The e-measures pilot

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INTRODUCTION

Measuring provision, spend and use of electronic resources has long been a concern for libraries. Data on provision are complicated by the variety of formats and packages available, while spending figures are often subject to institutional finance systems designed in a more straightforward age. On usage, providers have responded, offering a plethora of statistics for different resources, which Project COUNTER[1] has done much to standardise. While these are, generally, excellent as management statistics on which to base collection development decisions, they can be less useful on their own on an aggregate basis, to describe the library collection, or to present the wider picture for UK higher education sectors.

When e-measures questions were first introduced to the SCONUL return, in respect of 2003-4, they were informed by the HEFCE-funded e-measures project which Evidence Base at Birmingham City University had run in conjunction with SCONUL, and which had involved a number of SCONUL libraries in testing possible e-measures before they were introduced to the SCONUL return. Now more publishers follow the COUNTER codes of practice for reporting usage data, and there is more consistency. At the same time, e-resources are becoming so important in libraries that a review of how they are presented in the SCONUL statistics was thought to be timely.

Successive years have seen an increase in the number of libraries able to report on their use of e-resources in the SCONUL *Annual statistics* and a higher level of consistency in responses. At the same time, increased use and changes in the way e-resources are delivered have led some libraries to question the detail of some of the original definitions used and particularly to suggest that statistics required and reported on by SCONUL do not always match the requirements or practice of the libraries themselves. At the first two SCONUL statistics workshops run by LISU in 2008-99, discussion on e-measures focused on the definitions used for e-journals, e-books and databases and the need to ensure that the data collected for SCONUL matched as far as possible the way libraries are themselves recording their use of e-resources.

Planning for change

The SCONUL Working Group on Performance Improvement (WGPI) and its statistics sub-group have been aware of these issues, which have led some SCONUL members to question more generally the reliability of the e-measures results in the Annual statistics. The original e-measures project provided a considerable resource, which resulted in significant improvements to the measures collected and to the SCONUL returns. Although WGPI has aimed, through its regular business, to address the issues as far as possible, it was clear that more resourcing would be required to provide a comprehensive review of e-measures and to improve their relevance and consistency. The rapidly changing nature of the electronic resource environment meant that conventions established a few years previously had quickly become outdated. A proposal to provide resourcing for a full review of the e-measures collected was approved by the SCONUL Executive Board in 2009, and twenty libraries were recruited to trial a new or revised set of measures.

THE E-MEASURES PILOT PROJECT

The aim of the pilot project was to ensure that the e-measures questions in the SCONUL *Annual statistics* were sufficiently robust to give confidence in their use in a national/international context and in assisting SCONUL members to benchmark their own results against other libraries. In order to achieve this the following objectives were set:

- to review the current e-measures questions and their definitions

- to draw together feedback on any issues with current e-measures and any proposals for change
- to look at the approach taken by other national library associations, for example, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), for ideas and examples of good practice
- to make recommendations for amendments and/or additions to the existing e-measures questions

The project was coordinated by Pat Barclay, Angela Conyers and Claire Creaser, all members of the WGPI statistics sub-group. Following an initial meeting of interested parties early in the project, a set of possible questions was developed in an Excel spreadsheet. It was clear right from the start that practice between libraries varied, and in seeking to match the statistics requested with the way libraries themselves worked we were setting ourselves an almost impossible task. Twenty SCONUL member libraries bravely volunteered to compile data during 2009-10 and to make quarterly returns to test how easy the data were to obtain, how reliable they were and how well they aligned with institutional requirements. During the course of the year, the categories and definitions were adjusted in the light of comments received, and a final set of questions was incorporated into a wider revision of the SCONUL annual statistical return.

As well as providing figures, libraries added comments on how easy/difficult it had been for them to collect statistics on the new e-measures and some also produced working papers, which were useful in seeing how the results had been arrived at and the amount of work it had entailed.

A little over halfway through, in April 2010, a workshop was held for all participating libraries, as a forum to exchange views and to inform the final decision on what would go into the new return. Those present were able to discuss the data received so far and made useful suggestions and comments. There were 17 participants from fifteen pilot institutions and it was a lively and interesting meeting which raised a number of questions both in relation to the new e-measures questions themselves and to the way in which they would be used by library directors and by SCONUL itself.

Pilot data for the full year are now available, with figures being supplied by fourteen of the twenty

pilot institutions. Because these were collected only as a pilot exercise, we have not presented any figures here. The new questions have been incorporated into the return for 2009-10, along with a number of other changes, although it is likely that it will be a year or two before the full effects have worked through to provide enhanced data across the membership.

The new e-measures questions
Foremost among the changes affecting the e-measures questions in the SCONUL statistical return are the following:

Inclusion of e-journals and e-books held within databases in the count of serial and e-book titles
In the original e-measures questions, serials and e-books held within databases such as ABIInform, Business Source Premier or Early English Books Online (EEBO) did not count towards the total number of serials and e-books reported. It became apparent that this approach did not follow the practice adopted by libraries and resulted in an underestimation of number of titles for those libraries that had opted for databases rather than journal packages or e-book collections. This led to confusion – and even contention – on what constituted a database and what a serials or e-book collection, for which the 'definitions table', intended initially just as a guide, came under increasing scrutiny. Under the new model, the definitions table is redundant, and there is an element of apparent double counting – for example, EEBO is counted both as a particular number of e-books AND as one database in the relevant sections.

Addition of free titles or titles purchased in previous years
In the original e-measures questions, free resources were not included, as it was felt that this would depend very much on how the individual library chose to treat them. Now, with more open access titles, and more titles free at the point of use through JISC Collections offers etc., it was felt important not to neglect this category of resources.

This question also allows libraries to record titles purchased previously (for example, journal backfile collections, or certain models of e-book purchase). This is intended to provide a more accurate picture of the resources available.

Addition of database searches as a usage measure
In the first set of e-measures there had been no usage measure for databases, as at the time few vendors were supplying reliable Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources

(COUNTER) compliant data. It was felt that this omission could now be rectified, so that there are now separate usage measures for e-journals (COUNTER JR1), e-books (COUNTER BR2) and databases (COUNTER DB1). It is recognised that there are still suppliers in all these categories who do not yet supply COUNTER compliant data, and it is hoped that libraries will give the nearest equivalent in these cases.

Separation of costs of different types of e-resource
The problem some libraries have found in separating out their content and spend on print and e-resources has made it difficult to chart the trend towards increasing emphasis on e-resources and to produce reliable figures for use in a national or international context or for benchmarking. The new e-measures aimed to get a clearer picture of e-resource content, use and spend by asking libraries to differentiate where possible between content held as e-journals, e-books or different types of database, and to separate out the costs of each. In this way, 'costs per download' can more reliably be used as a performance indicator.

Although this looks complicated, the intention is to allow libraries flexibility in the way costs are reported, as well as being able to link costs, usage and resources in the most appropriate way. Using the EEBO example above, the cost of licensing this resource, entered as an e-book database, should contribute to both the average cost per e-book title and the average cost per database, but should not be double-counted in the total cost of e-resources or information provision.

Some issues to consider

How will the new e-measures statistics be used?
While some aspects of the new e-measures questions were appreciated by pilot members as reflecting more accurately actual library practice, there was a question over whether the amount of detail involved in establishing a set of performance indicators for e-resources was worth the effort it would entail. At the same time, the group wanted to introduce new measures, for example, counting the number of items in the institutional repository, which demonstrates the tension that exists between capturing new trends and creating extra work.

It was also apparent that among a group that was responsible for the actual collection of the statistics there was a strongly held view that the considerable amount of time and effort that went into the collection of the statistics was not always fully appreciated by library directors or justified in terms of the use to which they were put. Pilot members were often unsure how the statistics were used within their own institution, whether the performance indicators were used and more worryingly whether the statistics that had been collected were viewed with confidence.

The SCONUL statistics workshops run by LISU include presentations by library managers on how the statistics are used within their institutions. It is hoped that these sessions give those responsible for collecting the statistics some idea of how they can be used, and conversely those who use them some idea of the work that goes into collecting them.

Longer term trends
As an organisation, SCONUL is often required to provide trend information about various aspects of library activity, including e-measures provision and use. Many individual members also use trend analyses as part of their regular performance monitoring and benchmarking exercises. We were therefore concerned that the changes introduced should be compatible with the previous regime, so that wherever possible (and wherever the data were sufficiently complete and reliable), it would be possible to compare data collected on the new return with that on the old. It is partly for that reason that some of the detail has been included – to maintain the integrity of trends while the transition is made from statistics based on the 'old' e-measures to the new.

Can SCONUL provide more help?

In asking individual libraries to provide a detailed count of the number of titles in serials collections, databases and e-book collections, a large amount of duplicated effort is involved in libraries having to approach publishers individually for this information, which is not always easy to obtain. During the pilot project we looked at the approach adopted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the USA, and at work done in Australia by the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). There was a strong view from the workshop members that SCONUL could help considerably by providing a central resource that listed all the major collections available commercially and the number of titles in each, as is done in Australia by CAUL. While such a proposal has resource implications that will need to be addressed once more feedback on the new questions has been received, some help towards this is now being investigated, by looking at the possibil-

ity of including some of the worksheets produced by pilot members as part of the performance portal.

Conclusion

The WGPI do not expect that every SCONUL member will be able to give figures in all the new categories sought. If these chime with the way in which your institution collects its data, excellent. If not, complete what you can, fill the return with notes and explanations, but do not spend inordinate amounts of time re-analysing or recompiling data that were never designed for this. There are many more categories than there were before, because the landscape of e-measures has become increasingly complex in recent years, and providing figures which can be compared between libraries and aggregated across them to give the headline figures needed for strategic advocacy on a national scale has necessitated a more detailed breakdown than in the past.

The SCONUL statistics are a tool and servant of the members, helping libraries to run more effectively, and at the same time providing valuable evidence on UK academic libraries and their activities to the wider world. It is hoped that the new e-measures questions, as tested by the pilot project, will provide a reliable picture of the use of e-resources across the sector and will be useful to libraries individually or in benchmarking groups in assessing their own usage. The ways in which libraries will respond to the new questions over the next few years will demonstrate how successful this aim has been.

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Note

1   http://www.projectcounter.org/