**OPERA Recital: The accessible information landscape at the University of Kent.**

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In 2016, we presented this paper to the MmIT Conference, ‘Digital Citizenship: What is the library’s role?’ This article expands on the reading list element of our paper, ‘OPERA Recital’, and details how we are addressing issues linked to the digital access and inclusion theme of the 2016 MmIT conference.

**Introduction.**

At the University of Kent, we have been taking forward a university-wide accessibility project, [OPERA (Opportunity, Productivity, Engagement, Reducing barriers, Achievement)](https://www.kent.ac.uk/studentsupport/accessibility/opera.html) (University of Kent 2017) This is important work in light of changes in the [Disabled Students Allowance](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-education-student-support-changes-to-disabled-students-allowances-dsa) (Department for Business Innovation and Skills & Willets 2014), which looked to Higher Education Institutions to mainstream support for disabled students. The project aims are to implement a range of accessibility initiatives and monitor their impact on the development of a more accessible information environment at the University. We are also drawing on expertise and strategic guidance from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), who are providing early access to training resources in return for feedback, testimony and action research case studies.

In this article we share further details about how the Library has collaborated with Student Support and Wellbeing (SSW) at Kent to deliver accessible information through our mainstream Reading List Service. Our collaboration has resulted in a sustainable and scalable process to deliver reading list resources for students with print disabilities. The process works across the Library and SSW teams, and current students are already benefitting from the work we have taken forward.

**The opportunity of accessibility.**

In Higher Education, the issue of information accessibility is a pressing concern. At a time when the digital information landscape is evolving rapidly, online productivity and assistive technologies are also affording ever greater opportunities for people to access and be productive in using information. At Kent, the OPERA project is raising awareness of these tools, and empowering the university community to improve access to learning for all through the innovative use of technology.

Changes to the academic information landscape, and the increased focus on accessibility issues means this a great time to engage with publishers and eBook aggregators to enhance accessibility features for everyone’s benefit. Digital resources lend themselves to being adapted and manipulated. It’s possible magnify, reflow or change the colour of text. Text can be converted to speech, and documents can be navigated in a range of ways. The [eBook accessibility audit](https://sites.google.com/site/ebookaudit2016/home) provided a springboard for this engagement and benchmarked eBook platforms by focussing on key areas of practical user experience to measure basic accessibility functionality. The aim was to ‘give all stakeholders the common language on which to build meaningful conversations’ (McNaught 2016).

At Kent we are seeking to embed institutional cultural change. This means moving from a culture of making individual adjustments for students with Inclusive Learning Plans (ILP), towards anticipatory reasonable adjustments and inclusive practice by design. We are taking this forward by increasing awareness and understanding of the opportunities of accessibility across the university community, and designing services that are inclusive at source. A significant element of OPERA has been to deliver accessible information through mainstream processes, which involved a number of stakeholders across the University.

**The practicalities of providing accessible reading lists at Kent.**

In late 2015 the Academic Liaison Services (ALS) team within the Templeman Library began working with pilot schools to provide accessible materials to print-disabled students with an ILP who are blind or partially sighted. We use Talis Aspire reading list software, branded as Readinglists@kent, which informs what resources we purchase to support teaching modules. We require module convenors to create and update their own lists, and reading lists exist for the majority of Kent modules. Through the pilot, we wanted to test how a formal purchasing process might work to deliver reading resources for print-disabled learners.

Our aim was to encourage tutors to share their essential reading requirements with the Library. From there we would either purchase multi user licence eBooks or use the Load2Learn service, (now [RNIB Book Share UK education collection](https://www.rnibbookshare.org/cms/)) to request accessible copies of texts direct from publishers. During the initial trial, tutors were encouraged to inform us that they had published their reading list when they had an ILP student on their module, and highlight any ‘Core’ (must read) resources the student would require. Initially we were happy to accept reading lists via a paper pro-forma, as well as via Readinglists@kent. We then made sure we purchased eBooks where they were available using our regular suppliers. If we couldn’t purchase a commercially available eBook, we followed up with Load2Learn to request an accessible copy. The final step in the process was to email our colleagues in SSW to let them know what response we had received from Load2learn.

The challenges raised by this workflow were felt across all the parties involved in the first pilot. Academic tutors who chose to use the pro-forma then had two versions of their reading list, an online list and an additional paper list for the students with an ILP. We realised that this should ideally be integrated with the online list, but this was not necessarily happening.

Meanwhile in the Library, we were encountering numerous challenges. Information was coming to us via online lists, paper pro-forma and emails. Added to this, we were requesting resources through multiple sources, which was complex and risked both duplication and non-completion of work. The Load2Learn process itself was complicated. Each publisher had different forms to fill in, set their own criteria and had different timescales for responding. Some publishers we contacted didn’t respond at all, others required confidential student details which we were not in a position to share. This made the completion of the reading list slow and dependent on external sources beyond our control.

The non-standard nature of the pilot process added to our work load and we quickly became concerned about its scalability. Some reading lists were very long, and these were taking a disproportionate amount of time to work through. It also meant multiple Load2Learn requests were required, all of which needed to be tracked individually. In light of these factors, we felt it was not feasible to move out of the pilot phase and scale up for all ILP lists across Kent. The length of lists also had a financial implication. Kent budgets are devolved meaning that the Library receives a certain amount of funding per academic school, so applying an e-first policy to a 400 item list with an ILP flag could very possibly spend the entire book budget.

By early 2016 it was clear that our pilot had laudable aims and was timely piece of work, plus there was a shift in thinking happening around accessibility at the University. OPERA was making strides and as part of this work Ben Watson had designed a handbook for academics. This set out the respective roles of academic staff, the Library, SSW and the students, as stakeholders in an ‘accessibility’ partnership. So we looked again at streamlining our processes again, which was the point when we made headway.

The key breakthrough came when we agreed that ALS would only work with online reading lists, which meant that pro-forma or separate requests would no longer be accepted. This decision was important on a number of levels. It would ensure that there was one point of truth in Readinglists@kent. In turn this would streamline the library process, as we would then supply the materials that were needed for that module regardless of the needs of the students on the module. It also made the academic’s life easier, as they updated their online reading list and the only additional step for them was to send an email to let the Library know they had published an ILP list. In short, it was inclusive, as the ILP process was embedded within the mainstream process, so all students would benefit.

To tackle the issue of affordability, we also set guidelines restricting the purchase of eBooks to Core (must read) and Recommended (should read) texts. We made this decision on the grounds that longer lists would be cost prohibitive if bought entirely as e-first.  We also worked on the principle that no student was expected to read everything on a longer reading list, so it would be unreasonable to expect students with an ILP to do so. From the SSW perspective, if a student wanted to access a Background (could read) item, then a scan could be arranged. We felt that students with an ILP not specifically disadvantaged, as the Library only purchases single copies of Background items, so everyone may be required to wait for a hard copy to be returned to the Library at times.

The streamlined process allows ALS to focus solely on managing reading lists and buying commercially available Core and Recommended texts as eBooks. Meanwhile, SSW maintains direct contact with students and they also manage the procurement of individual requests via RNIB Bookshare. ALS prioritise ILP reading lists when we receive the email from the academic or list publisher in order to provide materials in good time. We also make use of the functionality in Talis Aspire, which allows us to add Library notes within reading lists. We use this to confirm which eBooks we have purchased or note where we cannot provide content in accessible formats. These notes are a nice legacy touch, which will help streamline our Library reviews process further in subsequent years. When ALS have completed their work, a standard email alerts SSW and most importantly details any eBooks that ALS were not able to buy. SSW receives ISBN details and an itemised list of the hard copies we hold in the Library. This means they know what to source via RNIB Bookshare or from individual publishers.

At all stages of the process we sought to optimise the student experience. The Library ensures the link in Readinglists@kent takes the student directly to the eBook version in our LibrarySearch discovery service. This removes an unnecessary click. Where materials are sourced by SSW, ILP students gain access to RNIB Bookshare using their own login details. Further to this the Library only purchases multi-user or unlimited user licence eBooks. This is at a time when single and managed user licenses are becoming more prevalent. Our reasoning here is that students with an ILP cannot be guaranteed priority access to content within a large cohort on a module.

**Outcomes**

90% of accessibility is about everyone making small conscious and deliberate differences. By adopting an e-first policy for ILP reading lists, we support all our students including part-time and distance learners in addition to students requiring reasonable adjustments. Through the OPERA project, we have arrived at scalable and effective process for managing ILP reading lists using our mainstream reading list processes. For academics and list owners their extra work load has been reduced to a single email. ALS has incorporated small changes to daily processes, whilst SSW can focus on content the Library has been unable to provide.

But the most important outcome can be summed up in an anecdote Ben shared with Louise recently. He had been trying to contact a student with an ILP for some time. When he finally caught up with her to ask how she was getting on, and whether she needed any help accessing resources, she was genuinely nonplussed by the question. The student reported that everything she needed was on her reading list, so she really wouldn’t be needing any SSW support for that course. Ben and Louise then joked at how frustrating it was that so much background work had gone unnoticed. In reality this was exactly what OPERA aimed to achieve, accessible information provided through mainstream processes and giving the same opportunities to all.

**Links**

RNIB Bookshare - <https://www.rnibbookshare.org/cms/> [Accessed 12th May 2017]

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