Editorial

Libraries without Number was a successful conference held on 18 April 1997 at the University of Kent for library and information practitioners and those engaged or interested in qualitative research. Delegates to the conference indicated an interest in the publication of the conference papers, and subsequently a number of requests for their publication have been received from as far away as Australia.

We are grateful to Fred Guy and the Editorial Board of Education for Information for dedicating this special issue of the journal to this purpose. We should also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the authors for their papers which, we hope you will agree, show the variety and range of qualitative research application in LIS.

Until quite recently research in Library and Information Services (LIS) has predominantly used quantitative (statistical and numerical) analysis (the work of Prof. Tom Wilson, is an early and very honourable exception). This is reflected in the fact that the majority of performance measures used in LIS are also quantitative.

The introduction of networked OPACS, followed by national networked services such as BIDS (Bath Information & Data Services, URL:<http://www.bids.ac.uk/>) and the local networking of CD-ROM databases take many readers conducting bibliographic research from libraries to computer centres and other points of access to the Internet. Librarians and others with interests in both the use of the Internet and library resources are posing questions with practical, managerial issues at stake. In addition to those raised by quality assessment exercises, such as those recommended in the Follett Report [1] and discussed in van House et al. [2]. Accountants prefer numbers, and so quantitative measures have been produced.

Some of these are easy to produce but of uncertain meaning (web usage statistics being a prominent recent example). This conference explored the contribution and application of qualitative research methods to the field of Library and Information Services, and in particular to bring together those actively undertaking qualitative research to exchange information about both results and methods used, as well as to bring their results to the attention of professional librarians and LIS managers.

By undertaking qualitative research we enter a different field: like many social anthropologists we are wary of questionnaires – being uncertain in advance of the parameters that we wish to study. Similarly, the results of study in 'usability labs' using preassigned tasks achieves replicability at the cost of generalisability. The sorts of people who will volunteer or can be bribed to participate will often be extremely co-operative: they try to assess what the researcher is interested in, and therefore attempt to be friendly by giving them what they are perceived to want to know.

Or systems may be tested which work in the context of the training which is

included (explicitly or implicitly) as part of the testing process. Research among users as they go about their ordinary business forces the researcher to confront the untidiness of the real world. Therein lies the challenge that neat systems producing quantitative results often actively seek to avoid. Confronting it may prevent us from producing nice, clean results but at least our results are closely tied to the actuality of those trying to undertake research.

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References

[1] Joint Funding Council and Libraries Review Group. Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Group: Report. A Report for Higher Education Funding Council for England, Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1993. <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/follett/report/>:HEFCE.

[2] N.A. van House, B.T. Weil and C.R. McClure. Measuring academic library performance: a practical approach. Chicago, Ill.: American Library Association, 1990.