

Sustaining Communities

Measuring the Value of Public Libraries

PHASE ONE

A REVIEW
OF RESEARCH
APPROACHES

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Executive Summary

Public librarians today work and manage in a complex operating environment, one dimension of which is a climate of accountability and transparency. In this climate of accountability, public librarians must be able to convince funding bodies and stakeholders that libraries are making valuable and worthwhile contributions to their communities. In this environment, performance assessment has moved beyond measuring effective service delivery to library users to demonstrating how public libraries create more indirect outcomes and impacts for the local community and for the nation's society overall.

The NSW Public Library Network Research Committee has initiated a large scale research project to explore and then measure the contributions made by NSW public libraries to the communities they serve. This report is the first stage in a multi-stage research project and has been prepared as context within which to consider the issues facing public libraries seeking to demonstrate their impact and value.

The report is a literature review, primarily of assessment and evaluation research in the fields of library and information science and cultural studies. The primary intent was to examine the various research approaches taken in recent years to investigate and demonstrate the impact and value of public libraries, and to identify important themes and issues facing researchers in this area.

Challenges identified include a lack of clarity surrounding the concepts being investigated, the cumulative and often long term nature of impact, and the difficulties of measuring impact, with cause and effect being difficult to establish when a range of factors possibly influence broad societal impacts. Further, while it may be relatively straightforward to assess the direct and tangible benefits of using of public libraries, individual users and non-users tend not to see the indirect and intangible benefits of their use of public libraries, making it more difficult to gather data about this aspect of impact or value. A final caution relates to the nature of the social and economic contribution of cultural agencies, including public libraries, to the well-being of the community. The contribution is just that – a contribution, one that arises as a by-product of the core service of the cultural agency or library. Managers and policy makers risk neglecting the performance of the service itself if they focus too much attention on demonstrating the indirect social and economic benefits of the service.

Recent research is broadly grouped into studies of economic impact and studies of social impact. The dual focus of the studies reviewed confirmed *sustainability* as a useful way of framing the larger research project, offering an opportunity to demonstrate the value of public libraries through the contribution they make to sustaining their communities. The studies reported in the reviewed literature are characterised by variety, both in overall methodological approach and in the research methods consequently used. Reasons for this

variety include the acknowledged complexity of the undertaking, differing research aims, which should lead to different research approaches and methods, and the debates over methods most appropriate for this type of research. Less attention was paid in the report to the findings of empirical studies demonstrating impact and value, although key research have been summarised in the annotated bibliography in Appendix One.

Recommendations include clarifying both the purpose of the NSW public libraries study and expectations about how the findings will be used. A research design based on mixed methods and techniques is recommended as the design most likely to provide the data needed to show how public libraries contribute to the NSW community. The research should allow measurement of direct and indirect, tangible and intangible impacts, as well as use and non-use value. Further the research design should be scaleable to allow replication by other public libraries.

The report concludes that, despite the methodological minefield and the very real difficulties in measuring outcomes, or impact or value of public library services, this is an important exercise for public libraries to undertake.

Public Libraries

Contributing to Sustainable Communities

INTRODUCTION

Public librarians today work and manage in an “environment characterised by conflicting, competing and ill-defined forces” [that is,] “the state, the civil society and the market” (Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004, p. 331). Part of this complex operating environment is the climate of accountability and transparency in which public institutions, including libraries, find themselves responding to demands to show they are making valuable and worthwhile contributions to their communities (e.g. Aabø and Audunson, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Holt et al, 1996; Wavell, et al, 2002). Although public libraries have always been accountable to their funding bodies – required to demonstrate efficient resource management and effective service delivery to meet the needs of their communities – demands are growing to provide evidence of value for taxpayer dollar invested.

These growing demands come at a time when library services are increasingly reliant on technology and during a period of significant demographic change in Western societies, coupled with the advent of the so-called *information society* (Coalter, 2001; Kerslake and Kinnell, 1997). This combination of circumstances results in demands for increased funding to support more and varied services and programs. Further some writers see the very *raison d’être* of public libraries being challenged (Buschman, 2003). Politically, public libraries “depend on their legitimacy” for survival – the public perception that they are “valuable, up-to-date”

(Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004, p. 330) and in this current climate, there are calls for a “debate about the meaning, function and impact of public libraries” (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1997).

One response to these challenges has been to show not only that public libraries deliver valued services to library users, but also how they create more indirect outcomes for individuals, for the local community and for the nation’s society overall. Since the 1990s, much research and evaluation effort has gone into projects aiming to convince various audiences that public libraries are a valuable resource for the whole community, well worth the investment of taxpayer dollars. Projects include economic impact analyses (e.g. McClure, et al, 2000; Morris et al, 2000), social audits (e.g. Linley and Usherwood, 1998) and case studies (e.g. Matarasso, 1998; Toyne and Usherwood, 2001). Most recently in Australia, the State Library of Victoria study, *Libraries / Building / Communities* (2005) provided evidence of how public libraries “add value to the community” (Executive Summary, p. 7), framing the research against the Victorian Government’s policy objective of “nurtur[ing] more resilient, active, confident communities” (Executive Summary, p. 6).

NSW public librarians are also seeking to demonstrate the value of their libraries in a way that is meaningful to government, stakeholders and to the communities they serve, within a context relevant to current NSW Government policy. Generally, arguments underpinning funding for public libraries are based on value

judgements and not on rigorous evidence that can be used to develop robust policy. NSW public librarians are concerned that increasingly this situation may result in critical reviews of both the level and pattern of current funding. As a proactive response to this issue, the NSW Public Library Network Research Committee has initiated a large scale research project to explore and then measure the contributions made by public libraries to the communities they serve. This report is the first stage in this multi-stage research project, and was prepared to provide the context within which to consider the issues facing public libraries seeking to demonstrate their impact and value.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DEFINITIONS

This report reviews the library and information science literature on impact assessment and value, as well, as the broader cultural studies work on assessment and evaluation. The report provides an overview of the various research approaches taken in recent years to demonstrate this value, such as economic impact studies and social audits, project evaluations and case studies. Further, it identifies key themes and issues surrounding the concept of the value of public libraries. However, it does not aim to be either a comprehensive review of the broad assessment and evaluation literature nor an exhaustive analysis of possible methodologies and research approaches.

The research method was a desk-based critical analysis of the literature, focusing mainly on Western, developed countries – in North America, Europe, including the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia. Most material cited was published in the 1990s or later, although some earlier work was included if especially pertinent. The main components of the body of work analysed were literature reviews, empirical studies demonstrating the value of libraries, and pieces of one-off research such as project evaluations. Searching was primarily conducted during January to February 2005, although monitoring of research publications continued up to submission of the report, in October 2005. Analysis of the existing literature reviews was augmented by database searches using the terms used below:

- Value, libraries
- Worth, libraries
- Value of libraries
- Public libraries, sustainable
- Libraries, cost benefit analysis
- Public value
- Impact assessment, libraries
- Impact studies, libraries

The report draws heavily on several recent comprehensive literature reviews of the differences that libraries, especially public libraries, make in the lives of individual users and their local communities: Coalter, 2001; Debono, 2002; Fitch and Warner, 1999; Kerslake and Kinnell, 1997; McCallum and Quinn, 2004; Morris, et al, 2000; Wavell, et al, 2002. The work of these researchers has helped the author invaluablely and their contribution is acknowledged.

This report does not seek to replicate those literature reviews but draws from them issues and challenges facing researchers in this area. Accordingly, the findings of the major empirical studies are not considered in the body of the report although they have been included in the annotated bibliography in Appendix One. In summary, major themes of these findings include:

- the great potential of public libraries to contribute to both personal and societal outcomes and impacts
- the variability between individual libraries in the degree to which they do contribute
- the difficulty in assessing the indirect and intangible outcomes associated with public libraries and their use
- a focus on social and economic outcomes
- variation in the nature of research methods and techniques used
- range of different reasons for undertaking the research.

Before considering the different research approaches taken to understanding and demonstrating the value of libraries, a review of the terminology and definitions will provide additional context.

Definitional debates

Impact assessment, outcomes measurement, value – there is little consensus in the literature of either the library or the cultural industries on the meaning and appropriate use of these terms (Wavell, et al, 2002), with many researchers and writers using one or more terms, sometimes interchangeably and often without any explanations.

An *outcome* is the difference a library visit makes in various aspects of the user's life, according to Lance, et al (2001). These researchers see "measurable impact" as deriving from use of a library service, and position *outcomes* evaluation as an attempt to show the impact made by public library services on "people's lives" (p. 3). Debono (2002, p. 83) takes a similar approach, concluding the "dominant definition" of *impact* in the literature is "one of meaning, difference, experience and influence", and noting impact may be immediate or cumulative. This definition suggests a neutral stance to what public libraries may contribute, though many studies focus purely on the positive impacts.

However, other scholars and researchers clearly differentiate outcomes and impact. For example, Davies (2002, p. 131) positions *outcomes* as the "contribution ... to the activities of users" whereas *impacts* are "the 'macro' effects of the service on its environment", a position shared by researchers at the Cultural Heritage Consortium (2002). Cram (1999) also distinguishes impact from outcome but in a different way – seeing impact as the effect of the service which may translate into either a beneficial or a negative outcome; she goes on to argue that measuring value means measuring those *realised benefits*. For McClure and Bertot (1998, p. 5), *benefit* is "something that from the *user's perspective* (original italics) markedly improved their personal, educational, economic, or other key aspect of their lives", and so apparently a positive outcome or impact.

Impact assessment is defined by one professional body as a “process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action” (International Association for Impact Assessment, 2005). Impact assessments, then, can be seen as a response to political demand, to demonstrate an organisation is meeting the policy targets set for it (Information Management Associates and David Hayes Associates, 2000).

Value is most often used in the context of economic value. Although Griffiths and King (1994) note the differences in economic terms between *economic value* - what people pay for goods or services – and *economic worth* – what is gained or derived from their purchase, this distinction is not made consistently throughout the literature reviewed. This latter concept of economic worth seems to have more in common with the meaning assigned to *impact* – that is, the difference made, although this difference may not always be observable.

The economic paradigm is not the only prism through which to assess the value of a service. Von Wistinghausen (2004), for example, challenges the reliance of economic impact studies as the best or preferable way to help demonstrate to policymakers “how much of society’s limited resources are to be invested in [the Cultural agency’s] activities”. Further, he argues this reliance takes attention away from the real reasons for funding cultural agencies, which are to do with “stewardship and scholarship” and that demonstrating value is about “*effective* (original emphasis) delivery of core mission and purpose”.

Framework for assessing library performance

In the light of the discussion above, it is desirable to position the current value research in a broader context of library performance assessment.

The recent interest in demonstrating benefits to the wider community has moved the performance assessment focus beyond outputs measurement to outcomes assessment and the demonstration of value. While a number of frameworks provide options for assessing how well public libraries are performing (e.g. Cram, 1999; Griffiths and King, 1994; IER Planning, Research and Management Services, 1998; National Information Standards Organisation, 2001), it is important to keep in mind that providing evidence of value is only one aspect of performance assessment and to situate the PLNRC research in that broader performance assessment context.

The Griffiths and King model (1994) in Figure 1 provides an overview of library assessment. The model has been expanded to include value assessment, which is conceptualised as deriving from effective and efficient service delivery, service outcomes and societal impact.

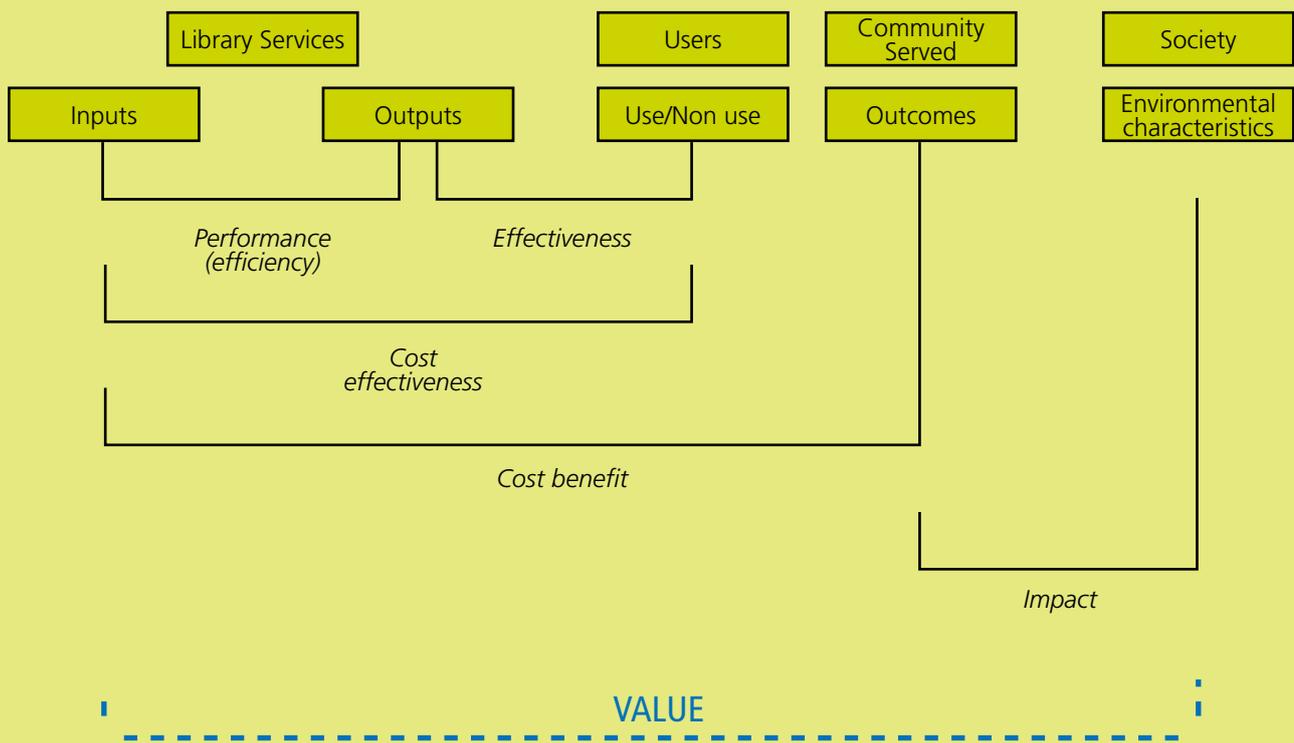


Figure 1: Framework for assessing library performance
Based on Griffiths and King, 1994, p. 89

In this report, when discussing the content drawn from the literature, terminology and definitions remain as intended by the original authors. Otherwise the terms outcomes, impact and value are used as outlined above, with impact and value encompassing the broad purpose of this research project.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES RAISED IN THE LITERATURE

As public libraries move beyond counting the often more tangible outputs, such as book loans, methodological challenges surface. Reflecting these challenges, the studies reported in the reviewed literature are characterised by variety, both in overall methodological approach and in the research methods consequently used. There are two important reasons for this variety.

Firstly, different research purposes and aims should result in different research approaches and methods. Thus, research that aims to assess the impact of public libraries is likely to focus on both social and economic impact whereas the underlying reason for the economic impact analysis of McClure et al (2000) is the conviction that an economic justification of the public library is essential to achieve ongoing funding, that “public libraries increasingly must justify the amount of public money they receive” (p. 2-1).

Coupled with demands for justification is the perceived need for hard data, generally equated with quantitative research methods, for use as evidence to support decision making (Holt et al, 1998). For example, Bundy (2000) argues that qualitative research findings “have little value in the political bargaining arena”. The traditional public good argument that supported publicly funded cultural activity, including public libraries, is given “short shrift” (Ellis, 2003, p. 4) in this environment of dominating economic theory and the demand for quantifiable hard evidence.

However, not all public administrators equate robust inquiry with quantitative methods. For example, the UK Cabinet Office (c2004) acknowledges the need for a range of different types of data in providing evidence for public decision-making, noting that it is less a question of either one approach or another, and more a question of the most appropriate mix of research methodology and methods. Support for this position on the need for hard evidence that proves cause and effect comes from Matarasso (1998, p. 5) who argues that public policy decisions are made based on the “balance of probability” rather than on the elimination of reasonable doubt”. This stance is reflected in the evaluation of public libraries and their services, where there is increasing acceptance that qualitative data is appropriate for some research questions, such as evaluating the societal impact of public libraries (e.g. Linley and Usherwood, 1998). Added support for a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods comes from Bundy (2000) and Debono (2002), while others call for better use to be made of existing quantitative data and telling a fuller story by complementing the quantitative analyses with qualitative data (Coalter, 2001).

The second reason for the variety that characterises research and evaluation into public libraries is the acknowledged complexity of the undertaking (Davies, 2002). The lack of clarity surrounding the concepts being investigated was discussed earlier in this paper (pages 7-8). As well, researchers caution about the difficulties of measuring outcome or impact, for example, cause and effect are difficult to establish with a range of factors possibly influencing outcomes and societal impacts (Cultural Heritage Consortium, 2002). Related to these problems is the cumulative and often long term nature of impact. The nature of the public library and its services also contributes to this complexity.

Public libraries are a hybrid organisation in economic terms, providing a mix of public and private goods and services. Further, they generate a mix of direct and indirect, tangible and intangible benefits for both the individual user and for society, both today and into the future.

	Direct	Indirect
Tangible	e.g. book lending	e.g. improved literacy
Intangible	e.g. increased personal well-being from attending programs	e.g. attracting new business to the community

Table 1: Benefits from public library services

The mix of tangible and intangible, direct and indirect economic benefits from public libraries includes, for example, purchasing materials, supporting new and relocating businesses as a resource, providing resources for job seekers, attracting people to the shopping precinct (Coalter, 2001). And while business resources in the library are of value in their own right, they are even more valuable “in the presence of the expertise of the library staff” (McClure, et al, 2000, p. ix). Public libraries also increase the “economic value of a community” by attracting new businesses to locate, homebuyers, tourists and others (Fitch and Warner, 1999, quoting Cooper and Crouch, 1994, p. 233) – to the extent that property appraisers look at the location of the public library when assessing property values. Improving literacy within the community delivers benefits to the community as well as to individual program participants and library users, for example, ameliorating the estimated annual \$1.6 billion cost of illiteracy to Canadian businesses (Fitch and Warner, 1999).

It is relatively straightforward to assess the direct and tangible benefits of using public libraries (Holt, et al, 1998). However, although well-used community institutions, public libraries are not “community-based” organisations, that is, they do not always evoke a strong sense of “community ownership, community management or accountability” (Harris, 1998, p. 2). As a result, while individual users are able to describe and

assign value to the direct benefits, they may be less able to see the indirect and intangible benefits of their use. Examples include the time or money they have saved or the better decisions they have made (Oppenheim, 1986) or the ways in which the community as a whole has benefited (Harris, 1998). By their nature, these indirect intangible benefits are almost invisible. A sense of community, the “therapeutic role” (Proctor, et al, 1998, p. 100), the opportunity to participate in the *information society* are other examples of indirect benefits not readily apparent to members of a local community or individual users.

A final comment on measuring the indirect value of the library, derived from attributes other than public library collections and services, relates to the ways in which this value is created. Ellis (2003) argues that the social and economic contribution of cultural agencies, which are taken to include public libraries, is just that – a contribution, one that arises as a *by-product* of the core service/product of the cultural agency. Ellis (2003, p. 3) goes on to contend that by focusing solely on measuring the indirect social and economic benefits, policy makers and public sector managers “risk ... damaging the underlying asset through neglect”.

RECENT RESEARCH INTO PUBLIC LIBRARIES' VALUE TO THE COMMUNITY

The following summary of recent research is broadly grouped into studies of economic impact and studies of social impact. Selected studies only are discussed in detail here. The reader will find a more detailed overview of findings in the annotated bibliography in Appendix One or the literature reviews cited on page 6 of this report. Those studies selected for inclusion in the following section are either major ones, or of particular methodological interest. The discussion focuses on methods and related issues rather than reporting the findings, which appear in the annotated bibliography.

Economic studies

The complex and varied nature of public library services and use (McClure, et al, 2000) makes assessing the economic effects of public library services difficult and researchers have come at this challenge in a number of different ways.

Economic impact analysis seeks to demonstrate the nature and extent of an organisation's impact on the local, regional or national economy, in terms of "new dollars [attracted] to the regions" (McClure, et al 2000: p. 2-2, quoting Holt, et al, 1998, p.99). Economic impact analyses have been carried out for several libraries (e.g. Barron, et al, 2005; Haratsis, 1995, cited in McCallum and Quinn, 2004; Sawyer, 1996), with all studies reporting a positive economic impact. However, Holt et al (1998) rejected economic impact analysis as a method appropriate to local libraries, arguing that public libraries are "fundamentally different" from cultural organisations such as museums, which are in a position to attract visitors to a region. Holt and his colleagues preferred cost-benefit analysis as a more appropriate method (summarised on page 13 of this report).

A different approach to assessing economic impact was used for the research into the **economic value** of the British Library – Contingent Valuation Method (CVM). CVM is a survey-based technique frequently used when valuing non-market resources in which use and non-use values can be estimated (Carson, 2000). Respondents to survey questions are presented with a hypothetical scenario and are asked to state their willingness to pay (or less commonly their willingness to accept compensation) in dollars for a change in amenity. The British Library study demonstrated that Library's contribution is on several dimensions: economic, cultural, social and intellectual (Pung, et al, 2004) concluding the British Library contributed £4.4 to the national economy for every £1 invested.

Although CVM is widely used for valuing non-market goods, the method is not without its detractors (Carson, 2000). Problems with CV analyses stem from strategic, information or hypothetical biases (Harik, 1999). For example, *information bias* might surface in a CV analysis of public library value because survey respondents need to have sufficient familiarity with the goods or services being valued to be able to assess that value to them. Continuing the example, while respondents are likely to be familiar with borrowing/buying books and so be able to place a dollar value on them, they may be less aware of indirect and intangible benefits such as social cohesion and empowerment.

Despite these concerns, Aabø and Audunson (2002) contend that CVM offers a promising approach to demonstrating public library value, as long as certain conditions are met. As an economics-based methodology, studies using CVM are based on two core assumptions of economic theory: that people behave rationally and that their actions are driven by self interest. However, Aabø and Audunson argue that when valuing public libraries and their services, it is important to use definitions which include motivation beyond narrow individual self-interest. This expansion allows the value that derives from non-use of the public library to be recognised and measured. This non-use value comes from the “benefits that third parties or the population as a whole derive when individuals use a service” (Holt, et al, 1998). Thus the CVM valuation must acknowledge, as well as direct use value, the value which may derive from the “mere presence” of public libraries (Aabø and Strand, 2004, p. 354), recognising that people are motivated by more than direct self-interest. Importantly, Aabø’s research found non-use value represents an “important component” of the total value of public libraries (Aabø and Strand, 2004, p. 364).

Cost Benefit Analysis is another method used to assess economic impact, for example, the analysis of St Louis Library Services carried out by Holt et al, 1998. The St Louis researchers considered taking the economic impact approach, discussed above, but concluded that a cost benefit analysis was a more appropriate method, arguing that because libraries have only a small short-term economic impact on their communities, the economic impact analysis method was likely to be misleading. However, in order to simplify the work involved in the analysis, the St Louis researchers omitted consideration of the intangible benefits and focused on direct and tangible goods and services, which could be more readily quantified in financial terms.

Return on investment (ROI) is a “measure of how well management has used all the permanent funds entrusted to the organisation” (Portugal, 2000, p. 9). Expressed as a ratio (income:assets), ROI is intuitively useful and apparently simple to implement but difficulties arise because it is not a “clearly defined ratio” (Portugal, 2000, p. x) and different organisations may define income and assets differently. Perhaps more importantly, although costs are relatively easy to determine, the benefits, especially the indirect or intangible benefits, are complex and inter-related. ROI is not frequently used to assess a library’s contribution (Cram, 1999) presumably because of the problems quantifying indirect or intangible benefits. However, one study, in Florida (Miami-Dade Public Library, 2000, cited in McClure et al, 2000) calculated an ROI by concentrating on benefits and impacts to local and state businesses, so side-stepping the problem of quantifying social benefits to the community.

A more innovative approach to assessing public libraries’ contributions to the local economy comes from Liu (2004) who looked at a little studied area of the contribution of a nation’s public libraries to the national economy using a statistical method called **path analysis**. Taking literacy as the variable to be tested, his study looked at public libraries in developing and developed countries and found a causal relationship between public libraries, literacy rates and economic productivity, with libraries having a direct effect on literacy levels and an indirect effect on nations’ economic productivity.

Time allocation method was used in a NSW study to establish a full cost of use of the public library, operationalising the library *product* as the “information derived from use of library materials” (Briggs, et al, 1996, p.3). This is one of earlier studies looking at both economic and social impacts and is discussed more fully in the next section on social impact assessment.

Economic analyses — issues

Several issues emerged in the discussions of studies into the economic effect of libraries. As long ago as 1988, Lancaster (quoted in McClure, et al, 2000, p. 2-7) suggested a “true cost benefit” analysis of library services is not achievable because of the intangible nature of the benefits of information services, which cannot be expressed in the same units as the costs. The challenges facing researchers attempting to demonstrate the economic value of libraries include:

- a lack of appropriate assessment tools
- the situation that most of the benefits may flow to community members who are often invisible, and
- the difficulties, perhaps impossibility of demonstrating a statistical causal relationship (Debono, 2002) across a broad range of benefits.

Further support for Lancaster’s position comes from Colalter (2001), who concludes the economic impacts of public library services are primarily indirect ones and so are more difficult, if not impossible to assess.

In contrast, other researchers argue the full range of benefits (economic, cultural, social) can be captured through economic impact analysis. In support of economics-based studies, Hawkins et al (2001) argue that public libraries provide few unique services that is, for most services there is an alternative source of good or service, although their modelling is based on the direct and tangible service of book loans to individuals, and so ignores the broader and more intangible societal benefits. McClure et al (2000) also feel the contributions of public libraries can be assessed economically and reported these beneficial contributions result from “increase[ing] and sustain[ing] local prosperity, decrease[ing] poverty for individuals and for particular areas, and ensur[ing] the survival of a range of cultural producers”, with their findings indicating that public library users believe “libraries

contribute to their financial well-being, provide economic benefits to local businesses and support the prosperity of the community” (p. vii).

A final caution about relying on economics-based methodologies comes from Madden (2001), who argues against use of economic impact studies in the cultural arena generally. Economic studies are an inappropriate tool from both a theoretical and a practical perspective and are often misapplied outside the discipline in which they were developed, with their use in advocacy is an example of this practice (Madden, 2001, p. 161). Economic impact studies

“provide no argument for government funding, nor are they particularly relevant to allocation decisions of government. Indeed, the studies were never designed for such purposes ... Strategically, using ‘economic’ impacts in advocacy may be self-defeating by demonstrating that the arts and cultural industries have mediocre ‘economic’ impacts.”

Madden, p. 161, 174

Nonetheless, much effort has been invested in assessing the impact of public libraries on the local economy or in financial terms, with several studies also attempting to provide an economic or financial value for social benefits. However, Briggs, et al (1996) conclude the valuing of public goods in an economic sense remains essentially a social rather than an economic endeavour, as the value cannot be tested in the market place and because of the assumptions that must necessarily be made.

In response to the case against economics-based studies, other researchers come at the question of the value of public libraries from a different perspective, seeking to assess how they help build social inclusion or community cohesion.

Social impact analyses

Public libraries play a role in creating positive social outcomes in communities in a number of ways. Some benefits flow directly to the individual user, enabling them to play a fuller role in their community or society, for example, through increased literacy skills, or by participating in community groups which operate out of the public library. As well, indirect benefits to the community or larger society are created, either as a *flow-on* from these improvements in individual well-being or through more intangible or indirect benefits, such as the library's positive role in the cultural life of a community (e.g. Linley and Usherwood, 1996). It is these latter benefits that are the focus of many of the social impact studies.

Social impact is described in the literature in a variety of ways, with terms such as *social benefit*, *social capital* or *social value* being used apparently interchangeably (Debono, 2002). Particular broad social benefits reported to flow from the public library and its services can be grouped into the following areas:

- fostering a sense of local identity and community (Fitch and Warner, 1999)
- helping people connect (Linley and Usherwood, 1996), in particular those who might otherwise exist on the periphery of the community, such as vulnerable learners or people in long-term unemployment (Libraries / Building / Communities, 2005)

- providing a non-threatening environment in which to access and use information (e.g. Coalter, 2001 p. 7, reports that, as an inclusive social space, public libraries have the potential to help with psychological health and well-being of certain groups and can provide a “non-threatening” source of health information)
- building community cohesion (e.g. Harris and Dudley, 2005), a concept which goes beyond social inclusion, emphasising the building of “social relations” (author’s emphasis), with the library often acting as a pathway to engagement with the broader community, or society, for those in marginalised groups (David Hayes Associates, 2001, para 10).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the acknowledged difficulty of assessing such intangible outcomes or impacts, there are fewer established methods for assessing this impact (Harris, 1998). Evidence supporting the positive social impact of public libraries and their services comes from a range of research projects. Coalter (2001) observes that much of the available evidence has surfaced in project evaluations (e.g. Brophy, 2004; Matarasso, 1998). As well, in the UK in particular, public libraries are attempting to show how they contribute to the Government’s social inclusion policy targets. Recently in the UK, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) has released a set of national indicators for public libraries to measure contribution to the Government’s targets (Clark, 2005). These indicators assess the following six public library activities on each of five dimensions: take-up, reach, satisfaction, impact and value for money:

Government Priority	Library Activity
Promoting the economic value of localities	Learning sessions
Promoting healthier communities	Provision and use of health related stock
Improving quality of life for children, young people, families at risk, older people	At Home service
Raising standards across schools	Book Start; Summer Reading Challenge
Creating safer, stronger communities	People's Network use

Table 2: UK national indicators for public libraries

A further example is research into *community cohesion*, part of an initiative to develop indicators through which to measure how libraries contribute to community and civic values, one of the UK Government's strategic objectives for UK public libraries. Harris and Dudley (2005) sought to develop this indicator by analysing the potential contribution of libraries against four dimensions: "library as resource; librarians as expertise; library as place and library as symbol" (p. 3); however, they concluded (p. 36) a single overall indicator would "meet the requirements of simplicity, ease of collection and longitudinal measurement".

One commonly used method in assessing the social impacts of public libraries is the **social audit**. *Social audit technique* measures impact in terms of how well the organisation has achieved its stated social objectives, combining "community profiling with interviews and focus groups with stakeholders" (Wavell, et al, 2002, p. 67). The social audit is a qualitative approach involving canvassing and cross checking the views of a range of stakeholders, and starts by identifying the values which will be used as benchmarks against which to assess the activities of the organisation under evaluation (Buckley, 1998). An example of the use of this technique is the UK research by Linley and Usherwood, in 1998.

The study of Briggs et al (1996) into Lane Cove Library appears to be one of the few studies which assessed the economic and social impacts of public libraries independently of each other. Recognising as long ago as 1996 that both dimensions were needed to fully understand the nature of the contribution made by public libraries, these researchers sought data on both

the direct individual and wider societal or community that residents associated with having a public library.

Black and Crann's (2002) *Mass Observation Archive* took a different path to assessing the social impact of the public library. The mass observation study, using a method neglected since its early days in the 1930s, gathered information from library users about their library use and the benefits they derived from that use, and also collected broader observations about the place of public libraries in society. The technique uses an *autobiographical diary* method, asking participants to record observations shaped by an "open-ended set of questions and prompts" (Bloome, Sheridan and Street, 1993, quoted in Black and Crann, 2002, p. 148) put together by the research team.

Issues with social impact assessment

Social impact is characterised by often indirect and intangible attributes which flow from the public library's existence as a "community institution" (Briggs, et al, 1996, p. 5). As a result, the assessment of impact is more difficult. Assumptions and estimates need to be made explicit, and in studies of this nature, causation is difficult to prove and may be contested (Kelly and Muers, 2002). Because of these circumstances, social impacts are less robustly demonstrated.

As well as the methodological considerations, there are a number of practical issues which need to be addressed when doing social impact assessment. As noted earlier, many research reports into social impacts do not fully explain what they purport to measure. Further, although the literature reports a number of indirect and intangible benefits flowing from public library uses, some researchers (e.g. Oppenheim, 1986) suggest people have trouble seeing these indirect and intangible benefits. This opaqueness highlights the need for effort at the research design stage to maximise the quality of the data to be collected. Further, Harris (1998) argues indicators for social benefits must be articulated in the community's terms otherwise they will have little meaning for the community. With the communities served by public libraries so varied and dynamic, it may be difficult to develop indicators that work for all public libraries across a library system such as NSW. This challenge again highlights the need to be clear about the purpose of the research.

Whether the purpose is to demonstrate to funding bodies that money is well-spent or well-invested, to show the library's contribution to broader social or economic targets, or to prove to the community the library is a valuable institution which should have its support, different purposes will require different research approaches.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES — SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES

This review of the literature has identified numerous studies which report on the ways in which public libraries contribute to both the economic and the social vitality of their communities, both through direct services and more indirectly. In spite of this attention to two of the three 'legs' of sustainability, the link between public libraries and community sustainability has not been explicitly a part of the debate on public library value. However, the dual focus of the studies reviewed confirmed *sustainability* as a useful way of framing the larger research project, offering an opportunity to demonstrate the value of public libraries through the contribution they make to sustaining their communities.

Sustainability — key concepts

The early focus of the global debate on sustainable development was on balancing economic development and environmental sustainability. More recently, this debate has widened to incorporate a third dimension – variously referred to as social well-being or social justice. This broader understanding of the concept resulted in definitions of sustainability such as: “meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity” (Western Australian Government, 2003). The refocusing of the sustainability debate saw the introduction of the concept of a sustainable community: for example, a community which has a “strong sense of place, and supportive networks receptive to the diversity of local needs” (Western Australian Government, 2003). Importantly, the three dimensions of sustainability do not exist in isolation to each other but are inter-related and interdependent (Buselich, 2002), although the third dimension of social well-being continues to receive less

attention in the literature (Barron and Gauntlett, 2001, cited in Western Australian Government, 2003, p. 113).

NSW policy framework

The NSW Government has not released an overarching policy statement on sustainability and cautions there is “no agreement on suitable measures for ‘sustainability’ ” and further, because of the complexity of the task, the “cost of sustainability reporting can outweigh its benefits” (NSW Government, 2004, p. 2). Nonetheless, the Government’s social justice policy (NSW Government, 2000) acknowledges the need to balance social objectives with economic growth and environmental needs. The same policy commits the Government to promoting social inclusiveness and building sustainable communities. Despite these commitments, initiatives in the NSW public sector remain separated along departmental lines with major focus of attention resting on the sustainability of rural communities and the environmental concerns of the major metropolitan areas, for example, managing water shortages and the planned growth of Greater Sydney.

At the local government level, *ecologically sustainable development* (ESD) is a driving force. ESD gained momentum in the early 1990s, with recent policy statements acknowledging that meeting the environmental, economic, social and cultural needs of local communities must be achieved in a balanced manner (Local Government Association of NSW, 2004; Shires Association of NSW, 2004). In a recent submission (Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, 2004) to the NSW Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Inquiry into sustainability reporting, the role played by public libraries in the cultural life of communities is explicitly highlighted.

Measuring and reporting on sustainability initiatives

In practice, identifying indicators against which to report sustainability achievements has been difficult (Chesson, 2005). There are two ways to approach the issue of reporting on sustainability. Reflecting the origins of the sustainability debate in environmental *planning*, Chesson (2005) suggests many people ask: *Is this project sustainable?* Along these lines, Gladwin et al (1995) identify five components of sustainable development as: inclusivity, connectivity, equity, prudence and security, arguing that development will be unsustainable if decisions “exclude, disconnect, promote inequity, reflect imprudence or raise insecurity” (p. 878).

However, Chesson (2005) proposes another way of looking at the question of sustainability reporting – advocating we ask *“How does this contribute to sustainability?”*, and, *“What sort of impact does this initiative have on the sustainability of this community?”* Although Vanclay (2004, p. 27) suggests in some organisations, this approach to sustainability reporting “has become simply a mechanism for accounting”, it seems to fit better with the question underpinning this research project: what role do public libraries play in sustaining their communities?

CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this multi-stage research project is to highlight the contribution public libraries make to a sustainable NSW community, that is, to show how public libraries contribute to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their local communities. This report concludes project phase one, which focused on relevant policy analysis and secondary data collection.

The links between public libraries and the sustainability of the communities they serve has not been explicitly a part of the debate on public library value. Nonetheless, the review of the literature confirms sustainability offers a useful policy framework within which to demonstrate the impact and value of public libraries, a position supported by the National Council for Science and the Environment, in its statement that the public library, both as a community resource and through the services it offers, “support and enhance” the community’s capacity for sustainability (*Libraries: Sharing Sustainability Data and Information*, 2001).

However, from the brief summary and analysis of research approaches used in recent years to demonstrate the impact and value of public libraries, several issues warrant highlighting:

- the complexity of this type of research
- the variation in the underlying purpose of the different research projects
- the debate over methods most appropriate for this type of research.

Complexity of the task

As public libraries attempt to show how they make a difference in people's lives, that is, moving from output measures to outcome and impact measures, the complexity of the task has become apparent. While measurement of public library inputs, processes and even outputs is relatively straightforward, "service outcomes and impacts present a far more difficult area of assessment" (Davies, 2002, p. 131). Different research approaches and designs may be needed for each of these aspects of performance assessment.

Although the MLA in the UK is allocating significant amounts of money to assessing the impact of public library services and their contribution to the Government's policy objectives, researchers are aware the "claimed impacts" are "interdependent" and "difficult to quantify" (Coalter, 2001, p. 10).

Purposes underlying research projects

A number of projects were conducted specifically in response to a perceived or real demand from funding bodies to show that public libraries are worth the investment made in them (e.g. Holt, et al, 1998; McClure, et al, 2001). However, the reader should note that demonstrating value does not automatically translate into increased funding or even sustained funding. For example, the Southern Ontario Library Service experienced budget cuts in 2005 (Southern Ontario Library Service, 2005) despite an active role in developing techniques for measuring and demonstrating the contribution of public libraries.

Other studies seek to understand how library users benefit from using the library, and describe how public libraries support the development of local and state economies. Much of the recent work in the UK (e.g. Laser Foundation, 2005) is being driven by the Government's requirement that all publicly funded institutions demonstrate how they contribute to the achievement of the Government's social and economic policy targets.

A countervailing position on these perceived demands to demonstrate impact or value, comes from Buschman (2003), who questions the principles which underpin assessing value in these ways. Buschmann argues that without a "public democratic purpose for librarianship, there is not compelling reason/argument in the long run to continue libraries" (p. 176). Further concerns about the underlying assumptions of value research are expressed by Cram (1999) who suggests that libraries have no direct control over value; they can only manage and control their processes and the value they add depends in large part on the competencies of their users.

Methods

As noted earlier, differences in methodological orientations can be seen in the varied research designs and techniques used. Some researchers (e.g. Bundy, 2000) acknowledge the dominance of quantitative data in the current era, whereas a contrary view is taken by other researchers, for example Debono (2002) and the Laser Foundation researchers (2005), who argue both quantitative and qualitative data are needed to be confident of telling the whole story.

The Cultural Heritage Consortium (2002) also argues for a mixed methods model, using both qualitative and quantitative techniques when assessing impact of services. Following an analysis of quantitative indicators for impact assessment for the UK MLA, Consortium researchers proposed a “regular large scale population survey” (p. 22), including an omnibus survey designed to elicit information on the nature of library use and how library users benefited from that use. In tandem with the survey, they advocated using focus groups and in-depth interviews to explore the nature of benefits and impacts in greater depth.

Recommendations

The inter-related debates highlighted in this report, debates on underlying research purposes and appropriate methodology for the complex task of providing evidence of the value of public libraries, suggest the following implications for the NSW PLNRC research project:

- The Research Committee must develop clear statements about the purpose of the research and the way in which it expects findings to be used, especially if it is decided that this research is the start of regular assessment of impact and value to be used throughout the NSW public library system.
- Despite debate on the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative methods, a mixed approach is most likely to provide the data needed to show how public libraries contribute to the NSW community.
- A research design that allows measurement of direct and indirect, tangible and intangible impacts, as well as use and non-use, will provide a comprehensive set of data.
- A research design that is scaleable and that allows replication on a regular basis may best serve the long term interests of NSW public libraries.

Despite the methodological minefield, despite the very real difficulties explored in this report in measuring outcomes, or impact or value of public library services, this is an important exercise for public libraries to undertake. Rapid technological advances and ongoing demographic change, with their implications for client base and service delivery, coupled with a climate of accountability, mean that public librarians must be able to show how their libraries make a difference in their communities. Further, if it is indeed the “difference between social value and ‘use’ value that justifies public funding” of library services (Usherwood, et al, 2005, p. 97), advocates for public libraries must have the evidence necessary to support their arguments for ongoing or increased funding.

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Public Libraries — Sustaining Communities

an Annotated Bibliography

SCOPE NOTE

This annotated bibliography has been compiled to assist researchers carrying out subsequent phases of the *Sustaining Communities: Measuring the Value of Public Libraries* research project of the PLN Research Program.

Material includes:

- Literature reviews on the broad topic of measuring outcomes of public libraries and their services
- Empirical research into the broad topic of outcomes assessment
- Research frameworks.

The analytical notes are written specifically as a help for researchers involved in the subsequent phases of this project and so are tailored to their needs.

**Compiled by Jennifer Berryman
October 2005.**

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Aims

To demonstrate both the use and non-use (direct and indirect) value placed on Norway's public libraries by the community and to capture the reasons behind non-use value.

Methodology

Representative sampling provided population of 999 people for interview. Contingent Value Methodology was used to value the library services.

Findings

The direct use value accounts for 40% - 50% of total value assigned to public libraries, with non-use value accounting for 30% - 40% of total value. Option value – having the library available for possible future use – accounts for 20% of value.

Conclusions

These values seem to indicate that respondents were motivated by both self-interest and social benefits. Suggests altruism – both local and global – should be included in the economic valuations of public goods.

Barron, D D, Williams, R V, Bajjaly, S, Arns, J & Wilson, S 2005, *The economic impact of public libraries on South Carolina*, School of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina, viewed 11 October 2005, <http://www.libsci.sc.edu/SCEIS/exsummary.pdf>.

Aims

Establish the economic benefit delivered to the community by public libraries.

Methodology

Two phase approach, starting with a quantitative survey asking for people's perceptions of the library and drawing respondents from users who used the library or website. This was followed by an economic value study which "demonstrate[d] a monetary equivalent" (p. 2) for the services provided.

Findings

Findings from the survey include support for argument that the library improves overall quality of life (92% agreed); enhances personal fulfilment (73%); nurtures a love of reading (73%); is a source of personal enjoyment (64%). Seventy-eight percent of business users said the public library helped with the success of business. The total direct economic impact of the libraries of South Carolina was \$US222 m. against total costs of \$US77.5 m. Also assessed an indirect economic benefit of \$US 126 m.

Conclusions

Argues that although South Carolina public libraries have a direct economic impact of US\$222 million, the total actual value of library services are difficult if not impossible to measure.

Benton Foundation 1996, *Buildings, books and bytes: libraries and communities in the digital age*, viewed 24 February 2005, <http://www.benton.org/publibrary/kellogg/buildings.html>.

Aims

Sought to capture public views on the future of the public library.

Methodology

Public opinion survey.

Findings

Confirms substantial public support for public libraries but reports that members of the public cannot clearly see a future for public libraries in a digital future.

Conclusions

Concludes there is an ongoing role for public libraries as collections, institutions and as community resources.

Black, A & Crann, M 2002,

'In the public eye: a mass observation of the public library', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 145-157.

Aim

Test the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) as a method for gathering commentary from members of the public about what the public library means to them and how it performs.

Methodology

Mass Observation method, consisting of autobiographical diary records by library users, combined with discourse analysis.

Findings

Different views of the public library are evident, with some respondents identifying it as a "popular, welcoming and safe" place to go, whereas others say the library as a "stagnating" social institution (p. 150).

Conclusions

MOA is a useful tool for the qualitative researcher, with this piece of research revealing the public library as a social institution "replete with ambiguity" (p. 156).

Briggs, S, Guldberg, H & Sivaciyan, S 1996,

Lane Cove Library – a part of life: the social role and economic benefit of a public library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

Aims

Demonstrate the social value of the public library to its community and provide an economic justification to support ongoing funding.

Methodology

Mixed qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative methods (analysis of demographic and library statistics). Drew on van House's model using *human capital* and *time-allocation theory*. Gathered data from users only.

Findings

Lane Cove Library contributes substantially to several important societal values such as quality of life and social justice. This social role is greater than the direct economic benefit. Report includes review of the literature and details of the methodologies used.

Conclusions

Concludes the "value of a public library is essentially unmeasurable" (p. 6) but nonetheless, it remains one of the local council's greatest assets.

Coalter, F 2001,

Realising the potential of cultural services: the case for libraries: research briefing twelve point one, LGA Publications, viewed 28 April 2005, http://www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Briefing/Our_Work/culture/Published%20-%20Libraries.pdf.

Aims

No explicit aim stated.

Methodology

Literature review.

Findings

Reports a range of roles for public libraries, including contributions to inclusiveness and safety, social cohesion, local image, local culture, individual and community empowerment. As well, public libraries contribute benefits in improved literacy, including IT literacy, to all age groups in the community. Also reports on the economic impact of public libraries.

Conclusions

Concludes there is anecdotal evidence demonstrating the “theoretical potential” (p. 35) for libraries to contribute to community well-being but calls for more robust and systematic output and outcomes measures, particularly to assess social impact. Acknowledges the difficulty of assessing outcomes but argues these difficulties must be addressed.

Fitch, L & Warner, J 1999,

‘Dividends: the value of public libraries in Canada’, *Australasian Public Library and Information Services*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 4-25.

Aims

Review the importance of public libraries to a range of stakeholders, including users, suppliers and publishers, Canadian culture, and to analyse the effects of reduced funding to public libraries on the economy and society at large.

Methodology

Not explicitly described but appears to be primarily desk research, including use of existing Canadian public library statistics and literature review.

Findings

Canadian public libraries are cost effective providers of information, support the local economy and culture but are in a critical financial position.

Conclusions

Concluded Canadian public libraries contribute substantially to community life on a range of dimensions.

Harris, K 1998,

Open to interpretation: community perceptions of the social benefits of public libraries, Community Development Foundation, London.

Aims

Explores possible framework for developing social benefit indicators for public libraries in England, Scotland and Wales. Examines methodological issues and highlights issues associated with community group perceptions of social benefits.

Methodology

Focus groups, with representation from a range of community groups, rather than individual users. Followed up with focus group of library staff. Suggests non-users must be represented in community benefits research.

Findings

Community members readily identify characteristics of and challenges for their communities, it is more difficult for them to discuss how the public library can provide social benefits.

Conclusions

Community should be involved in development of indicators for public libraries' contribution to social benefits. However, this can be challenging methodologically, since community members tend to see the library as a provider of library services, rather than an organisation helping the community to deal with social issues.

Harris, K & Dudley, M 2005,

Public libraries and community cohesion: developing indicators, MLA, viewed 7 October 2005, <http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/id1410rep.pdf>.

Aims

Develop indicators for measuring how public libraries contribute to community cohesion in England.

Methodology

Differentiates *community cohesion* from *social inclusion* and proposes indicators based on data gathered used telephone interviews, questionnaires, desk research, site visits and focus groups.

Findings

Community cohesion is a little understood concept, but nonetheless, a "legitimate central focus for library services" – p. 3. Puts forward a "4 point structure for understanding the potential contribution of libraries": library as resource, librarians as expertise, library as place, library as symbol.

Conclusions

Conclude a single indicator which captures a range of experience would serve practitioners and researchers best. Propose as that indicator: "Proportion of residents who say that the public library contributes to strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds".

Holt, G E, Elliott, D & Moore, A 1998,
Placing a value on public library services,
St. Louis Public Library, St Louis, viewed 16 April 2005,
www.slpl.lib.mo.us/libsrc/restoc.htm.

Aims

Develop and test methodology to apply economic measurements to demonstrate the value of public investment in public library services.

Methodology

Used cost benefit analysis to measure direct benefits to the library user. Used *consumer surplus* (a measurement of the value consumers place on the consumption of a good or service in excess of what they must pay for it), *contingent value* (willingness to pay and willingness to accept) and cost of *time*.

Includes detail of the data gathering methods and techniques. Note did not attempt to assess indirect benefits.

Findings

For every \$1 of tax, St Louis Public Library users receive back \$4. Indirect or societal benefits not measured because researchers wanted reliable, robust and credible evidence.

Conclusions

Using established economic methodologies, applied conservatively, demonstrates the public library is a good investment for the community.

Information Management Associates and David Hayes Associates 2000,
Best value and better performance in libraries,
Library and Information Commission Research Report 52 viewed 28 April 2005,
www.informat.org/bstvlmen.html.

Aims

Review performance measurement in school and public libraries in the UK.

Methodology

Mixed methods, including interviews, a brief questionnaire survey, structured focus groups and trial workshops.

Findings

Produced guidelines to help others replicate the work.

Conclusions

Regular community consultation over services provided is an important part of impact measurement. As a result, any indicators set up to measure impact will be measuring impact that is important to the community.

Kerslake, E & Kinnel, M 1997,
The social impact of public libraries: a literature review,
British Library Research and Innovation Centre, London.

Aim

To gather evidence of the social impact of public libraries.

Methodology

Literature review.

Findings

Summarises public library impacts as *impact on the community*, for example, through providing a cultural meeting place, and through an *economic impact* for example, support for new business and stimulating town centres.

Conclusions

Public libraries have an impact in two ways. Firstly, there are immediate and direct effects, for example, on the local economy and community, and secondly, more indirect impacts associated with social inclusion and citizenship. However, these impacts are under threat from widespread and far-reaching changes in society. Argues for an extension of the role of public libraries in contributing to social inclusion.

Laser Foundation 2005,
Libraries impact project, British Library & Laser Foundation, London, viewed 19 July 2005,
<http://www.bl.uk/about/cooperation/pdf/laserfinal6.pdf>.

Aim

Develop and test methodologies and measures for assessing public library contribution to four policy areas of priority to the UK Government: children, education, health and older people.

Methodology

Desk research and pilot studies in seven English libraries, to test methodologies and measures developed.

Findings

Research produced a set of measures providing a “transferable framework” (p. 5) for use in local government authorities throughout the UK, measures that assess the contribution of public libraries at both the local and national levels.

Conclusions

Public libraries do make a “measurable contribution” (p. 6) towards the achievement of policy targets, both locally and nationally, through the development of literacy skills in adults and in children, through the involvement of patients and the public in the health area and for older people, through increased well-being and more independent living.

Libraries / Building / Communities:

The vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries – a research report for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian Public Library Network, 2005, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

Aims

To demonstrate how public libraries and their services contribute to the achievement of government and community objectives.

Methodology

Data gathered from focus groups with users, non-users and library staff, telephone surveys of users and non-users and in-depth interviews with stakeholders and target user groups used to profile users, map frequency and type of use, list benefits both individual and social, and value financially the public libraries' services to individual users.

Findings

Key findings include the significant value placed on free library services by users and non-users; a high level of satisfaction with library services; an important role for libraries in developing reading, literacy and IT skills; a growing role for the library as a community hub and as a provider of access to government information. Also analysed service gaps to identify areas for improvement.

Conclusions

Public libraries do contribute to the achievement of government and community goals but argue that for libraries to realise their full potential in this contributory role, more funding is needed.

Linley, R & Usherwood, B 1998,

New measures for the new library: a social audit of public libraries, British Library Research and Innovation Centre Report 89, Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society, Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, viewed 24 February 2005, <http://cplis.shef.ac.uk/newmeasuresum.htm>.

Aim

To develop a tool to measure social impact of public libraries and to measure the social and economic impact of public libraries.

Methodology

Qualitative approach using social audit methodology to cross-check perceptions of local politicians, library staff, users and non-users about how well the public library has achieved its social objectives. Used focus groups for user/non-user data gathering. Data drawn from two public libraries in the UK.

Findings

Public libraries' "established roles [have] enduring relevance" (p. 95), through their roles as a cultural agency, in supporting education (student and lifelong), literacy and reading and through information provision. Public libraries have an indirect role in fostering and stimulating community well-being and an economic impact in the form of being a resource for new and existing businesses.

Conclusions

The social audit process is an effective method to assess the impact of public libraries and their services.

Liu, L G 2004,
'The contribution of public libraries to countries' economic productivity: a path analysis', *Library Review*, vol. 53, no. 9, pp. 435-441.

Aims

"Examine the causal relationship between public libraries, literacy level and economic productivity, measured by gross domestic product per capita" – abstract.

Methodology

Used path analysis to test hypothesis that public libraries, through their literacy programs, contribute to a country's economic productivity. Sample included countries at different stages of development. Path analysis is 'a series of regressions with different numbers of variables entered at different stages' (p. 437) and is able to "quantitatively identify direct and indirect effects from each contributing variable" (p. 440).

Findings

Confirmed the hypothesis that public libraries do have "significant indirect effects on nations' economic productivity" (p. 440).

Conclusions

Public library managers and local administrators need to raise policy makers' awareness of the contribution of libraries to their national economies.

Matarasso, F 1998,
Beyond Book Issues: The social impact of library projects, Comedia, London.

Aims

To identify the social impact on UK communities of public library initiatives.

Methodology

Case studies (12), selected as representative from over 100 submitted to award program on community initiatives. Data gathered via interviews with people involved with the projects, documentary research, questionnaires to community program participants and others involved in the projects.

Findings

Public library community projects benefit individuals and communities in different ways, including personal development, improving social cohesion, community empowerment, local identity, increasing creativity and improving health and well-being.

Conclusions

Outreach work of public libraries makes a difference – real and valuable – to individual lives and community well-being. Calls for new measures to be introduced since more appropriate management tools for public libraries are needed, tools that go beyond measures such as the number of books issued.

McClure, C R & Bertot, J C 1998,
Public library use in Pennsylvania: identifying benefits, uses and impacts: final report, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Bureau of Library Development, viewed 18 October 2005,
<http://www.ii.fsu.edu/~cmclure/padeptedumerge.pdf>.

Aims

Sought to understand how library use is of value to or benefits users, and describes how Pennsylvania public libraries support the development of local and state economics.

Methodology

Mixed methods approach, including survey, site visits, focus groups and telephone interviews. Also captured significant economic and social impacts through critical incident logs recorded by librarians.

Findings

Found “numerous and important impacts and benefits” (p. ii) flow from public library use, even though many Pennsylvania libraries are under-resourced. Public library patrons identified as the single most important impact the library had on them as: helping them start or grow a business; developing literacy skills in children, young adults and adults; helping older citizens retain engagement in their community.

Conclusions

Expectations about what public libraries should be doing are “often unrealistic” (p. iii) given their funding base.

McClure, C R, Fraser, B T, Nelson, T W and Robbins, J B 2000, revised 2001,
Economic benefits and impacts from public libraries in the state of Florida: final report to the State Library of Florida, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, viewed 22 February 2005,
<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/bld/finalreport/index.html>.

Aims

To identify and describe the economic impacts and benefits of public library services and programs in Florida and establish the return on investment delivered by public libraries.

Methodology

Multi-method approach including literature review, focus groups, financial analysis and a Florida-wide survey of library users. Also surveyed library directors and library staff.

Findings

Identified numerous, varied and complex economic and social benefits and impacts, both direct and indirect which are described in detail in the report.

Conclusions

Proposes a further study to measure the benefits identified. The follow-up study is to be a quantitative return-on-investment. Also calls for library staff to clarify their position in relation to explicitly providing services and programs aimed at making an economic impact.

Morris, A, Hawkins, M & Sumsion, J 2000,
Economic value of public libraries: summary of full report, viewed 28 April 2005,
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dlis/disresearch/pdf/general.pdf>.

Aims

To explore ways to assess and demonstrate the economic impact of public libraries and to assess the value assigned to public library services by users.

Methodology

Multiple methods, including literature review, economic modelling, with particular focus on developing an economic impact model for wider use. Analysis of library users and the nature of their use of libraries, based on existing research. Survey to test value placed by users on borrowing from the library. Used book borrowing as the service to be modelled.

Findings

Key findings from the analysis of use include book reading through the public library is spread across all ages and socio-economic groups, and high use by ethnic minorities. The researchers developed three new economic models for testing, including the optimisation model (modelling cost-effectiveness of book buying vs. book lending) and the benefits generated model (comparative analysis of 'book reads' from bought vs. borrowed books).

Conclusions

The major economic value of public libraries is to be found in the mix of objectives and the variety of the services. Delivering bundled services results in "greater value at lower input cost" than if each service was provided separately.

Proctor, R, Lee, H and Reilly, R 1998,
Access to public libraries: the impact of opening hours reductions and closures 1986-1997, British Library Research and Innovation Centre Report 90, Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society, Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, viewed 18 October 2005,
<http://cplis.shef.ac.uk/accesspdf.pdf>.

Aims

Included assessing the impact of public library service point closures and by extension, draw conclusions about the value of public library services for users.

Methodology

Mixed methods including surveys of library authorities, of library users before and after closures and statistical analysis of library management data.

Findings

Reported adverse affects on the community from library closures. Also found the value of a public library to its users and to the local community extends beyond the direct benefits such as access to reading material and information.

Conclusions

Concluded citizens are disenfranchised by public library closures although also notes inconsistent levels of performance in public libraries, so the impacts of closures are also different from one authority to another.

Pung, C, Clarke, A & Patten, L 2004,
'Measuring the economic impact of the British Library',
New Review of Academic Librarianship, vol. 10, no. 1,
pp. 79-102.

Aims

Sought to develop a holistic measure to quantify the social, cultural and economic benefits generated by the British Library.

Methodology

Economic impact analysis, using Contingent Valuation Methodology (CVM) to quantify benefits from indirect and intangible goods and services, as well as from direct use. Sought to demonstrate total value – use value, option value and existence value.

Findings

For each £1 of public funding, the British Library generates £4.40 for the UK economy. Conversely, if public financial support for the British Library cut out, the economy would lose £280m.

Conclusions

Concludes CVM is a useful approach to demonstrating value of library services and flags the intent of the British Library to carry out further studies.

Sawyer, R 1996,
'The economic and job creation benefits of Ontario public libraries', *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 14-26.

Aims

Measure the direct and indirect economic impact of libraries in Ontario, Canada, in terms of gross domestic product (GDP).

Methodology

Mixed methods, including "analysis of library jobs, direct and indirect library impact on the GDP, ... [an] economic impact survey" (p. 14). Includes job multiplier models.

Findings

Benefits from the Ontario libraries flow to local business, to lifelong learners and to job seekers, but these benefits not quantified. Based on direct and indirect impacts, in 1993/94, public libraries in Ontario contributed \$486 m. to Canada's GDP.

Conclusions

Suggests public libraries use this framework to demonstrate their economic impact and calls for more research into the value of indirect benefits of public libraries.

Wavell, C, Baxter, G, Johnson, I & Williams, D 2002,
*Impact evaluation of museums, archives and libraries:
available evidence project*, Aberdeen Business School,
The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen,
viewed 31 May 2005,
www.mla.gov.uk/documents/id16rep.pdf.

Aims

Sought to provide a “critical overview of impact evaluation in the museums, archives and libraries sector” – abstract.

Methodology

Literature review, for five year retrospective period, with an emphasis on work done in the United Kingdom. Analyses the literature along dimensions of social, learning and economic impacts.

Findings

No consensual definitions for impact or outcomes in literature makes it difficult to compare studies. Questioned the quality of the evidence provided by the museums, archives and libraries sector to support claims for beneficial impacts but notes that the evidence from public libraries “is potentially more convincing” (p. 32), as it is drawn from larger and more rigorous studies. Includes a summary of the research designs used in the literature.

Summarises the range of methodological approaches and methods used for impact evaluation, including surveys, social audits, case studies, project evaluations, critical incident technique, economic analysis, cost benefit analysis; also summarised data gathering techniques.

Conclusions

Recognises the potential of the sector to contribute to broad societal benefits and calls for researchers to work towards frameworks and methodologies which will allow comparative benchmarking within sectors, as well as more use of data already being collected. Concludes quantitative methodologies can be used effectively to investigate social, learning and economic impacts of cultural organisations, including public libraries.