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Approaches to the evaluation of library services in Lithuania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose – A comparison of methods for evaluating the performance of library services in three European countries – Lithuania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom – is given, with emphasis on developing trends and novel methods.

Design/methodology/approach – The published and unpublished literature is analysed and evaluated, to bring out themes and comparisons.

Findings – Common themes are identified, and suggestions made as to how the competences of the library profession can be improved, and practitioners supported, in embedding performance evaluation into a more evidence-based practice.

Originality/value – This is the only paper to date making explicit international comparisons of evaluation of library services.

Keywords Libraries, United Kingdom, Lithuania, Slovenia, Europe, Performance measurement (quality)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The evaluation of library services is a topic, and an activity, of importance in all countries with established library services. A wide variety of methods can be used. In this paper, some of the means used recently in three European countries – Lithuania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom are illustrated. These countries provide comparisons in population size, social structure, geographic location, and recent history. The aim is not to give a detailed account of all the methods used; rather to pick out some of the more significant and interesting approaches, to give a “flavour” of how this issue is dealt with in each country.



The authors do not attempt to review the whole field of library service evaluation, as this is dealt with in detail by various writers over many years: see, for example, Baker and Lancaster (1991), Bawden (1990), Blagden and Harrington (1990), Booth (2004), Evans *et al.* (2000) and Goodall (1988).

The situation in each of the three countries is dealt with separately (in alphabetical order), and some general conclusions brought out at the end.

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Evaluation of library systems in Lithuania

Lithuanian libraries have a long experience of collecting statistics, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, and these data are the basis of all assessments of library performance in the country. However, the usage of data collected in this way is impeded by inconsistencies in the nature of the data, and by delays in producing statistical reviews and cumulations. Perhaps because of this, there is little evidence of use of statistical data as a support for library management decisions.

The Ministry of Culture, the main coordinating body for librarianship in Lithuania, requires from all libraries annual reports, including both textual and statistical parts. The task of collecting and organizing library statistics is delegated to National Library of Lithuania (NLL), specifically to the Library Management Department of the Library Science Centre of NLL. It also has an obligation, agreed with the Statistical Department of the Republic of Lithuania, for preparation and implementation of standards in the field of Information and Documentation, among them ISO 2789:2003 International library statistics (and former version ISO 2789:1991) and ISO 11620:1998 Library performance indicators (Bliūdžiuvienė, 2003). Thus each year reviews of library statistics of the past year – both general and specifically for public libraries – are published in the main Lithuanian professional journal *Tarp knygų* (*Among Books*), also published by NLL. Later, more detailed summaries of, and commentaries on, library statistical and activity data appear in dedicated publications, for example *Lithuanian library statistics for 1991-2000* and *Municipal public libraries in 1990-2000: review of activities*. Both were published in 2002, and provide descriptions of activities and statistical data for the library network over the first decade of Lithuania independence. Inclusion of extensive English summaries in both publications widens the group of potential users and benefits.

However there are also weak aspects to these data, acknowledged by the compilers of Lithuanian library statistics for 1991-2000:

The general annual library statistical data in the publication have not been compared and analyzed, since it would be problematic to compare them, moreover it would mislead the users of library statistics indicators, as, for example, reports have not been collected from music, art schools, museums and some other libraries in 1991. In 1991 only 57 libraries presented any report, whereas in 1999 – already 101 library of professional education schools presented activity report[...] Therefore the data on some libraries or library networks are presented with different degrees of exhaustivity (Lietuvos bibliotekų, 2002).

Changes of standards and indicators and presentation formats create even more difficulty for the usage, especially where comparisons, tendencies and dependencies of longer time scale need to be followed. Another barrier to application is the delay of data. As, probably, everywhere, in Lithuania statistics appear behind time, with

publication delays of a year or even longer. However, it is good that the annual review of the previous year's data appears in June or July.

A third limitation of applicability of statistical data is that they usually represent positive, or at least neutral, aspects of performance.

Much more development is needed in the field of performance measurement and evaluation of library services in Lithuania. Few theoretical speculations, or case studies of practical performance measurement, are published in Lithuania professional and research literature.

This is because these are complicated issues and procedures, for which competence must be developed. Also there is limited availability of appropriately adapted measurement tools; even the standard *ISO 11620 Library performance indicators* is not translated into Lithuanian yet. Therefore in Lithuania we find that measurement and evaluation projects are mainly initiated and processed by representatives of academia, and exclusively in academic libraries.

In 1995, in the framework of Swedish-Baltic Library Management project an attempt at performance measurement based on the 1993 manual *Measuring Quality: International Guidelines for Performance Measurement in Academic Libraries* at Vilnius University Library and at NLL was made. Of many possible indicators, two were selected both concerning the collection quality: expert checklist and collection use. Several specific collections and faculty libraries were investigated; it was found that inclusion of newly established libraries put some limitations on the data collection, as the catalogues were under construction and there were older books in the collections. However this project demonstrated the measurement of one level of performance control, as a step towards wider performance evaluation program (Rudžionienė, 2000).

The evaluation of Vilnius University library branches was repeated in 1996, and again in 1997, in order to compare data and continuously monitor the library performance. These case studies resulted in the development of a specific course on library performance measurement and evaluation for the Master's degree study program at the Faculty of Communication, Vilnius University. Since then, one or two Masters dissertation projects each year have dealt with aspects of library performance evaluation. In 2002, with the support of an Open Society Institute Fellowship program at City University London, Jurgita Rudžionienė developed a continuing professional development course in two parts: library statistics and performance measurement (Rudžionienė, 2002).

These developments are helping to lead to the creation of a "critical mass" of competence in this aspect of library practice, even though there is still a need for a wider dissemination of research results in order to raise awareness of library managers, and all library professionals, to the value and potentials of performance measurement and evaluation exercises. The latest study on development priorities of public libraries in Lithuania, based on the Delphi method for obtaining consensus views of experts by iteration, shows that quality issues are not at the top, even though experts clearly stated that they cannot evaluate the changes of service quality in the past as there is no reliable and comprehensive evidence accessible. Quality management was priority no 6 for the second part of the coming decade – 2009-2013 (Petuchovaitė, 2004).

There is also a need for a revival of the tradition of continuous and wide studies on user satisfaction and use of library services. This aspect lost the attention of the library

community during the early years of Lithuanian independence, perhaps because more urgent issues, such as automation, internet, and simply survival under difficult economic conditions and changing values. There are some exceptions, for example studies of the use of Šiauliai city public library by older and younger age groups (Starožinskiene, 1999, 2001). Usually those research projects deal only with one library, and with user groups who tend to value existing library services highly. What is needed, and for some time already considered by the Ministry of Culture, is a wide scale and representative sociological survey of Lithuanian society attitudes towards library institution and services. The Delphi study mentioned above revealed an extreme opinion of public library experts, that the library service survives only by virtue of the fact that the users have no alternative (Petuchovaitė, 2004).

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Evaluation of library services in Slovenia

Libraries in Slovenia, as elsewhere, traditionally felt little need to evaluate their services, due to their relatively undemanding environment. Today's situation is different in many ways, not least that libraries are required to assess not only how well they work, but also how well they adapt to changes (Ambrozic, 2003). Ambrozic also argues that an evaluation study must tell the library how the changed conditions influence its business, how it can improve the effectiveness of its business and where to look for the reasons for its potential failure. All this makes the evaluation one of the most important factors in the process of strategic management and strategic planning.

Ambrozic (2003) argues that most manuals on performance measurement focus on effectiveness of library services for its users, therefore choosing one of possible levels of evaluation. Much lesser attention is dedicated to the development of the techniques for analysing the usefulness and usability of library services, because it is very difficult to measure, i.e. quantify, the usefulness and social impact of libraries. She argues that the performance measurement should focus precisely on measuring the outcomes or impacts that the users feel *because* they use the library (e.g. acquired information, solved problems, saved time). "The measurement of a library's effectiveness and efficiency should be the sum of all the individual benefits, thus telling us how well the library does its business" (Ambrozic, 2003, p. 36).

User studies have been investigated in Slovenia by Filo (1987), Urbanija (1987), Popovič (1991) and others. Urbanija reports that the first suggestions that the user studies are worthwhile came from other disciplines, e.g. sociology and social psychology. Filo describes different approaches to the study of library users according to their academic areas and divides them into:

- studies of the research process;
- studies of the causes that make the people use the libraries and information centres; and
- studies of ways the users acquire information.

According to Popovič (1991) the basic areas of evaluation are information sources (e.g. books, periodicals, library collections, bibliographic databases) which can be evaluated independently of the users, although their value is better estimated when we also take into account the users; information systems used for accessing information (e.g. reference literature, IR systems, OPACs); and information services (e.g. access to library materials, services to special groups of users, etc).

Library statistics provide valuable information about the state of collections, acquisition, money spent on various activities, number of users and/or uses, etc. It is the quantitative description of library activity and serves as an important tool of management, planning, decision-making and presentation of the library. Statistical data (Ambrozic, 2000a) can be used to measure library activities, the workload (processing of the materials, information requests, etc.), library collection (size, structure, etc.), library use (kind of users, number of visits, services used, etc.), library users (demographic structure, quantification of their satisfaction, etc.), income and outcome. However, Ambrozic (2000a) argues that by using the statistical methods we describe the input and partially also the outcomes, but this approach does not provide information on the achievement of goals or the impact of library services on the environment. Therefore, library statistics cannot be the only measure of the library's performance.

Although studies such as those noted above have brought the issues of library evaluation to the attention of the Slovenian library community, it needs to be emphasized that in Slovenia the area of library performance measurement has not been addressed in practice to a great extent. Substantial work has been done only in the academic library area, (see, for example, Ambrozic (1999, 2000a, b, 2003)).

In the area of public libraries the issue of quality measurement has not been addressed to such extent. In terms of quantitative research, the most significant source is the yearly statistical survey of the public libraries performed by the National Advisory Service in the National and University Library which publishes the findings on the internet (www.nuk.uni-lj.si/kis/podatki.html). This is the most comprehensive source of current quantitative data one can find on the state-of-the-art of not only Slovenian public libraries, but all types of libraries in Slovenia (the documents are only in Slovenian).

Other studies can be characterized as individual and partial approaches to measuring quality of some aspects of the public library services, or even services on a broader level which can also be looked at in the context of a public library. This does not imply findings are in any way doubtful. However, it is difficult to gain an overall picture of the Slovenian situation from such studies, which mainly focus on user attitudes. Typical of such studies are those on the usage of mobile libraries (Štendler, 2002), on services to users who cannot visit a library (Lujić, 2002), on public library web sites (Novljan, 2002), on the satisfaction of users of one public library (Vaukan, 2003), and on user satisfaction following a move to new premises and the introduction of new services (Cvikl, 2004). Although such studies are limited in the extent of data collected, and may raise questions about methodology, they show how individual libraries may begin to approach performance evaluation.

It can be concluded that Slovenian librarians are aware of the need to evaluate their services, but sometimes have difficulties putting this into action. Reasons include finances and resources, and a lack of relevant competence and knowledge in the profession. Apart from these, a major factor is the heavy daily workload of librarians and library managers, which sometimes prevents their taking a more long-term view of their service. In this respect the support from institutions with expertise and resources, such as the National Library, and research institutions such as the Department of Librarianship, Information Science and Book Studies at the University of Ljubljana, can be very valuable.

Evaluation of library services in the United Kingdom

Performance evaluation of libraries services in the United Kingdom has, until recently, mostly been limited to the collection of comparative statistics on collection development and use, backed up by occasional qualitative case-study analysis of services to particular groups. The main source of such data is the Library and information Statistics Unit, based at Loughborough University (www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu). The introduction of digital services has meant that usage can be studied more directly, by web log analysis, etc. but the basic means remain the same. For public and national libraries, these evaluations are used to justify library activities to the sponsoring government department; this has varied over time, and is currently the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

As with all other UK public issues, the approach is dominated by a search for “value for money” and “best value”; the effectiveness of this has been criticised by various commentators: for a library perspective, see Trickey (2003). A typical example is a study of the supply systems of public libraries, to ensure that books are ordered and acquired in the most cost-effective way (details available from www.mla.gov.uk/actions/framework/framework_014b.asp).

The minister responsible for libraries stated the aim of this study as “to show how costs can be kept to a minimum, with the fastest possible supply to customers, and the most responsive system to customer needs” (McIntosh, 2005). This emphasis on costs has dominated all recent studies of the performance of UK library systems.

A number of alternative approaches have been seen recently, and two are described below.

Framework for the Future is a 10 year strategy document, originally published in 2003, by which the DCMS aims to revitalise the public library service (Framework for the Future, 2005). It includes many issues, from extending opening hours to partnerships with coffee-shops and book-shops, and from provision of expert tuition in IT skills to involvement in the Bookstart scheme, by which all 9 month old babies are given a free book and library ticket.

It focuses on three areas:

- promotion of reading and informal learning;
- access to digital skills and services, including e-government; and
- measures to deal with social inclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship.

DCMS sees the framework as an overall structure within which to develop – and to evaluate and compare – service standards. It is the basis for a major enquiry into the UK public library service, which will report in early 2005.

This framework has been used to generate a series of more detailed standards and guidelines. Public libraries, for example, must follow a series of ten guidelines, introduced in 2004, as a streamlined version of 26 guidelines dating from 2001. The guidelines are specific, though sometimes not very helpful: one states, for example, that libraries operated by local authorities should buy 216 “books or other items” for each thousand people served. Another states that stock should be replaced when is no more than 6.7 years old. These are targets, not rules, and most UK public libraries are not performing to these standards.

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According to the minister with responsibility for libraries, these new standards are helpful in that “library users will now know what they have a right to expect, and how well their own service is performing compared to others”.

Another outcome of framework for the future is the introduction of a series of “national offers”: a formal description of the standards of service which all public libraries should meet. This will include: a clear definition of what libraries can do best for particular user groups; a list of precisely defined service actions; and a 3 year plan to achieve them. The first three plans are for: young people aged 11-19; adult basic skills; and reading clubs.

For basic skills, for example – dealing with needs of adults who have problems with literacy, numeracy and other essential skills – the offer specifies that a library:

- is accessible and welcoming;
- is able to support adults’ learning and help them to move on;
- offers books which inspire and inform at the right level; and
- offers creative activities around reading at the right level.

Examples of the extent to which libraries achieve success are also defined:

- *Standard*: staff are able to recommend books and other resources.
- *Medium*: staff are involved in reading-for-pleasure activities, and library work is integrated into the basic skills curriculum.
- *Advanced*: the library provides basic skills reading groups, arranges special events, is involved in basic skills development in workplaces, family settings, etc.

The second example comes from the British Library. The largest of the UK’s national libraries has recently completed an assessment of its contribution to the national economy, under the title “Measuring our Value” (British Library, 2004). Wanting to get away from the qualitative case studies used previously – which they regard as “telling good stories, perhaps, but failing to provide a comprehensive evaluation” – the BL used a quantitative approach, known as “contingent valuation”. This is based on the work of Nobel Prize winning economists Kenneth Arrow and Robert Solow, and involves trying to measure the “consumer surplus”: the value gained by users of the library over above any cost to them of using the libraries services. This value may be direct – gained by those who use the library – or indirect – gained by the wider community.

To assess this, a survey of 2,000 users of the Library, and also those who were not direct users but might gain from the Library’s activities. These people were asked questions to assess:

- how much they would be willing to pay for the continuation of the library’s services;
- how much they would have to be paid to willing accept the library’s closure;
- how much it costs them – both in money and time – to use the library; and
- how much they would have to pay to find alternative sources, if the library were not there.

The BL accepts that this is not “exact science”, but argues that it is most realistic and robust method available. It is also conservative, in that it ignores value generated for users outside the UK, and did not deal with all the library’s services, particularly the emerging web-based services.

The results indicate the BL generates in value about 4.4 times its level of public funding. This finding can be used to argue that the library represents good value for money to the British taxpayer.

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Conclusions

The material above shows the diversity of approaches to measurement of effectiveness of library services in just three countries. No doubt a wider international study would show still more diversity.

This indicates that there is still no “right way” to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of library services. Rather, librarians and information specialists must seek the best combination of old and new methods to provide the most useful assessments of their services.

Among the common issues which emerge from the three situations are:

- a need to move away from reliance on “simple” statistical data, and isolated qualitative case studies;
- a need to carry out studies across a range of library sectors;
- a need to improve methodology, and to introduce and validate novel methods;
- a need to build up competence within the profession for this aspect of library management, through formal education and professional development; and
- the need for involvement of practising librarians and library managers, supported as necessary by academics and researchers.

The authors believe that international studies of the kind reported here can be valuable in showing different perspectives and improving practices. This should help in embedding sensible and appropriate performance assessment as a part of a more evidence-based information profession.

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