

# ASCILITE 2025

## Future-Focused:

*Educating in an Era of Continuous Change*

### A recipe for smart spending: How OER save university libraries money

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As university libraries confront rising costs, shrinking budgets, unstable subscription models and expanding digital learning demands (CAUL, 2023), Open Educational Resources (OER) provide more than just student affordability: they offer a sustainable strategy for smarter spending. This presentation recasts OER not as an optional extra, but as essential infrastructure for modern teaching and learning, enabling libraries to deliver greater impact with fewer resources.

University libraries are often forced into an impossible balancing act, attempting to deliver on their mission in a fiscally strained environment while becoming increasingly dependent on the volatile and expensive commercial textbook market for materials the institution neither owns nor controls. One institution reports paying an average of A\$1,800 per commercial textbook licence (University of Adelaide, 2022). These are often recurring costs, not one-offs. Moreover, ProQuest's announcement earlier this year (2025a, 2025b) of its plans to remove perpetual (one-off) purchase options for its widely used suite of print and ebooks is a cold discovery of just how ephemeral these "purchases" are and the lack of consultation with libraries prior to the decision, underscores the tenuous and imbalanced nature of the library-publisher relationship (CAUL, 2025).

So, how can libraries continue supporting equity, access, and excellence in academia when budgets tighten and learning resources are tangled in ever-constricting commercial knots? By being strategic.

OER, by design, are free, openly-licensed, forever-owned, flexible and adaptable resources which empower libraries to shift from reactive purchasing to proactive co-creation – building the system we need, rather than remaining beholden to the broken system we've unwittingly enabled.

But OER, while free for the user, are not free for the creator, publisher, or distributor, all of whom must front-load the endeavour with their time, knowledge and technology for the future pay-off of a high-quality, free and open resource – and it's typically the university library's budget that covers this upfront cost which is larger than an individual commercial textbook subscription. So, we arrive at the problem.

Without considering the long-term implications, when faced with a choice between the status quo of expensive, but familiar, commercial options versus also expensive, but unfamiliar, open options, university libraries can easily mistake OER as the "nice to have".

The flaw in this logic is clarified when analogised: cutting out grocery staples, such as flour, eggs, pasta, and meat, because they cost \$100 a week, and replacing them with a seemingly cheap \$15 takeaway meal is not a savings when factoring in three meals per day, seven days a week. That's what cutting an OER program in favour of commercial textbook purchasing looks like. Continuing the analogy, home cooking requires effort and knowledge, but it's cheaper per meal, adaptable, and the quality and details can be controlled. The same goes for OER: it might require upfront investment, but it saves money long-term, gives back control, and builds institutional capability. Unlike takeaway (and commercial textbooks), home cooking (and an OER) is not at the mercy of price hikes or sudden menu changes.

With theoretical underpinnings in open and ecological systems (Cronin & MacLaren, 2018; Staggs, 2017) and drawing from practitioner experiences (CAUL, 2023; Desrochers, 2019; Hofer, 2017;

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Tlili et al., 2023), this presentation highlights how commercial textbook models represent a growing impost on public funds and how, by contrast, libraries can invest in OER to create long-term value and system resilience.

**Keywords:** Open Education, OER, Equity, Systems thinking, Strategic resource management

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