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Measuring the impact of higher education libraries: the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative

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Abstract

The Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) and the Society of College, National, and University Libraries (SCONUL) are working together on a joint initiative looking at the impact of higher education libraries on learning, teaching, and research. Twenty-two libraries have been involved in assessing the impact of particular services or new innovations in their institutions. This article considers why measuring impact is important, describes the background to the *Impact Initiative* and what led to it being set up, identifies the institutions that are involved and their chosen topics, outlines what is involved for the participating institutions, and reviews progress to date.

Context to the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative

Libraries in universities and colleges can no longer assume that their value will be recognised by the academic communities that they serve. The rapid change that now permeates higher education has blurred boundaries between libraries, IT, student support, and academic departments. In particular, for libraries, technology is altering the way in which knowledge is created, accessed and used. The effect has been that libraries cannot take for granted, if they ever could, that they have a monopoly over the provision of information to support teaching, learning, and research. This technological change forms part of wider societal and economic influences that are dramatically changing the face of higher education. These include increasing globalisation, greater consumerism, moves towards wider social inclusion, and placing more emphasis upon developing and maintaining a skilled workforce. Higher education institutions are fundamentally being transformed with increased student numbers, greater diversity in the student community, higher expectations of fee-paying students, new ways of delivering teaching and learning, the development of widening participation strategies, greater pressure to deliver world class research, and an enhanced profile for knowledge transfer and supporting enterprise. This fast moving environment means new challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions – and for their libraries. It is not only a question of libraries being pro-active, taking on new roles, developing new partnerships, initiating new projects, and establishing new services. Increasingly, libraries must also be able to demonstrate the value of what they are doing and provide evidence of the impact that they are making.

There is a growing concern within higher education to seek the views of students about their learning experience. This year, the Higher Education Funding

Council for England (HEFCE) has launched the National Student Survey that all final year students are being asked to complete. Most higher education institutions, as part of their quality procedures, conduct a regular 'student satisfaction survey'. While these large-scale surveys may ask few, if any, questions directly about library services, they certainly reflect a growing trend for gathering the views of 'consumers' that libraries cannot afford to ignore. It is not only funding council or institutional imperatives which are driving libraries to seek the views of their customers; there has long been an interest in 'user behaviour' which has been much more difficult to capture compared to the traditional counts of book issues and entries through the library gates.

While there is a place for institutional or library-wide surveys, the emphasis on the 'consumer' means that libraries must also prove that their individual services are meeting the needs of their users. This knowledge helps libraries to promote and market services, as well as demonstrating that staff and other resources are being well used. By using the methods of social science research, such as the focus group or the questionnaire, the library can also develop a research culture which makes it easier to discover the views of its users.

The proliferation of usage statistics relating to electronic services which SCOUNL (Society of College National and University Libraries) is also attempting to define and measure through its support to the e-measures project (Conyers, 2004) leads also to the question 'what difference do these e-resources make?' 'what impact do they have on student learning?' These and similar questions are becoming more frequently asked and illustrate the importance of using a range of qualitative methods alongside statistical reports.

What is the LIRG/SCOUNL Impact Implementation Initiative?

The LIRG/SCOUNL *Impact Implementation Initiative* seeks to develop methodologies to enable higher education libraries to assess their impact. All of those involved in the *Initiative* have recognized from the outset that this is no easy task. However, by focusing on the impact of particular aspects of the library service or on new initiatives, it is possible to apply a range of methodologies that evaluate whether or not libraries have achieved what they set out to do. The *Initiative* began by also seeking to develop sector-wide impact measures. However, it soon became clear that this would not be achievable initially and, in view of different institutional contexts, may never be possible. However, where there are shared objectives, some progress might well be achieved in benchmarking with comparable institutions using common methodologies and standard research instruments.

The *Initiative* is run jointly between the Society of College, National, and University Libraries (SCOUNL) and the Library and Information Research Group (LIRG). The two organizations agreed to support a one year project which would develop an appropriate methodology to measure impact within the higher education library sector. Accordingly, an invitation to participate was sent out in

June 2003 to SCONUL member libraries. There was considerable interest and ten institutions of different sizes, with a good geographical spread, were selected to take part in the one-year programme. Volunteering libraries were required to commit to participation in the programme at a senior level. This was designed to ensure that the *Initiative* projects became embedded into developments and projects that individual libraries were already planning to progress within their institutions. Participating libraries were encouraged to send up to four delegates to each of the three events taking place during the course of the programme. The suggested membership for the teams were the Head of service (or senior member of the Library management), the project leader, and up to two other staff members (which could include people from outside the Library). The intention was to encourage participating institutions to build their project teams through working together at the *Initiative* events. It was hoped that this would be sustained when the teams returned to their home institutions.

The programme started with a two day 'impact implementation seminar' at a hotel in Charlecote in Warwickshire in July 2003. A total of twenty-eight delegates attended including some Heads of Service and several people from outside the Library. This was followed up with a review seminar in Leeds in December 2003, and a final meeting in London in July 2004. Communication between the participating institutions and with other partners in the *Initiative* has been facilitated through a closed JISC-MAIL mailing list, LIS-IMPACT.

Following discussions with both LIRG and SCONUL, a second cohort of twelve libraries was recruited to the *Initiative* in July 2004. Some alterations were made to the programme in the light of the experience of the first phase and as a result of feedback from participants. A two-day 'impact implementation seminar' for this cohort was held at Charlecote and a review meeting was held in London in November 2004. The final review meeting for the second cohort will take place in Leeds in December 2005.

What led to the Initiative being set up?

The *Initiative* arose from a joint approach from SCONUL and LIRG to the question of how to measure the impact of library services on their users and stakeholder groups.

LIRG, a Special Interest Group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), aims to promote the value of information research and to link research with practice. This fits well with the *Initiative* which is concerned with using research techniques to assess whether services and new innovations are having their intended impact.

SCONUL's support is through its Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement (ACPI) whose terms of reference include the following:

- to investigate and propose methods of evaluation and improving the performance and quality of member institutions' libraries

ACPI is responsible for maintaining the statistical database and for producing the annual library statistics that give an important quantitative guide to library services in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It recognises the need also to provide member libraries with support in developing qualitative measures and has for several years produced a template that libraries can use or adapt for user satisfaction surveys (West, 2001). More recently, it has led a pilot project that tested the LibQual+ survey instrument developed by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) (Lock and Town, 2003) which surveys user views on various aspects of library services. The *Impact initiative* was therefore seen as an appropriate addition to the measures it was already supporting to improve performance and quality in member libraries.

The *Impact Implementation Initiative* was started with a LIRG seminar in Leeds in October 2001 (Everest and Payne, 2001) and continued at a joint LIRG/SCONUL ACPI conference 'Do libraries aid learning?' held in Scarborough in December 2002. The purpose of this conference was to encourage exchange of experience on ways of assessing the impact of libraries on learning. It was hoped that the conclusions could feed into the production of a set of guidelines or a toolkit for measuring impact. David Streatfield and Sharon Markless of Information Management Associates acted as facilitators for the whole event and so began their association with the *Impact initiative*. This event included a number of group sessions, but also had speakers from the school, academic and public library sectors on recent research on impact measurement.

There were 40 delegates at this conference, drawn mainly from the higher education sector. It was apparent from feedback to this event that more work was needed on a research methodology that could be tested on practical projects carried out in individual libraries before any guidelines or toolkit could be produced. Both LIRG and SCONUL agreed that a small surplus made on the Scarborough conference could be used to support the first phase of the *Initiative*.

Choosing the institutions

The institutions selected to participate in the *Initiative* are key partners in what the *Initiative* is seeking to achieve. On the one hand, they are trialing a standard approach being adopted by the *Initiative* to issues that are of concern to them in their institutions. On the other hand, by working with teams from other institutions, they are contributing to the development of experience, methods, and tools which will be of continuing benefit across the higher education sector.

The ten institutions chosen to participate in Phase 1 and their selected topics for investigating impact are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Participating institutions in Phase 1 of the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative

Institution	Impact investigation
Birkbeck, University of London	Impact of an online induction tutorial
Chester University College	Impact of making available electronic information resources and working with academics in the appropriate use of the resources
Glasgow Caledonian University	Impact of making available electronic information resources and developing an information literacy strategy
University of Gloucestershire	Impact of an online information skills tutorials in three subject areas
Leeds Metropolitan University	Impact of the introduction of an information literacy framework
University of Leeds	Impact of information literacy on students
Northumbria University	Impact of information and IT skills on students
Open University	Impact of information literacy
University of Teesside	Impact of support given to students based at local partnership colleges
University of Warwick	Impact of providing support to academics in identifying appropriate journals for publication

The initial plan was to choose institutions that were interested in looking at topics associated with support for e-learning. In practice, the initial selection was broadened out to involve a wider range of topics and themes. Despite the attempt to recruit institutions who were interested in a range of topics, some convergence took place at the first 'Impact Implementation' seminar and eight of the ten projects ended up being connected with information literacy (Payne and Conyers, 2004).

The selection of the institutions for the second phase of the *Initiative* sought to broaden the range of topics, include institutions of different sizes, and again achieve a good geographical spread. In view of the concentration on information literacy in the first phase, it was felt particularly important to trial the approach with new areas. The twelve institutions and their topics are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Participating institutions in Phase 2 of the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative

Institution	Impact investigation
University of Birmingham	Institutional Repository and Scholarly Communications Advocacy
Bournemouth University	Equality of access to e-resources
Brunel University	Information skills for research postgraduates
University of Edinburgh	Subject-specific electronic resources and the research process
University of Glasgow	Subject-specific electronic resources and the research process
King's College	Integrated enquiry desks
Newman College	Support for widening participation
University College Northampton	Support for widening participation
University of Southampton	Library support for non-traditional students of modern languages
Staffordshire University	Single point of access for IT and Library enquiries
University of Stirling	Student use of subject resources web pages
University of the West of England	Increasing amounts spent on electronic information services (EIS) each year

What is involved for the participating institutions?

The libraries participating in the *Initiative* are adopting a common approach to assessing their impact on learning or research processes. This draws upon an action research methodology that is described elsewhere in this issue by David Streatfield and Sharon Markless. The approach involves several stages:

- Choosing an area where the library is seeking to measure impact
- Articulating objectives that set out what the Library is seeking to achieve in the area chosen
- Developing success criteria by which a judgment can be made as to whether those objectives have been met
- Creating impact measures for the chosen area of investigation
- Identifying evidence that needed to be collected
- Selecting appropriate research methods to collect that evidence

The *Initiative* has been based upon a team approach which has enabled libraries to identify and define practical projects and has supported them in using that approach.

By assisting libraries to identify and define practical projects through a team approach and, by providing help with appropriate research methodologies, the *Initiative* aims to build up awareness of a range of research tools that can then be applied to other projects. Being firmly rooted in practice, it also helps libraries to answer the question 'what difference are we making?' by delivering tangible results to this question in relation to the chosen topic.

With one cohort of ten libraries having completed projects and a second cohort of twelve now under way, it has also enabled those taking part to share ideas and results. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to the production of some guidelines for measuring impact that can be applied across the higher education library sector and possibly across other sectors also.

Apart from an initial grant from LIRG and SCOUNL, the initiative has been financially self-supporting. This has meant that participating institutions have contributed an equal share to the costs of their phase of the *Initiative*.

What has been achieved?

Each institution has its own story to tell about participation in the *Initiative*. The reports of the ten institutions that participated in the first phase of the *Initiative* are reported elsewhere in this issue with an overview provided in a separate article by Pauline Blagden. Although it can be difficult to carry out this work alongside other pressing priorities for modern libraries, the findings can be invaluable for library managers who are navigating their libraries through a sea of change. The findings can help to guide managers and practitioners in assessing whether they have achieved what they originally set out to do. They can also provide evidence of what contribution libraries are making. However, it was clear from the review meeting for *Phase 1* institutions that the outcomes of participation have often been surprising. Undertaking the work can challenge preconceptions and misconceptions, contribute to the development of library staff, provide a vehicle for stimulating discussion with academic staff and other stakeholders, and even lead to new perspectives on what the Library should be doing. This is because the focus of evaluation is moved away from traditional views of service quality towards the contribution that libraries are making to the academic processes of learning, teaching, and research.

There is a wider benefit to the library community in that the *Initiative* promotes more generally the evidence-based practice that LIRG seeks to encourage. Twenty-two libraries will have participated in research which they might not otherwise have undertaken. The results of both individual projects and of the *Initiative* overall are being disseminated for the benefit of practitioners in other libraries. Finally, the outputs from the *Initiative* in terms of experience, impact

measures, toolkits, research instruments can be drawn upon by other libraries including those beyond the higher education sector.

Where now?

The final workshop for the second phase of the *Initiative* takes place in December 2005 in Leeds. Each of the teams will report on their projects and the workshop will provide the opportunity to share with the other libraries in Phase 2 what has been learnt. The workshop will also be used to review what has been achieved in Phase 2 and to identify successes, issues, concerns, and possible ways forward.

LIRG has demonstrated considerable support for the *Initiative*. Project teams need perhaps to be encouraged to disseminate the findings of their individual project studies as they provide good exemplars of the evidence-based practice that LIRG seeks to promote. There are two other implications for LIRG. First, the lessons from the *Initiative* in seeking to develop impact measures for the higher education sector could usefully be considered alongside work to assess the impact of library and information services in other sectors. There is much that can be learnt from each other and there is a great deal that can be shared in terms of experience, methodologies, and assessment tools. Secondly, the *Initiative* has highlighted the need for more training to be available to librarians in research methods and, particularly, in the use of qualitative research methods. LIRG has a key role in providing opportunities for practitioners to develop the skills to carry out, and to interpret, research findings.

The need for librarians in higher education to demonstrate the contribution of their libraries to learning, teaching, and research is likely to continue to grow. It is not surprising therefore that SCONUL have identified assessing value and impact of higher education libraries amongst their list of priorities in their strategic plan for 2005/2006. However, we need to take a step back to allow some reflection before embarking on a *Phase 3* of the *Initiative*. There is much to learn from the first two phases and it is important that we build upon the considerable amount of work which has been undertaken in individual institutions and across the *Initiative* as a whole. The results of the *Initiative* also need to be considered alongside work on measuring the impact of higher education libraries that is taking place worldwide and what is happening in other library and information sectors. The first priority, after *Phase 2* finishes, is to identify outputs that can be made more generally available. In addition to case studies from individual projects, these outputs are likely to include exemplars of impact measures, guidance on the use of these measures, and a toolkit or handbook of research instruments that can be deployed to gather the evidence. One issue that then should be considered is whether external funding needs to be sought to scale up the *Initiative* more widely across the higher education sector.

Measuring impact is not easy and is challenging. However, the *LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative* has demonstrated that useful results can be

obtained and valuable outcomes can be achieved. The opportunity now exists to build on what has so far been learnt, disseminate the results, share more widely the methodologies, extend the reach of the *Initiative* across the higher education sector, and to seek to embed impact measurement into the management of change within higher education libraries.

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Biographical notes

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