# Benchmarking the Library: Data for Best Practice

*By David Feighan and Julie Purcell*

No matter how good you are there is always room for improvement. In a busy school library, where staff are focused on day-to-day operations, how can we effectively and meaningfully confirm that we are still on track? How can we be sure that as technology, education, and our respective schools' expectations change, we continue to have a positive impact? And, how can we provide our school administration with compelling and meaningful data to confirm that we are delivering an effective library service efficiently?

This paper outlines how two Melbourne girls' schools have embarked on a benchmarking project that looks at when and where the rubber hits the road, the evidence that shows we are having a positive impact, and confirms we are working within recognised best practice. In writing this paper we have focused more on providing other schools with a benchmarking toolkit that includes practical help, rather than documenting what we have learned and the changes we have made.

For us it is still early days, we have started by benchmarking our respective collections and circulation data. Building on this work we hope to expand this information sharing exercise to include patron satisfaction surveys. In the meantime, this exercise has not only empowered the library staff, it has attracted the attention of our leadership teams. Our respective school leadership view this exercise very favourably as it is seen as evidence-based best practice and gives them the additional assurance that both libraries are operating efficiently and effectively.

> **. . . how can we provide our school administration with compelling and meaningful data to confirm that we are delivering an effective library service efficiently?**

## Environmental Scan

While sector wide data collection is common in other parts of the library community, it is practically unheard of in the Australian school library sector. Data collection can be used for a variety of purposes, but many libraries are moving towards an evidence-based approach so they can better understand and report on their impact. They are doing this because it can have a positive impact on the library budget, staffing and resourcing. Examples of sector-wide data collection include:

- The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) have been collecting data since 1953;
- The Association of Research Library, USA (ARL) and LibQAUL which is based on SERVQual. LibQual is the ARL instrument used internationally for measuring patron satisfaction in relation to the 'library as place' (library spaces), 'information control' (collections), and 'affect of service' (programs and library customer service);
- Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN);
- National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA);
- The National Centre for Education Statistics in the USA publishes statistics.

These sector-wide programs include detailed statistics on budget, print and online collections, staffing, patron demographics, circulation and program delivery. As a result, they can be used to support ongoing benchmarking and evidence-based service improvement. In Australia, both ALIA, SLAV and ASLA have done great work in advocacy but up till now have not had the resources to support regular and ongoing data collection. For example, ASLA has made available excellent documents outlining 'Evidence Guide for Teacher Librarians in the Highly Accomplished Career Stage' as well as 'Evidence Guide for Teacher Librarians in the Proficient Career Stage' (ASLA, 2014). While these documents mention outcomes such as 'maintain collections of high quality learning and teaching resources' (standard 2.2, ASLA, 2014) there is no specific definition of what is a high-quality or, adequate collection.

The ALIA Schools/Victorian Catholic Teacher Librarian 'Manual for Developing Policies and Procedures in Australian School Library Resource Centres' (ALIA Schools & VCTL, 2017) does provide more quantitative guidelines for:

- measuring and benchmarking print and online collections (Appendix A),
- collection selection criteria (Appendix B), and
- library operations, circulation and budget (Appendix C)

. . . but the criteria outlined in this document is not directly tied back to any international metric, for example ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013 (NISO, 2013).

This makes it harder to use the ALIA Schools & VCTL manual for detailed benchmarking based on empirical data. ALIA Schools & VCTL are to be congratulated for the work that has gone into this manual but there is a lack of specificity, particularly around measuring online collections. This is probably because the ALIA Schools & VCTL manual uses ACLIS, ALIA and ASLA surveys from 1992 and 1999 (ALIA Schools & VCTL, 2017, page 55) when school libraries had smaller online collections. Hopefully future editions of this manual will address some of these concerns.

While the work that ACLIS, ALIA, ASLA, SLAV and VCTL is to be commended, it could be argued that not doing regular sector-wide data collection and benchmarking puts the Australian school libraries at a distinct disadvantage. For example, during the 2011 Commonwealth Government inquiry into school libraries meeting in Melbourne, it was observed by the federal parliamentarians on the committee that it was not possible to tell how many Australian schools had a library, let alone whether the library was adequately staffed and resourced. It is therefore unfortunate that recommendation three of this Commonwealth government inquiry into school libraries was never adopted. This recommendation suggested that "the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority include statistical information about the breakdown of all specialist teachers, including teacher-librarians, on the My School website" (House Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2011, page xviii). For Ruyton Girls' School and Mentone Girls' Grammar School, our environmental scan indicated that in order to adopt a benchmarking process that was aligned to evidence-based best practice, we would have to use more than one framework. See the framework section of this paper for details.

## Getting Started

"Before beginning to collect data to evaluate programs and services, it is important to know why and what you are evaluating. Evaluation itself is not the goal; rather, the focus of evaluation should be on improvement" (Flowers, 2012, page 11). For Ruyton Girls' School and Mentone Girls' Grammar School our initial focus was on providing quantitative and qualitative data we could use to evaluate both our collections and services to see if we were adequately resourced, and were both effectively targeting the needs of our schools. Both schools regularly evaluated their own data and reported to their respective Principals and stakeholders. This new benchmark data provides additional context and assurance that we were both on track.

Flower (2012, page 11) also notes that "evaluation can be perceived of as threatening by staff, who may assume that its purpose is to increase their workload, criticise them, or even eliminate their jobs". It is therefore very important to explain why the library is embarking on a benchmarking process, and to ensure all the library staff are engaged in this process. In the case of Mentone Girls' Grammar and Ruyton, we not only made it clear to the library staff that their work is valued, the data was shared with the staff and we included their input.

We also explained that, as noted above, even though we are well run we should always review what we do and how we can do it better, especially as technology, education, and our respective schools' expectations change. A benchmark exercise with another school was seen as a safe and supportive way of assessing what we are doing and how we can do it better. Interestingly, while our benchmarking data did not highlight any surprises, it did confirm some of our thoughts and suspicions, and gave us the evidence to make some positive changes to our respective workflows and collections.

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## Choosing a Benchmarking Library

No two schools are exactly alike, but in choosing a school for benchmarking you need to remove, or at least identify, the differences and similarities that may impact the findings. In our case:

- We have similar size student populations. Irrespective of your student population, it is still recommended you use a per capita loan figure rather than straight raw circulation statistics. For example:
  **School A**. 1,200 students: 6,525 fiction loans for the reporting period divided by 1,200 students equals 5.44 loans per capita.
  **School B**. 700 students: 4,327 fiction loans for the reporting period divided by 700 students equals 6.18 loans per capita.
  Therefore, even though School A is doing more loans the collection in School B is being used more when you take into account it services a smaller student population.
- Using per capita data also gives you more meaningful insights if your student population changes from one year to the next. For Mentone Girls' Grammar this was important as we have some extra-large year level cohorts, so some year levels have an additional class.
- We have similar student cohort characteristics. While our students come from slightly different demographics, we are both independent girls' schools in Melbourne.
- We now have similar collection budgets, though in the case of Mentone Girls' Grammar School, because the Kerferd Library adopted a regular reporting and accountability process our budget has increased over the last few years.
- We have similar staffing levels.

It may be different for government schools, but as independent schools, Ruyton Girls' School and Mentone Girls' Grammar School had the support of our respective senior management to do this benchmarking project because we do not compete for students. Our two schools are 20 kilometres apart.

## Frameworks

It is often said that you can make statistics tell you whatever you want. To ensure relevance and integrity we are progressively aligning our benchmark data to industry recognised standards and best practice. This includes ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013 'Metrics and Statistics for Libraries and Information Providers', Project COUNTER reporting when measuring the use of electronic resources, and the ALIA/VCTL Manual for Developing Policies and Procedures in Australian School Library Resource Centres 2nd revision. We also looked at our respective school NAPLAN reading results in light of our library collections and services. See the following NAPLAN section for details.

## ALIA/VCTL Manual

As noted above, the Australian Library and Information Service, together with the Victorian Catholic Teacher Librarians, should be congratulated for publishing an updated and revised edition of their 'Manual for Developing Policies and Procedures in Australian School Library Resource Centre'. This document provides a great starting point for scoping out what it is you should benchmark. This includes collection, processes, circulation and budget.

The rubric in appendix C is particularly useful. However, the sections relating to collections, and in particular digital collections, do not really provide the necessary framework for documenting and benchmarking a 21st century school library. Again, as noted above, these sections refer back to ACLIS, ALIA, ASLA surveys from 1999 (nineteen years ago),

**. . . while our students still want to read fiction in print, they are increasingly using online nonfiction content for assignments and projects.**

and 1992 (twenty six years ago) when more of our collections were print based. Mentone Girls' Grammar School reverse engineered the print collection recommendations in the ALIA / VCTL appendix A (Size of foundation collection) against section 4 (funding and value) of the ALIA / VCTL rubric. If we used the ALIA / VCTL recommendations we worked out we would need to spend at least 20% more on nonfiction print items. This was unrealistic and not warranted. For example, while our students still want to read fiction in print, they are increasingly using online nonfiction content for assignments and projects.

## ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013

The ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013 Metrics and Statistics for Libraries and Information Providers Data Dictionary provides more specificity when documenting print collections. For example, section 4.3 (books and serials) recommends counting new units (see 4.3.1) and new titles (4.3.2) separately. Separating out the number of titles purchased from the number of copies of each title purchased, reduces ambiguity, but also helps us better understand the depth, as well as breadth, of the collections.

## Project Counter

"The COUNTER Code of Practice helps librarians demonstrate the value of electronic resources by facilitating the recording and reporting of online resource usage statistics in a consistent and credible way" (COUNTER, n.d.). The vendors our two libraries use that are COUNTER compliant include EBSCO, Gale Cengage, JSTOR and Digital Theatre Plus. This means we can not only consolidate our own online usage statistics irrespective of the vendor, but we can then share this data with the other school and know we are comparing apples with apples. COUNTER provides detailed documentation, and the reports framework is independently audited, so we also know exactly what is being counted and reported. It is scandalous (yes the use of this word may be considered dramatic, but look at the evidence) that so few vendors in the Australian school market DO NOT operate within the international library reporting standards. While it is difficult for small vendors to be compliant there are larger players who absolutely should be compliant. Yes, we're looking at you OverDrive, PressReader, Wheelers, World Book, and ClickView. This lack of compliance makes it is impossible for a school library to meaningfully consolidate these vendor statistical reports and consistently demonstrate the impact the library is having supporting literacy and learning. See the appendix for further information and a copy of a sample COUNTER report.

## NAPLAN Reading Data

As part of our benchmarking cross checking we also compare our NAPLAN reading results against a stable of similar schools (*See the following graph for details*). However, it is important to note that while a good school library can and does enhance reading and literacy, there are many things that impact upon a student's ability to read. This includes: teachers, parent engagement, the influence of the student's friends, and of course the student's existing reading skills. As a result, we do not draw any direct conclusions about our library services from this NAPLAN data, but these figures do provide additional insights.

*Figure 1: NAPLAN Reading scores for sample schools.*
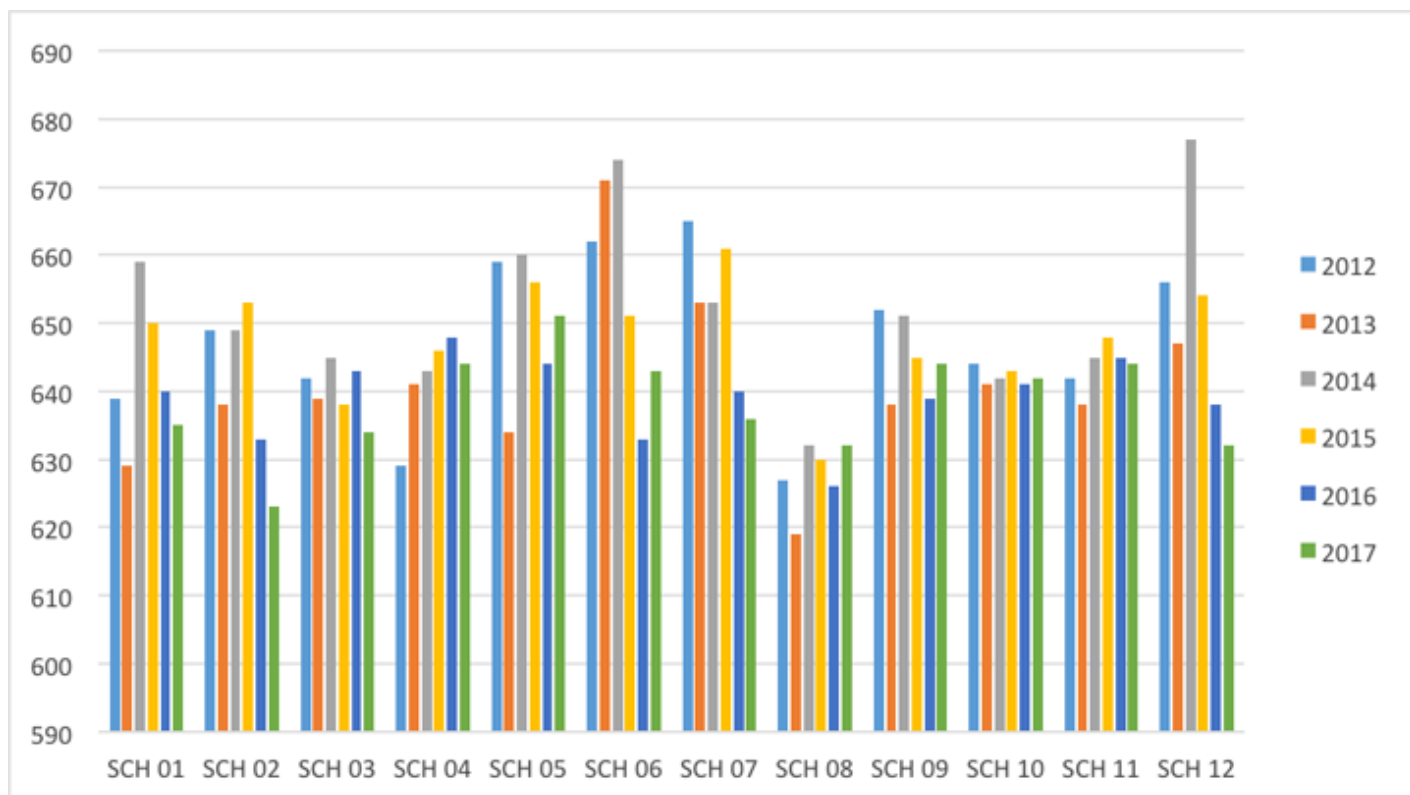
# Systems

Mentone Girls' Grammar School and Ruyton Girls' School happen to use the same catalogue system (OCLC WorldShare). Because WorldShare is in the cloud, uses THE global WorldCat bibliographic record, and the analytics module uses SAP BI, there are some things we can do that non WorldShare libraries can't do. This said, as long as you can pull out a tab delimitated / csv report from your catalogue that gives you some core data, you can benchmark with another school library, even if you use a different catalogue system. See the following benchmarking data section for details

# Benchmarking Data

Hernon and Altman (2010) note that "The library's value, impact, and benefit can only be experienced and judged by customers" so down the track we would like to explore and compare student and staff satisfaction. As stage one of our benchmarking project we have focused on the following circulation and collection data.

# Circulation Data

As Ruyton Girls' School and Mentone Girls' Grammar School use the same catalogue system we are able to access a wide range of circulation data. The main types being:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Cancel-Bill | Edit-item | Renew |
| Cancel-Hold | Expire-Hold | Report-Already-Returned |
| Change-Due-Date | Find-item | Report-Lost |
| Check-In | Fulfill-Hold | Report-Missing |
| Check-Out | Pay-Bill | Report-Never-Had |
| Create-Bill | Pickup-Hold | Soft-Check-Out # |
| Dispatch-Item | Place-Hold | Waive-Bill |
| (between branches) | Receive-Item | Withdraw-Item |

**#** *also known as a no-loan checkout. This records items used in the library but not borrowed. With our catalogue system our two libraries are able to capture this information and separate it from a standard patron check out/loan.*

The core data we used in our benchmarking includes:

- Patron Demographics including: Patron type e.g. student a staff, and year level. If you are a co-ed school you may also want to add gender demographics.
- The transaction type e.g. checkout, soft loan, check in hold request, hold pick up, hold cancel.
- The check out and check in dates.

Loan policies: the number of different types of items different types of patrons can borrow at any one time, the loan period, the number of times different types of patrons can renew an item, and how many items different types of patrons can put on hold, how long the hold stays active before it expires and is returned to the collection, or loaned to the next patron in the holds queue. These loans policies all impact on the how the collection is used. It is not that one loan policy is better than another, but when benchmarking it is important to share this information so the usage can be put in context.

# Collection Data

When approaching collection benchmarking, Mentone Girls' Grammar School and Ruyton Girls' School refer back to the ALIA / VCTL rubrics and in particular section 4a, but because both use WorldShare there is additional information we can benchmark against. We can look at the entire collection, or we can filter against format, language, published date ranges, last date circulated and the number of times the item has been borrowed; as

well as subject headings including filtering within a subject tree structure (e.g. History > Australia > Victoria). See the following figure and the information in Appendix 9.1 for details.

***Figure 2: Comparing collection depth, breadth and age.***
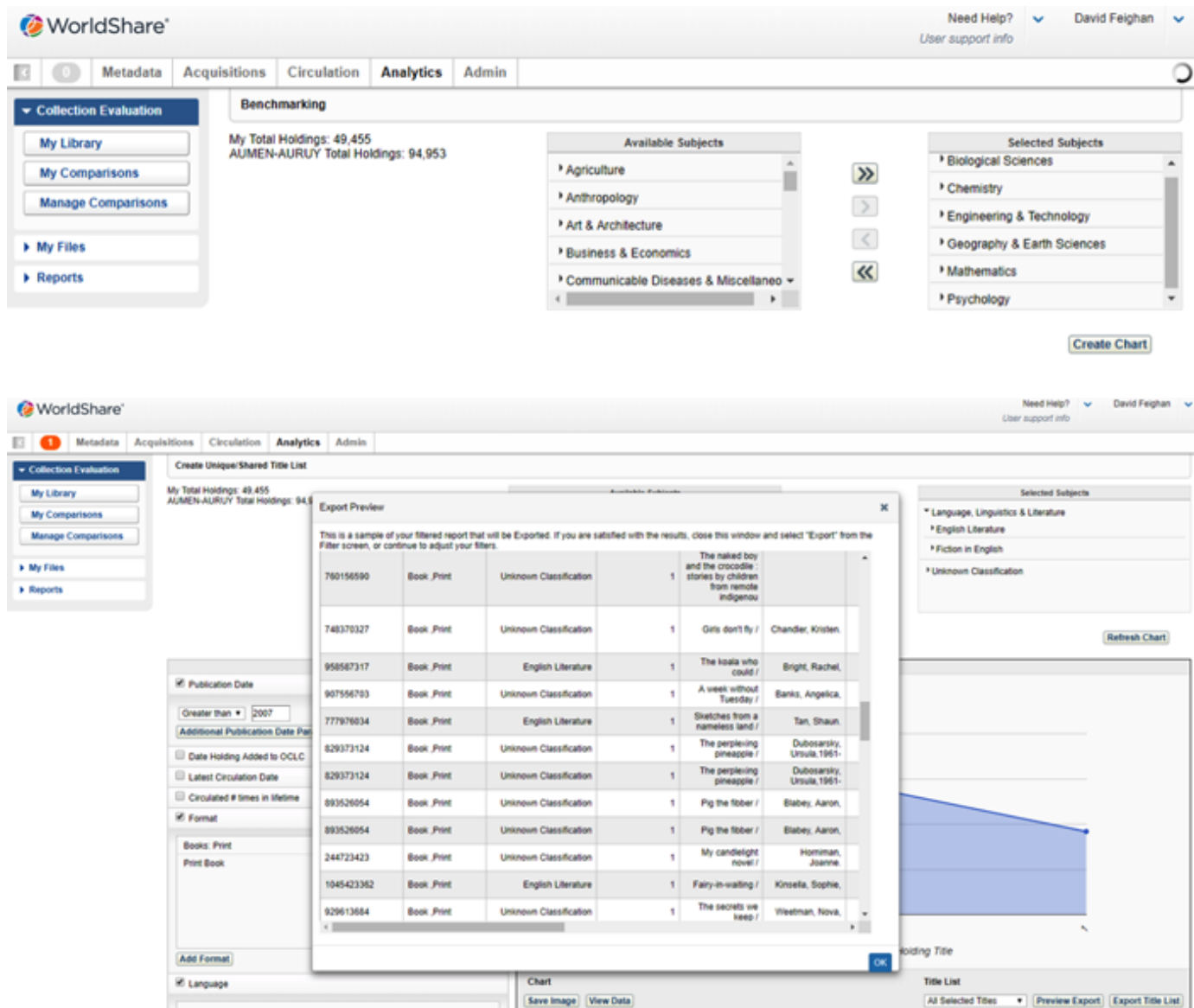


Core collection/bibliographic benchmarking data:
The core data we use includes:
**ISBN** – ties directly back to ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013: 4. Collections 4.3.1 through to 4.3.5
**Title** – helps you to confirm you are matching the same work/expression.
**Author** – helps you to confirm you are matching the same work/expression.
**Year published** – ties back directly to the ALIA/VCTL rubric 4a
**Format** – ties back directly to ALIA/VCTL rubric 4b as well as ANSI/NISO Z39.7-2013: 4. Collections 4.3.1 through to 4.3.4 (print collections) versus 4.3.5 eBooks, 4.2 audio-visual, and 4.8 other material print and electronic such as 4.8.1 computer files, 4.8.2 databases, 4.8.3 digital documents, 4.8.4 free internet resources, and 4.8.5 other digital holdings.
**Publisher** – helps you to confirm you are matching the same work/expression. This data provides the basic information you need to ensure you are matching the same work/expression within a FRBR framework or work and instance within a BibFrame framework. For a definition overview see slide 16 at the above link.

Additional collection benchmarking dat:
We also use the following collection data as this provides additional insights into what parts of the collection have been used and continue to be used.
**Date last circulated** – helps provide a meaningful comparison of collection usage across the benchmarking libraries.

**Number of times an item has been circulated** – helps provide a meaningful comparison of collection usage across the benchmarking libraries.
**Subject Headings** – provides additional insights into what parts of the non-fiction collections are being used across the benchmarking libraries.

## Key Skills

It helps to have a next generation cloud-based library catalogue system that conforms to library standards and is integrated into the global library and internet infrastructure. However, if like most Australian school libraries, you still use a catalogue system that is a stand-alone system, is not cloud based, and uses proprietary non-compliant data structures, you can still do benchmarking. The skills and tools you need are:
The ability to export a CSV or tab delimited text file out of your catalogue system that provides:
Detailed bibliographic collection data including a meaningful match point such as an ISBN or a SCIS control number. This enables you to compare / benchmark like with like irrespective of the library service and the catalogue software.

## Collection and or Circulation Data

Access to software to combine and process the data. We used Microsoft Excel.
The ability to build pivot tables and a pivot chart. Note: If you can drag and drop with your computer mouse you can build a pivot table. This gives you the ability to quickly and easily interrogate your data. Our two schools average between 65,000 to 75,000 transactions a year. This includes: check-out, check-ins, holds and so forth, but does not include acquisitions statistics, nor does it include our online usage statistics. Pivot tables and charts are essential when making sense of this amount of data, especially if the benchmarking libraries are using different catalogue systems.

## Conclusions

While it is early days and we are continuing to tighten up and refine our data collection and reporting processes, the overall experience has been very positive and confirms this exercise is worth pursuing. It has also been positive for the library staff and our respective school administration.

### Library Staff

Library staff have been able to see and immerse themselves in another library service. They have been able to compare what they do against the practices and outcomes of another similar school. This has enabled all of us to critically examine what we do, why we do it, who is it for, is it having an impact, and does it deliver value as perceived by students, staff and other stakeholders.

The way the two schools have approached this benchmarking exercise has helped ensure the library staff see it as an instrument of empowerment, and not as an exercise to reduce staffing, budget, and/or collections. This benchmarking process has resulted in the two schools exchanging ideas and learning from each other in ways that have proven mutually beneficial.

**This has enabled all of us to critically examine what we do, why we do it, who is it for, is it having an impact . . .**

### School Administration

Our respective school administrations, including Principals, Heads of Curriculum and Business Managers, have also viewed this benchmarking very favourably. They particularly like the fact that not only are the two library services benchmarking against each other, but that the benchmarking is being done against a set of external frameworks and standards (VCTL/ALIA, Z39.7-2013, and COUNTER). This gives them the confidence that our approach is not only measurable, it is meaningful and represents best practice.

One unforeseen consequence of this benchmarking exercise is that it has also made our work and roles much more visible to our respective administration. It has given them insights into the high-level skills needed to run an effective contemporary school library. These insights help ensure the real value and impact of our two libraries is better understood and appreciated by key decisions makers.

**It has given them insights into the high-level skills needed to run an effective contemporary school library.**

Overall both school libraries have benefited from this exercise. It has been a rewarding and empowering exercise and we look forward to taking this further over the coming years.

# Appendix

**WorldShare Collection comparison sample data**

In addition to the information outlined in the following table, Ruyton Girls' School and Mentone Girls' Grammar School can filter and drill down to see when an item has been added to the collection, the date last circulated, and the number of times it has been circulated within a nominated date range.

| OCLC Number | Format | Shared By | Title | Author | Publication Date | ISBN | Mentone Library Location (Collection) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1030929077 | Book, Print | 1 | Stranger | David, Keren | 2018 | 9780349003054 | MENA Young Adult Detective and Mystery Fiction |
| 839316027 | Book, Print | 1 | Emily Feather and the Secret Mirror | Webb, Holly | 2013 | 9781407130934 | MENA Junior Fiction |
| 897491931 | Book, Print | 0 | Kangaroos | Hendry, Lorna | 2013 | 9781742032771 | MENA Discovery Non Fiction |
| 614140650 | Book, Print | 0 | The Memory of Love | Forna, Aminatta | 2010 | 9781408808139 | MENA Senior Fiction |

**Project Counter Compliant statistics**
Counter compliant reporting https://www.projectcounter.org/ irrespective of the vendor. While COUNTER is moving from release 4 to release 5 our vendors still operate within the release 4 setting.
Book Report 1 (R4): Number of successful title requests by month and title
Book report 2 (R4): Number of successful section request by month and title
Database Report 1 (R4): Total search, result clicks and record views by month and database
Journal Report 1 (R4): The number of successful full text article requests by month and journal (magazine)

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Database Report 1 (R4) | Total Searches, Result Clicks and Record Views by Month and Database | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | Customer Name | Library NAME | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | Period covered by Report: | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | 2014-05-01 to 2014-10-31 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | Date run: | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | 2014-11-10 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | Database | Publisher | Platform | User Activity | Reporting Period Total | May-2014 | Jun-2014 | Jul-2014 | Aug-2014 | Sep-2014 | Oct-2014 | |
| 9 | Database 1 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Regular Searches | 199 | 67 | 69 | 33 | 2 | 12 | 16 | |
| 10 | Database 1 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Searches-federated and automated | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| 11 | Database 1 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Result Clicks | 284 | 108 | 92 | 22 | 7 | 21 | 34 | |
| 12 | Database 1 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Record Views | 117 | 20 | 53 | 13 | 4 | 13 | 14 | |
| 13 | Database 2 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Regular Searches | 536 | 95 | 88 | 165 | 11 | 33 | 144 | |
| 14 | Database 2 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Searches-federated and automated | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| 15 | Database 2 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Result Clicks | 825 | 141 | 181 | 169 | 19 | 28 | 287 | |
| 16 | Database 2 | Publisher XYZ | Platform ABC | Record Views | 594 | 94 | 117 | 141 | 13 | 13 | 216 | |
| 17 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 18 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 19 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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*Julie Purcell has worked as the Director of the Library at Ruyton Girls' School in Melbourne, since 2010. She began her working life as a classroom teacher before retraining in Information Management and Library Studies at RMIT. Before working within school libraries, she was employed within a university library and an IT company. She has a Bachelor of Education, a post-graduate degree in Information Management and Library Studies and a Master of Information Studies. In 2013 she was a contributing author in the Australian School Library Association publication* E-books in learning: A beginner's guide*. In 2014 she was named joint recipient of the School Library Association of Victoria's Innovator's Grant 2014 for the establishment of a shared e-book collection across the two schools.*

*David Feighan has worked as the Information and Library Services Manager at Mentone Girls' Grammar School since 2014 and has worked in the school sector since 2010. David has 28 years' experience in Australian libraries and is an active member of the profession. He worked as a librarian in the corporate sector as well as the Commonwealth and state government sectors. Working as a vendor, David set up EBSCO Publishing in Australia and New Zealand in the early 1990s. He has been VALA Committee member since 2007, and is a past VALA program chair and VALA President. David is currently representing schools on the ALIA eBook and elending advisory committee. David has an arts degree and post graduate degrees in both librarianship and marketing. In 2014 he was named joint recipient of the School Library Association of Victoria's Innovator's Grant 2014 for the establishment of a shared ebook collection across the two schools.*