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Sydney University Press – a model for combining open access with commercial sales

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Sydney University Press was restarted in 2003 to provide print-on-demand books from the University Library's digital collections. Since 2005, it has also been publishing new research titles. Through its co-location with the University's repository, it has begun to explore Open Access in conjunction with commercial publication. A number of SUP titles are freely available chapter-by-chapter in the University repository, with a link to purchase the printed volume. This paper explores some of the issues around scholarly publishing in the digital age: exposure, expertise and reputation vs. commercial imperatives; digital production and flexible uses, and the role of the scholarly publisher.

The role of the university and the university press

Universities have a dual role in teaching and undertaking research for the betterment of society. Implicit in these roles is that the university as a publicly funded institution will 'give back' to the community, through sharing research insights and results, contributing to public debate, and shaping social policy.

We see the university press' role as adding value to academic research by creating a package called a 'book'.

Underlying these simplistic statements is a number of tensions – to what extent should universities commercialise the results of research? What role does a book play in providing research in an easily digestible form? What are the benefits for authors, universities and the community in the continuation of the academic publishing process?

The imperative to publish

Researchers have a number of external and internal pressures to publish. A sizable publication output is useful for career advancement – promotion, esteem factors and general standing in the academic community. But communication of research can also be as informal as dialogue with colleagues, which is no less beneficial in the development of ideas.

External pressures to publish include career progression and funding opportunities. The federal government funds research based on a number of measures, one of which is the Higher Education Research Data Classification¹ (HERDC). All university staff are required to count the number of books, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers they publish each year. Funds are then made available to universities based on this quantitative method – X thousand dollars per point. Schemes such as HERDC are skewed towards “commercial publishing” although in recent times the ability to include Open Access works has become possible for journal articles and conference papers as long as the other criteria are fulfilled.

But can Open Access fulfil an researcher’s publishing requirements? Most Australian universities now have an institutional repository where staff can place research papers. Projects such as APSR² (Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories) have worked to ensure that these repositories are sustainable, and harvestable by search engines. Repository content is easily found in Google, Google Scholar, WorldCat and other global search engines. Social networking allows researchers to connect with others in their research field in formal and informal ways, the internet itself enables people to build their reputation. Attempts to assess the quality of research output are also being developed, most recently through the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative (ERA).

Publishing has traditionally been seen as a method of formal communication of research results. This can help build a reputation within your field of expertise outside the researchers with whom you have direct contact. University presses work on creating a quality book from a manuscript, and in marketing the book to the potential audience.

The role of the publisher

Thompson (2005) suggests that the areas that there are 6 areas where a publisher can add value. They are:

- Content acquisition
- Financial investment and risk taking
- Content development
- Quality control
- Management and coordination
- Sales and marketing

¹ Higher Education Research Data Classification Scheme,

² Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories, www.apsr.edu.au/about.html. Accessed 9 April 2009.

How we approach each of these areas differentiates SUP from other publishers and provides us with increased flexibility in how and what we publish.

SUP's position in the University of Sydney

SUP is part of the Sydney eScholarship (SeS) division of the University Library. SeS is a strategic initiative of the library to explore how the library can add value to the university through partnerships and the use of its expertise. The longest running area within SeS is the Sydney Digital Library (SETIS) where for 15 years staff have been creating XML versions of out-of-copyright Australian material for free publication on the web. Over 300 early Australian novels and explorers journals are available. The other main services are the University Repository, where various research outputs are stored and made available via the Web, and Digital Project Analysis, where staff advise researchers on best practice in creation, storage and retrieval of digital research data.

These varied areas mean that academics have a number of options in terms of making their research available, depending on whether they want open access, value added through commercial publishing, archival options or just advice. A combination of options is also available.

SUP strategy

SUP's publishing strategy can be summarised as follows:

- ❖ Important, interesting, Australian books based on high quality research
- ❖ Primarily publishing in humanities, social sciences and 'social issues'
- ❖ Shared investment and risk for publisher and authors
- ❖ Digital production and publishing to ensure longevity, flexible use, multiple formats
- ❖ Addressing both tangible and intangible goals – commercial sales, improving exposure and expertise, building the University's reputation, following government and society imperatives for public access to the results of publicly funded research

Content acquisition

SUP was able to start operations using a large collection of out-of-copyright material from the SETIS collections. This gave us an early insight into the relationship between open access and the potential for business outcomes. Feedback from users of the free publications encouraged us to provide print editions, particularly of the longer publications such as novels.

This was supplemented with a collection of in-copyright but out-of-print Australian novels, facilitated by the Copyright Agency Ltd through a Cultural Fund grant. The novels were chosen from a list prepared by Australian literature researchers, created to identify works they would like to be teaching if they were available. These works formed the basis of a small revenue stream from selling print-on-demand editions through an ecommerce-enabled website.

In 2005, we set up a publishing proposal process for acquiring new works. Some of the resulting publications came from the results of Australian Research Council (ARC) projects³ or conferences, both areas with increasing connections to open access.⁴ An early collaborator in this area was Professor Brian Fitzgerald, through the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. *Open Content Licensing: Cultivating the Creative Commons* was published in 2007, including papers from a conference of the same name held in late 2005. The individual papers were simultaneously released through the repositories of Queensland University of Technology and the University of Sydney. Since then, 2 other books based on conferences on copyright and open licence schemes have been published. Although the full text of these 3 books is freely available for download via the web, SUP has made nearly \$2000 in revenue from sales of the printed editions.

Other decisions we have made in the area of content acquisition help to support a successful publishing process. Leaving the subject areas fairly broad – humanities, social sciences and ‘social issues’ within the Australian sphere – has allowed us to choose only the best quality proposals from those submitted. A preference for having the manuscript complete on submission (rather than commissioning) gives us an idea of writing style as well as approach to structure and the ability to build a realistic timeline to publish. Not limiting our publishing program to staff from our own University also gives us the opportunity to choose from the best in the country, and avoids appearing self-serving or vanity publishing.

Financial investment and risk taking

Publishing is a labour-intensive industry, from creation through to sales and marketing. The initial investment by the Library in setting up the Press was facilitated through the use of existing infrastructure in the University. While an off-the-shelf ecommerce system was purchased to run the initial web-based eStore, a credit card payment gateway was already available through

³ Australian Research Council, National Competitive Grants Program, <http://www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/default.htm>. Accessed 10 April 2009.

⁴ Australian Research Council, ARC Profile, http://www.arc.gov.au/about_arc/arc_profile.htm. Accessed 10 April 2009.

the University's IT service. The University Printing Service had equipment suitable for digital printing and perfect binding – our small jobs acting as capacity management for them when they were not printing course notes, exam papers or other university material. The main ongoing cost has been the salaries for 2 fulltime staff. All other production costs such as cover design, copyediting, index creation, launches and advertising have been paid with sales revenue or production subsidy.

We use a shared risk approach to publication, asking for a production subsidy where possible to cover some of the external costs such as copyediting and cover design. Alternatives to actual funds may be the use of resources, eg. a research assistant to proof or make references across chapters consistent. The ability of an SUP book to qualify for HERDC points has also been a point of leverage for authors and editors – where they can show that the book will earn research income back to their institution, they have used this to request upfront funding to cover production.

The use of print-on-demand means that there are no sunk costs in a print run that need to be recouped. Each book is priced to recoup its own print costs, plus an amount for royalties, and payments to the partners (UPS, ICT, Library and SUP). The Recommended Retail Price is calculated to allow a 30% discount to trade purchasers – mainly bookshops and library suppliers.

The issues of 'who pays' and 'for what' in the open access environment has tended to put the onus on the author to cover production costs. Print-on-demand and direct distribution has meant that although SUP seek subsidy to cover some production costs, this has generally been a lower amount than a commercial publisher would seek for a similar title.

Content development and quality control

A conference provides a useful basis for the development of a book, particularly when peer review has been undertaken, providing a level of quality assurance. While conferences have been the source of some titles, we have attempted to transform the final book beyond the 'proceedings' into a work of collected essays. The edited work has the option of moving beyond the event, drawing in extra chapters to round out an issue, or address new thinking that has come to light.

Quality control per se is not a point for differentiation between SUP and other publishers, as we try to follow best practice through the use of external readers and professional editors to shape the final product. It is important that quality control is evident in the final product – so that SUP is accepted as a publisher of choice. As mentioned above, the co-resourcing of publications through author/editor subsidy has meant that a professional quality book can be produced for a modest investment.

Management and coordination

Collaboration is an essential element of the academic environment. SUP has been able to draw on a wide range of skills from within our university and others, in developing our publishing program. Informal relationships with other university presses, industry associations such as the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), have provided best practice and advice. The skill sets of authors and editors submitting books is also utilised for their understanding of the subject area and the potential audience for the book.

The use of digital production methods allows for the flexible use and reuse of the book content. Manuscripts are submitted mostly as Word files, which are laid out using Word templates or InDesign. The final work is then output as a print-ready PDF. The open access files are split into chapters from the master PDF, and any final print requirements are made, such as 2-up (2 versions of the page on an A4 sheet, allowing 2 copies of the book to be printed simultaneously). For some titles an TEI XML file is also created, for archival and future uses, such as eBooks and DAISY XML (for speech readers). The digital files could be used for future remix projects, such as a compilation of chapters from previous titles on a particular topic.

SUP's contracts are a licence to publish, which does not require copyright assignation from the author. However it does cover potential future electronic uses such as those listed above, so that SUP's publishing options can remain flexible as the market develops.

Sales and marketing

The direct-to-customer print-on-demand approach to publishing and selling is very different to the commercial publishing model based on a standard 3000 print run with sale or return distribution. However it is relatively well-suited to the research book market, as the potential audience for most titles is well defined. Libraries are targeted both through the library book supply companies and the various catalogues and bibliographic listings that they employ for collection development. Researchers in similar disciplines can be approached through email lists, although this is preferably managed by authors or editors to avoid the perception of spam. Although most of our titles are not textbooks, sample copies to academics have resulted in their use within various courses in universities across the country.

Making chapters freely available through open access repositories also exposes the content to the world-wide audience through Google and Google Scholar. The ability to count accesses and downloads of chapters gives

statistics on potential interest in the various books and chapter content, providing us with information on which to base future publishing decisions.

We are also looking at utilising more Web 2.0 technologies to connect with authors and readers. We are using SUP's Facebook site to publicise book launches, link to book reviews and generally engage with readers. We are also developing a blog covering writing and publishing more broadly, with the aim of communicating with potential authors and readers.

Benefits for authors, their institutions and SUP

Creating a small academic publisher based on digital production, print-on-demand and direct distribution including open access, has give SUP a unique position in the academic publishing market in Australia.

The books SUP is choosing to publish are not the non-fiction blockbusters pitched at the 'educated reader' market, but are no less important to the development of social policy and debate. The ability to take on more niche books means that SUP can potentially uncover exciting new writers and early career academics. By offering open access as well as commercial sales, SUP allows authors to benefit from the research publication funding mechanisms such as HERDC, as well as allowing wide exposure of their ideas to the global market. Interestingly not authors are interested in making their works open access, preferring either to defer or prohibit open access. Future research will compare the relative success of open vs closed titles.

The use of digital technologies including Web 2.0 applications means that authors potentially get greater exposure in the online sphere. This can include engagement in online discussion with readers through blogs, and connecting with younger readers, including students. Digital production methods can lead to multiple formats and remix uses, generating further interest from the content.

The benefits to the university include an increase of exposure and expertise of staff, improving the brand and standing. Although the idea of the university press as essential to the standing of a research intensive university is primarily emotional, a stream of well-researched, interesting books potentially adds to a positive public perception of the university and its engagement with society.

Challenges

In these pragmatic economic times, it is important for non-profit or cost centres to be able to demonstrate their value to the parent organization. SUP is non-profit, and has existed from 2005 on salary subsidy from the Library.

Costs above those provided by authors and editors are derived from book sales. So although we talk about increased flexibility in our selection choices, we need to make sure we are making the right choices, so that we cover our costs.

SUP also needs to develop and measure non-financial performance, such as literary awards, influence of content on society issues and debate. An increase in the level of submitted book proposals (particularly from non-Sydney academics) can be used to measure interest in SUP as a publisher of choice. Statistics on use of open access material can also be used as a measure of interest in our publishing choices.

To continue to increase our brand presence we need to be able to attract high profile authors and/or discover the upcoming ones. To this end we are seeking further funding from the university to increase our marketing activities and develop eBook formats to widen our potential audience.

References

Thompson, John B. *Books in the digital age: the transformation of academic and higher education publishing in Britain and the United States*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.