

## **Usage statistics at Hong Kong University: From fun to fundamental in just a few years**

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Have e-resource usage reports affected budgeting, staffing and marketing decisions at the University of Hong Kong Libraries? The simple answer is: yes and no.

If the question is “Do e-resources themselves affect our budgeting, staffing and marketing decisions?” the answer is a resounding YES. Why the difference?

### **The early role for usage statistics at HKUL**

In the past, the years prior to 2002, due to the overwhelming desire for digital resources by our patrons, the focus of our efforts was to create a critical mass of digital materials. Usage statistics were not used for budget or staffing purposes but were largely used to help guide marketing the continued buildup of our digital collections.

Nonetheless, our collection development department occasionally did use the data for other purposes. These included the following.

- Monitoring user acceptance by looking at session and search statistics.
- Proposing database cancellations or promotion based upon the same statistics.
- Reviewing the need for previously unsubscribed titles included in “big deals.”
- Talking about how costs – based on use – could be shared among members of our local consortium.
- Looking at what netLibrary books were used and so figure out what else to buy.

### **Comparisons of usage statistics at HKUL**

Because of past doubts in the reliability of usage statistics, for budgetary or staffing purposes, our use of them has continued to be limited. This doubt has come from the variance between our own data and statistics supplied by vendors. The table below gives a snapshot of such variance during 2003 and 2004. The acronyms in the COUNTER-Compliant row refer to each of the COUNTER defined usage reports.



Table 1 E-resources usage statistics sampling – Local versus Vendor

	E-resources	Local	Vendors			
	Usage period: July 2003 to June 2004	Sessions	Sessions	Searches	Turnaways	FT downloads
<b>Primary Publishers</b>	<b>COUNTER-COMPLIANT</b>		(DB3) **	(DB3 / JR4) **	(JR2) **	(JR1) **
	ACS online	14,235		29,593		102,926
	Emerald Fulltext	25,920	36,715			19,896
	Oxford Journals	12,658		12,660		46,868
	ScienceDirect	123,748	195,897	121,558		418,110
	Synergy	21,417	52,140	27,117		83,893
	<b>NON COUNTER-COMPLIANT</b>					
	CSA	76,960	45,624	59,153		

<b>Aggregator Databases</b>	<b>COUNTER COMPLIANT</b>		(DB1) **	(DB1) **	(DB2) **	(JR1) **
	Academic Search Premier	133,897		226,228	17	189,524
	ISI Web of Knowledge	37,739	82,929		588	
	Proquest	173,857	229,182	5,479,407		364,191
	<b>NON-COUNTER COMPLIANT</b>					
	ebrary	25,920	36,715			19,896
	JSTOR	42,688		30,790		42,093
Ovid	84,703	167,573	284,611		105,714	

\* The above sampling was selected from 141 e-resources (40% of the library's 350 subscribed) for which usage statistics are provided by vendors, including 31 COUNTER-compliant ones. Our library currently keeps local usage for about 100 e-resources only.

\*\* COUNTER-compliant statistics are extracted from vendor-provided usage reports prescribed by the COUNTER Code of Practice.

A lack of consistent definition is perhaps one reason for wide discrepancies that can result between locally generated and vendor-supplied data for numbers of sessions or searches. In other words, how are vendors and our library defining “session” or “search”? The fact that our users not only use our library website to find what they want, but also go to the resource through its direct URL or via other links or sites of interest to them, explains the sometimes wide differences between “local” and “vendor” supplied usage reports. Variance of as much as over 200%, such as we encountered in the case of ISI Web of Knowledge and Synergy, can have significant implication on the cost per login. If our goal were to demonstrate increased user demand or acceptance and lower cost per login, then a higher session count for ISI would be desirable. Though it’s difficult to decide which set of data to go by, we will certainly be inclined to use the data discretely to our advantage.

A further challenge is that even if differences in session statistics could be resolved, it is not clear what these statistics really mean. If our users only downloaded 187 items from ebrary, does that mean ebrary is a failure? What does it mean if the 1.4 session-to-download ratio for Academic Search Premier (ASP) is lower than ScienceDirect’s 3.4? Does it really mean ScienceDirect is twice as good as ASP? When the sizes of databases are radically different, can we compare such ratios without taking time to adjust statistics to account for volume of database contents?

The point is, what certain usage statistics mean is not all that clear, and the use of these statistics is still an art more than a science.

### **Examination of usage statistics at HKUL**

One useful measure of use is the number of full-text downloads from which to derive the cost per article. COUNTER recognizes full-text download as mandatory for electronic-journal reporting in its Code of Practice<sup>1</sup>. However, there are still relatively few COUNTER-compliant vendors; 48 are listed currently<sup>2</sup>. It is hoped COUNTER will work with more vendors to increase vendor-generated usage statistics. At the University of Hong Kong Libraries, we have conducted a study showing that of our

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<sup>1</sup> COUNTER (2002), “Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice,” COUNTER, <http://www.projectcounter.org/codeofpractice.pdf> (accessed Nov 30, 2004); COUNTER (2004), “Release 2 of the COUNTER Code of Practice (Draft),” COUNTER, [http://www.projectcounter.org/code\\_of\\_practice\\_release\\_2.pdf](http://www.projectcounter.org/code_of_practice_release_2.pdf) (accessed Nov 30, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> COUNTER (2004), “Register of Vendors providing COUNTER-compliant Usage Reports,” COUNTER, <http://www.projectcounter.org/articles.html>(accessed Dec 1, 2004).

350 subscribed electronic resources, only 141 entail vendor-provided usage statistics – and that of these 141 vendors, only 31 are COUNTER-compliant. If our library could rely on more vendors for usage statistics conforming to some standards, such as the COUNTER Code of Practice, we could make renewal decisions based on consistent comparison across all e-resources. Nevertheless, other than quantitative usage statistics, our library would also need to consider other qualitative measures for assessment, such as faculty’s perception of the research value of the resources.

### **A maturing role for usage statistics at HKUL**

Because of funding cuts and the need to show accountability for expenditures, our university is experiencing a growing need for quantitative usage statistics. With overlapping e-journal subscriptions in multiple packages, with thousands of e-books in our collections, with the consolidation of our electronic-resource funds into a single shared budget overseen by a faculty advisory committee, and with flat budgets at best and cuts at worst staring us in the face, usage statistics are becoming more important to us.

To reduce expenses, we need to eliminate duplication wherever possible and we need to decide for which subjects we need duplicate print and online monographs. Add to these two needs for usage statistics our requirement to demonstrate to our faculty committee what they are getting for their investment, and it’s apparent why statistics are increasingly important. While the initial e-resource collection-building motto might have been “Build it and they will come,” now our watchword is becoming “Unless it is used, consider cutting it.” Consequently, we have assigned a clerk to gather these statistics and our digital resources coordinator spends quite a bit of her time examining them.

To summarize, in the past usage statistics only minimally affected our budgeting, staffing and marketing decisions. Now, however, because we need this data to help us make better informed decisions about our resources and to convey the benefits of dollars invested in these resources, usage statistics are increasingly performing a role in driving collection development and service decisions.

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