

5 February 2021

Mr S Lotinga
Publishers Association
50 Southwark Street
London SE1 1UN

Dear Mr Lotinga

Open Letter to the Publishers Association

We start 2021 with the rapid roll-out of vaccines against COVID-19 and the hope on the horizon that at some point - perhaps even within a few months - we might begin to return to some type of pre-pandemic normality.

Until then, however, we face continued restrictions and the UK’s highest case and death rates of the pandemic. All of the home countries are in some level of lockdown. And while many university libraries are physically open to some extent, most students at UK universities have been told to study remotely and not to return to campus. Regulations vary across the devolved nations, but students at English universities, for example, are not expected to return until mid-February at the earliest, while in Scotland it will be March before the majority of students return. For many, teaching and learning will be entirely online for the coming term. And even for those students on campus, the UK Government has advised that universities should aim to limit ‘the number of people travelling to and from university facilities, including libraries’.¹ Physical resources should not be accessed unless absolutely essential.

During the first lockdown, many publishers were quick to react to the seriousness of the situation and to offer extended online access to their resources, so mitigating against some of the immediate problems caused by restrictions on libraries. SCONUL and RLUK were amongst a group of UK bodies that welcomed these moves by publishers.² As we said in our statement of 20 March 2020:

“Over the last week we have seen publishers, aggregators and suppliers of digital content and software come forward in offering a range of solutions

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-18/138877>

² <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/rluk-and-partners-call-on-providers-of-digital-content-to-help-research-communities-during-covid-19-crisis/>

to help institutions maintain their teaching and research activity during this time of crisis. On behalf of our members, we would like to thank you for providing open access to research in support of Coronavirus/COVID-19 and putting in place access options that remove limitations on use and users.”

These solutions were obviously always going to be time-limited. And although library services have never completely re-opened to their pre-pandemic levels, the initial reaction of publishers helped libraries navigate through the particularly troubling initial period and the first lockdown.

Unfortunately, universities in the UK find themselves in much the same situation as at the start of the pandemic and that first lockdown. With students required to stay away from campus the need for online access is as acute today as it was last March. Our members strive to provide as closely as possible the same experience to students studying remotely as those on campus. Unfortunately, licencing terms and conditions often mean that this parity of experience for students cannot be realised.

In our statement last year, we listed ten ways in which publishers could help the HE sector. Not all include making all content universally available, but all would improve learning, teaching, and research in the UK and help to show publishers’ partnership role.

We would ask the Publishers Association and the publishers you represent to look again at what you could do to support UK higher education and research as we pass through this difficult period. We would particularly urge publishers to permanently remove additional access barriers and related charges to institutions for registered students studying at a distance and move away from the per-FTE e-textbook pricing models.

Best wishes



Ann Rossiter
Executive Director, SCONUL



David C Prosser PhD
Executive Director, RLUK