Towards establishing an integrated system of Quality Assurance in South African Higher Education Libraries

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Abstract

Recent demands for evidence of quality and the impact of library services on teaching and research require libraries to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness to a divergent range of user needs. In 2004 the Committee for Higher Education Librarians in South Africa (CHELSA) recognised a need for an agreed set of criteria, standards and models for quality assurance and the critical success factors for self assessment in university libraries. CHELSA therefore established its own Quality Assurance Subcommittee to provide libraries with clear and practical direction in preparing for mandated national HE quality audits and to operationalise an ongoing process of library performance evaluation according to agreed measures. The author, a member of this Subcommittee, will chart the progress towards building consensus and establishing an integrated system and process of quality assurance at South African university libraries on the basis of international standards.

Introduction

The Higher Education (HE) landscape in South Africa at the beginning of the 21st century was in a state of transition. Institutions known as 'Technikons,' similar to the former British Polytechs, were restructured into Technical Universities. A number of some very disparate institutions were merged to address inequities of the past, to form new universities at times spread over different campuses. The Inter-University Library Committee was dissolved, as was the Council for Technikon Librarians and a single joint committee of all higher education librarians re-emerged in 2004 as the Committee for Higher Education Librarians in South Africa (CHELSA), a new body of the heads of libraries of both the established and the newly reconfigured universities.

By 2004, another recently created body, the South African Council for Higher Education, through its Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) had become responsible for quality assurance in all higher education institutions. National institutional audits were mandated, requiring higher education institutions to provide evidence of the quality of their processes, programmes and services, including library services. All HE libraries would from now have a role to play in the HEQC evaluations in their institutions and have to contribute to providing evidence of the quality and impacts of library services on teaching and research.

In order to assist libraries in their preparation for their institutional audits, CHELSA established its own Quality Assurance (QA) Subcommittee to work on a agreed set of criteria, standards and models to provide HE libraries with clear and practical direction in preparing for the quality audits and to institute an ongoing process of library performance evaluation. The historical background and the early activities of the QA Subcommittee were discussed at some length at the 6th Northumbria conference in 2005 (De Jager, 2006).

The QA Subcommittee decided at its establishment in 2004 to address two separate but related issues:

1. To agree on a set of performance measures for HE libraries to collect relatively basic but comparable data on an ongoing basis and thereby begin to develop a culture of assessment.
2. To develop a set of guidelines to assist institutions in preparing their portfolios for the Quality Audits at their own institutions.

There originally was some pressure from libraries to focus on the second of these, the guidelines for the quality audits, but the Subcommittee was convinced that the most basic prerequisite for effective quality assurance is data about library activities in the form of statistics that are gathered in a uniform manner so that benchmarks can be established and libraries can really find out how they are doing compared to others in an area, or of the same size, or with a similar student body profile. The Subcommittee therefore set as its first aim the compilation of a 'basket' of simple but potentially meaningful measures according to which libraries could collect data on their own activities in a standardised format, to form the basis for their own quality assurance processes.

Measuring for Quality

Using the internationally recognised measures collected by bodies such as the ARL (1989-2004, 2003-04), CAUL (2004) and SCONUL (2003-2004) as points of departure, a basket of practical and feasible measures was assembled. As it was essential for all libraries to "buy into" these measures, the document was circulated to CHELSA

members at the end of 2004 for comments, which were incorporated into a second draft of the document.

Typically there were two kinds of responses from CHELSA members: those who wanted to collect very much more detailed and specific measures, and those who wanted ready-made answers, as if the data were already available. In an attempt to reach consensus, the next meeting of CHELSA, in May 2005, convened a morning workshop, in which the second draft of the proposed document *Measures for Quality* was presented and extensively discussed, with the intention of getting everybody to agree to the importance of collecting and sharing standardised data.

The selected measures (together with standard definitions, subdivisions and instructions for counting and calculation) will be recognised as very common by anybody familiar with data collection in libraries:

1. Provision of Stock
2. Annual Additions to Stock
3. Subscriptions to Electronic and Continuing Resources
4. Study Places/Facilities
5. Number of Libraries
6. Hours Open per Year
7. Clientele
8. Library Staff
9. Use of Library Services
10. Expenditure

It emerged at the workshop that some librarians present were not convinced that measures such as these were the indicators of quality that they required for the HEQC audits. The last part of the Workshop therefore focused on the kinds of indicators that could be extracted from the measures and the meaning that could be derived from them. Libraries offering quality services are able to show their commitment to quality by having in place systems of quantifying, identifying, assessing and benchmarking their activities.

After considerable further discussion, members of CHELSA accepted the measures in principle, although they recognised that as a document-in-progress, it remained subject to change as required. They also agreed that the next step would have to be the establishment of a database and a website to host their institutional statistics. The development of this database is still in progress, but individual libraries and some consortia have begun to experiment with gathering data in this standardised format and individual institutions have also started sharing data to some extent.

Benchmarking and User Surveys

The HEQC has emphasized that self-assessments are to be evidence-based and that actual evidence should be provided for all claims that are made. It specifically calls for the use of "benchmarking, user surveys and impact studies" and encourages benchmarking as "source of information for goal-setting and continuous self-improvement" (CHE 2004, Criterion 18).

The process known as benchmarking is recognised as an important source of evidence of improvement in a self-assessment procedure. Kinnell, Usherwood & Jones (1999:140) give the following definition:

> "Benchmarking is the comparison and review of service performance or processes against best-in-class organizations. The aim is to identify and

implement possible areas for improvement. Benchmarking is an inherent concept of the self-assessment process."

Self-assessment and user feedback allow library and information services to identify areas that will particularly benefit from benchmarking. One therefore aims to achieve excellence at one's own institution by comparing identified departments or procedures with those deemed to be of a high standard - by comparing local practices with best practices. It is recommended that libraries select a peer group of institutions with comparable missions and goals, sizes, user groups or other attributes for comparative purposes (ACRL, 2004: 536).

Accurate data collection and measurement allow for the calculation of indicators that illustrate aspects of performance, which in turn enable the establishment of quantifiable benchmarks in order to track performance over time at a particular institution and to facilitate comparison between information services at different institutions. One of the prime reasons for compiling *Measures for Quality* had been to enable and facilitate benchmarking processes.

As noted above, user surveys are recognised by the HEQC as "important instruments in evaluating the effectiveness of institutions" (CHE 2004: Criterion 18). In response, the QA Subcommittee originally considered proposing a standard format for library user satisfaction surveys. In 2005, however, a significant and parallel new development saw seven Higher Education libraries in SA participating in the internationally standardised and validated user survey instrument, LibQUAL+ .

This survey has in recent years gained worldwide recognition. LibQUAL+ results provide a reliable and internationally benchmarked indication of the quality of a range of information services and activities at a particular institution, as well as provide comparable data for different libraries both nationally and internationally. The results of the South African LibQUAL+ surveys will enable libraries and information services to look afresh at their users and services and will provide rich benchmarking opportunities. Data are currently being analysed at the institutions that participated, and some core findings will be discussed at the IFLA conference in August.

The CHELSA Subcommittee supports benchmarking practices and regular user surveys as essential tools in the assessment of quality in library and information services at institutions of higher education in South Africa. It has therefore recommended that individual libraries conduct LibQUAL+ surveys on a regular basis and initiate their own benchmarking activities based on data derived from *Measures for Quality*.

Guidelines for Quality Audits

The Subcommittee's second task, of developing guidelines for Quality Audits, was the more challenging. Libraries are not given a great deal of assistance from the HEQC in preparing their Audit portfolios. Of the 19 Criteria in the document ***HEQC Criteria for Institutional Audits*** (CHE 2004), only Criterion 4 specifically relates to support services such as libraries and provides very broad guidelines for institutions to help frame their Audit responses. It reads:

Academic support services (e.g. library and learning materials, computer support services, etc.) adequately support teaching and learning needs, and help give effect to teaching and learning objectives.

In order to meet this criterion, the following are examples of what would be expected:

(i)   Academic support services which adequately provide for the needs of teaching and learning, research and community engagement, and help give effect to teaching and learning objectives. Efficient structures and procedures facilitate the interaction between academic provision and academic support.

(ii)   Academic support services which are adequately staffed, resourced and have the necessary infrastructure in place. The institution provides development opportunities for support staff to enhance their expertise and to enable them to keep abreast of developments in their field.

(iii)   Regular review of the effectiveness of academic support services for the core functions of the institution.

These stipulations are not prescriptive, but require that each HE institution displays its own fundamental understanding of quality and the unique and distinctive features that add value to its own institution. They are also very brief and not nearly as explicit as the ACRL's "final, approved" document or quality standards for libraries in higher education (ACRL 2004). The Subcommittee nevertheless decided to use the criteria to provide a framework for libraries to demonstrate the quality of their services, as the following key objectives of QA in HE libraries are recognised in the HEQC criteria:
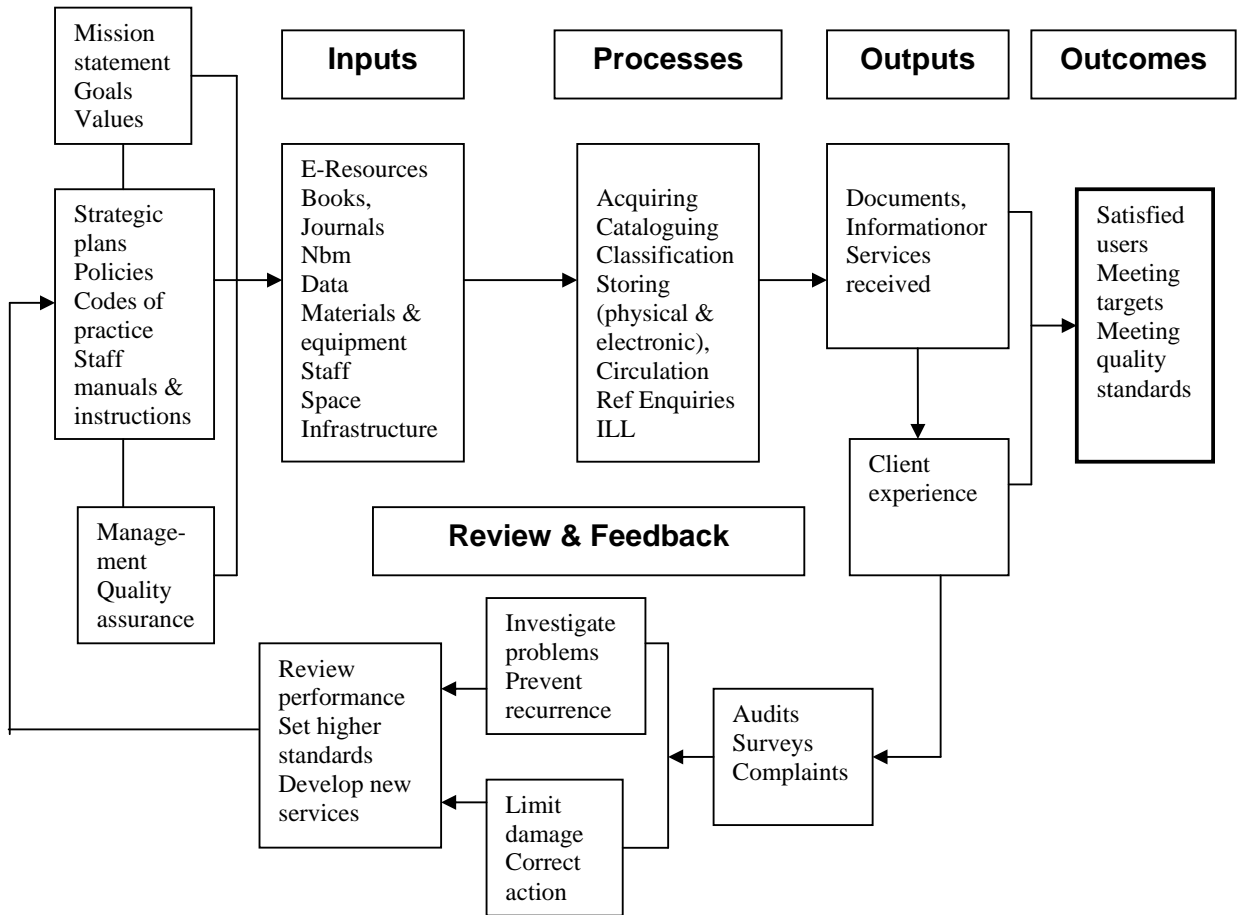
- Integration with institutional core functions, goals & objectives and evidence of the extent to which goals & objectives are achieved
- Adequate provision for the needs of teaching and research
- that the library is indeed run efficiently & effectively, is adequately resourced and provides suitable development opportunities for staff
- Measurable impact of library and information services on learning, teaching and research.
- Regular review of the effectiveness of information services in order to ensure continuous improvement.

Stages in the Assessment and Management of Quality of LIS

The aim of the Subcommittee was to develop a Guide that would take into account the HEQC's audit framework and criteria, and to provide an inventory and manual of good practice to assist LIS managers in framing their own self-audits, although it could be neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

In LIS, just as in any other system, four stages of activity may be identified:
(1) input, (2) process, (3) output and outcome, and (4) review. These stages formed the basis for a proposed framework for managing the quality of library and information services, and was depicted as follows:

Map of Quality Concepts

Mission statement Goals Values				

Inputs **Processes** **Outputs** **Outcomes**

| Strategic plans Policies Codes of practice Staff manuals & instructions | E-Resources Books, Journals Nbm Data Materials & equipment Staff Space Infrastructure | Acquiring Cataloguing Classification Storing (physical & electronic), Circulation Ref Enquiries ILL | Documents, Informationor Services received | Satisfied users Meeting targets Meeting quality standards |

Manage-ment Quality assurance

Review & Feedback

Client experience

Review performance Set higher standards Develop new services

Investigate problems Prevent recurrence

Audits Surveys Complaints

Limit damage Correct action

(Reconceptualised with input from Brophy & Coulling ,1997: 46,66.)

Critical Success Factors for Self-Assessment

The QA Subcommittee therefore proposed that library self-assessments for the HEQC audits could be structured according to the evaluative stages of

Inputs → Processes → Outputs → Outcomes → Review

as shown above. These stages were then interpreted in terms of seven "critical success factors" (Kinnell, Usherwood & Jones, 1999:123) which together could provide a comprehensive and holistic view of the quality of information services at a particular institution.

The Subcommittee then set about preparing a document consisting of definitions of each critical success factor, followed by a list of suggested documentary and other supporting evidence that could be used to demonstrate how information services interpret each critical success factor. It was shown how indicators derived from the standardised datasets stipulated by *Measures for Quality* can be calculated and preferably provided in some context, for example by presenting comparable data over time or in comparison with a benchmark partner, to produce a 'rich picture' of quality. Not all the indicators proposed under each critical success factor would be relevant to libraries at all institutions, but each could select its own 'basket' of indicators and other evidence from

each of the seven critical success factors, choosing those that most clearly express various aspects of its own quality.

The critical success factors proposed in the document *Towards a Guide to the Self-review of University Libraries* were:

1. Integration

The library has a clearly expressed mission and purpose with goals and priorities which are responsive to and integrated with those of its parent institution. Adequate human, financial and infrastructural resources give effect to these goals and priorities. The library is involved in institutional decision-making and in institutional budgetary processes (Wits, 2005:3-4). A commitment to quality management through strong leadership that translates mission into policy and strategy is evident.

The critical success factor of Integration comprises of three subdivisions:

    1.1   Integration with institutional goals & objectives
    1.2   Integration with institutional structures, systems and financial planning
    1.3   Quality management

2. Resources

Together with staff, Resources comprise the "inputs" into the system. In order to meet with the critical success factor of Resources, evidence that the library is adequately resourced to meet the needs of its entire range of users is required.

Two subdivisions of resource provision may be identified.

    2.1   Infrastructural resources
    2.2   Information resources

3. Human Resources

The library has sufficient, highly motivated and suitably trained and qualified staff able to support the library's mission, goals and objectives and to provide appropriate service to all users. Development opportunities exist for staff to grow in their profession.

4. Processes

The library employs processes and procedures that ensure efficient administration and running of all its activities. Processes include all the activities required for the acquisition, organization, management and circulation of all the information resources. Data collected according to *Measures for Quality* may be used to derive many of the well-known efficiency indicators that demonstrate aspects of the quality of internal processes.

5. Access

All users of library and information services, whether local or remote and including users with disabilities, should have prompt and efficient access to all resources, both physical and electronic, as well as access to document delivery services (local, consortial and national) that provide information resources not owned or accessible by the library.

6. Service Quality

The library establishes, promotes, maintains and evaluates services that support the mission and goals of the parent institution (ACRL, 2004: 538). Competent and prompt services reflect the outputs and eventually the outcomes of the library and are focused on the satisfaction of the teaching, learning and research needs of a diverse range of users.

As increasingly more information is available electronically, it has become evident that the expectations of users have increased significantly and that users are now also needing assistance in the assessment and evaluation of information quality. Changes such as these are giving rise to a changing role for information professionals that "suggests a closer partnership with users and a greater responsibility for the educational process" (ACRL, 2004: 536).

Review and Feedback

Feedback is an essential component of quality assurance. It serves to keep an organization on the right track by continually incorporating changes in response to signals both from within and from the surrounding environment, as it does not function in isolation, but interacts with its environment.

The library therefore regularly has to review its effectiveness by seeking the views and opinions of all its stakeholders, to communicate effectively and to work collaboratively with them to optimize service delivery.

Growing consensus

As the HEQC at present is particularly supportive of initiatives to assist institutions in preparing for their quality audits, it sponsored a meeting of CHELSA members to consider the draft document on indicators for quality at the end of March 2006. As the first round of HE audits had been completed at three universities in 2005, the Librarians at two of those universities reported on the process and findings at their own audits, followed by a presentation of the draft guidelines, which were extensively discussed in group sessions afterwards.

From this meeting it became clear that Librarians who barely a year ago had not shown a great deal of familiarity with practical aspects of data collection and quality assurance, had become a lot more knowledgeable and also concerned with these issues in the intervening period. They were very interested in the reports of the completed audits and also in the institutions that had done the LibQUAL+ surveys, and several expressed the intention of following suit.

Considerable appreciation was expressed for the work done by the Subcommittee and the guidance it was providing for the framing of LIS self-assessment reports. This growing interest in quality assurance in SA HE libraries is further evidenced by the fact that the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions in the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM), the largest HE consortium in SA, has arranged to continue this conversation at the *2nd International Quality Assurance Conference* in partnership with CHELSA in June 2006, where quality issues in libraries and information services will occupy a separate two-day track. The programme indicates that a number of librarians will be reporting on their own new quality assurance initiatives, or their experiences with LibQUAL+. Interesting findings from this conference will briefly be reported at IFLA in August.

This discussion has attempted to demonstrate that HE librarians in South Africa have in a period of barely two years grown an interest in and started to grapple with issues of accurate measurement of library activities and quality assurance. While it may therefore not yet be possible to say that HE libraries have a fully established and integrated system of quality assurance in place, they are well on their way to becoming able to demonstrate the quality of their services according to comprehensive and logically structured guidelines.

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