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e-books and libraries:

Stuck between user and publisher

Towering costs and limited access: while the demand for e-books has grown significantly, the problems for libraries are mounting. In the UK, the #ebooksos campaign aims to address the adverse impacts that e-book publishing practices have on libraries. The campaign inspired Alie Bijker and Louise Otting to write this article in which they describe the current landscape, take stock of alternatives and offer recommendations.

***“Students have traditionally been responsible for purchasing print versions of their required reading material. However, the onus is now on libraries to respond to the rising demand for e-books.”***

The ability to access electronic content has become increasingly important since the Covid-19 lockdowns. But libraries experience difficulties when trying to meet the rising demand for e-books because of developments in publishing. Academic libraries find themselves stuck between user needs and restrictions imposed by publishers. Although there are definite advantages to e-books and demand is soaring, facilitating student access is problematic, not least due to negative price developments, usage restrictions and often insufficient availability. A mere fraction of recommended literature is available to libraries in electronic form, which hinders the goal of building a sustainable collection.

Demand for e-textbooks has also been rising steadily, again mainly since the pandemic, with the price of some books tending to the extreme – in certain cases, reaching more than €1,000. Students have traditionally been responsible for purchasing print versions of their required reading material. However, the onus is now on libraries to respond to the rising demand for e-books. This places pressure on budgets.

Open research, open access

Academic libraries attempt to find the best price-quality ratio for their collections while developing sustainable licensing models that optimise usage and maximise (campus-wide) accessibility. This includes guaranteeing continuous access. It is also vital, whenever possible, to ensure the collection facilitates university-level knowledge and resource sharing, open access education and open research. Today, unfortunately, many e-books are not available as an open educational resource (OER), making them unaffordable. A purchasing policy that leans towards electronic formats can therefore be expensive and unfeasible.

A group of academic librarians, researchers, university lecturers and students in the UK started the #ebooksos campaign (academicebookinvestigation.org) to voice concerns about detrimental developments within the e-book market. Libraries in the Netherlands face similar issues, several of which are described in this article.

Huge purchasing costs

Academic libraries face significant additional costs for using e-books. An e-book is often three to four times more expensive than a print version, while e-textbooks can cost more than ten times the price, as indicated by the three examples below.

> *Research Methods for Understanding Professional Learning*, Bloomsbury, 2019.

* Print version: $34.95.
* A single user licensed e-book: $570.
* An e-book licensed for three concurrent users: $1,000.

> *Study Skills Handbook*, Macmillan International, 2019.

* Print version: $22.95.
* A single user licensed e-book: $632.

> *ISE Finance: Applications and Theory*, McGraw-Hill, 2022.

* Print version: $64.
* A single user licensed e-book: $625.
* An e-book licensed for three concurrent users: $937.50.

How these price differences are determined is unclear.

Limited availability

Another issue involves the availability of recently published titles. Electronic formats are often only made available some considerable time after the launch of print versions, and many titles are never released as e-books at all. This is especially concerning because in academia it is vital to keep abreast of the latest scientific developments. Delays due to limited availability are difficult to explain. Moreover, an increasing number of e-textbook titles are not or no longer available separately or can only be accessed for a semester or a year and/or by a limited group of users.

Publishers also regularly revoke or alter e-book licences, particularly with large rental packages from Ebook Central and EBSCO. These publishers do often send libraries lists of titles set to disappear from their collections.

Restrictive licences

Most e-books have concurrent user restrictions, which means they are licensed to be used by one person or by three people at a time. Libraries prefer unlimited access, as a title is often assigned to a group of students. Many of these restrictive licences involve titles found on third-party digital rights management (DRM) platforms.

The price differences between concurrent user licences are huge, as noted above, especially when considering that even a single user licence is already many times more expensive than buying the print version. Furthermore, the publisher can unilaterally change a title from a three user to a single user licence, even after the library has purchased it.

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Access to DRM e-books is hindered by printing, downloading and content-saving restrictions. This can be awkward and frustrating for students, who are often unable to finish an entire textbook in one sitting or copy by hand all important parts of a text for future reference. Another consequence of these restrictions is that required reading material is often not available campus-wide in electronic form. Finally, limiting e-books to specific groups of students and lecturers is almost impossible within existing library systems, resulting in libraries being unable to purchase many titles.

Complex business and licensing models

As with print books, libraries prefer to purchase separate electronic titles. This is why they favour publisher platforms which guarantee conditions for perpetual access and interlibrary loans (ILLs) and do not tend to impose restrictions on concurrent use, saving and printing. But many e-books are only available on the more restrictive third-party DRM platforms, and a minimum number of titles or a minimum order is sometimes required when purchasing.

Some examples of business and licensing models for e-books are presented below.

> *Purchasing or renting packages*: publishers offer packages that can be purchased per subject and year of publication. These packages can generally be found on publishing platforms without usage restrictions.   
> *Patron-driven acquisition (PDA)*: many libraries work with PDA models, also known as evidence-based acquisition (EBA) or demand-driven acquisition (DDA). In such cases, the publisher makes a large number of e-books available at once. To maintain accessibility after the licence expires, popular titles or required books can be purchased by the library at a fixed price (see Appendix 2 in the UKB document on bit.ly/UKB-ebooks for more information).   
> *Lease models*: limited groups of students are granted access to a selection of titles for a particular timeframe. This might involve, for example, required literature during an examination period. Similar to individual limited and temporarily available textbooks, these models require additional staffing time and technical support, making acquisition even more expensive and problematic.

***“When it comes to e-books and e-textbooks, libraries increasingly find themselves at the mercy of the monopolistic tendencies of publishers.”***

Various platforms

As already mentioned, publisher platforms offer the most sustainable access to e-books, with hardly any restrictions of note. These books do tend to be more expensive than print versions or titles on DRM platforms. However, many publishers also or solely market their e-books through DRM or aggregator platforms, with considerable restrictions on downloading, printing and the number of concurrent users. ILL is prohibited on these platforms.

An alternative is the so-called credit point model, where an e-book is acquired along with an annual number of individual access options or credits – a credit affords 24-hour access. These packages often involve purchasing 200-400 credits per person. This system allows for concurrent use, which is a definite advantage when it comes to required literature. However, the same DRM restrictions apply for downloading and printing.

Publishers are increasingly developing distinct textbook platforms alongside their 'regular' e-book platforms, often with additional digital resources. These models also have separate price terms, and titles tend not to be sold separately but are part of a subject-specific package. Access is arranged through the publisher's own platform based on an annually renewable licence.

Publisher-independent textbook platforms are online learning environments that provide access to e-textbooks, usually with additional tool options such as annotation add-ons. Each student is often given an individual access code and usage restrictions are different per publisher (see Appendix 1 in the UKB document on bit.ly/UKB-ebooks for more information).

It is problematic for libraries that e-books and e-textbooks are no longer sold separately through a publisher. Negotiations are entered into for specific titles and availability tends to be temporary and only for a select group, which makes arranging access an expensive and laborious process.

***“To adequately respond to the demand for e-books within education, developing our own open electronic education resources is vital.”***

User awareness

When it comes to e-books and e-textbooks, libraries increasingly find themselves at the mercy of the monopolistic tendencies of publishers. It is important for e-book users to be made aware of the dynamics and issues involved – and to understand what is and what is not possible. We advise lecturers who want to recommend e-books to students to contact the library as soon as possible to find the best version or a suitable alternative. For example, lecturers are often unaware that there is a difference between an e-book for an e-reader and e-books a library can provide.

In order to continue meeting the rising demand for e-books within education while managing costs, it is imperative to combine our expertise and develop strong negotiation skills. And most importantly, we must focus on developing our own open electronic education resources (see the report Electronic Education Resources in Higher Education: bit.ly/rapport-digitale-leermaterialen for more information).

Sourcing alternatives

Collection and information specialists can help find readily usable alternatives to e-books that are available in their own collections or through open access. California State University has developed a handy tool (library.calstate. edu/textbook/): based on an ISBN number, users can find freely available electronic education resources related in subject matter to a particular e-textbook.

You can contact any library for more information on the use of copyrighted material in digital learning environments, restrictions, possible costs and the Easy Access Scheme of Stichting UvO (stichting-uvo.nl – in Dutch).

Open educational resources

Encouraging and supporting the use of OERs in education can help curb the spread and cost of commercial content. This strategy underscores the recently published statement and report on the national approach to electronic and open educational resources (bit.ly/nationale-aanpak-open-leermaterialen) within the Acceleration Plan for ICT-driven Innovation in Education. The publication recommends increased control over the electronic resources used in educational settings.

A large amount of open material is already available and can be used to replace commercial educational resources. Visit your local university website for more information. Encouraging and supporting self-creation and sharing OERs is also recommended. Lecturers can find useful information at:

> SURF Open Education Resources (surf.nl/starten-met-openleermaterialen)   
> Step by step: Make your own textbook! (versnellingsplan.nl/Kennisbank/open-tekst-boek/ – in Dutch)   
> Edusources (edusources.nl)

Search for specific educational resources with Wikiwijs (wikiwijs.nl – in Dutch), a nationwide platform that allows lecturers to search, create, view and download educational material.

Open access publishing

An important alternative is publishing books using an open access model, affording everyone free access. The OA Books Toolkit (oabooks-toolkit.org) is an invaluable resource. Every academic library in the Netherlands has an open access/OER team standing by to help.

Libraries also support open access e-book initiatives in various ways.

> Open Library of Humanities (openlibhums.org)   
> Open Book Publishers, Punctum Books (openbookpublishers.com)   
> Knowledge Unlatched (knowledgeunlatched.org)   
> Sidestone Press (sidestone.com)

Some libraries have an open access fund for publishing books.

Inhouse publishing

Various Dutch universities have their own publishing houses that assist editors and authors in the publication of diamond open access e-journals and e-books. Some examples are presented below.

> Open Publishing (tudelft.nl)   
> University of Groningen Press (rug.nl/library/ugp/)   
> Open Press TiU | Tilburg University (tilburguniversity. edu/research/open-sciencecommunity/open-press-tiu)   
> Radboud University Press (radbouduniversitypress.nl)

These publishers can also advise authors during contract negotiations with other publishers.

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Advising authors

A significant amount of study material is written by lecturers themselves and academics can receive assistance during contract negotiations with publishers. When negotiating, the publisher's e-book policy can be uncovered by asking targeted questions. Should the publisher prove unable to sufficiently answer the author's concerns, specific clauses can be added to the contract to ensure accessibility (see the UKB document at bit.ly/UKB-ebooks for more information).

Ultimately, publishers are the only ones able to curtail or otherwise resolve the challenges associated with e-books and e-textbooks. By collaborating with libraries, publishers can find and develop sustainable models to optimise the advantages of electronic texts and support universities. We would be happy to share our thoughts and are open to discussions on this matter.

*Additional information   
> Tips for ordering compulsory literature (blog TiU, bit.ly/tipsTiU)   
> Statement on providing e-textbooks (bit.ly/statement-e-textbooks)   
> How the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated an e-book crisis and the #ebooksos campaign for reform (bit.ly/ebooksoscampaign)*

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