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Quality Indicators for National Libraries: The New Standard

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Performance indicators, measures for assessing the quality of products and services, have for a long time been used in libraries. They have been collected and described in the International Standard ISO 11620 "Library performance indicators" that is forthcoming in a second edition. ISO 11620 aims at comprising indicators for all types of libraries, but does not cover all tasks and services of every type of library. National libraries with their special collections and services need performance indicators that consider their situation and tasks.

The new Technical Report ISO 28118 "Performance measures for national libraries" describes 30 performance indicators that are adequate to the tasks of national libraries. These indicators were either adapted from the standard ISO 11620 or chosen from quality measures that have been used or tested by a national library and that cover the topics not considered in ISO 11620.

The Technical Report is also relevant for all libraries with regional tasks and without a defined population to be served, as many of their evaluation problems correspond to those of national libraries. As all efforts of assessing the quality of an institution should be based on the institution's mission and goals, the paper starts from the mission and tasks of national libraries and then describes the indicators and methods in the Technical Report.

The purpose

Since several years, national libraries have seen the need of getting consensus on performance indicators for assessing the quality of their services. Several groups, e.g. within the IFLA Section of National Libraries and CENL (Foundation Conference of European National Librarians) have been involved in this issue. The groups have used surveys in order to assess the present use of performance indicators in national libraries¹ and have discussed possible indicators, relying on indicators described in handbooks and standards.

There is indeed quite a wealth of performance indicators that have been well tested and that are in wide-spread use. The forthcoming 2nd edition of the ISO standard "Library performance indicators" shows 45 indicators meant for all types of libraries²; the second edition of the IFLA handbook, published in 2007, describes 40 indicators

¹ Ambrožič, M., Jakac-Bizjak, V. and Pecko Mlekuš, H. (2003), Performance evaluation in European national libraries: state-of-the-art, *World Library and Information Congress, 69th IFLA General Conference and Council*, Berlin, available at: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla69/papers/024e-Ambrozic_Jakac-Bizjak_Mlekuš.pdf

² ISO FDIS 11620 (2008), Information and documentation – Library performance indicators

with examples of results obtained in libraries³. So why did it yet prove difficult to find adequate indicators for national libraries?

National Libraries are unique institutions in their countries, and their data are not easily comparable. As Maurice Line stated, “no type of library varies so much in nature, size, types of media covered, range of acquisitions, functions and services”⁴. The roles of national libraries can differ from country to country as they are “subject to political agendas which change, often more rapidly than for public or academic libraries”⁵.

Other problems for finding performance measures that are relevant for national libraries are:

- National libraries may have several functions (e.g. university and national library, or parliamentary and national library),
- National libraries have no specified clientele or primary user group like public libraries, university libraries, school libraries and most special libraries. Therefore output data cannot be set in comparison to “members of the population”.

In spite of such problems, there is a large set of basic tasks that national libraries have in common and that should make it possible to find common quality measures. Maurice Line’s uses a memorable example: “National libraries are in fact rather like dogs: dogs also exhibit an enormous variety, but we somehow recognize them all as dogs”⁶.

The ISO work item

The idea of a separate ISO standard for national libraries was started at the IFLA conference 2005 in Oslo. The national librarian of Sweden, Gunnar Sahlin, mentioned the problem to the chair of the ISO committee responsible for quality issues in information and documentation (ISO/TC 46/SC 8).⁷ At a small table in all the noise of the IFLA coffee corner, two members of the ISO committee devised the first set of possible quality indicators for national libraries.

In the next months a kind of feasibility study for the purpose was drawn up and presented at the next meeting of SC 8 in May 2006 in Paris. The committee decided that the existing standard “Library performance indicators” did not sufficiently consider the needs of national libraries, and that additional performance indicators would be necessary in order to cover the main tasks of national libraries. Therefore, in June 2006 a proposal for the new work item was sent for voting to the members of SC 8; the vote was positive. As this is the first attempt at collecting performance indicators for national libraries, it was deemed best to choose the form of a Technical Report, for which there are less regulations than for a normal ISO standard.

Technical Reports need fewer procedures and less time and can be altered more quickly.

The new working group with 12 members and 2 guests from 11 countries met for the first time in January 2007, and already a year after, in January 2008, presented a full document for voting. The votes were positive, but many member countries sent comments and suggestions. Hopefully, the final version of ISO Technical Report

³ Poll, R., te Boekhorst, P. (2007), *Measuring quality, performance measurement in libraries*. 2nd revised ed., Saur, München, IFLA Publications 127

⁴ Line, M. (2001), Changing perspectives on national libraries: a personal view, *Alexandria* 13 (1), pp.44

⁵ Cullen, R. (2003), Benchmarking: overview and context, *World Library and Information Congress, 69th IFLA General Conference and Council*, Berlin, available at: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla69/papers/015e-Cullen.pdf>

⁶ Line, M. (2001), Changing perspectives on national libraries: a personal view, *Alexandria* 13 (1), pp.44

⁷ ISO/TC 46/SC 8 Quality – Statistics and performance evaluation

28118 “Performance indicators for national libraries” will be published in autumn 2008.

During the work progress, the drafts for the Technical Report were discussed with the CENL performance measures group and with the IFLA Section of National Libraries, so that in an early stage comments could be integrated.

The tasks of national libraries

Identifying performance indicators for a type of libraries requires the basis of a mission statement as starting-point. Therefore, the first task of the working group was to define the general mission and the main tasks of national libraries.

The ISO standard for library statistics yielded the following definition⁸:

national library = library that is responsible for acquiring and conserving copies of all relevant documents in the country in which the library is located; it may function as a legal deposit library.

A national library will also normally perform some or all of the following functions: produce the national bibliography, hold and keep up to date a large and representative collection of foreign literature including documents about the country; act as a national bibliographic information centre; compile union catalogues; supervise the administration of other libraries and/or promote collaboration; coordinate a research and development service, etc.

This definition does not specify the funding institution for a national library; generally this will be the national government.

The next step was to seek for mission statements on the websites of national libraries. Because of the unique character of national libraries, their mission statements show a great variety. But evidently there is consensus about the main destination and basic tasks.

Most mission statements stress the national library’s responsibility for the country’s cultural heritage, especially the documentary heritage. This means on the one side collecting and preserving that heritage, on the other side ensuring permanent access to the collection. Some examples:

- “The Library is a world-class cultural and intellectual resource that serves the needs of today’s researchers as well as being the custodian of the nation’s written and spoken heritage”⁹.
- “The National Library is responsible for collecting and preserving all Swedish publications, and for making the material available to the public.”¹⁰
- “The National Library of South Africa is a custodian and provider of the nation’s key knowledge resources.”¹¹
- “The National Library (NB) shall be the premier source of information about Norway, Norwegians and Norwegian culture, and it is to be Norway’s main resource for the collection, archiving and distribution of Norwegian media.”¹²
- “As the only depository library in Japan, the Library acquires all materials published in Japan, preserves them as national cultural heritage, compiles catalogs of these publications in a database or other format, and with these collections provides library services.”¹³

The last citation mentions cataloguing as necessary for the availability of publications to users. Many mission statements see the national bibliography as a crucial task:

⁸ ISO 2789 (2006), Information and documentation – International library statistics

⁹ British Library, Strategy, policy and programmes, available at: <http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/>

¹⁰ National Library of Sweden, Operations, available at: <http://www.kb.se/english/about/operations/>

¹¹ National Library of South Africa, About us, available at: <http://www.nlsa.ac.za/NLSA/about-us>

¹² National Library of Norway, About the National Library, available at: <http://www.nb.no/english/facts>

¹³ National Diet Library, NDL profile, available at: http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/aboutus/outline_1.html

- “The German National Library is the central archival library and national bibliographic centre for the Federal Republic of Germany.”¹⁴

The collections of national libraries comprise mainly the national documentary production in whatever format. “The collection constitutes the living national memory of written, printed and electronic publications.”¹⁵ This may include documents like manuscripts, archival materials, cartographic material, printed music documents, pictures, photographs and audiovisual documents. The concept of a national collection generally also includes foreign publications in the national language and/or about the country. Recently, national libraries have also started to collect websites in the national domain.

In addition to this national collection, most national libraries also provide foreign publications. This task is less clearly defined. The collection building policy for foreign literature is generally restricted to research literature, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

Another issue that mission statements of national libraries describe is to take the lead in national and international cooperation of libraries, especially in projects of central interest like standardisation. The Finnish National Library even names this as main task in the description of its role: “The National Library functions as a service and development centre for Finnish libraries with a duty to promote both national and international co-operation.”¹⁶

Evidently, national libraries have important tasks that differ from those of other libraries, such as the collection and preservation of the national documentary heritage, the publication of a national bibliography and a leading role in cooperation. In order to keep these issues well in mind while identifying performance indicators for national libraries, the first step of the working group was to formulate a general statement of the mission and tasks of national libraries that was added as Annex A to the Technical Report.

Performance indicators taken from ISO 11620

The new Technical Report ISO 28118 “Performance measures for national libraries” describes 30 performance indicators. In order to identify indicators that cover the tasks of national libraries, the working group consulted in the first place the standard ISO 11620 “Library performance indicators”. ISO 11620 describes indicators that are relevant for nearly all types of libraries. 15 indicators of the standard were chosen for the Technical Report. Indicators that compare library services to the clientele or population of a library were excluded, as national libraries do not serve a specified clientele like a university library (the members of the university) or a public library (the inhabitants of the community). Of the indicators chosen from ISO 11620, examples for good processes are:

- Shelving accuracy
- Median time of document processing
- Median time of document retrieval from closed stacks
- Speed of interlibrary lending

¹⁴ German National Library, The German National Library in brief, available at: http://www.d-nb.de/eng/wir/ueber_dnb/dnb_im_ueberblick.htm

¹⁵ Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Mission statement, available at: <http://www.kb.nl/bst/beleid/bp/2002/missie-en.html>

¹⁶ The National Library of Finland, The role of the national library, available at: <http://www.nationallibrary.fi/infoe.html>

Examples for user-oriented collections and services are:

- User satisfaction rate
- Cost per download per electronic resource
- Public seating occupancy rate
- Correct answer fill rate (in reference services)

Examples for cost-effective services are:

- Staff costs per loan
- Employee productivity in media processing

Examples for potentials and development in libraries are:

- Number of attendance hours at formal training lessons per staff member
- Percentage of library means received by special grant or income generated

The indicators could not be copied from ISO 11620 without change, but were adapted to the special needs and conditions of national libraries. A good example for this is the indicator "User satisfaction". In libraries with a defined population to be served, e. g. university libraries, public libraries, or special libraries serving the members of an institution or commercial firm, it will be comparably easy to assess user satisfaction, as the libraries know the structure and the level of education of their population. National libraries have no such specified clientele; their services can be used by interested persons worldwide. User surveys for national libraries therefore will have to consider different user groups:

- walk-in users, using e.g. the library's reading rooms,
- remote users (worldwide),
- publishers,
- other libraries that use the national library's services.

The new indicators

ISO 11620 does not offer indicators for all tasks of national libraries. Performance indicators for national libraries must consider issues like

- the collection's coverage of the national media production,
- the speed and comprehensiveness of the national bibliography,
- the effort for preserving the national documentary heritage,
- the effort for promoting the cultural heritage by digitising and events,
- the national and international engagement of the library.

In order to find such indicators, the working group consulted the websites of national libraries, looking for evaluation reports, benchmarking studies or service level agreements. There were quite a number of quality measures to be found, but the descriptions of methods were not always clear. Therefore, several national libraries that had sent experts to the working group tested indicators as to practicability and usefulness. Special thanks are due to the National Diet Library (Japan) that tested and improved many of the indicators.

The most important indicators that were thus selected concern the national collection and bibliography:

- Percentage of national publications acquired by the national library (The indicator assesses the completeness of the national collection.)
- Percentage of new entries in the national bibliography (The indicator assesses the speed of acquisition and cataloguing.)

As yet, ISO 11620 contains no indicators for preservation/conservation issues. Such indicators were therefore adapted from methods described in a British research report¹⁷ and from examples of the Bavarian State Library that cooperated in the working group:

- Percentage of the collection in stable condition
- Percentage of all materials needing conservation/restoration treatment that received such treatment
- Percentage of the collection housed in the appropriate environment

Another issue not yet considered in ISO 11620 is digitisation. When national libraries today engage in digitisation projects, they have two different purposes: to make their cultural heritage collections universally available via digitisation, and to conserve the original analogue material by substituting a digital surrogate.

The performance indicators for digitisation in the Technical Report consider first the whole collection, then the special collections, and lastly the usage of digitised items.

- Number of documents digitised per 1000 titles in the collection
- Percentage of documents digitised per special collection
- Number of content units downloaded per document digitised

National libraries are usually the principle agents promoting national and international cooperation in the library network. As no existing quality measures were found for this task, the working group tested and chose the following indicator:

- Percentage of staff in national and international cooperation and projects

The structure of the new Technical Report

The Technical Report does not use the structure of the Balanced Scorecard like the standard ISO 11620. The 30 indicators are grouped according to the main service areas of national libraries:

- Building the national collection
- Cataloguing
- Quick and easy access
- Usage
- Digitisation
- Reference service
- Preservation
- Management
- Potentials for development

The description of each indicator is very similar to the structure in ISO 11620: name of the indicator, aims, method, and interpretation of the results. But as this is the first time that a systematic collection of quality indicators is offered to national libraries, the working group deemed it advisable to give as much help as possible for the use of the indicators. Following the example of the new IFLA handbook¹⁸, two clauses were added to each indicator:

¹⁷ Walker, A. and Foster, J., (2006), *Knowing the need, a report on the emerging picture of preservation need in libraries and archives in the UK*, National Preservation Office, ed. by M. Feeney, available at: <http://www.bl.uk/services/npo/pdf/knowning.pdf>

¹⁸ Poll, R. and te Boekhorst, P. (2007) *Measuring quality, performance measurement in libraries*. 2nd revised ed., Saur, München, IFLA Publications 127

- Background (describing the service or activity that is evaluated by the indicator and its relevance for national libraries)
- Examples and further reading (giving references and examples of a library using the specified indicator or a similar indicator)

The examples can help libraries to realise workload, problems and advantages connected with each indicator and to compare their own results with those of other libraries.

Further development

The intention is to publish the Technical Report in autumn 2008. National libraries can then choose from 30 performance indicators for evaluating their services. Hopefully, groups of libraries will also try to benchmark by using a common list of indicators. Practical experience with the set of indicators in this Report will show whether further indicators or changes in indicators will be necessary. It will be decided later whether the indicators in this Technical Report can be incorporated into ISO 11620, or whether this Report should remain separate.

Though the Technical Report is in the first place intended for national libraries, it will be also relevant for all libraries with regional responsibility. Regional libraries have tasks that are similar to those of national libraries, e. e. collecting and preserving the regional documentary heritage or editing a regional bibliography. Like national libraries, they usually have no defined population to be served. Therefore, performance indicators for national libraries may well answer the needs of regional libraries.

Indicators for outcome and impact are not yet included in this Report, though it would of course be most interesting to show the national libraries' contribution to knowledge, information literacy, social inclusion, academic and professional success, or cultural life. Such indicators are still not sufficiently tested in libraries and might be added later.