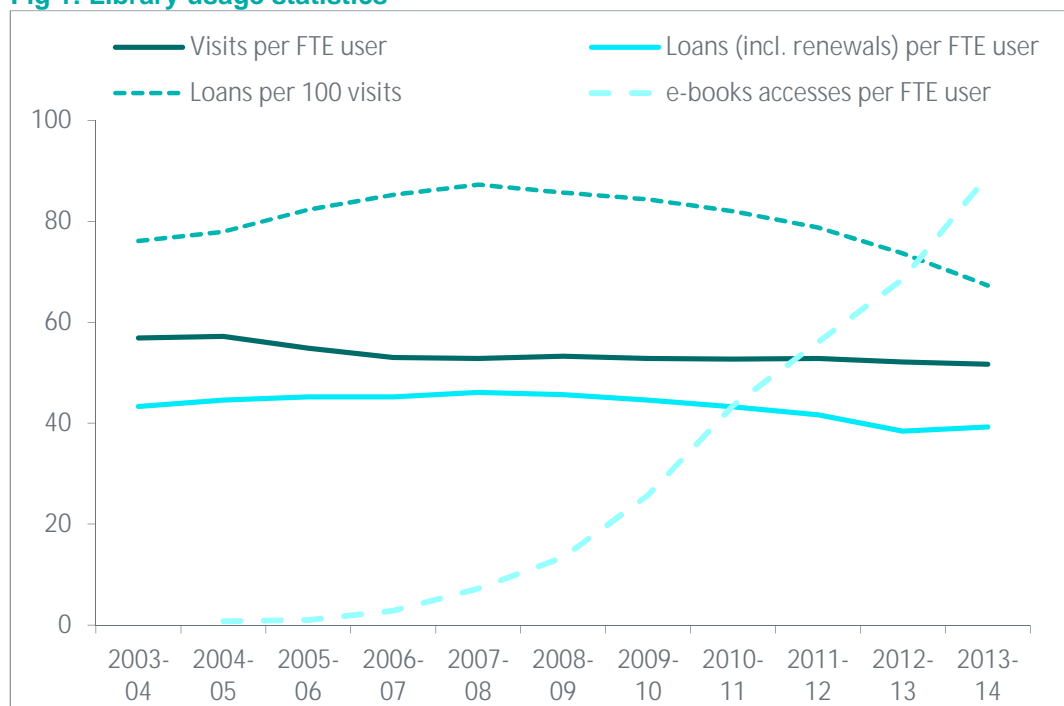# Changing trends in loans, visits & the use of e-books

The last ten years have seen significant changes in the way in which users seek and access academic information and libraries have had to adapt and evolve rapidly in response to these shifts. This brief spotlight looks at the changes in loan statistics over this period and how these relate to other key usage indicators such as library visits and e-book downloads.

Fig 1[1] shows the rate of growth in the use of e-books, compared to loans of printed material, and library visits. From 2013-14, SCONUL decided that data on loans were to be collected on the basis of initial loans only (i.e. excluding renewals) because of the widening disparities in how institutions undertake renewals. This change has made it more challenging to compare loans over time so this year libraries were invited to provide separate data on the number of renewals, and 63 did so. Based on this subset, it became clear that renewals made up some 68% of all loan transactions, and there was an increase of 2.2% in these total loans and renewals per FTE user over the previous year. This might indicate that more renewals are now being undertaken, particularly since some libraries have moved to the automatic renewal of loans on behalf of their borrowers. Overall, the number of loans of books and other printed material (including renewals) is estimated to have fallen over the ten-year period, so that the average number of loans per FTE user was 9.4% lower in 2013-14 than in 2003-04 (Fig 1).

Fig 1: Library usage statistics

One might assume that these loan plus renewal figures, alongside an increase in the use of electronic resources would correlate with a decrease in visits. However, Fig 1 illustrates that the average number
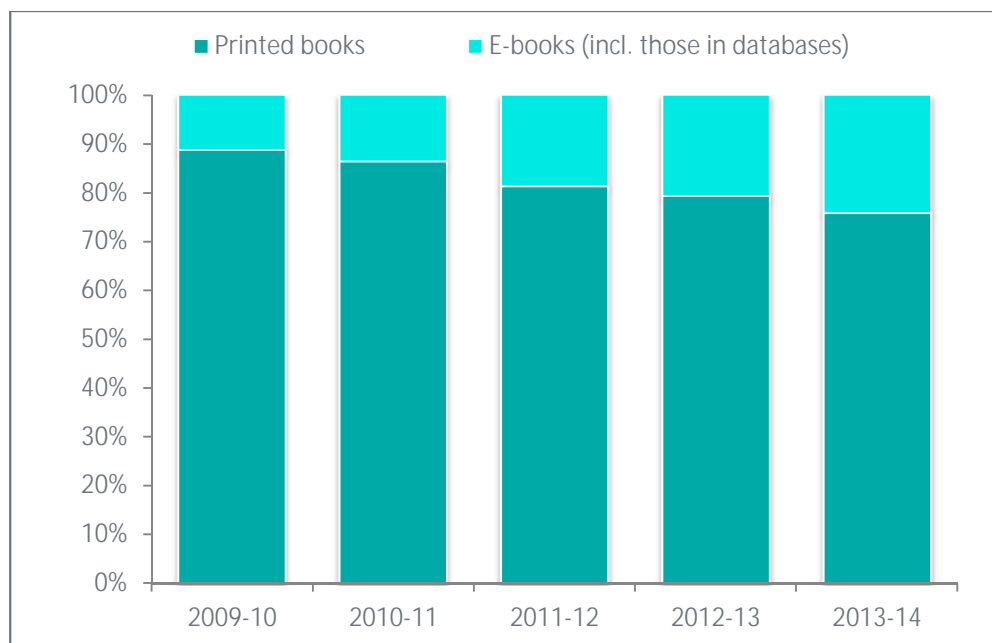
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[1] Note that, throughout this commentary, figures for 2013-14 are based on actual respondents, and do not include estimates for non-respondents. Figures for previous years are taken from the SCONUL database, and include estimates for non-respondents, unless noted otherwise.

of visits per FTE user throughout the ten-year period has remained relatively stable, at around 52-53 visits per FTE user since 2006-07. It should be noted that total annual visits per library have continued to increase in line with total student FTE numbers during this period. In other words, libraries are accommodating a greater level of foot fall in real terms than ever before.

Fig 1 also clearly shows that the drop in average loans per visit since 2007-08, has coincided with the rise in the use of e-books. Students and researchers continue to visit the library, but the main driver may not be to borrow physical resources. This highlights the more general question of what users do when they visit the library. The answers to this can be extremely complex and often lie beyond the scope of what the SCONUL statistics can currently tell us.

Data on the use of e-resources (based on the COUNTER code of practice) have been requested since 2003-04. However, they have been poorly completed over the ten-year period, and it is not currently possible to quantify all the trends on a sector-wide basis. Fig 1 displays the average number of e-book accesses per FTE user based on the number of respondents providing information in each year since 2004-05. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the increasing availability of e-resources, the average number of e-book accesses per FTE user has risen greatly, from an average of around one per FTE user in 2004-05, to almost 90 in 2013-14 – more than double the average number of physical loans (including renewals) per FTE user. Several respondents have indicated issues with e-book usage data during the 2013-14 academic year, with problems arising with one platform in particular, and so in reality this figure may be even higher. Further to this, it is important to note that work is being carried out on the COUNTER reports relating to the use of e-books, which are likely to be amended in the near future – it remains to be seen what impact, if any, this may have on the data available.
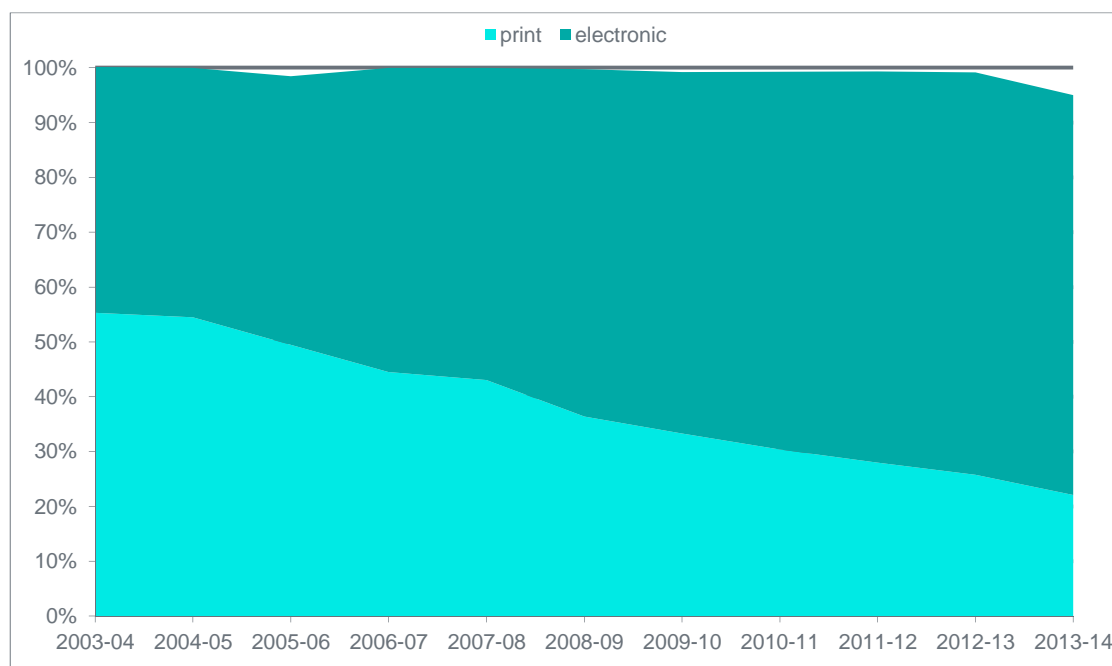
Fig 2: Proportions of book stock (UK)

Part of the growth in the usage of e-books can be attributed to increasing provision. Data relating to e-book provision has become more reliable over time, and estimates have been made for missing data

since 2004-05. Fig 2 shows the proportions of print versus e-books in each year since 2009-10 (the first year that titles available in databases were included), and shows that e-books accounted for 24% of total book stock, on average, in 2013-14, compared to 11% in 2009-10. Further to this, Fig 3 compares the percentage of total information expenditure accounted for by print materials (including books and special collections, print serials, binding and interlibrary transactions) and electronic resources (including electronic serials, e-books, databases and other digital documents), and emphasises the growing importance of electronic resources to academic libraries. In 2013-14 electronic resources accounted for 73% of information provision expenditure – compared to only 45% in 2003-04.

Fig 3: Proportions of information provision expenditure (UK)

These data illustrate that patterns of library usage have been undergoing a marked shift over the last decade. Stripping out renewals figures from the SCONUL loan statistics could well mean that this change may become even more apparent in the years to come. However, the statistics also show that the library, as a place to visit and study, is not becoming any less popular and that the remarkable rise in the use of e-resources, as shown here by the number of e-book accesses, more than compensate for the reduction in the number of books users are borrowing each time they visit. The statistics also show that the libraries themselves have played a central role in facilitating and encouraging this change by altering the way in which they spend their available resources by moving away from print resources and towards online delivery. This analysis clearly indicates that libraries deliver content and add value in many ways and that any quantitative analysis of the service needs to look beyond traditional metrics based on the use of print resources.

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