

Collection evaluation: micro and macro levels - preliminary guidelines and the results of a pilot study of two Finnish University Libraries

Raine Wilen & Anneli Ahtola

Collection evaluation may serve many purposes on different levels for libraries. Recognizing the given purposes and goals are important to select a relevant method of evaluation. However, collection evaluation can be very labor intensive, and finding a suitable method can be difficult. This article discusses the pilot study covering collections from Helsinki University Library and Tampere University Library trying to show that it is not necessarily so.

Collection evaluation serves many purposes on different levels - local collection work, collection development policy, financing and funding, national co-operation. It is very difficult to measure how “good” a collection is. Furthermore, the character of collections has changed a lot: they are more varied, less stable, and less predictable; they are also more demand-driven.

The same difficulty applies to collection **quality**, which is another vague and amorphous concept. The quality can be viewed from many perspectives, e.g. from the viewpoints of different stakeholder groups. However, quality assessment is an important process, and if well done, it provides a sound basis for the decisions in the future and supports planning and communication among libraries and their users.

One collection evaluation measure and method is not appropriate for every purpose. Accordingly, both the goals of the library and the goals and purposes of the collection must be clearly stated - usually they are described in the collection development policy document - before any meaningful evaluation can be started. After the collection goals have been assigned to various subject areas it is possible to evaluate how successfully the collection building has been managed.

Collection evaluation methods

Collections can be evaluated independently or in relation to their use and user demands. The standard approach to collection evaluation methods is to divide them in two distinct groups: **collection-centered** and **use-centered methods**.

The distinction is also made between **quantitative** and **qualitative methods**.

Each of these methods and techniques has particular strengths and weaknesses and they must often be used in combination to compensate for each other. It follows that the evaluator’s chief responsibility is to bring together a grounded understanding of the user community and its information needs together with a sophisticated and informed understanding of the publications universe.

The collections can be assessed in the **local context** or on the **national and international level**. The pilot study concentrated mainly on the local level evaluation because of strict time limits. However, a plan for national and international comparisons was outlined. The general guidelines of the collection evaluation process recommended by the Finnish Collection Map Project Steering Group are described below. The principles that guide the accomplishment of the process should be clear and practical.

Data gathering

The following restrictions applied to data gathering:

1. only items cataloged in the Voyager library system are included; card catalog information is used only as background material;
2. only printed monographs are considered;
3. theses are not included, because purposeful material selection criteria does not apply to them; and
4. circulation counts are based on Voyager statistics (2001 onwards).

Year and language distributions can be gathered from the Voyager system.

The guiding concepts in gathering the data must be accuracy and reliability. This is solid in theory, but not always in practice.

The larger the coverage of the materials, the poorer is the accuracy and reliability of the results. This holds true especially for the old and large libraries such as Helsinki University Library, where the majority of all titles is not cataloged in the open access collections but scattered around in closed stacks.

The Voyager system does not allow data gathering on these scattered items accurately but requires much manual, laborious and time consuming work. Therefore, the pilots included only collections, of which the data could be gathered similarly and accurately in both pilot libraries.

As for Helsinki University Library, this restriction means that only the open access collection with accurate data about holdings could be taken into consideration. On the other hand, the Helsinki University Library pilot excludes some part of the materials. The restriction has to be kept in mind when the comparisons between Tampere and Helsinki university collections are made.

The collection profiles were viewed from two different points of view: the collection in itself, i.e. the number of items in it (age and language categories), and the collection in relation to its use. On the local level these two distinct profiles can tell many important things and differences

between the collections.

The titles added to collection show how the different subject collections are developed. The figures make clear the growing or descending trends of the subject collections. The circulation counts reveal users interests. When subject collections are developed the circulation counts should be accounted somehow.

Some special features about two collections came out in our pilot studies. The local level profiles of the collections of all major Finnish libraries form the whole map of collections on the national level.

On the national level we used the national union catalog Linda as a yardstick. It is possible also to use other similar libraries' collections. Using Linda makes it possible to see how many duplicates and unique titles you have in your collection.

The amount and distribution (including age and language categories) of unique titles in subject collections tell something about the depth and breadth of the collection. The circulation counts of the unique titles are an important indicator that show the value of the selection process.

On the international level it is possible to compare your collection with some foreign collection that is considered to be of good quality on the international ranking. In this case it is important to pay attention to the size and purpose of the foreign collection that is used as a yardstick. The users and their interests can also be different. On the other hand the comparisons can be useful in spite of the differences of collections.

Pilot study results

The purpose of the pilot was to test the feasibility of the evaluation guidelines recommended by the Finnish Collection Map Steering Group. From within the Steering Group, a special evaluation team was formed, which included representatives from three university libraries. All three were supposed to participate in the pilot.

However, data could not be gathered in the agreed way in one of them, and therefore only two libraries were involved, namely Helsinki and Tampere University Libraries.

History was selected as the subject to be examined because of its centrality in university curricula. Furthermore, besides history as a whole, history of Great-Britain was selected for a closer review.

In Tampere, all history collections irrespective of the branch location were included in the pilot study. In Helsinki, on the other hand, the review consisted of the open access collection, which was established in 1977, and which now includes mainly new foreign materials.

This demarcation made it possible to collect data from the Voyager system in the same way - by shelf class numbers - in both libraries. (Additionally, Helsinki University Library has several monographic series that are not included in the open access collection and do not come up in the pilot study.) As specified in the recommendations, only printed monographs were included in the pilot.

Holdings by year categories

Both in history as a whole and in British history, Helsinki holdings show a strong increasing trend from the 1970s onward. This is natural due to the fact that the open shelves collection was started off in the late 70s. In Helsinki, the 70s titles accounted for 12.1 per cent of the total history titles, while the 80s titles accounted for 21.4 per cent and the 90's titles for 29.6 per cent. The titles of the 21st century so far accounted for 32.5 per cent of the total.

Tampere acquisitions, on the other hand, concentrated strongly in the 80s with a clear decreasing trend from that point on. In Tampere, the 80's titles accounted for 32 per cent of the total history titles, whereas the 90's titles accounted for 19.9 per cent, and the 21st century titles only for 6.9 per cent. The fact that the Tampere

holdings prior to 1970 surpass those in Helsinki, explains itself by the later foundation of the Helsinki collection.

There have been no significant changes in curricula that would explain the opposite development trends in these two libraries. It is concluded that the development trends result mainly from monetary allocations.

In Helsinki, the British history formed a 6.5 per cent share of the total history collection, while the corresponding figure in Tampere was 7.4. The growth trends in British history have been similar to the trends in history as a whole.

Holdings by language categories

Table 1. points out the wide range of languages in both collections. The most prevalent languages were English, German, Swedish, Finnish and French; the English being the most common. The significant difference in the number of Finnish titles is explained by the fact that Helsinki University Library is a legal deposit copy library, whereas Tampere University Library is not. In Helsinki, most Finnish titles are catalogued into the legal deposit collection, and only those, which are paid for, go into the open access collection.

Table 1. Language distributions

	Helsinki	Tampere
Titles	18 816	19 154
Languages	27	25
English	49.6 %	44.2 %
German	15.3 %	10.5 %
Swedish	10.4 %	7.9 %
Finnish	8.3 %	28.1 %
French	8.0 %	2.8 %
One title	6 languages (ara,grc,ice, jpn,pol,smi)	5 languages (chi,gre,ice, lit,rum)

The British history titles in both libraries were for the most part, approximately 98 per cent, in English. Besides English, titles in six other languages were catalogued in the Helsinki collection and seven in that of Tampere. Understandably, they formed only a very minuscule part of the collection.

Language trends

English has strengthened its position as the most prevalent language both in history as a whole and in British history in the Helsinki collection, while the numbers of German and Finnish titles have gone down. In the Tampere collection, German and also English titles have decreased in number,

whereas the Finnish proportion has enjoyed a strong growth. In both libraries, a little upward trend is noticeable in Swedish titles, while the French proportion has continued stable.

Usage

As can be seen from Table 2., the 80s and 90s titles, both in history as a whole and in British history, have circulated most frequently during the Voyager system era (since 2001). The 90s titles circulated somewhat more than those of the preceding decade, with the exception of the 80s British history in Tampere. The decreasing acquisitions in Tampere, of course, may somewhat affect circulation statistics.

Table 2. Circulation percentages

Titles	History		British history	
	Helsinki	Tampere	Helsinki	Tampere
-1969	7.1	13.9	2.9	6.7
1970s	16.6	13.1	14.1	16.7
1980s	31.5	29.2	34.5	45.1
1990s	34.3	32.4	36.8	27.0
2000-	10.5	11.5	12.0	4.4

Circulation counts per title were higher in Helsinki than in Tampere, as can be seen from Table 3. In Tampere, the circulation counts per title were the same for both collections, whereas in Helsinki,

British history had circulated more than history as a whole. From all history circulation transactions, the British accounted for 7.6 per cent in Helsinki and 7.4 per cent in Tampere.

Table 3. Circulation counts per title

	History/Helsinki	History/Tampere	British/Helsinki	British/Tampere
Titles	18 923	19 154	1 227	1 414
Loans	68 082	23 475	5 154	1 726
Loans/title	3.6	1.2	4.2	1.2

Unique titles

Due to time constraints, unique titles were examined only for the Tampere British history collection. Titles were defined as unique, if the university libraries' union catalog, LINDA, indicated them to be found only in Tampere. 399 titles out of the total of 1 414 turned out to be unique, thus amounting to 27.7 per cent of the collection. Almost all of them, 391, were in English. Nearly 50 per cent of the titles were from the 1980s and close to 30 per cent from the 1970s.

Conclusions

Even though the pilot study was of limited nature utilizing only quantitative methods, the benefits elucidated are obvious, however. Needed computer runs and data analyses were not considered laborious, yet the examination brought up factual information about the collection structure as to age, language and usage.

These data serve as a valuable guideline for future acquisitions as well as for weeding the existing collection. Unique titles can be considered important in the national collection map, and further data about their circulation frequencies would shed additional light on their true significance and usefulness in an academic collection.

Collection analyses make it also possible to verify how well the collection development policies have been adhered to in reality.

The pilot dealt only with two libraries. When comparisons can, and will, be done on a national scale, it is possible to gather information about the overlap, similarities and different emphases between collections. This perhaps will give impetus to formulate a national collection policy. Furthermore, international comparisons will reveal the standing of Finnish university library collections in wider research realm.

Selected Reading

Gorman, G., Miller, R. (2000) Changing collections: changing evaluation. In *Collection management*, Ed. G. Gorman., International Yearbook of Library and Information Management 2000/2001, London, Library Association Publishing.

Johnson, Peggy (2004), *Fundamentals of collection development & management*, Chicago, ALA.

*Raine Wilén, Librarian, Helsinki University Library
- The National Library of Finland
raine.wilen@helsinki.fi
Anneli Ahtola, Library Development Officer, Tampere University Library
email: anneli.ahola@uta.fi*