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	Quality assurance at the University of Cape Town Libraries: **Do we make a difference?** **Joan Rapp** University of Cape Town Rondebosch, South Africa
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Abstract

The University of Cape Town Libraries (South Africa) have focused on developing a framework and culture of quality assurance since 1998. With little early opportunity to do benchmarking based on institutional information available in South Africa and a University mission focusing on research quality and comparison with major universities worldwide, UCT Libraries developed criteria for quality assurance using measures developed in the USA and the UK. International benchmarking has been positively received and has helped increase institutional support for the Libraries. More recently, UCT Libraries have introduced LibQUAL+ and will participate later this year in the Association of Research Libraries' project on sustainable, practical assessment.

Meanwhile, in 2004 the South African government instituted the first round of quality audits in higher education institutions through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). In response, the Council for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA) has developed a set of initiatives to help support libraries in this process. The University of Cape Town was audited prior to the collaborative developments. Are the CHELSA initiatives positive steps for academic libraries? Is there and should there be a South African "integrated model" for quality assurance? Reflections on the University of Cape Town's experiences help provide some answers.

INTRODUCTION

For almost a decade, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Libraries have worked to develop and refine a quality assurance framework which is both credible within the institution and consistent with international standards and

best practice. The process began in 1998 with examination and redefinition of quantitative measures, followed by extensive benchmarking and international comparison, better assessment of user feedback, focused staff development and exposure to best international practice, and other tools to support and maintain a growing culture of quality assurance. Most aspects of this project were well under way before 2004, the year of the first government-mandated audits of tertiary institutions and the year in which CHELSA, the Council for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa, began its collaborative work on guidelines and measures.

In 2005 UCT was among the first South African universities to be audited. Part of the required institutional self-assessment included material from and about the Libraries. By this time, the Libraries' work on quality assurance had become part of the institutional landscape. Although preparing for the audit required considerable thought, reflection, and integration with the University's overall self-assessment, the Libraries were able to draw on existing data which responded to institutional priorities; provide benchmarks with other institutions; do briefly-scoped but reliable longitudinal studies; and indicate strengths and weaknesses based on a corpus of data which could be compared with similar data at a number of institutions worldwide.

For a set of historical reasons, which will be reviewed here, UCT Libraries' early work in performance assessment and quality assurance was not and could not have been done with extensive reference to the broader South African context. However now, in 2007, with the institutional audit long in the past, additional work done on some collaborative national guidelines, and some "in principle" agreements on some basic quantitative measures among most SA academic libraries, it is perhaps useful to ask several questions: In retrospect, would UCT Libraries have followed what might be called a "South African model"? With somewhat more data available nationally, would UCT have made more of national benchmarking? Would the broad self-review guidelines, and specifically the recommendation for voluntary peer review have been welcomed? Finally, does it appear that there is something that can be specifically called a South African model? If so, is it and should it be extensible?

THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN: INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE AND MISSION

Located on several campuses on and near the slopes of Table Mountain, the University of Cape Town has about 25,000 students in seven faculties and a Graduate School of Business. In addition to Social Sciences and Humanities, Commerce, and Science, there are Faculties of Engineering, Law, and Health Sciences, and a Graduate School of Business. The cross-faculty Centre for Higher Education Development supports the academic work of all the other faculties.

As is the case for many universities, UCT's full mission statement is multi-faceted; but broadly speaking, the University seeks to be comparable with the

best international institutions in the quality of its research and graduates, while focusing in a productive way on the value of being in an African context and being able to contribute to African development and scholarship.

The match of UCT's activities with its mission – a key reality check for evidence-based institutional assessment – can be surmised from a few indicative measures: Based on data submitted for 2005, UCT has the highest ratio of accredited research output per academic staff member and the highest number of A-rated scientists among universities in South Africa. UCT has been awarded 7 of 21 National Research chairs. The University attracts major capital investment from national and international foundations, trusts, research institutions, and private sector interests. Finally, UCT is the only African university ranked in the top 300 in the world by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University rankings – a less standard but still indicative measure.

THE BEGINNING OF FOCUS ON QA IN THE UCT LIBRARIES: RESPONDING TO INSTITUTIONAL NEEDS AND DEMONSTRATING VALUE

The decision of the UCT Libraries to begin focusing sharply on performance measures and quality assurance came about in 1998 with a change of library leadership. It was concurrent with a radical overhaul of library practices and policies and a reorganization designed to streamline backroom operations and put more staff into user services.

In late 1998 the Chair of the University Senate Library Committee and the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs expressed concern to the then newly-appointed Library Director that the Libraries were not broadly perceived as adding value to the University to the extent they could and should, particularly in the context of the University's strong academic mission and pursuit of excellence. Budget cuts were on the cards unless the perception of value changed and unless the Libraries were able to work more effectively with the University academic community. Concern was also raised that the Libraries were not moving quickly enough to keep up with dramatic changes in information provision, including providing electronic resources and something approximating the level of service and access experienced by UCT academics on sabbatical in major overseas institutions or in their collaborative work with academics from overseas.

It was clear that significant change was required, but in what direction? And how would the Libraries know either when making decisions or after implementation whether the changes were the correct ones? What evidence would the University consider sufficient to know the Libraries were "doing the right thing, doing things right", and providing value for money? What we needed was information about where we were, where we wanted to be, what we should be doing that we were not doing, what institutions exemplified best practice in areas of importance to us, and how we could apply their experiences to our context to provide a unified, high quality service.

COULD UCT LOOK TO OTHER SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS FOR ANSWERS?

Unfortunately, in the late 1990s, UCT could not look to the South African environment for assistance, and it soon became clear that we would have to look elsewhere. Why?

- In 1998 South Africa had been a democracy for only four years. The previous apartheid government had allocated university funding to higher education institutions based on race and, even further, on language and culture. The deliberate policy of separation extended even to white institutions, as they were split into Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking institutions and funded according to different formulas. There was scant inter-institutional cooperation, and secrecy about everything from funding to research profiles was the norm.

- There were no meaningful measures, historical standards, or benchmarks available from the racially segregated South African library associations or organizations. The national professional organization, LIASA, emerged only in 1997 as a national, unified, racially inclusive professional organization. The current Council for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA), which includes the library directors of all tertiary institutions, emerged only in 2004.

- The only data about academic libraries in South Africa which had been systematically collected were the so-called SAPSE (South African Post-Secondary Education) statistics, collected by the national government. They consisted of reports on money spent for acquisitions of titles and volumes purchased in each broadly defined academic discipline. (At one point they included circulation statistics and samples of numbers of users; but these requirements were later dropped.)

- Libraries in tertiary institutions varied in their acceptance of and adherence to definitions and measures, even for the few SAPSE statistics.

- Aside from the SAPSE statistics, there was little national or regional sharing of data among academic libraries or institutions.

- Because of the legacy of the previous apartheid government, the quality, capacity, and aspirations of institutions and their libraries were widely divergent.

- There was little institutionalized practice of looking outward and seeking information or solutions internationally. In part, this inward focus had been necessary because of boycotting during the apartheid years; but its impact had lasted, and a culture of trying to "find the local solution, applicable to South Africa" has persisted long into the period when many

international universities, foundations, and governments have offered assistance and advice.

KEY EARLY DECISIONS

Having found that the South African environment could not be a source of support, UCT Libraries took on the University's concerns in a two-pronged approach:

The first, and somewhat risky, part of the response was to begin reshaping services and structure based on information about best practices from highly visible models, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In particular, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, key staff were selectively exposed to what were viewed as well-led libraries, particularly in the United States. For the first time at UCT Libraries, staff working on specific projects were encouraged to contact multiple overseas institutions to discuss our thinking; other staff were sent to key US institutions to view projects and services which seemed to align with those required in a developing research university. From these overseas institutions came confirmation of our ideas for developing the highly successful Knowledge Commons, for streamlining and modernizing technical services, for benchmarking collection depth and realigning collections policies, and for focusing on developing levels of subject expertise which are not generally part of library education in South Africa.

The other, concurrent project was to focus intensely on developing a credible framework for assessing our progress. This project is ongoing, and we add more sophisticated ways of assessing our impact on the University community all the time. But in 1999, this process began quite simply by ceasing to use the unreliable and locally tailored measures which had been the basis of our statistical reporting; investigating definitions, norms, and other data provided by the most widely recognized international bodies, such as ARL (the Association of Research Libraries), SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries, UK), and CAUL (Council of Australian University Libraries); and redefining and recalibrating our measures on those produced by these international bodies. In particular, we decided to work principally on the basis of ARL data because of greater familiarity with those definitions and measures, the large number of institutions which use them, and the many UCT affiliations with academic institutions in the USA.

The library project team found that most of the internal data definitions and measures we had been using for years did not coincide with standard definitions. In addition, our statistics and reporting had been made even more unreliable by the fact that few definitions had been written down, and many were interpreted differently in different sections of the Libraries. Also, there had been inconsistent reporting and significant gaps in data. In the end, with the new, standardized measures in place and a willingness to update them in line with international bodies, we decided to literally "close the books" on using

previous statistics for any kind of reporting or public presentation and start anew.

Over a period of months, the Libraries implemented and refined the "measures" project by devising new library-wide reporting templates and ensuring consistent and timely data collection, spot-checking on counting methods in various units, training staff in collection and reporting of measures, and, as a by-product of this focus, standardizing many service practices which had been inconsistent throughout the Libraries.

RESPONSE IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

By late 2002 the Libraries were reasonably confident that the project and the newly acquired data could be put forward to the University community. Within another year, the Libraries had what it viewed as sufficient data to begin benchmarking against those institutions identified by UCT as in its reference group, either real or aspirant. It was clearly understood by everyone in the University community that UCT's budget and the Libraries' budget were not comparable to those of many research-oriented institutions in the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia. However, the mere fact of measuring and benchmarking on international norms was seen as important; and for the Libraries, these comparisons, both negative and positive, helped restore enormous credibility and gave us the ability to state our case in terms acceptable to the research community.

The overwhelmingly positive response to our willingness to benchmark on all kinds of measures – some of which in fact showed our weaknesses – had two key results: (1) It encouraged us to move forward quickly and adopt new methods of measuring, as they became available in the library environment, and (2) it perceptibly increased the level of support for the Libraries among academics and the executive. This renewed support has meant additional resources for targeted areas, prioritization of library needs in the budgeting process, additional monies for African studies collections, and even a guarantee by the Finance Department that the acquisitions budget will no longer be impacted by exchange rate fluctuations.

MOVING FORWARD WITH SELF-ASSESSMENT

Since the early days, UCT Libraries have continued to quickly adopt new internationally vetted standards and measures, for example as they apply to measurement of electronic resource usage and counting of electronic resources. And, with the use of basic standardized measures embedded in the institutional culture, and many improvements in service under way, the obvious next step has been to get from the users a better picture of the extent to which the Libraries are succeeding in meeting their expectations.

Some brief surveys of specific services have been done in recent years, but they were limited and not based on any standard methodology. It has been the

view of the Director that, while useful internally, such unscientific surveys would be only marginally credible in the wider community; and they clearly could not be used for benchmarking.

Fortunately, just before the time UCT was ready to take the next step, the LibQUAL+ instrument had been developed, was being used by many libraries in the US, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands, and was being refined to produce even more reliable data. This internationally recognized instrument was producing a wealth of information about user behavior and preferences in a large set of institutions, including many academic libraries. In early 2004 UCT became the first institution in Africa to announce its intention to register for the 2005 survey. By the time the 2005 iteration was launched, there were six (courageous) South African institutions participating. Finally there would be some measures which could be compared both internationally and nationally.

The LibQUAL+ survey has been a watershed event on the UCT campus: for the institution's growing interest in and support of libraries; for the Libraries' ability to analyze in a relatively sophisticated way the specific areas of gaps between what users want and what they have; for our ability to combine objective measures and user-generated data to solve problems and target resources. Though we have spent a great deal of time analyzing and responding to data collected through LibQUAL+, it often seems that we have only touched the surface. The UCT survey elicited a response rate of over 30%, with more than half of the respondents providing comments – some of which have caused us to completely restructure certain services and to focus on new areas. Our greatly enhanced ability to specify and target areas needing attention has reinvigorated the work of the Senate Library Committee and enhanced the relationships of our subject librarians with their constituents.

Though UCT Libraries had initially planned to repeat the LibQUAL+ survey in 2007, with the support of the Senate Library Committee, we have decided to defer the next iteration until 2008. The simple reason for the decision is that we have such a wealth of data to work from that we have several quality-improvement projects under way and want to test the reactions only when they are completed.

However, in the interim, we have not stopped working on our culture of assessment. This August we will take another step in following international best practice when we become the first African library to take advantage of the ARL program called. "Effective, Sustainable, and Practical Library Assessment". This program includes a site visit by two ARL program officers, a report to the Library with recommendations on practical and sustainable assessment, and follow-up assistance in implementing the recommendations. The purpose of the project is to help libraries develop "effective, sustainable, and practical assessment activities" that demonstrate the libraries' contributions to teaching, learning, and research.

WHAT ABOUT THE HEQC AUDIT?

In 2005 UCT became one of the first institutions of higher education to be audited by the HEQC.

The HEQC guidelines for institutional audit have little to say about how an academic library should prepare its self-assessment. The role of the Library is mentioned only briefly in the fourth of 19 criteria; and the guidelines are intended for all "academic support services":

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.

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

The criteria are explicitly put forward as "examples" of what would be expected. The HEQC is not prescriptive in requiring specific data or format of response. What the HEQC does clearly require is the following:

- attention to the level at which the service is able to support the institutional mission (The audit is not an audit of the library, but of the institution.);
- an evidence-based response;
- attention to benchmarking (indicated throughout the criteria); and,
- realistic identification of strengths and weaknesses.

The Libraries' part of the UCT self-review accounted for only four of 220 pages. But those four pages were specifically targeted to UCT's mission and carefully aligned with the factors and requirements listed here. There was no attempt to be fully comprehensive, though extensive supporting background documents were available to the assessment team, should they want to review them.

During the weeklong accreditation visit, the Libraries occupied a little over an hour of 3 team members' time. In the audit report received at the University in March 2006, the Libraries were mentioned in two of the thirteen university-wide commendations, and the audit panel briefly noted its satisfaction with "substantial evidence of good practice" and "careful attention … to benchmarking and monitoring of the library stock and services". (At the time of the visit, UCT had registered for, but not yet done the LibQUAL+ survey.)

It should not be surprising that we were delighted with that small part of the audit team's report which referenced the Libraries. We did a great deal of hard work to prepare the self-assessment documents and get ready for the visit. But our ability to meet the broadly stated HEQC requirements rested largely on decisions taken and work done in several preceding years to institutionalize standard, internationally accepted measures and benchmarking practices within and for the benefit of the University of Cape Town, and not in anticipation of a nationally mandated audit.

For us, the most important aspect of our work in self-assessment has been our ability to test what we do against the institutional mission, with the understanding that what we are testing can be compared with what libraries do in peer and "aspirant peer" institutions in many other settings. The production, quality, and impact of research are measured on a global basis. The HEQC worked closely with QA professionals in higher education in several developed countries to help ensure that the SA version would be internationally credible, despite some differing emphases. It would seem a logical conclusion that libraries supporting South African universities should measure themselves on a similar basis.

CONCLUSION: IS THERE A SOUTH AFRICAN MODEL FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE? IS THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE EXTENSIBLE?

The title of this session refers to a South African model, and much of the content focuses on the academic library community's response to the national government's mandate for institutional assessment in higher education. UCT was audited very early in the first cycle, and the written institutional self-review had to be submitted in early 2005. At that time, CHELSA had just begun its core work on quality assurance, and there was neither a collaboratively produced guide to preparing for an audit, nor the newly proposed peer-review process, nor possibility of reference to agreed-upon quantitative measures.

This sequence of events now gives us the opportunity to reflect on the extent to which we would have used and/or benefited from CHELSA's collaboratively produced guidelines, quantitative measures, and proposed peer review process; the extent to which we would agree with CHELSA proposals; and the extent to which we would have changed our own approach in view of subsequent developments.

With regard to all aspects of the CHELSA work, the steps taken so far are positive in inducing broader awareness, providing a more integrated support

structure, and highlighting the necessity of evidence-based self-assessment. There is also some movement toward adopting measures and definitions used internationally. However, these steps are far from being any kind of integrated model and even from providing specific guidance with regard to libraries' self-assessment within their own institutional settings.

There is considerable danger that libraries will view the numerous topics in the guidelines document as requiring full response. They will then run the risk of producing documents that are overly comprehensive in scope; are far too lengthy (confirming many University executives' view that librarians constantly focus on detail and not on the strategic picture); do not respond to the nature, environment, goals, and needs of the institution; and target getting through the audit rather than developing sustainable ways of benchmarking and improving services in the university.

In addition, the value of a guide to self-assessment can only be as high as the available data which inform responses to topics and questions. One of the few explicitly non-negotiable requirements of the HEQC self-review is that assertions about quality must be evidence-based and not value-laden opinion. Addressing such issues as usefulness of library collections in academic programs, impact of the library on postgraduate students, usefulness of interlibrary loan, etc., require the availability of reasonably sophisticated numbers and ratios and interpretive capacity. So far, only a very few basic quantitative measures have been included in the recommended CHELSA list, and not all institutions have even agreed on their exact definition and use. The current state of CHELSA work covers only the first and most basic steps in a multi-step process which, to be useful and nationally credible, must include standardized measures and comparable counting procedures, as an absolute minimum.

Simply put, there are no data and agreed measures by which most academic libraries in South Africa can answer many of the key questions posed. One of the key points of debate in CHELSA has been the extent to which international measures actually apply to the South African situation. It is clear that some of this concern reflects anxiety that some South African libraries may somehow not "measure up". But so long as this question derails efforts to begin verifiable measurement and expose the problems of historical under funding and underdevelopment of academic libraries, these problems will not be resolved. In a global environment, and particularly one in which the South African national government is calling upon its universities to improve quality to international standard, this kind of insistence on introspection and refusal to adopt a realistic approach can only continue to harm the weakest of the institutions. Not to take steps to measure things that matter ensures that the problems will remain unsolved for longer and dissatisfaction with libraries will continue. Reinventing definitions to fit a local situation only increases the credibility gap between libraries and their parent institutions.

Finally, with regard to CHELSA's proposal to institute peer review into the audit process, it is simply far too early to even consider such a step; and it is highly

unlikely that conducive conditions will exist for many years to come. The higher education landscape is still hugely fragmented; the problems involved in massive mergers of often large and geographically dispersed tertiary institutions will take many years to resolve; the legacy of huge funding disparities will take years and great effort to erase; and there is growing evidence that a *de facto* differentiated system of higher education is emerging, in an environment in which it is not politically feasible to yet postulate such a system. Given these historical and environmental factors, the relatively small number of universities in South Africa, and an emerging differentiation of missions, the questions of which institutions are actually peers is a valid one. And in the absence of internationally normed data and the ability to do any reliable benchmarking nationally or internationally, who is to determine the location of "best practice' or "best libraries"?

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