

Dear [MP name]

I am an [academic librarian/researcher/lecturer/student etc], writing to ask you to press the government to launch an investigation into the academic publishing industry over its pricing and licensing practices regarding ebooks. This issue has been raised with the then Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan, by several of your parliamentary colleagues, and has been put formally to the Education Select Committee and the Competition and Markets Authority.

The COVID-19 pandemic, where many students and researchers were not able to physically visit libraries and access paper books, brought the many market issues regarding ebooks sharply into focus as ebooks have become libraries' only purchase option. As lockdown began in March 2020 we observed students borrowing as much of the print material that they needed as possible, but as libraries shut academic librarians then did their best to source digital versions.

Due to UK copyright law university libraries cannot simply purchase an ebook in the way an individual can – instead we are required to purchase a version licensed specifically for university use. Public policy to support education and research should support a healthy ebook market, but we in fact see the opposite:

Frequently we find that academic books are not available to institutions to license as an ebook. Various estimates from the UK Higher Education sector estimate that only around 10% of academic titles are available to universities in electronic format ([see this 2018 study from SCONUL for one example](#)).

- Where ebooks are not available or are prohibitively expensive, copyright law disallows educational establishments from scanning whole books they own in print.
- If an ebook is available to license by a university it is almost always more expensive, and frequently significantly and prohibitively so. Ebook costs for a single user only can often be ten times the cost of the same paper book. We see the monopoly created by copyright law being a root cause of these huge pricing differentials and no economic justification for it at all.
- Price rises are common, sudden and appear arbitrary. I can name at least two well-known academic publishers who raised the cost for a single-user ebook by 200% or more with no warning earlier this year.
- Licences of ebooks are often confusing for both staff and students, and frequently restrictive.
- Publishers can, and do, withdraw ebook licences previously purchased by a library and are increasingly forcing a new licence to be purchased annually for an ebook already in the collection. Academic titles in paper form are protected from this gross exploitation by publishers of library collections and budgets.
- Publishers are increasingly offering titles via an etextbook model, via third party companies, licensing content for use by specific, very restricted, cohorts of students on

an annual basis. Quotes for these are usually hundreds, or sometimes thousands, times more than a print title, and this must be paid each year for new cohorts of students to gain access. This is exclusionary, restricts interdisciplinary research, and is unsustainable.

Academic Librarians nationally have been crowd-sourcing examples illustrating the points above. They can be viewed [here](#). These are not exceptions but are now the norm.

Much ebook content is either unavailable, or prohibitively expensive. The result is that many lecturers have faced the prospect of having 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.

The state of academic ebook publishing is also a public-policy issue. A few key players monopolise the market and with the lack of competition or alternative options, we can either pay the extortionate prices, or not purchase the ebooks at all – the latter being the choice we increasingly have to pick as our budgets won't cover the often exorbitant cost of ebooks.

University library budgets are finite, and are frequently prone to cuts. Many libraries have suffered budget cuts in recent years as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on our institutions. We have been “doing more with less” for years but there comes a point where there is just not enough money to purchase digital resources at their current prices. This will inevitably have an effect on the quality of education and research in Britain's universities.

I hope this letter has stressed the urgency of this matter and you will take imminent action to ensure that research, information and ideas are accessible to those enrolling in our universities.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

[Your Name]