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Report from a deviating collaborator: the University of Pretoria's interaction with the emerging integrated system of Quality Assurance in South African Higher Education Libraries

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Abstract

The South African higher education sector is in the process of building a quality culture and establishing structures for quality assurance (QA). The HE libraries, through the Committee for Higher Education Librarians in South Africa (CHELSA) embraced the opportunity to develop an agreed upon set of criteria, standards and models for quality assurance and critical success factors for self assessment in university libraries. The extent to which member libraries participate and contribute to this initiative will determine its success. The paper describes how one library experienced this interaction and the contribution it made to our quality journey.

Introduction

The University of Pretoria is one of the few big comprehensive research universities in South Africa. The Academic Information Service (AIS), as the library is known, has a reputation for strategic bravery, innovation and independent thinking. Within the university it is regarded as an important partner in the quest for academic excellence. Our quality journey started in earnest in 2002 after realising that we have neglected this very important link in the strategic chain. The CHELSA initiative provided a much needed platform for discussion, sharing and learning which contributed in no small measure to our growth as quality practitioners.

Pre-history of Quality Assurance in the AIS

Although our formal engagement with quality assurance only kicked off in 2002, similar programs have been on the agenda of the AIS for a long time. They were mostly the offspring of strategic discussions and initiatives and were largely uncoordinated.

In 1997 a colleague became interested in the balanced scorecard and sold the concept energetically not only to library staff but also to a number of other interested parties on campus. For a couple of years strategic and implementation plans were written in the four quadrants. Our quality awareness expanded to include the notion of quality as a multi-dimensional concept dependent on the perceptions of various stakeholders.

A second, important intervention was a 2001 client survey based on the SERVQUAL model done by an external consulting firm, Consulta. This was our first exposure to the concepts of gap analysis, service recovery and service level agreements.

The demise of the South African SAPSE system through which statistics were reported coincided with a wide-scale decentralisation of services throughout a collection of fairly independent faculty libraries. This process led to a near collapse of our information gathering process, and created an opportunity for a lurking mistrust of management information to surface. This mistake had to be corrected and in 2002 a new management information system was created.

2003 Audit

When the South African Council for Higher Education (CHE), through its Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), announced its intention to conduct regular quality audits at higher education institutions the University of Pretoria volunteered to take part in a pilot audit. At that stage the University had a small Quality Unit with little influence and the library had no QA infrastructure. In fact very few people knew much about the topic or the HEQC's specific approach. The enormity of the task led to the most attention being lavished on the university's main roles as performed by the faculties. The library was grouped with IT, Telematic Learning and Education Innovation (TLEI), the new Client Service Centre and Student Administration in a task team that tried to create, in a very short space of time, a single report based on the requirements of the HEQC's criterion 4:

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.*

In retrospect one realises that we hardly understood the definition of quality or what was expected from us – we should at least have written separate reports: clearly a library at the lower level of the Quality Maturity Model (Wilson & Town, 2006). Needless to say it was not a satisfactory exercise and we were very upset that the auditors did not realise that we were in fact “the best South African university library.” At least we made one positive contribution to the effort: throughout the visit the library served as headquarters for the audit team.

Pulling ourselves together: the 2004 self study and external review

In 2004 the library director retired and for a period the AIS was directed under TLEI. Together we decided to make quality assurance a high priority. A Quality Unit was established for the AIS by expanding the role of a staff member who had previously been responsible for management information. She would be backed by a Quality Assurance Team consisting of senior staff members with a remit to oversee a quality agenda for the AIS that would lead to continuous quality improvement. Furthermore it was decided to undertake a proper self review and to have it audited by two external academic leaders.

Thus the two units worked together to develop an understanding of the issues. In the AIS, task teams were assigned aspects of the service to investigate, to write a report of the status of operations, and to make recommendations for improvement. A template was created to guide teams in asking the right questions and to create a measure of standardization. A report, supported by a substantial portfolio of evidence, was provided to two auditors, Prof Derek Law, CIO of the University of Strathclyde and Prof Margaret Orr, University of the Witwatersrand.

The two auditors visited the University on 24-26 October 2004, to compare the written reports to evidence gathered from extensive discussions with our clients

and other stakeholders as well as from first-hand inspection of facilities and services.

This was a very good experience for both units: we received very good reviews from the panel and excellent suggestions for improvement. The review provided necessary benchmarks and revealed the advantages inherent in understanding the nature and benefits of QA. The report was used to inform our next round of strategic planning. Above all we experienced a sense of having at last arrived in the QA community: a basic understanding of QA took root throughout the organisation.

Client surveys

In-house client surveys

One of the items on the agenda of the Quality Team was to conduct an annual survey amongst clients to establish their library usage patterns and to gauge their level of satisfaction with our facilities, products and services.

The first survey was held on 13 May 2004 in all the service locations of the AIS simultaneously. For one hour a team of 50+ staff members of the AIS who were trained as surveyors conversed with clients. This was done based on a set of questions and indicators and also provided clients the opportunity for open remarks which led to lively discussion in some cases. Nearly 1000 clients responded in this way. The results were analysed by the Quality Unit and a report was submitted to library management and shared with all staff at an open staff meeting.

Much was learned about clients' preferences and perceptions of quality as well as their patterns of library usage. Staff members who took part, many of them not active in the front line, found this to be a valuable learning experience. Similar surveys have been done in 2005 and 2006. In 2005 the level of their "googlization" was added and in 2006 the concept was expanded by also surveying clients outside the library and thus getting information from students who never or seldom enter the library.

LibQUAL+™

In October 2004 the annual Stellenbosch Symposium was devoted to QA. Bruce Thompson delivered a keynote address on LibQUAL+™ and this met with an enthusiastic response from a number of South African libraries keen to take part in this international survey and benchmarking exercise.

The University of Pretoria was one of the three universities where more than one language is being used for teaching. We realised the advantages inherent in offering the survey in more than one language: not only would it ensure better understanding but it would also send the right message to Afrikaans students. In negotiation with staff from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the University of Stellenbosch and the Northwest University, the LibQUAL+™ survey was translated. Three staff members with good language skills each translated

the survey into Afrikaans. It was then discussed to find reasons for differences. Thereafter a professional translator checked and edited the result and another translator translated it back into English to ensure that no loss of meaning took place. Throughout the process all three universities made inputs and questioned phrasing until we arrived at the best possible solution.

The survey was a huge success: 2857 clients took part in it, 7.4% of the population – slightly lower than we hoped for but discussions with the UP unit for statistical analysis assured us that the results were indeed valid. We received 1619 comments consisting of 2471 bits of information because many of them dealt with more than one issue. Comments were analysed to enhance the picture. The results were in line with the outcomes of the in-house surveys and the normal feedback that we received from clients. The only exception was a slight negativity of postgraduate students with regard to their command of their personal information environment and their lower than expected evaluation of staff support.

At about the same time the Department of Telematic Learning and Education Innovation surveyed postgraduate students to gauge their level of satisfaction with general services for postgraduate students. They commended the library but complained about a number of other issues. This raised the possibility that students used LibQUAL+™ as a vehicle to vent other frustrations. However, we gave immediate attention to two of their problems:

- 1) *access to electronic publications* - we purchased substantial extra bandwidth, and
- 2) *general service problems based on the fact that the majority of them work and live far from the university* – we created a small unit to provide such students with a mailing service as a start to further tailored services.

We also decided to repeat the survey in 2006, concentrating on senior clients to verify the negative sentiments, and to test the impact of these and other changes in the environment.

Combining results

LibQUAL+™ has the advantage of being an internationally recognized instrument. It took some time for staff (and even many senior clients) to accept the value and validity of this “strange set of questions/statements, some of which are even repeated”. In addition, online surveys are not a general way of gathering information in South Africa which added to the unease (Cullen, 2003). Our in-house survey on the other hand may suffer from a lack of sophistication but has the advantage that it provides for in person discussion and contextualises the information tendered by respondents: e.g. if it is obvious that a student is mainly using the facilities of the library as a convenient study venue, remarks regarding other aspects of the service should not be taken too seriously.

Our advantage lies in combining these two sets of results and concentrating on those areas where there is a clear message from both directions which cannot be ignored.

Benchmarking with LibQUAL+™

We have only given scant attention to the results of the other South African libraries on the basis of the huge differences in our institutions.

Contribution to accreditation and faculty/departmental peer review visits

The AIS regularly contributes to accreditation and peer review visits by submitting a report which emphasises the library's support for the faculty or department's programmes. A template has been developed to address the important issues, particularly those relating to benchmarks, in a uniform way. In line with the library's position of being well integrated into academic life, an in-depth discussion and an on-site visit usually form part of the event. The AIS has received many good reports from these panels over the last three years.

Staff issues contributing to quality assurance

The skills level and commitment of staff contribute enormously to the quality of a library's service. The following interventions were made over the last number of years to strengthen this aspect:

General staffing concerns

The AIS is generally understaffed compared to our peers, which may also indicate a higher level of staff productivity. What is, however, unhealthy is the lack of standards between different units/libraries due to historical developments coupled with low staff turnover. Two studies have been done over the last three years to create new standards for staff provision based on a variety of factors. Client ratios have also been suggested. Both sets of guideposts assist in creating capacity for new developments.

Upgrading of posts

Another concern was the lack of career opportunities for staff. Many staff members performed significantly above the requirements of their posts but were not eligible for promotion. In conjunction with the University's Department of Human Resources, a thorough post level audit of all posts was done from 2001 to 2006. Posts were re-evaluated to establish their correct level within the Peromnes system and 105 posts were upgraded as a consequence. This foundation paved the way for ongoing re-evaluation in line with the dynamic nature of our profession.

Performance management

In 1996 the AIS piloted staff performance management on campus which has since been mainstreamed throughout the University. It is implemented in such a way that each staff member's role is described with reference to the contribution that the AIS is making to the success of the University ensuring that we are all doing the "right things". This is further strengthened by most staff members

working in teams where quality is directly related to overall performance. Outputs are measured against negotiated benchmarks and may lead to staff development opportunities and bonuses.

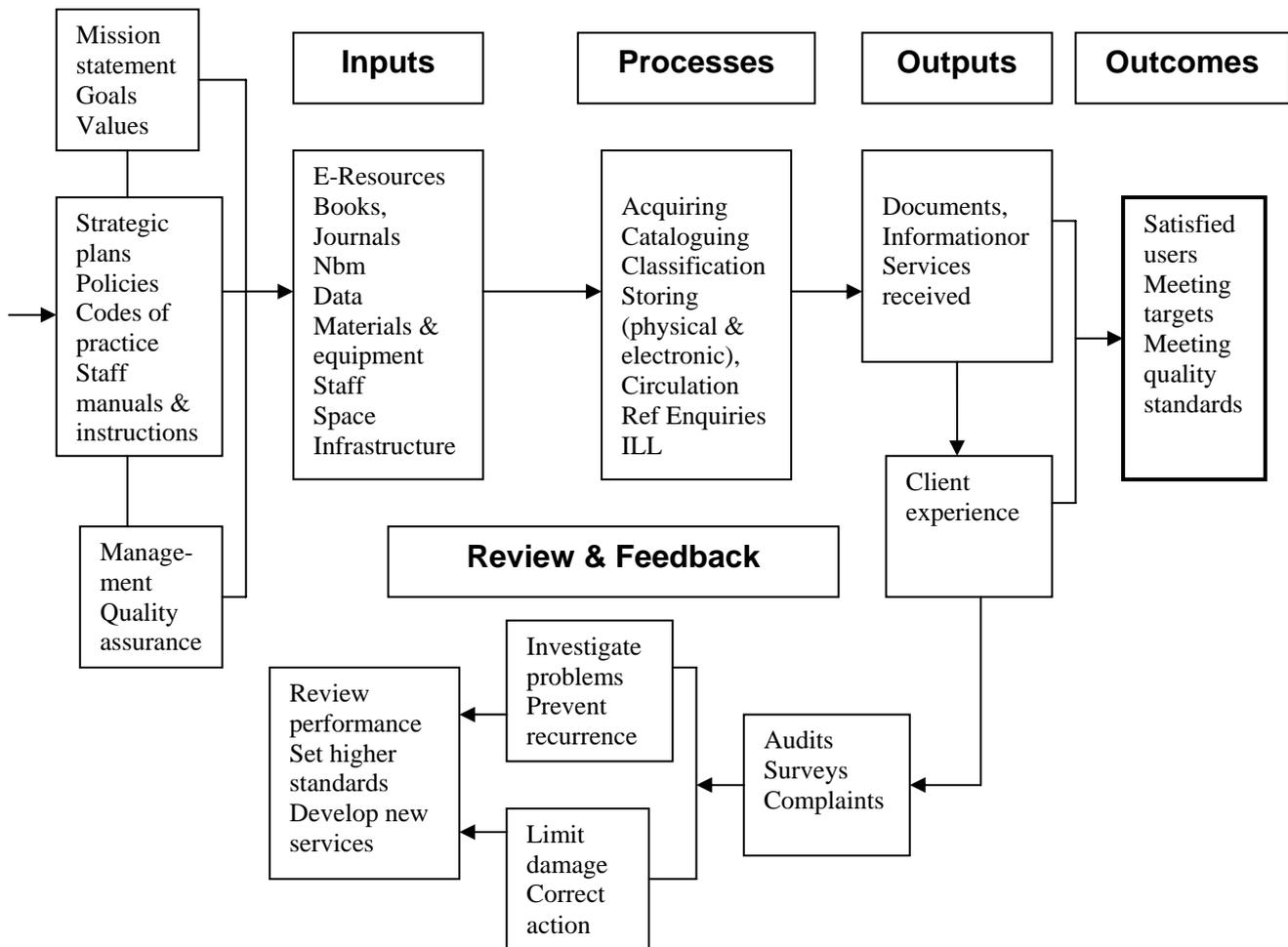
Interaction with and contribution to the CHELSA Quality Assurance Subcommittee

South African university libraries have a long history of co-operation. Even though our mother organisations may compete for students we tend to value efforts to improve our combined service. Although the AIS is not represented on the Subcommittee we always maintain a healthy interest in the work of the committee by being committed to its success. Thus we contributed to the development of both its *Measures for Quality* and the *CHELSA guidelines for audits* by debating the draft documents that were submitted to members and by submitting comments and proposals.

CHELSA guidelines for audits

On different occasions we were requested to comment on drafts of the guide. The last was in November 2006 when we were almost done with our self review and thus were aware of the help we got from the guide as well as the gaps we experienced while using it.

The guidelines were developed to suit the following model. Our main concern was that the model was too linear and one dimensional to represent the quality concerns of a large university library and tendered the following comments:



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

We missed a number of QA aspects such as

- The organizational model as a very important element in the group "Strategic plans...." has a huge impact on the success and quality of a library
- Building on strengths which is as, or even more, important than fixing problems for QA and continuous improvement
- The way processes inform and influence each other and lead to quick problem solving, change of direction and improvement. Similarly the continuous benchmarking inputs that come from visits, conference, reading etc that lead to immediate action. The model gives the impression that one has to go through the entire cycle before you know what's wrong and can fix it.

The group of processes has an overwhelming leaning towards traditional processes, not mentioning the new ones such as the building of institutional repositories and supporting research, and treating one of our most important activities, information literacy/fluency development, with an offhand, old-fashioned "User training".

The AIS holds a totally different view of information resources which is described as "Establishing a gateway to global information" in our mission. It means much more than "inputting" books, journals etc and "processing" them. This gateway is in fact our biggest product on which we spend the majority of our resources and it has to cater for the very diverse needs of a very diverse clientele in the way consumers nowadays expect customized, integrated products coupled to customized services.

We support CHELSA's suggestion for the development of a peer review process for South African libraries but prefer to keep this out of the HEQC's activities in order for it to be a true learning and benchmarking experience.

Measures for Quality

We were in agreement about the list of measures but have reservations about our ability to measure uniformly and hence the usability of the ratios.

2006 Self review for the 2007 audit

When the University's first official audit became due in 2007 both the University and the Library were far better prepared for the demands of the self review. The University's Quality Unit is a well-organised unit with a good grasp of the issues and an effective campus-wide, national and international network. Similarly the Library's one-person Quality Unit and QA Team have been running a very effective agenda of collecting and interpreting management information, conducting user surveys, preparing for accreditation visits and influencing staff.

Preparation for the 2007 HEQC Audit was the main activity of the Quality Assurance Team and the Quality Unit for 2006 and consisted of the following:

- Discussions with AIS staff at general staff meetings facilitated by members of the UP Quality Unit and AIS senior staff
- Extensive studying of the literature
- An Audit Task Team was appointed. Each team member, with the help of a representative group of staff members, investigated a designated aspect of the AIS, evaluated the evidence, judged the current quality status and made recommendations for improvement
- On 12 September 2006 the findings of these working groups were introduced by a representative group of staff members
- The AIS Executive visited the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand libraries to compare notes and contributed to the development of the CHELSA quality criteria
- The Director of the AIS and the Assistant Director responsible for quality assurance served on UP Audit Team 2 responsible for reporting on Teaching and Learning. We were given ample opportunity to add library items to this and other chapters of the report, particularly chapter 5 on Research. The University did not in fact expect the library to do a self review as part of preparation. We however, realised that we could benefit from the momentum on campus and wanted to do it for the sake of the CHELSA initiative.

- One staff member was trained as an HEQC auditor which proved to be very useful.
- The report was shared with all staff members for additional inputs and discussions in 2007.

Using and deviating from the *CHELSA guidelines for audits*

The CHELSA guide (still in draft form) was welcomed as a useful tool for the self review process. Task teams were encouraged to study the guide, to link the critical success factors to their investigation and to use as many indicators as possible but not to be limited by the guide.

The AIS is committed to the successful implementation of quality assurance as embodied by the HEQC and CHELSA. In a country in the process of rebuilding its higher education sector, quality consciousness is a necessity. We are also aware that the library is only one support service of a university and have factored in the possibility that the audit team's scant attention to library matters may be demoralizing. Our point of departure has therefore been at all times that *it should be a meaningful experience for all staff regardless of what the HEQC does or reports.*

During initial debate and discussions we realised once again that while quality is not an easy concept to grasp, it is necessary for staff to have a common understanding of QA. We therefore decided to structure our report around the HEQC's definition of quality and even more so to summarise it in an easy slogan QUALITY = DOING THE RIGHT THINGS RIGHT AT THE BEST PRICE. HEQC criteria have been linked to the different aspects of the definition:

Part A: *Quality as fitment of purpose* evaluates the AIS's alignment with and impact on UP direction as well as its integration with UP structures and systems. [HEQC Criteria 1, 2, 4, 19]

Part B: *Quality as fit for purpose* reviews the four main service aspects [HEQC Criteria 4, 8, 9, 15, 16, 17, 19]

- B.1 Creating a gateway to global information
- B.2 Supporting teaching and learning
- B.3 Enabling research
- B.4 People for a professional service

Part C: *Quality as value for money* reviews the outputs of the AIS as a return on the investment made by the University and other stakeholders. [HEQC Criterion 2]

Part D: *Quality as transformation* considers the role of the AIS as it facilitates transformation in the lives of students as well as its contribution to social transformation at UP. [HEQC Criterion 1]

To this we have added:

Part E: *Quality as fit for future* deals with factors that will guarantee the future success and sustainability of the AIS.

We think that our approach provides a different perspective on self review and a different view of quality in a big university library. It is easy enough to find the CHELSA critical success factors in this information package and we hope it will lead to debate and further refinement of the guide.

Where do we go from here?

We realise that our QA position is both that of a library which has recently come to grips with the basic issues while simultaneously needing to pay urgent attention to impact. Thus we are straddled between the upper and lower levels of quality maturity. Fortunately we have the support of the University's Quality Unit and other colleagues on campus who also want to explore similar issues.

Demonstrating impact is very important for us and so is creating performance measures linked to impact. The AIS's survival and sustainability is under no threat at the moment. We consider this to be the right time to investigate impact issues. We are particularly interested in the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Initiative (Payne & Conyers, 2005, and Poll & Payne, 2006) and hope to recruit some of our CHELSA colleagues for such a venture.

Benchmarking, which is also on CHELSA's agenda, is important for us in the sense that University management often needs information which we are not able to readily supply. It has also been suggested that the time is ripe for a formal ranking of South African university libraries. However, we are more interested in process benchmarking as described by Cullen (2003) and Wilson & Town (2005) as a starting point for interaction with other libraries towards learning from one another. It is in line with a style which we have been using successfully for years, using visits, conference attendance and following developments in the literature and on the web to compare ourselves with others. Benchmarking of quality management is also an issue that interests us (LATN QA Benchmarking Project, 2006).

Conclusion

South African university libraries have made a good start with Quality Assurance and the University of Pretoria is pleased to be part of it. A lot more work has to be done keeping in mind that just like every other aspect of librarianship, QA will also have to adapt to a fast changing environment.

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