HESA AOR code 4 case study

Provided by The Open University for the TNE licensing pilot

A partnership to support the development of an online library for the Arab Open University

Introduction

The Arab Open University (AOU) is a non-profit higher education institution now working across nine different Arab states. At the time that the Open University in the UK was working with the AOU, it operated in seven Arab states (Kuwait, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Oman) with its headquarters located in Kuwait. It opened in 2002 and was approved as a partner institution of The Open University in December 2003. As a pan-Arab distance teaching institution it increases access to higher education particularly for young people, women and those who are unable to access publicly-funded universities. Approximately 45% of the total student population of the AOU at the time was female. When we worked with the AOU, they licensed and adapted course materials from The Open University to support delivery of three undergraduate degree programmes, taught in English. Two postgraduate qualifications were also validated on the same basis. One undergraduate programme, taught in Arabic, and with course materials developed by the AOU was validated with local accreditation.

UK OU Library Services first explored offering online distance library content and support to the Arab OU in 2006.

The first contract was agreed in 2006, subsequent agreements were negotiated annually except the final agreement which covered two years until 2013.

The AOU library relationship was managed at the time by the, now redesigned, Library Services Business Development team in liaison with University Business Development Unit and Curriculum Partnerships Department. The Open University Validation Services (OUVS) and the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum (CIC) merged in 2012 to become the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships (CICP).

For 4 years, the agreement partially funded a 0.5FTE Grade 7 Partnership Librarian post in Library Services. Having additional staff resource to assist with licensing and service delivery was a key element in our ability to deliver this service.
Key services included

The below were only applicable to OU courses licensed by the AOU.

- A customised range of licensed and open access resources to support the needs of the AOU students and staff studying courses on the OU curriculum and organized as required by AOU.
- Email access to the UKOU Library Helpdesk support for information enquiries (excluding technical enquiries) for AOU students and staff. Student & staff response time to be within 48 hours, with the exception of English statutory holidays. Additional charges for helpdesk to apply when enquiries exceed 500.
- Project management and professional advice to the nominated Vice Rector responsible for library services and the designated University Librarian by conference calls, meetings and emails.
- Research, website development and professional support to the designated University Librarian.
- Website monitoring, checking and reporting of the Bahrain (or designated) version of the VLE (or the web based website when implemented).

Our approach to licensing content and issues that arose

Before we started the process of licensing content we needed to work out what it would cost us in staff time, both to cost our involvement and to provide advice about the staff input that would be needed when the AOU ran the service with its own staff. We also needed to agree a content budget with the AOU.

We developed a costing methodology based on our experience negotiating content for our own students. This comprised a process evaluation with timing, staffing and costing of each stage of the process to arrive at a cost for a single negotiation.

We assessed the subject content of the courses being licensed by the AOU which were mainly in Business, Management and Economics and Computing and ICT. Additional curriculum in English Literature and Software Development was added at Masters level in the 3rd year of the contract.
We approached publishers and aggregators with whom we had existing business relationships. Our first contact was with the UK Account Manager to discuss core content that we already licensed and that UKOU students on the same courses used. We then negotiated price and access for each of the 7 AOU locations.

**Challenges, issues and successes**

We established from the start that the UK OU had no plans to offer network access to AOU students, so our work was to assist the AOU in building its own online library rather than trying to licence access to ours.

Staff at the AOU who were responsible for establishing the online library service were not Librarians. They had been given responsibility for the library in addition to other roles, so it took time to train and build dialogue with them.

It was difficult to establish a budget for the content that the AOU would be willing to pay. This made scoping the range of potential content and work with suppliers more challenging.

There were national differences between the 7 sites and no single AOU network. Some of the AOU locations had existing library provision, some with access to online content already established, mainly through aggregators. We needed to be sensitive to this and not disenfranchise existing relationships at some of the sites.

Aggregators tended to want very detailed information about numbers of students at each location and this data was difficult to obtain.

We wanted to provide costed options for 1-3 years’ access but had no projected student numbers to give to suppliers as the University was growing unevenly in different locations. Success relied on establishing clear dialogue and trust and goodwill with suppliers largely due to our established UK-based business relationships.

Finding the right person to talk to was sometimes challenging. Sometimes we were put in touch with the Account Manager for the Middle East and sometimes the UK Account Manager was responsible for that territory.

Different business models and styles of doing business exist in the Middle East. We were advised about the expectations for business meetings in the Middle East being somewhat different to the style of UK business meetings.

Eventually our proposal for a relatively small number of contracts to quite large resources from Ebsco, Oxford University Press was agreed. Contracts were signed between the publisher and the AOU with Claire Grace advising the AOU of its responsibilities under the terms of those contracts.

Renewals were undertaken by the UK OU for the first year but this responsibility transferred to the AOU in subsequent years. Additional resources were licensed to support additional curriculum. The AOU then took over all development of its online library service.

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