
WILIP make a difference? Practitioner perspectives of the challenges facing libraries and information services

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Abstract

Resource commissioned the Wider Information and Library Issues Project (WILIP) to discover what challenges are facing the library and information domain, what needs to be done to tackle them, and what role Resource should take in helping to develop and promote strategies for action. In the initial consultation phase of WILIP practitioners identified a number of generic themes. Improved access for users was the primary goal with better advocacy, more effective funding – especially to sustain initiatives - workforce development and building a strategic framework as the key means of achieving it. Many respondents believe better focused, very practical research is essential to provide a coherent body of evidence to support the case for developing libraries and information services as a major component of the Knowledge Society.

Introduction

Where do people find their topics for research? This article is being written in the hope that the outcomes from a recent consultation exercise amongst library and information professionals, which sought to establish their views on the challenges facing the domain, will furnish ideas for research. Furthermore the follow-up publicity to the exercise should strengthen the hand of researchers when they approach potential funders. The exercise was part of an initiative known as WILIP (the Wider Information and Library Issues Project), which was funded by Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.

Background

Origins of WILIP

Resource is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Its mission is to provide the strategic leadership, advocacy and advice to enable museums, archives and libraries to touch people's lives and inspire their imagination, learning and creativity.

Until now most of Resource's work in the library and information domain has focused on public libraries. This is in large part due to the sheer size, scale and success of the People's Network, coupled with the need to prioritise the implementation of the *Building on Success* strategy for public libraries. Now, Resource wishes to see what can realistically be accomplished across the whole of the library and information community, ranging from school, further and higher education libraries, through health, prison and workplace libraries to the book trade and internet providers. To find out what needs to be done and how it might help, Resource commissioned the Wider Information and Library Issues Project. WILIP started with a consultation exercise, and the results of that will inform the strategic thinking needed to plan the way ahead.

The aim of WILIP

The aim of WILIP is to maximise the contribution made by the library and information domain to the economic, social, educational and cultural life of the UK.

Subsidiary objectives are to identify what needs to be done to achieve this and by whom, and in particular to determine the ways in which Resource can catalyse and promote the development of the domain.

Project structure

The project is funded and managed by Resource with informal strategic guidance from the British Library and the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP).

The project comprises a consultation phase (WILIP 1) and a strategy phase (WILIP 2). A Steering Group for WILIP 1, comprising professionals with knowledge of the various communities in the library and information domain, has advised on the coverage of the consultation programme and on the interim findings. At the time of writing it is about to advise on the final report on WILIP 1, which will inform the strategic phase of the project.

The consultation phase

The purpose of the consultation phase was to understand the challenges facing the library and information domain. Over 80 organisations participated, largely at the supplier end of the spectrum, comprising professional associations, groups of libraries and trade associations. The method of consultation varied according to the preference of the organisation and included group discussions, written submissions and one-to-one interviews with representatives, either face-to-face or over the telephone. A core set of standard questions was used with some variation or additional questions according to the nature of the organisation. They were:

- What are the challenges (both opportunities and threats) facing your type of library or information provider? [Or facing LIS organisations in your region/home nation]
 - What needs to happen to meet these challenges?
- What is your vision of the future for library and information provision in your community over the next five years?
 - From a user's point of view what do you think s/he would want to see in terms of access to libraries and information?

- What might other bodies do to help you meet the challenges and realise your vision?
 - Is there a need for more joined-up government when it comes to libraries and other information providers?
 - Do you believe there is a need for a national information policy or at least a series of linked strategies for each of the major library and information communities?
- In particular what role would you like Resource to fulfil?
 - Are there any actions that Resource can take in the short term that would bring immediate benefit?

Generic themes

At the time of writing, the consultation phase has only just finished, the results have not yet been fully analysed and the Steering Group has not advised on the final report. In this article, we are therefore presenting interim findings and would urge readers to watch the Resource website for news of the publication of the final report on WILIP 1 during the Spring.

One of the earliest findings of the consultation was that a few key themes kept recurring across virtually all of the various library and information sub-domains – particularly those in the public sector. The main themes where respondents said they would like to see action being taken were:

- Advocacy
- Funding and the sustainability of initiatives
- Workforce development
- Building a strategic framework
- Improved access for users

This last theme, improved access for users, came out very strongly in the vision that most respondents said they wanted to work towards. This vision represents the real goal or end, and the first four themes are means towards that end.

Research needs

For virtually every one of these generic themes that have come out of the consultation phase, a need for research was identified by at least some respondents to inform the way forward or to gather evidence to support cases for investment etc. The message that came across strongly was that the research must be very practical in nature. Respondents also wanted research to be better focused and better exploited so that it served the generic themes and enabled a coherent picture to be built.

Advocacy

Library and information professionals in the public sector are worried that the role that libraries play in supporting the government's economic, social, educational and cultural agenda is not recognised. They believe that a sustained advocacy campaign should be undertaken by the main players in the domain with the aim of raising the profile of the domain with government and making ministers and their advisers aware of the key role libraries can play in delivering their policy objectives.

However, before that can be truly effective, further research is needed, respondents thought, to provide better evidence of the impact that the domain is making in policy areas such as lifelong learning, literacy, social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and the knowledge economy.

Funding and the sustainability of initiatives

Funding was a major concern of respondents. It was recognised that a convincing case for new investment has to be made to those holding the purse strings, whether they be parent institutions or the government. The government's recognition of the importance of the knowledge economy therefore presents an opportunity for libraries and information services to demonstrate their economic value. This brings us back to the need to provide evidence of impact that was identified under the heading of advocacy.

The sustainability of initiatives was a key factor in respondents' concerns. The bidding or challenge culture was seen as generating too many overlapping pilot projects. The pilots are often not implemented in the rest of the sub-domain for which they were intended, because there are no resources to support it. Indeed it can be in an organisation's best interest to bid for yet another pilot project, because that is the only way to obtain funding for developments. A more effective method of funding would be welcomed.

There clearly are research possibilities in this area.

Workforce development

Workforce development in the domain is seen as being in need of a thorough overhaul, and the findings on this issue support completely the conclusions of the research study Resource commissioned from the Demos think tank on a Strategy for Workforce Development (Demos 2002). This study attempted to:

- map current work in training, leadership, and workforce development within the museums, archives and libraries domains;
- draw together existing and future commitments in Resource's existing workplans which relate to workforce development and place them within the context of the overall strategy;
- identify a role for Resource in these areas by consulting widely with appropriate stakeholders and assessing current and imminent developments such as Sector Skills Councils, Renaissance in the Regions and the new Regional Agencies.

The report's prime purpose is to inform Resource's thinking and to guide the formulation of Resource's strategy and its collaboration with other interested parties.

The findings of the Demos report and of WILIP's consultation phase are that poor salaries and low esteem are deterring high quality candidates from entering the profession, and there are concerns about where the next generation of leaders will come from. The widening of the profession to include knowledge management and a spectrum of related information disciplines is also creating challenges for training programmes and re-skilling. Several bodies are involved in workforce development in libraries: the Information Services National Training Organisation (isNTO), the Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation (CHNTO), CILIP and Resource

plus the emerging sector skills councils in areas like health. A view of many is that better co-ordination is required to eliminate overlaps and make the greatest impact.

Strategic framework

A strategic framework is needed to foster collaboration between libraries in different sub-domains. Its purpose would be to overcome the barriers created by having separate funding streams for different types of libraries coming from several different government departments. The aim of the framework would be to provide the strategic coherence and co-ordination necessary to make the best use of resources and to mobilise them in support of the government's knowledge society vision. The framework would link related strategies in the sub-domains, regions, home countries and subject areas – including, for instance, the Department of Culture Media and Sport's strategy for public libraries, "Framework for the Future".

The creation of such a framework of linked strategies might in itself require research and its existence could also facilitate a more co-ordinated approach to research, for example a range of impact measures could be devised that reflected the needs of policy makers across a number of sub-domains.

Improved access for the user

For a service oriented profession it is right and proper that the prime focus of any strategy should be the user. It is reassuring that the vision shared by almost all library and information professionals reflected that. The future they envisioned will look like this:

- Information-literate users have seamless and unfettered access to information resources at the time and place of their choosing and in the form that they want, no matter where the resources are located.
- Access is facilitated by more and more information being available electronically, including a wider range of older resources made accessible through digitisation.
- The library becomes the focus for access to the wider range of services.
- The library role becomes more closely geared to customers' needs, supporting self-navigation by users, helping them develop information literacy skills or providing intermediation, according to their requirements.

However, achieving this vision presents some major hurdles for library and information professionals, even when a framework is in place that helps break down barriers and facilitates collaboration across sub-domains. These hurdles hinge around the very practical issues of getting the appropriate content to the user.

Content

At the content end of the spectrum, respondents were concerned about the problems that must be overcome before the tremendous opportunity offered by the digital environment can be realised.

Licensing terms require standardisation to prevent the construction of barriers to access and to assure the long-term ownership and preservation of the content once electronic licences have expired. Respondents felt that some form of government guidance or intervention in the marketplace is probably required. There is a further role for a government agency to co-ordinate the effort being invested in the development of standards to ensure the interoperability of systems and content across

sub-domains and so prevent the erection of technical barriers to the flow of information. There is a lot of technical research going on into digital preservation and interoperability issues, especially in the academic world, but there is still a considerable way to go.

The major preoccupation of the workplace sub-domain - knowledge management - is very much a Cinderella in research terms. Knowledge management brings another type of content in to the spectrum – the information generated within organisations. Organisations are coming to realise that this corporate information is a key part of their competitiveness and that they must garner it and add it to their knowledge base. Government, too, has recognised the importance of the knowledge economy to wealth creation. It is here that librarians can make a major contribution by bringing to bear their organisational and retrieval skills.

Human-system interface

At the users' end of the spectrum the issue is to make sure that they get quality information as easily as possible. Obviously at the human-system interface there are two components: the user and the system.

On the system side there is scope for further development to improve the interface with the catalogue and to improve its connectivity with digital resources and the web, so that the user makes the catalogue his or her search engine of choice. Subject portals are thought by many to be the best way of guiding the user towards better quality, better organised information. A number of projects to develop subject portals were supported by the eLib programme (UKOLN 2001), and there may still be scope for further practical research on the design of subject portals in new fields.

To improve the user side of the interface respondents identified information literacy as the key. Library and information professionals are concerned that users are in many cases inadequately equipped with the skills needed for the e-environment. A 'Google generation' is being created, who believe one or two relevant items retrieved from a search of the Web solve their information needs, when in fact they could be missing much more important and better quality information. They may be computer literate, but this is not the same; they need to be trained in wider information skills. The solution proposed by respondents was to make information literacy part of the core curriculum in schools and tertiary education. In that way users can be made much more aware of the wide range of information resources available, where to find them and how to be more selective and critical in their use of information.

Is there a need for research in this area? Probably. For example, there may be scope for research into the way users want to search that will inform interface design and the content of the information literacy curriculum. Secondly there may be a need for evidence to support the case for investing in information literacy training.

Evidence

Obtaining the evidence to support investment in any of the areas for development identified by respondents is going to be a significant task.

Resource commissioned a review of the evidence of the impact of libraries, museums and archives currently available in a range of policy areas (Wavell, C., Baxter, G., Johnson, I. and Williams, D. 2002). The objectives were to:

- Identify what evidence already exists on impact evaluation for museums, archives and libraries;
- Synthesise the available evidence at a general level in order to provide a coherent picture of the impact that museums, archives and libraries have had;
- Identify and describe critically the different evaluation methodologies that have been used to date in the sector;
- Identify gaps and provide recommendations for next steps.

The conclusions of the study were disappointing: “While there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence and descriptions of best practice in the sector, extensive hard evidence of impact, gathered systematically, is often lacking.” So the profession is starting from a low base.

Neither are the tools for impact evaluation fully in place. The report comments, “While a number of naturally occurring indicators have already been identified by the sector staff both for social and learning impact, economic indicators and methodologies are still being explored.”

While the review team found some activity going on to rectify these omissions, their report highlighted a major gap in that much of the impact evaluation that has been carried out has tended to be on projects rather than on core services.

Their recommendations for supporting evidence-based practice included:

- Encouraging professionals to be more committed to evidence-based practice (as begun through the Inspiring Learning framework (Resource 2002)) and to recognise the needs of stakeholders for assessments of outcomes and impacts as well as outputs;
- Establishing a national forum to discuss best practice in impact evaluation;
- Encouraging the dissemination of impact evaluation methodologies;
- Setting up a portal to provide access to research, toolkits, evaluations and examples of best practice;
- Compiling a data archive to support comparative research;
- Establishing a role for the regional agencies in collecting and collating data as part of a co-ordinated national scheme.

Next steps

The results of the WILIP consultation exercise will be published in a report in the Spring of 2003 and will inform the second, strategic phase of WILIP. A Strategy Group, comprising policy makers and key influencers from the worlds of culture, learning, business, innovation and public service, is intended. Their role will be to undertake high-level strategic analysis of the results from WILIP 1, to recommend further actions and to be advocates for the strategy with government and other key stakeholders. WILIP aspires to be a UK-wide initiative and the membership of the Strategy Group will reflect this.

Conclusion

There is a very large task ahead in making sure the Knowledge Society draws full benefit from the accumulated skills and many years of acquired wisdom of the library and information profession. Librarians have to overcome the outdated image (and to some extent self-image) that could prevent them giving the UK a huge advantage in today’s global knowledge economy. The way to do that is through making the case for

development and investment, and that must be done by gathering and marshalling the evidence. This is where the domain's research community can make a crucial difference.

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