

Āta Mātai, Mātai Whetū: Remaining Firmly Grounded, Pursing Far Horizons in Textbook Provision

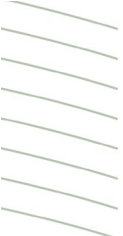
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Introduction

Academic libraries have long provided textbooks as part of their service, often placing them in high use collections to ensure equity of access for students. Increasing student expectations of online access to educational resources has led to libraries providing access to e-textbooks wherever possible. However, the rising cost of e-textbooks for libraries, along with increasingly strict data rights management provisions, threaten academic libraries' ability to continue to provide equitable access to textbooks. Libraries are effectively being cut out of textbook provision, with a consequent impact on equity of information access for students.

While work has long been underway in the North American academic library sector to combat this development by resourcing and advocating for open educational resources, little had been happening in Australasia until the COVID pandemic accelerated a growing awareness that a more proactive approach to textbook provision was required. Research had been undertaken in New Zealand into student perspectives of textbooks, but academic perspectives of textbooks in tertiary education was the missing piece of the puzzle to effectively tackling this issue. A research group, led by University of Canterbury, undertook a project to investigate academic perspectives of



textbooks, finding that academics are often unaware of whether students have access to the textbooks, or the issues libraries face in providing textbook access. The key to maintaining equity of textbook access lies in libraries collaborating with academics on the adoption and creation of open textbooks, venturing into new professional territory while remaining anchored by their role as information experts.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns focussed attention on the issues of e-textbook access in academic libraries, but the issue had been brewing for some years¹. Even before the demand for e-textbooks, prices had been steadily climbing due to the “principal agent problem”². In short, unlike most markets where the person deciding to purchase an item is the person paying for the item, in the textbook market the person setting a compulsory or recommended textbook (i.e. the lecturer) is not the person who will be paying for the item – that falls to the students and the library. Thus, the marketing is driven by what will appeal to the lecturer, and there is little incentive to compete on price given the unique nature of the product. In this context, students and libraries have little economic power.

Two New Zealand studies highlight the impact of this textbook publishing model on students. Brown et al.³ and Stein et al.⁴ both found that students reported lack of textbook access had a negative impact on their studies, with students often having to balance the financial cost of purchasing a text versus the academic cost of not purchasing the textbook. Furthermore, library provision of print textbooks was often cited as being inconvenient due to the limited check out times and opening hours.⁵

The traditional textbook market is based on print books, but the move to e-books placed even more market control in publishers’ hands, with the very real risk that libraries were no longer able to offer a key service of equitable access to information resources. The demand for electronic textbooks started to grow in the last five


¹ Rachel Bickley. “There’s big problems with the market for academic ebooks.” *Wonkhe*, March 29, 2021, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/theres-a-big-problem-with-the-market-for-academic-e-books/>.

² James Koch. “Episode 573: Why textbook prices keep climbing,” interview by David Kestenbaum. *Planet Money*, NPR, September 16, 2016. 15.00. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/494266135>

³ Brown, Cheryl, Prakash M. Bajaj, and Z. Luo. “Tertiary Students’ Perspectives on the Cost of Textbooks” FLANZ, 2020. *UC Research Repository*. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/100172>

⁴ Stein, Sarah, Simon Hart, Philippa Keaney, and Richard White. “Student Views on the Cost of and Access to Textbooks: An Investigation at University of Otago (New Zealand).” *Open Praxis* 9, no. 4 (2017): 403-19. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.4.704>.

⁵ Brown, Cheryl, Prakash M. Bajaj, and Z. Luo. “Tertiary Students’ Perspectives on the Cost of Textbooks” FLANZ, 2020. *UC Research Repository*. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/100172>



years,⁶ but COVID-19 significantly changed the learning and teaching landscape with increased demand for online teaching and research content.⁷ With lockdowns closing academic libraries, students had to have digital access to their textbooks and publishers began developing a plethora of different library access models for e-book content including 1 and 3-user licenses, read online only access to e-textbooks (i.e., no copying/printing a chapter), enrolment-based subscription models (i.e. yearly licenses based on numbers of students, publisher platforms requiring individual student sign-in (e.g. Kortext, VitalSource) and bespoke learning platforms (e.g. MindTap).⁸ Increasingly, libraries were not able to purchase e-textbooks, only lease them – if their budget even extended to the quickly increasing prices. Publishers are essentially encouraging lecturers to mandate cohorts of students (or their institutions) purchase their product (although promotional strategies tend not to frame it so bluntly). If such textbook models begin to dominate the textbook market, academic libraries will be effectively cut out of textbook provision – either at huge cost to institutions (if cohort subscriptions are purchased) or negatively impacting on equity of access for students (if access is dependent on students purchasing a textbook license).

It is not clear if academics are aware of how the textbook publishing market is changing and the possible consequences, with little literature on what informs academic choice of textbooks or academic perspectives of textbook use by students. Indeed, our experience at the University of Canterbury suggested not. Some examples include:

- academics planning lectures that require the whole class to access the library’s 3 user-licensed e-textbook,
- setting open book exams in which many students rely on the library’s limited user licenses, and
- signing a publishing agreement for a textbook they planned to use in a course only to find that it had been repackaged by the publisher as sections within an online database that was not available for individual purchase - print or e-book.

⁶ See: Ferguson, Christine L. "Textbooks in Academic Libraries." Article. *Serials Review* 42, no. 3 (2016): 252-58.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00987913.2016.1207480>, and Ohe, Kevin. "Textbooks in Libraryland — Perspectives from a Publisher." Article. *Against the Grain* 31, no. 3 (2019): 32-34.

⁷ Maria Kiriakova. "Pausing in the Middle of the Storm: Assessing Functionality of the Library Reserve Collection for the Post-Pandemic Future." *Journal of Access Services* 18, no. 3 (2021): 184–211.

⁸ See: Rachel Bickley. "There’s big problems with the market for academic ebooks." *Wonkhe*, March 29, 2021, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/theres-a-big-problem-with-the-market-for-academic-e-books/>; Denise A. Garofalo. "Tips from the Trenches." *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship* 34, no. 1 (2023): 61-63. doi:10.1080/1941126x.2023.2165243.; Glynn Moody. "Publishers want to make ebooks more expensive and harder to lend for libraries; Ron Wyden and Anna Eschoo have questions. *Techdirt*. November 1, 2021, <https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20211029/07343747837/publishers-want-to-make-ebooks-more-expensive-harder-to-lend-libraries-ron-wyden-anna-eshoo-have-questions.shtml>; Brad Vogus. "Open Educational Resources (Oer) and Textbooks: Opportunities for Academic Libraries." Article. *Public Services Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2019): 242-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2019.1629858>.



Research Project

In response to the increasing pressure on textbook provision, a team led by the University of Canterbury Library developed a research project seeking to understanding academic perspectives of textbooks, including how often they set prescribed textbooks in their courses, what influenced their selection of a textbook, their understanding of student perspectives of textbooks, their experience of textbook access during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and their knowledge of open textbooks. This research was driven by the realisation that we took our directions in the library from academics as to what books to buy assuming that the library, academics, and students are all operating within the same framework of understanding. We understood student perspectives and the library experience, but we needed to make sure we understood academic perspectives of textbooks, as working with academics on textbook selection seemed like the most important lever for ensuring equitable textbook provision for students.

The research team comprised Fiona Tyson (Manager, Macmillan Brown Library), Sara Roberts (Manager, Teaching & Learning), Lisa Davies (Kaiwhakahaere Ako), Associate Professor Cheryl Brown (University of Canterbury), Richard White (Copyright Manager at University of Otago) and Zhanni Luo (Research Assistant). We developed an anonymous Qualtrics survey with 18 questions, containing a combination of multi-choice, scale and free text investigating how often academics set prescribed textbooks, how they thought students accessed textbooks, the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on textbook practice and their awareness of open textbooks. As this research project built upon the studies conducted by teams at the University of Otago in 2015⁹ and Otago Polytechnic in 2019,¹⁰ the survey adapted questions developed in these projects' surveys. The survey questions are available via [Figshare](#)¹¹ and licensed under a Creative Common attribution license for reuse.

Survey Demographics

Respondents were asked which institution they worked at to enable individual institutions to undertake granular analyses of the data to inform their approach to textbook provision. The majority of respondents were from the University of Canterbury.

⁹ Sarah Stein, Simon Hart, Philippa Keaney, and Richard White. "Student Views on the Cost of and Access to Textbooks: An Investigation at University of Otago (New Zealand)." *Open Praxis* 9, no. 4 (2017): 403-19. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.4.704>.

¹⁰ Cheryl Brown, Prakash M. Bajaj, and Z. Luo. "Tertiary Students' Perspectives on the Cost of Textbooks" FLANZ, 2020. *UC Research Repository*. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/100172>

¹¹ [Academic Perspectives of Textbooks \[Survey\] \(figshare.com\)](#)

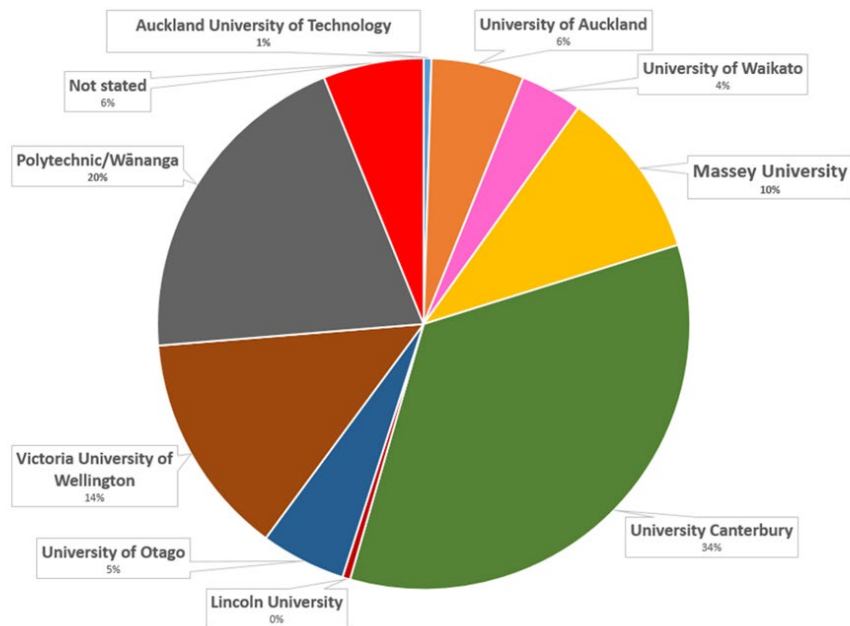


Figure 1. Survey demographics by tertiary institution.

Respondents were also asked to indicate what subject area they teach. We used the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification - Fields of Research V2.0.0¹² in the survey. In the analysis of the data, we transferred these subjects into broader classifications based on four main classifications:

- hard pure (e.g., maths, physics, chemistry etc)
- hard applied (e.g., computer science, mechanical engineering)
- soft pure (e.g., English, history, sociology, comms etc)
- soft applied (e.g., education, accounting, economics).¹³

These categories were used to gather the data into broader groups of like subjects to more easily draw conclusions.

¹² This classification systems is available online: [Ariā - Classifications \(stats.govt.nz\)](https://stats.govt.nz/Aria-Classifications)

¹³ Anthony Biglan. "Relationships between Subject Matter Characteristics and the Structure and Output of University Departments." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1973): 204-13.

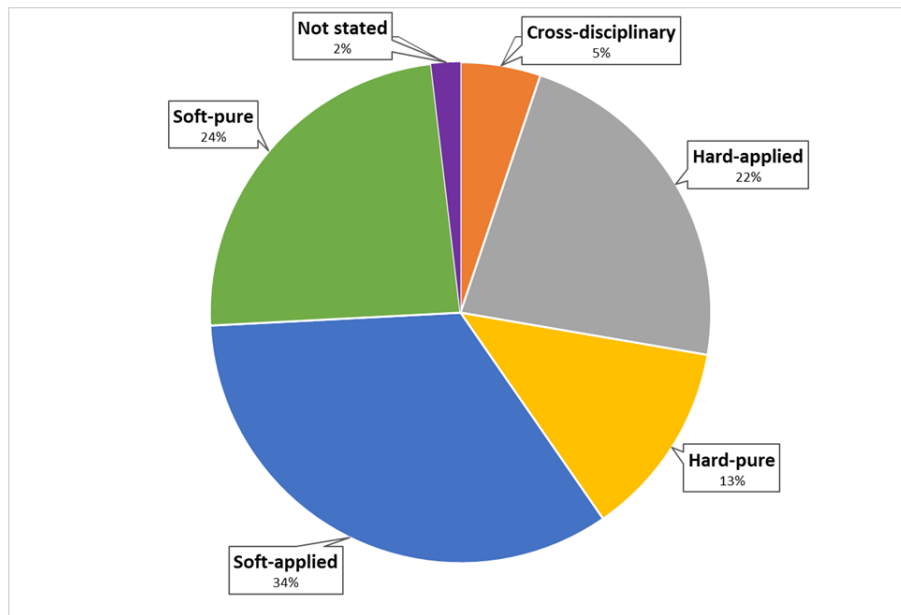
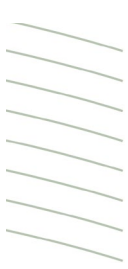


Figure 2. Survey demographics by academic discipline.

Academic Use of Textbooks

Academics from hard disciplines reported using prescribed textbooks much less than academics in pure disciplines. Nevertheless, textbooks were being used in a significant percentage of courses.

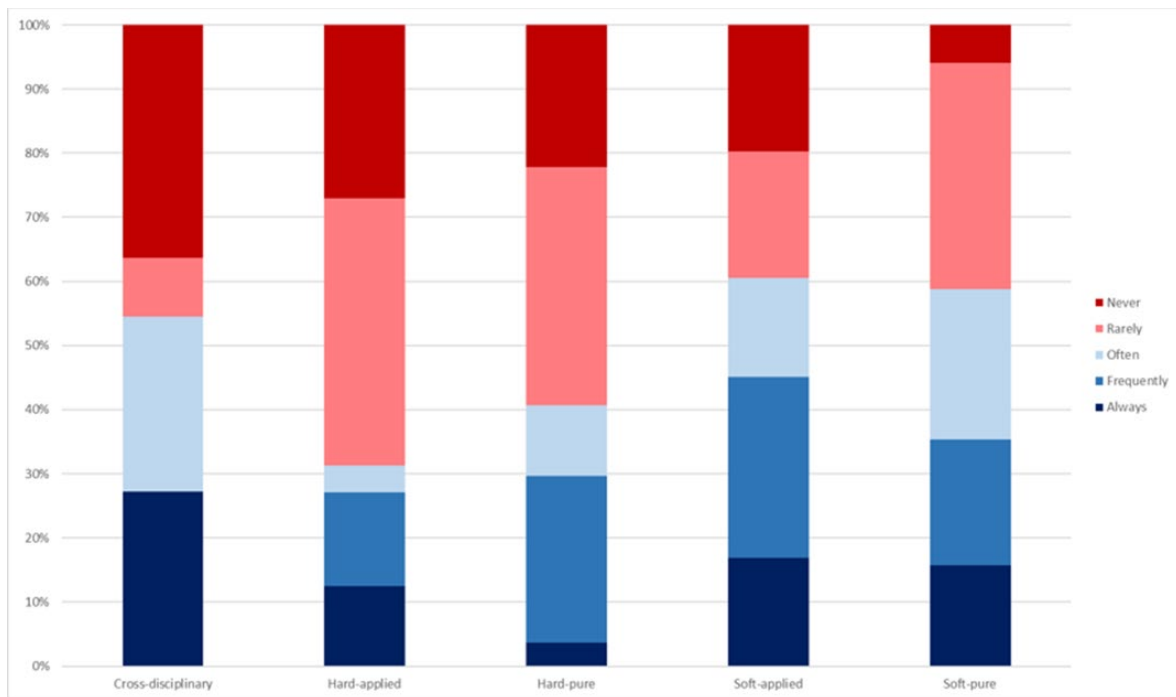


Figure 3. How often academics reported that the courses they taught into had prescribed textbooks.

We asked academics whether they took a variety of different factors into consideration when selecting a textbook, and of particular interest to us was the impact of price factor for students versus the price factor for the academic library. Academics reported high awareness of the impact of price for students but were much less likely to consider the cost for the library, with most rarely or never considering it.

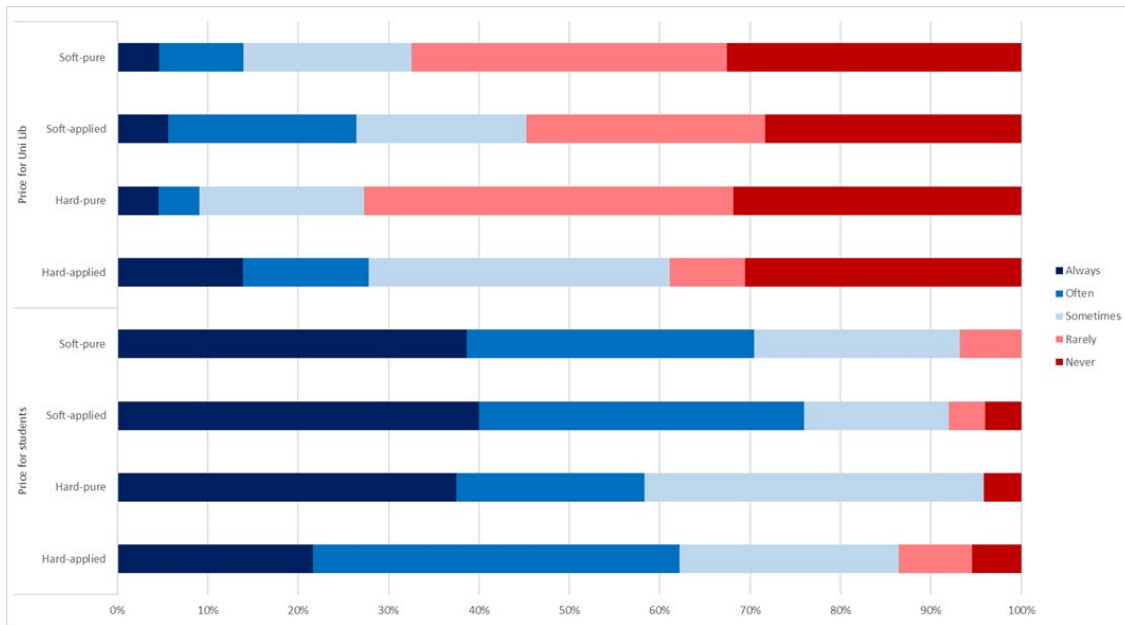


Figure 4. Impact of price factors on textbook selection.

This is somewhat surprising given that when asked about what alternative textbook options they offered students unable to purchase a textbook, these alternatives often involved the library providing access by purchasing copies or placing material in high demand collections.

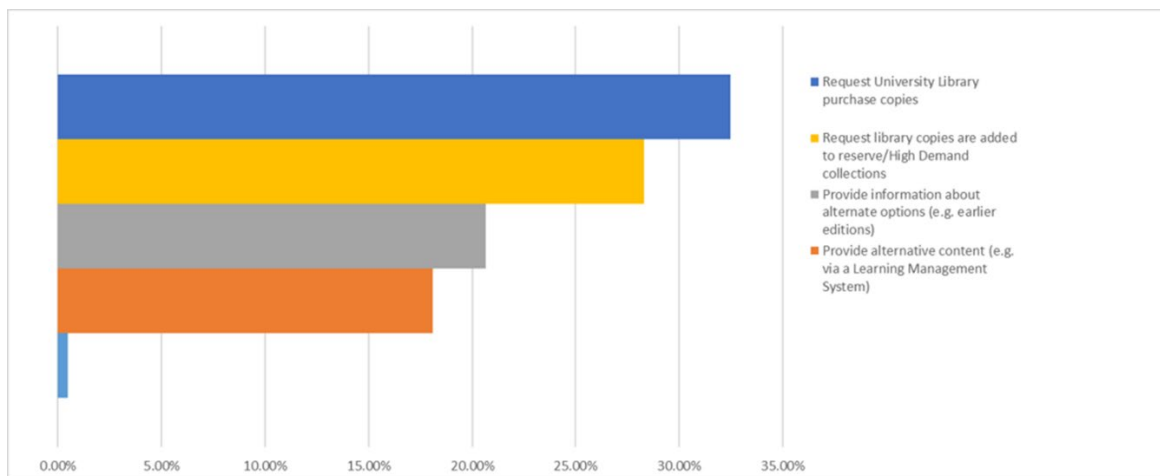


Figure 5. Alternative textbook options offered by academics.

This suggests that, as suspected, academics are unaware of the increasing budgetary pressures libraries are facing in providing textbook access.

However, survey responses to a question asking academics what proportion of students they thought were buying the prescribed textbook in their courses indicates that while academics may be sensitive to textbook cost for students, their awareness of student textbook access is low. Answers ranged from 0 to 100% for soft disciplines, with only academics in hard-pure disciplines indicating some professional consensus on how many students purchase textbooks.

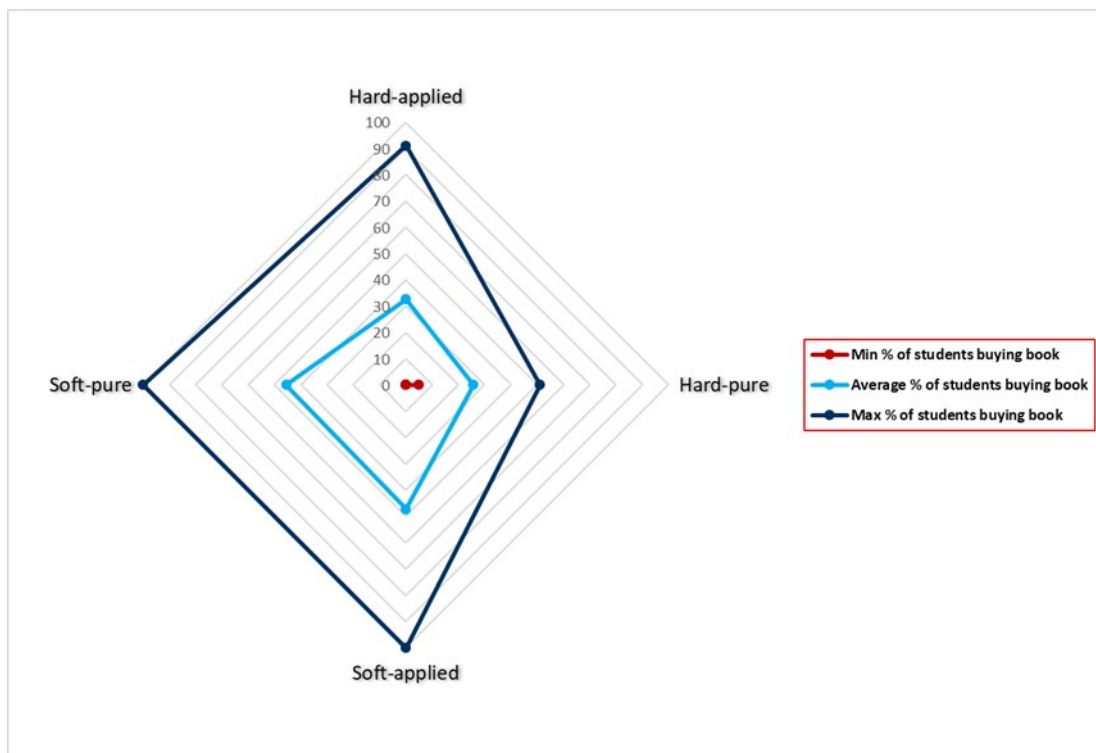


Figure 7. What proportion of students do you think are buying the textbook?

Given how frequently academics in all disciplines reported setting prescribed texts, these findings suggest a disconnect between the practice of setting textbooks and awareness of how and/or whether those set textbooks are being accessed. This indicates that many academics are still prescribing textbooks under the assumptions of the traditional print textbook model. These assumptions are that students will buy a prescribed textbook, and those that do not will be able to access copies via the library.

The University of Canterbury Library, like many academic libraries, found textbook provision became even more difficult during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. With print textbooks unable to be accessed, staff scrambled to purchase e-textbook access to support courses already underway, with a significant impact on

budgets. Nevertheless, there was often a limit to how many e-textbook licenses that could be bought, with a resultant impact on academics' instruction and assessment plans. It was possible this experience might have increased academic awareness of issues with textbook provision and, so, questions in the survey asked academics about their experience during lockdown.

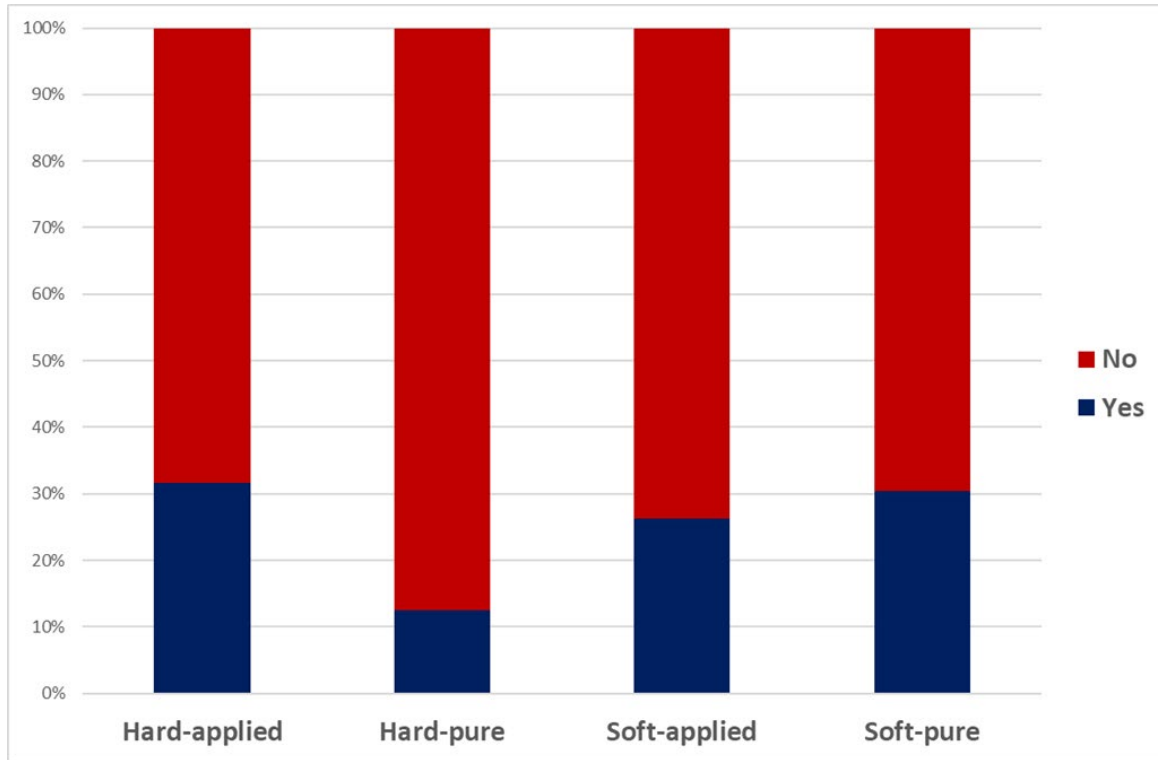


Figure 8. Did you experience issues with textbook access for students during lockdown?

As might be expected given the lower use of textbooks, academics in hard-pure disciplines experienced fewer issues. But the finding that approximately 30% of academics in the other disciplines experienced issues was lower than expected, given that approximately 60% of academics in soft disciplines had reported using textbooks often, frequently or always. Reflecting on the experience at the University of Canterbury, it is possible that libraries, in endeavouring to support student success and provide seamless service, concealed the issues from academic view.

The response to whether academics had changed their approach to textbooks as a result of their experiences during lockdown was also somewhat surprising, with academics in hard-pure disciplines more likely to report changing their approach.

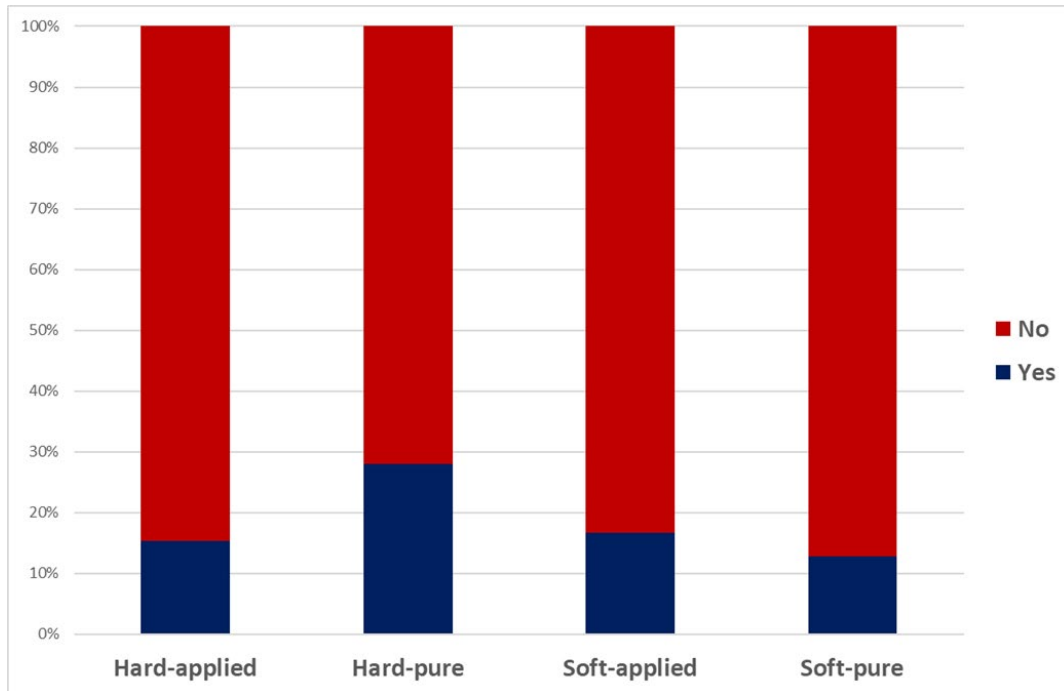
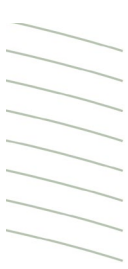


Figure 9. Has your approach to textbooks changed as a result of your experiences during lockdown?

The finding that the experience of COVID-19 lockdowns did not greatly influence academic practices around textbooks indicates that libraries have work to do in communicating the changing textbook market to academics. The issues were brought to a head by the pandemic, but the drive to e-textbook access will only intensify in response to student expectations and pedagogical shifts to online and hybrid teaching. Academic libraries have a key role as information experts in communicating to academics the issues with providing textbooks and exploring alternatives.

The final topic we were interested in exploring with academics was their awareness of open textbooks, given the potential for open textbooks to offer more equitable and affordable access to textbooks. Academics in hard disciplines reported less awareness of open textbooks, but almost 50% of academics in soft pure and 60% of academics in soft applied disciplines were unaware of or unsure where to search for open textbooks.

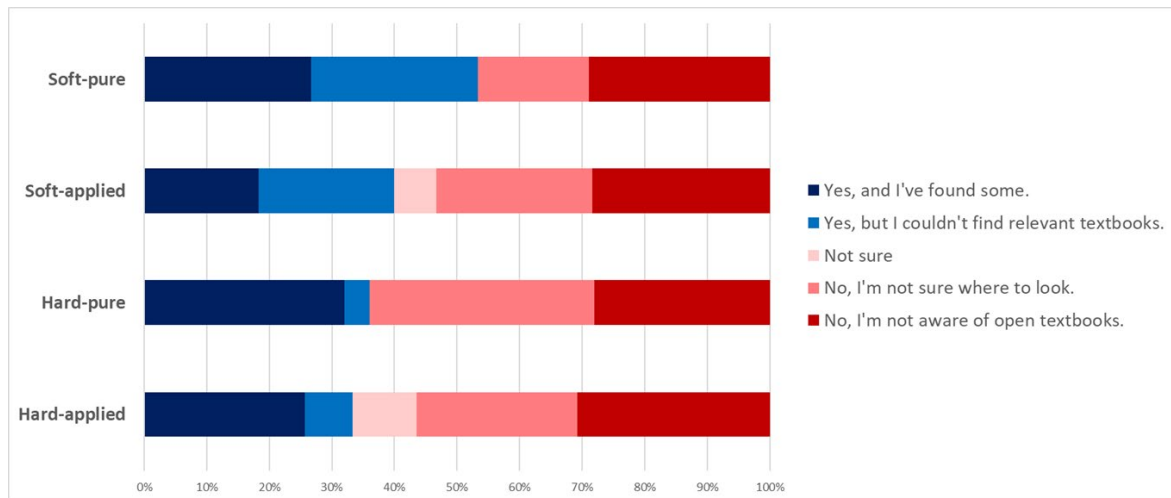


Figure 10. Have you searched for open textbooks in your discipline?

This indicates there is significant scope for academic libraries to raise awareness of and advocate for the use of open textbooks.

Applying our Findings

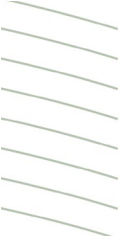
With textbook provision becoming increasingly financially unviable for academic libraries, textbook publishers are increasingly advocating for models of textbook access that exclude libraries from textbook provision (for example, see these columns from Kortext¹⁴ and Perlego¹⁵ advocating for institutions to buy cohort access to textbooks). Once institutions commit to such licensing agreements, they may be locked into spiralling subscription costs akin to the serials crisis, unable to escape without a serious negative impact on the delivery of courses designed around commercial products. It is the role of libraries – especially given their experience of the serials crisis - to continue to advocate for and support equitable and affordable access to e-textbooks for both students and institutions. Open textbooks ensure equitable textbook provision for all and “as the information experts on campus” tertiary libraries have a key role to play in raising academic awareness of open textbooks and how to access them.¹⁶

The University of Canterbury Library has taken an active approach to education and advocacy, starting with developing a statement on textbooks that outlined this issues with the e-textbook market, outlined criteria for

¹⁴ James Gray, & Tim O’Shea. “Textbooks are changing - the way we buy them needs to change too.” *Wonkhe*. March 29, 2021, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/textbooks-are-changing-the-way-we-buy-them-needs-to-change-too/>

¹⁵ Gauthier Van Malderen. “Online learning is flawed without e-books for everyone.” *Times Higher Education*, March 20, 2021. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/online-learning-flawed-without-e-books-everyone>

¹⁶ Jason B. Reed and Benjamin Jahre. “Reviewing the Current State of Library Support for Open Educational Resources.” *Libraries Faculty and Staff Scholarship and Research*. Paper 219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2019.1588181> p. 241.



e-book publishing models that the library will subscribe to and advocating for open resources.¹⁷ The next step was to advocate for the adoption of open textbooks. Open access repositories were reviewed, with particularly useful repositories identified for each discipline to facilitate academic discovery of high-quality open textbooks. UC Library also subscribes to EBSCO Faculty Select, a subscription resource useful for finding open textbook and commercial textbook with no Digital Rights Management restrictions. These repositories were promoted via a Subject Guide that also listed open textbooks already in use at UC to show academics that such texts are already being adopted by their peers.¹⁸ Adapting or creating open textbooks is also promoted, with a contestable fund to support academics with adapting or creating open textbooks introduced in 2021. A crucial component of this advocacy is initiating conversations with academics about textbooks by presenting at faculty and equity committee meetings, sharing information with academics about the costs of commercial textbooks for libraries, student experiences of textbook access, and the pedagogical opportunities made possible by open textbooks. Finally, in 2023, an Open Education Librarian role was established to lead and support this work.


There is exciting movement in the broader academic library sector. In 2021, the Council of New Zealand University Libraries (CONZUL) accepted a proposal developed by Richard White and myself to collaborate on funding and facilitating the publication of a New Zealand-focused open e-textbook that could be widely used in the tertiary sector, with almost all New Zealand university libraries signing up to co-fund the book. The proposal positioned this book as a pilot for testing whether collaborating funding an open textbook could be more effective for libraries than individual textbook licenses being purchased from for-profit publishers by each institution. Canterbury University Press was contracted to produce the open textbook, ensuring a high-quality textbook, and allowing for an on-demand print option alongside the open access textbook that is hosted on the University of Canterbury Library's Research Repository. *He Awa Whiria: Braiding the knowledge streams in research, policy and practice*, a book on the use of He Awa Whiria framework featuring using case studies from around Aotearoa and edited by Dr Melissa Derby, Professor Angus Hikairo Macfarlane, and Associate Professor Sonja Macfarlane, was published in February 2024.¹⁹ Next steps following this pilot are still to be determined, but leading the open textbook movement is a CONZUL strategic objective.²⁰

¹⁷ The statement is available on the University of Canterbury Library website: [Statement-on-providing-eTextbooks-2024-01-04.pdf \(canterbury.ac.nz\)](#)

¹⁸ The Open Textbook subject guide is available on the University of Canterbury Library website: [Adopt, Adapt, or Create Open Textbooks - Open Textbooks - Subject Guides at University of Canterbury \(libguides.com\)](#)

¹⁹ Information about the book, including a link to the open access version is available on the publisher's website: [He Awa Whiria: Braiding the knowledge streams | University of Canterbury](#)

²⁰ [CONZUL Strategic Priorities - 1 page \(universitiesnz.ac.nz\)](#)



There is also momentum more broadly in the Australasian context, with the establishment of the CAUL Open Educational Resources Collective in 2022. Initiated as part of a programme, CAUL set aside funds for a subscription to PressBooks, an online publishing platform, and called for volunteers to establish a collective that could work to build capacity across the sector to support open textbook publishing. Importantly, the collective seeks to “Build infrastructure, capacity and achieve tangible outcomes to move the OER agenda forward at a national level” by facilitating publishing of open textbooks “with a preference for the inclusion of local and/or indigenous content.”²¹ As of 2023, there are 37 participating institutions with 33 books published in two years²², and another 35-40 in pre-production.

Conclusion

The role of libraries is to serve their communities, to be spaces where everyone can access information. Librarians have a professional obligation to protect that fundamental ethos and to advocate for change when it is being threatened or undermined. As information experts, librarians are best placed on campus to bridge the divide between student experience and academic textbook practices and ensure textbooks are accessible and affordable. Open textbook advocacy is firmly grounded in the professional ethics of our profession. Equitable textbook access in the academic sector is still on the horizon, but momentum is building in Australasian libraries to collaborate with academics to better support students through the adoption, adaptation, and creation of open textbooks.

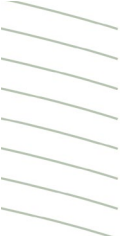
²¹ [Open Educational Resources Collective | CAUL](#)

²² Textbooks published with the CAUL Collective are freely available online: [Catalogue – Open Educational Resources Collective \(caul.edu.au\)](#)



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