

Libraries and Alternative formats research

Part 5: Good practice pointers

Making sense of complexity

The transfer of knowledge from an author to a print impaired learner has four main starting points summarised in figure 1 below. Print impaired learners need files in electronic format so they can personalise them (e.g. colours, font size), access them more effectively (e.g. navigation tools) or interact with assistive technologies such as text-to-speech. In addition to the enhancements the user might make (e.g. magnification) it may be necessary for specialised enhancements to be added – for example a blind reader may need images or formulae to be described or reading order to be tagged on a PDF file. A dyslexic reader may need heading levels marked up in order to make sense of the hierarchy of ideas.

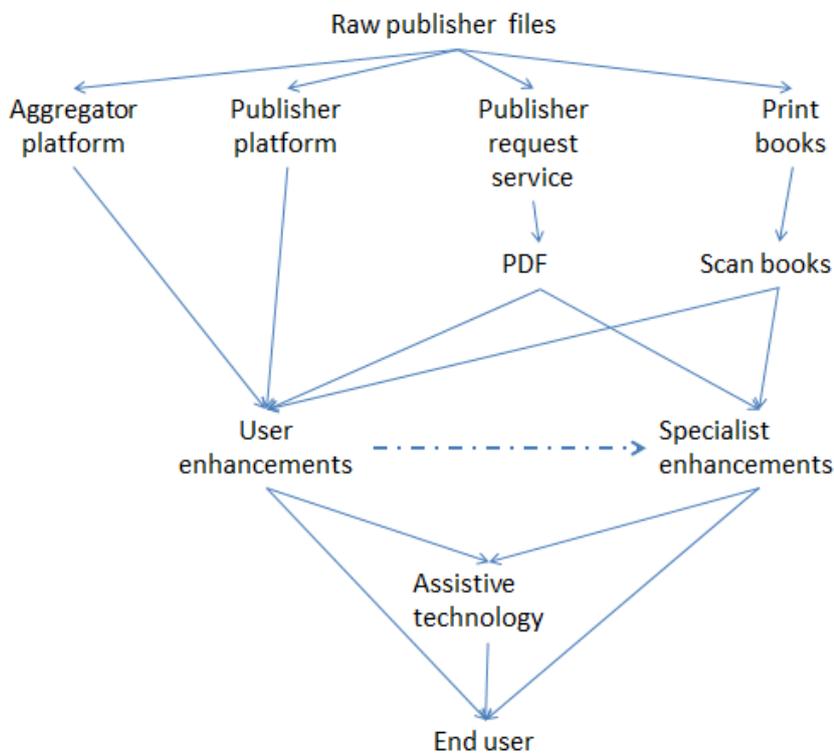


Figure 1 - Model illustrating the four key route ways by which publisher files reach the end users. See body text for explanation. Ideally, scanning books would be a last resort.

Whichever route way is taken to accessible information, library services are pivotal to the whole process - whether as repositories of print books, procurers of platforms or gateways to publishers. In the model above, the left-hand side of the diagram (aggregator and publisher e-book platforms) represents mainstream solutions which could benefit thousands of print impaired learners. The right-hand side of the diagram (publisher requests and scanning) represents increasingly specialist requirements to meet more complex needs. Our research showed that most attention is focused on a small proportion of high need learners. Several respondents make the point that they only have the capacity to deal with visually impaired learners; many were uncomfortable with this covert discrimination but were already overwhelmed in meeting needs. So how can services be refocused to provide a better job with less effort?

Refocusing the service

Recognise that your mainstream systems should be your solution

Even poorly accessible e-book platforms, databases and journal collections will have accessibility benefits compared to traditional print books. Make sure that you know what accessibility benefits exist. The more accessible the system is, the more learners will be supported at no extra cost. If you don't know the accessibility pros and cons of your system ask the publisher. You don't need to know technical standards but you do need to know:

- What is the maximum font size and does text reflow when you enlarge the font?
- Can a user change background/foreground colours or contrasts?
- Are there keyboard-only equivalents for all mouse actions?
- Is text marked up so it can be navigated in a meaningful way (for example by heading level)?
- Can text be selected and read by text-to-speech tools?
- Are text descriptions available for graphics and images?
- Which assistive technology tools has the system been tested with?
- Where can I find guidance for all these features?

If your supplier can't answer these questions then you should either consider changing to one that can or doing the research yourself and negotiating a reduced license fee to compensate.

The quote below illustrates a learning provider attempting to work strategically – starting with a mainstream solution where possible then approaching publishers. Note also their awareness of platform accessibility and their ability to critique the platforms they use.

“We try to obtain an e-book version of texts by buying a copy all students can use on one of our existing platforms. If this isn't possible then either the Library or Disability office will approach a publisher direct. Unfortunately we find that platforms that advertise as accessible aren't always as user friendly as they profess to be!”

Inform learners

When you know the accessibility features of your system, promote them to learners. The Open University has specific accessibility guidance for a number of their more popular collections.

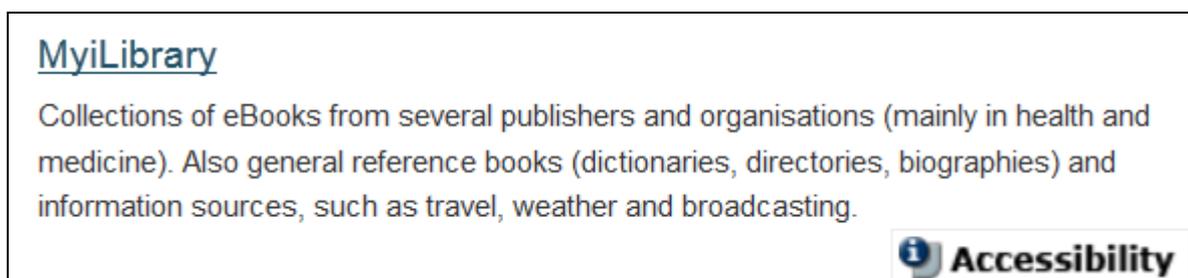


Figure 2 - Screenshot from the Open University webpage detailing the accessibility of different collections (where known).

Provide tools for self-reliance

One respondent noted wisely, “If the students wants audio, our aim is to help them modify the file and use it with their DSA equipment to promote and support their independent learning - so we'd do some of their files for them initially, then with them while they learn the process.”

Not all print impaired learners have a disabled students allowance and yet text-to-speech with high quality voices can be freely available to most post 16 learners in the UK via the TechDis Jess and Jack voices (England), Heather and Stewart (Scotland) and Geraint and Gwyneth (Wales). A range of inbuilt and free software tools can support learners who are not eligible for commercial products – see the JISC TechDis Toolbox site.

www.jisctechdis.ac.uk/tbx.

Clarify, and if necessary renegotiate, expectations

Involve the right players – including academics

The learning providers who were most proactive and responsive had clearly delineated responsibilities and areas of expertise. Everybody from the manager procuring e-book platforms to the disability service, library staff and tutors has an influence on practice. One proactive respondent noted, “If students have to use a textbook, it will be supplied with their module material and accessibility should have been sorted out by the academic writing the module/Disabled Students Services/Rights.”

Academics need to take some responsibility for the suitability of the reading list for print impaired learners. If books on the reading list are unobtainable in accessible format it could be fairly argued that the cost of scanning them should be borne by departmental budgets.

Involving a wider range of staff is very much in line with the JISC TechDis accessibility maturity model but it is important that lines of communication and responsibility are clearly delineated.

(We are currently reviewing this in an attempt to persuade the University to adopt a more professional procedure across the board.)

Clarify who pays for what

This is an important question with many implications. The answers varied from organisation to organisation depending on a number of factors. In the research, we found:

1. Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) tended to pay for:
 - a) non-core, additional research or material not given to sighted students
 - b) individual copying and scanning,
 - c) learning support workers copying and scanning
 - d) Braille and more complex formats.
2. The library tended to pay for:
 - a) e-book purchases that could be added to the library platforms,
 - b) time and administration costs contacting publishers,
 - c) simple scanning jobs.

There were many grey areas of funding which were sometimes covered by central budgets or by a completely separate transcription budget. Supporting disabled international students and was a key area for central funding.

Digital copies of text books from publishers will normally be priced similarly to the price of the hard copy however the nature of the supply chain is complex and there may be occasions where the price is higher if extra costs have been incurred by publisher. In practice, many library requests are provided **pro bono** if the library already has physical copies of the book. It is not unreasonable for learning providers to expect to pay for digital copies, particularly if they have good accessibility. However, it may be unreasonable to pay for a digital copy if it has poor accessibility and requires significant additional effort before the learner can use it. There is scope here for creative mutual self-interest, for example, some learning providers will improve the PDF provided to them and offer it back to the publisher in exchange for waived costs.

Find good publishers and promote them to academic teams

Using the publisher look up service (www.publisherlookup.org.uk) find the publisher contacts for alternative formats and sign up to the publisher look up feedback service to report on your experiences. Don't be put off by scare stories about how difficult it is.

“This works best with new books from big publishers - they can be fantastic.”

“I've obtained 14 pdfs of the 19 titles required this year.”

Make sure you feed back to academic teams the implications of their recommended reading choices but ensure you plan ahead, recognising that certain times of the year create bottlenecks that impact on speed of response (see figure 3 below).

“a few excellent providers send accessible files electronically in a matter of minutes e.g. Sage and Wilan; most publishers take several days, if not weeks, to provide accessible files.”

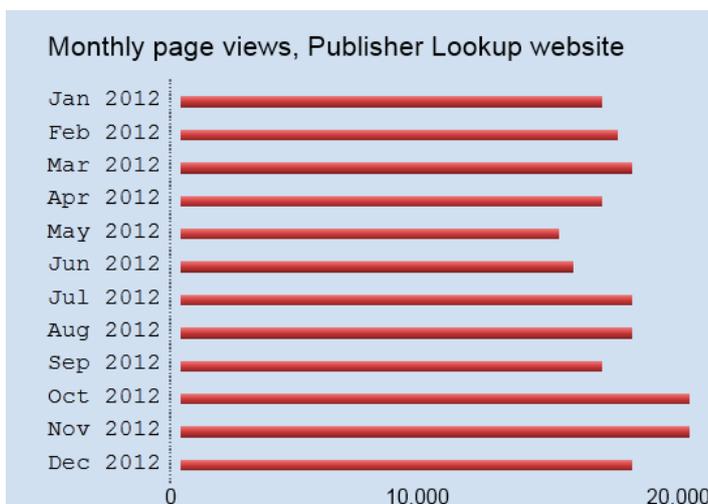


Figure 3 - Page hits on the Publisher Lookup website show peaks at March, July and October. The further you can plan ahead the quicker your response should be.

Conclusions

One respondent noted, “I look forward to a time when obtaining an 'accessible' version of a title will be as quick and effective as obtaining a print or eBook version.”

This time will come, but it will only come when:

- Thousands of dyslexic learners recognise they could be better served by digital text and start to demand that their needs are also met,
- Hundreds of university and college libraries make hundreds of alternative format requests per year, creating a strong business case for publishers to incorporate accessibility in their mainstream products,
- Accessibility becomes a core element of procurement processes,
- Accessible publishers become a core requirement of reading lists.

Ultimately, this is not about libraries versus publishers because they both have the same vested interest of getting as many people reading as possible. Several major publishers have accessibility expertise and staff actively working towards improved accessibility but it is difficult to make a business case for major workflow changes if you only get a few accessibility requests a year. A library sector, passionate about equal access for print impaired learners, is essential to provide the business arguments for positive change. It is our sincere hope that this research empowers and inspires library and disability staff to demonstrate - beyond doubt - the arguments for such a change.

Background

This research was carried out by JISC TechDis with a grant from CLAUD - a group of HE librarians in South West England working to help create libraries accessible to users with a disability. The research involved over 60 responses representing 49 different Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). We are very grateful to respondents for their insights, comments and honesty in providing the raw data.

This document is one of five in the Libraries and Alternative Formats Research Series:

Part 1- Is there a problem?

Part 2 – Does the availability of mainstream electronic text negate the need for special requests or special provision?

Part 3 –Are some disabilities treated less favourably than others?

Part 4 – Are some organisational approaches more effective?

Part 5 – Good practice pointers.