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Evaluation of the 63rd IFLA Council and General Conference 1997

Introduction

In 1997 the annual IFLA Conference took place in Copenhagen, Denmark from 31 August until 5 September. The authors of this article had the pleasure of organizing and carrying out the evaluation of the IFLA '97 Conference, a task we received as a special challenge.

In the present article it is our purpose to present the overall theoretical and methodological considerations concerning this evaluation. The main results are reviewed and discussed, and finally some reflections on the future role of IFLA Conferences are presented.

These reflections, related to the digital age, were the continuous developments in communication tools heralding changes in human communications worldwide. When more and more of our communication is managed electronically, it seems appropriate to put into context the relevance and current interest of today's international conferences. In the field of librarianship is there a present need for face-to-face exchange of professional ideas or could professional development occur likewise in i.e., electronic networks? A question related to this could be: for what reason do we need international conferences? Is it for professional or social reasons - or both?

Of course a single evaluation like the present will not provide us with adequate answers to all of these questions, although in the last section we will identify what particular aspects of IFLA Conferences justify their existence.

Why an Evaluation?

The evaluation of the IFLA '97 conference was initiated by IFLA Headquarters. Such a comprehensive evaluation of customer satisfaction had not been carried out since IFLA '87 in Brighton, UK, and it seemed the right time to conduct a new survey.

The main purpose of the evaluation was to support continuing improvements of IFLA Conferences. It should therefore provide conference planners, now and in the future, with the relevant information needed for decisions and action.

In terms of quality management, the intention was, through a customer-oriented viewpoint, to determine which aspects of the conference turned out successfully and which did not. In this way it is possible not only to identify quality problems or problem areas, but also to identify the main criteria of successes.

Therefore, to measure conference successes or failures, it was decided to look at customer satisfaction. Customers' (i.e., participants and delegates) perception of those areas in which their expectations were met, and those in which they were not. However, since perceptions and expectations are concepts difficult to define and measure in an unambiguous way, we found it necessary to design our survey so that these concepts would be examined from different approaches. This had consequences for our choice of methods, so in comparison with former IFLA evaluations, we widened the methodological scope by combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

Applied Methods

Our intention of combining a quantitative and a qualitative approach was to provide complementary data. In the total survey design data were therefore collected by the use of the following methodological approaches:

- a hard copy questionnaire for self-completion;
- an electronic version of the questionnaire, and
- personal in-depth interviews.

Data from the quantitative survey, the questionnaire, provided us with a picture of general distributions as to background variables and attitudes. Data from the qualitative interviews illustrates variability and extreme points of views. These methods together give us an idea of the relationship between participants' perception of the conference and to what degree their expectations were met, and of causes for satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The hard copy questionnaire for self-completion and its identical electronic counterpart were prepared in advance. Questions were divided into three parts:

- A. Evaluation of the conference
- B. Evaluation of conference location and accommodation
- C. Background information

The first part (A), contained questions related to the evaluation of the professional programme, presentations, services, and social/cultural events during the conference. The second part (B), was included because choice of conference city or location is considered a critical success factor for an IFLA Conference. Finally, the third part (C) contained questions about respondents' personal background (i.e., variables such as professional function and age).

Responses were indicated by rating on a five-point semantic differential scale from excellent to poor, or the option of answering "Don't know" if the respondent was unable to answer the question.

In the same way an interview guide was prepared in advance. The overall themes of the questions prepared were: participants' motivation, perceptions and expectations in relation to IFLA Conferences in general using IFLA '97 as an actual reference point. Related to this was the question of IFLA Conferences compared to other international conferences. Moreover, there were questions concerning attitudes towards the importance and future role of IFLA Conferences, and finally again questions about the choice of conference location and site.

An innovative feature of the evaluation was the idea of exploiting the interactive opportunities of the Internet by developing an electronic version of the questionnaire. Having established an Internet Bar at the conference site, it seemed obvious to utilize this media for evaluation as well. The electronic questionnaire was linked to the official IFLA home page, and the overall structure and content was identical to the written questionnaire.

Data Collection and Registration

An English version of the hard-copy questionnaire was placed in the conference bags. Questionnaires in French, Spanish, German and Russian were available at the information desk and the IFLA booth in the exhibition area on demand. The electronic version of the questionnaire was only available in English, which of course excluded answers from participants with little or no familiarity with English. Interviews were conducted in English by colleagues and students from the Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, while persons whose mother tongue was one of the other four languages conducted the French, Spanish, German and Russian interviews.

All data were collected during the conference week. Interviews were held with delegates at the conference site from Wednesday to Friday. As a special attraction respondents who filled out a questionnaire or delivered an interview were offered participation in a prize-draw for free registration at next year's IFLA Conference in Amsterdam. It seemed a proper way to thank people for their time spent, and to stimulate the interest of contributing to the evaluation of the conference.

In total we received 553 questionnaires and conducted 105 interviews, which, in our opinion, was a satisfactory result compared to earlier evaluations.

Data from the written and electronic questionnaires were coded and processed by the statistical software package, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This software was used for data analysis as well.

Review of Main Results

In this section the main results from the questionnaire-based survey as well from the qualitative interviews will be presented. The results are offered as an interplay of the three different kinds of sources: the data from the numeric answers in the questionnaire, the comments made in the questionnaire, and the results of the interviews.

In total 553 questionnaires were returned, corresponding to a response rate of 22%, and 105 persons were interviewed. The respondents were asked for background information, for instance, age, professional function, and activity followed during the conference. As to age, according to Table 1, we find a clear pattern of a conference dominated by middle-aged and elderly people, e.g., a majority of 63% of the respondents are 46 years or older and only a proportion of 11% are younger than 36 years.

Table 1. Age

under 25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	over 66	Total (n=553)
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Regarding the professional function, we find a clear domination of librarians and library directors among the delegates, in total 69% of the respondents. The members of the third largest category of 13% work as educators,

and concerning other professional functions the survey shows proportions of less than 8%, e.g., people from private companies, library associations, students and others.

The third kind of background information dealt with in this connection is the kind of activity the delegates had been involved in during the conference days. In average the respondents had been involved in about two kinds of activities, being either a conference attendee or a Standing Committee member as the two most frequently followed activities (both indicated by 21-22% of the respondents). As the third and fourth most frequently indicated activity, we find being an IFLA member (indicated by 17%) and a Conference speaker (indicated by 11%). All other kinds of activities are mentioned by between 1%-8% of the respondents, i.e. engaged in IFLA projects, Round Table member and National IFLA Committee.

Overall Impression

As the first point to stress it should be recognized that the delegates of IFLA '97, represented by the 553 respondents and the 105 interviewed people, in general were very content with their experiences at the Bella Centre in Copenhagen. Practically no one indicates a poor overall impression of the conference; as many as 77% finds it excellent or even very excellent while 22% indicates a neutral evaluation. See table 2 for the results in detail.

Table 2. Overall Impression

Very excellent	Excellent	Neutral	Poor	Very poor	Don't know	Total (n=530)
23%	54%	22%	1%	0%	0%	100%

There is a tendency among the respondents to link a positive overall impression of IFLA '97 with considerations of the overall purpose of IFLA; for instance, two remarks state: "It provides an opportunity for librarians to meet the world and the world to know and understand the field of librarianship" and "Very informative to talk to librarians from around the world and to learn about the many aspects of every kind of library and type of librarianship."

When asking a broad and relatively non-specific question as the one in focus, e.g., "Overall impression", it is of great interest to investigate whether the answers fluctuate or vary relating to other variables of the questionnaire. The results show a interesting pattern between both number of IFLA Conferences attended and age on the one hand, and on the other hand overall impression. The tendency is that the fewer conferences attended and the younger the delegates are, the more positive they are in their evaluation. And vice versa, the evaluations are more skeptical, or even critical, among delegates who have attended several conferences; a "veteran" who has attended between 7 and 27 IFLA Conferences belongs to the middle-aged or eldest age group.

If we turn to the opinions of evaluation in more specific terms, the positive answers focus on the organizational work, quality of exhibitions and a higher professional level in presented papers. The organizational aspect of the IFLA Conference '97 is paradoxically in focus regarding the more critical points of views, too. Furthermore,

logistic problems and cultural aspects are mentioned in the remarks made by the more experienced, and negative, delegates.

High Quality of Service Level

When analyzing the results, some dimensions of the survey stand out as "top scores" in as those most positively evaluated. In general, the service level of IFLA '97 is exceptionally positively evaluated, and in particular the work and services offered by the volunteers and the paperhandling functions are characterized by very high ratings.

Identified Quality Problems

The service level was the dimension most positively evaluated. The results also pointed out the dimensions with the least positive ratings. Here, especially, two aspects stand out: the quality of the simultaneous interpretation and the quality of papers and presentations. The quality of the simultaneous interpretation is criticized both in terms of technical aspects (e.g., channels, and therefore languages, overlapped; headphones), and in terms of the actual translation work. Regarding the latter, critical opinions are expressed concerning the interpreters' lack of insight into the professional vocabulary of information work and librarianship resulting in poor translations of the papers and speeches presented. The other aspect in focus, the quality of papers and presentations, reveals assessments characterizing papers presented as "only average concerning contents" and "a bit on the low side". At the same time several of the respondents give voice to dissatisfaction with lack of time or willingness to allow discussions at sessions and workshops.

A third area of interest with less positive ratings is the assessment of accommodation in Copenhagen. This result is primarily related to one specific hotel, but most interestingly this fact does not seem to influence the overall impression of the conference.

Professional and Social Aspects of IFLA '97

It is remarkable how uniform the answers are when the respondents are asked about the aspect(s) they found most rewarding at IFLA '97. A great proportion of the respondents to the questionnaire stress the importance of networking, personal and professional contacts and the exchange of knowledge and ideas. Many have made comments like "interaction with colleagues on matter of mutual concern" and "to widen my horizon due to the library situation in other parts of the world. Get inspiration!" In the in-depth interviews the respondents stress similar dimensions when they are asked what reasons they had for participating in IFLA '97. In fact it is possible to crystallize seven categories within a mixture of professional and social reasons:

- *Professional development, including to be up-dated professionally* (e.g., "the theme of the conference"; "the group Management and Marketing"; "how to build a library up after the war (in Lebanon)")
- *To obtain information about library-related products* (e.g., "library furniture"; "library data systems")
- *Establishment and confirmation of personal network, including meeting certain people* (e.g., "financial support, i.e., The Danida grants made it possible for many from developing countries to join IFLA '97")
- *Learning about the organization of international conferences* (e.g., "in charge of organizing conferences or exhibitions in home country")

- *Specific duties* (e.g., "presenting a paper"; "Member of Standing Committee")
- *Miscellaneous reasons* (e.g., "to buy an IFLA T-shirt - my daughter collects them"; "A must - a librarian's pilgrimage").

It is obvious that many of the reasons are not mutually exclusive and it seems similar obvious that an individual's decision to participate in an IFLA Conference typically is based upon a motivational structure including a unique combination of elements of broad or narrow professional interest, desire for networking, duties, curiosity etc. Indeed we can conclude that IFLA delegates are not alike and that their motivation for participating corresponds to different needs and expectations.

Despite the positive results presented above, we also find some critical remarks regarding the cultural and social events of IFLA '97. The outcome of the questionnaire survey reveals a proportion of 21% indicating a "neutral" rating and 11% indicating a "poor" or "very poor" rating. Several circumstances are pointed out in this relation, referring to a predominance of receptions compared to cultural events, too large receptions, lack of food, problems of finding the venues where receptions took place, and last but not least several mention a curious, but not unimportant, reason: "too little fun" and "many wanted some dancing!".

Copenhagen as Conference City and the Bella Centre as Conference Site

In relation to international conferences the choice of location of country and city and conference site is of great importance. We suppose that many conference planners and conference participants pay great attention to this issue.

Indeed, the results of the questionnaire survey show a quite strong relationship between this dimension and the overall impression of the respondents. The tendency is that respondents who have made a positive evaluation of the choice of location and conference site tend to evaluate the overall impression in positive ways, and vice versa. In terms of ratings, the results indicate that 67% evaluate this dimension as "very excellent" or "excellent", 19% indicate "neutral" and 12% indicate "poor" or "very poor". Many of the comments in the questionnaires relate to aspects of the choice of location and conference site, and several of the respondents emphasize Copenhagen as a very well-chosen city. But the crux of matter seems to be the location of Bella Centre too far out of the city and too far away from the hotels and in continuation of this matter, the transportation system is mentioned by many as insufficient. In particular, it should be mentioned that the food services at the Bella Centre are evaluated quite negatively. The respondents found food shortage, expensive food and wrong compositions of food, the latter especially related to cultural differences, as well as to eating habits.

In the qualitative interviews we had the opportunity to obtain more specific and detailed information in relation to factors influencing assessments of Copenhagen and the Bella Centre as conference site. It is difficult to find strong and clear patterns in the answers among the interviewed persons representing as many as 41 countries throughout the world. What seems to be quite clear, however, is that at an international conference like IFLA '97, delegates' perception and judgments are highly influenced by their own geographical and cultural background. Still, it is possible to find criteria that seem to be common in the assessments made by the interviewed persons, although the criteria naturally varies according to geographical and cultural conditions. The main criteria mentioned are: people; tourist sights and culture; safety; hotels; transportation; and price level.

IFLA '97 Compared to other International Conferences

As to several of the other aspects investigated in the questionnaire and the open-ended interviews, the results show both positive and negative judgments - sometimes it even seems so that different kinds of judgments go hand in hand! Regarding the question in focus here, IFLA conferences are appreciated by delegates for having a broader scope than traditional professional conferences because some delegates find it useful to meet people outside their own field of specialization. From the statements made, we can conclude that IFLA's annual conferences seem to occupy a certain and important niche in the global professional interaction of librarianship and information work. At the same time, this positive characteristic is followed by a less positive statement made by several: the professional level is assessed lower than the level at other, more "scientific", "smaller" or "concise" conferences.

Needs for IFLA Conferences in the Future?

As the last and final question the interviewed people were asked about their attitudes towards the importance and future role of IFLA Conferences.

Some of the answers reveal dark perspectives for future IFLA Conferences like: "IFLA is a big, conservative and slow organization". "No, I don't believe that IFLA Conferences will influence the development". However, most of the answers and comments made see a future role for the annual IFLA Conferences. In addition to the traditional justifications regarding their importance for professional networking, IFLA's specific role towards the Third World is emphasized. One comment expresses this: "It is an important forum to improve library services in the Third World, and it is important to exchange information with the Third World".

Discussion

The main results of the evaluation of IFLA 97, Copenhagen, have now been summarized. The purpose of this section is to discuss implications and consequences of the presented findings. Indeed, facts and figures first become really interesting when being interpreted and analyzed. The first evaluation issue concerns the quality of the conference: to what extent does the outcome of the evaluation reveal any serious quality problems and areas for improvement? To answer this crucial question it is necessary to make explicit what is meant by quality and a quality problem is defined. As a reasonable rule-of-thumb, the evaluation group has suggested that an excellence rate of 80% and above (this means that 80% indicate that they find the performance as to a given aspect either "very excellent" or "excellent") represents a desirable quality objective of an international conference. It should be added that the percentage of poor and very poor ratings should be 2% or less. An acceptable quality level means an excellence rate between 80% and 66%, combined with a percentage of poor/very poor indications at 5% or less. What lies outside these limits, in general, should be considered as quality problems to be addressed within a short-term horizon. Furthermore, in prioritizing quality improvement initiatives, one should focus on reducing the percentages of poor/very poor ratings rather than raising the excellence level above the 66% lower acceptance limit having in mind that it takes several pluses to neutralize a single minus.

Given this interpretation of what constitutes a quality problem, it is obvious that areas such as the quality of presentations, choice of conference site (Bella Centre), accommodation, food services, simultaneous interpretation, cultural and social events, all represent more or less severe quality problems.

To establish and prioritize quality improvement initiatives, however, it is not sufficient to know the distribution of satisfied and less satisfied conference delegates. Information about their individual causes of being more or less satisfied are also relevant. From the evaluation forms we often experienced that the same circumstances and events could cause quite different evaluation outcomes by different individuals, that the perception of one feature, e.g., accommodation might influence the perception of other aspects, e.g., overall impression, and that different people often emphasize different aspects. Indeed, interpretation of evaluation outcomes seems to be more complex than

immediately believed. Before implementing quality improvement efforts it should also be important to gather insight into the way IFLA delegates consider the relative importance and weight of different aspects of conference quality. After all, the quality of presentations and simultaneous interpretation seems to be more important to the professional value of a conference than food services and cultural events.

However, the evaluation results primarily tell about levels of participants' satisfaction. Only indirectly can the collected data provide us with knowledge about the relative perceived importance of the different aspects and features mentioned above. However, some insights can be gained from the questionnaires and interviews. In his opening speech, Robert Wedgeworth emphasized the exhibition as a vital component of the IFLA Conference programme. A study of the results of the evaluation seems to confirm that this point of view is shared by the delegates. Justifications for attending IFLA 97 such as the examples presented below indicate furthermore that the exhibition is considered a main attraction of an IFLA Conference: "compare different products concentrated at one place" (delegate from Turkey); "just bought new library furniture from Denmark and Sweden and wanted to see more" (delegate from Malaysia); "will be buying new data system and am using the conference to check out some systems" (delegate from Sweden).

From these statements it is evident that the standard of the exhibition is considered an important quality criteria of an international conference. Therefore, it is encouraging that exactly the exhibition is exceptionally positively evaluated by the delegates with an excellence rate of 82%.

Another innovation emphasized by the President in his opening speech was the establishment in 1994 of a worldwide communication network for libraries, IFLANET. It seems that this feature, too, has been appreciated and used very much by the delegates.

We will now focus on why delegates dislike certain aspects, choosing the quality of presentations as an important and illustrative example suited to identify common causes of poor ratings. Comments here reveal that many delegates miss more interaction between speakers and audience and demand more dynamic meeting forms. The way papers are presented is also an element identified as a critical success factor. "Papers should not be read," one delegate from Germany points out. Other delegates emphasize that multimedia presentations should be used more by the speakers. However, it is questionable whether multimedia presentations will really improve the participation and interaction level of a session. A number of experiences point in the opposite direction: people often fall asleep confronted with semi-dark rooms and endless rows of slides. Many information professionals are probably already spending hours in front of a computer screen and therefore long for more human interaction and a real professional dialogue. The point is here that evaluation results should be carefully analyzed to avoid hasty and misleading conclusions. There are also a number of factors which lie outside the control of conference organizers. Interaction at a session often depends on personal communicative and pedagogical skills of speakers and participants; professionals with interesting and relevant experiences to share are not necessarily also good entertainers. Nevertheless, future organizers of sessions and workshops could in many ways facilitate and encourage interaction and discussions when planning and chairing the meetings.

A number of comments from conference participants are relevant in this connection:

- Need to have strict control over quality of papers contributed
- Moderator must stop the speakers at the given time. I think that speakers should be given only 15 minutes (except for main speakers and guest speakers) and in these minutes tell the message of the paper. They should not read the entire paper

- Seek more people to contribute papers. the Call for papers should not be limited to an exclusive group.
- It would be better to examine papers before the conference and cut the conference into two parts: for experts and for newcomers

Certainly, these comments are to some extent ambiguous and even mutually exclusive. Some conference organizers seek to improve the quality of papers and presentations by increasing the proportion of invited papers at the expense of papers received through an open call for papers procedure, while others adhere to the opposite paper-gathering policy. The only safe conclusion being drawn from this evidence is that there certainly exists a pertinent need for more information on criteria and procedure of getting a paper accepted at an IFLA General Conference.

An idea for a future evaluation issue could be to identify sessions and workshops appreciated by participants for their interactivity and dynamics. In other words: to learn from these successes rather than from failures.

Another interesting discussion with consequences for which type of action to take on the evaluation results concerns delegates' reasons for participating in an international conference. What kind of development can be expected in a future digital age with electronic communication and networking? During the evaluation, and especially during the interview sessions, we have tried to create a picture of the preferential structure of a typical IFLA delegate. However, we must admit that it is not possible to do that because delegates are so individual in their preferences. The interviews left no clear picture of which aspect was considered the more important: the social or the professional? Delegates were, in general, not able or willing to answer such a highly hypothetical question. What can be said, however, is that the emergence of electronic networking and Internet resources has not made traditional face-to-face conferences superfluous.

However, delegates have put forward a number of suggestions as to how future IFLA Conferences could be improved as a forum for making professional contacts and networking such as: "better ability to find specific people (use computer system)" (delegate from Estonia).

In the 1990s and especially since Robert Wedgeworth was elected IFLA's President during the Moscow Council meeting in 1991, the IFLA annual conferences have seen a number of new beginnings and innovation in areas such as a growing recognition of those who provide products and services to libraries through the conference exhibition, the rapid development of the electronic communications network, and an increased focus on legal barriers and political pressures. However, IFLA has a problem which grows steadily from year to year: the over-representation of middle-aged and elderly people revealed by this evaluation. In five years from now when IFLA will celebrate its 75th anniversary of its foundation in Edinburgh, the distribution towards the middle-aged is likely to be even more biased than now because delegates who have attended one IFLA Conference tend to participate the next year too. The percentage of IFLA veterans having attended 7 or more conferences was calculated to 17%.

This skewness is not only revealed as an outcome of the evaluation: it is also observed by the younger conference participants. A number of suggestions are made by young (late '20s, early '30s) participants to change the situation such as reduced conference fees for students and young librarians and special meeting for the young ones. One suggestion reads: "Please invite to this conference more young library specialists!" It seems that the chance of meeting people of one's own age is an important feature in the necessary rejuvenation of the IFLA annual Conferences. The age problem of IFLA seems to reflect a general problem in libraries and library associations in many countries where people in their late '40s form heavy majorities.

The size and frequency of future IFLA Conferences was another issue dealt with by many participants. No one found that the duration of the conference was too short; a number of delegates suggested shorter and more concentrated conference programmes and biennial conferences. Economically, of course, biennial conferences would be cheaper both from an individual and an organizational point of view. But how would this change impact other aspects of the conference? Would the function of the IFLA General Conference as a forum for establishing and maintaining professional contacts be influenced negatively by a shift from yearly to biennial conferences? However, it is likely that more people will be able to get resources to attend the IFLA Conferences if they are held every second year. On the other hand, it is also likely that the inclination of libraries and library associations to enlarge the circle of participating persons, for example with junior employees or officers, may be diminished by a reduction in the number of conferences. So seen as a whole, no safe conclusions can be drawn from the evaluation on this issue.

Conclusions

Although the preceding discussion has revealed that there still remains a number of unsettled questions some firm conclusions can nevertheless be drawn.

First, it has now been proved that IFLA □97, Copenhagen, as a whole, was considered an absolute success from a customer satisfaction point of view.

Second, the choice of Copenhagen as a conference city was obviously very much appreciated by the delegates.

Third, there were a number of aspects which were particularly well received by the participants:

- service level at the conference site
- the organization and work of the volunteers;
- the paper handling function
- the exhibition

Fourth, there was also a number of more or less severe, quality problems identified to be addressed in a short-term perspective:

- accommodation;
- choice and placement of conference site;
- simultaneous translation;
- cultural events;
- quality of presentations.

Fifth, and finally, the evaluation revealed and identified some issues to be taken into consideration in a long-term perspective:

- the generation gap: IFLA Conferences are and will increasingly become gatherings of middle-aged and elderly people
- frequency of IFLA conferences: annual or biennial conferences
- how to make sessions more interactive

To deal with both short-term quality problems and long-term quality issues an evaluation procedure like the one

applied in Copenhagen has proved useful both to confirm assumptions based on intuition and anecdotal knowledge and to gain new insights into aspects not being recognized as quality problems and issues. Additional and fruitful knowledge is likely to emerge when systematic comparisons between participants' assessment of more conferences can be made. Also an evaluation of the effectiveness of quality improvement efforts implemented are possible when conference evaluations are being carried out on a regular basis.

If you are interested in reading the results in detail, the *Evaluation Report - IFLA Conference 1997* (final version) written by the authors of this article is available. Please contact The Royal School of Library and Information Science, 6 Birketinget, Copenhagen S, Denmark.