

User insights as a key factor for the development of a strategic plan at the Central Library of NTUA

Kouri Stavroula, Sisamaki Eugenia

Central Library - National Technical University of Athens

Abstract. Strategic planning in libraries is not a common and well established activity. Probably this is because, as Nawe states, “Libraries tended to take for granted that their importance would continue to be acknowledged without any questioning” (2003, p.418). Nevertheless, libraries no longer occupy the secure position which they did in the past. Therefore, it is crucial they can enhance their importance and contribution to institutional aims and outcomes. A path towards improvement includes upgrade in managerial and service effectiveness, identification of new perspectives and insights and improvement of user satisfaction. Given the potential benefits, all libraries should focus on developing a strategic plan. According to Jacobsen and Sparks (cited in McNicol, 2005:498) “In strategy, we are trying to convert information to knowledge to a decision about a course of action in the future”.

The wise use of data and information while developing a strategic plan can enhance its effectiveness in library performance (Hiller and Self, 2004). There is no point in designing services without user input. User-based determination of user needs should be considered as part of the strategic planning process (McClure, 1994). Inviting and enabling user input offers a fruitful planning approach in which libraries can design their future profile (Somerville and Collins, 2008). Even though libraries have been collecting data for a while, only recently they have started using it in library management. The issue at hand is how to properly use this data in order to improve library management and decision-making (Hiller and Self, 2004).

The NTUA Central Library in order to form, execute and evaluate a strategic plan aiming to evolve its services and performance, made use of numerous of the services that HEALink provides openly and freely to all its members. The main service that was exploited in order to collect information which led to the strategy formed was MODIPAV. MODIPAV is a service that offers electronic collection, processing, analysis and presentation of data concerning Greek Academic Libraries. The NTUA Central Library, thoroughly reviewed and interpreted user and staff insights which constituted the foundations upon the strategic plan were developed.

Additional services and tools such as ILSas, AMELib CRIS and DSpace which were developed by HEALink were also exploited and provided an advantage to the future goals of the NTUA Central Library.

The goal of this attempt is to make the most of what has already been developed and is freely offered in order to continue and improve throughout this time of financial difficulties.

Key words. Strategic plan, library services, user input, library management

1. Introduction

Strategic planning in libraries is not a common and well established activity. Probably this is because, as Nawe states, “Libraries tended to take for granted that their importance would continue to be acknowledged without any questioning” (2003, p.418). Nevertheless, libraries no longer occupy the secure position which they did in the past. Therefore, it is crucial they can enhance their importance and contribution to institutional aims and outcomes. A path towards improvement includes upgrade in managerial and service effectiveness, identification of new perspectives and insights and improvement of user satisfaction. Given the potential benefits, all libraries should focus on developing a strategic plan. According to Jacobsen and Sparks (cited in McNicol, 2005:498) “In strategy, we are trying to convert information to knowledge to a decision about a course of action in the future” (McNicol, 2005).

In the immediate future library planning should become increasingly refined as well as more efficient. Additionally, user needs and staff input should be considered essential when setting library goals and objectives (McNicol, 2005). The wide availability of information as well as the increase in student awareness combined with the decrease in funds order that academic libraries must become more user-focused. This means that the specific needs of library users must be recognized and met. Student perceptions and expectations of service from academic libraries vary, making it necessary to take appropriate actions in order to define their specific needs and to provide the type and level of service that meets them (Andaleeb and Simmonds, 1998). Every library aims to provide quality service. Nevertheless, it is needed to properly capture what quality is according to users (Adeniran, 2011). The aim is to provide learning experiences that are compelling, worthwhile, significant, and meaningful in the real world. Therefore, all pre-strategy actions are towards discovering how the library organization can better encourage learning not only for students, but also for all members of the academic community (Somerville and Collins, 2008).

The wise use of data and information while developing a strategic plan can enhance its effectiveness in library performance (Hiller and Self, 2004). There is no point in designing services without user input or not bother to evaluate them by those for whom the service was originally intended. User-based evaluation and determination of user needs should be considered as part of the strategic

planning process (McClure, 1994). Inviting and enabling user input offers a fruitful planning approach in which libraries can design their future profile (Somerville and Collins, 2008). In the past it was a well educated guess to accumulate user input from day to day interaction of library staff with users. Nowadays many librarians don't really know their users because of the changes caused by technological advancements, since users don't even need to step foot inside a library in order to utilize its services (Andaleeb and Simmonds, 2001). Currently strategic goals appear from surveys and other learner studies (Somerville and Collins, 2008) such as focus groups and interviews (Hiller, 2001), where user feedback is captured (McNicol, 2005).

In most libraries an adequate volume of library-related data is available, not only in transactional information from online library systems and electronic resources usage but also from efforts to gain user input through surveys, focus groups, and other methods. Even though libraries have been collecting data for a while, only recently they have started using it in library management. The issue at hand is how to properly use this data in order to improve library management and decision-making (Hiller and Self, 2004). It is extremely vital that after the collection of the data, proper evaluation is conducted so the outcome to be utilized in order to induce change in response to the findings obtained (Schlichter and Pemberton, 1992).

2. The strategic plan of the NTUA Central Library

The NTUA Central Library in order to form, execute and evaluate a strategic plan aiming to evolve and advance its services and performance, made use of numerous of the services that HEALink provides openly and freely to all its members. The main service that was exploited in order to collect information which led to the strategy formed was MODIPAV (in English: "Quality Assurance Unit of Academic Libraries" - QAUAL). MODIPAV/QAUAL is a service that offers electronic collection, processing, analysis and presentation of data concerning any Greek Academic Library, through the Internet, with the help of electronic questionnaires and the development and use of Business Intelligence Applications.

The NTUA Central Library thoroughly reviewed and interpreted user and staff insights collected thanks to this service which constituted the foundations upon the strategic plan was developed.

More specifically, the NTUA central library used data collected from two separate surveys. One was the survey for the evaluation of the library by its staff (self-evaluation), and the other was a user satisfaction questionnaire. These surveys have offered useful insights concerning the library's weaknesses, and have located areas in need of improvement. The data were interpreted after quantitative analysis made by the MODIPAV service, but they were also evaluated using a more qualitative approach by the NTUA Central Library.

Such an approach needs the researcher to be more focused in using the quantitative data acquired through quantitative procedures, to make sensible decisions on what needs to be done in order to improve performance (Hiller and Self, 2004). As such, evaluation is a decision-making tool that intends to ensure that the quality services are provided, and help decision makers in establishing goals and objectives (McClure, 1994).

The survey for the evaluation of the library by its staff was designed and the data analysis was executed based on the practices of the Common Assessment Framework. In the case of the NTUA Central Library this was the first attempt for self-evaluation which will also be used as a reference point compared with future surveys, in order to evaluate the success of the implementation of the strategic plan. This survey was conducted by 16 library employees.

According to the data acquired from this self-evaluation it is obvious that the higher score was given to the library's leadership, followed by the human resources manpower. The problematic areas of the library seem to be in strategy and planning, as well as the social impact of the library (Μονάδα Διασφάλισης Ποιότητας Ακαδημαϊκών Βιβλιοθηκών, 2016).

Library Evaluation by the staff

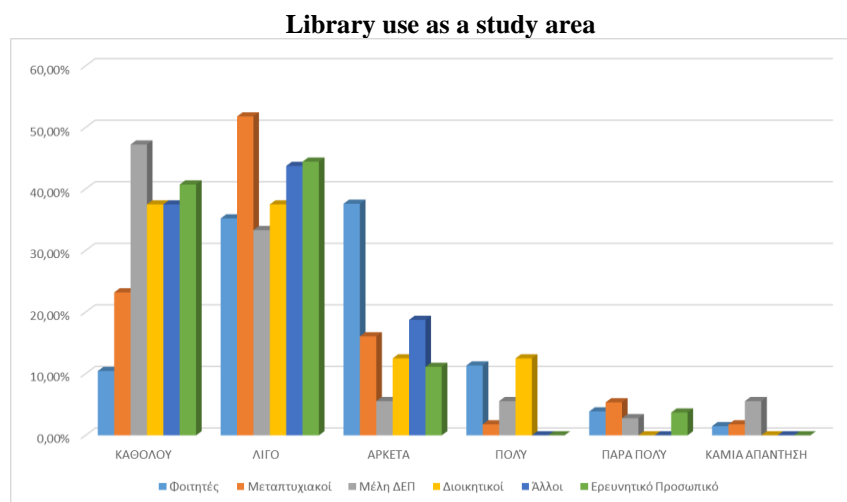


Using the above findings as a guideline, it is obvious that all the advantages that the leadership and the human resources have to offer should be utilized, while the need for a strategic plan and the enhancement of the social role of the library need to be addressed.

In order to develop a strategic plan that could improve the library’s weaknesses and utilize its strengths, the outcomes from the user satisfaction survey were also thoroughly evaluated.

The Quality Assurance Unit of Academic Libraries provides the option to modify its standard user satisfaction questionnaire and adjust it to each library’s needs. The NTUA Central Library took advantage of that opportunity and designed a questionnaire of 26 questions that were answered by 478 library users.

Some of the most important outcomes of that survey are stated below:



The table above suggests that as the research needs of the users incline (post graduates, researchers and academics) the library’s role becomes more than just a studying area. Additional questions indicate that 70,29% of the users state that the library facilitates their studying, while 50,21% of the users believe that the library contributes significantly to their academic research.

Considering that the aim and objectives of an academic library should be in accordance with the vision of the institution it is a part of (Birdsall and Hensley, 1994), then the significant research activity conducted at NTUA should motivate the library to increase the percentage of its contribution to research above the existent 50,21%. To this end, the aim of the strategic plan should also be to increase the use of all the advanced services of the library. Aspects of the strategic plan such as the upgrade of the institutional repository (Dspace) and

the enrichment of the Current Research Information System (CRIS) that were developed by HEAL-link, have the goal to facilitate the research needs of users. The NTUA Institutional Repository was initially developed in 2007 and later on it was upgraded from HEAL-link into HEAL-Dspace which is available to all academic institutions. The NTUA Central Library is currently using HEAL-Dspace which contains 29.000 research papers, 9.000 theses as well as rare publications from books and journals of the 18th and 19th century (Ε.Μ.Π. Εργαστήριο Ναυπηγικής Τεχνολογίας, 2016). The NTUA Central Library aims to continue enriching and upgrading its repository, correct malfunctions, develop an application to collect statistic data from the system and overall improve this service and increase its contribution to academic research.

The Current Research Information System (CRIS) operates under a distributed system which allows the organized registration, display and circulation of data related to the ongoing research activity of every academic institution which adopts it. This Information System was developed according to the Common European Research Information Format (CERIF). National Technical University of Athens has installed and enriched CRIS which is a useful tool for the projection, promotion and exploitation of the scientific and research activity of the university (Ευθυμίου κ. συν., 2015). At this point CRIS-NTUA only includes data from one research project. The strategic plan of the central library foresees the enrichment of the system with additional data as well as their review and corrections when necessary.

The previously mentioned survey for the self-evaluation of the library by its staff indicated that one of the strongest elements of the library is the expertise of its human capital. The library's staff is well informed and trained in using new technologies which is a crucial skill in order to adopt and operate new and advance technological tools such as D-space and CRIS.

Reflecting on the user satisfaction survey, some of the users' answers indicated that they are not aware of numerous services provided by the library. Specifically, 57.32% of the users don't often use the online catalogue, while 68.83% of them don't use the e-resources adequately (with the exception of the academic staff, which use the e-resources more than enough). These results indicate that users might not be informed or familiar with these services. Additionally, 72.59% of users were not aware of the procedure required in order to submit a thesis to the institutional repository, while 75.73% of the users has never attended a user orientation seminar. These percentages expose the need to provide information and training to the library's users.

Most libraries organize informative and training seminars for their users (Σκρέτα κ. συν., 2008). Following that trend, the central library of NTUA has exploited two new services of HEAL-link,

- 1) The e-course of Information Literacy for librarians (<http://ilseab.lib.uth.gr/edu/course/index.php?categoryid=5>) and
- 2) The Intellectual Property Legal Counseling service (Heal-Legal) (<http://lib2.uom.gr/heallegal3/>).

These services provided useful information and knowhow and led to the development of the Information Literacy e-course provided by the Central Library of NTUA to its students. This course is designed based on pedagogical models of behaviorism, cognitive behaviorism, structuralism and constructivism. Via presentations, exercises and homework, the students manage to specify and detect the kind of information they need, learn how to access this information and evaluate it, while they understand any economical, legal and social issues concerning these information sources. (Ευθυμίου κ. συν., 2015).

Furthermore, the libraries strategic plan states the need to enhance user oriented services by improving the library's help desk and promote new library tools, while creating an e-help desk for the immediate response to requests and queries. Finally, the use of social media has emerged in the NTUA Central Library, creating a new and blossoming trend with high acceptance.

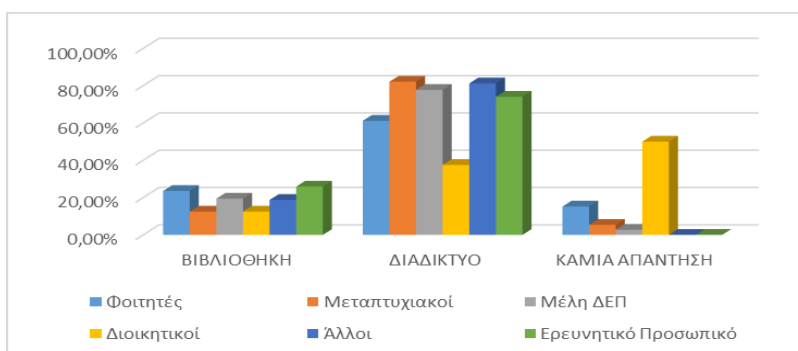
The above mentioned user satisfaction survey revealed that only the 40,80% of users are satisfied with the library's equipment (PCs, photocopiers, printers), which indicates the need for improvement. Such an improvement is the aim of the cost evaluation of all the repairs or replacements of the equipment as it is mentioned in the strategic plan.

Another aspect where the library needed to improve was uncovered after the evaluation survey from the library staff. This survey has shown that the library needs to improve its social identity, since nowadays libraries are also investing in their role as cultural centers. To that end, the NTUA Central library has already organized and implemented successfully several seminars addressing the academic community of NTUA. The explored topics were related to stress management, time management, and a first aid seminar. Beyond these seminars of a somewhat general interest, in the strategic plan a more sensitive and highly important issue is addressed. Heal-link has developed and offers to all academic institutions an important new tool called AMELib (Accessible Multi-modal Electronic Library). AMELib aims to provide books accessible via the Internet to all beneficiaries who are print-disabled users of academic libraries in the country. (Σύνδεσμος Ελληνικών Ακαδημαϊκών Βιβλιοθηκών, 2016). The NTUA Central Library has planned the enrichment of AMELib with the necessary items for the students and staff of the institution who need them and weren't able to access them until now.

3. Conclusions

As it is obvious throughout this paper the collected data that were properly processed and critically evaluated led to the identification of areas of the library that needed improvement. Services and tools additional to MODIPAV, such as ILSas, AMELib CRIS and DSpace which were developed by HEALink were exploited and provided an advantage to the future goals of the Central Library of NTUA. The ultimate goal is to continually try to meet the users' needs, so at some point the library can be able to prevail again its number one competitor as it is shown at the following graph:

Source of Information



As it is obvious from the users' answers, even in 2018 with all the advanced tools that have been developed and have been adopted by the libraries, the internet is still their biggest competitor. The goal of this attempt from the Central Library of NTUA is to make the most of what has already been developed and is freely offered in order to continue and improve throughout this time of financial difficulties in order to satisfy and fulfill its users' needs.

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