

# The Challenges of Textbook Access at Chinese Transnational Universities

Congjin Ran, Le Yang, and Qianyu Jin

**abstract:** Unlike students in traditional Chinese universities using textbooks published in China, students in transnational universities face unresolved issues in the acquisition and distribution of imported English language textbooks. The challenges, which have persisted for over a decade, include delays in delivery caused by international shipment, fluctuation of currency exchange rates, the uncertainty of customs clearance, the financial burden of unclaimed inventory, and the increasing price of textbooks. The practice and success of the open educational resources (OER) movement, which seeks to make learning materials freely available online for everyone to use, provided inspiring ideas to librarians struggling with textbook acquisitions at transnational universities. This article explains the textbook difficulties that are commonly faced by the community of transnational universities and how librarians integrated OER to improve student access to course books at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, a city near the east coast of China. The study aims to present best practices for peer institutions on the use of OER textbooks from the perspective of transnational university academic libraries.

## Introduction

Transnational universities are higher education programs initiated by the Ministry of Education of China that are cooperative on three different levels: the university level, which is an independent campus in China; the institute level, which is project-based within a traditional China-based university; and the degree level, which refers to joint degree programs between China and foreign campuses.<sup>1</sup> There are currently nine transnational universities that hold independent legal status in China. Three are Sino-American universities jointly operated by U.S. and Chinese entities: Duke Kunshan University in Suzhou, formed by Wuhan University in Wuhan and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; New York University (NYU) Shanghai, created by East China Normal University in Shanghai and NYU; and Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU) in Wenzhou, initiated by Wenzhou University and Kean University in Union and Hillside, New Jersey. The three universities adopted English as their principal teaching language,

supported by curricula designed by their parent universities in the United States and supplemented with textbooks and other English language educational resources. The transnational Sino-American universities have brought American higher education to both Chinese and international students, but some local issues have remained challenging, including access to English language textbooks.

The acquisition and distribution model for textbooks in higher education institutions in China differs from that in the United States. Unlike U.S. academic libraries, their transnational counterparts in China lack built-in systems of textbook purchase and allocation, functions usually handled by campus bookstores in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, transnational academic libraries in China have attempted to find a sustainable solution to permanently resolve the complex issues involved in textbook acquisition. The hurdles include international shipment, fluctuation of currency exchange rates, customs clearance, licensed importing agencies, and more. However, little progress has been made after discussions with publishers and importing distributors because they cannot effectively predict or control the uncertainty of these issues. As a result, the WKU librarians have begun to seek alternative solutions.

This paper explains the problematic situation of textbook acquisition and distribution that a Sino-American university faces, introduces OER strategy as a solution to resolve the issues, and describes how the WKU Library implemented the services and resources to re-strategize textbook initiatives for the university. The paper presents best practices for other transnational universities or joint degree programs in traditional universities, as well as for other jointly operated programs that may encounter similar issues.

### OER Textbook Acquisitions: Background and Issues

Open educational resources (OER) have been created to respond to the increasing cost of textbooks and proposed as a means of ensuring equal access to higher education resources for diverse student populations.<sup>3</sup> Academic libraries and librarians have played progressive roles in pushing forward OER by collecting resources, developing repositories, teaching workshops, and presenting a range of OER services. OER strategy, not yet broadly practiced in transnational universities in China,<sup>4</sup> may offer a possible solution to academic libraries struggling with international textbook issues.

UNESCO first introduced the term *open educational resources* in an educational forum in 2002, then expanded it as a global movement.<sup>5</sup> There are different definitions of OER, but the localized frameworks of OER usually meet the objective set by the UNESCO definition, which, in short, makes all sharable formats of educational materials legally free to use and distribute.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the *Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition* (SPARC), an alliance of academic and research libraries promoting open scholarly communication, introduced the “5R” principles of open education. For learning resources to be considered open, users must be free to perform the 5Rs—that is, to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute the materials.<sup>7</sup> These attributes of OER materials are made possible with protection by another nonprofit organization, Creative Commons, which provides the legal infrastructure for the communication and sharing of creative works.<sup>8</sup>

Since their emergence, OER have become a serious consideration among higher education institutions, and the movement has been adopted by many countries. Among



its advocates are the Open Education Working Group, a community of educators and others who support open education,<sup>9</sup> and the OER World Map, a website where people interested in OER can share information and ideas.<sup>10</sup>

OER began in North America,<sup>11</sup> but Bruce Massis notes that they have spread widely in Africa and Europe, led by nonprofit organizations that play critical roles in supporting student success in higher education.<sup>12</sup> India made the vital step to promote its own OER initiative, requiring authors to adopt the most permissive licenses when they submit their creative works to Creative Commons.<sup>13</sup>

According to Chris Bober, OER were created due to the increasing cost of higher education and course materials, reflecting a resolution to ensure equal access to higher education for all students.<sup>14</sup> As noted by Joseph Salem,<sup>15</sup> the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that textbook prices rose by 1041 percent from 1977 to 2015—more than triple the inflation rate. During the same period, college tuition rose 778 percent—double the inflation rate.<sup>16</sup> Studies by the team of Kristine Alpi, William Cross, Greg Raschke, and Madison Sullivan and by that of April Hines, Stacey Ewing, Colleen Seale, and Melissa Clapp pointed out that, within the recent decade, textbook prices increased by 82 percent, three times the rate of increase in overall consumer prices.<sup>17</sup> The cost of textbooks has reached \$1,300 per year on average for a student.<sup>18</sup>

Federal and state governments in the United States have made efforts to reduce the cost of textbooks by expanding the use of open resources for over a decade.<sup>19</sup> Many academic librarians took the lead in this effort through different means, such as developing technological systems,<sup>20</sup> forming resource-sharing consortia,<sup>21</sup> contributing content to repositories,<sup>22</sup> and providing services to support OER events and programs.<sup>23</sup> In his book *Affordable Course Materials*, Chris Diaz collects successful case studies of nine major research university libraries that supported OER on their campuses, presenting the best practices from different environments with different needs.<sup>24</sup>

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### The OER Initiative in China

China began to promote OER as early as 2003 through different efforts made by governments and higher education institutions. The Chinese Ministry of Education launched three projects called the Chinese Quality Course, the Provincial Quality Course, and the School Quality Course. The three projects developed hundreds of online video classes and made them available to the public via MOOC (massive open online courses) platforms.<sup>25</sup> These initiatives provided significant online learning resources to students; however, studies also revealed that they were used as supplementary learning resources



for individual interests instead of as a formal curriculum in Chinese higher education.<sup>26</sup> Significant challenges that hinder the use of OERs in China include infringements of intellectual property,<sup>27</sup> unfriendly user interface design,<sup>28</sup> lack of recognition for the value of OER,<sup>29</sup> inconsistent content quality,<sup>30</sup> and unsustainable budgeting for OER resources.<sup>31</sup>

The literature also reveals that the OER initiative in China mainly focuses on video recordings and sharing of class lectures in Chinese,<sup>32</sup> not on providing access to international textbooks. Why is this happening? Traditional universities in China typically adopt Chinese textbooks. Further, the cost of books for university students is mostly subsidized by the central, provincial, or prefecture-level governments, but this model cannot apply to Chinese transnational universities. Therefore, the success of the OER movement to address textbook issues has special relevance for transnational universities.

### Providing Textbooks to Students at Transnational Universities

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of a useful bookstore distribution model, the process of importing, the uncertainty of international shipping, and the layers of approval and clearance required by Chinese customs regulations.<sup>33</sup> This complexity of textbook issues often delays delivery several weeks into the semester, while instructors and students must

use alternative reading materials while waiting for their books. To resolve the issue, the NYU Shanghai Library tried different methods, including utilizing its general collection budget to purchase needed textbooks, librarian collaboration with faculty in textbook selection, course reserves to set aside books for student use, and offering library-licensed e-books. According to Michael Hughes, however, librarians at NYU Shanghai hoped that OER adoption would further alleviate complications in providing print textbooks.<sup>34</sup>

Similar situations have occurred at WKU. WKU is the only public transnational university that offers affordable tuition, allowing a diversity of students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll. The price of imported print textbooks is a critical consideration, especially considering the fluctuation of the currency exchange rate. After some students' comments about textbook costs reached the administration and after negotiation between the school and the student association, starting in 2015, WKU required students to purchase textbooks only in their first (fall) semester. The university made textbook buying optional for the other semesters throughout the students' four-year studies. Permitting students to opt out of textbooks resulted in a reduction of textbook usage even though teaching faculty listed the books as required in the syllabus.

As illustrated by Figure 1, the number of enrolled students at WKU has steadily increased, but the number of textbook orders has dropped for the last three years since 2015, when students were no longer mandated to purchase textbooks. The increase of student numbers and the decrease of textbook orders indicates students' reluctance to purchase books.

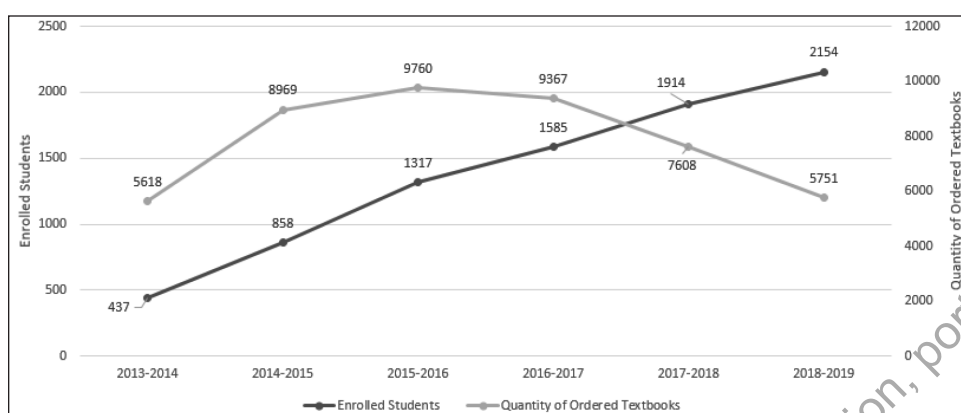


Figure 1. The trend in student enrollment compared to the trend in textbook orders at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.

Figure 2 presents that, although the number of textbook orders has decreased, the average price of textbooks purchased by WKU students has climbed. The slope between 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 signifies a 38 percent increase in textbook prices within a year. The rapid increase in costs may be another reason why students chose to abandon expensive books once they could do so.

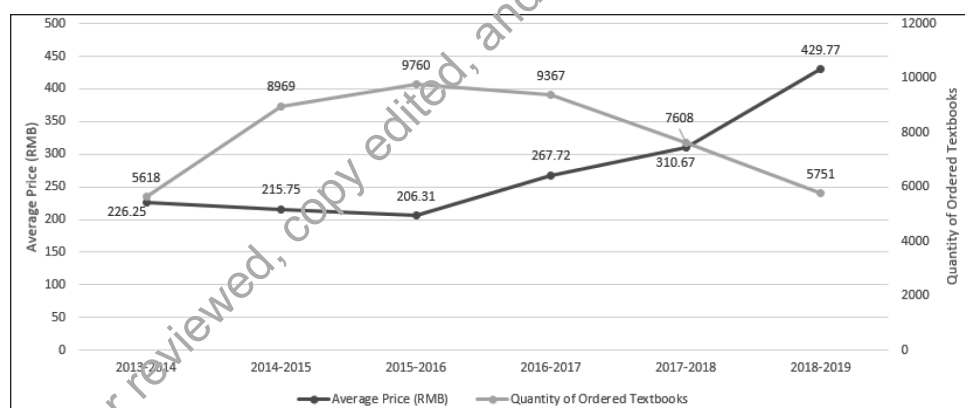


Figure 2. The trend in textbook prices compared to that for textbook orders in RMB (renminbi), China's currency, at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.

Figure 3 discloses another interesting phenomenon, suggesting that the book vendors seemingly have tried to make up for their loss of profits by raising prices. The trend of total textbook expenditures grew while orders declined. For example, WKU students purchased 393 fewer books in 2016–2017 than in 2015–2016, but the total expenditures increased by RMB half a million yuan or about \$70,000 in U.S. dollars; RMB (renminbi) is China's official currency. The enlarged area between the two lines implied a worse situation between 2017–2018 and 2018–2019; that is, students purchased 1,857 fewer books but spent 110,000 more yuan.

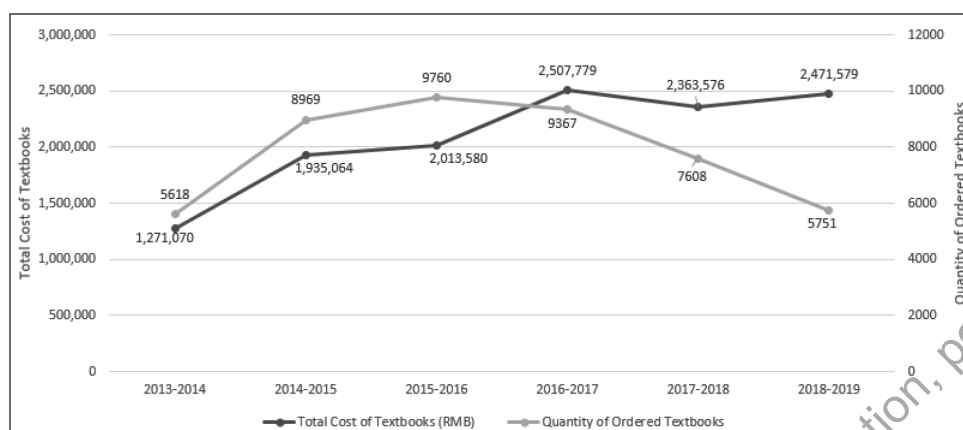


Figure 3. The trend in total textbook costs compared to that for textbook orders in RMB (renminbi), China's currency, at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.

Because of the textbook data presented, WKU administration and the library are concerned that students might choose to save money on course materials at the cost of academic performance. Among all independent transnational universities, WKU is the only public institution offering affordable American-standard higher education to a broad population in China.

Due to the uncertainty of international shipment and customs clearance of the imported textbooks, the WKU Library, Office of the Registrar, Office of Academic Affairs, and all colleges must work together on textbook selection. Furthermore, the university must order as early as five months before the semester starts based on the planned enrollment number of first-year students. The university fully covers the cost of textbook orders before the students are officially enrolled. However, when some admitted students fail to show up for registration, the unclaimed textbooks are added to a growing inventory, the expense of which becomes a burden for the university (see Figure 4). After six years of operation, the inventory of unclaimed textbooks reached 4,111 volumes with a total cost of RMB 1.4 million yuan, which is 10.73 percent of the total expense of textbooks. Worse, because WKU is a public-funded institution, the inventory of unclaimed textbooks becomes fixed public assets that are difficult, if not impossible, to handle. The need to reduce the number of unclaimed textbooks and minimize the financial burden of these materials remains urgent and critical.

Other studies have also found a decrease in student textbook expenditures. Phil Hill observed a declining average student expenditure on textbooks from 2007–2008 to 2014–2015 in the United States, even though the textbook prices rose within the same period. The most recent report shows another spending drop for 2018–2019.<sup>35</sup> Although some factors, such as textbook rentals, electronic textbooks, and online used textbook acquisition, can contribute to this trend, many students have simply decided not to purchase the required course materials because of the high cost.<sup>36</sup> Florida Virtual Campus, which provides distance learning, academic advising, and library services to public colleges and universities throughout the state, surveyed over 22,000 students and found that 64 percent of respondents do not purchase required textbooks because of the



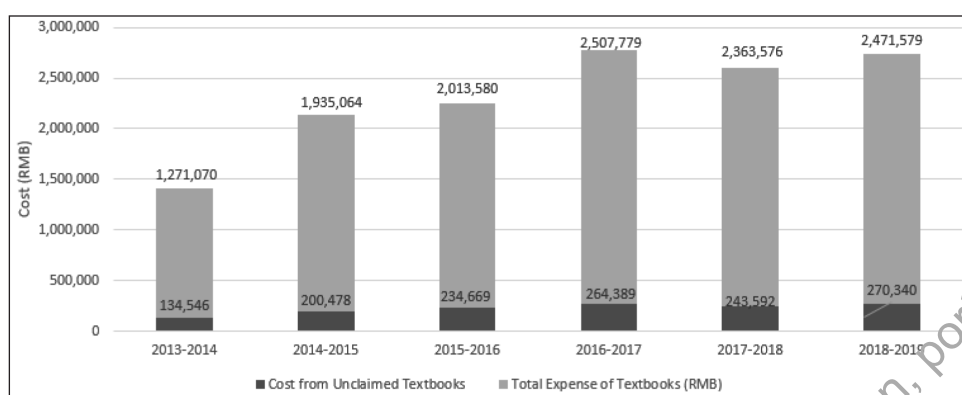


Figure 4. The yearly cost of unclaimed textbooks compared to the total yearly cost of textbooks in RMB (renminbi), China's currency, at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.

expense.<sup>37</sup> Young Mi Choi and Cathy Carpenter reported that 94 percent of those who made this decision were aware of the possible negative impact on their final grades.<sup>38</sup> A report from the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), a consumer advocacy group, confirmed this possibility, stating that more than 10 percent of students fail a course for this reason.<sup>39</sup>

### Strategies to Address Textbook Needs

Academic libraries have played a critical role in the OER movement because the existing infrastructures in technology (discovery systems), knowledge (information seeking and open access publishing), service models (collection of subject-specific information), and personnel (teaching and subject liaisons) have well prepared academic libraries for this paradigm shift in teaching and learning.<sup>40</sup> The WKU Library integrates local realities with the existing solutions, generating proposals for the administration and striving to re-strategize and implement the textbook program for the university. Its solutions include the following.

#### Solution 1: Establishment of Fixed Procedure and Policy

The library has worked with the Offices of Academic Affairs, Logistics, and Finance; the Office of the Registrar; and four independent colleges to develop an agreed and overarching procedure. The agreement requires strict deadlines and customizing options for the two long semesters and two short sessions each academic year. The library has also developed a general textbook policy to govern all students, adapting to the varied requirements and needs for first-year students and others.

In the policy, the WKU Library requires the adoption of e-books for the winter session, spring semester, and summer sessions because of the lengthy process in acquiring print textbooks. For the fall semester, when first-year students are required to purchase print textbooks, the policy allows both print and electronic books but requires a 4-month notice for architecture and design courses and a 3.5-month notice for other disciplines if the faculty wish to order print books. The policy also states that students are responsible



for their orders even if they drop or change courses during the semester, while the school pays for the redundant or unclaimed orders caused by failures to enroll.

Approved in July 2019, the policy offers a transparent and standardized procedure that all stakeholders can follow, which has eased the challenges of textbook acquisition. Since the policy's adoption, the number of redundant textbooks has decreased, and the financial waste of unclaimed textbooks has declined. The library tallied the inventory of unclaimed textbooks and proposed the compiled list to each college for possible reuse, worth RMB 1.4 million yuan.

### **Solution 2: OER Outreach Programs**

The parent institution of WKU, Kean University, is in New Jersey, where an enacted bill approved in May 2019 requires institutions of higher education to develop and submit open textbook plans to the secretary of higher education.<sup>41</sup> Because of the bill, the academic librarians at Kean University developed a central OER information portal to aid the campus initiative, offering useful information and resources about OER. The portal also publicizes a list of 85 courses in fall 2019 that utilize OER materials entirely or partially. The WKU Library and the Office of Academic Affairs encourage faculty who teach online or in person to adopt OER materials as well.

WKU librarians are usually invited to conduct presentations and workshops at orientations for new faculty. In the orientation sessions, in addition to introducing the faculty to library resources and policies, librarians familiarize them with the procedure of importing textbooks. Librarians explain the necessity of adopting OER in classes because of the unique situation at transnational universities. Librarians have also encouraged the WKU faculty who serve on search committees to deliver such information during the interviews, planting seeds of OER in prospective WKU professors.

### **Solution 3: Collecting of Resources and Alternatives**

Based on the resources collected by librarians at the parent campus,<sup>42</sup> WKU librarians compiled a list of OER databases and portals, sharing them in faculty workshops and presentations. The list includes direct OER repositories such as OpenStax, Open Textbook Library, Open SUNY (State University of New York), and the Orange Grove; generic search engines such as DOAB (Directory of Open Access Books), Internet Archive, Creative Commons Search, OER Commons, and Merlot (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-Line Teaching); as well as MOOC resources such as open courseware programs from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Massachusetts.

The WKU Library has also implemented a new acquisition strategy starting in the new fiscal year to combine subscription-based access with patron-driven acquisition (PDA) modes within an e-book database, so that e-book availability can be extended to fulfill textbook needs. Subject librarians have also reached out to help the faculty with checking e-book availability when they design curricula. To maximize this effort, the library has requested enough access tokens, a type of encrypted access code, within publishing contracts so that the subject librarians can use the tokens to help provide access to needed e-books.





## Conclusion

Since the adoption of the OER policy at WKU, the subject librarians have been visited more often by faculty when they are considering textbooks and educational resources for their courses in the coming semester. Watching over the overall resource budget and comparing the expenditures saved from the students' end, the WKU Library is considering requesting an additional budget for an OER campaign in the coming year, just as many universities have done in the United States. If approved, the OER-specific budget could be used for training librarians, providing additional introductory workshops to instructors, producing online tutorials, conducting assessments on courses and student achievement, and rewarding OER activities via seed grants. In the meantime, the WKU Library will continue to collect open access resources to enrich the OER offerings and will negotiate better access packages from publishers, providing more electronic alternatives to the teaching faculty.

In conclusion, transnational universities need OER because of the complex process of acquiring print textbooks. Higher education institutions and organizations abroad, primarily those in the United States and Europe, have made steady progress in implementing OER within their curricula. WKU Library endeavors to integrate different solutions, learning from both the best practices and practical experience of other institutions, to re-strategize the textbook programs for this public-funded Sino-American university. The library strives to find the best way for the diverse student population to save money without sacrificing academic success.

The WKU Library hopes to propose this OER strategy to the other eight independent transnational universities who are in similar need of OER, then gradually develop a consortial effort that brings more benefits to the students and the schools. The WKU Library will assess the OER strategy in the coming semesters by collecting statistical data, evaluating student performance, and interviewing the teaching faculty. Further studies and assessment results from the transnational universities and their libraries can enrich the literature in the field of open education resources.

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**Librarians explain the necessity of adopting OER in classes because of the unique situation at transnational universities.**

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*Congjin Ran is a professor in the School of Information Management at Wuhan University in Wuhan, China.*

*Le Yang is an associate librarian in the University Library at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China, and a doctoral student in the School of Information Management at Wuhan University in Wuhan, China; he may be reached by e-mail at: yanglegd@gmail.com.*

*Qianyu Jin is a textbook acquisition specialist in the University Library at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.*



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