

Feature Article

Hunting for the library value: benchmarking as a communication tool

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Abstract

International cooperation is an essential part of library and information professionals' work. Three European health and medical libraries started a benchmarking project in year 2013, aiming at comparing services among our libraries in order to find and implement best practices. We wanted to share ideas, solutions and examples. The purpose of this paper is to give the final report of the five-year benchmarking project. The project was a continuous best-practice benchmarking process. At the end the process, we essentially experienced this kind of library benchmarking as a communication and development tool. International benchmarking provides new skills for information professionals

Key words: *benchmarking; international cooperation; librarians; libraries; professional competence.*

Introduction

The aim of library benchmarking is to compare services among institutions involved in identifying best practices in library and information services at each of the libraries.

The suggestion and the plan for a benchmarking project among the health science libraries of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU/BMH), Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain/BSS) and University of Eastern Finland (UEF/KUH) were made in February 2013, by UEF. The libraries were selected because they were dealing with the same subject, in similar environment, serving both universities and university hospitals. Data and statistics were collected and compared from spring 2013 to spring 2014 and library sites were visited in autumn 2014. Online meetings occurred regularly from spring 2013 onward. The project aims at finding and implementing best practices, covering different areas of library activity from the users' viewpoint. After a brief review of the literature, this paper presents the project methods and results followed by a discussion.

Brief literature review

Library benchmarking is not very common. International (best practices) benchmarking among aca-

demical health sciences libraries is almost non-existent. Searches were performed in Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA), PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar and SCOPUS using the search query benchmarking AND librar* AND (academic OR university OR universities OR health OR hospital OR medical) AND international in title, abstract or keywords or subject headings (when applicable). The results (234) were limited to scholarly/peer-reviewed journals and books or book chapters written in English and to publications from 2003 to 2018 i.e. the last 15 years. The results (63) were browsed by title to remove articles that were not about library services but about e.g. hospital accreditation, health personnel competencies, IT systems, public libraries or library associations. Then the abstracts of the remaining publications (32) were read and the ones about e.g. comparing library systems, search tools or other technical rather than service related topics were removed. At the third stage, the full texts of 11 articles were read and we finally ended up with only four articles that were pertinent to our objective.

One of the very few papers dealing with any type of international benchmarking involving academic libraries was the one about The Matariki Network of

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Universities that includes Dartmouth College (USA), Durham University (UK), Queen's University (Canada), the University of Otago (New Zealand), Tübingen University (Germany), the University of Western Australia and Uppsala University (Sweden). Hart & Amos's (1) case study outlines the findings from an activity-based international benchmarking of academic libraries since its inception. Their benchmarking project produced a data set for the participating libraries. The latter were just starting to develop a series of common international performance measures. Their paper is about the first benchmarking activity that aims at offering a development path and a better assessment of progress to demonstrate value. Since September 2011 the project regularly publishes a newsletter about the benchmarking actions (2). Balagué and Saarti (3), who benchmarked ISO 9001:2000 based quality management systems for academic libraries in two countries (Finland and Spain), argue in their case study that it is possible to create common tools – like best-practice databases, education materials, even drafts for quality monitoring manuals – for academic libraries to be used in quality management procedures. But they also stress that each organization must create or at least implement its own type of quality management for it to have any true impact.

We are not the only ones who found statistical measurement and comparison challenging. We included the research paper about the pilot project and workshop on The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL¹) e-measures in the UK (4) though it was not about international but national (UK) benchmarking. The authors realised that statistics required by SCONUL did not always match the requirements or practice of libraries even in one country, so it is easy to see why international benchmarking statistical information is not common. We also included the paper by Siguenza-Guzman *et al.* (5) who investigated the opportunities of using Time-Driven Activity-Based Costing (TDABC) to benchmark library processes, though it was not about international but national (Belgium) benchmarking. They had two major research questions:

1) Can TDABC be used to enhance process benchmarking in libraries?

2) Do results at activity level provide additional insights compared to macro results in a process benchmarking?

These authors state that in the current challenging environment measuring library performance cannot be done by looking only at overall analyses and outcomes, and that benchmarking can provide evidence to support changes in resources, budgets or infrastructure. They implemented a TDABC model for two Belgian libraries and four library functions: acquisition, cataloguing, circulation and document delivery. They argue that TDABC provides library managers with information for making sound decisions about optimal resource allocation and with strategic information for identifying improvement opportunities. According to these authors, TDABC can be used to enhance process benchmarking in libraries through the identification of best practices and opportunities for improvements. Their study illustrates how both (or all) benchmarking libraries must learn from each other and that mutually beneficial ways of improving library performance can be found. They encourage rethinking roles, rules, and activities across the library workflow. Of course, there are also limitations: physical infrastructure and transportation distances cannot be easily changed or adapted; libraries may have different priorities; resource cost data must perhaps be disguised for confidentiality reasons; data collection takes a significant amount of time when measuring is obtained from direct observation; documenting the activity flows requires time; some staff members feel uncomfortable being observed which may cause resistance and delays data collection (if managers and TDABC team skip motivation and explanation of the measurement purpose).

Methods

We have used several methods to compare our libraries in the different phases of the project, both quantitative and qualitative. The starting point for the project was the following research questions:

- How is the physical library space used? We compared both library space in general and the library as a learning space.

¹ SCONUL represents all university libraries in the UK and Ireland, irrespective of mission group, as well as national libraries and many of the UK's colleges of higher education.

- How are library services integrated? We looked into how library services are integrated in student/researcher/clinician work, how information skills training is integrated in curricula and how the collaboration with other university services like ICT and student services works out.
- How are library services marketed? We looked into each library's communication strategies and ongoing marketing projects.
- What is the value of the library? We investigated methods and indicators to measure value.

Collaborative collection of data

The first step of the project was to collect statistical information about both the libraries and universities as the plan was to compare activities and results (6). Areas we compared were library areas, facilities and equipment; services for the public, including loan, ILL and user training; collection management, bibliographic records; institutional repository; library staff, both number and staff training; and financial data.

Comparing numbers did not bring useful information into our project partly because numbers were extracted from different contexts. The next step was to use standard ISO indicators (6). The indicators we used were taken from ISO 11620 (7). We first decided on indicators; second we used actual data from our libraries; and third we used indicators to produce information. The following indicators were chosen: user per capita stresses the importance of the library as a place for study, meeting, and as a learning centre, and indicates the institution's support for these tasks. Staff per capita assesses the number of library employees per 1 000 members of the population to be served. The amount of work to be done can be considered proportional to the number of persons in the population to be served. The number of user attendance at training lessons per capita assesses the success of the library in reaching its users through the provision of training lessons. The user services staff as a percentage of total staff indicator can be used to determine the library's effort devoted to the front office services in comparison with the back office services. User services include the following functions: lending, reference interlibrary lending, user education, photocopying, shelving, and retrieving items.

Observation, structured and semi-structured interviews

The members of the project visited all the three libraries involved and spent a week at each library. We held discussions with the library directors and interviewed both library users and library staff members. We also looked into physical space planning, collections, staff organisation, relationships between library and hospital, and between the library and the university.

For the interviews with library users we chose 6 to 8 different spots or areas in each library and observed and talked to individual users, pairs of users and groups of users and asked why and how they used the library space. We had three questions: What do you use this library for? Why do you (study/read/work/group work) right here? Where would you study if the library did not exist?

We observed a wide range of activities: reading lecture notes and other study material, discussing, writing lab reports and research papers, doing group work, searching for information, using library books and the reader's own books, using their own laptops and library computers. We observed both similarities and differences. The library "has a good atmosphere for studying" (student UCLouvain) "is not too quiet, not too noisy and gives the ability to work together" (student NTNU) and "there is always a librarian around to keep the peace" (student UCLouvain).

We interviewed three staff members at each library about their job and role in their library. We also invited them to share their views on the meaning and impact of their work and of the library's in general. Again, we had three questions: What value does the library (and your role in it) add to the university? What would it mean if the library did not exist/provide the services? In your opinion, is the library doing the right things/providing the right services?

Our colleagues were willing to share. What started as interviews soon turned into collegial discussions, where we found ourselves taking part in processes where people reflect on the meaning of their work and the value of library with outsiders. The discussions were an opportunity to map needs expressed by users with staff views. They can be used to trigger and develop, a more user-oriented activity in the library. It was an opportunity for free expression and reflections through which we ended up finding the value of the library together.

Method 3: Focus group session and interactive workshops

To get a broader insight into both international benchmarking and the value of libraries we invited members of EAHIL (European Association for Health Information and Libraries) to take part in the project by commenting and discussing benchmarking as a method and to come up with ideas about further work in the project. At the EAHIL workshop in Edinburgh in 2015 ten colleagues from all over Europe took part in a focus group interview session on how to proceed with the project. Focus group is a qualitative method; it is a moderated discussion with 5 to 10 participants. The purpose is to obtain a range of opinions from a representative set of people to create a picture of the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and reactions to concepts that exist among the participants. The results cannot be generalized to a population but can be useful in deriving trends. Our focus group discussed the following topics: data comparison, site visits, marketing and library as a place. The focus group suggested that we figure out what we want to measure at this point, that we use indicators, that we should compare staff and – most importantly – that we must focus on fewer topics. At EAHIL2017 we facilitated a workshop called Cooperation and benchmarking – finding the value and impact together, where we invited the participants to help us identify more future oriented indicators and to discuss how – or if – benchmarking can provide tools for creating an evidence base for health librarianship. We used two different brainwriting methods:

- BrainWriting 6-3-5: The name comes from the process of having 6 people write 3 ideas on Post-It notes in 5 minutes.
- BrainWriting Pool: Each person, using Post-It notes or small cards, writes down ideas, and places them in the center of the table. Everyone is free to pull out one or more of these ideas for inspiration. Group members can create new ideas, variations or piggyback on existing ideas.

During the workshop, we discussed and developed two themes:

- 1) identify new types of indicators – future oriented instead of based on what has been done – in order to measure impact and value for international (health) library benchmarking;
- 2) discuss how (or if) benchmarking can provide

tools for creating an evidence base for health librarianship.

At EAHIL2018 we facilitated an interactive session called Passing on the benchmarking baton: workshop on cooperation methods, using new indicators, finding partners, and reporting results

We had a group of 20 active participants. The workshop aimed at sharing methods and tools, encouraging cooperation and new partnerships between libraries and librarians, building on new indicators that were identified during the Dublin workshop, determining themes and methods for new benchmarking projects, and finding means and channels to report to colleagues. The interactive methods included speed-dating, brain-storming and brain-writing.

- Speed dating during the first activity, the paired participants discussed each of the proposed new indicators for two minutes and then moved to discuss the next indicator by joining in a new pair. The aim was trying to find a duo or group which is willing to work on the same indicator.
- During the second activity, the participants worked in the duos or groups they had just found during the speed-dating activity. They discussed the chosen indicator and its implementation and started planning new projects.

Tools and documentation

Our project started in 2013. None of us has a budget or dedicated time for this project. We have kept costs and time to a minimum as we mainly work online. The funding sources for the visits came from the Erasmus staff exchange program and from the libraries' budgets.

The work is loosely organised; there is no leader – or we are all leaders. The three of us are equal in all decisions and our roles are based on our personalities and competencies as suits this type of project. Since January 2014 (the main project period) we have used roughly 5% of our total work time each:

- Library visits: 3 weeks
- Work together at EAHIL meetings: 3 days
- Skype monthly meetings and preparations: 3 weeks
- Planning the focus group for Edinburgh: 1 week
- Planning the presentation and writing the full-text article for Seville: 1 week
- Planning for the workshops in Dublin and Cardiff: 2 weeks

One of the challenges has been to find time for in-

dividual activities like reading and preparing between our meetings.

Collaboration tools have been important in order to spend time effectively both during and between meetings. The most useful tools we've used for cooperation have been these: Dropbox for all kinds of data: meeting agendas and minutes, collected data, plans, photos and so on, Google Hangouts for online meetings and collaborative writing; and WordPress blog for communicating our results (27 posts).

Results

During the project and process our views on using ISO indicators and on implementing new indicators changed and developed. It turned out that what we wanted to benchmark, or compare, when we wanted to identify best practices and develop services, was not very well described using any of the ISO indicators we used. It was clear that instead of quantitative indicators there was a need for qualitative indicators and that those indicators should be more future-oriented than library indicators usually are as they measure what has been done in past instead of what is going on now and what will be the next steps in developing library services. It turned out that observation and interviews (during the site visits) and discussions (in the focus group and the interactive workshops) provided us with the most useful indicators.

During the site visits we found both similarities and differences when observing students. Though most of the user activities were similar in all the libraries, the users appreciated somewhat different aspects of the libraries' space perhaps guided by the furnishing and design of the premises, but which also could be explained through different learning cultures at the three institutions. The discussions with the library staff members in each of our libraries during the site visits gave us the possibility to match expressed user needs with staff views. We have been able to utilise some of these ideas to develop our library services. The focus group discussion in 2015 partly resulted in developing new indicators that could be used to measure the value of library services. For the next two years we continued to work on the indicators in the interactive workshops together with participating colleagues.

The 2016 workshop ended up with a list of ideas for new indicators, e.g. number of high "grade" student

essays/exam papers in relation to librarian time spent teaching/tutoring:

- How has the literature search been used to change practice?
- Impact on national health policies index/indicator
- When host organisation cites the library's contribution in press releases or publicity
- What is the new role of a librarian? Non-traditional work
- Publications from the faculty; visibility in altmetrics
- Can the customer get the grant he/she applies?
- Time saved by faculty e.g. lecture writing, student remediation
- Proportion of knowledge syntheses that reach publication
- Increase in application usage after a conference
- Chocolate/biscuits/cards – how many gifts (you get from customers).

The result of the 2017 workshop was five groups and two pairs that will continue the work on these indicators:

- How has the literature search been used to change practice?
- Proportion of knowledge syntheses that reach publication
- Publications from the faculty; visibility in altmetrics
- When host organisation cites the library's contribution in press releases or publicity
- And the most popular one: new roles for the librarian / information professional; non-traditional work.

The project influenced our libraries in different ways. Some of these ways were visible and direct marketing and user experience oriented activities in the libraries like, e.g. making #Skeletor a recurring figure both in the library and on social media in NTNU/BMH Library, using quick polls to regularly to collect users' point of view, paying attention to the importance of furniture to create a welcoming environment in UCLouvain health sciences library, and getting colourful and flexible furniture and even a certain chair model seen in NTNU when furnishing the new KUH Library, starting #bookfacefriday in UEF Library Instagram and creating UEF library videos. Some results have more to do with our working

methods, and other activities unrelated to benchmarking, such as always ask the user's opinion when developing the library area (UX) at the NTNU/BMH Library, ask the users to be involved in developing library areas (learning center) and new services (assistance in systematic reviews) in UCLouvain library, and have more staff that has a researcher background in UEF Library.

The benchmarking project also changed us personally. Something we all gained from the process is competency in organising interactive workshops and comparing different methods and tools, ability to write abstracts or proposals for conferences and workshops. Other benefits include better competencies in using indicators and statistics, in benchmarking (naturally), collaborative working and meeting online. In addition, we have learned how to work with colleagues from different countries and working cultures, and increased our language and communication skills, and for one of us the personal decision to transfer to a new department, outside libraries, where it is possible to take some action.

We assume that something also happened to those EAHIL members and other colleagues who participated in the focus group or workshops or read our blog or articles. Using interactive methods in workshops, we tried to pass on the benchmarking baton, and to plant some seeds.

Discussion

We experience this kind of library benchmarking essentially as a communication tool. We decided not to use the figures, as they were not useful for our purposes, but concentrate on looking for good, maybe even best practices, and to find the value of the library. What started as a benchmarking project became a professional co-development process (8). We invited colleagues to learn with us, to discuss, to share. Every colleague who has visited other libraries knows how much we can learn from each other.

This project helped in strengthening the health sciences university libraries specificity and needs. Most health information professionals face similar challenges and sometimes experience the same success. During the five years of our project, libraries in general went through physical transformations and the development of the services was based more on user-experienced activities. European libraries were also influenced by the European Union open access pol-

icy and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The communication competencies – analysis, discussion, clarification, negotiation, oral presentation, professional writing, persuasion, influencing, reasoning and cross-cultural communication – we learned are essential in developing the profession, to address the necessity to move forward and to handle the challenges in our specific environment resulting from different organisational, political and cultural situations.

Conclusions

This type of international benchmarking process involves working hours and personal interest but also organisational and collegial support. Aiming at providing good library and information services for students and staff, and involving evaluation and continuing development of competencies, is challenging and rewarding. Taking part in this kind of process provides information professionals and their organisations with new abilities and competencies. The main outcome of the project and of the process is that library benchmarking is a powerful tool for communication and development.

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