E-books: the Utopia for HE students

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Alex Ferguson, Liverpool Guild of Students

In 2014, I ran an SU sabbatical officer campaign at a Russell Group university, based on feedback I had gathered from a wide friendship group. Though it manifested itself in different ways, one of the biggest and reoccurring issues was around access to library resources. Once elected, I developed a wider perspective of the sector, and saw that peers at University of Birmingham, Sheffield, Hull and London's students' unions had run on very similar manifesto pledges. The issues changed from institution to institution, focusing on access to the physical library at all hours, access to education by having clearer reading lists, and even campaigning for free course textbooks bought by departments. Further to this, it is interesting that the majority of sabbatical officers I spoke to were from research intensive universities. Generally, they tend to carry a large variety of academic texts in libraries, which in turn the academics expect the students to access and use for study – all part of what it means to be educated in the Russell Group.

My manifesto pledge was 'to make all core course textbooks available as e-books'. It seems the perfect solution – reducing all the barriers I am to detail later. I was quickly informed by the liaison librarian at Liverpool that just to copy all the texts we had onto online copies would be illegal. I was intrigued to learn that textbook publishers were reluctant to move away from selling hard copies (so as to continue making revenue), and when they did produce an online copy, it was a similar price, albeit with restricted access. There is certainly a wariness around the dangers of online and the dreaded 'copyright'.

Let's highlight the barriers and issues students face when trying to access course material:

- financial barriers: a course gets a reading list at the beginning of the year, it varies from subject to subject how manageable buying that full semester's worth of textbook is. It can vary from £50 to £200. This is a hidden course cost, and a barrier to education. In a subject like law, where the cost is largest, the textbooks become out of date regularly, so old editions are harder to sell on, therefore the expense is carried beyond university.
- physical barriers: as mentioned before, research intensive universities expect students to use a wide range of textbooks. You cannot hope to buy all the textbooks. Therefore the library is essential. And lots of the most popular academic texts only exist physically, you literally cannot get them if someone else has them. Subjects like history have students racing to the library when they get an alert on their hold of *The Historian's Craft*. These books are not made available online, as they are too popular, and would cost a lot to buy an online licence for.
- communication issues: course leaders and lecturers are sometimes in the habit of not providing students with the full list of what they need to succeed on their course. Library

reading lists are given too late, and in unclear ways, which can mean that students cannot access the books.

The simple thinking behind having all the textbooks available as e-books was to give choice – there is never anything physically stopping the student from accessing information. It would stand to reason that, if the books existed as a simple PDF (a form of open access), then all students on the module requiring that textbook could access it. All of the time, from any device. Not just when in the library, on a university computer.

Whilst this is so, we know a large number of students will still prefer to buy physical copies, the same way they will sit in the library to revise rather than in the comfort of their home. The internet and online access gives you the choice, but you do not necessarily have to take it. When modules include fictional works they may be bought out of love of the work itself; some students may prefer to read text off a page, and annotate their own copy.

I still believe the case is strong for e-books. If we look at the trends in library usage and the way higher education is being taught it is unequivocal that publishers will have to allow for open access. Increasing student numbers mean more study space, and libraries need to create this study space. This means more books going into storage, and a need for other ways to access information. Alongside increasing numbers, students are paying more for education, meaning they expect more for their £9000 a year. Students' Unions will argue for the removal of financial barriers to education, and universities will more and more be expected to cover the cost of course materials (this is something the Liverpool Guild of Students is always arguing for). It is more cost-effective to provide a majority of these texts online. It is also more environmentally friendly – an increasing concern in a post-UN COP21 international community.

The biggest cultural change is the steady popularisation of online media, tablet devices and smart phones. This is the age of access, and large publishers need to think about how they allow access to their textbooks. As students organise study sessions via WhatsApp, access Blackboard online learning portals on their mobile phones, students need to be able to download their copies of *Inorganic Chemistry* and other books onto their tablet devices. The popularisation of this access means there is an appetite for online resources being made available widely. It means libraries will never run out of books, they can be updated via a couple of clicks and some online streaming year on year.

E-books might not mean the sudden death of the hard copy, and certainly does not make them defunct, but they are important for students in higher education to ensure equality in the degree and education received at the end of the day. Our university libraries are essential providers of academic resource, and will also be here, even after adapting to the marketisation of higher education and advances in technology.