Summary of the 2016 institution as e-textbook publisher annual reports

The textbooks

Our project teams chose very different disciplines, topics, levels and sizes of textbook for this project. All fulfilled a need of some kind and all had to have certain practical criteria met – typically an author or editor with the necessary skill and enthusiasm to engage with the project at fairly short notice. We have two short, general texts in the area of research or study methodology from the UHI with Napier team that are suitable for both undergraduate and postgraduate use, a large undergraduate business textbook from Liverpool, a short introductory philosophy text from Nottingham, an undergraduate to masters-level, niche business text from Nottingham, a professional-level, highly specialised surgery text from UCL, a history research methods text from Liverpool to showcase their library’s special collections, and a text on public archaeology from UCL suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate use.

The competitor landscape has changed little in the two years since the project began. No new major competitors for any of the books has emerged, but the Scottish team have reported an increase in the number of short and low-price texts in the relevant Amazon genres for their titles. All the teams except UHI with Napier have chosen to use Open Access (OA) with a Creative Commons (CC) licence under which to publish, mostly with some element that can be purchased as an optional extra. UHI with Napier are testing the Amazon self-publication model, which means that their books have to be made available on commercial terms i.e. they are sold, not given away unless there is a special promotion, so that Amazon can also make money on the publication in return for use of their platform and shop window. Their books’ copyright is owned by the university (as an employer) since CC was not an option for this method of publication.

Apart from the Scottish team, whose choice of Amazon dictated that a (albeit low) price had to be attached, all other teams chose OA and CC licences to enable the widest possible use of the content firstly by students at the home institution and secondly, anyone else. This was because the project called for a test of alternatives to the models employed by the commercial publishing industry, where prices for textbooks are typically high. Similarly, the UHI with Napier team chose a price which they felt presented no barrier for students, gave maximal return to the university, and compared favourably to the available alternatives. UCL’s new Press is founded on the OA principle throughout, Liverpool University Press is experimenting with these models, and Nottingham had created open-source software for Open Educational Resources (OERs) in their Xerte platform, so the concepts and practices are in line with existing institutional ethos and practice for all project teams. In terms of a business model, all are somewhat experimental and the project is allowing them to be tested without excessive financial risk to the HEI.

Choice of distribution method was largely dependent upon existing processes for three of our teams. The UCL team are using their own platform and the same channels as the rest of UCL Press for additional items, in line with Press policy. The Liverpool team have chosen two different platforms but are using Liverpool University Press channels for distribution and promotion. Nottingham has used its established OER distribution platform (Xerte) as well as different formats such as ibooks and smashwords to distribute the content as widely as possible, and in the case of the business book, has collaborated with a learned society to increase promotion and facilitate distribution through their channels as well. The team from UHI with Napier decided that Amazon provided a ready-made, professional, global distribution channel that would save them from developing their own distribution networks for just two books.

Content creation and publication

Most of the project teams have used conventional methods for creating content: finding an author or editor, discussing and agreeing the proposed book plan, and then largely leaving authors to get on with the work, whilst being available to support as required. This method is tried and tested and works in academic publishing because the author is the expert in their field and has ownership of the finished book. However, none of the project books (except the business textbook from Liverpool) was written by a single author, with co-authors or edited collections used extensively. One of the ways project books differ from commercial alternatives is this greater use of collaborative writing techniques, where authors are more likely to feel they are engaged on a community project.
All teams took longer than planned to reach a stage where a draft manuscript was ready to start work on to turn it into a finished publication. Schedules at the beginning were tight to comply with the project’s time-limited duration, and the usual delays that beset many publishing projects then happened. These were for a variety of reasons, some of which can be expected such as changes in employment to another institution, extra responsibilities being taken on, and personal reasons such as sickness or moving home. However, all teams reported that it would be helpful if authors were given better allowances against their teaching and other duties to enable them to commit more time to writing as most felt that they had not been given sufficient.

UHI with Napier held regular project team meetings to discuss the project plan, and used a team of authors to create content for the supporting websites (which are OA). They found that discussion around content creation was valuable and held some ‘writing sprints’ to alleviate writers’ block and to encourage and coach less-experienced authors. Despite this, content creation took longer than planned originally.

Nottingham also experienced some delays but still managed to publish both textbooks during this year. Their most challenging issues for the schedule were more to do with agreeing with the authors of the business book what interactive elements there should be, and how to achieve the freemium model of allowing access to different parts of the content to different groups of users, in order to comply with what the learned society (who held the publishing rights to some of the content) were prepared to give and how this would integrate with the new content.

Liverpool’s schedules were always longer, but have still suffered some slippage. The author of the business text had increased teaching duties and found that some material he planned to use was not OA and had to be substituted. The history text is a complex edited collection requiring co-ordination with scanned material from library collections, which has also caused delays.

UCL experienced author delays too. Their plastic surgery text involved teacher-practitioners, who had to put their clinical responsibilities ahead of writing time. Their second text, another edited collection but on archaeology, has also been late being delivered, for the common reason that edited collections tend to have to progress convoy-like at the speed of the slowest authors.

Once the content has arrived, the next stage is to begin the work of turning the files received into the finished product, and this has been a learning experience in some way for all our teams, even though all had experience of publishing either learning resources or full books. The actual process depends very much on the complexity of the material and what end results are desired. The full report from Nottingham contains a wealth of detail about the production of the different formats of each of their books, and what to do or not do for each. They employed a technical developer to assist with the process and decisions required. The UHI with Napier team were producing for Amazon’s Kindle format which was relatively straightforward given that they have a learning resources team used to similar tasks, and the books were short. In contrast, for one textbook Liverpool have been using Biblioboard, a commercial platform often used by libraries and museums for collections of audio, visual and textual works to present them in a useful way. However, this textbook is a departure because it integrates new material with existing items. They needed to work with Biblioboard to adjust some of the functionality to suit the book, and the library staff also undertook scanning of material from the Liverpool special collections. This operation was very time-consuming and some material too fragile to be scanned in-house, necessitating the use of specialist facilities – something which was unforeseen at the start of the project. UCL’s surgery text is also heavily illustrated, but they chose to use a supplier, YUDU, to develop the app for them to deliver the functionality required. All teams report that the project has provided them with valuable learning opportunities about how best to tackle the various options and formats available for modern ebooks, which can be applied to any future work they undertake.

Embedding, dissemination, promotion

For all our teams, this is a process that is on-going. Most titles have not been published long (all less than one year) and two books have only been available a few weeks. Three titles are forthcoming and planned for publication over the next six months. So the process of spreading the news and raising awareness is at an early stage.
Nottingham’s *Applied Ethics* title shows how a specific module is served by the project book, which has been embedded into teaching resources. In 2015/16, three chapters of the book were used as a core text for the module V71APE Applied Ethics (128 students). They were listed in the reading list and embedded in the Moodle page for the module. Their second textbook published in April 2016, but the first cohort of Nottingham students scheduled to use it will not be starting the course until September 2016. Nottingham’s method of publishing OERs includes advice on ‘cataloguing, circulation and connections’ all of which contribute to promotional activity and is detailed in the full report.

UHI with Napier have also published both books, but neither has been written for any specific module, being instead aimed at a wider market. They have found lecturers are interested in the project, but less in adopting the titles it produces than in the idea of being authors of their own texts. Adoptions of textbooks are subject to university rules, and changes require approval from a committee (not just one person), meaning that this is likely to be a slow process. Nevertheless, one book has been adopted for a Geography B.Sc.

Liverpool and UCL have still to publish most of their titles, with UCL’s first text published in late July. They can both benefit from the regular promotional activities such as catalogues and conference attendance that professional publishing operations perform because they have a number of books in similar areas. They also benefit from being known by potential readers and adopters as a place to seek titles of interest. Both will be utilising all their regular marketing activities and channels to promote the project books.

**Costs, effort and resourcing**

All our project teams have experience either of producing OERs or of traditional publishing processes. Nevertheless, they all found things to surprise them when working on the books for the project, whether it was because the type of book was very different, such as the history title from Liverpool that integrates library content, or the way the team was so diverse and had to invent new ways of working together when using a new system like publishing on Amazon, as the team from UHI with Napier found. The plans for budgeted costs and resources have varied accordingly, as may be expected with any new venture, and the full reports from each team provide details of where this occurred. Frequently, it has been difficult for teams to separate the time spent learning about how best to work in new ways from the actual work for the book itself. Overall however, most teams have managed their financial and other resources sensibly, with no major deficits or surpluses to report at this stage.

**Sustainability and viability**

All the project teams have made provision to ensure that the books produced from the project will remain available and most have planned for updates. This section however is more concerned with the concept of the project itself and its sustainability and viability. All teams have given this considerable thought, and all have been canvassing senior leadership within their home institutions to raise support for the idea of continuing and expanding the work started in this project. All have found favourable responses, ranging from the commitment by UCL to support UCL Press in its OA publishing operations for an unspecified period, to the generally favourable but “no promises” responses from Nottingham, Liverpool and UHI with Napier. To date, we have published five of the planned eight titles and teams feel that many of the questions associated with viability and sustainability of the project require more time after publication to assess questions such as how successful the business model, licensing or distribution arrangements have been. All agree that the focus for convincing institutional leaders has to be around student satisfaction, enhancement of teaching and learning, and reputation-building for the HEI involved, however that may best be achieved.

**Benchmarking and evaluation**

Evaluation is underway for all books published and responses we have had so far have been largely positive. The next stage of the project will focus on collection of data to enable evaluation of different aspects more fully. Authors joined the project mainly because they were supportive of OA in general, or of providing no/very low-cost textbooks for the benefit of students. Most were not paid anything financial, although Liverpool has made some provision to pay authors a fee on publication of the book. Other authors were given time off from their teaching duties in lieu of payment, but not all, and even those who were considered it insufficient, in the
main. Some wrote for no reward at all other than the satisfaction of being part of the project and having their name associated with the publication. The majority would do it again.

Student surveys and reviews from lecturers who were not the authors, is also planned and underway. In general, students are divided about how much they like ebooks in comparison to printed textbooks, but most will use ebooks without much thought. Where the alternative to an ebook is no access to the content at all, they prefer to have it. From the small amount of feedback from students who have tested draft or published books so far, the books have been compared favourably to alternatives, but they did not feel that provision of a free textbook alone would influence their choice of module.

An interesting point is made by the Scottish team: when comparing the cost of a home-published book against the commercial alternatives, its price is only one part. The total cost should include the total cost of acquiring all the titles for the module (often one book alone is unsuitable) as well as the cost of holding and providing access to them.

**Project communication**

The project (and its publications) have been communicated to the wider HE community both around the UK and overseas by members of the project teams and by Vivien Ward of Jisc Collections. A Jisc Digifest workshop in March attracted an audience keen to hear more about the project to assist their own thinking as several HEIs are in the process of producing their own publications or are evaluating the benefits and possible difficulties before launching a programme.

**Critical reflection on the project so far**

This project was conceived to meet a growing demand from universities for a change in the way textbook content was made available to them and their students. Whatever the eventual outcomes and conclusions, it will have been a very useful experiment not only for those taking part, but for the many others interested in trials of innovative publishing. With this in mind, the criteria for taking part were not prescriptive, but welcoming of different styles, methods, models and motives.

We have achieved variety: in the type of HEI and student population, the subject areas covered, the size and complexity of the textbooks produced, the experience of the authors and the rest of the team and resources available already, and the likely use within and outside the home institution. Making comparisons between books within the project is therefore not very useful in terms of costs, time taken, number used/sold, and similar measures. What is perhaps more useful is to compare the approaches taken to issues such as selection of subject area, size and complexity.

Commercial (publishing) wisdom is that there should be a market for what you intend to produce and all our books have addressed what they see as a market gap. For some, this is because there is nothing or very little available in the subject, as in Nottingham’s *Corporate Social Responsibility* and UCL’s *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, and their second title *Public Archaeology*. Liverpool’s *Using Primary Sources* stands out from the crowd because of its use of the scanned special collections content alongside the text. UHI with Napier have chosen a much larger market potentially, and compete with a range of alternative texts on price, ease of use, and length. Nottingham’s *Applied Ethics* title is in a similar position. However, received wisdom from the commercial publishing world was always that this latter strategy is associated with more risk than a niche publication. It is much harder to make sufficient profit from small, cheap books than bigger, expensive ones, even if the market is smaller. It is simply a case of the amount of investment and resources required against the sheer number of sales needed when prices are low. The books in this project are either no or low cost, so price will never be a barrier and profit not the main goal. But there is another, sales-related factor. Commercial publishers always consider their channels as well as the individual book project. For this project, the main ‘channel’ will be the home institutions’ use of the book. Liverpool’s second title is a business textbook. Although far from niche and positioned alongside a number of heavy-weight competitors, it has the advantage of a large home enrolment as well as a big distance-learning course. Both are likely to have good uptake of the title because it is bespoke to the course and free of charge, surely a winning combination. It will be interesting to see if the project books do indeed follow the ‘rules’ as there are always surprise winners and losers in publishing,
but the difficulty of the general market and channel availability are worth consideration for others thinking of following suit.

Related to this is the question of how best to make available the books produced. Amazon is very appealing in a number of ways, not least of which is that it is so well-known and has a global reach. The disadvantage is that many libraries will not acquire any content that is device-specific because they have to serve all patrons, and the embargo Amazon puts on the use of other distributors. Other formats such as ibook have similar advantages and disadvantages, as do pdfs and epub. There is also the question of whether it is desirable for print copies to be made available. The main question should always be “who will need this book and what would serve their needs best?” The answers will point to a strategy that is more likely to be successful than simply choosing what seems most convenient to the producer or one that appeals to the widest audience.

This raises the question of what is considered success – what would it be, beyond the provision of a no/low cost textbook that saves the library and students money compared to a commercial alternative? In general, it is unlikely that the cost to the institution will be matched or out-stripped by any revenue gained from the sale of alternative formats, so making a surplus, even one that would be re-invested, is likely to be a very long-term goal indeed. Publishing is not the area to choose if you seek a quick return-on-investment, but a steady, slow burn at best. (This was why Thomson got involved in holidays, where the product is paid for weeks in advance, to balance their existing publishing activities.)

But there are numerous other benefits to consider. The National Student Survey (NSS) asks students about resources in general and library resources, so providing free/low cost textbooks should be a crowd-pleaser. NSS scores matter to universities because they are part of the Key Information Sets (KIS) provided to new students when choosing a university, and affect their position in league tables.

There is research that shows that the amount of time spent on task is a much better predictor of student success than number of contact hours, for example (Gibbs, 2014). Provision of a free (or almost free), relevant and well-written textbook is more likely to encourage students to engage with the content and spend time on topic than sending them to the library or bookshop. Crucially, Gibbs (2010) also identifies that who is doing the teaching is important, so staff development is a vital ingredient to good quality teaching.

Our teams have used some innovative approaches to content creation. On the whole it has been a much more collaborative, team effort than a traditional publishing experience, and one that has been beneficial to those taking part, making them consider and evaluate their own teaching techniques, or having the benefit of an editor or ‘critical friend’ to comment. The value of this is shown by the interest in writing their own books found by the UHI with Napier team and the authors who are prepared to do it again.

Widening access is again rising in importance for university managers with the abolition of all maintenance grants and a rise in tuition fees imminent, so the provision of no/low cost textbooks has relevance here. Even in Scotland, where there are no tuition fees, it is a matter of equality of provision because a dispersed organisation like UHI has students without access to a physical library. Distance learning courses from all universities suffer in the same way because many commercial textbooks are either unavailable as ebooks at all, or unavailable to university libraries.

Equality of access and saving money for students has been the biggest driver for similar projects from the USA e.g. MERLOT II, probably the largest and oldest. We emphasise this aspect less because there has never been such a strong expectation in the UK that students will each spend hundreds of pounds buying textbooks, but it is still a consideration. What is perhaps more relevant to the UK is the increase in student expectation that all the resources they need for their course will be provided for them because they pay fees. This has led a number of universities to set up schemes to purchase suitable textbooks to give to every student on the course, which comes at a very considerable cost financially and in other resources, to administer. In comparison to this, the project books begin to make more sense financially.

Evaluation of all aspects of the project is our next priority. Up to this point, all have been prioritising content creation and production, and there are still three books to publish. Although this is a natural consequence perhaps of a tight project schedule, and there are many tasks that cannot be undertaken until the books have been used by students, teams might have paid a little more attention to this earlier. Lecturers and students are
difficult to track down, surveys take time to construct and response rates are often low, everyone is always busy. But valuable information about comparable titles could have been gathered well before our titles published. We have some bibliographic and library usage data, but some qualitative data on what students and lecturers thought about existing titles, which they bought or otherwise acquired (if any), and their feelings about textbooks in general would have been useful. We have very little information on this to date, despite best efforts in pointing out to teams the desirability of collecting it. These data can still be collected of course, alongside data on the project books.

Promotion outside the team’s own HEIs has been limited so far. Effective promotion requires at least some draft material to be available, and ideally the entire book. Commercial publishers usually publish almost one year prior to the beginning of the semester during which they expect most sales, in order to allow for lecturers to consider inspection copies, adopt and make any changes required.

In publishers’ focus groups, students often give their reason for not purchasing a text being that there is too much redundancy and they don’t want to pay for something they won’t use. One of the advantages of the HEI publishing a book is that it will be perfect for the course for which it is written. But what is bespoke for one course will not necessarily be right for the course down the road, in fact British academics often pride themselves on having unique versions of a course to attract students to their university. This could make promotion outside the home institution more difficult, and with little or no money likely to change hands for OA textbooks there seems little incentive for the publishing HEI to use scarce resources in this way.

The two teams with existing publishing operations (UCL and Liverpool) will slot the project books into their normal promotional activities, and they have shared what they do with the other teams. But while it is a small cost to add a couple of extra titles to a catalogue or leaflet, or a trip to a relevant conference they would attend anyway, the same cannot be said for an HEI without an existing publishing programme.

Some kind of central co-ordination may be the way to address some of these issues for the future. Sharing costs between several institutions, aiding discovery of resources, co-ordinating the creation of more granular content so that a number of courses can be served by what is produced, and perhaps arranging bulk prices for the purchase of publishing and promotional services, could make the whole operation a more attractive proposition for a larger number of HEIs.

The project is not an answer in itself, but an exploration of what is and may become possible when new approaches are developed. The experiences of the teams may spark new ideas in others, and encourage a wider cultural change in the academic learning and teaching community.

References


The full reports

University of Liverpool
University of Nottingham
University College London
University of the Highlands and Islands with Edinburgh Napier University