

## **Spare a thought for students in Southern Africa**

Earlier this year an editorial in *The New York Times* asked the provocative question:

That book costs how much?<sup>1</sup>

For many students at tertiary institutions in Southern Africa the cost of overseas textbooks have been a serious issue for many years. A substantial percentage of students at tertiary institutions in the region come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even for students coming from more affluent backgrounds, expensive text books are often a problematic issue. To pay high prices, especially for imported books, remains a persistent obstacle. For many students it sometimes ends in uncompleted studies at universities and unfulfilled lives. Traditionally the argument has been that it has a lot to do with import duties and profits taken by local wholesale and retail distributors. The fact that the issue of expensive textbooks was articulated in the *New York Times*, suggests that students in one of the most affluent countries on the globe experience similar problems.

As a rule academic publications, apart from being used by students on under- and postgraduate level, have a limited readership. Once a book has been published, the chances are that it will be recycled and

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<sup>1</sup>. Editorial Comment: "That book costs how much?" in *The New York Times*, 2008.04.25 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/opinion/25fri4.html> (Accessed 2008.04.26).

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finish up on a second hand bookshelf at campus bookstores. We need to also understand the predicament of publishers. They need to make profits. The more they sell the more profitable (and cheaper) the publication may become.

Textbooks are important. They provide an important educational support for students. Experience suggests that electronic copies of textbooks also do not seem to be readily available – at least not in southern Africa.

At many education institutions agreements are in place to make use of portions of textbooks in teaching modules. Arrangements of this nature, as a rule, tend to create a viable middle way, to circumvent excessive costs. The question begs to be answered as to whether arrangements of this nature, over the long run, are beneficial to the educational process and later studies of readers of the books. Ultimately it revolves around the intrinsic value of the printed work and its longevity as an extension of the available knowledge of the student.

In an era of constant communications revolutions, access to reading material – which can be readily reduced in price, providing it is in electronic format – should be a lot easier and also cheaper. Having the hardcopy work is, and will remain for a long time to come, still the most desirable of solutions. However, given the clear call for more affordable text material, we should support solutions that can promote the cultivation of a next generation of literate and well-educated people in all parts of the world. The availability and cost of textbooks should not hamper this process.