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Benchmarking efforts in Austrian university libraries

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Abstract:

In a time of great changes in university legislation it was felt that Austrian academic libraries should take performance measurement in their own hands. The fact that due to historical reasons there was a certain uniformity of library rules and standards was seen as major aspect in favour of developing a set of performance indicators to be used on a national scale for benchmarking reasons. Several initiatives are described covering both traditional and electronic library services. A new reporting system of Austrian universities is also outlined.

Changes in university legislation most notably the University Organisation and Studies Act (Universities Act 2002), which came into effect in 2004 made universities independent organisations giving them the greatest possible autonomy and self-administration led to quite radical organisational changes in most universities and university libraries in Austria.

Up until the year 2000 the 19 university libraries and 2 central libraries received their funding directly from the Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, the library director answering only to the minister. This put the university libraries effectively outside the institutions which they served. In 2000 university libraries

became part of the universities and answered directly to the rectors, their funding coming out of the global budget of the universities.

In the early phase of transition - which incidentally coincided with quite severe budget cuts - it was felt that libraries should take a proactive role when it came to performance measurement. So in early 2000 a working group was installed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture to deal with the topic of quality management and performance measures in academic libraries. The libraries wanted to be prepared for peer evaluations that were imminent for several institutions.

The declared aim of the working group was to choose a set of indicators from the ISO 11620 measures¹ and the IFLA guidelines² which were suitable for use in Austrian academic libraries. In order to keep the effort of collecting data to a minimum standardised automated queries were to be used to obtain data from the ALEPH library system wherever possible. The fact that there was a certain uniformity of rules and standards in university libraries would surely be of advantage to a benchmarking process.

Apart from user satisfaction the selected indicators were 1. market penetration, 2. interlibrary loan speed, 3. book processing speed, 4. acquisition speed, 5. cost per user and cost per library visit respectively, 6. percentage of required titles in the collection, 7. collection use, 8. subject collection use, 9. correct answer fill rate and 10. shelving accuracy.

Initially, all university libraries and the National Library took a keen interest in the project, however, although data was collected in most university libraries not all the results were passed along to the working group so that the outcome was rather patchy.

The indicator "interlibrary loan speed" for which a sample of 100 interlibrary loan requests per library were analyzed may serve as an example. Only six libraries sent in results which showed that interlibrary loan requests are generally dealt with within 5 days or sooner of receiving them.

In informal interviews it became clear that many libraries did not want to lay open outcomes that were not satisfactory even to them. And so a process of improving performance was set in motion although not as a result of a benchmarking process.

Of all indicators user satisfaction was seen to be the most important one. So the working group concentrated on developing a questionnaire aimed at measuring user satisfaction. The questions concentrated on library services (opening hours, catalogues, service speed, information provision), library collections (availability of textbooks, acquisition speed), staff (helpfulness, competency), infrastructure (PCs, photocopying facilities). The library users were also asked to rate how essential a given service was for their personal needs. A 4-point Likert scale was used with 1 representing high satisfaction and 4 representing low satisfaction.

¹ Information and documentation: library performance indicators (ISO 11620: 1998).

² Roswitha Poll and Peter te Boekhorst, Measuring Quality: International Guidelines for Performance Measurement in Academic Libraries (London: K.G. Saur, 1996)

Finally, in March 2001 a user survey was conducted in which 12 university libraries as well as the Austrian National Library took part.

Although the overall results were reasonably good, when they were presented to the directors of the libraries that took part in the survey it soon became clear that most of them were not ready to embark on the benchmarking process. This was partly due to the fact that unlike in a German initiative which took place in the autumn of the same year³ no neutral agency was involved in the gathering and interpretation of the survey data, the ministry not being perceived as a neutral agent. Also the discussion along the lines of "comparing apples to pears" had not been sufficiently anticipated.

As a result of the ensuing debate most libraries did not even publish their own results, although some did use the outcomes successfully with university administrators for applying for more funding to modernise their IT infrastructure and photocopying facilities.

The survey was not repeated. Instead, most Austrian university libraries now take part in the "BIX – the library index", a benchmarking initiative originally developed for measuring the performance of public libraries in Germany, but expanded to include academic libraries in 2002. It is felt that taking part in an international ranking of academic libraries will earn points with the governing bodies of their respective universities.

Another Austrian initiative on the benchmarking sector was more successful. In autumn 2001 a working group dealing with performance indicators for the electronic library was installed. Soon it was decided that a user survey should be conducted.

Great care was taken in the preparation of the survey and special attention was paid to methodological questions⁴ trying to avoid all the difficulties that were encountered in the earlier questionnaire. The more common and generally recommended 5-point Likert scale was used with 1 representing high user satisfaction and 5 representing low user satisfaction. A framework for comparing the results of the survey was set forth from the beginning. The participating libraries were divided into three clusters: the large general academic libraries, technical university libraries and life sciences libraries.

Eventually from mid November to mid December 2003 a web-based survey was conducted in 10 university libraries. In its form and scope it was unique in the German speaking countries. The questionnaire concentrated on user satisfaction with and the importance of the following library services:

1. web pages
2. OPAC search for books

³ Sebastian Mundt. Benchmarking user satisfaction in academic libraries – a case study. In: Library and Information Research, 27 (87), Winter 2003, pp 29-37.
http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00003420/01/article87_mundt.pdf [3/6/2006]

⁴ Bruno Bauer. Die elektronische Bibliothek auf dem Prüfstand ihrer Kunden: Ausgewählte Ergebnisse der Online-Benutzerbefragung 2003 an zehn österreichischen Universitäts- und Zentralbibliotheken unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Fachbereichs Medizin. In: medizin - bibliothek – information, Vol 5, No 1, January 2005, pp. 24-30.
http://www.agmb.de/mbi/2005_1/bauer1.pdf [4/6/2006]

3. OPAC search for journals
4. licensed databases
5. electronic journals
6. e-books
7. remote access to library's electronic services
8. document delivery service
9. information about and support in the use of electronic resources
10. user training for electronic services

Select results were presented at the Austrian Library Conference in 2004⁵. Not surprisingly, the online catalogue, electronic journals and the library's homepage were rated as very important, whereas e-books, information about and support in the use of electronic resources were rated as being of moderate importance. A significant number of users did not rate user training for the electronic services as important the reason being that most of the services were self-explaining and therefore training was not needed. Electronic journals are widely used; print journals are seen dispensable if access to the electronic version is provided.

A small but significant number of users did not know about specific services the libraries offer which gives ample room for improving the library's marketing strategies.

More importantly, however, the outcome of the survey had in some libraries a direct impact on the decision making process as to which electronic materials should be licensed.

Given the success of the survey a follow-up is planned in late 2006. It is hoped that eventually all university libraries will take part in this initiative.

Meanwhile, under the above-mentioned University Organisation and Studies Act (Universities Act 2002) Austrian universities are required by law⁶ to submit performance reports, intellectual capital statements, evaluation reports and financial statements to the Minister each year. This means that universities have to lay open to the public their assets both financial and intellectual. The new reporting system of Austrian universities aims at improving transparency, internal and external communication as well as management orientation and delivers comprehensive information for decision making and forecasting⁷.

Austria is the first country world-wide to introduce compulsory intellectual capital statements for universities. The reports are to contain the presentation in itemised form of

1. the university's activities, social activities, and self-imposed objectives and strategies

⁵ Bruno Bauer et. al.: Wie beurteilen Nutzer unser elektronisches Medien- und Dienstleistungsangebot? In: Enichlmayr, Christian [Hrsg.] : Österreichischer Bibliothekartag <28, 2004, Linz> : Bibliotheken - Fundament der Bildung : Tagungsband; 21. - 25. September, Linz. 2005 . - 251 S. . - 3-85252-684-1 kart. pp. 151-189. http://www.literature.at/webinterface/library/ALO_PDF_V01?objid=19563 [4/6/2006]

⁶ Verordnung der Bundesministerin für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur über die Wissensbilanz (Wissensbilanz-Verordnung – WBV). BGBl. II Nr. 63/2006

⁷ Michaela Schaffhauser-Linzatti. Intellectual capital reporting for Austrian universities – a thrilling work in progress. 2004. <http://www.eiasm.be/documents/abstracts/2824.doc> [5/6/2006]

2. the intellectual capital, broken down into human, structural and relationship capital
3. the processes set out in the performance agreement, including their outputs and impacts.

Four indicators for university libraries are included in the intellectual capital statements: 1. number of circulation, 2. number of extra activities (among which exhibitions, guided tours but also user training sessions (!) are listed), 3. cost for databases, and 4. cost for journals both electronic and print. Data will have to be collected for the first time for the year 2006.

All in all Austrian university libraries have used performance measurement and quality management as a key to strategic planning for some time now, which in the light of rising user expectations, tightening budgets and increasing competition among libraries seems to be the only way possible. It is to be hoped that this pays off when it comes to negotiating next years budget with the university governing bodies.