SCONUL Research Extra

by JOHN HALL

INTRODUCTION

SCONUL Research Extra is a cooperative access and borrowing scheme for staff and research students in UK and Irish higher education institutions. Under the terms of the scheme, eligible researchers may visit any participating library and register as an external borrower. The scheme is run on behalf of SCONUL, the Society of College, National and University Libraries which represents the directors of the library and information services in all the universities of the United Kingdom and Ireland, and in most other UK institutions of higher education, and the directors of the national libraries; it is for all institutions in membership of SCONUL able to lend library materials and, with 158 institutions signed up, it is now the largest reciprocal borrowing scheme in the UK and Ireland, serving almost the entire membership of SCONUL.

The origins of the scheme lie in the long established tradition of co-operation in the UK higher education library sector. SCONUL has always encouraged access to member libraries, and reference access to libraries by visiting academic staff and students has been the norm for many years. Higher levels of access developed on a regional basis, through regional library consortia such as the M25 Consortium covering London and the South East, all of which fostered co-operative arrangements between consortium libraries, including reciprocal access with borrowing rights. But the national picture remained fragmented, given that a researcher from one city might be able to borrow from a library within the consortium region but could not do so when working outside the consortium region. The increasing mobility of researchers in their quest for research information demanded that higher education libraries review access policies and consider how a researcher visiting another institution might make best use of precious research time. UK initiatives in the 1990s, arising out of the Follett Report of 1993, had already focussed on the needs of researchers - in particular, the Anderson Report, which led to the creation of the Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) and the distribution of funding to 48 university libraries, in recognition of the demands placed on them by visiting scholars, but with the expectation that work would be undertaken to open up access to research collections further.

Although the time was ripe to reconsider library access policies, an early attempt by the Consortium of Research Libraries (CURL) to establish a borrowing scheme for members of CURL institutions failed, and it needed an initiative from SCONUL to move the agenda forward. In 2002 a proposal was made at the annual meeting of SCONUL that a nationwide reciprocal borrowing scheme for researchers should be established. The proposal received general support and an organising committee was formed to translate the idea into a practical service solution.

The work undertaken prior to the launch of SCONUL Research Extra in June 2003 was supported by a grant from the Research Support Libraries Programme, and a further grant from this source was awarded to ensure the smooth operation of the service in its vital first year of operation. The initial task of the organising committee was to draw up a constitution and operating principles. Fortunately, UK Libraries Plus, an access scheme established not that long before for part-time students and distance learners provided a good model and the organisational framework of SCONUL Research Extra is thus heavily indebted to UK Libraries Plus. The grant from the Research Support Libraries Programme allowed the organising committee to use the services of consultants who carried out much of the essential detailed preparatory work, including most of the contact with SCONUL member libraries; the grant also paid for the design and production of publicity leaflets and tickets.

SRX – EASY ACCESS FOR RESEARCHERS TO MEMBER LIBRARIES

SCONUL Research Extra offers researchers quick and easy access to other libraries in membership of the scheme by means of comprehensive information on the SCONUL website.   A tight definition of researcher was adopted in order to ensure high participation by SCONUL libraries. In broad terms, only academic and research staff or postgraduate students pursuing higher degrees exclusively by research are eligible, and taught postgraduates whose courses include a research component are deliberately excluded. The home institution authorises the researcher to use the scheme, but only issues the SCONUL Research Extra card to

library users in good standing. A researcher in possession of a SCONUL Research Extra card is entitled to visit any participating library and apply for a ticket in the host library, simply on production of the SCONUL Research Extra card and the home library ticket. The researcher is then free to borrow from the host library. Participating libraries agree to lend from their general stock and the borrowing entitlement is expected to be the same as that offered to other external members of the library - but of course levels of entitlement remain entirely within the control of each library, and specialist areas of stock such as short loan collections or special collections are excluded from borrowing, and access to electronic services is not included. In order to reduce administration, the SCONUL Research Extra card is valid for three years but this is reduced if the length of contracted employment or the postgraduate course is of a shorter duration. The home institution remains responsible for the conduct of its members who have been issued with a SCONUL Research Extra card and is liable for any debts incurred which the host institution cannot recover.

SCONUL Research Extra has been a resounding success since its inception and, with continuing financial support from the Research Information Network to support the administrative work, it operates seamlessly and very effectively. The scheme includes almost all SCONUL institutions, the major exceptions being the three legal deposit university libraries. In the last year of operation (2004/05) 9,500 researchers registered as users and borrowed 99,500 items during the year; 57% of these loans are attributable to research students. An impressive 43% of borrowings took place outside the region where researchers originate, and this clearly demonstrates the importance and value of a national borrowing scheme in which researchers who travel a distance can make effective use of their time by borrowing library materials alongside the consultation of materials confined to the library building, such as archives or rare books. As the scheme becomes firmly established, so it also grows - user registrations in the second year of operation were up by 9% and borrowings by 7%.

SCONUL Research Extra is highly regarded by researchers and its success shows that it is clearly meeting a genuine need. Plans are in hand to develop the SCONUL website with more interactive features so that part of the registration process can be undertaken by researchers themselves, and the organising committee is already considering how to extend operations beyond the UK and Ireland and interact with other similar services in Australia and Canada, for example. When internationalisation of the scheme is achieved, SCONUL Research Extra will truly become a passport to higher education libraries globally.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

Anderson Report. http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/papers/other/anderson/

CURL - Consortium of Research Libraries. http://www.curl.ac.uk/

Follett Report. http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/follett/report/

RSLP - Research Support Libraries Programme. http://www.rslp.ac.uk/

SCONUL - Society of College, National and University Libraries. http://www.sconul.ac.uk/

SCONUL Research Extra. http://www.sconul.ac.uk/use_lib/srx/

UK Libraries Plus. http://www.uklibrariesplus.ac.uk/