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Abstract

*Special libraries are the least represented part of national library statistics. The difficulty starts with the question of what is meant by “special library”. Though there is a definition and an enumeration of special library types in the international standard ISO 2789, the special library is generally defined in terms of what it does **not** mean, namely academic, national, public, or school libraries. The paper gives an overview of the various types of libraries that can be classed under the label “special library”, ranging from the small traditional library of a specialised museum to the comprehensive electronic information centre of a pharmaceutical company.*

The variety of special libraries involves a similar variety in their mission and goals, funding, size, collection subjects, types of materials, services, and clientele.

Quality measures for special libraries will depend on the mission, clientele and tasks of the libraries. In libraries serving the daily needs of a defined population, quality will be mainly defined by the speed and accuracy of reference and information delivery services, the possibility of direct (desktop) access to the library’s collection and services, special customised services, and the cost-effectiveness of all services.

In libraries with long-range tasks and no specified population, quality will rather be defined by the coverage of the collection for its special subject, by preservation or digitization activities, attendances at library events, and possibly also the comprehensiveness and speed of a bibliography.

But there is also a range of quality measures that would be applicable to all types of libraries, namely indicators for the speed, accuracy and efficiency of background processes (e.g. acquisition or processing speed, accuracy of shelving), for employee productivity, for the library’s engagement in regional, national, or international cooperation, and for the priority that the library gives to staff training and therewith to the library’s ability to cope with new developments.

The paper shows sets of possible quality measures for different types of special libraries.

The definition of “special libraries”

Special libraries are always the least represented part in national library statistics. “In most countries, special libraries are the part of the library and information world about which least is known.”¹ The difficulty starts with the question of what is meant by “special library”. Though there are quite a number of definitions, the special library is generally defined in terms of what it does **not** mean, namely academic, national, public, or school libraries.

The IFLA Division of Special Libraries says in its scope statement that it is characterized by “libraries with specific kinds of service functions and subject specialties, such as art, biological and medical, geography and map, government, science and technology, and social science libraries”. This is not what is generally meant when we speak of special libraries, as it would include all academic libraries with specified subjects.

Definitions for special libraries generally start from enumerating types of libraries that would fall under the rubric.

“A library established and funded by a commercial firm, private association, government agency, nonprofit organization, or special interest group to meet the information needs of its employees, members, or staff in accordance with the organization's mission and goals. The scope of the collection is usually limited to the interests of the host organization.”²

The International Standard for library statistics defines the special library as follows:

“Independent library covering one discipline or particular field of knowledge or a special regional interest. The term special library includes libraries primarily serving a specific category of users, or primarily devoted to a specific form of document, or libraries sponsored by an organization to serve its own work-related objectives.”³

The ISO definition includes:

- Industrial and commercial libraries
- Media libraries (serving media and publishing firms and organizations, including newspapers, publishers, broadcasting, film and television)
- Libraries of professional and learned institutions and associations
- Health service libraries
- Government libraries
- Regional libraries (libraries serving a particular region whose primary function cannot be described as that of a public, school or academic library nor as part of a national library network)
- Libraries within voluntary organizations, museums, religious institutions, etc.

For this paper, I shall make use of the ISO definition.

Mission, goals and quality issues of special libraries

There is indeed a broad spectre of libraries that can be classed under the label “special library”, ranging from the small traditional library of a specialised museum to the comprehensive electronic information centre of a pharmaceutical company. This range of special libraries involves a similar variety in their mission and goals, funding, size, collection subjects, types of materials, services, and clientele.

Special libraries can be roughly subdivided into two groups:

- Corporate libraries, established within a company or organization to meet the information needs of its employees. This includes mainly industrial and commercial libraries, media libraries, health service and government libraries. These libraries serve a defined clientele, the members of their parent organization, and most times are not accessible for the general public. Their mission and goals must be aligned with those of their parent institution. Their main task is the efficient and speedy delivery of all required information to their clientele, often by customised services and proactive dissemination of information, and their collection building is based on actual user needs. Electronic collections will be important.
- On the other side, libraries e.g. of archives, museums, voluntary or professional associations, or libraries with regional tasks in many cases do not serve a defined population, but offer their services and collections to the general public. Their mission often involves building a comprehensive collection on a specified subject or a regional imprint and preserving that collection for future generations. The publishing

of bibliographies and catalogues and the organization of cultural events will often be included in the tasks.

Quality issues in special libraries will vary according to the mission of the library.

For libraries serving the employees of a company or organisation, quality will be mainly defined by the speed, actuality and accuracy of the reference and information delivery services, the possibilities of direct (desktop) access to the library's collections and services, and special customised services for the clientele. Cost-efficiency and impact measures will be crucial issues. The libraries must be able to demonstrate that their work supports the institution's goals and that the money spent on them will finally result in cost-saving for the institution.

In libraries with long-range tasks and no specified population, quality will rather be defined by the coverage of the collection for its special subject, by preservation or digitization activities, engagement in cultural activities, and possibly also the comprehensiveness and speed of a bibliography.

There are of course many general quality issues that special libraries share with other libraries:

- User-orientation and user-friendliness
- Speed, accuracy and reliability of the services provided

Performance indicators for special libraries

Performance or quality indicators (measures) have been developed and applied by libraries since several decades and have been published in handbooks and standards. The International Standard ISO 11620 for library performance indicators is in revision at the moment and will include performance indicators for traditional as well as for electronic library services.⁴ The IFLA guidelines for "Measuring Quality" that were published in 1996 will also come out in a revised edition in 2007.⁵ There is no lack of tested performance indicators, but special libraries will have to consider their special tasks when choosing a set of indicators for their situation.

For the first group mentioned before, the libraries serving the employees of a special commercial firm or institution, indicators should mirror their main tasks:

- A collection that is tailored to the needs of the clientele
- Collections and services that consider current needs more than possible future needs
- Speed and accuracy of reference services
- Proactive delivery of relevant information to users
- Customised user services (personal profiles, alerting services, selective dissemination of information)
- Efficient background services
- Cost-efficiency of services

Performance indicators for this group of special libraries could include "per capita" measures, indicators that relate the services offered to the number of persons in their target population or clientele. As probably a great part of their collection and of their services will be delivered in electronic form, measures for the use of the electronic media and services should be included. A set of performance indicators for such libraries, taken from the ISO standard and the IFLA handbook, could look like this:

Topic	Performance indicators	
General	Market penetration	Percentage of the clientele that make use of library services
Library as place for working	Seats per member of the clientele	Not relevant if the main service is electronic delivery
	Seat occupancy rate	To show whether there are enough working-places
	Opening hours compared to demand	Not relevant if the main service is electronic delivery
	Library visits per member of the clientele	Not relevant if the main service is electronic delivery
Information provision (collections)	Availability of required titles in the collection	To show whether the library's collection is adequate to the needs of the clientele
	Percentage of rejected sessions on electronic resources	To show whether there are enough licenses for the clientele
	Number of content units downloaded per member of the clientele	To show whether the library's electronic resources are relevant for the clientele
Information delivery	Interlibrary loan and document delivery speed	To show whether the library can quickly deliver information that is not available in its collection
	Correct answer fill rate	To show the reliability of the reference service
	Information requests per member of the clientele	To show the relevance of the reference service to the clientele
	Direct access from the homepage	The number of clicks necessary to find the most relevant information for the clientele
Background processes	Acquisition speed	To show whether new publications are quickly available
	Media processing speed	To show the efficiency of processes
Cost-efficiency	Cost per use (including lending, in-house use, interlibrary lending, document delivery)	The total cost of the library compared to usage
	Cost per library visit	The total cost of the library compared to visits
	Cost per database session	The costs of a database compared to sessions on that database
	Cost per download	The costs of an electronic resource compared to downloads from that resource
Development	Percentage of library staff providing end developing electronic services	To show the priority the library gives to the development of electronic services
	Attendances at training lessons per library staff member	To show the priority the library gives to staff development

For libraries without a defined clientele that build collections on specified subjects (e.g. history of gardening, Goethe, genealogy) or a collection about a specified region or community, the immediate delivery of requested information will be less important than the quality of the collection for current as well as future demand. Their indicators might be seen

in some analogy to those of National Libraries, whose main task is collecting and preserving the national documentary heritage. An International Standard for performance indicators of National Libraries is in work at the moment, and some of the indicators included there might also apply to the second group of special libraries.⁶ Special libraries of this group will probably have a large print collection and in many cases also rare materials. Therefore preservation and digitization issues ought to be included in their performance indicators. They will often engage in cultural activities, especially in exhibitions and other events that show the contents of their collections, and these activities should be considered.

The list of performance indicators for this group could then look like this:

Topic	Performance indicators	
Library as place for working	Seat occupancy rate	To show whether there are enough working-places
	Opening hours compared to demand	To show whether the opening hours correspond to user demand
Information provision (collections)	Percentage of regional publications acquired by the library	For libraries with regional collections, to show the coverage of the collection
	Availability of required titles in the collection	To show whether the library's collection is adequate to the needs of the clientele
	Percentage of new entries in the library-edited bibliography that refer to publications of the last 2 years	For libraries editing a bibliography about their subjects, to show the actuality of the bibliography
	Percentage of rare materials catalogued - of those in web catalogues	To show the library's success in making its rare collections known
Information delivery	Interlibrary loan and document delivery speed	To show whether the library can quickly deliver information that is not available in its collection
	Median time of document retrieval from closed stacks	To show whether requested items are quickly accessible
	Correct answer fill rate	To show the reliability of the reference service
Cultural activities	Number of attendances per cultural event	To show the effect of the library's cultural activities
Preservation and digitisation	Percentage of the collection in stable condition	To show the priority for preservation
	Percentage of the collection in appropriate environmental conditions	To show the priority for preservation
	Percentage of titles digitized per year per 1000 titles in the collection	To show the library's success in making its collections accessible
Background processes	Media processing speed	To show the efficiency of processes
	Shelving accuracy	To show the accuracy

		of processes
Cost-efficiency	Cost per loan	The total cost of the library compared to loans
	Cost per library visit	The total cost of the library compared to visits
	Staff costs per title catalogued (includes only staff costs for cataloguing)	To show the cost-efficiency of cataloguing
Development	Attendances at training lessons per library staff member	To show the priority the library gives to staff development

Assessing user satisfaction

For all types of special libraries, the assessment of users' needs and wishes and users' satisfaction with the collections and services offered will be a most important issue. A survey for special libraries in the UK and Ireland in 2006 showed that user surveys were the most-used instruments of evaluation.⁷ For special libraries serving a defined clientele, user surveys will be more effective than for libraries serving the general public.

Users' needs and wishes can for instance be ascertained by the evaluation of use data or reference questions or by services for complaints and suggestions. For a broad overview most libraries conduct a user satisfaction survey that asks for the user's satisfaction with the library's services and products, often on a 5-point scale. Assessing the grade of satisfaction with a service can be connected with an inquiry after the importance of that service for the user. Dissatisfaction with a service that the users rate as important would make it urgent for the library to react on that result.

Satisfaction surveys can be offered to users in different formats:

Method	Advantages	Problems
Print questionnaire in the library	High recall	Only active users that visit the library will be included
Questionnaire by mail to a sample of potential users	Non-users are included	Less recall
Telephone survey	High recall by direct contact	Time-consuming; may be influenced by the interviewer
Online survey on the library's website	No distribution needed	Bias on users who frequently use the website

A well-known model for assessing the quality of services that came from the commercial sector, the SERVQUAL model, was adapted to libraries by ARL (Association of Research Librarians) and is now called LibQualTM.⁸ It asks for the gap between

- expectation,
- perceived levels,
- and desired levels.

The survey has by now been used by more than 500 libraries.

A comparison between different types of user surveys used in academic libraries has recently been given by Claire Creaser.⁹

For libraries that have constant contact to their clientele, other methods like focus groups or interviews may be also interesting for evaluating user opinion.

Libraries with no specified clientele, whose services are used by interested persons worldwide. user surveys should consider the different user groups, e.g.:

- walk-in users
- remote users
- other libraries

Showing the library's impact and outcome

Performance measurement and user surveys can show whether a library is effective and efficient in delivering its services. But neither of these methods shows whether and how users benefited from their contact with library services. Outcome or impact means that there is a change in a user's skills, knowledge, or behaviour.

“Outcomes are the results of library use as affecting the individual user.”¹⁰

“Outcomes are the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs.”¹¹

Since several years, projects worldwide have tried to find methods for proving an outcome of library services. The problem for such methods is that influences on an individual are manifold and that therefore it is difficult to trace users' changes and improvements back to the library. Nevertheless, there are quite a number of possible methods that have already yielded interesting results.¹²

Special libraries serving a commercial firm or institution should show the impact of their services on the firm's or institution's goals, especially whether the existence of the library and the use of its services by members of the firm or institution helps to save time and effort in finding relevant information. Users of library services can be asked to rate what additional time they would have needed to get the information they required in their job without the help of their library, or whether they have gained information literacy by library training.

Generally, the efficient delivery of the information that the institution needs can be shown as a key issue for the institution's profitability and as competitive advantage.¹³

For libraries serving the general public, assessing outcome could also mean showing the library's importance for the region or generally for society and culture. In surveys, focus groups or interviews, users and non-users may be asked to rate

- the direct benefit from a library use,
- the indirect (potential) benefit of a library's existence, (e.g. free access to information, cultural life in the community, children's literacy, social inclusion),
- the potential value of the library for future users (e.g. by preserving the documentary heritage).

Reasons for assessing quality in special libraries

In the last decade a number of special libraries, especially corporate libraries, experienced severe cuts or were even closed and replaced by external information vendors. Libraries in commercial firm and other organisations were seen as additional cost factor, not as important part of the parent institution. Therefore, it has become crucial for special libraries to show that they work not only effectively, but also cost-effectively, and that their results benefit the parent organisation. “New roles have been defined, verifying that the special library is a main vehicle for cost-effective information provision and flow within organisations, for knowledge accumulation, sharing and use and, last but not least, for enhanced learning capabilities.”¹⁴ It has been helpful for special libraries that the issue of knowledge management made library services more important again.

Special libraries should try to find consensus on the statistical data they collect and on performance indicators and other evaluation methods. Using the same data and indicators, at least within a group of libraries with similar mission, structure and clientele, will make benchmarking possible and thus will make the results more convincing when reporting to the parent organisation. “The greatest chance of success will come from affiliating the library with the unique goals of its parent organization, and the needs of the people working to hit those targets.”¹⁵

¹ Spiller, D. (1998), UK special library statistics: the challenge of collecting and analysing data from libraries in the workplace, *64th IFLA General Conference*, <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla64/052-134e.htm>

² Reitz, J. M., ODLIS: Online dictionary for library and information science, <http://lu.com/odlis/>

³ ISO 2789 (2006), Information and documentation - International library statistics

⁴ ISO DIS 11620 (2006), Information and documentation – Library performance indicators

⁵ Poll, R. and te Boekhorst, P. (2007), *Measuring quality: performance measurement in libraries*, Saur, München (forthcoming)

⁶ ISO TR 28118, Performance indicators for National Libraries (in preparation)

⁷ McNicol, S. (2007), *Research, evaluation and evidence collection in special libraries, a survey of librarians in the UK and Republic of Ireland*, Evidence Base, University of Central England, Birmingham, http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/docs/special_libraries_report.pdf

⁸ <http://www.libqual.org>

⁹ Creaser, C. (2006), User surveys in academic libraries, *New Review of Academic Librarianship* Vol.12, No.1, pp.1 - 15

¹⁰ Revill, D. (1990), Performance measures for academic libraries, *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, Vol.45, Suppl.10, p.316

¹¹ ACRL. Association of College and Research Libraries (1998), *Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment Report*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/taskforceacademic.htm>

¹² see the bibliography at <http://www.ulb.uni-muenster.de/outcome>

¹³ Broady-Preston, J. and Williams, T. (2003), Using information to create business value: City of London legal firms, a case study, *Proceedings of the 5th Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services*, pp.150 - 155

¹⁴ Kalseth, K. (2005), The special library: bridging the physical and digital arenas, *Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly* Vol.38, No.4, http://www.splq.info/issues/vol38_4/04.htm

¹⁵ Matarazzo, J.M. (2007), Corporate score, *Library Journal* Vol.132, Issue 2, pp.42-43