

Niamh Tumelty

Caroline Ball

October 2nd, 2025

Open educational resources should be central to the public mission of universities

Discussing the current state of open educational resources and e-textbooks, Niamh Tumelty and Caroline Ball argue they should form a central part of university strategies for public engagement.

Access to essential teaching and learning materials is increasingly restricted, undermining both educational equity and institutional sustainability. Rising subscription fees, restrictive licensing, and digital rights management (DRM) technologies have created significant barriers for students and academics alike. Commercial textbooks are often prohibitively expensive piling further pressure onto students already stretched thin by rising living costs.

University libraries too can face charges of thousands of pounds for single e-textbook licences that may expire after one year or restrict access to a handful of students. These issues have led to mounting frustration within the academic community. Campaigns such as [#ebookSOS](#) have drawn attention to the exploitative pricing and [restrictive licensing models](#) used by major publishers, which severely limit the availability of essential learning materials. The campaign, launched by UK academic librarians (including one of the authors), has mobilised national media attention and parliamentary debate, highlighting how unsustainable these practices are for both institutions and learners.



When students can't afford reading materials, or academics can't adapt content to diverse learning needs, the quality and

inclusivity of teaching suffers.



When students can't afford reading materials, or academics can't adapt content to diverse learning needs, the quality and inclusivity of teaching suffers. The result is not just a reduction in grades, but also in engagement, confidence, and the sense that education is for everyone. We risk a version of education where access depends less on intellectual curiosity and more on who can afford to participate.

Why open educational resources matter

This is where open educational resources (OERs) offer a lifeline. OERs are teaching, learning and research materials that are openly available and free for anyone to use, adapt and share. They vary from individual lecture slides to complete textbooks, videos, datasets and case studies, even entire courses. Unlike traditional textbooks, academics can tailor them to reflect **local contexts, emerging topics, or underrepresented perspectives**.

For students, the adoption of OERs means guaranteed access anytime, no price tags or fine print, often in a variety of digital formats to support accessibility needs. For academics, OERs promote collaboration, innovation, and provide opportunities to contribute to disciplinary knowledge. They make it possible to update examples regularly, integrate research into teaching more directly, and achieve recognition for creating and sharing resources. For universities, OERs not only reduce pressure on strained budgets, they also align with bigger strategic goals: widening participation, improving equity, and engaging the public.



For students, the adoption of OERs means guaranteed access anytime, no price tags or fine print, often in a variety of digital formats to support accessibility needs.



OERs also contribute to knowledge equity more widely. By making teaching content openly available to all, we are supporting learners both locally in our own institutions and worldwide. We are

supporting a shift in power, and **redefining who gets to create, share, and access knowledge**.

Challenges

Creating and maintaining OERs takes time. It takes institutional support, recognition, and infrastructure in the form of platforms, policies, and funding models that align with open values. For academics already facing competing and increasing demands on their time and attention, building new resources or adapting existing ones can feel like a luxury.

And then there are the **bigger questions**: How do we ensure quality? How do we make them discoverable? Who maintains them when the original creators move on?



Creating and maintaining OERs takes time. It takes institutional support, recognition, and infrastructure in the form of platforms, policies, and funding models that align with open values.



That said, the greater risk lies in not acting, in **continuing with the status quo**. If universities remain so dependent on the current commercial model, we risk deepening existing inequities in who can learn, who can teach, and who gets to shape what counts as knowledge. A small number of large publishers dominate the academic and educational publishing market, and their business models are increasingly at odds with the values of higher education. Addressing this calls for a genuine commitment to openness, and recognition that OERs are not a 'nice to have' or something to dabble in, but central to the future of teaching.

Case study: A new open textbook in management

Despite these barriers, examples of innovative open practices already exist; some institutions and academics are already charting a different path. Within the LSE's Department of Management, academics have recognised the value of making their teaching materials openly available to all who

want to learn. *Navigating the 21st Century Business World*, edited by Dorottya Sallai and Alexander Pepper, is a collection of case studies that have been tested in LSE classrooms and are now available freely online. This is an excellent example of how academics can flip their approach to ensure more equitable access to the educational content they create and also have a much broader influence on how their discipline is taught globally.

Business models for case studies often present particular challenges for universities, which are typically required to pay for temporary access based on student numbers, with use restricted to the duration of a specific module. In many cases, students can't even retain access until their exams! This business model is deeply flawed, so it is especially encouraging to see these academics recognise the issue and choose to make their work openly available instead.

Openness in higher education

In many universities, conversations about openness still revolve around research outputs: journal articles, monographs, and data. But if we're serious about knowledge equity, then teaching content has to be part of that conversation too. Access gaps in the classroom can undermine the very purpose of higher education and undercut the future of both research and researchers.

OERs offer a practical, impactful way to widen access and rethink inclusion. But they require investment in content and in people. That means rewarding academics who create and share openly and recognising the work involved. It means **embedding openness into strategy**, not treating it as a side project or fringe benefit. The launch of *Navigating the 21st Century Business World* demonstrates that open, adaptable, high-quality teaching content is not only possible but necessary.



In many universities, conversations about openness still revolve around research outputs: journal articles, monographs, and data. But if we're serious about knowledge equity, then teaching content has to be part of that conversation too.



In contrast to extractive publishing practices, organisations, such as the [Open Book Collective](#), are demonstrating what more sustainable, values-driven models for open publishing might look like. By supporting open access book initiatives and encouraging collective funding models, they help ensure that high-quality academic content remains freely available while supporting the infrastructure and labour behind it. These community-led models provide a compelling alternative to commercial gatekeeping.

As financial pressures build, and we look to make our classrooms more inclusive, OERs can provide a solution. They represent part of a broader shift away from artificial scarcity and profit margins, and towards collaboration, adaptability, and access.

The real challenge isn't whether OERs are worth it. It's whether universities are ready to treat open education not as an optional extra, but as a central pillar of their mission. Knowledge should not be locked behind paywalls. We owe it to our students, and to learners everywhere, to open the doors.

Enjoying this blogpost? Sign up to our [mailing list](#) and receive all the latest LSE Impact Blog news direct to your inbox.

The content generated on this blog is for information purposes only. This Article gives the views and opinions of the authors and does not reflect the views and opinions of the Impact of Social Science blog (the blog), nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image Credit: [olrat](#) on [Shutterstock](#).

About the author

Niamh Tumelty

Niamh Tumelty is Director of LSE Library, which includes the role of Managing Director of LSE Press. Niamh's approach centres around the design of spaces, collections, policy and services based on deep understanding of the needs of differing disciplines, and she has a particular interest in what open social science would look like if designed from this perspective.

Caroline Ball is the Community Engagement Lead for the Open Book Collective, which brings together open access book publishers, publishing service providers, and libraries to work towards a sustainable future for open access books. Previous roles include academic librarian, copyright and licensing advisor, and lecturer in publishing. Her research interests centre on knowledge equity, information ethics, and systemic barriers and biases in dominant knowledge systems. She is also an active Wikipedian, was awarded the UK Wikimedian of the Year award in 2020 and currently serves on the Wikimedia UK board of trustees.

Posted In: Academic publishing | Higher education | Libraries | LSE comment | Open Access | Open Research | Public engagement



© LSE 2025