The transition from staff to student publishing

This blog post was written by Scott Connor, Educational Development Unit, University of the Highlands and Islands.

In creating our first two etextbooks; ‘How to write a research dissertation’ and ‘Undertaking your research project’, we designed a workstream based on existing processes gained from our well-established digital content development unit. This worked well for us and in general we only had to make some minor adjustments to accommodate the publishing of etextbooks. In the first two publications the authors of the books were long-serving members of university staff with many years of writing and publishing experience. This was always the plan, and it worked well within the agreed workstream.

From the outset there was always a desire to extend the reach of etextbook publishing beyond the scope of the Jisc project and to embed it within the university. The list of potential benefits to university staff and students as creators, co-creators and consumers of etextbooks is long, not to mention the benefit to those external to the institution as collaborators and consumers.

Our third publication could have come from a variety of sources however an opportunity arose to publish a dissertation by one of the university’s students. This was serendipitous, created by a demand following various of conference appearances.

This article highlights some of the issues encountered as we moved from publishing staff work to publishing the dissertation of one student’s work within the University of the Highlands and Islands. It does not cover mechanisms for selection or the criteria for this decision and assumes that the content has already been identified.

Institutional publishing of academic content differs from self-publishing in that there is generally a higher level of scrutiny and therefore perceived credibility due to the more rigorous review process and the desire to protect institutional reputation. Publication as an etextbook raises expectations of quality.

In publishing the student dissertation we expected to adopt the same approach as we had with the previous two books. As we progressed a few issues appeared that we think are worth highlighting to other institutions who might wish to follow the same path in the hope that they can avoid them.

The identified issues can basically be split into 2 groups:

- Those that were a product of the decision to publish post writing, that is that the dissertation and associated research was undertaken prior to any thought about publishing.
- Those that would have been present irrespective of the decision to publish.

The post writing issues were the most complex as they tended to centre around legal aspects of publishing such as ethics, ownership and copyright.

As part of the dissertation process the student was required to obtain ethical approval for their research. This approval was quite specific and contained many factors relating to aspects of data collection such as who the subjects are, what data will be collected, how it will be stored and what it
can be used for. The research participants were informed and consented. Issues began to arise when it was decided to publish as this constituted a change of use and one that consent had not been requested for. It is crucial that this is considered from the very outset, trying to gain ethical clearance post research and post publication is fraught with difficulty. The refusal of one or more subjects could result, at best, mean a rewrite of your conclusions and at worst mean your conclusions have no validity.

As a student of UHI, copyright of the chosen dissertation belonged to the student and this is generally the case, however universities have different rules regarding ownership and copyright of student work. Exceptions can arise where a prior agreement has been signed or where the research may have been sponsored by an external company who may wish to have some ownership.

Copyright of any images, graphs, etc. that may be contained within the publication present their own issues as copyright clearance will have been sought for the student’s work however it may not cover use for this new publication. A clear understanding from the outset should help negate any subsequent misunderstandings. Due to the nature of this dissertation images were sparse, therefore time and even finance should be factored in to allow for the sourcing of copyrighted images for publication.

The second group of issues were slightly easier to address as they are within the control of the writer and editorial team. These include publication quality, writing style and royalties.

Like many dissertations this one was written in the required style, register and vocabulary of the discipline so providing guidance on the preferred writing style required for a publication may not actually be very helpful. This requires some reworking the student dissertation to make it suitable for your readership which will take time and academic rigour.

A dissertation, as an academic publication, follows a format and will be of a certain quality (content, spelling, grammar, readability, etc.). These conditions can vary and even although, as in our case, the dissertation was of an extremely high standard, there was still a requirement to make changes in preparation for publication. These changes were influenced the intended audience and their expectations, and how we wanted the publication to reflect our institution. It would be advisable to decide whether you have one standard or a few standards of publishing and what the parameters are as this will affect the resource (financial and human) required to reach publication.

In all the excitement of progressing the next publication it is easy to forget the potential income or royalties. This money must go somewhere, belong to someone and be distributed somehow. Early discussions around this are worthwhile to avoid any misunderstandings or delays later. In the case of UHI the author wished to donate the money to a charity, however the institution (who was handling the money) was unable to fulfil this, as institutional policy prohibited donations to charity. One potential solution would be to make a nominal charge for the book with the proceeds being donated to a university fund to support ongoing student publishing. Another option would be to make the book free and open. However due to the chosen publishing mechanism (Kindle KDP) and their restrictive policy on distribution and cost this would require the undoing of many processes.
This article is part of the Institution as e-textbook publisher toolkit: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/institution-as-e-textbook-publisher-toolkit

Although the account above reflects the experience of publishing one student dissertation in one academic institution, it hopefully provides some direction to those wishing to travel down a similar path.

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