An Introduction to Avoiding Irresponsible Metrics
Comparing Apples with Oranges

Metrics are measurements, for example the number of students on a course or the number of ebooks the Library has purchased. It may be helpful to think of metrics as indicators – used appropriately they can be valuable evidence for decision making. However...

Metrics only tell part of the story so should not be used in isolation
Imagine the Library subscribed to a new online resource for £200. That initially sounds like good value for money, but is it? It depends if students and researchers use the resource – if only one person uses it on one occasion we either bought the wrong resource or our students do not know they have access to it. We would evaluate our purchase by also looking at usage statistics and entry routes to the resource to build a fuller picture.

What should I do? Wherever possible, use a basket of metrics.

Make sure you are comparing apples with apples
You may have heard of the H-index, a numerical value given to a researcher based on the number of papers they have published and the number of citations the papers have received. Sounds like a useful measure? Could you use the H-index to fairly compare a professor in History who may publish few journal articles but have authored several books with a professor in Medicine who publishes frequent journal articles? Could you fairly compare an ECR who with an established professor in the same discipline who has spent 40 years publishing? Equally it’s hard to compare papers or people from different disciplines (average citation counts vary); when a paper was published and it’s type (article, review, book chapter, etc.) matter too.

What should I do? Consider more appropriate person-based metrics.

Make sure you use the metric correctly
Journal metrics like the Impact Factor (JIF) are sometimes incorrectly used as a measure of the quality of an individual journal article, but not every piece of work published in a high impact journal is going to be highly cited. Also misuse of these metrics can lead to an author being judged by the journals they publish in, not the quality of their work. These metrics can be useful for helping you decide where to publish, but not for measuring the impact of a specific article.

What should I do? Check that your metric measures what you think it measures.

Using Metrics responsibly
- See our Responsible Metrics page which outlines the University of Southampton Responsible Metrics policy.
- The Responsible Metrics Matrix will guide you to the appropriate metrics to use, alongside expert judgement, to assess an individual, research group, journal article or publication.

For help or advice with any Measuring Research Impact or Bibliometrics query please email eprints@soton.ac.uk