

# Models for e-book purchase in UK further education

Information professionals are now tasked with the requirement to 'do more with less' in every sector. Having dealt with the fallout from the college building and expansion programme<sup>1</sup>, an average 16% cut in their funding for adult learning in 2009/2010, now coupled with an overall funding reduction of 25% over the next four years, further education (FE) librarians have had more experience than most in managing budget cuts in recent years. It was against this backdrop of impending cuts that I ran my workshop at the UKSG Conference 2010, reporting on the e-books for FE project and the FE market for e-resources. The article provides a summary from this presentation and outlines the steps that might be taken to respond to the demand for e-textbooks in FE in the UK.



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The further education (FE) sector has not shared the same enthusiasm and general use of e-resources<sup>2</sup> as observed in UK higher education (HE) institutions, with FE practitioners commonly citing insufficient resources as a barrier to the adoption of online resources. In other cases, there are significant variations in access and network capacity, resource budgets, staff skills and confidence<sup>3</sup>, and use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support e-learning.

The e-books for FE project, funded by the Learning Skills Council, was established in response to significant demand from the FE sector<sup>4</sup> for a national initiative to supply e-books. The project makes 3,000 e-textbooks available to students, whenever and wherever they wish to learn. The titles within the collection were assessed by the FE community, who cast around 80,000 votes via an online consultation. Since its launch in September 2009, FE students and teachers have viewed more than 8 million pages. The project is funded for five years, but the objective is sustainability. To explore how FE students might have access to the e-books needed for their studies, JISC Collections commissioned John Cox, Laura Cox and Mark Carden to evaluate a range of business models, including student pay models, and examined the business chain including publishers, booksellers, intermediaries, FE libraries and students. It was clear from the report and supporting surveys that the FE market is too immature to move to e-only<sup>5</sup>.

A study for the JISC E-books Working Group<sup>6</sup> noted that the use of textbooks in FE colleges resembles that in the US where the core text is 'adopted'. Due to the demands on resourcing in FE and the reliance on core texts, there is little demand for primary research material that requires additional alteration to ensure that it maps to the FE curriculum. The sector is dominated by a relatively small number of publishers, and the core texts and associated materials are endorsed and created in collaboration with qualifications bodies. With the wider availability of free 'good enough' content from the open web, it is this accreditation (e.g. Edexcel, owned by Pearson) which is valued, and subsequently paid for, by the sector.

Although colleges are catering for increasing numbers of part-time and distance learners, seamless off-campus access to resources remains elusive for many. Conversely, while there is clear demand for e-textbooks from both students and their teachers<sup>7</sup>, there is simply not the capacity to make best use of e-textbooks in FE colleges, certainly not at the levels seen with print textbooks. In spite of students' enthusiasm, few – only 12% of respondents to the survey<sup>8</sup> – were willing to pay for access to the e-textbook directly. However, this increased to 29% if the cost was included in the course fee.

One of the unexpected findings from the first phase of the e-books for FE project was that the provision of e-textbooks stimulated e-enablement

and engagement across the sector. Since the start of the project, the number of colleges with off-campus access to electronic learning material has increased by 40%. The JISC Collections UK Federated Access Management programme (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/federation.html>) aims to build upon this success and work with more colleges to provide 24/7 access to learning and teaching materials. The project provides the electronic content and, with it, the impetus to stimulate change in the sector. Providing more of the 'right' e-content will motivate colleges to deploy digital learning technologies, hopefully building a market for e-books in FE in the future.

Access to financially out-of-reach resources has now become a reality through the project. However, the FE market is still uncharted territory for the e-textbook market, as the real challenge for the project, and for the sector, is to sustain the current momentum in using and embedding e-books. Assumptions on the use of e-textbooks in FE, including title availability, pricing and business models, are often based on sales data of their print equivalents within a mature and saturated textbook market. The Catch-22 situation experienced in the Higher Education (HE) academic market, whereby the demand for key course texts is not being met due to uncertainties over business models and publisher's concerns about impacts on print sales, is exacerbated in FE due to their reliance on specific textbooks for course delivery. Almost one third of textbooks are bought by individual students,<sup>9</sup> new or second-hand. However, colleges are keen to ensure equity of access and that every student has access to the course materials by controlling the acquisition and distribution of textbooks themselves. This is especially pertinent given the high instance of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (16% of 16- to 18-year-olds in Further Education Colleges and 10% in Sixth Form Colleges)<sup>10</sup>. The diversity in courses and levels delivered by FE means that providing course texts can present specific challenges; even the collection of 3,000 titles delivered through the e-books for FE project has gaps in subject coverage and levels catered for. It is, therefore, unlikely that any college will be able to afford all of the e-books required for all students.

The selection of textbooks rests largely with curriculum staff and course managers, with the role of librarian usually limited to buying chosen books rather than developing broader collections.

The management hierarchy in FE colleges means that decision making is centralized in the senior management team. It is not unusual for IT, the VLE manager and the library to report to different members of senior management, and this structure often inhibits the development of digital initiatives unless expressly approved and encouraged by senior management.<sup>11</sup> With the capacity of FE librarians being eroded due to redundancies and higher instances of college mergers, the e-books for FE project, or any other initiative which relies upon the college library to promote and embed e-resources, faces huge challenges. As the squeeze on librarians' time also affects their capacity as marketers, there is an ongoing need for physical and virtual marketing materials from providers to help signpost and promote online content.

Colleges need e-resources that 'work first time'<sup>12</sup>, as it is the librarian who has to 'sell' e-resources to curriculum staff and students. E-resource interfaces must be intuitive, accessible to staff or students without the need for training. E-books can offer users with disabilities a level of independence and customization rarely available in print, but it is vital that e-resource platforms do not introduce unnecessary barriers to access<sup>13</sup>.

I was keen to ensure that this project had a nominal impact on staffing or college resources. Given that the library website and catalogue is, by far, the most effective way to inform users about the existence of e-books<sup>14</sup>, quality-checked MARC cataloguing records were provided. However, we soon found it was necessary to create a separate set of records compatible with the Heritage<sup>15</sup> library catalogue system, one of the prevalent OPAC systems in FE, for those colleges without the MARC import model. We are grateful for the co-operation of Heritage in the creation and maintenance of the c.3,000 records.

It is clear from the E-books for FE Business Models report that the market for e-books in FE, particularly for those models contingent on student purchase, is too immature for the purchase and use of e-books to be embedded in the immediate future without further central investment. However, to write off the FE sector as 'digitally immature' or unwilling to innovate would be to miss the point; FE practitioners need materials that will help get their students through the course. It is this sharp focus of efficiency where the most innovative and impressive initiatives can be seen.

In spite of operating from a single site and being relatively small in size (around 7,000 students), Carshalton College in Surrey consistently tops the charts of the e-books for FE collection and is an exemplar of how to leverage efficiencies from central funding. After speaking to Carshalton, it was clear that the historic divisions between learning technology advisors, IT and library staff often found in colleges are not present at this college. This lateral approach to staffing is also applied to e-resources promotion, with librarians populating the VLE with online content – a role usually reserved for ICT staff, curriculum staff or e-learning managers.

As with many FE colleges, Carshalton serves a diverse range of learners from pre-entry, apprenticeships, and teacher education to degree level. Student and staff inductions are integral to the adoption of ICT and e-resources at Carshalton. Library staff provide training on all aspects of technology within the college, including the intranet, uploading lesson plans to Moodle, their VLE and a mandatory study skills course which includes an e-resources tour. The college created title lists and business cards and handed them out at inductions, and pasted e-book covers into Moodle with embedded links. The library was soon inundated with requests for more content and information on how they could make the most of the collection.

In recognition of the disparity of access and use of e-textbooks in FE, and in order to increase use and awareness of e-textbooks, JISC Collections successfully applied for funding from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) to acquire an additional collection of e-books. In order to demonstrate value for money to our funders and to ensure we only pay for titles that are used, we will license a collection of about 60 e-books to FE colleges on a usage-driven basis. Usage of the collection will be captured, and selected publishers will be paid, on a per-page-view basis. So that funds are not exhausted prematurely on a handful of e-books, usage will be capped at limits set by participating publishers. Once central funds have been spent, institutions will no longer have access to the titles where usage did not reach the capped pricing. However, usage will be monitored and individual colleges will be offered the opportunity to 'top up' up to the capped price, via a credit system, to receive access to an expired title.

A model whereby colleges can license content on an institution-wide basis, providing multi-user or online concurrent online access, is constrained by concerns from publishers over potential loss of revenue from student sales. The usage-based procurement model, described above, could be offered via a central sales platform, similar to the CourseSmart initiative in the US<sup>16</sup>, to allow curriculum staff to direct their students to purchase course materials and allow integration with library- or college-bought materials. Smaller components of textbooks could be offered to students via a usage-based model (subsidised by the college or even paid by fees) and could possibly reduce the amount of lost revenue incurred by the production of photocopied course-packs and second-hand textbooks sales.

Textbook publishers play a key role in the ultimate adoption of e-textbooks by students, as only the core textbooks will stimulate a cultural shift and encourage colleges to commit to the use of e-resources. As in HE, FE libraries operate in a mixed economy, and digital content that does not replace printed textbooks will involve additional funding. Whilst there is little value in a model that is ultimately unsustainable for publishers, colleges need more core content with flexible models predicated on use rather than on projected sales of their print equivalents.

## References and notes

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