VitalSource®

eTextbooks and Differential Learning

Reducing Inequalities in UK Higher Education

UK higher education institutions seek to provide a supportive environment for students from diverse backgrounds with a wide variety of needs. However, different student groups have very different experiences in terms of satisfaction, course continuation, academic attainment, and graduate employment.

HEFCE data* suggests challenges persist for:

- Students facing financial challenges
- Students with disabilities
- Mature students

These students reported a greater benefit from eTextbooks, as these materials can reduce their specific challenges through affordability, flexible access, and functionality—thus improving their overall experience.

> "Free textbooks are golden, and they're easier to access than going to the library, which can be hard when anxiety is high."
>
> Final year undergraduate student with disability or mental health disorder.

Methodology

The research was conducted at the end of 2017 by Shift Learning, an independent agency with experience in UK higher education. They gathered information via an eSurvey, which was distributed to current UK undergraduate and postgraduate students using a number of different methods including their own opt-in list, social media, CINT, and institutions working with VitalSource. Almost 1,000 students from 184 different higher education institutions responded. The survey was constructed to elicit feedback from users and non-users of eTextbooks and to gather demographic information about specific categories of students.
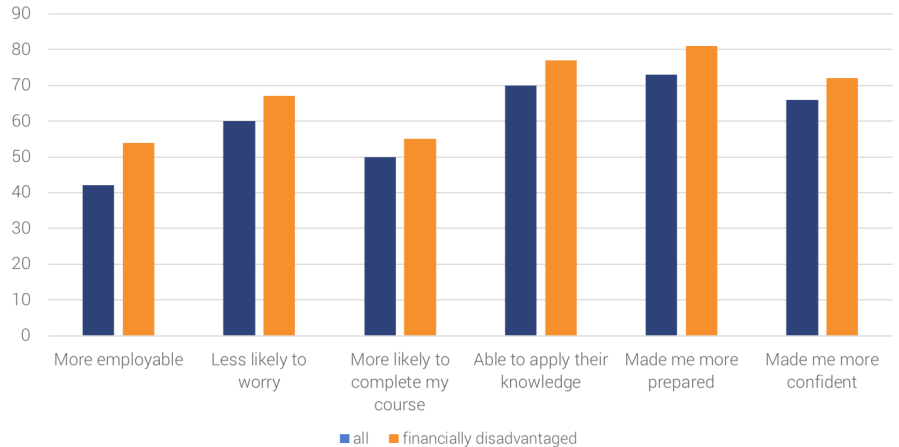
Disability categories surveyed included: Dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other learning difficulties; ADHD; Asperger's Syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder; physical or mobility issues; mental health conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, or anxiety disorder; deafness or hearing loss; blindness or low vision; photosensitivity; and other cognitive limitations, disability, learning difficulties, or impairments.

Supporting social mobility

66% of respondents were provided with eTextbooks by their institution. Students who had received free school meals or pupil premium reported that they would have been less likely to have bought new print (41%) or digital (33%) copies compared to their peers, and more likely to have delayed purchasing or reading the content (73%).

Compared to all students, financially disadvantaged students were more likely to report that eTextbooks supported their confidence (72% compared to 66%), feeling prepared (81% to 73%), and their ability to apply their knowledge (77% to 70%).

They felt that eTextbooks made them more likely to complete their course (77% to 70%), reduced their worry (67% to 60%), and make them more employable (54% to 42%).

Chart legend: ▪ all ▪ financially disadvantaged

Categories: More employable, Less likely to worry, More likely to complete my course, Able to apply their knowledge, Made me more prepared, Made me more confident

Supporting students with disabilities

Students with a disability are more likely to report that the portability (68%) and convenience (74%) of eTextbooks had a high positive impact on their learning than those without a disability (60% and 70%, respectively). Links to eTextbooks in the course module save this group time and hassle, thus having a positive impact on their learning experience. Compared to all students, they are more likely to report that eTextbooks make them feel prepared (78% compared to 73%) and worry less (66% compared to 60%).

"I can use the Read Aloud function, as I often find reading for long periods of time tiring."

First-year Social Studies student, in part-time work and with disability or mental health disorder.

Students with a visual, hearing, or other cognitive disability were more likely to report that some features, such as ability to magnify text, had a positive impact on their learning compared to their peers (94% vs. 87%). Likewise, students with a learning difficulty or social/communication impairment found features such as keyboard navigation (94% vs. 77%), subtitles in videos (90% vs. 81%), and the ability to listen to text (95% vs. 87%) had a positive impact on their learning.

Supporting non-traditional students

Mature students were more likely to report benefits around employability (53% compared to 42%), digital literacy (69% compared to 59%), course completion (57% compared to 50%), application of knowledge (74% compared to 70%), and feeling more prepared (79% compared to 73%).

Similar responses emerged from students who define themselves as being carers or in work. Both of these groups have a high overlap with mature students.

Chart legend: ▪ work ▪ carers ▪ mature students ▪ all

Categories: Improved my employablity, Improved my digital literacy, More likely to complete my course, Helped me apply my knowledge, Made me more prepared