

SUPC Case Study: Coventry University Textbook Campaign



Universities are under more pressure than ever to deliver value for tuition fees. So when Coventry University launched its *Promises Campaign* – a campaign aimed at delivering on the promise that students would get more for their tuition costs – there was considerable pressure to meet student expectations. One of the most challenging projects under the campaign was to distribute 20,000 textbooks to 3000 first-year students – a considerable task led by the Procurement Team, but requiring the cooperation of several university departments. Coventry’s Director of Procurement, Mike Hanson, and Procurement Manager, Michael Duffy, take us through the key challenges they faced and the factors that supported their success.

Prior to September 2012, a number of Universities, including Coventry, had some experience of delivering free textbooks to students. However, such initiatives were fairly limited in scope and were usually run within departments. With the launch of the *Promises* campaign, Coventry needed to set their sights on something much bigger. 20,000 textbooks. 3,000 students. Never before had Coventry University attempted to offer free textbooks to students on such a large scale.

One of the first challenges was assessing the market. Coventry’s Procurement Team conducted a considerable amount of research looking into retailers and wholesalers, and met with several suppliers to assess capability and to stimulate interest in the project. After a thorough examination of what was available, the team decided to tender under the SUPC’s Joint Consortia Book Agreement. Mike Hanson cited the suppliers’ proven track record within the Higher Education sector as one of the reasons for choosing the framework, stating: “Our market research indicated that there was little to gain in going out to open tender. The SUPC framework included many of the parties best suited to fulfilling our needs.”

After deciding to use the SUPC agreement, the University conducted a thorough further competition, giving all potential bidders the opportunity to suggest innovative ways to deliver. Ingram Coultts Ltd (Coultts) was appointed as the preferred supplier, having best met the evaluation criteria. Coultts discounted their rates significantly against recommended retail prices. Coultts also provided additional services such as free delivery and staff (provided free of charge) to assist with the distribution of books to students.

“Cost savings were key,” said Mike Hanson. “But so were the additional extras. By appointing under the framework agreement, not only did we achieve great savings, but we also acquired a trusted partner, one that was completely engaged with the projects’ aims and objectives.”

Although the experience was a first for Coventry, it was similarly challenging for Coultts, who had never delivered anything quite like this before either. Coventry worked closely with Coultts to implement the proposed solution. Innovative ideas like a customised barcoding and distribution system helped contribute towards the success of the project. As Michael Duffy explains, “The University couldn’t accommodate delivery of all of the textbooks at once, so Coultts scheduled delivery days by faculty.” Duffy added, “The supplier used unique barcodes on each pack to make sure the right students received the right books the first time around.” Coultts also supported the University in the marketing and communications aspects of the project.



A further challenge for the Coventry team was to keep a firm hold on the distribution numbers. As anyone who works within a university knows, student numbers and class registrations fluctuate up until the first day of term. This presented a significant problem for the team and their chosen supplier. To manage this as best as possible, the team was constantly reviewing and assessing the needs of departments.

“Early, proactive and continuing communication was essential to the successful delivery of this project,” noted Duffy. “We needed to work closely with several different University departments, set regular meetings, and conduct regular assessments to ensure everything went smoothly.”

As classes got underway, Coventry University saw the successful distribution of free textbooks to its first-year students. By week two of term, more than 90% of textbooks had been placed with the correct students.

When asked about the key factors that supported the project’s success, both Hanson and Duffy identified market research, early engagement with various University departments and having a defined and structured procurement approach as essential. By ensuring that communication occurred throughout the project, and not just when a problem arose, the Procurement Team was able to keep a close eye on potential issues and address them with the supplier quickly and effectively.

The project was such a success, Coventry extended their free textbook scheme to second-year students in September 2013 and the scheme now covers all undergraduates at the university.

The successful delivery of the project led to Coventry University winning the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award for Outstanding Procurement Team in 2014.

For more information about this project, email University of Coventry Director of Procurement Mike Hanson at mike.hanson@coventry.ac.uk.

For more information on SUPC and our agreements, visit www.supc.ac.uk or email supc@reading.ac.uk.

