

# Foreword

Madeleine Atkins

Higher Education Funding Council for England

In 1840, the essayist Thomas Carlyle wrote that “the true University of these days is a collection of books”. On this evidence alone, it’s safe to say that Carlyle may not recognise the universities of today. Decades of significant developments in pedagogy, research methods and journal publishing, enabled by expansion, globalisation, research assessment, and the impact and knowledge exchange agendas have transformed our understanding of what a university can be, for the better. The UK’s universities are dynamic, innovative and inventive places, geared up to embrace and solve the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Were he alive today, Carlyle would however no doubt be comforted to see that books of all sorts – textbooks, monographs, edited collections, critical editions and exhibition catalogues – continue to be hugely important to authorship, scholarship and education in many disciplines. He might therefore be somewhat disconcerted to learn that many people feel that the book is falling out of favour in academic life, with electronic journal articles and electronic course materials becoming more prominent in all universities, and with one university in the USA even having opened a new library containing not one single physical book.

Whether the book is in jeopardy is debatable. But the great challenge to conventional print books is obvious: the twin developments of digital text and the internet have brought about major and rapid advances in all areas of our lives. All of us are now accustomed to writing and producing our own documents electronically, communicating electronically, storing and retrieving information

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electronically, and, increasingly, accessing it anywhere on a wide range of devices. In this context, the humble print book can feel rather anachronous and students will rightly expect at least basic electronic access to their course books in the same way that they can access almost everything else they need: freely, immediately and online. As students' demands change, a transition to the print book's successor, the ebook, therefore seems both necessary and inevitable.

This publication by Jisc Collections describes very lucidly the current state of such a transition. Through some really eye-opening examples, we see how ebooks have been incorporated successfully into educational practice, improving the learning experience for students, particularly students with disabilities and distance learners. We see exciting partnerships with research institutes, the development and promotion of an ebook app, the creation of an open living book, and new collaborations with ebook publishers and vendors to provide access to e-textbooks to students. Such success stories reflect well on e-books more generally, showing us that they are reaching the level of maturity needed for widespread adoption. And the benefits here extend beyond the purely practical, as described neatly by the University of Leicester who recognise that ebooks can help them improve teaching, reduce costs and enhance the student educational experience.

If the encouraging stories told in this publication reveal anything, it is that ebooks are perhaps even more necessary and inevitable than previously thought. But in examining the situation further, we are acquainted with some of the significant challenges that ebooks have yet to overcome, most chiefly around functionality, curation and access. These challenges are not insignificant and should not be underestimated. One of the most pressing of these is the challenge of delivering open access to research publications, maximising their potential readership and impact on wider society. Open access has its own distinctive drivers and opportunities, as have been outlined here by Peter Suber, and are fully recognised by HEFCE in our own policy for open access in the next REF exercise. But open access for books has substantial cultural, technological and financial challenges, many of which are not well understood. I am also delighted that this publication will be followed up in 2015 by a much-anticipated report by Professor Geoffrey Crossick on the opportunities and challenges for monographs and open access, which will help to illuminate our understanding of this difficult area.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities must be at the forefront of embracing the opportunities brought about by new technologies as well as understanding and overcoming their limitations. For these reasons, I warmly welcome this new publication on ebooks in education, which sheds much-needed light on the significant opportunities for ebooks to transform and improve the learning experience for students. Throughout this publication the inventiveness and perspicacity shown by academics and librarians to deliver improvements to education by embracing the opportunities of ebooks are striking. It is clear that the future of ebooks in higher education is in safe hands.