

# Open Access: Open Textbooks: The Final Frontier?

**David Ball**

The economics of the textbook market have acted as a powerful brake on the appearance of e-textbooks: no wonder then that *open* textbooks are something of a rarity.

It has been estimated that 70-90% of publishers' revenue from textbooks in the UK comes direct from students, with the rest of spending being by libraries. These figures may be an exaggeration of the position, and do not reflect the full market, since they ignore the second-hand trade. However it is obvious that publishers would never make textbooks available to libraries under the same business model as scholarly monographs. It is also obvious that academic libraries would never be able, or willing, to make up the shortfall in publishers' income, or even be able to compensate for the trend towards lower overall spending by students on textbooks under the new UK regime of £9000 annual fees.

Publishers' attitudes are influenced by the world's biggest textbook market, the USA. A recent (2013) economic analysis by James V. Koch (*Turning the page: An economic analysis of the market for textbooks: Current conditions, new developments and policy options*; available at: [http://jamesvkoch.com/Recent\\_Consulting\\_Reports.html](http://jamesvkoch.com/Recent_Consulting_Reports.html)) shows that the US textbook market is huge: 18.6 million full-time college students each spend on average \$600 to \$1200 each year. Despite this size, Koch identifies increasing price sensitivity amongst students, in part arising from the ability offered by the web to compare prices more easily than in the past, and to find alternative sources.

Turning to the author, there is a marked difference between producing scholarly articles or monographs and producing textbooks. Academic authors of the first two are generally paid either nothing for their product (articles) or a small royalty on a print-run of maybe 250 copies (monographs). Textbooks have a different level of reward, because of the numbers in which they are sold and the potential for a swift succession of editions. Apart from content, the key to maximising reward is adoption by other HEIs: once the textbook is adopted the sales to students (and libraries) follow. Philip Kotler's *Marketing management: Analysis, planning, and control*, first published in 1963, reached its 14th edition in 2011 and is "the world's most widely adopted textbook in graduate schools of business" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Kotler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Kotler)).

E-textbooks are a live current issue in the USA.

Looking first at general academic library publishing, one initiative aimed at building capacity is the Library Publishing Coalition ([http://educopia.org/lpc/index.php/Main\\_Page#Library\\_Publishing\\_Coalition\\_Project](http://educopia.org/lpc/index.php/Main_Page#Library_Publishing_Coalition_Project)), comprising over 50 academic libraries, in collaboration with the Educopia Institute. The project is running for two years (January 2013 to December 2014) and has amongst its aims education and training, and the production and dissemination of documentation.

It has already produced the *Library Publishing Directory*, which provides a snapshot of the publishing activities of 115 academic and research libraries, including information about the number and types of publications they produce, the services they offer authors, how they are staffed and funded. Collectively, these libraries publish 391 faculty-driven journals, 174 student-driven journals, 937 monographs, at least 8,746 conference papers and proceedings, and nearly 100,000 each of electronic dissertations and theses and technical/research reports. However only a small minority of 12 libraries publish textbooks, and these are generally only in single figures for each institution. A further four plan to publish textbooks.

Seeking to redress this imbalance, a second initiative is the State University New York's (SUNY) programme, supported by internal SUNY Innovative Instruction

Technology Grants, to produce 15 textbooks this autumn. The initiative aims to publish:

high-quality, cost-effective course resources by engaging faculty as authors and peer-reviewers, and libraries as publishing infrastructure ... providing an editorial framework and service to authors, students and faculty, and establishing a community of practice among libraries (*LIS News*, available at: <http://lisnews.org/node/42460/>).

The first pilot involves six institutions; a second pilot will follow next year and add more textbooks and participating libraries.

Subjects include anthropology, business, computer science, education, English, geological sciences, mathematics, music education, physics, as well as generic study skills texts, with titles such as: *A User's Guide to Planet Earth*, *Discrete Mathematics with Computer Science Applications*, *Native Peoples of North America* (for a full list see <http://opensuny.org/omp/index.php/SUNYOpenTextbooks/catalog/book/1>).

The textbooks are to be made available as open educational resources ([www.opensuny.org](http://www.opensuny.org)).

A third initiative is the legislation introduced by two US Senators in November 2013, the *Affordable College Textbook Act*, which aims to expand the use of open educational resources (OER) to more colleges in more states, and provide a framework for sharing educational materials and best practice. The main elements are:

- *Grants for colleges*. The bill directs the Department of Education to create a competitive grant program for higher education institutions (or groups of higher education institutions) to establish pilot programs that use open educational resources to reduce textbook costs for students.
- *Pilot programmes*. Pilot programme activities can include any combination of the following: professional development for faculty and staff, development or improvement of educational materials,

creation of informational resources, or efficacy research. Grant funds can also go toward partnerships with other entities to fulfil these activities.

- *Open educational resources.* Any educational materials developed or improved through the grants will be posted online and licensed to allow everyone - including the general public and other colleges, students and faculty - to use the materials freely. The bill specifies that the licence will be the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), or an equivalent, which grants full use rights with author attribution as the only condition.
- *Sharing outcomes.* Grantees are required to submit a report evaluating the impact their respective pilot programs and to submit a plan for disseminating this information to other institutions. (<http://www.sparc.arl.org/advocacy/national/act>)

**Key outcomes are:** cost savings for all students involved; high quality materials made generally available; supporting innovation and development of best practice that can be shared with other institutions.

It remains to be seen of course if the bill becomes law, and the effect it will have. However, its existence is an indication of the seriousness with which the textbook problem is regarded in the US.

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