



## Motivations for Textbook and Learning Resource Publishing: Do Academics Want to Publish OA Textbooks?

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### Abstract

The affordability of textbooks and unsustainable commercial models are issues that many libraries face. As an alternative, there is a growing movement in the United States around open and affordable textbooks. However, to date there has been less activity in the UK despite the introduction of a range of policies that encourage or mandate open access publication of research outputs such as journal articles or monographs. These policy changes have affected academics' attitudes to open access, but it is not yet clear whether the opportunity to publish in open access would affect researchers' propensity to create non-research outputs such as textbooks and learning materials. In 2017, Jisc Collections proposed a study into author incentives for textbook publishing in order to understand whether open access would motivate authors to publish learning materials and thereby support a transition to open access for e-textbooks. The study consisted of a survey, focus groups and interviews. This article discusses the results of the research and provides several key insights and future opportunities for those wishing to explore open and affordable textbooks.

**Keywords:** Textbooks, Publishing, Authors, Learning Resources, Open Access

## **1. Introduction and Background**

In 2018, Jisc's Institution as e-textbook publisher project successfully concluded after the publication of eight open and affordable textbooks and the launch of a toolkit aimed at encouraging others to publish their own open access (OA) textbooks (Jisc, 2018a,b). However, in the transition to open, it is important to understand how publication of OA textbooks could be scaled up. As a result, a study into author incentives for textbook publishing was commissioned to understand the rewards for textbook authors and to provide models, best practice and recommendations for future work. The aim of this research was to dig deeper into the motivations for authors, rather than purely looking at open. The project wanted to understand why authors choose to publish textbooks and other learning resources to provide models, best practice and recommendations for future work on open textbooks. To provide greater context for their preferences as authors, the research was expanded to include more detail on what academics want as teachers.

This paper discusses the hypothesis that providing an open access option for e-textbooks would encourage authors to produce learning materials through non-traditional publishing routes, such as New University Presses.

The concept of a 'textbook' differs across courses and disciplines. This paper has intentionally kept the definition flexible. 'Textbooks' and 'published learning resources' are referred to as content, which has been made available via a third-party publisher for teaching and learning. The study included textbooks and learning material, which broadly falls within the UNESCO definition of open educational resources (OERs) (UNESCO, 2019).

## **2. Literature Review**

Alongside national negotiations, evidence has been growing from the community and via related projects that there may be an alternative to e-textbook agreements with the major publishers. Senack (2014) notes that there needs to be start-up investment in the creation of open textbooks. To this end, the Institution as e-textbook publisher project (Jisc, 2018a) ran in the UK from 2014 to 2018 and published eight open access/affordable textbooks from the four projects that took part. Project workshops held in 2017 and 2018

were well attended and received positive feedback from institutions that wished to investigate similar initiatives. In addition, all four projects have committed to publish further textbooks in the future. Indeed, in 2017, UCL Press put out a call for OA e-textbooks from its own authors (UCL, 2017). Most recently Chicago University Press announced the publication of its first free textbook commenting that “[e]qually, we seek new ways of extending the availability and accessibility of knowledge. These goals are achieved by making these outstanding, peer-reviewed volumes freely available in digital form” (PRWeb, 2018).

Delimont, Turtle, Bennett, Adhikari, & Lindshield (2016) report on a number of studies, predominantly in North America to replace textbooks with open/alternative educational resources (OAERs). Alongside OAERs, there are also a number of open textbook initiatives. Fischer, Hilton, Robinson, & Wiley (2015) note that the quality of some open textbooks varies. However, there are two particular projects that stand out. OpenStax, a not for profit initiative from Rice University publishing “high-quality, peer-reviewed, openly licensed college textbooks that are absolutely free online and low cost in print” (OpenStax, 2018). The Open Textbook Library from the Open Textbook Network (n.d.) provides free, peer-reviewed open access textbooks and encourages course adoption. In addition, the Alternative Textbook Projects at Temple University where faculty members were offered grants of \$1,000 to eliminate their existing traditional textbook resulted in 11 alternative textbooks being funded (Bell, 2012). There are also funded projects in Canada (BCcampus, 2019; eCampus Ontario, 2019) to support the use and creation of open textbooks for higher education.

In the UK, Rolfe and Pitt (2018) observe that “activity is more localised.” The two most prominent projects in the UK are the Institution as e-textbook publisher project (Jisc, 2018a) described above and the UK Open Textbook project, a Hewlett-funded project, which ran from March 2017-April 2018 and aimed to assess how the UK differed from North America and whether any methods for uptake were transferable (Rolfe & Pitt, 2018; UK Open Textbook project, 2019).

Literature on open textbooks appears to be confined largely to the UK and US. Further studies tend to concentrate on perception of open, rather than motivations for creating open textbooks, and these are limited to the US. For example, a study into college teacher and student perceptions “showed that the majority of students and faculty had a positive experience using the

open textbooks, appreciated the lower costs, and perceived the texts as being of high quality” (Bliss, Hilton, Wiley, & Thanos, 2013). There is, however, scant evidence in the literature on the motivation of authors to publish open access textbooks. Indeed, Kernohan and Rolfe note that “[y]ou’d think that the academic benefits of textbooks would be incontestable, and that both students and staff were clear on how textbooks are used to support learning. You’d be wrong.” (Kernohan & Rolfe, 2017).

As a result of the transition to open access for research monographs, there is a growing body of evidence in the area of author motivation. For example, the OAPEN-UK project held a number of focus groups on the topic (Milloy & Collins, 2014) and long form publication or research monograph is often held up as the ‘gold standard’ for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Mandler, 2019; Phillips, 2010) being the best means to convey the arguments of a single piece of research in these disciplines. There is also a complex relationship between OA and the research monograph, which is still being debated (Adema, 2019; Universities UK, 2019; Vincent, 2013). These concerns often centre around quality, peer review, particularly concerning new OA presses, copyright and reuse, and third-party rights. What we do not know is whether these motivations and arguments ring true for the textbook. However, research into the research monograph does give us context for this study.

Due to the small amount of evidence of what motivates textbook authors, we are often left with perceptions. For example, we often perceive that lack of royalties in an open access model is a demotivator. However, for monographs this perception was disproved in the OAPEN-UK author focus groups, where authors ranked royalty payments as fairly low in their priorities (Milloy, Stone & Collins, 2011). Evidence of perception differing from reality shows why a study on motivation is required.

A number of author blogposts from the Institution as e-textbook publisher project offer further evidence, “[t]he main reward for an author, as with... .. many other ‘conventional’ books, is for the author to see their name in print and have a feeling of satisfaction that their work is being read and appreciated. A key benefit for the institution is that the authors are recognised as being scholars/academics of a particular university, and that both the university and the authors gain an enhanced visibility on the global stage” (Rennie, 2017). Other benefits included being able to get academic ideas available quickly and inexpensively, a flexible method for in-house production and to have

“enhanced participant control of the production process,” and to re-purpose earlier work in a new and more accessible format. Rennie also noted that some authors were “disillusioned both by the time taken to produce the books, and by the high retail price of the subsequent products, which were felt to reduce the benefit for students” (Rennie, 2018). This final view is supported by the UK Open Textbook project, which reported that their “[i]nitial research suggests that the rise of textbook costs is a growing issue, and that open textbooks may have a role to play in addressing it” (Kernohan & Rolfe, 2017).

However, this evidence is largely anecdotal. Therefore, the gap in the literature combined with anecdotal evidence from the two UK open textbook projects were major contributing factors to the study, which sought to test perceptions in an attempt to shed further light on why authors publish textbooks and what the motivations and barriers might be to a transition to open access textbook publishing.

### **3. Methodology**

The survey was designed to explore two aspects. Firstly, what has in the past, and might in the future, motivate academics to produce and share learning resources via a third party. Secondly, how academics select and prioritise material on the courses that they teach. By understanding the current motivations of academics as authors and their priorities as teachers, the study allowed us to explore how open access might fit into the textbook publishing ecosystem, and the kinds of messages or motivators that institutions, funders and publishers could use to encourage publication of open learning resources.

We collected a range of additional data about respondents’ prior experiences with publishing both textbooks/learning resources and more traditional academic outputs, as well as biographical data about their discipline, experience and current institution, to provide additional context to their responses on open access. Studies in relation to research outputs have suggested that all these factors can affect attitudes to open access, and we wanted to test whether they had a similar impact on learning resources.

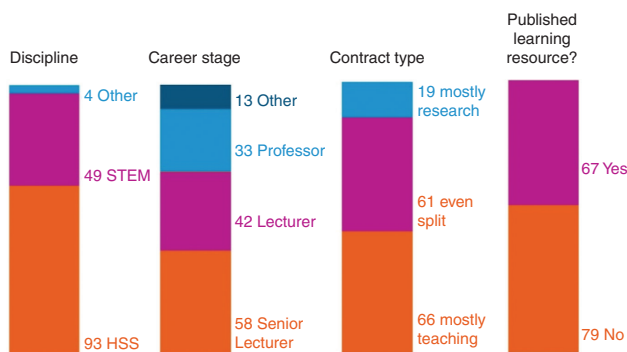
By asking about their publishing habits in other formats (journals, monographs, conference papers), we could see whether their textbook publishing/non-publishing habits are unusual or part of a bigger picture etc. The survey

was piloted with several of the Institution as e-textbook publisher authors and subsequently refined.

The intention of the study was to follow up the survey questions with a series of focus groups and interviews. The exact nature of the questions asked in these follow-up sessions was determined by the survey results. This allowed the study to ask relevant questions that would deepen understanding of what the survey findings might mean. The complete survey, focus group outline and interview questions have been made available for others to use (Collins, Marques & Stone, 2018). However, it should be noted that anyone wishing to reproduce the study may want to revise the follow-up questions to reflect the findings from their implementation of the survey.

151 usable responses from UK academics were received. Because it is a convenience sample, and a small number of responses, the findings presented here are purely indicative. Considerable further research would be needed to understand how representative these findings might be of the wider UK HE academic population. Nonetheless, analysis of the survey raised some interesting questions and insights and it was decided to further investigate these via focus groups with library staff from UK universities and telephone interviews with 10 academics who had responded to the survey. Eight interviewees worked in Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) subjects, and two in science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) disciplines. In general, response numbers are slightly biased towards HSS and towards more senior academics. Most respondents had at least an element of teaching within their responsibilities (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Makeup of survey respondents.

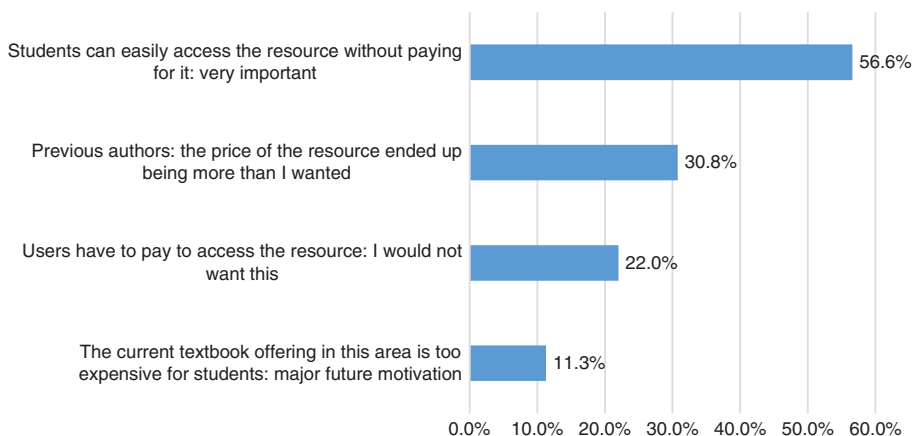


## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Considerations of Cost as Authors and as Readers

Although cost is not the only, or even the most important, consideration for open access publishing, ‘free at the point of use’ availability is an important driver towards open access. Several of the questions asked about different dimensions of learning resource pricing, and the results present a somewhat confused picture. The majority of teachers consider payment-free access for students as ‘very important’ when selecting a learning resource. But when considering an abstract future textbook, only 11% felt that the current cost of textbooks to students in this area would be a major motivation to produce something, and only 22% said they would actively not want users to have to pay to access the resource. It is not unexpected for academics to experience a disconnect when they are holding two roles: we see this in relation to researchers’ attitudes to open access when they are authors compared to when they are readers. However, it is a striking difference from the 57% of respondents who, as teachers, think this is very important (Figure 2). Furthermore, of the previous authors who faced challenges in producing their learning resource, 31% said the resource ended up costing more for users than they wanted.

Fig. 2: Cost of Learning Resources.



The follow up interviews suggested that academics have an understanding of the cost of learning resources, but that local budgets, processes and organisational structures mean that some are much more involved with resource selection and payment than others. In some institutions, the cost of resources is borne centrally, and academics make a 'wish list', which is prioritised by the library based on value for money, wider usefulness and the possibility of deals with publishers. In others – though in the interviews this was rarer – budgets are more devolved, and the academics must choose between different options, balancing the value and cost of individual resources. In such cases, academics might prioritise content that can be used on several different modules within a degree programme, possibly across years, to maximise value for money.

Interviewees recognised that providing enough textbooks for large-scale core courses was a financial challenge for university libraries, but also drew out some more detailed problems that can arise with learning materials. One academic, for example, mentioned that books are a major issue, especially when they are only available in print – even if core to the course they may not get used by students and it can be difficult to predict how long their 'shelf life' will be.

#### **4.2. What does motivate academics to produce learning resources?**

Improving the learning experience for students was a top reason for academics to have published learning resources in the past, and a key driver for any potential future learning resource publications. Filling a gap in the existing offering, and providing a benefit for students, were the top two motivations in each case (Figure 3).

Career development is also important for academics who are considering producing learning resources. When reflecting on resources they have published in the past, or may publish in the future, a significant proportion of respondents suggested personal development and benefits to CV/professional profile would be a main reason for choosing to publish a learning resource. Conversely, over half of respondents who had been approached to publish a learning resource, but chose not to, said that a main reason for their decision was the 'opportunity cost' of publishing a textbook rather than something else, which would be better for their professional profile (Figure 4).



Fig. 3: Key Motivations for Producing Learning Resources.

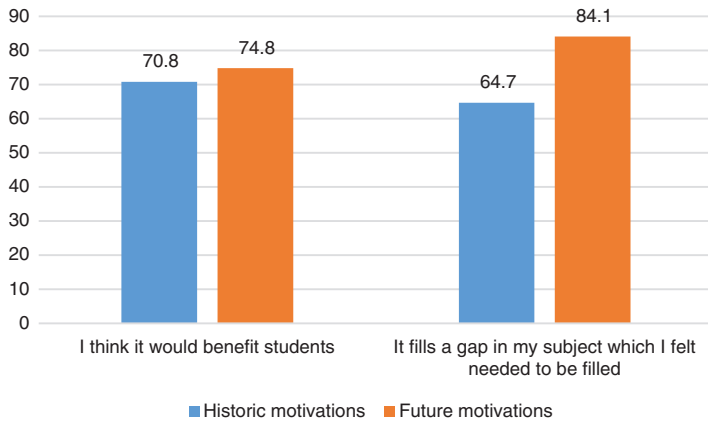
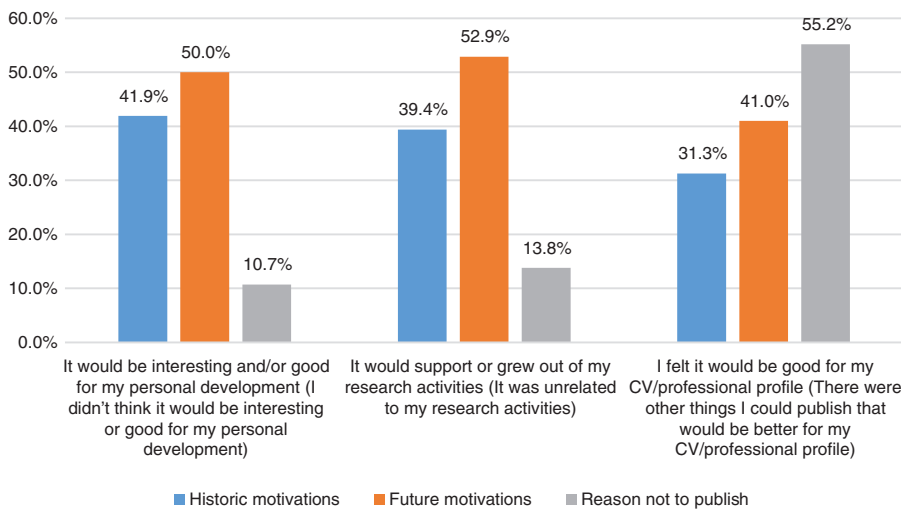


Fig. 4: Career Development and Author Motivations: 'Very Important' Factors.



A large proportion of previous and, especially, potential authors felt that a connection with their research area was or would be a main motivator for their choosing to publish a textbook or learning resource in future.

However, what did affect these academics was the strong sense that they could use their time to publish something else that would be much more

beneficial for their career, with over half giving this as a reason not to pursue production of a learning resource. Interviews gave considerable additional context to these results. Two interviewees talked about receiving specific advice from either a publisher or their institution to ensure they prioritised an academic monograph or journal article over a learning-focused publication. In one case, the academic board of a series of scholarly editions advised a commissioned author to delay his work for them until he had published the book based on his PhD. In another, a departmental colleague advised an interviewee to publish a novel aspect of his planned learning resource as a journal article before making it available in a teaching-focused publication. Other interviewees talked more generally about prioritising academic outputs, often with some reluctance, because these are viewed as more important either by the employing institution or by future potential employers.

#### **4.3. Views on Current and Future Structures for Publishing Learning Resources**

Most interviewees felt that institutions are limited in their ability to change or even work against cultures that reward research differently from teaching. Many said that while their own institution would value the publication of learning resources (for example, in one university this was a promotion criterion), when applying for jobs externally, publications that could be submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (UKRI, 2019) were key. One mentioned the apparent link between the REF cycle and the university's attitude to publishing non-REF-able content – they are much more open to this in the period after a REF submission than the period immediately before. Another mentioned the challenge of working in a system where you are pushed onto a 'research' or 'education' track, and the further you go down a track the harder it is to try to move back and forth between them. Librarians in the institutional focus groups echoed this point of view. Even in universities where a 'teaching track' has been specified for promotion and career development, this continues to be seen as less prestigious than the 'research track'.

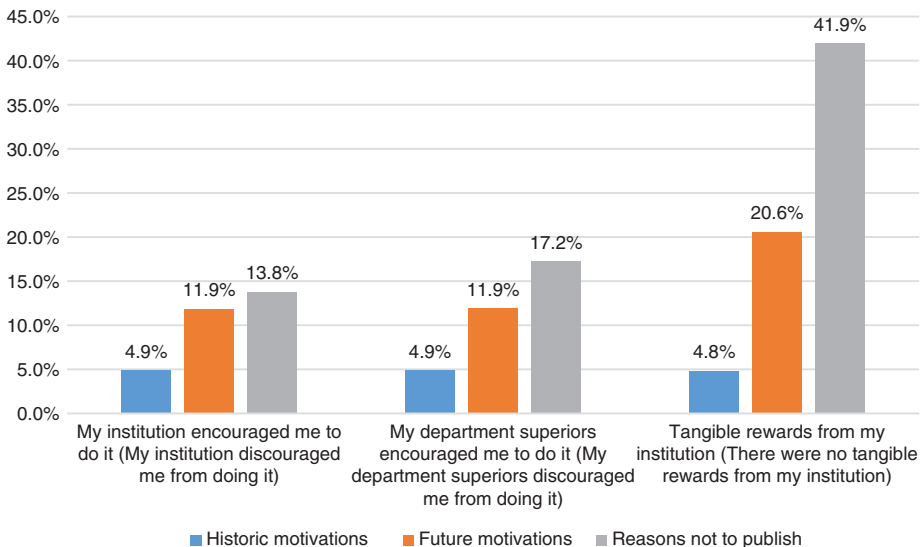
Practical institutional support is not currently a driver for publishing textbooks, but the lack of it is a significant factor in discouraging potential authors; authors may not see practical support as likely. Very few (around 5%) of previous authors cited institutional support (either at the institutional

or departmental level or expressed in terms of tangible rewards such as teaching load reduction) as a main reason in their decision to publish, and over 40% felt that these factors were not actually present at the time of publishing their textbook (Figure 5).

When considering potential future publications, tangible rewards from the institution would incentivise around 20% of respondents, whereas published royalties would only incentivise around 9% of respondents. This implies that if tangible rewards were offered, they might be more attractive than royalties. However, many interviewees spoke about a broad culture of institutional support for producing learning resources. But when it comes down to the practical details of facilitating such production, they are not always able to manifest such support. Most interviewees stressed that the time allocated for preparing and organising teaching can be inadequate (as little as one hour of preparation time for an hour's teaching), so there is no capacity to use teaching time to produce publishable learning resources.

Librarians in the institutional focus groups emphasised this point. In their view, even senior leaders have limited scope to actively support researchers who want to produce learning resources, because no credit is currently given

Fig. 5: Institutional support and author motivations: 'very important' factors.



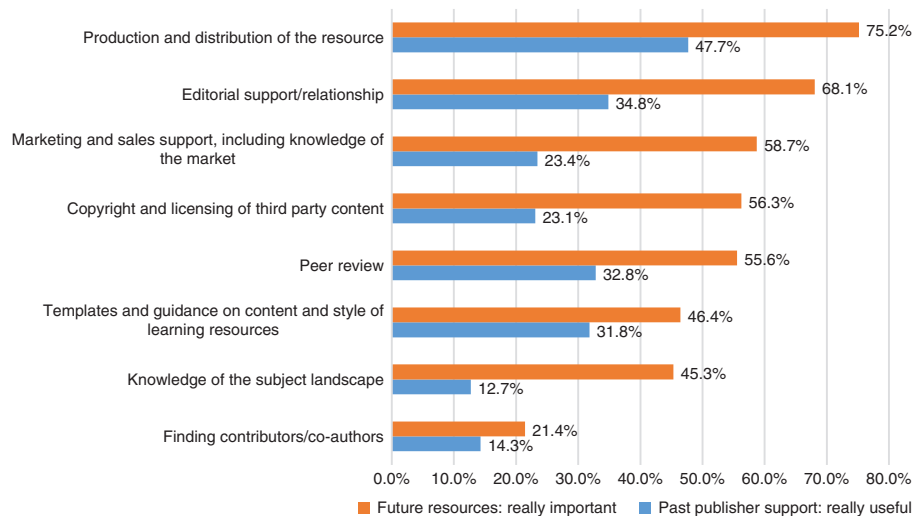
for this within the various university assessment and funding structures. External drivers, the Office for Students (OfS, 2019a) and specifically the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (OfS, 2019b), were mentioned by both librarians and academics as possible loci for institutional incentivisation.

It is unlikely that individual institutions, acting on their own, will be able to resolve the complex issues around academic careers, reputation and reward that limit opportunities to produce learning resources. Academics are clear that unilateral support by their institution will not assist them in the context of a wider portfolio of teaching and research, it will not be as attractive to other employers as a REF-able output and does not enhance their own professional credibility. At present there is no clear reward for this via funding and evaluation/regulation mechanisms.

#### 4.4. Publisher Services

In terms of publisher services, the priorities for potential authors of learning resources are mostly focused around producing, distributing and selling the resource, and on strong editorial support, including peer review (Figure 6).

Fig. 6: Publisher support for learning resource production.



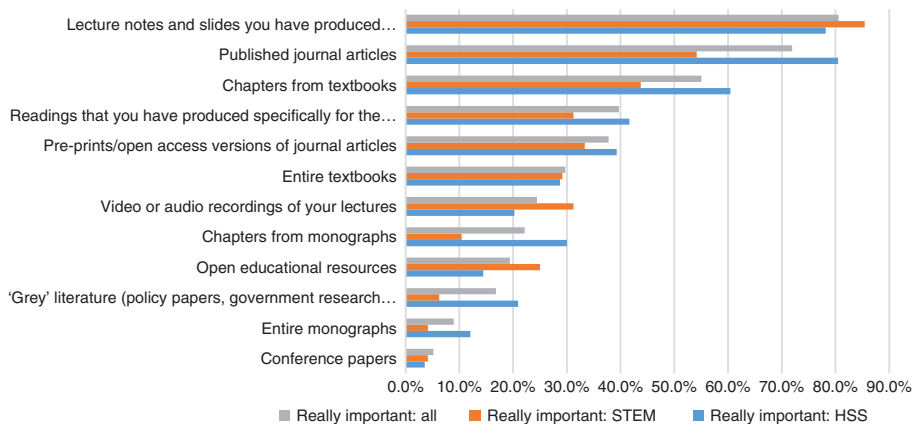
In general, author experience of publisher services on their last learning resource publication was not particularly positive. In every area, there are large gaps between the proportion of prospective authors who consider a service ‘really important’ and the proportion of historic authors who felt their publisher support on that service was ‘really useful’. There may be an opportunity for new providers to offer better, more targeted services in all of these areas.

#### 4.5. Resource Content

The survey suggested that academics prioritise non-textbook content in their teaching and learning (Figure 7). For the academics surveyed, it is more important for them to have access to a wide and diverse range of materials, which can be used to support student learning. The most important formally-published learning resource is the journal article, with 72% rating this as ‘really important’. Only 30% of teachers rated entire textbooks as ‘really important’, while 20% rated them as ‘unimportant’. In addition, 55% rated chapters from textbooks as ‘really important’.

The interviews provided further detail. While entire textbooks may be used as an overview of a module, especially at introductory levels in first year, most academics do not consider full textbooks to be absolutely core learning

Fig. 7: ‘Really important’ resource types, by subject.



materials. However, one or two chapters might be selected for pre-reading for a lecture or seminar to provide a basic overview of key areas, debates or concepts that will be dealt with in class and in the rest of the reading materials.

Regarding sharing of learning resource content, it appears that researchers are already taking advantage of opportunities to share resources beyond their immediate student cohort. However, most interviewees had some level of doubt about who owns the IP for the learning resources that they create and were concerned that sharing beyond the university might contravene their terms of employment. Another concern around copyright was the legal status of content they had used in their slides or notes from third party sources. Aware that there are restrictions on what can be used/shared for teaching, interviewees were not sure whether sharing beyond their own student body would be legal or not.

A further issue is credit and trust. At present there is no widely-accepted convention for acknowledging someone else's contribution within your teaching. Concerning trust, some interviewees were concerned that if their resources were available for delivery by someone else, especially if credit is given to them as the original author, their views or opinions might be misrepresented. Interviewees stressed that they bring their own individual take to a topic at hand (and that module descriptions are often broad to allow different teachers to share their own perspective or priorities as they take over teaching).

## **5. Discussion**

The concept of open access itself will not incentivise many authors to move away from current practice. The survey and interview results show that open access was not high on the agenda of authors or teachers. However, there are opportunities to address other issues raised by authors in which open access could be encouraged on a secondary level.

One such opportunity centres around the publishing experience. Author priorities are not always being met by existing publishers, there appears to be a clear opportunity for new market entrants to support alternative approaches, such as ease of access, currency and ease of updating. Academics want whoever publishes their learning resource to have a good understanding

of how to ensure it is used, and to support the content through good editorial relationships and peer review. These needs are not always being met by current models.

However, opportunities need to be taken into context against other issues. For example, while academics prioritise free-at-the-point-of-use access for students to learning resources they select for their teaching, they do not especially prioritise free availability to students as potential authors of learning resources. Therefore, it is not clear whether open access textbooks would be a major motivator unless a clear explanation of the relevance of open access in solving the problems that authors do have in relation to publishing or using learning resources is provided.

Furthermore, although teachers are already sharing some of the learning resources they create, the environment is not always conducive to this. Some resources are shared between peers in order to be collegiate. However, many have concerns over copyright and IPR – particularly in terms of what belongs to them and what belongs to their employing university. There is also a concern about reputational risk of learning resources being misinterpreted or misrepresented by other teachers who use them without fully understanding the context or purpose. These concerns are not unlike some of the issues raised in relation to OA monographs and have potential ramifications for a move to open textbooks.

One area that may act as a motivator for authors and institutions to move towards open textbooks is student attainment and satisfaction. While this particular aspect was not within the remit of this study, research carried out in North America suggests a positive level of satisfaction from students regarding OAERs and open textbooks (Bell, 2012; Delimont et al., 2016; Feldstein et al., 2012; Hilton, Gaudet, Clark, Robinson, & Wiley, 2013). However, virtually no in-depth research has been carried out in the UK (Rolfe & Pitt, 2018). Often, we hear that students prefer print, but we do not know that to be universally true. Indeed, in one set of UK survey results it was found that “61% of the comments about the lack of books directly referred to the absence of Ebooks in the collection, rather than asking for more print copies” (McGuinn, Stone, Sharman, & Davison, 2017). It is suggested that further research should be carried out in this area.

A potential barrier to widescale adoption of open textbooks centres around institutional culture. Academics and teachers reported that a major

de-motivator was the pressure to publish research rather than teaching output. Furthermore, many felt that their institution did not offer any tangible rewards for producing textbooks. This is an area that would need to be addressed at a national level in order for open textbooks to become part of the mainstream in the UK.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is hoped that the results from this study will allow conversations regarding open textbooks to start to happen, particularly with funders to explore whether and how learning resource production could be rewarded within existing mechanisms and for institutions to work collaboratively on developing mechanisms for publishing learning resources that meet academic needs/requirements. Practical advice and support is required for academics who may aspire to produce learning resources. For example, buying out time and advice on copyright and IPR.

The authors would also like to encourage institutions, departments and university presses who are interested in publishing textbooks to run the survey and hold focus groups with your own academics. This will enable a greater understanding of local pressures and priorities for learning resource production. Consideration should be given to how learning resource production could contribute to wider institutional strategies, such as student experience, differential outcomes, knowledge exchange, staff development and professional teaching qualifications. It is important to recognise that this is not just about library budgets!

At Jisc Collections in the UK, the findings of this research have, alongside the outcomes of the Institution as e-textbook project, fed into the new Institution as e-textbook project toolkit. The toolkit is an instrument to provide practical help and support to universities wishing to start or that are already in their initial stages of e-textbook publication (Jisc, 2018b). The evidence-based research presented in this paper together with the findings of the author as teacher section of the survey are supporting further work at Jisc Collections around an evidence-based affordable e-textbooks strategy. A position paper on open textbooks will be published in 2019 (Milloy & Stone, 2019), followed by the results of a more extensive study, which will include discussion with other European consortia.



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