

# Mission Impossible!

## Setting up a branch library in Dubai

■ Mandy Harper and Frances Machell

In 2018, the University of Birmingham (UoB) officially announced that it would be opening a branch campus in Dubai, the first global top 100 and Russell Group University to do so. UoB is initially operating out of an incubator building within Dubai International Academic City, a free zone dedicated to educational institutions, and offers taught programmes in four subject areas: business, computer science, mechanical engineering and education. In spite of the small size of the incubator space, University staff were encouraged from the outset to think about how Dubai would offer a comparable quality of experience to the campus in the UK.

Library Services had been aware of the University's plans since 2017, and therefore had already started considering the challenges. Due to the size of the building, there would not be a separate library space or separate library staff in Dubai: instead the library would be incorporated into the general study space, and would be

overseen by a cross-functional team of professional services staff. Against this backdrop, we formed an internal library project team to think about the range of different services required to set up a branch library from scratch, from support for academic skills through to how students would borrow and return books. In this article, we will be mainly focussing on the work relating to reading lists, and acquiring and licensing content.

### Identifying resource requirements

One of the first tasks was to determine which information resources would be needed by staff and students in Dubai. All first year courses would be taught programmes, and so we made an early decision to use resource lists to drive content selection. However at the start of our project, while programme design was its early stages and recruitment of academic staff had yet to start, those resource lists did not exist for Dubai modules. We therefore decided to take the





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lists from the UK equivalent modules as our starting point, and on that basis colleagues from the Library Academic Engagement Team went out to the academy to gather up lists. A briefing paper, clearly setting out what Library Services would do and how we would go about it, was presented to Education Committees and meetings were set up with programme and module leads.

As the project moved on, however, it became clear that this would not be the full solution. As recruitment got underway and new programme leads planned their teaching, they started to revise lists or create new ones. There was also a wide variance in academic expectations and understanding of the principles and processes behind the University's reading list system ResourceLists@Bham. Good communication and management of expectations was key, although not straightforward given that much of it had to be done at a distance. Giving members of the Engagement Team dedicated responsibility for Dubai helped, as did setting up a single point of contact for queries, rolling out resource list workshops and ensuring Engagement Advisers are now involved in new Dubai staff inductions.

### Access to electronic collections

The next big question was how we were going to provide access to content. Electronic resources

were known to be a major challenge. Due to technical limitations around authentication, and the difficulty of restricting access to a sub-set of resources, we needed to be able to make all (or as much as we possibly could) accessible. In addition, the focus on Dubai had highlighted other transnational and partnership activity in which the University was involved, and which also needed addressing from a licensing perspective. Such a huge and potentially costly project needed a systematic approach.

During summer 2017, we undertook a full scale audit of all our resource licences which allowed us to identify and obtain any missing documentation. All licences were recorded on our electronic resource management system to allow easy review of the relevant licence terms. We were then able to identify licences which already provided for overseas access, and licences that required amendments or clarification. To be transparent with the vendors, we drafted a briefing paper clearly explaining the University's transnational and partnership activity, including student and staff numbers and their relationship with the University. It was clear that the status of our overseas staff and students was exactly the same as those in the UK so, unless licence terms explicitly referred to UK only or site specific access, we took the stance that access would be

allowed. We were assertive in this approach, negotiating with suppliers and publishers where they did not agree or wanted to charge significant fees. Full disclosure was important and so we contacted all 383 publishers and vendors, covering 990 licences, prioritising multi-disciplinary, high-volume, high value resources first; then resource list content; followed by everything else. Ebsco, our subscription managers, helped us by contacting the long tail of vendors which they manage on our behalf.

The scale of the task seemed daunting at the start but the effort paid off. All of our publishers/providers have now been contacted and, although we still have some outstanding queries, the response has been much more positive than expected. 64% of providers confirmed there would be no additional fees for a total of 645 resources. 21% did levy additional fees but in many cases these related to our UK validations rather than the transnational activity. Only two declined to extend access, of which one was BoB and covered by the ERA licence so an expected outcome. Through negotiation, a 65% overall reduction on the original quotes was achieved.

### Developing a print book collection.

By comparison with resources, building a print collection should have been straight forward. We would use our preferred UK supplier, send books to Dubai shelf-ready and use established processes to order and receipt the books. Unfortunately, due to delays in the necessary licences, we were not able to ship books via this route in time for the campus opening, and we needed a 'plan B'.

'Plan B' involved buying books in country via the team of professional service staff in Dubai. Two local booksellers were identified and asked to provide quotes for the title lists compiled from resource lists. However, as they were bookshops rather than library suppliers, they did not stock everything and struggled to source all the books we needed. Many of the titles had to be sourced from the UK which created additional delay. The order and invoicing process itself was complex and bureaucratic, and to further complicate matters we were dealing with multiple quotes as the volume of resource lists increased.

Using non-library supply also meant that books would not arrive shelf-ready. The local

professional services team had no prior experience of library work and their focus was on getting the campus ready for the start of term, and so we decided to send UK staff out to Dubai to process the books. Whilst this entailed travel costs, the benefits were numerous: the UK staff had existing expertise which allowed them to work efficiently, solve problems as they arose, and provide on-site training, not just in book processing but in a whole range of library related processes and systems.

Thanks to the hard work of both UK and Dubai based staff, we now have around 2,000 items on the shelves, and have started ordered titles for

semester 2 and beyond. The university's import licence is in place and we are working with our existing suppliers to embed shelf ready Dubai book ordering into business as usual activity.

### Welcome to the Dubai Campus!

Teaching started in September 2018 with the first cohort of 100 students, and the University is already planning its next steps, with expanded programmes for 2019/20 and its purpose built campus is due to open in 2021. Library Services are working on converting its project into business as usual, and managing the ongoing relationship with the Dubai campus as the student cohort becomes established.

### About the Authors:

Mandy Harper is Head of Collection Development at the University of Birmingham where she has strategic and operational responsibility for the acquisition and discovery of information resources. Mandy has over 12 years' experience working in libraries including working at Eversheds law firm before moving into the HE sector. Frances Machell is Head of Collection Management at the University of Birmingham. She has over 15 years' experience of working in academic libraries and has recently led internal projects to set up the Library Services offer the University's new Dubai campus and to coordinate the implementation of an upgraded library management system.



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