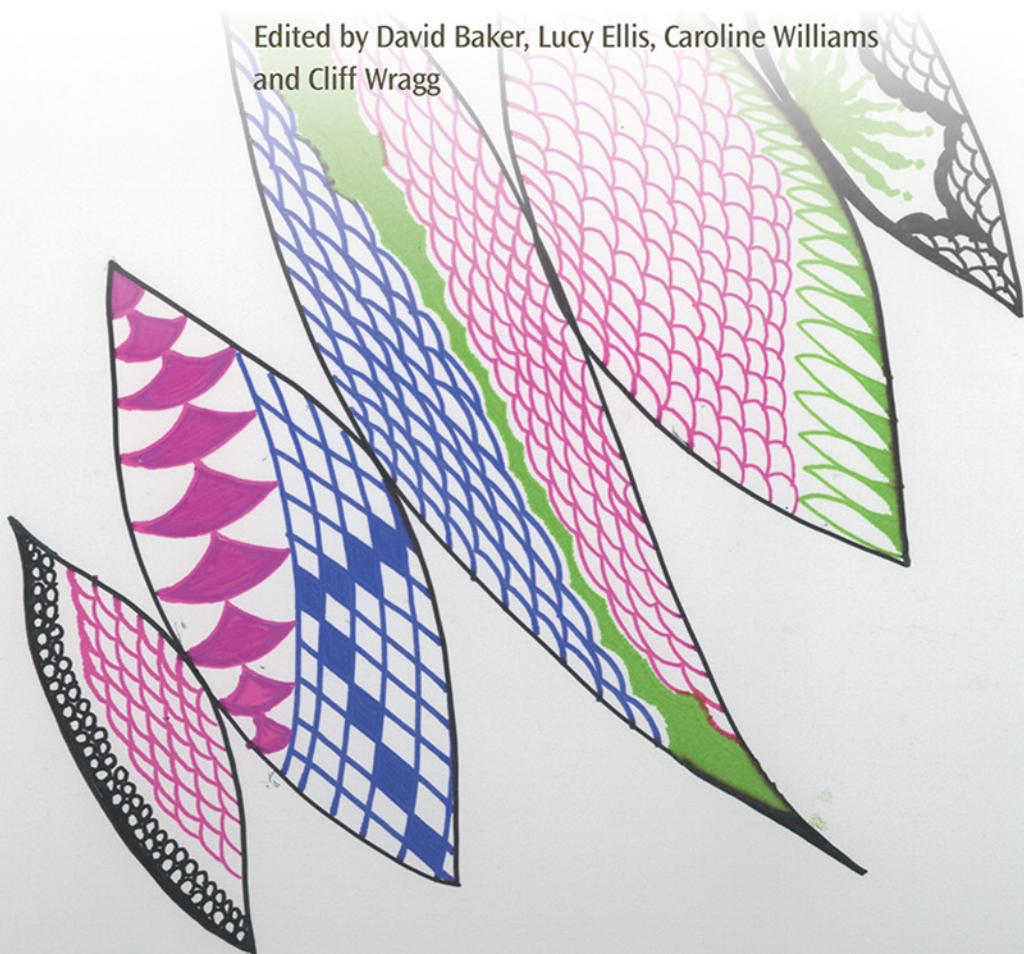


Benchmarking Library, Information, and Education Services

New Strategic Choices in
Challenging Times

Edited by David Baker, Lucy Ellis, Caroline Williams
and Cliff Wragg



Chandos Advances in Information



BENCHMARKING LIBRARY, INFORMATION, AND EDUCATION SERVICES

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Edited by

DAVID BAKER

LUCY ELLIS

CAROLINE WILLIAMS

CLIFF WRAGG



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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	xv
<i>List of contributors</i>	xvii
<i>About the authors</i>	xix
<i>Foreword by Paul Greatrix</i>	xxxi
<i>Foreword by Ruth Murray-Webster</i>	xxxv
<i>Preface</i>	xxxvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxxix
<i>Acronyms</i>	xli

1. Qualitative benchmarking: an introduction	1
David Baker and Lucy Ellis	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The need for frameworks	1
1.3 Benchmarking	4
1.4 Qualitative benchmarking	8
1.5 Conclusion	12
References	13

Part One Qualitative benchmarking: process and concept

2. Qualitative benchmarking in context: environment and outlook	17
David Baker and Lucy Ellis	
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Libraries, digital information, and COVID	18
2.3 Place and space: physical, digital, hybrid	19
2.4 People	21
2.5 Financial sustainability: paying for it all	23
2.6 Conclusion	24
References	25
3. Why qualitative benchmarking?	27
Caroline Williams	
3.1 Introduction	27
3.2 Background and context	28
3.3 Benchmarking in library and information services	29

3.4	Why qualitative benchmarking?	32
3.4.1	A method for learning and sharing strategies, challenges, and practice	34
3.4.2	The opportunity to learn together for senior library and information service professionals	35
3.5	Concluding remarks	36
	References	36
4.	The four P's framework: benchmarking across dissimilarities	39
	Lara Skelly	
4.1	Introduction	39
4.2	Integral vision	41
4.2.1	Upper right	42
4.2.2	Lower right	42
4.2.3	Upper left	42
4.2.4	Lower left	43
4.2.5	Interactions	44
4.3	A hypothetical case method	44
4.3.1	Introduction	44
4.3.2	Peter's problem to place the plans	44
4.3.3	Quadrant 1: Practice	46
4.3.4	Quadrant 2: Policy	46
4.3.5	Quadrant 3: Personnel	47
4.3.6	Quadrant 4: Professional	47
4.3.7	Peter's plan of action	47
4.3.8	Chris's plan of action	48
4.4	A word of caution	48
4.5	Conclusion	48
	References	49

Part Two—The international benchmarking exercise

Caroline Williams and Cliff Wragg

Part Three Sector-leading ideas arising from the exercise

5.	The power of place	111
	Diane Bruxvoort	
	References	116

6. Resilience, retention, and return of staff: the case of Stellenbosch University Library	117
Ellen Tise and Henriëtte Swart	
6.1 Introduction	117
6.2 South Africa's national lockdown levels	117
6.3 Management of staff during various phases of lockdown	118
6.3.1 Strong and decisive leadership	118
6.3.2 Managing with compassion	119
6.3.3 Open and transparent communication	119
6.3.4 Creating a positive organizational culture	120
6.3.5 Monitoring and evaluation of work	120
6.4 Staff development and empowerment	120
6.5 Return of staff to work on-site	121
6.6 Conclusion	122
References	122
7. Benchmarking on the fly and new ways of working: leveraging benefits from the pandemic experience	125
Caroline Williams and Kathleen Smeaton	
7.1 Introduction	125
7.2 Context and background	125
7.2.1 Research question	127
7.2.2 Themes	128
7.3 Theme 1—Learning from others quickly or “benchmarking on the fly”	128
7.4 Theme 2—Health, safety, and wellness (HSW) risk management is good management	130
7.5 Theme 3—Business continuity planning and prioritizing	131
7.6 Theme 4—Service development becomes business as usual	132
7.7 Theme 5—Connected and situational leadership and decision-making	135
7.8 Theme 6—Engagement not communication	137
7.9 Leveraging benefits from the pandemic experience	139
Acknowledgment	142
References	142
8. One library within one university: embedding a one library approach and vision	143
Coral Black	
8.1 Introduction	143
8.2 The one library imperative	143
8.3 The case study	144
8.3.1 University of Newcastle, Australia	144

8.4	Developing our one library approach	145
8.5	Developing a new library strategy	146
8.5.1	Setting the foundation	146
8.5.2	Emerging themes—bringing the team into the mix!	146
8.5.3	Stakeholder engagement—are we aligning and do we want the same things?	147
8.5.4	Closing the loop. Have we missed anything?	149
8.5.5	Finally—the launch	149
8.6	Building our new team	150
8.7	Keeping people informed and supported	151
8.8	Engaging with our stakeholders	152
8.9	Successful transition	152
8.10	Where are we now—18 months on?	154
8.11	What about the library team?	155
8.12	Conclusions	156
	References	157
9.	Cultivating agility and resilience over time	159
	Gabrielle Wong and Diana Chan	
9.1	Introduction	159
9.2	Pandemic measures at HKUST library	160
9.2.1	Space and environment	160
9.2.2	User behaviors and communication	160
9.2.3	Collections and services	161
9.2.4	Staff arrangements	162
9.3	Practices that cultivate organizational agility	162
9.3.1	Strategic planning and decision-making mechanisms	162
9.3.2	Quality assurance systems	164
9.3.3	A forward-thinking mindset in service planning	165
9.3.4	Trust within and beyond the library	165
9.4	Conclusion	167
	References	167

Part Four New applications of benchmarking

Section A Benchmarking in different contexts

10.	Library partnerships in an age of openness	173
	Liz Jolly	
10.1	Introduction	173

10.2	The British Library and its partnerships	174
10.3	COVID and post-COVID	176
10.4	The future	178
	References	181
11.	Lessons in leadership from third sector organizations	185
	Sarah Mears	
11.1	Introduction	185
11.2	A note on report conventions and anonymity	185
11.3	Interviews and areas of investigation	186
11.4	Research findings	187
11.4.1	The role of the CEO	187
11.4.2	The motivation of the interviewees	190
11.4.3	Managing risk and coping with anxieties	191
11.4.4	Positioning the organization and initiating culture change	193
11.4.5	Reflecting on being a woman in a leadership position	196
11.5	Conclusion	198
	Appendix 1 Interview questions	198
	References	200
12.	Fast forward or digital mirage—benchmarking education system responses to COVID, and what comes after?	201
	Martin Hamilton	
12.1	Introduction	201
12.2	The promise and peril of edtech	202
12.3	COVID-19 and the education system response	205
12.4	Case study—Edtech Demonstrator Program	207
12.5	Case study—Association of Commonwealth Universities	209
12.6	A forward and backward look	211
	References	212
13.	Planning for continuity, aiming for sustainability: libraries in the forefront of disruption	217
	Evgenia Vassilakaki and Valentini Moniarou-Papaconstantinou	
13.1	Introduction	217
13.2	Libraries and business continuity	219

13.3	Libraries, business continuity, and sustainability	221
13.4	Conclusions	223
	References	223
14.	Benchmarking for effective services in Nigeria	225
	Stephen Akintunde	
14.1	Introduction	225
14.2	COVID-19 in Africa	226
14.3	Methodology	226
14.4	Library services during the COVID pandemic	227
14.5	Benchmarking in Nigerian libraries	228
14.6	COVID-19 and benchmarking in Nigeria	232
14.7	How benchmarking can affect library services	233
14.8	Conclusion	235
	References	236
15.	Benchmarking the impact, quality, and value of an academic online e-Library	239
	Lucy Roper	
15.1	Introduction	239
15.2	Our vision: to be the center of excellence for built environment education	239
15.3	Library and information services	240
15.4	What is an online e-Library?	242
15.5	UCEM's library mission statement	242
15.6	Benchmarking	243
15.7	What is benchmarking? Reviewing the literature	245
15.8	Further definitions	246
15.9	Defining benchmarks and statistics	248
15.10	How do you measure success of change?	249
15.11	New ways of working—library provision over the COVID-19 pandemic period	253
15.12	Copyright licensing agency, digital content store	253
15.13	Quality assurance and benchmarking	255
15.14	The importance of establishing networks and key contacts	255
15.15	Recognition, accreditation, and awards	257
15.16	Matrix accreditation	257
15.17	At the hub of things—no student left behind	259
	References	261
	Bibliography and further reading	262

16. Information users as active prosumers: perspectives from social marketing and sociocultural value for academic libraries' benchmarking processes	265
Javier Tarango, Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo and Jesús Cortés-Vera	
16.1 Introduction	265
16.2 Active users (prosumers) as the central focus of social marketing in academic libraries	267
16.3 Benchmarking processes and the sociocultural contribution of academic libraries	270
16.4 Conclusions	274
References	276
17. Supporting research information management: overcoming the inherent culture gap between traditional library ethics and the management of CRIS systems	281
Otmane Azeroual and Joachim Schöpfel	
17.1 Introduction: about research information management systems	281
17.2 The connection with libraries	284
17.3 The challenge	286
17.4 Not a threat but an opportunity	288
17.5 Skills and ethics	290
17.6 Conclusion	292
References	292
18. Best practices for developing and disseminating audiovisual contents to promote library and information services	295
Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo	
18.1 Introduction	295
18.2 Preproduction	296
18.3 Production	298
18.4 Editing and postproduction	301
18.5 Dissemination and sharing	301
18.6 Conclusion	305

Section B Benchmarking vocational elements of Higher Education

19. Life experience of mature students and its relevance to leaders in making good strategic choices in higher education	309
Nazim Uddin	
19.1 Introduction	309

19.2	Rationale for the benchmarking questions	310
19.3	A unique set of characteristics	312
19.3.1	Motivation	313
19.3.2	Biological development	314
19.3.3	Strong self-concept	314
19.3.4	Social and professional circumstances	315
19.3.5	Experience and expectations	315
19.4	A case study of a selected NCL student	316
19.5	Harnessing work experience for learning	318
19.6	Experiential learning	320
19.7	Case study: NCL teaching practices framework	321
19.7.1	Context-dependent and context-independent knowledge	321
19.7.2	Benchmarking questions—NCL case study	322
19.8	Conclusion	324
	References	325
20.	Micro-credentials: need to be benchmarked across institutions	329
	Sayeda Zain	
20.1	Introduction	329
20.2	Defining micro-credentials	329
20.3	Rationale for micro-credentials	330
20.4	Challenges	331
20.5	Recognition	332
20.6	Quality assurance	332
20.7	UK-based micro-credentials models	333
20.7.1	Open University	334
20.7.2	University of Birmingham	334
20.7.3	University of Glasgow	334
20.8	Private company learning platforms	334
20.9	Regulation and benchmarking of micro-credentials	335
20.10	Conclusion	337
	References	337
21.	Strategic planning for digital submissions for institutions with creative arts programs: considerations, challenges, and routes to benchmarking	339
	Rebekah Okpoti	
21.1	Introduction	339
21.2	Electronic management of assessment	341

21.3	Benchmarking for digital submissions in the creative arts	344
21.3.1	Legacy	344
21.3.2	Accessibility	344
21.3.3	Key areas for development	345
21.4	Conclusion	346
	Appendix: Social media platforms	347
	References	351

Part Five Conclusions and the future of benchmarking

22.	Qualitative benchmarking and the future	355
	David Baker, Lucy Ellis, Caroline Williams and Cliff Wragg	
22.1	Introduction	355
22.2	Key themes	355
22.3	Key attributes and approaches for the future	356
22.4	Strategic choices and the new qualitative benchmarking	357
22.5	Conclusion	360
	<i>Index</i>	363



Information users as active prosumers: perspectives from social marketing and sociocultural value for academic libraries' benchmarking processes

Javier Tarango¹, Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo¹ and Jesús Cortés-Vera²

¹Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Autonomous University of Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico

²Department of Social Sciences, Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico



16.1 Introduction

Academic libraries are fundamental entities for contributing knowledge to information users. They provide direct aid in the achievement of informational development, and as an element of human development, through the provision and acquisition of immaterial goods, which involve certain ontological and epistemological aspects, related to the thinking theory and value theory (Da, 2022). Unlike other organizations that measure their performance through manufactured or shipped products, libraries are concerned with information users' growth processes, at the level of their human essence and personality, as a means of contributing to their survival in the society of the future.

Benchmarking of academic libraries should take a different route from that adopted in other types of organizations, especially for-profit ones. As the main input of an academic library, information can be manifested in at least two ways: (1) when it is used and returned as physical documents, and (2) when it is digitally consumed, though ultimately the source

remains active in the databases. This represents a different movement of “products,” where the used product finally returns or remains in the collection as a storage system. In the case of academic libraries, benchmarking goes beyond a quantitative comparison. As such, it helps in finding better ways to record events related to methodological approaches to information, orientating users according to their interests, and using technology in diverse ways for consulting data and developing research processes (Astakhova, 2021).

Today’s academic libraries have the fundamental purpose of searching for innovation. Benchmarking is one of the business tools that can best be adapted to information processes and services. Benchmarking’s ideal and expected result will be the identification of the benefit generated by knowledge through the development of new functions and the measurable impact behind the usage of information resources (Carjaval-Morales et al., 2014). From this perspective, the academic library as one of the main neural centers at a given university becomes the perfect setting for generating ideas and materializing knowledge for the solution of specific problems through the recognition of pertinent alternatives.

It is also important to note that benchmarking in academic libraries can be complex, since, typically, only comparative elements of a quantitative nature are retrieved. Current comparison processes between academic libraries of the same type tend not to involve deeper analyses to demonstrate users’ satisfaction (certainly more demanding in terms of the conditions in which information procedures occur), the application of the knowledge acquired, the demonstration of cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit, as well as all those training aspects that allow an identification of the true impact of the available resources and services.

In order to respond to these expectations, this chapter studies two central themes: the first is based on the importance of the user as a subject of study and the way in which academic libraries socially promote themselves to achieve a position beyond their mere survival or validity, and second, the search for the identification of various necessary elements for benchmarking processes as a means of evaluating and researching for innovation, as well as for positioning and developing academic libraries as sociocultural entities. A simplified and multilevel conceptual model was developed from the literature review, which integrates various elements for applying benchmarking in academic libraries.



16.2 Active users (prosumers) as the central focus of social marketing in academic libraries

The proper functioning of all organizations centers on their staff and clients. The same occurs in academic libraries, in relation to their staff and beneficiaries (users), which form a community or a closed group. Academic libraries are distinguished by the conditions of their beneficiaries in two basic ways: (1) it is easy to identify the population that is served; (2) the user has different purposes for using the information when seeking its consumption, which might include deriving a specific product (and hence they can be considered prosumers).

The development of users as prosumers of academic information does not necessarily emerge from academic libraries, but rather, like benchmarking processes, they arise from business sector initiatives, where the fundamental principles for developing beneficiaries as producers and not as mere consumers have been identified, by defining various elements related to the economy, technology, knowledge, social responsibility, impact measurement, and governance (Moreira and Fuster Morellc, 2020). In this case, universities and academic libraries demand the incorporation of the governance concept, with which they must have the capacity to meet specific needs related to structure, services, people, infrastructure, and decision-making (Giménez-Chornet, 2021).

Across various productive sectors, the prosumer developed a sense of survival. For instance, in their search for self-sufficiency because of the lack of external energy resources, the electricity sector considers that prosumers are not isolated cases, but their development can be described in cascade models, where problems are solved at the group level and by constantly including members, given their exponential growth (Scarcello et al., 2022). Agricultural communities generate food both for their own consumption and for sale, all of which are based on the commitment of the group members, who are chosen according to specific functional characteristics (Jain and Potdar, 2021).

In the case of the use and generation of information, there are numerous examples regarding the constitution of users as prosumers. In the health area, for example, work is being done on innovations that promote and encourage reconceptualizing patients as prosumers of medical care services through the activation, empowerment, participation, and commitment of

patients regarding the use of information on health-care processes (Vincenza Ciasullo et al., 2022). In the publishing industry, tools have been developed to identify prosumers' behavior in universities, including the types of data they demand and, consequently, their decision-making related to their forms of distributing, marketing, and segmentation of contents (De Rosa et al., 2022).

In addition, it is possible to identify various conceptions of the prosumer by observing certain actions, both in areas related to information and in other sectors that could serve as a reference to generate new forms of work that do not necessarily happen within academic libraries. The most obvious evidence to be gathered regarding the current use of information is related to internet usage, beyond the mere recording of frequencies of access and use. We must incorporate variables dealing with information reliability which are characteristic of the processes of publishing original content and sharing others' content. This would allow users to be defined either as consumers, prosumers, or observers (Arribas-Urrutia et al., 2019). In addition, incorporating various emerging technologies opens up significant educational possibilities for training prosumers in information management activities and their acquisition of skills in practical situations, all with the purpose of achieving the intention of using and generating knowledge (Ocampo et al., 2009; Cabero Almenada et al., 2018), as well as developing virtual societies (integrated as brand communities, with similar interests, and without geographical limitations), according to user motivations, the complexity of the information products demanded, symbolic aspects, or from the satisfaction with information products according to their level of quality (ShiYong et al., 2022).

Academic libraries intend to compare themselves with similar entities based on the characteristics of their users. However, they must take into account that they should first identify what is known as the global network and their respective demands, and based on this, measure their levels of consumption and production in clusters by compatibility, generating as many user groups as necessary (Caballero et al., 2019). This results in the separation of the members of an academic community into groups, according to their educational level, professional careers, or working environments (Jamil et al., 2022). In addition, users who produce content in digital format (both of scholarly or scientific dissemination nature, which may be developed by researchers, teachers, or students) must be identified from within these networks, and their common features and

practices should be extracted, taking account of theories of participation (Herrero Diz, 2015).

The promotion of library services, the identification of user communities, and their means of access should be based on social marketing, considered as an organized cycle to impact social change through the recognition of useful environments (Petrescu et al., 2021). Social marketing is not opposed to digital marketing; rather, it is considered the most effective means for benchmarking purposes, promoting services, and predicting user patterns (Saura, 2021). Social and digital marketing currently merge in social media. This even allows us to distinguish various paths for assessing the return on investment, such as social influence, relationships, and collaboration, through indicators of visibility, reputation, community loyalty, and new ways of attracting users, with which academic libraries ensure their permanence, build an image, and avoid the growing loss of their social presence (González-Fernández-Villavicencio, 2015).

Social marketing as a mechanism for developing benchmarking processes goes beyond the investigation of internal or external loans and library events or campaigns, and so it includes the promotion and dissemination of activities in social media, in such a way that it is possible to measure their respective impact (García Cámara, 2003). However, it seems that social marketing actions are not considered as a priority within academic libraries, because of the absence of internal challenges, the lack of skills evidenced from external challenges, and the lack of global reach within library groups and audiences (Akbar et al., 2001). In recent years, the study of social marketing in libraries has focused on the development of theoretical proposals, without registering the strategies used and remaining within an exclusive sense of promotion, in addition to not contributing to research processes on the subject, which are needed to define policies and practices on how to improve the use of strategies (Barbier et al., 2021) and to better interact with the user community (Huang and Chiu, 2020).

The application of social marketing in academic libraries contributes to the quaternary sector, by seeking to innovate in the information services offered, based on users' satisfaction (Amaral, 2015). The quaternary sector is linked to knowledge, information exchange, technology, culture, education, and research, as well as those activities defined as intellectual, which can take place either in traditional or online environments.

The use of social marketing in academic libraries originates in business marketing theory, which is based on assessing the cost–benefits and the return on investment of the products, as well as the best way to satisfy

different consumers' needs. It encourages the cultural change of the target audience as a group, but not individually. It tries to satisfy the needs of beneficiaries and seeks to provide more benefits than the mere calculation of costs (Liao, 2020). This implies that customers' behavioral change will be based on preceding attitudes (optimism, innovation, insecurities, discontent), subjective norms, and perceived behaviors (Rahmat et al., 2022). In our case, it is about generating information about users' commitment and engagement through social marketing. Trunfo and Rossi (2021) consider that these perspectives have a psychological component, based on the following: (1) impulse to loyalty; (2) engagement generation through interactive and cocreative experiences; and (3) intense user participation in information activities.

The development of a sense of belonging in academic libraries, by using social marketing, has become a fundamental aspect to integrate and develop a community of users. It should be considered that this is related to a psychological belonging, which people may feel toward a physical space, most commonly: home as a first place, work as second, with the third place dependent on the social identity developed through the client's (user) participation within and then attachment to other scenarios (Zambrano-Silva, 2008; Joo, 2020). That third place could be the university and, consequently, the academic library as a service provider, since psychological appropriation is characterized by an attachment to spaces in which the user experiences commitment, participation, and satisfaction of their needs.

Social marketing planning usually has three dimensions to specify the causes or influences of social issues or problems: micro, meso, and macro, which is an effective perspective for generating models for academic libraries through the following actions: definition of the problem, causal analysis of the problem, prioritization of influences, identification of stakeholders' perspectives, definition of objectives, development of a specific plan, and its implementation (Wymer, 2021).



16.3 Benchmarking processes and the sociocultural contribution of academic libraries

The sociocultural value of academic libraries lies in acquired and functional knowledge, manifested through the lexicon used by clients

through new social constructions in terms of behaviors, ideology, beliefs, and values (Perez-Cepeda and Arias-Bolzmann, 2022). All this is expressed through information literacy, the idea being that it focuses on ways in which people have access to information within a specific environment, and it focuses on the exploration of theoretical and empirical work in terms of information usage models and information activities' outcomes (Hicks, 2022).

This means that academic libraries develop educational processes as a functional activity, both formally (directly linked to the educational system) and informally (experiences based on societal demands and supported by a frequent and permanent search for information) (Toledo de Araujo, 1989). It is considered that academic libraries do not entirely fulfill their relationship with formal education, since curricular content does not always include them, though their compliance with informal education usually happens more frequently (Porterfield et al., 2020).

From a sociocultural perspective, academic libraries must experience migration processes in their way of working, thereby affecting all traditional models (Haugh, 2021). This is a consequence of radical changes that have occurred in the information market: (1) the information process does not end with the arrival of the product to the user, but in the measurement of its impact; (2) information barriers have disappeared, and their flows become immediate, based on technology, but information overload and the value of the information received are also considered; (3) users must also be knowledge generators, more critical, engaged, and productive; they become spectators, navigators, consumers—producers, and producers—users (i.e., prosumers); (4) teaching, research, and knowledge dissemination are promoted more extensively, as parts of the process of generating a solid scientific culture (García-Alonso-Montoya, 2011; Peterson et al., 2020).

In the study of academic libraries' cost-effectiveness, their social value, the benefits they provide, the cultural dissemination, and their socialization with the academic community served must also be measured (Ross García, 2019). In this way, they should focus on two strategies to assess their sociocultural contributions: assessing their financial value and their impact value, considering that by taking only the first aspect into account, academic libraries would hardly achieve their objectives; however, when including both, it is possible to better identify cost—benefits, by measuring their services and their contributions to education and research, from the usage of the available information resources (Oakleaf, 2010).

Academic libraries must define the reasons why they need to develop benchmarking processes, given that the tool aims to improve operational development, by systematically recording and analyzing the best practices of those organizations that are recognized by their excellence (Franco de Abreu et al., 2006). The Association of College and Research Libraries (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018) recommends that these processes should be aligned with institutional goals and carried out by comparing similar or equivalent cases, employing precise indicators for each case. If the academic library's purpose in using benchmarking is merely self-assessment for improvement (diagnostic or metric), it is simple to fulfill. However, if the objective is to compare cost-effectiveness, ways of working, and the application of best practices, it could be more complex, especially because this seeks to transform information management into knowledge management, for which a structured model of indicators must be integrated and employed.

When it comes to diagnostic or metric benchmarking, based on the indicators of resources owned or subscribed, and their usage, the most practical solution would be to work with databases or scientific observatories that concentrate pertinent statistics and with that develop comparative analyses, which could result in generating a structured model with its respective limitations (Xaurburu Clemente and Velasco Balmeseda, 2010). An example of this is the Association for Research Libraries (not to be confused with ACRL), which collects annual statistics on expenses, personnel, and services of more than 120 member libraries (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018). Another viable application is the comparative analysis of academic libraries' websites, identifying qualitative aspects related to their diverse programs (especially for information literacy), learning results, management, and continuous improvement processes, as well as the use of media and dissemination resources such as discussion lists, wikis, tweets, videos, newsletters, and virtual communities (Uribe-Tirado, 2011).

If benchmarking is solely based on collections, systematic mapping studies are recommended, analyzing publications on academic libraries' performance evaluation (Najafi et al., 2020). Beyond that, three basic evaluation aspects are recommended for comparison: (1) library staff conditions (professional and nonprofessional training); (2) physical spaces (dimensions and characteristics); and (3) collection (physical works, electronic services, and databases) (Martín Vega, 2005).

When working with structured models based on impact measurement, the situation may be further complicated by the lack of concordant or

matching data and the absence of uniformity in the indicators among the institutions participating in the comparative study. Therefore, more complex initiatives would be required for generating public policies regarding standardizing criteria for recording such data (especially on knowledge management indicators), through specific clusters, in this case, of academic libraries by type of entity (state or national universities, or research centers), by their size (small, medium, large), or by their disciplinary characteristics (multidisciplinary, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities).

Trying to develop benchmarking processes in academic libraries to demonstrate their economic impact, cost-effectiveness and return on investment is difficult. This is only achieved by calculating the cost of each service according to the effects and benefits they generate for their users and their usefulness to society. In this sense, statistical compilation is not enough; getting the community to value their libraries requires them to know the costs of each of the processes and services, as well as their actual results (Ross García, 2018).

Franco de Abreu et al. (2006) classify the types of benchmarking that are applicable to academic libraries: (1) internal benchmarking, consisting of the comparative analysis of practices within the organization itself. This procedure would work in large libraries and university library systems; (2) competitive benchmarking, which compares processes developed in academic libraries in comparison with similar ones that are recognized for excelling in their operation according to their forms of operation; and (3) functional benchmarking, which compares pragmatic activities among different academic libraries.

The decision to establish a formal and systematic service for the collection of comparative data through benchmarking in an academic library has implications. It requires generating a primary team that collects global results, selects indicators, determines the feasibility of obtaining required data (accessibility), collects such data and develops comparative analyses with similar entities, analyzes the data, and groups the results by dimensions (Plaza Tesías et al., 2005). These comparative work alternatives will happen if the team is able to have a complete vision of the administrative, teaching, and research structures, which will allow for the establishment of a clear management model toward constant innovation (Carjaval-Morales et al., 2014).

Evaluation using benchmarking of information consumption must go beyond mere quantitative indicators and should focus on aspects such as (1) scholars: including teachers, students, and researchers, their

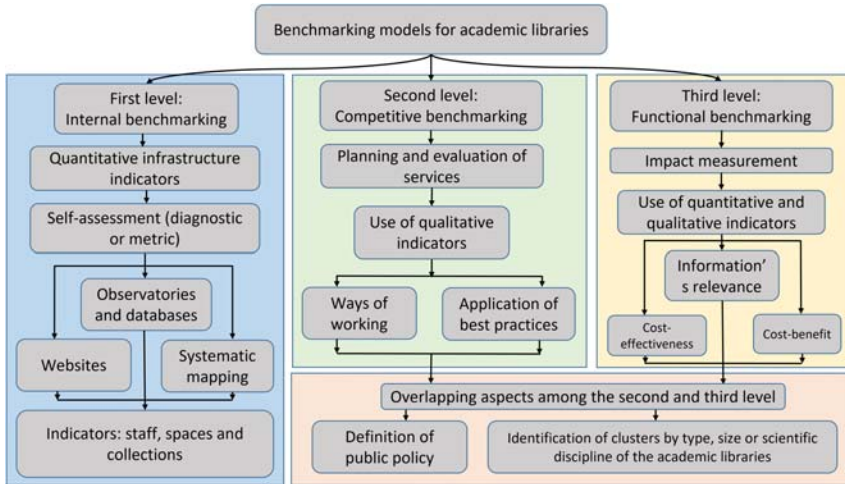


Figure 16.1 Benchmarking models in academic libraries.

consumption of information, for example, counting indicators such as article downloads as well as the relevance of the information retrieved and used; (2) planning and evaluation of library services: used and unused resources; and (3) economic: cost of acquired resources, studying the concentration and dispersion in the use of resources, and the relationships between the global cost versus the quantity of uses (Olea Merino et al., 2012). From this, the effects of the use of information must be evaluated in terms of its success and acceptance by users, and results may be classified as: inefficient (no impact), latent (with possible impact, but without really having achieved it), in development (information is adequately used, but there is no measurement of its impact), and strategic (with real measurement of its impact) (Vidal-Pineda, 2009).

The theoretical proposals reviewed in this chapter allowed to integrate a simplified conceptual model for benchmarking in academic libraries, which is divided into three levels (Fig. 16.1). The choice of a given level will depend on organizational interests and the conditions of available resources.

16.4 Conclusions

In general, benchmarking processes should focus on comparing various aspects of usage and users and of the impact of information, rather

than just counting resources or services offered by academic libraries, thereby seeking users' permanence and loyalty, accomplished by offering strong benefits intangibly embodied in their informational development. Achieving such an aim demands the development of benchmarking models designed according to the needs of academic libraries, rather than through the derivation of proposals from businesses.

Contrary to how benchmarking processes are applied in businesses, in academic libraries it is difficult to renew products and services since the storage of massive quantities of documents characterizes them as strong entities, a paradigm that might need to radically change, especially at present, and with new technologies. Such change should move the focus onto more specific needs of users and society. Qualitative aspects are more complex to identify, register, and compare, since they are almost solely based on intangible conditions, such as quality of services and information, social impact, or on users' learning processes.

The advantage of academic libraries is that they can recognize their user communities relatively easily (unlike public libraries) and they can also directly apply the findings from a benchmarking process, so they might have a clearer vision of their implementation and possible impact. However, a challenge is to cope with increasingly demanding users (students, professors, researchers) in terms of the quality levels of the information services and sources being offered, particularly because they should impact them at a personal and developmental level.

Quantitative indicators are more easily obtained, but they might be less likely to help measuring impact. The collection of quantitative data can be aided by public sources such as observatories or web pages. Qualitative data may be more useful for assessing services, best practices, and impact. These would be available if there is a desire for cooperation between library entities, otherwise, unethical situations might occur, such as those related to issues of intellectual espionage, or using third parties' data without authorization.

Academic libraries are sociocultural entities that are important to society and the communities they serve. Social marketing is used and becomes relevant for promoting library services through digital media, which does not require particularly ample financial resources. When an academic library promotes itself in this way, other similar entities may obtain legal access to the data derived from such activities and can benchmark to seek ways of evaluating their own performance and implement best practices.

Academic libraries' impact is characterized by their sociocultural contribution based on the emotional adherence and the search for the identity

of their users, thereby considering that their training processes, except in the case of information literacy, take as a reference the conditions and principles of informal education. This may complicate maintaining beneficiaries' permanence, as they usually have a finite presence in the library community, particularly in the case of university students.

The definition of benchmarking models in an academic library will depend on its interests, the availability of financial resources, and its infrastructure, as well as data availability. The higher level in the structure of the proposed benchmarking model (functional) requires greater investments of time, personnel, and resources. Conversely, the lowest level (internal benchmarking) is easier to conduct and has greater possibilities of being developed systematically. The situation may be complicated at the highest level of analysis, since measuring impact can be as broad, complex, or abstract as it is possible to imagine.

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