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**Michelle Donelan MP**  
Minister of State for Universities

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Alex Chalk MP

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18 March 2021

Dear Alex,

Thank you for your email of 18 November, enclosing your correspondence with the Chair of the Education Select Committee, about the costs of accessing e-books for universities. I am sincerely sorry for the delay in replying to you.

As you will know, the department is not responsible for matters relating to the pricing and licensing practices of independent academic publishing companies or copyright law.

However, we have been advised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that it is aware of the concerns being raised about the terms on which libraries of all kinds can licence and/or buy e-books from publishers.

The government recognises the value of the publishing sector as one of the UK's most successful industries and appreciates that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a significant challenge to many of DCMS' sectors, including the publishing industries. Through regular ministerial-led roundtables, working groups and contact with DCMS officials, the government will continue to work with the publishing sector to assess and understand the difficulties it faces in these challenging times and through recovery.

The government has provided unprecedented support for business and workers to protect them against the current economic emergency. The response has been generous and comprehensive, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme and the Bounceback Loan Scheme and business rates reliefs.

The publishing sector has also benefited from the government's introduction of a zero rate of VAT to e-publications, which will make it clear e-publications are entitled to the same VAT treatment as their physical counterparts.

We have also been advised by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that copyright is a private property right, so it is usually up to the right holder(s) to decide whether, or how, their works may be used by third parties. As such, this is a matter that falls outside the government's control.

With certain exceptions, the use of copyright material requires permission from the copyright owners who are entitled to charge for it. Sometimes such permission can be obtained directly from the rights holder, but often it is granted in the form of a licence from a third party, such as a publisher, that has been authorised to grant such licences.

Ultimately, copyright licences are private, commercial agreements between the parties concerned and the government plays no role in them.

The Office for Students (OfS), as the higher education (HE) regulator in England, is aware of the major changes to all aspects of work, life and study as the disruptive impact of the coronavirus outbreak has continued to unfold. It has adapted its regulatory approach to support providers at this time and reduce the regulatory burden. This has enabled providers to prioritise their response to the disruption caused by the outbreak and to focus on their students.

Providers that are registered with the OfS must ensure that all students, from admission through to completion, have the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from HE. In addition, providers must comply with their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that education and learning is accessible to all students.

Guidance for providers published by the OfS makes clear that all HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards. Providers must continue to provide sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience during the coronavirus pandemic. When making changes to the delivery of their courses, providers must consider how they support all students, particularly the most vulnerable, to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.

As English HE providers are autonomous bodies, it is a matter for individual providers to ensure that students have the support they need to succeed and benefit from their HE experience.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Donelan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Michelle Donelan MP**  
**Minister of State for Universities**