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The demand for evidence

If you are interested in the impact of your library services, or of library services in general, you may like to start by reflecting on where the impetus towards impact evaluation is coming from and how that impetus can itself distort the picture. These issues are explored below. However, if your concerns are purely practical please go on to Chapter 4.

1.1 Why is evidence of impact an issue for libraries (and information services)?¹

Picture a group of scholars working in the Library of Alexandria in about 50 BC. Now assume that they have been ferried forward in time and deposited in your library today. Will they identify their surroundings as a library? More specifically, will the scholars recognize the printed publications at the heart of your library as equivalent in some way to their scrolls? If so, it seems likely that they will know their surroundings as a library. But what happens if we ship them forward another 30 years and touch them down again? Will your library still be there? Will it be recognizable as a library? Will information technology and the demand for different kinds of interaction between library staff, users and the service have transformed the library beyond recognition?

Even the most sensitive crystal ball is unlikely to offer a clear picture of libraries 30 years hence because of the accelerating rate of change. However, if we can start to gauge the changes in the impact of various services, this will give us an indication of where things are going and help in managing the changes needed to get there.

We don't have to look 30 years ahead to make a case for looking at impact. One common feature of all types of libraries is that there is too much to do and too little time. 'Traditional' performance indicators are important for enabling you to tell whether aspects of a service are working efficiently. However, when a new initiative or project is undertaken, this is usually achieved by prising precious

time away from other operational activities. If this is the case, it is doubly important to know whether the innovation is working and how. More specifically, are you using this precious time well? How can your innovation be made to work better? Are there lessons from your current initiatives or projects that have implications for how you deliver the rest of the service? Do you need to know more about them? Asking these sorts of questions should move you towards gathering impact evidence that will tell you whether you are working along the right lines or whether you should be doing different things in different ways.

What are the big factors to be taken into account when evaluating the impact of innovations and the effects of accelerating organizational change? The most immediately obvious and pervasive influence is the accelerating expansion in information and communications technologies. These advances are raising a plethora of questions about library services provision, all of which demand impact evidence if sensible answers are to be adopted. Some of these changes and the questions they raise are reviewed below.

1.1.1 The impact of ICT

Advances in information technology are already making huge differences to the range of services offered by libraries, the expectations of library users and the roles of library staff. We offer below some examples of change in libraries followed by some questions in *italic*. If libraries are to make real advances in the 'Age of Information' they need to be able to answer many of these questions.

- 1 Libraries now have much **more information available** to them electronically than even five years ago, some of which could not have been realistically provided without enormous advances in computer power. Some of this information is only available on subscription and some of it is also available in traditional published form, raising a variety of questions.
 - *How much should the library spend on traditional forms of publication as against e-publications and electronic information?*
 - *Do different users (e.g. students seeking information, scholars, recreational readers, people with visual impairment) prefer traditional forms of publication or electronic access – and how fast are these preferences changing?*
 - *Should libraries subscribe to a wider range of electronic publications and, if so, which ones?*
 - *On what basis should they review and update these decisions?*

- *Should collections and services be managed locally or remotely, licensed for a fee or freely available?*
- 2 Since the internet (or ‘surface web’) offers more or less ready access to vast amounts of current or dated information, misinformation and disinformation, most of which cannot readily be filtered by libraries (see paragraph 3), this puts a premium on a range of **information literacy skills** that users may or may not have acquired. Users need to be able to select and reject information for a purpose, to identify and take account of biased information, and to decide whether information from a particular source can be seen as authoritative.
- *What is the role for library staff, if any, in helping people to acquire and develop appropriate information literacy skills?*
 - *How should they interact with other people, such as teachers, who have a role in information literacy development?*
 - *Do different types of libraries (e.g. health, education or public libraries) have different roles in information literacy development?*
- 3 Library staff should be better equipped than the average library user to **identify high-quality information on the internet**; they may have more time to do so and if they adopt a guidance role they may be able to steer users towards the most appropriate sources (whether these are electronic or traditional publications).
- *Is the way forward for library staff to be proactive in creating websites and multimedia web pages to promote library services and give easier access to various information sources?*
 - *Should they go further and seek to set up gateways through which users can identify and gain access to selected, good-quality information sources (helping to construct the ‘deep web’)?*
- 4 Libraries of all kinds are increasingly **investing in computer technology** and are reorganizing available space to accommodate this change. Public libraries offer an alternative means for people, and especially less affluent people, to gain access to the internet.
- *Since libraries are not the only potential providers of access to information (alternatives include computer services or basic skills units in education,*

internet cafés or specialist information centres for the general public) to what extent should libraries become computer providers?

- *What effect will increased public access to the internet from home have on library-based internet provision?*
- *Will public access computing in libraries lead to decline in other library services?*
- *Is there a danger of putting all eggs in the wrong basket – such as investing in computer terminals when people are opting for laptops or mobile technologies?*

5 It is widely predicted that developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs) will have great impact on **key areas of library work**, notably: reader development; access by potential service users; information provision; supporting lifelong learning (including information literacy); social inclusion – attracting users from sectors of society that have not traditionally been heavy library users.

- *How can information technologies be harnessed to actively encourage people to read more widely and deeply?*
- *Can library doors be opened to potential readers who are attracted to those doors by their wish for free ICT access?*
- *How can library access best be enhanced using ICT?*
- *How can libraries establish their place in the pantheon of electronic information providers and how high a priority should this be?*
- *How can ICT be deployed to engage with a wider range of potential library users and which should be the priority groups to target?*
- *What is the most appropriate balance between different ICT tools (e.g. mobile technologies; social media; visual content creation)?*
- *Is internet provision no longer the main focus? Public library internet use research in Poland suggests that 'it is not the internet that is the main attractor to libraries . . . classes and events . . . linked to education or social integration . . . may be the force that will allow the library to retain its social role.' (Kochanowicz, 2012, 35)*
- *If libraries become successful in attracting new groups of users, what will be the effect on the existing core users?*

All of these questions are regularly raised by library managers in our workshops focused on evaluating the impact of library services. They usually have the same effect on participants – rather like hitting a brick wall. What rapidly becomes clear is that the traditional performance data collected by most libraries will not help to generate answers to these questions; nor do they equip staff to make operational

or strategic decisions in these areas. Most library statistics still concentrate on monitoring the efficiency of the services currently being offered rather than their impact on users. Library managers usually do not have enough evidence of the impact of their current services to be able to tell how well they are doing, let alone having enough evidence to gauge whether a particular new service or intervention is likely to work. Fortunately, we have found ways of addressing these issues, which we will describe in later chapters.

1.1.2 The pressure to evaluate impact

Moving towards the electronic library may be bringing about a transformation in library-staff roles, user expectations, the range of services provided, service delivery methods and visions of access, but this is only part of the change agenda. As Megan Oakleaf writes in reviewing the academic library scene:

Academic libraries have long enjoyed their status as the ‘heart of the university.’ However, in recent decades, higher education environments have changed. Government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning. Top academic faculty expect higher education institutions to support and promote cutting-edge research. Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students’ collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning potential. Not only do stakeholders count on higher education institutions to achieve these goals, they also require them to *demonstrate evidence* that they have achieved them. The same is true for academic libraries; they too can provide evidence of their value. Community college, college, and university librarians no longer can rely on their stakeholders’ belief in their importance. Rather, they must demonstrate their value.

Oakleaf (2010, 11)

But what other factors are fuelling the drive towards impact evidence-gathering? Three of the obvious pressure points might be labelled ‘the accountability obsession’, ‘the value for money drive’ and ‘the evidence-based working aspiration’. These are more fully outlined below.

1.1.3 A growing focus on performance management and accountability in public institutions

The idea of evaluating performance is not new, but it is more heavily embedded in some areas of work than in others. To take the most obvious example,

assessment of student performance is heavily rooted in national education systems at all levels through internal tests, external examinations and, in many countries, through standardized assessment at various ages in schools. Inspection frameworks, for schools through to universities, now require more rigorous collection of evidence as well as the demonstration of analytical judgements based on this evidence. At the same time, national and federal governments are trying to create more consistent institutional management by demanding that all education institutions produce development plans addressing prescribed issues. There is also a growing movement towards evaluating the quality of teaching and of looking more broadly at the student experience within the education system.

The demand for more and better evidence of service efficiency and effectiveness has rapidly extended into other public service areas and is increasingly being felt in libraries of all kinds. The strength and focus of library target setting, benchmarking and efforts at standardization of services varies from country to country, but the trend towards greater accountability appears inexorable.

In this era of increased advocacy of public service accountability by national and local politicians, library managers have to be visibly on top of the evidence – this means not only collecting information but also being seen to analyse, interpret and apply the evidence with the (ostensible) aim of improving library services. How much real improvement results from all this activity will depend upon larger political factors such as the strength of the organizational will to bring about change, but a key contributory element is likely to be how much the evidence collected and analysed tells library managers about the impact of their current services and innovations.

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Government libraries in the UK are under intense scrutiny at this time of national austerity measures. Cuts, reorganization and restructuring are commonplace in the drive for efficiency. Libraries need to demonstrate how they contribute to policy, to ensuring that government runs smoothly and effectively, and to decision making. To provide evidence of the precise nature and extent of the library contribution is a real challenge because of the complex processes involved and the volume of information drawn upon at each stage.

The UK National Health Service is preoccupied with accountability and is heavily target-driven. In particular, the mantra invoked when looking at any aspect of the health service is that it should have ‘a positive impact on the quality of patient care’. It is sometimes hard to find evidence to demonstrate how this aim can be met by developing library services!

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1.1.4 The value for money ethos

The policy concern with public accountability is closely linked to a focus on perceived service effectiveness – but a view of effectiveness that tends to be narrowly defined in cost-benefit terms – getting more for less money. Public services are widely viewed by politicians as requiring constant rationing and reduction, although they usually prefer to talk about ‘cutting out waste’ rather than admitting that they want to reduce or remove highly regarded services such as libraries.

Within the organization a narrowly finance-driven approach may create a managerial environment in which it is necessary to argue for funding based on ‘results’. In this kind of environment the ‘results’ will again tend to be narrowly defined in terms of increased use or happier users (or, in higher education, increased levels of student retention), rather than what benefits people get from the services or whether different approaches might be more effective.

1.1.5 Rediscovering information

Until relatively recently, the processes involved in managing information in organizations were largely taken for granted. Although Henry Mintzberg (1973) identified three generic information roles among the ten that he attributed to all managers four decades ago, the idea that information should be managed alongside the traditional activities of managing people, finance and material resources was slow to take root.

Again, from the late 1970s onwards, advances in information technology played an important part here. With the advent of affordable mainframe computers and later of networked personal computers, proposals to spend substantial sums of money on efficient organization of various types of information, which had previously been handled less efficiently as an invisible part of various people’s jobs, tended to bring these information areas into sharper focus.

In the 1980s, the process of promoting information up organizational agendas was greatly assisted by Michael Porter (1985), who advanced the idea that better information is what brings organizational success. Porter’s version of competitive advantage, based on the ‘value chain’ (fed by strategic information) in turn led to other information-centred formulations such as the ‘learning company’, knowledge management and ‘evidence-based policy and practice’.

How far have these ideas penetrated into the core of library and information management thinking? The idea of competitive advantage gave business information services a powerful advocacy tool and some library service managers have made efforts to reconstitute themselves as higher-status knowledge managers. However, by no means all library services have reached the point where they feel the need

to introduce, for example, a strategic information strategy (as distinct from an information technology implementation and training plan).

1.1.6 Towards evidence-based library and information work

The idea of evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP) is potentially more important for the library and information service world, if only because it has taken organizational root in some traditionally strong areas of library service provision, notably health. The core idea emerged in the medical world in Canada and the USA as 'evidence-based health care' and was rapidly transplanted to Australasia and the UK (see Muir Gray, 1997), before being taken up in the education and social care sectors and by some national governments. In essence, EBPP is about systematic collection and interpretation of what is perceived as valid, important and applicable evidence.

It is clear that EBPP is interpreted in somewhat different ways in the various sectors involved. For example, in the UK health sector there is a strong focus on metaclinical evidence as a guide to decision making, but a growing recognition that different evidence rules apply at the public health end of the continuum; in social care and in education the focus is very much on the nature of acceptable evidence, while the UK government emphasis is primarily on securing a range of evidence to help in the formation, implementation and evaluation of policy. However, all these approaches recognize that the policy and practice evidence base draws (more or less confidently) upon a variety of sources, including:

- academic research evidence
- practice-generated impact evidence
- professionally mediated 'best practice' information.

In other words, EBPP concerns are very much the concerns of this book.

When it comes to applying EBPP principles in practice, the key concerns common to all the main public sector applications include:

- availability of sufficient evidence of high enough quality to inform a specific practice question
- synthesis of the available evidence on a key question to provide an overview of the findings
- adequate dissemination of the evidence to enable practitioners to gain access to the evidence in an appropriate form
- identification of gaps in the evidence and strategic initiatives to fill important gaps

- disciplined reporting of the research processes and the evidence in a 'practitioner-friendly' manner, to enable practitioners to gauge the relevance, importance and reliability of the evidence
- fostering of a strategic and operational management climate to encourage EBPP
- introduction of structures and mechanisms to encourage application of EBPP approaches
- professional development support for managers to equip them to find and appraise the evidence
- active debate about the nature and basis of professional knowledge and practice.

All of these components raise issues for evidence-based library work, but some progress has been made. In introducing the first professional textbook on the subject, two of the leading advocates (Booth and Brice, 2004) asked and answered the key question:

Is it possible to adapt the evidence-based practice model to librarianship and information work? To do so involves applying the results from rigorous research studies to professional practice to improve the quality of services to users.

There is now a well established Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) Conference² (heavily dominated by health librarians) as well as a specialist journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*³ which was launched in 2006. Unsurprisingly, there is also some challenge to the concept and especially the approach to compiling the evidence base (e.g. Banks, 2008) because of a perceived over-adherence to the medical 'gold standard' of randomly controlled trials (RCT). However, Brettle (2012) points out that although the definition of EBLIP offered by Booth (2006) refers to best-quality evidence (generated from research, among other elements) he makes no mention of particular research designs. Booth (2009) himself vigorously rebuts the perception that he favours the RCT approach and offers a flexible framework for evidence-based library work. Once this movement expands beyond the medical world (assuming that this is ever achieved) the whole process might be seen as providing a framework to exploit impact evidence systematically.

1.2 Emerging interest in the management of change

How much change are we really looking at? A decade ago, in her commentary on US academic libraries, Covey observes that:

Development of the digital library precipitates massive change, not only in delivery formats and access methods, but also in work and workflow, staffing, the scope of library instruction, and assessment efforts. . . . Web access and capabilities have brought with them the need for libraries to engage in the design, management, and assessment of multimedia Web pages, portals, and products. . . . Libraries are conducting surveys, focus groups, user protocols, transaction log analysis, and other kinds of research to assess traditional and digital resource use; the usability of online resources; user needs, expectations, and satisfaction; and the quality of library services and facilities. They are grappling with how to assess research and learning outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and cost-benefits.

Covey (2002)

These demands and challenges are now transforming all types of libraries. Specific drivers of change include substantial investment in ICT implementation in libraries of all kinds (including major public access through public libraries programmes such as the US Libraries Initiative⁴, the People's Network in the UK and more recently the Global Libraries Initiative in Central and South America (Mexico, Chile and Colombia), Africa (Botswana), Asia (Indonesia and Vietnam) and various East European countries).

If we take the levels of uptake of training workshops in various countries as an indicator of evolving professional development priorities among library staff it is clear that there is burgeoning demand for:

- ICT skills training focused on the changing work of library staff in e-information environments
- education and training focused on the roles of librarians as teachers, trainers and informal mentors, especially in helping people to use ICT effectively
- more help in development planning and change management as services adapt to the demands of increasingly ICT-based services.

The accompanying rhetoric is of transforming libraries and of the penalties if opportunities are missed to establish libraries at the centre of the new information landscape. Interestingly, a decade ago the People's Network chose to move beyond rhetoric in commissioning 'toolkits' linked to training programmes to help library service managers in grappling with the issues of managing change⁵. One central message from this work is that serious attention to change involves gaining greater clarity about what sorts of change are desirable, what change is inevitable and about the effects of change – based on evidence about what works. In this sense, moving towards more effective management of change is leading to greater need for impact evidence.

1.3 What is distorting the picture?

It is obvious to anyone who looks at the issues of evaluating the impact of library services that this is not a problem-free and straightforward process. As we will show in the next chapter, impact is a slippery concept that many service managers find difficult to grasp. But the problems begin even before the individual library service manager starts to get to grips with the concept. We have identified in this chapter some of the factors that are currently pushing libraries towards impact evaluation: the problem is that all of these factors can have a more or less profound distorting effect on how (and indeed, whether) we engage in gathering evidence of impact.

Taking these factors in roughly the order that they were introduced earlier, the gallop towards electronic libraries, the accountability obsession (and the value for money drive) and even the evidence-based working aspiration can all make life more difficult for the manager who wants to get a real hold on impact. There may also be problems with conflicting agendas and with our capacity to get involved seriously in gathering evidence of effectiveness.

1.3.1 Being realistic about evaluating ICT initiatives

We need to decide when collecting evidence is a good idea and what we are doing this for.

Staff of library services are racing to equip themselves as leading providers of access to the internet and to learn the new skills required to help their users to become confident users of electronic information sources. Unfortunately, the base from which many libraries are starting does not help. As David Murray (2003) noted:

When we roll out a superb development – the People’s Network for example – we graft it on to a failing infrastructure and hope the public will see ‘new library’. Too often, what they see is a load of new computers and new furniture in a building that’s coming apart at the seams.

This problem can be even more acute in developing or emerging countries, where library services have not necessarily developed to anything like the extent of services in Western countries. Putting ICT in place to encourage public access is not enough without ambitious training programmes seeking to transform the roles of library staff from custodian of the place to facilitator of public access and supporter of independent learning, backed by powerful advocacy to transform public opinion of the role of libraries in the community.

Similarly, many libraries are making efforts to engage users with ICT but without sufficient computers or licensed software to take this on realistically. Their staff may be striving to help users but may not themselves have sufficient training or experience in effective internet searching, or in providing one-to-one tuition or small group training.

Impact, in this less than favourable context, is likely to mean ‘any change in our users that may have come about despite the unsuitable environment, lack of confidence or competence in some staff and the depredations of years of systematic under-funding’. This may not be important, if the evaluation is being conducted primarily to inform managers about what needs to be addressed first, but there is a real issue about impact evidence collection for other purposes.

Service evaluation is, among other things, a political process, especially if the intention is to use the evidence to secure funds or to account to politicians or senior organizational managers. You may want to evaluate services that are being delivered in heavily unfavourable conditions and present the case for change – if there is a real chance of changing those conditions. To do such an evaluation in less optimistic circumstances may simply provide evidence to be used by others to allocate blame – in your direction.

1.3.2 The obsession with accountability

In the ‘value for money’ organizational environment, securing a share of diminishing organizational funds may become a ritual dance with its own rules, which may or may not involve presentation of high-quality evidence of effectiveness. In such an environment, presenting impact evidence as part of the case for service development may be vital or it may be more important to go through the motions of doing so. Evidence-based decision making may be a key to success in your organization but it may also be a notion to which strategic managers pay lip service.

Attention to the financial ‘bottom line’ is of course important for all organizations but, even in the private sector, there is growing concern that if we only think in narrow ‘value for money’ terms this may result in throwing out the creative and productive baby with the organizational bathwater. The concern does not end here.

Critics of New Managerialism (a term which is usually applied pejoratively) claim that it denigrates professionalism in favour of generic service management, emphasizes public scrutiny of services, opts for complexity in articulating service objectives, and focuses on evaluating apparent effects on ‘customers’ (who replace ‘service users’ in the New Managerialist vocabulary) by means of arbitrary service delivery targets. Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007) characterized the

consequent effect on public services as a descent 'from regulated autonomy to institutionalized distrust.' Pursuing this theme, Macfarlane claims that:

The performative culture is symptomatic of a society in which there has been an erosion of trust in the professions and those working in the public sector. . . . The effect has been to create a contemporary research environment that places a strain on many of the virtues essential to the ethical conduct of research . . .

Macfarlane (2009, 159)

(For a more positive view see Boston et al., 1996.)

What can we do to counter the tendency towards top-down control? Good governance requires us to move on from arbitrary performance indicators that may corrupt the services they are intended to evaluate by concentrating effort in inappropriate areas. Instead, we need high-quality evidence gathering about the effectiveness of library services, allied to sound professional judgements in interpreting the evidence and proposing appropriate action (see also Crawford, 2006). The process model described in Part 2 of this book should help to achieve these goals.

One other disturbing tendency that we have noted is for government departments and their national or local agencies to blur the important distinction between evaluating innovative programmes and making the advocacy case to do more of the same. Evaluation of initiatives should help to show what is working more or less well, which elements in the programme need remedial attention or should be more widely adopted, and whether the initiative represents good value for money. If the 'evaluation' assumes the last point and concentrates on showing how everything in the garden is lovely, this ceases to be evaluation and is not a good foundation on which to build a convincing case for development.

The fantasies about total control are not confined to the public sector. Looking at the world of business, Kaplan and Norton (1992) noted:

. . . because traditional measurement systems have sprung from the finance function, the systems have a control bias. That is, traditional performance measurement systems specify the particular actions they want employees to take and then measure to see whether the employees have in fact taken those actions. In that way, the systems try to control behaviour. Such measurement systems fit with the engineering mentality of the Industrial Age.

How should the business world set about performance measurement in the Postindustrial Age? Their solution is 'the balanced scorecard', which

... puts strategy and vision, not control, at the centre. It establishes goals but assumes that people will adopt whatever behaviour and take whatever actions are necessary to arrive at those goals.

We will return to the balanced scorecard in section 3.1 and explore its usefulness in selecting appropriate impact indicators across four important perspectives.

1.3.3 Is evidence-based working the answer?

When Mahatma Gandhi was asked by an interviewer what he thought about Western civilization he answered 'I think it would be a good idea'. Evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP) probably falls into the same category, at least for the immediate future. However, the idea of EBPP is already under challenge.

The contention that basing decisions on evidence (or aspiring to do so) is not enough has been around since evidence-based working was first proposed and is well articulated by Peter Knight (2003). He asserts unequivocally that 'Evidence cannot prescribe action' and that 'It is more fruitful to think about expertise-based practice in complex settings' before observing that 'evidence' is only as good as the questions we ask and calling on higher education researchers to learn to ask better questions. He then navigates into the long-running debate about the relationship (if any) between research evidence and policy decision making, arguing that 'evidence' needs to be *mediated*, because it is complicated, *complemented* because it is incomplete, and *championed* because even strong evidence gets ignored otherwise. Finally, he calls for expertise-based, rather than evidence-based, policy and practice. 'Experts', he says, 'are plainly informed by evidence but they add value to it, by making judgements about cases not directly covered by the evidence at hand and identifying areas in need of study.' They can also, he hopes, 'engage with policy-makers in ways that inert evidence cannot'.

Following on from Knight's arguments we suggest that the appropriate aspiration is towards *expertise-based and evidence-informed decision making*. (It is interesting to note that the main UK centre for EBPP in education⁶ prefers to talk about evidence-informed rather than evidence-based practice.)

1.3.4 Beware of 'methodological fundamentalism'

Clearly, New Managerialism is not a universal phenomenon and there has been some reaction against its extreme forms in countries which at first embraced its tenets with the greatest enthusiasm. However, where this approach to public sector management has been even partially adopted, it has fuelled demand for

introduction of service impact evaluation to gauge performance levels, often as part of the espousal of EBPP (which, by narrowly prescribing the nature of acceptable evidence may become a convenient rationing device to limit service innovation to proposals which can meet these prescriptions). Some researchers elect to adhere to a narrow conception of evidence-based working (described by House (2005; 2006) as ‘methodological fundamentalism’), which excludes all but the most rigid evaluation programmes based on randomized controlled trials and regression discontinuity designs that meet specific (politically defined) criteria.

The problem for US libraries is that, for the research to be taken seriously by the Federal Government, it has to feature in a charming website called the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)⁷, established by the US Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. The criteria for inclusion within the Clearinghouse are, to say the least, rigid: the research reports submitted to their review process are classified in one of three categories:

- 1 **‘Meets evidence standards’** – randomized controlled trials and regression discontinuity designs that meet their specific criteria (virtually impossible to achieve in any real educational research project concerned with library or information service provision).
- 2 **‘Meets evidence standards with reservations’** – strong quasi-experimental studies that have comparison groups and meet their other evidence standards.
- 3 **‘Does not meet evidence standards’** – studies that provide insufficient evidence of causality or otherwise fall foul of the WWC criteria.

The nasty trap for unwary researchers is that if you aspire to getting your research included in the second category and fail, you are then consigned to the ‘Does not meet evidence standards’ group. Not the most promising start to a postgraduate research career!⁸

1.3.5 Conflicting priorities

In some cases there may be conflict between the larger policy agenda and organizational priorities. For example, national policy makers may call on organizations to adopt an impact-focused and user needs-centred approach but internal organizational pressures may dictate a more limited and less challenging outputs-focused approach. (We encountered a frustrating example of this phenomenon in one country, where we helped a local team of consultants to construct a public libraries impact evaluation framework, which was accepted

by the supervisory committee but watered down as soon as we had left the country.)

Where national policy includes setting targets for a whole sphere of work, such as schools or the health service, these may be so general that they cannot be readily translated into library service contribution terms. We have already noted that health library services usually have only an indirect and diffuse impact on the quality of client care; similarly, although it is possible to show that schools that are equipped with good libraries tend to produce better exam results, it is much harder to show how anything done within a particular school library directly affects student examination performance.

We may also have conflicting priorities about where and how intensively to focus in relation to service impact within our own library service. Should we give attention to areas in which we can readily be shown to be failing, or concentrate on our main successes? Is it astute to focus, for example, on the relationships between academic staff and library staff in education settings or would this be counter-productive?

Since all libraries are short of time, and given that collecting impact evidence takes time and effort, what proportion of the performance evaluation for your library should be focused on impact? Will all the key players agree to spend the time required? There may also be concerns about timescales. Much of the evidence-gathering in organizations runs to an annual reporting cycle but looking at the impact of innovation in any significant area of work may well require a longer timescale. And how well attuned is your organization to the need to gather impact evidence at all? Will going down this road tend to isolate the library from the larger organization?

The key to answering these questions is to decide why you are looking for evidence of impact. If you are doing this primarily to account to the parent organization or to secure additional funding, it is important to choose ways of gathering evidence that will accord to the predominant organizational ethos. If you are gathering evidence to meet external project-funding requirements then it is likely that the parameters will be set as part of the contract award process. On the other hand, if you are focusing on impact primarily to inform yourselves as managers so that you can improve the service, then any evidence that you will find convincing is acceptable.

1.4 Why is it important to tackle impact?

1.4.1 What is driving the change?

We have tried to show that there are a number of different drivers pushing organizations towards evaluating their effectiveness. As we will see later, different

approaches to evaluating impact and different types of evidence will be appropriate depending on whether the demand is coming from:

- the federal/national government level (characterized by very strategic and apparently simplistic targets that are prone to change at short notice)
- external inspection regimes focused on service improvement or the achievement of standards
- the institution of which the library service is part (requiring effectiveness priorities to accord with institutional targets)
- the managers of the library service (focusing on greater understanding of what makes services work well)
- the members of, or participants in the service (where the motives for looking at impact may vary substantially).

It is also important to recognize that there are still many work areas where efficiency monitoring is all that is required; when for example:

- there is no pressure to show impact – there are few demands for evidence from inside or outside the organization
- it may not yet be politic to broadcast or share impact evidence (even if individual service managers choose to focus on impact as well as traditional performance measurement ‘busy-ness statistics’ to inform their own management decision making)
- there is a tacit conspiracy not to look too closely at whether large sums of money are being spent well!

Curiously, one of the areas in which effective performance has not been taken seriously, until very recently, is the implementation of ICT programmes, unless counting ‘hits’ on a website can be assumed to be evaluating anything. Various surveys of ICT projects have found that there is usually no real attempt to evaluate them and that when any questions are asked they normally stop at the point of establishing whether the installation works, rather than going on to ask whether it could have been done better or was worth doing at all. This situation is now changing fairly rapidly, at least where there is more or less direct competition between traditional and new ways of providing services.

1.4.2 Why move on?

There are several reasons why library services should be giving more attention to impact evaluation:

External factors

- 1 The political agenda is changing. The drive towards greater accountability may have a distorting effect on service provision – unless we can come up with good-quality evidence about what works and how.
- 2 There is a danger that externally imposed performance targets will be confined to evidence drawn from output measures and ignore much of what libraries are achieving.
- 3 Being effective in meeting government priorities (for example regarding social inclusion, lifelong learning and parity of access) may require additional service expenditure. Success in addressing these issues will have to be demonstrated to justify this. Capacity building in communities requires good evidence.
- 4 There are opportunities for libraries operating in different fields to learn from each other about how to demonstrate success effectively.

Internal factors

- 1 Choosing targets carefully and gathering appropriate evidence is an important management skill – the process encourages clarity and helps to focus on priorities.
- 2 Focusing on a limited number of aims and impact indicators should make you question why certain things are not happening. For example, why is the well staffed and stocked library not a first port of call for senior managers in this organization?
- 3 Where impact targets are integrated into practice this should lead to higher staff motivation, because they can see what they want to achieve, why they are doing things and what success they are having ('this is more satisfying than just jumping through hoops').

1.4.3 What library managers say

We have looked briefly at why there is a growing demand for evidence of the impact of services and at how these pressures can distort the picture. But why do library service managers get involved in yet another time-consuming activity? The evidence from several hundred managers who have participated in our workshops is that they usually get involved for one or more of eight reasons (in descending order of frequency of mention):

- 1 **Focus for development.** Most managers want to know whether they are being effective and what they need to do to get better.

- 2 **Survival.** Libraries are no longer automatically seen as ‘a good thing’ and there is increasing competition from other ‘support services’, especially organizational computer services and the internet. Libraries are (relatively) expensive to provide – so why bother? Assembling good-quality evidence of the impact of services currently being provided should help to fight off any future threat to libraries – if the threat is current it may be too late to start!
- 3 **Internal accountability.** Increasingly, parent organizations want to know not just whether their library services are working efficiently but how well they are contributing to the overall organizational goals.
- 4 **External accountability.** We have already shown that national and federal governments are seeking greater accountability (or control) from public services. They may want to focus on service impact, but even if they resort to more traditional performance measures it may be important to focus on impact in order to show the full extent of the library contribution.
- 5 **Professional pride/job satisfaction.** The demand for impact evidence from senior management or from government is not universal. Even where there are no external pressures, some managers want to get involved in looking at their service impact because they want to be sure that they are doing a good job – even if there is little scope for development.
- 6 **Status/profile.** Although this may not be an incentive at the outset, many managers report that one of the benefits of undertaking impact evaluation is greater recognition or more positive feedback from their users. These effects can be quite specific (such as when various school librarians field tested school library self-evaluation materials that mirrored the school self-evaluation framework about to be introduced and were seen by teachers as ‘instant experts’ on self-evaluation because of this) but asking questions about your service is likely to produce answers – some of which will be encouraging!
- 7 **Securing additional resources.** Where organizations are demanding impact evidence as part of the resource allocation process, it makes sense to get involved. In any case it will help your argument if you can show that you are being effective in ways that interest the fundholders.
- 8 **International advocacy.** Impact evaluation provides a basis for advocacy on behalf of public libraries, school libraries, or libraries in general.