

The Assessment of Basic Services 2021 –
Library management, and the adequacy and
competency of staff in public libraries

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Introduction

This report evaluates how the Library Act is implemented in terms of the adequacy and competence of library personnel and the management of libraries. The report is a shortened version of the original assessment published in Finnish in September 2022.

The data used in this report are the results of a survey (AVI survey) conducted for public libraries in the fall of 2021, other surveys related to the topic, and the statistical database of Finnish public libraries. The statistical data are from the period before the corona restrictions in 2020. The statistics from the beginning the corona-pandemic were not used, because the restrictions caused major deviations in the normal operation of the libraries.

There are 275 public libraries in Finland. They are libraries of individual municipalities and regional libraries. 95 percent of the library institutions responded to the AVI survey. Of the library institutions that responded to the survey, 38 % were in areas or municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

The national library policies regarding personnel have changed a lot with the new library act that came into force on January 1, 2017. Therefore, the results of the previous personnel evaluation from 2013 could only be partially used as reference material.

The new library act of 2017, and the reform of the government grants and the deregulation of norms in 2015 gave municipalities greater opportunities to organize library services and to recruit personnel more appropriately than before, according to the municipality's situation and needs. The educational structure provision for library personnel has been waived. However, it is now required that the competence of the person selected for the job must be primary. Competent personnel are central to the quality of libraries' operations.

The manager responsible for the library's operations must lead, plan and develop the library's operations. They manage changes, build partnerships, collaborate, and network. Due to the demanding nature of the position, a higher university degree is required from the manager. However, they are not required to have professional library training, but in addition to management skills, a good familiarity with the tasks and operations of libraries should be sufficient.

In the statements requested for the renewal of the Library Act, the views on the section on competence and management were divided. On one hand, it was considered that, especially in smaller libraries, the competence of the staff is

weakening, and the professional training for librarians is decreasing. On the other hand, it was thought that the change in the eligibility conditions enables flexibility, new types of service productions and the recruitment of versatile skills. Now, five years later, it can be stated that both predictions have come true.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutes (IFLA) published in 2021 a trend report, which includes factors affecting the operating environments of libraries. In the following, the changes are reflected in the competence needs of the library staff.

The report emphasizes the so-called soft skills and continuous professional development. Soft skills are personal abilities, skills, and behavior patterns, such as adaptability, creativity, innovation, problem-solving skills, and communication. Continuous professional development requires a broad understanding of society and changes in the operating environment. Libraries promote democracy by cooperating and involving citizens.

Libraries reinforce the importance of extensive reading. The library staff should boldly assume an expert position as a promoter of versatile literacy.

It goes without saying that IT skills are an essential part of an employee's professional skills. However, technology is only a tool in delivering an experience for the library patron and in getting to the ultimate goal of using them. Digital services must increase equality, they must not displace or increase division between citizens.

In the library space, the staff's task is to increase people's interaction, inclusion, and safety. Professional staff knows how to make the premises accessible, functional, and attractive. Skilled personnel recognize the needs of customers. When the needs and expectations of library users change, the library and its employees must also be ready to change their operating methods.

Libraries provide support and expertise so that people can find the information they need from among many information sources. Libraries must make it easier to find information and ensure its preservation. If library users cannot find the quality information they need from the library, they quickly turn to other, perhaps less reliable, sources. When society becomes polarized, the importance of literacy is also noticed. Strengthening comprehensive literacy is perhaps the only sustainable way to combat the mis- and disinformation spreading online.

The skills and training of library staff determine whether a library is just a storage space for books or a dynamic meeting place for citizens, research, and education. Climate change prevention is one example of how libraries play an important role in promoting awareness and new behavior patterns.

The experts who prepared the IFLA report are concerned that libraries are divided into developing ones and those whose resources are not enough to keep up with development. Experts from the Regional Administrative Agencies share the same concern in Finland as well.

In Finland, when certain tasks are transferred from municipalities to the so-called welfare areas in the beginning of 2023, a new and fresh vision is needed on how the remaining tasks are planned and carried out synergistically. The professional management and development of libraries in new, welfare-promoting cooperation and networks is even more important.

It is likely that libraries in forward-looking municipalities will cooperate even more on a contractual basis, crossing both administrative and municipal boundaries. This requires that the actors also agree on the distribution of costs and resources. Libraries have the option of hiring joint employees.

The operational environment

Library services are basic services for municipal residents of all ages. Libraries' collections consist of both printed and online published or shared materials.

The aim of libraries is to promote equal opportunities for education and culture for the population, to promote access to, and use of information, a culture of reading and versatile literacy. The goal is also to improve opportunities for continuous learning and skill development, and to promote active citizenship, democracy, and freedom of speech.

The municipality's task is to organize the operation of the public library. Activities can also be organized in cooperation with other municipalities. The operation of municipal libraries is based on the Act on Public Libraries.

In addition, the public library can have a national development task, a regional development task or a special task. Special tasks include, for example, maintaining a Sámi-language library, a multilingual library, as well as promoting literacy and reading for children and young people. The Ministry of Education and Culture provides for libraries handling national, regional, or special development tasks by decree.

The versatile field of tasks of libraries can also be approached from a municipal structural and demographic point of view. There were almost 300 municipalities in mainland Finland in 2021, of which 125 were municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. The next size category (5,000 to 9,999 inhabitants) included 72

municipalities, and the largest category, containing at least 10,000 inhabitants, included 96 municipalities.

Due to the size of the municipalities, population and regional structure, and financial circumstances, the starting points for producing library services vary significantly in different parts of the country. The versatility of Finland's library network, the specialization of libraries and the development of electronic services are ways to ensure the most equal services for citizens across the country.

The forecast for the regional development of the population aged 0-15 until 2040 is clear. According to the forecast, relatively most of the young people will be in the area between Oulu and Vaasa, and to certain housing centers. The differences between the municipalities are predicted to be considerable, even more than 20 percentage points.

Summary of the assessment

The number and expertise of the library's staff, and the resources of the library's management have a direct impact on how the municipal library can carry out its statutory tasks.

Not all libraries have enough staff. According to the statistical database, 36 % of libraries reached the service goal. There is not enough staff for all the tasks defined in the Library Act. The number of library staff has decreased in all provinces in relation to the population. The number of staff has decreased by six percent since 2013.

Only a third of the libraries that responded to the AVI survey estimated that they have enough competent staff to promote social and cultural dialogue, which are the latest statutory duties of the library. Half of the libraries estimate that the staff is sufficient for the promotion of reading and literature, which are the traditional basic tasks of the library.

Self-service libraries are a double-edged sword for the personnel. On one hand, they improve services, when the staff can focus more on the development of operations and services. On the other hand, if self-service libraries are only seen as a cost-saving measure, then the staff will be reduced without considering the library's entire service portfolio, the service needs of the municipalities, and the requirements of the law.

In small municipalities, new employees are recruited for libraries less frequently than libraries on average. In recruitment, there is an opportunity to look at the library's tasks and division of labor with new eyes.

Library personnel are better trained than before, continuing education is more planned and remote trainings have increased participation. The employer's attitude affects training. According to the libraries' own estimates, staff's professional skills are sufficient for the library's traditional tasks, but new skills are needed. Recruitment is an opportunity to strengthen and develop the library's operations.

Two out of three library institutions have a manager who is qualified under the Library Act. There are fewer qualified managers, especially in small libraries, even though the eligibility requirements of the Library Act have been relaxed considerably. In the library, public power is used, so the person leading the library must be an office holder.

There are fewer resources for managing and developing libraries. The same person can manage several industries in the municipality. Fragmentation of working hours makes comprehensive development work in the library difficult. The most important asset of a motivated leader is sufficient time for networking, familiarization, and development.

In the answers to the AVI survey, weak signals can be seen that the responsibility for managing library operations and its development is being transferred outside the library, and the responsibility for library management is becoming blurred. This leads to a waste of both human and financial resources.

Is there enough personnel in libraries?

Not all libraries have enough staff. 36 % of libraries reached the service goal. In this evaluation, the service goal was 0.8 person-years per thousand inhabitants, as it was also the goal in the 2013 evaluation. Practice has also shown that in a well-managed and organized library, this is enough to handle the tasks given in the Library Act. However, many libraries also perform other tasks outside of the Library Act, municipal or official tasks, in which case 0.8 person-years/1000 inhabitants is not sufficient.

In the 2017 Library Act, the functions of libraries were recorded in their own section, which was not in previous library laws. The national recommendations for the number of personnel were given up.

Libraries estimate that the least number of staff is available to promote social and cultural dialogue. This was the opinion of a third of the respondents. Small libraries rate the adequacy slightly better.

Only half of the libraries have enough staff to promote reading and literature, which has, however, been considered the library's traditional basic task. This is probably

influenced by the fact that the concept of literacy has expanded to also include critical media literacy, the promotion of which would require more staff.

Libraries are at their strongest in functions related to collections and materials. More than 80 % estimate that the personnel are sufficient for these tasks. The estimates were similar regardless of the size of the municipality.

The AVI survey estimates the adequacy of the staff in the future as well. Almost half of the library staff are over 50 years old. Nationwide, the age structure was almost the same in 2013. By 2030, approximately 30 % of library staff will reach retirement age. In Lapland, the library staff is older than the national average. Two out of three employees there were born before 1970.

The number of personnel has decreased both in absolute terms and in relation to the number of inhabitants. The absolute number of staff employed by libraries has decreased by six percent compared to the previous assessment in 2013. There were 4,233 employees working in Finnish public libraries, now there are 3,971. In small municipalities, the absolute number of person-years of libraries varies from 0.5 to 5. On average, they have 2.3 person-years per thousand inhabitants.

The number of staff in relation to the number of inhabitants has decreased. In 2012, 48 % of the library facilities reached the minimum service target of 0.8 person-years/1000 inhabitants (in smaller municipalities 84 %). Now the figure is 36 % (down from 74 %). The average for the entire country is now 0.72 person-years/1000 inhabitants, while it was 0.79 in the previous estimate. The change has been a steady decline.

Self-service libraries are a double-edged sword in terms of personnel and customer service. In other municipalities, autonomous use of libraries has improved services, when the staff has been able to focus more on the development of operations and services due to reduced routine work and cooperation with schools and other actors.

Self-service libraries have only been seen in some municipalities as a cost-saving measure, where the staff has been reduced without reviewing the library's entire service catalog and the requirements of the law. In these cases, the quality of customer service may have suffered.

During the previous evaluation, the first self-service libraries were just being established. Now 38 % of the libraries' opening hours are without staff present in the library premises.

Does the library staff have sufficient training and professional skills?

The average education level of the library staff has increased. According to the libraries' own assessment, the staff's professional skills are sufficient for the library's traditional tasks, but new skills are needed. Recruitments are an opportunity to strengthen and develop the library activity.

The Library Act requires that those working in expert positions have a university degree. According to the national library statistics, the share of university-educated professional librarians in libraries in the total staff of libraries in 2012 and 2019 has increased from 38 to 44 percent. The development has been positive in all provinces. This has probably been influenced by the fact that more people work in libraries now with degrees from universities of applied sciences than in 2012.

In addition to the increase in the general education level of the population, an explanatory factor may be that, as the economy has tightened, there is no longer as much untrained auxiliary labor in libraries as before. The share of library professional personnel in the total personnel has risen to 88 %, while it was 85 % in 2012.

Job advertisements show that the relaxation of eligibility requirements in the Library Act has not collapsed the appreciation of education in the field. In most job advertisements, the applicant was required to have a degree in library science or studies in the field included in the degree.

The libraries estimate that the personnel are least able to promote social and cultural dialogue. About 40 % of respondents shared this opinion. More than 90 % estimate that the staff's knowledge is sufficient in functions related to collections and materials. In 85 % of the libraries, knowledge was considered sufficient in the promotion of reading and literature, although only every other library has sufficient staff for this.

Every other library that responded to the AVI survey employs people who can only work part-time. In every second of these, the part-time workers are the municipality's own employees. 60 percent of the responding libraries have employed part-time workers from outside the municipality. Part-time workers are a good addition to the library staff, but if they do not have the necessary knowledge in the library, then they do not replace professionals in the field.

The education supply in the field has decreased when educational institutions have discontinued small education programs for financial reasons. After the previous evaluation, Oulu University of Applied Sciences has stopped library education completely. The loosening of eligibility requirements in the Library Act is also gradually starting to affect the field's education offerings. In combined positions and

activities, the share of library professionals decreases, the number of training places decreases. Demand is reflected in supply: if library jobs is not filled with library professionals, there is no need for permanent training positions either.

After the vocational qualification reform of 2018, it is possible to take a professional qualification in the library field as a demonstration degree, for example in apprenticeship training. Apprenticeship training, however, requires additional resources from libraries, which libraries may no longer have.

In recent years, the construction of multi-purpose facilities has become more common in municipalities. This also enables multi-professional network-like cooperation that crosses administrative branches and increases synergy. Different branches can also have employees in common. If the facilities are in the same building, the youth worker can work in the library for young people with or the school and the library can have a common pedagogical informatics specialist.

However, only every eighth library or library-cooperative has developed its service by recruiting a joint employee with the rest of the administrative branch. Recruitments are usually related to project activities together with teaching, youth, or other leisure activities. 13 % of libraries had considered a joint employee with other branches. Project activities can supplement the number and quality of library personnel for a while, but the effect will be temporary, unless the development work can be transferred to the everyday structures in the library.

Since the eligibility criteria for personnel are quite loose, municipalities would now be able to take the diversity of the population into account when hiring new employees for libraries. For example, anonymous recruitment could be a way in which personnel from different backgrounds can be hired to the library. When people from different backgrounds are hired in the library, then the library also has better opportunities to inform more efficiently and accessible about the tasks and services of libraries as part of integration training and other integration.

Is the municipality's library run by a person who meets the requirements of the Library Act?

Two out of three municipal library managers are qualified according to the Library Act. There are even fewer qualified managers, especially in small libraries, despite the Library Act eligibility requirements have been relaxed considerably. In the library, public power is used, so the person leading the library must be an office holder.

The Library Act requires the manager to have a suitable higher education degree, management skills and a good familiarity with the tasks and operations of the library.

Although the manager's qualification requirements have been relaxed in terms of studies, according to the AVI survey, the qualification situation has worsened: only 67 percent of managers are qualified according to the current law (in smaller municipalities 47 %). In 2013, 72 percent of libraries had a manager who met the eligibility requirements at the time.

Eight percent of the responding libraries are managed by a person who does not have any of the qualification criteria defined in the law: no higher university degree, no management skills, and no good knowledge of libraries as a field (in smaller municipalities 14 %).

The Municipal Act requires that the public authority in the municipality must be an office holder. Based on their authority, based on law, the office holder can unilaterally decide on the interest, right or obligation of another. An employed employee cannot use public power. However, in eight percent of the library institutions, according to the AVI survey, the decision-making power is exercised by someone other than the office holder.

Public authority is used in the library when a customer is banned from using the library. The person issuing the ban must be defined in the municipality's administrative regulations. If only employed persons work in the library, the decision is made by the office holder working outside the library.

Based on the AVI survey and everyday experience, the general picture of the management of smaller municipalities in particular is unclear. It's hard to know who really runs the library. Is it an office holder who puts his name on paper but has no other contact with the library's operations? Or is it an employee who practically handles all matters related to the operation and management of the library, but has no decision-making power?

What are the resources needed to manage the library?

There are fewer resources for managing and developing libraries. The same person can manage several administrative branches. Fragmentation of working time makes comprehensive development work difficult. The most important asset of a motivated leader is sufficient time for networking, familiarization, and development.

In 76 percent of libraries, the office holder working full-time in the library is the decision-maker (in smaller municipalities 64 %). Outside the library, the full-time office holder makes decisions in eight percent (in smaller municipalities 13 %). The number of part-time managers of the library is approximately the same as in 2013, when there were five percent of part-time managers.

For the most part and on average, the situation looks good: in 74 percent of libraries, the manager has both education in the field and experience in library work (in smaller municipalities 65 %). It is a cause for concern that 12 % of Finland's library institutions are managed by a person who has neither education nor working experience in the library field. In small municipalities, the situation is even worse: 18 % of managers lack both education and working experience in the field.

It is not only a question of formal qualifications, but above all of professionalism, the level of service provided by the municipalities and the efficient use of library resources. The lack of professional management is worrying, especially in small libraries. In those libraries, a qualified manager would be able to utilize the limited resources of the library with expert and proactive planning in cooperation with other administrative branches, and customers.

On libraries, where the library manager also takes care of issues in other administrative branches, only every other manager (in smaller municipalities 30 %) can focus solely on library tasks. One-fifth of library managers (in smaller municipalities 35 %) use more than 40 % of their working time for tasks in other administrative branches. One in eight (one in five in smaller municipalities) spends more than 80 % of their working time on other tasks.

In addition to administrative, management and development tasks, 64 % of the people managing the library regularly participate in customer service and other basic library work (in smaller municipalities 70 %). Most library managers cannot therefore delegate customer service or library routines to others.

The biggest concern of the Regional Administrative Agencies is directed at those municipalities whose only library has 1-2 employees without professional library management, in which case the libraries are unable to fulfill the tasks given in the Library Act and develop their activities in a sustainable way.

Who is responsible for the library's development and daily operations?

Weak signals are visible that management responsibility for library operations and its development is moving outside the library. Responsibility for library management is becoming blurred. This leads to a waste of both human and financial resources.

In the previous assessment in 2013, it was not yet considered appropriate to find out whether the decision-making power in library matters is in the library or outside it. At that time, the starting point was that the greatest expertise in library matters is in the library. In 2021, this was asked, when it became clear that already in eight percent of

libraries, their matters are decided by an office holder outside the library. This may be a signal that responsibility for the library's operations is moving outside the library.

The survey also wanted to examine separately the decision-making power of library development and the management of daily operations. In more than 80 % of libraries, the full-time library office holder is responsible for library development (in smaller municipalities 72 %). Responsibility for library development activities is part-time or as a purchase service in only three percent of libraries.

A person working in the library prepares the budget proposal for the board in 73 % of libraries (in smaller municipalities 62 %). In 84 % of cases, people working in the library are responsible for implementing the budget (in smaller municipalities 76 %). Monitoring the budget is done in 91 % of libraries (in smaller municipalities 84 %).

In 72 % of the libraries, the full-time library office holder is responsible for the day-to-day management of the libraries (in smaller municipalities 76 %). Responsibility for the day-to-day management of the library is part-time or as a purchase service in only five percent of libraries (in smaller municipalities 10 %). More than one person manages the daily activities in an average of 14 % of libraries (in smaller municipalities 3 %), which suggests that in larger libraries the operation is more differentiated.

In the open-ended responses to the AVI survey, the transfer of the library manager's duties outside the library was already clearly visible. The further the decision-making power goes from the daily work of the library, the more difficult it is for the library and its personnel to fulfill the tasks of the Library Act, serve its customers and develop its work and operations. The staff does not receive support to achieve the goals set in the municipality or even to survive in everyday work.

It is not possible to utilize resources as much as would be possible with good management. When the municipality saves money in the management of the library, the municipality's investments in the library are not used efficiently and the result deteriorates.

Conclusions and action proposals

Conclusions

With the loosening of the qualification requirements of the Library Act, there are fewer qualified managers in libraries.

The management of libraries in some municipalities is not centralized, so the responsibility for the actual management and development of libraries is often unclear. This complicates the implementation of the Library Act and the efficient use of library resources.

Libraries have difficulties in carrying out their statutory duties if skilled staff are not hired to replace those who leave, or qualified applicants are not found for open positions.

The good basic training and professional skills of library personnel are sufficient for libraries' traditional tasks, but new skills are needed.

The development of expertise in libraries is more systematic than before, but the acquired new expertise does not always change outdated methods of operation.

Action proposals

The municipality hires a person who is qualified according to the Library Act to manage the library.

For the resources invested in the library to be put to efficient use, the municipality clearly defines the authority and responsibility of the library manager and allocates time for them to manage and develop the library's operations in accordance with the Library Act.

The municipality anticipates and prepares for possible labor shortages by comprehensively assessing the skills of the personnel in service production, taking synergies into account. Recruitment is based on this assessment.

The library's management defines and plans the necessary expertise in cooperation with the staff.

The municipality enables the library staff to develop their skills. The library management ensures that the staff can use their new knowledge and skills in the library in the development of operations and services. Libraries taking care of regional

development tasks, and the Regional Administrative Agencies consider the requirements defined in the Library Act and plan their training programs accordingly.