Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Uneven Sustainability in Academic Publishing: A Call for Transparency and Collaboration

A Review of:
McCord, D., Cassady, S., Roman, P., Cato, J., & Mantz, E. (2025). Sustainability in Library Collection Development: Introducing a Green Audit Template. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship, 11*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v11.43852

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Abstract

Objective – To assess the sustainability practices of academic publishers and their alignment with library collection management, and to determine the nature of sustainable partnership opportunities at the intersection of library and publisher practices.

Design – A cross-sectional, unobtrusive analysis of existing content.

Setting – The academic publishing industry.

Subjects – Sustainability practices from 16 international academic publishers selected based on their prominence in Western Libraries' print book acquisitions.

Methods – The Green Audit Template, a rubric based on the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and industry standards and inspired by lifecycle assessment (LCA)

approach, was employed to assess various aspects of sustainability practices of the 16 publishers. The assessment relied exclusively on the publishers' websites and analyzed publicly available reports, corporate policies, and sustainability statements from the websites. The analysis focused on the trends found among all publishers rather than identifying major
differences between publishers.

Main Results – Notable variability was found in the sustainability practices of academic publishers, with transparency and commitment largely influenced by regional regulations, funding levels, and institutional capacity. Publishers based in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the European Union (E.U.), where environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting is mandatory, demonstrated the highest levels of disclosure, with all of them publicly sharing sustainability initiatives. In contrast, only 66% of North American publishers voluntarily disclosed such efforts, while 31% of all publishers lacked any publicly available sustainability information. Although 44% of publishers provided annual reports detailing environmental commitments, only half of them showed clear progress toward achieving their goals. In terms of sustainability commitments, 38% of publishers pledged to reach net-zero emissions, with target years ranging from 2040 to 2050. However, only two publishers had achieved ISO 14001 certification, an internationally recognized environmental management standard. Additionally, while 63% of publishers had signed the UN SDG Publishers Compact, the extent of their sustainability efforts varied, with some publishers focusing more on advocacy rather than implementing environmentally friendly practices. Material sourcing and production practices also revealed gaps in sustainability efforts. More than half of the publishers, 54%, reported using sustainably sourced paper, and 25% discussed their recycling processes, how they dispose of e-waste, or how they manage edition changes. Very few provided details on Open Educational Resources, servers, sustainable ink and glue. Transportation and infrastructure were also key areas of concern. While 43.75% of publishers reported implementing sustainable travel policies such as reducing business travel and promoting public transit, only 12.5% of publishers disclosed warehouse locations, and just 31.25% addressed eco-friendly shipping practices, primarily through strategies like reducing print production and minimizing plastic packaging. Among the 43.75% of the publishers that acknowledged sustainability efforts in their offices, a variety of practices were reported, such as using renewable energy, reducing in-office printing, using carbon credits, and funding reforestation projects to achieve carbon neutrality.

Conclusion – While some academic publishers are making progress toward sustainability, some of their practices vary widely. Government-mandated ESG reporting plays a crucial role in driving disclosure, with U.K. and E.U. publishers showing more comprehensive sustainability commitments compared to their North American counterparts. Larger publishers generally lead in green initiatives, while smaller publishers face challenges due to limited resources and capacity. The need for increased transparency and accountability in publishing is highlighted, and libraries and publishers are encouraged to adopt and adapt the Green Audit Template as a common reporting framework. Further research may delve into digital infrastructure sustainability, recycling practices, the role of smaller publishers in green initiatives, and collaborative efforts between libraries and publishers.

Commentary

This study is a valuable contribution to the discourse on sustainable collection development in academic libraries. Examined under The CAT: A Generic Critical Appraisal Tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014), this study is strong in the following areas: 1) the authors properly identified an important gap in research and provided clear explanations of how their study addressed this gap by evaluating sustainability practices in academic publishing; 2) the unobtrusive research design helped minimize bias by relying solely on publicly available data; 3) the data analysis instrument (the Green Audit Template), developed as a standardized rubric, offered opportunities for replicability and applicability of the study across different institutions; 4) consensus coding, where each publisher was assessed independently by at least two research team members, followed by a reconciliation process to

resolve discrepancies, ensured accuracy and consistency in the data analysis; and 5) sustainability-related suggestions for academic librarians, university administrators, and policymakers were properly informed by the findings and the literature.

The authors acknowledged several limitations that affect the generalizability of the study findings. One such limitation was the potential regional bias in the study's sample selection. While it included 16 international publishers, smaller publishers and those outside North America and Europe were underrepresented.

While the unobtrusive research approach ensures objectivity, the reliance on self-reported data from publicly available sources prevented the study authors from verifying the accuracy or completeness of publishers' sustainability claims. Without direct engagement, the study authors could not assess whether reported initiatives reflect actual practices, leaving the study vulnerable to greenwashing—where publishers present sustainability efforts without meaningful action. Additionally, the lack of interaction with publishers limited the researchers' ability to understand the challenges publishers face in implementing sustainability policies or to uncover internal efforts that are not publicly disclosed.

Since the primary focus of the study was on print publishing, there was minimal analysis of the environmental impact of digital resources, including server energy consumption, data storage, and e-book lifecycle emissions. Given that digital collections are becoming a larger component of academic libraries, this omission leaves an incomplete picture of overall sustainability efforts in publishing.

Although the Green Audit Template was developed through a comprehensive process, it lacked formal validation to ensure consistency and reliability across contexts. A stronger validation framework could have improved its credibility and standardized use in sustainability assessment for academic publishing. For instance, intercoder reliability testing using statistical tools like Cohen's kappa and a reconciliation protocol for scoring discrepancies would boost objectivity and reproducibility. An expert review, beyond publisher feedback, involving sustainability specialists and library practitioners, would align the rubric with UN SDG frameworks and confirm its practical utility. To strengthen its quantitative rigor, the study authors could incorporate benchmarking metrics and carbon footprint calculations based on publisher data. Lifecycle analysis using GHG Protocol standards could verify environmental impact claims and ensure measurable emission reductions.

Overall, this study highlights the critical role of libraries in promoting sustainability by incorporating environmental criteria into collection development decisions. It underscores the need for stronger accountability measures in academic publishing, and suggests that libraries, policymakers, and university administrators should advocate for standardized sustainability assessments to guide purchasing decisions and influence publisher practices. Future research may explore the applicability of the Green Audit Template. Some such applications: how aligning audit results with institutional sustainability goals could enhance transparency and support strategic planning, benchmarking, and reporting to leadership, accrediting bodies, and the broader public, and how audit findings might serve as a communication tool with faculty, helping to frame subscription decisions in terms of both environmental and financial sustainability.

References

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