
The LIRG/SCONUL Measuring Impact Initiative

Overview of phase I impact projects

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The success of the Phase 1 impact projects offers an opportunity to reflect on the benefits of the initiative, to the institutions, to library users, to the library services and the wider library community, as well as to the individual researchers themselves.

The predominance of topics around information skills and information literacy clearly reflects current concerns. Information literacy skills are vital for independent and lifelong learning yet can be time consuming to deliver. Libraries need to ensure that resources are being effectively deployed and that they are making a difference, making such programmes clear candidates for a project of this nature. Seven out of the ten projects fell under this broad heading. Though they were by no means identical, web-based information skills tutorials were a popular choice. The other projects looking at electronic resources (Chester), support for research (Warwick) and library support for students based at local partner colleges (Teesside). In all cases the initiative provided an opportunity to explore a topic of importance to the organisation, aligned with strategic aims and objectives.

In terms of outcomes, it is clear that institutions have benefited from the work that has been carried out as many of the projects reported tangible service improvements, better exploitation of library and information resources and the more effective targeting of finite resources. Some of the projects were able to demonstrate that their service made an improvement to an area of widespread concern within the institution, for example, substandard referencing in student assignments. Individual users clearly also benefited from improved services better meeting their needs.

Projects were able to answer management questions for libraries, examples being whether the increasing amount of time devoted to information literacy was well spent and whether generic information literacy resources were as useful as subject specific ones. In some instances the project provided the impetus to develop services as well as specific evidence about the direction in which that development

should take place, avoiding wasted effort. It is noteworthy, too, that many reports mention the embedding of information literacy skills further into the curriculum. Many of the library and information services involved clearly used the opportunity to collaborate more closely with other departments, liaising with academic staff, raising the profile of the library and arguably raising its status of the library through involvement in a research project. Project teams clearly worked hard to engage all stakeholders and steer the LIS agenda through their organisation. Some commented that this proved to be more difficult and challenging than actually carrying out the research.

Promotion and awareness raising is essential for any library and information service, of course, and the mere fact of carrying out research and approaching potential participants raises awareness of the service itself. Beyond this, the marketing opportunities offered by the impact initiative at various levels throughout the organisations are considerable and worth exploiting fully. The credibility factor is relevant in this context; being able to launch a new service with evidence of usage and impact should mean it is likely to be taken seriously.

For the individual members of the project teams, participation brought a number of benefits. As a CPD opportunity, it provided the opportunity to develop a range of new skills and to enhance others. The most obvious was to learn about conducting research in a context relevant to their job, and to carry out a project useful to them and the service they work for. Skills in both project management and research methods were involved here. The support offered through the workshops and discussion list were designed to make these challenging tasks less daunting! With the current interest in Evidence Based Librarianship such skills are likely to be increasingly useful. The project groups had to steer their projects through all the various stages from designing to dissemination. They had to address questions about how to measure the impact of their service, as opposed to demonstrating that it did make an impact and they had to ensure that their methodology was rigorous. They had to cope with the inevitable

problems and make adjustments when things did not go exactly according to plan. Most projects involved several different methods and overall, the variety and range of techniques used is impressive. The initiative provided project teams with the opportunity to try out techniques with which they were unfamiliar and learn about their advantages and disadvantages at first hand.

There are indications too, that participation in the project has led to changed ways of working and the development of a more “impact conscious” approach, for example by collecting statistics to facilitate the identification of year-on-year usage trends. But the reports make clear that the project teams were also involved in wide range of other tasks, such as assessing research proposals, team working, negotiating, influencing and marketing. The range of skills participants gained are transferable will be value, not only in the context of carrying out a research project but also in other aspects of their work. The initiative also provided opportunities for networking and sharing ideas. It provided space and time for reflection, giving participants a chance to ask fundamental questions about the design and delivery of services and what their priorities should be.

All new work will have some costs attached and measuring impact is widely recognised to be challenging. Participation in the initiative did generate some costs in terms of time and effort, opportunity costs and no doubt, some stress. One team did feel that their project was too time-intensive to repeat. Happily all the projects did demonstrate that the services being studied made a measurable impact!

In the fast changing and uncertain environment in which we operate, few would deny that libraries need to demonstrate the value of their services in an increasingly sophisticated and compelling fashion. The LIRG/SCONUL initiative provides a template that facilitates this process. The ten Phase 1 projects have demonstrated that the common model developed for measuring impact – specifying the objectives, determining the success criteria, establishing the impact measures and

identifying the evidence needed and how to collect it – works well. The individual reports illustrate that this framework, together with the support network provided by the initiative offered busy practitioners a feasible way of measuring the impact of a key service.

Participants have been successful in moving on from standard performance measures to devise impact measures which show that their service makes a difference. Crucially, too, they have been able to exploit this information to raise the profile of the library within their organisations.

The work is timely. With the developing interest in evidence based librarianship and the enhanced role which CILIP is according to research, an initiative which supports practitioners in this way is welcome. One of the strengths of the initiative is that it is firmly rooted in practice and empowers practitioners to harness research evidence to develop and demonstrate the value of their services. It is important that the outcomes are widely disseminated, not only across Higher Education but also across other sectors. The health sector would be just one example, where a recent review article appeared looking at the impact of library and information services on patient care, and where recent discussions have centred around other ways of taking forward ideas of measuring impact and demonstrating value, such as developing a ‘bank’ of questions and sharing research instruments.

The phase 1 project teams are to be congratulated for the outcomes they achieved and their success in measuring the impact of aspects of their services. The reports of the phase 2 projects are awaited with interest.

Reference

Weightman, Alison L and Williamson, Jane (2005) The value and impact of information provided through library services for patient care: a systematic review *Health Information and Libraries Journal* v22 (1) 4-25