

# Users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries in Belgium

Final report

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## Executive summary

### Objectives and research approach

TNS, an independent research company with a global presence, was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation to conduct research across 17 EU countries to identify perceptions and types of use of public libraries. The purpose of the research was to understand the impact that public libraries in the EU have on users' lives.

The research included:

- a workshop among the study stakeholders to discuss the priorities for the research;
- desk research, to collate key data concerning libraries;
- a survey of a representative sample of the population aged 15 and over in each of the 17 countries;
- a survey among library users and public access computer (PAC) users aged 15 and over, in each of the 17 countries, conducted in libraries; and
- qualitative research among library users and library staff.

This report provides a brief overview of the results for Belgium and compares the results to the EU total.

### The public library landscape

- The desk research estimates that there are 1250 public libraries in Belgium, which equates to 1.1 libraries per 10,000 population, compared with an average of 1.3 libraries per 10,000 population across the EU.
- Computer access is available in 100% of public libraries in Belgium.

### Library and PAC usage

- An estimated 3.8 million adults in Belgium, around two fifths adults in the country (42%) had used a public library in the last 12 months, compared with just under a quarter (23%) of all adults across Europe.
- An estimated 0.7 million adults in Belgium, 8% of adults, had used PACs in the last 12 months, significantly higher than the average of 4% of adults across the EU.
- PAC users in Belgium were more likely than the EU average to be men, to be aged 15-24, to live in a rural area, and to have stopped full time education aged 20 or over or be still studying.
- The primary motivations of PAC users across the EU are the free nature of the service together with the lack of other options that people have. PAC users in Belgium, compared with users across the EU, were much more likely to have mentioned working with friends or other people as a reason for using computers in public libraries.
- Overall, it is estimated that 0.2 million PAC users in Belgium had nowhere else to access the internet, or to access the internet free of charge.
- The value placed on the PAC service was slightly higher among users in Belgium than the EU average. Overall, 96% of PAC users in Belgium said that the library's computer and internet connection services were valuable, compared with 92% of all EU PAC users.
- Satisfaction with computers and the internet at public libraries was high among users: 91% of users in Belgium were satisfied.

### Perceptions and impacts of public libraries

- Around six out of ten library users in Belgium considered 'free access to computers' and 'free access to the internet' important (compared with around seven out of ten library users across Europe).
- Almost four fifths (79%) of the general public in Belgium (including both library users and non-users) felt libraries were either very effective, effective or fairly effective at meeting the needs of their local community. This was higher than the average across the EU of 64%.
- Around half (45%) of the public in Belgium felt that public libraries merited more financial support than at present, which was higher than the EU average (40%).

- Overall 89% of PAC users in Belgium said their PAC use had delivered at least one impact for them, higher than the average across the EU (83%) and representing approximately 0.6 million people in Belgium.
- Library users in Belgium were less likely than the EU average to strongly agree that public libraries 'Are accessible to everyone' (55% Belgium compared with 70% EU) and 'Provide access to information for those who don't have it elsewhere' (53% Belgium compared with 65% EU).

### **Informal and non-formal learning**

- In Belgium 21% of library users had taken part in an educational activity in a library in the last 12 months, which was below the EU average of 25%.

### **Employment and use of PACs for business**

- Around a quarter (26%) of PAC users in Belgium had used library computers in the last 12 months to support some employment related activity, below the EU average of 30%. This represents an estimated 0.2 million PAC users in Belgium who had used PAC for employment related activity.
- An estimated 81,000 PAC users in Belgium had used a PAC to apply for a job in the last 12 months, and an estimated 15,000 adults were successful in securing employment by this means.

### **E-government and active citizenship**

- The library survey found that a quarter of PAC users in Belgium (25%) had used PACs to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months, on a par with the EU average of one in four (24%). The most common ways in which PAC users in Belgium interacted with public authorities were to obtain information from public authorities' websites (20%) and to download official forms (10%).
- Overall, three in ten PAC users in Belgium (30%) had used PAC for civic engagement activities in the past 3 months, slightly higher than the average for users across the EU (26%). The two most common community engagement activities were reading and posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites (16% Belgium compared with 14% EU) and seeking information on local/national/EU government activity (13% Belgium compared with 10% EU).

# 1. Background and methodology

## 1.1 Context for the research

Public libraries across the European Union (EU) have long played an important role in communities by providing free access to information, guidance from trained librarians, and public meeting space. As meaningful participation in society increasingly requires access to digital information and resources, many public libraries in the EU have expanded their offerings to include access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) like computers and the Internet.

There is a growing body of evidence about the ways public access to ICTs contributes to economic, health, education, and social development<sup>1</sup>. For instance, the Global Impact Study on Public Access to ICTs, which covers five developing countries, found that those using Public Access Computers reported positive impact related to communication (79%), education (78%), access to government information (40%) and health (37%). More than 80% of public services in the EU are now fully available online,<sup>2</sup> but in 2011, just 41% of the EU population used government services electronically.<sup>3</sup> Today, some Europeans have their first experiences with computers or the Internet at a public library, and for some individuals this may remain the only place they can access ICTs (or access them without paying unaffordable fees)<sup>4</sup>.

Under the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the EU has set ambitious objectives in many of the development areas to which access-to-information efforts contribute – specifically employment, innovation, education, and social inclusion. EU Member States are expected to meet targets in these areas by 2020. There is anecdotal evidence that ICT access through public libraries can support the implementation of the specific growth, education, and cohesion policies related to the EU 2020 Strategy, such as digital skills and inclusion milestones described under the Digital Agenda for Europe (one of seven flagship initiatives of the Strategy) or informal and non-formal learning, which is mentioned in three of the seven flagship initiatives. In other policy areas, such as supporting a skilled workforce and connecting people to employment opportunities, public libraries' roles may be less obvious and additional data are needed to demonstrate the contributions of public libraries and help them secure EU support for their work.

This research, which includes EU-wide and country-specific reports, was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation to illuminate the role of public libraries in supporting social and economic policies under the EU 2020 Strategy.

## 1.2 Research objectives

The main purpose of the research was to understand the impact that public libraries in the EU have on users' lives.

## 1.3 Research method

The research was conducted in the following seventeen countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom.

The research involved several phases. First, desk research was carried out to collate existing information showing the public library landscape in the survey countries, using sources such as IFLA, national and local library statistics, local library associations, national statistical offices, Eurostat, Eurobarometer and so on. Survey work was carried out in October/November 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> See [The Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technology](#) about the scale, character, and impacts of public access to information and communication technologies. Looking at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafes, the study investigates impact in a number of areas, including communication and leisure, culture and language, education, employment and income, governance, and health. Implemented by the University of Washington's [Technology & Social Change Group](#) (TASCHA), the Study is part of a broader research project supported by Canada's [International Development Research Centre](#) (IDRC) and a grant to IDRC from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Eurostat](#), 2010

<sup>3</sup> [Eurostat](#), 2011

<sup>4</sup> Sciadas, G., with Lyons, H., Rothschild, C., & Sey, A. (2012). *Public access to ICTs: Sculpting the profile of users*. Seattle: Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington Information School.

Users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries in Belgium

- A representative sample of 1,018 members of the public aged 15+ in Belgium (17,816 across the 17 countries) were interviewed regarding their usage of libraries, computers in libraries and their attitudes towards libraries.
- Interviews were carried out in libraries. In Belgium, 885 interviews were conducted with people who had not used Public Access Computers (PACs) in libraries (12,537 across the 17 countries) and 650 with those who had (11,716 across the 17 countries). The interviews in Belgium were conducted in 20 libraries which were selected and contacted with help from representatives of Bibnet and the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles Service de la lecture publique. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face.
- Qualitative fieldwork was conducted, consisting in each country of five 60-minute depth interviews with library managers and four 90-minute group discussions with PAC users. At least 3 libraries were represented in each country, in both urban and semi-rural locations.

Survey results were weighted to ensure that the final results were representative of the population within each country. Weighting was also applied to rebalance the weight of each country within the pan-European totals, in proportion to the population size.

## 1.4 This report

This report provides a brief overview of the results for Belgium and compares the results to the EU total. EU results are based on findings from the 17 countries included in this study. Individual reports for each country surveyed have been produced as well as an overall report<sup>5</sup>.

Throughout this report where we refer to:

- A 'library': This means a public library, which anyone can go to, and does not include school, college, or university libraries'
- PAC user/usage': This refers to usage of a public access computer to access the internet within a public library, and is based on those who responded affirmatively to the following question:

*Have you used a public access computer in a public library to access the internet in the last 12 months?  
Please do not include using your personal computer or smart phone in the library.*

Throughout this report comparisons are made between the findings in Belgium and the average across the EU. The EU average is calculated based on responses from the 17 countries in the survey. It should be noted that figures for Belgium are *included* in the EU average, which has the effect of lessening the statistical power of comparisons between the Belgium and EU figures.

While most of the data is presented in terms of percentages, on a number of occasions throughout this report data have been grossed up to represent the population of Belgium and are presented in terms of estimated numbers.

## 2. The public library landscape and internet provision

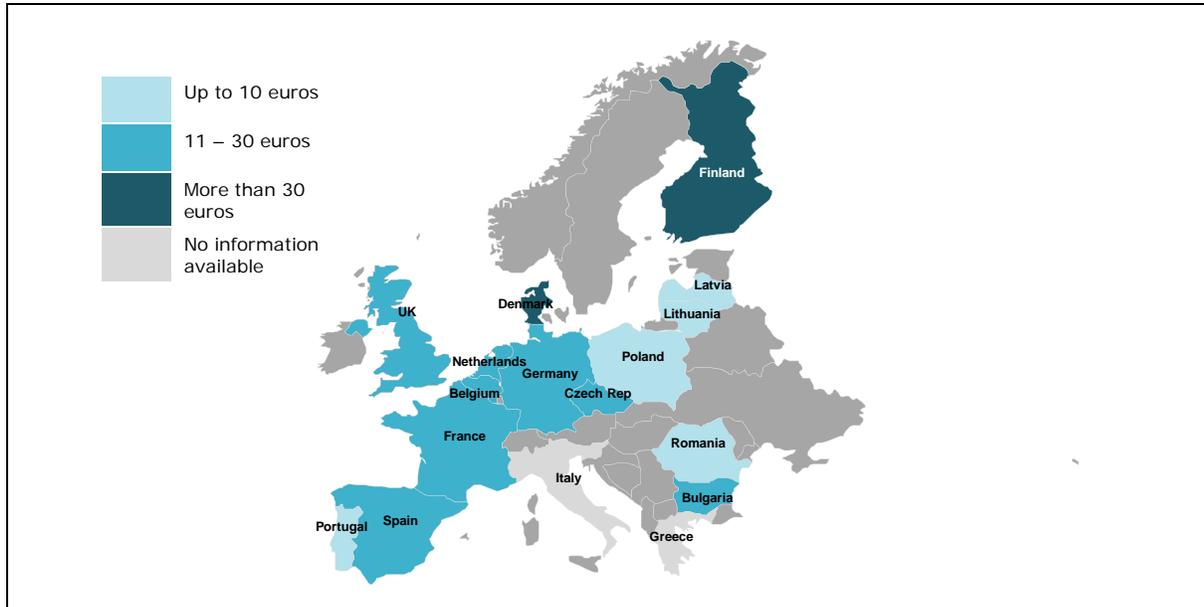
There are 1250 public libraries in Belgium (2012), which equates to 1.1 library per 10,000 population.<sup>6</sup> This compares to an average across the 17 EU countries of 1.3 libraries per 10,000 population.

In Belgium, culture is under the authority of the communities. The three language communities of Belgium, French, Flemish and German-speaking, have all adopted their own legislation in matters of public reading. Because of socio-economic but also political disparities between the north and the south of the country, the financing of public reading is not the same everywhere: the Flemish-community spends more per capita and the French community less. Overall, however, the annual public spending on libraries per capita in Belgium is about 27 Euros, which is similar to other Western European countries, as shown in the map overleaf.

<sup>5</sup> Quick, Prior, Toombs, Taylor and Currenti (2013): *Cross-European survey to measure users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries* (funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation)

<sup>6</sup> Sources: *La Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles en Chiffres*; *MFWB, Service de la lecture publique*, p.149, Edition 2012; [http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/volwassenen/bib\\_gesubsidieerd.aspx](http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/volwassenen/bib_gesubsidieerd.aspx), retrieved 23/11/2012  
Users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries in Belgium

**Figure 1: Annual spending on libraries per capita**



Source: TNS desk research

Computer access is offered by 100% of public libraries in Belgium<sup>7</sup>.

Eurostat data (2011) for Internet access at home shows that Belgium has a high level, with 77% of households having access to the Internet, compared with an EU average of 73%. It may therefore be expected that demand for and usage of PAC services would be lower in Belgium than in other countries.

### 3. Library and PAC usage

#### 3.1 Access to libraries and PACs

The general public survey found that library usage in Belgium was well above the EU average.

- An estimated 3.8 million adults in Belgium, two fifths of adults in Belgium (42%) had used a public library in the last 12 months, compared with just under a quarter (23%) of all adults across Europe.
- An estimated 2.2 million adults, a quarter (24%) of adults in Belgium, had used a library at least once a month, against an EU average of 14%.

The prevalence of library use in the last 12 months, by different groups in Belgium and across the EU, is shown in Figure 2. In Belgium:

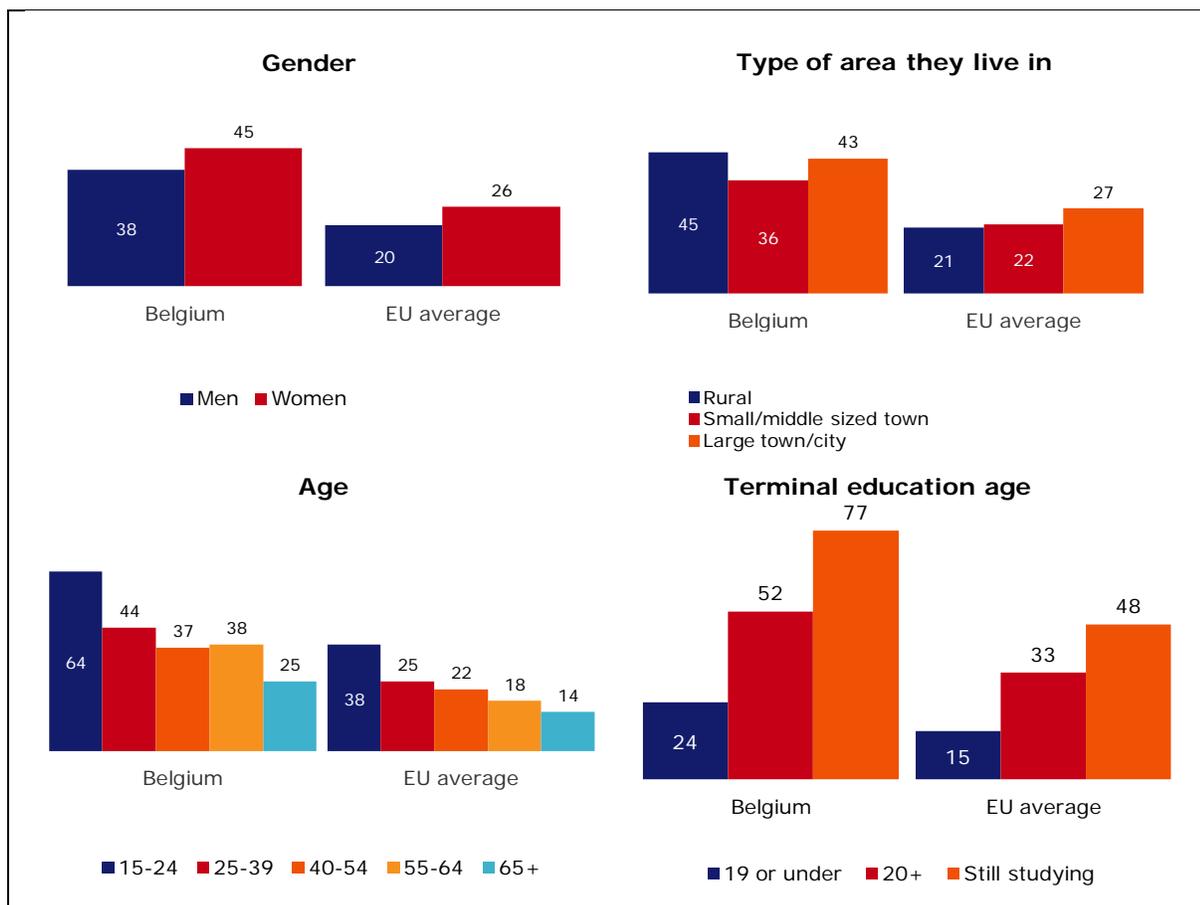
- Women (45%) were more likely than men (38%) to have visited a library, in line with the findings across the EU.
- Library usage in Belgium was high among all the age groups, particularly so among 15-24s (64% of those aged 15-24, 44% of those aged 25-39, 37% of those aged 40-54, 38% of those aged 55-64 and

<sup>7</sup> Sources: *La Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles en Chiffres*; *MFWB, Service de la lecture publique*, p.10,34, Edition 2012 ; *Bibliotheek cijfers BIOS 2011*, [www.bibliotheeken.be](http://www.bibliotheeken.be), retrieved on 23/11/2012

25% of those aged 65+ had visited a library in the last 12 months. Library usage in Belgium was higher than the EU average in every age bracket.

- Library use was similar among those in large towns and cities (43%), those in smaller towns (36%) and those in rural areas (45%).
- Library use was particularly high among those who were still studying – 77% of this group had used a public library in the last 12 months, one and a half times the EU average.
- Library use was higher among those born in Belgium than outside Belgium – 43% vs 34%

**Figure 2: Percentage of each group who had used a library in the last 12 months**



Source: Omnibus survey – Q1. Have you visited a public library in the last 12 months?

Base: Belgium – All adults (1018), Men (488), Women (530), 15-24 (194), 25-39 (236), 40-54 (279), 55-64 (136), 65+ (173), Large town/city (234), Small town (317), Rural area (463), Finished education 19 or under (468), 20 or over (395), Still studying (141), EU - All adults (17816), Men (8521), Women (9295), 15-24 (2636), 25-39 (4152), 40-54 (4592), 55-64 (2937), 65+ (3496), Large town/city (5352), Small town (6653), Rural area (5633), Finished education 19 or under (9943), 20 or over (5500), Still studying (1801).

The profile of library users in Belgium, compared with across the EU, was:

- 44% of library users in Belgium were men, 56% women; on a par with the EU average (42% men, 58% women)
- users in Belgium had a similar age profile to the EU average – 29% were aged 15-24, 24% aged 25-39, 24% aged 40-54, 12% aged 55-64 and 10% aged 65+; compared with the EU average of 25% aged 15-24, 26% aged 25-39, 25% aged 40-54, 12% aged 55-64 and 12% aged 65+.

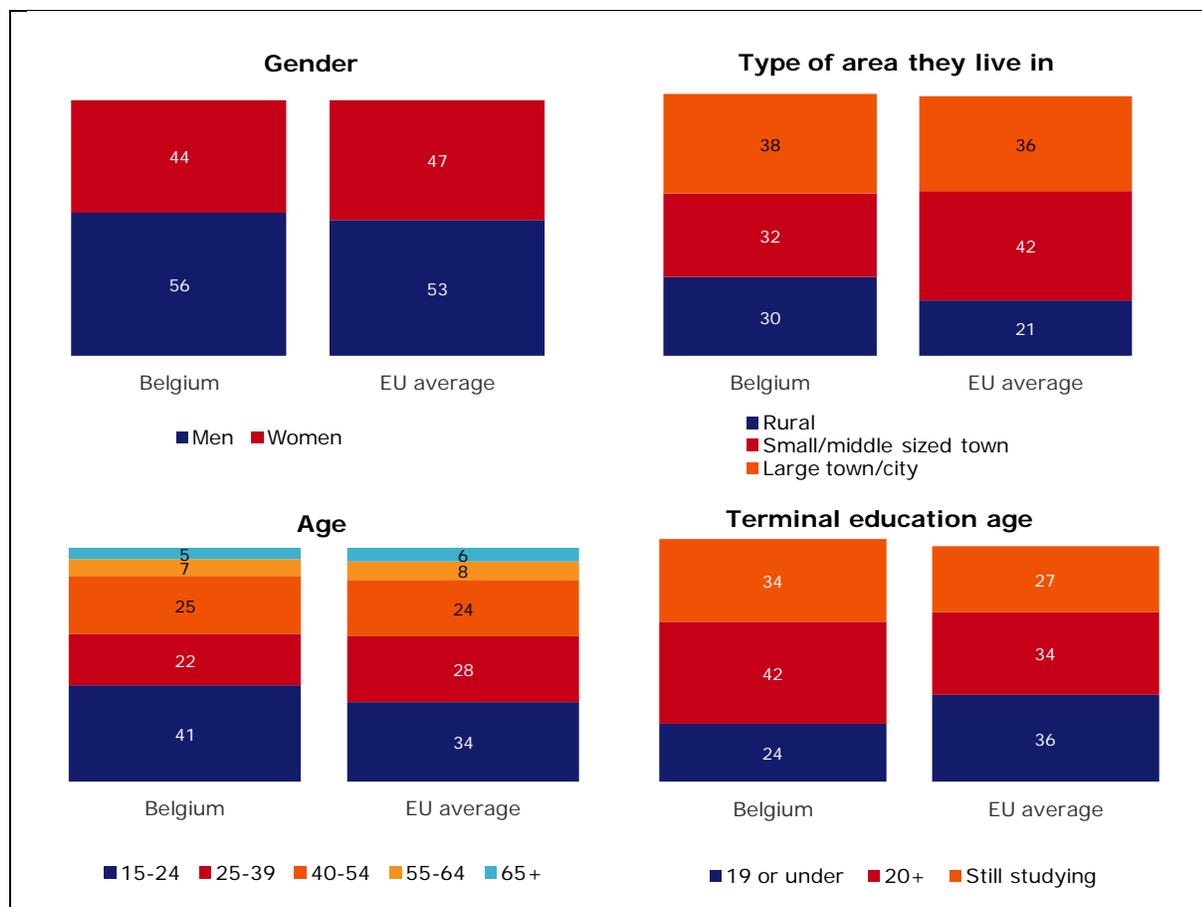
Approaching a fifth (17%) of those who had visited a library in Belgium in the last 12 months used a PAC, which is slightly higher than the EU average of 14%. When those who had not used a PAC were asked why this was, although the majority (82%) said they had no need to because they had a computer/internet at home, a

significant minority of 3% said they did not know how to use computers or the internet, implying that there is potential for libraries to further increase their customer base for PAC.

In total, the survey found that 8% of adults in Belgium had used PACs in the last 12 months, significantly higher than the average of 4% of adults across the EU countries. This is estimated to be around 0.7 million adults within Belgium.

PAC users in Belgium were more likely than the EU average to be men, to be aged 15-24, to live in a rural area, and to have stopped full-time education aged 20 or over or be still studying, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Profile of those who had used a PAC in the last 12 months**



Source: Library survey – C4. Have you used a public access computer in a public library to access the Internet in the last 12 months?

Base: All PAC users Belgium (650), EU (11716).

Over two fifths of users in Belgium (44%) had used PACs once every three months or less often, which is close to the EU average (47%). 29% of PAC users in Belgium made use of PACs at least once a week, compared with 23% across the EU, with 24% doing so once to three times a month (compared with 29% across the EU).

In the qualitative research, library managers described a variety of ways in which they were working to increase PAC usage and meet the needs of their users. Whilst there were few problems attracting visitors to the library as a whole, there were some groups which were harder to reach due to specific barriers and special efforts were needed for these. Examples included older users, people with disabilities, people on low incomes, unemployed and ethnic minorities.

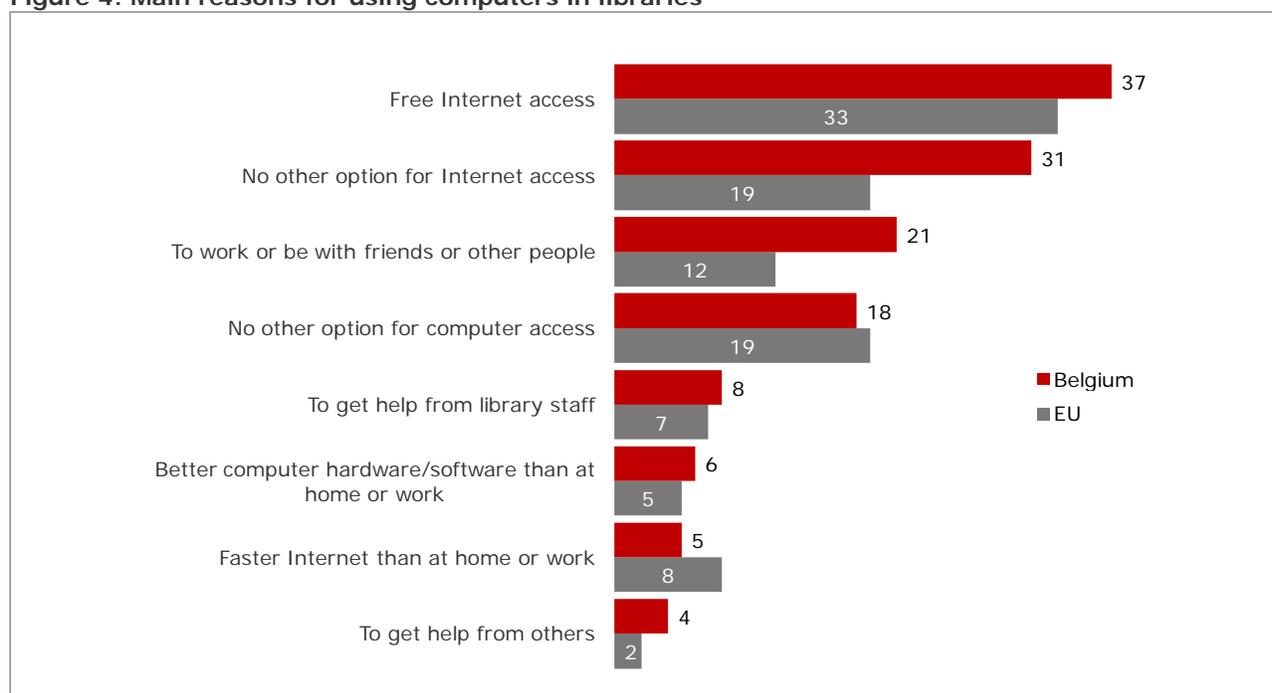
To encourage these groups, libraries were looking towards collaborations with different public bodies in contact with these people (e.g. Welfare Office, Community centres), and communicating more effectively to different groups in society by targeting these groups' needs and easing any fears that they might have through the appropriate channels, whether they be partner organizations or local media. As one of the key barriers was the perception of the library as 'intellectual', which created aversion among certain groups, librarians/senior librarians felt that it was necessary to communicate the key message that the library was 'more than just books'.

They were also looking to develop projects and courses to create enthusiasm among particular groups e.g. video games, video editing for younger visitors.

### 3.2 Reasons for using PACs

PAC users interviewed in the in-library survey were asked what their main reasons were for using computers, the internet and software in public libraries within the last 12 months. It is clear that in Belgium and across the EU, the primary motivations for PAC users are the free nature of the service together with the lack of other options that people have. PAC users in Belgium were more likely than those in other countries to have said that the library enables them to work or be with friends or other people (21% in Belgium compared with 12% across the EU).

**Figure 4: Main reasons for using computers in libraries**



Source: Library Survey - C8 What are the main reasons you have chosen to use computers, Internet and software at public libraries in the last 12 months?

Base: All PAC users- Belgium (650); EU (11716)

PAC users were also asked two more direct questions as to what other options they had, firstly regarding where else they could access the internet from, and secondly, where else they could access the internet 'for free'. In Belgium, 13% of PAC users said that they had no other options for accessing the internet (compared with 11% across the EU), and a further 16% that there was no other source of free internet for them (compared with 14% across the EU). Overall, it is estimated that 0.2 million PAC users Belgium (29% of PAC users) had nowhere else to access the internet, or to access the internet free of charge.

Those who indicated that they had no other options for accessing the internet tended often tended to come from 'digitally excluded' (and often 'socially excluded') groups, which clearly highlights the role of PACs in the future of the EU's 2020 Growth Strategy. Specifically, the following groups were particularly likely to indicate that they did not have any other options:

- Older people – 21% of PAC users aged 65+ had no alternative internet access, compared with 6% of those aged 15-24

The qualitative research supported the survey results, shown in Figure 4. Most visitors using ICT in the library were unable to afford the purchase of hardware / network connections that they needed, and as such, being able to use these ICT facilities without cost was the primary motivation for using computers in the library. They did not know where, and how else they would be able to do access these. Being connected to others via ICT was also cited as an important driver – not just through the social environment of the library, but users also felt that the basic mastering of ICT was a 'necessity' in today's society and the library facilitated this ability to 'keep up' and met their need to feel 'connected' with society at large. Whilst ICT training was not a driver in itself, (apart from older participants who came to the library for this reason), the majority of participants expressed their interest in it.

*"I use the computers in the library, because I wouldn't know where else I would be able to use them."*  
(User, M, 65+, Belgium)

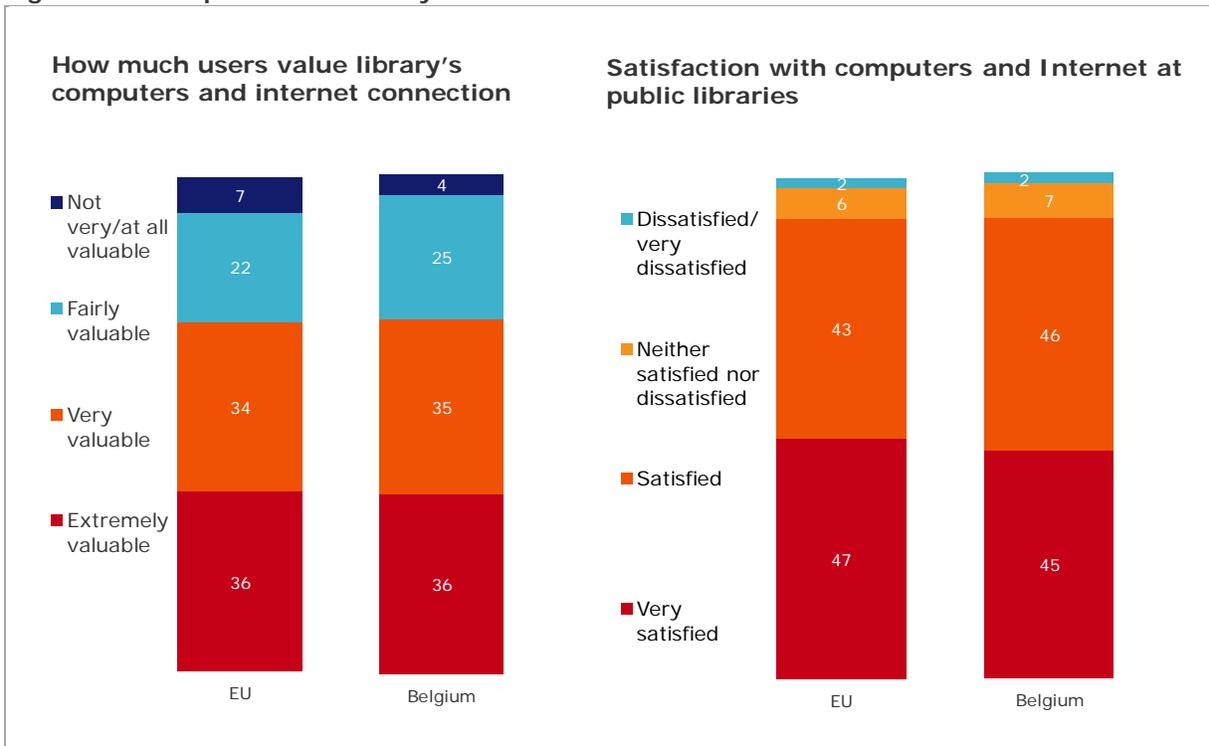
*"It is essential to be connected, keep up with your time. Otherwise you will not be part of society"*  
(User, M, 44-55, Belgium)

The value placed on the PAC service was slightly higher among users in Belgium than the EU average, as shown in Figure 5. Overall, 96% of PAC users in Belgium said that the library's computer and internet connection services were valuable, compared with 92% of all EU PAC users. The proportion of PAC users in Belgium saying the service was 'extremely' valuable though, was identical to those across the EU as a whole (36%).

The library's computers and internet connection were valued particularly highly in Belgium by users aged 40-54 (57% rated the services as extremely valuable), and those in large towns/cities (49% 'extremely valuable').

Satisfaction with computers and the internet at public libraries was high among users, as shown in Figure 5: 91% of users in Belgium and 91% of EU users as a whole were satisfied; 45% and 47% respectively said they were very satisfied.

**Figure 5: Value placed on PACs by users and satisfaction with PACs**



Source: Library survey - C30 How much do you value the library's computers and Internet connection? & C31 How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your access to computers and the Internet at public libraries?

Base: All PAC users. Belgium (650); EU (11716)

In Belgium, around three-quarters of PAC users (83%) said that when they go to a library to use a computer, they find a free computer straight away, and a further 10% that they have to wait for no more than 10 minutes. These waiting times are less than the averages reported across the EU (72% of PAC users find a free computer straight away, and a further 16% wait for no more than 10 minutes).

In the qualitative research, according to the reports of library and senior library managers, the number of PACs and other hardware, software per library was determined by visitor numbers and budget – ranging from 7 to 40 PCs in the libraries engaged in the research. Hardware was mostly limited to PCs, which were divided into ones for informational and recreational use, and those exclusively used for looking at the library catalogues or managing material lending. The hardware available included printers (much used by students), scanners (not all libraries) and touch screens (in one library).

Despite there being a standard policy across the libraries to renew PACs every 4-5 years, library/senior library managers noted a strong distinction between the reliability of PACs in urban and in semi-rural areas – those in urban libraries were less reliable, semi-rural libraries on the other hand caused no complaint. They attributed this to the amount they were used:

- In urban areas, PACs tended to be used more intensively (because of longer opening hours, larger number of users) and therefore the hardware wore down faster and needed quicker replacement. They were also using older versions of operating systems. Furthermore, the technical support delivered by municipal ICT organisations was limited because of the number of libraries they covered. Library/ senior library managers in these libraries called for dedicated ICT technicians who could deal with individual libraries' needs.

*"We only replace a computer when it has completely broken down" (Library Manager, Urban, Belgium)*

- PACS in semi-rural libraries were less frequently used, and library/senior library managers reported no problems regarding their reliability. They also had more freedom of choice of software, and often

received technical support from private companies, which resulted in up to date configurations and individual attention to the library.

Overall, users were generally satisfied with the ICT provisions offered to them in the public libraries. Their views on the provision of hardware and software in the library were broadly similar to library/senior library managers, with some difference in emphasis. For example, they also reported more problems in urban compared to semi-rural libraries, however whilst library managers focused on the problem of the reliability of the computers, users in urban areas found the shortage of PACs more problematic. They spoke of “traffic jams” to use the facilities, and found the limitation of 1 hour’s use per day frustrating. There were also some issues regarding software raised across the libraries, however on the whole they found PACs reliable for most of their activities.

All public libraries offered broadband and internet connection generally caused no problems, apart from one library, where there were some complaints about slow connection due to being connected to the municipal network. Users were also mostly content with the connection provided. Whilst both managers and users were satisfied, both anticipated that there could be problems with lack of bandwidth in the future, due to high demand.

Library / senior library managers saw Wifi as an essential part of the library’s services and role as an information provider, through enabling access to information, and facilitating study and research. Most of the libraries included in the qualitative research had Wifi, used most frequently by students; those which did not provide Wifi connection saw it as a shortcoming and had plans to offer it in the near future.

*“I see the fact that we do not offer Wifi as a serious shortcoming” (Library Manager, Semi Rural Belgium)*

Users also rated Wifi highly, with many using it within the libraries using laptops or smartphones. However, some had had experiences of connectivity not being strong enough /not working, and there were some libraries which did not provide Wifi, which had led to complaints among visitors.

## **4. Impressions of public libraries**

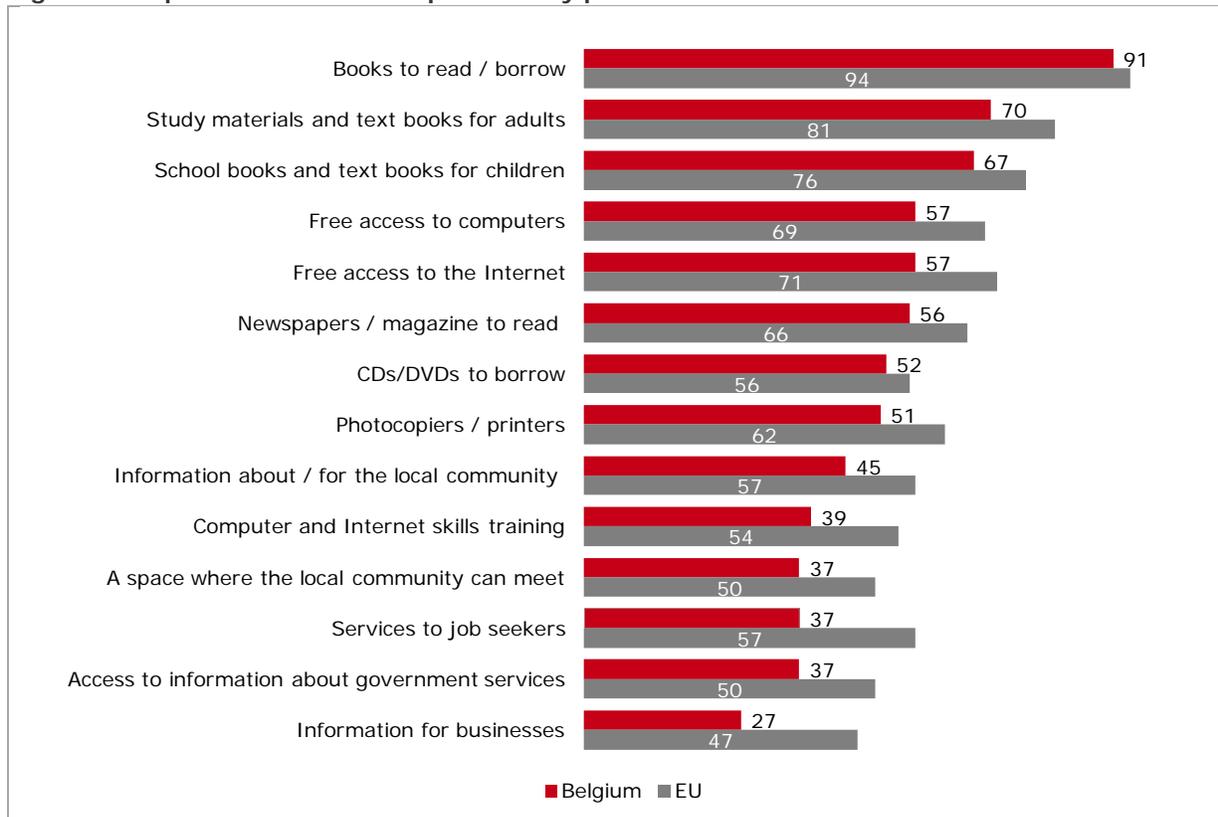
### **4.1 Importance of library services**

Library users (both PAC users and non-PAC users) were asked to rate each of a list of services that could be offered by libraries, on a 5-point scale from ‘extremely important’ to ‘not at all important’. Figure 6 shows the percentage in Belgium, and across the EU, rating each service as 4 or 5 on the scale.

Not surprisingly, the core service of ‘books to read/borrow’ was considered the most important, rated as important by 91% of users in Belgium (and 94% across the EU), followed by ‘study materials and text books for adults’.

‘School books’ were rated as important by two thirds (67%) library users in Belgium, and ‘Free access to the internet’ and ‘free access to computers’ were rated as important by over a half (57%) library users in Belgium - lower than the equivalent figures across Europe.

**Figure 6: Importance of services provided by public libraries**



Source: Library survey - C15 How important is this service that can be provided by public libraries.

Base: All library users - Belgium (1535); EU (24253)

For all the services, users in Belgium were less likely than the EU average to rate them as important. 39% of users in Belgium rated the provision of computer and Internet skills training as an important compared with 54% EU average).

Regarding the importance of libraries to community life, ‘providing a space where the local community can meet’ was seen as important by 37% of library users in Belgium (compared with 50% EU average), and ‘providing information about or for the local community’ was seen as important by 45% of library users in Belgium (compared with 57% EU average).

In the qualitative research, users were positive about the library environment, describing it as quiet and convivial. The library was perceived to be a space not just to engage with books, but also other people – whether they be other visitors or staff, this social contact was important to some users. ‘Leaving the house’ was cited as a reason for coming to the library, and younger users especially met with their friends there. They saw the library as a place they could combine both socialising and studying: taking advantage of the excellent study facilities available, as well as the motivating environment of being surrounded by others working, and being able to study together with friends too.

## 4.2 Effectiveness and funding of public libraries

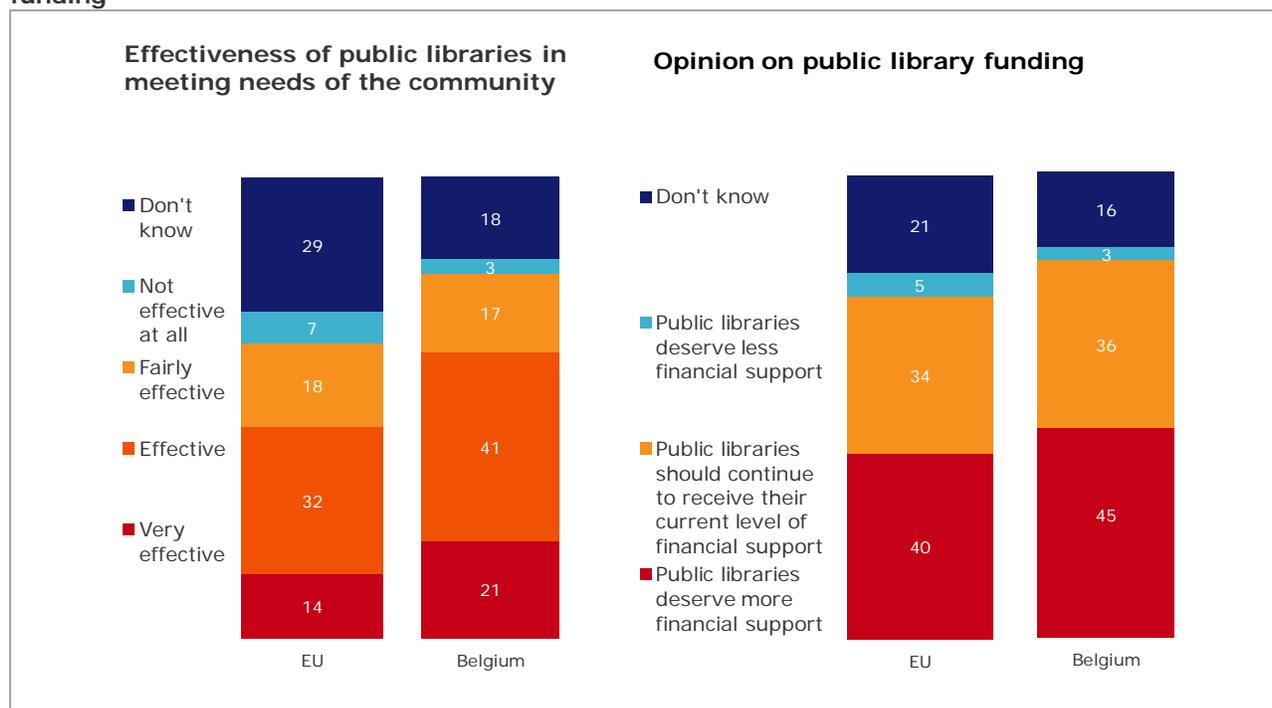
Almost four-fifths (79%) of the general public in Belgium (including both library users and non-users) felt libraries were either very effective, effective or fairly effective at meeting the needs of their local community. This was higher than the average across the 17 EU survey countries of 64%. The proportion saying libraries were ‘very effective’ was particularly high in Belgium, at 21% against the EU average of 14%.

Library users in Belgium and PAC users were almost unanimous in their opinion that libraries were effective in meeting the needs of their local community – 95% of all library users felt they were effective, rising to 99% among PAC users.

Around half (45%) of the public in Belgium felt that public libraries merited more financial support than at present, which was higher than the average of all 17 EU countries (40%). Almost all the remainder either felt that the funding should continue as at present (36%) or did not express an opinion (16%). Only 3% of the public in Belgium felt that public libraries deserve *less* financial support.

Not surprisingly, library users and PAC users were even more likely than non-users to say that libraries deserve more financial support – 51% of all library users, and 52% of PAC users, were in favour of more financial support for libraries.

**Figure 7: Effectiveness of public libraries in meeting community needs and opinion on public library funding**



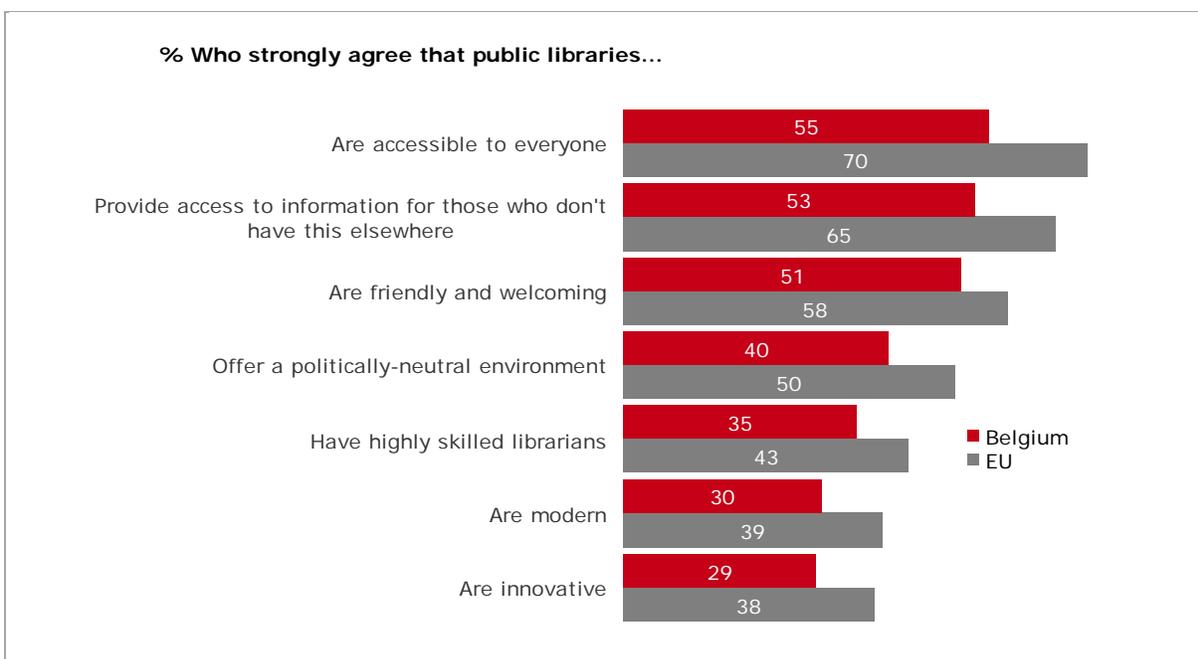
Source: Omnibus survey- Q6 How effective do you think your local public library is at meeting the needs of your community? & Q7 Which of the following statements represents most closely your opinion regarding the current funding for public libraries?.

Base: All adults - Belgium (1018); EU (17816)

### 4.3 Perceptions of public libraries

All library users were asked their opinions of public libraries, through a series of agree/disagree statements. Figure 8 shows the proportions in Belgium and EU who strongly agreed with each of these statements. Library users in Belgium were less likely than the EU average to strongly agree with all of these statements, with the biggest differences from the EU average for 'Are accessible to everyone' (55% Belgium compared with 70% EU) and 'Provide access to information to those who don't have this elsewhere' (53% Belgium, 65% EU).

**Figure 8: Perceptions of public libraries**



Source: Library survey- C29 How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements..  
 Base: All library users. Belgium (1535); EU (24253)

## 5. Informal and non-learning

Public libraries are key players in the delivery of the non-formal/informal component of the European Commission's lifelong learning policy, particularly with regard to *inclusive* delivery. The role of libraries in providing education to users was explored through asking all library users whether or not they had taken part in any educational activities in a public library within the last 12 months.

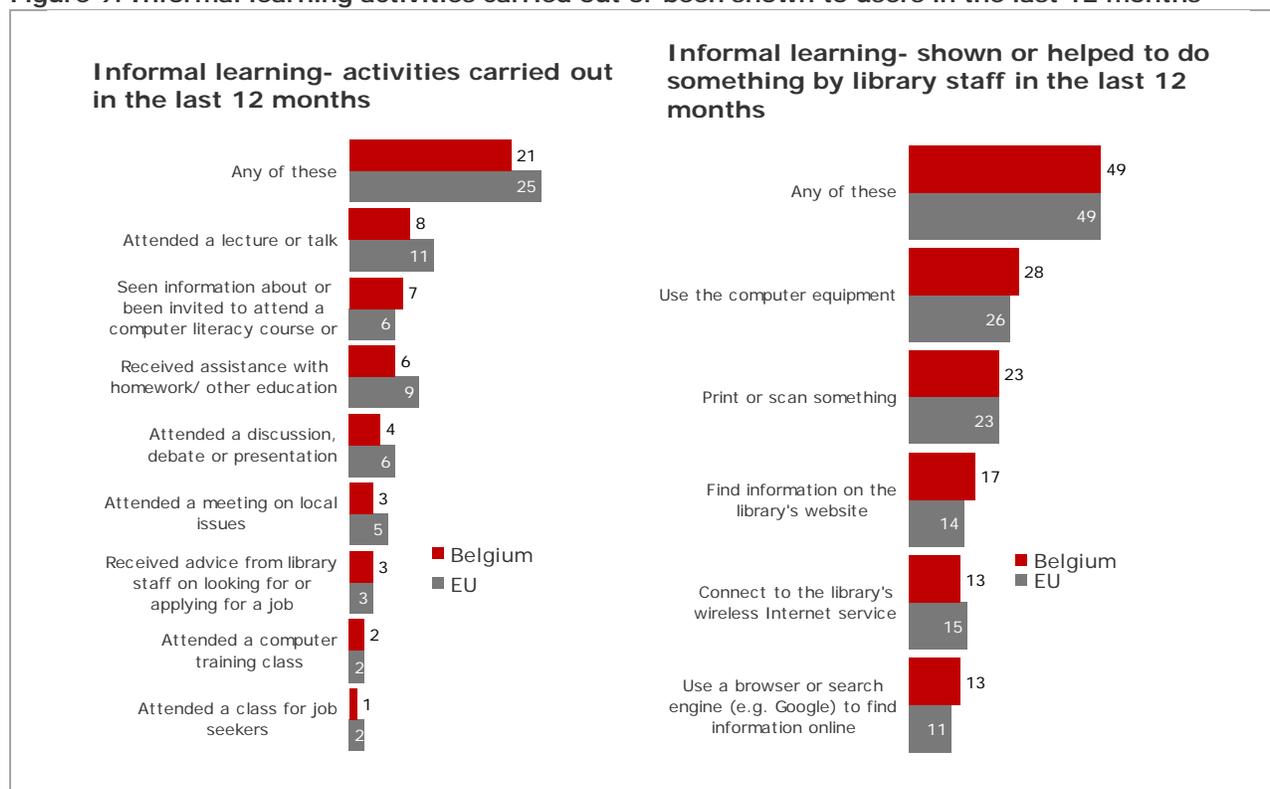
Overall, in Belgium 21% had taken part in one of the educational activities in libraries asked about in the last 12 months, which was below the EU average of 25%.

Engagement levels in all educational activities in libraries tended to be lower in Belgium than for the EU as a whole (Figure 9), including, among others:

- Attending a lecture or talk (8% vs. EU average of 11%)
- Seeing information about or being asked to attend a computer literacy course (7% vs. EU average of 6%)
- Receiving assistance with homework or other education (6% vs. EU average of 9%)

Two per cent of library users in Belgium reported that they had attended a computer training class in the last 12 months – the same as the EU average. This means that c.84,000 adults in Belgium attended a computer training class in a library in the last 12 months.

**Figure 9: Informal learning activities carried out or been shown to users in the last 12 months**



Source: Library survey-C16 In the last 12 months, have you done any of the following things in a public library & C17 In the last 12 months, have you been shown how or helped to do any of the following things by staff at a public library...  
 Base: C16- All library users - Belgium (1535); EU (24253). C17- All PAC users – Belgium (650); EU (11716).

As Figure 9 shows, public library staff play an important role in assisting library users in informal learning. Overall, nearly a half (49%) library users in Belgium had been shown or helped to do something by a member of library staff within the last 12 months, the same as the EU average of 49%.

The most common ways in which library staff assisted library users were helping with using the computer, printing or scanning, and finding information on the library's wireless website.

In the qualitative research, users reported that ICT support in libraries was dependent on the present staff members and their goodwill, time available and competence. As such, support was not always available, and there were some limitations of computer knowledge reported. However, users were able to give some examples of way in which staff had supported them. These were mostly basic practical and technical questions e.g. problems with printing, saving files, using USB sticks, inserting page numbers. This was seen to be especially useful for new users, who were likely to have basic questions - such support enabled them to move forwards. Some more competent staff were also able to deal with some more advanced issues e.g. how to compress files.

There was mixed awareness among users about what ICT services were available to them, with very little awareness in urban areas but greater awareness in semi-rural areas. There was, however, in all areas a strong interest in different services that might be available to them, and also training as they were keen to improve their skills. Training was provided in several libraries, run by external organisations mostly (one library had a course run by staff). Users who attended these courses were positive about them; they enjoyed the fact it was in small groups, adopted a personal approach and slow teaching pace.

## 6. Use of PACs for employment and business

Public libraries have a role to play not only in providing a community gateway to higher level skills – but also to employment, and therefore the role of the public library in helping Europeans access employment opportunities was a key theme within the research.

Over a quarter (26%) of PAC users in Belgium had used library computers in the last 12 months to support some employment related activity, below the EU average of 30%. This represents an estimated 0.2 million PAC users in Belgium who had used PAC for employment related activity.

Overall, 12% of PAC users in Belgium had used a PAC to apply for a job (either in Belgium or in another EU country) in the last 12 months - this represents approximately 81,000 adults in Belgium. Of those respondents who applied for a job through PAC, 19% said that they were successful. This means that in all 2% of PAC users in Belgium – or an estimated 15,000 adults– applied for and got a job via a PAC in the last 12 months.

Public library staff have a role to play in supporting employment related PAC activities, as is shown in Figure 10; less than one in ten (9%) of PAC users in Belgium indicated that they had been shown or helped to do some employment-related PAC activity (below the EU average).

**Figure 10: Employment related PAC activities carried out in last 12 months**

Employment related activities - Used computers in last 12 months to...			Employment related activities - Been shown/helped to... by library staff in the last 12 months				
	%	Belgium	EU		%	Belgium	EU
<b>Any listed below</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>Any listed below</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>
Find information about searching and/or applying for jobs		14	14	Improve skills needed in your current job		3	4
Search for jobs		15	13	How to write a CV		5	5
Write a CV or covering letter		10	12	How to develop skills needed to obtain a job		1	2
Improve skills needed in your current job		8	11	How to look for a job online (such as finding a recruitment company, searching for information about an employer)		2	3
Apply for jobs in this country		12	10	How to apply for a job online		2	2
Search for information about an employer		10	8	How to look for and apply for jobs in other EU countries		1	1
Find a recruitment company		8	5				
Use spread sheet/data		1	3				
Search for jobs in other EU countries		4	2				
Apply for jobs in other EU countries		2	1				

Source: Library survey-C18 In the last 12 months, have you used the computers available in public libraries to...& C20 In the last 12 months, have you been shown how / helped to do any of the following things by staff at a public library....

Base: All PAC users. Belgium (650); EU (11716).

PAC users were asked whether they had used PACs for a range of business-related activities in the last 3 months. One in six users in Belgium (16%) had used a PAC for finding information related to a business they worked in, which was below the EU average of 20%. Three per cent of PAC users in Belgium had used a PAC for

participating in professional networks, half the EU average (6%). Four per cent in Belgium (the same as the EU average), had used a PAC to find ways or places to sell their own products or goods.

In the qualitative research, library/ senior library managers and users mentioned the role of the public library relating to users accessing employment opportunities. Managers reported that many of their libraries' users made use of ICT in the library for this purpose, as the Internet had become such a prominent channel for jobseeking. This was supported by users engaged in the research, many of whom had used PACs in the libraries to apply for jobs. Librarians reported some of the ways they supported these users e.g by providing courses ("applying for a job online") and also mentioned was a special computer (WIS), which was an easy to operate computer with an exclusive job seeking function. This WIS computer had, however, since been retracted as the functions were also available on regular PCs and the periodical cost was too high for libraries.

*"We had to make a CV for school and I did it in the library" (Recent first time user, F, 16-24, Belgium)*

The impact of using PACs on employment opportunities was illustrated in a variety of examples of users who had been consequently successful in getting jobs. One library managed reported that one of its most loyal visitors who frequented the library to study had also found work by using the library's computers. Users too gave examples of the successes they had achieved, both through searching and applying for jobs.

*"I found my current job by searching and emailing in the library (User, F, 25-39, Belgium)*

*"I found my summer job here, I could go to work in the French Alps for 8 weeks. It was very hard not to scream with joy when I read that email in the library" (User, F, 16-24, Belgium)*

There were few initiatives relating to business-related activities, however library staff provided guidance when necessary, e.g. helping users to look for information.

## **7. E-government and active citizenship**

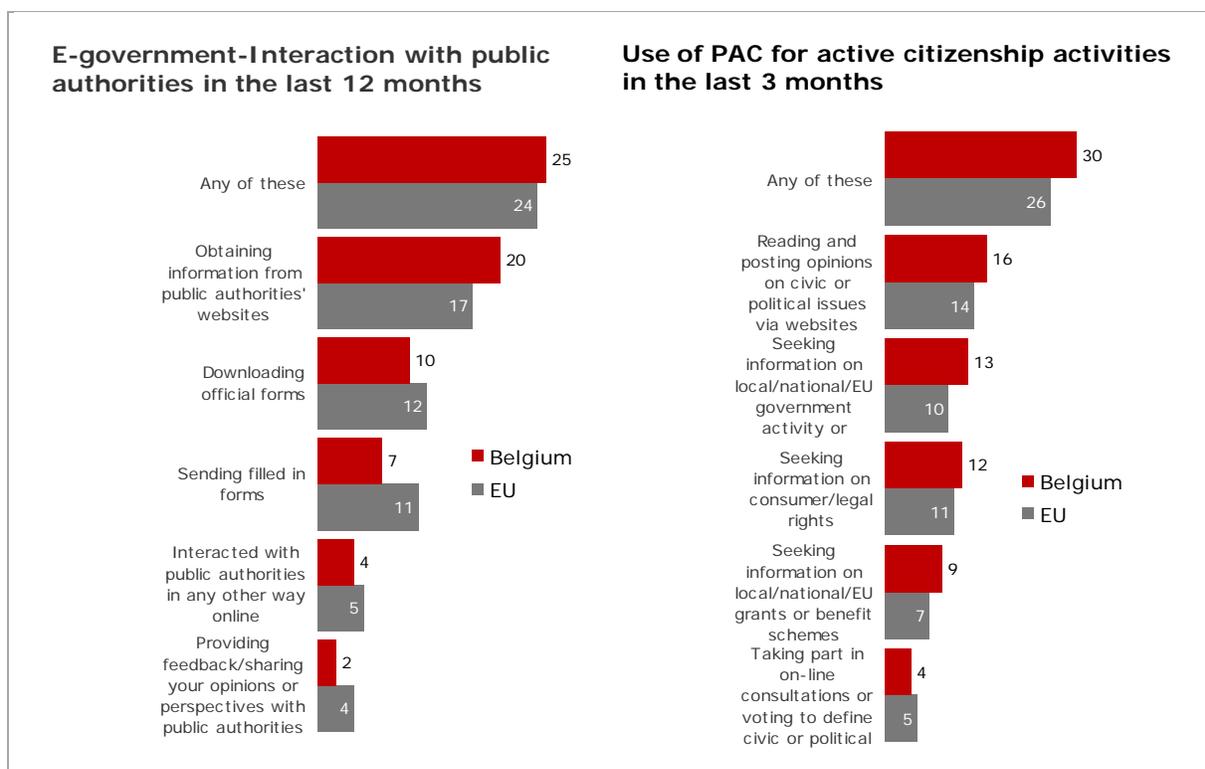
As part of the 'Connecting Europe' agenda, public libraries represent a network of public digital access points which can assist in the effective delivery of access to e-government. Computer users were asked about their interaction with public authorities using PACs, including obtaining information from public authorities' websites, downloading official forms, sending filled in forms, providing feedback/sharing opinions or perspectives with public authorities, and any other way they had interacted with public authorities online.

According to Eurostat data, E-government usage by individuals in Belgium is above the EU average - 47% of adults in Belgium used the internet in the last 12 months to interact with public authorities, compared with 41% across the EU. Citizens in Belgium were also more likely than the EU average to use the Internet to obtain information from public authorities' web sites (39% compared with 35%).

The library survey found that a quarter (25%) PAC users in Belgium had used PACs to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months, on a par with the EU average of 24% of PAC users having engaged in E-government interaction, but considerably below the Eurostat finding for all adults in Belgium. PAC users in Belgium were more likely than the EU average to have used PACs to obtain information from public authorities' websites (20% Belgium compared with 17% EU) and less likely to download official forms (10% in Belgium compared with 12% EU) and less likely to send in filled in forms (7% in Belgium compared with 11% EU.)

Computer users were also asked about their use of PACs for activities related to civic engagement and active citizenship (Figure 11). This covered areas such as civic participation (reading/posting opinions, taking part in on-line consultations, petitions etc) and seeking information on consumer or legal rights, and on government activity or politics, or grants/benefit schemes. Overall, 30% of PAC users in Belgium had used PAC for engagement activities in the past 3 months, higher than the average for users across the EU (26%). The two most common community engagement activities were reading and posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites (16% Belgium compared with 14% EU) and seeking information on local/national/EU government activity (13% Belgium compared with 10% EU).

Figure 11: E-government-Interaction with public authorities in the last 12 months



Source: Library survey-C23 Did you interact with public authorities over the Internet using a computer at a public library for private purposes in the last 12 months for the following activities & C10 For which of the following activities have you used the Internet on computers in public libraries in the last 3 months...  
 Base: All PAC users. Belgium (650); EU (11716)

In the qualitative research, library/ senior library managers gave several examples of ways in which libraries provided E-government support. For example:

- Initiatives were taken in most libraries relating to tax-on-web (filing in tax return online.) This included providing electronic card readers, which many Belgians do not own.
- Libraries brought in experts of federal financial services to the library during a pre-planned time to help visitors fill in tax forms correctly; this enabled these users not only to learn for that time, but to become self reliant in the future.
- In one library, the staff provided assistance for users who were registering children for primary school, as this could only be done online in that city.
- Finally, another library reported that when a law had been passed which obliged citizens to register a residential alarm system, there had been an influx of visitors to the library and the library produced a manual for the registration, which helped visitors whilst reducing workload for staff.

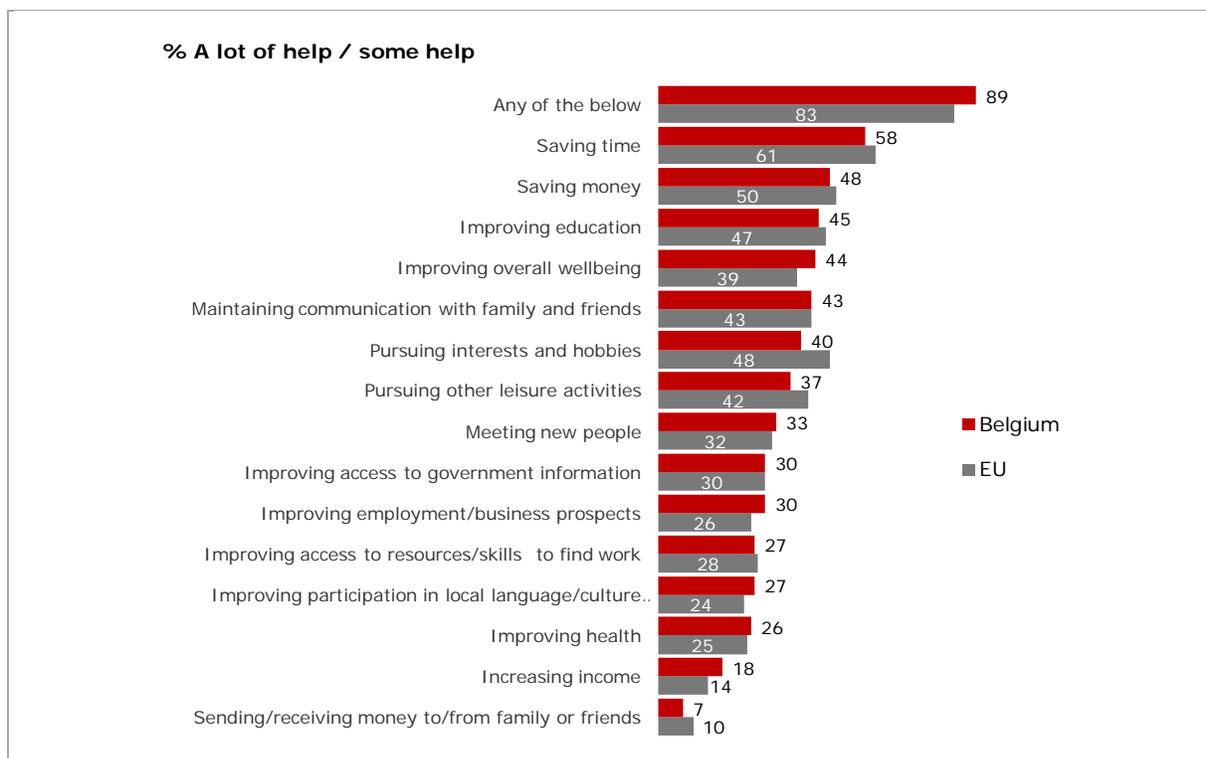
## 8. Impacts

A key aim of this research was to evaluate the impact of increased digital engagement through PAC use for users. This was assessed by asking PAC users how helpful using computers at public libraries had been for them in the last 12 months, across a wide range of areas including saving time and money, and increasing access to information and resources.

Overall 89% of PAC users in Belgium said their PAC use had been helpful to them in at least one of the areas asked about, higher than the average across the EU (83%) and this represents approximately 0.6 million people in Belgium.

Figure 12 shows the proportions saying PAC use had been helpful in each area, in Belgium and across the EU.

**Figure 12: Impact of PAC for users**



Source: Library survey- C28 In the last 12 months, has using computers at public libraries been helpful to you in the following areas?

Base: C28- PAC users- Belgium (650); EU (11716).

As well as the general areas of saving time (58% Belgium, 61% EU) and money (48% Belgium, 50% EU), PAC use was rated as helpful in improving education (45% Belgium, 47% EU), overall wellbeing (44% Belgium, 39% EU) and a range of leisure and social areas such as maintaining communication with family and friends (43% in Belgium and EU), and pursuing interests and hobbies (40% Belgium, 48% EU). The half of PAC users (48%) in Belgium who said PAC was helpful in saving money represents an estimated 0.3 million PAC users in Belgium.

Overall it is estimated that in Belgium, PAC usage in the last 12 months helped:

- 0.3 million people to improve their education
- 0.2 million people to improve their access to government information services
- 0.2 million people to improve their employment or business prospects
- 0.2 million people to improve their access to resources necessary to find work
- 0.1 million people to increase their income.

In the qualitative research, users highlighted numerous benefits and impacts of using PACs.

As mentioned earlier in this report, most users would not have had access to ICT without the library, therefore simply being able to use these facilities made a significant difference to users' lives. First and foremost, this related to improving their ICT skills, which made a large impact on users' confidence and self esteem. Due to lack of familiarity, users often started off with low self esteem, but with help and support, as well as regular use, they developed the basic ICT skills which they deemed 'necessary' in order to function in modern society; this resulted in greater self-esteem and they felt better informed, open to new things, and 'connected.'

Learning and developing these ICT skills had a benefit in itself, but also resulted in opening and facilitating new opportunities for users. For example, users were able to keep in touch with friends and family, especially

abroad. They were also able pursue interests, and keep up with the activities taking place in their local area, and therefore engage with their community more.

*"The computers here allow me to keep contact with my father, who works abroad" (User, F, 25-39, Belgium)*

ICT also enabled users to learn new skills such as learning languages, and facilitated studies, especially among students who depended on the library's ICT facilities to complete school tasks.

*"I'm a French-speaker, and I try to polish my Dutch. On the computer here, I often go to search engines to look for new words" (User, F, 16-24, Belgium)*

PACs also meant that users could carry out necessary practicalities in their day to day lives. For example, completing e-government applications (electronic tax declarations being the most cited example) , searching health related information (especially among older visitors) and for those seeking jobs, to search and apply for vacancies.

*"My father does his tax declaration always online here, it goes a lot quicker than through the mail" (User, F, 16-24, Belgium)*