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## The Impact of Libraries on Learning, Teaching and Research

Report of the LIRG seminar held in Leeds, 30<sup>th</sup>. October 2001

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### The authors

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What makes a good academic library? Those of us who work in academic libraries know that we need to be able to demonstrate value for money. The Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) has recently organised two seminars on the effective academic library. These have been concerned with how we measure the performance of an academic library. The first of the seminars on benchmarking took place at Staffordshire University in June. A report of this seminar appeared in the last issue of *Library and Information Research News*<sup>1</sup>.

The second of the seminars took place at the Jarvis International Hotel in Leeds at the end of October, 2001. The theme was measuring the impact of libraries on learning, teaching, and research. The day allowed the 70 delegates to reflect on how we can demonstrate the effectiveness of our contribution to, and our impact on, learning, teaching and research.

Professor Gaynor Taylor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University welcomed the delegates. She spoke of the impact of libraries on cultural and educational life across the country and their key role in enabling and expanding participation in education and lifelong learning. She then went on to praise the role of libraries, arguing that they were central to academic communities. She emphasised the benefits of integrating libraries fully into the student learning experience. Libraries need to be involved from the very beginning of course development and need to make relevant information available in ways that suits users' access needs.

Philip Payne, Chair of LIRG and Head of Learning Support Services at Leeds Metropolitan University, echoed Gaynor Taylor's point of view in his response. He argued that there were three reasons why it was now particularly important to investigate the impact of what we do. Firstly, as an integral part of the quality agenda, we need to demonstrate that we are providing a 'good' service in FE and HE. Secondly, the rate of change in FE and HE libraries is rapid, we need to manage that change, and be aware of the impact of innovation on our clientele. Finally, there is an increasing focus in academic libraries on users and in meeting their needs. Measuring the impact of our services potentially forms part of having a customer focus. He concluded by saying that measuring impact will never be easy but that he felt that it was vital to try to do so.

The first speaker was Professor Peter Brophy, Director of CERLIM at Manchester Metropolitan University, whose topic was 'Measuring the impact of libraries: methods, approaches and outcomes'. Prior to this, however, he took the opportunity to question Gaynor Taylor's assertion that libraries are central to learning and teaching. He felt that it is easy for libraries in some institutions to become peripheral, and for users (staff and students) to drift into managing without them. In his paper, he started off by stating that we often, inappropriately, use other measures such as 'inputs', 'outputs' and 'outcomes' as a substitute for measuring impact. He proposed a definition of 'impact' and highlighted that impacts can be positive or negative and intended or unintentional. He queried who is making the judgements about impact and suggested that what is 'good' might depend on the stakeholders involved. He also suggested that there are different levels of impact from hostility to changed action. He then went on to examine what could be measured and suggested that it is impossible to measure 'impact' itself, but instead we should consider measuring surrogates of impact. He proposed that it might be useful to find out what the customers think of the service, or how they might react if the service were to be withdrawn. However, even this, may be hard to ascertain objectively. The question that is asked is never the same one that is answered. The only sure way is to observe what the customers are actually doing and what they are producing as a result. He warned delegates to beware of what he termed 'the Google effect'. This is the tendency for users to just search the Web using search engines and to bypass subscription based services provided by libraries. . Users do not use services in the way that we think they do, partly because librarians are inconsistent in our promotion of services and partly because academics misunderstand what our resources are about.

The next speaker was David Streatfield of Information Management Associates, who spoke on 'The Effective College Library'. David's talk was in fact far wider ranging in scope than the title might imply. He began by emphasising that we all need to know that we are working efficiently and effectively. Traditional performance indicators will always have a role to play. However, he then went on to state that whilst libraries are very good at measuring, they tend to avoid looking at impact which is more difficult to gauge. He described several projects in which he has been involved that have used measures of impact or effectiveness. In these, he worked on the development of performance and impact indicators and 'success criteria' through asking the questions such as 'what are you trying to achieve?', 'how can you tell if you have made a difference?' He echoed Peter Brophy in stating that it is important to know the objective of the investigation and the audience to whom it is to be presented. Libraries should ask themselves the question 'how do you want to be judged?' He gave the example of a group he worked with in the health sector, which decided that they wanted to concentrate on impact measures as a group, leaving the efficiency studies to individual libraries. Once this is complete, they intend to benchmark their impact across libraries, which is, to date, a new area. David warned of the dangers of looking at just financial indicators in performance measurement 'as this stifles creativity. He proposed approaches, such as balanced scorecards, which took account of both financial performance and impact. He concluded by outlining some possible universal measures of impact that could be used in libraries today, whether or not in the further or higher education sectors.

After lunch, three case studies were presented, centring on the topics of the day.

In the first case study, Professor Peter Ashworth from the Learning & Teaching Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University spoke on 'The Adsetts Centre at Sheffield Hallam University and its contribution to student learning. In his paper he talked about the establishment of the new Learning Centre, and about its subsequent evaluation after the first year. The information gathered was used to inform the university on its strengths and weaknesses, to influence policy on resource-based learning, and to learn and plan for the next Learning Centre. He added that the evaluation itself was part of the development policy. He then reported on the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation:

- students should understand the place of resource-based learning;
- students' own responsibilities need clarification, that further encouragement of independent learning is needed;
- skills training for students needs developing;
- the role of the lecturer as a director of the process of information seeking should be expanded;
- there should be an extension of the concept of the Learning Centre.

The second case study was on 'the awareness and use of electronic information services by academic staff at Leeds Metropolitan University'. Andrew Hewitson from the School of Information Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, spoke about his recent research, which found that there are low levels of awareness of academic staff regarding the electronic information services that are available to them, and variation in their skills and knowledge in accessing them. He showed that there are many factors influencing their take up of electronic information services, including confidence and perceived skills, support from the University as a whole and specifically from the Learning Centre. He also noted that academic staff are encouraging student use of these services, but are concerned about student's ability to measure the value and quality of what they have found. He pointed out that staff are universally appreciative of the role of the Learning Centre in promoting the use of electronic information services to them and their students, and of the central role that they have in the teaching and learning process. He concluded by stating how useful the research had been to Learning Support Services staff at Leeds Metropolitan University in developing and promoting electronic information services and by giving some examples of how practice has already begun to change as a result.

Finally, Jenny Brook and Sheila Anderson from the INHALE project, Huddersfield University spoke on 'measuring the impact of information for nursing and health in a learning environment'. The main aim of the INHALE project is to create a set of web-based learning materials to enable students to exploit relevant, high quality electronic information. The project focuses on nursing and health information. The speakers concentrated on how the project has been evaluated and where the electronic services have made a difference to student's study. This is, in practice, in those courses where information skills and resources have been integrated fully into modules and correspondingly assessed as part of the coursework, and not those where they have been additional to the module information.

In the final session of the afternoon, delegates were given the opportunity to take part in discussions to enable them to share their experiences about approaches to impact measurement. Delegates worked in groups to discuss the practical implications of

measuring impact in different academic library scenarios. This work was concluded with a plenary session, where the principles of what had been discussed were presented and common ground highlighted.

The main conclusions were:

**Audience:** Be clear about who the research is aimed at. The audience will affect the way in which the study is conducted and how the results are presented. Political aspects to undertaking the research need to be considered carefully. It is likely to be important to engage and involve key stakeholders so that they have ownership of the results.

**Success criteria:** What are the measures by which we assess our impact? Who decides on those measures? Over what timeframe do we measure whether or not we have been successful? What is the starting point against which we wish to measure subsequent impact? We need to be aware that there may be negative impacts as well as positive ones, and that there may be unintended impacts as well as intended ones. We are likely to be talking about 'surrogates of impact' (e.g. the extent of linking to learning resources in MLE modules or referencing in students' work). It may also be more appropriate to talk of assessments of impact rather than measurement.

**Evidence:** The audience for the research and how the research is going to be used will influence the research design and the data collection methods used. There is likely to be a need for a mix of data collection methods with emphasis on qualitative methods. The cost and ease of data collection will influence the design of the study. We are likely to be particularly interested in the views of our clientele but they may not be reliable, knowledgeable informants. We will need to demonstrate the validity of our choice of evidence of impact and of the methods used to collect that evidence. We may need to recognise that evidence will not always be available to demonstrate impact.

**Time and resources:** How is the research going to be supported? Can you persuade stakeholders in the University to contribute to the funding, thereby increasing their ownership of the results? Do you have staff with the skills to undertake this type of work? Would it have more credibility/objectivity if you bring somebody in to the work such as a consultant, an academic elsewhere in the University, or work with staff from a Department of Information Studies? Is there scope for sharing methods/research instruments between institutions? What can we learn from other sectors and fields (e.g. public libraries, health sector)?

**Dissemination/using findings:** We need to be clear from the outset for whom we are doing the research. There may be a need for an element of 'marketing' the results. Sometimes, telling 'the story' of how services impact on individuals (the personal dimension) can be the most convincing way of demonstrating that we are making a difference.

**Difficulty of measuring impact.** Assessing impact is not easy and it is not an exact science. We are dealing with a changing environment where people, services, and needs are constantly evolving. Any research will inevitably provide a snapshot of what is happening at a particular point in time. It is very difficult to prove that the

actions taken by library management have led to improvements in learning, teaching, and research. This is particularly the case as we dealing with the extent of integration between our resources/services and learning, teaching, and research. As we achieve more integration, it is going to be intrinsically more difficult to identify our specific contribution to students' learning or to the research of a member of staff.

In summary, the seminar was stimulating and enjoyable. However, it is clear that academic libraries still have some considerable way to go before impact measurement does become an integral part of the quality improvement agenda.

### **Reference**

1. Hart, L. Comparing ourselves: using benchmarking techniques to measure performance amongst academic libraries: report of the LIRG seminar, the effective academic library held in June 2001. **Library and Information Research News**, 25 (80), Autumn 2001, pp23-34