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Towards open, multidimensional measurement of library services - case: Finland

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Abstract

Libraries must show the effectiveness and impact of their operations. The National Library of Finland offers common statistics services to the scientific libraries. The annual library statistics are collected into a public online database open for all through the Internet. It offers scientific libraries and decision-makers information about the operation of libraries as the basis of decision-making in a compact and easy-to-use form. Combining subjective data obtained from nationwide surveys coordinated by the National Library with objective data obtained from the library statistics, makes it possible to get more exact information about quality of the services and about the effects of resource allocation on the customers and services.

Thanks to the developing statistics of libraries, more and more factual information for decision-making and managing the library is obtained.

The excellent library network in Finland is an integral part of the national culture. It is a comprehensive whole which works in a cooperative network and consists of the National Library, about 20 university libraries, about 30 polytechnic libraries (libraries in the universities of applied science), more than 400 public libraries, about 20 provincial libraries, and hundreds of special libraries. (The special libraries in Finland are the library and information services of public administrations, foundations, communities and companies or private research institutions and research institutions funded by state subsidy).

The objective of the Finnish information society is to ensure the availability of culture and information also in the digital environment irrespective of the citizens' place of residence, level of competence, wealth and age. The good standard of education, the linguistic development and the knowledge of the national culture are the components of the welfare of citizens', success and competitiveness. The libraries take care of the high quality and versatile information services of the citizens. The lending, the interlibrary lending, the information retrieval, and the network services of the library network are mainly accessible free of charge to everybody in the country.

The information reserves of the National Library are the valuable common capital of society. The libraries have common services such as common library systems and acquisition consortiums provided by the National Library.

National library network services form a service package aimed at libraries to make information more accessible to society. For the package, the libraries have chosen services that generate added value for the library network as a whole. The service package consists of

- Support of the digital library services and digital library environment
- Top quality availability of information resources (FinELib), and
- Development of the means to measure the impact and results of library activity.

The aim is to use resources efficiently by centralizing the services and applying service centre thinking. The statistics service offered by the national library is a part of the operation of this service centre.

The National Library offers, too, the common statistics services to the scientific library network in which all the university and polytechnic libraries, and about twenty special libraries are participating.

The annual statistics of Finnish scientific libraries are collected into a public online database. It is open for all interested parties through the Internet and it can freely be browsed without logging in using the two official languages of Finland (Finnish and Swedish) plus English.

The database is maintained by the National Library of Finland and it is a part of the National library network services.

The public libraries of Finland have their own database. The data in the Finnish Public Libraries Statistics Database and its maintenance is the responsibility of the Culture and Media Division of the Ministry of Education.

All the public libraries in Finland (except Aland Islands) and the Provincial State Offices take part in the production of the statistical information of the public libraries database.

The statistics are collected according to the standard ISO 2789. The statistics of the scientific libraries give a general view of the resources, collections and services of Finnish scientific libraries. The statistics contain information about the national library,

about the university libraries, about the Polytechnic libraries and about several special libraries.

The statistics contain a large portion of uniformly reported information about the operation of Finnish scientific libraries starting since the year 2002. The older statistics have been published in printed form.

The information for the annual statistics is directly entered into the database in the libraries where the person in charge for statistics takes care of entering the information. Part of the information saved in the database is directly produced as a computer run from the library databases.

Now that we already have a statistical time series of more than half a decade in our use open to everyone it is possible to produce time series, too. It is also possible for the information seeker to do searches defined by himself in the database and the results can be recorded in Excel format.

The system also gives an opportunity to produce graphic presentations on the basis of the statistics information which offers new challenges to the further development of the database. Already now the database serves scientific libraries and decision-makers by offering information about the operation of libraries as the basis of decision-making in a compact and easy-to-use form.

Reliable statistics are of vital importance in collecting information as the basis of decision-making and planning in libraries.

Correctly delivered statistics that are collected according to uniform instructions with the focal information about libraries and their operations are an important strategic tool for libraries. The statistical data can be used as help in the follow-up and reporting of functions and in development plans and in the evaluation of resource requirements.

The estimating and measurement of the effectiveness and impact of library activity are still more important and the libraries as the basic service units of their frame organizations must be able to show the effectiveness and impact of their operations. This will be an important theme in further development of the statistics and indicators describing libraries.

More than 20 key figures are automatically counted by the computer on the basis of the information given by the libraries. New indicators will be developed in addition to the present ones or to replace some of them, and the functional statistics tool as the producer of the reliable facts (e.g. investment in library materials, staff, facilities etc.) is necessary.

These key figures are mainly based on the standard ISO 11620, and some have been developed for the needs of the Finnish scientific libraries themselves. The present key figures do not answer the special needs of the National Library very well, and therefore we put great hopes on the technical report containing indicators designed particularly to the needs of national libraries that is under development in ISO.

In the future education of libraries in how to use statistics, there will be more weight than before given to how to use and develop statistical data in order for that data to be pertinent and meet the demands for measurement.

The final objective is to establish the statistics database into use within libraries as a routine tool from which they can easily and reliably obtain the central indicators corresponding to their needs and describing their operations.

The statistical facts have already been utilized in the financing report of Finnish university libraries made by the Council for Finnish University Libraries. In the report, attention is paid to several disadvantages related to the financing of university libraries. Corrections would be needed for the financing arrangements of the licences especially of scientific electronic materials.

The National Library of Finland is coordinating nationwide surveys, too. The aim is to gather qualitative data for service assessment.

The National Electronic Library (FinELib) surveys concerning the use of electronic material have been conducted biennially, the latest one in April 2007.

We have, too, developed a common questionnaire for all Finnish libraries, concerning the national library network services as a whole. With this questionnaire, conducted biennially starting this year, we survey the knowledge of the services we produce for libraries, our success in the production of the services and development needs of the services.

The information obtained from the surveys is subjective data. With this, we mean opinions that are original to their introducer and they describe his personal preferences and how he has experienced the service he has received.

The objective data, on the other hand, is neutral, balanced and impartial information. It is real information the contents of which meet the target of the information.

Collecting objective data from the library statistics next to subjective data, gives us new kinds of possibilities to get more exact information about the quality of the services and about the effects of resource allocation on the customers and services.

So, we believe that use of statistical facts is a good way of responding to the growing need for reporting and Knowledge Management based on statistical and factual evidence used in evaluation and benchmarking.

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About the author

Markku Laitinen is a Planning Officer at the National Library of Finland, Library Network Services. He is responsible for compiling the annual statistics of Finnish scientific libraries, maintaining and developing the Research Library Statistics database of Finland and for adapting international library statistic standards in Finnish circumstances. He is a member of ISO working groups involved in international standardization regarding library statistics, performance measures and quality indicators and a member and information coordinator of IFLA Standing Committee for Statistics and Evaluation. He may be contacted at: markku.laitinen@helsinki.fi

