

# Performance Measurement of U.K. University Libraries

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*This article summarizes current activity in measuring the performance of United Kingdom university libraries, focusing particularly on work with Government and with university representative bodies.*

Just like their North American cousins, United Kingdom university libraries have a long tradition of collecting and publishing comparative library statistics. The association that represents all 135 U.K. university libraries and national research libraries, the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (SCONUL), publishes an annual volume of statistics on member library inputs, throughputs, and outputs.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in recent years, the Higher Education Colleges Learning Resources Group (HCLRG) has collected and published a smaller set of data for most higher education college libraries in England, Wales, and Scotland, based on the SCONUL definitions.

For the past ten years, the SCONUL data have been brought together in a database for trend analyses over time. This work, and production of the annual statistics publication, has been contracted to a specialist agency – the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University – that also handles the aforementioned HCLRG data as well as data about U.K. public libraries. More information about LISU and its publications, which cover all types of U.K. libraries, is available on LISU's website at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu/lisuhp.html>.

Through its Advisory Committee on Performance Indicators (ACPI), SCONUL has sought to develop the collection and use of statistics into the production of useful performance indicators that are recognized nationally beyond the contributing libraries, revealing trends across time and comparing descriptive and evaluative data between libraries. There was initial expectation and enthusiasm that we could rapidly agree on a small set of indicators that would support and fine-tune subjective judgements about the quality of libraries. By the early 1990s, after several years' efforts, the Advisory Committee faced the common truth that the exercise would be more technically complex and politically difficult than expected.

But persistence has finally brought partial success with the imminent publication of a small set of U.K. *Higher Education Library Management Statistics, 1997/98*.<sup>2</sup> This publication brings together SCONUL data, parallel data collected for higher education college libraries, and university-level data – university income, enrollment, etc. – drawn from official Government statistics about universities. The data are presented as six "management statistics" along with further background data about each library and institution, chosen to characterize the individuality of institutions and cast light on the variations in the management statistics. The management statistics are:

- total library expenditure per FTE user (i.e., full-time equivalent target user group of students and academic staff);
- expenditure on information provision per FTE user;

- expenditure on staffing per FTE user;
- seat hours available per week per FTE user;
- loans per year per FTE user; and
- interlibrary loans as a percentage of all loans.

The publication identifies for future inclusion three areas where data are not currently collected or are not yet sufficiently robust: stock on loan, electronic services, and user education. We also acknowledge the need to address a few gaps where institutions provide incomplete data and we expect that the increasingly official nature of this usage will encourage nearer to 100 percent compliance. The Advisory Committee had hoped to have the statistics published as a supplement to the Higher Education Statistics Agency's official volume of comparative university statistics, but HESA was unwilling to publish data it had not itself collected. Instead, the library management statistics will be published by SCONUL in a format as close as possible to that of HESA's official statistics publication.

This modest outcome has taken six years of studies and negotiations. In 1993, the report of a national committee of enquiry, the Follett Report, first advocated that "a coherent and generic set of performance indicators for libraries should be developed as soon as possible."<sup>3</sup> The developmental stages have included:

- an initial working party report;
- a national consultation on the working party's recommendations;
- a data-cleansing project to identify and correct errors and gaps in historical data;
- a one-year funded research project to explore in detail the validity and usefulness of fifty potential performance indicators;
- a second national consultation on revised recommendations; and
- detailed review and approval by a group set up by the heads of universities – the Higher Education Management Statistics group.

All this work, of course, sits beside the continuing process of collecting the basic data from university libraries.

Why has this process proved so difficult? First, there is less underlying commonality of view than expected about what makes a good library, leading to emotional debate about which indicators to use. Second, there are some aspects of library performance for which indicators are less easily defined – areas like user education, reference services, overall performance, and effectiveness in terms of economy or efficiency. Third, different stakeholders – librarians, institutions, users, library staff – have different priorities and needs. Fourth, the task of making definitions watertight and effectively understood by data providers has proved as taxing as expressing the definitions to users of the resulting statistics and indicators. However, it might be argued that the process of collectively defining the issues has itself been progress, and a learning exercise that probably could not have been avoided. Let's hope the outcomes produce some additional useful benefits!

The SCONUL Advisory Committee on Performance Indicators is pursuing other approaches to this issue. The Committee has sponsored a national benchmarking exercise involving small

groups of volunteer libraries in jointly producing and testing benchmark processes for particular aspects of library activity, for example reference desk service. SCONUL will publish the outcomes of this project as a book late in 1999. A second working group is producing a national user-satisfaction questionnaire. We are monitoring work elsewhere to develop management statistics covering electronic services: there is no point in replicating funded research.

The Advisory Committee has also established cross-representational links with the Statistics Working Group of the organization that represents U.K. University IT Services – the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA). UCISA has recently begun to collect statistics about IT activity (see <http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/docs/statsur/stats98.htm>). The aims of this collaboration are: to share knowledge and save effort; to use compatible definitions where appropriate; to deal with the shifting boundaries brought about by growing use of electronic technology; and to ease the situation of the growing number of "converged" Information Services units in U.K. higher education. More than half of U.K. universities have brought their libraries together organizationally with all or some of their IT services. Some of the resulting units are highly converged and thus have difficulty separating out their resources and activities into traditional "library" and "IT" pockets in order to contribute data separately to both SCONUL and UCISA.

Another SCONUL working party, known for brevity as the SCONUL Quality Group, has been approaching library performance measurement from a different viewpoint. In the U.K. there has been strong Government pressure on the higher education funding agencies and on universities to demonstrate the existence of effective quality measures for teaching, learning, and the student experience, and to publish the results of these measures. The significant influence of this concern reflects the dominance of national Government funding of teaching activity in U.K. higher education and a cross-party political determination in a "customer is king" society to ensure good value for money. As a result, there has evolved what might be described as a national accreditation agency for universities – the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>).

Jointly owned and financed by the funding agencies and the educational institutions, the QAA regularly inspects institutions and particular subject program areas and issues public reports grading and commenting on its findings. When this process was first initiated, coverage of learning resources management and provision was sketchy and inconsistent. The SCONUL Quality Group was set up as a joint project between SCONUL, HCLRG, and UCISA, and representatives of the predecessors of the QAA, in order to develop an appropriate weighting and methodology for review of the quality of learning resources. The outcome has been that "learning resources" (which covers departmental teaching facilities as well as central services) is one of six aspects of provision that are evaluated in each subject report in each institution, using a standard set of question guidelines evolved with input from the SCONUL Quality Group. We have consequently achieved a good standard of consistent reporting and a source of detailed data – beyond statistical measures! – about the effectiveness of university libraries in support of teaching. Furthermore, explicit inclusion in the QAA visit checklist has had very positive effects in encouraging good communication between subject departments and

university library services and the development of joint approaches.

SCONUL would be happy to provide more information about any of the above activities, and to hear of comparative North American developments. The author can be contacted by email at [<ian.winkworth@unn.ac.uk>](mailto:ian.winkworth@unn.ac.uk). The SCONUL Secretariat can be contacted at [<sconul@mailbox.ulcc.ac.uk>](mailto:sconul@mailbox.ulcc.ac.uk) or via its website [<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/>](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/).

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## Endnotes

1. Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, *SCONUL Annual Library Statistics, 1997/98* (London: SCONUL, 1999). (Volumes for previous years also available.)
  2. SCONUL/HCLRG, *U.K. Higher Education Library Management Statistics, 1997/98* (London: SCONUL, 1999).
  3. Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group, *Report* (Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993).
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