

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

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### **Abstract**

Academic libraries' benchmarking processes raise the need for generating a specific conceptualization and characterization of marketing for enabling them to promote their services, transcending the traditional schemes that are typical of for-profit organizations and thus suggesting a definition of a new model based on social marketing as a management tool. It proposes a differentiation in treating the information user as an active prosumer instead of a passive client or beneficiary. With this, some ingrained inconvenient habits are identified, to define and address the authentic needs, which would lead to the required improvements of information services. Such a social marketing for academic libraries would consider the following four main elements: a) redefining profitability as sociocultural value, as libraries are non-profit service organizations; b) enhancing the identification of the target prosumers and their needs that can be satisfied with libraries' services; c) identifying prosumers' satisfaction mechanisms that provide valuable and mutual feedback for improving information products, resources and services, while making them more efficient for the community; and d) defining the library identity as a social stakeholder, instead of centring on a corporate image, which would enhance its perception at a sociocultural level. Social marketing best practices allow deriving a series of indicators that can be used for benchmarking processes regarding the main elements analysed in this chapter.

**Keywords:** information users, information prosumers, social marketing, cost efficiency measurement, library performance, library reputation, information beneficiaries, information clients, library benchmarking.

### **Introduction**

Academic libraries, specifically university libraries, are considered fundamental entities for contributing knowledge to information users, therefore, they provide direct aid to the achievement of informational development, as an element of human development, through the provision and acquisition of immaterial goods, which involve certain ontological and epistemological aspects, and are related to the thinking theory and value theory (Da, 2022). Therefore, 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 means of contributing to their survival in the society of the future.

The study of benchmarking for academic libraries should take a different route from the one conducted 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, but 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. So, in the case of academic libraries, benchmarking goes beyond a quantitative comparison, as such, it helps 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, and 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 centres 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 consider that there is a wide complexity involved when attempting to use benchmarking within the reality of academic libraries, since it could happen that only comparative elements of a quantitative nature are retrieved. The current interests of the comparison processes between academic libraries of the same type pretend to carry out 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 identifying the true impact of the available resources and services.

In order to respond to these expectations, this chapter studies two central themes: the first, 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 for evaluating and researching for innovation, as well as for positioning and developing academic libraries as sociocultural entities. A simplified and multilevel conceptual model was integrated from the literature review, which integrates various elements for applying a benchmarking in academic libraries.

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

The proper functioning of all organizations centres 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. It can be considered that academic libraries are distinguished by the conditions of their beneficiaries in two fundamental aspects: (1) it is easy to identify the population that is served; and (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 a prosumer).

The development of users as prosumers of academic information does not necessarily emerge from academic libraries, but rather, like benchmarking processes, they arise from initiatives of the business sector, 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 the specific needs related to structure, services, people, infrastructure, and decision-making (Giménez-Chornet, 2021).

From the perspective of various productive sectors, the prosumer developed from a sense of survival. For instance, in their search for their self-sufficiency due to 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). Moreover, agricultural community groups generate food both for their own consumption and for sale, all of which is 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 case of the publishing industry, tools have been developed to identify prosumers' behaviour 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 evidences to be gathered in relation to the current use of information are 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 as observers (Arribas-Urrutia, 2019). In addition, incorporating various emerging technologies opens up great educational possibilities for training prosumers in information management activities and for their acquisition of skills in practical situations, all with the purpose of achieving the intention to use and generate knowledge (Ocampo et al., 2009; Cabrero 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, 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 must 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, 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 into account the 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, in fact, it is considered the most effective means for benchmarking purposes, for promoting services and predicting user patterns (Saura, 2021); in fact, social and digital marketing currently merge in social media. As such, it even allows us to distinguish various paths for assessing the return of 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 to develop 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, and they observe conditions related to the absence of internal challenges, lack of skills evidenced from external challenges and the lack of global reach within library groups and audiences (Akbar, et al., 2021). In recent years, it can even be considered that the study of social marketing in libraries has only fallen into 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 on traditional or online environments.

The use of social marketing in academic libraries originates in businesses marketing theory, which are strongly based on assessing the cost-benefits and the return of investment of the products, as well as the best way to satisfy different consumers' needs, and it encourages the cultural change of the target audience as a group, but not individually; in addition, 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' behavioural change will be based on preceding attitudes (optimism, innovation, insecurities, and discontent), subjective norms, and perceived behaviours (Rahmat, 2022). In our case, it is about generating information 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 co-creative 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, and the third place depends 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).

### **Benchmarking process and the sociocultural contribution of academic libraries**

The sociocultural value of academic libraries lies on the acquired and functional knowledge, which is manifested through the lexicon used by users through new social constructions in terms of behaviours, ideology, beliefs and values (Perez-Cepeda and Arias-Bolzmann, 2022). All this is expressed through information literacy, under the idea that it focuses on the 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 society demands and supported by a frequent and permanent search for information) (Toledo de Araújo, 1989). Currently, it is considered that academic libraries do not fully fulfil their relationship with formal education, since curricular contents do not always include them, however, their compliance with informal education usually happens more frequently (Porterfield, 2020).

Academic libraries, from a sociocultural perspective, must experience some kinds of migration processes in their way of working, thereby affecting all traditional models (Haugh, 2021). This is a consequence of the following radical changes that have occurred to 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, therefore, they become spectators, navigators, consumers-producers and producers-users (that is, prosumer); and (4) teaching, research and knowledge dissemination of 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 it serves 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 reason they consider it necessary to develop benchmarking processes, considering that this tool aims to improve the operational development of organizations, by systematically recording and analysing the best practices of those organizations that are recognized by their level of excellence (Franco de Abreu et al., 2006). In addition, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2018) recommends that these processes should be aligned with institutional goals and be carried out by taking care of comparing similar or equivalent cases and employing precise indicators for each case. If the academic library's purpose for using benchmarking is merely self-assessment for improvement (diagnostic or metric), it is simple to fulfil. 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 of this association (ACRL, 2018). Another viable application form is through the comparative analysis of academic libraries' websites, identifying qualitative aspects related to their diverse programs (especially with 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, it is recommended to use systematic mapping studies to analyse publications on academic libraries' performance evaluation (Najafi, 2020), but beyond that, it is recommended to consider three fundamental evaluation aspects for comparison: (1) library staff conditions (professional and non-professional 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 the 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 centres), by their size (small, medium, large) or by their disciplinary characteristics (multidisciplinary, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities).

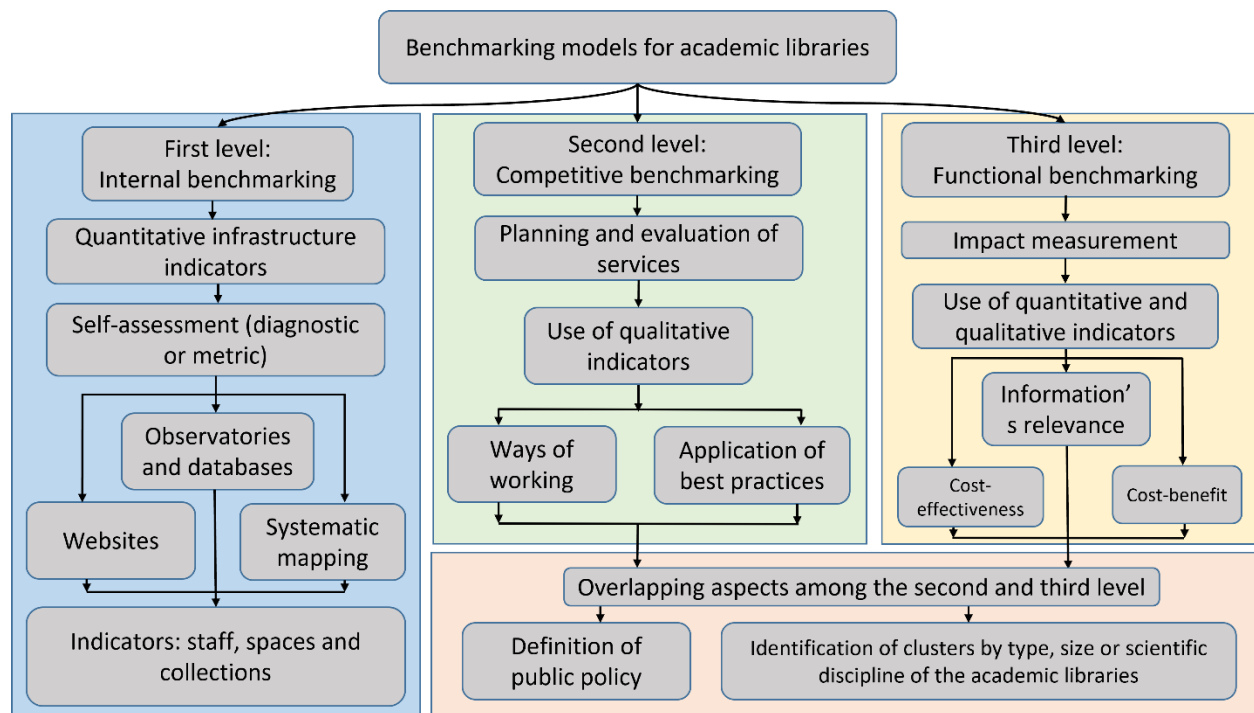
Trying to develop benchmarking processes in academic libraries to demonstrate their economic impact, cost-effectiveness and return on investment is usually difficult and this is only achieved by calculating the cost of each service, according to the effects and benefits they generate for their

users and their usefulness to society. In this sense, the statistical compilation is not enough and for 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 its 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, analyses 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 establishing a clear management model toward constant innovation (Carjaval-Morales et al., 2014).

**Figure 1. Benchmarking models in academic libraries**



The evaluation using benchmarking in relation to information consumption must go beyond mere quantitative indicators and must focus on aspects such as: (1) scholars: includes teachers, students and researchers, their 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, study 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 in three levels (Figure 1). The choice of a given level will depend on organizational interests and on the conditions of available resources.

### **Conclusions**

In general, benchmarking processes should focus on comparing various aspects of users and of the impact of the information, rather than just counting resources or services offered by academic libraries, thereby seeking users' permanence and loyalty, which will be accomplished by offering strong benefits that will be intangibly embodied in their informational development. Achieving such purpose demands the development of benchmarking models designed according to the needs of academic libraries is demanded, rather than through the derivation of proposals from businesses.

It should be considered that, contrary to how benchmarking processes happen in businesses, in the case of academic libraries it is difficult to renew products and services, since, in this case, the storage of massive quantities of documents usually characterizes them as strong entities, a paradigm that might need to radically change, especially in current times and with new technologies. Such change should move focus on more specific needs of users and society. It should also be considered that 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 on 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. However, qualitative data may be more useful for assessing services, best practices, and impact, but 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 or to the community they serve. Therefore, 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 its services through digital means, other similar entities may obtain legal access to the data derived from such activities and hence they can conduct a 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, which 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 complicate when trying to reach 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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