

# Understanding the open textbook landscape across Europe: a focus on discoverability

The LIBER Educational Resources Working Group has spent the last 18 months focusing on the discoverability of open textbooks.

Libraries have always played a key role in supporting their universities with the provision of resources for teaching and learning. The digital shift, already in evidence pre-pandemic but now widespread, has resulted in increased demand for e-textbooks for many university libraries. Alongside this increased demand, libraries are facing increasingly restrictive and costly models of provision. Not surprisingly, libraries have been seeking alternative ways to provide textbooks for students.

The Educational Resources Working Group operates under the Steering Committee for [Advancing Open Science](#), as defined in [LIBER's 2023-2027 Strategy](#). The group works closely with the SPARC Europe-led [European Network of Open Education Librarians](#) (ENOEL) on achieving common goals and on their implementation. Both the LIBER Working Group and ENOEL support and promote open textbooks and open education in their networks. Within LIBER there is an exchange with the LIBER Open Access Working Group as well as the LIBER Copyright and Legal Matters Working Group.

Whilst the Educational Resources Working Group has focused on open textbooks, it has seen them within the broader OER context. UNESCO defines OER as follows: “Open Educational Resources (OER) are learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open licence, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others.”<sup>1</sup>


Clearly, open textbooks fit within the UNESCO definition, but they have further important characteristics as articulated within the Wikipedia definition: “An open textbook is a textbook licensed under an open licence and made available online to be freely used by students, teachers and members of the public. Many open textbooks are distributed in either print, e-book, or audio formats that may be downloaded or purchased at little or no cost”.<sup>2</sup>

Given the increasing interest in open textbooks, we set out to understand more about how libraries are surfacing this resource within their discovery systems. We designed a survey<sup>3</sup> which was disseminated to the library community via LIBER members and mailing lists. It was open for responses from October to November 2023 and in total, 70 responses were received from 24 countries. As illustrated in the figure below, responses were received mainly from European countries. Many responses were also received from the USA and a small number of other countries from beyond Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unesco.org/en/open-educational-resources>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_textbook](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_textbook)

<sup>3</sup>  Good practice with OER survey October to November 2023

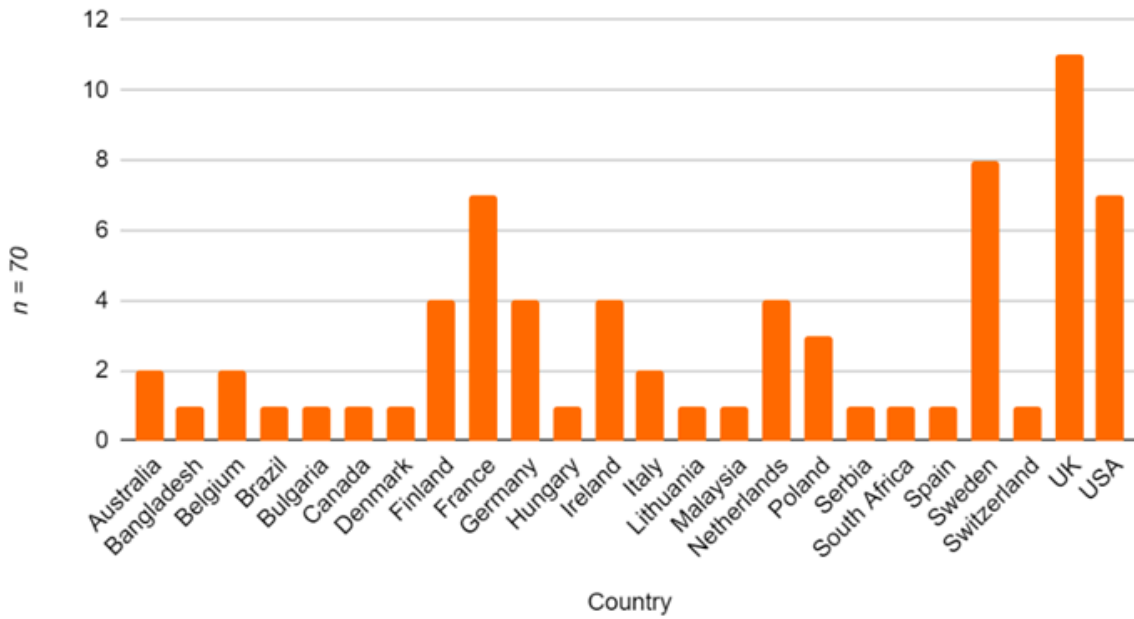


Figure 1 Survey question: In which country are you located?

The survey asked which discovery systems were in use and as illustrated on the figure below, the three most used systems are Ex Libris Primo, Ebsco Discover and WorldCat.

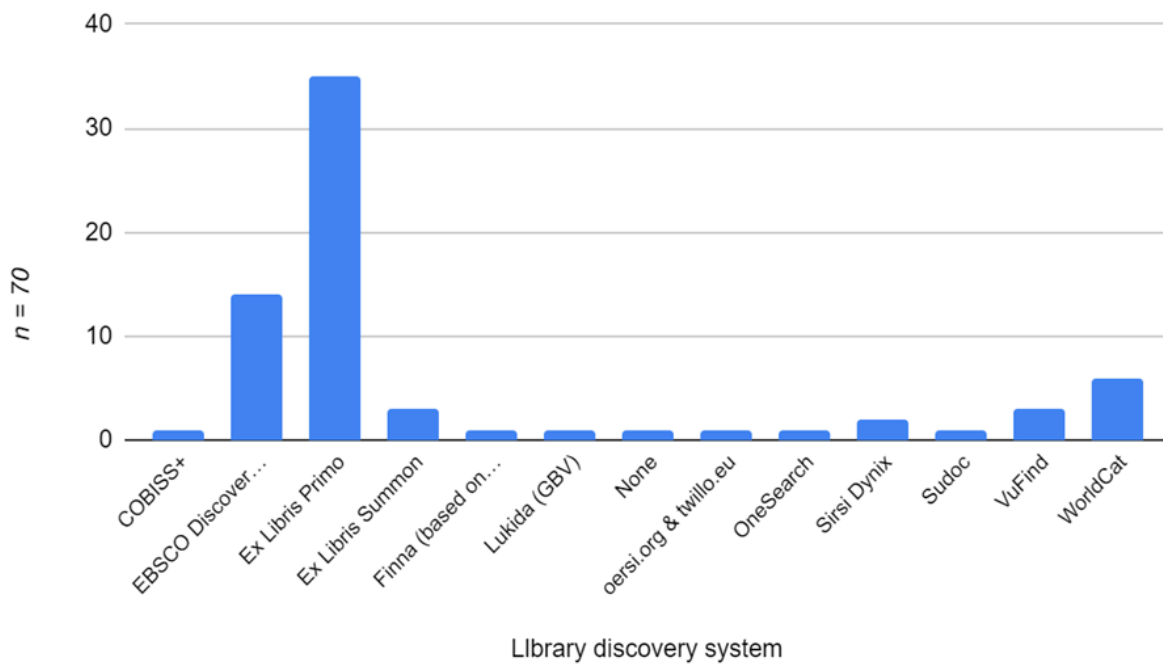


Figure 2 Survey question: Which library discovery system does your institution use?

Next, the survey asked whether libraries included open access and open educational resources within their discovery systems. We deliberately included this comparator question so that respondents would think about the detail of their open material – i.e. what was OER specifically in comparison to the broader ‘Open access’ label.

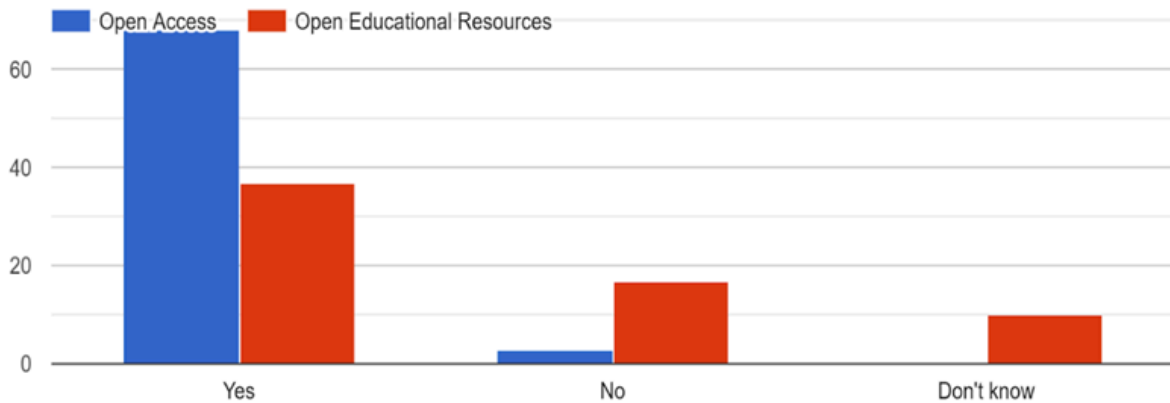


Figure 3 Survey question: Does your institution include open access material and / or open educational resources in your library discovery system?

We asked respondents to list the different types of open material included in their library discovery systems. Nearly all respondents (97%) listed books (including textbooks and monographs) and journal articles. Other formats listed included videos (22%), courseware (17%), lecture notes (14%), podcasts and audio (14%), and quizzes (6%). Some respondents indicated that other open content was discoverable via their systems such as digitised cultural heritage material, working papers, maps, conference papers, datasets, dissertations, images, and reports.

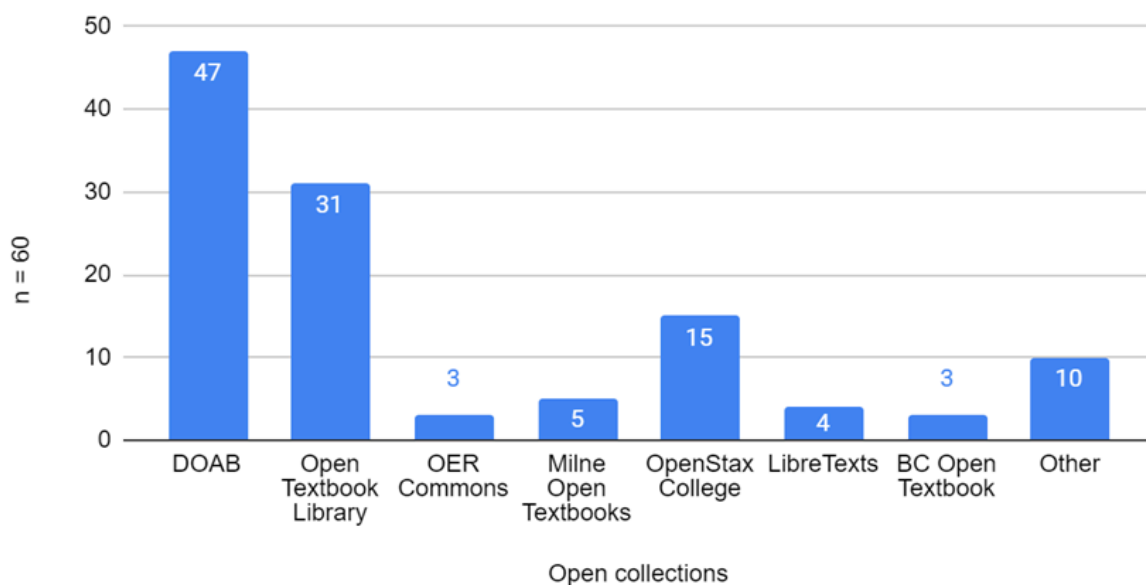


Figure 4 Survey question: Which, if any, open collections are discoverable in your library system (excluding journals and articles)?

Collections listed under 'other' include publisher collections (for example Brill Open Access Books, SpringerLink Open Access eBooks, T&F eBooks OA, Emerald OA Books), national OER repositories (such as <https://aoe.fi>), subject repositories (such as [www.econstor.eu](http://www.econstor.eu)), institutional repositories, and scholarly presses (for example MIT Press Direct to Open). Others indicated the ad hoc addition of titles.

Whilst many institutions appear to harvest and ingest book collections in their entirety (52%), a significant number (25%) are more selective, choosing to include material that is perhaps more aligned to their institution's discipline coverage. A further 13% expressed an interest in being able to be more selective over content, but commented that they were unsure how to make this possible.

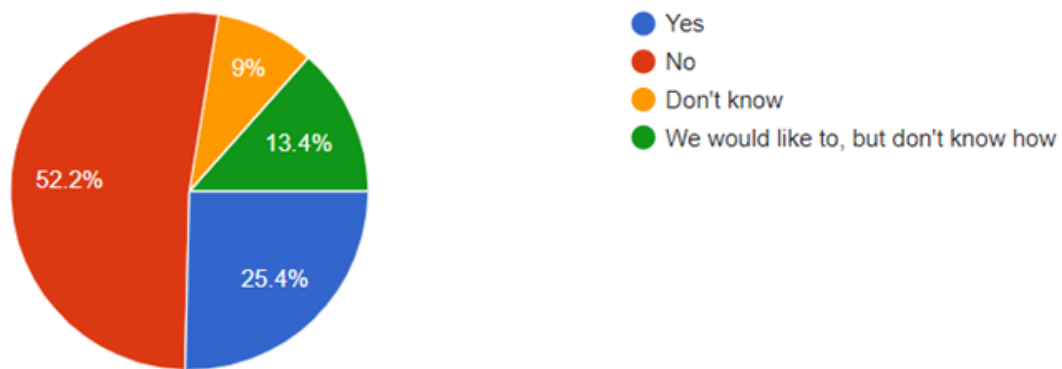


Figure 5 Survey question: Do you harvest/activate sub-collections of larger collections?

Other places from where OER records are harvested include MERLOT, AU Press, Europeana, YouTube, OCLC WorldShare, Institutional Repositories, OASIS (<https://oasis.geneseo.edu/>), Library of Open Educational Resources (<https://aoe.fi/>) and Open Educational Resources Search Index (<https://oersi.org/resources/>).

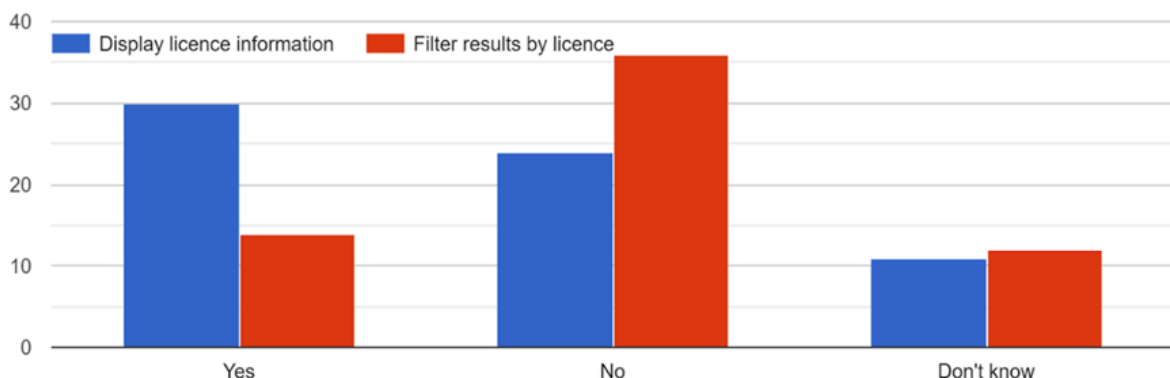


Figure 6 Survey question: Within your discovery system, is it possible to easily display the licence for any item and filter your results by licence?

We asked: “What challenges have you faced when trying to make open educational resources more visible to your users through your discovery system?” Many respondents cited poor or incomplete metadata as their primary challenge. This includes lack of clarity about licences. Staffing capacity was also mentioned - where MARC records are not available to be automatically harvested, extra staff time is required to make OER discoverable.

There was general agreement that discovery systems suppliers could improve the situation by improving OER metadata. This included making licence information more visible and creating a category or tag that could be used for filtering. Other suggestions included making more OER available in link resolver knowledge bases.

Language issues were commented on, both in terms of lack of OER availability in some languages and staff time required for dealing with foreign language material.

“OERs because of their less funded nature, lack the product placement, marketing, quality control and versioning/updating mechanisms, as well as the permanence of commercial content. This, including the lack of an additional supply chain (such as vendor provision of metadata and catalogue records), places barriers between their adoption, and fulfilment.”

We asked respondents for examples of institutions or library discovery system suppliers that have been successful in making OERs visible. Here are a few of the examples given:

<https://edusources.nl/>

<http://oersi.org>

[Finna.Fi](https://finna.fi)

<https://edshare.gcu.ac.uk/>

<https://www.x5gon.org/>

Discoverability is key to the successful adoption of open textbooks within higher education curricula, but advocacy is also very important. Libraries need to champion the use of open textbooks through a combination of advocacy and removal of as many barriers as possible. The LIBER Educational Resources Working Group reviewed some of the literature on this topic and found the research by Pitt et al particularly insightful.

“Engaging with individual educators and providing a multifaceted approach to supporting engagement with OER and/or OEP are key to innovating practice around curriculum provision and delivery”<sup>4</sup>

Advocacy needs to include highlighting successful open textbook use, including the advantages of repurposing to create teaching resources that meet pedagogical requirements. Open licensing is frequently not well understood. Good engagement needs to demystify licensing so that educators

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca (Beck) Pitt, Katy Jordan, Beatriz de los Arcos, Robert Farrow & Martin Weller (2020) Supporting open educational practices through open textbooks, *Distance Education*, 41:2, 303-318, DOI: 10.1080/01587919.2020.1757411

understand the flexibility of open textbooks. Pitt et al list “recommendation and familiarity” alongside “quality assurance” as key to successful adoption (p.314).

With universities in many countries increasingly trying to avoid ‘hidden costs’ for students, removing the need to purchase expensive textbooks has become a significant driver in adoption. Whilst there has been a trend towards institutional purchase of e-textbooks, with squeezed library budgets, this is becoming less palatable for some (and for many, it was never an option in the first place).

A study by Fischer<sup>5</sup> looked at the reasons for non-adoption of open textbooks. With preference for print and suspicion of quality being the top reasons, there is clearly much advocacy work to be done across the academic community.

Code	<i>n</i>	% of total responses
Prefer hardcopy of text	23	20.0%
Suspicious of quality	22	19.1%
Additional instructor resources	13	11.3%
Would first need to vet	9	7.8%
No suitable alternatives	8	7.0%
Like current textbook	8	7.0%
Time to adopt	7	6.1%
Did not respond	6	5.2%
Funding model concerns	6	5.2%
Other	13	11.3%

A recent SPARC report<sup>6</sup> also looked into the reasons for lack of engagement:

“Resistance to change is prevalent across institutions and the challenge of overcoming it to generate buy-in is a consistent theme. ‘Low adoption among educators’, ‘no buy-in at all from academic staff’ and ‘desire to work with traditional resources’ were cited as specific challenges” (SPARC 2023, p24)

In their discussion of the challenges faced by users, Mićunović, Rako and Feldvari (2023) outline the principal issues users encounter when looking for relevant and high-quality resources within the vast pool of OER. Not having enough time to conduct a thorough search was an important factor, combined with inadequate metadata, interoperability problems between platforms, functionality in search tools, and insufficient user search skills (p5). The article suggests that using the Schema.org metadata framework to improve searchability may provide a partial solution (p5). To enhance discoverability and reuse of OER, the authors suggest OER should comprise three elements: the content itself, good quality metadata, and supplementary material which makes clear the resource's structure. OER should then be hosted on platforms that comply with open access standards and feature Web 2.0 functionalities.

<sup>5</sup> Fischer, L. Open Praxis, vol. 12 issue 3, July–September 2020, pp. 399–415 (ISSN 2304-070X)

<sup>6</sup> Treadway, J., Corti, P., & Proudman, V. (2024). Open Education in European Libraries of Higher Education 2023. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10889503>

Pitt et al argue that open textbooks are an easy entry point to OER in North America because exchanging a traditional paid-for textbook for an open book is a straightforward and sensible concept for teachers to embrace. Not only do students often pay for their textbooks in the US but often degree programmes are designed around specific titles.

“Increases in open textbook use has been supported by the provision of materials aligned with the scope and sequence of a whole course such as OpenStax (<https://openstax.org>) and membership initiatives such as the Open Textbook Library (<https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/>).” (Pitt et al 2020, p305)

## Conclusion:

The Working Group suggests that, in order to make substantial progress in the provision of sustainable learning resources, a collaborative approach with academic staff, libraries, publishers, and platform developers is needed to enhance the discoverability, use and re-use of open textbooks. Open textbooks have an image problem and as such, a collaboration would assist the sector to build quality and reputation, remove barriers and improve ease of use. Further work would need to be done on improving literacy around licensing, both for creators of content and users of that content to enable the full potential of open textbooks to be realised. In the meantime there are steps each institution within the European higher education community and beyond can take:

- Use our communication channels and user groups to influence and lobby discovery system suppliers to make licensing information clearer and more visible. This includes the ability to search and filter by licence type. As shown in the Working Group’s survey results, many libraries are using the same systems and if we work as a community, this should be achievable. If you are an Ex Libris institution [use your vote to support this idea](#).
- Work with Open Access book platforms, indexers and providers to find the optimal ways for open textbooks to be included and made discoverable. Particularly thinking about inclusion criteria for open textbooks that are more non-traditional in nature and format, such as Open Educational Resources.
- Consider what open content is available within our own institution’s discovery system. How do we decide what to include? What criteria do we base your decisions on?
- As a library community, how can we support the development of open textbooks in languages other than English? Let the Working Group know about any non-English open textbook collections.

As Fischer et al conclude:

“faculty and librarians’ shared desire for quality education and social justice intersect well in the use of OER” (Fischer et al 2020, p410).

## References:

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■ Good practice with OER survey October to November 2023