



# Enhancing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) in Open Textbook Publishing: The Development of a Guide

**INNOVATIVE  
PRACTICE ARTICLE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While open textbooks offer opportunities to enhance inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA), it is often seen as an afterthought in open textbook publishing processes. By examining existing literature, this paper dispels myths surrounding open textbooks and IDEA, including that openness does not equal inclusion, access or accessibility. This paper then explores issues of authoring privilege in open textbook publishing, before reviewing the diversity and inclusivity of open textbooks published at a regional Australian university. Using cultural relevance reviews from the Open Textbook Library, common themes emerged concerning IDEA in open textbook publishing. To address these themes, this paper then presents a case study, of how a librarian adapted a framework and created a guide on Enhancing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) in Open Educational Resources (OER), to develop staff awareness and capability when creating open textbooks. The paper ends by discussing the development of the guide and reviewing the limitations and impact of the guide.

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Concerted efforts are being directed towards the diversification and inclusivity of open textbooks in higher education. Open textbooks are an open educational resource (OER), created and published in a way that allows anyone to freely access, (re)use and share the text. Open textbooks are released under an open licence, which gives users free and perpetual permission to engage in what is known as the 5R activities – retain, reuse, revise, remix and redistribute (Wiley, n.d). There is a significant gap in the literature regarding open textbook publishing, and the labour and process in ensuring that open textbooks are accessible, diverse, and inclusive. Scholarship on OER, equity and social justice is limited and vague due to the ‘plethora of topics covered by research subjects like open, as well as actual scarcity of scholarly content on the social justice potentials of OER,’ (Lambert, 2018). Most of the literature focuses on how open textbooks benefit students academically and financially (Hilton & Laman, 2012; Jhangiani et al., 2018; Clinton & Khan, 2019; Engler & Schedlosky-Shoemaker, 2019; Oelfke, 2021). Lambert (2018, p. 227) calls this redistributive justice, a social justice principle that ‘reduces the costs and increases the chances of success for learners who by circumstance have less [and] are marginalised in education, workplaces and more broadly in society.’

In Australia, open practitioners often focus on reducing textbook costs since Australian student poverty causes one in seven students to regularly miss meals (Universities Australia, 2018), increases mental health issues (ACOSS, 2019), reduces housing stability (Morris, Hastings & Ramia, 2021), and limits access to essential health services (ACOSS, 2019). Although important, access and affordability are only two issues surrounding the equity and inclusivity of textbooks.

This paper explores the access barriers, representational issues, and matters of authoring privilege in open textbook publishing, before reviewing the diversity and inclusivity of open textbooks published at a regional Australian university. This paper then presents a case study, of how a librarian at an Australian regional university adapted a framework and created a guide on enhancing inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA) in OER, to develop staff awareness and capability when creating inclusive open textbooks.

## LITERATURE

Content branded as ‘open access’ or ‘freely available’ may give the impression that open textbooks or other OER are universally accessible (Andersen, 2022). However, many users still face barriers to access and inclusion such as technological barriers, representational issues, or issues of authoring privilege.

### OPEN DOES NOT ALWAYS EQUAL ACCESS OR ACCESSIBILITY

It is a myth that open textbooks are automatically accessible. Johnson & Abumeeiz (2023, p. 5) acknowledge that the open access and open education movement often use the terms access and accessibility interchangeably, and in doing so have ‘inevitably reproduced and enshrined paradigms of inaccessibility.’ Suber (2004) states that even after open access status has been achieved, four kinds of access barriers might remain: filtering and censorship barriers; language barriers; barriers for people with a disability, and connectivity barriers.

The myth that open textbooks are universally accessible marginalises the needs of people with a disability who may struggle to use the internet because of inaccessible design. OER—and the platforms that host them often lack accessibility for disabled learners (Rodríguez et al., 2017; Moreno et. al., 2018; Navarrete & Luján-Mora, 2018), with Zhang et al. (2020) acknowledging that OER accessibility is still in its infancy. A study that evaluated 350 open textbooks against a rubric based on the World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Accessibility Content Guidelines (WCAG), version 2.1 found that the majority of open textbooks failed to adhere to accessibility practices such as providing alternative descriptive text for any images, properly formatting tables, and appropriately using headings (Azadbakht et al., 2021).

Although there is some scholarship on OER accessibility, there is a gap in the research on assistive technologies and the usability of open textbooks with screen reading devices. Additionally, Weber and Skyer (2022) found that OER is ‘inefficiently accessible’ for Deaf education. The myth that open automatically equals access or accessibility does not hold those who oversee open

textbook publishing in their institutions accountable for undertaking accessibility and usability testing in their processes.

Additionally, beyond the disability space, the myth that open textbooks are accessible also marginalises people with poor internet connectivity, and people who speak and read English as a second language (Willems & Bossu, 2012). Barber (2023) acknowledges that true accessibility is more than technological access. It includes ‘analysing all types of barriers to educational materials, such as cost, Internet access, learning design, multimodal format availability, language, cultural representation, and digital literacy,’ (Barber, 2023).

## OPEN DOES NOT EQUAL INCLUSION

Additionally, open does not equal inclusion. A key part of creating inclusive open textbooks is authentic, diverse representation. As the saying goes “You can’t be what you can’t see,” meaning students who do not see themselves represented are more likely to feel like they don’t belong in a course and are less likely to pursue careers in that domain (Nusbaum, 2020; Hollich, 2022). Research also found that representation affects the comprehension of content in textbooks. Good et al. (2010) found that women who read chemistry textbooks with images of women scientists were able to better comprehend the material than women who read text where the images were of male scientists. These findings suggest the diverse representation of professionals in textbooks enhances the number of marginalised students pursuing careers in these fields and increases their knowledge in the discipline. Despite this research, western, white, male, cisgender and abled perspectives are often centered in academic learning resources, and diverse perspectives and experiences are often presented as ‘other’ or as deficits (Nusbaum, 2020; Lambert & Fadel, 2022). This is reinforced by Barber (2023) who states ‘traditional textbook publishing magnifies some voices while silencing others, pushing consistently marginalised groups into the education exclusion zone.’ However, Johnson & Abumeeiz (2023) argue that racism, ableism, capitalism and sexism are interacting forces that also impact open textbook development, not merely traditional publishing.

While open textbooks are branded as a solution for social justice, one that can solve the equity issues in the textbook market, there is no evidence that open textbooks are any better than commercial textbooks at addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Mishra, 2017), even though they are more democratic in nature than their commercial counterparts. This is supported by a survey conducted by Sergiadis et al. (2024), which found that students did not mention diverse representation when reflecting on the OER they were using. Despite this, open textbooks enable the opportunity for diversification due to their open licensing, and the ability to revise, remix and reuse. Bossu et al. (2019) state open textbooks should emphasise diversity and that it is a ‘value of OER.’ However, they also acknowledge that open practitioners might be caught up in the inherent “goodness” of open education that they neglect to critically evaluate equity in their publishing processes and practices (Bossu et al., 2019). This is reinforced by Bozkurt et al. (2023, p. 79) who state if ‘open practitioners are not intentional in what they do, it could reinforce Euro-American epistemologies and institutions, support fake public goods, disrespect Indigenous rites of passage to knowledge, and export standardised education globally.’

## AUTHORING PRIVILEGE IN OPEN TEXTBOOK PUBLISHING

The ability to have marginalised voices in open textbooks is what Lambert (2018) calls representational justice – the ‘self-determination of marginalised people and groups to speak for themselves and not have their stories told by others.’ However, Jordan (2023) notes that ‘people who create [open textbooks] are often those with the most privilege: at institutions with resources, where faculty have tenure and status,’ and are in positions that allow them to explore open textbook publishing. To resolve the issues around authoring privilege in open textbook publishing, Jordan (2023) identifies that open practitioners must ‘approach the advocacy of [open textbook] development by using an intersectional approach, by acknowledging that... creators need support in different ways depending on the intersections of their positions, workloads, personal experiences and individual attributes.’ This is supported by Bossu et al. (2023, p. 26) who states that work in the open ‘should not be mistaken for not requiring support, structure, and recognition.’ Perryman & de los Arcos (2016) also acknowledge that there are

still gendered inequities in the use and authoring of OER in developing countries, even though OER can help achieve women's empowerment in these countries.

Access barriers, representational issues, and issues of authoring privilege are three factors that impact the diversification and inclusivity of open textbooks in higher education.

## A REVIEW OF THE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY OF OPEN TEXTBOOKS PUBLISHED AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) is a multi-campus, regional university located in southeast Queensland, Australia. UniSQ has a student cohort of more than 25,000 undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher-degree research students across a range of disciplines. UniSQ Library has been engaged in open educational practices (OEP) since 2015 and published its first open textbook in 2019.

The Open Educational Practice (OEP) team within the UniSQ Library partners with academic authors to publish open textbooks. Considerations around IDEA are communicated as part of UniSQ's open textbook publishing workflow.

### AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Open textbooks published by UniSQ Library are deposited into the Open Textbook Library, which enables open peer reviews licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution licence. This qualitative data was studied between 2021–2022, as a member of the UniSQ's OEP team analysed the open peer reviews concerning 'cultural relevance,' a key part of the Open Textbook Library's review criteria. Cultural relevance is measured by the following definition: 'the text is not culturally insensitive or offensive in any way. It should make use of examples that are inclusive of a variety of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds,' (Open Textbook Library, n.d). Despite this definition, it was noted that many peer reviews in the Open Textbook Library commented on all aspects of diversity and inclusion in the section 'cultural relevance.' Ten of UniSQ's 26 open textbooks have been reviewed in the Open Textbook Library. Some open textbooks have been reviewed multiple times with a total of 37 individual reviews. Figure 1 shows the star rating of UniSQ's open textbooks for the criteria 'cultural relevance in the Open Textbook Library,' with 1 being a low score and 5 being the highest.

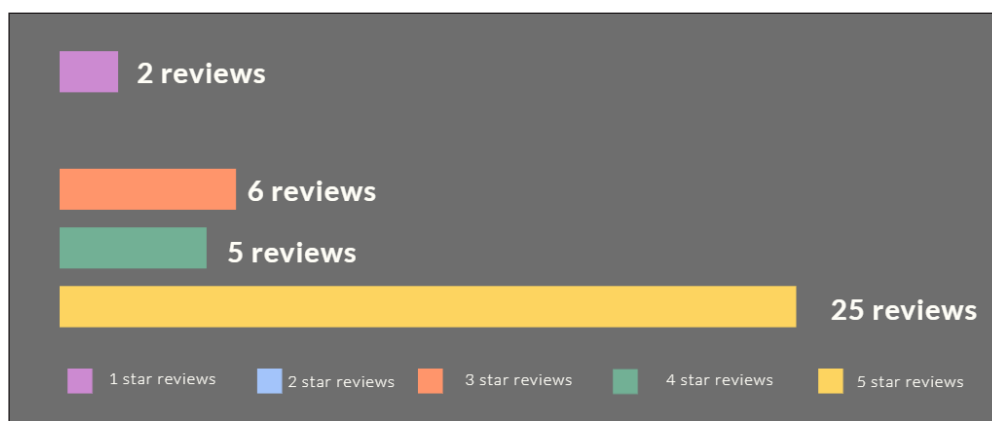


Figure 1 Star rating of reviews for cultural relevance in the Open Textbook Library.

The positive open peer reviews around diversity and inclusion in UniSQ's open textbooks included:

- "Images embedded in the chapters are thoughtful, in that they appear to represent diverse groups in terms of race and ethnicity," (Saunders, 2021).
- "It has quotes from students with diverse backgrounds which I liked," (Williams, 2021).
- "The authors were intentional in their design to bring in multiple voices and experiences throughout the text," (Lehr, 2021).
- "The text is written in bias-free, culturally responsive language, and is inclusive of a variety of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds," (Thomas, 2021).

- “Inclusion is intentional and not an afterthought. They [the authors] do a phenomenal job of expressing the importance of creating safe spaces,” (Ford, 2020).
- “The book reaches into all corners of diversity, not just cultural or physical. The reader is reminded that there are many diversities among us and that the educational environment often accentuates differences rather than homogenizes them,” (Lambert, 2022).
- “The text is sensitive and addresses sensitive issues in a manner that the reader can use to foster conversations,” (Lambert, 2022).

Some of the open textbooks received a mixture of positive and negative feedback that often contradicted one another. For example, one text received a review stating, “real life images of real people from diverse races, ethnicities and backgrounds would be nice to see throughout the text,” (Vines, 2022) whilst also receiving two other reviews acknowledging that “actual pictures depict different races and ethnicities” (Hays, 2021) and that they [the reviewer] “appreciated the diversity presented in pictures,” (Gohn, 2022). Similarly, another open text received two open reviews – one 1-star rating and one 5-star rating for cultural relevance. This reinforces the notion that inclusion means different things to different people. Something that may seem diverse and inclusive to one individual might not be to another, due to the diversity of everyone’s lived experience and perspectives.

The constructive reviews for UniSQ’s open textbooks within the Open Textbook Library included:

- “Real life images of real people from diverse races, ethnicities and backgrounds would be nice to see throughout the text,” (Vines, 2022).
- “The book would greatly benefit from the inclusion of broader communities of people in the images, videos, text, and references. While it was very helpful to hear about the challenges faced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (though their story was largely told through a deficit-lens perspective),” (Hass, 2022).
- “A lack of addressing diversity in images and content. For example, this text would be strengthened by including...BIPOC students and LGBTQ experiences. It would also be a more inclusive text if there were images of BIPOC students along with those with disabilities,” (Gilpin, 2022).
- “Although there is nothing outwardly offensive, nearly every image shows white children and adults which could potentially show a bias of the authors and is less inclusive of other races and cultures,” (Oslen, 2022).
- “This is an area that could be strengthened. In addition, any assessments should be reviewed to value culture and languages,” (Watson, 2020).

The major themes of this analysis were the need for more diverse and inclusive imagery, inclusive language, diverse examples, and balanced perspectives. It is also acknowledged that some open textbooks are heavily westernised.

## **DEVELOPING A GUIDE ON ENHANCING INCLUSION, DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY (IDEA) IN OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER)**

Many resources are available to support the creation of open textbooks, with some addressing diversity and inclusion (OpenStax, 2019; Jisc, 2021). However, Barber (2023) notes that there is a ‘gap in practical support at the nexus of OER and inclusive design in Australia’ as most resources are published in the northern hemisphere. Consequently, after analysing public reviews in the Open Textbook Library, UniSQ Library adapted OpenStax’s framework *Improving Representation and Diversity in OER Materials* for the Australian context. OpenStax’s framework needed to be adapted to suit the Australian tertiary environment, including the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Additionally, new categories were added including inclusive language; indigenisation, decolonisation, and cultural inclusion; accessibility, usability, and Universal Design for Learning; and anti-racist and inclusive open pedagogy, which also included trauma-informed pedagogy. Many of the new categories in the guide centred around cultural relevance and cultural sensitivity as that was a theme that emerged from the analysis of previous open textbook reviews. In addition, the University of Southern Queensland

is a multicultural university, which is why cultural relevance and indigenisation were major new themes within the guide. There was also a need to build practical tips, resources and good practice examples around the framework so open textbook authors could learn how to implement IDEA in practice.

The guide was structured around nine themes and developed into a guide titled *Enhancing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) in Open Educational Resources (OER)*, which was published in September 2022. The final structure of the guide is as follows:

- Diverse and inclusive imagery
- Examples names
- Inclusive language
- Researchers and references
- Diverse examples and balanced perspectives
- Appropriate terminology and inclusive metadata
- Indigenisation, decolonisation, and cultural inclusion
- Accessibility, usability, and Universal Design for Learning
- Anti-racist and inclusive open pedagogy

The four primary principles in the creation of the IDEA guide were (a) intersectionality (b) acknowledgment of authoring positionality (c) Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (d) engagement of those with lived experience.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that was developed to address how people's experiences are shaped based on their intersecting social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, etc.). This approach focuses on the importance of considering power, privilege, and social structures in relation to people's access to resources, experiences of discrimination, and interpersonal interactions (Sabik, 2021). Intersectionality is used throughout the guide to examine how various identities interact with one another. This is important because openness matters to people's intersectional identities. This is affirmed by Maha Bali who states:

'I am expressing why openness matters to my intersectional identity. The more oppression we experience in our context, the more vulnerable we are to openness, and paradoxically, the more likely we are to benefit from openness. Openness as liberation, as empowerment, as opportunity, as generosity, reciprocal or not, not just as an economic advantage or a joyful experience. For some of us, openness is the only way out of darkness, and it's a sensibility and worldview that we would suffer without,' (Bozkurt et al. 2023, p, 81).

The guide also acknowledges positionality, with the editor providing a Statement of Positionality, modelling for the reader's transparency regarding one's identity, and how that may privilege or marginalise one's self in society and impact upon the authoring of the guide, and consequent readership.

UDL was also a key part of the guide's design process. "UDL is a curriculum design, development, and delivery framework used to create equitable, inclusive, and accessible learning environments. UDL assumes all learning environments are diverse and that all learners have variable learning needs," (Kearney, 2022). UDL was a systematic part of the guide's design and development. For example, the guide contains multimodal resources and content in various modes that achieve the same learning outcome. This ensures readers approach their learning about IDEA in a way that is most accessible and beneficial to them.

Finally, engagement and inclusion of those with lived experience was a key part of the guide's production. *Enhancing IDEA in OER* underwent an extensive peer review process by librarians, academics, students, and diversity and inclusion experts, all of whom contributed their diverse experiences and perspectives to the guide. In line with the disability rights movement motto 'nothing about us without us,' the reviewers were of diverse identities including reviewers with disability or neurodivergence, an Aboriginal reviewer and multiple reviewers who identified as LGBTIQ+. The idea of nothing about us and other strategies for meaningful inclusion is particularly important when considering policy, research and services affecting marginalised

groups, including the peer review processes in academic and professional publications (Jackson and Moorley, 2021). According to Bell (2023), it is not enough to rely on research if it ‘doesn’t recognise diverse values, perspectives and lived experiences.’ This is why engagement with lived experience and diverse peer reviewers was paramount to the guide’s publication process.

## LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

It is acknowledged that there were challenges and limitations in the guide’s creation. Ideally, an opportunity to gain further feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics for the chapter on indigenisation, decolonisation and cultural inclusion would be recommended. While one Aboriginal academic was consulted to peer review this chapter in accordance with university protocols for engaging with First Nations content, it is acknowledged that this chapter may not fully represent the diverse perspectives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is especially relevant because open licensing is rooted in Western copyright systems and may not align with the broader or collective views of First Nations staff in Australian higher education institutions, let alone other contexts. It is crucial to recognise that different communities and Elders may have varying perspectives on the relationship between open licensing and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge. Further consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is needed, particularly if others were to adopt or adapt the guide in their local contexts. Another recommendation is the consultation of peer reviewers from other races and ethnicities, which was lacking. This was an oversight in the guide’s original production and is recommended for any further iterations.

To determine the reach of the guide, Google Analytics was used to track engagement, popularity of chapters and geographic reach. The analytics showed that since its publication *Enhancing IDEA in OER* has been viewed 8569 times and downloaded 313 times. The most viewed chapters were examples names, diverse and inclusive imagery, and diverse examples and balanced perspectives.

Ideally, an opportunity to analyse qualitative feedback from authors involved in open textbook publishing would be recommended. The guide was deposited into the Open Textbook Library and has received one 5-star review. The reviewer acknowledges that accessibility and usability were at the forefront of the guide’s design; that the author ‘nicely draws relationships among open pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and trauma-informed pedagogy’; that cultural relevance is the main strength of the guide; ‘intersectionality is used throughout the book chapters to examine how various identities interact with one another,’ (Toscano, 2023) and that the guide provides useful and actionable principles to implement for IDEA in OER.

However further analysis of the guide’s use and value is needed. It is hoped that systematic integration of the guide across UniSQ’s open publishing program can contribute to more diverse and inclusive open textbooks. A more in-depth evaluation of the guide could measure not only the guide’s usage by academic staff but also its influence on students’ sense of belonging and its impact on their learning experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The myth that open automatically equals access or inclusion does not hold those who oversee open textbook publishing accountable in ensuring the critical evaluation of IDEA in their publishing processes. Through the development of a guide on *Enhancing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) In Open Educational Resources (OER)*, staff at a regional Australian university aimed to increase staff knowledge and capability in IDEA. Further research is needed to determine the use of the guide, its impact on the diversity and inclusivity of the open textbooks produced within the institution, and its impact on students’ sense of belonging.

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available in the [Open Textbook Library](#) and licensed under a CC By licence.

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Nikki Andersen: Conceptualization, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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