

Public library effectiveness

Philip Calvert reports on the progress of his current research

Philip Calvert presented a paper at the ALIA Conference on the research that he and his colleague Rowena Cullen of the Department of Library and Information Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand had conducted on public library effectiveness.

Philip explains that their work aims at a 'parsimonious set' of performance measures for New Zealand's public libraries, based on research which meets two major criteria. Firstly, it should be based on a consensus view of the definition of public library effectiveness which includes the views of 'stakeholder' groups such as local government councillors and the library users. Secondly, empirical evidence should be used to enable the team to construct an objective view of public library effectiveness, in contrast to much subjective work frequently found in the performance measures area.

Research done in the United States by Van House and Childers

gave a very interesting model to follow. The New Zealand research has drawn upon the American work for theory and inspiration, though it has varied from it in practice. Their key articles were published in *Library and Information Science Research* 11, pp. 273-301 and 12, pp. 131-153.

The first stage of the research project was conducted in 1991 supported by the National Library of New Zealand. A questionnaire listing 95 different indicators of public library effectiveness was used. Randomly selected representatives of three stakeholder groups—library staff, councillors, and users—from twelve public libraries around New Zealand, were asked to help with the survey. Respondents were asked which of the indicators they thought best defined an effective public library.

The involvement of stakeholder groups in the construction of the definition of public library effectiveness is an aspect of the research which has provoked comment. Calvert made his

opinion of the value of involving local government councillors and users quite clear in his presentation to the south Australian Branch of ALIA. His argument is that if the definition of library 'effectiveness' can be dictated by a small, unrepresentative group (whoever it may be) we may see public libraries becoming increasingly aimed at delivery of information to groups which are already 'information rich'. It is only by broadening the definition of library effectiveness, by involving several stakeholder groups in the construction of that definition, that such ideological 'capture' can be headed off.

The second stage of research, which involves analysing opinions of the actual performance of public libraries, is currently under way. Data collection and input is almost complete. This stage of the project is being funded by Victoria University of Wellington, and the team look forward to presenting results of this part of the research in the future. ■

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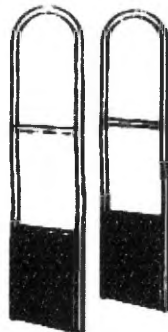
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