

## **Getting started with RNIB Bookshare: challenges and opportunities**

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### **Background – before RNIB Bookshare**

In Library Services at London Metropolitan University responsibility for supporting various aspects of accessibility lies with the Academic Liaison Librarians (ALLs), Reader Services Managers, Senior Library Assistants, Duty Librarians and others across the service. However, when we started using RNIB Bookshare in the latter part of 2016, I became the Primary Contact for our institution, assuming the responsibilities concerned with obtaining accessible books for eligible students.

Until then I had experienced the frustration that many of us have, of applying directly to publishers for accessible copies of books and waiting for responses, sometimes with a negative outcome. At that time, I experienced some of the barriers that someone with a visual disability can experience on a daily basis and raised this with our Head of Library Resources and E-Strategy.

Requests for accessible versions of books were occasional and so we did not have much in the way of formal procedures in place. Naturally, when we started to use Bookshare and to publicise the service to our students, this needed to change.

Back then, there was some collaboration between the Library Services and the Disabilities and Dyslexia Service (DDS): The Reader Services Managers, Senior Library Assistants or Duty Librarians, would see the Individual Needs Assessment Reports (INARs) for students, which would indicate if longer book loans and book fetching services were required. Their Library accounts would then have a code or a note to provide these services.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

Initially, it was necessary to teach myself how to use Bookshare and to train the rest of the ALLs and the Disabilities and Dyslexia Advisors, so that the workload would be spread across both teams and multiple entry points would be available to students, should we reach a point where high numbers of students were requiring access. Library Services reached out to the Head of DDS and we began to have meetings to discuss how the two services could work more closely and better serve our students. In December 2017 we arranged more formal training for the ALLs and Disabilities and Dyslexia Advisors with Stacy and her colleague from RNIB, who kindly visited us for a day.

Despite Bookshare being fairly easy to learn to use, this training was absolutely invaluable, as there are always things one fails to discover on one's own. It also highlighted the need for more extensive written procedures and recording mechanisms to be in place. Following this, we jointly worked on a new procedures document, and a spreadsheet was created for recording any requests that we made on behalf of students, either via Bookshare or directly to publishers. Both of these documents were shared with all DDS Advisors and ALLs. However, there was much work still to be done on the administration side of things, especially following the implementation of GDPR.

### **Outcomes: progress to date**

We've now reached the stage where our admin and procedures are robust, though of course we are learning more all the time. Here's a summary of what we now have in place:

A recording spreadsheet; a copyright declaration template for when we request books from publishers and pass them on to the students; folders for storing book files, when not specifically told to destroy them; publisher request and declaration form templates; completed publisher request and declaration forms; and our own completed copyright declaration forms. Anything containing student details is deleted every 3 years, the length of many of the undergraduate degrees and sensible for GDPR. File naming conventions are in place so that everything is consistent and easy to find. Procedures are also in place to ensure student anonymity when being added as members of Bookshare, whilst allowing for identification by us to check enrollment status and remove any students who have graduated or left. Enrollment status of Bookshare members is checked twice per year. An anonymised version of the Bookshare downloads report is produced on a monthly basis and circulated to DDS and Library Services senior staff as well as the ALL team, along with a summary of how many of the student members have been making the downloads.

Following further training sessions for new and existing staff, and the questions that have arisen as a result, the procedures document has been further updated for clarity with an accompanying mind map, which better lends itself to the 'if this, then that' nature of what to do when students first request an accessible version of a book.

Library Services and the Disabilities and Dyslexia Service now have much closer ties. As a matter of course, any new DDS member of staff meets an ALL and the Reader Services Manager at Holloway Road as part of their induction. This is followed by training on Bookshare and the procedures and files involved. This has allowed further collaboration and changes that benefit our students. For instance, DDS Advisors have arranged for individual personalised library tours/inductions on behalf of students who would particularly benefit from this with their ALLs.

More eligible students are being told about Bookshare and added as student members by DDS Advisors. Initially, we went with a soft launch, and only had two or three student members on Bookshare. But now, with publicity via Library Services web pages, ALLs and DDS Advisors (this last being the most crucial), there are 38 student members as at 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, and this keeps growing. DDS Advisors are also now more likely to recommend Bookshare on an eligible student's INAR, which will then be brought to the attention of the relevant ALL.

Whilst the work involved is always ongoing, with reminders and refresher training for staff, occasional updates to procedures, and general administration, it is now much more manageable and a great deal smoother than in the earlier stages.

For anyone starting out on this journey from a similar position, evidence so far at London Metropolitan University shows that collaboration between relevant services and departments is crucial to the growth and improvement of both the service and of any procedures and policies to be developed. Alongside that, expert training from RNIB and drawing upon expertise of colleagues within and without your own institution is also really important. Attendance of the regular meetings of the Library Champions for Disability Access group has been very helpful in expanding knowledge of accessibility issues and tools.

Whilst there has been a lot of work involved, the positive outcomes of a better service for students, clearer procedures, well-informed staff, and increased communication and collaboration between departments have been well worth it.