# Bespoke bookselling for the twenty-first century: John Smith's and current UK higher education

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## Abstract

The JS Group is the business home to the prize-winning chain of booksellers for higher education institutions, John Smith's. Under the deceptively simple term 'bookseller', however, lies a shift in thinking about books published by John Smith's, which deserves articulation. This shift moves from regarding books as a source of knowledge conveyed through the book's text to books as an agency capable of producing a range of notably different outcomes, of which knowledge is one, for each of the actors involved in its book-retail network. Through their aggregated engagement with what Darnton calls the communications circuit, John Smith's manages to deliver different outcomes for students, lecturers, parents, student support services, for university executive management and for the state. These outcomes are only heightened when combined with Smith's smart card system, sometimes called ASPIRE. In conjunction with a Samsung tablet, ASPIRE is then able to deliver 'free' digitized learning, funded through the UK fair access bursaries. The article examines John Smith's model and questions the trade-off between effectiveness and freedom, finding the alternatives to be wanting. The research emerges from ongoing work into reading within the frame of commodity culture and, as such, the disciplinary fields supporting it are sociologies of literature, economics and book history studies, expressed in terms of cultural and critical discourse. The combination, it is hoped, will provide a fresh perspective.

**Keywords**

Booksellling; ASPIRE; John Smith's; retail; bursary; higher education; fair access; tablet

> *In an age of dominant neo-liberal capitalism, what is indispensable is a text delivery system that is effective, if any belief in the emancipatory potential of higher education is to remain viable.*

## 1. Introduction

One might be forgiven for thinking that 'John Smith's UK Higher Education' is a chain of university bookshops. While they do operate both clicks-and-bricks and bricks-and-mortar shops, their identity can be better understood from the space they inhabit across the fields of education, publishing, finance, distribution and retail. The concrete shops are, rather, one of the sites where those fields meet, granting John Smith's a sustainability unusual in an age when many booksellers regard themselves as endangered species. By contrast, John Smith's have decided not to adapt old roles in a threatened environment, but instead create something akin to a sustainable architecture, which develops bespoke spaces in hitherto conflicted habitats. But of the many retail chains that trade in the potential of texts, John Smith's stands out most for its self-declared focus on 'outcomes' that books may afford, both tangible and intangible, for readers and those involved in text production and supply. In choosing John Smith's, therefore, this report will not only describe a prescient development in international text supply but represent a scholarly intersection of literary-critical and business-history interests.[1]

For some years, I have been trying to build a proper theorized account of reading in commodity culture, which begins from the thesis that much commercially mediated reading –

arguably stretching back in the west to the nineteenth-century industrialization of literature –
is based on a conception of gains. Much comparative literature criticism and study has
emerged from a tradition of literary appreciation, coupled to the hermeneutic analysis of
texts, which is supposed to reveal a text's deeper meaning, and thus a 'truer' value
conceptually free from commercial interest. In dominant commodity culture, however, I
suspect that readers read for private gain, and for over a century in the industrialized west
have consistently paid for and accepted opportunity costs for something they believe they
'get' from a text: a proposal I have been testing in a number of publications (see Frost 2012,
2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

In their conception of 'outcomes', John Smith's appears to operate with an
understanding of supply not unrelated to that of 'readerly' gains. Readers of John Smith's
books – in this case students in higher education – are conceived of as gaining a desired
'outcome': they can pass an assessment, progress to the next academic year and eventually
secure an award. But these 'outcomes' extend to others in the communication circuit too.[2]
Teachers and educators are conceived as gaining more effective teaching resources; student-
support teams gain evidence of student engagement; and university executive management
gains an improved achievement of strategic objectives. Throughout the circuit, operations are
thus arranged to increase the widest range of gains available through education material
supply for the greatest number of participants.

The present report is not a business report but an attempt to understand John Smith's
(hereafter JS) in terms of cultural and critical discourse, employing models known to
sociologies of literature, economics and book-history studies.[3] This strategy has two main
aims. First, the narrative will open up what otherwise would be an organization report to the
qualities of humanities discourse. Second, because the narrative draws from economics and
professional practice, its articulation should introduce critical insights that an exclusively

humanities-oriented report would have overlooked. Against this background, the report therefore focuses on qualitative analysis, and resists the drive towards the reduction of phenomena to measurable indices, which are the tools of modern management practice. In this pursuit, however, the usual clashes will appear: pragmatism contests idealism; postmodern relative values contest the unfinished project of enlightened modernity. And where clashes do appear, the report will not remain neutral. Its commitment is to the benefits of higher education, and if forced to choose between contesting principles, such as better higher education and absolute individual freedom, or better higher education and the dream of education untainted by capitalization, the report will honour its commitment.

Finally, it should be noted that the awkward fit of JS into standard descriptions of bookselling is something latent in book retail to higher education, when contrasted to general-trade, high-street book retail where demarcations between the book-industry roles can be more pronounced. However, in current general trade conditions of increased aggregation of trade roles and disintermediation, the unique experience of JS may indicate what is to come: both for other sectors of book retail and for the design of descriptive models.

In conjunction with its companion piece (see 'John Smith's: Historical perspectives and historical precedence'), this report will attend, first, to the current JS practice, described not according to the bookselling procedure but thematically around the challenges pertaining to HEIs that JS addresses. Second, it will introduce the JS smart card scheme known as ASPIRE, and especially its combination with Samsung's tablet, before raising several necessary critical objections. Lastly, the report will look at how JS is distinguished at the shop level, before moving to a conclusion. Overall, it is hoped that this report will contribute to the discussion about learning material provision in higher education, but more widely to

current debates about value and reading, and of the necessity for well-functioning text-provision at the national level if such values are to be usefully mined by readers and citizens.

### 1.1. Current practice: JS and the HEI[4]

JS has been running since the middle of the eighteenth century, not solely but often in the operational vicinity of higher education. It has consistently had many other interests than book retail: as publishers, a circulating library, a global library supply service and in its contributions to Scottish identity through its publication policies and its shops, as a cultural institution. Over two and a half centuries it has made business responses to periods of protective regulation and liberalization, the most significant late twentieth century example being the liberalization of trade following the collapse of the Net Book Agreement and the near annexation of the market by online book-retail conglomerates.

In just over a decade, JS has emerged from the remnants of old-school academic bookselling from the turn of the century to become a very different kind of business, picking up significant prizes from the Booksellers Association in the intervening period.[5] Its focus stretches far beyond the simple provision of academic texts in e- and p-book format. Their customers are no longer solely students, but include many other interest groups within each HEIs, each with different needs targeted by JS services. Those varied needs may be equally intangible as tangible: a Vice-Chancellor (VC) requiring better widening participation (WP) figures; a particular student unable to access the core texts recommended by her tutor; the university library needing to pass on the responsibility and implementation costs for tablet-based digital textbooks; or lecturers wishing to provide students with the most effective tools for progression within a degree programme. The generic JS shop home page cites fourteen categories of provision aimed at students, of which books are only one:[6] art supplies,

university-branded bags and clothing, digital equipment (laptops and other reading, writing and printing devices) and mobile phones, medical and nursing equipment, photographic equipment, magazine subscriptions, besides the more traditional stationary and office equipment, snacks/foods and toys/games/gifts, in addition to less obvious items such as sport and fitness items, bicycles, specialist clothing and training courses (online language courses, or 'how to' courses, such as Android and Apple App developer packages, and so on).

Wanting to give a single designation to the range of needs met through JS services for students, lecturers and university management, JS refers to itself as a solutions provider, or more specifically, a supplier of 'outcomes'. For students, part of the 'solution' is to equip students with items they need to enter HEI, stay the course and exit to a job: hence, the Amazon-competitive prices to attract students, the bicycles to help them get to university and the interview suits or packages of discounted CV writing guides to help them through an interview. The successful outcome will therefore be the student achieving the relevant academic award and pathway to a career. But for the institutions who are rated on numerous student-centred targets, outcomes refer to achieving measurable strategic objectives. Thus, JS looks to provide successful outcomes across the student experience, however 'outcome' is defined and for whichever agency or, as Latour would call them, actors (2005: 10, 64).

### 1.1.1 Operating according to fluid rationales

Rather than listing JS products and services, followed by examples at various HEIs, the complexity requires a demand-driven approach, starting with the HEI. Activities such as textbook delivery, the ASPIRE scheme (see Section 1.3.) and liaising on learning strategy are all tools used by JS to help resolve particular HEI challenges. Using an analogy with, say, Bosch Power Tools, whose core business is the 120v motor, but whose main activity is the provision of quality hand-held tools, JS has a core business in academic textbooks, but a main

activity in problem-solving for HEIs, which includes helping institutions to reach target objectives. The situation is made more complex, however, because not only between HEIs but within each HEI too thinking and decision-making is not homogenous. Apart from the usual micro-level disagreements within each organizational entity, there may easily be macro-level structural discrepancies between, for example, academic staff and upper-management (typically represented at VC level and in officerships of operations, finance and performance), eliciting very different responses to the same questions, depending on the type of capital – social, economic or cultural – that the group values most. Between and within an HEI, and despite public-relations statements to the contrary, there is often no singular 'all' for one size to fit.

The nearest we can get to a common denominator are the key issues facing each HEI and its internal subgroupings (students, lecturers, management) in varying degrees. In effect, these concerns are part of 'demand'. The key concerns are recruitment of appropriate students; demonstrating commitment to WP; retention; qualification results and position in national tables; and a successful 'student journey' registered in concepts such as 'student experience' or statistically by tools such as the National Student Survey (NSS). The task for JS is to assist in positive outcomes for these key issues, and thus satisfy demand, for each of the various actors at each HEI through their provision of products and services.

The first axis along which JS organizes its task is found in how specific challenges are interpreted by interest groups internal to a specific HEI. A second, state-driven and more slowly responsive axis is coordinated according to (often whimsical) the changes to the Government ruling about targets any HEI is required to meet. Underneath this lies the third axis, which is the presence or absence of various bursary systems decided on initially by the HEI – all regulating the possibilities open to JS.

Bursaries



State requirements
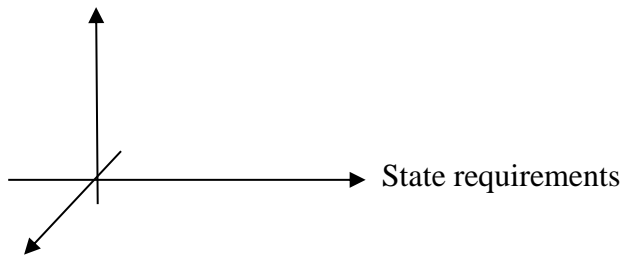
HEI-internal challenges

Coordinates on this chart will differ greatly between institutions. Some HEIs will offer no bursaries, while others do. Others may suddenly decide to redirect their bursary policy away from the provision of academic materials towards, say, maintenance grants or fee waivers. Specific internal challenges for some HEIs will be minimal; for others challenges would be immense – institutions in the Million+ group, for example, are considered accessible by WP students and may have good outreach but struggle with retention, while for Russell Group universities the situation may be reversed. Government may change policy – for example, the cap to Student Number Control, limiting the places available to students with less than ABB grades (or equivalent) – or implement medium to longer-term policy shifts on fees. In effect, a chart needs to be created, not only for each HEI but for each school, department and in principle for each programme and even course/unit requiring academic material.

As JS provides its products and services in response to those five key issues – recruitment, WP, retention, academic results and student experience (incl. NSS) – it does so in a targeted way, arguing and always, where possible, providing data for the impact of a particular initiative on a selected issue. For analysis, however, it becomes impossible to tell whether the

impact on one issue does not also affect another. Measures to increase WP, for example, may also help retention and influence the student's responses in the NSS. To problematize further, issues may have varied resonance for each actor concerned. Increased recruitment for management may mean more income, which invites strategies to increase numbers through clearance or to attract more overseas students, who represent an important source of revenue. For academic staff, extra numbers may mean (often untenable) increases in teaching, (potential) decreases in teaching quality and time away from research and peer collaboration, which is essential for research-based teaching. Conversely, too-large classes and lessened student–lecturer contact time is a common complaint of students reporting in the NSS, and some resource-rich HEIs may consider measures to enhance the student experience, such as limiting the cohort size. JS's challenge is not to articulate a unilateral aim – for one actor on one issue – but to negotiate its multilateral implications.

## 1.2. Issues and tactics

As any academic bookseller, JS is unarguably involved in the procurement and supply of appropriate learning materials to generate revenue for the company but, on its own, the observation that sold-books equal profits does not satisfactorily explain why JS activities have become so wide-ranging and complex. Beyond procurement and supply, an across-the-board role for JS is its participation in the student-support package, which is largely seen as contributing to recruitment and retention. JS can easily become an additional campus facility, both in their bricks-and-mortar shops and in their online and offline services. They contribute to, and sometimes co-produce, HEI-information material (online as well as print). They attend student open days, take part in HEI promotion (for example, the Anglia Ruskin University 'I Love ARU Fridays') with low sales potential but longer-term benefits, retail branded items promoting the HEI (fashion items, accessories or stationery), run prize draws

and promotion days, or in more detail provide instruction for new students about how to (and sometimes why they should) access precisely those materials selected by course lecturers. Students arriving through the A-level system have often been intensively coached and lack confidence in higher academic procedures: such as negotiating confusing bibliographies. Combined with the shock of the initial financial outlay, and a confusing environment, some students who struggle are tempted to quit. Where possible, JS will try to assist the important 'best start'. Shop-held data for each course (and with ASPIRE, for each student) tell JS staff exactly what materials each student needs from day one: both ideal purchases and minimum requirements. Should an HEI have an ASPIRE scheme, or ASPIRE in combination with a tablet, this also becomes part of the package of attractions, integrated into the HEI promotions.[7] Specifically for recruitment, for example, the University of Bedfordshire has provided a £25 voucher for learning materials, administered by JS, targeted at potential students from low-participation neighbourhoods (LPN).

All actors involved in higher education are concerned with student drop-out rates. Retention is a prerequisite for graduation. It gives meaning to teaching, and clearly affects national tables as well as state education policy. But from another point of view, stopping may be preferable to accruing debts amounting to some £50,000 (fees plus living and other expenses) for a bachelor's degree which suits neither the students' real abilities nor ambition. HEIs try to mitigate this through proper signage on entry and in creating an attractive student identity, which to a certain extent JS takes part in through its promotional material, and in liaising measures with student unions in making memberships available for student clubs, gyms and sports clubs. At the University of East London (UEL), the HEI has gone one stage further by enabling bursary funds to be used for childcare – a critical issue for many student-parents – with payments administered through JS.

For ease of access to appropriate learning materials, JS organizes its services to make additional contributions. It procures massage tables for physiotherapists, or screen make-up kits for courses such as Media, Make-Up and Character Design. Revision guides are also on the list, along with bicycles to get to the university and second-hand buy back, to help replenish funds. Pamphlets and book series around placement are packaged into student offers – especially around teacher placement. Where possible, JS assembles learning materials at one easily accessible point, either physically in bundles and custom texts or through a tablet portal. This also proves beneficial in allowing increased discounting.

The university library may well coordinate efforts with JS to ensure students have adequate access. A library may go for breadth, knowing that JS supplies the bulk of core texts for which the library has either too little purchasing power or shelf-space, and they may also coordinate reading lists. The Library and Information Science offices too as they do at Chester, may electronically administer reading lists and student records. TALIS, for example, is a system used by one university library for collating reading lists, and JS has its own systems, including Top Courses Top Books (TCTB), that aim for bi-monthly records of reading lists of the most prevalent titles and courses. Libraries and JS do exchange information – often attending the same university meetings – but there are both rights and IT issues, as with any coordination, that require sections of JS operations to liaise with interested parties.

Once JS has the reading list, it then coordinates with publishers, publisher's reps, then possibly back with lecturers and libraries to suggest amendments, and to obtain the best discounts balanced against the need for viable operations: a procedure that takes place on two tiers, at the shop-level by managers and at the company level. On occasion, when text-book authors are local academics, JS may liaise between lecturers and publishers and be more closely involved in guaranteeing distribution rates with publishers for custom texts. In

general, JS has data on student-buying patterns that publishers simply do not have, which leads to JS, again at both shop and company level, becoming involved in publishing decisions. This is most true when the distribution platform is online with digital textbooks, comprising many sections of copyrighted text. In such cases, JS very much returns to its historical practice of joint publication, simply without the JS imprint.

## 1.3. ASPIRE

What accelerates these strategies, and makes them more than an extension of former academic bookselling, is something generically known as ASPIRE: a scheme that combines both financial-administrative and data dimensions. The financial dimension derives from the State's commitment to fair access. Each HEI is required to deploy a portion of the income from fees to attract and retain students from resource-weaker environments. Unless the HEI can demonstrate commitment, they will not be permitted to charge the £9000 fee. Each institution signs an Access Agreement approved by the Director of Fair Access that details the procedures and targets each institution has decided on. An HEI may decide that rather than fee waivers or cash bursaries, it may earmark funds for learning materials, which JS can deliver through a pre-loaded smart card that binds a given amount of bursary to an individual student for designated books, products and services purchasable through JS. In addition, the card assists in the timing of bursary release, which is a further tool for encouraging student engagement with study. The data dimension comes through the smart card's role as both a repository for existing data and a resource for generating new data. For each qualifying student, the fund-bearing card contains details of all the students' courses and of the limits around what each student may buy: whether books, equipment or other items designated by the HEI. As each student uses the smartcard, data generated provides student-specific

purchase information, in a similar manner to any augmented EPOS system, but it can also provide the HEI with information correlating to reading practices and learning patterns.

By way of illustration, University of Greenwich operates a bursary linked to learning material provision: £200 in 2014/2015, for all full-time UK and EU undergraduate students paying full fees. As a formal part of enrolment, the student registers with JS to authorize information exchange between JS and the HEI, and is then given a PIN-protected ASPIRE@Greenwich card, to be used at JS campus stores or JS online. The JS shop informs each student about the range of materials to which they are entitled, which may vary considerably, and provides course-specific reading lists with editions or bundles suggested by the lecturer, or for other support materials. For the students of paramedic science, for example, the manuals required by the London Ambulance Service who offer placement, which the Service can no longer afford to provide free, are supplied at a discount by JS. Greenwich has decided to authorize half the full bursary, £100, to be used on textbooks, stationery and other essential learning resources in the first semester (until 1 November 2014), and the remaining £100 to be used on a wider range of goods afterwards, acting as an incentive to students to prepare for and progress beyond the first stage of assessment towards the end of semester one. JS Greenwich is currently negotiating with the University and the students' union to allow students to pay for club and gym memberships through the card funds.

The collected funds available to a cohort, or year, is known to JS as the 'pot', and the amount of funds used is called 'pot burn' – although ASPIRE carries spending data for each student. JS also calculates 'penetration rate', which is course or module specific, and is usually conducted over a single promotion. Its aim is similar to measuring the pot burn but is calibrated on numbers of students, and can tell both lecturers and JS how successful a particular promotion has been. Penetration rates can be ascertained in non-bursary shops too.

If 75 students from a cohort of 100 buy a bundle of discounted core texts, there is a 75 per cent penetration rate. If each student has £100, the pot burn is the amount from the total £10,000 spent on purchases, including books, but also other products and services. Pot burn and penetration rates are analysed side-by-side with other data from ASPIRE, or from TCTB. Across the entire ASPIRE scheme, unspent funds are returned to the university.[8] As JS has no share in unused funds, its aim is to make each student aware of their entitlement – the JS 'Use it or lose it' campaign – though, despite considerable efforts, some students still fail to spend their allotted funds, which are returned to the HEI.

The use of ASPIRE provides JS with minute-by-minute data. Knowing precisely the (remaining) potential purchase funds and student numbers enables more reliable procurement, but the data also feed back to the HEI, telling lecturers whether certain items have quick take-up, potentially indicating early student engagement with the course, or whether items are last-minute pre-assignment purchases. It shows how many students have bought the recommended item (and, in principle, which students have not). Making clear that there is no determining relationship, JS takes pains to demonstrate the correlation between book purchases and grades, with higher grades going to students who have also spent more on learning materials.[9]

More broadly, the absence of sales can provide student support services with an early warning system for when students are failing to engage or, conversely, when the popularity of certain combinations of material with a specific course indicate the reverse. Most importantly, though, much New Public Management is predicated on measurable phenomena that require documentation, particularly from the HEI and student support, showing the extent to which measures taken to satisfy access agreements are working – itself a task that is resource heavy. The data generated by ASPIRE, therefore, represent a valuable documentation resource. For Anglia Ruskin University, for example, bursaries were

previously aimed at fee waivers. Surveys showed that students were somewhat worryingly less concerned about long-term debt than they were about immediate challenges such as subsistence and progression. When, in 2012, Anglia Ruskin introduced joint fee waiver and £100 learning support bursaries in combination with ASPIRE, they were able to document through penetration rates and spend figures that students were indeed using bursary funds to remain in the study. On the basis of successful implementation and a continued need to demonstrate WP, Anglia Ruskin increased the ASPIRE bursary to £400 in 2014 and planned to increase this for students from lower-income families in 2015/2016.[10]

The quality of JS services plays its role in the overall student experience, widely becoming the issue of greatest concern for HEIs. The experience is given voice in the national students survey (NSS) completed chiefly by final-year undergraduates, which ranks each HEI nationally according to student, or in some versions of HEI management, customer satisfaction. Quantitative data collected by JS can be integrated into qualitative data from student support focusing specifically on student experience. Clearly, when students are surveyed about how well ASPIRE satisfies, the questions can bear a passing resemblance to those of the NSS. And if one were to make predictions, then further initiatives with ASPIRE and bursary provision might be expected.

The high-point of ASPIRE, however, comes when the scheme exploits the potential in targeted bursaries together with a tablet device, supplied in partnership with Samsung, with its operating platform from Kortext – a scheme implemented at UEL, whose key challenge was not WP but retention. An enhanced Progress Bursary worth £1200 in 2014/2015, with £300 credit per year to spend on study items for a maximum of £900 over three years, was made available to students successfully progressing through a programme. As the Progress Bursary was deliberately awarded in January to aid progression, UEL ran a further 'bursary advance' scheme awarding £150 advances annually at the year-start. Both the Progress and

Advance bursaries can be subject to repayment if the student fails to meet targets: incl. adequate deadline submission of coursework and assignments, examination and satisfactory class-attendance, and non-breach of UEL regulations, specifically those relating to plagiarism. Also funded from the £1200 from the enhanced Progress Bursary is the 'Free Books' scheme, which supplies one 'free' textbook for every module studied and one 'free' study skills book, from year-start onwards, in 2014/2015, for which students from years one, two and three were eligible – with inequalities in spending between courses (law books are notoriously expensive; English-studies books are not) absorbed into the overall bursary expenditure. In 2014/2015, around 4000 freshers received their 'free books' uploaded onto a tablet device, a Samsung Galaxy Note 8.0, together with a range of additional digital learning resources (UEL 2014). Once programme content becomes digitized, the scope for added digitized-learning techniques expands radically: potentially including enhanced feedback facilities, tablet-borne peer-to-peer learning, and tablet-borne tutor-to-peer and peer-to-peer evaluation. When combined with ASPIRE, the ability to turn all this traffic into collectable data on behalf of JS and the HEI expands exponentially too.

When collated centrally, data from the 25 JS stores accumulated through ASPIRE or through mechanisms such as TCTB or, potentially, the Samsung tablet begin to generate regional and national patterns, informing procurement and learning provision across the board. The increasing data volume, then, impels JS towards a more complex data analysis and the conviction in a data-driven future. But, to paraphrase, with great amounts of data comes great responsibility: not merely in terms of data protection for student users, but also for JS and the HEIs. The challenge is to ensure adequate protection for end-users but equally to protect the flexibility of the bespoke practice from centralized imposition (both within JS but also the HEI). Any centralized initiative inspired by large-scale data-analysis runs severe risks.

The complexity of each HEI interacting with the complexity of JS – the latter emerging as all JS bespoke stores and all JS operations taken together – create what cultural theorists like to call a hypercomplex system (Qvortrup 2003), in which navigation has been likened to 'walking through a maze, the walls of which rearrange as one walks' (Urry 2006: 114). Because of the inherent unpredictability, centralized initiatives may easily bring about negative unforeseen consequences for delivery at the local shop level; furthermore, it affects the reliability of local data that feed back into the overall system. A more sustainable response might be to resist the urge for centrally driven innovations that affect the organization as a whole and instead to focus on incremental innovation at a local level, which if applicable can then be applied more widely.[11]

The other main risk is political because unless centralized decision-making hands precedence to the mandatory role of each actor comprising the HEI (incl. student representative bodies) – remembering that HEIs may be centrally managed but are far from homogenous – then the ASPIRE bursary schemes risk losing their political credibility and thus the cooperation of all those involved. Without cooperation, and the regulatory agreements needed to sustain it, the most ready scenario would be a return to free-market radical liberalism led by online retailers such as Amazon. Wherever possible, innovation must obtain, document and display mandatory sovereignty.

### 1.3.1. Objections

The first objection to targeted bursaries coupled to ASPIRE derives from a point of principle: the right to be 'free to choose'. Surely, students should be free to administer their own funds and to purchase what they will. One would expect to answer in favour of freedom, unless what is meant by free choice is the freedom to be left wanting (in this case, wanting quality textbooks). The 'Free Books' delivered by UEL are not free but paid for out of the agreed

bursaries, themselves a portion of already-regulated student fees. In effect, bursaries merely return some of the student fee in the form of learning materials. But why not return cash?

The concern with cash-bursaries is that funds will not be used for education, but for leisure or living expenses. While extra disposable cash can contribute to the student experience, it may not do in ways that contribute to a progressive future. And when we need to define what is meant by progressive, and who does the defining, then in the context of higher education the constant factor must be the linking of progress to learning – the appropriateness of any new item or service being argued from that principle. There is a financial safety aspect too as students may not be the sole agents making spending decisions. Families already struggling to support students may regard cash returns on fees as belonging to the family, especially in family structures awarding greatest rights to the family head. In such cases, the HEI's primary responsibility is towards the student. For payments 'into' ASPIRE accounts as well, by limiting possible purchases, parents or other supporters can top up the student's bursary if they choose, knowing that funds are being used as intended. The question of diverting bursaries for living costs presents a particularly nasty dichotomy with no easy resolution, apart, perhaps, from insisting that both learning materials and maintenance are required for successful study and that competition between the two is counterproductive. Bursaries need to be adequate, and some of that funding needs to be channelled into learning-material supply.

The difference between now and the bookish past is that students inhabit the same hypercomplex world as JS and the HEI, where choice is boundless and making the right choice becomes a nightmare. Given the almost limitless alternatives competing for student pounds, the pressures to perform well and the maze of learning-material options, students are at a disadvantage in choosing between claims to benefit their study. Often – as shown by the unused bursaries pots – the choice made has been to do nothing at all. The issue is so

important that it warrants a system that directs choice to the results jointly needed by all those involved: students, lecturers, the HEI and society.

The second objection is to what could be described as ring-fencing student funds for restricted use in JS shops, suggesting that JS and the HEI are jointly manipulating the free market for self-interest. There is self-interest on behalf of JS, in terms of business revenue, and of the HEI, in terms of target objectives, but the situation needs its context. The starkest historical comparison is to the company store, where workers are paid in company tokens, redeemable only in the company's (overpriced) store for essentials. The remedy for such historic abuse has always been alternative channels for essentials but what are current alternatives? If not JS or another campus-based competitor, the alternative is for either the university library to undertake greater learning-material provision, or for provision to gravitate towards the lowest purchase-price supply, which currently means multinational online retailers. The capacity of the former, whether in funding, staffing or storage, is too small to meet demand and would need substantial reorganization of national funding procedures, which at present seems unlikely. The latter lack the intimacy with lecturers, derived from being campus-based, that is necessary for targeted discounting of relatively small localized reading lists and reliable provision to programmes that run over years rather than months: a situation that is equally true of virtual shops in general. Furthermore, large-scale online corporations are in no way responsible to either State institutions or the HEI for operations. Their interests are in meeting shareholder dividends, rather than educational targets, regardless of how capricious those targets might be. Regulation of the free market can provide benefits, and the rising radical free-market is often not a better alternative for end-users. And unlike exploited company labourers, students are not paid for their labour but are paying fees to attend.

That ASPIRE-administered bursaries are only redeemable in JS stores invites a comparison with currency. Every currency is subject to limitations on exchange, and some currencies, such as Bitcoin or other fiduciary payment systems, can only be used in highly specific contexts. National Book Tokens, launched in 1932 – and from 2005 to 2011 chaired by former JS President Willie Anderson – can only be exchanged for books, and only in shops registered with this Bookseller Association scheme.[12] And like any loyalty scheme, from Supermarket Nectar schemes (also a data-gathering mechanism) to the old-style green stamp books used by the CO-OP (though its profits were stakeholder shared), they remain viable only because of the limitations the scheme sets on exchange. ASPIRE is simply another scheme that derives benefits from reducing the exchangeability of the capital it administers. A better question is whether those benefits are shared equitably between JS and students: the balance of gains from reading and economic viability that are the inseparable strategies running through JS history, as evoked in the companion to this article. One measure of that balance, for example, might be the success of JS discounts for both the company and students (approachable through penetration rates), measuring whether the pricing has competed with Amazon-levels or whether any higher price has been justified in additional service.

From student responses to the author's current project and confirmed in interviews with HEI student-support staff, student concerns are not for principles about freedom-of-choice, or for reducing fees whose payback, if ever, recedes into an indeterminate future, but for issues of data protection and privacy.[13] The option to not sign the agreement for information exchange between JS and the HEI is largely nominal, since in most cases this would lead to losing the bursary. But while fully acknowledging the importance of data protection, as JS does, it should be noted that website use in the current online environment commonly exposes users to behaviour tracking by cookies, and few online services operate

without terms and conditions allowing tracking data to be passed internally to the company and its partners, or sold externally to third parties. While undesirable, such data collection is not seen to be sufficient so that users switch to widespread offline life. A more anxious dimension to 'tracking', however, is surveillance, and whether data gathered by ASPIRE could be used, for example, by lecturers to monitor student behaviour: especially in cases of academic offence. The thought of a lecturer knowing which passages from a student's textbook have or have not been accessed on the tablet device – technically possible – did not appeal. First, accessing is not reading and reading could have taken place elsewhere, but, as with all evidence collection, both parties can participate and evidence may support a student's formal complaint, either documenting student claims or providing evidence of HEI omissions. The surveillance issue, here, is not whether a particular system has the capacity to survey but agreement about whether, and with what limitations, that surveillance should or should not be conducted.

In any regulatory system, pragmatism contests idealism, and values are relative to the actors involved. It all depends on perspective. But if the priority is the benefits to society and students derived from successful progression through higher education, then the provision of competitively priced learning materials beyond library supply is essential. HEIs would still have to set up an organization for the purpose and, given the alternatives, that organization could do well to mirror JS. Whatever the latent dangers of coupling ASPIRE to targeted bursaries, they are worth risking and tackling for such viable on-campus provision.


### 1.4. Bespoke shops

Rather than stripping away the differences in practice to reveal common features, JS stores together only began to make sense by attempting the reverse: stripping away the obvious procedural commonality, and instead focusing on the specific situation and response at each

shop. JS does not attempt to provide the same products and services to as many people as it can – something that distinguishes it from multinational online alternatives. What this approach revealed was a new common denominator, that of the relationship between each shop and its HEI. The relationships differed greatly – some were fledgling and tentative, others entirely robust – but they were relationships and, like any, no matter at what stage, they need working on.

The JS outlet at Chester is a lovely flint-square and red-sandstone shop, in a leafy walkway, on the edge of the main Chester campus, which students invariably pass on their way into the town. The bookshop at Luton is in the town's main shopping mall, at the entrance closest to the University of Bedfordshire Luton campus, and part of a busy public retail environment. The store at UEL is in one of the main Docklands campus buildings, on its busiest thoroughfare, visited only by people using the university. The Chester shop thrives partly because the university actively wants a campus-bookshop. It suits the university's self-image. Chester JS does not push discounted laptops because a majority of Chester students already have them, along with other electronic necessities; it does not sell hoodies because the student union does, but it does focus on what students do not yet have, which is recommended reading at competitive prices – for example, the (specifically) Norton edition of Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (RRP 7.99) at 7.99 and 5.99 second-hand, compared with an Amazon search giving 7.95 new and 5.13 used (not incl. any postage). By contrast, the Luton shop found its trade affected by the closure of a nearby 'Mothercare' outlet, losing custom for its children's books. Unlike other stores, however, the Luton shop takes part in the annual Mall 'Lock-In' where students bargain hunt throughout the mall after normal trading hours (Anon. 2011). At UEL, who take on *c.*3500 students annually, the 2014/2015 delivery of an estimated 4000 Samsung tablets during enrolment required a special marquee set-up on the

campus, IT-equipped and of considerable size, with additional security, and much mileage covered by the press offices of UEL, Samsung, Kortext and others.[14]

Figures from October 2014 show JS with shops at 25 UK universities. Some of these HEIs will have more than one JS shop across their campuses, including permanent second shops and temporary 'pop-ups', often at the start of a semester. Six of these HEIs have virtual shops only, although with many HEIs shifting attention to international campuses and increased enrolment of international students who are not always on campus, the strategy is not surprising. Online shopping is available to all JS branch users (distribution being organized in a cascade initially from Southampton, then Glasgow and then others), but proportions of offline to online sales vary with each branch.

The bursary amounts available through ASPIRE can also vary enormously: from a one-time award of around £50 at Chester to a sizable £1200 staggered over three years at UEL. Most shops experience a significant spike in September and October, with 48.5% of sales in 2013/2014 during that period, and a lesser sales peak in February and March.[15] However, the impact of this seasonal variation differs greatly across the parameters listed – store location and identity, online and offline trends, bursary size and composition and so on – due not only to student numbers but also to proffered modules. Anglia Ruskin's Chelmsford campus runs in the region of 150–200 modules but its Cambridge campus runs in approximately 900 modules; creating dramatic differences in impact around semester start. By way of contrast, at precisely those shops that do not have ASPIRE (that requires verification on enrolment), the opportunity exists to make text bundles available to students before registration, and thus mitigate the semester-start rush. Necessary responses, desirable or even possible for each shop at high season, when around half of all trade takes place, will vary widely. Some shops may be tested to the breaking point, while others may remain relatively relaxed.[16]

Possibly because of more intensive central HEI management, some shop managers may conceive themselves of having dual roles: as service providers and as HEI partners. Others, where student services have fewer demands in regard to JS, may experience the two operations as a seamless match. Where there are bricks-and-mortar shops, there are good opportunities for the relationship between the HEI and JS to be developed, with the shop functioning as a hub for numerous operations in which the retail of print books is only a part. The campus shop gives JS a presence that online services and branded imagery alone cannot provide. Relationships with key reps can be developed; staff may come in to browse; explanations for anomalies in low penetration rates can be gathered more readily (hearing that the lecturer is on a research leave); and the doors on which managers knock in search of reading lists are always nearby. Since bursaries change from year to year, sometimes significantly, shop managers and regional and business managers can liaise on the information they gather from lecturer and VC-level contacts. Proximity makes it easier to pick up indications of changes in policy, fortune favouring the well-prepared visit, and word-of-mouth is instrumental in increasing the take-up of ASPIRE. But above all, unlike online provision, the bookshop has the clear potential benefit for students by becoming a welcoming refuge.

Relationships between the HEI and JS are reinforced outwardly in the cross-fertilization of imagery, which further integrates the specific JS shop into the campus life. The appearance of the ASPIRE card differs too for each HEI. Indeed, the University of Chester has no designated ASPIRE card but administers the Chester ASPIRE Scheme through the student card ID.

**Figures 1 and 2:** Sample of JS ASPIRE smart cards, from the author's archive. Note the subtle difference in emphasis of the JS logo: at UEL where is sits on the right of the reading line comparable in size to the UEL logo, to others where it is absent.

Due to Scotland resisting fee-paying regimes, there is no general basis for ASPIRE in Scotland. The Stirling shop, for example, runs off the sheer efficiency of its relations with the university and the shop's suppliers. Having said that, the University of Glasgow does have ASPIRE, with its own ASPIRE smart card, but only for its business school M.A.s (M.Sc. and MBA), who are fee paying. Its MBA students in 2014/2015 were even provided with a Samsung tablet with Kortext. This demonstrates a precedent. The opportunity exists for any JS store and indeed any HEI to adopt ASPIRE anywhere in the world where English-language academic texts are read in combination with a critical mass of fee-paying or corporate funding: for further fee-paying courses such as M.A.s, for other bursaries (merit- or VC bursaries) and various match-funded schemes with professional practice, or for groups such as international students (incl. English students abroad) and even researchers.[17] The future for JS appears to lead from where it began, in Glasgow. This is the shop through which many of the threads pass that tie JS together, threads weaving through both fee-paying and non-fee-paying conditions. In a nice symmetry with Glasgow's eighteenth-century past, perhaps, it is noteworthy that the Glasgow ASPIRE scheme is named 'Enlighten'.

**Conclusion**

The trade-off between regulation to trade and to bursaries in exchange for a sustainable supply of learning materials is one that benefits higher education. A radical liberalization of learning material supply will only produce adverse effects over the medium to long term.

This is due to the current nature of bookselling and to the structural conditions of higher education, particularly technological and financial: both are complex, and thus any interaction between them forms a hypercomplexity that only on-campus provision can hope to be sensitive enough to navigate.

Therefore, because the relationships between JS and the HEIs are so important, it is appropriate to ask where the power lies in these relationships. Turning to examples that incorporate ASPIRE as the most telling, we see several actors involved in the purchase of any given title. The bookseller's 'customer' is no longer just the student, since the buyer is split between payers and those involved in selecting the title. This leaves at least four actors involved in the purchasing decision: there are lecturers who design their teaching modules and select specific titles; there is the VC-level HEI management that sets limits to what kinds of items can be purchased, as well as agreeing the limits and timing of bursaries; there is the original source of the purchasing finance, which are parents or other actors covering fees; and finally there is the card-holding student, who carries out the transaction. More credibly as an aspect of supply, the negotiations between JS and the academic publisher, however, also affect reading lists, and so, strictly speaking, begin to overlap with those actors determining the purchasing decision.

There is no science that can measure precise differences in power but it is hard to see configurations where power resides solely with students. From some perspectives, students merely buy what they are told to, but that does not account for variation within a cohort and severely underestimates student autonomy. Parents have little say. Lecturers are influential, and at a greater distance; so is the HEI management, but neither makes the decisive final choice. Rather, the decision chiefly resides in the relationship between the lecturer and the student; in the trust between the lecturer and the student, and in the presence or absence of trust. That trust is largely a result of interactions within the HEI, and something a bookseller

cannot easily influence. Promotions of lecturer-authored titles, meet-the-author events for high-profile academics or measures to draw attention to lecturer achievements might help. Lecturer recommendations can be supported with external reviews or publisher materials, incorporated into the student support package. Evidence of lecturers responding to student evaluation of titles, as part of the support package, might also help. Further activities can be imagined, but, as always, such initiatives place burdens on lecturers and student support, who would need to see the advantages.

In terms of overall operations, in contrast to purchasing, other relationships come into play, primarily on three levels: between JS and students, at the level of shop and students, as well as JS management and student representatives; between shop staff and retail managers interacting with lecturers and, when appropriate, with VC-level operations management; and lastly JS regional, business and company managers liaising at VC level on issues of overall strategy, planning and operations. Alongside these, on the one hand, are State organizations that draw up policy and police it through bodies such as OFFA, and on the other hand those supplying the funds: from bodies such as HEFCE distributing public funds to higher education to, in the majority of cases, parents. Each actor has its own leverage, and will exercise whatever influence it can through its representatives. Time is a further factor that comes into play. Although the implementation of any new ASPIRE scheme can be completed usually within three months – run in tiers, first at company management level followed by operations – the decision-making and subsequent successful development of ASPIRE across an HEI can take years, during which time any number of policy, procedural or personnel changes may have occurred.

The one actor where access to decision-making in all these processes is greatest is the VC office, which in turn is driven by the stick and carrot of external targets and the HEIs management vision. How closely the interpretation of the position between carrot and stick is

linked to the personal temperament of the VC is impossible to tell. But many JS implementations and all ASPIRE schemes must pass through the VC office. Without the full enthusiasm of that office, those implementations will only underachieve.

The introduction of EPOS from the mid-1990s had a huge impact on book retail (Squires 2007: 33 ff.). Their augmentation by smart card schemes such as ASPIRE can only have similar lasting effects. In the estimate of one manager, the big change for JS as an academic bookseller is not so much the bursary funding, which changes the financial structuring of customer purchases, but more so the technologies that administer it, and that those technologies can be applied to bursary use. But while the future may well be data-driven, people must act on that data. HEI decisions are often made for internal cultural reasons, and data on occasion may frustrate the 'vision' set out by the HEI. Furthermore, the 'Eldorado' of overlapping interests can still remain confused when differences in what motivates the overlap are not appreciated. The roles around the communications circuit have become aggregated: publishers retail books and book retailers pursue activities formerly carried out by publishers (Squires and Murray 2013). A similar overlap now permeates progressive academic bookselling, with HEIs integrating commercial learning-material provision into their operations, and booksellers liaising on learning services. To navigate the technology and the complexity, people will still need to talk, slowly and quietly, and a bookshop seems the right place to do just that.

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Notes

[1] This report comes from a part of a larger project, 'Private Gains and Retailed Literature*:* Pathways to an Account of Reading based on Sustainable Economic'. Unless otherwise

stated, all primary material is derived from a series of visits to John Smith's UK branches, and interviews with management and staff, undertaken between September 2014 and February 2015. It draws too on a number of company documents that were made available, now part of the author's archive. Research interviews were also conducted with University student-support teams, and with students. Acknowledgement is due to co-investigators on the project Professor Alexis Weedon and Professor Claire Squires.

[2] The report regards bookselling as integral to what is known as the communications circuit (see Squires and Murray 2013).

[3] Each agency involved in the communications circuit is regarded according to the Actor Network Theory as actors whose interactions a posteriori create a given network. As such, actors need not be human agents, see Latour (2005) and for Actor Network Theory and the market, see Callon (2005).

[4] I am using HEI as a generic term for Higher Education Institute, but which in principle should also include Further Education College (FEC).

[5] Winning the Booksellers Association's annual UK award in the academic, professional and specialist bookselling sector in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2014.

[6] See http://www.johnsmith.co.uk/qmul.

[7] See universities of Bedfordshire, Anglia or Chester websites for three typical examples: (1) http://www.beds.ac.uk/howtoapply/money/funding/scholarships/aspire-card, (2) http://www.anglia.ac.uk/ruskin/en/home/student_essentials/student_finance_2014/undergraduate/funding/scholarships/books_plus.html, (3) http://www.chester.ac.uk/aspire.

[8] The observation is made in good faith, since this report has not examined accounting data to verify. It should be stressed, though, that any covert non-return of funds would damage perceptions of the ASPIRE scheme and, were there any cases of non-return, a transparent

reinvestment in learning opportunities for the next generation of ASPIRE users would be desirable.

[9] Clearly, the correlation can result from a combination of many factors. Undeniably, though, there is a correlation.

[10] So great was the need for documentation that, in 2011–2012, AMOSHHE, a national umbrella organization for student services, together with Anglia and the University of East London (UEL), along with three commercial providers (incl. JS), jointly developed a scheme to gather evidence for the effectiveness of targeted bursaries, which featured ASPIRE, under the title 'Financial interventions to assist retention and student transitions' (FIRST): supported by a £55,000 award from the digital technologies in the UK education and research charity JISC, see AMOSSHE (2012).

[11] Reminiscent of the *Kaisen* favoured by post-war Japanese business. But where Kaisen intends continuous incremental improvement, its modern counterpart might be continuous incremental innovation.

[12] For book tokens, see Mumby (1974: 315–16); Hall (2009: 51); and national Book Tokens, http://www.nationalbooktokens.com/customer-promise/gallery/Brief-History.aspx, accessed January 2015.

[13] See research blog entry from the University of Stirling International Centre for Publishing and Communication on 14 November 2014 (http://www.publishing.stir.ac.uk/2014/11/14/visiting-speaker-dr-simon-frost-bournemouth-university/, accessed January 2015). Also, interview with Nicole Redman, Assistant Director of Student Services, Anglia Ruskin on 20 November 2015 (documentation available from the author).

[14] For Samsung, see http://www.samsung.com/uk/news/local/university-of-east-london-to-provide-latest-samsung-devices-and-ebooks. For Kortext, see

http://www.kortext.com/news.php, for UEL, see http://www.uel.ac.uk/news/press-releases/2014/09/samsung.htm and for technology journalism, see http://www.computing.co.uk/ctg/news/2372200/samsung-gives-uel-students-4-000-tablets-while-exiting-europe-laptop-market-for-good and for BBC Online News, see Education and Family (http://www.bbc.com/news/education-29346992 [24 September 2014] [accessed January 2015]).

[15] Sales data from JS, held by author.

[16] Variation between shops can also be idiosyncratic. Because of an enthusiasm by one friend of the shop for unusual board games, Stirling offers these US-sourced 'cult' items to develop the attractions of the shop. The Glasgow shop is the nearest source of pens and pencils for students using the library.

[17] Beyond students, the other great body of academic text readers are researchers, whose reading increasingly passes through various green and gold open access funding schemes.