Could library book budgets be used to fund open access monographs?¹

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Could you use library book budgets to fund open access monographs? This was a question raised some people at the recent Critical Issues in Open Access event at Goldsmith University. Steven Hill from Research England responded to one of these comments by saying the classic policy answer would be to have a matched funding scheme for a set period. This suggested that policy makers have thought about this model, even if it is not the route they would go down in the end.

Ideas for re-purposing library budgets for open access have been floating round for some time, primarily from people who want to move away from article-processing charges (APCs). The consortia led-model for open access journals is built on a version of this idea e.g. as used by Open Library of Humanities.² The model, recently proposed by Martin Eve, to transition learned society journals to open access also works this way.³

It is noticeable that, when it comes to books, library colleagues can be more sceptical about this approach. Why is this? Perhaps the controversy around Knowledge Unlatched (which uses consortia funding) has had a negative effect.⁴ But I suspect the day-to-day realities of managing budgets is more influential. Whilst it is true that university library books budgets are relatively more flexible than the journals budget (as they are less tied up with long-term subscriptions), this is not the way it appears to librarians on the ground. To them there is never enough money every year to satisfy demand. Whilst some of this financial pressure undoubtedly comes from the price of academic books (an issue open access is trying to solve) and the total budget available, as important is how the budget is apportioned and what kind of books it is being used to buy.

There is no single sector model here, but ‘demand-led acquisitions’ has been very influential.⁵ For teaching-focused university libraries, that demand primarily comes from undergraduate reading lists. Monographs and edited collection are purchased through this route, but so are textbooks, surveys, novels etc. It is worth remembering that the largest cohorts of students are generally in law, medicine, and business, which are orientated as much to professional

¹ This is my personal reflection, and not an official position of the University Library.
practitioners as they are to academic research. Some of the materials and publishers do not easily fit under the heading ‘academic book’. As Michael Jubb noted, “we have no comprehensive data on which kinds of books—text-books, course readers, and so on as well as monographs—are being used and in which subject areas”.

There is also a question around heritage disciplines like archaeology or museum studies. In these areas, non-HE bodies are important players (indeed probably more so than the AHRC). Librarians might ask: why are we bearing the cost of making British archaeology books open access: shouldn’t Historic England be taking responsibility for this? There is a general problem then, of deciding which ‘bit’ of the budget is for monographs that fall clearly under the UKRI remit.

You may also end up funding the production of a book that is not relevant for your collections. Re-purposing journals subscription is easier to model because it is established that the library wants long-term access to that title. You only know that you want a book until it has been published and a reader requests it. If a re-purposed book budget ended up in a general fund for open access book publishers, it may meet the objection that a library was funding the production of books it would not otherwise have wanted to acquire.

Then there is a long-term consequence of the shift to eBooks. Some libraries have gone heavily down this route for a variety of reasons. There are several ways of purchasing (or obtaining access) to eBooks for academic libraries, but with providers like Ebook Central the ‘platform capitalism’ that several speakers at Goldsmiths warned against is already here. Extracting some library’s spending and collections from this could be hard.

There is discretionary spending that could be re-purposed, but it may be less than people think. And it will be hard to convince library directors on the ground that they should have less money to immediately satisfy student demand in the era of the NSS. For this model to work, a greater realism about how libraries buy books and why is needed.

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6 Ibid., p.65.