

19 January 2022

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP  
Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you on behalf of many in our sector about the pricing and licensing of e-books by the academic publishing industry.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant borrowed materials haven't been returned and print material hasn't always been accessible to students and researchers. As a result there has been a sharp increase in the use of e-books for academic purposes, as they have often been the only purchase option for staff and students.

Due to UK copyright law, university libraries cannot simply purchase an e-book in the way an individual can – instead they are required to purchase a version licensed specifically for university use.

I hope you would agree that key to education and research in the current climate should be a healthy e-book market, but we in fact see the opposite.

Frequently academic books are not available to institutions to license as an e-book with only around 10% of academic titles available to universities in electronic format. A study by the Society of College, National and University Libraries and other sector stakeholders from 2018 demonstrates the extent of the problem - [Microsoft Word - CNAC Research Project Report FINAL with logos.docx \(sconul.ac.uk\)](#)

If an e-book is available to license by a university it is almost always more expensive, and frequently significantly so. E-book costs for a single user only can often be ten times the cost of the same paper book. Price rises are common, sudden and appear arbitrary.

Licences of e-books are often confusing for both staff and students, and frequently restrictive. Publishers can, and do, withdraw e-book licences previously purchased by a library and are increasingly forcing a new licence to be purchased annually for an e-book already in the collection. Academic titles in paper form are protected from this gross exploitation by publishers of library collections and budgets.

Where e-books are not available or are prohibitively expensive, copyright law disallows educational establishments from scanning whole books they own in print.

Given that much teaching has had to be conducted online recently, and university spaces have not been fully open, university librarians are examining reading lists and finding that much of the e-book content is either unavailable, or prohibitively expensive. The result is that many lecturers have had to design their teaching content around what reading is actually available electronically and what is affordable. I am sure you will agree this does not support a vibrant higher education sector producing world-beating research.

A few key players in academic e-book publishing monopolise the market and with a lack of competition or alternative options, universities are forced to either pay the extortionate prices, or not purchase the e-books at all – the latter being the choice many libraries have to pick as budgets won't cover the often exorbitant cost.

University library budgets are finite, and are frequently prone to cuts and UCU fears that further budget cuts may happen this year as we wait for the extent of the impact of the pandemic on HE institutions to become clear.

I am sure you agree that universities shouldn't be put in this position when all they are trying to do is provide students, researchers and staff with the necessary resources. UCU is therefore asking you to contact the Competition and Markets Authority to ask them to undertake a review of the academic e-book market so that we can ensure that research, information and ideas are accessible to those enrolling in our universities.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

Dr Jo Grady

General Secretary