
'VITAL' EVALUATION: the value of ICT services in public libraries

Juliet Eve

The Author

Juliet Eve is a LIRG Committee member who has recently taken over as Group Treasurer. She was the full time researcher at CERLIM for the VITAL Research Project. From September 2001, she will be starting a new position as Lecturer in Communications and Media at Brighton University.

The Occasion

The completion of the Project has recently been announced. This is a summary of the results and provides access to the full reports.

- What is the value of having access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) in public libraries?
- Can we develop methods which will enable us to determine what impact ICT access may have for individuals and communities?

These were the kind of questions posed by the VITAL (Value and Impact of IT Access in Libraries) project, which ran for 18 months between April 1999 and September 2000. The project was funded by the former Library and Information Commission and Re:source, and the work was carried out at CERLIM (Centre for Research in Library and Information Management) in the Department of Information and Communications at Manchester Metropolitan University.

The project had a twin focus: to develop a set of methods to evaluate the value and impact of end-user access to ICT services in public libraries, and to gather indicative data to enable initial conclusions about value and impact to be drawn. In support of the second aim, three partner authorities (Birmingham, Cheshire, and Cumbria) piloted the methods over a period of six months during 1999. Each authority carried out a survey of library users via questionnaire, and interviewed existing ICTs users in depth about their experience of accessing facilities in the library. A questionnaire survey of library non-users was also piloted, using a variety of approaches.

Results from the library user questionnaires indicate that there is strong support for ICT facilities in public libraries, both among those who use such services and those who don't, as comments like this illustrate:

I don't need to use them myself, as I have access at work, but I think it's vital for the general public.

Across the three authorities, 96% of library users considered it very or quite important that libraries provide ICT facilities, and 50% considered such services vital.

The final report of the project presents the results of both library user and non-user surveys, and concludes with a number of observations and recommendations, including the need to implement VITAL-style studies on a widespread basis. A companion workbook sets out the methods, with basic guidance on carrying out the research, and includes prototype questionnaires and an interview schedule which can be used by any public library authority.

Both of these are available to download from the CERLIM website, at:
<http://www.cerlim.ac.uk/projects/vital.htm>.

Further details on the project are available from Professor Peter Brophy, Director of CERLIM, p.brophy@mmu.ac.uk.