A quality assurance and benchmarking framework in an academic library

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Abstract

This paper explores the journey Curtin University Library has taken in developing a quality assurance program to direct its continuous improvement processes. It discusses the Library's approach to planning and performance and how benchmarking has been used to demonstrate good practice and identify targets for future success.

Currently the Library's quality assurance approach is supported by frameworks for planning and performance. These frameworks contain benchmarking activities and measures but the Library is developing a third supporting framework to specifically implement systematic benchmarking in the Library.

This Library benchmarking framework reflects the overall objective of benchmarking at Curtin which is to "remain competitive and demonstrate evidence of clearly recognised good practice which will contribute to Curtin's reputation nationally and internationally".

The Library benchmarking framework identifies important core activities such as collections, facilities, spaces, online services, efficient & effective processes, planning & quality processes, collaborative partnerships, sustainability etc that can contribute to success. It addresses identifying national and international partners with good practices that are willing to work together and share information. These partners may include other libraries, other cultural institutions and service industries. The framework identifies appropriate methodology/ies to be used including measurements of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes using a range of performance measures.

It is expected that the benchmarking framework will significantly contribute to the Library's objectives to be:
- A quality library that is best-practice and client-focussed;
- A library that is continually improving its services;
- A library that adopts innovative new ideas and technologies; and
- A library that is efficient and effective.

1. Introduction

Increasing competition globally in the higher education sector is reflected in the increased importance of world university rankings and league tables and has encouraged universities to pay greater attention to quality assurance processes and continuous improvement.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is the national quality assurance agency in higher education and uses the Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement method known as ADRI to evaluate institutions' continuous improvement on the four dimensions as follows:

Approach links the organisation's vision, mission, and values to more specific objectives in planning documents;
Deployment considers how effectively the approach is being fulfilled;
Results reflect on how well the deployment achieves the planned approach;
Improvement focuses on whether the organisation is engaged with continuous improvement including the use of external benchmarks. (AUQA, 2008, p.6)[1]

Between 2002 and 2007 AUQA conducted its first cycle of audits. In an analysis of the first cycle of quality audits, benchmarking was consistently mentioned as an area of improvement for Australian universities. (Shah & Treloar, 2007, p.147)[2] AUQA commenced a second round of audits in 2008 where again it highlighted the need for Australian universities to "pay attention to their benchmarking strategies". (Mather, 2007, p7)[3]

Curtin University of Technology was first audited by AUQA in 2002 and has used ADRI since that time for quality assurance. ADRI was also used in the preparation of Curtin's performance portfolio for the second audit in 2008. In addition the University formalised its benchmarking policy to ensure consistent and appropriate benchmarking across faculties and areas.

Curtin University Library has a quality assurance program to guide both its planning and performance processes. The program, which is structured around the ADRI cycle, informs clients, university management, and library staff what the Library is attempting to achieve and how well it is meeting its stated objectives.

Within its quality, planning and performance frameworks, the Library has a stated commitment to benchmarking. It has actively participated in a number of benchmarking activities over the years. However in preparing for the AUQA audit in 2008 it was realised that the Library needed to develop a more formal, systematic approach to benchmarking to provide *"a structured method to compare and evaluate processes … in order to ascertain best practice and improve performance".* (Robertson, 1998, p.121)[4]

2. Quality assurance program at Curtin University Library

Approach

The Library quality assurance program is underpinned by two frameworks.

The Planning Framework addresses the development of the Library's medium term strategic plan and annual strategic and operational initiatives, the scoping of planned initiatives, and how progress on the plans is monitored and reported. Regular continuous improvement reviews form part of this framework.

The Performance Framework outlines arrangements for collecting, analysing and reporting Library statistics and performance measures including strategic indicators of success (the "Library Scorecard"), operational statistics, service standards, and stakeholder assessments. The schedule for the collection of data within and across years is provided.

In addition the quality Approach includes the following:

- A Risk Assessment Register for the forthcoming year;
- Documentation of the Library's approach to individual/staff work planning and performance review (WPPR);
- A Communication Plan which documents how information on Library plans and performance are communicated to various target audiences;
- A Client Charter outlining service standards the Library aims to maintain;
- Feedback mechanisms to be employed including suggestion boards and a client blog.

Finally the Library has a Budget Framework which guides the funding of strategic and operational initiatives identified through the quality assurance program.

Deployment

The Library Plan is developed every three to five years depending on the planning cycle used by the University. The Plan incorporates the University's vision and values and articulates the Library's mission, objectives and strategic indicators of success. The Library's core values are also aligned with those of the library profession.

A planning cycle takes place each year to identify strategic and operational initiatives for the following year. A planning day is held in November each year during which Library managers identify strategic initiatives that will progress one or more of the Library's objectives during the coming year. Prior to the planning day the Library's performance for the previous year is reviewed using the Library Scorecard and library staff have the opportunity to provide ideas for planning through an "ideas register".

Initiatives from the planning day are scoped using a standard Library template and resources required to carry out the work (funds, staff and IT support) are identified.

Once initiatives have been approved, an "action cycle" for the completion of strategic initiatives runs from March to February.

As part of the Library's commitment to continuous improvement at least one strategic initiative is to review an area of the Library's operations and/or processes. In addition quality assurance visits are made to a number of libraries of the University's offshore partners.

All Library units develop operational plans and initiatives. Some initiatives arise from continuous improvement ideas suggested by unit staff; others are the result of suggestions from the managers and staff of other Library units.

When strategic and operational planning is complete, individual staff in conjunction with their manager develop their own aligned work plans.

Review/Results

Throughout the year, review of progress on strategic and operational initiatives takes place through quarterly reports presented and discussed at Library management meetings.

Reports of the Library's annual continuous review are received and considered, as well as reports on offshore partner visits.

Feedback obtained through suggestion boards, blogs and the staff ideas register is also reviewed.

Special performance meetings are held three or four times per year to consider Library performance for the year to date. Performance measures are documented in the Library Performance Framework and include the following:

- *Operational statistics* are used to monitor Library operations on a regular basis, for example the number of non serial items acquired during the semester, numbers and types of loans, in-person and virtual visits to the Library. The information is collated and charted each semester and enables operational issues and trends to be identified in a timely way and addressed if required.

- *Charter service standards* are tested on a regular basis to indicate whether the Library is performing at the level committed to in the Library Charter. A 'traffic light' system is used to indicate whether target measures are achieved during the year and from year to year. For example the target "to have 99% of items accurately shelved" is checked using a sampling method and accuracy is recorded using a green, amber or red light with commentary indicating achievements and concerns.

- *Stakeholder assessment surveys* such as LibQual+[TM] are used to get feedback from stakeholder groups and statistics such as the annual Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) Statistics[5] provide comparative data in areas such as staff numbers, library expenditure and loans. A survey of staff satisfaction is undertaken by the University and library staff results compared with other Curtin response groups and with library staff in other Australian universities that use the same survey.

A *Library Scorecard* is compiled annually based on strategic indicators of success from the range of performance measures detailed in the framework. Scorecard measures are relatively few in number and include a combination of stakeholder assessments and objective data, and at least some outcome and impact measures. A quantifiable target is set for each objective in the Library Plan and over the life of the Plan it is expected that, through the successful completion of strategic initiatives, progress toward the Scorecard target will be discernible.

Progress on individual workplans is reviewed by staff members and their managers and a review report prepared annually.

Improvement

At Library management meetings where quarterly reports have been considered and performance measures reviewed, necessary actions to correct deficiencies and achieve improvement are identified and documented. These action items are monitored through subsequent meetings and reports.

Corrective action arising from continuous improvement reviews is agreed, implemented and monitored. Where appropriate, recommendations for action in relation to offshore partner libraries are provided to the University's International Office.

An important aspect of the Planning Framework is the opportunity provided to all Library staff as well as managers to provide suggestions for improvement – through input to strategic and operational planning and contribution to the staff "ideas register" throughout the year.

3. Benchmarking assessment

Benchmarking can be defined as:

"… the formal and structured process of searching for those practices which lead to excellent performance, the observation and exchange of information about those practices, the adaptation of those practices to meet the needs of one's own organisation, and their implementation.

(Meade, 2006, pp. 7-8)[6]

The emphasis is on being systematic, learning from results and applying these to improve performance. It is about more than just copying and comparison – it is a means of obtaining objective evidence about where an organisation is now in relation to other organisations, and how the differences are being achieved. (Wilson and Pitman, 2000, p.6)[7]

Libraries can benchmark processes or performance.

Process benchmarking involves comparison of practices, procedures and performance, usually focusing on one business activity at a time such as the monographs acquisitions function or the delivery of an online reference service. Process benchmarking almost always involves a partnership whereby two or three libraries or like institutions document, observe and review each others' practices.

Process benchmarking can lead to:

- Improved understanding of internal workflows, processes and procedures;
- An understanding of alternative workflows, procedures and processes in other organisations to achieve the same ends;
- New ideas and insights;
- Improved performance and productivity.

    (adapted from Wilson & Pitman, 2000 pp.8-9)

Performance benchmarking involves the development of performance indicators leading directly to improvements or it is used to identify operations that could be improved through process benchmarking. An example of performance benchmarking would be supply times for document delivery where supply times are stated and performance is measured against these indicators.

Performance benchmarks are mostly expressed as a score, percentage or ratio, and typically the benchmarking involves libraries in the first instance participating in large data collection exercises across many libraries. As a result of the data gathering exercise 'best practice' libraries can be identified for specific process benchmarking activities.

Performance benchmarking can be useful for:

- Providing library staff, managers and university leaders with an appreciation of where their library stands and where it can be improved;
- Demonstrating areas of merit to stakeholders;
- Justifying claims for additional resources.

    (adapted from Wilson & Pitman, 2000 pp.8-9)

Other benchmarking options include:

- *Internal benchmarking* - seeking out and replicating examples of best practice within one's organisation including other areas of the University.
- *Competitive benchmarking* – investigation of direct competitors
- *Industry* benchmarking – comparison with non-competitors in the same industry (this might be the library sector in general, or academic/research libraries, or perhaps just university/tertiary libraries)

- *Generic* – comparison with organisations outside one's own industry, but comparable in some way (this might be commercial information providers, e.g. information brokers, search engines, bookshops, distributors, etc) (Wilson and Pitman, 2000, p.7)

There are sometimes references to a library/organisation benchmarking against itself by comparing its current to its past performance. However this does not include the elements of identifying best/better practice and the factors contributing to it required in the University's benchmarking policy.

In preparing for the 2008 AUQA audit and reviewing its quality program in light of the University's benchmarking policy, the Library concluded that it had made commitments to benchmarks and benchmarking and had undertaken some "benchmarking activities", but benchmarking was not adequately embedded within its frameworks or its practice.

Through the Performance Framework the Library had collected and examined comparative data from other libraries in several areas:

- In drawing up the Client Charter standards, reference had been made to the standards in use at other Australian libraries with a client charter.

- In choosing stakeholder assessments to be run, a deliberate preference had been stated for national and international surveys which would permit Curtin Library to compare its performance against other libraries. Accordingly the Library had run the national Rodski/Insync[8] and international LibQual+[TM] client satisfaction surveys on a number of occasions and, in analysing its results, sought out and made comparisons with the performance of other West Australian, Australian and international libraries. Similarly in assessing the quality and accessibility of its collections, the Library had deliberately run the CAUL Materials Availability Survey[9] and compared its results with those of other Australian libraries whose results were available.

- The annual CAUL statistics had been used for several years to plot Curtin's ranking vis-à-vis other Australian and New Zealand libraries, and to support arguments to the University for increased resources for the Library.

- In selecting measures for inclusion in the Library Scorecard, a deliberate attempt had been made to include assessments of the Library's performance relative to the performance of other libraries.

On reflection however the Library considered that the comparisons it had made using this data had been ad hoc and opportunistic, not systematic or sustained over time, as required by true performance benchmarking. Comparisons had been made with libraries for which data could be reasonably readily obtained rather than a consistent, focussed group of relevant libraries. The comparisons made had been general, across a wide range of criteria, not targeted at areas of high priority to the Library. The emphasis had been on Curtin's ranking relative to the performance of others, rather than the identification of the "best performers" on specific criteria with investigation into why their performance was superior to Curtin's.

The Library also noted that generally its improvement ideas and action plans had been internally-generated rather than the result of considering what was done in best-practice libraries. Using data from the Performance Framework, Library management had identified areas where improvement was necessary to address client concerns, raise the Library's ranking, improve Library collections and services etc. However their decisions had not been informed by study of what was different in the libraries of the best performers – what they were doing differently from Curtin, and whether it was feasible for Curtin to adopt or adapt their practices.

The annual continuous improvement reviews in the Planning Framework had the potential to overcome these deficiencies, since they were almost always conducted by a reviewer external to the Library who was considered to be an expert in the area. However it was noted that no attempt had been made to draw the reviewer from the best performing libraries identified through the Performance Framework. The area selected for review was often a relatively large operational unit (e.g. Bibliographic Services) rather a process area (e.g. monograph ordering) and selection of the area was not necessarily based on results of the comparisons made through the Performance Framework. Recommendations of the reviewers were generally accepted and implemented but there was no systematic follow through the next year to assess whether the adoption of the recommendations actually led to improvements on the Library's performance measures and whether these improvements had in turn led to improved rankings of Curtin Library compared with others.

It was noted that the Library had participated in a number of benchmarking studies with local and national academic libraries, including at least one foray into process benchmarking:

- *Benchmarking Document Delivery 2004 – 2008*

  Since 2004 the four publicly funded members of the Western Australian Group of University Librarians (WAGUL)[10] have benchmarked response times for the supply of copies and loans under a document delivery agreement that requires that all sites supply the majority of items within 48 hours. An annual review of outputs is reviewed collectively and good and poor performance identified.

- *Quality Assurance within LATN Libraries (2006)*

  In 2005 – 2006 a benchmarking project was undertaken to review current practice in quality assurance processes across the Libraries of the Australian Technology Network of Universities (LATN)[11]. The project looked at quality areas such as plans, planning processes, effective communication plans, monitoring and performance measures across all libraries. It identified best practice in each quality area and provided exemplars and gaps where no exemplars were identified for possible improvement.

- *Benchmarking across LATN using LibQual+ ™*

  In 2004 the LATN University Librarians agreed to implement LibQual+™ as the common assessment tool to be used to benchmark performance. During 2005/6 and again in 2007/8 the LATN LibQual+™ results were compared for undergraduates, postgraduates, and staff across the 22 core questions and three main dimensions used in LibQual+™: 'affect of service', 'information control' and 'library as place'. The results from the two surveys were shared among the five libraries enabling each library to see how it rated against the other four libraries over time.

While the Document Delivery and LibQual+™ exercises provided useful comparative data for participating libraries, they were not followed up with an examination or sharing of the practices of the best performers, which other libraries might consider adopting. The Quality Assurance study did provide best practice examples, some of which were adopted at Curtin, but the adoption was not systematic, the impact of the changes was not tracked and no follow-up assessment was undertaken.

4. Towards a Curtin benchmarking framework

Having identified the shortcomings in its benchmarking to date, Curtin Library has committed itself to a more systematic application of benchmarking in its forthcoming planning period (2010– 2012). At the time of writing the Library has not determined whether to develop a companion Benchmarking Framework to the Planning and Performance Frameworks which currently underpin the Library's quality program, or alternatively the existing Quality, Planning and Performance Frameworks may be revised to better address benchmarking.

The first stage for the Library is to identify from the Library's Strategic Plan specific areas which are essential to the future success of the Library, then to use output of the Performance Framework to identify which of these need improving and are appropriate for benchmarking.

One can potentially benchmark virtually anything and, as with performance measurement, there is a temptation to benchmark what is readily countable or comparable, rather than focussing on what is truly important. However there is little point in benchmarking processes and outcomes which are not a priority for the organisation.

To go beyond simply making comparisons and move to true benchmarking requires considerable time, effort and resources. Not all Library objectives identified as priorities in the Library Strategic Plan can be accommodated within the life of a single plan. Activity needs to be focussed on high priority areas where the gains to be achieved through benchmarking will be worth the investment required.

The second stage is to decide whether process or performance benchmarking is appropriate, and from the Performance Framework identify the appropriate statistics and measures to be used.

As higher education becomes increasingly competitive and global, libraries need to be aware of how their performance rates not only with local and national libraries but international libraries as well. The Library uses LibQual+ ™ for performance benchmarking because of its use both internationally and in Australia, and the CAUL statistics provide rankings on some criteria in Australia and New Zealand.

Curtin University has a vision to be positioned among the top 20 universities in Asia by 2020. Areas across the University are being asked to assess and improve their standing vis-à-vis the leading universities in this region. The challenge for the Library will be to use performance benchmarking to establish where it sits in comparison with other libraries in the region, on the criteria it has established are of importance.

The third stage is for the Library to establish with whom it will benchmark. Just as a Library can potentially benchmark on many things, it can potentially benchmark with many other libraries or like institutions.

While performance benchmarking often involves many libraries in data gathering exercises if the Library is to move onto process benchmarking and learning from better performing libraries, the co-operation of selected libraries will be required. While Universities operate in a competitive environment, libraries tend to work collaboratively, however there still needs to be benefit for all partners in any process benchmarking exercise given the required investment of time from both or all parties. Benchmarking will therefore require not just the selection of partner libraries but the securing of partners as well.

Finally having identified better practices, the Library must act to adopt or adapt practices that will 'raise the bar' at Curtin. Moreover, consistent with the ADRI method, a subsequent review and assessment must be made of the benchmarked area, to determine whether improvements have been achieved and if not, why not, so that further action can be planned and implemented. This will "close the continuous improvement loop"

5. Conclusion

External factors in the higher education sector and a new University vision and approach to quality improvement have required Curtin University Library to re-examine its quality program.

While the program is based on a reputable method (ADRI) and ensures that there are many appropriate activities taking place that contribute to library quality, the Library's benchmarking needs to be reviewed. A benchmarking framework, or revised planning and performance frameworks, will be developed to provide this structured and systematic approach to continuous improvement.

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