Executive Summary

Background
The briefing paper was commissioned by the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) to examine the current picture and evolving role of electronic textbooks (eTextbooks) and third party eLearning products in the academic arena. The study reviews industry trends, identifies the major players and considers the different stakeholder perspectives of eTextbook adoption. Within the context of learning and teaching in the digital age, specific areas of research, policy and practice are highlighted to consider the implications that eTextbooks might have for universities in general and for university libraries in particular. An environmental scan focused on the analysis of current developments and the anticipated future directions of digital learning resources in Australia, as well as in other major English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. This research guided the development of key interview questions aimed at examining, at a deeper level, diverse stakeholder perspectives about the roles university libraries can play in the adoption of digital learning content.

eTextbooks and open textbooks
The first generation of commercial eTextbooks were page-fidelity or print-fidelity (PDF) products representing exact screen renderings of the pages of a printed textbook. More recently, eTextbooks have evolved into products that support increased interactivity through embedded multimedia objects, such as audio, video, 3D models and interactive pictures. Students are able to make their own annotations or share their notes with other students, and assessment tools can be integrated into the resources. The larger educational publishers have established their own eLearning products accessed through web-based portals where students can engage in immersive enquiry with the content and social interactions with other students through the learning activities. Open textbook publishing offers new collaborative opportunities for authors through communities of practice, with the ability to design and collate content from a range of sources in a variety of formats. Open content is free for all to use, and to adapt and change as needed. The lines between textbooks and software tools are blurring as different tools allow people to build their own digital units, to link to and to share learning content in many new ways. It is predicted that online learning systems, both commercial and open, will ultimately replace the traditional textbook.
**Advantages and disadvantages of eTextbooks**

eTextbooks have a number of positive aspects, including portability and access, allowing them to be used anywhere, anytime. They offer the user the ability to search, highlight and annotate the text, and the flexibility to cut and paste, copy and print, although digital rights management (DRM) may effect tight controls over the content. The multimedia and interactive features support diverse learning styles and promise to make students more excited about and engaged in their learning. There are, however, some perceived disadvantages to eTextbooks, many relating to the variety of eReader devices and the lack of common file formats. Licence conditions can be restrictive, limiting access to a single user on a single device, with time limits on access to the resource. Users need to consider the costs associated with acquiring an eReader and their readiness to study in a digital environment, both in terms of their information and media literacies and the actual user experience of navigating and reading in an on-screen environment.

**Educational technologies and learning**

The study reports on some of the trends in educational technologies which are likely to impact on eTextbook adoption: people expect to be able to work, learn and study whenever and wherever they want. Increasingly, students want to use their own technology for learning and educational paradigms are shifting to include online, hybrid and collaborative models of learning. The rapid take-up of the iPad and tablets is not only driving up consumer acceptance of digital content, but is also likely to transform how learning materials are delivered. Educational publishers will be required to repurpose content so that it is delivered in small packages that can be aggregated and adaptive learning programs will use learner analytics data to examine the students’ precise level of knowledge and skills, thereby directing them to the exact material they need to study to achieve the desired learning outcomes. It is feasible that the learning content will adapt itself to an individual student’s learning style, eg more pictures and video for the visual learner, and introduce interactive quizzes that reinforce the specific concepts that the student may find challenging. The move to digital content will therefore facilitate new literacies for students, require lecturers to develop fresh pedagogies and offer opportunities for academic institutions to regenerate curriculum design.

**The eTextbook market**

The existing textbook market hinges strongly on the notion of ‘prescribed textbooks’. Prescribed texts are common in some areas of study, such as in undergraduate courses in business and the sciences, but are less common in the humanities and social sciences where students are encouraged to read widely about a specific topic. A prescribed textbook in one university course may only be recommended reading in another, or not be used at all. Increasingly students avoid buying new textbooks, preferring to make do with second hand copies, to share or photocopy the text, to access the book in the library or to just use Google instead. Students are likely to resist the move to digital texts if the academic staff do not actively utilise the resources in their teaching; there is already a low student uptake of activation keys or supplementary online materials where it is included in the price of a printed textbook.

The standard business model for print textbooks is the ‘student pays’ model. Students are expected to purchase their own textbooks and libraries only acquire a relatively small number of textbooks for the collection, in comparison to the overall student numbers. This ensures that universities comply with the provisions of Commonwealth Higher Education Support Act 2003 and the Higher Education Provider Guidelines by making set textbooks available to students free of charge through the library.
The regulatory provisions that stipulate that the university should provide students with access to prescribed textbooks without cost will need to be carefully scrutinised when or if publishers distribute their textbooks in digital format only, as this will require libraries and publishers to reach agreement on the licensing conditions for eTextbooks.

Any proposals to make eTextbooks more widely available through the university library are received warily by publishers. In the United Kingdom some publishers have made eTextbooks available to libraries as part of their subject collections and/or aggregated collections, regarding it as a potential new revenue stream, but others were not willing to risk a decline in sales with their textbook titles. A major change to the traditional economic model of textbook publishing, with disruption to the publisher’s revenue stream, would be inevitable if libraries were to become the principal provider of access to eTextbooks. Increasing interest in open textbook publishing will present further challenges.

**Licence models for eTextbooks**

There are many different licence models for eTextbooks: hybrid (print or digital options), key technology access, direct to consumer, purchase of individual chapters, ‘just-in-time’ access, lifetime access, purchase plus subscription for updates, site licenses, consortial licences, and rental schemes. Any shift of emphasis from library collection to user access will require new funding models: library budgets would need to be reconfigured if academic libraries were to procure and manage digital licences for eTextbooks. It may be timely to trial new pricing models based on user-need through some pilot projects that can be closely analysed from all stakeholder perspectives. The current lack of evidence based practice has led to some universities, particularly in the United States, being interested in experimentation in order to develop appropriate business models.

**eTextbook policy and practice in Australian universities**

There is considerable diversity of educational philosophy and practice across the different universities in Australia. The level of interest in and potential for the adoption of eTextbooks and eLearning solutions depends on where an individual institution sits along the spectrum of face-to-face/blended/hybrid/virtual learning. In some universities, approaches to learning and teaching were driven by the fact that their students came to campus for the direct classroom interaction, while in others the strategic intent to maximise the affordances of new technologies was outlined. The level of potential acceptance of eTextbooks may be determined by the degree of importance of the learning management system (LMS) in the institution: where the LMS is a key component of the academic program, it is likely that a stronger interest in digital resources will emerge.

At the institutional level, there is an appreciation that developments in the eTextbook field are happening haphazardly and with little coordination, and that many universities are not yet fully prepared to address the issues. The successful adoption of eTextbooks and third party eLearning products inevitably involves multiple stakeholders: LMS support, eLearning designers, ICT support, T&L committees (faculty and university), academic policy makers, bookshop and library. However, institutional diversity means there are centralised vs decentralised structures, with varying models of cross-institutional communication, different levels of technological infrastructure and disparate levels of interest and experience in eLearning.
A wide range of issues needs to be considered across the university when considering the acquisition and implementation of eTextbooks, including the business models and price negotiation, contract negotiation, financial management, legislative requirements and technical factors. Third party eLearning solutions may potentially not only supplement, but even replace some of the university’s proprietary learning materials. Quality assurance becomes a critical issue not only for the academic staff at the local level, but for the university as a whole. The actual role of the academic as a ‘teacher’ may be questioned, and by extension, the institutional brand of the university itself may come under scrutiny. The situation may be even more complex when professional accreditation or Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) processes come to bear. Some universities are adopting a coordinated approach to managing third party learning solutions, for example by establishing a working party under the auspices of the university’s Learning and Teaching Committee which can explore the issues in depth and make recommendations about policy and procedures.

**Opportunities and challenges for university libraries**

There is a very strong sense that the time has arrived for a fundamental shift in learning and teaching, with the disruptions anticipated in the eTextbook paradigm representing a microcosm of the changes that are likely to occur across the higher education sector. There are certainly gaps in our understanding of the complex eTextbook environment and how it might fit into the rapidly changing context of educational technologies. There is considerable uncertainty surrounding the issues of content delivery, academic acceptance, student demand and institutional readiness for the transformations that have been forecast. University librarians have a unique blend of knowledge, skills, experience that has value within and across the diverse areas of the academic institution. By working closely with both teachers and learners, they appreciate their diverse needs and they are sensitive to the interplay between pedagogies, information skills and learning outcomes. They also have a well-developed understanding of the technical requirements associated with eResources and can provide academics with advice and guidance about the range of issues to be addressed and managed. Their expertise in licence negotiation gives librarians excellent opportunities to ensure that appropriate licence models are introduced for new digital resources.

The significant role already played by university libraries to develop information and media literacies should not be underplayed. Academic librarians can help members of the academic community master and apply new digital literacies, they can support the development of integrated policies and strategies for learning through their work as ambassadors across organisational boundaries. Digital pedagogies encourage a technology-enabled personalised learning environment where self-directed and inquiry-based learning can flourish. Partnering with faculties and students, the library can strive to integrate and embed information research and learning skills into the curriculum in undergraduate and postgraduate courses and to run professional development programs to build the academics’ own digital skills. Library staff must keep abreast of emerging developments in learning technologies and develop strong relationships with other stakeholders in order to understand the changes in educational practice which will potentially impact on the university community and to develop innovative new services that will meet the needs and expectations of students and staff. This new territory may mean developing new skill sets in order to provide more specialist expertise in the evolving eLearning environment. While academic libraries will not be immune from the winds of change, they are well positioned to face the challenges ahead.