

To boldly go – creating an online library for alumni

The Alumni Library Online (ALO) service at Cranfield University was launched in 2007, following many months of planning and negotiation between administrative departments within the University. The article looks back at the original reasons for developing the service and highlights some of the motivational factors and issues arising from this. It examines in more detail the licensing of relevant products and goes on to show how the service was put together. Finally, it looks at the lessons learned during this project and how these are being acted upon to move the service forward.



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Cranfield University – one of the top five research-intensive universities in the UK – comprises Schools of Applied Sciences, Defence, Engineering, Health and Management, whose areas of expertise include aerospace, automotive, bioscience, defence and security, energy, environment and manufacturing.

Within these schools students represent over 100 of the world's nationalities and, unique in the UK, they are all postgraduates. Compared to other universities in the UK the student population is small.

Like all other universities, Cranfield University has a key imperative to build and maintain strong links with its alumni body. However, unlike other institutions, it does not have the advantage of a body of undergraduates ready to feed into post-graduate programmes so the need to recruit and retain customers is paramount. One reason why these relationships have been difficult to develop in the past was because responsibility for the forging of links with alumni bodies was through individual Schools, with no one person in the University responsible for this. More recently, the Alumni Office within the University's Business Development Office has been co-ordinating alumni activities and when the Library raised the concept of an online library for alumni it was seen as a positive means of uniting the University with a tangible benefit to former students and future ambassadors.

Historically the preoccupation with library services for alumni has been in offering access to book stock, but this does not set the alumni apart

as a privileged and 'special' customer group in the same way that remote access to online resources does. It also sets an unwelcome divide between those who live within easy reach of the library (Ferguson, 2000) and those further afield – the majority in the case of Cranfield alumni. It is interesting to note that a recent survey, carried out by the British Business Schools Librarians Group, to look into the provision of library services for alumni (Smith et al., 2007), found that the concept of delivering an entirely electronic alumni library service is still an innovative one.

There was a strong business case for developing an online library service and high motivation from all our stakeholders to ensure it got off the ground. Key to it all was the fact that our customers – having been intensely trained and versed in their use by the Library whilst on their courses – were asking the Library for continued access to electronic library resources after their study. Having had access to several hundred online databases whilst studying at University it is not easy to explain to ex-students exactly why their status has shifted in the eyes of the database suppliers. A key factor here is an understanding of the terms and conditions imposed by suppliers' licences which strictly detail the need for usage to be 'for your own personal use' and not 'for commercial gain or exploitation...' (Sykes, 2002). Furthermore, Faculty and School management teams were working hard to maintain contact with students beyond their time on campus. Bearing in mind the strong links with business and industry that make Cranfield

University unique, any networking opportunity must be beneficial.

The Library's plans to create an online library for alumni was based on the desire for a focused service that provided support for personal lifelong learning. The concept was presented to the Alumni Office with the knowledge that here was a tangible benefit for alumni that would continue their association with the University and provide a springboard from which they could launch new services and initiatives.

For the Library, however, there were other aspects to take into consideration, the most important being the need and desire to maintain existing strong relationships with our suppliers. This was a theme that had to be emphasized time and again during the course of the project and the whole business of juggling differing priorities and expectations was a recurring theme of project meetings, with the library team steering a course through it all to ensure service integrity and realistic ambitions.

Licensing

Having established the remit for the online library service, the Library took the lead in establishing the content that was required. The potential customer base for the service took in a huge range of disciplines and research backgrounds yet databases featured in the new electronic library were to be licensed for personal development use only. Suppliers were approached and of the ones that responded positively, many replies carried a note of caution with them of the 'we'll keep an eye on it and see what happens' approach.

These responses served to reinforce the view, as mentioned earlier in the article, that this extension of licensing to include ex-students is still a largely unexplored one. Only two suppliers – ProQuest and EBSCO – actually acknowledged that they had become aware of a need for an alumni product and were already working on a solution for this. They were willing, however, to go ahead with a trial for the Alumni Library Online (ALO) using their standard products but with the knowledge that an alumni version was imminent. (In fact, by the time our service was launched, the alumni products were ready to roll out.)

The six database suppliers that we secured agreements with were all already providing

extensions to licences to enable our short course executive development customers remote access to their content. We had clear procedures in place to ensure that all these customers agreed and signed their acceptance of the terms and conditions laid down by the suppliers and by the University for their usage and we were keen to make sure that suppliers were reassured that these same strict procedures would be in place to authenticate our alumni customers. This commitment to user authentication was key to our relationship with suppliers and to the integrity of our service.

The process

Considering the complexity of issues that have to be tackled to launch such a service it is perhaps hardly surprising that there are so few university libraries spending time and money on developing electronic access to library resources for anyone outside their core customer base.

Setting the expectations of users is a common theme in libraries, and never more so than in developing a remote access information resource for alumni (Dudman, 2005). In Cranfield's case this has revolved around the two issues of database coverage and availability. Unlike other online alumni schemes, Cranfield has attempted to create a service to cater for all graduates of the University whether they are from the Business School or any of the other departments on the campus.

The outline of our main aims was straightforward: to transfer the current model used for managing alumni access to the management library into a university-wide system that would be enhanced by the following:

- online application and renewal forms
- online tick-box for remote acceptance of terms and conditions of use
- membership information to be stored on CEDRIC, the University's student database managed by Registry
- automatic renewal generation
- online payment.

The ALO was created to enable Cranfield University alumni access to information resources anywhere in the world at any time. It would operate with the minimum of administration and allow members to be as self-sufficient as possible.

It was clear this was not a Library project in isolation. Expertise of colleagues from various

University functions was vital. Based on previous experience we knew that IT was key to the success of the project and that as we were now offering a service to the whole university, not just the School of Management, we could draw on a greater range of resources than was previously available. Administration of the alumni service had always been very labour-intensive, particularly as the process was largely manual, and streamlining this was now paramount.

We decided that in order to attract people to sign up, there should be a tiered service offering. The ALO would be a free package providing quick access to University research databases, plus ManagementFirst; and a fee-based package known as Alumni Library Online PLUS would provide the rest of the content. Marketing and promotion was crucial and the Business Development Office brought invaluable project management and marketing skills and a clear understanding of the needs and wants of alumni.

Discussions with marketing colleagues suggested that current library subscription rates of over £100 were too high and too much of a commitment, whereas a charge of around £50 was considerably less than the cost of many professional membership subscriptions and offered clear value for money. We worked out that we would need about 325 alumni to register for the PLUS service to cover the costs of database subscriptions; a target deemed realistic by all involved.

There were two teams of IT specialists involved. The library team was tasked with achieving secure access to databases, ideally with just one user login and password required. (Under the 'old' alumni scheme, each alumni subscriber would be e-mailed a list of passwords unique to each database. Some were assigned by the supplier; others were generic passwords that we had to recreate every three months and e-mail out to members – one even had to have a login assigned to each subscriber individually.)

All but one of the databases selected for the ALO PLUS service was accessible via ATHENS so this quickly presented itself as an option. We already had an ATHENS licence for executive development delegates in the School of Management so it was reasonable to assume that this might be the simple solution. However, there would always be the dissatisfaction and inconvenience of knowing there was still a supplementary password to be issued to each alumni subscriber, and uncertainty about the

future of ATHENS and the path the University would take with regard to this and Shibboleth.

In the end, through much liaising with suppliers to obtain the correct referring URLs, it was possible to create a secure login page using EZPublish, through which databases could be searched without the need for further logins and passwords.

Online registration and payment were essential to the success of the scheme, therefore input and co-operation from the central IT team was vital. This was a particularly tricky area to negotiate as IT specialists had huge workloads and plenty of demands on their time from other projects, and actual practical experience of setting up electronic payment processes, as it transpired, was limited. Their confidence in tasks "not being a major issue" was therefore not always justified and did lead to some frustrating delays in launching the ALO.

The forthcoming service launch was promoted through the various channels created by the Business Development Office, including the glossy alumni magazine and e-zines that were distributed by e-mail. In reality, the actual launch was delayed until just before the Christmas break. A decision was made to 'go live' with the free service in the belief that people could sign up for this now and then upgrade to the PLUS service when it was launched in the new year. A bulk e-mail was distributed to everybody who had already registered their interest in ALO. We then broke for Christmas and returned in January in eager anticipation of the registration numbers.

The reality and lessons learned

The desire for a fully automated online library has fallen slightly short of the mark but has the potential to become this later next year. A combination of time, resource availability and technology has meant that although electronic registration, renewal and payment has become a reality, there is still very much a need for the human intermediary to make databases and systems 'talk' to each other.

The Library Secretariat receives registration requests and electronic payment confirmation then has to search the Registry database to validate the alumni status. They create a username and password in EZPublish and e-mail these details to the alumni in question. All these details are then entered onto an Access database which has to

be searched manually to identify memberships coming up for renewal.

From the alumni point of view, the ALO is very much 'self-service', and initial feedback about its ease of use has been positive although an online survey of members carried out a couple of months ago did highlight issues around communication and content that we were already aware of and were working to address.

A key lesson learned from the project is that it will always take longer than you think. Working with individuals from departments across the University inevitably means that individual priorities and workloads will vary considerably and some degree of organizational politics also holds back progression.

The setting of user expectations is also paramount. Although we promoted the service to its target audience prior to its launch, in hindsight this turned out to be too far in advance. It was inevitable that in the delay, some alumni felt that they had then missed out on communications that said when the service had actually been launched. The timing of the launch was not ideal as by then we had missed out on capturing the body of students leaving and graduating in that year. We have certainly improved on this and in June and again in September this year we e-mailed all graduating and leaving students inviting them to a two-month free trial of the ALO PLUS service and information also went out in leaving packs.

User expectation has also to be managed with regard to database content. There is a danger, for example, that a graduate of the School of Applied Science might consider the service to be biased towards the business and management disciplines. Having had access to several hundred online research databases whilst studying at Cranfield University, it can be hard for the new alumni to see the ALO service as a benefit, instead dwelling on the withdrawal of access to useful resources. Under the banner of 'lifelong learning', however, and with supplier licences on a sure footing, we do feel that there is a market for this service and have

been actively involved in taking the message out to all areas of the University, particularly careers departments and course directors.

It is anticipated that the next stage of the project will involve moving the administration of the ALO into the University's registry database so that alumni, who will have password access to this database, will be able to update their own personal records and select the ALO from a list of special interest groups available from within the secure website. This can only reinforce the original remit of the ALO which was to build advantage for the University rather than being a vehicle to generate income for the library service, and if this can happen soon, and the Library is able to cover its costs, then the project can certainly be deemed a success.

Further reading

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