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Performance indicators for reference and information services - Round 1

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Introduction

Australia, with a population of 18.4 million, has 43 universities catering for 453,309 equivalent full-time students. The south-eastern state of Victoria contains 8 universities ranging in size from 4,000 to 34,000 equivalent full-time students. Most of the larger institutions are large regional universities with multiple campuses located across urban and country areas.

The external environment in which university libraries in Australia operate has seen a dramatic increase in accountability and the application of quality processes following the general trend away from input standards to output (as measured by performance). Mainstream reference work in Australian academic libraries covers a range of activities from the most visible: the reference desk, reader education, database searching, liaison and one to one consultation, to the less visible: staff development, and collection management. It was recognised by reference librarians themselves (ie within the profession) that they needed to develop a suite of performance indicators and measures rather than for such tools to be imposed by an external group (either within, or external to, the library).

The need to justify resource allocations, the growing expectations of users, the rapid expansion of electronic information sources and the demands for greater knowledge skills among reference staff, all highlight the urgency to identify the unique and complex contribution made by reference and information services to the overall value and benefit provided by the academic library. Because of the value-added nature of much of reference and information services, use of solely quantitative measures with such services is limited in assessing their effectiveness. Despite these difficulties there is a growing demand from reference staff, library users, library managers and professional bodies to define and demonstrate the real value of reference services. Performance indicators that can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively need to be identified, with the aim of demonstrating a realistic value of reference and information services.

Within Victoria, the university librarians have established a company, CAVAL Ltd (Cooperative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries), which exists to provide cooperative services across the various tertiary libraries. The CAVAL Reference Interest Group, with representatives from each member and campus library, steers several working parties each concerned with specific aspects of reference work.

The development of performance measures for reference services had been identified as a project of the CAVAL Reference Interest Group in 1989, but had not been taken up for four years, despite the fact that the reference service is one of the most prominent links between users and information resources. The Working Party on

Performance Measures for Reference Services was set up by the CAVAL Reference Interest Group in late 1993. By mid-1995 this Working Party had produced its first report [1] which identified ten major categories of performance indicators together with a detailed picture of the roles and tasks performed by reference staff in Victorian academic libraries. In effect this report provides a 'snapshot' of reference work as perceived by the reference librarians, and conveys the idea of the complexity involved in providing a service which involves a multiplicity of roles and a wide variety of skills. The preliminary results already published are to be combined with those of two other groups (academic library managers, various user groups) with the aims of finding shared performance indicators, and the development of a suite of performance measures.

The work described was carried out in an environment where other organisations were concurrently engaged in related programmes. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), arranged for the development of selected performance indicators [2] for Australian University Libraries and have provided a suite of indicators for general user satisfaction (library/clientele congruence), document delivery, and materials availability. The Arts Industry Training Board was responsible for the development of the National Library Competency Standards which describes the skills of the library workforce in Australia. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has conducted Competency Standards Workshops in all states across Australia using the Library Competency Standards [3] generated by the Arts Industry Training Board. This project compliments these activities by focusing specifically on the analysis and production of performance indicators for reference and information services. There has been general agreement that a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods are necessary to evaluate fully the complexity of the reference service, although there has been a reluctance to adopt qualitative measures. This may be due primarily to the difficulty in selecting appropriate performance indicators and the concern over their effectiveness.

Methodology

The main aim of the Working Party was to identify the performance indicators and measures currently used to evaluate reference services in Victorian academic libraries. A literature review of performance measurement revealed that the 'multiple constituencies model' [4] (also known as the participant satisfaction model) is the most commonly used for evaluating the effectiveness of human service organisations in the public sector. In this model the organisation is established to provide a service to a diverse group of users, and must meet the needs and expectations of a number of strategic constituencies participating in the organisation.

In studying performance measures for reference services in an academic library, there are a number of constituent groups who have a vested interest in the nature of the service:

- library managers because of the cost-benefit of providing the services,
- staff and students because of the need for intermediaries to navigate and map the increasingly complex resource base, and
- reference staff because of their professional commitment and a climate of increased accountability for the provision of quality services.

Within these constituent groups there may be further sub-constituencies such as undergraduate and postgraduate students, international students, remote users, students from different subject disciplines, and academic staff.

Each constituent group has its own needs and expectations, and will therefore use a different set of evaluation criteria or performance indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation. For example, an undergraduate student may regard the availability of prescribed texts as the key indicator of the effectiveness of the library, whereas a library manager charged with developing the collection for a range of teaching and research purposes may use the relevance of the whole collection as a key indicator. The research shows that members of identifiable constituent groups are likely to share similar indicators whereas between constituent groups there will be some noticeable differences resulting from the varying roles of participants. It is therefore important to canvas all the constituent groups.

Performance measurement is the means by which performance indicators are assessed. The complexities of measuring reference services, where a number of possible outcomes may or may not meet the expectations of users, obviously makes the task of attaching performance measures for this type of service even more difficult, whether qualitative or quantitative.

The Working Party selected a critical success factors approach to determine the key indicators for each constituency. This method attempts to extract from the members of a constituent group the five or six most important indicators that they use to evaluate the success or otherwise of their organisations. The aim is to tap into the implicit indicators that are often not articulated through formal organisational evaluation programmes. The management literature shows that these indicators are often the most powerful criteria for evaluating performance because they are ones that are developed through practice rather than from theory. The best way of determining these critical success factors is by the technique of focus group interviews.

The technique of focus group interviews [5] [6], a method used for collection of qualitative data, leads to transcribed data being sorted into key ideas/words, formulation of categories, placing of the ideas/words in the categories, and consequent clustering of the various categories. This method encourages 'ownership' of the results by the individual members of each group by the very act of their direct involvement. The process focuses on the criteria for evaluation and not the evaluation itself, and on the service offered as a whole rather than on individual staff members. The skill of the facilitator lies in drawing out the implicit, and being flexible in clarifying responses or further probing [7].

Data Collection

The first constituent group to be studied was the reference staff, a group having the most critical role to play in the delivery of quality services to library users. The CAVAL Reference Interest Group, which has always involved the grass-roots staff in its projects, initially gained acceptance from the eight University Librarians for permission to interview relevant staff. Focus group interviews were conducted firstly with a pilot group, followed by seven interviews with staff from libraries selected to reflect rural/urban and central/main campus/branch campus variations. Interviews

were conducted between August and October in 1994. More than eighty participants took part and included professional and paraprofessional staff involved in the delivery of services to patrons. Reference supervisors, document delivery staff, reader education staff, as well as those with other library roles who also staff reference service points, had input to the process. The interviews lasted approximately two hours, and were conducted by two members of the Working Party. The group size varied between seven and twelve.

Participants were first asked to brainstorm and list the tasks in their roles as reference staff. All activities were listed for comment and further expansion. This proved to be a useful stimulus for staff and led to wide-ranging discussions on roles and tasks in reference services. In the second hour of the session staff were asked to enumerate the measures and indicators of effectiveness they were using, both formally and intuitively. In order to assist the participants in working out how they made their judgements of what was successful, participants were encouraged to reflect on what made them think that, at the end of the day, they had done a good job or had been successful. No attempt was made to distinguish between measures and indicators at this point.

The focus interview groups were asked to nominate the five most important indicators/measures that they had proposed. The participants were also asked to hypothesise how their managers would rank the indicators.

Data collected from the seven interviews was consolidated and in December 1994 an open forum/workshop was held to discuss and take comments on the consolidated data. Staff involved in reference services at the eight university libraries were invited to attend. The consolidated data was validated in this forum and is deemed to be representative of academic libraries in Victoria. A further validation process took place following the production of the draft of the first report. An overview of the data collection and processing of the results is given in Diagram 1.

Results

The datasets to be analysed fell into three categories: tasks or roles, performance indicators and measures, and ranking of indicators. The Working Party had initially resisted any classification of the tasks in analysing the data, however, the tasks segment was so large that the Working Party decided to classify all the tasks into six broad categories based on a 'traditional' view of reference services, selected merely as a strategy to manage the data. <u>Table 1</u> provides a list of the categories together with details of the key indicators identified for each area.

The inter-related nature of reference services has resulted in some duplication of indicators and measures across the categories, and these duplications have been retained in the data presented. For example an indicator could be relevant to more than one category (see <u>Table 1</u>), and a measure could be associated with more than one indicator (see <u>Table 2</u>). The indicators and measures are clearly interdependent, for example, the survey of users for the performance indicator user satisfaction in Table 2. Associated indicators were grouped into ten major categories of performance indicators on the basis of their context and inter-relatedness (see <u>Table 3</u>).

It should be noted that the results recorded at the focus group interviews are those provided by the participants and are not the value interpretations of the Working Party. It is not intended to provide a further synthesis until all three constituencies have been interviewed. It is anticipated that there may be differences between the results from the three constituencies and examination of these could lead to a further understanding of the effectiveness of the reference and information services provided.

The ranking of the key performance indicators by the reference staff constituency demonstrated a high degree of consistency. The qualitative indicator user satisfaction featured in the top three levels of rankings by reference staff across the seven institutions studied. The quantitative indicator use of services was also ranked highly. All the groups perceived that managers were frequently more interested in quantitative rather than qualitative assessment of the service offered, but responded in particular to negative feedback.

Observations

The Working Party identified a number of issues which added a further dimension to understanding the complexity of reference services and these are discussed in its First Report. The following observations draw on this discussion and demonstrate the value of recording qualifying comments during focus interviews.

One issue which emerged during the interviews related to the perceived roles of reference staff. While reference staff have a role to provide answers to clients, they must also furnish them with skills to enable them to seek out their own information. This educational role may not be explicitly acknowledged, and may not sit comfortably in an environment of customer focus.

Another issue was that reference staff perceived that the different constituent groups may view the reference desk differently. To the reference staff the reference desk is the most visible and seemingly central aspect of their work, and the effectiveness of the service provided is dependent upon all the other areas of reference work (staff development and training, collection management, reader education and academic liaison) functioning appropriately. Users and library managers, however, may view the reference desk as another library service point, seeing it as an important service because it is the most visible, while not perhaps appreciating the complex nature of the service offered. Almost all tasks and duties of the reference services staff are interrelated even if the 'reference desk' is perceived by them to be the place where they perform one of their most complex, challenging and rewarding roles. This emphasis on the reference desk may diminish as reference services shift to a tiered reference service.

It appeared that the focus interviews encouraged reference staff to view their role in a new way, recognising the complexity of their role and its implicit value in the overall service provided by the library. The value added component of the reference service in the academic library is implicit. For many of the clientele, the reference staff are a vital key to the resources provided by the library. The skills and attitudes of the reference staff play a critical role in the quality of the overall service provided by the library. How those same reference staff define quality of service will in many ways determine the quality of service which is provided, or aimed for.

The process of conducting the focus group interviews appeared to have a number of identifiable benefits for the staff involved including: a heightened awareness of data which is easily available and collectable and which is relevant to the evaluation of the reference service (e.g. letters from clients, reports originating from other sources in the university), an awareness of evaluative processes already in place which are indicators or measures of performance of reference services, and an awareness of the importance of developing a suite of performance indicators for reference services, and an interest in their development.

Conclusion

This project has a number of strengths: its cooperative nature and the support provided by eight institutions, the scale of the project (made possible by the methodology used) in interviewing more than eighty reference staff, the methodology adopted encouraged the incorporation of qualitative responses, and it is readily transportable for use by other groups.

Focus interviews were conducted with the second constituent group, i.e. with the senior library managers of the same eight institutions, in September and October 1995. The only variance from the earlier interviews was that two groups were interviewed, each comprising a mix of staff from across the eight institutions (that is the participants in each group were not confined to one institution). The results of these interviews have not yet been published.

Following the final round of focus group interviews with the third constituent group, it is hoped that the final list of performance indicators and measures for reference and information services will provide clear tools that will not only assist in their management, but also be a valuable adjunct in the accountability process. Provision of a suite of indicators and measures will also assist any dialogue between library staff (managerial and practitioners), the user community, and funding bodies (internal and external to the universities). This work is being supported by the Council of Australian University Librarians and it is proposed that the outcomes will be adopted nationally.

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Abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms

- **AIMA -** Australian Information Management Association
- **CAVAL** Cooperative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries

Diagram 1: Overview of data collection and processing of results

Note: yellow boxes indicate work carried out in conjunction with reference staff.



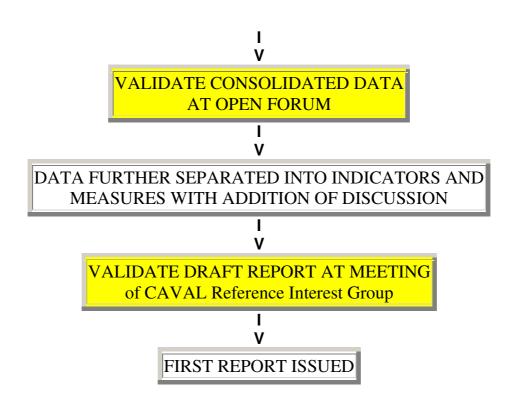


Table 1: List of the six reference categories with associated key performance indicators

| Category of | Key performance |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| reference activity | indicator |
| | Integration into |
| | academic community |
| Academic liaison/ | Promotion of |
| subject liaison | resources and services |
| | Use of service |
| | User satisfaction |
| | Matching resources to |
| | user needs |
| Collection | Participation of users |
| management | in selection |
| | process User |
| | satisfaction |
| Database searching | Provision of relevant |
| | information |
| | System availability |
| | Use of databases |
| | User satisfaction |
| Reader education | Appraisal by peers |
| | and managers |
| | Participation in |
| | teaching programmes |
| | User satisfaction |

| Reference desk | Effective teamwork Institutional commitment to staffing Intellectual accessibility of service Physical accessibility of service |
|--------------------------------|---|
| | Provision of relevant information Use of service User satisfaction |
| Staff development and training | Organisational and institutional culture Organisational support for training sessions, conferences and continuing education Participation in research activities Staffing policies Team culture |

Table 2: List of performance measures for the performance indicator 'User Satisfaction'

The performance measures are arranged alphabetically. Numerals in square brackets indicate the category of reference tasks to which the indicator applies as given below (**Note:** the category 'Staff development and training' does not appear).

- 1. Academic liaison/subject liaison
- 2. Collection management
- 3. Database searching
- 4. Reader education
- 5. Reference desk

Ability of library to hold or acquire documents found in search [3]

Acknowledgement in theses, research reports, etc. [1]

Amount and quality of feedback from user group [5]

feedback board (suggestion box at front of Library)

formal and informal non-verbal responses

unsolicited and solicited feedback

Analysis of deferred inquiries [5]

Analysis of user expectations within stated aims of service [5]

Ask departments for suggestions for improvements [5]

Clientele growth [3,5]

Daybook/diary with comments by librarians about 'busy-ness', equipment failures, etc. [5]

Discussion of library report with faculty and other user groups [5]

Documenting service provided via written reports (annual/regular) [5]

Enthusiasm of academics [1]

Evaluation of services by students and academic staff [3,5]

External formal reviews - comments on Library services [5]

Feedback from users (i.e. academic staff and all levels of students) [1,2,3,4]

Feedback from marking assignments [4]

Formal evaluation [4]

Informal feedback - solicited/unsolicited [4]

Letters, suggestions, complaints file and responses [5]

Letters from academics [1]

Non-use of library [5]

Number of longer/more complex consultations [5]

Number of queries relating to databases [3]

Number of searches logged database software [3]

Numbers of bookings for equipment [3]

Numbers of directional/reference queries [5]

Range and number of databases available [3]

Range of database sources available compared with known/published sources listed for subject areas [3]

Range of databases in relation to subject needs of the user population (including library staff) [3]

Referrals from students, academic staff [1]

Suggestions for improvements from departments [4]

Support by senior academics in official forums [5]

Survey of users [1,2,3,5]

Table 3: Grouping of performance indicators identified after focus interviews with reference staff

- Provision of relevant information
 - User satisfaction
- Use of databases
 - Use of service
- Matching resources to user needs
- Participation of users in selection process
- Intellectual and physical accessibility of services
 - System availability
- Institutional commitment to staffing excellence

Organisational and institutional culture

Organisational support for training sessions, conferences, continuing education

Staffing policies

• Effective teamwork

Team culture

- Appraisal by peers and managers
- Promotion of resources and services

• Integration into academic community Participation in research activities Participation in teaching programmes