

OPEN TEXTBOOKS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Who are we talking to?

- University managers
- Government higher education bodies
- Knowledge production sector partners (including libraries)

What is the 'moment' we are responding to?

1. Urgent need for access to locally appropriate teaching materials that can be freely/legally shared online in order to address:
 - Higher education curriculum transformation imperatives.
 - The undergraduate performance gap.
 - COVID-19 learning losses.
2. Leveraging 10 years of open educational resources and open textbook development at UCT that can benefit other South African universities.

What are we recommending? On what basis?

- Recommending institutional support for open textbook development, publishing and curation.
- Based on innovation and potential to address transformation demonstrated by nine grantee initiatives in a three-year research, advocacy and implementation initiative at the University of Cape Town.

Textbook access and performance in South African higher education

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) *Access to and Use of Learning Materials: Survey Report 2020* shows a strong reliance on the ongoing use of traditional prescribed textbooks (DHET, 2020).

The 53 223 students who participated in the DHET survey indicated that 87% of their modules made use of a prescribed textbook. The report states that 26% choose to forego purchase of prescribed textbooks entirely. While students demonstrated creative means to acquire access to the prescribed materials, such as file sharing and borrowing of print copies from friends), 19% of students indicated that they could not get access at all (DHET, 2020).

In addition to challenges relating to access to textbooks, research at the University of Cape Town (UCT) shows

a widening gap in the preparedness of incoming students.¹ Drawing on course performance data gathered from a cohort of students between 2015 and 2017, the Institutional Planning Department at UCT has identified 70 high-risk courses that may be impeding graduation (CIGs). Many of these are required for first-year programmes and typically have large enrolments with great diversity in the backgrounds and abilities of the class.² Research also shows a performance gap between black and white students.³

Research by the Digital Open Textbooks for Development (DOT4D) project at UCT indicates that in many instances students are choosing to forego purchasing of textbooks, thereby jeopardising learning outcomes – not only because they are unaffordable, but also because they are deemed unfit for context or because courses only make use of a fraction of the overall content (Cox, Masuku & Willmers, 2020).

¹ <https://www.uct.ac.za/main/teaching-and-learning/courses-impeding-graduation>

² <http://www.cilt.uct.ac.za/cilt/news/unpacking-achievement-gap>

³ <http://www.students.uct.ac.za/event/suellen-shay-troubling-articulation-gap>

Digital open textbooks for development

Open textbooks are digital, free to use and openly licensed collections of course-related teaching and learning content published on platforms and in formats that provide affordances for the integration of multimedia and ancillary practice or assessment components. These locally published textbooks present opportunities for inclusive, collaborative authorship strategies. The open licensing aspect also means that these resources can be legally shared and redistributed, both within and beyond the institution.

DOT4D research shows that increasing numbers of lecturers at UCT are taking steps to explore alternative content creation approaches that address limitations around relevance, format and genre associated with traditional textbooks (Cox et al., 2020).

A landscape survey conducted by the DOT4D project surfaced 39 openly licensed textbooks produced across all faculties at UCT (Masuku, 2021). The majority of these publishing processes were collaborative (26 of 39), and showed evidence of quality assurance (27 of 39). The primary hosting spaces for these resources were the OpenUCT repository, the UCT Libraries Continental Platform, and alternative websites (including Vula, UCT's learning management system).

Research at UCT (Cox, Masuku & Willmers, in press) indicates that open textbook production is frequently an extension of critical, inclusive pedagogy and arises as a result of lecturers identifying social injustice in the classroom. These academics have a perception that open textbooks can serve as a platform or mechanism through which to incorporate multiple voices and challenge the status quo, shift power dynamics and address issues of relevance, and challenge existing publishing models.

What is needed?

DOT4D research and implementation activity at UCT indicates that the following support mechanisms could be useful in promoting open textbook activity at South African HEIs:

- Small to medium-sized grants programmes to facilitate open textbook development and publishing.

- Recognition of open textbook development efforts for promotion and other forms of institutional reward.
- Acknowledgement of the time commitment and protracted time cycles involved in open textbook production (with concomitant relief from other academic duties).
- A review of intellectual property policies to alleviate IP constraints to staff and students at South African HEIs wanting to undertake open textbook production.
- An audit of local, institutionally supported IT infrastructure available to facilitate textbook creation, publishing and curation across a wide range of formats and disciplines.

In addition to institutional efforts, there is a need for national support and coordination in order to grow and develop an open textbook community of practice that can provide support across institutions and co-ordinate content production activities in order to obtain greater efficiencies in HE resource production, publication and curation across the sector.

The 'Open Textbooks in South African Higher Education' roundtable: Towards locally-driven community action

The DOT4D 'Open Textbooks in South African Higher Education' virtual roundtable event on 7 July 2021 aims to:

1. Raise awareness of open textbooks as a strategy for addressing financial cost burden, curriculum transformation and decolonisation, and the performance gap in South African HEIs.
2. Articulate mechanisms that can be employed across institutions to support local open textbook development.
3. Identify a community of practice in the South African HE sector that can collaborate on supporting open textbook production across South African HEIs.

The event provides an opportunity for higher education managers, librarians and academic development practitioners to have exploratory conversation around possible areas of collaboration and identify practical, implementable steps that can be taken to support this area of work going forward.

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