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# Obtaining accessible alternative- format materials for print-impaired students:

latest developments from the Open  
Rose Group

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*ORG, dazed by the sun, meeting Sal Cooke at TechDis in York*

The ability to provide an equal service to print-impaired students is a huge challenge to most academic libraries, not least because of the time and cost involved. For example, the contents of a book may need to be scanned and manipulated in order to convert it to a format that is accessible to screen-reading software. Much discussion involving staff and organisations involved in supporting visually impaired (VI) people (library staff, JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) TechDis, the RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People)) has been taking place on a national level to try to persuade publishers to provide their

material in an accessible format. One positive result has been the joint JISC TechDis/Publishers Association 2008 publication *Guide to obtaining textbooks in alternative formats*, to which one member of the Open Rose Group (ORG), Paul Conway, contributed his 'invaluable assistance' based on personal experience.

The differing experiences of five of the eight member institutions of the ORG are described below. The ORG has pulled together these differing needs and drawn up a generic mind-map of the processes involved in requesting alternative formats from publishers, which was circulated and discussed at this year's conference of librarians in higher education working to improve library access for disabled users in the south and south-west of England (CLAUD). The ORG has also devised a letter that all members can send to publishers when requests arise.

### **1. SUPPORTING AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AT LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY, BY ALY PEACOCK**

We recently had to request numerous items (29 core texts and 15 recommendations for background reading) for an international student who was only with us for six months on placement. We worked closely with her college in America. If her college library there stocked the titles she needed, they would be emailed to me, sometimes within twenty-four hours, which was incredible! If the titles were not in stock, the student had to buy the books and ship them over to her home institution, where they were scanned and emailed back to us. We approached UK publishers for many of the titles and, although they were helpful up to a point, most could not provide an electronic copy and only granted us permission to scan.

This is not an ideal outcome, because the process involves many issues and practicalities:

Who approaches the publisher for an electronic format?

- Who monitors progress of requests?
- Who does the scanning?
- Who formats the files?
- Who pays for this?
- What timescales are involved?

All these issues were further complicated by the fact the student was not eligible for a disabled student's allowance (DSA).

VI students need inclusive services: having books in a format that is already accessible means that they, and we as library staff, do not have to over-

come obstacles in order to acquire their electronic texts. If students have to engage with the administrative issues associated with this process – such as keeping track of what we have been able to obtain electronically, what needs to be scanned in-house, which items must be outsourced and so on – rather than on their coursework, they are not on a level playing field with their peers who do not have to jump through hoops to obtain course materials they can access. A blind student, for example, would need to use a package that screen-reads. If we have to scan the contents of the book individually to make an accessible electronic copy, that's incredibly time-consuming. There must be a better way of doing this and sharing our scanned files. That is where the JISC TechDis resources come in. We feel that Publisher Lookup UK ([www.publisherlookup.org.uk](http://www.publisherlookup.org.uk)) and the *Guide to obtaining textbooks in alternative formats* answer specific and important needs faced by students and staff.

Using the ORG's work as a starting point, our library is working with the copyright officer and digitisation project team, disability services and library managers to mainstream our approach to this issue across the university and to draw up a policy that we can all work with. This will also enable us to have a clear idea where all our responsibilities lie.

### **2. SUPPORTING VI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY, BY PAUL CONWAY**

At Sheffield Hallam University, since December 2005, as a pilot scheme I have been supporting a blind undergraduate criminology student throughout her course in obtaining and accessing alternative formats of key texts. Information adviser Jo Dobson has been similarly supporting a visually impaired undergraduate sports student since September 2007. Our experiences have been very different. I have, on the whole, obtained PDF versions of books from publishers reasonably quickly, though the response rates have varied from a six-minute (!) email response with PDF file attached, from Sage Publications, to several weeks: the average response time has been about a week and a half. This success has no doubt been due to the fact that many key titles on the criminology reading lists are recent and they are published by major publishers.

On the other hand, Jo has had mixed results because many of the books on the reading lists of the student she has been supporting are older and were published by smaller firms, many of

them international. A recurring problem has been the incompatibility of the latest version of Adobe with the version of screen-reading software used by the student. This is an issue which has taken much time to resolve and is still the subject of ongoing tests. During the 2008/09 academic year, obtaining alternative textbooks for students will be opened up to all print-impaired students with a learning contract with the university whom student services tutors feel would benefit from this service.

### **3. SUPPORTING VI STAFF AND STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, BY LOIS BURT**

My first real introduction to the issue of publishers and accessible formats occurred several years ago when I was approached by a blind research assistant who instructed me to contact all the publishers and force them to provide all their material electronically. I was fortunate in that, because it was the vacation and a quiet time for them, the Leeds transcription service, of which the University of Sheffield is a member, agreed to send me a couple of previously digitised items free of charge. Normally its service is available only to students, not to staff, and, naturally, costs are incurred if the material is not already available.

My main recent experience has involved supporting a VI postgraduate research student. Whereas VI undergraduate students tend to need most help with obtaining core textbooks in an accessible format, our postgraduate has required more obscure research material. It was a rather desperate attempt to clarify all the options and factors to consider that led me to draft the first version of a flowchart (see [www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat)). Both Sage Publications and the publisher of a small magazine have been approached for digital copies of their material and, fortunately, free-of-charge co-operation has been excellent and very quick in both cases. For another request, involving a chapter from an older edition of a textbook, the decision had to be made as to who would provide it more quickly and cheaply – a good publisher like Sage or the Leeds transcription service? When the student realised it would not be available instantly, he settled for a photocopy which one of his medical helpers read out to him!

Strange as it may seem, no help has been required in obtaining accessible formats of material for a blind undergraduate student I have recently supported. The main difficulties that have arisen in her case were due to the fact that the subject databases were upgraded without adequate reference

to the implications for users of JAWS (Job Access With Speech).

### **4. PROVIDING READINGS IN ALTERNATIVE FORMATS AND THE WORK OF THE DIGITISATION TEAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD, BY CHRIS BEEVERS**

At the University of Huddersfield the post of library disability support officer (DSO) and the section responsible for digitising course readings under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agency licence both come under the user services team. Working closely together has highlighted the overlap between the work to digitise readings and to make them available to everyone on a particular course and efforts by the DSO to provide references in accessible formats for individual VI or dyslexic students. This might seem like stating the obvious but, as can happen in any institution, if activities are undertaken independently in different departments, any similarities and potential for synergistic working can be overlooked. This was evident when members of the ORG sat around a table to develop the mind-map already referred to. As part of their work to digitise course readings, members of staff in the user services team are responsible for:

- obtaining reading lists via our library subject teams
- liaising with academics about scanning requirements
- scanning material within the terms of the CLA licence
- applying to publishers for permission to scan material that falls outside the terms of the licence
- managing the above processes and keeping accurate records.

These activities lend themselves very well to also providing readings in accessible formats. Members of the team are already used to contacting the permissions departments of publishers when material is not covered by the licence, and can easily adopt the ORG letter (see below) to request readings in accessible formats. In instances where publishers are unable or unwilling to supply material in appropriate formats, the team can scan material in-house. Text-readable PDFs which have undergone the optical character-recognition process are produced as standard.

Scanning can be both time-consuming and costly in terms of staffing resources, and publishers should always be approached to supply accessible copies of their own material as a first recourse.

However, when this is not possible, having material scanned by an already experienced team is surely the most cost-effective option.

##### **5. SUPPORTING PRINT-IMPAIRED STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS AND THE RNIB TRANSCRIPTION CENTRE. BY AUDREY COBB**

I have faced many of the same issues as my ORG colleagues in obtaining core texts for undergraduates and research materials for postgraduates and in supporting international students who do not have access to a DSA. Resourcing provision of alternative format in terms of time is increasingly difficult. Students frequently request items they need urgently but publishers can be slow to react. Using both Publisher Lookup UK and the ORG letter template has made a significant difference to response times and seems to have improved publisher understanding. However, problems in response times, occasionally of receiving no response at all, and difficulties in obtaining alternative formats for print impairments other than VI remain. This is especially true of those publishers who are not involved with Publisher Lookup UK.

We are fortunate here at Leeds to have the RNIB transcription centre on campus: consequently I do not scan items. The transcription centre does amazing work transcribing materials held by the library quickly and efficiently into any format required. They also obtain alternative-format material direct from publishers and have experienced many of the same problems the ORG has noted: lack of response from some publishers, lengthy delays in responses, restrictions on PDFs that make them difficult to use with screen-readers, difficulties with obtaining older material (in some cases pre-2003 items are not available in archives) and charges for alternative-format versions. We have had one exploratory meeting where we swapped experiences but more work needs to be done so that we can provide students with a clear, co-ordinated, effective and efficient service.

Many questions need addressing, including:

- How do students know who to ask?
- How do we know in a timely fashion what is required?
- What is the role of the library, of disability services and of the transcription centre in providing alternative formats for a range of print impairments?
- What is the publishers' reaction to the role of the transcription centre and Revealweb?

##### **6. CONCLUSION**

ORG members have agreed to write up their experiences of obtaining materials in alternative formats from publishers for students and to share them with the rest of the group. This information should form a very useful knowledge base, which will help to quickly identify issues, trends, anomalies and good practice in the process as an increasing number of VI and other print-impaired students from our institutions begin to request materials in a broad range of subjects.

The mind-map (Inspiration 8 and Word format) and letter are available on request via [openrose@email.com](mailto:openrose@email.com). Alternatively, go to [www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat). We'd really like your feedback on these and are hoping that other institutions will adopt this approach, the theory being if we all ask the same questions and push in the same directions, along with the backing of more influential organisations like JISC TechDis and the RNIB, we may gradually persuade all publishers to make their material accessible to all.

##### **FURTHER READING**

Copyright Licensing Agency Limited, *Photocopying and scanning HE licence* [online], available from: [http://www.cla.co.uk/assets/357/he\\_uuk\\_photo\\_scanning.pdf](http://www.cla.co.uk/assets/357/he_uuk_photo_scanning.pdf) [accessed 6 October 2008]

Great Britain. Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, Chapter 48. London: HMSO, 1988

Great Britain. Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Act 2002, Chapter 33. London: HMSO, 2002

JISC TechDis and The Publishers Association, *Guide to obtaining textbooks in alternative formats*. York: JISC TechDis, 2008

##### **Useful links**

[www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat](http://www.techdis.ac.uk/getaltformat)

[www.publisherlookup.org.uk](http://www.publisherlookup.org.uk)