MEASURING QUALITY IN LIBRARIES

NOTES ON A SEMINAR ORGANISED BY THE LIBER DIVISION OF LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION AT THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, RUE DE RICHELIEU, PARIS, 23 MARCH 2007

1. The Seminar was introduced by Suzanne Jouguelet, Chair of the Division, and Bill Simpson, Divisional Secretary who explained the rationale for the day, what it was hoped could be achieved and how the conclusions would be presented. Presentation would include a session at the LIBER Annual Conference to be held in Warsaw in July 2007.

2. Assessment of Service Quality. Martha Kyrillidou (MK) of The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) spoke about LibQUAL and tabled papers on performance measurement and metrics. She explained that some national libraries have now adopted LibQUAL and its value not only as an assessment tool but, because of the co-operative nature of the enterprise, its usefulness in fostering a sense of community among libraries and librarians.

LibQUAL recognised the need for quantitative as well as qualitative assessment, particularly as libraries adapt to a world in which Google has become the default information resource for many and only 15.7% of those surveyed recently agreed with the statement "The internet has not changed how I use the Library". Reassuringly 98% of respondents agree that the Library contains information from known and credible sources. ARL is working on new developments such as DigiQUAL to keep pace with changes in the information world.

Stephen Town (ST), spoke of the experience of SCONUL (Society of National, College and University Libraries), pointing out the many tools and options available such as Quality Assessment, Peer Review, Performance Indicators, Satisfaction Surveys and Total Quality Management, some of which can be used in conjunction with each other. He explained that for universities two "bottom lines" are crucial – the financial and the academic (research, teaching and learning). It is vital that the Library can have a positive impact on both.

ST referred to the "toolkit" produced by the SCONUL Working Group on Performance Improvement but stressed that more is needed for upward advocacy of the Library's cause within our parent institutions. He mentioned our ability to move from a "business as usual mode" to the management of new initiatives (The Capability Maturing Model) and our ability to demonstrate our impact and value (i.e. how much is delivered per €1 invested in the Library for research or teaching and what value do Library staff add to the institution?)

In the discussion that followed this session reference was made to the introduction of tuition fees in the UK and its impact on the expectations of students and their parents, who increasingly see themselves as customers buying a service or product rather than as recipients of a free public good. Pierre Carbone also raised the issue of the impact of the Library on examination success and the quality of publishing.

3. Standardisation Pierre-Yves Renaud (PYR) drew the participants' attention to ISO2789, dealing primarily with Library statistics, and ISO11620 covering performance indicators, using the classic model involving efficiency, effectiveness, relevance etc. Although neither standard is new, they are well-established and recognised and can express, in a common set of concepts, what can be clearly and effectively defined. There is now a need for a common standard which, like the GDP of a nation, is able to synthesize a set of data into a single figure that can be used for comparative purposes, either year-on-year within the same institution or at regular intervals with other similar institutions. Such a single measure would have to be built on clear definitions of what it should do, collection of common data and agreed indicators.

Willy Vanderpijpen (WV) described the many areas of measurement for national libraries, the initiatives being undertaken and the need for synthesis. It was hoped that this synthesis could be achieved and a common approach adopted through the Conference of European National Libraries. In the discussion that followed this paper it was agreed that the indicators and approach described by WV were as applicable to university as to national libraries.

4. Paul Ayris (PA) described the work of University College London (UCL) in adopting a system of quality management for its Library. The process was being managed by an Operational Planning Team using three types of measurement: benchmarking against other libraries, internal key performance indicators (KPIs) and user satisfaction/impact assessment. Other institutions against which UCL will benchmark itself are being identified and KPIs will be agreed by July 2007. Because it is difficult to measure impacts the launch of the VAMP project is awaited with interest. LibQUAL will be used for satisfaction surveys and LIBRA when quantitative approaches are required.

Paul Sheehan (PS) described the process of Quality Review in Irish universities that had resulted from the Irish Universities Act of 1997. This was an exhaustive process, applied separately to all parts of the university, including the Library, that required six months' to a year's preparation and was repeated every 4/5 years. It extended beyond statistical analysis and was required to be "comprehensive and reflective", including staff and customer perspectives and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. The Peer Review Group consists of five people, three from outside the institution (one of whom must be international) and produces a formal report to the university. The Review process results in the production of a Quality Improvement Plan, whose recommendations are discussed with senior university officers. Those that are agreed are referred to the Budget Committee. PS's view was that the process is useful, though very labour intensive and that budgetary constraints often made it difficult to implement recommendations.

Bill Simpson (BS) spoke of the process of Operational Performance Review at Manchester. This included KPIs, some on an ongoing basis, some varying from year to year as targets were achieved. OPR also includes staff performance in terms of return for RAE (the UK Research Assessment Exercise), membership of external bodies and learned societies, publications and papers given at conferences, etc. Performance against the Manchester 2015 agenda and the Library's own Strategic Plan is also considered, as are the findings of internal student surveys (largely based on gap analysis) and the Library's participation in LibQUAL. The process includes a long meeting with senior academics and some lively debate. JRUL has also taken the lead in setting up an international benchmarking group of libraries in the UK, North America, Australia and the Far East. European partners are being sought.

ST raised a number of points from a SCONUL perspective:

· Can LIBER facilitate international consortia?

· Would it be possible to set up national or international (LIBER?) clearing houses for benchmarking?

· What about e-benchmarking?

He observed that benchmarking, particularly with external partners, was good for staff development.

In discussion the question of whether the French libraries' programme to set up a system of international comparison should come under the aegis of LIBER. Obtaining agreement on what could reasonably be achieved across Europe was seen as a potential obstacle to this, though perhaps not insuperable if a relatively small and clearly defined group of indicators could be agreed.

Further remarks on benchmarking were made by Janifer Gatenby of OCLC, who spoke of the use that could be made of tools such as WorldCat in quality measurement.

Ulrich Niederer (UN) spoke of the Swiss Benchmarking Project which began in 2001 with agreement on performance indicators. Initially unsuccessful because of the amount of work involved for Library staff, it assumed a new life as national statistics became available in more usable form. "Circles of comparison" include public as well as academic libraries and attempts have been made to include German libraries. UN would be prepared to provide the indicators used to participants in the Seminar. A critical question for the Swiss had been the level of staffing resources needed to benchmark effectively.

5. Final Debate and Synthesis: The following key points and statements were made:

· It is essential to engage staff, both in the process and, especially, in ensuring that findings are acted upon rather than simply being noted.

· The point of the whole process, whichever methodologies are adopted, is not just to gather information but to improve performance.

· People will stop responding to surveys if they do not lead to change and improvement and, particularly, if their concerns are not addressed.

· We should not confuse the collecting of data with strategic engagement and decision making at the highest level. Performance measurement should be a tool for upward strategic engagement within the institution.

· There is a need for measurements that are independent of local culture if international comparisons are to be made. Should we begin by collecting and comparing existing lists?

· We should not survey users too often since "survey fatigue" sets in and response rates drop quickly.

· Should there be a LIBER group for LibQUAL.

· It was noted that French academic libraries, after some initial scepticism, are likely to adopt LibQUAL, with the first probably participating in 2007.

Bill Simpson
May 2007