Performance Indicators for Academic Libraries in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The performance of an academic library is one of the criteria for accreditation of an academic programme and ranking of a university. PERPUN, through its task force, is looking into the design of an instrument to measure performance indicators of academic libraries in Malaysia. After examining similar efforts in other parts of the world, the task force adopted the ISO 11620 "Information and documentation - Library performance indicators." The task force will do a pilot run of the instrument before applying it to the member libraries.

THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

An academic library is the seat of knowledge in a university or college. It welcomes the birth of a new knowledge, nurtures the existing one and preserves the old knowledge. It is where rationale and reasoning intertwine, opposing ideologies co-exist and the old and new sciences reinforce each other. It contributes to the development of the scholar through the strength of its collection, its services, technology and its staff. The library is one of the criteria for accreditation, evaluation and rating of academic programmes as well as ranking of universities and colleges. The academic library supports directly and contributes to the success of an academic programme, more so than other support services of a university or college. Besides being accountable to the parent organization, i.e., the university or college, a library is expected to prove the value of its contribution to achieving the overall goals of the parent constituency. The library's services are expected to support the educational life of students while its collections are expected to meet curricular, research and service needs of students and faculty with particular attention to special programme or objectives of the parent organization.

The accreditation process takes into consideration not only the size of a library's collection, but more importantly how well the library helps to prepare the students for their future careers. Management generally favours the young professionals who could work independently and show certain level of ability in conducting search for facts and in report writing. Employers do expect at least knowledge level one from graduates of accredited schools or programmes. This is especially true in the present scenario of information profusion where it is imperative one knows how to evaluate the value of a certain piece of information.

With the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT), there is increasing demand for some form of distance education. This development is the added impetus that has led to the virtual library concept. The form and services provided by this kind of library would certainly be of greater importance in the accreditation process. University ranking can boost the standing of a university or bring it down in the eyes of the public and the university's stakeholders. This has driven university management to identify niche areas where they could excel.

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THE QUALITY FACTOR

A library has to align itself with the criteria by which universities and academic programmes are judged. Without doubt this will lead to a discussion on the efficiency and effectiveness of the library. Efficiency is the measure of the utilization of resources in order to realize a library's objectives. Effectiveness is the degree to which a library's objectives are realized. Both efficiency in its performance and effectiveness in satisfying stated and implied needs of its customers constitute the quality by which a library is known. The term "measure" to some people implies that something can be measured in a direct way. "Indicator" is considered more relevant in the context of performance and evaluation. Performance Indicator is therefore defined as the verbal or numerical expression derived from library statistics and other data used to characterize the performance of a library.

There are several models of performance measurement found in the literature on this topic, among them stressing on goal attainment, system resource, internal process and constituency satisfaction. Generic measures include input, output and service domain while derived measures refer to operational performance, operational effectiveness, cost effectiveness and impact. Yet other models measure process, organization, interaction and access. It is interesting to note in one of the articles written in the nineties, the question was posed whether the ISO 9000 could be adopted as an indicator of quality. To date at least three academic libraries in Malaysia have been certified to the ISO i.e. Perpustakaan Sultanah Zanariah of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Perpustakaan Sultanah Bahiyah of Universiti Utara Malaysia and Universiti Sains Malaysia Library.

The need for evaluation of academic library services was first discussed at an international forum during the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Conference in 1988. The expressed aim was to convince the funding authorities of the relevance of the libraries' goals and to show their effectiveness to obtain the required financial support for their services. The first draft of guidelines and indicators that have been tested in some libraries was presented at IFLA 1993. This draft, plus comments and results of further testing were incorporated in an international standard on performance indicators for libraries produced by The International Organization for Standardization i.e. ISO 11620 Information and documentation - Library performance indicators in 1998. The objective of these indicators is "to function as tools to assess the quality and effectiveness of services provided by a library and of other activities undertaken by a library, and to assess the efficiency of resources allocated by the library to such services and other activities." The standard claims to have been thoroughly tested by widespread use in libraries or by explicit testing by researchers. The standards have been formulated, guided by the following criteria:

- Informative content
- Reliability
- Validity
- Appropriateness
- Practicality
- Comparability.

At least 29 indicators have been put together, covering major activities of a library such as providing and retrieving of documents, lending and delivery of documents, enquiry, reference and information searching, facilities and technical services. Each indicator has a unique, descriptive name, and an explicit objective, stated in terms of the service, activity or use of resources to be evaluated. The scope and definition of each indicator are specified. The standard also cautions that the indicators should be used in the context of the mission, goals and objectives of the library and if comparison is to be made, it should be between like entities only. The indicators are only tools for planning and decision-making, facilitating control in the management process and as a basis for reference and dialogue between library staff, funding bodies and the user community.

In the United States of America, two prevailing standards seem to be used. Between the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the...
Regional Association of Schools and Colleges, twenty (20) areas of library management are addressed as criteria for purposes of accreditation.

**LIBRARY PERFORMANCE IN MALAYSIA**

An earlier study of library performance indicators was done as a short-term research project by a team comprising librarians and academic staff of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in 1995. The study involved 17 academic libraries in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong. Respecting confidentiality, requested by the respondents, the data were used only in UTM for purposes of assessing the standing of its library in different aspects of library management. Although the exercise was not repeated, it nevertheless has given a good indicator who UTM could benchmark its Library with.

In 1997 "Asiaweek" conducted a ranking of universities in Asia, leaving mixed feelings in some quarters. That was the first time any ranking of universities has been done in this region and for many of the universities, it was also the first time to be ranked against others. The magazine has since then successfully done so every year. In some ways it is an event anticipated by many in the middle of each year. About the same time too Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN) or the National Accreditation Board was set up. Both Asiaweek and LAN consider the library as one of the criteria in the ranking, with LAN giving more details on how the libraries were to be evaluated. LAN announced that amongst its first assignments was to do a ranking of the universities in Malaysia. Although this exercise has not been done yet, it would be proprietary to be prepared for it.

Persidangan Perpustakaan Universiti dan Negara (PERPUN) or Conference of University and National Libraries has taken the initiative to set up a task force to come out with some set of indicators which would reflect how they felt academic libraries should be evaluated. With increasing cost of library materials and decreasing resources given to libraries, there is a real need to justify for budget allocation and to prove high quality and performance of services. The Task Force on Performance Indicators met several times and discussed how best Malaysian academic libraries could be evaluated. They examined the indicators used in the United States as found in the ACRL Standards for College Libraries and the accreditation criteria as stipulated by the Regional Association of Schools and Colleges. They also examined the situation in the United Kingdom and also took note that a series of workshops were conducted in Europe on the implementation of performance indicators. Several projects were conducted in Europe under the EU Telematics for Libraries initiative as a result of adopting the ISO indicators.

ISO 11620 seems to have incorporated most of the criteria laid down by all these parties. Considering it is an international standard and adopted in several countries, the Task Force has decided to use it as base for coming out with an instrument that could be used by all participating libraries. The hope of PERPUN is so that there would be an instrument that could be used for self-evaluation as well as for comparison of similar kind of libraries. The Task Force recognized that different libraries require different indicators to suit their needs and no one set of indicators will suit all libraries. Therefore it was decided that the application of this instrument will be done as a pilot project between the public-funded libraries first since there are similarities in goals and objectives as well as funding and control practices among them. They all are accountable in general to the same Ministry and are governed by similar set of rules and regulations. The instrument could be extended to the private universities and colleges, depending on the success of the pilot run. Modifications will have to be done to the instrument to suit it to the environment of private institutions.

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2. Author is Chairperson of Task Force on Performance Indicators set up by PERPUN.
ADOPTION OF ISO 11620

The ISO 11620 contains 29 indicators residing on several data sets. The standard is divided into two sections, one for the qualitative measure and the other for quantitative measure. The qualitative aspect measures customer satisfaction under the heading User Perception. The quantitative section attempts to measure inputs of the library against the population or other variables. Using the standard closely as guideline, the Task Force was able to produce a draft instrument that could be used in all PERPUN member libraries. The Task Force decided to concentrate first on indicators for the performance of activities and services. This is because most libraries regularly collect statistical data of their resources and output. By doing so, usefulness of existing data could be maximized, increasing understanding of trends and patterns and hence contribute to the decision making process. Draft questionnaires, which would try to elicit information on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of library service and products, were prepared. To date only the draft on the quantitative indicators have been deliberated. In principle, PERPUN, at a meeting in February 2002, has agreed to adopt the instrument presented by the Task Force.

The Task Force's guiding principles in selecting and interpreting the ISO standard is that any indicator adopted must be useful in the decision-making process and the method to obtain data on these indicators should not be too complicated nor obtrusive. Library management is hard put as it is with the demands from its clientele and all its constituents without having more weight added to its already heavy burden. Most important, an indicator should answer the question for what purpose do we collect data and formulate into an indicator? If it does not help the management in planning its resources, its services and forecast the future, the indicator is not valid. Another premise established by the Task Force was that these indicators are for the use of the public-funded university libraries that are all automated and are heavy users of information technology. Since these indicators are measurement of performance in a certain year, all one-time expenditures for purposes of asset building, are excluded in the calculation of a library's expenditure.

The Task Force started its assignment by establishing a common understanding of terminologies and their definitions. This is required of the ISO standard, which is actually only a guide that could be adopted by different kinds of libraries, at different levels of development and operating in different kinds of environment. Even in a group of homogeneous libraries like those of public-funded university libraries, a discussion on terminologies and their definitions could lead to long debates. The Task Force also discussed and agreed on the sampling method to be used for certain indicators.

CRITIQUE OF ISO 11620

Understandably it must have been a colossal task to come out with the standard, but it is for the very reason that it has several setbacks. In the measurement of the activities, services and library management, ISO 11620 is quite thorough. So it came as a surprise that it could not offer any measure on certain aspects of library management and activities that are important to a library especially today. This includes areas of User Education, Promotion of Services and the Availability and Use of Human Resources. Most libraries have some clear ideas on the measure of performance indicators in other more traditional library activities and services and have looked forward to a guide from an international body like the International Organization of Standards. In the absence of reliable indicators in ISO 11620, The Task Force has formulated indicators for these three areas of concern. A first test of an indicator is that the method of deriving the indicator should meet the objective of the indicator. The objective of the Median Time of Document Retrieval from Open Areas is "to assess whether self-explanatory sign-posting and correct shelving allow prompt access to documents." But the method of collecting the data requires a test person to check a random listing of titles against the catalogue and to retrieve them from the shelves. Distance covered, whether climbing of stairs is
involved and whether the materials are near the staircase or in the distant corner of the floor would affect the speed of retrieval. This kind of indicator is better elicited through the use of questionnaire and therefore belongs to the User Perception part of the standard.

The use of proxy users or surrogates for certain indicators is a worrying proposition. It is certainly an obtrusive method and it is not good management practice to expose the weakness of the library staff to "outsiders". This practice could also undermine the confidence of library patrons on the capability of the library staff. The Task Force is of the opinion that a library manager who is concerned on the competencies of his/her staff could easily conduct this test internally.

The standard does not make any distinction between the different kinds of enquiry and reference questions a library gets from its customers. Ambiguity should be avoided in a good standard. The Task Force has identified four types of enquiries that are normally received by academic libraries i.e. directional, instructional, quick reference and information search. These different types of enquiries take different amount of library staff time and resources, therefore impacting staff deployment and resource allocation.

Computers are widely used in academic libraries and increasingly, more information is offered as non-print materials, especially in machine-readable forms. In an environment where library users have been exposed to the quick search on OPAC through the use of keywords and free-text indexing, a test on information retrieval distinctly by "title" and "subject" is quite irrelevant. Similarly the indicator Automated System Availability does not reflect the stage of library development in Malaysia. It is the general practice for a server to run twenty-four hours non-stop and therefore making the catalogue more accessible. After all this is the raison d’etre for automation. This indicator is better replaced by a ratio of computers to the number of users and expenditure on electronic materials per user to reflect the use of electronic resources and services in libraries. Indeed the absence of indicators for the application of information technology is very noticeable, considering the heavy investment in information technology especially by academic libraries in Malaysia. The same sentiment is felt in Europe where several projects are underway to address the need of all libraries to develop and utilize performance measures for the new networked, electronic environment, alongside traditional measures.

**CONCLUSION**

The use of the standard ISO 11620 is a good start to measure the performance of academic libraries in Malaysia provided some modifications are done. Such exercise should measure and incorporate library value into processes that involve the universities concerned such as academic accreditation, educational assessment and rating of certain programmes. Consequently it contributes to the organizational analysis and decision-making process of the universities. This could well be the beginning of benchmarking among academic libraries in Malaysia.

A set of performance indicators should necessarily pay attention equally to the traditional analysis of data of services and products as well as to establishing user satisfaction as a performance indicator. After the initial round of applying the instrument as formulated by the Task Force, the next step for academic libraries in Malaysia is to develop outcome measures that convey customer expectation and measure both user satisfaction and the impact of library services on their customers.
REFERENCES


