Since lockdown hit in the UK, it has become apparent the ebook publishing landscape is a challenging one to navigate for academic libraries and their users. At York St John, the librarians wanted to work with academic colleagues, publishers and others in trying to work towards a sustainable system. This is the text of a report we sent to committees across the institution, and we thought we would share it with you in case it proved useful elsewhere. We added to this core report with examples specific to our programme areas, so that course leaders could see where they were being impacted the most. A Word version is available for you to adapt as you wish.

# Ebook report from the Academic Liaison Librarians

The purpose of this paper is to highlight unsustainable practice in the publication and dissemination of academic ebooks, and to gain support in tackling the publishers and suppliers of academic ebooks in terms of both course resourcing and research publication.

## Current ‘normal’ situation

Pre-pandemic, there were already pressures in the academic ebook landscape. Like many other university libraries, the library service at York St John relies on four key aggregate suppliers of academic ebooks. Through these aggregate suppliers it is possible to purchase ebook versions of individual texts either on the suppliers’ own platforms, or hosted on the publishers’ platforms, but **only if the publisher has agreed to this**, and with **a variety of different licences** assigned to them. There are other methods of purchasing and providing academic ebooks, such as subscriptions to packages, evidence-based acquisition, and academic etextbook purchases for specific modules. Each of these provides its own challenges.

### Individual ebook purchase

The library has a digital first collection development policy. If a text is deemed essential to a module, we endeavour to provide electronic access to it. The process for doing this has several stages:

1. The academic liaison librarian will check across the four aggregate supplier platforms for an ebook which allows DRM free access (i.e. allows full, permanent download/print for as many users as require the text). This is usually the most expensive ebook option but will provide the biggest end benefit for accessibility. These generally cost many times more than a print text.
2. If there is no DRM-free ebook, the academic liaison librarian will check for a credit-based licence. This involves a one-off fee to purchase a set number of ‘accesses’ per annum, usually between 200 and 400 individual logins. The costs vary from the equivalent to the cost of a print text to substantially more. The publisher licences how much can be printed or downloaded by the reader – this usually aligns with copyright exceptions for print versions (i.e. one chapter or 10%) but can be less.
3. The next option is for a limited concurrent user licence. Common ones allow either one or three concurrent users at any time and it is these licences which generally cost the same as a print text (or the multiple of the cost of the print text if it allows more than one user). Again, the publisher licences how much can be printed/saved permanently.
4. An option seldom used is that which combines these models and provides only a limited concurrent user model, but also for a finite amount of time, effectively mimicking a subscription which would need renewing annually.
5. If no ebook is available, or the licence is not suitable, we fall back on exceptions we are permitted under our CLA licence. This allows us to scan from print copies of books and store them in the CLA’s Digital Content Store. This does not permit whole book scanning, with a 10% limit generally in place, and so is not suitable where whole book access is required. If a book is published abroad, scanning may not be permitted at all.

There is **no guarantee that any text will be made available on library ebook**. This is the decision of the publisher. There have also been instances of licence provisions being withdrawn, either for a text already purchased, or in not assigning a licence to a new edition of text. Similarly, new releases may be print only for several months, or for only restrictive licences to be issued with a new release, with more generous licences only arriving later and requiring another payment to secure. The academic liaison librarians have a list of over 100 texts from essential reading lists which do not appear to be available on any platform under any licence at all.

### Other access models

There are a variety of reasons as to the lack of titles being made available for individual library ebook purchase, but these are the main ones:

#### Wish to keep print only

There are some publishers and authors who wish to keep to print publications only, for reasons linked to the importance of the physicality of the access. This provides a problem in terms of accessibility for those who are unable to access text in this fashion.

#### Limiting ebook models to packages

Several publishers limit the availability of ebook content to package deals. This means they do not supply individual titles to the aggregate platforms. Instead packages of subject-based ebooks are offered. If libraries purchase these packages, they pay for content that may not align with current research and teaching in order to gain the percentage of the collection which is needed.

#### e-textbook contracts

This type of contract has grown rapidly in the past three years. Third party companies provide online access to texts via an e-textbook contract model. Some academic publishers currently provide access to their online content only via this route. Under this model, universities pay for a single module cohort to be able to access online versions of texts, and this fee must be paid each year for new module cohorts to gain this access. This means that libraries cannot list these electronic versions of titles on the library catalogue, as access is on an individual basis. Universities must apply for each title on an individual basis as there is no database of books to search, and the terms are worked out for each title upon application. This is expensive in terms of staff time to administrate each year, and in annual fees to continue access. It is likely that a whole programme library book budget would be swallowed up by just two or three module titles which only a small percentage of the programme cohort could access.

## Pandemic response

We had encountered issues in providing online access to texts in terms of off-campus delivery, apprenticeships and placement students, when ebooks of essential texts were not available to purchase, or on restrictive models. This was brought into sharp focus when all courses became online-only and there was no access to print texts due to the pandemic lockdown. It was hoped that publishers and suppliers would relax licence terms and widen the number of texts available on ebooks for libraries. Many have responded, with one user licences becoming unlimited, and collections of ebooks that were previously only available in subscription packages becoming more widely available. However, this is for a limited period and spread over a wide range of platforms, leading to questions of what to do when the current emergency ends. Others have advertised that they were making their titles available online, but upon investigation this has been a restrictive access model which would be difficult to sustain long-term and has led to concerns about managing student expectation.

It should also be noted that, copyright scanning options were extended to 30% of a text during the period of lockdown, via the CLA licence. However, there are limits to the new exceptions both in terms of the content available and the ability of libraries to create scans under lockdown conditions. This has impacted on the student experience.

## Future decisions

The academic liaison librarians would like the support of academic colleagues in ensuring ebook access improves and becomes more accessible. There is a risk that unaffordable and unsustainable models will become the default. We therefore ask that colleagues work with us in feeding back to publishers and authors that we cannot make their texts essential to module teaching if they are not available on ebook, or are only available via the e-textbook model. We also ask that, when seeking opportunities to publish, colleagues discuss ebook access with the publishers, to ensure that the work is not restricted.