

# **Effects of the New Public Management (NPM) and austerity in European public and academic libraries**

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**Abstract.** The changing information environment calls for a new leadership, new competences and new approaches to the library services. In today's information age, information literate citizens must be able to assess the reliability of information, making information literacy instruction an important task for libraries. In this paper, five representatives from European countries did research and present data from interviews with library leaders from Germany, Romania, Finland, UK and Norway. Their experiences were different, reflecting varying levels of economic austerity, and how closely each country adheres to New Public Management (NPM)-theory and practice. However, they also show how NPM and reduced budgets can lead to a greater and better cooperation.

Keywords: New Public Management, library leadership, information literacy, Finland, Germany, Norway, Romania, UK.

## **INTRODUCTION**

New Public Management (NPM) is a common term for a set of principles and methods for organising and managing public enterprises. It has been used to reform the public sector by employing approaches from the private sector. NPM advocates claim that it is a more efficient and effective means of attaining the best outcomes than traditional public administration with regulations, legislation and administrative procedures; and it is rooted in an assumption that when a public enterprise is managed in a market-oriented manner, it will contribute to a better quality and greater efficiency within public services. Hood (1991) lists the seven basic principles of NPM:

- Management
- Performance standards
- Output controls
- Decentralisation
- Competition
- Private-sector management
- Cost reduction (p.4)

However, he stresses that not all the seven aspects are present in all settings, and that the emphasis differs from one government to another. NPM is not a theory that is set in stone once and for all, but is evolving and developing constantly, and this makes it difficult to define in a clear manner.

“For example, the idea of a shift in emphasis from policy making to management skills, from a stress on process to a stress on output, from orderly hierarchies to an intendedly more competitive basis for providing public services, from fixed to variable pay and from a uniform and inclusive public service to a variant structure with more emphasis on contract provision, are themes which appear in most accounts” (Hood 1995, p. 95).

Hood (1991) claimed that one way of interpreting the origin of the NPM is to see it as the joining of two ideas, "new-institutional economy," including competition and incentive use, and the idea of a more "business-type" management form, "managerialism", with management as a profession and a high degree of discretionary power, "free to manage" (Hood 1991, p.5).

There is also a huge amount of research on different aspects of introduction of NPM in the countries of the world. In this paper we are looking at the European ways of implementing NPM policies in libraries. We will be looking at NPM in library settings

in five countries. We will, however, give some background of the introduction and implementation of NPM, as well as its basic principles. We will also be looking at how the economic crisis in 2008 and onwards, and the accompanying austerity manifested itself in these selected countries and libraries.

Historically, NPM as a system was first deployed in Europe in the UK under the Thatcher and Major governments (1979 – 1997), and thereafter came other countries by and by, which employed larger or smaller parts of this theory.

From the literature on public management reform, it seems that the most active NPM countries in Europe would be Sweden and the UK. Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway are showing some signs in the direction of NPM. Lower implementation of NPM is found in Germany, Greece, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey (Hood 1995, p.99).

Hood (1991) saw NPM in the context of four other megatrends in that time:

- Attempts to reverse or slow down the growth in the public sector in terms of the number of employees and expenses.
- The shift towards privatization and quasi-privatization instead of state institutions.
- The development of automation, especially in information technology, in the production and distribution of public services.
- The development of a more international agenda.

Austerity is a result of the global economic crisis of 2008

“Roughly speaking, the countries hit hardest in Europe were those in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and in the British Isles, while Western European countries

were modestly hit, and the Nordic countries were relatively mildly affected by the crisis” (Randma-Liiv & Kickert 2017a, p. 901).

Randma-Liiv and Kickert (2017b) also argue that the previous financial-economic crisis in the 1980s paved the way for the subsequent NPM reforms. While the crisis type of decision-making in many European countries only started in 2010, or even in 2012, the long-term impacts are still to be seen; however, short- and medium-term impacts of the austerity are beginning to appear in most of the countries the authors mentioned are investigating.

As they see it, the crisis in the 1980’s forced governments to increase their cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency, leading to the widespread introduction of models and techniques from the private business sector. The management of budgetary cutbacks in the 1970’s and 1980’s used the same rhetoric which was later transferred into the main slogans of NPM, such as ‘cost-consciousness,’ ‘efficiency,’ ‘result-orientation,’ ‘flexibility’ in personnel regulations and financial management, and ‘performance measurement’ as a basis for decision-making (Randma-Liiv & Kickert 2017a).

With these forces at play and in this era of misinformation, libraries as guardians of the quality of information for everyday life have become even more important. Information literate citizens need guidance and help to assess and understand the reliability of the information they are gathering. Information literacy in the public sphere is therefore an important task, especially for public libraries worldwide. In this framework, information literacy can be defined as in the new definition from the Chartered institute of library information professionals (CILIP). "Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society” (CILIP 2018).

The growing importance and need to educate information literate citizens especially against the background of NPM and reduced or at least stagnating budgets calls for a new leadership, new competences and new approaches to the managing of the library services. At the same time, as we noticed from the introduction of research on New Public Management and austerity in European public organisations, the impact of NPM and austerity was not the same in different countries. We would therefore expect this to hold true also for the libraries.

In this paper, the authors will present data from interviews with 22 library leaders from five European countries, Finland, Germany, Norway, Romania and the UK, discussing the impact of NPM especially on information literacy training needs in public and academic libraries. Information literacy is chosen as the main example as it is, and has been, an important task for libraries globally for some years, and it also is part of a “new set of skills” emerging from the information overload resulting from internet.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As mentioned earlier, there is not a lot of current research on NPM in libraries. However, as NPM involves a need to develop strategies with operating figures and budgets and to ensure that the strategic goals set – especially customer satisfaction as most important goal – are met, there are a few publications in this area of research in European libraries. Düren (2010) looked at how German libraries must implement cost and activity accounting and performance measurement with an emphasis on output and outcome instead of input, as well as benchmarking to compare the library’s processes, costs and activities with those of other libraries (p.163). Or as Pors and Johannsen (2003) summarize: “NPM is a movement that tries to transfer principles from private

sector into the public sphere” and with this into libraries" (p.59).

Vallet (2015) argued that NPM at times can lead to an overemphasis on the financial aspects instead of the societal benefit, and reduces options for creative or innovative activities, which might be financially risky. It also sometimes provides fewer opportunities for a participative management style, as negotiations and agreements might lead to additional costs (p. 9). Furthermore, he argued that in addition to financial skills and competences, library leaders need to improve their strategic management competences. (p. 12). Düren, (2010) seems to support this view, stating that “management must develop a strategy with vision, mission and strategic goals. It must plan annual programme budgets based on cost and activity accounting to show how efficient and effective their work is” (p. 163).

Previous research on library leaders and the need for new competences, under NPM and under other changing circumstances shows that the introduction of NPM in libraries does not have to conflict with the library’s core values. Instead, NPM can be interpreted as a package of useful tools for library management. A Danish study showed that librarian “identity” can both be in conflict and in harmony with the logic of NPM. Kann-Christensen (2009) shows that at both field level and organizational level the librarian logic, regarding user contact and promotion of information, and culture remain crucial issues. Furthermore, librarianship as a profession is not opposed either to the pressure for efficiency or to the principle of evolution of the library’s function. However, one can identify a resistance towards changes in libraries where the possibility for librarians to influence their organization and work is taken away (Kann-Christensen, 2009).

Kann-Christensen and Andersen (2009) investigated a Danish county library and found that user satisfaction is important for legitimizing the library’s existence;

especially when libraries are caught between the demands of being cost-effective while at the same time catering to the needs and wishes of their patrons. In another Danish study, Pors, Dixon and Robson (2004) compared Danish library leaders with their counterparts from the UK and investigated the employment of management tools in libraries. Their theoretical perspective originated in Hofstede's (1980, 1991) work on differences in national cultures but included also a modifying factor called "institutional imperatives", which were defined as "a requirement decided by funding authorities for conducting a specific kind of measurement" (Pors, Dixon and Robson, 2004, p. 21). Their study found that the British library directors preferred tools and approaches connected to strategic planning, comparison and quality assurance, while the Danish were more directed toward staff development. The study concluded that a culture of assessment and institutional imperatives such as NPM were much stronger among the UK library leaders than the Danish.

In Finland, a study by Saarti and Juntunen (2011) showed the benefits of a quality management system in merging university libraries in Finland. In another Finnish study, Salmela (2014) conducted a survey on local library needs for training in Finland: Although the respondents in this study had a good knowledge about management, they also expressed that there is a great need for further education especially in different leadership styles, strategic work and developing the knowledge and skills of the workers. The greatest challenge was that while a lot of library managers had better knowledge in subject matters due to their library specified education, their motivation towards the leadership role was quite often somewhat lacking.

Düren (2010) demonstrated how a German academic library could use the Balanced Scorecard to develop and implement strategy, because of growing pressure

from NPM-inspired reforms in the German public sector. In another study, Düren et al (2017) conducted a survey among 245 academic and public library leaders in Norway in 2011 and found that library leaders had more focus on strategic tasks, and more on the softer forms of leadership than on administration and creating rules. In this survey, the percentage of respondents that claimed a “high level of knowledge” to any of the tools mentioned above was quite small, and for most of them, that level was less than 10 percent. Interviews with 11 library leaders also revealed a considerable amount of confusion about definitions, content and usage of the tools. Also, the number of respondents who reported a higher or lower degree of knowledge was lower for the least known tools, meaning that there were several respondents to the questionnaire who either skipped the question or replied: “don’t know/not applicable” (Düren et al 2017, p.480). However; when looking at the 11 best-known tools and approaches (communication, activity plans and accountancy, use of statistics/indicators, user surveys, management by objectives, work environment surveys, strategic planning, project management, knowledge-based/evidence-based praxis, education plans and value-based management), a clear majority of the tools showed that Norwegian library leaders were knowledgeable about NPM (Düren et al 2017, p.480).

Apart from these international studies from Belgium, Denmark/UK, Germany, Finland and Norway, it is apparent that within the field of library research, NPM has not been thoroughly investigated. The authors believe that a comparative perspective will provide library leaders and researchers with new insights.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY**



The main research questions of this study are:

1. To what extent are library leaders equipped to provide the library sector with a new leadership and management style?
2. How can libraries, in a squeeze between the demands for better service and less money, find a way to train citizens in information literacy?

To answer these two research questions the authors interviewed academic and public library leaders in the five select countries, namely Finland, Germany, Norway, Romania, UK. The aim of the study was to find out if and how the twin forces of austerity and NPM impacts their management of their libraries as well as their library's role in information literacy instruction, and how do the library leaders propose to ensure a continuing support for an information literate society?

For the qualitative expert interviews, 22 library directors from public and academic libraries (see table 1) were contacted and asked the following:

1. Libraries should nowadays be guardians of authoritative information and of information literacy as a tool for citizens to be able to decide for themselves what facts to rely on. At the same time, New Public Management is changing the way libraries, both public and academic, are allowed to act in their local communities. These changing circumstances call for new leadership and new leader roles in the libraries. To what extent are you as a library leader equipped to do this? (e. g. management skills, leadership skills, budget for skill enhancement / education, cooperation)
2. How does your library in a squeeze between the demands for better service and less money find a way to train citizens in information literacy?

The table below provides a summary of the participating library leaders- what country their library is located, what type of library (academic or public), how long they have held the leadership position and how many full-time employees work in the respective libraries.

**Table 1** Libraries that participated in this study

<b>No</b>	<b>Type of library / country</b>	<b>Full time equivalent (FTE)</b>	<b>Leader of this library since</b>
E1	Public library / UK	58	2014
E2	Public library / UK	113	2014
E3	Academic library / UK	277	2008
E4	Academic library / UK	63	2016
F1	Public library / Finland	87.8	2014
F2	Public library / Finland	182.6	2005
F3	Academic library / Finland	54	2010
F4	Academic library / Finland	43.3	2015
G1	Public library / Germany	115	1992
G2	Public library / Germany	5.25	1997
G3	Academic library / Germany	20.5	2006
G4	Academic library / Germany	182	2005
N1	Public library / Norway	32	2014
N2	Public library / Norway	88	2011
N3	Public library / Norway	14,8	2013
N4	Academic library / Norway	26.5	2014
N5	Academic library / Norway	21	2015
N6	Academic library / Norway	106	2015
R1	Public library / Romania	30	2012
R2	Public library / Romania	86	2015
R3	Academic library / Romania	35	2000
R4	Academic library / Romania	67	1997

The interview questions were developed by the first author in German and translated into English. The four other authors were consulted and agreed to the

wording. Thereafter, the authors, each in their own country, translated the questions into their own languages and ran the interviews.

The five selected countries included those that have implemented NPM early and are actively using it since the beginning, such as UK (see Introduction) and Finland, countries where it has been implemented, but not as intensively (e. g. Norway); and those with later and lower NPM-implementation such as well as one country in Eastern Europe (Romania). In each country, the researchers identified leaders of academic and public libraries of varying sizes and with different years of experience as leaders of their library.

The interviews were transcribed and translated into English and sent to the first author for a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring, defining categories through an inductive approach (Mayring, 2015) using the MAXQDA software.

There are many aspects of New Public Management and austerity that could be investigated in the libraries. In this study, the focus was on how library directors view their role in training citizens or students in information literacy. Due to the nature of the data collected one cannot make statistical conclusions on the state of information literacy training of citizens in the five countries. However, our analysis can point to tendencies and challenges that are commonly experienced in the European library world.

## **RESULTS**

### **Management training needs reported in this study**

All library leaders of the 22 libraries from 5 different countries that were interviewed for the study had to deal with often decreasing or at least stagnant budgets.

In this, there were no differences between the responses in the interviews with library leaders from the five countries. Most leaders say that they had to or intended to learn different management aspects and for this, they underwent training in different forms. In Norway, the training can be done in-house in the owner organisation, often with other leaders of public services in the municipality or the academic institution, or as stand-alone courses. In Germany, external training is offered for leaders, but also learning through practice and repetition were mentioned as useful for learning the different management aspects relevant for leading libraries.

In Finland there has been active management training programs for the leaders provided mainly by the employees of the public administration. This may be one reason for the successful implementation of the NPM ideas also in the libraries. In addition, one could see that the younger library managers had also had management training in their general education.

The Romanian library leaders interviewed did not report having undergone any management training, only that they were aware of the need.

In the UK, there was a varied approach to training as reported by the four library leaders. In two cases, informal approaches rather than formal training were highlighted as being more important: mentoring and peer support (public library); learning the language of marketing (academic library). Another of the leaders reported a need for diversifying their training to include business management, in addition to the acquisition of traditional library skills (academic library). Conversely, the fourth leader indicated that training has been followed in customer service and customer focus, but not on business issues (public library).

Most of the leaders seemed to be handling their budget cutbacks successfully. Most members of staff of these libraries had undergone training to be able to perform

their tasks in the changing library world. At the same time, specialist staff without LIS background, such as pedagogues, web developers, event organisers, marketing specialists, and accountants were employed in the libraries. All library leaders seemed aware of the importance of prioritizing user needs and fundraising.

With the acknowledgement that financial management has also changed through NPM with global budgets, financial accounting, yearly business plans etc, many libraries, including the ones involved in this study, recognize the need to reorganize themselves to become more efficient. The leadership aspects, especially the motivation of members of staff are also of prime importance.

### **Information literacy (IL) under budget restrictions**

In this section we focus on the second research question “How can libraries, in a squeeze between the demands for better service and less money, find a way to train citizens in information literacy?”.

The content analysis identified three categories. The frequency with which these were mentioned/number of coded findings are added in parentheses below:

- IL content (33)
- IL cooperation (17)
- IL importance (15)

These three aspects are discussed in more detail in this section.

#### ***IL content***

The study found a huge variety in the content of information literacy activities in the libraries. In all the five countries and both kinds of libraries, basic computer training and / or providing computers, tablets and facilities for the users was an important

service. The practical aspects of helping people to get online and to find their way around the internet as a service was more prevalent in public libraries: as one leader from a Finnish Public Library pointed out: “we are also conscious of the importance of providing computers, tablets and facilities for users”.

Academic libraries in all the countries reported providing training in basic internet safety and on how to find credible sources, thus providing general support on how to handle the vast amount of information within reach of all those with access to electronic media. When it comes to more specific skills, like health information, financial information, digital citizenship, guiding citizens in using public service web platforms and finding information for pupils, these were tasks more often reported by the public libraries.

An example given from a German public library was organizing an action-bound rally for school students to explain public library digital services and resources in a transparent and modern way. An example from an UK academic library was about facilitating activities such as “My Learning Essentials Program”, which pulls together information skills along with a broad range of learning opportunities for university students, “developing a new teaching framework for the whole university, which corresponds to the library’s role in open learning and which helps to position the library holistically as a learning hub” (UK academic library). Another example from academic libraries was in “ensuring a presence on a Moodle platform to offer a range of distant learning courses and to continually upload content for the audience interested in such courses across the country” (UK academic library).

The public libraries also reported facilitating “Information markets” which provide services for citizens (Finnish Public library); running coding clubs for children (Norwegian public library) and being a learning centre, e. g. offering a language café for

refugees (Norwegian public library). A German public library also mentioned taking part in the national “Weeks for books for young people”.

The academic libraries mentioned their vital roles in providing databases for students, running workshops for students on scientific paper writing, academic work methods and techniques, and also in providing IL instruction to the university’s faculties and across almost all subjects. The teaching is adapted to all levels, from first graders to PhD students; and tailored to each group (first graders, bachelors, masters, doctoral students). Additionally, the academic libraries indicated that they are investing in helping university professors upgrade their information retrieval skills.

As far as financial constraints, library directors from both academic and public libraries in all the countries reported how they try to be innovative by increasing the investment in independent online learning tools or developing and implementing a mobile phone application that recommends books. Public libraries also go the extra mile by organizing action-bound rallies for school students to explain public library digital services and resources in a transparent and modern way, or sometimes they will instigate pop up actions, such as makerspaces and gaming-actions.

Libraries should actively support literacy campaigns, as literacy is the key to education and knowledge and the use of libraries and information services. In addition, the library should address every kind of user as this example from a Romanian public library leader shows: “The audience [of the digital literacy courses] was diverse, from medical doctors who still lacked such skills, to a plastic artist who then went into computer painting” (Romanian public library).

Public libraries should, as one Finnish public library leader said “...primarily invest in supporting the work of schools and early childhood education; then comes older people and the other specialist groups, lastly adults” (Finnish public library).

One leader said that they tend not to use IL as a term, as the library's learning offer is much broader than that (UK academic library). In another library, IL is officially described as digital literacy (UK academic library).

### ***IL cooperation***

To fulfil all the activities needed for IL (see IL content) with often decreasing or at least stagnant budgets, collaborative partners are needed.

One UK public library noted that given new legal requirements, it is sometimes easier for libraries to develop working partnership with charities and third sector organisations. One UK academic library for instance tries to increase IL capability by fostering collaborations with academic staff with an interest in issues such as social media or misinformation. To achieve this, there must be a close relationship between teaching faculty and the subject librarian. Another example is of a Norwegian academic library that has a good collaboration with the county library while another library is prioritizing integration work with an IKT-lab where the library can provide computer training.

Also, inter-institutional cooperation is possible for sharing resources, creating sustainable and credible partnerships and extending collaborations between librarians, publishers, teachers, libraries and other providers of information and knowledge. This is especially important for sharing good practices (projects, programs campaigns etc.) between librarians and their collaborators and partners. Cooperation is important too with other similar organisations in order to share data and resources with different training providers, professional associations, private institutions, non-governmental organizations, etc.

One German public library mentioned having up to 220 collaborative partners in its city. It was noted that issues such as those related to refugees cannot be managed



without such collaborative partners. This relates not only to events, but also to language instruction. This library therefore works with foreign language institutions in the city and with the university. In addition, a small branch office of the citizens' service centre is located within the library. Some of the libraries mentioned offering their space or being used as a platform for its collaborative partners instead of being the sponsor of the event.

In as much as cooperation is very important, there is often no time for it, and sometimes, the obstacles to cooperation are too high. For instance, the participation of one library in a programme called "Reading makes strong – Reading with digital media" was inhibited because of insufficient staff resources needed to implement it and the extensive effort needed to integrate volunteers.

Even when cooperation might be easy, it sometimes fails because of a lack of communication. One example was from Norway in a school, where first graders got iPads and teachers showed them the e-books available from the public library but failed to inform the library (Norwegian public library).

### ***IL importance***

The complexities of the internet have made the supporting role of libraries more important than ever, especially as IL is not well taught in many schools. The strengthening of information and digital literacy, beginning from kindergarten classes, has not been introduced everywhere. Libraries must promote IL and lifelong learning for their communities. They need to be ready "...to maintain services, in light of the impending 'tsunami' of older people in the years to come" (Norwegian public library).

Most of the libraries indicated that IL is extremely important for academic libraries and is included in their everyday activities. This must be done despite the difficult financial climate the libraries have to face.

However, not everyone supports this. One library mentioned, that it must work hard at embedding IL in university teaching modules: another must defend, in different contexts, that current IL modules remain mandatory in course requirements.

One German university library manager complained that “this development and the resulting new role of libraries in relation to the citizens as user have never been formally or informally announced to us. [...] Maybe because none of the decision makers at the university level have an idea that libraries could contribute to it. For most [people] libraries are still merely a place to store books, which can be found there and borrowed” (German academic library).

There is a “[...] need to do things and get noticed” (Norwegian public library). IL services must be marketed actively, especially in universities and for members of the public.

The following Figure summarizes the most important results of this study.

**Figure 1** Major results of this study

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Management training for library leaders is essential</li><li>2. IL content increases in variance and differentiation</li><li>3. IL is nearly impossible without cooperation / collaborative partners</li><li>4. IL gains in importance</li></ol> |
|---|

## **CONCLUSION**

All library leaders of the 22 participating libraries in the five countries report that they handle information literacy under budget restrictions very well. The IL activities in these libraries vary widely, but there are no significant differences between the

countries in the fact that they are all cognizant of the vital role their libraries play in the information literacy instruction trainings of students and citizens. In all countries, the library leaders recognize that they must find collaborative partners if they are to be able to organize and execute all IL activities they see as necessary. It is their view that cooperation will even gain more in importance. The results of the interviews show that IL initiatives and activities are of prime importance, but not all university players nor all community members are aware of it.

One can say based on even this small number of interviews that the new public management type of ideology and procedures have been implemented throughout Europe. This has on the other hand meant for the libraries, that they have had to start to learn how to strategically and economically manage and lead their libraries. From the brief overview we presented of the implementation of NPM, and of the austerity following the economic crisis of 2008, the implementation of NPM and the austerity measures were unequally distributed in the five European countries we investigated. This was however, not reflected in the interviews with library leaders.

It therefore seems that this has not only been a case of negative budget and service cutbacks, but it has also helped the libraries to manage and renew their role in the changing environment. Here, prioritizing information literacy seems to be a good strategy for service development and more intense integration into the different types of communities the libraries serve in their daily work.

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