Editorial

How long is it since you demurred, or even lost your temper, with the misguided way some people talk about QUALITY? There seems to be a spectrum of definitional angles ranging from the 'Rolls-Royce / spell it right /idealist' philosophy to the 'Best we can do in the circumstances, guv' / 'Aim for 40%, achieve 40 % = 100 % quality' alleged Quality by Objectives mish mash. And of course the philosophical - terminological confusion is even more a feature of the outside world than of library and information services. It applies in schools, universities, some public services, and many businesses where Quality assessment moves according to the resources available, the inherent capabilities of students, and the expectation of the average recipient.

Mercifully the relaxed versions of quality assessment do not seem to be taking hold in what we can call the 'potentially life threatening professions': bridges falling down, patients dying on the operating table, trains colliding, contaminated water supply all meet absolute versions of quality where no one dreams of qualifying their quality by low level targets or reduced resources.

Now, as we all know, the logical key to this dilemma lies simply in the word "Expectations". The virtuous cycle of progress starts with a given situation, adds an invention or two and/or clever management, 'spoils' the users with extra goodies - which in turn raises their expectations, stimulates further development, raises expectations of the 'normal' even further, and so on. The vicious cycle of decline happens in reverse: poor resourcing leads initially to mumbling and grumbling, then to users opting out because their initial expectations are no longer met: we used to expect the police to catch most thieves!

In our LIS world a dramatic example of the way Expectations can upset a simple assessment occurs when applying Needs Fill Rates to assess the proportion of users' demands than can be met immediately from the shelves. A small suburban library supplying a high proportion of 'genre' fiction will score higher on the 'quality' measure than the large central library faced with a more demanding and sophisticated clientele. But let this more demanding clientele be disappointed by years of cuts in the book fund, the more sophisticated readers will give up, and the 'quality' measure apparently improves! Or consider how much higher will be the Queuing Time for Internet access in a service point with six networked PCs compared to a service point that has none!

So - no one can or should get away with partial assessments: the full historical perspective is a 'must'. However, since the 'full historical assessment' implies managers with time and research assistants on their hands, it is often not feasible to take the longwinded approach and there comes an irresistible demand for short cuts. This can take the form of the UK Funding Councils' recent requirement for NOT MORE THAN A DOZEN OR SO Performance Indicators (Barton,J. and Blagden,J. *Academic library effectivess* BLR&I Report 120). Or it can be even simpler: "more visits to libraries than museums score, please".

Now this writer has spent about 5 per cent of his working life labouring in the cause of Performance Measurement as a good and indispensable - if admittedly incomplete - way of assessing provision and excellence in library matters. (For his latest intellectual excursion see a contribution to the CAMILE/DECIDE web site at < http://www.dmu.ac.uk/~camile > - which may yet be expounded in a future number of *LIRN*.) He is encouraged by John Prescott's Thirteen Indices of Progress towards the good life!

A digression: one problem with statistical results is that they are mostly dead dull for the simple reason that most of them are at or near the average. There is little point in arguing whether an institution comes 25th or 45th in a league table if their actual figures (say, Cost per student FTE) are only 4 per cent apart (say, £156 : £163). It is the outliers - and the services in which they comparatively excel or fall down - and trends over the years - where the real interest lies. The average is almost by definition dull!

But there is a simpler approach to this quality dilemma - which I should like to suggest to you as the text of this number's 'sermon'. While there are these real problems and complications in assessing Good Quality, turn the thing on its head and they become quite manageable. Focus on what makes for Bad Quality - and all of a sudden the terminological problems disappear; life gets dangerously interesting!

So, what makes for a Bad Quality Library & Information Service?

- untidy stock, misshelved or shelved late, 'wrong' catalogue entries
- stock the librarians think readers ought to need, not what they actually want
- not enough new stock
- items on course reading lists not available
- too few enquiry desks; wrong answers from (junior) employees
- requests that take months to supply
- cold, congested space in need of decoration
- inadequate and 'wrong' opening hours
- staff always blaming their colleagues and budget cuts, impolite
- OPACs where users get stuck
- poor signing; no promotion of 'helping' services
- cannot afford networked/electronic resources

Now I expect your reaction to this list, like mine, is that these are just the basics
- the dull bits that almost every library gets right in this day and age. Probably so; they can generally be taken for granted. On most of these points most libraries will score reasonably - which is why most user surveys give librarians such a high 'helpfulness' rating. But I doubt if most libraries could not improve significantly on at least two or three of them. And there is hardly any room for professional disagreement on the objectives!

You can, of course, extend this argument to distinguish between the quality of the library service and the quality of its management. Conceptually, according to 'quality correct' lines of thought, the library manager can score

'excellent' in efficiently delivering a substandard ineffective unpopular library service - if that is what his or her corporate policy declares to be its 'Objective'!

Now this focus on Bad Points may or may not be useful when applied to the library service and/or its management overall. But here we are concerned more particularlywith Research in the LIS field. So, can it help to focus not on what makes research excellent but on what distinguishes Bad Research? And how often is the question raised? Dare one risk identifying poor or unsuccessful research undertaken by friends, associates or competitors?

I am reminded of my unsuccessful attempt to persuade LISC(E) to omit the usual 'thanks to all the participants for their time and effort' when the research project in question had been ill defined, subject to a nonsensical change of direction to suit local circumstances, when its proponents found themselves too busy to attend more than the first steering committee, and where those involved at the practical level achieved only peak levels of frustration! Lessons could have been drawn but only if the camouflage of success had been honestly discarded.

It is our hypothesis that a consensus on what constitutes bad research is much easier to arrive at than a consensus on research excellence, and that describing its features is well worth the effort. So here goes!

The first sign of poor research is the most obvious. Often bad work does not get published. The corollary of this is simple: where you cannot lay your hands on published results, the most likely reason is that the work was too poor to publish. Mercifully this non publication happens quite frequently - particularly where management consultants are employed on an inadequate time scale. Funders bold enough quietly to avoid publication of indifferent research deserve some thanks for their integrity.

Now for some features of poor research in check list form:

- no time to check recent research in the area
- literature search limited to abstracts (e.g. LISA) at the expense of reading relevant books, compendia, and grey literature
- where there has been comparable recent research, its conclusions and data are not integrated with the present project
- no opportunity to drop the main research project if the Feasibility Study shows it (i) has either already been done or (ii) is not feasible
- a different methodology employed to that used in previous research simply to be different
- no time for a dummy run or prototype questionnaire; proceed straight to the full questionnaire survey
- survey samples too small: often librarians are content with 10s or 20s where 200 or 300 are needed
- the non-responding percentage may be high and its possible bias is not checked
- a sampling error that is satisfactory for the full sample (say 300) may be quite unsatisfactory for those questions within the questionnaire that are only answered by, say, a tenth of respondents
- research staff recruited from those with no background knowledge of the area being studied
- 'specify the project right and never mind the calibre of the researcher'
- no time allowed to pursue interesting leads that come up during the research but are not specifically listed in the project plan
- shortcomings and disappointments (i.e. approaches that did not work out) either not mentioned or camouflaged as successful
- not enough time left to analyse findings and to consider alternative strategies after data collection has overrun its allotted time
- only one 'solution' considered - no evaluation of other alternatives
- not enough time to allow Steering Committee members (or similar advisers) to comment on and influence the final report

The list is incomplete, but there is sufficient there to confirm the approach is constructively

interesting as well as provocative! Turn it on its head and the corollary leads to a prescription for the research ideal. In case the reader is sceptical some examples of 'near ideal' research are already in mind for our next issue! Examples of research meeting each of the 'bad' criteria above are also in mind - but will be left to readers to discuss individually, without the libel danger, over a friendly pint!

There has been much research mapping activity of late - leading to increased awareness of difficulties in locating relevant research at the literature review stage. This tends to apply more to public and schools libraries than to universities - where there is better coverage through the refereed journal. My personal awareness has much to do with the large amount of excellent, indeed indispensable research undertaken in local authorities - which was collected for the LISU/BML book *Perspectives of Public Library Use* (England, L & Sumsion, J compilers, 1995, sequel expected 1999). The problem comes about when individual research items are published as reports, mentioned in the professional press, and (some) published in journals - but nowadays hardly ever collected together in a monograph to survey and evaluate the position.

The Library Association five yearly series by Allott and Bishop used to cover some of this ground. *The Librarianship and Information Work Worldwide* series (reviewed later in this issue) goes some way to allow an intelligent and selective approach to the relevant formal literature. But neither meets the need completely. And paradoxically this 'need' really points the answer to the topical question 'Who needs the book, and for what purpose?'

The prescription for such books runs something like this. The author will have read and digested all the literature relevant to a special field. The author summarises it all so that the reader is saved the chore of exploring it. Progress over the last ten years or so is assessed, as are the prospects and problems likely to occupy the next few years. The relationship of events in this field to those in adjacent areas is covered. If concentrating on one country, the relationship of

developments in other countries is explored. The author will pay most attention to research that is original and important: an uninformed even handedness is not called for. The author will certainly not assume that the reader wants to spend weeks of time searching the Internet: his prime task is to save the reader the trouble - save perhaps for what has appeared between the dates the text was written and the book's publication date.

It should be obvious that many shortcomings of present research would be rectified by literature of this sort. The 'literature search' would be easier and more complete. Less research would be duplicated. Ironically the scholarly monograph, apparently out of fashion, has so many answers to provide. Should not the RAEs be persuaded at least to make some move in this direction by upgrading its status? It is, after all, knowledge and true scholarship that is most important for our professional targets - to which end the monograph (or its electronic equivalent) has a vital role in integrating and broadcasting the fruits of good research.

Introduction to Contents

Similar themes come up in Ros Cotton's 'News and Views'; the problems will be dealt with in the excitingly programmed LIRG Course now off the ground; Professor Jack Meadow's review article on LIC's new research strategy tackles brilliantly even more fundamental aspects of research strategy.

Group News announces worthy winners and reminds us of the group's prize programme. Then two of this number's substantial articles present practitioner research. Sheila Anderson's discussion of research assessing an OPAC interface is deliberately unabridged as it can serve well as a master recipe for similar effort in future. Maurice Wakeham and his colleagues show what can be achieved in an essentially practical approach at the HE college level.

Diane Sloan's explorations into the information needs of architects provide an interesting analysis of architectural practice and a good example of

the need to change research tactics at the mid point of a long project. Finally, there is an unusually thick and interesting batch of book reviews.

Having been under the doctors in recent months your editor apologises for this number arriving later than planned. He is particularly grateful to the contributors this time. Perhaps we may have been sufficiently provocative in places to provoke some written response from members - looking towards the Spring LIRN. Your dumb silence - is that a tautology? - will not be appreciated!

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