

Assessing the hybrid university library: addressing diverse agendas through effective and efficient approaches

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Introduction

In recent years university library assessment has gone through fundamental changes in approach and intent. The purpose of this paper is to explore why these changes have occurred and to establish the place of library assessment in the 21st century University. Three specific purposes of assessment will be identified and explored: informing service development, providing evidence internally on library services to the rest of the institution and the need for evidence on quality to central government. Library assessment will then be considered within the context of limited resources. Strategies to overcome resource constraints such as effective and efficient data collection; clear focus and library staff culture will be examined. There will be a discussion on issues disseminating the library assessment outcomes such as political dimensions, format and presentation and the role of the user.

Library assessment has been effected primarily by the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICT) (Covey: 2002) that has resulted in the development of the digital library. Covey (2002) provides a detailed perspective on what this has meant with developments such as:

- Changes in delivery and access
- Alterations in work and workflow
- Increase in the number of services
- Remote user who never physically visits library
- Necessity of altering user instruction
- Need for library to be involved in design/ management etc of multimedia web pages, portals and products

This represents fundamental challenges when library assessment has to be considered. Until recently, as de Jager (2002) points out, library assessment was primarily concerned about size:

- Number of current periodical subscriptions
- Number of books in stock
- Number of periodical back runs
- Number of books issued

This emphasis on size and volume of activity obviously does not fit very easily into the ICT developments.

Apart from library assessment being altered by technology changes, the other major influencing driver has been the developing role of the user in the assessment process. Users previously have had a minimal role in assessment. The role was confined to reading the annual university library report which give a detailed summary of the size measures already alluded. This is altering fundamentally with them having a central position in library

assessment. Examples of the 'user centric' approach are seen in many other aspects of business, service industry and society. Ray (2001) points out that the previous library assessment focus on outcomes is not enough and that assessment should describe the library contribution to the library users' learning. This is further developed by Phipps (2001) who argues that assessment should focus on understanding the library users' needs. Only by developing an informed perspective of the users' personal expectations and needs can appropriate services be provided. If friendly, helpful and knowledgeable library services are to be delivered, then library staff have to understand their customers (Simmonds: 2001). A further reason has been identified by Covey (2002) why assessment needs to become more user-focussed. There are now significant competitors to university library services such as publishers, bookshops and free web search engines. Only by knowing the user can libraries ensure their services are competitive and can make a difference in learning and research.

Limited consideration is given in current writing on university library assessment about assessment within the hybrid university library context. Attention is being focussed on digital service assessment where paper information based services do not have a profile. Jackson (2001) has recognised that despite the massive developments in digital library services, most library services and resources are still provided within the context of hybrid delivery. Knight (1997) has given the following definition of the hybrid library service.

The hybrid library is a library which can provide a one-stop-shop for both hardcopy and electronic resources. Its information systems should provide the end user with a seamless interface that will allow them to locate paper books and journals held locally and at neighbouring sites at the same time as being available to find relevant online resources, electronic publications and digitised material. To do this, the user needs to be provided with a front end that can access information in a variety of databases which are widely distributed and can contain a variety of information in different formats

Booth et al (2002) acknowledges that in the short to medium term, libraries will continue to be delivered in hybrid format. The challenge is to place university library assessment in the context where the service is hybrid, the influence of ICT will increase and user is central

Three specific purposes of assessment: informing service development, providing internal university evidence and providing external evidence

Library assessment has many purposes to fulfil but the focus in this paper will be on three specific perspectives. The first purpose to be considered is the need for **informed service development**. University library services are much more complex now with new technologies emerging that need to be considered and incorporated. It has been argued that the primary focus in assessing libraries is to develop an understanding of the customers' needs to allow services to be modified (Phipps: 2001). This theme is explored further by Davies (2002) who stresses the need for knowing how well a service is

performing and the need for evidence to refine and re-define existing services. . Library assessment should provide the framework for decision-making on current and future services (Bertot: 2001). Within the context of the hybrid library, decisions have to be reached about the evolving balance between paper and electronic delivery. There is further discussion needed on how university libraries can share library assessment evidence nationally and internationally. Libraries should be able to learn from each other and use evidence gained elsewhere to inform service development

A further important reason to assess the library is to be able to **provide internal evidence** to the university on quality and value for money. A feature of higher education has been the diminishing unit of resource where more has to be done for less. More and more is expected of people, services, technology and buildings whilst the funding at best is maintained at current levels. At the same time as resources are scarce, the lowest level of investment needed for an effective hybrid library service is to have a robust networked infrastructure so effective use can be made of Internet based services. The library has to therefore be able to convince the rest of the university about the need for investment. The university needs evidence for providing scarce resources for existing and current services. A further complexity is that the hybrid library user is also demanding access to paper as well as electronic resources. It is very difficult to re-allocate resources from paper to electronic when these demands are present. Library assessment has therefore to be used to provide evidence to the wider organisation about the quality of existing services, the need to maintain hybrid services and the need for further investment.

Data from library assessment is needed internally within a university but there is also a need for **external bodies** to have evidence. Accountability of higher education is being clamoured for by central governments across the world. In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has been set up specifically to assess the quality of learning provision in individual universities. The process that existed until recently to assess quality in the United Kingdom health and higher education sectors is described by Hewlett and Walton (2001). The process has recently changed. Previously, university libraries were heavily involved in providing evidence to show the quality of learning resource to the quality assessors. Significant library assessment programmes were undertaken to produce this evidence. A new process has recently been introduced to reduce the heavy workload attached to this activity.

Library assessment and limited resources

The demands on university library staff supplying a hybrid service are manifold. They have to maintain services that are long standing such as book lending, provision of printed journals and study spaces. Pressures on these traditional services are not always diminishing but may be increasing in some instances. At the same time e-journals have to be integrated into services and e-books considered and chosen. An increasing number of databases are available from different providers that need to be evaluated. With expansions

in student numbers, library staff have to deliver information skills sessions to more and more groups needing to acquire information skills to effectively use these new services. Academic staff have to be updated so they are aware of the changes in services. Help desks have to be developed to provide personal support for all students' information needs. Other support mechanisms also have to be developed such as telephone help lines and e-mail support. At the same time, library staff has to develop their skills so they can deliver these changing services. This corresponds in many universities to reductions in library staffing levels. External funding sources have to be sought to resource developments and this involves bid writing etc. It is therefore challenging for university libraries to effectively assess their services when there are many other demands on resources and staff.

Library assessment is not optional. Without accurate data, there will be no evidence to ensure services evolve and change to meet users' changing needs. The library will not be able to go the university asking for more investment for the infrastructure if it does not have the proof of impact. Outdated and ineffective work practices will remain and continue, as there will no be no evidence indicating necessary changes. Users demand quality in all services they access and library assessment is needed to produce the performance indicators etc to illustrate this. Hybrid library services need to be developed within limited resources whilst simultaneously assessing service provision.

Achieving all this may seem a tall order but there are various strategies that can be adopted to ensure effective assessment of the hybrid library occurs. It is imperative to ensure that there is effective **and efficient data collection**. The library assessor is faced with an array of library assessment tools all of which have implications for their use. Bertot (2001) identifies a significant range of methodologies for measuring electronic networked services. The challenge is to choose methods that produce the data required as easily as possible. For example, user surveys are recognised as appropriate for many aspects of assessment but they are expensive and time consuming to undertake (Jager: 2002).

It is crucial to ensure that the resources exist to analyse the data when the assessment process starts. ICT developments have heightened the need for library assessments whilst also enhancing data collection opportunities. Automatic issue systems provide detailed management data on users' book borrowing patterns. Controlled access turnstiles can show which student groups physically use library buildings and for how long. Data can be easily provided on how often specific web pages are used and from where.

As Davies (2002) highlights, library assessment has to include the traditional quantitative measures but there is also a need for soft indicators. Management information systems can generate the quantitative data effectively and efficiently but qualitative data can be more demanding in resources to produce. E mail questionnaires are very effective in generating qualitative data because the nature of completion means the analysis is made much easier (Gannon-Leary, Wakeham and Walton: 2003). E-mail

suggestions and written comments from users can be used to both provide qualitative data and allowing opportunity for feedback. Minutes from meetings held both within the Library and other university committees can be scoured for data that can be used for assessment.

Another strategy to ensure library assessment occurs within existing resources is to ensure that it has a **clear focus**. When commencing library assessment, the first step is to ensure there is absolute clarity about the purpose of the specific assessment activity. If this clarity is not present there is a danger to over collect evidence. Having too much data can be as much a disadvantage as having too little. If the assessment is to aid decision making, then too much data can be overwhelming and inhibiting. Establishing the clear focus needs then to be matched with selecting the data collection methodology that will most effectively provide the intelligence to meet the specified purpose. It may be that once the clear focus has been identified, data already exists to provide the required evidence.

The final strategy to be considered in ensuring university libraries has effective assessment process is to address **library staff cultural issues**. This has been considered by an array of authors: Booth et al (2002), Covey (2001), Lakos (2002), Ray (2001). The challenge is to build into library staff the outlook whereby evaluation and assessment is not seen as a separate activity but as part of working practice. Ray (2001) proposes that 'learning' should be the principle behind all aspects of the organisation. If this is achieved then assessment becomes an integral part of daily operations. Assessment will not be an imposed activity or a distraction but will be a process where all staff are participants. Assessment needs to become a routine. Lakos (2001) argues that library staff need to become more concerned with assessing outcome and outputs and be outward looking. Perhaps the most effective summation has been provided by Covey (2002) about what needs to happen:

...Turn library ethos and normative behavior into the culture of assessment, focused on user-critical evidence that drives decision making and strategic planning. ...It must cease to be remarkable. It must become routine.

Changing university library culture to embrace assessment in this way is complex and difficult.

Disseminating library assessment: political dimensions, format/presentation and the user.

Little has been written which explores the dissemination aspects of university hybrid library assessment. Unless the dissemination of the assessment is carefully managed and planned, there is the risk that the work will have limited impact. There needs to be consideration of the **political dimensions** in the dissemination. All organisations are political where power shifts and moves. The library has to function within this environment and needs an awareness about the politics within both the library and the larger organisation.

Questions about the intended impact of the assessment need to be identified at the earliest stage.

- Should the outcomes go to powerful senior individuals first to influence their perspectives or should they go to the appropriate committee?
- If the assessment is more intended to change internal practice, which staff are likely to be most effected? How should the process be managed to limit resistance and ensure commitment?
- If library staff from a specific section have undertaken an assessment where the results are at odds with other trends then is there a political reason?

Related to the political dimensions is the **format/ presentation** of the assessment outcomes. It is important that the perspective with which the prospective reader approaches the assessment is anticipated. Again a range of questions needs to be answered.

- Will the person using the assessment need a detailed report that includes all the raw data?
- How appropriate is it just to produce a short executive summary? Will publishing the outcomes on the web alone be sufficient?
- What level of explanation is needed to ensure the prospective reader can make valued judgements?
- If the assessment is for internal consideration, to what extent does the a lot of attention have to go on style and format.

The argument should be that if the **user** is at the centre of library assessment then they should be at the centre of the dissemination. In practice this is not easy to achieve. For the user, their agenda is that the assessment will lead to better, enhanced library services. As long as services evolve and develop to match their changing needs then it is unlikely users will have a significant interest in the detailed evaluations. Nevertheless (on grounds of fairness alone) if users have contributed then they should have the opportunity to see the results if they wish. Web publishing is now so easy that this should suffice to ensure access for the user.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore library assessment within the context of hybrid delivery. In the United Kingdom at least, there appears to be a n emerging ground swell of opinion that collaboration and co-operation should underpin practice in many areas. This should also extend to university library assessment. It would be in everybody's interests if processes and procedures were in place to allow the sharing of evaluation outcomes between university libraries. Even if these were in place, the next challenge would be to overcome cultural barriers to make people use these channels.

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