



Guide for Procurement Teams Buying Media for Higher Education

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A man and a woman in business attire are looking at a tablet together. The man is wearing glasses and a dark suit jacket over a light blue shirt. The woman is wearing a dark top. They are both looking down at the tablet held by the man. The background is a blurred office setting.

The lowest cost doesn't always mean the lowest risk.

Media services are one of the most difficult categories to evaluate fairly. On paper, procurement frameworks balance cost and quality. In practice, pricing is easier to standardise and compare – while performance is delivered over time and harder to evidence upfront. This creates a gap where proposals can appear comparable, but deliver very different outcomes.



The challenges

Limited transparency into media costs	Pricing inputs are inconsistent	Pricing models are not standardised
<p>Access to ad accounts is not always contractually defined.</p> <p>Without full visibility media costs can include undisclosed mark-ups and true value becomes difficult to assess.</p>	<p>Requests such as “cost per 1,000 impressions” assume like-for-like conditions. In reality, costs vary significantly based on: audience targeting, geography, timing etc.</p> <p>Without consistent inputs, agencies can provide misleading numbers.</p>	<p>Agencies may use: % of spend, fixed retainers, hourly rates, blended or hybrid models</p> <p>Each model incentivises different behaviours, making direct comparison challenging.</p>
Pricing can be optimised for scoring	Limited opportunity for commercial alignment	Performance is harder to evidence upfront
<p>Without reviewing how ambiguous a matrix is, pricing may look great.</p> <p>Agencies can manipulate matrices to provide low headline costs, simplified assumptions, reduced visibility on delivery approach.</p>	<p>In many sectors, pricing is refined through negotiation or alignment post-submission.</p> <p>Rigidity can mean procurement teams may not see how agencies would respond commercially in practice.</p>	<p>Quality responses outline approach, but:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimisation happens during delivery • Performance depends on ongoing decisions • Reporting standards vary <p>This makes it harder to compare how effectively agencies will manage spend over time.</p>



A pricing matrix is only useful if it reflects how media actually works for institutions

Before relying on pricing scores, consider whether your matrix accounts for the following:

1. Are inputs truly standardised?

- Have you defined audience, geography, and channel assumptions?
- Are all bidders working from the same campaign scenario?
- Have you removed flexibility that could distort cost comparisons?

Without consistent inputs, pricing comparisons can be misleading.

2. Have you defined delivery expectations?

- Is the level of optimisation clearly specified (e.g. frequency, approach)?
- Are expectations around testing and iteration consistent?
- Is team structure and seniority defined?

Different delivery models can produce very different outcomes at similar cost.

3. Is reporting clearly specified?

- Have you defined what dashboards should include?
- Are data sources consistent (platform, GA4, CRM)?
- Are metrics and attribution models aligned?
- Is reporting frequency and depth standardised?

If reporting isn't defined, accountability isn't comparable.



4. Does pricing reflect reality?

- Are fees separated clearly from media spend?
- Is there full transparency into platform costs?
- Are assumptions realistic, or optimised for scoring?

Headline costs don't always reflect true delivery cost.

5. Are you evaluating performance, not just price?

- How will success be measured post-award?
- Is there a clear optimisation framework?
- Can performance improvements be tracked and evidenced?

Media value is created during delivery, not at proposal stage.

6. Can the decision be defended in 6 months?

- Will you be able to explain where budget was spent?
- Will performance be clearly attributable?
- Will reporting stand up to scrutiny?

Strong evaluation reduces future risk.



A group of diverse office professionals in a meeting, smiling and looking at laptops. The image is overlaid with a blue and purple gradient.

**A well-structured pricing matrix
should reduce ambiguity – not introduce it.**

Want to know more?

Get in touch for an honest agency perspective on your media evaluation approach.





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