

Developing a quality framework at Curtin University Library

Curtin was among the first university libraries in Australia to develop a framework for its quality assurance activities. Here, **Karen Tang**, who developed the framework, explains what they did and why – and outlines approaches which other libraries might usefully adopt.

The library at Curtin University in Australia is a large academic library serving a population of over 47,000 students, as well as teaching and research staff.

In 2006, a review of the arrangements for quality assurance at the library revealed that while we undertook many activities in planning, performance and benchmarking which were aimed at improving library quality, our efforts were somewhat disjointed, ad hoc, and incomplete. For example:

- We had a medium-term and an annual library plan, and annual initiatives intended to progress the plans. We also had a process for scoping our proposed initiatives including identifying, reviewing and approving their resource implications. But the plans had no quantitative targets or measures associated with them, and were not aligned with a university plan or university key performance indicators.
- Each library unit collected a mass of statistics, but rarely shared these and didn't necessarily act on them. Most of the statistics were of the input kind or what could be readily generated by our library management system. From time to time, we ran surveys of client and staff satisfaction and attempted to act on the results, but we didn't conduct repeat or follow-up surveys to see whether the improvements had been achieved, and if not, why not.
- We occasionally undertook internal or external reviews of the performance of library units and processes which we thought were not performing well, and even participated in benchmarking or comparative studies with other libraries. However, our reviews were sporadic and, having made changes, we did not necessarily review the area to determine what had/hadn't been achieved.
- Ensuring quality was supposed to be the responsibility of all library managers but, in reality, this meant that no one felt they were specifically responsible. Managers did what they could, when they could. Library staff had little interest or involvement. While we felt our efforts were achieving

some level of quality in the library, we also felt we could do much better.

Improvements required

In particular, we felt we needed:

- An approach which would set us on the path to continuous improvement
- Greater coordination and integration of our activities. In particular, a schedule reminding us what we should do and when we should do it
- Confidence that we were focusing on the areas that mattered most

The solution was to provide a framework or programme for our various quality activities. We opted to develop a home-grown product which would progressively build on what we already had in place.

Continuous improvement

We found that an essential component of most quality frameworks was achieving 'continuous improvement' through the use of a 'quality loop'. We adopted one of the commonest approaches: ADRI – Approach, Deployment, Results, Improve (sometimes referred to as: Plan, Do, Review, Improve).

We reviewed all of our documentation in relation to our planning, performance and benchmarking, and re-wrote it under the ADRI headings by asking ourselves a series of questions:

● Approach (Plan)

What are we trying to do and why are we doing it? What is the environment/context in which we are doing it? For example, are there university policies impacting on what we can do or are doing? Who is leading or has overall accountability for this area?

● Deployment (Do)

What action do we take in order to achieve the objectives indicated in our Approach? Who does it? When? How? (Sometimes a separate, detailed deployment document for library/unit staff reference is necessary here, but it is always linked to from the Deployment section of our overall document.)

● Results (Review)

What evidence do we collect regarding whether what we are doing is actually achieving what we planned? What arrangements are there for reviewing these results? For example, who collects the results, where are they documented, who reviews and analyses them, when do they do this?

● Improve

If our results indicate a need to improve, what do we do about this? Who is responsible for doing it and in what time frame? How do we know they have done it? If more significant action is required, how is this fed into the Approach/Planning part of our ADRI cycle? Who will be accountable for taking the action? How and when will we capture and review the results of the changes made?

By asking these questions for each step in our planning, performance and benchmarking processes, and by documenting what we found under the ADRI headings, we identified gaps and ambiguities which we have subsequently addressed.

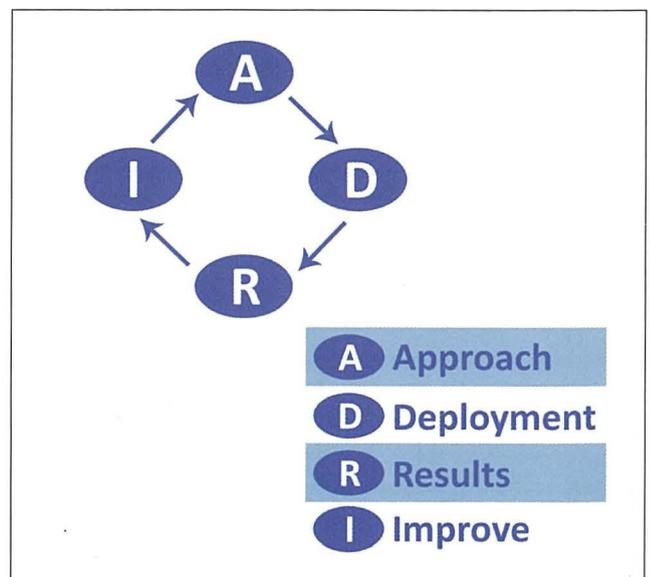


Figure 1: The ADRI cycle

But quality requires continuous improvement. Going around the ADRI cycle time after time is essential – not only to identify where we have had success, but also where we haven't. A quality library needs to address its shortcomings but also keep improving on its improvements. The world doesn't stand still and what will make a high quality library today may not be enough tomorrow.

As we have developed new documents for other key library areas (see below), we have included an ADRI cycle in them, too. They may not be written under ADRI headings because they may have another audience (library staff, clients, external stakeholders, and so on), but we insist that an ADRI approach needs to be discernible in all of them.

Scope

While continuous improvement is an essential ingredient in any quality programme, of equal importance is consideration of scope – focusing on areas that matter.

A danger in thinking of quality only in terms of continuous improvement is that we could spend a lot of time focusing on areas of library activity (especially the new/exciting/interesting things, or the things that more vocal clients have criticised) that aren't particularly important, while overlooking or assuming that the big, fundamental areas are ticking along quite nicely. This won't achieve a quality library – or if it does, it will be through good luck rather than good management.

In addition to, or instead of, stressing continuous improvement, 'quality' can also be defined in terms of 'fitness for purpose'. A quality framework doesn't define what that purpose is; its role is to assist the library to meet whatever purpose the library decides it has.

Rather, however, than thinking of quality in terms of either 'fitness for purpose' or 'continuous improvement', we've found a preferable expression to be 'doing the right things, right'.

The scope of our quality programme has expanded beyond the planning, performance and benchmarking with which we started, to also include our defined core business areas (scholarly resources, information literacy, space and facilities, for example) and the things we need to support and enable our core business (money, people, communications, controlled risk, and so on).

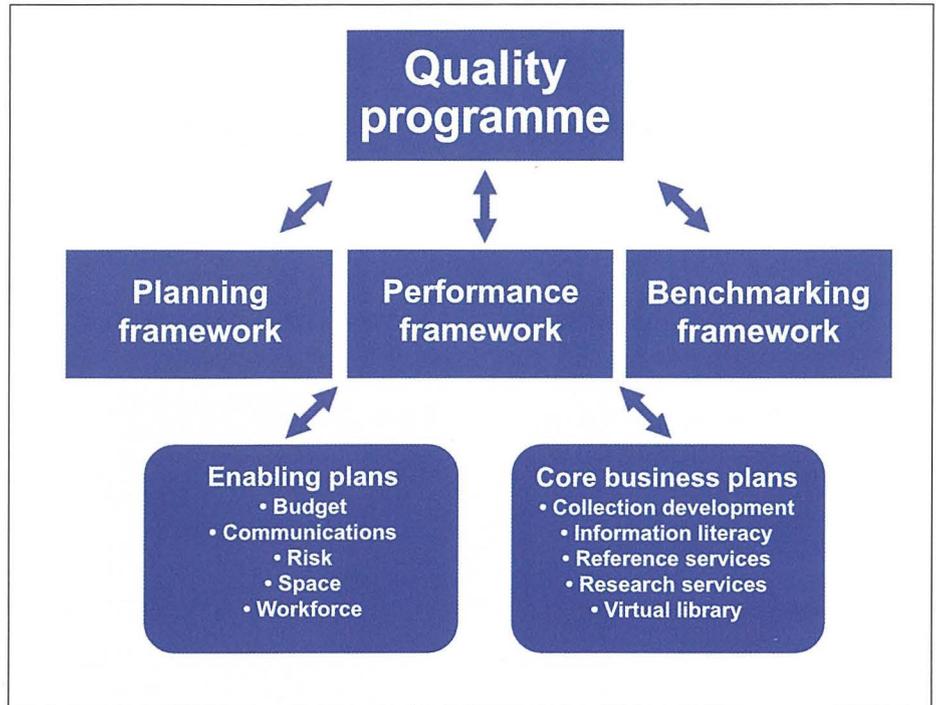


Figure 2: A diagrammatic representation of Curtin library's quality framework

For each of these areas, we have asked ourselves: Do we have a clear idea of what we are trying to achieve? Is there an ADRI cycle in place to keep us moving towards this?

To ensure that we have this shared understanding and that we continuously improve in each area, we have reviewed or developed plans for other key library areas as part of our quality framework, incorporating an ADRI cycle in each. These have included 'enabling plans' for budget, communications, risk, space, workforce, and human resources. Meanwhile, core business plans have included ones for collection development, information literacy, reference services, research services, and the virtual library.

Coordination and integration

Our quality framework, therefore, can be seen as a set of interlinked plans – see Figure 2.

The top-level document in the hierarchy depicted above, the 'quality programme' document, serves to summarise our framework and pull together in an integrated fashion the various activities being undertaken through the subordinate plans.

Documenting what – and when – quality steps need to be taken has facilitated the development of a schedule of quality activities within and across years.

Similarly, clarifying who is responsible for each activity has made it simpler for staff to schedule their quality work and ensure it gets done, and for accountability to be determined if it isn't.

To encourage library staff engagement with the quality programme, each library operat-

ional unit has or is developing its own unit framework to collate aspects of the quality programme of particular relevance to them.

Conclusion

The framework and the documents associated with it are all reviewed and improved on a regular cycle. While they will never be perfect, we are comfortable that they have delivered for us an approach to quality which is coordinated, focused, and continuously improving. We definitely feel our library is the better for it.

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Much of Curtin's quality framework documentation is available through their institutional repository at <http://espace.library.curtin.edu.au>

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