tried and tested. But it is also because textbook publishing is only just beginning to exploit these possibilities and the field is developing rapidly.

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One of the lessons to have emerged is the need for early discussions between authors and technical teams. Authors may either have expectations that the technology can do things it cannot, or be unaware of the possibilities presented to move through their content in novel ways in comparison to printed books. Trying to backwards-fit content to platforms and software can be a source of delays. Another, but related problem was experienced by the team from Nottingham who have experimented with the freemium model of offering some content OA, but restricting access to other parts, in their *Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability in Practice*. This was a requirement from the copyright holders of some of the content, the ICRS, who also collaborated with Nottingham Business School to produce the new content. The book has five different levels of user, each with different access. The main problem was finding a way to authenticate the four groups who could access the parts of the book that were open to them only. At the project outset, not only had the technological solution not been identified, but the exact parts of the content for each group had still to be decided. This proved to be much trickier than anticipated, again with implications for the schedule, although it was resolved eventually by using Xerte online toolkits.

'Trying to backwards-fit content to platforms and software can be a source of delays'

It is rather too early to comment on dissemination and embedding as some texts are still to publish and others have only been available for a few weeks. However, we have found differences between teams on the early adoption of the texts, although this may be reversed at a later date. Nottingham's *Applied Ethics* was written specifically to support one module in the philosophy department by the current teaching team. It covers only the topics taught on the five seminars in the module, and students are told that so long as they read all of the book, they do not need to find other sources to pass. The book has been used for one cohort already and is available via the university virtual learning environment (VLE). Results indicate that it has been popular with the students to whom it was available.

In contrast, UHI with Napier's books appeal to a much wider audience, but were not written to support any specific module at either university. The project has received a great deal of interest from lecturing staff, and the first book has a steady sales profile apart from positive surges at the beginning of term. To date, the team is not aware of any course that has adopted either book, however. In common with many universities, UHI and Napier have a policy that course reading lists and adoptions require a committee decision to make changes to existing lists, so progress is inevitably slower for new adoptions.

The Scottish team chose the Amazon self-publication route for a number of reasons, including a ready-made shop window and global marketing and distribution, along with easy measurement of the performance of their own titles and comparable ones. But there are also drawbacks, such as the embargo on using any other distributor for an initial period of time, and university library policies that frequently prevent the purchase of device-specific titles because not all patrons have them. An important consideration for universities exploring publishing their own e-textbooks is therefore the choice of platform and other technologies.

## Early recommendations for institutions wanting to explore this option

Although the project has yet to reach any firm conclusions, it is possible to make some suggestions that may be of use for others, particularly with the earliest stages of new

278 ventures. Most of these relate to strategy and planning, which are the foundations of success in most projects, and many of which our teams were required to consider as they drew up their proposals in response to the CFP. The suggestions are as follows:

- Find out what the priorities are at an institutional level with which your venture could assist. For example, a commitment to providing resources for students to widen participation, or finding an aspect of the university to showcase such as library special collections, or improving employability skills. Try to match your aims with these.
- Decide if your goals are longer or shorter term ones. Publishing ventures are never very short term, but longer, more complex books will take longer to write and produce, books without a clearly defined home audience may take longer to show usage results. Define how you will measure success against your goals, for example is the home institution the most important audience, or a wider one?
- Consider all aspects of copyright for the books, and whether the licence will be a CC one, or something more conventional. Even if the licence for the work will be CC, decide if you need to formalise the relationship with authors with a contract. Do not forget to instruct authors about third-party material and permissions.
- Discuss writing times not only with the authors themselves, but ideally with their managers too. Try to negotiate allowances against their other duties to allow them time to write. Can you offer your authors any other reward?
- Investigate available technologies early, and make the choices in consultation with the academics who are producing the content. Choice of publishing platform and format can have a bearing on who will distribute or have access to the content.

## Conclusions

Our project is now moving into the evaluation phase, where our aim will be to assess the experiences gained, the processes, implications for the future and, of course, the books themselves. The project will be assessed using both qualitative and quantitative measures. We still have three books to publish, but early indications are favourable as can be seen in the example below.

One of the first books to publish was for a module that has run once since its publication. *Applied Ethics* from Nottingham is available (in its entirety) as a free download in multiple formats from Smashwords and the iBooks Store. By the end of July 2016 there had been 521 downloads from Smashwords. In addition, three chapters were placed on Moodle (the university's VLE) and 'Introduction' was accessed 155 times. The chapter 'Abortion' was accessed 240 times. The chapter 'Allocating Scarce Resources' was accessed 61 times. As a comparison, Nottingham University library holds nine copies of *Applied Ethics* by Peter Singer, identified as one of the nearest commercial alternatives. They had been borrowed a total of 325 times since 2000. All other comparable titles had been borrowed fewer times.

Further details about the project can be accessed via the project website,<sup>10</sup> where you will find annual reports for the first two years of the project and other news under 'News and progress'.

### 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 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

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### Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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