

**AIMS AND ACHIEVMENTS OF LIBECON2000
IN CONTEXT**

Chapter 1 Aims And Achievements Of Libecon2000 In Context

CONTEXT AND PREVIOUS SURVEYS

The LIBECON2000 study traces its origins back to 1986 when the [then] Directorate General 13 of the European Commission was undertaking the policy analysis which led to the Telematics for Libraries Programme. At that time there was no easily available source of up to date statistical and economic data on libraries in Europe. Accordingly, a study was commissioned and produced called “A Study of Library Economics in the European Community.” This was updated and extended to include not only EU countries but EFTA[†] too in a publication entitled “Library economics in Europe: An Update-1981-90”¹ As plans for enlargement of the Union gathered pace in the 1990s and DG13’s interest in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe grew, the study “Library Economics in Central and Eastern Europe”² was commissioned and published, providing data and commentary for an additional 10 countries. The present study extends its scope to 29 European countries in all and updates the data to the latest possible year. A further year will be added to the LIBECON2000 database and made available on the website in 2000. The focus on Europe reflects the policy interests of the funding body.

The study adds value to the original source material and makes it accessible, transparent and useful. The source material is often obscure and unknown outside its country and sector of origin so that researchers, policy makers and other users cannot easily obtain it. It is often available only in the original language which makes it inaccessible for many users. It needs to be as up to date as possible. It needs to be formulated to a common standard and free of errors. It needs to be grossed up in appropriate cases to produce valid trend lines. For financial data, currencies need to be standardised to allow comparisons between countries and over time. Producers and users of the data are relatively few and far between and benefit from contacts with each other which the web site facilitates. Above all, a commentary is needed, provided here which interprets the data and clarifies key trends.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of LIBECON2000 are:

- To maintain an up-to-date monitor of the scope and scale of library activities throughout Europe, to inform policy direction and promote greater awareness of their impact.
- To provide a framework that develops standardisation for better consistency of information about libraries - links with ISO and
- To encourage better forms of collating statistical information.
- To create a virtual community of those who create and use library statistics of European countries, to reduce their isolation and to improve access to their data.

Libraries are developing an ever increasing role in the supply of knowledge and it is estimated that at the end of the decade in the main countries of Europe, total expenditure on libraries amounted to 14 billion euros per year. As we progress to the end of the century, rapid progress in methods of distributing knowledge by electronic means is being made and librarians are playing a key role in managing this information revolution. In this context, we have a concern

[†] EFTA – European Free Trade Agreement.

¹ Ramsdale, Phillip. Library economics in Europe: An Update-1981-90. Luxembourg, Office for Official Publication of the European Communities, 1995. ISBN 92-826-9197-7.

² Ramsdale, Phillip and Fuegi, David, Library Economics in Central and Eastern Europe. Luxembourg, Office for Official Publication of the European Communities, 1997. ISBN 92-828-1562-5.

to monitor the economic place which libraries occupy and it is the objective of LIBECON 2000 to provide the appropriate statistical evidence to better inform policy judgements and investment appraisals by international, national and local governments. As the policy focus shifts to encompass the converging role of all the “knowledge institutions” [libraries, archives, museums] in making a reality of the Information Society, it is apparent that the benefits conferred by the LIBECON2000 study on policymakers, managers and researchers of the libraries sector could usefully be extended to the other relevant sectors in the future.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The study team is drawn from the National Library of the Czech Republic, the Library Information Statistics Unit and the Institute of the Public Finance. IPF [Phillip Ramsdale and David Fuegi] direct the research. LISU [The Library and Information Statistical Unit, Loughborough University] is a subcontractor responsible for database validation. Through its former director, John Sumsion, now a Senior Fellow in the university’s Information Science Department, the project maintains close links with the relevant sections of both IFLA and ISO. The Czech National Library, through its Deputy Director, Dr Adolf Knoll, co-ordinates inputs from Central and Eastern Europe. Though technically subcontractors, both these organisations are treated as partners and consulted on major questions. Both IPF and LISU have considerable expertise in this field. Both employ professional statisticians and are responsible for major national statistical series.

In mid-1998, a list of potential collaborators was drawn up covering the 29 countries targeted. These “country coordinators”, who worked on a voluntary basis, undertook to:

- Transfer data from national data sources onto the LIBECON2000 forms and send it to the study team;
- Respond to queries about the data and validate data returned to them;
- Supply details of sources of the data for inclusion in a bibliography on the website;
- Provide an English translation of major column headings in their statistical publications;
- Publicise LIBECON2000 locally and contribute to its Newsletters;
- Continue to contribute to improved standardisation of the data where possible and necessary.

A survey was designed based on the forms used for previous studies to ensure continuity but modified in the light of consultation with members of the ISO committee responsible for the revision of ISO 2789 [International Library Statistics] and of feedback received at the workshop “From Quantity to Quality: Collection, Analysis and Use of Statistics for Libraries” held in Luxembourg in December 1997 at which both users and suppliers were represented and where both IFLA and UNESCO supported the proposed study. The questionnaire form is shown in Appendix 3 - along with Guidance Notes and Definitions.

Two of the three surveys to be conducted during the course of the project have been completed. The first, in February 1999, bridged the gap from 1995 and the second and third [late 1999 and 2000] add an additional year each time. On receipt all data were checked, amended as necessary, standardised as necessary [grossing up, converting currencies etc], returned to their originators for validation and then added to the database.

The whole database plus newsletters, contacts list, bibliography and discussion list is available on the website. Cooperation from colleagues in most countries has been excellent and the result is a rich and easily accessible statistical resource of value to practitioners, policy makers, researchers and suppliers selling into this market.

The material for this study is ideal for web publishing which can:

- ✓ Overcome language barriers;
- ✓ Potentially achieve more rapid publication than print [though LIBECON currently draws mainly on published sources];
- ✓ Achieve wider dissemination than print sources to users who are scattered and mainly require facts rather than whole publications;
- ✓ Facilitate communication between producers and users.

IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

The project has impacted on the revision of ISO2789. A number of questions in the LIBECON2000 questionnaire piloted changes being considered for adoption by ISO. The proposal to drop the sector “Other Major non-specialised libraries” altogether and to break up the “Specialised” sector into distinct groupings has been taken up. A consultation draft has been produced by TC 46 Working Group incorporating these changes which were recommended by previous Libecon studies.

The project is having a beneficial impact in a number of countries which are either adopting ISO2789 as a result or else are planning to carry out surveys for the first time or in an improved format. Examples include:

- Italy where the responsible ministry [MURST] has commissioned the first ever statistical survey of university libraries, using the LIBECON survey form. This is particularly important because a lack of data on key sectors in large countries can affect the overall results;
- Hungary, where improvements to library statistics are in hand under the leadership of the National Library and in line with the LIBECON form;
- Romania, where the Ministry of Culture has funded a special project called PROBIB2000 to recommend improvements to statistics and performance indicators for public libraries;
- Luxembourg, where a special survey was instituted in 1999 to obtain data for LIBECON2000.

These changes result, of course, from a wish by the authorities in the countries concerned to improve their data. But this desire is stimulated and reinforced by the annual nature of the LIBECON survey and the stimulus which it provides.

SOME PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Gathering consistent information about the part played by libraries in developing the information resources within Europe is a difficult process and involves overcoming a number of practical problems. A major problem is that one can only collect data which exist - unless one has a budget for primary survey work; this would not be appropriate even if it were affordable as it would involve an additional survey burden and redoing the work of the responsible agencies at national or in some cases, provincial level. Using existing data presents some or all of the following problems, the position varying from country to country:

- Missing data, for example:
 - ✓ Sectors³ missing [e.g. no survey or sampling of school libraries in many countries];
 - ✓ Sectors incomplete [libraries missing];
 - ✓ Sectors not internationally comparable⁴;
 - ✓ Data not available [questions not asked or not answered];
 - ✓ Data on the impact and penetration of new technologies in libraries.
- Language problems.

To improve the quality of the data, all of these problems need to be addressed:.

Missing sectors can best be addressed at the national level by would-be users of the data bringing pressure to bear on the relevant authorities and institutions to undertake the work, but this activity at national level can be made more effective by international support. LIBECON2000 has had some success in a number of countries both in stimulating coverage of sectors which were not previously covered and in widening the scope of pre-existing surveys and promoting the adoption of standardised definitions. Public libraries, national libraries and higher education libraries are usually, but not always, covered in Europe. Coverage of schools and of the other two sectors is much rarer. If a LIBECON survey became an annual event, this would strengthen the case of people at national level lobbying for improvements.

Incomplete sectors [i.e. sectors which need to be grossed up] are best tackled at national level by local experts but in an internationally consistent way. It is not commonly attempted in the published documents, which severely reduces their usefulness. LIBECON2000 aims to tackle interpolation consistently but using the advice of informed local sources. It is possible that a section in a revised ISO 2789 recommending that this be done and outlining an approved methodology could over time be influential and beneficial. Failing this, a continued or successor LIBECON activity could improve the position in Europe. Good quality grossing up and interpolation is essential for meaningful time-series and international comparisons.

The problem of **non-availability** of data is being gradually solved and some instances are cited earlier. Over the years, the UNESCO questionnaire became the de facto standard for library statistics. Many countries do not venture outside its limits even though there is much more data which could usefully be collected for use at national level and some which seems essential at international level. Arguably, this could be overcome, as it has been in many countries, by librarians and other would-be users of the data agreeing to national definitions for topics not covered by ISO 2789 and ensuring their adoption.

The problem of **lack of data on new technologies** will benefit from ISO's recognition of it in their new draft of ISO 2789 which seeks to widen the range of definitions in order to begin to recognise recent technological developments. Most European libraries, for example, would not now be thought by their users to reach adequate standards without pervasive use of ICT including access to networked resources and the internet. Whilst definitions in this area remain somewhat problematic, it is clearly essential to tackle these questions. In future years, LIBECON could encourage a more rapid take up of these new metrics.

Initiatives such as LIBECON have the potential to overcome some of the **language problems** through use of the internet as outlined above.

³ Sectors means types of libraries as defined in ISO 2789 [public libraries, national libraries etc.]

⁴ The Other Major Non-Specialised and the Specialised Sectors gave the most headaches in the past though the new ISO proposals should solve this.

SOME FUTURE CHALLENGES

The future of this activity [the collection and publication of library statistics on an international basis] is surrounded by some uncertainties as the new millennium opens. UNESCO, which pioneered this work in the 1970s, has reduced the numbers of its statistical staff and it is not clear what the consequences of this might be for library and other cultural statistics. EUROSTAT, which collects statistics for the European Union, has recently been asked to compile cultural statistics at the EU level but has not included libraries in its programme. A continuation of LIBECON2000 could meet this need for Europe cost-effectively. Better still would be to include comparative data for advanced countries outside Europe. Even better, would be to tackle the whole sector of the knowledge institutions [libraries, archives, museums], underpinning research activities and policy analysis and improving management and transparency across the board.

At the same time, libraries and the world of information are changing rapidly as technologies change and governments emphasise the role of libraries in supporting education, social inclusion and economic growth as well as the more traditional cultural role. Digitisation is going ahead on a large scale in some countries, increasingly undertaken by libraries but not measured in the statistics. A new LIBECON2000 initiative could speed up progress in Europe in a number of these fields to the benefit of governments which pay for libraries and the 139 million citizens estimated to use them.

The Libecon2000 web-site contains the survey data which form the basis of this study. The site comprises various sections:

- a newsletter to which contributors of the data provide articles and the summary findings deriving from each survey are reported;
- an exchange page for discussing developments and receiving suggestions for improvements in the statistical series and definitions;
- a page of sources of statistical information for each country. This lists key contacts in the country, and where provided, descriptions of data sources and a listing of the main column headings in relevant statistical publications;
- a survey page which archives the reported data from previous annual returns on questionnaires which can be downloaded at any time by country contacts to update the statistical series for their own countries/sector of libraries;
- a database page which contains available statistics for each country and various derived ratios.

The web-site has proven to be a significant development in statistical reporting. It has introduced the concept of a “real-time” survey where the data are accessible before a formal publication reports the information. Furthermore, it provides a “hub” for the exchange of statistical information on a regular basis.

The platform is now established for 29 European Countries, and the extension of the facility to other counties can be made.

Further and constant updates on the trends reported in this report are available on the site: www.LIBECON2000.org