Better Together: How the alliance between Liaison Librarians and Academic staff can drive change in eBook provision

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Liaison Librarians have always worked in partnership with academic staff, but those partnerships have assumed increased significance over the past year as academic libraries have worked relentlessly to provide access to the content required to enable academics to teach effectively and for students to learn successfully.

At the University of Liverpool, the pandemic accelerated the direction of travel towards an e-first policy for content acquisition – a simple concept, but far from simple in practice. Managing staff and student expectations is difficult when there is a confusing and often nonsensical picture: why hasn't the Library got this eBook, it's on Amazon Kindle? Why can't I download this eBook to read offline? Why can't you get this eBook, it is listed on the publisher website? Why can't I access this eBook, I know three of my classmates are using it right now? I need the 4th edition, but the Library only has the 3rd edition online. I used this eBook last year but now I can't find it…repeat to fade.

The campaign to investigate the academic eBook market has brought these issues, particularly in relation to textbook provision, to the fore, making them headline news (see the Guardian, the BBC and WonkHE). The campaign continues, but in the meantime, library liaison teams have the opportunity - or duty? - to use their influence to engage with academic colleagues on these issues and highlight how the current models impact on the student experience.

Librarians are naturally helpful: we want our users to access the information they need with the least amount of intervention required on their part. Behind the scenes, library teams are

working to source, test, negotiate, purchase and promote collections to ensure seamless access. However, it might be beneficial to unveil the reality of our 'messy' working environment: licensing negotiations, authentication hoops, eye-watering prices and all. Let's have open and frank conversations with academic colleagues about what providing access to their textbook of choice actually entails.

The Liverpool approach

In June 2020, the Liaison and Collections teams at the University of Liverpool discussed the way forward for content provision and how to manage user expectations in a hybrid/online teaching environment. The Liaison team circulated a paper to academic staff outlining how the Library planned to provide content to support teaching and learning in the new environment. The paper marked a noticeable shift in the way the Library engaged with academics and positioned the Library squarely as a partner in learning and teaching delivery. The message was clear that "we can do X…but we need you to do Y". Whilst this message has always been implicit in our discussions with academic departments, the paper explicitly put that message front and centre.

We also signalled our move to an e-first policy. As a historically well-funded library, we have been fortunate to be able to purchase print or e-versions of texts according to user preference, and moving to e-first was a significant shift. Our aim was to be explicit and transparent about the complex eBook environment, whilst maintaining a balance between informing but not overwhelming academics with excessive detail. We defined what 'eTextbook' meant for us at Liverpool and created clear descriptions of DDA and EBA arrangements for colleagues who wanted to learn more.

Additionally, we enhanced the promotion of online reading lists as the means by which students could easily access resources from off-campus. The multitude of online learning opportunities during spring and summer 2020 ensured the Liaison team were well-versed in the relevant vocabulary, and could clearly explain how online reading lists are ideal tools to "scaffold student learning", guiding students through the new environment and enriching the learning experience. Attendance by academic staff at our revised, pedagogically focussed reading list workshops increased significantly as our messages resonated more effectively.

But how could we engage academic colleagues in the wider issues facing the academic library community? A blog post on the staff intranet in February 2021 highlighted the #eBookSOS campaign and suggested actions that academics could take to support efforts to ensure fair access to learning resources. Libraries continue to engage with eTextbook models because there are few alternatives, however these unsustainable, subscription-based models are moving libraries away from their main purpose of providing content accessible to all.

Inspiring academics to act

If a specified title is unavailable to purchase, choosing an alternative is not always an option: what if the module leader is the author of the key text? Moreover, academics have the freedom to choose the texts which best support their teaching, and this freedom should not be

limited by publisher models. This, to quote a phrase favoured by a previous manager, is 'the tail wagging the dog'. Academics have power as content creators and can push back against publisher decisions. Liaison Librarians can use their network of contacts to inform, influence and encourage academic colleagues to drive the cultural shift required to effect real change. We have:

- Suggested that academic authors ask publishers how their content is made available to libraries and at what cost.
- Advised academics to discuss eBook models with their Liaison Librarian before signing contracts, enabling us to give a view on the publisher's approach to online content.
- Prompted academics to discuss online options if approached by publishers.
- Briefed academics to ensure they are not distracted by fancy platforms or unnecessary functionality and instead, focus on cost, restrictions and accessibility.

What next?

Some form of blended learning will likely remain across the sector, and academic colleagues will inevitably become more involved in resource discussions. To successfully influence behaviours and provide an enhanced student experience, liaison teams will need to apply the intelligence they've captured about academic and student preferences, departmental and institutional aims and curriculum developments to present solutions in ways which resonate with academics.

[Open Access monographs are one solution](#), but there is much work to do (our own [Liverpool University Press](#) are active here). Open Educational Resources (OERs) are common in the US, but different learning and teaching methods means these models do not necessarily translate as effectively across the pond. Furthermore, until institutions value the creation of teaching resources in the same way as research outputs and actively engage in supporting academics to produce OERs, progress will be minimal.

It is not a Liaison Librarian's responsibility to dictate where academics publish, or which titles they add to their reading lists, but it is their responsibility to have honest conversations with academics about the impact of their textbook choices, both financially and on the student experience.

We have real opportunities here. The [direction of travel highlighted by JISC](#) promises to mobilise the sector to capitalise on the current momentum and desire for change. In this context, the value of the trusted partnerships between liaison librarians and academic staff cannot be underestimated as we work towards creating meaningful change in eBook provision for our students.

Editor's note: for those of you who registered for the conference, you can see/read more about this issue here:

[BS32 - #Ebooksos scandal: the need for critical collection development](#)

Also possibly of interest:

BS19 - A new funding model for open-access monographs: introducing a novel approach to publishing OA books through library membership funding

BS25 - Exploring Open Access Books

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.