

How to work together on an international project? Experiences from a benchmarking project of three European health libraries

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Abstract

International cooperation is an essential part of (health) library and information professionals' work. Three European health and medical libraries – the Library of the Health Sciences at Université catholique de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium, the Medicine and Health Library at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, and the Kuopio University Hospital Medical Library at the University of Eastern Finland Library, Kuopio, Finland – decided to collaborate in a benchmarking project. The project started in year 2013.

The purpose of this paper is to give a report of our benchmarking project so far, to explain the experience, and to discuss the challenges and opportunities of international library benchmarking. The aims of the project are to compare the library services, to learn from each other, and to find good practices.

The method of this paper is descriptive. We explain how we have cooperated, what have been our means and tools of communication, and how we have documented the project and the process.

The methods of the project are collaborative collection of data; observation and shadowing as well as structured and semi-structured interviews with library users and staff during the site visits; and a focus group with EAHL colleagues; collaborative blog writing; and learning by doing.

International benchmarking involves working hours and personal interest but also the support of the supervisors of the participating staff and the whole organisation. International benchmarking is challenging and rewarding. Aiming to provide good library and information services for students and staff involves constant evaluation and continuing development of the library's functions and staff competencies. In this, benchmarking can provide tools and suggestions as well as draw attention to different ways to manage a library.

International benchmarking is challenging but rewarding. It provides plenty of information and many new skills for information professionals as well as gives their organisations unique opportunities not only to compare facts and figures but also learn about staff attitudes and working cultures.

Keywords: benchmarking; international cooperation; librarians; libraries, medical; library services/statistical and numerical data

Background

International cooperation is an essential part of (health) library and information professionals' work. Three European health and medical libraries – the Library for Health Sciences (BSS) at Université catholique de Louvain (UCL), Brussels, Belgium, the Medicine and Health Library (BMH) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim (NTNU), Norway, and the Kuopio University Hospital (KUH) Medical Library at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) Library, Kuopio, Finland – decided to collaborate on a benchmarking project. The project started in year 2013.

The library director of UEF proposed the project. UEF has since introduced the proposal for benchmarking project between the three universities in February 2013. The original project plan (1) was written in October 2012 by UEF. It sets the aim, introduces the tools, suggests some topics and methods, as well as proposes a further, bigger project.

The other two library directors have supported the project mainly by agreeing on their staff spending time on the project. The funding sources for the visits came from Erasmus staff exchange programme and from the libraries' budgets. Costs have been kept to a minimum as we mainly work online.

A collaborative project with three enthusiastic participants does not need a project leader. We are equal in all decisions and our roles (for example one setting up the blog and organising meeting agendas, another one taking a closer look at the ISO indicators, and another one taking the leading role in the focus group, only to mention a few) are based on our personalities and competencies, previous knowledge and experience, and mutual understanding of time constraints, working cultures and individual factors.

History says that shoemakers, taking measure for shoes, first used the term benchmarking. The former placed someone's foot on a bench to draw the model for the shoes. Today, benchmarking is most commonly used to measure performance using a specific indicator, for example cost per unit or time per unit.

Instead of measuring feet size or cost and time expenses, our project is a best-practice benchmarking project. This kind of benchmarking is used especially in strategic management, through which organisations evaluate various aspects of their activities in relation to best or better practices in other organisations. This comparison allows organizations to make improvements or adapt to a best - or better – practice, usually with the aim of increasing some aspect of performance. Benchmarking may be a one-time event, but is often a continuous process.

Aims

“Benchmarking should be seen as the beginning of a journey of discovery – not as an end in itself. The aim should be to learn more about your service by comparing its impact with that of the others – not to secure a place in a table of merit.” (2)

The purpose of the project is to compare services among our libraries in order to find and implement best practices. We wanted to get ideas, solutions and examples on

- Library space planning in general and for the library as a learning space;
- How others teach IL and how they integrate information skills training in curricula;
- Marketing and promoting library services, and finding new ideas for social media and other platforms for communication;
- Integrating library services in student/researcher/clinician work;
- Collaboration with other university services like ICT and student services.

The purpose of this paper is to give a report on our benchmarking project so far, and to explain the experience and the tools we have used.

We are eager to share our experience with our EAHIL colleagues in order to encourage similar activities among libraries and information professionals. "European medical librarians and information workers have a great deal in common, regardless of the institution they work for or the country where they live. EAHIL aims to improve library services to the health professions by cooperation and shared experience across national boundaries" (3) and we think benchmarking can be used as a method.

Methods

The method of this paper is descriptive. We explain how we have cooperated, what have been our means and tools of communication, and how we have documented the project and the process.

The methods of the project are:

- Collaborative collection of data,
- Observation and shadowing,
- Structured and semi-structured interviews with library users and staff,
- A focus group with EAHIL colleagues,
- Collaborative blog writing,
- Learning by doing.

Tools and methods for cooperation

When three people, from three different countries, using four different languages, want to work together, on the same documents, there are specific solutions to be used.

We decided to use Dropbox to save all documents in a shared folder after language concerns experienced using Google Docs/Drive. Just before the site visits, we started a blog called *Benchmarking project of three European health libraries* to report activities and main findings. The blog moreover helps us to stay active and to keep deadlines. Blog posts are written collaboratively both during meetings and in between. We chose to use WordPress because we were familiar with the interface. For the online meetings, we started using Skype but we finally preferred Google Hangouts because of better audio and video functionalities. Luckily, we had also the possibility to meet in person at least once a year.

Data collection

At the beginning of the project, we collected and shared plenty of statistical information about our libraries and universities. The plan was to compare the activities and results. Areas of concern were

- Library areas, facilities and equipment;
- Services for the public, including loan, ILL and user training;
- Collection management, bibliographic records;
- Institutional repository;
- Library staff, both number and staff training;
- Financial data.

Statistical data is more usable and valuable when compared with others or with own data over time. Hence, the questions are: Which statistics are comparable? How to compare them? (4)

Statistical data must be seen in their context. As an example we can look at the use of library collections and number of loans. Elements affecting this data are the size of the universities, the size and age of the collection, how up-to-date it is, the number of acquisitions per year, the number of users, the number of e-books and e-journals, of printed books replaced by e-books, the way potential users are made aware of the collections, among others. The same applies to many of the other areas we have looked into.

Our starting point for benchmarking were three quite similar libraries, serving both university and hospital, and with quite similar user groups. We had hoped to compare their financial data, but this was difficult because both libraries and universities are neither organised nor financed in the same way. Financial data can be useful as background.

To make this data comparable, we selected three International Standard Organisation (ISO) indicators (5):

- *User area per capita (B.1.3.1)*, is used to assess the importance of the library as a place for study, meeting, and as a learning centre.
- *Staff per capita (B.1.4.1)* is used to assess the amount of work done by the library staff related to the population to be served.
- *User Services staff as a percentage of total staff (B.3.3.1)* is used to determine the library's effort devoted to public services in relation to the background services.

Library visits

While visiting all the three involved libraries, we held discussions with their directors. The latter are keen to compare both financial and other data.

Our main activities during the visits were:

- Interviewing library users about why and how they use the library space (6);
- Interviewing library staff members about their job and role in their library, and their views on the meaning and impact of their work and of the library in general (7);
- Looking at the physical space and collection organisation;
- Learning about staff organisation, relationships between library and hospital, and between the library and the university.

First, we spent a week in October 2014 in Trondheim. As the BMH is brand new, and we all are very interested in library space planning, we took an extensive tour in the modern library. That gave the visiting members of the group many useful tips, e.g. about furniture and lightning. We also explored two other topics: information literacy training and library services marketing. These activities are part of a "visible librarian" strategy: the library staff goes to the customer, and shows up on campus, in the places where the users actually are, also out of the library.

Then, we had a week in November 2014 in Belgium. On the main campus of UCL, in Louvain-la-Neuve, we had a meeting with the team behind the libraries' marketing project called « *Biblio-Jack* » (8). This is a modern and fun way to teach students the basics about how to use the university library. We also learned about DIAL, the university's institutional repository, and visited the recently opened new library and learning centre for science and technology. UCL is situated on five separate campuses, the longest distance between them being 120 km, from Woluwe to Tournai. Finally, we visited Kuopio for a week during December 2014. We had an online discussion about information literacy teaching with the head of learning and information services, a colleague from UEF Joensuu campus that is situated 137 km from Kuopio. At UEF, online meetings (video or Skype) are part of everyday life. We talked about online courses, their integration in the curricula, collaboration with academics, quality criteria, feedback from the students, and peer evaluation. In addition to discussions with other library staff members, we visited the National Repository Library (*Varastokirjasto*) that receives, stores, and delivers material from and to all kinds of libraries in Finland.

Focus group with EAHIL colleagues

In late May 2015, we invited EAHIL colleagues to take part in our project by commenting and discussing benchmarking as a method. The focus group session took place at the EAHIL+ICAHIS+ICLC workshop in Edinburgh, June 2015. (9) We invited the participants to comment on the project and their interest in benchmarking both before and after the session.

A focus group is a moderated discussion with 5 to 10 participants. The purpose is to obtain a range of opinions from a representative set of people to create a picture of the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and reactions to concepts shared among participants. Focus group is a qualitative method. Its results cannot be generalized to a population but can indicate trends and recurrent features and patterns.

Results

In this paper we focus mainly on the results from the library visits and the library as a learning space as well as on the meaning of libraries. As the project unfolds, we will report in later papers or presentations on data comparisons and indicators.

User interviews

We asked users in each library the same three questions about their use of the library space:

- What do you use this library for?
- Why do you (study/read/work/group work) right here?
- Where would you study if the library did not exist?

In Trondheim, there were eight different spots or areas where we talked to individual users, pairs of users and groups of users. In Brussels, there were six different spots and we talked to individual users only as there is no space for group work in the library. In Kuopio, we have chosen five different spots and talked to five individual users, as there were then no rooms for group work.

People in the libraries, mostly students, were reading lecture notes and other study material, discussing/talking, writing lab reports and research papers, doing group work, searching for information, using library and their own books, using their own laptops and library computers. These activities were similar in the three libraries.

Users appreciated somewhat different aspects of the libraries' space. In Trondheim, they mention the comfort of the furniture, the satisfactory silence level and the possibility to work together as well as the availability of computers and reference material. In Brussels, they appreciated to be part of a studying community, a good study atmosphere, the silence and the constant availability of the librarian to enforce this studious atmosphere. The availability of Wi-Fi, of computers and the possibility to search for information were mentioned as well. The natural daylight, the ventilation and the warmth were also appreciated. In Kuopio, the access to the computers was important; quiet and having the possibility to sit by the window were valued.

If the library did not exist, most of the users in BMH would have chosen to stay at home instead of using the "too silent" reading rooms. In BSS, on the contrary, the users would not have stayed at home or in the dorm. If the library did not exist, they would sit in a study room on campus, even if it is too noisy. In KUH library, most of the interviewees would have gone to the learning centre or to the campus library and one would have studied at home.

To conclude, our learning points for planning libraries as learning spaces include:

- Availability of spaces for both individual and collaborative work,
- Opportunity for both silent and semi-silent work or study,
- Access to computers and Wi-Fi,
- Natural daylight.

Discussions with library staff

In interviews with the library staff members, the starting point was about roles and value:

- What is your role in this library?
- Why do you work here?
- What is the meaning/purpose of your work here?
- What value does the library (and your role in it) add to the university?
- What would it mean if the library did not exist/provide the services?
- In your opinion, is the library doing the right things/providing the right services?

The method turned out to be very useful. Staff members were willing to share, and what started as interviews soon turned into collegial discussions. We found ourselves taking part in processes where people reflect on their work. It seemed possible for them to talk about the meaning of their work and the value of library for outsiders. These fruitful discussions ended by this statement: If libraries did not exist, they would have to be invented.

Even if their supervisor was present, the meeting was not official and there were no organisational objectives. It seemed staff members were able and willing to speak freely. There were no “right answers” but opinions and views. We ended up finding the value of the library as a whole together – in connection to each person’s tasks in their library. This was an opportunity to connect needs expressed by users with staff views. This benefits directly the local library manager, and indirectly colleagues, by driving their attention on the qualitative results of a meaningful discussion. It can be used to trigger, and develop, a more user-oriented activity.

Advice from the focus group

Ten EAHIL colleagues took part in our focus group session (10). The topics discussed and results, very briefly explained, were:

- Data comparison: discussion about library quality assurance in different countries; advice on using indicators in order to measure progress.
- Our site visits: agreed that interviewing the students has given useful information but advised also to think about what we could learn from non-users.
- Marketing: suggested that marketing could be one of our main focuses and that EAHIL should have a new dedicated Special Interest Group (SIG).
- How the project should proceed: suggested to figure out what we want to measure at this point, that we use indicators, and that we must focus on fewer topics.

Conclusions

International benchmarking

- Involves working hours and personal interest but also the support of the supervisors of the participating staff and of the whole organisation;
- Aims at providing good library and information services for students and staff
- Involves constant evaluation and continuing development of the library's functions and staff competencies;
- Provides tools and suggestions as well as draw attention to different ways of managing a library;
- Is challenging but rewarding;
- Provides plenty of information and many new skills for information professionals as well as provides their organisations with unique opportunities not only for facts and figures comparison but also for learning about staff attitudes and working cultures.

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