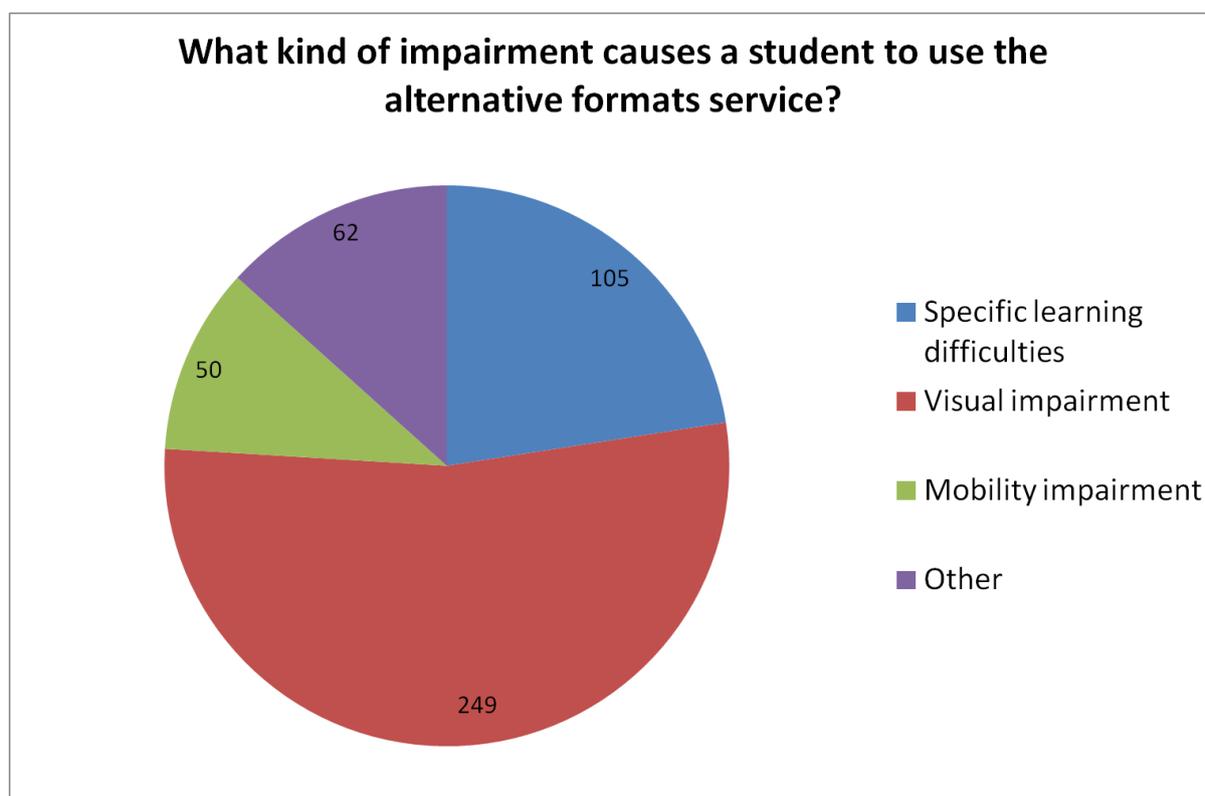


## Alternative formats: Impact on student learning

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The national ebook audit<sup>1</sup> highlighted the fact that many students who are print-impaired are also unable to use off-the-peg ebooks, so must rely on specific requests for texts in formats accessible to their particular needs (alternative formats or alt-formats)<sup>2</sup>. We set out to investigate the scale of this issue and its effect on student learning.

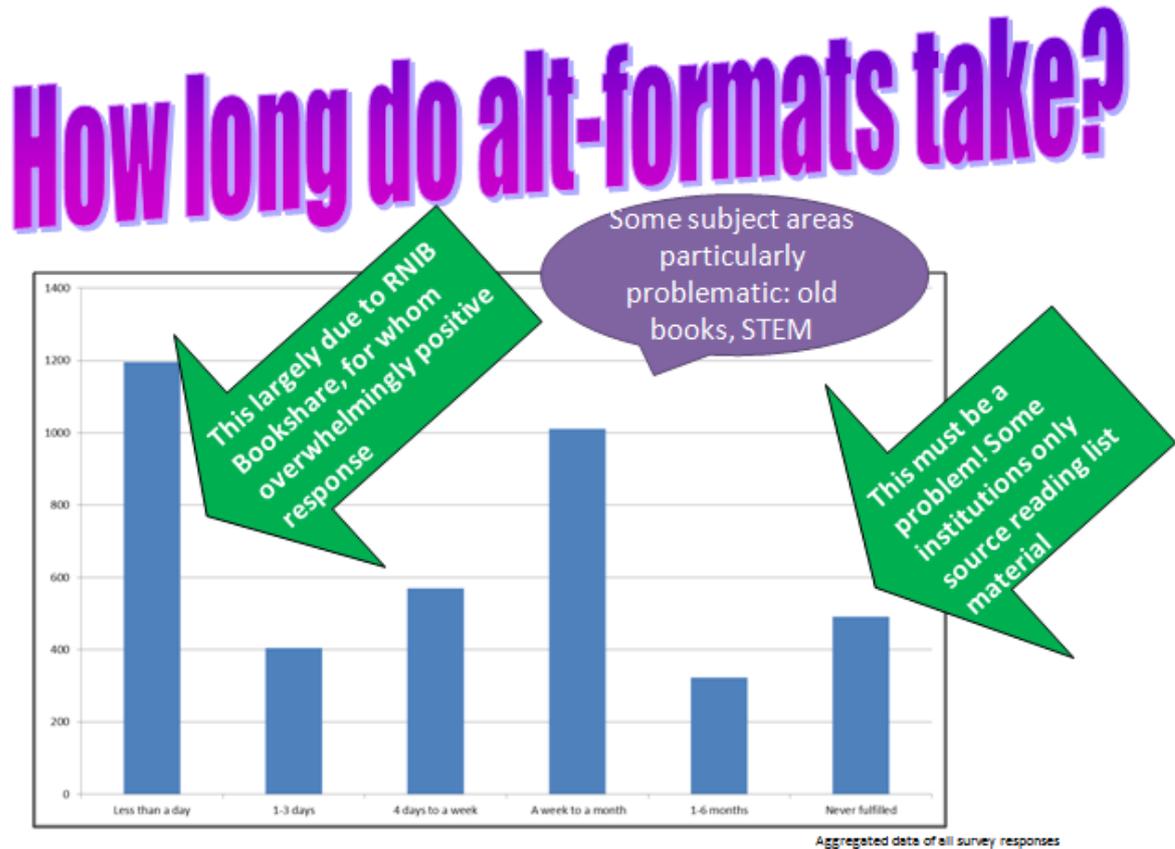
There are various JISC Mail lists concerned with library accessibility<sup>3</sup>, providing a massive potential resource of knowledge and assistance in the area. Our first step was to send a survey to the library and disability professionals on these lists to investigate their attitudes to the issue of alt-formats and their effects on student learning. We had 20 responses, of which 17 were from UK HEIs. The respondents provided alt-format services to almost 500 students with a range of impairments, mostly visual impairment and specific learning difficulties (eg dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia), with mobility impairments, autistic spectrum, ADHD and mental health difficulties mentioned



A big surprise was the number of students - almost 1/3 – who were entitled to use alt-formats services but never placed a request. How are these students finding their information? Do they stick to accessible resources such as the majority of e-journals or less formal avenues such as Sci-Hub? Are they relying on websites rather than books and journals and thus losing marks for less authoritative sources?

One big issue that came out of the survey was the length of time taken to receive alt-format requests. The RNIB Bookshare service<sup>4</sup> received unstinting praise for their role in reducing waiting

times, often resulting in requests being fulfilled instantly. But there was still a long tail of requests taking more than a month or never being fulfilled, which must surely have an impact on learning, especially as some institutions only order reading list material rather than “nice-to-have” background reading.



We asked if the number of requests was generally rising or falling and here opinion was sharply divided. Those who saw it fall had two broad explanations: one was that students come in with better coping strategies and staff are more attuned to support them; the other was to do with technical solutions such as SensusAccess<sup>5</sup>, RNIB Bookshare and ebooks. Those who had seen it rise, on the other hand, mostly attributed this to student behaviours: the students are more aware of the service and of their rights, and are encouraged to use it by good results and a single point of contact. Several also said that this success meant that print-impaired students read more widely because they could! Earlier diagnosis of cognitive disorders and help being put in place were also mentioned.

We asked respondents' opinions on the impact of reliance on alt-formats. The answers received demonstrated that this was a classic case of asking the wrong question! We wanted to know about the effect on student learning of reliance on alt-formats versus being able to access resources “off-the-shelf” as other students do. We got a lot of answers about the difference between reliance on alt-formats and having no support at all, which unsurprisingly produced many answers about the undoubted positive impacts of services. There were, however, some answers around the extra hurdle placed in front of print-impaired students of having to wait for alt-formats and of the lack of serendipity in the browsing process that even the smallest wait imposes. Respondents said that print-impaired students had to plan further ahead than their peers and one even said that they were

helping students to choose topics for their essays and dissertations based on the availability of accessible material rather than the students' preferences.

So the questions we were left with were:

- How do students who are eligible to use alt-formats but don't get their information?
- For those who do use alt-formats, what is the impact on their learning?

And the question we asked UXLibs was: how can we find out? We had already thought of interviews (face-to-face, Skype or telephone depending on the students' preferences) but discussions at UXLibs produced more innovative suggestions such as learning diaries, observation or love/hate letters about their information-seeking behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> McNaught, A., MacMullen, R., Smith, S. and Dobson, V. (2018) Evaluating e-book platforms: Lessons from the e-book accessibility audit. *Learned Publishing* 31 (1), 5-10

<https://sites.google.com/site/ebookaudit2016/home>

<sup>2</sup> A print disability is one that severely inhibits or prevents the student from reading traditional print materials. See <https://www.rnibbookshare.org/cms/bookshare-me/who-qualifies> for more details. An alternative format (alt-format) is a text that is provided to a student in the format of their choice if they cannot use print or an "off-the-peg" ebook. These will often take the form of a machine-readable PDF.

<sup>3</sup> LIS-Accessibility, DIS-Forum and Disability-Research

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rnibbookshare.org/cms/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://sensusaccess.com/>