The Fast Track in Library Evaluation: The South African Experience in Higher Education Libraries

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Abstract

As the higher education sector was being transformed through mergers, the Library Directors of Higher Education Institutions of South Africa realized the need for a joint effort and launched the Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA) at the University of Pretoria in June 2004. The committee consists of Library Directors of Higher Education Institutions of South Africa. This committee replaced the former Forum for University Librarians of South Africa (FULSA) and the former Inter-Technikon Library Committee (ITLC). CHELSA identified quality management in higher education libraries as one of its priorities. This was in response to the government's introduction of quality audits in higher education institutions through HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee). A CHELSA Quality Assurance subcommittee was established in 2004 to provide leadership in activities which will facilitate the implementation of best practice initiatives in South African higher education libraries. The paper will provide an overview of CHELSA's initiatives towards quality assurance in higher education libraries. These initiatives include: involvement of key stakeholders, the development of an agreed upon set of measures to be collected by higher education libraries, and the development of a Guide to the Self Review of University Libraries. The paper concludes that CHELSA has taken a step in the right direction but there is still much to be accomplished.

1. Introduction

In South Africa, recent transformation of higher education has been characterized by two major developments. The first was the merging of higher education institutions as documented in the Education White Paper 3(1997). The second

was the launch of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in 2001.The HEQC is a committee of the Council for Higher Education charged with implementing a national system of quality assurance.

The roll out of the national Quality Assurance system started in 2004. From 2004 to April 2007 eight public higher education institutions have been audited. All higher education institutions are audited at least once within a six-year audit cycle. Institutional audits generated a lot of interest amongst librarians and the need to fast track a collaborative approach and a system of preparing for national audits. The paper will provide an overview of the Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa's (CHELSA) initiatives towards promoting quality assurance in higher education libraries since 2004. These initiatives include the involvement of key stakeholders in particular the HEQC; the development of a set of agreed upon measures to be collected by higher education libraries, and the development of a Guide to the Self Review of University Libraries.

2. Higher Education Quality Committee

The Higher Education Act of 1997 assigns responsibility for quality assurance in higher education to the Council of Higher Education (CHE). The CHE achieves its responsibility through its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The responsibility of the HEQC includes promoting quality assurance in higher education; auditing the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions and accrediting programmes of higher education. The HEQC is also involved in Capacity development and training forms a critical component of its activities in order to build an effective national quality assurance system (CHE Institutional Audit Framework, June 2004). This paper will focus on HEQC institutional audits.

In the view of HEQC, individual higher education institutions take primary responsibility for the quality of their core business: learning, teaching, research and community engagement. Each institution must therefore decide on the arrangements it will put in place to achieve and manage quality as well as how it will judge quality. This includes the use of HEQC criteria, peer judgment, self-evaluations as well as developing appropriate benchmarks, indicators and targets. The overall purpose of the audit is for a panel of peers to arrive at an evidence-based judgment of the effectiveness of institutional quality management arrangements. The panel will look at four quality management elements, each of which can be considered in terms of the quality of input, process and outcomes:
- Quality assurance
- Quality support
- Quality development and enhancement
- Quality monitoring.

The audit panel will validate the institution's own self- evaluation report, which is expected to cover all of the above dimensions.

3. HEQC Criteria for Quality in Library and Information Services (LIS)

At the outset, we realized the importance of establishing links with the HEQC in order for us to achieve our goals. In 31 May 2004, the former Forum for University Librarians of South Africa (FULSA) and the former Inter-Technikon Library Committee (ITLC) held a workshop at the University of Pretoria on quality assurance. A member of the HEQC was invited to give a presentation. This was the beginning of a very positive relationship with HEQC. The presentation highlighted the fact that libraries *per se* are not a focus in HEQC audits and there is no audit criterion that addresses libraries specifically. Instead, libraries are expected to provide evidence for the self-evaluation process which might relate to a number of broad criteria, these are referred to in the Guide to the Self Review of University Libraries (CHELSA: 2006)

In the document, *HEQC Criteria for Institutional Audits* (CHE 2004a) only Criterion 4 of the stipulated 19 criteria specifically relates to support services such as libraries. It provides broad guidelines for institutions to help frame their Audit responses and could also provide a guide to HEQC requirements for LIS self-assessment. This Criterion 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 institution displays its own fundamental understanding of quality and its unique and distinctive features that add value to its own institution.

The presentation also highlighted that national bodies such as FULSA and ITLC could assist by promoting and sharing good practices and building capacity, particularly in respect of continuous improvement and self-evaluation. In addition

national bodies could also assist libraries at higher education institutions to develop effective self-assessment tools that are an integral part of the quality management systems that their own institutions should be developing.

4. Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa

As the higher education sector was being transformed through mergers the Library Directors of Higher Education Institutions of South Africa realized the need for a joint effort and launched the Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA) at the University of Pretoria in June 2004. This committee replaced the former Forum for University Librarians of South Africa (FULSA) and the former InterTechnikon Library Committee (ITLC). The need to merge was influenced by changes in the higher education landscape where some universities had merged with the former technikons and the term technikon was replaced by university of technology.

FULSA and ITLC had held several joint meetings since 1999. In May 2003, a joint workshop was held in Thohoyandou where it was proposed that a single body to represent Librarians of Higher Education Libraries be formed with affiliation to the proposed Higher Education South Africa (HESA) a single body of the South African University Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) and the Committee for Technikon Principals (CTP). The nature of the affiliation is still being negotiated. The decision was taken based on the success the ITLC had enjoyed by working as a subcommittee of CTP.

5. Quality Assurance Subcommittee

The Quality Assurance Subcommittee was the first subcommittee to be set up in order to focus attention on the government's newly introduced quality assurance system. The terms of reference of the subcommittee were to recommend quality assurance models, an agreed upon set of criteria and standards for library services in order to assist libraries in preparing for institutional audits.

The subcommittee held a meeting with two representatives from HEQC in 2004. While the committee acknowledged that there were several approaches and models to quality assurance in libraries, the committee decided to follow an approach which is similar to that of HEQC. The Quality Assurance sub-committee identified the following objectives as important in quality issues in libraries:

- Collection of national statistics to enable national benchmarking
- Development of a National Best Practice Guide to assist CHELSA members as they undertake self-evaluation, including benchmarking in the preparation for an HEQC audit
- Alignment of our individual library self evaluations with that of the HEQC which have a six year cycle
- Training library evaluators, to act as peer evaluators when CHELSA members undertake self-evaluation

- The possibility of using a common instrument such as the North-American LibQual+^{TM}. This will enable libraries to conduct satisfaction surveys regularly and to benchmark.

6. Common Measures

Our first activity was to identify measures which would be collected by higher education libraries. A list of common measures which were practical were selected from ARL, SCONUL and CAUL, the measures were circulated to all CHELSA members for comment. A draft of its document entitled, "Measures for Quality (M4Q)" was extensively discussed at a CHELSA workshop in May 2005 at the University of Western Cape. At this workshop we had a member of the HEQC present.The intention of CHELSA is to create a web based database which provides statistical capture facilities and reporting facilities in line with international practices for example SCONUL and CAUL.

This database will provide libraries with an avenue of benchmarking which we do not have currently. Benchmarking is recognised as an important source of evidence of improvement in a self-assessment procedure, Kinnell, Sherwood & Jones (1999:140). Self-assessment and user feedback allow LIS to identify areas that will particularly benefit from benchmarking. In a benchmarking project therefore, one aims to achieve excellence at one's own institution by comparing identified departments or procedures with those deemed to be of a high standard. It is recommended that LIS select a peer group of institutions with comparable missions and goals, sizes, user groups or other attributes for comparative purposes (ACRL, 2004: 536).

At that workshop, it was proposed that LIS in higher education measure their activities according to the prescriptions in M4Q, even prior to the establishment of a database that would collect this data on a national basis. The following measures were agreed upon:
- Provision of Stock
- Annual Additions to Stock
- Subscriptions
- Study Places /Facilities
- Hours open per year
- Clientele
- Library Staff
- Use of Library Services
- Expenditure

The collection of accurate data and measurement will enable CHELSA to calculate indicators that illustrate aspects of performance and quantifiable benchmarks.

7. User Surveys

The HEQC recognizes user surveys as "important instruments in evaluating the effectiveness of institutions" (CHE 2004: Criterion 18). The CHELSA Subcommittee has recommended that libraries conduct LibQUAL+ surveys on an individual basis on a regular basis and initiate their own benchmarking activities based on data derived from the surveys.

Some of the higher education libraries have taken part in a pilot web based satisfaction survey using LibQual+. We are hoping that most of the libraries will go that route; this will provide us with information for benchmarking nationally.

8. Guide to the Self Review of University Libraries

CHELSA received sponsorship from HEQC to hold a workshop to develop a system of self and peer reviews in libraries. The workshop was held on 29 and 30 March 2006 in Johannesburg. The promotion of good practice guides and manuals is part of the quality promotion and development focus of the HEQC. The purpose of CHELSA's guide is to provide a framework and indicators that provide a basis for:

- A higher education library to conduct a self review and produce a self review report on the management of quality in the library.
- External panels of peers to verify, substantiate, corroborate, and validate the claims and conclusions in the self review report on the basis of evidence submitted.

8.1 Framework for Managing Quality

The Guide was developed taking into account the HEQC's audit framework, criteria and aims to provide an inventory of good practice to assist LIS managers in conducting their own self-audits, although it is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. It is acknowledged that the activities regarding the core functions of the higher education institution consist of four evaluative stages, namely:

(1) Input, (2) process, (3) output and outcome, and (4) review. It is proposed, therefore, that these evaluative stages should form the basis for the framework for managing the quality of LIS.

- *Inputs:* in the LIS context inputs are the resources available to the system. These range from financial, staffing, and material resources.

- *Process:* related arrangements for the implementation of LIS. In the LIS context, *processes* consist of the activities taking place in the system, such as acquisitions, cataloguing, classification and storage "A process is a value-adding activity and, at the point of delivery to the library user, is inseparable from the final testing of the process" (Brophy & Coulling, 1997: 55).

- Monitoring and evaluation to gauge the *output and outcome* of LIS. In the LIS context**,** *outputs* reflect the use made of the LIS; or LIS activities; they "serve to quantify the work done, i.e. number of books circulated, number of reference questions answered" (ACRL, 2004: 535).

- O*utcomes,* which ACRL defines as "the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the Library's resources and programs" (2004: 535). Outcomes are concerned with the effect that the use of LIS has on each individual client and which is not necessarily a direct effect of input, process or output. Tangible outcomes of library services are not easy to measure. Many outcomes of LIS will therefore be qualitative rather than quantitative.

- *Review* of all LIS activities. *Feedback and review* are essential components of a system of quality assurance. They serve to keep the system on track by continually incorporating changes into the system in response to signals from the rest of the system and the surrounding environment within which it operates, thus ensuring continuous improvement. (CHELSA, 2006:12-13).

8.2.   Critical Success Factors for Self-Assessment

It is therefore proposed that self-assessments of LIS at HEIs may be structured according to the evaluative stages of Inputs → Processes → Outputs → Outcomes → and Review. These stages may be interpreted in terms of the following seven critical success factors (CSF) (Kinnell, Usherwood & Jones, 1999:123) which together could provide a comprehensive view of the quality of LIS at a particular institution:

1. Integration
2. Resources
3. Human resources
4. Processes
5. Access
6. Service Quality
7. Review and feedback.

The guide provides detailed description of each critical success factor, followed by a list of documentary and other evidence that may be produced to demonstrate that the library adheres to each CSF together with data and statistical indicators as supporting evidence (CHELSA, 2006:17-27)

Not all the indicators proposed under each CSF would be relevant to libraries at all institutions, but it is suggested that each institution select its own 'basket' of indicators and other evidence from each of the seven CSFs, choosing those that most clearly express various aspects of its own quality. The guide emphasizes

that self-assessments are to be evidence-based and that actual evidence should be provided for all claims that are made.

9.   Contributions from CHELSA members

The method we used was that the Subcommittee of five members drove the process and come up with the initial draft documents. However, the final documents were a result of a concerted effort from all directors of libraries in South Africa.   After the Guide was reviewed at the March workshop. A second draft was circulated to CHELSA members for further commends.   The same applied to the M4Q document. The process of involving all members in the drafting of documents was valuable in that the committee was able to get input and areas of concern were raised. An area which still has to be formalized and where other members have raised their concerns is how CHELSA could be involved in peer –reviews. It was proposed by HEQC that CHELSA could establish a forum of assessors, who will be trained and form a pool of local peer – review experts. Peer review visits could then be conducted under conditions which assure impartial judgment. Other librarians were concerned about the impartiality of peer reviews whilst other commented that a peer review process would be a good example   of cooperative ventures of the LIS sector in South African. The comments which came from CHELSA members showed that most members were appreciative of the documents produced thus far.

From the sharing of experiences with institutions which have been audited it was evident that there were differences in the manor in which libraries were audited, in terms of time spent evaluating a library and areas of emphasis.   This calls for an evaluative exercise on how libraries are experiencing institutional audits.

10.   Conclusion

The Measures for Quality and Guide to the Self Review of University Libraries gives CHELSA members a road map on how to prepare for audits and manage quality. HEQC assisted CHELSA in fast tracking library evaluation in South Africa. Continued collaboration with HEQC and other international library bodies will ensure continued improvement in the way libraries will be evaluated in South Africa. In addition, the relationship might contribute significantly to the position of libraries in higher education when institutions are being audited. The HEQC emphasizes the use of peer reviews in the guide, but that process has not yet been fully implemented. The focus of CHELSA quality assurance subcommittee is still on promoting and sharing good practice and building capacity. Ways of implanting a web based collection of statistics is still being investigated. CHELSA has taken a step in the right direction but there is still much to be accomplished.

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