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Abstract

From 2004-2009, all the public higher education institutions in South Africa, and the qualifying private providers of higher education, will undergo quality audits of the effectiveness of their arrangements for the management of quality in the three core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. The HEQC is to provide external validation of the claims made by a higher education institution in its self-evaluation report which it submitted as part of its audit portfolio.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (the institution of the authors) was to be audited in September 2006. In preparation for this, in 2004 the Senate Library Committee established a Quality Assurance Sub-Committee to assist the Library with its self-evaluation exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to examine the evidence of the Library that it was addressing the needs of its users and to highlight the areas where further improvement might be needed. The Sub-Committee compiled a Library Framework Document (LFD) with seven criteria for self-evaluation.

Staff working groups were formed to work on each of the criteria and were charged with the task of preparing a self-review portfolio.

The exercise enabled the Library to provide evidence for claims made in its self-evaluation report about quality related inputs, processes and outputs. Numerous improvement opportunities were identified which would enable the Library to continue to improve on the quality of the services it provides to clients.

The Wits Library quality assurance process was aligned with the requirements of both the national quality agency and with the international understanding of quality as

developed through research and scholarship. The self-evaluation exercise achieved its purpose of quality enhancement and improvement. The Library's strategic plan for 2006-2010 was informed by the 2005 SWOT analysis carried out by Library staff as well as the Library's Self Evaluation Report.

The Library Framework Document (LFD) which was used in the process has hopefully contributed to the development of a national guide.

For academic libraries in African countries contemplating embarking on QA, it is expedient to seek to develop a national framework for benchmarking library services. There is a lot to be said for benchmarking for self-improvement as it can also improve the capacity of a system to regulate itself.

Introduction

Prior to the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, higher education was divided into several sectors, namely, universities, technikons, and teacher-training, agricultural, nursing and technical colleges, each within separate areas of governance. Within each sector there were historically white English-medium institutions and historically Afrikaans-medium institutions. These were the historically advantaged institutions. The historically disadvantaged institutions comprised the majority of the black institutions.

While universities, and to some extent technikons, enjoyed a degree of autonomy in addressing quality issues, the other groups of institutions had virtually no autonomy. These colleges are still under the control of provincial governments and are not regarded as part of the higher education sector (Kistan, 1999).

Technikons evolved from senior technical colleges to colleges for advanced technical education in 1968, and eventually, in 1979, to technikons. They were conceived as institutions for advanced vocational learning. However, over time the technikons began to offer technological degree programmes at the bachelors, masters and doctoral level thus blurring the distinction between the two types of institutions (Smout and Stephenson, 2002).

Quality Assurance in higher education in South Africa started in the 1980s with the creation of the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) as a statutory body for the technikon sector in 1986. SERTEC started engaging in programme accreditation in 1988 and proceeded to the auditing of certain institutional aspects as well.

Prior to 1996 universities were recognised by the state as independent certification bodies, responsible for their own quality assurance. As such they could determine their own curriculum content, student numbers, admission criteria, methods of instruction, examinations and granting of qualifications. Within universities, quality assurance assumed a form of self-evaluation and peer review, mainly through moderation of external examiners and regular departmental reviews. There was no systematic quality assurance system (Kistan, 1999).

Professional associations were, and still are, involved in programme accreditation at both universities and technikons for those professional programmes where such associations exist. In the case of the technikons, this was done in co-operation with SERTEC. For example, the statutory professional bodies such as the South African Institute of Architects, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the Independent Regulatory Board for Auditors, have had certain powers with respect to determining minimum conditions for training for entry into the professions, and the recognition of the qualifications issued by universities. These external bodies thus have the power to influence the presentation, content and standards of degrees in particular fields of study.

In anticipation of the implementation of the Higher Education Act, the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) established a Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) to engage in institutional audits of universities. This Unit was established in 1996 and continued to function until January 1999 when its activities were terminated.

Smout and Stephenson (2002) observed that quality assurance was interpreted differently by the technikon and the universities. Whereas the technikons focused largely on minimum standards, programme evaluation and statutory compliance, the universities favoured a developmental approach in which self-evaluations were based on fitness for purpose and were related to institutional missions and goals.

Transformation of higher education in South Africa

The South African higher education sector is currently being transformed and restructured through a series of mergers and incorporations aimed at consolidating 36 universities and technikons (polytechnics) into 23 institutions. The new institutional types that have resulted from this process are variously referred to as universities, universities of technology, comprehensive universities, and national institutes. The rationale for the transformation is to meet the social, cultural and economic development imperatives of the new social order and to establish a single coordinated national education higher education system (Higher Education Act, 1997).

The goals identified as central to achieving the overall goal of the transformation of the higher education system in the country include the building of high-level research capacity to address the research and knowledge needs of South Africa, and the building of new institutional and organisational forms, and new institutional identities, through regional collaboration between institutions (South Africa, DoE, 2001). It is envisaged that a transformed higher education system should lead to increased graduate enrolments and outputs at masters and doctoral level.

The higher education institutions have a key role to play in national development and the enhancement of global competitiveness of the South African economy. Their mandate includes knowledge generation and human capital development.

Quality Assurance became a national imperative in the wake of several policy and legal initiatives to transform higher education after the demise of apartheid. Several

contemporary developments, notably the South African Higher Education Bill and the Education White Paper 3 (Higher Education) are part of the government's commitment to transform higher education.

The Higher Education Act of 1997 assigned the Council on Higher Education (CHE) with statutory responsibility for quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education. This responsibility is discharged through its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The HEQC's quality assurance mandate is carried out within the framework of the Regulations for Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs) of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which has overall responsibility for overseeing standard setting and quality assurance in support of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The functions of the HEQC as stipulated in the Higher Education Act are:

- (i) promote quality assurance in higher education;
- (ii) audit the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions; and
- (iii) accredit higher education programmes.

As part of the task of building an effective national quality assurance system, the HEQC has also included capacity development and training as a critical component of its programme of activities.

Strydom and Holtzhausen observed that in the Education White Paper 3 of 1997, quality was spelt out more concretely and dealt with in three ways:

- **Quality:** The pursuit of the principle of quality means maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at. These expectations and ideals may differ from context to context, partly depending on the specific purposes pursued. Applying the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress.
- **Effectiveness:** An effective system or institution functions in such a way that it leads to desired outcomes or achieves desired objectives.
- **Efficiency:** An efficient system or institution is one which works well, without unnecessary duplication or waste, and within the bounds of affordability and sustainability. It does things correctly in terms of making optimal use of available means.

The HEQC existed in interim form for 2 years and was formally constituted in May 2001. Smout and Stephenson (2002) observed that the founding document of the HEQC embodies international best practice in quality assurance and is also sensitive to the specific needs of South Africa. In the founding document, the HEQC identified the areas of activity in which it will engage in and take responsibility for including,

- Accreditation and evaluation
- Certification
- Auditing and institutional review
- Capacity development
- Quality promotion
- Quality assurance coordination
- Quality assurance research
- International liaison
- Information

The HEQC has undertaken extensive work to translate the vision, principles and goals outlined in the founding document into systems, strategies and activities.

The HEQC finalized its institutional audit framework and the criteria for institutional audits in 2004, and outlined its quality assurance activities for the cycle 2004-2009. The 19 criteria which were identified were to guide institutional self-evaluation in preparation for an HEQC audit, together with additional quality benchmarks which an institution has set for itself.

Specifically, the HEQC Criterion 4 states as follows:

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.

This criterion is open to different interpretation by different institutions. The HEQC has indicated that it would not prescribe a set of detailed procedures.

The Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA), recognised that certain other aspects of the HEQC Criteria may also be relevant, for example:

Criterion 1: Institutional mission

This criterion could be useful in evaluating the extent of integration with mission and goals of the parent institution.

Criterion 2: referring to links between planning, resources allocation and quality management

Criterion 16: referring to research support for example requires that:

Research functions and processes are supported and developed in a way that assures and enhances quality, and increases research participation, research productivity, and research resources.

This criterion could usefully include examples of activities that demonstrate the library's support for research at its institution.

Criterion 19: referring to benchmarking, user surveys and impact studies are also relevant to libraries.

The University of the Witwatersrand Library (Wits Library) took the above into account in its preparation for self-evaluation.

Preparation for Institutional Audit in the Library

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (the institution of the authors) was to be audited in September 2006.

In preparation for this, in 2004 the Senate Library Committee established a Quality Assurance Sub-Committee to assist the Library with its self-evaluation exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to examine the evidence of the Library that it was addressing the needs of its users and to highlight the areas where further improvement might be needed. The Chairman of the Sub-Committee was Professor F. Cawood of the School of Mining Engineering and a member of the Senate Library Committee. While the Chairman of the Sub-Committee took active interest and drove the process, the participation of the other academic members declined with time.

The Sub-Committee compiled a Library Framework Document (LFD) with seven criteria for self-evaluation. This document was reviewed and approved by the Senate Library Committee.

The seven Library audit criteria were established after consulting the University of Pretoria and incorporating the CHE/HEQC Criteria for Institutional Audit, elements from the CHE MBA Re-accreditation manual, and the Association of College and Research Libraries document Standards for Libraries in Higher Education.

The Library Quality Assurance Sub-Committee examined the HEQC criteria in order to identify other criteria where the Library needs to make input, in addition to Criterion 4 above. The Sub-Committee recommended that the following seven criteria be used to guide the self-evaluations:

1. Alignment with the University's strategic direction
2. Integration with the University's structures, systems and financial planning
3. Physical infrastructure to support teaching, learning and research
4. Information Resources and services to support learning
5. Information Resources and services to support teaching and research

6. Human resources
7. External partnerships

The criteria were presented in the style of the HEQC Criteria for Institutional Audit. Each criterion statement had examples of what would be expected in order to meet this criterion. In addition, there were questions to assist the Library in developing the necessary narrative account, and the nature of documentation that were needed as evidence for claims made.

Because of the large number of audit questions identified under each criterion and the limited time available, it was agreed that only some questions would be dealt with during self-audit while others would be held over until a later date.

The Library held a Quality Assurance Self-Evaluation workshop with senior Library staff on 14 September 2005 to introduce them to the Wits Audit process and the expected contribution of the Library to the process. Staff were taken through the Library Framework Document and the seven criteria to be used to guide the Library self-evaluation. Staff working groups were formed to work on each of the criteria and were charged with the task of preparing a self-review portfolio by:

compiling data/information (quantitative and qualitative) on each criterion statement (using questions to guide response);
analyzing and appraising such data/information and making evaluative judgements;
identifying achievements and improvement opportunities;
proposing recommendations for improvement.

Data gathering was accomplished relatively easy as the Library produced annual reports which were organised within the framework of the Library's strategic goals. The reports had ample statistics of the Library's activities over the years. The Library also obtained benchmarking data from the report of a GAELIC institutional members survey.

The Working Groups presented their findings to the Library staff at a half-day workshop on 2 December 2005, and there was enthusiastic input into the findings. Numerous improvement opportunities were identified which would enable the Library to continue to improve on the quality of the services it provides to clients.

The exercise enabled the Library to provide evidence for claims made in its self-evaluation report about quality related inputs, processes and outputs. The HEQC Quality Audit team used the products provided by the library, among others, as the basic point of reference in formulating and issuing value judgments.

The University has not yet received the report of the audit exercise. However, the manner in which the Library went about its preparation for the audit was commended by the University.

Retrospections

The report of the outcome of the Library's extensive self-evaluation exercise is a summative interpretative report describing the Library's significant achievements, improvement opportunities and assessment processes (the evidence) under each of the criteria. An appropriate analysis of the findings, and their integration into the Library's goals and objectives, will enable the most appropriate interventions to be developed.

As the Library routinely collected data that reflects how the library is meeting its objectives, hard facts of quantitative evidence were presented to the HEQC's Audit team which visited the Library. While this was useful, the data reflected internal trends only. It would have been more useful when amplified by comparative studies defining the library's position in relation to standards, national norms, or ranking among peer group or competitive institutions (Sacks, 1993). An authoritative statistical study identifying an institution's standing within a peer group is useful in convincing institutional management of the need for more resources; it is important to use peer groups acceptable to management. The Audit team raised this issue of benchmarking during the visit to the Library, it was informed that the Library carried out a limited benchmarking exercise using the GAELIC Institutional Members Survey 2005.

The Library had hitherto gathered information from other academic libraries in line with its own development agenda. It usually was a one-to-one exercise in order to build an information base for presenting an argument for better funding from the institutional authorities.

South African academic libraries do not formally utilize benchmarking, and the absence of readily available sources of library data in the country is an impediment to using comparative statistics. However, a growing number of university libraries in South Africa have undertaken LibQUAL+™ survey. This Web-based suite of services is used to solicit, track, understand, and act upon users' opinions of service quality. (See <http://www.arl.org/libqual>). Rhodes University has reported that the use of the LibQUAL+™ survey has been most valuable and hope to be able to repeat the exercise again (Moon, 2006).

McCord and Nofsinger observe that assessment projects of this nature provide baseline data for future measurements of service quality and changes in perceptions of service. However, could the calibre of library users in different institutions impact on the outcome of the survey and thus the comparability of institutions? Wits Library has been involved in the University's Service Excellence Campaign (a quality improvement project) since 2003. The Library had also implemented other client satisfaction surveys such as "Question of the Month" in the periods of time between large scale client satisfaction surveys, which would invite responses to how the library performed. The Library receives suggestions/comments through remote electronic access and also maintains suggestion boxes. The Library intends to undertake a LibQUAL+™ Survey in 2008.

The Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa (CHELSA) is working on developing measures for quality in SA HEI libraries. This should create the necessary condition for metric benchmarking thus enabling comparisons to be

drawn between different libraries. Institutions can judge how well they are doing against a benchmark that is appropriate for their particular context.

A self-review process should amplify the Library's contribution to institutional outcomes.

In the Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (2004), it is observed that "Outcomes are the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs". The Standards observes that:

Outcomes assessment can be an active mechanism for improving current library practices. It focuses on the achievement of outcomes that have been identified as desirable in the library's goals and objectives. It identifies performance measures, such as proficiencies, that indicate how well the library is doing what it has stated it wishes to do. Assessment instruments may include surveys, tests, interviews, and other valid measuring devices. These instruments may be specially designed for the function being measured, or previously developed instruments may be used.

The Standards advocates the use of both a quantitative and a qualitative approach to assessing the effectiveness of a library and its librarians. They advocate the use of input, output, and outcome measures in the context of the institution's mission statement. They encourage comparison of these measures with those of peer institutions; they provide statements of good library practice, and they suggest ways to assess that practice in the context of the institution's priorities.

Nelson and Fernekes suggest that relevant data collected from all sources is compiled and summarized in a planning matrix or chart. Such planning matrix is formed by constructing four columns titled respectively, "Purpose", "Goals", "Evaluation Procedure", and "Use of Results". By using the result the quality loop is closed. The process is repeated for continuous improvement. This is the typical quality improvement cycle of planning, implementation evaluating and using results for improvement. Quality should be integral as well as descriptive of the way in which things are done or the standard to which things are done.

Nelson and Fernekes suggest examples of quantitative and a qualitative data which a library collects about its performance and uses to assess itself including

- Surveys: user satisfaction, general library knowledge, graduating students, focus groups
- Institutional self-study documents
- Library annual reports
- National data for library comparison: academic library survey, statistical data
- Internal evaluations: academic programmes, etc
- Outside evaluators: professional bodies such accounting, engineering, health professions
- Pre- and Post-test to measure results of library instruction
- Recommendations by regional and specialized accrediting agencies

The self-evaluation processes undertaken by Wits Library are deemed appropriate. The Library needs to examine the outcomes of the exercise, integrate the results into

its goals and objectives so that it ensures that it works towards “closing the loop” where necessary.

It has adopted the planning matrix mentioned above but with five columns titled respectively, “Goals”, “Objectives”, “Performance Areas and selected measures”, “Evaluation Procedure”, and “Use of Results”.

Conclusion

The Wits Library quality assurance process was aligned with the requirements of both the national quality agency and with the international understanding of quality as developed through research and scholarship. The self-evaluation exercise achieved its purpose of quality enhancement and improvement. The Library’s strategic plan for 2006-2010 was informed by the 2005 SWOT analysis carried out by Library staff as well as the Library’s Self Evaluation Report.

The Library Framework Document (LFD) which was used in the process has hopefully contributed to the development of a national guide.

For academic libraries in African countries contemplating embarking on QA, it is expedient to seek to develop a national framework for benchmarking library services. There is a lot to be said for benchmarking for self-improvement as it can also improve the capacity of a system to regulate itself (Jackson, 2001).

A quality audit should be seen as the first step in a quality assurance process as it is supposed to interrogate the quality mechanisms and process an institution has in place. It should be the basis on which a library begins to gather historical evidence/material to show a “progression of evaluation and how the results are used in a new evaluation procedure”. Such evidence/material can prove useful in the next round of quality assurance exercise. It would show that the library maintains a systematic and continuous programme evaluating its activities and identifying and implementing needed improvements.

The quality improvement cycle include planning, implementation evaluating and using results for improvement. While a separate exercise might be undertaken during a quality audit, this should not be seen as an end in itself but a means of enriching the quality process of a library.

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