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Benchmarking through Performance Indicators for Norwegian Academic Libraries
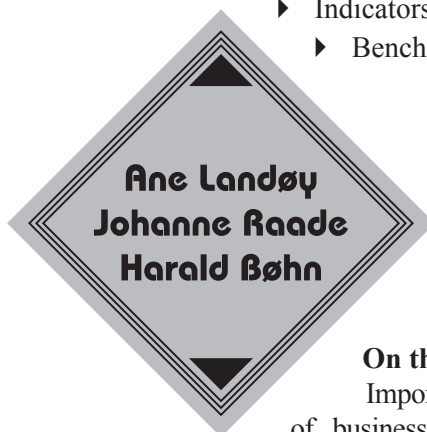
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Background

On the use of indicators

Important aspects, necessary for any kind of businesses – also academic libraries - are efficiency, quality, and value for money. But in order to estimate how the library is doing when it comes to these issues, key performance indicators will be useful. However, statistical data and indicators will give most meaning when used for comparisons, either with one self, over time, or with relevant others, or both. Thus, statistics and indicators are better employed in longitudinal series or as background for benchmarking.

The global library organisation IFLA (The International Federation of Library Associations), has a special section on statistics and evaluation. IFLA, and other international agencies such as UNESCO and ISO, "aims to promote the compilation and use of statistics both in the successful management and operation of libraries and in the demonstration of the value of libraries outside the profession". (IFLA 2014).

In 2010, the IFLA Governing Board endorsed its manifesto on the importance of library statistics. As well as being necessary for library management, statistics are vital for advocacy and for demonstrating the value that

Abstract

How can leadership and strategic planning in academic libraries be based on statistical evidence - evidence based leadership? In this paper, the authors present how the National Library of Norway has led the way in developing indicators for the public and the academic libraries. These indicators may be used either longitudinally or for benchmarking within or between libraries. The authors will also give examples of how libraries can find indicators to support benchmarking. The indicators chosen as examples in this papers were mainly economic indicators.

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libraries provide, both to individual users and to society at large. IFLA encourages relevant and sustainable of statistics in both public and academic libraries.

ISO standard 2789 is called 'Information and Documentation – International Library Statistics'. This ISO standard is meant to cover all aspects of libraries: Size and type of the collections (printed or electronic); number and kind of users; usage of library services; and the library resources (staff, funding, space).[1]

Norwegian academic and public libraries are gathering data and submitting to the National Library of Norway. In the following, after a brief overview of the recent history and background of the indicators from the National Library of Norway, the authors will show some examples on indicator usage from Norwegian academic libraries.

On the indicators developed by the National library

"The theories and research about use of indicators point to some general requirements for indicators. They must be valid; that is: Measure what is sets out to measure, by answering to a very precise question and nothing else. Also, it must be accurate. It must be useful for decision-making and it must be reasonable easy to get the data."[2]

In 2010 the Norwegian library authorities decided on a set of indicators for academic libraries, for the libraries to be able to both look at development and tendencies longitudinally, as well as to be able to benchmark with other academic libraries within or outside their own organization.[3]

In 2012, the National Library of Norway had taken over the responsibility for the indicators, and the Norwegian association for higher education institutions, library group (UHR-B) had also been looking at the indicators. However, testing and benchmarking uncovered problems with the data collections, leading to lack of data consistency. UHR-B appointed a working group to administer a large-scale test where as many as possible of the academic libraries tested four of the former 24 indicators, and also to assess the indicators as tools for decision-making, reporting and benchmarking.[4]

In 2014 the Norwegian Council of Higher Education Institutions, library group, appointed a permanent group for Statistics and indicators. This group has members from academic libraries of different size, and will hopefully be able to work with one of the major problems: The consistency and robustness of the data.

Still, as the leader of this permanent group reports, "Yes, we have good management data, but access is still not satisfactory. We have made a lot of progress but we're not there yet. Only when the information is easily accessible to the public will we have reached our goal. Only then will it be possible to utilize the target data efficiently."[5]

The first bench-marking experiences from the Social Science and Humanities libraries in Norway

The Social Science and Humanity-libraries in the four largest universities in Norway (Oslo, Bergen and Tromsø Universities and the Norwegian University for Science and Technology) did some testing of bench-marking possibilities of some of the indicators. The results were reported at the QQML2011-conference in Athens[6]. In 2012, the University of Agder also joined in the testing, and updated results were reported at the bi-annual Norwegian library meeting in 2012.[7]

Data collection to do bench-marking between the Social science and Humanities libraries was not as easy as one would think. Despite the long standing practise of collecting and reporting statistics from Norwegian academic libraries, relevant data was reported differently to the national agencies. At the same time, focusing on bench-marking between branch libraries, not the whole university library, also meant that data had to be locally harvested. To find the similar and the most correct data for all the libraries involved took time and patience and involved some serious discussions.

The results of these first investigations were however interesting. One such result, as reported in Bøhn and Langseth 2012 was the differences in primary users divided on library staff. The Arts and humanities and Social Science branch libraries at the University of Bergen library had approximately 150 users per library staff, in Oslo and Tromsøthe number was around 100, while NTNU and Agder had around 250 users per library staff in the Humanities/Social Science branch libraries. This may be looked at as a measure of effectiveness, but there may also be other explanations that have to do with the organisation of the libraries. The difference may be physical or geographical: how many library buildings are they located in? The more branches, the more staff will be needed. Also, the differences in the organisation of the libraries' workflow and tasks will have an impact. When core tasks like cataloguing and acquisition are decentralised, one will find library-staff with these functions also being counted in some of the libraries.[8]

2011 – 2015: Testing, testing, testing

After the two first reports from the Humanities/Social Science branch libraries the branch library leaders decided to continue the testing and bench-marking, but on university library level. This was due to the difficulties in obtaining relevant and comparable data for the branches from the data that had already been gathered as part of the normal national reporting. It just became too difficult to continue, and the bench-marking took more time than it was worth.

In 2014 and 2015 the same group of branch library leaders collaborated in gathering data from the University Library level, including from the libraries at the newer universities at Nordland and Stavanger; where data could be obtained. Agder can also be considered as a new university, but had been part of the testing network longer. The reports were presented at QQML2014 in Istanbul, and QQML2015 in Paris[9].

Economic indicators

Even when looking at University library level data, the bench-marking between Norwegian academic libraries was full of difficulties, so the bench-marking group tried to find the best data to use. It became clear that this was the economic indicators. They were easy to find, as they are reported from the University to the central higher education statistics bureau, and not from the library to the National library. They are also quite easy to use, and we find that they are also interesting for the Rectorate and the strategic leadership of the university.

In this round, and some of this has also been reported at QQML2014 and QQML2015, we chose four indicators to give as examples:

The examples have been chosen because they were quite easy to find data from all the Norwegian universities, and also to illustrate a point about the challenges in finding and using university-wide data from a multitude of sources.
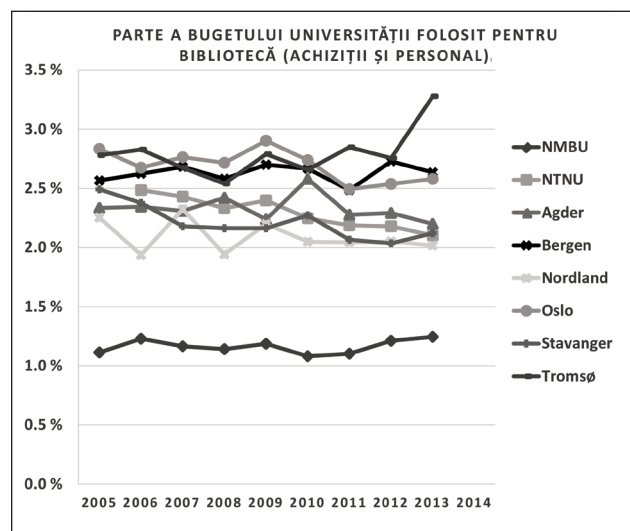

Figure 1: Part of university budget used on library (acquisitions and staff)

There are 8 universities in Norway. Four of them – Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø and NTNU, are traditional universities, with full research portfolios, Ph.D's in all subjects and a wide range of subjects. The other four are newer, smaller, and to a certain degree more specialized. NMBU has its background in the College of Agriculture, while Stavanger, Nordland and Agder all are University Colleges with traditionally more focus on applied sciences – nursing instead of medical doctors and engineering instead of pure science.

In Figure 1, part of university budget used on library, we can clearly see the divide between the "old" and the "new" universities, with a couple of exceptions. NTNU is a university with a heavy focus on technical and natural sciences, and there is probably a larger part of their budget going to expensive equipment than in the other universities. Subsequently, all other parts of the university will have to "share" a smaller budget. The NTNU-library is as well staffed and has the same level of media budget as the other three older universities.
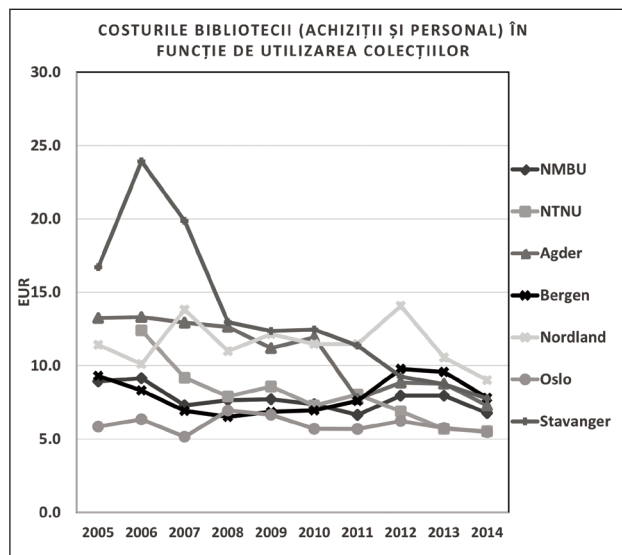
On the other hand, Tromsø, which looks well-funded in figure 1 went through a fusion with a university college in mid-2013, and this also effects the budget allocations there. In 2013 the Library in Tromsøalso got responsible for the University of Tromsø'sdigitalization of teaching and flexible learning program. The comparison between the University Libraries shows this in the growth of budgets used for Library.

In figure 1 the goal was to be as high in the table as possible, while in figure 2, library cost per collection use, the preferred place to be is as low as possible. In this figure "collection use" is composed of the number of loans, and the number of full-text downloads of electronic documents, and this is where it gets complicated: The reporting of book-loans is done from the same library system, and there is a detailed description of what parameters to choose and how. The reporting of downloads is much more random, depending on different systems. Tromsø has not reported their use of electronic literature, and is therefore excluded from this table. University of Stavanger did not report downloads for the years 2005-2007, the figure for cost per use for these years are based on loans alone This fact explains why the calculated cost is so high for these years.

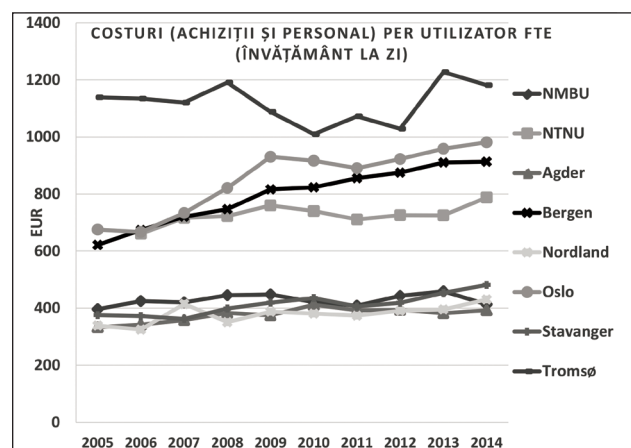Figure 2: Library cost (acquisitions and staff) in Euro per collection use.

Figure 3: Cost (acquisitions and staff) in Euro per user FTE.

In figure 3 the library costs per user can be seen. It is quite clear that the older universities use more money on each library user than the newer ones. It is also clear that the costs in Tromsø is, and has been for the last ten years at least, much higher than the other old universities, but they are gaining now. Tromsø has been the smallest of the old universities, but with the new fusions going on the number of user FTE will be larger there also, and it will be interesting to see how this is reflected.

Part of the reason why the newer universities have a lower cost per user FTE is that they don't offer the expensive subjects like medicine and the hard sciences. Another factor may be connected to the organization. A smaller library, as the new ones are, have fewer non-library staff (working with administration), fewer branches and therefore a lower staff budget. The calculations behind figure 3 is the whole library budget divided on the number of users FTE. Another interesting indicator could have been using the media acquisition budget instead of the whole library budget.
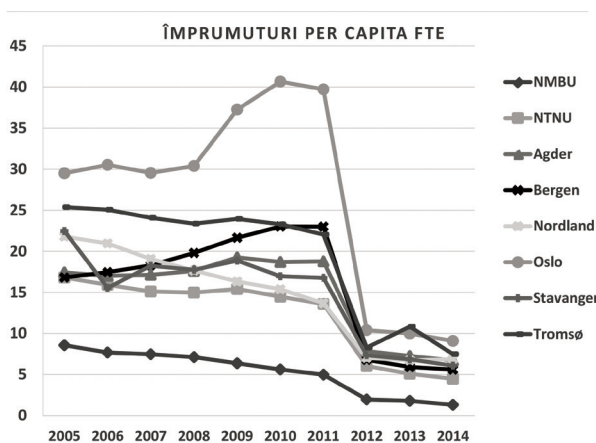

Figure 4: Loans per capita FTE

In figure 4 we see the number of book loans per capita FTE. The indicator gives an interesting illustration of the technological changes in the Norwegian academic libraries. You may ask "What happened in 2012, to cause this drop in loans?" The answer is simple: In 2012 there was a change in the reporting. Up to then, all loans and renewals had been counted as loans, and reported, as the work for the library staff was quite similar for a renewal as for a new loan. From 2012 only first time loans were reported. In 2008 a new service came from the OPAC provider, whereby the user could self-renew. There were different kinds of campaigns in different libraries from 2008 to encourage patrons to self-renew, and we can see that University of Oslo were successful.

The number of loans are between 5 and 10 per capita, and there is really no big differences between the older and newer universities. That NTNU and the Agricultural University are at the bottom probably reflects that the scholars there use more journals than books.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper we have looked at the history of usage of indicators in academic libraries in Norway, and recognized that there is a ways to go yet before the data is robust and consistent enough for benchmarking between institutions.

The authors' recommendations are in line with the national committee working with statistics and indicators in academic libraries: To concentrate on just a few indicators, to make robust and clear instructions for gathering data, and to make the results public through the system for other statistics and indicator data where they can be seen by the university managements also.

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