
SCONUL Research Extra: a new age of enlightenment?



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It is a painful fact known to all chief librarians, that the purchasing power of the library budget can never fully meet research demand. Academic institutions benefit from successful research, but have to balance the requirements of different departments, and within those, of teaching and research. Subject librarians do their best in support of their academic departments, as anyone who has ever attended a meeting to carve up a library budget will testify. Once the budgets are fixed, however, the academic support teams have to work within them, trying to balance the needs of individuals within their departments and inevitably leaving researchers with frustrating gaps in accessing required resources.

A key part of an academic support librarian's role has, for many years, been one of managing expectations. Stereotypical researchers live in their own world, following lines of reasoning and enquiry with very little interest in the funding implications of their needs. In the real world, however, most are sufficiently pragmatic as to acknowledge that their library cannot fund every book or journal in which they have a passing interest, but it has always been more difficult to explain why they could not simply go to another library to access the resource. The ability to access library holdings information electronically has obviously increased this demand. Researchers can now easily locate required publications for themselves and not unreasonably expect to access them just as easily. Librarians don't like to give

bad news and academics are not famous for their stoical attitudes to denial of access to 'publicly funded resources'. This resulting discontent could be quite stressful for frontline staff and potentially damaging to important working relationships.

That however was the bad old days. We now live in a world of enlightened self-interest where members of an extended academic community share their resources and trust each other to play according to the rules. We would like to acknowledge that there has been a shift in culture and this is reflected in a more relaxed approach to access agreements. This shift began with a series of regional access agreements to allow reference only access to visiting researchers and has progressed to a point where SCONUL Research Extra can offer researchers a completely new level of service, that of borrowing privileges at any participating library, thus providing access to the printed resources of a wide range of higher education institutions in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the English regions and the Republic of Ireland.

SCONUL Research Extra has quickly become an established service, with 96.3% of SCONUL members (i.e. 156 out of a possible 162 eligible institutions) currently participating in the scheme. Membership of the scheme has grown in two ways since the beginning of the year. Four previously unconvinced SCONUL members have joined up (Bath, Cumbria College, Rose Bruford College and UHI Millennium Institute) and SCONUL has acquired two additional members: Dartington College of Art and Norwich School of Art and Design, both of which have joined the scheme.

Librarians from all sections of the community were initially concerned about the increased workload and the possible unequal flow of demand between institutions. SCONUL was also keen to monitor the impact of its access scheme and so requested that all members should provide detailed information on the numbers of external users registered, as well as the loans and renewals generated under the scheme. The first set of statistics, covering a seven month period between June and December 2003, suggested that librarians and researchers had reacted positively to the scheme. These figures can be found in detail at http://www.sconul.ac.uk/use_lib/srx/SRX_statistics.html

The second set covered another seven month period, January to July 2004 both in order to give some level of comparability between the two sets of statistics and to pave the way for an annual

survey covering the academic year from August to July.

As project officers we were keen to encourage a high level of participation in this second statistics gathering exercise to see whether the early enthusiasm had been sustained. An amazing 146 of SCONUL Research Extra members submitted their data and we are grateful for the additional 'encouragement' provided by friends and colleagues within the regional consortia. Only 31 of these returns reported no activity and, as a further 16 institutions were unable for technical reasons to report loans data, the loans figures are slightly undercounted.

The results of the surveys show that:

- The first seven months of the scheme saw a total of 5901 users registered under SCONUL Research Extra
- During this period (June – December 2003) a total of 37,328 loans / renewals were recorded
- By July 2004 a total of 8622 academics and research students had registered; a growth rate of just over 46% on the previous period
- 6241 of total users originated from within the local academic consortium of the returning institution
- 3975 of the total users were staff and 4647 were research students
- Between January and July 2004 there was a total of 55,219 loans / renewals; an increase of 48% on the first seven months.
- 36,340 of these loans / renewals were made to users from within the local academic consortia of the returning institution
- 27,135 of these loans were made to staff and 28,084 to research students.
- The total number of loans / renewals during the first fourteen months of the scheme stands at 92,547

Quantitative data is useful but informal feedback shows the real impact on individual researchers and library staff. Library staff at Teesside commented that they 'found the scheme relatively easy to administer and have found the documentation to be comprehensive and easy to follow'. This statement seems to sum up the view of many frontline staff, who now seem comfortable with the scheme.

We are naturally pleased that librarians seem at home with the scheme but what of the academic users? Bad news tends to travel fast: so can its absence be interpreted as success? The representa-

tive from the University of Bath hit on a common theme when she commented that the researchers using the scheme were probably happy as 'we find that we get feedback quite quickly if they are dissatisfied'. Gratifyingly, some people have made a point of praising the service and contacts around the country have used words such as 'complimentary' and 'enthusiastic' to describe their staff's and PhD students' attitudes to the scheme. A researcher in Warwick commented to a member of staff that 'the simplicity of the procedure is what makes it so attractive' and that, we think, is the crux of it. SCONUL Research Extra works because it is simple, inclusive and gives free rein to academic researchers to access a wealth of printed resources. Perhaps not academic utopia but a significant step in the right direction.