

## Supported self-evaluation in assessing the impact of HE Libraries

Sharon Markless and David Streatfield

### 1 Impact as a problem area

There are two major challenges for anyone who sets out to evaluate the impact of higher education libraries: there is no established tradition for service managers to draw upon in this kind of work and there are practical as well as motivational problems in getting busy staff to take on difficult processes, especially if these are seen as partly in the home territory of academic researchers rather than practitioners.

Looking at the first challenge, most library service managers of all kinds are proficient in monitoring the efficiency of their services using a variety of process and output performance indicators: why then have many been slow to take up the effectiveness challenge by looking at the impact of these services?<sup>1</sup> Our personal journey through fifteen years of UK national research and staff development on library impact evaluation has covered schools<sup>2</sup>, further education colleges<sup>3</sup>, public libraries<sup>4</sup>, health services and higher education<sup>5</sup>, to give us some answers to this question. Some factors inhibiting the move towards evaluating effectiveness gleaned from our practitioner workshops<sup>6</sup> are that:

- there has been no real pressure until recently for academic library managers to look seriously at impact because:
  - the library was a stable and well-established element of academic life. How could academic staff and (most) students seriously envisage doing their work without frequent resort to the journals, books and reports provided from the library?
  - since libraries could be viewed as systems for obtaining and storing published information and then for making these materials available for reference or loan, a system performance measurement approach to monitoring the efficiency of that system through a range of well-recognised quantitative performance indicators seemed both appropriate and adequate
- when evidence of impact was required:
  - this was usually to show that additional external funds had been properly spent; if so it was usually enough to offer some indication of user satisfaction using anecdotal qualitative evidence
  - there was a tendency to confuse customer satisfaction (i.e. whether they like what they are getting) with service impact (i.e. whether it makes any difference to what they do and how). Since customer satisfaction surveys are relatively easy to administer (and usually provide very positive results when questions are asked about libraries) this is also an attractive option for managers
  - when external pressures (such as demands for quality assurance and performance management in higher education) did call for evidence of impact, the criteria and targets imposed were (and are) usually very general, and as a result encouraged crudely superficial and mechanistic approaches to evidence gathering
  - more concerted efforts were sometimes made to get evidence by employing academic researchers, but they too often found real impact evaluation difficult and tended to refocus on describing what they saw as interesting practice which was *intended to have an impact*.

Turning to the practical issues for HE libraries when engaging with impact evaluation, given the problems already outlined and the fact that librarians do not generally regard themselves as qualitative researchers, and the plethora of other jobs calling for immediate attention, how can staff be persuaded to take on impact evaluation as a serious managerial task?

Two prior questions are probably, what do we mean by impact and why should library managers and their staff want to go down this road at all? Taking the definition first, our preferred variation amongst many similar statements is: “... any effect of the service (or of an event or initiative) on an individual or group.” The impact may be positive or negative (it is as important to know what is not working as well as what is going well) and may be intended or accidental (there are usually unintended good or bad consequences in any human action or interaction). Two further points to make when talking about impact are firstly that impact evidence is not a distinct category of information, it is information gathered to assess whether impact has occurred or not; secondly, because measuring impact is about identifying and evaluating change, it is not finally possible to assess the impact of any intervention or activity - the best we can hope for is to find strong surrogates for impact that provide a close approximation (for example, someone describing an experience immediately afterwards or after due reflection about it).

We can testify to the recent upsurge of interest by academic library managers in impact evaluation because of major changes in their working context:

- higher education libraries are no longer being taken for granted as ‘a good thing’
- there is hugely increased availability of electronic sources of information, including e-journals, accessible directly by academic staff and students (these two factors combined to ensure the closure of at least one UK university library)
- there is greater competition for finite resources in academic institutions and allocation is increasingly being linked to perceived benefits for student learning
- there is increasing emphasis on value for money and accountability
- academic libraries are widening their range of services, raising questions about whether these new offerings are effective
- academic library staff are becoming increasingly involved in contributing to formal teaching and training within their institutions and are expected to show that their efforts contribute to specified student learning outcomes.

Is there a way forward to directly engage higher education library staff in impact evaluation to provide evidence of effectiveness and in doing so to address these changes in the work context? The *Impact Initiative* was designed to find a viable way forward. The evolution of the supported self-evaluation process that was eventually applied in the *Impact Initiative* programme is outlined below and the process is then described.

## 2 Developing the approach

With hindsight, the whole of our work on impact evaluation in a variety of library settings over the past fifteen years can be seen as preparation for the process described below but there were three significant stages along the way.

### Further education college libraries

After mapping further education library involvement in supporting teaching and learning as phase one of the **Effective College Library** project (funded by the then Further Education Development Agency and the British Library)<sup>7</sup> we undertook a series of case studies in partnerships to develop and evaluate specific aspects of practice in six colleges<sup>8</sup>. The overall process involved observation of students and interviews with academic and library

staff, leading to understanding of what the library was trying to achieve and the context in which this work was happening. This led to a workshop in which the nominated library staff from the six colleges worked through a process designed to help them engage with impact evaluation and, through that process, enabled joint generation of impact indicators and approaches to gathering data.

During the data gathering and evaluation period project research staff spent time on-site in further observation, interviews and discussion. Several practitioner workshops were run after the programme ended to share project findings and especially the approach to evaluation. Although the evidence-collection tools were published as part of the project report there was no attempt at this stage to standardise methods of evaluation or tools for this purpose. (A later attempt to produce a toolkit of methods for evaluating specific types of service intervention, drawing on this work, was abandoned because of the amount of library staff commitment required to standardise the tools.)

**Contribution to the developing approach:** This project led to the production of a prototype model of the process of impact evaluation (based on a series of key steps); it also demonstrated the importance of understanding the specific aims of each service and demonstrated the value of the researcher/librarian partnership in collaborative problem-solving.

### **School library self-evaluation**

The authors were commissioned by the then UK Government Department for Education and Skills to devise and test sets of school library self-evaluation materials for primary<sup>9</sup> and secondary<sup>10</sup> schools in England. These generic materials were based on national and international research and drew upon the combined experience of the authors. Sets of performance and impact indicators were offered with accompanying guidance about data collection for each indicator and with appropriate evidence collection tools which could be adapted to meet the needs of specific schools. The prototype version was tested in 53 primary and secondary schools and heavily adapted as a result. A programme of workshops has been offered since publication of the materials to support implementation by librarians and teachers.

**Contribution to the developing approach:** The whole experience emphasised the vital importance of workshops to encourage people to get started with evaluation and to support the use of the resources provided. Remodelling the prototype materials involved a deliberate shift from a judgemental focus (finding the library good, average or poor) to a developmental focus (how to get better). The other important lessons were about using existing research to guide generation of performance and especially impact indicators and about the need to bridge the gap between practitioners and researchers by designing and making available appropriate tools for data collection for librarians.

### **Health libraries and public libraries**

The basic process for getting to grips with impact evaluation originally developed as part of the *Effective College Library* project was strengthened and refined as part of the *Best Value and Better Performance in [Public] Libraries* project<sup>11</sup> funded by the Library and Information Commission. Again, impact workshops were organised for practitioners during and after the project to introduce people to the model and its use, supplemented by a growing range of materials (e.g. examples of objectives and indicators, data collection tools and guidance on how to collect data).

This model was then adapted for use with teams of health service librarians in two regions to help them to evaluate particular aspects of their service. In both programmes, fuller support was offered in the form of cycles of workshops to introduce impact evaluation and the model, to troubleshoot problems encountered by the librarians when doing the

evaluation and to take stock at the end of the process. Support materials were again provided and e-support was offered to deal with particular issues as they arose.

***Contribution to the developing approach:*** This phase of the work involved refining the model so that it works in, and is seen as relevant to, different types of library service. The power of the supported action research approach was demonstrated in the health service projects.

In arriving at the approach described below we also drew heavily upon work on organisational impact evaluation<sup>12</sup> (including, but not confined to work in the library and information field<sup>13</sup>), as well as on the very useful literature of educational impact evaluation<sup>14</sup> and on various published guides and models<sup>15</sup>.

### **3 The approach as used in the Impact [implementation] initiative**

The *Impact Initiative*<sup>16</sup> grew out of a UK national workshop facilitated by the authors for members of the Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL). This 24-hour event, *Do libraries aid learning? Approaches and methods for measuring impact*, was designed for university library managers and was held at Scarborough in December 2002.

Both organisations were sufficiently convinced of the case for doing further work on service impact to commit to organising the programme of research and development that became the *Impact Initiative* and which ran from 2003 to 2005. (The project was originally entitled the *Impact Implementation Initiative*, emphasising the organisers' concern to initiate impact evaluation work in HE libraries.)

The essence of the project was that the participants should be equipped to undertake their own impact evaluation and should receive support in undertaking this work. Key elements of the initiative were that:

- 22 university teams were actively engaged in the programme, consisting of library service managers (and a few academic staff) each of whom undertook to work through a cycle of impact evaluation in their own institution focused on their chosen aspect of service provision. The first (one year) cycle involved ten teams; the second (15 month) cycle was undertaken by 12 teams
- teams of participants chose their own theme from a shortlist offered at the outset and each elected to evaluate an aspect of information literacy, supporting research staff, or providing electronic services
- both of the impact evaluation cycles entailed working through a series of linked residential workshops to introduce impact evaluation and choose the evaluation themes (event 1), review progress and address problems (event 2) and report outcomes and decide how to move forward (event 3). e-support was provided between events and site visits were also offered if necessary (although there was no uptake)
- 17 of the 22 teams finished the cycle to the point of submitting a final report and, in the case of the first cycle, contributing an article, in the form of a structured report, to a special issue of *Library and Information Research* which was devoted to the project.

The approach adopted by the authors for this project can best be described as Facilitated Action Research (FAR). The main features of this process are:

- it is based on the impact evaluation model (since published in book form) to provide a coherent and systematic approach
- workshops are deployed to engage, motivate and orientate people; to empower librarians as practitioner researchers; and later to keep up the momentum and deal with problems arising
- examples of service objectives, impact indicators, data collection tools and other materials are provided to keep the focus on impact
- e-support is offered between workshops to keep people on track and sort out specific problems
- teams work together within each participating library - mutual support is vital
- where possible (i.e. where they share an evaluation focus and approach) teams are encouraged to work together
- the facilitators perform guidance, feedback, monitoring and support roles
- the essence of the approach is **self**-evaluation – each team chooses its own objectives, impact indicators (how they want themselves to be judged) and methods of data gathering (allowing sensitivity to the local context); and writes its own report of the process and outcomes.

The underpinning principles driving this approach to evaluation are:

- it is based on the capacity of evaluation to enhance the services under review (the whole approach is developmental not judgemental)
- the process is owned/adapted by practitioners (the intention is to empower participants whilst they are engaged in the project and to equip them to undertake other evaluation work independently after the project ends)
- these practitioner-formulated approaches are conducted within a coherent framework
- preparation for this work involved the facilitators in tapping impact evaluation research across different disciplines (e.g. education and business) to help participants get at impact
- this approach also seeks to learn from the research about how specific services can be provided effectively
- participants should work within a supportive team and explore evaluation issues in a risk free workshop environment
- the teams engage in a real initiative with no extra time or money provided; they have to fit the work into busy lives
- the idea of impact evaluation is to move people beyond a traditionalist view of 'good professional practice.'

The whole programme was complex because it operated simultaneously at each of three levels:

- action research undertaken by each team **within** each participating university library
- sharing and reviewing impact indicators, data gathering tools and problems **across** participating libraries
- evaluating the impact model together with the facilitated action research approach as an experimental programme of change.

#### **4 Review of the *Impact Initiative***

What did we all learn from this programme? The **participants** identified several real changes as a result of completing their cycle:

- the power of supported self-evaluation - they acknowledged that the overall approach re-focussed them away from input, process and output performance and towards impact, leading to deeper understanding of what their services could achieve and how
- bringing about real development and change in particular aspects of their services and how they are viewed:
  - enhanced interventions with students (e.g. improving the quality of information literacy diagnostic tests used with distance learning students; integration of information literacy into student learning) - *“We have changed the way we teach our postgraduate students as a result”*
  - changes in relationships with academic staff - raised library profile; achieved better relationships; more positive attitudes towards information literacy
  - deeper librarian understanding of teaching and learning
  - funding gained for focused tutorials on Web CT – after evaluation showed that the existing induction was failing to have impact on search strategies
- enabling library staff to demonstrate impact by showing an increase in student awareness of services and resources, positive academic staff attitudes leading to more student use of materials, or gains in skills by students - *“Even experienced postgraduate students can improve their searching skills and gain awareness of more appropriate tools to use...”*

Turning to what the participants felt that they gained from this type of programme, they identified the opportunities for collaboration and networking as critical to their success, found the framework and structure supportive, welcomed the chance to focus on one aspect of provision in depth and valued the examples and detailed descriptions of research tools provided. On the negative side they encountered some of the problems of academic cooperation, particularly in data collection and some found it challenging and stressful to engage with impact.

The main lessons for the **facilitators** were about the critical role of the workshops in the process (these were changed twice to improve the focus and level of help at different times) and about the need to change the facilitation role at various stages in the cycle (from research advice at the outset to facilitation as problems emerged and then to change management as these were addressed).

There were a few problems from the facilitator perspective. Facilitation itself was not problem free: the main complaint from the first cadre of participants was that they had not been coerced into collaborating! Unfortunately, even if it had been possible to force teams to work together this would have run counter to our mission to empower the participants. Of more concern was the low rate of requests for help (apart from specific e-mail enquiries and calls for feedback on their evaluation tools) even from those teams that did not complete their cycle.

## 5 Organisational and Structural factors

Some participants experienced difficulties in fitting the requirements for impact evaluation into the organisational planning and work cycle, since impact evaluation evidence gathering and analysis won't necessarily fit comfortably into the academic year. Again, there are potential problems in 'institutionalising' impact evaluation work. Assuming that evaluation of a particular service is successful, should the process then be repeated annually, should attention be turned to another service or should impact evaluation be put on hold until another issue calls for attention?

The other organisational concern was that, unlike traditional library performance indicators, doing impact evaluation usually involves evidence gathering from academic staff or students. This moves the work into the institutional research ambit and, as one senior manager concluded ruefully, "*Influencing academics and getting change at Academic Boards was harder to do than the evaluation.*"

## 6 Taking this work forward

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to report on the impact indicators produced and tested by the participating teams, there is probably scope for more work here. Reports of the project teams, including their impact indicators and the results obtained by applying them, can be found on the LIS-Impact discussion group site for the project<sup>17</sup>.

We have no doubt that the *Impact Initiative* was a successful programme that met its main objectives and that facilitated action research was an appropriate strategy. We have tried to help spread the word by including a full description of the process and examples of the materials used, including evidence-collection instruments on the SCONUL Vamp Project website.<sup>18</sup>

Some considerations for anyone thinking of trying a similar programme are that:

- having an effective framework and structure is vital (whether or not you choose to follow the *Impact Initiative* version) in order to achieve and maintain coherence and clarity
- cross-site collaboration in this type of programme is important in order to achieve synergy, but the *Impact Initiative* had only limited success in achieving this. The questions to be addressed include: when is the best time in the cycle to try to create such collaboration, what can be done by the facilitators (up to or even including coercion!) to support and encourage collaborative working, and, how realistic is this as a goal for busy managers trying to produce change and maintain services at the same time?
- encouraging participating teams to report on their processes and outcomes (including the parts that don't work) is important not only because making the research results public is an important stage in action research but because an agreed process of external reporting provides natural deadlines and targets for all the participants. The ownership of the 'local' reports by each team is also important. We provided a suggested framework for reporting in the form of a set of questions, but each team reported their own views in their own words and we did not attempt to provide any form of editing or censorship process
- asking difficult questions may produce some painful answers or may increase uncertainty about the best ways. Learning can be a painful process.

Looking at the process as a whole, facilitated impact evaluation requires adequate structure, facilitation and active management. This management dimension is particularly important if there is any aspiration to compare impact across institutions. The facilitated action research approach inevitably creates tensions between elegance of research design, consistency of data collection, validity of results and rigour in research execution on the one hand and real development and empowerment on the other. It is not realistic to aspire to turn library managers into skilled academic researchers, but it is a reasonable aspiration to support practitioners in becoming effective evaluators of their own service impact through facilitated action research.

---

<sup>1</sup> WAVELL, C., BAXTER, G., JOHNSON, I. and WILLIAMS, D. (2002) *Impact evaluation of museums, archives and libraries: available evidence project* Prepared by the School of Information

---

and Media, Faculty of Management, The Robert Gordon University London: Resource ISBN 1 901 085 716 <http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/id16rep.doc>

<sup>2</sup> STREATFIELD, D.R. and MARKLESS, S. (1994) *Invisible learning? The contribution of school libraries to teaching and learning* Library and Information Research Report 98 London: The British Library Research and Development Department ISBN 0 7123 3283 9

<sup>3</sup> STREATFIELD, D.R. and MARKLESS, S. (1997) *The Effective College Library* British Library Research and Innovation Report 21 Developing FE Series 1 (8) London: Further Education Development Agency ISSN 1361 9969 [Phase 1 project report]

<sup>4</sup> STREATFIELD, D.R. and others (2000) *Rediscovering reading: public libraries and the National Year of Reading* (with Library and Information Commission) Research Report 30 Twickenham, Middx.: IMA for the LIC ISBN: 0-9538432-0-3

<sup>5</sup> MARKLESS, S. and STREATFIELD, D.R. (2006) *Evaluating the impact of your library* London: Facet Publishing ISBN 13 9781 85604 488 2

<sup>6</sup> The authors have run more than forty one to three-day workshops on evaluating the impact of library services for library service managers on behalf of CILIP, LIRG and SCONUL, School Library Association, various parts of the National Health Service and others, involving a total of more than 750 participants.

<sup>7</sup> STREATFIELD, D.R. and MARKLESS, S. (1997) *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> MARKLESS, S. and STREATFIELD, D.R. (2000) *The really effective college library* Library and Information Commission Research Report 51 Twickenham, Middx.: Information Management Associates for the Library and Information Commission ISBN 095384322X [Phase 2 project report]

<sup>9</sup> STREATFIELD, D. R. and MARKLESS, S. (2004) *Improve your library: a self-evaluation process for primary schools* London: Department for Education and Skills

[www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoollibraries](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoollibraries)

<sup>10</sup> MARKLESS, S. and STREATFIELD, D.R. (2004) *Improve your library: a self-evaluation process for secondary school libraries and learning resource centres* 2 vols. London: Department for Education and Skills [www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoollibraries](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoollibraries)

<sup>11</sup> STREATFIELD, D.R., MARKLESS, S., COOKMAN, N., HERBERT, D., McCulloch, S. and SWAN, R. (2000) *Best Value and better performance in Libraries* Library and Information Commission Research Report 52 Twickenham, Middx.: IMA for the LIC ISBN: 0-9538432-1-1

<sup>12</sup> QMW (1999) *Achieving effective performance management and benchmarking in the public sector* QMW Public Policy Seminars, University of London 14th October

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: KINNELL, M. and others (1999a) *Improving library and information services through self-assessment: a guide for senior managers and staff developers* BLR+I Report 172 London: The Library Association ISBN 1856043363; also the *Inspiring Learning for All* Framework developed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council [www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk)

<sup>14</sup> For example, FITZ-GIBBON, C. T. and KOCHAN, S. (2000) 'School effectiveness and education indicators' in TEDDLIE, C. and Reynolds, D. (eds.) *The international handbook of school effectiveness research* London: Falmer Press.

<sup>15</sup> Such as the Balanced Scorecard and the Business Excellence Model; see: KAPLAN, R.S. and NORTON, D.P. (1992) 'The balanced scorecard: measures that drive performance' *Harvard Business Review* Jan-Feb.; KAPLAN, R.S. and NORTON, D.P. (1993) 'Putting the balanced scorecard to work' *Harvard Business Review* Sept-Oct. [Both articles reprinted in: *Harvard Business Review on measuring corporate performance* Boston, USA Harvard Business School Press 1998]; BRIGHAM, C. (1999) *EFQM Excellence Model* London: Improvement and Development Agency.

<sup>16</sup> MARKLESS, S. and STREATFIELD, D.R. (2005) 'Facilitating the Impact Implementation Programme' in *Library and Information Research* 29 (91) (Spring) 10-19. *The whole of this special issue of LIRN is devoted to the Impact Implementation Programme.*

<sup>17</sup> [www.jiscmail.ac.uk/archives/lis-impact.html](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/archives/lis-impact.html)

<sup>18</sup> <http://vamp.diglib.shrivenham.cranfield.ac.uk/impact/impact-initiative>