

Have Your Say: Best Practice Consultation

Reporting to Multiple Institutional Identities

Problem statement

Content providers offer many different authentication methods to end users. This is great in terms of allowing a user to access content seamlessly, but multiple eligible authentication methods means the usage activity of a single session (i.e. a single user) could be attributed to multiple institutions at the same time. For example, a user may be affiliated with institution A through IP recognition, institution B through Shibboleth / Open Athens authentication, and Institution C through role-based access (i.e. a personal log-in for an editor).

Some publisher platforms restrict sessions so that a user may only be authenticated against a single institution in any session, but this is not universal. We do not have a fixed count of the number of platforms which restrict authentication to a single institution, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is in the region of 10% of platforms. That means a large proportion of usage is happening on platforms that allow users to authenticate against multiple institutions in a single session. There are many benefits to having multiple identities, specifically around minimising friction for gaining access to content. This consultation is about how usage should be attributed when a publisher platform permits a user to authenticate against multiple institutions in a single session.

Please note: As a best practice guideline, this does not impact on audit processes.

We have identified a series of options for managing reporting to multiple institutional identities, shown in our 'More detail' section from most to least permissive. Once we have received and analysed the survey responses, we will draw up best practice guidelines accordingly, including a description of appropriate fallback positions if the preferred outcome is not technically feasible for specific publishers.

More detail

To clarify how the options would affect usage reporting, we have used a scenario where a user is affiliated with three institutions: A, B and C. For the sake of the scenario, we are only talking about Controlled content. There is a question about Open and Free_To_Read materials in the survey.

Option one: multi-attributed usage is reported to all institutions

Under this option, usage by a user with multiple institutional identities is reported to all of the user's institutional identities, even where one or more institutions does not hold a license / subscription for the content being used.

[metric included in report yes/no]	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Search metrics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denial metrics (where no institution holds a license)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Usage metrics (Investigations and Requests)	Yes	Yes	Yes

BENEFITS: For report providers, this option is technically simple to implement and easy to audit. It is also already in place for many platforms. For report consumers, this option is easy to understand.

RISK: Reporting usage to all institutions could be regarded as double counting (though each institution would see only a single count for each user activity). Equally, non-licensing institutions will see unexpected usage metrics in their reports. This already happens today, and is one of the reasons we're working on creating this best practice guide. It's covered in our FAQ:

"Why do I sometimes see usage for content that I haven't licensed?"

If a user has visited a publisher website and can be attributed to your institution (e.g. through IP recognition or single sign-on), the publisher will show that usage in your COUNTER Reports. Searches, denials and Investigation metrics are to be expected. Requests may occasionally also show up, where the user is dual-attributed with both your institution and another institution which does hold a license for the content."

Option two: multi-attributed usage is reported to institutions with licenses for the content

In this option, usage by a user with multiple institutional identities is reported to the user's institutional identities which hold a license for the content being used (for license, read also subscription or alternative form of authorisation).

[metric included in report yes/no]	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
	Has licensed Journal A	Has not licensed Journal A	Has licensed Journal A
Search metrics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denial metrics for Journal A	Not applicable	No (the user has access via A and C)	Not applicable
Usage metrics for Journal A (Investigations and Requests)	Yes	No	Yes

You'll note that Institutions A and C see usage metrics (Investigations and Requests) for Journal A because they both hold a license for that content. We know that some people might want Institution

B, which does not license the content, to see a denial for the user's activity on Journal A. That is technically complex, creates high risk of errors if data needs to be restated, and cannot be audited (not to mention factually incorrect as the user has access to the content), so we are not offering that as an option within this guidance.

BENEFIT: All institutions which have licensed content will see usage metrics for their users.

RISK: Institutions will not know that their users are interested in materials that the institution does not license. Reporting usage to all licensing institutions could be regarded as double counting.

Option three: multi-attributed usage is reported to a single 'primary' institution

In this option, usage by a user with multiple institutional identities is reported to only one of the user's institutional identities (the 'primary institutional identity'). The option creates a challenge, as we do not yet have a way to select a primary institutional identity. It also raises a question about how to handle situations where the primary institutional identity does not hold a license to the content. To be clear, we think it is important to put user experience first and allow the user to access all materials to which they are entitled through all of their institutional identities.

[metric included in report yes/no]	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
	Primary institution Has licensed Journal A	Has not licensed Journal A	Has licensed Journal A
Search metrics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denial metrics for Journal A	Not applicable	No (the user has access via A and C)	Not applicable
Usage metrics for Journal A (Investigations and Requests)	Yes	No	No

BENEFIT: Usage will only be reported against one institution, eliminating the double-counting risk from options 1 and 2.

RISK: Non-primary institutions will not see complete usage metrics for content they have licensed. Primary institutions may see usage metrics for content they have not licensed.

Option four: multi-attributed usage is reported to institutions on a cascade basis

In this option, usage by a user with multiple institutional identities is reported to the user's primary institutional identity in the first instance. If the user's primary institution does not hold a license for the content, the user's other institutional identities are checked; should a secondary institution hold a license for the content, the secondary institution will receive the usage reporting. Like option 3, we

do not yet have a mechanism for identifying the primary institutional identity, nor is there a clear mechanism for creating a cascade or hierarchy within the secondary identities to allow reporting.

[metric included in report yes/no]	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
	Primary institution Has not licensed Journal A	Has not licensed Journal A	Has licensed Journal A
Search metrics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denial metrics for Journal A	No (the user has access via C)	No (the user has access via C)	Not applicable
Usage metrics for Journal A (Investigations and Requests)	No	No	Yes

BENEFIT: Usage will only be reported against the institution which holds a license, eliminating the double-counting risk from options 1 and 2.

RISK: Non-primary institutions will not see complete usage metrics for content they have licensed. This option holds technical complexity around reporting usage in a cascade.

Option zero: platforms may only authenticate users against a single institution

We must acknowledge that the situation is far easier where publisher platforms restrict sessions so that a user may only be authenticated against a single institution in any session. While it is tempting on the surface to insist on this being the route for all platforms, it does have significant drawbacks in terms of user experience. Option zero is compliant with the Code of Practice, but it is not something that COUNTER wishes to enforce.