

St Andrews University Alt Format Suite

St Andrews is a beautiful town, always popular with visitors from Scotland and beyond. The sense of history and beauty abounds, and people are attracted to this part of Scotland for many reasons - the town, the golf and of course the University.

The University of St Andrews is the oldest university in Scotland and the third oldest in the UK. It is not a campus University per se, the different departments and buildings are closely integrated with the beautiful town of St Andrews, and one of the services at the heart of the University is the Alt Format Suite.

The service is housed in a beautiful cottage/gatehouse in the centre of the University and is managed by Paresh Raval. Paresh moved to St Andrews from Oxford University five years ago to set up the Alt format Suite. Previously any resources required in alternative format at St Andrews University were outsourced to external services, however building on the model at Oxford University Paresh along with his dedicated team of volunteers has created an excellent resource for students at the University of St Andrews.



Alt Format Suite - St Andrews

The Alt Format Suite plays a crucial role in ensuring that students with barriers to learning and print difficulties have parity of access to academic textbooks and written course work. The Alt Format Suite houses two state of the art recording booths, two PCs with OCR scanning software and a Braille Embosser.

What are the issues for learners?

Students who are blind, visually impaired, those with dyslexia and students with mobility/manual dexterity issues (often referred to as print disabled) have difficulty accessing traditional text, frequently finding hard copies of text in books or in handouts very difficult to read, manipulate or even navigate.

Electronic resources provide individuals with the opportunity to adapt and personalise resources to suit their preferences. For example the text can be accessed on their own computers and carried about on a USB pen drive, they can be personalised to suit individual needs, enlarged, the colour of font and background can be changed to suit the individual, if the electronic resources have heading structures added students can navigate long documents and move to specific parts of an electronic document with much greater ease. With the help of assistive technologies, information can also be read out loud or magnified using screen readers or magnification software

Copyright Issues

In May 2010 the Copyright Licence Authority issued a new 'Print Disability Licence'. This new licence extended the opportunity for people with print disabilities (and for the first time extended the license to students with dyslexia) to reformat resources into an accessible format. This might be Braille, MP3 versions, Digital Talking Books (often referred to as DAISY Books)ⁱⁱ or large print.

For the student, parity of access is the most important factor. For Paresh and his team and indeed for any organisation, accessing resources in alternative formats, timing and collaboration with relevant others to speed up the process is a crucial factor. In order to access course text in the students preferred alternative format Paresh first has to identify if this material is available elsewhere in the alternative format. If for example the same book is available elsewhere in the UK in an e-version at another university or in another library or indeed at the RNIB National Library Service then the Alt Format staff (Paresh) will try to access the copy from that University or indeed from the publishers - this process can take an extremely long period of time. If it is not available elsewhere then the team at St Andrews will go about creating that book in MS Word.

What Does the Alt Format Process Involve?

One of the issues that Paresh encounters is that often books required for many of the courses at the university are traditional resources such as classics, ancient history, philosophy or even Latin texts which are not readily available in electronic format nor are they easy to access elsewhere. The process for creating books in alternative formats is a long and fastidious one. The first stage in this process involves identifying students who require alternative formats and at this point the relationship with the Disability Service is crucial. This partnership approach also involves disseminating the exact nature of the students' alternative format needs, the collaboration with academic staff to ascertain the appropriate texts required including the stages that this may be required during the academic session. Finally the relationship with library and learning resources is integral to identify the source textbooks and help identify if the alternative format is available.

Students may require electronic versions of traditional books, for example in plain text, HTML, Word or PDF, this involves scanning the books using special Edge scanners. Paresh and his team often find that the original books have handwritten notes, doodles or scribbles added by previous borrowers, these additions have to be erased before scanning. If the graffiti is in ink, then Paresh has to decide whether it is worth editing out the ink in the scanned images using MS Paint or tidy it during proof-reading – post-OCR.

Processing and adapting the scanned resources through OCR Software (ABBY Fine Reader Pro v9) takes time; this scanning process converts scanned text into editable and searchable electronic text. Proofing the text carefully is important to ensure that it looks exactly like the original (including relevant footnotes etc).

Once the reading material is created in an adapted and accessible MS Word version, the print-disabled student can have the e-book in a format that suits them, i.e., Braille, Audio, Large Print, PDF. Paresh also tried dabbling in producing DOC_NAME.AZW files for the Kindle but the end product was not consistent and had to give up and offer the print-disabled student a Word or PDF file for their laptop. If students require audio version of books, the proofed-adapted e-book can be converted to an audio version by sending the e-text through a Text-To-Speech (TTS) engine: Paresh has Dolphin EasePublisher which is used to produce DAISY Talking Books. The Alt Format Suite can produce synthetic voices or invite volunteers in to record with human voices to create talking books in the audio booths.

Further Information about St Andrews Alt Format Suite

<http://www.altformat.org/index.asp?pid=250>

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/itsupport/academic/specialneeds/Alternativeformatsuite/>

Other Relevant Links

RSCTv - Accessing Information in Alternative Formats: a guide for lecturers, library and support for learning staff by Alistair McNaught of JISC TechDis (7th December 2010).

www.rsc-sw-scotland.ac.uk/rsctv/RSCTv.htm#archive

ⁱ http://www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=3_20

ⁱⁱ <http://www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/readingwriting/Talkingbooksanddaisyplayers/Pages/daisy.aspx> and <http://www.altformat.org/index.asp?pid=225>