

Student Views on the Cost of and Access to Textbooks: An Investigation at University of Otago (New Zealand)

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Abstract

The rising cost of textbooks is influencing students' choice of courses, as well as the quality of their learning experience once they are enrolled in a course, according to recent studies. This paper builds on those studies by exploring the possible effects that textbook costs may be having on study behaviours of students at one New Zealand tertiary institution: University of Otago. Perceptions of undergraduate students (n=811) about cost of, and access to, textbooks and possible influences on their study behaviours were gathered through a questionnaire. Results showed that students: are more likely to buy textbooks than access them through libraries; experienced purchasing expensive textbooks that were rarely used; questioned the value of textbooks; described alternative resource-seeking behaviours; and are heavily reliant on alternatives suggested by lecturers. Perceptions about affordability and academic value, access issues and consequential influences on study-related behaviours and attitudes are discussed.

Keywords: textbooks; cost; access; higher education; student perceptions; student behaviour

Background to the Study

The traditional print textbook has been regarded as the foundation for advancing learning, designed to provide an authoritative and pedagogic version of an area of knowledge, according to the community's or society's beliefs about what is important for students to learn (e.g., Lowe, 2009; Williams, 2014). Ideally, textbooks serve to guide discussion, frame issues, illustrate processes, identify critical questions and, thereby, enrich the learning experience.

At the University of Otago in New Zealand, textbooks remain a critical component of many courses and academic programmes, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that there is a tendency to rely on traditional, purchased textbooks rather than, or in association with, other resources including digital resources and e-books. From our experience, the choice of required textbooks tends to be made by lecturers and others involved in designing courses. Depending on the course, those "others" can include programme teams and departmental academic boards, all of whom would be influenced by their perspectives and demands made by disciplines or professions. Usually students have no involvement in this choice, even though they are directly affected by it. Cost of purchasing the chosen textbook is the most obvious impact on them but alongside this is access: libraries can provide copies

via high-demand services when necessary, and copyright licensing also allows excerpts to be made available via password-protected systems but each of these options is limited and may not meet demand.

Evidence from outside our context indicates that the cost of textbooks is having a negative effect on student behaviours (e.g., Martin, Belikov, Hilton, Wiley & Fischer, 2017; Jhangiani & Jhangiani, 2017; Senack & Donoghue, 2016). The problem is serious enough that it is not only influencing students' choice of courses but also their academic achievement (Hilton, 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Senack, 2014). Researchers argue that one alternative to the traditional textbook is the open textbook; one benefit being that they are free and readily accessible (Hilton, 2016; Jhangiani & Jhangiani, 2017; Martin, et al., 2017). (Erroneous) assumptions often underpinning such claims include: that all students are connected; that open textbooks are free; and that open textbooks are digital only.

The constantly changing nature of higher education means that there has been a dramatic increase in enrolment numbers at tertiary institutions (<http://data.uis.unesco.org>), with students from greater ranges of academic levels and backgrounds than in the past. Inquiry into students' experiences of entering higher education has become the focus of much research over the last two decades, with universities addressing specific transition needs that focus on both social and academic support (e.g., Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007; Sotardi & Friesen, 2017). As part of this, university staff, such as librarians, express concerns about the ability to provide the needed wide range of suitable resources, including textbooks (e.g., Werner, 2014) to meet needs of courses, staff and students. Additionally, each institution will have its own sets of goals reflecting expectations, resourcing, and policy, determined at a number of levels from government to individual teacher. These institutional factors flow through to students' experiences as well as their perceptions about learning and study in higher education; the place, value and role of textbooks being one part of those experiences.

Then there are the textbooks themselves: what they are; how they are used by teaching staff within courses and by students; where they originate; and their relevance to a course (e.g., as discussed in Weller, de los Arcos, Farrow, Pitt & McAndrew, 2015). The nature, intentions, structure and content of a course, including teachers' values and pedagogical beliefs, and courses' expectations and opportunities to engage and interact with learning resources will influence student responses and approaches to their study (e.g., Entwistle, 2000). Added to this is the broader textbook market environment. This factor is not new (e.g., see commentary in *What is a textbook?*, 1924), with publishers' behaviours influenced and determined by commercial interests. These behaviours include the regular publication of new editions and the continually rising costs of academic publishing (e.g., Larivière, Haustein & Mongeon, 2015). Students, teachers and institutions are subject to these costs and must either accept them, or seek other avenues through which to source resources to support learning, teaching and research.

The context of the aforementioned studies is different in many ways to those of our New Zealand higher education environment. In order to investigate the situation in our institution, while we took the outcomes of those studies into account, it was important for us to explore the topic more widely so as to determine whether the same sort of impact reported in the North American-based studies is present in our country, New Zealand. For us, the key question was whether the cost of textbooks is affecting student study choices and behaviours. Associated with that, is the effect a negative one?

This paper presents part of a larger investigation into these questions to contribute to an ongoing search to explore the extent to which textbook cost and access might be developing into a systemic barrier to student learning. Reflecting a focus on students making the transition to higher education from school, we also wished to explore if there were any differences between experiences reported by first year students and those in second/third/fourth years.

Design and Methods

The study was undertaken at the University of Otago, New Zealand: a research-intensive institution within a tertiary education environment where there is a legislative requirement that teaching and research are closely interdependent. That legislation does not include any reference to textbook selection, leaving such academic decisions to those most closely involved with teaching and administering courses: usually teachers, and other discipline/professional experts.

Our study context differs from that described in the Senack (2014; Senack & Donoghue, 2016), Jhangiani and Jhangiani (2017) and the Martin et al. (2017) studies. Our study was conducted on one campus of one institution in New Zealand. The Senack study was conducted across over 156 different campuses of different institutions in North America; and the Jhangiani & Jhangiani study included students from across institutions involved in the BC Open Textbook Project in Canada. While the Martin et al study was undertaken in one US-based institution, it included staff views as well as those of students.

Ethics approval was attained through the institutional ethics committee. The research was a survey research/perception-driven study (Fowler, 2014). The principal data source was an online questionnaire.

Setting

At the University of Otago in 2015, there were 18,421 equivalent full-time students, including 4,171 students undertaking postgraduate studies (University of Otago, n.d.). Courses and programmes are offered in Commerce, Health Sciences, Humanities, and the Sciences. This study took place at the University's primary campus in Dunedin.

In New Zealand, students have access to New Zealand student loans and allowances schemes – the latter being means-tested – for course fees and living costs; in addition, NZ\$1000 per annum may be accessed for 'course related costs' (Ministry of Social Development, n. d.). These funds are accessed by just under three quarters of eligible students (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, actual course costs vary and course-related costs are not limited to the purchase of textbooks. This means that there may be a difference in the influence that the cost of textbooks is having on New Zealand students compared with those reported in the US-based studies mentioned earlier.

Data sources and procedures

The survey from Senack (2014) was used as a starting point for the development of the survey for the current study. Ensuring the suitability of the survey instrument for use in our context involved an initial draft being "tested" with three focus groups of volunteer students, purposively sampled (Palys, 2008), drawn from the 2015 Class Representative group (called "Class Reps") (n=811). Class Reps are students who have volunteered to represent their peers by providing feedback on their peers' course experience to the responsible teaching department; suggestive of high engagement with study and a tendency towards responsibility and/or leadership. As less than five per cent of students become Class Reps in any year, it is acknowledged that, while not representative of the full student demographic, the nature of their feedback would be rich and relatively easy to gather. Twenty-five Class Reps from across the disciplines were selected.

The feedback from the focus group sessions informed the development of the final draft of the survey, which was generated using Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>) software, for which the University has a licence. (See the core questions in the appendix.) The invitation to participate was sent to the target group, the Class Reps (n= 811), via email. The survey was open for two weeks in mid July 2015, with one reminder being sent during that time. An incentive was offered in the form of ten \$50 supermarket vouchers.

Analysis of data

Of the 811 Class Reps who were invited, 239 responses were received (29.4%); 233 respondents completed the whole survey and six did not. This means that earlier questions in the survey have a slightly higher number of responses than those at the end of the survey. Aggregated summary data were generated from the survey and analysed by the research team.

One of the research team carried out an initial assessment of the questions that produced statistical data. This was then presented to the rest of the research team for verification and further analysis. For free text responses (Q3, Q6, Q10 and Q22), two researchers on the team independently analysed the raw data to identify common themes using keywords. The results of these independent analyses were then compared, and through further whole team discussion, were refined into four intertwined common themes: affordability; access; perceptions of academic value; and behaviour/attitudes.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the analysis, grouped into two areas of focus: affordability and accessibility behaviours, with each in turn revealing perceptions about value and general experiences, attitudes and behaviours related to textbooks.

What do students spend on textbooks?

The graph in Figure 1 shows the amounts the respondents said they spent on textbooks, in answer to Q1 (238 responded to this question). More than half (137 or 58%) said that they spent less than NZ\$250, with another 20% or 47 indicating no spending at all. Spending above NZ\$500 was about one in five students (44 or 18%). The ranges, at NZ\$250 intervals, enabled calculation of a minimum and maximum amount that respondents spent on textbooks, a total of at least NZ\$43, 941, or at most, NZ\$91, 500 (median=NZ\$67, 720.50). The average spent per respondent therefore was between NZ\$184 and NZ\$384 (median=NZ\$284). (As a point of comparison, the weekly student living allowance is NZ\$170).

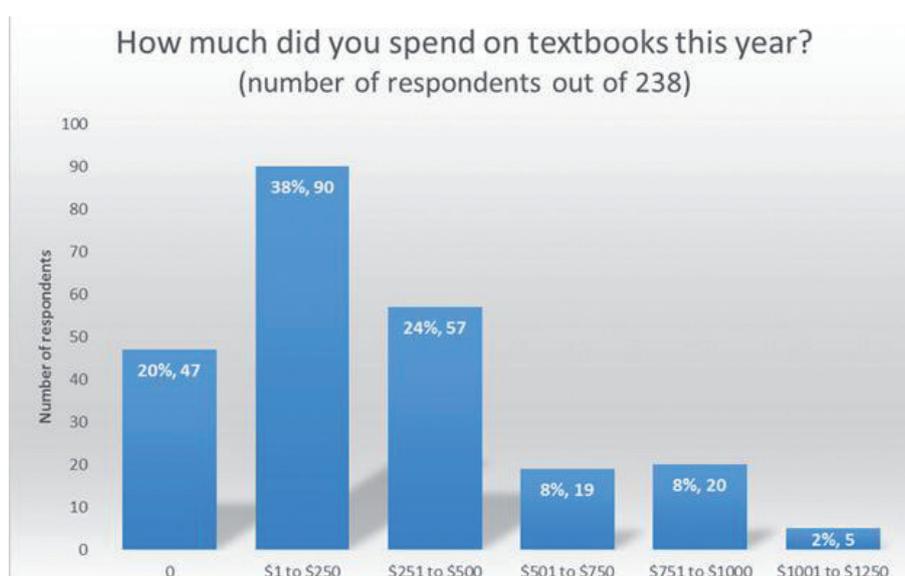


Figure 1: Amounts Spent on Textbooks

These data were considered in conjunction with years of study (Q14). The chart in Figure 2 shows the breakdown spending by year of study.

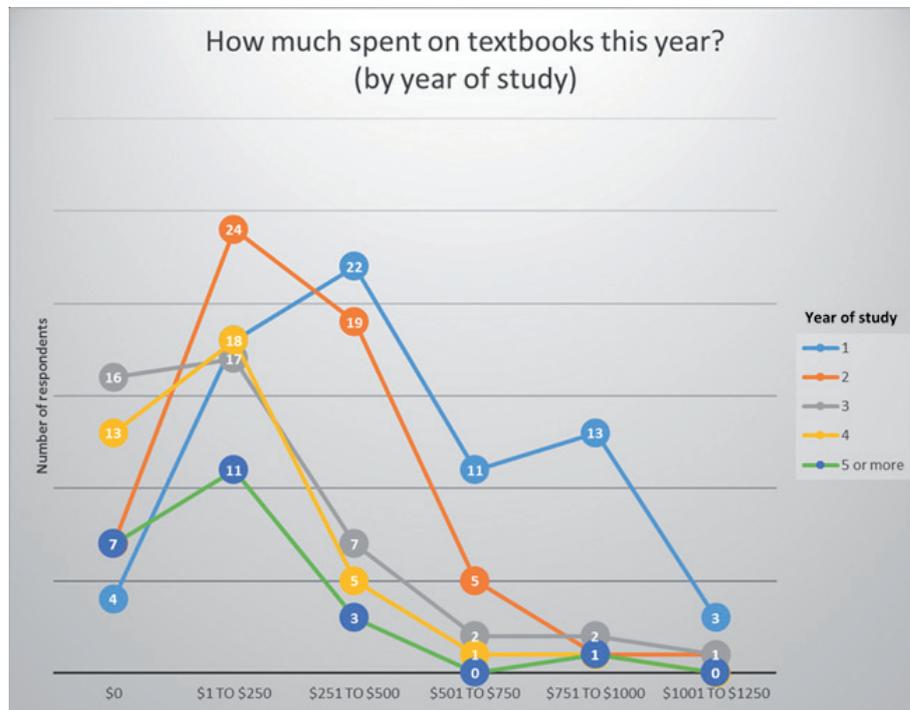


Figure 2: Breakdown of Spending by Year of Study

The pattern in each year is broadly similar, with spending concentrated in the lower ranges. However, first year students, in blue, spent the most on required textbooks, with fewer of them spending nothing ($n=4$ or 6% of all first-year respondents) and more of them indicating higher levels of spending, as evidenced by the blue line being higher on the right side of Figure 2. Over one-third of first year respondents spent more than NZ\$500 (15%, 18% and 4% reported spending of NZ\$501-750, NZ\$751-1000 and NZ\$1001-1250 respectively). Second year students, in orange, shadow this pattern of spending at slightly reduced levels. By third, fourth and fifth years there is a drop in total spending. In each of these categories: around one-third spent nothing; most spent less than NZ\$250 (between 74%-82% reported NZ\$0-NZ\$250 of spending); a few spent between NZ\$251-500 (13-16% of respondents); and only 8 individuals out of 105 (8%) third, fourth or fifth years had spent more than NZ\$500. Compare this with the 37% of first years who spent more than NZ\$500. This could suggest strategic spending of resources as students gain more experience in study at tertiary level, a theme that did emerge during the focus group testing of the survey tool. However, there could be other reasons for this. It should be noted that degree structures are flexible at the University of Otago. A student could be taking an elective first level course and yet be in the third year of study.

The influence of the cost of textbooks on student decisions

Linked closely to cost and affordability of textbooks is their perceived academic value for students, especially in terms of the influence of the cost of textbooks on study decisions. These views

were gathered principally through survey questions Q2 & 3, Q4, Q9 & 10, along with comments in responses to Q22.

In one of the most clear-cut results, 95% of respondents (226) indicated that they had not decided to withdraw from a course or not to enrol in one because of the cost of textbooks (Q2). Only 5% (12 respondents) indicated that they had made conscious decisions and/or had given serious thought to the cost. For example (note that all quotations are reproduced verbatim),

I didn't withdraw, but I seriously considered withdrawing from [course] as the textbook was NZ\$70.00 which I know is not expensive in comparison to other subjects but for half a year and the size and content of the book I didn't think it was worth it.

Others rationalised their spending or their decision not to spend money on textbooks. For example,

Felt that if I could not find an alternative to find the cash to be able to complete the learning criteria of the course [...] I would then wait and work a bit longer just to buy the recommended book, especially if the lecturer or course provider stated that the newer edition was preferable or that they would be referring to the newer edition, than the previous years.

I couldn't afford the textbook or justify spending that much on one book which I would use for one semester so chose not to.

This low number of respondents who stated that their course choices have been impacted on by textbook cost is in marked contrast to the result in the US PIRG study (Senack, 2014). In that study, 48% of respondents indicated that they did alter which classes they took based on textbook costs, either taking fewer or alternative courses (Senack, 2014, p. 12). This could be reflective of the differences in methodology between our survey and the Senack study (e.g., the data collection method was quite different) and indeed differences between US and New Zealand in the nature and requirements of courses and processes involved in enrolling and withdrawing from courses. It must also be pointed out that the respondent group in the current study was not necessarily representative of the wider student population of the University (see Design and Methods section, above).

Perceptions about access and effect on academic performance

Building on these results, an examination of responses to Q9 provides some more insights into the nature of “access” as viewed by respondents, and their perceptions of negative academic effects due to lack of access. In Q9, “access” was intended to convey either having/owning the textbook or having ready access to a copy, either provided via a learning management system (LMS) or through a library service.

While studies elsewhere, in quite different educational settings, have indicated that very high proportions of students reported feeling negatively-affected academically by lack of access to textbooks (e.g., Buczynski, 2007; Senack & Donoghue, 2016), it was still surprising to see 49% of the respondents reporting that they either ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ felt affected negatively (see Figure 3). More students felt negatively affected than those who said they had not, with 41% suggesting that ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ they had not been affected. This question received 10% ‘I don’t know’ responses.

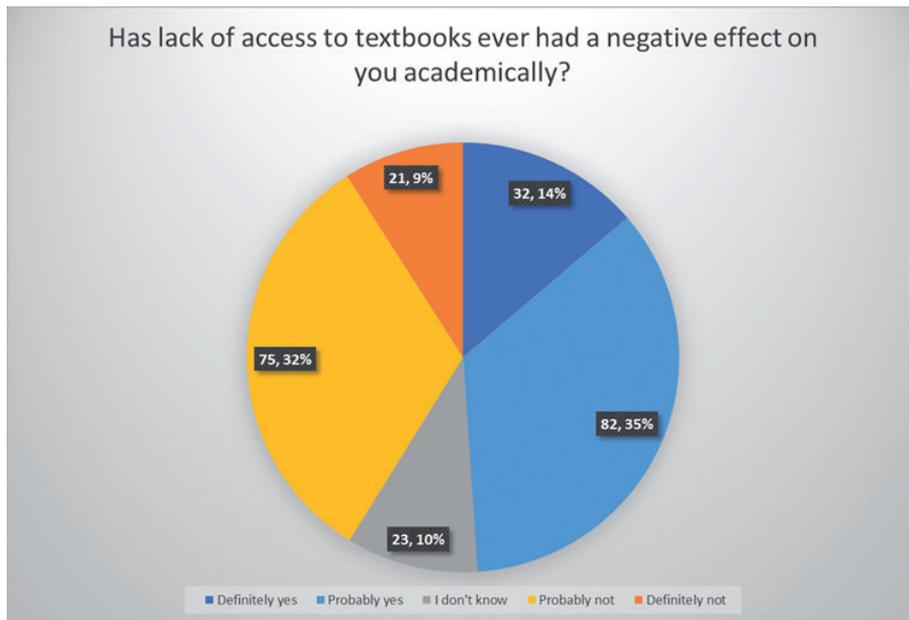


Figure 3: Negative Effect of Lack of Access to Textbooks

There did not appear to be much difference according to subject area. Neither was there evidence of any strong correlation between year of study and being affected by lack of access to textbooks. As discussed above in relation to Q2, respondents did not report that they would not take a course or withdraw from one because of textbook cost. However, deciding which course to take (Q4) is more likely to be affected, as shown in Figure 4. A total of 43% of respondents suggested that cost ‘rarely’ or ‘sometimes’ affected whether to take a course. Nevertheless, just over half (53%) said it was ‘never’ a factor.

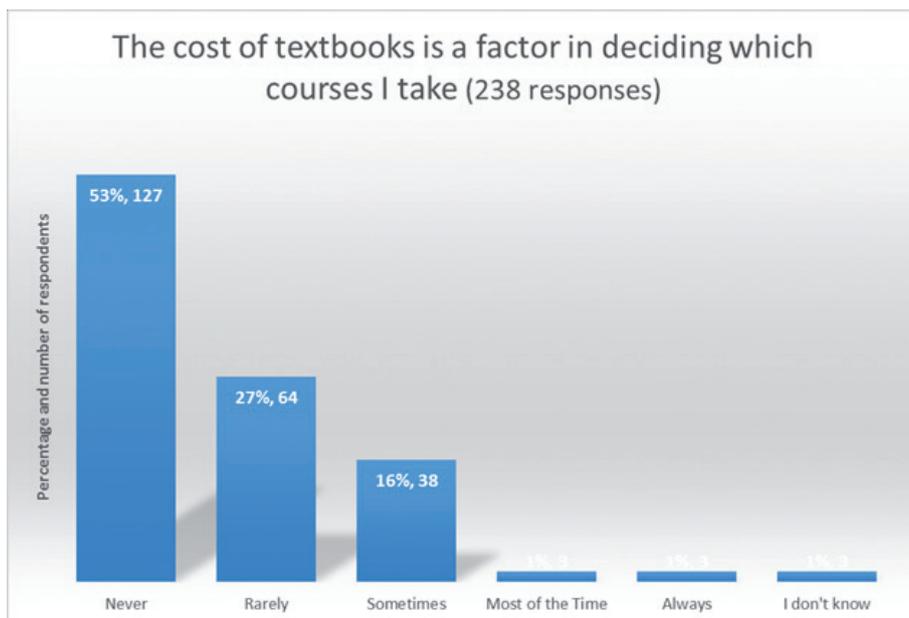


Figure 4: Influence of Cost of Textbooks on Course Choice

Examining these overall results in the light of those who felt they have been negatively affected academically, as shown in Figure 5, for those respondents who felt affected (shown in the orange line) cost was more likely to be considered when deciding which courses to take, than for those who probably did not or definitely did not feel affected. Once again, the results of this question may reflect the generally positive personal attributes of the respondent group.

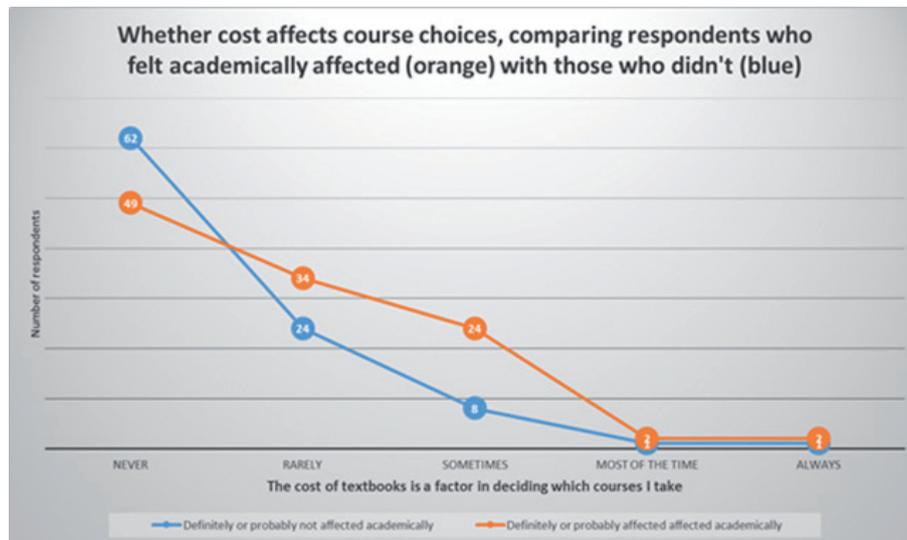


Figure 5: Textbook Cost and Course Choice - Comparison of Affected and Not Affected Academically

The orange line in Figure 5 shows that the number of respondents who indicated that lack of access has ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ had a negative effect on them academically (Q9); the blue line shows those who did not report negative effects. This demonstrates a slight propensity for those who felt affected to be more likely to consider cost when deciding which courses to take. Where cost was ‘never’ a factor in course choice, 62 respondents felt unaffected by lack of access as opposed to 49 who did; those for whom cost was ‘sometimes’ a factor in course choice, were three times more likely to indicate they felt negatively affected academically. A comment in response to Q3 provides an example.

The cost outweighed the need to take the [course] as their were other [courses] available that did not require me to purchase a course reader or expensive textbook.

In the free text comments throughout the survey, 31% of respondents (76) stated that there was academic value in having required textbooks, even though none of the questions specifically asked them to reflect on this. The comments reflected the positive value of textbooks as well as students’ perceptions of poorer academic performance had they undertaken their study without required textbooks.

For a short time, I went without a textbook due to its price. After seeing myself fall behind I purchased it and began to catch up once more.

It’s definitely mentally stressing to have a lecturer tell you to read a page or two which may not even be that important, because you don’t know what those pages’ content is because you don’t have the textbook. It feels like you’re slipping and being left behind and not on top of things.

Perceptions about value

It was, however, unclear whether some of these comments about “academic value” expressed the view that, simply, it is good to have the textbooks that are required for a course, as in the comments above, or whether the comment reflected a more fundamental or generalised belief or principle about academic value, as in, for example,

The textbooks are absolutely essential for understanding material.

Textbooks do provide more valuable information than random online resources and it's more relevant to the lecture materials.

Twenty-nine individual respondents felt that textbooks were not value for money, explaining that they were high cost items that would only be used for a short period of time.

The number of times we actually get referred to a textbook or asked to read a chapter don't make it worth the money it costs to buy a textbook. I got one in first year and I have looked at it once - apart from that everything else I need is online or I can get the same information in a different book.

In responses to Q10, 47 comments from a total of 39 individual respondents identified affordability of textbooks as a key concern. Comments included those connected with finding textbooks expensive but still buying them; finding alternatives to new textbooks that were less satisfactory, such as older editions or high demand and course reserve library copies; and choosing not to take courses because of the cost of textbooks. For example,

I feel like I am putting my grades at risk because I refuse to pay such ridiculous prices for textbooks.

Most assigned textbooks are on course reserve, and only being able to get a book out for an hour means not being able to go further than the library to read it and strangely, the library isn't always the most calming place to read a book.

Only one respondent contemplated, but did not action, withdrawing from a course because of the cost of the required textbook. Eleven other students reported that the cost of textbooks was a deciding factor when choosing their course of study. A typical comment was, “I can't afford to buy the textbook, so essentially I can't take the class.”

Further connections can be made between the responses discussed above and behaviours and attitudes about textbooks, and their accessibility. These connections are discussed in the next section.

Access behaviours

The survey asked respondents to indicate their behaviours in relation to gaining access to textbooks, other than buying them. The specific questions on access behaviours in the survey included Q5, Q7 & Q8, and Q22.

The accessibility of resources

Forty-eight free text comments in response to Q6 and Q8 referred to accessibility of physical and online resources. Half of these comments identified a lack of text availability, including limited textbooks being available to borrow through the Library and available for purchase from bookstores. Examples of comments of this type included:

I am worried about the availability of the textbook I need. Particularly during exam time, I like to study from the book and need to know for sure that I can access it.

Often they're on course reserve so I can't get them out (or not for very long) or there aren't enough copies. Sometimes it's because it's easier to have my own copy to highlight or make notes in.

While six students stated that the Library's online and physical resources met their academic needs, eight students asked for increased availability of online textbooks and e-resources, for example,

I would like to see an increase in the online availability of textbooks. In this day and age, it is so much more efficient to carry a laptop containing a number of books rather than the book itself. It also saves time when searching for key terms or topics.

Behaviours as students seek to gain access

Insight into the various behaviours of respondents as they seek to gain access to textbooks is provided by the responses to Q5, presented in Figure 6. This Likert-style question presented them with a five-point range from 'never' to 'always'.

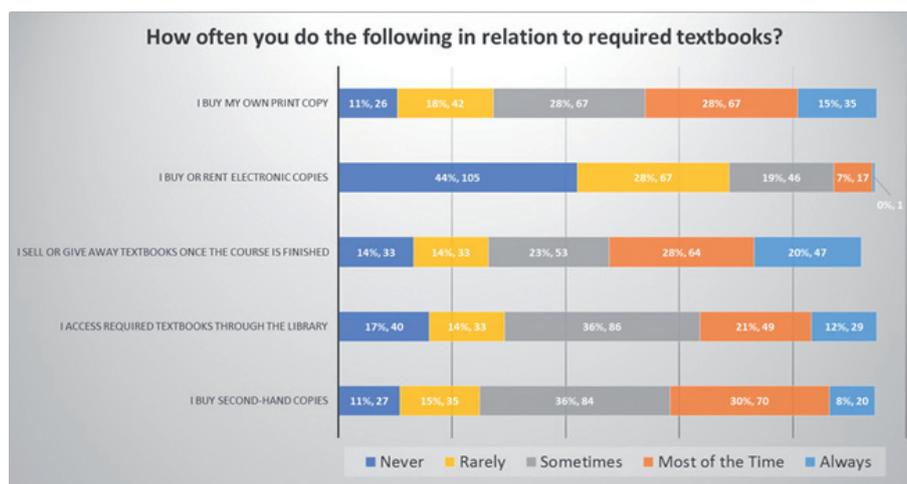


Figure 6: How Often Textbook Access Behaviours Occur

Figure 6 shows that a reasonable number of respondents do still buy print copies, with 43% indicating that they do this either 'most of the time' or 'always'. Breaking purchase of books down by subject, using demographic subject area data from Q16 and Q17, showed broadly similar behaviour across the different disciplines. As for buying electronic copies, this is not (yet) particularly common, and would depend on availability: 72% said they 'never' or 'rarely' do this; only 7% said 'most of the time' or 'always'. Certainly, this is far less common than buying 'my own print copy', either new or 'second-hand copies', or getting access 'through the Library'. In both these cases, results were similar, and indeed comparable to buying 'my own print copy', though purchase is still slightly more common.

Responses to Q7 are presented in Figure 7, where respondents were asked to indicate what they did if they did not purchase their own copy of a required textbook.

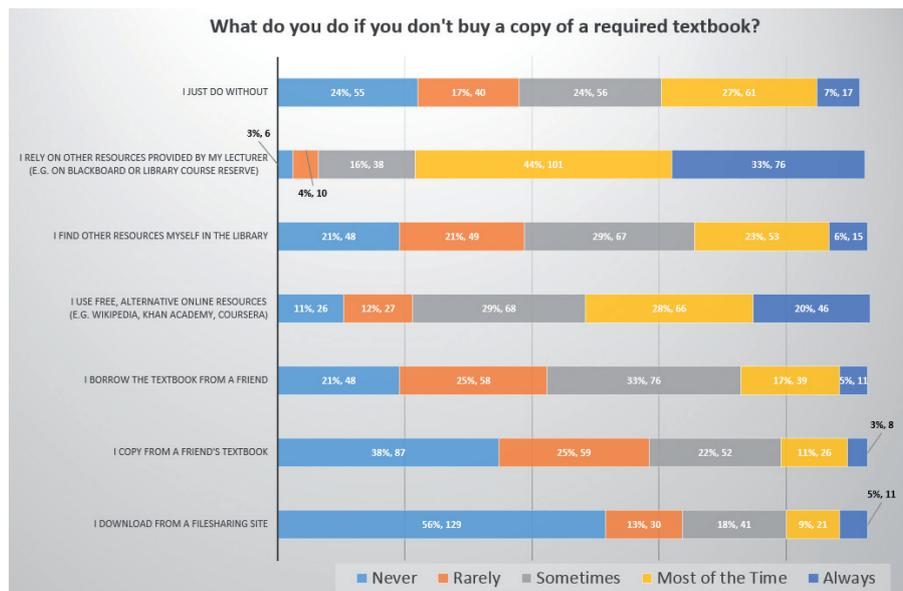


Figure 7: Textbook Access Behaviours Other Than Buying

When they do not have the required textbook, respondents indicated that they rely very heavily on resources provided by lecturers, either through the LMS (e.g., Blackboard) or the Library course reserve service. 77% per cent of respondents (187) indicated that they use these systems either 'always' or 'most of the time' when they do not buy a required textbook. Only 7% (16) 'never' or 'rarely' used them. The following comment in response to Q22 provides some illustration:

It's great having everything you need for course reading online through the Library. If every reading I had to do was done like that, it would make my life easier in terms of time management and for others, cost.

The next most common alternative to purchase of a required textbook is 'free, alternative online resources', with 48% of respondents (112) indicating they do this 'always' or 'most of the time', with a further 29% (68) doing this 'sometimes'. 'Doing without' is relatively common, with just over a third (34%, 78) indicating that they do this 'most of the time' or 'always' when not buying their own copy of the textbook. Students commented that

I think prices really influence students and if it's too expensive they're more likely to not buy it and rely on friends or just do without, and it of course reflects badly on grades.

Text books are cripplingly expensive and usually not worth the price and are debatable for their educational value which forces student into using alternative study aids. This will result in student relying on textbooks less in favour of more effective learning tools such as Google. Google is a far more valuable education tool, not to mention more cost effective.

For each of the questions already discussed about habits when they do not buy the textbook, respondents indicated relying on those habits more than seeking alternative resources in the Library, where only 29% of respondents (68) indicated doing this 'always' or 'most of the time'. Even going without is slightly more common than finding alternative resources in the Library. Borrowing or copying from a friend was considerably less common; downloading from file sharing

sites was clearly the least common activity, with more than half of respondents reportedly never doing it.

Some of the difficulties of using the Library resources, seeking alternative ways to source textbooks and even difficulties when trying to purchase the textbook are illustrated in this comment:

Textbooks are often very expensive, which increases the difficulty of access. There are sites online where you can buy them for much cheaper, but they take weeks to arrive - which then puts you behind the rest of the class. Library access is difficult at times, particularly if you live far from campus or they are kept in course reserve.

In summary, respondents said that they tend not to factor the cost of textbooks into course selection, and it is rare for them to withdraw from a course because of the cost of a required textbook. However, they frequently feel textbooks reflect very poor value, which is considered not only in purely financial terms but also in terms of academic value.

Discussion

This study found that the cost of textbooks does not seem to affect choice of course at all; this result is contrary to the Senack (2014) and the Jhangiani & Jhangiani (2017) studies. Possible reasons for this may include the existence of the course-related costs that are part of student loans in New Zealand, or that for many courses at the University of Otago, minimal information is provided before enrolment. Limited information thus inhibits student ability to make decisions about course choice, based on textbook cost. Added to that, when courses are compulsory, often because they are part of an externally credentialled, professionally-oriented qualification, such as Medicine or Teacher Education, students cannot withdraw or make changes to their programme. This means that students cannot choose to enrol or not enrol in courses on the basis of textbook cost or accessibility. Where first years are concerned, their limited knowledge about higher education means that they are probably more likely to follow recommendations made to them about such things as purchasing textbooks, without being in a position to critique the expectation or to make a judgement about how best to find out how “set” a set textbook actually is. This situation may have been one reason why first years made up the group reporting spending the highest amount on textbooks in this study.

Some students expressed a view that textbooks have limited “value” – value for money and/or academic value. Respondents reported purchasing expensive textbooks that were rarely referred to by lecturers and/or used for one course and no more. Alternatively, many students expressed limited value (for money), especially when they had experienced minimal direct need for textbooks they had bought in the past. Despite these views, many students held the view that textbooks, at least in principle, did have academic value. In addition, they saw the benefits of having access to their own textbooks that they had bought.

Participants in this study reported that they do seek alternative resources and other ways to access textbooks when cost is considered a factor. Students reported relying heavily on alternatives to essential textbooks, particularly from lecturers. Taking the form of materials that lecturers provide access to via, for example, the learning management system, students also reported searching online for supplementary resources. While many acknowledged the ability to access library copies, the limitations, including, availability, inability to make notes on the text, and limited loan time, were highlighted. Student access to textbooks is restricted in the sense that (a) resources provided electronically rely on licensing that allows copying of this nature, that is, either resources must be

openly licensed or they must be covered by a blanket copying licence or by library subscription; and (b) physical course reserves are, by their nature, limited to the vagaries of demand at peak times.

When the value of purchasing textbooks is brought into question by students, leading them to engage in alternative resource-seeking behaviours such as those revealed by participants in this study, teachers should be concerned. While information literacy skills are important for students to develop, the sourcing of high quality information as an alternative to a set textbook, is not straightforward. Students, especially in their first few years of university study, are not generally experienced and knowledgeable enough about a discipline area to be able to engage in the high level of critique that is needed to inform choice and use of information through the alternative sources they find. Lecturers who select appropriate, accessible and affordable textbooks for their courses may play a key role in facilitating positive academic outcomes for students and reducing the likelihood of students accessing inappropriate or inadequate alternative resources.

This suggests another issue, which is related to course development and design, incorporating the decision-making involved in choosing which textbooks should be accessed and which textbooks are essential. Each lecturer and course team will approach this differently; with many decisions being based on lecturers' views about education, textbooks and their place and role in courses, teaching and learning. The process can be unique to individual lecturers and so will vary from course to course. Students usually have minimal or no exposure to those decision-making processes. The only decision that they can make is to either follow the directions of lecturers to buy the set textbooks, or to take it upon themselves not to buy the textbook and seek alternatives. Having said that, the consequence of not buying or having access to essential textbooks is a perception of the negative impact this has on academic performance. While this study is based on self-reports and therefore highlights expressed perceptions only, it is of concern if students view that their academic success is being impaired because of their inability to afford or have access to textbooks. Also of concern is that they struggle to cope without buying the text, only to sometimes buy it anyway because of difficulties in gaining easy access.

Conclusions

The overarching intention of this study was to gain a better understanding of the student point of view about textbook cost and access within our educational setting, with an interest in the reported behaviours of our first year cohort.

The results of the study suggest strongly that the position of students where textbook purchase is concerned needs to be acknowledged and recognised: their views and their contexts in terms of their financial situation and their perceptions of the monetary and academic value of textbooks. In addition, interestingly, the study highlights that first-year students tend to spend much more on textbooks than students in each of second, third and fourth years. The latest report from the PIRG (Senack & Donoghue, 2016) and from Jhangiani and Jhangiani (2017) say that students are experiencing financial difficulty because of the cost of textbooks. Those authors argue that the cost of textbooks should be reduced and that other options, such as open textbooks, should be given serious consideration. However, the authors of the current study ask the question, is the traditional view of the textbook being the important resource that it has been perceived to be in the past, still viable? The content within a textbook may be invaluable, but the way it is presented and made accessible has changed and continues to change with ongoing developments in digital technologies. Teachers have a responsibility to acknowledge such changes and to seek to understand the position of students within the changing university learning environment.

More specifically, it is important for lecturers and course designers to accept the changing nature of information provision. There is a wide variety of options available to source high quality resources to support courses, teaching and learning; options other than textbooks that are of high monetary cost to students and fraught with access difficulties. Granted, the introduction of different options for provision and access of resources for students is not necessarily straightforward. As Brown (2013) notes when commenting upon the use of e-textbooks, as one possibility of an alternative to hard copy textbooks, “just because we can do something does not mean we should” (p. 220).

There are many constraints and barriers inherent within any complex institutional environment and broader student learning experience and context. Access and cost, along with institutional and related teaching, learning and support systems (e.g., library, bookshop, Internet access) are some of the variables that need to be considered in the process of providing learning environments and experiences that are satisfying for students.

This study prompts further investigation and action to contribute to ongoing efforts at the University of Otago and beyond to gain a deeper understanding of those variables. Future research may include modifying the survey instrument for different institutions or for defined groups of students. A study such as this is a way to prompt conversation within an institution about teaching, learning, course planning and the explicit support that students need to assist learning how to access and evaluate open and other resources. Continuing the exploration of related issues and topics suggested by this study will ensure that, informed by the student voice, universities can better understand textbook practices and the possible influence that these may have upon their students’ sense of achievement and success.

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Appendix: Survey

(https://figshare.com/projects/Textbooks_cost_access_University_of_Otago_Student_Survey_2015-16/17474)

For the purposes of this survey, think about texts/textbooks that

- are "required," "prescribed" or "essential" for your courses;
- you have to pay for yourself or access through the library; and
- are either print or electronic.

Don't think about textbooks that are:

- optional texts, textbooks or readings; or
- 'course readers' or 'course packs' (which you might pay for but this only covers the cost of copying)

Q1 About how much did you spend on textbooks *this year* (print and electronic)?

Q2 Have you ever decided against taking a course because of the cost of textbooks?

Q3 Tell us about that decision.

Q4 The cost of textbooks is a factor in deciding which courses I take:

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Most of the time
- Always
- I don't know

Q5 Indicate how often you do the following in relation to required textbooks

- I buy my own print copy
- I buy or rent electronic copies
- I sell or give away textbooks once the course is finished
- I access required textbooks through the library

Q6 If you don't use library copies, what are the reasons why?

Q7 What do you do if you don't buy your own copy of a required textbook?

- I just do without
- I rely on other resources provided by my lecturer
- I find other readings by myself
- I use free, alternative online resources
- I borrow the textbook from a friend
- I copy from a friend's textbook
- I download from a filesharing site

Q8 Tell us about any other method you use not covered in the options above.

Q9 Has lack of access to textbooks had a negative effect on you academically?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Probably not
- Definitely not
- I don't know

Q10 Please describe how you think lack of access to textbooks affected you academically.

Q11 Which type of tertiary institution are/were you enrolled at? (Check all that apply)

Q12 Please describe the type of institution

Q13 Name of institution(s)?

Q14 How many years of tertiary study have you done (including your current year)?

Q15 Your gender

Q16 Your subject area(s)

Q17 Please describe your Other subject area(s)

Q18 How you study (mode)

Q19 Do you have a disability that affects your study?

Q20 Are you a native speaker of English?

Q21 What is your ethnicity? (Choose up to three)

Q22 Do you have any other thoughts or comments to make that weren't covered in other questions?