

Trends in the Dutch and Finnish library landscape

Library
landscape

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide an overview of the current situation as it relates to library acts and prominent usage trends in public libraries in The Netherlands and Finland.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach takes the form of a review of the relevant legislation, as well as statistical analysis from national library data in The Netherlands and Finland.

Findings – The findings suggest that while we can see a decrease in physical lending and literacy, we also see an increase in the number of visitors, digital lending as well as activities and events. In addition, in The Netherlands, financial support is decreasing, while in Finland, expenditures of public libraries are growing.

Originality/value – The paper draws upon various viewpoints from public libraries in The Netherlands and Scandinavia, focusing on Finland.

Keywords Data analysis, Digital library, Law, Public library trends, The Netherlands, Finland

Paper type Research paper

In The Netherlands, there live about 17 million people. All these people can find a library within a few kilometres of their home, where various services and activities are offered. In doing so, Dutch libraries maintain the five core functions that they have been obliged to perform since the introduction of the Public Library Provisions System Act (*Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheekvoorzieningen*, Wsob) on 1 January 2015. The new Act has brought about major changes in the library system. These changes were particularly positive. Nevertheless, some worrying trends can also be observed: Dutch libraries are receiving fewer and fewer subsidies, and the number of physical loans is decreasing. The literacy rate of the Dutch is also deteriorating.

Libraries, however, are joining forces to turn the tide and are jointly making the transition from lending library to social library. In addition to books, other functions now occupy an important place as well: more and more libraries function as the city's living room, where a variety of activities take place. More and more users are also finding their way to the library's digital collection, and many Dutch people are being helped by the library's range of courses and other activities to improve their basic skills, digital skills and more.

The Dutch library landscape in figures

About 3.6 million Dutch people – one in five – are a member of the public library. They have a total of around 25 million physical items at their disposal, including books, music CDs, DVDs and sheet music. Together, all these items are lent out almost 70 million times a year. These materials can be found in approximately 760 branches and 170 service points, subdivided into approximately 150 library organisations. In addition, more than 20,000 e-book titles can be found in the national digital library, which, thanks to the one copy multiple user system, can be borrowed by several members at the same time. Also, there are over 2,200 audiobooks available.



The Dutch library sector in a nutshell

Nationwide: KB, VOB, VNG and OCW

The Dutch library sector has a national, provincial and local layer. The national organisations involved in the library field include the KB, the Association of Public Libraries (*Vereniging van Openbare Bibliotheken*, VOB), the Association of The Netherlands Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten*, VNG) and the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*, OCW). Since the introduction of the Wsob, the KB has had a guiding role within the network and offers national support to all public library organisations. The KB is also responsible for, among other things, the digital supply and for drawing up a national collection plan. The VOB is the sector association for public libraries. The VNG supports municipalities and provides them with advice on, among other things, the implementation of local library work. Finally, the ministry of OCW is responsible for legislation and financing relating to the Dutch library sector.

Provincial: POIs, united in SPN

At the provincial level, The Netherlands has eight provincial support institutions (*provinciale ondersteuningsinstellingen*, POIs), which together form a nationwide network. They are united in the Foundation Cooperating POIs Netherlands (*Stichting Samenwerkende POIs Nederland*, SPN). The SPN organises the cooperation between the POIs and other organisations. Most POIs are active in the field of digital services and infrastructure, innovation, collection policy, business operations and education. In addition, they are responsible for interlibrary loan traffic (*interbibliothecair leenverkeer*, IBL), which makes sure that books can be transported from one library to another.

Local: public libraries and municipalities

At the local level, we find the library locations, clustered in library organisations. They depend on the municipality in question for their funding.

Dutch libraries organise more than 200,000 activities every year

Libraries organise many different activities, divided into the following five categories: knowledge and information, development and education, reading and reading promotion, meeting and debate and art and culture. In this way, they serve every age category and layer of society: from babies to the elderly, from those with low language skills to those who have difficulty finding their way in the digital world. Dutch libraries are organising more and more activities: this number rose from over 72,000 in 2014 to approximately 202,000 in 2018. This increase is partly because of the improvements in research into the number of activities, but is largely because of the changing programming of libraries: they spend more time, money and energy on creating an attractive programme of activities. This programme is also more varied. Reading and reading promotion and education and development are the largest categories, with 43 and 33%, respectively ([Van de Burgt and Van de Hoek, 2019](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

Number of physical loans decreases

The Netherlands is struggling with a declining number of physical loans: this number has been declining fairly steadily since 1999 ([Figure 2](#)). This applies to books as well as audio-visual materials, books for adults as well as books for youth and both fiction as well as non-fiction. In 2018, 66.5 million materials were lent out, of which 63.2 million were physical books; approximately 6% less than in the previous year ([Van de Burgt and Van de Hoek, 2019](#); [CBS, 2019a](#)). This is in line with the reduction in the number of hours that Dutch people spend on

ACTIVITIES ORGANIZED BY PUBLIC LIBRARIES, 2018

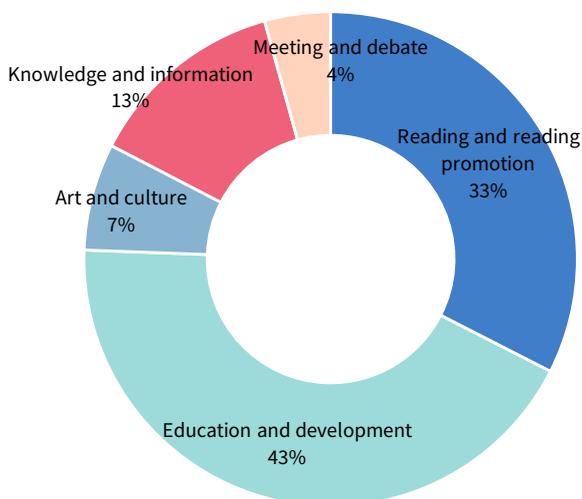


Figure 1.
Activities by subject
category (Van de Burgt
and Van de Hoek, 2019)

NUMBER OF LOANS PHYSICAL MATERIALS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
(x 1,000), 1950-2018

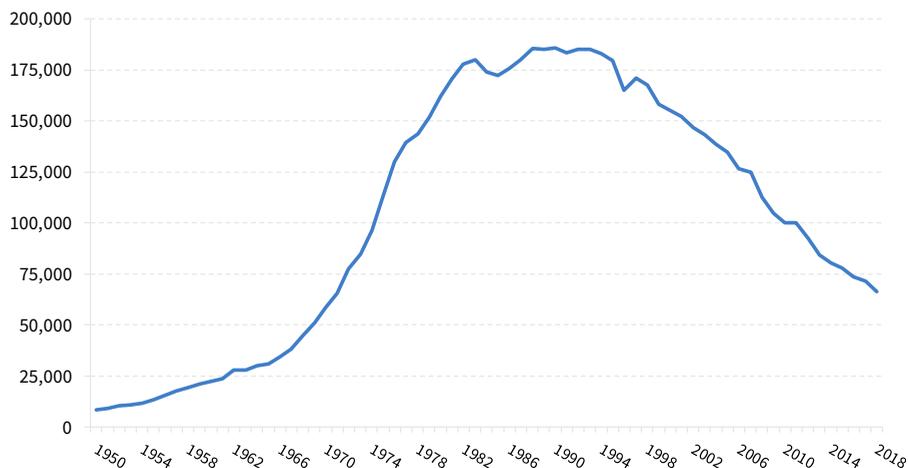


Figure 2.
Physical loans in 1950–
2018 (Van de Burgt and
Van de Hoek, 2019)

reading, as a result of the multitude of other activities that people can carry out in their leisure time.

Digital library is growing

Yet, there is also reason for hope: the digital library is growing. Not only the number of available e-books and audiobooks shows an upward trend, the number of accounts and the

number of loans are also increasing. For example, the number of e-book loans rose from 1.6 million in 2015 to 3.5 million at the end of 2018 (Van de Burgt and Van de Hoek, 2019; CBS, 2019b) (see Table 1 and Figures 3 and 4).

Reading literacy decreases

The Netherlands has approximately 2.5 million low-literate people. This number is increasing, partly because Dutch young people read less and less often, less well and with less and less pleasure. They experience many distractions from other kinds of leisure activities, such as gaming and social media. As many as 18% of the 14-year-olds threaten to leave school with too low a language level (Stichting Lezen and Schrijven, 2016). The most recent edition of the triennial survey of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which charts the literacy of 15-year-olds from 24 European countries every three years, also showed The Netherlands to be a poor scorer (PISA, 2018) (Figure 5). On average, the 5,000 young people who took part had poorer reading skills than in 2015. The international position of The Netherlands also deteriorated. Important Dutch organisations such as the Council for Culture and the Education Council, therefore, call for more attention to language and literature at school and a more attractive programme and collection policy for libraries (Council for Culture and Education, 2019). With a multitude of activities, libraries and POIs try to attract more young people to the library. The project Hiphop in je Bieb

Table 1.
Digital library licences
in The Netherlands
(Van de Burgt and Van
de Hoek, 2019)

Digital library licences	2015	2016	2017	2018
E-books	10,611	12,299	18,222	21,583
VakantieBieb*	66	60	66	62
Audiobooks	–	750	1,212	2,210
Courses**	–	32	42	48

Note(s): *Through the online Library of The Netherlands, the VakantieBieb will be opened in the summer: a free app with 50–60 e-books for the whole family

**The courses offered by the public library were discontinued at the end of 2018

Figure 3.
Number of e-book
accounts in The
Netherlands
(Van de Burgt and
Van de Hoek, 2019)



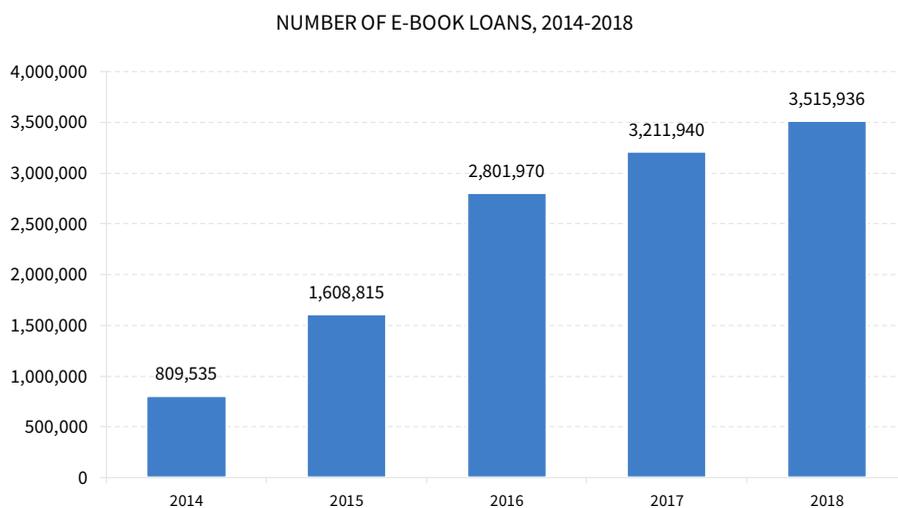


Figure 4.
Number of e-book
loans in The
Netherlands
(Van de Burgt and
Van de Hoek, 2019;
CBS, 2019a)

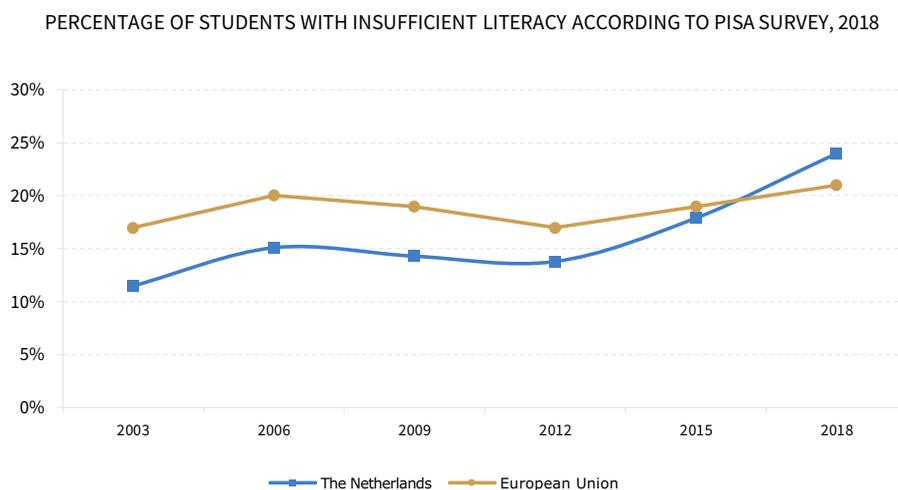


Figure 5.
Percentage of students
with insufficient
literacy in The
Netherlands (Gubbels
et al., 2019)

(Hiphop in your Library) is a good example of this: through urban culture, it allows young people to play actively with language, with attractive programming, floating collections and informal education.

Dutch library buildings win prizes

Since the reopening of the Amsterdam Public Library (OBA) in 2007, many Dutch library buildings have won prestigious prizes. The most recent winners are the LocHal in Tilburg, School7 in Den Helder and Forum in Groningen. They attract large numbers of visitors with their impressive architecture, which invites them to use the library more intensively (Plates 1 and 2). These buildings often function as the city's living room: their doors are open to everyone. Other libraries also try to increase their residential function through their interiors.

LM



Plate 1.
School 7. Photo:
Jacinta Krimp



Plate 2.
Forum. Photos: Stella
Dekker

This is also reflected in the number of visits to a library by the Dutch in 2018: approximately 62.6 million people entered a library, 5% more often than in 2017.

Budget cuts put library under pressure

This large number of impressive new library buildings could give the impression that Dutch libraries have plenty of money to spare. However, this is not true: Dutch public libraries have had to make quite a few cutbacks in recent years. Libraries are largely dependent on subsidies. Together, all 146 public library organisations received €419m in subsidies in 2018, accounting for 79% of their total income. The vast majority, €407m, came from municipalities (Van de Burgt and Van de Hoek, 2019). In principle, the national government does not finance libraries and therefore makes hardly any contribution to the income of libraries, apart from occasional projects (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), 2018).

Public libraries have had to deal with many cutbacks in recent years. This is partly due to the reduction of municipal budgets through the decentralisation of other tasks, including youth care. Many municipal and other budgets have also been cut due to the financial crisis. In addition, the reduced number of members, resulting in reduced income from memberships, has a small impact on the income of libraries. For example, after 2011, when the total number of library members just exceeded four million, a decline began, which has not been reversed to date (Figure 6). As a result, libraries have had to adjust their policies, and sometimes even

close their doors in smaller villages. Sometimes, these gaps are filled with inventive solutions, such as a library bus or a service point.

Library provides safety net for Dutch people with low digital skills

Approximately four million of the almost 17.5 million Dutch citizens are not digitally proficient (enough) to do business independently with the government (Bommeljé and Keur, 2013). Fortunately, the library has an extensive range of digital skills: 98% of Dutch libraries offer one or more digital programmes, 94% of which are specifically for working with the digital government. The library also helps people with basic skills, such as language skills, financial skills and work and application skills (Figures 7 and 8).

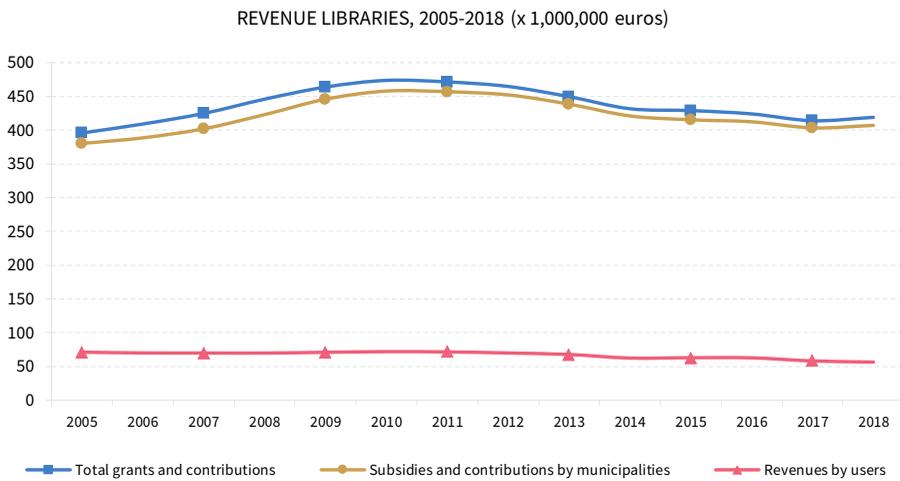


Figure 6. Revenue of libraries in The Netherlands 2005–2018 (Van de Burgt and Van de Hoek, 2019; CBS, 2019)

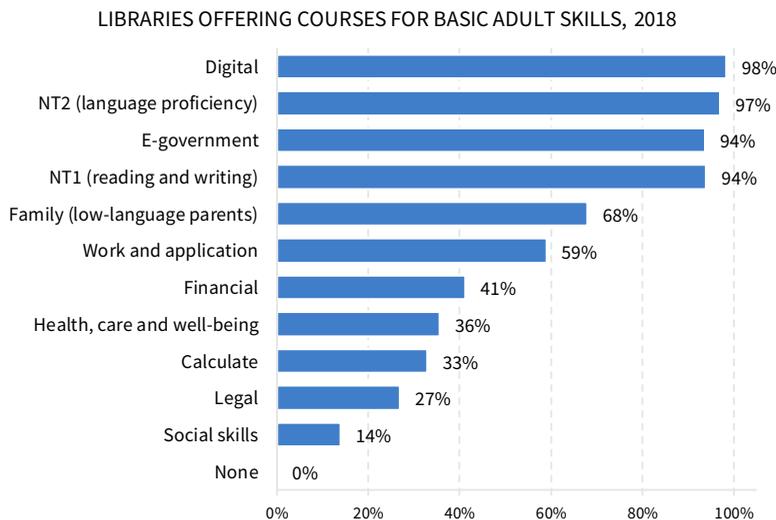


Figure 7. Share of libraries in The Netherlands offering courses for basic adult skills (Van de Hoek and Van de Burgt, 2019)



Figure 8. Infographic of library statistics in The Netherlands. The research results in this article are from the site Bibliotheekinzicht.nl. On this Dutch website, the KB, National Library of The Netherlands, bundles knowledge from various studies that provide insight into the state of the library system. Here policy makers and library professionals can find reliable, neutral and up-to-date information about the public library sector

Library acts in Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, there is a library act in all countries – Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland.

In Sweden the newest act is from 2014 ([Bibliotekslag, 2013](#)). The legislation includes public libraries, school libraries, regional libraries, academic libraries, lending centres and other libraries that get public funding. The act emphasises that through knowledge sharing and freedom of speech, libraries can advance democracy in the society. Libraries can also enhance the status of literature and citizens' interest in civilisation, education, research and culture. Every municipality has to have a library, and they have to put special emphasis on children and youth. In Sweden, there are no qualification requirements for library staff. The responsibility of the libraries is provincial (*landsting*) ([Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016](#)).

In Norway, the library act is also from 2014 ([Lov om folkebibliotek, 2019](#)). The principles are practically the same as in Sweden, and the law concerns public municipal libraries, regional libraries and certain libraries that are state responsibility. According to the law, public libraries have to promote civilisation, education and other cultural action by delivering books and other material free of charge and make it accessible to everyone. Libraries have to act as independent and free meeting points and as arenas for public discussions. In Norway, there is a special decree for staff qualifications ([Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016](#)).

In Denmark, the library act concerns both state libraries and public libraries. The law is wider and more detailed than in other Nordic countries. According to the law, the purpose of libraries is to promote civilisation, education and culture by offering books, magazines, e-books, music and electronic material. They also have to deliver information about society, state and municipality. Religious, moral or political aspects may not influence material acquisition. Central libraries act as lending centres for other libraries and ensure material availability to all libraries. The Danish library act is from 2000, and there have been some small reforms in 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2019. The last reform concerned national library cataloguing ([Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016](#)).

Library acts in Finland

The first library act in Finland is from 1928, and it is the oldest law concerning public libraries in general. Public libraries have a very strong position in the Finnish society. The first libraries were founded in the rural areas at the beginning of the 19th century, but, already during the 18th century, Lutheran churches had owned collections of books and bibles to be lent to the common people. Following the model of Sweden and Germany, reading societies and libraries were founded by the educated people for their own use in the 1790s in prosperous coastal towns in Finland ([Eskola, 2001](#)).

The 1928 library act was a good law in its own time. It was of great importance in bringing the library services to every corner of the country and securing a minimum level for library services in Finland. The first reform of the act in 1961 started a new era for Finnish public libraries and created the library network existing today.

There were two reformations on the law, 1986 and 1998, when only small changes were made to the Library Act. They merely stated what had already happened in reality. The preparation of the 2016 Library Act started in 2015, when a group of library specialists from different library sectors started to compose the new act. Ministry of Education and Culture was responsible for this reform.

Why was the new Library Act needed in Finland?

There were several societal changes that had reshaped the operational environment of libraries. Some of the crucial changes were:

Evolution from the collection-centric to user-centric service

The role of the library was not confined to reading and collections anymore. The public library had become more open, having more events and activities, education and cooperation with its customers.

Digitalisation

During the 2010s, digitalisation started to bring new types of material to Finnish libraries. The Finnish society was increasingly going online. Libraries offered more education for citizens to build their digital capabilities.

Multicultural society

The society was becoming more diverse in terms of culture. The first refugees came to Finland in 1970, and since then, they have been a part of Finnish society. During 2015, Finland received 32,000 refugees mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Albania. Libraries play an important role in social integration, social equity and dialogue.

The role of libraries in promoting and reinforcing democracy in the society

Libraries have always promoted democracy, and the 2016 Library Act finally acknowledged this. Libraries are open and free to everyone, and they have a lot of opportunities to act as a platform for all kinds of events, discussions, panels, etc. for promoting democracy and freedom of speech.

Staff qualifications

Qualifications for the library profession have changed during the past years. Librarians do not only work with books or cataloguing, and therefore, information studies are not the only path to working in a library. In the old Library Act, the qualifications for library staff were quite strict, and this paragraph had to be revised to a more open form.

Objectives of the public library

The objectives of public libraries are stated in the law as follows:

To promote:

- (1) equal opportunities for everyone to access education and culture;
- (2) availability and use of information;
- (3) reading culture and versatile literacy skills;
- (4) opportunities for lifelong learning and competence development; and
- (5) active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression.

The implementation of these objectives is based on the sense of community, pluralism and cultural diversity ([Public Libraries Act, 2016](#)).

Duties of public libraries

For the first time ever, the act also defined tasks for the library – the former laws did not state what a public library should and must do:

- (1) providing access to materials, information and cultural contents;

- (2) maintaining versatile and up-to date collections;
- (3) promoting reading and literature;
- (4) providing information services, guidance and support in the acquisition and use of information and in versatile literacy skills;
- (5) providing premises for learning, recreational activities, working, and civic activity; and
- (6) promoting social and cultural dialogue.

Furthermore, to do these things “public libraries shall have adequate premises, modern equipment and sufficient and competent staff at their disposal” (Public Libraries Act, 2016).

The impact of the new Library Act in Finland

Following the new defined tasks for public libraries, there has been a clear change in what happens in libraries. Events are increasing rapidly, promoting reading, democracy and freedom of speech.

More than 55,000 events were organised in Finnish libraries in 2019. Of these, more than 40,000 were organised by the libraries themselves, and 15,000 organised by other municipal actors (such as cultural, youth, senior and health services) or external actors (such as NGOs, cultural establishments, charities and banks). The number of participants in all events combined peaked at 995,000 in 2019 (Figure 9).

This development is partly because of the improvements in the collection of comparable national library statistics, but largely because of the changing emphasis of priorities in libraries, similarly to The Netherlands. Librarians are also better trained to produce events.

Libraries have taken a stronger role in producing and organising their own events. Some years ago, libraries concentrated mostly on literature events and author visits, but now there is more cooperation with other actors and more all-round events. All this is based on the legal duties of public libraries. However, 59% of all events still fall under literature and reading promotion, reflecting the traditional mission of public libraries.

In addition to events, user training given to library visitors is monitored yearly in the national library statistics. In 2019, more than 266,000 school children and adults took part



Figure 9.
The growth in the number of events organised by Finnish libraries 2012–2019 and their audience

in book talks and various forms of multiliteracy education, including media literacy – that is almost 5% of the total population. Education of information retrieval, digital technology and library usage reached 190,000 participants. Total combined outreach of these has grown 61% in 2012–2019, and the number of classes given similarly increased by 57% in the same period.

During the past few years, the Finnish government has required public libraries to take a more concrete role in providing digital support for citizens. Libraries have provided access to digital services since the mid-1990s, and the forms of digital support have constantly evolved. Although Finland is at the forefront in digitalisation, digital marginalisation is a real concern. There are large groups of citizens who face challenges in the use of digital devices and services, including e-government services and library services themselves (Ojaranta and Litmanen-Peitsala, 2019).

Open access and self-service in Finnish libraries

Customer service hours in Finnish libraries have been on a slight decline throughout the 2000s. However, the trend towards so-called *open library access* has increased total opening hours 32% from 2000 to 2019. Also, some bigger cities such as Helsinki and Tampere have managed to increase both service hours with library staff present and open library hours in 2010s (Figure 10).

Open library (Finnish: omatoimikirjasto, Swedish: meröppet bibliotek) essentially means a library where customers are allowed to enter unattended by the library staff before or after service hours. Customers can enter using their library card and a personal PIN code, use computers, hold a meeting, do homework or study, as well as loan and return material with self-service machines. Security systems are installed at the door, and CCTV cameras are operating in the premises. In The Netherlands, most libraries have self-service for several hours as part of their normal opening hours, but there is back office staff to open the doors, so the concept is different.

In Finland and other Scandinavian countries, open libraries are becoming more prevalent. In a recent national inquiry, municipalities in Finland reported a total of 233 Open branch libraries (Mustikkamäki, 2019). The favourable experiences of pioneering municipalities encourage others. In Tampere the first Open library was opened in 2014; now there is already five of them and two more will be established in 2020.



Figure 10. Customer service hours and open library hours in Finnish libraries 2000–2019. The share of open library access hours has grown rapidly from 4% in 2014 to 36% in 2019

There have been some problems with Open libraries, such as disorderly conduct or vandalism. These cases are often successfully settled through conciliation and non-legal hearings. Mostly, the open libraries function very well (Mustikkamäki, 2019).

Open libraries reflect the new library law. The principles of “providing premises for learning, recreational activities, working, and civic activity” and being “available and accessible to all” are the key drivers behind this phenomenon. The significance of the gatekeeper role has dwindled among libraries. They have begun to trust their customers and changed libraries into public places figuratively owned by the taxpayers, not librarians. This has proven to be a successful strategy: Open libraries are the fastest growing branches in terms of numbers of visitors and loans, and customers welcome transforming existing libraries into open libraries in user surveys (Plate 3).

Library visits have declined from peak numbers and levelled down to approximately 50 million visits yearly. However, in the recent years, numbers of visits, especially in large city libraries have increased, reflecting urbanisation in growth areas in Finland. Also, the placement of libraries in welfare centres, shopping malls and other joint service points has increased foot traffic into library spaces. This implies that declining visits are not an irreversible and inevitable trend.

The unprecedented media attention of central library Oodi in Helsinki – awarded the 2019 Public Library of the Year – as well as the 2019 library tour of newly appointed cabinet ministers have attracted Finns to other libraries in Finland across the country (Finland Today, 2019). Oodi was a major flagship investment of Finland and a symbolic birthday present for the 100th anniversary of independence of the state; “monument to the Nordic model of civic engagement”. The sculptural building itself stands opposite to, and at the same eye level with the Finnish Parliament House (Plate 4).

At the same time, the number of unique lending customers has taken an upward turn since 2017. The number of these active library card holders grows slightly faster than the population of Finland. This can indicate successful measures in attracting new customers and retaining them. On an average, 38% of Finns use their library card yearly (Figure 11).

Physical lending in decline while e-lending surpasses collection growth rate

The Finns are avid readers and library users: in 2019, the total annual lending was 86 million items (15.7 per capita), the annual number of library visits was 54 million (9.8 per capita) and the internet services of the libraries were used 47 million times. Library lending has been in



Plate 3.
Koivistonkylä branch library in Tampere is open with self-service access 7 a.m.–9 p.m. year round. The number of visits has grown almost 150% and the number of loans 160% since the self-service access was initiated in February 2016, i.e. the use has more than doubled. Photo: Tampere City Library



Plate 4.
Oodi. Photo: Kuvio

LIBRARY VISITS, LENDING CUSTOMERS AND PHYSICAL LOANS IN FINLAND

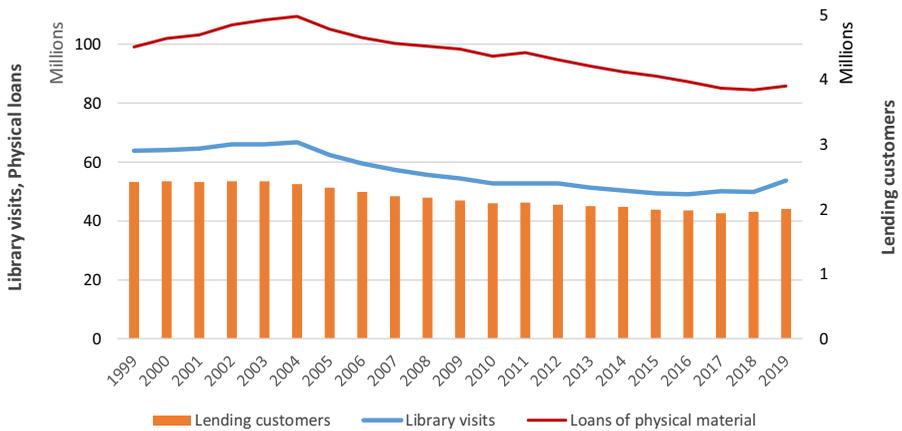


Figure 11.
Development of library visits, unique lending customers and loans of physical material in Finland 1999–2019. The decreasing trends are showing signs of reversing

decline since 2004, but much more moderately than in The Netherlands. The decline has finally reached a plateau and physical lending is gaining new growth in some cities at the end of 2010s.

Attractive programming of literature events, book talks and library user training in versatile literacy are the most common measures taken to reverse the downward trend. Usage data are analysed to support collection management and acquisitions to make the most of material budgets. New books and bestsellers are promoted with shorter loan periods to maximise their circulation. Personalised and data-driven recommendation services and apps are introduced. Books, music and films are marketed in the social media. Mobile library

services such as library buses frequent schools and day-care centres, lowering barriers for early library patronage.

Collections of electronic books have grown 144% in 2015–2019, while usage has skyrocketed 336%. Furthermore, all e-book loans are first loan periods as they cannot be renewed. Each e-book was used 10.7 times a year on average in 2019, and subsequently, there is pressure to increase budgets for acquisition of e-book licenses (Figure 12).

Staff costs remain the largest part of expenditures in Finnish public libraries (52% share in 2019), followed by cost of library space (25%). Albeit a small fraction of total costs (0.8%), expenditure on e-materials has grown proportionally the most in 2010s, as well as expenditure on space. Expenditure on printed books and other library materials (music, films, magazines, newspapers) has grown smaller (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Collections of electronic books have grown 144% in 2015–2019, while usage has more than tripled

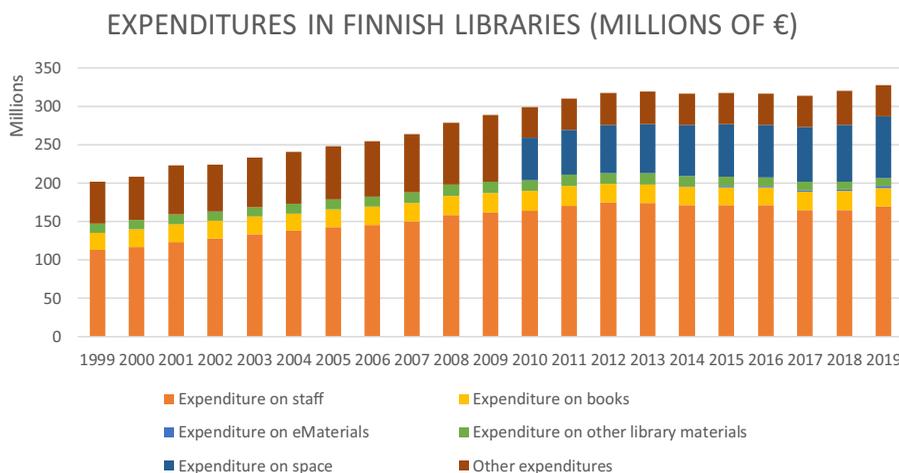


Figure 13. Growth of library expenditures in Finland 1999–2019. The Finnish library statistics in this article are from the Finnish Public Libraries Statistics database (Public libraries in Finland, 2020). On this website, the Ministry of Education and Culture makes data collected by all the public libraries and the Regional State Administrative Agencies publicly available.

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