Scaling in-house e-textbooks publications at Liverpool: views from the Library and the University Press on the potential for new e-textbooks to be written and future plans

By Emma Thompson, Education Lead, University of Liverpool Library and Alison Welsby, Editorial Director, Liverpool University Press

Library View: Liverpool’s involvement in the project has enabled us to publish two very different textbooks and has given us an insight into the hows and whys of this type of work. We have had the benefit of working with Liverpool University Press, so we had all the publishing functions ready to go (although textbooks were a departure for LUP as their focus has been on monographs and journals, so this was a new area of work for them).

As we reflect on the project, and consider what we have learned, we feel better placed to understand the considerations of an institution embarking on publishing e-textbooks, especially the considerations for moving this beyond time limited projects to become business as usual. As with any work we do, it is useful to go back to the fundamentals, so some questioning can help:

1. Why? It’s a pretty simple question, but why would you do this? It involves time and money so there needs to be a key driver. What’s your purpose in doing this? The purpose at an institutional level needs to be much more than “it seems like a good thing to do”. What is the key driver for your institution? The drivers could include:
   - Existing titles do not meet pedagogic needs
     - Perhaps a new and innovative programme needs core materials and there is no good fit on the market
   - To push forward with innovation
     - Perhaps existing commercial textbooks in several subject areas do not offer the type of platform that students need and/or do not connect well with existing platforms that students use, especially the VLE. Do students need to be able to download a book to use on a mobile device in a clinical or workplace setting?
   - Value for money
     - Have expanding student numbers made licencing content from commercial publishers’ poor value for money?
   - Showcasing university expertise
     - Are the key experts in this subject area amongst your staff? Would you rather harness their expertise and support them internally to publish than to lose them to a commercial publisher where the resulting title may be viable for them, but not meet the needs of your institution’s programmes?
   - Attracting prospective students
     - Are there titles that meet the core values of your Institution and may be useful to sixth formers as well as first year students, particularly those undertaking the Extended Project Qualification?
• Is a commitment to Open Education part of your institution’s strategy? Licenced resources can never be easily browsed by the curious individual, interested in signing up to a course or just curious.

PRESS VIEW: Throughout the ‘Institution as E-Textbook Publisher Project’, we have been continually thinking ‘how can we take this forward with the knowledge gained from the project’? With Using Primary Sources, there is certainly room for further development as more chapters and archive material can be added, and possibly new subject areas. With Essentials of Financial Management, we can easily update the file and spreadsheets to respond to any changes in the module and subject, making it very much a ‘living textbook’. But what about scaling this up further to create more Open Access e-textbooks for students?

The ‘Institution as E-Textbook Publisher Project’ project has generated many conversations between the press and academics on campus on what we can do to help them create e-textbooks to support their teaching needs and provide valuable Open Access material to students, conversations that are still ongoing. Whilst there are no concrete plans currently on what will come next, from what we have learnt through the ‘Institution as E-Textbook Publisher Project’, we are well equipped to ask the right questions at the beginning of the project, to knowledgeably assess the variety of technology, software and platforms available regarding suitability and long term sustainability, and, importantly, to calculate the necessary investment required, both time and financial, to make a project a success.

The ‘Institution as E-Textbook Publisher Project’ project has shown us the possibilities that lie within Digital Humanities, especially as we reflect not only on what the academic book of the future will be, but also the textbook of the future. This projects marks the beginning of LUP’s Digital Humanities publishing programme, and we gratefully thank Jisc for putting us on this path.