Studying Success

The Role of Books in Higher Education

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Introduction

The modular textbook is an enduring feature of education systems and this report will focus on its place within contemporary higher education. It is important that the value of the textbook, both physical and digital, be recognised and, more broadly, the most effective institutional approaches to resources be developed to ensure the best learning outcomes for students.

Students need to be adept at filtering and digesting digital, web-based information; a skill that should be honed at university, if not before. However, students often find accessing and understanding textbooks easier than compiling online sources, with notetaking and highlighting being key methods for digesting information. Further, textbooks present students with the fundamentals of a subject, ensuring they grasp all critical information and help to make the material easier to understand. Where students are developing skills in source identification and evaluation, textbooks can save time and effort in finding the key themes and relevant outcomes for their subject.

This report comes as the result of a roundtable discussion and brings together the views of individuals in publishing, academia, bookselling, libraries and education. It assesses the role of the textbook in universities today, at a critical juncture for learning methods in higher education.

Among the themes covered are student habits and ways of learning in relation to books; availability and use challenges; how resource use is measured as part of The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF); and how the use of books in universities can be made most effective. Those connected with higher education institutes are cautioned not to be so overcome with the drive towards digital transformation that they fail to fully acknowledge the benefits of textbooks. It will be suggested that institutions should review their spending on resources, improve communication between academics and academic librarians (as well as with the broader community including government and students) and to ensure that spaces to browse books are protected.

Textbooks and Learning

Although textbooks are now available in physical and digital forms, the mode in which students learn and digest information varies student to student. This section will discuss the differences between absorbing information through digital and print form, consider the role of notetaking as a useful skill for learning and the value of textbooks in providing authority and anchorage for students.

Absorbing Information in Digital and Print

Lecturers encourage students to use multiple entry points and data sources to acquire knowledge and a range of resources are available for this. However, despite technological advancements, students still express a preference for physical books (Millar and Schrier, 2015). In a 2017 study, Baron et al. found that 80% of students preferred print (when the costs were comparable) and 92% found their concentration was better when reading print is opposed to digital.

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There is some debate as to whether recall and retrieval is less efficient when reading from a digital source. Jeong (2012) found that it was, but Morineau et al. (2005) found no significant difference. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2012) argue that the ability to take in longer sections of text is improved in

There is some debate as to whether recall and retrieval is less efficient when reading from a digital source.

print, but for shorter chunks of information, there is little difference between the two. The authors suggest this could be down to the introduction of eye strain and therefore fatigue after a longer period of time.

Wulf (2018) suggests that readers' expectations of different types of technologies might dictate what they take from them:

> *Students seemed to expect to spend more time and be more engaged by print, and so perhaps they are...print and digital will each have their place...we will add new technology (digital) and not take away the old (print).*

Notetaking as a useful skill for learning

Barnaby Lenon, Chair of the Independent Schools Council, is a strong advocate of textbooks, which he sees as critical in developing methods of learning (especially, in the school context, where they often compete with the commonly favoured hand-out). He suggests the process of notetaking from books is an important learning tool that is often overlooked. He remarks that the steady decline in production of textbooks at school level is, perhaps predictably, *"mostly due to cost pressures"*.

As a result of this decline, pupils have been getting out of the habit of note-taking from textbooks, the most efficient method for retention of information. A pupil's approach to handouts, he suggests, is rarely to annotate save for highlighting which is often done in a more habitual than analytical manner. In addition, he points out that textbook authors do *"a really good job of assimilating and clarifying an entire syllabus"*, thus giving students a clearer idea as to the core facts of a subject. He suggests that ensuring this approach to learning is adopted at school age will better equip pupils for learning at higher levels.

Information Anchors

As Barnaby argues, when provided by a textbook, information can be presented in a more economical fashion – this is particularly useful to

Textbooks provide anchorage to students

students in courses such as biomedical sciences, law or medicine, where an enormous amount of knowledge has to be assimilated. Textbooks provide anchorage to students, helping them to explore relevant academic themes without significant divergence. Professor Jenny Higham, Principal of St. George's, University of London (the UK's only university solely concerned with medical and health sciences training, education and research) notes that an attempt by the University to establish an open-resource-taught course left many students feeling lost:

> *Often students would go down avenues to more and more excruciating depths and have no idea at what point on the spectrum to stop.*

Textbooks are a useful authority on the key points of a subject. Of course, all students benefit from the support of good learning materials, but for those in danger of missing the fundamentals, textbooks can be transformational. If the foundations are missed, the likelihood increases of students falling behind and being unable to progress with the subject.

There can be a disparity between the expectations of professors and the understanding of the students they teach. Textbooks can be used to level the playing field between different students, while also serving to bridge the gap between where students are and where educators need them to be so that teaching is worthwhile for both parties.

In situations where students or teachers are findings topics challenging, textbooks can serve as an anchor and reference point.

Availability, Costs and Access

Challenges Facing the Sector

According to David Prescott, Chief Executive of Blackwell's, many higher education institutions are under resourced in terms of undergraduate books. Where they are available, there is rarely enough for every person on the course.

A challenge with ensuring sufficient supply of textbooks is that they can go out of date, whether superseded with new versions or not. Web-based resources are advantaged in this sense as they can be regularly updated (though this does not necessarily mean they are).

There are signs that some university librarians are refocusing on the physical copy because of student preference.

Ensuring space to house textbooks can also present challenges to universities. The library is often the most popular area on a university or college campus. This is testament to the importance of resources in the higher education experience. It can, however, lead to great competition for space therein. There is a real difficulty in ensuring that libraries can accommodate both the students who wish to use them as well as the physical copies of books for which they were built.

Libraries remain active hubs at most universities, often with not enough desks for all those who want to work there. Books take up space which could be used for additional desks or computer banks.

However, there are signs that some university librarians are refocusing on the physical copy because of student preference. The use of digital books helps with funding and some of the access issues, but as discussed above, are not as well liked by users.

Universities should consider how to accommodate for much-needed physical books/resources while making sufficient study space available for students.

Teaching and Resources

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) has placed the focus in higher education on research and development, in some cases to the detriment of teaching. The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) has been introduced to redress the balance. With changes to course funding and student loans, students have become more demanding consumers with a greater emphasis on value for money. Part of the intention of the TEF has been to help future cohorts of students decide where to study. It goes beyond satisfying a basic standard and offers awards for achievement of 'excellence'.

Under TEF, an independent panel of students, academics and other experts assess a selection of metrics and a written submission from the university which are then benchmarked against their student profile, so as not to penalise those who accept more disadvantaged students. The metrics

It is important that resources are being measured in higher education despite limitations on metrics.

include results of the National Student Survey (NSS), dropout rates from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and leaver destinations (looking at both whether graduates have gained employment and whether their work is 'highly-skilled').

In 2017, following the government's TEF 'lessons learned' exercise, changes were brought in to reduce the weighting allocated to the student survey and to take into account Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) which incorporate graduate salaries.

The Government is now piloting a subject specific version of TEF to run alongside institution level awards. It was shown in the government consultation on this issue that 'good resources and facilities' were ranked higher than most other factors by both applicants to the TEF and students. In a response to this, in October 2018 the Government said they would be introducing learning resources as one of two new NSS metrics. The learning resources section, among other questions, asks students to what extent they agree that library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported their learning.

'Good resources and facilities' were ranked higher than most other factors

These are important measures. As this report has shown, a good balance of resources is important for student learning as is ease of accessibility. This approach of measuring quality of resources through the student survey, although imperfect, appears practical as a more prescriptive approach would be unworkable and restrictive. Maja Maricevic, Head of Higher Education at the British Library, argues that the significance attached to metrics in higher education can pose a risk that too much prescription could close down students' ability to explore resources. *"We need people to understand everything that is out there. If TEF learning environments are too rigid, it will be detrimental".* But it is important that resources are being measured in higher education whatever the limitations of metrics may be.

Ensuring Effective Use in Higher Education Institutes

Communication and Supporting the Sector

There is a feeling among some academics that a better understanding of teaching styles could improve how suitable the available resources found in university libraries are. Academic librarians often seek greater input from academics; however, restraints on time mean that this is challenging. Ways of improving these channels of communication between academics and academic librarians should be devised.

More broadly, greater discussion around the use and availability of resources should be had between institutions, publishers, students and government. Better support between these groups in relation to resource provision would lead to improved outcomes for all students.

Funding Review

Universities should ensure that the funds they allocate for resources are assessed and, where possible, assigned using an evidence-based approach. The drive toward digital transformation can be seductive, but traditional modes of learning should be afforded equal consideration.

The inclusion of quality of resources in TEF might act as a catalyst for universities to rethink how they allocate their funds. There is an argument that a certain proportion of tuition fees should be ringfenced for resources. Louis Coiffait explains that some universities take the "Ryanair" approach, where students are required to shell out for resources and other additions once they have started a course. Since the tuition fee increase of 2010 and the subsequent allowance for fees to rise in line with inflation (having recently been allowed to rise to a maximum of £9,250 p.a.), students have become more conscious of their position as consumers. They could well become less tolerant of approaches which do not deliver value-for-money.

Conclusion

Holding, reading, annotating and writing a book are all important experiences, ones which build knowledge and understanding, and we should not lose sight of this. Clearly, textbooks remain relevant in modern education; their place needs to be recognised and protected. It is important that they remain a mainstay of education and used as effectively as possible.

Recommendations

Institutions should review their spending on resources. A ringfencing of fees might be considered by individual institutions, but this is not recommended as a national target.

In order to find the most suitable approach , there is a need for more rigorous research around the use of resources in higher education. The many studies conducted in this field could be collated to give a comprehensive view of the issue.

Spaces in which to browse books in learning institutions should be maintained (be it libraries, campus book shops or others) despite competition for space.

Greater communication between academics and academic librarians should be encouraged and supported by institutions. Publishers, government and students should also be brought into the conversation of effective use of resources.

This exchange of information would ensure that the acquisition and use of resources at higher education institutions provide the best learning experience for students.

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About Professor Neil Carmichael

Neil's career has combined farming, business, education and politics. A former County Councillor in Northumberland, he was elected as Member of Parliament for Stroud in 2010. He was elected as a member of the Education Select Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee in 2010, and was appointed Chair of the Education Select Committee in 2015. In that role he challenged a number of assumptions (and his own Party's policies) and oversaw a range of inquiries into Multi Academy Trusts, special educational needs and the productivity gap; a role for which he won widespread support across the education community and the political spectrum.

Neil chairs the independent Commission on Sustainable Learning for Life, Work and a Changing Economy, which has been set up to investigate the future world of work and provide practical solutions for the education sector on how to meet the challenges posed. Neil's upcoming book, *Progressive, Productive, Proper: A New Reform Agenda for Education*, will look at how an education system delivering an innovative, fair, competitive and resilient economy for the future might be created. Neil has contributed to a number of Wild Research publications, three of which focus on Education Governance.

The Founder and former Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Education Governance and Leadership, he is a graduate, and Honorary Professor, of Nottingham University and a former lecturer in post war politics.

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About Booksellers Association

The Booksellers Association is a membership organisation for all booksellers in the UK & Ireland, representing over 95% of bookshops.

The Booksellers Association exists to support, advise and work with its members to create excellent products for booksellers and thus there are many benefits of the BA membership. These range from National Book Tokens, a gift card which offers increased footfall and keeps gift spending in the book trade and Batch, their award-winning payments service, which saves time, money and hassle when settling invoices and organising returns, to a full range of money-saving affinity deals, a free Business Support Helpline and a whole range of tailored events, marketing and promotional campaign work, including Books Are My Bag, IndieBound, World Book Day and Independent Bookshop Week.

Making sure that we monitor all the structures that underpin the modern-day book trade and life as a bookseller, we also keep a close eye on developments in technology and government legislation and have a raft of advice and information for members.

The BA also offers members the opportunity to become involved in a leading trade organisation, through a number of special interest groups, the BA Council and a range of ad hoc working parties; this can be great career development for engaged booksellers and puts them right at the forefront of their ever-changing business.

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Wild Search is an established, well-connected and innovative executive search and advisory company. Our team provides extensive sector knowledge and brings a formidable and constantly evolving network of contacts to every search.

Formed in 2010, our work has encompassed advising on the appointment of executives and non-executives for a range of organisations, primarily in the education and charity sectors. We have also worked with boards to develop new roles and secured shortlists for them. Our market knowledge, network and the Wild Search community are constantly evolving through a combination of searches, reports and events.

We are firmly committed to providing strong methodology, a rigorous approach, thorough research and imaginative thinking, in addition to clear and candid advice. We combine transparency with a sharp focus on the key requirements for each client for every position.

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Wild Research was formed in 2011 and has since published 23 reports. The majority of the reports focus on education, but others relate to charities, housing and development and the rural economy. In order to further our understanding of our clients' needs and outlook, we seek to evolve and improve our knowledge of the issues they face and challenges that lie ahead.

By contacting and interviewing experts and practitioners in each field, we aim to improve our insight, share best practice and provide new perspectives.

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