

EVALUATION OF READER SERVICES IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN GHANA: BEYOND THE CLIENT-CENTRED APPROACH, WHAT NEXT?

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Abstract

Facet studies of various degrees employing the client-centred approach have been undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of reader services of university libraries in Ghana. A school of thought observes that results from the client-centred approach cannot be taken seriously because they are imprecise, incomplete and inadequate to assess interaction between various operations and services and between related inputs and outputs. In its place, the objective method which comprises specific indicators of performance is suggested. This paper seeks to go beyond the client-centred approach, which has characterised library evaluation in Ghana, to explore and examine the suitability of the objective method as an alternative measure for evaluation. It is concluded that neither method enjoy universal acceptance among library evaluators. Either method, with fewest practical weaknesses, could be adopted.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of university library evaluation is not new. Library administrators and staff have always examined their respective libraries and their services to determine whether the libraries are following the missions originally set out for them; whether there has been any change in performance over a given period; and if there has been a change - the extent and direction of the change. Primarily, therefore, library evaluation is to develop an efficient and effective system. The issue of accountability in managerial practice is also a good reason for evaluation. University libraries require enormous investment of public funds hence the need for periodic evaluation. A number of writers in the literature share this view. One of them asserts that "it is necessary to measure the performance of libraries first, because a library almost always gets its funds from outside sources ..."¹. Other writers observe that the incipient stampepe academic libraries are engaged in, the struggle for adequate placing on budget priorities of

their institutions and rising costs provide the need for justification of their funding and therefore the need to evaluate them to determine how well they are performing.²⁻⁴

Three reasons may be adduced for library evaluation. First, a library may evaluate its services to determine how well it is performing and to justify its funding. Secondly, without evaluation, it is almost impossible to make any positive claim to a library's achievement; and thirdly, it is difficult to modify on-going programmes in a systematic way without evaluation. Library evaluation encourages library management to examine priorities and the extent of commitment to the provision of services that meet information needs of users.⁵ It enables libraries to remain relevant to the needs of their users. "Without any evaluation or performance measurement, there is a tendency for organisations to become chocked with services and operations which have outlived their usefulness, which never performed as well as was hoped, or which consume resources which could be used to greater effect elsewhere"⁶.

This paper reviews evaluative studies of three university libraries in Ghana.⁷⁻⁹ These are the University of Ghana, Legon, the University of Science & Technology (UST) in Kumasi and the University of Cape Coast. The paper considers in particular the methodologies adopted for the studies and the extent to which they proved satisfactory in measuring the effectiveness of reader services in the three libraries. Consideration is given to other methodologies and their strengths and weaknesses are compared.

METHODOLOGY

Each of the three studies in the main, adopted the client-centred approach or methodology. This is a subjective method which primarily depends on users' opinion or attitudes to measure the effectiveness of a library. This method involves the use of questionnaires or interviews or both. The subjective approach makes the user the unit of analysis. The assumption here is that such a user evaluation is a valid indicator of library performance. The subjective approach has received the tacit consent of authorities on library evaluation. They contend that some demands for materials are either too complex or too ambiguous to cope with the constraints of measures outside the subjective approach. Secondly, some of the services which users require can only be measured by the subjective method, and in such cases it is imperative that the user as the final consumer of these services becomes the most qualified person to evaluate the performance or effectiveness of such services.

It has been noted in support of these views that "in the process of information transfer, ... the ultimate evaluation must be from the view-point of the potential recipients ..."¹⁰ These arguments emphasize the subjective approach as a useful method in the evaluation of library performance. This is particularly so when its methodological application is sound and scientific. This is corroborated by an ardent critic of the subjective approach who observed that "It should be noted

... that subjective satisfaction as expressed and tested in more realistic form of users preferences, has in fact found methodological application in a number of studies".¹¹ User opinions therefore, remain a valid and potent measure of user satisfaction. It may be concluded that, in determining the degree of success with which a library performs, the ultimate authority, the library user, is the most logical source for an answer. This, among other reasons, explains why the client-centred approach has remained the popular method that runs through all the studies carried out in the three university libraries.

CLIENT-CENTRED APPROACH

Since the client centred approach mainly involves the use of questionnaires and interviewing, a need arises for the study of the population from which a sample is to be taken. This involves a comprehensive study of the library's community, their interests, their needs and the actual use they make of the library. This affords the researcher the chance of getting an intimate knowledge of the characteristics of the population which ultimately determines the appropriate sample to be selected, the methods to be adopted in the sample selection, the provision of justification for them and the selection of other data and information collection methods.

The use of the client-centred approach implies that users will be required to state their level of satisfaction. And that certain conditions should be met. In using the construct-user satisfaction, which is users' self reported degree of satisfaction of a library's services,¹² it is assumed that the higher the proportion of satisfied to dissatisfied users within a selected sample, the higher the presumed level of performance of the library. However, users in their assessment of the variety of collections, services and facilities that are generally considered to be important in the evaluation of library services should identify the various inadequacies and strengths. The results must be based on the scope of activities of the users within

the precincts of the library. The major instrumentation - the questionnaire - must have *face-validity*. "An instrument is assumed to have face validity when it appears to measure the variables it purports to measure and the situation in which it is used is accepted by the subjects as being reasonable."¹² The instrumentation must also have *content validity*. "An instrument is assumed to have content validity when it can be demonstrated that the content of the instrument samples adequately covers the subject matter about which conclusions are to be drawn."¹²

A cursory look at the three studies show that whilst some of these standards were met others were not. For instance, each of the three studies shows that the users were unable to identify the inadequacies and deficiencies of the various services they used in their respective libraries. This was in spite of the fact that the results of each study was based on the scope of users' activities within the precincts of the libraries in question. The questionnaires administered in each of the three studies had *face-validity*, in that, the instrumentation measured all that were intended to be measured. What is more, the intended purposes of each evaluation were clearly stated to the respondents. Above all, the questions were specific, succinct and relevant to the respondents' knowledge of their libraries. It appears therefore that the questionnaires, as a whole, exhibited reasonable face validity. There is also ample evidence that the questionnaires had content validity. This is because the questionnaires designed for each study posed questions that were addressed to a variety of collections, services and facilities that are generally considered crucial to the evaluation of library services. The questions were modelled on questionnaires used in other library evaluations. Also, the population of various campuses were intimately studied and appropriate sample methods were employed to determine and select the sample frame.

Finally, in each of the three studies, a sample of

three segments of users were required to give a verdict from a three scale level of performance; that is, very satisfactory, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The assumption being that the level of performance the majority in each of the three segments claimed to enjoy became that segment's self-reported degree of satisfaction it derived from the services, hence the performance of that library.

PROBLEMS

The reliability of the instrumentation - the questionnaire - is a core issue one must consider in accepting the validity of studies that adopt the client-centred approach. The issue is the extent to which instrumentation may be accepted to be reliable in each of the three studies. A look at some observations in a similar client-centred study is of considerable importance. Though the focus of the study was different, the observations are relevant: It was observed that: "While these arguments for assuming validity appear to be reasonable, they are by no means conclusive. There is still the possibility that one or more of them are fallacious, thereby calling into question the validity of this questionnaire and, by extension, the credibility of this and possibly other studies employing user-based evaluations of the library. However, if the assumptions that the users in this study were competent to evaluate the library and that the instrumentation was valid and true, then the results of this study raise some serious questions about user behaviour."¹²

Upon examination one finds that the UST study shows an apparent lack of relationship between users evaluation of specific collections and services and the performance of these services within the library from which one may draw the users self-reported degree of satisfaction. This is crucial viewed against the background that these collections constitute the pillar behind reader services function. There is also ample evidence in the UST study that library instruction which is central to the identification, retrieval of materials and

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use of services and facilities is poor, inadequate, deficient and ineffective. As a result, the main recipients of the library's user education programme, the students, show signs of ignorance of the retrieval tools and little knowledge of standard and quality reader services delivery. Hence, their expectation for standard and quality reader services delivery is nothing but low and seem to have been conditioned to accepting the type of services offered them in the library. Truly, user education is a kind of conditioning and so if the programme is not well structured, it may condition the recipient to have low expectations as a result of lack of awareness of what to expect. It is the same with the supporting staff who are also recipients of the impoverished user education programme. Though the teaching staff do not receive user education, it was expected that as a result of exposure to better library facilities outside the country and their long familiarity with the local library they would demand higher standard of services such as literature searching and bibliographic services. This was not the case. They seemed to have become conditioned to be satisfied with whatever services they could get from the UST library.

These observations support the philosophy of user-based studies which states that declared level of satisfaction is relative to user awareness. For this reason, the reliability of an instrumentation would be enhanced if the user population is adequately prepared, critically and effectively educated or has high level of user expectation and high level of awareness. At this point users develop high expectations and make greater demand for high standard and quality services. The UST study has proved the contrary. Similar conclusions were arrived at in the two other studies. It may be concluded that, users of the libraries under study seem to have overrated the little they did receive. Could it be that the users were not competent to give valid evaluation of the library services, resources and facilities? If this was the case, then serious questions could be raised about the credibility of the results. This is what unfolds

in the evaluation of reader services in the three university libraries.

In the light of the above, it has been suggested that users are not competent to give valid evaluations of library services. "It seems doubtful, to say the least, that results from subjective satisfaction measures could be taken seriously".¹¹ This statement assumes that other measures that are more reliable exist and could be adopted. What are these measures, one may ask? The search for an answer leads to the question, "beyond the client-centred approach, what next?", as the sub-title of this paper. It is submitted that book collections and other related materials can be evaluated by quantitative and qualitative methods and by usage.

QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

The absolute size of a collection is one means by which its utility may be measured. The assumptions here are that the larger the collection the greater the probability that it will be able to satisfy the information needs of its users. It is also generally agreed that there is a positive correlation between the size of a library, its usefulness, the quality of the academic institution it serves, and its ranking in terms of academic excellence. A library is unlikely to function effectively, and provide the variety of materials required for academic service, if its collection is below a certain minimum. The level of resources available to the library service ultimately determines the potential level of performance which can be expected of that service.

The Clapp-Jordan formula¹³ is one major collection-centred method which has survived the test of time. It is claimed that this formula can be used to measure the minimum adequacy of an academic library collection by the number of documents it contains, e.g. books, periodicals and government publications. The formula is written as:

$$V = 50,750 + 100F + 12E + 12H + 335U + 3050M + 24,500D; \text{ where}$$

F	-	Number of faculty
E	-	Total number of students enrolled
H	-	Number of undergraduate honours students
U	-	Number of major undergraduate subjects
M	-	Masters field offered
D	-	Doctoral fields offered
V	-	Volumes

and 50,750 is a constant that represents a minimum viable university library in number of volumes, and the series as enrichment factors. The efficacy of the formula, is however, dependent on two important factors. First, materials must be carefully selected to meet the objectives of the library. Second, the weeding of obsolete materials must be active and realistic.

A number of criticisms have been levelled against the Clapp-Jordan formula. First, the weight for the number of doctoral fields covered by a university is so large that it can possibly exert too much influence on the formula. Second, it provides a low estimate for the number of periodicals needed. Third, minimum standards set by the formula is at times taken for optimum levels and when this happens the rate at which materials are acquired may be altered, and this may affect the annual rate of growth. Its test may reveal that a library's collection may be inadequate to support rich and varied academic programmes offered by an institution, whilst in actual fact, it may be capable of supporting a particular educational programme. In a situation such as this, it is prudent that adequacy of an institution's resources be judged in terms of its programme. In spite of these criticisms, no other formula relating to collection size "appears to have aroused the same general interest as the Clapp-Jordan formula".¹³ Hence, for a long time to come the formula may remain in the librarian's tool kit.

Current expenditure has also been suggested as a valuable measure by which to evaluate a library's collection. However, in the UST, Legon and Cape

Coast settings, little or nothing could be achieved in the application of expenditure on the collections. This is because these libraries receive about 1% of annual university estimates and hence the libraries depend heavily on exchange, charity and donations. This state of affairs glaringly shows that not much is spent by the local libraries themselves on acquiring materials. The technique therefore, has insignificant application in the local setting.

QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

The use of standard lists (list-checking method) or holdings of other institutions with similar subject coverage is one of the qualitative approaches to the evaluation of the quality of library collections. This may be achieved by comparing a collection with the holdings of another library or an authoritative subject bibliography. Within the local setting, the list checking option is easy and can be implemented without any problem if one is able to identify a relevant list. It is therefore not surprising that many studies in this area have resorted to the use of the list-checking method. It is a reliable evaluator of quality. Level of collection use as reflected in statistics of circulation is another valuable indicator for studying the quality of collections. However, one cannot draw inferences about the total collection. It is useful for studying the quality of specific collections.

Stratified model

In spite of the numerous innovations and great strides in collection analysis, the issue is still beset with difficulties. As a partial solution to the problem, the American Library Association (ALA) in 1979 came out with a new measure which marked a departure from the practice of comparing collections to some ideal holdings elsewhere. The latter measure was designed to describe existing collections ('collection density') and the rate of collection growth ('collection intensity').

The scheme is difficult to apply in Ghana because collection development of the local university libraries is not based on such stratification. The

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processes are cumbersome and also their application require multistage effort, adequate time and funds to employ well trained and conditioned assistants.

Document exposure

Document exposure is defined as "the amount of time spent by an individual looking at, or listening to, a document."¹ Direct exposure occurs when a library user exploits library materials directly, and this transaction can be measured quantitatively by the number of items borrowed or consulted in the library, the number of photocopies made, and documents obtained by means of inter-library loan, *et cetera*. Indirect exposure takes place when a library staff communicates to an individual as a substitute for direct exposure. It can be measured by the number of informational requests answered either in person or by telephone or some other means. Three methods for measuring exposure of documents to library users are exposure counts, item-use days and exposure time. In exposure counts, every single use or exploitation of the library's resources counts as one exposure. This could be direct or indirect. Item-use days measure exposure by number of days of use. This means that if a library user uses an item within the library for part of the day, this may be counted as a single item-use day the period of time put in notwithstanding. But if the same item is borrowed for use outside the library for six days, this may be counted as six item-use days. Exposure time measures the actual hours of use of a borrowed item. The process is difficult and time consuming, and therefore it is not easy to undertake. A practical problem that arises is that of user co-operation.

Document delivery capability

This is a way of measuring the effectiveness of a library's document delivery service. Specifically, it measures a library's ability to make materials available to its users from its own stock or through inter-library loan. In either case the time it takes to satisfy a request is measured.

Document availability

Availability is defined as the proportion of expressed demand for documents that is satisfied in a given time period.¹ Document availability is measurable both in the closed and open access library. In the first case measuring is possible continuously whilst in the latter, some kind of sample survey would have to be undertaken. At an appropriate time all users of a library or a representative sample may be asked to record the identity of documents they are looking for, and their success in finding them. A single measure is not adequate to judge performance and therefore requires some repeated measures.

Information provision

This is one of the core services the reference section of every library provides, and the test for its quality has attracted a considerable amount of work. The provision of information involves a direct contact between the reference librarian and users at an enquiry desk, and for that matter a qualitative assessment of this can be measured by the answers to questions. Similarly, assessment can use the technique of unobtrusive testing. In this method, a sample of questions are prepared and posed anonymously through 'proxies.' It is reasonably cheap to administer. It does not disrupt routine activity. It is a useful indicator of reference service activity.

Literature searching

Literature searching is an important reader service and in a library where this activity is intensive and extensive, its effectiveness could be evaluated. In the local university libraries dominant users of the libraries - the students and faculty - come in to look for some few documents or references on a particular subject, and for which they either browse, consult the catalogues, some printed indexes or are assisted by a staff. From observation the bulk of reference activities that goes on involves the answering of directional and some factual questions. Therefore the literature searching method is not a measure that finds methodological application in university libraries

in Ghana.

DISCUSSION

The discussion has so far brought significant issues to the fore which are worthy of consideration. It has been demonstrated that there are two main methods for the evaluation of a library's effectiveness. These are the subjective method and the objective method. Judging the two by using standard criteria indicators, methods and measures of performance, it is observed that these indicators, methods and measures are useful approaches and techniques capable of evaluating or measuring whatever they purport to measure. They are relevant, helpful, valid, reliable, capable of being used for comparative purposes and are practicable. It has been demonstrated that the use of the subjective method - the client-centred approach - remains the most popular technique for the evaluation of the effectiveness of university libraries in Ghana. In spite of its qualities the client-centred approach has been found to be full of weaknesses. Among its faults are: "imprecision, incompleteness and irrelevance; above all they are completely inadequate to assess interaction between various operations and services, between related inputs and outputs. It is these shortcomings which the newer methods of evaluation attempt to overcome."

Beyond the client-centred approach is the objective method which is useful for the qualitative and quantitative assessment of resources, documents and utilization and methods that measure document exposure, delivery capability, document availability, provision of information and literature searching. It is believed that the latter methods have edge over the client-centred approach and therefore ought to be adopted in future evaluation of the effectiveness of reader services. However, in considering indicators, methods and measures of performance, prudent consideration must be given to the environmental setting and conditions within which libraries operate rather than by comparison with general patterns or norms. Each library supports a particular pro-

gramme or programmes and therefore performance measurement ought to assess the quality and extent of the services provided within the limits set by the level of resources available. It is in this context that performance measurement has a better appeal.

However, the latter indicators, methods and measurements need to be given a second look. An intimate examination brings out glaringly the lopsidedness of some of the quantitative measures and some aspects of the indicators of utilization. It comes out that in the areas such as document exposure, document delivery capability, document availability, literature searching and the use of the Clapp-Jordan formula, certain identified problems and difficulties make it difficult to employ these indicators. Similarly, collection analysis using the stratified multidimensional model has no application in the local setting. There are some inherent weaknesses in the aforementioned indicators, measures and methods irrespective of the place of use. There is no doubt that these quantitative and qualitative measures and the indicators of utilization have made their impact in the advanced countries where library provision and service make their application easier and where all the human and material resources needed can easily be reached.

CONCLUSION

One may agree to the observation that, "... to this point no adequate measures of effectiveness exist which could be utilized by university libraries.¹⁴ The truism is that, "as yet, there are no universally accepted measures, measuring units, or methods for the study of library effectiveness".¹⁵ But the question is, will there ever be a time that evaluators will reach consensus on measuring units, or the methods for the study of library effectiveness? Hernon is pessimistic: "... the profession cannot reach a consensus about which measures have the most utility and internal validity".⁵ What then do librarians do when they attempt to measure effectiveness of their readers' services? The answer would seem to be

to "Measure what they purport to measure and the fewest conceptual and practical weakness".⁵

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