Evaluating the Success of Scholarly Publishers
Elizabeth le Roux
Director: Unisa Press

Abstract
In today's 'globalised' environment, a scholarly publisher can no longer focus only on the local market – it must compete internationally if it is to survive and justify its continued existence. For smaller publishers and those with limited means (and in particular those with the perceived disadvantage of being based in a 'developing' country) – who cannot afford to set up offices around the world, or to employ huge sales forces – this means that partnerships are becoming more important than ever and that moving into the electronic environment is inevitable and indeed essential. However, this does not imply a headlong rush into 'online'. Rather, a considered and planned approach is required if success is to be achieved.

The question that arises is, how do we measure the success of a scholarly publisher?

Some of the options may include:

- Profit, or the ratio of profit to subsidy;
- Number of titles produced;
- Visibility, presence or reputation;
- The attraction of authors and manuscripts;
- Number of collaborative projects or agreements;
- Repeat sales and customer satisfaction;
- Extent to which the publisher fulfils its mission (e.g. mission of the parent university in the case of a university press).

Various other criteria may be added, and this paper will consider some approaches by different scholars. The aim is to distil a set of criteria that may be used to evaluate the work of scholarly publishers, particularly in the African context.

Does the electronic environment change these criteria? It certainly has an impact on a publisher’s conception of who its audience is; how it reaches them; and how it packages its products – but I would argue that the core business of a scholarly publisher remains essentially the same: to facilitate scholarly communication. As a result, planning for the online environment must be based on the publisher’s conception of success and must be regularly evaluated against these criteria.
Introduction

In today’s ‘globalised’ environment, a scholarly publisher can no longer focus only on the local market – it must compete internationally if it is to survive and justify its continued existence. For smaller publishers and those with limited means (and in particular those with the perceived disadvantage of being based in a ‘developing’ country) – who cannot afford to set up offices around the world, or to employ huge sales forces – this means that partnerships are becoming more important than ever and that moving into the electronic environment is inevitable and indeed essential. However, this does not imply a headlong rush into ‘online’ publishing. Rather, a considered and planned approach is required if success is to be achieved.

It should not need to be debated that scholarly publishers, like any other organisation, need to monitor their performance and assess their success regularly. What does remain a question is how this notion of “success” can be measured. There is a vast amount of literature focusing on the evaluation of texts (and especially journals, using means such as impact factors and citations), but not nearly as much on the evaluation of the publisher as an organisation. Moreover, much of the literature on success in publishing focuses on success in business terms – making a profit, maintaining a competitive edge, developing a sound business plan, and so on (see e.g. Cox 2005; Erdmann 1999). Good marketing and distribution is also a recurring theme. Indeed, a glance at publishers’ press releases and annual reports shows that the usual means of measuring performance and growth, at least for a commercial publisher, is to look at the numbers: profitability, sales targets, numbers of titles published, growth in circulation, subscriptions or sales, ratings, and so on.

These measures can also be applied to scholarly publishers, but with the caution that this is often a non-profit environment, dependent on subsidies and grants. It is also an environment closely linked to the verification or certification of research results, and to related notions of quality and excellence. As a result, other means of measuring success also need to be developed, and these should take into account the changing

---

1 I should mention, from the outset, that my exploration of this field began as a highly pragmatic attempt to define criteria to assess the scholarly publisher of which I am Director, Unisa Press – and the paper reflects this pragmatic focus rather than a purely academic one. However, I think the effort has wider potential and should be taken seriously be African scholarly presses if they, in turn, wish to be treated as serious publishers.
context and new technologies in publishing. These criteria could be linked to the issue of ‘trust’ – also a recurring element in the commercial publishers’ assessments, mentioned above – which refers to the credibility, market positioning and accessibility of a brand or organisation. Specifically, in this regard, the three criteria identified by Kling and McKim (1999: 897) for assessing the strength of scholarly publishing – publicity, trustworthiness and accessibility – are useful in this regard. While their criteria were originally developed to assess how effectively a book or article has been published in the scholarly community, they could also be used to assess the health or success of the scholarly publisher as a whole.

The aim of this paper is to distil a set of criteria that may be used to evaluate the work of scholarly publishers, particularly in the African context. The aim is not to look at obstacles to success, but rather to look at what measures might be applicable and appropriate when assessing a publisher. The notion of evaluation and measurement is inherently competitive, implying as it does comparison with other presses. Even within the scholarly sphere, there will always be a leading press and others that aspire to its position in the marketplace. Yet success could – and should, in my view – also be measured in less competitive ways, such as in terms of collaboration. Success is also a reflection of good planning and positioning, with a focus on specific markets and how to reach them. And good measurement, in turn, implies better strategic planning.

**Quality vs. quantity**

It immediately becomes clear, when looking at how publishers (including both commercial and scholarly publishers for the moment) measure their own performance and benchmark themselves against others, that we are looking at two major sets of criteria: those that can be quantitatively measured (the ‘numbers’) and those that are more subjective, less tangible criteria, such as credibility, reputation, and visibility. In some ways, this comes down to a distinction between quantity and quality (although this is obviously a simplification). However, this is not necessarily an oppositional relationship, a set of binary opposites: rather, we should be looking at both quality and quantity when we assess our performance as publishers.
Another way of categorising measures of success is to define them in terms of their orientation: successfully implementing internal procedures and policies (and meeting internal targets); attracting authors; measuring books as products; and measuring market penetration, awareness and share. As can be seen by the growing list, the temptation is there to develop a proliferation of measures and indicators, but, as Peter Givler (2006) of the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) notes, “There are really only two basic metrics for showing the value of a scholarly publishing operation to its parent institution: the quality of the books it publishes, and its financial performance.” Edinburgh University Press, on its website, translates these measures into a mission statement:

Seeking excellence in its chosen subjects, the Press aims to strike a balance between imaginative flair, scholarly rigour, and commercial reality, to produce academic books of the highest quality.

**Crunching the numbers**

The more familiar numerical or financial performance indicators and measures are those used in any business. Measures of quantity are certainly easier to process, as they can be counted and compared to previous years’ figures, as well as to other publishers’ figures (where these are available in the public domain). Some of these measures would include profit margin, turnover, return on investment, sales targets, numbers of titles published, growth in circulation, subscriptions or sales (as well as repeat sales), ratings, etc. In terms of academic journals, impact factors and citation indices are also based on numerical formulae, in an attempt to quantify the value of those journals.²

Elsevier, a world-leading commercial publisher in the scientific, technical and medical fields, provides a good example of the use of quantifiable criteria to measure success, especially in the context of electronic publishing. The publisher lists the following criteria for evaluating its “productivity-related results” (Elsevier, 2004: 1):

- wider and more direct access;

---

² Interestingly, the production of books rather than, or as well as, journals could be linked to another indicator of success: how long a publication remains in the public eye. According to King (2005), journals are read for an average of 1.3 years, reports for 1.6 years, and books for the longest period, of around 5.3 years.
• number of users;
• functionality, or improved benefits for readers;
• decline in per article costs for customers.

A scholarly publisher that is not focused on the bottom line as the most important measure of success can still find a great deal of value in evaluating its performance against such criteria. And, increasingly, the institutions that fund scholarly presses, such as universities, are interested in return on investment. Givler (2004) puts the matter succinctly:

It doesn’t really matter what the press’s financial goals are as long as they are set realistically – that is, it’s reasonable to expect that you can achieve them, given the resources you have to work with – and as long as you, as the Director, are getting the kind of financial reports you need to assess your progress toward those goals as the year goes on, and take corrective action if necessary.

For instance, instead of measuring pure profit, the measure could be shifted to look at the ratio between profit and the subsidy received, or the diversity of sources of income could be considered. Consider this example from Louisiana State University Press (see the LSU website):

As an academic unit of the University, LSU Press does receive some state funding. However, the Press is 90 percent self-supporting with revenue derived from book sales, subsidiary rights, licenses, grants, and contributions from private individuals.

A ratio of copies sold to print runs is also an interesting and useful indicator; Darko-Ampen (2003: 212) suggests that on average an African university press is able to sell between 20% and 65% of titles produced in a year. This could suggest an average yardstick of around 42% of copies sold. As Darko-Ampen (2003: 212) goes on to explain, in his study,

not all the presses in the study have been successful at selling the books they publish, because selling below 60% of the books published may not recover production costs. Most of the presses do not appear to have a clearly defined subject focus. This may be interpreted to mean their lists are not focused, a factor that could partially explain the difficulty they face in marketing their books.
It is also useful when looking at numbers of titles produced, to measure these against staff numbers, to assess productivity. And many presses measure themselves in terms of number of titles produced. In a recent study of university presses in Africa, Darko-Ampen (2003: 161) identifies the largest press, in terms of annual average number of titles over a five-year period (1998–2002), as Unisa Press (at 68 titles). These measures are particularly useful when they can be used to indicate growth in a specific area – such as growth in the number of unsolicited manuscripts a publisher is attracting, or the numbers of authors from African countries who are sending in applications for publication. Similarly, at Harvard University Press, it seems that success is measured in terms of expansion, for instance of “the list, the number of employees, and the net income” (Harvard University Press, 2004).

In terms of the quantifiable criteria, then, a press could certainly lay claim to being the largest in its field – but could it also claim to be the leading scholarly publisher? Such a claim, in my view, requires a different set of criteria; these are the less tangible, and less easy to define, measures.

A commercial publisher, Penguin (2006), defines itself in terms of both size and quality: it aims to be both the “largest and most successful” publisher in its field, as well as holding a “market leading position”. The criteria that emerge from Penguin’s publicity material include “good quality books”, attracting bestselling and award-winning writers, the diversity of their list, and their “dedicated team (of) talented individuals”.

Quality criteria, in other words, could include any of the following:

- The establishment of an imprint as a successful brand;
- Visibility, presence or reputation;
- The quality of books and publishing standards;
- The attraction of the best authors and manuscripts;
- Range or diversity of subjects and authors;
- Market penetration or share, and visibility among new markets;
- Approaches to engage in collaborative projects;
- Customer satisfaction;
• For a university press, the extent to which the publisher fulfils its mission.

It is difficult to quantify these measures – which is why the controversial impact factors were introduced in the first place. But let us see how scholarly publishers are grappling with such issues.

**Measuring quality**

Quality is of fundamental importance when assessing a scholarly publisher because it is the cornerstone of the publishing philosophy. The importance of quality and standards is a very common feature in the editorial missions of university presses. In fact, it is the factor that most sets them apart from commercial presses, as they strive to publish books whose scholarly value is balanced with – and in some cases outweighs – their commercial value. Kling and McKim would link this issue to their criterion of trustworthiness in assessing a scholarly publisher.

This statement from Indiana University Press (2004) reveals a wide-ranging definition of the concept of quality:

(The press) has both embodied and protected the academic freedom that is essential in higher education, fulfilling the goal of its prescient founder. Certain features have characterized IU Press from its earliest days:

- High acquisition and editorial standards
- Thoughtful development of specialty lists
- Strong support of key disciplines
- Willingness to publish without precedent
- Determination to innovate and expand
- Cultivation of respect from peers and reviewers
- Exceptional attention to visual impact.

The notion of innovation and diversity emerges as a strong theme when browsing the reports and statements of various scholarly publishers. This is very difficult to measure, even as some do in terms of quotas, but is a claim that many publishers like to make. New York University Press (2004), for instance, boasts of its success in a statement that would be very difficult to disprove: “The NYU Press has had as its mandate the publishing of books that cut across the political spectrum. One of the reasons we have been successful is that we are a press that is open to all
perspectives.” More pragmatically, NYU Press also links its success to financial indicators, and specifically to “turning a profit without sacrificing quality”.

How then can quality be measured? The internal measure of a Publications Committee and thorough peer review process is an important first indicator, and its smooth running will certainly impact on the success of a scholarly press. For an external assessment, Givler (2006) provides a simple measure:

Judgments of quality can of course be notoriously subjective, so what many presses in the States do is track the published reviews of its books and make sure the key people in the administration know when a book gets a good review in a major magazine or newspaper. It’s also important to submit books for appropriate prizes, and, again, to make sure all the right people in the administration know when a book wins one. In short, keep plugging away at anything that will help demonstrate to the rest of the university that the press is a center of intellectual excitement in its own right.

Similarly, Texas Tech University Press, in their 2004 strategic plan, seek to measure their success and quality using the following measures:

**Goal 2: Academic Excellence: Attain national recognition as a top public university press.**

Critical Success Factors (measures of the degree of success over the next 5 years):

- Publish 30–40 books annually in 9–10 established focus areas with 90% or more of books in those areas.
- Publish 6 journals in focus areas.
- At least 50% of books from senior scholars with top reputations as published writers.
- At least 2 state awards and 1 national award annually in recognized state, regional, and national competitions.
- At least 2 positive reviews on 80% of Press books in prominent scholarly journals and trade book review media.

Success factors to measure quality at university presses, then, include positive book reviews; the publication of key series in their field, often representing the most original or innovative work in that discipline; the publication of distinguished authors; or recognition in the form of awards or prizes. (Prizes are particularly important measures because they create such good publicity for a press and its authors – they let everybody know about your success while giving it the stamp of external, ‘objective’ credibility and authority.) Quality of production, and especially editorial standards, is
also important. And quality can also be linked to how well a publisher establishes itself in a specific niche or speciality field. In this way a reputation is established, and trust is developed between the Press and its markets.

But a scholarly publisher is also measured in terms of how well it carries out its mandate. Many presses’ mission statements refer to the close relations between the parent institution (for instance the university) and the publishing house, and the congruence between their missions and aims. The most obvious area in which this is seen is in the names of the university presses, and in their aims to extend the activities, reach and reputation of their parent institutions. Presses seek to contribute to many of the university’s purposes, including “teaching, research, public service, and dissemination of the results of scholarly inquiry” (Texas A&M University Press website). One of the ways in which they do this is by improving the accessibility, credibility and availability of research results emanating from the parent institution.

Johns Hopkins University Press, for instance, boasts on its website and in promotional materials that it “continues to uphold the ideal set forth by President Gilman in 1878: ‘It is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge, and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures – but far and wide.’” This is seldom as closely linked to performance evaluation as in the following statement:

The significance of publishing at Exeter is measured in the service it provides to the academic community worldwide. Our aim is to enhance the University’s academic reputation by associating its name with successful international publishing. (Exeter University Press website)

The corollary to this support offered by the university press to its parent institution is that the support of top management at the host appears to be essential to the sustainability of a press.

**Outward-focused criteria**

It has been suggested that scholarly publishers have moved from inward, or passive, measures of success, such as number of titles, to more outward-focused measures relating to markets – the key question being, are we reaching our target markets? Good marketing (and good market research) is essential to the success of a publisher,
not least a scholarly one. This does have implications for prioritising, especially when it comes to allocating budgets.

Of course, a close match between the books produced and the markets targeted should be visible in the publisher’s sales figures, but again there are less quantitative measures that could be used to inform an evaluation. For example, a press may find it important to publish in more than one language, or in minority languages in addition to the almost universal languages of scholarship (and especially English and French). This translates into an attempt to reach specific markets and audiences – clearly speaking to Kling and McKim’s criterion of accessibility.

But what of the criterion of publicity? If awareness of your books is limited to a small area or group, then can you be said to be a successful publisher? For many, the geographic spread of distribution networks is thus of importance, especially if a press can claim to be truly worldwide in its operations. This global recognition is of importance in almost any area of scholarly study, because the scholarly and research community is a world-wide one, not many small national pockets. A large multinational publisher such as Cambridge University Press certainly measures its success in such terms:

The Press is now in a real sense a ‘world publisher’. English is the dominant world language of scholarship and science, and the Press seeks to attract the best authors and to publish the best work in the English language worldwide; it currently has over 24 000 authors in 108 countries, including well over 8 000 in the USA, over 1 300 in Australia, and over 100 each (and rising fast) in countries as various as Japan, Russia, South Africa, Spain and Israel. The Press publishes and distributes the whole of this varied output through its own network around the world: there are branches in North America, Australia, Africa, Brazil and Spain, all representing the whole list, supported by sales offices in every major centre; there are editorial offices in New York, Melbourne, Cape Town, Madrid, Singapore and Tokyo, each contributing to it their own related publishing programmes; and the Press’s websites are visited by over 2.5 million people worldwide. (CUP website)

For a small press, this is an area of particular difficulty. The most effective solution, at this point, is to enter into partnerships and collaboration. This suggestion reinforces similar recommendations by scholars such as Darko-Ampen (2003), who suggests the

Another criterion related to collaboration also seems to be of some importance. For instance, a successful scholarly publisher could be one that is approached by other (credible, reputable) publishers to co-publish works, and that is involved in various networks of influence. Some publishers might take the notion of collaboration and diversity further, to include the training and mentoring of new staff, interns and students.

Here is an example of how such measurements of success in collaboration might translate into a strategic plan (Texas Tech University Press strategic plan, 2004):

**Goal 5. Partnerships: Build strategic partnerships and alliances, as appropriate to the Press’s focus areas, with publishers and other organizations nationally and internationally.**

Critical Success Factors (measures of the degree of success over the next 5 years):
- Copublish 1 to 3 books per year with foreign publishers.
- Publish annually 3–5 books commissioned by other organizations.
- Acquire 2–4 new journals from sponsoring organizations.
- Distribute the books of 2–3 other not-for-profit publishers in the region.
- License a minimum of 30 books and all journals to netLibrary, Questia, Project Muse, and other electronic research and publishing media.

**Success in the electronic environment**

Does the emerging and current electronic environment affect the measurement of success? It certainly has an impact on a publisher’s conception of who its audience is; how it reaches them; and how it packages its products – but I would argue that the core business of a scholarly publisher remains essentially the same: to facilitate scholarly communication. Indeed, most publishers have simply added the electronic environment to the media in which they publish (a strategy of print and, rather than print or electronic publishing). As a result, planning for the online environment should be based on the publisher’s own conception of success and must be regularly evaluated against its performance criteria.
King (2005) suggests measuring the impact and success of publishing in the electronic environment by looking at the following wide range of indicators:

- publishing inputs (resources, costs)
- publishing outputs (amounts, quality, accuracy, comprehensiveness, timeliness, format, availability, price)
- usage (amount of use, factors affecting use – e.g. accessibility, price, awareness, satisfaction)
- outcome (achieves purposes – e.g. save time, better quality, productivity; value of publications)
- domain (target population, user population, needs).

How we as scholarly publishers apply these indicators to our own business depends on our own circumstances and objectives. For instance, the publishing inputs – and especially the costs required – may be considerable if there is little expertise or support for developing electronic products within one’s organisation. A cost-benefit exercise in such a case would differ from that being proposed and implemented at a university press in the United States, as a result. Moreover, the user population may have different needs in a context of high Internet connection costs and slow download speeds. This is not to say that we should not enter the electronic fray, but rather that our measures of success will not automatically include electronic versions of all of our publishing products.

In terms of developing an indicator to measure success, the creation of electronic publications or products and the setting up of new distribution streams can be closely linked to Kling and McKim’s concepts of accessibility as well as publicity – especially when the focus is not on creating new revenue sources, but rather on reaching new audiences. This is a goal that most scholarly publishers can understand and support. In effect, what is being measured in such a context is not sales, but rather impact. King (2005) notes, in this regard, that “usage is a better indicator of usefulness and value than sales”. The indicator, in that case, would be linked to the measurement of unique visitors or hits, or to the number of downloads of a particular publication. What would be the benchmark figure for a successful publisher, in terms of traffic to their website? One commercial angle puts the figure at 10 000: “If you are
a successful publisher in terms of your site’s traffic (10 thousand unique visitors a month or more), you should be able to target a niche market of businesses that would like to reach your site visitors, and therefore, sell significant advertising” (Austin, 2005).

The measurement of impact in this way could thus remain independent of a financial indicator – or, to put it simply, is income from online sources the best way of measuring one’s success in the electronic environment? The example of open access journals may be instructive in this regard: they are struggling to generate sufficient income to stay afloat without subsidy, but it cannot be denied that they are having an impact, and are becoming a highly effective means of disseminating information. The examples of open access book publishers, such as the National Science Foundation in the United States and the HSRC Press in South Africa is even more interesting: free downloads have not diminished income from traditional, print publications, and they have also had the advantage of disseminating the authors’ ideas and research far more widely than the circulation of the print copies alone.

It could even be argued, based on such examples, that a mixed medium dissemination strategy based on open access and the intelligent use of print-on-demand is essential for the success of a scholarly publisher faced with limited means and a worldwide market. To back this up, a strong and focused marketing vision is required (cf. Gray 2005).

**Conclusion**

This exploratory paper does not aim to provide a definitive answer as to how to measure success in a scholarly publisher. Besides, each publisher may tailor its indicators and measures to fit its own specific circumstances. However, some trends and patterns have emerged from a review of the literature and of information available in the public domain on how presses measure their own success.

The answer need not be complicated. Let us give Peter Givler (2006) the last word:

> So it’s really pretty simple: just publish the best books you can, make sure everyone knows about your successes, do your best to keep the press on track
financially, and when there’s bad news, make sure your boss hears it from you first. Nothing to it, right?

What this quotation implies is that the success of our presses is in our own hands. Henry Chakava (1997: 45) would agree, arguing that the African publisher has not “approached his (sic) job with the energy, determination and innovativeness that would guarantee success”. So, whatever methods or measures we choose to assess our performance, let us approach what we do as scholarly publishers with energy, determination and innovation.

References

AUSTIN, K. 2005. Available online:  
http://www.einfonews.com/ebizbydesign/vol1iss1pg1.htm

Development Dialogue 1–2.


Available online: http://www.pma-online.org/scripts/shownews.cfm?id=88.

GIVLER, P. 2006. Personal communication.


NYU PRESS. 2004. Available online:  
http://www.nyu.edu/publicaffairs/newsreleases/f_pfundappt.shtml