Making etextbooks available in the library

With the huge surge in online learning, etextbooks for university students are becoming more popular. But publishers have been wary, seeing a possible erosion of a once-lucrative market, as ALISON SINCLAIR of University of the Sunshine Coast reports.

With the widespread uptake of ebooks in the Australian university sector and the growth of online learning, Queensland University Libraries Office of Cooperation (QULOC) librarians involved in collection development and resource management wanted to get a clearer picture of the future of etextbooks. While most university libraries provide copies of print textbooks to support student equity, the number of copies purchased is based on student enrolment numbers, the number of campuses and recommendations from faculty. To continue this high-value service, being able to offer e-versions of textbooks is a logical and cost-efficient choice, with convenient resource management and reporting features.

The QULOC Information Resources and Access Working Group held a forum in Brisbane in June 2015, inviting academic publishers and librarians to outline their vision for this important component of university collections. There were over 50 attendees and a further 15 took part via videoconference.

Gillian Hallam from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library and Information Science School began with a presentation on the recent history of the use of etextbooks in Australia.

The publishers then responded. Until recently, academic publishers would routinely restrict institutions from licensing their textbook as ebooks, while offering students print or individual e-versions. Cambridge University Press, Cengage and, most recently, Pearson now allow institutional etextbook licensing, either on publisher platforms or via aggregator interfaces, such as MyiLibrary and Ebook Library (EBL). Most publishers expressed interest in offering etextbooks to libraries but remain sensitive to protecting textbook sales to students, which is a significant part of their market.

The forum provided an opportunity for university library professionals to question publishers about possible future licensing models, and talk about any underlying business strategies they were prepared to share.

Dr Paul Harper, law lecturer at the University of Queensland, gave a thorough and honest review of the many and varied ebook platforms. Paul has been blind since childhood so the usability of ebooks is critical to his work.

Kate Houston from Central Queensland University (CQU) Library outlined the work of a CQU project team that aims to improve the quality of the process of textbook selection at that institution by working closely with faculty.

Colleen Cleary (QUT Library) reported on the recent pilot of selected Pearson etextbook titles at QUT. Early signs are that the return on investment is very promising, even taking into account that etextbooks can be up to six times more expensive than single print editions. The QUT pilot used a subscription rather than outright purchase model, which makes sense considering the life cycle of textbooks – most editions stay current for around three years. Students are happy with the convenience, they experience few turnaways and academics welcome the format.

The most important take-home messages were:

Publishers have sensitivities around market share but are now prepared to offer some etextbooks for library licensing.

University library professionals need to be clear about their demand for etextbooks, be prepared to pay higher prices for these titles, and consider subscription models.

And in the end, it is hoped that the tangible benefits of this advocacy will flow directly to our undergraduate students.

ALISON SINCLAIR
Library Resource Co-Ordinator, Information Services
University of the Sunshine Coast
a.sinclair@usc.edu.au

Alison Sinclair