

# USQ Open Textbook Initiative

## Institution & Institutional Context

The University of Southern Queensland is based in Toowoomba, Queensland, with campuses also in Springfield, Ipswich and Fraser Coast. The institution was established in 1967 as the Queensland Institute of Technology (Darling Downs). In 1971 it became the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, then the University College of Southern Queensland in 1992. USQ is part of the Regional University Network (RUN). It has 2 faculties: Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts (BELA) and Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science.

USQ has a diverse student population, including undergraduate and postgraduate students from more than 100 countries, with more than 80 nationalities. The current student enrolment is approximately 28,000 and of this total, more than 20,000 study off-campus by online/distance learning. Over half of USQ students are female, just over one quarter are classified as low socio economic status and only 10% are school leavers. In 2013, 496 Higher Degree Research students, 4433 Higher Degree Coursework and 14930 Bachelor level students were enrolled at USQ. In 2013 over 5000 international students were enrolled with 1797 students studying on-campus and the remainder studying outside Australia either through USQ Education Partners or directly with USQ.

The USQ Strategic Plan 2013-2015 (see <http://www.usq.edu.au/about-usq/about-us/plans-reports/strategic-plan>) is built on four pillars – Personalised Learning, Focused Research, Enriched Communities and Engaged Enterprise. The Plan guides the University in delivering its mission, which is ‘to enable broad participation in higher education and to make significant contributions to research and community development’. The Plan was approved by USQ Council in 2012 and has been enacted by all USQ staff throughout 2014.

## Keywords and OEP themes

Lower costs for students; authentic learning experience; Lower costs; access to university; role of libraries.

## What is the case study about?

In 2015 USQ for the first time introduced an Open Textbook Initiative. The goal of the Initiative is to encourage USQ academics to experiment and find new, better and less costly ways to deliver learning materials to their students. Through the Initiative academics can receive funding to develop an alternative or Open Textbook. There is no expectation that academics will author complete open textbooks (although they were welcome to put forward a proposal like that). Possible approaches to the development of an Open Textbook could include:

- Adopting and/or modifying an existing Open Textbook (from sources such as OpenStax, Flatworld Knowledge, or Connexions).
- Creating a new open textbook or collection of resources (using a range of resources such as articles, video, audio, websites)
- Expose the framework which exhibits the mechanics behind the creation of an open textbook. Examples may include working schemes which facilitate discovering existing content, collaboratively creating/editing content, storing content, publishing content in the form of an open textbook, open textbook file type/format conversion and further disseminating content for reuse.

Any academic staff member, at any USQ campus, wanting to explore the role and development of an Open Textbook for a course they are teaching may apply.

Applications from teams are welcome.

While the team leader must be an academic staff member, professional staff may be listed as a member of the team.

Successful applicants received \$15,000 to support their activities. They also received support and advice from the Academic Services Division, including Library Services, Learning Environments and Media and Learning and Teaching Services.

Successful applicants will be required to:

- Prepare for, attend and actively contribute in all meetings, workshops and activities designed to support successful applicants in undertaking their work (i.e. anticipated monthly).
- Submit a progress report in August and a final report in January 2016 on the results of their activities (report templates will be provided).
- Develop, as outlined in the application, an open textbook.
- Share their work with the larger USQ community by giving a presentation on their work at the December showcase.

Applications were due 16th March 2015 using the application form provided (go to <http://www.usq.edu.au/learning-teaching/excellence/landtgrants/OpenTextbooks/howtoapply>). A selection committee consisting of key stakeholders across USQ reviewed the applications. Applications were selected based on the following criteria:

- Quality of the application (how well it responds to the questions stated in the form).

- Innovative and creativity of approach proposed
- Well articulated evaluation plan
- Transferability (to other USQ courses and to other institutions or the open environment)

A number of information sessions were held leading up to the application closing date. A total of 14 applications were received and 4 were funded. The 10 unsuccessful applicants were invited to attend a special meeting to discuss how their work might still progress even though they did not receive funding. Eight of the 10 accepted the invitation to attend this meeting. Discussions are continuing on how to help the group move forward.

Adrian Stagg, Learning Designer in the Academic Services Division is the primary contact to the successful applicants. Adrian is facilitated a “learning community” in that all successful applicants are invited to meet fortnightly to work together to learn and develop their ideas. Through the learning community approach the idea is that the applicants will work together to not only develop their open textbook but also develop a shared understanding of open education and open educational practice.

## What is the issue or need you are addressing?

A 2014 study from the USA observed that the rising cost of textbooks not only adds to the overall financial burden of attending university, it can also have a measurable negative impact on students academic performance and success. A few key facts from the study:

- students spend an average of \$1200 per year on textbooks
- textbooks costs have outpaced inflation by 300% over the last 30 years.
- 7 out of 10 students have forgone purchasing textbooks because of cost
- 48% of students say they altered which classes they took based on textbook costs, either taking fewer classes or different classes
- 82% of students say they would do significantly better in a course if the textbook were free online and a hard copy was optional!

Additionally, in the current financial climate academic libraries are finding themselves no longer in the position to be buying large numbers of textbooks for loan to students (even if only for short periods).

The Open textbook Initiative will encourage the use of technology and information resources to support our students’ learning and support academics that are interested in pursuing non-traditional open educational resources as an alternative to the traditional textbook. The goal of the Initiative is to provide the opportunity for USQ academics to experiment in finding new, better and less costly ways to deliver learning materials to their students. The Initiative will promote the development of 21st century fluency for staff and students in information, media, technology, and visual skills in a way that connects directly to learning and teaching in academic disciplines.

Applications were due March 16th 2015; successful applicants were notified April 7th 2015; the first meeting of the successful applicants was held April 27th 2015. Each successful applicant participates in a “learning community” in that they attend regularly sessions facilitated by Adrian Staff (Learning Designer). The sessions are currently held fortnightly, this will continue until the end of July when the Progress Report is due. The community will then decide how best it will support its activities (e.g. frequency of meetings etc). A Progress report due 3rd August 2015. Each participant will present their work (outcomes, processes, reflections) in a USQ Learning and Teaching Grants Showcase on 1 December 2015. The Final report and artefact (e.g open textbook) is due 29 January 2016.

## How was the initiative implemented?

Details have been provided above. The whole initiative was established via an operational team led by the PVC (Scholarly Information and Learning Services) and key members of the USQ community e.g. learning and teaching support services, library services. This is a new initiative; it has only just commenced. Evaluation will take place – it is still to be determined. At the moment the lead facilitator, Adrian Stagg is writing a field journal noting his

observations and reflections on the process. It is anticipated that further evaluation data will be gathered via interviews with the successful applicants and review of the final product produced – where possible student data will be obtained e.g. those applicants who will in the short time period of the initiative be able to use the textbook they develop with students.

## Outcomes

The outcomes are many and varied: (i) to develop 4 open textbooks to be used within and outside USQ; (ii) to raise awareness and understanding of the potential role of open textbooks and open educational practice in USQ; (iii) to build momentum through champions and role modelling for open educational practice in USQ; (iv) to help students in their studies by reducing the costs associated with purchasing of expensive textbooks. The student voice has been represented so far through the inclusion of a student on the selection committee. The student voice may come through as the initiative continues and if the 4 successful applicants are in the position during the life of the project to implement the textbook they create within their course; if this is possible student evaluation of this experience will be sought. It is most likely that the student voice will come through post initiative, as the 4 successful applicants will have the time to include the textbook they have created into their curriculum.

## Issues & challenges

The initiative has only just commenced very few challenges have been faced so far.

## Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

It is not possible to address this point yet. Once the initiative has concluded (January 2016) a response can be provided.

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