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Indicators for public libraries

Content:

- 1. Background**
 - 2. Norway: goals and strategies for libraries**
 - 3. The project group**
 - 4. Indicators**
 - 5. Benchmarking**
 - 6. National indicators for Norwegian public libraries**
 - 7. References**
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Background

Archives, libraries and museums face huge challenges. They constantly encounter new demands for reorganisation in line with changes in society. New technology, changes in the use of public services and an increasing focus on cost-effectiveness require tools for effective library management both for the local authorities and for the libraries.

Norway is, like other countries, experiencing the general development of central and municipal government setting requirements regarding management by objectives and status reports from subordinate agencies. Central and local government administration now requires the active use of various forms of data to enable it to:

- Demonstrate activity/performance/development in the sectors
- Acquire a basis for decisions in government administration, both locally and centrally

To achieve this, tools and methods must be found to enhance the quality of the services in library institutions with regard to their operation, evaluation, development and promotion – in other words, an internal management and development tool. Used in the right manner, grants, reports and statistics represent excellent tools for measuring the quantity and quality of the institutions while at the same time providing professional and policy signals concerning what central government expects of the sectors and institutions. The questions asked and the requests made give the institutions some indication of what central government administration views as important.

There is a need to develop methods for data collection and for data processing, interpretation and dissemination. This also includes the production and quality assurance of data. The task of ABM-utvikling is to assist the institutions in their work of assuring

the quality of content and services and in the correct use of allocated resources. ABM-utvikling must also cover the need from all levels of government administration for information, data, and activity in and concerning archives, libraries and museums.

ABM-utvikling gathers statistics/data for archives, libraries (academic/specialist/public/school) and museums. In addition to the yearly collection of statistics, which are presented in an annual publication, we now recognise the need for other types of data. These can be collected via different types of surveys and can be used actively in status reports. An internal group in ABM-utvikling is currently working on a strategy plan involving a broader and extended range of activities within statistics, data collection, data analysis, data use etc.

To strengthen the libraries we have to start to analyze the library situation. This work should be done on both local and national level.

At national level it is important to focus on

- National policy on library matters
- National priorities: strategies and goals

The policy and the priorities will change over time. So this exercise has to be done on regular basis.

In Norway we have two important documents:

- “Library Reform 2014”
 - Part I: Strategies and initiatives
 - Part II: Norwegian Nationwide Library – a network for knowledge and culture
- Report no. 23 to the Storting (2008-2009): The library: a knowledge centre for society, a meeting place and a cultural arena in a digital age

On assignment from the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs, ABM-utvikling presented the report “Library reform 2014” in 2006. The report covers all types of library and consists of two main documents – one that outlines strategies and initiatives, and a background document entitled “The Norwegian Nationwide Library – a network for knowledge and culture”.

Under target area 2: “The Norwegian Nationwide Library – Contents and Services”, strategy 2.4 summarises the initiative as follows: *“To develop tools and methods for the evaluation and improvement of library activities”*. The strategy is followed by a description of the initiative: *“New tools shall be developed in order better to evaluate and improve the quality of library activities. Library statistics shall be assessed with a view to developing and improving the collection and presentation of data.”*

Report no.23 to the Storting (2008-2009) *Bibliotek: Kunnskapsallmenning, møtestad og kulturarena i ei digital tid* (The library: a knowledge centre for society, a meeting place and a cultural arena in a digital age) mentions statistics and analysis several times. It refers to the fact that an important task in the future will be to strengthen the work of statistics and analysis. Under the heading “Statistics and analysis”, Chapter 10, the report

states that large amounts of statistical data are currently collected from archive, library and museum institutions, partially in cooperation with Statistics Norway.

The ministry will ensure that a unified procedure is developed for mapping and analysing the archive, library and museum sector. This includes the large-scale monitoring of and the dissemination of information on international activities in the field of knowledge development within this sector. The report recommends that in addition to such initiatives, different sets of indicators should be developed to describe what constitutes good service in the archive, library and museum sector. These can be utilised in the context of both statistics and other forms of analyses. The report also states that status reports will be compiled on current activities in the field. These will be partly based on the various sets of indicators and special mapping projects, and can also be used as a foundation for assessing how the specific policy for the sector should be formulated.

The two reports focused on use of indicators. These indicators had to be settled. Strategy and goals should be different for each library – but they will usually have something in common.

Based on the two reports, indicators were to be found for the following areas:

- The library as a part of the society
- The library as arena for knowledge and learning
- Dissemination of culture and literature
- The library as arena for cultural diversity

On local level the focus should be

- The library's mission, strategy and goals
- The library's declaration of service
- The quality system of the local authority

To attain a library of high quality there is a need for vision, goals and plan. We have to collect data, analyze and compare the results with the library's goals. With this in mind there are possibilities to plan and make choices for the library, and develop a "quality library" (fitness for purpose) adjusted to the users.

Management by objectives and results set focus on

- Establish goals
- Measure the results
- Analyze the results
- Compare the results with the goals
- Use this information to make a "better" library (action!)

But it is important to remember that management by objectives and results are:

- Steering
 - Development
 - Better performance
 - AND Management
- IT IS NOT purely control!

The library needs data of different kind to show their performance, their use of resources and their results. Data collected on national level will be the main source in this matter. Beside we need other data collected at national and local level.

Norwegian Library Indicators Project

On the basis of the above, ABM-utvikling set up two project groups in 2008 – “Benchmarking using performance and management indicators” – one for Norwegian public libraries and one for Norwegian academic libraries.

The objective of the project was:

To develop tools for evaluating and managing one’s own library and for comparing it with other libraries, drawing on the library’s (and the institution’s) formulated goals and possibly also on the libraries’ service statement and the quality assurance system of the institutions (the municipality).

The purpose of the project was twofold:

1. To develop and test sets of indicators for public libraries and academic libraries respectively.
2. To develop tools for the pending “benchmarking” projects in public libraries and academic libraries.

A project group organisation that involved the library community was chosen since the activities were to form the foundation for further work on quality and performance indicators in Norwegian libraries. It was important for ABM-utvikling to include librarians from the practice field to ensure that the library environment acquired a feeling of ownership for the project and the result.

In addition to developing and testing indicators suitable for Norwegian libraries, the work was also to include:

- Initiating and encouraging the use of collected data and of performance and quality indicators in the library sector
- Focusing on management by objectives and results in libraries
- Using the project group participants as innovators

The project groups were composed of practising librarians from different types of libraries: small and large public libraries, county libraries, university libraries and university college libraries. The libraries varied with regard to resources, and had different target groups and thus different objectives. The two project groups each had approximately eight external participants. External involvement made the work time-consuming and challenging. However, the working method ensured a result that consists of relevant and appropriate indicators. Those in the practice field know best how, and how easily, data can be acquired, as well as what it is most important to gather information about. The work in the project group also functioned as a learning process for the participants.

Indicators

Indicators are a practical tool for evaluation of the library and the library’s services.

An indicator is defined as

a qualitative and quantitative expression to assess the value of an activity or service

A performance indicator is

a measure of how well an employee, department, organization, or institution is meeting its goals and objectives –

or

Numerical, symbolic or verbal expression, derived from library statistics and data used to characterize the performance of the library” (ISO 11620)

An indicator should be

- Informative – helpful for identifying problems and possible actions to be taken
- Reliable – producing the same results when used under the same circumstances
- Valid – measuring what they are intended to measure
- Appropriate – compatible with the library’s procedures and working environment
- Practical – easy to use and understand, applicable with reasonable amount of effort in terms and staff time, staff qualifications, operational costs and users’ time and patience
- Comparable – allowing comparison of results between libraries of similar mission, structure and clientele

(Poll & te Boekhorst, 2007)

Data, qualitative and quantitative assessments, they all give us excellent tools to steer the library in adequate direction. They are supposed to measure or describe in what extent the library has reached their goals. Combining various methods of measurement – such as statistics, counts, and user surveys or user observations – can provide a good general picture of the library’s activities and quality.

But we have to remember: An indicator *indicates*. It does not present the absolute truth about the quality of the performance of a given service. However, if an indicator is used over time and is combined with other data, a good general picture of the library can be the outcome.

An indicator put two or more numbers together and the numbers will give us the possibility to view the library in three dimensions:

1. Size/Volume
2. Costs
3. Use

To be able to use indicators effectively, we need to

- Get easy access to reliable data
- Analyze data
- Evaluate data

In short:

- **Choose the mission and goals**
- **Choose your indicators**
- **Be practical**

Benchmarking

The indicators have been drawn up to enable different services in different libraries to be compared, as well as to serve as an internal management tool.

The statistics submitted annually at national basis have constituted the instrument used to compare libraries of different sizes or within a region. A set of indicators give libraries more opportunity to acquire a broader base for comparison. However, it is important that the quality of the data used makes the comparisons authentic.

Benchmarking is comparing library processes and performance on national, regional or local level to find possibilities to improve processes and services in your own library. We have to learn from “best practice”.

National indicators for Norwegian public libraries

The project group wanted to find indicators that covered the full range of resources and services generally offered in the library. There are changes in the way the public use the libraries. It was a challenge that statistical data collected does not cover activities that need attention.

The priority is given to identifying indicators for which it is easy to find data. Most of the data is found in the ABM statistics (library statistics), from library systems or from the municipal accounts. Some indicators are based on internal registrations/counts – for example “the proportion of library employees’ working hours spent on handling in-depth references.”

The applicability of each indicator has been assessed.

- Is the goal described sufficiently well?
- What does this indicator tell us?
- Is the indicator appropriate for comparison with other libraries?
- Is it difficult or easy to obtain data?
- With which other indicators should it be considered?
- Is the indicator best used as an internal management tool?

In the search for good indicators the group considered different suggestions. Some indicators are based in the national statistics or in Kostra, while others were obtained from international quality assessments. Attempts were made to adapt them to Norwegian conditions. Some indicators are more appropriate for internal use, while others are best suited for benchmarking.

The main groups in the proposal for indicators are (Balanced Scorecard):

- A. Economy/resources
- B. Use/visits
- C. Collections/services/processes
- D. Development/innovation/marketing

A ECONOMY/RESOURCES

A1 Percentage of Municipal Means allocated to the Library

A2 Costs per Opening Hour

- A3 Acquisitions/Access Costs per Capita**
- A4 Percentage of Salary- and Acquisition/Access Costs spent on Acquisition**
- A5 Costs per Document Downloaded**
- A6 Percentage of the Expenditure for Acquisitions/Access spent on Electronic Resources**

B USE/VISITS

- B1 Visits per Capita**
- B2 Electronic Visits per Capita**
- B3 Loans per Capita**
- B4 Number of Documents Downloaded per Capita**
- B5 Proportion of Visits of Non-native speakers**
- B6 Percentage of Visitors coming from other Municipalities**
- B7 Number of Participants on Library Arrangements per Capita**

C COLLECTIONS/SERVICES/PROCESSES

- C1 Opening Hours**
- C2 Man-year per 1000 Inhabitants**
- C3 Acquisition per 1000 Inhabitants**
- C4 Proportion of Culture Fund Media of total Acquisition**
- C5 Media in non-Scandinavic and non-English Languages**
- C6 Turnover non-Scandinavic and non-English media**
- C7 Relation between Loans from other Libraries and Loans to other Libraries**
- C8 Percentage of Loans from own Collection**
- C9 Number of Reference Questions per Employee**
- C10 Time spent at Reference Desk**
- C11 Time spent on National/Regional Library Services**
- C12 Time spent on School Library Activitie**

D DEVELOPMENT/INNOVATION/MARKETING

- D1 Time spent on Projects**
- D2 Time spent on Competence Raising**
- D3 Number of Arrangements per Employee**
- D4 Number of Cooperation-Arrangements per Employee**
- D5 Number of Interactive Services**

Conclusion

The presented set of indicators is not fully completed or fully tested. There has been some testing of the indicators, and we have acquired some experience, but the proposed indicators should be tested on a broader basis. The testing will continue.

The proposed indicators have been distributed for comments, but the group has reached no conclusion so far.

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